

## *Introduction*

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The challenge of any literary history framed synchronically within ten-year increments, as is the case with the volumes in the *African American Literature in Transition* book series, is how to speak to the diachronic elements of the works and authors under study. In other words, how do we discuss the developments happening in the 1930s as unique but also innately tied to a larger Black literary history? This is particularly important in a volume like ours, which has the added challenge of tending to a literary decade bookended by two of the most explored literary movements in twentieth-century African American literature: the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the emergence of social realism and protest fiction in the 1940s. In spite of this, in this volume, we contend that the decade of the 1930s provides a meaningful time frame for many scholars who seek to give substantial attention to generic shifts, parse out the development of individual authors, and account for the unique aesthetic and political influences that the Great Depression buoyed in Black literary and cultural production.

In tracing Black art as it *transitions* between 1930 and 1940, we have committed to engaging a broad perspective on the decade and providing a textured account of the historical contours of African American literary production and criticism. In lieu of beginnings and ends, we offer a volume rooted in notions of fluidity. Rather than categories of stability, we examine the era's volatility. We ask how might we conceive innovative means of critical engagement if we lean into the Great Depression's influence on the decade's writers? What new insights about Black expression might we attain if we contemplate the Depression as muse, creative roadblock, and cultural broker? What inventive reading strategies can we initiate to forge nuanced interpretations of 1930s Black writing?

We have dealt with these issues and questions by tapping into contemporary scholarship of African American literature overwhelmingly produced in the dawning decades of the twenty-first century. What we have

found is that some of the richest works of scholarly inquiry do not focus exclusively on the 1930s decade but instead tend to explore the interwar years, the post–Harlem Renaissance, Depression-era proletarian literature, the Old Left, the Great Migration, or the Chicago Renaissance. Although we are less interested in adhering to fixed boundaries of periodization that such literary phrasing claims, any scholar interested in the 1930s as a transitional decade would be wise to tap into these keywords. Thus, for the general history that undergirds this volume, we have consulted a number of groundbreaking texts that approach the decade from these various modes of periodization. Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (2010) provides a compelling narrative-based historical account of the Great Migration, reminding us that some 480,000 African Americans left the American South in search of opportunity during the Depression.<sup>1</sup> Robert Bone and Richard Courage’s *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932–1950* (2011) highlights the role that Chicago played in incubating many of the writers that would come to the fore of literary production during the 1930s and into the 1940s. Finally, Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff’s *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (2009) provides a comprehensive history of the limits placed on Black cultural producers within the federal system. Taken together, these texts highlight the historical conditions, material realities, and geographic contours that made the 1930s a fecund period for literary development that was also limited by the political realities of systemic racism on every front. Additionally, our approach to convening this volume would be incomplete without some consideration of E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939). Frazier’s sociological study analyzes Black migration, urbanization, precarity, segregation, and desire for racial uplift, all themes shared with many Black literary writers developing their corpuses during the 1930s.

Again, what emerges beyond literary history and periodization is the interplay between politics and poetics during the decade. A number of scholars have robustly explored the generic innovation prompted by the precarity of the Great Depression and the relief promised by the competing possibilities of Roosevelt’s New Deal or the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA). Stacy I. Morgan’s *Rethinking Social Realism* (2004) is a particularly astute interlocutor for understanding the generic shift toward social realism brought on by the Depression. Along with Morgan’s work, Barbara Foley’s *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929–1941* (1993) and Michael Denning’s *The*

