

## CONTENTS

Introduction	1
1 How to Segregate a Renaissance	19
2 Integration and Its Discontents	71
3 Challenging Little Black Sambo	108
4 What Was Postwar American Culture?	141
5 Toward Disunion	174
Coda	205

*Acknowledgments* 211

*Notes* 215

*Index* 263

# Introduction

FEW PEOPLE REMEMBER the best-selling Black author of the twentieth century: Frank Yerby. Six months after the publication of Yerby's *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), a historical romance set on an antebellum plantation near New Orleans, the novel became the first book written by a Black author to sell more than a million copies. In early 1947, the Associated Negro Press reported that a nationwide poll, administered by Harlem's Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature of the New York Public Library, had named Yerby as one of a dozen African Americans who had "done the most for the improvement of race relations 'in terms of real democracy'" in the previous year.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, *Foxes* became the first Black-authored book adapted into a film by a major Hollywood studio, after 20th Century Fox paid Yerby \$150,000 for the story, or nearly \$2 million in today's dollars.<sup>2</sup> By 1949, the *Chicago Defender* predicted that the zeitgeist in Hollywood films heralded many more empowered, dynamic portrayals of Black Americans. The *Defender's* estimates for the future also pointed to the adaptation of Yerby's *Foxes* as "the first of the current movie wave" to initiate the trend.<sup>3</sup>

*The Washington Post* praised Yerby as a "gifted Negro writer," albeit one who had written "two propaganda novels which were turned down by publishers." This journalist affirmed that instead of giving up, Yerby found a way to revisit "his original serious intention of bolstering the Negro cause" through melodramatic historical novels, "which book buyers will read, liberally laced with a message."<sup>4</sup> On the eve of the Cold War, Yerby was considered a prominent example of an African American who advanced "interracial understanding, mutual respect and co-operation between the colored and white races."<sup>5</sup> Although Yerby became an exceptionally visible and successful Black author in mid-century America, today he is virtually unknown. How could this be?

Yerby's career, cultural inspirations, and professional relationships represent a forgotten era of interracial literary culture that is the focus of this book.<sup>6</sup> While the term *interracial* is not as familiar as it once was, this was how contemporaries often described cross-racial collaborations and cultural influences for much of the twentieth century.

During and after the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, *interracial* typically referred to sex or romance across racial lines. In the preceding decades, however, racially progressive authors and critics used the term *interracial* to describe a broad range of cultural interactions and literary texts. Books, plays, and other works by Black authors that enjoyed critical and commercial success with readers and audiences across the color line were also perceived as interracial and were credited for promoting cross-racial thinking and habits.

Yerby's success was exceptional, but his absence from literary and cultural history is emblematic of broader elisions in American—rather than exclusively African American—letters. Dozens of Black writers and literary professionals were once at the forefront of America's publishing business, carving out new ways to fit into the literary field. These Black authors were highly accomplished editors and publishers, in addition to maintaining other roles that frequently intersected, and they forged innumerable forgotten partnerships with white peers.

Led by Black writers and publishers, the best writing and collaborations of this understudied tradition challenged inequitable, separatist, and exclusionary conventions in the mainstream publishing trade. But as calls and demands for racial integration in American society competed with rallying cries and action plans for Black Power during the 1960s, positive assessments of the term *interracial* and interracialism declined. Changes were made possible by interracialism, but they often appeared small, and working across racial lines in the twentieth century was frequently tense. In 1959, W.E.B. Du Bois remarked: "If one were not careful, an interracial meeting would be an interracial fight."<sup>7</sup> Around the same time, James Baldwin, in a letter to Lorraine Hansberry, divulged that his novel in progress, which was later published as *Another Country* (1962), was a "grim interracial drama."<sup>8</sup> In another example, in 1967, a typical Black commentary on race riots in Detroit posited: "The phrase 'black power' which cropped up early and disappeared of its own inappropriateness, really had no emotional force in an atmosphere of interracial looting, interracial vandalism, interracial incendiaryism and interracial sniping."<sup>9</sup> Without question, this is a grim conception of interracialism. Yet negative and fraught uses of the term in the 1960s were by no means new.

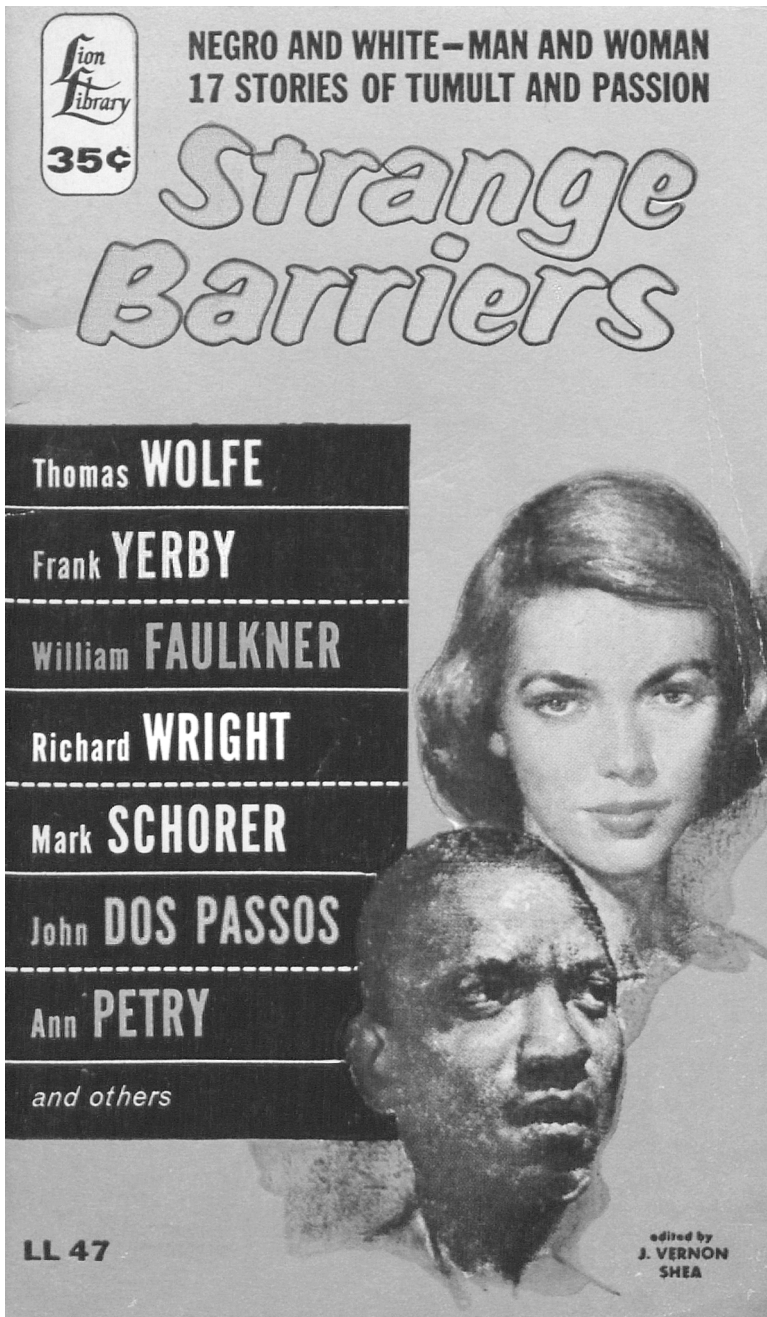


FIGURE 0.1. *Strange Barriers* (New York: Lion Library, 1955), an anthology of short stories by Thomas Wolfe, Frank Yerby, William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Ann Petry, and other writers, edited by J. Vernon Shea, was one of numerous attempts at mid-century to challenge the “strange barriers” that segregated Americans of different races from one another. Cover art by Clark Hulings.

Fear of social and cultural interracialism in American life contributed to the rise of anti-Black rhetoric after the Civil War. The most well-known examples of interracial print culture before, during, and after the Civil War included autobiographies by the formerly enslaved, including prolific Black authors such as Frederick Douglass and a host of others.<sup>10</sup> From the 1860s onward, however, the widespread belief, especially among white people, that humans could and should be classified into separate “races” based on immutable traits passed on through generations was used to justify eugenics, racial separatism, and many other forms of prejudice and exclusion. In short, racial mixing was perceived as a threat to the alleged superiority of the white race and the prospect of white nationalism.

Between the turn of the century and the mid-1960s, a growing number of Black authors and cultural professionals responded to these biases with bold proclamations that the United States was their country as well. It was the norm for ambitious Black writers and publications to attack cultural barriers between races and ethnicities, and many intellectuals, artists, media firms, reading communities, and cultural professionals refused to see American literary culture in racially discrete terms.

*Impermanent Blackness* traces a long history of challenges to racist standards in the predominantly white publishing business throughout the twentieth century, facilitated by Americans of all races at the top of their fields. I focus on the many Black writers, editors, and others who contributed to these efforts but who have been forgotten, overlooked, or simply taken for granted. Once perceived or labeled as “interracial” or “integrationists,” they pushed the boundaries of what Black writing was and what counted as “American” and “African American” literature.

