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**The Role of Harlem in the Development of
African American Urban Culture: Cultural
Capital versus Ghetto**

Diplomová práce

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Abstrakt

Newyorská čtvrť Harlem byla historicky vnímána jako centrum afroamerické kultury a zároveň jako černošské ghetto. Tato diplomová práce zkoumá zrod afroamerické městské kultury v Harlemu a analyzuje ji skrze to, jak byl Harlem zobrazován v černošské literatuře, hudbě a výtvarném umění dané doby. Období 20. až 40. let 20. století nejvýrazněji ilustruje dvojitou identitu Harlemu jako hlavního města černošské kultury a ghetta. Dvacátá léta byla obdobím nebývalého rozvoje afroamerické kultury ztělesněném Harlemskou renesancí, zatímco 30. a 40. léta byla charakterizována ekonomickou krizí a jejím dozvukem. V těchto letech došlo k výraznému zhoršení životních podmínek v Harlemu. Cílem této práce je kriticky analyzovat období Harlemské renesance a její význam a relevanci pro dané období v porovnání s pozdějšími uměleckými reakcemi na život v ghettu. Hlavním argumentem je, že způsob, jakým byl Harlem zobrazován a popisován v černošské kultuře dvacátých až čtyřicátých let a reflexe jeho výše zmíněné duality, vypovídal o charakteru rozvíjející se afroamerické městské kultury, s důrazem na realitu městského života v kontrastu s jeho idealizací.

Abstract

Harlem is an emblematic neighborhood in New York City, historically perceived both as the center of African American culture and a black ghetto. This thesis explores

the African American urban culture at its birth and analyzes it through the portrayls of Harlem in black literature, music, and visual art of the period. The era of the 1920s through the 1940s illustrates most distinctly the dual identity of Harlem as a cultural capital versus a ghetto as the 1920s marked a period of unprecedented cultural flowering embodied by the Harlem Renaissance, whereas the 1930s and 1940s were characterized by the Great Depression and its aftermath. During these years the living conditions in Harlem significantly deteriorated. The aim of this work is to critically analyze the period of African American cultural boom of the Harlem Renaissance years and discuss its relevance for the period in comparison to the artistic reactions to the experience of life in the ghetto. The proposed argument is that the way Harlem was depicted in African American culture and the artistic reflection of its duality characterized African American urban experience and culture in the period of 1920s through the 1940s, concentrating on the problem of urban reality in contrast with urban fantasy.

Klíčová slova

Harlem, afroamerická kultura, afroamerická literatura, Harlemská renesance, černošské čtvrti, ghetto, afroamerická identita

Keywords

Harlem, African American culture, African American literature, Harlem Renaissance, black neighborhoods, ghetto, African American identity

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1. Prohlašuji, že jsem předkládanou práci zpracoval/a samostatně a použil/a jen uvedené prameny a literaturu.
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V Praze dne 16. května, 2014

Julie Kárová

Poděkování

Na tomto místě bych ráda poděkovala své vedoucí práce, Prof. PhDr. Svatavě Rakové, CSc., za cenné rady a za čas, který mi během psaní této práce věnovala. Také bych ráda poděkovala Prof. Normě Hervey, Ph.D., za vstřícnou pomoc s jazykovou úpravou práce.

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Prof. PhDr. Svatava Rakova, Csc.

V čem se oproti původními zadání změnil cíl práce?

The aim of the thesis is to show that African American urban culture is from a great part defined by two factors – one is the pride of belonging into a developed urban community, the other is the experience of living in a ghetto. The cultural expression reacts to the changes of conditions in the urban environment.

Jaké změny nastaly v časovém, teritoriálním a věcném vymezení tématu?

Changes were made regarding the timing of the thesis. Although the basis will be the 1920s as an example of the cultural flowering of Harlem, the thesis will further concentrate on the period of 1960s and 1970s, when African American culture again strongly reacted to the ongoing changed in the urban environment.

Concerning the territorial specification, no changes were made and the neighborhood of Harlem, New York City, remains the concern of this thesis.

Regarding the actual topic of the thesis, instead of focusing on the reaction of the culture

to the rise and fall of Harlem, I will rather analyze to the particular changes taking place in the neighborhood, such as the loss of population in 1960s and 1970s. My attempt will be to answer the question of how does the community react to the changes of its urban surroundings, mainly through their cultural expression.

Jak se proměnila struktura práce (vyjádřete stručným obsahem)?

Concerning the structure, I will very briefly describe Harlem in the context of its historical development, explaining how it turned into an African American neighborhood during the first two decades of the 20th century. The following section will be dedicated to the period of 1920s and 1930s, describing the Harlem Renaissance as the cultural expression of the era and its importance in the process of shaping the idea of Harlem being the African American capital, followed by a different perception of Harlem not as the "black paradise" but as an emerging ghetto, looking at the downside of this urban black community and how it is reflected in African American cultural expression. The next section will be dedicated to the era of 1960s and 1970s, describing the new changes of the living conditions in Harlem and the cultural reaction of the community to these changes. Finally, I will point out a similar trend which can be traced in African American culture as it reacts to the changing environment of the urban setting.

Jakým vývojem prošla metodologická koncepce práce?

No significant changes were made concerning the methodology of the thesis.

Které nové prameny a sekundární literatura byly zpracovány a jak tato skutečnost ovlivnila celek práce?

Regarding primary sources, I have been working with specific examples of African American cultural expression such as poetry of the 1920s by major African American poets. A new secondary source which significantly influenced the thesis as a whole is *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* by Jonathan Gill. This source makes it possible to truly work with Harlem as a historically important neighborhood of New York City as it provides thorough factual details on its development from the first settlement until today.

Charakterizujte základní proměny práce v době od zadání projektu do odevzdání tezí a pokuste se vyhodnotit, jaký pokrok na práci jste během semestru zaznamenali (v bodech):

I have done a thorough research on the period of 1920s and 1930s, which was concluded

by a 25 pages long research paper. The chapters of this paper are dedicated to Harlem Renaissance and its legacy, Harlem's turn into a ghetto in the 1930s, and the phenomenon of Harlem in African American culture, balancing between reality and fantasy. This paper will be further developed into the final thesis. I also visited Harlem and did further research in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (part of New York Public Library) located in Harlem.

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Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
1. THE DEVELOPMENT OF HARLEM AS BLACK NEIGHBORHOOD.....	8
1.1. BECOMING BLACK	8
1.2 HARLEM AS THE NEW CULTURAL CENTER	10
1.3 NEGATIVE REALITIES OF LIFE IN HARLEM.....	13
2. HARLEM AS CULTURAL CAPITAL	17
2.1 THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE	17
2.2 HARLEM CELEBRATED IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE.....	22
2.3 THE MUSIC OF HARLEM	27
2.4 THE VISUAL HARLEM: ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY	30
2.5 THE DEBATE OVER DEPICTING HARLEM.....	34
3. HARLEM THE GHETTO.....	37
3.1 THE MYTH OF HARLEM.....	37
3.2 HARLEM GHETTO IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE.....	40
3.3 THE GHETTO DEPICTED IN ART	44
3.4 MUSIC OF THE GHETTO	46
3.5 HARLEM AS CULTURAL CAPITAL VERSUS GHETTO.....	48
CONCLUSION.....	50
RESUMÉ.....	54
SOURCES.....	56

Introduction

The history of Harlem, neighborhood in Northern Manhattan, New York City, is the story of the creation of African American urban society and culture. Although only one of the many examples of predominantly black neighborhoods in American cities, Harlem is unique in many ways, most importantly because historically it has been perceived as the center of African American culture. Simultaneously, at particular stages of its development, it had a reputation of a black ghetto with living conditions incomparably worse than those in other parts of the city.

This paper introduces the phenomenon of Harlem's duality as reflected in the artistic achievements of the 1920s through the 1940s, at a time of mass influx of African Americans to the cities. Harlem depicted and celebrated as a home in African American literature, music, and art, marked an important transition from the heritage of a rural slave past towards the new urbanity. Portraying Harlem as a ghetto, African American writers, artists, and musicians voiced their protests and despair about the situation of blacks in the United States. The play between Harlem as a cultural capital and Harlem as a ghetto traces the ever-present duality in African American history, the duality connected with identity search, the contrast between who one really is versus the identity created by others.

Looking at the phenomenon of Harlem romanticized and demonized, the principal aim of this paper is to critically analyze the cultural reaction of African Americans to the new urban experience. The work addressed the following questions: What was the role of Harlem in the development of African American urban culture in the period from 1920 to 1950? How is the dual perception of Harlem both as cultural capital and a ghetto reflected in African American cultural expressions?

The main thesis is that the duality of Harlem as the cultural capital versus a ghetto defines the African American urban experience. On one hand, it expresses the aspirations connected with life in the city and the advancement of black urban society, on the other hand it manifests the radicalization of African American urban population connected with the unfulfilled hopes for better living standards in the urban environment.

The geographical scope of this thesis must be defined, as throughout history, Harlem has been a very mixed and multicultural part of New York City. This paper is restricted to the African American Harlem, which is generally connected with the area around 125th Street. More specifically, it is defined as Central Harlem, spreading roughly from 110th Street to 155th Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Fifth Avenue.¹

The research is limited to period of the 1920s through the 1940s. This time illustrates most clearly the dual perception of Harlem as cultural capital versus ghetto as the 1920s marked an era of enormous cultural flowering whereas the 1930s and 1940s were marked by the Great Depression and its aftermath, which led to a significant deterioration of living conditions in Harlem. This period is crucial for the development of African American urban culture and cultural identity in black Harlem. It provides the roots of African American urban culture, symbolized by the transition from the carefully cherished culture of the Harlem Renaissance to the later, perhaps more authentic, voice of blackness coming from the ghetto, even more explicitly represented

¹ United States Census Bureau. "Ethnographic Follow-up of a Predominantly African American Population in a Sample Area in Central Harlem, New York City," accessed May 5, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/srd/papers/pdf/ev91-11.pdf>.

by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, which became the artistic voice of Black Nationalism, a period beyond the scope of this thesis.

It must be pointed out that this paper focuses on just one segment of Harlem's population, discussing African American intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians, coming predominantly from an educated black middle class, rather than those inhabitants of Harlem suffering most critically from the living conditions of the ghetto.

This work is a case study of Harlem concentrated on the dual perception of Harlem as a black cultural capital versus Harlem as a ghetto. It captures a long-term process of the development of African American urban cultural identity, using artistic depiction of Harlem between 1920 and 1950 to demonstrate the specifics of the black community in Harlem as well as more general tendencies in African American artistic expression. It is a historical analysis, using selected examples of creative work from the period and academic studies on this topic.

One of the challenges associated with the topic of this paper is that it deals with Harlem as a cultural metaphor and therefore needs to address the relationship between hard facts and people's perception of them. A disadvantage of cultural explanations is dealing with fantasy as well as reality and individualist versus collective beliefs. However, it is exactly this challenge, which serves as a motivation to explore these topics.