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*Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1996) provide frameworks for understanding African American proletarian literature within a broader radical US literary movement centering on the working classes. Likewise, William J. Maxwell's *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (1999), James Smethurst's *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–1946* (1999), and Anthony Dawahare's *Nationalism, Marxism, and African American Literature Between the Wars* (2003) all explore the radical left, Marxism, and the Communist Party's influence on Black literature's generic and political concerns. Case in point, volume contributor Nicole Waligora-Davis argues that 1930s and 1940s African American artists "transformed a tradition of African American expressive culture" by utilizing Marxist ideology and the social science techniques for documenting Black life advanced during the period.<sup>2</sup> For Bill V. Mullen, this 1930s Black aesthetic rarefies the CPUSA's Popular Front and fuels the Black Chicago Renaissance, which locates African American cultural workers' coming of age in the lake-front Midwestern city (whose Southside had the second largest Black population) rather than identifying it as a holdover from Harlem's "New Negro."<sup>3</sup> What becomes clear in this collection of critical scholarship is that the African American literary turn toward Marxism, the CPUSA, and the Popular Front helps us to understand the 1930s as a critical moment in African American literature's turn to internationalism as a viable mode of production. This turn would seed the coming decades of Black American international literary production.<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, in telling the story of the 1930s one must also tell the stories of the close interpersonal, intellectual, and aesthetic ties among the decade's Black cultural producers. This volume, then, finds itself in the company of Lawrence P. Jackson's *The Indignant Generation: A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934–1960* (2010) and Gene Jarrett's *Deans and Truants: Race and Realism in African American Literature* (2007). As editors of this volume, we make our first critical intervention by reconsidering periodization and bridging the gap between the Harlem Renaissance and the literature of social realism to foreground the transitional quality of the 1930s. For example, "dean" Richard Wright, who crops up during the Depression and dominates 1940s social realist fiction, and "truant" Frank Yerby, whose anomalous fiction evidences the diversity of Black cultural production, are in conversation as writers employed by the Federal Writers' Project (FWP).<sup>5</sup> Wright and Frank Marshall Davis are but one set of writers who offer additional

insights into how Black writers transitioned from journalism to fiction as well as Black political aesthetics. In these instances, our adherence to historical dates and generation-defining events highlights – and distinguishes – the various “deans” and “truants” of the 1930s, including the decade’s writers and foremost critics, such as Alain Locke and Sterling A. Brown. You’ll find more examples of such period, genre, and professional bridging in the chapters of this volume.

Additionally, the Great Depression and its aftermath complicate this putatively literary divide and invite us to consider new relational exchanges. *African American Literature in Transition, 1930–1940* also makes great strides in fleshing out the coalescing articulations among Black women that would develop into Black feminist thought throughout the twentieth century. Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, Marian Minus, Marita Bonner, and Margaret Alexander Walker would all find voices to articulate the particular precarity of Jane Crow.<sup>6</sup> By tracing interpersonal, intertextual, and ideological connections, we hope to provide a sense of the stakes involved in developing a literary and critical framework for understanding the community of Black cultural producers that would impact the nation and the world well into the twentieth century.

Just as the past thirty years have produced a number of impressive studies that begin to devote substantial attention to the 1930s, we want to highlight the fact that the decade the chapters in this volume study also marks the emergence of some of the earliest volumes of African American literary history and criticism. Vernon Loggins’s *The Negro Author: His Development in America* (1931), Sterling A. Brown’s *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937) and *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), and Alain Locke’s *The Negro in Art* (1940) were all published during this decade and serve as early scholarly studies meant to codify and analyze the historical and aesthetic shifts that comprise what we have come to take for granted as African American literature. These are some of the foundational, early twentieth-century articulations of African American literary criticism. In addition to temporizing the infamous clash between Hurston and Wright, the 1930s also signals the maturation of African American literary criticism with Hugh M. Gloster founding the College Language Association, a historically Black organization serving the scholarly and professional interests of college teachers of English and foreign languages, in 1937. When considering these publications and events, the 1930s begin to take shape as an integral decade in the development of African American literary history and cultural production. As the editors of this volume, we

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attend to Depression-era literature with fresh modes, methods, and frameworks to highlight the difference in the period's sense and sensibility, which provides fertile ground for engendering a transhistorical and historically specific Black aesthetic.

