Politics and Institution Building 
in the New Negro Renaissance
Compiled for the 2010 NEH Summer Institute at Washington University in St. Louis
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Anthologies:


This extensive collection of essays is a valuable, foundational tool for those wishing to understand the intellectual movement for racial uplift that sought to redefine/recreate and promote a new African-American identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The New Negro Movement sought to replace the Old Negro identity, tied to slavery, minstrelsy, subservience and lynching, with a new identity of race pride, economic success, artistic prowess and political equality—the New Negro. The editors state, “By reprinting approximately one hundred canonical and lesser-known essays written or published between 1892 and 1938, we lay the groundwork for scholars, teachers, students, and general readers to learn more about the political interconnection of race, representation and African American culture.” The essays are written by a wide array of intellectuals for whom the meaning and significance of art, culture, and politics were incontrovertibly tied to racial representation.

The editors’ introductory comments provide an overview of the movement’s main themes as well as a guide to the structure and content of the collection. The New Negro Movement’s concerted construction of a racial identity is described as rising from the understandable desire of African-Americans to reconstruct the “Old Negro” identity that had been largely defined and forced upon them by the dominant, racist, white society and its institutions. This act of conscious identity construction is an artificial process; thus, the Old Negro and its antithesis, the New Negro, are radically different, but both, to some degree, are fictions. The name “New Negro,” the editors suggest, was co-opted by Alain Locke and other intellectual leaders to apply to their literary movement, from post WWI editorials that wielded the name in a much more radically political sense—the New Negro being one who ably defended himself from mob violence. This literary movement supplants traditional political action, which is shown ineffective in WWI-era treatment of African-American soldiers and racial violence on a massive scale perpetrated against blacks in dozens of US cities. This, and the historic denial of participation in US political institutions and processes, led to a “cultural turn in black politics,” as African-Americans sought cultural acceptance by the larger society as a means of achieving political acceptance and equal civic participation. This concerted shift from “political radicalism to romantic culturalism” would be rejected by some intellectuals and activists who continued to call for political action and to openly demand justice (Gates and Jarrett 7-9).
Further, this political action in the guise of artistic movement was relatively short-lived in African-American history, and even among the New Negro Movement intelligentsia, as newer voices, like Richard Wright, and evolving voices, like Locke and Du Bois, would increasingly espouse political radicalism and internationalism in the 1930s and beyond.

What is particularly useful about this collection is that it provides a clear but multi-paned window into the complexity of the debate (among members of the African-American intelligentsia) over how to define the “New Negro,” how to communicate this definition to the wider African-American community, and how to represent the New Negro to dominant American society and even to the world. Of the roughly one hundred essays, according to the editors (the reviewer is not knowledgeable enough to expertly assess this), there are both “old guard” and more radical, both well-known and lesser-known definitions of “New Negro” and strategies for achieving social, political and economic uplift. The essays are categorized into the following subtopics: the New Negro; artistic portrayal of the Negro; the Renaissance; art as propaganda; history and theory of literature; the literary profession; poetry; spirituals; jazz; theater; and the fine arts.

While seemingly representative of the diverse opinions about who this New Negro actually was, or ought to be, truly critical or skeptical voices appear few and far between. One essay, entitled “New Negro Hokum,” questions the political relevancy and efficacy of this New Negro, while remaining sympathetic to the goals of racial uplift and civil rights. The artists associated with the literary magazine Fire!! are largely and noticeably absent from this anthology, save one essay each by Wallace Thurman and Zora Neale Hurston. Perhaps their notoriety outshone their actual influence within the New Negro debate, although several essays by members of the leadership appear to react to ideas championed by those more radical and provocative voices. When it comes to the various art forms embraced by the movement, the debate seems somewhat more lively. The topic of the literary profession alone elicits essays including, George Schuyler’s “Negro Authors Must Eat,” James Weldon Johnson’s “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” and “A Negro Writer to His Critics,” by Claude McKay.

Whether or not key voices and ideas are left out of this anthology is open to debate. Regardless, it is a rich reference text and provides a tremendously valuable overview and “jumping off point” for further, more in-depth study of the particular visions and debates over the definition and goals of the New Negro Movement. (Erin Lynch)


The Black Poets is an anthology of black poets. Included are works by the author, who is an accomplished poet himself. The book was first published in 1971. Within its covers are poems written by black artists who are expressing their views in a variety of ways pertaining to civil rights and the black power movement. Obviously, the book
attempts to address concerns that impact the lives of black people. However, anyone who has an ear for poetry will enjoy reading this book. The reader will find a full range of poems where virtually all ages and regions are covered. There are poems ranging from the time of slavery to the time when the book was published.

Within Randall’s book there are a number of poems that can be interpreted as having a Pan-African focus. For instance, “Go Down, Moses” is taken from scripture: Exodus 7:26. This poem is a spiritual that is frequently recited in African-American churches as a song of liberation. Then there is “If We Must Die,” penned by Claude McKay in 1919. The poem requests that black men—and women—stand up with courage and dignity against the injustices that surround them. Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” written in 1921, addresses the vast territories where people of African descent reside. The rivers represent the flow of blood, the major arteries; tributaries represent the smaller arteries. Last but not least, “Strong Men,” published in 1931 by Sterling Brown, examines the role slavery has played in the lives of African people and its impact on our present society. All of these poems stress the need for African liberation and unification.

The author of course has other poems that will be useful in the classroom. But the ones that are provided will serve as ample resource materials in showing the connectedness of all people who live in the African diaspora. Whether a student is in elementary or secondary school, or college, The Black Poets will prove to be sound reading. (Lenard E. Jackson)


Articles / Essays:


This article was first published in 2003 and reprinted in 2006. Because I teach World History to 9th, 10th, and 11th graders, I will annotate this article with these groups as my primary audience.

One topic the article discusses is reasons why African-Americans joined the military. The reasons stated are employment opportunities, prestige, and respect (just to name a few). The article goes on to discuss the different levels of racism that African-Americans faced during World War I. For example, Blacks were treated less harshly in the Army than in other branches of the service. Blacks could not join the Marines and
could only serve as menial workers in the Air Force. Additionally, blacks who served in
the infantry were treated better than those who served as laborers. More importantly, this
article brings home the importance and the impact blacks had in the war. It tells stories of
blacks in different battles in the war and their victories. Finally, despite the mistreatment
of blacks during World War I, a large percentage of those soldiers went on to reenlist in
World War II. (Antwayn Patrick)


This issue of the Harvard Law Review includes papers prepared for a symposium
commemorating the 75th anniversary of Charles Hamilton Houston’s completion of
Harvard Law School. It is geared towards anyone interested in learning more about a man
who influenced civil rights litigation in the United States. After the initial symposium, the
articles appeared in a journal available to law students and to practicing attorneys, as well
as to the general public. The journal is edited by students and is especially fitting because
it honors a person who served as the first African-American editor of the Review.

Various authors wrote the articles, including Genna Rae McNeil, Houston’s
biographer, and J. Clay Smith, Jr., a law professor at Howard University School of Law,
where Charles Hamilton Houston famously served as professor and later Vice Dean from
1924-1935. The authors provide both a biographical sketch of Houston as well as the
impact of his work on civil rights litigation.

Regarding institution building, Houston was instrumental in revamping Howard
University’s Law School. Additionally, preceding his service as a lawyer, Houston had
been a member of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Although his chapter was not located
on the campus of a historically black college or university (HBCU), his dedication to the
early Civil Rights Movement and to the community service work of his fraternity is
reflected in his later commitment as Vice Dean of Howard Law School—an HBCU. His
story is just one example of how one can move from the confines of an undergraduate
fraternal setting to a place of action as an adult.

As Vice Dean of Howard Law School, Houston firmly believed in institution
building. Within two years of his 1929 appointment, he transformed the school into a
full-time, nationally accredited law school. As an administrator and professor, “he valued
self-determination and believed that the educated had a duty to the race.” In this sense,
he adheres to Du Bois’s idea of the “Talented Tenth.” Further, he hoped to instill certain
values in whoever participates in the Howard Law program. He asserts that “if a Negro
law school is to make its full contribution to the social system, it must train its students
and send them [to apply pressure to eliminate racial antagonism].” He armed his charges
with an understanding of civil rights litigation that would enable them to be crusaders for
the cause of integration. At the same time that he was leading this institution, he put theory into practice as the Special Counsel for the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund. In the 1930s, his service to both institutions would provide an example to such pupils as fellow Alpha Phi Alpha brother (Lincoln University, PA) Thurgood Marshall.

Questions that may arise include the following: What obstacles did Charles Hamilton Houston face in trying to bring about Howard Law School’s accreditation? How was the affiliation between Howard Law School and the NAACP mutually beneficial? What is the lasting impact of the foundation that Houston built at Howard Law School? Did Houston involve current students of his old fraternity in the work he was doing on civil rights? (Petra Riviere)


This relatively short essay in *The Crisis* was written a little more than a year after the 1939 roadside protest by more than 1,000 sharecroppers and their families in Missouri’s Bootheel. Interestingly, the title and the timing of the article seem to imply that the author would discuss the events leading up to and following the sharecropper protest. While that is partially true, it quickly becomes apparent that the author intends to focus most of the space on the La Forge project that the Farm Security Administration implemented in 1937—two years prior to the roadside demonstration. For the first time, many sharecropping families were given land that was truly theirs to do with as they pleased. In addition to cash crops, the FSA gave the residents of La Forge land to use for gardening. The author’s praise for the project promoted farming cooperatives. Owen Whitfield, a former La Forge resident and, according to many accounts, the leader of the roadside demonstration, later founded another 100-acre cooperative on ground he purchased in Southeast Missouri.

Although it was not part of the essay, the editors strategically placed a political advertisement for Franklin D. Roosevelt at the end of the article. The full-page advertisement displays an image of FDR and his wife. Written below the image:

He knows how to handle our foreign affairs
His New Deal has helped ALL Americans, regardless of section, race, creed or color
On November 5…vote for...ROOSEVELT [bold in original].
Political advertisement authorized by the colored division, Democratic National Committee.

It is unlikely that the placement of the advertisement was accidental. Instead, it seems that the protestors’ demonstration was merely a means for the author and/or editors to promote the New Deal prior to the election.

Although it does not specifically address the effect of the New Negro Renaissance on rural African-Americans, this essay in *The Crisis*, like most others, adds to the complex nature of the movement. Instead of focusing on the role of communist leaders, white plantation owners, Jewish authors, African-American college students or the sharecropping reverend who assumed a prominent leadership position in the Bootheel protest, this essay seems to argue the important and supportive role that the New Deal played in helping the sharecroppers. Unfortunately, the author ignores the fact that it was
the same New Deal program that issued the initial parity checks that led to the large-scale eviction of sharecroppers. (Joseph Hunter)

**Davis, Arthur P. “The Negro College Student.” The Crisis 37, no. 8 (1930): 270-271.**

This issue of The Crisis intends to have a wide readership. The magazine notes distributing agents on five continents. This article is featured in the 19th Annual Education Number and would attract those interested in education—specifically higher education.

Regarding institution building, the first pages include ads for various historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as well as announcements of recent degree recipients from an array of schools. This might serve as inspiration to younger readers and as vindication to older supporters of higher education. Schools conferring degrees range from MIT to Morehouse, and include both men and women.

The article on the Negro college student offers both praise and criticism. As a professor at Virginia Union University, an HBCU in Richmond, the author speaks from a position of authority. He has already excelled, having graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a Master’s from Columbia University. Thus, he represents the establishment influencing the education of the New Negro.

Davis has high hopes for this generation, but to his chagrin he feels that many do not understand what it means to have that enduring thirst for knowledge. He writes that “[o]ne does not expect undergraduates to turn out lasting examples of scholarship, but one does expect…that their college years be at least a period of training, whether for further graduate work or for the practical problems of later life. But the Negro student has not yet grasped this conception.” Davis feels that students, as well as the HBCUs themselves, are still in a “transitional phase,” figuring out what is most important for students to learn. However, he has high hopes that with time, they both will sort out this dilemma.

