

Cultural Perspective on African American Culture

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Abstract

The migration of blacks in North America through slavery became united. The population of blacks past downs a tradition of artist through art to native born citizens. The art tradition involved telling stories to each generation in black families. The black culture elevated by tradition created hope to determine their personal freedom to escape from poverty of enslavement and to establish a way of life through tradition. A way of personal freedoms was through getting a good education that lead to a better foundation and a better way of life.

Keywords: Art, Music, Dance, Literature, Theatre, Culture

1. Introduction

One of the most significant musical forms was the spiritual. During the late 18th and early 19th century, many African Americans converted to Christianity, but they reshaped the religion to meet their distinctive needs and blended it with traditions carried from Africa.

Drawing on stories from the Old and New Testament, the spirituals dealt with religious themes-faith, freedom, hope and salvation. They expressed sorrow over life in bondage, but also hope in a better life. Frederick Douglass, the fugitive slave who would become one of this country's leading abolitionists, described the significance of the spirituals with these words:

They would sing words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy. I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those songs. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains...Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.

Spirituals also contained hidden transcripts. In coded language, they offered practical advice about escaping from slavery.

African-American literature is the body of literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. It begins with the works of such late 18th-century writers as Phillis Wheatley. Before the high point of slave narratives, African-American literature was dominated by autobiographical spiritual narratives. African-American literature reached early high points with slave narratives of the nineteenth century. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a time of flowering of literature and the arts. Writers of African-American literature have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison. Among the themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and equality. African-American writing has tended to incorporate oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues, or rap.^[1]

As African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so, has the focus of African-American literature. Before the American Civil War, the literature primarily consisted of memoirs by people who had escaped from slavery; the genre of slave narratives included accounts of life under slavery and the path of justice and redemption to freedom. There was an early distinction between the literature of freed slaves and the literature of free blacks who had been born in the North. Free blacks had to express their oppression in a different narrative form. Free blacks in the North often spoke out against slavery and racial injustices using the spiritual narrative. The spiritual addressed many of the same themes of slave narratives, but has been largely ignored in current scholarly conversation.^[2]

At the turn of the 20th century, non-fiction works by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. During the American Civil Rights movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and black nationalism. Today, African-American literature has become accepted as an integral part of American literature, with

books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, which won the Pulitzer Prize; and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison achieving both best-selling and award-winning status.

In broad terms, African-American literature can be defined as writings by people of African descent living in the United States. It is highly varied.^[3] African-American literature has generally focused on the role of African Americans within the larger American society and what it means to be an American.^[4] As Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau has said, all African-American study "speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all."^[4] African-American literature explores the issues of freedom and equality long denied to Blacks in the United States, along with further themes such as African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, a sense of home,^[5] segregation, migration, feminism, and more. African-American literature presents the African-American experience from an African-American point of view. In the early Republic, African-American literature represented a way for free blacks to negotiate their new identity in an individualized republic. They often tried to exercise their political and social autonomy in the face of resistance from the white public.^[6] Thus, an early theme of African-American literature was, like other American writings, what it meant to be a citizen in post-Revolutionary America.

African-American literature has both been influenced by the great African diasporic heritage^[7] and shaped it in many countries. It has been created within the larger realm of post-colonial literature, although scholars distinguish between the two, saying that "African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by members of a minority community who reside within a nation of vast wealth and economic power."^[8]

African-American oral culture is rich in poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues, and rap. This oral poetry also appears in the African-American tradition of Christian sermons, which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence, and alliteration. African-American literature—especially written poetry, but also prose—has a strong tradition of incorporating all of these forms of oral poetry.^[9] These characteristics do not occur in all works by African-American writers.

Some scholars resist using Western literary theory to analyze African-American literature. As the Harvard literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said, "My desire has been to allow the black tradition to speak for itself about its nature and various functions, rather than to read it, or analyze it, in terms of literary theories borrowed whole from other traditions, appropriated from without."^[10] One trope common to African-American literature is Signification. Gates claims that signifying "is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony, and also hyperbole an litotes, and metalepsis."^[11] Signification also refers to the way in which African-American "authors read and critique other African American texts in an act of rhetorical self-definition"^[12]

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2. Refuting the dominant literary culture

Throughout American history, African Americans have been discriminated against and subject to racist attitudes. This experience inspired some Black writers, at least during the early years of African-American literature, to prove they were the equals of European-American authors. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has said, "it is fair to describe the subtext of the history of black letters as this urge to refute the claim that because blacks had no written traditions they were bearers of an inferior culture."^[45]

By refuting the claims of the dominant culture, African-American writers were also attempting to subvert the literary and power traditions of the United States. Some scholars assert that writing has traditionally been seen as "something defined by the dominant culture as a white male activity."^[45] This means that, in American society, literary acceptance has traditionally been intimately tied in with the very power dynamics which perpetrated such evils as racial discrimination. By borrowing from and incorporating the non-written oral traditions and folk life of the African diaspora, African-American literature broke "the mystique of connection between literary authority and patriarchal power."^[46] In producing their own literature, African Americans were able to establish their own literary traditions devoid of the white intellectual filter. This view of African-American literature as a tool in the struggle for Black political and cultural liberation has been stated for decades, perhaps most famously by W. E. B. Du Bois.^[47]

3. Existing both inside and outside American literature

According to Joanne Gabbin, a professor, African-American literature exists both inside and outside American literature. "Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part," she says.^[48] She bases her theory in the experience of Black people in the United States. Even though African Americans have long claimed an American identity, during most of United States history they were not accepted as full citizens and were actively discriminated against. As a result, they were part of America while also outside it.

Similarly, African-American literature is within the framework of a larger American literature, but it also is independent. As a result, new styles of storytelling and unique voices have been created in relative isolation. The benefit of this is that these new styles and voices can leave their isolation and help revitalize the larger literary world (McKay, 2004). This artistic pattern has held true with many aspects of African American culture over the last century, with jazz and hip hop being just two artistic examples that developed in isolation within the Black community before reaching a larger audience and eventually revitalizing American culture.

Since African-American literature is already popular with mainstream audiences, its ability to develop new styles and voices—or to remain "authentic," in the words of some critics—may be a thing of the past.^{[dead link][14]}

Balkanization of American literature

Some conservative academics and intellectuals argue that African-American literature exists as a separate topic only because of the balkanization of literature over the last few decades, or as an extension of the culture wars into the field of literature.^{[49][citation needed]} According to these critics, literature is splitting into distinct and separate groupings because of the rise of identity politics in the United States and other parts of the world. These critics reject bringing identity politics into literature because this would mean that "only women could write about women for women, and only Blacks about Blacks for Blacks."^[49]

People opposed to this group-based approach to writing say that it limits the ability of literature to explore the overall human condition. Critics also disagree with classifying writers on the basis of their race, as they believe this is limiting and artists can tackle any subject.

