

# Dietrich Bonhoeffer in New York

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## Preface

This is the revised English-language version of a conference presentation originally delivered in German (Berlin, Germany, October 2018). Some references were added, but the presentation style was kept.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer twice spent time in New York: first as a postdoctoral student, when, beginning in September 1930, he spent about a year at Union Theological Seminary; and later, in the summer of 1939, for just a few weeks. It is the first, longer visit that is the focus of this paper, as well as my documentary film project, in collaboration with Professor Reggie Williams, Chicago (working title: 'Cloud of Witnesses'; <https://bonhoeffer-documentary.info>).

A point on language: although the word 'negro' (and the equivalent term in German, *Neger*) is now quite rightly seen as derogatory, it did not have such negative connotations in 1930/31, when Bonhoeffer was in New York. The term seems to have had a neutral character at the time. For example, some African-Americans used the term 'the New Negro' in that period, in the context of the social and cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. W. E. B. du Bois even suggested capitalizing the word (Negro), in order to express a confident, proud tone.<sup>1</sup> I have therefore kept this terminology wherever it occurs in the cited texts of the period.

## New York

First-time visitors to New York City tend to be impressed by its skyline—something that Bonhoeffer seems to have felt, too. To quote Eberhard Bethge's seminal biography of Bonhoeffer:

Bonhoeffer was overwhelmed by New York and the giant concrete buildings between the Hudson and the East River. Lower Manhattan still dominated the skyline. Upper Manhattan did not yet have Rockefeller Center, and the Empire State Building was under construction. But he soon saw the other side. In 1930, unemployment was proportionally much higher than in Germany, and this was causing widespread alarm. Since the Wall Street crash the year before, the Depression had been in full swing. Public opinion was agitated by Prohibition.<sup>2</sup>

I would like to add a few points to Bethge's observation. The Chrysler Building had been completed in 1930, and was then the tallest building in the world. Yet even during Bonhoeffer's stay in New York, it was surpassed by the Empire State Building: completed in 1931, and having been built in record time, it remained the tallest building in the world for four decades. When

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<sup>1</sup> Wall, Cheryl A. 2016. *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, p.20

<sup>2</sup> Bethge, Eberhard. 2000. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography*. Translated by Victoria Barnett. Rev. ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, p.148f

the George Washington Bridge was opened in October 1931, connecting Manhattan with New Jersey, it had the longest bridge span in the world at the time. Such buildings and structures illustrate the spirit of optimism and self-confident strength, which undergirded the development of this city.

Whether that sense of optimism contributed to the bursting of the bubble on the stock exchange in 1929 is a matter I am not in a position to comment on. Nevertheless, the DowJones-Index (or Dow Jones Industrial Average) had risen by 200 points between 1923 and 1929. Stock investments were not just made by banks, companies, and large capital investors, but also by millions of small investors. Many ordinary people even took out loans in order to invest in the stock market, with the intention of paying off the loans with the gains made by successful stock market speculation. When 'Black Thursday' happened on 24 October 1929, however, it triggered a world-wide economic crisis. Even during Bonhoeffer's stay in New York, the Dow-JonesIndex lost half of its value, and it kept on declining for some time.<sup>3</sup>

As a student, Bonhoeffer must have stood out at Union Theological Seminary (UTS). Most of his fellow students would graduate with a Master's degree at the end of the academic year 1930/31, but Bonhoeffer had already gained his doctorate in Berlin in 1927, and his *Habilitation* in July 1930 (that is, in effect, a second doctorate, usually required to become eligible for a professorial post at German universities at the time). In that sense, he could have been a professor at UTS, rather than a student. Perhaps this helps explain his rather harsh views in respect of his fellow students, as expressed in his letter to Max Diestel:

There is no theology here. Although I am basically taking classes and lectures in dogmatics and philosophy of religion, the impression is overwhelmingly negative. They talk a blue streak without the slightest substantive foundation and with no evidence of any criteria. The students—on the average twenty-five to thirty years old—are completely clueless with respect to what dogmatics is really about. They are not familiar with even the most basic questions. They become intoxicated with liberal and humanistic phrases, are amused at the fundamentalists, and yet basically are not even up to their level.<sup>4</sup>

Even then, UTS was an institution with a strong socio-political orientation, something one might argue exists to this day. At least, that is how I experienced it during a visit in 2011: several students had just been arrested since they had participated in the 'Occupy Wall Street' protests.