The materials used for this paper were drawn from a variety of different sources. As it works with Harlem of fiction and Harlem's history, the spectrum of sources is quite broad. Among the primary sources are poems, novels, essays, and articles written by African American writers including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Working with literary texts

and poetry is challenging as one faces a mixture of fiction and reality. However, the literary reflections of the era must be taken into consideration, as these works are an important evidence of the incredible cultural and artistic achievements.

Secondary sources include mainly books and articles from academic journals on the Harlem Renaissance, African American culture in the urban context and the debate about culture in the ghetto. The following two books were most inspiring, bringing a deep insight on Harlem and the foundation of African American culture and identity. In *Harlem Between Heaven and Hell*, Monique M. Taylor explores the historical as well as symbolic importance of Harlem. Taylor points out the issues of race, class, and gentrification in the changing urban environment of Harlem, observing the intertwining of class and race as well as the movement of black middle class. Ron Eyerman's work *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* provides an in-depth analysis of the development of African American urban culture and identity-formation through the perspective of the cultural trauma theory, in this case regarding black collective memory of slavery as the foundation in the process of shaping African America identity. The book is well written; to mention one fault, it is perhaps Eyerman's slightly narrow and uncritical account of the Harlem Renaissance.

Maria Balshaw's *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature* served as a useful source on the subject of the creation of black urban aesthetics in Harlem, exploring the relationship between reality of life in the city and its fictional interpretation. A similar topic is addressed in Sidney H. Bremer's article published by Modern Language Association called "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers." Among other noteworthy articles is that of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "Harlem on Our Minds," which came out in the *Critical Inquiry* in 1997. Gates suggests that four renaissances occurred in African American

cultural history, the second and most well known one being the Harlem Renaissance. He discusses the role of Harlem within cultural revolutions, highlighting the hyphenation and tension between the myth of Harlem and its social realities.

The main source in regard to the historical development of Harlem is Jonathan Gill's book *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America*, a detailed study of the history of the neighborhood, looking at the political, social, and cultural importance of the place, but also its downfall. The books *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* by Cheryl Greenberg and *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* by Gilbert Osofsky were helpful regarding the process of the ghettoization of Harlem as well as the context of the controversial debate about when did Harlem actually turn into a ghetto. Collection of essays *Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* edited by Ray Hutchison and Bruce D. Haynes provides a useful background for theories connected with ghettos in the United States.

The paper is divided into three main sections. The first chapter provides the factual base for the thesis. It introduces Harlem and traces its development as an African American neighborhood. It briefly describes Harlem's history before the 1920s as well as the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to cities to demonstrate how Harlem became a predominantly black community. It continues, looking closely at the decade of 1920s as Harlem evolved into the center of African American culture, black politics, and business. Lastly it explores the deterioration of Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, discussing the worsening living conditions as well as the race riots of 1935 and 1943.

The second chapter concentrates on Harlem as a cultural capital of black America. It describes in detail the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, as this period is crucial for

the legacy of Harlem as the African American cultural capital, but goes beyond the scope of this decade, as some spheres of black culture flourish in the later years as well. It looks closely at the idea of Harlem as a black cultural capital reflected in African American literature, music, and art of the period. Its last part analyzes the debate over the depiction of Harlem, illustrating the clash between the older and younger generation of African American intellectuals, writers, and artists and their views on the role of Harlem in the establishment of black urban artistic expression.

The third and last section examines Harlem as a ghetto and its reflection in the African American culture. How did the perception of Harlem change as it became a ghetto? Or was it already a ghetto in the 1920? What were the new tendencies in African American literature, art, and music? It provides a different perception of Harlem in black artistic expression not as the "black paradise" but as an emerging ghetto, looking at the negative realities of this urban black community. The phenomenon of Harlem is discussed with an accent on the duality of the place, bringing together the different ways Harlem has been portrayed in African American artistic expression.

1. The Development of Harlem as Black Neighborhood

1.1. *Becoming Black*

Harlem was originally settled by Dutch farmers and, for a long time, remained quite an isolated part of the city due to its location, being relatively far from the more inhabited parts of Manhattan. By the end of the 19th century, it was a predominantly German district, and, gradually, Jewish immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe settled there. The first African Americans started to move to Harlem at the beginning of the 1890s. There was a pattern in the movement of African Americans within Manhattan going uptown, trying to escape bad living conditions and clashes with other inhabitants. In Harlem, they found better housing opportunities and a more attractive environment than in other parts of the city. The neighborhood attracted especially the middle- and upper- class blacks, who took advantage of that fact that “informal racial boundaries that kept them out of most downtown neighborhoods weren’t yet being enforced uptown.”² Most of the newcomers settled in the area around 135th Street.

The Afro-American Realty Company directed by Philip Payton played an important role, as it encouraged black tenants to rent apartments in Harlem. During the first decade of the 20th century, the supply of real estate in Harlem exceeded the demand. One of the main causes was the unfinished construction of the Lenox Avenue subway line intended to simplify the transportation to this relatively distant part of the city. The real estate owners had problems paying for the apartments and Payton used this fact to convince them to accept black tenants. Due to his fight for better living conditions for the African Americans in New York City, he became known as the „father of colored

² Jonathan Gill, *Harlem: The Four Hundred Year History from Dutch Village to Capital of Black America* (New York: Grove Press, 2011), 175.

Harlem."³ He "bought property on 134th Street and Fifth Avenue in 1904 and opened good-quality Harlem buildings to black tenants for the first time."⁴ The white residents of Harlem did not always welcome such initiatives and protested against what they called a "Negro invasion".⁵ As the black population of Harlem increased, it stopped attracting white tenants and their number declined. The real estate prices dropped and African Americans used this opportunity to buy apartments. In 1914, St. James Presbyterian Church moved to Harlem and other churches soon followed. Harlem was steadily transforming into a black neighborhood and by the end of World War I, it gained the reputation of the biggest black community in the United States.⁶ At that time, white residents of Harlem were still in majority, but this was going to change soon.

The Great Migration between 1916 and 1930 brought many African Americans from the rural areas of the South to the cities of the North, including New York City. Whereas in 1890, less than 20% of black Americans lived in urban areas, by 1920 it was already 34% and by 1930 the figure reached almost 44%.⁷ They were attracted by economic opportunities and hoped for better living conditions and a less racist environment. As Taylor writes in her study of Harlem, it was inevitable that some part of New York City had to become an urban 'black belt' as the black population increase was significant.⁸ Harlem was the obvious choice, as it had already begun to develop a black community before the increased migration. Although migration from the South was the major source of this increase, it must not be forgotten that foreign-born blacks

³ Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 84.

⁴ Cheryl Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode?: Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.

⁵ Monique M. Taylor, *Harlem Between Heaven and Hell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 30.

⁶ Gill, 184.

⁷ Clare Corbould, *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 7.

⁸ Taylor, 27.

participated in this movement to New York City as well. "Eighteen percent of Manhattan's black population in 1930 came from foreign countries, mainly from the Caribbean."⁹ Harlem gradually evolved into a diverse and culturally unique neighborhood.

As a consequence of the influx of black, white population of Harlem dropped significantly. In 1910, the population of Central Harlem was 9.89% black and 90.01% white, whereas in 1930, it was 70.18% black and 29.43% white.¹⁰ The remaining percentage consisted of people of Hispanic and other origins. Nevertheless, whites remained in charge of Harlem economically, as landlords or shopkeepers. In 1931 white people still owned more than 80% of businesses in Central Harlem.¹¹

1.2 Harlem as the New Cultural Center

Harlem was different from other evolving black neighborhoods in Northern cities. In Chicago and Detroit for example, black labor was concentrated mainly in large industries, whereas Harlem had more varied and rather smaller commercial enterprises.¹² This did not guarantee jobs to African Americans and it must be pointed out that there was also unemployment in Harlem. Yet the place symbolized opportunity and hope for the migrants coming from the South. Harlem was a desirable and distinctive place with fine housing, located quite conveniently near the most prominent areas of Manhattan. "Harlem's physical condition in the early part of the twentieth

⁹ Greenberg, 17.

¹⁰ Census Tract Data from National Historical Geographical Information System in Andrew Beveridge, "An Affluent, White Harlem?" *Gotham Gazette*, August 27, 2008, accessed May 12, 2014 <http://www.gothamgazette.com/index.php/demographics/4062-an-affluent-white-harlem>.

¹¹ Greenberg, 61.

¹² Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 113.

century contributed to the perception that it was not a slum and inspired pride among its black residents.”¹³

Harlem turned into an attractive location for the newcomers as it developed as a center of African American culture. It was the place to be for the African American elite from the entire United States. Despite the fact that in 1917, there were only 2,132 African Americans enrolled in a university or college, an establishing group of African American intellectuals significantly contributed to the development of Harlem’s community.¹⁴ “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.”¹⁵

The African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois was the first African American to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard in 1895.¹⁶ He moved to Harlem in 1910, where he became a member of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the editor of its magazine *The Crisis*. Du Bois introduced the term ‘Talented Tenth’ to describe the “mobilizing elite” of black intellectuals.¹⁷ He believed that it was first necessary to create a black leadership, because “the Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men.”¹⁸ James Weldon Johnson was a poet, novelist, diplomat, and a civil rights leader who attended Columbia University in New York. He became the executive secretary of the NAACP in 1920 and held this position until 1931. Alain Locke, perhaps the leading intellectual of the Harlem

¹³ Lance Freeman, *There Goes the ‘Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 20.

¹⁴ David Levering Lewis, “The Intellectual Luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 7 (1995): 68, accessed May 8, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2963433>.

¹⁵ Eyerman, 96.

¹⁶ Brent Haynes Edwards, introduction to *Souls of Black Folk*, by W. E. B. Du Bois (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), ix.

¹⁷ Lewis, “The Intellectual Luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance,” 68.

¹⁸ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 205.

Renaissance, studied at Oxford and earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Harvard in 1918.¹⁹ He later became a faculty member of Howard University. Lastly, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson, who, originally from Chicago, obtained his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago, also believed in the power of culture within the struggle for racial equality. In 1924 he founded *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* and encouraged African American writers to contribute to this publication.²⁰

Harlem became renowned as the "Mecca of the New Negro" as the cultural movement took place there during the 1920s, known as the Harlem Renaissance. These were the golden times of Harlem, when it was linked with "jazz, black art, economic prosperity, the rise of African American middle class, the so called "New Negro" and the celebration of Afro-American heritage and culture."²¹ It came to symbolize a new era of African American history, linked no longer with the rural environment of the South but with the Northern city, having a "profound influence in the creation of America's newest cultural voice."²²

At that time Harlem also became the center of black politics and business. The key African American organizations dealing with the civil rights problems, the NAACP and the National Urban League moved their headquarters there. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, the major Black Nationalist organization of the time, was founded in Harlem. The crucial point was that a black public sphere emerged and provided a setting for further development of African American culture as well as political engagement.

Key institutions were established in Harlem, which were crucial for the

¹⁹ Lewis, "The Intellectual Luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance," 68.

²⁰ *Opportunity* was the official journal of the National Urban League.

