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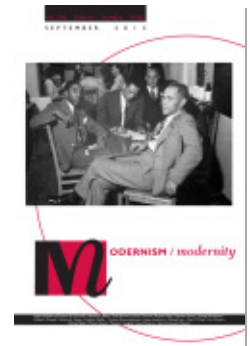
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Introduction

In Conversation: The Harlem Renaissance and the New Modernist Studies

Adam McKible and Suzanne W. Churchill

“When should the centennial of the Harlem Renaissance properly be celebrated? And where shall we celebrate? Presumably, it’s right around the corner—but which corner?” Michael Soto poses these provocative questions in his contribution to this special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* on the Harlem Renaissance. In doing so, he not so innocently gestures toward a central concern of the entire issue: the trouble with locating the Harlem Renaissance in both time and space. When exactly did the Harlem Renaissance begin, when did it end, and where did it happen? While Harlem in the 1920s remains its most celebrated spatiotemporal arena, the contributors to this issue, reflecting recent scholarly trends, call for a much broader historical and geographical framework for understanding the movement.

Indeed, some scholars have suggested that we retire the term “Harlem Renaissance” as an anachronism and a misnomer. In this issue, Barbara Foley argues that the term “New Negro movement” “more accurately reflects the movement’s contemporaneous self-concept (it became known as a ‘renaissance’ primarily in retrospect)” because it “leaves open the connection between economics and politics on the one hand, art and literature on the other.” While Cherene Sherrard-Johnson shares Foley’s dissatisfaction with the term “Harlem Renaissance,” she questions whether “New Negro movement” is a capacious enough alternative: “Given its fluid boundaries and the fact that the New Negro movement precedes the interwar period most often associated by historiographers with the Harlem Renaissance, how do we continue to argue for the specificity, the ‘newness,’ of this

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428 era without continuing to draw intellectual energy away from the literary 1890s and 1940s?" Numerous scholars have likewise resisted the spatial boundaries and temporal limits implied by the term "Harlem Renaissance." Michael Nowlin, for example, begins his investigation in 1912—that annus mirabilis for modernism which gave birth to the *Masses* in New York, *Poetry* in Chicago, and *Poetry Journal* in London. Nowlin argues that James Weldon Johnson's quest for a "normal" literature, which coincided with these modernist interventions in print culture, was as significant and formative as any avant-garde activities to emerge from Harlem a decade later. Indeed we might trace the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance to on or about November 1910, when W. E. B. Du Bois began publishing the *Crisis*, the journal of the newly formed NAACP, headquartered at 20 Vesey Street in New York City. But because the *Crisis* attracted contributors and readers from well beyond Harlem and routinely addressed issues of migration, international relations, and global politics, the term "Harlem Renaissance" still seems too narrow to encompass the magazine's transnational scope, as well as its long duration, which continues to the present day.

The constellation of cultural activities—artistic, musical, theatrical, political, and sociological—not only began much earlier but also extended well beyond the decade "when Harlem was in vogue." It did not, as has been charged, wither and die in the 1930s or '40s. As Houston Baker points out here, the myth of the "failure" of the Harlem Renaissance has roots in the 1960s, when "fiercely black nationalist and Black Arts advocates castigated the Harlem Renaissance as a bourgeois, individualistic, narcissistic movement working under the commands of white patronage and black bourgeois audience demands." While Baker debunks the failure myth in his influential *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), more work is needed to combat its lingering effects and to document the Harlem Renaissance's roots in earlier literary and artistic movements and its subsequent, continuous contribution to American and global literatures. As William J. Maxwell observes, "the most consequential work now being done in the vicinity of Harlem Renaissance studies proposes various models of elongated renaissance time." Jean-Christophe Cloutier's article in this issue is an example of research that extends the temporal reach of the Harlem Renaissance beyond the 1920s, offering the first critical analysis of Claude McKay's recently discovered late novel, *Amiable with Big Teeth*. Cloutier argues that McKay found full expression of his aesthetic and political ideals in this previously unpublished novel, written at least a decade after his more celebrated works, *Harlem Shadows* (1922) and *Home to Harlem* (1928).

