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Introduction: The Harlem Renaissance in an Inter-American Perspective

In the preface to his seminal anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), the first collection of black U.S. American verse to appear with a major United States publishing house (Edwards 45), James Weldon Johnson employs the term “Aframerican” in the widest possible sense, as a designator for people of African descent from the entire American hemisphere rather than as an exclusive label for blacks from the United States (1959, 37-40; also Edwards 48). In his preface he emphasizes that alongside such luminaries of black U.S. writing as Paul Lawrence Dunbar stand Afro-Latin American poets like “Plácido and Mantano in Cuba; Vieux and Durand in Haiti; Machado de Assis in Brazil, and others” (“Creative” 37; also Chrisman 807; Edwards 48). The collection itself, although focusing largely on U.S.-American writing, adequately includes a few poems by black anglo- and hispanophone Caribbean writers (Edwards 47, 50; Chrisman 807). In 1966, Julio Le Riverend (re)conceptualizes a hemispheric “Afroamérica,” which he defines as “the black zone ... situated basically on the Atlantic coast of the two continents” (23; trans. and qtd. in Coser 175-76, n. 6). More recently, Agustín Lao-Montes calls for a notion of “Afroamerica” that encompasses the black experience throughout the Americas [1], and Abdul Alkalimat envisions a concept of “African American Studies” that “covers the entire American hemisphere, including North, Central, and South America, the Caribbean, and ... Greenland. ... [T]here are more than 103 million Black people of African descent throughout the Americas, of which only 27% are in the U.S.A., while 47% are in Brazil” (1).

Interactions between Afro U.S. and Latin American cultures, however, have never been limited to the *black* experience in the Latin and Caribbean countries. As Ifeoma C.K. Nwankwo points out, “engagements with Latin America and Latin Americans have constituted a crucial element of US African-American attempts to gain access to and recognition within mainstream US literary, intellectual, and political discourses” (580; see also Coser; Jackson). In his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912), James Weldon Johnson depicts the interactions among black (or

mulatto) U.S. Americans and Cuban migrant workers in Florida (*Autobiography*; Chrisman 807). Three years after Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry*, another volume of black writing and thought, the text collection *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke and based on a special issue of *Survey Graphic* magazine earlier that year, includes a short story set in Panama and written by Panamanian-Guayanese writer Eric Walrond (Locke, *New*; also Nwankwo 598 n.10). In his foreword, Locke cites the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the Mexican *Indigenismo* movement of the 1920s, also labeled "Mexican Renaissance," as two among several "nascent movements of folk expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world to-day". [2] Locke was probably also familiar with an earlier issue of *Survey Graphic* entitled *Mexico: A Promise* (1924). The contributors to that volume included, among others, the Mexican intellectual José Vasconcelos, the Mexican artist and key proponent of the *Indigenismo* movement, Diego Rivera, and the U.S.-based German artist Winold Reiss, who created the graphic design for Locke's *The New Negro* and became one of the major artists of the Harlem Renaissance (Porter; also Mehring 237-39).

As these examples indicate, the Harlem Renaissance always had a transnational dimension, to which black Caribbean immigrants to Harlem contributed (Watkins-Owens), most prominently among them the Afro-Puerto Rican writer, historian, and activist Arturo/Arthur Schomburg (Kirschner 36-37), as well as black U.S.-American travels and travails abroad, or the interactions among artists and intellectuals of different nations and their affiliation with the poor and ethnically/racially oppressed populations within and beyond their national borders (Edwards; Luis-Brown 147-201). Latin American writing from the same period further attests to the integration of the Harlem Renaissance in an international array of socio-aesthetic movements, for example when the Cuban journalist José Antonio Fernández de Castro labels the Harlem-based Mexican caricaturist Miguel Covarrubias "the discoverer of the Negroes of Harlem" (43, my translation; also Chrisman 813; Guridy 127). That Latin Americans were critically aware of the differences that would remain between black U.S. and Latin American cultures becomes evident most pronouncedly in Nicolás Guillén's essay "El camino de Harlem" (1929). Here, the Afro-Cuban poet warns against the spread of the U.S.-American system of racial segregation in his native country due to the growing political, economic, and cultural influence of the United States in the Caribbean. The titular "road to Harlem" signifies the path to racial segregation and black ghettoization, despite the merits of Harlem for black culture. [3] Nonetheless, as one result of these multiple exchanges among the New Negro movement in the United States, the different *Negrismo* movements in hispano- and lusophone Latin America, and the French Caribbean *Négritude* [4], a black diasporic [5] consciousness emerged that "enabled black people to 'feel' part of the same 'gente' ... irrespective of their cultural and linguistic background." [6]

