

“YOU’VE GOT TO BE MODERNISTIC”:
AMERICAN VERNACULAR MODERNISM, 1910-1937

by

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Abstract

“YOU’VE GOT TO BE MODERNISTIC”:

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This study interrogates the commonly held assumption that literary modernism—broadly conceived—was an exclusively international, cosmopolitan, and elite movement violently opposed to the commercial marketplace. The thesis of this project argues that modernist literary experimentation appeared in many popular contexts in American literature of the early twentieth century. I call this aesthetically experimental popular writing “vernacular modernism,” a reference to its reliance on American slang and to its anti-elitist position in the cultural hierarchy. This “vernacular modernism” drew its inspiration from H.L. Mencken’s study *The American Language*, a work that implicitly allies the American vernacular with both formal and linguistic innovation as well as a harsh critique of the same nineteenth-century bourgeois gentility that canonical modernist writers rejected.

Throughout this period, writers in a variety of popular genres were experimenting with language, subjectivity, and representation in works published alongside well-recognized modernist texts. To demonstrate this phenomenon, I apply a combination of cultural studies and formalism to fiction in four genres: humor writing, the Jewish-

American memoir, hard-boiled crime fiction, and the urban novel of the Harlem Renaissance. Ring Lardner and Anita Loos, Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold, Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett, and Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay serve as paired subjects that transform their respective genres in ways analogous to the literary experimentation of high modernists. Understanding these popular writers as “vernacular modernists” allows a thorough consideration of the authentic dialogue between experimental vernacular language and modernist aesthetics, enabling fruitful new readings of mid-1930s American modernists (William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and John Dos Passos) engaged with regionalism, racial and ethnic identity, and working-class consciousness.

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To Beth and her vanishing accent,
perhaps where this all started.

**“‘You’ve Got to Be Modernistic’:
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PROLOGUE

“When you start to play modernistic...”

In late 1929, stride pianist James P. Johnson recorded a curiously titled composition called “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic.” Until recently an obscure piece in most jazz discographies, this recording might have been wholly forgotten, had it not reemerged as a prominent part of jazz pianist Jason Moran’s 2002 album *Modernistic* (Blue Note).¹ Moran’s outing, with its blend of funk, standard jazz, and hip hop covers, might have more appropriately been titled *Postmodernistic*, a term emblematic of his sound in the contemporary jazz landscape. As a title, the term “modernistic” now sounds somewhat antiquated, like the description of some earlier vision of what the future would look like, such as the city in Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis*. But Moran’s album does more than just play with words; it invokes an interesting heritage in jazz through its opening track, the *de facto* title track, a version of Johnson’s “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic.”

While James P. Johnson is less well known than his contemporaries Fats Waller, Art Tatum, Willie “The Lion” Smith, and Duke Ellington, he was an equally respected figure in the world of jazz piano and, importantly, composition. In her 1951 autobiography, singer Ethel Waters gave him an immense tribute that suggested his deep influence on his 1920s contemporaries as well as mid-twentieth-century bebop players: “All the licks you hear, now as then, originated with musicians like James P. Johnson. And I mean *all* of the hot licks that ever came out of Fats Waller and the rest of the hot piano boys. They are just faithful followers and protégés of that great man, Jimmy Johnson.”² Despite Waters’s grand claims for his pervasive influence, Johnson is primarily remembered for composing the “Charleston,” the tune on which the popular

dance was based, and for being one of the first to translate the jazz idiom successfully into an extended classical form in “Yamekraw.”³ But much of Johnson’s career was concerned with being “modernistic,” a term that suggested a multitude of meanings when the song was first recorded in 1929.

Johnson recorded “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” a total of four times in 1929 and 1930. The earliest recordings feature vocals with lyrics presumably written by Johnson himself. “When you start to play modernistic,” the lyrics instruct, “don’t forget to be futuristic.” Jazz, modernism, and “futurism” are terms sutured together in the opening of Johnson’s song, suggesting the degree to which the idea of playing “modernistic” was itself a part of the popular consciousness of the jazz record-buying public. While critics like Alfred Appel, Jr. (in *Jazz Modernism*) have outlined the modernist aesthetic of jazz, whether in its profound influence on visual art or its own aesthetic of individual and collective improvisation, such a connection is often framed as something after-the-fact.⁴ And, rarely, if ever, are jazz artists and consumers seen as highly aware of the modernism of this work.

Scott E. Brown, Johnson’s only biographer, describes “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” as “one of Johnson’s most interesting compositions.” It “is a fast-paced number, modern in the sense of its unusual harmonies. Whole tone (augmented), ninth and diminished chords predominate in the first two strains, giving rise to a series of highly rhythmic and inventive choruses.”⁵ Based on Johnson’s earlier, popular composition “Steeple Chase Rag” (1917), “Modernistic” explicitly pushes against notions that popular art lacked the sophisticated aesthetic self-consciousness that characterized classical music and other forms of “high” art. Playing “modernistic,” according to

Johnson's lyrics, could mean any number of things: possibilities included "futuristic," "realistic," "optimistic," and "characteristic."

While Johnson's composition has lacked the staying power of the work of jazz figures like Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Jelly Roll Morton, it demonstrates the degree to which creators of popular culture (even in largely forgotten cultural documents like "You've Got to Be Modernistic") were conscious of modernism around them, and how much they identified themselves and their work as "modernistic." Taking Johnson's title as a starting point, this study will investigate the literary analogues to Johnson's "Modernistic." Indeed, during the modernist era there were far more popular artists and writers starting to play "modernistic" than has been acknowledged.

¹ "You've Got to Be Modernistic" is set to appear on a forthcoming new edition of the *Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz*, a canonizing project that is sure to place this piece at the center of the history of jazz composition in the 1920s and 1930s. Thanks to Jeffrey Taylor, whose notes to "You've Got to Be Modernistic" will appear in this collection, for alerting me to this recording's inclusion.

² Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye is on the Sparrow: An Autobiography* (1951, repr. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1992), 145.

³ Begun in the 1910s, Scott Joplin's aborted *Treemonisha*, a jazz opera, did not see a complete performance until the latter half of the twentieth century.

⁴ See Alfred Appel, Jr., *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington and Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). Critics of African-American literature and culture have often cited the jazz aesthetic as the model for a black form of twentieth-century modernism.

⁵ Scott E. Brown, *James P. Johnson: A Case of Mistaken Identity* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press and the Institute of Jazz Studies, Rutgers University, 1986), 197.

INTRODUCTION

The Mencken Era: Toward a Theory of American Vernacular Modernism

It is too late to be studying Hebrew; it is more important to understand even the slang of to-day.

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)¹

The distinguished trait of the American is simply his tendency to use slang without any false sense of impropriety, his eager hospitality to its most audacious novelties, his ingenuous yearning to augment the conciseness, the sprightliness, and, in particular, what may be called the dramatic punch of his language.

H.L. Mencken, "The American: His Language" (1913)²

By 1929, the year that James P. Johnson first recorded "You've Got to Be Modernistic," the strains of Anglo-American modernism were not only being heard, but becoming more easily identifiable to listeners and readers. Seven years after the appearance of two touchstone texts of literary modernism—T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)—an obsession with being "modernistic" was present, not just in transatlantic literary culture, but also in American popular culture. The summer of 1929, though, saw the publication of a singular event of modernist expression, the celebrated "Revolution of the Word" issue of the little magazine *transition* (number 16/17, June 1929), published in Paris. Edited by Eugene Jolas, this little magazine was noteworthy for publishing excerpts from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (completed and published between covers in 1939) under the title *Work in Progress*, as well as its regular publication of pieces from Gertrude Stein, including "Four Saints in Three Acts," published in this "Revolution of the Word" issue.

The issue gets its title from the opening section of the magazine, which includes Jolas's editorial "Proclamation." "Tired of the spectacle of short stories, novels, poems and plays still under the hegemony of the banal word, monotonous syntax, static

psychology, descriptive naturalism, and desirous of crystallizing a viewpoint,” Jolas and the mostly obscure co-signers of this modernist manifesto lay out a twelve-point plan for, as Ezra Pound might put it, making it new.³ Jolas’s bombastic document works as both a descriptor of many characteristics and assumptions of what has come to be known as modernism as well as a laundry list of the specific nineteenth-century tropes that modernists found so detestable: “the banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, [and] descriptive naturalism.” In response, Jolas posited complete freedom for the creative mind, “the plain reader be damned.” “The writer expresses,” the “Proclamation” claims, “He does not communicate.”

Alongside Jolas’s manifesto the opening section of *transition* includes a number of pieces designed to demonstrate the claim that “the revolution in the English language is accomplished fact.” One of these, however, stands out as particularly interesting in light of the apparent attempt to alienate the “plain reader.” Near the end of the “Revolution of the Word” section, only a few pages before Stein’s “Four Saints in Three Acts,” appears a piece entitled “Slanguage: 1929.”⁴ Acknowledged as a reprint from *The New York World*, this list, credited to Theodore D. Irwin, is a glossary of contemporary slang words and phrases with definitions on the facing page. These include terms like “Wowser,” “To make whoopee,” “Everything is copesetty,” and “To be Chicago’d” (the latter meaning “Despatched [*sic*] via machine gun or automatic”).⁵ As originally published in *The New York World*, a list like this might make for an interesting lifestyle piece; in the “Revolution of the Word” issue of *transition*, it takes on an entirely different meaning. Perhaps, its inclusion suggests, the revolutions of modernism and the

revolutionary nature of American street slang share more than modernist critics have ever acknowledged.

This cross-fertilization is at the heart of the present study. While critics have acknowledged the debt many modernist authors have to the popular culture surrounding them, few have been willing to take this popular culture itself as modernist experimentation. The “Slanguage” piece in *transition*’s “Revolution of the Word” issue effectively equates the experimentation of American vernacular language with the language experiments of high modernism. When one examines the vast print culture in America during the modernist era, it becomes clear that the Left Bank and little magazine crowd was not the only group thinking about language in experimental ways. In fact, a great deal of popular fiction of the era had begun asking modernist questions about the arbitrariness and externality of language. “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” argues that American popular writers long thought of as working in the nineteenth-century traditions of realism and naturalism were, in fact, experimenting with language in much the same way that their European and internationalist counterparts were doing. Writers like Ring Lardner, Anzia Yezierska, Dashiell Hammett, and Claude McKay form a group of “vernacular modernists,” rejecting the “banal word” with the same enthusiasm as Jolas and the contributors to *transition*, holding language at arm’s length, exploring its representational potential, and finding it the same malleable form that high modernists did. Perhaps more importantly, these writers are the ones creating a veritable homemade version of American modernism, building a unique form of vernacular modernism out of the colorful and complex possibilities presented by American vernacular language, a

language both celebrated and described in the popular linguistics of American critic H.L. Mencken.

Modernist Genealogies, Part I: Modernism vs. Popular Culture

Historically, modernism has been constructed as an international phenomenon that self-consciously rejects the marketplace in favor of a unique and difficult aesthetic, one that elevates the artist's individual vision. The earliest articulations of this position on modernism emerge in the late 1920s and early 1930s with Laura Riding and Robert Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1928) and Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931). While Riding and Graves were not the first Anglophone writers to use the word "modernist" to describe the new literature emerging in the twentieth century, their survey is the first major consideration of the term as an aesthetic signifier, one which stands in hostile opposition to what they call the "plain reader."⁶ Wilson, on the other hand, calls this "self-conscious and very important literary movement" Symbolism.⁷ Published at the veritable peak of modernism, Wilson's text articulates the first version of a modernist canon, one which includes both poets and prose writers. His intuition was rather prophetic; the major subjects of his study (Yeats, Eliot, Proust, Joyce and Stein) have all remained at the center of modernist studies into the twenty-first century. His other subjects (Valery and Rimbaud) figure largely in French Symbolist poetry, and effectively help create one of the two internationalist "settings" for modernism that continue to dominate contemporary critical ideas about the movement: the Left Bank of Paris (the other is London). As a result, in almost any list of major modernist writers, the vast majority of individuals will have

spent significant amounts of their creative careers in Paris during the 1910s and 1920s. This naturally causes difficulty in parsing the national distinctions among modernist writers; indeed, modernism is often conceived of as an international movement that respects no national boundaries or provincial concerns. Instead of remaining part of several independent movements that draw on the traditions of national literatures, the expatriate American, English, and Irish writers join with the French to create a cosmopolitan modernist identity in which the works of the Left Bank writers have more in common with each other than they do with any specific national literatures written on domestic soil.

This international and cosmopolitan characterization of modernism has always created problems for American literary periodization. Wilson only includes two American writers in his canon: Eliot, who became a British citizen in the late 1920s, and Stein, who expatriated herself for decades in Paris. Many other American writers associated with modernism present similar problems (e.g., Pound, with his embrace of Italian fascism in the 1930s; H.D. and Laura Riding, who spent much of their writing lives in London; and Djuna Barnes, who spent her creative period in Paris and London). As a result, narratives of American modernism are far more difficult to assemble than are those of British modernism, which had its hub in London and publishing outlets like *The Egoist* and Hogarth Press. Some texts, like Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (1995), explicitly acknowledge the inevitable transatlanticism of American modernist aesthetics. Others focus on domestic obsessions with place (Hugh Kenner's *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* [1975]), race (Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and*

Pluralism [1995]), or technology (Cecelia Tichi's *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* [1987]). Still an emphasis is almost inevitably put on American writers with transnational credentials. With a few exceptions, it remains difficult to break into the modernist canon without spending significant time on the Left Bank (or at least publishing in one of the Paris-located little magazines like *transition*).

The consequence of situating American modernists in the sphere of transnational modernism is the privileging of the so-called "lost generation" of young writers, many of them devotees of Gertrude Stein, remembered in memoirs like Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return* (1934) and Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1961). The difficulty, then, in constructing a narrative about American modernism (and, for the purposes of this project, American modernist prose) arrives with the consideration of the large number of writers, both inside and outside the canon, who never spent significant time on the Left Bank. A number of literary histories of modernism, working from a host of critical perspectives, have uncovered the wide variety of other figures important to modernist aesthetics.⁸ These new histories, like Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank* (1987), generally create an alternative canon to retell the story of modernism, though they largely remain within the canonical confines of London and the Left Bank, while critiquing the masculinist impulse of canonization. Still, the fetishization of Paris as the locus results in ignoring many of the interesting innovations happening in fiction written and published stateside. Many histories of American modernism can effectively write out most of these authors, as Hugh Kenner does, calling them "provincial," rather than "international."⁹ Such highly limited categorizations end up downplaying the work of modernists like

William Faulkner, who may be the most successfully experimental American prose stylist of the modernist era after Gertrude Stein.

In effect, theoretical histories of a national American modernism are relatively few and far between. After publishing his monumental work on European expatriate modernists, *The Pound Era* (1971), critic Hugh Kenner turned his attention to theorizing a national strain in American modernists in the far less ambitious *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers*. Kenner's canon here is slightly expanded from the articulation of Wilson, but many of his subjects (Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Williams) still have strong international leanings. What emerges from Kenner's study is a sense of how incredibly difficult it is to characterize American writers of this generation; he admits "American literature is tricky for the critic."¹⁰ He uses a variety of descriptors to locate some common ground among writers as distinct as Fitzgerald and Zukofsky: American modernism involves "a poetic of the local," it "is all about honesty," and it involves "an immense panorama of futility and anarchy, together with some hope of articulating it through myth."¹¹ By the time he concludes his study, Kenner has arrived at a better-formulated definition of modernism in America: "The assumption [of American modernist writers] is that Language is something arbitrary, something *external* both to the speakers who use it and to the phenomena they hope to denote."¹² Though he claims that "never so much as in America has [this fact] been felt in a whole people's bones," his definition of American modernism is vague enough that it might as easily describe the assumptions of the writers on the Left Bank or with London's Egoist Press. Still, Kenner's definition is instructive, and clearly suggests the degree to which literary criticism has been unwilling to cope with a wider scope of American modernism.

The history of modernist studies provides a fascinating window into the anxieties about the preservation of a modernist canon. As Terry Eagleton has argued, the arrivals of modernism and of New Criticism are incredibly intertwined. In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton charts “The Rise of English” in the twentieth century as a discipline built around a set of New Critical reading practices specifically formulated to engage developments in modernist literature.¹³ After much of the middle third of the twentieth century was spent—in Anglo-American modernist criticism, at least—in seeing modernism purely in terms of form, as the “well-wrought urn” of New Critics like Cleanth Brooks, criticism of modernism underwent a shift in which its cultural elitism was seen as carrying significant ideological weight. Critics like Terry Eagleton exposed this New Critical reading practice as a kind of “political inertia...[and] submission to the status quo.”¹⁴ This “well-wrought urn” was the product of learning and craft, of critical and creative engagement with literary traditions, and, above all, of a self-conscious literary elite. The writers in Wilson’s canon constitute the center of this elite group, and Kenner’s insistence on calling the modernist period *The Pound Era* points to Ezra Pound as the driving force behind Anglo-American modernism.