He feels that the positives that he witnesses will help: “Perhaps the most hopeful sign in the Negro student is his growing independence of spirit.” Davis may also be directing this article to an older generation who might be frustrated with freewheeling youth. As someone whose job is to shape students into scholars, he claims that “anyone who understands youth can appreciate the present exuberance, knowing that it will soon settle into the rightful channel.” Although presently frustrated by the laziness of some youth, he feels that their independent spirit of action will eventually evolve into an independent spirit of thought.

While he fears that a plethora of students entering college might make a degree worthless, he considers “a large opinionated and informed class… a very necessary asset to the Negro race.” His final paragraphs reflect his ambivalence about the Negro student as he urges students to acknowledge that college is here to prepare them to be the standard bearers who will serve to uplift the race.

This article may raise the following questions: Did The Crisis ever publish a response by students to this article? Besides giving students more freedom on college campuses, what else did HBCUs do to channel the energy of the New Negro student in a positive way? Also, what alumni voices exist that could speak to college as a transformative process for students? (Petra Riviere)

This section is the last in this issue. “The Postscript” also can be found in other issues of the magazine and seems to be meant for those concerned with W.E.B. Du Bois’s musings.

*The Crisis* appears to be a place where Du Bois can write about various topics of concern to him. He also uses this space to clear up any misconceptions readers may have pointed out to him. This particular set of articles addresses the issue of segregation. For the sake of context, it may be helpful to read the other articles within the “Postscript” before tackling “Negro Fraternities,” the main section of interest. In a previous “Postscript” article, entitled “The New Negro Alliance,” Du Bois mentions how segregation can serve as a useful tool in the climate of 1934 and urges the following: “…don’t squat before segregation and bawl. Use segregation. Use every bit that comes your way and transmute it into power.” For him, segregation is a part of life that—although negative—may be used as a tool for uplifting the African-American community. Additionally at the very beginning of this section, the article entitled “Counsels of Despair,” reminds parents that they must make sure to raise children who are proud to fight…. [and who] learn what they are fighting for is the opportunity and the chance to know and associate with black folk. They are not fighting to escape themselves. They are fighting to say to the world: the opportunity of knowing Negroes is worth so much to us…that we want you to know them, too.

Du Bois asks parents to instill this idea of racial uplift and positive image in their children—the same children who may someday become part of the subject of Du Bois’s final writing on “Negro Fraternities.”

In regard to institution building, this last section addresses the concerns that people may have about fraternities on college campuses. Du Bois views these groups through the same lens as in the above articles: during a time of discrimination, they are a positive form of segregation because of what they provide for students. Fraternities allow students access to dormitory space, something that was not always available on campus. Moreover, they allow students a space where they can be “inspired” by others. He encourages readers who have “any doubt as to the meaning and inspiration of these fraternities… [to] attend one of their national meetings and see the type of men and women that they are bringing together.” He seems pleased with how students have taken difficult situations and have been able to carve out havens for themselves on the college campuses.

Some questions that may arise from this article are the following: What kinds of people did W.E.B. Du Bois realistically hope would develop from these fraternities? Were the arguments in this section about segregation the sort that created a divide between Du Bois and the NAACP (he left the organization in 1934)? Besides fraternities, what other opportunities might students have had to build community on college campuses? (Petra Riviere)


Although Lorenzo Greene wrote this account in 1987, it tells the story of his personal involvement with the 1939 sharecropper protest in Southeast Missouri. In general, he discusses how he “became actively involved in the plight of the sharecroppers” and “inspired the students at Lincoln University to help them.”

According to Greene, he was asked to give a speech in Southeast Missouri. Due to car trouble, he had to spend the night. The next day a local citizen took him to witness the sharecropper demonstration and introduced him Walter Johnson, a camp leader who played prominently in Greene’s account of the demonstration. The larger theme of the article revolved around Greene’s facilitation of Lincoln University student efforts to collect money and supplies for the families. Later, the students proved instrumental in Owen Whitfield’s purchase of the piece of land that eventually became the farming cooperative called Cropperville. In addition, specific references to donations from across the country suggest that Greene’s organizational efforts extended far beyond Lincoln University.

Within the context of the New Negro Renaissance, the picture painted by Greene makes sense. A group of educated African-Americans were aiding the efforts of over 1,000 Missouri sharecroppers and their families. Interestingly, Greene’s account seems to mention Owen Whitfield in passing. Scholarly accounts of the protest vary widely. Some focus on Whitfield, some have focused on efforts of union leaders from St. Louis, while Greene focuses on the importance of the students from Lincoln University. One thing all accounts have in common is a connection between the rural movement in Southeast Missouri and a more educated group of people in urban environments. (Joseph Hunter)


Bonnie Stepenoff is a professor of history at Southeast Missouri State University. She has authored three books including one on the Southeast Missouri town of Ste. Genevieve. Stepenoff’s focus on the Sharecropper protest of 1939 differs slightly from other accounts. Instead of focusing on Owen Whitfield and Thad Snow, she chooses to devote her attention to Whitfield’s connections to Marcus “Al” Murphy and Fannie Cook, both of St. Louis. According to the author, this urban connection was vital to the “success” of the protest.

Al Murphy was an African-American member of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). He organized training schools for prospective Communist organizers, helped form the Sharecroppers Union (SCU) in Alabama, and helped raise donations for food and supplies for the sharecroppers in Southeast Missouri. In addition, Murphy was instrumental in connecting Whitfield to an affiliate of the CIO in St. Louis. According to Stepenoff, it was the Communist Party that got the movement started—not Whitfield.

A decade later, during the height of the McCarthy era, the federal government arrested Murphy for violating the Smith Act. Interestingly, Thad Snow, the white plantation owner who helped Whitfield organize the sharecropper protest, paid his bail. The feds eventually dropped the charges in 1958, only after Murphy had paid a large price for his communist activities.

In addition to Murphy, Stepenoff spends a considerable amount of time discussing Fannie Cook, who was an affluent white author from St. Louis. Cook was the “driving force” behind the St. Louis Committee for the Rehabilitation of the Sharecroppers. Her activity in the Committee put her in contact with Al Murphy and other active communists. In addition, Cook chaired the Department of Race Relations of the Community Council of St. Louis. During the spring of 1939, she traveled to the Bootheel to witness the plight of the sharecroppers first-hand so that she could do some research for her second novel. What she saw appalled her, and she vowed to help make changes. She loosely chronicled her experiences in her novel Boot-Heel Doctor (1941). Like many other urban supporters of the sharecroppers, Cook used her ties to wealthy St. Louisians to help provide aid and financial support for the later protests.

Although scholars traditionally have viewed The New Negro Renaissance within an urban context, a large percentage of African-Americans still lived in rural areas. While Stepenoff loosely discusses the protest in rural Missouri, she focuses primarily on its urban connections. By seemingly discounting Whitfield’s leadership and choosing to focus a large portion of her academic effort on the important role a white Jewish woman played in supporting the sharecroppers’ efforts, Stepenoff might appear to suggest that the protest fails to fall within the framework of The New Negro Renaissance. Instead, it
is quite the contrary. Stepenoff’s account shows the complexity of the protest and the benefit of having centralized control in an urban environment. In addition, the story examines the rise of two African-American sharecroppers to positions of prominence within the union. Although they did not completely alter the condition of sharecroppers, they did influence federal legislation—an accomplishment that would likely not have been possible prior to The New Negro Renaissance. Although a proportionately larger number of African-Americans were sharecroppers, the roadside demonstration was an interracial effort to achieve equity. Stepenoff states that the links between the “rural protesters and their urban sympathizers ultimately were not ideological, but human.”

(Joseph Hunter)


“Although much American history has been written as if segregation was not effectively challenged before the 1954 Supreme Court decision of Brown v. Board of Education, a more careful examination of African-American racial struggle in the twentieth century reveals a legacy of resistance to segregation in the courts and in the streets.” This point is effectively made in the opening paragraph of an article that appeared in the magazine of the Organization of American Historians in 1993. It is then followed by a concise but clearly stated summary of three key points.

The first point grows out of a review of the historical background of the racial climate in Detroit prior to the arrest of an African-American physician named Ossian Sweet and ten others for shooting two people (one fatally) in September of 1925. The point is that jobs in defense plants during the World War I combined with those generated by the burgeoning auto industry led to a twenty-fold increase in Detroit’s African-American population between 1910 and 1930. Wolcott includes specific information pertaining to segregation patterns as well as the overall racial environment in Detroit.

The second point discussed is a description of the shootings by the Sweets and their friends in defense of their recently purchased home in an all-white neighborhood. The article then goes on to describe the strategy of the NAACP with its three-pronged national attack on racial segregation and how the hiring of the nation’s foremost attorney, Clarence Darrow, fit into this strategy. The trial is chronologically reviewed, including excerpts of trial testimony.
The third point addressed by this article is the long-term historical significance of the trial and its aftermath. Wolcott makes connections with contemporaneous developments that were taking place as part of the New Negro Renaissance, as well as with subsequent cases and events in the ongoing battle against racial segregation.

All in all, Victoria Wolcott’s article on Ossian Sweet and his historical trial would be of much use in any high school classroom that is using this series of events as a vehicle to deepen understanding of the racial enigma of the 1920s. On one hand, this was a decade of amazing progress for African-Americans in such areas as poetry, literature, music and even sports. On the other hand, the decade was characterized by deadly race riots in such places as East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa. In fact, the worst race riot the nation had yet witnessed took place on Detroit’s streets in 1942. It can clearly be seen that Sweet’s victory in the courtroom was definitely not the end of the struggle. (Joe Regenbogen)


In 1940, Carter G. Woodson, the man credited with the democratization and professionalization of black history, chastened, “Do not let the role which you have played be obscured while others write themselves into the foreground of your story.” Recognizing that history was an important battleground, he had founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915. *The Journal of Negro History*, the accompanying quarterly aimed at the preservation and dissemination of African-American history, began publication in January of 1916. Providing insight into the redefinition underway during the New Negro Renaissance, “Negro Life and History in Our Schools” speaks to the need of countervailing the dominant narrative and staving off the direction in which history was being shepherded.

Blanket omission on the part of white scholarship was no longer appropriate in post-Civil War America; the Negro had to be given some attention. Requisition of the narrative was imperative for the South: “Many of its ambitious young men went North to study in the leading universities then devoting much attention… toward the vindication of the slavery régime and the overthrow of the Reconstruction governments.” The amalgamation of these accounts began to have the desired effect. The great migration northward of both African-American immigrants and Southern invective led to Northern educators questioning how best to present the social sciences. Instead of incorporating a comprehensive curriculum, they sided with promotion of the Southern, post-bellum polemic: “Their position seems to be that because the American Negro has not in fifty years accomplished what the master class achieved in fifty centuries, the race cannot be expected to perform satisfactorily the functions of citizenship and must, therefore, be treated exceptionally in some manner as devised by the commonwealths of the South.”

Conspicuous was the need for the formation of intellectual elites to oppose the whitewashing of black history. Nativity of this thought is present in Woodson’s essay: “A few Negro schools sufficiently advanced to prosecute seriously the study of social sciences have had courses in sociology and history bearing on the Negro… These
schools, moreover, are now not only studying what has been written but have undertaken
the preparation of scholars to carry on research in this neglected field.” It is, precisely,
the said lack of scientific training that had stunted progression and given way to charges,
ironically, of subjective rhetoric.

Concerning the date of Dr. Woodson’s piece, he spoke of the contributions of
African-American soldiers in WWI. Likewise he gave witness to efforts on the home
front: “Negroes maintained their morale and supported the war.” Accounts to this end
remain localized in courses studying Negro life but were not incorporated into a greater
social fabric. The collecting and recounting of historical events had direct merit but,
according to Woodson, would pay dividends for posterity. “The chief value of such
literature is to furnish facts as to sentiment of the people, which in years to come will be
of use to an investigator when the country will have sufficiently removed itself from race
prejudice to seek after truth as to all phases of the situation.” African-Americans as
active agents in an American history were what Carter G. Woodson foresaw through the
professionalization of black history. (Shawn Hornung)

Zacharias, Patricia, “’I Have To Die a Man Or Live a Coward’ – The Saga of
2010).

