

Regina Anderson Andrews: Playwright, Activist, Librarian

As a critical contributor to the Harlem Renaissance and friend of W.E.B. Dubois, librarian Regina Anderson Andrews expanded a cultural movement through community outreach at the 135th St. Branch Library. Before joining New York Public Library (NYPL), she began her library career with the Chicago Public Library right after graduating high school. She worked with Vivian Harsh, an exceptional librarian that curated one of the most prominent research collections of Black Heritage in the country, and whom Andrews credits as an early influence and mentor.¹ Andrews attended Wilberforce University in Ohio, the nation's oldest private Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) owned & operated by Black Americans.² She worked at the library on campus. When Andrews applied for the library position with NYPL, she had work experience in academic and public library settings. Although her path did not include completing a library science degree,³ Andrews' service and commitment to serving Black communities remain an inspiring tale of library programming and civic engagement working in tandem.

By the time Andrews began her career in New York in the 1920s, the seeds were already planted for performing outreach and using the library to build stronger relationships within these neighborhoods. Ernestine Rose had created positions within NYPL to reflect a growing population of Black American and Puerto Rican library users. These once-white communities of European immigrants were changing. By 1920, the First Great Migration period had taken shape

¹Endnotes

Ethelene Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 30-31

² Wilberforce University. <https://wilberforce.edu/about-wilberforce/> (retrieved 7/5/2021)

³ Ethelene Whitmire, "Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews the New York Public Library." *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 42, no.4 (2007): 412

along with the passing of the Johnson Shafroth Act,⁴ legislation extending a partial version of U.S. citizenship to the Puerto Rican people. As a result, 1920s Harlem was a diverse community of varying socioeconomic classes and Black people from all over the country and the world.⁵ Rose recognized the importance of preserving cultural traditions from her previous work with European immigrants and wanted her staff to reflect the communities served. For this very purpose, Andrews was hired by Rose to create programs serving specific needs. Another notable appointment of Rose was Pura Belpré, the Puerto Rican storyteller who inspired the distinguished children's book award presented to Latinx creators. She was hired to address the needs of the Spanish-speaking population.⁶

In an interview with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the first newspapers serving Black communities, Andrews discussed her new position integrating the 135th St. branch library: "Library work is a difficult field, requiring a great deal of study and training.....Of course, the chances for colored girls are not the best, but I do believe that if they meet the requirements they will receive appointments to important posts the same as others."⁷ Andrews built upon Rose's relationships at the 135th St. Branch and took them to new heights. She supported Rose in her library outreach activities, such as organizing the North Harlem Community Forum, which included scholars Franz Boas and W.E. B. Du Bois, a client of Andrews' father, a prominent Chicago-based attorney.⁸ Communist and Marxist ideas were comfortably shared in this forum, which welcomed innovative and progressive ideas.

⁴ Thomas, Lorrin. 2020. "Response to Padilla Peralta, Dan-El. Citizenship's Insular Cases, from Ancient Greece and Rome to Puerto Rico. *Humanities* 2019, 8, 134." *Humanities* (2076-0787) 9, no.4 (2020): 140.

⁵ Betty L. Jenkins. "A White Librarian in Black Harlem." *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 60, no. 3 (1990): 219.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁷ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 55.

⁸ Whitmire, "Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews the New York Public Library," 410.

A Black cultural shift in thought was emerging that would later be referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. Andrews was involved in the execution of experimental theater group performances in the 135th St. Branch Library basement. The emerging theater of this period was a political stance rejecting unfavorable interpretations of Blackness created by whites. As a dear friend of many famous creatives behind the Harlem Renaissance, Andrews extended her home to entertain guests and accommodate out-of-town visitors. The amiable Andrews shared an apartment with two girlfriends, who together actively promoted the philosophy behind this *New Negro Movement*. Andrews and her roommates Ethel Ray Nance and Louella Tucker commonly referred to this apartment as “Dream Haven”⁹ and hosted so many events that the apartment was referred to as the “Harlem West Side Literary Salon.”¹⁰ It was located in the affluent Sugar Hill neighborhood, described as having “luxurious apartment homes and brownstones overlooking Harlem.”¹¹ This apartment was also commonly referred to as “580” and received visits from scholars and writers like Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Arna Bontemps, Aaron Douglas, Jessie Redmon Fauset, just to name a few.¹² Photographs capturing the joy from these gatherings can be viewed within The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

It is widely speculated that Andrews and her apartment were featured in Carl Van Vechten’s 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*. Van Vechten was among the many “580” visitors and is believed to have used both Andrews and her roommate Ethel Ray as models for characters and

⁹ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 38.

