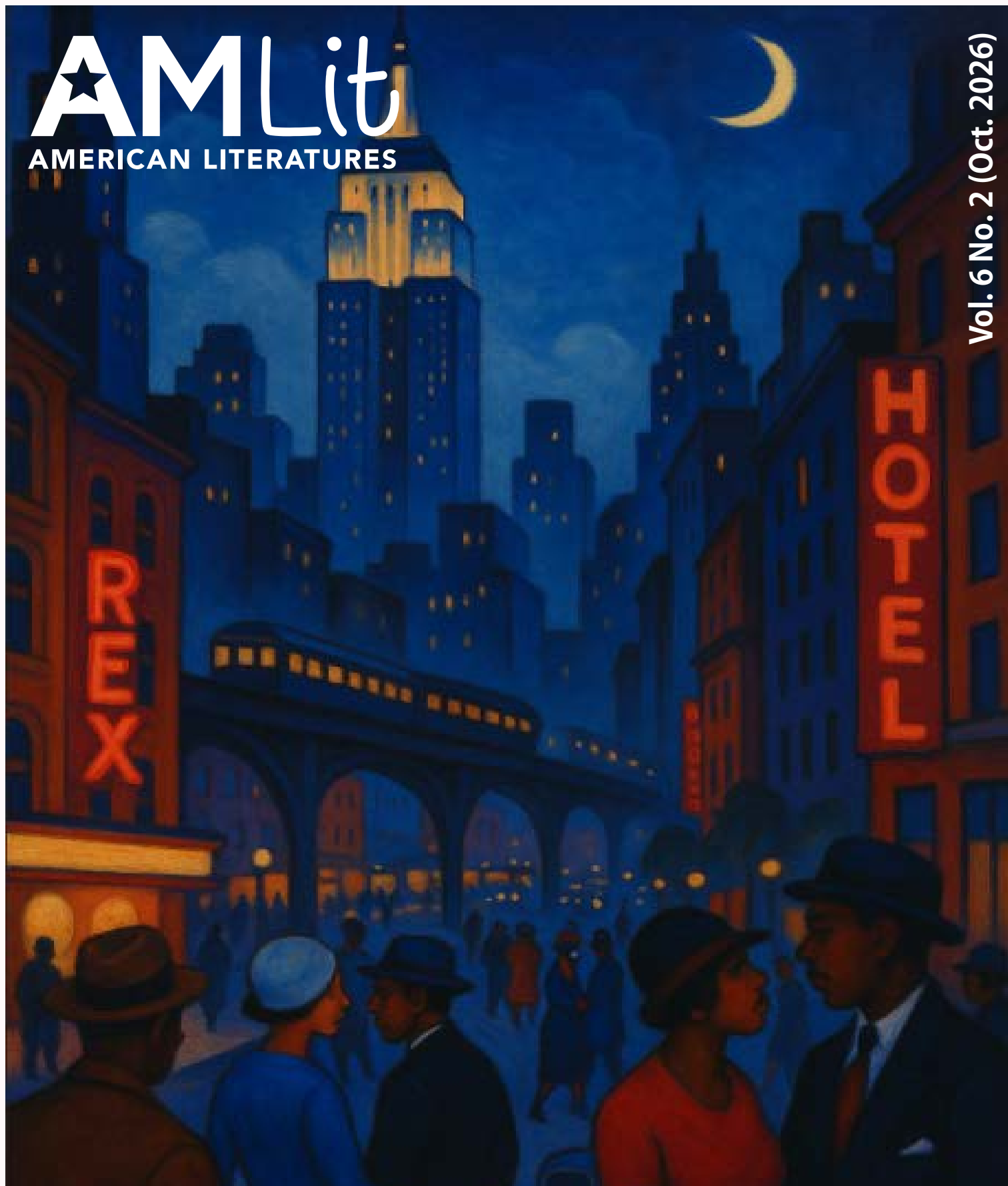




Writing the New Twenties

Thomas Mantzaris
(Guest Editor)

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Content

- 4 Introduction
 Thomas Mantzaris
- 16 “Make It New”:
 Echoes of Change in American Literature Across a Century
 Irakli Tskhvediani
- 34 Multimodal Archives and Metamodern Narratives:
 Exploring the Archival Turn in the 21st Century
 Elin Ivansson
- 54 “Let’s Sing It, Dance It, Write It, Paint It”:
 Revisiting Intermedial Life Writing in the Harlem Renaissance
 Frank Mehring
- 75 Contesting the 1920s: Malcolm Cowley versus Kay Boyle,
 John Glassco, Katherine Anne Porter – and Robert McAlmon
 Hans Bak

Introduction

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Abstract

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

Keywords

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

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

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

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

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

Decades of Change and the Challenges of Hope

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

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

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

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

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

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

American Writing Amid Transformations and Crises

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Contributions to this special issue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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

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

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“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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Multimodal Archives and Metamodern Narratives: Exploring the Archival Turn in the 21st Century

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Abstract

An archival turn has recently been noted in twenty-first-century literature, as the construction of the archive has become central to the narrative of many acclaimed works of fiction (Chadwick, Collins). This turn goes beyond a thematic concern with the archive to include the visual insertion of archival material, such as photographs, documents, and other clippings, into the narrative discourse (Davis; Ivansson and Gibbons). This article addresses the convergence of this latest archival turn with metamodernism as an influential cultural mode by analysing how contemporary multimodal archival fiction's interest in the archive compares with and expands on earlier modernist and postmodernist engagements with the archive as well as its critiques. I propose that multimodal archival fiction offers a new, complementary perspective to previous accounts of metamodern culture's concern with historicity, depth, and sincerity. By analysing Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive*, James Elkins' *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, and Catherine Lacey's *Biography of X* as metamodern archival fiction, I show how contemporary archival fiction's multimodal, stylistic, and thematic engagement with the archive not only returns to but expands on modernist and postmodern aesthetic strategies and concerns with history, authenticity, and identity.

Keywords

Archival Fiction; Multimodality; Archival Poetics; Contemporary Fiction; Metamodernism.

Introduction

From the development of the modern archive to the present day, there have been dramatic transformations in the methods of storing, recording, and organising knowledge through the advancement of new archival technology, evolving from typewriters to smartphones. As Derrida points out, “what is no longer archived the same way is no longer lived the same way” (18); archival technologies construct and shape the archive and, consequently, our experience of past and present. With the recent digital revolution, the archive today has shifted from being a predominantly physical place-bound institution comprised of artefacts, books, and paper records to now, instead, “consist of streams of data invading our work and private lives” (Manoff 391). Furthermore, an archival turn has recently been noted in contemporary literature, as the construction of the archive has become central to the narrative of many acclaimed works of fiction (Chadwick; Collins; Davis; Ivansson and Gibbons). As Jim Collins points out, in recent novels published on the cusp of the 2020s, “reading and writing are inseparable from the assemblage and curation” (220). However, as I have argued elsewhere, importantly, “the current archival turn in contemporary literature is also visual and material,” with the inclusion of archival materials such as photographs, documents, and other clippings (Ivansson and Gibbons, 101; see also Davis).

The recent archival concern in contemporary fiction can be elucidated further when contextualised by the long tradition of literary and artistic engagements with the archive, from the modern archive’s institutionalisation in the 1880s, and the modernist and postmodernist cultural modes of the 1900s, to today’s digital age. Marco Codebò, establishes the history of the archival novel by tracing the genre from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) via works by Alessandro Manzoni (1840), Honoré de Balzac (1829–48), Gustave Flaubert (1881), and Georges Perec (1978) to Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988). He defines it as “a fictional genre where the narrative stores records, bureaucratic writing informs language, and the archive functions as a semiotic frame that structures the text’s content and meaning” (13). In contrast to Codebò’s concern with the bureaucratic archive, my definition of contemporary archival fiction extends to address the visual and thematic act of collecting and constructing a fictional archive within the novel’s narrative discourse, be it public or private (Ivansson). Due to the dawn of the digital age, Codebò dismisses the future of the archival novel, arguing that “the bureaucratic archive reached its technological sunset with the advent of the digital database in the 1970s” (17). He posits that the rise of digital databases alongside the waning of traditional paper archives has created a disconnect between the documentary foundation of the novel and the sophisticated technology employed for the management and distribution of knowledge. Instead, despite this technological development, or perhaps because of it, I connect the recent archival turn in contemporary fiction with the “rise of the multimodal novel” at the turn of the millennium (Hallet). Multimodal fiction refers to novels that, while still relying on verbal text, incorporate a variety of semiotic modes, like graphics, images, documents, and clippings, as well as the use of colour, typography and layout design in ways which carry narrative meaning (Hallet; Gibbons *Multimodality*). The increase in multimodal fiction at the beginning of the twenty-first century is often described

as influenced by a fear of the death of the printed novel due to the rapid development of digital technology (Hayles; Pressman; Gibbons *Multimodality*). However, this worry instead led fiction writers to explore “literary strategies that reaffirm the novel as a book itself” (Gibbons 15), often emphasising the printed page’s power as a multimedia format connected to digital technologies (Pressman). Furthermore, the opportunities available through digital technology, such as design and word processing software, allowed writers to become designers of their fictional texts (Hallet). I view archival fiction as a sub-genre of multimodal literature, denoting novels that demonstrate a visual and thematic concern with the archive by including fictional and factual archival material and sources; implement archival methods and principles of organisation; and explore archival themes, such as fragmentation and ontological ambiguity (Ivansson). Taken together, these features of contemporary multimodal archival fiction result in the presentation of an archive within the novel’s narrative discourse, which positions the reader as an active archival researcher within a fictional archive (Ivansson). Works of multimodal archival fiction published since the early 2000s include, for example, Barbara Hodgson’s *Hippolyte’s Island* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), D.A. Stern’s *Shadows in the Asylum: The Case Files of Dr. Charles Marsh* (2006), J.J. Abrams and Doug Dorst’s *S.* (2013), Shelley Jackson and Zachary Thomas Dodson’s *Riddance* (2018), and the novels analysed in this article: Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive* (2019), James Elkins’ *Weak in Comparison to Dreams* (2023), and Catherine Lacey’s *Biography of X* (2023). Considering this selected corpus, I suggest that contemporary multimodal archival fiction can be understood as a reconfiguration of earlier forms of the archival novel responding to the digital and cultural context at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

To further explore the visual inclusion of archival documents in contemporary fiction and their structural and thematic engagement with the archive, I have expanded on Rebecca Macmillan’s and Brian Davis’ term, “archival poetics.” Macmillan uses the term to capture how, in multimodal lyric poetry, visual and structural engagement with the archive “presses us to consider the contents collected and to notice the process of collection,” inviting “association between materials without the claim of complete or definite representation” (201). Davis utilises it to discuss “multimodal book archives,” which he describes as an experimental genre of contemporary literature in which the narrative is constructed “through the collection and representation of reproduced texts and other artefacts, in which the book-object is presented as a container for preserving and transmitting textual artefacts” (84-85). Utilising a broader—yet more specific—definition of archival poetics, together with Alison Gibbons, I have proposed that “archival poetics encompasses a radical evocation of archival organisation, through the inclusion of lists, inventories, storage, indexes, and methods of cataloguing; typical archival features such as fragmentation, referentiality, order and disorder; and explicit thematisation of the power dynamics connected with selection processes” (101). This definition of archival poetics thus combines both formal features reminiscent of physical and digital archives, while raising questions about the role of the archive and archival practices in both public and private spheres, as well as its role in preserving the past as well as the present.

However, in this article, I am not interested in how archival poetics manifest in contemporary multimodal archival fiction in isolation, but rather, I align myself with scholars of archival art, such as Hal Foster, Sven Spieker, and Ernst van Alphen, who argue that the “archival impulse” (Foster, 3) is not solely a postmodern or millennial phenomenon, but, as I outline in the following section, one that can be traced throughout the twentieth century via modernism to present day metamodernism. Situating contemporary multimodal archival fiction within this broader historical and aesthetic context, I analyse Valeria Luiselli’s *Lost Children Archive*, James Elkins’ *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, and Catherine Lacey’s *Biography of X* as metamodern archival fiction. I propose that these novels’ multimodal, stylistic, and thematic engagement with the archive not only reactivates but expands on modernist and postmodernist strategies, and critiques of the archive in ways that feed into metamodern concerns with historicity, depth, and sincerity, exploring contemporary tensions between the public and the private archive, objective and subjective knowledge and experience, and questions about how we understand ourselves and our world today through archival poetics.

Modern/Postmodern/Metamodern Archival Poetics

The turn of the millennium, which I have previously pinpointed as the beginning of the recent archival turn in multimodal literature above, has also been identified as the emergence of the aesthetics of metamodernism. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen introduce the term to refer to “a structure of feeling that emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today’s stage of global capitalism” (5). Whilst postmodernism—through the prefix ‘post’—suggests a rupture from modernism, they posit that the prefix ‘meta-’ (which refers to both *with* or *among*, as well as *between* and *after*) describes the more complex relationship between the past and the future exemplified in contemporary Western European and Northern American literature which borrows strategies from both postmodern, modernist, realist as well as earlier aesthetic forms (van den Akker et al. 9, e.g. see also James, *Modernist Futures*; van den Akker, “Whatever Works”; James and Seshagiri, “Metamodernism”; Pressman, *Digital Modernism*). Van den Akker and Vermeulen describe metamodern aesthetics as “the upcycling of past styles, conventions and techniques” (10), which, in contrast to postmodernism’s recycling of culture through parody and pastiche, adds new value to an old form. In their analysis of autofiction and true crime documentaries as metamodern genres, Gibbons, van den Akker, and Vermeulen demonstrate how postmodern strategies—previously associated with what Marie-Laure Ryan describes as “a ‘crisis’ of the dichotomy between fact and fiction” (Ryan 165; qtd. in Gibbons et al. 174), and referred to, as the “doctrine of panfictionality,” (165)—are now employed to generate a reality-effect, or “new depthiness” (Vermeulen “The New ‘Depthiness’”, “Metamodern Depth”), in contrast to what Fredric Jameson called the “new depthlessness” of postmodernism (“The Cultural Logic). “Depthiness,” according to Gibbons, van den Akker, and Vermeulen, “designates a renewed need or wish to experience the world as possessing depth, as real, even amidst a lingering postmodernist scepticism of such an attempt” (174). These strategies include self-referentially, drawing attention to the text as a fictional construct; imitating and fictionalising techniques

of non-fiction; creating “obvious intra-textual clashes between fictional and non-fictional ontologies” (175); and making it impossible for readers to “decipher the referential or fictional status of a narrative’s storyworlds” (175). Simply put, “postmodernist devices are put to new use, reterritorialised” (Gibbons et al. 173). In contrast to postmodernism, metamodernist and post-postmodernist aesthetics have been described as striving to “reconnect with something beyond representation, something extralinguistic, something real” (McLaughlin 213). Although they continue to use metafictional or self-reflective strategies, they attempt to “write through them” (McLaughlin 215) to represent the world and connect with, rather than to play with or ridicule their readers through language games.

Similarly, David James emphasises that contemporary writers use modernist strategies as a homage to the past whilst simultaneously exploring their formal and critical potential to address social and political issues, such as “racial, sexual, and social identification or injustice” (*Modernist Futures* 4). James demonstrates how novelists, like J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, and Toni Morrison, build on modernism’s experimentation with representing mental experiences and consciousness to show how “mental experiences are shaped by material circumstances, how protagonists’ psychological states adapt to and are mutually pervaded by the social realms they navigate” (9). Hence, they implement features from the modernist novel to connect their characters’ internal and external worlds. Whereas, thus far, I have addressed how postmodern and modernist aesthetics permeate contemporary metamodern fiction in general, as my concern is with how archival poetics can be traced through modern, postmodern and metamodern culture, an aspect not previously addressed concerning metamodern aesthetics, I will now sketch out what modern and postmodern artistic concerns with and what conceptions of the ‘modern archive’ entail, before embarking on my analysis of metamodern archival fiction.