Methodologically, *African American Literature in Transition, 1930–1940* follows and maps Black art as it draws on its predecessors and imagines new pathways for its successors. The chapters contained in this volume are remarkable for their willingness to linger in the economic, social, and political uncertainty – the transitions – that mark this often under considered decade. Bound not simply by a willingness to grapple with cultural works produced during national and international economic, political, and social upheaval, the volume's chapters are unified through a four-pronged methodological approach. Each chapter explores some different aspect of the African American literary tradition, while also offering: (1) an articulation of the dynamics of change; (2) an identification of catalysts and chain reactions to document how new literatures, themes, or aesthetics are brought into being; (3) an engagement with both the literary and the extra-literary effects on writers and cultural production; and (4) a challenge to stable categories, narratives, and modes of periodization that many scholars and students take for granted when engaging in African American literary history. This four-pronged approach ensures historicization, theorization, and analysis of the material conditions and formalistic adaptations of Black literary production amid the social turmoil of the US Great Depression, the global crisis that would bring the country into World War II in 1941, as well as the burgeoning throbs of decolonization that would rock many nations of the African continent during the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Great Depression and its repercussions, most notably the New Deal programs, haunt the majority of the chapters contained in this volume. Thus, our second intervention as editors of this volume is to make explicit the various ways in which federally funded Black arts open up a space for training, networking, and honing the modern Black radical tradition that would shape the decade and those that followed. But, as Darryl Dickson-Carr asserts, the FWP was an “ambivalent opportunity” for Black writers, providing financial support to writers in the midst of a national financial crisis but limiting the independence of Black writers who might write against the US racial and economic policies and practices.<sup>7</sup> Thus, a number of our contributors explore the tension between opportunity and constraint offered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The 1930s mark a transition for modern African American literary and cultural work

precisely because the decade reflects a shift and a stasis in textual content, artistic production, and professional networks.

A convergence of aesthetics and politics, of creativity and critique, threads the decade's seemingly disparate ambitions. In contrast to existing scholarship on the tradition, this volume of *African American Literature in Transition* highlights the need for literary scholars to rethink how we engage with the 1930s as well as configure its history. Together, the volume's chapters explore the transitional effect of economic precarity on 1930s African American literary production by delineating the decade's themes but also noting key social, political, and creative methodologies. The volume's eleven chapters are arranged by four themes that function as orienting subsections: "Productive Precarity and Literary Realism," "New Deal, New Methodologies," "Cultivating (New) Black Readers," and "International, Black, and Radical Visions." These subsections are meant to provide a governing arrangement for the ideas shared by their composite chapters. Yet, in the spirit of the volume's emphasis on transition, each chapter gestures to a shared 1930s milieu, the literary history that prefigures and motions toward the decade's creative legatees.

### Contextualizing "The Crash" for Black Life

Although the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, is often framed as the start of the most financially, politically, and socially challenging decade of the twentieth century, many Americans remained uninformed regarding the dramatic economic decline's long-term impact in the days and weeks that followed. This unawareness was no less true among African American citizens. One early Black newspaper to engage the crash was the *Baltimore Afro-American*, which, about two weeks out from the event, provided reactions from a few local Black business-oriented men. They noted a lack of impact in their lives from the crash and attributed this lack to their limited participation in speculation markets.<sup>8</sup> The Black press's and Black businessmen's refusal to centralize the stock market crash's bearing on Black life debunks the contemporary narrative regarding the unprecedented event's uniform significance for all Americans. While unseating the market crash as the singular colossal calamity impacting Black life in the early decades of the twentieth century, the relative silence of the press and these Baltimore businessmen's seeming disregard for its impact also speak to the deeper and longer-standing deterrents to Black socioeconomic advancement.