¹⁰ Boyd, Herb 2017. “Regina Anderson Andrews, Librarian, Playwright and Patron of the Arts.” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 27, 1.

¹¹ Cary D. Wintz. 2007. *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*. Sourcebooks. 40

¹² Lean’tin L. Bracks, and Jessie Carney Smith. *Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance Era*. (Maryland: Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 166.

events in the book.¹³ Mary, the librarian, is believed to be the character that Andrews is based on as the author highlights similar details featured in the apartment and her bedroom bookshelf.¹⁴ “Du Bois hated *Nigger Heaven* and published a scathing review of it in *The Crisis*, advising readers to ‘drop the book gently into the grate.’”¹⁵ Although the author’s polarizing work had inspired some younger writers during this time, Andrews disliked the novel and felt that the white writer had betrayed her.¹⁶

Theater played a significant role during this period, and community theater groups developed throughout Harlem. The foundations of Black theater were being established during the Harlem Little Theater Movement, and the 135th St. Branch Library played a considerable role by providing a space for the community to experience these plays. In addition to being a librarian, Andrews was also a playwright and wrote under several pen names throughout her lifetime. For example, she wrote the Harlem Experimental Theater (HET) production “Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” a play about a lynching, under the pen name Ursula Treling.¹⁷ A conflict of interest in the library is believed to be why Andrews chose a pseudonym to write under.¹⁸

The Krigwa Players Little Negro Theater (KPLNT) was established by Du Bois as a response to the limited theater outlets where Black actors could perform plays by Black writers. “The creation of the KRIGWA Players and other little theaters throughout the nation was a response to plays that portrayed African Americans in a negative light as ignorant, shuffling, inarticulate caricatures.”¹⁹ Beyond an artistic movement, the Harlem Renaissance was also a

¹³ Wintz, 2007. *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*. Sourcebooks. 41

¹⁴ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 38

¹⁵ Hutchinson, George. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶ Wintz, 2007. *Harlem Speaks: A Living History of the Harlem Renaissance*. 41

¹⁷ Boyd, “Regina Anderson Andrews, Librarian, Playwright and Patron of the Arts.”, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 64.

radical expression of authenticity among Black creators. With an emphasis on complete ownership of this creative process, it became a genuine display of what the community was feeling at the time.

The Krigwa Players Theater debuted its first performance in the 135th St Branch Library basement. “For the premiere performance of the Krigwa Players on May 3, 1926, the small basement lecture room of the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library was transformed into the Harlem Little Negro Theatre, complete with stage and dressing rooms specially constructed by library personnel.”²⁰ Despite differing accounts of who presented the idea of using the library space for the Krigwa Players Theater, there is no disputing Andrews’ involvement within the group itself, as she supported the theater as an actor along with her husband, Attorney Bill (William) T. Andrews.²¹ Andrews’ recollection of this time is recorded as she shares that “within the library, we provided a platform for the soapbox orator. Our small auditorium offered one of the first platforms he had in Harlem.”²² She remembers how monumental it was to have a theater of this magnitude housed in the library.

KPLNT's library stage united the Harlem community and was described as an "intimate studio space" resisting hierarchical, segregated seating, unlike theaters downtown.²³ This theater movement created a space for Black Americans that rarely existed before this period. Although the KPLNT’s presence was short-lived (three years), it is mainly responsible for inspiring the Black theater movement of the 1960s with successors like the Negro Ensemble Company, The

²⁰ Monroe, John G. “The Harlem Little Theatre Movement, 1920-1929.” *Journal of American Culture* (01911813) 6: (Winter 1983): 66-67.

²¹ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 61.

²² Ethel Pitts Walker. 1988. “Krigwa, a Theatre by, for, and about Black People.” *Theatre Journal* 40 (3):352

²³ Braconi, Adrienne Macki. 2015. *Harlem’s Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press.42-65.

