# Commitment and Racial Uplift in African-American Literature from the Harlem Renaissance to Black Nationalism.

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**Abstract**: This article aims at showing the way different and sometimes contradictory perceptions of the notion of commitment have contributed in improving African-American literature and the image of black people. Born in a historical and political context of struggle for the recognition of the dignity of black communities, this literature has always been more or less committed. However, the movement of the Harlem Renaissance was a turning point in the development of African-American literature in that, it allowed literary critics and novelists to think not only over their common fate, but also over the role of literature in their quest for social and literary advancement. These different conceptions of the notion of commitment have played a role in the social and literary promotion of African-Americans.
**Keywords**: Harlem Renaissance, commitment, race, promotion, aesthetics.

**Résumé** : cet article vise à montrer la manière dont des perceptions différentes et même souvent contradictoires en apparence de la notion d'engagement ont contribué à améliorer la littérature africaine-américaine et par ricochet, l'image du Noir. Née dans un contexte historique et politique de lutte pour la reconnaissance de la dignité des communautés noires, cette littérature à toujours été plus ou moins engagée. C'est cependant la Renaissance de Harlem qui permit aux critiques littéraires et romanciers africains-américains de mener des réflexions sur leur sort commun et notamment, sur le rôle de la littérature dans leur quête de promotion sociale et littéraire. Ces divers niveaux et natures d'engagement, souvent imperceptibles en apparence, ont participé à la promotion sociale et littéraire africaine-américaine.

**Mots clés** : Harlem Renaissance, engagement, race, promotion, esthétique, critique.

## Introduction

African-American literature was born in a historical and political context of struggle for the recognition and dignity of black communities, making the idea of commitment an unavoidable reality. Thus, most African-American writers have displayed their concern for the advancement of their race in their work. However, a look at an important period of the African-American literature, that is, from the Harlem Renaissance to the advent of Black Nationalism reveals different and sometimes contrasting forms of commitment which vary from one epoch to another and from one author to another. These differences raise the question of the practice of art for art's sake for the African-American writers on the one hand, and the role of literature as a functional and utilitarian tool on the other. They also call attention to the polysemic dimension of the word commitment.

According to J. A. Cuddon, "a committed or *engagé* writer (or artist) is one who, through his work, is dedicated to the advocacy of certain beliefs and programmes especially those which are political and ideological and in aid of social reform"[1]. This definition points out the political and ideological dimensions of the word. However, a writer, being an individual living in a specific environment, he is inevitably involved in the issues of his time without necessarily taking an open stand. Thus, for William Horozs, commitment "is an awareness, an attitude, a clear and feeling full recognition of being fully present in the moment, making the choice of the moment, and standing by the consequences of these choices whether anticipated or not"[2].

Commitment can therefore express the political, social as well as the moral and esthetic convictions of writers. How have these different interactions between the literary and the ideological discourse shaped the African-American literary and social experience?

To point out the way African-American writers' different visions of the role of literature, expressed through different aesthetic trends**,** have contributed to enrich their literary production, we will use a three-part analysis. Firstly, we will go back to the movement of the Harlem Renaissance that can be considered as a turning point in the formation of a conscious articulation of black people's plight. Secondly, we will highlight the major aesthetic tendencies used by African-American writers to uplift their racial group. Thirdly, we will examine the discussions that have continued to enrich the literary field and have resulted in an original literature cultivated by Black Nationalism.

## I The Role of the Harlem Renaissance in the Foundation of a Committed Literature

The Harlem Renaissance is a movement of African-American cultural revival that took place between 1920 and 1930, although some analysts extend this period to 1940. It was not only the basis for the interplay between the political and literary articulation of the plight of black people, but it also provided the groundwork for the exploration of different visions of social and political commitment through literature.

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[1] J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Oxford: Miley-Blacwellb, 2013, p.142.

[2] William Horosz, *The Crisis of Responsibility, Man as a Source of accountability*, Norman Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press 1975, p. 248.

# 1 The Harlem Renaissance and the Black Condition

The Harlem Renaissance was the first phase in the African-American committed literature born in the mid-1920s. The name "Harlem" refers to the neighborhood of New York of the same name in which this cultural revival took place, affecting different areas such as art, photography, music and painting. However, during that period, it is the field of literature tracing its roots to slave narratives like the one of Frederick Douglass and various other writings such as those of Booker T. Washington, Zora Neale Hurston, which prevails. This movement, also known as The New Negro Movement, occurs in a context of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the southern part of the United States of America to the North.

