

# Aula 3

## JAMES BALDWIN: HIS LIFE AND WORK

### **META**

Illustrating how the the context in which James Baldwin produced his work influenced his literary production.

### **OBJETIVO**

Understading how the diferente episodes in his life ended up giving him much of the material with which he would work later;  
Raising students' awareness about the relationship between the author and the contexto in which he was born and raised.

### **PRERREQUISITO**

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura norte-americana;  
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.  
Noções de história dos Estados Unidos.

**Luiz Eduardo Oliveira**  
**José Augusto Batista dos Santos**

### INTRODUÇÃO

To the white literary critics and historians of the United States of America, African American literature is body of literature written by black Americans. Beginning in the pre-Revolutionary War period, as we could see in Literature in English III, African American writers have expressed all their anguish and hopes in a kind of literature which is rich in expressing the social insight of the American negro, offering illuminating aspects of American identities and history. Although since 1970 African American writers, led by **Toni Morrison**, have earned international critical acclaim, the so called “African American literature” has been recognized as a national literary expression since the late 18th century, with writers like **Frederick Douglas**.



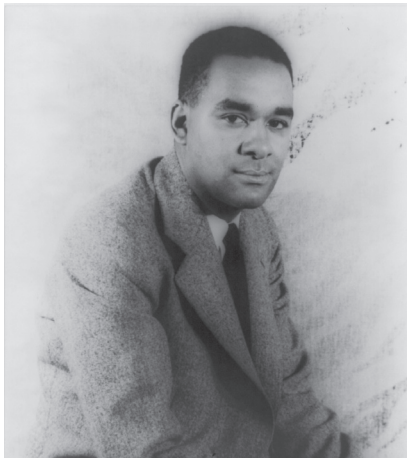
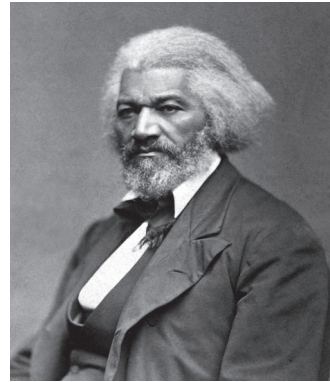
Toni Morrison, born Chloe Ardelia Wofford (1931-) is an American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher, and professor emerita at Princeton University. She won the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved*. The novel was adapted into a film of the same name, starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover, in 1998. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. In 1996, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected her for the Jefferson Lecture, the U.S. federal government's highest honor for achievement in the humanities. She was honored with the 1996 National Book Foundation's Medal of Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. Morrison also wrote the libretto for a new opera, *Margaret Garner*, first performed in 2005. On May 29, 2012, President Barack Obama presented Morrison with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2016, she received the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni\\_Morrison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison)

In this class we will focus on the twentieth century, and more specifically from the forties on. Black writers of this period followed or found alternatives to the Richard Wright tradition of angry social protest. James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, both protégés of Wright, wrote polemical essays defending a literature that could reflect the full complexity of black life in the United States.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was an American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. After escaping from slavery in Maryland, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts and New York, gaining note for his oratory and incisive antislavery writings. In his time, he was described by abolitionists as a living counter-example to slaveholders' arguments that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens. Northerners at the time found it hard to believe that such a great orator had once been a slave.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick\\_Douglass](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederick_Douglass)

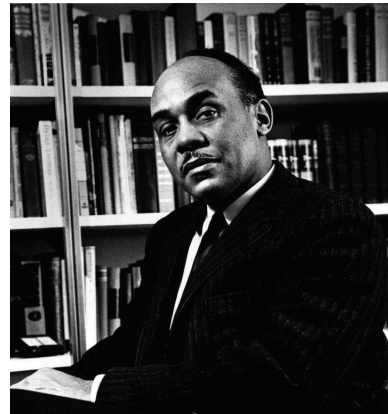


Richard Nathaniel Wright (1908-1960) was an American author of sometimes controversial novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction. Much of his literature concerns racial themes, especially related to the plight of African Americans during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries, who suffered discrimination and violence in the South and the North. Literary critics believe his work helped change race relations in the United States in the mid-20th century.

