

# The Politics of the Page

Recontextualizing Willa Cather, Zora Neale  
Hurston, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Una Marson

*Jennifer Sorensen*

## ABSTRACT

This essay argues that attending to the bibliographic codes of early and multiple versions can enhance our understandings of the material forms of texts in the ways that George Bornstein modeled in *Material Modernism*. Focusing on modernist women's complex engagements with print cultures, the essay analyzes pages from Willa Cather's novel *The Professor's House*, Zora Neale Hurston's short story "Sweat", Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnet "the progress", and Una Marson's poem "Little Brown Girl". These texts are most widely available in editions that place their richest print contexts "under erasure". This essay argues that these kinds of material analyses can be used to center the work of Black women modernists as these approaches can enrich the research and teaching of less canonical texts without as many versions.

---

## Introduction

I HAVE LONG BEEN INSPIRED BY GEORGE BORNSTEIN'S METHODOLOGICAL magnificence in the first chapter of his groundbreaking *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*, and I teach his contextualizing of multiple versions of four sonnets regularly in my courses focused on print cultures and modernism. I first came across this work when I began graduate school at the University of Michigan in 2003 and was fortunate to have a seminar with Bornstein on Editorial Theory. In his course as well as in his writing, Bornstein demonstrated the joys of textual scholarship and particularly the delight in finding meaningfully different versions of the same text. He continually pointed out that comparing multiple versions of the same text could yield exciting results in the classroom and could create new scholarly understandings of familiar texts. When invited to contribute to this special

issue honoring his legacy, I wanted to show how much I'm indebted to his methods for reading multiple versions and for attending to meanings in the bibliographic codes of those versions. In this essay, I will offer four short analyses that emphasize how multiple print contexts can open up texts in new ways for students and scholars.

In *Material Modernism*, Bornstein argues that “examining modernism in its original sites of production and in the continually shifting physicality of its texts and transmissions” can help us “emphasize historical contingency, multiple versions, and the material features of the text itself” (2001, 1). He avows that *Material Modernism* “argues above all for modernism as a thoroughly historicized project both reflecting and contributing to the politics of its time and of our own” (2001, 1). For me, Bornstein’s text has always been one of the most compelling manifestoes of the “New Modernist Studies” because he shows in many concrete examples how modernist form was always already deeply political. He pointedly asks, “If the “Mona Lisa” is in Paris at the Louvre, where is *King Lear*?” (2001, 5), to help us “see that the work of literary art exists in more than one place at the same time. That means that any particular version that we study of a text is always already a construction, one of many possible in a world of constructions” (2001, 5). In his first chapter, he outlines his method for “how to read a page”: “In reading a particular page, we would want to know of the other versions of that page, and the first step in reading would then be to discover what other pages exist with claims on our attention” (2001, 6). Bornstein, building on work by Jerome McGann, urges us to consider not only the words, but also all the other features that frame a text and contribute to its meanings: he adjures us “to recognize that the literary text consists not only of words (its linguistic code) but also of the semantic features of its material instantiations (its bibliographic code). Such bibliographic codes might include cover design, page layout, or spacing, among other factors. They might also include the other contents of the book or periodical in which the work appears, as well as prefaces, notes, or dedications that affect the reception and interpretation of the work” (2001, 6). Bornstein links these material features to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura and crucially revises Benjamin’s sense of loss through reproduction to argue that “for literary works original mechanical reproductions can create their own aura” (2001, 6). Thus, Bornstein theorizes a methodology that fuses formalist and historicist practices to recover multiple levels of meaning in multiple versions of the texts we study.

In his “How to read a page” methodological tour de force, Bornstein explains that he chose sonnets partially because they are texts we often

teach and they are often treated as the “most overtly ‘aesthetic’ forms of writing” which seem “as far from involvement in historical contingency as literature is likely to get” (2001, 9). Bornstein chooses “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer” by Keats, “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, “Leda and the Swan” by W. B. Yeats, and “my dreams, my works, must wait until after hell” by Gwendolyn Brooks to trace how their meanings shift across different versions. Ultimately, Bornstein concludes that “any material page on which we read any poem is a constructed object that will encode certain meanings even while placing others under erasure” (2001, 31). For my tribute, I’ve chosen four texts from my current research focused on modernist women’s complex engagements with print cultures that have particularly rich print contexts: I will analyze pages from Willa Cather’s novel *The Professor’s House*, Zora Neale Hurston’s short story “Sweat”, Gwendolyn Brooks’s sonnet “the progress”, and Una Marson’s poem “Little Brown Girl”. While some of these texts are popular for teaching, all of them are most widely available in editions that place their richest print contexts “under erasure”. I have chosen a wider range of genres to demonstrate how flexible this methodology can be, and I’ve incorporated texts that are far less canonical than Bornstein’s examples to show how this kind of material analysis can work even for texts without as many versions. I am hoping to draw attention to these exciting and largely neglected earlier print contexts to enrich teaching and scholarly conversations about these texts.

### **Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House* in *Collier’s Weekly***

Willa Cather’s novel *The Professor’s House* first appeared in *Collier’s Weekly* in nine installments running from 6 June through 1 August 1925.<sup>1</sup> Charles Johanningsmeier has documented how many more readers encountered Cather’s novel through the pages of *Collier’s Weekly* than in book form: the Knopf book edition “sold only approximately 65,000 copies by the end of 1925” while “during the summer of 1925, slightly over one million copies of each issue of *Collier’s* containing *The Professor’s House* installments were printed and circulated” (2010, 70–1).<sup>2</sup> In addition to its demands on our attention from its massive historical readership, the serial version of *The*

---

1. Given that *The Professor’s House* appeared in *Collier’s Weekly* and in the Knopf edition in 1925, these texts are distinguished where necessary as 1925a and 1925b, respectively.

2. See JOHANNINGSMEIER 2010, 68–96, especially, 70–71.

*Professor's House* shifts our understandings of Cather's narrative divide between competing kinds of material and economic value. *The Professor's House* continually articulates the Professor's desires to keep his relation with Tom Outland separate from the world of commerce — he claims it as “the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue” and avows that “there was no material clause” in their bond (1990, 50).<sup>3</sup> Here, I've chosen one particularly resonant pairing of text and illustration to gesture to the multiple ways in which this anti-materialist strain of the novel develops when read within the hyper-mediated, aggressively “material” context of *Collier's Weekly*. These material conditions for *The Professor's House* invert the novel's politics, creating a shocking division between the novel's physical form and its narrative content.

Throughout the serial run, *Collier's* split up the story into many small chunks dispersed throughout each issue in a very noticeable practice of “ad-stripping” — maximizing how many different pages of advertisements would be seen by readers following the narrative through its dispersed nuggets. *Collier's Weekly* often frames its pages with advertising borders, interrupts columns with ads in their midst, and devotes a huge amount of space to full-page and half-page advertisements. The reading field of *Collier's* continually emphasizes the commercial and the materialist aspects of magazine print culture — and the inseparability of the literature that appears upon those pages from the ads that surround it.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the Professor repeatedly articulates his desire to keep his ideals uncontaminated by the marketplace and by money. As he refuses his daughter's insistent demand that he accept money from his beloved, deceased student's invention, the Professor stresses his desire to keep what he most values fiercely un-commercial: “There can be no question of money between me and Tom Outland. I can't explain just how I feel about it, but it would somehow damage my recollections of him, would make that episode in my life commonplace like everything else. And that would be a great loss to me. I'm purely selfish in refusing your offer; my friendship with Outland

- 
3. Since the *Collier's Weekly* issues are not available freely online and even the copy I was lucky enough to scan at Oberlin College for my own teaching purposes was missing pages due to historical wear and tear, passages from Cather's *The Professor's House* cited here are from the 1990 Vintage Classics edition, a popular paperback teaching edition.
  4. Johanningsmeier compellingly argues that the *Collier's Weekly* circulation would have reached many more working-class readers than the book version, an observation that also intensifies the complexities of the novel's portrayals of class and value.

is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue” (1990 50). When Rosamond “resentful[ly]” suggests that he thinks she shouldn’t have taken it either, he clarifies that only his bond is outside of the market economy: “You had no choice. For you it was settled by his own hand. Your bond with him was social, and it follows the laws of society, and they are based on property. Mine wasn’t, and there was no material clause in it” (1990, 50). The Professor’s anti-materialism becomes more virulent as the novel progresses. He increasingly associates the social bonds with his family as an insupportable form of bondage to the materialistic realm that becomes increasingly linked with the women in his family.

I want to quickly gesture toward the many ways that the *Collier’s* context makes visible the novel’s persistent and complex gendering of greed. Professor St. Peter’s eldest daughter, Rosamond, is the novel’s poster-child for materialism. The page and illustration I have chosen to focus on feature the Professor and Rosamond and crystallize the novel’s complex entangling of gender, power, and acquisition (see Fig. 1).

Street’s illustration pictures a scene near the middle of the book when the Professor is becoming increasingly alienated from his family and particularly from his greedy daughter who flaunts the wealth she has acquired from Tom’s death. The scene depicts a Chicago shopping trip that Cather places immediately after a disillusioned passage when the Professor discovers “everything around him” to be “insupportable” because of Outland’s wealth “corrupt[ing]” his formerly unworldly colleague Dr. Crane (1990, 131). The Professor feels “sea-sick” and “imprisoned” by his discovery of the “vulgar” turn of Crane and the *Collier’s* layout reinforces the constriction of greed and commerce: the disillusioned passage and the shopping trip narrative are sandwiched together between an Aqua Velva after-shave advertisement and the image of conquering shopper Rosamond, captioned: “She had a faultless purchasing manner. She was like Napoleon looting the Italian palaces” (see Fig. 1). St. Peter seems ill at ease in the image and is only partially sketched-in in contrast to the darker figure of his Napoleonic daughter in the foreground whose eyes are trained on the loot laid out in front of her. In contrast, St. Peter’s gaze seems very downcast and seems to point generally in her direction and away from the objects under the brim of his hat. After the shopping trip illustrated here, St. Peter becomes bitter toward his daughter and her purchases — even refusing to buy his own fur coat that he had planned to buy in Chicago. When his wife Lillian asks about the non-purchased fur, he snaps at her: “Well, I didn’t,” he said rather shortly. “Let’s omit the verb ‘to buy’ in all forms for a time” (1990, 134) and refers to the trip as “an orgy of acquisition” and seems horrified at



**Amber-colored crystal-clear**  
—as fine for after-shaving as it looks

Not sticky. Not greasy. The skin absorbs Aqua Velva. It does not stay on the surface to clog the pores and help collect dust and germs.

