



Harlem Tenement in Summer, 1939 (Sid Grossman)

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Harlem: Black Dreams of the Promised Land

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Pearl Cleage’s contemporary classic *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is a work of historical fiction, meaning the story, while fictionalized, takes place in a very real past. The play is set in Harlem, New York City, in the summer of 1930. It is a time of great transition for African Americans, from the creative exhilaration of the Harlem Renaissance to the despair of the Great Depression to the migration from the Jim Crow South to cities in the North.

From roughly the 1910s to the mid-1970s, approximately six million Black Southerners left their homes and relocated to Northern, Midwestern and Western states in a mass movement known as the Great Migration. It was one of the largest migrations of people in the 20th century. Sharecroppers from Mississippi, tobacco workers from Virginia and millions of others from small towns and villages in Alabama,

Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee and North Carolina made the quiet and courageous decision to pick up their belongings and move to cities they had only heard about or seen in mail-order catalogs.

They left because the threat of racial violence was palpable. Across the South, between 1889 and 1929, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days. They

left because they wanted their children to have better educational and economic opportunities than their own. And they left because the stifling conditions of Jim Crow laws made living in the South untenable. The racial caste system of Jim Crow was conceived to disenfranchise African Americans and reverse political and economic gains made during Reconstruction. Under “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws, the



Above: *Facades*, 1938, featuring storefronts at 422-424 Lenox Avenue (Aaron Siskind); Above right: *Peace Meals*, 1937 (Aaron Siskind); Far right: Crowds cheer boxer Joe Louis and his wife, Marva Trotter Lewis, as they take a stroll in Harlem, 1935 (unknown); Right: *Grocery Store*, 1940, featuring a storefront at 645 Lenox Avenue (Aaron Siskind)



lives of African Americans were legally relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

The Great Migration serves as the backdrop in Cleage's bittersweet play *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. Angel and Guy would have been part of that migration, having left a life of sexual exploitation at Miss Lillie's in Savannah, Georgia, and fleeing North with dreams of a better future. The cities of the North beckoned millions, with New York City, Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles being the most popular destinations. In New York City, for African Americans, the place to be was Harlem, a large neighborhood

near the tip of Manhattan. By 1930, Harlem was internationally known as the largest Black community in the U.S. It was the cultural capital for Black Americans; it was the Black mecca of the New Negro.

The Wecquaesgeek tribe of the Wappani people were the first inhabitants of what we now know as Harlem. By 1930, Harlem had a rich ethnic history. After the Dutch settlements established in 1658, Harlem became home to Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants. The conversion of Harlem into a Black neighborhood is widely believed to have begun in 1904 following a speculative

construction boom. Motivated by the creation of a new subway line, greedy speculators overbuilt poor-quality housing and overestimated rental values. The resulting abandoned properties pressured desperate building owners to make their apartments available to Black residents while also overcharging them. In the 1920s, many West Indian migrants began to make their way to Harlem as well.

With the influx of newcomers from the South and immigrants from the Caribbean, plus native New Yorkers, Harlem's population of Black residents developed into a thriving community and



Harlem in the 1930s, ca. 1930s (unknown), featuring 125th Street just east of Seventh Avenue looking west. The marquee signs of the Victoria and Apollo theaters are visible in the distance.

grew exponentially, expanding from 84,000 in 1920 to more than 200,000 in 1930 with fewer than 25% being born in New York. There were more Blacks in Harlem in 1930 than the combined Black populations of Birmingham, Memphis and St. Louis.

For many, Harlem was the dream capital of Black America. New arrivals would often land at Penn Station and take the A train uptown where they would be greeted by friends and relatives

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who had already made the trip North. The jobs found in New York were menial but paid better than the low wages in the South, and public schools for their children were a substantial improvement over those in Southern climes.

The mixture of native New Yorkers, newer migrants from the South and Caribbean immigrants was not always smooth. There was an inherent tension between the authoritarian control under Jim Crow as experienced in the rural South and the relatively individualistic behaviors found in the large, anonymous cities of the North. Without the full force of family surrounding them, migrants got their first taste of anonymity in the city. Values that were held so dearly at home within an extended family could be relaxed in the

North. Even the choice of a church could be made without familial pressure. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Leland is a newcomer to Harlem who holds tightly to his Southern and conservative religious values. His convictions lead to an inevitable conflict of social mores between himself and the found family that Angel, Guy, Delia and Sam have built in the North.

Blues for an Alabama Sky presents many questions about dreams: How much do you risk to fulfill your dreams? When is it time to give up on your dreams? In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem was a place of promise for many. For some, the dream died; for others, it was deferred. But for many years, Harlem was the place where Black dreams could come true. 