

“Make It New”: Echoes of Change in U.S. American Literature Across a Century

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Abstract

This essay offers a comparative study of U.S. American literature in the 1920s and the 2020s through the lens of Ezra Pound’s modernist injunction to “make it new.” It examines how writers in both periods respond to moments of profound social, cultural, and technological transformation by reimagining literary form, voice, and subject matter. The analysis is divided into 4 different sections—Fragmentation and Formal Innovation; Identity and the Self; Race, Power, and the American Dream; and Time, Memory, and History—highlighting how each era negotiates the tension between continuity and rupture. In the 1920s, modernists such as T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald broke with linear narrative and conventional representation to address postwar disillusionment and cultural instability. In the 2020s, authors including Claudia Rankine, Ocean Vuong, Colson Whitehead, Jennifer Egan, and Percival Everett employ hybrid forms, multimedia structures, and intersectional perspectives to confront racial injustice, climate crisis, queer identity, and the digital transformation of experience. While modernist fragmentation often sought aesthetic mastery and mythic coherence, contemporary fragmentation embraces instability as both political stance and artistic method. The essay argues that “making it new” in the twenty-first century entails ethical as well as aesthetic innovation, with literature functioning as a site for historical recovery, social critique, and the rearticulation of marginalized voices. Over the course of a century, the drive to reshape persists, yet the “new” now emerges as a palimpsest—layered over inherited forms, in dialogue with the past, yet attuned to the urgencies of the present.

Keywords

Modernism; Contemporary American Literature; Fragmentation; Identity; Race; Memory; Literary Renewal.

Introduction

In the shifting landscapes of U.S. American literature, few phrases resonate as persistently as Ezra Pound’s modernist mandate: “Make it new.” The phrase, associated with Pound’s modernist ethos, carries both visionary potential and troubling affiliations.¹ Emerging in the late 1920s,² it was transformed into a hallmark of modernist aesthetics in the 1930s, particularly with the publication of Pound’s essay collection *Make It New* (1934), which gathered essays and notes written between 1908 and 1931.³ It was not initially about radical innovation in poetic form per se, but rather about rejuvenating tradition through translation, especially from classical and non-Western sources. The nature of novelty in this context should not be oversimplified as a mere call for innovation for its own sake or the total rejection of conventional forms—though it has often been misinterpreted that way. Pound’s encouragement to “make it new” emphasized not rupture but revitalization—an effort to recover, refine, and reanimate tradition through deliberate acts of selection and transformation. As Michael North argues, the phrase functions less as a rallying cry for radical change than as a form of “historical recycling,” grounded in continuity rather than discontinuity. Pound’s conception of the “new” was shaped by what North describes as a “dense palimpsest of historical ideas,” resisting the reduction of modernism to a purely revolutionary break. The emphasis, then, lies not on novelty itself, but on what North variably refers to as “the tradition of cultural rediscovery and rebirth,” “recombinations of traditional elements,” and “the sense of historical recurrence.” When modernism is reduced to a slogan, this nuanced engagement with tradition risks being erased—flattening a movement that, paradoxically, sought to make the old new again. As Thomas Stearns Eliot underscores, Pound’s work was driven not merely by aesthetic rupture but by the deeper aim of literary renewal:

Whether Pound is giving his attention to the enunciation of general principles, or to the reassessment of neglected authors and to expounding neglected literatures, or whether he is advertising the merits of new writers . . . the motive is fundamentally the same: the refreshment, revitalization, and ‘making new’ of literature in our own time. (“Introduction” xii-xiii)

Initially associated with what Hugh Kenner describes as “Pound’s translating activities” (99), over time the phrase acquired a broader cultural resonance, coming to symbolize modernism’s general drive toward renewal, reinvention, and transformation. It has come to encapsulate not only a stylistic ethos but also a historical cycle—one in which literature is periodically compelled to reinvent itself in response to social upheaval, technological change, and cultural redefinition. This essay examines how American literature in two pivotal decades—the 1920s and the 2020s—has engaged with the complexities embedded in the phrase “make it new,” particularly as they manifest through the dialectic of old and new, continuity and rupture, inheritance and transformation. Though separated by a century, 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.

The 1920s, often referred to as the “Roaring Twenties,” was a decade defined by the aftershocks of World War I, the rise of urban modernity, and the fragmentation of established cultural certainties. Writers such as T. S. Eliot, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner turned to modernist experimentation to capture a world in flux. Fragmentation, interiority, ambiguity, and allusiveness became hallmarks of a literature that no longer trusted linear narrative or stable meaning. In this period, literary innovation was both a response to crisis and an assertion of new artistic autonomy.

