

## Basketball as a Stage for the “New Negro”: The Harlem Renaissance and the Harlem Globetrotters

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### Abstract

In this paper, I probe the cultural adjacency between theater, bodily performance, and basketball that emerged in the Harlem Renaissance era, a golden age in African American culture lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s. I focus on the story of a black basketball team named after Harlem: the Harlem Globetrotters (The Globetrotters), an all-black American basketball team founded in Chicago that would eventually become widely known for its combination of athleticism and theatrics. The Globetrotters offer useful insight into the Harlem Renaissance phenomenon, demonstrating that it was not confined to New York. Reproducing or strategically mimicking the stereotypical minstrel figure of the “Old Negro,” the Harlem Globetrotters recreated basketball into a “New Negro” sport spectacle.

### Key words

United States of America, African American Culture, African American Literature, Sports, Race

### Introduction

Though virtually forgotten today, the Harlem Renaissance significantly reshaped the relationship between theater and sports in the 1920s. As documented in Daniel Anderson’s seminal study *The Culture of Sports in the Harlem Renaissance* (2017), Sterling Brown, one of the Renaissance’s prominent poets, treated sports—including baseball, football, track and field, tennis, and basketball—from the 1920s on as an important subject matter in African American culture to “bridge the gap between sports and literature” (Anderson 185–186). Later, in his essay “Athletics and the Arts” (1951), Brown argued that sports should be given “first-class citizenship,” on an equal basis with the arts, because the achievements of a black athlete meant “his acceptance as an individual to be judged on his own merits, with no favor granted, and no fault found, because of race” (Brown 99). Similarly, Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist Arna Bontemps published *God Sends Sunday* (1931), a novel about an African American jockey’s glory and failure in horse racing and gambling, which “bridges past [i.e., historic black sport culture] and street culture” by the term “sporting life” (Abney 90).<sup>1</sup>

Taking a cue from Brown and Bontemps, I would like to re-examine the link between sports, particularly basketball, and the Harlem Renaissance. Basketball is of special relevance in this context because basketball in Harlem emerged from an entertainment institution called the Harlem

Renaissance Ballroom and Casino (often called the Renaissance Casino), a black cultural complex built in the first half of the 1920s (Caponi-Tabery 6–7; Peterson 97). The Renaissance Casino included a ballroom, theater, and casino, but it could also accommodate basketball, since a basketball court has similar rectangular dimensions to a large ballroom. Thus, a ballroom or a dance hall also served as a basketball court.

William (Pop) Gates, an African American basketball athlete who started his basketball career with the New York Renaissance (often called the Rens) in Harlem in the 1930s, remembers how a dance hall with a “slippery floor” was transformed into a basketball arena at the Renaissance Casino: “They [The Renaissance Casino] had baskets that they put up before every ball game and markers they put down for the foul lines and so forth. The spectators were seated at tables in loges on the second tier and in boxes in the third tier. That was supposed to be an elite area.” According to Robert W. Peterson, the Rens played on this less-than-regulation-size court “with the musicians’ bandstand on one side and a wooden barrier surrounding the dance floor” (Peterson 97–98).<sup>2</sup>

The role of basketball in the Harlem Renaissance was not lost on the movement’s writers. Wallace Thurman, the *enfant terrible* of the Renaissance, noted in *Negro Life in New York’s Harlem* (1927) that basketball became a popular form of entertainment in Harlem with the rise of the Rens, an all-

black basketball team founded in 1923 that used the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino which was their home court. Thurman significantly alluded to the coterminous of the dance hall and basketball, referring to the casino building as “formerly a dance hall, rented out only for social affairs,” which now had “a basket ball [sic] game every Sunday night that is one of the most popular amusement institutions in Harlem” (Thurman 49). Comparing Harlem’s two dance halls—the Savoy Ballroom and the Renaissance Ballroom—Thurman declared that the Renaissance was “considered more ‘dicty’ than the Savoy,”<sup>3</sup> inasmuch as it “has a more regulated and more dignified clientele” and is “sponsored by some well-known social group” (Thurman 50). Interestingly, archival research has turned up a 1923 flyer that referred to “Basketball Games and Dance” at the Renaissance Ballroom as the “Season’s Biggest Attraction!”<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, I probe the cultural adjacency between theater, bodily performance, and basketball that emerged in the Harlem Renaissance. I go beyond the Harlem Rens, however, to incorporate the story of another black basketball team named after Harlem: the Harlem Globetrotters, an all black American basketball team founded in Chicago that would eventually become widely known for its combination of athleticism and theatrics. The Globetrotters offer useful insight into the Harlem Renaissance phenomenon, demonstrating that it was not confined to New York. Reproducing or strategically mimicking the stereotypical minstrel figure of the “Old Negro,” the Harlem Globetrotters recreated it into a “New Negro” sport spectacle.

