A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER: MODERNIST IMAGINATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINARY

by

Geoffrey Jacques

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York.

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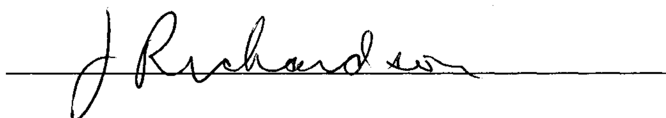

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Abstract

A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER: MODERNIST IMAGINATION, AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINARY

by

Geoffrey Jacques

Advisor: Professor Meena Alexander

This dissertation is an exploration of the impact of African American culture on modernist poetic language. It explores the work of Jean Toomer, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, James Bland, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Bert Williams, Samuel Beckett, and the genesis of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley-style song. The dissertation consists of four chapters. The first chapter, "Haunted," is concerned with the idea of the uncanny as a function of language. Through an examination of "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923) by Wallace Stevens, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) by Zora Neale Hurston, Tender Buttons (1914) by Gertrude Stein, and "The St. Louis Blues," by W.C. Handy (1914), this chapter shows how Freud's idea of the uncanny can be used to read in modernist texts an enactment of a specific type of anxiety which catalyzes the construction of modernist self-consciousness, which is partially a racialized self-consciousness. The second chapter, "Lyric," discusses the emergence of symbolist and early modernist lyric poetry in English in relation to the emergence of modern popular songs in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and

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suggests how this examination can illuminate the work of Paul Laurence Dunbar, arguing that he is a little-examined, but important, precursor to modernism. The third chapter, "Minstrel," begins with a study of the relationship between performativity and lyric language in the art of Bert Williams, the early 20th century vaudeville comedian. The influence of minstrelsy on the work of Samuel Beckett is the subject of the concluding section of this chapter. The section studies two of Beckett's plays: Waiting for Godot (1953) and Not I (1972). Questions of canon formation and the aims of modernist criticism are explored in the fourth, and last chapter, "Vaudeville," and the implications of that discussion are drawn out through an examination of the modernism of Cane (1922). Cane, although it is a multi-genre, linguistically experimental text published by the same company as The Waste Land, is not commonly designated as an unqualified central text of modernism. This chapter (and this dissertation) inquires into why this state of affairs exists.

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Introduction

This dissertation is a contribution to the study of the genealogy of modernism. It seeks to elaborate such a genealogy within a framework that privileges the interaction — as opposed to the dichotomy — between African American and "white" culture. It proposes this relationship as a defining characteristic of modernism at the level of the identity of the modernist project itself.

What happens when we elaborate a genealogy of modernism in Anglo-American literature that puts African American culture, and African American artists, at its center? What particular issues might be cast into relief? Where might such an investigation lead? There are pitfalls involved in a study of this kind. Indeed, Michel Foucault advises the genealogist to use history to "dispel the chimeras of the origin" (Foucault "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," 144). Yet, given the contested terrain, one sees a need for a study that raises these questions in an attempt to understand the relationship between African American culture, on the one hand, and modernist literature, on the other.

The present project seeks to distinguish itself by arguing for an understanding of modernism that sees a singular project, cutting across cultural lines. It seeks to demonstrate how the question of difference might be approached in a way that leads us away from the apparent dichotomies between African American culture, on the one hand, and modernism, on the other.

Thinking about these ideas can lead to a reconsideration of questions like performativity and self-fashioning, and to the relationship these questions have to

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modernism. Such an inquiry can also lead to a reconsideration of the idea that modernism's identity is inextricably tied to an estrangement from popular, or "mass" culture.

Consider the way African American culture haunts some famous modernist texts by writers who aren't African American. How are we to understand Ezra Pound's complaint: "The pianola 'replaces'/Sappho's barbitos" (Personae 189) in the context of the larger complaint in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" Or the reflection of Eliot's speaker, in "Portrait of a Lady," a poem that could be thought of as a musical landscape of Western culture: "Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins/Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own" (9)? Let me suggest that "haunt" may be a useful way to account for the appearance of the pianola and the tom-tom in these two poems. Each is an instrument identified with black culture, and in each poem these specific instruments seem to work as symbols of cultural anxiety. However, it seems that this "haunting" that I'm identifying signifies not only the impact of black culture on modernist culture in a broad sense. It also reflects the impact of black cultural artifacts (the ragtime-era player piano, modern "drum kit"), and of black artists, on the work and consciousness of modernism generally. This study attempts to expand the idea of this "presence" by examining its function at the semantic and symbolic levels by invoking the term the "African American Imaginary" as an analytic tool. Here, the term is used to identify an aspect of the historical and cultural milieu in which modernism developed.

This study distinguishes itself from the argument advanced by Houston A. Baker, Jr., that African Americans "have little in common with Joycean or Eliotic projects" (xvi), by proceeding from a point of view that investigates the role of black culture and of

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African American artists as catalysts of, and not just influences upon, modernism. It will draw from the discourses of psychoanalysis and post coloniality.

This study draws from Sigmund Freud, whose ideas about the uncanny, and about the symbiotic relationship between the "primitive" and the "modern," are critical to this inquiry. This project is also informed by the work of both Homi K. Bhaba ("the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow" [82]), and of Toni Morrison, who suggests, in Playing in the Dark, that we should pay close attention to the "carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence" in American literature (6). This latter idea can be considered a version of the phenomenon I'm identifying in this study with the term, "haunted."

A Change in the Weather also seeks to distinguish itself from works like those of Michael H. Levenson, Frederick R. Karl, Michael North, Ann Douglas, and Mark A. Sanders. Both Levenson and Karl, in their nevertheless useful studies, limit their discussion to the generally accepted modernist canon, while North seeks to develop an understanding of modernism that does include an agentive role for African American culture. Indeed, North's concept of "racial masquerade," is one starting point for the present inquiry, as is his assertion that "[t]he new voice that American culture acquired in the 1920s, the decade of jazz, stage musicals, talking pictures, and aesthetic modernism, was very largely a black one" (7). From this beginning, it seems that a fruitful examination must go beyond the notion that the relationship between black culture and modernism is one where African American creativity's role was limited to, as North's writes, "raw material for white writers to use" (135). What happens if we think of African American culture, not as "raw material," but as a codeterminate agent of the modernist

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project? When North writes about the relationships examined in this study, he seems to take for granted that the existence of legal segregation should define and limit how we understand cultural interaction within modernism:

> Despite its enthusiasm for Africa and Meso-America, despite its promises of a transnational America and a multiethnic American modernism, the avant-garde proved ill prepared to include within its conception of the new American writing any examples that actually stretched the old categories of race and ethnicity.
>
> (150)

To describe the relationship between cultures and artists as a function of the legal environment these cultural actors found themselves in is to reveal a limited understanding of how cultural interaction works. In the early twentieth century, the rise of African American culture had the effect of changing the very character of modernist culture in the West. This development cannot be understood by paying attention only to the subjective consciousness of the participants. That the critics who first sought to explain modernist poetics saw the jangled syntax of Eliot as a form of syncopation, and then related that syncopation to the music of, say, Paul Whiteman should not be thought of as a kind of false consciousness, as North suggests (Reading 1922, 145). After all, Bix Beiderbecke was a member of the Whiteman orchestra, and the music he played was very syncopated indeed. Moreover, the music he played was, by all accounts, the black music of jazz. Neither legal racial segregation, nor the ideology that it engendered among individuals, could stop the rise and impact of black culture on the culture as a whole.

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Ann Douglas, on the other hand, maps a network of artistic and social relationships across "racial" lines, but keeps these relationships within a schematic of "influence." Mark A. Sanders argues that "the dichotomy dividing hegemonic modernism and New Negroism is in fact false" (16). His examination of the work of Sterling A. Brown takes a point of view Sanders calls "panmodernism" (19), which nevertheless emphasizes, if not a "dichotomy" then at least a difference, between modernisms.

The title of this work is derived from three of the discourses that are under examination in this dissertation. “A Change in the Weather,” comes from the lyric to one of the earliest hits of the jazz age, “There’ll Be Some Changes Made.” The song was a hit for Ethel Waters in 1923, and seems to be a good starting point from which to begin a consideration of the issues discussed in this study. Here is one of the song’s two choruses:

> Why, there's a change in the weather, there's a change in the sea,
> So from now on there'll be a change in me,
> Why, my walk will be different, and my talk, and my name,
> Nothing about me gonna be the same;
> I'm gonna change my way of living, and that ain't no shock,
> Why, I'm thinking about changin' the way I gonna set my clock,
> Because nobody wants you when you're old and gray.
> There's gonna be some changes made today,
> There'll be some changes made.
>
> (Waters)

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One of the tasks of this study is to restore the consideration of popular song, and of popular song lyrics, to the center of the discussion about modernist poetic language. This is a largely neglected subject, but one that needs to be explored in order to account more fully for the "revolution of the word" which was a hallmark of modernist poetics. The lyric quoted above is emblematic of some of the concerns explored in this dissertation. It is a famous lyric, so much so that it was still occasionally used in the late twentieth century as a theme song for television commercials.[1] In this study the importance of the "coon" song and the blues for understanding the emergence of the new poetic language of modernism is explored. One of the elements of this inquiry is a demonstration of how the chorus of the popular song developed into its dominant feature, how this feature relied, primarily, on the mobilization of clichés for its power, and how the development of a lyric art based on clichés has important implications for the concurrent development of modernist poetics. The popular song was an important transmitter of vernacular language and with the development of recorded sound and the commercial recording industry, this means of transmission became universal.

As important as the popular song (and the sound recording) was for the spread of vernacular languages and utterances, there is another feature of the song lyric quoted above that deserves attention. It is the fact that the female singing subject is asserting herself as an autonomous individual who is able to shape her own reality. It is, in a word, a song about self-fashioning. This is true in another sense as well, in that the song was recorded for the Black Swan label, the first African American owned record company. Harry Pace, who had been a business partner of W.C. Handy, founded Black Swan, and

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[1] One commercial, for a New York City clothing store, used the version recorded by Jimmy Rushing with the Dave Brubeck Trio. See BZ/Client Projects. Also see Brubeck and Rushing.

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the company had many prominent African Americans on its executive board, including W.E.B. Du Bois. Besides Waters, the company recorded early works by Fletcher Henderson, as well as classical music by African American singers. It was one of the earliest of the "New Negro" institutions. And its history is an example of the idea of self-fashioning as it came to characterize black America from the end of the first World War onward.[2] The idea, most famously articulated by Stephen Greenblatt, that self-fashioning is a hallmark of the individual in modernity is well known. In the context of modernist culture, and also of African American culture, this idea is central, and is a distinguishing characteristic of the blues and other African American song forms. It is invoked here as an emblem of the modernist imagination.

One significant achievement of modernism was its ability to (to use Frederick R. Karl's word) "decreate" ordinary language. This development came about in many ways and from many sources, and continued to be a hallmark of experimental poetics throughout the twentieth century. One source of such "decreation" when it is considered in terms of its relationship with modernism, was African American vernacular speech. Others have explored this question, but discussion of these matters often centers on the 1920s. However, the process of decreation had been underway for nearly a generation by the time the first blues and jazz recordings became available. African American vernacular speech had been part of the larger culture for a very long time, but when Paul Laurence Dunbar began to publish in the 1890s, he brought to the form a sensibility that was distinctive, and, as this dissertation argues, one that had many affinities to the earliest modern poets. The poems Dunbar wrote in "Negro Dialect" were considered the best of their kind in his own day. These poems have suffered a decline in esteem from some

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[2] For a history of Black Swan records, see Suisman.

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critics, who seem to be influenced by the assessment of dialect works made by James Weldon Johnson. However, the art of Dunbar deserves reconsideration. His poetry—and this assessment includes both the works written in standard English as well as his dialect poems—has, because of its significant affinities with Symbolism, qualities which have hitherto been overlooked in the study of the development of modern poetry.

In his examination of the discursive relationship between Africans, African Americans, and the dominant discourse of the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., employs the idea of the "Discourse of the Black Other" (Figures in Black 49). He is referring to "the literature that persons of African descent created as well as the nonblack literature that depicts black characters." Gates traces this idea from such "Noble Negro" narratives such as Oroonoko by Aphra Behn, through the slave narratives. He also uses this figure when he draws a parallel history, tracing the emergence of the harlequin to the "American Minstrel Man" (51). He is interested in the signifying relations between these figures and those of the dominant culture. However, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the relationship Gates describes is one whose main content is domination. The figure of the black other exists in a subordinate position to the (white) figures to which it has what Gates calls a "signifyin(g)" relationship. This relationship reflected the position of Africans in the Americas, during the period Gates examines.

A change began to occur in this relationship during the late nineteenth century, however, one that reflected the new status of black people that came about as a result of the destruction of chattel slavery; and this change gave rise to the phenomenon that is identified in this dissertation with the term the "African American Imaginary." The rise

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of African American culture to a place of significance and influence on the culture as a whole began in the late nineteenth century, and is demonstrated most obviously by the rise of ragtime music. Studies of ragtime, ranging from that of Rudi Blesh and Harriet Janis, to that of Edward A. Berlin, have outlined this influence. Alec Wilder has written about the relationship between ragtime song and American popular song generally. The present study undertakes to build on those findings, and investigates how ragtime era songs helped "decreate" English, by introducing African American vernacular speech forms which were subsequently used by modernist poets ranging from Gertrude Stein to T.S, Eliot, and which formed a basic element of modern poetry and poetics. In addition, this study identifies a whole range of cultural products from songs to the modernization of the minstrel character, as elements of the "African American Imaginary," a collective cultural milieu characterized, not by relations of domination, but by relations which can best be identified as involving (to borrow a term from Jacques Lacan), "imaginary interplay" (82).

For Lacan, this interplay takes the form of two pair of actions: "expulsion and introjection" and "projection and absorption" (82). Thinking about the African American Imaginary in these terms helps us see how a figure like Bert Williams could be so important in understanding the way in which black culture helped engender modernism.

In his performances, Williams played, simultaneously, both the despised Negro and the Universal Man; he at the same time played the "darky" stereotype while being, in the words of W.C. Fields, "the funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I ever knew" (Rowland 128). Each of these categories is suggestive of a relationship between the African American artist and the surrounding culture that is more complicated than one

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which can be defined by a term such as the "Discourse of the Black Other." In a discourse of the black other, the possibility of "knowing," the "Other" (in the sense of friendship and intimacy suggested by Fields) is limited. In a milieu where interplay is at work, however, the stereotype is always in the process of dissembling; the rise of ragtime, blues, jazz, and of modernist literature written by both African Americans and non-African Americans were instances of this dissembling. At each juncture, the stereotypes associated with the "Discourse of the Black Other" are invoked, only to be undermined in the very process of invocation. "The Comedian" in Wallace Stevens's poem is both New World explorer and a man whose own identity develops in an anxious relationship with the "Maya Sonneteers" who precede him; the best explanation for understanding the linguistic innovations of modernist poets is to liken them to the syncopated rhythms of jazz; and a book that is itself a typical, if not key, text of literary modernism (Cane) becomes, in the eyes of its publishers, a "vaudeville."

In sum, this dissertation is an exploration of the impact of African American culture on modernist poetic language. It explores the work of Jean Toomer (1894-1967), Wallace Stevens (1875-1955), Gertrude Stein (1874-1946), James Bland (1854-1911), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Bert Williams (1874-1922), Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), the genesis of ragtime and Tin Pan Alley-style song, and of modernist criticism. The dissertation consists of four chapters. Chapter summaries are given below.

Chapter One: Haunted

The idea that black culture haunts modernism is one that was brought into contemporary literary studies by Toni Morrison. While Morrison is primarily concerned with the means by which this haunting takes place as a function of fictional rhetoric and

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character development, this chapter is concerned with this trope as a function of language. Through an examination of "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1923) by Wallace Stevens, this chapter shows how Freud's idea of the uncanny can be used to read Stevens' poem as an enactment of a specific type of anxiety which catalyzes the construction of modernist self-consciousness, which is at the same time a racialized self-consciousness.

Continuing in this vein, this chapter uses Tender Buttons (1914) by Gertrude Stein to demonstrate how even the most apparently opaque modernist texts are implicated in this dynamic of the racialized uncanny. Using "Characteristics of Negro Expression" by Zora Neale Hurston (1934) as our primary guide, this chapter attempts to uncover the "black" voice of Tender Buttons. Finally, an examination of "The St. Louis Blues" by W.C. Handy (1914) provides an opportunity to further explore some of the roots of the linguistic decreation that became identified with modernist poetics.

Chapter Two: Lyric

This chapter begins by arguing that the emergence of modernist lyric poetry in English was in part influenced by the changes in the character of popular song lyrics in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The genealogy of American song, through late minstrelsy, ragtime, and early Tin Pan Alley, is examined. The discussion singles out two characteristics of American songs: the development of the chorus as a self contained utterance, independent of dramatic or narrative context; and the emergence of the cliché as a primary carrier of poetic heft within that utterance. One focus of the chapter is on the little-studied nineteenth century African American songwriter, James Bland, who introduced these characteristics into his songs in the 1870s. Bland's song, "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" (1879) was one of the first modern

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American songs, and is examined here as an exemplar of the changes in poetic language that would later bloom more fully in both popular songs like "Some of These Days" (1910) by Shelton Brooks, and in the canonical poems of literary modernism.

Although Paul Laurence Dunbar is not a modernist poet, this chapter argues that he is a little-examined, but important, precursor to modernism. By placing an examination of use of poetic language within a context that privileges the innovations in lyric brought about by the emergence of American popular song, this chapter argues that Dunbar was an important modernizer of American lyric language. The poems this chapter studies include "We Wear the Mask," "The Deserted Plantation" (both published in1896), "The Poet" (1903), and in song lyrics like "Down de Lover's Lane" (1900) from The Casino Girl, the Broadway show on which he collaborated with composer Will Marion Cook. Dunbar is especially important for this study because he alone among major U.S. poets was popular both as a literary figure and as a writer of songs for the musical theater. Both Dunbar's "pure" English poems and his poems in "Negro dialect" are examined for how they share certain affinities with that style of poetry that is associated with the term "symbolist."

Chapter Three: Minstrel

This chapter begins with a study of the relationship between performativity and lyric language in the art of Bert Williams, the early twentieth century vaudeville comedian. This chapter argues for a view of Williams's performance personality as an archetypal modernist figure. His incarnation of the tramp manipulates racial stereotypes in such a way that it transcends the very stereotype it performs. The lyrics of his songs,

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especially his most famous song, "Nobody" (written with lyricist Alex Rogers) (1905) gives voice to this modern urban tramp figure.

The influence of minstrelsy on the work of Samuel Beckett is the subject of the concluding section of this chapter. The section studies two of Beckett's plays: Waiting for Godot (1953) and Not I (1972). In each, the various elements derived from minstrelsy are reconfigured into his theatrical style. In the latter play these elements are joined by the features of poetic language (fragmentation, the autonomous utterance, the cliché) that are the object of inquiry throughout this study.

Chapter Four: Vaudeville

The final chapter explores the relationship, often described as contentious, between modernism and popular culture, with special reference to Cane by Jean Toomer. This discussion begins with a consideration of the use of the words "vaudeville" and "jazz" as metaphors for modernism. This is a question that has received insufficient attention, but it is important to understand that these metaphors were constituent elements of the language used to describe, and to understand modernism. This discussion is also an attempt to come to terms with a larger question about the relationship between African American culture as such, and modernism. If, as I claim in this study, this relationship might be described as interdependent and, to some extent, filial, then why is this idea not yet a commonplace in our understanding of modernism? One answer might be found in the way modernist criticism has polarized "high" and "popular" against each other, as if the polarization was itself a commonplace understanding about modern art and literature. In this chapter I question this view. This polarization is, I am suggesting, historically bound, and this chapter explores how this polarization came to be socially constructed.

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In an exploration of some aspects of the genealogy of modernist criticism, the issue of the fissure within that criticism that allows for the prevailing consensus that renders texts by African Americans and women to a "marginal" status to prevail is explored. One of the primary vehicles for this exploration is Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." There, as in much modernist criticism, this fissure is rendered through the polarities signified by terms like "kitsch" and "popular culture."

The major themes of the dissertation are then explored through an examination of the modernism of Cane (1922). What qualities in Cane are "modernist"? Which are "African American"? These questions are posed in order to uncover the relationship of Cane to such phenomena as the blues, the idea of the aesthete, the uses of the pastoral and the attendant interplay of the symbols of modernity in the text.

These questions are also posed in an effort to reconsider the place of Cane in the literary canon. The fact that the work has been kept alive primarily by African American literary criticism has in some ways obscured its relationship to literary modernism as a whole. Exploring that relationship is, in some ways, a means of coming to terms with the larger question of how can the relationship between the art of African Americans in the modernist era and modernism itself be defined. The conclusion reached in this study is that African American culture is a constituent part of modernism, and that modernism cannot be fully understood unless its African American element is fully explored. It is in this sense, as well, that the culture and art works created by African Americans in the twentieth century be seen as essentially modernist.

Thinking in this way calls for a new understanding of modernism. It means that those definitions and explanations that seek to place black literature and culture at the

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margins of our understanding of modernism end up misunderstanding modernism itself. Such explanations cannot fully account for modernist literature, its linguistic innovations, or its strategies of self-articulation and self-fashioning. The result is often an array of explanations that seem emptied of heft. In this dissertation, I use many of the newer studies that have emerged in recent years that attempt to integrate the means by which (white) modernist artists used African American culture in their work; but whether it is a case of the enthusiasm T.S. Eliot had for (white) blackface comedians, or the use by William Carlos Williams of Jazz Age black vernacular, most of these studies do not see African Americans as actors on the modernist stage in a relationship of, if not equality, then at least of interaction. The present study is distinctive in that it sees modernism as a scene of "play," not only in the sense outlined above, but also in the sense used by jazz musicians. It is a scene in which the various actors "played together" to make modernism.

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Chapter One

Haunted

1

The idea that black culture haunts American literature is one that was brought into contemporary literary studies by Toni Morrison, who identified what she calls an "Africanist presence" (6) in American literature. While Morrison is primarily concerned with the means by which this haunting takes place as a function of fictional rhetoric and character development, this chapter is concerned with this trope as a function of poetic language and style. It is an attempt to expand the idea of this "presence" by examining its function at the semantic and symbolic levels. In doing so, this chapter explores how this language acts as a function of what I am calling the "African American Imaginary." Here, the term is used to identify an aspect of the cultural milieu in which modernism developed. This milieu is a historical one, in which late nineteenth and early twentieth century culture in the United States was being reshaped, in part, by the migration of African Americans from the rural areas to the cities. Much of the influence on the larger culture that this migration produced can be seen in its reflection in popular culture, and part of the new, urbanizing African American culture's influence showed up in the way popular culture "imagined" black people, and in the way African American artists' artistic imagination impacted the larger culture. This was, as I try to show, a process marked by, to use Jacques Lacan's words, "an alternating mechanism of expulsion and introjection, of projection and absorption, that is to say from an imaginary interplay" (82). This process works, I want to suggest, in two ways. At the symbolic level, it

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provides a means by which modernism defines the self in terms of its opposition to this Africanist presence, by proposing that this presence be understood as a kind of binary opposite to itself, a binary in which one side is, in effect, haunted by the other. At the rhetorical level, this process is one which uses the forms of linguistic expression the African American people brought into the culture a means of creating its own, "new" or "modernist" expression. Put another way, there is a relationship between the concept of the "colonial uncanny" and that of the "African American imaginary." Modernism is, in part, constituted by an engagement between the racial self-consciousness of whiteness, and the figure of the racialized other. That other is not, as is often thought, a mute, and unnamable presence, but one whose works in the world are as present as those of the speaker, the "modernist."

The ways in which these relationships develop, either in culture in general or in the realm of artistic expression, are not straightforward. As I attempt to demonstrate, the mechanisms described above by Lacan (and used, as I suggest below, by Homi K. Bhabha in his discussion of the stereotype) call for understanding this process as one characterized by an interplay of both mimetic and synthetic elements; that is, the song lyrics, dialect phrases, cultural artifacts, and iconography which make up the substance of these elements may or may not belong to the actual African American culture. Whether they are "real" or "copies," however, makes little difference to the substance of this inquiry, because both forms, together, make up the "African American Imaginary" that I wish to explore here.

Through an examination of "The Comedian as the Letter C" by Wallace Stevens (Stevens, Collected Poems 27-46, hereafter "The Comedian"), one can see how Freud's

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idea of the uncanny can be used to read Stevens' poem as an enactment of a specific type of anxiety which catalyzes the construction of modernist self-consciousness, which is at the same time a racialized self-consciousness.

In a discussion of Tender Buttons (1914) by Gertrude Stein, this chapter will also demonstrate how even the most apparently opaque modernist texts are implicated in this dynamic of the racialized uncanny. Using "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) by Zora Neale Hurston as our primary guide, this chapter attempts to uncover the "black" voice of Tender Buttons.

This chapter begins with a consideration of what I am calling the "language of the colonial uncanny" as it is expressed in the voyage of Crispin in "The Comedian." This idea of the "colonial uncanny" is a way of thinking about how modernism can partially be conceptualized in terms of a performative relationship between the racial self-consciousness of whiteness and the figure of the racialized other. It is a relationship in which the connection between racial self-consciousness and the racialized other can be said to involve an act of haunting. Following this discussion, I will turn to another means of using language that engaged in by Stein in Tender Buttons. That use, I argue, is rooted in what I have termed the "African American Imaginary." This term is meant to identify that mixture of cultural influences derived from both real and imagined representations of black culture as they existed in the culture at large in the early part of the 20th Century, during the years Stein was composing her first experimental works.Finally, in an examination of the lyrics to the seminal blues song, "The St. Louis Blues," I hope to demonstrate the how the linguistic operations common to modernist verse are also shared by blues composers.

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The three texts under examination here are chosen not only because I am arguing that they each are implicated in the African American Imaginary; they are also chosen because these works are exemplars of the modernist sensibility. The choice to insert the lyrics to a song based on the blues as a "poetic" text alongside two other canonical, and more conventionally "literary" ones may at first seem provocative; but this song first entered the culture as a text written on paper, and this particular song was a major conduit (both as a text and as a representation of an aesthetic practice) for the interaction of African American expressive and creative culture with the majority culture.

2

It has been a long time since the days when literary critics could ignore the racist epithet in the title of one of most famous and accomplished poems of Wallace Stevens, explicating that title with only a gloss calling it an "ellipses" (Vendler, "Like Decorations" 136) or by referring to its meaning in a footnote (Vendler, On Extended Wings 65-78; 321). This state of affairs dominated Stevens criticism historically, however, and this silence about his racialized language often shocks new readers of the poet's work (DuRose 6-8). At the same time, the attention paid to the way race and racialization figure in Stevens' work has its own peculiar features, which tend to focus on thematics, treating the rhetorical strategies he employs as a secondary feature in enhancing our understanding of the poet's relationship to race and racism. To cite one example, Aldon Lynn Nielsen is concerned with Stevens' subjective attitude towards black people: "The black in America is Stevens' homeless cosmopolitan," Nielsen writes (65). Stevens' work is an example, he adds, of a poetry "in which black people simply carry things about while white writers experience them" (76-77).

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As Lisa DuRose writes, critics have cited numerous incidents from Stevens' life which reveal a presumed "alignment with and sympathy for the African Other." However, she adds:

> No critic asks what Stevens gains, artistically, by embracing 'the primitive strength' of his African American characters or by experimenting in his poetry with the rhythm of ragtime music. Their tone suggests an admiration for the poet, for what he gives African Americans, namely a sense of legitimacy and a call for recognition of their gifts (all stereotypically framed, of course).
>
> (7)

In examining this question, critics write about a handful of poems, including "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," cited earlier; "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," "Nudity in the Colonies," "Nudity at the Capitol," "Prelude to Objects," "The News and the Weather" (DuRose 6-8), and, sometimes, "The Silver Plough Boy." When he talks about Stevens' racializing tropology, Eric Keenaghan is interested in how Stevens' language allows "his speakers perspectives to become <u>overdetermined</u> by what his contemporaries would interpret as perverse forms of sexual desire, ranging from miscegenation to voyeurism to homosexuality" (441, italics in original). In all of these interpretations, the focus is on Stevens (and Stevens' speaker) as poetic subject. Yet there remains the rhetoric of the poems themselves, which seem to call for explanations which place us outside of a paradigm which centralizes its focus on the moral subjectivity of the poet. There is a sense in which both those critics who ignore Stevens' racial language, and those who criticize the poet's racial stereotyping are united in privileging the poet,

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rather than the poems, as the center of critical attention. This privileging is not always presented as being unmotivated — indeed, the idea that Stevens is at least somewhat motivated in presenting his racialized characters and tropes is a common thread in the criticism that addresses race — but it is often presented as a means by which the poet achieves aesthetic goals. To ask "what Stevens gains, artistically" through this racial tropology is the overriding mode of inquiry.

The problem with this mode of inquiry is that it doesn't sufficiently examine what is at stake in the poet's deployment of a language that signifies racialized distancing. In ignoring or playing down this aspect of the poetry's language, much of the criticism that concerns Stevens has the effect of erasing the agency of the racialized figures the poet creates, which in turn poses problems for our own reading of the poems, and especially for our reading of the ways in which the stereotypes and other racialized figures are being deployed. In this chapter I am seeking to reverse this normative strategy of reading, and to discover whether we can find some new way of explaining the role these figures have in the poetry. More generally, this chapter is aimed at finding whether we can more adequately explain how race and racializing language can be said to be a constituent element in the construction of the modernist literary artwork.

"The Comedian" is a poem that deploys the language signifying the racialized other, but one whose deployment of such language is not necessarily obvious or normally a subject of inquiry.

It has long been accepted that "The Comedian" is a quest poem, and its genealogy in this regard (its relationship to Shelley's "Alastor," and Whitman's "The Sleepers," "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," and "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life") has

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been established by both Vendler and by Harold Bloom. Bloom, not surprisingly, sees the poem as being primarily about the anxiety of influence. "It is a poem about those writers who induced such anxiety, however repressed, in Stevens," he writes (72). However, rather than seeing the poem as being primarily a literary argument, we might take the poem's mythical burdens seriously, and consider with which myths both the poem's speaker, and the poem's character, Crispin, are contending.

We are confronted with this problem from the poem's first stanza. From the opening lines we face what appears to be an assertion of the generic "man" and his domination over nature:

> Nota: Man is the intelligence of his soil,
>
> The sovereign ghost, as such, the Socrates
>
> Of snails, musician of pears, principium
>
> And lex.
>
> (27)

This is a common enough theme in Stevens' poetry; but then the poem asks the rhetorical question of whether man is "the preceptor to the sea?" Whether, in other words, man is the instructor of nature. It is here that "man" becomes a specific man: Stevens' hero, Crispin. He is named and introduced as the eye whose gaze encompasses, and, presumably, defines nature.

> the eye of Crispin, hung
>
> On porpoises, instead of apricots,
>
> And on silentious porpoises, whose snouts
>
> Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,

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Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world.

(27)

Though his gaze may be powerful, two adversaries confront Crispin at the beginning of the poem: his own limitations, and Triton; and while Crispin may be the "musician of pears," it must be remembered that Triton is a trumpeter of the seas. This conflict animates the first part of the poem, that part titled, "The World Without Imagination":

Against his piping sounds a trumpet cried

Celestial sneering boisterously. Crispin

Became an introspective voyager.

(29)

Triton is followed by even more significant adversaries, whose strength both frightens and challenges Crispin. They include the Maya Sonneteers, the storm that comes from "west of Mexico," and the visions of Crispin's sleep:

In which the sulky strophes willingly

Bore up, in time, the somnolent, deep songs.

(33)

Throughout the poem there stands, behind the conflicted but still-powerful voyager, a latent power that always threatens, and.sometimes challenges Crispin. There is an undercurrent of anxiety in the poem, signified, in one instance, by the Maya Sonneteers, the "green barbarism turning paradigm" who, despite the anxiety they produce for Crispin and his project:

Came like two spirits parleying, adorned

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In radiance from the Atlantic coign

For Crispin and his quill to catechize.

(31)

In what is perhaps the most direct allusion to the nature of this anxiety, the voyager, in the poem's "Approaching Carolina" section, has left the parts where his gaze and his writing have conquered, and entered, as it were, a land where human labor power and its products predominate. The warehouse and railroad with their smells provide, for Crispin, the balance that would "help him round his rude aesthetic out" (36), but this Whitmanesque allusion immediately succumbs to another; one that would again signify a central set of anxieties animating this poem. Warehouse, railroad spur, "rotten fence," would have, so the speaker claims, a salutary effect on Crispin:

It purified. It made him see how much

Of what he saw he never saw at all.

(36)

The allusion appears to be to a line from Huckleberry Finn: "It shows how a body can see and don't see, at the same time" (291), and it is this double nature of Crispin's vision that gives the poem, for all its fantastic language and its mapping of a linguistic terrain of self-discovery, a type of anxiety founded upon a rhetoric which I will choose to call the language of the colonial uncanny.