One of the most insistent guardians of modernist cultural boundaries, Ezra Pound continually set the elite, artistic work of his circle of friends in opposition to the literary prostitution of the marketplace; in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, the wholly compromised “Mr. Nixon” tells the poem’s speaker “Consider/Carefully the reviewer” and “Butter reviewers.”¹⁵ Pound’s disdain for uninformed, popular criticism and what he perceived as subliterate, popular magazines of the early twentieth century is constant through much of his career. As early as 1912, he lamented the fact that “the modern poet is expected to

holloa his verse down a speaking tube to the editors of cheap magazines – S.S. McClure, or some one of that sort.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, he would say, “I may reserve my opinion that literature is not a commodity, that literature emphatically does not lie on a cou[n]ter where it can be snatched up at once by a straw-hatted young man in a hurry.”¹⁷ Pound’s influence looms large over modernist studies; as poet, editor, and theorist of modernism, Pound was in a position to speak for the larger concerns of the modernists, both poets and prose writers.¹⁸ His 1934 essay collection *Make It New* belatedly gave a slogan to the modernists: break with traditional modes of representation and popular commercial expectation and make something entirely different and unexpected.¹⁹

In a sense, Pound’s disdain for commercial culture sets the tone for a vast majority of work in modernist studies.²⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno theorized the “culture industry” in the mid-twentieth century, and created what amounts to a left-wing parallel to Pound’s right-wing elitism. The culture industry, which includes not only popular literature, but film and popular music, fails to challenge its consumers with any aesthetic or ideological complexity, characteristics that Horkheimer and Adorno idolize in the difficult works of high modernism. Following this Frankfurt School approach, influential works like Andreas Huyssen’s *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1986) highlight the ways in which modernists consciously defined themselves against the marketplace and created what Huyssen calls the “Great Divide” between high and low culture. As he notes, “Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.”²¹ Though Huyssen has modified his stance to a degree, the notion of “contamination” is apt; modernists consciously rejected

the overt commercialization of their work, instead engaging the marketplace in sophisticated ways that effectively commodified their hostility toward mass culture in rare, collectable editions (i.e., the Shakespeare and Company edition of Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922]). Still, this ostensibly hostile relationship to the marketplace would, for many critics, become the defining characteristic of modernism. As Terry Eagleton has argued, "[m]odernism is among other things a strategy whereby the work of art resists commodification, holds out by the skin of its teeth against those social forces that would degrade it to an exchangeable object."²²

While Pound's cultural elitism has certainly come under attack, his obsession with modernism's opposition to what Horkheimer and Adorno would later call the "culture industry" still carries a great deal of weight in modernist studies. Recent trends in criticism have turned the focus away from ideas of "literary value," but the assumptions that underlie Pound's characterization of literature are still implicit in almost every major study of modernism. The material modernism movement, inaugurated by George Bornstein's 2001 *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*, has worked to counter Pound's notion that "literature is not a commodity," emphasizing the status of the physical modernist text as a commercial fetishized object. However, while texts like this and Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt's collection *Marketing Modernisms: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (1996) suggest a shift in thinking about modernism's relationship to the marketplace, the list of subjects of the majority of essays in this volume (Pound, Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Marianne Moore) suggests something else: literature may, in fact, be a commodity, but the only

commodities worth discussing at length are precisely those tests that scholars of modernism have been discussing since Wilson's *Axel's Castle*.

Modernist Genealogies, Part II: Embracing Culture, Abandoning Aesthetics

With the emergence of the so-called New Modernist Studies in the 1980s and 1990s (and its effective institutionalization with the founding of the journal *Modernism/Modernity* in 1994), it became possible for scholars of modernism to address texts outside the canon, but this came only with the caveat that modernism itself must undergo a redefinition. This is perhaps most succinctly described by Daniel Joseph Singal, who noted in 1987 that “[p]ut simply, Modernism should properly be seen as a *culture*—a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values, and modes of perception—that came into existence during the mid to late nineteenth century, and that has had a powerful influence on art and thought on both sides of the Atlantic since roughly 1900.”²³ In their introduction to the first issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, Lawrence Rainey and Robert von Hallberg sound much the same note: “Modernism was more than a repertory of artistic styles, more too than an intellectual movement or set of ideas; it initiated an ongoing transformation in the entire set of relations governing the production, transmission, and reception of the arts.”²⁴ While variations on this definition of modernism have held some sway for the last twenty years, its assumptions are problematic. To say that modernism consists of a series of thematic foci or of a collection of ideological elements would ultimately be to include nearly all works in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as examples of modernism.

Clearly, the vast majority of early twentieth-century literature was grappling with the rapid development of modernity in the Machine Age. The continuation of realist, naturalist, and even romantic modes of literary representation engaged the economic, social, political, and technological developments of the contemporary world from a variety of ideological vantage points, many of which were quite in line with those of the major modernist writers. As Astrudur Eysteinnsson comments, “Surely we can imagine a traditional realistic text that fulfills the thematic requirements” of modernism, particularly those articulated here by Singal, Rainey, and von Hallberg.²⁵ Instead, it is not “a constellation of related beliefs, values, and modes of perception” that constitutes modernism, but rather a particular aesthetic relationship between the text and the world that does. In other words, modernism does not depend on one’s ideas but on how one engages her/his ideas via (in this case, textual) representation. Modernists have exhibited all kinds of attitudes towards modernity—from the fascism of Pound to the socialism of John Dos Passos, from the hostility toward machines and progress in Eliot to the naturalization of the mechanical in William Carlos Williams.²⁶ In effect, modernism is not present in what you say, but in *how* you say it; one does not have a modernist “perspective,” one presents her perspective in a modernist fashion.

The adoption of a cultural studies model like the one articulated by Singal accomplishes two related things in the discussion of modernism. First, and most explicitly, it allows for the inclusion of a host of previously excluded texts. In this way, the New Modernist Studies is most explicitly a product of the culture wars of the 1980s. Simultaneously, however, the entry of these new texts under a new, cultural studies rubric implicitly suggests an inequality. This reframing of modernism as a culture (as opposed

to an aesthetic mode) implies that these newly included texts could not compete at the level of aesthetics, i.e. that these works would not have held up as modernist texts worthy of study under earlier formalist approaches. I see their recent inclusion both as a part of an increasing obsession with subcategorization within literary studies and as an aesthetic lowering of the bar, a backhanded complement to texts that would not have interested traditional scholars of high modernist aesthetics.

As the advocates of New Modernist Studies were moving toward the notion of a modernist ideology or culture, the 1981 translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975) provided these critics with a powerful new way to think about literary connections. The notion of the "dialogic" began to replace the "anxiety of influence" or the engagement with the literary tradition as one of the central ways in which critics talked about the relationship between literary texts.²⁷ In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin defines the novel as "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."²⁸ In the essay "Discourse in the Novel," he utilizes the idea of "heteroglossia," perhaps best described as the novel's "intimate interaction (both peaceful and hostile) with living rhetorical genres (journalistic, moral, philosophical and others)...; this interaction was perhaps no less intense than was the novel's interaction with the artistic genres (epic, dramatic, lyric)."²⁹ Critics have seized upon the ways in which canonical novels demonstrate this heteroglossia with their incorporation of non- or sub-literary discourses. One of the first major examples of this kind of criticism was David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), in which Reynolds charts the popular cultural tropes adopted and transformed by the

canonical American writers of the mid-nineteenth century. In modernist studies, one of the best examples of a Bakhtinian approach is Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature*. North's project is not strictly dialogic, but, like Reynolds, he charts the ways in which major figures in the modernist canon (Eliot, Pound, Stein) were heavily influenced by the popular fascination with race and racial representation in the early twentieth century. As North notes, with its dialogic incorporation of black dialect, "Modernism became another form of mongrelization, another impurity stirred into the terrifying mixture that America was becoming."³⁰ This dialogic mixture is, for North, the central concern of these modernist writers.

Certainly, North and others argue, modernists were consumers in the literary marketplace, and many were fascinated with elements of popular culture and frequently cannibalized them for their own creative purposes. In theory, Pound's opposition between the elite and the popular has been thrown into doubt, if not completely disproved. Gertrude Stein was an aficionado of detective fiction, James Joyce was an admirer of the humor of Anita Loos, William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway were avid readers of pulp fiction, and Virginia Woolf was highly impressed with the work of humorist and sportswriter Ring Lardner.³¹ Of course, critics have frequently outlined how these popular forms influenced the writing of these major writers. Stein tried her own hand at the detective novel (*Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* [written 1933, pub. 1982]), Joyce included a host of references to low-brow culture in *Ulysses* (1922) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939), and Faulkner (in *Sanctuary* [1930], *Pylon* [1935], and *Intruder into the Dust*

[1948]) and Hemingway (in *To Have and Have Not* [1937]) adopted and transformed popular formulas from pulp magazines.³²

Existing dialogic criticism generally stops here. After all, isn't it sufficient to demonstrate how these canonical writers were drawing on the popular culture of their era? Certainly, this seems to be the position of most critics in a field so tightly policed as modernist studies currently is. However, the idea of dialogue—and of the dialogic—suggests not a unidirectional flow of influence, but a multidirectional conversation and exchange. If high modernists like Stein and Joyce were reading popular fiction and imbuing their own work with ideas and tropes they found there, as critics have argued, is it not possible that these very same popular writers were reading the high modernists and doing much the same thing?

In the criticism on modernism, such a question has never been fully articulated, in part because of the ways in which modernism continues to be critically distinguished from and effectively defined against popular writing. There exist various means of making such distinctions; one common fallacy has been to see modernism as somehow ideologically distinct from its contemporary popular culture. Certainly, there are ways in which *some* popular texts resolve the ideological contradictions of modernity on which high modernism thrives into a kind of “utopia” as Frederic Jameson has argued in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture.”³³ At the same time, however, works like Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995), and Michael North's *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (1999) demonstrate how the ideological obsessions associated with high modernism permeate popular and realist texts

of the same period. But, in a sense, if these studies call their popular texts “modernist,” they imply a consensus with the notion that modernism exists as a kind of cultural system rather than an aesthetic mode.

If we return to the modernists’ characterization of themselves, a significant challenge to this fast and loose use of the term modernist clearly emerges. From Pound’s call to “make it new” to Williams’s “not ‘realism,’ but reality itself,” modernism’s definition came through its forms of representation and creation more than its content (whether poetic, ideological, or narrative).³⁴ A modernist could write about the Old South as easily as the Left Bank; what made the works modernist was the privileging of a particular kind of form or aesthetic approach over the content. A realist writer could tackle the same subjects, but would almost inevitably rely on the “banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, [and] descriptive naturalism” that Jolas’s *transition* manifesto criticized. On the other hand, a modernist text would foreground its own representational existence. In realism, particularly in its American variety of the late nineteenth century, the language of the text is meant to be transparent; realist writers assume that language can accurately and unproblematically represent the fictional world it purports to describe. The objective nature of this realist language reaches its high point in the work of Henry James, where the language of the narrator exhibits an almost superior realism to the characters it describes.

This new, problematic relationship to language is, in essence, the crux of the modernist agenda. When Virginia Woolf claimed in her 1924 essay “Character in Fiction” (later published as “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”) “on or about December, 1910, human character changed,” she was engaged in the review of Victorian realists whose work she

saw as wholly unfit for the new writing of the twentieth century.³⁵ Eight years earlier, John Dos Passos argued in an essay entitled “Against American Literature” (1916) that “[t]he tone of the higher sort of writing in this country is undoubtedly that of a well brought up and intelligent woman, tolerant, versed in the things of this world, quietly humorous, but bound tightly in the fetters of ‘niceness,’ of the middle-class outlook.”³⁶ For both Woolf and Dos Passos, the “niceness” of nineteenth-century realist representation was a restriction; what shattered those “fetters” was a new mode of representation, one that reached beneath the artifice of the external.³⁷ These writers and others created this shift during the 1910s and 1920s by wildly transforming the aesthetic and formal aspects of their work and, in many cases, leaving the content relatively undisturbed.

While the privileging of modernism involves its emphasis on form, the critique of popular fiction is frequently based on its formlessness. Products of the “culture industry,” Adorno and others would argue, do not exhibit the same self-consciousness about their existence as do high modernist works. The conditions of production under which popular fiction is produced differs wildly from that of high modernism. While high modernists labor over word and sentence (Joyce’s example remains the most obvious), popular writers, writing for the filthy *lucre* rather than for “art’s sake,” produce page after page of text for magazine and quick hardback publication. The easily identifiable result of the former is literature, of the latter trash, or to use the binary articulated by Clement Greenberg, “avant-garde and kitsch.”

Strangely, the formulations of Greenberg, Adorno and others remain quite relevant in modernist studies. As Greenberg notes, “One and the same civilization

produces simultaneously two such 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.”³⁸ While the existing dialogic criticism of modernism complicates Greenberg’s dichotomy (after all, he ignores Eliot’s obsession with “that Shakespeherian Rag”), it is much more unorthodox to argue that a Tin Pan Alley song or a *Saturday Evening Post* cover might be influenced by Eliot or Braque.³⁹ The false assumption here is that popular culture, because of its place in the commercial world, remains unconscious of its form and merely provides content to its consumer. Horkheimer and Adorno put this in slightly different terms, arguing that “the style of the culture industry, which no longer has to test itself against any refractory material, is also the negation of style.”⁴⁰

The binary of modernism/form and popular culture/content is continually replicated in existing dialogic scholarship. From Reynolds’s groundbreaking *Beneath the American Renaissance* to North’s *The Dialect of Modernism*, the existing hierarchies of literary value remain central. In these constructions, popular cultural forms (whether city mysteries or “coon songs”) merely provide content—tropes, images, characters—that more sophisticated and self-conscious canonical figures transform into capital-L Literature. The complicated hierarchical and cannibalistic relationship articulated in these works suggests that the study of popular culture and the study of literature still remain quite separate, with critics of Literature occasionally engaging a popular work, as long as it is used to shed appropriate light on a more canonical text. The division between the so-called high and low is nowhere as distinct as in modernist studies, where the dominant modernist canon remains, with a few obligatory inclusions, almost fully intact from its

earliest incarnations. This suggests that modernist studies as a field has not come as far from the days of *Axel's Castle* as New Modernist scholars may think.

Vernacular Modernism: Aesthetic Parameters, Popular Texts

In contrast to the existing modernist/popular culture paradigm, I would like to propose an alternative way to think about the modernist era. Rather than see Wilson's canon (and its limited expansions) as the only legitimate examples of modernism, I point to the wide variety of popular fictions that experienced massive changes during the peak moment of high modernism, from roughly 1910-1937. This period, beginning near the publication of Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909) and concluding with the mid-1930s culmination of high modernism (including the publication of William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!* [1936], Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* [1936], and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* [1937]), coincides with an important moment in popular American linguistics: the investigations of critic H.L. Mencken into what he called the American language. While critics have already delineated the ways in which modernist writers were fully engaged with the popular culture of this era, they have often been blind to the degrees to which these genres themselves were experiencing a revolution in their own stylistic and narrative assumptions, many of which parallel the changes brought on by modernism. For the purposes of this dissertation, I call the literature transformed by these changes, present in a number of different genres, "vernacular modernism."

The term vernacular modernism poses some problems of definition. The word "vernacular," for our purposes, should evoke two distinct, but related meanings. In its more common usage, the term suggests the common language of the streets, as opposed

to the elite language of the academy. Vernacular language differs quite radically from a dialect, especially in the realm of literary studies. Dialect literature, popular in the nineteenth century, emphasized difference between the reader and the speaker; by nature, dialect is the language of an outsider, in Spivak's terminology, a "subaltern."⁴¹

Vernacular language, by contrast, is a more widely-used and widely-understood common language, and is, as a result, a kind of linguistic fiction; the early twentieth century (as we shall see) was full of studies trying to identify common American vernacular. Naturally, vernacular, with its Latin root meaning "a home-born slave" (*OED*), also evokes class considerations that are crucial in understanding its relationship to the elitism of high modernism and a kind of domestic identity that counters the cosmopolitan, international identity of high modernism.

Simultaneously, I wish to draw on the term "vernacular" as it appears in the discipline of musicology. Since the late 1960s musicologists have used the terms "vernacular music" and "cultivated music" to differentiate between music produced by and/or for academy-educated musicians ("cultivated") and the enormous amount of popular and folk musics ("vernacular").⁴² "Unlike musics known and practiced by a socio-cultural and professional elite, vernacular music is accessible to the majority of people because of their familiarity with its forms and functions and because they are able to acquire knowledge of it through everyday practice, that is, without any specialized skills."⁴³ While this is nearly as problematic as the high/low or modernist/popular binaries in literary studies, it eliminates contradictory constructions like "low modernism," a phrase that merely reinscribes the long-standing hierarchy of value in modernist studies. It also untangles the difficulties that arise when works thought of as

exemplary of high culture (like Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* [1933]) become commercial successes and when works intended for a popular audience result in commercial failures. Vernacular modernism, then, consists of identifiably experimental work written by popular but not elite authors, published by major magazines or presses, and read by the general public. This modernist strain contrasts with what I will continue to call "high modernism," texts self-consciously written by and for a literary elite.⁴⁴ There is always some danger in importing a critical concept from one discipline into another, but here the confluence of definitions (vernacular language and vernacular literature/music) is exceptionally useful in examining the popular literature of the modernist era.

While serving a dual function as a descriptor of the language, content, and cultural context of the texts, I would also like vernacular to carry the weight of another critical concept, that of the "multiaccentuality" of the linguistic and ideological sign, as theorized by Soviet linguist (and member of Bakhtin's circle) V.N. Vološinov. As Vološinov writes, "Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e., with the community which is the totality of users of the same set of signs for ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of class struggle."⁴⁵ Vološinov's "accents" have an explicit political orientation and suggest a political analogue of what has come to be known as "reading communities." Along these lines, Michael Denning has drawn on the notion of "multiaccentuality" in his important work on dime novels and working-class readership.⁴⁶ "Multiaccentuality" is useful here because vernacular modernism depends on linguistic self-consciousness and

an awareness of the ways that non-standard, “accented” vernacular speech can have radical formal and aesthetic influence on literary production. This does not empty the concept of its political weight—indeed, my notion of vernacular modernism is an effort to understand and seek value in the reading preferences of non-literary elites—but it adds an aesthetic dimension to Vološinov’s concept. These accents rely on the ways in which different classes of readers encounter a text: one might, for example, read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as an adventure tale (as many did), while another reader may see it as a proto-modernist psychological meditation on colonialism.⁴⁷ What Vološinov sees as the variant political accents present in all signs can simultaneously be seen as a kind of politically charged aesthetics.⁴⁸

The problem in literary study comes when the divisions are made between works with a self-conscious aesthetic and others presumed to lack such an aesthetic: popular works like dime novels and pulp fiction that have long been thought of as “unauthored discourse.”⁴⁹ Naturally, both highbrow and popular works can be read with an emphasis on their “popular” accents, what Peter Brooks might call “reading for the plot,” even if this means reading “serious” works against the grain, in the same way a popular paperback might be read.⁵⁰ What literary criticism has generally lacked is a willingness to see the “literary” accents present in popular writing. This blindness does contain a significant political dimension that reinscribes Pound’s elitist notions; the implicit assumption here is that working-class readers and popular authors are sub-literary and, lacking literary quality, there remains nothing aesthetic or formal worth discussing in these texts. Of course, certain writers have been taken up by critics as exemplary in their historical moment; many of the writers in this study have received substantial scholarly

attention. This attention, however, is nearly always in the form of some ideological criticism, some focus on the content of the works without any attention to their aesthetics. The assumption is that these works all conform, to varying (and critically uninteresting) degrees, to the standards of realism. However, as Astrudur Eysteinnsson notes, “[l]abeling the whole so-called culture industry ‘realistic’ hardly seems productive. Those who endorse this dichotomy often do not address the question of popular culture at all.”⁵¹ Even his study fails to address this question sufficiently.

