The name Nora Holt glimmers through histories of the Harlem Renaissance: as a guest at the era’s legendary parties, including the one given in honor of the publication of Langston Hughes’s *The Weary Blues*, as a principal in the period’s most tabloid-ready scandals, and as the model for Lasca Sartoris, the seductress of Carl Van Vechten’s notorious novel, *Nigger Heaven*. Lasca Sartoris is more caricature than character and does not remotely capture the complexities of the woman on whom she is based. A conservatory-trained musician on the one hand and a cabaret singer on the other, Nora Holt impressed some people who met her as a proper New Negro matron, while to others she was a jazz-age goddess. She was a study in contradiction, a woman whose multiple careers and identities remain difficult to reconcile. She reinvented herself constantly, which she could do because she was constantly on the move.

Born Lena Douglas in Kansas City, Kansas, perhaps in 1885 (the years 1890 and 1895 are sometimes cited) the daughter of Reverend C. N. Douglas, an elder in the African-American Methodist Church, and Grace Brown Douglas; the girl who became Nora Holt seemed destined for a life of respectability and achievement. In her later years, she looked like a portrait of a Negro lady, complete with hat, veil, and gloves. An
influential reviewer and critic, her columns on classical music ran for years in the *Chicago Defender* and the *New York Amsterdam News*, and in the 1960s she hosted ‘Nora Holt’s Concert Showcase,’ a weekly music program on a Harlem radio station. As the first African-American woman to earn a Master’s degree in music, she was well equipped for these positions. She co-founded the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), a guild of trained performers, composers, and teachers of what was defined as ‘classical’ music. She herself composed more than two hundred pieces, although only two, *Negro Dance, Opus 25, no.1*, and *The Sand-Man*, seem extant. She later studied voice at the American Conservatory of Music in Fontainebleau, France, and taught music in the Los Angeles public schools. When she died in 1974, Holt left a record of the accomplishments for which she had so carefully prepared.

But the intervening years were a study in experimentation and self-invention. In the 1920s and 1930s, she was tall, glamorous, and blonde: a jazz-age goddess, who captivated audiences from stages in Berlin, Monte Carlo, Paris, Shanghai, and Tokyo. She performed a repertoire of bawdy tunes some of which she also composed and sang in a voice one London reviewer described as ‘astonishing.’ He elaborated: ‘she can produce sounds not comparable to orthodox singing, ranging from deepest low voice to a shrilling high, often unaccompanied by words…’

Five-times married, Holt’s romantic escapades were fodder for the Black press at home, a typical headline blared: ‘Raid on Rooming House “Love Nest” Reveals Double Life of Married Pair.’ In these early years, Holt changed names even more often than she changed husbands: Lena James, Lena James Douglas, Lena James Holt, Nora Ray, and Nora Holt Ray are a few of the appellations by which she was known. She was eager to try on and shed new identities, in part because they allowed her to inhabit roles that would have otherwise been incompatible. Holt reveled in the confusion she left in her wake.

Quoting from a letter she had received from Gertrude Stein, she wrote to their mutual friend Carl Van Vechten: ‘Carl has been writing me about a Nora Ray. You write me Nora Holt. Well, ‘Rose is a Rose — —’" Holt and Stein knew each other only in passing, but the bond

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1 Review in the *London Daily Express*, date unknown.
between Holt and Van Vechten proved unbreakable. Almost thirty years later she attended the ceremony at which the novelist, who was patron and confidante to such Harlem Renaissance artists as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson, and Nella Larsen, presented his papers and those of a roster of Harlem Renaissance luminaries to the Beinecke Library at Yale. In the photographs that survive from that occasion, Holt looks like the proper lady she had perhaps by then become.

Nora Holt traveled widely across the United States, Europe, and Asia but the borders she crossed were not only geographical. In her professional life, she crossed and re-crossed the boundaries between high culture and popular culture, as she achieved success in the worlds of classical and popular music. Quite often, her champions in one world knew nothing of her participation in the other. One student of her career in classical music believed she objected to jazz because of the sexual component of nightclub dancing. He would have been shocked to learn that as a cabaret singer, one of Holt’s signature tunes was ‘My Daddy Rocks Me with a Steady Roll.’ In her personal life, she ignored the constraints of respectability politics, deciding to love and marry as freely as she chose.

This essay explores the porousness of the professional boundaries that Holt regularly transgressed and considers the extent to which scholars may have drawn them more strictly than they in fact existed. I want to analyze Holt’s professional achievements, which the notoriety of her personal life may have overshadowed, and finally I want to consider how Holt’s life exemplifies more general connections between movement and self-invention for women. That she traveled as widely and as freely as she did testifies to Holt’s audacity, for she came of age in a world where the codes of conduct for middle-class African-American women were rigorously enforced.

