Rapid #: -17460177

CROSS REF ID: **5950821**

LENDER: **HUL :: Widener Library**

BORROWER: **HUL :: Widener Library**

TYPE:	Book Chapter
BOOK TITLE:	The new Negro thirty years afterward : papers contributed to the sixteenth annual spring conference... April 20, 21, and 22, 1955 /
USER BOOK TITLE:	The new Negro thirty years afterward : papers contributed to the sixteenth annual spring conference... April 20, 21, and 22, 1955 /
CHAPTER TITLE:	Sterling Brown “The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955),
BOOK AUTHOR:	Howard University. Graduate School. Division of th
EDITION:	
VOLUME:	
PUBLISHER:	Howard University Press,
YEAR:	1974
PAGES:	???
ISBN:	
LCCN:	
OCLC #:	841567143
PATRON NOTES:	Table of Contents EndNotes Accompanying Images/Plates Title/Verso Page(s)

Processed by RapidX: 4/16/2021 12:39:55 PM

IE

RapidX Upload

12 **Rapid #: -17460177**

Status	Rapid Code	Branch Name	Start Date
New	HUL	Widener Library	04/15/2021 09:09 PM
Local Holding In	HUL	Widener Library	04/15/2021 09:09 PM
Pending	HUL	Widener Library	04/15/2021 09:09 PM
Batch Not Printed	HUL	Widener Library	04/16/2021 06:59 AM

CALL #: **E185.5 .H73 1956ax**
LOCATION: **HUL :: Widener Library :: 32044012505053**

REQUEST TYPE:	Book Chapter
USER BOOK TITLE:	The new Negro thirty years afterward : papers contributed to the sixteenth annual spring conference... April 20, 21, and 22, 1955 /
HUL CATALOG TITLE:	The new Negro thirty years afterward
CHAPTER TITLE:	Sterling Brown "The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955),
BOOK AUTHOR:	Howard University. Graduate School. Division of th
EDITION:	
VOLUME:	
PUBLISHER:	Howard University Press,
YEAR:	1974
PAGES:	???
ISBN:	
LCCN:	
OCLC #:	841567143
CROSS REFERENCE ID:	[TN:5950821][ODYSSEY:206.107.43.109/HUL]
VERIFIED:	

BORROWER: **HUL :: Widener Library**
PATRON NOTES: Table of Contents EndNotes Accompanying Images/Plates Title/Verso Page(s)

This is an authorized facsimile of the original book, and was produced in 1974 by microfilm-xerography by Xerox University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A.

HOWARD UNIVERSITY

THE NEW NEGRO THIRTY YEARS AFTERWARD

PAPERS CONTRIBUTED

to the

SIXTEENTH ANNUAL SPRING CONFERENCE

of the

DIVISION OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Department of Anthropology
Department of Business Administration
Department of Economics
Department of Geography
Department of Government
Department of History
Department of Philosophy
Department of Social Science
Department of Sociology

APRIL 20, 21, and 22, 1955

Edited by
Rayford W. Logan, Chairman
Eugene C. Holmes
G. Franklin Edwards

Published by
THE HOWARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Graduate School, Howard University
Washington, D. C.

1955

THE NEW NEGRO THIRTY YEARS AFTERWARD

Library of Congress Catalog Card No. 56-7060

THE NEW NEGRO IN LITERATURE (1925–1955)

Sterling A. Brown

I am grateful for the chance to participate in this symposium, dedicated to the memory of Alain LeRoy Locke. My acquaintance with Alain Locke dates back to his appearance at this university when, together with the other "Young Howards," a gang of boys that infested the campus, I stood in awe of the dapper man with a cane who had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. Young barbarians on the brink of an unknown world, we thrilled at those magic words and wondered how so much learning could be stored in so slight a frame. When years later I joined the faculty here, I was struck by his incisive and wide ranging mind and by his devotedness to the university; I soon learned how firm a respect he enjoyed from such peers as Kelly Miller, Ernest Just, Charles Burch, Abram Harris, and Ralph Bunche, all stalwarts who have now left us. I have collaborated with him on articles, I was one of his associates in the Bronze Booklet Series, and although our critical views did not always coincide, I have profited from his wise counsel. I should like here to salute him as benefactor, colleague, and friend.

This conference, assessing the achievements of the New Negro movement and paying tribute to one of its prime launchers and sponsors, fills a need. Official biographers of eminent Negroes have commented only scantily on Alain Locke; in Embree's *Brown America* (1943) Locke's name is in neither bibliography nor index; in Embree's *Thirteen Against the Odds* he gets part of a sentence. In Brawley's *The Negro Genius*, he is merely called the "*maestro* of the New Negro performance" and is solely praised for "a fine sense of the value of words"—this of a man whose essays in *The New Negro* said more about the "Negro genius" than Brawley's entire book. It is true that, though little recorded, his place as mentor and interpreter is established. But it is good for this conference, in memoirs and elucidations, to make that place even clearer.

The Twenties

My colleagues have ably filled in the social and historical backgrounds of the New Negro movement. It is my task to trace and evaluate the literature by and about Negroes from 1925 to the present. Because of the exigencies of time and space, drama must be excluded.[1] The divisions of this essay are natural, corresponding roughly with decades which had distinct cultural characteristics: they are (1) The Harlem Vogue, 1920–1930; (2) The Depression Thirties, and (3) World War II and Its Aftermath. I have hesitated to use the term Negro Renaissance for several reasons: one is that the five or eight years generally allotted are short for the life-span of any "renaissance." The New Negro is not to me a group of writers centered in Harlem during the second half of the twenties. Most of the writers were not Harlemites; much of the best writing was not about Harlem, which was the show-window, the cashier's till, but no more Negro America than New York is America. The New Negro movement had temporal

roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America, and the term has validity, it seems to me, only when considered to be a continuing tradition.

