

DEFINING MOMENTS THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



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Omnigraphics

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Chapter Four

MUSIC AND ART OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE



The Negro is bringing about an entirely new national conception of himself; he has placed himself in an entirely new light before the American people. I do not think it too much to say that through artistic achievement the Negro has found a means of getting at the very core of the prejudice against him . . .

—James Weldon Johnson,
“Racial Prejudice and the Negro Artist”

At the same time that black political activists were lobbying for social change and black writers were documenting the hopes, dreams, and frustrations of African Americans from all walks of life, black artists, musicians, dancers, and composers were putting their own stamp on the Harlem Renaissance. It was during this period that black painters and sculptors achieved critical and popular success in the United States for the first time. Moreover, blues and jazz—musical genres that owed their very existence to African-American musicians and singers—burst into prominence during this time. “It is impossible to imagine the Harlem Renaissance without its music,” wrote scholar Cary Wintz in *Harlem Speaks*. “Jazz and the blues provided the background music for almost every event in the Harlem Renaissance. . . . Poets and writers depicted jazz joints, musicians, and blues singers in their writing, while artists painted them. Music was everywhere.”

The Blossoming of Jazz and Blues

Blues, ragtime, and jazz are all forms of African-American folk music that trace their roots to the system of slavery that dominated the American



Louis Armstrong was one of many talented African-American blues and jazz artists who descended on New York City during the Renaissance era.

South prior to the Civil War. Blues songs developed from the sorrow-filled laments that were sung by slaves on plantations all across the South. “Rag-time”—music played in syncopated or ragged time—evolved from the call-and-response patterns of slave work songs. Jazz music, meanwhile, took elements of both blues and ragtime and joined them with traditional black spirituals and an emphasis on musical improvisation.

Important early black composers such as W.C. Handy, known as the “father of the blues,” and ragtime giant Scott Joplin spent most of their careers far from New York City. Joplin wrote “Maple Leaf Rag” and other famous ragtime songs in St. Louis, Missouri, while Handy was based for much of his career in Memphis, Tennessee. But the musical forms developed by Handy, Joplin, and other early blues and jazz pioneers in Memphis, Chicago, Kansas

City, New Orleans, and other cities eventually made their way to New York City in general and Harlem in particular.

The sounds of these musical innovations first wafted out of New York clubs in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Bandleaders and composers like Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, James Reese Europe, and Fletcher Henderson descended on the city from all points of the country, attracted by the vibrant nightclub scene and Harlem’s growing reputation as the “capital of black America” (see Ellington biography, p. 110). By the early 1920s, white and black audiences alike were flocking to clubs and concert halls like never before to revel in these distinctively African-American musical forms.

The “Jazz Age” reached its zenith in the United States in the 1920s due to a wide range of factors. The talented musicians and composers that gathered in Harlem and other cities drew energy and inspiration from one another, spark-

ing the creation of a mighty stream of exciting new music. Growing white fascination with “Negro” culture also contributed to the popularity of jazz and blues, as did the poetry and stories of Langston Hughes and other black writers. In many of their literary works, jazz and blues music was presented as the heartbeat of the “New Negroes”—confident and self-aware African Americans who were determined to assert both their civil rights and their pride in their ethnic heritage.

The arrival of Prohibition in 1920 also played a role in the meteoric rise of black musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, and black singers such as Ethel Waters, Gladys Bentley, and Bessie Smith (see Smith biography, p. 150). The exuberant, emotional rhythms of blues and jazz struck a chord with black and white Americans who had emerged from the misery, hardship, and death of World War I with a renewed enthusiasm for drinking, dancing, and other simple pleasures of life. The federal government’s decision to ban the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages thus spawned a tremendous proliferation of clubs and “speakeasies”—illegal taverns—in New York City and other American cities where patrons could consume alcohol in defiance of U.S. law. Jazz and blues music seemed a perfect complement to the rebellious spirit that saturated these establishments

Finally, technological innovation and industrialization were key factors in the rise of jazz and blues. For many Americans, the bouncy rhythms and improvised melodies of jazz music seemed to embody the country’s quickening economic pulse and growing industrial power. In addition, jazz came along at a time when the communications and entertainment industries were being revolutionized by technological advances. Phonograph records and commercial radio, for example, enabled jazz orchestras and blues singers based in New York, Chicago, and New Orleans to spread their music to American towns and cities thousands of miles away.

Shuffle Along

The first and perhaps greatest musical event of the entire Harlem Renaissance era was *Shuffle Along*, a jazz musical written, composed, and performed

Bandleaders and composers like Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, James Reese Europe, and Fletcher Henderson descended on the city from all points of the country, attracted by the vibrant nightclub scene and Harlem’s growing reputation as the “capital of black America.”



Ragtime composers Eubie Blake (left) and Noble Sissle wrote the music and lyrics to *Shuffle Along*, the popular Broadway play often credited with opening white America's eyes to the talent of African-American entertainers.

by African Americans. This Broadway smash hit, which opened in 1921 and enjoyed a run of 504 electrifying performances, served notice that a new age of American music was dawning. It also “legitimized the African-American musical, proving to producers and managers that audiences would pay to see African-American talent on Broadway,” wrote Jo Tanner for the online site *Drop Me Off in Harlem*.