For Freud, the uncanny refers to an emotional effect that is transformed, by repression, into a morbid anxiety, and that anxiety becomes uncanny by virtue of repetition. The repeated occurrence of this morbid emotional effect causes the sensation of being haunted. This is an idea which animates much of the modernist project; and in

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this, Stevens' first major long poem, like many other such works, the idea of the racialized other is often an active agent, pushing forward the anxiety of the presumed modernist subject. The important thing to remember, however, is exactly the point that this just-below-the-surface agent is an active, constitutive part of the construction of the identity of the modernist work of art. The "other" is only an other if we don't pay attention to what the figure is saying. In Stevens' "The Comedian," this "other" figure appears as the Maya Sonneteers, who challenge the primacy of the poem's voyager, with a presence of their own, one which commands forces of wind and storm which the "introspective voyager" with his catechizing quill can barely tame. The important thing, however, is not simply the conflict enacted in the poem between the various and repeated manifestations of the obstacles erected against the voyager; it is the way the language projects these obstacles as elements of the fantastic, of, perhaps, even fantasy. Homi K. Bhabha writes about the essential role of fantasy in the construction of colonial discourse:

> Not itself the object of desire but its setting, not an ascription of prior identities but their production in the syntax of the scenario of racist discourse, colonial fantasy plays a crucial part in those everyday scenes of subjectification in a colonial society which Fanon refers to repeatedly. (81)

Such fantasy is the substance of the racialized stereotype, which Bhabha, drawing his language from Jacques Lacan, describes in the following way:

> Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies,

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> displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of "official" and phantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.
>
> (81-82)

"The Comedian" deploys a whole array of fantastically described insects, flora and fauna to describe the terrain through which Crispin travels, and it is within this terrain that the eruptions of storms, mysterious counter poetics, and the "somnolent, deep songs" — perhaps an allusion to black music that's as stereotypical as it is complex — occurs. The term suggests the African American ("Negro") Spiritual, those songs that W.E.B. Du Bois called the "sorrow songs," and in the phrase itself is the suggestion of one such song, "Deep River," that was beginning to achieve popularity in the 1920s through performances and recordings.[1]

Freud talks about a second part of the uncanny, in addition to the recurrence of the repressed emotional effect. The uncanny, he says, "is nothing new or foreign, but something familiar or old fashioned in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (148). He adds:

> An uncanny experience occurs either when repressed infantile complexes have been revived by some impression, or when the primitive beliefs we have surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.
>
> (157)

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[1] See Du Bois 164-64. "Deep River" was published in an art song arrangement by Harry T. Burliegh in 1916. "With 'Deep River' Burleigh created a new format, sometimes known as the art song spiritual," write Doris Evans McGinty and Wayne Shirley. By doing so, Burleigh "opened the door for the inclusion of the spiritual on vocal solo recitals" (108). Among those who recorded the song were Roland Hayes, Nettie Moore, John McCormack, and Paul Robeson.

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The stereotype, and the figure that haunts, must be, above all, something familiar, and it is this familiarity which gives the figure its characteristic as a fetishized thing. Avery F. Gordon cites three characteristics of haunting:

> [T] he ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge. I have also emphasized that the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope. Finally, I have suggested that the ghost is alive, so to speak.
>
> (63-64)

The problem with reading "The Comedian" as an autobiographical poem of discovery, or as simply an argument over literary influence, is that such readings repeat and reinforce the repression which the poem itself enacts only with great tension and anxiety. The price of Crispin's anxiety is his own uncertainty, his own ambivalence in a world in which he is the discoverer, the voyager, but a world, the ownership of which, for all his exertion of power over it, ultimately eludes him.

The section titled "The Idea of a Colony" is the turning point of the poem, as the voyager now has to devise the parameters of his domination. As Edward Marx observes:

> Crispin's half-serious poetic ideology concocted in "The Idea of a Colony" is beset by conflict and irresolution as he grapples with the

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> question of imposing some kind of order on the cultural producers of his colony.
>
> (272)

Here is where the language of the uncanny becomes plenitudinous. Throughout the poem, the reader has been treated to the eruptions of anxiety visited on both the speaker, and upon Crispin, as he navigates his way through this territory in which he is both discoverer and the figure that's being "discovered." Here, however, we come up directly against the anxiety that has been with us all along:

> The natives of the rain are rainy men.
>
> Although they paint effulgent, azure lakes,
>
> And April hillsides wooded white and pink,
>
> Their azure has a cloudy edge, their white
>
> And pink, the water bright that dogwood bears.
>
> And in their music showering sounds intone.
>
> (37)

These "rainy men" with their "showering sounds" threaten to engulf Crispin, even as Crispin establishes himself in this colony, whose "idea" is to replace the "natives of the rain" with other colonizers: "The man in Georgia walking among pines/Should be the pine-spokesman." The poem then continues with a striking verse, which signals the link I am attempting to demonstrate between the concept of the "colonial uncanny" and that of the "African American imaginary." The use of both terms here is an attempt to show the ways in which modernism is, in part, constituted by an engagement between the racial self-consciousness of whiteness, and the figure of the racialized other, which is not, as is

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often thought, a mute, and unnamable presence, but one whose works in the world are as present as those of the speaker, the "modernist." It is important to consider that when Stevens's speaker identifies the "man in Georgia," this "man" lives in a world with other men, such as the Maya sonneteers, or with the artists whose presence is hinted at in the following verse:

> The responsive man,
>
> Planting his pristine cores in Florida,
>
> Should prick thereof, not on the psaltery,
>
> But on the banjo's categorical gut,
>
> Tuck, tuck, while the flamingoes flapped his bays.
>
> (38)

To be "responsive," then, is to be responsive, in particular, by means of imitation, to the African. A key to this passage, I would argue, is the appearance of the banjo as a symbol. It is not uncommon, as we will see, for the mechanism of this uncanny that I have been discussing to appear in the form of a musical instrument, or as a specific musical genre that is identified with African Americans. The banjo, in this instance, like Crispin, signifies travel and exploration. The instrument has a long history in the Americas. Though its exact provenance is a source of dispute, the appearance of the instrument among slaves brought from Africa to the Americas has been noted as far back as the seventeenth century. In an often-cited footnote, Thomas Jefferson, in the midst of the diatribe against black people that he published in Notes on the State of Virginia, wrote: "The instrument proper to them [black people] is the Banjar, which they brought hither from Africa, and which is the original of the guitar, its chords being precisely the four

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lower chords of the guitar" (135; cf. Courlander 212; Epstein 354). The footnote, and the book of which it is a part, is also intriguing for another reason. Like "The Comedian," Jefferson's Notes is, as Floyd Ogburn, Jr., points out, a text in which the quest metaphor plays a significant role (142-43). Others have pointed to Jefferson's racist rationalizations in the section of Notes that the "banjar" footnote annotates (Magnis). Scholars seem to have paid scant attention to the way black Americans haunt Jefferson's text. Perhaps this is due to the effect this text is presumed to have had on African American culture; an effect described this way by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

> Asserted primarily to debunk the exaggerated claims of the abolitionists, Thomas Jefferson's remarks on Phyllis Wheatley's poetry, as well as on Ignatius Sancho's posthumously published Letters (1782), exerted a prescriptive influence over the criticism of the writing of blacks for the next 150 years.
>
> (Figures in Black, 5)

Whatever the truth of Gates's assertion, it is also true that Jefferson's Notes is an exemplar of the ambivalence that Bhabha assigns to the trope of the stereotype. Jefferson's mixture of supposition and superstition in assigning inferior status to Africans in the Americas is fraught with the necessity of naming figures whose very existence poses a threat to the scaffold of ideas he is trying to construct. "Religion, indeed, has produced a Phyllis Whatley [sic]; but it could not produce a poet," Jefferson writes (135). Why, however, must he be engaged enough to name her? Jefferson continues by saying that her poems are "below the dignity of criticism." This mention of Wheatley occurs during one of two discussions of poetry in Notes, and Wheatley is the only American

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poet Jefferson mentions by name in the entire text. Through this very acknowledgement, then, Jefferson betrays an anxiety which is at the heart of my concerns in this chapter, that is, the way in which a relationship of "charged strangeness," to use Avery Gordon's words, exists between African American culture and modernism (and, in the case of Jefferson, the culture of modernity); and how this strangeness is not based on an acknowledgement of this relationship based on what might be called an "anthropological' model of discovery of artifacts. It is a relationship that acknowledges itself in the form of direct address, by the naming of artists and the instruments of art, and by the incorporation of forms of language, of African Americans. This is what is meant here by the term "African American Imaginary." By naming Wheatley and the banjo, Jefferson engages this imaginary while rejecting it at the level of the text's foregrounded exposition.

The same is true for the speaker of "The Comedian," whose own evocation of the banjo is made in the context of the tasks that the poem's explorer must undertake to become the man who is "responsive" to his environment. The very evocation of the banjo here, however, reveals the anxiety at the heart of the poem's language. It is not only the natural environment and the people within it which the poem's explorer must conquer; to be truly responsive, the explorer must conquer the art forms, and instruments of art making, that he finds within that environment as well. He must learn to play the banjo. Despite such mastery, however, the anxiety never goes away for Crispin, because he knows that the colony is, after all, only an idea:

> He could not be content with counterfeit,
>
> With masquerade of thought, with hapless words

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That must belie the racking masquerade

(39)

Understanding the dilemma which haunts Crispin, and the poem's speaker, cannot be, as Eric Keenaghan rightly observes, limited to identifying a "simplistic return of the racialized repressed" (441), if for no other reason than that the return is itself not so simple. Implicated within the lyric exposition of this voyage is the question of what to do with the fact that the figures and voices which Crispin (and the poem's speaker) seek to repress are not, in fact repressed at all, but are themselves constituent (if unconscious) parts and voices of the poem. It is a question the poem itself repeatedly asks, and one which modernist poems find themselves asking quite a bit. In a line that repeats an image we also find in T.S. Eliot's "Portrait of a Lady," the poem's speaker uses an object which itself signifies the very anxiety I've been attempting to identify throughout this chapter:

Was he to company vastest things defunct

With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?

(41)

In Eliot's poem, the speaker is plagued with the sounds of competing strands of music, each representing, presumably, the differing directions in which modern society is being pulled:

Among the windings of the violins

And the ariettes

Of cracked cornets

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Inside my brain a dull tom-tom begins

Absurdly hammering a prelude of its own

Capricious monotone

That is at least one definite "false note."

(9)

In each poem what is at stake is the speaker's attempt to resolve the conflict between the values of his present life, and the voice of the racialized other, which threatens the stability of that presence. This anxiety, this conflict is at the very core of modernism. It is, in a sense, a constituent part of the modernist identity itself, an identity that we can only understand as one that's split into a racialized "subject" and "other" (as opposed to one whose racialized tropology is an object of fantasy) if we refuse to listen.

3

If Wallace Stevens' Crispin can be said to enact his voyage in a language of the colonial uncanny, in Gertrude Stein's, earliest experiments with poetic language a fissure seems to take place between the language on the page and its linguistic antecedents. The argument of this section of this chapter seeks to uncover the contents of that fissure, by exploring whether we can find an unconscious African American language within the apparent opacity of Stein's Tender Buttons (1914). This work is particularly useful for our investigation because of its increasingly acknowledged place in the canon of American modernist poetry.

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The work's appearance came at a moment that was significant for modern culture for another reason: the year 1914 was also the year "The St. Louis Blues," W.C. Handy's seminal blues song, was published. While I do not seek to make a claim of linkage between the two works, the coincident temporal appearance of these two works of modern culture seems to suggest lines of investigation into the making of modernist culture that would demand that we pay attention to what Adele Heller and Lois Rudnick call "the cultural moment."

For Heller and Rudnick, that moment is the year 1915, when the Provincetown Players were born. We need not argue for prioritizing one year over the other, however, when we point to Tender Buttons and "The St. Louis Blues" as objects of our investigation. My point, in focusing on what I am calling the "African American linguistic unconscious" in Tender Buttons, is to deepen the discussion of the "language of the colonial uncanny" that I deployed earlier in this chapter. The aim, here, is to deepen our understanding of how Stein's linguistic experimentalism can be said to be a product, in part, of an interaction with black American culture, an interaction which, however much it has been acknowledged at the thematic level, is rarely investigated from the point of view of looking at the style in which Tender Buttons is written.

To aid in this investigation, I will also pay some attention to a work which appeared twenty years after Stein's, but which stands as one of the earliest popular and literary investigations into African American vernacular language: "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) by Zora Neale Hurston, which originally appeared in Negro, the anthology published by Nancy Cunard.

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Commentators have often acknowledged the influence of African American culture on Stein's work. "While Stein is arguably one of the most radical innovators in early twentieth century literature, her work at the same time contains some of the most openly racist descriptions of characters," writes Laura Doyle (256). Aldon Lynn Nielsen's comment, that "Stein's own attitudes toward the nonwhite are everywhere problematic" (22), seems to be confirmed by numerous biographical and exegetical examinations of her life and work, including his own summary account. Most discussions of Stein's racism begin, as does Doyle, with an examination of her story "Melanctha," from Three Lives. Jamie Hovey, for instance, examines the ways in which "Melanctha," deploys primitivist tropes as a means of rewriting (and at least partially obscuring) the lesbian sexuality that is present in the story's source, Stein's early, autobiographical novel, Q.E.D. (1903), which was never published during her lifetime.

A few critics, such as Nielsen and Lorna J. Smedman, point to the presence of racist epithets in Tender Buttons, drawing particular attention to the phrase "needless are niggers" (494), from the poem "Dinner" in the "Food" section of the work. Rarely do these discussions also point to the one line poem "White Hunter" in "Objects": "A white hunter is nearly crazy" (475). Nevertheless, this search for the racist epithet in Stein's work has its own problematic dimension. Doyle suggests that Stein's racist remarks were a provocation:

> These lines are calculated to offend. They are indistinguishable from contemporary racist assumptions among many educated, established whites about blacks and new immigrants but are pushed a step further than

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> "polite" white society (which Stein knew well enough) would like to read in print or hear out loud.
>
> (263)

Given that Stein began her writing career during the heart of the years Rayford Logan calls the "nadir" of African American life, it is difficult to agree with Doyle about what could be said aloud in "polite" society. Nevertheless, in the context of "Melanctha," whose main character is a young African American woman Stein portrays more sympathetically and in a less stereotypical and derogatory manner than was typical for white writers at the time, one could understand how Doyle could come to such a conclusion. Such a claim would be more difficult to support in the context of Tender Buttons, a text whose reputation as one of the most linguistically obscure of all modernist works would seem to make any talk of intentionality on the writer's part speculative at best. At the same time, the phrases quoted above would seem to call upon readers to inquire whether there is more to Stein's engagement in Tender Buttons with African American culture than a few epithets. What if there is, within this apparently opaque language, a reflection, and perhaps a continuation, of Stein's engagement with a perceived African American linguistic universe that began with "Melanctha"? The question of Stein's style in this work has long puzzled readers. Yet there seems to have been no inquiry into whether there is some relationship between that style and the African American speech — either as real speech or as cultural artifact — which would have been part of Stein's everyday milieu.

That everyday milieu included Baltimore, where Stein attended Johns Hopkins medical school. Carla L. Peterson has written in detail about the African American

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culture of Baltimore of the last decade of the nineteenth century and its influence on Q.E.D. and Three Lives. Indeed, Peterson claims that to write "Melanctha," "Stein turned to black cultural forms with which she had come into contact during her Baltimore years" (145). The city was a major site of modern African American music, and was particularly well known as a center of ragtime music. The title of one of the best-known ragtime songs, "Baltimore Buzz," gives a fair indication of the importance of the city to the development of African American musical culture.

The suggestion made by Peterson that the black music of the time had some influence on Stein's early work is an intriguing one. In particular, Peterson argues that readers should pay close attention to the phenomenon known as the "coon" song in order to uncover some of the sources of Stein's experimental literary language:

> Perhaps the earliest Negro sound that Stein would have heard in Baltimore in the 1890s was the coon song, sung by whites and blacks alike, that had developed out of earlier minstrel and road show traditions. Its lyrics relied on caricature and racist stereotyping in order to ridicule and lampoon blacks as uncivilized and primitive people.
>
> (146)

This song form constituted a major style of popular music of the last two decades of the nineteenth century, prefiguring the rise of ragtime at the end of the century. Many of the important popular singers of the era were "coon" singers (or "coon shouters," as they were often called). Among the major singers associated with the form were African American singers like Ernest Hogan and Bert Williams, and white singers like Arthur Collins (the so-called "King of the Coon Shouters"), Dolly Connolly, Billy Murray, May

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Irwin, Al Jolson, and Sophie Tucker (Clarke, Rise and Fall, 62; Wondrich, Stomp, 81-111). All of these performers, both black and white, performed in blackface makeup.

This would probably have been the primary form of popular music Stein and her contemporaries listened to and played at home on the piano during her youth and young adulthood. As Peterson writes, the "coon" song deployed many of the most outlandish racial stereotypes in its lyrics. Peterson suggests that many of Stein's characters in "Melanctha" are based on stereotypes made popular by the "coon" songs. "It is to this tradition, I suggest, that Stein turned in order to portray Melanctha's father, James Herbert, her last lover, Jem Richards, and her friend, Rose Johnson," Peterson writes (146). The "coon" song was enormously popular, and sheet music of these songs sold well throughout the United States and abroad. Their popularity was in large part based on the simultaneous rise, in all media, of anti-black racist stereotypes as a major social discourse. As James H. Dormon points out:

> The coon song craze in its full frenzy was a manifestation of a peculiar form of the will to believe—to believe in the signified "coon" as represented in the songs—as a necessary sociopsychological mechanism for justifying segregation and subordination.
>
> (466)

Dormon begins his examination of this phenomenon by calling our attention to the rise of what he calls "an essentially new etymological departure: the pervasive use of the word 'coon' as a designation for 'Afro-American'" (452-53). He calls the emergence of this term a "linguistic coup" (453), and, indeed, many of these songs seemed to rest on the use of this word as their main identifying feature. The word was a conduit for the

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pervasive use of insulting and degrading language and scenes in the song, while at the same time serving as a term that identified the songs as, in some sense, belonging to African America. This genre consisted of songs written by both blacks and whites, a point to which we will return later in this study.

It will be sufficient for our purpose in the present chapter, however, for us to take note of just a few of the basic characteristics of this genre. The first thing to note is that these were humorous songs based on syncopated melodies. This humor, however, was often deployed in the interest of portraying the most intensely derogatory racial stereotypes. As Dormon writes:

> In these songs...blacks began to appear as not only ignorant and indolent, but also devoid of honesty or personal honor, given to drunkenness and gambling, utterly without ambition, sensuous, libidinous, even lascivious. 'Coons' were, in addition to all these things, razor-wielding savages, routinely attacking one another at the slightest provocation as a normal function of their social lives.
>
> (455)

The "coon" song portrayed black people as "indolent and unambitious" (456), but it also had another aspect. Perhaps the "single most threatening of the new ascriptive 'coon' stereotype," writes Dormon, "was the implied threat to the hallowed racial caste system protected in the past by slavery, and now, in the early 1890s, devoid of clear sanction in law. This most threatening of all themes — threatening at least in its encoded subliminal message — was the theme of the black who wants to become white" (461). This theme was related to the idea of racial passing, and of its collateral assault on the ideas of white

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racial purity that animated so much white supremacist discourse. Here we begin to see, in the development of the song styles that were emerging at this time, themes which hint at the idea of African Americans as both familiar, yet strange and threatening. It seems, then, that one element that gave the "coon" song its power was, in a word, its capacity to play on the very anxieties that constituted so much of white supremacist discourse. Dormon gives numerous examples of this latter theme from songs of the 1890s, but it is also useful to recall that variations of this theme remained in African American popular music for a long time afterward. A derivation of the theme appeared, perhaps most famously, in a song of the jazz age, a song by Andy Razaf that Louis Armstrong used as a theme song in performances during the civil rights era:

> I'm white, inside, but that don't help my case,
>
> Cause I, can't hide what is in my face.
>
> (Armstrong, "Black and Blue")

This is perhaps a far cry from the way the sentiment was expressed some thirty years earlier, by the chorus of one of the most famous songs of the "coon" song era:

> Coon! Coon! Coon!
>
> I wish my color would fade:
>
> Coon! Coon! Coon!
>
> I'd like a different shade.
>
> Coon! Coon! Coon! Morning, night, and noon.
>
> I wish I was a white man!
>
> 'Stead of a Coon! Coon! Coon!
>
> (Dormon 463)

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This combination of the deployment of racist stereotypes along with an obsessiveness with whiteness and the possibilities of racial passing was pervasive in the language of the "coon" song. The "coon" songs were just as often expressive of these anxieties among white people as they were songs that portrayed a set of supposed analogous anxieties among black people. This was a kind of doubling masquerade that was embodied in the "coon" song and which was characteristic of minstrelsy, which initially based itself on the idea of whites masquerading as blacks. The "coon" song is a product of late minstrelsy, as it was beginning to give way to vaudeville, an era in which black performers such as Ernest Hogan, George Walker and Bert Williams began to gain national attention through variations on this masquerade.

Black minstrels had long used blackface makeup, imitating white minstrels who imitated black people; but here, in the "coon" song, we have black and white songwriters and singers "imitating," on the national stage, the psychological anxieties attendant to the rising racism of the time. It was a case of the emergent African American Imaginary using humor and parody to both give voice to, and to signify upon, the paranoia that lies at the heart of racist discourse.[2]

One way of thinking about this doubling masquerade is in terms of Judith Butler's idea of the performative. Her idea has to do with the way gender is not an ontological category but a socially constructed one, and the use of her idea here must carry with it an appropriate set of qualifications.[3] Nevertheless, her idea that in the construction of gender, "acts, gesture and desire" produce the appearance of gender identity "on the

[2] In chapter four I take up some of these issues again, in an examination of the art of Bert Williams.
[3] Butler herself has supplied us with this warning. See Gender Trouble, xvi.

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surface of the body" is quite useful in understanding the cultural discourse catalyzed by the emergence of the "coon" song. Butler adds:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.
>
> (173. Italics in original.)

Minstrelsy and the "coon" song created an idea of racialized expression and of the racialized body that reflected primarily a set of social restrictions and customs that reflected the legal regime of racist segregation that was then emerging in the United States. At the same time, the idea, as expressed in the song quoted above, of the "black" singer's desire to be "white" was itself an act that expressed itself in terms of an African American culture whose primary existence was as a *staged* event. What relationship did this staged event have to social reality as it was lived by black people? To what extent did it reflect a social reality or a social paranoia? It is easy to say that minstrelsy and the "coon" song were fabrications, and leave it at that; but the fact is that these "fabrications" were also part of an expressive, artistic culture then emerging from the black community. It is from within the nexus of this contradiction that the African American Imaginary (which can be said to be a site where "black culture" is "performed," by the culture at large), emerges. These issues surrounding the performance of blackness in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the period that Rayford Logan calls "the nadir of the Negro's status in American society" (52) seem to also be ones which were crucial in the formation of the culture we call "modernist." It is here, then,

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that we can productively read the interplay of the African American Imaginary with Gertrude Stein's early experimental texts such as Tender Buttons. That is because these issues, and the linguistic representation of them, appear to have been a central concern for Stein as well. Lorna Smedman has written about the use of the word "coon" in Stein's work. For Smedman, the importance of Stein's use of such words is illustrative of a contradiction that's embedded in her experimental language project.

> Stein's use of racialized language is best understood in the context of her focus on difference and relation in the arenas of semantics and syntax. Racialized signifiers, which foregrounded the issue of difference by embodying America's brutal racist history, posed the greatest challenge to Stein's project: to unlink the signifier from the signified, to foster a plurality of meaning, to reformulate relations between words outside the laws of grammar. If she was drawn to racialized terms and references again and again, it was because, unlike many others, these signifiers could not be separated from what they signified.
>
> (570)

If Stein's use of these terms was prompted primarily by their challenge to her artistic project, then we can be justified in reading their use within a historically and sociologically bound narrative, which helps explain Stein's personal tastes and prejudices. Smedman's description of the meaning for Stein of this racialized language also suggests another interpretive possibility, however. One could argue that Smedman's description of Stein's project has certain similarities to the way African American culture (and the imitators of African American culture) used language in both every day speech

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and in such venues as the "coon" song. Indeed, it is possible that Stein's very attempt to use this racialized language to accomplish her aesthetic ends had the effect of (at least partially) wrenching these terms from their moorings. This can perhaps be more clearly demonstrated by looking, not at how she uses the languages that racializes African Americans, but at how her language discourses on "whiteness."

In some of the earliest pieces in Tender Buttons, "A Substance in a Cushion," "A Box," and "A Piece of Coffee," Stein uses the word "white" in a discourse alluding to both color and stereotype. White is deployed in a meditation on the idea of cleanliness, which arrays the color against counter-concepts of colors associated with dirt:

> A closet, a closet does not connect under the bed. The band of it is white and black, the band has a green string. A sight a whole sight and a little groan makes grinding a trimming such sweet singing trimming and a red thing not a round thing but a white thing, a red thing and a white thing.
>
> (462)
>
> So that the order is that the white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and it is disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analyzed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again.
>
> (463)
>
> Dirty is yellow. A sign in more of not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The

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> clean mixture is whiter and not coal color, never more coal color than altogether.
>
> (463)

> All the seats are needing blackening. A white dress is in sign. A soldier a real soldier has a worn lace a worn lace of different sizes that is to say if he can read, if he can read he is a size to show shutting up twenty-four.
>
> Go red go red, laugh white.
>
> (475)

The association of yellow with dirt, the idea that white and black "does not connect under the bed," and the idea that coffee's "resemblance to yellow" is "dirtier," and that "[t] he clean mixture is whiter and not coal color," can all be read as racialized signifiers, used here for the purposes of scrambling the normative relations of syntax; and yet their use here is also consistent with the way these terms were used in such popular language arenas as advertising and the popular "coon" songs of the day. Shades of skin color were among the subjects of several "coon" songs, and the association between black skin and dirt was widely used by advertisers of soap and detergent products.

The language of advertising is of interest here for another set of reasons. Richard Ohmann has traced the change in the discourse of print advertising during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He notes that the language of advertising became, over this period, less text-heavy, and more reliant on images to carry the burden of persuasion (175-185, 218). As the amount of texts in advertisements diminished, the

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burden of persuasion came to rest more on slogans, on clichés. It is useful to keep in mind that the emergence of the slogan as the carrier of the main burden of persuasion in advertising took place right at the moment that Stein was composing Tender Buttons.

The advertising slogan tended to raise the poeticity of advertisements. Samuel Jay Keyser has looked at how modern advertisements use poetic devices as means of persuasion. He cites such devices as syllable repetition, the use of poetic format, and the use of rhyme, chiasmus, exemplification, and compression, among others, as common features of magazine advertisements. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when the modern phase of advertising was developing, these features were just coming into wide use. Modern advertising was aimed primarily at female consumers and its language and imagery were focused on selling domestic products. Soap, foodstuffs, household goods, new technology such as washing machines and modern stoves were among the major items being advertised. Moreover, as Marilyn Mannes Mehaffy has demonstrated in her study of advertising trade cards of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these advertisements were part of a racialized discourse, much like the "coon" songs. In trade card advertisements this discourse was realized by the pairing of "black domestic labor and white (consuming) domesticity," which, Mehaffy, says, constitutes the "primary iconography" of such cards. She adds:

> This prevalent pairing can be attributed, in part, to the trade card's representational participation in a larger national discourse — of plantation literature, the visual arts, and politics — mythologizing antebellum slavery as a more coherent, tranquil era "lost" to the

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> uncertainties and upheavals of postwar urbanism, industrialism, and commercialization.
>
> (142)

These ads and songs were a fundamental part of the popular culture of the day. In the case of the ads, it was not only their iconography that took part in this racialized discourse, but the text of the ads did so as well. In many such ads, the texts were written in a style that approximated the African American theatrical and literary dialect of the broader culture. This ersatz African American speech, in both advertisements and songs, were part of the environment of the African American Imaginary that constituted part of Stein's environment as well. It was this environment that she drew from in her experimental texts, where she used these racialized words and associations in order to dissemble language. One of the ways she uses such language is not that far removed from how it was used in the African American community, as a means of fostering, to use Smedman's words, "plurality of meaning." In order to understand this linguistic strategy further, I will turn this discussion briefly toward another text, one which can help us see more clearly some aspects of Stein's experimental texts.

Though it was published some twenty years after Tender Buttons, the essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) by Zora Neale Hurston is an important interpretive tool for the present discussion because that essay is an important literary (as opposed to strictly linguistic) analysis of African American speech of the sort with which Stein would have been familiar. Written for Nancy Cunard's anthology Negro (1934), it is an attempt to codify and characterize some elements of African American speech. Indeed, it is one of the earliest texts of any sort that attempts a serious examination of

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African American speech. "Significant research on Black English in the United States is almost entirely a product of the 1960s," claims J.L. Dillard (6).[4] One aspect of Hurston's essay is how it seems to compliment some of the concerns that occupied Stein during the time she was writing Tender Buttons.

In what might be seen as a somewhat ornate analysis, due to the way it employs some of the terms that were commonly accepted by anthropologists of the time such as "primitive," Hurston's claims for the distinction of African American vernacular language revolve around four assertions. The first is the use, in African American language, of "picture words." These are words (she uses examples such as "sitting chair," and "cook pot") in which "the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use" (50).[5] Then there is the "will to adorn," (50), the use of ornamental expressions and words. She cites several, at least one of which remains a part of the language: "bodaciously,"[6]

Hurston then writes about what she calls "the Negro's greatest contribution to the language (51). These include: "(1) the use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive; (3) the use of verbal nouns." She then lists numerous examples of each category, and here is where Hurston's text begins to enter the realm of modernist poetic language. Here is a sample from the "metaphor and simile" section:

> One at a time, like lawyers going
>
> to heaven.

---

[4] Dillard, in his survey of the research, does not mention Hurston's essay, which had just come back into print with the republication of Cunard's Negro, two years before the publication of Dillard's book.
[5] All citations are from the Turtle Island edition.
[6] Bodacious: an adjective meaning "complete, thorough, arrant" (OED). The Oxford English Dictionary cites its first use as 1833, and defines it as a variant of an English dialect word. Major, who gives the definitions "extreme; exceedingly excessive; grand," dates its use in English from the 1680s, and claims its root word to be botesha, from the Bantu language (50).

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You sho is propaganda.

Sobbing hearted.

I'll beat you till: (a) rope like okra,

(b) slack like lime, (c) smell like unions.

Fatal for naked.

Kyting along.

That's a rope.

(51)

Such syntax, in which the adjectives appear to be used as substitutes for nouns and verbs, seems not so very different from the sort of linguistic operations Stein employs in lines like "A white dress is in sign," or "Go red go red, laugh white." Hurston's list of "nouns from verbs" shows a remarkable affinity with Stein's language:

Won't stand a broke.

She won't take a listen.

He won't stand straightening.

There is such a complaint.

That's a lynch.

(53)

Here we see a mixing of word functions in a manner that is distinctive. Lisa Green has shown how some verbs in African American Vernacular English can function as adjectives as well as verbs (50-53). Some of Stein's sentences can be read in this way as

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well, especially those that come closest to the sort of syntax we've come to hear in speakers of African American, Vernacular English. Her sentence "All the seats are needing blackening," for instance, can be read as a variant of "all the seats be needing blackening." This characteristic of using words for multiple functions by African American speakers may not be unique in the English language, but this function might be unique to English:

> This faculty of using one and the same form with different values, while the context shows in most cases what part of speech is meant, is one of the most characteristic traits of English, and is found to a similar extent in no other European language.
>
> (Jespersen 73)

Otto Jespersen calls such expressions "grammatical homophomes." While such forms may not be unique to African American speech, it is nevertheless true that black speakers used them in radical ways. In "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston also helps us consider how nouns are used in African American English. One of her categories, the "verbal noun" ("'Taint everybody you can confidence" is one of her examples [52]), is among those nouns whose usage by African American Vernacular English speakers has been discussed by Salikoko S. Mufwene. Mufwene shows how black English speakers use nouns in a variety of ways: as "mass" and "countable" nouns; and he shows how proper nouns can be used as common nouns (72-73). Hurston also calls attention to two other aspects of African American expression: "angularity" and "asymmetry" (54). She uses the term "angularity" to describe African American dancing ("Every posture is another angle") and visual sensibility ("The pictures on the walls are hung at deep angles.

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Furniture is always set at an angle"); for the term "asymmetry" she quotes a verse from the poem "Evil Gal" by Langston Hughes (Collected Poems 120).

All of these linguistic operations were a part of African American popular culture and its artistic expressions, as well as of everyday speech, and while some of them were certainly present in the "coon" songs, they came more clearly to cultural prominence with the blues. The song that is perhaps the most famous blues song ever written was published the same year as Tender Buttons. "The St. Louis Blues" by William Christopher Handy shares with Stein's text some of the same linguistic operations I have been attempting to identify here, operations that Hurston summarizes in her essay.