Although archives and their practices date back to ancient times, the term ‘modern archive’ refers to archives shaped by the archival theory introduced in the wake of the French Revolution and cemented through *The Dutch Manual: Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, published in 1898 (Muller et al.; cf. Codebò 13). Simultaneously, the Industrial Revolution marked a time when bureaucratic organisation replaced face-to-face interactions as people moved from the country to the city (Spieker 5). James Beniger refers to this period spanning from the 1880s to the 1930s as the “control revolution”; a control that was made possible due to the new archival technology of the time, including storage systems, like index cards and office equipment such as typewriters, carbon paper, stenography, and the telegraph. Together, these tools contributed to the bureaucratisation of everyday life and influenced modernist art practices, particularly through an interest in collecting, automatic writing, photography, and visual and literary collages. Foster neatly describes archival art as art that “not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private” (5).¹ As I will demonstrate in the following section, this applies to modernist and postmodernist engagements with the archive.

Especially within the Surrealist and Dadaist movements, artists began to utilise archival methods of organisation to critique the archive. Sven Spieker connects “early surrealism’s infatuation with card indexes and other office technology,” like lists, protocols, letters, and memos, with “its ambition to assemble an archive of unconscious facts” (88). He explains that “surrealism appeared to be interested exclusively in extreme phenomena that defy the archive and the ambition to record” (Spieker 88) whilst simultaneously registering and archiving strong emotions like shock, ecstasy, and delirium. French Surrealists even set up the *Bureau de Recherches Surréalistes* (Office of Surrealist Research) in Paris, which went beyond documenting the work of its members to “collect data that would help elucidate the workings of the unconscious by collecting written transcripts of unconscious dreams and other material” (Spieker 94). Exploring the unconscious was a way of redocumenting the self. One of the surrealists’ methods was automatic writing as a means not to depict reality, but to “reveal the subliminal principles of its temporal and spatial organisation” (Spieker 89). Automatic writing sessions captured “events of whose existence the writing subject never knew about but that nevertheless have been filed away in the archive of the unconscious” (Spieker 96). Spieker explains that “to the surrealists, the typewriter was much more than a machine that mechanized the production and archivization of symbols; its accelerated beat embodied the shock-like rhythm of life itself, a pulse well below the threshold of consciousness” (89–91). Hence, the typewriter both documented and represented the new tempo of the modern world and the people in it.

Beyond the work of the surrealists, van Alphen traces the “emergence of the archival impulse” (21) in modern and contemporary art further back, to the invention of photography in 1826 and its subsequent growing popularity. According to Susan Sontag, “the industrialization of photography permitted its rapid absorption into rational—that is, bureaucratic—ways of running society” (21). Documents become valid only once they have “a photograph-token of a citizen’s face” (Sontag 22) affixed to them. However, “the archival promise” of photographs was quickly “frustrated” by the lexical instability of photographs as well as “the sheer quantity of images” (Sekula 17). Similarly, van Alphen addresses this double-sided relationship between the archive and photography, arguing, firstly, that photographs themselves need archival organization due to their indexical multiplicity and extreme volume, and secondly, that “the photographic image itself can be seen as an archival record,” one that is “inherently unstable” (21–22, 27). This is because “once severed from their referents they can always be read differently” (van Alphen 27), opening them up to multiple readings and interpretations. Hence, whilst photography became an influential tool for documenting reality, the photograph on its own undermines its documentary power by being context-dependent, as it can easily be reframed based on the spatial and verbal context in which it is placed.

Another modernist engagement with the archive, also emphasising context dependency, is the use of collage, fragmentation, and intertextuality in both visual and verbal art. Graham Allen notes that modernist painting that implements ‘found material’ creates intertextuality between the included objects. This is particularly evident in the collage art of Cubist painters like Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque (Drăg). As Wojciech Drăg explains, collages

combine seemingly disjointed elements and fragments, such as photographs, clippings, and artefacts, often juxtaposed to create tensions. These elements, according to Drag, are often ready-made, meaning they are real, often mass-produced images or texts. In literary collage, “the ready-made usually takes the form of an unintegrated and often unacknowledged quotation or a photograph” (Drag 11). This account aligns with Lance Olsen’s description of collage fiction as a form of textual appropriation, exemplified by writers such as T.S. Eliot and William S Burroughs, who were “cutting up previous texts to create new ones” (Olsen, “Notes” 187; qtd. in Drag, 11). Underscoring that intertextuality is both a modernist and postmodernist practice, Linda Hutcheon differentiates between the two by describing Eliot’s quoting of Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land* as “a kind of wishful call to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing” (*Poetics* 11), whereas, in postmodern parody, it is often used to create an “ironic discontinuity” (11). Hence, intertextuality can both draw attention to the continuity of texts by claiming a lineage between them or be used to create parody which draws attention to the fact that, despite the modernist mantra, nothing is new. Regardless of its use, intertextuality underscores that no text exists in a vacuum but rather in a complex sociohistorical context. Furthermore, I propose that the intertextual collages can construct archives by foregrounding other texts and establishing connections between the new and the old, the past and present, whether to evoke modernist nostalgia or to offer a postmodern critique of the past.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodernist thinkers interrogated the role of the archive as the “rise of computerized society” (Lyotard 3) marked a change in how knowledge was organised and interpreted, challenging overarching narratives and exposing the contingency of historical records (Hutcheon, *Poetics*; *Politics*). Furthermore, the postmodern critique brought on a shift from viewing archival records as products of administration to acknowledging them as active agents in forming and influencing human memory (Cook). This was also reflected in postmodern historiographic metafiction that questioned the archive by revealing how history is mediated through archival materials that are vulnerable to manipulation and reinterpretation (Hutcheon, *Politics*). Hutcheon (*Poetics*) emphasises that historiographic metafiction is an important part of the postmodern theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs. Whilst both historical fiction and historiographic metafiction incorporate historical data into the narrative, historical fiction weaves it into the text, rendering it invisible, whereas, in historiographic metafiction, “more often, the process of attempting to assimilate is what is foregrounded” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114). Hence, “the metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels ... poses that ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now?” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 114–15). Hence, although historiographic metafiction engages with the archive, it does not offer a nostalgic return to the past but rather emphasises that there is no singular true past to return to. Instead, historiographic metafiction foregrounds the role of the archive in postmodern culture as a place where knowledge is produced rather than stored (Stoler).

Sketched out together, modernist and postmodernist artistic engagements with the archive reveal how the archive has figured beyond its role as a public institution to offer artists and writers new ways to address their own internal (conscious/unconscious) archived

self and reflect on how the public archive shapes our understanding of past and present. Additionally, questions raised in the postmodern critique of the archive remain valid in the twenty-first century as we have fully entered “the post-digital age” (Cramer) where archives have not only been digitised but engulfed by Artificial Intelligence, which severs information from its original source. As mentioned in the introduction, the archive today is no longer a place-bound institution, but rather, as Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen highlight, we are all archivists documenting our lives with our smartphone cameras, email archives, and chat history, and perhaps most pervasively, the data traces we leave behind every time we engage online. The control revolution Beniger described has now intensified to new extremes. Simultaneously, questions about the distinction between fact and fiction infiltrate both digital and political domains, manifesting in phenomena such as ‘fake news’ and ‘deepfakes.’ Clearly, the postmodern rejection of historiography and epistemological and ontological certainty is not magically resolved in metamodern art and culture. Therefore, this socio-cultural and technological context offers a particularly fruitful backdrop for exploring how archival poetics are implemented in contemporary archival fiction.

Metamodern Archival Fiction

After briefly outlining the history of the modern archive in modernist and postmodern artistic engagements, I now turn to address how these conceptions linger and even flourish in contemporary archival fiction, suggesting that this genre offers a new, complementary perspective to previous accounts of metamodern aesthetics. Across my three case studies, I analyse contemporary archival fiction’s multimodal, stylistic, and thematic archival poetics, and demonstrate how metamodern archival fiction *upcycles* modernist and postmodern archival poetics through their play with intertextuality and referentiality to blur lines between reality and fiction and capture the fluid nature of identity and the archived self.

Lost Children Archive: An Intertextual Archive

Luiselli’s novel, *Lost Children Archive*, is a travelogue of a family’s final road trip together across the United States, from New York City to Arizona. The novel includes collected material from the parents’ separate research projects as soundscape artists, as well as the wife’s son’s photographic archive of the family’s trip, and the husband’s daughter’s box of (typed-out) sounds. The wife’s project focuses on the 2014 “child refugee crisis” (Luiselli 23) at the U.S.-Mexican border; meanwhile, the husband’s interest lies in the historical displacement of the Apache Warriors, due to the 1830 Indian Removal Act. Beyond permeating the narrative text verbally, the parents’ research is included visually in the novel through seven box-chapters that collate inventory lists, newspaper clippings, maps, and Polaroid photographs. The boxes are the most experimental and multimodal feature of Luiselli’s novel, and it is via these that the reader is positioned to explore the family’s personal and professional archive. The visual presentation of the boxes distinctly differentiates the Box-chapters from the novel’s narrative text by presenting a title page stating “BOX” followed by a number between I-VII, which is surrounded by a thin black border following the outline of the page. The full-page rectangular frame creates

a simplistic yet iconic visual representation of a box within the pages of the novel. This visual representation merges further with the materiality of the novel's codex as each BOX-title page is placed on the right-hand side of the page-spread and thus functions as a lid/page which the reader needs to lift/turn to open the box and reveal its content. In this way, the reader is positioned to actively engage with the family members' personal archives. The inside of the boxes is structured as inventories with lists dividing items into categories, such as notebooks, books, and, for example, a folder with "facsimile copies, clippings, and scraps" (Luiselli 34). This structure thus suggests an underlying archival principle of organisation, which, according to van Alphen (2014), is what differentiates storage boxes from archival boxes. The visual presentation of the boxes, together with their archival structure, creates a multimodal archival poetics which draws attention to the act of collecting and organising the family's personal and professional items.

As a multi-award-winning novel, *Lost Children Archive*'s archival format and its ethical, socio-political, and ecological concerns have attracted substantial scholarly criticism (e.g. Cho; Ivansson & Gibbons; Ivansson; James, "Listening"; Mantzaris; Stuelke; Vermeulen, "The Field of Restricted Emotion"). However, Luiselli's modernist strategies have mainly been emphasised by Vermeulen, who traces the aesthetics across her novels, and Thomas Mantzaris, who addresses the fragmented nature of the novel's archival composition. Beyond highlighting the novel's archival structure, the inventories of books in the Box-chapters also establish an inter-textual network by listing works by, for example, André Gide, Ezra Pound, Rosalind Krauss, Susan Sontag, and Dubravka Ugrešić. According to P. Vermeulen, this contributes "to the novel's bid for literary distinction by constructing a modernist genealogy and New York-consecrated affiliations" (92). Hence, it constructs continuity between Luiselli's novel and other prominent works and authors. Furthermore, Luiselli engages with other modernist strategies that complement her archival poetics. For example, the "Echo Canyon" chapter consists of 20 pages of an unpunctuated fluid stream-of-consciousness sentence that switches between narrative levels and character perspectives, utilising Virginia Woolf's aeroplane device used in *Mrs Dalloway*. Luiselli describes this as a technique for "point-of-view shifts that occur when the eyes of two characters 'meet' in a single point of the sky, by looking at the same object" (Luiselli 382). The "Echo Canyon"-chapter is narrated by the wife's son through second-person address to the husband's daughter as the two children have run away together to the desert to find the "lost children" (321) that they have read about in the embedded fictional novel, *Elegies for Lost Children* by the fictional author Ella Camposanto. Instead of looking up to the sky for an aeroplane, the two children spot a group of eagles:

I can see the birds, too, flying around the clouds, and you asked me if I thought those birds were the eagles, so I looked through my binoculars and then said yes of course they are, those are the eagles, *the same eagles the lost children now see as they walk north into the desert plain*, beating muscled wings, threading in and out of black thunderclouds, they see them with their bare eyes, the five of them, as they walk onward. (Luiselli 321; my emphasis)

The birds, first seen by the son, then the daughter, and finally by the five lost children, here serve as a point-of-view shift that changes the narration from second-person to third-person and subtly shifts the focalization to the group of lost children. Before the “Echo Canyon” chapter, the world of the lost children was only accessed through 11 excerpts presented in stand-alone paragraphs within Luiselli’s novel, which positioned the reader to read these alongside the mother and son. However, as I have argued elsewhere, through this pointing up towards the eagles, the novel culminates with a merger of the two texts, where neither the worlds nor words of Luiselli’s and Camposanto’s novels are kept distinct (Ivansson). Instead, the two groups of children communicate and share storyworld space within the Echo Canyon.

This merger is then amplified once more as Luiselli reveals that “the *Elegies* are composed by means of a series of allusions to literary works that are about voyages, journeying, migrating, etc.” (382). Whilst not quoting these works directly, Luiselli constructs a complex intertextual archive, which underscores her novel’s thematic concern with migration across space and time. Texts written by European modernists, such as Pound, Conrad, and Eliot, are intertwined with later works of Mexican writers like Augusto Monterroso and Juan Rulfo and repurposed to tell the stories of South American child migrants crossing into the United States on top of gondolas in “a not-so-distant future” (Luiselli 138). In her works cited list at the end of the novel, Luiselli comments on her practice of creating literary allusions, borrowing, and altering citations as a method that does not need to be evident to the reader. She explains that she “is not interested in intertextuality as an outward, performative gesture but as a method or procedure of composition” (Luiselli 382). Luiselli’s fusing of textual fragments traces back to, what James describes as “an effort made most iconic by Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, ‘to create meaning from the flux and fragments of an atomized contemporary world’, as Leonard Wilcox puts it, ‘to pierce the veil, to reveal underlying truth’” (James, 13; cf. Wilcox, 348). Instead of critiquing the Eurocentric modernist aesthetics present in Pound, Conrad, and Elliot’s work, she, to borrow Van den Akker and Vermeulen’s term, *upcycles* their texts both as a creative practice and to historicise the child migration crisis. By combining overt intertextuality—through the inventory lists of books read by the parents—with more covert allusions and paraphrased quotations within the text, Luiselli engages with both modernist and postmodernist approaches to intertextuality. She does this both by drawing explicit attention to the texts that have shaped the parents’ view of the world and by weaving those texts directly into the narrative discourse itself. By combining these approaches, Luiselli’s intertextual archive anchors itself in literary history whilst also connecting historical Western experiences of migration with the 2014 child refugee crisis at the U.S border. Furthermore, in alignment with James’ argument about the modernist concern with how mental experiences are tied to material circumstances, Luiselli’s use of stream of consciousness in the “Echo Canyon” chapter ties the children’s mental experiences and their metaleptic meeting with the lost children, together with the texts and books consumed by their parents. Hence, in this way, the listed texts and the intertextual composition of *Lost Children Archive* underscore the historical and textual context in which we, and the children, exist. Whilst this composition could be read as a quintessentially postmodern gesture drawing attention to the constructed nature of texts, I propose that the

metaleptic merger also suggests the potential of texts to bridge time and space, and to position both the children and the reader to experience the world from a different perspective through the new use of the old words of modernist writers, drawing attention to experiences of migration, and shedding light on the lived experience of refugee children in America today. As such, Luiselli's use of intertextuality in *Lost Children Archive* aligns with the metamodernist quest for 'depthiness' and truth beyond the text.