Back in nineteenth-century America, the only theatrical avenues open to black actors and performers had been vaudeville and burlesque stages and minstrel shows. On these stages, black entertainers (and white entertainers who blackened their faces in crude imitation of blacks) offered up the most stereotypical portraits of African Americans. Almost without exception,

blacks were portrayed as ignorant, childlike, and eager to please their white superiors.

This state of affairs began to change just before the turn of the century, when *A Trip to Coontown* opened in 1898 in New York City. This theatrical production, written by a black composer named Robert A. Cole, was the first musical production in U.S. history to be primarily organized, written, produced, and managed by blacks. Cole also helped launch two other black theatrical productions that appeared on New York stages over the next decade—*The Shoo-fly Regiment* (1906) and *The Red Moon* (1908).

Other important early figures in the black theater in New York included composer Will Marion Cook and lyricist Paul Laurence Dunbar, who collaborated on *Clorindy—The Origin of the Cakewalk* (1898); and Bert Williams and George Nash Walker, who produced such shows as *In Dahomey* (1902) and *Bandanna Land* (1908). In the 1910s, though, not a single theatrical production written, composed, or produced by African Americans appeared on Broadway.

In many respects, then, *Shuffle Along* seemed to come out of nowhere when it took Broadway by storm in 1921. This revue, written by Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, with music and lyrics by the ragtime vaudeville team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, featured a crowd-pleasing blend of lively jazz dancing, spirited singing, and romantic drama. It dazzled black and white patrons alike and launched the careers of Florence Mills and Josephine Baker.

The joyful spirit and stunning showmanship that swirled across the stage during each performance of *Shuffle Along* also influenced Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and other talented young writers of the Harlem Renaissance. “*Shuffle Along* . . . became a smash on Broadway at about the same time Cullen and Hughes were making their initial bows,” recalled fellow writer Arna Bontemps in *The Awakening: A Memoir*. “A happier conjunction could scarcely have been imagined, and the impact of this production, the wide popularity of its songs, the dazzling talent of its performers almost lifted the boy poets off their feet. . . . *Shuffle Along* was an announcement, an overture to an era of hope.”

New Opportunities in American Theater

Shuffle Along was so successful that Broadway promoters rushed to find other African-American musicals for their stages. In 1923 Miller and Lyles starred



After first attracting attention for her performance in *Shuffle Along*, African-American singer/dancer Josephine Baker became an international star.

in *Runnin' Wild*, which became most famous for launching the Charleston dance craze across the nation. One year later, Josephine Baker vaulted to stardom in Sissle and Blake's *Chocolate Dandies*. This role enabled Baker to relocate to the racially progressive nation of France, where her fabulous singing and sexy stage persona made her an international star. Seven other African-American musicals also premiered at various Broadway venues between the debut of *Shuffle Along* and the end of 1924. For the remainder of the decade, musical revues written, directed, and performed by African American artists regularly appeared on Broadway.

The success of these musical revues led to the opening of several jazz dancing schools in Harlem and other parts of New York. White customers flocked to these schools to learn the

Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Lindy Hop, and other dances popularized by black performers. Affluent whites also began to drift up to Harlem, where club after club was opening to take advantage of the sudden craze for jazz and blues music (and the thirst for illegal alcohol).

White visitors to Harlem could find Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Gladys Bentley belting out blues songs in small speakeasies, and legendary jazz players such as saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and trumpeter Louis Armstrong practicing their art in smoky cabarets. These same dance halls and clubs attracted large numbers of African-American patrons as well. "Among blacks, far more people knew who Ma Rainey was than James Weldon Johnson or even Langston Hughes," explained historian Cary D. Wintz in *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. "Singers and the top musicians became celebrities."

Black actors and actresses also enjoyed greater success than ever before in the 1920s. In 1920 black actor Charles Gilpin played the starring role in *The*

Emperor Jones, a play by famed playwright Eugene O'Neill. Four years later, Paul Robeson accepted O'Neill's offer of the lead in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, a bold, challenging drama about interracial marriage. This role, combined with his performance in a 1924 revival of *The Emperor Jones*, established Robeson as a theatrical star. Over the next three decades, Robeson's skills as an actor, his magnificent singing voice, and his gradual turn to Communist-based political activism made him one of the country's biggest—and most controversial—celebrities (see Robeson biography, p. 143).

Other milestones in serious black theater during the 1920s included the 1923 Broadway debut of *The Chip Woman's Fortune*, a drama by black playwright Willis Richardson that was performed by the National Ethiopian Art Players; the 1925 drama *Appearances* by Garland Anderson; Paul Green's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *In Abraham's Bosom*, which debuted in 1927 with an all-black cast including Jules Bledsoe and Rose McClendon; and the 1929 Broadway hit *Harlem*, which was co-written by the fiery black writer Wallace Thurman and white playwright William Jourdan Rapp. In addition, important black acting troupes and organizations such as the Negro Experimental Theatre, the Negro Art Theatre, and the National Colored Players all were founded in the 1920s.



Paul Robeson, seen here in a London production of *Othello*, was one of the greatest stars of the stage in the 1920s and 1930s.

