

# Introduction

## The Harlem Renaissance and the History of American Art

It is a curious thing—it is also a fortunate thing—that the movement of Negro art towards racialism has been so similar to that of American art at large in search of its national soul.

—ALAIN LOCKE, “Beauty Instead of Ashes” (1928)

Prior to the 1920s, there had been little need for white critics in the United States to examine their assumptions about black culture. This was altered dramatically by the ascendance, in the American imagination, of exotic notions of blackness that emerged in the early twentieth century, casting the sensuous, intuitive, natural African as the opposite of the calculating, pragmatic, and deeply repressed Caucasian. Many have argued that this construction of black identity served the needs of artists and intellectuals seeking an escape from boredom or an antidote to the soulless, materialistic culture of their age. For a brief period, this critical literature suggests, white Americans in particular thought they had discovered in Harlem what they lacked in themselves.<sup>1</sup>

To an extent, this perception of black difference was encouraged by African American cultural critic and philosopher Alain Locke. In his celebrated anthology, *The New Negro*, published in 1925, Locke marshaled impressive evidence that America was on the threshold of a black artistic coming of age.<sup>2</sup> The artistic production of the “New Negro,” as described by Locke, sought both to affirm a positive racial identity and to claim a place for black artists in American culture. African American writers such as Locke and W. E. B. DuBois argued that the creation of great art was a mark of racial maturity; they proposed that the black population would gain greater respect because of the demonstrated talent of its artists. In its headier moments, the leaders of this so-called New Negro renaissance believed in the capacity of artistic expression to alter deeply ingrained

assumptions of black inferiority and eliminate prejudice, a phenomenon scholar David Levering Lewis has described as faith in “civil rights by copy-right.”<sup>3</sup>

Locke’s writings on literature and visual art made frequent reference to racially specific dimensions of experience and culture that in America, he maintained, existed as fortunate complements to one another. Furthermore, he urged black artists to express themselves in characteristically racial terms by drawing on the uniqueness of their circumstances, on their position as heirs both to an authentic American folk culture and to the artistic traditions of ancestral Africa. With the subsequent emergence of an African American cultural intelligentsia, and the flurry of artistic activity we have come to know as the Harlem Renaissance, it seemed an opportune moment to consider the possibility that a characteristically “Negro” art had developed in America, and to speculate on its contribution (past, present, future) to the formation of national culture.

Paralleling the New Negro renaissance was the forecast of a renaissance on a national level that would eventuate in the creation of an authentic American art. Cultural nationalist ideals dominated critical discourse about art in America during the interwar decades, and Locke himself encouraged black artists to understand their work as part of this larger project involving national self-discovery and renewal. Within the African American community, lively exchanges on the nature of black creativity were consistently framed in terms of a dynamic interaction of race and nationality. Under these circumstances, and given that writers on art in early-twentieth-century America were generally more inclined to attach their critical judgments to expectations about the positive social outcomes of art rather than to aesthetic theory, the black artists who emerged in the context of the Harlem Renaissance might readily have moved from the margins closer to the center of American culture.

While scholars of the Harlem Renaissance have long recognized interest in the articulation of modern racial identity within the black community as analogous to the preoccupation with American identity at the national level, historians of American art have done little to configure black artistic production as an essential or constituent element in this chapter of American cultural history.<sup>4</sup> In her catalog essay for the 1987 exhibition *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, Mary Schmidt Campbell noted that the historical legacy of the Harlem Renaissance has been contained within the limiting conditions of cultural separatism, a by-product of legal segregation that has been sustained by ignorance, neglect, and critical distortion.

Although these artists emerged during a time of intense interest in the creation of an authentic American culture, and were deeply embedded in the struggle for power to articulate its essence, their artistic production remained outside of mainstream discourse.<sup>5</sup>

The present study builds on the insights of Campbell and others who for several generations have actively interrogated assumptions behind the conceptual formations that effectively isolate black artists from dominant historical and critical narratives. The issues that are the central focus of this book are thus familiar to scholars and critics occupied with African American art and Harlem Renaissance studies, as well as to many practicing artists. Through creative practice, traditional scholarship, and critical writing, compelling arguments have been made for the fundamental difference between the historical experiences of African American artists and that of their nonblack peers. But it is often also noted that the fact of such obvious difference need not result in the conclusion that artworks produced by the former necessarily resists analysis in terms of cultural ideals shared with the latter. Nor conversely can such work be adequately understood as simply derivative of these ideals.

For most of the twentieth century, black artists in America were held hostage (or ignored) by a critical and historical establishment that either failed to acknowledge their work as deserving of attention in terms of mainstream ideals, or when it did afford such attention, failed to take into account the wide range of expressive possibilities that emerged under the specific conditions of African American life, conditions that brought unique cultural sensibility to bear on the creation of works of art.<sup>6</sup> These circumstances have left the black artist, in the words of eminent historian David Driskell, “without critical portfolio.”<sup>7</sup> Writers such as Driskell and Keith Morrison, both of whom are also practicing artists, responded in the 1970s with a call for the development of viable critical traditions within the black community that would provide the kind of insight into African American art conspicuously absent from mainstream American art criticism.<sup>8</sup>