Weak in Comparison to Dreams: A Surrealist Photographic Archive

Elkins' novel, *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, is self-reflexively presented as a manuscript composed by the protagonist, Dr Samuel Emmer, a microbiologist from Guelph, Canada, who is unexpectedly appointed by the city's Zoo Feasibility Committee to visit zoos across the world to gather information on stereotypical behaviour among caged animals. The novel opens with Emmer declaring that a narrative format is no longer available to him: "That winter ruined any hope I had of experiencing my life as a story" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). He explains that "that winter tore me from myself and pushed me into a world of dreams" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). Faced with the fear of losing himself, the narrator declares he "wants to write this book" (Elkins, *Weak* 15). The following almost 500 pages are Emmer's manuscript narrating the days and nights leading up to his entering in a fugue state, driving off into the Canadian wilderness. The final section of the novel is written by Emmer 30 years later, at the age of 90, as he has rediscovered the manuscript and rereads it, but struggles to connect to his younger self. In "Notes," the older Emmer reflects on how the manuscript is as if written by another person; similarly, the younger Emmer describes the experiences of his younger self, as a child, as belonging to a different person, to whom he refers as Sam. The initial manuscript and the "Notes" section thus function as two different documents capturing the protagonist at two distinct moments of his life. The division between the two sections underscores Emmer's initial rejection of conceptualising his life as a continuous story; instead, the format available to him is an archival collection of moments, documents, diagrams, and images. This combination of narrative and archival material reflects the surrealist's engagement with archival modes, to "establish an archive not of history but of its rupture, not of narrative but of its other" (Spieker 96). The rupture in Elkins' novel is between the past and present protagonist, whose life cannot be conceptualised as a consistent narrative, but only as archival snapshots which capture the person in a present moment. As such, Elkins' archival poetics demonstrates a return to the surrealists' exploration of archiving the moment and the momentary self.

Elkins, professor of art history, has a special interest in experimental writing with images, and the practice of incorporating photographs, charts, diagrams, and sheet music into the narrative discourse. He describes the inclusion of visual material as occasionally presenting material which has been gathered or created by the characters, mixed with "other passages when the main narrator imagines them and we [the readers] see them on the page" (Elkins, "Writing" 114). Both types of presentations can be understood as moments of what Gibbons calls "doubly deictic subjectivity" (*Multimodality* 80), meaning when a reader and a character's perspectives align, and readers are positioned to see what the character/narrator sees. How-

ever, a significant aspect of Elkins' novel is how fluid the materiality of the inserted visuals is, as documents are occasionally presented as material artefacts and in other moments, immaterial images of the narrator's imagination. By immaterial images, I refer to the visual inclusion of photographs of dreams in the twelve dream chapters, which alternate with the chapters describing Emmer's daily zoo visits. Narrated by Emmer, the dream chapters follow the development of him driving through unpopulated landscapes, which eventually catch fire and burn to a cinder. In each dream chapter, the page is divided equally between text and image, showing first a black-and-white photograph followed by narrative text. The equal division of text and image suggests that each semiotic mode is equally important for the narrative. The "First Dream" (Elkins, *Weak* 31) includes a horizontal photograph depicting a grassland with tall, wild-growing grass in the foreground and sporadic trees in the background. The photograph includes no identifiable features revealing the exact geographic location where it was taken. Hence, it has no explicit referential relationship with a place in the actual world; however, in the narrative text, Emmer connects the landscape with a location from his childhood. He describes this first dream as images projected onto his eyes:

That night I slept a strange, illuminated sleep. I watched, enchanted, as my mind showed me images. Pictures shone on my closed eyes, gleamed in my imagination. Clearly, I thought, as my bemused sleeping mind contemplated the images that kept arriving, this is from my childhood. Somewhere near Watkins, New York, nearly forty years ago. (Elkins, *Weak* 31)

The description of the images being displayed to the dreamer by his mind positions him as a passive onlooker: dreaming is like watching a film. Furthermore, the verbal reference to the specific image on the page: "this is from my childhood" (Elkins, *Weak* 31) both acknowledges that the reader is presented with a specific image out of the many shown to Emmer, yet the geographical and temporal reference to the real world remains vague pointing to "Somewhere near Watkins, New York, nearly forty years ago" (Elkins, *Weak* 31). Hence, as van Alphen emphasises, once the photograph is severed from its original context, its referential status is unstable. Whilst van Alphen describes this as an inherent issue with photographs as archives, Elkins' inclusion of dream photographs also adheres to the metamodern concern with complicating the referential or fictional status of elements within narrative storyworlds (Gibbons et al.). Although the text invites readers to interpret the photograph as depicting Emmer's childhood in Watkins, neither the photograph nor the text offers a way to confirm this relationship. The photograph's indexical multiplicity is further underscored by the fact that visuals experienced by our dreaming minds cannot be photographically reproduced. Hence, the reader might consider that the photograph is not an actual representation of *exactly* what the dreaming Emmer sees, but rather a picture taken "somewhere near Watkins" in a different context. This positions the reader in a state of flux, toggling between understanding the photograph as representing their own actual world and/or a fictional dream world.

Independent of the reader's interpretation of the referential status of the photograph, the included dream photographs create a juxtaposition between the materiality of photo-

graphs as real physical artefacts and their visual representation of the protagonist's dream content, which is only visually available within the protagonist's own mind. To clarify this, I draw on the picture theorist W.J.T. Mitchell's distinction between images and pictures. He categorises pictures as concrete objects and images as virtual and explains that the distinction between the two is "the difference between a deliberate act of representation ('to picture or depict') and a less voluntary, perhaps even passive or automatic act ('to image or imagine')" (4, fn. 5). Sara Tanderup Linkis makes this distinction more explicit by elaborating that "while 'images' are immaterial, virtual, and easily move between media, pictures are understood to be embodied images, manifestations of the image that depend on the concrete material, context in which they are presented" (44-45). Hence, the terms images and pictures capture, what so far, I have described as material or immaterial images, meaning how or if an image is contained in a medium. Elkins' presentation of dream photographs plays with this distinction by visually depicting mental images—imaginings—through the material form of photographs that we usually understand as indexically grounded in the real world. Thus, applying Mitchell's distinction between images and pictures, readers might on their initial encounter interpret the dream photographs as images, hence imaginings, rather than physical, material pictures. In this way, Elkins plays with archival poetics by collecting uncollectable images and incorporating them into the narrative discourse as if they were material objects. As such, he makes the character's internal life physically present on the page in a way that echoes how the surrealists turned to documentary methods to capture the unconscious.

The dream photographs are later, in the "Notes" section of the novel, revealed to have been collected by Emmer while collating his manuscript, thus confirming the photographs' material existence within the storyworld. Despite this, their material and referential ambiguity enhances the surrealist, dream-like quality of the dream chapters, which depict how Emmer's world falls apart following his divorce and his increasing estrangement from his daughter, all while travelling around observing animals in cages. The photographs of increasingly burning landscapes symbolise Emmer's waking life, as he states that the dream world "was ruined. Just like the other one" (411). Dreaming becomes Emmer's way of distancing himself from his real life, in which he feels disconnected from his family. Along with documents and diagrams of the caged animals' repetitive movements, the dream chapters represent Emmer's inner mental struggle in a multimodal manner. Consequently, Elkins' archival poetics juxtaposes the materiality of the archive with the immateriality of the mind's mental workings and imaginings. In this way, Elkins builds on modernist—and specifically surrealist—engagements with the archive to visually redocument the protagonist's self and inner struggles. While the novel's photographic archive of dreams explores a very different documentary method from the surrealists' use of the typewriter, it still shares a similar aim of their automatic writing, namely, to document and archive the unconscious. However, in a metamodernist context, the inclusion of the photographs also underlines the medium's failure to reliably reference a place either in the real world or in the protagonist's dream world.

Biography of X: A Counterfactual Archive

Lacey's novel *Biography of X* plays with the non-fictional format of the biography genre by nesting a book-within-the-book. Whilst the book cover clearly states Lacey as the author, followed by nine pages fading from black to white, the book reveals a second title page, listing the same publisher, Granta, but a different author: C.M. LUCCA. The page spreads fading from black to white are reminiscent of a cinematic fading to an opening or closing scene, which appears both at the beginning and end of the novel. These fading pages embed the nested narrative visually within Lacey's novel, and create an initial deictic push, which pushes the reader into an embedded narrative, a biography written not by Lacey but by the protagonist and widow of the visual artist X. This nesting of the biography marks the starting point where the blurring of the genre boundaries, characteristic of both archival and metamodern fiction, begin. Despite X's widow's original reluctance to turn her wife's life into "a historical object" (Lacey 11), she is taunted to write the biography to rectify the inaccuracies in another biography released shortly after X's death. The novel then follows C.M.'s quest to get to know who her wife actually was, both before and during their marriage, tracing her origin story beyond the wall of the Southern territory.

The ontological blurring of Lacey's novel becomes even more complex as the biographical narrative unfolds in a United States of America which has been divided into three territories after the so-called "Great Disunion" (Lacey 53) between 1945 and 1996. *Biography of X* thus situates itself in the genre of counterfactual historical fiction, offering an alternative political path for Post-World War II America, which echoes the division between East and West Germany with the American twist of Christian conservatism. The narrator explains that the most definite division was between the Northern and Southern Territories, marked by a physical wall. While the Northern Territory was led by a socialist capitalist party under the leadership of Emma Goldman—a real historical figure and anarchist activist—the South was ruled by a theocracy based on Christian values and gender roles. As Riyukta Raghunath emphasises, the fictionality of counterfactual historical fiction is complicated due to the genre's construction of "fictional worlds whose histories contradict the history of our world" (60). "Such texts," she explains, "are set within a familiar historical period and include popular historical figures within a fictional context" (Raghunath 60) that resembles the reader's own world. Like the works of counterfactual historical fiction analysed by Raghunath, Lacey also includes photographs to blur the fictionality and ontological relationship between the fictional and actual world. However, interestingly, the image chosen to represent the fictional border division between the three territories of the United States is a nighttime satellite photograph. The caption reads: "Image; Satellite photograph of the Northern, Western, and Southern Territories, 1993" (Lacey 53). The dark photograph shows the shape of the U.S territory through its lit-up lights. Hence, borders are not visible on satellite images, nor is the described wall between the north and the south visible in the nighttime photograph. The photograph, therefore, appears as a factual satellite photograph of U.S territory rather than of the divided nation within the novel. This ambiguity opens the question of whether the borders of concern in Lacey's novel are, in fact, ideological and socioeconomic rather than geographical. Especially as the counterfactual

narrative splitting of the North and the South as progressive versus conservative could be interpreted as representing the current political polarisation in the country today.

Despite the novel's politically divided setting, at its heart is not the political situation at large, but the question of identity. In contrast to Elkins' novel, where the archive becomes representative of how personhood cannot be accurately traced across time in a narrative format, Lacey's narrator turns to the archive to find and reconstruct her spouse, having to come to terms with the impossibility of knowing someone else fully. Similarly, to Emmer, she too rejects a pure narrative format, explaining that: "I know now a person always exceeds and resists the limits of a story about them . . . People are, it seems, too complicated to sit still inside a narrative, but that hasn't stopped anyone from trying, desperately trying, to compact a life into pages" (Lacey 33). The archival poetics of Lucca's biography of her wife, thus, suggest that an archival—rather than a narrative—structure is needed to grasp the complexity of X's life and personas. Beyond the multimodal inclusion of archival material and photographs, the biography's chapter structure is non-linear, organised around people's accounts of X's life, specific events, or places rather than chronological time. This offers snapshots of periods of X's life rather than a continuous story, and amplifies her obsession with creating new personas based on the social context in which she was currently. Hence, in contrast to Emmer's identity changing over time, the artist X actively changes and creates new personas as part of her artistic oeuvre. As she accesses fragments of her wife's life through other people's stories, C.M. begins to question if she ever knew X's true self at all.

Additionally, beyond political historical figures like Emma Goldman and Franklin Roosevelt, the novel includes cultural figures, such as David Bowie, Susan Sontag, Nathalie Léger, and RuPaul. Lacey interweaves these contemporary thinkers with X's work and, similarly to Luiselli, constructs an intertextual network of altered quotations from their work and interviews filtered in through quotes, letters, and newspaper texts, creating a cultural backdrop for the novel. This intertextual weave presents a detailed, yet distorted picture of New York in the 1990s. As in Luiselli's novel, as well as other works of archival fiction, such as Barbara Hodgson's *Hippolyte's Island* and Leanne Shapton's *Important Artifacts and Personal Property from the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry*, a network of intertextuality is often constructed to ground the fictional world within the readers' actual world and thus cross the ontological boundary between the two. In Lacey's novel, this relationship is made even more complex as real people's quotes are altered or anachronistically included in the novel. This means that, despite X dying in 1996 according to the biography, she is positioned in a context of texts that she would not have had access to. For example, the novel mentions a quote from RuPaul—"You're born naked and the rest is drag" (Lacey 39)—as influential in X's work in the 1980s, although RuPaul did not utter those words until an interview in 2004 (Theophano; Lacey 379). Hence, while Lacey's novel, like Luiselli's, uses text fragments to situate the narrative within its broader historical context, Lacey's anachronistic intertextual weave creates an impossible archive, one that highlights the constructed nature of texts by refusing to let the novel's historical setting dictate which sources are included. Although this intertextual play might read as a postmodern gesture

towards “depthlessness,” the novel’s complex intertextual network also invites the protagonist and the reader to make connections with texts that highlight the complexity of identity in a divided United States. By rejecting a historically accurate timeline for its citations, Lacey’s novel foregrounds its fictionality and asserts the freedom of (counterfactual) historical fiction to draw on knowledge from across eras. Ultimately, the novel suggests that identity struggles transcend historical boundaries and remain relevant. As my analysis of the archival poetics of *Biography of X* has shown, through her complex intertextual network and inclusion of ontologically ambiguous photography, like *Lost Children Archive* and *Weak in Comparison to Dreams*, Lacey’s novel includes archival modes and motifs that draw attention to the novel’s complicated relationship with the private and public archive, and to the actual, historical and fictional world.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article has mapped significant aspects of modernist and postmodernist artistic engagement with the archive in the twentieth century to explore how these conceptions feature in contemporary archival fiction and can be understood in relation to twenty-first-century metamodernism. As my analysis of three works of contemporary archival fiction has demonstrated, metamodernist engagement with the archive echoes and expands on modernist and postmodernist concerns with authenticity, truth-value, consciousness, and identity by drawing on archival poetics, such as the inclusion of archival material, like photographs, and other textual sources, as well as archival methods of organisation, fragmentation and intertextuality. In the analysed works, this is particularly obvious through their use of intertextuality to position the texts in a historical context and their exploration of the referential instability of photography. Taken together, these novels demonstrate how metamodern archival fiction upcycles modernist and postmodernist archival poetics to explore contemporary tensions between fact and fiction, past and present, and the fluid nature of identity and the archived self. Metamodern archival poetics thus reflect a literary interest in crafting narratives from visual and verbal collected fragments that, together, reveal something more authentic than the sum of their parts.

Expanding since the turn of the millennium, the archival turn in contemporary fiction not only exemplifies how digital technology allows writers to more easily incorporate visual semiotic modes and material into their narrative texts, but it also captures an interest in combining narrative and archival methods of documentation and organisation. Furthermore, in contrast to the digital setting in which these works are produced, their inclusion of archival material into the novel’s physical codices also suggests a nostalgic turn to the pre-digital archive. Whilst the archival material itself might be digitally sourced and manipulated, the narration often describes it as material objects, handled and touched by the protagonists. In this sense, archival poetics may be understood as a counterpoint to the hyper-digitised age we currently inhabit.

Notes

¹See Sara Callahan's monograph *Art + Archive, Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* for an extensive review of archival art and how the archive has figured in the artworld since the twentieth century.

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“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 Goesser’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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Contesting the 1920s: Malcolm Cowley versus Kay Boyle, John Glassco, Katherine Anne Porter – and Robert McAlmon

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Abstract

Grounded in biographical research and drawing on archival sources, this essay examines how the influential paradigm of literary modernism and the expatriate 1920s that was established by Malcolm Cowley in his *Exile's Return* (1934; 1951)—and, concomitantly, his parsimonious appraisal of Robert McAlmon—was contested by his literary coevals Kay Boyle, Katherine Anne Porter, and John Glassco. The appearance of Boyle's and McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together* (1968) and Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970) triggered altercations in print and private correspondence which, centered on the figure and function of Robert McAlmon, challenged premises and assumptions—of politics and geography, of gender and sexuality—in Cowley's narrative that made his claim of representativeness disputable. The essay also considers how the contestations of the 1920s by Cowley, Boyle, Porter, Glassco and McAlmon conjointly anticipated the large-scale revision of (the canon of) "high" modernism that was propelled by the rise of postmodernist theory and feminist revisionism in the 1980s, and how more recent scholarship, including insights from sexuality and queer studies, may help us come to a literary re-appraisal of Robert McAlmon. It shows how, even when the decade was still within human memory, "writing the 1920s" was a complicated, contested and contradictory enterprise, fraught with dissent and distortion, fabulation, manipulation and revision—a dynamics of historiography that may likewise make "writing the new Twenties" a highly tenuous, provisional and indeterminate enterprise that will be subject to ongoing contestation and adjustment, revision and subversion.

