INTRODUCTION: “HARLEM IS VICIOUS MODERNISM”

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Introduction

“Harlem is vicious Modernism”¹

CLAUDINE RAYNAUD ET FRÉDÉRIC SYLVANISE

Since the upsurge of studies on the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement from the mid-eighties, the relationship between African American expressive culture and modernism—be it Euro-, Anglo- or American modernism—has been constantly questioned, rethought and reassessed². The publication of numerous anthologies, together with essays that sought to define the distinctive features of Afro-modernism or to delineate the links between “Western” and African American modernism (Lewis, Gates and Jarrett; Huggins; Wintz and Finkelman) are now giving way to approaches that highlight the transnational and diasporic dimensions of African American modernism (Pavlić).³ These critical reappraisals displace and problematize the Harlem Renaissance, and with it African American modernism, as they integrate anthropology, art history, cultural studies and visual studies into literary studies. Within the field of publishing history and cross-media studies, the works of the period, complete with their para- textual elements, are for instance currently analyzed alongside the visual and artistic productions of Survey Graphic (1925), Fire!! (1926), The Crisis and Opportunity (Carroll, Nadell).

In a 1991 essay titled “Afro-Modernism,” art historian Robert Farris Thompson called for “a retelling of Modernism to show how it predicts [that] the triumph of the current sequences would reveal that ‘the Other’ is your neighbor—that black and Modernist cultures were inseparable long ago” (91).⁴ In the wake of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic (1993), Afro-American modernism has been the site of a questioning that located the Atlantic, the experience of the Middle Passage and Du Bois’s double consciousness, resolutely

¹. The title is taken from Amiri Baraka’s poem “Return of the Native.” James de Jongh’s study of the representation of Harlem in literature also bears this title.

². The spelling of African America with or without hyphen has been left to the authors' discretion.

³. See Smethurst for a radically new periodization of the Harlem Renaissance.

⁴. Farris Thompson’s discussion bears on postmodernity and the use of “post” as a prefix (he opposed post-modern and post-black), yet this call for different temporalities applies to the Harlem Renaissance.
at the center. New critical ventures endeavored to retell the narrative of the New Negro, using the theoretical prism of Deleuze’s rhizome, these complex interconnections privileging flux over roots, routes over home (Sweeney). Yet the nationalist thrust of the Harlem Renaissance, the uplift of the black race, coincided with a similar move at the national level, artistic expression being the privileged mode of asserting a distinctly American identity. After all, the era is often dubbed “The Jazz Age.”

Prior to Gilroy’s groundbreaking essay, in 1988, Henry Louis Gates linked his textual analysis of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) in terms of the “speakerly” to modernism and to the modernity of the Black American subject. Commenting on her use of dialect and Standard English, Gates stated that Hurston “constantly shifts back and forth between her ‘literate’ narrator’s voice and a highly idiomatic black voice […] signify[ing] her full understanding of modernism. Hurston uses the two voices in her text to celebrate the psychological fragmentation both of modernity and of the black American” (294-96). A year later, Houston A. Baker Jr., in his *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1989), tried to offer a *sui generis* definition of the “modern Afro-American sound” (xiv). Noting that Africans and Afro-Americans have little in common with Western modernisms and that the chronologies and histories of these modernisms are radically opposed to Afro-American modernism, the cultural critic offered two concepts, “the mastery of form” and the “deformation of mastery,” to account for these specific discursive practices. African American modernism is inseparable from the experience of slavery; it derives agonistically from it:

Modernist “anxiety” in Afro-American culture does not stem from a fear of replicating outmoded forms of giving way to bourgeois formalisms. Instead, the anxiety of modern influence is produced, in the first instance, by the black spokesperson’s necessary task of implying audible extant forms in ways that move clearly up, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery.

(Baker and Gates located respectively the sound and the voice, blues geography and signifyin’, at the heart of the Harlem Renaissance and of African American literary and artistic tradition. They placed African Americans—their culture, their history—center stage, a gesture that Gilroy, a black British cultural critic, later extended to the black diaspora.

