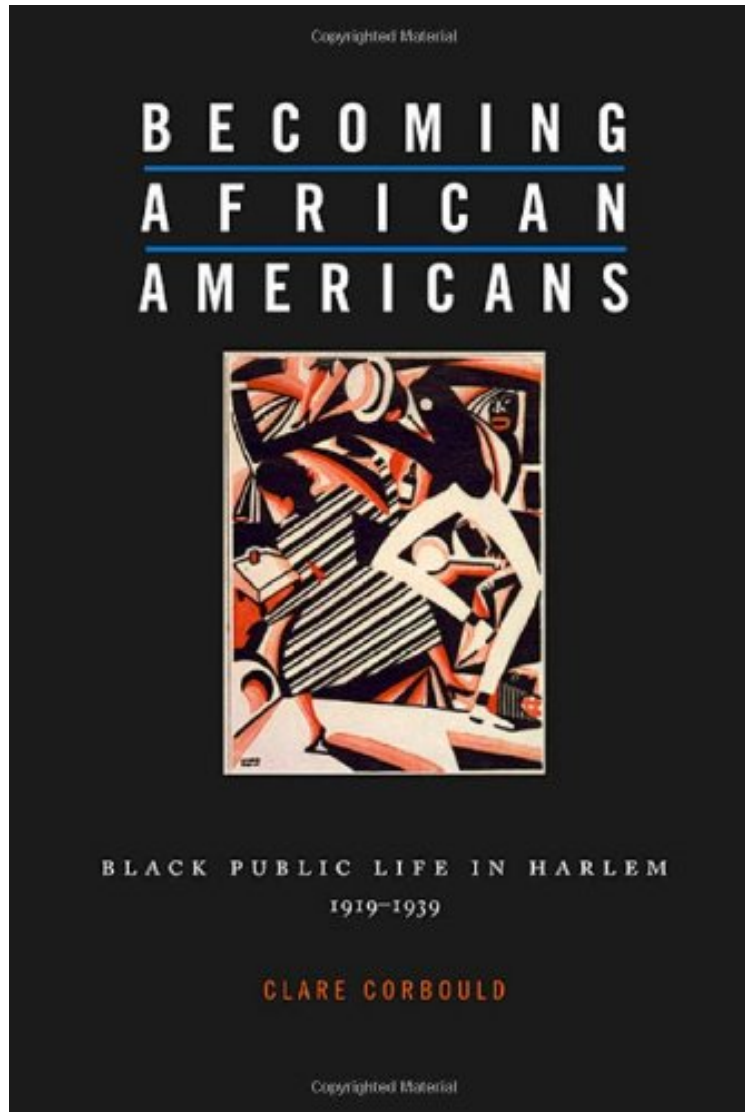


[Free] Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939

Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939

Clare Corbould

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Clare Corbould : Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939:

In 2000, the United States census allowed respondents for the first time to tick a box marked African American in the race category. The new option marked official recognition of a term that had been gaining currency for some decades. Africa has always played a role in black identity, but it was in the tumultuous period between the two world wars that black Americans first began to embrace a modern African American identity. Following the great migration of black southerners to northern cities after World War I, the search for roots and for meaningful affiliations became subjects of debate and display in a growing black public sphere. Throwing off the legacy of slavery and segregation, black intellectuals, activists, and organizations sought a prouder past in ancient Egypt and forged links to contemporary Africa. In plays, pageants, dance, music, film, literature, and the visual arts, they aimed to give stature and solidity to the American black community through a new awareness of the African past and the international black world. Their consciousness of a dual identity anticipated the hyphenated identities of new immigrants in the years after World War II, and an emerging sense of what it means to be a modern American.