Keywords

American Modernism; 1920s; Expatriation; Memoirs; Historiography; Malcolm Cowley.

Introduction

First published in 1934 as “a narrative of ideas,” then revised in 1951 into a “literary odyssey of the 1920s,” Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*, combining autobiography/memoir with literary historical analysis and cultural interpretation, established a paradigm of the 1920s that remained authoritative and iconic for much of the twentieth century (a Penguin Classics edition was issued in 1994). Extrapolating from the transatlantic migratory experience of his own “lost generation,” it posited a formative pattern of “exile” and “return,” of alienation and reintegration, as defining for the canon of modern(ist) American literature. Cowley’s paradigm was rooted in premises and assumptions—of politics and geography, of gender and sexuality—that made his claim of its representativeness disputable. Even during his lifetime, female contemporaries like Kay Boyle and Katherine Anne Porter protested against being fitted into what they saw as Cowley’s procrustean experiential paradigm. The publication of two competing accounts of the 1920s—*Being Geniuses Together* (1968), a “stereoscopic” memoir of the 1920s by Boyle and Robert McAlmon, and John Glassco’s *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970)—generated a fierce altercation, in print and private correspondence, between Cowley and Boyle, centered about the figure and function of Robert McAlmon, with Porter and Glassco playing auxiliary roles. In this essay, grounded in biographical research and drawing on archival sources, I examine the ways in which Boyle—flanked by Porter and Glassco—contested Cowley’s reading of the 1920s, in particular his literary appraisal of McAlmon, and challenged the premises of gender and literary politics underlying Cowley’s paradigm of modern American literature. In a coda and conclusion I consider how the ways in which Cowley, Boyle, Porter, Glassco and McAlmon conjointly contested the 1920s anticipated the large-scale revision of (the canon of) “high” modernism that was propelled by the rise of postmodernist theory and feminist revisionism in the 1980s, and how more recent scholarship, including insights from sexuality and queer studies, may help us come to a reappraisal of Robert McAlmon from perspectives that go beyond the personal or cultural horizons of not only Cowley but Boyle, Porter, Glassco—and McAlmon himself.

This essay hopes to show how, even when the decade was still within its actors’ human memory, “writing the 1920s” proved a complex historiographical exercise, in which contestation and contradiction vied with fabulation and distortion, revision and manipulation. Lived experience clashed with personal memory and retrospective reconstruction, precluding a uniform, consonant or monolithic account and necessitating the competing co-existence of multiple perspectives and counterpoints on a legendary decade that for the literary historian must remain fluid, malleable and mercurial. It stands to reason to expect that the historiographical dynamic that governed the writing of the “old” Twenties may similarly come to determine the writing of the “new” Twenties, making it—by necessity and definition—a highly tenuous, provisional and indeterminate enterprise that will be subject to ongoing contestation and adjustment, revision and subversion.

Exile’s Return in American Literary History

Cowley’s *Exile’s Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (1934) was a retrospective account of the intellectual and aesthetic trajectory followed by the author and his cohort of literary coevals

between 1915 and 1930. Cowley presented himself as a representative voice of the “lost generation” of American writers, as he sought to explain the role they had played in the emergence of a modern national American literature from a process of cross-fertilization with European modernism. *Exile's Return* traced the formative years of the post-World War I young generation from being “uprooted, schooled away, almost wrenched away, from its attachment to any region or tradition” (34) in high-school and university; through volunteer service in World War I (where it cultivated a “spectatorial attitude” [47] to the war, which persisted into post-war life and society); through a stint of living as poor, struggling artists-on-the-make in Greenwich Village; to a feeling of disaffiliation from an America in the grip of puritanism, philistinism and prohibition; to the embrace of “salvation by exile” (84), the expatriate experience in Europe, the confrontation with international modernism, the rediscovery of America's aesthetic potential, and the “return” to America on the eve of the Depression. The core of Cowley's critique of the past was his analysis of the symbolist aesthetics at the heart of modern literature and its ethical, social and political implications. Written under the auspices of his Depression-inspired conversion to radical politics, the 1934 *Exile's Return* amounted to a repudiation of the aesthetic, non-political poetics which had marked his generation in the 1920s; it ended with a stirring call to radical engagement. The book was controversial, and met with a strongly mixed, and for the author discouraging reception.

In 1951 the book was reissued by Viking in a newly revised edition, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*. Though Cowley claimed that he had left the core of his account unaltered, in effect the 1951 edition amounted to a different book: it placed the intellectual and artistic peregrinations of Cowley and his generation in a de-politicized light and emphasized the timeless mythical underpinnings of the “odyssey” of his generation. This time, the book was hailed as a contemporary classic of American literary history, a tribute to the achievement of the “lost generation,” and an influential study of the “making” of American literature. It cinched Cowley's reputation as one of America's major critics.¹

Though never unchallenged, *Exile's Return* for several decades maintained its position of authority among the countless memoirs and autobiographies by key figures or fellow travellers of the “lost generation” that began to flood the US literary market in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1930s Fitzgerald's pioneering “Echoes of the Jazz Age” (1931) and Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) had preceded *Exile's Return* (1934) as revaluations of expatriation in the 1920s, and close upon its heels had appeared Vincent Sheean's *Personal History* (1935), Harold Stearns's *The Street I Know* (1935), and Robert McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together* (written in 1934 but not published until 1938, in London). The 1940s saw Janet Flanner's *An American in Paris* (1940), Edmund Wilson's compilation of Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* (1945) and Samuel Putnam's *Paris Was Our Mistress* (1947). But with the post-war revival of interest in the 1920s an avalanche of lost-generation memoirs followed Cowley's revised edition of *Exile's Return* (1951), most prominent among them Caresse Crosby, *The Passionate Years* (1953), Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (1956), Harold Loeb, *The Way It Was* (1959), Robert M. Coates, *The View from Here* (1960), Matthew Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists* (1962), Man Ray, *Self-Portrait* (1963), Morley Callaghan, *That Summer*

in *Paris* (1963), Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (1964), John Dos Passos, *The Best Times* (1966) and Nancy Cunard, *Those Were the Hours* (1969). In 1968 Fitzgerald's "My Generation" (written in 1939) posthumously appeared, and Kay Boyle published what Padraic Colum on the dustjacket called "a binocular view" of the 1920s in her revised edition of McAlmon's *Being Geniuses Together*, supplemented by alternating chapters of her own reminiscences. In 1970 appeared John Glassco's *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, a book that on Cowley's strong recommendation was reissued in a US paperback edition by Viking Press in 1973.

Though the sheer number of retrospective accounts published between the early 1930s and 1970 in and by itself belied the possibility of a consensual and unified historiography of the "old" Twenties (and more expatriate memoirs would follow Glassco's), *Exile's Return* retained a uniquely influential position. Rooted in memory and imaginative reconstruction of autobiographical experience, Cowley's book went beyond the personal, anecdotal and gossipy reminiscence of a wild and wasteful decade of literary and erotic adventure that marked most 1920s memoirs, and established a larger design of literary historical analysis and cultural interpretation, which would set the dominant image of the Lost Generation and confirm its place of centrality in the American literary canon for the remaining decades of the twentieth century. Not until the culture wars of the 1990s, and the revision of the canon of American literature through enterprises like *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*—the first edition of which appeared in the year of Cowley's death, 1989—would the paradigm of modernism which *Exile's Return* helped to establish be displaced.²

Over time, critical appreciations of *Exile's Return* fluctuated with literary and political fashions, as critics challenged Cowley's "narrative of ideas" not only (as this essay will show) from the perspectives of feminism, gender and sexuality studies, but also from the perspectives of neo-marxism, neo-conservative criticism, multiculturalism, diversity studies, and transnational American studies.³ But even its most fervent detractors and dissenters had to grant its influence and authority as "the book that did more than any other to popularize [the legend of the lost generation] even as it was among the first to validate the great importance of the literature which made the legend possible" (Aldridge 481). Yet even in Cowley's lifetime its status and interpretation were disputed, sometimes furiously, by fellow-writers and coevals.

Cowley, Boyle and McAlmon: Living and Remembering the Expatriate 1920s

Among the most vocal detractors of Cowley's reading of the past was novelist, poet and political activist Kay Boyle (1902–1992), whose 1968 reissue of *Being Geniuses Together* was the occasion for a bitter altercation with Cowley, focused on their different appreciations of Robert McAlmon (1895–1956), poet, fiction writer, memoirist and—through his *Contact Editions*—an influential publisher of American expatriate writing in 1920s Paris. Though Boyle felt she did not technically qualify as an "expatriate"⁴—in marrying a French officer Richard Brault in June 1922 she had surrendered her American nationality to become a French citizen—she was, in Cowley's 1951 perception, perhaps "the only permanent expatriate" (292) among the writers of the "lost generation". Cowley's actual period of expatriation was limited

to two years, 1921–1923. An American Field Service Fellowship allowed him to immerse himself in French Classicism for a year at the University of Montpellier in the South of France, which was followed by a summer of European travel (Brussels, Berlin, Innsbruck, Vienna) and a second year in Paris and Giverny, when he met the “saints” of modernism (Joyce, Valéry, Eliot), fell under the spell of the French Dadaists (Tzara, Aragon) and was arrested and jailed for his “significant gesture” of punching the café proprietor of La Rotonde in the face (Cowley, *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey* 110–32, 164–70). The two years Cowley spent in France were watershed moments in his literary career, when he first developed the ideas that would remain axiomatic with him and—partly through working for *Broom* and *Secession*—rediscovered the aesthetic potential of “America” by viewing it from a European perspective (Bak, *Malcolm Cowley* 178–275). Boyle, by contrast, spent many more years, from 1923 to 1953, in Europe, mostly in France, England, Austria and Germany—with the exception of a 1940s war-time interlude in New York. In the 1920s she published in the expatriate little magazines—*Broom*, *This Quarter*, *transition*—and moved in expatriate circles with Eugene Jolas, James Joyce, Harold and Caresse Crosby, Harold Stearns—and Robert McAlmon. In *Exile’s Return* Cowley mentioned her, almost in passing, as one belonging to Harry Crosby’s circle and listed her as one of the signers of *transition*’s “Revolution of the Word” proclamation (251, 262, 277n, 284, 292n).

Boyle and Cowley had not personally met in Paris in the early 1920s, though technically they might have, as they moved in different but convergent circles, and their stays in Paris briefly overlapped, Boyle arriving in France with her French husband on June 5, 1923 (Mellen 55), Cowley departing to New York on August 2 (Bak, *Malcolm Cowley* 276). But Cowley was aware of her through *Broom*⁵ – Boyle’s poem “Morning” had appeared in *Broom*’s January 1923 “American” number, which also contained Cowley’s “Pascin’s America” – and may even have caught glimpses of her in Montparnasse: in 1963 he recalled her as “a rather elfin creature” (79) in her Paris days. In 1922, Boyle had worked as “business manager” for *Broom* in its New York office, serving as assistant to Lola Ridge, a revolutionary activist and poet, like Boyle of Irish descent. Ridge had hoped to have editorial control over which writers to include in *Broom*’s “American” number (she objected to the inclusion of Gertrude Stein), but when editor Harold Loeb proved reluctant to give her the autonomy he had promised her, she resigned as the magazine’s New York editor. When in January 1923, upon learning that his sponsors were to withdraw their financial support, Loeb decided to halt the magazine, Ridge and Boyle offered to take it over (Mellen 49–53). By Boyle’s account, Loeb consented, then within 48 hours changed his mind, cabling from Europe “second thought, no,” and passed editorial control of *Broom* over to Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley and William Slater Brown, much to the anger and frustration of both women, who experienced Loeb’s reversal as a patriarchal act of curt dismissal. The memory would rankle. Loeb’s cable, Boyle later wrote to Cowley, was like “a death sentence passed on all our hopes.”⁶

Once in France Boyle was determined, not without bitterness towards Loeb, to find her own way among the “cliques” and “camps” of expatriate Paris (Mellen 63) and empathically took her distance from Cowley. As she wrote to Lola Ridge in September 1923, she came

prepared to attack “the cheap cheap cheap criticism of Jean Toomer, Matthew Josephson and Malcolm Cowley” (qtd. in Mellen 62) which she had encountered in the pages of *Broom*. “How often,” she told Ridge on September 12, “have I thought that were I Malcolm Cowley I should long ago have written a clever superficial note on French provincial life—‘this land where horses go uncastrated and all good journeaux eventually become toilet paper,’ relying on several lines of magnified type to carry my point” (Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century* 55). It is likely that Boyle’s wrath was roused by Cowley’s tongue-in-cheek cultural criticism in a series of caricatural portraits which had appeared in *Broom* between October 1922 and March 1923.⁷ More immediately she reacted against Cowley’s “Snapshot of Young Lady” in the August 1923 *Broom*, a Dada-inspired satirical fantasy, full of bizarre coincidences and illogical plot twists, which parodically conflated cliché’s from pulp fiction murder mysteries and male fascination with Hollywood’s hazle-eyed, golden-haired romantic heroines.⁸ Her Paris, she was adamant, would not be the Paris of glamor, license, and literary bickering between the editors of little magazines: “Paris doesn’t mean for me ‘The Dôme’ and the hot fierce arguments across liquor—, not Harold Loeb’s Paris, nor Cowley’s, not Gorham Munson’s!”⁹ Even so, as much as any expatriate she was eager to escape a bourgeois and capitalist American culture grounded upon “the business of money-making, money-spending, money-saving,” as she wrote to Lola Ridge. For her, as for many an American expatriate, Europe represented freedom, America enslavement (Mellen 69).

From her New York days on *Broom*, Boyle had been aware of Robert McAlmon, as a consort of William Carlos Williams, co-editor of *Contact* (which published two of her poems in 1923), and founder of Contact Publishing Company. Through Harold Loeb she first met McAlmon in 1923 in Paris at the terrace of the Café de la Paix, and, herself an impressionable 21-year-old, fell under the spell of this handsome man seven years her senior. McAlmon, she recalled in *Being Geniuses Together*, had “a profile not unlike John Barrymore” and, for all his brutal cynicism and icy blue eyes, “appeared to be totally without conceit.” She found him a witty conversationalist, his thin lips marked by “a half-humorous, half-mordacious twist” and “acrimonious laughter” (*Being Geniuses Together* 94-95). Four years later, at 25, she found McAlmon “honest and sensitive . . . the real thing”—beneath his “hard, obdurate, stubborn and insensitive manner” he was “keenly sensitized to the subtleties of truth” (qtd. in Mellen 102-03). Poet Evelyn Scott, however, sensing Boyle’s hero-worshipping tendency, noted an “emotional prejudice” (Mellen 106) towards McAlmon.

Boyle did not settle in Paris until 1928, when she began moving in the circles of Jolas’ *transition*, with Carnevali, Joyce, Sylvia Beach, Gertrude Stein, Stearns, and the Crosbys. Though she found McAlmon openly hostile to *transition* and its “Revolution of the Word,” Boyle—writes biographer Joan Mellen—“fell in love with Robert McAlmon, even as she knew the truth about his homosexuality” (118) and despite his verbal cruelty. McAlmon, recently released from a marriage of convenience with the lesbian—and wealthy—poet Bryher, could or would not publicly (and only very rarely privately) avow his homosexuality, and Boyle and he were never lovers, despite Boyle’s infatuation and her enduring belief that he must be in love with her (Mellen 124). Even after she had been the lover of the bisexual John Glassco,

who presumably was McAlmon's lover too, and had faced further evidence of McAlmon's homosexuality, Boyle clung to her illusion of love, remained loyal to McAlmon, and persisted in feeling that he had never received proper recognition as publisher and catalyst of American writing in 1920s Paris (Mellen 125, 148, 285).

