

The Harlem Renaissance

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Women weren't the only Americans who expressed themselves in new ways during the 1920s. African Americans from the South migrated to Northern cities, where some of them embraced the concept of the "new negro." Black musicians provided a soundtrack for the 1920s: jazz. Urban Black neighborhoods, most notably Harlem, became centers of literature, politics, and Pan-African nationalism.

This tutorial explores the Harlem Renaissance in three parts:

1. The Great Migration

Jazz provided a uniquely American soundtrack for the 1920s. It began during the 1890s in clubs located in the red-light district of New Orleans. Its improvisational style was the product of a variety of musical traditions, including blues and ragtime.

When the United States entered the First World War in 1917, New Orleans became an important point of departure for troops traveling to Europe. To prevent soldiers from getting into trouble while waiting to leave, the city shut down its red-light district.



DID YOU KNOW

The closure of New Orleans's red-light district was part of a national effort by the U.S. Army and a group known as the Commission on Training Camp Activities to limit the spread of venereal diseases among soldiers destined for Europe. When clubs in the district were forced to close, musicians—including Joe "King" Oliver, Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, and Louis Armstrong (pictured below)—lost their jobs.



Louis Armstrong in 1953.

The musicians moved north, up the Mississippi River, to Midwestern cities, including St. Louis and Chicago. They became part of the **Great Migration**, or the mass exodus of nearly 2 million African Americans from the South to Northern cities between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Great Depression. During the 1920s alone, more than half a million African Americans migrated north.



TERM TO KNOW

Great Migration

The name for the large wave of African Americans who left the South for cities in the Northeast and Upper Midwest before and after World War I.



This black-and-white version of a painting by African American painter Jacob Lawrence, which is part of his “Migration Series,” depicts the Great Migration and the ways in which African Americans adjusted to Northern urban life.

New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Indianapolis, in addition to St. Louis and Chicago, were the primary destinations for African Americans who traveled north.



DID YOU KNOW

The Black population of New York City doubled during the 1920s.

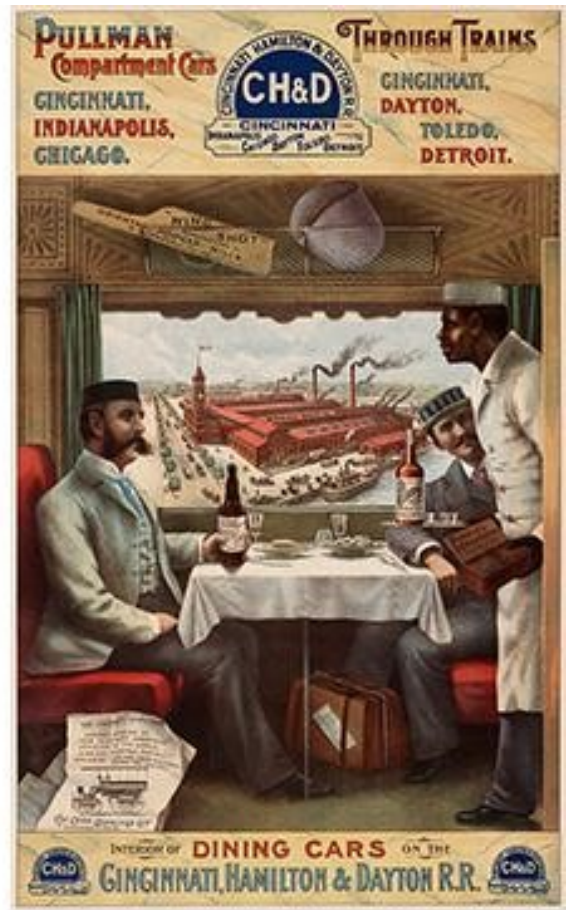
As was the case with European immigration, a combination of “push” and “pull” factors contributed to the Great Migration.

- *“Push” factors:* Despite the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which ensured freedom, equal protection under the law, and the right to vote regardless of race, African Americans remained subject to hatred and segregation, political disenfranchisement, and economic marginalization in the South. The North offered them an opportunity to flee Jim Crow laws and the customs that kept segregation in place.
- *“Pull” factors:* Among other factors, African Americans were “pulled” to Northern cities by jobs—opportunities to earn wages rather than by sharecropping for a landlord—and the chance to exercise their rights as citizens, free from intimidation and violence.