That at least some of these operations were known and identified with black culture during the time Stein was composing Tender Buttons can be demonstrated by the popularity of Handy's song, and by the scholarship existing at the time on African American music. In 1911, Howard W. Odum published his essay, "Folk-Song and Folk Poetry as Found in the Secular Songs of the Southern Negroes" in the Journal of American Folklore. There, he characterized the style of the African American work songs and blues that were the subjects of his study:

> The language is neither that of the whites nor that of the blacks, but a freely mingled and varied usage of dialect and common speech. Colloquialisms are frequent. The omission of pronouns and connectives, asyndeton in its freest usage, mark many negro verses, while the insertion of interjections and senseless phrases go to the other extreme.
>
> Odum, qtd. in Tracy, 145

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These operations have striking affinities with those used by Stein. The sentences of her prose poems seem to defy sense precisely to the degree that they use colloquialisms, omit pronouns and connectives, and to the extent that syntactical units, or phrases, seem not to make sense because of missing conjunctions. What is most significant for our purposes here is that the particular ways that African American speakers made multivalent use of the parts of speech, and, perhaps just as important, the means by which those methods were put to use by writers and performers of song lyrics, became widely known in the United States at about the same time as Stein was composing Tender Buttons. Here is an example from Stein's book:

> It was a way a day, this made some sum. Suppose a cod liver a cod liver is an oil, suppose a cod liver is tunny, suppose a cod liver oil tunny is pressed suppose a cod liver oil tunny pressed is china and secret with a bestow a bestow reed, a reed and a reed to be, in a reed to be.
>
> Next to me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a foldersome waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with her for less.
>
> (496-97)

At the very beginning of the poem, the pronoun seems to be placed in the subject position in the sentence. The second pronoun, "this," refers to "it," whose referent is absent from the utterance. Neither part of the sentence seems to directly refer to the other, giving the sentence the sense of a list of disconnected phrases, in a case of asyndeton "in its freest usage." The second sentence seems governed by wordplay between the set of nouns "cod liver," "oil," "tunny," "china," "secret," and "reed." Here, nouns become verbs by virtue

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of punning ("cod liver"), but the verbs then revert back to nouns. The poem is a model of the asymmetry and angularity that characterizes this book as a whole. Only in the second paragraph are we given a hint of a setting, and that hint is quickly undermined by the poem's incessant wordplay, as the second paragraph refers, again by pronoun, to a "her" that may have as its referent "waiter" (wait her). The use of internal rhyme and of phrases, which rely on common constructions ("suppose A is B"), may be reminiscent of advertising copy. In any case, the "meaning" of the poem is secondary to the sound of the words playing against each other, in a manner that is reminiscent of some of the better-known African American songs of the day.

4

I have been arguing that to read Stein's experimental texts from within the context of the African American Imaginary is to read for those affinities these works have with the emergent urban African American culture of the early twentieth century.

In an effort to demonstrate this point more clearly, let me turn now to that other canonical text I have already referred to, "The St. Louis Blues." I turn to it for several reasons. For one thing, it marks the best-known example of an African American popular song lyric from that time. For another, its very canonicity allows us to see it alongside Stein's texts and to demonstrate how African American culture forms a crucial part of the context of modernism, and of the context within which modernist texts were created. More to the point, this song demonstrates the very qualities I have been pointing to in Stein's verse. Here are the first four stanzas of Handy's song.

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I hate to see de ev'nin sun go down,

Hate to see de ev'nin sun go down,

'Cause my baby, he done lef dis town.

Feelin' tomorrow lak ah feel today,

Feel tomorrow lak ah feel today

I'll pack my trunk, make ma gitaway.

St. Louis woman, wid her diamon rings,

Pulls dat man roun' by her apron strings.

'Twant for powder an' for store-bought hair

De man ah love would not gone nowhere, nowhere.

Got de St. Louis Blues jes as blue as ah can be,

Dat man got a heart lak a rock cast in the sea,

Or else he wouldn't have gone so far from me.

(Handy 89)

While it is not the most radical set of blues lyrics, "The St. Louis Blues" demonstrates some of the disjunctive qualities that characterize modernist texts. The verses constitute a set of laments that hardly add up to a coherent narrative. An especially disjunctive feature of the lyric is the use of the word "feelin" (feeling). Standard American English would have the sentence read: "If I feel tomorrow as I'm feeling today." However, the conjunction and the pronoun are absent, and the tenses of the word

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"feel" are reversed. The melody of the song is just about all that keeps the verse from sounding like nonsense. As the song progresses through another fourteen stanzas, the lack of narrative connection appears even more dramatic. In recorded renditions of the song, singers have chosen almost randomly from among the verses to make up their versions of the song. In the classic version of the song, recorded by Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong on January 14, 1925, Smith sings the first four verses printed above, with two word substitutions: "grip," for "trunk," in line six, and "wouldn't go" for "would not gone," in line ten. In line three, she sings, "It makes me think I'm on my last go-round" (Smith).

"The St. Louis Blues" "is by far the most performed and recorded individual blues of all time" (Friedwald 42). In the years between the two World Wars, it was one of the most recorded and performed American compositions. Among the most distinctive features of the song is the degree to which its origins and organization reflect a modernist aesthetic sensibility. The song is essentially a pastiche. Musically, it is a traditional blues combined with a tango, which enlivens the chorus.[7] It is, however, the song's manifestation as a linguistic product that most concerns us here. What is remarkable about "The St. Louis Blues," from this point of view, is the means by which the composer sought to create his song.

It is important, for purposes of my analysis, to remember that "The St. Louis Blues" is, in part, a commodity and a literary product. Its primary manifestation was as a musical composition written and sold on sheet music. This is significant because most writing about the blues, since the days of Howard W. Odum, treats it as primarily a product of an oral culture. Though this is true of the music generally, it is also important

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to remember that the form entered the consciousness of modern society as the product of literacy. This is one reason why, in our attempt to understand "The St. Louis Blues" as a product of a modernist sensibility, we will turn to the circumstances of its composition, as we try to sort out how it came into existence as a product of language. We have an especially rich source for our investigation, as W.C. Handy tells us, in his memoir, the circumstances surrounding the composition of his most famous song.

"The St. Louis Blues," it seems, came about not only in response to the composer having suffered from the vagaries of the capitalist marketplace. Its writing was also preceded by an engagement with a form of literary "nonsense." Handy's "Memphis Blues" of 1912 was a big hit, and was one of the first commercial hit blues songs. Soon after writing the song, Handy lost the rights to it, and he was determined to write another hit with from he could make back some of the money he lost when he lost the rights to his original song. His first attempt was with a song called "Jogo Blues." This is of interest because of the story Handy tells of the song's origins:

> The inspiration for the new composition was a curious Negro custom that could be traced to the Gullahs and from them all the way back to Africa. I had first noticed it among the troupers of the minstrel company. Whenever these fellows wanted to say something to one another — something not intended for outside ears — they used words invented by themselves for this purpose. Sometimes they simply attached new means to familiar words. For example, a white person was always "ofay," a Negro "jigwawk." The terms, as pliable as silk, were also extended to cover fine distinctions. Thus if the girl you were sparking at the moment was light

[7] For an extensive musical analysis of the song, see Friedwald, 39-74.

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colored, you might describe her as ofay jigwawk. If she was the stove-pipe variety, you might have to hear her called a jig-wawk-jigwawk. I recalled that back in the nineties Ben Harney wrote a ragtime song entitled *The Cakewalk in the Sky*. But when the jigs sang it, the audience heard something like this: *The Kigingy Kikake Wygingwawk Higin The Skigy*.

Of course, in the theatrical profession one meets alert ears and sharp wits, and the public early became familiar with words like "ousylay" and "umbay." To meet this cleverness, we used throw-offs to confuse them. "Siging Sigwatney" was one such a throw-off — it meant nothing whatever. "Jogo" did have meaning, however. It meant colored and was a synonym for jigwawk. I decided to call my new composition the *Jogo Blues*.

(116-17)

Handy is careful to authenticate the provenance of his composition by placing the origins of its structural concerns in Africa. In this context, it is necessary to remember just how much African American popular culture from these years harkened back to Africa for just such authentication. Even come of the "coon" song writers did so, despite the fact that many of their compositions were racially insulting. Nevertheless, some of the most famous songs and theatrical productions of the era, such as Bert Williams and George Walker's Broadway musical <u>In Dahomey</u> (1905) evoked just such a context. Next, Handy couches his composition within the context of a language maneuver, one that is similar to the practice which came to be known as "signifying" (Gates, <u>Signifying Monkey</u> 54). The maneuver as described by Handy, however, relies on nonsense for its

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effect: "it meant nothing whatever." What seems distinctive, however, about these word-games is that they base themselves on the effects of "meaningless" sounds. This use of nonsense was to become a major trope in African American artistic practice, especially among musicians, during the twentieth century, resurfacing most notably with Louis Armstrong in 1926, with his recording "Heebie Jeebies" and again two years later, with his introduction of what came to be called "scat singing," in "West End Blues." After World War II, African American musicians would spark a whole musical style, bebop, named after a nonsense word. As important as this cosmology is, it is just as important to see Handy's evocation of "jigwawk" as an experiment that stands in the same arena of artistic production as Hugo Ball's sound poems at the Café Voltaire in Zurich, and the Zang Tumb Tuuum of F.T. Marinetti (which he premiered in St. Petersburg in 1914), as well as of Stein's own experimental texts (Perloff, The Futurist Moment, 45-79).

"Jogo Blues" was not the hit Handy wanted. For one thing, it was an instrumental song; it was too obscure, and too difficult. "Only Negro musicians understood the title and the music," he writes (119). He wanted something with the complexity of "Jogo Blues," but a song written in so that both the sheet music buying amateur players as well as professionals could play it. He also needed a song with words. Handy then tells the story of how he went about writing his song. What he says is striking, in light of how I have been trying to convey the sense of the "African American Imaginary" earlier in this chapter. "[T]his number would go beyond its predecessor and break new ground," he writes. "I would begin with a down-home ditty fit to go with twanging banjos and yellow shoes" (118). We are brought once again into the center of this Imaginary, through the use of one of its important symbols. Handy's story of origins is filled with tropes attesting

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to the authenticity of the work. For one thing, he suggests that "The St. Louis Blues" is, like its predecessor, rooted in Africa. Among the more unusual features of the song is the tango rhythm that is in the introduction and the middle strains of the song. "Indeed, the very word 'tango,' as I now know, was derived from the African 'tangana,' and signified this same tom-tom beat" (120).

In the first of two allusions to "coon" songs the "down-home ditty" he's looking for is identified with a song made popular by May Irwin, a white "coon" song singer. He then tells the story of one of the song's key verses. As he sat in a rented room in Memphis, he was remembering a long-ago visit to St. Louis: "there was the picture I had of myself, broke, unshaven, wanting even a decent meal, standing before the lighted saloon in St. Louis without even a shirt under my frayed coat." He sees a woman "whose pain seemed even greater." She was drunk and disheveled. "Stumbling along the poorly lighted street, she muttered as she walked, 'Ma man's got a heart like a rock cast in de sea'" (119). Handy didn't know what she meant, and stopped another woman to ask for a translation. "She replied, 'Lawd, man, it's hard and gone so far she can't reach it.'" It's not clear whether this "translation" enlightened Handy; but the song's lyric remains as mysterious as ever. "Thus," writes Friedwald, this section of the song "opens with a curious 'Mona Lisa' kind of a line that few people who hear it, or even sing it, quite understand, yet it certainly makes the song more interesting than your average drawing-room drama of 1914" (49). Whatever his reaction to this "translation," here is where Handy shows us what was really revolutionary about his new composition. "Her language was the same down-home medium that conveyed the laughable woe of lamp-blacked lovers in hundreds of frothy songs, but her plight was much too real to provoke

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much laughter" (119). "The St. Louis Blues," in other words, had taken the medium of the "coon" song, and made it into a modern means of expression. "I resorted to the humorous spirit of the bygone coon songs," he writes (120), and thereby recreated the African American vernacular as a medium for high art.

It's hard to overestimate the impact of The St. Louis Blues on twentieth century culture. The song came to be identified with both African America and with American culture generally in the years between the World Wars, as a veritable sign of the modern. It became, in a sense, the visible sign of the African American Imaginary and its relationship to modernism. It became part of the standard repertoire in orchestras throughout the world during these years. It doesn't seem to have made a difference whether these bands were jazz bands or simply dance bands. That this was true was shown by Langston Hughes, who wrote about the song in connection with his 1933 visit to Japan:

> Blues were not unknown in Japan. "The St. Louis Blues," W.C. Handy's classic, was very poplar. The words had been translated into Japanese — "I hate to see de evenin' sun go down" — and records of it were whirling on Tokyo jukeboxes. The Tokyo jazz bands, with a number of Filipino musicians in them, played good jazz.
>
> (Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, 242)

This examination of Handy's song has focused on the language of the lyric in an attempt to demonstrate that the rhetorical operations which are commonly identified with the modernist lyric were also being developed by writers of modern African American song lyrics. The next chapter will explore this question more fully, with an examination

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of another aspect of this problem, as it relates to the use of the cliché and of some aspects of symbolism in black American poetry. Here, however, my purpose has been to demonstrate how the blues and their "coon" song antecedents can be said to stand in an uneasy, uncanny relationship to the texts of canonical modernism. "The St. Louis Blues," published the same year as Tender Buttons, can be seen, then, as using language in a way that foreshadowed the way this vernacular would come out from behind the minstrel mask of the "coon" shouters, and into the mainstream of modern culture, helping, along the way, to create modernism.

5

Throughout this chapter, I have used the terms "uncanny" and "haunted" to characterize the relationship I've been trying to describe. However, I want to clarify one important fact. The relationship between canonical modernism and African American culture that I have been describing should by no means be construed as one in which black culture stands as docile, or inert. In the sense that it is described in this study, African American expressive, creative culture must be seen as itself modernist, and a full-fledged agent of the modernist project. The use of the terms "haunting," "the uncanny," and the "African American Imaginary" in this chapter are attempts to describe the multiple means by which the same phenomenon occurred. With Stevens and Stein, their work of making a modernist artwork took place within a context that required them to engage African American culture and its products, even if they did not name the real-life artists behind those artifacts. It was enough to name articles (musical instruments) or

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to engage racial myths and white America's obsession with whiteness for this engagement to become productive elements in their art. This engagement without naming is the mechanism that I have referred to with the term, "haunted."

Yet all this does not, by any means, indicate that the "unnamed" agent of the uncanny did not exist in real life, within the very culture that Stevens and Stein lived in. One could fairly say that, by the early twentieth century, in the United States at least, African American people and their culture had ceased to be, as it had been since the early days of minstrelsy, a culture whose presence was mainly mediated to the white majority through imitation and ascription. As the culture became more urbanized, and as black people became an increasing proportion of that urbanizing majority, so their culture, too, became, in a real sense, a part of that majority culture. As I attempt to demonstrate in the following chapters, that is at least one meaning of the emergence of ragtime as a national art form. It certainly accounts for the increasing use of a (presumed) African American dialect in both the mainstream theaters and in the emergent national advertisements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As I have argued, one reason why the relationship between the "minority" and "majority" cultures has been obscured by many commentators is because of an apparent confusion between the legal-historical framework in which artists worked, on the one hand, and the mechanisms of cultural translation on the other. These latter often worked around and between the legalistic barriers erected against them. After all, it was at the height of racial segregation that an African American musical form became the country's first truly national music, and it was at exactly this moment when it became clear that an American way of speaking English would have to be, at least partially, based on a real, or

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imagined, African American dialect. This real and imagined dialect, which was the dialect of the "coon" songs, was one of the early manifestations of this African American Imaginary that I have been discussing, an Imaginary came to have an anxious, uncanny relationship with the "majority" culture throughout the twentieth century.

This anxiety can be said to be characteristic of the century. Michael Rogin and Jeffrey Melnick have written about the way black culture was used by some immigrant cultures in during this era as a tool "Americanization." The distinction I am attempting here, however, is that these phenomena were not only social and historical. (In any case, one point this study seeks to make is that the changes that many scholars identify with the 1920s were already in place nearly a generation earlier.) These phenomena also took place at the level of poetic language and rhetoric as well. The importance of the distinction will, hopefully, be clarified even more in the following chapters, as this study looks into the poetics of what is commonly understood to be the "lost" years of American poetry.

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Chapter Two

Lyric

1

At least one overlooked point of departure for modernist poetry in English can be found in an old saloon in Sedalia, Missouri. It was at the Maple Leaf Club, on Main Street in that city, at the end of the nineteenth century, that one of the major revolutions in the English language lyric began to stir. It was a revolution that would soon find its way into the body of twentieth English language poetry. It is not quite a story of modernism popping, like a genie, out of a bottle of rye; rather, by urging that we focus our attention on this Saloon, my aim is to focus our attention on an often-reiterated assertion about the relationship between modernism and African American culture. In particular, it is an attempt to unpack the assertion made by Michael North that the voice of modernism "was very largely a black one" (Dialect of Modernism 7). North examines the collaboration between Pablo Picasso and Gertrude Stein, which resulted in the construction of what he calls "Modernism's African Mask" (59-78). He also looks at the "racial masquerade" practiced by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (79-99) in what is an exploration of how these artists used African and African American culture.

I'm proposing that we think about the Maple Leaf saloon as a site, the examination of which can help us understand what happened to the English language lyric in the early part of the twentieth century. In doing so, I want to extend North's assertions somewhat, and ask that we look outside of the strictly literary domain to help explain the demotic turn this poetry made as it became what we now call modernist. Before doing so, however, I want to call attention to what Denis Donoghue identifies as

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one of the unique qualities of the poetic language of American twentieth century poetry. "The modern revolution in such American poems as 'The Waste Land,' 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,' 'Paterson,' 'The Maximus Poems,' and 'The Changing Light at Sandover,'" he writes, "depends on a different sense of life and a different syntax." He adds:

> One's first reading of these poems leaves an impression of their poetic quality as residing in their diction: the animation of the verse arises from the incalculable force of certain individual words or phrases that stay in the mind without necessarily attracting to their orbit the words before or after. The memorable quality of those phrases seems to require a space on all sides. The relations that the words of an American poem enact are not prescribed or predictive but experimental. Around each word is a space or a void in which nothing is anticipated nothing enforced. Every relation must be invented, as if the world had just begun (114).

By calling attention to the diction of these poems, and by suggesting that this diction is particularly American (as opposed to British), Donoghue is observing a quality that is at the heart of my concerns in this chapter. In addition, his calling attention to the phrase as a constitutive element of the poetry is also of interest, because it is important to remember that modern American poets very often use the phrase as a unit of measure in the poetic line. A focus on the phrase can also lead us to consider how important speech rhythms are to American poetry. Phrases, modern speech rhythms, and the "black" voice in modern poetry are widely understood to be distinctive qualities of twentieth century verse in English as practiced in the United States (Olson, "Projective Verse"; Damon,

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Dark End of the Street; Nielsen, Black Chant). What is less understood is how all this came to be. In this chapter, I will explore some implications of North's claims about the "black" voice of modernism.

The Maple Leaf Club serves as a metaphor for an inquiry into lyric poetry and modernism because it is here that some historians locate one of the beginning points of ragtime (Blesh and Janis). Ragtime is our entry point for this inquiry because it focuses my argument that too little attention has been paid to the ways in which the lyrics of ragtime era songs have influenced modernist poetry, and it is the purpose of this chapter to look at that impact. Sedelia, Missouri serves as a fitting location for our reexamination of the rhetoric of early modernist poetry. Its geographic proximity to where several modernist poets spent their childhoods, especially T.S. Eliot (St. Louis), and its site as a crossroads between Ezra Pound's Hadley, Idaho birthplace and his childhood in Pittsburgh give us ground for investigating a question which has rarely been posed in literary studies. What connection can we draw between the emergence of ragtime music, especially ragtime song, and the modernist lyric as developed by American poets in the early 20th century? The question is posed as a kind of thought experiment, the aim of which is to help us understand more fully the idea, as put forward by Donoghue, of the importance, and distinction, of diction in American poetry.

The character of ragtime-era songs is what strikes us, first of all. Edward A. Berlin points out that the major public perception of ragtime music during the early 20th century was mainly perceived by its contemporary public as vocal music, a music of songs (Berlin 5-17). The public perception that ragtime was mainly piano music is a product of the rise of jazz, and especially of the late 20th century rediscovery of the music

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of pianist-composer Scott Joplin. It is with ragtime era song, and with its precursors, however, that we are most concerned here.

Ragtime song emerged at about the same time as that genre of American song associated with the "Tin Pan Alley" type (Hamm 284-325; Wilder 3-28). Indeed, in its earliest days the two forms were often indistinguishable from one another. What made them distinct from earlier forms of the popular song — and what made them distinctly American — were two things: their adherence to spoken diction, and the emergence of the chorus as a distinct, self-contained, element of the song.[1] These developments have a long history, which has only partly been uncovered by music historians. One of the most prominent of these historians, Charles Hamm, locates the beginning of the rise of the verse-chorus form in American popular music as occurring in the 1840s. It came to dominate American song some fifty years later. While the verse-chorus form had become standard by the late 19th century, during the turn to the 20th century an "important difference" arose:

> [T]he "chorus" is given to the solo voice, rather than to a quartet of mixed voices. And the relationship between verse and chorus, in length and importance, has changed: in the majority of these songs, verse and chorus are of equal length, and in some the chorus is longer than the verse. More importantly, the chief melodic material is now in the chorus, not the verse. A person knowing any of these songs from memory, upon being asked to

[1] In what follows, I am using the distinction between "verse" and "chorus" as it is understood by song writers and music historians. The "verse" is the introduction of the song, which usually carries dramatic and scene setting content; the "chorus" is a kind of response to the situation or scene set by the "verse." This form seems to be related to the "call and response" form that emerged from African American sacred music (see Jones, 62).

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> play or sing it, will invariably respond with the music of the chorus, not the verse—and may not even be familiar with the latter. (292)

One of the earliest manifestations of this form in American popular music was in the work of African American songwriter James A. Bland (1854-1911). Bland, whose major work dates from the late 1870s and early 1880s, was an important precursor to the ragtime era, and an important, if now largely overlooked transitional figure. Bland was born a free person. His father, Allen, was "one of the first college-educated blacks in the United States" with a degree from Wilberforce (Jasen and Jones 8); he was a Howard University law graduate and Reconstruction-era Federal appointee, as an examiner at the U.S. Patent Office. James A. Bland dropped out of Howard to pursue a career on the minstrel stage. He was a major influence in popular music for over two decades and on two continents. While living in England in the 1880s, he was known as "The Idol of the Music Halls" (Southern 234). He gave command performances before Queen Victoria, and one of his songs became the official song of the state of Virginia, the only such official song written by an African American.[2]

He traveled to Europe in 1881 with a minstrel troupe and remained there, living mainly in England, for over a decade, dispensing with the blackface makeup of the minstrel shows, and "performing as an elegantly dressed singer-banjoist" (Southern 236). Bland has often been described as trading in racialized and degrading minstrel stereotypes, a charge that has been effectively addressed by William R. Hullfish (Hullfish 1-33). The song that won him fame in Europe was "Oh, Dem Golden Slippers" (1879):

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Oh, my golden slippers am laid away,

Kase I don't 'spect to wear 'em till my weddin' day,

An' my long-tail'd coat, dat I love so well,

I will wear up in de chariot in de morn.

And my long white robe dat I bought las' June,

I'm gwinter get it changed kase it fits too soon,

An' de old gray horse dat I used to drive,

I will hitch up to de chariot in de morn.

(Chorus)

Oh, dem golden slippers!

Oh, dem golden slippers!

Golden slippers I'm gwinter wear,

Because dey look so neat;

Oh, dem golden slippers!

Oh, dem golden slippers!

Golden slippers I'm gwinter wear,

To walk de golden streets.

Oh, my old banjo hangs on de wall

Kase it ain't been tuned since way las' fall

But de darkies all say we will have a good time

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[2] The song, "Carry Me Back to Old Virginia," became a source of heated controversy in the late 1990s. In 1997, the state legislature, ceding to demands by African American constituents who were angry at the

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When we ride up in de chariot in de morn.

Dere's old Brother Ben an' his Sister Luce

Dey will telegraph de news to Uncle 'Bacco Juice

What a great camp meetin' dere will be dat day.

When we ride up in de chariot in de morn.

(Chorus)

Oh, my good-bye, children I will have to go,

Where de rain don't fall and de wind don't blow,

An' you' ulster coats, why, you will not need,

When you ride up in de chariot in de morn.

But de golden slippers mus' be nice an' clean,

And yo' age mus' be jes' sweet sixteen,

And yo' white kid gloves yer will have to wear,

When you ride up in de chariot in de morn.

(Chorus)

(Bland)

Here we have a key point in the transition of the American song lyric from its dependence on its British, Scottish and Irish origins to something more uniquely based in U.S. culture. "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" doesn't quite fit, historically speaking, within the period of Ragtime (roughly1895-1917), but comes from an earlier era just after the Civil War, when black performers were first performing the minstrel shows. Yet formally and aesthetically, some of the features of "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" are of interest for

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song's affectionate references to plantation life, voted to replace the song. See Sacks (187).

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our study of the diction of the American lyric. This is because, structurally, the lyrics to Bland's song prefigure the major innovation, the most important difference, which would characterize, first, the ragtime song of the turn of the twentieth century, and later, the Tin-Pan-Alley song. Both song forms would have decisive impact on the emergence of American modernist poetry.

Perhaps the most important sign of this difference is in the nature of the chorus of "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers." Though written for multiple voices, as was common practice for American songs in the pre-Tin Pan Alley period, the chorus of this song shares a distinguishing feature of the later genre of song. People familiar with this song often demonstrate their knowledge of it by beginning to sing the first phrase of the chorus.[3] The chorus and the verse of the song are both dependent on, and independent of each other; and the chorus can, and often does, stand alone as that part of the song that is most often remembered.

The chorus stands apart from the main body of the song as an independent utterance. It is not necessary to know the rest of the song in order for the chorus to cohere. This is so, despite the context that the verse of the song adds to a dramatic, or narrative understanding of the piece as a whole. The chorus coveys enough of a sensation on its own terms to make it a pleasing verbal object. Among the ways it accomplishes this is by its concentration on the utterance as a means of communication.

In "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers," the first utterance, the title phrase, is a repeated exclamation that claims our attention both for its simplicity of phrasing and for its evocation of an image. The term "golden slippers" contains no dramatic content of its

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own, and the sentence that follows ("Golden slippers Ise gwing to wear, because they look so neat") adds little to any consideration of the chorus as an example of dramatic or narrative content. The thematic content of the chorus, at this stage, is simply that the speaker admires the pair of golden slippers for the sensation provided by their appearance alone. We are reminded, here of Immanuel Kant's idea of the importance of form in generating our understanding of what is beautiful. For Kant, it is the play of figures in space, or the play of sensations, that make a claim for our appreciation, for our sense of beauty (61-62). This claim, which appears to us as a having "merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without purpose, is quite independent of the concept of the good," writes Kant. This idea is useful for the present inquiry in that it allows us to better appreciate the autonomy the chorus of "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" has from its assumed context. For many of those familiar with the song, the theme of the text is less about getting dressed up for a wedding than it is about the aesthetic appreciation, for its own sake, of a pair of slippers.

With these qualities of familiarity, autonomy, individual expression and joyful intonation, the chorus assumes the characteristic of an independent utterance, one that is not contingent on a narrative frame in order to produce the sense of a meaning.[4] And yet, the utterance itself only suggests a meaning. The evocation of pleasure does not derive from the subject of the chorus. The chorus is itself the evocation of pleasure.

Another way of looking at this chorus is to divide it into a pair of utterances that have, as it were, a formulaic quality that encourages memorization. Walter J. Ong,

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[3] This occurred twice in private conversations while I was preparing this chapter. Amina S. Parker (September 4, 2003) while recounting her childhood memory of singing the song, and Rachel Rubin (September 6, 2003) began singing the song as a way of showing her familiarity with it.

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drawing on the work of Milman Parry, has pointed out how such formulaic utterances played an important role in the transition from oral to written culture. Ong discusses Parry's discovery that the Homeric poems are structured in a way that suggests their origin in oral culture. This gives us a clue as to how to think about the relationship between the utterance in American popular song of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the modernist innovations in literary verse during that same period. "Parry's discovery might be put this way," writes Ong. "Virtually every distinctive feature of Homeric poetry is due to the economy forced on it by oral methods of composition" (21). It appeared that Homer, writes Ong, "had some kind of phrase book in his head. Careful study of the sort Milman Parry was doing showed that he repeated formula after formula." Homer, writes Ong, "stitched together fabricated parts" which consisted of phrases garnered from the oral tradition (22). Ong then adds a comment that's quite striking:

> This idea was particularly threatening to far-gone literates. For literates are educated never to use cliches, in principle. How live with the fact that the Homeric poems, more and more, appeared to be made up of clichés, or elements very like clichés? By and large, as Parry's work had proceeded and was carried forward by later scholars, it became evident that only a tiny fraction of the words in the Iliad and the Odyssey were not parts of formulas, and to a degree devastatingly predictable formulas.
>
> (23)

[4] For a discussion of these characteristics of the utterance, see Bakhtin, "The Problem of Speech Genres," 79-81.

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In his study, written in the 1920s, Parry was concerned with the transmigration of the oral epithet into the written verse of Homer. Nearly sixty years later, Ong uses the term "cliché" to characterize these formulaic phrases. The term cliché has come into use in English only in the last century or so. H.W. Fowler identifies the term with the phrase "hackneyed phrases" (602), and the Oxford English Dictionary's earliest citation of the word is from the last decade of the nineteenth century.[5] Cliché is, then, a very modern concept, and according to Anton C. Zijderveld, a term which is intricately bound up with late industrial and postindustrial modernity itself. According to Zijderveld, the distinction between the use of the cliché in traditional literature and speech and its modern use has to do with how the utterance carried meaning. The cliché-like epithet once had a distinct meaning, it had "symbolic vigour and semantic power" (12). The modern cliché, on the other hand, is distinguished by the absence of such vigor and power:

> A cliché is a traditional form of human expression (in words, thoughts, emotions, gestures, acts) which — due to repetitive use in social life — has lost its original, often ingenious heuristic power. Although it fails positively to contribute meaning to social interactions and communication, it does function socially, since it manages to stimulate behavior (cognition, emotion, volition, action), while it avoids reflection on meanings. (10)

This definition, with its emphasis on repetition, avoidance of reflection, and what Zijderveld calls the "supersedure of original meanings by social functions" (10), coincides with our argument about the relationship between the emergence of twentieth century popular song in the United States and the syntactic change identified with

[5] For a discussion of the history of the word "cliché," see Pickrel.

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modernist poetry. This is especially true if we add to the definition cited above two more of Zijderveld's points. The first concerns the autonomy of the cliché. Because they "can be set apart as distinct entities" (15), that is, because of their "reified nature, and because of their repetitiveness, clichés have a tendency to acquire a momentum of their own, i.e., to become relatively autonomous vis-à-vis the individual in society" (16). This autonomy stimulates memory, and is one reason why the most memorable element of modern American songs, the chorus, gradually assumed the character of an autonomous expression, abstracted from its original dramatic or narrative context and meaning.

The second point concerns the idea that the rise of the cliché in modern social life coincides with the decline of the "aura" in art, a decline identified by Walter Benjamin as one of the hallmarks of modernism. For Benjamin, the "aura" is identified with the historical authority and authenticity of the work of art. It is the aura which "withers" in the age of mechanical reproduction (221). The characteristics of this loss of aura concern the loss of distance, uniqueness, and the authority and authenticity of the traditional work of art, a loss occasioned by the subjection of the work of art to mechanical reproducibility. For Benjamin, the prime example of this process is film. The decline of the aura can be likened to the decline of meaning in that form of poetic utterance we are identifying with the word cliché. In "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers," for instance, this decline is reflected in the ambivalence that is attendant to identifying the genre of the song. When it was first published, it was marketed as a minstrel song. However, in the twentieth century, the song has been performed as both a Spiritual (Waller) and as a country western song. In this hybridity of genre the song's original status as a historically situated work of art has been lost.

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By pointing to the aesthetic autonomy of the chorus in "Oh! Dem Golden Slippers" and the relationship of the song's lyrics to the concept of the cliché, I am attempting to locate the "incalculable force of certain individual words or phrases that stay in the mind" that Donoghue says is so characteristic of American poetry. This force was very much a characteristic of the way American song developed as it moved away from its original United Kingdom models. This development occurred as American song adopted, and transformed, the traditions inherited from the minstrel stage and from African American "spirituals" that had their first national (and international) hearing in the decades after the Civil War. The American song would continue to develop in this direction, to the point where the autonomy of the chorus, its existence as an aesthetic "object of sense" in its own right, to use Kant's phrase, would become a dominant characteristic of the genre.

By the turn of the twentieth century the form of the American song had long settled into its introduction-two verse-chorus form; but most importantly, with the rise of ragtime and Tin Pan alley in the 1890s, the chorus had matured into the most important element of the song. The revoltution in song form that Alec Wilder wrote about as having emerged around 1910 could also be seen as the victory of the chorus. Wilder identifies "Some of These Days," a 1910 song by Shelton Brooks as "the landmark song" (14) of the transition era in popular music between the era of turn-of-the-century sentimental songs, and that form generally associated with the heyday of Tin Pan Alley. Brooks, an African American, introduced the song to Sophie Tucker, who sang it throughout her career. Here is the chorus:

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Some of these days, you'll miss me honey.