In glaring contrast, in *Exile's Return* (1934) Cowley virtually erased McAlmon from the expatriate scene, barely granting him a place or role of any significance: his name occurs only once, in passing and dismissively, in a quote from a June 29, 1923, letter to Kenneth Burke, as one with whom one should avoid getting involved in "petty literary wars" (1934, 171; 1951, 162). Cowley had met McAlmon shortly after his arrival in Paris in 1921, but he had ironically read his presence there as confirming that Paris was little more than an extension of Greenwich Village bohemia (Bak, *Malcolm Cowley* 180). Indeed, little love was lost between McAlmon and the members of Cowley's group. Since his Village days McAlmon had regarded Burke, Cowley and Josephson as belonging to a "reprehensible species of egghead" in possession of a forbidding erudition, and had preferred the company of William Carlos Williams (Josephson 74, 77). In contrast to Burke and Cowley's appreciation for the formalist intellectualism of modern literature, McAlmon preferred to engage in literary partnership—and an ensuing long-lasting friendship—with Williams through their joint magazine *Contact* (1920–1921, 1923), which propagated a literature of lived experience grounded in "contact" with, and using the idiom of, native locality (Smoller, *Adrift* 30–32). Burke, Cowley and Josephson, on their side, continued to feel cold toward McAlmon through the 1920s.

The summer 1928 issue of *transition* was an "American Number" featuring, among others, a poem by Cowley ("Seven O'Clock"), a poem by Boyle ("The United States"), and a poem by McAlmon submitted through Boyle under the pseudonym of "Guy Urquhart." It also, ironically, included a twenty-page group manifesto, "New York 1928," concocted by Cowley, conjointly with Burke, Brown, Josephson and Robert Coates, from a room at the Chelsea Hotel.¹⁰ The manifesto testified to a change of heart among former "exiles" and amounted to a double-aimed critique: savage and comico-serious attacks on notorious expatriates like Pound were counterbalanced by scathing satires on the insipidity of American culture in an age of mass production and consumerism. McAlmon, as archetypal expatriate, came in for the brunt of bitter renunciation by the exiles-turned-nativist: one jingle, a parody of Heine, read: *I dreamt that I was Pound himself, / Whom heavenly joy immerses, / And ten McAlmons sat about / And praised my verses*. A couplet composed by Slater Brown belittling McAlmon's quality as a writer belatedly gained notoriety: *I'd rather live in Oregon and pack salmon, / Than live in Nice and write like Robert McAlmon*.¹¹

The jingles infuriated Boyle: in her 1968 *Being Geniuses Together* she denounced the manifesto as "some limping and would-be waggish doggerel, the blunt barbs of which were directed against American exiles, doggerel which a group of New York literary men had apparently spent an uproarious night composing in a room at the Chelsea Hotel" (337). Without giving away names, she denounced its facile humor, "intellectual effrontery" and "embitterment"—sentiments she would never allow to cloud her "love" ("deeply and wholly without question") and appreciation of McAlmon and Jolas (337–38). Writing to Boyle in December

1967, Cowley confessed: “Those doggerel verses in *transition* that made you so angry were written by Slater Brown. I thought they were funny, and so did Jolas, but then we weren’t friends of McAlmon.”¹²

In the original version of *Being Geniuses Together* (1938) McAlmon included a trivializing account of an incident Cowley blew up to symbolic proportions in *Exile’s Return* as a Dadaist “significant gesture”—his well-advertised fisticuffs with the *patron* of La Rotonde on Bastille Day 1923 and his ensuing arrest and imprisonment: “It appeared that Malcolm Cowley had taken a sock at the patron of the Rotonde and the cops arrested him. We were all against the patron of the Rotonde. He disliked Americans, had become rich through them, and was sour-faced and mercenary at best. The lot of us flocked to the police station and swore that the patron had started the fight . . . It was thought that Cowley had been saved a six months jail term, for they are strict about fisticuffing in France” (113–14). McAlmon’s account, written in February 1934, antedated the publication of *Exile’s Return* in May of that year, but McAlmon would have read Cowley’s report on his “significant gesture” pre-published in the September 1931 issue of *The New Republic*, the magazine on which Cowley had recently succeeded Edmund Wilson as literary editor.¹³ McAlmon implied that he had played a mediating role of some importance in effecting Cowley’s release. Though his intervention, with that of American companions like Laurence and Clotilde Vail and Kitty Cannell, may have helped to sway the French judge, Cowley had effectively been released through the help of French literary friends, in particular André Salmon, who as reporter of Paris murder trials for *Le Matin* was on good terms with the police (Bak, *Malcolm Cowley* 264–65).

McAlmon followed up his 1934 account of Cowley’s trial with a spiteful recollection of Cowley’s altercation with Archibald MacLeish, in *The New Republic* in the early fall of 1933, about the American involvement in World War I. At the time, Cowley had come to understand the war through Communist spectacles as a war of imperialism, which had claimed too many who had “died in vain.”¹⁴ Cowley’s stance—and his implied critique of MacLeish’s connection with Henry Luce’s big-money enterprises *Time* and *Fortune*—roused McAlmon’s ire and contempt, and he reported on Cowley’s new political allegiances and his supposedly limited powers of intellectual analysis with barb-wired condescension:

In any case, Cowley soon went back to America and joined the staff of *The New Republic*, to continue being duly ponderous, the young-intellectual fairly slow on the uptake, for in 1933 he bolted somewhere to the middle-rear as a leader of thought by declaring war is a sell and a disillusionment and that so and so should declare themselves. At the time Osbert Sitwell, Beverly Nichols, Storm Jameson and a crew of English lady novelists had been declaring themselves passionately anti-war for some time, and in cases analyzed the conditions and persons – i.e. munition-makers, bankers, those seldom involved in the agonies of but profiting by wars – responsible for war . . . Perhaps Cowley should go a bit deeper into the causes for war, and leave the emotional outcry against the cruelty and futility of it to women’s clubs, even if their outcry does not seem to influence those in authority. (McAlmon 114–15)

When, in the 1960s, Boyle came to revise McAlmon's memoirs for her "binocular" edition of *Being Geniuses Together*, she deleted most of McAlmon's diatribe against what he had deemed Cowley's slanted and wrongheaded reading of the First World War. But she retained McAlmon's barbed mockery of Cowley's presumed intellectual deficiencies, and she made sure that in the revised passage McAlmon appeared in a more favorable light:

In any case, Cowley soon went back to America and joined the staff of *The New Republic*, where he could be duly ponderous, the young intellectual fairly slow on the uptake, who startled a naïve public by daring to declare (in 1933) that war is a sell and a disillusionment, and that MacLeish, Hemingway, and all of us should say so. After that blast from Cowley's pen, I got romantic and read again *War and Peace*, and *Le Feu* and *Three Soldiers*, and other anti-war books, and recalled that Osbert Sitwell, Beverley Nichols, Storm Jameson, and a crew of English lady novelists had been declaring themselves passionately against war for some time past. (*Being Geniuses Together* 42)

Over the ensuing years, Boyle remained loyal to her hero-worshipping memories of love and friendship for McAlmon. After having been a prolific author and an influential publisher in the 1920s, McAlmon's career declined in the 1930s, even though he published a book of stories in 1932, a volume of poetry in 1937, and his memoirs in 1938. McAlmon continued to reside in Europe until 1940, when he returned to the US to live in Texas, and died, almost forgotten, in 1956. Boyle continued to feel that McAlmon had been "exploited, betrayed, neglected, deceived, and imitated beyond recognition" (qtd. in Mellen 303), and she became determined, upon his death in 1956, to revive his reputation, writing in *The Prairie Schooner* in 1960: "It was McAlmon who, in liberating himself from genteel language and thought, spoke for his generation in a voice that echoes, unacknowledged, in the prose of Hemingway and that of other writers of his time" (qtd. in Spanier, *Kay Boyle* 26).

Boyle versus Cowley, Part One: *Being Geniuses Together* (1968)

Though both writers maintained distant, if mostly cordial and diplomatic relations over the years, Boyle's resentment against Cowley's reading of the expatriate 1920s, especially his in her eyes wrongheaded appraisal of McAlmon, lingered, to flare up in full force in the late 1960s. By then, their careers had followed divergent paths: by the time of her definitive return from Europe in the 1950s, Boyle had moved from *transition's* aesthetic rebelliousness to a more socially and committed stance that culminated in anti-Vietnam political activism; Cowley, by contrast, had abandoned his 1930s leftist activism to become part of the literary establishment (in 1956, the year of McAlmon's death-in-oblivion, he was elected President of the National Institute of Arts and Letters) and a publicly recognized authority on the "lost generation" of the 1920s. By the early 1960s—in the wake of the deaths of Hemingway, Faulkner and Cummings—both Boyle and Cowley had become legendary survivors of a patina-covered literary generation: in 1963 both featured in a double-spread group photograph of "The Last of the Lost Generation" published by *Esquire* magazine.¹⁵ In an accompanying essay,

Cowley spoke of the “lucky” rather than “lost” generation and, with a humorous twinkle, described Boyle as “looking more Latin than Irish; one might take her for an admired diva who has passed in a moment from a fit of scorn to an outburst of hilarity.” He singled her out as “the baby of the group” (incorrectly giving her date of birth as 1903, a fib often used by Boyle herself), recalled that in Paris she had seemed “a rather elfin creature,” and ended on a retrospective note of admiration: “one looks back with amazement at the work she has accomplished. Besides raising six children by three marriages, she has written twenty volumes of fiction and three volumes of poetry” (Cowley, “Last” 79).

Some years after Boyle’s return to the US in 1953, she and Cowley had resumed epistolary contact in a vein of mutual respect and friendship. But the cordiality of their relations took a downward turn when in October 1967 Cowley announced to Boyle that he had been asked by Ken McCormick, Boyle’s publisher at Doubleday, to give his verdict of Boyle’s latest project, a revised reissue of McAlmon’s 1938 *Being Geniuses Together* interspersed with chapters from Boyle’s own memoirs of the 1920s.¹⁶ Boyle’s undertaking was motivated by her loyal determination to give McAlmon the recognition as an influential publisher and mentor in expatriate Paris that she felt had unfairly been withheld from him. As she wrote to Katherine Anne Porter, she was eager to put McAlmon “in a proper perspective” and remedy the dismissive treatment of McAlmon she had encountered in *Broom* and *transition* in the 1920s, as well as more recently in Cowley’s *Exile’s Return* (the 1951 revised edition had been reissued as a Compass paperback in 1965) and Josephson’s *Life Among the Surrealists* (1962): “Bob was annihilated as a writer by Cowley, Josephson, Slater Brown, and others, and this book will, I hope, help to reinstate him both as a writer and publisher in our time.”¹⁷ The manuscript of McAlmon’s original memoirs, she wrote to Edward Dahlberg, had been much “emasculated” by his London publishers, largely from fear of libel, and she knew McAlmon had been “bitterly disappointed” in the published version.¹⁸ Boyle was now adamant to restore the book’s “original power” by going back to the 1934 text. Indeed, she did not hesitate to revise and rewrite according to her own light.¹⁹ As the British novelist Anthony Powell perspicaciously noted, Boyle had cleaned up McAlmon’s original narrative by omitting stories that showed him in a less than favorable light (Mellen 457). In order to focus her book of combined memoirs more astringently on the 1920s, Boyle left out the chapters in McAlmon’s original version that dealt with the years 1931–1934, including McAlmon’s eye-witness account of Hitler and his Brown shirts parading through the streets of Munich in 1932. In this way, as Brian Busby noted, Boyle “refashioned the memoir to better resemble her idealized image” of McAlmon, “a man for who she had once felt an unreciprocated love” (219–20). “It is my hope,” Boyle wrote undauntedly in a prefatory note to the new edition, that “the present revision will do more than provide a deeply sympathetic portrait of a writer and publisher who deserves to be remembered for his unique qualities, but that it will as well help to accord to Robert McAlmon his rightful and outstanding place in the literary revolution of the early nineteen-twenties” (xiii).

As soon as she learned of McCormick’s request, Boyle jumped to actively discourage Cowley from complying: “I can’t think why Ken McCormick thought you would want to read

even the revised version of *Being Geniuses Together*. I know you did not like McAlmon, and he is not complimentary to you in the book, and had Ken McCormick asked my advice first I would have said you should not be bothered with it . . . So please do forget about the whole thing.”²⁰

Ignoring Boyle’s plea, Cowley wrote to McCormick to express his verdict of *Being Geniuses Together* (“superb title”): the alternation of McAlmon’s and Boyle’s chapters gave “a special feeling of solidity” to the book as they complemented each other “in a curious fashion”: “McAlmon, a realist able to make shrewd judgments, but lacking in imagination and blind to anything beyond the end of his own nose; Miss Boyle, a romanticist and still full of illusions forty years after the events she describes, but very often able to grasp the essence of a character and always eager to acknowledge greatness in others because there is something of greatness in herself.” Indeed, Boyle possessed in excess what McAlmon crucially lacked, and Cowley frankly owned up to his predilections: “I enjoyed her chapters much more than I did McAlmon’s. He drank with every one, he tells good stories, but he wrote his part of the book at a time when everyone else was becoming famous, or so it seemed, and he was sinking into obscurity, so that he was full of grudges and resentments. Miss Boyle keeps insisting on his generosity, but there is hardly a hint of it in his prose. She, on the other hand, is generous to a fault, generous to everyone including McAlmon, and leaves one with a feeling of courage and warmth.” The book was most effective, he thought, when both writers dealt with the same people and events: together they offered “a stereoscopic view” which made for an “indispensable” account of Paris in the 1920s.²¹

Writing to Boyle, Cowley was more unrestrained: he had read the book “with fascination” and “admiration” for Boyle’s chapters but found the quality of McAlmon’s writing “rather saddening” – “He had a certain amount of raw talent, but he couldn’t write prose, and on principle refused to learn.” Again, Cowley confessed to bias: “No, I didn’t like him, and I like him rather less after reading his narrative” – but if McAlmon helped others “in an admirably off-handed fashion,” Cowley was hard-pressed to find even “a shred of generosity” in his work – “only grudges and resentments.” Part of the reason for this, Cowley surmised, was McAlmon’s unhappiness about his declining reputation: “Almost everybody he had known in Paris was becoming famous, while he was becoming obscure. He had been the patron of others, almost the Maecenas, and now he needed help, which nobody offered. It would have taken a great spirit not to feel resentful. McAlmon wasn’t a great spirit. In some ways he was a man of the eighteenth century: realistic, shrewd, skeptical, but short-sighted . . . He lived among the great without ever knowing what made them great.” Nor was Cowley, contrary to what Boyle suspected, “in the least” aggrieved by McAlmon’s “little crack” about him as the *New Republic* editor who “could be duly ponderous, the young intellectual fairly slow on the uptake” – “What saddens me are the cracks he insists on making about better people than I am.” Boyle herself, unlike McAlmon, wrote “with imagination” and “real generosity of spirit” and Cowley had felt “deeply moved” by her narrative.²²

Cowley thought the book was important enough to warrant an extended review, in a place of prestige and high visibility: on June 9, 1968, the front page of *The New York Times*

Book Review featured “Those Paris Years,” illustrated with photographs of Boyle as a wavy-haired, unfathomable beauty in Nice in 1930, and a black marble sculpture of a long-necked McAlmon by Mariette Mills. Cowley devoted the entire front page (almost two-thirds of his review) to an uncharitable discussion of McAlmon, before offering a generous appraisal of Boyle’s share of the book—a choice which thwarted Boyle’s purpose to restore McAlmon to his proper stature. Written with American down-to-earthiness, a touch of poetry, but also witty (sometimes vicious) innuendoes, Cowley’s review recapitulated the verdict he had given in his letters to McCormick and Boyle, now couched in a tone of ironic nostalgia and avuncular retrospection befitting a piece rooted in personal recollection and generational memory. In a Twain-like character vignette of McAlmon, he pictured him as blowing into Paris in 1921 “like a wind from the prairies” and, with his broad-brimmed hat, resembling “a wild Cayuse or its rider.” Aiming to be fair, Cowley described McAlmon as a man with “self-confidence, a winning smile, and . . . a generous supply of money, derived from his incredible marriage to the poet Bryher,” who seemed “destined” to have a “brilliant career” and built an impressive network among the great (Eliot, Pound, Joyce) while secretly cherishing his superiority. Being “generous to younger and needier writers,” he founded Contact Editions and published a distinguished roster of “famous or soon-to-be-famous authors”—Cowley listed Hemingway’s “first two booklets,” Pound, Williams, Mary Butts, H.D., Coates, Stein, “as well as seven books of poetry and fiction by Robert McAlmon” (Cowley, *Flower* 243–44).