Proponents counter that the exploration of group and ethnic dynamics through writing deepens human understanding and previously, entire groups of people were ignored or neglected by American literature.^[50] (Jay, 1997)

The general consensus view appears to be that American literature is not breaking apart because of new genres like African-American literature. Instead, American literature is simply reflecting the increasing diversity of the United States and showing more signs of diversity than before in its history (Andrews, 1997; McKay, 2004).

African American criticism

Some of the criticism of African-American literature over the years has come from within the community; some argue that Black literature sometimes does not portray Black people in a positive light and that it should.

W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in the NAACP's *The Crisis* on this topic, saying in 1921, "We want everything that is said about us to tell of the best and highest and noblest in us. We insist that our Art and Propaganda be one." He added in 1926, "All Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists."^[47] Du Bois and the editors of *The Crisis* consistently stated that literature was a tool in the struggle for African-American political liberation.

Du Bois's belief in the propaganda value of art showed when he clashed in 1928 with the author Claude McKay over his best-selling novel *Home to Harlem*. Du Bois thought the novel's frank depictions of sexuality and the nightlife in Harlem appealed only to the "prurient demand[s]" of white readers and publishers looking for portrayals of Black "licentiousness." Du Bois said, "'Home to Harlem' ... for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath."^[51] Others made similar criticism of Wallace Thurman's novel *The Blacker the Berry* in 1929. Addressing prejudice between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks, the novel infuriated many African Americans, who did not like the public airing of their "dirty laundry."^[52]

Many African-American writers thought their literature should present the full truth about life and people. Langston Hughes articulated this view in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). He wrote that Black artists intended to express themselves freely no matter what the Black public or white public thought.

More recently, some critics accused Alice Walker of unfairly attacking black men in her novel *The Color Purple* (19xx).^[53] In his updated 1995 introduction to his novel *Oxherding Tale*, Charles Johnson criticized Walker's novel for its negative portrayal of African-American males: "I leave it to readers to decide which book pushes harder at the boundaries of convention, and inhabits most confidently the space where fiction and philosophy meet." Walker responded in her essays *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (19xx).

Robert Hayden, the first African-American Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, critiqued the idea of African American Literature saying (paraphrasing the comment by the black composer Duke Ellington about jazz and music), "There is no such thing as Black literature. There's good literature and bad. And that's all."^[54]

Kenneth Warren's "What Was African American Literature?" argues that black American writing, as a literature, began with the institution of Jim Crow legislation and ended with desegregation. In order to substantiate this claim, he cites both the societal pressures to create a distinctly black American literature for uplift and the lack of a well formulated essential notion of literary blackness. For this scholar, the late 19th and early 20th century de jure racism crystallized

the canon of African American literature as black writers conscripted literature as a means to counter notions of inferiority. During this period, "whether African American writers acquiesced in or kicked against the label, they knew what was at stake in accepting or contesting their identification as Negro writers."^[55] He writes that "[a]bsent white suspicion of, or commitment to imposing, black inferiority, African American literature would not have existed as a literature"^[56] Warren bases part of his argument on the distinction between "the mere existence of literary texts" and the formation of texts into a coherent body of literature.^[57] For Warren, it is the coherence of responding to racist narratives in the struggle for civil rights that establishes the body of African American literature, and the scholar suggests that continuing to refer to the texts produced after the civil rights era as such is a symptom of nostalgia or a belief that the struggle for civil rights has not yet ended.^[57]

In an alternative reading, Karla F.C. Holloway's "Legal Fictions" (forthcoming from Duke University Press, 2014) suggests a different composition for the tradition and argues its contemporary vitality.^[58] Her thesis is that legally cognizable racial identities are sustained through constitutional or legislative act, and these nurture the "legal fiction" of African American identity. "Legal Fictions" argues that the social imagination of race is expressly constituted in law and is expressively represented through the imaginative composition of literary fictions. As long as US law specifies a black body as "discrete and insular," it confers a cognizable legal status onto that body. US fictions use that legal identity to construct narratives--from neo-slave narratives to contemporary novels like Walter Mosley's "The Man in My Basement." that take constitutional fictions of race and their frames (contracts, property, and evidence) to compose the narratives that cohere the tradition.

African-American culture, also known as black culture, in the United States refers to the cultural contributions of African Americans to the culture of the United States, either as part of or distinct from American culture. The distinct identity of African-American culture is rooted in the historical experience of the African-American people, including the Middle Passage. The culture is both distinct and enormously influential to American culture as a whole.

African-American culture is rooted in Africa. It is a blend of chiefly sub-Saharan African and Sahelean cultures. Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of Americans of African descent to practice their cultural traditions, many practices, values, and beliefs survived and over time have modified or blended with white culture and other cultures such as that of Native Americans. There are some facets of African-American culture that were accentuated by the slavery period. The result is a unique and dynamic culture that has had and continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture, as well as the culture of the broader world.

Elaborate rituals and ceremonies were a significant part of African Culture. West Africans believed that spirits dwelled in their surrounding nature. From this disposition, they treated their surroundings with mindful care. Africans also believed spiritual life source existed after death. They believed that ancestors in this spiritual realm could then mediate between the supreme creator and the living. Honor and prayer was displayed to these "ancient ones", the spirit of those past. West Africans also believed in spiritual possession.^[1]

In the beginning of the eighteenth century Islam began to spread across North Africa; this shift in religion began displacing traditional African spiritual practices. The enslaved Africans brought this complex religious dynamic within their culture to America. This fusion of traditional African beliefs with Christianity provided a common place for those practicing religion in Africa and America.^[1]

After emancipation, unique African-American traditions continued to flourish, as distinctive traditions or radical innovations in music, art, literature, religion, cuisine, and other fields. 20th-century sociologists, such as Gunnar Myrdal, believed that African Americans had lost most cultural ties with Africa.^[2] But, anthropological field research by Melville Herskovits and others demonstrated that there has been a continuum of African traditions among Africans of the Diaspora.^[3] The greatest influence of African cultural practices on European culture is found below the Mason-Dixon line in the American South.^{[4][5]}

For many years African-American culture developed separately from European-American culture, both because of slavery and the persistence of racial discrimination in America, as well as African-American slave descendants' desire to create and maintain their own traditions. Today, African-American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct cultural body.^[6]

African-American cultural history

From the earliest days of American slavery in the 17th century, slave owners sought to exercise control over their slaves by attempting to strip them of their African culture. The physical isolation and societal marginalization of African slaves and, later, of their free progeny, however, facilitated the retention of significant elements of traditional culture among Africans in the New World generally, and in the U.S. in particular. Slave owners deliberately tried to repress independent political or cultural organization in order to deal with the many slave rebellions or acts of resistance that took place in the United States, Brazil, Haiti, and the Dutch Guyanas.^[7]

African cultures, slavery, slave rebellions, and the civil rights movements have shaped African-American religious, familial, political, and economic behaviors. The imprint of Africa is evident in a myriad of ways: in politics, economics, language, music, hairstyles, fashion, dance, religion, cuisine, and worldview.