Clifford Green has argued that Bonhoeffer "gave the Depression comparatively [to his involvement in the African-American community; H.S.] little attention"<sup>5</sup> during his stay in 1930/31. Yet even Green notes that Bonhoeffer participated in an ethics course at UTS which critically analyzed the role of the banks in the 'great crash'. In Bonhoeffer's own words: "The whole story shed a bright light upon a very dark situation of personal dishonesty, unfairness, ruthlessness, lack of the consciousness of social responsibility."<sup>6</sup>

Large-scale unemployment was also discussed in this course, and Bonhoeffer wrote a letter

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<sup>3</sup> Green, Clifford J., in DBWe 10, ed. 2008, Editor's Introduction to the English Edition, p.18

<sup>4</sup> DBWe 10, p.265–266

<sup>5</sup> Green, Clifford J., in DBWe 10, p.28

<sup>6</sup> DBWe 10, p.431

(dated 31 January 1931) to his twin sister, Sabine, in which he states: "The colossal complaints of

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the people themselves here don't make a very convincing impression on us as Europeans. In reality, the only ones who really have it bad are the unemployed, who have no insurance at all."<sup>7</sup>

This letter—on the occasion of the twins' birthday—also mentions the Prohibition, still in full swing in the USA in 1931: "It's so unnerving for me that we really are going to be twenty-five now ... Unfortunately I can't even toast you with a glass of wine at this occasion, since it's forbidden by federal law; how frightfully tedious, this Prohibition in which no one believes."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the Prohibition arguably increased the crime rate in the USA.

## Friends at Union Theological Seminary

Bonhoeffer celebrated his 25<sup>th</sup> birthday (4 February 1931) with Paul Lehmann and his wife, Marion. His friendship with Lehmann was one of four close friendships Bonhoeffer developed during his year at UTS. An US-American theologian with German ancestors, Lehmann (1906–1994) loved European culture, spoke German, and was writing his doctoral dissertation on two German-speaking theologians, Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth. The friendship with Paul Lehmann persisted beyond Bonhoeffer's year in New York. They met again in Berlin, in the spring of 1933, and it was Paul Lehmann who arranged for Bonhoeffer to come to New York in 1939, with Europe on the brink of war, in order to save him. Later, in 1941, Bonhoeffer asked Lehmann to write a position paper on US-American plans for the political restructuring of Europe (and Germany in particular) in order to help Bonhoeffer with his work in the German resistance.

The Swiss theologian, Erwin Sutz (1906–1987), also spoke German, and shared Bonhoeffer's passion for playing the piano. Sutz and Bonhoeffer travelled to Cuba together during the Christmas break in 1930. Their friendship, too, continued beyond their time together in New York. It was Sutz who helped arrange Bonhoeffer's first meeting with Karl Barth in 1931, after their return to Europe. As a Swiss citizen, Sutz became an important point of contact when Bonhoeffer travelled overseas during the war, ostensibly under orders of the German *Abwehr* (military counter-intelligence), but actually on behalf of German resistance groups. For example, Sutz became the conduit for the communication between Lehmann in the USA and Bonhoeffer in Germany. It was through Sutz that Lehmann heard about Bonhoeffer's death, in a letter dated 6 June 1945, about two months after Bonhoeffer's execution. In Sutz own words: "He was one of the most capable and brave theologians of the Confessing Church and was in touch with the best elements of the resistance movement. And for us he was surely "The big one" without whom that year at Union Seminary would have been quite unmemorable."<sup>9</sup>

Bonhoeffer initially viewed his other European friend, Jean Lasserre [as Bethge writes in his biography of Bonhoeffer; H.S.] as much less of a kindred spirit. It was his first encounter with a Christian pacifist of his generation, and Lasserre was a Frenchman; it was much more difficult for a German to shake off all feelings of resentment. Still, unlike

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<sup>7</sup> DBWe 10, p.227

<sup>8</sup> DBWe 10, p.226–227

<sup>9</sup> DBWe 16, p.470

his American contemporaries, Lasserre was a European theologian who could not be dismissed as naïve or ignorant of the relevant history of dogmatics. In contrast to the

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undisputed sincerity and earnestness of many young theologians at Union Theological Seminary, Lasserre confronted him with an acceptance of Jesus' peace commandment that he had never encountered before. Not that Bonhoeffer immediately became a convinced pacifist—in fact he never did so—but after meeting Lasserre the question of the concrete reply to the biblical injunction of peace and of the concrete steps to be taken against warlike impulses never left him again. (...) This soon led Bonhoeffer to a new understanding of the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of his year as a visiting student at UTS, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Jean Lasserre drove to Mexico together in an ageing Oldsmobile, via Chicago, where they dropped off Erwin Sutz and Paul Lehmann. The connection with Jean Lasserre continued beyond their time in North America. Bonhoeffer invited him to ecumenical conferences he was involved in, such as the conference on the Danish island of Fanø in 1934, where Bonhoeffer delivered his famous 'peace address'.

