

## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



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Harlem is vicious  
Modernism. BangClash.  
Vicious the way it's made,  
Can you stand such beauty.  
So violent and transforming.

- Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)

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## THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Harlem Renaissance (HR) is the name given to the period from the end of World War I and through the middle of the 1930s Depression, during which a group of talented African-American writers, thinkers and artists produced a sizable contribution to American culture.

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Into Bondage, Aaron Douglas

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**SOUTHERN BLACKS AND THE LURE OF THE NORTH  
BEFORE AND AFTER 1914**

- ✦ Most African Americans remained in the South nearly fifty years after the Civil War.
- ✦ There were plenty of reasons for blacks to leave the south, but little economic advantage to moving northward.
- ✦ With outbreak of World War I, this dynamic changes because:
  - + 1) war generates new opportunities for industry
  - + 2) much of existing labor supply leaves work force
  - + 3) immigrant labor pool evaporates.

End result: The Great Migration which congregated black populations in northern cities like Chicago and New York in unprecedented numbers. The concentration, in New York city, occurred on the upper west side, in Harlem.

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**HARLEM, NEW YORK**




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### THE NORTH AS PROMISED LAND AND LAND OF BROKEN PROMISES

- ✦ Northern city life proves both exhilarating and extremely troubling from World War I onward.
- ✦ Economically, gains moving from the South are real, but frustrations over their limits grow over time.
- ✦ Relative to the South, the North provides greater educational, political, social opportunities, but rising northern racism leads to strict residential segregation that causes overcrowding, run-down conditions, artificially high rents.

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### IMPORTANT FEATURES OF THE HR

- ✦ It became a symbol and a point of reference for everyone to recall. The name, more than the place, became synonymous with new vitality, Black urbanity, and Black militancy.
- ✦ It became a racial focal point for Blacks the world over; it remained for a time a race capital.
- ✦ The complexity of the urban setting was important for Blacks to truly appreciate the variety of Black life. Race consciousness required a shared experience.
- ✦ It encouraged a new appreciation of folk roots and culture. Peasant folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for racial imagination.
- ✦ It continued a celebration of primitivism and the mythology of an exotic Africa that had begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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### IMPORTANT FEATURES, CONT'

- ✦ Common themes begin to emerge: alienation, marginality, the use of folk material, the use of the blues tradition, the problems of writing for an elite audience.
- ✦ The HR was more than just a literary movement: it included racial consciousness, "the back to Africa" movement led by Marcus Garvey, racial integration, the explosion of music particularly jazz, spirituals and blues, painting, dramatic revues, and others.

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## MUSIC OF THE HR



- ✘ Bessie Smith
- ✘ Duke Ellington
- ✘ Louis Armstrong
- ✘ Cab Calloway

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## THE JAZZ AGE

✘ "Jazz music is idiosyncratic by nature where the performer creates the rhythm. There is truly no incorrect way to play Jazz. J.A. Roger wrote, "Jazz isn't just music, but also a spirit that can express itself in almost everything." It was in many ways a revolt against constraints because it was so joyous. Typically instrumented by piano, string bass, and drums, jazz began to take charge of the new era of music."

✘ -- Kwa King, "The Jazz Age"

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## THE YOUNG BLACK INTELLECTUALS



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- ✦ Among the important intellectuals writing and thinking during the Harlem renaissance were W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, and Alain Locke.
- ✦ The notion of "twoness," a divided awareness of one's identity, was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the author of the influential book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903): "One ever feels his two-ness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

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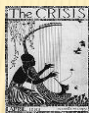
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THE HR. GAVE BIRTH THE MANY IMPORTANT PUBLICATIONS, SUCH AS CRISIS MAGAZINE, EDITED BY W. E. B. DUBOIS, GIVING BLACK WRITERS A FORUM WHERE THEIR VOICES COULD BE HEARD.