Before the late 1910s, supporters and enemies alike considered the Black poet, editor, and critic W. S. Braithwaite (1878–1962) the finest and most influential anthologist in the United States. As Jessie Fauset, the novelist and literary editor of the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine, wrote in 1920: “Every person in this country who is interested in poetry has the latest Braithwaite Anthology in his library, and many poets who scorned the early efforts of [this] Negro lad are now standing on tip-toe to know whether he will include their work in his book.”<sup>11</sup> Fauset was not exaggerating. When *The Crisis* noted Braithwaite’s death decades later, the obituary stated that “most of his readers know that the compiler of the annual *Anthology of Magazine Verse* (1913–1929) was a Negro” and that he “was one of the few American Negro artists who realized that art knows no color line.”<sup>12</sup> Braithwaite’s loyal readers would have known him as one of the most acclaimed interracialists of his generation.

## National Association for the Advancement of Colored People



**WILLIAM STANLEY BEAUMONT BRAITHWAITE**, Fourth Spingarn Medalist; born in Boston, Mass., December 6, 1878. He is the author of two volumes of

verse, three anthologies of English poetry and five anthologies of American magazine verse. He is the most prominent critic of poetry in America.

73

FIGURE 0.2. W. S. Braithwaite was awarded the NAACP's fourth Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement by an African American, as announced in *The Crisis*, July 1918.

Discussing this unifying vision that launched his career in an essay on “contemporary” Black poets written for *The Crisis* back in 1919, Braithwaite proclaimed: “All great artists are interracial and international in rendering in the medium of any particular art the fundamental passions and the primary instincts of humanity.”<sup>13</sup> Skeptics and rivals such as Claude McKay scoffed: “In Braithwaite’s writings there was not the slightest indication of what sort of

American he might be. And I was surprised one day to read in the Negro magazine, *The Crisis*, that he was a colored man.”<sup>14</sup> When McKay asserted that Braithwaite’s literary work was not Black enough for his tastes (or intuition), he failed to note, or chose to ignore, that this “colored man” had mentored, promoted, and published scores of aspiring Black writers in an era when others refused to. Decades later, countless African Americans took McKay’s criticism at face value, further calling into question Braithwaite’s insistence years earlier that he was building support for cultural unity across the United States.<sup>15</sup>

In the twenty-first century, interracial print culture and networks are primarily associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s far more than any other decade or period. George Hutchinson’s landmark book *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) was the first major study of the Harlem Renaissance to make a case for the cultural power of interracialism between the 1910s and mid-1930s.<sup>16</sup> More recently, several major historiographies and literary studies have shed new light on the remarkably complex racial, transnational, and chronological dimensions of the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>17</sup>

Despite an impressive corpus of scholarship on the first quarter of the twentieth century, however, histories of Black and interracial authorship, literary work, and institutional support before—and after—the 1920s are less well known.<sup>18</sup> As the literary scholar Daylanne K. English has observed, the enormous influence of this period demands an awareness of how it has been constructed: “I do not wish to argue that there was no cultural flowering during the 1920s. But I do want to suggest that there is a contemporary academic selection process at work whereby the Harlem Renaissance often emerges as the most compelling moment in the history of African American culture.”<sup>19</sup> Rethinking and traversing commonly accepted literary categories and chronologies helps clarify the ambitions of scores of published Black authors who defied racial assumptions and expectations in their published work. *Impermanent Blackness* interrogates how cultural labels (e.g., the Harlem Renaissance) are established, by looking critically at the writers and editors who wanted to create an equitable print culture, unbound by the limits and constraints of Jim Crow.

In the first issue of the Chicago-based magazine *The Champion* (1916–1917), for example, the editor, Black poet Fenton Johnson, wrote, “We realize that it is not possible to bring about a literary Renaissance by holding ourselves aloof from those aspiring, nor can we gain results by publishing [material] which does not measure up to [this] standard.”<sup>20</sup> A few months later, Johnson boasted: “America is at her highest poetic level, a renaissance due to both the Great War



FIGURE 0.3. *The Favorite Magazine* (Autumn 1920) was edited and published by Fenton Johnson.

and her social growth, but the world would not be aware of this condition if it were not for these [annual] Braithwaite anthologies.”<sup>21</sup> In *The Champion* and other short-lived publications, Johnson enthusiastically encouraged “the reconciliation of the races.”

Even during the Great Depression, Black authors employed by Chicago’s Federal Writers’ Project published a popular, meticulously produced pamphlet entitled *Cavalcade of the American Negro* (1940), assuring their diverse readership that cultural segregation was waning: “A co-operative program of interracial action is in process of realization through the furtherance of mutual

acquaintanceship and mutual understanding of the common interests.”<sup>22</sup> As the literary historian Liesl Olson writes: “Interracial collaborations in Chicago, often difficult but not unusual, occurred through projects sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, through leftist circles, and through the individual daring of artists and writers.”<sup>23</sup> Praising Braithwaite’s contributions to this work, the chapter “Literature and Art” in the Works Progress Administration’s *Cavalcade* outlined how he had challenged white readers’ assumptions about Black poetry: “The influence of [Paul Laurence] Dunbar made it difficult for a Negro poet to find readers unless he wrote Negro dialect. Nevertheless there was a group of Negro poets who clung to the ideal of conventional language. Most notable of these were William Stanley Braithwaite of Boston, [who is] best known as an anthologist and critic.”<sup>24</sup> Braithwaite indeed strongly opposed the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes used to denigrate African Americans. His stance on this matter in the years after Dunbar’s death in 1906 heralded the game-changing potential of twentieth-century literary interracialism at its best.

African American support for these publishing achievements remained fairly steady until the late 1950s. As the literary historian Werner Sollors has explained, cultural emphases on Black and white solidarities shifted “as interracialism became decriminalized, more commonplace, and so widespread as to become an accepted part of the commercial culture, and, indeed, so much a part of ordinary and socially sanctioned human life that the emotions some of the earlier writers brought to this theme seem almost beyond comprehension today.”<sup>25</sup> In the decades prior to the 1960s, facing challenges that ranged from lackluster white liberalism to downright hostile white supremacists, Black interracialists romanticized rather than repudiated the feasibility of a robust, multiracial democracy.

During the first six decades of the twentieth century, African American readers and critics recognized publishing clout and financial success as civil rights achievements. When the *Pittsburgh Courier* “saluted” Frank Yerby for his commercial successes in 1948, it explained: “For [a] Negro author to make the list of best-sellers in the highly competitive field of writing is still a rarity. For a Negro author to make a best-seller’s list in books not dealing primarily with Negroes, is still more a rarity if not unprecedented.”<sup>26</sup> At the time, it was subversive for African Americans to publish anything that was not distinctively Black. The previous year, when other Black newspapers outlined why Yerby merited a mention on the “Race Relations Honor Roll” for 1946, they all reported that sales of *Foxes* had “exceeded those of any book ever written by a Negro American.” While many readers knew Yerby was African American,