Much more could be said about Bonhoeffer's theological studies at UTC and his friends there. In general terms, Clifford Green's introduction to volume 10 of the English edition of Bonhoeffer's works will serve well in this respect. On this occasion I would like to focus more on his time in Harlem, which is perhaps less well known. Bethge's biography tells us that Bonhoeffer brought music records with spirituals to Germany, and that he played them for his students at Finkenwalde. He also wrote an academic essay on African-American literature for a university course in Germany. Sadly, the essay is not extant; only the literature list for that course has survived.<sup>11</sup>

## Bonhoeffer in Harlem

On October 25, 1930, Bonhoeffer participated in an organized trip for students 'to Negro Centers of Life and Culture in Harlem'. The students visited sites such as the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library. The collection of Bonhoeffer's papers held at the Berlin State Library contains a bibliography of African-American literature ("compiled by the 135<sup>th</sup> Street Branch Library in 'Negro Harlem'") which he had brought back to Germany. Bonhoeffer also purchased a copy of Robert Russa Moton's book, *What the Negro Thinks* (1929). The preface of the book indicates its intention, namely to show what African-Americans themselves say about their experience of "race and colour": "The subject has lately excited a growing interest, especially among those who would approach the problem of the Negro's presence in America with sympathy and understanding."<sup>12</sup>

Evidently Bonhoeffer tried to find out what he could about African-Americans soon after his arrival in New York. At the end of November 1930, his friend Albert Franklin Fisher took Bonhoeffer to Washington, DC, where Fisher had studied at Howard University, an intellectual

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<sup>10</sup> Bethge 2000, p.153–154

<sup>11</sup> see Appendix; DBWe 10, 421–422

<sup>12</sup> Moton, Robert Russa. 1929. *What the Negro Thinks*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Doran.

center of African-Americans. In a letter to his parents, Bonhoeffer wrote: "In Washington I lived completely among the Negroes and through the students was able to become acquainted with all the leading figures of the Negro movement, was in their homes, and had extraordinarily

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interesting discussions with them."<sup>13</sup> Sadly, there is no record of who Bonhoeffer encountered in Washington.

Before we turn to 'Negro Harlem' in 1930 in more detail, a few words on the history of African-Americans after the abolition of slavery.

## From 1865 to World War I

After the Civil War, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America abolished slavery (1865). The last of the southern states (Georgia) re-joined the Union in 1870; the military occupation of the southern states by Union troops, however, did not end until 1877. That year also marks the end of the era of 'reconstruction'. Yet in many ways the situation of newly freed African-Americans hardly changed: they had to pay high rents, were forced to purchase over-priced food (some of which they had labored to grow themselves), and earned so little that they remained dependent and often accumulated serious debts. One should also not underestimate the constant threat of lynch mobs, which terrorised African-Americans.<sup>14</sup>

Once reconstruction ended, several southern states instituted racist laws designed to 'separate' African-Americans under the cynical "separate but equal" doctrine. Some of these laws remained on the statute books until 1964. This period is now known as the era of 'Jim Crow laws', after the racist fictional black faced character of 'Jim Crow' developed by Thomas D. Rice.

*Booker T. Washington* (1856–1915), who had been born into slavery, argued that genuine equality could only be achieved in the long term, and by means of education. Thirty years after the abolition of slavery, Washington delivered a speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, GA, addressing a largely white audience (later often referred to as the "Atlanta Compromise" speech). In that speech, he infamously called on African-Americans to educate themselves, and to work hard; a position for which he was later criticised by W. E. B. Du Bois and others. "It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities." Washington implicitly accepted, for the time being, the 'separate but equal' doctrine: "The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than the opportunity to spend a dollar in an opera-house." Washington demanded "all privileges of the law" for African-Americans, but not full legal equality, nor access to college and university education<sup>15</sup>. Not surprisingly, his speech was well received by the white audience in the South, and Washington was the only African-American that President Theodore Roosevelt received in the White House.

