

# ***Beyond the Harlem Shadows: A Holistic Exploration of the Harlem Renaissance's Influence on Reshaping African American Identity***

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## **Abstract**

The Harlem Renaissance, a seminal cultural movement in early 20th-century African American history, holds a crucial place in shaping identity. This research delves into the interdisciplinary dimensions of literature, music, and visual art within the Harlem Renaissance, unraveling its profound impact on African American identity. Through the works of literary giants like Langston Hughes and music pioneers Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith, we explore how the movement became a catalyst for expressing racial consciousness, heritage, and pride. The visual arts contributions of Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Archibald Motley are analyzed for their role in forging a unique African American aesthetic. Beyond art, the paper contextualizes the Harlem Renaissance as a postcolonial phenomenon, examining its broader socio-political implications. In essence, this research aims to offer a concise yet comprehensive understanding of the transformative influence of the Harlem Renaissance on African American identity.

**Keywords:** Harlem Renaissance, African Americans, America, Jazz, Toni Morrison

## **Introduction**

**W**hile the term "Harlem Renaissance" has become commonly used to describe this period of heightened cultural and artistic activity in 1920s Harlem, it is essential to recognize its broader context and evolution. The term itself did not gain widespread usage until the 1960s, long after the era it purportedly encapsulates (Bremer 1990). Originally referred to as the "New Negro Movement" or the "Negro Renaissance," this cultural phenomenon was envisioned by figures like Alain Locke to be not just confined to Harlem but to have a global and interracial reach. By

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delving into the origins and evolution of the term "Harlem Renaissance," this paper seeks to challenge conventional narratives and expand our understanding of this transformative period in African American history. We advocate that the Harlem Renaissance be viewed as a component of a larger "Black Renaissance" that encompasses a wide range of artistic, intellectual, and political activities that took place in a variety of times and locations (Mitchell 2010). Many places were changed by the Harlem Renaissance, so it would be more accurate to call it a time that changed many places.

Our study looks at how the Black Renaissance is linked to different kinds of art, like music, literature, visual arts, and even social and political problems. Along with that, it looks at how it has changed how African Americans see themselves over time. We believe that if we look at the movement's racial and foreign aspects, we can get a fuller and more nuanced picture of how it changed the culture of Harlem and the African diaspora as a whole.

### **Review of the Literature**

Everyone in the US who was African American worked to improve their lives and looks during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. What Frances Richardson Keller knows will be at the heart of this effort. It is stated in his article titled "The Harlem Literary Renaissance" that the reason for the emergence of this artistic and cultural movement was due to the fact that individuals of different races living in urban areas of the United States did not understand one another. In order to rewrite the story of African Americans, to confront biases, and to imagine a more open American identity, it was a very important search. It is undeniable that the movement was beneficial to the fields of literature, music, and visual arts; but, it did not bring about the significant societal shifts that were anticipated to result from it. This demonstrates how difficult it is to make things equitable for all people in the United States. According to Keller (1968), this literature review discusses the multiple goals, issues, and impacts that the Harlem Renaissance had on how African Americans perceive themselves about themselves.

Harlem's African American newcomers developed a critical mass, developing a thriving subculture with great visibility, in the spirit of Jewish immigrants who densely populated the Lower East Side. This was done within the context of Harlem. In his piece titled "Home in Harlem, New York: Lessons from the Harlem

Renaissance Writers," Sidney H. Bremer highlights the similarities that exist between the two towns. Harlem was home to a variety of distinctive cultural resources, like as language, folkways, and ceremonial aesthetic forms, despite the fact that it was plagued by problems such as poverty and dependence on unreliable white sponsorship. Bremer creates the impression that Harlem is a self-contained "city within a city" by highlighting the different cultural institutions that are located within the neighborhood. These institutions include political organizations, clubs, cafes, theaters, newspapers, and places of worship. By highlighting the resiliency and cultural richness of Harlem's African American population during the Harlem Renaissance (Bremer 1990), this finding makes a significant contribution to the study of the relevant literature.

