

# **The New Negro Era and the Great African American Transformation**

**Gerald Early**

## **The Great War and Black America**

War. No other man-made event can cause as much social upheaval as quickly as war. And no man-made event holds the same rich promise of dramatic social transformation and political change. For a minority group with a history of persecution, nothing can offer as much peril and as much hope as war. What World War I offered African Americans, even before the United States officially entered it, was three distinct advantages or at least three promising possibilities for improving their condition: 1) the war consolidated great power, both economic and judicial, within the federal government, as happens virtually with all major wars this country has fought; this meant that blacks, accustomed to appealing their case for citizenship to the federal government, could now hope that that government could do more on their behalf simply because it had more wide-ranging authority; 2) the war created more jobs and increased income, thus creating greater economic opportunities; 3) the war brought the mobilization of more than 380,000 black men who served in the armed forces. Before the war, about 10,000 black men served in the United States Army, the overwhelming majority of all the black men in the military, serving in the four all-black units created immediately after the Civil War, the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments and the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> cavalry. To put this in perspective, more than four times that number or about 42,000 served in Army combat units in France in 1918. It must be remembered that the vast majority of blacks in the Army were in service units, around 150,000 black stevedores served in Europe during the war. Seven

## 10 Gerald Early

hundred and fifty blacks died in combat and 5,000 were wounded. Nearly one million black men registered for the draft during World War I. Such mobilization could not help but raise African American political awareness and their cultural exposure, not least of all their cultural exposure to one another. And this could not help but affect the black American population as a whole because it made the issue of military service a mass concern, an inevitability when a nation adopts conscription as the United States did on May 18, 1917. I would argue that the war made African Americans a truly modern national community with a more informed international consciousness and this, in turn, helped to make the New Negro Movement possible. Eventually, the irony had to strike most blacks, men and women, that fighting to save and protect democracy in the so-called western world while being systematically and legally oppressed by a democracy was either one of the world's most profound existential dilemmas worthy of soul-shaking tragedy or an absolutely fatuous political act worthy of utter contempt. The war, in short, intensified how black Americans thought about the nature of their citizenship; it politicized them, or, one might say, it re-politicized them in ways that seem to be essential in any effort to understand the New Negro Movement that dominated the 1920s. It is true that World War I did not change the condition of African Americans in the United States but it did change the way that many blacks thought about their condition if, for no other reason, than it made them think about the duties and privileges of citizenship and the issue of loyalty to a nation or to a set of communities.

In his book *The American Negro in the World War*, former Booker T. Washington aide Emmett J. Scott, who served as a special assistant to Secretary of War Newton Baker from 1917 until the end of the war, wrote about the March 25, 1917 deployment of the all-black First Separate Battalion to guard the District of Columbia as particularly significant: "In this battalion there were to be found no hyphenates. In fact, the Negro has always proved himself to be 100-per-cent American, without alien sympathies and without hyphenate allegiance. The fact that a colored military unit," Scott observed, "was placed in this first honor post, to protect the President, the Congress, and the great Executive Departments of the Nation, as well as the vital supply stations that make for the health, happiness, and personal security of the capital of the American Republic, was an honor keenly appreciated."<sup>1</sup>

Just five months after this deployment, on August 23, 1917, black soldiers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, fed up with the harsh Jim Crow indignities of Houston and poorly led by their white officers, fought a mini-race war against whites in Houston. The result was 16 whites killed, 12 wounded. Of the 54 found complicit in this rebellion, 13 were hanged in December. Blacks decried this action. African American newspapers called it military lynchings. In subsequent courts-martial, more hangings followed. Clearly, Emmett Scott thought the way Booker T. Washington had, that the great political and cultural chip that blacks had to play that would protect them from white violence and mistreatment was their so-called loyalty, a quality that whites sentimentalized as part of the racial

politics of paternalism. In short, in this racial dance, blacks and whites both understood the art of condescension. If blacks could not be smart, they could certainly be good, went this line of racial reasoning. Blacks, according to Scott, were uncomplicated; they were 100 percent American. Of course, Scott never poses the question: what else could they be, for perhaps he thinks that blacks have never posed that question to themselves? According to his theory, blacks were far superior for use by the white American power elite than European immigrants who still held their homeland close to their hearts. Perhaps painter Aaron Douglas put it best when he said about his own eagerness for military service during the War, "Patriotism was as Afro-American as religion."<sup>22</sup> Douglas himself volunteered to serve in the regular army during the war, first serving with the Nebraska Student Army Training Corps and later transferring to the Minnesota Student Army Training Corps. But he transferred because the Nebraska unit no longer wanted him because of his race. Patriotism was a peculiar fate for the black American.