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<sup>13</sup> DBWe 10, p.258

<sup>14</sup> For example, a study by the Equal Justice Initiative ("Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2017), documents more than 4,000 murders between 1877 and 1950; <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report> .

<sup>15</sup> Washington, Booker T. [1895]. "Atlanta Compromise Speech". <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/39>

In January 1931, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his brother, Karl-Friedrich Bonhoffer, in which he commented on 'racial separation':

The separation of whites from blacks in the southern states really does make a rather shameful impression. In railways that separation extends to even the tiniest details. I found that the cars of the Negroes generally look cleaner than the others. It also pleased

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me when the whites had to crowd into their railway cars while often only a single person was sitting in the entire railway car for Negroes. The way the southerners talk about the Negroes is simply repugnant, and in this regard the pastors are no better than the others. I still believe that the spiritual songs of the southern Negroes represent some of the greatest achievements in America.<sup>16</sup>

Born after the abolition of slavery, *W. E. B. Du Bois* (1868–1963) was much more radical than Washington. Bonhoeffer read his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as he had read Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) in class with Niebuhr at Union. Both books are still important reading today, but at this point I wish to focus on just two relevant passages from *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The first passage is Du Bois' critique of Washington:

His doctrine has tended to make the whites, North and South, shift the burden of the Negro problem to the Negro's shoulders and stand aside as critical and rather pessimistic spectators; when in fact the burden belongs to the nation, and the hands of none of us are clean if we bend not our energies to righting these great wrongs. (...) We cannot settle this problem by diplomacy and suaveness, by 'policy' alone. If worse come to worst, can the moral fibre of this country survive the slow throttling and murder of nine millions of men? The black men of America have a duty to perform, a duty stern and delicate, -- a forward movement to oppose a part of the work of their greatest leader.<sup>17</sup>

For Du Bois, there was no forward movement with Washington's model of black progress. Washington diminished black life to a caricature in a white racist nation, and what's worse, he ignored the violence that white's inflicted on black people. For Du Bois, black life was much more textured than Washington acknowledged.

Music was a constituent of the many-textured existence of black people. At the beginning of each chapter of his book *Souls*, Du Bois places a poem, followed by a line from a spiritual. For Du Bois, music is the great gift that 'Negroes' gave to the nation: "And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song--the rhythmic cry of the slave--stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas."<sup>18</sup>

In 1909, Du Bois became a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which exists to this day. A year later, the NAACP's magazine, *The*

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<sup>16</sup> DBWe 10, p.269

<sup>17</sup> Du Bois 1903, p.58–59

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.259

*Crisis*, was published for the first time. In due course, it became a leading voice for the rights of African-Americans. Bethge's biography of Bonhoeffer records that Bonhoeffer collected material about the NAACP. It would be certainly be interesting to explore Du Bois and Bonhoeffer further in this regard, but it is time that I turn to 'Negro Harlem' in 1930.

## 'Negro Harlem'

As a result of his friendship with Albert Fisher, Bonhoeffer soon did not just come to Harlem as a tourist. Fisher took him along to the Abyssinian Baptist Church, where Bonhoeffer got involved in Sunday School activities—sometimes together with Fisher, but often also on his own. Bonhoeffer also got involved in a Bible study group for women. In his second report on his studies at UTC, Bonhoeffer writes:

Through my friendship with a Negro student at the seminary, I came together with a group of Negro boys each week and also visited them at home. This opportunity was one of my most important experiences in America. Here I had the opportunity to get to know America quite intensively at one of its delicate points without being in a position where someone might dazzle me. And the results of such an experience are, I must say, deeply distressing. Here one gets to see something of the real face of America, something that is hidden behind the veil of words in the American constitution saying 'all men are created free and equal'.<sup>19</sup>

Yet Harlem in 1930 was also a place of renewal and hope. A sense of this is communicated in a letter Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter to Karl-Friedrich and Grethe Bonhoeffer, in April 1931:

I don't quite know whether I have not perhaps spent too much time on this question here [i.e., in the USA, H.S.], especially since we don't really have an analogous situation in Germany, but I've just found it enormously interesting, and I've never for a moment found it boring. And it really does seem to me that there is a great movement forming, and I do believe that the Negroes will still give the whites here considerably more than merely their folksongs.<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned before, Bonhoeffer had read Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which the latter had called African-American music a gift to the nation. But what did Bonhoeffer mean by "great movement"?

