

A New African American Identity: The Harlem Renaissance

With the end of the Civil War in 1865, hundreds of thousands of African Americans newly freed from the yoke of slavery in the South began to dream of fuller participation in American society, including political empowerment, equal economic opportunity, and economic and cultural self-determination.

Unfortunately, by the late 1870s, that dream was largely dead, as white supremacy was quickly restored to the Reconstruction South. White lawmakers on state and local levels passed strict racial segregation laws known as “Jim Crow laws” that made African Americans second-class citizens. While a small number of African Americans were able to become landowners, most were exploited as sharecroppers, a system designed to keep them poor and powerless. Hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) perpetrated lynchings and conducted campaigns of terror and intimidation to keep African Americans from voting or exercising other fundamental rights.

With booming economies across the North and Midwest offering industrial jobs for workers of every race, many African Americans realized their hopes for a better standard of living—and a more racially tolerant environment—lay outside the South. By the turn of the 20th century, the Great Migration was underway as hundreds of thousands of African Americans relocated to cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York. [...] Harlem in New York became a destination for African Americans of all backgrounds. From unskilled laborers to an educated middle-class, they shared common experiences of slavery, emancipation, and racial oppression, as well as a determination to forge a new identity as free people.

The Great Migration drew to Harlem some of the greatest minds and brightest talents of the day, an astonishing array of African American artists and scholars. Between the end of World War I and the late 1930s, they produced one of the most significant eras of cultural expression in the nation’s history—the Harlem Renaissance. [...]

The Harlem Renaissance encompassed poetry and prose, painting and sculpture, jazz and swing, opera and dance. What united these diverse art forms was their realistic presentation of what it meant to be black in America, what writer Langston Hughes called an “expression of our individual dark-skinned selves,” as well as a new militancy in asserting their civil and political rights. [...] At the height of the movement, Harlem was the epicenter of American culture. Among the Renaissance’s most significant contributors were intellectuals W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, legendary musicians, including Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Josephine Baker and countless others.

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