In her contribution to the literature review, Daylanne K. English engages critically with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s characterization of multiple cultural renaissances in African American history. English questions the utility of defining these movements as distinct renaissances, spanning from 1890 to the present, suggesting it may oversimplify the continuous vibrancy of African American culture. She emphasizes the role of criticism and cultural history in shaping these narratives, echoing Gates's assertion that renaissances are acts of cultural construction to satisfy broader social and political needs (English 1999). English challenges the conventional characterization of the 1920s and the 1990s as clear peaks, urging a more nuanced understanding of the ongoing dynamism of African American culture. This critical perspective contributes to a richer, more complex depiction of the evolution of African American cultural production throughout the 20th century (English 1999).

## **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative, multidisciplinary approach to examine the impact of the Harlem Renaissance on African American identity through literature, music, and art history. This is the procedure's operation:

The study commences with a detailed analysis of notable Harlem Renaissance literature, including the poetry of Langston Hughes and the novels of Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay. Thematic analysis is one method to achieve this. It examines analogous themes of racial pride, ancestry, and the affirmation of black identity in this literature. The study examines musicological analysis, focusing on recordings and compositions by artists such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith to

uncover how jazz and blues encapsulated the emotional and cultural complexities of the African American experience.

Art historians examine painters such as Aaron Douglas and Jacob Lawrence to gain insights into visual art. The study examines the formal characteristics and symbols in select works to ascertain their role in establishing a distinctive African American style and providing individuals with novel means to express their identity and resilience.

This research examines the Harlem Renaissance within a wider historical and political framework, considering elements like as the Great Migration, segregation, and postcolonial perspectives. Primary and secondary sources are utilized to contextualize the movement within both American cultural history and the broader African diaspora. These comprise monographs, peer-reviewed academic papers, and archival records.

The approach is consistently comparative and interdisciplinary. It connects literature, music, and art, utilizing critical synthesis to examine how the collective cultural output of the Harlem Renaissance fundamentally altered African Americans' self-perception in a lasting manner. This comprehensive approach ensures that the research demonstrates the continuity and divergence of the Harlem Renaissance's enduring legacy.

### **"Cultural Resurgence: The Birth of The Harlem Renaissance"**

The Harlem Renaissance, a landmark cultural and artistic movement that unfolded in the early decades of the 20th century, stands as an epochal chapter in African American history. Originating in the vibrant and culturally rich neighborhood of Harlem, New York, this period marked a transformative shift in the expression of black identity, intellectual thought, and artistic creativity (Dickey 1997). As we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the The Harlem Renaissance's profound influence on reshaping African American identity makes it essential to situate this movement within its broader historical context. The United States at the start of the 20th century faced a challenging social and political landscape. According to Philipson (2006), the country was heavily influenced by the lingering effects of slavery, institutionalized racism, and the fight for civil rights. During the Great Migration, a significant number of African Americans moved from the South to

Northern cities, including Harlem. This migration caused a major shift in the demographic makeup of the period. People relocated in search of escape from racial segregation, economic hardship, and better opportunities. This movement brought together various cultures, laying the foundation for the Harlem Renaissance (Vogel 2021). The migration set the stage for this cultural flowering.

As a consequence of these circumstances, segregationist policies, Jim Crow laws, and systematic voter suppression against African Americans became more prominent in the early 1900s. The narrative of what it meant to be African American was something that black artists and intellectuals aimed to challenge (Boyd 2021). They sought to combat racial stereotypes, promote pride in their culture, and reshape the story being told. The Harlem Renaissance, often called the "New Negro Movement" or the "Negro Renaissance," served as a catalyst for this intellectual and cultural revolution. Although the term "Harlem Renaissance" became popular mainly in the 1960s, thinkers like Alain Locke envisioned a movement beyond geographic boundaries, embracing an international and interracial scope (Farebrother and Thaggert 2021).