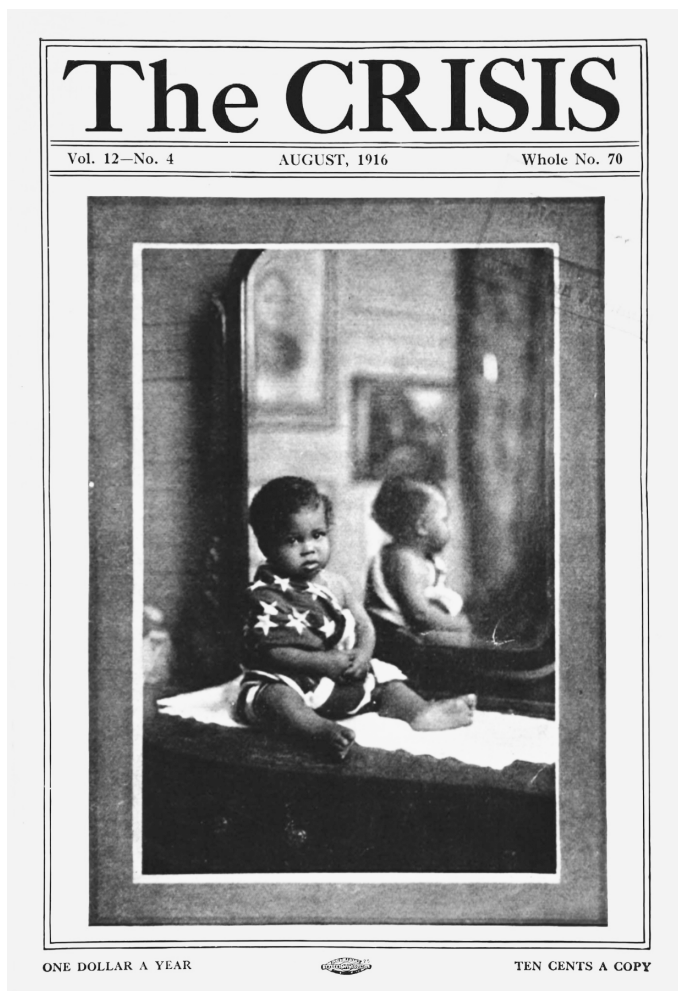


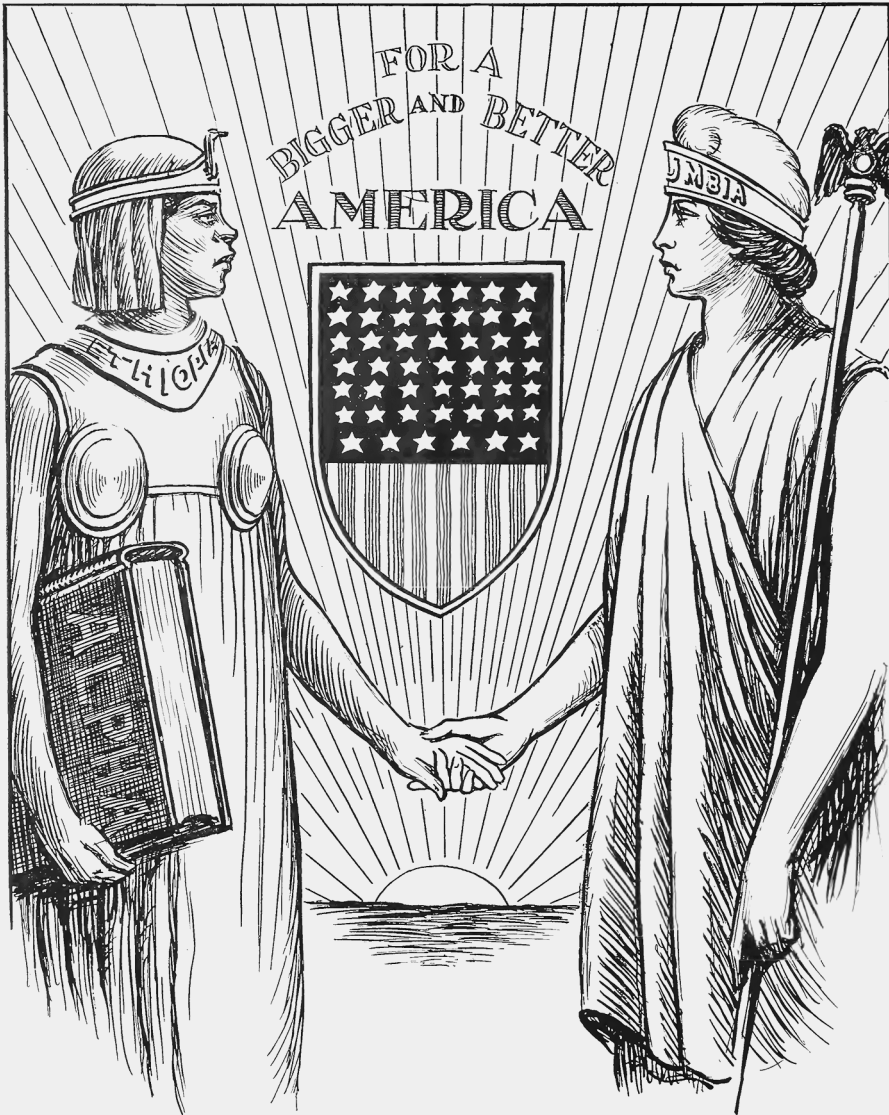
FIGURE 0.4. From the turn of the twentieth century, popular photographs of Black children wrapped in or holding American flags signaled the power, value, and necessity of fighting for an inclusive democracy. This photograph, credited to “Turner,” appeared in *The Crisis*, August 1916.

critics and booksellers on both sides of the color line were confident that white Southern readers “probably do not know the author is a Negro.”<sup>27</sup> In 1947, one Black critic, reporting on a well-received talk Yerby gave at the University of Pennsylvania, joked about how surprised white Southerners would be if they knew how “scholarly” and “colored” this novelist was: “Incidentally, Yerby has numerous profitable invitations from Dixie to address ladies’ literary groups. [Yerby] chuckled to think what would happen if he accepted and showed up

to address the aristocracy of Natchez, Mobile, Savannah, or Charleston,” in the era of Jim Crow.<sup>28</sup>

The same year, a Harvard-trained Black chemist asserted in the *Afro-American*, “Except for ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ [1852] Yerby’s novel [*Foxes*] is the only important one which has condemned the entire social system of the antebellum South, by showing not only how completely unmoral and immoral it was, but also how futile!”<sup>29</sup> Yet two decades later, as the Civil Rights Movement became more militant, Yerby’s cultural prominence and breakthroughs had become far less important, as perceptions of writing across racial lines and foregrounding white protagonists changed. Langston Hughes remarked, possibly with some jealousy, in another nationally distributed African American newspaper: “Although Mr. Yerby is not white, his writing is. And no Negro writer has made as much money as he has, ever.”<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Hughes included Yerby’s work in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (1967).<sup>31</sup> Only in recent years have scholars investigated how varied and contradictory African American readers and critics’ responses were to Yerby. This book shows how a broader set of prominent Black writers preceded him in fashioning and refashioning American and African American cultural standards, including Braithwaite, Charles Chesnutt, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Juanita Harrison, Ellen Tarry, and Richard Wright, among others. These Black authors—and several white interlocutors—cultivated networks that paved the way for Willard Motley, Alice Childress, Julian Mayfield, Lorraine Hansberry, and many others at the center of the story that follows.

During and after the 1960s, debates among African Americans about the role and impact of popular Black writing and criticism became more heated and more public. It became popular to accuse authors such as Braithwaite, Yerby, Hansberry, Ralph Ellison, and scores of others of not being Black enough. A poem by Amiri Baraka published in 1973 declared: “In the midst of chaos, and near injury / we survive, because we are still young and correct / and black enough to be tough.”<sup>32</sup> Disavowals and sharper critiques of older generations of Black writers who were widely associated with interracialism—Baraka was a figurehead for this turn—paralleled a radical shift in how demands for a biracial democracy were framed and sold to the literate public. In short, the difference between the Black-organized, racially inclusive calls by Fenton Johnson and his colleagues “For A Bigger and Better America” in a representative issue of *The Champion* published in 1917 and the title of Julius Lester’s *Look Out Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!* (1968) couldn’t be starker.



Cartoon by E. C. Shefton

"THE RECONCILIATION OF THE RACES"

FIGURE 0.5. "The Reconciliation of the Races," a cartoon by E. C. Shefton, appeared in *The Champion Magazine*, January 1917.

This study is not intended, and should not be misconstrued, as a criticism of Black-authored books that were unapologetic in emphasizing racial conflict during and after the 1960s. Without question, Lester's *Look Out Whitey!* championed African American pride and autonomy. At the same time, many books in this genre also reified racial differences between "Blacks" and "whites," thus refuting common definitions of "interracialism" altogether. Or as Black author and filmmaker Kathleen Collins asked in the title as well as the last line of her most famous short story: "It's 1963. Whatever happened to interracial love?"<sup>33</sup> After the 1950s, interracialism was on life support.

Revealing the complexities of this multiracial world of literary production would have been impossible without consulting dozens of excellent biographical studies and revisionist narrative accounts of this period.<sup>34</sup> Archive-based research has never been more prominent in Black literary studies. I build on overlapping but distinct layers of scholarship by revisiting personal diaries, letters, and other firsthand accounts preserved in manuscript collections; popular commentary and literary criticism; and archived book contracts, historical advertisements, and high-profile endorsements.<sup>35</sup>

Though relatively small in number, cross-racial collaborations in the decades up to the 1960s helped affirm and legitimate Black lives in an epoch when white supremacists casually denied the shared humanity of people of color. Interest in soliciting Black authors capable of connecting people irrespective of their race or ethnicity signaled for others that the reform and advancement of both American and African American writing mattered. In a draft of his own philosophy of literature at mid-century, Chester Himes, one of the most popular Black authors of the post-World War II era, noted: "Theoretically, I believe that the problem of humanity is humanity, itself; that the hunger of an Italian child can not be divided by color from the hunger of an American Negro child."<sup>36</sup> Drawing from carefully preserved materials like these, in conjunction with dozens of exchanges between authors and readers, this study brings to life a rich sense of the personal relationships and intellectual influences that reaffirmed interracialism—and those that, at various moments, reified demands that Black and white communities remain "divided by color," even in print.

Chapter 1, "How to Segregate a Renaissance," examines the first three decades of the twentieth century, a period when an unprecedented number of African Americans united with white counterparts to begin dismantling racial imbalances in the publishing world. W. S. Braithwaite was hailed by readers,

writers, and critics of all races for inaugurating a “poetic renaissance” in America prior to World War I. Or as one influential white editor stated after this global conflict, “William Stanley Braithwaite, the anthologist, lent his strongest encouragement to the *renaissance*.”<sup>37</sup> Braithwaite was far from alone in promoting this loose-knit cultural movement, which ultimately extended well beyond poetry. During the 1910s, scores of commercially oriented literary professionals created space in various domains for Black authors. The interracial print culture that emerged included periodicals, plays, novels, anthologies, poetry volumes, sociological studies, literary criticism, short story collections, travel memoirs, and autobiographies. Black writers and literary themes were better represented than ever while Braithwaite held power. Yet by the mid-1920s, roughly the apex of the Harlem Renaissance, a growing number of Black intellectuals were criticizing white contemporaries for popularizing an offensive mix of exotic and stereotypical images of Black people. Several of these white authors had already launched racist attacks on Braithwaite, actively denigrating his contributions to modernizing and advancing American literature and criticism.