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5. Gilroy’s influential work has been critiqued. See, for instance, Warren 2009, for an assessment of works that focused on the national and the local.

6. Both concepts are linked.
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The Harlem Renaissance heralded the birth of the “New Negro” (Alain Locke, 1925) and witnessed an unprecedented explosion of African American arts and a reflection on the future of blacks in America. American Modernism must then necessarily be thought as a complex and fraught dialogue between black and white artists and thinkers. Even the “high modernists” —T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound— need to be read in relation to the black poets Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen. In The Dialect of Modernism (1994), Michael North traced the racial cross-identification of white writers such as Conrad, Eliot and Stein, the “racial ventriloquism” they engaged in, and went so far as to state that “Modernism […] mimicked strategies of dialect and aspired to become dialect itself” (North, preface). Language ties black and white writers together, yet the former in contra distinction to the latter, North acknowledged, attempted to free a language from domination. George Hutchinson in The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White (1995) similarly analyzed the links between white patrons and black writers, following Cary Wintz’s Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance (1988) that had examined the interactions of white publishers and patrons with Harlem artists and writers. 7

The terms “modern” and “post-modern,” as Toni Morrison had underlined, are coterminous with the condition of blacks in America ever since slavery (Gilroy 1993b). The Nobel Prize novelist thus hammered home the fact that these categories, devised from the center for the center, relegated the margins, and the populations of the margins, outside their realm. Black History had different modalities and temporalities. Moreover, the need to go back to the origins to regenerate a dying civilization and the cultural movement that called itself “Primitivism” placed the Negro in a peculiar position since it was his own heritage that he/she needed to probe to “make it new” (see Lemke). Historically, Modernism coincided for African Americans with the Great Migration that saw six million blacks move from the rural South to the Northern cities of Cleveland, Pennsylvania, Chicago and New York. The conditions of blacks at the turn of the century, and after WWI, in which they participated, were those of increased violence in the South, repeated lynching, and economic duress. 3,417 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1944 (Sanders 136). The black man’s African-ness was now “in vogue,” when it was that very ancestry that had been the source of his belittlement, oppression, and the unbridled violence unleashed against him. Hence the emphasis on stereotype, masquerade, minstrelsy, and performance, that went together with a desire for authenticity, the need

7. For a critique of Hutchinson and a fine analysis of the arts of the Harlem Renaissance, see Feith. See also Douglas and Sylvanise 2008.
to discover the Negro’s inner life, the urgency to let him/her speak for himself/herself.

Literary critics have been prompt to celebrate Jean Toomer, and his *chef d’oeuvre Cane* (1923), as the ultimate black modernist artist, along with McKay and Hurston. These writers, as well as the poet Langston Hughes, recur in literary studies of American Modernism as mechanical citations that amount to an accepted canon of black writers. Yet the moment of the Harlem Renaissance was rife with different endeavors, run through heated debates that often found themselves in the novels that came out in great numbers (see Raynaud). It blurred the boundaries between the arts: painting, sculpture, music, dance, drama, fiction, and poetry. The question then is not so much “do the features that are said to define modernism apply to African American art and literature?” as “what modernist vision emerges from these works?” or rather more bluntly “what is African American modernism?” once categories have been exposed as unstable, in motion, stemming from specific cultural and historical preoccupations, in short over-determined. The gaze needs to be reversed, conflicts and tensions (dialect v. standard English, South v. North, rural folklore v. urban life, black artist v. white patron, black writer v. white audience, the “Negro further down” v. the elite) minutely accounted for, since they are symptomatic of modernity’s troubled hold on the black American subject. Brought forth by thinkers such as anthropologist Franz Boas and psychologist William James, cultural pluralism and epistemological uncertainty echoed the call for social progress and democratic accomplishment of the New Negroes, yet there were distinctive claims and specific undertakings, albeit at times contradictory in their impulses.

