

The Harlem Renaissance Project

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, former professional basketball player, co-authored, *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance* (Simon and Schuster, 2007). The book is now a documentary movie. This lesson package was created as a companion for the documentary by Dana Chibbaro, Sam Garrison, Milagros Harris, and Langdon A. Wagner, Jr. of the Newark, New Jersey Public Schools. This article is adapted from an interdisciplinary unit that can be modified for upper elementary, intermediate, and high school students. Abdul-Jabbar was interviewed about the book on BookTV (<http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/197838-9>). This unit was developed to align with the NCSS 2010 National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies as well as the 2009 New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies and Language Arts Literacy.

Background: The Harlem Renaissance is the name given to the period from the end of World War I and through the middle of the Great Depression, during which a group of talented African-Americans produced exceptional works of poetry, fiction, drama, music, essay, cultural identity and athleticism. An important aspect of the Harlem Renaissance is the notion of “two-ness,” a divided awareness of one’s identity that was introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois. As one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the author of the influential book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) he said: “*One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled stirrings: two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.*” The Harlem Renaissance also included themes of the “back to Africa” movement led by Marcus Garvey, a renewed demand for racial integration and sense of shared identity. In addition, in the mid-1920s through the late 1940s, Negro athletic leagues held an important role in African-American communities as exemplars of athleticism and business savvy. Teams, players and businessmen helped build the Negro leagues into popular and profitable establishments for thousands of adoring fans over the course of two decades. Essential question: What were the social, political and economic elements that contributed to the unique culture of the Harlem Renaissance?

Lesson 1: I am the Harlem Renaissance (Pre-Screening)

Introduction: Period era music from Harlem Renaissance plays while students enter the room. PowerPoint images from Harlem (clubs, stores, parades, etc.) with an overlay urban traffic sounds to recreate active city life.

Do Now: Students write a brief observation about what they believe is happening. A quick *who, what, where, when, why* is acceptable. Class discusses student observations.

Activity 1: Students read brief historical summaries (secondary sources) about the Harlem Renaissance and compare the reading to primary sources from the time period. Primary sources can be selected based on student interest and ability, but a variety of art, culture, business and sports topics should be briefly presented.

Activity 2: Class views clips from “On the Shoulders of Giants” and discusses how and why historic events should be remembered.

Summary Question: How should the Harlem Renaissance be remembered?

Lesson 2: I am the Harlem Renaissance (Continue with similar multimedia front loads - music, images)

Activity: In small groups, students read selections and view images from sources in the following categories: Music, Pop Culture, Intellectuals, Literature, Artists/Performers. Some featured individuals, institutions, and groups should be Billie Holiday, Cotton Club, Speakeasies, Savoy Ballroom, Rent Parties, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Apollo Theater, Harlem Rens. Basketball team, Marcus Garvey, Count Basie, Black Swan, Countee Cullen, Romare Bearden, Lena Horne, Claude McKay, Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Calloway, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonious Monk. After completing a document shuffle (each person comments on each document), students share their results with the class.

Summary Question: What were the overall themes and influences of the Harlem Renaissance?

Lesson 3: I am the Harlem Renaissance (Continue with similar multimedia front loads - music, images).

Do Now: “We are born in a certain time and certain place and like vintage wines we retain the flavor of our origins.” -- Carl Jung. In your opinion, what does Jung mean?

Activity 1: A poem by George Ella Lyons (<http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html>), “Where I’m From,” lends itself to imitation and an exercise in exploring where personal perspective come from. Students read and discuss the poem and use it as a template for writing their own poems on the topic “I am the Harlem Renaissance.”

Lesson 4: “ The Harlem Renaissance Project”

Do Now: List factors that have made Hip-Hop such an integral part of African-American Urban Culture. Use the board to create a mind map with Hip-Hop at the center, surrounded by all its cultural, social political components

Introduction: Video summary of the Harlem Renaissance (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kZBHWzgbFA>)

Activity: Read and discuss: “Fighting for Respect: African-American Soldiers in WWI” by Jami Bryan (<http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/wwi/articles/fightingforrespect.aspx>).

Summary Question: How was the culture of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s similar to or different from Hip Hop culture today?

Lesson 5: Harlem Renaissance Project

Introduction: Documentary Part 2 (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAOvgP2rQjU&feature=related>)

Activity: Play music by Harlem Renaissance composers such as Count Basie or Cab Callaway. Students create and display posters or a Harlem scene showing what a location would have looked like in the Twenties.