Seeing popular texts as especially good subject matter for the unpacking of the history and ideology of literary discourse has served as a boon, both to the work of critics and to the critical reputation of many popular writers. Still, critics generally talk about the aesthetics of high modernism and the content of popular fiction, as if the aesthetics of the popular writing were either nonexistent or somehow beneath their critical interest. While seeing the content of popular writing as central to the project of modernism purports to break down the longstanding boundaries between the high and the low, it has done little to bring value to popular writing on its own terms. However, is there a fundamental political value, as New Modernist scholarship implicitly argues, in shifting the terms by which we talk about modernism away from the terms used by modernists themselves? Does seeing popular culture as a venue exclusively in which to discuss ideology not simply reinforce the cultural hegemonies of the existing canon?

Modernists conceived of their work in a variety of ways, but for the purposes of this study, two central concerns will dominate the discussion. Modernists were engaged in a wholesale rejection of many of the tenets of nineteenth-century realism while simultaneously suggesting that their own writing was closer to the “real thing” than the

staid, conventional works of realism ever were.⁵² Theories of modernist writing were obsessed with accessing the real that somehow still eluded the nineteenth-century realists. Virginia Woolf differentiated between the “real” and the “lifelike,” associating the former with new writing and the latter with the stale attention to realistic presentation of detail that characterized the writing of “Edwardians.”⁵³ In “A Note on Realism,” Sherwood Anderson claimed that “realism, in so far as the word means reality to life, is always bad art—although it may possibly be very good journalism.”⁵⁴ Later critics and theorists of modernism latched on to this heightening and necessary aestheticization of the “realistic” by modernist writers. In an essay that deals largely with European figures, Theodor Adorno emphasizes, “[i]f the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the façade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it.”⁵⁵

The two most crucial changes the modernists brought in this rejection had to do with the very assumptions that a realist novel somehow depicted the real world. First, the notion of objective narration was almost wholly jettisoned. No individual, the work of these writers suggested, could realistically write from the privileged vantage point from which most realist novels were told. People do not actually think in serpentine Jamesian sentences. The most “realistic” narration, then, would be either a completely subjective narration (i.e. a first-person narrative that involved a significant plumbing of psychological depths) or a third-person narrative that dug so deeply into the minds of its characters, often governed by free indirect discourse, that conventional narrative structure would break down, in a variety of degrees, to represent the thoughts of a character on her own terms, rather than according to some prescribed, external set of grammatical rules.

From Ford Madox Ford's "On Impressionism" (1914) through Adorno's "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel" (1954), the narrative position of modernism appeared as a wholesale break with the assumptions of realism. Modernist writing depended on, according to Adorno, "a subjectivism that leaves no material untransformed and thereby undermines the epic precept of objectivity or material concreteness."⁵⁶ Woolf's 1919 essay "Modern Novels" would argue for much the same subjectivism: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness."⁵⁷

In a second major shift away from realist assumptions, modernists became distrustful of the innocence of the linguistic sign. For the most part, realist writers of the late nineteenth century saw language as a more than suitable medium for the communication of ideas. By the early twentieth century, the notion that language was a transparent window into these ideas had fallen seriously into doubt. Words were words and the world was something entirely different. In Sherwood Anderson's words, "What never seems to come quite clear is the simple fact that art is art. It is not life."⁵⁸ As William Carlos Williams noted in *Spring and All* (1923), "It is not a matter of 'representation'"; the purely representational or mimetic aspect was no longer the primary function of language.⁵⁹ Instead, in line with Pound's dictum to "make it new," modernists were remaking the world via language. Jolas's "Revolution of the Word" manifesto argues this position most adamantly: "the literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries" and "he has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing

grammatical and syntactical laws.”⁶⁰ The manipulation of language in text was privileged over some kind of transparent representation or mimetic quality of language. In a later articulation, Jolas claimed that the “Revolution of Language” involved “an attitude which regards modern language as inadequate for the expression of the changing background of the world, and which posits the necessity of a radical revision in its communicative and symbolical function.”⁶¹ In modernism, it became often more important *how* things were said (their form, style, sound, and shape) than *what* was said.

This particular characterization of modernism has often been used to reinforce high/low distinctions that undergird modernist studies; this emphasis on complex forms and impenetrable style make high modernist writing notoriously difficult for readers. Richard Poirier, in his essay “The Difficulties of Modernism and the Modernism of Difficulty” argues that “[m]odernism in literature can be measured by the degree of textual intimidation felt in the act of reading.”⁶² Indeed, modernist texts make the casual reader into a “grim reader...by the claim that most people are inadequate to them. We are met with inducements to tidy things up, to locate principles of order and structure beneath a fragmentary surface.”⁶³ According to this perspective, experimentation with language precludes any possible ascension to the modernist canon by easily digestible (and presumably non-fragmentary) popular writing. Such a perspective, however, completely ignores the degree to which popular writing of the modernist era is heavily invested in both narrative and linguistic experimentation. If we posit that the aesthetic opposition between realism and modernism resides primarily on the principles of intense subjectivity and the privileging of textual form over content, the entire artistic culture of the modernist era begs some reevaluation.

While the high modernists were experimenting with language and the representation of subjectivity on the Left Bank of Paris, many Americans on this side of the Atlantic Ocean were becoming interested in the power and inventiveness of the American vernacular. While popular dialect literature and humor in the late nineteenth century emphasized social and cultural differences in America (often to quite nefarious ends), the early twentieth century saw an increasing interest in describing a truly American language, a vernacular language that had sufficiently divorced itself from its British roots to claim its right as a completely independent entity, worthy of discussion in its own right. The literary uses of this American vernacular resulted in a vernacular modernism, a style in which a variety of non-realist and often non-representational vernacular languages became central to a host of popular genres. Humorist, memoirists, detective fiction writers and others transformed their respective genres into highly self-conscious textual objects that both emphasized subjectivity and foregrounded non-realist language. As in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), these writers chose to have their characters speak and write in their own vernacular voice through their own highly individualized consciousness, often from a strongly compromised narrative position. The resulting vernacular modernism runs parallel to its high modernist counterpart, operating in a more identifiably dialogic relationship.

It might be easy to see this movement toward a fully American language and literature as part and parcel of the nativist tendency in America in the 1910s and 1920s—so articulately described by Walter Benn Michaels in *Our America*—and to a degree it is. However, the most well-known figure in the drive toward describing and cataloging the American language was himself frequently derided as a Germanophilic anti-American

during World War I and spent the majority of his career as a journalist savaging American culture. Indeed, it was H.L. Mencken's *The American Language* (and his articles that preceded it) that put the question of vernacular language into the forefront of the American popular consciousness. With Mencken's wide-ranging popularity throughout the 1910s and 1920s as a literary and social critic, as well as his fascination with the American vernacular, it is possible to read *The American Language* (1919) as a veritable manifesto of American vernacular modernism.

“When Things Get All Balled Up”: H.L. Mencken's Modernist *American Language*

H.L. Mencken was no fan of high modernism. While he gave Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) a positive review in *The Smart Set*, noting that “[t]here is not the slightest hint in it of the usual structure of prose fiction; it is new both in plan and in detail,” he downright hated *Ulysses*, calling it “deliberately mystifying and mainly puerile...I have never been able to get over a suspicion that Joyce concocted it as a kind of vengeful hoax.”⁶⁴ Mencken's own literary preferences—his prejudices, as he might call them—remained rather Victorian throughout his life. He preferred the literary work of naturalist Theodore Dreiser and debunking realist Sinclair Lewis, and he had little use for new experimental art forms, whether they were—like jazz—commercial products or—like Joyce's *Ulysses*—emblematic of a more elite literary avant-garde. However, he doubted the mimetic function of literary language and would claim in a 1926 essay entitled “On Realism” that “[o]ne of the strangest delusions of criticism is to be found in the notion that there is such a thing as realism.”⁶⁵

Still, Mencken's literary tastes became, by the middle of the twentieth century, largely unfashionable, and contemporary scholars rarely cite Mencken as an authority on any matters of literary value. Around the same time that his taste in literature went out of style, his increasingly controversial political positions further marginalized him in the American mainstream. His marginalization as both a literary and cultural critic and a political and social thinker has only increased with the revelation of some of Mencken's more controversial views about Jews and World War II; for all intents and purposes, he has become a kind of *persona non grata* in American literary studies. Only one recent work in American Studies, Chip Rhodes's *Structures of the Jazz Age: Mass Culture, Progressive Education, and Racial Disclosures in American Modernism* (1998) deals with Mencken at any length. This is somewhat surprising, given that Mencken was probably the most influential and well-known social and cultural critic of the 1920s and served as editor of *The Smart Set* and *American Mercury*, two periodicals that set standards for both literary and intellectual discourse in the American mainstream in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the popular American mind at least, the 1920s were not "the Pound era," but almost undeniably "the Mencken era."⁶⁶

When Mencken is addressed in criticism, the results are frequently predictable. An avowed Nietzschean, contemptuous of American culture and the Americans who embraced it, Mencken's name has become synonymous with the concept of "debunking," a popular fascination of the 1920s. With his series of essays *Prejudices* (1919-1927) as well as his commentary in *American Mercury* (on, among other things, the Scopes trial), Mencken's reputation has long been that of the gritty realist, driven to explode myths and expose idiocy wherever he saw them. Unfortunately, Mencken's status as harsh cultural

critic has largely limited the ways in which his importance to the modernist era has been discussed. Beyond the hackneyed characterization of him as the ultimate “debunker” and leader of a movement that historian Frederick Lewis Allen called in 1931 “The Revolt of the Highbrows,” it is difficult to situate him in the contemporary milieu of modernist studies where race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity constitute a matrix in which modernist writers and thinkers attempt to reconfigure the changing world around them.⁶⁷ As a result, New Modernist critics do not quite know what to make of him.

Unlike so many other major figures in the American 1920s who were literally trying to make the world “new,” Mencken remained locked into a schizophrenic Victorianism. While railing against an American “boobacracy” of Puritan values in his work, he lived much of his private life in line with nineteenth-century genteel bachelorhood. Because of these contradictions (as well as his recently-unearthed controversial ideas) biographies of Mencken outnumber critical studies of his work by more than two to one. Of course, the inconsistencies in a subject’s life are far easier to explore than are contradictions in one’s work and thought. And Mencken’s work is almost unbelievably varied: his writings encompass reportage, literary journalism, philosophical biography, literary criticism, popular linguistics, cultural criticism, travel writing, memoir, and dramatic burlesques (among others). The studies that do attempt to bring together Mencken’s varied work inevitably end up in a familiar place. Writers like Frederick J. Hoffman in *The Twenties* and Edward A. Martin in *H.L. Mencken and the Debunkers* essentially reinscribe Allen’s thesis that Mencken was “the keynoter of this revolt [of the highbrows], its chief tomtom beater.”⁶⁸

Almost inevitably left out of any “comprehensive” study of Mencken’s work is his magnum opus, *The American Language*.⁶⁹ Initially published in 1919, this book is one of the first in a series of books by major figures in American intellectual history that suggest an early articulation of American “exceptionalism” after World War I.⁷⁰ *The American Language* does not fit conveniently into any of the rubrics for understanding Mencken as a man or as an intellectual. It is neither polemic, nor burlesque; it is not cranky or hostile. It is, in many ways, Mencken’s most earnest attempt at creating a literary legacy. As Raymond Nelson has noted in the only essay on the book published to this point, “Mencken came to believe it would be the single work for which he would be remembered.”⁷¹ Such a position does not jibe with our common notion of Mencken as the self-appointed scourge of the *boobus Americanus*. Even in Mencken biographies, *The American Language* gets short shrift. For example, in Terry Teachout’s acclaimed 2002 biography of Mencken, *The Skeptic*, he devotes more time to Mencken’s influential review of Dreiser’s 1910 novel *Jennie Gerhardt* than he does to *The American Language* (all four editions and two supplemental volumes) in its entirety.

The critical avoidance of this work is somewhat surprising, considering that Mencken worked on versions of it for most of his career. Beginning with journalistic musings in *The Baltimore Sun* in 1910, it evolved into a special series of articles in 1914 and a book-length study by 1919. The next four years saw two new editions (1921 and 1923) and, while writing influential cultural criticism during the late 1920s, Mencken continued to amass material toward the fourth and final edition, published in 1936, a moment when Mencken’s public reputation had become increasingly unpopular. While this has become the standard edition (and remains in print to this day), Mencken

published two “supplements” in 1945 and 1948 and followed these with a series of “postscripts” in *The New Yorker* from 1948-1949, his last major publications. Mencken’s engagement with *The American Language* covers nearly his entire professional life, more time than his influential editorships at *The Smart Set* (1914-1923) and at *The American Mercury* (1924-1933), as well as his acclaimed essay series *Prejudices* (1919-1927). And while *The American Language* is frequently deemphasized by Mencken scholars due to its perceived inconsistency with Mencken’s thought, reviews of the first edition noted that “[n]ever has the flourishing personality of H.L. Mencken been so happily exercised as in this big book on the living speech of America.”⁷²

The problem that *The American Language* poses for the critic may be ameliorated by returning to the period in which questions of language were paramount. While Mencken’s cultural criticism is far more likely to appear in more recent studies of modernism (like Rhodes’s *Structures of the Jazz Age*), *The American Language* consciously rejects the cultural criticism for which Mencken is more well-known today. His interest in language does not appear to be a part of his “mediaeval but unashamed taste for the bizarre and indelicate, [his] congenital weakness for comedy of the grosser varieties” that he describes as his somewhat perverse reasons for remaining in the U.S. in his essay “On Being an American.”⁷³ Rather, his linguistic study—as unsystematic as it is—seems rooted in two other tendencies: Mencken’s desire for a uniquely American culture, separate from English influence, and the modernist belief in the ability of language to (in Ezra Pound’s words) “make it new.” If we assume that literary modernism is itself an inquiry into the ways in which writers bend language to their own

artistic ends, *The American Language* can be read as a homespun, vernacular variation on the modernist manifesto.

On the cusp of the 1920s, as modernist writers like Virginia Woolf were considering the expressive nature of the “modern novel” of the past decade, H.L. Mencken might have been reflecting on the development of his own ideas. After all, the first edition of *The American Language* saw publication in March of 1919 after a decade of tinkering with ideas about the concept. Mencken’s first series of articles that would become *The American Language* does not strike one as necessarily revolutionary; these pieces include (as does *The American Language* itself) extended lists of variable meanings between American and British English. He begins this series relatively humbly: “Words change and their meanings change. Idioms decay, dry up and blow away. Grammatical forms give birth to new grammatical forms. The same verb is conjugated differently in different ages, in different countries, on different sides of the street. The English people speak an English which differs enormously, in vocabulary and idiom, from the English spoken by Americans.”⁷⁴ The articles that followed this one, “The Two Englishes,” fell along the same lines, with Mencken pointing out the differences in English and American slang in “England’s English” (October 14, 1910), creating conjugation charts for vernacular American usage in “Spoken American” (October 19, 1910) and “More American” (October 20, 1910), and contrasting the variant uses of pronouns in “American Pronouns” (October 25, 1910). While Mencken occasionally exhibits some of his notorious contempt for the American public—for example, when he says that “[a]ny spoken language, however barbarous, is worthy of investigation”—the

overall impression of these pieces is that Mencken has developed a real fascination for the independence of the American vernacular from its English roots.⁷⁵

Indeed, Mencken would later expand his ideas and celebrate the idiosyncrasies of American English in a *Smart Set* article entitled “The American: His Language,” published in August of 1913. Here, Mencken notes, “Such is American, a language preeminent among the tongues of the earth for its eager hospitality to new words, and no less for its compactness, its naked directness, and its disdain of all academic obfuscations and restraints.”⁷⁶ Strangely, this article appears in a series (entitled “The American”) in which Mencken has few positive things to say about American character. In other articles in this series, subtitled “His Morals,” “His Ideas of Beauty,” “His Freedom,” and “His New Puritanism,” Mencken savages virtually every element of American life in the early twentieth century. Only in “His Language” does Mencken praise some element of the culture he made a living criticizing.

What Mencken seizes upon in his articles on American English is the ways in which it quite literally declares independence from the English of England. The issue of linguistic independence, particularly in the vernacular uses of the language, remains central in all of the later incarnations of Mencken’s language studies. Of course, given Mencken’s own political distaste for England and oft-discussed Germanophilia, this could be read as a means of extricating his own American identity from too close an association with England. At the same time, however, his interest in common American language, as opposed to the academic language that he saw replicating the English of England, suggests something rather different.

By naturalizing the vernacular American language, Mencken creates a critique of the genteel language of the nineteenth century, what Kenneth Cmiel has charted in *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (1990) as the “middling” incorporation of “refined” language over the course of the century.⁷⁷ As Mencken’s work underwent revisions, this particular critique becomes emphasized in curious ways. Most important for Mencken is American slang, which he sees as central to the independent identity of American English. In “The American: His Language,” he notes that the “striving for vividness and forcefulness, when applied to the sentence instead of to a single word, produces the extraordinarily lush and vigorous thing called American slang.”⁷⁸ By opposing the “vividness and forcefulness” of slang to the dead weight of academic language, and the English inherited from England, Mencken sets up a series of crucial oppositions that inform all of his linguistic work.