One hundred years later, American literature in the 2020s faces a different but equally urgent set of challenges. The proliferation of digital media, the climate crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, renewed movements for racial justice, and the destabilization of truth in the post-truth era have compelled writers to once again reimagine the role and shape of literature. Figures such as Claudia Rankine, Ocean Vuong, Colson Whitehead, and Jennifer Egan employ hybrid forms, multimedia techniques, and non-linear storytelling to address the complexity of identity, systemic inequality, and the fragmented nature of experience in the digital age. Their work recalls modernist innovation but is rooted in contemporary concerns, particularly those shaped by intersectionality and cultural pluralism. This essay provides a comparative analysis of literature from these two decades, structured around four central thematic concerns: Fragmentation and Formal Innovation; Identity and the Self; Race, Power, and the American Dream; and Time, Memory, and History. Each section offers an in-depth exploration of how writers in the 1920s and the 2020s engaged with the challenge of “making it new” in both form and theme. By placing these works in dialogue across time, the essay not only highlights continuities in literary innovation but also underscores the ways in which literature remains a dynamic and evolving response to the crises and possibilities of its moment. While the focus here is on the 1920s and the 2020s, the creative momentum of any given decade often begins in the preceding years, as artistic sensibilities gather force before crystallizing into defining works. Several of the works discussed originate in the 1910s or the 2010s, reflecting the fact that artistic movements and cultural shifts rarely align neatly with calendar decades. “Making it new” is never bound to a rigid chronology. Rather, it unfolds as an ongoing process of transformation in which renewal draws upon the lingering energies of the past even as it anticipates the contours of the future.

Fragmentation and Formal Innovation

The 1920s ushered in a significant shift in American literature, driven by the disillusionment that followed World War I and the rapid modernization of society. Writers of this decade, largely associated with the modernist movement, responded to the perceived collapse of traditional values and epistemologies by radically reimagining literary form. Fragmentation—of narrative, perspective, temporality, and meaning—became one of modernism’s defining features, reflecting a world fractured by war, industrialization, and urban alienation. In the 2020s, a century later, American literature once again turns to fragmentation, though now shaped by the pressures of digital culture, racial reckoning, (post)pandemic reality, and the multiplicity of identity. While the motivations and methods differ, the impulse to “make it new” through formal innovation unites both periods.

T. S. Eliot's poetic practice, deeply informed by his belief in the continuum of literary history, balances reverence with rupture.⁴ *The Waste Land* (1922), the quintessential modernist text composed in the aftermath of the Great War, eschews linear narrative in favor of a collage of voices, languages, and allusions. Eliot constructs a poetic world that resists coherence, instead foregrounding cultural and spiritual disintegration. Eliot's theory of impersonality, articulated in his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), famously argued that the poet's personality should be “a catalyst,” not the substance, of the poem (42). This notion informs his use of fragmented voices and masks in *The Waste Land*, emphasizing a poetics of detachment and multiplicity. The line “These fragments I have shored against my ruins” (Eliot, *The Waste Land* 22) epitomizes the poem's self-awareness of its own fragmentation. The poem is built from remnants—of myth, history, high and low culture—and its form mirrors the very breakdown it laments. As Michael Levenson argues, “the poem becomes not a solution to disintegration but a testimony of it” (64).

Likewise, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), though predating the decade, greatly influenced the 1920s avant-garde. Stein breaks with conventional syntax and linearity, producing texts that revel in ambiguity and repetition. Her experiments with repetition and disjunction reveal a poetics of perception rather than representation.⁵ In passages like “A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing” (Stein 3), Stein undermines referential meaning, turning attention instead to the texture and rhythm of language. Her work reflects a Cubist sensibility⁶—language fractured and reassembled, much like Picasso's paintings, to reveal multiple simultaneous perspectives. Stein's prose was a rebellion against the rigid expectations of literary realism and an assertion that meaning could emerge from disorientation.

Beyond her formal experimentation, Gertrude Stein helped shape the cultural and psychological identity of her era. Her coinage of the term “lost generation”—applied to Ernest Hemingway and his contemporaries and later popularized by Hemingway in the epigraph to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)—became a durable shorthand for the post-World War I cohort of American writers disillusioned with their homeland's values. Hemingway's pared-down prose, with its emotional restraint and clipped syntax, mirrored the existential dislocation of that generation. While often praised for its masculine stoicism, his style has also been understood as a modernist exercise in symbolic compression—what Cleanth Brooks described as “the language of gesture rather than exposition” (128).

This sense of generational disorientation was not merely imposed from without, but often embraced from within. As Malcolm Cowley observed in *Exile's Return* (1934), many young writers embraced the identity of being “lost,” claiming their place among “the legion of the lost ones, the cohort of the damned” (35). Even so, Cowley conceded that such terms functioned as “half-accurate tags” (35), useful but reductive. As a cultural signifier, “lost generation” obscures the diversity and creative energy of the decade's intellectual life. The romanticized posture of exile, though evocative, narrows our understanding of a period marked less by despair than by artistic innovation. Writers like Stein, Eliot, Dos Passos, and Hemingway were not merely disillusioned but actively searching—experimenting with new

forms, vocabularies, and structures to capture the complexity of modern experience. In this light, their sense of “being lost” becomes secondary to their creative ambition—the drive, above all, to make it new.

William Faulkner represents another modernist innovator whose use of fragmentation redefined narrative form. In *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Faulkner employs multiple narrators and nonlinear chronology to depict the psychological complexity of the Compson family. The first section, narrated by Benjy, a cognitively disabled character, dissolves time and perspective, immersing the reader in a fragmented consciousness. The technique of stream of consciousness allowed Faulkner to explore the internal chaos of his characters, revealing how memory and trauma distort reality. His disrupted timelines and stream-of-consciousness technique dramatize memory as mutable and recursive. His modernism is deeply internalized, focusing on the fragmentation of individual perception and familial disintegration in the American South.