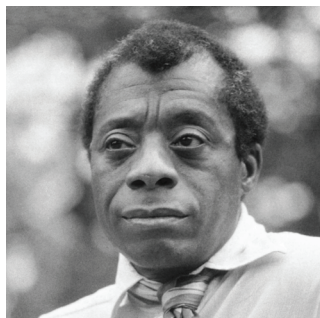
**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard\\_Wright\\_\(author\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Wright_(author))

Ralph Waldo Ellison (1913-1994) was an American novelist, literary critic, and scholar. Ellison is best known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953. He also wrote *Shadow and Act* (1964), a collection of political, social and critical essays, and *Going to the Territory* (1986). For *The New York Times*, the best of these essays in addition to the novel put him “among the gods of America’s literary Parnassus”. A posthumous novel, *Juneteenth*, was published after being assembled from voluminous notes he left after his death.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph\\_Ellison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Ellison)



**James Baldwin** (1924-1987), the author we will deal with in this class, in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), portrayed the Harlem world and the black church through his own adolescent religious experiences. **Ralph Ellison**, in turn, wrote *The invisible man* (1952), a very significant novel that tried to capture the full range of black experience – rural sharecropping, segregated education, northward migration, ghetto hustling, and the fascination to political ideologies as nationalism and communism.



James Arthur “Jimmy” Baldwin (1924-1987) was an American novelist and social critic. His essays, as collected in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), explore intricacies of racial, sexual, and class distinctions in Western societies, most notably in mid-20th-century America.

Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Baldwin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Baldwin)

### James Baldwin’s life

James Arthur Baldwin was born in 1924 and died in 1987. According to the biographical collection *Notable black American men* (1998), edited by Jessie Carney Smith, his mother, Emma Berdis Jones, left his biological father because of his drug abuse. She moved to Harlem, New York, where Baldwin was born and married a preacher, David Baldwin, with whom she had eight children between 1927 and 1943. Her husband, in turn, also had one son from a previous marriage. As the family was poor and his stepfather was harder on him than on anybody else, he used his ability to read to spend much of his time in libraries. When he became a teenager, he found a passion in writing. To give an example of his prodigious intelligence, in 1937, at the age of thirteen, he wrote his first article, “Harlem—Then and Now”, which was published in his school’s magazine, *The Douglass Pilot*.

His stepfather died of tuberculosis in the summer of 1943, on the very day his last child was born, just the day before Baldwin turned 19. Coincidentally, the day of the funeral was also the day of the Harlem riot of 1943, which was portrayed in his *Notes of a Native Son*. The book was his first non-fiction book and was published in 1955. It contains ten essays which had previously appeared in periodical like *Harper’s Magazine*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New Leader*. Most of the essays dealt with issues of race and ethnicity in the United States and Europe.

Being a black man and growing up in Harlem obviously made Baldwin face many obstacles, and the most basic one was education. In one of his many interviews which can be found on Youtube.com, he said he knew he was black, but he also knew he was smart. As he narrates in *Notes of a Native Son*, when he was nine he wrote a play which was directed by a white teacher at his school. Seeing his potential, she offered to take him to “real” plays, what caused a deep impression on him. She also lent him books. He studied at Frederick Douglass Junior High, where he came to be strongly influenced by the poet Countee Cullen, a leading figure in **the Harlem Renaissance [1]**, being encouraged by his math teacher to serve as editor of the school newspaper. He then went to DeWitt Clinton High

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School in the Bronx's Bedford Park section. There, he also worked on the school magazine as literary editor.

Countee Cullen (1903-1946), born Countee LeRoy Porter, was a prominent African-American poet, novelist, children's writer and playwright during the Harlem Renaissance.



In his teenage years, as soon as he began to go to the church, he became dissatisfied with ministry, considering it hypocritical and racist, and left the church because he didn't want to be a preacher, as he was supposed to be, according to his step father, but at the age of 14 he attended meetings of the Pentecostal Church and ended up becoming a junior minister. All this in vain, because at the age of 17 he came to the conclusion that Christianity was based on false assumptions.