The rise of the New Negro movement coincided with increased interest in Negro life and character in the twenties. American literature was in revolt against the squeamishness and repression of Victorianism, and the philistinism of an acquisitive society. Carl Van Doren wrote: "What American literature decidedly needs at the moment is color, music, gusto, the free expression of gay or desperate moods. If the Negroes are not in a position to contribute these items, I do not know what Americans are." The decade was ushered in by Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1920), an undoubted theatrical success, significant in placing the Negro at the tragic center instead of in comic relief, but overly reliant on tom-toms, superstition, and atavism. Waldo Frank's *Holiday* (1923), along with a humanitarian's dismay at injustice, defined white and Negro "consciousness" too schematically. Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925) protests his fondness for the "Negro way of life," but when he equates this with self-satisfied satire of white neuroticism he shows how fondness could use a little knowledge. In his harrying of Puritanism, Carl Van Vechten made excursions to Harlem; despite his defenders' claim that he discovered the Negro élite, *Nigger Heaven* (1926) emphasizes the flamboyant and erotic. The influence of Europe was strong on the new sophisticates. Picasso's admiration for African sculpture, Gide's interest in the Congo, and the award of the *Prix Goncourt* to René Maran's naturalistic *Batouala* (1921) indicated France's turning to vital, genuine sources. But Paul Morand is merely a cynical camp follower in *Magie Noire* (1929), in which he includes absurd fantasies of American Negroes reverting at slightest provocation to ancestral savagery. Several British books seasoned Kipling's white man's burden with Mayfair ridicule; Ronald Firbank's *Prancing Nigger* (1925) is such sophisticated racist burlesque. Americans found the West Indies to be a treasure trove for authors, but where John Vandercook brought back from Haiti the stirring epic of Henri Christophe, W. B. Seabrook could find there little more than the weird, the voodoistic, the orgiastic, which he exploited in *The Magic Island* (1929).

Written with some distinction, these widely selling books by white authors enforced a tradition of exotic primitivism. Healthier interest in Negro life, of the here and now in America, was manifested in the liberal periodicals, the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, and the *American Mercury*. Alerted by James Weldon Johnson, Charles S. Johnson, and Alain Locke to the growing expression of Negro life by Negroes themselves, the *Survey Graphic* issued a Harlem number in March, 1925. This afforded the nucleus of an epochal collection of the work of young and old, aspiring and established, fledgling poet and established racial statesman, which, under the creative editing of Alain Locke, appeared a few months later as *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.

Alain Locke introduced the volume confidently: The New Negro "wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not." [3] The already published *Cane* (1923) by Jean Toomer deserves such praise. Apprenticeship to experimental writing had helped Toomer develop a revelatory prose;

deep pondering over Negro life in border cities and Georgia had supplied him with rich material; the resultant book, *Cane*, expressed Negro life with insight, beauty, and power. Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death* (1926), brilliant impressionism about the tragedies of his native Caribbean, was unapologetically naturalistic, and firmly controlled in style.

Neither wrote another work of fiction, however, and their pioneering was not followed. Negro writers instead trooped off to join Van Vechten's band and share in the discovery of Harlem as a new African colony. Wa-wa trumpets, trap drums (doubling for tom-toms), and shapely dancers with bunches of bananas girdling their middles in Bamboo Inns and Jungle Cabarets nurtured tourists' delusions of "the Congo cutting through the black." Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1926) concentrates on the primitive, which McKay defiantly glorifies in *Banjo* (1929), whose hero decides to "let intellect go to hell and live instinct." *Joie de vivre* was acclimated to Harlem especially, to Negroes generally. It was all rhythm, rhythm; jazz-bands swung out on "That's Why Darkies Were Born;" pent-houses sprouted miraculously atop Lenox Avenue tenements; the cabin was exchanged for the cabaret but the old mirth was still inside. Even Countee Cullen in *One Way to Heaven* (1932) proclaims "Enjoyment isn't across the [racial] line." The whites have only money, privilege, power; Negroes have cornered the joy.

Gay with youth, heady from attention, caught up along with much of America in ballyhoo, flattered by influential creators, critics, and publishers who had suddenly discovered the dark world at their doorstep, many Negroes helped to make a cult of Harlem. They set up their own Bohemia, sharing in the nation-wide rebellion from family, church, small town, and business civilization, but revolt from racial restrictions was sporadic. Rash in the spurt for sophistication (wisdom was too slow and did not pay off), grafting primitivism on decadence, they typified one phase of American literary life in the twenties. A few magazines such as *Fire* and *Harlem* flared like rockets; good experiments jostled against much that was falsely atavistic and wilfully shocking.

But several writers were uncomfortable at the racial mystique that seemed the price of the new freedom. Wallace Thurman illustrates their ambivalence in *Blacker the Berry* (1929), which counterposes lurid descriptions of Harlem with a somber account of a dark heroine who is defeated by color snobbishness among Negroes themselves. All was certainly not joy in Thurman's heaven. Alain Locke warned that "too many of our younger writers . . . are pot-plants seeking a forced growth according to the exotic tastes of a pampered and decadent public." [3] Rudolph Fisher rose above this ruck. Kin to O. Henry with his quick eyes and ears and curiosity, Fisher wrote insouciant fiction that tells more about Harlem than is in all of *Nigger Heaven* and its brood.

The obvious preference for low-life Harlem was chided by W. E. B. Du Bois, who wished creative literature to enlist in his trenchant crusade for equal rights. His novels, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) and *The Dark Princess* (1928), have undoubted social wisdom and prophetic vision, but their virtues are those of pamphleteering. The fiction by the officers of the NAACP is programmatic, fighting Nordicism, disfranchisement, segregation, mob violence, and other

racial evils. Walter White's *Fire in the Flint* (1924) has strength chiefly as an anti-lynching tract. Alert against the obvious stereotypes, White lent his support in *Flight* (1926) to the stereotype of the heroine who passes for white until she gets a mystical revelation that happiness belongs on the darker side of the racial boundary. Passing, in novels, became an inordinate preoccupation of leisure class Negro women. Such is true of Nella Larsen's heroine in *Passing* (1930); and in *Quicksand* (1928) her heroine is torn between pulls of race and caste. Jessie Fauset's novels also have an undue amount of passing, but her chief purpose is to exhibit the Negro world of education, substance, and breeding. Like most novels of the Negro middle class, however, these have little penetration; they record a class (idealized) in order to praise a race (imperfectly understood).