In every edition of *The American Language*, Mencken notes the inability or unwillingness of American philologists to take vernacular language seriously. Looking for evidence of serious scholarship on American language and speech in the existing work of philologists, Mencken

soon found that no such work existed, either in England or America – that the whole literature of the subject was astonishingly meager and unsatisfactory...Worse, an important part of the poor literature that I unearthed was devoted to absurd efforts to prove that no such thing as an American variety of English existed—that the difference I constantly encountered in English and that my English friends encountered in American were chiefly imaginary, and to be explained away by denying them.⁷⁹

These philologists, he suggests, are stuck in the nineteenth century with their study of academic English. For Mencken, the proper object of twentieth-century linguistic study is American slang, the living language of the streets. This particular opposition creates a

number of correspondences. He associates the nineteenth century with academic, British English, and, by extension, Victorian language. The twentieth century, on the other hand, is associated with the American language, slang, and a “vividness and forcefulness” that is lacking in the genteel language of Victorian English.

What remains most striking about these oppositions in Mencken’s consideration of the American language is that they correspond so well with the modernist critique of realist language, as advocated, for example, in theoretical statements by Virginia Woolf, Eugene Jolas, Sherwood Anderson, and Ezra Pound. The positive attributes that Mencken gives to American slang—its “vividness and forcefulness” and its “naked directness”—oppose the gentility of the realist mode in virtually the same way that Woolf’s celebration of “Modern Fiction” calls for a break from this realist tradition. When Woolf says of realist fiction that “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide,” she could very well be speaking of the American slang that Mencken sees as invigorating an overly genteel language of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ Likewise, Pound suggests that modernist poetry will “move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr Hewlett calls ‘nearer the bone.’”⁸¹ For Mencken, Woolf, and Pound, the twentieth century demands a “naked directness,” something “harder and saner,” in order to access “the essential thing.” The problem resides in the traditional insistence on seeing language as purely mimetic in the realist mode and an corresponding unwillingness to recognize that a new century demands a new form of expression, one that effectively gets closer to the “real” or “the essential thing.”

For Mencken, this “real thing” is the real language of ordinary Americans, the slang that “originates in the effort of ingenious individuals to make the language more pungent and picturesque—to increase the store of terse and striking words, to widen the boundaries of metaphor, and to provide a vocabulary for new shades of difference in meaning.”⁸² This characterization of slang is useful in that it does not argue that slang somehow has a purely pragmatic function, i.e. that it has a more mimetic relationship to the ideas and things it describes. Instead, slang is all about artifice, about “widening” the gap between signifier and signified, and ultimately creating a more nuanced “meaning,” one that eludes conventionally realist language. Seen in these terms, slang echoes high modernists’ call for new literary forms to represent a new world; Mencken notes that slang already has such a relationship to the world, and this representation has been largely ignored in products of genteel culture.⁸³

While equating Mencken’s writings on American slang with the quasi-manifestos of Virginia Woolf and Ezra Pound might seem, at first, to be a perverse use of these writers, there is some suggestion that Mencken saw his work as a manifesto of its own kind. In the second (1921) and third (1923) editions of *The American Language*, Mencken included an appendix titled “Specimens of the American Vulgate,” a nod toward his own proclivity for writing burlesques throughout the 1910s. Designed to display the American language in practice, these sections included pieces by humorist Ring Lardner, poet John V.A. Weaver, and Mencken himself. Lardner’s pieces, “Baseball-American” and “Ham-American,” demonstrate different kinds of specialized argot (among baseball players and actors), and Weaver’s poem shows how vernacular language could appear in serious poetry. Mencken’s pieces, on the other hand, are

actually “translations” of historical American documents into the slang of the 1920s. The piece that appears in both editions, and that would be later reprinted as a “burlesque” in Mencken’s *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (1949), edited by Mencken himself, is his translation of the American Declaration of Independence.

Mencken’s rationale for such a translation is interesting: “it must be obvious that more than one section of the original is now quite unintelligible to the average American of the sort using the Common Speech.”⁸⁴ This claim of unintelligibility points toward an almost evangelical use of translation; because no one can understand this liberating document, Mencken implies, I will liberate the document (and its readers) by rendering it in a language that has a more nuanced contemporary meaning. His opening operates simultaneously as a burlesque and a declaration of independence for vernacular modernists:

When things get so balled up that the people of a country have to cut loose from some other country, and go it on their own hook, without asking no permission from nobody, excepting maybe God Almighty, then they ought to let everybody know why they done it, so that everybody can see that they are on the level, and not trying to put nothing over on nobody.⁸⁵

Mencken’s translation removes the Enlightenment language of the original document, substituting in its place a series of highly idiomatic expressions. His entire translation, full of ephemeral slang, much of which has long passed out of use, almost needs its own set of annotations for an early twenty-first-century reader. Like the major documents of high modernism, Mencken’s declaration rejects a realist language for a set of vernacular metaphors which draw attention to themselves as much, if not more than, the content they purport to communicate. “When things get all balled up,” as they often do in the language of genteel realism, only a vernacular language, an aesthetics of slang, can liberate them.

The vernacular take on modernism found in Mencken's popular linguistics emerges in a number of writers, many of whom were closely connected with Mencken. This study will chart the ways in which new ideas about an American vernacular language manifested themselves in a variety of popular American genres of the 1910s and 1920s. The vernacular modernists effectively created a parallel development to the work of internationally minded high modernists, one that was truly "homemade" (to borrow Kenner's term). From the mid-1910s to the early 1930s, these two strands of modernism developed alongside one another, each occasionally lifting ideas and techniques from the other. By the time the early 1930s arrived and the political winds had shifted, many high modernists began to rethink their own ideas about the modernist subject. While the 1920s saw many high modernist works where the artist was the central figure through which ideas about modernity needed to be worked out, the effects of the Great Depression caused many high modernists to radicalize themselves and see the impact of modernity rather differently. At this point, the proletarian subject became of prime interest to the high modernists, and, to a certain extent, the two strands of modernism merged in the early 1930s for these political reasons. The work of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hurston, and others signals a wholesale incorporation of vernacular modernist techniques by high modernists. The chapters of this dissertation will chart this move toward this merger by considering the importance of vernacular modernism in a number of popular genres.

Methodologically, "You've Got to Be Modernistic" uses the term genre in two related, but distinct modes. Standard literary genres appear in chapters one and three:

humor writing and the crime novel are identifiable generic practices with a history of conventions. Chapters two and four follow a more sociological notion of genre. The Jewish-American fictional memoir and the African-American urban novel could both be conceived as literary genres, but as categories, they also serve as windows into specific anxieties experienced by ethnic groups and demonstrate modes of understanding the particularly complex relationship these groups had to ideologies of realism. This latter notion of genre is informed, to a degree, by Richard H. Brodhead, who argues for a “history of literary access” in *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993). This history involves “the history of the processes by which literary writing has had different cultural places made for it, and so has had different groups placed in different proximities to it.”⁸⁶ The era that spawned modernist writing also saw increased interest in immigration (as both immigrant advocacy and the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924 demonstrate), as well as a fascination with African-American culture when, as Langston Hughes phrased it, “the Negro was in vogue.”⁸⁷ These phenomena alone did not create “cultural places” for these writers, but contributed to the literary access that, itself, enabled aesthetic transformations in the received traditions with which these writers were engaged.⁸⁸

Despite its subtitle, “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” does not intend to become yet another attempt at sub-canonization. The last two decades have seen innumerable studies, many cited in this project, that attach an adjective to the term modernism to create some alternative: “pop modernism,” “ethnic modernism,” “vicious modernism,” “bad modernism,” “pulp modernism,” “black modernism,” etc. While “vernacular modernism” certainly follows this tradition, “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” hopes to

shift the discussion not exclusively to an underappreciated group of interesting writers, but, more importantly, to shift the terms of the debate back to the experimentation that dominated wide varieties of modernist discourse before canonization limited the number of writers considered sufficiently interesting or “experimental.” Vernacular modernism is a mode, a strand, a current running parallel to high modernism; it engages canonical writers as these writers engage vernacular forms. Most importantly, this concept hopes to acknowledge the wide-ranging modes of literary and linguistic revolutions happening across broad swaths of early twentieth-century literary culture, rejecting existing binaries that charge that revolutions only occurred in short-run little magazines printed abroad and read by an elite group of literati. Countering the elite and classist notions that popular readers and writers were the mindless producers and consumers that modernist critics have often made them out to be, vernacular modernism as a concept—and as a particularly American literary mode—acknowledges something long overdue: there was a great deal more literary production, especially stateside, that wanted, as James P. Johnson would put it, “to play modernistic.”

The first examples of vernacular modernism appeared in the writing of one of Mencken’s favorite writers, humorist Ring Lardner. No single writer of the 1920s is more influential and less critically examined than Lardner, whose work was almost universally praised by high- and lowbrow critics alike. Like Mencken’s, Lardner’s influence extends throughout the dissertation. The first chapter examines Lardner’s specific impact on the long-popular genre of American humor writing, particularly the ways his writing provides a critique of nineteenth-century realist humor. In its place, Lardner’s work foregrounds individual subjectivity, completely resetting the aesthetic terms of humor.

Lardner's texts, like the classics of high modernism, represent the growth and development of their narrators through their particular use of language. As a result, Lardner's characters, emotionally and often intellectually stunted, must tell stories that their language is often incapable of communicating. In addition, this chapter looks at another popular writer (and favorite of Mencken) who took Lardner's development even further, Anita Loos. Loos's work has received a great deal of well-needed attention in terms of its gender politics, but the sophisticated sense of narration and style in her most celebrated novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925), still needs significant unpacking.

The second chapter retains the emphasis on subjectivity in its discussion of popular Jewish-American autobiographical fiction. While pioneering writers like Abraham Cahan and Mary Antin relied on the standards of realism to articulate the problems of assimilation into American society, Jewish-American writers of the 1920s and 1930s rejected a purely realistic mode for a more complex narrational strategy that layered English vocabulary onto Yiddish syntax. Most prominent among the early practitioners of this style was Anzia Yezierska, whose short story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920) became a popular success both in print and as a Hollywood adaptation. Yezierska's characters challenge notions of standardization among English speakers; indeed, the stories in *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and the novel *Bread Givers* (1925) allow characters to speak "modernistically," piecing together foreign words and phrases into abstract forms of representation. Like Yezierska, Mike Gold utilizes vernacular characters in his *Jews Without Money* (1930). Though Gold's narration derives more from the realist tradition of Cahan, his novel operates as a series of grotesque impressions, an

expressionist (and Whitmanesque) organizational strategy that draws on his own experience writing expressionist drama.

The urban grotesques of Gold provide a transition to the hard-boiled crime narratives in the following chapter. Chapter three begins a discussion of a pulpwood magazine that Mencken and George Jean Nathan founded to offset the losses by *The Smart Set*. This magazine, *Black Mask*, became a pioneer in the development of the hard-boiled detective story, a style which has come to dominate the genre of mystery fiction. This style first emerges in the work of Carroll John Daly, whose early work shows a conscious shift from the genteel narrator to the hard-talking tough guy that would dominate American detective narratives in the twentieth century. This figure, born into a truly modern network of social, political, and economic corruption, grapples with this world through a laconic, slangy form of narration. Indeed, the standard epistemological assumptions of the detective genre are thrown into disarray as the world becomes both linguistically and symbolically illegible. In the mouths of characters that are, in Daly's terms, "halfway house[s] between the dicks and the crooks," language assumes a truly modernist form. Not only is its ability to represent the world with any sort of accuracy seriously compromised, the world itself assumes a form that appears incomprehensible to the linguistic. In Dashiell Hammett's work, in particular, wide, impressionistic swaths of violence and grotesque character description replace the realist modes that dominated the classical detective story.

Finding some common ground between the Harlem Renaissance and modernism has created difficulty for scholars of African-American literature and culture since the 1920s. Chapter four examines how some of the apparent contradictions in the literary

history of this period might be resolved with the use of the concept “vernacular modernism.” Though the Great Migration of African-Americans northward had come at least ten years earlier, by the mid-1920s African-American culture was increasingly presented as both urban and urbane, and many writers and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance soundly rejected dialect writing. During the late 1920s, however, African-American fiction began to shift back toward the use of dialect, largely in response to Carl Van Vechten’s notoriously titled *Nigger Heaven* (1926). Following Van Vechten’s controversial novel, debates raged in African-American periodicals about the propriety of depicting working class black characters. In response, writers like Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay recentered these figures, elevating the drama of urban vernacular characters to the level of middle-class “dickties” (in Fisher’s *The Walls of Jericho* [1928]) and emphasizing the crucial link between the vernacular figure and the aspiring modernist writer (in McKay’s *Home to Harlem* [1928]).

This new articulation of an American vernacular modernism allows a wholesale rethinking of the relationship of modernist aesthetics to popular culture in American writing. The conclusion charts the ways in which the lines of influence crisscross more explicitly in the work of recognized modernists of the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. Far from merely a model of cultural appropriation, American high modernists recognized in the vernacular writers an exciting possibility—that of yoking the American language (as celebrated by Mencken) to trends of experimentation current in Europe. The convergence of these two strains of modernism begins to occur in the late 1920s and becomes even more prominent in the 1930s in the work of John Dos Passos, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner. Each of these high modernists draws on the variant strands of

vernacular modernism, weaving into their fictions the vernacular subjectivities of Lardner and Loos, the aestheticization of assimilation in Yeziarska and Gold, the breakdown of realist epistemology in Daly and Hammett, and the radical return to working-class environments in Fisher and McKay. Ultimately, “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” seeks to promote a rethinking and redefinition of modernism in terms that more closely consider American literary history, language, and cultural hierarchies.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 643.

² H.L. Mencken, *Mencken’s America*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Athens: Ohio UP, 2004), 37-38.

³ [Eugene Jolas], “Proclamation,” *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), 13.

⁴ Theodore T. Irwin, “Slanguage: 1929,” *transition* 16/17 (June 1929), 32-34.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

⁶ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1928, repr. New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1969), 9-34, 83-109. Matei Calinescu surveys the Latin American notion of *modernismo* and the earlier use of the term by John Crowe Ransom in *The Fugitive*. See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1987), 68-85.

⁷ Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle: A Study of the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931, repr. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 3.

⁸ See, for example Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1987) and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988).

⁹ Hugh Kenner, “The Making of the Modernist Canon,” *Chicago Review* 34 (Spring 1984), 56.

¹⁰ Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1975), 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12, 13, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 213.

¹³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996), 15-46. See also Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 145-161.

¹⁴ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 43.

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 133.

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, ed., *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 8.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Scott and Melvin J. Friedman, eds., *Pound/The Little Review: The Letters of Ezra Pound to Margaret Anderson: The Little Review Correspondence* (New York: New Directions, 1988), 157.

¹⁸ Pound’s editorial engagement with both Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Joyce’s *Ulysses* certainly positions him as a figure important to both modernist poetry and prose.

¹⁹ Pound’s call to “make it new” informs two early essays on modernism: Harry Levin, “What Was Modernism?” in *Refractions: Essays in Comparative Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), 271-295 and Maurice Beebe, “What Modernism Was,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 3 (July 1974), 1065-1084.

²⁰ Recent work has highlighted the ways in which modernism marketed itself. See, for example, Kevin J.H. Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds., *Marketing Modernism: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1996) and Ian Willison, et al, eds., *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996). Still, any marketing that occurred around modernist texts involved the conscious promotion of an anti-commercial product identity, rather than a “popular” one.

²¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), vii.

²² Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism, Postmodernism," *Against the Grain: Essays, 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), 140.

²³ Daniel Joseph Singal, "Towards a Definition of American Modernism," *American Quarterly* 31.1 (Spring 1987): 7.

²⁴ Lawrence Rainey and Robert von Hallberg, "Editorial/Introduction," *Modernism/Modernity* 1.1 (January 1994), 1.

²⁵ Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 38.

²⁶ For a discussion of the importance of the machine to Williams, see Cecilia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1987), 230-288.

²⁷ On the "anxiety of influence," see Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).

²⁸ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 262.

²⁹ Ibid, 269.

³⁰ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 27.

³¹ For some examples of studies that come out of these relationships, see the plethora of 1990s volumes that pair a canonical figure's name with "and popular culture": R.B. Kershner, *Joyce and Popular Culture* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1996); Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Popular Culture* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990); etc.

³² Of course, this does not even begin to scratch the surface of the traces of popular culture in modernist texts, especially those of poets. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* includes references to the popular tin-pan alley song "The Shakespearean Rag" and to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a text so popular he didn't feel the need to cite it in his notes. For more on Eliot and popular culture, see David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003).

³³ Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979), 130-148.

³⁴ William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol 1: 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz & Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 204.

³⁵ Virginia Woolf, "Character in Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 421.

³⁶ John Dos Passos, *Travel Books and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2003), 590. There are a number of parallels between the gendering of realism in Dos Passos's criticism and Raymond Chandler's gendering of the classical detective story, discussed at the beginning of Chapter Three. The issue of the gendering of modernism and realism (or of modernism and popular culture) emerges in a chapter entitled "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other" in Huyssen's *After the Great Divide*, p. 44-62.

³⁷ Naturalism, on the other hand, seems anything but nice. However, while some of its notions about narrative and character may be different from realism, it shares its most formal representational qualities with realism: hence, Jolas's invective against "descriptive naturalism."

³⁸ Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3.

³⁹ Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) demonstrates the degree to which popular advertising incorporated the developments of modernist art, obviously making Greenberg's division even more porous.

⁴⁰ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1987), 129-130.

⁴¹ For a thorough discussion of the role of dialect literature in late nineteenth century America, see Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999).

⁴² One of the first major musicological texts to create this distinction was H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969).

⁴³ Philip V. Bohlman, "Vernacular Music," *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 13 Sept 2007), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

⁴⁴ Terms like "high modernism," "highbrow," "lowbrow," and "literary" (in the sense of "high literature") will appear extensively throughout this dissertation. Occasionally, when context warrants, they will be explicitly surrounded by quotation marks. However, even when used without quotation marks, they should

be seen as exactly what they are: problematic constructions with a host of historical and cultural connotations.