²¹ Gerald David Jaynes, *Encyclopedia of African American Society* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005), 395.

²² Taylor, 9.

advancement of black public sphere. The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, originally The Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints, opened in 1925 as a branch library of The New York Public Library. German-Puerto Rican scholar and bibliophile Arturo A. Schomburg donated his personal collection of books and art to the library. Located on 135th Street, it became a notable center of African American academic research and a venue for lectures by prominent scholars including W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, or Schomburg himself.²³ The local branch of the YMCA served as a meeting point for black intellectuals.²⁴ It was the first destination for many newcomers to Harlem as it provided affordable accommodation and social service.

1.3 Negative Realities of Life in Harlem

Despite the flowering African American culture and celebration of Harlem as the cultural capital of black America in the 1920s, the everyday living conditions in Harlem were much worse than in the rest of New York City. Cheryl Greenberg argues that “economic and artistic advancement was not sufficient to dislodge entrenched racial discrimination or lessen Harlem’s widespread poverty.”²⁵ The truth about the neighborhood would be clearly revealed with the start of the Great Depression. Harlem was severely hit by the national economic crisis.

The unemployment rate rose rapidly during the Depression years. In the early 1930s, a quarter of Harlemites were out of work and this number rose to 50% unemployment in 1933.²⁶ One of the causes was that whites dominated Harlem’s economy. Many local stores and companies didn’t have any black employees. The

²³ Gilbert Osofsky, “Symbols of the Jazz Age: The New Negro and Harlem Discovered,” *American Quarterly*, 17, no. 2 (1965): 231, accessed April 23, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711356>.

²⁴ YMCA is the abbreviation for Young Men’s Christian Association.

²⁵ Greenberg, 14.

²⁶ Gill, 283.

National Urban League initiated a boycott against stores operated by whites, using the slogan "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work." Because unemployment became an issue for white Americans as well, African Americans had to compete with them for even the lowest paid positions, previously not attractive to whites, who suddenly demanded jobs as janitors, porters, factory laborers or domestic workers. Drug dealing, especially of heroin, became a common way to make money in Harlem. The increase in drug use led to higher rate of criminality. Income of African Americans, already well below the city's average, declined as well: "In Harlem the median family income fell by one-half between 1929 and 1932."²⁷

The population of Harlem grew with the arrivals of migrants from the South as well as the West Indies. This led to overcrowding and the deterioration of living conditions. Due to ongoing segregation, black tenants could not threaten their landlords that they would move out if rents were too high. As a result, rents were actually higher in Harlem than in other parts of the city while building conditions worsened. High rents in Harlem led to the division of apartments into even smaller units and the population density in Harlem was very high: at one point it was more than twice that of the city as a whole.²⁸

Health care conditions were critical, as the "mortality rate in central Harlem was 40 percent higher than the city average during the early years of the Depression, while the infant mortality rate was twice the city average (...)." ²⁹ Schools were in terrible condition as well, suffering from overcrowding, providing low quality education – the New York City Board of Education actually punished underperforming teachers by placing them in uptown schools.³⁰

²⁷ Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 199.

²⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Encyclopedia of New York City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 524.

²⁹ Gill, 285.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

The harshening conditions led to increasing anger in the community. The first race riot in Harlem took place in 1935 and another followed in 1943. The 1935 riot was sparked by a rumor that a young black boy, accused of stealing a knife at Kresge's Department Store on 125th Street, was beaten to death by the police. The store had previously been a target of local protest and had quite a history of discrimination in employment and racist acts.³¹ This incident therefore led to an angry protest of the blacks who were already disturbed by the attitudes of the store, which was forced to close. This riot was aimed at property rather than people.

Later, Mayor La Guardia set up a commission to analyze the causes of the riot. Although the group included some African American intellectuals such as A. Philip Randolph and E. Franklin Frazier, the majority were white people. This fact, together with the unsatisfactory outcome when the Mayor did not make the report public frustrated black Harlemites. The riot definitely proved that the situation in Harlem was unstable. Some historians argue that the 1935 riot marked the beginning of Harlem's descent into the status of America's representative black ghetto.³²

The second race riot in Harlem took place in August 1943. It was, again, sparked by a rumor and symbolized the great tension and frustration of black Harlemites. The police arrested a black soldier, who quarreled with them because they wanted to arrest a black woman for disorderly conduct. When he tried to get away, one of the policemen took out his gun and fired. The soldier was wounded and taken to hospital. Meanwhile a rumor spread that a white policeman killed a black soldier and the situation escalated. Crowds gathered and burst into violence and looting. The outcome was a disaster:

³¹ Ray Hutchison and Bruce D. Haynes (eds.), *Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 124.

³² Gill, 303.

“1,469 stores were vandalized, 606 people arrested, and 189 injured. Six blacks were killed, four by police and two by other blacks.”³³

Both the 1935 and 1943 riots expressed the economic hardship of Harlem as well as racial tensions – the targets represented white power, stores owned by white people. They were a reaction to the terrible state of housing conditions in Harlem and “a radical exercise in the remaking – or perhaps destroying as a precursor to rebuilding – human geographies in the context of racism.”³⁴ The riots generally raised awareness of black issues, but there was no resolution to the problems.

Throughout the 1930s, Harlem slowly lost its reputation as a center of black artistic activity and became more closely identified as a black ghetto. This transition was reflected in the works of African American artists, writers and musicians. As Harlem symbolized the flowering of African American culture during the Harlem Renaissance era, throughout the 1930s it became a symbol of poverty and despair of the urban African American population.

³³ Greenberg, 211.

³⁴ Thomas Heise, *American Literatures Initiative: Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 129.

2. Harlem as Cultural Capital

From the 1920s to the 1940s, African American culture developed a new era, in which a generation of artists, writers, and musicians experimented “with new ways to express themes of racial pride, African roots, the American South, social and political equality.”³⁵ Harlem became the stage of their creative activity, a source of inspiration as well as pride. They defined themselves against a rural, slave past and adapted to the new urban setting. This chapter explores Harlem as the cultural capital of black America and the way this perception of the neighborhood was captured in African American literature, music, and art. It concentrates predominantly on the period of Harlem Renaissance but goes beyond into the 1930s and 1940s as well, although these decades will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

2.1 The Harlem Renaissance

During the 1920s, black intellectuals saw Harlem as a place of hope and expectation. This era, marked by the flowering of African American culture, later became known as the Harlem Renaissance. At the time it was called the New Negro Movement, as the term "New Negro" introduced a new identity of the urban African American, who is "politically aggressive, culturally articulate, and urbane."³⁶ Alain Locke, often considered the ideological leader of the Renaissance, used the term frequently, arguing that the 'New Negro' was “new because he could now define himself, taking control over his own self-perception as a step toward control over his

³⁵ “Aaron Douglas: Teacher Resource,” Spencer Museum of Art, accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.aarondouglas.ke.edu/resources/teacher_resource.pdf.

³⁶ Jonathan Scott Holloway, “Harlem Renaissance Scholars Debate the Route to Racial Progress,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 8 (1995): 60, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2963052>.

own destiny."³⁷

While the exact timing of the Harlem Renaissance differs from source to source it is primarily associated with the decade of the 1920s. The economic and social forces of the first decades of the 20th century played a key role, as the "Renaissance began in the wake of World War I, thrived during Prohibition, and died with the onset of the Depression" and was "shaped by urbanization, emigration, and employment trends of the 1910s."³⁸

This period was crucial in the process of shaping the idea of Harlem being the African American cultural capital and is sometimes referred to as the era when "Harlem was in vogue." Life in cities offered a new inspiration and modified black culture as a result of greater opportunities. Writers took different approaches to describe the atmosphere of a new black urban society, each expressing their own individuality. It was believed in intellectual circles that culture would give African Americans a solid foundation to develop as full citizens of the United States. Culture differentiated African Americans from white Americans and became their original means to construct their modern urban identity. As James Weldon Johnson wrote in the introduction to his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry*: "No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior."³⁹ The aim of the 'New Negro' concept was to create a new African American identity, which would replace the legacies of slavery, leading to a new collective identity.

The cultural awakening of African Americans in the 1920s was closely linked to the Great Migration, as mentioned before. Most of the writers, artists and musicians of

³⁷ Eyerman, 113.

³⁸ Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920 – 1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995) 11.

³⁹ Gerald Early, "Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of The Harlem Renaissance." *Callaloo* 1 (1991): 137, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931446>.

the Harlem Renaissance were migrants from the South. The city within a city idea of Harlem attracted migrants from the whole country as a place of paradise for black people, where they could create and control a community of their own. It became the center of cultural action, being the largest black community at the time, located in the national cultural capital, New York City. Harlem "became a lasting symbol of black cultural identity" and a "symbol of black cultural expression."⁴⁰ A space was being created for African Americans to participate in the creation of a new urban collective identity. As the poet Langston Hughes said: "Harlem was like a magnet for the Negro intellectual, pulling him from everywhere."⁴¹

Magazines served as an important tool for black urban expression. They gave African American authors the possibilities to publish and made their work more accessible. The press also spread new ideas and opinions of the black urban society. Among the most well known magazines circulating in Harlem were *The Crisis*, which was the official journal of NAACP and *Opportunity*, published under the patronage of the National Urban League. *Opportunity* was actually released not in Harlem, but in Chicago, which was another important center of black culture in the 1920's. *The Messenger* was published by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen. This journal concentrated mainly on political problems. A one-issue magazine *Fire!!*, published in 1926 and edited by Wallace Thurman, was a more radical example of black press. It opposed the 'New Negro' concept of Alain Locke, being more combative. Thurman actually excluded several conservative black writers from the project, as he aimed to be more realistic about the urban situation of African Americans. Instead of presenting a highbrow black culture, it dealt primarily with the problems of the African American

⁴⁰ Taylor, 31.

⁴¹ Langston Hughes quoted by Cheryl A. Wall in "Paris and Harlem: Two Culture Capitals," *Phylon* 35 (1974) 64, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/274612>.

working class. Topics such as urban sexuality and prostitution created great controversy among the less radical intellectuals of the period and Thurman was criticized by the black elite for publicizing a negative view of African Americans.

African American intellectuals found a new stage for their activities in Harlem. Alain Locke described himself as a "midwife to the younger generation of black writers in the twenties."⁴² In 1925, he edited the Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro" and later developed this work into the key anthology of the Harlem Renaissance called *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. It was a collection of essays, short stories, poems, and drawings of African American writers and artists, which aimed to present the intellectual successes of the black urban society. With the help of this anthology, Locke tried to mediate and describe the changes in African American mentality and attitude.

Locke believed Harlem was to be the black capital and refused to see it as a ghetto. „Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia,“ he argued.⁴³ Locke's attempt was to bring together the writing and art of African Americans to fully express a self-conscious urbanity. As he wrote in the introduction to *The New Negro: An Interpretation* in 1925, “In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self determination. It is - or promises to be – a race capital.”⁴⁴ Such sentiments expressed the great hopes of Harlem. Terms such as “group expression” or “self determination” underlined the search for a common ground and identity in an urban setting, which Harlem symbolized.