Morrison and Driskell were contributors to the 1986 project *Choosing: An Exhibit of Changing Perspectives in Modern Art and Art Criticism by Black Americans, 1925–1985*, an early forum for discussion of the critical dilemma faced by African American artists. While the general thrust of *Choosing* was toward the need for development of critical approaches that take adequate account of the racial dimensions of creative practice, it also brought into focus the social and historical conditions that contributed to

the status quo. For example, in his valuable overview of critical discourse about African American artists, Arna Bontemps pointed out that black critics such as Alain Locke, and later Morrison, filled a void that was the product of neglect and lack of access to the infrastructure of the American art world:

black Americans have always understood the need to choose—that is, interpret and legitimate—their own art, have never lacked the will to do so nor the diversity of perspectives necessary to insure the integrity of the process. What we have lacked is the freedom to do more than defend, preserve and promote the art and viable, stable forums in which that freer expression can be fully and systematically developed and projected.<sup>9</sup>

In the writings of Locke and many of these later critics, the work of African American artists is interpreted through a critical methodology that merges observations about the specificity of black experience and the expressive power of racially inflected aesthetic choices, with discussion of dominant artistic practices. Similarly, most historians of African American art typically consider works by black artists in the context of both racial experience *and* mainstream discourse or formal allegiances. This precedent was established in the groundbreaking early histories written by Locke and especially James Porter, and continues to characterize subsequent scholarship, including the work of Driskell and more recently Richard Powell and Sharon Patton.<sup>10</sup>

Bontemps also noted in *Choosing* the dearth of substantive criticism (as opposed to simple reporting) during the interwar decades, when art writers tended to deal with African American art in general terms and rarely undertook detailed aesthetic analysis of the objects they reviewed. This observation, repeated and expanded by Gary Reynolds in an essay for the exhibition catalog *Against the Odds: African-American Artists and the Harmon Foundation*, reverberates throughout the historical literature on the critical reception of African American artists, and serves as a key underlying premise of this book.<sup>11</sup> In the present study it is linked to the related observation that sociological insights dominated discussions of African American artists during this period, a point made in the mid-1930s by the Harlem Artists' Guild, and one heard frequently in the ensuing decades.<sup>12</sup> Although both insights have become common wisdom regarding the critical reception of African American artists, insufficient attention has been

paid to the fact that such circumstances also characterized a good deal of criticism written about nonblack artists, and it is in light of this intersection that the current study unfolds.

To a degree, the relative invisibility of black artists in histories of American art can be understood as a function of scholarly lag caused by prior neglect; but it also unmistakably reflects the priorities and interests of the individuals working in the field of early-twentieth-century American art and culture. There is a fair amount of literature on the history of American art, criticism, and theory in the early twentieth century, for example, but it rarely addresses art or writing produced by African Americans. Thus the issues that preoccupied American critics and artists during these years have been clearly identified, but they have not been brought to bear on the analysis of African American art.<sup>13</sup>

Another problem is the relatively low visibility of visual artists in Harlem Renaissance cultural studies. Although scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance is plentiful, it often does not address distinctions between artistic productions in different media, and the unique role of the visual arts is rarely considered. Accomplishments in poetry and music tend to be centralized as the most representative forms of expression, with the visual arts being largely overlooked. Art historians with an interest in this period tend to lean on typologies of so-called Negro art developed in the 1920s and 1930s as if they can be broadly applied, with little attention to disciplinary differences. This is by no means inappropriate, as many of these expressive ideals were held to be universal dimensions of black creativity. But it is also true that these typologies were structured most often around musical and literary production, both of which functioned in very different institutional worlds.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most striking disparity between cultural engagement in the literary versus visual provinces of the Harlem Renaissance can be located in the notion of audience. The institutional parameters that governed the exhibition and critical reception of visual art differed greatly from those of the literary scene. George Hutchinson, for example, maps the interconnectedness of a publishing world in which a reasonably well informed readership with a sustained interest in black writers and representations of black life was cultivated through the overlapping activities of authors, critics, publishers, and the editors of literary magazines. By way of contrast, the world of visual art was much more fragmented and art criticism far less professionalized. Experiential factors such as the logistics of viewing and the cost of purchasing works of art (as opposed to works of literature) mil-

itated against the formation of a parallel audience for art, one conversant with a relatively coherent set of issues and with the capacity to extend analysis of black visual expression beyond obvious and simplistic notions of racial difference.<sup>15</sup>

Despite this imbalance, the construct of the Harlem Renaissance itself has played a seminal role in thinking about the development of modern African American art. In exhibitions of twentieth-century black artists, the Harlem Renaissance is often either the main event or at the very least the prehistory against which subsequent African American art is measured. Until quite recently, exhibitions on the visual art of the Harlem Renaissance have consisted largely of general introductions to black artists and their works through essays and catalog entries that lean heavily on biographical scholarship. This pattern was established by the “Negro art” shows of the 1920s and 1930s; the result has been a relative lack of the sort of analytical scholarship necessary to move beyond the rudimentary task of recognition and simple audience creation.

