

“Let’s Sing It, Dance It, Write It, Paint It”: Revisiting Intermedial Life Writing in the Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract

This article reconceptualizes the Harlem Renaissance as a site of intermedial life writing, where text, image, sound, and performance intersect to forge innovative modes of self-representation and cultural identity. It argues that Harlem’s artists and writers created multimedia strategies of identity-making that remain vital for understanding contemporary multimodal art and literature. Drawing on expansive theories of life writing (Hornung; Smith and Watson), the essay develops an intermedial framework to examine how visual, literary, and performative forms converged to produce a collective self-portrait of what Alain Locke called “the New Negro.” Through three case studies—Winold Reiss, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas—it explores how portraiture, ethnography, and modernist design translated lived experience across media. Reiss’s portraits and layouts for *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro* established a visual rhetoric of dignity; Hurston’s *Mules and Men* and WPA fieldwork integrated song, narrative, and performance as participatory ethnography; and Douglas’s illustrations and murals rendered Black history as rhythmic visual autobiography. Together, these intermedial practices negotiated tensions central to Black modernity—authenticity and marketability, insider articulation and mediated representation—while transforming life writing into a multidimensional cultural archive. The article concludes that Harlem’s intermedial strategies prefigure twenty-first-century multimodal life narratives, from graphic memoir to digital performance. Reading the 1920s alongside the 2020s, it contends that the durability of life writing rests not in medium-specific mastery but in *cross-form resilience*—an ethics of representation in which to “sing it, dance it, write it, paint it” becomes both method and manifesto.

Keywords

Harlem Renaissance; Intermediality; Life Writing; Transatlantic Modernism; Zora Neale Hurston; Aaron Douglas; Winold Reiss.

Introduction

Thomas Mantzaris contends in his introduction to this *AmLit* edition that being “in the midst of the new twenties” necessitates a dialogical reading of the 1920s and the 2020s, while simultaneously attending to their distinct historical frameworks. The question, he suggests, is not to define the present decade too hastily, but to recognize how its turbulence and transformations echo the hopes and anxieties of a past century. The Harlem Renaissance is a particularly fitting site for such an inquiry, since it exemplifies how literature, art, and performance once intertwined to articulate new forms of identity, citizenship, and cultural modernity. By engaging this legacy, the project not only revisits how intermedial strategies of the 1920s reshaped cultural expression, but also probes how such strategies can illuminate the ways American literature today negotiates equally urgent social, political, and artistic change. To that end, this essay examines a number of key figures of the Harlem Renaissance whose work across visual art, ethnography, literature, and performance forged new intermedial modes of life writing and together constructed a collective self-portrait of the “New Negro.”

Drawing on an inclusive definition of *life writing*—encompassing heterogeneous forms of autobiographical and biographical expressions (Rausser and Teixeira; Hornung, “American Lives”; Smith and Watson)—this article investigates how the “New Negro” movement employed specific strategies to represent personal and collective identity. To do so, I adopt an intermedial lens.¹ By *intermedial life writing*, I refer to biographical or autobiographical narratives that integrate multiple media—such as text, visual art, design, photography, film, and music—to convey lived experience. This approach builds upon Alfred Hornung’s conception of life writing as a multidimensional and multimodal practice that extends well beyond traditional written autobiography. Contemporary life narratives, he argues, integrate individual, collective, cultural, and transnational dimensions of identity and employ diverse media to articulate increasingly complex self-representations. Their multidimensionality reflects the intersection of personal narratives with social, historical, and intercultural contexts, embedding them in broader networks of memory, migration, and global exchange. Their multimodal character involves the combination of textual, visual, oral, and digital forms—from literature and photography to film, performance, social media, and digital archives—enabling more layered and dynamic modes of self-representation across multiple channels and audiences (2013 and 2019).

Life writing in the Harlem Renaissance was never confined to conventional autobiography or biography. It flourished across multiple media, creating intermedial dialogues that redefined how individual and collective Black lives could be narrated. Visual art became a particularly powerful extension of life writing, providing forms of cultural self-portraiture and collective biography that paralleled literary explorations of identity. Figures such as Aaron Douglas and Winold Reiss played crucial roles in this transformation, while Zora Neale Hurston extended these experiments into a multimedia ethnographic register. Together, their work demonstrates how Harlem Renaissance life writing became a hybrid practice, fusing text, image, sound, and performance. This article argues that Harlem Renaissance

creators such as Winold Reiss, Zora Neale Hurston, and Aaron Douglas established an intermedial mode of life writing across text, image, sound, and performance that functioned as a collective self-portrait of the New Negro.

The 1920s marked a profound explosion of African American creativity. At the center of this intellectual and artistic awakening stood Alain Locke, often referred to as the “Dean” of the Harlem Renaissance (Molesworth viii) and self-described as the “mid-wife to a generation of young writers” (Stewart, *Locke* 13). Locke encouraged writers and artists to shape themselves into a “new negro,” a concept that Henry Louis Gates Jr. would later describe as a metaphor for a self-willed beginning and a “neological utopia” (4). In his groundbreaking 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, Locke urged readers to “seek the enlightenment of that self-portraiture which the present developments” in African American cultural expression that they were producing (“Foreword” xxv). The notion of a proud “self-portraiture” suggested a revolutionary shift in how Black identity could be articulated across various media, including literature, visual arts, and music, providing innovative platforms for autobiographical representation. The anthology combines essays, poetry, fiction, and musical analyses to document the cultural vibrancy of the Harlem Renaissance. The use of portraits in *The New Negro* emphasizes the reality and dignity of the leading African American intellectuals of the time. The book features illustrations and reproductions by artists working within and alongside the movement, including Aaron Douglas and Meta Warrick Fuller, as well as Miguel Covarrubias and Winold Reiss, combining woodcuts, graphic motifs, and photographic reproductions of sculpture. Jeffrey Stewart noted that: “It was a graphic book” (507). The visual contributions underscore in a remarkable way African heritage, racial pride, and a modern sense of identity, reinforcing the anthology’s celebration of cultural self-recognition and collective empowerment. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Douglas put intermedial approaches at the heart of the artistic endeavors in the 1920s: “let’s bare our arms and plunge them deep through laughter, through pain, through sorrow, through hope, through disappointment, into the very depths of the souls of our people and drag forth material crude, rough, neglected. Then let’s sing it, dance it, write it, paint it” (qtd. in Goesser 1).

