

[CFP: Black Lives Matter--Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance](#)

Announcement published by Christopher Varlack on Monday, March 15, 2021

Type:

Call for Papers

Date:

June 4, 2021

Subject Fields:

African American History / Studies, Black History / Studies, Literature, Race / Ethnic Studies, Race Studies

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance

- proposals due Friday, June 4, 2021 -

With the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman in the slaying of Trayvon Martin, the Black Lives Matter Movement emerged in protest of police brutality, the culture of racial violence against Blacks, and a legal system that time and again held no one responsible for these acts. Protestors therefore sought not only to declare the value of Black lives in a society sadly rooted in the traditions of chattel slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the myth of white supremacy but also to set in motion the gears of systemic change. Driven in large part by the same overwhelming frustrations that prompted Fannie Lou Hamer's infamous declaration, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired!", at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, protestors took to the streets, rallying from Ferguson to New York City. Their goal was to once again, like King decades before, "create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism"—"a situation so crisis-packed" that it could no longer be ignored. As a result, the Black Lives Matter Movement, which has spread far beyond the borders of the United States, has played an integral role in advancing important conversations regarding racism and the institutional forces at work determined to keep the racial status quo in place. At the same time, it has shaped and reshaped the racial consciousness of the present, the names of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Sandra Bland, and so many others a constant echo spurring remembrance and change.

For scholars of literature and culture, the texts of the past then prove invaluable in tracing the heritage of racial violence that has prompted the Black Lives Matter Movement (as well as its predecessors) while also providing insight into how to negotiate this tenuous space of unending frustration, deep-seated anger, fatigue, and enduring pain. For instance, addressing mob violence enacted against

Black communities during the Red Summer of 1919, Claude McKay, in “If We Must Die,” encourages active resistance from his kinsmen, “pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back” rather than waiting for the slaughter “like hogs/Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot.” Langston Hughes, in his 1931 play *Scottsboro, Limited*, lambasts an unjust legal system in which an all-white jury would sentence eight Black boys to death on the charge of rape, even with the testimony of doctors who had determined that no such crime had occurred in “this-here Southern Hell.” In his 1936 text “Southern Cop,” Sterling A. Brown offers a critique of a police-involved shooting in a poem that could easily have been written today, the community forever shaken by “the dying Negro moan” and the flurry of excuses— “[t]he Negro must have been dangerous,” “the Negro was running,” the officer’s “nerves were jittery” (code for he must have been afraid)—to justify the actions of this “rookie with a chance/To prove himself a man.”

Works like these help preserve the record of past violence against the constant threats of historical revision, erasure, and silencing that have so deeply contributed to the disregard for Black lives across time. At the same time, they help us to better understand the ways in which dangerous stereotypes—like that of the Brute Negro—have enabled the oppression of and violence against Blacks, from the brutal buck breaking tactics employed during the antebellum era to discourage dissent, to the widespread tradition of public lynchings, to the many forms of racially motivated violence aimed at countering racial uplift and sociopolitical change. For that reason, their value extends beyond the twentieth century, providing invaluable tools for students and scholars alike to process the racial conflict that has consistently divided the United States. To promote this vital conversation, I am therefore inviting chapter proposals for an edited volume tentatively titled *Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance* that will probe the literature of the Harlem Renaissance era in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement of the present day. Scholars who are interested in participating in this project are asked to consider the following questions, among others:

1. What insights do the authors of the New Negro Movement, often referred to as the Harlem Renaissance, provide into the stigmatization and stereotyping of Blackness that are in many ways the root causes of racial discrimination and violence across time? Consider works such as Sterling A. Brown’s “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” for the history of these stereotypes, but also consider the ways in which they contributed to the targeted killing of Black men and women by figures such as Dylann Roof.

2. What insights do authors of this period provide into racial pain and the longstanding impact on the Black community? Consider works such as Langston Hughes' *Black Misery*, George Schuyler's *Black No More*, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and others that delve into the psychosocial implications of racial mistreatment while considering the toll this also takes on generations facing similar acts of discrimination, oppression, and violence today.
3. How do authors of the Harlem Renaissance use their texts to record the systems of violence against Blacks and to hold accountable, if they do at all, those who have contributed to the subsequent racial trauma and pain? In his 1924 novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, for example, Walter White depicts the killing of Black physician Kenneth Harper and holds responsible the KKK as well as those determined to suppress the racial uplift that he comes to represent.
4. What insights do authors of the Harlem Renaissance leave behind that could be useful to those forced to negotiate complex issues today regarding policing such as the continued use of excessive force, police-involved shootings of unarmed Blacks (like Breonna Taylor and Botham Jean), and the suspicious deaths of Blacks in custody (like Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland)?
5. How can educators use the texts of the Harlem Renaissance to promote meaningful conversations in the classroom (and beyond) regarding anti-Black violence and oppression as well as antiracism? What pedagogical approaches can be used to facilitate dialogue on those intersections between Harlem Renaissance-era thought and the Black Lives Matter Movement?

Scholars interested in contributing to *Black Lives Matter: Lessons from the Harlem Renaissance* should then submit a CV, abstract of no more than 400 words, and a biographical statement of no more than 100 words to the volume editor, Dr. Christopher Allen Varlack, at varlackc@arcadia.edu by Friday, June 4, 2021, in order to be considered. Preliminary conversations have already taken place with a university press greatly interested in publishing this project. Thus, accepted abstracts will be included in the formal project proposal to be vetted through their peer review process. Please feel free to reach out via E-mail with any queries or questions related to this endeavor.

Contact Info:

Christopher Allen Varlack, Arcadia University

Contact Email:

varlackc@arcadia.edu