### The Rise of Basketball in Chicago

“Bona and Paul,” a short story in Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer’s book *Cane* (1923), is set in Chicago and significantly features a basketball game as a theatrical spectacle of interracial conflicts between the title characters. Bona is a young Southern white woman; Paul is a racially unidentified man whom Bona suspects of having African blood. At the outset of the story, Toomer depicts two different but related scenes of dance and basketball, staged in a school gymnasium by a racially-mixed group of male and female college students who “are going to be teachers, and go out into the world.” Bona feels an attraction to Paul’s “rhythmical and syncopated” steps: “The dance of his blue-trousered limbs thrills her.” The dance scene is followed by a boys-versus-girls basketball game, which becomes a contested

arena for race and gender or interracial sexuality. In the game, Paul’s “pass” operates as a racial metaphor, since he is so light-skinned that he could pass for white, a feature that Bona cannot tolerate (Toomer 70–71).<sup>5</sup>

The story of the Harlem Globetrotters in Chicago is a different story of race, involving an America that was not racially mixed but, rather, quite strictly segregated. Although professional basketball began in 1898, the National Basketball Association, the primary U.S. professional league, practiced segregation until 1950, when at long last three black players joined NBA teams (Peterson 43; George 95–102). The history of the Globetrotters reflected America’s Jim Crowism, and yet the theatrical spectacle that the Globetrotters created through their comic antics had a significant bearing on the contours of the Harlem Renaissance culture.

Basketball was a relatively new sport during the Harlem Renaissance era. In winter, 1891, James Naismith, a Canadian-American physical educator and physician, invented the game while at the International Young Men’s Christian Association Training School in Springfield, Massachusetts. Naismith was seeking a way to promote the health of young Americans during the bitter winter months that the northeastern region of the United States experiences (Naismith 29–34). Basketball eventually reached Chicago and gained significant popularity there, resulting in the founding of teams such as the white Chicago Bruins and the black Globetrotters.

In the 1920s, basketball in Harlem was strongly associated with African American culture. Games played by the barnstorming black team actually based in Harlem added momentum to the popularity of basketball in Chicago’s black community. However, the American Basketball League (ABL), founded by white businessmen in the East and Midwest, expelled the Rens from its membership in 1925. Thus, the rivalry between the Harlem Rens, who never showed submissiveness, and Chicago’s white ABL team, the Bruins, intensified (Baldwin 218). Yet, the Harlem Globetrotters did not follow in the Rens’ footsteps. The Globetrotters “represent [ed] innovative Black basketball and the compromise of dignity to acquire a few scarce quarters,” as Nelson George has remarked (George 42). Thus, gradually, Chicago became a new cradle of black basketball culture, fusing athleticism and black theatricality.

Like the Rens, the Globetrotters emerged from a ballroom, but one on the South Side of Chicago. In fall, 1927,

the Savoy Ballroom opened in the central hub of Bronzeville, at Forty-seventh and South Parkway, and it would become the Globetrotters' home court.<sup>6</sup> The team was initially named the Savoy Big Five after the ballroom, but it was later renamed the Harlem Globetrotters (Zinkoff and Edgar 21–25). Abe Saperstein, a team promoter, explained the geographically anachronistic new name: “‘Harlem’ lets people know we’re a black team. And ‘Harlem Globetrotters’ makes it sound as if we’ve been around. Who knows? Maybe someday we really will travel around the world” (Gutman 16–17). Just as Saperstein predicted, the Globetrotters would become a barnstorming team, traveling across the country and eventually the globe as a symbol of the “New Negro” culture’s mobility.

### The Emergence of Clown Play in Basketball

Though initially a high-performing, all black basketball team, the Globetrotters gained their skyrocketing popularity by inventing and staging comedic antics and clown play. In their early years, the Globetrotters were one of the most competitive black basketball teams in the country, playing without antics and taking pride in their ability to win games. Yet, the team struggled to attract crowds during the Depression Era of the 1930s. Seeking a new way to attract and entertain white as well as black fans, the Globetrotters deliberately chose to play the role of “happy darkies” rather than “uppity niggers” in the sports arena of Jim Crow America (Roberts and Olson 31). Thus, their clowning emerged as a representation of the dominant culture’s entrenched and stereotyped portrayals of African American men living the sporting life. As sport historian David K. Wiggins notes: “Nowhere was the stereotypical image of the black athlete more fully expressed than by the Harlem Globetrotters” (Wiggins 183). It was an act of economic desperation; however, what began as black-minstrel entertainment for economic gain would later be recreated into their distinctive feature and central attraction, a New Negro sport spectacle.