Books and Book Chapters:

Adi, Hakim, and Marika Sherwood. Pan-African History: Political Figures From

Barbeau, Arthur E., and Florette Henri. The Unknown Soldiers: Black American

The Unknown Soldiers was released in 1974 and was reprinted in 1996. This book
was considered the gold standard on the topic of African-Americans and World War I.
The book gives a stunning account of the African-American fight for equality in the
armed forces and in the United States. This author gives stark accounts of blacks and the
drafting process. He discusses the discrimination against African-Americans from the
President of the United States, Senators, northern and southern whites, and from the
press. This book breaks down every area of the war from the perspective of African-
Americans. It discusses the St. Louis riots in detail, as well as the reasons why African-
Americans joined the war and the fight African-Americans had both in the war and back
at home during the war. Also, this book contains pictures and letters of African-American
soldiers.

One of the drawbacks of the book is it was written in the early 1970s. It may not
be as detailed as other recent books because of more information that has been located
since that time. Also, the book does not give enough positive accomplishments of the
soldiers who served during the war. However, this book, according to my research, offers
a more vivid and perhaps a more realistic view of what African-Americans endured
during the war. This book is a “must read.” (Antwayn Patrick)

This critically acclaimed nonfiction best seller provides a comprehensive telling of the overall story of Ossian Sweet and was intended for a diverse audience of readers. A high school teacher could assign this book as a supplemental text for students to read, and it could then be used for a mock trial or similar project designed to add depth to any unit on this time period in American History.

The book begins by providing background information on the political, cultural and racial climate of the nineteen twenties. It then moves on to describe specific details concerning the situation in Detroit, which had recently received a large infusion of African-Americans who had moved into the area to take relatively high-paying jobs in the auto industry. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan was on the rise in the area as a response to the rise of racial tension. The book provides details about the protagonist, Ossian Sweet, an African-American physician who had recently moved to Detroit with his wife and daughter.

Trying to please his bride, Sweet agreed to purchase a home in a previously all-white neighborhood. After his arrival, “a mob gathered outside his house. Suddenly, shots rang out: Sweet, or one of his defenders, had accidentally killed one of the whites threatening their lives and home.” Sweet and the other African-Americans inside of the house were arrested and taken into custody. Recognizing the significance of these events, the NAACP took the case, raised money for the legal defense of the Sweets, and persuaded Clarence Darrow to represent Ossian Sweet and his brothers. Sweet then became “a controversial symbol of equality.”

Historian Kevin Boyle “weaves the police investigation and courtroom drama of Sweet’s murder trial into a narrative history” that documents the racial friction of the times. Ossian Sweet represents the success that was being enjoyed by the “Talented Tenth” of African-American society during the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s. His trial, however, demonstrates the volatility and racial tension that had already been seen in the race riots that occurred in East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa.

Overall, this book provides an excellent starting point for any class that wants to use this trial to deepen its understanding of life during the Harlem Renaissance. In particular, it reflects the political changes brought on by the Great Migration of African-Americans to northern cities, the rise of explosive racial pressure and the cultural achievements that emerged from the dynamic juxtaposition of these different trends. (Joe Regenbogen)


This supplemental US History text is meant as a resource for educators who are either pressed for time in which to discuss a topic, or seek an efficient mechanism for teaching students how to deeply analyze a particular type of historical document. One
chapter suggests using advertisements from *The Crisis* magazine to analyze the values and goals of the African-American community (at least those who were reading *The Crisis*) during the time of the New Negro Renaissance. The featured advertisements were printed in the magazine from 1910-1913. Edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* was essentially his mouthpiece, reflecting his beliefs about racial uplift, the Talented Tenth, the New Negro, and the NAACP’s program of social advancement through artistic excellence. It can be assumed that the advertisements are representative of his values and beliefs, guiding African-Americans in choosing products and services that would both reflect and support a respectable, educated, upwardly mobile black society. While it is also true that advertisements were a critical source of income for the magazine, because of the success of the publication and its healthy readership, advertisers who decided to purchase space in *The Crisis* made a sound business decision, and Du Bois likely had the ability to be somewhat selective in the types of businesses that advertised in its pages. It is also unlikely that Du Bois would have sacrificed his powerful and unwavering vision for the sake of advertising revenue.

One fascinating advertisement from the Philip A. Payton, Jr., Company, is entitled, “How to Elevate the Moral and Civic Tone of the Negro Community.” The answer? Housing and real estate, in which “desirable tenants,” will serve as a force for bettering the “moral and civic condition of Negro communities.” While trumpeting the newly available housing, which features the “same conveniences and accommodations as the whites,” it is interesting and fitting, given the rather elitist tone of Du Bois’s program of racial uplift, that the advertisement also recommends discrimination within the African-American community. In order to place the proper sort of tenants in these new, comfortable and spacious accommodations, the company recommends that prospective tenants be subjected to reasonable scrutiny, including the provision of references. No doubt referring to the less affluent, less well educated and those recently-arrived from the South, the ad states, “Any tenant not furnishing such references should be ‘Jim-crowed,’ as it were, from decent neighborhoods.”

Other advertisements feature a newly built luxury hotel in Cape May, New Jersey, owned and operated by African-American businessman E. W. Dale. An ad for an employment agency trumpets positions in the “best places” and with the “best families.” The ideals of entrepreneurship and independence are seen in an ad that admonishes, “Don’t Slave for Wages. Be your own boss. We show you how.” This message is seen repeatedly in the exhortations to support successful African-American-owned and operated businesses—shipping enterprises, pharmacies, barber shops, and women’s beauty product companies. A wide variety of advertised African-American educational institutions, for both women and men, include a military academy, “industrial” schools, colleges, and training schools for nurses. These are all goods and services fit for Du Bois’s New Negro, and businesses that promote race pride and race solidarity.

These documents, and other advertisements from *The Crisis* that one might find, offer a window into the aspirations of the strivers in the African-American community, but also reveal the actual values and habits of many of the readership. While this focus admittedly would exclude perhaps the majority of African-Americans who still lived in rural or urban poverty, the class divide, and whether and how to bridge it, was a major point of debate in the redefinition of African-American society and culture, or, the effort to define the New Negro. Many of the tensions running through this social movement are
seen in these advertisements. Race pride (the Negro Doll Company, support for African-American owned businesses) collides with aspirations to seemingly emulate “white” society (luxury hotels on golf courses, an ad for women’s face power with decidedly European-tinted ladies’ faces). Invitations to the “best people” (real estate, employment bureaus), the overall “bourgeois” nature of the goods and services, and the near silence as far as the working and poor classes are concerned illustrate the focus of The Crisis on the elites and middle-class strivers as the hope for African-American society. One interesting exception in this collection is an ad for a “Negro colony” in New Mexico called “Blackdom,” which sought Negro families, preferably farmers, to build a community in a state purportedly free of Jim Crow laws.

Clearly, such a collection of primary source documents is rich with possibilities for analysis and discussion with students. If The Crisis was meant to be the magazine of the New Negro Movement, study of these advertisements is another avenue by which students can come to understand who this New Negro was. Who read The Crisis? Who likely did not? What were acceptable careers, and what, by their omission, were likely unacceptable? To what degree was the ideal culture and lifestyle a purely African-American one, or did it seem to mimic white society? What access did Crisis readers seem to have to economic opportunity and upward mobility? To what extent do the ads use religion, education and gender to affirm African-American equality and respectability? Here are just a few questions that can be explored in examining these fascinating artifacts of commerce, values, and aspiration. (Erin Lynch)


The New Negro Renaissance was a movement to redefine Negro culture and identity, both within the African-American community and in the wider US society. Carroll closely examines the imagery of several key publications—The Crisis, Opportunity, Survey Graphic, The New Negro, and Fire!!—used by African-American intellectuals, artists and activists to document, create and communicate their complex, evolving and often conflicting definitions of the New Negro. The author relates how she was captivated by the full color images in a first edition of Alain Locke’s anthology The New Negro, and that these images enriched her thinking and understanding of the publication’s ideas. She was thus compelled to research and analyze the power of such visual texts, alone and in interplay with written text, to shape viewers’ understanding of the New Negro. Carroll suggests that whether these publications succeeded or failed in redefining the New Negro and undermining racism, their study allows greater understanding of the New Negro Renaissance, the power of multimedia, and the fascinating enterprise of redefining and communicating identity. Carroll believes that there remains a wealth of understanding to be gleaned from additional serious and thorough study of these collaborative and innovative multimedia publications, which she sees as the most complicated efforts to represent the New Negro Movement. The book’s chapters offer close readings of the five publications listed previously, accompanied by a wealth of their images.

Word, Image and the New Negro appears to be a valuable tool for teachers who must select from a vast array of available texts (written, visual, auditory, etc.) in teaching
the era to their students. The choices teachers make in selecting texts will determine how completely or accurately a class may understand the movement’s goals and how it will assess the movement’s success. Carroll’s analysis both provides guidance in selecting texts and models close study of them. Carroll cautions that her analysis is not exhaustive of the publications of the era, the types of texts they used, or the ideas and perspectives they represented. She suggests newspapers and illustrated books of fiction and poetry as other rich sources of such analysis.

The writers and artists who contributed to each of the publications examined in *Word, Image and the New Negro* utilized an astonishing variety of visual and written texts to express their identity and aspirations. African-American writers had long been on the cutting edge of mixed media, or using images to enhance the impact of their written work, since they had to demonstrate their literary and intellectual abilities in ways never demanded of their white counterparts (12). This level of innovation, “pulling out all the stops,” as it were, in the era of the New Negro Renaissance, was deemed necessary to counter the pervasive and deeply dehumanizing images of African-Americans propagated by mainstream white society, which controlled most media. Sadly, even the most innovative, learned or artistic contributions of African-Americans did no more than put a small dent in the virulent and entrenched racism of white society.

Less suited as a student text, this work’s close analysis of the textual composition of these publications provides teachers (especially those without expertise in graphic arts, or sociology, for example) with the background to more effectively analyze these publications (all of which are available online, from academic libraries, or are still in print) with students. One example discussed is the cognitive dissonance created by *The Crisis*’s juxtaposition of graphic denouncements of lynching with photos of beautiful African-American children. Certainly this juxtaposition draws attention, and students could debate whether this practice would have more effectively motivated readers to act in protest against lynching. Another, less confrontational tactic used in some of these publications is a realistic and less opinionated tone—content dominated by “objective” essays and factual documentation. This more scientific approach may have changed some readers’ thinking, and again, makes an interesting case for students to consider. Of course, the significant attention to the arts and African-American artistic achievement was also a hallmark of these publications and a rich topic for student evaluation. Carroll argues that an accurate assessment of the movement’s significance and transformative power for African-American identity requires study of these visual representations, in addition to the more commonly studied literature and music of the Harlem Renaissance.

There are other important reasons to include texts like *The Crisis, Opportunity,* or *Fire!!* in our study of the New Negro Renaissance. Because these seminal publications were collaborative efforts, they will also provide students with a wide range of opinions regarding how the New Negro ought to have been seen and understood. That there was such a great diversity of perspectives within the African-American community and tremendous debate over how to define identity, yet great unity in the promotion of race pride and consciousness, is a critical concept to understand about the New Negro Movement.

In summary, the textual analysis explored in this book is an essential tool for teachers to use in more effectively studying the New Negro Movement with students. The rich variety of texts used in the publications offer valuable insight into the complex
process of identity redefinition and representation, and the innovative and powerful ways these publications used visual imagery to communicate this identity to their audiences will stimulate and engage today’s students. (Erin Lynch)


*Pan-Africanism For Beginners* is a must read for all those who are interested in world events and furthering their global knowledge. The book examines the conditions that people of African descent have endured since the slave trade. It also acknowledges those who have been instrumental in planting the seeds of Pan-Africanism in the minds of Africans. The book provides a chronological history from the slave trade up to the struggles against apartheid in South Africa.