## Harlem Renaissance

During World War I, the number of immigrants from Europe had declined sharply. The economy in the northern states needed more workers. As a result, African-Americans from the South were actively sought out to work in the north. The more favorable conditions in the northern states—higher wages, healthier living conditions, better public schools, and a release from the threat of violent white lynch mobs—were naturally attractive for many southern African-Americans. Historians refer to this period from 1915 onwards as 'the first great

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<sup>19</sup> DBWe 10, p.321

<sup>20</sup> DBWe 10, p.293

migration'.<sup>21</sup> "It had taken courage to move, and it required grit to stay in places that in no way resembled home. Like the European immigrants who had earlier landed in waves in northern cities, black migrants struggled to adapt to the pace of urban life, its sense of dislocation, and anonymity."<sup>22</sup>

One outcome of that struggle was a new sense of self-confidence: "the new negro". An early, highly visible sign of such self-confidence was the return of African-American soldiers of the 369<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment, who had fought in World War I. On February 17, 1919, the regiment marched through Harlem in celebratory triumph. The day turned into an unofficial holiday: many schools allowed their pupils to attend the parade, and thousands of people lined the streets. African-Americans had fought for the nation, and there was a sense of optimism for a better, more equal future. At first, though, that hope was largely restricted to the North, as shown by the popular saying "I'd rather be a lamp post in Harlem than a governor of Georgia."<sup>22</sup>

In 1925, *Rudolph Fisher* (1897–1934) published a short story which illustrates what a newcomer to Harlem might have felt at that time. *The City of Refuge* describes the experience of an African-American from North Carolina who had to flee to the North, since he had killed a white man in self-defense. As he arrives in Harlem, he stares in disbelief at what he sees:

The Southern Negro's eyes opened wide; his mouth opened wider. If the inside of New York had mystified him, the outside was amazing him. For there stood a handsome brass-buttoned giant directing the heaviest traffic Gillis had ever seen; halting unnumbered tons of automobiles and trucks and wagons and pushcarts and streetcars; holding them at bay with one hand while he swept similar tons peremptorily on with the other; ruling the wide crossing with supreme self-assurance. And he, too, was a Negro! Yet most of the vehicles that leaped or crouched at his bidding carried white passengers. One of these overdrove bounds a few feet, and Gillis heard the officer's shrill whistle and gruff reproof, saw the driver's face turn red and his car draw back like a threatened pup. It was beyond belief – impossible. Black might be white, but it couldn't be that white!<sup>23</sup>

The somewhat native migrant from North Carolina ends up selling illegal drugs and is arrested, but even at that point, the sight of an African-American causes him to stare:

Gillis found himself face to face with a uniformed black policeman. He stopped as if stunned. For a moment he simply stared. Into his mind swept his own words, like a forgotten song suddenly recalled: "Cullud policemen!" The officer stood ready, awaiting his rush. "Even – got – cullud – policemen –". Very slowly King Solomon's arms relaxed; very slowly he stood erect; and the grin that came over his features had something exultant about it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> According to Prof. Samuel Roberts (source: <https://bonhoeffer-documentary.info>)<sup>22</sup>  
Wall 2016, p.5

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p.45

<sup>23</sup> Fisher 1925, p.2

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p.11

*Countee Cullen* (1903–1946) was one of the young poets of the Harlem Renaissance whose works Bonhoeffer read. In his poem, *Harlem Wine*, Cullen describes the will-power of people in this new national capital of African-American culture. The poem projects a mixture of rebellion and joy:

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  
With loose elastic lips  
Its measurements of joy compute  
With blithe, ecstatic hips.<sup>25</sup>

The beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance are often given with a precise reference: March 21, 1924. For on that day, Charles S. Johnson (1893–1946) had invited about a dozen relatively unknown young writers to dinner in the Civic Club; at the time, the Civic Club was the only such elegant venue that did not practice racial segregation. In the end, more than a hundred people showed up for the event. A week later, the *Herald Tribune* published a story on that meeting, and gave the burgeoning movement its name: "The Negro was finding his artistic voice, the article stated, and America was 'on the edge, if not already in the midst, of what might not improperly be called a Negro renaissance.'"<sup>27</sup>

Subsequent years showed an increasing number of supporters and sponsors of AfricanAmerican artists, including white artists from Greenwich Village, representatives of the 'lost generation'. These artists had grown up during World War I and were dissatisfied with the conditions in the USA after the war, albeit not for the same reasons that drove AfricanAmericans.

