

Waking from the Nightmare

The Origins of Renaissance

In other countries the past is the neutral ground of the scholar
and the antiquary; with us it is the battlefield.

Member of the Young Ireland movement

If you know your history, then you would know
where you're coming from.

Bob Marley

To understand why comparisons between African Americans and Irish people were made so frequently in the early part of this century, it is necessary to examine their histories. These two groups have in common a strong sense of a powerful, violent past, exemplifying James Clifford's assertion that "[t]hroughout the world indigenous populations have had to reckon with the forces of 'progress' and 'national' unification. The results have been both destructive and inventive. Many traditions, languages, cosmologies, and values are lost, some literally murdered; but much has simultaneously been invented and revived in complex, oppositional contexts" (16). The histories of African Americans and Irish people alike show both the destruction and the invention described by Clifford.

A History of Conquest

When the Anglo-Normans came to Ireland in the twelfth century, they encountered not a united nation under one ruler but a patchwork of

small tribal land divisions united under several provincial kings, whose inhabitants fought each other as often as they fought the English. Indeed, one dispossessed Irish leader, Diarmait Mac Murchada (Dermot MacMurrough) invited the Anglo-Normans into the country, hoping to ally himself with them and regain his lands (Martin 44). By 1250, the Anglo-Normans controlled two-thirds of the island. After the mid-thirteenth century, however, Irish culture experienced a revival as many of the descendants of the Norman settlers assimilated to Irish customs and adopted the Irish language and others died in the Black Death of 1348. The area under English control shrank over time until in 1494 it totaled only about 60 square miles around Dublin on the eastern coast.

The rulers of England were deeply concerned about the acculturation of their vassals in Ireland. Beginning in 1297, a series of laws was passed which attempted to separate loyal subjects from “degenerate” subjects and “Irish enemies.” This legislation culminated in the Statutes of Kilkenny of 1366 in which England attempted to strengthen its position in Ireland through cultural segregation: subjects of the crown were forbidden Irish law, language, sports, and spouses. Bards and minstrels were outlawed as spies. Although the Statutes of Kilkenny were ignored as often as they were enforced, they indicated English distress over the state of affairs in Ireland, and they foreshadowed the more severe measures of the centuries to come (E. Curtis 112–14).

During the sixteenth century, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, who paid more attention to Ireland than their predecessors, found it necessary to effectively reconquer the land, subduing first the Norman-Irish and then the native Irish people. Following a policy known as plantation, they encouraged English and Scottish Protestants to settle in Ireland and made choice lands available to them by dispossessing the native Catholic Irish landowners.¹ Partly by virtue of numbers, some plantations succeeded where earlier attempts to control the culture and language of Ireland had failed. With the new inhabitants came schools that did not teach in Irish and courts where Irish speakers would require an interpreter: the Tudor monarchs and their advisors understood the importance of language to political domination and national identity (Beckett 37).² Edmund Spenser, who served in the retinue of the Lord Deputy of Ireland, wrote that “the wordes are the Image of the minde So as they procedinge from the minde the mynd must be nedes affected with the wordes So that the speache beinge Irishe the harte muste nedes be Irishe for out of the abundance of the harte the tonge speakethe” (119).³ Oliver Cromwell brutally intensi-

fied the practice of plantation initiated by his predecessors, and his successors completed the conquest of Ireland, crushing the Irish at the end of the seventeenth century so badly that they did not mount another rebellion for a hundred years.

While the Irish were deprived of their distinctive language and culture without leaving their island home, enslaved Africans experienced a similar loss when communication and culture were disrupted both intentionally and incidentally by the slave trade. The geography of sub-Saharan Africa had caused cultures to develop in small, isolated groups and had facilitated the evolution of more than eight hundred languages and dialects; because Africans with a common language were often separated upon capture, on the slave ships, or upon being sold, the possibility of retaining one's native tongue during slavery was limited (Sowell 184; Thompson 162).⁴

The Atlantic slave trade transported approximately 11.5 million Africans between the mid-fifteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The majority of those who were brought to what is now the United States came from the coastal and interior areas of west and west-central Africa. Even so, they spoke many different tongues and practiced customs sometimes as divergent from each other's as from the American colonists'. After 1720, 80 percent of new slaves arrived in the American colonies directly from Africa rather than from other slave-owning parts of the Western Hemisphere. Owners often preferred these new slaves, termed "outlandish," to the acculturated "seasoned" slaves who were more expensive, had often been discarded by island plantations, and were likely to foment rebellion (D. Wright 17, 9, 12, 20).

New slaves were taught English (or French, or Spanish), instructed in their owners' expectations, and generally introduced to the new country by seasoned slaves or by white servants. The rate of acculturation varied, depending on the amount of time spent with non-slaves, the level of urban development in the area, the number of "outlandish" slaves present, and the degree of supervision. Among the slowest to acculturate were the rural coastal slaves of South Carolina and Georgia who worked independently in rice fields cultivated with African technology. Their culture retained many African elements and their blend of English and central African languages, known as Gullah or Geechee, survives today (D. Wright 89, 83).

Legalized Oppression

Once conquered or enslaved, both Irish people and African Americans suffered under an oppressive system. Theodore Allen details the similarities in *The Invention of the White Race*: neither people had the most basic human rights, as the law “destroyed the original forms of social identity, and then excluded the oppressed groups from admittance into the forms of social identity normal to the colonizing power” (82).