Aqua Velva emulates the natural moisture of the skin. So it keeps it flexible, vibrant, well-conditioned all day long. No stiffness, no parched dry feeling to the Aqua Velva treated face. Aqua Velva keeps the skin as Williams Shaving Cream leaves it.

Because we designed Aqua Velva expressly for after-shaving, it does all that such a preparation should do:

- is single delicately when applied
- is gentle and safe to hair, skin
- protects the face from sun and wind
- is perfect for face-line
- is delicate with its moustache treatment

Hundreds of thousands now compare their shave with Aqua Velva. A 150-drop test bottle free for you to try. Use the coupon below or a postcard.

The large 5-ounce bottle costs 50 cents (60 cents in Canada). Costs almost nothing a day—only a few drops needed. By mail, postpaid, on receipt of price if your dealer is out of it.

**Williams Aqua Velva**  
for use after shaving



By the makers of Williams Shaving Cream

For free test bottle:

Address:  
The J. B. Williams Co.,  
Dept. 11, 114, Chicago,  
Ill., U.S.A. (Postpaid)  
In Canada, address The  
J. B. Williams Co., 25,  
Gerrard St., Toronto,  
Ont., Canada

Send free test bottle of Aqua Velva

# The Professor's House

Continued from page 30

You cannot shut your eyes to the fact that the money, coming into your family, has strengthened your credit and should be. But your claim was less definite than mine. I spent time and strength I could ill afford to spare on the very series of experiments that led to this result. Marcellus gets the benefit of my work as well as of Outland's. I have certainly been ill-used—and, as you say, it's difficult to get recompense when I ask for it so late. It's not to my discredit, certainly, that I didn't take measures to protect my interests. I never thought of my student's work in terms of money. There were others who did, and I was not considered," he concluded bitterly.

"Why don't you put in a claim to Marcellus for your time and expert advice? I think he'd honor it. He is going to live here. He probably doesn't wish to be more unpopular than a suddenly prosperous man is bound to be, and you have many friends. I believe I can convince him that it would be your policy to disregard any reasonable demand."

"I had thought of that. But my wife's brother advises a different course."

"Ah, yes. Mrs. Crane said something of that sort. Well, Crane, if you're going to law about it, I hope you'll consult a sound lawyer, and you know as well as I that Homer Bright is not one."

Dr. Crane colored and hesitated. "I'm sure you are disinterested, St. Peter, but, frankly, I think your judgment has been warped by events. You don't realize how clear the matter is to unprejudiced minds. Though I'm such an unpractical man, I have evidence to rest my claims upon."

"The more the better, if you are going to depend on such a wretched as Bright. If you go to law, I'd like to see you win your case."

St. Peter said good night, went down the stairs and out through the dark pine trees. Evidence, Crane said; probably letters Tom had written him during the winter he was working at Johns Hopkins. Well, there was nothing to be done unless he could get old Dr. Hutchins to persuade Crane to employ a reputable lawyer. Homer Bright's raps on Marcellus' case, but it would amaze a judge in an equity court.

The professor took a taxi in the park before going home. The interview had depressed him, and he was afraid he might be wakeful. He had never seen his colleague in such an unbecoming light before. Crane was narrow, but he was straight; a man you could count on in the shifty game of college politics. He had never been out to get anything for himself. St. Peter would have said nothing about the vulgar success of Outland's idea could possibly matter to Crane, except as it gratified his pride as a teacher and friend. The park was deserted. The arc lights were turned off. The leafless trees stood quite motionless in the light of the clear stars.

THE world was sad to St. Peter as he looked about him; the lake shore and light and airy; Hamilton small his new house, everything around him, which he had imagined empty to a sick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world on the voyage among all the stars, might become like that—a boat from which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings of revolution.

He brought himself back with a jerk! Ah, yes, Crane; that was the trouble.

If Outland were here to-night, he might say with Mark Antony: *My fortunes have overgrown honest men.* . . .

At the end of the semester, in February, St. Peter went to Chicago with Rosamond to help her buy things for her country house. He had very much wanted to stay at home and rest—the university work seemed to take it out of him that winter more than ever before—but Rosamond had set her mind fore—St. Peter told him on his going and Mrs. St. Peter would be unable to refuse. A Chicago merchant he couldn't refuse. A Chicago merchant had brought over a lot of old Spanish furniture, and on this nobody's judgment would be better than the professor's. He was supposed to know a good deal about rugs, too. When his wife said a thing must be done, the professor usually did it, from long-established habit. Her instincts about what one owed to other people were better than his.

Lonie accompanied them to Chicago, where he was to join his brother, the one who was in the silk trade in China, and go on to



"She had a faultless purchasing manner. She was like Napoleon, buying the Italian palaces."

Figure 1. Page 32 of July 4, 1925 issue of Collier's Weekly featuring Willa Cather's The Professor's House illustrated by Frank Street.

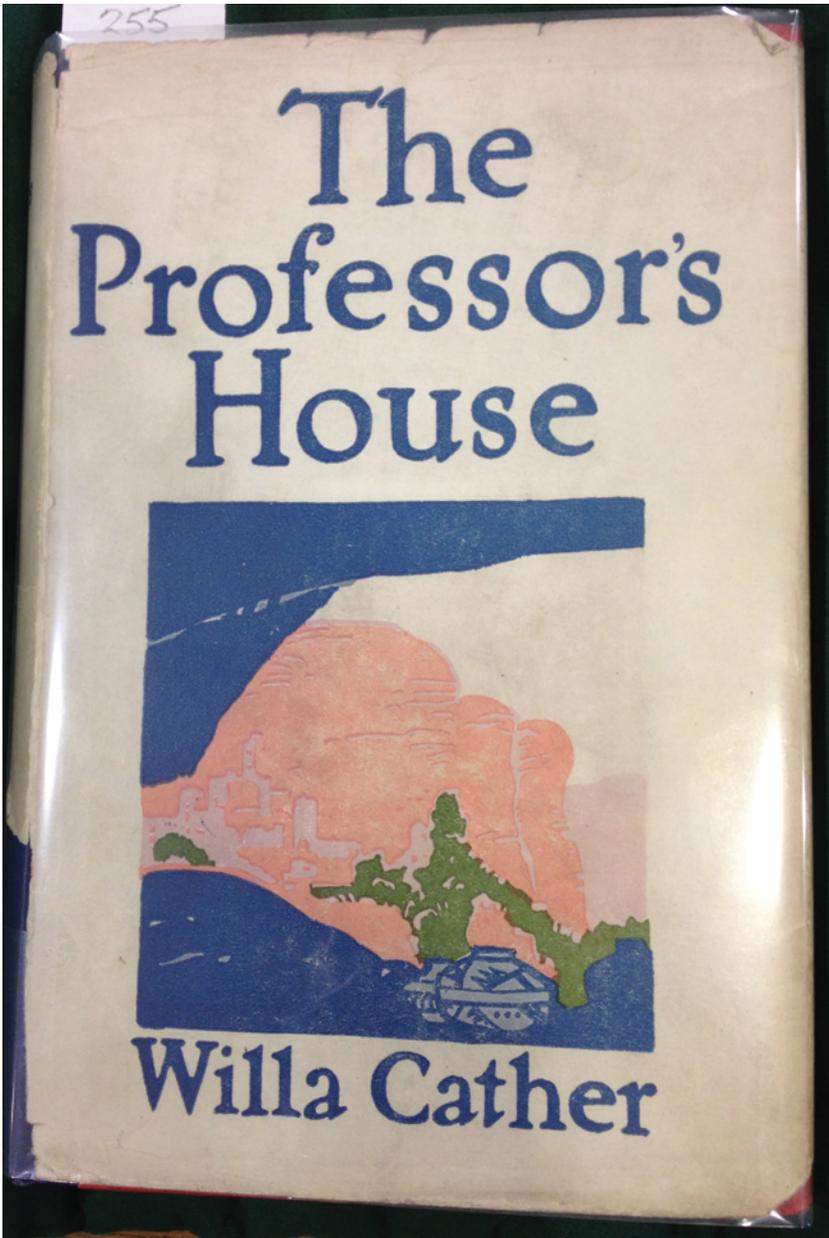
Rosamond's conquering manner (the illustration's caption is taken from his speech) (1990, 135). This chapter ends with the Professor's misanthropic, slightly misogynistic identification with Euripides's self-isolation: "when he was an old man, he went and lived in a cave by the sea, and it was thought queer, at the time. It seems that houses had become insupportable to him. I wonder whether it was because he had observed women so closely all his life" (1990, 136). Earlier in the novel, the Professor relishes some of the creature comforts of wealth — he is "very much interested" in Rosie's new purple fur and he "stroked his daughter's sleeve with evident pleasure" (1990, 67) — and even insists on the female icons of Augusta's dress forms as an inseparable part of his old study and as necessary to his scholarly work. Yet as the novel progresses, he increasingly shuns these kinds of pleasures in luxury and familial ties — refusing to buy his own fur coat and spending more and more time in the old bare house alone — as he increasingly idealizes the less material past, while demonizing the women in his family as those corrupted by wealth and materialism.