Some of these days, you'll feel so lonely;

You'll miss my hugging,

You'll miss my kissing,

You'll miss me honey,

When you go away.

I feel so lonely,

For you know honey,

You've always had your way;

And when you leave me,

I'll know you'll grieve me;

You'll miss your little baby;

Yes some of these days.

(Jasen 129-30)

The lyric is composed almost entirely of clichés. It appears to be a set of commonplace utterances strung together, and even though its meaning is apparent, there is no narrative or dramatic context that the lyric fits within. Indeed, its function is not to provide any such context, but to simply be a set of phrases which carry the musical melody. This is the function of the chorus of the early twentieth century American-style popular song, a function which would soon come to dominate much modernist poetry in English as well.

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Let me conclude this discussion with some brief remarks on the use of "Negro dialect" in Bland's song.[6] It is not necessary, here, to rehearse the discussions of the debates around the origins of African American dialect speech, which have been exhaustively covered elsewhere (Dillard 73-138). What is important here is the understanding that Negro dialect (as distinct from the actual speech, or dialect, of African American people) had, by the mid-nineteenth century, had become a literary and theatrical language, whose relationship to actual spoken speech was somewhat arbitrary. The entry of African Americans onto the minstrel stage in the mid-century did not radically alter this situation. In fact, black performers often created exaggerated versions of the racist stereotypes initiated by white minstrels. Nathan Huggins has speculated on the reasons for this, suggesting that this was an attempt to empty the stereotypes of their racist content:

> Some black performers attempted to achieve the distance between the stage character and themselves by the very extremities of the exaggeration. Grotesques, themselves, could allow black men, as they did white men, the assurance that the foolishness on stage was not them. (258)

This "grotesque" took place at the level of language, as well, with the appropriation by black minstrels of the white minstrel's Negro dialect speech. The relationship between the stage dialect and the actual speech it was supposed to represent is a matter of debate (Huggins, Redding), but, as William J. Mahar argues, there is some basis for supposing that the stage dialect reflected an attempt to imitate real speech. It is

[6] I place the term "Negro dialect" between quotation marks, here, to distinguish it from spoken speech and to point to its character as a stage and literary form. All other uses of the term in this study should be

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in any case true, as Gavin Jones shows, that Negro dialect was among the most popular of the many ethnic dialects used on the minstrel and vaudeville stage. Whatever the relationship between black speech and minstrel speech, the rise of the black minstrel troupes in the latter decades of the nineteenth century added something to the linguistic veracity of minstrelsy.

In addition, use of Negro dialect by performing artists became something more than reflection, something in addition to mimesis. As representation, dialect performers often saw themselves as paying tribute to a despised caste; or they saw themselves (especially after the Civil War) as reflecting a past that was rapidly slipping from memory. At the same time, however, the use of dialect reflected an additional impulse. It was an attempt to create verbal art out of a language that more closely resembled contemporary spoken dialect, and which at the same time sought to fragmentize and, to use a term that Frederick Karl uses in relationship to Stéphane Mallarmé, to "decreate" ordinary language. This attempt to recreate an authentic speech through the use of what was, after all, primarily a theatrical convention was a major feature of literary discourse as well. It was not only a major characteristic of American fiction, in particular with its use by Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris and others, but by poets as well. Although African American poets do not seem to have used dialect in their verse until the 1870s (that is, after the emergence of black minstrel performers on the American stage), their use of it did not seem to be very different in character than the use of dialect by white writers (Sherman xxviii-xxix). Paul Laurence Dunbar is the most famous African American poet of the period to have written in dialect. Though Dunbar himself was not, strictly speaking, a modernist poet, an examination of his work can reveal several points

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understood as signifying this meaning.

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of transition toward modernism, points which, I will argue, have been virtually ignored in the critical literature on this poet.

2

Few readers seem to evaluate the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar in terms that privilege its aesthetic content. Critics have often followed Sterling Brown in classing Dunbar as an imitative poet, indebted to Thomas Nelson Page, Irwin Russell, or James Whitcomb Riley (Brown 32). Even as sympathetic a reader as J. Saunders Redding follows the general line of opinion that divides Dunbar's work along lines of qualitative evaluation, judging his dialect poems to be better than his poems written in "standard" English: "Though certain of his pure English lines are frequently quoted," writes Redding, "in general they are overlooked; not because they are poor, but because they do not distinguish him from dozens of other poets" (67). The fact that Redding excludes nearly a dozen of Dunbar's "pure English" poems from this criticism doesn't lessen that criticism's impact. Each of these critics judges Dunbar's work by the standards of a succeeding generation. By lumping him with the sentimental popularizers of Dunbar's day, these later critics also seem to be enacting, from within the precincts of black literature, the general modernist rejection of the verse of the late nineteenth century.

Later critics are no less involved in seeing Dunbar's poetry primarily from the standpoint of its presumed limitations. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. invokes the standards not only of the New Negro rejection of the Negro dialect convention (Gates, Figures in Black, 167-187), but also those of African American authenticity derived from the

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aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement of the last quarter of the twentieth century. Gates suggests that what is ultimately at stake in Dunbar's poetry is the debate over "the absence and presence of the black voice in the text" (Signifying Monkey, 174). At the same time, Houston A. Baker, Jr., finds that "Dunbar offered the example par excellence of a tragic hemming in of Afro American *artistic* aspiration" (39, emphasis in original). This example offered by the poet, Baker suggests, is due to Dunbar's facility in using standard, inherited forms to enact a strategy of concealment and subversion of stereotypes. But in the end, Baker judges Dunbar, as a poet at least, as "naïve, politically innocent, or simply 'spoiled'" (40). One major source for these opinions can be found in the writings of the poet himself, and in reminiscences of friends, acquaintances, and even from those who were connected, if only distantly, with Dunbar's circle. Dunbar is said, by James Weldon Johnson, to have disliked being pigeonholed into writing dialect verse. "I didn't start as a dialect poet," he told Johnson. "I simply came to the conclusion that I could write it as well, if not better, than anybody else I knew of, and that by doing so I could gain a hearing. I gained the hearing, and now they don't want me to write anything but dialect" (Along This Way 160). This sentiment is reinforced, in many commentators' minds, by the following lines of Dunbar:

> He sang of love, when earth was young,
> And Love, itself, was in his lays.
> But ah, the world, it turned to praise
> A jingle in a broken tongue.
>
> (Life and Works, 275)

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Before beginning any aesthetic consideration of Dunbar's poetry, then, we must acknowledge the absolutely terrifying circumstances under which the poet lived and worked, and the toll they took on him. We must also acknowledge the profound existential dilemma this produced, which is reflected in the work itself. The period during which Dunbar worked and published his major works (1895-1906) was coincident with the period that Rayford Logan terms the "nadir" of African American life.[7] Over 1,200 black people were lynched in the United States during the decade 1890-1900. In 1896, the year the poet's first major publication, Lyrics of Lowly Life appeared, the United States Supreme Court decided Plessy vs Ferguson, the case which codified legal racial segregation (Aptheker 792; Statistical History 218; Sundquist, 225-270).[8] This period of extreme racism and terrorism against the African American population placed an artist like Dunbar under extraordinary pressures. Though he was a popular artist who read his poems in "literary concerts" before both black and white (though rarely before mixed) audiences, the consequences of that popularity took an emotional toll. In a speech given at a literary conference organized to celebrate Dunbar's centenary, J. Saunders Redding repeated an anecdote he heard from the poet's widow, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, who was a family friend and one of Redding's childhood schoolteachers. The story tells of a public reading the poet gave before an audience of wealthy white people:

> After one such literary concert in Newport, Rhode Island, a staid and imperiously aristocratic white lady rose while the all white audience was still applauding, waited for silence and said, 'Paul' — she had never seen him before much less met him — 'Paul,' she said, in a most

[7] See Logan (1954; 1997).
[8] On lynching, see Litwack; Patterson gives an insightful analysis of the symbolism behind the practice.

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> complimentary and gratified tone, 'I shall never again wax impatient and cross at the childish antics of my servants, members of your race. Tonight, you have made me understand and love them.' Following this remark, the applause was resumed more enthusiastically than before, and Paul Dunbar fled through a side door to an anteroom where his wife waited. There he dropped to his knees before her, buried his head in her lap, and wept convulsively.
>
> ("Reminiscence," 42)

It is no wonder, then, why readers of Dunbar's poetry have such difficulties reading the work in a way that privileges its aesthetic value. It is as if Karl Marx's comment, about how the "tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living" (Eighteenth Brumaire 15) could serve as an allegorical signifier of the wall that seems to stand between the poet and his readers. The problem can also be seen from another point of view. It is, in a sense, the wall that stands between Dunbar's own remark, about the audience which only praises a "jingle in a broken tongue," and the manifestation of such praise in the Newport literary concert.

This problem of reading plagues approaches to Dunbar and his poetry because readers are often driven, given the historical circumstances in which the artist worked, toward making the poems into what Theodor Adorno calls "objects with which to demonstrate sociological theses" (37). Adorno's attempt to lead us out of such a circumstance may be helpful to us in reading the poems of Dunbar.

For Adorno, the significance of lyric poetry lies with the supposition that the lyric poem "hopes to attain universality through unrestrained individuation" (38). However,

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the lyric poem's universality is social in nature. The fact that it speaks with an individualized voice is itself an act which posits itself against society, but in a way that reveals its own contradictory nature: "even the solitariness of lyrical language itself," Adorno writes, "is prescribed by an individualistic and ultimately atomistic society, just as conversely its general cogency depends on the intensity of its individuation" (38). The discovery of this intensity, Adorno suggests, must lie outside a consideration that limits itself to "the so-called social perspective or the social interests of the works or their authors" (38):

> Instead, it must discover how the entirety of a society, conceived as an internally contradictory unity, is manifested in the work of art, in what way the work of art remains subject to society and in what way it transcends it. In philosophical terms, the approach must be an immanent one. Social concepts should not be applied to the work of art from without but rather drawn from an exacting examination of the works themselves. (39)

If it sounds as if Adorno is advocating a kind of New Critical approach, it should be noted that what is at stake here is the discovery of how the work of art functions as both an "internally contradictory unity" but also how it functions aesthetically. Adorno is, perhaps, less explicit about this as he might be; his concern, however, is with developing a means of social interpretation that bases itself on keen attention to the lyric poem's aesthetic qualities:

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> [N]othing that is not in the works, not part of their own form, can legitimate a determination of what their substance, that which has entered into their poetry, represents in social terms.
>
> (39)

To extend Adorno's point somewhat, we can say that it is within the poem itself that we can find the source of its transcendence. The poem is not simply a reflection of protest against a society that would stamp out its presumably utopian aspirations; it is a work that enacts, as it were, the act of protest itself by the operation of its very structure as a lyric work. It accomplishes this by the way it operates upon, and, in a sense, challenges our normative view of how language produces meaning, as well as the very meanings produced by poetic language.

> [T]he lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself.
>
> (43)

There are objections to Adorno's sweeping generalizations. We could say, along with John Brenkman, that discovering the veracity of these claims depends not on general assertions, but must rest on the individual examination of individual poems (Brenkman 108-111). This is a welcome and necessary caution, apparently aimed at guiding readers toward a more exacting and fruitful reading of the poems at hand. I would question whether the "accord" Adorno writes about is even possible; whether one of the tensions which gives the lyric poem — and especially the Romantic and post-Romantic lyric

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poem — its power is precisely the *inability* of the lyric subject to reach a successful "accord with language itself." These reservations do not detract from our ability to use Adorno's insights to help us approach Dunbar's poetry. Even Adorno's provocative idea that lyric poetry is most deeply grounded in society "when it communicates nothing," can be extremely helpful in showing us what is at stake in a body of poetry such as that of Dunbar, which, presumably, draws its power from what readers have come to believe the poetry communicates.

No one seems to have paid more attention to the pessimism in the work of Dunbar more than has Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. Dunbar's best poems, writes Bruce, "were distinguished by their pessimism and by a sense of ambiguity that was equally uncommon in black writing" (79). In his thoroughgoing and penetrating reading of the poetry, Bruce portrays Dunbar as a poet whose scepticism and pessimism provide major themes for his work. He points out how this is particularly true of Dunbar's poems on religious themes. "In many of his poems," writes Bruce "scepticism is stronger than piety" (80), and, he adds:

> Although Dunbar was, in many ways, a sentimental poet in standard English, his writings often showed a studied rejection of the bases of sentiment found in earlier black writing.
>
> (81)

Bruce is right to point out that the scepticism in Dunbar's work distinguishes it from earlier African American poetry. It should be noted that these features also distinguish him from his generally accepted influences, Riley and Russell, as well. At the same time, it should be noted that both Edgar Allen Poe and, possibly, William Blake

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were important to Dunbar, according to at least one of his biographers (Cunningham 66).[9] However, when Bruce searches for the sources of this pessimism, he goes outside the poems themselves, and cites the poet's marital problems and the historical situation of the poet's times. While these circumstances were no doubt influential for the poet, depending on them for an explanation of the poetry's power is ultimately unsatisfying, not necessarily because they are wrong, but because, I would argue, they are incomplete.

An examination of Dunbar's poetry will reveal a rich element that has heretofore been missing in our thinking about the pre-modernist history of American poetry. Dunbar can best be seen not only as the most important Black American poet of the turn of the twentieth century, but it also appears that Dunbar's poetics contained elements of a style which bore some similarities to the poetics which were associated, in other contexts, with the term Decadence and the Symbolist aesthetic. I argue, further, that what Bruce calls Dunbar's pessimism reflects a kind of emptying out of language that can be found in the poet's work; that what gives his work at least some of its power is that it, to use Adorno's words, "communicates nothing." Put another way, his poetry, especially to the degree that his diction argues with itself, tends toward a kind of fetishization of language, toward a dependence on clichés. This is true in both his "true" English as well as in his dialect poems, though it may be more apparent in the latter. In considering these aspects of Dunbar's poetry, it must be kept in mind that he was not only a man of letters, but also a writer of librettos for the Broadway stage. His collaborations with Will Marion Cook on such Broadway productions as <u>The Casino Girl</u> (1900) and In <u>Dahomey</u> (1902) place

[9] Cunningham writes that Dunbar would recite Poe at public literary gatherings. Bruce (79) cites echoes of Blake in Dunbar's poetry.

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Dunbar at the center of the transformations taking place in American lyric song as well as poetry.

Controversy over Dunbar's dialect verse has dogged the poet's reputation from the beginning. Dickson D. Bruce has amply demonstrated that the poet's dialect verse was popular with African American readers during Dunbar's lifetime ("On Dunbar's 'Jingles'"), yet modern readers are mostly familiar with James Weldon Johnson's criticism as it appears in The Book of American Negro Poetry, which takes to task the (by then) older generation's tradition of dialect verse.

An examination that looks beyond humor and pathos, the "two stops" of Johnson's complaint, however, can see why the dialect poems resonated so well with contemporary African American as well as white audiences. Despite his misgivings about the form, Dunbar himself knew that he wrote dialect poetry better than any of his contemporaries; and though these works comprise only about a third of his published poems, they contain some of his most intriguing work. In addition, Dunbar seems to have been aware, as Marcellus Blount suggests, of how his use of vernacular dialect "could serve to subvert the constraints of literary convention." "In writing in the vernacular, black poets like Dunbar donned their stereotypical guises as a way of deceiving white audiences," writes Blount. He adds that Dunbar "challenged his audience's assumptions by revealing that the use of such language, depending on the rhetorical and ideological contexts, could be liberating" (586). Blount demonstrates this liberating effect with a subtle reading of one of Dunbar's most famous vernacular poems, "An Ante-bellum Sermon" (Dunbar, Collected Poetry 13-15), in which he shows how the poem "is self-consciously angled and refracted as Dunbar risks rhetorical instability." The poem,

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Blount adds, "performs the devious agenda of African American cultural practices" (590, emphasis in original) while it invites us to think and theorize about the practices of African American poetry. Blount roots his reading of "An Ante-bellum Sermon" in a historical interpretation of the sermons of slave preachers, and is able to provide some rich insight into the poet's use of African American vernacular dialect.

There is, however, an additional means we can use to see how Dunbar, in his vernacular dialect verse, performs this agenda, and that is by reminding ourselves of what I have been suggesting are rhetorical affinities in Dunbar's verse with the language we've come to associate with the symbolist aesthetic. In two of his best-known dialect poems, "The Deserted Plantation" (Lyrics of Lowly Life 158-160) and "When Malindy Sings" (Lyrics of Lowly Life 195-199), he employs some of these subversive strategies to great effect, through a use of language which, while coming from within the nostalgic-plantation tradition, transcends that tradition with an almost-modern poetics. In "The Deserted Plantation," the speaker introduces us to a barren, empty place whose former natural and human abundance is signified by the marshalling of a rhetoric of absence:

> In de furrers whah de co'n was allus wavin',
> Now de weeds is growin' green an' rank an'
> tall;
> An de swallers roun' de whole place is a-bravin'
> Lak dey thought deir folks had allus owned it
> all.
>
> (Lyrics 159)

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This rhetoric is contrasted only by nature, including birds (swallows and whippoorwills), and the voice of the speaker, who is describing the scene. The poem opens as a catalogue of absence: an empty house, a barn without a carriage or driver, a (musician-less) banjo, and the lack of a singer to accompany it. All that's left is the natural world, which the speaker describes wearily:

> But de murmur of a branch's passin' waters
>
> Is de only soun' dat breaks de stillness dere.
>
> (159)

At this point it may be tempting to read this as a catalogue of nostalgia, but the speaker gives us little ground for that assumption. The voice's description is without affect, even when describing the banjo and hymns that no longer inhabit the scene. The speaker describes a "rustin" hoe, a plow that's "a-tumblin down" in the field, a house without "a blessed soul," and despite the prominent place of the banjo in the scene, "D' ain't a hymn ner co'n-song ringin' in de/air" (158-59). All that's left is the sound of the waters. Even the change of mood in the poem pronounced by the next stanza fails to fully counteract the world-weariness of the speaker's voice. At this point it becomes clear that the poem has been deploying clichés all along to create its mood. Through a series of interjections posed as rhetorical questions, the speaker leads the reader through a second catalogue, this time through a group of racially stereotypical tropes:

> Whah's de da'kies, dem dat used to be a-dancin'
>
> Evry night befo' de ole cabin do'?
>
> (159)

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These lines, with their alternating syllabic stresses, seem to dance, performing the function of enacting the very racially charged stereotypes they signify; but in the hands of Dunbar, they also reveal the emptiness of the gesture, as the series of questions resolve themselves into an exclamation which brings us back to the significance of the poem's title: "Gone! not one o' dem is lef to tell de story" (160).

The speaker tells us that all the inhabitants of the plantation — ex-slaves as well as ex-slave masters — have abandoned the place "to de swallers." All that's left is the speaker, "a lover till de las'," who will tend to and live on the land. But the focal point of the poem is the evacuation of all other human inhabitants from the premises, its subsequent deterioration, and the fact that this evacuation is being told by a speaker who is left with a language devoid of any productive meaning other than to perform its own absence. It is, in a word, the language of clichés.

Dunbar also used the language of clichés and their deployment in lyric art in his work in the Broadway theater. The lyrics he wrote for the shows conducted by Will Marion Cook were full of clichés, and the strategies he used there were similar to those he had been using in his poetry. Lyrics such as those from "Down de Love's Lane," a song Dunbar wrote for Cook's The Casino Girl (1900) show just how familiar Dunbar became with the use of the cliché. The song was labeled a "Plantation Croon":

> Summer night an' sighin' breeze,
>
> Long de Lover's Lane —
>
>
> Friendly, shadder-makin' trees,
>
> Long de Lover's Lane —

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White fo'ks wu'k all done up gran',

Me an' Mandy han' in han',

Struttin' lak we owned de lan',

Long de Lover's Lane.

(Riis, <u>More than Just Minstrel Shows</u> 24-25)

Here the cliché is deployed liberally, and to great effect. Narrative is virtually suppressed, and we are left with little more than a series of images. The song is, in sense, a satire on the "coon" song. This evacuation of meaning in lyric language in favor of one consisting of impressions, symbols and images would, as the twentieth century progressed, become a commonplace in poetry. Here we see a prescient presentation of these concerns in a vaudeville song (though, significantly, in the verse, not the chorus) written by a literary poet.

In "When Malindy Sings," a poem published a few years earlier, Dunbar posed a set of questions about the relationship of the emergent, free African American culture to the larger one. In that poem, the poet asserts the contents of the challenge posed to the "majority" culture by the "minority" one:

G'way an' quit dat noise, Miss

Lucy—

Put dat music book away;

What's de use to keep on tryin'?

Ef you practise twell you're

gray,

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You cain't sta't no notes a-flyin
  Lak de ones dat rants and rings
F'om de kitchen to de big woods
  When Malindy sings.

(Collected Poetry 82)

Throughout the poem, music as written text is contrasted to music as human expression, with the songs of Malindy clearly having the upper hand. Indeed, to push the point, the poem's speaker extols Malindy's supremacy over the music-making capacities of both humans and nature:

Fiddlin' man jes' stop his fiddlin,
  Lay his fiddle on de she'f;
Mockin'-bird quit tryin' to whistle,
  'Cause he jes' so shamed hisse'f.
Folks a-playin' on de banjo
  Draps dey fingas on de
      strings—
Bless yo' soul—fu'gits to move em,
  When Malindy sings.

(82)

Though both the fiddle and the banjo would remain staples in African American music for another two generations, they were already being identified with the ideologically contested ground of the minstrel stage and its purported antecedent, the plantation entertainers.

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If in the nineteenth century, African American music would be most closely identified with minstrelsy and with instruments like the fiddle and the banjo, the twentieth century would become the era when American culture would be dominated by African American vocal music. The song Malindy is identified as singing at the end of the poem, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," would first come to international prominence in the 1870s and 1880s with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. It is also a song that could be said to presage the dominance of the music of Malindy's heirs in U.S., and world, musical culture over the next century.

The poem also thematizes the birth of the Ragtime-Tin Pan Alley era in American music history. It is a history that I have been attempting to explore throughout this chapter in terms of its relationship to the emergence among American poets in the first years of the twentieth century of that new type of poetic lyric identified with the term modernist. Dunbar was, I have attempted to demonstrate, a significant forerunner of modernism, in particular because of the self-reflexivity and symbolic heft of his language, particularly in its deployment of the cliché. He was the only major American poet to have participated as a full-fledged professional artist in both the emergent American musical theater and in the international world of letters. That he was a figure of international renown can be demonstrated by his 1897 trip to London, where he read "When Malindy Sings" and other poems at the Southplace Institute (Wiggins 67-68), lived with Alexander Crummell, and met Henry Morton Stanley and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the latter of whom set some of Dunbar's poems to music (Cunningham 159-171). This trip of Dunbar's has received far too little attention in the available scholarship on

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the poet, and deserves much more detailed study, especially in light of the aesthetic concerns I have been attempting to trace in this chapter.

Let's continue our inquiry into Dunbar's poetry with "The Poet," the poem quoted earlier. Here it is in full:

> He sang of life, serenely sweet,
> With, now and then, a darker note.
> From some high peak, nigh yet remote,
> He voiced the world's absorbing beat.
>
> He sang of love, when earth was young,
> And Love, itself, was in his lays.
> But ah, the world, it turned to praise
> A jingle in a broken tongue.
>
> (Life and Works 275)[10]

In this poem, in diction and meters reminiscent of Houseman, Dunbar deploys clichés throughout. The language appears almost opaque, until we reach the wholly original last line, which compels us to read back into the poem to unravel its meaning and significance. In the phrases that open the poem, we are presented with the speaker's alienation, as he speaks of himself in the third person; and the phrases themselves seem hackneyed, but with a hint of obscurity, and of despair. The speaker is aloof from the world. The language is itself remote, the nouns lacking in specificity, the tone in the past

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tense and in the passive voice. It seems as if the poet is alienated from his own poem. The second quatrain mirrors the first, with the same qualities of distance, alienation, weariness, discontent, and even boredom. The projection into the eternal past of the speaker ("He sang of love, when earth was/young") has the effect of sharpening the distance of the speaker from his own voice, from his own presence. The vagueness communicated in the first quatrain is due to the dominance there of adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and the three word interjection ("now and then"), which together make up half the stanza. This burden of vagueness is only slightly relieved in the second stanza, which, in almost mirror-like fashion to the first, is dominated by nouns, verbs and pronouns. The formulaic phrases ("He sang of life"; "He sang of love, when earth was young") only add to the weariness evoked by the poem. While he speaks of his attempts to win the world's favor through the time-honored themes of poetry, he is also a speaker whose poem is about the exhaustion of poetry itself, even as it contains a complaint about the world's refusal of the poet's work.

What makes the poem's last line so remarkable is the way it seems to refer to both the song — the one outside the poem itself — which the world "turned to praise," as well as to the present poem. The key to this understanding is a consideration of the word "jingle." Among the definitions given by the Oxford English Dictionary are "any arrangement of words intended to have a pleasing or striking sound without regard to sense," and "a short verse or song in a radio or television commercial or in general

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[10] There is no satisfactory critical edition of Dunbar's poetry. The same poem may differ in its line breaks in each of the texts used in this chapter. I am using selections from each of the texts listed in the bibliography according to how the chosen poem best fits the discussion at hand.

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advertising." The poem appears to use the word in both senses.[11] The word, here, signifies nonsense, empty expression, just as the poem enacts a series of empty expressions, a series of aporia, to signify upon itself. The poem doubles back on itself, as it were, in an almost mirror-like manner. This is a rhetoric that's not inconsistent with the symbolist aesthetic. "The symbolist imagination consistently employs the mirror as an icon for the ambivalence of existence, because of its mysterious betrayal of uncertainty in what is perceived and the strangeness of its shadowed world," writes Margaret Stoljar (364). While "The Poet" does not explicitly use mirror imagery, the poem's rhetoric is in a self-reflective mode, with such self-reflexivity being named as the subject of poetry as such ("And Love, itself"). The self-reflexivity and ambivalence of "The Poet" can serve, then, as a useful beginning of our exploration of the affinities between Dunbar's poetry and that of the poetic avant- of the late 19th century.

It is at this point that we should clarify some terms. Having introduced the term "symbolism," and having attempted to read Dunbar as a poet who worked with a poetics that at least had some affinities with those poets associated with the term, I would like to pause to consider some further characteristics of the style I am attempting to identify. This is not as simple as it may at first appear. The terms "decadence" and "symbolism" have come to be identified, in literary studies, with certain sets of historical coteries of artists, each identified with a set of (mainly European) nations or nationalities, with a poetics tied to a certain set of historical figures, and, perhaps only secondarily, to a means of making poetry. Once one begins to examine the poetics of this late nineteenth century poetic avant-, however, the possibilities of reading a poet like Dunbar in new ways open

[11] It should be remembered that the poem appeared during the earliest days of mass advertising, before radio and television, to be sure, but certainly during the time when advertisements using songs began to

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up tremendously. A detailed exegesis of symbolism would be out of place here, but a brief statement of the style's central aesthetic problem, as given by Paul de Man, would be useful:

> The symbolist poet starts from the acute awareness of an essential separation between his own being and the being of whatever is not himself: the world of natural objects, of other human beings, society, or God. He lives in a world that has been split and in which his consciousness is pitted, as it were, against its object in an attempt to seize something that it is unable to reach. In terms of poetic language — which as an agent of consciousness is on the side of the subject (or poet) — this means that he is no longer close enough to things to name them as what they are, that the light and the grass and the skies that appear in his poems remain essentially other than actual light or grass or sky. The word, the logos, no longer coincides with the universe but merely reaches out for it in a language that, in other words, is *merely* a symbol.
>
> (150, emphasis in original)

It is from this standpoint that we get the vagueness, aporia, and ritualization of language whose most telling residue is the cliché, the split between the subject and the objects in the real world that appear in the poet's verse, and the poetry's weary acceptance of a state of affairs that cannot be changed, a weariness that often appears as a nostalgia for an imagined past, and perfect, world. The exemplary poet in English in this regard is William Butler Yeats. The language and the style, however, have become so normalized as features of modern poetry that their distinctiveness is often overlooked, in

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appear as part of popular culture.

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particular in poets whose value is assumed to reside not so much in their style as in their presumed "message." This split in consciousness described by de Man and which manifests itself in the way objects are treated in symbolist poetry is a central feature of some of Dunbar's best poems. It is not only the existence of this split that figures in the poetry, but the set of choices the poet makes with regard to this split is an important feature of this style as well. In de Man's view, the symbolist poet chooses either to maintain the split through the use of metaphor, or to make the language itself an objective, malleable thing. In this latter alternative, one pursued by Mallarmé, language reflects the "ambiguity" of being. It is "handled very much as if it were an object, with considerable attention given to its objective qualities of sound, visual appearance, and form" (159). Elsewhere, de Man writes about how symbolism "transfers attributes of consciousness onto the natural object" (Rhetoric of Romanticism 154), as a means of attempting to achieve the unity of subject and object.

These problems become apparent in the verse of Dunbar when we consider some of his best-known poetry. "We Wear the Mask" is a poem that is familiar to all readers of Dunbar's poetry.

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes, —
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.
> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?

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Nay, let them only see us, while

We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!

(Collected Poetry 71)

In comments already alluded to here, Houston A. Baker, Jr. considers that this poem reveals Dunbar's naiveté:

> Rather than recognize that the black soul's eternal indebtedness is a result of white guile, the speaker accepts an indebtedness to 'guile' as a force—not unlike a cosmic spirit making life bearable—that enables stoicism. In other words, it is as though Dunbar's speaker plays the masking game without an awareness of its status as a game. It seems that he does not adopt masking as self-conscious gamesmanship in opposition to the game white America has run on him. And he surely does not have as one of his goals the general progress of the Afro-American populace.
>
> (39)

Baker is here concerned with Dunbar as a historic figure, and with his poem as an expression of a historical condition. This is fair enough, if one decides, as Baker has

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done, to place the poem within a racialized discursive frame that can only be supported by referring to historical and biographical circumstances that exist outside the poem, but which are not referred to directly by the poem at all.

The poem is a rondeau, a style of verse that comes from medieval French prosody (Turco 239-40). Dunbar's use of this classic form seems suggestive, given the poetics he develops here. The form was first brought to English prosody by Sir Thomas Wyatt, and, far from echoing William Ernest Henley, as Baker suggests, "We Wear the Mask" seems to be a rewriting and recasting of one of Wyatt's Egerton manuscript poems ("What vaileth trouth? or, by it, to take payn?") (Wyatt 3).[12] That Dunbar chose to use this form, and perhaps this poem, for his model can be seen as a deliberate rhetorical strategy, aimed at placing himself face to face with his nemesis, human guile, as an equal; and facing his opponent from the standpoint of one who, like that nemesis, is rooted in the very culture whose language they share. The mention of guile, here, is a direct echo of Wyatt. Here is the last stanza of the poem, from the edition edited by Kenneth Muir:

> Deceved is he by crafty trayn
> That meaneth no gile: and doth remayn
> Within the trappe, withoute redresse
> But for to love, lo, such a mistresse,
> Whose crueltie nothing can refrayn.
> What vaileth trouth?
>
> (4)

[12] Dunbar could have seen Wyatt's poem. The most recent edition of Wyatt's poems then available was probably the Aldine edtion of 1866. Tottlel's Miscellany, where the poem first appeared, was also in print in the United States at that time, in editions published in 1854 (Little, Brown) and 1870 (Houghton, Mifflin). I am indebted to James Smethurst for this information.

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What is interesting, given this context, is how Dunbar modernizes the poem. The refrain, which is repeated twice within the poem (as befits the rondeau style), begins with the nominative plural personal pronoun, which does not specify any body of persons as its referent. The line appears at least as much involved in performing a function as it is involved in conveying meaning. It seems that the function of "we" is only to refer to the action of wearing the mask; the vagueness of the pronoun seems aimed at drawing our attention not to the wearer, but to the mask. The immediacy of the polarity set up between subject and object here is striking. The mask is introduced as the possession of the subject, but as soon as it is introduced, it assumes another character; it assumes an aspect of consciousness: ("We wear the mask that grins and lies"). The mask is introduced not merely as a metaphor, but as a conduit of language as well as gesture. As the poem proceeds, the polarity between subject and object and between self and mask become relationships of identity. It is no longer certain where the self ends and the mask begins:

> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
> And mouth with myriad subtleties.

The poem oscillates between polarity and identity of subject and object, and it is this oscillation which gives the poem its tension. In the final lines, the speaker has surrendered to a tragic condition, that of having to remain behind the mask. But the last lines reveal something unusual about the mask. It is that the world is unaware that the speaker and those for whom he is speaking are even wearing a mask. While it is certainly valid to read the passage from which the lines quoted above are taken as having to do with specific historical circumstances — the "guile" which brought about the "nadir" of African American life — it is hard to escape the astonishing fact that the mask presented

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here consists of gesture and language; through gesture and language this mask hides not only the self, but also hides the fact that it is, indeed, a mask. At the same time, it is clear that the speaker is aware not only that he is wearing a mask, but he is also aware of the functions the mask is being deployed to perform. The speaker is aware that he is deploying mask as a performative object — an inanimate object imbued with consciousness — and this self-consciousness makes the poem more than simply a lyric deploying a symbol which is chiefly representational. By the time the refrain containing the word "mask" is repeated a third time, it, the line in which it is embedded has already become a cliché, and is being self-consciously articulated as such.

