

Introduction

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Abstract

Writing the New Twenties is a critical investigation of the 2020s through a comparative study with a transformative decade for American literature and culture, the 1920s, also referred to as “the twenties.” Both decades present signs of major social change and transformative innovation, providing raw material for social tension, artistic creativity, and intellectual novelty. The “new twenties” are characterized by stark contradictions, as the proliferation of media is questioned by the rise of disinformation, while the emergence of new voices of American literature is undercut by threats to freedom of speech and fear of prosecution. Contributing authors trace these parallels across aesthetic forms, ranging from intermedial life writing and competing autobiographical renderings of the 1920s, to contemporary multimodal narrative experiments and current considerations of what it means to “make it new.” This special issue draws attention to the points of convergence between the 1920s and the 2020s as decades of transformative change and intense creativity, as well as chronicles our initial understanding of the present moment in American literature, history, politics, and society.

Keywords

2020s; Archives; Autobiography; Contemporary Fiction; Intermediality; Modernism; Multimodality; Twenties.

2025 marked one hundred years since the publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a classic text of American fiction and a seminal work in its depiction of the roaring 1920s. Centennial celebrations abounded in New York City, with "Gatsby-style" events offering a temporary glimpse into the lavish lifestyle of the 1920s, much like enjoying a drink at The Back Room, a secret-entry speakeasy bar from the prohibition era. These experiences could have been part of Georgi Gospodinov's *Time Shelter* (2022), a novel about (re)creating rooms of the past, conceptualized around the fascination of countries with a specific decade of their history, as a means of coping with present instability. For the United States, the 1920s would be a serious contender. Whether to get some of that twenties glamor, immerse themselves into a sparkling version of the American dream, or just escape present-day Manhattan, people are drawn to "the twenties," which still ring vibrant and enchanting in the popular imagination.

As we find ourselves in the midst of "the new twenties," as it were, this special issue begins as an exercise in identifying points of convergence between the 1920s and the 2020s, all the while recognizing the fundamentally different historical frameworks shaping the two decades. *Writing the New Twenties* asks: what are the defining characteristics of the "new twenties," and how does American literature respond to them? How can the 1920s inform our understanding of the present moment in American literature, politics, culture, and society?

Probing into the specifications of a decade in progress may seem untimely, even risky. In this regard, writing about the new twenties is a daunting task in and of itself. And yet, the 2020s are already a fascinating decade, eventful in anticipated and unprecedented ways, inspiring hope and despair, much like the 1920s. Aware of the inherent limitations of the task—to chronicle and interpret an ongoing decade in the span of a few pages—this special issue aims not to provide definitive answers and normative theorizations of the present, but to deepen our understanding of it, to unveil undercurrents that lead American literature to new horizons, and to articulate notions, values, and concerns that characterize the "new twenties."

In the framework of this study, "the new twenties" are understood as a temporal context whose capacity to influence social, political, and artistic literary developments of scale parallels that of the 1920s. While it is impossible to disengage a decade completely from its preceding one—the 2020s begin in the 2010s in the same way the 1960s begin in the 1950s—the magnitude of events and transformations warrants an investigation that situates them within the tight, but still porous enough, chronological framework of a decade. And although the 2020s have not elapsed, the occurrences and developments of the first five years already mark the 2020s as a distinct decade. Before turning to the literary landscape, I will go into more detail about the historical, social, and cultural context of the 1920s and the 2020s to conjure up key ideas, developments, and innovations, noting the critical register associated with them.