⁴⁵ V.N. Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986), 23.

⁴⁶ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987).

⁴⁷ For an influential reading on the multiple modes of conceptualizing Conrad's work, see Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 206-280.

⁴⁸ One of the ideas I stress here is that the discussion of aesthetics is never apolitical, and the study of ideology is never without recourse to aesthetics. Criticism has often been too willing to compartmentalize these two elements of texts (hence, the emphasis on ideology in the New Modernist Studies), but the shunning of aesthetics for ideology itself marks a specific political and ideological valuation.

⁴⁹ Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 24.

⁵⁰ See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

⁵¹ Eysteinsson, 187.

⁵² For a discussion of the modernist desire to create a more realistic depiction of existence than the realists, see Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989), 240-286.

⁵³ Woolf, "Character in Fiction," 426.

⁵⁴ Sherwood Anderson, *Sherwood Anderson's Notebook* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), 76.

⁵⁵ Theodor Adorno, "The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel," *Notes to Literature*. Vol 1. Ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 30.

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Novels," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume III: 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1988), 33-34.

⁵⁸ Anderson, 72.

⁵⁹ Williams, 204.

⁶⁰ [Jolas], "Proclamation," 13.

⁶¹ Eugene Jolas, "What is the Revolution of Language," *transition* 22 (February 1933), 126.

⁶² Richard Poirier, "The Difficulties of Modernism and the Modernism of Difficulty," in *Images and Ideas in American Culture: The Functions of Criticism; Essays in Memory of Philip Rahv*, ed. Arthur Edelstein (Hanover, NH: Brandeis UP, 1979), 125.

⁶³ Poirier, 130.

⁶⁴ H.L. Mencken, "Criticism of Criticism of Criticism," *The Smart Set* 52 (August 1917), 143. Mencken on *Ulysses* quoted in Terry Teachout, *The Skeptic: A Life of H.L. Mencken* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2002), 114.

⁶⁵ H.L. Mencken, *A Second Mencken Chrestomathy* ed. Terry Teachout (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 222.

⁶⁶ I say this not to get into yet another debate about who is the most representative modernist (on this, see, for example, Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" *New Literary History* 13.3 [Spring 1982], 485-514). Rather, I see Mencken as yet another nexus of creativity; as editor, he published many of the most challenging of the popular writers in the U.S. (as well as many writers based in Europe). As critic, he influenced an entire generation of disaffected young men and women in the wake of World War I.

⁶⁷ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s* (1931, repr. New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), 195-211.

⁶⁸ Allen, 199. See Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York: The Free Press, 1965), esp. 344-355. Other approaches to Mencken frequently focus on a single element of his thought (such as his opinion of the American south as in Fred C. Hobson's *Serpent in Eden: H.L. Mencken in the South* [Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1974]) as emblematic of his worldview.

⁶⁹ Alternatively, when studies do include *The American Language*, such as Charles A. Fecher's *Mencken: A Study of His Thought* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), his philological work is sequestered into its own category and seen as largely independent of his work as "critic" or "philosopher."

⁷⁰ Others include Waldo Frank's *Our America* (1919), George Santayana's *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1920), Harold Stearns's *Civilization in the United States* (1922), D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in*

Classic American Literature (1923), William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain* (1925), Charles and Mary Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927), Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought* (1927-1930), and Constance Rourke's *American Humor* (1931).

⁷¹ Raymond Nelson, "Babylonian Frolics: H.L. Mencken and *The American Language*," *American Literary History* 11.4 (Winter 1999): 668.

⁷² Francis Hackett, "The Living Speech," in Douglas C. Stenerson, *Critical Essays on H.L. Mencken* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1987), 55.

⁷³ H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: Third Series* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), 58.

⁷⁴ H.L. Mencken, "The Two Englishes," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 6, 1910, p. 6.

⁷⁵ H.L. Mencken, "Spoken American," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, October 19, 1910, p. 6.

⁷⁶ Mencken, *Mencken's America*, 38-39.

⁷⁷ Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence: The Fight over Popular Speech in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1990).

⁷⁸ Mencken, 36.

⁷⁹ H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919), v-vi.

⁸⁰ Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 160.

⁸¹ Eliot, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, 12.

⁸² H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937), 563.

⁸³ While slang seems to represent the ability of language to constantly "make it new," Mencken's characterization of thieves' cant (and, by extension, of professional argot) intersects with the concerns of modernism in an even more suggestive way. Both cant and modernism exude an exclusivity that makes clear understanding available to only a select few. "The idea behind such far-fetched forms [of cant] is to conceal meaning from the uninitiated... The criminal frequently has to communicate with his fellows in the presence of the enemy, and under circumstances which make a revelation of his plans hazardous to him" (578). While thieves' cant is the ultimate insider language, the strategies of modernism, especially in its "high" cultural forms (as in Eliot's "The Waste Land" or Joyce's *Ulysses*), might be read as a form of literary cant, comprehensible only to the inside circle of literati (or with a host of annotations).

⁸⁴ H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, revised ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 388.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), 115.

⁸⁷ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940, repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 223-233.

⁸⁸ It is also clear that the other writers in this dissertation, writers working in more identifiable "genres," benefited from an increased literary access as well. Ring Lardner's baseball stories depended on the emergence of the sport as a national pastime (indeed, a popular phenomenon constructed by sportswriters like Lardner himself); Daly and Hammett's crime writing directly engaged Prohibition and the popular fascination with gangsters and bootleggers in the late 1920s.

CHAPTER ONE

"Never mind the comical stuff...They ain't no joke about this!": Ring Lardner, Anita Loos, and the comic origins of vernacular modernism

In fact, the most of the successful authors of the short fiction of to-day never went to no kind of college, or if they did, they studied piano tuning or the barber trade. They could of got just as far in what I call the literary game if they had of stayed home those four years and helped mother carry out the empty bottles.

Ring Lardner, "Preface," *How to Write Short Stories (With Samples)* (1924)¹

In his 1879 study *Hawthorne*, Henry James makes the now notorious list of the "absent things in American life" that hamper the development of a serious novelist in the United States. Essentially, he argues, America lacks the usable past of Europe, and without a long history, the creation of a complicated, literary novel is essentially impossible in what he perceives as the young society of the United States. He does note, however condescendingly, that despite lacking all these important historical and cultural legacies of Europe, Americans are not completely without culture. "The American knows that a good deal remains; what it is that remains—that is his secret, his joke, as one may say. It would be cruel, in this terrible denudation, to deny him the consolation of his natural gift, that 'American humour' of which of late years we have heard so much."² James's somewhat snide dismissal of the popularity of American humor set the tone for much of the discussion of humor in American literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is almost certain that James is referring to the genre that has become known as Southwestern Humor, particularly popular in the 1830s and 1840s, but heavily influential on the work of Mark Twain, whose "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" became a national sensation in 1865.³ These two writers, James and Twain, provide the literary

ancestry for the two strains of modernism under discussion in this dissertation. James's idealization and centralization of the figure of the artist and his interest in chronicling the inner lives of the European and American elite lead almost directly to the work of high modernists like Pound, Stein, and Woolf. Indeed, Pound saw his own poetry as deriving from the prose of James.⁴ Twain's work, on the other hand, establishes a somewhat different legacy. His specialty in creating "authentic" character speech (particularly of children, African-Americans, and rural figures) informs a major strain of American humor and the larger tradition of vernacular modernism as defined here, and his particular brand of humor is a clear antecedent to the humorists of the modernist era.⁵

In the 1910s and 1920s, Ring Lardner and Anita Loos transformed the nature of American humor writing, foregrounding its textuality (in contrast to the orality of earlier humor texts like Twain's). Indeed, these two writers pushed language to new extremes, emphasizing a narrative subjectivity that was itself fragmented, incomplete, and wholly unreliable. While James had dismissed humor as a bastard form of culture, the only uniquely American development, Lardner and Loos demonstrated the degree to which James's own modes of psychological interiority and textual manipulation could affect the experience of humor. Both favorites of canonized literary figures and of the general public, these two humorists created a subjective, textually self-conscious form of humor that revels in the linguistic exuberance of Mencken's modernist slang. As a result, Lardner and Loos enable the long history of American humor to move from the realm of realist representation into the new world of vernacular modernism.

"I'll explain it to ye": Realist Aesthetics and American Humor

Somewhere between the two—that is to say, foninst th' gas-house and beyant Healey's slough and not far from the polis station—lives Martin Dooley, doctor of philosophy.

Finley Peter Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (1898)⁶

Following the dismissal of American humor by James, the history of American humor writing (outside of the figure of Twain) has received relatively scant attention in the mainstream of American literary history. When critics do discuss humor, it is frequently in the realm of "humor studies," a literary critical sub-specialty that isolates humor from the rest of American literature. Constance Rourke's *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) is one of the first and only American Studies texts to see humor as central to conceptions of American identity and American literary history. For Rourke, however, humor is almost inevitably regional; in *American Humor*, she identifies three distinct nineteenth-century character types or strains that ultimately overlap and intertwine in the twentieth century: the Yankee, the backwoodsman, and the "Negro."⁷ Representing the North, the West, and the South respectively, these types ultimately inform fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; her analysis anticipates (by over fifty years) the dialogic work of the 1980s as she identifies the ways in which these popular comic types make their way, however subtly, into the work of such canonical writers as Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and even Henry James (!).⁸

While such comic types, and the history of American humor itself, were necessarily important to the writers of the early twentieth century, Rourke does not complete a full survey of contemporary humorists in *American Humor*. In a section entitled "Round Up," a reference to the well-known 1929 collection of Ring Lardner's

short stories of the same name, she devotes as much time to Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis, writers with considerable literary credibility, as she does to humorists Lardner and Finley Peter Dunne.⁹ Her insistence is most frequently on seeing humor as something necessarily situated in the past. For Rourke, humor serves as a part of the raw material of American character that contemporary literature cannibalizes; this actually prefigures the complex problematic of literary influence discussed in the introduction, but fails to consider how humorists of the early twentieth century engaged and transformed the aesthetic assumptions of American humor. If Rourke had spent a greater deal of time examining the most popular humorists around the time of the publication of *American Humor*, her discussion would have centered on two major figures in 1920s humor, Ring Lardner and Anita Loos. Both favorites of H.L. Mencken, these two writers suggest a continuity with some of the traditions of American humor and a significant break with many of the assumptions of the comedic tropes of the nineteenth century. Informed by a host of transformations in media and literature, it was humor that inaugurated the vernacular modernism advocated in Mencken's writings on the American language.

To a degree, humor writing in America had always been interested in an American vernacular; its generally regional focus highlighted the ways in which language, representation, narration, and identity are necessarily intertwined. The Southwestern humorists of the 1830s and 1840s demonstrate these forms quite explicitly. The vast majority of this writing appeared in William T. Porter's *The Spirit of the Times*, a weekly newspaper that made no secret of its hostility toward the emergence of Andrew Jackson's brand of democratic politics. In many of these sketches, the humorists lampooned Jackson's constituency from the perspective of a genteel, Republican narrator.

The ignorance of the frontier figures—signified by their speech in a regional dialect—textually and linguistically eliminated the possibility of their being legitimate, genuine, or reasonable citizens. But Southwestern humor rarely operated in such a reductionist manner. Many of these tales, regardless of where they were published, satirized the genteel narrator's inability to understand the community and language of the frontier. In these situations, the narrator, feeling himself superior to the frontier figures, often gets in over his head. The consequences of this may be as innocuous as being mocked in front of a group of backwoodsmen or as serious as physical violence.¹⁰ In both cases, the humor relied on a distinct linguistic and textual difference between the genteel (and sometimes anthropologic or ethnographic) narrator and the regionally specific frontier characters.

Indeed, the majority of humor throughout the nineteenth century turned on the difference between languages, a difference that would in some ways anticipate and ultimately parallel the standards of literary realism itself. This found expression in two different forms of humor writing that critics have called "the misspellers" (or the "literary humorists") and the "rural humorists."¹¹ Brom Weber argues that these writers were more than "popular funny men whose prime comic stock in trade was butchery of the English language by means of gross misspellings and other crude linguistic shenanigans."¹² Many popular writers, including rural humorists like Bill Nye and "misspellers" like Artemus Ward, employed elements of satire that were frequently highlighted by their publication in newspapers alongside actual political commentary.

What these trends in nineteenth-century humor emphasize is the degree to which humor remained fully invested in articulations of regional difference, most often through the signifier of linguistic difference. Major turn of the century humorists continued to

exploit these issues of language, with some changes. These writers, including Chicagoans Finley Peter Dunne and George Ade, began to push literary humor in a direction that problematized the literate subject/illiterate object divide that informed the vast majority of nineteenth-century humor.¹³ In this sense, they functioned as precursors to the vernacular modernism that arrived in the mid 1910s. However, their debt to realist assumptions about language, narrative, and subjectivity remained strong and they still reinscribed many of the markers of difference on which realist humor depended.

As was true with much of the humor throughout the nineteenth century, late nineteenth-century literary humor often appeared in dialect tales, focusing on racial, ethnic, and regional groups increasingly marginalized by political, economic, and cultural modernity.¹⁴ In 1898, Chicago newspaperman Finley Peter Dunne became a national sensation with the publication of *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War*, a collection of social and political commentary written in a thick Irish brogue under the pseudonym "Mr. Dooley." This book, derived from articles published around the turn of the twentieth century, operates as a running commentary on American involvement in the Spanish-American War, as well as a general set of observations on working class Chicago society.

The question of authorship, as with many nineteenth- (and twentieth-) century humorists, is intentionally blurred. Dunne's name appeared on neither the newspaper articles nor the book, suggesting that "Mr. Dooley" himself is, in fact, the author of the text. The book's preface, signed "F.P.D.," complicates this even further. Is Dunne posing as editor or author here? Even the use of language in the preface blurs some of these distinctions. It begins "Archey Road stretches back for many miles from the heart of an ugly city to the cabbage gardens that gave the maker of the seal his opportunity to call the

city 'urbs in horto.'"¹⁵ There can be little doubt that this is the commanding and controlling voice of the narrator of nineteenth-century literary realism. What follows, however, is Dunne's first attempt at disturbing this realist mode: "Somewhere between the two—that is to say, foninst th' gas-house and beyant Healey's slough and not far from the polis station—lives Martin Dooley, doctor of philosophy."¹⁶ The dialect that will dominate the book, the Irish brogue of Dooley himself, seeps into this dominant narrational voice, but here it is only in an appositional phrase, prefaced by "that is to say." Thus, the dialect, describing the location of Dooley's home, appears in Dooley's own voice as a modified quotation. Like other instances of dialect in this preface, the punctuation of this first appearance sets the dialect off from the language of realism, seeing it at a distance as something foreign and fundamentally different from the genteel language that Dunne predominantly uses in the remainder of the preface.

The function of the preface in a book of dialect humor like Dunne's is of central importance to the project of literary humor during the realist era. In a sense, this is like the Southwestern humorists, who mediated their dialect with a genteel narrator that could interpret the language of the frontiersman for the literate readership. However, in works like *Mr. Dooley* (as well as more well-known works like Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* [1885]), the heavy mediation of the narrator who becomes a kind of fictional ethnographer gives way to a more subtle form of textual and narrational mediation. Through prefaces, indication of dialogue, and impression of recorded speech, humorists maintained the dichotomies of realism (literate *langue*/sub-literate *parole*) while de-emphasizing their own narrative involvement. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's "Notice" and "Explanatory" note (signed "The Author") suggest that it is

Twain, not Huck, who is ultimately in control of the text.¹⁷ Indeed, this seems to indicate that the story that follows is not "written" by Huck, but rather is a form of highly authentic reported speech (as the "Explanatory" note both argues and parodies), an important element of all nineteenth-century dialect writing.¹⁸

Unlike Twain, Dunne does not go to such lengths to complicate the idea that he is recording speech. Instead, the Mr. Dooley sketches are all indicated as dialogue; the opening sketch begins with a characteristic trope of the Dooley pieces: "'I'll explain it to ye,' said Mr. Dooley."¹⁹ As a result, while the text is almost completely dominated by the voice of Mr. Dooley himself, there is a mediating force, however slight, between the reader's experience of Dooley's language and of the text. Because the sketches are presented as dialogue, there is an assumption that the speech is somehow reported and the "F.P.D." of the preface retains ultimate control over the representation of Dooley's words.²⁰ Like other dialect figures in realist or regional writing, Dooley remains a character in need of interpretation and his language requires a buffer (however slight) to prevent any misapprehension by the reader.

At the same time, Dunne's humor—like a majority of dialect writing—turns on a particular kind of semiotics that the vernacular modernism of Lardner and Loos works to disrupt. The Dooley stories operate on the assumption that they do, in fact, sufficiently articulate the ideas of Mr. Dooley, whom Dunne calls in his preface "the traveller, archaeologist, historian, social observer, saloon-keeper, economist, and philosopher, who has not been out of the ward for twenty-five years 'but twict.'"²¹ As a result, the authorization of Dooley's "expertise," however satirical, means that the language of the sketches can be understood as a function of a kind of comprehensible dialect semiotics.

In other words, the reader must work through Dunne's representation of Dooley's thick brogue to arrive at a clear understanding of the ideas being communicated. The assumption remains that Dooley has articulated a complete and closed idea; the job of the reader is to engage the language at the level of semiotic substitution (refiguring pronunciation, unpacking idiomatic expressions, etc.) to gain access to a definite signified.

