

The Harlem Renaissance

Their Eyes Were Watching God was published in 1937, several years after the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. But the novel should be read with the context of the “New Negro” in mind, since Hurston was an influential member of the Harlem literati.

Thousands of African Americans migrated north at the beginning of the twentieth century. According to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, “between 1910 and 1920 New York’s black population increased by 66 percent, Chicago’s by 148 percent, and Philadelphia’s by 500 percent. Detroit experienced an amazing growth rate of 611 percent.” This exodus heightened black intellectual output in cities like New York and Chicago. While new industry (like Henry Ford’s automotive factories) supplied jobs to these new arrivals, artists within these communities gave voice to the new challenges of the African-American experience. Ralph Ellison captures this journey in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. In this story, the main character migrates from his boyhood south to New York City. An educated young man’s dreams transform as urban life brings betrayal and racial strife.

Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, became the center for African-American artists from 1910 to 1930. These artists produced an astounding array of internationally acclaimed works. Harlem Renaissance literary greats included poet Langston Hughes, author Zora Neale Hurston, writer Richard Wright, and political thinker W.E.B. DuBois. At the same time, a host of musicians would make an indelible mark on the evolution of American

music. These artists included Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Benny Goodman, and Bessie Smith. Since racial prejudice dominated mainstream America, some artists, like actress and dancer Josephine Baker, met with more success in Europe. International audiences also provided artists with an opportunity to experiment more freely with their art form.

While American society was still segregated, artistic collaborations between blacks and whites would provide a foundation for improving interracial relations. Zora Neale Hurston, a trained anthropologist as well as novelist, called whites supporting this artistic movement “Negrotarian.” Jazz musicians from New Orleans to New York to California overcame racial differences to embrace potent musical collaborations. Literary works, plays, paintings, and political commentary provided all Americans with new, positive, and realistically complex images of the African American. As a result, there was great debate within African-American communities as to what would properly represent the race. W.E.B. DuBois rejected Bessie Smith’s music as inappropriate. Richard Wright and Alain Locke criticized Hurston’s use of language as failing African Americans by representing them as uneducated. The gusto and triumph of the Harlem Renaissance was fed precisely by tensions that forced artists to come to terms with new definitions of race made possible in and through a variety of art forms.