Whether licentious Harlem or sedate brown Babbittry, the most frequent setting for New Negro fiction was the urban North. Great segments of Negro life obviously remained unrecorded. Agreeing with the wag who would rather be "a lamppost on Lenox Avenue than the mayor of Atlanta," most Negro novelists left the South to white authors. Julia Peterkin's absorption in the plantation life of coastal South Carolina and Du Bose Heyward's poetic use of the lives of Charleston Negroes, at its best in *Porgy*, showed unusual grasp of folkspeech and folkways, an unfeigned sympathy different from the old cozy condescension. There remained some stress on the exotic and violent, some traces of the plantation tradition, some failure or unwillingness to comprehend. But regionalism drew close to reality. Howard Odum's Left Wing Gordon is as authentic as countless conversations with footloose working-men and minstrels could make him. The little-heralded books of E. C. L. Adams contained dialogues of folk Negro talking to folk Negro, which were unsurpassed in their ironic awareness and added dimensions to people who had long been considered quaint, artless children. John Sale and R. Emmett Kennedy wrote of Mississippi and Louisiana Negroes from long and loving study; even Roark Bradford, of the same region, knew much about the folk Negro. But, for all of his grasp of idiom and mannerism, he saw little in folk-life beyond the ludicrous and wasted his knowledge on burlesque.

Thorough collection and study of Negro folksong accompanied the growing regionalism. Howard Odum and Guy Johnson turned up valuable ore in *The Negro and His Songs* (1925) and *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926). The researches of Guy Johnson and Louis Chappell set John Henry deservedly in the pantheon of American folk heroes. Abbe Niles and W. C. Handy, in *Blues: An Anthology* (1926), pioneered in the analysis and history of this original music, which Mamie and Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey were popularizing. James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson edited collections of spirituals in 1925 and 1926, for which the former wrote valuable introductions. These together with Alain Locke's perceptive appreciation in *The New Negro* and the appealing voices of Roland Hayes, Paul Robeson, Taylor Gordon, Marian Anderson, and the Hall Johnson choir, made the spirituals, in the words of one enthusiast, "the finest medium for interpreting to the whites some of the best qualities of the Negroes." [3]

Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows* signalled the new movement in poetry. The substance of McKay's poems was different; nostalgic recreations of early Jamaica life alternated with harsh pictures of America. The poet's manly anger and militant self-assurance were properly influential. Countee Cullen, a precocious disciple of the romantic tradition, produced gifted lyrics on love and death as brown youth coped with them. For all of his disclaimers, race pride and defense hovered over his verse. Cullen sought a tradition to glorify, turning, as in "Heritage," to story-book Africa, or to romantic heroes such as Christophe and Simon the Cyrenian. When he turned to American Negro experience the result was the unconvincing *Black Christ*. Langston Hughes felt Negro life more sincerely and portrayed it more movingly. *Weary Blues* (1926 and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) presented blues singers, honky-tonk dancers, lonely piano players, wastrels, and others of the urban folk with sympathy and authenticity. Hughes learned from Lindsay and Sandburg, but wisely also studied the rhythms of jazz, the spirituals, and the blues. Deceptively simple, these poems often contain real insight. James Weldon Johnson was influenced by the new regionalism to discard his older rhetorical approach; *God's Trombones* (1927) dramatically resurrects the eloquence of the bard-like folk preacher. These seven poetized sermons, wrought with loving care, showed as did some of Toomer's lyrics, how folkstuff could be invested with dignity. These were the more important poets: lyrics of merit were written conventionally by Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Grimke, and unconventionally by Anne Spencer and Fenton Johnson, who bitterly echoed *Spoon River Anthology*. Helene Johnson, Frank Horne, Arna Bontemps, and Waring Cuney won prizes in the annual contests held by the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* magazines.

What was the critical standing of the literature of Negro life in the twenties? Reviewers were generous, but in later accounts of the period omit books once praised. Opposition critics included Wyndham Lewis, whose *Paleface* (1929) railed at sentimental primitivism, which he felt was swelling the fearful tide of color. Harvey Wickham, deploring the degradation of much fiction about Negroes, still counseled the Negro to be "engagingly different" and to create "the romance of Africa espoused to our own South, the savage's sense of the nearness of the spiritual world." [5] Present day literary historians of the decade are silent about the New Negro movement. The latest and fullest coverage mentions only Van Vechten, Sherwood Anderson, and Waldo Frank, and summarizes the interest in the Negro as simplification, distortion, and exploitation of primitivism.[6]

Such easy dismissal is injustice, however; primitivism is not the only trend of early New Negro writing. When one realizes that since Chesnutt's pioneering, no fiction by Negroes had tapped the rich materials except James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and since Dunbar, little poetry except genre sentimentality and race rhetoric, one sees in fresh perspective the positive achievements of the earliest New Negroes. The fiction of Toomer, Walrond, Fisher, and of McKay at his uncontroversial best; the poetry of *God's Trombones*, McKay, Cullen, and Hughes; the winning of real respect for Negro spirituals, seculars, and folkstuff generally; all of these had solid merit.

New publishing houses—Knopf, Harcourt Brace, Viking, Liveright and the Bonis—welcomed Negro talents, who opened doors that have stayed open.

Langston Hughes's credo expressed proud independence: "We younger Negro artists intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." In not caring whether white people or Negroes were pleased, these artists stand "on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves." But the fine idealism runs up hard against the reality that white critics were constantly looking over the writers' shoulders and, even when well-meaning, often counseled amiss.[7] There were few Negro critics for guidance. One of the best equipped, Allison Davis, keenly analyzed the opportunism of the rampant primitivism, cynicism, and luridity. He found in the experience of Negroes here in America, both past and present, qualities better worth attention; these were "fortitude, irony, and a relative absence of self pity" [8]—a broader human nature available for the imagination that could grasp it, and a higher potential for truer and more universal literature. But such trust and such prescription point forward to the thirties.