From the time she was a teenager, Holt did only some of what the protocols of propriety commanded. She went to school and played for the choir on Sunday but at fifteen she married Sky James, a local musician who might have introduced her to vernacular forms of music. The marriage did not distract her from her educational goals. She enrolled at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, a school run by the African Methodist Episcopal church and the first college for Negores west of the Mississippi. Combining an industrial training program with a liberal
arts curriculum, the school had an unusually strong music department. Other distinguished women trained at Western include choir director Eva Jessye and singer/actress Etta Moten. Holt wrote the school song.³

After graduation she went to Chicago where she enrolled in Chicago Musical College and studied with a stellar faculty that included a number of prominent emigré composers, including Frederick Borowski and Louis Victor Saar. These professors affirmed Holt’s ambition to write as well as to perform music, an ambition that was unusual for any woman at the time. Her thesis was a composition, Rhapsody on Negro Themes, scored for a hundred-piece orchestra. Like other conservatory-trained Black musicians, including William Grant Still and Clarence Cameron White, Holt was inspired by the example of Antonín Dvořák, whose Symphony for the New World drew on motifs from Negro spirituals. With her composition, Holt completed the requirements for the Master of Music degree that was conferred in 1918, and widely reported in the Black press. Even before the ink on the sheepskin was dry, the Chicago Defender announced that Lena James Douglass would write about opera and symphony for the paper.⁴

In the interim Holt was the subject of several feature stories, including one in which she paid fulsome tribute to her husband, George W. Holt, for ‘the wonderful inspirative [sic] background’ he ‘formed when he presented her an elegant residence […] decorated and furnished in the New England style, and the world’s finest piano, a Mason & Hamlin concert grand.’⁵ She and Holt, a wealthy hotel owner and the treasurer of the Liberty Insurance company, who was forty years her senior, had married while she was in school. Unreported was the fact that Holt was her fourth husband. She had been briefly married to a politician named Philip Scroggins and a barber, Bruce Jones, before she began her graduate studies.⁶ Also unreported, but more germane to her professional future, was the fact that as a graduate student she helped to support herself by ‘singing light songs, […] and spirituals’ at dinner parties in the homes of

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⁴ ‘Lena James Douglas to Write About Opera and Symphony,’ Chicago Defender, 3 November 1917, p. 11.
⁵ ‘Lena James Holt Takes High Honors at Chicago Musical College,’ Chicago Defender, 29 June 1918, p. 10.
rich Chicagoans with surnames like Armour, McCormick, and Swift as well as at clubs in the city’s ‘Red Light’ district, then known as the ‘Line.’ For a time she appeared at one of its fanciest brothels: the Everleigh Club, run by two sisters from Omaha, who counted novelist Theodore Dreiser, boxer Jack Johnson and Prince Henry of Prussia among their clientele.\(^7\)

Holt remained determined to pursue the career for which she had been trained. In her Defender column she reviewed almost every classical music concert featuring a Black musician in Chicago, beginning with one by the acclaimed tenor Roland Hayes. She was the first music critic employed by a Black newspaper, as well as the first woman to join the Defender’s writing staff. Although her first column ran on the women’s page of the newspapers, it soon moved to the regular news pages. She took on a range of assignments in addition to reviewing. Her columns, published under several titles including ‘Musical Notes,’ ‘Music News,’ ‘Music,’ and ‘New of the Music World,’ reported on the accomplishments and appearances of Black musicians around the country including Nathaniel Dett, Rosamond Johnson, Harry Burleigh, Hazel Harrison, and Clarence Cameron White. One can reasonably infer that only a small number of the Defender’s readers were interested in classical music, but they were all interested in the advancement of what the newspaper always referred to as ‘the Race.’ Holt was avidly interested in both.

She recognized that the best way forward was to make common cause with like-minded people. In 1919 she organized the Chicago Music Association. As she acknowledged, others had previously called for a national association but the advent of the First World War and the 1918 influenza epidemic slowed their progress. The time seemed right when Holt invited a group of local artists to her home and announced her plan to launch a national association. When she learned that a group in Washington, D.C. had a similar idea, she issued a call for ‘Musical Unity,’ in her column.\(^8\) The groups decided to come together and hold an inaugural convention in Chicago from 29 July to 1 August 1919.


