

From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans 10e

Classroom Activities and Projects

Activity 1: Sports and social justice

Objective: In this activity, students will examine how black athletes broke barriers and dismantled myths about blacks being inferior to whites.

1. Warm-up: Engage students in an open discussion about their sports heroes. What makes them a hero? Why are they exceptional? Did they dispel any stereotypes in society?
2. Have students read or re-read the subsection “Black Sports” on pages 402–404 of the student resource excerpts provided. While reading students should consider:
 - Why was it so shocking to see blacks excel in sports?
 - How do you think white America viewed black athletes during this time?
 - How did blacks continue to break barriers through sports?
3. After completing the reading, students will research one of the sports figures of their choosing mentioned in the text and explain how their actions broke barriers in sports? How did they use their platform to raise awareness of social injustices? Do you consider them a hero? If so, why?
4. Then have students write an article for a sports section of a newspaper about the individual they chose and how they have affected today’s sports world.

Classroom Activities and Projects

Activity 2: Why did African Americans join the military?

Objective: Students will observe how African Americans continually answered the call to fight for America while still being treated as less than equals in the country.

1. Have students watch this video about the Harlem Hellfighters from the History Channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEuoAl1eLU>). While watching the video, students should reflect on the following questions:
 - Why were African Americans so willing to fight for the United States?
 - How did the experience of fighting in the war affect black soldiers abroad and in the U.S.?
 - Why were the Harlem Hellfighters significant? What did they represent?
2. Divide students into four groups. Each group is responsible for researching the historical significance of an African American military unit and the contributions made by the soldiers. Have students choose a regiment, battalion, or battery from the chart below.

Brigade	Brigade	Brigade	Divisional Troops
365th Infantry Regiment	367th Infantry Regiment	349th Field Artillery Regiment (75-mm guns)	348th Machine-Gun Battalion
366th Infantry Regiment	368th Infantry Regiment	350th Field Artillery Regiment (75-mm guns)	317th Engineer Regiment
350th Machine-Gun Battalion	351st Machine-Gun Battalion	351st Field Artillery Regiment (155-mm howitzers)	325th Field Signal Battalion
		317th Trench-Mortar Battery	

Classroom Activities and Projects

Activity 3: Why does representation matter?

Objective: In this activity, students will examine how “race films” reshaped how African Americans and others viewed the race.

1. Warm-up: Have students watch the video “Preserving the History of America’s First Black Filmmakers” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn5OzRyilSg>). Questions for them to consider while watching:
 - How were blacks portrayed in black films?
 - How were blacks portrayed in white films?
 - Why was it important to see positive images of blacks on screen?
2. Have students read “Motion Pictures” on pages 483–486 of the student resource excerpts provided. While reading, students should take notes on the issues black filmmakers addressed, the importance of seeing blacks in a positive light, and the accomplishments of Oscar Micheaux. Students may want to use this video to learn more about the contributions of Micheaux (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHRBK3Q23Ek>).
3. Then have students research other black filmmakers. As they research, have them keep this questions in mind: How do their movies address the issues of their time? Then have students write a short biography on the filmmaker of their choosing, including their films and the impact the filmmaker had.
4. As a follow up, have a class discussion to answer these questions:
 - How are blacks portrayed in movies today?
 - Why do some filmmakers think it is important to create all black movies with all black casts?
 - What barriers and stereotypes are still being addressed today that were addressed during the era of “race films?”

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Classroom Activities and Projects Student Resource

Activity 1: Sports and social justice

Objective: In this activity, students will examine how black athletes broke barriers and dismantled myths about blacks being inferior to whites.

African Americans of all classes and in every part of the country thrilled to the triumphs and mourned the defeats of black sports heroes, especially those in the highly

Sports Heroes visible sports of horse racing, boxing, and baseball. For many blacks, these athletes were racial champions whose physical achievements struck a literal and symbolic blow against the “enemies of the race.”