Having said that, two writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance were more closely connected with the lost generation than most: Festus Claudius McKay, called Claude McKay (1889–1948), and Jean Toomer (1894–1967). McKay, born in Jamaica, enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute (founded by Booker T. Washington) in 1912 to study agriculture. He was shocked by the racism he encountered in Charleston, NC. Two years later he left North Carolina and moved to New York City, hoping to establish himself as a writer. From 1917 onwards, he began to publish poetry in a number of magazines and papers associated with the 'lost generation'. His most well-known work is *Home to Harlem*, a novel, published in 1927.

Beginning with his studies at Tuskegee, McKay became involved in political work, read Karl Marx, and attended the 4<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Communist International (a.k.a. the 'Third

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<sup>25</sup> Locke 1997, p.130 <sup>27</sup>  
Lewis 1981,

International') in Moscow (1922). He spent half a year in Moscow and wrote a book, now lost, in which he discussed race relations in the USA. He would not, however, have been a disciplined party member: "if McKay was proud of his blackness, he began to wonder whether the Russians really appreciated the man behind the color."<sup>26</sup>

Back in New York, he later described how he tried to take two white friends to his favourite cabaret in Harlem, only to be rejected at the door. On another occasion, he went to New Jersey with a couple of white friends. When they tried to find a place to order lunch, they were forced to eat in the restaurant's kitchen. "'I felt not only my own humiliation,' McKay gritted, 'but more keenly the humiliation that my presence had forced upon my friends. ... I did not want my friends to make such sacrifices for me.'"<sup>27</sup> Albert Fisher and Dietrich Bonhoeffer had a similar experience together: they promptly turned on their heels and left the restaurant.

The father of Jean Toomer, the second writer linked to the 'lost generation', had briefly been Governor of Louisiana, the first African-American to reach that office in any of the federal states. Like Claude McKay, Jean Toomer also experienced the racism of the southern states. In 1921, he worked as a teacher in a small school in Sparta, GA. African-Americans essentially lived like serfs, he observed, but Toomer also noticed the depth of their emotions and spirituality in their music: "God, but they feel the thing. Sometimes too violently for sensitives nerves; always sincerely, powerfully, deeply. And when they overflow in song, there is no singing that has so touched me."<sup>28</sup>

Toomer's novel, *Cane*, was published in 1923 and associated him with the Harlem Renaissance. He, too, had been invited to Charles Johnson's meeting in the Civic Club, though he did not attend: like others among the 'lost generation', he had become a student of George Gurdjieff and his 'Fourth Way', a spiritual system for personal self-development.

Charles Johnson was also the editor of the academic journal, *Opportunity*. *Ethel Ray Nance* (1899–1992) worked as Johnson's secretary, but the apartment she shared with two other women also became a first point of contact for new arrivals in Harlem. The address was at 580 St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, but everyone knew what was meant when people just said "fiveeightry". *Regina Anderson*, who lived with Nance in that apartment, worked in the public library on 135<sup>th</sup> Street. Her "role was to persuade her employer, librarian Ernestine Rose, that the community had a new talent whose works cried out for audition at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street library."<sup>31</sup>

Another crucial figure in the Harlem Renaissance was *Jessie Fauset* (1882–1961). Her novel, *There is Confusion*, was one of the reasons for the meeting that Charles Johnson had called at the Civic Club. Fauset was not only the secretary of W. E. B. Du Bois's journal, *The Crisis*, but also its literary editor—a role which allowed her to further the careers of many young writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance. But *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* did not just offer a forum for writers: *Aaron Douglas*, perhaps the most well-known African-American painter at that time, contributed drawings and illustrations to both journals. Today, the public library on 135<sup>th</sup> Street houses four of his great paintings on the African-American path out of slavery.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p.57

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p.56

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p.64 <sup>31</sup>

*ibid.*, p.128f.