⁴² Alain Locke quoted by Amritjit Singh in *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance: Twelve Black Writers* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 3.

⁴³ Alain Locke quoted by Maria Balshaw in *Looking for Harlem: Urban Aesthetics in African-American Literature*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 30.

⁴⁴ Alain Locke quoted by Robert A. Lee in *Designs of Blackness: Mapping in the Literature and Culture of Afro-America* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 50.

James Weldon Johnson, a well-known author and important figure of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote about Harlem in a very positive manner. In his 1925 essay, he glorified Harlem:

"In the make-up of New York, Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city."⁴⁵

He believed that Harlem was soon to become a self-supporting community, which would not have to rely on white people, because had its own businesses, companies, shops, churches, social and civic centers to rely on. Johnson also expressed optimism opposing the possibility of Harlem becoming a point of race friction in New York. Instead, he felt that the coexistence of blacks and whites is less problematic in Harlem than anywhere else in the country. But he was also asking himself:

"Is there danger that the Negro may lose his economic status in New York and be unable to hold his property? Will Harlem become merely a famous ghetto, or will it be a center of intellectual, cultural and economic forces exerting an influence throughout the world, especially upon Negro peoples?"⁴⁶

This dual perception of Harlem illustrates that the hopes for Harlem were great, but doubts about its future were present as well, as early as the 1920s. The force behind the Harlem Renaissance was that "creative work could prove that assumptions about black racial inferiority were unfounded."⁴⁷ Therefore African American intellectual elite carefully observed how Harlem was depicted and doubts about its prosperity were suppressed.

In his study of Harlem, John L. Jackson proposes that it was the Harlem Renaissance era above all that "helped constitute Harlem's symbolic and racially

⁴⁵ James Weldon Johnson, "Harlem: The Culture Capital." National Humanities Center, accessed February 8, 2014, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/community/text1/johnsonharlem.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Corbould, 141.

charged significance.⁴⁸ He describes it as “a moment when Harlem’s black intelligentsia and literati were able to offer it up as the culmination of black racial civilization and achievement in America.”⁴⁹ From this perspective, the Harlem Renaissance played a pivotal role in establishing the idea of Harlem as cultural capital of black America, despite its questionable relevance for the period and its vague reflection of the reality.

2.2 Harlem Celebrated in African American Literature

Before the 1920s, only a few books written by African American authors were published and this selection generally did not gain a wider readership. This changed in the decade of 1920s, when "over two dozen novels by blacks appeared, and most of them were issued by major American publishers."⁵⁰ Harlem gave the establishing writers and poets a new setting as it "provided a symbolic space upon which the writer could reflect and present the conditions of black Americans to the rest of the world."⁵¹ Among the most respected writers and poets of the period were Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, Jean Toomer, Charles Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Wallace Thurman. Most of them, in one way or the other, included Harlem in their work. “Collectively they developed a vision of an urban home that was at once an organic place, a birthright community, and a cultural aspiration.”⁵² The meaning of this urban home and their relationship to it became a

⁴⁸ John L. Jackson, *Harlemworld: Doing Race and Class in Contemporary Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 28.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Singh, 2.

⁵¹ Taylor, 37.

⁵² Sidney H. Bremer, “Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers,” *PMLA* 1 (1990): 48, accessed April 2, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462342>.

central theme of their literary activity. The Harlem Renaissance authors “regarded Harlem as their primary, symbolic home.”⁵³

Let us now look more closely at selected authors of the Renaissance era to see how they dealt with the space of Harlem in their literary work. Langston Hughes, born in Joplin, Missouri, is considered “the poet-laureate of Harlem,” was concerned with the black metropolis from his first publication down to his latest.⁵⁴ He portrayed Harlem, where he moved in 1921, in his poems and wrote about it with great passion. He recalled in one of his works: “I was in love with Harlem long before I got there, and I am still in love with it. Everybody seemed to make me welcome. The sheer dark size of Harlem intrigued me.”⁵⁵ His poems often portray the black urban life; for example, in one of his most famous poems *The Weary Blues* published in 1926, he depicts the atmosphere of Harlem streets at nights, when a black man plays his blues. Langston Hughes “had no difficulty fusing jazz and poetry,” as the rhythm of his poems corresponds with the rhythm of black music.⁵⁶

Hughes works with the imagery of Harlem’s streets to illustrate the life of the urban African American community:

“I could take the Harlem night
and wrap around you,
Take the neon lights and make a crown,
Take the Lenox Avenue buses,
Taxis, subways,
And for your love song tone their rumble down...”⁵⁷

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Arthur P. Davis, “The Harlem of Langston Hughes’ Poetry,” *Phylon* 4 (1952): 276, accessed April, 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/272559>.

⁵⁵ Langston Hughes quoted by John Henrik Clarke, ed., in *Harlem, U.S.A.* (Berlin: Seven Seas Books, 1964), 76.

⁵⁶ Eyerman, 118.

⁵⁷ Langston Hughes quoted by Clarke, 246.

in *Juke Box Love Song*. In *Harlem Sweeties*, he portrays the women of Harlem and flavors of the neighborhood: “Feminine sweetness/In Harlem’s no lack” and “Delicious, *fine* Sugar Hill.”⁵⁸

Hughes was inspired by “the experiences of common people he saw in Harlem.”⁵⁹ Writing about cabarets, jazz and blues musicians, or Harlem’s beautiful women, his poetry depicts the Harlem of everyday life, the life and people of its streets, rather than ideals of *high culture*. He uses African American creativity and folk expression as his inspiration instead of drawing on English-style lyrical poetry. Already in the earlier works of Langston Hughes are found traces of his disillusionment with Harlem, which became even more evident in his later poetry and will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Another remarkable poet of the period was Countee Cullen. Some of his best poems were published in the 1925 collection *Color*. In this volume, he points to the collective past of black Americans, exploring, for example, the African heritage.⁶⁰ In his 1926 poem called *Harlem Wine*, Cullen pays tribute to the power of black culture of the Harlem Renaissance, describing it as wine flowing through Harlem’s streets:

This is not water running here
These thick rebellious streams
That hurtle flesh and bone past fear
Down alleyways of dreams.

This is a wine that must flow on
Not caring how or where
So it has ways to flow upon
Where song is in the air.

So it can woo an artful flute

⁵⁸ “*Harlem Sweeties* by Langston Hughes,” Poetry Foundation, accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177389>.

⁵⁹ Kathy J. Ogren, *Jazz Revolution: Twenties American and the Meaning of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 128.

⁶⁰ “*Heritage* by Countee Cullen,” Poetry Foundation, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171329>.

With loose elastic lips
Its measurements of joy compute
With blithe, ecstatic hips.⁶¹

Cullen was known for his attempt to escape the nets of race and the label of black poet.⁶² His poetry was acknowledged by white audience as well and surpassed the scope of racial division. The manifestation of protest in his work is limited and he is not as bitter as some of his contemporaries.⁶³ His only novel *One Way to Heaven* was published in 1932 it was received with mixed feelings by the public.⁶⁴

Claude McKay, originally from Jamaica, came to Harlem in 1914. He was fascinated with the place as he recalled: "Harlem was my first positive reaction to American life. (...) It was like entering a paradise of my own people."⁶⁵ His writing may be assessed as fairly radical, especially in the cultural context of the 1920s and the debate about what African American culture should manifest. His most famed novel *Home to Harlem* portrayed the lower class life in Harlem and for this reason it was not a favorite among the black intellectual elite. In *Home to Harlem*, McKay depicted the duality of Harlem, its ups and downs, through the feelings of one of the main characters, Ray:

"Going away from Harlem ... Harlem! Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood-red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its "blues" and the improvised surprises of its jazz. He had

⁶¹ Countee Cullen's *Harlem Wine* in Harriet Semmes Alexander, ed., *American and British Poetry: A Guide to the Criticism 1925-1978* (Athens: Swallow Pr., 1984), 120.

⁶² Charles W. Scruggs, "Alain Locke and Walter White: Their Struggle for Control of the Harlem Renaissance," *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 3 (1980): 95, accessed March 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041658>.

⁶³ Robert A. Smith, "The Poetry of Countee Cullen," *Phylon (1940-1956)*, 11, no.3 (1950): 217, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/272005>.

⁶⁴ Roger M. Valade, "A Black Literary Guide to the Harlem Renaissance," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 11 (1996): 103, accessed April 20, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2963328>.

⁶⁵ Claude McKay quoted by Steven Watson in *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920 – 1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 34.

known happiness, too, in Harlem, joy that glowed gloriously upon him like the high noon sunlight of his tropic island home."⁶⁶

Despite the present criticism, Harlem remains a central setting for his novels, which do not try to avoid the portrait of Harlem's negative aspects. McKay presented Harlem primarily as a home, describing its sounds, tastes, and images. In 1922, he published a collection of poetry called *Harlem Shadows*. Though the feelings of bitterness and despair are present, the affection for Harlem is clearly visible, expressing the excitement of the city experience. McKay had always been on the periphery of the Harlem Renaissance, because he expressed his insights on what was wrong with it.⁶⁷ Attacking the rigid Renaissance leadership of Alain Locke, he criticized Locke's introduction to *The Negro Negro*: "Dr. Locke's essay is a remarkable chocolate soufflé of art and politics, with not an ingredient of information inside."⁶⁸

Zora Neale Hurston was the leading female writer of the Renaissance. Though she dedicated her time to ethnographic fieldwork in the South and drew on the black folk tradition, she was an influential figure of Harlem's literary scene.⁶⁹ So was Jessie Fauset, who was, thanks to her position as the literary editor of *Crisis*, well aware of the talented writers in Harlem and helped to foster the literary careers of some of the most prominent authors of the era, including Countee Cullen or Langston Hughes.

⁶⁶ Claude McKay quoted by Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett, eds. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892 – 1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 245.

⁶⁷ Charles W. Scruggs, "Alain Locke and Walter White: Their Struggle for Control of the Harlem Renaissance," *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 3 (1980): 95, accessed March 7, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041658>.

⁶⁸ Mark Helbling, "Claude McKay: Art and Politics," *Negro American Literature Forum*, 7, no. 2 (1973): 49, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3041269>.

⁶⁹ Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph, eds. *Harlem's Glory: Black Women Writing 1900 – 1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). 302.

As Sidney H. Bremer outlines, the authors of the Harlem Renaissance “walked a delicate line.”⁷⁰ Portraying the authentic picture of Harlem meant that they would have to face criticism from the fathers of the Harlem Renaissance. She argues that they therefore depicted Harlem rather as a place of opportunity and emphasized the positive aspects of the place, suppressing the negative side of limits imposed by white ghettoization. This observation is valid, but at the same time, the disillusionment with Harlem is already present in some fiction and poetry of the 1920s and what is more significant for the era of the Harlem Renaissance is the debate it sparked between black intellectuals, who insisted on a positive presentation of the black urban community, and a younger generation of writers, who were inspired by Harlem but wanted to show its other face too.