Pan-Africanism over the years has been misunderstood, and in some instances its definition has been confusing to say the least. However, the author states that Pan-Africanism is essentially “a set of ideas and ideologies containing social and cultural,
political and economic, material and spiritual aspects”(11). Furthermore, he adds that it “includes all people of African ancestry living in continental Africa and throughout the World” (11). In other words, Pan-Africanism seeks to bond people of African descent who have been dispersed around the world either through slavery or migration.

Overall, Pan-Africanism For Beginners is easy reading complemented with pictures and diagrams. It is most appropriate for middle and high school students, and it will surely generate an interest in Africa and wherever its tentacles reach. The book is also equipped with an extensive glossary. (Lenard E. Jackson)


This book was published in 2009. It contains not only precious facts, but pictures and letters of African-Americans in the war. This book begins with an introduction from the author that makes the reader thirsty to begin reading. The author asks several questions in the introduction that she will answer (I must remind you that sometimes there is more than one answer) through detailed facts from soldiers, leaders, and results. Lentz-Smith makes the reader see the war through the eyes of African-Americans. Lentz-Smith begins the book with recruits at Camp Gordon. She takes you through the fighting for equality of African-Americans in the war, the way that equality sometimes led to violence and court martial, and how a Medal of Honor was finally awarded to the only black soldier in World War I. This book contains important leaders of the African-American community who both opposed the war and supported its efforts. The books go on to discuss whether African-Americans should join the war efforts, the efforts of different groups to persuade them to abandon the war, and the triumph of African-Americans in certain battles throughout the war. Also contained in this book are other sources and articles the reader can consult about African-Americans and their relationship to World War I.

From an African-American perspective, I find this book a very useful tool for any grade level, including college. It contains numerous pictures, letters, and opinions from the leaders of the black community such as Du Bois and Washington. This book asks several questions in its introduction and guides the readers to answer those questions. (Antwayn Patrick)


This book provides a historical overview of the persistent phenomenon of segregation in American cities and links it to the significant poverty that still plagues a large segment of the African-American population today. American Apartheid explains how the black ghetto was created in the first part of the twentieth century in order to isolate the growing numbers of African-Americans who were traveling from the Deep South to northern cities in search of better economic opportunities. It also develops a direct connection between these segregated housing patterns and the rising racial tensions that marked the period before, during, and after World War One. At a time when this stress literally exploded into violent riots in cities like East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa, the rise of forced racial segregation was both a cause and an effect of these demographic changes.
As ghetto residents adapted to this new environment under a climate of racial isolation, they developed attitudes, behaviors, and practices that further marginalized their neighborhoods and undermined their chances of success in mainstream American society. This marginalization resulted in conditions in cities like Detroit where the white population resorted to a wide range of options, both legal and illegal, to maintain the segregation and their dominant place in society. Detroit in particular witnessed the rise of the Klan and the threat of mob rule as its black population increased by 611% between 1910 and 1920.

*American Apartheid* provides an excellent background for students in a high school class to better understand the conditions in Detroit that led Ossian Sweet and his brothers to resort to violence in defense of Sweet’s recently acquired home. This shooting, which took place in 1925, led to the death of one man and the injury of another in the all-white crowd that had begun hurling rocks at his house and screaming threats of violence. His subsequent arrest and trial led to one of the most important turning points in the history of racism and housing segregation in the United States. For any teacher who wants to use the trial of the Sweets as a component of any unit that includes the political and racial climate in the 1920s, *American Apartheid* will provide much greater clarity as to why these events occurred. (Joe Regenbogen)

**McRae, Donald. The Last Trials of Clarence Darrow. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.**

This recently published book provides a very readable account of the later years in the life of one of the nation’s most important legal scholars, Clarence Darrow. While it goes into much of the detail expected from a well-crafted historical monograph, this book would still be of much use and interest to an average class of high school students.

The book does not attempt to be a comprehensive biography. With the level of detail provided by McRae, a book of that nature would have to run for thousands of pages. Instead, it focuses on the three cases that Darrow tried towards the end of his career when he was in his mid-sixties. These cases were Leopold and Loeb, the Scopes trial and the Sweets’ case. “After capital punishment and evolution, only festering racial strife of a vast country could galvanize him [Darrow] into a final epic tilt against injustice. His own immortality might just be sealed in the process.”

This book is very readable. It does a nice job of blending together Darrow’s feisty character, his personal life and his courtroom theatrics to tell a compelling story that would appeal to a wide range of readers. More important, McRae provides specific details on the Sweets’ trial. Told in a chronological fashion, roughly one-third of this 400-page book is devoted to the Sweets’ case and includes much of the actual testimony as well as ample description of behind-the-scenes courtroom strategy.

It should be noted that the Sweets’ trial was seen at the time as a symbolic racial battleground. To the NAACP and some of its early leaders, including W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, a victory in this case would not only mark an important benchmark in the drive towards racial equality in housing, but would also represent a victory on behalf of those African-Americans who had followed the precepts of Booker T. Washington in terms of seeking a higher education, working hard and climbing the ranks of American society. It might also help to quell some of the racial tension that had been building as the Great Migration saw thousands of African-Americans from the
South seek higher-paying auto jobs in the Motor City. While it is true that Detroit did not witness deadly race riots on par with those that had recently occurred in East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa, the Detroit Klan had accumulated much political power, and it could be argued that without a victory in a Michigan courtroom, there could be comparable violence in what was then the fourth largest city in the United States.

It is for all of these reasons that the NAACP wanted to send in their biggest legal gun, Clarence Darrow. “The Great Defender’s” involvement not only enhanced the chances for a victory, but also was seen as a major symbolic commitment. Clarence Darrow is arguably the most important trial lawyer of the twentieth century, and he took center stage in the trial of the Sweets. This book does an excellent job of telling his story and describing the role he played in this most important race trial. (Joe Regenbogen)


“Perhaps the most pioneering of all the project’s subsidiary efforts became the black studies, first begun for the state guides and then taken up in their own right.” Monty Penkower, in his study of the WPA’s Federal Writer’s Project, devotes a chapter to these “auxiliary projects.” Originally meant to be part of the five-volume federal guide, with its own separate section entitled “Negro Culture In America,” the information was instead incorporated into the various state primers. Coverage of the state editions lends keen insight to race relations in the United States of the 1930s. Recognition that an entire generation of persons born into slavery was aging quickly and that their stories would soon be lost to antiquity necessitated collection and preservation for the Library of Congress under the American Slave Narratives initiative. Penkower also speaks of efforts unfulfilled such as the “Portrait of the Negro as an American”: “the proposed work would have revealed the black as a participant rather than a separate ‘problem’ in American life.” The endeavor never came to fruition due to Sterling Brown, the editor of the black studies component, and his full-time position at Howard University. Eventually, in 1939, the Federal Writer’s Project ended.

Attempting to foster patriotism and stimulate travel during Depression-era America, the state and national guidebooks had a distinct purpose. The “geographic encyclopedias” were meant to elicit interest and increase revenue, through tourism, to the individual states. When the black studies component was to be included in the national index, a clearer picture of the country’s racial dilemma could have emerged. Instead, when left to the bastions of the 10th Amendment, one may guess the portrait that surfaced.

Silence and omission often accompanied the state copies. There was no mention of black professionals, local ordinances, or living conditions. In states where mention of the African-American population was unavoidable (read the South) the dialogue was as to be expected. In Alabama, blacks and whites were engaged in a “friendly and stimulating rivalry,” and in Georgia, the Negro “cherished only affectionate regard” for his former Southern masters. Other depictions promoted caricature. Kentucky noted that
blacks were “by nature gregarious”; Louisiana used “imitative,” a word synonymous with aping, and in Delaware, the “Negroes whistle melodiously.” Northern portrayals fared no better. For instance, high black mortality rates were blamed on the frigid climate of Ohio. None of this is to say that objections were not made.

Sterling Brown objected to such distortions and voiced his concerns to project head Henry Alsberg. When relaying said concerns to the individual state project directors, Alsberg was met with defense and indignation. Oklahoma viewed any need for revision or inclusion of separate essays as an infringement upon States’ rights. “Dr. Brown has a chip on his shoulder” and white scholars were from the “Yankee School” was the response of a vexed Alabama. In resignation, Alsberg was left saying “I certainly don’t want this to happen again.”

Famed ethnographer John Lomax became the national advisor on folklore to the FWP; it was he who drew up a standard questionnaire for the American Guide Manual “to get the Negro to thinking about the days of slavery.” Discussion ensued as to who should guide the narratives and conduct the interviews. Ben Boykin and Sterling Brown were able to amend the questionnaire to “remove traces of bias and forestall the artistic flourishes reminiscent of [white historians] Thomas Nelson Page and Joel Chandler Harris.” Alas, white interviewers conducted most of the interviews, and respondents would often “tell white journalists what they generally wanted to hear.” Still all was not entirely lost as these narratives, sanitized though they may have been, were preserved in the Library of Congress as testament for future generations.

Black participation in the Federal Writers’ Project was one of mixed success. According to a WPA report generated in 1937, of 4,500 workers, 106 were African-American writers employed primarily in New York City, Illinois, and Louisiana, an under-representation addressed after-the-fact by the former Georgia director: “Looking at the matter from the viewpoint of 1968, I wonder why we did not have the Negro representation on our State staff, but in the 1930s it didn’t seem urgent, if indeed we ever thought of it.” Nevertheless, the FWP did support the likes of Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright. The transition from “Old Negro” to “New Negro” with regard to who controls the narrative makes Penkower’s piece well worth a look.

(Shawn Hornung)


*W.E.B. Du Bois: His Contributions to Pan-Africanism* is not just another book on Du Bois’s life-long achievements. By all means it goes much farther than that. His intellectual expertise helped shape the minds of Pan-Africanist leaders. He is credited with organizing five Pan-African Conferences—1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, and 1945. All of them hold importance; however, the fifth one set the stage for eliminating colonial rule in Africa. Thus, he planted seeds that would eventually blossom in the 1950s, but even more so in the 1960s. We must not, however, single out one conference over another because with each conference the idea of liberation was expanded.

This book will suit those who are concerned with the freedom of African people worldwide. At the same time, *W.E.B. Du Bois: His Contributions to Pan-Africanism* will appeal to anyone who follows the works of Du Bois or who seriously wants to know more about Pan-Africanism and what impact it has had on our society.
There are nine chapters that span the origin of Pan-Africanism up to contemporary times. The author warns that some conservatives may have political differences with the contents. Nevertheless, he is confident that the message that Du Bois delivers is clear and to the point. He also acknowledges that Du Bois’s contributions have been transmitted through his writings in fiction, poetry, sociology, and history.

To utilize this book in the classroom, teachers could provide students with excerpts from each chapter that they would critique and find out what message is being presented. Certainly, this would create discussion, and thus lead to critical thinking. Du Bois’s works have always demanded that the reader become a thinker; *W.E.B. Du Bois: His Contributions to Pan-Africanism* extends the same courtesy. (Lenard E. Jackson)


This book details the history of each historically African-American fraternity and sorority that has been incorporated in the United States. According to the author, this book serves as a guide “to enlighten fraternity and sorority members, prospective members of these organizations, high school students, and all those interested in African American history.” The text was even edited by someone with a vested interest in its success, Kensington Books’ Karen Thomas—a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority.

This book not only covers the founding of each organization, but also highlights present chapters of each one. The most pertinent parts of the book detail the origins and community activism of each organization. These sections show how the fraternities and sororities dedicated their members to service outside of the schools’ walls. Also helpful are the short essays on famous alumni and alumnae of each group. They range from Paul Robeson and Jesse Owens to Marian Anderson and Dorothy Height.

