

## PART ONE

# 1910-1918

*Negro life is not only founding new centers, but finding a new soul.*

—Alain Locke (1925)<sup>1</sup>

The New Negro–Harlem Renaissance has come to symbolize an era of unprecedented musical, artistic, literary, and dramatic outpourings. It was a time in which black people began to liberate themselves from a past fraught with minstrelsy and degradation, turning instead to what art historian Richard Powell calls “an unprecedented optimism, a novel pride in all things black and a cultural confidence that stretched beyond the borders of Harlem to other black communities in the Western world.”<sup>2</sup> This new sense of selfhood was blossoming in all areas of art and life. Social critic Hubert H. Harrison observed in 1920 that the “new situation” for black people in the United States was evident “in the mental attitude of the Negro people.” African Americans, Harrison maintained, “have developed new ideas of their own place in the category of races and have evolved new conceptions of their powers and destiny.”<sup>3</sup> This newly discovered pride and optimism would find expression in philosophy, medicine, science, education, and the arts.

The cultural efflorescence of the 1920s grew out of events in the 1910s. Dance historian Jacqui Malone raises the salient point that between 1910 and 1920, black theatre developed away from Broadway, permitting it “to grow without the constraints of white critics.”<sup>4</sup> Harold Cruse has it right when he asserts that the 1920s Harlem Renaissance “was actually a culminating phase of a previous renaissance that had emerged with the initial growth of black Harlem around 1910.”<sup>5</sup> Theatres operated by African Americans for an African American audience began appearing throughout the decade of the 1910s. Moreover, black people were finding new ways

to express their creativity. In what follows, three important genres of performance—sports, dance, and pageantry—are examined in order to investigate their influence on culture and impact on race.