While Faulkner turns inward to chart the fragmentation of consciousness, John Dos Passos directs modernist experimentation outward, towards the sprawling dynamics of urban life. His novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) exemplifies modernism’s urban fragmentation through its kaleidoscopic structure and cinematic montage. The novel weaves together a mosaic of loosely connected characters, headlines, interior monologues, and urban imagery, capturing the disorientation of modern life in New York City. As David Harvey argues, the fragmented modernist form often mirrors the “discontinuous, disorienting spatial experience of capitalist urbanism” (25), a point vividly illustrated in Dos Passos’s narrative cartography of New York City. Dos Passos’s approach, drawing on techniques from film and journalism, mirrors the formal rupture seen in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* but applies it to prose. His innovation lies not only in narrative form but also in content, revealing how capitalist modernity atomizes social experience and dissolves coherent identity.

In the 2020s, fragmentation remains a prominent formal strategy, though it reflects a different set of cultural anxieties. As Richard Gray has argued in the context of post-9/11 fiction, recent American literature often “repeats the form of trauma itself—disjunctive, recursive, and incomplete” (135), a formal echo we can trace to writers like Claudia Rankine and Colson Whitehead. The rupture is less about the breakdown of Western civilization and more about the fracturing of identity, the instability of truth, and the overwhelming velocity of the digital world. Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) exemplifies this. Written as a letter from a queer Vietnamese American son to his illiterate mother, the novel breaks genre boundaries—part memoir, part novel, part epistolary confession. The narrative does not follow a linear plot but unfolds through lyrical vignettes that jump across time, memory, and place. Vuong’s text embodies a form of lyrical hybridity—melding poetry and prose, memory and invention—where fragmented narrative becomes a mode of survival and self-fashioning. Vuong draws upon queer and diasporic poetics to construct a fragmented but luminous memoir-novel.⁷ He writes, “Dear Ma, I am writing to reach you—even if each word I put down is one word further from where you are” (Vuong 3). Critics such as Cathy Park Hong have noted Vuong’s use of fragmentation as a formal register for the diasporic

experience—at once poetic, traumatic, and nonlinear. The text itself enacts the impossibility of a cohesive self, fragmented by trauma, displacement, and queerness. Vuong’s form reflects his subject: a fractured family history transmitted through an incomplete cultural and linguistic inheritance. Christopher Gonzalez suggests that Vuong’s lyric form, while intensely personal, “invokes a kind of neo-modernist disruption,” pushing language toward its emotional and structural limits (147).

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) is another powerful example of twenty-first-century fragmentation. Blending poetry, essay, visual imagery, and cultural criticism, Rankine constructs a hybrid form to address the pervasive microaggressions and racial violence experienced by Black Americans. The use of the second person (“you”) creates a disorienting narrative intimacy that implicates both the reader and the speaker. Rankine intersperses historical events, art pieces, and contemporary cultural references, creating a text that mirrors the fractured, nonlinear experience of Black life in America. As Rankine puts it, “because white men can’t/ police their imagination/ Black men are dying” (135). The form of *Citizen* is itself a response to systemic violence⁸—it refuses closure, coherence, or catharsis.

One of the key differences between modernist and contemporary fragmentation lies in their respective aims. Modernists like Eliot and Faulkner sought to reflect disorder but also to reconstruct meaning through myth, depth, and structure. Despite their fragmentation, many modernist works retain a belief in artistic mastery and coherence—Eliot’s use of mythic structure (e.g., the Grail quest)⁹ or Joyce’s invocation of Homeric parallels in *Ulysses* (1922) attest to this. Contemporary writers, by contrast, often embrace the instability of meaning as a political and aesthetic stance. Fragmentation is not something to be overcome but something to dwell within—a way to bear witness to the disintegration of language, identity, and narrative under the pressure of lived experience.

Moreover, the sources of fragmentation have shifted. While modernists responded to industrialization and the trauma of war, contemporary authors write within a hyper-mediated, post-truth, globalized reality. Digital culture—tweets, texts, screenshots—invites a mode of reading and writing that is inherently nonlinear. Jennifer Egan’s *The Candy House* (2022), a loose sequel to her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), exemplifies this. Egan uses multiple narrators, fragmented timelines, PowerPoint presentations, and algorithmic logic to explore memory, data, and consciousness in the age of surveillance. The novel’s structure imitates the user experience of the internet: fragmented, fluid, and constantly shifting. As one character notes, “But knowing everything is too much like knowing nothing; without a story, it’s all just information” (Egan 333).

These formal innovations echo modernist experimentation but adapt it to the conditions of twenty-first-century life. While the modernists were responding to the fragmentation of public life and cultural narratives, contemporary writers contend with the fragmentation of private identity and virtual reality. The self is no longer unified or stable but dispersed across platforms, constructed through hashtags, and mediated by code.

In both the 1920s and the 2020s, then, fragmentation serves as more than a stylistic device. It becomes an epistemological and ethical strategy—a way of challenging dominant narratives, resisting commodified coherence, and representing the inexpressible. As Fredric Jameson notes, postmodern fragmentation often reflects the “waning of affect” (10), but contemporary writers like Vuong and Rankine reinject emotional and political urgency into disjointed form.