There were a number of such shows in the 1980s, and while some departed little from this early model, others sought at least to interrogate the premises on which it was originally based. *Since the Harlem Renaissance: 50 Years of Afro-American Art*, for example, assumed a self-conscious posture toward the enterprise of the all-black exhibition, noting that it reinforced notions of binary opposition that have plagued African American artists throughout the twentieth century. The catalog essay placed into conversation the dilemma faced by artists who may wish to have the ethnic or racial component of their work acknowledged but do so at the risk of then being either oversimplified or relegated to a separatist ghetto from the standpoint of audience and relevance. While all-black shows may perpetuate this problem, the writer affirms, without them these artists are often completely invisible.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of disengaging from the quagmire of problematic assumptions associated with art and race identification that are explained in the essay, however, *Since the Harlem Renaissance* in the end underscores their capacity to stimulate interest in the work of black artists and amplify its significance:

Great art is great not only because of the intrinsic qualities of the work but because of the myth-making that often surrounds it, that is, the critical writing, exhibitions and incidents that endow the work with an aura it would not have otherwise. It is our hope that this exhibition will add to the mystique surrounding these works.<sup>17</sup>

This statement is perfectly consistent with contemporary theoretical opinion that suggests the success of art and artists is as much a function of promotional strategies as it is a matter of inherent aesthetic value.<sup>18</sup> The author acknowledges the aura imparted by the context of race and history as both desirable and unavoidable. Selections for the exhibition were in fact made so as to present the various issues that support this process.

If the catalog for *Since the Harlem Renaissance* sought to frame these problems historically and conceptually, it also fell into some of the same traps as earlier Negro art shows. Perhaps the most striking feature that connects this exhibition to the precedents established by these prior enterprises is the extent to which it reinforces the preeminence of the social and biographic at the expense of the aesthetic, a practice that has long vexed black artists. Because emphasis was to be placed on the uniqueness of black experience, the decision was made to include and also interview artists whose firsthand personal accounts could provide the mechanism whereby specific works and salient issues could be brought into proper focus.

While there is nothing unusual about this curatorial practice or objectionable in principle, historians of African American art have recognized that an exaggerated emphasis on anecdote and perceptions derived from race experience has become a methodological problem with the potential to circumscribe the interpretation of black artists and their work. Jacqueline Francis, for example, notes that black artists are too often regarded as “translators” whose primary function is to create visual analogs of black life. To the extent that their work is perceived as a kind of documentation or testimony, the imaginative aspect of creative practice is undermined.<sup>19</sup> In the scholarly literature, this legacy has created what Kymberly Pinder has described as a conflation of subject and object in African American art history; the black artist can be known only through representation and artistic production that is consistently presumed to be a direct, unmediated extension of the racial self.<sup>20</sup>

The Studio Museum show of 1987, *Harlem Renaissance: Art of Black America*, also sought to break the pattern of general introductory exhibitions by including catalog essays that focused on aspects of social history in the development of New Negro visual art.<sup>21</sup> Without implicitly challenging the intellectual foundations of the Harlem Renaissance, the catalog provides a rich and textured account of the era in relation to a select group of visual artists who matured in this milieu. As has been noted, the authors also raised questions about the nature and function of art historical judgments that have led to the subsequent invisibility of black artists associated with the climate of the Harlem Renaissance.

Campbell's essay, for example, points out that African American artists are (and were) rarely compared with nonblack artists from the period, and instead are measured against each other, a pattern that has only recently begun to change in the work of emerging scholars who position African American artists in more complex interpretative frames.<sup>22</sup> There is also an emphasis in this catalog on institutional factors that contributed to the formation of this regrettable historical legacy, including the problematic role played by various forms of public and private support for black artists. The Harmon Foundation, mentioned by nearly every scholar who has written on the period, was itself the subject of a seminal exhibition in 1989. *Against the Odds* has since become the standard reference for inquiry into the foundation's promotion of black artists and the extent to which it created a confusion of critical standards around their work, a situation brought to light in the mid-1930s by the artist Romare Bearden.<sup>23</sup>

A decade later, *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* assumed a self-consciously revisionist stance in its presentation of Harlem Renaissance visual art. As co-curator Richard Powell stated in the catalog, their intention was to shift from the model of the Harlem Renaissance exhibition as "a pictorial roll call," that is a cursory introduction of artists and their works, to an analytical and installation framework that mixed media and thus opened the objects themselves up to questioning and new modes of reception.<sup>24</sup> In addition to a project of reconceptualization that challenged the chronological and geographical boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance, the exhibition itself was defined by its emphasis on visual culture, broadly understood as encompassing the traditional media of painting and sculpture as well as photography, graphic art, film, and certain aspects of performance (such as dance and theater) that intersect in significant ways with the visual.

Although laxity with respect to issues of geography and chronology has long characterized scholarship on so-called Harlem Renaissance visual art, to frame this as deliberate revision encourages historians to think in terms of Harlem Renaissance ideals without being bound to a finite time frame or locale that automatically excludes the production of pivotal figures whose work embodies them.<sup>25</sup> Included in the pantheon of Harlem Renaissance visual artists, for example, are figures such as Archibald Motley and Sargent Johnson, African Americans who did not live in Harlem, but in Chicago and San Francisco respectively, both at great distance from the epicenter of "Black Manhattan." This is particularly important in the consideration of black artists who matured in the ideological climate of the

Harlem Renaissance but, because of limited access to exhibition and educational opportunities, received little exposure until the 1930s, well outside the standard time frame of the Renaissance.