The law was used in Ireland to keep the Catholic majority down. In the late seventeenth century, the Catholic Irish attempted to throw off English rule by backing James II, the last Catholic ruler of England. Their forces suffered a series of defeats at the hands of William III’s commanders, leading to the Treaty of Limerick in 1691. This treaty, designed mainly to confiscate the property of large estate owners, was lenient and loosely written, but the writers of the treaty would not be ruling Ireland. Faced with the daunting prospect of governing a large rebellious population, the Protestant elite controlling the country took advantage of the treaty’s loopholes and passed a series of harsh statutes known as the Penal Laws.⁵

These laws were, in effect, a three-pronged effort to render Catholics powerless: first, their religious practices were severely restricted; second, their secular rights were removed; and third, they were heavily taxed. The Penal Laws exiled all bishops and required priests to register with the government. Catholics could not legally vote or intermarry, own guns or good horses, become lawyers or soldiers, or hold political office. Education and property rights were severely restricted as well. Rents to the landlords and tithes to the Protestant Church of Ireland were fixed and inflexible, regardless of one’s actual income or religious affiliation. Several times during the seventeenth century, Irish people were sold to other countries as soldiers or plantation laborers (Allen 73–74).

The Penal Laws were, however, not entirely successful: although they were extremely harsh on paper, they were generally enforced loosely and sporadically. The Irish Parliament succeeded in confiscating land, and thus political power, from Catholic people, but hedge schools and secret masses were organized to fight the educational and religious restrictions. Many landowners converted to Protestantism solely to keep their lands and remained friendly to their Catholic neighbors, and historian R. F. Foster notes that more conversions to Protestantism occurred *after* the

laws began to be repealed in the late eighteenth century than before (206). Although the Catholic Irish population was crushed politically in one sense, with no representation in parliament and no rebellions from 1690 to 1798, many middle-class urban Catholics prospered in the available professions as merchants, moneylenders, and doctors. Manifesting considerable economic power, they and the English pressured the Irish Parliament to initiate repeal of the Penal Laws in 1778. These statutes' most lasting effects were Protestant contempt and fear, and Catholic servility, resentment, and suspicion—primarily psychological and spiritual effects, yet extremely damaging ones (Foster 205, 220, 207). The repeal of the Penal Laws in the late eighteenth century and the completion of Catholic emancipation in the early nineteenth century brought hopes of a new day in Ireland, much as the Emancipation Proclamation and the ratification of the antislavery amendments would in America. However, in the mid-nineteenth century the suffering of the Irish continued, with both political and natural causes. A series of crop failures culminated in the Potato Famine of 1845–49, in which approximately one million people died and several million more were compelled to emigrate (Foster 324).

In America, oppression was legalized both during and after slavery. The nearly four million American slaves enumerated in the 1860 census had no right to be educated, own property, marry, maintain a family, vote, or choose an occupation. It was a crime to give a slave a Bible, but not to rape one. Although somewhat protected by their status as valuable property, slaves were completely subject to the caprice of their owners. They were prevented from escaping by a system designed to foster dependence and ignorance: most owners provided food, clothing, housing, and daily schedules and forbade any education. Field slaves worked from dawn to dusk and then had to do their personal chores, such as cooking. The most common offense was “impudence,” which had an extremely broad definition. The five hundred thousand free African Americans listed in the 1860 census were mostly poor, unskilled, and devoid of legal protection or civil rights, but they were often literate and acculturated to urban living (Bennett 87, 94–95; Sowell 187, 195–96).

After the ratification of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments in the late 1860s, African Americans were technically full citizens of the United States. However, the Reconstruction, in which Northern troops enforced the principles of equality, lasted only twelve years. For most, conditions changed little from slavery to freedom. Sharecropping and strict work

laws often replaced slavery, with former slaves incurring astronomical debts—often purposely inflated—that bound them to a creditor as surely as to an owner. Disgruntled whites organized vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan in order to keep blacks submissive, and lynching, which had not originated as a race-specific practice, increasingly happened principally to African Americans. One notable change involved married black women increasingly staying home with their children, distressing whites who had previously relied on them for domestic labor.

Beginning in the 1880s, Jim Crow laws were passed in the South to prevent interracial social contact, especially eating and marriage, and to keep the African-American population in its place (Bennett 256–57). Skirting the 14th and 15th Amendments, laws created segregated jobs, neighborhoods, restaurants, and transportation. Black voting became a brief memory of the Reconstruction. In Birmingham, Alabama, blacks and whites could not legally play checkers together (Bennett 268). The Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) institutionalized “separate but equal” treatment of and facilities for African Americans across the nation, which in practice rarely meant equal and quite frequently meant nonexistent. Education, for example, was difficult to find in the South, especially beyond the elementary level and in rural areas: those who could afford to turned to private education, and those who could not often went without. Atlanta did not have a public high school for African Americans until 1924 (Sowell 202–4).

A Digression Concerning the Anglo-Irish

Although to this point I have focussed on the Catholic population of Ireland, in order to discuss the Irish Renaissance one must address the complex situation of the Anglo-Irish. This group, composed of gentry, professional, mercantile, and working classes, filled the gaps in Irish politics and society caused by the enforcement of the Penal Laws. Over the years, however, they came to find that their loyalty to England was not always rewarded: the English government viewed Ireland with its own ends in mind. Yet because of their fear of Catholic power, the Anglo-Irish almost always supported legislation enforcing discrimination against Catholics. They felt trapped between English machinations and the desires of the disempowered Catholic majority.

