

A New Cultural Identity

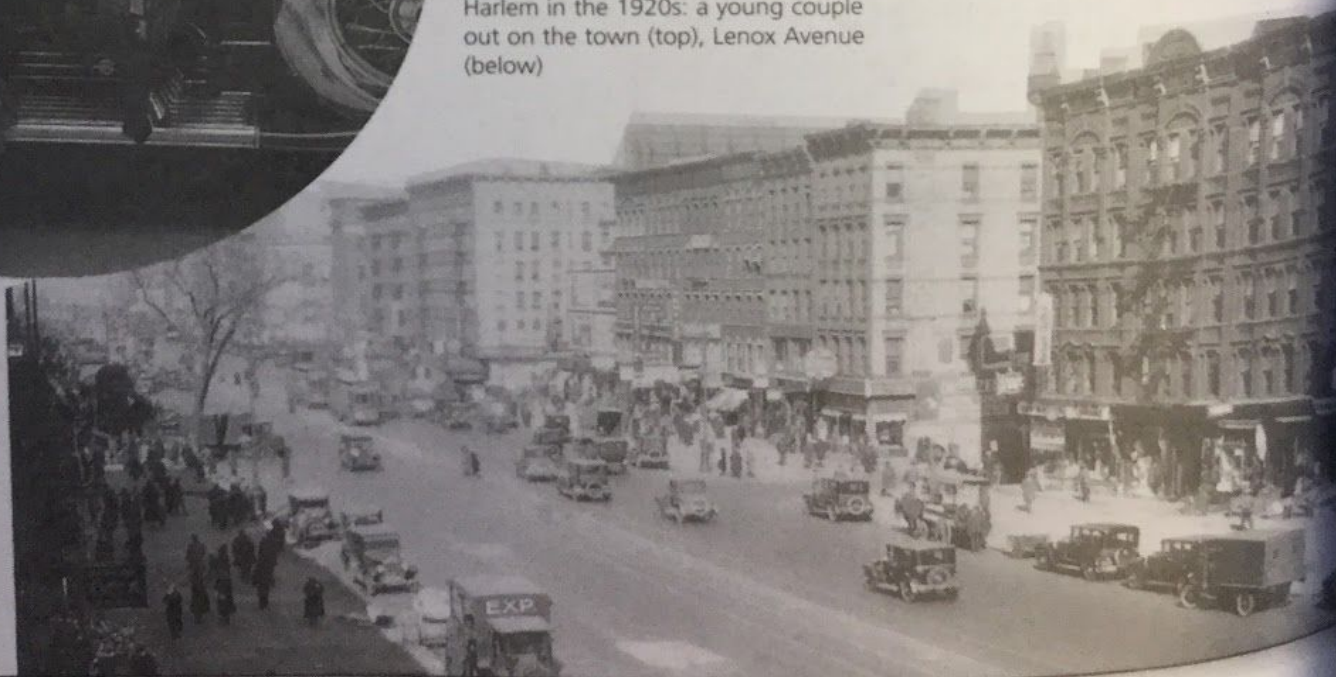
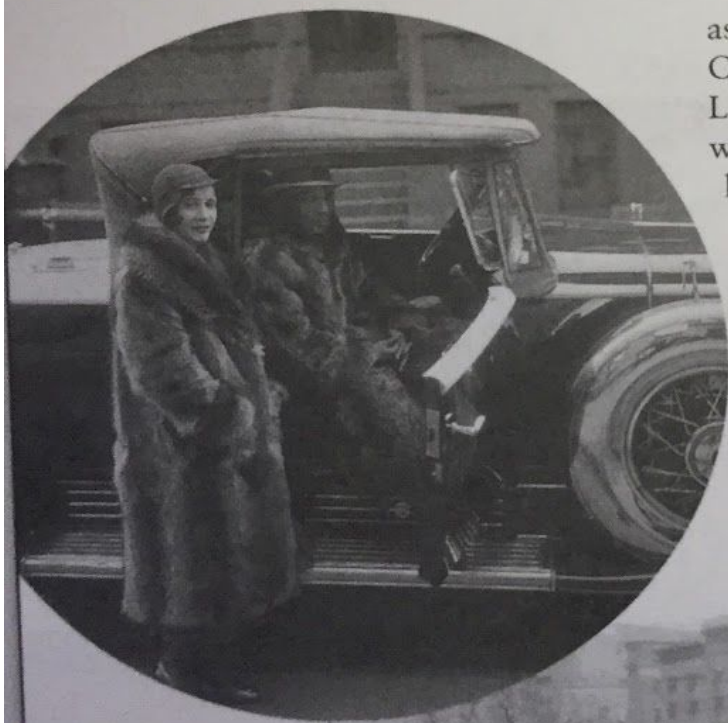
The Harlem Renaissance

"The Harlem Renaissance was an unprecedented period of literary, musical, and artistic production among African Americans that reached its peak in the 1920s. This movement was centered in the Harlem section of Manhattan in New York City—a magnet for thousands of blacks migrating from the South, the Midwest, and even the West Indies. Southern blacks, in particular, were fleeing poverty and growing racial violence, hoping to find more economic and personal freedom in the North. Politically, the Renaissance years were an extremely difficult time for African Americans. During the "Red Summer" of 1919, there were bloody antiblack riots in 26 cities, including Chicago and Washington, D.C. In the 1920s, membership in the terrorist, white-supremacist Ku Klux Klan rose to more than 4 million nationwide.

