

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47255-5 — African American Literature in Transition, 1930–1940
Edited by Eve Dunbar, Ayesha K. Hardison
Frontmatter
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AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN TRANSITION, 1930–1940

This volume explores 1930s African American writing to examine Black life, culture, and politics and to document the ways in which Black artists and everyday people managed the Great Depression's economic impact on the creative and the social. Essays engage with iconic figures such as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Dorothy West, and Richard Wright as well as understudied writers such as Arna Bontemps, Marita Bonner, Henry Lee Moon, and Roi Ottley. This book demonstrates the significance of the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), and Black literary circles in the absence of white patronage. By featuring novels, poetry, short fiction, and drama alongside guidebooks, photographs, and print culture, *African American Literature in Transition, 1930–1940* provides evidence of the literary culture created by Black writers and readers during a period of economic precarity, expanded activism for social justice, and urgent internationalism.

EVE DUNBAR is a professor at Vassar College (NY). She is the author of *Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers Between the Nation and the World* (2012).

AYESHA K. HARDISON is an associate professor at the University of Kansas. She is the author of *Writing through Jane Crow: Race and Gender Politics in African American Literature* (2014) which won the Nancy Dasher Award and was a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN TRANSITION

Editor Joycelyn K. Moody, *The University of Texas at San Antonio*

Associate Editor Cassander Smith, *The University of Alabama*

Across 17 authoritative volumes and featuring over 200 of today's foremost literary critics and social historians, *African American Literature in Transition* offers a critical and comprehensive revisionary analysis of creative expression by people of African descent. Reading transtemporally from the origins of "African American literature" by the first peoples calling themselves "African Americans," this series foregrounds change, and examines pivotal moments, years, decades, and centuries in African American literature and culture. While collectively analyzing both far-reaching and flash-forward transitions within four centuries, the multi-volume series replaces conventional historical periodization in African American scholastic and literary anthologies with a framework that contextualizes shifts, changes, and transformations in African American literature, culture, politics, and history.

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- o.1 *The Soup Kitchen* by Norman Wilfred Lewis. © Estate of Norman Lewis; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. *page 22*

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Preface
African American Literature in Transition

Joycelyn K. Moody, General Editor

When I accepted the invitation to act as Series Editor for African American Literature in Transition, Barack Obama had several months more to serve as President of the United States. The US was in a time of tremendous transition, we knew, but the extent of the impact of the coming election and its outcomes on the lives of African Americans, we had yet to learn. In the years since, dozens of today's foremost literary critics and social historians have traced across this authoritative multi-volume series revisionary analyses of creative expression by peoples of the African diaspora. Reading transtemporally, African American Literature in Transition foregrounds change, and examines pivotal moments and eras in African American history and historiography, literature and culture, art and ideology. The contributors explore four centuries of far-reaching as well as flash-forward transitions, to replace conventional literary periodization with a framework that contextualizes shifts, changes, and transformations affecting African American people.

Taken singly or together, the more than 200 chapters of the series provide not customary synopses of African American literature but unprecedented, detailed analyses – each expansive, in-depth, engaging. Every contributor finds their perfect pitch. Where contributors are musicians, then, to quote John Lovell, Jr.'s *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, “music raise[s] both performer and audience far above routine emotion; the elderly throw away their sticks and dance.”

The central aim of African American Literature in Transition is to reorient readers' expectations of the literary critical and appreciative experience. The series emphasizes the importance of reading intertextually, transhistorically, and interdisciplinarily. In this way, we foster readers' comprehension of ways in which legal cases such as the *Dred Scott* Decision and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, for example, were forecast in David Walker's 1829 *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* and have reappeared in *Solitary: My Story of Transformation and Hope*, by Albert

Woodfox (2019). Truly distinctive, *African American Literature in Transition* offers rich demonstrations of how to read Black creative expression as a sequence of shifting contexts and dynamic landscapes.

I offer sincere gratitude to Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press for selecting me to spearhead this project, and to Cassander Smith for seeing it through with me. I am grateful to Edgar Mendez and Cambridge interns Caitlin Gallagher and Rebecca Rom-Frank. I appreciate the enthusiastic support of my family, friends, and colleagues over the years: especially Lorraine Martínez, Roxanne Donovan, Kimberly Blockett, Barbara Neely, Cynthia Lockett, Rhonda Gonzales, T. Jackie Cuevas, and Howard Ramsby II. Colleen J. McElroy and my uncles Charles and Glenn inspire me in ways they cannot imagine. My son and my parents influence everything I undertake. To the *African American Literature in Transition* volume editors and contributors: your dedication to tracing transitions with me made all the difference.

Chronology, 1930–1940

- 1930 First year of the Great Depression
 September: White supremacists stage an “anti-Negro labor” movement
 November: Haile Selassie (I) becomes emperor of Ethiopia
 Global labor movements spark protests in major US cities
 August: William Grant Still starts composing his opera *Troubled Island*, about Jean-Jacques Dessalines, with a libretto begun by Langston Hughes but completed years later by Verna Arvey
 Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*
 James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*
 Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*
 Rudolph Fisher, “Common Meter”
- 1931 The US Depression worsens
 March: “The Star-Spangled Banner” becomes the US national anthem
 The Scottsboro Boys’ trials begin
 George S. Schuyler, *Black No More*
 Jessie Redmon Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree*
 Langston Hughes, “Christ in Alabama” and *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*
 Rudolph Fisher, “Dust”
 Gwendolyn Bennett, “Nocturn”
 Arna Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday*
 Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, “Little Roads”
 Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America*