In turn, African-American culture has had a pervasive, transformative impact on many elements of mainstream American culture. This process of mutual creative exchange is called creolization.^[6] Over time, the culture of African

slaves and their descendants has been ubiquitous in its impact on not only the dominant American culture, but on world culture as well.^[8]

4. Oral tradition

Slaveholders limited or prohibited education of enslaved African Americans because they feared it might empower their chattel and inspire or enable emancipatory ambitions. In the United States, the legislation that denied slaves formal education likely contributed to their maintaining a strong oral tradition, a common feature of indigenous African cultures.^[9] African-based oral traditions became the primary means of preserving history, mores, and other cultural information among the people. This was consistent with the griot practices of oral history in many African and other cultures that did not rely on the written word. Many of these cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. The folktales provided African Americans the opportunity to inspire and educate one another.^[9]

Examples of African-American folktales include trickster tales of Br'er Rabbit^[10] and heroic tales such as that of John Henry.^[11] The Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris helped to bring African-American folk tales into mainstream adoption.^[12] Harris did not appreciate the complexity of the stories nor their potential for a lasting impact on society.^[13] Other narratives that appear as important, recurring motifs in African-American culture are the "Signifying Monkey", "The Ballad of Shine", and the legend of Stagger Lee.

The legacy of the African-American oral tradition manifests in diverse forms. African-American preachers tend to perform rather than simply speak. The emotion of the subject is carried through the speaker's tone, volume, and cadence, which tend to mirror the rising action, climax, and descending action of the sermon. Often song, dance, verse, and structured pauses are placed throughout the sermon. Call and response is another pervasive element of the African-American oral tradition. It manifests in worship in what is commonly referred to as the "amen corner." In direct contrast to recent tradition in other American and Western cultures, it is an acceptable and common audience reaction to interrupt and affirm the speaker.^[14] This pattern of interaction is also in evidence in music, particularly in blues and jazz forms. Hyperbolic and provocative, even incendiary, rhetoric is another aspect of African-American oral tradition often evident in the pulpit in a tradition sometimes referred to as "prophetic speech."^[15]

Other aspects of African-American oral tradition include the dozens, signifying, trash talk, rhyming, semantic inversion and word play, many of which have found their way into mainstream American popular culture and become international phenomena.^[16]

Spoken word artistry is another example of how the African-American oral tradition has influenced modern popular culture. Spoken word artists employ the same techniques as African-American preachers including movement, rhythm, and audience participation.^[17] Rap music from the 1980s and beyond has been seen as an extension of oral culture.^[9]

African American culture in the United States includes the various cultural traditions of African ethnic groups. It is both part of and distinct from American culture. The U.S. Census Bureau defines African Americans as "people having origins in any of the Black race groups of Africa."^[1] African American culture is indigenous to the descendants in the U.S. of survivors of the Middle Passage. It is rooted in Africa and is an amalgam of chiefly sub-Saharan African and Sahelean cultures.

Although slavery greatly restricted the ability of Africans in America to practice their cultural traditions, many practices, values and beliefs survived and over time have incorporated elements of European American culture. There are even certain facets of African American culture that were brought into being or made more prominent as a result of slavery; an example of this is how drumming became used as a means of communication and establishing a community identity during that time. The result is a dynamic, creative culture that has had and continues to have a profound impact on mainstream American culture and on world culture as well. After Emancipation, these uniquely African American traditions continued to grow. They developed into distinctive traditions in music, art, literature, religion, food, holidays, amongst others. While for some time sociologists, such as Gunnar Myrdal and Patrick Moynihan, believed that African Americans had lost most cultural ties with Africa, anthropological field research by Melville Herskovits and others demonstrated that there is a continuum of African traditions among Africans in the New World from the West Indies to the United States. The greatest influence of African cultural practices on European cultures is found below the Mason-Dixon in the southeastern United States, especially in the Carolinas among the Gullah people and in Louisiana.

African American culture often developed separately from mainstream American culture because of African Americans' desire to practice their own traditions, as well as the persistence of racial segregation in America. Consequently African American culture has become a significant part of American culture and yet, at the same time, remains a distinct culture apart from it.

History

From the earliest days of slavery, slave owners sought to exercise control over their slaves by attempting to strip them of their African culture. The physical isolation and societal marginalization of African slaves and, later, of their free progeny, however, actually facilitated the retention of significant elements of traditional culture among Africans in the New World generally, and in the U.S. in particular. Slave owners deliberately tried to repress political organization in order to deal with the many slave rebellions that took place in the southern United States, Brazil, Haiti, and the Dutch Guyanas.

African cultures, slavery, slave rebellions, and the civil rights movements (circa 1800s-160s) have shaped African American religious, familial, political and economic behaviors. The imprint of Africa is evident in myriad ways, in politics, economics, language, music, hairstyles, fashion, dance, religion and worldview, and food preparation methods. In the United States, the very legislation that was designed to strip slaves of culture and deny them education served in many ways to strengthen it.

In turn, African American culture has had a pervasive, transformative impact on myriad elements of mainstream American culture, among them language, music, dance, religion, cuisine, and agriculture. This process of mutual creative exchange is called creolization. Over time, the culture of African slaves and their descendants has been ubiquitous in its impact on not only the dominant American culture, but on world culture as well.

5. Oral tradition

Slaveholders limited or prohibited education of enslaved African Americans because they believed it might lead to revolts or escape plans. Hence, African-based oral traditions became the primary means of preserving history, morals, and other cultural information among the people. This was consistent with the griot practices of oral history in many African and other cultures that did not rely on the written word. Many of these cultural elements have been passed from generation to generation through storytelling. The folktales provided African Americans the opportunity to inspire and educate one another. Examples of African American folktales include trickster tales of Br'er Rabbit and heroic tales such as that of John Henry. The Uncle Remus stories by Joel Chandler Harris helped to bring African American folk tales into mainstream adoption. Harris did not appreciate the complexity of the stories nor their potential for a lasting impact on society. Characteristics of the African American oral tradition present themselves in a number of forms. African American preachers tend to perform rather than simply speak. The emotion of the subject is carried through the speaker's tone, volume, and movement, which tend to mirror the rising action, climax, and descending action of the sermon. Often song, dance, verse and structured pauses are placed throughout the sermon. Techniques such as call-and-response are used to bring the audience into the presentation. In direct contrast to recent tradition in other American and Western cultures, it is an acceptable and common audience reaction to interrupt and affirm the speaker. Spoken word is another example of how the African American oral tradition influences modern American popular culture. Spoken word artists employ the same techniques as African American preachers including movement, rhythm, and audience participation. Rap music from the 1980's and beyond has been seen as an extension of oral culture.

6. Harlem Renaissance

Zora Neale Hurston was a prominent literary figure during the Harlem Renaissance. The first major public recognition of African American culture occurred during the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1920s and 1930s, African American music, literature, and art gained wide notice. Authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen and poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen wrote works describing the African American experience. Jazz, swing, blues and other musical forms entered American popular music. African American artists such as William H. Johnson and Palmer Hayden created unique works of art featuring African Americans.