The migration of Blacks can be explained partly by a quest for economic opportunity and, secondly, a desire to escape white brutality and segregation laws of the South. Black people therefore took the direction of northern cities and, frequently, New York in search of a better quality of life[3].

But once in New York, even if they enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, Blacks realized that they were relegated to the periphery of the American dream. Racism and racial segregation were their daily lot. Confined in outlying areas like Harlem, they could not possibly fit into the circle of the realities of mainstream America. They had no other choice but to think about the means they could use to be recognized and legitimized. Harlem became the gathering place of the black elite, who resolutely worked towards Black fulfillment.

The Harlem Renaissance, which is the platform on which the committed literature was able to bloom was supported by figures such as Alain Lock or Carl Van Vechten. At the literary level, names such as Arna Bontemps, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and W.E.B Du Bois are persons, who among others, were prominent during this period.

The cultural explosion witnessed by this movement is not a coincidence. It finds its foundation in the growth of black scholars' work that preceded that period at black colleges and other institutions. Ron Eyerman explains this idea when he says that, "the development of concentrated and literate black population facilitated the emergence of social and cultural movements which would articulate as well as signal a new social awareness and a revisioning of the collective past."[4] For him, the increasing number of Blacks and their growing literacy favored their racial and social consciousness.

The need to develop strategies to fight the inequalities endured became a reality. The black elite residents of Harlem and elsewhere used literature to challenge racial stereotypes, to promote the integration of African Americans into the mainstream society, and to strengthen their creative power. Social movements also have played an important role in this cultural and literary blossoming.

The best known example of these social movements is the National Association for the Advancement of the Colored People (NAACP) and their journal *The Crisis*. There is also The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters linked to the socialist journal, *The Messenger*. There is finally the mass movement created by Marcus Garvey, The Universal

[3] James Gilbert Cassedy, "African-Americans and the American Labor Movement", *Prologue*, Summer 1997, Vol. 29. No 2, pp.113-120.

[4] Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.96.

Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), whose ideas were propagated through the weekly *Negro World*.[5]

The Harlem Renaissance was a pivotal period in the enhancement of black people's condition. This episode of artistic revival stimulated a new awareness in African-Americans as a group. In literature, this new consciousness was expressed through different literary profile.

## 2 From Du Bois's Romanticism to Richard Wright's Social Realism

African-American literature was a key element in African-Americans struggle's for their social and political rights. Lacking direct access to political forums, black authors used their writings to disseminate their worldviews. They did so according to their visions and inspirations. However**,** the ascetic form used by authors to express their perceptions of their plight was used as a barometer by the critical reception and the black readership to evaluate the level of their commitment. Two of them being pioneers in their standpoints, they are used here as a support to bring out the major facets of this literary classification. One, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, offers a romantic version of the Black's condition, while the other, Richard Wright, chooses a literary form marked by social realism.

Du Bois's fight for the advancement of the Blacks' condition through the channel of literature is not frontal. It transcends reality and presents an idealistic view of Blacks, trying to legitimize them as human beings just like the Whites. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* by Du Bois takes place in Alabama, within heart of the Southern Black Belt. It is a story of the victory of love between the Negro hero Blessed Alwyn and the white heroine Zora. This love story revolves around the complex relationship between the North and the South's financial policy.[6] The aim of the author in this work is to show the persistent oppression of Blacks on the economic and administrative levels. With this social and historical reference, Du Bois expresses intrigue and mystery related to the romantic literary movement. This romanticism is also visible in its use of the power of love and freedom to transcend reality.

As a result, this work carries sociopolitical concerns of African-Americans as it highlights the story of characters that crystallize the suffering of the black community. However, the presentation of the discomfort of the characters who are victims of the system of oppression of white America is quite romanced and surrounded by virtues of love even though that love can be traumatic.

This fictional representation of black issues is consistent with the political thought of Du Bois. Unlike Booker T. Washington, who thought that Blacks would succeed by learning vocational trades, Du Bois believed that a "talented tenth"--a small elite group of Blacks--would lead the black masses. For him, black inferiority witnessed then was not a biological matter but rather a social construct. It follows that his literary representation is underpinned by the idea of showing the African-American a capable person in order to avoid to downgrade him as a human being. This vision seems to be shared by some other black scholars. According to Cary Wintz, those thinkers "believed that depicting the

[5] George Hutchinson, "HARLEM RENAISSANCE" *Encyclopædia Universalis*, Web. accessed 13 July 2015. URL: http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/renaissance-de-harlem/

[6] WEB Dubois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, 1911, New York: Harlem Moon, 2004.

squalor and vice of ghetto neighborhoods would only reinforce negative racial stereotypes."[7] It was therefore a necessity for them to depict the black man positively.