2.3 The Music of Harlem

One of the greatest cultural spheres of the 1920s era in Harlem was black music. Jazz, especially, and to a certain extent the blues, played a pivotal role in the process of shaping new African American cultural expression. Music gave Harlem glamour and helped established its name as a great place for entertainment, attracting both black and white New Yorkers. It created a strong identity of the neighborhood and a true expression of Harlem. More than how Harlem was presented in music, it is important to look at the music scene as something that gave Harlem its fashionable look, enforcing the idea of Harlem as a cultural capital, especially during the period of roaring 1920s, which is sometimes referred to as the Jazz Age.

⁷⁰ Sidney H. Bremer, “Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers,” *PMLA* 1 (1990): 51, accessed April 2, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462342>.

There is a deep musical tradition among African Americans, coming originally from the plantations of the South. Jazz emerged from the South and “its capital city, New Orleans, where variety of native musical traditions mixed with those of the Caribbean and then traveled north, much like the people themselves...”⁷¹ During the Harlem Renaissance, the character of black music changed to adjust to an urban environment. Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, and Bessie Smith were among the famous musicians of Harlem. Many jazz songs were closely linked to and inspired by the neighborhood. The pianist Duke Ellington came to Harlem in 1923. His "theme, "Take the 'A' Train," (...) guided newcomers directly to the center of the new African American world, Harlem's Sugar Hill."⁷² The lyrics of “Drop Me Off in Harlem”, another of Ellington’s themes with lyrics by Nick Kenny, celebrates Harlem:

Drop me off in Harlem,
Any place in Harlem,
There's someone waiting there
Who makes it seem like
Heaven up in Harlem.

I don't want your Dixie,
You can keep your Dixie,
There's no one down in Dixie who can take me
'Way from my hot Harlem.

Harlem has those southern skies,
They're in my baby's smile,
I idolize my baby's eyes and
Classy up-town style.⁷³

For Duke Ellington, music meant a manifestation of what he called “pride... the greatest race pride” and it expressed the “Negro feelings put to rhythm and tune.”⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2010), 199.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 200.

⁷³ “Drop Me Off in Harlem Lyrics,” accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.lyricsnmusic.com/ella-fitzgerald/drop-me-off-in-harlem-lyrics/1067059>.

Among the most important jazz venues were the Cotton Club, the Apollo Theater, and the Lafayette Theater, which are considered to be perhaps the most iconic jazz clubs throughout history. The Cotton Club became the most exclusive music club in the city, especially due to Duke Ellington.⁷⁵ The Savoy, located on Lenox Avenue, and stretching on a whole block between 40th and 141st Street, was the community's greatest ballroom.⁷⁶

Music attracted white people to Harlem seeking to experience its culture. Harlem was the destination for white slummers – a term to describe people who went there to experience its nightlife. "The fascination with Harlem was accompanied by the new objectification of the Negro as an exotic icon."⁷⁷ This exoticism was linked tightly to music, which was wild and vivacious. The rich nightlife offered in the streets of Harlem attracted white Americans from the whole city, especially during Prohibition.

Jazz music was preferred by the African American elite over blues music, which was more closely linked with slavery and the black struggle, as its main themes "refer to sexual freedom and physical mobility, to traveling, being left behind, and making love, and being made a fool of," they "express melancholy" and "give expression to the desire for freedom, here of a physical rather than spiritual sort."⁷⁸ But, despite the fact it was preferred over the blues, jazz was still a point of controversy in the debate about the essence of African American urban, modern culture. As the Harlem Renaissance historian Nathan Huggins argued, Harlem intellectuals "tended to view it as a folk art –

⁷⁴ Duke Ellington quoted by Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, eds., in *Jazz: A History of America's Music* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2000) 152.

⁷⁵ Gill, 269.

⁷⁶ Ward and Burns, eds., 174.

⁷⁷ Watson, 105.

⁷⁸ Eyerman, 19.

like the spirituals and the dance – the unrefined source of the new art.”⁷⁹ The “promoters of the Harlem Renaissance” like James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke “were so fixed on a vision of *high* culture that they did not look very hard or well at jazz.”⁸⁰

On the other hand, Kathy J. Ogren claims in her book on the meaning of jazz that jazz music and performance played a significant role in the Harlem Renaissance:

“Jazz and blues appeared as theme and language in Harlem Renaissance novels, poems, and paintings, usually with jazz performance depicted as evocative of both the modern sensibility generally and the black experience in particular... And while there was no consensus about the influence of jazz among Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, jazz performance became a touchstone of the rich (if uneven) experimentation that characterized their literature and cultural debates.”⁸¹

Alain Locke, for example, defended jazz music and highlighted its positive impact on society. He viewed it as a “spiritual child of the twenties, anchored in folk traditions but speaking to modern life.”⁸² Several writers of the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston were inspired by jazz music, which helped to formulate the aesthetics of their work.

2.4 The Visual Harlem: Art and Photography

The tradition of African American visual art was basically created during the Renaissance era in Harlem as artists lacked earlier opportunities. The evolving black urban culture needed a visual face, which was to be created by black artists. The new visual concept of black urban communities introduced new themes in art such as street life and jazz and blues musicians. Other themes include the Great Migration from the

⁷⁹ Huggins, 9

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ogren, 117.

⁸² Ibid., 125.

South or African heritage in search of a collective identity.

Aaron Douglas, born in Topeka, Kansas, moved from Kansas City to Harlem in 1925 and soon became the leading artist of the Harlem Renaissance. His illustrations accompanied major black publications such as *The New Negro* or James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones*. He cooperated with writers, including Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, and designed book covers for their works. Among his finest achievements were murals he painted in Harlem at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, the Harlem YMCA, and New York's Ebony Club.⁸³

In Douglas's art, one can see the search for African American identity visualized. He portrayed the turn to an African heritage and combined the images from African culture with those of black American culture.⁸⁴ Another frequent image in his art is the motive of movement in African American history, especially the migration from the rural South and the moment of arrival in Northern cities. Urban surroundings were evident in his work as well. Like other personalities engaged in the New Negro movement, Douglas was fascinated by Harlem. He described it upon his first arrival:

“There are so many things that I had seen for the first time, so many impressions I was getting. One was that of seeing a big city that was entirely black, from beginning to end you were impressed by the fact that black people were in charge of things and here was a black city and here was a situation that was eventually to be the center for the great in American Culture.”⁸⁵

In Douglas's visual expression, the city represents hope and new opportunities and a turning away from the heritage of the rural slave past. At the same time, he enforced the imagery of the African heritage, which in his paintings mixes with the atmosphere of city life. The city is a source of inspiration with an uplifting environment, created by a

⁸³ Gill, 278.

⁸⁴ Donald F. Davis, “Aaron Douglas of Fisk; Molder of Black Artists,” *The Journal of Negro History* 2 (1984): 96, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717601>.

⁸⁵ Douglas in July 16, 1971 interview with Leslie M. Collins in “Aaron Douglas: Teacher Resource,” Spencer Museum of Art, accessed April 4, 2014, http://www.aarondouglas.ke.edu/resources/teacher_resource.pdf.

sensual mixture of specific sounds, smells, and colors. As Douglas described: "Here one found a kaleidoscope of rapidly changing colors, sounds, movements – rising, falling, swelling, contractions, now hurrying, now dragging along without an end, and often without any purpose."⁸⁶ But he felt an inner harmony behind this urban chaos, a unity and coherence.

The sculptress Augusta Savage was one of the most influential artists in Harlem in the 1930s. Originally from Florida, she moved to New York City where she experienced the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. She spent several years in Europe thanks to various fellowships and grants. Upon her return to New York she achieved great success. She was appointed the first director of the Harlem Community Art Center, which marked an important turning point in her career as an artist and teacher.⁸⁷ It was opened in 1938 and provided young black artists with the possibility to obtain education either for free or for a symbolic amount of money. Savage established the first black art gallery in New York City in 1939 – the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art on 125th Street.⁸⁸ Savage was a teacher to many developing artists in Harlem including Jacob Lawrence. Among her highest achievements as an artist was her sculpture *The Harp* inspired by James Weldon Johnson's poem *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Augusta Savage was among those heavily burdened by the economic depression. Her gallery closed down quite soon after opening due to shortage of money and she eventually moved away from Harlem.

Born in Florence, South Carolina, William Henry Johnson came to New York City in 1918. His chances to succeed as a black artist in the segregated South were limited and life in the city offered new and tempting opportunities. He attended the National

⁸⁶ Aaron Douglas quoted by Eyerman, 125.

⁸⁷ "Augusta Savage," Smithsonian American Art Museum, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=4269>.

⁸⁸ Gill, 311.

Academy of Design and afterwards spent several years in Paris, where he discovered a fertile ground. He returned to Harlem in 1930 but then moved several times back and forth between the United States and Europe. His images of the black community portray black musicians, dancers and generally the atmosphere of Harlem's nightlife.

Jacob Lawrence, sometimes referred to as "the heir to the Harlem Renaissance," was another major artist of Harlem. He became famous especially thanks to his series of paintings from 1941 called *The Migration of the Negro*. Born in 1917, Lawrence came to Harlem around 1930 and experienced the era of the Depression there, which is strongly reflected in his art. He was greatly influenced by other artists as well as writers of the Harlem community. In Harlem, he was for the first time exposed to the world of art, having the opportunity to visit galleries, museums, and meet local black artists. Lawrence specifically cites the art studio of the director of the Harlem Art Workshop, Charles Alston, located at 306 West 141st Street as a source of inspiration. The 306 became the meeting spot of Harlem's artists. Lawrence met major personalities of Harlem's cultural scene there including Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglas, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison.⁸⁹ Lawrence's work will be further discussed in the following chapter as he is more critical towards Harlem and does not represent the idealistic perception of the neighborhood as a cultural capital.

In the 1920s, photography "not only enhanced, but functioned as perhaps the primary vehicle of the period's optimistic racial-familial portraiture."⁹⁰ One of the most well known photographers of Harlem was James VanDerZee. In his photographs, he depicted famous Harlemites and Harlem life. He was the official photographer of

⁸⁹ Ellen Harkins Wheat, "Jacob Lawrence and the Legacy of Harlem," *Archives of American Art Journal* 1 (1986): 20, accessed April 1, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1557354>.

⁹⁰ Daylanne K. English, "Selecting the Harlem Renaissance," *Critical Inquiry* 4 (1999): 812, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344105>.

Marcus Garvey's UNIA.⁹¹ The photographs of VanDerZee show Harlem and its residents as a source of racial pride and success. They represent the "urbane elegance" and the notion of the New Negro, who was so closely tied to the city's glamour.⁹² Rather than portraying everyday street life, VanDerZee created a fictional imagery. "VanDerZee's work was dramatically stylized, with far-fetched poses and extensive backdrops, costumes, and makeup."⁹³ The photographs presented the material success of the New Negro, avoiding images of the downside of Harlem. His approach to visualizing Harlem fits the desired imagery of the New Negro. Throughout the decade, photos, which appeared in major black periodicals such as *The Crisis* or *Opportunity*, generally presented "a rather aggressively optimistic visual construction of a thriving black community."⁹⁴

Although the golden era of Harlem faded with the start of the Depression, the neighborhood remained an important location for black artists. In 1933, with the implementation of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was introduced. The WPA funded the Federal Art Project, which aimed to create jobs for writers, artists, and musicians. This was an important source of support for African American artists throughout the 1930s. Several major artistic projects were implemented thanks to the WPA, including the Harlem Hospital murals and the Harlem Community Arts Center, established in 1939.