Regarding the role of institutions in forming the New Negro, this book gives some general information that may help someone in starting to think about how a fraternal experience might influence later development of young people during the Renaissance.
Specific examples include Alpha Phi Alpha’s early involvement in education and voter registration, as well as Delta Sigma Theta’s early foray into women’s suffrage and social justice.

For example by 1922, Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity had created a program “which tutored students, provided financial help, and increased the educational level of young African Americans throughout the country.” Their Voting Rights Program mirrored efforts that this country would see in full force over thirty years later. The book distinctly states that participation in these programs would help these young men to develop key leadership skills and that these programs were specifically geared towards the uplift of the black community.

Additionally, the book chronicles the story of the schism between the sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha and its offshoot, Delta Sigma Theta. The latter wanted women to make their mark by becoming more involved in issues affecting the African-American community. Thus, in the 1920s and 1930s, they financially supported both students and organizations, including the NAACP and the ASNLH. They even lobbied the U.S. government on such issues as the Scottsboro case and the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign.

Some questions that the book raises include the following: Which issues did these fraternities and sororities steer their members away from supporting? Were there any projects that they felt—however noble—would not lead to the uplifting of the race? Can the alumni point directly to their service with a fraternity in shaping who they would become? Did students—however talented—receive pressure from their fraternities to steer clear of occupations that did not seemingly work to uplift the race (example: early jazz)? (Petra Riviere)


This book was first printed in 1919. The author, Emmett J. Scott, was the highest-ranking African-American in Woodrow Wilson’s Administration. If you want a book to highlight African-Americans’ accomplishments in World War I, then look no further. This book has it all, pictures, letters (written by everyone from the soldiers themselves to the President of the United States), and even discussions about what caused the war. This book goes into the reasons why African-Americans joined the war. It takes the reader through African-Americans as officers, soldiers, and nurses. One of the book’s most important attributes, besides the pictures and letters, is that it goes into great detail about every achievement of African-Americans during the war.

Purely from an historian’s perspective, this book gives the reader a false sense that blacks suffered very little discrimination during the war. It never goes into detail, unlike other books discussing this era, about discrimination or acts done by whites to prevent blacks from serving in the war. This book is extremely positive, however misleading. Nevertheless, I recommend the book because it has pictures, letters, and other testimony and documents that highlight black contributions to the war. (Antwayn Patrick)

This book is one volume in a series devoted to examining the historical circumstances and artistic achievements of literary women. This particular volume examines the experiences, contributions, and unique challenges of African-American women who strove to contribute to the redefinition of racial identity that was the New Negro Movement. The most prominent essays and debates among the African-American intelligentsia, despite the active presence of many talented and vocal women artists and writers, cast the New Negro in a decidedly masculine light. Educated and aspiring New Negro female writers struggled both against the stereotypical images of African-American women in the eyes of white society, and against the restrictions placed upon women within their own society: they battled both racism and sexism. Male writers of the Harlem Renaissance often expressed optimism, determination, autonomy, and a sense of change while female writers often conveyed feelings of isolation, entrapment, dependency, and stagnation. Men chafed too at racism and expectations of the “Old Guard,” but, as seen in their writing, women felt even more acutely the pains of race, gender and class inequality, and prejudice.

The chapter noted in the citation above (Chapter 1, “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored”) gives voice to the female New Negro as it examines ideas and experiences of women writers and contrasts them with those of their male contemporaries. Marita Bonner published an essay, “On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored,” the same year that Alain Locke published The New Negro (1925). The tone set in each is strikingly different. The author suggests that the racial stereotypes (i.e., the Old Negro) that Locke rejects in his essay still seem to restrain and thwart the development of women of the era, even educated, middle- and upper-class women. Male writers were seemingly vaulting ahead in their development and innovation, while female writers remained trapped by gender conventions (despite the groundbreaking passage of the 19th Amendment) and defined by racial stereotypes. Further, women writers like Bonner felt both guilt at their success and entrapped by the expectations and customs of the “gilded cage of the middle class” (Wall, 7).

Male writers like Langston Hughes often made an end run around stifling middle-class pretensions (though not without criticism) by evoking the South, the “primitive,” jazz and the blues, and the experiences of common folk in their work. Women writers were largely denied such freedom of thought and expression since they were doubly hampered by the constraints of socially acceptable race identity and an outdated and
impossible feminine ideal. They struggled both to disprove hateful racial stereotypes ascribed to black females and to adhere to a highly conservative vision of female propriety demanded by the elites and elders. Women poets and writers were caught between and fighting against both of these identities. Despite this, the author uses excerpts from their work to show how Bonner, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Elise Johnson McDougal, Anne Spencer and Gwendolyn Bennett still managed to discuss race, criticize prejudice, and question gender constrictions in a subtle, muted or covert fashion.

Zora Neale Hurston most notably challenged and freed herself from this convention, and was significantly criticized for her honest portrayals of black female lives. Wall continues by discussing the few other women of the Harlem Renaissance who were actually free to express themselves and all manner of taboo subjects because they spoke through their own, not an adopted, art form which connected many African-Americans to their Southern roots. Of course, these were the blues singers like Bessie Smith, singing the hopes, fears and lives of the common African-American woman.

This chapter provides an accessible and illuminating analysis of the important but often overlooked role that gender played in the redefinition of African-American identity and the uniquely daunting situation women found themselves in as they battled both racial and gender prejudice. In each point of comparison, the author describes both fundamental agreement, and striking differences in tone and understanding between the male and female literati. Excerpted works of many of the female literary lights of the era powerfully articulate the uniquely feminine themes at the core of their work. This essay offers the reader a more accurate and fuller understanding of the New Negro Renaissance through the brief examination of the writing of some of its leading women, many of whom were largely forgotten until recently. As with all of human history, one cannot truly understand or appreciate the New Negro Renaissance without listening carefully to both male and female voices. (Erin Lynch)


This book is an “historical monograph” and thus very narrow in its focus. It is geared towards an audience interested in garnering more information about the transformation of various types of historically black colleges and universities (HBCU’s).

According to the author, this text contains examples of rebellion from each of the various kinds of HBCU’s, including “Fisk…the leading liberal arts college…Howard, the only black multiversity….Tuskegee and Hampton…the nation’s most prominent industrial institutes….Florida A. & M. and Lincoln (Mo.)…state-supported land-grant colleges….Wilberforce…managed by a Negro church, and Lincoln (Pa.)…controlled by a white church board.” Additionally, the author notes that each rebellion was provoked either by students or by alumni and administration.

Regarding institution building, this book provides a good example of how alumni, administration and students sought—as W.E.B. Du Bois states—to encourage the idea of the New Negro on campus. In the case of Fisk, Du Bois gears his words towards President Fayette Avery McKenzie. Although he had helped raise a staggering
$1,000,000 towards an endowment, McKenzie insisted on keeping the Victorian traditions that sent Fisk socially back to the nineteenth century.

After months of hearing his daughter Yolande’s complaints about school trustees encouraging the institution to educate “blacks to build and lead ‘a separate Negro society,’” Du Bois used the occasion of her 1924 graduation to assure the school’s leadership that “black students of the 1920s had come of age.” No longer should they “tolerate the sort of petty dictation [of their lives] that seemed natural when Fisk began and when the Negro was obviously in tutelage; the students of the 1920s were free men, not freedmen.” At that time, Fisk students had few outlets—publications or clubs—where they could express themselves. Because of his respected reputation, Du Bois was able to organize conferences that enabled students and staff to voice disapproval of McKenzie’s administration.

Despite the support of alumni such as Du Bois, as well as local black businesses, the text makes clear that the students initiated the subsequent demonstrations and strikes on campus. Wolters even notes that students were “annoyed” upon hearing that Du Bois was to blame for their disillusionment with the school. One student leader, George Streator, even mentioned that he and others had been organizing against McKenzie since 1922—two years before Du Bois’s incendiary comments. Streator would later go on to work for the NAACP’s The Crisis magazine, no doubt influenced by his experiences at Fisk.

These stories raise various questions, including the following: The text notes some students were given permission to transfer schools as a result of involvement in the protests. Were they welcomed at new institutions? Were other institutions worried that uprisings might happen on their campuses? Across town, students writing for Vanderbilt University’s paper voiced the validity of rights that students at Fisk sought. How supportive were students at black and/ or white colleges of the protests at Fisk? Lastly, how can a place of education balance pleasing financial supporters with uplifting students? (Petra Riviere)


Compiled by the Illinois Federal Writer’s Project of the New Deal’s Work Projects Administration and edited by Arna Bontemps, Cavalcade of the American Negro was produced to accompany the Diamond Jubilee Exposition celebrating 75 years of African-American freedom and accomplishment. Held in Chicago from July 4 to September 2, 1940, the exposition offered exposition-goers the first opportunity to
experience the art of the Illinois Art Project’s Adrian Troy, which graced the program’s cover.

“And now ye are cursed, and ye shall never cease to be bondmen, and hewers of wood, and drawers of water for the house of my God.” Often quoted, this passage from the Old Testament Book of Joshua was used as justification for the blight that was slavery. The passage was trafficked and interpreted for a truly captive audience; how perfectly fitting, then, that the artwork of Adrian Troy comes in the medium of wood-cut with a tree as the dominant image presented to the observer. On the diamond anniversary of emancipation, Adrian Troy is, in effect, carving out a new identity for American blacks.

When we view the cover for the first time, our eyes are drawn to the tree that dominates the entire left hand side of the print. Atop the tree is an image of a vessel at sea, and although this ship is no slaver, we see juxtaposed the remnants of a noose or chain just below and before we see men coming ashore. The men disembarking are explorers of African descent shown climbing bravely out onto a branch. Arna Bontemps chooses to begin the first chapter of Cavalcade of the American Negro, entitled “Toward Freedom,” by dispelling the notion that the first blacks came to the Americas in chains, rather speaking to the role of blacks in the beginnings of the Atlantic World—as active participants. As such, the explorers pictured, Bontemps tells the reader, are Alonzo Pietro the “Negro captain” of Columbus’ Nina as well as Nuffo de Alamo, who accompanied Vasco Nunez de Balboa. Troy extends the branch through the window of a town hall, the symbol of democratic process. Crispus Attucks, a black man, is pictured next, shot at the hands of a British redcoat—the first to die in the War for Independence. In clockwise fashion, African-American military contributions are evidenced. Emerging from the bottom right-hand corner is a black family—father, mother, and child—with the parents each carrying an ax, joining a man chopping down the tree depicted to the left. As stated, the only allusion to slavery—the singular narrative used to describe the African-American experience as promoted by the white hegemony—is the rope or chain looped over the branch. Adrian Troy places the ax in the hands of the “hewer of wood” and has him chop down the prescribed definition; he has agency and re-defines himself “New Negro.”

Art complements the written word as the inset woodcut mirrors the content of the primer. The preeminence of education and the prominence of the church are given serious attention. Likewise, chapters are devoted to accomplishment in several fields—music, literature and art, theater, and business. Contributions of the working class and those skilled in the trades get their own section entitled “Workers.” All of these topics are attended to artfully by Troy. The Cavalcade of the American Negro truly is a procession of achievements that runs through a greater context, no longer confined to the constraints of the “house of my God” but seated at the table of our collective God, perhaps a God, with a nod to Marcus Garvey, recast in a different hue. (Shawn Hornung)
Children’s Books:


This children’s book depicts a great day in the life of young Hezekiah Horton, resident of Harlem. Tarry, a noted African-American author of children’s picture books (among other works), also wrote *Janie Belle* (1940), *My Dog Rinty* (1946) and *The Runaway Elephant* (1950). Born and raised in the South, Tarry moved to New York City in 1929 where she entered the circle of writers and activists of the Harlem Renaissance. As noted in Katharine Capshaw Smith’s interview of Tarry, she wrote stories for children that emphasized the “here and now,” rather than fairy tales or fantasy stories. Children’s literature was a much-debated topic among the literati of the Harlem Renaissance, viewed by many as an essential avenue for teaching New Negro ideals of race pride and racial uplift to the next generation of African-Americans (Smith).