Although the term was not coined until the late 1700s, the eighteenth century was the heyday of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the power elite made up of landed aristocrats, influential professionals, and high-rank-

ing civil servants. Membership in this group was not restricted on the basis of birth or ethnic origin, but by religion. Of the twenty-five percent of Ireland's population that was Protestant, only that half who were Anglicans could belong to the Ascendancy. Few barriers existed beyond this one: the descendants of acculturated Normans rubbed elbows with the grandchildren of Cromwellian settlers, and the sons of blacksmiths, lawyers, and country gentry met at Trinity College, where they aspired to serve in the Irish Parliament (Foster 173). As the years passed, an Anglo-Irish consciousness developed, particularly among the Ascendancy, and the sense of marginalization from English affairs and isolation within Ireland deepened. Many resented their dependence on England and feared it would lead to betrayal; they began to speak of freedom for Ireland but were, as yet, unwilling to include the Catholics in their inchoate vision.

As the eighteenth century progressed, Anglo-Irish people increasingly demonstrated their concern with identity. They began to call themselves "Irish gentlemen" rather than "the Protestants of Ireland" or "the English of this kingdom" (Foster 178). They developed a passion for building so great it often surpassed the capacity of their purses, and they memorialized themselves and their possessions in innumerable portraits and landscapes. In 1785, the Irish Academy (afterward the Royal Irish Academy) for the study of Irish history and achievements was founded. The last two decades of the century brought the beginnings of Catholic emancipation and the Act of Union, both of which most Anglo-Irish people had strongly opposed. The Act of Union took away much of their political power by dissolving the Irish Parliament. In the future, laws governing Ireland would be made at Westminster, and no guarantee existed that the Irish representatives would be Anglo-Irish.

The Act of Union signaled the beginning of the decline of the Anglo-Irish. By the middle of the nineteenth century, many were supporting the Union their parents had rejected because the alternative had become Home Rule with a widely enfranchised Catholic majority. The dream of an Ascendancy-led Ireland was fast fading as tenants declined to vote for landowners' preferred candidates and began to join proto-nationalist organizations. Many Anglo-Irish people saw the Union as their economic and physical protection, but as the century closed, they were not at all certain that it would last. The means by which they had defined their identity began to collapse as well: their great tracts of land were increasingly split up and their elaborate Dublin townhouses were often converted into tenement housing.

The disintegration of their identity and political power made a sizable number of Anglo-Irish people begin to visualize an independent Ireland whose sectarian rifts could be closed. Like many in the Catholic majority, they felt abused by England, and their resentment provided a fruitful nexus for Protestant and Catholic nationalists. The Young Ireland movement, the Parliamentary party, and the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) all had Anglo-Irish members and even leaders, including Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, and Charles Stewart Parnell. Indeed, the Gaelic League, like the Young Ireland movement, was founded with the intention of uniting members of different faiths who cared about Ireland and Irish culture.

Because the Anglo-Irish elite lived in “the big house,” their Catholic Irish tenants called them “master,” and words like “plantation” crop up in discussions of Anglo-Irish history, some draw parallels between them and the slaveowners of the South. However, the comparison is limited at best. Southern slaveowners did not ally themselves with the black population out of resentment against a distant central government, though they certainly rebelled against its policies and tried to convince their slaves that they were in the right. A better parallel might be between the free blacks and the slaves of the nineteenth century. In many cases, freedmen and women did not readily identify with their enslaved cousins, and in some cases, they even owned them as slaves. When the emancipated slaves and their descendants began to move North, much of the long-standing free black population was dismayed by the arrival of their unwashed kin. However, this attitude was not widespread long into the twentieth century.

Hegemonic Views

In the years before the Harlem and Irish renaissances, the majority of English and Anglo-Irish people and white Americans perceived Catholic Irish people and black Americans in similar ways. The work of John Beddoe and Thomas Nast, discussed previously, is typical of the attitudes in both popular and high culture, which characterized African Americans and Irish people as physically and mentally inferior to the respective dominant cultures. In the case of African Americans, a belief among many whites in “the fundamental identity of complexion, character, and intellectual capacity” acted to their detriment (Gates, *Figures* 18). They were often considered most closely related to apes and were believed to be incapable of complex thought or sophisticated written expression.

African Americans were thought to be an emotional and sensual race, prone to dissipation and unendowed with the capacity for moral or aesthetic judgment. Most whites felt either that African Americans had been degraded by slavery, or that by nature they were fit only for servitude. In either case, after emancipation black people were faced with the necessity of proving their humanity and equality.

The nature of stereotypes suggests that considerable overlap would occur between hegemonic views of African Americans and of Irish people. Indeed, both groups were frequently characterized as simple and superstitious folk endowed with a potential for violence, which was emphasized as they fought for civil rights. Many also regarded them as lazy and dirty peasants lacking the capacity for self-regulation or independence. Like animals or children, they were believed to be unconcerned with the past or the future. As Nast's illustration indicates, African Americans and Irish people were not only perceived similarly, but compared to one another.

The dominant cultures profited psychologically and materially from their attitudes toward their subject peoples. Because of this profit, they would relinquish neither the stereotypes nor their control over the institutions that produced them without a struggle. Thus, Lady Gregory's London publisher initially asked her to rewrite her rendition of ancient Irish sagas, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, on a more juvenile level (*Seventy Years* 399). Although the publisher may have seen this simply as a marketing strategy, Lady Gregory was indignant. Recalling similar feelings, Jessie Fauset told an interviewer in 1932 that her first novel, *There Is Confusion*, was originally rejected because it depicted sophisticated, bourgeois black people (Sylvander 73). As Edward Said wrote of a similar stereotype, Orientalism, it "is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (6). Hegemonic representations of African Americans and Irish people were generated from a potent social force.