The Thirties

Those who nostalgically recall the Harlem boom include in their memoirs far more of the good time parties and big contacts than of the writing. Alain Locke was troubled by the feckless irresponsibility of a fad produced "by a period of inflation and overproduction."[9] Langston Hughes dated its end "when the crash came in 1929 and the white people had much less money to spend on themselves and practically none to spend on Negroes." [10] For all of its positive services in encouraging racial respect and self reliance, a large number of Negroes were ignorant of, indifferent or ill disposed toward the new literature of Negro life.

The current literary fashion in America is to make the thirties a whipping boy, while pampering the glamorous twenties. Nevertheless a period which saw the maturing of Dos Passos, Farrell, Wolfe, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Caldwell, and Faulkner cannot be cavalierly dismissed as stodgily naturalistic or proletarian. The central characteristic of the period is its grave reappraisal of American life and positive affirmation of democracy. When Black Friday ushered in the Depression, American writers were shocked by the unfamiliar sights of bread lines, unemployed workers, closed factories, farm evictions, hunger, and loss of human decency. It *had* happened here, and America wanted to know why. American writers, sensitive and dismayed, assumed serious social responsibilities.

Negro authors of the thirties, like their compatriots, faced reality more squarely. For the older lightheartedness they substituted sober self searching; for the bravado of false Africanism and Bohemianism they substituted attempts to understand Negro life in its workaday aspects in the here and now. Clear-eyed and forthright social scientists—Charles S. Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, and Abram Harris—supplied needed documentation, analysis, and synthesis. Alert to the changing times, a few critics—Alain Locke among them—charted new directions.

The first books by Negroes in the thirties continued the preoccupations of the twenties, when they were conceived. Taylor Gordon's bawdy autobiography *Born to Be* (1930) was sponsored as usual by Van Vechten, who praised the author's six-foot lankiness, "falsetto voice, and molasses laugh," but neglected to point out his literary distinctions; one of which—a murderous way with grammar—charmed several aesthetes. George Schuyler's swashbuckling *Black No More* (1931), a fantasy about the dire results of the discovery of a treatment to whiten dark complexions, indiscriminately lampooned Dixie racists and professional race-men. Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) exposes the Harlem literati, whom he calls Niggerati, in their dissipation. Seven years after their brave beginning Thurman is grieving over the New Negroes as a lost generation, pandering to tourists on the safari for queer dives in Harlem.

More engagingly written, Arna Bontemps's *God Sends Sunday* (1931) belongs with the earlier school in its evocation of the life of jockeys, rounders, and demi-mondaines of the gaudy Negro tenderloin at the turn of the century. His second novel illustrates the change: now involved with the Negro's struggle for freedom, Bontemps chose a new sort of history for *Black Thunder* (1936). Based on a little-known slave revolt, written with imaginative identification, *Black Thunder* is one of America's better historical novels.[11] Langston Hughes, a barometer of this decade as of others, turned to semi-autobiographic fiction in *Not Without Laughter* (1930), a quietly moving novel of boyhood in a Kansas town. *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), a collection of Hughes's short stories, contains fondness for underprivileged people and shrewd, sometimes exasperated irony at patronage. Zora Neale Hurston showed a ripeness worth waiting for in the tales she contributed to *Story Magazine* in the thirties, and in the folk-based *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a superior regional novel about the rural Negroes of Miss Hurston's native Florida. Miss Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935) is a first class collection of Negro yarns, gaining from the author's being both insider and trained folklorist. Inside intimacy is also in George Wylie Henderson's *Ollie Miss* (1935); George Lee's combination of river legend, sharecropping realism and protest in *River George* (1937); and the promising beginnings of a family saga in E. Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* (1937) and *O Canaan* (1939). But, not staying with their material, these authors forfeited the slow maturation so apparent in the best of American regionalist writing.

The nation's Economic Problem Number One—The South—strongly attracted the social conscience. The poor white sharecropper—America's forgotten man—written of definitively by William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and by Erskine Caldwell in *Tobacco Road* (1932) was shown as having much the same characteristics—improvidence, shiftlessness, promiscuity, superstition—that had been superficially considered Negro traits. "Kneel to the Rising Sun," Caldwell's most striking story, showed a Negro who has grit denied to his white fellow in misery, and humanity denied to the sadistic landlord. Novels by white authors aware of the harshness of Negro life include Roy Flannagan's *Amber Satyr* (1932), and Robert Rylee's *Deep Dark River* (1935). William March's *Come In At The Door* (1934) and Hamilton Basso's *Courthouse*

Square (1936) go even farther, portraying Negroes of education and ambition with sympathy hitherto reserved for peasant types.

Left-wing authors, among them Scott Nearing, John Spivak, and Myra Page, attacked the rampant injustices—wholesale discrimination, peonage, the chain gang, unjust employment practices, and lynching—in a catalogue too true in its tragic particulars, with veracity as a *J'accuse*, but with less verisimilitude as literature. Grace Lumpkin's *A Sign for Cain* (1935), the best "proletarian" novel about Negro life, springs from wide knowledge and deep feeling. A schematic conclusion to most of the proletarian fiction was the union of white and Negro workers, which at this point of history, not only in the deep South, was more wishful than realizable.

In 1938 Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* won *Story Magazine's* contest for the best book of fiction by a member of the Federal Writers' Project. Comprising four novellas, this book showed intense militancy and a power to present the starkest of tragedies. Largely self-trained, a brooding, lonely seeker for decency, rasped by constant racial rebuffs in the South, Wright poured more anger and terror into his fiction than any other Negro author had done. He made his people vivid and convincing in their full humanity, courage, and wisdom, their frustration and fortitude. In 1939 Wright added to the volume "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," which was an early draft of *Black Boy*, and "Bright and Morning Star," which, though as bleak as the first novellas, nourished the hope for brotherhood of the oppressed, which for a short while Wright believed that Communism was to achieve.