Decades of Change and the Challenges of Hope

The 1920s are often characterized by a fervent desire to break away from traditions of the past, to leave behind the moral and physical devastation of World War I and of the influenza pandemic, to reach new social and artistic frontiers, and usher in the new, urban lifestyle promised by the modern cities. The spirit of expanding economic opportunities and the impact of

inventions such as the automobile, electricity, and the radio profoundly changed the reality of Americans, feeding a sense of unchecked optimism, where everything seemed possible. The planning and construction of iconic Art Deco buildings such as the Chrysler Building (1929) and the Empire State Building (1930-1931), transformed the New York City skyline and introduced the skyscraper race. The decade started with the nineteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting white women the right to vote, transforming the fabric of American society and introducing the flappers as a symbol of modernity and progress. While Prohibition, bootlegging, and speakeasies are commonly portrayed as hallmarks of urban life in the 1920s, the shift toward urbanization was equally defined by alienation, anxiety, and altered perceptions of space and time. Charles Lindbergh's historic solo, non-stop transatlantic flight from New York to Paris in 1927, revolutionized aviation and traveling. The age of mechanical reproduction brought innovations in transportation, print culture, and art, while the rise of photography seemed to displace established perceptions of high art and mass production, triggering questions about "authenticity" and a lost sense of "aura" (Benjamin).

The predominant optimism of the decade obscured the social and environmental vulnerabilities of change. The Scopes Trial (1925) revealed the gap between scientific progress (represented by Darwin's theory of evolution) and traditional conservative values. The Tulsa Race Massacre (1921) and the march of 40,000 Ku Klux Klan members on Washington D.C. in support of white supremacy (1925) showed that modern progress had not eroded the legacies of racial discrimination. In addition, The Miami Hurricane (1926) and The Great Mississippi Flood (1927) served as early warnings of environmental fragility in the face of relentless human activity. The spirit of the 1920s famously ended with the Wall Street crash of October 1929, which marked the beginning of the Great Depression. Despite the shocking collapse of the market and the contradictions of modernity, the 1920s are still viewed through the lens of prosperity and progress.

A century later, the world enters the second half of the 2020s amid the rise of Artificial Intelligence, the pressing urgency of climate change, increased political instability, and a developing reality of misinformation and deep fakes, all in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, the prospect of the first female President was once again "deferred" (in the words of Langston Hughes from "Harlem") and replaced by the re-election of President Donald J. Trump. The ensuing months have sparked extraordinary controversy, with actions that imposed restrictions on academic freedom, the militarization of borders, ICE raids in American cities and televised deportations, contentious budget decisions, the banning of nearly 16,000 books from public schools in several states (Tolin), and the fleeing of researchers to other countries. The beginning of the decade also witnessed the attack on the US capitol, shaking the foundations of American democracy and interrogating the tradition of a peaceful transfer of power. In early 2025, President Trump's Executive Order ("Ending Radical and Wasteful") to end programs centered on diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI) and other actions taken towards the dismantling of the Department of Education raised questions regarding the defining values of the country and the federal government's priorities for social progress, education, and research.¹

The 2020s are also defined by increased tensions in American society, making the lines of division more rigid. The issue of police brutality picked up steam in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, intensifying social unrest relating to the enduring issues of reproductive freedom, gun violence, economic inequality, immigration policy, and access to health-care. Meanwhile, the transition to a fully-fledged digital age has been accelerated by the pandemic and the rise of open-access AI technologies, creating enormous opportunities but also widening the chasm between digitally literate generations and social groups. Against this backdrop, the end of the 2020s harbors a host of ambivalent emotions, eliciting promises as much as fears.

The question of how American literature responds to this reality, and which connecting threads between contemporary and modernist writing of the 1920s can assist in our understanding of the new twenties, will form the subject of the next section.

American Writing Amid Transformations and Crises

The literary landscape of the 1920s was characterized by richness, fragmentation, polarization, and innovation. The work of T. S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound, among others, sought to depict the frenzy and disillusionment of the decade, emphasizing the effect of social transformations on individual experience.² Texts such as *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *The Wasteland* (1922), and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) would come to define American writing of the 1920s and inspire generations of writers and readers. Autobiographies of “the lost generation” chronicled the life and concerns of American expatriates living mainly in Paris,³ while Harlem Renaissance figures like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston started making their mark, their literature intertwined with the frantic pace of jazz music and the richness of the African-American cultural heritage. Experiments with textual form, design, and viscosity acted as conduits for cultural expression and artistic renewal, pushing literature to boundaries that are still explored today.