However, racism and lack of education relegated many Black workers to low-paying jobs in the steel, mining, construction, meatpacking, and other industries. Many were employed by the railroads as porters and servants in the luxurious Pullman sleeping cars that catered to wealthy White patrons.



(a)



(b)

A Pullman porter (a) assists a White passenger with her luggage. An 1894 advertisement (b) shows a Black waiter serving White patrons in a Pullman dining car.



DID YOU KNOW

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, organized in 1925 under the leadership of A. Philip Randolph, was the first labor organization led by African Americans to be recognized by the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Even though their jobs did not pay well, most African Americans earned more in the North than they could by working the same jobs in the South. They also found more available housing in Northern cities. However, the cost of living was higher in the North, because of higher rents and higher prices of food and other essentials. As a result, African Americans often lived in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, similar to how many European immigrants at the time lived.

The racial violence of 1919 showed that racial discrimination flourished in the North as well as in the South. It was most evident in housing: Landlords frequently discriminated against African Americans who wanted to rent from them. Homeowners in White neighborhoods developed informal agreements and, later, formal covenants in which they agreed not to sell their homes to Black buyers. Some bankers practiced mortgage discrimination—a policy later known as redlining—by denying home loans to qualified African American buyers.

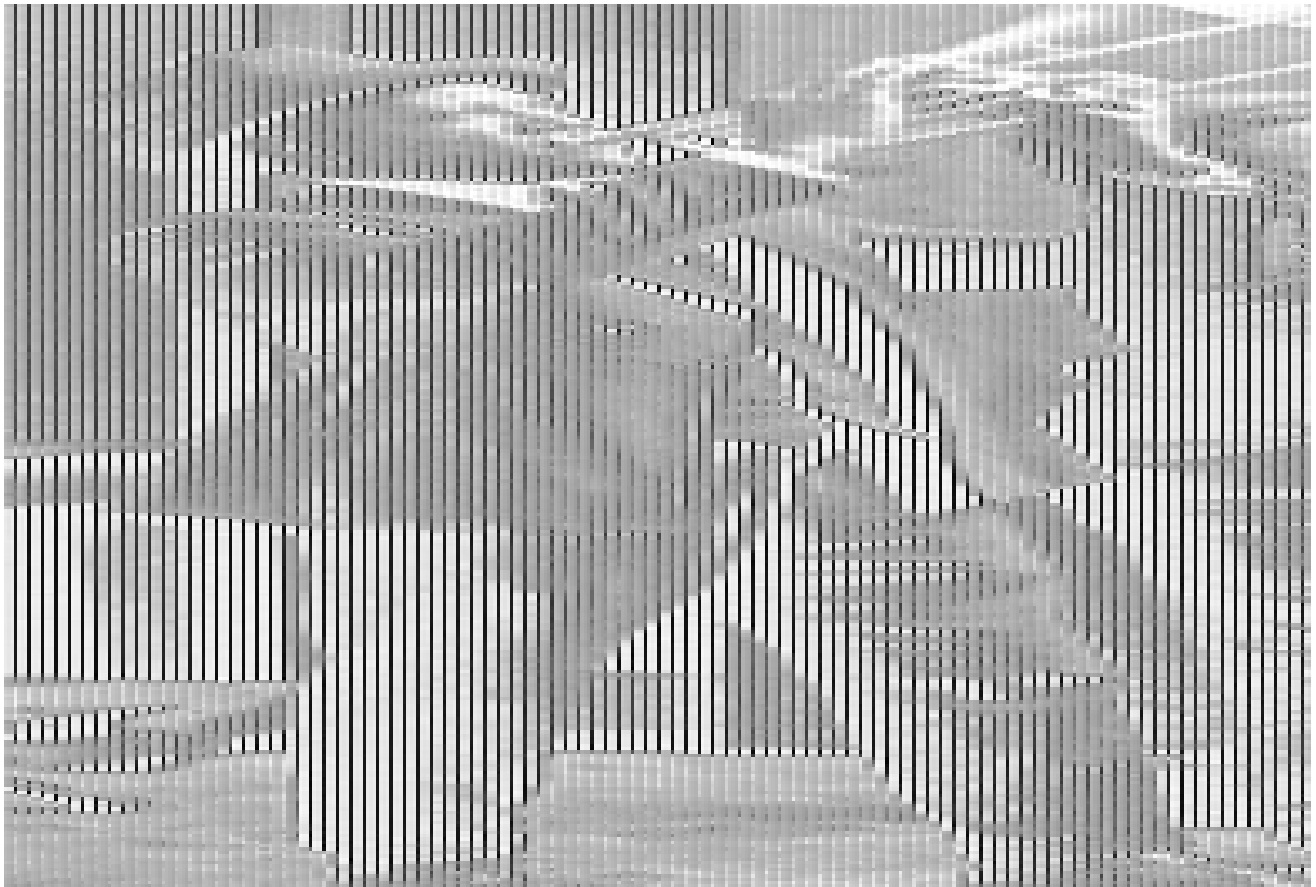
Pervasive discrimination in residential areas led to a concentration of African Americans in some of the worst slums. However, like the ethnic enclaves that developed in Northern cities, the residential concentration