Great Migrations

Geographical issues played a large part in the experiences of Irish people and African Americans that engendered the Irish and Harlem renaissances. The Irish not only emigrated from Ireland but also moved from the poverty and famine-stricken Irish countryside to the cities, while African Americans began to move north. Massive Irish immigration to

the cities and to other countries in the nineteenth century threatened the rural folk culture, and the Irish Renaissance might be said to be a response to that threat, an attempt at preservation. However, the mostly Anglo-Irish intellectuals who began to collect and study Irish sagas and folklore were motivated as much by a pan-European interest in studying the past as by an Irish desire to preserve a culture laid waste by famine and emigration. Indeed, a movement impelled by cultural decline alone would likely have begun many years previously, for while the Potato Famine of 1845–49 had a tremendous impact on Irish life, emigration had been steady for years before this particular potato blight struck. People were already leaving at a rate of 130,000 per year in 1841, and mass emigration continued until the population of Ireland was down to 4,400,000 in 1911, nearly halved from 8,200,000 before the Famine (Foster 323–24). Conditions were so wretched even before the 1840s that African-American slaves in the United States had a longer life expectancy, better living quarters, and better nourishment than the average Irish peasant, for though they were not free, they were at least considered valuable property (Sowell 18).⁶

While dramatic population changes influenced the Irish Renaissance, the connection was stronger and more direct in the case of the Harlem Renaissance. In the late nineteenth century, Harlem was a white upper-middle-class neighborhood in the midst of a building boom. Washington, D.C., was the capital of black culture, as many political organizations, wealthy families, and writers made their homes there; however, as late as 1910, 75 percent of African Americans were rural dwellers, and 90 percent lived in the South (Wintz 17, 13). The first black people in Harlem were, ironically, middle-class New Yorkers moving away from the Irish on the middle West side (Sowell 38).

Beginning around 1915, a combination of attractions in the North and deterrents in the South caused African Americans to move slowly but steadily north. As economic conditions worsened in the South because of boll weevils, flooding, and rising food prices, word spread of better times in the North, where the war had virtually eliminated European immigration, a major source of factory labor, while stimulating industrial growth. Fear of violence also impelled northward migration: lynching increased after the United States entered World War I, and race riots gave the summer of 1919 the epithet “Red Summer.” Given these conditions, many African-American leaders abandoned the idea of the South as home and future and focussed instead on the growing northern commu-

nities (Wintz 14–16, 13, 6). As Thomas Sowell phrases it, “More than three-quarters of a million blacks left the South in the decade of the 1920s—more people than migrated from Ireland to the United States during the famine decade of the 1840s” (209).⁷

Areas like Harlem offered opportunity: one could leave southern, rural, and familial restrictions behind and come to a place where colorful success stories were told, like that of Pig Foot Mary, who parlayed her makeshift food stand into a small fortune in real estate (Lewis 109–10). These feelings were eloquently described as early as 1902 by Paul Laurence Dunbar, who wrote in his novel *Sport of the Gods* that immigrants from the South “had heard of New York as a place vague and far away, a city, that, like Heaven, to them had existed by faith alone. All the days of their lives they had heard of it, and it seemed to them the centre of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world” (68). If anything, this sentiment only grew over time.

A New Spirit

Although material conditions were poor in Ireland and in Harlem during the renaissances, some improvement had occurred since the days of legalized oppression under slavery and the Penal Laws. The Famine and the failure of Reconstruction had been great setbacks, entrenching poverty in Ireland and discrimination in America, but a new spirit was coming to both peoples.

With the abolition of the Penal Laws and with full Catholic emancipation in 1829, many Catholics had taken up parliamentary and revolutionary agitation, although the majority of the population was concerned mainly with local and agrarian issues—that is, when they had enough to eat. By the late nineteenth century, Catholic political figures had been joined by a number of Protestants disillusioned with England and eager to repeal the Act of Union and acquire Home Rule for Ireland. Leading the Home Rulers of the Irish Parliamentary party was “The Chief,” Charles Stewart Parnell, whose political collapse and subsequent death following the exposure of his relationship with Mrs. Katharine O’Shea scarred the nation. Yeats stated in a lecture delivered to the Royal Academy in Sweden on the occasion of his 1923 Nobel Prize that “[t]he modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary

politics; an event was conceived; and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation" (*Autobiographies* 559).

Many scholars have followed Yeats in stating that political activism gave way to cultural nationalism in the years between the death of Parnell and the 1916 Easter Rising.⁸ Foster's recent study of modern Ireland argues otherwise: citing the growth of such political organizations as the United Irish League, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the Irish labor movement, he posits cultural nationalism as the province of a tiny minority that existed alongside thriving popular political organizations (431–33). The average Irish person at the turn of the century was an agrarianist more than a nationalist, and when a nationalist, one in the tradition of the Young Ireland movement of a generation past, not that of the Irish Renaissance (Foster 459). However, like their counterparts in black America a generation later, the Irish were being reborn.