The Harlem Renaissance was also a time of increased political involvement for African Americans. Among the notable African American political movements founded in the early 20th century are the United Negro Improvement Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Nation of Islam, a notable Islamic religious movement, also began in the early 1930s.

7. African American cultural movement

The Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s followed in the wake of the non-violent American Civil Rights Movement. The movement promoted racial pride and ethnic cohesion in contrast to the focus on integration of the Civil Rights Movement, and adopted a more militant posture in the face of racism. It also inspired a new renaissance in African American literary and artistic expression generally referred to as the African American or "Black Arts Movement."

The works of popular recording artists such as Nina Simone (Young, Gifted and Black) and The Impressions (Keep On Pushin'), as well as the poetry, fine arts and literature of the time, shaped and reflected the growing racial and political consciousness. Among the most prominent writers of the African American Arts Movement were poet Nikki Giovanni; poet and publisher Don L. Lee, who later became known as Haki Madhubuti; poet and playwright Leroi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka; and Sonia Sanchez. Other influential writers were Ed Bullins, Dudley Randall, Mari Evans, June Jordan, Larry Neal and Ahmos Zu-Bolton.

Another major aspect of the African American Arts Movement was the infusion of the African aesthetic, a return to a collective cultural sensibility and ethnic pride that was much in evidence during the Harlem Renaissance and in the celebration of Négritude among the artistic and literary circles in the U.S., Caribbean and the African continent nearly four decades earlier: the idea that "black is beautiful." During this time, there was a resurgence of interest in, and an embrace of, elements of African culture within African American culture that had been suppressed or devalued to conform to Eurocentric America. Natural hairstyles, such as the afro, and African clothing, such as the dashiki, gained popularity. More importantly, the African American aesthetic encouraged personal pride and political awareness among African Americans.

8. Music

Men playing the djembé, a traditional West African drum adopted into African American and American culture. The bags and the clothing of the man on the right are printed with traditional kente cloth patterns.

African American music is rooted in the typically polyrhythmic music of the ethnic groups of Africa, specifically those in the Western, Sahelean, and Sub-Saharan regions. African oral traditions, nurtured in slavery, encouraged the use of music to pass on history, teach lessons, ease suffering, and relay messages. The African pedigree of African American music is evident in some common elements: call and response, syncopation, percussion, improvisation, swung notes, blue notes, the use of falsetto, melisma, and complex multi-part harmony. During slavery, Africans in America blended traditional European hymns with African elements to create spirituals.

Many African Americans sing Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing in addition to the American national anthem, The Star-Spangled Banner, or in lieu of it. Written by James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson in 1900 to be performed for the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the song was, and continues to be, a popular way for African Americans to recall past struggles and express ethnic solidarity, faith and hope for the future. The song was adopted as the "Negro National Anthem" by the NAACP in 1919. African American children are taught the song at school, church or by their families. Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing traditionally is sung immediately following, or instead of, The Star-Spangled Banner at events hosted by African American churches, schools, and other organizations.

In the 1800s, as the result of the blackface minstrel show, African American music entered mainstream American society. By the early twentieth century, several musical forms with origins in the African American community had transformed American popular music. Aided by the technological innovations of radio and phonograph records, ragtime, jazz, blues, and swing also became popular overseas, and the 1920s became known as the Jazz Age. The early 20th century also saw the creation of the first African American Broadway shows, films such as King Vidor's *Hallelujah!*, and operas such as George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. Rock and roll, doo wop, soul, and R&B developed in the mid 20th century. These genres became very popular in white audiences and were influences for other genres such as surf. The dozens, an urban African American tradition of using rhyming slang to put down your enemies (or friends) developed through the smart-ass street jive of the early Seventies into a new form of music. In the South Bronx, the half speaking, half singing rhythmic street talk of 'rapping' grew into the hugely successful cultural force known as Hip Hop. Hip Hop would become a multicultural movement. However, it is still important to many African Americans. The African American Cultural Movement of the 1960s and 1970s also fueled the growth of funk and later hip-hop forms such as rap, hip house, new jack swing and go go. African American music has experienced far more widespread acceptance in American popular music in the 21st century than ever before. In addition to continuing to develop newer musical forms, modern artists have also started a rebirth of older genres in the form of genres such as neo soul and modern funk-inspired groups.

9. Dance

The Cakewalk was the first African American dance to gain widespread popularity in the United States.

African American dance, like other aspects of African American culture, finds its earliest roots in the dances of the hundreds of African ethnic groups that made up African slaves in the Americas as well as influences from European sources in the United States. Dance in the African tradition, and thus in the tradition of slaves, was a part of both every day life and special occasions. Many of these traditions such as get down, ring shouts, and other elements of African body language survive as elements of modern dance.

In the 1800s, African American dance began to appear in minstrel shows. These shows often presented African Americans as caricatures for ridicule to large audiences. The first African American dance to become popular with White dancers was the cakewalk in 1891. Later dances to follow in this tradition include the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, and the Jitterbug. During the Harlem Renaissance, all African American Broadway shows such as *Shuffle Along* helped to establish and legitimize African American dancers. African American dance forms such as tap, a combination of African and European influences, gained widespread popularity thanks to dancers such as Bill Robinson and were used by leading White choreographers who often hired African American dancers.

Contemporary African American dance is descended from these earlier forms and also draws influence from African and Caribbean dance forms. Groups such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater have continued to contribute to the growth of this form. Modern popular dance in America is also greatly influenced by African American dance. American popular dance has also drawn many influences from African American dance most notably in the hip hop genre.

10. Art

Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City by Henry Ossawa Tanner 1859-1937

From its early origins in slave communities, through the end of the twentieth century, African-American art has made a vital contribution to the art of the United States. During the period between the 1600s and the early 1800s, art took the form of small drums, quilts, wrought-iron figures and ceramic vessels in the southern United States. These artifacts have similarities with comparable crafts in West and Central Africa. In contrast, African American artisans like the New England-based engraver Scipio Moorhead and the Baltimore portrait painter Joshua Johnson created art that was conceived in a thoroughly western European fashion.

During the 1800s, Harriet Powers made quilts in rural Georgia, United States that are now considered among the finest examples of nineteenth-century Southern quilting. Later in the 20th century, the women of Gee's Bend developed a distinctive, bold, and sophisticated quilting style based on traditional African American quilts with a geometric simplicity that developed separately but was like that of Amish quilts and modern art.

After the American Civil War, museums and galleries began more frequently to display the work of African American artists. Cultural expression in mainstream venues was still limited by the dominant European aesthetic and by racial prejudice. To increase the visibility of their work, many African American artists traveled to Europe where they had greater freedom. It was not until the Harlem Renaissance that more whites began to pay attention to African American art in America.

Kara Walker, Cut, Cut paper and adhesive on wall, Brent Sikkema NYC.