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More than disrupt the economic progress of African Americans on the whole, the Great Depression made more visible the relative lack of advancement in Black Americans' work life and wealth that had been in place since the post-Reconstruction period. As Cheryl Greenberg writes in her history of the African American experience during the Great Depression: "Most African Americans . . . did not have that far to fall when the Great Depression arrived. Even before 1929, the vast majority lived in desperate poverty."<sup>9</sup> African Americans' economic position improved after their emancipation from slavery, but it was never on a par with that of their white counterparts or recent European immigrants. From 1890 to 1930, most Black Americans earned significantly lower wages, remained relegated in great proportion to menial employment options, or were unemployed at much higher rates. These employment disparities were shaped by institutional racial injustices just as they precipitated additional inequities. For example, whereas the illiteracy rate for US-born whites was 2 percent, almost 25 percent of African Americans were illiterate in 1920. In comparison to half of white families, fewer than a quarter of Black families owned the homes in which they lived by the time of the stock market crash. "African Americans lived in a depression," Greenberg explains, "long before Wall Street's collapse in 1929 gave the economic catastrophe a name."

In their groundbreaking 1945 sociological study of Black urban life, St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton referred to African Americans' socially engineered employment stagnation during the early twentieth century as the "job ceiling" in order to capture the habitual and systemic role of racial discrimination within the US labor marketplace.<sup>10</sup> While Black workers would find increasing representation in the menial labor marketplace throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, their representation within the skilled labor force remained small.<sup>11</sup>

Some of the racial inequalities entrenched in the South, where more than 90 percent of the Black population lived in 1860, eased with African Americans' migration to the North and West, where, by 1930, more than 20 percent of the Black population lived. However, African Americans still had limited access to skilled jobs, albeit the number of these positions had increased, and the higher cost of living that Black migrants faced in their new urban dwellings did not drastically alter their collective economic mobility. At the bottom of the labor hierarchy, Black women experienced restrictions on their employment options and compensation doubly due to sexism and anti-Blackness. Almost 60 percent of employed Black women remained in service or in domestic work in 1940.<sup>12</sup> Forced to stand on

sidewalks to secure a day's work, New York domestic workers earned an average of \$15 a week during the 1920s; they were subject to unregulated hours and pay and sexual harassment, too. Once the Depression hit, their working conditions deteriorated further, and their already meager wage dropped to \$6–\$10 a week.

Although Baltimore's Black businessmen did not register the impact of the 1929 stock market crash two weeks after the event, a month out from the crash, George Schuyler recognized the decided shift and impending transition for Black life that the Great Depression would produce for Black Americans long term. In his article "The Talented Tenth," circulated across many press platforms, including *New York Amsterdam News*, Schuyler uses the United States' looming financial crisis and early governmental plans for an intervention to argue for the importance of Black American social integration and uplift as a central national agenda item. Schuyler would come to be remembered more for his satirical critiques questioning the legitimacy of an authentic and distinct Black American culture and the political conservatism conveyed in his 1931 satirical and speculative fiction *Black No More: Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933–1940*. However, at the dawn of the 1930s he also saw the limitations of racial inequity in restricting Black people's capacity to fully integrate into American society. Shortly after the crash, Schuyler notes, particularly in his journalism, that while the rest of the nation might strive for a return to "normalcy," such a backwards-looking intention was not preferable for Black Americans: "Unlike American business, the Negro cannot afford to go 'back to normalcy.' That's what he wants to get away from. He wants something better in every field of endeavor."<sup>13</sup> Despite appealing to white paternalism in his vision for Black social progress in the United States, what stands out is Schuyler's sense that the Depression needed to be thought of beyond recent and short-term fiscal losses for Black Americans. Addressing the long-standing impact of racial discrimination would take far more than restoring the US economic system to pre-crash business as usual. In other words, focusing on the impact of the stock market crash and ignoring Black Americans' systemic oppression would not comprehensively tell the long and vexed history of Black economic precarity in the United States – neither would failing to acknowledge the added deprivation that the 1930s effectuated.