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**ALAIN LOCKE FROM "THE NEW NEGRO":**

"So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being --a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality"

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**ALAIN LOCKE FROM "HARLEM" PUBLISHED IN SURVEY GRAPHIC:**

\* "If we were to offer a symbol of what Harlem has come to mean in the short span of twenty years it would be another statue of liberty on the landward side of New York. It stands for a folk-movement which in human significance can be compared only with the pushing back of the western frontier in the first half of the last century, or the waves of immigration which have swept in from overseas in the last half. Numerically far smaller than either of these movements, the volume of migration is such none the less that Harlem has become the greatest Negro community the world has known--without counterpart in the South or in Africa. But beyond this, Harlem represents the Negro's latest thrust towards Democracy"

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**JAMES WELDON JOHNSON**



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### THE MAKING OF HARLEM BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

- ✦ To my mind, Harlem is more than a Negro community; it is a large scale laboratory experiment in the race problem. The statement has often been made that if Negroes were transported to the North in large numbers the race problem with all of its acuteness and with New aspects would be transferred with them. Well, 175,000 Negroes live closely together in Harlem, in the heart of New York, 75,000 more than live in any Southern city, and do so without any race friction. Nor is there any unusual record of crime.

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### ARTISTS OF THE HR

- ✦ Palmer Hayden
- ✦ Hale Woodruff
- ✦ Edward Burra
- ✦ Aaron Douglas
- ✦ John Henry Adams
- ✦ Laura Wheeling Waring
- ✦ Jacob Lawrence

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PALMER HAYDEN  
"THE JANITOR WHO PAINTS"



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HAYDEN, THE TUNNEL



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PALMER HAYDEN



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HALE WOODRUFF, 1934



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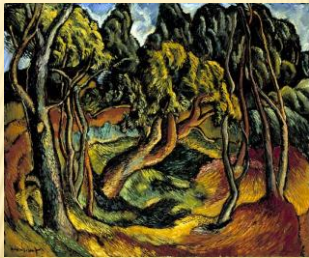
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HALE WOODRUFF



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HALE WOODRUFF



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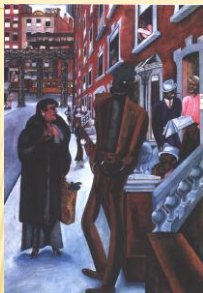
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EDWARD BURRA, 1934



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**EDWARD BURRA**



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**JACOB LAWRENCE**



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**WRITERS OF THE HR**

- ✘ Sterling Brown
- ✘ Claude McKay
- ✘ Langston Hughes
- ✘ Zora Neal Hurston
- ✘ James Weldon Johnson
- ✘ Countee Cullen
- ✘ Nella Larson
- ✘ Richard Wright

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## CLAUDE MCKAY



America

Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,  
And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,  
Stealing my breath of life, I will confess  
I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!  
Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,  
Giving me strength erect against her hate.  
Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.  
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,  
I stand within her walls with not a shred  
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.  
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,  
And see her might and granite wonders there,  
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,  
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

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## LANGSTON HUGHES

Cross

My old man's a white old man  
And my old mother's black.  
If ever I cursed my white old man  
I take my curses back.  
If ever I cursed my black old mother  
And wished she were in hell,  
I'm sorry for that evil wish  
And now I wish her well  
My old man died in a fine big house.  
My ma died in a shack.  
I wonder where I'm going to die,  
Being neither white nor black?



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## THE WEARY BLUES

\* [http://mathrisc1.tunet.edu/blues/L\\_Hughes.html](http://mathrisc1.tunet.edu/blues/L_Hughes.html)

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## ZORA NEAL HURSTON



✦ I want a busy life, a just mind, and a timely end.”



✦ \$945 is the most any of her books made.

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## HARLEM CHRONOLOGY

### 1919

- ✦ First Pan African Congress organized by W.E.B. Du Bois, Paris, February.
- ✦ Marcus Garvey founded the Black Star Shipping Line.

### 1920

- ✦ Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) Convention held at Madison Square Garden, August.
- ✦ Charles Gilpin starred in Eugene O'Neill, *The Emperor Jones*, November.
- ✦ James Weldon Johnson, first black officer (secretary) of NAACP appointed.
- ✦ Claude McKay published *Spring in New Hampshire*.
- ✦ Du Bois's *Darkwater* is published.

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### ✦ 1921

- ✦ *Shuffle Along* by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, the first musical revue written and performed by African Americans (cast members include Josephine Baker and Florence Mills), opened, May 22, at Broadway's David Belasco Theater.
- ✦ Marcus Garvey founded African Orthodox Church, September.
- ✦ Second Pan African Congress.
- ✦ Colored Players Guild of New York founded.
- ✦ Benjamin Brawley published *Social History of the American Negro*.