Winold Reiss and Intermediality in *The New Negro*

Literature played a central role in articulating the complexities of African American life during the Harlem Renaissance. Through autobiography, fiction, and poetry, Black writers explored the nuances of identity, history, and cultural experience. Crucially, this literary production was profoundly intermedial, interweaving text with visual art, music, and performance. The 1925 *Survey Graphic* issue, *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, and its expanded counterpart, *The New Negro*, exemplified this aesthetic and ideological fusion. Under Alain Locke’s editorship, these volumes curated a dynamic synthesis of African-inspired motifs, modernist design, and progressive visual rhetoric. The portraits by German immigrant artist Winold Reiss, depicting figures such as Locke, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston, offered “an innovative visual rhetoric” that challenged dehumanizing caricatures and affirmed Black dignity (Mehring, “Silhouettes” 140). This strategy, complemented by the work of artists like

Aaron Douglas and Miguel Covarrubias, provided readers with a transformative lens on Black life and cultural expression. Figures such as Paul Robeson further extended this intermediality, translating vernacular forms into transnational circuits. His performances of spirituals, lead roles in plays such as *The Emperor Jones*, and collaborations with filmmaker Oscar Micheaux embodied how voice, film, and stage could function as vehicles for both cultural affirmation and political resistance (McGilligan 2; Robeson 52).

The above-mentioned Winold Reiss was a central figure in intermedial life writing during the Harlem Renaissance. His contributions spanned portraiture, graphic design, and pedagogical practice. Hailed in *Du Pont Magazine* (1931) as a “modern Cellini,” Reiss resisted conventional categorization in his own time and continues to elude simple classification today. What earlier critics identified as a difficulty—his stylistic versatility and disciplinary mobility—may instead be understood as integral to his cultural role: a figure whose life and work traverse media, genres, and national boundaries. Approaching Reiss through the prism of color—his own recurring metaphor for aesthetic, political, and cultural expression—illuminates how his oeuvre stages a biography in and through multiple media forms. In this sense, Reiss exemplifies a mode of intermedial life writing that not only narrates a self but also embeds that self within broader histories of migration, diversity, and the making of modern American culture (Mehring, “Intermedial Life Writing”).

Born in Karlsruhe in 1886, Reiss received artistic training in Leipzig, Stuttgart, and Munich before emigrating to the United States in 1913, just prior to the outbreak of the First World War. His transatlantic trajectory underscores his role in mediating between European modernist traditions and American cultural experimentation. In New York, Reiss founded an art school and design studio in Greenwich Village, taught at institutions including the New York School of Applied Design for Women and New York University, and ran summer programs in Woodstock and Glacier Park, Montana. His celebrated Native American portraits—rendered in situ rather than in studio isolation—foreground his commitment to immersive representation, an approach he later carried into his iconic Harlem Renaissance portraits of writers, intellectuals, and cultural figures (Caro 190). Through these works, Reiss inscribed himself into the life writing of a generation, crafting visual narratives that expanded the forms through which Black modernity and cultural hybridity could be represented.

Reiss’s renewed prominence in the twenty-first century reflects the contemporary urgency of his intermedial and intercultural vision. Major exhibitions—*The Art of Winold Reiss: An Immigrant Modernist* (New-York Historical Society, 2022) and *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2024)—have repositioned him as a key cultural mediator within transatlantic modernism. Recent scholarship, including Frank Mehring’s *The Multicultural Modernism of Winold Reiss* (2022), Denise Murrell’s *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* (2024), and Jewel Stern and Christopher Long’s *The Vanguard: Central European Émigrés and American Modern Design, 1910–1940* (2025), underscores the breadth of his impact across art, design, and cultural history. These studies suggest that Reiss’s work functions as a form of intermedial life writing—his biography told through portraits, interiors, and pedagogical spaces—making him not only an artist of the

Harlem Renaissance but also an interpreter of migration, representation, and belonging in modern America.

Reiss’s portraits and illustrations for *Survey Graphic: Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* (1925) and Alain Locke’s expanded anthology *The New Negro* (1925) provided some of the first widely disseminated images of Renaissance figures, and in doing so, helped translate Locke’s philosophical conception of the “New Negro” into a visual language. The *Survey Graphic* cover shows head of the singer Roland Hayes who had just returned from a concert trip to Europe where he received excellent reviews for his classical interpretations opening up new doors to American concert halls in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. (Stewart, Locke 369) The cover is a highly recognizable blending of Winold Reiss’s artistry of “pastel portrait drawing, lettering and graphic design” (Mehring, *Democratic Gap* 185) with abstract patterns of parallel lines, circles, and machine-like patterns with highly original letters. Jeffery Stewart argued that what we see are “African motifs, American Art Deco and primitivism” (Locke 472) contributing to the enormous success of the special issue. Reiss’s contribution underscores how visual culture operated as a form of life writing—an intermedial practice that documented and shaped African American identity in dialogue with literature, music, and politics. Reiss’s role in shaping the visual identity of the Harlem Renaissance is most clearly evident in his contributions to Alain Locke’s *Survey Graphic* number *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* (March 1925) and the subsequent anthology *The New Negro* (1925). These two publications were pivotal in defining the New Negro movement. “Reiss’s images gave Locke’s literary and sociological arguments a distinct visual language, breaking with caricatural iconography in U.S. popular and fine arts and moving beyond Du Bois’s respectability portraits in *The Crisis* to stage a confident, modern Black subject” (Stewart, Locke 461).