The clowning style of the Globetrotters can be traced back to the intersection of sports and theater. Indeed, the root of minstrelsy in the Globetrotters’ performances seemingly derived directly from the stage or the theater. Initially, basketball games were “nothing more than a prelude to ballroom dancing” at places like the Renaissance Casino or Chicago’s Savoy Ballroom (Molter). Interestingly, the latter

facility also hosted annual minstrel balls (Green, *Spinning the Globe* 91). By incorporating the minstrel tradition, the Harlem Globetrotters underwent a significant metamorphosis, transforming basketball in a ballroom into a staged theater of sports and, thus, conjoining the black body, athleticism, and comic antics into a new black culture.

This picture becomes even more complex when we compare it to another popular black sport, baseball. In the late nineteenth century, African American baseball players (excluded from the white-dominated professional league) created their own Negro League. However, the black teams suffered financially and struggled to draw sufficient attendance. To keep fans amused, black baseball adopted comedic antics into its baseball performances. As baseball historian Sol White explains, “Every man on a team [of colored baseball] would do a funny stunt during a game back in the eighties and early nineties” (White 74).<sup>7</sup> *Around the World with the Harlem Globetrotters*, a souvenir book published in 1953, notes that the early Globetrotters “introduced a modified form of baseball, with a ‘pitcher,’ ‘catcher,’ ‘batter’ and two ‘fielders’” into their basketball spectacle in an effort to boost their popularity (Zinkoff and Williams 28).

Several comedic routines introduced by the Globetrotters apparently derived from the clown play of black baseball. Among the entertaining new repertoires that the Globetrotters invented were “pepper-ball” and “shadow-ball” performances, which became two of their signature antics or tricks. In these acts, field players gradually increased their pace while throwing a ball back and forth. Even after they discard the ball, they continued the motion of throwing faster and faster (Thomas, *Globetrotting* 58). In baseball, pepper is a pregame exercise for infielders, in which players throw a ball back and forth to warm up their arms and learn “quick throwback” (Swope 28).<sup>8</sup> According to William A. Young, the Indianapolis Clowns, often dubbed the Harlem Globetrotters of baseball, began to perform the pepper-ball and shadow-ball routines before World War I. In their version, players performed “a juggling act with a ball” and never showed the same tricks twice in the same game. The shadow-ball performance was “the Clowns’ trademark,” in which they enacted an infield practice with an invisible ball, typically after the seventh inning (Young 123). Scholar Damion Thomas observes that the Globetrotters drew their inspiration from black baseball, especially the Clowns:

“Replacing the baseball with a basketball and adding fancy passes, coupled with their musical anthem, ‘Sweet Georgia Brown,’ the team re-named its now world-renowned routine, ‘The Magic Circle’” (Thomas, “Around the World” 49).<sup>9</sup> “Sweet Georgia Brown” was a standard jazz song written by Maceo Pinkard and Kenneth Casey in 1925, which the Globetrotters adopted as their theme song during the 1940s. The Globetrotters performed their “Magic Circle” routines to the music, with players “passing the ball to each other, faking, mugging, dancing” to the theme song (Nelson 531; Lemon and Jenkins 15). With their dance routine and official song, the Globetrotters emerged as an embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance culture, blending comedy, jazz, showmanship, and athletic skill in their barnstorming performances.

The Globetrotters also incorporated another important African American cultural tradition, gambling, into their performance, recalling the “sporting life” depicted in Arna Bontemps’ *God Sends Sunday*. They invented a craps-shooting gag in which two team members play basketball at some distance from the opposing players, while three other players lounge on the floor and roll dice (Green, *Spinning the Globe*, 92). This gag piece is best understood within the context of the black gambling tradition. According to Daniel Anderson, Renaissance writers used the term *sports* for two meanings: athleticism and gambling. Sport was associated with a hyper-masculine image and “connoted gambling, prostitution, and, by extension, jazz” (Anderson 182). The Harlem Globetrotters’ dice reference the casinos of the Renaissance culture. In this regard, the Globetrotters’ craps-shooting gag carried the traditional black sport of gambling into another realm of sport, basketball.