Baldwin once visited **Elijah Muhammad**, leader of **the Nation of Islam [2]**, who inquired him about his religious beliefs, and, before and after spending some time in Europe, he was engaged in many of the fights and public manifestations in the **Civil Rights Movement [3]**. In many of his writings, Baldwin accuses Christianity of reinforcing the system of American slavery by palliating the oppression and delaying salvation with a promised afterlife. On the other hand, he praised religion for inspiring and relieving black American citizen of daily oppression.

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Elijah Muhammad, born Elijah Robert Poole (1897-1975) was a black religious leader who led the Nation of Islam (NOI) from 1934 until his death in 1975. He was a mentor to Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan and Muhammad Ali, as well as his own son, WarithDeen Mohammed.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah\\_Muhammad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah_Muhammad)



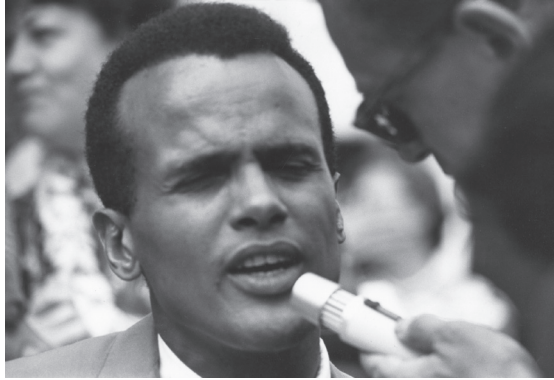
In his youth he assumed he was gay, and his sexuality, as well as sexuality in general, became a central topic in his essays and in his fiction. The reason he left the United States is told in a story he always mentions. It happened in 1948, when he walked into a restaurant he knew he would be denied service for being black and, as the white waitress explained that black people could not be served there, he threw a glass of water at her. Anguished by daily prejudice, he left the United States at the age of 24 and went to Paris, France, where he was soon involved in the cultural radicalism of the city and started to publish his work in literary anthologies, notably *Zero*, which was edited by his friend Themistocles Hoetis (1925-2010) and had already published essays by Richard Wright. He lived in France for the most part of his life, spending some time in Switzerland and Turkey.

But it was in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, in the south of France, where he settled in 1970, in an old Provençal house, that he became frequently visited by his American friends, like the painter **Beauford Delaney**, who made Baldwin's house in Saint-Paul-de-Vence his second home, and the actors **Harry Belafonte**, **Sidney Poitier**, **Nina Simone** and **Ray Charles**.



Beauford Delaney (December 30, 1901 – March 26, 1979) was an American modernist painter. He is remembered for his work with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as his later works in abstract expressionism following his move to Paris in the 1950s. Beauford's younger brother, Joseph, was also a noted painter.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beauford\\_Delaney](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beauford_Delaney)

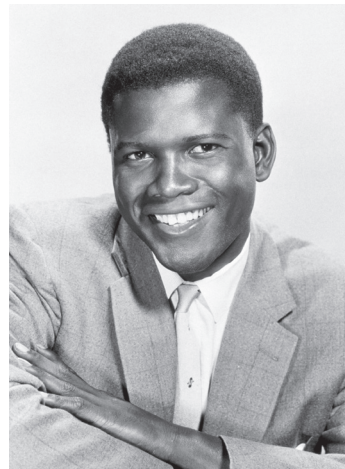


Harry Belafonte (born Harold George Bellanfanti Jr., on March the 1st, 1927) is an American singer, songwriter, actor and social activist. One of the most successful Jamaican-American pop stars in history, he was dubbed the “King of Calypso” for popularizing the Caribbean musical style (originating in Trinidad & Tobago) with an international audience in the 1950s. His breakthrough album *Calypso* (1956) is the first million-selling LP by a single artist. Belafonte is perhaps best known for singing “The Banana Boat Song”, with its signature lyric “Day-O”. He has recorded in many genres, including blues, folk, gospel, show tunes, and American standards. He has also starred in several films, most notably in Otto Preminger’s hit musical *Carmen Jones* (1954), *Island in the Sun* (1957), and Robert Wise’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959).

