Introduction


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The *Chicago Defender* began the year 1920 by presenting a startling headline to its readers: “Nine Ex-Soldiers Lynched.” The paper protested the wave of anti-Black violence that took place the preceding year and highlighted the soldiers who, after fighting for the United States during World War I, were “assassinated on [their] return to [the] land of democracy.” The editors noted that, despite the increase in violence, a sense of possibility was invading Black communities across the nation. They briefly considered a word then being readily attached to African Americans before determining that the term was inaccurate: “‘new’ is a misnomer; the better word is ‘awakened.’” 1919 has given us much for which we are thankful; we are expecting more of 1920.”

The expectations African Americans had of the nation were undoubt-
edly high at the beginning of the decade. In the face of the anti-Black violence of 1919, writers, artists, and intellectuals in large numbers created art, literature, music, plays, and essays to convey and celebrate the complex conditions of being Black and American in the early twentieth century. Often described as a flowering, an outpouring, a movement, and most famously a “renaissance,” the years between 1920 and 1930 have long fascinated the American public and have been the subject of significant scholarship. This volume of *African American Literature in Transition* studies some of the literary and historical figures, events, and debates that helped to transform an earlier decade of violence, which reached a global peak during the Great War, into one of the more productive decades in African American literary history.

One challenge to shaping this volume has been the overwhelming amount of material already existing on the “Harlem Renaissance.” The familiar, and now somewhat contested, moniker commonly invokes popular dances of the 1920s such as the Charleston or Black Bottom, parties held in celebrated venues such as The Cotton Club, and charismatic entertainers such as Ethel Waters and Duke Ellington. The Harlem
Renaissance’s familiarity and fame, has, in some ways, contributed to a romanticized and uncomplicated understanding of the time. Actively reading the literature produced and the cultural politics espoused during this ten-year time frame reveals that there is still much unexpected and unexplored.

As the Defender suggested, and as articulated in various writings of the time, the “New Negro” was forward-looking. African American representation in the 1920s “transitioned” from depictions widely authored and accepted by the white public to self-defined images of African American independence, sophistication, and erudition. No longer consigned to conventional stereotypes of blackness that had more in common with minstrel shows than with the full range and complexity of African American life, writers and artists in the 1920s felt emboldened to cast off rigid and restrictive portrayals of Blacks. This was the message presented by one of the most important volumes of the decade, The New Negro, edited by Howard University professor Alain Locke. Originally the March 1925 issue of the liberal magazine Survey Graphic, Locke’s anthology expanded the magazine issue by including over thirty-five writers, artists, and intellectuals to depict what he called “a spiritual Coming of Age,” one in which the Black artist confidently spoke for him or herself.

Transitioning from magazine to book, from Old Guard to New, from “Philanthropist, Sociologist, and Race Leader” to “a younger generation . . . vibrant with a new psychology,” Locke’s The New Negro presented a stunning promise of what could be – that “the day of ‘aunties,’ ‘uncles’ and ‘mammies’ is . . . gone.” Locke’s volume was important not only in identifying this younger generation but also in offering some shape to the still-forming aesthetic debates that would occupy the decade.

Literary and cultural production in the 1920s was characterized by a heterogeneity, marked, in often quite complex ways, by larger political, economic, and social transitions in the wake of the Great Migration, the rise of consumer capitalism, the Red Summer – the name given to the violence of 1919 – and the transatlantic vogue nègre. Throughout the 1920s, a diverse body of work, ranging from the trenchantly political and the satirical to the modern and the decadent, emerged. There was a vigorous debate about the scope of the movement and what that movement should be called, with terms such as the Negro Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, and the New Crowd Negro giving a flavor of a debate about terminology and scope that has remained a consistent preoccupation in subsequent scholarship.
Even as early as 1920 there was some hesitancy about the term the “New Negro.” To return to the Defender’s editorial, for example, the paper contested assumptions inherent in the phrase: “The thinking white people for divers [sic] reasons are wont to style us ‘the new Negro.’ The word new implies that there has been no past, but we have had a past and they have figured largely in it. We may be able to forgive but not forget.” Although the term appeared as early as 1900 in Booker T. Washington’s anthology *A New Negro for a New Century*, it is more widely associated with the confident Black artist of the 1920s. Even some participants of what has been called the New Negro Movement questioned the lexicon. Another Howard University professor and poet, Sterling Brown, for example, routinely discounted the term “Harlem Renaissance,” noting in an interview in the 1970s that “I have no relationship to any Harlem Renaissance.”