During the 1920s, artists such as Raymond Barthé, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, and photographer James Van Der Zee became well known for their work. During the Great Depression, new opportunities arose for these and other African American artists under the WPA. In later years, other programs and institutions, such as the New York City-based Harmon Foundation, helped to foster African American artistic talent. Augusta Savage, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and others exhibited in museums and juried art shows, and built reputations and followings for themselves.

In the 1950s and 1960s, there were very few widely accepted African American artists. Despite this, The Highwaymen, a loose association of 27 African American artists from Ft. Pierce, Florida, created idyllic, quickly realized images of the Florida landscape and peddled some 50,000 of them from the trunks of their cars. They sold their art directly to the public rather than through galleries and art agents, thus receiving the name "The Highwaymen". Rediscovered in the mid-1990s, today they are recognized as an important part of American folk history. Their artwork is widely collected by enthusiasts and original pieces can easily fetch thousands of dollars in auctions and sales.

The Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s was another period of resurgent interest in African American art. During this period, several African-American artists gained national prominence, among them Lou Stovall, Ed Love, Charles White, and Jeff Donaldson. Donaldson and a group of African-American artists formed the Afrocentric collective AFRICOBRA, which remains in existence today. The sculptor Martin Puryear, whose work has been acclaimed for years, is being honored with a 30-year retrospective of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York starting November 2007.

Notable contemporary African American artists include David Hammons, Eugene J. Martin, Charles Tolliver, and Kara Walker.

11. Literature

Langston Hughes, a notable African American poet of the Harlem Renaissance.

African American literature has its roots in the oral traditions of African slaves in America. The slaves used stories and fables in much the same way as they used music. These stories influenced the earliest African American writers and poets in

the 18th century such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. These authors reached early high points by telling slave narratives.

During the early 20th century Harlem Renaissance, numerous authors and poets, such as Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois, and Booker T. Washington, grappled with how to respond to discrimination in America. Authors during the Civil Rights era, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation, oppression and other aspects of African American life. This tradition continues today with authors who have been accepted as an integral part of American literature, with works such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *Beloved* by Nobel Prize-winning Toni Morrison, and series by Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley that have achieved both best-selling and/or award-winning status.

12. Museums

The African American Museum Movement emerged during the 1950s and 1960s to preserve the heritage of the African American experience and to ensure its proper

interpretation in American history. Museums devoted to African American history are found in many African American neighborhoods. Institutions such as the African American Museum and Library at Oakland and The African American Museum in Cleveland were created by African Americans to teach and investigate cultural history that, until recent decades was primarily preserved through oral traditions.

Generations of hardships imposed on the African American community created distinctive language patterns. Slave owners often intentionally mixed people who spoke different African languages to discourage communication in any language other than English. This, combined with prohibitions against education, led to the development of pidgins, simplified mixtures of two or more languages that speakers of different languages could use to communicate. Examples of pidgins that became fully developed languages include Creole, common to Haiti, and Gullah, common to the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia.

African American Vernacular English is a type variety (dialect, ethnolect and sociolect) of the American English language closely associated with the speech of but not exclusive to African Americans. While AAVE is academically

considered a legitimate dialect because of its logical structure, some of both Caucasians and African Americans consider it slang or the result of a poor command of Standard American English. Inner city African American children who are isolated by speaking only AAVE have more difficulty with standardized testing and, after school, moving to the mainstream world for work. It is common for many speakers of AAVE to code switch between AAVE and Standard American English depending on the setting.

13. Attire

The cultural explosion of the 1960s saw the incorporation of surviving cultural dress with elements from modern fashion and West African traditional clothing to create a uniquely African American traditional style. Kente cloth is the best known African textile. These festive woven patterns, which exist in numerous varieties, were originally made by the Ashanti and Ewe peoples of Ghana and Togo. Kente fabric also appears in a number of Western style fashions ranging from casual t-shirts to formal bow ties and cummerbunds. Kente strips are often sewn into liturgical and academic robes or worn as stoles. Since the Black Arts Movement, traditional African clothing has been popular amongst African Americans for both formal and informal occasions. Another common aspect of fashion in African American culture involves the appropriate dress for worship in the Black church. It is expected in most churches that an individual should present their best appearance for worship. African American women in particular are known for wearing vibrant dresses and suits. An interpretation of a passage from the Christian Bible, "...every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head...", has led to the tradition of wearing elaborate Sunday hats, sometimes known as "crowns."

14. Hair

Hair styling in African American culture is greatly varied. African American hair is typically composed of tightly coiled curls. The predominant styles for women involve the straightening of the hair through the application of heat or chemical processes. These treatments form the base for the most commonly socially acceptable hairstyles in the United States. Alternatively, the predominant and most socially acceptable practice for men is to leave one's hair natural. Often, as men age and begin to lose their hair, the hair is either closely cropped, or the head is shaved completely free of hair. However, since the 1960s, natural hairstyles, such as the afro, braids, and dreadlocks, have been growing in popularity. Although the association with radical political movements and their vast difference from mainstream Western hairstyles, the styles have not yet attained widespread social acceptance.

Maintaining facial hair is more prevalent among African American men than in other male populations in the U.S. In fact, the soul patch is so named because African American men, particularly jazz musicians, popularized the style. The preference for facial hair among African American men is due partly to personal taste, but because they are more prone than other ethnic groups to develop a condition known as pseudofolliculitis barbae, commonly referred to as razor bumps, many prefer not to shave.

15. Body image

The European aesthetic and attendant mainstream concepts of beauty are often at odds with the African body form. Because of this, African American women often find themselves under pressure to conform to European standards of beauty. Still, there are individuals and groups who are working towards raising the standing of the African aesthetic among African Americans and internationally as well. This includes efforts toward promoting as models those with clearly defined African features; the mainstreaming of natural hairstyles; and, in women, fuller, more voluptuous body types.

16. Religion

While African Americans practice a number of religions, Protestant Christianity is by far the most popular. Additionally, 14% of Muslims in the United States and Canada are African American.

Christianity

A river baptism in New Bern, North Carolina near the turn of the 20th century.

The religious institutions of African American Christians commonly are referred collectively as the black church. During slavery, many slaves were stripped of their African belief systems and typically denied free religious practice. Slaves managed, however, to hang on to some practices by integrating them into Christian worship in secret meetings. These practices, including dance, shouts, African rhythms, and enthusiastic singing, remain a large part of worship in the African American church. African American churches taught that all people were equal in God's eyes and viewed the doctrine of obedience to one's master taught in white churches as hypocritical. Instead the African American church focused on the message of equality and hopes for a better future. Before and after emancipation, racial segregation in America prompted the development of organized African American denominations. The first of these was the AME Church founded by Richard Allen in 1787. An African American church is not necessarily a separate denomination. Several predominantly African American churches exist as members of predominantly white denominations. African American churches have served to provide African American people with leadership positions and opportunities to organize that were denied in mainstream American society. Because of this, African American pastors became the bridge between the African American and European American communities and thus played a crucial role in the American Civil Rights Movement.

Like many Christians, African American Christians sometimes participate in or attend a Christmas play. Black Nativity by Langston Hughes is a re-telling of the classic Nativity story with gospel music. Productions can be found at African American theaters and churches all over the country.