Readers are introduced to Hezekiah Horton, a young boy who loved automobiles so much that his mother wondered if he was “right in the head” because he spent so much time wistfully thinking of them, imagining the day when he could get a job and begin saving money to buy one. The story tells of the greatest day in Hezekiah’s life and gives, in Tarry’s description, “a glimpse of a most glorious future.” Hezekiah can be seen as Ellen Tarry’s version of the New Negro, enjoying a contented, stable, middle-class life in the present, and dedicated to striving, through hard work, for an even more successful tomorrow.

The book is an ideal representation of the New Negro to share with students since it is aimed at a young audience and the images of African-Americans and their daily lives are void of the blatant stereotyping and racism inherent in the mainstream (white) portrayal of African Americans of this era. Hezekiah is an adorable, well-dressed little boy who sports a cap, a jacket and tie, and a child’s short pants. In Hezekiah’s neighborhood live successful independent African-American adults like Mr. Gaffney, who owns and operates a garage across the street. Hezekiah’s mother expects him to do his homework rather than sitting and dreaming of automobiles. His interactions with whites are friendly and free of overt racism, though for readers today, there remain less than subtle reminders of the era’s racial and social divisions. The blond (apparently wealthy) man who finds the young boy closely admiring his car is happy to talk with Hezekiah and demonstrate all the car’s bells and whistles. That the man who owns this dream machine is white fits the race and class realities of the day, and yet, a significant number of African-American men in Harlem and elsewhere in the country owned automobiles as well. As Hezekiah is allowed to sit in the driver’s seat and work all the buttons and knobs, a group of classmates appear, also transfixed by the shiny car and crowding to see it up close. Invited into the car as well, they jostle for space, creating a scene. “By now people were leaning out of their windows, and traffic jammed as the motorists stopped—the better to see this shiny red automobile full of giggling, wriggling colored boys, with a tall blond man in the driver’s seat” (Tarry 29). Tarry’s choice in making the car’s owner a white man may simply reflect the economic realities of the day, or she may have wanted to write a story in which race is no deterrent to friendly interaction. Still, from today’s vantage point, this seems to reinforce rather than question or transcend the era’s racial and class distinctions. One might wish that the kind car
owner had also been African-American, though for Tarry’s audience, perhaps the story as she wrote it was still quite optimistic and hopeful.

Hezekiah’s dreams of car ownership seem both “normal” and surprising. Normal, in that there is nothing suggested as unrealistic or improper about a young African-American aspiring to own a car. Yet the author suggests that some of the passing motorists (presumably the white ones) whose cars Hezekiah is admiring, would be surprised to know that the dreamy-eyed boy on the stoop is not sitting there empty-headed, but is planning his brighter future (in New Negro parlance—racial uplift) and the route he will take to it—a good job, hard work, saving his money, and finally, the automobile purchase he’d dreamed of.

In a classroom today, this book could make a powerful counterpoint to the distorted and stereotypical images that era presented of young African-Americans in literature, advertising, film and every other mainstream media. It also provides a fascinating and subtle entry into African-American messages to the next generation, of cautionary hope, racial uplift and acknowledgement of racial and socioeconomic divisions that were so pervasive that even this hopeful rendition can’t be so audacious as to envision a world without them.

While Hezekiah Horton’s portrayal of African-American life, values and aspirations is positive and fits neatly into the general ethos of the New Negro, it is, however, interesting to note the subtle class and race distinctions that enter the story midway and lead to a less than satisfying ending for modern readers. Sensing Hezekiah’s fascination with his automobile, the white man, now known as Mr. Ed, promises to assist Hezekiah in achieving his goal. Thanks to his benefactor, Hezekiah can now look forward with certainty to a bright future in which he will have a job and learn to drive a car—so that he may serve as driver for the kindly Mr. Ed, whose beautiful red car so transfixed Hezekiah. It is a subtle reworking of the young Hezekiah’s dream—rather than a professional job which will allow him to independently purchase his own car, Hezekiah will get a job, and he will learn to drive, but it will be in service to the white man who has taken him under his wing. Kate Capshaw Smith’s interview with Ellen Tarry reveals that this story is loosely based upon actual interaction between a white man and African-American boys in a Chicago neighborhood and also reflects the many positive and affectionate interracial relationships Ellen Tarry herself enjoyed (Smith). So, while not the ending anticipated by modern readers, this engaging story would have been both hopeful and encouraging for young African-Americans yet still reflecting the social, political and economic realities of the time. Hezekiah can aim higher than his parents, but there is still a limit to his dreams. (Erin Lynch)

Dissertations:


Documentary Films:


Against the Odds was created in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at the Newark Museum of Art featuring African-American artists who had been supported and recognized with awards by the Harmon Foundation in the 1920s and 1930s. The film examines this complex and controversial artistic explosion—a veritable “cottage industry” that develops from the confluence of African-American artistic talent, liberal white patronage, and a concerted political strategy of racial uplift and cultural redefinition led by African-American intelligentsia. This is another important piece of the story of the New Negro Renaissance in which, just as for literature and music, divergent beliefs about the subject, meaning and purpose of painting and sculpture collided. Most of these painters and sculptors sought artistic freedom and critical success, and some also wanted to use their talent to serve their race. Wealthy, primarily white patrons practiced benevolent censorship as they sought to influence the style, tone and subjects of the art, as well as to assist the artists in achieving recognition and economic viability. And African-American social and political elites believed the best and brightest African-American talent would sway white opinion about the race with their sophistication, skill, and appropriate depictions of African-American life and culture. Clearly, this mix of motives and complex power relationships was a recipe for conflict. The legacy of this fascinating artistic campaign is bittersweet and still debated. Some artists achieved lasting acclaim, while the majority, whether truly gifted or merely competent, faded into obscurity, poverty and disillusionment.

The documentary provides a clear, compelling and well-paced account, very well suited for a high school classroom. It uses an effective blend of historian and curator comments, archival film footage of the artists and the exhibitions, modern interviews with some of the now elderly artists, and examples of many remaining art pieces to bring this intriguing era to life. The film also clearly grounds these artists’ stories in the context of the New Negro Renaissance by first laying the scene with historical events like the Great Migration, WWI, 1919 race riots and the NAACP’s campaign to redefine African-American identity. Additional context is provided with examples of the pervasive, racist stereotypes (seen in advertising, popular minstrel characters and films like Birth of a Nation, etc.) and the dismal educational and professional opportunities available to even the most talented African-Americans. The film also introduces the viewer to a variety of important figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, William Harmon and of course many artists, and their complex and sometimes conflicting motivations. Several intriguing philosophical issues are also discussed, for example, the appropriate source of inspiration for these New Negro artists—should it be Africa? European artistic traditions? Uniquely African-American heritage and experiences? Each was weighted with social and political implications, and the artists often felt trapped in the midst of this un-winnable debate. Thus, from the beginning, the viewer understands the very high stakes for these artists and activists as well as the obstacles they faced and intended to overcome through their art.
As the film and the era end, there is both lasting critical acclaim for some artists and for others, tragic loss of life and art. The historians and art experts opine about the legacy of this artistic movement and re-evaluate some of the criticism—i.e., patronizing racism—that has been leveled at the Harmon Foundation. It remains a fascinating story and unresolved debate. There is much room for discussion among students about the lasting impact, the nature and purpose of art, the use of art to combat racism, and the many connections that can be made to art, racial identity and patronage today. (Erin Lynch)


Many would consider W.E.B. Du Bois one of the greatest scholars that the world has produced. He is well known as a writer, historian, sociologist, critical thinker, and Pan-Africanist. This documentary film on his life is short but informative. It begins with his early life as a child, and moves on to his undergraduate days at Fisk University where his political activism came of age. He then attended Harvard and gained a second BA, MA, and PhD.

Du Bois’s studies prepared him for struggle. He read extensively and kept himself politically active. He placed great effort in striving for excellence. However, oftentimes, his methods were misunderstood. To his misfortune, he seemed to stay in controversy with other leaders of his time. Nonetheless, he continued on his path.

He was co-founder of the NAACP, where he served as editor of *The Crisis Magazine*. He is recognized as the father of Pan-Africanism. His association with Pan-Africanism led him to become a world leader. Du Bois is credited with organizing five Pan-African Conferences, in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, and 1945. In his later years, he became a Communist, a decision that placed him under surveillance by government authorities and resulted in his castigation by the media. Communists in America have always had a rough time; there was no exception in this case. Sadly, Du Bois died on August 27, 1963, the same day as the march on Washington. He was unable to witness the “I Have a Dream” speech by Martin Luther King, Jr.

This video is 30 minutes of chronological data on the life of Du Bois. It includes the major organizations of which he was a member. A sure plus is that it is short enough to show within a class period and have discussion. Students should take note of Du Bois’s strive for excellence. Here “the talented-tenth” is open for discussion. Classroom debates are also good to perk up interest and stimulate thinking. (Lenard E. Jackson)


*Marcus Garvey: A Giant of Black Politics* is a documentary about the personal and political impact that Garvey had on society. The film shares views of his friends and historians who have researched his movement. It opens showing youth entering a school
building. After everyone is seated, a gentleman—a Rastafarian to be exact—begins lecturing them on the history of Jamaica and the role of Marcus Garvey. While he is speaking, pictures and illustrations are being shown of the horrible aspects of slavery. The children are attentive. Meantime, in the background the Mystic Revelation band plays a tune dedicated to Marcus Garvey.

From there the scene shifts to an interview with a close friend of Garvey and a member of the UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), Vivian Durham. Durham explains Garvey’s efforts to convince mulattos that his program was for the betterment of all. This is important because Jamaica suffers from color distinctions, that is, the lighter ones are allowed more privileges. The bulk of this policy stems from British colonization. Garvey, says Durham, being very dark, was not accepted by this group.

Rupert Lewis, Garvey historian, says that color was indeed an issue. However, he says, blacks’ fear of reprisals by whites for associating with Garvey’s Pan-African teachings stood out even more. Colonial powers did not care to see African people uniting, says Lewis. Furthermore, historian David Garrow says that Garvey’s movement was gaining worldwide attention. It caught the eye of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. They had, according to Garrow, numerous informers inside and outside the UNIA. Eventually, he says that they had to find something, so they charged Garvey with mail fraud though the evidence was weak.

This film is interesting in that it covers the experiences of young Garvey as a child when he is exposed to racism. He is also a victim of “color” classification. Nevertheless, he continues to organize his people. Marcus Garvey: A Giant of Black Politics presents Garvey as a man on a mission to rescue the souls of his people. His dedication is sincere. The film runs about sixty minutes, and it will be extremely useful in the classroom. Students will get plenty of visuals that are bound to stimulate discussion. (Lenard E. Jackson)


This film was released in 1977 and revised and re-released in 1995. This 60-minute documentary brings to life the true heroism of the first established African-American combat unit. This film offers visuals such as pictures and facts, but far more important, actual statements from African-Americans who fought in World War I. The film pays tribute to the 369th Infantry Regiment, well known as the Hellfighters. This documentary takes the viewer from the beginning of the formation of the Hellfighters, through the racism in the unit, and through countless battles in the war (this unit fought longer on the frontline of the war than any other unit). What makes the film so appealing is that it takes accounts from actual Hellfighters. As a reader it is always good to read about the past, but to actually watch it and hear from it is priceless.