While Dunne was, in a sense, working fully within the nineteenth-century dialect tradition of writers like Joel Chandler Harris and others, another Chicago newspaperman, had also begun to reconceptualize and revise some of the assumptions associated with nineteenth-century humor. Beginning as a kind of Midwestern urban regionalist, writing fiction about the experience of Chicago life, George Ade became the most popular humorist in America in the first decade of the twentieth century, largely due to his highly successful series of humorous fables. Ade's peak in popularity lasted from the turn of the century until about 1915. His work, like that of most other American humorists, has remained relatively unexamined by critics, but his influence was enormous; notoriously, Theodore Dreiser plagiarized one of Ade's fables in the first edition of *Sister Carrie* (1900).²²

The title of Ade's most famous work, *Fables in Slang* (1899), certainly suggests his importance to the notion of vernacular modernism, and his work, like Lardner's and Loos's, was praised by Mencken. In *Prejudices: First Series* (1919), Mencken wrote "[t]he facts are that Ade is one of the few genuinely original literary craftsmen now in practice among us; that he comes nearer to making literature, when he has full steam up, than any save a scant half-dozen of our current novelists, and that the whole body of his

work, both in books and for the stage, is as thoroughly American, in cut and color, in tang and savor, in structure and point of view, as the work of Howells, E.W. Howe or Mark Twain."²³ However, despite Ade's designation *Fables in Slang*, slang does not dominate the fables themselves, and is frequently minimized. E.F. Bleiler argues that "the slang element in them is small. They are really written in the vernacular, in the colloquial tradition."²⁴ And, while comic writers interested in linguistic difference utilize a frequently mediated first-person narrator, Ade's stories employ a kind of disinterested, realist third-person narration. Indeed, Ade's fables depend on many realist conventions and, while they do challenge some notions of linguistic propriety, they remain largely consistent with Victorian norms.

To begin with, Ade's fables depend on the omniscient third-person narrator of realism. As fables, there is a sense that Ade's narrator speaks from a privileged perspective. With titles like "*The Fable of the Brash Drummer and the Peach Who Learned that There Were Others*," Ade's short sketches intentionally evoke the unquestioned authority of the didactic fable, complete with a moral at the end of every story.²⁵ While the narration of Ade's tales complicates their stance relative to both realism and modernism, Ade's use of slang is also in line with the semiotics of nineteenth-century realism as opposed to twentieth-century vernacular modernism. The humor of the fables turns on the distanced and objective use of slang in an otherwise genteel story. Ade replaces standard English with idiomatic expressions, assuming a nearly one-to-one correspondence between the two linguistic signs. In this case, the humor works as a simple semiotic puzzle. Naturally, if the reader understands the meaning of the vernacular expression, the fable (and its accompanying moral) is

completely comprehensible (if still irrelevant). What makes these tales funny is their constant use of a language inappropriate to the didactic realist narration, but one that remains completely representational.

The visual presentation of the text enhances this distancing; his titles use italics and capitalization to announce their specific investigation of particular terms. In "*The Fable of the Professor Who Wanted to be Alone*," Ade's objectification of specialized language is apparent: "One day a Professor, preparing to make a Grand Ascension, was sorely pestered by Spectators of the Yellow-Hammer Variety, who fell over the Stay-Ropes or crowded up close to the Balloon to ask Fool Questions. They wanted to know how fur up he Calkilated to go and was he Afeerd and how often he did it. The Professor answered them in the Surly Manner peculiar to Showmen accustomed to meet a Web-Foot Population. On the Q.T. the Prof. had Troubles of his own."²⁶ Here, Ade's realist relationship to language is relatively clear. In general, the narrator capitalizes all nouns, as well as his attempts to substitute specialized terminology ("Stay-Ropes"), general vernacular expressions ("Q.T."), or dialect pronunciation ("Calkilated"). In each case, the terms that seem to suggest a diversion away from realism become the objects of realistic investigation. Ade's objectification of these words, by their capitalization, is essentially parallel to the frame created by implicit or explicit quotation in the vast majority of dialect tales. The capitalization of these words, then, becomes a marker that confirms the realistic narrative foundation of the fables.

While literary humor was struggling in the work of Dunne and Ade to break free of the assumptions of nineteenth-century realism, with its standard English/dialect binary and frame narration, other media provided models of how one might create and dramatize

comic situations under entirely different structural, narrational, and representational principles. The 1890s saw the emergence of two major forms of mass media that would transform not only American comedy, but the majority of all American popular culture, as well. The sound recording and film technologies developed by Thomas Edison and others provided alternatives to print as the notion of entertainment media (what Horkheimer and Adorno would call "mass culture") began to develop in the United States.

At first, these new technologies struggled with the adaptation of contemporary elements of popular culture; one of the primary inspirations for many early films and sound recordings was the dominant popular culture form of the time, vaudeville. Still, as producers in these new media discovered, the experience of a song, a comedic sketch, or a scene from a minstrel show was profoundly different when experienced absent of the expected sound or visual cues, the frame devices that helped identify humor. These discoveries resulted in a new consideration of new forms. The limitations of these media, both in time and in content, forced their producers to reconsider the elements of vaudeville comedy that would work in each of the new media. The resulting developments produced two of the most popular genres of early twentieth-century comedy, the comic monologue (on cylinders or recorded discs) and slapstick comedy (in film).

Humor recordings, such as Cal Stewart's popular "Uncle Josh" series, engage their listener under a set of limits created by sound recording technology. Unlike the vaudeville routines from which they derive, there was no proscenium or visible audience to frame the humor on a record. The only framing device was the alienating experience of

the actual absence of any contextualizing element (save Stewart's voice). Like the vast majority of literary humor during the realist period, which used frame narrators, the humor of vaudeville was mediated in a variety of ways to constantly remind its audience of the artificiality of the performance. Outside of the visible proscenium and fellow audience members, other reminders included the constant shifts between vaudeville acts and, at times, a speaker who introduced and interpreted or commented on the acts. In vaudeville performances the audience knew, through a variety of visual and situational semiotic clues, when to laugh and when to wait for the punch line. The three-minute maximum recording time on the cylinders and discs would cause performers to condense their acts and, as a result, eliminate some of the mediating cues to which audiences had become accustomed. If a "straight man" existed in the stage routine, his role was often the first to be cut. What resulted was a far more direct form of comedy that created an entirely different experience for its listeners. Without a straight man or other mediating elements (such as an audience), the resultant comedy meant that the listener was laughing *at* the performer as opposed to laughing *with* another performer, the audience, etc. These mediating contexts create a relatively safe space for identification. The audience laughs because it knows it is not the butt of the joke; rather, the audience identifies with the straight man pointing and laughing.

The frequent absence of semiotic clues such as the straight man (in routines like the "Uncle Josh" performances) meant that the individuals listening to the record had to work with more complicated difficulties involving identification. While it is certain that consumers often listened to these records in groups, the invention of the phonograph was itself a means to bring entertainment into the private sphere. When a listener encountered

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Uncle Josh in this way, s/he did so without an audience or a straight man to guide her/his laughter. This anxiety was mildly ameliorated by the laughter of the comic monologist himself. Still, this presented the individual listener with a problem: given only one person (the comic) with whom to identify, what happened when this person was also the butt of the joke? Lacking any form of mediation, listeners were forced to identify both with and against figures like Uncle Josh, a problem that texts during the realist era self-consciously avoided through of their insistence on mediating dialect humor. As Jason Camlot has argued, "in this in-between space the [recorded comic] monologue is both objectified and received from a distance, and yet is also potentially something performed by the audience itself."²⁷ The only laughs in the records are Uncle Josh's, laughing, as one critic has noted "at his own rigid behavior in the face of modernity, at the same time providing a suture between the listener and the modern apparatus of the phonograph."²⁸ In these recordings, the listener's only possible source of identification was Uncle Josh himself; did this then mean that when the listener laughed at Uncle Josh, s/he was also, in effect, laughing at her/himself?

Parallel to the development of sound recording, early comic film negotiated some of the same issues. Critics like Hugh Kenner and Michael North have connected the slapstick film to the developments of modernism, and what Tom Gunning has called the "cinema of attractions" was one of the most explicitly "avant-garde practices" of the era.²⁹ In the first decade of the twentieth century, slapstick dominated nickelodeons; Eileen Bowser notes that these comedies "constituted 70 percent and more of the fiction films" of this period. More than anything else, these films were notable for their "vulgar, amoral, and anti-establishment" nature, which would cause serious problems when social

censorship became a part of the industry.³⁰ The chaos and anarchy (and potentially ensuing social disruption) of these early films were the major causes of a shutdown of New York City nickelodeons in 1908. The disruptions inherent in these films, however, were of more than just a moral nature. Like comedic sound recordings, slapstick film comedy reset the subject/object position of comedy from a relatively stable vaudevillian model to something more direct and immediate.

The modes of humor brought on by the emergence of these new media technologies provided innovative models that were fundamentally different from their realist predecessors. These modernist forms of humor were centered on an individual figure, encountered without any form of textual or contextual mediation. In large part because of the early technological limitations of these nascent media, this new humor rejected the dramatic frame of vaudeville, the political frame of the newspaper, and frequently, the explanatory frame of narrative. This shifted comedy away from the notion that the humorous figure must necessarily be objectified in relationship to some other subject (the genteel narrator of the dialect tale, the editorial staff of a newspaper, the straight man, or the vaudeville announcer). Instead, as with the "Uncle Josh" recordings, this figure could embody a kind of subjectivity that demanded identification from the audience, precisely because the text offered no alternatives. The resulting emphasis on the subjectivity of the comic individual, the elimination of the comic frame, and the disturbance of other realist conventions created the background for what would emerge in literary humor as comic vernacular modernism.

These revolutions in American humor, brought on by both technological and literary innovations, led to the first major example of vernacular modernism in the work

of Ring Lardner. The ways in which these new media eliminated the need for some form of mediation as well as some of the basic elements of narrative, meant that even literary humor could do away with the restrictive narrators and prefatory notices that characterized humor during the realist period. What results, however, is a kind of crisis in identification; in the work of Lardner and Anita Loos, it often becomes difficult to identify at whom we should be laughing. When our only, unmediated version of the story originates in the mouth of the comic object her/himself, the realist norms of nineteenth century American humor are tremendously warped. The product of this is a new brand of twentieth-century American humor *and* the first major example of vernacular modernism.

"I can't figure out if he is kidding or in earnest": Ring Lardner and the Emergence of Vernacular Modernism

[W]hatever Ring's achievement was, it fell short of the achievement he was capable of, and this because of a cynical attitude toward his work. How far back did that attitude go?—back to his youth in a Michigan village? Certainly back to his days with the Cubs. During those years, when most men of promise achieve an adult education, if only in the school of war, Ring moved in the company of a few dozen illiterates playing a boy's game. A boy's game, with no more possibilities in it than a boy could master, a game bounded by walls which kept out novelty or danger, change or adventure. This material, the observation of it under such circumstances, was the text of Ring's schooling during the most formative period of the mind. A writer can spin on about his adventures after thirty, after forty, after fifty, but the criteria by which these adventures are weighed and valued are irrevocably settled at the age of twenty-five. However deeply Ring might cut into it, his cake had exactly the diameter of Frank Chance's diamond.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Ring" (1933)³¹

It may shock Mr Lardner to know that he has done in little what Mr Joyce has done on the grand scale in *Ulysses*.

Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924)³²

Chapter One: “Never mind the comical stuff”

The story of Ring Lardner is itself a complex and twisted narrative of literary success and disillusionment during the modernist era. Working his way up in the sports pages of the Chicago newspapers and becoming one of the first nationally-known sportswriters of the twentieth century, Lardner’s literary aspirations (first glimpsed in plays he wrote as a young man) did not disappear with this new career. Instead, he took the raw material of his experience as a baseball reporter and turned it into one of the most successful examples of literary humor of the period. His *You Know Me Al* (1916) made him a sensation, and his later work was some of the most highly sought after magazine fiction of the 1920s. Biographers and critics generally divide Lardner’s career into three or four phases: the Keefe stories of the mid-1910s; the “wise boob” stories of the late 1910s and early 1920s (including “Gullible’s Travels” [1916], *The Big Town* [1921], and “The Golden Honeymoon” [1922]); the dark satire of his later collections *How to Write Short Stories (With Samples)* (1924) and *The Love Nest and Other Stories* (1926); and the nonsense plays, a genre that Maxwell Geismar has termed “native dada.”³³ The standard narrative of Lardner’s career follows an evolutionary model, with the later work more broadly appreciated for its ruthless critique of middle-class Americans.

Like other humorists, Lardner is difficult to fit into literary history, and the fact that he never “graduated” (to extend Fitzgerald’s metaphor) into more easily canonized works like Twain did with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* makes him a peripheral figure, even in 1920s literary studies. Edmund Wilson asked in a 1924 review of *How to Write Short Stories*, “[w]ill Ring Lardner, then, go on to his *Huckleberry Finn* or has he already told all he knows?...[H]ere is a man who has had the freedom of the modern West no less than Mark Twain did of the old one, who approaches it, as Mark Twain did, with

a perceptive interest in human beings instead of with the naturalist's formula... If Ring Lardner has anything more to give us, the time has now come to deliver it."³⁴ His inability to deliver "anything more" than short fiction has left him out of most literary histories of the modernist era. As a result, his late collection *Round Up* (1929) is seen as representative, though it contains only six stories (out of thirty-five) that appeared before 1924 and completely ignores Lardner's breakthrough work in *You Know Me Al*, constructing Lardner's literary legacy as a pure satirist in the conventional mode of realism.

Round Up works to write out Lardner's dependence on his baseball background, or, as Fitzgerald called it, "Frank Chance's diamond." Since the traditional narrative of Lardner's career frequently assumes the development into a mature satirist, the small amount of existing criticism on Lardner usually deals with his later work, particularly *How to Write Short Stories* and *The Love Nest*.³⁵ Few have considered his work as a whole, and when they have they remain fixated on Lardner's biography. Douglas Robinson's *Ring Lardner and the Other* (1992), the only major scholarly monograph on Lardner to be published since Maxwell Geismar's 1972 study *Ring Lardner and the Portrait of Folly*, combines psychoanalytic theory and structuralism in an extended close reading of the story "Who Dealt?", as well as a consideration of Lardner's career and audience. Early in his career, Lardner himself said in an interview, "I'm tired of this sort of writing. I'd give anything to be able to stop writing dialect stories. And I'm tired of writing in the first person. I'd like to write in the third person."³⁶ Given the prevailing standards of realism in humor writing in the 1910s, this evaluation of his vernacular

writing should come as no surprise, and his reluctance to include much of this work in *Round Up* shows the degree to which he maintained a distance from his early work.

Still, while Lardner's satire certainly became sharper later in his career, his aesthetic approach in much of the later work was far more conventional, utilizing third-person narration that shared many of the assumptions and representative modes of nineteenth-century realism. It is his early work, what one critic has described as his "orthographic" humor, where Lardner's most radical inventiveness and experimentation truly lie.³⁷ These stories, including the bushier tales of Jack Keefe in *You Know Me Al* as well as *The Young Immigrants* (1920) with its child writer/narrator, redefine the central modes and transform the nineteenth-century antecedents of humor writing. Far from being purely "orthographic," as much of nineteenth-century humor was, Lardner's early writings exemplify the vernacular modernist paradigm by exploiting the textuality of his work, engaging questions of subjectivity, and rejecting assumptions of mimetic realism.

In many ways, Lardner's career is the antithesis to that of the prototypical modernist. Fitzgerald's eulogy of him effectively points out all the ways in which Lardner's own history diverged from the master narrative of the Lost Generation. The successful writers of Fitzgerald's group, "men of promise," "achieve[d] an adult education, if only in the school of war." Fitzgerald was at Princeton during World War I, but a significant portion of the other American figures associated with modernism (Dos Passos, Hemingway) were involved in the war, or, in the case of William Faulkner, pretending to be involved. "The text of Ring's schooling" was not the same text that these literary figures read, nor was it the same text that made modern cynics out of them.³⁸ As opposed to the presumed "man's game" of war, Ring's text was "a boy's game"; he spent

his formative years as a sportswriter, covering the two very popular Chicago baseball teams, the White Sox and the Cubs.

Fitzgerald's critique is overdetermined: because Lardner was born in 1885, too early to achieve this education in the men's game of war, he could not become one of the "men of promise." However, Fitzgerald conveniently forgets Lardner's somewhat sardonic look at the war in two books (the journalistic *My Four Weeks in France* [1918] and Jack Keefe's extended adventures as a soldier in *Treat 'Em Rough* [1918]). In these texts, Lardner maintains a significant distance from the masculinized ideals of the war that, when upended, forged the Lost Generation of writers. Lardner did not go to war only to find his ideals destroyed; an older and less impressionable man, he took few ideals with him in the first place.

In spite of the somewhat dismissive language he uses in this eulogy of Lardner, Fitzgerald had an enormous amount of respect for the Chicago sportswriter and humorist. In the mid-1920s, he lobbied to have Scribner's publish Lardner's work in a deluxe five-volume edition. But while Fitzgerald saw this work as something to be preserved, Lardner himself was not exactly engaged in a self-conscious preservation of his own literary legacy. Fitzgerald's eulogy remembers this, as he notes in disbelief that Lardner had not kept copies of his manuscripts or publications and that "the material of *How to Write Short Stories* was obtained by photographing old issues in the public library!"³⁹ Given what Fitzgerald sees as Lardner's talent, he is shocked by the way in which Lardner treats his own material; the suggestion is that Lardner viewed his work as ephemeral and expendable, the absolute antithesis to literature, especially as constructed

by those writing in the modernist era. In his own mind, Lardner's work was not meant to last, but meant to be consumed as entertainment.⁴⁰

Lardner's perspective on the transience of his own work, one that nearly replicates James's criticism of the "natural gift" of the American—humor writing—is surprisingly contradicted by Gilbert Seldes's celebration of Lardner in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924), where he claims that "It may shock Mr Lardner to know that he has done in little what Mr Joyce has done on the grand scale in *Ulysses*." Seldes, the managing editor of *The Dial* when it published T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922, had modernist credentials to spare.⁴¹ His connection between Lardner and Joyce, written at the moment when *Ulysses* dominated discussions of modernist fiction, might have seemed baffling to a writer like Fitzgerald, who saw Lardner as an exceptionally talented (and funny) sportswriter who never took his work that seriously. It is notable that Seldes made this particular comment at the height of Lardner's career; he was a very popular writer at this moment, and this comparison preceded the Scribner's deluxe reprint of Lardner's works. To laud Lardner in this way at this time meant to challenge existing hierarchies as well as to hope for more ambitious work from the humorist.