Although most cultural nationalist organizations were tiny and did not affect large numbers of people, two bear mentioning, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Gaelic League. The GAA, described by Foster as a "powerful rural network" dedicated to reviving Irish sports and suppressing English ones, was founded by Michael Cusack in Tipperary in 1884 (447). In addition to popularizing hurling and Gaelic football, the GAA drew a connection between rejecting English games and rejecting the rest of English culture. It was never only a sports movement, for it also sponsored periodicals, publishing poetry by Yeats, among others, and many members of the revolutionary organization the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) also belonged to the GAA (Lyons 39–40; Foster 454). Because of its rural and popular nature, the GAA was one of the largest cultural nationalist organizations.

The Gaelic League, whose goal was to revive the Irish language, was founded nine years later in 1893 by Eoin MacNeill and Douglas Hyde. The League was originally intended to bring Protestants and Catholics together, and its membership also crossed class lines, making it a heterogeneous organization for its time. Many Catholic Gaelic Leaguers linked Gaelicness to Catholicism, however, leading the Protestant membership to dwindle after 1900 (Lyons 43). The League was an extremely small organization until the turn of the century, when the Boer War galvanized anti-English sentiment and boosted its membership. Although small, the Gaelic League included among its members many of the militant nationalists of the first two decades of the twentieth century in Ireland, includ-

ing Patrick Pearse, leader of the 1916 Easter Rising, Arthur Griffith, founder of the radical organization Sinn Fein, and Eamon de Valera, first president of the revolutionary Republic. Ironically, the Gaelic League was originally a fairly apolitical organization: until the IRB infiltrated it between 1905 and 1910, it was dedicated to achieving cultural autonomy, and many of its members considered political independence an unnecessary or unrealizable end (Foster 450).

In America, similarly dramatic sociopolitical changes were occurring, for World War I was a turning point in the self-image of many African Americans. As Nathan Huggins explains, "World War I had been a kind of puberty rite for peoples the world over. Self-determination, an aim of the Allies in the war, became a slogan in the 1920s. Black intellectuals saw in the Yugoslavs, Czechs, and Irish a clue for their own emancipation and uplift. They, too, were a people to be defined" (*Harlem* 83). Lynching and other forms of racial violence increased after the war as many white Americans attempted to maintain the status quo, but African Americans, armed with the concept of self-determination, began to resist, both physically and psychologically. During violence in Chicago, Longview, Texas, and Washington, D.C., in 1919, African Americans fought back with guns (Lewis 18–20). Radical journals like the *Messenger* became more "bellicose and irreverent," and Marcus Garvey's organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), prospered by emphasizing racial pride (J. Anderson 119–21). As part of the militant new spirit, Claude McKay wrote the poem "If We Must Die," urging the victims of racial violence to strike back at their oppressors. It concluded: "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" (*Selected Poems* 36).⁹

Most African Americans were not as radical as McKay, but many were suffused with a new spirit. They were called "New Negroes." This term can be traced at least as far back as an 1895 editorial in the *Cleveland Gazette*, which defined it as "a class of colored people . . . with education, refinement and money" (qtd. in Meier 258). In the thirty years between the *Gazette* editorial and Locke's 1925 publication of the *New Negro* anthology, the term itself was the subject of much debate. Most agreed that New Negroes were self-assured and deserving of respect, not subservient objects of pity. They demanded equal political and social treatment from white Americans, combining elements from the beliefs of several African-American leaders: Du Bois's militancy, Booker T. Washington's self-sufficiency and racial pride, and Marcus Garvey's Pan-

Africanism (Wintz 47). New Negroes were almost never revolutionaries: they were more politically inclined than Locke's largely cultural anthology suggested, but they were not socialists who avidly followed the revolutionary activities of the Russian communists and the Irish nationalists, as A. Phillip Randolph claimed in the *Messenger* (18–19). The vast majority of those who might have identified themselves as New Negroes were demanding only the right to assimilate to American middle-class values, but even this meager claim disturbed the white establishment. As Huggins phrased it, "Apparently white Americans believed in the New Negro as much as black Americans did; he was a threat to one as much as a hope to the other" (*Harlem* 56).

The Harlem and Irish renaissances were partly engendered by similar popular sentiments—popular, at least, among their constituencies—to end physical submissiveness and cultural subordination. Before this spirit took hold, both peoples were largely against the use of physical force to achieve their goals, but gradually more Irish people accepted the idea of fighting for independence and more African Americans practiced self-defense. In both movements, cultural and political activities blended, sharing aims and members.

New Cultural Centers

With more Irish people and African Americans living in urban areas, centers of cultural and political activity began to take shape. Dublin, and to a lesser extent London, experienced a great deal of Catholic as well as Protestant Irish relocation during the nineteenth century. Once in these cities, those in search of a workable Irish identity and interested in a revival of Irish culture, often Anglo-Irish people, gathered at homes and social clubs and eagerly read the work of Irish scholars and more or less gifted amateurs involved in the pan-European revival of folklore, linguistics, and archaeology (Hunt 11). Influential books included Standish James O'Grady's two-volume set *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period* (1878, 1880), a retelling of Irish heroic legends; Douglas Hyde's *Beside the Fire* (1890) and *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), collections of stories and poems in Irish and English; Lady Gregory's renditions of ancient sagas, entitled *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904); and Yeats's collections of folklore, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893).