Of course black Americans were, as Du Bois famously pointed out, riven, too, by double consciousness of probably a more complex sort than any European immigrant. The problem of black people was not that they were 100 percent American, but that they couldn't be that, even if they wanted to be. African Americans were torn between assimilation and separatism. The problem was that in fiercely disavowing one or the other, the alternative that was left was either a form of neurotically chauvinistic illusion or a craven acceptance of political and cultural surrender. For the cynic, both alternatives might plausibly be argued as being displays of self-hatred. But in the years immediately following the close of the war, either position was, reasonably, a form of resistance, as whites did not wish to integrate with blacks nor to see them an independent, empowered community. For whites, blacks must always remain a deformed population beset by crisis, failure, and dissension, what Richard Wright would call, "fear and frenzy."

Du Bois's famous or infamous editorial in the July 1918 issue of *The Crisis*, "Close Ranks," showed that he, too, was not above being seduced by the idea of black loyalty, when he asked African Americans (especially the Talented Tenth) to put aside their grievances and fight "shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy." This call may have been, perhaps, an acknowledgement of the powerlessness of blacks at the time: what choice did they have, as a display of disloyalty would only have made their situation worse than it already was. And as Du Bois points out in the editorial, it would have been unthinkable for blacks to side with German power which "spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all the darker races for equality, freedom, and democracy."<sup>23</sup> Of course, a cynic could respond, how much worse could a horrible situation become? And besides, despite the intense racism of the Wilson administration, Du Bois may have believed, like Emmett Scott, that the immense war powers of the federal government could change things for the better. But the black masses were always a bit more skeptical than the leadership.

## 12 Gerald Early

The federal government did just enough in responding to the black press to make sure that blacks would not become a fifth column. Scott was appointed to his job in the war department in October 1917, and his difficult job was to keep up black morale while symbolically being a form of morale boosting because his was, as philanthropist Julius Rosenwald put it, “the most significant appointment that has yet come to the colored race.”<sup>24</sup> This position was reinvented in 1941 by President Roosevelt when William Hastie was appointed Civilian Aide to the War Department, so Scott’s job set an important precedent. About 1200 black officers were created as a result of the war, a small but nonetheless certified leadership group. Nonetheless, the war ended with blacks discredited as fighting men: the all-black 92<sup>nd</sup> Division, made up entirely of draftees, was written off as a complete failure under fire, the 369<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, with so many inexperienced men filling its ranks, was largely doing its trench fighting with only a core number of men and was completely demoralized. The non-experienced ran from battle in droves. The 370<sup>th</sup> and 371<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiments did well. But they went largely unrecognized by their own government, as American general John J. Pershing virtually handed these units over to the French. It was largely planned this way by the white military establishment that blacks would fail as fighting men in the war; they were in effect discredited in advance of the war: poor, haphazard training, inadequate equipment, poor officer leadership with racist white officers and demoralized black ones, difficult and highly isolated army camp experiences were not conducive to making good soldiers. Some black men failed as soldiers because they were convinced of their own inferiority but other black men felt they had no reason to die in the wars of white men. At the end of the war, blacks perhaps had a distinct and bitter answer to the question, *What Price Glory?*

Du Bois wrote in his 1919 essay about blacks in the Great War: “To everyone war is, and, thank God, must be disillusion. This war has disillusioned millions of fighting white men—disillusioned them with its frank truth of dirt, disease, cold, wet and discomfort; murder, maiming, and hatred. But the disillusion of Negro American troops was more than this, or rather it was this and more—the flat, frank realization that however high the ideals of America or however noble her tasks, her great duty as conceived by an astonishing number of able men, brave and good, as well as of other sorts of men, is to hate ‘niggers.’”<sup>25</sup> But did it really take a war of this magnitude to tell black Americans this?