created vibrant communities and encouraged cultural growth.

Why did the Great Migration continue throughout the 1920s despite the economic challenges and pervasive discrimination that awaited those moving to the North? According to some historians, the answer lies in noneconomic gains, including the following:

- *Greater educational opportunities.* Northern state legislatures and local school districts spent more money on education for all students, regardless of color, than in the South. They also enforced compulsory school attendance laws more rigorously.
- *The opportunity to express personal freedom.* Unlike the South, where the lack of a deferential gesture by an African American could result in physical harm, crowded Northern cities provided a degree of anonymity—and, as a result, personal freedom. This enabled African Americans to speak, travel, and work without deferring to every White person with whom they crossed paths.

This freedom, along with the support of communities established as a result of the Great Migration, created opportunities for jazz musicians. By the early 1920s, jazz had spread from New Orleans to St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. Its melodies and improvisational performances, which were suited to the hectic pace of urban life, attracted many listeners.



Black jazz bands like the King and Carter Jazzing Orchestra, photographed in 1921 by Robert Runyon, were immensely popular with White urbanites in the 1920s.

➞ **EXAMPLE** The Cotton Club in Harlem was famous for performances by Black entertainers (including Duke Ellington), even though its White owner maintained a “Whites only” policy regarding the audience.

2. The Harlem Renaissance

In a community enlarged (and strengthened) by the Great Migration, frustration over ongoing discrimination and racial violence found an outlet in a cultural flowering in the 1920s that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem, a neighborhood at the northern end of Manhattan in New York City, became a center of Afrocentric art and literature associated with the “**New Negro**” Movement.



TERM TO KNOW

“New Negro”

A cultural and political movement that rejected established stereotypes of African Americans and asserted an independent Black culture that encouraged racial pride.



DID YOU KNOW

Philosopher and writer **Alain Locke** popularized the concept of the “New Negro” with the 1925 book *The New Negro*, which included the work of a number of Harlem Renaissance authors, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Alain Locke

Writer and philosopher who helped popularize the concept of the “new negro” in his 1925 book *The New Negro*, which featured essays and literary works by prominent authors associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

African American writers, many of whom were supported by the White intellectual press, sought to establish an independent Black culture and to encourage racial pride. They rejected adherence to White cultural standards by Black artists.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” (selection provided below) called on African Americans to fight back in the aftermath of the race riots of 1919.

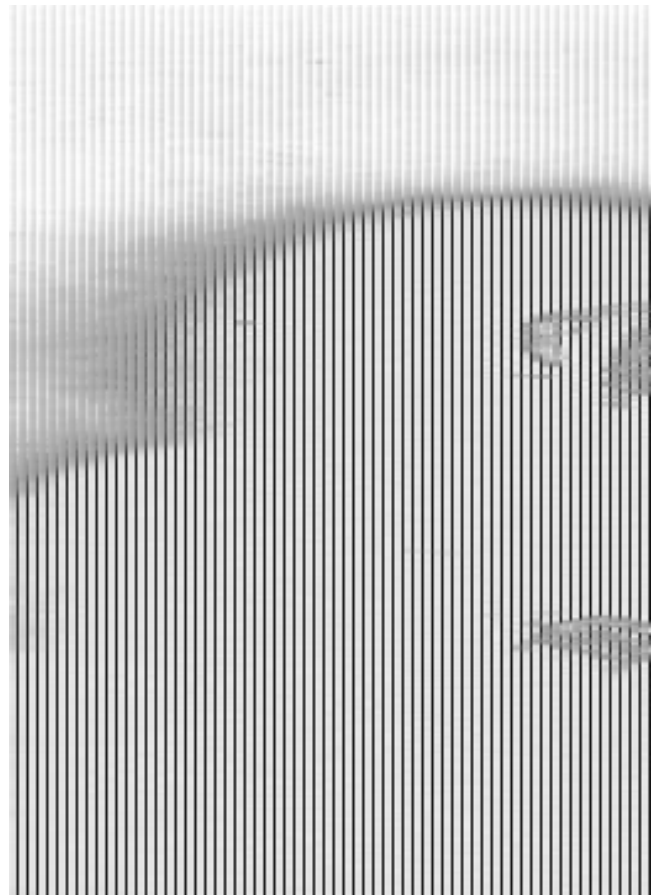
Claude McKay, “If We Must Die”