In the midst of this flowering of critical studies and continuous reassessments (see Goebel, Lamothe, Dickson-Carr, Harris), we have chosen to focus on a formal aspect of modernism, the techniques of collage and montage, to analyze the works of key African American novelists and poets, together with Aaron Douglas’s celebrated mural *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934). Collage, understood as a mode of production (“the violent piecing together of brutally incompatible elements,” (Aji 36, our translation) as much as the production itself (a diversity of fragments which allows “the free circulation of meaning and interpretation,” *ibid.*) calls forth Cubism, ready-made

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8. For a thorough study of Toomer’s *Cane*, see Michlin.
9. For a different anthology including lesser-known artists, see Patton and Honey. For a book-length study of Langston Hughes’s poetry, see Sylvanise 2009.
10. A specific volume of *Cahiers Charles V* dedicated to Anglophone poetry, with a section on American poets (E. E. Cummings, Marianne Moore, Susan Howe, Charles Reznikoff) entitled “Collage/Montage/Assemblage” came out in 2003 (Volsik).
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materials, recycling, and painting. It is mainly a spatial operation implying “the superimposition and/or juxtaposition of various fragments of sentences or texts imported from another text, using free association” (Boisseau 191). As for montage, it is a term imported from cinema, whose very syntax it constitutes and whose political and polemical potentialities Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein creatively explored in the 1920s. It determines the speed of the succession of shots and their order, in other words rhythm. Hence it is essentially used to try and dominate time (Ibid., 194). Still, if the notions of collage and montage refer to specific artistic practices, they can be used metaphorically, all the more so since their definitions can vary through time and as these techniques are transposed to other media. For example, contrary to what it originally meant in the 1920s, collage progressively came to designate the mere association of heterogeneous elements in a text whose narrative nature hence needs to be qualified.

Textual productions are thus assessed in analogy with the visual arts and their technical innovations. In 2009, Rachel Farebrother, in her *The Collage Aesthetic in the Harlem Renaissance*, chose that angle to explore central literary works of the Harlem Renaissance (Locke, Hurston and Toomer) in the context of the development of Boasian anthropology. Yet fiction, or drama for that matter, was not the privileged object of Renaissance artists. African American poetry from the beginning was the site of the affirmation of the modernity of black expression as well as the undisputed claim of racial pride for a people, with the publication in 1922 of James Weldon Johnson’s *Book of American Negro Poetry* and McKay’s *Harlem Shadows*. Poetry can bear the mark of modernism and exhibit formal novelties much more readily than prose; Hughes’s “Montage of a Dream Deferred” (1951) signals that very appropriation of cinematic language for poetic purposes.

In this issue, the collage and montage aesthetics of Douglas’s mural responds to the formal preoccupation of the Harlem Renaissance that went together with a revision of African American history and the prophecy of a better future—in Hughes’s words—“temples for tomorrow.” A key female

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11. Here is Farebrother’s introductory statement: “The pages of Harlem Renaissance fiction abound with fragmentary cultural pieces which are combined and revised to make something new, whether that be the orchestrated patterns of formal discord in *Cane*, or the textual synthesis achieved in Hurston’s lyrical novels.” (2). The choice of this collage aesthetics allows her to replace these productions in a transatlantic context of cultural exchanges and to revise Brent Edwards’s work.

12. Countee Cullen’s *Color* was published in 1925.

13. The complete and final sentence of the essay reads: “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves” (Hughes 95).
author of the period, Zora Neale Hurston is then re-read through the lens of textual analysis and cultural criticism. The fusing of the categories of modernism and postmodernism underlines the continuum in the production of such prominent writers as James Baldwin and John Edgar Wideman, as well as in the poetic works of Robert Hayden and Douglas Kearney whose aesthetics evoke those of high modernists while nourishing a dialogue with each other across time.