While the reading field of *Collier's* emphasizes crowding, constriction, and the confluence of materialism and literature, the bibliographic code of Knopf's first book edition emphasizes spaciousness and its own value as an art object through the artistically framed cover image, the frequent use of blank pages to separate books, ample blank space at the ends of chapters, and colophon emphasizing the fine quality printing. The Knopf dust jacket presents the openness of the vista as seen from Tom's mesa and suggests an almost infinitely distant horizon that merges with the off-white background (see Fig. 2).

The Knopf version frames the novel with the idealized cliff dwelling cover — devoid of human figures or any hint of constrictive social bonds or contaminating commerce; here we are positioned inside Tom's mesa — a space "preserved through the ages by a miracle" (1990, 221) and thought of as untranslatable into money by Tom and by the Professor. The book's material form then seems to resonate with the Professor's anti-materialist dream of separation from his family through the maintenance of an untainted, un-vulgarized space apart.<sup>5</sup> However, the end of Cather's novel forecloses on this fantasy of separation from the social and the marketplace — the Professor ultimately is forced to "let something go [. . .] something very precious" in order for him to "face with fortitude the *Berengaria* [the

---

5. Of course, the pottery shown and the treasures of the mesa are sold by Roddy, and thus even the Knopf cover only captures a fleeting moment before the pressures of the market invade, and, according to Tom and the Professor, desecrate this space apart.



**Figure 2.** The dust jacket from the Knopf edition of *The Professor's House* (1925) reproduced with permission of Penguin Random House, Inc.

ship returning from Europe with his money-obsessed family members] and the future” (1990, 258). In contrast to the book version, the *Collier's* context doesn't just contradict the anti-materialism of the Professor and Tom — it underscores the ways in which anti-materialism is an untenable dream within the novel. The ad-stuffed, ad-stripped pages of *Collier's* render the inevitable failure of the Professor's attempted refusal of his family responsibilities and their commercial underpinnings even more tangible.

Here I have suggested the payoffs reading a page of *The Professor's House* in the context of *Collier's Weekly*. The payoffs for Cather were immense — she sold the serial rights for \$10,000. In a final playful twist, Cather wrote to her friend Irene Weisz in an envelope addressed from “The Professor” a card gleefully proclaiming that: “Professor St. Peter has just gone and bought me a mink coat! Isn't he extravagant?”<sup>6</sup> The Vintage Classics teaching editions that I first read in college and that I teach with now unsurprisingly erase the fascinating initial *Collier's Weekly* and Knopf first book edition versions opting to forego any introduction, note on the text, or annotations, and only adorning Cather's novel with a cover illustration. In one version, the cover depicts the sketchily painted space of the professor's office featuring one of Augusta's clothing forms and an open window looking out to Lake Michigan and in the most recently redesigned version the cover features the very odd unexplained choice of four wild flowers floating on a cream background.<sup>7</sup> Even in the case of a canonical author like Cather, many teaching editions erase meaningful contexts and other versions of the pages that can be fascinating to consider in our scholarship and in our teaching.

### Zora Neale Hurston's “Sweat” in *FIRE!!*

Zora Neale Hurston's short story “Sweat” first appeared in the extraordinary periodical *FIRE!!* which only lasted one issue published in November 1926 before it ran out of funding. Scholar Thomas H. Wirth has established “The *FIRE!!* Press” to supply teachers, scholars, and students with a facsimile edition of the rare issue since as he documents, “Copies of the original are treasures beyond price. Langston Hughes reports in his autobiography

---

6. From the Newberry Archives MIDWEST MS Cather — Weisz, Box 1, folder 49.

7. Perhaps these flowers somehow hint at the Professor's French garden, but I suspect that they are more likely a nod to the female author and function to package the book with an easy marker of femininity that seems to violently clash with the aggressively sexist attitudes of the Professor toward the women in his life.

*The Big Sea* that several hundred of them were consumed (quite literally) by a real fire in the basement where they were stored. Then *FIRE!!* went broke. Indeed, it was never solvent. Only the first issue of this ‘Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists’ ever appeared.”<sup>8</sup> Wirth asserts that the issue was a collaborative effort between Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, Richard Bruce Nugent, John Preston Davis, and Gwendolyn Bennett and free from the usual market pressures: “Financed by its creators, a small circle of their friends, and a printer who wasn’t paid, *FIRE!!* was free from the restraints imposed by the need to please patrons and publishers (who tended to be wealthy and white). Unlike the contemporary periodicals *Crisis* and *Opportunity* — organs of the NAACP and the Urban League, respectively — *FIRE!!* was independent of sponsoring organizations with “larger” political and social objectives. So there was no need to restrict its contents to material which would “elevate” the image of the Race as a means of contributing to social progress” (WIRTH n.p.). However, this narrative is slightly contradicted by the plea for investors on the second page of the issue that also thanks a small list of “patrons” for the first issue including white author Carl Van Vechten before asking, “Being a non-commercial product interested only in the arts, it is necessary that we make some appeal for aid from interested friends. For the second issue of *FIRE* we would appreciate having fifty people subscribe ten dollars each, and fifty more to subscribe five dollars each. We make no eloquent or rhetorical plea. *FIRE* speaks for itself” (1926, 2).<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the magazine failed to secure the necessary funding to

---

8. The facsimile edition that I ordered from <https://firepress.com/> included an inserted leaflet featuring a short description by one of the original contributors, Richard Bruce Nugent, and a short retrospective essay by re-publisher Thomas H. Wirth.

9. Indeed, the final piece in *FIRE!!* by Wallace Thurman could be read as a plea to reappraise Carl Van Vechten’s controversial novel, *N[word] Heaven*, as an exploitative and partial account that will confirm the racist attitudes of white readers, “the white people who read the book will believe that all Harlem Negroes are like the [. . .] lewd hussies and whoremongers in the book” (1926, 47). Thurman defends Van Vechten by arguing that, “[i]t is obvious that these excited folk do not realize that any white person who would believe such poppy-cock probably believes it anyway, without any additional aid from Mr. Van Vechten, and should such a person read a tale anent our non-cabareting, church-going Negroes, presented in all their virtue and glory and with their human traits, their human hypocrisy and their human perversities glossed over, written, say, by Jessie Fauset, said person would laugh derisively and allege that Miss Fauset had not told the truth” (1926, 47). I have chosen to redact the hate speech in his title throughout this article.

continue — but the single issue that was published is a remarkable collection of literary and visual cultures from the Harlem Renaissance.

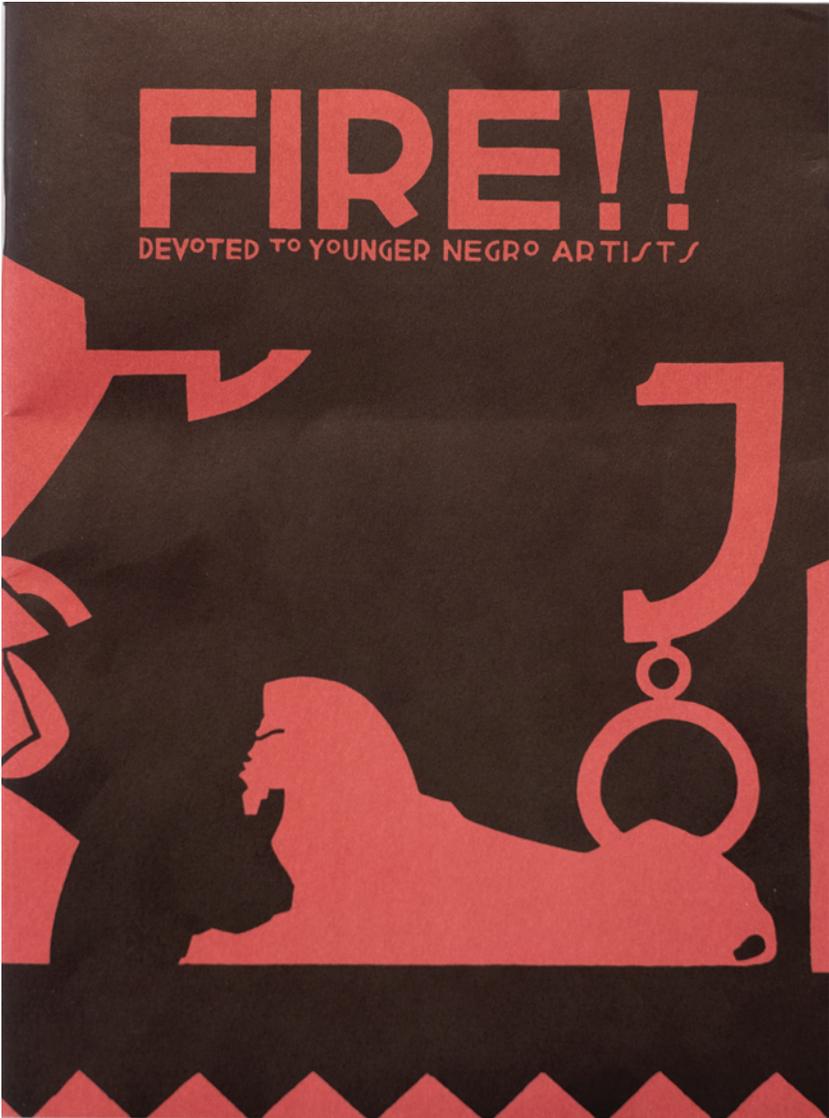
Martha Nadell documents that *FIRE!!* was “[p]rinted by Joseph Leventhal [. . . and] used heavy paper stock and rich colours for the cover” (2012, 809). Nadell cites Langston Hughes’s autobiography *The Big Sea* for his assertion that, “It had to be on good paper, he said, worthy of the drawings of Aaron Douglas. It had to have beautiful type, worthy of the first Negro art quarterly” (cited in NADELL 2012, 809). The black and red front cover features an evocative image created by Aaron Douglas (whose line drawings are also included inside the issue) which includes a sphinx in red against the black background of a silhouetted face with bold graphic features and an earring (see Fig. 3).