2.5 The Debate over Depicting Harlem

The Harlem Renaissance era was marked by a debate over the foundation of black

⁹¹ Universal Negro Improvement Association.

⁹² Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 436.

⁹³ Gill, 248.

⁹⁴ English, "Selecting the Harlem Renaissance," 812.

culture, dividing the old and new generation of African American writers, artists, and scholars. The question was what was supposed to be the role of culture in the developing urban black society. This debate revealed deep concerns about black urban culture and identity. "The new generation was working out its own aesthetic, which included a perspective on slavery and the past, thus reworking collective memory as it forged its identity."⁹⁵ Literature, especially the younger generation of writers, dealt with topics such as the misery of the black urban community and inner emotions connected with the problem of racism – topics avoided by the older generation. As stated by Cary Wintz, the older generation of writers "believed that depicting the squalor and vice of ghetto neighborhoods would only reinforce negative racial stereotypes."⁹⁶ The younger generation, on the other hand, sought to express the everyday reality of Harlem and turned away from romanticizing the situation.

The space of Harlem, its Sugar Hill, cultural institutions, and music venues, became a source of racial pride, providing a sense of a racial capital of black America. It was crucial that Harlem "had its own cultural resources of language, folkways, and ritual aesthetic forms."⁹⁷ The Harlem Renaissance intellectuals celebrated Harlem and its black culture but, at the same time, they sometimes enforced the *high culture* and influences from Europe rather than the true creativity of Harlem's streets, most explicitly expressed through jazz music. Alain Locke, for example, urged black artists to imitate European modernists, who were, though, influenced by traditional African art.⁹⁸ This is what Daylanne K. English calls a "middle-class bias in artistic preference" of African American intellectuals such as Locke and Du Bois.⁹⁹ The black middle class

⁹⁵ Eyerman, 117.

⁹⁶ Cary Wintz quoted by Eyerman, 117.

⁹⁷ Bremer, "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers," 48.

⁹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Harlem on Our Minds," 4.

⁹⁹ English, "Selecting the Harlem Renaissance," 816.

"wished to see the race represented by institutions such as Howard University rather than through the bars and tenements of working-class Harlem."¹⁰⁰ The race-conscious urban culture was to be created on intellectual basis rather than on a low culture. This issue provoked a debate about what and who should represent the black culture in America. The representation of Harlem in African American culture demonstrated this clash and illustrated the ongoing debate about the African American identity. It is indisputable that Harlem functioned as a site for an experiment, creating an urban conscious black American culture. It definitely became a symbol during the 1920s – a state of mind and a cultural metaphor for black America.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Balshaw, 29.

¹⁰¹ Gates, "Harlem on Our Minds," 11.

3. Harlem the Ghetto

As it had become a symbol of black culture in the 1920s, so Harlem symbolized the despair of the black urban ghetto in the 1930s and thereafter. Life in a ghetto meant social as well as cultural isolation from the rest of the city and African American intellectuals were well aware of this situation. The optimism of the Harlem Renaissance no longer represented black artistic expression. This chapter considers the artistic reflection of Harlem as a ghetto. How did the perception of Harlem in literature, art, and music change? What were the new directions? Did the idea of Harlem as the cultural capital stay alive or did it vanish in the Great Depression, with its devastating effects on the neighborhood?

3.1 *The Myth of Harlem*

A controversial question is whether Harlem was actually a ghetto in the 1920s. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out in his critical essay *Harlem on Our Minds*, that the Harlem Renaissance “occurred precisely as Harlem was turning into the great American slum.”¹⁰² He looked at the contrast between reality and fantasy during the Renaissance era and argued:

“the valorization of black rhythm, spontaneity, laughter, sensuality ... contrasted starkly with Harlem’s squalor and the environmental or structural limitations upon individual choices such as those finally depicted in Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) in part as a reaction *against* what he felt to be the Renaissance writer’s bohemian decadence.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² Gates, “Harlem on Our Minds,” 11.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Gates highlights this paradox of the 1920s optimism and focuses on the writer Richard Wright who finally portrayed the reality of American slum. Sidney H. Bremer argued in a similar manner, explaining the sentiments of Renaissance writers:

“While emphasizing the fertile dirt in which their dreams grew, they resisted recognizing the extent to which white ghettoization limited the spread of Harlem’s sensory vitality, even turned it back on itself. Instead they asserted the magic of that vitality and its sole dependence on their own community.”¹⁰⁴

Cheryl Greenberg claims, without compromise, that Harlem “lived in depression before the Depression” and that it “crumbled into a slum while optimists noticed only advancement.”¹⁰⁵ The 1920s work of African American intellectuals and writers, most notably of James Weldon Johnson and Alain Locke, had hopes for Harlem, which later turned to be too optimistic. Alain Locke acknowledges in a 1936 article that looking at the situation in Harlem, it is “hard to believe that the rosy enthusiasms and hopes of 1925 were more than bright illusions or a cruelly deceptive mirage.”¹⁰⁶ Harlem scholars concluded that the optimism of the Harlem Renaissance did not reflect reality. However, it still had a major impact. Though the approach might seem hypocritical, it is important understand the logic of black intellectuals that, if African American culture and creativity was to be used as a tool in the struggle for equality and justice, it was necessary to present the black urban community in Harlem in a positive light to set a base for further development of African American urban culture.

The Depression of the 1930s ended illusions about Harlem. An important factor was that many of those African Americans closely associated with Harlem’s cultural scene left the neighborhood during the 1930s and 1940s. Although the place still inspired them, the attractiveness of living there significantly dropped. It seemed like the

¹⁰⁴ Bremer, “Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers,” 51.

¹⁰⁵ Greenberg, 14.

¹⁰⁶ Alain Locke, “Harlem: Dark Weather Vane,” *Survey Graphic* 25, no. 8 (1936): 457, accessed April 18, 2014, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma01/davis/survey/articles/faces/faces_aug36_2.html.

venues such as jazz clubs moved elsewhere. And it was the black middle class, who wanted to escape. This turned the situation into a vicious circle. As Monique M. Taylor points out, “years of flight from Harlem by the black middle class was offered as an explanation for the despair and declining social condition in the community.”¹⁰⁷ So was Harlem, to use the words of Alain Locke, still the ‘Mecca of the New Negro’?

The reaction of black writers and artists to Harlem changed according to the evolving situation of the neighborhood as well as the development of the African American struggle for civil rights. As Harlem obviously declined into being a slum, black literature and other arts reflected this process.¹⁰⁸ The deterioration of Harlem into a ghetto posed a challenge to black writers who had to come up with “new literary forms and strategies in order to grasp the dimensions of the ghetto experience” and they “developed new strategies and forms to test and to project black cultural and communal identity in the social setting of the deteriorating ghettos.”¹⁰⁹

Glorification of Harlem became rare in black cultural expression, which stressed instead the despair of living in an isolated neighborhood suffering from poverty, terrible living conditions and a high crime rate. The race riots, which took place in Harlem in 1935 and 1943, carried a powerful message of Harlem’s frustrations. The 1943 riot was especially reflected in black literature. The writer Ralph Ellison, for example, “witnessed some of the worst rioting, on West 117th and West 118th streets between Lenox and Eight avenues,” which had an impact in details of his later novel *Invisible*

¹⁰⁷ Taylor, 23.

¹⁰⁸ Robert, *Designs of Blackness: Studies in the Literature of African-America*, 60.

¹⁰⁹ Günter H. Lenz, “Symbolic Space, Communal Rituals, and the Surreality of the Urban Ghetto: Harlem in Black Literature from the 1920s to the 1960s,” *Callaloo* 35 (1988): 328, accessed May 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930966>.

Man.¹¹⁰ African American cultural expression was striving for a new and more radical tone to vocalize protest.

3.2 Harlem Ghetto in African American Literature

Even during the Harlem Renaissance, some authors did not avoid writing about the negative sides of life in Harlem. Wallace Thurman was the thorn in the side of the founding fathers of the Renaissance. He moved to Harlem in 1925 and immediately started to interpret the neighborhood in his articles and fiction. Thurman describes Harlem as “a magic melting pot, a modern Babel mocking the gods with its cosmopolitan uniqueness,” drawing attention to the multicultural character of the place.¹¹¹ In his 1927 essay, Thurman openly presents Harlem’s downsides: “There is filth in Harlem. ... There is starvation and wealth and food and sickness and death. People are dispossessed, their belongings piled on the pavement. ... Harlem is a ghetto struggling for more room and for more air.”¹¹² These lines are however followed by the claim that “Harlem is the capital of black America, the greatest Negro center in the world.”¹¹³ Harlem’s duality is the core of Thurman’s work.

Claude McKay, already discussed in the previous chapter, combined in his work the perception of Harlem both as a home and a ghetto. In his poem from 1918 called *Harlem Shadows*, he writes:

Ah, stern harsh world, that in the wretched way
Of poverty, dishonor and disgrace,

¹¹⁰ Gill, 330.

¹¹¹ Wallace Thurman, “Negro Life in New York’s Harlem: A Lively Picture of a Popular and Interesting Section,” in *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*, eds. Amritjit Singh and Daniel M. Scott (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 44.

¹¹² Thurman, Wallace. *Harlem: A Vivid Word Picture of the World’s Greatest Negro City* in Singh, Amritjit Scott, Daniel M. *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 32.

¹¹³ *Ibid*.

Has pushed the timid little feet of clay,
The sacred brown feet of my fallen race!
Ah, heart of me, the weary, weary feet
In Harlem wandering from street to street.¹¹⁴

The tone of this poem is not celebratory and expresses the despair of life in Harlem. In his novels, including *Home to Harlem*, McKay recounted Harlem's underworld – its wild nightlife. For this reason, W. E. B. Du Bois was one of the most insistent critics of this novel, arguing that it suggests the wrong picture about African American culture. Though McKay admits that the neighborhood resembles a ghetto, the idea of Harlem as a home and black cultural center stays alive even in his later works including the novel *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940), where he describes Harlem as “the queen of the black belts, the Negro capital of the world.”¹¹⁵

The disillusionment with Harlem becomes clearly visible in the later work of Langston Hughes.¹¹⁶ His poetry of the 1940s has little to do with the celebratory lines of his earlier poems, depicting Harlem as a joyous urban community. In his poem *Puzzled* from 1949 he writes:

So we stand here
On the edge of hell
In Harlem
And look out on the world
And wonder
What we're gonna do
In the face of
What we remember.¹¹⁷

To link the image of Harlem to that of hell is quite a radical transition, especially for Hughes. In Hughes' poetry, Harlem becomes the symbol of black America in the urban

¹¹⁴ Claude McKay, *American Poetry Recovery: Complete Poems* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 162.