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry\\_Belafonte](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Belafonte)

Sir Sidney Poitier, (1927-) is a Bahamian-American actor, film director, author, and diplomat. In 1964, he became the first Bahamian and first black actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actor, and the Golden Globe Award for Best Actor for his role in *Lilies of the Field*. The significance of these achievements was bolstered in 1967, when he starred in three successful films, all of which dealt with issues involving race and race relations: *To Sir, with Love*; *In the Heat of the Night*; and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*, making him the top box-office star of that year. In 1999, the American Film Institute named Poitier among the Greatest Male Stars of classic Hollywood cinema, ranking 22nd on the list of 25.

**Fontes:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney\\_Poitier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sidney_Poitier)  
<https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/sidney-poitier/>



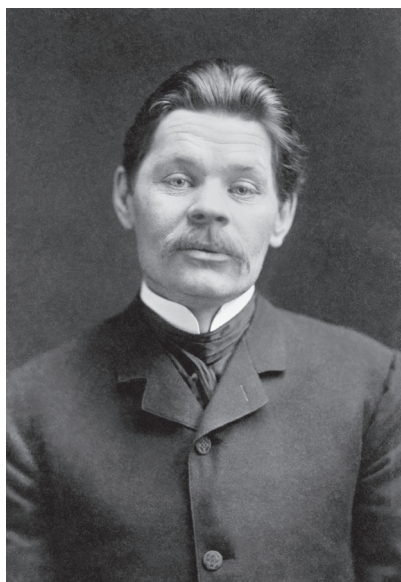
Nina Simone, born Eunice Kathleen Waymon (1933-2003), was an American singer, songwriter, pianist, arranger, and activist in the Civil Rights Movement. Her music spanned a broad range of musical styles including classical, jazz, blues, folk, R&B, gospel, and pop.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nina\\_Simone](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nina_Simone)

### His literature

His first professional critical work was a review of **Maxim Gorky** which was published in *The Nation* in 1947. He continued to publish in that magazine and was a member of its editorial board until his death, in 1987. His first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, as many of his writings, was a semi-autobiographical **Bildungsroman** [4] published in 1953. His first collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, which was already mentioned, appeared 1955. He used different literary forms throughout his career, producing poetry, plays, fiction and essays.

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Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (1868-1936), primarily known as Maxim (Maksim) Gorky (Russian: Максим Горький), was a Russian and Soviet writer, a founder of the socialist realism literary method and a political activist. He was also a five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Around fifteen years before success as a writer, he frequently changed jobs and roamed across the Russian Empire. These experiences would later influence his writing. Gorky's most famous works were *The Lower Depths* (1902), *Twenty-six Men and a Girl*, *The Song of the Stormy Petrel*, *My Childhood*, *Mother*, *Summerfolk* and *Children of the Sun*. He had an association with fellow Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov; Gorky would later mention them in his memoirs.

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim\\_Gorky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maxim_Gorky)

Baldwin's second novel, *Giovanni's Room*, caused great controversy when it was first published in 1956, because of its explicit homoerotic content. *Giovanni's Room* is predominantly about white characters. His next two novels, *Another Country* and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, are experimental works dealing with black and white, heterosexual, gay and bisexual characters.

His essay "Down at the Cross", originally published in two issues of *The New Yorker*, put Baldwin on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1963, while Baldwin was in the South of the United States speaking about the Civil Rights Movement. Around the time of publication of *The Fire Next Time* (1963), in which the essay "Down at the Cross" was included, Baldwin became a celebrity noted for championing the cause of black Americans, appearing on television and delivering speeches on college campuses. There are many videos of his lectures on Youtube.com. The essay dealt with the



uneasy relationship between christianity and the Black Muslim movement. After publication, many black activists criticized Baldwin for his conciliatory attitude. They questioned whether his message of love and understanding would do much to change race relations in America. It was the same kind of criticism Malcolm X came to address to Martin Luther King. As very few writers, Baldwin was capable of articulating the anger and frustration felt by black Americans with clarity and style.