Blacks were participants in horse racing as early as the colonial period, especially in the South where the “sport of kings” was popular. A number of southern white enthusiasts had trained their male slaves to become some of the sport’s leading jockeys. These early black jockeys served in a variety of capacities, since they were also responsible for feeding, grooming, and the overall care of the horses. On occasion, they also assumed the role of a trainer or stable manager. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, slave jockeys continued to be a significant presence, their prowess and skill often making them winners. In the fifty years after the Civil War, black jockeys continued to be familiar figures on the turf. Oliver Lewis, an African American and the winner of the inaugural Kentucky Derby in 1875,

was one of several blacks in that race. Of the first twenty-eight Kentucky Derbies that were run, eleven African American jockeys rode fifteen of the winning horses. Abe Hawkins, a black man, is often ranked as the greatest jockey of the late nineteenth century, winning 44 percent of his races, including three Kentucky Derbies and four American Derbies. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, however, changes in the organization of the sport and the era's intensified racism combined to eliminate African American jockeys.

African American boxers were leading contenders from the time the sport became popular in the United States in the late eighteenth century. Slave boxing served as both entertainment and a gambling sport for whites. Among the earliest boxers of distinction were Richmond and Tom Molineaux (or Molyneux). Brought to England in 1777 by a British officer, Richmond, a former slave, was styled "the Black Terror." Richmond was the first American to be recognized as a major prizefighter. Molineaux, born a slave in 1784, made his master rich and gained his own freedom through victorious bouts with slaves of neighboring plantations. Once free, Molineaux moved to England, where under the nickname "the Moor," he became a major contender. By the time of his death in 1818, he had competed twice, both times unsuccessfully, for the British heavyweight championship. Following the Civil War, several blacks in the United States emerged as prominent professional boxers. In 1890 George Dixon, known as "Little Chocolate," was declared bantamweight (weight between 115 and 118 pounds) champion after an eighteen-round fight. In 1891 Dixon, securing next the featherweight title, became the first person to win a double title in boxing history. Dixon held the featherweight title until 1900. From 1901 to 1903, Baltimore-born Joe Gans held the lightweight title.

Jack Johnson, often described as "one of the greatest fighters of all time," was heavyweight champion from 1910 to 1915. In 1910 the return to the ring of white former heavyweight champion Jim Jeffries was hailed as the "Hope of the White Race," and Jeffries himself was reported at the time to have remarked that he had come out of retirement "for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a negro." For African Americans, Johnson's victory over Jeffries vindicated at the very least racial equality. The black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, declared Johnson "the first negro to be admitted the best man in the world."

Whites' alarm over the defeat of their "white hope" grew to such an extent that race riots broke out in several cities, and the U.S. Congress passed a bill outlawing fight films in movie theaters. Johnson's victories in the ring and his disregard of segregation in his private life—epitomized by his dating of and marriages to white women—so incensed white supremacists that



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Jack Johnson, 1878–1946

Johnson was the first African American to win the world heavyweight boxing championship.

they persuaded Representative Seaborne Roddenbery of Georgia to propose a constitutional amendment in 1912 banning interracial marriage. (The bill failed to pass.) White boxing fans and sports writers continued to search for a “white hope” to defeat him. Johnson’s enemies were pleased and his supporters crushed when he lost his title to Jess Willard, a white boxer, on April 5, 1915. It is likely that Johnson allowed Willard to knock him out in the twenty-sixth round; indeed, Johnson himself claimed that he threw the fight in return for help in reducing his legal problems.

John W. “Bud” Fowler (John W. Jackson) is thought to have been the first African American professional baseball player. From 1872 to 1900, he played on teams throughout the United States and in Canada, often as the only black man among white teammates. Eventually Fowler and Frank Grant, an African American who got onto white teams by passing as an Italian, formed a team of African American players. Theirs was not the first “all-Negro” team; several had been formed as early as 1885. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of these teams grew, and several leagues were formed. By 1900 the color line had become so rigid in baseball that black ball players, with the exception of those passing as white or Hispanic, had no options except the all-Negro teams.

The election of a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, in 1912 ushered in a southern style of Progressive reform that included imposing new forms of segregation on the nation’s capital and a new policy of racial discrimination in the awarding of Civil Service jobs. The Wilson administration showed little desire to seek Booker T. Washington’s or any other black leader’s counsel and advice. Gone was the political power of Washington’s Tuskegee Machine along with the patronage that blacks enjoyed under Republican presidents. Nor had Washington’s tact and moderation halted the racist mobs in the cities of the North and South. The bright star of Tuskegee grew dimmer as his influence waned, and his reputation teetered in the face of a personal debacle. He was still the great man, but he had little time to live. As the year 1916 dawned, Washington would be dead. The times themselves had prophesied change—in the black community and in America—a new fighting spirit. But who knew the world itself would change? Who saw the great and cataclysmic war ahead?