The issue of language and its constitutive capacity is a concern that runs throughout Dunbar's poetry, existing as an element of his dialect poetry just as strongly as it exists in a poem like "We Wear the Mask." All the other elements I've attempted to identify here in the "pure" English poems — the use of the cliché, the emptying out of language, the self-conscious use of the symbol, and the anxious gap between subject and object — also appear in Dunbar's dialect poetry. In the dialect poems, however, readers too often find difficulty in seeing the distinctive aesthetic elements at work; these elements exist in both styles, however, and are among the characteristics that make Dunbar's work a precursor to the linguistic concerns that modernist poets would take up in earnest just a few years after his death. That Dunbar's voice would not be a stranger to modern sensibilities can be seen in the way some of his poems continued to be a source for creative artists; in 1960, Abbey Lincoln would record a modern jazz version of "When Malindy Sings," on a record that included a song with lyrics written by Langston Hughes (Lincoln). This fact, and the argument made here, can be taken as suggestive of

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Dunbar's importance to the linkage between the revolution in poetic language and the African American Imaginary, that was an important, if overlooked, part of the genealogy of modernism.

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Chapter Three

Minstrel

1

It is useful, at this stage of the discussion, to remind ourselves of the characteristics of laughter, as understood by Mikhail Bakhtin: its universality, "its indissoluble and essential relation to freedom" (89) and its "relation to the people's unofficial truth" (90). The heyday of modernist culture in the 1920s was also the heyday of the silent film comedy, exemplified by the movies of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton. Walter Benjamin offers the comment that Chaplin accomplished "in a more natural way" the same reaction in audiences that the Dadaists desired (250); but his examination of the rise of film and its relationship to the artistic enterprise does not offer an assessment of Chaplin's comedic art, or of comedic art as such. The comment nevertheless remains an important one, if only because the linkage he draws between Dadaism and Chaplin's art allows us to glimpse just how important the comedic is to the modernist enterprise.

To consider the importance of the comedic to modernism is, in a sense, to reconsider the relationship of popular culture to modernist aesthetics, seeing the former in a filial, rather than a competitive relationship to the latter. This runs the risk of prompting a further reconsideration, one which has been a theme throughout this study, that is, once the relationship of popular culture to modernist aesthetics is repositioned, then the further question of the relationship between African American culture and modernism comes to the fore. That's because the relationship, within African American culture, between these

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two poles is not as clear-cut as some modernist criticism has postulated for the aesthetic creations of the majority culture. To raise the question of the comedic also allows for consideration of another question, that of the relationship between modernism and African American culture as such; and to consider this relationship is at the same time to ask questions about how modernism came to have its particular "modern" caste. How do we recognize a work as "modernist?" One way of answering this question is to resort to the categories of radical subjectivity, multiple perspective, discontinuity, and so on (Everdell 346-360). As much as these categories may explain, or be used as signs that point to modernism, there is much they don't explain. Once the question of the comedic is posed, for instance, it is possible to inquire into other sources of modernist consciousness, into the shared cultural history and consciousness of modern society, and not only into the art of Chaplin, but into the sources of that art, such as American minstrelsy.

One of the characteristics of late minstrelsy and early vaudeville, as African American artists performed it, was the use of humor as a means of conveying this "unofficial truth." To do so, the old minstrel stereotypes had to be transformed and imbued with a new agency, one that embodied a distinctly modern form of humor which emerged in the twentieth century, one in which agency and self-consciousness combined with the parodic to produce a new kind of comic hero.

To search for this comic hero of a new type involves a discussion about pairs, twins, doubleness, illusion, parody, minstrels, and tramps. It involves an inquiry into how this comedic type emerged in American comedy in the early years of the twentieth century in the work of the African American comedian Bert Williams. Williams first

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came to prominence, in 1898, as one half of a comedy team, Williams and Walker. His teammate, George Walker, left the stage in 1908, after contracting tuberculosis, and died in 1911, one year after Williams joined the Ziegfeld Follies. Williams was the only African American star of this musical review, which also starred such comedians and singers as Eddie Cantor, W.C. Fields, and Sophie Tucker (Riis, Just Before Jazz 43-47).

This exploration will also involve a look at some affinities between the characters in Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett, and some of the characters and characteristics of American, and particularly African American, minstrelsy and vaudeville. While I don't seek to make claims about influence and causality between African American vaudeville, on the one hand, and Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, and The Boy on the other, I am interested in seeking out affinities. In particular, I want to explore the question of familiarity: how is it that we recognize the characters in Godot so readily? At the same time, what is distinct about these comic clowns? Part of the answer has to do with the contributions Williams made to modernizing the tramp, or the vagrant, as a comic figure.

Part of what is involved here is a further exploration of the role of the African American Imaginary in the construction of the modernist imagination. If such affinities can be seen in earlier manifestations of modernism, is it also possible that they are implicated in later examples of literary modernism? It is one thing to assert that African American culture, and its presence, was intricately involved in the development of Jazz Age artworks; it is, perhaps, quite another to think about this presence as a part of identity of modernism as a whole. If this is the case, then the argument for a view of modernism that sees modernism as an essentially white, "very masculine affair" (Macey 259) is, perhaps a distorted understanding of a literary and cultural movement which, because it

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embraced and expressed the sense of the culture as a whole, had among its sources and exemplars hitherto under acknowledged artists, methods, and influences. In particular, placing both Williams and Beckett within the same discussion can also allow us to understand how central the African American Imaginary is to the modernist project.

2

Thomas L. Riis cites two teams and one individual singer as central figures in early twentieth century African American stage entertainment: besides Williams and Walker, there are the Cole and Johnson Brothers team, and Ernest Hogan. "The shows of Williams and Walker, Cole and Johnson, and Hogan, constitute the principal, although not the only, contributions to black American musical theater from 1898 to 1911" (Riis 46). To these must be added the team of Flournoy Miller and Aubrey Lyles, "the most influential black comedy team in the early century" (Watkins159).

Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and (often) James Weldon Johnson were one of the most successful songwriting teams in the country in the first decade of the twentieth century, and Ernest Hogan, who billed himself "The Unbleached American" was a key figure in the transition from old-style minstrelsy to vaudeville.

All of these figures were involved in the nearly fifteen year presence of African American musical production in New York in the century's early years. Their shows, Clorindy, or the Cakewalk (1898), The Sons of Ham (1900), In Dahomey (1903), Abyssina (1906), The Shoo-Fly Regiment (1907) and Bandanna Land (1908) were all Broadway hit shows (Riis 194-195).

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Among these performers, Hogan might be considered a transitional figure between minstrelsy and vaudeville. He emerged as a nationally known performer during the "coon song" era of the 1890s, which he is credited with starting with his 1896 hit, All Coons Look Alike to Me, a song whose title the songwriter spent the rest of his life apologizing for. The song from this style that has lasted the longest is Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey (Fletcher138).

He was also famous as a facial contortionist "His mobile face was capable of laughter-provoking expressions that were irresistible," wrote James Weldon Johnson (Black Manhattan 103). But most audiences today would probably consider Hogan's type of humor tasteless, since it reportedly relied on racist stereotypes for its effectiveness. Yet Jessie Redmon Fauset, the Harlem Renaissance novelist and cultural editor of the Crisis magazine, had a high regard for him. Hogan, she writes, added something new to the minstrel tradition. He "changed the tradition of the merely funny, rather silly 'end man' into a character with a definite plot in a rather loosely constructed but none the less well outlined story." She adds:

> The method was still humorous, but less broadly, less exclusively. A little of the hard luck of the Negro began to creep in. If he was a buffoon, he was a buffoon wearing his rue. A slight, very slight quality of the Harlequin began to attach to him. He was a clown making light of his troubles, but he was a wounded, sore-beset clown.
>
> (Fauset, "The Gift of Laughter," in Locke 162)

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She asserts that Hogan raised the status of the "end man," giving him depth of character. The "end men" were a staple of the minstrel stage, the pair of actors whose comic dialogue would traditionally open minstrel shows. As Wittke puts it:

> The endmen furnished the comedy of the show, and according to all accounts, from the beginning of minstrelsy to its decline as a form of professional theatricals, they were universally successful in keeping their audiences in an uproar, by their grimacing while the balladists were performing, by their own comic songs sung to the accompaniment of various clever or grotesque dance steps, which sometimes became indescribably eccentric gyrations, and by their rapid-fire jokes.
>
> (141)

For Fauset, the distinction Hogan brought to his art had to do with the realism and pathos he gave to his characterizations. When the "hard luck" of black people's condition emerged as a part of the minstrel routine we have also the beginning of a transition in the history of American comedic stage performance. What old-time minstrel enthusiasts like Wittke see as the "decline" of the art form can also be seen, from a different angle, as the appropriation by black artists of a theatrical form based on "Negro imitators" for different ends. It becomes, in fact, the emergence of a self-conscious African American comedy.

In both the Williams and Walker and Miller and Lyles teams, the transition that started with Hogan went a few steps further. For one thing, the comic clown was transformed from a plantation sharecropper to an urban, dweller. Sometimes he was an urban tramp; sometimes he was a naïve newcomer to the city; sometimes, as Barbara L. Webb points out, he was a dandy. What is important to note here, however, is the

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transformation — during the transition period from the minstrel to the vaudeville era (eras which overlapped as well) of this African American comic character. When Williams and Walker performed as a duo act, Walker was the "prancing dandy," to Williams's "shiftless darky" caricature. "Williams would come onto the stage in tattered clothes, shambling, ill at ease, a forlorn, wide-eyed expression on his face, which was corked to appear much darker than Walker's," writes Mel Watkins. "Inevitably, Walker preyed on Williams's naïveté and supposed ignorance" (Watkins 175). Webb draws on the literary and the theatrical traditions of the dandy to provide some insight into the character Walker played. "Walker emphasized the dandy's point of view," she writes. "He sought to fuse everyday life and performance in a way that staked out a dandyist claim for the dignity and humanity of African Americans" (15). The duality the two performers presented, then, was parodic not only on the stereotypes inherited from minstrelsy; the parodic element also presented a pair of new figures which sought to transcend the bounds of the stereotype by signifying a more "universal" and humanist character. In these routines, Williams and Walker's dual urban characters represented the fortunes and misfortunes of urban life, thereby making something new out of the minstrel stereotype. Webb comments that newspaper reviewer comments on Walker's elegant dress reflected the notion that he was transcending the received stereotypes. The descriptions, she writes, "indicate that neither blacks nor whites perceived Walker's dress as strictly, or even primarily, comic." The writers, she adds, "all show an awareness of being in the presence of an *actual* rather than parodied well-dressed black man" (16, emphasis in original). One result of this was that Williams's onstage persona was also increasingly seen as a performative role rather than a mimetic one. The effect was, in

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part, to raise his status as an artist in the eyes of his audience. This is, perhaps, one explanation for the increasing success of his phonograph records in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

The influence of Miller and Lyles on American comedy has yet to be fully quantified. They were the dialogue writers on the 1921 Broadway musical "Shuffle Along," which is considered a key catalyzing event of the Harlem Renaissance (Krasner 240). Ann Douglas characterizes the show as a "free-form mock homage" to minstrelsy (378). The duo's own act influenced the early Amos and Andy radio performers, and Flournoy Miller worked as a writer for both the radio and television versions of "Amos and Andy." The influence of the Miller and Lyles, whose act consisted of conversation of an almost surrealistic character, influenced both film and television comedy for decades. "In 1908, Miller and Lyles began experimenting with two characters who, although similar to the familiar minstrel stereotype, had an assertiveness, an urban flair, and just enough trickster's cunning to set them apart," writes Watkins (169). The most indelible residue of their performance was their "Indefinite Talk" act, which Miller revived with his later partner, Johnny Lee, in the film Stormy Weather. Arthur Knight explains this practice this way:

> Indefinite talk is a mixture of an authoritative tone and obscure content created by the dialogue partners chronically cutting one another off. When the partners are not interrupting one another, their sentences alternate between abstractions (usually because their pronouns have no clear referent), questions (that go unanswered), and hyperbolic pronouncements (which are immediately deflated). Along with precise gestures and timing,

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> some punning and malapropisms, the deformations of dialect, and a schism between character and tone, what most makes indefinite talk unique (and funny) is that the indefinite talkers always understand each other.
>
> (110)

One striking aspect of this description is its similarity to the 1911 description by Howard W. Odum of rural African American folksongs, especially those linguistic operations that render the sentences abstract. The omission of pronouns in particular, and the fact that the two speakers "always understand each other" (a point made explicitly by Miller in the scene under examination), seems to give the audience the impression that it is eavesdropping on a sort of secret communication.

This sense of insider talk would have a long and deep history in African American performance practice, which by no means died with the old-style minstrel and blues performances. It reached its height in the "scat" singing of jazz artists, starting with Louis Armstrong's "Heebie Jeebies" recording of 1928, and continuing through the post World War II period, when "scat" singing became a staple of John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie and other modern, bebop, jazz musicians. There, the practice would become allied with the growth of the sensibility associated with the term "hipster"; but it would also become a performance practice that would be perfected (and to some extent brought close to mainstream culture) by singers like Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald, and the trio known as Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. The nonsense syllable singing of the "scat" singers was one side of a verbal performance practice that would have its roots in such scenes as the one by Miller and Lee in Stormy Weather.

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In their scene, Miller and Lee come onstage in an old, beat-up jalopy, which backfires before it stutters to a stop, steam jetting out of the radiator. The car is falling apart. Each man is made up in blackface makeup, wearing white gloves and lightly colored top hat and tails. During the dialogue, each man is shouting:

Miller: What's wrong with it? Where'd you have it fixed?

Lee: I just had it worked on!

Miller: Well, who worked on it?

Lee: The man that's around. . . around —

Miller: He ain't no good. The man you want is the man —

Lee: I had him! He's the one that ruined it.

Miller: Well, I see you got plenty of water, but it's out of gas.

Lee: No, 'tain't that. I think maybe it's —

(Lee leans on fender, which falls off the car, loudly.)

Miller: Oh, it couldn't be that.

Lee: Well, ain't much wrong with it.

Miller: What you need is one of them new gadgets. You know the kind that you buy —

Lee: I bought some.

Miller: Oh, not them. I mean the kind what fastens where they fits. . . a whole dozen'll cost about —

Lee: That's too much money. I can't afford it. I got to get some that don't cost no more —

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Miller: You can't get 'em that cheap.

Lee: Well, we can get the car fixed up good maybe for around a —

(Goes over to car, another piece falls off.)

Miller: No. . . What you need (leans on car, car collapses) is a new car.

Lee: Yeah.

(Stormy Weather; Knight 110-119)

One source of the humor in this dialogue stems from the way the two speakers base their discourse on the use of fragments. In some cases, the fragments are produced by one speaker dropping of nouns, pronouns, phrases, and clauses ("I got to get some that cost no more —"), only to have the second speaker respond as if he had heard the lost noun ("You can't get 'em that cheap"), when in fact it was never uttered.

These absences also recall the "singularity disorder" identified by Roman Jakobson in his discussion of speech aphasia. Speakers in a dialogue often ask for confirmation of meaning from each other: "Do you know what I mean?" The clarification is the way the "lost" elements in a sentence are often conveyed from one person to another. Aphasics, however, cannot name such an element. "Such an aphasic can switch neither from a word to it synonyms or circumlocutions nor to its heteronyms (equivalent expressions in other languages)," writes Jakobson (104). When thinking about the fragmentation of language in modernist artistic discourse, it is also useful to remember that that fragmented language was characteristic of minstrelsy, or, as Houston A. Baker notes: "The minstrel mask is a governing object in a ritual of non-sense" (21).

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For Baker, the use of nonsense is a means by which African American performers mastered, by means of parody and mockery, those elements of minstrelsy that reinforced (by the use of degrading, racialized stereotypes) the legal environment of violence and oppression in which African Americans lived. At the same time, we can see in these comedians a distinction from the old, self-deprecating humor which characterized minstrelsy. This comic duo was a direct descendant of Ernest Hogan, and the pair's presentation is suffused with the "hard luck of the Negro" that Fauset identified in the older comedian. The basic theme here is poverty and the inability of one speaker (Lee) to get a fair deal in repairing his car. The field in which this comedy routine takes place is filled with signs pointing to urban life: the car, the dandyish clothes worn by Miller and Lee, and the conversation, which centers on money and commodities. The humor is self-reflective without being self-deprecating, yet if anyone is the object of this humorous routine, it is the "new," urbanized Negro.

3

If Ernest Hogan was one of the first to begin to complicate the minstrel character's simple presentation by adding "a little of the hard luck of the Negro" to his characterization, then Bert Williams seems to have brought this character to a new level of complexity. His primary solo stage character, which won him international fame, came not just with a bag of comic tricks, but with a philosophy as well. Williams not only modernized the minstrel, but created, out of the degraded figure of the minstrel "darky," a modern, and modernizing, character as well.

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It is almost impossible to consider the art and career of Bert Williams without noting the terribly racist conditions under which he worked. Even in the atmosphere of New York and big city vaudeville the racist segregation and violence that characterized this period of African American life was pervasive. W. C. Handy's reminiscences are suffused with stories of such violence, of lynchings and near-lynchings performers endured while travelling through the south. He tells the story of Louis Wright, trombonist with the Georgia Minstrels, who was lynched by a mob in Missouri after besting a white mob in a snowball fight:

> That night a mob came back-stage to the theatre. They had come to lynch Louis. In his alarm the sharp-tempered boy drew a gun and fired into the crowd. The mob scattered promptly, but they did not turn from their purpose. They reassembled in the railroad yards, near the special car of the minstrel company. This time their number was augmented by officers. When the minstrels arrived, the whole company was arrested and thrown into jail. Many of them were brutally flogged during the questioning that followed, but no squeal was forthcoming. In time, however, Louis Wright was recognized. The law gave him to the mob, and in almost less time than it takes to tell it they had done their work. He was lynched, his tongue cut out and his body shipped to his mother in Chicago in a pine box.
>
> (Handy, Father of the Blues 43)

Racist segregation in the entertainment world was commonplace even in the northern cities. Buster Keaton recalled that "when Negroes were allowed in white saloons at all, they were restricted to the end of the bar farthest from the door." As part of the

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family act, The Four Keatons, young Buster played a Boston theater with Williams, in 1909. Years later, he told a story about his father offering to buy Williams a drink in such a saloon, near the theater:

> "Bert," said Pops, "Come up here and have a drink with me." Bert looked nervously from one white face at the bar to another, and replied. "Think I better stay down here, Mr. Joe.
>
> "All right," said Pops, picking up his glass, "then I'll have to come down there to you."
>
> (Smith 113)

Blacks weren't allowed to sit in the audiences in many theaters. When Williams first appeared with the Ziegfeld Follies in 1910, Ann Charters reports that the comedian insisted that his contract state that "at no time would he be on stage with any of the female members of the company." This was, presumably, in order to forestall any fears of miscegenation, which was a major rallying cry of American racists. In addition, Charters adds that "Ziegfeld promised that the follies would never include Southern cities in its annual tours; this was promised as a favor to Williams, who Ziegfeld knew never appeared below the Mason-Dixon line" (Charters 115). Eric Ledell Smith quotes Williams to the effect that these terms were part of a verbal agreement the performer had with Ziegfeld. "There never has been any contract between us" Williams said of his work with Ziegfeld. Theirs was, he added, "just a gentleman's agreement" (Smith 132). That racism had a profound effect on Williams is widely known. "Bert Williams was the funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I ever knew," recalled his friend W.C.

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Fields. In a moving tribute to his fellow comedian, Fields spoke of Williams's "deep undercurrent of pathos" (Rowland, 128).

This attitude seems to characterize most biographical and critical readings of Williams as well. Both Ann Charters and Eric Ledell Smith detail the conditions under which Williams worked, and the stress and exhaustion that hastened the pneumonia that killed him in 1922 at forty-seven years old.

Among the very few critical writings on Williams's art, most also emphasize these racist conditions. "Misfortune and caricature" is how David Krasner titles his essay on Williams (368). Citing Freud on caricature and unmasking, he adds:

> In blackface, the alleged pretenses of African Americans were exposed. Through the malapropian, deceitful and pompous caricatures personified by Miller and Lyles, and the fatalistic, naïve, and set-upon caricature of Williams, the "unmasking" of their alleged superficialities manifested the supposed true image and revealed the so-called real traits of African Americans. Caricature thus assisted in "exposing" pretenses for amusement.
>
> (369)

Although Krasner acknowledges the praise Williams got from African American community leaders like Booker T. Washington, he cites approvingly the condemnation the comedian received from periodicals like A. Philip Randolph's The Messenger and from Marcus Garvey's Negro World (270). However, Williams was considered by his contemporaries not simply a pioneer, but a great artist, and it is this consideration of

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Williams that is missing from evaluations, like Krasner's, which focus on the negative side of Williams caricature.

Most of these comments on Williams focus on his relationship to the racist caricature that this comedian's work was said to exemplify. Writers such as Krasner seem content to read Williams as operating within the legal limits set by the world of legal and institutional racism of the turn of the twentieth century. These critics don't seem invested in interrogating whether it's possible that Williams, though working from within the racist stereotype may have at the same time performed it in such a way that is worked against the stereotype's apparent message.

Here it is useful to recall the work of Homi K. Bhabha, who thinks of the stereotype as a kind of fetish. It is in this context that Bhabha focuses on the ambivalent characteristic of the stereotype. He reminds us that the stereotype is the "major discursive strategy" of modern racial domination, and that it is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (66). Bhabha warns against seeing the stereotype as "offering, at any one time, a secure point of identification" (69). The double nature of the stereotype is one that offers an image that is at the same time an "other," and one that appears to be "entirely knowable and visible" (71). In addition, when considering the anti-black stereotype embedded in American minstrelsy, this doubling can be seen as a site of degradation, on the one hand, and of fantasy, on the other. "The objective of colonial discourse," Bhabha reminds us, "is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (70).

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The maintenance of the idea of the colonized as "degenerate" is necessary as both an ideological and a psychological support for colonial discourse. In the early twentieth century U.S. entertainment industry, the parade of degenerate stereotypes of the African American was all but ubiquitous. James Weldon Johnson's well-known complaint about Negro dialect, that "it is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos" (xl) illustrates the limits of this end of the stereotype dyad.

It is when we begin to consider the other side of this dyad, the site of fantasy, with which we can begin to unlock the element that made an entertainer like Williams such a pivotal figure. The side of the dualism embodied in the stereotype that appears familiar — "entirely knowable and visible" — is also, in Williams, the side in which the artist's own agency comes into play.

One of the problems recent critics of Williams have in interpreting his art derives from their sources. Most rely on descriptions of stage performances, and from photographs of Williams in blackface makeup and outrageous costumes. But Williams's significance, both in his own time and in ours, derives from an additional source that is rarely studied. Williams was, for the first quarter of the twentieth century, the most prolifically recorded black American recording artist. He made about eighty recordings between 1901 and his death, and these songs deserve closer study.

His most famous song was "Nobody," written with lyricist Alex Rogers. He introduced the song in 1905, and used it in Bandanna Land. It became his encore performance at nearly every appearance. Ann Charters recreates a typical Williams performance of the song:

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> Usually his appearance on stage was announced by a spotlight that caught the tentative wiggling of gloved fingers against the closed plush curtains. Hesitantly the hand followed the fingers, then an arm, a shoulder, and finally, with awkward reluctance, a tall man in a shabby dress suit pushed through the curtains and walked slowly to the front of the stage. The applause started before he reached the footlights, but the face behind the mask of blackface remained downcast. As if resigned with some inevitable and unending stroke of bad fortune, he shrugged his shoulders. With exaggerated care he searched his ragged coat pocket, pulled out a small leather notebook, and slowly turned the pages of the book until he found what he was looking for.
>
> (Charters 8)

He would then begin to half sing, half recite the song. In this reconstruction, the "Nobody" is both song and text. Williams very often used literature, and the notion of the literary, in his act. One of his recordings, "Never Mo'" is a parody of Edgar Allen Poe's poem "The Raven." Charters shows us how Williams again uses the stereotype against itself. The appearance of the illiterate "darky" who finds his verse in a notebook is precisely the sort character that gives audiences both the comfort of the stereotype and the discomfort of the unknown. If the stereotyped blackface clown also has access to the "talking book" (to borrow Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s phrase), then how comforting is the stereotype that is being performed? In a sense, by using the gesture of the notebook, by his employment of the gesture of reading, Williams renders the very stereotype he performs, absurd.

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In the 1913 recording he made for Columbia, with an orchestral arrangement by Will Vodery (Rowland 67), "Nobody" begins with a fanfare, followed by a mournful, almost melodyless motif, as Williams recites:

> When life seems full of clouds and rain
> And I am full of nothin' and pain,
> Who soothes my thumping, bumping brain?
> Nobody!
>
> (Charters, Nobody 135-36)

As the song begins, the speaker is beset with illness and bad weather. He is "full of nothin, and pain." The speaker is not only plagued from the outside, but from inside as well. The phrase is paradoxical, yet revealing. To be "full of nothing" suggests a consciousness of one's place in the world beyond the purely sensuous being that inhabited the anti-black racist stereotyped "darky." This is not simply sadness. This is alienation. We have here, from within the scene of fetishism that Homi Bhabha ascribes to the stereotype, the fantasy enacting its opposite. "For the stereotype is at once a substitute and a shadow," writes Bhabha (82). The whole of minstrelsy was, in a sense, an enactment of the (white) fantasy of slave happiness and fulfillment, while it simultaneously harbored a narrative side that contradicted that fantasy. But here, in a performer wearing the sign of the stereotype — the African American blackface comedian — comes a conscious negation of the fantasy, with an appeal signifying a condition which has a paradoxical, and modern, appeal: "full of nothing, and pain."

In the following verse, nature's indifference is joined by human callousness: Who says "Here's twenty-five cents, go ahead and get something to eat?" The figure that

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emerges in Williams's song also lives in a modern, urban environment. The song's famous chorus follows:

> I ain't never done nothin' to Nobody;
>
> I ain't never done nothin' to Nobody, no time:
>
> And until I get somethin' from somebody sometime,
>
> I'll never do nothin' for Nobody, no time.
>
> (137)

In the published versions of the song, "Nobody" is capitalized, and in the recordings the word is stressed in such a way that the word does double duty, as both pronoun and proper noun. The speaker is "full of nothing" and has also "done nothin' to Nobody." This "Nobody" figure suggests a figure that Frederick R. Karl identifies as the "new man" of modernism, "disaffected, effete or aesthetic, outside social coordinates, himself coordinate of emptiness, often a "nil" man. He is a person for whom the outside world, however defined, has ceased to function, for whom it has become a dark place" (174). Karl's prototypes for this figure are Mallarmé and, significantly, Nietzsche, whose books Williams is reported to have had in his library. In this light Nietszche's comment, which he attributes to Silenus, seems to express a condition that is suggested by Williams' song: "not to be born, not to be, to be *nothing*" (22). W.E.B. Du Bois expresses this idea in another way, when he writes about the "veil" of color, and of double consciousness.

There is a sense in which the image of the veil, in Souls of Black Folk, anticipates the idea of invisibility, as it was to be developed half a century later by Ralph Ellison. The veil hides the speaking self, who cannot be seen, but yet is at the same time familiar,

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and of the same world as those on the other side of the veil. The idea is introduced, in the first words of the book's first chapter as a function of a conversation:

> Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All nevertheless flutter around it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.
>
> (10)

For Du Bois, the persona of the African American is already an exemplar of the modern figure, the "nil man," the one who is seen by the world outside the veil as something other. To be sure, it can be argued that to be a problem is not "to be nothing," but that depends on what is meant by "problem." Du Bois remembers how this consciousness he is referring to here first thrust itself upon him. He attempted to exchange a visiting card with a schoolmate, and the girl "refused my card, refused peremptorily, with a glance." He continues that he then realized that he was "shut out of their world by a vast veil" (10). While Du Bois poses the issue of the status of African Americans as both a metaphorical and an ontological one, he never loses sight of the fact that it was also a legal one. All three of these meet at the nexus of "problem," and "veil."

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And his schoolmate's refusal, assertive, abrupt, "with a glance," is one that, with its rejection of even the simplest social intercourse, attempts to render Du Bois a non-person. It is here that we can see how Du Bois's veil became the subject of one of the most famous songs in the United States in the years preceding the First World War.

> When summer comes all cool and clear,
>
> And my friends see me drawing near,
>
> Who says "Come in and have some beer?"
>
> Nobody!
>
> (135-36)

There is a sense in which Williams's approach to his material — and the way he carved out and fashioned a self from within that material — recalls Steven Greenblatt's description of Sir Thomas Wyatt's method of self-fashioning. "For all his impulse to negate," Greenblatt writes, "Wyatt cannot fashion himself in opposition to power and the conventions power deploys; on the contrary, those conventions are precisely what constitute Wyatt's self-fashioning" (120). The modernist self-fashioning of Bert Williams took place from within the conventions handed to him from American minstrelsy. From within those conventions, he was able to create a modern character by invoking those conventions and grafting them onto an urban, as opposed to a rural, persona. It was a persona with an introspective, instead of a simply humorous, consciousness; a character whose pathos and humor began to transcend minstrelsy by turning the sign of the minstrel into the modern tramp by making of that tramp a modern form of sensory and aesthetic communication, a symbol.

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4

Before the early twentieth century, the male itinerant, vagabond figure — the tramp — was generally considered an anti-urban personage. His earliest literary ancestor is the Fool, but in the United States in the nineteenth century he emerges as a strikingly different figure than the traditional Fool. He is a romantic figure whose cosmology is perhaps most idealized in the voice Walt Whitman assumes in his poem, "Song of the Open Road." This poem, which John D. Seelye calls "the manifesto of American bohemianism" (540), is also an example of how the nineteenth century tramp was romanticized:

> Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
>
> Healthy, free, the world before me,
>
> The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.
>
> (149)
>
> . . . .
>
> I inhale great draughts of space,
>
> The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are
> mine.
>
> (151)

Whitman's tramp is an anti-urban figure, one who values the open, endless road, which, as he well knows, is rapidly passing away. The open road, "the efflux of the soul" (153) is the very embodiment of freedom. The persona of Whitman's poem is not a downtrodden tramp, but a free vagabond. He is not at odds with the society that

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surrounds him, but in fact, sees himself as the embodiment of that society's highest ideals. In this sense, we can distinguish him from the fool, whose satire is aimed at criticizing authority. Whitman's vagabond is self-sufficient, and yet there is in this soul a great yearning for a companionship that seems just out of reach:

> Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!
>
> Traveling with me you find what never tires.
>
> (154)

Though Whitman is as much a poet of the city as he is of the open road,[1] here the poet's traveller notes the "impassive surfaces" (150) of the city, contrasting it with the road as a site of ecstasy:

> The efflux of the soul is happiness, here is happiness,
>
> I think it pervades the open air, waiting at all times,
>
> Now it flows unto us, we are rightly charged.
>
> (122)

This model of the tramp as rural wanderer was one that inspired urban bohemia well into the twentieth century (see Dell, 176-189), even as this figure was being made obsolete as society rushed toward modern complexity. We can see this in Whitman's language, which presents us with lists of objects or gestures and emotions that together appear to suppress a coherent argument. The resulting fragments appear not only to represent the free spirit of the vagabond; in their insistent tug away from a stable, believable representation of its subject and his quest, the poem suggests a transition in an understanding of the role of the vagabond. When Michel Foucault writes that "at the

[1] "Song of the Open Road" immediately precedes "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" in the standard, or so-called "Death-Bed" edition of Leaves of Grass.

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beginning of the nineteenth century, the law of discourse having been detached from representation, the being of language became, as it were, fragmented" (306) he is talking about how poetic language came to increasingly rely on abstraction, and on how it was increasingly being used by philosophers and poets (here he is talking about Nietzsche and Mallarmé) for its materiality, that language itself increasingly became the subject of both poetry and philosophy. For Whitman, the persona on the open road appears in transition, still a part of society, but just barely, still able to represent a point of view, but barely. The rhetoric of lists instead of argument in Whitman's poetry is an example of this transition toward fragmentation of poetic language, just as his vagabond, no longer the Fool of medieval and post-mediaeval literature, is an emblem, as it were, of a transition toward a new kind of figure, which was to become embodied in the modernist figure of the tramp. This transition can also be expressed in historical terms. With the mass migration to the cities came a transformation of the idea of the tramp. Whitman's heroic bohemian figure gave way to its urban counterpart, the vagabond who was no longer at one with nature. This new vagabond was distinguished by social isolation on the one hand, and by an oppositional relationship to society on the other. In popular culture representations, this figure was often nameless and always without property. One result of the rise of late nineteenth century industrial society was its attendant labor wars. It was within this context that the modern, urban vagabond arose. One early manifestation of this new, urban vagabond was his rise as a heroic figure in the cosmology of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). It was in this atmosphere that Williams began his career.