Most of the poetry of the decade is regionalism or social protest. Welborn V. Jenkins's *Trumpet in the New Moon* (1934) is rhapsodic but vivid cataloguing of Negro experience; Frank Marshall Davis is likewise panoramic in *Black Man's Verse* (1935) and *I Am The American Negro* (1937) which mingle sharp etchings with irony and belligerence. Richard Wright's occasional poems were farthest to the left. In the early thirties, Langston Hughes suddenly rebelled from a white patron who believed that Negroes had "mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their souls" when not polluted by whites. He responded that he did not feel the primitive surging through him. He admitted a love for the surface and the rhythms of Africa, but said, "I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem." [11] "Advertisement for the Waldorf Astoria," contrasting luxury with down-and-out Harlem, signalized Hughes's revolt, which extended to praise of revolutionary heroes, attacks upon false Negro leadership, and heated defense of the Scottsboro boys.

Negro, an anthology edited by Nancy Cunard in 1934, struck insistently the chord of protest against colonialism in Africa and the Caribbean and second-class citizenship at home; the numerous contributors included whites as well as Negroes. The "united front" against Fascism partly broke down the isolation of the Negro author. The Federal Writers' Project gave even fuller participation to Negroes, employing Bontemps, McKay, Roi Ottley, Ted Poston, Henry Lee Moon, Wright, William Attaway, Ellison, Margaret Walker, Willard Motley, Frank Yerby, and Zora Neale Hurston. The Writers' Project aided Negro au-

thors as well as white by exploring the American past and encouraging a sound, unchauvinistic regionalism. Of the planned series of books on Negro life, only the *Negro in Virginia* (1940) prepared by Roscoe Lewis from materials amassed by Negroes on the Virginia Project was completed, but this book is earnest of what might have developed had not the solons at the Capitol killed the Project so soon. In December, 1940, as a sort of climax to the New Deal interest in Negro life, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Thirteenth Amendment was commemorated at the Library of Congress by an exhibit of paintings, books, and manuscripts, and a festival of music in which Dorothy Maynor and Roland Hayes sang, and the Budapest Quartet played music on Negro themes. On the evening devoted to Negro folk music, Alain Locke was commentator on the Spirituals, Sterling Brown on the Blues and Ballads, and Alan Lomax on the Reels and Worksongs. Locke repeated his proud faith in the survival of the spirituals, and believed them at last safe "under the protection of the skilful folklorist." [13] He was correct: around the hall in the Folk-Archives were thousands of records of Negro folk music of all types, needing interpretation and creative shaping certainly, but available to any honest searcher for truth.

From the Forties to the Present

The rediscovery of the American past in the thirties deepened into passionate affirmation of democracy in the early forties when Fascism menaced the entire world. American Negroes shared as always the determination that democracy should survive. But they knew bitterly that democracy had never been simon-pure for them; that, as Langston Hughes wrote: "America never was America to me." Fighting against Hitlerism abroad, they found nothing contradictory in fighting against injustice at home. The democracy they endorsed was of the future; they were lukewarm at the slogan that victory would restore American life exactly as it had been. Exclusion from complete service in factory and on firing line was galling. The irony of rejecting one tenth of the nation from an all-out defense of democracy was apparent both at home and among our allies.

In Richard Wright's significant *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas was native born, but an exploited ghetto was his home, and a straight course from delinquency to crime was his doom. *Native Son* was composed in great anger, but except for excessive melodrama and the Marxist lawyer's harangue explaining what Wright's powerful dramatic scenes had already left clear, the anger was disciplined by craft. A large audience, prepared by Dreiser and Farrell and depression naturalists, acclaimed *Native Son*; the Book-of-the-Month and The Modern Library selected it (the first choice in both instances of a book by a Negro). Wright's impressionist "folk history," *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), excellently illustrated by Edwin Rosskam, stresses exploitation and revolt. *Black Boy* (1945), the autobiography of Wright's early years, is also violent and outspoken. Hatred of racial injustice made Wright seek France as refuge. Here, having broken with the Communist Party, he wrote fiction of the Underground Man, Wright's new symbol for the American Negro. Influenced

by existentialism, *The Outsider* (1953) lacks roots in the American scene that Wright knew so well, and suffers in the transplanting.

William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), another unapologetic novel, is based on unused material—the experiences of three brothers who give up sharecropping for work in the steel mills; its style, veering from naturalistic to symbolic, is mature; the ideas are perceptive. Chester Himes in his shorter fiction had drawn his characters from the lower depths; his novels are concerned with the lonely and frustrated who, no more than Bigger Thomas, can find a home in America. Himes's *If He Hollers* (1945) portrays a Negro whose neuroticism is tormented by wartime experiences; *Lonely Crusade* (1947) shows a labor organizer's disillusionment with fellow Negroes, organized labor, and the Communist Party. The white world is blamed by Himes for most of the dead-ends of his characters; in *Third Generation* (1954), however, a family is ruined by a mulatto mother's pathologic worship of color and upper-class striving.

The intra-racial problem of color has now ousted the once favorite problem of passing. Dorothy West's *Living is Easy* (1948), written from long familiarity with Boston, satirizes convincingly the snobbishness based on color and social prestige. Willard Savoy's *Alien Land* (1949) probes anew the dilemmas of a fair-skinned Negro confronted by race loyalty and racial rebuffs. J. Saunders Redding's *Stranger and Alone* (1950) uses a new milieu, Negro college life,—about which Redding certainly has an insider's knowledge—, but revelation is sacrificed for embittered exposure of two mulatto misleaders who exhaust the vices of Uncle Tomism.

