

The Harlem Renaissance

Week 1
Jan. 15, 2021



“The New Negro”: What was the Harlem Renaissance?

Before 1920

What was African American life like before 1920? What historical and demographic events prompted the intellectual and artistic movement known today as the Harlem Renaissance?

The New Negro

Who was 'the new negro'? If there was a 'new,' what was the 'old'? How did the declaration of 'new'-ness indict old assumptions about African Americans and argue for a morally, intellectually, and culturally relevant civilization of Black people?



Reconstruction into Modernity: Industrial Capitalist War

- 1867-1877 = Reconstruction (after Civil War)
- Modernity is characterized in philosophy and political economy as the proliferation of industrial capitalism throughout the Western World. In America, this saw the ending of Reconstruction, the induction of Jim Crow laws, including red-lining and ghettoization of Black communities into places like South Side in Chicago and Harlem in New York City.
- Modernism - the literary and artistic movement of the interwar period known for its countercultural sentiment and skepticism of modern industrial capitalism based in rationality. Modernism is often seen as in response to the war crimes of World War I and the use of rationality/industrial capitalism to carry out war (tanks, machine guns, chemical gas) as well as the proliferation of masculinized nationalism. Often associated with writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Simultaneous to this movement, of course, was the self-proclaimed New Negro Movement that we know today as the Harlem Renaissance.
- Aesthetic and artistic similarities among Harlem writers and Traditional Modernist writers:
 - stream of consciousness
 - imagistic realism
 - poetic interpollation of fiction
 - third-person omniscient POV
 - New Criticism