Black Music and Black Intellectuals

The runaway success of *Shuffle Along* and other African-American musicals, combined with the rising popularity of Harlem-based singers, musicians, and orchestras, attracted the notice of New York City's leading black intellectu-

als. These men and women—W.E.B. Du Bois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and others—believed that a historic opportunity to reshape white attitudes about blacks was at hand. They asserted that the emergence of talented black singers, musicians, and composers could help lift the social fortunes of *all* African Americans by increasing white respect for the artistic capacities of blacks. They had made these same arguments about black literature over the previous few years, so it was not a stretch for them to expand the list of race-empowering artistic pursuits to include music.

But many black intellectuals were uncomfortable with the jazz and blues music pouring out of Harlem's clubs. They worried that these musical forms were too unrefined and primitive. Some activists even asserted that jazz music damaged the image of African Americans. These individuals wanted to highlight other musical and theatrical accomplishments by black musicians and composers instead. They sought to emphasize events such as the debut of James P. Johnson's *Yamekraw: A Negro Rhapsody* at Carnegie Hall in 1929 and the careers of black symphonic composers such as Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, and William Grant Still. When Alain Locke's influential 1925 anthology *The New Negro* was published, the book barely even acknowledged the existence of jazz and blues giants such as Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington.

Other leading black voices of the Harlem Renaissance embraced jazz and blues music, though. They felt that this music had a uniquely African-American character, and that the rhythms of blues and jazz reflected both the sorrowful history and proud spirit of black Americans. Writing in *The Big Sea*, author Langston Hughes recalled that he desperately wanted the “blare of Negro jazz bands [to] penetrate the closed ears of colored intellectuals.” By the late 1920s, Hughes and other leading writers of the Renaissance were frequently incorporating jazz music rhythms and cabaret settings into their poems, short stories, and novels. And as scholars Michel Feith and Geneviève Fabre point out in *Temples for Tomorrow*, even intellectuals who worried that blues and jazz would be “seen as the primitive expression of an uncivilized people” admitted that the music was a “distinctive Negro art form” and “the symbol of a freedom from restraint that many longed to achieve.”

Famous Clubs of Harlem

At the peak of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s, many Harlem nightspots became famous throughout New York City. One street on the south-

A'Lelia Walker and The Dark Tower

During the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, no hostess was as popular or notorious as A'Lelia Walker. Born on June 6, 1885, in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Walker was the only child of Madam C.J. Walker, one of America's first wealthy black entrepreneurs. Walker's line of hair-care products for black women made her a wealthy woman. When she died in 1919, A'Lelia inherited her mother's fortune, which included a Harlem townhouse and a country mansion outside New York City.

During the 1920s the flamboyant heiress became known as Harlem's greatest party-giver. She threw elegant and lavish parties at her country mansion, but the gatherings at her Harlem townhouse were even more spectacular in some ways. Walker redecorated much of the townhouse into a vast salon of music, poetry, drinking, and dancing that she called the Dark Tower, in honor of the title of a regular column that Countee Cullen wrote for *Opportunity* magazine. Some names on Walker's guest lists for parties scandalized the more conservative members of the Harlem elite, but the six-foot-tall hostess seemed to enjoy their disapproval. Every party at the Dark Tower was packed with poets and gangsters, whites and blacks, and straight and homosexual guests, and Walker savored every glamorous moment. "A'Lelia Walker was the joy-goddess of Harlem's 1920's," recalled Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea*.

Walker's parties at the Dark Tower ended with the onset of the Great Depression. She moved out of the townhouse in 1930, and on August 16, 1931, she died unexpectedly in Long Branch, New Jersey, while visiting friends.

ern end of Harlem, 133rd Street between Lenox Avenue and 7th Avenue, housed a particularly dense concentration of cabarets and clubs. Notable nightclubs on this street, popularly known as Jungle Alley, Paradise Valley, or simply The Street, included Barron's, the Catagonia Club, and the Clam House.

Other well-known nightclubs were sprinkled all around Harlem. The Lenox Club, the Stork Club, Smalls' Paradise, the Bamboo Inn, and the Renaissance Casino and Ballroom all attracted large numbers of patrons dur-

ing the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. The two biggest names in Harlem nightclubs, however, were the Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom. These two clubs, which were almost polar opposites from one another in their approach to issues of race, became famous across the United States—and even as far away as Europe.

The Cotton Club opened in September 1923 on the northeast corner of Lenox Avenue and 142nd Street, and it instantly became one of the most glamorous—and notorious—establishments in all of New York City. Owned by Prohibition-era gangster Owen Madden, the Cotton Club was decorated in spectacular fashion to attract wealthy downtowners. It also boasted appearances from some of the era's greatest black entertainers. From the early 1920s through the late 1930s, the house orchestra was led by such musical giants as Fletcher Henderson, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway.

Madden, however, established a whites-only policy regarding paying customers. The only black people who were permitted to enter the club—which was located in the heart of “black America”—were cooks, waiters, busboys, and entertainers. The club's management also restricted membership in its female chorus line to light-skinned African-American women who were presumably more attractive to the white clientele. These employment restrictions, combined with the “Southern plantation” decorative scheme, produced an atmosphere that reeked of racism. Calloway, whose orchestra replaced Ellington's in the early 1930s, recalled in his autobiography *Of Minnie the Moocher & Me* that

the bandstand was a replica of a southern mansion, with large white columns and a backdrop painted with weeping willows and slave quarters. The band played on the veranda of the mansion, and in front of the veranda, down a few steps, was the dance floor, which was also used for the shows. The waiters were dressed in red tuxedos, like butlers in a southern mansion, and the tables were covered with red-and-white-checked gingham tablecloths. There were huge cut-crystal chandeliers, and the whole set was like the sleepy-time-down-South during slavery. Even the name, Cotton Club, was supposed to convey the southern feeling. I suppose the idea was to make whites who came to the club feel like they were being catered to and entertained by black slaves.



