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The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940. Vol. 5-Remembering the Harlem Renaissance by Cary D. Wintz

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Collison's book is very well-written, although one wishes for a more complete index, and it would have been well to give more prominent acknowledgment to the previous scholarship on Minkins—sparse though it is. Collison provides a new and interesting perspective on the history of the Fugitive Slave Law and its victims, and adds some shading to what is still only the barest outline of a biography. The usefulness of this volume is that it competently synthesizes an appreciable amount of prior scholarship on the era of the Fugitive Slave Law. Barring the possibility of some amazing discovery that Minkins was literate after all, and that he was the author of a book or the editor of a newspaper, it seems unlikely that he will ever be as important to African American history as David Walker. It is maddening that the sum total of biographical raw material that we can retrieve on Walker is roughly the same as that we can retrieve on Minkins. This tragic fact in itself tells us something of the brutal realities of black intellectual life in North America during the mid-nineteenth century, where so much of the literary and cultural life of the desperate communities of "Free Africans" must be reconstructed from relics whose very obscurity bears mute testimony to the instability of their freedom and the fragility of their happiness.

Cary D. Wintz, ed. *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940. Vol. 5—Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Garland, 1996. 476 pp. \$87.00.

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Almost everything about the period in African American literature that is typically termed the Harlem Renaissance has been contested. The name, the location, the dates for the era, whether or not it was a "renaissance," as well as the event itself—all have come under question at some point. Sterling Brown, one of the commentators on the period, argues that the "five or eight years generally allotted are short for the life span of any 'renaissance.'" In Brown's estimation, black writers were not centered in Harlem; many were not from Harlem; and many did not even write about Harlem. For him, the term *New Negro Movement*—within the context of "a continuing tradition"—is far more valuable.

In terms of dates, Langston Hughes in *The Big Sea* (1940) begins the period in 1921 with the opening of *Shuffle Along* and ends it with the crash of the stock market in 1929; both David Levering Lewis—*When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1971)—and Nathan Irvin Huggins—*Harlem Renaissance* (1979)—mark the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance at 1919, when the 369th United States Infantry Regiment marched through Harlem after the war. Lewis ends the New Negro bon ton with the 1935 riot in Harlem, which followed the beating of Lino Rivera by a white store clerk. Huggins, while agreeing with Hughes on the end of this moment in literary history, argues that the "creation of the 'New Negro' failed"—a sentiment that sociologist E. Franklin Frazier presents in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1955).

Benjamin Brawley, in *The Negro Genius* (1937), evades the issue of the New Negro or a New Negro Renaissance by referring to Harlem Renaissance writers as the "New Realists" and as writers of "Protest and Vindication." Brawley further establishes a precedent for, indicates the lack of novelty in, and, perhaps, shows the attitude of the New Negro by pointing out that Lucien B. Watkins, who died in 1921, wrote a poem titled "The New Negro," "in which he speaks of one who 'thinks black.'" What does seem to be a consistent position is that

something important in African American literature did happen during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In Wintz's "Series Introduction" to *The Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*, he states that "the writers and poets who participated in the movement were aware that they were involved in a literary movement and assumed at least partial responsibility for defining the parameters and aesthetics of the movement." Wintz acknowledges, however, that any attempt to circumscribe the boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance is difficult. He begins the Harlem Renaissance with the publication in 1923 of Jean Toomer's *Cane* and extends this literary period through the end of the 1930s.

Volume five in this series is *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance*, a collection of early responses to the New Negro literary moment. In this fifth volume of Wintz's seven-volume series, he brings together essays by scholars and writers, including some of the New Negro writers themselves. He begins *Remembering the Harlem Renaissance* late in the decade that immediately followed the active days of the Harlem literary movement—the 1930s. Wintz extracts excerpts from early studies of African American literature: Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro Genius* (1937) and Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937) as well as *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937). Wintz also selects essays from the Harlem Renaissance retrospective edition of Atlanta University's *Phylon* (1950), two important anthologies that were published in the decades following the New Negro era, as well as post-Renaissance essays by Sterling Brown, J. Saunders Redding, William Stanley Braithwaite, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright.