But these might be the specific lessons of World War I: the war taught black Americans much about how to become a collective political entity, a truly imagined community of aspirations and expectations and not simply a people limited only to reacting to their condition. The NAACP’s membership increased so sharply after the war that it became a truly mass organization that clearly rivaled Garvey’s UNIA, if not in numbers, then certainly in influence, with Du Bois’s competing view of Pan Africanism having been sharpened by his disillusionment with the ideals of the war. The war taught blacks about the limitations of loyalty and about how much citizenship claims were tied to the masculine imperatives of war and that massive, international war might be the trend of the

future. One had to learn how to sacrifice one's life for one's country in a way that was politically useful for the group. Loyalty was not a hope but a bargain and this lesson black people more successfully put into practice during World War II when they asked for something in exchange for their loyalty to a larger community that had frequently betrayed them and a set of ideals more honored in the breach than in the practice. The war taught blacks that whites were not all-powerful and that the colonial status of the colored races could be overcome, that there was, indeed, a collective colonial identity that stood in opposition to the West. As one scholar put it, the war sharpened awareness among blacks of "[the] concepts of self-determination, separatism, and cultural identity,"<sup>6</sup> which became the ideological fault-lines of the twentieth-century civil rights struggle. The war, because it brought western dominance and values so much into question, taught black Americans who aspired to leadership to think about their identity in more sophisticated terms than they had in the past, to think beyond the Victorian notions of Christian virtue that had so governed their self-conception of what it meant to be civilized and what it meant to be successful. The war changed nothing and the war changed everything about how the oppressed could imagine themselves in relation to a modern world of airplanes, phonograph records, radio, and a burgeoning mass culture. This changed conception for the oppressed black American resulted in the New Negro. But what war ultimately teaches is that when the next one comes do not re-fight the last war. It is never very clear whether anyone, including black people, ever thoroughly learn that truism. People love to re-fight wars that have already been decided or people tend to think that old tactics will win new battles. A people may have many ways to die but they usually decide, for better and for worse, that they have only one way to fight.

### Peace in Our Time

"I was there," wrote poet/novelist/playwright/translator Langston Hughes about the Harlem Renaissance. "I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. . . . For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley."<sup>7</sup> They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on in green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alain Locke.

"I don't know what made any Negroes think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any. . . ."<sup>8</sup> This famous quotation from Hughes's 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*, is, by turns, guileless and cunning. On the one hand, for Hughes, the renaissance seemed to have certified the African American as the nation's Entertainer, but as really nothing else. Black intellectuals were too naïve, thinking that art could serve as an effective political wedge for blacks or as a way to empower a black

## 14 Gerald Early

elite. Art was simply swallowed in a huge processing machine called popular culture from which it was dispensed as a commodity to be consumed, with its politics appropriately de-fanged and, in the case of blacks, exoticized. Hughes also suggests that black intellectuals, the black elite, were largely estranged from ordinary blacks, a common charge then as now. Indeed, most of the blacks who aspired to be a true elite were self-absorbed, concerned only with their status and their fumbling efforts for white patronage and recognition. On the other hand, Hughes, a major literary presence himself during the renaissance, seems to say that the renaissance was a big party with blacks playing the role of inspired primitives and whites as the voyeurs and second-rate romantic ethnographers, when they weren't being outright thieves.

The Harlem Renaissance should not be understood, in retrospect, as solely an artistic movement or the attempt of some blacks to create a literary school or an effort merely to take advantage of white fascination with the primitive. The renaissance also had political, economic, and social dimensions that transcended or ignored art. And though most blacks probably hadn't heard of it, many were familiar with something called the New Negro Movement, and it would be wise to think about the Harlem Renaissance within the context of the New Negro Movement, an age in which blacks were transformed from a rural to an urban people with a distinct urban culture. The New Negro Movement, as its name would imply, also signaled an age of redefinition, to borrow a phrase from Stanley Crouch, of African Americans striving to define themselves on their own terms. This attempt at redefinition was frequently clumsy and sometimes painful, but always necessary. The Harlem Renaissance as a Negritude-esque artistic endeavor must be considered one aspect of the New Negro Era exemplified by the emergence of jazz as a modernist art movement against which the literature of the period paled by comparison; another aspect of the New Negro Movement would be the rise of Pan Africanism and anti-colonialism exemplified by Marcus Garvey, Du Bois's Pan African conferences, the racialist politics of Hubert H. Harrison, and the socialism of A. Philip Randolph; a third aspect would be the rise of a new racial entrepreneurship exemplified by the founding of the Negro baseball leagues by Rube Foster, the hair care products of Madame C. J. Walker and Annie Malone, and Marcus Garvey's ill-fated Black Star Line. Clearly, these last activities indicate that if some members of the black elite were interested in attracting white philanthropy, other blacks were trying to devise economic schemes that would free the race of white support. In this sense, the New Negro Movement was a new phase of the institution-building and collective identity-construction work that marked African American endeavors since the end of the Civil War, a phase where blacks began to throw off the shackles of both a shallow Victorian-oriented sense of virtue (although most of Garvey's grander ideas were strictly inspired by Victorianism) and an isolated rural folk-life that constrained as much as it enabled. It is too much to expect that people who have been battered by the brutality of white racism are going to emerge from this completely sane. It simply will not do to measure the activities of this era

