

Trying to Transcend: Black Escape and Transnation from The Colored Conventions to the Harlem Renaissance

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Mary Ann Shadd Cary's *A Plea for Emigration; Or, Notes on Canada West* (1852) is a peculiar addition to the emigration pamphlets which circulated out of the Colored Conventions of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Despite the document's unique positionality, Shadd's rhetoric was much in line with the right to freedom Black people under the institutions of slavery and white supremacy could experience once they crossed the border and instantly became British citizens. Decades later during the Harlem Renaissance, a fascination with Black internationalism and cosmopolitanism, spurred by the writings of Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. du Bois and other Black intellectuals of the early-twentieth century facilitated a fascination of Black life outside of the confines of Jim Crow. Theorized in Black fiction, poetry and art, and experienced through nonfiction essays and other personal writings, Black literature focused on cultivating concepts of existence in societies that [supposedly] treat the presence of Blackness better than the U.S. generates critical thought around transcendence. Knowing that the grass is not greener on the other side, however, the concept of transcendence is abundant within the traditions of Black literature, and understood among Black expats today. Therefore, this essay works toward a rhetorical and aesthetic genealogy of Black transcendence of racism and white supremacy, and what it means to theorize such a concept as we continue necessary conversations on racism and anti-Blackness in the U.S.