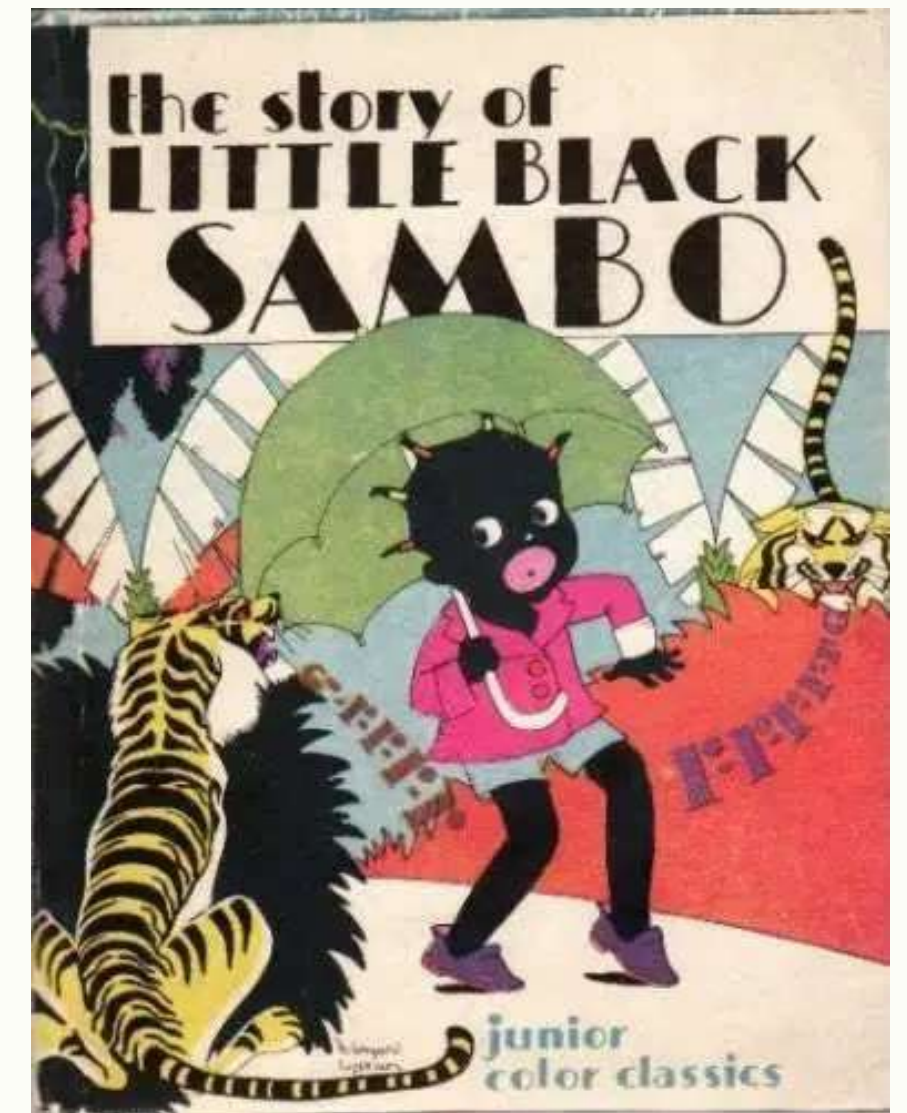
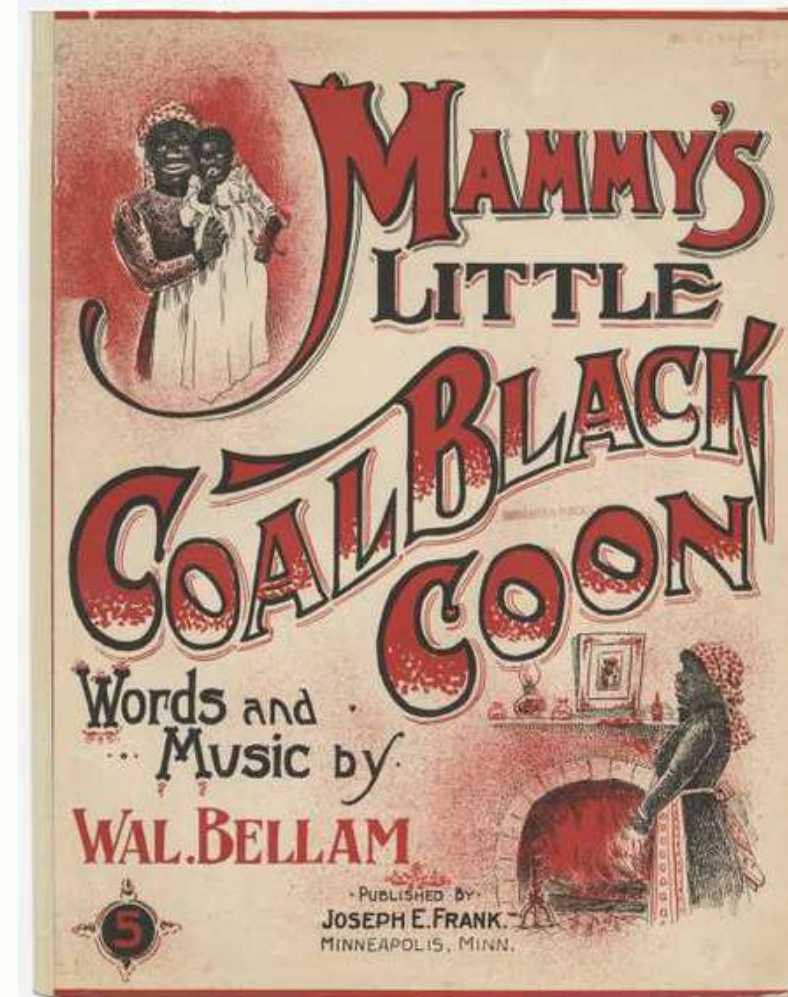


Pablo Picasso, *Violin*

From 'Old' to 'New' Negro: the Transformation of the Image of the African-American from Savage to Savant

"the Old Negro was a trope that depicted the African diaspora as an inferior race. Allegedly, Negro uncles, mammies, and chillun' dressed, talked, behaved, and thought in ways that lacked the kind of sophistication and refinement generally attributed to Anglo America. Such caricatures oversimplified black subjectivity and experiences, while ridiculing the idea of black assimilability to American civilization. African American discourses of the New Negro, however, emerged to contest degrading black stereotypes. Literature, photographs, illustrations, theater, and speeches were but a few of the contexts in which African Americans declared that the race could be morally, intellectually, and culturally elevated to civilization."