Just as the temporal limits of the Harlem Renaissance often omit important developments before and after the Roaring Twenties, the geographical boundaries of Harlem also exclude the many national and international sites of black cultural production. In her article comparing Williams's *When Washington Was in Vogue* and Larson's *Passing*, Pamela L. Caughie directs our attention to Washington, D.C. and Chicago—two major hubs for black literary, artistic, social, and political innovation in this period. And, through her use of previously under-utilized statistical measures and transnational periodicals, Lara Putnam invites us to shift our perspective beyond U.S. borders, thus redirecting our attention to the cosmopolitan Caribbean as one of the new vantage

points for understanding the international exchanges and global reach of black cultural production in the early decades of the twentieth century. Such reorientations of scholarly focus—beyond the borders of Harlem and the decade of the 1920s—allow for greater attention to issues of migration, diaspora, and transnationalism that shaped the era.

Scholarship is also paying greater attention to the transdisciplinarity of African American literary and artistic production, though Venetria Patton wonders whether “our teaching has, like our research, moved beyond our disciplinary silos.” The contributions to this issue suggest a concerted effort to do so. For example, Steven Pinkerton attends to the oft-neglected religious dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance, rereading Alain Locke’s *New Negro* anthology as indicative of the “hitherto obscured theological core of Harlem Renaissance politics and poetics” in order to examine “the dueling rhetorics of consecration and desecration” that characterize the era’s literature. As Maureen Honey suggests, we must “move forward in embracing modernism’s diversity” by considering not only the Harlem Renaissance’s incorporation of vernacular, folk culture, spirituals, jazz, and blues but also its plethora of both literary forms and techniques. In addition, contributors to this issue call for more work on queer and performance theory, gender and sexuality studies, and women writers—topics that may seem to compete with Marxism and black nationalism but should instead stimulate more interest in them. Still another way the scope of our investigations is being widened is through access to unexplored and expanding print and digital archives. This issue of *Modernism/Modernity* cannot possibly represent all of these rich avenues for investigation. Notably absent from the articles gathered here are focused attention on women writers, queer politics, black performance studies, Garveyism, and Marxist-inflected political radicalism.

Despite its own gaps, this issue attempts to address what Houston Baker calls “the old lacunae” of critical practices that occlude and obscure the connections between the field(s) of study that are called—quite imperfectly—the “Harlem Renaissance” and “modernism.” These “old lacunae” continue to haunt us today. Since the “new modernist studies” emerged in the 1990s, signaling a cultural turn in scholarly approaches to modernism and a concerted effort to diversify the field, the Harlem Renaissance has remained notably underrepresented in *Modernism/Modernity* and at the Modernist Studies Association conference—two of the premier scholarly venues dedicated to the study of the purportedly pluralistic “new modernisms.” In his “Racial Formation of Modernist Studies,” published here, Michael Bibby calculates that only 1.5 percent of the panels at the 2011 MSA conference featured African American writers, with an annual conference average since 1999 of five presentations whose titles indicate a focus on a Harlem Renaissance writer. While *Modernism/Modernity* scores higher with slightly more than 10 percent of its articles addressing race issues in their titles, many of these articles examine race in the work of white modernists; scholarly emphasis on black modernists is considerably more scarce: “Since its inception [in 1994], *Modernism/Modernity* has published only 13 articles whose titles indicate a focus on a New Negro writer.” This issue acknowledges the underrepresentation of black writers, artists, and intellectuals in the new modernist studies and directs attentions to recent developments in Harlem Renaissance scholarship and pedagogy. Yet while this issue

430 addresses the persistent neglect of the Harlem Renaissance by the new modernist studies, it cannot redress the imbalance in one single issue. Instead, the issue points toward the exhilarating and even dizzying possibilities opened up by the “spatial enlargement” and “transtemporal” turn that William Maxwell sees in recent scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance. In doing so, we aim to stimulate a conversation that we hope will continue in a sustained and energetic way in subsequent issues of *Modernism/Modernity* and at upcoming MSA conventions.

Scholars are unlikely to ever reach consensus on definitions of “modernism” and the “Harlem Renaissance,” but if there is one thing we can agree on it is the centrality of print culture, especially magazines, to this period of unprecedented literary and artistic expression. As we have argued elsewhere, modernist magazines were conversational: publicly discursive rather than monologic, expressing multiple points of view not only through their tables of contents but also in forums such as letters to the editor, reviews, surveys, and questionnaires. Because of the centrality of magazines to modernism, a conversational model more aptly describes modernism than the military tropes often deployed by earlier scholarship, and we would suggest that the same is true for the Harlem Renaissance. Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, however named or defined, were part of a cultural moment when open, transgressive, and multivocal talk became recognized as vital and valuable—as the very mark of being modern.