For the *Survey Graphic*, Reiss provided a series of striking portraits of Harlem’s leading intellectuals and artists, including W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Jean Toomer. Rendered in pastel and charcoal, these portraits eschewed caricature and ethnographic typology in favor of psychological depth and individuality. By presenting his sitters as modern cultural figures rather than stereotypes, Reiss offered a visual archive of the Harlem Renaissance that resonated with Locke’s conception of the New Negro as confident, creative, and self-possessed (Hills 129). When Locke expanded the *Survey Graphic* issue into *The New Negro* anthology later that year, he again relied heavily on Reiss. The book included not only his portraits but also his designs—geometric, angular borders and patterns drawing on African and Art Deco motifs—that structured the volume visually. These decorations provided a modernist framework for the literary content, signaling that Black culture was to be presented in a style as aesthetically advanced as its European and American contemporaries. Reiss also created silhouettes that served as visual interludes between sections, reinforcing the anthology’s sense of unity and rhythm. In combining portraits, decorations, and silhouettes, Reiss’s contribution was not ornamental but constitutive. He made Locke’s anthology a multimedia artifact in which the visual register of faces, forms, and abstract designs embodied the New Negro’s presence alongside poetry, fiction, and critical essays.

From Locke’s perspective, Reiss’s contributions were indispensable. Locke sought to present African American culture as modern, sophisticated, and aesthetically innovative, and Reiss’s images gave this vision a compelling visual form. By portraying Harlem’s leading writers and thinkers with dignity and individuality, the portraits countered racist caricatures and made visible the human agents of cultural renewal. The geometric decorations and African-inspired motifs reinforced Locke’s argument that African heritage could be reimagined as a source of modernist design rather than as a vestige of primitivism. In this way, Reiss’s work advanced Locke’s larger project of cultural diplomacy: to demonstrate to both Black and white audiences that the *New Negro* was not only a concept in print but also an image, embodied in recognizable faces and framed within the stylistic language of modern art. Jeffrey Stewart sums up the importance of the portraits in a powerful fashion. “They epitomize self-confident self-awareness looking back at us. Reiss inverts the whole racist tradition of Whiteness as the source of beauty and culture and asserts the revolutionary ‘notion that Black and Indigenous peoples are aesthetic authorities with something to teach us’ (‘Subjectivizing Transnationalism’ 28).

Among these portraits, his depiction of Langston Hughes stands out for how vividly it captures the poet’s own musical modernism. Reiss’s portrait of Hughes (1925) not only celebrates a leading poetic voice of the Harlem Renaissance but also visualizes the same intermedial aesthetic that animates Hughes’s own work. In the vibrant artistic landscape of the Harlem Renaissance, the poet Langston Hughes emerged as a quintessential voice. Described by Mark A. Sanders as a “veritable icon of the Harlem Renaissance” (107), Hughes was a Black internationalist (Hutchinson 4) who employed blues and jazz aesthetics to portray the lived experiences of African Americans. His book *The Weary Blues* (1926) exemplifies how vernacular music became a vehicle for life writing. The title poem presents a blues musician whose performance becomes an expression of lived sorrow: “He did a lazy sway... He made that poor piano moan with melody” (23). As Arnold Rampersad notes, Hughes honored both Black and European traditions by incorporating childhood blues lyrics into this poem (65). He argued that Hughes “wrote himself and his awkward position accurately into this poem.” (65) The refrain “I got the Weary Blues / And I can’t be satisfied...” (23) captures the transformation of personal anguish into cultural memory of the healing power of blues music, a hallmark of Hughes’s intermedial approach. Both artist and poet were deeply invested in translating the rhythms and emotional cadences of African American music, especially the blues, into new modernist forms. In this sense, Hughes’s poem *The Weary Blues* offers a literary analogue to Reiss’s visual experimentation: just as Hughes transforms musical performance into verbal art through rhythm, repetition, and syncopation, Reiss renders that expressive intensity through chromatic contrast, angular composition, and a dynamic interplay of line and form. Seen together, poem and portrait exemplify how Harlem artists reimagined Black expressivity across media, shaping an intermedial language that bridged sound, image, and text.

Reiss’s engagement with musicality also resonates with broader aesthetic debates of the 1920s concerning race, modernity, and representation. By transforming sonic rhythm into visual pattern, his portraits participate in a transmedial discourse that sought to visu-

alize the vitality of Black culture while negotiating the tension between ethnography and abstraction. Based on the concept of “autobiographical imagination”² Baxter Miller explains that for Hughes and his two autobiographies *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder As I Wander* (1956), life writing is often “literary history” (9) in which the narrator “projects himself into the mask of the dramatist, writer, and singer” merged together in the role of the artistic creator. (10) The aspiring life of the young blues poet was captured visually in an iconic portrait by Reiss. The drawing played a central role in the innovative 2024 MET exhibition *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* accentuating the transatlantic resonances in the work of Hughes in particular and the Harlem Renaissance in general. The cubist-influenced backdrop with musical notes and the translation of the poem’s protagonist laying in bed while the “weary blues echoed through his head” (23) underscores the poem’s intermedial references. Similarly, Miguel Covarrubias’s silhouetted design for the book cover of *The Weary Blues* visually echoed the lyrical melancholy of blues music, highlighting how life writing was being reimagined through visual and musical forms. Hughes’s “Negro Dancers” and his collaboration with Locke on *The New Negro*, which opens with the spiritual “O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a-coming” as a dedication, further affirm this commitment to intermedial narratives. (Unpaginated)