Further, Powell's conceptualization of the Harlem Renaissance as international in actuality and in consequence marks a fairly dramatic shift of emphasis from familiar notions of the Renaissance as the by-product of an emergent black American urban identity epitomized by Harlem. The show confirms that a good deal of creative activity taking place in Paris, London, and the Caribbean during the interwar decades rightfully belongs in the orbit of the Harlem Renaissance or its aftermath.<sup>26</sup> Past scholarship on African American art has been burdened by the need to rationalize the artistic production of the 1930s as a second renaissance when in many ways it extends the exploration of constructs and issues introduced the previous decade. This deliberate collapsing of boundaries opens the way for the inclusion of the so-called Harlem Renaissance in related discourses such as transatlantic modernism and American cultural nationalism.

*Rhapsodies in Black* included artists of diverse racial, national, and ethnic origins in its presentation of Harlem Renaissance expression. This approach also characterizes Powell's work elsewhere, and can be understood in some ways as a contemporary iteration of Alain Locke's original conception of Negro art, which was not based solely on the race of the artist but rather on the interpretation of racial materials.<sup>27</sup> While the emphasis on interracial collaboration in the Harlem Renaissance is hardly new, *Rhapsodies in Blacks* joins what has become a chorus of scholarly voices arguing for a more complex understanding of the hybrid nature of American culture. This position, sometimes referred to as "integrationist" history, gained currency with the publication of several ambitious works charting the intricate connections between race, cultural expression, and national identity in early-twentieth-century America.<sup>28</sup>

In *The Dialectic of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth Century Literature*, for example, Michael North examines the attitudes and practices of black and white writers for whom the departure from conventional language, and the appropriation of vernacular speech, were essential features in the evolution and definition of modernist American literature. Black intellectuals such as Locke and V. F. Calverton argued consistently that black folk culture was the only truly original indigenous American expression, and because of this, discussions of the uniqueness of American culture and language always ended up being discussions of race. North concurs that there is no way to converse about American culture without

taking into consideration race and interracial interaction, and acknowledges (via Locke) the mutual impetus toward cultural renewal that linked racialism with Americanism. But he also argues that dreams of white and black modernist writers meeting on equal terms in a common effort to forge a national art free from inhibiting literary traditions remained largely unfulfilled. Eventually Harlem Renaissance writers were forgotten, and “the Americanist avant-garde demonstrated instead a persistent inability to understand how race fits into its conception of modern America, or how the language of African America fit into its conception of ‘plain American.’”<sup>29</sup>

According to North, while cultural pluralism was valued by the so-called transnational American generation, the largely compensatory nature of their primitivist ideology made it impossible to integrate black writers into American culture in a way that would also protect their integrity and independence. In this sense he does little to dislodge the long-standing model of Harlem Renaissance expression as hamstrung and impossibly compromised by white intellectuals in temporary search of the primitive. The seminal work on literary studies of this period in the integrationist vein, George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, conversely seeks to alter radically the perception of interracial politics in the Harlem Renaissance. Hutchinson favors an argument suggesting that the Harlem Renaissance was a period of sustained, mutually beneficial interaction between people of different races with a common investment in the concept of cultural Americanism.<sup>30</sup>

Although primarily concerned with literature, many of Hutchinson’s observations about cultural nationalism and black expression in the interwar decades are useful to art historians interested in this period. In particular, Hutchinson points out that the implications of cultural nationalist thinking in the early twentieth century were obvious to Locke and his peers, and that they deliberately and strategically exploited this cultural moment. The notion of the Negro’s “contribution” to American culture was put forth, in other words, precisely *because* of a context preoccupied with the search for and definition of a national spirit, a point made also by North and earlier by Nathan Huggins.

These authors all maintain that Locke tried to fit emerging African American art into a coherent program that merged New Negro ideology with American cultural nationalism. They argue that the goals of the Harlem Renaissance must thus be understood in the context of heated battles over the relationship between race, nation, and culture that dominated

the intellectual landscape of the early twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> But Hutchinson further insists that the significance of this era is not merely that Negro art was first taken seriously in such a context, but rather that the Harlem Renaissance was itself one of the most powerful expressions of the cultural nationalist platform articulated by transnationalists before World War I.<sup>32</sup> African American writers and artists recognized and indeed negotiated their strategic relationship to the discourses of cultural nationalism, and played a seminal role in the systematic program “to define the ‘spirit’ of the nation, to control its public meanings.”<sup>33</sup>

In order to understand this process, however, Hutchinson argues, we have to look beyond canonical modernism, and this has become a recurrent theme in revisionist histories of the Harlem Renaissance. Hutchinson claims that New Negro writers failed to gain prominence in mainstream thinking about American national culture both because of racism and because of the institutionalization of modernism as an idea.<sup>34</sup> The uncertain position of the Harlem Renaissance in relation to early American modernism has preoccupied other cultural historians, who often explain its position as a function of the exclusionary premises of modernist theory itself. In fact, the analysis of theoretical modernism, with its exaggerated emphasis on formal innovation and social transgression, as an instrument of exclusion has become a major trope in contemporary critical discourse about African American art and art history.<sup>35</sup>