Ultimately, the formal fragmentation of American literature in these two decades underscores the enduring power of disruption. Whether it is Eliot’s shattered myths or Rankine’s fractured lyric, American writers continue to reimagine the possibilities of form in response to cultural rupture. To “make it new” is not merely to innovate but to break, scatter, and reassemble the pieces in search of something that might still speak.

Identity and the Self

The interrogation of identity—its construction, fragmentation, and performance—lies at the heart of much of the most compelling literature in both the 1920s and the 2020s. In each era, American writers grappled with shifting definitions of the self, shaped by profound cultural and societal changes. In the wake of World War I, modernist authors deconstructed the notion of a coherent, unified self, instead portraying consciousness as fractured, interior, and often alienated. A century later, contemporary authors build upon this legacy but address identity through the lenses of race, gender, sexuality, and digital embodiment. While modernist authors often universalized alienation, contemporary writers emphasize the social and political dimensions of identity, framing it as a site of negotiation, resistance, and reinvention.

Modernist interest in the multiplicity of identity is prefigured by Gertrude Stein’s linguistic experiments in *Three Lives* (1909) and *Tender Buttons*. Stein’s prose dismantles grammatical conventions and mimics the rhythm of thought rather than formal coherence. In doing so, she foregrounds how language itself constructs and destabilizes identity. As Lisa Ruddick observes, “Stein’s project was less about depicting characters than about unsettling the categories by which identity is commonly understood” (112).

Virginia Woolf—though British, was widely read in American literary circles—offered a foundational articulation of the modernist self as dynamic and internally fragmented. In *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), Woolf’s stream-of-consciousness technique dissolves the boundary between internal and external realities, rendering identity as fluid and multifaceted. The novel moves between Clarissa Dalloway’s present-day preparations for a party and her internal reflections on love, loss, and time. Clarissa’s sense of self emerges not from fixed traits but from fleeting sensations and shifting memories. Although Woolf’s narrative strategy is more aligned with psychological realism than radical rupture, it contributes to the modernist understanding of identity as temporally and emotionally contingent.

William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* offers an even more fragmented portrayal of the self. Through the consciousness of multiple narrators—each marked by trauma, cognitive difference, or obsession—Faulkner depicts subjectivity as inherently unstable. Benjy’s

section, in particular, challenges the reader to enter a world where time is collapsed and sensory impressions dictate experience. As Donald Kartiganer notes, “Faulkner’s innovation lies in his refusal to present a unified vision of the self, choosing instead to render consciousness as a collection of moments, associations, and ruptures” (57). The self, in Faulkner’s hands, becomes an assemblage of narrative traces, haunted by memory and shaped by familial and cultural decay. This very fragmentation and complexity have inspired modern “reimaginings” of the text that engage with the materiality of reading itself. Notably, the Folio Society’s 2012 edition of *The Sound and the Fury* uses 14 different ink colors in Benjy’s section to provide readers with a visual orientation through the shifting moments of consciousness. By utilizing this multi-colored typography, the edition not only pays homage to Faulkner’s formal innovation but also exploits contemporary print design to make the novel’s fractured temporality more accessible. This multisensory approach offers a tactile and visual counterpart to the disjointed narrative, inviting readers to navigate the instability of subjectivity through both narrative and visual cues.¹⁰

The 2020s expand this modernist legacy of dissociated subjectivity by integrating identity politics, intersectionality, and digital mediation into the literary exploration of the self. Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* exemplifies how identity in the contemporary era is shaped by trauma, migration, queerness, and linguistic dislocation. Written as a letter to a mother who cannot read, the novel positions language as both a bridge and a barrier. Vuong writes, “I am writing because they told me to never start a sentence with because. But I wasn’t trying to make a sentence—I was trying to break free” (104). Here, formal rebellion becomes a metaphor for identity formation: to exist authentically requires breaking free from inherited linguistic and cultural structures. The protagonist, Little Dog, navigates multiple selves—immigrant, son, queer lover, writer—none of which can be fully reconciled. Vuong’s lyricism and non-linear structure reflect the multiplicity of his identity, resisting any attempt at resolution.

Similarly, Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric* blurs the line between poetry, essay, and documentary to explore how racial identity is continually constructed through language, gaze, and microaggressions. The use of the second person implicates the reader in the construction of the “you” being described—often a Black subject rendered invisible or hypervisible within white spaces. Rankine writes, “You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed; he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there” (10). In this moment, identity is not merely a self-description but a condition imposed by social dynamics and power structures. Rankine’s text refuses to resolve these tensions, insisting instead on the unresolved and traumatic nature of racial identity in America.

Another crucial development in contemporary literature is the exploration of gender and fluid identity. Torrey Peters’s novel *Detransition, Baby* (2021) tells the story of Reese, a transgender woman who navigates motherhood and complex relational dynamics with Ames (formerly Amy), her detransitioned ex-partner. The novel’s form is conversational and non-linear, reflecting the instability and contingency of its characters’ understandings of gender.