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The migration of African Americans out of the south, which began after 1875, added to this transformation of both the real world and the romanticized, vagabond. The Negro vagrant was subject to both legal and extra-legal censure, but he was also the object of stereotype. Tom Fletcher notes that black travelling performers were a big part of the emergence of a distinctly African American entertainment milieu, and that these performers traveled as both individuals and in groups like Maharry's Minstrels. These performers formed part of the background out of which Bert Williams emerged. It is interesting, in this light, to see representations of Williams as they appeared in the poetry of American modernism. Hart Crane mentions Williams in "The Bridge," a poem that is, in part, concerned with modern life and alienation:

> Stick your patent name on a signboard
>
> brother—all over—going west—young man
>
> Tintex—Japalac—CertainTeed Overall ads
>
> and lands sakes! under the new playbill ripped
>
> in the guaranteed corner—see Bert Williams what?
>
> (Poems of Hart Crane 57)

Williams appears here amid a network of signs that shows the new urbanism of the twentieth century, among the billboards advertising laundry dye, paint varnish, and overalls is a handbill advertising a performance by Williams.[2] In chapter two of this study, I wrote about how the language of modern advertising drew from a real and presumed African American vernacular syntax, and we can see how Crane reproduces that syntax — not as African American "dialect," but as advertising speech — here.

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[2] For an analysis of this poem, see Berthoff, 100-102.

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Crane's hoboes are tied to the railroad and to other emblems of urban life. He employs an amalgam of signs similar to those that William Carlos Williams suggests when he writes, in a not too dissimilar context, that "The pure products of America/go crazy—" (131). He, too, was referring to the modern form of vagabondage. Both poets connected their vagabonds with the signs, not just of industrial capitalism, but with advertising, the "pure product" of that capitalism.

Jessie Fauset saw in Williams what critics like Krasner appear to have missed: his symbolism. Her tribute to the comedian is titled "The Symbolism of Bert Williams," and she approached the comedian's art from the point of view of the aesthetic which seemed to catalyze his work.

> By a strange and amazing contradiction this *Comedian* symbolized that deep, ineluctable strain of melancholy, which no Negro in a mixed civilization ever lacks. He was supposed to make the world laugh and so he did but not by the welling over of his own spontaneous subjective joy, but by the humorously objective presentation of his personal woes and sorrows. His *rôle* was always that of the poor, shunted, cheated, out-of-luck Negro and he fostered and deliberately trained his genius toward the delineation of this type because his mental as well as his artistic sense told him that here was a true racial vein. (Fauset, "Symbolism" 254. Emphasis in original)

Fauset emphasizes the role played by Williams, which he perfected in the late 1890s, and suggests that the key to his art is the projection and universalizing of "his personal woes and sorrows." It is also true, however, that Williams, from the very

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beginning, created this character as a symbol. As Fauset and others have pointed out, Williams, who was born in the Bahamas and grew up in California, had to learn African American culture. In this respect he had a certain characteristic in common with white Americans who played minstrelsy in blackface; but Williams's own part-African ancestry (his grandfather was Danish) helped him see and learn about African American culture, from a position of closer social intimacy than his white theatrical colleagues could achieve.

5

We are in familiar territory, then, when we hear Estragon's first words in Waiting for Godot: "Nothing to be done." The despair that's traded between the two major characters in the play seems almost like an echo. The conventions of the play seem familiar as well: they are both tramps. Throughout the first act, Estragon has trouble with his feet, with his boots. He has an odor. He sleeps in a ditch. He is cranky. Vladimir, by comparison, is more introspective. He is patient. He is the one who reminds Estragon (and the audience) of the purpose of the pair's vigil. The most extensive episode of physical intimacy between them is an elaborate comic charade involving three hats, at the end of which Vladimir rejects his own hat in favor of Lucky's, which he wears until the end of the play. All this also seems familiar to us, as they are well known theatrical tropes from the vaudeville stage.

Critics as wide ranging as Frederick J. Hoffman, Hugh Kenner and John Bradby have commented on Beckett's debt to popular culture, especially the artist's affinity with

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the English and Irish music hall, and to the circus. However, Beckett's relationship to African American culture should also be acknowledged, in order to facilitate a more rounded reading of his work. As Alan Warren Friedman has shown, Beckett became knowledgeable about several aspects of African American life and culture when he contributed nineteen translations, comprising more than 63,000 words, to Nancy Cunard's Negro. They include studies of jazz and of Louis Armstrong, historical and cultural articles on Brazil, Haiti, Guadeloupe, Madagascar, and the Congo, as well as the Surrealist manifesto "Murderous Humanitarianism," and Rene Crevel's "The Negress in the Brothel."

It is useful to remember that the Paris of the 1930s was the Paris to which African American musicians and other artists flocked in order to find a freedom that was unavailable to them in the United States. It was the Paris in which Josephine Baker was a major star, to be sure, but it was also a place where many lesser-known musicians, writers, visual artists and performers joined with those of many other nationalities in making that city the world center of the arts.

Beckett was personally acquainted with at least one of these musicians, Henry Crowder, a pianist who arrived in Paris in the late 1920s with violinist Eddie South and his band, the Alabamians. Crowder was also the lover of Nancy Cunard, who also published Beckett's first separately issued work, the poem "Whoroscope" (1930). Beckett contributed a poem to an anthology, "Henry-Music," which consisted of works Cunard assembled and dedicated to Crowder. James Knowlson cites at least one episode when Beckett and the couple socialized together in one of the city's jazz clubs (120-121).

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It is not necessary to draw direct links between Beckett's later work and these translations in order to acknowledge the writer's familiarity with African American popular culture, and with the idea of stereotype. Several of Beckett's translations address the later point, in particular "Sambo Without Tears, by Georges Sadoul, In this latter essay, the author surveys the racism of French children's papers "that are calculated to turn their readers into perfect imperialists" (52). Sadoul gives us an example of the stereotype as a means, as Bhabha reminds us, of refashioning the colonized as "a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin," a refashioning which provides a means for justifying conquest and creating a system of administration and instruction (Bhabha 70). One way of reading Waiting for Godot, then, can be founded on a reconsideration of how Beckett addresses these issues of stereotype and degradation, in what might be seen as a barely deracialized presentation of these tropes.

The play centers on the actions of three sets of pairs: Vladimir and Estragon; Pozzo and Lucky; the goatherd boy and his offstage brother. The play takes place on a country road, but the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, are not on a journey. They are there simply to wait. The play reverses the motif of freedom that the road represents in other literature. When Bakhtin writes about the "chronotope of the road," he suggests that the road is a metaphor for discovery and searching. Nothing of the kind is at work here. These characters are on no voyage, take no external action. The action of the play largely consists, as David Bradby has suggested, of play itself. The two tramps in this "tragicomedy in two acts" (as Beckett subtitles the play) replay old comedic routines, but these routines veer more toward pathos than comedy.

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There are several ways in which this play echoes its roots in minstrelsy. It seems obvious that Vladimir and Estragon suggest the "endmen" of the minstrel performance. They spend the first part of each of the play's two acts mainly trading one-line statements with each other. Many of these are in the manner of absurd paradoxes or insults:

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.

Estragon: (despairingly). Ah! (Pause.) You're sure it was here?

Vladimir: What?

Estragon: That we were to wait.

Vladimir: He said by the tree. (They look at the tree) Do you see any others.

Estragon: What is it?

Vladimir: I don't know. A willow.

Estragon: Where are the leaves?

Vladimir: It must be dead.

Estragon: No more weeping.

Vladimir: Or perhaps its not the season.

Estragon: Looks to me more like a bush.

Vladimir: A shrub.

Estragon: A bush.

Vladimir: A —. What are you insinuating? That we've come to the wrong place?

Estragon: He should be here.

Vladimir: He didn't say for sure he'd come.

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Estragon:	And if he doesn't come?
Vladimir:	We'll come back tomorrow.
Estragon:	And then the day after to-morrow.
Vladimir:	Possibly.
Estragon:	And so on.
Vladimir:	The point is —
Estragon:	Until he comes.
Vladimir:	You're merciless.

(10-11)

This recalls the "Indefinite Talk" routine of Miller and Lyles (Lee), which became a standard of duo comic teams during the early twentieth century. It also recalls, as Bradby and others have pointed out, the music hall routines of English, Irish, and American theater, all of which owe some of their origins to American minstrelsy.[3] The "Indefinite Talk" routines appear to be an early ancestor of the widespread "cross talk" routines of vaudeville, which became a staple of film comedy beginning in the 1930s. In the "Indefinite Talk" of Miller and Lyles, each partner addresses the other with a form of address that suggests intimacy, but neither partner quite connects logically with the other; it is a form of paired malapropism. The dialogue is carried out in fragments. The fact that this dialogue is carried out in fragmented language, not only heightens the comic effect, it also serves to give the dialogue a sense of unreality. This fragmentary language, the language in which objects are present in the conversation but cannot be named, becomes, in the hands of Miller and Lyles, a sign of irony and of comedy. In the world of Waiting for Godot, the absences produced by the fragments are emblematic of a world in which

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neither Vladimir nor Estragon can even name the single living thing in their environment outside of themselves: "What is it? / I don't know. A willow. /Where are the leaves? /It must be dead. /No more weeping. /Or perhaps its not the season. /Looks to me more like a bush. /A shrub. /A bush. /A —. What are you insinuating?"

It is an effect that certainly would have appealed to artists who, like Beckett, were a part of the Surrealist milieu of 1930s France. In Waiting for Godot the dialogue resembles a normal conversation more closely than Miller and Lyles, in keeping with Beckett's overall fidelity to a naturalist approach in his play; and yet the true subject of the conversation (who is Godot? why are they waiting?) remains elusive. In each act of Godot, this banter between the two of them leads up to the entrance of Pozzo and Lucky, the master-slave duo who provide the second structural component drawn here from minstrelsy, the olio. Mel Watkins describes this part, as it occurred in nineteenth century American minstrelsy:

> In the second part of the show — the olio, or variety segment, the comedy highlight was the stump speaker, a lone comic who stood and delivered a discourse that ranged from pure nonsense to supposedly serious lectures on some social or philosophical issue. The comic, usually one of the end men, spoke in a black version of the familiar vernacular dialect of the Yankee or Frontier type. Often he satirized women's suffrage, education, or some other current political or scientific topic. Malaprop reigned supreme; although important issues were often addressed, the focus here was purely on humor.
>
> (92)

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[3] For a discussion of Godot and music hall theater techniques , see Bradby 38-40.

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In Godot, this role is played, in the first act, by Lucky, and in the second, by Vladimir. Malaprop is a distinguishing feature of the modernist use of language. Such usage ranges from the suggestiveness favored by symbolist writers to the automatic writing favored by the Surrealists. The idea is not simply to supply the absurdities and paradoxes which produce laughter — the ludicrous as "a subdivision of the ugly" (Aristotle 59), or the comic degradation that Freud speaks about in his analysis of caricature (200-201); it is an attempt to reveal the hidden unconsciousness behind reality. Beckett, however, was attuned to both the high artistic and the "low" comedic properties of malapropism, and unites these qualities in Lucky's speech.

> Given the existence as uttered forth in the public
> works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal
> God quaquaquauqa with white beard
> quaquaquauqa outside time without extension
> who from the heights of divine apathia divine
> athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with
> some exceptions for reasons unknown but time
> will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with
> those who for reasons unknown but time will tell. . .
>
> (29)

The speech, with its apparent references to religion, to Beckett's own work, bodily functions and to Nancy Cunard ("in view of the labors of Fartov and Belcher

bodily functions and to Nancy Cunard ("in view of the labors of Fartov and Belcher

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points out, "a series of clauses that lack resolution" (76), and is very similar to the kind of speeches Watkins and others write about in describing the "stump" speeches in minstrel shows. As stump speaker, Lucky's speech also recalls a similar speech, in which Mark Twain satirizes Hamlet's soliloquy in Huckleberry Finn. That novel also owes much to minstrelsy in its structure and in its use of humor. In both Lucky's speech and in the Duke's apparent parody in Twain's novel, malapropisms form a basic component of the monologue. Each text is presented as a learned speech, uttered by someone who is signified by the text as a comic character performing an absurd function. In addition, while Twain is satirizing the nineteenth century Shakespearean revival of the American Elizabethans of the nineteenth century (Reardon 1983), Beckett appears to be satirizing modernism and its uses of tradition in the twentieth, including modernist's atheism.

Pozzo and Lucky, the master and slave, can also be seen as a parody of a minstrel motif. In minstrelsy, the parody was often aimed at the idea of freedom for blacks. All aspects of the freedom to be exercised by blacks were lampooned, from simple everyday transactions to voting and holding office.[4] Beckett here reverses the stereotype, parodying the idea of slavery and lordship. In Beckett's rendering, both slave and master are equally objects of humor, with the slave acting out a ritual of knowledge production in which his response to his master's directive to "think" is, in fact, to speak. This parody, writes Bradby, "is the shape of a mind that shrinks, pines and dies as a result of the failure of the world, as perceived, to meet the demands of the inquiring mind." He adds:

> Where academic discourse claims to discern order, logic and even progress, the "Think" resembles a lecture as it might be given in a bad

[4] One late example of this motif can be seen in the film Rufus Jones for President (1933), starring Ethel Waters and Sammy Davis Jr., in his first film role. See Watkins, 214.

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> dream. The monologue enacts a struggle between an attempt to impose a structure of scientific research and philosophical discourse on experience, which is constantly disrupted by the breaking through of phrases (such as "abode of stones") suggesting brute natural forces quite indifferent to human logic or consciousness.
>
> (34)

It is possible to read this conflict as one involving identity. By "thinking" aloud, Lucky subverts the "natural" position of the slave, which is that of silence. If colonialism "repeatedly exercises its authority through the figures of farce" (Bhabha 85) then so do other modes of power. Lucky, like the minstrels Hogan, Williams, and Miller and Lyles, is parodying the authority of knowledge, which exercises its power by speaking "over the heads," as it were of its audience. Lucky's speech, composed as it is of fragments and disjointed phrases whose overall architecture and subject is suggested but never stated, is over the heads of all who hear him. However, at least one member of Lucky's primary audience seems to be in on the joke. When the speech is finished, Estragon responds, "Avenged!" (30).

Beckett repeatedly returned to the use of minstrel tropes in his work, and here it is only necessary to consider, briefly, a late play of his in order to see how the relationship between the playwright and the older theatrical form continued to be a productive one for him.

One the striking elements of the play Not I (1972) is how the play is staged as a kind of satire on blackface theatrics. Here are the stage directions, as written by Beckett:

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> Stage in darkness, but for MOUTH, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from closeup and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone.
>
> AUDITOR, downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, faintly lit, standing on invisible podium about 4 feet high shown by attitude alone to be facing diagonally across stage intent on MOUTH, dead still throughout but for four brief movements where indicated. . .
>
> As house lights down MOUTH's voice unintelligible behind curtain. House lights out. Voice continues unintelligible behind curtain, 10 seconds. With rise of curtain ad-libbing from text as required leading when curtain fully up and sufficient into:
>
> (Collected Shorter Plays 216)

At this point a woman's voice, the MOUTH, begins her monologue. The illuminated mouth is contrasted, in these directions, to its darkened environment, and can be seen as an ironic restaging of the blackface comedic performance. Here the black and face provides the audience with a familiar ground on which to accept a performance that consists entirely of a monologue.

The other figure in the play, dressed in a garment associated with Muslim and ex-colonial populations, serves as a kind of interlocutor. The silence of this interlocutor, however, in no way diminishes the minstrel association of the duo, the pair, whose interaction is essential to the dynamics of the performance.

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The play is a monologue of a voice that delivers its message in fragments. In fact, much of the dialogue is little more than a set of clichés seemingly piled on top of each other. Each utterance, each cliché, is about three or four words each, separated by ellipses:

> . . . . out. . .into this world. . .this world. . .tiny little thing. . .before its time. . .in a godfor—. . .what?. .girl?. . .yes. . .tiny little girl. . .into this. . .out into this. . .before her time. . .godforsaken hole called. . .
>
> (216, ellipses as in original.)

The autobiography told by the voice that is MOUTH is one that starts, stops, begins again, interrupts itself with rhetorical questions. It is a discourse consisting of introjections, exclamations, prepositional phrases, and other fragments of sentences. Here the linguistic operations that have become commonplace in modernist verbal art are taken to their limit, and reflect back on the viewer (and reader of the text) as a kind of jabberwocky. Here, the dropping of pronouns and conjunctions, the absence and suppression of context, are marked by the graphic elliptical sign of three, or four, dots.

As in other literary forms where such operations are at work, the audience is left to supply its own context, while a reasonable assumption may exist that the speaker is talking in a "secret" language, whose meaning she knows. In this way, Beckett's play appears to belong to a lineage that includes songs and comedic routines of late minstrelsy and the blues, or in the routines of performers Flournoy Miller, Aubrey Lyles, and Johnny Lee. This assumption of a secret language is promoted precisely because the suppressed material is so obviously suppressed, and because the speaker seems to understand herself. This form of interiority has the appearance of a speaker who is talking

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to herself, yet by virtue of the fact that the talk is performative, the secrecy of the language also appears communicative. This interiority is a feature that Not I shares with a large array of linguistic practices, both formally performative ones as well as those that take place in everyday cultural practice. These practices include the dialects and vernacular forms associated with minorities like African Americans, as well as those associated with cultural subgroups (hipsters, rappers) which are direct spin-offs form African American culture.

It is in this sense that Not I, and much of Beckett's work, derives its power, at least in part, from utilizing those elements of American-style poetics identified by Denis Donoghue, in which the verse is animated by the apparent syntactic autonomy of its phrases. This could be termed the poetics of the cliché. It is part of another secret history, the outlines of which have been a major subject of this study. The elements identified by Donoghue, and utilized to such effect by Beckett, echo many of the elements of African American poetics, as they were developed in the performing and literary practices of black American poets and entertainers. To employ the term of art used here just a little further, the secret history of modernism is its intricate relationship to African American artistic practices. It is in this sense that the work of Beckett can be said, at least in terms of the uses of language outlined here, to be indebted to the African American tradition.

To return, finally, to the comedic: the syntactic disruption of Beckett's play is also a comedic gesture, its apparently random interruptions of discourse appear intended to get a laugh, even as they also portray a tragic situation. The white mouth peeping out of the shadows directly signifies on the old American tradition of minstrelsy. The vision is at first disturbing to those who know this tradition, and yet once the mouth begins to

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speak, the jangled syntax seems to displace this signification. We may be reminded of a minstrel show, but we are not, finally, in such a show. We are in a thoroughly modern work, in which the psychological decline of a consciousness is on display. But how far away are we, really from minstrelsy, from the traditional sources of American style comedy, in Not I?

At the same time, it might be productive to inquire into the reasons why the relationship that has been outlined in this chapter between minstrelsy and its conventions, on the one hand, and the dramatic art of Beckett, on the other, have not occupied a larger space in the critical discourse than it has so far. One reason for this may be found in the nature of that critical discourse itself. The next chapter suggests why this might be the case. The idea of an ontological tension in the relationship between the popular arts, such as minstrelsy and, as I discuss in the next chapter, vaudeville, and modernism on the other, has been a staple of modernist criticism. This idea needs to be interrogated, if we are to more fully understand the aesthetic sources of much of modernist literature and culture. The next chapter undertakes just such an interrogation, with the aim of also clarifying the relationship between African American writing and modernism as well.

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Chapter Four

Vaudeville

1

The use of the term vaudeville as a metaphor for the modernist project is one that goes back to the beginnings of modernism itself. Music hall performers and dancers inspired the English decadent and symbolist poets, and Arthur Symons, in his collection London Nights (1895) is considered to have created a classic expression of the connection the precursors of modernism (who thought of themselves as modernist) made between their art and the emergent variety, or vaudeville, theater, as he demonstrates here, in the "Prologue" to the collection:

> My life is like a music-hall,
>
> Where, in the impotence of rage,
>
> Chained by enchantment to my stall,
>
> I see myself upon the stage
>
> Dance to amuse a music-hall.
>
> (Symons 38)

As Linda Dowling remarks, Symons treated the music hall "in the spirit of art" (233).[1] The word vaudeville, which in the late nineteenth century began to be used to refer to a particular genre of theater performance, also came to be identified, as well, with a style of making art. That style was characterized by the mixing of genres in a performance with the aim of emphasizing their varietal character. One particular feature of this genre was the assembling of various parts of the performance in what appeared to be random order.

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[1] On the relationship between the English Music Hall and the Symbolist poets, see Adlard, Faulk, Jan B. Gordon, and Kermode, 127-140.

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James Weldon Johnson described one early vaudeville performance, The Octoroons (1895) this way: "It was billed, 'A Musical Farce,' but it was made up of a first part, a middle part, and a finale, neither one having any sequential connexion with the others" (96, spelling as in original). Robert W. Snyder has described in detail the structure of these performances. "To an outsider, the sequence of acts looked as random as the scenes glimpsed from a trolley car on a busy city street," he writes. However, the selections "were actually based on established principles of vaudeville" (66). Those principles, as described by George Gottlieb, a booker for the Palace Theater, and as summarized by Snyder, have the vaudeville performance divided into nine parts: a "dumb act," consisting of dancers or trick animals; followed by "anything more interesting than the first act," such as a singer; a comic; another two singers, one lesser known than the other. Then there is an intermission, followed by the last four acts, which consist, again, of miscellaneous performers, including mimes, comic skits, and, of course, the big star, who is followed by "the closing act, preferably a visual number—trick animals or trapeze artists—that sent the audience home pleased" (Snyder 66-67).

The lack of narrative developmental or sequential connection between the various parts of the show is crucial to understanding what differentiated vaudeville from other forms of comedic stage performance. The lack of an overarching, determinative narrative was a modernizing characteristic of the form. It prefigured the disruption of narrative and sequential architecture that became a hallmark of modernist art.

Among those who understood this were the original publicists of Cane by Jean Toomer. The description they wrote on the dust jacket of the first edition of the book called it "a vaudeville out of the South." Presumably the authors of this description had

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some confidence that their audience would understand the term, as it was applied to the book. Here is the dust jacket copy, as quoted by Michael Soto:

> This book is a vaudeville out of the South. Its acts are sketches, short stories, one long drama and a few poems. The curtain rises (Part One) upon the folk life of Southern Negroes, their simple tragedies, their wistfulness, their waywardness, their superstitions, and their crude joy in life. Part Two is the more complex and modern brown life of Washington. Jazz rhythms all but supplant the folk tunes—one simple narrative weaves its plaintive way, and is almost lost amid the complications of the city. Part three (a single drama) Georgia again. But this is not a brief tale of peasant sorrow. It is a moving and sustained tragedy of spiritual suffering.
>
> There can be no cumulative and consistent movement and, of course, no central plot to such a book. But if it be accepted as a unit of spiritual experience, then one can find in Cane a beginning, a progression, a complication, and an end. It is too complex a volume to find its parallel in the Negro musical comedies so popular on Broadway. Cane is black vaudeville. It is black super-vaudeville out of the South.
>
> (Soto 169-70)

The linkage established here between jazz, vaudeville, and certain characteristics of a modernist literary work ("no cumulative and consistent movement," "no central plot," "a unit of spiritual experience") is one that was commonly drawn by those who were attempting to understand literary modernism in the 1920s. In fact, the linkage between "high" modernism and the art forms of which vaudeville was a part was, if not a

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commonplace, at least widely and importantly used as a hermeneutic tool among some of the important early critics of modernism. Among these were Clive Bell and Gilbert Seldes. Both Bell and Seldes identified literary modernism as a movement belonging to the same impulse that gave rise to jazz. Bell, in his essay "Plus de Jazz" (1921) went so far as to say this about T.S. Eliot: "Mr. Eliot is about the best of our living poets, and, like Stravinsky, he is as much a product of the Jazz movement as so good an artist can be of any" (223). Bell describes modernist literature in terms of its perceived affinities to jazz:

> In literature Jazz manifests itself both formally and in content. Formally its distinctive characteristic is the familiar one—syncopation. It has given us a ragtime literature which flouts traditional rhythms and sequences and grammar and logic. In verse its products—rhythms which are often indistinguishable from prose rhythms and collocations of words to which sometimes is assignable no exact intellectual significance—are familiar to all who read.
>
> (223)

Here the revolution in poetic language that was heralded by modernism is described in terms of its relationship to jazz; in particular, the metaphor for the linguistic disruptions and jaggedness of modernist poetry is linked to syncopation, which is the distinctive characteristic of African American music. Seldes, whose association with the Dial magazine made him one of the major arbiters of modernist literary taste in the 1920s, also took pains to draw these connections. Referring to the work of James Joyce, he writes: "if he is jazz, then Mr. Joyce's sense of form, his tremendous intellectual grasp of his aesthetic problem, and his solution to that problem, are more proof than is required of the

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case for jazz" (106). He adds: "similarly for Mr. Eliot." Seldes makes this case in his essay, "Toujours Jazz," first published in The Dial magazine in August, 1923 and reprinted the next year in The Seven Lively Arts. In this essay, Seldes argues that the popular arts and what has come to be known as "high" modernism have a shared sensibility.[2] It is important to note here that both critics contextualized literary modernism in terms of the aesthetic values of African American expressive culture, especially ragtime and jazz, rather than the other way around:

> The fact that jazz is our current mode of expression, has reference to our time and the way we think and talk, is interesting; but if jazz music weren't itself good the subject would be more suitable for a sociologist than for an admirer of the gay arts. Fortunately, the music and the way it is played are both of great interest, both have qualities which cannot be despised; and the cry that jazz is the enthusiastic disorganization of music is as extravagant as the prophecy that if we do not stop "jazzing" we will go down, as a nation, into ruin.
>
> (83)

There are many significant ideas at work here. First of all there is the idea that jazz is "our current mode of expression," which suggests that Seldes sees the music, as a mode of expression, as a starting point for understanding modern artistic expression generally. It is a point of departure for understanding how "we think and talk." However, he continues, it is the music itself, seen not simply as a cultural form of reference, but as a distinct art form in its own right, that allows both jazz, and Seldes's claims for it, to become the means of defining and understanding modernism generally. Perhaps the most

[2] For a discussion of Seldes's book, see North, Reading 1922, 140-172.

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interesting aspect of Seldes's essay is that point which has come under the most criticism. Seldes is criticized for his alleged ignorance of African American musicians, and for extolling white ones such as Paul Whiteman and Darius Milhaud. However, the significance of Seldes's accomplishment here is often overlooked. Seldes points out just how deep the "jazz" sensibility has affected western music as such, thereby permanently transforming twentieth century Western musical culture. "The free use of syncopation," writes Seldes, "has led our good composers of ragtime and jazz to discoveries in rhythm and to a mastery of complications which one finds only in the greatest masters of serious music" (88). He then quotes Henry Edward Krehbiel, who compared the music of Hector Berlioz to drummers from Dahomey who performed at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Berlioz, writes Krehbiel, "produced nothing to compare in artistic interest" with the Dahomian drummers, who he calls "savages." Seldes then adds:

> I am fully aware of the difference between savage and sophisticated, between folk and popular music; yet I cannot help believing that this entire statement, including Berlioz whom I greatly admire, could be applied to Paul Whiteman playing Pack Up Your Sins or his incredible mingling of A Stairway to Paradise with the Beale Street Blues.
>
> (88-89)

The focus by such sensitive critics as Michael North on the racist language used by Bell, or on the alleged ignorance of the African American roots of jazz on the part of Seldes (Reading 1922, 144-147), seems to miss the overall significance of these essays for their authors, who were attempting, among other things, to find a way of communicating to a

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broad audience just how modernist culture worked.[3] These criticisms seem to elide the very milieu in which these discussions of the meaning of the term "The Jazz Age" are taking place. North's suggestion that because Seldes refers to the white bandleader Paul Whiteman as his major model of a jazz composer he thereby compromises his interpretative authority and authenticity glosses over several points. For one thing, Seldes is careful to cite African American singers, songwriters and bandleaders (especially Florence Mills, Henry Creamer and Turner Layton, and James Reese Europe), as well as white ones. It must also not be forgotten that recordings by African American dance bands were still relatively rare in the early 1920s, when Bell and Seldes's essays first appeared.[4]

As if to demonstrate the claims made by Bell and Seldes, Eliot began his exploration of the possibilities of poetic drama, in 1923, with a farce that would draw directly from the minstrel tradition, racist mythology, and from the creative work of at least one African American poet. "Sweeney Agonistes" has long been recognized as Eliot's introductory foray into poetic drama, and as his major public engagement with the African American Imaginary. In 1935, F.O Matthiessen situated the play in just this fashion: "Eliot subtitled his first brief scenes 'fragments of an Aristophanic melodrama,' but the source of the verse spoken by Sweeney and his friends was much nearer at hand," he writes. Eliot, he adds, "was trying to utilize vaudeville rhythms for reasons that he had recently articulated in his appreciation of Marie Lloyd as 'the greatest music-hall artist of

---

[3] These criticisms may be especially unfair to Krehbiel, who, despite his use of the offensive "savages" (65) wrote a landmark book on black music; and who, in the book's preface, cited Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, and printed several songs arranged by Harry T. Burliegh.

[4] At that time, Whiteman was the most famous bandleader in the country, but his ascension to that post was in some ways accidental. Europe, the most famous of the African American bandleaders, was murdered in 1919, and it was not until the mid-1920s that a black bandleader of his stature would again emerge, when

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her time.'" Matthessen adds: "The songs in Eliot's play, 'Under the bamboo tree' and 'My little island girl,' found their stimulus in American jazz, as did the syncopation of the dialogue" (158-159).

Eliot wrote his eulogy for Lloyd, the English music-hall performer, in November 1922. It was published the next month in the Dial magazine.[5] He was interested in Lloyd as a "popular" performer. Popularity "in her case," he writes, "was something more than success. It is evidence of the extent to which she represented and expressed that part of the English nation which perhaps has perhaps the greatest vitality and interest" (658). In the original article, Eliot cites a report of her funeral, and then writes about her as a performer. What most interests him is her connection, and her ability to express, the lives and sensibilities of the working class:

> To appreciate for instance the last turn in which Marie Lloyd appeared, one ought to know already exactly what objects a middle-aged woman of the charwoman class would carry in her bag; exactly how she would go through her bag in search of something; and exactly the tone of voice in which she would enumerate the objects found in it. This was only part of the acting in Marie Lloyd's last song, I'm One of the Ruins That Cromwell Knocked Abaht a Bit.
>
> (661)

The combination of vaudeville and working class cultures that interested Eliot here would become the foundation on which he would build "Sweeney Agonistes." The

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the band led by Fletcher Henderson orchestra became the first nationally known black-led jazz orchestra of the era. See Charters and Kunstadt, and Jacques. On James Reese Europe, see Badger.

[5] For some reason, the date given in Eliot's Selected Essays (1935) is 1923. Quotes given here are from the essay as it appeared in The Dial.

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play evokes both the minstrel show and paranoid white colonial fantasies associated with cannibalism ("I'll carry you off/to a cannibal isle" Sweeney says to Doris, "I'll gobble you up" [Collected Poems 79-80]), closing with a set of chanting lines in a meditation on death and loneliness ("And you wait for a knock and the turning of a lock for you know the hangman's waiting for you. / And perhaps you're alive/And perhaps you're dead/Hoo ha ha" [Collected Poems 84-85]). Rachel Blau DuPlessis has explored how this fantasia is embedded within a "construction of whiteness," but her observations about the formal qualities of "Sweeney Agonistes" are also of interest in light of the present discussion:

> As a fusion of genres "Sweeney Agonistes" is rich, compounding melodrama, tabloid talk, working-class sentimental poetry, true crime confession, bartender's parable, religious ritual, and Gilbert and Sullivan operetta—as well as minstrel and vaudeville.
>
> (683)

The play combines the cross talk-style dialogue of the comedic duet (though it doesn't quite rise to the level of parataxis one finds in Miller and Lyles's "Indefinite Talk" routines) allusions to the end-men performance of minstrel shows, and a recasting of a "coon" song era composition co-written by James Weldon Johnson ("Under the Bamboo Tree") into a brief, two-act play.[6] In offering her description of Eliot's melodrama, DuPlessis shows just how deeply involved modernism was in the popular. This involvement deepened throughout the interwar years and provoked a critical reaction that had broad implications for the construction, not only of the modernist canon,

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[6] Ronald Schuchard writes that when Eliot arrived in London in 1914 "he was already steeped in American vaudeville and minstrel shows" (104). In the later 1920s, he would entertain friends like I.A. Richards with the 1927 record, "Two Black Crows," by the American (white) blackface comic duo, Moran and Mack (149).

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but also of our society's cultural memory of what modernism as such was as a creative endeavor and artistic movement.