Against this historical backdrop, the Harlem Renaissance emerged as a cultural revival, creating a space where black artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers could express themselves freely, reclaim their cultural heritage, and engage in critical conversations about identity, representation, and social change (Dickey 1997). The movement not only became a symbol of cultural pride but also a platform for fighting systemic racism and advocating for social justice. As we explore this research, our goal is to understand the complex forces that sparked the Harlem Renaissance. We can see how the Harlem Renaissance changed what it meant to be African American by looking at the social and political climate, the migration patterns, and the intellectual goals of the time. (Knupfer 2023) It changed the way people lived all over the world. Giving examples of how music has changed over time and how it has affected African American culture: In 2021, Vogel says that the changes in music during the Harlem Renaissance had a big effect on society and showed how deep the African American experience was. During this exciting time, jazz and blues became well-known types of art.

## **Emergence of Jazz and Blues**

During the Harlem Renaissance, jazz and blues, which were a mix of African and European styles of music, became very popular. During this musical revolution, people stopped using standard forms and began using improvisation and syncopation instead (Dickey 1997). As more African Americans moved from the South to the cities, different types of music mixed to make a new sound that was full of energy, just like the movement itself (Goldstein 202).

## **Expressing the Complexities of the African American Experience**

Jazz and blues became powerful tools for expressing the subtlety of African American life. Spontaneous jazz, with its inventive improvisation, mirrored resilience and creative spirit amid hardship. Blues, grounded in personal stories and emotions, offered a heartfelt outlet for sharing struggles and joys (Murray and Tangedal 2021). These genres conveyed a broad spectrum of feelings, from celebratory triumphs to somber reflections on hardship.

## **Iconic Figures and Their Contributions**

The Harlem Renaissance's profound influence on reshaping African American identity makes it essential to situate this movement within its broader historical context. The United States at the start of the 20th century faced a challenging social and political landscape. According to Philipson (2006), the country was heavily influenced by the lingering effects of slavery, institutionalized racism, and the fight for civil rights. During the Great Migration, a significant number of African Americans moved from the South to Northern cities, including Harlem. This migration caused a major shift in the demographic makeup of the period. People relocated in search of escape from racial segregation, economic hardship, and better opportunities. This movement brought together various cultures, laying the foundation for the Harlem Renaissance (Vogel 2021). The migration set the stage for this cultural flowering.

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This is the historical background for the culture revival known as the Harlem Renaissance. It gave black intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians a place to speak out freely, take back their cultural heritage, and have important talks about identity, representation, and social change (Dickey 1997). Along with being a sign of ethnic pride, the movement was a way to fight institutional racism and work for social justice. We want to learn more about the many complicated things that led to the Harlem Renaissance as we do this study. We can see how the Harlem Renaissance changed what it meant to be African American by looking at the political and social situation, the way people moved around, and the intellectual goals of the time. Knupfer (2023) says it changed societies all over the world.

### **Unveiling the Evolution and Impact of Musical Expression in African American Culture**

Vogel (2021) says that the changes in music during the Harlem Renaissance shocked everyone and showed how deep the African American experience went. Jazz and blues became well-known types of art during this exciting time.

#### **Emergence of Jazz and Blues**

During the Harlem Renaissance, jazz and blues, which came from a mix of African and European styles, were very popular. It was a break from established structures and an acceptance of improvisation and syncopation that characterized this musical change (Dickey 1997). The influx of African Americans from the South into urban centers helped blend various musical influences, creating a unique sound that reflected the energy of the cultural movement (Goldstein 2023).

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Against this historical backdrop, the Harlem Renaissance emerged as a cultural revival, creating a space where black artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers could express themselves freely, reclaim their cultural heritage, and engage in critical conversations about identity, representation, and social change (Dickey 1997). People wore the movement as a sign of ethnic pride and as a way to fight racism and get social justice. As we look into this topic, we want to find out more about the many things that came together to make the Harlem Renaissance happen. What it means to be African American changed during the Harlem Renaissance. We can see this by looking at the political and social climate, migration trends, and intellectual goals of the time. It changed society all over the world, not just where it happened (Knupfer 2025).

### **Examples of how music has changed over time and how it has affected African American culture**

Vogel (2021) asserts that the shifts in musical styles that occurred during the Harlem Renaissance had a significant influence on African American culture and brought to light the profound nature of the African American experience. During this exciting time, jazz and blues became well-known types of art.