Sieglinde Lemke’s *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* addresses this absence of black artists and black experience from histories of European and American modernism. In her analysis of black artistic expression, Lemke seeks to diverge from the methodological strategies of literary historians such as Houston Baker who, she claims, have dealt with this exclusionary mentality by juxtaposing white modernism with a black countermodernism.<sup>36</sup> Instead she wishes to examine aesthetic collaboration and formal connections between black and white modernists. In effect, Lemke extends Powell’s emphasis on interracialism in the Harlem Renaissance to encompass all of modernism. In so doing, she aligns herself with scholars such as Ann Douglas, Marianna Torgovnick, and Paul Gilroy who address the impact nonwhites have had on the formation of transatlantic modernity.<sup>37</sup>

To establish these connections, Lemke analyzes in detail a handful of cultural productions in distinct genres for which primitivism was a central theme: the painting of Picasso, American jazz, Josephine Baker’s performances, and the anthologies on black culture published by Alain Locke

and Nancy Cunard. She first seeks to unpack the complex and multiple meanings of the primitive and then to locate them in these various expressive forms. Primitivism is understood here as a construct to which both white and nonwhite artists responded, albeit in different ways and toward different ends. By locating the essence of modernism in the African primitive, Lemke hopes to demonstrate that black culture was constitutive of modernism and was in turn reconstituted through modernism. In conclusion, she argues apropos of the visual arts, correctly if not originally, that discussions of the modernist appropriation of so-called primitive African art forms fail on two counts: they grant little integrity to African sculpture as a distinctive art form in its own right, outside of its use value for radical Western modernists seeking to defy artistic and social conventions; and that such discussions rarely take into consideration the parallel interest in tribal art on the part of African American artists, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance.

In the latter claim, she is on solid ground, and this study casts in high relief the invisibility of black artists in traditional histories of modernist art, both European and American. What she refers to as “black primitivist modernism,” African American expression inflected with the ideals of both African sculpture and European modernism, rarely surfaces in mainstream accounts of early modern art, despite the fact that scholarship on the artists in question is becoming more readily available. Further, Lemke makes an important distinction between her thesis and the recent impetus to chart black “contributions” to modernism. She argues for not merely the recognition of isolated or random contributions, but also for an understanding of modernism and American identity that renders it indivisible from black culture, such that “any critical account of modernism that ignores the impact of black culture fails to grasp the complexity of modernity.”<sup>38</sup>

But the most important study of American modernism in recent years, Wanda Corn’s *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935*, exemplifies the complexities that emerge when faced with the task of incorporating African American *artists* (as opposed to a more general concept of black American culture) into a narrative centered primarily on canonical modernist visual art.<sup>39</sup> Corn states at the outset that black culture factors into her study of transatlantic modernism via well-recognized phenomena such as the popularity abroad of jazz music and performer Josephine Baker. But at the same time she explains that neither the New Negro movement nor the Harlem Renaissance could be easily

woven into the story she tells here. The author's thoughtful and nuanced account of the reasoning that led to this conclusion demonstrates the very real challenges faced by even the best scholars who must work from an existing historical record that is either incomplete or informed by a limited (and limiting) set of questions.

Corn points out that until recently scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance has not been written in a way that would support the transatlantic, intercultural conceptual frame within which she worked.<sup>40</sup> *The Great American Thing* departs from a group of key works by canonical American modernists, and more importantly from a particular construct of visual modernity informed by a very specific set of cultural and social ideals. It would have been difficult to include African American artists in this story because, as she correctly notes, many artists associated with the New Negro movement were figurative painters working in a representational style that was avoided by the modernists who are the focus of her study. Issues of chronology also played a role in Corn's decision to omit New Negro artists. As she states, her selected time frame (1915–35) disallowed consideration of black artists who were influenced by the Harlem Renaissance but did not develop these ideas until later. Aaron Douglas might have been a logical choice, but Corn explains that his modernist murals really belong to the ethos of the 1930s:

The rise of regionalist consciousness from the late 1920s through the 1930s, as well as the revival of the mural movement, helped Douglas conceive a style that was not only modern but also epic and narrative, both qualities excised from early modernism but permissible, even desirable, in the 1930s.<sup>41</sup>

Corn's superb study cannot be faulted for failing to discuss works of art or artists that clearly rest outside the formal, conceptual, and chronological parameters the author has set herself. What is frustrating about *The Great American Thing* is that some of her claims regarding such things as primitivism and American cultural nationalist ideology intersect, at least in theory, with ideas of significant consequence in the Harlem Renaissance. In several instances she writes perceptively about these connections. For example, her account of the role of primitivism makes good use of parallel perceptions regarding race and identity within and about the black community. Europeans constructed Americans in terms similar to the way blacks were understood both abroad and at home: embodiments of savage

vitality and childlike simplicity. As Corn points out, black performers such as Josephine Baker were in some ways for Europeans the ultimate Americans: “that they were often African American reinforced European’s fluid picture of America as a place of exotic otherness, where skyscraper primitives lived with tribal primitives—this cohabitation itself seemed modern—unfettered, uncivilized, freed from convention.”<sup>42</sup>