Zora Neale Hurston between Autobiography and Cultural Anthropology

Hurston approaches African American language and culture not only from a poetic perspective but also by deploying scholarly methods that extend well beyond the efforts of her precursors. Her training at Barnard College, which she entered in 1928 as its first Black student, provided her with an intellectual environment where questions of cultural identity and scientific method converged. The anthropologist Franz Boas, under whose guidance she studied, left a particularly strong impression on her. Hurston referred to him lovingly as “Papa” (*Dust Tracks* 683), a term of endearment that signals both her personal attachment and her deep intellectual respect. Boas’s insistence on cultural relativism—his methodological refusal to rank cultures hierarchically or to treat Western civilization as a universal standard—became central to Hurston’s own practice.³

Beyond his influence on the Harlem Renaissance via the work of his protégé at Columbia University, Melville Herskovits (Rubin-Dienstfrey 108), Boas recognized Hurston’s talent early and arranged a fellowship for her to collect “Negro folklore” in her former hometown Eatonville, Florida, a community with which she had a lifelong personal connection. This appointment was more than a matter of academic training: it placed Hurston at the intersection of personal memory, cultural heritage, and scientific inquiry. In addition to the fellowship, Hurston’s formal memberships in the American Folklore Society, the American Ethnological Society, and the American Anthropological Society further positioned her as a scholar in dialogue with the established institutions of anthropological research. She was not merely a literary figure gathering tales for artistic transformation; she was also an ethnographer engaging with disciplinary discourses about culture, race, and history.

In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*, Hurston highlighted Boas’s methodological rigor, particularly his emphasis on disinterested observation: “He has no pet wishes to prove. His instructions are to go out and find what is there ... I was proud that he trusted me” (687). For Hurston, this approach to fieldwork—one that avoided preconceived theoretical frameworks—meant that her responsibility was to let the material speak in its own terms. She was deeply proud that Boas considered her capable of conducting such work, and her subsequent writings show the extent to which she internalized his principle of “pure objectivity.” At the same time, Hurston’s adaptation of Boasian anthropology was far from a mechanical application of his principles. Instead of sustaining a cultural imaginary based on alleged racial purity or a nostalgic search for “authentic” African survivals, Hurston documented crossovers, exchanges, and hybrid elements in African American expressive culture. She rejected rigid notions of origin and instead embraced the dynamism of cultural interaction. Her ability to locate African American folklore within larger circuits of hybridity marked her as a thinker attuned to both the specificity of Black vernacular traditions and their position within global cultural networks.

Boas himself was particularly struck by the quality of Hurston’s findings and congratulated her on the originality of her contributions. In his introduction to her work, he noted:

To the student of cultural history the material presented is valuable not only by giving the Negro’s reaction to every day events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions, but it throws into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the importance of which diminishes with increasing distance from the south. (Boas 3)

This evaluation underscores how Boas recognized Hurston’s ability to capture what he called “the peculiar amalgamation” of traditions, the very hybridity that Hurston herself foregrounded in her writing. It was precisely this capacity—to render the intersections of cultures without reducing them to essences—that distinguished Hurston’s anthropological project. By combining ethnographic training with her personal investment in African American expressive culture, Hurston effectively redefined the possibilities of folklore collection. Her work was not limited to archiving but aimed at creating what we might call an intermedial form of life writing: a mode that brought together biography, ethnography, literature, and cultural history. In this sense, her anthropological foundation provided both the authority and the flexibility for her later experiments with text, sound, and performance.

Hurston’s *Mules and Men* represents a remarkable achievement in African American cultural history, as it combines the methods of folklore scholarship with the narrative techniques of literary art. Published in 1935, it was her first major work of anthropology and remains one of the most important documents of Black vernacular culture. The book’s construction exemplifies how Hurston translated her Boasian training into a hybridized text: at once a scholarly record, a literary performance, and an intermedial work that circulated between the registers of oral tradition, visual representation, and printed form.

Visual elements played a central role in the book. Hurston admired Miguel Covarrubias's caricatures and his scathing commentaries on American culture. Covarrubias was a Mexican artist who moved in Harlem Renaissance circles and became associated with figures such as Langston Hughes, Winold Reiss, and Carl Van Vechten. His involvement in Hurston's project likely owed much to the encouragement of the publisher J. B. Lippincott, who recognized the appeal of combining folklore with modernist illustration. Though the partnership may have been commercially motivated, the result was an intermedial collaboration that expanded the cultural resonance of Hurston's work.

At first glance, the use of caricature might appear at odds with Hurston's project of racial uplift and recognition of African American culture. However, art historian Wendy Wick Reaves has persuasively argued that caricature in the 1920s and 1930s developed into a new, distinct form of artistic expression. Unlike the satirical graphics of nineteenth-century magazines such as *Puck* or *Harper's Weekly*, caricature in this later period often functioned less as mockery and more as a mode of psychological portraiture. As Henry Tyrell explained:

Between modern caricature and modern 'straight' portraiture there is only a thin and vague line of demarcation. Both are psychological in their way of seeing a subject exaggerating the salient and significant feature . . . and rendering the summary impression by the quickest and most arbitrary strokes. (qtd. in Reaves 3)

This distinction illuminates the function of Covarrubias's drawings in *Mules and Men*. Rather than undermining Hurston's anthropological authority, the images provided visual interpretations which mirrored the blend of accuracy and artistry that lies at the heart of her project. The opening of *Mules and Men* situates folklore within a living cultural environment. Her Polk County narratives, for instance, begin with a blues refrain: "You don't know Polk County lak Ah do./ Anybody been dere, tell you de same thing too" (62). This opening gesture underscores how folklore and music were inseparable, and it signals Hurston's commitment to grounding her ethnography in the lived experiences of everyday communities. She then offers elaborate descriptions of guitar players strumming pieces such as "Polk County" and "Red River," or performing unnamed instrumental hits while dancers gathered around bonfires. By capturing both the social setting and the artistic practice, Hurston conveyed the performative richness of Black vernacular culture.

