

TEACHING THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

I Skyped with four eighth graders seated in someone's living room while someone's grandma pattered around in the background, obviously eavesdropping. (I didn't blame her: she didn't know if I was a fine, upstanding citizen or some she-wolf.) I was surprised to be contacted by these local eighth graders whose study group would be competing at a National History Day. Would I be willing to answer their interview questions on the Harlem Renaissance? Most of their questions had to do with race: prejudice, mingling, limitations, and barriers. The girls sent me the questions ahead of time, and I prepped different answers to what seemed like the same question over and over. These are eighth graders who don't realize that the situation back then (and now) is more complex than black and white. There are many perspectives, skin colors, mixed races, and human emotions complicating everything for those that want to make generalizations. The art of the Harlem Renaissance, the human creation, is pure. How far into this should I go with these students, one of whom spent most of the interview making duck lips on the bottom left of the screen? I decided that one sentence about perspectives, aesthetics, colors, and emotions would suffice to inspire them into some research, and I sent them supplemental materials from the course. And, I told them about Negrotarians.

They saw my course advertised in the community college's non-credit course brochure where I'm listed as teaching a course on the Harlem Renaissance for the 55-and-up set. The original Harlem Renaissance course I taught was to be a three-week non-credit course at a retirement village. One of the resident leaders requested it as a follow-up to an American Music course which had just concluded. At their request the content of the American Music course ended as jazz was starting to evolve. "At that point, Margaret," they explained, "the music is in our memories." But then it occurred to them that they might like to learn specifically about the

Harlem Renaissance. I had no special knowledge about this except for some of the music: Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway led two of my favorite big bands, and I knew Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong were there, too. As I prepped the course I realized I couldn't focus on the music alone. I would have to make the course multidisciplinary for it to make sense. I'd have to show the art, read the literature, and introduce the students to the musicians, artists, dancers, writers, and the thinkers (W.E.B. duBois and Alain Locke) who attempted to get a new aesthetic started.

W.E.B duBois was an essay-writing philosopher who worked to erase racial stereotypes. He encouraged African American artists to use sophisticated themes to create a new, elegant art. His dream was to create the "Talented Tenth," an aspirational preferred gene pool for the future of Harlem. Alain Locke was another essay writer but he encouraged Black artists to look to Africa for inspiration. What actually happened was that artists did what artists do: they took inspiration from their own experiences, or the oral traditions of their families, or any other place to which they felt an affinity. They didn't know they were creating a thing called the Harlem Renaissance (that name was not coined until 1947 by historian John Hope Franklin); they were creating art, music, literature, and community.

Even though I understood the basics of how the Harlem Renaissance blossomed, I was still concerned about my authority in the classroom. I hadn't studied jazz formally, but I've enjoyed listening to it for years. I remember my friend Jeanne's anguish years ago as a brand-new middle school Social Studies teacher. As if teaching middle school kids wasn't scary enough, she, a young-middle-aged suburban white girl was assigned to teach African-American History. Black kids challenged her. She tried to address their concerns and teach creatively. I helped her with a jazz lesson. It was a rough couple of years until she earned some seniority and could opt-out of

A-A History. Would my students challenge my authority on this topic? After all, I hadn't even been to Harlem! That is why I was anxious to go on a Harlem tour.

Our tour excursion started with an hour-long New Jersey Transit train ride through Princeton Junction, New Brunswick, Elizabeth, and nine other stops to New York's Penn Station where we switched to the noisy underground 'A' Train to Harlem. The 1920s flourishing of African-American artists, musicians, writers, and philosophers happened in a section of New York City just north of Central Park—a city-within-a-city. Once in Harlem, Fred and I compared the address on the receipt to the buildings in front of us. It was a storefront, and the door was locked. The lights were on, and we could see a moving shadow inside behind the old window shades, but the door remained locked. Soon we were joined by a pair of young women with European accents, also looking forward to touring Harlem with “a tour guide born and raised in this part of the city.” Saturday traffic buzzed by on Malcolm X Blvd. as we four waited for our tour guide to appear. It was not a terribly cold January day, and the situation was neither friendly nor threatening, but we were anxious to get moving.

My class would start the following Saturday without benefit of the tour. This would be the first time I taught anything other than serious art music ('classical') and the first time I attempted a multidisciplinary course. Did I have the “chops” (knowledge, aptitude, competence) for this? I wasn't simply sticking my toe in, I *dove* into the subject.