\(^8\) Nora Holt, ‘Musical Unity,’ Chicago Defender, 29 March 1919.
One of the worse race riots in US history broke out that weekend. The immediate catalyst was a white mob’s attack on a young Black man who was on a beach reserved for whites. But the underlying reasons were the migration of tens of thousands of Black southerners to the city and the competition for jobs and housing they represented to white workers in the midst of both an economic downturn and an upsurge of Black militancy. By the time order was restored, thirty-eight people had been killed (twenty-three Black, fifteen white), more than five hundred injured, and thousands more, mainly Black, made homeless. It was the deadliest of a series of riots that swept across the United States during what became known as Red Summer. In Chicago, the violence interrupted transportation in and out of the city, and service on buses and trains in the city was suspended.

Registrants for the NANM convention scrambled to get to meetings as events were rescheduled and venues were changed. Nora Holt was the rare conventioneer who arrived by electric car. When the ballots were counted, the Washingtonian Henry Grant was elected president of the NANM. Nora Holt was elected vice president. Holt might well have felt that her gender was the reason she was not elected to the top post. For the rest of her life, she worried that she was not given sufficient credit for her role in founding the organization. But she was savvy enough to publish ‘A Chronological History of NANM’ in 1921 to document her role.9

The highlight of the convention was the concert which, as Holt observed in her review, had ‘no precedent in the history of Negro musicians.’ She noted that due to the riot the venue was changed and the concert, scheduled for Wednesday evening, took place on Friday morning. After listing the names of local and visiting artists, she concluded, ‘each participant was a star and each star an artist.’ But one star shone brighter than the rest, a young contralto from Philadelphia, Marian Anderson, who brought the audience to its feet with her performance of the aria ‘Adieu, forêts’ from Tchaikovsky’s Jeanne d’Arc. Holt recorded the response eloquently: ‘Every one stood and acclaimed

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9 Nora Holt, ‘A Chronological History of NANM,’ Music and Poetry, July 1921, pp. 15–21. In a letter to Theodore Stone, then president of NANM, dated 1 September 1969, Holt expressed her happiness that her role in the organization’s founding had been acknowledged. Theodore Charles Stone Collection, Chicago Music Association, Box 100, Folder 2356, CBMR.
her with cries of bravo and bis, while tears of joy were in the eyes of many musicians who felt that the dawn of a new era in music had arisen for our people.\textsuperscript{10} The crowd was so moved that a collection, begun with Holt’s pledge of $50, was taken up to establish the first NANM scholarship, which was awarded to Anderson. Anderson would remain associated with NANM for the rest of her life and served as the honorary chairperson of the ‘Jubilee’ convention in 1969.\textsuperscript{11}

In January 1921 Holt published a magazine, \textit{Music and Poetry}. It bore the subtitle \textit{A Monthly Magazine of High Standard for Musicians and Music Lovers} and the imprint of the Holt Publishing Company. In her mission statement Holt declared that her generation was but a ‘short span’ from slavery, yet they were nonetheless a ‘new people.’\textsuperscript{12} Spirituals were a bridge between the old and new. For classically trained musicians, the spirituals were a deep well of inspiration and formal influence: most of the composers, instrumentalists and singers whom Holt championed arranged and performed spirituals. Anticipating views set forth by Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson, Holt was keen to explore the possibility of assimilating European and African American musical forms.\textsuperscript{13} Notably, she refers to Blacks ‘assimilating’ rather than being assimilated into white culture, thereby suggesting a relationship of reciprocity rather than hierarchy. \textit{Music and Poetry} was unusual in its equal treatment of male and female subjects and writers. As scholar Joyce Marek observes, ‘Holt’s support for racial equity in the concert hall, her international perspectives, and her interest in multiple art forms allowed \textit{Music and Poetry} to treat Black involvement in music with considerable depth and complexity.’\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Nora Holt, ‘Musicians Organize National Association,’ \textit{Chicago Defender}, 9 August 1919, p. 15.
\textsuperscript{11} Doris McGinty (ed.), \textit{A Documentary History of the National Association of Negro Musicians} (Chicago: Center for Black Music Research, 2004), p. 20. The NANM is still in the business of holding conventions, awarding scholarships, and providing moral support for professionals in the music business. Unlike the teachers and performers originally involved in the association, current members adhere to a capacious definition of music that includes blues, jazz, gospel, and computer-generated genres. McGinty, \textit{A Documentary History}, p. 52.
Each issue of the magazine implored its subscribers to sign on to this musical creed: ‘I Will Use Something of Negro Origin on Every Program.’ To help its readers fulfill the pledge, the magazine printed a composition by a Black composer in each issue. The first was Holt’s own ‘Negro Dance, No. 1’ [of 4] from ‘the Southern Suite for Piano.’ It was described as a ‘brisk, lively number, which should be played with verve and spontaneity.’ Written for the piano in the key of G Major, its style is reminiscent of ragtime, with a generally steady left hand accompaniment and syncopated right hand melody.\(^{15}\) A second Holt composition, ‘The Sandman,’ was published in the June number. Were it not for her decision to publish her own work, none of it would be extant. The manuscripts she put in storage when she left the United States in the late 1920s were all lost.