Tribulations of the slum-shocked filled most of the decade's novels of Negro life. Best of these is Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), the winner of the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship. Miss Petry's crowded tenements, delinquent youngsters, hunted women, and predatory men inhabit a city drastically different from the joy-filled playground of the Harlem Vogue. A skilled and thoughtful novelist, Miss Petry has also written *Narrows* (1953), which tells of a doomed interracial affair in Connecticut. Carl Offord's *White Face* (1943) about Harlem, Philip Kaye's *Taffy* (1950) about Harlem and Brooklyn, Alden Bland's *Behold A Cry* (1947) about Chicago, and Curtis Lucas's *Third Ward Newark* (1946) are typical of the sociological fiction where poverty, family disorganization, alcoholism, unemployment, police brutality, and other urban evils are rendered better than the characters. Case studies at their best, literary slumming at their worst, they are exposures of the obvious rather than illumination of the hidden. Too often hopelessness palls; the course of the neurotic pawns is disastrous instead of tragic; the protagonists are victims, not heroes, because they struggle half-heartedly if at all. In the soft-back publishing bonanza, however, such novels sell well; it is likely that the four S's of sex, sadism, sensationalism, and sentimentality pay off better than the justified racial indignation.

William Gardner Smith's *South Street* (1954) seeks a wider scope than the slums, but his handling of an interracial romance lacks the biting reality of his earlier *The Last of the Conquerors* (1948). This novel, one of the few to tap the Negro's rich war experience, tells much about the Negro G. I. in Europe, where

the lack of color prejudice among the defeated Hitlerites contrasts ironically with its presence among white soldiers of the American occupation. John O. Killen's novel *Youngblood* (1954) departs from the futility of the slum exposures, and sets its major sections in Crossroads, Georgia, where slow improvements are brought about by militant unionists, teachers, and preachers, who learn to organize their strength. *Have You Been to the River* (1952) by Chancellor Williams is also solidly documentary, this time on the cult religions and their zealots, with a social scientist expounding the meanings.

White authors did not neglect the dramatic life of Negroes in the changing South. Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit* (1944) with sharp and deep understanding shows race-crossed lovers in a mean-spirited Georgia town. Insight into the many types, Negro and white, a cross-section of the South, helps *Strange Fruit* disclose hitherto concealed truths. Bucklin Moon's *Without Magnolias* (1949) gives another cross-section: its delineations of a Southern Negro college under white control, the Uncle Toms, courageous labor leaders, working folk, and intellectuals, are authentic and sincere. Hodding Carter, alarmed by war tensions, wrote *Winds of Fear* (1944), a middle-of-the-road novel recognizing the Negro's growing and justified militancy. William Russell's *A Wind is Rising* (1950), Arthur Gordon's *Reprisal* (1950), and Earl Conrad's fiction are protests against lynching and exploitation, as are several of Caldwell's sardonic later novels. The incidental Negro characters in the fiction of Carson McCullers and Peter Taylor reveal aspects of race relations unrecorded earlier. Without stressing violence, Jefferson Young's *A Good Man* (1953), Lonnie Coleman's *Clara* (1952), and Hubert Creekmore's family saga *The Chain in the Heart* (1953) tell of Negroes whose essential dignity is firmly respected. William Faulkner has grown in wisdom about Negroes; after early stereotyping and groping, he created in *Go Down Moses* (1942) Negro characters of complexity and depth. Sometimes, as in *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Faulkner yields to fierce anti-yankeeism, but when he lets Negroes do their own talking and acting, they refute his political tirades, and join the company of his best characterizations.

The most recent fiction by Negro authors is personal, not social; psychological more than sociological; it attacks no problems but wrestles with philosophical meanings. It shares the current distrust of liberalism and naturalism. One young critic denounces the "professionally liberal" publishers who insist that the Negro writer "cannot possibly know anything else but Jim Crow, sharecropping, slum-ghettoes, Georgia crackers, and the sting of his humiliation, his unending ordeal, his blackness." [14] This swing of the pendulum from the publishers of the Van Vechten vogue with their demands for the exotic is striking. Nevertheless, some publishers still take risks with Negro fiction not burdened with the conventional problem. William Demby's *Beetle Creek* (1950) presents a stifling small town where an old white eccentric seeking friendship from Negroes is rejected with cruel barbarity. Owen Dodson's *Boy at the Window* (1951) focuses steadily on a Negro boy's growing up in Brooklyn and Washington; the problems are those of youth and adolescence, not race. James Baldwin considers the problem novel to be the cage of Negro writing. Of his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), Baldwin says: "I wanted my people to be people first, Negroes

almost incidentally. . . . I hoped by refusing to take a special, embattled tone, to involve the reader in their lives [so that] he would close the book knowing more about himself, and therefore more about Negroes, than he had known before." Baldwin's depiction of a Negro family and of the religion of Harlem storefront churches has rich insight. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is by any reckoning a major novel. Its theme is time-honored—the education of a provincial; its manner ranges from naturalistic to surrealistic. Its hero—humiliated as a boy in the South, disillusioned by a Southern college, catspaw of Communists, quarry of frenzied Negro nationalists, rejected and harassed, denied identity as a person—pays exorbitantly for his education. But Ellison has humor as well as starkness. His swarming gallery of characters: Negroes, whites; folk illiterates, Park Avenue sophisticates; menials and mad messiahs; all have the ring of truth. Saying more about Negro life than any preceding novelist, Ellison claims universality for his novel. "Who knows, but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you," his protagonist asks all other men who are perplexed by the tensions of modern civilization.