Duke Ellington was an ear man. This means that he performed and composed his music without the benefit of sheet music. He did this well into his professional career. He and his musicians would decide on the overall form of a piece (the “head arrangement”), its key, and who would take solos just before they began playing it. This is more or less how most jazz musicians work,

but when the arrangements become complex something has to go down on paper. Ellington eventually had to learn to score and write parts (or have them written) for each musician. “Satin Doll,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “Mood Indigo,” “Take the ‘A’ Train,” and other Ellington standards are preserved on paper just how the Duke Ellington Band played them.

Ellington had a reputation as a ‘riff’ thief according to Terry Teachout’s biography, *Duke: A Life of Duke Ellington*. (I read this along with a bunch of other books in preparation for the course.) He would hear his guys warming up, grab some melody or pattern of notes they were using and build a block of music around it. Then he’d take the blocks of music and arrange them in some kind of order that pleased his ear and smoothed out the transitions. For example, imagine walking through a garden comprised of a series of floral displays: first black-eyed Susans and coneflowers, then a section of all white blooms, then cactus and succulents, then an assortment of rosebushes. Between each garden section there’s a path or bridge to ease the transition to the next. That’s what Ellington’s music is like, varied sections with contrasting textures and characters. This does not sound innovative to us now, but back in the 1920s it was the cat’s pajamas.

The Duke Ellington band had come to New York City twice from Washington, DC. They were called The Washingtonians in those early days, before Ellington emerged as the suave, charismatic leader. The second time they came from DC, they eventually found success at The Cotton Club, the most popular, and mainstream-ish, nightclub in Harlem. In the 1920s, white people would go uptown to Harlem to hear what would become known as the Duke Ellington Band, and enjoy the rest of the varied Cotton Club show. As the tuxedoed Ellington Band grew in popularity, they began to tour, travelling in customized Pullman railroad cars to solve the problem of hotels not accepting black guests. When the Ellington Band was on the road, another

band substituted at the Club. This band was led by the consummate showman Cab Calloway who famously led his band's signature swingy number, "Minnie the Moocher."

A hand went up on the left side of the Retirement Village Game Room. Nancy: "My uncle took me to The Cotton Club once, and what I remember besides the exciting music was the weird segregation. The audience was all white, and the performers all black, although the female dancers were light-skinned." 'Sepia' they were actually called, and they had to be tall: at least 5'7". Gangsters ran The Cotton Club and enforced the rules for the performers and the all-white audience.

After the band members entertained at The Cotton Club, they'd head to the side streets to play at rent parties. "Guests" would pay admission to attend these parties, and enjoy live jazz while purchasing food and perhaps alcohol, drugs, and sex. Proceeds would go to the hosts to help pay the rent on the apartment. Very few white faces were seen at these parties. (I didn't mention rent parties to the eighth graders.)

The most wonderful, moving moment occurred after that first class where we talked about the popular bands. "We used to dance," Eleanor, the elegant one-legged woman told me. "These bands used to come to my college when they were on tour—Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and others, and we had so much fun." She had tears in her eyes and she told me this, and we both understood that she hadn't danced for a long time and she wouldn't again. My lecture on the Harlem Renaissance had touched Eleanor and reminded me why I love teaching these courses for the senior citizens. Wouldn't it be fantastic to put the eighth graders and the senior citizens together and listen to the conversations?

The rest of the older students did not challenge my expertise. In fact, the Village organizers asked me back a few years later to teach the course again because there was still considerable interest in the topic. This second group took a special interest in Harlem Renaissance Art, and one woman complained that I had no dimensions or measurements for the art I showed in my PowerPoint slides. “How can I understand them if I don’t know their size?” I was grateful for this thoughtful question and went home to make a list of each example of art and its dimensions. I annotated each slide for future viewers. I learned through my reading about the Harmon Medal for art that was awarded to many African American artists associated with Harlem in the 1920s: Palmer Hayden, William H. Johnson, James Lesesne Wells, and Laura Wheeler Waring. Their works made up the core of the art lecture and the class and I looked at them together. Not all of the artists lived in Harlem, but they were all connected to the place in some way.

Lois Mailou Jones is one of my favorites because she was a textile artist who became a painter just so she could compete for a Harmon Medal. She never won the medal, but she did win a scholarship to study watercolor painting in Paris. When she returned to the United States, she taught at Howard University but still encountered discrimination because she was black and a woman. A colleague of hers, Augusta Savage, was a sculptor who went broke when the Great Depression hit and signaled the end of the Harlem Renaissance. Savage destroyed all her unsold art, but her “Gamin” (from 1929 and nine inches high) was spared and is now on display at the Smithsonian. It is a bust of a black youth. Both women were frustrated by the era in which they lived, but were revered then and now.