— "Introduction" of *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*



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- Reconstruction technically lasted ten years, "to be replaced by a dark period in American history known as Redemption, which Sterling Brown once said lasted in the South from roughly 1876 'to yesterday'! By the turn of the century, Southern Redemption had become fused with black disenfranchisement and the rise of the white supremacist movement, led by the Ku Klux Klan...two antithetical figures of the black — the curious heritage of the New Negro, and the white figure of the black as Sambo."
- "The fiction of an American Negro who is 'now' somehow 'new' or different from an 'Old Negro' was sought to counter the image in the popular American imagination of the black as devoid of all the characteristics that supposedly separated the lower forms of human life from the higher forms."
- "Almost as soon as blacks could write, it seems, they set out to redefine — against already received racist stereotypes — who and what a black person was, and how unlike the racist stereotype the black original could actually be. To counter these racist stereotypes, white and black writers erred on the side of nobility, and posited equally fictitious black archetypes...If various Western cultures constructed blackness as an absence, then various generations of black authors have attempted to reconstruct blackness as a presence."

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- "The *trope* of reconstruction was the trope of the New Negro in African American discourse between Reconstruction and WWII. The long period, rather than the short one between 1867-1877, was the crux of the period of black intellectual reconstruction."
- "The 'New Negro,' of course, was only a metaphor, a trope. The paradox of this claim was inherent in the trope itself, combining as it did a concern with time, antecedents, and heritage, on the one hand, with that for a cleared space, the public face of the race, on the other. The figure, moreover, combined implicitly both an eighteenth century vision of utopia with a nineteenth-century idea of progress to form a black fin-de-siècle dream of an unbroken, unhabituated, neological self — signified by the upper case in 'Negro' and the belated adjective 'New.' A paradox of this sort of self-willed beginning was that its 'success' depended fundamentally upon self-negation, a turning away from the 'Old Negro' and the labyrinthine memory of black enslavement and toward the register of a 'New Negro,' an irresistible, spontaneously generated black and sufficient self."
- "The weary dream of a perfected state of being, with no history, the dream of naming a second, new self, was emblematic of the anguish in African American history. This naming ritual, in short, was prefigured in the autobiographical texts of the ex-slaves published before 1865."

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- "It was the several definitions of the 'New Negro' as the sign of a new racial and public self after Reconstruction that applied most directly to the Harlem Renaissance. This racial self, as we define it here, did not exist as an entity or group of entities, but 'only' as a coded system of signs, complete with masks and mythology. At least since its usages after Reconstruction, the name had implied a tension between strictly political concerns and strictly artistic concerns. Alain Locke's appropriation of the name in 1925 for his literary movement represented a measured co-opting of the term from its fairly radical political connotations..."
- "In *So Black and Blue* (2003), Kenneth W. Warren...identifies a long historical trend in African American intellectualism tracing back to a post-Reconstruction 'cultural turn in black politics,' when African American leaders and uplifters linked cultural to political arbitrations of racial representation. According to Warren, this logic was flawed because culture was not — and has not ever been since — as responsible and transformative as direct political action."

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Political Activation and Radicalism: The New Negro as Marxian



- "The admirable participation of African American soldiers in an international struggle on behalf of America and its European allies against the German military, according to Du Bois's testimony, could not alleviate the soldiers' concerns that their home country 'represents and gloats in lynching, disenfranchisement, caste, brutality, and devilish insult' of the dark-skinned race. Consequently, African Americans did not desire just to 'return from fighting,' but to 'return fighting' on behalf of 'Democracy.'"
- According to Barbara Foley's *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (2003), "In the revolutionary crucible of 1919, the term *New Negro* signified a fighter against both racism and capitalism; to be a political moderate did not preclude endorsement of at least some aspects of a class analysis of racism or sympathy with at least some goals of the Bolshevik Revolution.' In periodicals ranging from *Call*, *Liberator*, and *Worker's Monthly* to *Negro World*, *Messenger*, and *Crusader*, antiracist discourse portrayed the New Negro, through a class frame of analysis, as a political activist of both national and international stature."