Just as it is important to recall how involved Eliot was with popular forms, it is also important to recall how this contextualization was a part of the way Cane was first discussed. Cane was published by the Boni and Liveright, the same publishing house that brought out Eliot's "The Waste Land" in 1922, and would bring out other canonical texts of modernist literature, such as Personae by Ezra Pound and White Buildings by Hart Crane in 1926, and this fact suggests the place of Toomer's work at the center of modernist literature. Yet the canonization process that has taken place renders Cane in a different, and to some extent marginal, place in relationship to the others in this company. In addition, the fact that at least some of the earliest critics of modernism saw the modernist project in terms of its relationship to African American expressive culture has been lost to the process of canonization that modernism has undergone in the second half of the twentieth century.

How did this happen? While a detailed examination of the history of modernist criticism is out of place here, it is useful to examine some of the ideas that have come down to us in terms of our understanding of modernism in order to help us further understand, not only the relationship of modernism to the African American Imaginary, but to also understand what might be called the critical displacement that faced Cane, and, by implication, much of the rest of African American literature produced during the modernist era.

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It seems that the further the historical moment of modernism recedes, the more urgent the exploration of questions about the genre, genealogy, and canon of modernism become. This is so for many reasons, at least one of them being our need to better understand that history and culture that is presumed to be the immediate antecedent of our own. At the same time there is a strong current — which is by no means limited to what might be called "conservative" criticism — which seems to suggest that these are settled questions. Even as these questions are raised, the first reactions, as they have been suggested above, can still be heard. These questions have been settled, these reactions seem to suggest, and the major task for literary criticism now is to examine the details.

It is remarkable how these ideas continue to inform much of our understanding of literary modernism, and it remains of interest how impervious the received wisdom on these questions seems to be to the challenge posed by new claims on the categories of canon, genre and genealogy. How this could be so is as important a question as why it should be so. A large part of literary studies seems to remain within a discursive field bounded by a set of assumptions about literary modernity that differ little from the time these questions were first posed, and presumably answered, in the mid-twentieth century. Examples of this situation are abundant, but a cursory look at just one contemporary definition of literary modernism will suffice to make the point outlined here.

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Definitions of modernism abound.[7] What is of interest is how this vast literature is summarized, and what such a summary can tell us about how we understand the modernist project. One such summary, appearing in a reference work published at the beginning of the twenty-first century, can serve as a subject for an inquiry into the idea of modernism itself. David Macey, in the Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory, under the heading "modernism" (257-259), tells us that the word "is widely used to describe a variety of tendencies within the European, and especially Anglo-American, literature of the early twentieth century" (257). "Modernism is in fact a surprisingly elusive term," he adds, "not least in that there are so many national variations to its meaning" (258). He defines the word in terms of the famous names associated with the movement: Joyce, Stein, Eliot, Stevens, Pound, and attempts to firmly situate modernism as an Anglo-American phenomenon, by arguing that the word, as it is used in French, Italian, and Spanish, refers to cultural phenomena that is distinct from its use in Great Britain and North America. He also identifies modernism with some of the same characteristics Everdell does: stream of consciousness, free verse, abstraction; and, citing Clement Greenberg, he points to the artist's focus on the medium as the material for art-making as a characteristic of modernism. In a second reference to Greenberg, Macey writes about the latter's argument "that the abstraction of modernism is the only real defense against the kitsch of mass culture" (259). On this point, Macey adds that "the aesthetic introversion that leads to the accusation of elitism and the distrust of popular culture are perhaps symptomatic of the darker side of modernism typified by Eliot's anti-Semitic remarks in After Strange Gods or Pound's apologias for Italian Fascism" (259).

[7] Harry Levin has written a succinct essay covering the topic. For more extensive, book-length explorations, see Bradbury and McFarlane; Everdell; also see Karl. Everdell (363-65) provides an extensive

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What follows is a rhetorical gesture that can serve to illustrate the major concern of the present discussion. It is the only mention in this entry of the literary and cultural output of non-white artists; at the same time, it seems to situate those artists within a framework that is itself canonical, within the context of modernist criticism:

> Despite the presence in the modernist canon of Woolf and Stein, modernism often appears to be a very masculine affair, but Scott's Gender of Modernism anthology (1990) does much to correct the gender imbalance. Sara Blair's suggestion (1999) that the Harlem Renaissance should figure in any serious discussion of modernism is also to be welcomed.
>
> (259)

The most interesting aspects of this definition are those elements that are most familiar. These include: canon-building by naming what might be called modernism's Big Six (Eliot, Woolf, Pound, Stein, Stevens, and Joyce); the subsequent claim of modernism's Anglo-American provenance; the definition that focuses on artistic technique and the artist's concentration on the materiality of the art work as both the means and object of art-making; and the counterpoising of high against low culture, of the avant garde against kitsch, abstraction against mass culture, modernism against popular culture.

These dualities have governed the consensus about literary modernism since at least the late 1930s. The deployment of them here is particularly telling because of its characterization of them, one aspect of which, we are told, is the growth in influence of right-wing political ideology on some of the leading modernist writers. This is remarked upon without any evaluation concerning how this could have come about. It is not here,

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bibliography.

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however, that the definition reveals the fissure that is of concern here. What is of real interest is the way in which gender and "race" are deployed within this definition of modernism. "Modernism appears to be a very masculine affair" is an idea that has been widely challenged, as Macey points out. In addition, the idea that the Harlem Renaissance would "be welcomed" within any discussion of modernism is also remarked upon without elaboration. What is the effect of this rhetoric? By using the consensus view of the ontology of modernism, and then parenthetically adding the questions of gender and of African American literature, Macey appears to accomplish two things. He allows the consensus view to stand unchallenged, and by the device of the parenthetical nod, rhetorically places the would-be challengers to this view (gender and "race") at the margins of the discussion.

Macey's definition can stand, then, as a kind of metaphor for a whole set of critical concerns, including those that have so far occupied the present study. There have been several responses to this consensus view. One of them has been to engage in the project of historical recovery, such as that referred to in the paragraph quoted above. Gender studies has gone a long way toward reconstructing a canon of modernist literature in which the important women writers consist of more than Woolf and Stein. Yet the consensus view can still be deployed, even in a book as useful and comprehensive, when it comes to identifying trends, thinkers and ideas of contemporary theory as the Penguin Dictionary. Modernism "often appears" to be a masculine affair, despite the importance of writers ranging from H.D. and Marianne Moore to Zora Neale Hurston and Djuna Barnes. Recovery, then, seems to have its limits. Barnes may be marginal to Macey's definition, and yet her novel, Nightwood received, from T.S. Eliot (who wrote an

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introduction to the book), the praise "that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it" (xii). Eliot's act of legitimization might seem patronizing and old fashioned; yet it is curious how it does not signal to a critic writing several decades later the need to revise his own authoritative "masculine affair" theory of modernism.

Another response to this rhetoric of marginalization has been to construct a counter-canon, with its own set of definitions. Here, again referring to the literary movement cited in the Dictionary, we find advocates of those writers associated with the "Harlem" school of the 1920s resorting to a new vocabulary. Hence, we have the terms "Afro Modernist Aesthetics" (Mark A. Sanders), "Afrocentric Modernism" (Lorenzo Thomas), "African American Modernism" (Michael Coyle), and Houston A. Baker Jr's two terms, "Afro Modernity" and "black modernism."

One consequence of this over-determined use of qualifiers is the suggestion that these texts and writers were somehow marginal to the modernist project itself. It is a view that is certainly shared by consensus builders like the compiler of the Penguin Dictionary, but one that does not necessarily accord with the facts. To claim an "Afro" modernism is to appear to accord with the view that the writers under discussion were not only overlooked in their lifetimes, but that their works had no discernable impact on the culture beyond a small, select circle. This is true, of course, for many of the writers whose works were recovered by feminist and African American literary specialists in the latter part of the twentieth century. This idea should be interrogated, however, when it is meant to ascribe a condition of "marginality" on writers like Gertrude Stein or Langston Hughes. Stein was famous enough to be a popular cultural reference in the movies: at one

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point in the 1935 film Top Hat, by Mark Sandrich, Dale Tremont (Ginger Rogers) responds to a character who read her a telegram that he finds incomprehensible by saying, "sounds like Gertrude Stein."[8] For his part, Hughes was for decades the most widely read African American writer in any genre, with a body of work that ranged from poetry to libretto for the Broadway stage. One of the founders of the New Critics school of modernist criticism, Cleanth Brooks, in a telling remark, found both Genevieve Taggard and Hughes guilty of "sentimentality" (51), which he considered a cardinal sin. On the other hand, James Edward Smethurst has argued the case (93-115) for seeing Hughes as a modernist poet whose use of an African American vernacular voice was a distinguishing element of his modernist style. The question remains, however, concerning how productive it is to read a poet like Hughes as one whose work must be considered solely from within an African American tradition.

While not disputing the claim that the category of "Afro Modernism" and its related terms are useful for purposes of recovering lost texts, assigning the place of such texts within the black literary tradition, and for the elaboration of an African American poetics, it must be said that the claims made under such categorizations seem to demand very little of the broader English language literary tradition as such. Those operations that set up a distinct canon, as valuable as they are, do not interrogate whether such a canon, or the texts within such a canon, have any affect on the composition of that canon that is generally ascribed as that belonging to the "majority" culture. Given the richness and

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[8] The "telegram," read by the character Alberto Beddini (Erik Rhodes), follows:
"Come ahead, stop.
Stop being a sap, stop.
You can even bring Alberto, stop.
My husband is stopping at your hotel, stop.
When do you start, stop." (Top Hat)

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complexity of African American literature, how can the maintenance, for example, of a definition of modernism that makes the Harlem Renaissance a parenthetical category be allowed to stand? In a word, the claims of those critics who are establishing a distinct African American literary tradition seem to be too modest. What is the source of this modesty? One way of looking at this question is to inquire into what qualities the modernist consensus and its "Afro Modernist" may have in common.

Among the distinguishing features of the Afro Modernist discourse is its attention to the question of identity, and to the use by black writers of elements from popular culture. In the criticism that focuses on African American writers of the modernist period, these two questions are given pride of place, and are part of what seems to be what is meant when critics of African American literature claim, along with Houston A. Baker, Jr., that:

> African and Afro-Americans—through conscious and unconscious designs of various Western 'modernisms'—have little in common with Joycean or Eliotic projects. Further, it seems to me that the very *histories* that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism, especially the *discursive* history of such modernism.
>
> (Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, xvi, emphasis in original.)

Baker's sense of the discursive history of Afro-American modernism certainly includes the engagement by such discourses with issues of the racialized self, and also includes

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engagement with popular culture, in particular the blues and jazz. It is, however, these very distinctions drawn by these critics when writing about black literature and modernism that place them in what seems to be a discursive intimacy with the consensus view. Both seem to presume the non-racialized universality of the modernist speaking subject, and both seem to agree that the fissure between "high" and "low" culture, the distinction between avant garde and kitsch, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of "Joycean or Eliotic projects." Both groups appear to believe that part of the anxiety that produced modernism in the first place is what Macey calls high modernism's "distrust of popular culture," and that therefore black writers who write in a modernist mode must be considered as separate and distinct from the former, precisely because they exhibit less of this distrust.

The consensus view about universal identity and the fissure between modernism and popular culture are ideas which have their own history, and that history is in large measure identical with the history of modernist criticism itself. In other words, there is the distinct possibility that modernism, as it emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century, and as it was understood by artists and critics alike, was not at all a "very male affair," and certainly not an all-white project. One only has to read the earliest issues of Poetry magazine to see how many of the earliest free verse practitioners were women; and that the most famous of them all, Amy Lowell, was one of the best known American poets of the early twentieth century.[9] One of the most important American literary critics and champions of the new poetry was William Stanley Braithwaite (1878-1962), who wrote a widely-read newspaper column on modern poetry in The Boston Evening

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Transcript, and edited an important annual series of poetry anthologies that for nearly two decades influenced popular taste in modern poetry in the United States.[10] These facts would seem to suggest a reality that preceded the consensus view, an alternate reality that has only recently begun to receive attention once again. Curiously, however, the attention very often seems to come from within a discourse that signifies itself as coming from the margins, thereby reenacting the very moves that created the consensus in the first place.

Figuring out how literary criticism in general, and modernist literary criticism in particular, came to this state of affairs would require writing a history of that criticism, a history which is outside the scope of this study. While it is true that the emergence of "practical criticism" of the English school (I.A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, and William Empson) in the late 1920s (and the publication of I.A. Richards's book of that name in 1929) is generally acknowledged as a critical juncture in the emergence of formalist criticism; what is less understood is how the emergence of such criticism would lead to the displacement of the African American Imaginary from the critical and aesthetic understanding of modernism. It might be said that even raising the issue in this way is provocative. However, it is useful to remember Cary Nelson's observation that "we no longer know" the history of the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. He adds "most of us, moreover, do not know that the knowledge is gone" (4). The same might be said for the development of modernist criticism; in lieu of attempting a historical reconstruction, however, it might be useful to speculate on how the emergence of

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[9] It is certainly true that by the mid 1920s, most of the contributors to Poetry magazine were women. In 1923, fifty-one contributors were male, while 104 women contributed poems to the magazine. See Poetry: A Magazine of Verse.

[10] Braithwaite edited the annual Anthology of Magazine Verse from 1913 to 1930. See Butcher. Also see Szefel, and Thomas, 45-73.

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formalism was implicated in the displacement of the African American Imaginary from our understanding of modernism.

3

The charge of sentimentality Brooks levies against Taggard and Hughes comes at the end of a long discussion that draws on the poetics of John Donne and the Metaphysical poets to mount an argument that opposes poetic truth to propaganda (39-53); the charge is made against the poets regarding their contributions to the left-wing literary anthology Proletarian Literature in the United States, edited by Granville Hicks and a group of other writers associated with the Communist left and the popular front.[11] The issues Brooks is concerned with have to do with elevating the value of metaphor and irony in poetry, in opposition to a "scientific" (and propagandistic) poetry. At the same time, the issues raised by Brooks were part of a larger debate, one which is itself implicated in the displacement of texts by African American and many women authors from the canon of modernism. This displacement was a major result of the rise of formalist literary criticism in the 1930s. The history of the rise of this style of criticism is well documented, and need not be repeated here.[12] Much discussion about the rise of formalist criticism identifies this displacement in terms of the political struggles of the 1930s, and comments such as those of Brooks in Modern Poetry and the Tradition, give ample ground for such a view. However, little attention has been given to how the rise of formalism effected black writers and writing. John Fekete has pointed to the racially

[11] For a discussion of this book and the milieu from which it arose, see Denning 200-229.

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reactionary ideas of some of these critics, especially the defenses of slavery and the Confederacy undertaken by John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate in the 1930s (233).[13] While Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Michael Bérubé have detailed the impact of the writings of Allen Tate and Karl Shapiro on the critical reception of the poetry of Melvin Tolson, it seems that more can be said on this score. For one thing, both Fekete and Bérebé appear to treat the displacement and marginalization of African American writers and black culture as a commonly understood and accepted fact of literary history. This rhetorical naturalization of the marginal status of black writing seems difficult to comprehend, when we consider the publication history of a text like Cane, or the apparent need of a critic of Brooks's stature to engage in an act of critical dismissal of an artist as well known as Hughes. On the other hand, if the displacement of black writing is considered as an historical act, one undertaken as a deliberative critical move, then perhaps the relationship between black writing and modernism can come into a different focus than has hitherto been the case.

One problem in reconsidering how this displacement came about has to do with the fact that most of the relevant discussions have focused on political questions, making it difficult to see the aesthetic issues involved. A quote from Clement Greenberg can serve as an illustration of this problem. In a parenthetical comment in the essay "The Late Thirties in New York," he writes that "some day it will have to be told how 'anti-Stalinism,' which started out more or less as 'Trotskyism,' turned into art for art's sake,

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[12] See Wimsatt, Jr., and Brooks. A more succinct, modern version can be found in Dickstein. Both Fekete and Lentricchia have written more critical studies of this subject.
[13] He quotes Ransom (from "The Aesthetic of Regionalism." The American Review II, January 1934, 303): "The peculiar institution of slavery set this general area [the South] apart from the rest of the world, gave a spiritualcontinuity to its many regions, and strengthened them under the reinforcement of 'sectionalism.'" Fekete also quotes Tate, from his book Stonewall Jackson, The Good Soldier (1928); 39: "The institution

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and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come" (230). This comment, and the essay in which it is embedded, seems at first glance like a straightforward political statement, yet the phrase "turned into art for art's sake," is suggestive of more than politics. It suggests an aesthetic positioning with regard to the place and time that the essay claims to recall; it is a positioning in which politics "turned into" art, thereby stimulating a "heroic" age. This heroic age that Greenberg identifies can be seen a little more prosaically as the age in which, as Karen O'Kane suggests, the Nashville group of former Southern Agrarians joined with a group of left wing critics (who were beginning to abandon their former leftism) under the aegis of the Rockefeller Foundation to create the institution of modern literary criticism. This story, as O'Kane tells it, is somewhat different than the way this turn is often described (O'Kane). Paul Lauter has charted the exclusion of African American and women writers from poetry anthologies and from the college curriculum from the 1920s through the 1960s. He cites two important anthologies, however, which did include black writers: Alfred Kreymborg's Lyric America (1930) and Louis Untermeyer's Modern American Poetry. Untermeyer's anthology went through six editions between 1919 and 1942. Here is how Lauter describes how the fortunes of African American poets fared in this anthology:

> Untermeyer's editing exemplifies the rise and fall of interest in black writers. His first two editions (1919 and 1921) contained poems by Dunbar, joined in the 1925 version by Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, and Alex Rogers, and then later by Langston Hughes, and Jean Toomer. By the 1942 sixth edition, however, only

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of slavery was a positive good only in the sense that Calhoun said it was: it had become a necessary element in a stable society." Tate also wrote a biography of the president of the Confederacy.

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> Dunbar, Johnson, Cullen and Hughes remained; the seventh edition witnessed the elimination of Dunbar.
>
> (25)

What happened? "Three important factors may be responsible," writes Lauter. These include "the professionalization of the teaching of literature, the development of an aesthetic theory that privileged certain texts, and the historiographic organization of the body of literature into conventional 'periods' and 'themes'" (27). It is an explanation that is striking in its projection of these developments as having apparently developed "naturally," as it were, and stands in some contrast to the agentive explanation that Greenberg gives. O'Kane offers a more motivated explanation as well, when she explains how the New York critics associated with the Partisan Review came into an alliance with the "Nashville group" in a project that produced, among other things, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's textbook, Understanding Poetry. Each of these stories might be open to an interpretation which shows the dominance of formalist criticism from the mid-twentieth century as a phenomenon which came from an opportunistic alliance between a group of Marxist New York intellectuals and another group, made up primarily of defenders of slavery, the Confederacy, and racial segregation in the South. One trouble with this interpretation is that it underestimates the degree to which the writers associated with the Partisan Review, as it was newly reorganized in 1938, had already severed any association they once had with African American writers. As James Smethurst points out, this magazine, which started "as a publication of the John Reed Club and the Communist left from 1934 to 1936 published—and reviewed works by African American authors." The authors published and reviewed in the early Partisan Review included Langston

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Hughes, Richard Wright, Arna Bontemps, and Sterling Brown. The magazine suspended publication in 1936. Smethurst describes what happened next. "After a hiatus of eighteen months, Partisan Review reappeared in December 1937 as a journal of what came to be known as the 'anti-Stalinist left.'" He then adds:

> From that point, as far as I can tell, nothing written by an African American author appeared in the journal until James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel," a patricidal assault on Richard Wright and the Communist Left via Uncle Tom's Cabin in June 1949. During the same period, no African Americans were included on the masthead of Partisan Review and only three reviews of books by African American authors (a review of Wright's Uncle Tom's Children in 1938, a brief review of Native Son in a survey of current fiction in 1941, and a longer review of Black Boy in 1945) were published.
>
> (222)

Strictly speaking, Smethurst is mistaken on one point. The journal did publish "A Portrait of the Hipster," by Anatole Broyard in its June, 1948 issue (Broyard). Broyard was an African American who was passing for white. His article was an examination of a social type that was characteristically ascribed to African Americans, and which would become an iconic symbol of the African American Imaginary in the post-World War II years.[14] On the other hand, Smethurst's observation highlights the fact that for ten years, the only African American writer to appear in the "anti-Stalinist left" edition of the Partisan Review was one who denied being black; one who, in doing so, pretended to be

[14] Broyard became a leading New York Times book critic. See Gates, "The Passing of Anatole Broyard." On the concept of hip and hipsters, see Ross, 65-101; also see Eversley. "The Source of Hip."

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a white person examining and explaining an aspect of black culture for a (presumably) white audience. This sort of "racial masquerade" in reverse (to borrow a phrase from Michael North) is ironic, given that a distinguishing characteristic of modernism in the years between the world wars was the impact of the African American Imaginary on modernist literary culture. The turn away from this influence on the part of the intellectuals around Partisan Review was part of a larger cultural development, the impact of which would be felt on American literary culture for a generation. The terms that governed how this development came about have largely been articulated as political ones. It is also the case, however, that aesthetic issues were involved as well. There is no particular reason why a means of teaching and interpreting literature that focuses on close textual readings should, in and of itself, exclude black writers. Yet this is precisely what happened. It did not happen naturally, however, but was in part the result of an aesthetic strategy, which, when recalled as the "turn to art for art's sake," appears to obscure more than it reveals.

4

One place to look for the rupture that helped displace African American writing and culture from modernism is by taking a close look at another article by Greenberg, one published in Partisan Review after its revival and revamping as a critical voice of "high" modernism. "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," opens with a claim that is, itself, a kind of rhetorical enactment of the displacement that I have been attempting to identify:

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> One and the same civilization produces simultaneously two such very different things as a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song, or a painting by Braque and a Saturday Evening Post cover. All four are on the order of culture, and, ostensibly, parts of the same culture and products of the same society. Here, however, their connection seems to end.
>
> (3)

This essay is widely taken as a kind of aesthetic manifesto of the postwar avant-garde in painting, but in its original place of publication, it was also an argument for an interpretation of modernist culture generally. Its opening pair of binaries and its polemical tone point to an unidentified opponent whom, apparently, does not agree with the author's opinion. The terms under discussion are presented in a way that seems obvious. We presumably "know" who "T.S. Eliot," and "Braque" are, just as we "know" what a "Tin Pan Alley song," or a "Saturday Evening Post cover" is; and just as we "know" what they are, we also "know" they are ontologically different from each other. They may belong to the same society, but that is all: "here, however, their connection seems to end." The supposed obviousness of these terms, however, should not be so easily accepted. They are worthy of interrogation within the context of the present study, in part, because Greenberg's essay stands at a critical juncture in the history of modern culture. It stands at a dividing line in the history of recent cultural memory, when—to repeat Cary Nelson's formulation—the history of American poetry (and, by extension, of American culture) that "we no longer know" began to be submerged to the point where it became a kind of secret history, a history and body of knowledge that was so secret that most of us "do not know that the knowledge is gone." One way of identifying this

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"secret" history is to follow the revisionary histories of the interwar period that have emerged in the last few years. Along with Nelson and Smethurst, Michael Denning, Ann Douglas, Lewis A. Erenberg, Walter Kalaidjian, Nina Miller, and others, have given us a much more complicated view of the workings of modernist culture than that argued in the opening lines of Greenberg's essay.

Before thinking about the implications of this history for the argument advanced here, it will be useful to explore in more depth the argument made in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch." This is because, as Greenberg himself says, the questions he raises are aimed at exploring "the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place" (3). Already at the beginning of this essay, Greenberg has located these "social and historical contexts" as residing across a line of difference, where "one and the same civilization" can produce the binaries he identifies. The beginning of the essay is a historical review of the emergence of the avant-garde, and what is significant, given the character of the binaries he proposes at the beginning, is that this history is exclusively one of late nineteenth and early twentieth century European culture. This is all the more remarkable because his argument begins with a characterization that describes both European and U.S. artists and artworks. The avant-garde, he writes, arose in the mid-nineteenth century, in part catalyzed by "a superior consciousness of history—more precisely, the appearance of a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism;" and "the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically—and geographically, too—with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe" (4). By identifying the avant-garde and its sources as strictly European, Greenberg revives an

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old inferiority complex that has lived at the heart of American criticism since revolutionary times. At the same time, he elides the question of whether any American sources of the avant-garde can be found; the idea that began this chapter, the vaudeville (or its musical headquarters, Tin Pan Alley) can in some way be a metaphor for modernism is thus elided as well. One advantage he derives from this is his ability to claim that the "purity" of abstract art derives from the artists' concentration on the artwork's materiality as the sole source of value. "The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape—not its picture—is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars, or originals," he writes (6, emphasis in original). "Avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating," (8). For Greenberg, what the avant-garde artist imitated were the materials of the work of art. This is a fundamental part of his argument, because when artists sought to use new—even abstract—means of making art that was also involved with the popular, such art is no longer avant-garde; such art is kitsch.

It is immediately apparent that Greenberg elides the most obvious impact of African and African American culture on modern culture as such: the impact of black vernacular speech, the African sources of Cubism, and other African sources of abstract visual art. Commentators on this essay have often concentrated on its political dimension, and such a concentration is justified.[15] For Greenberg, kitsch was not only tied to popular culture in the United States, but with totalitarian political power abroad as well He goes to great lengths to describe the affinities both the Nazi and Soviet states had to kitsch. He argues that the rise of both the avant-garde, and of kitsch, are themselves symptoms of

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the world crisis that also brought about the economic crisis and the rise of Nazi and Soviet totalitarianisms.[16] The economic crisis caused a split between the avant-garde culture and its primary sponsors and patrons, the ruling classes:

> The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs—our ruling class.
>
> (8)

In Greenberg's formulation, kitsch appears as a site of tension, almost of paranoia. It is an encroaching, haunting presence that exists alongside modernism. Indeed, he even proposes that kitsch arose alongside modernism, suggesting a filial (but oppositional, as opposed to constitutive) relationship between the two. Both avant-garde and kitsch are products of modern society; each is, in a sense, a reaction to modern society. However, where avant-garde stands for purity, kitsch stands for pollution, and is, in fact, a source of pollution. It is, he says, "ersatz culture," which is "destined for those who, insenible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide" (10). Those who enjoy this "debased" culture, however, are, Greenberg suggests, victims of this debasement brought about by their affection for kitsch. As a fake culture, kitsch is also a dishonest culture:

> Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensation. Kitsch changes according to style, but

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[15] See the debate in Frascina for some of the political implications of Greenberg's argument.
[16] For a summary of the political environment in which Greenberg's essay was written, and the political issues at stake, see Guilbaut. While not attempting to underestimate those issues here, my primary concern is how the rhetoric of "Avant-garde and Kitsch" seems to have signaled a shift in literary and cultural politics that, among other things, displaced black writers and culture from a place in the modernist mainstream which they had occupied since the early 1920s.

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> remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.
>
> (10)

This extraordinary passage, which resounds with all the energy of a ritual chant, provides a set of values by which the reader would presumably be able to determine what products are kitsch. Andreas Huyssen argues for an affinity between Greenberg's anxieties about mass culture and those of Adorno. It is true that both thinkers identify such phenomena as Hollywood film with these anxieties. (Greenberg also adds the New Yorker magazine, the funny papers, and the Saturday Evening Post to his list.) It is important, though, to draw a distinction between the two. Greenberg is writing from within a modernist culture in which the relationship between "high" and "low" culture is already more complicated than he lets on; and it is to the silences embedded within his critique that attention must be paid if we are to see what is really at stake in this essay.

"Avant-garde and Kitsch" is almost silent about two major cultural events of its time, the rise of swing music, and those cultural forms and movement associated with the Popular Front. In some senses, as Michael Denning and Lewis A. Erenberg suggest, both swing music and popular culture were part of the same cultural formation that dominated U.S. society in the interwar years. These cultural milieus increasingly blended the linguistic and artistic innovations of the avant-garde with the instruments of popular culture in the service of a populist oriented art. This mixing of genres and styles had become pervasive by the late 1930s, and could be seen in such forms as the swing-era jazz band and in motion pictures, as well as in the poetry of such writers as Hughes,

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Taggard and Kenneth Fearing. These writers had used popular forms such as vernacular speech, music, advertising, and other elements of popular culture in their work as sources of allusive reference, just as Eliot had done during the previous decade. It was, in a sense, this 1930s modernism, which did not shrink from identifying with the African American Imaginary, which was one of Greenberg's major targets in "Avant-garde and Kitsch." In a word, when he talks about Kitsch, Greenberg is talking, at least in part, about African American culture and its impact on modern culture generally. His attempt to draw a line between "T.S. Eliot" and "a Tin Pan Alley song" can be read, then, as an attempt to reconstruct modernism on a new basis, one which eschewed the mixing of genres, and the populism, that were characteristic of modernist literature and cultural forms during the interwar period; and one which had been especially characteristic of American modernism during this period.[17]

What seemed to be at stake for Greenberg in taking this action was the legitimacy of the modernist project. Part of the rise of kitsch, and the danger it represents to high culture, comes, Greenberg suggests, from the fact that the avant-garde has lost the sense of its audience. "The avant-garde itself," he writes, "is becoming more and more timid every day that passes." He adds:

> Academicism and commercialism are appearing in the strangest places. This can mean only one thing: that the avant-garde is becoming unsure of the audience it depends on—the rich and the cultivated.
>
> (9)

[17] Theodor Adorno, whose writings on popular culture are compared (by Huyssen, among others) with Greenberg's, valorized Arnold Schoenberg's music as the epitome of high art values. It is interesting, though, how Adorno, in doing so, downplays Schoenberg's late, tonal works, which the composer wrote

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At least one aim of Greenberg's essay, then, seemed to be to restore the relationship between "the rich and the cultivated" and the avant-garde artist. That is exactly what happened with the visual arts, beginning in the early years of World War II and extending throughout the post-war years. This opposition to the culture of the popular front formed the basis for the alliance between the New York writers associated with Partisan Review and those associated with the Fugitive group in Nashville. This alliance, which was to dominate intellectual discourse in the United States for a generation or more after World War II, had the effect of nearly erasing one of the singular achievements of modern art during the interwar years: the ascendancy of African American art and culture to a place of respect and influence within the culture of modernism as such. This is a very different modernist culture than that envisioned and promoted by "Avant-garde and Kitsch." It is one whose heroes include modernist poets who write Broadway shows and detective fiction (Langston Hughes and Kenneth Fearing); who valorize the products of kitsch as sources of creativity (the Eliot of "Sweeney Agonistes); and who began to take visual abstraction that had been the hallmark of the avant-garde and interject it into popular culture generally (Stuart Davis and Jacob Lawrence). The conservative turn signaled by "Avant-garde and Kitsch" would not only bury the modernist aesthetic that I have been describing here, but it would, in effect, create a fissure in the way modernism was understood in critical discourse, a split whose resonance remains with us today, in the split, and splintered narratives that seek to explain the modernist past. This is especially true when we look at texts by African American writers that appeared during the interwar years. To insist that these texts can

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after he moved to Los Angeles and became connected with Hollywood. See Philosophy of Modern Music 103, 120. The composer's relationship with film industry musicians is explored by Otto Friedrich (31-59).

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best be understood as either "Afro Modernist," or as symptomatic of the failed hopes for a multiracial modernism that were defeated by the limitations imposed by a racially polarized society comes very close to reading literary and cultural history through the eyes of the conservatism inherited from the Faustian alliance between a group of post-Marxist New York critics and a group of post-Confederate Nashville ones. We can perhaps see that this is perhaps the case by taking a look at the life of one such text. Jean Toomer's Cane offers us an opportunity to rethink questions of canonicity and history with regard to modernism, if for no other reason that it stands at the boundary of all the categories that I have been discussing throughout this study.

5

If we consider Cane from both a historical standpoint and in terms of its genre as a literary text, it is surprising that it is less considered as a central text of literary modernism than appears justified. Indeed, the most important defenders of Cane's modernism seem to be those who write from the standpoint of also defending it as a central text of the African American tradition (Gates, Figures in Black 196-234). Cane went through two printings, in 1923 and 1927, before disappearing from view, and in its first five years of existence, had sales comparable to Hart Crane's White Buildings (also published by Boni and Liveright), which sold five hundred copies within the first three years of publication.[18] That each book sold fewer than one thousand copies of its first printing is less important than what the existence of both books within the same milieu

[18] On the sales of White Buildings, see Mariani, The Broken Tower 325. Michael Soto writes (180) that Cane sold 653 copies by mid-1928.