Chapter 2, “Integration and Its Discontents,” illuminates the depth and breadth of Black writing in the 1930s and 1940s, when Black intellectuals such as Braithwaite, Grace Nail Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson mentored a new generation (post-Harlem Renaissance) of Black writers to keep advocating for literary desegregation—in short, for antiracist narratives about Black life and critical recognition of Black art that blurred racial distinctions and categories. When W.E.B. Du Bois resigned as editor of *The Crisis*, after calling for a segregated economy for African Americans, Braithwaite assured him in 1934: “Your stand is a triumphant call to the youth of a new generation.”<sup>38</sup> In these years, a diverse cohort of Black artists, intellectuals, and aspiring professionals gained more opportunities and assumed more prominence in organizations on both sides of the color line. Their achievements and professional prospects were precarious, transient, and often exploitative. Sharing much in common with Braithwaite’s reputation a generation earlier, Frank Yerby and Willard Motley’s best-selling novels published in the 1940s were described by several of their contemporaries as “raceless.” Yet this was an inadequate characterization of their multiracial, multiethnic books, as important scholarship on “white-life” novels and novelists has pointed out.<sup>39</sup> Another Black writer, Juanita Harrison, the author of one of Macmillan’s best-selling travelogues, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (1936), was also an important



FIGURE 0.6. Promotional photograph of Juanita Harrison, author of *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (New York: Macmillan, 1936).

precursor to Motley, Yerby, and Richard Wright's commercial successes. Harrison and Yerby, in particular, chafed at, rejected, and defied political affiliations. But it was virtually impossible for Black authors such as Yerby to evade either racism or politics in the United States in the early Cold War years, even when they tried.<sup>40</sup>

Chapter 3, "Challenging Little Black Sambo," highlights an overlapping group of Black writers and cultural interracialists, from different backgrounds,

who wrote and illustrated an impressive range of books for children and young adults. Since the first decade of the twentieth century, numerous authors, artists, and editors devoted time and energy to bringing Black and white characters together in the same juvenile texts—but on much fairer terms than those popularized by Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* (1899). Shedding new light on the ubiquitous resistance to the racial reform of children’s books within the corporate publishing trade, which was dominated by white female editors by the 1940s, affirms how groundbreaking improvements and achievements in this sector were. Muriel Fuller, Frank Yerby’s first literary agent, was also a leading children’s book editor at mid-century. Her commentaries, correspondence, and notes on juvenile literature form the core of this insider’s portrait of the children’s book business that flourished at mid-century.

Chapter 4, “What Was Postwar American Culture?” explores the tumultuous Cold War years of the late 1940s and 1950s, when scores of Black cultural professionals fought for and wooed broader audiences of readers and media consumers than ever before. New and increased capacities for inexpensive paperback printing supported larger and larger print runs of cheaper and cheaper books by Black writers. Biracial networks of entrepreneurial authors and booksellers diversified popular reading for generations of Americans, elevating African American writing to new heights. A fast-growing segment of editors were deeply supportive of interracial books and a host of other collaborations between people of different races and ethnicities. As debilitating as the anti-Communist Red Scare was, African Americans refused to give up on the potentially liberating power of Black-authored books and Black cultural representation. Optimism and deliberate efforts to work across the color line to attract white as well as Black audiences were hallmarks of an era when interracialism became a cultural standard.

The final chapter, “Toward Division,” documents how Black and cross-racial books, meetings, and exchanges became fractious in the 1960s. In the end, literary and artistic interracialism, promoted by Braithwaite and numerous other Americans of all backgrounds, faltered during and after the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>41</sup> As race relations deteriorated, demand for vitriolic mass media rose sharply. In this chapter I argue that sensationalized Black print and cultural programming—sponsored, and often written, by white authors, editors, and cultural professionals—stood in stark contrast to the aims of an established cohort of African American artists, writers, and intellectuals in the 1960s. While the broad-based Black Arts Movement that emerged in this era established magazines, publishing houses, and other institutions to elevate Afrodiasporic

## What the World Is Saying About FENTON JOHNSON

THE YOUNG NEGRO POET

Who begs to announce that in order to bring to both races his message of good will and keen appreciation of lowly life he desires to give readings from his works, "A Little Dreaming" (1913. Price 75c. net), "Visions of the Dust" (1915. Price \$1.00 net), "Songs of the Soil" (Recently published. 50c. net) at Chautauquas, churches and private entertainments.

The *London Literary World* says: "Some of his verse is in formal, cultivated English, some in the corrupted language of the American Negro. The latter rings true; it expresses with singular intensity the joys and sorrows of a subject race."

"A Little Dreaming" gives promise of a true poetic gift, a natural, spontaneous lyricism with the same distinguishing racial qualities that characterize the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar."—*Review of Reviews*.

"Mr. Johnson has assumed the place held by the late Paul L. Dunbar."—*Detroit Free Press*.

"The dialect poems are especially excellent, strange, amusing, plaintive, appealing songs from the heart of a childlike, feckless race, done with ease and without self consciousness."—*The Ballman*.

"He has the vision and the faculty divine."—*Rochester Post-Express*.

"Deserves attention as the verse of a young Negro poet who, whether he writes in conventional English or in Negro dialect, combines simplicity and genuineness with unusual lyric gifts."—*Living Age*.

"The silence is now broken by a new note of lyricism, more homely and nearer to the earth and the soul of growing things."—*Chicago Daily News*.

"A colored poet exhibiting a rollicking humor, a pronounced sense of rhythm and quick response to nature characteristic of his race."—*Boston Herald*.

"With such a field, the author has readily unearthed a wealth of buried traditions and attractively set forth phases of history of the colored race with all its natural pathos and humor of a vivid imagination."—*Book News Monthly*.

"Appealing poems."—*The Continent*.

"Especially successful in expressing the feeling of his own people in dialect verse."—*Providence Journal*.

"Apt use of dialect."—*Pittsburgh Gazette-Times*.

"I have especially enjoyed the dialect poems, which have much grace, freshness, and tenderness."—*Gamaliel Bradford*.

"An interesting study."—*Brooklyn Standard-Union*.

"A spontaneous lyric quality."—*Portland Express*.

"A brilliant young dreamer."—*Ohio State Journal*.

Josephine Turk Baker, Editor of *Correct English*, Joel E. Spingarn, Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, and others have in personal letters expressed their appreciation of Mr. Johnson's work.



For terms address FENTON JOHNSON, 3522 State Street, CHICAGO, ILL.

FIGURE 0.7. Advertisement for Fenton Johnson's books in *The Nation* (May 25, 1916).

culture, a parallel nexus of white writers and publishers frequently exaggerated and embellished Black anger and racial tensions for profit. In 1969, one white publishing executive instructed publishers who sought to diversify their book lists that they "should not rely on consultants and researchers or even members of the black middle class, with whom publishers can talk comfortably." Instead, he advised them to "go into the ghetto," to establish connections with "the 'tough, angry' Negro who won't pull any punches," to capture "a tremendous black and Puerto Rican market."<sup>42</sup> In the 1960s, James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry rebuked white Americans who arbitrarily exacerbated racial divisions. The famous question Baldwin posed to the predominantly white readership of the *New Yorker* in 1962, "Do I really want to be integrated into a burning house?" encapsulates these tensions.<sup>43</sup>

Each chapter of *Impermanent Blackness* centers on Black and white authors who relied on a mix of romanticism and realism to convey African American perspectives against racist opposition. Since the 1910s, critics have accused some of the nation's most prominent Black writers of publishing texts that were too white to be fully appreciated by Black readers. Yet authors such as Fenton Johnson and the prizewinning essayist Isaac Fisher, who did not write

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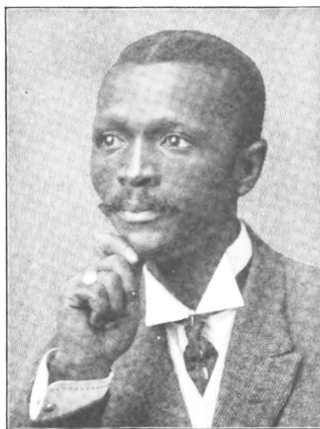
# ISAAC FISHER

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WINNER OF THE FIRST PRIZE  
in  
EVERYBODY'S "RUM" CONTEST

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*A Letter  
from*  
BOOKER T.  
WASHINGTON



ISAAC FISHER

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*To the Editor of  
Everybody's Magazine,*  
MY DEAR SIR:

As I have already written you, I was very much pleased to note, in the September issue of *EVERYBODY'S MAGAZINE*, that your First Prize of Five Hundred Dollars for the best essay on the subject, "What We Know About Rum, etc.," had been awarded to Isaac Fisher, a graduate of this institution.

I was not at all surprised to learn that he had won this prize, for in one way and another he has been winning prizes almost ever since his graduation from Tuskegee Institute. Counting large and small, he has won more than thirty prizes in essay contests with the best brains of this country.

From the time when I sat in one of the students' prayer-meetings here at Tuskegee some years ago, and saw a very small and rather poorly dressed boy stand up, and with diction that was almost perfect, manner intensely earnest, and ringing voice, declare: "I can not ever hope to match the logic of the gallant Colonel Ingersoll; but poor in reasoning power as I am, I can not accept his philosophy because he takes away my Bible, on which I have been taught to lean for guidance, and gives me nothing

better in its place; and in spite of my ardent longing for life after death, tells me that the grave ends all, giving me nothing to quiet my soul's unrest"—ever since that night, I have known that Isaac Fisher was no ordinary student, and that under proper guidance he would become an unusually strong man. I backed my judgment by sending out on the farm for him the next morning, telling him that his future was to be along literary lines, and offering him my personal interest to help him through the school.

Remembering his powerful speech in the prayer-meeting, I was astounded to find that he was in one of the lowest classes in the school.