In another of his essays, “No Name in the Street”, discussed his own experience in the context of the later 1960s, especially the assassinations of three of his personal friends: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. He continued to produce during the 1970s and 1980s, although this part of his work has been overlooked by the critics. Nevertheless, he has always been true to his convictions, and can be considered a leading literary voice of the civil rights movement, as well as of an inspirational figure for the gay rights movement. His two novels published in the 1970s, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974) and *Just Above My Head* (1979), emphasized the importance of black American families. He ended up his literary career publishing a volume of poetry, *Jimmy's Blues*. In 1985, however, he published *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, a long essay about the Wayne Williams Atlanta child murders of 1979-1981. The title is a reference to the definition of faith from the Biblical Letter to the Hebrews.

In 2016, *I Am Not Your Negro*, a documentary film directed by Raoul Peck based on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript, *Remember This House* was launched. Narrated by the actor **Samuel L. Jackson**, the film explores the history of racism in the United States through Baldwin's reminiscences of civil rights leaders Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr, as well as his personal observations of American history. It was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 89th Academy Awards and won the BAFTA Award for Best Documentary.

Samuel Leroy Jackson (1948-) is an American actor and film producer. He achieved prominence and critical acclaim in the early 1990s with films such as *Goodfellas* (1990), *Jungle Fever* (1991), *Patriot Games* (1992), *Amos & Andrew* (1993), *True Romance* (1993), *Jurassic Park* (1993) and his collaborations with director Quentin Tarantino including *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Jackie Brown* (1997), *Django Unchained* (2012) and *The Hateful Eight* (2015). He is a highly prolific actor, having appeared in over 100 films, including *Die Hard with a Vengeance* (1995), *Unbreakable* (2000), *Shaft* (2000), *The 51st State* (2001), *Black Snake Moan* (2006), *Snakes on a Plane* (2006), and the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy (1999–2005).

**Fonte:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel\\_L.\\_Jackson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_L._Jackson)



### CONCLUSION

James Baldwin is considered the most important African American author of his time, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Born and raised in Harlem and the eldest of nine children, he rose from poverty and left New York and the United States to live in Europe from the late 1940s until his death, in 1987. He originally went to Paris, but later spent many years in Istanbul and in the south of France, returning to America intermittently. His literary output is marked by restlessness, for he experimented with new forms, new subjects and new perspectives. Critics frequently debate whether Baldwin was more adept at fiction, based on his six novels and one story collection, or nonfiction, based on the same number of collections of essays. He also wrote three plays (one unpublished), a film script, a children's book, two collections of poems, and a handful of works that defy easy classification. He resisted all labels and would be reluctant to classify himself as any single type of writer, just as he would resist words like "gay" to describe his sexual orientation, even though homosexuality and bisexuality are frequent motifs in his fiction, and even though he made no secret of his same-sex love affairs. Baldwin's reputation as a writer was augmented by his prominence as a speaker. Having been trained as a preacher from a young age in a Pentecostal church, he was a comfortable and formidable orator. During the years of intensified strife in the American south in the early 1960s, Baldwin visited that region not only to write about what he had witnessed (in fiction, nonfiction, and drama), but to speak publicly, sometimes in front of huge audiences, about what had to be done to end America's racial turmoil. He was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine was summoned to a meeting with the then-Attorney General Robert Kennedy that same year to discuss race relations in the United States. The year 1963 also marked the publication of his most famous book, *The Fire Next Time*, which was largely composed of a lengthy essay entitled "Down at the Cross," first published in *The New Yorker* the previous year, about the Nation of Islam, black Christianity and the future of race. Although his works published after 1963 did not receive the same universal praise, he continued to publish prolifically and tirelessly until his death. Along with a sustained and ever-increasing body of published criticism, five recent conferences have been devoted entirely to Baldwin's life and work (London in 2007, Boston in 2009, New York in 2011, Montpellier in 2014, and Paris in 2015) and an annual journal, *James Baldwin Review*, was inaugurated in 2015. *I Am Not Your Negro*, a 2016 Oscar-nominated film based on an unpublished Baldwin manuscript, revived popular interest in him.