The illustrations provided a kind of visual pendant to these textual and musical accounts. Yet they did not aim for anthropological accuracy in the narrow sense. Instead, they conveyed imaginative renderings of Miguel Covarrubias's impressions of Harlem dancers, whom he depicted in abstract black-and-white figures defined less by clothing or facial features than by the fluidity of their movements. As Rubin-Dienstfrey argues, Reiss's 'relationship to Mexican émigré artist Covarrubias "provides another piece to the 'artist-as ethnographer' puzzle" (113). The images emphasized rhythm, kinetic energy, and the unity of the dancing couples, echoing Hurston's textual emphasis on performance and motion. Additional sketches depicted Hurston interacting with her informants (Hurston: 1995, 90), visu-

alizations of sermons (Hurston 136), and the initiation ceremony of the hoodoo priest Father Watson, known as the "Frizzly Rooster" (204).

These images, though marked by caricatural overtones, nonetheless highlight the central tension in Hurston's project: the need to balance anthropological accuracy with artistic expression. Just as her narratives blurred the line between scientific objectivity and literary performance, so did Covarrubias's sketches oscillate between portraiture and caricature. Together, the text and images created an intermedial work that engaged readers on multiple sensory levels, inviting them not only to read folklore but to see and imagine its performance. By combining glossary, narrative, song, and image, *Mules and Men* expanded the very definition of folklore study. It challenged disciplinary boundaries by insisting that folklore was not merely material to be catalogued, but an aesthetic and performative practice that demanded intermedial representation. Hurston's work thus embodied a broader Harlem Renaissance ambition: to create new forms capable of doing justice to the complexity, vitality, and creativity of African American life.

If *Mules and Men* demonstrates Hurston's ability to combine ethnographic research with literary narration and visual commentary, her broader practice as a cultural anthropologist underscores an equally important dimension of her project: the integration of sound, music, and performance into the documentation of African American life. Hurston was not content merely to transcribe the words of work songs or blues lyrics; she sought to capture the texture, rhythm, and sonic atmosphere in which they were performed. This insistence on the acoustic and performative elements of folklore points to the intermedial quality of her ethnographic life writing: the crossing of textual, musical, and performative registers in order to render culture as lived practice.

Hurston included not only the lyrics of songs but also transcriptions of melodic lines, thereby foregrounding their rhythmic qualities. Her ethnographic practice involved explaining the social functions of the songs alongside their textual content. One notable example is the work song "Can't You Line It?," based on the lining rhythm widely known throughout Florida. Hurston recalled meeting Charlie Jones in a railroad construction camp near Lakeland during one of her excursions in 1933, where she asked him to sing the song for her. Later she proposed a full-scale recording expedition into Florida, stressing the urgency of preservation: there was, she argued, an abundance of religious and secular songs that could still be documented with proper technical equipment in a "sort of cultural pocket that is not being drained off so rapidly as other sections of the state" (Hurston: unpublished, 3).

Her collaboration with Alan Lomax and Barnicle in subsequent fieldwork illustrates her commitment to an intermedial approach. Together they interviewed and photographed singers and produced field recordings, bringing folklore into contact with the emerging technologies of sound reproduction and visual documentation. Hurston understood these songs as part of a larger cultural and historical network that linked African American expressive traditions to the Atlantic world. As she noted, Black culture was profoundly shaped by a multiplicity of transatlantic influences:

The drums throb: Africa by way of Cuba; Africa by way of the British West Indies; Africa by way of Haiti and Martinique; Africa by way of Central and South America. Old Spain speaks through many interpreters. Old England speaks through black, white and intermediate lips. Florida, the inner melting pot of the great melting pot – America. (Hurstons: unpublished, 8)

This passage exemplifies Hurston's understanding of folklore as hybrid and diasporic. Rather than conceiving African American music as a static survival from Africa, she emphasized its constant transformation through encounters with European, Caribbean, and Latin American traditions. The Florida fieldwork, in her eyes, revealed a unique cultural "pocket" that documented the history of the United States as part of a transatlantic network of exchange. Hurston's role in preserving and performing this material was never confined to the field. She later performed many of these songs in lectures and concerts, thus transforming research into a performative act that reanimated folklore for broader audiences. Her performances drew attention to the sonic textures of vernacular music. Onomatopoeic lines such as "shack-a lack-a lack- a lack-a lack-a lack-a" captured rhythm in ways that could not be fully conveyed by transcription alone (see ill.). Even the "grunt" was reinterpreted as a meaningful sonic event, functioning simultaneously as a rhythmic filler on an eighth note and as a percussive element that provided structural coherence to the refrain. Hurston explained in an interview with Herbert Halpert as part of the Florida WPA Project: "When they say 'Shack-alackalackalack,' they're getting ready to pull back, and when they say 'Unh!' they shove the rail over" (Library of Congress AFS 362A).