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Classroom Activities and Projects Student Resource

Activity 3: Why does representation matter?

Objective: In this activity, students will examine how “race films”
reshaped how African Americans and others viewed the race.

Motion Pictures

The African American community’s outrage in 1915 against D. W. Griffith’s racist motion picture *Birth of a Nation* underscored the great hunger of African Americans for films that featured members of their race in a positive light and addressed issues that affected their lives. It is no coincidence, then, that black film companies began to appear in Harlem in 1916. The most significant of the black companies were the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, established by the brothers George and Noble Johnson in 1916, and Oscar Micheaux’s film and book company, begun in 1918.

Before the Lincoln Company's demise in 1923, the Johnson brothers produced at least six films and pioneered in establishing patterns for advertising, booking, and promotion that would be imitated by other black independent filmmakers. Oscar Micheaux, a man of great drive and energy as well as shrewd business acumen, was the most important and prolific producer of black films during the 1920s. Yet, he and other African Americans in this field were never able to overcome the restrictions imposed by their limited capital, their inability to purchase state-of-the-art equipment, and the vast advertising budgets and powerful distribution systems of the white filmmakers with whom they competed in the African American community.

The early black filmmakers produced a steady stream of films, called "race movies," with all-black casts. Coming before the "talkie" revolution, the silent black films played in southern segregated theaters and in northern urban black neighborhood theaters. On occasion, they played as well at black churches and schools. Race movies were intended by their producers to offer more than entertainment. They provided black audiences with a separate film culture insulated from the racial stereotyping of Hollywood; they gave black film actors and craftsmen the opportunity to express their cinematic talent with dignity; and they guaranteed black entrepreneurs control over the means and content of production. The films presented black versions of the established Hollywood genres: musicals, westerns, gangster films, and melodramas. The racial pride evoked by these films, the real subtext for all black film production, rested in the novelty of seeing black actors of all types in the same popular film genres that existed in the world of Hollywood

Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division/The New York Public Library.



The Micheaux Film Corporation: Cameraman, director, and actor

Oscar Micheaux's silent films, such as *Within Our Gates* (1920), addressed black social concerns.

with white actors. Hollywood routinely either excluded black actors or gave them demeaning, stereotyped parts.

Black films did not so much offer a separate aesthetic genre as respond to the commercial demands of black audiences who shared, with white audiences, a general popular understanding of what constituted cinematic entertainment. In some instances, black films made explicit social statements. One such example was the film *Scar of Shame* in 1927. The film, produced by the Colored Players Corporation, directly addressed issues of racial respectability and racial uplift, through the story of a woman from lowly origins who marries into the black middle class. Oscar Micheaux's silent films sought to address social concerns important to blacks. He perceived his film *Within Our Gates* (1920) as the black response to *Birth of a Nation*. For example, Micheaux's film contains a lynching scene and depicts a sexual assault of a virtuous black woman by a white man. It ends with a message of racial uplift by the well-educated and supremely refined character Dr. Vivian, who intends to be a leader of the race. *Birthright*, a silent movie from 1924, also featured as the hero a member of the black educated elite—in this case a Harvard-educated black man who goes south to found a school for the purpose of racial uplift.

The musical short-subject and feature film was a new, direct product of the “talkie” revolution in film. The black talent first tapped by the major white studios were those performers who had made national reputations on records and, significantly, on radio, rather than performers with exposure limited **Black Talent in White Studios** to the New York stage. Two of the earliest features for black performers who had gained national followings through radio and recordings were Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington. In 1929 both starred in musical shorts released by RKO Productions, and directed by Dudley Murphy. Smith was featured as actress and singer in *St. Louis Blues*, which told the story of mistreatment and abandonment by her man, leading to Smith's poignant rendition of the W. C. Handy classic. Ellington's *Black and Tan*—a film on which film scholars believe the white literary figure Carl Van Vechten worked—offered a more complex plot with Ellington as a struggling composer whose girlfriend, played by black actress Freddie Washington, risks her life by taking a job at a club that agrees to hire Ellington's band to accompany her. A frenzied dance by Washington, whose character suffers from a heart condition, causes her eventual death. The death scene occurs against the haunting strains of Ellington's “Black and Tan Fantasy,” a staple of his Cotton Club “jungle music” performances.