Allan Freelon was one of those artists who refused to use African influences just because he was black and Alain Locke said he should. He looked to his more recent ancestors’ history in the slaveholding South for inspiration. We looked at his black and white graphic, “The New Negro,”

which was used as the cover for *Carolina Magazine*. The image shows a person in silhouette in front of a white African-style mask. There are silhouetted leafless trees in the background. It was my student John S. who noticed first: “What’s hanging from the trees?!” I enlarged the projected image so that we could all see clearly that yes, those were bodies hanging from two of the trees. There was a hush in the usually vivacious Game Room, but at long last I moved on to Laura Wheeler Waring’s portrait of Ann Washington Derry (20 x 16 inches) which won the Harmon Medal in 1927. I’m still haunted by that Allan Freelon graphic.

I was invited by my favorite English Professor friend to speak to his American Literature class about the Harlem Renaissance because they were studying the poems of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. (He often asks me what I’m teaching at the retirement village because, I suspect, he might want to teach there, too. The Harlem topic was a surprise both because it’s different from my usual, and because it intersected with his course.) Maybe his students will challenge me, I thought; maybe this is when it will happen. I focused this talk on Harlem Renaissance literature and included a cool video of Langston Hughes reading his poem “The Weary Blues” accompanied by a jazz combo. (I knew from countless shifts at the library’s reference desk that undergraduates enjoy researching Hughes’s “jazz poetry” which borrows images and rhythms from jazz music.) The class responded enthusiastically, and the professor injected relevant comments from an earlier classroom discussion. We listened to Langston Hughes again, this time reading “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Here I learned something: the origin of the phrase ‘being sold down the river’ is that slaves sometimes actually were floated on a barge down a river to be sold. This was considered one of the worst things that could happen to a person. Hughes never says this outright in the poem (I was supposed to get the reference), but the English Professor explained it to the students (and me).

In order to keep their interest during this hour, I showed them some videos of the Cab Calloway Band (“Minnie the Moocher”), the Duke Ellington Band (“Old Man Blues”), and some athletic Lindy Hop dancers. (My standard quip after that dance video is to make sure you choose your costume headgear carefully if you ever star in a dance video because all of the headpieces in this video go flying.) We also looked at some of the Harmon-Medal-winning art. Though we were focusing on literature, the music, art and dance helped put it in the context of the Harlem Renaissance ‘movement’. “But remember: those artists did not necessarily know they were part of a movement at the time. They were simply creating their art. We can look back and call it a movement, but they couldn’t see into the future.” The students enjoyed the talk, the Professor was delighted, and I began to stop worrying about my credibility. But I still hadn’t been to Harlem.

Eventually, back in Harlem, someone came out of the storefront with a broom and gave us a strange look. He went back in. He came out again with the broom. “You’re not waiting for the Harlem tour, are you?” We said we were, and he informed us that we were in the wrong place. “That tour starts at the Schomburg Center up the street.” I showed him the address on the receipt in my hand and he agreed I was in the right place according to it. But the tour starts elsewhere, evidently too far for us to walk. He flagged down an unmarked sedan. “I know this guy. He’ll take you there and you can catch up with the tour.” We tourists looked at each other. “I wouldn’t get in an unmarked cab in Cape May,” I thought. “I’m not getting in one in Harlem.” As if reading my mind, one of the women asked quietly, “Will you help us find our way back to Lincoln Center? Our hotel is near there.” Good: it was decided and I didn’t have to decide it. We four walked back to the noisy ‘A’ Train and headed south, the ladies to Lincoln Center, and Fred and me to Midtown.

I was invited to teach the three-week course again at another senior community. We talked about the Harmon Medal and The Cotton Club, Allan Freelon, Duke Ellington, and Langston Hughes. This class was fascinated by someone called Snakehips: “Listen man, my name is Snakehips. I dance, and if I don’t stop the show, you can fire me.” This is how Earl “Snakehips” Tucker allegedly got his job at Connie’s Inn, another segregated nightclub in Harlem. This mysterious performer writhed around on the stage with a tassel hanging from his waist sash. He appeared to have no skeleton preventing him from his brand of wiggly “eccentric dance.” He died at 32 after a short career, but not before dancing in MGM’s 1930 movie, “Crazy House.” (The clip is on YouTube.) The students in this third instance of the class hadn’t met me before and did not know what to expect. They were pleased with the course, my credibility remained unchallenged, and I still hadn’t been to Harlem.