Wirth interprets this face as a profile of a young Black man that reimagines racism into a celebration of beauty: “[t]he abstract designs on the left are his eyes, nose, and lips. These features, which in the Twenties were frequently the subject of vicious racist caricature, coalesce into a new standard of beauty” (1926, n.p.). The back cover inverts the black and red color scheme featuring a much smaller centered design resembling an African mask on a red background. Both the front and back cover evoke strong images of graphic Blackness and iconography of Africa with the Sphinx and the mask. Nadell argues that the “front and back covers suggest a lens with which to approach the magazine as a whole. The magazine is racially modernist, attentive to racial themes and motifs combined with formal experimentation” (2012, 807–08). I agree with Nadell’s assessment that the striking visual evokes the graphic boldness of *BLAST* and explicit references to African visual iconography.

The issue’s “Foreword” is an incantatory string of italicized descriptions following “FIRE . . .” repeated four times (1926, 2). This cluster of abstract images of fire concludes with the following description:

“FIRE . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom  
and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned . . .  
the flesh is sweet and real . . . the soul an inward flush  
of fire. . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire — on fire in the  
furnace of life blazing. . .  
“Fy-ah,  
Fy-ah, Lawd,  
Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!”

(1926, 1)



**Figure 3.** Front Cover of Facsimile edition by The FIRE!! Press reproduced with permission of The FIRE!! Press

By evoking the image of fire upon an “ebon bordered loom”, this Foreword seems to describe the “vivid” red and black design that Douglas created for the cover and makes the bottom triangle border read doubly as a textile pattern and as a series of pyramids evoking an iconic African landscape. The Foreword concludes with the prayer rendered in a Black vernacular that resonates with the song that Hurston’s protagonist Delia sings on the way home from church, “Jurden water, black an’ col’ / Chills de body, not de soul / An’ Ah wantah cross Jurden in uh calm time” (1926, 44). While the Foreword describes a fire that burns the soul, Hurston’s character imagines a cooling water that only chills the body and leaves the soul unharmed; the climax of Hurston’s story resonates with both prayers as it questions whether the immobility of Delia’s body in coming to Sykes’s aid damages her soul or changes his soul in his dying moments.

Zora Neale Hurston’s “Sweat” appears near the end of the issue, and before further unpacking the ways in which the *FIRE!!* context enriches our understandings of the story, I will offer a brief overview of the story. The story begins with protagonist Delia Jones at work sorting her pile of clothes to wash when her abusive husband Sykes terrifies her by looping his bull whip around her shoulders so that she fears that it is a dreaded snake and ends with him trying to run her out of their house (paid for by her washing labors) by catching a giant rattlesnake and releasing it in the house to attack her. Delia escapes unharmed and hides in the haybarn while Sykes goes to investigate if his attempt to harm her has succeeded and he then falls prey to the snake in the dark trap (he had previously taken most of the matches) that he laid for his wife.

Early in the story Hurston develops the theme of Delia’s labor as painfully wrung from her body to pay for the house: when defending her decision to continue to wash the clothes of white folks against Sykes’s attacks, Delia says, “Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it” (1926, 40). The story begins with Sykes’s bull whip terrorizing act and his verbal abuse of Delia over her labor. The narrator emphasizes that the story begins on the particular Sunday night when Delia finally begins to stand up to Sykes. Hurston emphasizes this change after Delia seizes the iron skillet to protect herself in their opening fight when Sykes attempts to prevent her from working and her defensive action “surprised” and “cowed him” so that he does not “strike her as he usually did” (1926, 40). By the end of the story, Delia threatens to go to the white folks if he beats her again after he brings home the snake to terrorize her (1926, 43). Hurston sets her story at a moment of shifting power between the couple while also emphasizing that Sykes’s abuse has transformed Delia

over the years: “Anything like flowers had long ago been drowned in the salty stream that had been pressed from her heart. Her tears, her sweat, her blood [. . .] She was young and soft then, but now she thought of her knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands, and drew herself up into an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed (1926, 41). The clustered harsh consonants describing Delia’s body — “knotty, muscled limbs, her harsh knuckly hands” — emphasize the violence of her physical transformation from abuse and labor. Hurston underscores the physicality of her title “Sweat” with the story’s repeated references to Delia’s embodied labors and transformative psychological and physical pain.

The final page of Hurston’s story features the slightly ambiguous ending as Sykes dies while Delia reacts to his snake bite and experiences his pain acutely in her body. Hurston stresses Delia’s embodied reactions throughout the final paragraphs — “She lay there” and “Delia could not move — her legs were gone flabby” (1926, 45) — as she experiences Sykes’s torments from a distance. Finally, she is able to get up from the flower-bed and approach the door of the house before her physical and emotional responses again drive her body away from him:

She saw him on his hands and knees as soon as she reached the door. He crept an inch or two toward her — all that he was able, and she saw his horribly swollen neck and is [sic] one open eye shining with hope. A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye that must, could not, fail to see the tubs [. . .] She could scarcely reach the Chinaberry tree, where she waited in the growing heat while inside she knew the cold river was creeping up and up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

(1926, 45)

Hurston’s emphasis on Delia’s bodily reactions throughout the story sets up this ending where the narration blurs her bodily and spiritual responses as she is physically borne away by “a surge of pity” and she imagines “the cold river” of death “creeping” up inside Sykes’s body as he realizes that she has been outside not helping him as he cried for her. The final sentence emphasizes the terrible knowledge of both Delia and Sykes of her refusal to help him through the repetition of “she knew” surrounds the distanced reduction of Sykes to “that eye which must know by now” (1926, 45).

This final page of Hurston’s story resonates with the many narratives in *Fire!!* describing failed relationships, broken women, and how the prejudice of anti-Black racism and colorism poisons relationships. Wallace Thurman’s

opening story “Cordelia the Crude” begins the theme of mistreated women as it describes a young Black girl denied her early love in South Carolina, then unwillingly transplanted by her family to New York City, and finally left to “become wise” (1926, 5) through groping encounters in the Roosevelt Theatre on her way to becoming a prostitute. In Hurston’s play “Color Struck”, the protagonist Emmaline cannot believe that John loves her dark skin. Throughout the play, Emmaline is continually jealous of lighter skinned women, creating her own misery through her self-hatred that causes her to refuse to perform at the cake walk due to her jealousy and to exclaim, “Oh — them yaller wenches! How I hate ’em! They gets everything they wants” (1926, 11). At the end of the story, when her lover John comes back to marry her twenty years after the opening cake walk refusal scene, Emma is initially delighted by his proposal, but then flies into a jealous rage when he wipes the brow of her feverish lighter skinned daughter and chases him away with her renewed suspicion that he must desire the girl. John bemoans the tragedy that his love has been wasted as Emmaline’s internalized racism will not allow her to accept it: “JOHN (*slowly, after a long pause*). So this is the woman I’ve been wearing over my heart like a rose for twenty years! She so despises her own skin that she can’t believe any one else could love it!” (1926, 14). In Gwendolyn Bennett’s “Wedding Day”, the white bride-to-be Mary ultimately rejects the Black protagonist Paul Watson because of his race despite initially claiming not to be “prejudiced” (1926, 27). In Bennett’s story, initially Paris seems like an escape from the violence of anti-Black racism in the U.S. — Paul thinks, “[w]ouldn’t he have a hell of a time if he went back to America where black was black. Wasn’t white nowhere, black wasn’t” (1926, 28) — but then the racism of Mary prevents his happiness as ultimately, she “just couldn’t go through with it” (1926, 28) because of his race and after this rejection, even in Paris, Paul starts to feel uncomfortable under the stares of the white subway riders in the story’s final paragraph.

Reading Hurston’s “Sweat” in the pages of *Fire!!* also emphasizes the story’s construction of painful Black labor through resonances in several poems in the issue. In Countée Cullen’s “From the Dark Tower”, the long history of Black people’s alienation from the fruits of their labor through chattel slavery is invoked, “We shall not always plant while others reap / The golden increment of bursting fruit, / Nor always countenance, abject and mute, / That lesser men should hold their brothers cheap” (1926, 16). This poem suggests that the time for enslaved labor and abjection will “not always” last and asserts that “We were not made eternally to weep” (1926, 16). Cullen’s poem hints at the kind of refusal of abuse that Delia’s

character starts to embody in “Sweat”. Although her tireless body-crushing labors seem interminable even when she escapes Sykes’s wrath, the end of the story hints that she might finally be able to fully enjoy the fruits of those labors in a way that resonates with the final lines of “From the Dark Tower”: “So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds, / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds” (1926, 16). While it depicts a very different kind of labor than Delia’s rural washerwoman strain, Langston Hughes’s “Elevator Boy” describes another form of unsatisfying Black labor, here gendered male and part of the urban technological modern city, but ultimately not less grinding than Delia’s washing. The speaker of the poem describes his job as a “chance” for a “little luck” at the start of the poem, by the end he seems to have lost hope in the job as he depicts the repetitive unsatisfying labor:

Maybe no luck for a long time.  
Only the elevators  
Goin’ up an’ down,  
Up an’ down,  
Or somebody else’s shoes  
To shine,  
Or greasy pots in a dirty kitchen.  
I been runnin’ this  
Elevator too long.  
Guess I’ll quit now.