The Savoy Ballroom was one of the jewels of the Harlem nightclub scene during the Renaissance era.

The existence of the segregationist Cotton Club within America's most famous black neighborhood angered and frustrated many Harlem residents. The cabaret survived for only a few short years, though. One year after the Harlem riots of 1935, the Cotton Club moved to a new downtown location. Few Harlem residents were sorry to see it go. Four years later, it closed its doors forever.

The Savoy Ballroom, meanwhile, was treasured by the people of Harlem. Occupying an entire city block, the Savoy opened on Lenox Avenue in March 1926. The Savoy's huge dance floor, elegant furnishings, and parade of top talent made it a premier destination for partygoers. Another important element in the Savoy's tremendous popularity was the owners' decision to open

their doors to people of all colors and classes. This policy, which created a festive atmosphere in which white and black patrons danced side by side, made the Savoy a delightful oasis of integration in 1920s America (see “Frankie Manning Remembers the Savoy Ballroom,” p. 188).

Visitors to the Savoy’s plush ballroom were treated to performances from many of the leading entertainers of the Jazz Age, including bands led by Fletcher Henderson, Louis Armstrong, Chick Webb, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, and Count Basie. Famous singers who performed at the Savoy during the Renaissance era included Bessie Smith, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday. The ballroom finally closed in 1958, thirty-two years after its debut.

Black Painters and Sculptors

As in the worlds of music and literature, black art became much more vital and visible during the Harlem Renaissance. But unlike the era’s black music and literature, which first blossomed in the 1910s and early 1920s, the first sustained wave of important African-American art did not emerge until the late 1920s. Prior to the early 1920s, few African Americans worked as sculptors or painters. Those individuals who did work in these media rarely tackled racial themes or tried to create art that reflected their African past. Works such as Meta Warrick Fuller’s 1914 sculpture *Ethiopia Awakening*, which depicted a proud black woman adorned with the headdress of an Egyptian queen, were rarities.

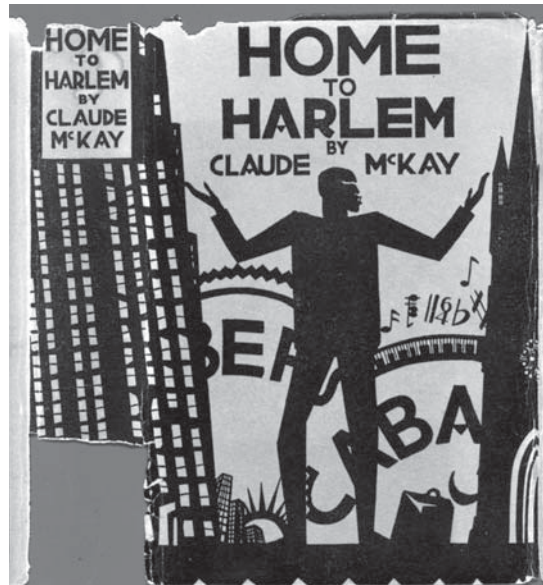
In the mid-1920s, though, the first stirrings of a uniquely African-American vision in sculpture and painting could be seen. This growing interest in African artistic traditions—and their relation to modern black America—was fueled in large part by Alain Locke, one of the primary architects of the Harlem Renaissance. “Locke encouraged [black] artists to include the emotion and drama of African art, to make the work passionate, to move those who experienced it,” wrote Amy H. Kirschke in *Temples for Tomorrow*. “He believed African art was a tangible way to teach African-Americans, indeed all Americans, about the connection of black America to Africa and Africa’s rich culture.”

Black literary magazines were an important early outlet for this new direction in black art. *Opportunity*, which was produced by the National Urban League (NUL), and *Crisis*, the literary magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), provided black painters and illustrators with a valuable avenue by which they could show

their work to the public. This exposure, combined with modest growth in illustrating opportunities in support of black novels, poetry collections, and theatrical productions, launched the careers of major Renaissance-era artists like Aaron Douglas.

Ironically, one of the most influential early collections of illustrations to explore African themes was created by Winold Reiss, a German-born artist. The African-based motifs of the illustrations he provided for Alain Locke's special March 1925 Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic* greatly influenced Douglas, who is today widely regarded as the greatest of the Harlem Renaissance artists (see Douglas biography, p. 97). During the late 1920s and 1930s, Douglas's illustrations and paintings—which relied heavily on hard geometric edges, African cultural themes, and the spirit of African-American jazz music—became closely identified with the Renaissance. His paintings and illustrations appeared everywhere, from the pages of James Weldon Johnson's monumental book of poetic sermons, *God's Trombones*, to the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, where he created his famous four-panel mural *Aspects of Negro Life* in 1934.