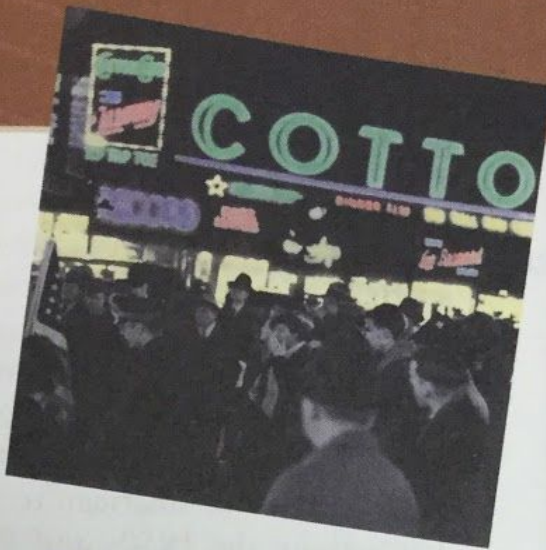
Not only a magnet for blacks, Harlem drew whites as well—tourists flocked to nightspots such as the Cotton Club to hear the new jazz music played by Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. And white writers, publishers, and patrons of the arts developed a keen interest in Harlem residents and their culture.

For African Americans a new cultural identity crystallized during the Harlem Renaissance; it was the time of "The New Negro," in the words of philosopher Alain Locke, who first defined the movement. "New

Harlem in the 1920s: a young couple out on the town (top), Lenox Avenue (below)



The Cotton Club



Negroes” rejected beastlike or sentimental stereotypes, claiming the right to define themselves and defend themselves against attack.

“New Negroes” felt a collective identity—they had pride in their race and asserted its contributions to American culture. At the same time, they possessed an international consciousness, recognizing kinship among blacks in the United States, West Indies, and Africa. Such an international outlook was advocated by Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican immigrant whose popular back-to-Africa movement called on African Americans to leave the United States and form their own nation.

The writers of the Harlem Renaissance embodied these “New Negroes.” Langston Hughes was one of the most original and important. In 1925, he published his first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, following it with dozens of volumes of poetry, fiction, plays, and essays over a career lasting into the 1960s. He praised blackness, embraced common people as subjects, and blended elements of blues and jazz into his work. The exuberant Zora Neale Hurston, raised in a small, all-black Florida town and trained in anthropology at Barnard College, also drew upon African-American folk traditions. Her stories, novels, essays, and folklore collections reflect a love of black language and manners. Hurston was one of the first writers to present African Americans as complete, multifaceted human beings. Other important Renaissance writers were James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Arna Bontemps, all of whom showed mastery of traditional literary forms and poured into them new expressions of individual and collective feeling. Yet another significant figure was Jean Toomer, whose experimental *Cane* (1923) blended poetry and prose to evoke the beautiful, terrible South of black experience.

Voices from the TIMES

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the
dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the
present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day
begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

James Weldon Johnson
“Lift Every Voice and Sing”
(the “Negro national anthem,”
first performed in 1900)

All art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy.

W. E. B. Du Bois
from “Criteria of Negro Art”

I had an overwhelming desire to see Harlem. More than Paris, or the Shakespeare country, or Berlin, or the Alps, I wanted to see Harlem, the greatest Negro city in the world.

Langston Hughes
from *The Big Sea*

Here in Manhattan is not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life. It has attracted the African, the West Indian, the Negro American; has brought together the Negro of the North and the Negro of the South; the man from the city and the man from the town and village; the peasant, the student, the business man, the professional man, artist, poet, musician, adventurer and worker, preacher and criminal, exploiter and social outcast. Each group has come with its own separate motives and for its own special ends, but their greatest experience has been the finding of one another.

Alain Locke
from *The New Negro*

Man, if you gotta ask you'll never know.

Louis Armstrong
when asked what jazz is

What American literature decidedly needs at the moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know what Americans are.

Carl Van Doren
from a speech to young African-American writers

Up you mighty race, you can accomplish what you will.

Marcus Garvey
(a rallying cry for his Universal Negro Improvement Association)

Traditions Across Time: Reaffirming Cultural Identity

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought an end to the Harlem Renaissance, causing many of the writers who had gathered in Harlem to scatter and take other jobs to support themselves. But their work planted seeds that continue to generate important writing from the African-American experience.

In 1950, the poet Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, James Baldwin, who left the United States and the racism he felt here to live in Paris, gave us some of the most important essays of the period, essays based on his experiences and struggles with racial identity. And in contemporary times, Toni Morrison has become one of the most accomplished American novelists, winning nearly every important literary award, including the Nobel Prize for literature. In her essay in this part of Unit Six, Morrison demonstrates the continuing effort to find and present the essentials of African-American life.



Toni Morrison accepting the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature in Stockholm, Sweden (above), and a close-up of the prize itself (at right)



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