Because of the phenomenal sales of Frank Yerby's historical romances and the critical esteem accorded Willard Motley's novels, certain critics now counsel Negro novelists to stop writing about Negro life. But Yerby's period pieces are hardly pertinent to such counsel. Escapist fiction, shrewdly concocted of sex and sadism, sensationalizing rather than illuminating history, has never invalidated the time-proven truth that in representational literature an artist does best with what he knows best and feels most deeply. Motley's *Knock on Any Door* (1947) about an Italian gangster, and his *We Fished All Night* (1952) about perplexed veterans, support the axiom; this polyglot, fringe world is precisely the world that Motley knows best. Most Negroes, however, have not shared such experiences. The pragmatic proof is still the quality of the book; the "white novels" of Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petry, Chester Himes, William Gardner Smith are inferior in significance and skill to their novels centered in Negro experience. That Negro novelists should not be confined to Negro characters goes without saying. Even if said, bold imaginations would always be found to disobey; Negroes will write of whites with as much knowledge and sympathetic identification as they can muster. But this does not mean the forfeiture of the life that perforce they know best. Negro life is called a prison by certain critics who equate civic disabilities with artistic, but for the artist of imagination it is no more imprisoning than the worlds of Zola, Dostoevsky, Joyce, O'Casey, or Faulkner.

Negro poets of the last fifteen years have followed the course of modern poetry, from "public" verse to private symbolism. Poetry of the early forties was social: Waring Cuney turned from elegiac lyrics to harsh blues, which the folk singer, Joshua White, recorded as *Southern Exposure*. Langston Hughes continued his racial indignation in *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943) and his quizzical portraiture in several books, from *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) to *One Way Ticket* (1949). *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), experimenting with counterparts of jazz forms—from swing through boogie-woogie to bebop—

shows Hughes at his mature best in revealing the complexity of his beloved Harlem. Frank Marshall Davis's *47th Street* (1948) has vigor and bite and the same kind of knowingness about Chicago that Hughes has about Harlem. Margaret Walker's *For My People*, which won the Yale University Younger Poets award in 1942, expressed strong racial pride and faith in both dithyrambs and ballads. Quite different is the carefully disciplined poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks's *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945); frankness, insight, and increasingly intricate symbolism mark her *Annie Allen* (1949), which won the Pulitzer Prize. *Powerful Long Ladder* (1946), by Owen Dodson, another highly trained poet, includes sincerely felt poetry on race experience; his later poems, in step with *avant-gardism*, explore a private mystical world.

Robert Hayden's earliest *Heart Shapes in the Dust* (1940) contained deft lyrics of clarity and melody; the poems of his second phase explored the heroic and tragic in the history of the Negro; his latest poems in *The Lion and The Archer* (1948) and *Figure of Time* (1955) are densely symbolic. Hayden is the leading spirit in a group that issued a manifesto, "Counterpoise," which opposed the "chauvinistic, the cultist, the special pleading" of Negro writing, and its evaluation "entirely in the light of sociology and politics." [15] Myron O'Higgins, whose poems comprised the second part of *The Lion and The Archer*, Bruce McWright, May Miller, and Carl Holman are also skilful modernist poets. M. Beaunorus Tolson's poetic career extends from the rhapsodic poetry of *Rendezvous with America* (1944) to the *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1955), where Whitman's influence is exchanged for those of Hart Crane, Pound, and Eliot. Tolson's praise of the Liberian experiment is not perfunctory; *Libretto* grew out of long antagonism to imperialism, a wide-reaching intelligence, and a vigorous vocabulary. Allen Tate has called this poem the Negro's first complete assimilation of the "language of the Anglo-American poetic tradition," i.e., the tradition of Allen Tate. With great respect for Tolson's gifts, one may still say of his latest sponsor, to paraphrase one of his favorite poets: *Timeo Tateos, donas ferentes.* The *Libretto* has a *succès d'estime* and is to be studied over the land in college classes; for this explication Tolson has supplied sixteen pages of notes for twenty-nine sparsely printed pages of text, but for one reader these are not yet enough.

The discovery of America, encouraged by the Writers' Project, stimulated Roi Ottley's *New World A-Comin'* (1943), which gave an up-to-date, guardedly optimistic account of the changes of the racial front. Ottley's *Black Odyssey* (1948) is sprightly, journalistic history; his *No Green Pastures* (1951) records disillusionment with Europe, concluding that despite the disabilities, America still offers the greatest promises to Negroes. J. Saunders Redding's *No Day of Triumph* (1942) is one of the best examples of the reportage of the forties, telling much about Negro America with keenness and perceptiveness. These qualities also mark *They Came in Chains* (1950), a volume in Louis Adamic's People of America Series. Redding's *On Being Negro in America* (1951), baring the exasperations of a Negro intellectual, was supposed to be his last word on "race," but in *An American in India* (1954) race confronts him constantly and he is

forced to spend much of his mission defending America from Communist hecklers. Carl Rowan's *South of Freedom* (1954) is the discovery by a Negro veteran of a few changes in his native South, slowed down by prevailing and dangerous inertia. Langston Hughes's *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) and *Simple Takes A Wife* (1954) are a concoction of reportage, satire and fiction. The chats of the author and his sharp witted buddy center about race in a new kind of cracker-box philosophizing transferred to Harlem juke joints, with no loss of the old pith and pungency. Two books on Africa contrast: Era Bell Thompson has written a breezy, journalistic travelogue in *Africa: Land of My Fathers* (1954); and Richard Wright has written an angry and troubled account of a visit to the Gold Coast in *Black Power* (1954); both books are based on short trips, to which Africa proverbially yields up few secrets.

At the start of the twenties, the only books available on the folk Negro were the Uncle Remus Tales, a few collections of spirituals, and Talley's *Negro Folk Rhymes*. Today materials abound. B. A. Botkin's *Lay My Burden Down* (1945), edited from the thousands of ex-slave narratives collected by the Writers' Project, is valuable "folk history," helping to lay the ghosts of the plantation tradition. The vast collection of discs in the Library of Congress Archives, started by the Lomaxes, has discovered unknown songs and singers; among these was the dynamic Leadbelly, who, together with Josh White, brought unadulterated folk music to thousands of Americans. The record companies have responded to the appeal of this music. It is significant that whereas even an artist like Roland Hayes found the recording studios closed to him in his early years, today not only are the voices of Marian Anderson, Dorothy Maynor, and other concert singers everywhere available on records, but staid companies issue long-play volumes of folk singers such as Bessie Smith and Mahalia Jackson, with their strong faces gracing the colorful album jackets. Frederic Ramsey's *Music From The South* in ten long-play volumes, from field recordings in areas hitherto untouched, crowns Ramsey's tireless search for the roots of jazz. Together with Charles Smith, Ramsey pioneered in the historical and critical study of jazz; today a long bibliography by many authors shows the wisdom of such pioneering. Most of the above collectors and interpreters are white; Negro collectors of folk material have been rare, but second-generation respectability is declining: J. Mason Brewer has enthusiastically collected yarns; Lorenzo Turner has studied Gullah with scientific linguistic techniques; and William H. Pipes, with sociological interest, has recorded old-time sermons in backwoods churches. The interest in Negro folk expression is not a momentary fad; the collection and interpretation are the work of both white and Negro folklorists, united in respect for material which, no longer set in isolation, is becoming recognized as integral part of the American experience.