More revolutionary in its intentions, but far less financially successful, was the all-black musical *Hallelujah!* (1929), conceived and directed by white filmmaker King Vidor. Intending to offer a sympathetic rendition of black family life in the South, and particularly of the religiosity of black folk culture, Vidor's film does much more. The palate of characterization shows rich contrast. The core family has two grown sons, the literate, responsible, and religious Spunk, and the irresponsible, womanizing Zeke. Lead female actress Nina Mae McKinney plays a seductive role that divides the brothers. It is Spunk's accidental death that motivates the dramatic scenario of the prodigal Zeke's route from sin to ultimate redemption within a strong two-parent family.

King Vidor's most striking and radical move for the time was his treatment of Zeke, portrayed by the actor Daniel Haynes, as a complex and conflicted adult rather than as the more pervasive childlike or buffoonish black character. Press leaks about the adult, nonstereotypical concept of black manhood, along with the sexual message in *Hallelujah!* sparked

sufficient racist backlash to require King Vidor to hire bodyguards for the film's leads Haynes and McKinney. Film historian Donald Bogle has argued that the portrayal of the black family in *Hallelujah!* was the most sensitive and realistic treatment in Hollywood film until the release of *Souder* in 1972, over forty years later.

Black Theater

In the prewar years African American theater flourished in Harlem, to predominantly African American audiences. Black actors performed in a range of roles, free of the stereotypical ones acceptable to white audiences. The Lafayette Players, formed in Harlem in 1915 as the first African American stock company, presented almost every type of play, including those by white playwrights—*Madame X* by the French playwright Alexandre Bisson, *The Servant in the House* by Charles Rann Kennedy, and *Within the Law* by Bayard Veiller. The Lafayette Players performed at the Lincoln Theater in Harlem, and from this group emerged a number of highly respected dramatic actors, including Abbie Mitchell, Laura Bowman, Edna Thomas, Charles Gilpin, Frank Wilson, Clarence Muse, and Jack Carter.

Black actors began to appear before wider audiences beginning in the war years, especially with their employment in plays written by white authors. In 1917 a group of black actors under the sponsorship of Emily Hapgood presented three one-act plays by playwright Ridgely Torrence at the Garden Theater in New York's Madison Square Garden. Torrance's *The Rider of Dreams*, *Granny Maumee*, and *Simon the Cyrenian: Plays for a Negro Theater* marked the first time that African American actors had commanded the serious attention of New York's white critics and the general press. Because the United States entered the war on the day following the opening of the three one-act plays, black dramatists had to wait until the war's end before they could claim a substantial place in American public entertainment.

In 1919 there was a revival of interest in African Americans in the theater with the appearance of Charles Gilpin as the Reverend William Custis in John Drinkwater's *Abraham Lincoln*. In the following year Gilpin's performance in the title role of Eugene

Postwar Theater

O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* received such outstanding acclaim that he was given an award by the Drama League of New York as well as the NAACP's Spingarn Medal. Some critics predicted for him a career similar to that of Ira Aldridge, who had captivated European audiences with his Shakespearean roles in the previous century.

In 1924 Paul Robeson played the leading role in O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*. It was the first time in American history that a black man had taken a principal role opposite a white woman. In 1926 Paul Green of the University of North Carolina brought to New York *In Abraham's Bosom*, in which Jules Bledsoe played the leading role, ably assisted by Rose McClendon, Abbie Mitchell, and Frank Wilson. The play was a distinct success and demonstrated both the adaptability of African American life to the theater and the ability of African American actors in the theater. In the following year, *Porgy*, a folk play of black life in Charleston by Dorothy and DuBose Heyward, was produced by the Theater Guild. Once more, black actors Rose McClendon, Frank Wilson, and others in the cast captivated New York audiences. These plays about black life by white authors reached a high-water mark with the long-running production in 1930 of Marc Connelly's *The Green Pastures*, a fable of a black person's conception of the Old Testament, with Richard B. Harrison as "De Lawd."