But there are other places in this study that feel like missed opportunities, particularly with respect to the position of Alain Locke, whose ideas and rhetorical practices were often very much in sync with the cultural theorists she discusses. For example, Corn explains that progressive American artists and critics perceived the need during this period to invent new visual forms embodying specific notions of modern national identity. Locke similarly believed that a racial idiom reflective of modern black identity would require the same process, and was fairly dismissive of artists whom he regarded as timid or conventional. She further notes that these forms were expected to transcend the representation of simple subject matter if they were to communicate an identity that was distinctive if not literal, a point made frequently by Locke about racial art. According to Corn, words such as *America*, *spirit*, and *soil* dominated the critical lexicon of artists and critics associated with the second Stieglitz circle, as writers habitually spoke of native artists plowing fields, establishing roots, and maturing. This observation could be extended to Locke, who, as Paul Anderson has recently demonstrated, used similar organic metaphors to describe the development of New Negro art.<sup>43</sup>

Corn’s chapter on Sheeler, with its extensive emphasis on theory and criticism, would most obviously have supported a comparative discussion of Harlem Renaissance ideology and Locke’s critical practice. She explains Sheeler’s success in relation to an intellectual and rhetorical landscape dominated by art writers whose function it was to elevate a specific kind of artwork by positioning it in nationalist terms, especially in relation to American folk art:

For this group the creation of an aesthetic past had to be functional; their aim was, not to honor forefathers, but to bolster those in the present trying to do fresh and authentic American work. . . . none of them presumed to revive the past in a disinterested fashion. . . . Rather, they wrote or created exhibitions or built collections with the stated intention of deepening the present by giving it an identifiable past. They wanted to throw out received history, proclaiming it genteel and sterile,

and to search for role models and works of art and literature that contemporary American artists, without embarrassment, might adopt as constituting a national heritage.<sup>44</sup>

Many of Locke's activities as a cultural advocate (which included theorizing as well as involvement in exhibiting and collecting African and African American art) were similarly driven by a concurrent investment in the notion of a "usable past" to displace the conventional attitudes that inhibited the formation of a vital modern racial identity. He belongs solidly within this matrix as an American "critic-historicist" who strategically employed the concepts of both race *and* nation in his promotion and rationalization of idiomatic expression among black American artists.<sup>45</sup>

Whitman was a hero to these writers, and Locke was no exception in his perception of the poet as "the prophet of the new world and the father of American modernism."<sup>46</sup> Scholars have identified Whitman as crucial to the formation of Locke's early ideas about the relationship of national soul to national culture, and to his faith in the transformative powers of art. Locke's 1911 essay "The American Temperament" in particular, written in the wake of his Oxford experiences, weaves Whitmanesque concepts of nationalism with modern formulations of the autonomous self. Charles Molesworth assigns a good deal of importance to this essay as an early contribution to the literature of modernism wherein Locke merges "elements of political analysis, social psychology, a historicizing sensibility, and an aesthetic imagination" in a complex exploration of national character:

Alignments between the self and the nation, and especially the artistic self and the national character, lie at the heart of Whitman's project. . . . Locke shares Whitman's commitments here and also advances them, as he self-reflexively expresses and criticizes the complexities of identification and distance in ways typical of modernist culture.<sup>47</sup>

Molesworth maintains that Locke was in the forefront of raising questions that were at the root of American cultural criticism in this generation, although his writings were not well enough known to have widespread influence on the writers who embarked on discussions of these issues in the 1920s.

Despite the fact that specific artworks themselves do not strictly fit the conception of modernity visualized that is central to Corn's explication of the Stieglitz group, the analytical frame of identity and cultural national-

ism she employs furnishes extremely useful guidelines for bringing black artists into a related narrative that takes advantage of the expanded parameters suggested by *Rhapsodies in Black*.<sup>48</sup> The Harlem Renaissance may have ended in the late 1920s, but most historians agree that New Negro ideas continued to resonate for black artists into the 1930s, mediated by transformations in American cultural nationalist ideology.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, Corn's observation regarding the representational language favored by many black artists of this period is consistent with that of historians of African American culture who have long recognized that the aesthetic allegiances of practitioners associated with the climate of the Harlem Renaissance were often at odds with those that make up the received modernist canon. They were not radical modernists in a formal sense, but rather belonged to a more conventional group of artists and writers who understood modernity in very different terms. The challenge that faces historians is to bring questions about modernity and cultural nationalism together in way that makes sense given the unique circumstances of black artists within the landscape Corn describes.

An important step in this direction can be found in the alternative approach to the era taken by historian Helen Shannon, who has wrestled with the concept of black visual modernism not from the standpoint of exclusion but rather by asking complex questions about the terms of discourse and singular circumstances into which both African and African American art were thrust.<sup>50</sup> Like Lemke, Shannon notes that historically studies of primitivism have focused on the influence of African art in the undermining of Western mimetic artistic styles; but they have not looked at other aspects of African art reception, especially within the African American community, where one typically does not see these formal innovators. Shannon accounts for the content and institutional circumstances of several key exhibitions of African art in the early twentieth century, taking into consideration the range of various responses to these shows. A very different story emerges when the reception of African art by black and white artists is viewed comparatively in terms of their respective individual interests and experiences.<sup>51</sup>

Together the conclusions reached by Corn and Shannon have the potential to construct a more complex history in which overlap between the common concerns of artists from majority and minority cultures is made obvious, and yet specificity can be respected and explained.<sup>52</sup> Take, for example, their accounts of the discourse of the folk primitive, one that played an important role in both American modernism and the Harlem