Peters directly interrogates sexological frameworks such as “autogynephilia,” arguing that the concept collapses if trans women are understood as women rather than as a distinct category defined by deviation: “[...] term “autogynephilia” only works if you don’t think trans women are women. If you do, then you immediately see that the majority of women, cis or trans, are all autogynephiles, and that most men would be autoandrophiles—it’s not something special about trans women. Of course women are turned on by being women and men turned on by being men!” (142). In doing so, the novel exposes how medical and institutional language produces artificial distinctions between cis and trans bodies. Rather than treating gender as an essential or diagnostic property, Peters frames it as socially mediated and relational, shaped through recognition, desire, and interpretation. This challenges essentialist models of identity and instead foregrounds gender as something constructed within shifting social and narrative frameworks.

In the 2020s, identity is increasingly shaped by digital technologies. Jennifer Egan’s *The Candy House* explores how data, memory, and social media complicate selfhood in an age of surveillance and self-curation. The novel imagines a future in which people can upload their memories to a collective consciousness, effectively dissolving the boundary between public and private selves. Through fragmented narrative voices, algorithmic structures, and metafictional games, Egan presents identity as no longer solely psychological or cultural, but also digital. The self is not only performed but archived, analyzed, and repurposed. This hyper-mediated subjectivity stands in sharp contrast to the introspective solitude of modernist figures like Eliot’s Prufrock, yet both signal a crisis of authenticity and coherence.

Despite their differences, writers in both decades share an understanding that identity is not innate or fixed, but constructed through language, memory, and culture. The fragmentation of the self is not simply a formal innovation but a thematic concern rooted in lived experience. Where Faulkner and Stein use experimental narrative to depict alienation and psychological rupture, Vuong, Rankine, and Peters use similar strategies to interrogate structural inequality and collective trauma. The modernist self is fractured by war, dislocation, and modernity; the contemporary self is fractured by race, gender, migration, and digital multiplicity.

This evolution from universal to intersectional framings of identity reflects broader changes in American society and thought. While modernist authors often universalized alienation as a human condition, twenty-first-century writers emphasize the differential distribution of alienation along racial, gendered, and economic lines. In the 2020s, literature does not merely represent the self; it intervenes in the discourses that define and delimit it.

Thus, the literary portrayal of identity and the self in both decades reflects a continual reimagining of subjectivity. From stream of consciousness to hybrid memoirs, from linguistic experimentation to digital narration, American writers have sought new forms to express the complexities of being. In doing so, they affirm that to “make it new” means not only to innovate stylistically but to rearticulate what it means to be a self in a changing world.

Race, Power, and the American Dream

The American Dream—an aspirational ideal rooted in the promise of equal opportunity and upward mobility—has long functioned as both a defining narrative and a site of critique in U.S. literature. In both the 1920s and the 2020s, American authors have interrogated this myth, exposing how race and systemic power fundamentally shape who can access, embody, or even imagine that dream. While writers of the 1920s like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nella Larsen scrutinized the illusions and exclusions embedded in the dream, contemporary authors such as Colson Whitehead, Jesmyn Ward, and Brit Bennett emphasize its continued inequities, often with a deeper engagement in systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, and resistance. The racialized contours of the American Dream reveal a through-line of literary critique that binds these two centuries of writing, even as the strategies and focal points evolve.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) remains one of the most iconic examinations of the American Dream’s failure. Jay Gatsby’s relentless pursuit of wealth and status, in the hope of winning back Daisy Buchanan, becomes a parable for the hollowness at the core of the dream itself. Though often framed as a universal tragedy, Fitzgerald’s novel also points to the racial and class boundaries that undergird the dream. Gatsby, a nouveau riche outsider, is persistently denied legitimacy by old-money elites like Tom Buchanan, whose xenophobic ranting in the novel (“Have you read *The Rise of the Colored Empires* by this man Goddard?” (Fitzgerald 12)) reflects a broader anxiety about racial and social hierarchies being overturned. The dream, in this formulation, is not only inaccessible—it is violently guarded.

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) provides a more direct challenge to the racial exclusions of the American Dream. Through the intersecting lives of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry—two mixed-race women who navigate the racial color line in 1920s Harlem—Larsen exposes how race mediates access to social mobility, safety, and selfhood. Clare’s choice to “pass” as white affords her material security but estranges her from her community and, ultimately, leads to her ambiguous death. Larsen critiques not only the personal costs of racial performance but also the structural violence that makes such choices necessary. As Cheryl Wall notes, “Larsen’s depiction of passing critiques the social structures that compel racial dissemblance and the violence that underpins white privilege” (89). In contrast to Gatsby’s failed dream of romantic and economic redemption, *Passing* suggests that for African Americans, the dream may never have been possible at all.

Contemporary authors take up this legacy but often shift from individual disillusionment to systemic critique. Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys* (2019), based on the real-life Dozier School for Boys in Florida, centers on two young Black boys—Elwood and Turner—who are sent to a brutal reform school in the Jim Crow South. Elwood, inspired by the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., clings to a belief in justice and moral progress. Yet his idealism is crushed by the school’s institutionalized racism and physical abuse. Turner, more cynical, understands the system’s duplicity from the start. Whitehead writes, “Even in death, the world was an untrustworthy place” (*Nickel Boys* 180). Here, the American Dream is not simply deferred but dismantled. The novel critiques how institutions of supposed reform

perpetuate violence and racial subjugation, challenging any belief in moral or social progress as inherently linear or inclusive.