The boy was having an unusually hard time to pay for his board and clothing, not having any money and being dependent entirely upon himself for support. But he did not complain and did not call on me for aid, as I intended that he should do. His doggedness and determination, together with rather unusual ability as a student and power as a speaker, made him many friends among the teachers, including Mrs. Washington, who saw to it that he had all the books he craved; and when I made him special news correspondent for the school,

523

FIGURE 0.8. Booker T. Washington wrote a letter in praise of the prize-winning essayist Isaac Fisher in *Everybody's Magazine*, April 1915.

primarily or exclusively about African American life, broadened the white public's awareness of how expansive Black creative and intellectual pursuits could be. Black authors who challenged racial conventions wanted to be in conversation with other creatives, intellectuals, and writers who reflected and meditated on the human condition. Forward-looking Black and white

interlocutors (authors, critics, publishers, editors, and audiences to some degree) welcomed their literary contributions.

In the course of the twentieth century, the methods and motivations behind cultural interracialism were neither uniform nor inevitable. Some authors used, pitched, or became poster children for blurring racial lines in American literary culture to make a living. Others reached across the nation's tenacious social divisions to illuminate, interrogate, and rebel against Jim Crow or simply to enjoy what the historian Allyson Hobbs has termed "racial indeterminacy."<sup>44</sup> Whatever their reasons, these men and women were keen to undermine the cultural legitimacy of structural hierarchies in the United States and other white-majority nation-states. Proponents of distinctively Black and white literary standards maligned these efforts as conservative and inauthentic. But in many ways, their passion for artistic freedom and conviction to working across and moving beyond racial boundaries was radical.

These artists and intellectuals have much to teach us about the opportunities and challenges that underpin present-day commitments to building an inclusive American society. Attending to the elusive character of progressive interracial literary culture helps explain the reversals and discontinuities that still hinder racial pluralism. These men and women lived like dreamers and pragmatists at once. And this delicate interracial milieu is no less fragile, contentious, or urgent today.

## INDEX

- Across the Cotton Patch* (Credle), 117–18
- Adams, John Henry, 112, 115
- Afro-American*, 10, 77
- Aldington, Richard, 59
- Allensworth, Allen, 39
- American Dilemma* (Myrdal), 88
- American Historical Review*, 34
- American Magazine*, 31
- American Review of Reviews*, 44
- Anchor Man* (Jackson), 130
- Anderson, John, 195–96
- Anderson, Sherwood, 58–59, 67–68
- Angry Black South, The* (Mitchell and Peace, eds.), 193–94, 198–99
- Annie Allen (Brooks), 158
- Another Country* (Baldwin), 2
- Anthology of Magazine Verse*, 4, 7–8, 39, 58, 63, 67; estimated sales of, 39; Alain Locke in, 20
- Appleton-Century, 96, 98
- Ashmore, Ann Mulloy, 130
- Associated Negro Press, 1, 76
- Associated Press, 79, 130, 184
- Associated Publishers, 120
- Association of Children's Book Editors.  
See Children's Book Council
- Atlanta Daily World*, 144
- Atlanta Monthly*, 76
- Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, 28
- Atlanta University, 19, 83, 145
- Atlantic*, 77
- Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Stein), 37
- Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Johnson), 31, 38, 49, 83
- Avedon, Richard, 180–81
- Avon Publishing, 147–48
- Baker, Augusta, 137–38
- Baker, Ray Stannard: *Following the Color Line*, 31, 35; letter to Du Bois by, 30–31
- Baldridge, Cyrus LeRoy, 127–28
- Baldwin, James, 16, 98, 142, 145, 155, 177–78, 181–86, 194–95; on *Another Country* as interracial drama, 2; *The Fire Next Time*, 184; *Giovanni's Room*, 95, 153; *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, 152, 160–61; picture of, 162; *Notes of a Native Son*, 186
- Bambara, Toni Cade, 206
- Bank Street School of Education, 120
- Bannerman, Helen, 15; *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, 15, 109–10, 117, 124, 140
- Baraka, Amiri, 10, 165, 190, 194, 197–99
- Barber, Jesse Max, 114
- Barbizon-Plaza Hotel, 132
- Barton, Rebecca Chalmers, 80
- Baudelaire, Charles, 177
- Bechhofer, C. E., 24; *The Literary Renaissance in America*, 24–25, 68
- Bechtel, Louise, 118
- Becker, Joseph, 80
- Beim, Jerrold, 129; *Swimming Hole*, 130
- Beim, Lorraine, *Two Is a Team*, 129–30
- Belafonte, Harry, 167, 185
- Berea College, 68

- Best Short Stories by Negro Writers* (Hughes, ed.), 10
- Bethune, Mary McLeod, 205
- Big Sea, The* (Hughes), 79
- Biondi, Martha, 202
- Birth of a Nation*, 28
- Black Arts Movement, 15, 74, 190, 197, 199, 201
- Black Boy* (Wright), 79, 93–94
- Black Metropolis*, 94
- Black Panther Party, 203–4
- Black Power* (Wright), 176–77, 189
- black power, as a phrase, 2, 175–77
- Black Power Movement, 175–76
- Black Scholar*, 201
- Boccaccio, Giovanni, 74
- Boni & Liveright, 59–60, 62
- Bontemps, Arna, 87, 99, 142; *The Fast Sooner Hound*, 87
- Boomba Lives in Africa* (Singer), 127; cover of, 128
- Boskin, Joseph, 137
- Boston Authors' Club, 30
- Boston Transcript*, 29–30, 38
- Bowles, Minnie Redmond, 150
- Braithwaite, W. S., 12–13, 19–32, 39–40, 51, 62, 77, 83, 85, 106, 163, 207; *Anthology of Magazine Verse*, 4, 7–8, 39, 58, 63, 67; background of, 21, 26; at the *Boston Transcript*, 29–30; correspondence with W.E.B. Du Bois by, 13; at *The Crisis*, 34; criticism of Lindsay, 49–50; criticism of Sandburg, 50, 65; on interracial art, 5; on literary renaissance, 24, 39; *Lyrics of Life and Love*, 26–27, 38; perceived race of, 6, 58; picture of, 5, 32; poems by, 29; praise of the Fugitives, 67; on “racial material” in literature, 22; racist boycott of, 63–70; on Wood, 54–55
- Branch, William, *A Medal for Willie*, 168
- Brentano's, 55
- Brett, George, 38
- Brickell, Herschel, 60
- Bristow, Nancy, 175
- Broad Ax*, 27–28, 40; praise of Braithwaite in, 27
- Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 53, 55, 124
- Brooks, Gwendolyn, 155–58, 200–201, 206; *Annie Allen*, 158; *Maud Martha*, 157; picture of, 154
- Brown, Margaret Wise, 121
- Brownies Book*, 112
- Browning, Robert, 28
- Brown v. Board of Education*, 130, 135, 175
- Bryn Mawr College, 35
- Bureau of Intercultural Education, 127, 133
- Butcher, Margaret Just, 163–64
- Butler, Octavia, 206
- Call Me Charley* (Jackson), 130
- Canby, Henry, 89
- Cane* (Toomer), 60
- Carmichael, Stokely, 175, 204
- Carroll, Anna Ella, 148
- Catholicism, 63, 95, 97
- Cavalcade of the American Negro*, 7
- Cayton, Horace, 93–94
- CBS, 98
- censorship, 101, 133–34, 141, 167
- Champion*, 6–7, 40, 43; cartoons in, 11, 41, 52
- Chattanooga Daily Times*, 182
- Chesnutt, Charles, 10, 21, 31, 77; on the color line in literature, 57; on his inability to publicly criticize *Nigger Heaven*, 56–57; *Paul Marchand*, 51
- Chicago Daily News*, 158
- Chicago Defender*, 147
- Chicago Poems* (Sandburg), 50, 58, 65
- Chicago Race Riots, July 1919* (Sandburg), 58
- Chicago Tribune*, 55, 88, 159
- Children's Book Council, 123, 125–27, 131–35
- Children's Book Week, 123, 127; posters for, 126
- children's publishing, estimated annual titles in, 136
- Childress, Alice, 10, 167–70, 207; *Trouble in Mind*, 169
- Child's Story of the Negro, The* (Shackelford), 120