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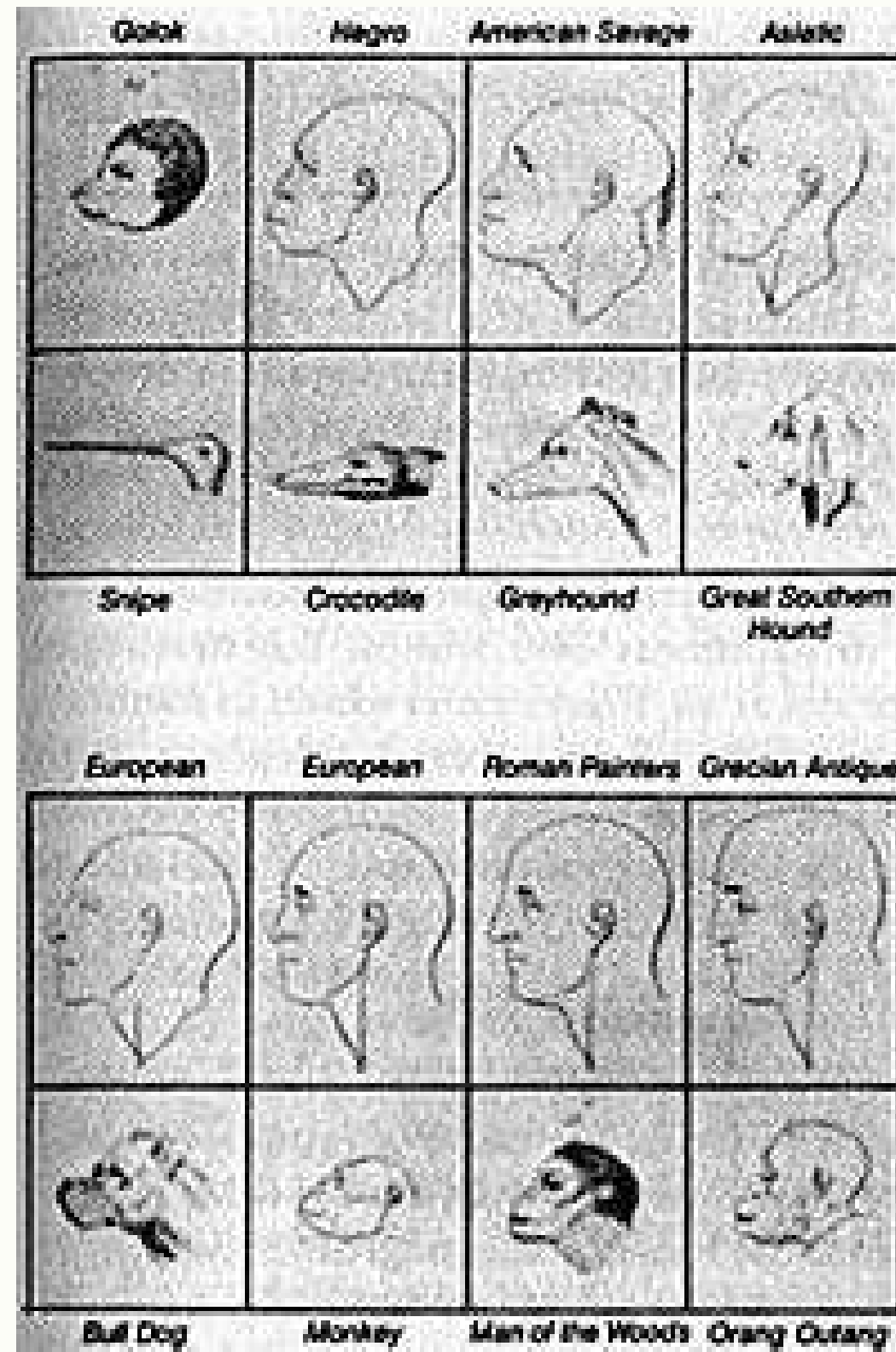
Turn Away from Politics: Locke's *New Negro* Uses 'Folk' Trope to Relieve Political Radicalism and Construct the New Negro as 'Elevated'

- "Locke relatively succeeded in disengaging African American culture from radicalism in *The New Negro*. Through the revision of certain essays to the omission of others that conjured up radical sentiment, Locke suppressed in his 1925 collections the idea that the New Negro was radical both in tone and in purpose. Romanticized as ahistorical, lower-class, and authentically black, the folk served as a metonym or synecdoche of the African American community, lubricating Locke's turn from racial antagonism to racial amelioration."
- While others like Du Bois, Schuyler, and Wright, sought to not only question the lack of realization of any American democratic ideals but also uplift the race, Locke's camp succeeded.
- "J.W.E. Bowen, writing in *An Appeal to the King* (1895), defines the New Negro only in terms of racial 'consciousness' and its relation to 'civilization.'"
- "Locke's New Negro served in yet another capacity: it transformed the militancy associated with the trope and translated it into a romantic, apolitical movement of the arts — which his debate with DuBois over aesthetics versus propaganda made clear. Locke's New Negro was an artist, and it would be in the sublimity of the fine arts, and *not* in the political sphere of action or protest poetry, that Anglo America (it thought) would at last embrace the Negro of 1925, a Negro ahistorical, a Negro who was 'just like' every other American, a Negro more deserving than the Old Negro because he had been reconstructed as an entity somehow 'new.'