If Hubert Harrison dismissed the idea of a “Negro literary renaissance” as a concoction “present only in the noxious night life of Greenwich Village neurotics who invented it,” other writers were concerned about white appropriation of Black culture, or what James Weldon Johnson called the “dilemma of the Negro author” who faced “a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view.” Critical accounts of the period tend to highlight the disagreements about the politics of representation in W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art,” Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” and George Schuyler’s “The Negro-Art Hokum,” which made respective cases for art as propaganda, a celebration of cultural distinctiveness and resistance to “the mold of American standardization,” and Black culture being “subject to the same economic and social forces that mold the actions and thoughts of the white Americans.” But such narratives do not do full justice to the multiplicity and scope of New Negro cultural expression, not least because they sideline female writers such as Marita Bonner for whom questions of gender and sexuality were integral to any examination of the relationship between art and politics.

In her 1925 *Crisis* essay “On Being Young – a Woman – and Colored,” for instance, Bonner not only anticipated the late twentieth-century concept of intersectionality in her condemnation of “a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; hedging in, pressing down on eyes, ears and throat.” She also invoked the unreadable stillness of the Buddha to reconceptualize concepts of Black selfhood: “Like Buddha – who brown like I am – sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before the white man knew there was so very
much difference between feet and hands. Motionless on the outside. But on the inside? Refusing the logic of a social order that “see[s] a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all uncontrolled,” Bonner put pressure upon such legibility, limning the gap between an “inside” and an “outside” to develop a subtle, elusive understanding of subjectivity that resonated with broader shifts in ideas about selfhood across the decade as is evident from the militancy, vibrancy, and self-assertiveness visible in the literature and art of the period.

This sense that the Harlem Renaissance itself is continually in transition and under revision is borne out by analysis of critical debates in the 1920s and in subsequent scholarship. From the late 1970s, pioneering Black feminist scholars such as Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, Maryemma Graham, Trudier Harris, Akasha (Gloria) Hull, Deborah E. McDowell, and Cheryl A. Wall transformed understanding of the Harlem Renaissance, not least by their “rediscovery” of important women writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen who have since become central to the period’s popularity. Inspired by the “conjunction of the black arts movement and the women’s movement,” Barbara Christian, who often read early twentieth-century novelists in dialogue with contemporary writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker to establish the contours of a tradition of Black women’s writing, chose to focus on writers who she had been told “were terrible – not worth [her] trouble.” Nevertheless, the issue of how to define a tradition of Black women’s writing remained contentious. Aware of the risks of essentialism, McDowell insisted that the parameters of what Barbara Smith calls “an identifiable literary tradition” should not be explained through uncritical generalizations. In this context, it is also notable that much Black feminist scholarship has sought to develop supple, fluid concepts of tradition that make room for redefinition, revision, intertextuality, pastiche, parody, and allusion – or transition – as in McDowell’s notion of “the changing same,” Mae Gwendolyn Henderson’s “speaking in tongues,” and Wall’s blues-inflected theory of “worrying the line.”

Even this partial account of critical trends and developments demonstrates the extent to which each generation has remade the Harlem Renaissance in line with its own preoccupations in memoirs, fiction, and criticism (whether that be the pessimism of the 1930s or the focus on interracial identities in the 1990s). At the same time, it is imperative to acknowledge that at least some of these shifts are the result of broader social and political forces including the entrenched racism and sexism that led to the complete marginalization and neglect of writers like Hurston...
and Larsen, which then set the stage for their critical recovery by Black feminist scholars including Christian, Wall, and McDowell.

When considering the shifting parameters of Harlem Renaissance studies, its endless capacity to make and remake itself, it is also worth attending to the haunting presence of what the poet, curator, and scholar Kevin Young has called the “shadow book – a book that we don’t have, but know of, a book that may haunt the very book we have in our hands.”18 Young defines shadow books in three ways, speaking of books that “fail to be written” (11), such as the second novels of Jean Toomer and Ralph Ellison; “the removed book, the book that’s a shadow of the one we do have,” including texts that are shaped, in elusive, unquantifiable ways, by “the losses inherent in black inheritance” (12); and “the lost” book, “written and now gone” (13). Haunted by those books that “memory, time, accident, and the more active forms of oppression prevent from being read” (14), Young identifies a corollary imperative for “resistance” and “recovery” (15), insisting that such reclamation must reach beyond the empirical to embrace the “ineffable, lyric quality found in the imagination” (19).