by the simplistic yardstick of what was assimilationist and what was nationalist, what was resistance and what aimed for integration and conformity. Much of what black people were doing at this had mixed motives, intending to be both assimilationist and nationalist, simultaneously trying to prepare the race to be independent and to be integrated with whites. The Negro baseball leagues are a good case in point: the leagues which had mostly but not exclusively white owners were meant to be a race business venture but it was meant to prepare black athletes for the day when the major leagues would accept black players. To play in the major leagues with whites was what nearly all of the Negro Leagues players wanted, as the latter-day play, *Fences* by August Wilson, reminds us. After all, understanding that playing sports was supposed to be based on merit and nothing else, it was, on its face, absurd to have leagues based on color. The biggest drawback for the blacks was that they had to call themselves the Negro Leagues but the whites would never have to call their leagues “white baseball.” Their leagues were just baseball. Black Americans perhaps have been flustered, confused, and angered by their contradictory motives of wanting to beat white people and to join them.

There are two reasons why 1915 is a good date to choose as the beginning of the New Negro Movement or of New Negro consciousness. First, it was the year that the old king, Booker T. Washington, died, and even though this remarkable black leader, often called The Wizard by his intimates but never to his face, used the term “New Negro” in the title of one of his many ghostwritten books, he really represented a kind of Old Negro prototype. Washington was southern (had been a slave), felt that the future of blacks was rooted in the South, did not challenge segregation (at least, not openly), and was essentially a ruralist, an agriculturalist. All of this seems very much connected with the Gilded Age of the nineteenth century, with the great white industrialists and with imperialism, which shaped Washington’s thinking and demeanor. Washington never challenged any of the ideas of his era, including racism itself. In some ways, he tried to personify them, becoming, in effect, a kind of black monopolistic of big race boss similar to white ethnic machine bosses. He tried to get blacks to live as subordinates to whites under a system that supported the ideas of laissez-faire capitalism, manifest destiny, and white paternalism, that saw these ideas as the defining ideology of American values. He did not want blacks to agitate for their rights, and his credibility with the powerful whites who supported him was, in part, dependent on his ability to keep blacks from agitating, while isolating those who did, like W.E.B. Du Bois (who, at first, had been a supporter of Washington) and William Monroe Trotter (always an avowed enemy). By 1915 a new set of black leaders was emerging with decidedly more militant ideas, or at least more interest in active social reform, leaders who believed in the need for blacks to agitate for their rights and full citizenship and none of whom, unlike Washington, had been born into slavery. William Pickens, James Weldon Johnson, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Alain Locke, Walter White, and Charles S. Johnson were among those who helped form the basis of a black mainstream civil rights

establishment after Washington's death. Powerful civil rights and economic advocacy groups which advocated integration, such as the NAACP and the Urban League, had come into existence in the decade between 1910 and 1920. With the death of Washington, and the diminished power of the Tuskegee machine to control black political affairs nationally, coupled with the disillusioning but enlarging experience of the Great War, the idea of the New Negro became especially powerful, and a great flowering of diverse black thinking began to emerge. After the death of Washington, blacks produced their first socialist publication, their first international political publication, their first children's magazine, their first systematic attempt to cultivate a leisure, spectator audience, and their first serious nationalist movement. The New Negro Movement created our first modern and modernist black elites, that is, professional cadres of trained black people in artistic, bureaucratic, commercial, and academic circles. As black people became more modern, they became more professionalized and re-established elites that moved away from color solely (being light-skinned, the aristocracy of slavery, although color continued to matter) as a mark of privilege to merit, possessing credentials and having institutional connections, (the Talented Tenth) as a mark of distinction. This shift was important in liberating talent and ideas within the group itself.