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(and market) suggest about Cane's place in the avant-garde. Yet there remain literary historians who problematize Cane's place in literary history in a way that seems to suggest that the ambition its author had for the book should be read as a symptom of failure. For Michael North, Cane's importance lies in the idea that "it distills a dilemma that faced the Americanist Avant-garde and the Harlem writers at the same time." That dilemma, he writes, had to do with irreconcilable artistic agendas:

> Whether it was the avant-garde, trying to make modernism into a dialect so as to challenge the cultural supremacy of English, or the Harlem writers, trying to make dialect into a modern literature so as to avoid the primitivizing pressures of the past, the central problem of reconciling competing linguistic motives remained. In the end, perhaps it was simply this dilemma that that two groups shared and nothing else.
>
> (Dialect of Modernism 174)

It is usually unproductive for a critic who is attentive to the details of American culture to underestimate how powerful, pervasive, and ubiquitous racism is in that culture. To the extent that North draws our attention to the fact of this racism in his examination of the relationship between Toomer and the white members of the literary avant-garde, he allows us to better understand some of the underlying issues at play in this relationship. However, such a reading has its limitations. By using a binary that echoes the one proposed by Greenberg (e.g., North's "avant-garde," and "Harlem writers," versus Greenberg's "T.S. Eliot" and "a Tin Pan Alley song") North presents readers with a dilemma: how can Cane best be interpreted? In this passage it appears that North is suggesting that the text belongs to the Harlem writers and not to the avant-garde, but his

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argument is not so simple. The passage comes at the end of a chapter in which North narrates a shared literary history between Toomer and William Carlos Williams in the 1920s American avant-garde. It is a narrative based on a pair of ideas: the first is that despite its interest in African and Meso-American culture, the (presumably all white) American avant-garde "proved ill-prepared to include within its conception of new American writing any examples that actually stretched the old categories of race and ethnicity." Secondly, that Toomer's increasing alienation from a legal system of racial categorization that would force him to identify solely as an African American demonstrates "the fundamental asymmetry of the American racial situation, in which Williams was free to define himself, even if it meant defining himself vicariously as black, while Toomer was not" (150). In his examination of what he calls the avant-garde's "contradiction of racial cross-identification and racial hatred" (161), North is at pains to draw the conclusion that the distinct and differing relationship to language that black and white writers each had during this period created a circumstance in which each group was carrying on competing, if not contradictory, aesthetic projects. Part of the argument he mounts for this point of view involves comparing Cane with William's Spring and All. It is a surprising move, in that he is, in a sense, comparing two works which, while they share some formal affinities, are unalike in one significant aspect. Although it was published in Dijon, France by Robert McAlmon in the fall of 1923 in an edition of 300, Spring and All is a book which, in effect, does not exist as a contemporary of Cane. Paul Mariani explains:

> [A]lmost no one saw Williams' book in its original edition. The Paris booksellers weren't interested in limited editions, McAlmon was to

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> explain, and most of the copies that were sent to America were simply confiscated by American customs officials as foreign stuff and therefore probably salacious and destructive of American morals. In effect, Spring and All all but disappeared as a cohesive text until its republication nearly ten years after Williams' death.
>
> (William Carlos Williams 209)

Although he does briefly acknowledge the virtual non-existence of Spring and All by calling it "a work that, if it had had any readers," would have seemed the "very epitome" of the avant-garde's desired style of "plain American" writing (147), North doesn't clarify the point. He places his examination of Williams's text near the beginning of the chapter, and, because he is writing a literary history, gives the impression of a social and historical equality between Spring and All and Cane. It is a curious critical move. By elevating Williams's virtually non-existent text to the discursive (and historical) level of Toomer's text, which was well known and widely regarded in its own time, and then by ascribing to Williams's text an advantage denied Toomer, North seems to reproduce the very condition of "the fundamental asymmetry of the American racial situation" that he criticizes the American avant-garde for not overcoming. The formal qualities that Spring and All possesses, and which North lists, include qualities which readers—and in particular readers of the literature of the American avant-garde—could have seen in Toomer, but not in Williams: "generic indeterminacy," "formal jaggedness," and "the breathless incompletion of its style" (152). In fact, attentive readers of the books of the leading New York avant-garde publisher of the early 1920s would come to identify these qualities, not with Williams, but with Boni and Liveright's T.S. Eliot and Jean Toomer;

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and they are qualities which readers, and the marketers of the avant-garde, would have identified with vaudeville, and with jazz.

It is useful, in this connection, to call attention to certain sections of Spring and All which readers would have seen, not in the complete book, but as at least one of them appeared in the most prominent little magazine of the avant-garde.

Poem XVII of Spring and All ("Shoot it Jimmy") is widely discussed by critics who are interested in the relationship between Williams and African Americans, and between the poet and jazz music. North points out that this section "includes some of the most extremely demotic lines of the whole sequence" (153). The poem originally appeared, slightly altered, in The Dial in August 1923 (Williams, Collected Poems 216, 504). It consists of free-verse couplets:

> Our orchestra
>
> is the cat's nuts—

Some, including, presumably, the editors of the Dial, might read this couplet as sexual innuendo, but such readers might be unaware of the vernacular meaning of the word "cat," which had already entered the language as a synonym for a wise and aware person (usually male).[19] Indeed, Langston Hughes published a related poem a few years later, "The Cat and the Saxophone (2 a.m.)" (Hughes, Collected Poems, 89), which can be seen as signifying on Williams poem. Both of them engage in demotic language and each of

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[19] The OED has this figurative use of the word: "an expert, or one expertly appreciative of, jazz. slang (orig. U.S.) (2:962). It follows this with a reference, from 1922, to John Alden Carpenter's ballet based on the comic strip, Krazy Kat, by George Herriman. Carpenter called his ballet a "jazz pantomime" (Seldes 321-245; 377-379). However, J.L. Dillard writes that the word's meaning as "a person," "comes from the Wolof "hipicat," meaning 'an aware person'" (Lexicon 66). He says its first English literary usage occurred in 1902, in The Black Cat Club by James Corrothers (67). Also see Corrothers, esp. 32-37.

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them revolve around verses from the same jazz song. Williams closes his poem with a verse from the song:

Nobody

Nobody else

but me—

They cant copy it

This verse resembles lyrics from "Everybody Loves My Baby," a song first recorded in 1924 by both Eva Taylor (who recorded it with a band led by a pianist who was one of the song's composers, her husband Clarence Williams), and by Alberta Hunter. (Louis Armstrong appears on both recordings.) Since the song was published in 1924, the year after his poem was published, it is not clear whether Williams was actually quoting it, but it is possible that the song was being sung in New York cabarets long before it was copyrighted, and that Williams heard the song in live performance.

It is very likely that Langston Hughes heard the song in live performance, as well as on record. The Red Onion Jazz Babies, a band that was led by New Orleans composer-pianist Clarence Williams and including Louis Armstrong and Sidney Bechet, recorded the song twice on November 6, 1924. Each record had a different singer: Eva Taylor and Alberta Hunter. It is possible that Alberta Hunter sang the song four days later, at a NAACP benefit in Harlem. The entertainment included, besides Hunter, singer Florence Mills, dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and band lead by Noble Sissle and Fletcher

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Henderson (with Louis Armstrong). Langston Hughes was in the audience (Hunter; Rampersad 96-97).

Both Williams's and Hughes's poems employ multiple voices. In Williams's poem, there are two, perhaps three voices, each discussing the uniqueness of jazz music, as is expressed by the poem's final line. Hughes ups the ante by creating a poem of up to five voices, including a voice of the singer, who is singing (in all capital letters) the song's lyrics:

EVERYBODY

Half-pint—

Gin?

No, make it

LOVES MY BABY

corn. You like

liquor,

don't you, honey?

BUT MY BABY

Sure. Kiss me,

DON'T LOVE NOBODY

daddy.

BUT ME.

Say!

(89)

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In his reading of Williams's poem, North argues that the "Nobody" of the poem refers to Bert Williams's song. "It is not at all unlikely," writes North, "that William Carlos Williams would have quoted the title of Bert Williams's song in his poem on jazz" (154). The phrase "Nobody but me" does not appear in Bert Williams's song. Nevertheless, the supposition that the poet is quoting the recently deceased ragtime-era master (North points out that Bert Williams died in 1922), rather than the then-contemporary singers Eva Taylor or Alberta Hunter, allows North to suggest that the resulting "Shoot it Jimmy" pivots on an act that resembles bad faith. Not only does North assume that the poem's reference to "Nobody," comes from Bert Williams's song, he refers to Gilbert Seldes, whose essay "Toujours Jazz," with its reference to Paul Whiteman, appears in the same issue of the Dial as Williams's poem. "If this is true, however, then the whole poem simply consumes itself," writes North. "If the white Williams is putting himself in the role of the black Williams, making a play on surnames quite the reverse of Seldes's, then the proud boast 'They can't copy it' becomes ironic nonsense." The word "nobody," North adds, "curls up on itself" (154), in a way that has the poet using the word in blackface; a blackface that inverts Bert Williams's grievance in a way that "puts African Americans in a seamless trap; they are nothing whenever they try to say anything but that they are nothing" (154). North adds:

> How is it that a term that makes a black man invisible and impotent can, when used in blackface, as it were, make for a white poet's assertion of difference and originality? The difference that made jazz appealing in the first place has been replaced here by a perfect simulacrum of itself.
>
> (154-55)

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The significance of the lyrics to “Everybody Loves My Baby” seems lost on North, in a way that it was not lost on either William Carlos Williams or Langston Hughes. “Everybody Loves My Baby” was a major signpost of the jazz age sensibility, one in which the word “nobody” transcended the boundaries it had adhered to in late-minstrel and ragtime era discourse. African Americans, in this new song, were individuals, creating an individual art and an individualized aesthetic sensibility. The distinction of this fact was surely not lost on the poet Williams, who was certainly aware of the sense of the phrase “they can’t copy it” as musicians used it. Jazz musicians used it to signal that the new music they created couldn’t be easily copied and commercialized by mainstream culture. However mistaken they may have been on this point, the struggle to create an art form in which this phrase would be perennially true was one of the motive forces behind the modernist (including the jazz) sensibility. This sensibility was also something that the poet Williams was trying to capture in “Shoot it Jimmy.”

Another aspect of the significance of “Everybody Loves My Baby” has to do with the fact that it was a love song. I will return to this point shortly, but here it is sufficient to point out that one characteristic of the New Negro sensibility as it entered the 1920s was the assertion of equal social status in matters of the heart. Songs asserting the individual right to love replaced the comic love songs of the ragtime era. (A companion song to “Everybody Loves My Baby” was “I’m a Little Blackbird,” also recorded by Eva Taylor with Clarence Williams. Part of its lyric goes: “I’m a little jazzbo looking for a rainbow too/ Building fairy castles same as all the white folks do.”) This can be seen as both an existential assertion as well as a political one, since the denial of the right to individual choice in love had been denied or constricted by white supremacy since the slavery era.

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Hughes certainly recognizes this, by embedding "Everybody Loves My Baby" into a poetic record of a couple engaging in a sexual negotiation. If he is alluding to "Everybody Loves My Baby," then, Williams can be seen as acknowledging the presence and value of the New Negro sensibility to his own work. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that this recognition produced anxieties similar to those shared by other white modernist writers. Aldon Lynn Nielsen writes about the primitivism, "romantic racism" and "aesthetic slumming" practiced by white American modernist poets (Reading Race 51-52). In examining Williams's work, Nielsen finds that he "shared with Pound the tendency to employ blacks as objects of local color, as he shared with Stein and so many other modernists an intense and highly romanticized interest in the purported sexuality of black people" (72). In a comment on "Shoot it Jimmy," however, Nielsen acknowledges that Williams "nevertheless was inspired by the rhythms and energies of jazz and wanted them for his own" (80). While these conflicting and contradictory impulses are commonplaces within modernism, as Nielsen demonstrates, they also reflect, as well, the importance of the African American Imaginary to the modernist project. Perhaps it would be too strong to say that modernist writers couldn't help themselves in engaging this Imaginary, but it is certainly not too strong to suggest that this engagement was constitutive of the modernist identity.

At the same time, the tendency to see the role of African American artists as passive bystanders or otherwise disengaged from modernism, by virtue of the results of an aesthetic or a social contradiction that is deemed irreconcilable, strains our understanding of modernism as a pluralistic cultural phenomenon and moment. Consider the following observation, from Michael North, about Toomer, Williams, and the

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American avant-garde: "If anything, Toomer was more solidly ensconced within this group than was Williams" (149). At the same time, North can argue for the relative marginalization of Toomer from this group. That marginalization, argues North, is a reflection of a contradiction he sees within Cane itself; a conflict that consists of the work's existence as a formally experimental work of literature, on the one hand, and one in which the author sought to express something of the social dimension of African American life, on the other. "The formal task that Toomer set for himself," writes North, "was to use the tools of modernism in such a way as to draw from them something more socially responsible than he found in the imagists" (173-74). Toomer also wanted to us "use traditional forms in a way that would not conduce to the sort of primitivism he loathed" in such writers as Sherwood Anderson and Waldo Frank (174).

This problem, between the need to create a work of art using experimental language, and the need to express ideas concerning the social conditions of the historical life world reflected in the text, is seen by North as reflecting the "competing linguistic motives" dividing the white and black writers of the twenties. This divide has similarities with the one proposed by Greenberg, in so far that each divide somehow proposes a fissure between white and black writers and culture that is embedded in the natural state of each group. Once this happens, it becomes even more difficult to ask questions concerning how these divisions came into being in the first place. In the case of Cane, asking these questions become even more urgent, since this text was clearly a central text of the 1920s American avant-garde, despite of the racialized social conditions under which was produced, just as it was a central text of the New Negro, or Harlem, Renaissance. That the latter movement became, as it were, the keeper of Cane's

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reputation as it languished in a literary limbo for four decades should not divert us from the larger questions concerning how this displacement, and by extension the displacement of many African American writers from the literary canon, came about.

5

To argue that Cane's stature in the canon of literary modernism has been displaced by a criticism that has diminished part of the identity of modernism itself is not quite the same thing as arguing for a consideration that places Cane in a central place in the modernist canon. It is true that the critical recovery of Toomer's work, in particular that recovery that has been undertaken by African American literary criticism, has claimed it as a central text of the African American literary tradition, and to the extent that such claims base themselves on recovering (or discovering) an African American modernism, the text has been considered a central text of such modernism. As such, any claim for Cane as a central text of literary modernism as such could rest on another set of claims: that African American literature is itself a central strain of literary modernism. This claim may be on its way to becoming a commonplace, but it has not yet become so, as I hope I have demonstrated above in the discussion of David Macey's definition of modernism. To claim Cane as a text that is central to the modernist canon may require a reading that allows us to see, in this work, the identity of modernism itself. As a work consisting of the mixture and interplay of genres, Cane may be seen as coming from a long, and distinguished genealogy, which includes works as diverse as the early American almanac, a novel like Clotel: Or, the President's Daughter, by William Wells

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Brown, or Darkwater, by W.E.B. Du Bois and Winesburg, Ohio, by Sherwood Anderson, on the other. At the same time, the establishment of Cane as an avant-garde text is accomplished not just by its proximity to other texts, but by its own form and identity.

The first story in Cane announces itself with a poetic epigram that echoes the blues. This firmly places itself within a stylistic framework that immediately raises the question of genre, and of generic instability. The allusion to the blues in "Karintha" is signaled by the repeated refrain "when the sun goes down," which had already entered popular culture as an utterance that had blues connotations. This is just one of several references to black music in Cane. Nathaniel Mackey cites the allusions to the spirituals and, in the poem, "Cotton Song," to the African American work song (236-40). Mackey does not, however, refer to the echo of the first line of "The St. Louis Blues" ("I hate to see the evenin' sun go down") that can be found in "Karintha." This echo that anticipates the well-known blues lyric "I hate to see the evenin' sun go down," which would be recorded later in the 1920s, and in the 1930s, by Leroy Carr, Leadbelly, and others:

> Now her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
>
> O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
>
> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
>
> . . .When the sun goes down.
>
> (3)

The story that follows is that of male lust, a young woman's sexual initiation, and of the death of her baby. The main tension of the story is, as Monica Michlin points out, sexual. The integration of the allusion to the song lyric into the text ("Men had always wanted her, this Karintha, even as a child, Karintha carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when

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the sun goes down" [Cane 3]), turns the lyric in which the allusion is embedded, writes Michlin, from a song of praise "into one of sexual domination and reification." The story's syntax, Michlin adds, "makes Karintha an object, not a subject, of what should be *her* story" (99, emphasis in original). The hints of male pedophilic desire in the text, Michlin writes, only sharpens the sense that Karintha is simply an object of sexual desire:

> Even if one takes it to be an organic image, the reduction of the human to the organic is disturbing, although it is part of Toomer's half-primitivistic, half mystical strategy to use the same words ("a growing thing") for Karintha's body, her soul, and later (implicitly) for the unwanted baby.
>
> (99)

The story oscillates between a praise song for Karintha's sexual independence and a narrative that objectifies her body, and the tension has given rise to numerous interpretations that focus on one side or the other of the story's duality. Yet it is the tension itself that seems to be the story's subject, a tension that is not resolved with an ending which circles back to the beginning, with Karintha as an adult described in nearly the same terms as she was at the beginning:

> Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon. They will bring their money; they will die not having found it out. . . Karintha at twenty, carrying beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down. Karintha. . .
>
> (4, ellipses in original.)

"Karintha" is a one of the early texts that exemplified the then-new blues sensibility, as it was emerging from the African American communities of the time. Although the earliest

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blues singers and performers were often itinerant traveling male performers, by the time "Karintha" (and Cane) were published, the blues had become identified in the public consciousness as a vehicle of expression for women artists. Most of the popular blues performers were women. The first woman to record blues songs, Mamie Smith ("Crazy Blues," 1920) started a development during which dozens of women performers made blues records, many of which sold in the thousands (Davis xii; Harrison 43-62). Throughout the 1920s, the blues was widely understood as a form of expression dominated by African American women. These singers, most prominently Bessie Smith (who recorded 160 songs in the decade after 1923) were considered a part of the modernist aesthetic by literary contemporaries is apparent not only from the influence they had on black writers like Toomer and other New Negro Renaissance writers, but by their influence, whether direct or residual, on a wider range of literary culture. When a young, white, Mississippi poet named Charles Henri Ford wanted to start an avant-garde literary magazine in 1929, he called it Blues. Kay Boyle, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Kenneth Rexroth, among others, contributed to it (Denning 211-212).

These blues performers and blues songs distinguished themselves by their unique approach to poetic language, as well as by their new approach to the position of women in both the private and public spheres. As has already been noted in this study, blues lyrics share many of the qualities that were identified with the renovation of poetic language that was identified with modernist verse. It has only recently been noted, however, that these lyrics were also an important reflection of the new, modern consciousness among women, of which the feminist movement of the time was only one manifestation. The significance of women's blues as a modernist expression among

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women—and thereby amid society as such—lay, in part in its approach to individual sexuality. "The classic blues women sang of female aspirations for happiness and frequently associated these aspirations with sexual desire," writes Angela Y. Davis, "but they rarely ignored the attendant ambiguities and contradictions." (23). In addition to the complex approach to sexuality and individual love that was the subject of much of the blues, these songs were also notable, as Davis informs us, for the way they disestablished the social boundaries which kept women confined to the domestic sphere. "The blues as a genre," writes Davis, "never acknowledges the discursive and ideological boundaries separating the private sphere from the public" (25). These two aspects of the blues seem to inform "Karintha." If the story is understood within the context of the blues, as (to use musicians' parlance) a riff on the blues, then the contradictions articulated within it become that much more comprehensible. Far from creating a tension that undermines the piece, as Michlin and others have suggested, these contradictions and tensions appear to be held in precarious balance; and it is this balance which gives the story its edgy, modernist feeling.

Another thematic tension within "Karintha" is that between the urban and rural selves. Much attention has been given to the exploration of the rural setting within Cane, and this attention seems to imply that the text's attention to rural Georgia is an almost hermetic one; but the rural settings can also be seen in another light, as harboring within that theme another one, in which the city is seen as a means of escape, almost as a utopian alternative to the harsh rural landscape that is foregrounded in the text. This tension can be found throughout Cane, yet it seems to have elicited little comment from critical readers. In "Karintha," for example, the city appears as the place young men

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travel to, only to return with gifts intended to impress Karintha: "Young men to the big cities and run on the road. Young men go away to college. They all want to bring her money" (4). The railroad, and the city, are both symbols of modernity, and of escape. In "Becky," the story of a woman who is socially isolated as "a white woman who had two Negro sons" (7), the railroad serves not only as a symbol of modernity, but also of a world that is quickly rendering the rural life obsolete, while Becky herself seems to be an icon for both racial alienation and rural isolation.

> Six trains each day rumbled past and shook the ground under her cabin. Fords, and horse- and mule-drawn buggies went back and forth along the road. Trainmen, and passengers who'd heard about her, threw out papers and food. Threw out little crumpled slips of paper scribbled with prayers, as they passed her eye-shaped piece of sandy ground.
>
> (7)

Throughout the stories and poems set in rural Georgia the instruments of modernity intrude, as crude interruptions in the pastoral environment. These instruments can be the railroad, an automobile, or a factory, such as the sawmill in "Carma":

> The sun is hammered into a band of gold. Pine-needles, like mazda, are brilliantly aglow. No rain has come to take the rustle from the falling sweet-gum leaves. Over in the forest, across the swamp, a sawmill blows its closing whistle.
>
> (12)

These eruptions and intrusions of modernity have been seen as evidence, not of a text that is evoking a world in transition, but as evidence of its lack of engagement with that

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world. Barbara Foley argues that "Toomer offered a somewhat superficial portraiture of the life of the sharecropping and working class blacks" of rural Georgia in the early 1920s ("In the Land of Cotton" 182). She adds that Cane's evocation of the sawmill factories in the poems "Georgia Dusk" and "Song of the Sun" only serve lyrical, rather than mimetic, purposes. "In both poems," Foley writes, "Toomer's lush lyricism is achieved only through fetishization of labor processes. The mill whistle that summons men to and from their labor takes shape as a natural phenomenon; low wages, layoffs, and debt peonage are invisible" (183).

The term "fetishism," in this connection, appears to be derived from Karl Marx, who wrote that commodities appear to us as, in a sense, simple objects, in which the social relations that produced them have disappeared; such relations are, to use Foley's word, "invisible."[20] It is in this sense that the sawmills (and, perhaps, the railroads) are fetishized in Cane; however, if this is true, what is accomplished in the text by such fetishization? It is true that the sawmill and other icons of modernity appear as if out of nowhere; yet what is remarkable is how they also appear as fleeting images, almost without a life of their own. It is not until "Blood Burning Moon" that a factory appears as the center of any action in Cane; and then it is as the site of a lynching. Each of the story's three parts are punctuated by the following verse:

> Red nigger moon. Sinner!
>
> Blood-burning moon. Sinner!
>
> Come out that fact'ry door.

(37)

---

[20] See Marx, Capital, 72.

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By fetishizing the labor processes, Cane simultaneously offers us a picture of a world in transition. Rather than giving us simply a picture of a pastoral South that is passing away, Cane at the same time shows, through glimpses, icons, and symbols, the modern world which is already encroaching onto the southern landscape. It is this attempt to present both worlds at the same time that constitutes another major stylistic tension within the first section of the text. This dynamic presentation of both old and new worlds recalls Henri Bergson's conceptions of time and duration. Bergson explains that we experience time, or duration, in two ways: as a "homogeneous" experience, which corresponds to our conscious experience of time as a phenomenon consisting of sequential events, what he calls "the numerical multiplicity of states." At the same time, we also experience what he calls a "qualitative multiplicity," where "a self in which succeeding each other means melting into one another and forming an organic whole" (128, emphasis in original). This idea, which Bergson first published in 1889, would become the foundation for modernism's "stream of consciousness," the conception made famous by James Joyce.[21] Toomer's use of time to signal the distinction between the present, pastoral setting, which is in the process of passing away, and the future, urban one, is related to the stream; but the dynamism with which he locates both past and present within the lyrical and narrative present of the text suggests that what Foley calls the "fetishization of labor processes" at work in Cane can also be seen as a form of symbolic critique of a world in which both the landscape contains both the pastoral landscape, in which both loving and lynching takes place; one shared by machines (railroads, factories), that contain both promise and tragedy. This duality of promise and tragedy is yet another one within which the tensions of Cane unfold.

[21] For discussions of Bergson and the stream of consciousness idea, see Kern, 24-27, and Karl, 235-39.

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In "Blood Burning Moon," the factory in which Tom Burwell is burned alive by a lynch mob is a pre-war, abandoned, cotton factory. It appears to have some relationship to the illusions Burwell expresses earlier in the story: his hopes to have a farm leased to him by the town's large landowner; and his initial disbelief in the sexual interest the landowner's son, Bob Stone, has for Louisa, the woman Burwell is courting. The verse quoted above, from which the title derives, is repeated three times, a number that signifies misfortune.[22] The violence which concludes the tale, in which Burwell slits Stone's throat and is subsequently lynched in the abandoned factory, seems to bring to a climax the tensions between the pastoral environment and the encroaching machine age that have animated the first section of Cane; but the repetition of the verse at the end creates more ambiguity than the finality of Burwell's lynching would seem to give the story.

If the text gives us a pastoral beauty of the South cancelled by violence, then the second section of Cane, with its stories and lyrics set in northern cities, develops the tensions of the first section in reverse. In the urban sections, we are also introduced to a heroic figure that resembles another character typical of modernist texts: the aesthete. Toomer's urban figures sometimes evoke a Southern past that is, if not paradisal, at least summons an idealized memory. This can be seen, for example, in Dan Moore's internal monologue about the old man who sits on a chair outside Muriel's house:

> Saw the first horse-cars, the first Oldsmobile. And he was born in slavery. I did see his eyes. Never miss eyes. But they were bloodshot and watery. It

[22] Folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett was informed, in the mid-1920s, by an informant from Keysville, GA, that odd numbers were considered "unlucky" (462, 599). Keysville is about 45 miles east of Sparta, the town on which Toomer's fictional Georgia town of "Sempter" is based. See Foley, "Jean Toomer's Sparta."

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> hurt to look at them. It hurts to look at most people's eyes. He saw Grant and Lincoln. He saw Walt—old man, did you see Walt Whitman? Did you see Walt Whitman! Strange force that draws me to him.
>
> (68)

It may be stretching the point to claim that several of the characters in Cane—Dan Moore, Rhobert, Ralph Kabnis, and the lyric and narrative voice of the text as such—are all manifestations of an aesthetic personality, and of that modernist character called the aesthete. It is important to note, however that these characters all seem to center their attention on the sensuous and the aesthetic, and how the lyric voice in the poems, whatever subject appears on the surface, always seems to circle back to the aesthetic as a major source of concern:

> My body is opaque to the soul.
> Driven of the spirit, long have I sought to temper it unto the spirit's
> longing,
> But my mind, too, is opaque to the soul.
>
> (70)

Like many of the verses in Cane, this one echoes Walt Whitman, and its concerns are those of the relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual. Those who see Toomer's conversion to the spiritual practices of Georges Gurdjieff, and, later, to the Quaker religion as evidence of a retreat from modernism seem to forget just how much these practices and others were a part of the modernist search for spiritual knowledge outside of traditional Western religions. It is just this search that inspired, for instance, some of the most powerful poems of William Butler Yeats. In the verse quoted above, the speaker

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shares with Whitman the idea that the search for transcendence can be sought in the temporal world, through the body. At the same time, the search in this realm is, perhaps inevitably, a failure; and it is this failure which is the subject of the poem:

> O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger,
>
> Direct it to the lid of its flesh-eye.
>
> I am weak with much giving.
>
> I am weak with the desire to give more.
>
> . . .   . . .
>
> My voice could not carry to you did you dwell in stars,
>
> O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger . .
>
> (70)

The diction here is reminiscent of Whitman and Yeats, and recalls the mood of some of the poems of Rilke. The verse evokes the sense of a modern yearning and skepticism that seems to haunt much modernist poetry. It is this skepticism that we find in Paul's last speech, in "Bona and Paul," despite its apparent bravura:

> [M]y thoughts were matches thrown into a dark window. And all the while the Gardens were purple like a bed of roses would be at dusk. I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals.
>
> (80)

That Paul turns away, at the end of this speech, to find that Bona, one of the "petals of roses" that he is seeking to gather, has disappeared, seems emblematic of a major theme at work in Cane; the subject of loss and the unavailability of any redeeming remedy for

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such loss. The idea that loss is a common human condition pervades much modernist literature, and this certainly one of the major themes of modern American lyric art, in particular that of the blues and the African American influenced popular song. Consideration of the surface bravura of Paul's speech also uncovers one of the major problems facing critics of African American literature. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has written that many consider works by black authors to be transparent in their meaning. Gates writes about the "trope of blackness" being signified by "an absence, the sheer absence of invisibility." Borrowing a phrase from Barbara Johnson, he defines this trope of blackness as being the "already read text" (Figures in Black 200). In this sense, he adds, Cane and its author are the "'blackest' text and author of all." That this is a problem is demonstrated by the degree to which criticism of Cane is dependent on historical and biographical factors for their explications. This is at least in part due to the challenge posed to social norms by Toomer's refusal to acquiesce to demands that he perform "race" within the socially constructed boundaries and binaries that this term embodies in modern U.S. society. "It should not prove surprising," writes Gates, "that much of the published Toomer criticism is, in some sense or other, biographical or pseudo psychological" (211). Even readings which proclaim themselves as textual often fall back on negotiating the anxiety provoked by the author's own racial nonconformity. Such readings very often find themselves at a loss when faced with the fate of Ralph Kabnis, who, after being panic-stricken by an unpredictable, beautiful, but violent environment, finds himself in a cellar, dressed in a "gaudy ball costume" (Cane 106), overwhelmed by the thought that he, Kabnis, is the embodiment of "sin": "The whole world is a conspiracy t sin, an against me. I'm the victim of their sin. I'm what sin is," he says (116,

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punctuation and syntax as in original). In a sense, the "sin" is the mixed text, the vaudeville text, that is Kabnis, and Cane; and it is the artist who cannot find his place in a society that rejects such mixtures out of hand. In the end, Kabnis "trudges" (117) out of the cellar, presumably to take his place as a laborer in the workshop upstairs.

If the concerns of Cane have, due to the "already read" trope of blackness, kept this text at the margins of critical considerations about the central texts of modernism, then it should be of no surprise that African American literature as such should be similarly kept at such margins. This may be for no other reason that the universalistic claims of black literature are not read as such by those who look for such claims from literature. If the alienation expressed by the lyric voice and demonstrated by the characters in Cane is judged according to conformist values in which "racial" concerns are, by definition, not universal, then it follows that the split in critical consciousness that allows for the (often unremarked) displacement of African American culture and writing can also be seen as normative. Yet the problems posed by a consideration of Cane's relationship to the central concerns of modernism should be a challenge to such normative readings. These problems can also be said to arise when examining many texts of the African American tradition, especially those that are contemporaneous with Cane, as well as those that followed in its wake. When Langston Hughes wrote a few years later, in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," that black artists should be looking toward Bessie Smith, Paul Robeson, Aaron Douglas and Jean Toomer as models to follow in their artistic practice (95), he wasn't simply posing a problem for black artists. He was posing an aesthetic problem which faced all modern artists, one which, despite

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the attempted reconstruction by later critics of what modernism meant, remained a central problem for American (and not just American) artists throughout our modern era.

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Conclusion

The role that African American culture has played in the development of modern Western culture is an issue that is still under dispute. This is somewhat surprising, given the fact that the sole musical form of the twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries that is performed worldwide has turned out to be derived from African American musical forms of the early twentieth century. However, it is still widely assumed that black Americans practicing other art forms have had less impact on our culture, and that black culture is a politicized project. This study has attempted to open the way to another kind of discussion, one which takes one step further the necessary project of historical recovery that has been so basic to the study of texts authored by African Americans. This involves attempting to understand how these texts lived in the world side by side with other texts by non-black authors. It involves understanding the culture as a whole organism, rather than one that is bifurcated and Balkanized along "racial" lines.

In some ways, the project undertaken here was necessary because so much about our immediate past has been forgotten. Research on figures like Bert Williams is only beginning to be undertaken, and this project has benefited from some of that work. At the same time, it is hoped that the issues raised here would spark a reconsideration of how we understand the most recent cultural past. This work is intended as a challenge to those who still find themselves able to write about modernism without considering just how much of what they write about involves African American culture. The argument made

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here is also intended as a challenge to those who may still make claims about the particularity, and lack of universality, of black culture.

Despite its claims to attempt to move beyond historical recovery in considering African American culture and its texts, it must be recognized that this study is, itself, in part a recovery project. What is at stake here is an idea about modern culture, and what criticism means when it talks about that culture. To identify a certain relationship between "The Comedian as the Letter C" and black culture as one that is "uncanny" is to identify something basic about the structure of the culture as a whole. It is to suggest that modernist culture was constituted, in part, by this "uncanny." To identify some of the characters in Cane as aesthetes is to also suggest that there is a particularly American model of the aesthete that may differ from its European counterpart. How does one live a life dedicated to art in the face of U.S.-style violence? This is the sort of question that Toomer's text opens up for attentive readers. However, these questions, and others like them, are likely to be closed as long as readings of a book like Cane focus solely on the question of the negotiation of racial identity.

The questions raised in this dissertation were made possible, in part, by the fact that the study of contemporary literature and culture is far less bifurcated than is the study of the period under consideration here. In literary and cultural studies today, texts by African American authors are used to illuminate the full range of human endeavor. Today it would be difficult to study contemporary poetry or the novel (especially in the United States) without putting African American authors in the center of such study. It would be equally difficult to study any really important question of literary or cultural studies

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without taking into account such texts. As this dissertation has argued, the same should be true for the period of modernism.

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