Seldes was not the only major modernist to appreciate Lardner. Indeed, even Virginia Woolf commented favorably on Lardner's first collection *You Know Me Al* (1916) in a 1925 review entitled "American Fiction." Her description of Lardner emphasizes his American-ness, his novelty, and his experimentation: "Mr. Lardner...provides something unique in its kind, something indigenous to the soul, which the traveller may carry off as a trophy to prove to the incredulous that he has actually been to America and found it a foreign land."⁴² Lardner, more than the other writers

Woolf reviews in this essay (Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis), leads Woolf to seriously consider American literature in all its complexities: "French is simpler, English is simpler, all modern literatures are simpler to sum up and understand than this new American literature. A discord lies at the root of it; the natural bent of American is twisted at the start."⁴³ This notion of the "twisted" nature of American literature, particularly as exemplified by Lardner, points toward the notion of a vernacular modernism. The language is not clear or transparent; it exhibits a "discord at the root" of its relationship to representation. What Woolf subtly identifies in this quote is the degree to which Lardner's work demonstrates the complexities of modernist representation through the use of a vernacular and anti-realist representational strategy.⁴⁴

Lardner's first collection, *You Know Me Al*, was published in book form in 1916, the same year that James Joyce published *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Under contemporary literary rubrics, such a connection might appear as a perverse coincidence, but Gilbert Seldes's articulation of a link between the lowbrow Lardner and the highbrow Joyce suggests this connection might have appeared to modernists themselves, already implied by the adjacency of Gertrude Stein and "Slanguage" in *transition*'s "Revolution of the Word" issue, discussed in the introduction. The power and modernist innovation of Joyce's debut novel derive from the careful inclusion of interior narration. The story of a developing mind, *Portrait* follows Stephen Dedalus as he grows into a self-conscious artist. The famous opening sections of the novel present Stephen as a child, through a child's consciousness. As the novel progresses, Stephen's understanding of the world becomes more sophisticated, and the textual representation of this understanding becomes more mature and self-consciously literary. As we saw in the introduction, this

technique represents one of the major tenets of all modernism—the privileging of subjectivity—along with the understanding that these subjectivities are in constant flux, developing, changing, and evolving. Simultaneously, the novel posits that the language of realism should not be the default means of presenting these subjectivities. Instead, since language and subjectivity are inevitably intertwined, the proper means of demonstrating subjectivity is through the language available to that subject at the moment of experience.

Joyce's *Ulysses*, published six years later, begins to anticipate a crucial modernist question: what if the growth of this mind is redirected, and its endpoint is not the idealized artist figure, but something else? Lardner's *You Know Me Al*, had, in a sense, already put forth a provisional answer to this question. One of the major innovations of Lardner's early work is its continual privileging of the consciousness of the narrator via that narrator's own textual self-representation. Lardner's work lacks the mediating qualities that characterize the vast majority of the nineteenth century; as Woolf notes in her review, Lardner "lets Jack Keefe the baseball player cut out his own outline, fill in his own depths, until the figure of the foolish, boastful, innocent athlete lives before us."⁴⁵ As with Joyce, Lardner's strategy is to let the character not only speak, but write for himself (i.e. "cut out his own outline, fill in his own depths"), privileging that consciousness as it is, suggesting that the authentic experience of Jack Keefe is only truly comprehensible through his own perception of it. In fact, it would not be a stretch to imagine the subtitle of *You Know Me Al* as *A Portrait of the Ballplayer as a Young Man*.

This choice of allowing his characters narrative control, typical of Lardner's work throughout his career, immediately calls into question notions of representability and suggests the capacity of language to conceal as much as it reveals. Lardner does not

attempt a *faux* ethnographic representation of some obscure class of American society from some privileged vantage point, as humorists before him had continually done. Likewise, he does not report speech from the perspective of the genteel editor. The textual and linguistic distance between the narrator and the figure of dialect humor was often vast in nineteenth-century humor, and writers in this genre exploited this gap by overwhelming readers with a transcribed dialect that was as much visual as audible. In many cases, these writers "were not really writing a viable dialect, but rather distorting their language for an effect. Lardner, on the other hand, uses a narrator whose language is internally consistent, and whose knowledge and awareness are consistent with the sort of man his language shows him to be."⁴⁶ Instead of merely substituting incorrect grammatical and lexical forms for correct ones (as most nineteenth-century humorists did), Lardner allows a member of that group to describe himself in the language to which he has access, a combination of baseball terminology, common American vernacular, and empty clichés.

Lardner achieves this impact by framing the book as a series of letters, written by Keefe to his friend Al, back in his small hometown of Bedford, Indiana. The comic fictional letter is one of the oldest forms of humor in America: Charles Farrar Browne's "Artemus Ward" letters, first published in 1858, are some of the best examples in the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Like the dialect tales of the realist era, these contextually mediated examples of epistolary humor often relied on realist semiotics in which misspellings or phonetically-represented speech still communicated a set of ideas in a comprehensible way, however much those ideas were being satirized by the representation of them. As one critic has noted, "Nasby, Ward, and their fellows misspell gloriously, and sometimes

they make common subject-verb disagreement, but they write whole passages in which there is nothing incorrect about the prose except the spelling, and they use subordination in rather sophisticated ways." While the individual grammatical elements of these comic "misspellers" might suggest the ignorance of the writer/narrator, the complex sentence structure present in them assures us that a highly literate comedian is pulling the strings. By contrast, as Merritt Moseley notes, "Lardner...has gotten into the skin of the semi-literate, and has mastered his whole repertoire."⁴⁸

Lardner's innovation in this trend in American humor involves the complete absence of any mediating or authorizing voice that assists in the interpretation of the letters. Instead, readers are left with a form of narration that includes substantial gaps in time, unreliable and egocentric representations of events, and a constant use of language that does not adequately represent (i.e. clichés) or does not always seem accessible (i.e. specialized baseball argot). The act of reading a Lardner story like those in *You Know Me Al* does not demand merely an ability to replace misspelled words or obviously incorrect grammar with correct forms; instead, the entire plot must be reconstructed by the reader, who must not only read through the grammatical and orthographic mistakes, but also negotiate the narrative gaps and complex persona of the narrator. The narrative of *You Know Me Al*, originally published as a series of short stories in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1914, follows Keefe, a "bush league" pitcher, as he tries to make it into major league baseball with the Chicago White Sox. Through fits and starts, he makes the team, gets married, and begins to raise a family while constantly deflecting any criticism of himself. In his letters to Al (who is termed "dear pal," "dear Al," and "friend Al" in various salutations), Keefe carries on a continual argument with the versions of events

conveyed by others: sportswriters, coaches, and other players. Though they may technically be more "objective," the competing realities of other characters, Keefe's narration suggests, do not accurately represent Keefe's experience. The entire book is an attempt at justification and self-aggrandizement via re-writing this experience from Keefe's own idiosyncratic perspective. The title, *You Know Me Al*, is Keefe's refrain: because Al knows him, he knows what can and cannot be true.

Readers of this text, on the other hand, are caught in a complex narrative bind. We do not know Keefe as Al supposedly does, and his versions of the events seem anything but complete. Keefe's description of his first professional meltdown, at the hands of a powerful Detroit Tigers team led by Ty Cobb, is one of the more explicit narrative interventions performed by Keefe:

Cobb come up again to start the third and when Schalk signs me for a fast one I shakes my head. Then Schalk says All right pitch anything you want to. I pitched a spitter and Cobb bunts it right at me. I would of threw him out a block but I stubbed my toe in a rough place and fell down. This is the roughest ground I ever seen Al. Veach bunts and for a wonder Lord throws him out. Cobb goes to second and honest Al I forgot all about him being there and first thing I knowed he had stole third. Then Moriarty hits a fly ball to Bodie and Cobb scores though Bodie ought to of threw him out twenty feet.⁴⁹

An understanding of Keefe's version of the events depends on a relatively sophisticated understanding of baseball terminology as well as a willingness to piece through the constant shifts in verb tense, the awkward verb conjugation, and the misuse of words (like "of" for "have"). More than merely the use of malapropisms, Keefe's letters restructure the English language around his own agenda, supporting his self-image to the "boys back home." As he notes at the opening to this letter, he says "I am writing you this

so as you will know the truth about the game and not get a bum steer from what you read in the papers."⁵⁰

In truth, Keefe sees nothing funny in his letters home. While he is the constant butt of jokes told by players, and especially by the assistant manager Kid Gleason, more often than not Keefe misapprehends the jokes, passing them on in a half-understood fashion to Al and to the readers. "Manager Callahan is a funny guy and I don't understand him sometimes. I can't figure out if he is kidding or in earnest."⁵¹ The narrator's deflection of or complete obliviousness to humor is characteristic of many of Lardner's stories, especially those that utilize the vernacular. As one character says in "Harmony," another Lardner story, "Never mind the comical stuff...They ain't no joke about this!"⁵² Keefe's failure—both as a player and a narrator—is, in a sense, the result of taking himself too seriously. When Gleason tells him "Rub some arnicky on your head to keep the swelling down and you may be a real pitcher yet," Keefe responds, "I ain't got no swell head. He [Gleason] says No. If I hated myself like you do I would be a moveing picture actor."⁵³ That Keefe passes such details on to Al further complicates the narrative strategy. In general, when Keefe writes of his own experience on the field, he re-writes the events to absolve himself of any kind of failure. At other times, frequently off the field of play, he passes on less-than-flattering details that he does not completely understand.

The act of reading *You Know Me Al*, ironically enough, makes us into what Richard Poirier has termed "grim readers." As in high modernist texts, in Lardner's humorous work "[w]e are met with inducements to tidy things up, to locate principles of order and structure beneath a fragmentary surface."⁵⁴ In his work, Lardner exploits the

modernist obsession with fragmentary surfaces and creates one of the more complicated (and yet naïve) unreliable narrators in American literary history. It is the unreliability of this narration that sustains the humor; while reading *You Know Me Al*, we come to know and expect Keefe's textual manipulation of the events as they occurred. Piecing together the "order and structure" of the events themselves and attempting to "tidy things up" result in a clearer picture of Keefe. But the importance of the text, and the ways in which it becomes exemplary of vernacular modernism, is that the distance between the "real" world being represented and the text, is itself a function of the text's continual desire to deflect the real and to work on its own terms, eschewing grammatical norms and standard language. Lardner's hyper-stylized first-person narration re-creates the world—not according to social or psychological principles, but according to internally consistent linguistic and textual ones.

Lardner biographer and anthologizer Jonathan Yardley has suggested that "the real reason so many thousands responded with such joy to the early Jack Keefe stories was that they heard their own voices therein and were transfixed by what they heard." In contrast to what Yardley calls the "awkward pidgin English that readers could understand but with which they could not connect"—the standard, genteel language of middlebrow magazines of the era—Lardner's work signaled a massive shift toward the use of common language.⁵⁵ However, having always conceived of literature as a form written in this genteel "pidgin English," contemporary readers of Lardner must have been rather discomfited in encountering something so unorthodox in the pages of the always genteel slick magazine and representative middlebrow publication *The Saturday Evening Post*. Yardley's notion that readers would have gravitated toward Lardner's work because of its

innate familiarity ignores the degree to which his stories—particularly those in the vernacular—remain challenging both semantically and narratively. The shift to a vernacular language might make the stories at least superficially “easier” for an audience in the 1910s and 1920s to understand, but its consequent mangling of the representational standards of realism and even of the legacy of American humor, made Lardner’s vernacular fiction into a kind of modernist puzzle, one without a decisive answer.

The vernacular modernist puzzle of *You Know Me Al*, and a good deal of Lardner’s other early work, turns on the protagonist’s lack of knowledge about the humor of his/her own situation. Like the comic monologist on a sound recording or the slapstick comedian on film, the only person at whom to laugh is the one person with whom the reader identifies. As with many major modernist texts, *You Know Me Al* is the story of the development of an individual; it is at some level both *Bildungsroman* and picaresque. The problem with Keefe, however, is that he lacks any consistent internal development or personal growth and is ultimately the same psychological being at the end of the stories as he was at the beginning. However, this does not diminish the importance of subjectivity in the stories. In fact, it is the highly subjective narration itself that serves as the engine of the humor. We know that we are not getting the entire story, and, as with any modernist writer, we must piece together the elements into some kind of narrative coherence.

The only way such coherence can be achieved is through a sophisticated understanding of all the specialized linguistic elements Lardner employs in the stories: the language of baseball, the empty clichés, the common vernacular, and the strategic misuse of words to ensure the dominance of Keefe’s own particular narrative. Even then,

the story is not "complete." Lardner's heavy use of contemporary references renders a number of his jokes impenetrable to the twenty-first-century reader. To this point, H.L. Mencken lamented the fact that Lardner's work might go out of fashion, as the 1830s stories of Thomas C. Haliburton had done: "[Lardner's] stories, it seems to me, are superbly adroit and amusing; no other contemporary American, sober or gay, writes better. But I doubt that they last: our grandchildren will wonder what they are all about. It is not only, or even mainly, that the dialect that fills them will pass, though that fact is obviously a serious handicap in itself. It is principally that the people they depict will pass, that Lardner's Low Down Americans—his incomparable baseball players, pubs, song-writers, Elks, small-town Rotarians and golf caddies—are flitting figures of a transient civilization, and doomed to be as puzzling and soporific, in the year 2000, as Haliburton's Yankee clock peddler is to-day."⁵⁶ Beneath Mencken's words here is a larger fear that echoes Fitzgerald's concerns: Lardner's work lacks the universality of great literature and remains too fully engaged with its moment. As such, Lardner's work cannot speak to later generations in the way it spoke so effectively to readers of the 1920s.

Even more challenging than the stories of Jack Keefe, *The Young Immigrants* operates as a nonsense book, a satire on the Lardner family, a parody of the popular book *The Young Visitors* (purportedly written by a nine-year-old British girl named Daisy Ashford), and an extension of the textual humor Lardner developed in *You Know Me Al*.⁵⁷ *The Young Immigrants* tells the story of the Lardner family's move from the Midwest to Greenwich, Connecticut, a move they actually made in the fall of 1919. Lardner's humor here begins on the title page, where Ring W. Lardner Jr. is credited as the author, "With a

Preface by the Father." The preface itself can be read as a microcosm of some of the central concerns of comic vernacular modernism.

The person whose name is signed to this novel was born on the nineteenth day of August, 1915, and was therefore four years and three months old when the manuscript was found, late in November, 1919. The narrative is substantially true, with the following exceptions:

1. "My Father," the leading character in the work, is depicted as a man of short temper, whereas the person from whom the character was drawn is in reality as pleasant a fellow as one would care to meet and seldom has a cross word for anyone, let alone women and children.
2. The witty speeches accredited to "My Father" have, possibly owing to the limitations of a child's memory, been so garbled and twisted that they do not look half so good in print as they sounded in the open air.
3. More stops for gas were made than are mentioned in the story.

As the original manuscript was written on a typewriter with a rather frayed ribbon, and as certain words were marked out and others handwritten in, I have taken the liberty of copying the entire work with a fresh ribbon and the inclusion of the changes which the author indicated in pencil in the first draft. Otherwise the story is presented to the reader as it was first set down.⁵⁸

While Lardner is parodying the convention of the "authorizing" preface, evoking both J.M. Barrie's preface for Daisy Ashford's book and Twain's "Explanatory" note in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, his concerns center on vernacular modernist principles.⁵⁹ In fact, this preface might be read as a theorization of much of Lardner's early work. First, the narrator of this tale is, quite impossibly, Lardner's four-year-old son. Not only is he the narrator, however, he is also the author of the "manuscript." As in *You Know Me Al*, Lardner emphasizes the text as text; this is not the reported speech of a child (as in *Huckleberry Finn*), but a written document created by a pre-literate character. The final paragraph of the introduction heightens the absurdity, suggesting that Lardner Jr. has utilized a typewriter in the creation of the document (not to mention making marginal corrections to his own typescript).⁶⁰ Additionally, Lardner acknowledges his own mediation of the document, noting that it had already undergone revision ("certain

words were marked out and others handwritten in") and needed retyping, which suggests a potential compromise of the "author's intentions," a central concern in high modernist literature. If *The Young Immigrants* had been published a mere two years later, its reference point would most certainly be T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a text that underwent significant revision at the hands of an interested editor, Ezra Pound.⁶¹

While emphasizing the textual nature of the document, Lardner also points out its weaknesses. The "limitations of the child's memory" have corrupted particularly witty remarks and led to the misperception of the "Father" (whom the preface-writing father naturally sees as "the leading character in the work"), resulting in a text not only mediated by language (the semi-literate writing of the "son" and the editorial interference of the "father"), but also told from such a subjective standpoint that its communication of the details themselves remains suspect. The hyper-subjectivity of the child, also reminiscent of the opening pages of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, becomes a wry and satirical commentary on the trip, precisely because "Bill" (as Ring Jr. is known in the text) represents things as he experiences them, in text that approximates his aural and visual experience. Chapter titles like "Buffalo to Rochester 76.4" seem baffling at first, but as the numbers designate mileage, the titling strategy becomes apparent. Likely seen on a road sign, these titles are the representation of trip markers. The narrator Bill perceives these signs in the same way one might see a chapter title, signaling the need for a new beginning within the narrative. Additionally, Bill's self-conscious conclusion of chapters speaks to the artificiality of the text's fictional construction. In one case Bill notes, "under those conditions I will not repete the

conversation that transpired between Albany and Hudson but will end my chapter at the city limits of the last named settlement."⁶²

Bill's mishearing (or mis-transliteration) of the words his mother and father speak results not only in a series of malapropisms, but in a variety of textual mediation. Bride and groom become "bride and glum," the grand concourse becomes "the grand concorpse," a wrong turn leads to "a holycost of the first water," and the family arrives in "the Bureau of Manhattan."⁶³ Many of these mistakes appear to be puns created by the "father," i.e. Lardner himself, who lauds his own "witty speeches" in the preface. However, with Bill's other mistakes in both spelling and transliteration, there remains some doubt as to whether the puns themselves are intentional on the father's part or merely the fortunate result of Bill's lack of letters. The prefatory note only serves to obscure this, acknowledging textual revision and potential editorial interference with the initial text written by the narrator Bill.