Islam

A member of the Nation of Islam selling merchandise on a city street corner. Despite the popular assumption that the Nation represents all or most African American Muslims, less than 2% are members.

Generations before the advent of the Atlantic slave trade, Islam was a thriving religion in West Africa due to its peaceful introduction via the lucrative trans-Saharan trade between prominent tribes in the southern Sahara and the Berbers to the North. In attesting to this fact the West African scholar Cheikh Anta Diop explained: "The primary reason for the success of Islam in Black Africa...consequently stems from the fact that it was propagated peacefully at first by solitary Arabo-Berber travelers to certain Black kings and notables, who then spread it about them to those under their jurisdiction" Many first-generation slaves were often able to retain their Muslim identity, their descendants were not. Slaves were either forcibly converted to Christianity as was the case in the Catholic lands or were besieged with gross inconveniences to their religious practice such as in the case of the Protestant American mainland. In the decades after slavery and particularly during the depression era, Islam reemerged in the form of highly visible and sometimes controversial heterodox movements in the African American community. The first of these of note was the Moorish Science Temple of America, founded by Noble Drew Ali. Ali had a profound influence on Wallace Fard, who later founded the Black nationalist Nation of Islam in 1930. Elijah Muhammad became head of the organization in 1934. Much like Malcolm X, who left the Nation of Islam in 1964, many African American Muslims now follow traditional Islam. A survey by the Council on American-Islamic Relations shows that 30% of Sunni Mosque attendees are African Americans. African American orthodox Muslims are often the victims of stereotypes, most notably the assumption that an African American Muslim is a member of the Nation of Islam. They are often viewed by the uneducated African-American community in general as less authentic than Muslims from the Middle East or South Asia while credibility is less of an issue with immigrant Muslims and Muslim world in general.

Other religions

Aside from Christianity and Islam, there are also African Americans who follow Judaism, Buddhism, and a number of other religions. The Black Hebrew Israelites are a collection of African American Jewish religious organizations. Among their varied teachings, they often include that African Americans are descended from the Biblical Hebrews (sometimes with the paradoxical claim that the Jewish people are not). There is a small but growing number of African Americans who participate in African traditional religions, such as Vodou and Santeria or Ifa and diasporic traditions like Rastafarianism. Many of them are immigrants or descendants of immigrants from the Caribbean and South America, where these are practiced. Because of religious practices, such as animal sacrifice, which are no longer common among American religions and are often legally prohibited, these groups may be viewed negatively and are sometimes the victims of harassment.

19. Life events

For most African Americans, the observance of life events follows the pattern of mainstream American culture. There are some traditions which are unique to African Americans.

Some African Americans have created new rites of passage that are linked to African traditions. Pre-teen and teenage boys and girls take classes to prepare them for adulthood. They are typically taught spirituality, responsibility, and leadership. Most of these programs are modeled after traditional African ceremonies, with the focus largely on embracing African ideologies rather than specific rituals.

To this day, some African American couples choose to "jump the broom" as a part of their wedding ceremony. Although the practice, which can be traced back to Ghana, fell out of favor in the African American community after the end of slavery, it has experienced a slight resurgence in recent years as some couples seek to reaffirm their African heritage.

Funeral traditions tend to vary based on a number of factors, including religion and location, but there are a number of commonalities. Probably the most important part of death and dying in the African American culture is the gathering of family and friends. Either in the last days before death or shortly after death, typically any friends and family members that can be reached are notified. This gathering helps to provide spiritual and emotional support, as well as assistance in making decisions and accomplishing everyday tasks.

The spirituality of death is very important in African American culture. A member of the clergy or members of the religious community, or both, are typically present with the family through the entire process. Death is often viewed as transitory rather than final. Many services are called homegoings, instead of funerals, based on the belief that the person is going home to the afterlife. The entire end of life process is generally treated as a celebration of life rather than a mourning of loss. This is most notably demonstrated in the New Orleans Jazz Funeral tradition where upbeat music, dancing, and food encourage those gathered to be happy and celebrate the homegoing of a beloved friend.

20. Cuisine

A traditional soul food dinner consisting of fried chicken, candied yams, collard greens, cornbread, and macaroni and cheese.

The cultivation and use of many agricultural products in the United States, such as yams, peanuts, rice, okra, sorghum, grits, watermelon, indigo dyes, and cotton, can be traced to African influences. African American foods reflect creative responses to racial and economic oppression and poverty. Under slavery, African Americans were not allowed to eat better cuts of meat, and after emancipation many often were too poor to afford them. Soul food, a hearty cuisine commonly associated with African Americans in the South (but also common to African Americans nationwide), makes creative use of inexpensive products procured through farming and subsistence hunting and fishing. Pig intestines are boiled and sometimes battered and fried to make chitterlings, also known as "chitlins." Ham hocks and neck bones provide seasoning to soups, beans and boiled greens (turnip greens, collard greens, and mustard greens). Other common foods, such as fried chicken and fish, macaroni and cheese, cornbread and hoppin' john (black-eyed peas and rice) are prepared simply. When the African American population was considerably more rural than it generally is today, rabbit, possum, squirrel, and waterfowl were important additions to the diet. Many of these food traditions are especially predominant in many parts of the rural South.

Traditionally prepared soul food is often high in fat, sodium and starch. Highly suited to the physically demanding lives of laborers, farmhands and rural lifestyles generally, it is now a contributing factor to obesity, heart disease, and diabetes in a population that has become increasingly more urban and sedentary. As a result, more health-conscious African-Americans are using alternative methods of preparation, eschewing trans fats in favor of natural vegetable oils and substituting smoked turkey for fatback and other, cured pork products; limiting the amount of refined sugar in desserts; and emphasizing the consumption of more fruits and vegetables than animal protein. There is some resistance to such changes, however, as they involve deviating from long culinary tradition.

21. Holidays and observances

A woman wearing traditional West African clothing lighting the candles on a kinara for a Kwanzaa celebration.

As with other American racial and ethnic groups, African Americans observe ethnic holidays alongside traditional American holidays. Holidays observed in

African American culture are not only observed by African Americans. The birthday of noted American civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr has been observed nationally since 1983. It is one of three federal holidays named for an individual. Black History Month is another example of another African American observance that has been adopted nationally. Black History Month is an attempt to focus attention on previously neglected aspects of the African American experience. It is observed during the month of February to coincide with the founding of the NAACP and the birthdays of Frederick Douglass, a prominent African American abolitionist, and Abraham Lincoln, the United States president who signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Less widely observed outside of the African American community is Emancipation Day. The nature and timing of the celebration vary regionally. It is most widely observed as Juneteenth, in recognition of the official reading of the Emancipation Proclamation on June 19, 1865 in Texas. Another holiday not widely observed outside of the African American community is the birthday of Malcolm X. The day is observed on May 19 in American cities with a significant African American population, including Washington, D.C..