Institutions such as the Harmon Foundation (founded by white businessman William E. Harmon in 1922) also provided valuable support. The Harmon Foundation bestowed annual cash prizes to African Americans in the visual arts, business and industry, literature, science, and other areas. In 1928 it also sponsored the first-ever American art exhibition composed entirely of works by black artists. Douglas, sculptor Augusta Savage, painter Palmer C. Hayden, and many other prominent black artists of the Harlem Renaissance directly benefited from the assistance of the Harmon Foundation. Another important group was the Harlem Artists Guild, an organization of black painters and sculptors founded in 1935.



The art of Aaron Douglas, seen here on the cover of a Claude McKay novel, became closely associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

Douglas remains the most famous artist associated with the Renaissance. But many other artists made important contributions. In addition to Savage and Hayden, painters and graphic designers affiliated with the movement included Archibald J. Motley, Hale Woodruff, Laura Wheeler Waring, William H. Johnson, Jacob Lawrence, and Lois Mailou Jones. In the area of sculpture, important black artists of the period included Elizabeth Prophet, Selma Burke, Sargent Claude Johnson, and Richmond Barthe.

Black Artists in the City of Light

Prior to the Great Depression, African-American visual artists were scattered all across the United States and Europe. France remained a particularly welcoming place for African-American artists. Savage, Douglas, Woodruff, Hayden, Motley, Johnson, and many other black painters and sculptors spent extended periods of time working and studying in Paris. The godfather of this expatriate community was painter Henry Ossawa Tanner, who had lived in Paris since the 1890s. In the so-called “City of Light,” Tanner and these other artists basked in a racially tolerant culture that prized intellectual and artistic achievement.

The economic difficulties of the Depression, however, forced many of these artists to return to the United States. It was at this time that New York City became a true center of African-American artistic activity and education. Important new galleries and schools for black sculptors, painters, and visual artists opened during this period. In addition, grants from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a New Deal program designed to help lift America out of the economic wreckage of the Depression, were instrumental in nurturing artists like Lawrence and Romare Bearden in the late 1930s.

Today, the record of visual art from the Harlem Renaissance era is not viewed as being as influential as the African-American literature and music that came out of that same period. Still, many significant paintings, sculptures, and other artistic works were created during this time. Scholars note that much of this art is imbued with a remarkable sense of optimism and racial pride. Indeed, many black artists of the era pursued their craft in a spirit similar to one articulated by Aaron Douglas in a letter to poet Langston Hughes, one of his closest friends:

Let's bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter,
through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disap-

Harlem's Photographer

Born in Lenox, Massachusetts, on June 29, 1886, James Van Der Zee grew up to become the foremost photographer of Harlem and its residents during the Harlem Renaissance era. A fine pianist and violinist, Van Der Zee first moved to Harlem in 1906 to pursue a career in music. Financial struggles led him to take a job as a darkroom technician at a department store in Newark, New Jersey. The job rekindled a childhood interest in photography, and in 1917 he opened his own photography studio on 135th Street in the heart of Harlem.

For the next two decades, Van Der Zee used his camera to document all aspects of Harlem's social, economic, and cultural life, from high-society parties and weddings to street scenes. Many of the leading writers, activists, musicians, and civic leaders of the Harlem Renaissance posed for him during these years.

Van Der Zee was particularly skilled at capturing the confidence and pride of Harlem residents who loved living in America's most famous black neighborhood. He composed his portraits carefully, and many of his works showed a master's touch for hand-tinting and retouching photographs in ways that put his subjects in their best light. Van Der Zee's body of work celebrated Harlem and its people by portraying the community as successful, happy, and dignified.

Van Der Zee's fortunes declined in the 1950s, and by the late 1960s he was retired and leading an impoverished existence. But a 1969 Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition called *Harlem on My Mind* brought renewed attention to his early work. He resumed his photography career in the 1970s and received several prestigious awards during that decade. He died in Washington, D.C., on May 15, 1983.

pointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let's sing it, dance it, write it, paint it. Let's do the impossible. Let's create something transcendently material, mystically objective. Earthy. Spiritually earthy. Dynamic.

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979)
Painter and Illustrator of the Harlem Renaissance

Aaron Douglas was born in Topeka, Kansas, on May 26, 1899. His parents, Aaron Sr. and Elizabeth, had migrated to the Great Plains from the Deep South during the post-Reconstruction era. One of Douglas's earliest artistic influences was his mother, who enjoyed drawing and painting during the precious few hours when she was not caring for her children or attending to household chores.

By the time Douglas graduated from Topeka High School in 1917, he had already developed into a promising young artist. Restless to make his mark in the world, he cast his gaze to the industrial cities to the east, where he hoped to earn money to continue his education. "Detroit, the money Mecca of every young Negro youth who yearned to escape the oppressive conditions of his life, was the place where my journey came to a temporary halt," he recalled years later in an unpublished autobiography.

Douglas worked in Detroit's exploding automobile industry for several months. Shrugging off his weariness at the end of his long shifts, he filled his evenings by attending free art classes at the Detroit Museum of Art (now the Detroit Institute of Art). His factory work experiences in Detroit, though brief, had a lasting impact on his art. The pride and determination of fellow black laborers inspired him and contributed to his later depictions of African-American workers as strong and noble figures.

The Siren Call of the Harlem Renaissance

After he had saved enough money to resume his schooling, Douglas enrolled at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1918. He was one of the only black students in the entire university, but he earned the grudging respect of fellow students and faculty with his talent and passion for art. After earning his bachelor's degree in fine arts from Nebraska in 1922, he



Photographed by Carl Van Vechten.

spent the next few years teaching art at Lincoln High School in Kansas City, Missouri.