The death of George Holt ended the run of *Music and Poetry*. Without her husband’s financial backing, she closed the magazine, soon after stepped down from her post at the NANM, and ceased writing her column for *The Chicago Defender*. A new marriage brought her back into the public eye. In 1923 she wed Joe Ray, a wealthy African American employed by steel magnate Charles Schwab. The wedding was extravagant. According to the *Defender*, the bride was ‘a picture of loveliness gowned in a gorgeous creation of crepe Elizabeth, beaded on masses with pearls […] and a tulle veil [which] fell gracefully to the floor, caught here and there with orange blossoms.’\(^{16}\) The marriage was short-lived. Holt, who much preferred Harlem to her husband’s home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, moved to New York in the blaze of publicity occasioned by her divorce from Ray, her fifth and final husband.

In 1926, still in the glare of tabloid headlines stemming from her divorce, Nora Holt sailed for Paris, in the wake of Josephine Baker, Bricktop (Ada Smith), and Florence Mills. The Negro vogue had crossed the Atlantic, become *Le Tumulte Noir* in France, and would soon spread throughout Europe and beyond. With her glamorous looks and striking

\(^{15}\) Nora Holt, ‘Negro Dance,’ *Music and Poetry*, January 1921, p. 8. The piece may have influenced the well-known piano piece, ‘Three Little Negro Dances,’ (1933) by Florence Price, who also composed the arrangement of ‘My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord,’ made famous by Marian Anderson. The first Black woman to compose a symphony, Price was at the center of a group of Black women musicians in Chicago that included her student Margaret Bonds, Muriel Rose, and the author’s aunt, Nannie Mae Strayhorn, during the 1930s.

\(^{16}\) ‘Holt-Ray Wedding Style Most Brilliant Affair,’ *Chicago Defender*, 4 August 1923, p. 4.
voice (which, like Mills’s, was never recorded) Holt quickly created a sensation. She made her debut at the Les Nuits du Prado in Paris in October. She was now a full-on blonde, and keenly aware of the effect she had on her audiences. In a letter to Van Vechten, she confided, ‘these French are too excitable to be stable. [...] The little music hall “Prado” goes on well. It is quite chic, no dancing and only French people. Imagine them liking me and they don’t know a word I am singing or what it’s all about. The real truth is, I’m selling my hair and personality. So far so good. I am not greatly enthused. It’s a lark for me you know.’

It was a ‘lark’ that would continue for twelve years. Her seemingly cavalier attitude might reflect the ambivalence Holt as a classically trained musician felt about her newfound fame in continental cabarets. Holt was hardly alone among African-American musicians who pursued dual careers in classical and popular music in the early twentieth century. The opportunities in the former were slim. After trading the concert stage for the nightclub, Holt headlined shows in Monte Carlo and Berlin and returned to Paris multiple times. In the fall of 1929, Holt played an extended and widely advertised engagement at the Café de Paris in London. She had not lost her flair for publicity; an article in the Daily Mail reviewed an exhibition by an artist named Adrian Daintrey; the reviewer detected ‘a merry twinkle — almost a wink in the eyes and the quiver of a smile about the lips’ in the drawing of Holt, identified as ‘the white Negro diseuse.’ If the description disparaged Holt’s complexion, it complimented her talent as a singer/storyteller. She had a gift for drama. Before she performed ‘The Man I Love,’ she would aver, ‘I knew Mr. Gershwin.’ This was probably true, as Gershwin was a regular at Van Vechten’s New York parties. Holt also liked to recount the night at the Café de Paris when the Prince of Wales showed up with his future wife, the divorcée Wallis Simpson. In Holt’s telling, the Prince came to the stage at the end of the set to congratulate her.