In many ways, writing in the 1920s involved engaging closely with the transformative media environment of the time, integrating emerging cultural traditions into prose writing, and rendering the rapidly changing social structures in renewed ideas of fictional form. A hundred years later, the 2020s, or “new twenties”, are seeing American fiction engaging closely with social issues, often of a global scale, venturing for more inclusive narrative practices, and exhibiting growing experimentation with textual form and media, part of which is starting to become established.

Though I do not claim that literary engagement with social issues is exclusive to the present decade, the magnitude of issues accelerated by public involvement across media platforms seems to propel authors to explore burning questions of our time through the affordances, and liberties, of fiction. The challenges of unmediated communication in the digital age became the subject of Don DeLillo's *The Silence* (2020), whose depiction of a digital breakdown functioned as a fitting—but not deliberate—portrayal of social distancing during the onset of the pandemic. Responding to the migration crisis at the US-Mexico border,

Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2020) sparked a great deal of controversy over the author's right to tell the story, unlike Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (2019), which articulated the delicate position of documenting the crisis partly through its multimodal narrative content, urging the reader to bear witness with a combination of immediacy and multiplicity. Focusing on social injustice, drug use, and poverty in rural America, Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead* (2022) re-imagined Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*. Indicative of a larger corpus, these texts attempt to balance historical accuracy, social justice, and fictional storytelling. Literary responses to the unsettling social realities of the early 2020s—particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the murder of George Floyd—has prompted Sari Altschuler and Thomas Constantinesco to devote a special issue of *American Literature* to the “multiplicity” of pain, suggesting “a paradigm shift in the broader cultural understanding of pain after 2020” (142, 144).

To restore historical justice and promote more inclusive narrative practices, several novels have tended to the ethics of representation. Percival Everett won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *James* (2024), a novel that re-imagines Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), by placing Jim, a runaway slave, in the role of the narrator, granting him voice and agency. Inspired by characters steeped in the history of American literature, *James* interrogates morality and duty, while revealing the underpinnings of language use by the characters. Jayne Anne Phillips's *Night Watch* (2023) portrays the emotional repercussions of post-Civil War America, focusing on race, trauma, and mental health. Different from Everett's form of inclusivity, Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby* (2021) offers an intimate exploration of gender and trans life. The debut novel *There, There* (2019) by Tommy Orange follows the experiences of a cast of Native American characters in urban contexts, emphasizing diversity, cultural tradition, and historical burden. Louise Erdrich delved deeply into her grandfather's letters on the Termination policies of the mid-twentieth century, which sought to end the special relationship between Native Americans and the federal government.⁴ Her novel, *The Night Watchman* (2020), became an exploration of family legacy, cultural community, and the entangled histories of displacement.

At the same time, we are also witnessing a greater openness of fiction to extra-linguistic material: encountering maps in the frontispieces of novels is increasingly becoming more common, while coming across remediated (Bolter and Grusin) photographs, handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, emails, reports (even music scores!), is no longer out of the ordinary, verging on gimmickry, or being part of a deluxe or limited artistic edition. Here, I am not referring to novels that overtly experiment with narrative content, such as Rian Hughes's *XX* (2020) or Daniel James's *The Unauthorised Biography of Ezra Maas* (2022); perhaps not even to the presence of redacted text in Justin Torres's *Blackouts* (2023) or to Catherine Lacey's experimentation with the linearity of the reading experience in *The Moebius Book* (2025). What I am referring to is the openness of fiction to include elements outside the bounds of verbal text, either in modified form, “drained” of design and contextual properties, or represented, in part of course, *with them*.⁵ With regard to the history of literary experimentation with other media forms, I agree with Jørgen Bruhn's observation in *The Intermediality of Narrative Liter-*