In that spirit of energetic and groundbreaking conversation, we open this issue with responses to a questionnaire modeled on two modernist magazine precedents: the 1926 *Crisis* symposium “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” and the questionnaire published in the final, 1929 issue of the *Little Review*. Admittedly, we were not the first to see the wisdom in revisiting this discursive forum: Henry Louis Gates Jr. revived the *Crisis* symposium twenty-six years ago in *Black American Literature Forum* with “The Black Person in Art: How Should S/He Be Portrayed?” (1987). With the centennial of the Harlem Renaissance just around the corner, now is the time to re-mediate this experimental, conversational form. Thus, to mark the occasion of this special issue, we invited prominent scholars working in Harlem Renaissance studies to respond to five questions:

How do you understand the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance, modernism, and/or modernity?

How have your ideas about the Harlem Renaissance evolved since you first began writing about it?

What do you think is the most interesting or challenging work being conducted in this field today, and why?

What figures, connections, or areas of inquiry require further attention or reflection?

What aspects of the Harlem Renaissance are we missing or ignoring?

What question is missing from this survey?

Thirteen distinguished scholars responded thoughtfully and generously to our query. We begin this issue by presenting their responses (in alphabetical order), followed by six scholarly essays (organized chronologically and thematically).

Perhaps predictably, the central and unresolved thread in the ensuing conversation is the relationship between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. On the one hand, many scholars identify strong commonalities between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, Anne E. Carroll argues that “understanding the Harlem Renaissance as modernist helps us better understand both movements”; George Hutchinson sees “the Harlem Renaissance as being unquestionably a modernist movement in the arts broadly considered”; and Barbara Foley avers that “there’s no doubt that the Harlem Renaissance is now seen as integral—indeed central—to U.S. modernism.” Similarly, Cherene Sherrard understands “the relationship between modernism and the Harlem Renaissance as mutually constitutive,” and James Smethurst characterizes it as “more or less dialectical.” Other scholars, however, insist on strict distinctions between the movements, and express skepticism about efforts to broaden modernism and integrate the Harlem Renaissance. Kathleen Pfeiffer sees “the Harlem Renaissance and modernism as two overlapping but not necessarily interdependent movements, each emerging from traditions that both precede and outlive their intersection.” She argues that the Harlem Renaissance “emerges from a historically, culturally, and aesthetically specific African American literary tradition, whereas literary modernism grew from a fundamentally different set of artistic and philosophical concerns.” Emily Bernard identifies as a distinguishing characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance “the assumption . . . that aesthetics could impact—even transform—the social and political position of black people in the United States.” Arguably, this ardent belief in “the inextricable dynamic between art and politics” was shared by many white modernists and may well be an article of faith that unites modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. Despite such commonalities, however, Cary D. Wintz admits that he is “yet to be convinced that there is anything to be gained by redefining the Harlem Renaissance in terms of modernism.” As we continue to redefine our paradigms and revisit the question “What was modernism,” Michael Soto advises, “we should also be prepared to ask ‘What wasn’t modernism?’” Michael Bibby’s analysis of the historical and scholarly construction of the modernist canon suggests that “modernism” as a hermeneutic category was determinedly and persistently racially exclusive. Put more simply, his argument suggests that, whatever it was, modernism wasn’t black. In light of his findings, we might be wise to consider whether merging modernism and the Harlem Renaissance risks erasing a history of racial exclusion.

Despite such cautionary skepticism, however, there are good reasons for a celebratory attitude toward this special issue, particularly in light of the upcoming centennial of the Harlem Renaissance. Whenever, wherever, and however we mark the occasion, the centennial provides an opportunity to follow through on Houston Baker’s vision of a center for the study of the Harlem Renaissance and on Kathleen Pfeiffer’s suggestion for a “renewal of the ‘Criteria of Negro Art’ symposium, perhaps one in which contemporary black writers and artists are included, not just modernist and Harlem Renaissance scholars.” Perhaps you, too, have ideas about how to mark the occasion, and we hope you will contribute them to *Modernism/Modernity*, present them at an upcoming MSA conference, or find other ways to join the conversation.