### Playing a Clown in the Athletic Theater

This type of clowning seemed to reinforce the distorted image of the Old Negro as lazy and ignorant. However, the craps-shooting gag also functioned as a powerful theatrical tool, displacing or upending the dominance of whites over blacks, if only within the basketball arena. Employing James Scott’s concept of the “hidden transcript,” Damion L. Thomas observes that the antics of the Globetrotters fell within the African American trickster tradition. In this tradition, African American people ostensibly accepted the dominant stereotypical image, but they deployed it tactically “as powerful weapons to defend

themselves against the ravages of racial oppression” (Thomas, *Globetrotting* 63–64). On the theatrical stage of the Globetrotters, the mimicking minstrelsy and clowning were a political performance. Retaining the essence of the body movement of sports within the style of minstrelsy, the Globetrotters successfully transformed straight basketball into a staged spectacle to capture white audiences as both athletes and entertainers. Eventually, a master Globetrotter would earn the moniker of “Clown Prince.”<sup>10</sup> Meadowlark Lemon was a lead clown for the team from the 1950s to the 1980s and was inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in 2003.

As discussed above, the Globetrotters’ clowning took on multiple meanings in the context of the Harlem Renaissance culture. The date when the Globetrotters incorporated antics into their play for the first time is vague, but evidence suggests that they had begun to introduce a trickster basketball style by the mid-1930s.<sup>11</sup> A 1935 newspaper article in Spokane, Washington reported on some of the gags in use by then, such as a shorter player climbing on the shoulders of another player to dunk the ball (Thomas, *Globetrotting*, 56). Some moves, like this one, were practical as well as theatrical; as the Globetrotters’ barnstorming tours in those years were quite exhausting, their tricks permitted some players to take a rest even while in the game. At the same time, the performance was also capable of easing racial tensions. *Around the World with the Harlem Globetrotters* (1953) noted that Inman Jackson, who joined the team in 1929 and became “the club’s first clown,” used gags for that purpose. When Jackson and Ed “Moose” Krause, a famous white player on an opposing team, “had some great duels” in competing against each other on the basketball court in 1936, Jackson and his teammates of the Globetrotters “went into their clown routine.” When Jackson finally stopped moving at center court with his arms crossed, the audience’s laughter reached its peak. Krause, realizing that he had been mocked by the Globetrotters since he found a ball put between his legs on the floor by a player of the Globetrotters, would become embarrassed over being the object of the crowd’s laughter and would express his embarrassment by kicking the ball. Krause later recalled that the game was “the most amusing and embarrassing thing that ever happened to me” (Zinkoff and Williams 29–30). By deploying their antics in this fashion, the Globetrotters rechanneled racial conflict into entertainment and elicited laughter. At once appropriating

and displacing the minstrel image of the Old Negro, the Globetrotters’ theatrical skills and athleticism, coupled together, represented a hallmark of the New Negro rewriting the black-white relationship.

The Globetrotters’ comic antics can also be read as a strategic statement in the debate over what a “Negro” was. The Globetrotters ostensibly embodied the stereotypical image of black men, “hilariously funny, naturally talented, but temperamentally unsuited for real commitment and competition” (Roberts and Olson 31), by playing the role of clowns. Yet, the members also revised this scenario created by whites. The Sambo image, for instance, was a manipulative tool of white supremacy designed “to strip [African American men] of masculinity, dignity, and self-possession” (Boskin 14), but the Globetrotters appropriated this actually powerless image to successfully mask the narrative of black athletes’ prowess. Thus, the Globetrotters’ bodily performance at once reinforced and unsettled the racial hierarchy within the basketball arena, if not outside.

The Harlem Globetrotters further developed their comedic antics in the 1950s as two black players—Reece (Goose) Tatum and Marques Haynes—created a more elaborate comedic basketball style. Although the earlier Globetrotters’ antics were always well-rehearsed so that the audience knew what would come next, Tatum renovated the shows with his improvisational skill as “the team’s first full-time court comedian,” demonstrating that “black people can do new things in new ways” (Thomas, *Globetrotting* 60; Stewart 76).