Similarly, Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017) examines the intergenerational legacies of racism and incarceration in the rural South. Through the voices of Jojo, his drug-addicted mother Leonie, and the ghost of a murdered boy named Richie, Ward constructs a narrative where personal trauma and national history are inextricably intertwined. The novel's setting—marked by poverty, addiction, and spectral memory—contrasts sharply with the upwardly mobile trajectory typically associated with the American Dream. Instead, Ward depicts how the past continues to inhabit the present, suggesting that trauma remains unresolved across generations, both literally and metaphorically. As Mam explains to Jojo, “when someone dies in a bad way, sometimes it's so awful even God can't bear to watch, and then half your spirit stays behind and wanders, wanting peace the way a thirsty man seeks water” (Ward 236). In this landscape, the past is not simply remembered—it persists as an active presence that shapes the living. Dreams of escape or renewal are therefore destabilized by inherited grief and the enduring effects of systemic neglect and racial violence.

Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020) revisits themes introduced by Larsen but within a contemporary frame. Spanning decades, the novel tells the story of twin sisters Desiree and Stella Vignes, who run away from their small, segregated Louisiana town. Stella ultimately chooses to pass as white and cuts ties with her family, while Desiree returns to raise her daughter in their Black community. The novel foregrounds how race is not only performed but structurally imposed, with consequences that reverberate across generations. Bennett writes, “The truth was, she'd chosen this life. It wasn't something that had simply happened to her, and her choices had splintered her family like kindling” (210). In contrast to the moral ambiguity of Larsen's Clare, Stella's decision is framed as both a survival tactic and a betrayal. Bennett's expansive, multi-generational narrative structure allows for a deeper exploration of how racial identity intersects with gender, class, and family, complicating simplistic narratives of escape or success.

What unites these contemporary texts is not merely a critique of the American Dream, but a reframing of what constitutes power and possibility in American life. In a departure from the modernist inwardness of the 1920s, 2020s authors often foreground structural conditions—racism, incarceration, capitalism—that determine individual agency. Their narratives insist that the dream cannot be reclaimed without a reckoning with historical injustice. Moreover, their formal choices—whether Ward's lyrical realism, Whitehead's historical excavation, or Bennett's braided timelines—reflect a refusal of linear, meritocratic narratives in favor of complexity, contradiction, and multiplicity.

There is also a notable shift in how resistance is portrayed. While Fitzgerald and Larsen portray the dream's collapse largely through personal tragedy, contemporary authors foreground community, memory, and survival as forms of resistance. Jojo's ability to hear and carry the stories of the dead in Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, for instance, offers a counternarrative to erasure. Similarly, Turner's survival in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*, and his decision to live in Elwood's name, becomes a quiet act of defiance against a

system that tried to annihilate them both. These authors suggest that while the American Dream may be broken, the act of storytelling itself—of bearing witness, of preserving memory—becomes a vehicle for resilience and, potentially, transformation.

Ultimately, literature from both decades reveals that the American Dream, as traditionally conceived, has always been unevenly distributed and violently policed. Yet, while the 1920s often emphasize its personal futility, the 2020s foreground collective experience and structural critique. Both periods demonstrate that to “make it new” is not just to innovate aesthetically, but to reimagine the terms by which American life—and literature—is understood and valued.

Time, Memory, and History

American literature has long grappled with the tension between individual memory and collective history, with writers employing both as narrative devices and thematic anchors. In the 1920s, modernist authors experimented with time as a way to reflect inner consciousness and subjective experience, often detaching characters from linear, historical frameworks. By contrast, many authors writing in the 2020s have returned to history with urgent intensity—particularly marginalized histories—foregrounding the relationship between personal memory and national trauma. These writers often reanimate forgotten or suppressed pasts, complicating the boundaries between remembrance and imagination. Thus, while both periods reflect temporal experimentation, their focal points diverge: the modernists’ interiority opposed to the contemporary writers’ ethical engagement with history as a living force.

T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a watermark of modernist poetry, exemplifies the fragmentation of time as both formal innovation and philosophical inquiry. The poem moves rapidly across epochs—from ancient fertility rites to World War I trauma—without coherence or clear resolution. Here, time is dislocated, reflecting not only cultural collapse but also the fractured psyche of modern man. Eliot’s intertextual layering of myths and literary allusions (from Chaucer to the *Upanishads*) creates a dense temporal mosaic, in which history becomes a ghostly echo rather than a linear narrative. In this modernist vision, history is not a source of progress or meaning, but a rubble heap from which fragments may or may not be salvaged.

In a more personal key, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* disrupts temporality to probe memory and loss.¹¹ The novel’s first section, narrated by Benjy Compson, a cognitively disabled man, collapses time entirely—events from different decades surface as simultaneous impressions. Faulkner’s innovative stream-of-consciousness technique dramatizes the instability of memory and its entanglement with grief. As Quentin, another narrator, ruminates, “I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire... I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then” (Faulkner 93). Faulkner thus articulates a modernist ambivalence toward time: it is both the measure of decay and a force to be resisted or transcended through art. However, the novel remains largely insular, using the collapse of Southern aristocracy as an allegory for cultural decline, without explicitly engaging with the broader racial and historical forces underpinning that decay.