During his years in Lincoln and Kansas City, Douglas displayed a growing fascination with the early stirrings of the Harlem Renaissance, the Negro political, cultural, and literary movement that was at that time transforming New York City. Douglas's own thirst to see racial equality in America had been deepened during World War I, when a racist officer in Nebraskas rejected his efforts to volunteer for military service in 1917 solely because of the color of his skin. The memory of this humiliation made it even easier for Douglas to embrace the declarations of racial pride expressed by W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and other luminaries of the Renaissance.

In the spring of 1925 Douglas's world was rocked by the publication of a special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine that was devoted to Harlem and its foremost civil rights leaders, writers, and artists. Inspired by the publication's descriptions of Harlem as a vibrant black community with a thriving, exciting artistic and literary scene, Douglas left the security of his teaching position behind to see this "Negro Mecca" of America for himself.

The "Prodigal Son" of the Renaissance

After his arrival in Harlem in the summer of 1925, Douglas was introduced to Du Bois, whose many activities at that time included editorship of *The Crisis*, the literary magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Douglas also met Charles S. Johnson, the influential editor of *Opportunity*, the magazine of the National Urban League (NUL).

Another important encounter was with Rinold Weiss, the European artist who had provided the Africa-inspired cover art for the special Harlem issue of *Survey Graphic*. When Weiss offered Douglas a scholarship to study in his private studio, the young Kansas native quickly accepted. He spent the next several months soaking up knowledge from Weiss and studying African art in various private and public collections scattered throughout New York City.

Both Johnson and Du Bois were impressed by the young artist's potential, and in 1926 they commissioned him to provide cover and interior illustrations for both *Opportunity* and *Crisis*. In addition, Alain Locke hired him to provide illustrations for *The New Negro*, an expanded book-sized version of the *Survey Graphic* issue on the Harlem Renaissance.

Douglas's work surpassed even the most optimistic hopes of these early clients, all of whom were giants of the Renaissance. His illustrations blended an arresting visual style of flat forms and hard geometric shapes with images taken both from ancient African culture and contemporary African-American life. The final result was a bold, striking vision of the modern black American spirit. "As I remember now, [my early illustrations] were gladly received with no questions asked," Douglas later said. "They seemed to have been in a miraculous way a heaven-sent answer to some deeply felt need for this kind of visual imagery. As a result, I became a kind of fair-haired boy and was treated in some ways as a prodigal son. I began to feel like the missing piece that all had been looking for to complete or round out the idea of the Renaissance."

Triumph and Rebellion

In 1926 Douglas married Alta Mae Sawyer, a former high school sweetheart who left an unhappy marriage to be with the artist. Their Harlem home became one of the most popular and stimulating gathering spots among the community's top young writers and artists.

During this time, Douglas and many of the poets and painters with whom he socialized expressed rising impatience with black civil rights leaders and liberal white supporters. They felt that these activists and patrons wanted them to produce works that advanced the cause of racial equality at the expense of their own artistic desires and explorations. Determined to establish his artistic independence, Douglas broke ties with the wealthy white socialite Charlotte Osgood Mason, one of his main financial patrons. Other young writers and artists took similar steps to proclaim their determination to explore all facets of black life in America.

In 1926 Wallace Thurman organized Douglas and several other of these Renaissance rebels to produce a radical new black literary magazine called *Fire!!* Douglas contributed several powerful illustrations to the publication, which he saw as a sign of a dawning new age in black art and literature. "We have no axes to grind," Douglas declared. "[But] we believe that the Negro is fundamentally, essentially different from their Nordic neighbors. We are proud of that difference. We believe these differences to be greater spiritual endowment, greater sensitivity, greater power for artistic expression and appreciation. We believe Negro art should be trained and developed rather than capitalized and exploited." As it turned out, only one issue of the magazine was

ever published before financial problems killed it. Years later, though, Douglas expressed great pride in the magazine and the defiant spirit of its creators.

Douglas's work for *Fire!!* further cemented his reputation as the leading visual spokesman for the Harlem Renaissance. By the late 1920s his highly symbolic drawings and paintings had become synonymous in the minds of many with the boldest elements of the movement. "Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies causes the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimpse of their own beauty," declared poet Langston Hughes, one of Douglas's closest friends.

Turning to Murals

Douglas added to his artistic legacy in the late 1920s with some of his most enduring book and journal illustrations. Notable works of this type included illustrations for Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and Paul Morand's *Black Magic* (1929). His most famous illustrations, though, appeared in James Weldon Johnson's 1927 masterwork *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. In this book, wrote Renaissance scholar George Hutchinson, "Douglas transformed traditional white Christian iconography by putting black subjects in central roles and evoking (like Johnson's poems) the identification of black Americans with the suffering of Jesus and other central motifs of the Bible. His stylized, silhouette-like renderings of Negro physical features, imbued with qualities of both spiritual yearning and implicit dignity, became a signature of the movement."

In 1930 Douglas went to Fisk University, a black school in Nashville, Tennessee, to tackle a new artistic challenge: mural painting. As artist in residence, he painted a cycle of murals for the university's new library. Collectively, these murals provided a tapestry of black triumphs and tragedies through history.