Rising above the specific book under consideration, Cowley made his review into a mini-treatise on key themes that would resound through his later, more substantial essays: the dynamics of failure and success, the interactions of talent and character, the requirements of a living and possibly lasting art. Cowley was clearly fascinated as well as puzzled by McAlmon’s decline from high promise into oblivion and inclined to attribute this to a combination of personal and professional elements. Unlike Boyle, who agreed with friends who held that McAlmon had been “exploited, neglected, deceived, and imitated beyond recognition, but anyway preyed on by the vultures of the literary world” (244), Cowley refused to see McAlmon as the victim of a bitterly competitive literary world but looked for explanations in McAlmon’s personality: he “did not bear his sorrows like a Christian” but offered “so many harsh judgments” on those more successful than himself that the book’s original version seemed “McAlmon’s revenge on almost all the writers he had known” (244). For Cowley “the true cause of his failure” lay in McAlmon’s irredeemable literary inadequacies: “he never in his life wrote so much as a memorable sentence,” he charged, severely and somewhat hyperbolically (245). But his deficiencies were aggravated by flaws of character, Cowley thought: McAlmon “refused to accept instruction,” even from renowned mentors like Pound, and, mostly from stubborn pride and a (mistaken) sense of superiority, was unable “to learn from his own mistakes.” Inclined to always use “the first and easiest words,” he violated a basic tenet of the modernist creed (Pound’s “make it new”); as a result, his writing lost “its original freshness” and earned him his coevals’ mocking contempt, as in the couplet printed in 1928 in *transition* – “After forty years,” Cowley noted, “Miss Boyle is still indignant about it” (245).

If he was parsimonious in his appraisal of McAlmon, Cowley was amply fair to Boyle: her chapters gave McAlmon the centrality and recognition she felt were his due and thus, Cowley reflected, bestowed on him “a dignity of failure.” Unlike McAlmon Boyle was “bound to the craft [of writing] like a medieval apprentice” and “determined to learn.” While Boyle could muster the requisite humility to study others as a model, McAlmon committed what for Cowley was the unforgivable sin for a critic: “he read books to judge them, most often with a hostile and contemptuous eye” (246).

But Cowley also measured McAlmon and Boyle as writers by a deeper standard of literary failure or success—to what extent does the writer “give himself away,” engage in honest self-revelation? McAlmon, he thought, might be “candid about other people,” even spiteful, but “he tells us little about his feelings and almost nothing about his intimate life.” Boyle, by contrast, might be “less than candid about others,” being given to protectiveness and “romantic illusions,” but she did “give herself away” by “speaking frankly of her worst follies” and thereby achieved “a sort of selflessness.” Boyle thus met what Cowley’s friend, the poet Conrad Aiken, had defined as the primary responsibility of the writer, namely, to “take off the mask” and she allowed her readers “a glimpse of the despairing face” behind the mask, the “moment of self-revelation” that McAlmon withheld from his readers (246–47). Still, Cowley concluded his review, the cooperation was “amazingly successful.” By offering a picture of people and events “from different angles, as if they had been taken with a stereoscopic camera,” the book achieved a level of “depth and substantiality” absent in other memoirs of 1920s Paris, “notably” in McAlmon’s original book (247).²³

Most critics agreed with Cowley’s verdict that Boyle was the better writer; Jean Stafford in *The New York Review of Books* typically found McAlmon’s prose “repetitious and boring” while Boyle’s was “instinct with grace and gallantry” (qtd. in Mellen 457). In Joan Mellen’s judgment, Cowley had even erred on the side of generosity to Boyle: Boyle’s chapters had been “distressingly pretentious” and “self-dramatizing,” full of “overblown” analogies, “riddled” with “errors of fact and of omission,” unreliable in its account of literary history, and marred by “excessive romanticizing,” even as there were “moments of striking honesty” (Mellen 457–60). Busby, too, noted how in her own chapters Boyle had “fabricated for herself a richer history” by distorting and rearranging biographical facts (Busby 220).

Boyle was infuriated by Cowley’s appraisal of *Being Geniuses Together*. She wrote to him she was “very much saddened” by the review, which she read as Cowley’s “revenge” for McAlmon’s slur about his being “ponderous” and “a little slow on the uptake.” She launched into a five-point enumeration of what she—partly wrongheadedly—assumed were “inaccuracies.” She took offense at what she felt was Cowley’s belittling mention of McAlmon having published Hemingway’s “first two booklets,” and thought it was “inaccurate, and vindictive” to imply that McAlmon had launched Contact Editions largely to publish his own work. She was angered by Cowley’s suggestion that McAlmon “never wrote a memorable sentence” without specifying which books of McAlmon’s he had read, and she thought it unfair to quote “the relatively unknown” William Slater Brown on the quality of McAlmon’s writing, where Katherine Mansfield, Porter, Joyce and Eliot had praised his work. Lastly, she resented Cow-

ley's referring to Ethel Moorehead as "Ernest Walsh's mistress" and fulminated: "Had you ever read my novel *Year Before Last*, you could never have made this inaccurate and insensitive statement. I have no choice but to conclude that in reviewing *Being Geniuses*, you reviewed a book written by two people whose work you simply were not familiar with." She was not "indignant," she insisted, "just saddened that you chose to get back at McAlmon in this way."²⁴

Cowley kept his cool—and his humor. In an even-tempered letter he countered Boyle's "catalogue" of inaccuracies, confessing he in turn was "very much saddened" by her suggestion that he had wanted to "get back" at McAlmon for his slur: "My God," he noted with self-irony, "that was almost praise, considering what he said about other people. It isn't even wholly untrue, though what I'm really slow about is the comeback." If he had wanted revenge, he would not have so strongly urged people to read the book, he added. He admitted that he had indeed not read *Year Before Last* ("though I have read some of your other books with admiration") and he apologized for his inaccurate reference to Moorehead as Walsh's "mistress."²⁵ For the publishing record of Contact Editions, Cowley explained, he had taken his facts from Robert E. Knoll's *Robert McAlmon, Expatriate Writer and Publisher* (1957), which had listed seven titles by McAlmon. As for Hemingway, he insisted, *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and *in our time* could rightly, and without belittling, be termed "booklets"²⁶—Hemingway's "first real book" was *In Our Time*, published in New York in 1925. Cowley persisted that "after forty years" Boyle's account of the jingle mocking McAlmon had "the unmistakable ring of indignation"—his point, he explained, was that "it expressed what most people of my acquaintance felt about McAlmon's writing; that's why it achieved 'a certain amount of notoriety.'" In their praise of McAlmon, he maintained, Porter and Pound were "the exceptions." But Cowley really refused to budge about the quality of McAlmon's writing, and he now reiterated his charge with redoubled force: "I have read as much of McAlmon's work as I could and have never found a memorable sentence or the promise of his being able to write one. If I'm wrong, will you please quote me a memorable sentence that he wrote?" Boyle, he urged, should stop defending the indefensible and shed her illusions about McAlmon's writing: "For heaven's sake, Kay, why can't you admit that Bob McAlmon, for all his wining qualities (not winning to all), was radically incapable of writing the English language? . . . I am amazed that anyone who writes as well as you can should fail to recognize the lack of this ability, this vocation, in another, and I put it down to your generosity of spirit."²⁷

But Boyle would not give up her illusions or her loyalty so easily. Persuaded that Cowley had acted from "personal spite," she turned for help to John Glassco (1909–1981), the Canadian poet, translator and (later) author of erotic fantasy who had been both Boyle's and McAlmon's lover in Paris in the late 1920s (Mellen 125). She asked him to hunt for memorable lines from McAlmon's work that she could use in rebuttal to Cowley. Glassco marked up a few passages from McAlmon's stories, but also had to admit that—though he thought Cowley "rather sterile and Establishment"—he considered his review "not so bad" (qtd. in Mellen 461) and found himself in general agreement with Cowley's verdict: "I do think C. has a point about 90% of Bob's writing: it is pretty slapdash," he wrote to Boyle. The remaining ten per-

cent showed what McAlmon “might have done if only he’d taken more care with his writing” (qtd. in Busby 217). Boyle reacted with four months of silence.

How closely Glassco’s appraisal of McAlmon’s writing and Boyle’s reclamation project dovetailed with Cowley’s appeared from a letter of praise he wrote to Boyle on June 28, 1968, just as she was in the midst of her quarrel with Cowley: “What a wonderful book *Being Geniuses* is! It holds the essence of those days as no other book of the period does. But surely Bob never wrote as well as this! You must have done some very judicious revising to make him articulate without losing his own particular ‘quality’ (that favorite word of his!).” Glassco confessed to “a wonderful feeling that the whole period has really been pinned down for the first time. Your idea of alternating your own work with Bob’s was brilliant: it gives both variety and a kind of double vision trained on the scene. Your own part strikes me as better than his: Bob never gave himself, the way you do” (qtd. in Busby 216).

Cowley versus Boyle, Part Two: John Glassco and *Memoirs of Montparnasse*

After a last brief spasm Boyle’s and Cowley’s epistolary debate about the quality of McAlmon’s writing died down in late 1968.²⁸ But three years later their conflicted reading of the expatriate 1920s—and Robert McAlmon—once more flared up into acrimonious dispute when Cowley reviewed a book published in Toronto, *Memoirs of Montparnasse* (1970) by John Glassco. Cowley found the book “of unusual interest,” he wrote Glassco, but “almost completely overlooked in the US,” and launched into an enthusiastic campaign to find an American reading public for it.²⁹ To Reed Whittemore, then editor of *The New Republic*, he offered to review this “extraordinary” book, “the best account I ever read of Montparnasse in the 1920s.” Not beyond fabulating himself, Cowley depicted its author-protagonist as “a Canadian boy so handsome at the time that the elderly lechers of all sexes descended on him crying ‘Meat! Meat! Meat!’ as cannibals used to do when they went into battle.”³⁰ In an enthusiastic memo for Viking Press, he argued for a US reissue of the book as a Viking Compass paperback. This, he advanced, was “the liveliest and raunchiest” of the memoirs of Paris in the 1920s. Most of these were “based on nostalgic memories”—but this one, as Cowley (following Glassco) assumed, was begun “on the scene” in 1928–1929, and completed as Glassco was awaiting a life-threatening operation for tuberculosis in a Montreal hospital in 1932–1933; it was “the McCoy.”³¹ Despite their age difference (Glassco was eleven years younger) and the discrepancies in their expatriate experiences (Glassco’s being decidedly more libidinous and licentious) Cowley enjoyed the literary and memoirist rapport he felt with Glassco, in whom he recognized a gifted fellow-writer. Cowley recognized many of the real-life characters represented in Glassco’s book, and both writers entered upon a decade-long lively correspondence which only ended with Glassco’s death in 1981.

Cowley’s review, “We Had Such Good Times,” appeared in the Christmas 1971 issue of *The New Republic*. It was a big plug for a book that he felt had undeservedly “received very little notice” with American readers. Among expatriate 1920s memoirs—by Cowley’s “hasty count” at least eighteen—Glassco’s book stood out for being “fresher and truer to the moment than the others, as well as being more novelistic and, in a sense, legendary.”

Glassco's, Cowley believed, was not written "long after the events they colored with various shades of repentance, resentment, and nostalgia" (as had been most others, including his own *Exile's Return*), but "on the very scene" – it evoked the events with unparalleled immediacy. In his review Cowley noted that, by taking Glassco under his wings, McAlmon had saved him from complete degradation, but he also referred to McAlmon—almost in passing—as "the bitter homosexual novelist" who "had a generous side that redeemed his bitterness." *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, Cowley concluded, not only embodied "a fable," it presented "the most accurate picture of Montparnasse" he had seen; "this is the way it was" (Cowley, *Flower* 247–51).

Glassco was tickled by the review.³¹ But Boyle, still resentful after three years, once more took to the barricades: she was "distressed," she wrote Cowley, by his "lack of objectivity" regarding McAlmon, and persisted in her refusal to acknowledge his sexual identity: "Was Robert McAlmon a homosexual? I knew him probably as well as anyone, and I would not for a moment feel I was being accurate if I made such a statement." She was vexed by what she called Cowley's "distasteful labeling" and wondered: "why not 'Gertrude Stein, the Lesbian innovator,' or 'the sexually promiscuous Henry Miller,' or the 'however-you-might-wish-to-label-me, Kay Boyle'?" Determined as ever to restore McAlmon to his proper importance, she grievously noted: "If only you could have described McAlmon as 'the generous benefactor of young and old writers alike, and the dedicated publisher of their work! Such a designation would have been accurate, and would have brought credit to you both.'" "You do have a thing about McAlmon," Cowley responded, but he refused to capitulate. Since he was retelling Glassco's story, and "since Glassco had a close relation with McAlmon until they quarrelled," he maintained, it would have been "dishonest" and "falsifying" not to acknowledge that McAlmon was homosexual. Moreover, he granted, persisting in his earlier appraisal: "He was generous, extremely generous in a quiet and sometimes self-sacrificing way, but he also had one of the meanest tongues in Paris, which is a strong statement, and he 'absolutely, positively' refused to learn anything about the craft of writing – Glassco calls him 'illiterate,' and isn't that essentially true? In your long acquaintance with him, did you ever know him to read a book from beginning to end?"³⁴

Boyle was so infuriated at Cowley's "labeling" of McAlmon that, a day after writing to him, she vented her anger to her friend Katherine Anne Porter, whom she knew to be a loyal defender of their common friend from Paris days, and admitted her distrust of Cowley's motives: "It is not that what Malcolm says is derogatory or insulting but that Malcolm certainly wished it to be." She was convinced Cowley lost "no opportunity to vent his venom on Bob," where he should have placed McAlmon "in the literary scene of the time."³⁵

Porter had had her own altercation with Cowley about the way he had portrayed her Mexican experience as a mode of "exile" in his revised edition of *Exile's Return*.³⁶ When, in 1965, Cowley's book was reissued in a new Viking Compass paperback edition, she vented her anger circumstantially to Cowley in a series of letters.³⁷ Cowley, she charged, had not grasped the real nature of her affection for the people and culture of Mexico. She particularly resented his observation that "Mexico City was her Paris and Taxco was her South of France"—and

curtly set him straight: “Mexico City was not my Paris; it was my beloved Mexico City . . . I went to Mexico because I was not going into exile, but I was going back to a place I knew and loved.”³⁸ In defense, Cowley reasoned that he had “only” used her Mexican experience as a personal variation on what he persisted was “the general pattern of the age”—of “departure and return” or “to use fancier words, alienation and reintegration”—and insisted on the general validity of his thesis: “Yes, yes, you were moderately alienated from the American life of the time, in your own fashion, it’s true, but still with a cousinly resemblance to the sense of alienation that the rest of us felt.”³⁹ He offered to make minor revisions in a future edition, but Porter was hardly pacified. In her altercation with Cowley, as Jeffrey Lawrence pertinently suggested, she in effect challenged the modernist paradigm of “exile” and “return” (and its implied Eurocentric and masculinist bias) which Cowley had influentially posited as defining for modern American literature (37–38).

