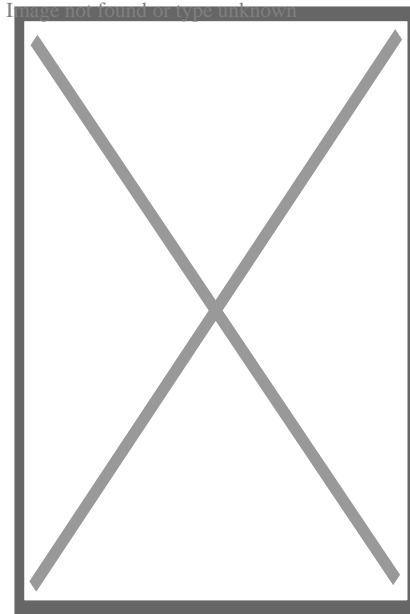


Shawn Anthony Christian. *The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader*



Shawn Anthony Christian. [*The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader*](#). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. iii, 140p. ISBN 9781625342010 (paper); 9781625342003 (hardcover). \$US 25.95 (paper); \$US 90.00 (hardcover).

The Harlem Renaissance and the Idea of a New Negro Reader argues that the idea of the reader was central to Harlem Renaissance discourse. African American commentators celebrated “close,” “engaged,” and “critical” reading (25, 37, 18) as the key to black autonomy and equality. By the 1910s, literacy was a widely shared value in the United States, a skill linked to moral, intellectual, and material success. The promises attached to literacy were especially attractive to marginalized readers, such as African Americans. In the antebellum period, the association of reading with autonomy had led to prohibitions on slave literacy. At the turn of the twentieth century, Booker T. Washington’s privileging of basic literacy over higher learning and imaginative literature drew the ire of W.E.B. DuBois and others. When Harlem Renaissance commentators enthusiastically endorsed African American authorship and recommended the reading of poetry, fiction, and drama, they engaged a long-standing controversy.

Harlem Renaissance debates about the style and subject matter of black writing have been much discussed: writers, editors, and reviewers repeatedly asked whether a black artist should represent folk culture using dialect or “on the contrary” provide images of respectable middle-class life. What were the limits of “artistic freedom” for black writers (79)? Did a black author have “the right to produce art devoid of an intentionally racial focus,” as Countee Cullen argued (84)? By focusing on the idea of the reader, Christian effectively repositions such questions. As he shows, black commentators assiduously generated “models for other African American readers to follow” (41).

Christian extrapolates such models from anthologies that define and promote a black canon, from

literary contests hosted by two leading black newspapers in the mid-1920s, and from examples of black pedagogy, especially a course designed and taught by James Weldon Johnson at Fisk in 1931. The ideally engaged and critical black reader emerges with particular clarity from several rich neglected sources, such as readers' letters to the editors of *Crisis* and *Opportunity* or Johnson's handwritten notes for "English 123." Yet the model of an ideal reader, so central to Harlem Renaissance discourse (eg. 104, 111, 114), could not ensure compliance "many sorts of reading practices inevitably escape from ideals articulated by professionals. While commentators could guide, urge, and invite, they could not "compel" response (cf. 23-4, 56). From this perspective the "record of how African America developed into the population of New Negro readers that so many Harlem Renaissance writers envisioned" (117) necessarily remains incomplete.

Christian wisely avoids sweeping claims about African American reading practices. Foregrounding the "idea," not the reality, of a "New Negro Reader" (as his title suggests), he productively explores the debates and the achievements of authors, critics, and specific journals. Yet the study would have been still more penetrating had it directly addressed not only the gap between real reading and prescriptions for reading, but also tensions among the commentators' own goals. Christian's analysis implies that the endorsement of autonomous, "critical reading" (87) often clashed with the pressure to read out of racial pride or "collective sensibility" (29, 44). Engaging such contradictions more explicitly would have added depth and nuance to the book.

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