In 1931 Douglas and his wife traveled to France. He spent more than a year studying in Paris, where he also met Henry Ossawa Tanner and many other expatriate black artists and entertainers. They returned to Harlem in the summer of 1932 and settled in a new home in the community's prosperous Sugar Hill area. The following year Douglas had his first solo exhibition, at Caz Delbo Gallery in New York.

In 1934, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) commissioned Douglas to paint *Aspects of Negro Life*, a four-panel mural for the Harlem branch

of the New York Public Library on 135th street. This cycle of panels—*The Negro in an African Setting*, *Slavery Through Reconstruction*, *An Idyll of the Deep South*, and *Song of the Towers*—remain Douglas’s most famous mural works. Using powerful imagery from Africa, the Deep South, and twentieth-century America, Douglas chronicled African-American history from ancient times to the industrial age. Today, this mural cycle is housed at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem.

Douglas spent much of the next few years working on murals from New York City to Dallas. He also served as the first president of the Harlem Artists’ Guild, founded in 1935. As president, he successfully lobbied WPA administrators to give greater numbers of commissions to black artists struggling to make ends meet in Depression-era America.

Return to Fisk

In 1937 Douglas returned to Fisk University to become the founding chairman of the school’s art department. He stayed at Fisk for the next four decades, though he also traveled widely in Europe, Africa, and Latin America during these years. In 1944 he earned a master’s degree in fine arts from Teacher’s College at Columbia University.

Douglas retired from Fisk University in 1966, but he remained active. In 1969 he undertook a painstaking restoration of the murals he had painted for the Fisk library back in the 1930s. In some cases, Douglas actually repainted panels, using more bold and vibrant colors than in the original. After his restoration efforts, some of the murals were unfortunately lost, but the rest have been carefully restored and preserved. After his retirement, Douglas also frequently lectured on the history of African-American art and the Harlem Renaissance. He died in Nashville on February 3, 1979.

Today, Douglas continues to rank as the foremost visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance. “He recognized that he had a unique power as an artist,” wrote Amy Helene Kirschke in *Harlem Speaks*, “and he was always willing to take risks to relay his message. Through his illustrations, murals, paintings, and teaching, Aaron Douglas inspired both the public and his students to explore and celebrate African American history and culture.”

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W.E.B. Du Bois Discusses Black Hopes and Dreams

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many African Americans spent their lives trapped in a web of poverty and bigotry. The discriminatory ways of the Jim Crow South seemed destined to live on forever, and the small minority of educated African Americans despaired that the black race would ever stand on equal footing with whites.

*It was in this environment that black sociologist, writer, and civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903. One of his most influential works, *The Souls of Black Folk* contained a series of passionate essays that explored what it meant to be a black person in America. Following is the opening chapter in the book, titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings."*

O water, voice of my heart crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the
sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.

—ARTHUR SYMONS

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls straight and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two

unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Through history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. By the poverty and ignorance of his people, the Negro minister or doctor was tempted toward quackery and demagogy [arguments based on emotion or prejudice]; and by the criticism of the other world, toward ideals that made him ashamed of his lowly tasks. The would-be black savant was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood. The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message

of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.

Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. In song and exhortation swelled one refrain—Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had Freedom in his right hand. At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences:—

“Shout, O children!
Shout, you’re free!
For God has bought your liberty!”

Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation’s feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem:—

“Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble!”

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.

The first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom, the boon that seemed ever barely to elude their grasp,—like a tantalizing will-o’-the-wisp, maddening and misleading the headless host. The holocaust of war, the terrors of the Ku Klux Klan, the lies of carpet-baggers, the disorganization of industry, and the contradictory advice of friends and foes,

left the bewildered serf with no new watchword beyond the old cry for freedom. As the time flew, however, he began to grasp a new idea. The ideal of liberty demanded for its attainment powerful means, and these the Fifteenth Amendment gave him. The ballot, which before he had looked upon as a visible sign of freedom, he now regarded as the chief means of gaining and perfecting the liberty with which war had partially endowed him. And why not? Had not votes made war and emancipated millions? Had not votes enfranchised the freedmen? Was anything impossible to a power that had done all this? A million black men started with renewed zeal to vote themselves into the kingdom. So the decade flew away, the revolution of 1876 came, and left the half-free serf weary, wondering, but still inspired. Slowly but steadily, in the following years, a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power,—a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of “book-learning”; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.

Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly; only those who have watched and guided the faltering feet, the misty minds, the dull understandings, of the dark pupils of these schools know how faithfully, how piteously, this people strove to learn. It was weary work. The cold statistician wrote down the inches of progress here and there, noted also where here and there a foot had slipped or some one had fallen. To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he

had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance,—not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet. Nor was his burden all poverty and ignorance. The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home.

A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems. But alas! while sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair. Men call the shadow prejudice, and learnedly explain it as the natural defence of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the “higher” against the “lower” races. To which the Negro cries Amen! and swears that to so much of this strange prejudice as is founded on just homage to civilization, culture, righteousness, and progress, he humbly bows and meekly does obeisance [gesture of deference or humility]. But before that nameless prejudice that leaps beyond all this he stands helpless, dismayed, and well-nigh speechless; before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignoring of the better and the boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-pervading desire to inculcate [implant] disdain for everything black, from Toussaint [L’Ouverture, a Haitian revolutionary leader of the 1790s] to the devil,—before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom “discouragement” is an unwritten word.