One of the most noted African American holidays is Kwanzaa. Like Emancipation Day, it is not widely observed outside of the African American community, although it is growing in popularity within the community. African American scholar and activist "Maulana" Ron Karenga invented the festival of Kwanzaa in 1966, as an alternative to the increasing commercialization of Christmas. Derived from the harvest rituals of Africans, Kwanzaa is observed each year from December 26 through January 1. Participants in Kwanzaa celebrations affirm their African heritage and the importance of family and community by drinking from a unity cup; lighting red, black, and green candles; exchanging heritage symbols, such as African art; and recounting the lives of people who struggled for African and African American freedom.

22. Names

African American names are often drawn from the same language groups as other popular names found in the United States. The practice of adopting neo-African or Islamic names did not gain popularity until the late Civil Rights era. Efforts to recover African heritage inspired selection of names with deeper cultural significance. Prior to this, using African names was not practical for two reasons. First, many African Americans were several generations removed from the last ancestor to have an African name since slaves were often given European names. Second, a traditional American name helps an individual fit into American society.

Another African American naming practice that predates the use of African names is the use of "made-up" names. In an attempt to create their own identity, growing numbers of African American parents, starting in the post-World War II era, began creating new names based on sounds they found pleasing such as Marquon, DaShawn, LaTasha, or Shandra.

23. Family

When slavery was practiced in the United States, it was common for families to be separated through sale. Even during slavery, however, African American families managed to maintain strong familial bonds. Free, African men and women, who managed to buy their own freedom by being hired out, who were emancipated, or who had escaped their masters, often worked long and hard to buy the members of their families who remained in bondage and send for them.

Others, separated from blood kin, formed close bonds comprised of fictive kin; play relations, play aunts, cousins and the like. This practice, perhaps a holdover from African tradition, survived Emancipation, with non-blood family friends

commonly accorded the status and titles of blood relations. This broader, more African concept of what constitutes family and community, and the deeply rooted respect for elders that is part of African traditional societies may be the genesis of the common use of the terms like "aunt", "uncle", "brother," "sister", "Mother" and "Mama" when addressing other African American people, some of whom may be complete strangers. Or, it could have arisen in the Christian church as a way of greeting fellow congregants and believers.

Immediately after slavery, African American families struggled to reunite and rebuild what had been taken. As late as 1960, 78% of African American families were headed by married couples. This number steadily declined over the latter half of the 20th century. A number of factors, including attitudes towards education, gender roles, and poverty have created a situation where, for the first time since slavery, a majority of African American children live in a household with only one parent, typically the mother. These figures appear to indicate a weak African American nuclear family structure, especially within a large patriarchal society.

This apparent weakness is balanced by mutual aid systems established by extended family members to provide emotional and economic support. Older family members pass on social and cultural traditions such as religion and manners to younger family members. In turn, the older family members are cared for by younger family members when they are unable to care for themselves. These relationships exist at all economic levels in the African American community, providing strength and support both to the African American family and the community.

24. Politics and social issues

Since the passing of the Voting Rights Act, African Americans are voting and being elected to public office in increasing numbers. As of January 2001 there were 9,101 African American elected officials in America. African Americans are overwhelmingly Democratic. Only 11% of African Americans voted for George W. Bush in the 2004 Presidential Election. Social issues such as racial profiling, the racial disparity in sentencing, higher rates of poverty, institutional racism, and lower access to health care are important to the African American community. While the divide on racial and fiscal issues has remained consistently wide for decades, seemingly indicating a wide social divide, African Americans tend to hold the same optimism and concern for America as Whites. In the case of many moral issues such as religion, and family values, African Americans tend to be more conservative than Whites. Another area where African Americans outstrip Whites in their conservatism is on the issue of homosexuality. Prominent leaders in the Black church have demonstrated against gay rights issues such as gay marriage. There are those within the community who take a more inclusive position most notably, the late Mrs. Coretta Scott King, and the Reverend Al Sharpton, who, when asked in 2003 whether he supported gay marriage, replied that he might as well have been asked if he supported black marriage or white marriage.

25. Neighborhoods

African American neighborhoods are types of ethnic enclaves found in many cities in the United States. The formation of African American neighborhoods is closely linked to the history of segregation in the United States, either through formal laws, or as a product of social norms. Despite this, African American neighborhoods have played an important role in the development of nearly all aspects of both African American culture and broader American culture.

Due to segregated conditions and widespread poverty some African American neighborhoods in the United States have been called "ghettos." The use of this term is controversial and, depending on the context, potentially offensive. Despite mainstream America's use of the term "ghetto" to signify a poor urban area populated by ethnic minorities, those living in the area often used it to signify something positive. The African American ghettos did not always contain dilapidated houses and deteriorating projects, nor were all of its residents poverty-stricken. For many African Americans, the ghetto was "home" a place representing authentic blackness and a feeling, passion, or emotion derived from the rising above the struggle and suffering of being of African descent in America. Langston Hughes relays in the "Negro Ghetto" (1931) and "The Heart of Harlem" (1945): "The buildings in Harlem are brick and stone/And the streets are long and wide,/But Harlem's much more than these alone,/Harlem is what's inside." Playwright August Wilson used the term "ghetto" in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1987), both of which draw upon the author's experience growing up in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, an African American ghetto.

Although African American neighborhoods may suffer from civic disinvestment, with lower quality schools, less effective policing and fire protection. There are institutions such as churches and museums and political organizations that help to improve the physical and social capital of African American neighborhoods. In African American neighborhoods the churches may be important sources of social cohesion. For some African Americans the kind spirituality learned through these churches works as a protective factor against the corrosive forces of racism. Museums devoted to African American history are also found in many African American neighborhoods.

Many African American neighborhoods are located in inner cities, These are the mostly residential neighborhoods located closest to the central business district. The built environment is often row houses or brownstones, mixed with older single family homes that may be converted to multi family homes. In some areas there are larger apartment buildings.

Shotgun houses are an important part of the built environment of some southern African American neighborhoods. The houses consist of three to five rooms in a row with no hallways. This African American house design is found in both rural and urban southern areas, mainly in African-American communities and neighborhoods.

The first major public recognition of African-American culture occurred during the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1920s and 1930s, African-American music, literature, and art gained wide notice. Authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen and poets such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen wrote works describing the African-American experience. Jazz, swing, blues and other musical forms entered American popular music. African-American artists such as William H. Johnson and Palmer Hayden created unique works of art featuring African Americans.^[16]

The Harlem Renaissance was also a time of increased political involvement for African Americans. Among the notable African-American political movements founded in the early 20th century are the United Negro Improvement Association and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The Nation of Islam, a notable quasi-Islamic religious movement, also began in the early 1930s.^[18]

26. African-American cultural movement

The Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s followed in the wake of the non-violent American Civil Rights Movement. The movement promoted racial pride and ethnic cohesion in contrast to the focus on integration of the Civil Rights Movement, and adopted a more militant posture in the face of racism.^[19] It also inspired a new renaissance in African-American literary and artistic expression generally referred to as the African-American or "Black Arts Movement."