Wintz's selection of texts from his primary sources are well-chosen. He effectively juxtaposes his excerpts from Brawley and from Brown. These two critics' differing assessments of the era are useful for students investigating early scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance. Brawley's preference for conventional form and his disparagement of blues and jazz offer a telling contrast to Brown's embrace of these qualities in African American literature, yet Brown also encouraged attention to craft while not requiring convention. The *Phylon* excerpts include Hughes's positive assessment of the Harlem Renaissance, along with his resonant lament over the "dearth of really good critics." Also in the *Phylon* section is "The Negro Writer—Shadow and Substance," J. Saunders Redding's historically situated assessment of the distinguishing characteristics in black writing and his critique of a literary culture that rejects sincere pictures of black life.

Excerpts from the book *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* include "The Historical Setting of *The New Negro*" by the historian Rayford Logan, whose discussion of uses of the term *New Negro* prior to 1925 is important to include in a collection of this type. E. Franklin Frazier's "The New Negro Middle Class," also excerpted from *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward*, is a provocative essay on the emergent black middle class. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Portrait of Wallace Thurman," from *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*, is a valuable study of this Harlem Renaissance writer, and her references to Dorothy West's essay "A Memoir of Wallace Thurman: Elephant's Dance," first published in the November 1970 edition of *Black World*, point to a glaring gap in this volume. Excerpts from Dorothy West's short-lived literary magazines *Challenge* and *New Challenge* are additional notable omissions. West explains her post-Harlem Renaissance literary renewal project in a number of her "Dear Reader" sections; Carl Van Vechten comments on the Harlem Renaissance in one of its issues; and James Weldon Johnson's "Foreword" to the first issue of *Challenge* gives a brief overview of literature during and after the Harlem Renaissance. West's last foray into the literary magazine terrain as well as her first issue of *New Challenge* includes a review of Zora Neale Hurston's

Their Eyes Were Watching God, which also would have been beneficial to this volume. Wintz explains the reasons for the absence of the *Black World* issue as well as other gaps, but without selections from *Challenge* and *New Challenge* and the *Black World* retrospective on the Harlem Renaissance this volume is incomplete.

The last essay in this volume is Richard Wright's "The Literature of the Negro in the United States." In this essay on black writing, Wright comments on a number of Harlem Renaissance writers; he explains "The Forms of Things Unknown"; and he discusses the "Negro" as a social construct. All are important issues to rethink as we near the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance. These essays—among others in the collection—along with the pictures of W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Margaret Walker make this a valuable volume in Wintz's series.

A major problem with this volume, however, is the inconsideration with regard to format and the very slight introductory material that Wintz provides for such an important project. Wintz's "Series Introduction" presents general information about the Harlem Renaissance and a very brief description of the "goal of the series," yet he doesn't provide an outline of the types of material that readers might find in each volume, nor does he include detailed scholarly discussions of the issues and controversies that shape this moment in African American literature that is referred to as the Harlem Renaissance.

His introduction to volume five exhibits a similar paucity of scholarship on the contents of the volume. Perhaps this can be explained by reference to Wintz's introductory history of the Harlem Renaissance, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. In this book, he states that "Black literature before the Harlem Renaissance cannot be considered very successful." If considered honestly and on Wintz's terms, there was, then, no real literature in the United States before the twentieth century. This, of course, as well as Wintz's statement, is untrue. Comments such as the one above as well as his insouciance toward African American culture in his earlier book—in which he states that Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Kansas, refers repeatedly to Harlem of the 1920s as a "ghetto," and praises Dunbar's "ghetto realism"—may point to the reasons for the perfunctory format and the slight treatment of his introductory material in this volume.

Sterling Brown's selection from *The New Negro Thirty Years Afterward* refers to the symposium at Howard University that led to the publication of the essays in this book, but this context is not explained in Wintz's introduction. In the *Harlem Renaissance Remembered* section, the endnotes are missing from Wintz's selections. Richard Wright's *White Man, Listen!* was published in 1957, not 1964, as Wintz indicates. Problems such as these are compounded by the lack of section divisions to separate each of the volume's five parts. Readers, for instance, must refer to the page numbers in the table of contents to determine whether Brawley or Brown wrote the first selections collected in this volume. Then, a slight difference in font and in format are the only hints to readers that they have moved from selections out of Brawley's book into selections from Brown's. The rest of the volume is spared this indignity because the books or journals from which Wintz copied the essays provide the authors' names and the titles of the selections on the first pages of their essays. Then there are problems with pagination. I recognize that Wintz presents copies of primary documents, and I would offer that this volume is worth having. Yet I also believe that the literature of the United States and the Harlem Renaissance do not warrant such indifferent treatment.