### **Emergence of Jazz and Blues**

During the Harlem Renaissance, jazz and blues, which are a mix of African and European styles of music, became very popular. A big part of this musical change was moving away from set forms and toward creativity and syncopation (Dickey 1997). African Americans who went from the South to cities took with them various musical styles that melded together to form a sound that was full of vitality and reflected the culture shift (Goldstein 2023).

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## **Iconic Figures and Their Contributions**

According to Green 2020, key figures of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith, had a substantial impact on the development of jazz and blues, respectively. Accomplished in both composition and conducting, Duke Ellington emerged as a significant figure during the Harlem Renaissance, serving as a prime example of the depth and originality that jazz embodies. The band, which is more usually referred to as the Duke Ellington ensemble, served as a catalyst for musical excellence, thereby redefining the parameters of jazz and shaping its growth into a sophisticated art form (Boyd 2021). Ellington's skill lay in his ability to easily combine a variety of musical styles, including blues, swing, and classical, so creating a distinctive sound that transcended the boundaries of traditional genre categories. According to Goldstein (2023), his songs, such as "Take the 'A' Train" and "Mood Indigo," demonstrated a remarkable orchestral richness and harmonic sophistication, thereby creating a new benchmark for jazz orchestration. During the Harlem Renaissance, the Duke Ellington Orchestra was acknowledged for its pioneering achievements, which earned them a great deal of praise. The orchestra was a shining example of musical intelligence and innovation. Duke Ellington was recognized not just for his abilities as a composer and bandleader, but also for his commitment to bringing attention to the distinctive abilities of the members of his ensemble (Philipson 2006). As a result of this strategy, famous soloists within the ensemble were able to rise to prominence, which further strengthened Ellington's effect on the essential collaborative nature of jazz.

In the realm of blues, Bessie Smith, often hailed as the "Empress of the Blues," stood as a luminary figure whose contributions were characterized by emotional depth and authenticity (Vogel 2021). Her powerful voice became a conduit for expressing the joys and sorrows inherent in the African American experience. Bessie Smith's performances were characterized by a raw and unfiltered emotional intensity, and her ability to convey a wide range of emotions through her singing captivated audiences. Songs like "St. Louis Blues" and "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" became iconic representations of her ability to infuse each lyric with personal resonance and universal relevance (Green 2020).

Smith's impact extended beyond the sheer power of her vocal delivery; she also played a pivotal role in transforming the blues into a commercially successful and

widely appreciated genre (Goldstein 2023). Her recordings with Columbia Records in the 1920s contributed significantly to the popularization of blues music, breaking new ground for African American artists in the recording industry. Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith, through their distinct contributions to jazz and blues, respectively, became emblematic figures of the Harlem Renaissance's musical landscape. Ellington's innovative approach to jazz orchestration and Smith's emotive prowess in blues vocalization not only defined the musical milieu of their time but also left a lasting legacy that continues to influence and inspire generations of musicians across genres (Philipson 2006). Together, they played instrumental roles in elevating African American musical expression to new heights during this transformative era.

### **Examining How African American Writers Used Literature as a Catalyst for Social and Cultural Change**

The literary works that were produced during the Harlem Renaissance are an integral component of this cultural and creative movement. These works exemplify fundamental shifts in African American identity, expression, and social critique that occurred throughout the early 20th century (Green 2020). Within the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of the Harlem Renaissance, notable literary giants like as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Claude McKay exerted a substantial amount of influence.

The poet Langston Hughes, who is sometimes referred to as the "poet laureate of Harlem," filled his poetry with a profound awareness of racial issues and an unapologetic respect of black culture. Through his body of work, which included "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "Montage of a Dream Deferred," he explored the profound nature of African American culture and identity. As a powerful medium, Hughes used his poetry to communicate the struggles, resiliency, and aspirations of the black community. As a result, he made a significant contribution to the development of a distinctive African American voice (Murray and Tangedal 2021). Zora Neale Hurston, a renowned author and anthropologist, conducted an investigation of the social structure of black people in the South in her seminal work titled "Their Eyes Were Watching God." Through the use of vivid prose and dialect, Hurston brought to light the reality that black women face, so showcasing their autonomy and independence. Her work spanned more than only the realm of literature; she also conducted anthropological research that documented the

cultural practices and folk traditions of African Americans living in the South (Colbert, 2021).