The works of popular recording artists such as Nina Simone ("Young, Gifted and Black") and The Impressions ("Keep On Pushing"), as well as the poetry, fine arts, and literature of the time, shaped and reflected the growing racial and political consciousness.^[20] Among the most prominent writers of the African-American Arts Movement were poet Nikki Giovanni;^[21] poet and publisher Don L. Lee, who later became known as Haki Madhubuti; poet and playwright Leroi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka; and Sonia Sanchez. Other influential writers were Ed Bullins, Dudley Randall, Mari Evans, June Jordan, Larry Neal, and Ahmos Zu-Bolton.

Another major aspect of the African-American Arts Movement was the infusion of the African aesthetic, a return to a collective cultural sensibility and ethnic pride that was much in evidence during the Harlem Renaissance and in the celebration of Négritude among the artistic and literary circles in the U.S., Caribbean, and the African continent nearly four decades earlier: the idea that "black is beautiful." During this time, there was a resurgence of interest in, and an embrace of, elements of African culture within African-American culture that had been suppressed or devalued to conform to Eurocentric America. Natural hairstyles, such as the afro, and African clothing, such as the dashiki, gained popularity. More importantly, the African-American aesthetic encouraged personal pride and political awareness among African Americans.^[22]

27. Music

Composer Duke Ellington, pictured receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from Richard Nixon, is often held to be one of the most influential musical figures of the 20th century.

African-American music is rooted in the typically polyrhythmic music of the ethnic groups of Africa, specifically those in the Western, Sahelean, and Sub-Saharan regions. African oral traditions, nurtured in slavery, encouraged the use of music to pass on history, teach lessons, ease suffering, and relay messages. The African pedigree of African-American music is evident in some common elements: call and response, syncopation, percussion, improvisation, swung notes, blue notes, the use of falsetto, melisma, and complex multi-part harmony.^[9] During slavery, Africans in America blended traditional European hymns with African elements to create spirituals.^[23]

Many African Americans sing "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in addition to the American national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner", or in lieu of it. Written by James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson in 1900 to be performed for the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, the song was, and continues to be, a popular way for African Americans to recall past struggles and express ethnic solidarity, faith, and hope for the future.^[24] The song was adopted as the "Negro National Anthem" by the NAACP in 1919.^[25] Many African-American children are taught the song at school, church or by their families. "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" traditionally is sung immediately following, or instead of, "The Star-Spangled Banner" at events hosted by African-American churches, schools, and other organizations.^[26]

In the 19th century, as the result of the blackface minstrel show, African-American music entered mainstream American society. By the early 20th century, several musical forms with origins in the African-American community had transformed American popular music. Aided by the technological innovations of radio and phonograph records, ragtime, jazz, blues, and swing also became popular overseas, and the 1920s became known as the Jazz Age. The early 20th century also saw the creation of the first African-American Broadway shows, films such as King Vidor's *Hallelujah!*, and operas such as George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

Rock and roll, doo wop, soul, and R&B developed in the mid-20th century. These genres became very popular in white audiences and were influences for other genres such as surf. During the 1970s, the dozens, an urban African-American tradition of using rhyming slang to put down one's enemies (or friends), and the West Indian tradition of toasting developed into a new form of music. In the South Bronx the half speaking, half singing rhythmic street talk of "rapping" grew into the hugely successful cultural force known as Hip hop.^[27]

Contemporary

Hip Hop would become a multicultural movement, however, it still remained important to many African Americans. The African-American Cultural Movement of the 1960s and 1970s also fueled the growth of funk and later hip-hop

forms such as rap, hip house, new jack swing, and go-go. House music was created in black communities in Chicago in the 1980s. African-American music has experienced far more widespread acceptance in American popular music in the 21st century than ever before. In addition to continuing to develop newer musical forms, modern artists have also started a rebirth of older genres in the form of genres such as neo soul and modern funk-inspired groups.^[28]

29. Dance

African-American dance, like other aspects of African-American culture, finds its earliest roots in the dances of the hundreds of African ethnic groups that made up African slaves in the Americas as well as influences from European sources in the United States. Dance in the African tradition, and thus in the tradition of slaves, was a part of both every day life and special occasions. Many of these traditions such as get down, ring shouts, and other elements of African body language survive as elements of modern dance.^[29]

In the 19th century, African-American dance began to appear in minstrel shows. These shows often presented African Americans as caricatures for ridicule to large audiences. The first African-American dance to become popular with white dancers was the cakewalk in 1891.^[30] Later dances to follow in this tradition include the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, the Jitterbug and the swing.^[31]

During the Harlem Renaissance, African-American Broadway shows such as Shuffle Along helped to establish and legitimize African-American dancers. African-American dance forms such as tap, a combination of African and European influences, gained widespread popularity thanks to dancers such as Bill Robinson and were used by leading white choreographers, who often hired African-American dancers.^[31]

Contemporary African-American dance is descended from these earlier forms and also draws influence from African and Caribbean dance forms. Groups such as the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater have continued to contribute to the growth of this form. Modern popular dance in America is also greatly influenced by African-American dance. American popular dance has also drawn many influences from African-American dance most notably in the hip-hop genre.^[32]

African-American literature has its roots in the oral traditions of African slaves in America. The slaves used stories and fables in much the same way as they used music.^[9] These stories influenced the earliest African-American writers and poets in the 18th century such as Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano. These authors reached early high points by telling slave narratives.

During the early 20th century Harlem Renaissance, numerous authors and poets, such as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, grappled with how to respond to discrimination in America. Authors during the Civil Rights era, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation, oppression, and other aspects of African-American life. This tradition continues today with authors who have been accepted as an integral part of American literature, with works such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *Beloved* by Nobel Prize-winning Toni Morrison, and fiction works by Octavia Butler and Walter Mosley. Such works have achieved both best-selling and/or award-winning status.^[46]

30. Family

When slavery was practiced in the United States, it was common for families to be separated through sale. Even during slavery, however, many African-American families managed to maintain strong familial bonds. Free African men and women, who managed to buy their own freedom by being hired out, who were emancipated, or who had escaped their masters, often worked long and hard to buy the members of their families who remained in bondage and send for them.

Others, separated from blood kin, formed close bonds based on fictive kin; play relations, play aunts, cousins, and the like. This practice, a holdover from African oral traditions such as sanankouya, survived Emancipation, with non-blood family friends commonly accorded the status and titles of blood relations. This broader, more African concept of what constitutes family and community, and the deeply rooted respect for elders that is part of African traditional societies may be the genesis of the common use of the terms like "aunt", "uncle", "brother", "sister", "Mother", and "Mama" when addressing other African-American people, some of whom may be complete strangers.

31. Conclusion

African-American neighborhoods are types of ethnic enclaves found in many cities in the United States. The formation of African-American neighborhoods is closely linked to the history of segregation in the United States, either through formal laws, or as a product of social norms. Despite this, African-American neighborhoods have played an important role in the development of nearly all aspects of both African-American culture and broader American culture.

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