“If we must die—let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot . . .
Though far outnumbered, let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men, we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!”



THINK ABOUT IT

How does McKay's poem reinforce the impulses behind the "New Negro" Movement?



The Jamaican-born poet and novelist Claude McKay was a notable figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

3. Pan-Africanism

The "New Negro" Movement found its political expression in an ideology that celebrated a distinct racial identity, articulated nationalist goals, and embraced Africa as the true homeland of all people of African descent. This ideology is known as **Pan-Africanism**.



TERM TO KNOW

Pan-Africanism

The notion that African Americans embrace their distinct racial heritage from the African continent as the true homeland of all people of African descent.

W. E. B. Du Bois was among the early proponents of Pan-Africanism, which is also referred to as Black nationalism. He encouraged Black Americans to work together in support of their interests and promoted Black literature and other expressions of Black culture. In 1919, Du Bois organized a Pan-African Congress in Paris, which met as Woodrow Wilson and other world leaders negotiated the Treaty of Versailles. The Congress appealed to the Allied Powers to grant self-determination to native people who lived in European colonies in Africa.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

W. E. B. Du Bois

Leading Black intellectual and civil rights activist; advocate of Pan-Africanism; prominent

spokesperson for the Niagara Movement, which called for immediate political, social, and economic equality for African Americans; and cofounder of the NAACP and longtime editor of its journal *The Crisis*.

Marcus Garvey, who migrated to the United States from Jamaica in 1916, also advocated Pan-Africanism during the 1920s. Like Du Bois, Garvey was frustrated by U.S. racism. Unlike Du Bois, he did not believe that African Americans could overcome it. He was also skeptical of cooperation with Whites. As a result, Garvey started the “Back to Africa” Movement.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Marcus Garvey

Jamaican immigrant to the United States and a leading voice for the “New Negro” Movement and Pan-Africanism; founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the Black Star Steamship Line to transport Black Americans to the Caribbean and Africa.

To move Black Americans to a (presumably) more welcoming home in Africa, Garvey founded the Black Star Steamship Line, a shipping and passenger service that began to operate in 1919. From his headquarters in Harlem, Garvey also started the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which attracted thousands of low-income working people. UNIA members, who wore colorful uniforms, lived according to the doctrine of “negritude,” which reversed the color hierarchy of White supremacy by elevating Blackness and identifying light skin as a mark of inferiority.

Like the body of work associated with the “New Negro” Movement, views on Pan-Africanism and Black political expression during the 1920s were diverse. The movement was divided between those who advocated for community cooperation and equal rights in the United States and those who advocated for autonomy and, if necessary, a move to Africa.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Class influenced Black political opinion. Many working-class African Americans supported Garvey’s movement because they had received little support from W. E. B. Du Bois (and the NAACP), whose approach appealed more to middle- and upper-class Black audiences.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1923, Garvey was sentenced to federal prison following his conviction for mail fraud. In 1927, he was deported to Jamaica.



SUMMARY

For African Americans, the 1920s were marked less by leisure and consumption than by creativity and purpose. The Great Migration reached its climax during the decade, as millions of African Americans moved to Northern and Midwestern cities. Jazz musicians, including many who traveled the paths of the Great Migration, provided a soundtrack that matched the frenetic pace of the era. Writers affiliated with the Harlem Renaissance and the “New Negro” Movement rejected conventional Black stereotypes and asserted racial pride. These assertions were sometimes politicized, dividing African American communities, as in the development of Pan-Africanism.

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REFERENCES

Claude McKay, “If We Must Die,” 1919 Retrieved from bit.ly/1NLLhRI



ATTRIBUTIONS

- [During World War I there was a great migration north by southern Negroes](#) | Author: Jacob Lawrence | License: Public Domain
- [Image of Louis Armstrong](#) | License: Public Domain



TERMS TO KNOW

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