Hurston's performance practices illustrate how Hurston used her own body and voice as instruments of cultural preservation. In describing her method of learning songs, she highlighted the reciprocity between ethnographer and community: "I get into the crowd of the people and their singing. I listen as best as I can. Finally, I can sing a verse or verses. Then I sing them back to the people until they tell me that I can sing them just like them." (Hurstons, Library of Congress AFS 3138B 2). This participatory approach blurred the line between observer and performer, and it positioned Hurston as a cultural mediator who re-authenticated the songs she presented.

In addition to "Can't You Line It?", Hurston transcribed and contextualized widely known ballads such as "John Henry". In *Mules and Men*, she included the musical score (235–36), and in her essay "Folklore and Music" she reflected on its meaning:

Take John Henry, for example, and it is plain that the words and the music are one and the same thing. Read the words aloud and you have the tune. The stresses and lack of stresses all come where they would naturally be if the story were told without music. In other words, the ballad is the prelude to prose. (880)

This comment crystallizes Hurston's conviction that the relationship between words and music was organic and indivisible. In the ballad tradition, she argued, the music and text

shaped one another so fully that reading the lyrics aloud could reproduce the rhythm of the tune. For Hurston, such examples revealed not only the artistry of African American folklore but also the close kinship between oral tradition, music, and prose narrative. By emphasizing performance, sound, and rhythm, Hurston responded to what she perceived as the growing estrangement between the social functions of vernacular culture and the commodified entertainment of the music industry. Her work dramatizes the stakes of folklore preservation: without careful recording, transcription, and performance, the cultural and historical meanings embedded in song risked being lost or flattened by commercial reproduction. Her intermedial approach—textual, visual, and sonic—thus becomes both a method of preservation and an argument about the vitality of African American culture in the modern era.

This attention to sound and meaning emerges clearly in her explanation of the word “Halimuhfack” in the blues song of the same title. The word is a corruption of “Halifax,” elongated by two extra syllables in order to fit the rhythmic requirements of the blues (881). Such examples reveal her linguistic sensitivity: Hurston emphasized that rhythm, rather than semantic meaning alone, shaped language in vernacular contexts. Her investigations into children’s rhyme-making similarly illustrated how sound often took precedence over sense. She noted that rhymes emerged from playful manipulation of sound patterns and only later accumulated aphoristic or cultural meaning. One such example is the couplet: “Nought is a nought, figger’s a figger; All for the white man, none for the nigger.” (881). Here, rhythm and sound laws converge with social commentary, demonstrating how vernacular speech contained within it both aesthetic and political force.

In public performances, Hurston dramatized her role as both ethnographer and performer. After singing “Halimuhfack,” she explained her method of learning songs through immersion: “I get into the crowd of the people and their singing. I listen as best as I can. Finally, I can sing a verse or verses. Then I sing them back to the people until they tell me that I can sing them just like them” (Hurston, Library of Congress AFS 3138B, 2). This process of repetition and communal validation illustrates how Hurston framed herself as a cultural mediator. Rather than treating folklore as an object to be collected and removed from its context, she embedded herself within the performance until she could reproduce it convincingly. Theatricality, in this sense, became both a field method and a literary technique, allowing her to transfer the vitality of vernacular culture onto the page and the stage.

The complexity of this performative stance has not gone unnoticed by critics. Paul Gilroy, for instance, has argued that Hurston created a tension between tradition and modernity by producing an image of authentic folklore with herself as custodian of an “essentially invariant, anti-historical notion of black particularity” (91). While Gilroy rightly identifies an essentialist strain in Hurston’s rhetoric of authenticity, it is important to emphasize the nuance of her practice. Her ethnographic attention to hybridity—her insistence that African American culture was shaped by diasporic and intercultural exchanges—complicates any reading of her work as merely static or essentialist. Rather, her commitment to authenticity was less about locating a pure origin than about resisting the distortions produced by popular entertainment and the literary market.

Hurston made this point forcefully in her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” There, she wrote: “I know that I run the risk of being damned as an infidel for declaring that nowhere can be found the Negro who asks ‘am it?’ nor yet his brother who announces ‘Ise uh gwinter.’ He exists only for a certain type of writers and performers” (846). Her critique targets those who fabricated exaggerated dialect forms for comic or exotic effect, pandering to stereotypes that had long circulated in minstrel shows and vaudeville performances. Such distortions were, for Hurston, a betrayal of the lived realities of Black speech. Her criticism extended to contemporaries. She found Richard Wright’s use of dialect in *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938) particularly troubling. In a review published in *The Saturday Review* on April 2, 1938, Hurston wrote: “One wonders how he arrived at it. Certainly he does not write by ear unless he is tone-deaf” (Hurston 913). This sharp dismissal reflects Hurston’s sense that Wright’s stylized dialect was disconnected from the sonic realities of African American speech. By attacking what she saw as artificiality, Hurston defended her own method as one rooted in listening, participation, and performance.

These debates reveal the larger challenges facing Harlem Renaissance writers: the competing demands of racial uplift, anthropological authenticity, and commercial viability. For Hurston, the project of recording vernacular culture was always a counter-attack against popular notions that had already been commodified and circulated in white-controlled markets. The tension between her ethnographic fidelity and the literary market’s expectations parallels, as you note, similar struggles among Pennsylvania German poets, who distinguished between “authentic” dialect poets and popular imitators of “Dutch” speech. In both cases, authenticity became a contested category, shaped as much by performance and reception as by linguistic accuracy. Hurston’s intervention was distinctive because she brought intermedial strategies to this struggle. By embedding songs, glossaries, caricatures, performances, and field recordings within her work, she expanded the very terms of authenticity. For her, dialect could not be reduced to text on a page; it was inseparable from rhythm, performance, and communal validation. In this way, she confronted the pressures of the literary market not only by defending folklore as authentic expression but by demonstrating that authenticity itself was a multi-sensory, intermedial phenomenon. Thus, Hurston’s work exemplifies how life writing in the Harlem Renaissance operated across media.