(1926, 20)

Despite the differences between the speaker’s and Delia’s labors, both feature repetitive motions and suggest a lack of agency and gradual exhaustion. The speaker’s casual “Guess I’ll quit now” contrasts with Delia’s unceasing commitment to her washing work and suggests that the speaker imagines better luck than Delia can entertain in her bleak struggle for survival.

The piece immediately before Hurston’s story, Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is the issue’s most hopeful and most formally experimental contribution. The whole narrative is riddled with ellipses generating a thrillingly queer third-person stream of consciousness perspective of Alex, a young struggling artist.<sup>10</sup> The story begins with the

---

10. Indeed, the piece is so explicitly queer that Wirth argues that is why Nugent uses the pseudonym of his shortened name “Richard Bruce”. Nadell cites Hughes’s assessment in *The Big Sea* (1940, 237) that Nugent’s piece caused many of the

protagonist's desire to create: "He wanted to do something . . . to write or draw . . . or something . . . but it was so comfortable just to lay there on the bed . . . his shoes off . . . and think . . . think of everything . . . short disconnected thoughts — to wonder . . . to remember . . . to think and smoke . . . why wasn't he worried that he had no money" (1926, 33). While the speaker does include memories of his father's death and funeral and his mother's disapproval of his lifestyle, the majority of the narrative focuses on his pleasures in his body, his love of his artistic community, and his thoughts and his ecstatic sexual encounter with a man he picks up who asks him for a match in Spanish. The narrative describes their transcendent connection when they go back to his room: "no need for words . . . they had always known each other . . . as they undressed by the blue dawn . . . Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being . . . his body was all symmetry and music . . . and Alex called him Beauty . . . long they lay . . . blowing smoke and exchanging thoughts" (1926, 36; all ellipses in original). Alex's euphoric intimate connection with "Beauty" and their deep wordless understanding jars against the horribly violent and unequal relationship between Delia and Sykes in the story immediately following "Smoke, Lilies and Jade". Surprisingly, the only space for connection and pleasure in the whole issue is the most formally experimental narrative with an explicitly gay coupling. When reading the contents of *FIRE!!* through in order, the tragedy of the abusive heterosexual marriage of Delia and Sykes strangles the momentary expansive pleasure opened by Nugent's piece.

*Fire!!* frames Hurston's story set in the rural south within the cultural landscape of Harlem by sandwiching the story between Nugent's story set in New York City which namedrops "Zora" as a character in Alex's literary circles ("it was nice to walk in the blue after a party . . . Zora had shone again . . . her stories . . . she always shone . . . and Monty was glad . . . every one was glad when Zora shone" [1926, 36]) and Wallace Thurman's final piece defending Van Vechten's controversial best-selling *N[word] Heaven* for its role in boosting white tourism to Harlem: "Harlem cabarets have received another public boost and are wearing out cash register keys, and entertainers' throats and orchestra instruments" (1926, 47). Hurston's story stands out from other contents in the issue with her

---

hostile reviews of *FIRE!!*: "Hughes wrote that '*Fire* [sic] had plenty of cold water thrown on it by the colored critics [. . .]. Dr. Du Bois in the *Crisis* roasted it. The Negro press called it all sorts of bad names, largely because of a green and purple story by Bruce Nugent, in the Oscar Wilde tradition'" (cited in NADELL 2012, 815).

two contributions being the only two set in the rural south and heavily featuring her representation of Black voices. Yet “Sweat” resonates with other surrounding pieces sharing themes of painful relationships, violence against women, and crushing Black labor.

These layers of contextually enriched meaning are muted in the 1997 Rutgers University Press teaching edition.<sup>11</sup> In her introduction, Cheryl A. Wall analyzes the final moment as a “terrible spiritual cost”: “Delia makes no effort to warn, rescue, or even comfort him. She exacts her revenge, but at a terrible spiritual cost. To describe the moment that Delia leaves Sykes to die, the narrator weaves together images of heat and cold, the sun and the river, in a way that underscores the elemental, inexorable dimensions of this tale. The narrator does not pass judgment. Yet, how will Delia, good Christian though she has tried to be, ever cross Jordan in a calm time?” (1997, 12–13). This teaching edition — marketed as part of the “Women Writers: Texts and Contexts” series — includes the editor’s introduction, the story, a section on the “Background to the Story” including other pieces written by Hurston (“Research”, an excerpt from Hurston’s autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*, her selection from Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology* entitled “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, and her story “The Gilded Six Bits”) as well as excerpts from Genesis 1–3 to underscore the story’s biblical serpent allusions. Finally, the volume includes a selection of critical essays concluding with Alice Walker’s “Searching for Zora”, which details Walker’s anger upon hearing that her literary idol died of “malnutrition” (1997, 219)<sup>12</sup> and her search for Hurston’s grave in the long weeds filled with “hissing” and the threat of snakes. Indeed, in this edition the snake in “Sweat” is emphasized through the inclusion of Genesis to underscore the mythic allegorical threat of the “serpent” tempting the woman into eating the forbidden fruit in order to know “good and evil” (1997, 117) and Walker’s fear of the snakes in the grass in the weedy field where Walker hunts for Hurston’s unmarked grave.

The final version of “Sweat” that I wanted to mention is in *Spunk*, a play adaptation of “Three Tales by Zora Neale Hurston” by George C. Wolfe, published by the Theatre Communications Group in 1991, with music

---

11. See HURSTON 1997; the editor’s introduction does mention the initial print context in *FIRE!!* very briefly but doesn’t include many details.

12. This momentary rage at misinformation is tempered a few pages later when Walker explains that in her later conversation with Dr. Benton, “a friend of Zora’s”, that “Zora didn’t die of malnutrition [. . .] she had a stroke and she died in the welfare home” (1997, 224, 225).

by Chic Street Man. This text includes a short production history explaining that “*Spunk* was originally developed under the auspices of the Center Theatre Group of Los Angeles” and “had its world premiere at the Crossroads Theatre Company on November 2, 1989” (1991, n.p.). This adaptation features the narrator-like figures of “Guitar Man” and “Blues Speak Woman” who interject into the stories/plays and segue between them. Wolfe’s adaptation of “Sweat” splits the final paragraph in Delia’s voice between the actress/character of Delia and the Blues Speak Woman:

SYKES: Delia, is dat you Ah heah?

BLUES SPEAK WOMAN: She saw him on his hands and knees. His horribly swollen neck, his one eye open, shining with . . .

SYKES: Hope.

*Sykes extends his hand toward Delia. The weight and desperation of his grip pulls her to the ground. She is about to console him, but instead, scurries away.*

DELIA: A surge of pity too strong to support bore her away from that eye . . .

BLUES SPEAK WOMAN: That must, could not, fail to see the lamp.

DELIA: Orlando with its doctors . . .

BLUES SPEAK WOMAN: Oh it’s too far!

*Sykes grabs hold to the hem of her dress. Delia calmly steps beyond his reach.*

DELIA: She could scarcely reach the chinaberry tree, where she waited . . . in the growing heat . . .

BLUES SPEAK WOMAN; While inside she knew, the cold river was creeping up . . . creeping up to extinguish that eye which must know by now that she knew.

*Music underscore. Delia looks on as Sykes recoils into a fetal position and dies.*

*The sound of the snake’s rattle as she looks at the audience.*

DELIA: Sweat!

*Blackout.*

(1991, 28)

In this version, the conflicted response of Delia is split into her character’s speech and the Blues Speak Woman’s speech dramatizing her originally internalized conflict into a doubled voice and adding the final line “Sweat!” which jars against the silence of Delia’s “wait[ing]” and

Hurston's final line emphasizing knowledge. Here Delia momentarily gets the final word, "Sweat!", but it is a cryptic remark in the aftermath of the internal battle she undergoes in the story's final moments — perhaps a cry of satisfied vengeance as it echoes her character's earlier insistence on her own labor as paying for the house that he fails to take from her or perhaps a cry of resignation acknowledging that even after this moment of release she'll soon return to her labor. After the stage fades to black, the Guitar Man comes out singing a song which includes the line, "Not everybody's got a snake in they house, but we all gits the blues" (1991, 29). The adapted version connects Hurston's story explicitly to music and to blues, incorporating the sheet music for the Guitar Man's songs throughout the adaptation at the end of the volume, while also creating more universalized figures in the Guitar Man and the Blues Speak Woman who highlight the allegorical, mythical aspects of Hurston's story.

### **Gwendolyn Brooks's "the progress" in *A Street in Bronzeville***

In 1945, Gwendolyn Brooks published her first poetic volume, *A Street in Bronzeville*, which concludes with a sequence she called "soldier sonnets" entitled "Gay Chaps at the Bar". Bornstein includes one of these sonnets, "my dreams, my works, must wait until after hell", as one of his four sonnets in the first chapter of *Material Modernism*; his analysis focuses on how the Norton Anthology omits the contextual information provided by the sonnet's embeddedness in the longer sonnet sequence "Gay Chaps at the Bar" that initially included an epigraph dedicating the entire sequence to her brother: "souvenir for Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks and every other soldier" (BORNSTEIN 2001, 29). In the opening poem of the sequence, Brooks begins with an epigraph taken from a letter she received from a soldier and takes up his phrase "gay chaps at the bar" as her title for the opening poem and the whole sequence. Brooks's titular gesture plays off of the discord set up in the epigraph between the soldiers who "return from the front crying and trembling" and their former identities as "guys I knew in the States": "Gay chaps at the bar".<sup>13</sup> Bornstein's brief reading of Brooks's sonnet argues that returning to the initial print context in *A Street in*

---

13. BROOKS 1945, 46; all citations from Brooks's sonnets in *A Street in Bronzeville* will give line numbers from the first 1945 edition published by Harper & Brothers.