Tracing the complex cultural and political currents that fed into the romance of Africa for 'New Negroes,' Corbould reveals that the movement to 'invent' a useful Africa both united and divided African Americans. Writing with uncommon panache, Corbould has written one of the most engaging and important books on the Harlem Renaissance in years. (W. Fitzhugh Brundage, author of *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*) Clare Corbould performs a miracle of synthesis, drawing together the major contours of scholarship for the past half-century, and presenting an elegant new theory of the rise of Harlem's cultural and intellectual history. (Wilson J. Moses, author of *Creative Conflict in African American Thought*) This is a rich and strikingly original portrait of a vibrant black public culture in the early twentieth century, and its far-reaching cultural and political engagements with Africa and questions of black identity. Tracing the search for a usable past and the development of black history, Corbould debunks claims that black identification with Africa was defensive or idiosyncratic. (Penny Von Eschen, author of *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*) In this fascinating and highly readable work of cultural history, Clare Corbould shows how a specifically African American identity profoundly affected by notions of Africa and shaped by the public culture of New York emerged between the world wars. *Becoming African Americans* will be of interest to anyone concerned with the relationship between internationalism and black consciousness in the United States. (George Hutchinson, Indiana University, Bloomington) The strengths of Corbould's book lie not with the revelatory nature of her information but rather with the detailed and nuanced nature of her argument about the formation of African American identity. She delves deeply into a wide variety of artistic and intellectual, public and private, local and national materials to flesh out older understandings; to unearth the authors' and artists' intentions; and to reveal the ways in which seemingly contradictory arguments regarding black identity, shaped by a sensitivity to political realities, informed and strengthened each other. As she demonstrates, the sophisticated use of these multiple foundations for identity advanced the cause of black equality. Well written, thoroughly researched, and persuasively argued, *Becoming African Americans* helps make sense of this complex moment in the development of an African American identity. (Cheryl Greenberg in *American History* 2010-09-01) Clare Corbould's excellent book... is concerned with social and cultural formations and institutions in the emergence of an African-American public culture. The emphasis on a black public sphere helps the book rise above being a synthesis of earlier cultural and intellectual histories of the New Negro movement and the renaissance. From this standpoint, the shift in the 1930s seems considerably less dramatic than many accounts of Harlem and African-American modernism have suggested. According to Corbould, "the concerns of the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, far from being a vogue made possible by white patronage that ended with the onset of economic depression, matched those of black Americans across the country." The "renaissance" was an aspect of a broader Negro movement that, one could argue, culminated in the early civil rights movement... What Corbould's argument does show is that, while the term African American did not become particularly common until the post-1960s, the identity it came to stand for had a much longer arc of development than we often assume. (And the term "African American," proposed by James Weldon Johnson, was fairly widely adopted between the wars.) (George Hutchinson *American Literary History* 2011-03-01) It is common practice to chart the evolution of racial politics along a simple path marked by period-specific nomenclature. Thus, we have brightly illuminated the road from "negro" to "Negro," and then on to "New Negro," to "Afro-American," to "Black," and to "African American." Clare Corbould's fascinating book expands the illumination and offers a view not of a single, simple path but of a busy landscape cluttered with meaningfully different descriptors. In her telling, the 1920s and 1930s were the source of a rich, complicated, cacophonous debate about a name, a continent, and a nation. At once synthetic and original, this study makes a strong contribution to the already rich historiography of one of the wildest periods in the American racial past... How did an expression of racial difference and the establishment of a new geography of identity come to so ably serve the national interest in pluralism and, later, multiculturalism? What history is inscribed into the hyphen between "African" and "American"? Those interested in these questions should turn to Corbould's work for one set of provocative and compelling answers. (Matthew Pratt Guterl *American Historical* 2011-06-01) Corbould brings a fresh perspective to African American intellectual and cultural life in the interwar years. Using a wealth of sources from histories to poetry, fiction, and essays, as well as the

visual arts, theatrical productions, and other manifestations of popular culture, she tracks the complex relationship between U.S. blacks and their African heritage...This book, rich in detail and addressing a wide range of black cultural life, is indispensable reading for any scholar of 20th-century African American history and thought. (C. D. Wintz Choice 2009-11-01)Corbould's major achievement in *Becoming African Americans* is to connect the everyday lives of black men and women in Harlem, and the culture they built and lived, with broader political struggles, international as well as national and local...*Becoming African Americans* rests on thorough, indeed prodigious primary research. The book exploits an impressive array of published and archival sources, one of the platforms of Corbould's analysis is her astute reading of a wide array of cultural forms, from poetry and literature, through art and music, to the lively street life in which African Americans participated...Written with verve and confidence, *Becoming African Americans* is an admirable achievement. Corbould has added significantly to our understanding of African American life during the interwar period. (Chris Dixon Australasian Journal of American Studies 2009-07-01)Black Americans' cultural and national identities have long been debated. Are black Americans more African than American, or vice versa? Corbould's engaging book offers a fresh historical interpretation to this long-standing conversation. Her detailed analysis of visual art, literature, newspaper editorials, cartoons, plays, historical and anthropological scholarship, pageants, poems, and other sources uncovers ways in which black American identity was not predicated upon choosing to be either African or American but rather melding together both African and American subjectivities into a multifaceted and coherent identity rooted in the United States and the African diaspora...Corbould's interdisciplinary approach and close analysis of diverse sources gives this study remarkable breadth, tracing how numerous playwrights, political orators, intellectuals, and pageant directors imagined Africa and the African diaspora through musical motifs, literary themes, and new historical narratives that reclaimed a "usable" black past. (Brian Purnell Journal of Interdisciplinary History 2010-09-01)[An] engaging, thoughtful study of African American identity formation during the interwar years...One of the strengths of *Becoming African Americans* is its insistence on the centrality of the stage, in various incarnations, as a key site of identity formation... What Clare Corbould's wonderful study reminds its readers is that identity itself has many components, and the story of black becoming can be told from a number of different vantage points. Corbould's most important contribution to this grand narrative is her fresh perspective on the role that the public sphere played in the construction of individual and collective "blackness" during the interwar years. (Emily Bernard Journal of Social History 2010-12-01)About the AuthorClare Corbould is Australian Research Council Future Fellow at Monash University, Melbourne.