¹¹⁵ Claude McKay quoted by Taylor, 18.

¹¹⁶ Arthur P. Davis, “The Harlem of Langston Hughes' Poetry,” *Phylon* 4 (1952): 276, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/272559>.

¹¹⁷ Langston Hughes, “Harlem Shadows,” in *Life of Langston Hughes, Volume 2: 1914-1967*, Arnold Rampersad (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2001). 61.

context. “When he depicts the hopes, the aspirations, the frustrations, and the deep-seated discontent of the New York ghetto, he is expressing the feelings of Negroes in black ghettos throughout America.”¹¹⁸ Günter H. Lenz argues that Hughes’ later work of late 1930s and 1940s is far away from the earlier glorification of Harlem, as the space of the ghetto is “understood not as a cultural space for the dramatization of communal identity, but as a symptom of capitalist exploitation of the black minority.”¹¹⁹ His later collections of poetry such as *Shakespeare in Harlem*, *One Way Ticket* or *Montage of a Dream Deferred* show a different picture of Harlem than in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, but at the same time depict Harlem both as hell and home.

Literature coming out of Harlem became more radical with the outburst of the economic crisis. Authors expressed their frustrations of life in Harlem. It was especially the voice of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, who in the 1940s and 1950s openly criticized the living conditions of Harlem. Both were inspired by Richard Wright, one of the most notable African American writers who is however more linked to Chicago than New York and therefore will not be discussed in greater detail. These authors described the social realities of everyday life in Harlem more openly and critically. The 1940s introduced a new era of black culture and politics, and black writers had to come up with “new literary forms and strategies in order to grasp the dimensions of the ghetto experience and to contribute to the common cultural and political fight against oppression and the dominant culture.”¹²⁰

Ralph Ellison, originally from Oklahoma, came to New York City in 1936 at the age of twenty-three.¹²¹ He was initially a trumpeter, but eventually turned to writing.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 283.

¹¹⁹ Lenz, “Symbolic Space, Communal Rituals, and The Surreality of the Urban Ghetto: Harlem in Black Literature From The 1920s to The 1960s,” 328.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Gill, 315.

His most famous novel, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, discusses the struggle for the search for black identity in the urban environment. For the purpose of the analysis of Harlem as cultural capital versus Harlem as ghetto, it is especially important to point out Ellison's essay *Harlem is Nowhere*, written in 1948, but not published until 1964. The essay is an open critique of the inhumane living conditions in Harlem. Ellison brings up a decisive argument. By proposing that Harlem is "nowhere," he suggests that it is separated from the rest of the city and does not belong anywhere. Ellison advocates, according to Thomas Heise, that "living in the pressurized, segregated terrain of the city did not result in a feeling of bondedness, the sense of belonging to a besieged territorial culture that might serve as a foundation for a collectivist politics tied to place."¹²² This argument contradicts the Harlem Renaissance rhetoric of Harlem as a place of inspiration and hope, where urban community creates a fertile ground for the advancement of African American society and culture.

To Ellison, Harlem was the opposite of a cultural capital; rather it was a "ruin" and "the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth."¹²³ Opposing the optimists of the Harlem Renaissance years, Ellison didn't see black culture as a possible tool for resistance in the African American struggle for racial equality. He viewed Harlem as "the city's dark unconscious where all the nightmarish dreams that whites had of black urban squalor were materializing."¹²⁴ He denies the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance as he argued that Harlem is a place "in which the major energy of the imagination goes not into creating works of art, but to overcome the

¹²² Heise, *American Literatures Initiative: Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 140.

¹²³ Ralph Ellison, "Harlem is Nowhere," Robert F. Wagner Documents Collection, 55. Accessed March 18, 2014.
http://www.laguardiawagnerarchive.lagcc.cuny.edu/FILES_DOC/WAGNER_FILES/06.021.0058.06028.0.12.PDF.

¹²⁴ Heise, 139.

frustrations of social discrimination.”¹²⁵

In 1948, James Baldwin, Harlem native and one of the most acknowledged American writers of the 20th century wrote his essay *Harlem the Ghetto*, in which he openly criticizes the living conditions in Harlem. He also suggests that the situation had been like that for a long time and there is no vision for change:

“Now as then the buildings are old and in desperate need of repair, the streets are crowded and dirty, there are too many human beings per square block. Rents are 10 to 58 per cent higher than anywhere else in the city ... All over Harlem now there is felt the same bitter expectancy with which, in my childhood, we awaited winter: it is coming and it will be hard; there is nothing anyone can do about it.”¹²⁶

The Harlem of Baldwin’s essays is a space of frustration, “pervaded by a sense of congestion, rather like the insistent, maddening, claustrophobic pounding in the skull that comes from trying to breathe in a very small room with all the windows shut.”¹²⁷

Harlem symbolizes the isolation of black Americans from the rest of America and unfulfilled hopes. At the same time, Baldwin suggests that Harlem may not seem like a slum at first sight, as it “wears to the casual observer a casual face,” which is, however, “not as open or as careless as it seems.”¹²⁸ This, again, shows the double perception of Harlem, where the reality is hidden beneath the surface.

3.3 The Ghetto Depicted in Art

Most of the artists discussed in the previous chapter depicted the negative realities of life in Harlem as well. Aaron Douglas was perhaps most linked to the Harlem Renaissance and his art represented the New Negro tendencies. Others, however, especially those from the younger generation, projected the deterioration of Harlem in

¹²⁵ Ralph Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere,” 55.

¹²⁶ Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (London: Corgi Books, 1974), 47.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

their art. African American art turned more towards the style of social realism throughout the 1930s and 1940s, which perhaps provided a better means to depict the feelings of despair as well as those of resistance. During the Depression, one of the main themes of black artists were working people.¹²⁹ This marked a turn away from depicting Harlem's glory to portraying everyday life realities.

William H. Johnson's painting *Moon Over Harlem* (1943 – 1944) is a response to the riot of 1943. What is interesting about this painting is that it portrays the policemen as black men, although the policemen were actually white. Perhaps it suggests the self-destruction of the black community in Harlem. The silhouette of New York City's skyline in the background seems like a symbolic depiction of the alienation of Harlem from the rest of the city.

Jacob Lawrence experienced the Harlem of the Depression, not the Renaissance. His work touches the subjects of Harlem's everyday reality, its poverty and the black struggle for justice.¹³⁰ His paintings generally depict the creation of a black urban working class. As Ron Eyerman writes:

“Although his warm optimism concerning the future of the community he so closely identifies with comes through, Lawrence appears well aware of the conditions under which the vast majority are forced to live. His panels depict the overcrowded and segregated housing and the angry whites who feel threatened by the newcomers.”¹³¹

Lawrence is, in this sense, closer to the expression of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin as he portrays the Harlem of overcrowded housing and social unrest rather than the celebrated black cultural capital. Palmer Hayden, known especially for his painting *The Janitor Who Paints*, also painted the images of Harlem streets and community.

Throughout the 1930s, James VanDerZee remained the main figure capturing

¹²⁹ Painter, 210.

¹³⁰ Wheat, “Jacob Lawrence and the Legacy of Harlem,” 18.

¹³¹ Eyerman, 159.

photographic images of Harlem. It is interesting to compare his photographs of Harlem's black community with those of Aaron Siskind, a white photographer, whose photographs show Harlem as a community in crisis, suffering from the effects of the economic crisis. James VanDerZee felt these effects as well – he also experienced poverty and moved into a small studio in Harlem, where he lived in isolation for years. His photographs were rediscovered in 1969 when they were part of the exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

3.4 Music of the Ghetto

How did the music scene reflect Harlem turning more into a ghetto? Rent parties and white slumming in Harlem, activities of the Harlem underworld closely linked to the music scene, are considered to be symptoms of the emerging ghetto, the “cultural symptoms of the massive overcrowding and extreme poverty of many of the people who live in Harlem.”¹³² Harlem's music nightlife attracted white New Yorkers, especially during the Prohibition. One of the paradoxes of the time was that some of Harlem's venues were opened only for white audience - blacks were not allowed to enter. Racial segregation was brought to the most famous black community in the United States through the interest of white Americans in African American culture.¹³³ Due to the deteriorating living conditions and spreading poverty in 1930s, many musicians left Harlem and several key venues closed or moved elsewhere. Harlem was no longer in vogue.

In the early 1940s a new style of black music called Bebop developed in Harlem.

¹³² Gerald Early, “Three Notes Toward a Cultural Definition of The Harlem Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 14 (1991): 139, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2931446>.

¹³³ Eyerman, 108.

Its most popular protagonists were Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. It was quite a revolution in the world of jazz, as it turned from the big band dance music jazz was in the 1930s to smaller group music.¹³⁴ Bebop was more open to improvisation and played at much faster tempo. As jazz helped to turn Harlem into a black capital, the bebop era was “one of unrest, anxiety, and massive discontent with the urban ghetto.”¹³⁵ Bebop became closely connected with Harlem: “If jazz was truly America’s music...bebop was Harlem’s distinctive slant on Americana.”¹³⁶

But not everybody welcomed this transformation of music with pleasure. Ralph Ellison, for example, was quite critical of the newly developed style of black music, arguing that “the lyrical ritual elements of folk jazz ... have given way to the near-themeless technical virtuosity of bebop a further triumph of technology over humanism.”¹³⁷ Langston Hughes, on the other hand, put bebop into social context, claiming that the name came from “the police beating Negroes’ heads. Every time a cop hits a Negro with a billy club, that old club says, ‘BOP! BOP! ... BEBOP! ... MOP! BOP!’”¹³⁸ Bebop is considered a more self-conscious form of jazz, as it became more individualistic and more rebellious. Farrell and Johnson argue in their study of the bebop era that bebop “emerged during a period when the oppression of black working people was particularly acute” and that it expressed “the anguish and disenchantment of black urban laborers in the north.”¹³⁹

¹³⁴ Painter, 228.

¹³⁵ Walter C. Farrell and Patricia A. Johnson, “Poetic Interpretations of Urban Black Folk Culture: Langston Hughes and the “Bebop” Era,” *Melus* 8, no. 3 (1981): 59, accessed April 9, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/467537>.

¹³⁶ Jackson, 27.

¹³⁷ Ellison, *Harlem is Nowhere*, 57.

¹³⁸ Langston Hughes quoted by Gill, 345.

¹³⁹ Farrell and Johnson, “Poetic Interpretations of Urban Black Folk Culture: Langston Hughes and the “Bebop” Era,” 58.

3.5 Harlem as Cultural Capital versus Ghetto

Whereas the tone of the Harlem Renaissance was mostly a celebration of Harlem, in the following decades of 1930s and 1940s, the voice radically changed to express the uneasiness of life in the ghetto and the desperate need for change - the need to get out of the isolation of the ghetto and to become equal inhabitants of the city. The artistic voice of the post Harlem Renaissance years became angrier and less accommodating.¹⁴⁰ Harlem came to symbolize poverty and isolation based on race.