It is generally agreed that Toni Morrison is a literary heir to the Harlem Renaissance, despite the fact that she came into being much later than the movement. Her piece titled "Beloved" addresses the legacy of slavery, the sorrow that it causes, and the complexities of parenthood. In order to communicate the psychological and emotional nuances of her characters, Morrison's writing demonstrates a comprehensive investigation of the African American experience. She does this by combining elements of historical realism and magical realism in her writing (Locke 2021). Claude McKay, a Jamaican poet and writer, examined topics such as racial pride, resistance, and identity in his works such as "Home to Harlem" and "If We Must Die." McKay was born in Jamaica. The poetry and prose of McKay regularly addressed the tension between assimilation and the maintenance of cultural legacy, so strengthening the greater discourse over the essence of black identity in the United States of America during a period of considerable societal turbulence (Smith and Who 2021).

There were a lot of false ideas about what it was like to be African American during the Harlem Renaissance. They tried to clear those up by painting a true and positive picture of life. The work of these people talks about many things, like race, history, and identity. Akbardjanovna and Shukurjon Farhodovna (2022) say that literature was a powerful tool for these artists because it helped them understand other cultures and express themselves. It gave people a way to express themselves through art and get involved in politics and society. It also changed and reflected how the movement as a whole was changing. African American writers were able to keep writing about identity, power, and the fight for equality because of what they did (Imane 2021). The writers of the Harlem Renaissance made art that has stood the test of time and inspired more artists to come.

### **The Evolution of African American Aesthetics in Harlem Renaissance Art**

The Harlem Renaissance began in the early 1900s and was a busy time for art and culture. New works of music and writing were born, and the visual arts were woken up in a big way (Wintz 2020). During this time of huge change, African American artists changed the way people thought about things. They did this to show who they were as a culture and to bust some long-held race myths. Artists like Aaron

Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Archibald Motley show how this time in history had an effect that lasts. It turned out to be a great way to talk about culture and society (Wadlington et al. 2022). A lot of people were still dealing with the effects of slavery, segregation, and racism at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Many African Americans used the visual arts to show how hard their lives were (Whalen 2021). This beginning talks about how African American artists during this time were able to make a difference. The unique things Douglas, Lawrence, and Motley brought to the table are talked about, such as how their new styles changed the way people thought about black identity and art (Fisher 2020).

During the Harlem Renaissance, Aaron Douglas, who is known as the "Father of Black American Art," was one of the first artists to change the way African Americans were shown in art. This artist's picture, which mixed African and modernist styles, became a sign of the movement's goals of racial pride and unity (Jindal 2022). W.E.B. Du Bois was in charge of drawing Douglas's pictures for *The Crisis*, which were very important. The way he used stylized patterns, geometric shapes, and symbols in his art made people feel like they were emotionally transcending and part of a group. Douglas wrote huge books like "Aspects of Negro Life" that talked about both past and current events. (de Souza 2023) He bravely and with respect spoke about the problems and successes of African Americans. Through his art, Douglas not only created a new visual vocabulary but also laid the foundation for an aesthetic that celebrated the cultural heritage of African Americans (Schultz 2021). Jacob Lawrence, a master of narrative realism, achieved iconic status through his groundbreaking series of paintings, "The Migration Series." Focused on the Great Migration, this collection of works provided a visual documentation of the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North (Mitchell 2010). Lawrence's use of vivid colors, angular shapes, and sequential storytelling created a powerful visual narrative that transcended traditional boundaries.

Lawrence's contribution extended beyond artistic innovation; it became a form of historical preservation and social commentary. His depictions of crowded trains, bustling urban scenes, and individuals striving for a better life captured the urgency and agency of African Americans during this transformative period (Keller 1968). By infusing his work with a sense of historical purpose, Lawrence elevated the visual arts to a platform of social and cultural significance.