These works were enthusiastically received in urban intellectual circles: Yeats, who had lamented in 1890 that translations of ancient Irish

literature were nearly impossible to find, was moved to write in the preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, “I think this book is the best that has come out of Ireland in my time. Perhaps I should say that it is the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland’s gift to the imagination of the world—and it tells them perfectly for the first time” (*New Island* 33; *Explorations* 3). Similarly, John Synge would call this book “still a part of my daily bread” two years after he first read it (qtd. in Gregory, *Theatre* 124).¹⁰ Yeats and Synge were excited because this group of publications was the first modern scholarship to treat Irish sagas and folktales as respectable subjects and to avoid a condescending tone. In the late 1880s, a number of Yeats’s early reviews had criticized writers for not treating Irish lore in a more serious fashion: fifteen years later, several works had been published that one could use to connect to an Irish past, and the Irish Renaissance had received a necessary impetus.

A few years later, African Americans of all walks of life were being drawn to Harlem as a burgeoning cultural center. Although the black population of midwestern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland increased more rapidly, New York added the largest number of African Americans to its population in the early twentieth century (Wintz 14). Because of this population increase and the excellent facilities for publishing and artistic performance, New York became the center of African-American literary, political, and social activity, as London and Paris were for Anglophone and Francophone African colonials (Huggins, *Voices* 6). Though many Washingtonians felt disdain for Harlem’s “vulgar splendor” and lack of social status or great black universities, by 1920 the headquarters of the NAACP, the Urban League, Marcus Garvey’s UNIA, and the emerging literary movement were all situated in Harlem (Wintz 20–22). African-American churches in midtown Manhattan read the signs and followed their parishioners uptown, where clergy like Adam Clayton Powell, Sr., and Reverdy Ransom continued to provide powerful leadership on social and racial issues (J. Anderson 4, 21–24). They were joined by clubs, newspapers, entertainers, professionals, saloons, and criminals (J. Anderson 62). As Cary Wintz puts it, “Harlem . . . was where the action was in black America during the decade following World War I” (22). Other cities had black literary societies and journals, but Harlem had leadership and notoriety.

While African Americans physically moved to Harlem and celebrated it in literature, the Anglo-Irish might be said to have psychologically

moved Ireland by focussing on the rural past while living in Dublin or London.¹¹ Both types of movement created a workable space for a literary renaissance, and both would prove problematic as well. Harlem was an exciting place for African Americans to live in the 1920s, but it was already becoming a slum and a black ghetto. In Ireland, the rejection by many writers of the present and the urban in favor of the past and the rural simplified ignoring the glaring problems of both. Each renaissance city was at once a dream and a nightmare.

Urban Conditions

Many urban Irish people and African Americans lived in appalling conditions. The history and folklore so popular with urban Anglo-Irish intellectuals dealt almost exclusively with the past or an idealized countryside, but the misery of modern rural Irish life was matched by few places, one of them being Dublin. A 1903 article in the *British Medical Journal* paraphrased the Earl of Dudley, Lord Lieutenant of Ireland: "He had seen the misery of Irish peasants in the West, but nothing comparable with what existed at their own doors in Dublin" ("Housing" 1108). In the early twentieth century, the death rate in the capital reached fifth highest among cities world-wide before it began to decline (Foster 437).

Those who survived spent a good deal of time looking for work, trudging the streets of Dublin, which were so filthy and poorly maintained that they "generated twice as many tons of street sweepings per mile per year as even larger cities such as Edinburgh and Leeds" (J. O'Brien 67). Because of the predominantly non-industrial nature of the city's economy, many working-class people had no skills whatsoever: known as "general laborers," they were forced to depend on the vagaries of temporary employment. They often went home at night to "eighteenth-century tenements bereft of water or sanitation" (Foster 437), as the beautiful townhouses built a hundred and fifty years before by the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy had become warrens for people frequently packed four to a room, or more. In 1885, the average Dublin tenement dwellers lived in one and a half rooms per family. As Joseph O'Brien writes, "inadequate housing and unsanitary accommodation had consigned over one-third of the population to conditions of intolerable overcrowding and, most often, ill health" (23, 126).

Little help could be expected from the city government or the Catholic urban middle class. Despite the former's predominantly nationalist convictions, its members often owned tenements and opposed social pro-

grams on political and religious grounds. A 1913 housing inquiry revealed that sixteen of the eighty council members were tenement owners. A resolution forbidding city officials to own tenement property was introduced, but it was ignored (J. O'Brien 152). When the massive Transport Workers' strike threatened participating families with starvation in the same year, the Catholic Church refused to let the children be sent to England, fearing that Protestants would attempt to convert them. Many newspapers, politicians, prominent businesspeople, and city officials joined the Church's condemnation of the fledgling Irish labor movement (Lyons 77). Yeats, preferring labor to what he thought of as the crass capitalism of the Catholic urban middle class, wrote the following lines to describe the latter:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone;
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave. (*Poems* 108)

In addition, in an article in the *Irish Worker*, he condemned both the Unionist and nationalist newspapers for inciting citizens against the striking workers (Lyons 78).¹²

Like many Dubliners, Harlemites often lived in squalid conditions. Harlem enjoyed such epithets as "The City of Refuge" and "The Mecca of the New Negro," but Carl Van Vechten also accurately described it in his 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven* (another name for Harlem) as a crowded and dirty ghetto with little egress (45, 149).¹³ African-American novelist Wallace Thurman concurred, writing in 1928 that "[t]he people seen on Fifth Avenue [in Harlem] are either sad or nasty looking. The women seem to be drudges or drunkards, the men pugnacious and loud—petty thieves and vicious parasites. The children are pitiful specimens of ugliness and dirt" (qtd. in J. Anderson 144).