The Harlem Renaissance was an artistic movement, to be sure, producing fiction, poetry, fine art, music, and dance, including novels by Jean Toomer (*Cane* 1923), Wallace Thurman (*The Blacker the Berry* 1929, *Infants of the Spring* 1932), Countee Cullen (*One Way to Heaven* 1932), Claude McKay (*Home to Harlem* 1928, *Banjo* 1929), George Schuyler (*Black No More* 1931), Walter White (*The Fire in the Flint* 1924, *Flight* 1926), Langston Hughes (*Not Without Laughter* 1930), Nella Larsen (*Passing* 1928 and *Quicksand* 1929), and Jessie Fauset (*There is Confusion* 1924, *Plum Bun* 1929), as well as poetry by Cullen (*Color* 1925, *Copper Sun* 1927, *Ballad of the Brown Girl* 1927), Hughes (*The Weary Blues* 1926, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* 1927), James Weldon Johnson (*God's Trombones* 1927), Georgia Douglas Johnson (*The Heart of a Woman* 1918, *Bronze: A Book of Verse* 1922, *An Autumn Love Cycle* 1928), and Sterling Brown (*Southern Road* 1932). There were paintings by Aaron Douglas, who illustrated books by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and James Weldon Johnson and sculpture by Augusta Savage. The renaissance saw the rise of jazz with some of the most important bands and soloists in the history of that music including Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Coleman Hawkins, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, King Oliver, Sidney Bechet, and Earl Hines, as well as musical theater by Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, and James P. Johnson ("Shuffle Along" 1921, "Runnin' Wild" 1923), and the great women singers Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Ethel Waters. It was the era of the classic women blues singers like Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Ma Rainey, and Mamie Smith. There were experiments in black theater such as Du Bois's Krigwa Players (1926-1928) and the Lafayette Players (1914-1932). Actor/singer Paul Robeson emerged as the big African American dramatic star (*All God's Chillun Got Wings* 1924, *Emperor Jones* 1925, *Porgy* 1928). And this



is only a short list of some of the period's luminaries. This intense artistic and cultural activity was clearly a self-conscious attempt on the part of race leaders to redefine the race's role and image through art. Never again, except possibly during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, would bourgeois black leadership and mainstream black civil society devote this much time and energy to art. The art gambit was a two-edged sword—granted that blacks were offered few other arenas in American cultural and intellectual life that they could exploit—nonetheless, it seemed merely to fulfill the common stereotype of white sociologists like Robert Park, and some black sociologists as well, that the Negro was the “Lady of the Races” who had a natural inclination toward oratory and art, especially music. Of course, it was Du Bois who once wrote that “the Negro is primarily an artist.”<sup>9</sup> But even in art, African American output was uneven. The literature was surely a mixed bag, partly because the black audience, as Du Bois pointed out in his 1921 piece, “Negro Art,” was too insecure to appreciate complex art that showed African American characters as ambiguous or deeply flawed. And many of the artists were too unsure of their craft to produce consistently well-written books. African Americans were much more able to express themselves more profoundly in their music but even here much was mediated by forces beyond their control who, in some measure, decided how black music should sound.

When Alain Locke published his seminal anthology of Renaissance writing, *The New Negro*, in 1925, the expression, “New Negro,” was at least 25 years old. The origins of the term are problematical. Booker T. Washington (with contributors) wrote a book called *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race* published in 1900, suggesting that the term “New Negro” goes back at least as far as the turn of the twentieth century. But it goes back still further. “The New Negro” was spoken of as early as the 1880s, referring to that generation of blacks who had grown up after slavery. (In this sense, the first black heavyweight boxing champion, Jack Johnson, who held the title from 1908 to 1915, was a New Negro, as he was born during Reconstruction. Southern whites saw this generation of blacks, of whom Johnson was, perhaps, emblematic, as a problem because they had not grown up the authoritarian rule of slavery and did not know their proper place. Johnson clearly acted in a way that greatly annoyed whites and was eventually prosecuted under the Mann Act, a hallmark piece of anti-prostitution legislation that federalized the crime of selling sex, mostly because he flaunted having sex with and marrying white women.<sup>10</sup> But if Johnson was a New Negro of some sort to whites, proud in his strange unruliness; he was a problem for bourgeois and respectable black society in that his profession was disreputable, even dishonorable, his passion for white women a display of racial self-hatred, and his sex life generally unseemly. Johnson was, in short, a personification of the white stereotype of the black male. The turn-of-the-century black leadership did not want New Negro to re-inscribe the racist stigma of being black but rather to erase it or better still uplift it. What blacks did not want was to take people like Johnson seriously as political emblems of revolt because whites hated them.

So, clearly, blacks and whites thought about the term, New Negro, differently.) Morgan State College vice-president William Pickens published a book entitled *The New Negro: His Political, Civil, and Mental Status, and Related Essays*, in 1916, at least a few years before the start of the renaissance. So, Locke's anthology may not so much have defined the era as signaled the mid-life or middle age of the term. The book had illustrations by Aaron Douglas and forever associated him with the New Negro movement.