- xii Chronology, 1930–1940
- 1932 The US unemployment rate climbs to 24.5 percent with 13 million people unemployed
 “All of Me” by Louis Armstrong and His Orchestra becomes a hit
 March: Ford Hunger March in Dearborn, Michigan demands increased wages, better work policies, healthcare benefits, an end to discriminatory hiring practices, and the right to unionize
 June: The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) sponsors the travel of Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson, and twenty-two other Black American artists to create a film discussing racial discrimination
 Langston Hughes, *Scottsboro Limited* and *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*
 Countee Cullen, *One Way to Heaven*
 Wallace Thurman, *Infants of the Spring*
 Rudolph Fisher, *The Conjure-Man Dies* and “Ezkiel”
 Sterling A. Brown, *Southern Road*
 Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson, “Harlem John Henry Views the Airmada”
- 1933 The unemployment rate peaks at 25.2 percent, marking the worst year of the Great Depression
 March: Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) enters first year in office and enacts the New Deal, a series of programs, projects, and reforms to stimulate the economy
 November: Bessie Smith makes her final blues recordings, for which she was paid a non-royalty fee
 December: The 21st Amendment was passed, repealing the 18th Amendment and ending prohibition
 James Weldon Johnson, *Along This Way*
 Zora Neale Hurston, “The Gilded Six-Bits”
 Alain Locke, *The Negro in America*
 Rudolph Fisher, “Ezkiel Learns,” “Guardian of the Law,” and “Miss Cynthia”
 Gwendolyn Bennett, “Go to Camp”
 Marita Bonner, “A Possible Triad on Black Notes,” “Of Jimmy Harris,” and “Three Tales of the Living”
 Arna Bontemps, “A Summer Tragedy”
 Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Comedy: American Style*
- 1934 July: The racially integrated Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union is

Chronology, 1930–1940

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- established in response to the policies of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, a part of the New Deal that aided landowners but not necessarily sharecroppers
- September 15: The USSR joins the League of Nations, which was established for international diplomacy after World War I
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*
- Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks*
- Marita Bonner, "Tin Can"
- 1935 April: FDR signs the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act and creates the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided employment for writers, artists, teachers, and researchers through the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Federal Writers' Project
- July: Congress passes the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, guaranteeing workers the right to organize, collectively bargain, and strike
- September: George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, based on the play and novel *Porgy*, is performed for the first time
- October: FDR expands part of the New Deal's social safety net by signing the Social Security Act
- Italy invades Ethiopia under Benito Mussolini in an attempt to expand its empire
- W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*
- Langston Hughes, *Mulatto*
- Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*
- Rudolph Fisher, "John Archer's Nose"
- Countee Cullen, *The Medea and Some Poems*
- Frank Marshall Davis, *Black Man's Verse*
- 1936 August: Jesse Owens wins four gold medals at the Summer Olympics in Berlin
- December: The Flint Sit-Down Strike against General Motors, organized by the United Auto Workers Union (UAW), leads to the unionization of the US auto industry
- June: Margaret Mitchell publishes her US Civil War-era novel *Gone with the Wind*
- Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, "Where the Jack Hollers"
- Arna Bontemps, *Black Thunder*
- Langston Hughes, *Little Ham*

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Chronology, 1930–1940

- Elizabeth Laura Adams, “Until I Found You” and “Consecrated”
Marita Bonner, “A Sealed Pod”
- 1937 January: FDR starts his second term as US president
September: Dorothy West, Marian Minus, and Richard Wright debut the literary magazine *New Challenge*, which includes Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing”
Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
Frank Marshall Davis, *I Am the American Negro*
Claude McKay, *A Long Way from Home*
Arna Bontemps, *Sad-Faced Boy*
Sterling A. Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama* and *The Negro in American Fiction*
- 1938 Nazi Germany begins the mass persecution of Jews
The WPA reaches its peak, providing employment for three million people
June: The Fair Labor Standards Act is passed, standardizing minimum wage, prohibiting child labor, and mandating overtime
Joe Louis wins his boxing rematch against German Max Schmeling with a knockout in the first round
Theodore Ward, *Big White Fog*
Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*
Richard Wright, *Uncle Tom’s Children*
Langston Hughes, *A New Song* and *Don’t You Want to Be Free?*
Elizabeth Laura Adams, “Yes, I’m Colored”
Marita Bonner, “Black Fronts” and “Hate Is Nothing”
Frank Marshall Davis, *Through Sepia Eyes*
- 1939 The Works Progress Administration is renamed the Work Projects Administration
Nazi Germany attacks Poland, resulting in France, Australia, and the United Kingdom declaring war on Germany
The Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) condemns World War II as an imperialist war
April: Billie Holiday records the song “Strange Fruit”
December: The film *Gone with the Wind* premieres to positive reviews but also receives criticism for its portrayal of enslaved Black people and romanticization of the antebellum South
W. E. B. Du Bois, “Black Folk: Then and Now”
Zora Neale Hurston, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*

Chronology, 1930–1940

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- Marita Bonner, “The Makin’s,” “The Whipping,” and “Hongry Fire”
 Arna Bontemps, *Drums at Dusk*
 J. Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black*
 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*
- 1940 World War II continues
 The Great Depression finally eases, as the escalating global war and US defense spending fuel the economy
 W. E. B. Du Bois founds *Phylon*, a quarterly journal examining issues of race and culture
 February: Hattie McDaniel becomes the first African American actor to win an Academy Award, specifically for Best Supporting Actress with her role as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*
 November: FDR wins his third US presidential election, becoming the only president to be in office for more than two consecutive terms
 Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*
 Robert Hayden, *Heart-Shape in the Dust*
 Richard Wright, *Native Son*
 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*
 Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*
 Elizabeth Laura Adams, “There Must Be a God ... Somewhere”
 Marita Bonner, “Patch Quilt”
 Countee Cullen, *The Lost Zoo*
 Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art*

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