From the perspective of an African-American and a teacher of World History, I thought that this film was very provocative. It will give students a sense of history about a war that was deemed by many as a “White Man’s War.” Students of all ages can enjoy this film both from a historical standpoint, but also, if your students are similar to mine,
from pure enjoyment. This film is a “must view” for any teacher who wishes to teach about and know more about African-Americans’ involvement in World War I. (Antwayn Patrick)


During a cold January in 1939, more than 140 sharecropping families from Southeast Missouri packed up their meager belongings and set up camp along the roadside of Highway 61 in protest. *Oh Freedom After While* is a documentary film that tells the story of the sharecroppers as they struggled to survive in Southeast Missouri during the Great Depression. More specifically, the film focuses on the efforts of Owen Whitfield, a poor, African-American sharecropping preacher, who, with the help of a white plantation owner, organized the protest. Before the story was finished, Whitfield had meetings with the Missouri Governor (Lloyd Stark) and the President of the United States. He evaded those who threatened his life, and with the help of several students from Lincoln University (under the leadership of Lorenzo Greene) Whitfield purchased over 90 acres and formed a farming cooperative for displaced sharecroppers (Cropperville, MO). The federal government later followed suit.

Farmers in Southeast Missouri faced one tragedy after another during the 1920s and 1930s. Heavy rains occurred in the north in 1927 and 1928. The Great Flood destroyed many farms in Southeast Missouri. In addition, a boll weevil infestation in the southern cotton fields led many African-American farmers to move north. Large and small landowners took advantage of the labor influx and took many on as sharecroppers and tenant farmers.

Because of mechanization, cotton prices were plummeting. In order to help keep the prices at a reasonable level, Franklin Roosevelt’s administration began to write checks to farmers if they would plow under 1/3 of their cotton crops. According to the film, the administration intended farmers to share at least ¼ of the subsidy with the tenants. Of course, that did not happen. Instead, they kept the checks and evicted the tenants. The only remedy for the tenants was an appeal to the local community that was led and controlled by the planters. In January 1939, 142 families packed up their belongings and set up camp along the roadside. There was no way for residents of the region to ignore the plight of tenant farmers any longer. Governor Lloyd C. Stark had the protestors removed as a violation of health laws. Many of the planters threatened Whitfield’s motive and leadership. They accused him of outside influence. Eventually, Whitfield had a meeting with Stark and Roosevelt in Washington D.C., but it was the visit by Lorenzo Greene that truly helped the protest to succeed. Greene, with the support of several student organizations, helped provide supplies to the evicted farmers and ultimately helped Whitfield purchase enough acreage in Southeast Missouri to form a town. The federal government then created additional communities for others.

As a documentary film, *Oh Freedom After While* serves a wide audience. The lay community, students and scholars alike should easily understand and enjoy the film. Through archival videos, photos, newspapers, modern images and interviews, the director is able to intersperse a wide variety of material within a historical narrative that keeps the viewer awaiting the ending.
Although the New Negro Renaissance has traditionally been viewed as an urban movement, for those in rural areas of the country it tends to beg the question: What did the New Negro Renaissance mean for rural African-Americans? Although the sharecropper revolt occurred at the tail end of the time frame that is traditionally referred to as The New Negro Renaissance, it should be noted that national trends are frequently delayed in rural areas. Interestingly, this film demonstrates that some people in rural areas were also actively fighting the system that was entrenched in Missouri. With the help of people from St. Louis and Lincoln University, Whitfield was able to make a difference. This success tends to support the idea of the New Negro Renaissance as a movement that was led by a growing middle class. One of the most fascinating aspects of the sharecropper revolt was the fact that Owen Whitfield organized the revolt from the pulpit. This fact seems to run counter to what Carter G. Woodson suggested about the church as an arm of the dominant white society. Instead, Whitfield was organizing the congregation to fight class oppression.

Fiction:


Film:


As part of Michigan’s sesquicentennial celebration in 1987, professor Arthur Beer wrote the play *Malice Aforethought: The Sweet Trials.* The courtroom usually makes for compelling drama, and in this case, the 1925 trial of the Sweets, an African-American couple who were tried for murder, provided the foundation for a fascinating stage production.

Ossian Sweet, a physician, had recently purchased a house in an all-white neighborhood in Detroit just as the Klan had won an overwhelming victory in the local elections. This was during a decade that was rife with racial tension. Higher paying jobs had lured thousands of African-Americans from the Deep South to northern cities like Detroit, but this influx created a rise in racial prejudice that had already exploded into riots in several cities, including East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa. Expecting problems, Doctor Sweet moved into his new home accompanied by two of his brothers and a few friends. They were all well armed.

On the second evening after the move, crowds of white neighbors gathered outside their home. After rocks were thrown and threats of violence were screamed, shots were fired from the second floor of the Sweets’ home. One person in the crowd was hit in
the leg and another was killed. Police then entered the Sweets’ home, and all of the residents were placed under arrest.

Sensing the importance of the upcoming trial, the NAACP raised $50,000 to legally support the Sweets. They retained the services of Clarence Darrow, who at the time was considered the best attorney in the nation. The significance of this event is not just the fact that this was Clarence Darrow's last important trial or that an African American family was acquitted of murder by an all-white judge and jury. For the first time, justice prevailed over bigotry in an American courtroom.

*Malice Aforethought: The Sweet Trials* is a play that recreates all of the drama connected to this historical event. Students in a high school classroom can use this play and its accompanying educational materials to deepen their understanding of the racial climate of the 1920s. (Joe Regenbogen)


This film is directed towards a general audience. Its December 2007 release not only allowed it to reach a large holiday audience, but also that year’s Academy Award nominations. The DVD cover features a quote from famed film critic Roger Ebert, who lends credibility to the performances of a cast as full of award-winners as unknowns. The storytelling itself allows one to understand and enjoy the film with very little background knowledge of the events. For example, the change of the 1935 championship location to Harvard would prove more dramatic than the reality of USC.

The DVD includes a special feature entitled “The Great Debaters: An Historical Perspective,” in which former Wiley College students recall their time on the debate team with their coach, Professor Melvin Tolson. The film’s creators acknowledge other changes made for dramatic effect: Henry Lowe is based on student Henry Heights, while Samantha Booke is primarily based on Henrietta Bell Wells.

In regards to institution building, the DVD features Wiley College as an establishment helping to foster the creation of the New Negro. The well-trained faculty includes Boston University graduate James Farmer, Sr. With their choice of employment limited, the faculty’s full focus becomes the success of this younger generation. In the movie, Tolson declares that faculty members “are here to help… [students] to find, take back, and keep… [their] righteous mind.” Their primary aim is to help students—as Robert Eisele notes—to become “the kind of human beings that could alter the course of American history.” Ms. Wells notes that the faculty wanted “students to be good representatives of their race.”

Additionally, the film portrays Wiley’s faculty taking a personal interest in students. Tolson shows particular concern for Henry Lowe, a talented student who has passed through Wiley’s doors over the years. In the film, Tolson rescues Lowe from self-destructive behavior and even entrusts him with helming the team at Harvard. His efforts echo the New Negro Movement’s hopes of forging a new generation of leaders from the well educated.

Despite Tolson’s efforts to help Lowe, the real Henry Heights has disappeared from records after Wiley College. This raises the question of how many people these colleges were indeed able to help. One sees that Lowe lives a very simple life, having
missed years of school. Perhaps this simple life is due to poverty, or there is an allusion to some time in prison. This begs the question of how much financial help small Wiley could give even to its brightest students. While the school was willing to support enthusiastically those who could pay, what of those who could not afford the tuition? Even Ms. Wells was placed precariously at Wiley with a meager $50 scholarship from her local YWCA. Would it not fit the mission of creating a New Negro Movement for a school to be able to raise funds for the poorest of their bright students? Did Henry Heights disappear because he had lost hope of becoming part of that talented elite that the New Negro Movement so craved? (Petra Riviere)


**Music Recordings:**


Lomax, Alan, Woody Guthrie, and Pete Seeger. *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-Hit People.* (American Folk Songs of the Depression and the Labor Movement of the 1930s). Musical Score. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. This book was first published in 1967, and according to the back cover, was “twenty-seven years in the making.” The team of Lomax, Guthrie, and Seeger collected almost two hundred protest songs and poems. Although many of the songs are fitting for a discussion of the New Deal, chapter XI (“The Farmers Get Together”) specifically deals with the plight of sharecropping on the Mississippi River in Arkansas and Missouri.

As could be expected with a group of songs meant to draw attention to the terrible conditions faced by sharecroppers, this is not a group of songs meant to bring people out to a dance floor. The songs discuss sharecroppers who have been kicked, beaten, cursed, evicted and starved. Although most of the lyrics do not bring a smile to your face, many end in a rather optimistic fashion. For instance, “There is Mean Things Happening In This Land” ends by promising that:

There’ll be GOOD THINGS happening
In this land,
When the workers take a stand and
Unite in a solid band…

“Ten Little Farmer Men” tells the story of falling one by one to the tribulations of farming. That is, until the last stanza that boldly claims that:

United, one by one their foes they subdue;
What Union did for them it can do
For you

Probably the most recognized of the passages is a poem titled “The Planter and the Sharecropper” that was written by John Handcox, who was about 25 years old when he
wrote the poem in 1935. Handcox’s form is a little “sing-songy,” but complex poetry was not necessary. Through the harsh, biting lyrics, Handcox became the voice of the farmer and, according to Pete Seeger, Handcox was one of the most important songwriters of the twentieth century.

The songs demonstrate the importance of unions for the southern farmers. Conversely, it is also important to understand the importance of the southern farmer in the desire of the union to expand. The inherent inequities facing the sharecroppers were deplorable and were easily recognized by African-Americans and whites alike. (Joseph Hunter)


Poetry:


Web Sites:


Henry Alsberg, Director of the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Writer’s Project, issued a memorandum to the directors of the satellite state projects with “suggestions,” both general and specific, about how best to gather and record the biographies of those who had been born into slavery. This primary document provides key insight into the nature of the endeavor as to its guidance and allows readers to discern inherent shortcomings of the project’s overall construction. Limitations aside, the collection of narratives gave voice to a people who actively shaped their own destinies and the destiny of the United States as well.

“The African American Experience,” is a module in The American Mosaic, a collection of digital resources hosted by Greenwood Electronic Media. Providing social history, lesson plans, and primary documents, the site has noble aims: “The two primary goals: to provide rock-solid information from authorities in the field, and to allow African-Americans to speak for themselves through a wealth of primary sources.”
Allowing African-Americans to speak for themselves was the aspiration of the FWP American Slave Narratives, and this Web site facilitates a greater understanding of this ambition.

Greater presence in the national dialogue is deemed important by the very nature of this undertaking; further, “more emphasis should be laid on questions concerning the lives of the individuals since they were freed.” Encouraging in the fact that respondents are not limited to a definition couched solely in captivity, the memorandum can also be read in a less-than-forthright fashion. Evident in the dispatch are some of the common trappings of prior scholarship, one of which is the recasting or downplaying of events that are particularly damning. By shifting the focus to post-1865, some of the damage could be averted. Regardless of intent, initial attempts at inclusion are open to suspicion due to precedent.

Another pitfall is the tendency toward stereotype. General topics, complete with questions meant to elicit feedback, are found in the memorandum. The inquiries bear witness to overgeneralization. Question 13 asks individuals to “Tell about the ghosts you have seen.” Framed in a discussion of folklore, the question suggests the caricature of a primitive guided by superstition. Likewise the construction of question 19 is prone to typecast: “Tell why you joined a church and why you think all people should be religious.” The ascendancy of the black church is well documented, but as evidenced, assumptions abound in this query.

Finally, loss of distinct, locale-bound culture is a foregone conclusion due to the homogenization of language. Audience takes priority over author. “Simplicity in recording the dialect is to be desired in order to hold the interest and attention of the readers. It seems to me that readers are repelled by pages sprinkled with misspellings, commas, and apostrophes.” Manifest, therein, is a tidy voyeurism provided the reader without the difficulties of navigating narratives steeped in the oral tradition; the biography is secondary. If recorded for posterity, two transcripts should exist—one recorded phonetically, as spoken, and another “sanitized” for purpose of translation. Alsberg notes the many pronunciations for the same word and comes down on the side of homogeneity. “I believe that there should be, for this book, a uniform word for each of these [questionable words and phrases].” States from Texas to Maryland; Florida to Missouri, were engaged in these recordings. Changing regional dialect is cultural misappropriation denying regional distinctiveness.