- Child Study Association, 118, 124, 133  
*Christian Herald*, 101  
 Civil Rights Movement, 135, 149, 173–76,  
     178, 180–83, 187, 194–95, 197, 205, 209  
*Clansman, The* (Dixon), 28, 34  
 Clark, Kenneth, 185  
 Clarke, John Henrik, 167  
 Clay, Henry, 79  
 Clifton, Lucille, 206  
 Cold War, 14–15, 91–92, 100, 111, 129, 131, 135,  
     141, 143, 150–51, 156, 159, 165, 169, 173, 177  
 Coleman, Lonnie, 171  
*Colored American Review*, 42  
 Collins, Kathleen, 12  
*Commentary*, 174, 188, 201  
 Committee for the Negro in the Arts, 165, 173  
 communism, 15, 132, 152, 166–68, 203, 244, 252  
 Congress of Racial Equality, 186  
 Conkling, Price, Webb & Company, 53  
 Conrad, Earl, 147  
 Conroy, Jack, 87, 99  
 Constitutional League, 114  
 Corinth Books, 193–94  
 Cornell University, 60, 201–2  
 Cornhill Publishing Company, 51, 54  
*Cornhuskers* (Sandburg), 66  
 Cortez, Jayne, 206  
 Cosmopolitan Club, 32–33  
 cosmopolitanism, 66, 80, 127, 187  
 Council on Books in Wartime, 90, 124–25  
 Council on Interracial Books for Children,  
     114, 138, 140, 142  
*Country Place* (Petty), 146  
 Credle, Ellis, 119; *Across the Cotton Patch*,  
     117–18; *The Flop-Eared Hound*, 118; *Little*  
     *Jeemes Henry*, 118  
*Crisis*, 23, 33–37, 56, 69, 84, 113, 161; articles  
     on Braithwaite in, 4; photo of a black  
     child in, 9  
 Crichlow, Ernest, 165  
 Crone, Albert, 123  
 Cruse, Harold, 168  
 Cullen, Countee, 59  
*Current Opinion*, 44  
 Dagleish, Alice, 110, 118, 125, 130, 132–35  
 Darby, Ada Claire, *Jump Lively Jeff*, 125  
 Daughters of the American Confederacy, 28  
 Davis, Angela, 206  
 Davis, Frank Marshall, 76  
 Davis, Jefferson, 125  
 Davis, Thadious, 161  
 de Kay, Charles, 118  
 DeVoto, Bernard, 89  
 de Zayas, Marius, 45  
*Dial*, 49  
 Dial Press, 85, 101, 142, 152, 208  
 Diggs, Arthur, *Black Woman*, 151  
 Dixon, Thomas, 28; *The Clansman*, 28, 34  
 Dorsky, Blanche, 196–197  
 Doubleday, Page & Company, 28, 31, 87  
 Double Victory Campaign, 123  
 Drake, Sandra, 202  
 Drake, St. Clair, 202  
 Dreiser, Theodore, 96  
*Dr. George Washington Carver, Scientist*  
     (Graham), 128  
 Du Bois, David, *And Bid Him Sing*, 203  
 Du Bois, Shirley Graham. *See* Graham,  
     Shirley  
 Du Bois, W.E.B., 2, 13, 19, 30–31, 33–34, 68,  
     82, 112, 165, 202–3; criticism of Van Vech-  
     ten, 56; *Dusk of Dawn*, 78; FBI file of,  
     171; on the Harlem Renaissance 21; on  
     William James, 33; on Lindsay's "The  
     Congo," 49–50; praise of Braithwaite by,  
     19, 22; *Quest for the Silver Fleece*, 34, 40;  
     on *Three Lives*, 35  
 Dudziak, Mary, 109  
 Duhamel, Marcel, 152  
 Dumas, Alexander, *père*, 6, 85  
 Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 8, 27–28, 30, 44,  
     114  
 Dunbar-Nelson, Alice Moore, *Dunbar*  
     *Speaker and Entertainer*, 115–17  
 Dunham, Katherine, 86  
 Dunning, William, 34  
 Dunning School, 34  
*Dusk of Dawn* (Du Bois), 78

- Earth Turns South, The* (Wood), 53  
*Ebony*, 72–73, 93–94, 101–2, 146, 199  
*Ebony Jr.*, 158  
 Eighth Street Book Shop, 194  
 Ehrlich, Henry, 100  
 Elbee Audio Players, 170  
 Ellison, Ralph, 10, 79, 142, 145, 209; *Invisible Man*, 155–56, 163, 200  
 English, Daylanne K., 6  
 E. P. Dutton, 53–54, 108, 137–38  
 Ets, Marie Hall, 121  
 Exposition Press, 150
- Fadiman, Clifton, 128  
 Farrar, John, 167  
 Farrar, Strauss & Young, 167  
 Farrell, James, 96  
*Fast Sooner Hound, The* (Bontemps and Conroy), 87  
 Faulkner, Georgene, *Melindy's Happy Summer*, 129  
 Faulkner, William, 3, 155  
 Fauset, Jessie, 4, 10, 37–38, 77, 112; *There Is Confusion*, 60  
*Favorite Magazine*, 7, 53  
 Fisher, Isaac, 16–17; picture of, 17  
 Fax, Elton C., 129, 141  
 Federal Writers' Project, 7, 82, 86–87, 107  
 Fenolosa, George Manuel, 136–37  
 Ferrin, Dana, 96  
 Ferris, William H., 61, 63  
 Firbank, Ronald, *Prancing Nigger*, 55, 60  
*Fire Next Time, The* (Baldwin), 184  
 Fischer, Jack, 189  
 Fisk University, 83, 86  
 Fletcher, John Gould, racist criticism of Braithwaite by, 66  
*Flop-Eared Hound, The* (Credle), 118  
 Floyd, Silas Xavier, *Floyd's Flowers*, 112–15  
*Following the Color Line* (Baker), 31, 35, 417 (Mayfield), 167–68  
*Foxes of Harrow* (Yerby), 8, 10, 85, 91, 105–6, 170, 209; Hollywood adaptation of, 1, 101–2
- Frank, Waldo, 58  
*Freedom*, 168  
 Fugitives, 66–67  
 Fuller, Muriel, 15, 90, 100, 103–5, 108–9, 117, 119, 123, 125, 127, 130–31, 136–38, 161, 203–4  
 Fuller, Olive Muir, 103–5
- Gannett, Lewis, 128  
*Gardner, The* (Tagore), 38  
 Gates, Henry Louis, 207  
*Guardian*, 181  
 Gibson, Percival, *Flower o' the Peach*, 37–38  
 Gibson, Richard, 165  
 Giltinan, Caroline, letter to Braithwaite by, 19  
 Gilyard, Keith, 142  
 Giovanni, Nikki, 206  
*Giovanni's Room* (Baldwin), 95, 153  
 Goldsby, Jaqueline, 157–58  
*Go Tell It on the Mountain* (Baldwin), 152, 160–61  
*Gone with the Wind*, 105  
 Gorman, Herbert, 59  
 Govan, Christine Noble, 137  
 Grafton Press, 35  
 Graham, Shirley, 128, 165, 206; *Dr. George Washington Carver, Scientist*, 128; picture of, 129  
*Grand Parade, The* (Mayfield), 181; cover of, 182  
 Great Depression, 7, 67, 73, 81–83, 109  
 Greco-Roman culture and iconography, 11, 43, 65  
 Green, Adam, 73  
 Green, Alan, 125  
 Green, Buddy, 149  
 Griffith, Beatrice, *American Me*, 148
- Hader, Berta and Elmer, *Jamaica Johnny*, 109–10  
 Halverson, Cathryn, 75, 81  
 Hamilton, Virginia, 206  
 Hammon, Jupiter, 155  
 Hampton University, 150

- Hansberry, Lorraine, 2, 10, 16, 89, 92, 98,  
167–73, 182, 184–87, 190–91, 194–99; FBI  
file of, 171; *The Movement*, 180; *Raisin in  
the Sun*, 165, 170, 187–88
- Hansen, Harry, 88–90, 132
- Harcourt, 129, 138
- Harcourt, Alfred, 37, 58
- Harlan, Louis, 114
- Harlem Renaissance, 6, 13, 20–21, 23, 61–63,  
68, 70, 82, 142; additional scholarship on  
interracialism in the, 6n17
- Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, *The*  
(Hutchinson), 6
- Harlem Writers Guild, 166
- Harlem Writers' Workshop, 167
- Harper & Brothers, 86, 93, 119, 130, 135, 156–57,  
176–77, 189, 200
- Harper's*, 90, 190
- Harrington, Oliver, 122–23
- Harris, Laura, 123
- Harrison, Hubert, 54
- Harrison, Juanita, 10, 13–14, 73, 85, 207;  
background of, 74–76; *My Great, Wide,  
Beautiful World*, 74–78, 80–81, 91, 105; pic-  
ture of, 14
- Harvard University, 10, 19, 32–33, 35, 37, 39,  
58, 67, 89, 116, 195
- Hazlitt, William, 74
- Heap, Jane, 23–24
- Hefner, Hugh, 194
- Hemingway, Ernest, 208
- Henderson, Alice Corbin, 45, 50, 64–68, 208
- Henry, Joseph, 155
- Henson, Matthew, 80
- Hernton, Calvin, *Coming Together*, 189
- Hertel, John A., 112, 114–15
- Hezekiah Horton* (Tarry), 121–23; illustra-  
tion from, 122
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth, 30
- Hill, Leslie Pinckney, 33, 116, 125
- Himes, Chester, 12, 91–92, 145, 159, 207;  
*Lonely Crusade*, 152–53; picture of, 160
- Hitchcock, F. H., 35
- Hitler, Adolf, 45, 73
- Hobbs, Allyson, 18
- Hogan, Inez: *Mule Twins*, 137–38; *Nicode-  
mus*, 137
- Holiday*, 99
- Holiday House, 127–28
- homosexuality, 96–98, 152–53, 171, 210
- Horne, Lena, 185–86
- Houghton Mifflin, 51, 87, 136–37
- Hound and Horn*, 67
- House Un-American Activities Committee,  
152
- Howells, William Dean, 57
- Hugh Gordon Book Shop, 148–49
- Hughes, Langston, 57, 59, 67, 72–73, 79–82,  
89, 92, 106, 125, 131, 142, 144–45, 200–201,  
207; *The Big Sea*, 79; *Mulatto*, 80; picture  
of, 154; on Yerby, 10;
- Hunter, Kristin, 140, 206; *The Soul Brothers  
and Sister Lou*, 140
- Hunting, H. B., 68
- Hurston, Zora Neale, 206
- Hutchinson, George, 51; *The Harlem Renais-  
sance in Black and White*, 6
- I'll Take My Stand*, 66–67
- Indian Social Reformer*, 116
- integration, 72, 130, 136–37, 150, 157, 162–63,  
165, 173
- interracial authorship, additional scholar-  
ship on, 6n18
- interracialism, 2, 6, 10, 12, 15, 18, 24–26, 33, 38,  
45, 61, 66–67, 70, 72, 81, 103–4, 106, 110–11,  
123–24, 139, 141, 158, 168–70, 175, 177, 183,  
187, 195, 197–99, 205, 208–9; after the Civil  
War, 4
- Invisible Man* (Ellison), 155–56, 163, 200
- Ives, Vernon, 127, 130
- Jackson, Blyden, 141–42
- Jackson, Esther Cooper, 206
- Jackson, Jesse, 135; *Anchor Man*, 130; *Call  
Me Charley*, 130
- James, Alice, 37
- James, Henry, 35; *The Beast in the Jungle*, 186

