salons during the Harlem Renaissance

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Writers, visual artists, performers, educators, and others interested in cultural events during the Harlem Renaissance often gathered in meetings known as salons, where they discussed various ideas and sometimes displayed their work. Such meetings formed an integral and substantial part of the New Negro movement.

Salons among participants in the Harlem Renaissance varied in their degree of formality or informality. Some resembled the conservativeness of an upper-class English gathering, while others were closer to simple "hang-out sessions" where like-minded individuals freely enjoyed each others' talents and intelligence. Among blacks, the salons offered an environment where talent and intelligence were not qualities that had to be proven, as professional black creative artists of the era often felt they had to do in regard to white America, but qualities that could be taken for granted. Moreover, such environments sometimes functioned like prep schools in which future writers were reared.

Virtually every major participant in the Harlem Renaissance either periodically hosted salons or attended them. In many ways, Niggerati Manor was a nonstop salon with its many financially struggling but exceptionally brilliant residents frequently interacting with each other on one level or another. Among them were Richard Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Huston, Aaron Douglas, and Wallace Thurman. The latter lampooned the tradition of salons in his 1932 satirical novel, Infants of the Spring. In one famous scene, young writers and artists gather to discuss a black cultural agenda with A. L. Parkes, a character modeled after Howard University professor Alain Locke. Also present in the scene are some half dozen other Harlem Renaissance writers and artists presented as characters debating cultural politics.

Standing in contrast to Niggerati Manor was heiress A'Leila Walker's Dark Tower, named after a column by author Countee Cullen, specifically as a gathering place for the culturally inclined. She called it "my contribution" to the era. Located in a 136th Street mansion initially purchased by her millionaire mother, Madame C. J. Walker, the tower featured literary quotes on its walls and displays of rare books along with art by Aaron Douglas. Attendees included entertainer Florence Mills, author and political activist James Weldon Johnson, patron and writer Carl Van Vechten, and performing artist Ethel Waters. The Dark Tower functioned as a restaurant as well as a cultural outlet. While meals were served in one area, a literary critique might be taking place in another and a card game or piano recital in yet another. Remaining open only for a year, the Dark Tower closed in 1928.

More typical of the salons were those hosted by such writers and educators as Regina Andrews and Jessie Redmon Fauset, both of whom held salons with the intent of helping others recognize and develop their talents. Andrews opened her home on Sugar Hill to aspiring creative artists in much the same manner that she opened the basements of the libraries where she worked to help establish such theater groups as the Krigwa Players and Harlem Experimental Theater. Philadelphia native Jessie Redmon Fauset required those attending her salon to speak French. Her role as hostess on such occasions complemented and supplemented her role as literary editor for the Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races.

In Washington, D.C., poet and playwright Georgia Douglas Johnson hosted one of the most famous and well-attended salons of the era. Johnson not only opened her home for salons but for writing workshops in which aspiring writers developed ideas and actual works. Those writers based in New York City often made it a point to visit the Johnson home when traveling through
Washington or periodically visited the city specifically to attend the salon. Some historians maintain that the idea for the Civic Club dinner that launched the literary aspect of the Harlem Renaissance originated out of discussions that took place at Johnson's home. Participants in her salon included playwright Willis Richardson, poet and playwright Angelina Emily Weld Grimké, author and mystic Jean Toomer, writer Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and May Miller.

Miller actually grew up in a home on the campus of Howard University where her parents, two educators, often hosted salons or entertained influential visitors. As such, Miller was also acquainted with Johnson as a guest in her own home. Others that Miller met while growing up and that influenced her development as a writer were educator Booker Taliaferro Washington, editor and sociologist W. E. B. DuBois, and poet and critic William Stanley Beaumont Braithwaite. Upon becoming established as an educator and author, Miller continued the tradition of hosting salons at her home on S Street in Washington. Some of those attending her salon were writer Owen Dodson, artist Charles Sebree, future Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks, and future Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison.

An important complement to those salons hosted by African Americans in the United States during the Harlem Renaissance were those by sisters Paulette Nardal and Jeanne Nardal in Paris, France. Natives of François, Martinique, the Nardal sisters published *La Revue du Monde Noir, or The Review of the Black World*, one of the early central journals of the Négritude movement. At the Nardal salons, African-American writers visiting France often met black French authors and students. Such associations often led beyond discussions. Through his acquaintance with the black French author and editor René Maran, Alain Locke published articles of his own in France as well as works by Claude McKay, Cullen, Toomer, and Hughes. Moreover, through their meetings with black American writers at the Nardal salon, then students and aspiring poets Leon Damas, Léopold Senghor, and Aimé Césaire drew the inspiration and examples to expand the Negritude movement.

With the surge in the publication of books by African Americans during the late 1990s, a new version of salons evolved in the form of such reading groups as the national Sisters Sippin' Tea, the Hotlanta Book Club based in Atlanta, the Ebony Book Club in New York, the Imani-Nia Book Study Group in Denver, and the Oprah Winfrey Book Club.

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