Studying the accounts of ex-slaves—the “Old Negro”—may, at first glimpse, appear antithetical to the concerns of the “New Negro.” However, it becomes pertinent when investigating the romanticizing and misapplication of the past, control of narrative, and the professionalization of black history—all of which makes Alsberg’s memo an enlightening source. (Shawn Hornung)


This is a picture of the first Pan-African Conference held in Paris, France. W.E.B. Du Bois is shown right in the center of the photograph, surrounded by dignitaries from various countries who attended the event. To Du Bois’s pleasure, he is the chief organizer of the conference. His position is Secretary. His investigation of racist treatment toward black troops in France has gained international exposure.

This is the conference where “Pan-Africa” was defined. There were some 30 delegates in attendance, mostly from England and the Caribbean. This particular conference did not necessarily focus on Africa. Overall, the conference, though limited in numbers, was considered a success.

This photo can be used in a classroom to create brainstorming strategies. Students will display their thinking skills to see what is going on—see if they can identify anyone in the photo. (Lenard E. Jackson)


Library of Congress. [http://www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)

This Web site, Library of Congress, is the absolute best place to go to find information on African-Americans and World War I. If you want pictures, letters from soldiers, or books about this subject, this is the first place I will go. On this site, I have located thousands of pictures of African-American soldiers during the war. Additionally, I have located books, which you can check out, that are not found anywhere but this Web site. This site gives a detailed account of the treatment of blacks from a variety of perspectives. It has congressional and presidential letters and statements that pertain to African-Americans.

From an historical perspective, this site is wonderful. The only drawback is it may be too much information to comb through. However, as a teacher, I would rather have too much information than not enough. If you are doing research on African-Americans and World War I, or would like any historical information, I would start at this site. (Antwayn Patrick)


This website has everything that a teacher might want in a class that is using the trial of the Sweets to deepen students’ understanding of the racial climate during the Harlem Renaissance. In fact, the site is a terrific resource for any teacher who is looking for material concerning most of the significant trials that have occurred in history. This Web site includes comprehensive information for over sixty trials of individuals from Socrates and Galileo to William Calley and O.J. Simpson.

The trial of Ossian Sweet brought to the surface the juxtaposition of several developments that dominated the 1920s. For much of the country, this was a decade of fantastic industrial growth, the rise of modernism and a return to conservative politics. For African-Americans, these years witnessed the migration of millions of blacks from the sharecropping fields of the deep South to northern cities like Detroit in search of higher-paying jobs in the automobile plants and defense industries that thrived during World War I. On the positive side, African-Americans would witness a plethora of cultural achievements during this period in literature, music, theater, film and even sports. On the negative side, the sudden surge of African-Americans into northern cities would lead to a rise in racism, a dramatic resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan and the explosion of race riots in cities like East St. Louis, Chicago and Tulsa.

This was the climate in which an African-American named Ossian Sweet bought a house in an all-white neighborhood of Detroit for his wife and infant daughter. Expecting trouble, he invited two of his brothers and some friends to spend the first couple of nights with him in his new home. He also made it a point to be sure they were armed. On the night of September 9, 1925, a crowd of several hundred whites gathered on the street in front of the Sweets’ house. After the mob threw rocks and began to scream racist threats, shots were fired from the upstairs. In the crowd, one man was shot in the leg and another was killed. The police then managed to place the eleven residents of the house under arrest.

Understanding the significance of the case in battling housing segregation, the NAACP stepped in and hired America’s foremost trial attorney, Clarence Darrow, to represent the Sweets. The trial then went on to become one of the most significant legal battles during this period. It can serve as an excellent vehicle for any class studying the racial dynamics of the first half of the twentieth century.

Teachers who want their students to fully understand the trial would find this Web site offered by the law school at the University of Missouri in Kansas City to be an excellent resource. It includes sections entitled “Chronology,” “Maps and Diagrams,” “Key Figures,” “Trial Background,” “Transcript Excerpts,” “Darrow’s Trial Summation,”
“Images,” a bibliography and several other sections. All in all, it is a thoroughly complete package for this subject. (Joe Regenbogen)

http://www.international.ucla.edu/africa/mgpp/photo03.asp

This document, containing headlines from the *Negro World* newspaper and a flyer showing a picture of the members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), is an important item in researching the Garvey movement. As one can plainly see the *Negro World* headlines speak to the needs of the people. The newspaper addresses the African plight and encourages African-Americans to support the liberation movement. Below the flyer is a picture of members of the UNIA. There are six gentlemen dressed in suits looking very distinguished. The message here is that the UNIA promotes cleanliness, prosperity, and honorable individuals within their organization.

A great assignment for the students would be to have them compare and contrast the headlines in the *Negro World* (1921) with headlines in their local newspapers of the same date. Furthermore, they can observe the clothing worn by UNIA members and brainstorm what professions these gentlemen are in and their time period. (Lenard E. Jackson)


PBS. “From Swastika to Jim Crow.” Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

The People vs. Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet, et al., Transcript of Testimony Given In the Recorders Court of the City of Detroit, Michigan, November 5, 1925 to May 13, 1926.


Jarod Roll’s dissertation, “Road to the Promised Land: Rural Rebellion in the New Cotton South, 1890-1945” won the Herbert Gutman prize in 2008. Although the Web site seems to be an interactive, lighter version of his dissertation research, it is very readable and could easily be understood by both scholars and the average history
enthusiast. Roll effectively argues that the “demonstrators successfully manipulated the cultural narratives and iconography of rural poverty to force government action.”

In an effort to avoid the “Great Men” approach to history, Roll focuses on the protestors as social actors rather than those who were acted upon. Interestingly, Roll points out the role that photographs played in the success of the protest movement. Initially, the photographers on the scene were focusing on the white sharecroppers or taking photos at a distance, which served to create a group of faceless demonstrators. It was photographers working for the Farm Security Administration that began to put faces to the hurt and anguish of the African-Americans as well.

The photographers working within established New Deal programs helped to capture and transmit images of the sharecroppers’ plight to the rest of the nation. Once again, the impact of the New Negro Renaissance on rural African-Americans was rather complex. While they may have been able to organize under local leadership, they needed the support of those who actually could make a difference. In this account the people who could make a difference were already working within the government. (Joseph Hunter)


AfricaWithin.com bills itself as “an online portal to African and African-American History.” Primary documents are invaluable in understanding any historical construct. I was able to find the complete text of “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” The New Negro Renaissance engenders an awakening in black consciousness—a re-definition, part of which includes reclaiming history. Coincidentally, this is precisely what the Web site is trying to facilitate for a larger viewership. Of note, this essay can also be found in David Levering Lewis’s The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader.

Originally appearing in the March 1925 edition of Survey Graphic, the article by Arthur A. Schomburg asserts: “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.” Posterity is not the paramount drive in the natal stages to preserve black history. Schomburg relays the difficulty in presenting African-American historical contributions in a systematic, scientific format due to misappropriations from both black and white agendists: “The race issue has been a plague on both our historical houses, and that history cannot be written with either bias or counter-bias.”

History as appropriated by the white hierarchy was one of distortion, sanitation, homogenization to the point of caricature, and omission. On the other hand, countering the dominant storyline could easily be written off as anecdotal and self-promoting. In application for racial uplift, early accounts of black history read as a who’s-who of African-American agency and voice. This motif was problematic in a two-fold manner. Schomburg, when reviewing Abbé Gregoire’s work, for instance, notes, “These great men compendiums were often over-laudatory.” Praise in the name of racial pride and furtherance is praise-worthy in its own right; however, due to its inherent lack of critical analysis, this pattern of study is derided as propagandist rhetoric. Further, the exhibition of the “great man” was often dismissed as the exception; these examples of achievement were considered anomalies, peculiarities devoid of group context.

Schomburg not only speaks of the aforementioned dismissal, but also notes that any reference to blacks as active participants in our nation’s history, both as “collaborator
and pioneer,” falls prey to creative license or overt editing. Most damning, the truism that “the remote racial origins of the Negro… offer a record of creditable group achievement when scientifically viewed, and more important still, that they are of vital general interest because of their bearing upon the beginnings and early development of culture” is often expunged entirely, therefore discrediting blacks’ contributions to human history and denying collective collaboration and interdependence. According to Schomburg, “The Negro has been a man without a history because he has been considered a man without a worthy culture.” It was for this distinct purpose that the Negro had to “dig up his past” and commandeer it.

Posterity may not have been the singular focus, but collection was crucial. It is of note, here, that Carter G. Woodson, credited with the professionalization of black history, was unable to pursue his post-secondary research interests due to the dearth of available scholarship. Assemblage, therefore, became channeled toward analysis, for once the narrative had been amassed it could be recast and critically placed into a broader context. Schomburg identifies this measured emergence from story to scientific endeavor: “…only gradually have the men of this group [African-American intellectuals] been able to work toward pure scholarship.” Eventually black scholars could draw upon a corpus of work, and the initial attempts at uplift could now emerge from a selective group of academic elites. (Shawn Hornung)

The University of Chicago Library. The University of Chicago Centennial Catalogues. “The University of Chicago Faculty—A Centennial View: Robert E. Park, Sociology.”

Commemorating its centennial, the University of Chicago, through its Department of Special Collections, compiled a list of faculty who had distinguished themselves in the institution’s initial hundred years. Sociologist Robert Park made this exclusive compilation. Recognizing the immensity of cataloguing a century of collective scholarship and the futility of presenting it in phonebook fashion, late curator Robert Rosenthal chose a different approach. “Instead, attention turned to the selection of a number of individual faculty members who would represent others in the larger historical group.” Charles Spurgeon Johnson, the first black president of Fisk University and distinguished sociologist in his own right, who served as Vice-President of the American Sociological Society and established the Institute for Race Relations while at Fisk, is witnessed via Park in said fashion.

Robert Park began his professional career as an exposé journalist in the Belgian Congo. Steeped in the muckraking tradition, he shed light on the excesses of King Leopold at the expense of his subjects. In these formative years, vocation and location proved vital to Park’s role in the New Negro Renaissance. The presentation of truth for public discernment and the ties to Africa (and the greater global context) would, no doubt, prove seminal. According to Rosenthal, “Park felt he was observing ‘the historical process by which civilization, not merely here but elsewhere, has evolved, drawing into the circle of its influence an ever-widening circle of races and peoples.’” Further, through his work with Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institute and his mentoring of Charles S. Johnson at the University of Chicago, Park acted as intellectual bridge from
“Old Negro” to “New Negro” and was an instrumental figure in the professionalism of the black middle class.

Of particular interest is the presentation of Park’s lecture outline entitled “The Negro: The Origins of Slavery.” Somewhat hard to decipher as the outline is in the author’s own hand, it provides key insight into Park’s desire to place black history into a larger American history: “One of the purposes, pre-occupations of sociology, is to mitigate the natural history of civilization. 1) To indicate factors in any situation that seem to explain it, make it compatible with other situations and the processes by which they work. 2) To reveal the forces that tend to produce the same or similar results in the same or similar situations.” The ability to critically analyze situations, and recognize similarities therein, requires the formation of an educated elite trained in employing an unbiased lens yet capable of utilizing their conclusions to affect change, to apply their science.

Robert Park’s interest in urbanization, collective behavior, and group interaction, influenced the intellectual formation of Charles S. Johnson, with Chicago providing the ideal laboratory. Johnson would be appointed to the Illinois Governor’s Committee investigating the Chicago race riot of 1919. Johnson’s work in *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot*, reads, in part, as a purely scientific study of social forces and group dynamics but acts as a conduit for analyzing race relations beyond original loci. Given Park’s influence on one of the prominent African-American social scientists and his ability to span the “Old” and the “New,” this site is beneficial in further comprehending the historical construction and intellectual evolution of Charles Spurgeon Johnson. (Shawn Hornung)