But with folk culture corresponding less and less to Negro experience in America, it is of course to the conscious literature that we turn for fullest expression. The New Critics find such a literature negligible, unworthy of anthologizing or evaluation. To a young white critic, John W. Aldridge, literature about Negroes has a "specialness" that works against universality;[17] to a young Negro

critic, Richard Gibson, literature by American Negroes is a dismaying spectacle because no single work "stands out as a masterpiece."[18] But universality and masterpieces are never called out of the vasty deep by critics' incantations or debarred by their proscriptions. That they are hard-won and rare in whatever time or place is not likely to stop the vigorous contemporary writing. The Negro writer's task is that of his fellows in England, France, Italy, and America; to do as honest, truthful, well-designed, and revelatory work as his powers and insight permit; the rest he must leave to the future. Some signs confute the Cassandras who decry the possibilities of a sound literature of Negro life: the growing craftmanship, learned from the best models; the waning provincialism, self-pity, and denunciation; the increasing integration in American literary life; the leisure for creative maturing, more possible because of new publishing conditions; the loss, on the part of Negro readers, of their hypersensitivity and, on the part of white readers, of their superficial preconceptions. In one of the last essays he wrote, Alain Locke looked with serenity upon the future of the literature to which he had given such support and guidance. He saw how improving race relations have relaxed the Negro writer's tensions, and made possible deeper human understanding on his part; on the part of whites he saw growing fraternal acceptance. Should this cultural recognition and acceptance be realized, he wrote,

> the history of the Negro's strange and tortuous career in American literature may also become the story of America's hard-won but easily endured attainment of cultural democracy.[19]

---

[1] The treatment of the Negro in drama is of course significant, but complete coverage of three decades of a fairly abundant literature is impossible for an essay of this length. The major plays, *In Abraham's Bosom* (1924); *The Green Pastures* (1930); *Porgy and Bess*, the "folk opera" (1935); *Stevedore* (1934); *Native Son* (1941); *Strange Fruit* (1945); *Deep Are The Roots* (1945), and the recent Louis Peterson's *Take A Giant Step* (1953), and Charles Sebree's and Greer Johnson's *Mrs. Patterson* (1954), conform to the trends that will be discussed. In 1927 Alain Locke saw on the near horizon great tragedy and comedy of Negro life, "universal even in sounding its most racial notes." ("Introduction," *Plays of Negro Life*, edited by Locke and Montgomery Gregory, New York and London, 1927), p. vi. But that hope has yet to be fulfilled.

[2] Locke, "The New Negro" in Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York, 1925), p. 11.

[3] Locke, "Art or Propaganda?" *Harlem, A Forum of Negro Life*, I (November, 1928), 12.

[4] "In the Driftway," *Nation*, CXXXI (September 8, 1930), 245.

[5] Harvey Wickham, *The Impuritans* (New York, 1929), p. 283.

[6] Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York, 1955), p. 269. Edmund Wilson's *The Shores of Light* (1952) touches only on Frank and Toomer; John K. Hutchen's *The American Twenties* anthologizes no work about Negro life; William Hodapp's *The Pleasures of the Jazz Age* (1948) anthologizes only a dithyramb by Sherwood Anderson to Negro easy living as an instance of the period's interest in The Race Question!

[7] See, for example, Dorothy Van Doren's review of Schuyler's *Black No More*, which says: "The Negro will never write great literature while he tries to write white literature. It may be that he can express himself only by music and rhythm and not by words." "Black, Alas, No More!", *Nation*, CXXXII (February 25, 1931), 219.

[8] Allison Davis, "Our Intellectuals", *Crisis*, XXXV (August, 1928), 285.

[9] Locke, "This Year of Grace", *Opportunity*, IX (February, 1931), 48.

[10] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York, 1940), p. 247.

[11] Historical fiction about slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction has been plentiful. Despite the phenomenal success of *Gone With The Wind*, the plantation tradition is in decline. More satisfying artistically and historically has been the recreation of the past by regionalists whose documentation and honesty draw them far from the moonlight and magnolia school.

[12] Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 316 ff.

[13] *Seventy Years of Freedom* (Commemoration of the 75th Anniversary of the Proclamation of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States) (Washington, 1940), p. 15.

[14] Richard Gibson, "A No to Nothing," *Kenyon Review* (Spring, 1951), reprinted in *Perspectives USA* (Winter, 1953), p. 92.

[15] "Counterpoise" (Nashville, 1948) n.p.

[16] "Introduction," Tolson, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (New York, 1955), n.p.

[17] John W. Aldridge, *After the Lost Generation* (New York, 1953), pp. 102 ff. Aldridge is sound in hoping that "problems of race" will be treated as human problems, not as "forced polemics journalistically presented." But, though he categorizes the Negro and the Jew with the homosexual (p. 103) as the last remaining tragic types, he considers their problems minor issues, not "central to the meaning of this age." Such lofty dismissal divulges the narrowness of much current academic criticism.

[18] Gibson, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

[19] Locke, "The Negro in American Literature," Arabel J. Porter, ed., *New World Writing* (New York, 1952), p. 33.