Aaron Douglas and Intermediality in the Harlem Renaissance

Aaron Douglas’s work has often been discussed in terms of intermediality, since his illustrations, murals, and collaborations with writers and editors translate literary, musical, and historical themes into a distinct visual language that both complements and extends the texts they accompany. In *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (1976), edited by David C. Driskell, Douglas is framed as a foundational figure securing recognition for African American art within U.S. cultural history, whereas Richard J. Powell’s *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (1997) situates him within a broader global modernist context, highlighting his intermedial synthesis of African and European aesthetics. Aaron Douglas stands out as the most important visual architect of the New Negro aesthetic—a visual life writer who trans-

lated the themes of identity, struggle, and resilience central to Renaissance literature into a modernist graphic idiom. He was so moved by the design of the Survey Graphic Cover on Harlem, that he wanted to become a student of Winold Reiss and moved to New York (Stewart, *The New Negro* 485). His work provided a crucial visual corollary to the literary life writing of figures such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, making visible the contours of Black selfhood that text alone could not capture. Douglas’s importance has been chronicled in Amy Helene Kirschke’s *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*, which emphasizes his foundational role in creating a modernist African American visual vocabulary. Caroline Goeser’s *Picturing the New Negro* situates him within the print culture of the 1920s, showing how his illustrations operated as “visual counterpoint” to the prose and poetry of Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* anthology (1925). Douglas’s silhouette figures and concentric circles did not simply decorate Locke’s volume; they gave form to the anthology’s arguments, representing the *New Negro* as a historical agent moving from bondage to emancipation, from the rural South to the urban North, and from invisibility to cultural self-assertion.

His illustrations for James Weldon Johnson’s *God’s Trombones* (1927) are equally emblematic. Here, Douglas visualized sermons as collective biography, transforming the preacher into a symbolic figure who embodied the memory and resilience of African American communities. His imagery fused African design motifs with modernist abstraction, producing what Richard J. Powell describes as an adaptation of “synthetic Cubism” that allowed Douglas to integrate form and content in a resonant mode of storytelling (39). By visually narrating collective histories through archetypal figures, Douglas pioneered a form of visual life writing that paralleled literary autobiography but worked through abstraction, rhythm, and symbolic layering. The visual dialogue of silhouetted figures, musical elements including instruments and dance, with spirituality can also be seen within the African American struggle for freedom and, as Denise Murrell argued in her exhibition and book on *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism* “the quest for liberation from bondage” (23).

Douglas’s reach extended into book culture and periodical print, making his art inseparable from the circulation of New Negro life narratives. His stylized silhouettes appeared on the covers of Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928), Langston Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter* (1930), and his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940). Aaron Douglas’s cover illustration for Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* (1928) provides a crucial example of how visual art intersects with intermedial life writing in the Harlem Renaissance. McKay’s novel charts the experiences of Jake, a Black soldier and migrant, whose movements through Harlem capture both individual self-fashioning and collective urban modernity. Douglas’s stylized silhouettes and rhythmic geometric forms parallel this narrative by abstracting personal experience into archetypal representation. The cover, with its concentric circles and dynamic figures, conveys motion, vitality, and community, suggesting that Jake’s story is simultaneously one man’s autobiography and a collective biography of Harlem itself.

From the perspective of intermedial life writing, Douglas’s contribution is not merely decorative but interpretive. His illustration reframes McKay’s text by embedding it in a visual

register that underscores themes of migration, identity, and cultural performance. Just as Hurston wove song and performance into her ethnographic life writing, Douglas visualized the pulse of Harlem through abstraction, making the city itself a living subject. In this sense, the cover functions as an autonomous act of life writing, offering a symbolic portrait of Harlem as both stage and character. Douglas’s art demonstrates how literature and visual culture converged to narrate Black modern life in multimedia form.

These designs not only embellished the texts but echoed their themes, providing, as Amy Helene Kirschke observes, “a bridge between an often white reading audience and the culture of African American self-representations” (146). They are political and at times utopian (Earle 13). Douglas’s visual framing thus operated as a form of intermedial translation: rendering Black modernity legible through iconic forms that mediated between audience and text.⁴ Other artists continued this trajectory—Jacob Lawrence’s series of paintings entitled *Migration Series* (1941) and Augusta Savage’s *The Harp* (1939) offered visual narratives of movement and collective voice—but Douglas’s centrality lay in his ability to synthesize African, diasporic, and modernist elements into a language that became emblematic of the Harlem Renaissance itself. His murals, such as *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934), explicitly staged history as visual life writing: across four panels, Douglas charted a collective autobiography from Africa to slavery, through Reconstruction and into urban modernity.

It is in this context that Hurston’s work appears as a complementary, yet distinct, contribution to intermedial life writing. Like Douglas, Hurston sought to document and perform African American life in forms that challenged disciplinary boundaries. Whereas Douglas abstracted figures into symbolic silhouettes, Hurston grounded her writing in specific voices, songs, and performances. Her *Mules and Men* (1935) exemplifies this dynamic: the book combined transcribed folklore, musical scores, and Covarrubias’s illustrations, creating a multimedia text that paralleled Douglas’s integrations of image and narrative. For example, where Douglas’s cover designs for Hughes’s *Not Without Laughter* visualized the rhythms of Black life through silhouetted figures in motion, Hurston’s transcription of “Can’t You Line It?” captured similar rhythms through sound notation, phonetic dialect, and onomatopoeic repetition. Both artists were concerned with rhythm as a carrier of cultural meaning, though one rendered it visually and the other textually and sonically. Similarly, Douglas’s depictions of the preacher in *God’s Trombones* resonate with Hurston’s accounts of sermons in *Mules and Men*, where she not only transcribed but staged the cadences of Black preaching traditions.