- James, William, 33, 94; on *Three Lives*, 35, 37  
*Janie Belle* (Tarry), 107, 120  
Jarrett, Thomas, 145  
Jenkins, Deaderick, *It Was Not My World*, 149; *Letters to my Son*, 150  
*Jerry Newson Story, The* (Green and Murdock), 149–50  
*Jet*, 161, 163  
Jett, Ruth, 166  
Jewish Education Committee, 127  
J. L. Nichols, 112, 114–17  
Joel, George, 101  
Johnson, Charles R., 200  
Johnson, Fenton, 6–7, 10, 16, 21, 45, 51, 53, 68, 86; *A Little Dreaming*, 40; picture of, 16; in *Poetry*, 46–47  
Johnson, Georgia Douglas, 23  
Johnson, Grace Nail, 13, 85, 107; picture of, 86, 121  
Johnson, James Weldon, 13, 35, 39, 55, 59, 63, 67, 82–87, 103, 106; *Along This Way*, 82; *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, 31, 38, 49, 83; *Negro Americans, What Now?*, 71–72; picture of, 86; on Gertrude Stein, 35  
Jones, Edward Smyth, *The Sylvan Cabin*, 39  
Jones, Gayl, 206  
Jones, Hettie, 198  
Jones, James Earl, 167  
Jones, LeRoi, 198. *See also* Baraka, Amiri  
Jones, Lois Mailou, 120  
Joyce, James, 59  
Julian Messner, Inc., 128–29  
Julian Messner Award, 128  
*Jump Lively Jeff* (Darby), 125  
*Kansas City Sun*, 40–41  
Keats, Ezra Jack, *The Snowy Day*, 121  
Kennedy, Robert F., 182–86, 197, 199  
*Keystone Kids* (Tunis), 124  
Killens, John Oliver, 202, *Youngblood*, 142–43, 167  
King, Georgina Goddard, 35  
Kirkus, Virginia, 117–19, 139  
*Kirkus Reviews*, 119  
Kirstein, Lincoln, 67  
*Knock on Any Door* (Motley), 93–100, 146, 210  
Knopf, 56, 152–153  
Knopf, Alfred and Blanche, 57, 82  
Knupfer, Anne Meis, 87  
Ku Klux Klan, 28, 130, 174–75  
Lacy, Leslie Alexander, *The Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro*, 188–89  
Larsen, Nella, 77, 83, 206  
Lash, John S., 159  
Lawrence, Elizabeth, 156–57  
Lawrence, Jacob, 167  
Lester, Julius, 183; *Look out Whitey!*, 10, 12, 189  
Lewis, Richard, 135  
Lewis, Sinclair, 68  
*Life*, 103, 178–79  
Lindsay, Vachel, 46–50, 53, 65  
Lippmann, Walter, 58–59  
Lipscomb, George D., 128  
*Literary Renaissance in America, The* (Bechhofer), 24, 68; title page of, 25  
*Little Dreaming, A* (Johnson), 40  
*Little Jeemes Henry* (Credle), 118  
*Little Review*, 23, 39  
Locke, Alain, 20, 62, 81; on integration, 162–63; *The Negro in American Culture*, 163–64; *The New Negro*, 23, 62, 163  
*Lonely Crusade* (Himes), 152–53  
*Look*, 99–100, 192  
*Look Out Whitey!* (Lester), 10, 12, 189  
Lorde, Audre, 206  
Lowell, Amy, 39, 65  
Lyon, Danny, 180  
*Lyrics of Life and Love* (Braithwaite), 26–27, 38  
Mabry, Tom, 67  
Macmillan Company, 38, 74–76, 78  
Macrae, John, 138  
Mailer, Norman, *The White Negro*, 190–91  
Marshall, Paule, 206  
Martin, Gertrude, 147  
Massee, May, 121, 123, 135  
Matthews, Brander, 31, 55

- Maud Martha* (Brooks), 157  
 Maxwell, William, 171  
 Mayfield, Julian, 10, 167–68, 172–75, 181, 187–88, 201–3, 204–5, 207, 252n119, 253n121, 260n109; *The Grand Parade*, 181–82  
 McCarthy, Jesse, 210  
 McCarthy era, 145, 169  
 McClurg Bookstore, 34, 40  
 McKay, Claude, 55, 62–63; on Braithwaite, 5–6; on the European renaissance, 44  
 McKean, Else, *Our Negro Brother*, 134  
 Melamed, Jodi, 129  
*Melindy's Happy Summer* (Faulkner), 129  
 Mencken, H. L., 77; racist criticism of Braithwaite by, 66  
 Mickenberg, Julia, 124, 126, 131  
*Midnight Birds* (Washington, ed.), 206  
*Mis-education of the Negro, The* (Woodson), 116–17  
 Mitchell, Koritha, 65  
 Mitchell, Glenford E., 193  
 Mitchell, Lucy Sprague, 120–21  
 Mitchell, Margaret, 105  
 Modern Library, 178  
 Monroe, Harriet, 44–50, 61, 64, 68  
*Montgomery Advertiser*, 53–54  
 Moore, Willard, 171–72  
 More, Brookes, 51, 54  
 Morgan, Edward, 92  
 Morrison, Toni, 206–7  
 Motley, Willard, 10, 13, 73, 76, 91, 106, 153, 155; *Knock on Any Door*, 93–100, 146, 210; picture of, 94  
*Movement, The* (Hansberry), 180  
*Mulatto* (Hughes), 80  
*Mule Twins* (Hogan), 137–38  
 multiracial literary production, additional scholarship on, 12n34  
 Murdock, Steve, 149  
 Murphy, Beatrice, 118, 125  
*My Dog Rinty* (Tarry), 121  
*My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (Harrison), 74–78, 80–81, 91, 105; advertisement for, 78  
 Myrdal, Gunnar, *American Dilemma*, 88  
 NAACP, 31, 33–34, 37, 40, 175  
 National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women, 127  
 National Book Award, 155  
 National Conference of Christians and Jews, 127  
*National Guardian*, 194  
 National Urban League, 127  
*Native Son* (Wright), 86, 88–93, 95, 101, 153, 156  
 Neale, Walter, 24  
 Negro Actors Associated, 169  
*Negro Americans, What Now?* (Johnson), 71–72  
*Negro Art Exhibition*, 45; pictures of, 48  
*Negro Digest*, 101, 208  
*Negro in American Culture, The* (Locke), 163–64  
*Negro Year Book*, 57  
 Nelson, Alice Dunbar, 10, 115  
 New American Library, 146–47  
*New Caravan*, 77  
 New Criticism, 37  
*New Era Magazine*, 32  
*New Negro, The* (Locke, ed.), 23, 62, 163  
*New Republic*, 39, 94  
*New York Age*, 30, 169  
*New Yorker*, 16, 178, 184, 194  
*New York Sun*, 72  
*New York Times*, 27, 55, 59, 77, 151, 156, 181, 209  
*New York Times Book Review*, 55  
*New-York Tribune*, 53–54  
 New York University, 83  
 Newson, Jerry, 149–50  
 Niagara Movement, 114  
*Nicodemus* books (Hogan), 137  
*Nigger: A Novel* (Wood), 54–57  
*Nigger Heaven* (Van Vechten), 56–57, 61, 153  
 Nixon, H. C., 67  
 Nixon, Richard, 203  
 Noble, Hollister, *Woman with a Sword*, 148  
 Nordstrom, Ursula, 130, 135