Enlisted by Boyle in her campaign against Cowley, Porter—notorious for speaking with slashing, if slanted, malice about her literary contemporaries, male or female—wrote back that she had never been able to decide whether Cowley “is just so stupid that he doesn’t know what he is saying, or just stupidly malicious—and swings his hatchet blindly.” Porter’s letter was less a response to Cowley’s review—she had not actually seen *The New Republic* lately, she confessed—than a personal endorsement of a female friend’s verdict: she welcomed Boyle’s writing her about “M’s brutal remarks about our dear McAlmon,” adding that Boyle, McAlmon and Sylvia Beach had been “the only people I knew in Paris that I loved and trusted.” McAlmon, she emphasized, was “a kind of living center of our many sympathies,” and Porter admired Boyle’s “elegance and restraint and perfect candour in this rebuke to Malcolm—it is too good for him, but yet it may seep through if there are any pores in that thick hide.” As for McAlmon’s homosexuality, she—somewhat disingenuously—admitted to Boyle that she “never knew anything” about McAlmon’s private, sexual life, nor did she ever discuss it with him, except by confidential implication: “I took for granted that sex is a private, individual mystery that cannot be explained, analyzed, subjected to public curiosity.”⁴⁰ Boyle thought Porter’s rejoinder a “strong and beautiful letter” and confessed herself “touched”—“I hope very much that you will write Cowley,” she added.⁴¹ Cowley’s rebuttal, she noted, was an “evasion” of all her objections: “There was never any discussion about whether Bob ever learned about ‘the craft of writing’ and all this illiteracy rot,” she insisted. Unwilling still to accept McAlmon’s homosexuality, she advanced that she had been “rebuking Cowley for his crass assumptions about Bob’s private life.” Since McAlmon’s sexual identity had “nothing whatsoever to do with the book Malcolm Cowley was reviewing,” she could only conclude he was “malicious, not just blunderingly stupid.”⁴²

Boyle’s—and Porter’s—reluctance or inability to acknowledge McAlmon’s homosexuality was not uncommon among the members of the lost generation and an integral part of the literary culture of the 1920s, even among self-proclaimed anti-bourgeois liberals. Cowley and his cohort, for example, knowing full well of the homosexual proclivities of their much-admired poet-friend Hart Crane, tended to be tacit and reticent in speaking publicly about them in the 1920s and 1930s. They knew themselves surrounded by a homopho-

bic conservative culture which easily identified the modern artist with deviant modes of sexuality that might necessitate forms of disguise or explain eruptions of unorthodox raging (in Crane's case) or bitterness (in McAlmon's). If they were ready to proclaim Crane's poetic genius, they were also adamant to have it understood that Crane's friends were not themselves homosexuals (Fisher 224-25). A similar concern about the effect on her own and McAlmon's literary standing may have made Boyle reluctant to speak out. As Mellen surmises, "by 1968, believing perhaps that any admission of McAlmon's homosexuality would damage the reputation she was working diligently to resurrect, Kay Boyle chose to deny it altogether" (460).

Boyle's resentment may well have been fanned by Cowley having done for Glassco's memoirs precisely what she had hoped to do for McAlmon's: give new visibility and recognition to a book and a reputation undeservedly underrated. But Boyle and Glassco, too, for all their loyalty in friendship, were in discord, both about McAlmon, about *Being Geniuses Together*, and about *Memoirs of Montparnasse*. In correspondence with Cowley, Glassco was more explicitly critical of McAlmon than he had been in writing to Boyle: "I only saw McAlmon's original work in fragments of typescript," he told Cowley, but in their joint *Being Geniuses Together* Boyle, or her editor, must "certainly" have "improved his syntax. I think we must face the fact that he was almost illiterate." Boyle's chapters, he added, were "very much like her"—but her memories, he agreed with Cowley, weren't "exactly reliable."⁴³ Indeed, as Busby has noted, there are telling discrepancies between Boyle's and Glassco's memories of their relations (47). Boyle, for one, had been fairly reticent about her relations with Glassco in her chapters of *Being Geniuses Together* (332-33). In the original manuscript of *Memoirs of Montparnasse* Glassco had modelled a "May Fry" after Boyle, and had been explicit about their "wonderful feats of inventiveness and endurance" in bed together (qtd. in Mellen 125). But when, as he now told Cowley, he had sent Boyle his original passages for approval, she had objected that "she didn't talk like that" and asked Glassco to "rewrite all her dialogue – and since this was obviously impracticable I had to re-name and disguise her completely."⁴⁴ In the published version of Glassco's memoirs Boyle appears, disguised but still recognizable, as the "famous" British novelist "Diana Tree," with whom he has an affair doomed to be short-lived; she appears side by side with a character named "Kay Boyle" (32, 80-87, 108-11, 190-95).

In *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, it is "Diana Tree" who introduces Glassco to McAlmon at the counter of the Dôme. Glassco portrays McAlmon as likable and generous with his wife's money ("Robber McAlimony"), but also as a man given to posturing, provocation, and abrasive, contemptuous estimates of others. Glassco is reputedly struck by McAlmon's "charm, loneliness and bitterness" and "touched by his vanity and refreshed by his rudeness" (50-51). But Glassco also shows that he shared Cowley's frugal estimate of McAlmon's qualities as a writer that so offended Boyle. Reading two of McAlmon's books, he noted, he found them little more than "literal transcripts" of vivid recollections, written without invention or subterfuge, and marred by the author's propensity to project himself as "the centre of everything"—"There were occasional flashes of observation and understanding, even moments of grace; but the style and syntax revealed the genuine illiterate" (79-80).

Glassco's portrait of McAlmon was—much like Cowley's own—ambiguously appreciative at best.⁴⁵ Boyle was again quick to hit back. Writing to Cowley, she insisted Glassco's account was as unreliable as Glassco had claimed hers was: “Either as fact or fiction, I thought the book without interest as a record of anything except Buffy's [Glassco's nickname] fantasies. It is, as you suggest, ‘novelistic’—and that to such an extent that I asked Buffy to take out the passages in which I appear as they were totally (although quite complimentary) without basis in fact.”⁴⁶ In correspondence with Boyle, Glassco frankly acknowledged his “fabrication”: “our friendship has been blown up, glamourized and made intensely significant in the framework of the story itself,” and “the events of the whole book have been re-arranged, telescoped, speeded up and dramatized in the same way”—in sum, he confessed: “It's really fiction: I was trying to re-create the atmosphere and spirit of the Paris of those days as it was for *me*. The way George Moore and Casanova did for the world of *their* youth.”⁴⁷ “The real value of ‘memoirs,’” Glassco insisted to Boyle, was “not so much a record of ‘what happened’ as a re-creation of the spirit of a period in time.”⁴⁸ Like a fiction writer, it was verisimilitude, not veracity, he was after.⁴⁹

In his 1971 review of *Memoirs of Montparnasse* Cowley finely intuited the book's truthfulness of spirit rather than fact: he highlighted its novelistic and legendary qualities, and yet, though he called it “a fable,” at the time of writing his promotional review Cowley may well have underestimated or downplayed the degree to which Glassco had fictionalized and fabulated. In view of Glassco's confession to Boyle, Cowley's claim that this was “the most accurate picture of Montparnasse” he had seen, that “this is the way it was,” comes to sound overblown (Cowley, *Flower* 251).

Nor, in view of what we now know of the genesis of *Memoirs of Montparnasse*, can we fault Cowley for believing, as did most critics at the time, that Glassco's manuscript, as he advanced, had indeed been composed “on the scene” (xiii) in 1928–29 and shortly after, during three months in 1932–1933 when he lay eye-to-eye with death in a Montreal hospital. In reality, much of the book was written in 1963–1964.⁵⁰ As did not become apparent until after Glassco's death, his claim that the manuscript had lain dormant and untouched for thirty-five years and that even then he had “changed very little of the original” (xiii) was a disingenuous one. Just as Cowley, in revising *Exile's Return*, had claimed that he had “left most of the narrative untouched, out of a feeling that myself in 1934 had as good a right to be heard as myself today” (12; Bak, “Fall”), so Glassco claimed to have resisted the temptation to revise “the youthful memoirist in all his flippancy, hedonism and conceit,” and taken his distance from his younger self: “This young man is no longer myself: I hardly recognize him . . . and in my memory he is less like someone I have been than a character in a novel I have read” (xiii).

Though Glassco continued to spread the myth that he had left the manuscript untouched since the early 1930s, in the years after his death scholarship has revealed the extent to which he tinkered, revised and expanded the original, thereby casting further doubt on Cowley's contention that “this is the way it was.” Canadian poet and critic Louis Dudek, made newly aware of the author's use of “high-level literary tactics,” reversed his ear-

ly judgment that the book was historically accurate and reliable: “*Memoirs of Montparnasse* is a great little book, but only if you remember that it is not a memoir, it is not a history, it is a work of fantasy and imagination” (Busby 4, 231–32). Though historians and biographers like Humphrey Carpenter have continued to quote Glassco’s memoirs as authentic and reliable literary history, in effect, as Busby establishes, many “anachronisms, inconsistencies, and improbabilities” mar the veracity of the book, making it “an untrustworthy keystone” of biographical or historical accuracy (3). Indeed, in *Memoirs of Montparnasse* Glassco had admitted that he was “always, though mainly in self-defence, a great practitioner of deceit” and “an accomplished liar” (38). He left several signposts of his manipulations, fabrications and deceit in his Personal Journal, confessing that one quarter of the book was “lies,” and inscribed the copy he presented to Boyle with a poem which called the book “this loose and lying chronicle” and appealed to her understanding of “how the falsehoods of the printed page / Are the true image of our vocal rage” (Busby 232–33).

Coda and Conclusion: From Contestation to Reappraisal

Drawing on published sources as well as unpublished correspondence, my essay has aimed to illuminate how Cowley, Boyle, Porter, Glassco and McAlmon – each in their own way an actor and participant in modes of “exile” or “expatriation” in 1920s Paris – questioned each other’s accounts of shared acquaintances or historical moments, each attributing to the others varying degrees of fabulation, distortion, sentimentalizing or romanticizing. Conjointly their memoirs provide a multi-perspectival if not always consonant autobiographical and historical record of the experience of expatriation that had been the foundational impulse of American literary modernism. If their views and memories showed discrepancies, conflicted versions and wilful fabrications of “the way it was,” Boyle’s and McAlmon’s *Being Genius-es Together*—as well as Glassco’s *Memoirs of Montparnasse*—deserve be taken into account, as Sandra Spanier has aptly noted, as offering “a strong counterpoint” to Cowley’s *Exile’s Return*, for so long “generally considered the classic account of the era.” (Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century* xxvi) Such a shifting dynamic of reminiscence and historiography, while typical for the legendary 1920s, is certainly not restricted to it; in the longer run it is likely to also govern both the contemporary and retrospective historiography of the “new” Twenties.

It is important to note that Boyle’s (and Porter’s) contestation of Cowley’s reading of the 1920s—in particular as focused on the figure and function of Robert McAlmon—anticipated the large-scale revision of the canon of modernism (and related phenomena like “expatriation,” “exile,” and the “lost generation”) that was propelled by the rise of postmodernist theory and feminist revisionism in the 1980s. As Shari Benstock’s *Women of the Left Bank* (1986) pathbreakingly demonstrated, these new modes of scholarship—very much in line with Boyle’s and Porter’s earlier critiques of Cowley—have challenged the masculinist, patriarchal assumptions underlying a presumably unified, monolithic master narrative of “high” modernism that critics like Cowley—for all their sensitivity to individual nuance and variation—had helped to establish and keep in place. Benstock persuasively argued the need for a more richly diversified and pluralistic conception of modernism and its canon that reckoned with

varieties of female experience and sexual orientation beyond the hegemony of masculinist patriarchy and heterosexuality (6–7, 312). As she also perspicaciously noted, through his Contact Editions McAlmon not only published work by Hemingway, Williams, Nathanael West, and Cowley's friend Robert M. Coates, but as an expatriate critic, editor and publisher he also advanced the work of a disproportionately large number of women writers—among them Kay Boyle, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, H.D., Djuna Barnes, Bryher, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Edith Sitwell (361). By contrast, in *A Second Flowering* (1973), published in the wake of his altercations with Boyle and Glassco, Cowley centered his “canon” of the Lost Generation around eight “representative” male writers: Hart Crane, Cummings, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Thornton Wilder and Thomas Wolfe. Strictly applying a criterion of age (his canonical authors were all born between 1894 and 1900), Cowley not only sidetracked younger and older writers like Miller, Steinbeck, or West but also effectively excluded female writers like Porter, Barnes, or Millay for the—disputable—reason that “the admired writers of the generation were men in the great majority” (240). Though behind the scenes, in private counsel or as publisher's advisor for Viking Press, Cowley fully supported female writers like Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Louise Bogan, Dawn Powell and Tillie Olsen (Bak 2014), in delineating his “lost generation” canon he was not able or willing to lift himself above the gender determinants of his critical and cultural horizons.⁵¹ As in his altercations with Boyle, Porter and Glassco, in *A Second Flowering* Cowley stuck to his earlier verdict: he again presented “McAlmon, a homosexual,” as “a bitter but often generous man who regarded himself as an unacknowledged genius,” who was “radically unteachable” as a writer, and who maliciously spread what Cowley held to be “baseless tales” about Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's sexuality (61; cf Smoller, *Adrift* 222–25). Cowley's judgment of Boyle also remained unaltered. As late as 1988, in a personal note for a special Kay Boyle issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, Cowley still “questioned” Boyle's account of shared events and noted: “I thought she fabulated.” But he also praised her “gifts as a writer” and her “personal courage in difficult times,” and saluted her “long and brilliant career” (Spanier, *Kay Boyle* 271–72).

Cowley's appraisal of Robert McAlmon as a writer was largely confirmed by Sanford J. Smoller in the first—and still only—full-fledged biography of McAlmon, *Adrift Among Geniuses* (1975).⁵² Charges of slipshod writing haunted McAlmon throughout his career—his detractors being always more numerous than his defenders (with Boyle, Porter, Pound and Williams as his most faithful supporters)—and McAlmon remained persistently disdainful of revision; he valued spontaneity and authenticity of expression over formalist precision and craftsmanship (Smoller, “Introduction” xlv), much as would Jack Kerouac, whose *On the Road* (1957) was shepherded into publication with Viking Press in the year after McAlmon's death—by none other than Malcolm Cowley. Joyce, for one, though generally supportive of McAlmon and thankful for his generosity, thought McAlmon's writing so careless and “racy” that at his suggestion McAlmon's first collection of short stories was entitled *The Hasty Bunch* (1921) (Smoller, *Adrift* 64); later he derogatorily dubbed McAlmon's 1938 memoirs “the office boy's revenge” (qtd. in Smoller, *Adrift* 259). In line with Cowley's appraisal, Smoller also shows that, after 1925, McAlmon became increasingly embittered: “As his peers [Hemingway, Fitzgerald]

started to achieve the commercial success he thought he deserved, anger, bitterness, and frustration sapped his vitality and fragmented his efforts” (166). As his promise remained unfulfilled, or at least unrecognized, McAlmon sank into anonymity, the list of broken friendships and enemies growing exponentially, and enforcing his sense of remoteness, oblivion and isolation.

As Boyle had hoped to accomplish, McAlmon’s record as a prolific author and influential publisher of expatriate writers became firmly established.⁵³ Though his bisexuality is today beyond doubt, McAlmon remained reticent and ambiguously veiled about his sexuality in his published writings (Smoller, *Adrift*; “Introduction”). Only by rare exception did he reveal his sexual identity—as when, in a Paris bar in 1929, he drunkenly sneered to the Canadian writer Morley Callaghan, “I’m a bisexual myself, like Michelangelo, and I don’t give a damn who knows it” (qtd. in Smoller, *Adrift* 212). And in a late confidential letter, he reflected: “There are no real homos, male or female, but there is the bi-sex, and in more people than know it about themselves. Personally the types I object to are the female who droops female sex appeal or the male who swaggers with virility. They are the real ab-norms” (qtd. in Smoller, *Adrift* 216).