Early-twentieth-century migrations by poor southern African Americans occasioned renewed segregation by whites and resentment from African Americans already in residence during the more liberal years at the end of the nineteenth century (Sowell 210–11). Alain Locke proudly

reported in his 1925 anthology *The New Negro* that Harlem was “not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life” (6). Locke’s claims were fairly accurate: in addition to the influx of southerners, West Indians made up one-quarter of Harlem’s population during the 1920s because of a migration of 130,000, mainly to New York City, in the first three decades of the century. But relations between the native-born and the immigrants were often strained: many of the former resented the generally superior education, motivation, and business skills of the West Indians, calling them “black Jews” and “monkey-chasers” (Sowell 216, 219). Harlem Renaissance writers made Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey a frequent target of their satire, emphasizing his physical attributes and his love of pomp (Wintz 150, 152).

Probably as a reaction to increased southern and West Indian immigration, the Society of the Sons of New York was founded, with membership limited to wealthy African Americans born in the city (J. Anderson 26). White owners of major Harlem stores maneuvered to avoid integrated hiring, and African Americans often paid white landlords almost twice the rent that white tenants paid elsewhere in Manhattan for comparable quarters (Lewis 108–9). Preachers and journalists encouraged African Americans to open businesses, but customers of their own race were scarce when they did so: many African Americans would patronize white stores and professionals despite their condescension and frequent insults (J. Anderson 66–67). And though Harlem was notorious for its “rent parties,” reputed to ooze sex and gin, the purpose of such events was to raise funds to ward off eviction (Lewis 108).

The excitement associated with Dublin and Harlem as urban centers of cultural renaissance often overshadows the desperate poverty with which it coexisted. As Gilbert Osofsky remarked in his 1966 work *Harlem: The Making of A Ghetto*, “[t]he most profound change that Harlem experienced in the 1920’s was its emergence as a slum” (135). Dublin’s slums, on the other hand, had been growing since the Act of Union of 1800 when the seat of government moved to London and the city lost its economic base. Some Irish historians suggest that Dublin did not even have Harlem’s advantage of being situated in a major artistic center: as Joseph O’Brien relates in painful detail, theater, music, painting, libraries, and publishing were all limited. According to him, Dublin’s only cultural wealth was its newspapers (44–62). One must therefore

take care to balance one's images of the renaissance cities so that they are not, in Hugh Kenner's words, "vivid, credible, and wholly literary" (Foreword viii).

Political Activity

Despite the crushing poverty, in addition to participating in the cultural activities in Dublin and Harlem, many Irish people and African Americans became involved with the numerous political organizations available to them, which ran the entire spectrum from liberal to radical means of advocating social change.

Irish people enjoyed many political options after Parnell's fall in 1891, including constitutional nationalism, pro-force nationalism, and socialism. On the constitutionalist front, John Redmond replaced Parnell as leader of the Irish Parliamentary party, and he managed to maneuver a Home Rule bill, which would grant a measure of independence, past the House of Commons and the House of Lords by July 1914. This legislation had been debated since the 1870s, and in 1893 had even passed the lower chamber before being dismissed by the Lords. Unfortunately, the beginning of World War I in August 1914 suspended the British Empire's internal political considerations, and Home Rule hung in limbo. Irish people who had followed Redmond and the constitutional nationalists were of two minds at this juncture: a majority (including Redmond) were willing to wait for Home Rule until the war's end, and a radical minority wished to pressure the English into granting it immediately, perhaps by force (Foster 397, 424, 462, 471, 473).

In addition to the frustrating struggle for Home Rule, the Boer War (1899–1902) had also had a radicalizing effect on Irish politics because it offered an opportunity to root against England (Foster 456). In its wake, and that of World War I, tiny and largely inactive organizations such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) saw their memberships grow and their energies focus. Redmond's constitutional nationalism appeared ineffective to them and his Irish Parliamentary party the home of fruitless endeavors, for the IRB favored revolution over democratic measures (Foster 474–75).¹⁴ Disciplined and puritanical, this group of Irish-language enthusiasts, romantic revolutionaries, and mystical Catholics preached a message of revolutionary sacrifice: its leaders began to plan their own martyrdom, which they perceived as a cleansing sacrifice that would drive the English and their contaminating influence from the land (Lyons 86). As IRB leader Patrick Pearse wrote in 1915, "[t]he old heart

of the earth needs to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country” (216). The discourse of blood sacrifice was common across Europe before and in the early years of World War I, and even those who did not particularly believe it found it useful for rationalizing and achieving their undertakings (Lyons 91).

One person converted very late in the game to Pearse’s camp was the labor leader James Connolly. Connolly and his fellow organizer James Larkin had found socialism slow to catch on in Ireland, a largely unindustrialized country. When Irish people were politicized, it tended to be along agrarian and nationalist lines; they were not often interested in a brotherhood of workers without an Irish national identity in the offing. Dublin trade unions had been growing stronger toward the end of the nineteenth century, but even they frequently rejected Connolly’s Irish Socialist Republican party ideals (J. O’Brien 208–9). After the failure of the 1913 strikes, Connolly and the Irish labor movement were gradually absorbed by the nationalist cause. As late as December 1915, Connolly still protested Pearse’s rhetoric of blood sacrifice, but in the months that followed, he too joined the preparations for the Easter Rising of 1916, the event that led, indirectly, to Irish independence (Foster 478–79). The trade unionists played an important role in the Rising, and Connolly himself was executed for his participation in it.