## The Globetrotters and the Harlem Renaissance Culture

The Harlem Globetrotters team that emerged from the Savoy Ballroom in Chicago successfully created a new bodily performance through basketball and contributed to the athletic image of the “New Negro,” who unraveled the image of a subordinated race by competing successfully against whites. Without violating the rules of the game, the Globetrotters embodied black Harlem, using a basketball court as their theater. Harlem Renaissance writers came to acknowledge the Globetrotters’ unique contribution to African American culture and “sporting life.” In the 1950s, Sterling A. Brown honored them as one of the “highly successful all-Negro teams” in basketball and one that had “long acquainted the sports world with the prowess of

Negroes” (Brown 103–104). In the 1960s, Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes fit the team name into his poem “Horn of Plenty”:

Global Trotters Baseball Batters

Jackie Willie Campanella

Football Players Leather Punchers

Unforgotten Joes and Sugar Rays (Hughes 498)

Along with citing famous jazz musicians elsewhere in the poem, such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Miles Davis, Hughes here names Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Roy Campanella (all great baseball players) and boxers Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson as African American star athletes who made black history. Günter H. Lenz observes that Hughes’ list is designed to indicate the collective success of the African American community rather than individual achievement: “These heroic figures, who have often deeply transformed the sphere of life they excelled in, are … not isolated individual achievers, but supported by the spirit of resistance and determination that has always characterized African-American people” (Lenz 280). A horn of plenty, often described by the term *cornucopia*, symbolizes “a sort of windfall,” or “a basket from which spills the harvest of the autumn … with additional connotations of hard work and hospitality” (Green, *The Tattoo Encyclopedia* 55). Thus, Hughes was alluding to the Globetrotters as among the significant fruits of black culture. Their accomplishments were a memorable outgrowth of an unusual coterminous relationship between basketball and the Harlem Renaissance.

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### Notes

- 1 Arna Bontemps further demonstrated his interest in sports by publishing a book for children, *Famous Negro Athletes* (1963).
- 2 William (Pop) Gates recalled that the wooden barrier with sharp edges surrounding the court was quite dangerous for players (Peterson 98).
- 3 In *Negro Life in New York’s Harlem*, Thurman noted that there were “minor divisions determined by color and wealth” in Harlem. Based on the social group called “dictys” in Harlem, Thurman seemed to use the term “dicty” as he explained thus: “First there are the ‘dictys,’ that class of Negroes who constitute themselves as the upper strata and have lately done much wailing in the public places” (Thurman 45).
- 4 A flyer of “Basketball Games and Dance.” Chris “Dutch” Huiswoud Scrapbook, Schomburg Center Manuscripts and Archives, Sc MG 661, Box 1.

- 5 Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr observe that the basketball scene of “Bona and Paul” is depicted as “a king of utopian moment, for within the game there is gender equality and contact between races” (Scruggs and VanDemarr 181).
- 6 Although the official narrative of the Globetrotters states that the first game of the Harlem New York Globe Trotters (former name of the Globetrotters) was on January 7, 1927, Ben Green, who has chronicled the team’s history, notes that the debut of the Hudson’s Savoy Bear Cats at the Savoy Ballroom was on January 3, 1928 (Green, *Spinning the Globe* 39).
- 7 In addition, a son of Syd Pollock, a promoter of the Indianapolis Clowns who combined comedy and showmanship in black baseball, notes the humorous aspect of black baseball: “The truth is that black baseball was never hypocritical. It was always joyous. It was never mercenary. It always struggled to survive. And while black baseball was played seriously, with risk, improvisation, aggressiveness and daring seldom seen in white baseball, it was always fun” (Pollock 96).
- 8 Scott Simkus observes that the Israelite House of David baseball team, a barnstorming team founded at a religious society in Benton Harbor, Michigan, was a “baseball precursor to the Harlem Globetrotters’ Sweet Georgia Brown basketball act” by inventing the pepper ball performance (Simkus 187). Although the Clowns were not specifically inventors of the pepper ball trick, the Globetrotters’ performance seemed to derive from the Clowns, as several scholars suggest.
- 9 Reece (Goose) Tatum, a star player for the Globetrotters between 1940s and 1950s, was recruited by Abe Saperstein while serving as lead clown for the Ethiopian Clowns, later renamed the Indianapolis Clowns. His move between sports reinforces the fact that black baseball and black basketball followed similar patterns of combining comedy and sports (Green, *Spinning the Globe* 162–163; Thomas, *Globetrotting* 60).
- 10 Max Patkin, a Jewish player and comedian known for his slapstick performance as “Clown Prince of Baseball,” gained popularity in the 1940s.
- 11 Ben Green suggests that Saperstein had already begun adapting gags that drew on the traditional stereotypical images of African American people by March, 1935 (See Green, *Spinning the Globe* 92).

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