The consequent avoidance of the daily realities of Blacks was becoming a real concern for younger generations. To this romantic conception of the literary treatment of African- Americans suffering, Richard Wright, opposes social realism, as an aesthetic approach more suitable for the fictionalization of the black cause. This concept gradually replaced the romanticism that characterized the writing of Du Bois and others.

Wright disapproved of the ineffectual and decorative dimension of Blacks' writings. He believed that their willingness to try to prove that they were not inferior to whites was not the kind of attitude that could awaken an awareness of their actual living conditions. For him, Blacks had to seek rather to express the reality of their daily lives, their needs, their trials and their aspirations, in order to be fully conscious of their plight and then, be able to provide an appropriate response. It is therefore not surprising that in his works, he tries to raise awareness by highlighting violence in his writing.

In his novel *Native Son*, which appears in the early 1940s, Wright tells the story of a black driver who accidentally kills the daughter of his boss. The author tells this tragedy as the logical culmination of abuses that Blacks were victims of. The great misunderstanding, which leads to an unreasonable fear, is rooted in the prejudice and mistrust that the citizens of the same countries experience. This fear is so intense that it leads the protagonist, Bigger Thomas, to commit an unplanned crime. The constant chore of living under racist conditions and limited options causes Thomas to turn to violence as a means of personal protection. Resentment is so ingrained in Thomas that the white characters like Mary and John, fail to convince him to join them[8]. The race relations in the novel seem so conflicting that a common project for political claims appears impossible. Richard Wright had become with the work of fiction *Native Son* a leader of the protest novel and showed a new line of attack in the social engagement of Blacks through literature.

As we can see, with the protest novel revealing brutal social realities, Richard Wright appears as a prototype of the committed writer. If he points out and denounces social inequalities in order to contribute to the advancement of black people, Dubois's final intention is not different from his. The latter's romantic depiction of black people is to show that they could be as creditable as white men and that their apparent inferiority was not a biological matter but rather the result of social stratifications. Both of them were therefore committed writers. However, the level of commitment which seemed to have taken precedence over the aesthetic consideration in the evaluation of the African-Americans' literary production made it necessary for writers and theorists to discuss the role of literature in their context.

## II Debates over the Function of Literature in African-Americans' Plight

The controversy over the function of the African-American literature between 1920 and 1970 will be summarized in three points here: the questionable ability of the systematic use of literature for political goals to reposition Blacks in America and some writers' integrationist orientation.

[7] Cary Wintz quoted by Eyerman, *op. cit*., p.117.

[8] Richard Wright, *Native Son*, New York: Harper and Row, 1940.

The attitude of using literature to point out Blacks' constant recrimination was not acceptable to many critics and writers. The novelist William Gardner noted in 1950 that art was not about enumerating the injustices endured by Blacks, stating that "*too often ... in Negro novels do we witness the dull procession of crime after-Crime Against the Negro. These ... chronicles of offenses do not constitute art*"[9]. That representation of social life was too naive and represented a misunderstanding of human nature itself.

The constant complaint of Blacks for their living conditions through literature in the United States was seen by some critics as enclosing them, limiting the scope of their writings because they were in that way, excluded from the universal dimension that naturally allows the literature. According to Carl Milton, "*the wider perspective eliminates the Negro novelist from literary specialization with its corresponding emphasis upon injustices"*[10]. For him, the protest novel was not helpful for the literary future of Blacks.

In front of this impasse, other intellectuals and writers rejected the use of literature as a political weapon. This approach resulted in the adoption by these authors, of subjects considered as non racial. These criticisms against the social realism in literature were boosted by the new social environment. Suspicion related to any treachery to the nation from the Cold War, coupled with the economic downturn threatened the survival of this kind of literature. Some writers like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were deeply disturbed by what was considered as their responsibilities to their race. Taking a distance from the social realism tinted with radicalism, which according to them could only tarnish the image of Blacks, and give a narrow view of them, they chose an integrationist option. They yearned for a large space that could enable them to flourish in literature by shedding light on the complexity of the human being, be it a Black or a White. Social realism for them therefore missed the point.