Those who could not afford to pay for admission to theatres, cabarets and clubs could still use the public library, but also private gatherings and parties, where public readings were given, and bands performed. Attendance at such events cost little, even though it was a way for those who lived in the apartment to help make the rent. Perhaps the most impressive plea for the freedom of art and the self-confidence of the young writers of the Harlem Renaissance is that of *Langston Hughes* (1902–1967):

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.<sup>29</sup>

Another important sponsor of the 'Negro Renaissance' should be mentioned here, if only because Bonhoeffer had read his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man: James Weldon Johnson* (1871–1938), a key figure in the NAACP. He used his influence to support young writers and artists. His anthologies (*The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922, and *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 1925) became classics. Al Fisher gave Dietrich Bonhoeffer a copy of the latter work as a present. Traditional spirituals were in the process of being rediscovered in the wake of W. E. B. du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Once slavery ended, AfricanAmericans perhaps did not wish to be reminded of that period. Many also tried to adapt to mainstream white church music in order not to avoid attracting attention.

Two further books are on Bonhoeffer's seminar reading list. *The New Negro* (1925), edited by *Alain LeRoy Locke*, is an anthology of essays, fiction, and poetry by a number of AfricanAmerican writers. In time, it became a classic. I cannot go into detail here, even though Locke was an important sponsor and supporter of the Arts during the Harlem Renaissance. Finally, *Copper Sun* (1927) is a collection of poems by Countee Cullen. It includes the following lines from the poem 'Heritage', which form a poetic expression of Afro-American relationships with Africa:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track,  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black

Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his fathers loved,  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?<sup>30</sup>

The artists associated with the 'Negro Renaissance', whether writers, musicians, painters or sculptors, realised that some white artists at the time, like Pablo Picasso and Henry Matisse, were also fascinated by 'Africa'. For example, the African masks displayed in the *Musée de*

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<sup>29</sup> Wall, p.43

<sup>30</sup> Locke 1997, p.130

*l'Homme* in Paris attracted their attention. Most African-Americans had little direct knowledge about Africa. Most of the artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance had never been to the African continent, but they nevertheless felt a connection to the home of their ancestors.

In this regard, *Marcus Garvey* (1887–1940) should be mentioned here as well, since he founded the first black mass movement. Born in Jamaica, Garvey pursued the dream of a 'Negro empire' on the African continent. In contrast to most leading figures in the 'New Negro' movement, Garvey regarded the possibility of equality in North America as an illusion: after all, as he put it, slaves had never in history been able to govern their former masters. In 1914, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA); five years later, it already had two million members, world-wide, and many more supporters. With 725 branches in the USA by 1926, by

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far the biggest branch of UNIA was the one in Harlem. Garvey advocated a separation of 'races' and even met representatives of the Ku-Klux-Klan. "In 1922, the federal government indicted Garvey on charges of mail fraud ... He was convicted, as he was a second time on charges of income tax evasion (on a salary he never received) and was jailed in Atlanta. Although he was pardoned, he was deported to Jamaica in 1927."<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

Historians continue to debate when the Harlem Renaissance came to an end. Be that as it may, Black Friday (1929) and the depression that followed destroyed many hopes. By 1935, there were race riots in Harlem; three people died, and hundreds were injured. "That riot symbolized that the optimism and hopefulness that had fueled the Harlem Renaissance was dead."<sup>32</sup> Yet when Bonhoeffer came to Harlem in 1930/1931, the movement was still alive.

Bonhoeffer did not just encounter the terrible effects of the Great Depression, but also a fascinating, energetic movement that created hope. This paper is intended to serve as an introduction to 'Harlem around 1930', because in Germany today, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance are mostly unknown, with the exception of international stars like Duke Ellington and Luis Armstrong.

My documentary film project, 'The Cloud of Witnesses' (projected release: late 2020), is meant to show how Bonhoeffer's thinking, his actions, and his theology were shaped and changed by his stay in New York, and in particular by his encounter with people in Harlem. A first impression is offered by the teaser, available at <https://bonhoeffer-documentary.info>. The 'teaser' is meant to help raise funds for the film project. Together with Dr Reggie Williams, I was able to interview Rev. Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in May 2018, as well as Prof. Samuel Roberts, a grandson of Al Fisher.

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<sup>31</sup> Wall, p.74

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Stewart, quoted in: PBS 1998

## Appendix: The Literature List from Bonhoeffer's Seminar

Cullen, Countee: *Copper Sun*, 1927

Du Bois, W.E.B.: *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903

Johnson, James Weldon: *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 1912/1927

Locke, Alain LeRoy: *The New Negro*, 1925

Washington, Booker T.: *Up from Slavery*, 1901

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