By contrast, authors in the twenty-first century often approach time as a contested political terrain. Ocean Vuong’s *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*, for instance, frames memory as a process of reclamation. The novel takes the form of a letter from the narrator, Little Dog, to his illiterate mother, recounting his experiences as a queer Vietnamese American shaped by intergenerational trauma, war, and migration. Vuong writes, “Let no one mistake us for the fruit of violence—but that violence, having passed through the fruit, failed to spoil it” (88). Here, personal memory becomes a vehicle for reconstructing buried histories—not just of Vietnam or the refugee experience, but of queerness, language, and filial love. Vuong collapses temporal distance through poetic language, blending past and present into a single gesture of witness. The novel’s refusal to adhere to chronological progression reflects the psychological reality of trauma, where past events persist as living wounds.

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen: An American Lyric*—though slightly predating the 2020s, remains vital to contemporary discourse—likewise challenges linearity in favor of accumulative memory. Structured as a hybrid of prose poem, lyric essay, and visual collage, *Citizen* recounts microaggressions, racial violence, and media images, layering them into a collective record of Black American experience. Rankine incorporates documentary forms and multimedia into poetic narrative to articulate collective racial memory.¹² The present is haunted by the past; Trayvon Martin and Hurricane Katrina recur not as historical events but as ongoing conditions of American life. Rankine’s layering of present-tense racial encounters with references to historical violence has been linked to what Christina Sharpe calls “the afterlives of slavery” (5).

Rankine’s second-person address implicates the reader in this history: “You are you even before you/grow into understanding you are not anyone/worthless” (139). Time becomes recursive, not progressive—a loop in which injustice is neither past nor resolved. Through her cumulative, fragmented form, Rankine creates a temporal poetics of resistance, where remembrance is an act of confrontation.

Moreover, in contemporary speculative fiction and metafiction, time itself becomes a malleable medium for rethinking historical accountability. In *The Prophets* (2021), Robert Jones Jr. reconstructs a queer love story between two enslaved men on a Southern plantation. While the novel is primarily historical fiction, it periodically shifts into the voices of ancestors and descendants, collapsing time to create a chorus of witnesses. Jones writes, “Time was not a river but a circle. The ancestors did not sleep; they spoke. They remembered” (204).¹³ Similarly, in *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead reimagines American history through speculative and realist lenses, foregrounding the brutal legacies of slavery and systemic racism. Jones and Whitehead’s fictional narratives reconstruct silenced histories and reanimate enslaved and queer lives with psychological depth.¹⁴ This cyclical view of time offers both a critique of historical erasure and a reparation through narrative. Similarly, in *The Trees* (2021), Percival Everett merges satire, horror, and crime fiction to revisit the lynching of Emmett Till. As characters discover supernatural phenomena tied to racial violence, the novel refuses closure, suggesting that unacknowledged histories will continue to erupt into the present until they are faced.

Everett's project of rewriting and reframing American racial history continues in his *James* (2024), which returns to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of the enslaved Jim—renamed James—thereby centering a voice historically marginalized in U.S. literature. Everett reframes Twain's episodic river journey as an account of intellect, agency, and survival under slavery, exposing how the original novel's humor and vernacular often masked deep systemic violence. Through metafictional asides, linguistic play, and sharp satire, Everett interrogates both the literary canon and the cultural mythologies it sustains. As with *The Trees*, *James* refuses the comfort of historical distance: its protagonist's wit and self-awareness undercut racist caricature while illuminating the persistence of racial stereotypes in American consciousness. In doing so, Everett not only “makes new” a foundational American text but also insists that the American Dream, in its traditional form, was built on the erasure of Black subjectivity—a reality that must be rewritten to be reckoned with.

These contemporary works resist the modernist tendency to aestheticize historical rupture. Instead, they politicize time, arguing that the past is not only present but urgent. This approach is also evident in narrative structure: while modernists like Faulkner and Eliot emphasized disorientation and ambiguity, 2020s authors often balance experimental form with ethical clarity. The act of remembering—particularly for marginalized communities—is framed not just as a literary strategy but as an ethical imperative. The past must be named, narrated, and, when possible, repaired.

At the same time, contemporary writers are also more attentive to intersectionality and the layered temporality of identity. Vuong, Rankine, and Jones, for instance, write at the confluence of race, gender, sexuality, and diaspora, demonstrating how different histories operate on different clocks. Their work refuses a singular American narrative in favor of polyphonic temporalities—histories that interweave and diverge, that are lost, retrieved, or still unfolding. This approach marks a crucial evolution from modernist fragmentation toward what might be called reparative narration.

In sum, while the 1920s modernists destabilized time to reflect alienation and artistic rupture, the writers of the 2020s revisit time to reclaim histories and forge new solidarities. The modernist concern with interiority and loss gives way to a contemporary insistence on collective memory and historical justice. In both periods, time remains central—not merely as a theme, but as a structuring principle of narrative. Yet in the hands of today's writers, it becomes not a wasteland or a mausoleum, but a battleground for truth, accountability, and hope.