Young’s haunting concept of the “shadow book” provides a fruitful model for the project of African American literary history in African American Literature in Transition, 1920–1930. It acknowledges an enduring imperative to establish (and debate) the terms of a Black literary tradition, with a particular focus on recuperating and honoring a lost, neglected archive without underestimating how “the black imagination conducts its escape by way of underground railroads of meaning” (19). While the chapters in this volume seek to map the historical contours of African American literature by tracing ideological, historical, and cultural shifts in the 1920s, they are also informed by a sharp awareness of reception and revision, often intervening in contemporary critical conversations and political concerns.

This volume looks beyond the romanticized story of the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, or the Negro Renaissance. Moving aesthetically from the ephemeral to the material, from delineating abstract ideas of salon “taste” and décor to reading literary magazines of the period as textual objects, it investigates concepts, events, and figures that have been obscured by the customary narratives of the era. Each contributor provides an eclectic look at the years that make up this most fascinating decade, addressing under-discussed aspects of the period, such as Marcus Garvey’s forays into popular culture, the intersection between Black poetry and new recording technology, and Black modernism’s
entanglement with religion. Complicating the familiar reading of the 1920s as a decade that began with a spectacular boom and ended with disillusionment and bust, the collection lays stress upon the range and diversity of Black cultural production, which encompassed everything from left-leaning magazines such as *The Messenger*, to political journalism by St. Crucian émigré and renowned Harlem radical, Hubert Harrison; essays on race, gender, and sexuality by Marita Bonner; and nature poetry by Effie Lee Newsome and Anne Spencer. Emphasizing a generative contrast between the ephemeral qualities of periodicals, clothes, and décor and the relative fixity of canonical texts, the volume captures in its dynamics a cultural movement that was fluid and expansive, created by cultural producers with varied, sometimes diverging political and cultural interests. Taken together, the chapters underline that the period should be considered anew through the diversity of its material and literary culture. The emergence of ethnography, white literary modernism, cultural commodification, technology, and Black popular culture are complex, moving parts that shape a complicated whole.

By the close of the decade, the *Defender* would publish articles that, in hindsight, suggested the economic difficulties that lay ahead. In December 1930 Madam C. J. Walker’s famed mansion in New York, Villa Lewaro – one of the celebrated gathering spots of the Harlem Renaissance – was sold, along with the contents within it, in order to pay a $15,000 mortgage. Where the *Defender*’s editorial cartoon of January 1920 depicted an Uncle Sam expecting a “clean slate” for the new year (Figure 0.1), the editorial sketch of December 1930 showed a woman and child staring at a closed “door of compassion” (Figure 0.2). The collapse of several Harlem banks also filled the pages of the *Defender* and another prominent Black weekly, the *New York Amsterdam News*. Some scholars would later argue that the high expectations with which the decade began went unfulfilled, and the literature of the 1920s reflected the move from great expectations to somber considerations. Writings celebrating the vibrant time of parties, salons, and literary debates transitioned into the period of social protest literature and a desire for realistic or “documentary” depictions.

Ironically, it was one of the New Negro movement’s most vigorous promoters who captured the mood of disappointment and disillusionment. In the 1931 edition of his annual retrospective of the year’s work in “Negro literature” in *Opportunity*, Alain Locke pronounced the movement a passing “fad,” a “period of inflation and overproduction” that would be eclipsed by “a second and truly sound phase” of cultural
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Figure 0.1  "A New Leaf – and Let’s Keep It Clean!" Chicago Defender, January 3, 1920: 16.
development after “a collapse of the boom.” In later reviews, written against the backdrop of devastating economic depression, Locke noticed a “turn to prose” as Black and white writers alike became “convinced of an imperative need for sober inventory, analysis, and appraisal.” Even so, as the chapters collected in this volume attest, the dynamic changes that took
place within the decade of 1920–30, which inspired so many innovative and modern depictions of Black life, cannot be limited to a linear shift from optimism to pessimism. Indeed, the sense of expectation that animates the January 1920 edition of the *Chicago Defender* is haunted by a sense of precariousness, not least because the “clean slate” of 1920 is juxtaposed with the bloodstained record of 1919 and a call to “keep it clean.” It is these tensions and entanglements—between hope and disillusionment, past and present, militancy and culture—that are the primary focus of the pages that follow.

**Notes**

4 Ibid., 3, 5.
5 “The Old and the New,” 16.
12 Ibid., 7.
13 Ibid., 5.


“A New Leaf – And Let’s Keep it Clean!” Chicago Defender, January 3, 1930: 16.

“Open Wide the Door,” Chicago Defender, December 13, 1930: 12.


Alain Locke, “We Turn to Prose: A Retrospective Review of the Literature of the Negro for 1931,” in Critical Temper of Alain Locke, 209–13 (at 209).