Archibald Motley, associated with the Chicago Renaissance, brought a distinctive vibrancy to the visual arts. His paintings, characterized by bold colors, intricate compositions, and a celebration of urban life, defied conventional expectations. Motley's work, such as "Blues" and "Mending Socks," presented a nuanced and multifaceted representation of African American life, challenging prevailing stereotypes (English 1999). Motley's art was a celebration of the diversity and vitality within black communities. His canvases depicted scenes of joy, resilience, and interconnectedness, countering prevailing narratives that often-portrayed African Americans in limiting and stereotypical ways. Through his exploration of everyday life, Motley contributed to a more authentic representation of black identity, one that acknowledged the complexity and richness of the African American experience (Kravagna 2022).

Collectively, the artistic contributions of Douglas, Lawrence, and Motley signaled a paradigm shift in the visual narrative of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance. Their works moved beyond mere representation, actively challenging societal norms and contributing to the development of a unique African American aesthetic (Mix 2022). The visual arts of the Harlem Renaissance became a dynamic force for cultural pride and self-expression, portraying black identity in a way that countered prevailing stereotypes and reflected the richness and resilience of the African American experience (Mock et al. 2021). Through their innovative and impactful creations, these artists left an enduring legacy, influencing subsequent generations of visual artists and contributing significantly to the broader cultural transformation of African Americans in the early 20th century. Their art not only adorned the canvas but also served as a powerful agent of change, fostering a redefinition of black identity and aesthetics during a pivotal era in American history (Elvoid).

## **Conclusion**

The period known as the Harlem Renaissance is a significant one in the history of the United States. It is a representation of a cultural and artistic revival that transcended both geographical and temporal boundaries. An examination of the literary works, musical compositions, and visual arts that were produced during this period of profound change reveals a tapestry that was weaved with patience, pride, and originality. The Harlem Renaissance was not only a restricted burst of creativity that occurred in Harlem during the 1920s; rather, it represented a significant

transformation in African American identity that did not adhere to any particular temporal boundaries (Barton 2022). It was through the literary criticisms of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Claude McKay that the complex aspects of racial knowledge, legacy, and identity were brought to light. Through the use of their language, the authors of the Harlem Renaissance established a literary foundation that serves as an important reference for subsequent generations, thereby encouraging a dynamic and accurate picture of the life of African Americans (Akbarjanovna and Shukurjon Farhodovna 2022).

The collective essence of African Americans in music was expressed in the virtuosity of Duke Ellington and the emotional profundity of Bessie Smith. Not only did their contributions to jazz and blues have an impact on the musical environment of the Harlem Renaissance, but they also served as cultural anthems that captured the pleasures, sufferings, and aspirations of a people that was undergoing a transformation (de Souza 2023). Not only did the visual arts function as reflections, but they also acted as transformational declarations of black identity, as evidenced by the works of Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Archibald Motley. Their canvases conveyed profound ideas, which challenged the prevalent racial myths and contributed to the development of a distinctively African American aesthetic that honored variety, resiliency, and community (Wintz 2020). According to Colbert's article in *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre 2021*, these visionaries not only decorated walls with their artwork, but they also became builders of cultural transformation. They dismantled preconceived notions and reinterpreted the visual vocabulary of Black identity.

The Harlem Renaissance had effects that went beyond a certain time and place. What it means to be African American has changed many times over the past hundred years thanks to intellectual, artistic, and social forces. Later fights for civil rights, social justice, and the cultural freedom of all people were influenced by these organizations.

There was more to the Harlem Renaissance than just one event in history. It was the start of a larger "Black Renaissance" that happened in different places and times. From different academic points of view, we can look at writing, music, and the visual arts to see how they are connected and how their traditions will live on. We know that the Harlem Renaissance did more than just get rid of old things. It also changed the story of how African Americans have been brave and strong in the face of

hardship. There were many sides to the Harlem Renaissance world, and this can be seen. The Harlem Renaissance shows how strong a group of people can be. In the past, they had a lot of problems, but they also started a culture revival that has gone on for hundreds of years. At its core, this chapter is based on the idea that people are always working for equality, ethnic pride, and artistic expression. It tells us to always value and connect with the many aspects of being African American.

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