The first article, entitled “Reading Aaron Douglas: Collage, Montage, Pastiche,” is precisely dedicated to Harlem Renaissance’s most emblematic painter. James Smalls explains how he uses techniques that can be transposed to literature—as the rest of the volume shows extensively—in a mural series entitled *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934). The panels that compose it integrate text and image so as to condense a vision of African American history in a political perspective. This “visual text” constitutes a complex form to decipher whose motifs are symbolic and allegorical. What James Smalls identifies as collage, montage and pastiche universalizes and particularizes African American history at the same time.

Three articles are dedicated to major prose writers who, each in his/her own way, illustrate the distinctive and provocative nature of African American modernism. Claudine Raynaud’s article observes how Zora Neale Hurston creates a text mixing fragments of other texts in a “patchwork” which exhibits traces of collage and montage. Alternating vernacular language and Standard English, the novel’s narrative exemplifies the double consciousness theorized by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1903. Jean-Paul Rocchi analyses James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man” as a short story in which the point of view is diffracted in a complex modernist fashion, through narrative collage and perceptual montage. The protagonist, deputy Sheriff Jesse, re-lives the trauma of a scene he unwillingly witnessed as a young boy—the lynching and castration of a black man. The borders between past and present are blurred, as well as the literary categories the text belongs to. Likewise, as Michel Feith shows, John Edgar Wideman’s latest novel flaunts the same blurring of categories. Indeed the construction of the author’s most experimental novel to date partakes of collage, rhapsody, visual and musical models—all related through the paradigm of cinematographic montage. A portrait of Frantz Fanon through the addition of fragments, the novel also conjures up the figure of filmmaker and montage theoretician Jean-Luc Godard in a metafictional perspective.

As befits the crucial place of poetry in modernist aesthetics, the final section of the volume is dedicated to two poetic works. In his article, Frédéric Sylvanise analyses the polyphony of Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” (1966), a poem on the slave revolt on board the *Amistad* in 1839, as both metaphorical collage and montage. Hayden assembles several
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kinds of discourse (log books, slave narratives, court testimonies, etc.) to create a panoramic account of a major historical event of African American history. Far from being incompatible, or illogically organized, fragments of discourses contradict each other by multiplying the points of view, evoking the process of antiphony at work in most African American forms of music. Last, through his analysis of Douglas Kearney’s *Black Automaton*, Cyril Vettorato shows that the techniques of collage and montage, among others, are still used in African American poetry today, not to inscribe the poem in a precise genealogy but to establish a dialogue with the contemporary period. Inspired by rap music and by the very functioning of a radio, it absorbs and transforms a considerable amount of sources, requiring active participation on the part of the reader who needs to identify them. Here again, collage and montage do not necessarily mean disorganization: poems interrelate by creating series in which musical, cinematographic and poetic references—including Hayden’s “Middle Passage”— resonate with one another.

Suggestive of the profound revaluation of the place and import of Black modernism, this issue is far from exhaustive. Among others, novelists and essayists such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, an artist such as Romare Bearden, along with poets like Melvin Tolson, Langston Hughes and Amiri Baraka whom Kathy Lou Schultz associates in her essay entitled *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History* would have deserved to be included. But the studies presented here are indicative of the continuity of African American modernist approaches throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as if post-modernism was another name for modernism. Indeed, as Marjorie Perloff notices: “[As] we moved into the twenty-first century, the modern/postmodern divide has emerged as more apparent than real” (164). By describing a “twenty-first century modernism,” exemplified by Douglas Kearney’s and John Edgar Wideman’s works, she actually negates a clear-cut frontier between the two concepts. She even notes that today “may well be the moment when the lessons of early modernism are finally being learned” (200). Still, there remains a specificity of black modernism, which does not mean that African American modernism necessarily tries to affiliate with “high modernism.” But there has always been between them a complex dialogue (as Hayden and Kearney’s poems exemplify) which continues today in a very dynamic way, even as black modernism also keeps developing autonomously, reviving techniques such as montage and collage to talk about the present and to herald the future.
WORKS CITED


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Claudine Raynaud et Frédéric Sylvanise