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- "These two metaphors [capacity and elevation], by the way, along with the myriad versions of the vernacular phrase 'we is risin',' were echoes of the eighteenth-century terminology of racial uplift, related to the idea of a vertical great chain of being, along which both races and individuals 'rose' from the animal kingdom to the most sublime instances of humanity, such as those frequently identified with the mathematician Isaac Newton and the poet John Milton. 'Capacity' designated physical cranial measurements, but it quickly became the metaphor for the measure of the potential of human intelligence."
- Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood publish *A New Negro for A New Century* in 1900, "clearly intended to 'turn' the new century's image of the black away from the stereotypes scattered throughout plantation fictions, blackface minstrelsy, vaudeville, racist pseudoscience, and vulgar social Darwinism...intellectuals believed that their racist treatment in life merely imitated their racist 'treatments' in art. Accordingly, to manipulate the image of the Negro was, in a sense, to manipulate reality. The public Negro self, therefore, was an entity to be crafted."



From Charles White's *An Account of the Regular Gradation in Man, and in Different Animals and Vegetables* (1799), to the left, and 1579 drawing of the Great Chain of Being from Didacus Valades, *Rhetorica Christiana*, above.

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Fannie Barrier Williams's essay, "The Club Movement among Colored Women of America," argues that there is a "direct relationship between the self and the race, between the part and the whole, that is the unspoken premise of *A New Negro* (1900). As much as transforming a white racist image of the black, then *A New Negro's* intention was to restructure the race's image of itself." In another essay of hers, with the same title, Williams "places the black woman at the center of the New Negro's philosophy of self-respect and racial uplift. 'The Negro woman's club of today,' she maintains, 'represents the New Negro with new powers of self-help.' Two years later, in 1904, John Henry Adams, Jr. in a *Voice of the Negro* essay called 'A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman,' concurs with Williams's assessment of the central role of African American women in the New Negro movement, and even goes so far as to reproduce images of several ideal New Negro women so that other women might pattern themselves after the prototype."