Irish people found the renaissance years a time of increased, if not particularly successful, political activity. The downfall of Parnell and the beginning of World War I were stumbling blocks to Home Rule, for which the Irish Parliamentary party had worked so long; the socialists and trade unionists were largely thwarted in their attempts to improve working conditions for Dublin workers; and the Easter Rising would have been a complete failure if the English had not galvanized Irish nationalist sentiment by executing its leaders. In the end, twenty-six of Ireland’s thirty-two counties were finally able to form the Irish Free State in 1921.

While African-Americans would not meet with unqualified political success either, increased political activity accompanied the New Negro spirit in Harlem and other African-American communities. As in Ireland, one could choose from a wide range of approaches to change, including the NAACP’s racial uplift, Marcus Garvey’s Back to Africa program, and the *Messenger’s* socialism.

Speaking of the end of World War I, W. E. B. Du Bois, leader of the NAACP, wrote the following in a 1919 article: "Make way for Democracy! We saved it in France . . . we will save it in the United States of America, or know the reason why" ("Returning" 14). Since its inception in 1909, the NAACP had consistently spurned the accommodationist politics of Booker T. Washington and demanded equal treatment under the law. Even this seemingly moderate position alienated many people of both races who favored Washington's approach. As James Weldon Johnson wryly observed in his autobiography, "Communists, who advocate and work for the overthrow of the entire governmental system, run no such risks as the Negro 'radical' who insists upon the impartial interpretation and administration of existing law" (*Way* 310). Where Washington had been conciliatory, Du Bois refused to hide his thoughts, writing acidic editorials for the *Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP. Du Bois, the NAACP, and Harlem quickly "became identified with the spirit of Negro protest and self-assertion in the minds of the [*Crisis's*] wide national readership" (Huggins, *Harlem* 21). But the NAACP could not and did not speak to all African Americans. In 1916, Johnson had difficulty convincing the Board of Directors that the organization should be extended to the South, as they feared that southern African Americans would be too conservative (*Way* 314). And its tireless promotion of the black bourgeoisie led West Indian intellectual Hubert Harrison to dub it the "National Association for the Advancement of *Certain* People" in the early 1920s (McKay, *Long Way* 113–14).

Many African Americans displeased with the NAACP turned to Marcus Garvey's UNIA, the only group that appealed to the black urban masses. Garvey began lecturing at the Harlem speakers' corner about "a renaissance Mother Africa" in the spring of 1916, and by the end of 1918 he could draw several thousand to rallies at Harlem's Palace Casino. At first, Garvey's references to Africa shocked those who were ashamed or ignorant of their African heritage. No black leader had spoken in this vein since the end of Reconstruction, and the Euro-American vision of "the dark continent" had taken hold in the minds of many people of African descent. For many people, Garvey connected Africa to unity and self-improvement, engendering pride where shame had reigned. As UNIA grew, it attracted black nationalists, socialists, and communists, and it angered Du Bois, the NAACP, and much of the African-American bourgeoisie. When the war ended and racial strife increased, Garvey's organization thrived on the disillusionment prevalent in many African-Ameri-

can communities. But UNIA and Garvey's power collapsed as quickly as they grew: his poor money management incurred the government's wrath in 1922 (though UNIA was already under surveillance by the FBI in 1919) and his courting of the Ku Klux Klan as a fellow separatist organization in the same year inflamed many of his erstwhile supporters. In 1925 Garvey was jailed for mail fraud, and although UNIA continued to exist, its days of glory were over (Lewis 34–44, 111). As Nathan Huggins suggests, the causes of Garvey's success and failure were one and the same: he tried to make his dream of a return to Africa tangible through titles, uniforms, parades, and even an African-American shipping company, and the ranks of his organization swelled accordingly; however, this dream based on expensive and complicated pageantry quickly foundered, as Garvey tried "to produce grand results before he had the experience or organization to manage them" (*Harlem* 43).

The African-American socialists and communists, Garvey's early allies, attracted a much smaller following during the 1920s than the NAACP or UNIA, but they were a vocal minority on the Harlem political scene. These "race radicals" faced a tough challenge when they stood at the speakers' corner at Lenox Avenue and 135th Street: although the average African American was a severely exploited member of the proletariat, he or she was also against immigration and unions and in favor of the capitalist system. Smashed unions and curtailed immigration meant employment opportunities to many African Americans, and their leadership often concurred (Lewis 22). In addition, the arrant racism of most American labor unions did not help them gain African-American sympathy or members. However, during the 1920s, the Communist party made an effort to recruit African Americans and to have its platforms reflect their concerns, advocating interracial socializing and marriage, class struggle as a means to racial equality, and even an African-American state in the Deep South (Wintz 194). But because the American Communist party could not offer viable solutions to racial problems and because it was plagued by racism itself, it was never popular with African Americans: their membership probably peaked at about two hundred out of fifteen thousand total members (Lewis 286).

The era of the Harlem Renaissance opened more political venues to African Americans than it engendered political and social change. Black leaders of the 1920s lacked the power their successors would enjoy: they could not muster the numbers to carry out a successful boycott, and the major political parties cared little about the African-American vote.

Black political figures tended to make speeches on broad issues rather than do battle on the lowest political levels, and this refusal of the majority of African-American leaders to engage in party politics at the level of the ward also hurt their chances for achieving significant changes (Huggins, *Harlem* 31, 26).

In addition to their political activities, many African Americans and Irish people saw literature as a means of social change. The remainder of this work will explore the issues raised by this attitude towards literature: issues of language, identity, and representation.