Conclusion: The New in the Now

Across a century of American literary production, the ethos of “make it new” has never faded—it has only shifted form. In the 1920s, modernist writers confronted a world shaken by war, modernization, and cultural upheaval, responding with stylistic experimentation, narrative fragmentation, and a deep skepticism toward traditional authority. Their revolution was formal as much as thematic, breaking open the literary canon to accommodate doubt,

despair, and reinvention. In the 2020s, American literature again finds itself in a period of significant change: racial reckoning, climate crisis, queer visibility, and digital life have reshaped not only the subjects that authors explore, but the voices and forms that dominate the page. As Mark Greif suggests, American literature unfolds in cycles of “rebellion and reflection,” where new generations both reject and unconsciously inherit the forms of the past (89). The question now is whether we are entering a cycle of renewal that will echo its predecessors—or diverge entirely.

This speculation invites us to look ahead. If the century-old rhythm holds, the decades to come may parallel the 1930s and '40s, when art was pressed into dialogue with political urgency, economic instability, and global conflict. The 2030s and '40s could see literature shift from radical experimentation toward modes of collective witness, ethical responsibility, and ideological struggle. Yet the unprecedented conditions of our own time—hyper-connectivity, climate precarity, and the erosion of a shared epistemic ground—suggest that the future may not simply replay the past. We could instead be entering a hybrid era in which rebellion and reflection operate simultaneously: the dismantling of inherited structures alongside the deep mining of cultural memory.

If the modernists disassembled time and language to reflect alienation, today's writers often do so to reclaim presence and power. Where modernists circled inward, today's authors often reach outward—toward community, memory, and change. Claudia Rankine's collage-like lyric, Ocean Vuong's poetic prose, and Colson Whitehead's genre experimentation are not only stylistic choices but acts of testimony. The innovations of the 2020s are shaped by different urgencies—social justice, inclusion, and historical recovery—yet they inherit the experimental spirit of the 1920s. Both periods privilege the new, but the new in our moment is often ethical as well as aesthetic: to tell stories long suppressed, to repair fractured narratives, to speak where silence once reigned.

Such hybridity makes the “new new” less an echo of the “old new” than a palimpsest—layers of innovation inscribed over the traces of prior revolutions. The arc from Eliot to Rankine, from Faulkner to Vuong, reveals a literature still in conversation with itself, still remaking the world with language. This continuity in the politics of form underscores that innovation is never purely aesthetic; it is also a stance toward the world.

To “make it new” in the twenty-first century, then, is not to break with the past entirely, nor to repeat it entirely, but to enter into an ongoing conversation where past and present continually refashion one another. The real challenge—and promise—of American literature in the decades to come will be to decide whether that conversation bends toward renewal that merely reflects the cycles we have seen before, or toward a transformation capable of altering the cycle itself.

Notes

¹ Pound’s own work and life were marked by fascist sympathies, complicating the legacy of literary innovation he promoted.

² The phrase “make it new” was popularized by Ezra Pound, though its origins trace back to a Confucian slogan, adding a layer of intercultural resonance to its modernist legacy. The expression is thought to derive from a Confucian anecdote about the Chinese Emperor Cheng Tang, who had the phrase inscribed on his washbasin as a daily exhortation to renewal. The first documented use of “make it new” by Pound appears in his 1928 translation of the foundational Confucian text *Da Xue*: “Renew thyself daily, utterly, make it new, and again new, make it new” (Pound, *Ta Hio* 12). Pound’s engagement with Confucian philosophy would eventually inform his broader aesthetic agenda.

³ As Clément Oudart notes: “Under the banner of radical change, Pound mixes old and new critical material of his [. . .]. Ironically, then, most of the material published under the arresting headline (*Make It New*) was fifteen to twenty years old and circulated in small journals when selected for a reprint” (par. 3).

⁴ Eliot’s own essays—particularly “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919)—frame his modernist poetics as simultaneously historical and innovative.

⁵ Stein’s stylistic innovation has been read as a challenge to normative syntax and patriarchal narrative form, as feminist critics like Marianne DeKoven have noted (70–74; 71).

⁶ Stein’s engagement with Cubism was influenced by her friendships with artists like Picasso and Braque, making her literary experiments analogous to Cubist visual art.

⁷ Ocean Vuong’s poetics is informed not only by modernist influence but also by diasporic and queer sensibilities shaped by 21st-century trauma.

⁸ Rankine’s *Citizen* has been discussed as an example of ‘lyric hybridity,’ combining elements of poetry, criticism, and visual art into a single, politically charged form.

⁹ The ‘Grail quest’ structure Eliot used was informed by Jessie L. Weston’s book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920).

¹⁰ More information can be found here: www.thewholebookexperience.com/2014/07/13/the-sound-and-the-fury-by-william-faulkner-published-by-the-folio-society/.

¹¹ Faulkner’s temporal experimentation aligns with Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée*, where time is experienced as psychological flow rather than clockwork sequence.

¹² Rankine’s use of visual media and documentary fragments echoes modernist collage but is repurposed for antiracist critique.

¹³ Cf. Faulkner’s concept of the past as never truly gone: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

¹⁴ The resurgence of speculative and historical fiction by authors like Robert Jones Jr. and Colson Whitehead reflects a desire to revisit—and rewrite—America’s foundational myths.

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