The comparison sharpens when we consider the role of illustration. Just as Douglas’s silhouettes mediated between literature and visual abstraction, Covarrubias’s caricatures in Hurston’s *Mules and Men* offered a visual counterpoint to her ethnographic text. While Covarrubias emphasized kinetic energy and fluidity rather than anthropological accuracy, his sketches functioned as visual echoes of Hurston’s own performative ethnography. In both cases—Douglas illustrating Locke and Johnson, Covarrubias illustrating Hurston—visual art served to expand the possibilities of life writing by amplifying the text’s cultural resonance.

The parallel between Douglas and Hurston underscores a central feature of Harlem Renaissance cultural production: the interdependence of art forms in narrating Black life. Douglas’s visual life writing articulated the collective body of the New Negro in archetypal silhouettes; Hurston’s intermedial ethnography articulated it in the interplay of voice, song, and performance. Both resisted the commodification of dialect and stereotype, insisting instead on new modes of representation that affirmed hybridity, resilience, and cultural creativity. By placing Douglas and Hurston side by side, we see how the Harlem Renaissance redefined life writing as an intermedial practice. Douglas gave visual form to collective autobiography through symbolic imagery, while Hurston created a multimedia archive of folklore that blended anthropology, literature, music, and visual art. Together, their works map out a cultural field in which life writing was not only textual or visual but a hybrid art, capable of rendering the fullness of African American experience.

Conclusion

The Harlem Renaissance forged an intermedial mode of life writing in which text, image, sound, and performance collaborated to construct a collective self-portrait of the “New Negro.” Locke framed the conceptual project; Reiss supplied its visual lexicon; Douglas translated its themes into modernist iconography; and Hurston extended it into ethnographic and performative practice. Together, they transformed life writing into a multisensory archive where the choice of medium itself became a claim about identity, credibility, and cultural authority. This model clarifies the frictions that accompany representational innovation. First, authenticity versus marketability; second, insider modernism versus mediated portraiture; and third, credibility across diverse publics. Rather than retreating from these tensions, Harlem artists negotiated them through intermedial strategies that allowed different media to reinforce and translate one another—a dynamic that resonates with Mantzaris’s call to read the 1920s and the 2020s in dialogue. In this light, the intermedial approaches of the Harlem Renaissance partly anticipate contemporary multimodal practices in American literature—from the fusion of image and text in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* and Robin Coste Lewis’s *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, to the digital storytelling and performance poetics of artists such as Danez Smith or Jesmyn Ward. Like their Harlem predecessors, these creators respond to urgent questions of race, identity, and belonging by testing how narrative moves across sound, image, and screen. The persistence of such strategies underscores that intermediality remains a vital means of negotiating aesthetic innovation and social transformation.

For the present “new twenties,” Harlem’s experiment remains both instructive and cautionary. Contemporary multimodal forms such as graphic memoir, documentary hybrids, digital performance reprise Harlem’s wager that identity is most fully realized when mediated across forms. Yet, as the Harlem model warns, multimodality also multiplies risks: spectacle, commodification, and algorithmic reduction. The Renaissance response was procedural rigor. Hurston’s participatory ethnography, Douglas’s sequenced iconography, Reiss’s dignifying portraiture each yoke their medium to an ethics of representation.

To “sing it, dance it, write it, paint it” was thus not ornament. In the new twenties amid fresh turbulences and infrastructures this earlier experiment remains instructive. It shows how to craft self-portraits that are credible because they are composite, resilient because they are multimedia, and transformative because they insist that the story of a life is never only written but also staged, sounded, and seen. In that sense, Jeffrey Stewart’s conclusion to his biography on Alain Locke rings particularly true: “A New Negro is in all of us—not just African Americans but every American who embraces this capacity for reinvention through African forms because those forms are in them too, waiting, like the rest of us, to be released to soar” (878). And let me add: not just Americans but every human being dedicated to the cause of overcoming what W. E. B. Du Bois identified as a key problem at the time: the color line, or even more tuned to our times—the color lines. Read against 2025’s digital modernities, Harlem’s intermedial experiment underscores that life writing achieves durability not through medium-specific mastery but through cross-form resilience, an ethics of representation that remains as urgent now as it was a century ago.

Notes

¹ References to intermedial life writing build on and are explored in more detail in my article “Intermedial Life Writing: The Bloomsbury Group vs. the Harlem Renaissance.”

² Baxter Miller employs the term “autobiographical imagination” to refer to the creative process through which writers transform personal experience into literary form, linking individual memory to broader cultural and historical narratives. In his analysis of Langston Hughes, Miller shows that autobiography operates as a generative mode of imagination rather than a purely documentary account of the self. R. Baxter Miller, *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1989). 11–13.

³ I first examined Hurston’s cultural anthropology in my article “Performing Anthropological Authenticity: Ethnic Identity Politics from Minstrel Realism to Zora Neale Hurston’s Transatlantic Blues.”

⁴ Covers of contemporary American novels are often deeply integrated into the narrative itself, functioning not merely as marketing devices but as extensions of the storyworld through carefully coordinated visual-textual strategies. As scholars have shown, such collaborations between authors and designers enable covers to participate in meaning-making: they echo narrative themes, mimic textual aesthetics, or even serve as narrative entry points (Starre; Nørgaard; Mantzaris). In this way, the cover becomes part of the novel’s multimodal poetics, foregrounding the material and visual dimensions of literary fiction.

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