ature: *Medialities Matter* (2016) that “literature has always been under the influence of other medialities, even well before the digital era” (5). But the current flexibility I am discussing here can be attributed, in part, to the influence of multimodal fiction, a genre that rose in the early twenty-first century and pushed the boundaries of narrative content, reconceptualizing the notion of a literary text by utilizing the meaning-making capacity of design, layout, color, and images, among others.⁶ Moreover, it is the outcome of innovative book production, the transformative capacity of open-access software and digital publishing, and the flexibility of the book medium in “hosting” a multitude of re-mediations and literary experiments. No longer confined by a (purported) sense of uniformity and standardized conventions of black type on white pages, “books manifest their heterogeneity thematically, medially, visually, and commercially” (1) as Sjöberg et al. observe in their introduction to *The Experimental Book Object: Materiality, Media, Design* (2024). In this regard, and in light of the very different framework within which contemporary literature is produced, I find it difficult to agree with Mat Graham’s suggestion in *Postmodernism, Twenty-First Century Culture, and American Fiction* (2025) of a “postmodern continuum stretching into the twenty-first century” (2). Instead, I side with Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen’s observation of an “‘upcycling’ of past styles, conventions and techniques” (10).

What seemed “experimental” between 2000 and 2015, is currently starting to seem rather ordinary; a natural “transfer” of information technologies across media that emulates the real-life experience of navigating information of various modes across communication platforms. Hernan Diaz’s *Trust* (2022) includes four different book covers within the actual cover to signal the different perspectives from which the story is told, but this practice does not seem experimental, in part due to its discreet design, which blurs the boundaries between covers, title pages, and book chapters. While *Trust*’s multiple narrators hint at modernist experiments in fiction (see William Faulkner’s *Absalom Absalom!* for instance), the embedding of multiple covers seems to be a “product” of the present moment in literary writing and book publishing. As is Library of America’s *The Annotated Great Gatsby: 100th Anniversary Deluxe Edition*, which features photographs and illustrations of the Jazz age, extensive annotations to the original text, letters between Fitzgerald and the editor Maxwell Perkins, newspaper reviews and other material from Fitzgerald’s scrapbooks, and all sorts of details surrounding the composition and editing of this seminal American text. Encouraging the reader “to linger in the margins,” this richly illustrated edition enables a more profound understanding of Fitzgerald’s text, as well as the reality of the roaring twenties it depicts. And yet, although this is a special edition, it would not be impossible to imagine lines of literary texts published in a similar form in the coming years: the text could increasingly take the role of a central node in a network of media, displaying elements of its inception in the book’s pages and enabling connectivity to an array of cultural sources, archival or contemporary. For some, this is precisely the fantasy that the newly introduced interactive e-books are trying to fulfil. While for others, this kind of information overload and multiple connectivity may obliterate the fundamental function of literature to create a fictional world only through the power of words, and effectively transport the reader into it.

For the publishing industry, the 2020s have been characterized by corporate reshufflings, the dominance of the “Big Five,”⁷ and the rise of audiobooks alongside the resilience of print. Meanwhile, the advent of AI technologies presented new challenges and debates, revisiting notions of authorship and continuously demanding policy adaptations. Concerns over environmental impact have led to “greener” production practices, where sustainably sourced, certified, recycled, or “acid-free” paper is more widely used, and formats such as print-on-demand are becoming standardized in an effort to minimize the environmental footprint. More than being environmentally responsible and attuned to AI technologies, literary production of the new twenties is bound to be marked by increased pressure from both domains. In writing and theorizing the new twenties, the very “fictionality” (Ghosal and Gibbons) of literature ought to be reconsidered, what it means to write in fictional terms in the midst of post-truth politics, alternative facts, and AI slop.