But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate. Whisperings and portents came home upon the four winds: Lo! we are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts; we cannot write, our voting is vain; what need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the Nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men? Away with the black

man's ballot, by force or fraud,—and behold the suicide of a race! Nevertheless, out of the evil came something of good,—the more careful adjustment of education to real life, the clearer perception of the Negroes' social responsibilities, and the sobering realization of the meaning of progress.

So dawned the time of *Sturm und Drang* [turmoil]: storm and stress to-day rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past,—physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands,—all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong,—all false? No, not that, but each alone was over-simple and incomplete,—the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power. To be really true, all these ideals must be melted and welded into one. The training of the schools we need to-day more than ever,—the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and above all the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts. The power of the ballot we need in sheer self-defence,—else what shall save us from a second slavery? Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek,—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. Will America be poorer if she replace her brutal dyspeptic [bad-tempered] blundering with light-hearted but determined Negro humility? Or her coarse and cruel wit with loving jovial good-humor? Or her vulgar music with the soul of the Sorrow Songs?

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity.

And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.

Source: Du Bois, W.E.B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1903.

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Afrophiles

Black slang term for wealthy white supporters of Harlem Renaissance artists and writers.

Bennett, Gwendolyn (1902-1981)

Writer, painter, and educator who also served as an editor at *Opportunity*.

Bentley, Gladys (1907-1960)

Singer and entertainer during the final years of the Harlem Renaissance.

Blues

An African-American musical genre founded on the topical themes and repetitive rhythms of slavery-era spirituals and work songs.

Bontemps, Arna (1902-1972)

Novelist, poet, and anthologist.

Brown, Sterling (1901-1989)

Scholar, folklorist, and author of the 1932 poetry collection *Southern Road*.

Calloway, Cab (1907-1994)

Jazz singer and bandleader.

Cotton Club

A glamorous nightclub in Harlem that owed its popularity at least in part to blatantly racist employment and admittance policies.

The Crisis

Literary magazine of the NAACP during the Harlem Renaissance.

Cullen, Countee (1903-1946)

Poet and novelist who ranked as one of the most acclaimed writers of the Renaissance.

CHRONOLOGY

Note: This Chronology of Events includes a see reference feature. These references refer readers to sections of the Narrative Overview where the events are discussed in greater depth.

1865

The Civil War ends and the twelve-year period known as Reconstruction begins, forcing Southern states to end a wide range of discriminatory practices against blacks. *See p. 7.*

1868

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution becomes law, granting citizenship to African Americans. *See p. 7.*

1870

The Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is ratified, guaranteeing black voting rights. *See p. 7.*

1876

State legislatures across the South pass the first wave of discriminatory “Jim Crow” laws. *See p. 9.*

1877

President Rutherford B. Hayes orders federal troops out of the South, bringing the Reconstruction era to a close. *See p. 9.*

1895

Booker T. Washington delivers his “Atlanta Compromise” speech to a white audience at the Cotton States and International Exposition. *See p. 21.*

1896

In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that state laws in the South that require segregation of schools, passenger trains, and other facilities are constitutional. *See p. 9.*

1903

W.E.B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.

1905

Black civil rights leaders collectively known as the Niagara Movement meet on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. *See p. 22.*

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Harlem Renaissance: A Multimedia Resource*. Available online at <http://www.jcu.edu/harlem/index.html>. This Internet site, created and maintained at John Carroll University, features a wide range of audio, video, and text materials that touch on a wide assortment of Harlem Renaissance topics, including literature, religion, education, art, and political activism.
- Hill, Laban Carrick. *Harlem Stomp! A Cultural History of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Little, Brown, 2004. This colorful, heavily illustrated history of the Harlem Renaissance era is written especially for juvenile audiences.
- Jabbar, Kareem Abdul, with Raymond Obstfeld. *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007. NBA basketball legend Kareem Abdul Jabbar blends memoir and history together in this entertaining book. Much of the book is devoted to a warm retelling of the triumphs of the Harlem Renaissance era, but the author also includes numerous anecdotes about his own youthful experiences and memories of New York City in the 1940s and 1950s.
- Lewis, David Levering. *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York: Viking Press, 1994. The selections in this anthology of poetry, short stories, essays, and novel excerpts highlight all of the major writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including such leading figures as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Weldon Johnson. The book also features interesting introductory notes for many of the pieces, as well as brief but valuable biographies of all featured writers.
- Locke, Alain, ed. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Touchstone, 1999. This reprint of the famous book published at the height of the Harlem Renaissance features contributions from Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and many other African-American writers. It also includes an introduction by Arnold Rampersad, a noted Harlem Renaissance scholar.
- Wilson, Sondra Kathryn, ed. *The Crisis Reader: Stories, Poetry and Essays from the N.A.A.C.P.'s Crisis Magazine*. New York: Modern Library, 1999.
- Wilson, Sondra Kathryn, ed. *The Opportunity Reader: Stories, Poetry and Essays from the Urban League's Opportunity Magazine*. New York: Modern Library, 1999. These two books provide histories of the two leading black magazines of the Harlem Renaissance. Both titles feature a wealth of reprinted essays, poems, and stories by many of the leading African-American writers of the era.

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