Those eighth graders were especially interested in whites and blacks mingling, and one of the best examples of this was the influence of the Negrotarians. They were white people who one way or another, usually with money, supported the arts and innovation in Harlem. “Miss Anne” is black slang for a white woman involved with Harlem. The Godmother was a well-known Miss Anne. Charlotte Osgood Mason (her real name) was a white woman from old money who supported Zora Neale Hurston’s epic research trip to Florida by supplying a car and cash. On the way home from this trip, Hurston ran into Langston Hughes and gave him a lift to Harlem. Godmother supported Hughes, too, and encouraged the two writers to work together. They did collaborate on an opera called *Mulebone* while living in a New Jersey house rented for them by Godmother. The project did not work out and the two writers parted ways. Hughes was annoyed with Godmother’s meddling (she gave him pages of edits and revisions which he ignored), but

Hurston stuck with her. She kept working on *Mulebone*, and when it was eventually performed it was billed as Hurston's work. The eighth graders knew nothing of this and encouraged me to tell them more about the Negrotarians.

Carl Van Vechten was a white writer who came to New York from the Midwest to be the music and dance critic for the *New York Times*. He and his wife, Fania Marinoff, gave lavish integrated parties with alcohol during Prohibition, not in Harlem, but in their tony home on West 55th Street. Van Vechten's address book included many Harlem thought leaders, but he would alienate many of them with the publication of his novel. I can't even type the title here because it is obnoxious and repugnant to me. (The eighth graders understood when I explained that the title had the 'N' word in it.) Langston Hughes, a protégé of Van Vechten, defended the book, but most others in the Harlem community did not appreciate the familiarity of this white guy's novel with black culture, as supportive as he might be otherwise. W.E.B. duBois wrote in the magazine *The Crisis* that the novel is "an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white." I haven't set aside time to read it yet.

My favorite Negrotarian figure is Ernestine Rose, the librarian at the New York Public Library's Harlem branch. Librarians are taught to address the needs of their constituents and this is what Miss Rose did: at her first NYPL branch with Chinese patrons, then at another location with Russian Jews, then with soldiers as part of the American Library Association's World War I Library War Service. After that war, she landed at the NYPL's Harlem branch. She tapped into the talents and interests of this city within a city and organized poetry readings, concerts, book discussions, and other cultural experiences irresistible to her Harlem patrons. At the same time, she was extremely active in her career, publishing articles and speaking at conferences. By all accounts she was a humble woman, quietly promoting the talents of her constituents and

becoming a great Negrotarian example for eighth grade girls. Her legacy at the NYPL also includes the Division of Negro Literature, History, and Prints which she founded in 1925.

On the evening of the failed tour, after a quick pasta dinner in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan near the train station, and the hour ride home on the train, I finally talked to the tour guide. There were multiple messages from him waiting on my phone machine. He was trying to figure out how to make this up to us. He claimed his website clearly said the tour was to meet in front of the Schomburg Center, and I pointed out that I didn't have the website with me; I had only the mobile version on my phone and the printed-out receipt with the storefront address. Both locations were on Malcolm X Blvd. though with different street numbers, and those two women made the same mistake. He agreed to fix the receipt so that the Schomburg address would print out on it in the future, and he agreed to give me a refund (which I never saw), and he hoped he could take us around Harlem sometime soon. "My Saturdays are booked for the foreseeable future with my Harlem Renaissance class," I told him, "but I still want to go on the tour!" That's when he told me that the guy sweeping up the store where we were waiting is his brother, and the driver of the unmarked cab is a close family friend.

What I learned from this Harlem Renaissance experience is that with meticulous research I could establish myself as, at least, a credible teacher and, at most (unexpectedly), a local expert. I knew the subject well enough to make it appropriate for the young people in that study group. No one challenged my credibility in any of these situations because I presented my content with respect, confidence, and proper citations. (I tell the story of the failed Harlem tour to classes, emphasizing the humor in the story and playing down the fact that I've been unable to reschedule it.) Through the three occurrences of this course, I watched Ernestine Rose emerge from mention on a single PowerPoint slide representing her as simply a supportive white librarian to a

champion of librarianship and culture and a hero to me as a librarian. Most importantly, I've learned that artists and creative people have similar motivation no matter their training or background, and they do their best when allowed the freedom to represent their own personal experience and aesthetic. I still want to tour Harlem, but would a twenty-first century trip help me feel the feels of the 1920s Harlem milieu?