The Black Atlantic's Western shores stretch from Newfoundland to Tierra del Fuego and that "the heart of the New World African diaspora lies not north of the border, [between Mexico and] the United States, but south" (Andrews 3). The present volume ventures into exploring the hemispheric scope of this black diaspora, taking the example of the Harlem Renaissance—its artists, intellectuals, and activists and their work, agendas, and reception— as a phenomenon of international dimensions. In so doing, this issue of *FIAR* hopes to be a worthy homonym of *Fire!!* (1926), the (albeit short-lived) black literary magazine of the Harlem Renaissance, whose exploring controversial subjects like homosexuality, prostitution, or color prejudice in the African American community challenged established conventions of black (self-)representation (Johnson and Johnson 78-84). In a similar, though less radical, vein, the present volume contributes to a growing body of scholarship that strives to bridge the gap between the research paradigms of African U.S. American, Black Caribbean, and Black Atlantic Studies with their predominant focus on the English- and French-speaking sections of the American hemisphere, on the one hand (Cosser 7-8; Evans), and of U.S. Latina/o, Latin American, and Hispanic Caribbean Studies, in which Afro-Latin perspectives remain under-discussed, on the other (Kirschner 7-14, 27, 36-38; Lao-Montes). Inter-American Studies, as a body of transnational and -regional scholarship on the Americas in the sense of hemispheric (Post-)Area Studies, I argue, enables a viable expansion, yet not a displacement, of existing disciplinary and regional approaches, as it offers the opportunity of a non-hierarchical dialogue with scholarship and paradigms of thought not only from various areas of inquiry but also from outside the hitherto dominant North American—and with regard to scholarship on Latin America also continental Latin American—academe (Thies and Raab 8-16). The study of Afro-America/América/Amérique proves particularly relevant here. While there have always, and always will be, conflicts among black populations as well as between blacks and other racial/ethnic groups in the hemisphere and beyond, the shared experiences of slavery, racial discrimination, and political as well as cultural emancipation brought forth a long and fruitful history of black interaction and diasporic consciousness across geographic, linguistic, and cultural lines in the Americas.

Within the history of Afro-America/América/Amérique, the Harlem Renaissance provides a crucial case in point, as it represents probably the first, and definitely the most prominent, black cultural movement that was profoundly shaped by, and in turn would itself shape, people, ideas, and (black) cultural exchanges throughout the Americas. The present volume seeks to explore some of the Harlem Renaissance's and Renaissance Harlem's interactions with the Caribbean as well as Latin America—to be understood in the widest possible sense of the term as encompassing the anglo-, franco-, hispano, and lusophone hemisphere. The following essays address a variety of topics pertaining to some of the major Harlem Renaissance artists, intellectuals, and activists:

Sandra Becker, Paul Franke, and Florian Reschke's documentary film, "The Boiled-Down Juice of Human Living: The Anthropological Fieldwork of Zora Neale Hurston," looks at the scholarship of this African U.S. American anthropologist-turned-writer in the context of the international scholarly community of this emerging academic discipline. In his article "Mediating Mexico: Winold Reiss and the Transcultural Dimension of "Harlem" in the 1920s," Frank Mehring analyzes the Mexican journey of German immigrant painter Winold Reiss and its influence on his subsequent engagement with Mexican and African U.S. American cultures, which turned him into one of the leading artistic figures of the ensuing Harlem Renaissance. My own contribution, "Un continente 'de color': Langston Hughes y América Latina," studies the way black U.S. American writer Langston Hughes developed an intersecting hemispheric black and leftist political consciousness through his travels to and autobiographic as well as fictional literary dealings with Latin America, especially Mexico and Cuba. In her essay "A Vagabond with a Purpose," Tatiana Tagirova explores the crucial role Jamaican writer Claude McKay's Caribbean beginnings and international sojourns played in his search for an original form of black American literary expression. As this rather short list indicates, the present volume views does not understand itself as a comprehensive survey but as a beginning that seeks to inspire further inquiry to explore the interrelations and *mutual* influences between the Harlem Renaissance and its larger entanglements with the American hemisphere, its black diasporas and beyond.

Endnotes

[1] Lao-Montes 323-24. Neither he nor Le Riverend mentions Johnson's earlier formulation of this concept, though.

[2] Locke, "Foreword" xxvii; also qtd. in Luis-Brown 147. On the Harlem Renaissance see Lewis; on the Mexican *Indigenismo* movement of the 1920s-1940s see Knight.

[3] Guillén 6; also Jackson 94, 114; Kaup 97-100. For this and similar critiques by Guillén and other Cuban artists and intellectuals see Leary 136, 140-41, 144-55.

[4] De Jongh 48-70; Jackson 86, 92, 171; Leary 147-55; on *Afrocubanismo* see ; on the *Négritude* movement see Thompson.

[5] For a detailed definition of the term "diaspora" and its particular meaning with regard to the Black Diaspora see Edwards 11-15; Lao-Montes 309-18.

[6] Guridy 135, italics in the original. For a critique of this concept, especially of the marginalization of black U.S. Latinos and Afro Latin Americans see Lao-Montes 318-23.

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