Although James Baldwin said that he was indebted to the work of Richard Wright, he was one of the latter's opponents in this debate. In his essay "Nobody Knows My Name; More Notes of a Native Son ", James Baldwin admitted that through *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, Richard Wright had been able to voice for the first time all the bitterness and destructive grief that had undermined his life and that of other Blacks he knew. If he recognized the beneficial effect that Richard Wright's writings had on his life, he nevertheless supported the fact that literature had to remain in his field, and politics in its domain[11]. To support his view, he advanced the idea of the division of labor "*there is a division of labor in the world -and as i see it- and the people have quite enough reality to bear, simply getting through their lives*"[12].

He thus advocated the division of responsibility between the writer and the politician, and supported the idea that the novelist must be able to understand the depth of things by referring to history, moral assumptions, and concerns of the country. In his novel *Invisible Man*, the author tells the story of a young black whose name remains unknown throughout the work. He becomes disillusioned in the multiethnic and capitalist environment prevailing in America. No matter his actions or opinions, he remains invisible to others and to himself. However, without losing hope, he fights, talks, breaks stereotypes. Faced with the rejection of his fellow blacks, and alleged whites benefactors,

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[9] William Smith Gardner, The Negro Writer: Pitfalls and Compensation ", in CWE by Bigs, ed, *The Black American Writer*, Vol I. Baltimore: Penguin, 1971, p. 73.

[10] Carl Milton Hughes, *The Negro Novelist 1940-1950*, New York: The Citadell Press, 1970, p. 266.

[11] James Baldwin, "Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son," the New York Dial Press, 1961, p. 24.

[12] James Baldwin, "Mass Culture and the Creative Artist: Some Personal Notes" Daedalus 89, pp. 375-376.

plagued by social and political manipulations, his response is optimism and dynamism[13].

Without any fatality, Ralph Ellison presents the fate of the Black man and his tribulations as the result of the opaque and stuffy nature of social relations. With this work, he departed from the social realism that led after a certain success to the impasse noted then in the fiction. This novel reflected what he himself described as an "experimental approach" that combines social responsibility and work structure.

As for Ralph Ellison, sharing Baldwin's vision, he leaned toward a modern perspective of fiction with personal and allegorical representation. For him, the author is supposed to work on the complexity of social realities without falling in commonplaces. This approach was perceived by some other Blacks as a betrayal to their own race. Leroy Jones alias Amiri Baraka, described this disloyalty in these terms: "Men like Baldwin want to be free from such an ugly thing as the racial struggle … their colour is the only obstruction I can see to this state they seek, and I see no reason why they should be denied it for so paltry a thing as heavy pigmentation"[14].

For Baraka, the aspiration of Blacks like Baldwin was to melt in the mass and the only thing that prevented them was their blackness. Baraka was in this way criticizing the individualism of the latter, which was also considered as being integrationist. For the opponents to Baldwin's vision, the position of black people in a certain way required the acceptance and the implementation of protest and the authors whose works did not put emphasis on injustice were bitterly criticized.

From the debate over the role of literature in the African-American context, if the protest novel was a bit disturbing by its insistence upon injustices, it appeared indecent for writers to overlook their inequitable social conditions. In spite of the unfair accusations against them, the assimilationist or integrationist writers did not neglect the plight of black people. Their commitments were more visible in moral and aesthetic areas and in their way, they contributed to the maturing of Blacks' literature. However in the multicultural environment of the United States of America, the need to incorporate their cultural heritage became observable with the advent of the Black Power movement and its insistence upon a new Black Nationalism.

## III The Originality of African-American Literature through Cultural and Political Commitment

The failure of racial integration made it necessary for black people to assert their distinctive personality in literature. In addition, after independence, the African continent became a source of pride for Blacks in the United States. These impulses of self-determination were also visible in literature by the adoption of literary rules and standards specific to the black culture.

Three decades after the Harlem Renaissance, the Black Nationalism was on the rise. In the same period, Africa emerged with her first independent states and became a great source of inspiration for African-Americans. In this regard, the historian Nicole Bacharan wrote that art, clothing, names, hairstyles and African foods were then very popular in African- American communities and that black intellectuals and artists went on "pilgrimage" in Africa, in search of their roots[15].

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[13] James Baldwin, *Invisible Man*, New York Vintage, 1972.

[14] LeRoi Jones, "Brief Reflections on Two Hot-Shots", *Home,* p. 120.

[15] Nicole Bacharan**,** *Histoire des Noirs Américains au XXème siècle*. Bruxelles: Complexe, 1994, p. 25.

While political leaders demanded the autonomy of the political and economic management and struggled to transform the way African-Americans were treated and defined in America, nationalist writers for their part, sought to transform the image of black people in literary representations, once again. That time around, the focus was to propose a version of the black man that would be based on African-Americans' cultural richness. The new literary and artistic approach now aimed to produce committed works of fiction, consistent with the socio- political and community spirit of the time.