But while the digital age has brought new modes and platforms for reading, the act of reading literature is beginning to face tremendous challenges. An article by Rose Horowitz in *The Atlantic* recently highlighted the challenges of Ivy League students to complete the reading of a single novel, forcing lecturers to assign shorter reading material to students, who reportedly get easily distracted and overwhelmed. As the practice of thinning out syllabi and the culture of “2-minute-read” articles gain prominence, fundamental traditions of deep concentration and immersive reading are increasingly challenged. In sum, literature seems to be already impacted by the reading habits of the early 2020s. Students may be attracted by experimentation and fresh ways of rethinking the value of literature, but can, for instance, Danielewski’s new novel, *Tom’s Crossing* (2025), sustain readerly engagement across 1,232 pages? Are “megatexts” (Fest) one of literature’s responses to big data and digital co-authorship? Though literature is already thematically engaging with the arrival of big data and the creation of digital archives, as Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen rightly observe in “Literature in the New Archival Landscape,” these engagements, if accompanied by formal experiments in fiction, are also bound to give rise to a new set of reading experiences that shape critical soft skills for the digital age. Therefore, while literature is redefining its social purpose and formally re-inventing itself across media, it would not be unlikely that the current shifting practices of reading will lead to a more rigid division between “high” literature and literature for entertainment, this time less induced by modernist ideological foundations but symptomatic of digital screens and the marginalization of the humanities. Peter Childs describes modernism as “a literature of not just change but crisis” (16). With the humanities currently in crisis all around the globe and reading in crisis, is literature also in (yet another) crisis, before it picks up again?

The essays collected in this special issue illustrate the enduring relevance of the 1920s to our understanding of contemporary American writing, bringing forth the distinctive characteristics of the literary landscape and observing what it means to write “the new twenties.”

Contributions to this special issue

In “‘Make It New’: Echoes of Change in American Literature Across a Century,” **Irakli Tskhvediani** conducts a comparative analysis between the roaring twenties and the 2020s, noting that “both eras are periods of intense transformation, and their literatures are marked by a shared impulse to reinterpret cultural traditions, challenge narrative conventions, and reimagine the possibilities of form and voice.” Tskhvediani structures his analysis around four main pillars: fragmentation and formal innovation; identity and the self; race, power, and the American dream; and time, memory, and history. His essay brings together the modernist literature of T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner with the recent work of Ocean Vuong, Claudia Rankine, and Jennifer Egan, among others, that despite stemming from differing conceptual points of departure and yielding heterogeneous literary outcomes, shape a trajectory of American writing that remains committed to experimentation with form.

Tskhvediani emphasizes the shifting contours of American literature, noting the move from modernist fragmentation to “reparative narration,” from individual disillusionment and urban alienation to systemic critique and fractured identities, from aesthetic non-linearity to the “politicization” of time, and from the myth of the American dream to the legacies of inter-generational trauma.

In “Multimodal Archives and Metamodern Narratives: Exploring the Archival Turn in the 21st Century,” **Elin Ivansson** sketches the archival turn in contemporary writing, tracing its development alongside that of multimodal literature. Ivansson argues that the archival turn draws on and expands earlier modernist and postmodernist engagements with the archive, revealing, among others, our perception of ourselves and the world in a time of information proliferation.

To demonstrate the convergence between archival fiction and metamodernism, Ivansson focuses on Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019), James Elkins’ *Weak in Comparison to Dreams: A Novel* (2023), and Catherine Lacey’s *Biography of X: A Counterfactual Archive* (2023). Her analysis reveals how these texts both engage with modernist and postmodernist concerns with authenticity, truth-value, and identity, and draw on archival poetics (a concept she expands in her monograph, *Contemporary Archival Fiction*) “to grapple with how to represent the contemporary experience of living in our current digital age.”