- Notes of a Native Son* (Baldwin), 186  
*Nothing Personal* (Baldwin), 180  
*Nowhere Street* (Mayfield). See *Grand Parade, The*
- Oakland Tribune, 180  
 Obama, Barack, 210  
 Oden, Gloria, 206  
*Of Men and Books*, 92  
 Olson, Liesl, 8  
*Opportunity*, 84  
 Organization of Young Men, 198  
*Our Negro Brother* (McKean), 134  
 Ovington, Mary White, 33  
 Oxford University, 67  
 Oxford University Press, 118
- Page, Walter Hines, 28, 31  
 Palfi, Marion, 73  
 paperback publishing, black-authored book  
     sales numbers in, 146  
*Paris Review*, 156  
*Partisan Review*, 161  
 Patterson, Haywood, 147  
*Paul Marchand* (Chesnutt), 51  
 Peace, William H., 193  
*People's Platform, The*, 98  
 Perry, Imani, 89  
 Petry, Ann, 76, 86, 91, 206; *Country Place*,  
     146; *The Street*, 74  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 85, 180  
 Pillsbury, Albert, 34  
*Pittsburgh Courier*, 8, 56, 61, 148, 151, 166  
*Playboy*, 194  
 Podhoretz, Norman, 194–95  
*Poetry*, 44, 65, 68–69  
 Poitier, Sidney, 167  
 Polacheck, Hilda Satt, 34  
 Polite, Carlene Hatcher, 206  
 Pound, Ezra, 71, 208; racist attacks on  
     Braithwaite by, 24–26, 45, 63–64, 69–70  
*Prancing Nigger* (Firbank), 55–56, 60  
*Publisher's Weekly*, 22, 50, 78, 110–11, 117–18,  
     125, 130, 132–33, 137, 142, 147–49, 189
- publishing sector: pre-WWI growth of, 22;  
     post-WWI struggles of, 51. See also paper-  
     back publishing  
 Pulitzer Prize, 66, 158  
*Pullman Porters' Review*, 44  
 Purdy, Ted, 93–94, 98–99  
 Pushkin, Alexander, 61, 85, 116, 202  
 Putnam, Wallace, 184
- Quest for the Silver Fleece* (Du Bois), 34, 40
- Rabinowitz, Paula, 146  
*Raisin in the Sun* (Hansberry), 165, 170,  
     187–88  
 Rampart Press, 203  
 Random House, 155, 178, 207  
*Reader's Digest*, 157  
 Reconstruction, 34  
*Redbook*, 90  
 Reddick, L. D., 153, 155  
 Redding, J. Saunders, 207  
*Reedy's Mirror*, 40  
*Reporter*, 161  
 Rey, Hans and Margaret, 130  
*Rise and Fall of a Proper Negro, The* (Lacy),  
     188–89  
 Robeson, Paul, 104, 165  
 Robinson, Rose, 206  
 Rodgers, Carolyn, 206  
 Rodgers, Daniel T., 205  
 Roosevelt, Eleanor, 90, 97, 103–4  
 Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 90, 107  
 Roosevelt, Theodore, 31, 183; and “the  
     Brownsville affair,” 28  
 Rustin, Bayard, 141
- Sanchez, Sonia, 206  
 Sandburg, Carl, 50, 57, 65, 68, 70; *Chicago*  
     *Poems*, 50, 58, 65; *Chicago Race Riots*,  
     *July 1919*, 58; *Cornhuskers*, 66  
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, 177  
 Sasser, M. Tyler, 120–21  
 Schick, Frank, 146  
 Schlesinger, Arthur, Jr., 184–85

- Scottsboro Boy* (Patterson and Conrad), 147  
 Scribner's, 80  
 Sedgwick, Ellery, 76–78  
 Shackelford, Jane Dabney, *The Child's Story of the Negro*, 120  
 Shackelford, Otis, picture of, 112  
 Shackelford, Theodore Henry, picture of, 20  
 Shange, Ntozake, 206  
 Sharpe, Stella, *Tobe*, 120  
 Shaw, Albert, 44  
 Sheldon, Myrtle, 107  
 Shelton, Bobby, 130  
 Sherman and French, 38–39  
 Shipp, Cameron, 100  
 Simon & Schuster, 180  
 Singer, Caroline, 127  
*Slappy Hooper* (Bontemps and Conroy), 87  
 Smethurst, James, 68  
 Smith, Jerome, 185  
 Smith, Katherine Capshaw, 114, 120  
 Smith, Lillian, 106; *Now Is the Time*, 178; *Strange Fruit*, 72, 88–90, 153  
*Snowy Day, The* (Keats), 121  
 Sollors, Werner: on interracialism, 8  
*Soul Brothers and Sister Lou, The* (Hunter), 140  
 Southern Agrarians, 66  
 Southern University, 159  
 Spingarn, Joel, 58; and New Criticism, 37; picture of, 36  
 Spingarn Medal, 40  
 Springfield Race Riots of 1908, 31; Lindsay on, 49  
 Stanford, 202  
*Star Bulletin*, 55  
*Star Tribune*, 60  
 State University of New York at Albany, 138  
 Stein, Gertrude, 92–93, 106, 139; *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 37; *Three Lives*, 35, 37, 81, 94  
 Stewart, George R., 59  
 Stieglitz, Alfred, 45, 48  
*Story of Little Black Sambo, The* (Bannerman), 15, 109–10, 117, 124, 140  
*Story of My Life and Work, The* (Washington), 114  
 Stout, Rex, 131–132  
 Stowe, Harriet Beecher, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 153  
*Strange Barriers*, 3  
*Strange Fruit* (Smith), 72, 88–90, 153  
 Strauss, Helen, 100–101, 106, 153, 196, 209  
*Street, The* (Petry), 74  
*Survey Graphic*, 62  
 Swerdlow, David, 170  
*Swimming Hole* (Beim), 130  
*Sydney Morning Herald*, 181  
*Sylvan Cabin* (Jones), 39  
 Szeffel, Lisa, 23  
 Tagore, Rabindranath, *The Gardener*, 38  
 Talladega College, 169  
 Tarry, Ellen, 10, 107, 140, 147, 207; background of, 120; *Hezekiah Horton*, 121–23; picture of, 121  
 Tate, Allen, 66–67, 71  
 Taylor, Clarice, 169  
*There Is Confusion* (Fauset), 60  
*There Was Once a Slave* (Graham), 128  
*They Seek a City* (Bontemps and Conroy), 87  
*Three Lives* (Stein), 35, 37, 81, 94  
 Thurman, Wallace, 57  
*Time*, 161, 183, 195  
*Tobe* (Sharpe), 120  
 Toomer, Jean, 10, 21, 23, 58–59, 62, 77; *Cane*, 60; picture of, 60  
 Totem Press, 198  
 Trager, Helen, 133  
 Travis, Trysh, 119  
 Tunis, John, *Keystone Kids*, 124  
*Two Is a Team* (Beim), 129–30  
 Uhlan, Edward, 150–51  
*Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe), 153  
*Uncle Tom's Children* (Wright), 86–87  
 University of Alabama, 53  
 University of Chicago, 86–87, 150, 159, 209

- University of North Carolina Press, 67  
 University of Ottawa, 155  
*Up from Slavery* (Washington), 183
- van Couenhoven, H. W., 96  
 Vanderbilt University, 37  
 Van Doren, Carl, 128, 165  
*Vanity Fair*, 58  
 Van Vechten, Carl, 55, 68, 81–82, 85, 93;  
     *Nigger Heaven*, 56–57, 61, 153  
 Van Vechten, Charles Duane, 56  
 Varner, Velma, 138–139  
*Vicksburg American*, 30  
 Viking, 71, 120–21, 123, 138, 178  
*Voice of the Negro*, 114
- Walker, Alice, 206  
 Wallace, Henry, 97–98  
 Walrond, Eric, 57  
 Ward, Francis and Val Gray, 201  
 Ward, Julia, 30  
 Warner, Samuel, *Madame President-Elect*, 151  
 Warren, Robert Penn, 67; *Segregation*,  
     178–79  
 Washington, Booker T., 183; *The Story of My*  
     *Life and Work*, 114; *Up from Slavery*, 183  
 Washington, Mary Helen, 166; *Midnight*  
     *Birds*, 206  
 Webster, Margaret, 165  
 Wheatley, Phillis, 156  
*White Negro, The* (Mailer), 190–91  
 White, Walter, 77  
 Whitman, Walt, 116  
 Whittier, John Greenleaf, 116  
 Wilentz, Theodore, 194, 198–99  
 William Morris agency, 101
- Williams, Kenny, 26–27  
 Williams, Paul: *New Homes for Today*, 149–50;  
     *The Small Home of Tomorrow*, 149  
 Williams, Robert F., 174  
 Wilson, Prince, 209  
 Wilson, Woodrow, 28  
 Winslow, Henry, 161  
*Witnesses for Freedom* (Barton), 80  
 Wolfe, Humbert, 59  
 Wolo, Plenyono Gbe, 32–33  
 Wood, Clement, 53–55, 65, 68; *The Earth*  
     *Turns South*, 53  
 Woodson, Carter, 19, 116–17, 120, 131  
 Wordsworth, William, 116  
 Works Progress Administration, 8, 87  
 Wright, Richard, 3, 10, 72, 76–77, 145; *Black*  
     *Boy*, 79, 93–94; *Black Power*, 176–77, 189;  
     *Native Son*, 86, 88–93, 95, 101, 153, 156;  
     *Uncle Tom's Children*, 86–87  
 Wright, Sarah E., 206  
 Writers' War Board, 124, 131–33
- Yaddo, 159  
 Yale, 53, 61, 89, 204, 207  
 Yeats, William Butler, 49  
 Yerby, Frank, 1–3, 8–10, 13–15, 73, 76, 83–85,  
     87–93, 100–103, 108, 142, 144–45, 151–53,  
     155–56, 158, 163, 190, 196, 199, 207–8; ad-  
     ditional scholarship on, 2n6; background  
     of, 79, 86; book sales of, 85; *Foxes of Har-*  
     *row*, 85, 91, 101–2, 105–6, 170, 209; perceived  
     race of, 161, 190; *The Tents of Shem*, 199;  
     writing habits of, 156, 190
- Young, Adele, 148  
*Youngblood* (Killens), 142; cover of, 143  
 Youngberg, Arthur, 158