It is actually more in the arena of politics than in art that one can talk more usefully about the construction of a New Negro consciousness, partly in the rise of a populist Pan-Africanism with Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League, which, like the creation of Harlem itself, was an expression of black entrepreneurship as political and economic power. Garvey, at one point, had an international paper published in four languages and a claimed membership of four million, which if in reality was inflated by half, was still the biggest mass movement among blacks in their history. Despite his Pan African vision having much of the trappings of blacked-up British imperialism (which Garvey deeply admired), there were aspects of his movement that were deeply appealing to the average black: the idea of being able to invest in the race; the idea that the race had a secular destiny and that it had a sweeping international identity that could be called a Black World; and most importantly that the race had a psychology that had been damaged but could be saved through the reconstruction of its history, an idea that was virtually identical with that of Harvard PhD Carter G. Woodson who had, only a few years before Garvey launched his Black Star Line in 1919, started the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and who, a few years after the failure of Garvey's shipping venture, would launch Negro History Week, probably the most enduring political and cultural creation of the New Negro Era. Indeed, when Woodson started Negro History Week in 1926, Garvey was in prison for mail fraud, his movement ended. Garvey, of course, invented modern black nationalism as both a form of politics and a form of mysticism and all its later advocates, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Kwame Ture are indebted to him. Other black political leaders of the day like socialist and union organizer A. Philip Randolph who co-edited with Chandler Owen, *The Messenger*, and leftist-leaning Pan Africanist Du Bois who edited *The Crisis*, despised Garvey, sometimes used racial slurs to describe him, and worked actively against him, dismissing him as a fraud and a demagogue. These fissures created during the New Negro Era that existed in the various schools of black liberal and radical politics probably in some form or fashion remain today. But what is most interesting is that Garvey always deeply admired Booker T. Washington, the most conservative of black leaders, whom he considered the only true institution-builder among black leaders. Garvey visited Washington's successor, Robert Russa Moten at least twice in 1918 and 1923 and spoke at Tuskegee during his 1923 visit. Emmett J. Scott, Washington's former secretary, was one of the few prominent leaders, who spoke out against Garvey's deportation. So Garvey who so personified the

New Negro political consciousness and Washington who so personified the Old Negro whose accommodationism had to be swept away wound up embracing in an odd but compelling way. Perhaps Garvey was more of the Old Negro dressed in new clothes or perhaps Washington was more of a New Negro than anyone thought. But no era or epoch is ever what it seems or is ever what it was to itself when another generation examines it.

And when did the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro Movement end? The answer to that greatly depends on how one defines the goals and philosophy of the era: was it largely literary and artistic? Was it political and consciousness-raising? Was it about institution-building and entrepreneurship on a new scale? Was it about the reconstruction of the black image? Was it about how blacks re-emerged as a creative and commercial force in American popular culture? Maybe the New Negro was all of this. I like to think of the movement, in part, as redefining black heroism and so I have always felt its starting point was the ascension of Jack Johnson to the heavyweight title in 1908 and how Johnson became a modern, pop culture race hero, hated by whites and admired, if not entirely loved, by blacks. The end point is the second fight between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis in 1938 when Louis became the first race hero equally embraced by both blacks and whites, a new New Negro because Louis was a perfect storm of masculinity, politics, and popular culture but perhaps Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit” in 1939 is even a better end point. “Strange Fruit” was the first commercially successful black protest song equally embraced by liberal whites and blacks. Holiday herself was the perfect storm of sex, politics, art, and popular culture in a way that complements Joe Louis very well. But who can say? All we really know is that everything must change because everything does end.

## Notes

1. Emmett J. Scott, *The American Negro in the World War* (n.p., 1919), 37.
2. Quoted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 7.
3. David Levering Lewis, ed., *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 697.
4. Scott, *The American Negro in the World War*, 47.
5. Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, 699.
6. Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas*, 16.
7. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), 228. Gladys Bentley (1907-1960) is not as well-known as other artists from the Harlem Renaissance, but she was a popular cabaret singer in the 1920s. She weighed over 400 pounds, dressed in male clothing, sang in a rough voice, and pounded the ivories like a pianist in a sanctified church. She was homosexual and even married her lover in a civil ceremony. Later in life, she married a sailor.
8. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 228.
9. Eric Sundquist, ed., *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 311.
10. Geoffrey C. Ward, *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 139ff; Jack Johnson, *Jack Johnson—In the Ring—And Out* (Chicago: National Sports Publishing Company, 1927), 76ff; Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 73-75, 116-123.