*Bronzeville* restores the framing epigraphs which highlight how the sonnet sequence focuses on the “disruptive experience of war” for Black soldiers during WWII (2001, 29). Here, I hope to build on Bornstein’s insights to argue that the material form of *A Street in Bronzeville* transforms our understanding of the concluding sonnet sequence — I’ll focus specifically on the final sonnet “the progress” — and underscores Brooks’s evocation of the weight of historical recurrence and uneasy circularity as her speakers struggle to even imagine post-war “progress”.

In the opening sonnet of the sequence, “gay chaps at the bar”, Brooks adapts the Italian sonnet form to set up the jarring break between the opening octave’s account of the past bar scene and the speakers’ sense of absolute mastery of the codes for language and loving appropriate for the bar space and the final sestet’s articulation of a lack of any voicing or language that could work in war: “No stout / Lesson showed us how to chat with death. We brought / No brass fortissimo, among our talents, / To holler down the lions in this air” (ll. 11–14). Many of the sonnets in the sequence attempt to imagine life after the war — returning from the front and “Hoping that, when the devil days of my hurt / Drag out to their last dregs and I resume / On such legs as are left me, in such heart / as I can manage, remember to go home, / my taste will not have turned insensitive / To honey and bread old purity could love” (“my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell”, ll. 9–14). The speakers of the sonnets repeatedly doubt the possibility of returning to pre-war life as in “piano after war” when the octave imagines a momentary escape when music will “warm” and “rejuvenate” the speaker before “A cry of bitter dead men” will cause the speaker’s “thawed eye” to “go again to ice” (ll. 6, 8, 11, 13).

When Brooks was asked about these sonnets, she remarked in 1972 *Report from Part One* on her warping of the form to accommodate the “stuff of letters” from soldiers and the horror of the war: “A sonnet series in off-rhyme, **because I felt it was an off-rhyme situation — I did think of that**. I first wrote the one sonnet, without thinking of extensions. I wrote it because of a letter I got from a soldier who included that phrase [‘Gay Chaps at the Bar’] in what he was telling me; and then I said, there are other things to say about what’s going on at the front and all, and I’ll write more poems, some of them based on **the stuff of letters** that I was getting from several soldiers, and I felt it would be good to have them all in the same form, because it would serve my purposes throughout” (1972 156, emphasis added). Brooks emphasizes the links between her form and content and challenges Houston Baker’s famous claim that Brooks’s style and subjects were at odds. Baker asserts: “What

one seems to have is white style and black content — two warring ideals within one dark body” (1987, 21). Brooks’s italicized emphasis — “I did think of *that*” (emphasis in the original) — speaks to her sense that she radically adapted the “style” of the traditional sonnet to further portray the “off” situations that she described.

In *Report from Part One*, Brooks also writes about her first taste of book publication with *A Street in Bronzeville* and her eagerness to see her work in volume form. After an initial attempt with Knopf,<sup>14</sup> Brooks sent a sample of her work to Harper and Brothers: “Take your time,’ was the burden of editor Elizabeth Lawrence’s accepting letter. **But I would not take my time.** They might forget me in the suggested two years — in a year! I folded myself firmly into my kitchenette [ . . . ] I wrote, wrote. [ . . . ] Then I went, **heart beating fast**, to the post office. Soon, a second Harper and Brothers envelope came to 623. I **ran** into the community bathroom, locked the door, and **gasped through the gold of a firm acceptance.** Pandemonium. The Crowd — my ‘crowd’ — went **wild.** My family, my friends, my neighbors, thanked heaven and Harper’s” (1972, 72, *emphasis added*).<sup>15</sup> Here Brooks recounts and dramatizes her bodily reactions to the Harper’s contract while also flaunting the literary ecstasy of the experience through her heavy alliteration in this passage. Brooks’s breathless excitement about

---

14. In *Report from Part One* Brooks recalls, “When I won a Midwestern Writers’ Conference poetry award in 1943 Emily Morison of Knopf congratulated me and asked me if I had enough poems ‘for a book.’ *Indeed.* ‘Send them to me,’ invited Emily Morison. In high hysteria I rushed home to pull out all my poems. Very soon I had packed off at least forty — love poems, war poems, nature poems, patriotism poems, ‘prejudice’ poems. Eventually Emily Morison replied. She had liked the ‘Negro poems.’ She hoped that, when I had a full collection of these, I would try Knopf again. Always ready to make lemonade out of lemons, I availed myself of Emily Morison’s wisdom. I culled nineteen ‘Negro poems’ from the medley before me, and I sent them, not to Knopf, for I was too shy to approach that door again, but to Harper and Brothers” (1973, 71).

15. Jacqueline Goldsby’s 2021 article “‘Something is Said in the Silences’: Gwendolyn Brooks’s Years at Harper’s” analyzes the nearly fifty year-long correspondence between Gwendolyn Brooks and her Harper’s editor, Elizabeth Lawrence, to compellingly argue that in their collaboration “Brooks and Lawrence used the work of art to negotiate the racial and class power imbalances between them” (245). Closely analyzing their correspondence from the Harper’s archive, including the initial contract for *A Street in Bronzeville* featuring Brooks’s son Henry’s “jelly-stained fingerprints”, Goldsby contends that, “the women forged a place for innovative verse at a mainstream firm and, in that process, developed an enduring social bond through their shared aesthetic commitments” (253, 245).

the Harpers production of her book continued as she neared publication and in a letter to her editor Elizabeth Lawrence, she raves about the dust jacket and even playfully anticipates the day when she will get to shelve her printed volume: “Dear Miss Lawrence, I’m greatly impressed with the jacket. It’s eye-catching, suggestive, and dignified. I simply love it. How happy I am that there are no little funny figures, with patches, open collars, and so on! [ . . . ] I stuffed the Pocket book of Short Stories in my jacket, then stood it between some “other” books I have on a table here. Then I **gazed and gazed** — and Henry was just as **exhilarated as I am** — **mighty, mighty proud**. Well, from now on I’ll be downstairs mornings **waiting** for the postman” (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> Brooks’s writing about her exhilaration with print publication emphasizes her awe, pride, and her eagerness to behold her poems as a printed object.

Elizabeth Lawrence sent a proof of the jacket to Brooks in late June of 1945 and sketched out their rationale for the design: “It was not an easy jacket to arrive at. We wanted to keep it simple and we also wanted to get away from the usual delicacy which stamps a volume of poetry.”<sup>17</sup> The design emphasizes urban space rather than highlighting the soldier sonnets or any of their images of horrors at the front. Yet, while the front cover emphasizes “Negro life in a great American City”, the back cover of the first printing foregrounds the wartime production context of the volume by including an intriguing appeal for readers to “BUY WAR BONDS!” signed by Brooks herself. Like “gay chaps at the bar”, the blurb includes a citation of a letter from a soldier and Brooks moves between her own position on the home-front and her voicing of the soldier’s warning and visions:

“Remember, when you read laudatory accounts of us in the newspapers, that killing [Japanese] wins hill 250 — not victory necessarily.”

That is the unhappy warning we have from an infantryman in New Guinea. A soldier who, like others and others and others, has not found it pleasant to watch men he laughed with fall about him, abruptly crumpled dreams; or to watch many men “buried by bulldozers, rumbling, able

---

16. Letter dated June 30th, 1945, Harper and Brother’s Archive, Firestone Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Box 5, Folder 28, June — December 1945.

17. Letter dated June 28, 1945, Harper and Brother’s Archive, Firestone Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Box 5, Folder 28, June — December 1945.

and indifferent.” No, the war is not yet won, nor should we dare breathe deeply till every active hostility has come to an end.

But meanwhile we need not be ineffective. We can buy — and hold onto — extra war bonds, and take pride in thus contributing the more to that international health and quiet sure, one day, to come.

None of us can object to speeding the end of the war and guaranteeing future personal advantages as well!

While the Harper’s archive has no information on how Brooks came to use her back cover to try to help the war efforts, her use of the soldier’s letter, her construction of the image of “abruptly crumpled dreams”, and her citation of the rumbling indifference of the burying bulldozers link the back cover to the final sonnet sequence and its exploration of the irresolvable tension between hoping for a future and despairing in the midst of a seemingly inescapable war.

Brooks chose to conclude her volume with “the progress”, a poem that questions how the speakers will be able to “progress” to a future after the war and which ends by commanding listening. The poem begins by documenting the ceremonies of patriotism as outward display through a series of “Stills” which turn in line 8 toward a recognition of the reason behind the “sallowing” of the speakers’ “Initial ardor” — “For death of men who too saluted, sang”:

**the progress**

AND still we wear our uniforms, follow  
The cracked cry of the bugles, comb and brush  
Our pride and prejudice, doctor the sallow  
Initial ardor, wish to keep it fresh.  
Still we applaud the President’s voice and face.  
Still we remark on patriotism, sing,  
Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice  
For death of men who too saluted, sang.  
But inward grows a soberness, an awe,  
A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.  
For even if we come out standing up  
How shall we smile, congratulate: and how  
Settle in chairs? Listen, listen. The step  
Of Iron feet again. And again      wild.