Lesson 6: What impact did Negro League baseball have on African-American communities?

Introduction: Period music from 1926-1949 performers and baseball game sounds play as students enter the room. PowerPoint images and tube videos (CNET.com) show NLB (clubs, players, parades, stadiums, crowds, etc.).

Do Now: Students view and listen to the sights and sounds of the Negro League Baseball upon entering the classroom and write a brief observation about what is happening. A quick, *who, what, where, when, why* is acceptable. Class discusses the results.

Activity: Students read brief historical summaries about Negro League Baseball and compare the reading to primary sources from the time period. Suggested sites include: Black Baseball’s Negro Baseball Leagues, Negro League Baseball Players Association, Negro Leagues Baseball Museum web site, Negro League Baseball Project, St. Louis Negro League Ballplayers

Lesson 7: What impact did Negro League baseball have on African-American communities?

Activity: Create a Timeline of milestones, major events, and triumphs. Write an expository essay – How did Negro League Baseball affect the social and economic lives of African-Americans during the 1920s and 1930s?

Lesson 8: How successful was the Harlem Renaissance in bringing about racial equality? (Post-Screening)

Do Now: What does racial equality mean to you? Explain in a paragraph. Students share responses.

Activity 1: Each statement represents one aspect of the Harlem Renaissance as portrayed by the book or documentary *On The Shoulders of Giants*. Based on what you learned from the book, film, or previous lessons, select the statement you believe is the most accurate.

1. The leaders of the Harlem Renaissance had the greatest impact in bringing about more racial equality. Leaders such as: William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Charles S. Johnson, and Alain Locke.
2. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance had the greatest impact in bringing about more racial equality. Writers such as: James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes.
3. The musicians and singers of the Harlem Renaissance had the greatest impact in bringing about more racial equality. Musicians and singers such as: W.C. Handy, Mamie Smith, Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, B.B. King, Willie “the Lion “ Smith, Count Basie, Fats Waller, Jelly Roll Morton and Cab Callaway.
4. The athletes of the Harlem Renaissance had the greatest impact in bringing about more racial equality. Athletes such as: Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Jesse Owens, Leroy (Satchel) Paige, Josh Gibson and James (Cool Papa) Bell, Harlem Rens, and Bob Douglass.

5. The unknown heroes of the Harlem Renaissance had the greatest impact in bringing about more racial equality. These include the average African-American who may have not been gifted intellectually, musically or athletically.

Activity 2: Divide the class into groups according to the five statements and have each group defend a statement.

Activity 3: Following the debate, present the students with the following quotes from the book “On the Shoulders of Giants.” Students should read and discuss. “Ed Henderson, the first black man to teach physical education in an American school, and founder of the first black basketball league, explained how important black athletes were to the movement for racial equality when in 1927 he told a reporter, “I doubt whether the mere acquisition of hundreds of degrees or academic honors have influenced the mass mind of America as much as the soul appeal made in a thrilling run for a touchdown by a colored athlete . . . Fairness creeps out of the soul in the athletic world to a larger extent than anywhere else” (144).

“Nearly seventy years ago, a team of brave and dedicated athletes defied all expectations by becoming the first world champions basketball. Because of them, black players were soon allowed to play on professional white teams. Because of them, I was able to become a professional athlete. Because of them, black Americans can look through that telescope of hope and see a future of limitless opportunities for us and our children. Their history gave us our future” (192).

Project Ideas

T-Shirt: Design a T-shirt with a slogan and image representing the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem Renaissance Poster: The subject could be a magazine cover, a stage production, music group or performer, public lecture or forum. Get ideas at sites like Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance.

Basketball Cards: Use this website, [http://www/blackfives.com/](http://www.blackfives.com/) to create a set of Basketball Cards for the Rens or another team from the era.

Baseball Cards: Create NLB baseball cards of players, managers and owners celebrating accomplishments.

Biographical PowerPoint Presentation: Start by selecting an important person of the era. You may find some help in selection and resources at Biographies of the Harlem Renaissance.

Harlem Renaissance Newspaper Project: Create a newspaper that demonstrates knowledge of life in the Harlem Renaissance. You may choose any date for your issue between 1924 and 1929. All events need to be within the same five-year time span. The paper should include: feature article, interview article, an obituary, an editorial, two advertisements, sports story, political cartoon, and three lifestyle articles, focusing on the arts, music, and literature. You need to describe what life was like in Harlem. Be creative with your description; focus on supposed upcoming celebrations, fashion news, or gossip but remember that it must be based on fact.

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