Already disadvantaged African Americans increasingly felt the brunt of the crash as the Depression unfolded and persisted. According to the American Federation of Labor, three million people were unemployed in



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January of 1930, and the federal government estimated that 38 percent of the Black population, in comparison to 17 percent of the white population, needed public assistance. Three years later, 13.5 million people could not find jobs. Pandemic unemployment aggravated hunger, homelessness, health issues, and orphaned children. Manufacturing stalled; entrepreneurs and tradespeople forfeited their clientele; sharecroppers lost their livelihood. The crisis, although far-reaching, had an acute effect on disenfranchised African Americans, who were the last hired and first fired, had less in the way of savings and less access to traditional banking and finance services, and paid more for segregated housing. Additionally, white men and women's willingness to take less-desirable and menial jobs historically dominated by Black men and women, including domestic work, had added repercussions for Black employment.<sup>14</sup>

While the stock market crash was seismically impactful, solely centering on it and the reciprocal narrative of Black poverty does not provide a full portrait of African American life during the 1930s – or its representation in African American literature. In this volume of *African American Literature in Transition*, we mark the subtle and climactic changes to the literary and cultural landscape of Black people by suturing the aesthetic and political disjuncture of the Depression era. In keeping with the series' broad objectives, the 1930–1940 volume aims to resist relying exclusively on questions about *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when*, which prioritize the singular and the dramatic. Instead, the chapters of this volume also provide a deep exploration of *how* and *why* in order to show the *revision* and *fluidity* of African American cultural production due to both the gradual and the striking historical shifts of the decade. Focusing on the Great Depression while also complicating our understanding of its impact on African American communities and creative endeavors allows us to move beyond austere literary movements and their corresponding aesthetic modes; our approach to the 1930s invites nuanced interpretations of the decade's fiction and nonfiction work as well as new understandings of its cultural workers. This book offers any student or scholar of the decade a coherent but elastic account of its variabilities to accommodate its conflicts, pivots, and fluctuations.

**Documenting Precarity in 1930s Black Writing**

The Harlem Renaissance, which flourished during the 1920s, and the emergence of protest fiction, which characterized the 1940s, simultaneously overshadow Depression-era Black literature. Comparably, African

American modernism (1910–1950) envelops 1930s Black literary production within the various trends and historical happenings of the first half of the century, including the Black Chicago Renaissance (1935–1950). The experimental forms and alienation themes of Western European and Euro-American modernism’s writing methods convene with the effects of the Great Depression as well as the Great Migration, two world wars, unionism, and the beginnings of the Cold War and the Civil Rights movement on Black American life.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, African American literature produced between 1930 and 1940 is often deemed amorphous or incongruous. Scholars of the tradition tend to write *through* the 1930s as an extension of the previous decade’s New Negro Renaissance, a preemption of the subsequent decade’s social realism, or an appurtenance under modernism’s expansive and sundry blanket. Our goal, then, is for this volume to register the *transitions* of these dynamics rather than the beginnings and ends of their categorical periodizations, which are less definitive and conclusive than they are often deemed.

Whereas the Depression’s added economic weight on Black lives is clear, for many of the writers transitioning from the patronage and endowment support of the Harlem Renaissance, the imprint of the 1930s financial crisis is understated in their creative works. In addition to George Schuyler’s novel *Black No More*, poet Countee Cullen’s only novel *One Way to Heaven* (1932), Wallace Thurman’s roman à clef about the Harlem Renaissance *Infants of the Spring* (1932), and Langston Hughes’s short story collection *The Ways of White Folks* (1934) distinguish themselves discursively from the historical moment. Daryl Dickson-Carr highlights: “Despite their publication dates in the 1930s, very little material within these works explicitly considers the impact of the Depression on African Americans.”<sup>16</sup> He explains that this is because many of the texts are written in the 1920s or early in the Depression era and, thus, did not have the chance to reflect upon the crisis. These writers would be eclipsed toward the end of the decade by a generation of emerging writers compelled to write about the economic and political realities brought on by the Depression. Writers like Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Dorothy West, Marita Bonner, and others would find explicitly writing through the economic realities of the Depression foundational to their writing. Nonetheless, as Ichiro Takayoshi points out, “literary problems popularly associated with the 1930s, such seemingly *sui generis* events as the political radicalization of literary culture, government funding of arts, and the rise of documentary journalism, are revealed as especially stormy manifestations of traditional literary concerns at a time of transition.”<sup>17</sup> That is to