In the wake of the failures of Reconstruction, in the midst of increased violence against African Americans, and on the eve of the Harlem Renaissance, Arthur Schomburg offered this call in “The Negro Digs Up His Past” (1925): “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future. [...] History must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generation must repair and offset” (937–38). Schomburg, the founder of one of the world’s largest repositories of African American texts, insists that the task of African Americans in modernity is to restore, preserve, and celebrate that culture. Like Schomburg, many African Americans writing between 1880 and 1940 countered the hegemonically imposed break with the past by re-creating a link to it and preserving it at the moment it was being severed. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), art by African Americans “is as new as it is old and as old as new” (1002), suggesting that African American art resists the modern’s break with the past by synthesizing the past with the present.

While Modernists envisioned their revolt from the past as a break from Victorian values and epistemologies, what Paul De Man calls “a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier” (148), the break with tradition for Americans of African descent happened much earlier as a
forced break during the Middle Passage and slavery. Malcolm X captures the sense of a violent break that predated the Modernists’ when he writes in his autobiography, “We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock, my brothers and sisters, Plymouth Rock landed on us” (201). Africans kidnapped in the trans-Atlantic slave trade were the first “modern” subjects, experiencing the world through unparalleled dislocation and migration (Gilroy, Black Atlantic). Instead of discovering a New World, newly arrived Africans faced not only enslavement but also a violent denial of their subjectivity and culture. As Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich note, “For the European the encounter with America represented human progress in history, but for the slaves it meant their expulsion from history” (50). Following the end of slavery, African Americans sought to rebuild their ties to an African past by synthesizing African and Euro-American ways, but they would have to make it new in the wake of “their expulsion from history.”

The end of the Civil War and of legalized slavery ushered in radical changes to the South, including rapid industrialization, the political upheaval of Reconstruction, and freedom for enslaved African Americans. But the end of the war did not occasion a break with the past; it signaled only a new phase under a new name for the same old conditions of modernity for many African Americans. While the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 decreed African Americans free, in reality many African Americans continued to live in slave-like conditions through a series of laws and practices that kept many confined in the same positions they were in before the Civil War. As soon as the Civil War ended, states in the South worked quickly to pass the Black Codes (based on the antebellum Slave Codes), which limited African Americans’ freedom to speak, travel, and choose where to live—in short, to be citizens of the United States. While the federal government attempted to integrate African Americans into the larger American culture through education and the economic efforts of the Freedman’s Bureau, the Black Codes forced many African Americans to limit their movement and required them to work, perpetuating slavery even after it had been abolished. By 1880, some 75 percent of African Americans in the United States lived in the South under legally sanctioned slave-like conditions (Franklin and Moss 277). While the war’s end meant the modern experience for African Americans would include liberation, whites in the South responded by overtly denying African Americans that freedom.

The experience Booker T. Washington describes in his autobiography Up from Slavery (1901) captures the incongruity of a tentative