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1923

- \* The Cotton Club opened, Fall.
- \* Third Pan African Congress.
- \* Publications of Jean Toomer, *Cane*; Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinion of Marcus Garvey*. 2 vols.

1924

- \* Civic Club Dinner, sponsored by Opportunity, bringing black writers and white publishers together, March 21. This event is considered the formal launching of the New Negro movement.
- \* Paul Robeson starred in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, May 15.
- \* Countee Cullen won first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Competition.
- \* Publications of Du Bois, *The Gift of Black Folk*; Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*; Marcus Garvey, *Aims and Objects for a Solution of the Negro Problem Outlined*; Walter White, *The Fire in the Flint*.

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1925

- \* *Survey Graphic* issue, "Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro," edited by Alain Locke and Charles Johnson, devoted entirely to black arts and letters, March.
- \* Publications of Cullen, *Color*; Du Bose Heyward, *Porgy*; James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson, eds. *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*; Alain Locke, *The New Negro*; Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (a novel showing Black life).

1926

- \* Savoy Ballroom opened in Harlem, March.

1927

- \* Louis Armstrong in Chicago and Duke Ellington in New York began their careers.
- \* Harlem Globetrotters established.

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1929

- \* Wallace Thurman's play *Harlem*, written with William Jourdan Rapp, opens at the Apollo Theater on Broadway and becomes hugely successful.
- \* Black Thursday, October 29, Stock Exchange crash.
- \* Publications of Cullen, *The Black Christ and Other Poems*; Claude McKay, *Banjo*; Nella Larsen, *Passing*; Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker the Berry*; and Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: The Biography of Judge Lynch*.

1933

- \* National Negro Business League ceased operations after 33 years.

1934

- \* Rudolph Fisher and Wallace Thurman die within four days of each other, December 22 and 26.
- \* W.E.B. Du Bois resigns from *The Crisis* and NAACP.
- \* Apollo Theatre opened.

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1935

- ✦ Harlem Race Riot, March 19.
- ✦ *Porgy and Bess*, with an all-black cast, opens on Broadway, October 10.
- ✦ *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes, first full-length play by a black writer, opens on Broadway, October 25.
- ✦ 50 percent of Harlem's families unemployed.

1937

Publications of McKay, *Long Way From Home*;  
Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

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## WHAT HAPPENED TO IT?

- ✦ Professor Tomason: I also think that the Harlem Renaissance ended because the central ideas that underlay its artistic production had been exhausted by the mid 1930s. The idea that the American Negro was somehow the harbinger of a rural, southern, ultimately African primitivism had been exhausted as a literary idea by the works that had been produced in the 1920s and early 1930s, works by Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, and Zora Neale Hurston. There were only so many poems and short stories to be written about "what it means to feel like black me" and "what does Africa mean to me?" In the later twenties, moreover the desire to take advantage of the "vogue of the Negro" led some writers to produce works of poor quality that inevitably eroded the staying power of the movement.

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- ✦ Even those like Langston Hughes who had contributed mightily to the Harlem Renaissance's celebration of the distinctive culture of the Black of "primitive" masses, found that in the 1930s he needed to move on to embrace what Alain Locke later called "proletarian literature," a poetry and fiction of the Black masses that focused on their class position rather than their ethnic or racial specialness. In that move, Langston befriended and mentored a whole new generation of leftist writers like Richard Wright, Frank Marshall Davis, and Sterling Brown who found in the blues and the southern experience of Black people a powerful critique of American society that was altogether missing from Harlem Renaissance writing.

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- ✦ Others from the period like Zora Neale Hurston took another route out of the Harlem Renaissance and embraced a Black Diaspora consciousness, that saw the logical extension and exploration of Black culture taking them to the Caribbean where many believed Africanisms survived in much more potent forms. Here her work connected with that of a younger generation that included such dancers and choreographers as Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, both of whom, like Hurston, combined an artistic with an anthropological interest in studying Black culture in the Caribbean, and such visual artists as Jacob Lawrence and Lois Mailou Jones, who explored Caribbean historical and artistic themes in their work.
- ✦ In short, the Harlem Renaissance reached a natural end, but was able to feed into and stimulate further developments in the 1930s.

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