Amiri Baraka, among others, contributed enormously to develop the configuration of the new poetics of the Black Nationalist culture of the 1960s. During a trip to Cuba, he discovered the concept of revolution as a reality. That experience changed his perception of literature as a means to personal liberation. Baraka realized the strength of cultural solidarity and black consciousness. He began to consolidate the foundations of a black nationalism advising young artists to devote their talents to enrich their community. In an essay entitled "The Myth of the Negro Literature», this author called black artists to make aesthetic proposals in order to *"Provide their version of America from that no man's land outside the mainstream*"[16]**.** Such an assertion expressed the growing worry black intellectuals experienced in front of the dominant ideology. The nationalist thinkers realized well that without concrete proposal from Blacks to the nation, they could not really prosper in literature.

With such statements, universality was no more considered as the main assessment tool for this literature. Instead, black novelists and critics decided to establish a system of values oriented to their culture. That new philosophy was summed up by Malcolm X when he stated that their priority would be Black Nationalism in all domains: "Our political philosophy will be Black Nationalism. Our economic and social philosophy will be Black Nationalism. Our cultural emphasis will be Black Nationalism… The political philosophy of Black Nationalism means: we must control the politics and politicians of our community"[17].

The ramifications of such an ideology in literary criticism and fiction productions were large and numerous. The assertion of an independent cultural identity and the tendency to reject anything that is white was paramount. The white critics were accused of racism and the Western aesthetic was considered meaningless and unsuitable for black literature. The authors of the caliber of James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison were referred to with the uncomplimentary term "assimilationist".

All this agitation reflected the fairly awkward question of the dependant status of black literature and the consequent racial loyalty of black critics and writers. Maulana Karanga summarizes this position quite accurately when he explains that, "black art irregardless [sic] of any technical requirement ... must be functional, collective and committing and must expose the enemy, praise the people and support the revolution "[18]. A politicized art was encouraged by critics. These critics asked the African-American

[16] LeRoi Jones, "The Myth of a Negro Literature", *Home: Social Essays*, New York: Apollo Books, 1966, p. 114.

[17] George Breitman, ed., Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements. New York: Grove Press, 1966, p. 21.

[18] Maulana Ron Karenga," Black Cultural Strangulation" in *The Black Esthetics*, p. 89.

writers to have a black spirit and a black judgment. This philosophy was within the framework of the redefinition of black literature from an ethnic point of view, in order to destroy the preeminence of white critics. As a result, they were considered as unqualified because they could not comprehend the culture that underpinned black people's works.

The creation of the novelist was used as a way of advocating the political aims of black people while revealing the brutality of the Whites. Black nationalists wanted to establish a rational formal setting and accordingly, encouraged the creation of independent black publishing houses. In this respect, the struggle of Black Power, established a literary branch of the organization called the Black Arts Movement in the perspective of ensuring the independence of African-American literature and freedom from the monopoly of white criticism. In particular, it led to the setting up of an African-American curriculum in universities, the creation of newspapers, and Black publishing houses. It also allowed writers to address effectively the development of new literary forms. The disqualification of the white worldview and the repossession of racial pride was the master narrative of the black nationalists. Thus, the use of cultural references combined with the promotion of black literary publishing houses provided a great personality specific to African-American literature.

## CONCLUSION

Committed literature was a long journey for African-Americans literature. If it is true that it has existed since slavery with the slave narratives and other writings, it is also true that this literature really took off from the Harlem Renaissance, which is an important historical landmark. The conjunction of the efforts of many individuals and those of civil rights advocates made this historical period a platform for discussions where the consciousness of a common fate among blacks arouse. Various solutions to promote Black interests are explored and it gives rise to different visions of the Black experience.

Luckily, the debates over the role of African-American literature in the advancement of Blacks were beneficial for the maturing of Blacks' literature and their self-confidence. Du Bois' romantic depiction of the black experience intervened in the early twenties, a time where it was important to show that the black man had the same feelings and potentialities like the white man. The younger generation come with social realism to remind of the fact that the social conditions of black persons were totally different from those of while people. The advocates of arts for art's sake also took the African-Americans a step forward because they showed that Blacks could perceive the complexity of the human nature, and social relationships. Finally, the nationalist vision of African-American literature allowed writers to consider the culture in the elaboration of the literary canons and increased their cultural and literary independence. All those contributions strengthened the African-American literature and improved the image of the Blacks in the United States.

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