New Lafayette Theater, Inner City Cultural Center, Kuumba Theater, and other Black theaters created during the 1960s.²⁴

The group later disbanded due to a period of inactivity and internal conflicts. The Harlem Experimental Theater (HET) was established with Andrews serving as the executive director.²⁵ After a few attempts to perform plays written by white writers, this group realigned themselves with the same mission of the Krigwa Players Theater, where Du Bois emphasized, “the plays of a real Negro theatre must be written by Blacks dealing honestly with black life ... the Negro theatre must seek, and be supported by, Black audiences and be located in a Black neighborhood.”²⁶ Recognizing the impact of the Harlem Experimental Theatre within the broader context of the Little Theater Movement and its influence on giving talented unestablished actors a platform to express themselves, Andrews appeared on the radio to say: “The story of the struggles and achievements of this group is representative of similar groups in other communities. The need it has filled in a Negro community like Harlem cannot be estimated.”²⁷

Andrews’ successful approach to library outreach leveraged treasured friends supporting her professional work. While she was described as having light skin and being of multiracial heritage,²⁸ her social and professional world saw her as a Black woman. She was a member of the Black Greek sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, and served as the president.²⁹ In 1939, Andrews was one of ten Black women honored at the state fair and featured on the cover of *Messenger* magazine³⁰, an independent Black literary magazine. When Rose hired Andrews at the 135th

²⁴ Ethel Pitts Walker. 1988. “Krigwa, a Theatre by, for, and about Black People.” *Theatre Journal* 40 (3): 356

²⁵ Braconi, *Harlem’s Theaters: A Staging Ground for Community, Class, and Contradiction, 1923-1939*. 65.

²⁶ Monroe, “The Harlem Little Theatre Movement, 1920-1929.” *Journal of American Culture*, 66.

²⁷ Whitmire, *Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian*, 65.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁰ Boyd, “Regina Anderson Andrews, Librarian, Playwright and Patron of the Arts.”, 1.

Branch Library, she saw her as a library worker that could serve the needs of Harlem's growing Black community. After filling out an application at another NYPL location, she was ushered along the narrow pathway commonly shared among other Black librarians in New York during this period. She could only be assigned to work at the Harlem branch.³¹

Unfortunately, this also meant that Andrews would be unable to partake in opportunities for promotions and pay increases. Despite countless achievements serving the community through library programming and outreach, Andrews faced challenges in promoting her position to the next level at NYPL. Eventually, a boycott ensued, led by friend, scholar, and National Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP) founder W.E.B. Du Bois. Through a series of correspondence to NYPL Administrators, Du Bois posed questions around Andrews' dedication and commitment to being an exceptional librarian for the organization and the lack of advancement opportunities despite these efforts.³²

DuBois addressed various administrators and called out discriminatory practices.³³ After no immediate solutions were provided to Andrews' satisfaction, he protested and called for a boycott of the NYPL. "Others joined Du Bois in protest. On February 20, 1930, his colleague Walter White, then acting secretary of the NAACP, boycotted the library on Andrews's behalf."³⁴ Andrews would later become the first Black woman to lead an NYPL branch.³⁵

The Harlem community organizing in solidarity with Andrews is a true testimony of her influence. Despite the Library Employees' Union having an established date of 1917, the membership remained small and was not racially integrated. "Rather than relying on their more

³¹ Whitmire, "Breaking the Color Barrier: Regina Andrews the New York Public Library.", 409.

³² Ibid., 412.

³³ Ibid., 413.

³⁴ Ibid., 414.

³⁵ Ibid., 415.

deferential colleagues, (the union) sought support from outside organizations that might be willing to call for the necessary accommodations publicly and assertively.”³⁶ Perhaps a more inclusive membership would have proved beneficial to all library workers. During this time, segregation was still in place and made it harder for employees of color to take advantage of opportunities to collectively bargain. Also, the numerous exams and classifications for library workers made it harder for workers to unite and work towards a common solution. Nevertheless, this was the first union of public library workers in the United States, and its limitations would inspire future organizing efforts.

The legacy of Regina Anderson Andrews should be shared and widely celebrated. Andrews recognized that her work as a librarian made her a valuable contributor to Harlem’s Black community. The 135th Street Branch Library was used to uplift a burgeoning movement celebrating Black intellectual thought, literature, and art. Andrews’ role was to bridge the gap often experienced in these segregated spaces and make it feel more like it belonged to the community it served. She used her connection with one of the most prominent Black voices of this time to advocate for better pay and promotion. She could also tap into her creativity and contribute a voice to what we now recognize today as the Harlem Renaissance.

³⁶ Shanley, Catherine. "The Library Employees' Union of Greater New York, 1917-1929." *Libraries & Culture* 30, no. 3 (1995): 253.