(ll. 1–14)

The sibilance links the “sallow” with the “stills” and enhances the link between living and dead men who “salute” and “sing” and develops into “soberness” after the turn from external to internal in the ninth line. The sonnet’s sestet moves from the troubled outward show — the “cracked cry” of the opening octave — to question what kind of “progress” can be hoped for when “inward grows a soberness, an awe, / A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold” and the speaker questions: “For even if we come out standing up / How shall we smile, congratulate; and how / Settle in chairs” (ll. 2). The “even if” recalls the resistance to the difficult labor required for dreaming in “kitchenette building” at the beginning of the volume and questions what kinds of responses will be possible even assuming physical survival. The volume ends by stressing listening — commanding that we “Listen, listen” to the marching rhythm of the war and to the resistant beats of Brooks’s off-rhyme sonnet sequence which refuse to fall into step with “iron feet” and prescribed sonic patterns (ll. 13, 14). Rather than the regulated performance of the opening octave, Brooks ends the poem by including a lingering lacuna in the final line. This spatial and sonic pause disrupts the regularity of the marching feet and the insistence on persistent rhythms throughout the poem — from the reiterated “stills” to the “again. And again” — and instead substitutes the unexpected concept of “wildness”. Does the “wild” suggest the continuous and yet estranged beating of the iron feet or does the space signal the silence left when the marching stops?

I want to end this section by thinking about the volume’s material form in which the soldier sonnets are re-placed within the “Street in Bronzeville” referenced by the titular phrase that Brooks found so central to her understanding of the work of this volume. The front cover shows the urban bricks to which the soldiers hope to return to, while the back cover re-inscribes the ongoing war as “not yet won”. Brooks uses both the structure of the sonnet — as a form that can be skewed through off-rhyme and through the tensions created through the expected turn — to question how these soldiers can “progress” in a post-war environment and to attempt to imagine a return to “wildness” that seems unimaginable to her speakers.

### **Una Marson’s “Little Brown Girl” in *The Moth and The Star***

For my final example, I wanted to focus on the Jamaican poet Una Marson and her poem “Little Brown Girl” as it appeared in its initial print context of her self-published 1937 volume *The Moth and The Star*. As recently as 2008, Anna Snaith wrote that Jamaican writer Una Marson was a victim

of “scholarly neglect” and pointed to her “almost total erasure from literary and general histories” of the modernist period.<sup>18</sup> Since then, Snaith and Alison Donnell’s critical recovery work has inspired a burgeoning scholarly conversation about Marson’s work, but there is still only one edition of her poetry in print: *Una Marson: Selected Poems* edited by Alison Donnell first published in 2011 by the Peepal Tree Press. Thus far there has not been much critical conversation about her intensive engagement with print cultures in her self-publishing endeavors. This lack of scholarly attention is likely due at least in part to the scarcity of archival materials about her printing experiences and because very few libraries have copies of her self-published volumes.<sup>19</sup> While Marson’s poem does not yet have the multitude of print contexts that all of Bornstein’s examples exist in, the poem is included in Donnell’s *Selected Poems* and here I’ll focus on how its meanings are amplified by the context of Marson’s *The Moth and The Star*, the self-published volume printed by the Gleaner Co. in Kingston, Jamaica in 1937.

Marson’s third volume of self-published poetry has a striking cover image featuring a black and white design of a mostly white moth in the lower left-hand corner with a comet-like shooting star diagonally reaching to the top right corner against a dark black background (see Fig. 4).<sup>20</sup>

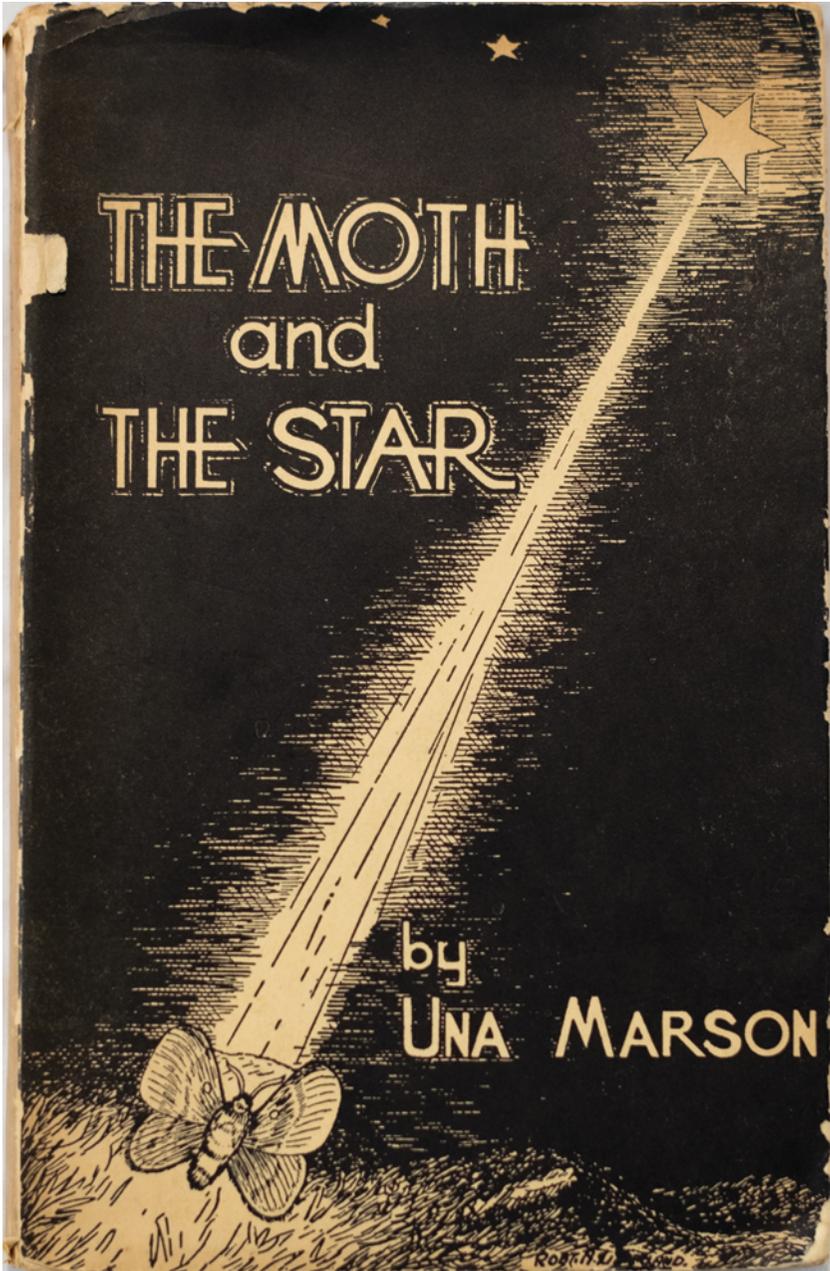
The predominance of inky blackness on the cover and the black and white design seem to hint at the tension between Blackness and whiteness that Marson explores inside the volume. The cover invokes the British literary canon when read through her epigraph by Shelley offering “the desire of the moth for the star / Of the night for the morrow, / The devotion to something afar / From the sphere of our sorrow” — but the cover also seems to hint at her local Jamaican pastoral landscape with grassy slopes, no closer city lights to attract the moth, and the horizontal lines surrounding the diagonal light-beam evoking reflections on the water suggesting the island context of Marson’s beloved Jamaican landscape described in many of the volume’s poems.

---

18. A Worldcat search suggests that only the National Library of Jamaica and the British Library hold copies of Marson’s first volume *Tropic Reveries* (1930) and expands the list to ten libraries for *The Moth and The Star* (not including the Beinecke Library which I know also has a copy suggesting that Worldcat’s list is incomplete). I felt like I won the lottery when I found a copy for sale at an Oxfam website a few months ago.

19. On this issue, see SNAITH 2008, 94–95.

20. I have not yet been able to find out any information about the cover design and I cannot make out the artist’s signature/mark on the bottom edge.



**Figure 4.** The Front Cover of Una Marson's *The Moth and The Star*, self-published and printed by the Gleaner Co. in 1937 (author's copy).

Marson chose to frame her third collection with an Introduction by Philip M. Sherlock who is prominently listed on the title page with his various titles. As Alison Donnell notes in the introduction to her edition of Marson's *Selected Poems*, Sherlock was a noted "founding father of the University of the West Indies, but also a white Jamaican and Knight of the British Empire" (2011, 17), and thus it is perhaps galling that his introduction seems to critique her angrier poems in which he claims "the racial sense is at times 'hectic and forced' rather than normal" (cited in MARSON 2011, xi–xii). Sherlock writes that he prefers her poems that agree with the Alain Locke passage he cites at length, praising Locke for saying, "the current acceptance of race is quiet with deep spiritual identification, and support by an undercurrent of faith rather than a surface of challenging pride" (cited in MARSON 2011, xii). While he does later go on to compare two lines from "Kinky Hair Blues" in which the speaker appreciates her Blackness to snippets of poetry extolling Black beauty by Countée Cullen, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Lewis Alexander, he characterizes these poems as sharing a "note of quiet assumption" (cited in MARSON 2011, xii).<sup>21</sup> Despite including this framing gesture by Sherlock that seems to critique or soften her poetry expressing anger about racism and white supremacy, Marson does include many poems in this collection that represent pride in Blackness and rage at injustice.

Marson's stunning poem "Little Brown Girl" includes shifting perspectives between a racist, exoticizing, and questioning white narrator and glimpses of the thoughts of the titular subject of the "little brown girl" in the "white, white city" of London. Anna Snaith compellingly argues that "the poem's modernism lies in its silences, its empty center, and its ambiguity of voice", and, further, that "[t]hrough the anonymity of its subject and narrator the poem evokes the barriers to self-description, or autobiography, for a black woman on the streets of London" (2008, 99). The poem develops a central tension between a racist white narrator who questions, "How is it that you speak/ English, as though it belonged/ To you?" (ll. 88–90)<sup>22</sup> and "Would you like to be white / Little brown girl?" and the girl who is "proud / To be brown"; the poem makes space for the white narrator to at least register and demonstrate the girl's alienation, exoticization, and objectification within

---

21. Sherlock misspells Bennett's first name as Gwendoline while citing the first line of her poem "To a Dark Girl".

22. "Little Brown Girl" is the sixth poem in the collection printed on pages 11–13 and thankfully freely accessible via the University of Florida's digital collections: <https://dloc.com/UF00077395/00001> (I've linked to this valuable resource for scholars which is sadly missing the cover image).