In the special issue’s third essay, “‘Let’s Sing It, Dance It, Write It, Paint It’: Revisiting Intermedial Life Writing in the Harlem Renaissance,” **Frank Mehring** reminds us that writing the 1920s involved more than, literally, textual writing. Turning his attention to the visual and performative work of Winold Reiss, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas, Mehring observes how the representation of the “New Negro” became a subject for balancing the tensions between cultural authenticity and literary market demands, emphasizing the dynamic nature of African-American identity, as transformed by cross-cultural exchange, transatlantic mobility, and modernist impulses.

Heavily influenced by methodologies of anthropology, Hurston’s collaboration with Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias to integrate his caricatures into her work resulted in a visual outcome that signaled the creativity of Harlem Renaissance and its ambition to create new

forms. By including music scores into *Mules and Men*, Hurston became a cultural mediator of folklore music, proposing hybridity over single-mode representation. The artwork of Aaron Douglas has become an iconic point of reference with regard to African-American community, but specifically his approach of representation through abstraction managed to “visualize the pulse of Harlem” and extend the possibilities of art forms and life writing in narrating Black life. The visual artistic components extended the capacity of life writing to represent the changing identity of the “New Negro,” and emphasized a perception of African-American heritage as the outcome of dynamic cultural exchange and hybrid expression.

The special issue will conclude with an essay by **Hans Bak** that addresses the ongoing presence of the 1920s in contemporary literary perspectives and archival research. In “Contesting the 1920s: Malcolm Cowley versus Kay Boyle, John Glassco, Katherine Anne Porter – and Robert McAlmon,” Bak probes deep into archival correspondence to reveal the contested perspectives of the 1920s, as expressed by important figures associated with literary modernism. Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return* (1934) was met with controversy for portraying a version of “lost generation” that was short-sighted and not inclusive, according to Kay Boyle.

Although Bak contends that Cowley’s text “established a larger design of literary historical analysis and cultural interpretation,” his examination of print private correspondence reveals “a multiperspectival if not always consonant autobiographical and historical record of the experience of expatriation that had been the foundational impulse of American literary modernism.” In doing so, his essay demonstrates the continuing relevance of the 1920s and literary modernism to current theorizations of the present moment in American fiction that transcend boundaries and assume a global dimension.

Taken together, the contributions in this special issue frame American writing of the 1920s as a dynamic continuum that is neither marked by a fracture with the past nor appears disengaged from its turbulent socio-political present. Rather, American literature expands its tradition of formal experimentation and steers its textual innovations towards historical justice, inclusive representation, and incisive political critique. Drawing attention to echoes of the 1920s in the current literary landscape, *Writing the New Twenties* examines “the new twenties” through the lens of a seminal decade in the history of American literature.

Notes

¹ Tensions escalated in the cases of Columbia University and Harvard University, where the open conflict with the Trump administration resulted in funding cuts, police intervention on campuses, fines, and concessions.

² Although writing of the time was heavily focused on representations of urban life, with *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Great Gatsby* being two apparent examples, “American modernism was far wider than an anatomy of the metropolis” (Childs 90).

³ See Ernest Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (1934).

Notes

⁴ Further information can be accessed here: <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/bia/termination>.

⁵ To clarify, by modified form I mean representing only the verbal content of sources and typically encasing it in a frame to separate it from the “main” text as in the case of Alex Foster’s *Circular Motion* (2025), which depicts email communication, court proceedings, and meeting minutes using the same typeface and design as the rest of the book. Whereas when referring to the representation of content that bears part of its original design, I have in mind the faux academic journals in Alice Winn’s *In Memoriam* (2023), the handwritten notes in Ransom Riggs’s book series *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* (2011–2021), and the chat communication in Ana Huang’s *The Striker* (2024).

⁶ While a walk in a local bookstore will also reveal a current trend of multi-colored sprayed edges in books, these serve mainly marketing and not narrative purposes.

⁷ Reference here is to Hachette Book Group, HarperCollins Publishers, Macmillan Publishers, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. In terms of retail distribution, Amazon’s dominance has been intensified by the acquisition of companies such as Book Depository, which ceased its operations in 2023.

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