Renaissance. Corn charts the swift ascendance of folk art from curiosity to icon and museum object:

It [folk art] was an American variant of primitivizing, repeating the pattern of transformation that tribal arts underwent as they moved from ethnographic museums to progressive artists' studios, the commercial market, and, finally, the art museums. . . . Early exhibitions of African art, moreover, sometimes coincided with those of folk material and were organized by the same people. Folk art enthusiasts used a mythologizing vocabulary similar to that of the primitivists, celebrating the supposed freedoms of the untrained artist and romanticizing preindustrial communities. When Americans pictured the art of their ancestors as charming, naive, intuitive and childlike, they infantilized folk artists and pictured them as without culture, or at least without a superior culture like their own. They created folk artists as "other."<sup>53</sup>

Shannon similarly notes parallels in the early appreciation of African art and folk art, and expands upon the circumstances that led some American museums to show African art in the context of interest in the folk mentality, while others emphasized the connections of African form to the development European modernism.

Corn and Shannon alike acknowledge that while African art functioned initially as an important primitivism for both blacks and whites, it was gradually rejected by the latter in favor of indigenous American folk art and Native American culture. Corn, for example, points out that collectors of folk art did not mix American objects with other kinds of primitivism in art, African or European: "Lest the folk art recovery be seen as only primitivizing, however, let me underline how much the conversation around folk art focused on its being 'ours' rather than 'others.'"<sup>54</sup> Conversely, according to Shannon, the postcolonial struggle of black artists led many of them to continue thinking in terms of European modernism combined with African ancestralism long after their nonblack peers had moved on to embrace a usable past closer to home.

These circumstances inevitably placed black artists in an uncertain relationship to variants of cultural nationalism that privileged domestic models of primitivism. As Shannon explains, when the work of academic African American visual artists did not itself demonstrate obvious ancestral retentions—as did works of music, for example—there was really no easy way for critics and theorists to embrace the African primitive as an

indigenous source. Thus she concludes that “with no possible connection seen between the visual arts of Africa and of Africans in the Americas, the latter could be easily dropped from consideration as a primitivist model for an indigenous modernism.”<sup>55</sup>

Shannon makes these observations in the context of her analysis of Marsden Hartley’s 1920 essay “The Redman Ceremonial: An American Plea for American Aesthetics,” which is used by Corn and other scholars to exemplify the period impulse to lay claim to an indigenous “primitive” past as a source of artistic inspiration. While conceding the important function of this essay within the cultural nationalist rhetoric of the 1920s, Shannon also demonstrates that Hartley encouraged interest in Native American culture because he regarded it as both a more appropriate *and* more palatable alternative to the racial primitivism associated with American blacks: “As an intelligent race, we are not even sure we want to welcome him [the black man] as completely as we might, if his color were just a shade warmer, a shade nearer our own.”<sup>56</sup> Although Hartley recognized the originality and importance of black folk culture, Shannon identifies the aspects of nativist *and* racist ideology that inform this essay as he strains “to fit the chronology of New World history into the master narrative of evolutionary thought.”<sup>57</sup>

By unpacking the influence of disparate racial experiences on critical reactions to primitivism and African art in America, Shannon is able to contextualize Locke’s ideas to parallel developments in early mainstream modernism and American cultural nationalism across generations. Her account of the relationship between folk art and American cultural nationalist thinking is thus deepened to include analysis of the circumstances that affected the community of black artists caught between these paradigms. And while she essentially agrees that African American art does not fit easily into the standard accounts of American modernism, she identifies issues that can be brought to bear on the singular position of black artists within this narrative.

The privileged status of primitivism in Harlem Renaissance discourse, and its connection to the evolution of canonical modernism, has become a significant battleground for cultural historians interested in this period. Literary scholars such as J. Martin Favor argue that by locating racial authenticity in the concept of the “folk” and the “primitive” we limit the discursive frame and restrict the cast of New Negro artists who might enter the pantheon of American modernism, as well as the terms under which

they would be admitted. In literature, this has led to a neglect of black bourgeois writers with a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward the “folk” and vernacular expression; in visual art it has resulted in the tepid reception of academically inclined African American artists for whom primitivist themes and modernist styles did not resonate with any particular force.<sup>58</sup> Because black modernism ran both parallel and divergent from canonical American modernism, Shannon similarly argues that an integrated history of American modernism can be achieved only if the narrative of American modernism itself can be made to accommodate the seemingly unrelated styles produced by both groups within the same historical moment.<sup>59</sup>

Collapsing chronology, easing the boundaries enforced through issues of formal allegiances, and resisting the impulse to give the decades between the wars completely distinct personalities would all allow for the development of analytical frames wherein discussions of the interconnectedness of black and nonblack artists make sense and are not forced by arbitrary notions of inclusiveness for its own sake. By charting the complex interplay between music, American modernist art, and cultural identity in the early twentieth century, for example, Donna Cassidy is able to situate African American artist Aaron Douglas comfortably into the history of American art between the wars.<sup>60</sup> *Painting the Musical City: Jazz and Cultural Identity in American Art, 1910–1940* concerns itself in part with the elision of black experience and expression from the critical history of modernism; but by addressing herself to a thematic in American art and culture, the author seeks to move beyond the idea of simple inclusion/exclusion.