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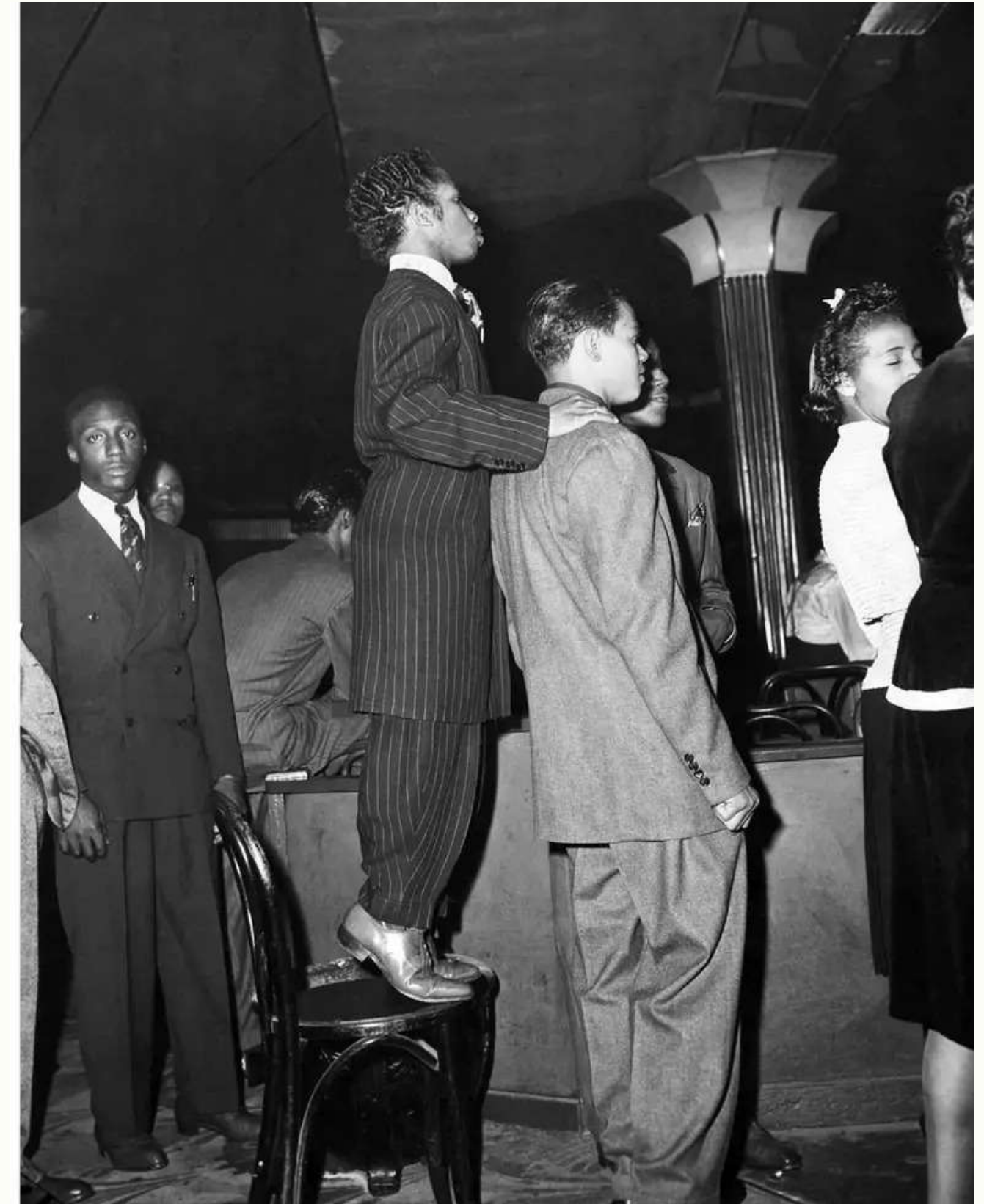
THE "NEGRO" IN JOURNALISM

"What is of importance here is Adams's stress upon the 'features' of this 'new' Negro, drawing a correlation between the specific *characteristics* of the individuals depicted and the larger, uplifted *character* of the race. Why is this so important? Precisely because the features of the race — its collected mouth-shape and lip-size, the shape of its head (which especially concerned phrenologists at the turn of the century), its black skin color, its kinky hair — had been caricatured and stereotypes so severely in popular American art that black intellectuals seemed to feel that nothing less than a full facelift and a complete break with the enslaved past could ameliorate the social conditions of the modern Negro."

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What to expect for this course

- We will attempt to understand what we call the Harlem Renaissance as a political, cultural, and artistic set of concerns in the African American community at the turn-of-the-century.
- As a literary scholar, it is my duty to address the many aesthetic interests and perhaps place these alongside larger historical trends in American literature and aesthetics. We will, however, also attend to the historical questions of 'racial uplift,' 'racial consciousness' and 'class struggle' versus 'artistic expression' that are emblematic of the debates held throughout the Harlem Renaissance.
- We will, therefore, place our own understanding of the things published at the time in their respective historical moments; then, we will ask how they resound with the political and artistic concerns of our contemporary world.



What to expect for this course (cont'd)

- You will never have required reading or purchases for this class, though I encourage you to take notes and bring questions if you have them.
- Each week, before Wednesdays, I will email you what our lecture for that week will be about with different reading suggestions you might want to look into should you wish. By and large, you can assume we will be going according to the themes on the course schedule.
- The two texts I will most be using in preparation are *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, edited by David Levering Lewis and published in 1994, and *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett and published in 2007. However, if I use other sources, I will include them in my weekly emails with PDFs so if you would like to read them you may. Some of these resources may include:
 - *The Wiley Blackwell Anthology of African American Literature: Volume 2, 1920 to the Present*, ed. by Gene Andrew Jarrett
 - *Representing the Race: A New Political History of African American Literature* by Gene Andrew Jarrett
 - *Women's Work: An Anthology of African-American Women's Historical Writings from Antebellum America to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. by Laurie f. Maffly-Kipp and Kathryn Lofton
 - *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance* by James Smethurst