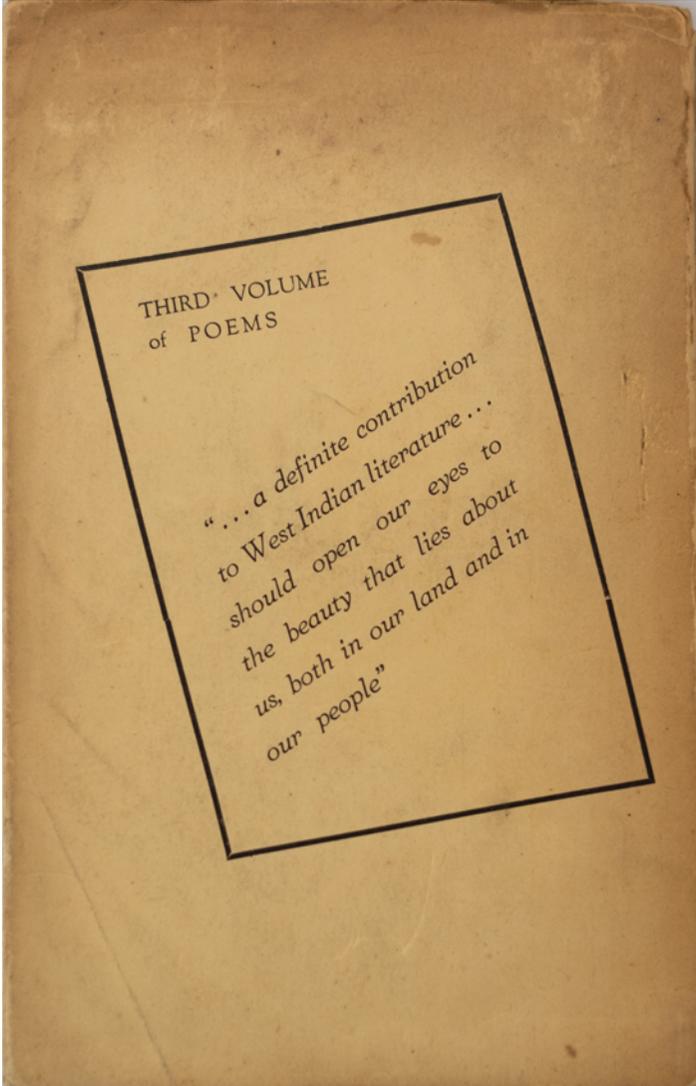
London and her ultimately unsatisfying “Seeking, seeking, seeking” in the “dismal / City of ours” (ll. 110, 112–13).

The third stanza of “Little Brown Girl” also resonates with Marson’s construction of Jamaica as a winterless paradise that welcomes white tourists as the presumably white interrogative speaker describes an unnamed tropical land as belonging to his addressee but offering benefits to white tourists:

Little brown girl  
 Why did you leave  
 Your little sunlit land  
 Where we sometimes go  
 To rest and get brown  
 So we may look healthy?”  
 (ll. 12–17)

While this stanza gives the “Little brown girl” ownership of the land, it also diminutizes it as “little” and reduces its function to a spot where white tourists can go to “get brown” and attain the appearance of “health”. Here Marson plays with the complexities of audiences for her work in a poem that is dominated by the point of view of the racist cosmopolitan white Londoner with brief glimpses of the titular “girl[s]” thoughts and feelings which construct her homeland as full of varieties of Blackness and beauties and meaning in contrast with the monotonous and alienating whiteness and loneliness of London. Marson expresses the “charm[s]” (l. 32) of the girl’s homeland through negations of what she isn’t seeing in the “white, white, white” (l. 34) sameness of London: “And they all seem the same / As they say that Negroes seem. / No pretty copper coloured skins, / No black and bronze and brown / No chocolate and high brown girls” (ll. 35–39). But while the opening of the stanza uses repetition and repeated negation to emphasize what London is lacking from the girl’s perspective, the negations become overwhelmed in the richness of her positive descriptions of her homeland (“smart colours”, “delicate dainty shoes”, “that one can admire”, “friendly country folk”, “bright attractive bandanas”, “Black faces, pearly teeth, / And flashing eyes” (ll. 40, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 49, 50–51). The comparison to London gets more and more distanced until finally the stanza ends with the seemingly private moment where the women “greet each other / And tell of little things / That mean so much to them” (ll. 56–58). In this stanza, Marson allows the values and longings of the girl to emerge into the poem and to take up space that shuts out the racist, uncomprehending white narrator.

The structure of the volume and the inclusion of Sherlock's introduction which both frames the text and appears excerpted on the back cover (see Fig. 5) resonates with the complex relationship of the white narrator and the "little brown girl" who finds "little to charm the eye" in the "white, white, white" monotonous sameness of "coats, coats, coats" that she finds in London (ll. 32, 34, 28).



**Figure 5.** The Back Cover of Una Marson's *The Moth and The Star*, self-published and printed by the Gleaner Co. in 1937 (author's copy).

Within the context of the paratexts, structures, and tensions within the material form of Marson's self-published and thoughtfully designed volume *The Moth and The Star*, we can see how the poem's conflicting perspectives on race resonate with how the Sherlock introduction frames her poems through a white man's condescending voice perversely citing Alain Locke to warn against "challenging pride" in Blackness. By reading "Little Brown Girl" in the context of the bibliographic codes of *The Moth and The Star*, we can see Marson's complex constructions of race and colonialism within the poem and in the material form of the volume.

## Conclusion

In each of these short analyses of the print contexts of texts by women modernist writers, I have shown how attending to the bibliographic codes of early and multiple versions can enhance our understandings of the material in the ways that George Bornstein so elegantly demonstrated in *Material Modernism*. Each of these examples required some recovery work through archival scrambling or just luck in finding a copy or scan of the initial print context: *Collier's Weekly* is not currently available in online scans, but I hope now that the 1925 run of *The Professor's House* is out of copyright maybe some ambitious DH project can make the serial issues freely available; I hope that *FIRE!!* also becomes available digitally to encourage more research; Brooks's war bonds stamped dust jacket was only used for the first printing since the war ended the week it came out; and Marson's *The Moth and The Star* has a free scan online that I hope will encourage more readers to return to this early version of her work. In the cases of less canonical authors and Black women modernists in particular, collaborative work to recover these materials can offer opportunities for new scholarship and teaching that centers their work. Bornstein's methodology has been particularly exciting and transformative for me because it encourages you to approach any text that you are interested in with a range of tools for discovering new meanings, new histories, and new politics embedded in and surrounding that text.

*Texas A & M—Corpus Christi*

## Works Cited

### *Archival Materials*

- Willa Cather to Irene Weisz, ALS, Newberry Archives MIDWEST MS Cather — Weisz, Box 1, folder 49.
- Elizabeth Lawrence to Gwendolyn Brooks, ALS, June 28, 1945, Harper and Brother's Archive, Firestone Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Box 5, Folder 28, June — December 1945.
- Gwendolyn Brooks to Elizabeth Lawrence, ALS, June 30th, 1945, Harper and Brother's Archive, Firestone Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Box 5, Folder 28, June — December 1945.

### *Printed Sources*

- BAKER, JR, Houston A. 1987. "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks". In *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*, edited by Maria MOOTRY and Gary SMITH, 21–29. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- BENNETT, Gwendolyn, John P. DAVID, Aaron DOUGLAS, Zora Neale HURSTON, Langston HUGHES, Richard Bruce NUGENT, and Wallace THURMAN. [1926] 2019. *FIRE!!* Yellow Springs, Ohio: The Fire!! Press.
- BORNSTEIN, George. 2001. *Material Modernism: The Politics of The Page*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- BROOKS, Gwendolyn. 1945. *A Street in Bronzeville*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- . 1972. *Report from Part One*. Detroit: Broadside Press.
- CATHER, Willa. 1925a. *The Professor's House* in *Collier's Weekly*, June 6–Aug. 1.
- . 1925b. *The Professor's House*. New York: Knopf.
- . 1990. *The Professor's House*. New York: Vintage Classics.
- GOLDSBY, Jacqueline 2021. "Something is Said in the Silences: Gwendolyn Brooks's Years at Harper's". *American Literary History*, 33.2: 244–70.
- HUGHES, Langston. 1940. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- HURSTON, Zora Neale. 1997. "Sweat", edited. by Cheryl A. WALL. Rutgers: Rutgers University Press.
- JOHANNINGSMEIER, Charles. 2010. "Determining How Readers Responded to Cather's Fiction: The Cultural Work of *The Professor's House* in *Collier's Weekly*". *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography*, 20.1: 68–96.
- MARSON, Una. 1930. *Tropic Reveries*. Kingston, Jamaica: The Gleaner Co. (self-published).
- . 1937. *The Moth and The Star*. Kingston, Jamaica: The Gleaner Co. (self-published).
- . 2011. *Una Marson: Selected Poems*. Edited by Alison DONNELL. Leeds, United Kingdom: Peepal Tree Press.

- NADELL, Martha. 2012. "'Devoted to Younger Negro Artists': *Fire!!* (1926) and *Harlem* (1928)". In *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II: North America 1894–1960*, edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, 801–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- SHERLOCK, Philip M. "Introduction", x–xiv. In MARSON 2011.
- SNAITH, Anna. 2008. "'Little Brown Girl' in a 'White, White City': Una Marson and London". *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 27: 93–114.
- WIRTH, Thomas H. 1982. "The FIRE!! Press". <https://firepress.com/>.
- WOLFE, George C. 1991. *Spunk: Three Tales by Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.