Through their critiques of Harlem, African American writers, artists, and intellectuals living there voiced their anger about the situation of black Americans and the despair of an unfulfilled dream. It served as a tool to express discontent. Jonathan Gill argues in his lengthy study of Harlem that its writers, musicians, and artists shared “common experience of poverty and discrimination, as well as a shared sense of racial or ethnic pride” and this “was a powerful source of cohesion.”¹⁴¹ This sentiment expresses well the role of Harlem in the development of African American culture.

Harlem has a truly unique status in the debate about the meaning of culture in the ghetto and the meaning of shared space for the development of culture. It has always been a place of contradictions and it deserved, in different phases of history, to be called both a cultural capital and a ghetto. Through the depiction of Harlem, African Americans could express their cultural pride as well as deprivation and anxiety about life in isolation. Perhaps it became a fictional place in arts and literature, which had little in common with the Harlem of everyday life. But it served well as a symbol to vocalize the sentiments of the African American society. Bremer argues that Harlem

“expressed African America’s cultural aspirations in public voice. As a

¹⁴⁰ Taylor, 27.

¹⁴¹ Gill, 369.

literary center, the wellspring of a creative movement its writers proclaimed a renaissance, and as a recurring, central subject in their art, Harlem offered them this ... spiritual home strength. In celebrating the organic place and community of Harlem in fiction, poetry, plays, autobiographies, and histories, they were simultaneously realizing, and reflecting on, Harlem as an expression of their creative spirit.”¹⁴²

This argument is extremely important and though it best describes the era of the Harlem Renaissance, it is suitable for the later years as well. The difference was that the character of the “creative spirit” changed dramatically, as it sought not to express the joy of urban life, but the despair connected with it. The ghettoization of the neighborhood was linked to the cultural expression of its community. As Peter Marcuse argues, “high levels of ghettoization and strong solidarity may well accompany each other.”¹⁴³ He proposes that one of the origins of cohesion in the ghetto is “the positive cultural history of the group being subordinated.”¹⁴⁴

From a certain point of view Harlem was not a place to be praised and celebrated as it held the African American population of New York City in isolation via segregation in housing, the living conditions there were terrible and its inhabitants lived in poverty. At the same time, however, the hopes that were put in it by the Harlem Renaissance thinkers and intellectuals, though maybe hypocritical, helped to set the ground for the development of a strong urban black culture, which became a powerful tool in the struggle for equality. Being part of an urban community created a "sense of pride and security" among African Americans.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Bremer, “Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance Writers,” 52.

¹⁴³ Ray Hutchison and Bruce D. Haynes, eds., *Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 45.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Cheryl A. Wall, "Paris and Harlem: Two Culture Capitals," *Phylon* 35 (1974): 72, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/274612>.

Conclusion

In the 1920s, Harlem became known as the cultural capital of black America. Although it already showed signs of being a ghetto rather than a neighborhood “in vogue” and most of its residents witnessed its downsides rather than its cultural boom, it attracted African American intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians who believed in its potential to become the new epicenter of black culture. The leading cultural movement of this period, the Harlem Renaissance, symbolized these hopes. African American literature experienced an enormous thrive, as the urban environment provided new possibilities and source of inspiration. Black writers such as Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Wallace Thurman contributed to the world of fiction, many of them using Harlem as the setting of their stories. Langston Hughes became the poet laureate of Harlem, drawing his inspiration from Harlem’s streets and black music.

Jazz became the new symbol for African American urban culture. Though some black intellectuals considered jazz music a form of folk art inappropriate for the new cultural expression developing in the urban surroundings, it became the defining voice of African Americans in the 1920s. African American artists Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, William Henry Johnson, and Jacob Lawrence gave Harlem Renaissance its visual face. The imagery of the migration from the South to the city as well as Harlem’s street life or jazz musicians became the new motives in black art. James VanDerZee was the leading photographer of the Harlem Renaissance, who portrayed the glamorous Harlem on highly stylized pictures of celebrities and black middle class. African American writers, artists, and musicians who moved to Harlem found a new setting which stimulated their creativity. Together, they had the opportunity to transform

African American culture as it adjusted to the urban environment. They were creating a new identity of black cultural expression and this was quite challenging.

Harlem Renaissance is perceived as the key African American cultural movement of the 1920s. Simultaneously, there is an ongoing debate about its impact and relevance for the period. This debate is closely linked to Harlem as a space presented in black artistic expression. Perhaps it could be called a hypocrisy that African American intellectuals such as Alain Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson spoke with unlimited optimism about Harlem as the new kingdom of culture or the Mecca of the New Negro, when living conditions there resembled those of a ghetto. It is important to acknowledge, however, that some writers as well as artists did not avoid talking about Harlem's negative aspects even during the Renaissance years, for example Claude McKay in his novel *Home to Harlem*.

This led to a debate about the meaning and purpose of African American culture and a clash between the older and younger generation of black intellectuals and personalities from the artistic and literary world. The older generation saw a great potential in using the cherished African American culture in the struggle for equality to demonstrate that black Americans have their own cultural identity. However, the younger generation wanted to present the reality and express not only pride, but also anger and protest. This clash is well reflected in the presentation of Harlem as cultural capital versus Harlem as a ghetto.

Despite the possible mythization of Harlem during the 1920s, this era provided an important source of cultural pride for African Americans. Being part of a black urban community with a glamorous reputation provided a pivotal ground for further development of African American culture. Harlem became the setting for novels, stories, poems, and songs. It was presented as a new home, a place to return to, a place

with its own identity. Overall, though it was built up on the Harlem of imagination, it provided the foundation of black urban culture.

The reality of life in Harlem uncovered more visibly with the start of the Great Depression. The already bad living conditions deteriorated and the neighborhood suffered from poverty, high rate of unemployment, substandard health care, and low quality education. Black writers became more radical in expressing their discontent with life in the ghetto. The poetry of Langston Hughes did no longer portray Harlem as heaven but rather Harlem as hell, representing the unfulfilled dreams of the establishing African America urban society. Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin openly criticized the terrible conditions in Harlem. The tone became more political, more engaged, and more radical. African American culture shifted towards a new era, which would later experience its peak with the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. In visual art, the imagery turned from depicting Harlem's glory to the realities of everyday life. Working people became a common topic for African American artists. Black music underwent a change too, as a new style of jazz called bebop emerged. Bebop is generally considered a more individualistic and rebellious form of jazz, expressing the tensions of life in the ghetto and oppression of urban black working class.

Harlem again served as a tool to express the sentiments of black urban society. This time, however, it was the feeling of anger and despair. Writers and artists expressed their lost hopes about Harlem. At the same time, the idea of Harlem as home still reverberated in African American creativity, which came hand in hand with the feeling of pride about Harlem and the advancement of black culture of the metropolis.

The way Harlem was depicted in African American artistic expression carried an important message about black culture. It reflected the sentiments of the developing African American urban society. The duality of Harlem as the cultural capital versus a

ghetto well defines the African American urban experience in the period of 1920s through 1940s. It is relevant to think about it also in the context of later development of Harlem in the 1970s and 1980s, when it had a terrible reputation within New York City as a symbol of urban decay, a place of poverty, violence, and crime, and today, as it is becoming a neighborhood in the midst of a shift, attracting non-black residents from other parts of New York City. A question mark is hanging over Harlem about its future, whether and how will this emblematic African American neighborhood preserve its uniqueness.

Resumé

Diplomová práce *The Role of Harlem in the Development of African American Urban Culture: Cultural Capital versus Ghetto* se zabývá rozvojem afroamerické kultury v Harlemu v období 20. až 40. let 20. století. Harlem je zde prezentován jako příklad městské čtvrti, která je definována přítomností určité etnické skupiny, jejíž kultura se vyvíjí ruku v ruce s rozvojem místa a je silně ovlivněna momentálním děním. Newyorský Harlem, nejznámější černošská čtvrť ve Spojených státech, je specifický tím, že byl vždy vnímán jako centrum afroamerické kultury. V určitých stádiích vývoje byla však tato čtvrť považována za ghetto a tamní životní podmínky byly zdatelně horší než v jiných částech města. Tato práce představuje fenomén duality Harlemu a její reflexi v černošské kultuře mezi lety 1920 až 1950, tedy v období přílivu Afroameričanů do New Yorku v rámci tzv. Velké migrace a formování afroamerické městské společnosti.

Hlavním cílem práce bylo ukázat, že afroamerická městská kultura byla historicky definována právě touto dualitou. Ve 20. letech začal být Harlem nazýván hlavním městem černé Ameriky. I když každodenní realita nasvědčovala spíše tomu, že Harlem byl už v této době černošským ghetttem, čtvrť přitahovala afroamerické intelektuály, spisovatele, umělce a hudebníky z celých Spojených států. Černošská intelektuální elita věřila v potenciál Harlemu jakožto epicentra černošské kultury. Spisovatelé Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen nebo Wallace Thurman přijali Harlem jako dějiště svých prací. Langston Hughes se stal básnickým mluvčím Harlemu, inspirován pouličním životem a černošskou hudbou. Jazz se stal novým symbolem afroamerické městské kultury a i když byl považován některými intelektuály za nižší formu umění, nevhodnou pro vyjádření nové městské černošské společnosti,

stal se jejím vůdčím hlasem. Došlo také k rozvoji výtvarného umění, které reagovalo na nové podněty městského života.

V této době se rozpoutala debata mezi starší generací černošské intelektuální elity a mladší generací afroamerických intelektuálů a spisovatelů o významu a zejména účelu afroamerické kultury. Tento spor úzce souvisel se znázorňováním Harlemu v literatuře, hudbě a umění. Zatímco starší generace zdůrazňovala potřebu prezentovat černošskou kulturu a společnost v tom nejlepším světle, mladší generace se vůči tomuto optimismu vymezovala a snažila se o pravděvější výpověď o situaci Afroameričanů v městském prostředí.

Ekonomická krize třicátých let způsobila výrazné zhoršení už tak špatných životních podmínek v Harlemu. To se odrazilo i v černošské kultuře, která v Harlemu vznikala. Spisovatelé začali volit radikálnější a angažovanější tón, aby vyjádřili nespokojenost s životem v ghettu. Veřejná kritika života v Harlemu už nebyla takovým tabu jako dříve. Výtvarné umění se začalo soustředit na nová témata a to zejména na každodenní život pracující třídy. Změny nastaly i v hudbě. Nový styl jazzu, bebop, typický pro toto období, byl individualistický a vyjadřoval napětí života v ghettu. Harlem opět sloužil jako nástroj, pomocí kterého vyjadřovali afroameričtí spisovatelé, hudebníci a umělci nespokojenost a protest.

Práce dochází k závěru, že Harlem hrál klíčovou roli pro rozvoj afroamerické kultury v prostředí města. Způsob, jakým byl vykreslován v afroamerické tvorbě, zásadně vypovídal o náladách černošské městské společnosti. Dualita Harlemu jakožto oslavovaného centra černošské kultury a zároveň ghetta výstižně definuje zkušenost afroamerické společnosti s prostředím města ve dvacátých až čtyřicátých letech 20. století.

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