Recent scholarship, taking into account the complicated dimensions of McAlmon’s sexuality, has emphasized the need for a literary reappraisal of Robert McAlmon from perspectives that lay beyond the personal or cultural horizons of not only Cowley but Boyle, Porter, Glassco, and possibly McAlmon himself. Reviewing the 1990 reissue, by University of New Mexico Press, of McAlmon’s novel *Village* (first published in Paris in 1924), James R. Mellow (biographer of Hemingway, Stein, and Fitzgerald) argued it was “time to rescue” McAlmon the writer and to undertake a “long overdue assessment of his real contribution to American literature.” After reissuing *Village*, Edward Lorusso also brought out McAlmon’s 1923 novel *Post-Adolescence* (1991) and *Miss Knight and Others* (1992), thereby—in the wake of the deaths of both Cowley (1989) and Boyle (1992)—opening up the path to re-appreciation and rehabilitation of McAlmon’s writing.⁵⁴ The opportunity was enhanced when, in 2007, Smoller brought out an edition, from typescript, of the book McAlmon wrote in the 1940s, *The Nightinghous of Paris*, which offers a fictionalized portrait of McAlmon’s boundary-blurring encounters in late 1920s France with, among others, John Glassco and his friend Graeme Taylor that, in the verdict of Smoller, deserves to be placed with McAlmon’s and Boyle’s *Being Geniuses Together* and Glassco’s *Memoirs of Montparnasse*.⁵⁵

From the perspective of queer studies McAlmon’s work has recently gained renewed attention, in particular *The Nightinghous of Paris* and *Distinguished Air (Grim Fairy Tales)*, a compilation of three stories, including “Miss Knight,” which was first published in 1925, at what Smoller (1975) deemed “the high point of his career” (166), then forced to circulate underground because of its presumed obscenity. (324) The stories explore, “without didacticism or sentimentality” (164), the nightlife of Berlin as McAlmon had experienced it in 1921 – a fluid space of transvestites, gays, lesbians, heterosexuals and bisexuals in a city both permissive and constricting, both liberating and threatening.⁵⁶

Subsequent reappraisals from new perspectives may also be able to address the question to what extent McAlmon’s peculiarities of character, which triggered such wildly

fluctuating and contradictory responses of high appreciation (Boyle) and ferocious dislike (Cowley) among his expatriate coevals, may be rooted in his desire to find a safe and private place for living in contra-normative sexual freedom. It is this longing that may well have been a primary motivation for expatriating himself to France where, in contrast to the United States, a bisexual could—as Dimock suggests—benefit from the “lack of a sodomy law and relaxed obscenity laws” (98). It is in this context, also, that we may seek to understand the impact of McAlmon’s controversial and often mocked and misunderstood marriage to Annie Winifred Ellerman, the lesbian daughter of a wealthy British shipping magnate, who published under the name “Bryher.” Their marriage (1921-1927) was an arrangement of convenience, allowing Bryher to live out her lesbian relation with the poet H.D. in unencumbered freedom yet under the cloak of bourgeois respectability, and enabling McAlmon, thanks to the fortune that came with it, to become the generous and influential publisher and *Mæcenas* of 1920s Paris. If the marriage earned him the contempt that resounds in the nickname his contemporaries bestowed upon him (“Robber McAlimony,” as Glassco called him), it also taught him the complex pain of living outside the scope of conventional categories of sexuality and the price of a masked existence (cf Smoller, *Adrift* 49-166, *passim*).

As my examination of the memoirs, reminiscences and unpublished correspondence of Cowley, Boyle, Porter and Glassco has shown, there were boundaries to the ability or willingness of each to understand or acknowledge the full complexities of McAlmon’s veiled sexual identity—and, concomitantly, his literary abilities. Boyle and Porter each had difficulty admitting to McAlmon’s homosexuality, even though they personally knew him well. Cowley might boldly (and to some offensively) label him “the bitter homosexual novelist” but he seemed unable or unwilling to probe deeply enough into the reasons why McAlmon was not able to “take off the mask” and honestly reveal his sexual identity and its concomitant tribulations. Insofar as their personal correspondence reveals, none appears to have entertained the possibility that McAlmon’s bitterness, the “icy stare” that the young Boyle found so attractive, may in part have been a mask, his way of protecting or defending himself against an American culture that—as Tennessee Williams confirmed in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1949) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)—until far beyond the Second World War regarded homo- and bisexuals as victims of degeneracy or perversion, condemning them to an underground, veiled or disguised existence. Further research will have to examine to what extent possible blinders to Cowley’s and Boyle’s perception of McAlmon may have been a matter of personal failure of perception or of restraining culturally imposed norms. Though they thought of themselves as liberal and progressive, and even, at different moments of their careers, oppositional and subversive writers, from today’s perspective they may well have been less openminded, tolerant or perspicacious than they thought.

Finally, further research will have to examine the degree to which McAlmon fit or deviated from the paradigm of “exile” and alienation followed by “return” and reintegration established by Cowley in *Exile’s Return*, the book so long regarded as the master narrative of expatriation.⁵⁷ Unlike most who fit Cowley’s pattern and who – after an enforced or voluntary return to the United States—managed to successfully re-establish themselves as writers in

the home culture they had left in disenchantment, McAlmon never re-found his niche in the United States: he remained, in the words of his biographer, “a constitutional exile” who could find “no home in the world,” but was fated to “roam incessantly, in perpetual discontent” (Smoller, *Adrift Among Geniuses* 322). If this is so, then Cowley was, ironically enough, and in a way different from his intent or understanding, perhaps justified in according McAlmon a position of minor importance in *Exile’s Return*. By another ironic twist of literary history, it had been Kay Boyle who, echoing Cowley’s paradigmatic words in an early review, had pointedly spoken of McAlmon as “an exile who couldn’t return” (Boyle, “Exile”).

Notes

¹ For a discussion of Cowley’s 1951 revisions of his original 1934 account and the contrastive reception of both, see Bak, “Fall.”

² For a discussion of the impact of the *Heath Anthology*, see Bak, “Heath.”

³ For additional critical, revisionist or alternative interpretations of the paradigm outlined in *Exile’s Return* beyond the ones discussed in this essay, see John D. Hazlett, *My Generation: Collective Autobiography and Identity Politics* (1998); Kenneth S. Lynn, *The Air-line to Seattle* (1984); Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank – Paris 1900–1940* (1986); Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995); Marc Dolan, *Modern Lives: A Cultural Re-reading of ‘The Lost Generation’* (1996); Craig Monk, *Writing the Lost Generation: Expatriate Autobiography and American Modernism* (2008); Susan Winnett, *Writing Back: American Expatriates’ Narratives of Return* (2012); and Nancy F. Cott, “Revisiting the Transatlantic 1920s: Vincent Sheean vs Malcolm Cowley.”

⁴ Boyle and McAlmon, *Being Geniuses Together* (1968), p. 11.

⁵ Cowley to Boyle, July 31, 1981. Kay Boyle Papers, Morris Library, Southern Illinois (hereafter KBP).

⁶ Boyle to Cowley, July 26, 1981. Malcolm Cowley Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago (hereafter MCP); Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, pp. 685–86. Boyle continued her work for *Broom*, unpaid, until the March 1923 issue, but had, Mellen writes, been “granted her first lesson in the duplicities of literary politics” (53).

⁷ “Young Man with Spectacles” in *Broom* vol. 3, October 1922, pp. 199–203, portrayed a Cowley-like young man befuddled by the contradictory manifestations of modernism; “Young Mr. Elkins” in *Broom* vol. 4, December 1922, pp. 52–56 satirized Harold Stearns’s cultural renunciation of America and embrace of European culture; and “Portrait by Leyendecker” in *Broom* vol. 4, March 1923, pp. 240–47 mocked the consumerist ideal of life as propagated by American advertising.

⁸ “Snapshot of a Young Lady,” *Broom* vol. 5, August 1923, pp. 3–10.

⁹ Boyle to Lola Ridge, August 11, 1924; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 85; also qtd. in Mellen, pp. 72–73. Munson was the editor of *Secession* (1922–1924).

¹⁰ The 1928 manifesto was partly intended as a reprise of *Aesthete* 1925, an earlier group manifestation targeting Ernest Boyd. See Bak, *Malcolm Cowley*, pp. 323–32.

Notes

- ¹¹ For a more elaborate discussion of “New York: 1928” see Bak, *Malcolm Cowley*, pp. 402–04.
- ¹² Cowley to Boyle, December 10, 1967, KBP.
- ¹³ Cowley, “Exile’s Return: Significant Gesture,” *The New Republic*, September 30, 1931, pp. 172–76.
- ¹⁴ The altercation with MacLeish is reprinted in Cowley, *Think*, pp. 35–47.
- ¹⁵ Besides “forerunners” Carl van Vechten, Marcel Duchamp, and Man Ray, the photograph (by Carl Fischer) showed eight others, including, besides Cowley and Boyle, Caresse Crosby, Dawn Powell, Glenway Wescott, William Slater Brown, Matthew Josephson, and Virgil Thomson.
- ¹⁶ Cowley to Boyle, October 22, 1967. KBP.
- ¹⁷ Boyle to Porter, August 8, 1967; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 605.
- ¹⁸ Boyle to Dahlberg, January 4, 1967, Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 595.
- ¹⁹ See Monk, pp. 145–60 for a systematic discussion of the scope, strategy and effects of Boyle’s revisions of McAlmon’s original text. In 2007, McAlmon’s biographer Sanford J. Smoller thought it “debatable” whether Boyle had done McAlmon’s reputation a service by revising and editing his memoir (xxviii).
- ²⁰ Boyle to Cowley, November 10, 1967. KBP.
- ²¹ Cowley to Ken McCormick, December 9, 1967. MCP.
- ²² Cowley to Boyle, December 10, 1967. KBP.
- ²³ It remains unclear whether, as Sanford J. Smoller pertinently wondered in 2007, Cowley knew if the English publisher of McAlmon’s original 1938 memoirs had cut a sizable part of it because it was (in McAlmon’s words) “too vulgar, dangerous or American” – and if Cowley would “have changed his opinion [of the 1968 re-issue] if he had” (xxix).
- ²⁴ Boyle to Cowley, June 22, 1968, MCP; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, pp. 612–13.
- ²⁵ In 1985, when “Those Paris Years” was reprinted in Cowley’s *The Flower and the Leaf* (1985), pp. 243–47, he remembered Boyle’s objection and changed the phrase to “Walsh’s former Mrs. Maecenas” (247).
- ²⁶ Ford, pp. 404–06, lists twenty-one titles published by Contact Editions, including six by McAlmon and fifteen by others. Among the latter is Hemingway’s *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923); *In Our Time* (1924) was published by Bill Bird’s Three Mountain Press. The latter also brought out a seventh title by McAlmon. Bird’s and McAlmon’s presses shared the same quarters on the Ile Saint Louis, which may explain the confusion about the number of McAlmon titles. Cf Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 613, n2.
- ²⁷ Cowley to Boyle, June 26, 1968; KBP.
- ²⁸ Cf Boyle to Cowley, November 3, 1968 (Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, pp. 613–14); Cowley to Boyle, November 10, 1968, KBP.
- ²⁹ Cowley to Glassco, December 15, 1971, MCP.
- ³⁰ Cowley to Reed Whittemore, November 1, 1971, MCP.

Notes

- ³¹ Viking Memo, November 2, 1971, Bak, *Long*, pp. 630–31.
- ³² Glassco to Cowley, January 21, 1972, MCP.
- ³³ Boyle to Cowley, December 30, 1971, MCP; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 635.
- ³⁴ Cowley to Boyle, January 8, 1972, KBP.
- ³⁵ Boyle to Porter, December 31, 1971; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 636.
- ³⁶ In the new epilogue for his revised 1951 edition of *Exile's Return*, Cowley had written: "Each life has its own pattern, within the pattern of the age, and every individual is an exception. Katherine Anne Porter was a newspaper woman in the Southwest before she went to Mexico and worked for the revolutionary government; Mexico City was her Paris and Taxco was her South of France" (291).
- ³⁷ Cf Porter to Cowley, March 3, 1965, MCP; Cowley to Porter, March 9, 1965, Bak, *Long*, p. 582; Porter to Cowley, March 16, 1965, MCP.
- ³⁸ Porter to Cowley, March 16, 1965, MCP; Unrue 2012, p. 307.
- ³⁹ Cowley to Porter, March 9, 1965; Bak, *Long*, p. 582.
- ⁴⁰ Porter to Boyle, January 21, 1972; Katherine Anne Porter Papers, University of Maryland Libraries.
- ⁴¹ As appears from an undated fragment in Porter's papers at the U of Maryland, at Boyle's request Porter set out to draft a letter to Cowley about McAlmon, but did not finish it.
- ⁴² Boyle to Porter, January 26, 1972; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, pp. 636–37.
- ⁴³ Glassco to Cowley, December 16, 1971, MCP.
- ⁴⁴ Glassco to Cowley, December 16, 1971, MCP.
- ⁴⁵ See Smoller's "Introduction" (xxx–xxxiv) for a fuller discussion of Glassco's portrayal of McAlmon in his *Memoirs of Montparnasse* and McAlmon's portrayal of Glassco in *Nightinghous of Paris*.
- ⁴⁶ Boyle to Cowley December 30, 1971; Spanier, *Kay Boyle: A Twentieth-Century*, p. 635.
- ⁴⁷ Glassco to Boyle, December 2, 1968; qtd. in Busby, p. 218.
- ⁴⁸ Glassco to Boyle, March 19, 1969; qtd Busby, p. 221. See Busby, pp. 218–21 for a discussion of Glassco's revisiting and revising of his memoirs in the late 1960s, and Boyle's and Glassco's correspondence about their respective memoirs.
- ⁴⁹ The distinction is George Wickes' in his *Americans in Paris* (Doubleday, 1969), p. 52.
- ⁵⁰ For a close study of the chronology of composition of Glassco's book, see Thomas E. Tausky, "Memoirs of Montparnasse: A Reflection of Myself," *Canadian Poetry: Studies/Documents/Reviews* 13 (Fall/Winter 1983), pp. 59–84.
- ⁵¹ In a 1973 letter to Nancy Milford, then at work on a biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay, Cowley advanced it was age not gender that explained the critical disregard of Millay by her

Notes

male contemporaries, and granted that he himself had “missed at the time her immense importance as a folksinger of the sexual revolution.” Bak 2014, pp. 640–41.

⁵² An abbreviated and updated version was published as the introduction to Smoller’s 2007 edition of McAlmon’s *The Nightinghousls of Paris*.

⁵³ See Smoller, *Adrift*; Robert E. Knoll, *Robert McAlmon, Expatriate Publisher and Writer* (U of Nebraska Studies, 1956); Knoll, ed., *McAlmon and the Lost Generation: A Self-Portrait* (U of Nebraska P, 1962); Hugh Ford, *Published in Paris: American and British Writers, Printers and Publishers in Paris, 1920–1939* (1975; Pushcart P, 1980), pp. 34–94, 404–05.

⁵⁴ Lorusso himself gave an impetus to a reappraisal of McAlmon’s fiction in *Naked Truth* (independently published, 2020), arguing that, contrary to the perception of many of his co-evals, McAlmon’s writing deserves to be seen as multilayered and textually complex.

⁵⁵ As Smoller observes in his introduction, though in *The Nightinghousls of Paris* McAlmon is “perfectly direct about sexual couplings and uncouplings” of Glassco and Taylor as of others including Boyle, he remains “reticent” about himself (xxxii–xxiii).

⁵⁶ For illuminating close readings of McAlmon’s stories from the perspective of queer studies, see Richard E. Zeikowitz, “Constrained in Liberation: Performative Queerness in Robert McAlmon’s Berlin Stories,” *College Literature*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Summer 2004), pp. 27–42; and Dimock, 88–160. “Miss Knight” was included in *The Columbia Anthology of Gay Literature*, edited by Byrne R.S. Fone (Columbia UP, 1998).

⁵⁷ For a useful first attempt at “mapping McAlmon’s biography against Cowley’s dominant narrative,” see Dimock 95.

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