18 The example of William Marion Cook is telling. The violin prodigy was appointed first chair by the Boston Symphony then forbidden to play any solos. He never played in public again, but found success as the composer of musicals starring George Walker and Bert Williams. See Bill Reed, Hot From Harlem: Twelve African American Entertainers, 1890–1960 (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2010), pp. 8–28.
20 Reed, Hot From Harlem, p. 77.
In November 1932, Langston Hughes wrote Van Vechten from Ashkhabad, Turkmenia, Soviet Central Asia to inquire about Holt: ‘... The papers say Nora’s gone to Shanghai. I want to come home in the Spring via Siberia, and will go to Shanghai too if it’s possible to get the dollars and the visa. Let me know if Nora will still be there.’ Van Vechten replied in a postcard: ‘Also Nora Holt (who is in Shanghai — c/o American Express — do send her a line).’ Perhaps Hughes had seen the photograph headed ‘She’s Shanghai-Bound,’ which appeared in Holt’s hometown paper, the Kansas City Plain Dealer, as well as in other Black papers. The short article reported that Holt had ‘recently left for Shanghai where she will fill an eight months engagement at one of the exclusive English night clubs.’ Holt would spend much of the next eight years performing in the city popularly known as the ‘Paris of the East.’ As one scholar notes, ‘what made Shanghai the “Paris of the East” was its dazzling nightlife.’

Shanghai was a modern city in many respects: for example, the first skyscrapers outside the West were built there. It was a segregated city: the fancy hotels, theaters, elegant shops, cabarets, and golf course were reserved for whites only. The masses of Chinese lived in desperate poverty. But for the international elite, Shanghai in the thirties was wide-open: drugs were legal, prostitution flourished, and gambling was widespread. Jazz was the music of choice in the European quarter. According to one estimate, by 1934, the number of Black jazz musicians in Shanghai was greater than the number of Black jazz musicians in Paris. Black entertainers were allowed to work and live in the Bund, the city’s European compound.

Holt was a mainstay of nightlife in Shanghai off and on from 1932 to 1937, when the Japanese invaded China. Dancer Al Baldwin was

21 Langston Hughes to Carl Van Vechten, 15 November 1932; Carl Vechten to Langston Hughes, 3 December 1932; in Emily Bernard, Remember Me to Harlem: The Letters of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), pp. 99–102. Hughes did stop in Shanghai on his way home, but he does not say either in his correspondence or his memoir I Wonder As I Wander whether he saw Holt there.

22 ‘She’s Shanghai-Bound,’ Kansas City (Kansas) Plaindealer, 2 September 1932.


her most frequent partner on stage, and Holt kept Blacks back home informed of her success. An item from the column ‘Topical Types in Filmland’, circulated by the Associated Negro Press, announced Holt’s upcoming engagement at a club in Los Angeles: ‘... glamorous Nora, who, as you know, has been the toast of many continents will take over the Underwood and tell in her own words about the subtopics of Shanghai.’ The column quotes Holt: ‘Don’t hand me the typewriter, dearie. I haven’t done anything on a machine since back in the 19’s.... never mind the date.... when I published the mag, Music and Poetry for the National Association of Negro Musicians.’ Despite the confidential tabloid tone she assumed, she had little to say about her Chinese sojourn. Instead she spoke of her eagerness to revisit places closer to home: ‘I’ve seen all the world,’ she confided, ‘and I am broadcasting: “Hello Harlem, your naughty little Nora will be seein’ ya.”’

Back in the US, Holt reinvented herself once more. Reclaiming her original surname, she earned certification as a schoolteacher in Los Angeles. She taught music and for a time served on the city’s board of education. Then in 1939 she opened the Nora Holt Beauty Salon, where she promised to bring ‘Hollywood service to West Side business and society matrons.’ Hers was the first Black-owned business in the historic Vermont-Jefferson district of Los Angeles.

In 1942, she moved back to Harlem and became music critic for the New York Amsterdam News, where she again took up the mantle of racial uplift. For example, she chastised Black New Yorkers for not supporting concerts by Black musicians and promoted the careers of a new generation of performers, including Martina Arroyo, Leontyne Price, and William Warfield. She continued her support of the NANM, serving as president of the New York City branch in 1950. That year a testimonial concert was held in her honor at St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, a bastion of the Black bourgeoisie, which featured greetings from the vicar and a host of stellar performances.

Nora Holt lived on for more than twenty years. She was a major supporter of Van Vechten’s efforts to establish the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University. The letters she exchanged with him are the primary source of information about her life. There is much

26 Bernard, Remember Me to Harlem, p. 166.
more to discover. She was a free woman, who lived and loved as she chose, and somehow managed never to pay the price such freedom usually incurred. She maintained the respect of her peers in the small but rarefied world of African Americans in classical music, while enjoying the prerequisites of show business success on three continents. By staying on the move, Nora Holt succeeded in two equally unlikely careers: she was a woman who became both a New Negro composer and a jazz-age goddess.
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