Cassidy examines the works of five American artists for whom jazz was a central theme: John Marin, Joseph Stella, Arthur Dove, Stuart Davis, and Aaron Douglas. Drawing on observations contained within mainstream scholarship on the Harlem Renaissance, she demonstrates that Douglas’s mural *The Song of the Towers* functions effectively as an artistic space in which New Negro ideals merge with constructs of modernity and the programmatic goals of American cultural nationalism. For Douglas, jazz becomes a means to signify not only abstractions that connect urban vitality to modern sounds, but also the struggle for a coherent sense of self, an African American identity able to stake a claim in the modern world. Douglas emerges in this book as the prototypical African American modernist, engaged in the sophisticated negotiation of complex and often

competing cultural paradigms. Cassidy connects his murals to the modernist ideals of the 1920's as well as to those of well-known American mural painters of the 1930s such as Thomas Hart Benton.<sup>61</sup>

Effectively “integrated” studies of the interwar decades tend, like *Painting the Musical City*, to examine works of art in terms of key aspects that comprise the era, rather than simply race or modernism per se. This is admittedly much easier to accomplish when the balance is shifted toward the 1930s, both because of the emergence of certain discursive formations for which inclusion is a systemic and fundamental principal, and because there are many more representative examples to support these hypothetical premises. Helen Langa and Andrew Hemingway, for example, give careful attention to the works of black artists within narratives that focus on left-wing politics and institutions in the 1930s, and the social issues that brought artists together.<sup>62</sup> While such connections have been well established in the literature on African American art, these more specialized studies are important departures from general mainstream surveys of the period that tend toward the awkward, albeit well-intentioned, inclusion of black artists.

Similarly, there are a growing number of monographic studies that successfully avoid the pitfalls of ghettoizing African American artists as participants in an entirely separatist tradition unconnected to the developing history of American visual culture. Margaret Vendryes achieves this goal by considering the impact of things such as dance, sexual identity, and religion on the work of sculptor Richmond Barthe.<sup>63</sup> By foregrounding the impact of artistic training on the specific choices made by Malvin Gray Johnson, Jacqueline Francis is able to place the artist in the context of a wider conversation about diverse forms of conservative modernism that is relevant to many American artists of this era irrespective of race.<sup>64</sup> Caroline Goesser's complex exploration of the relationship between art, literature, and commerce provides an opportunity to position Harlem Renaissance graphic art in relation to mainstream ideas and artistic production in the domain of illustration.<sup>65</sup> Discussions such as these extend naturally into the respective relationship of black and white artists to specific ideas and circumstances.

This book seeks to explain the possibilities and pitfalls faced by black artists as they pursued a collective identity during a crucial period of American cultural history. It will, I hope, encourage new ways of articulating the centrality of African American expression to the history of Ameri-

can art, and of exploring points of intersection between the work of black artists and that of artists operating within the majority culture. Such projects need not ignore the concrete realities of circumstance that make for substantive differences in the respective critical and expressive paradigms that ultimately emerge. Although mindful of cultural nationalism as a dominant ideal, Locke, to a much greater extent than his Americanist peers, needed to expend considerable effort counteracting prevailing social and economic conditions that continued to impede the development and appreciation of African American art. This prompted him to work through adult education programs in an effort to combat ignorance and build audiences for black artists. Further, the phobias and shame associated with the past among African Americans far exceeded general American cultural defensiveness in relation to Europe, making the restoration of dignity to the perception of blackness itself a preoccupation that white artists did not share.

Even in light of these differences, I am suggesting that the shared discourse of cultural nationalism provides useful entry into many issues of relevance to the consideration of black artists in a way that logically situates them within mainstream historical narratives. It goes without saying that the concept of nationalism, like the concept of the artist, is itself unstable. As both Hutchinson and Corn point out, nationalisms are constructed and are subject to constant change.<sup>66</sup> But it is also true that African American artists in the 1920s and 1930s were deeply embedded in ongoing conversations about the meaning of the nation, however fluid we may understand their terms to be. This stands in sharp contrast to earlier eras of American cultural history, even those similarly preoccupied with national identity, about which such a claim cannot be made.

Sarah Burns has demonstrated the extent to which the language of art criticism and other mechanisms of communication participate in the construction and interpretation of modern artistic personalities, and in the maintenance of their reputations. Artists in the modern age, she argues, are “products of shifting networks of discourse on the questions of who and what an artist was to be in a changing and rapidly modernized world, and what it meant to be modern and American.”<sup>67</sup> In Burns’s account of her decision to structure an argument around a select group of late-nineteenth-century artists, she explains the mere “walk-on role” of renowned African American expatriate painter Henry Tanner as a matter of theoretical consistency:

The absence of race in this study should not be inferred as an evasion but rather a reflection of its non-existence in cultural discussions of the Gilded Age, when there was little or no question that only whiteness counted in building, defending, and advancing civilization.<sup>68</sup>

While issues of imbalance with respect to cultural power certainly persisted, it would not be reasonable to extend Burns's assumption into the interwar decades. In an era clearly preoccupied with the relationship of race to the definition of national culture and to the concept of America as a modern civilization, African American artists will remain suspended between the rhetoric of distinction and the reality of persistent denial.