**Fonte:** <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199827251/obo-9780199827251-0004.xml>



## RESUMO

In this class, you will see a short biographical sketch of James Arthur Baldwin, born in 1924 and died in 1987. A novelist and essayist of considerable renown, James Baldwin a witness of the terrible consequences of American racial strife in the 1960's. His literary career began in the last years of legislated segregation. His fame as a social observer grew at the same time of the civil rights movement. He is a voice which reflects the American blacks' aspirations and disappointments.



## ATIVIDADES

Read the poem below:

Untitled - Poem by James Baldwin

Lord,  
 when you send the rain  
 think about it, please,  
 a little?  
 Do  
 not get carried away  
 by the sound of falling water,  
 the marvelous light  
 on the falling water.  
 I  
 am beneath that water.  
 It falls with great force  
 and the light  
 Blinds  
 me to the light.

Based on the text you read for this class, try to interpret the poem, relating it to the context in which it was written. Write in English. O texto deve ter, no máximo, 15.000 caracteres com espaço.

## ACTIVITY COMMENT

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer você construir uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta terceira Aula, de modo a compreender criticamente a trajetória de James Baldwin, bem como o significado de sua literatura.



## PRÓXIMA AULA

### CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Na próxima aula, analisaremos como o movimento em prol dos direitos civis nos Estados Unidos criaram um novo contexto para a visibilidade das reivindicações relativas a etnia e gênero.

### GLOSSÁRIO

**[1] The Harlem Renaissance** was an intellectual, social, and artistic explosion that took place in Harlem, New York, spanning the 1920s. During the time, it was known as the “New Negro Movement”, named after the 1925 anthology by Alain Locke. The Movement also included the new African-American cultural expressions across the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest United States affected by the African-American Great Migration,[1] of which Harlem was the largest. The Harlem Renaissance was considered to be a rebirth of African-American arts.[2] Though it was centered in the Harlem neighborhood of the borough of Manhattan in New York City, many francophone black writers from African and Caribbean colonies who lived in Paris were also influenced by the Harlem Renaissance.

Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem\\_Renaissance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance)

**[2] The Nation of Islam**, abbreviated as NOI, is an African American political and religious movement, founded in Detroit, Michigan, United States, by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad on July 4, 1930. Its stated goals are to improve the spiritual, mental, social, and economic condition of African Americans in the United States and all of humanity. Critics have described the organization as being black supremacist and antisemitic. The Southern Poverty Law Center tracks the NOI as a hate group. Its official newspaper is The Final Call. In 2007, the core membership was estimated to be between 20,000 and 50,000.

Islam (/ˈɪslɑːm/)[note 1] is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion teaching that there is only one God (Allah) and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. It is the world's second-largest religion[4] and the fastest-growing major religion in the world, with over 1.8 billion followers or 24.1% of the global population, known as Muslims. Muslims make up a majority of the population in 50 countries. Islam teaches that God is merciful, all-powerful, unique and has guided mankind through prophets, revealed scriptures and natural signs.

The primary scriptures of Islam are the Quran, viewed by Muslims as the verbatim word of God, and the teachings and normative example (called the sunnah, composed of accounts called hadith) of Muhammad (c. 570–8 June 632 CE).

Fontes: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation\\_of\\_Islam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation_of_Islam)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam>

**[3] The civil rights movement**, also known as the African-American civil rights movement, American civil rights movement and other terms, was a decades-long movement with the goal of securing legal rights for African Americans that other Americans already held. With roots starting in the Reconstruction era, during the late 19th century, the movement resulted in the largest legislative impacts after the direct actions and grassroots protests organized from the mid-1950s until 1968. Encompassing strategies, various groups and organized social movements to accomplish the goals of ending legalized racial segregation and discrimination in the United States, the movement, using major nonviolent campaigns, eventually secured new recognition in federal law and federal protection of all Americans.

Fonte: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil\\_rights\\_movement](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Civil_rights_movement)

**[4]** In literary criticism, a **Bildungsroman** – a German term, “bildung” meaning “education” and “roman” meaning “novel” – is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood (coming of age), in which character change is extremely important.

Fonte: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildungsroman>

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