Finally, *The Young Immigrants* acknowledges its own narrative limits quite explicitly, when Bill falls asleep in the car in the chapter "Syracuse to Hudson 183.2": "Soon we past through Amsterdam and I guess I must of dosed off at lease I cant remember anything between there and Schenectady and I must apologize to my readers for my laps as I am unable to ether describe the scenery or report anything that may of been said between these 2 points."⁶⁴ Presumably, the correct spelling of Amsterdam and Schenectady results from signs on the road, though here Lardner as author pushes the already warped limits of plausibility. But plausibility, either in representation or in narration, is not what Lardner is after here. This kind of experimentation—used in a

longer, more centralized narrative—extends the possibilities of *You Know Me Al*, both in its humor and its vernacular modernist aesthetics.

It was Lardner's early work—the first-person vernacular tales that he was so eager to stop writing—that initially propelled him into the realm of literary celebrity. This reputation was solidified with his move into darker and more conventional satire in the mid-1920s. While he would come to disdain the early writing, excluding much of it from the retrospective collection *Round Up* in 1929, this work was powerfully influential on a host of writers in the 1920s, ranging from humorists to crime fiction writers, and from vernacular writers to high modernists. More than Lardner's dark satire, his vernacular tales of baseball players, precocious children, and "wise boobs" provided a model for twentieth-century aesthetic experimentation in popular writing. Works like *You Know Me Al* and *The Young Immigrants* inaugurated vernacular modernism, proving that popular writing could experiment with narration, subjectivity, and language in sophisticated ways that rejected and revised its realist antecedents.

"Any Chance to Be Unrefined": Anita Loos, the Vernacular Modernist Diary, and Cinematic Narrative

Please accept my envious congratulations on Dorothy – the way you did her through the intelligence of that elegant moron of a cornflower...My God, it's charming...most of them will be completely unmoved – even your rather clumsy gags wont [*sic*] get them – and the others will only find it slight and humorous. The Andersons even mentioned Ring Lardner in talking to me about it. But perhaps that was what you were after, and you have builded better than you knew. But I wish I had thought of Dorothy first.

William Faulkner to Anita Loos, February 1926⁶⁵

As Ring Lardner's star continued to rise throughout the mid-1920s, culminating in the 1925 Scribner's deluxe edition of his work, other humor writers were quick to exploit

Lardner's formula, often with uneven results. A glance through the popular magazines of the era, including *Saturday Evening Post* competitors like *American Magazine*, *Colliers*, and others, reveals a variety of vernacular humorists emulating Lardner. Even pulp magazines like *Black Mask*, which later became known for its introduction of the hard-boiled crime narrative (discussed in Chapter Three), would publish Lardneresque stories in its early issues. Of all of the humorists following Lardner's lead, the most successful of them was Anita Loos, who began her career as a scenarist for D.W. Griffith. Loos's first novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) combines Lardner's flair for the vernacular with sophisticated elements of early film narratology. The result was a national bestseller, a cross-media phenomenon, and another important example of how humor writing opens up the possibilities for literary experimentation that enable vernacular modernism to thrive.

In the thirty-year period after its initial publication, Anita Loos's most well known novel, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, lived more lives than perhaps any other text in American popular culture. Of twentieth-century texts, only L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) could claim presence in as many forms of media to that point.⁶⁶ Initially a serialized tale in the slick fashion magazine *Harper's Bazar*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* became, in turn, a novel between covers (1925), a stage play (1926-27), a film (1928), a Broadway musical (1948), and a Howard Hawks-directed Hollywood musical (1952).⁶⁷ It spawned a sequel, *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, which made a similar transition from the pages of *Harper's* (1926) to the hardback market (1928) to the stage (as *The Social Register*, 1932) and twice to the silver screen (1934, 1955). Despite this wide and varied history, if one were to judge from the state of contemporary scholarship, critics have

remained unable to reconcile Loos's two creative lives: comic novelist and Hollywood film figure (both influential title-card writer and gossipy memoirist of the silent era).⁶⁸

As a young scenarist whose ideas were forged working with cinema giants like D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks, Loos does not reject her Hollywood past in her fiction. Rather, her work combines the narratological specialties of silent film writing—especially the crafting of title-cards—with the comic experiments of Ring Lardner and the accompanying interest in subjectivity, the performance of identity, and textuality. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is a profound example of vernacular modernist invention, incorporating the vernacular narrative voice with a new, and for a 1920s audience, decidedly vernacular form of story-telling: the popular film comedy. Like Lardner's Jack Keefe, Loos's blond narrator Lorelei Lee controls her own story, strategically allows (or refuses) access to her own thoughts, and textually frames the world around her to ensure her success. Into this Lardneresque environment, Loos introduces Dorothy, who, as Lorelei notes, "never overlooks any chance to be unrefined," disrupting Lorelei's coherent narration with a strategy derived from cinematic title-cards.⁶⁹ In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Loos constructs a fascinating vernacular modernist text, one where competing strands of vernacular narrative collide, producing both aesthetically experimental and humorous results.

Contrary to popular assumption, Anita Loos's first book was not *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. In 1920, she and her husband John Emerson published a volume entitled *How to Write Photoplays*, a work relatively untapped by literary critics but one which provides an early framework for scenario writing in influential film studies texts like Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*.⁷⁰ Aside from the

interest this book might have for film scholars as an indication of an emerging theory of film, it actually provides an interesting commentary on how Loos viewed writing for the screen. The book begins with a caveat to the amateur scenarist, who might get carried away with "jotting down that wonderful idea and sending it off in the same mail."⁷¹ After this caveat, the book purports to be a methodical instruction manual for the would-be writer, providing information on where to gather inspiration for stories, how to choose stories that will sell, how to utilize action, how to become a "continuity writer," and how to write titles for a story.

Textual interludes, sometimes ornately stylized but more often plain white text, distracted *cinephiles* from the visual aesthetic of the film. However, title cards had come to narrative film to stay and the question would not be *if* title cards would be a part of narrative film, but *how* the scenarists would employ them. Loos was singled out as "an expert subtitle writer" by Vachel Lindsay in *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922).⁷² These title cards served a very specific aesthetic and narratological function for Loos. As she and Emerson state in *How to Write Photoplays*, "The only place where the photodramatist may 'spread' himself in clever verbiage and literary style is in the subtitles, the inserts of printed matter flashed on the screen between photographed scenes. It is this matter of sub-titling which is winning the continuity specialist his place as an artist."⁷³ Subtitling serves as verbal commentary, often in the form of comic explanation or witty dialogue. "Artistry" for the scenarist has become associated with writing effective subtitles. According to John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh the impact of a Loos subtitle "meant the power of the editorial comment, the thrust of a personal satiric vision conveyed by the pungent slang of the wisecrack. In the subtitles, her films carried

on a lively kind of monologue to the audience that ran a satirical counterpoint to the action on the screen."⁷⁴ As Loos herself told interviewer Karl Schmidt in 1917, "Often a script intended for drama has become comic by the invention of subtitles that 'kidded' the story."⁷⁵ Film historian Thomas Schatz identifies this method as the "Anita Loos school" of scenario writing, highlighting others who followed her model by having "a penchant for hyperbole, wisecracks, and double entendre."⁷⁶ For Loos and her "school," subtitles become spaces where text can create conflicts of meaning with the images it accompanies, and the artistry that subtitles represent is a function of the subversive power of language. In effect, these titles become a means of comically textualizing the screen image.

This foregrounding of modernist textuality emerges in Loos's most well-known work and first lengthy work of fiction, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, a novel that uses a vernacular narrative to explore the text/image dichotomies that served as foundations for silent cinema. The plot has become practically universalized in the story's many forms, but a brief summary will prove useful. Lorelei Lee, the blonde of the title, is sent to Europe to gain "education" by her admirer, Gus Eisman "the button king." She tackles London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, picking up many admirers along the way. She continually coaxes her beaux to spend vast amounts of money on her; she meets "Dr. Froyd" who cannot quite understand her, as she does not seem to repress anything. Finally, she returns to New York and marries the wealthy and religious Henry Spoffard, who spends much of his time "censuring" photoplays. At the conclusion of the novel, and in exchange for her hand in marriage, Lorelei has convinced Henry to use his fortune to

support the production of a film about "the sex life of Dolly Madison," in which she will play the lead.

In the 1963 reprint of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Anita Loos added a preface to *Blondes* entitled "The Biography of a Book." Here she lays out the biographical origins of the novel, providing later critics with a means for conceptualizing the text. She notes the importance of H.L. Mencken in the genesis of the novel; she claims to have written the novel both as a satire of his preference for "a witless blonde" and as a means to gain his acceptance as a writer on par with those he lauded in his influential 1919 study *The American Language* (GPB xxxviii).⁷⁷ She also cites how Mencken turned down the story for his publication *American Mercury* because of its controversial treatment of sex and suggested she "send it to *Harper's Bazaar*, where it'll be lost among the ads and won't offend anybody" (GPB xli).⁷⁸

As an important context for understanding the text's genesis, Loos's reconstruction of the initial moment that inspired the novel is particularly useful for thinking about *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a novel steeped in Hollywood conventions. Her opening establishes the Hollywood context: "There was a time a number of years ago when I found myself on a train, the de luxe *Santa Fe Chief*, traveling from New York to Los Angeles. We were a party of co-workers in the movies, en route back to our studio after a cherished holiday in New York, for we belonged to the elite of cinema which has never been fond of Hollywood." Among the group, which included Douglas Fairbanks and Loos's husband John Emerson, was a blonde who "although she towered above me...and was of rather a hearty type, was being waited on, catered to and cajoled by the entire male assemblage" (GPB xxxvii). After attempting to discover the "radical

difference" between the blonde and herself, Loos finally decided that it was because "she was a natural blonde and I was a brunette." This "palpably unjust" situation caused her to "reach for one of the large yellow pads on which I composed Doug's scenarios, and...[begin] to write down my thoughts, not bitterly, as I might have done had I been a real novelist, but with an amusement which was, on the whole, rather childish" (*GPB* xxxviii).

Whether Loos's reconstruction of the events is completely accurate or not, it sheds some important light on the centrality of Hollywood and the film industry to the construction of this text and how she wants her readers to understand this background. Rejecting the mantle of the "real novelist," Loos writes her thoughts on the pad used for scenarios. A diminutive brunette (of "90 pounds"), she recedes into the world of text while the "hearty" blonde captures the male gaze.⁷⁹ This characterization works as a metaphor for Loos's larger role in Hollywood. As a scenarist with a specialty in subtitles, her dominion was the world of text, the yellow pads of paper as opposed to the blond locks of screen stars. Her writing becomes a modernist act of textual subversion, an attempt to use text to undermine the world of the visual, something that carries over into the textual environment of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.

The novel itself is figured as a subversive act of writing as well. Subtitled *The Illuminating Diary of a Professional Lady*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* is structured as a diary in which Lorelei records her thoughts and experiences. She opens the text, "A gentleman friend and I were dining at the Ritz last evening and he said that if I took a pencil and a paper and put down all of my thoughts it would make a book" (*GPB* 3). While critics have tended, I would argue, to overread Lorelei's manipulations of her

suitors as liberatory, it is important to remember that Loos's critique of Lorelei stems from her critique of the "hearty" blonde on the train to Hollywood.⁸⁰ The dynamics that exist in Lorelei's textual presentation of her own life and Loos's authorial manipulation of Lorelei are far more complex than they initially seem. These complexities derive from the critical juxtaposition of the blonde as the object of the gaze in cinema and the scenarist who controls text and therefore ironic evaluation of this visual "object." It is no coincidence, then, that Lorelei's diary is "illuminating," as cinema is the art of light and shadow. This kind of "illumination" is contentious: Lorelei uses language in a decidedly modernist fashion, alternatively to conceal and to reveal, frequently glossing over important moments at certain points while providing biting critical commentary at others.⁸¹

Near the opening of the novel, we begin to see the tension present between words and images as Lorelei notes that she might become an "authoress" but that her second choice would be "cinema star" (*GPB* 6). Writing and the cinema seem to be connected throughout the texts and one of her earliest entries in her diary is a memory of her work on D.W. Griffith's film *Intolerance*, where she is one of the girls "falling off the tower" in the Babylonian crowd scene. Though this reference is overtly linked to Lorelei's suggestion of how to suppress "bolshevism" in the button factories (with Griffith's superior managerial skill), it establishes her previous connection to Hollywood, a connection that has been severed by the concern Gus Eisman has for her "brains" (*GPB* 8). Her role as an extra in *Intolerance* further points to the relationship Loos has to the character. Whereas Loos was called in for a very particular textual job on Griffith's

film—she was hired specifically to write the title cards—Lorelei fulfills another specialized role, that of the purely visual.

Gus Eisman, however, has severed Lorelei's connection to the Hollywood world of the visual because, as Lorelei writes, his mother is "authrodox" (*GPB* 6). Instead of having her focus on a life of visuality, he prefers that she emphasize her "brains." Critics have noted that this emphasis Lorelei puts on brains and education suggests complex sexual metaphors that suppress the actual textual and intellectual associations with the terms. Susan Hegeman's nuanced reading of the complex levels of meaning embodied by the terms "brains" and "education" is particularly instructive in rejecting the earlier notions that there is a one-to-one correspondence between sex and "education" in the text.⁸² In a sense, these terms operate as modernist signifiers; it is clear that Lorelei is concealing something sexual about her intellectual relationships, but the power of her linguistic performance enables the complete and total elision of any final signified. Lorelei's obsession with porous and malleable terms like these help to situate *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* as a text critiquing the language of nineteenth-century gentility, highlighting its hollowness in a twentieth-century world.

Concepts like "sophistication" and, more importantly for Lorelei, "reverance" [*sic*], form a semiotic matrix in which the book operates. At the level of the pure reading experience, Lorelei's use of these terms is often inverted. Her level of linguistic obfuscation may be unparalleled in American fiction. According to her diary, her admirers are interested purely in her "brains." As a result, they want to "educate" her. When situations become too difficult for Lorelei to cover up with language, she merely glides over them. In the novel's first chapter, Lorelei describes her trip around the park

with Gerry in a hansom cab. She writes, "I mean Gerry knows how to draw a girl out and I told him things that I really would not even put in my diary" (*GPB* 11). Lorelei repeats this phrase in describing her visit with "Dr. Froyd" (*GPB* 90). These moments provide a crucial context for understanding Lorelei's use of text. For her, text is a means of obfuscation, renarration and revision. Her diary, theoretically the location of all Lorelei's innermost thoughts, is merely a fictionalization, an overt aestheticization of her real experience. Anything "unrefined" is left out.

Given this important context of the semiotics of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, it becomes possible to read some of Lorelei's catch phrases in light of a matrix of meaning and representation derived from Loos's work in film narrative. If text, in Lorelei's hands, is always suspect, how are we to understand her favorite concepts: her own "reverance" and her best friend Dorothy's habit of being "unrefined"? Clearly these are loaded terms, and Lorelei's insistence on her "brains" being her finest attribute and her unwillingness to allow her readers access to a deeper interiority make them suspect. In her construction of Lorelei, Loos seems to be reflecting the dynamic that exists between image and text in the experience of silent film. With this in mind, it becomes possible to connect Loos's experience as a title card specialist, Loos's biographical commentary on the book's inception, and the text's relationship between Lorelei and Dorothy.

If Lorelei is at least partially discredited through her misuse of text, Dorothy becomes the stand-in for Loos, who has said in interviews that she modeled Dorothy on herself.⁸³ As with the story that Loos uses to preface the 1963 edition of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, Dorothy is situated securely on the outside of the main circle of the action. She is Lorelei's chaperone on her European trip and she continually follows a path

separate from Lorelei's, choosing her boyfriends based on her attraction to them, not to the size of their wallets. When Loos compares herself to Dorothy in a 1965 interview, she claims, "I have always been the brunette who lost out, and I've always gotten the wrong end of everything! I've gone through all my life without a single diamond!"⁸⁴ In the serialization of *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, the second installment (June 1926) entitled "The Unrefinement of Dorothy" appears opposite a full-page portrait of Loos, with the title "This is Anita Loos" underscoring this connection in the text. However, the comparisons run deeper than this. Like Loos, Dorothy is a master of language, one who uses it subversively as ironic commentary on Lorelei's world. This makes her, in Lorelei's words, "unrefined" and lacking in "reverance." It also makes her the novel's walking, talking title card.

Dorothy, then, acts as a convergent semiotic point in the novel. Evoking the biographical, the cinematic, and the "unrefined," Dorothy's more marginal role in the narrative begins to make more sense as the text's unifying factor. Indeed, this helps to explain comments made in a letter to Loos written by William Faulkner: "Please accept my envious congratulations on Dorothy—the way you did her through the intelligence of that elegant moron of a cornflower...I wish I had thought of Dorothy first."⁸⁵ Many admirers of the novel focused on the characterization of Lorelei, but Faulkner, then developing his own complex narrative style, saw Dorothy, a manipulator of words forcing her way into Lorelei's text, as the key to understanding the novel, a sign of the text's modernist aesthetics. Here, Faulkner is onto something. It is the presence of Dorothy as a form of linguistic commentary that forces itself through the veiled text of Lorelei's diary. In Dorothy's words, as in Loos's title cards, we see the same "penchant

for hyperbole, wisecracks, and double entendre" that identifies the "Anita Loos school" of scenarists.

Indeed, Dorothy's role in the novel increases as we make our way through it. She begins to appear more frequently in Lorelei's narration and her words become increasingly quoted as opposed to paraphrased. In the first chapter, also entitled "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," Dorothy is practically nonexistent. We learn that she is to chaperone Lorelei on her European trip and that she has a boyfriend she calls "Coocoo." The conventional understanding of the composition of *Blondes* suggests that this first chapter was written as a stand-alone story, and Loos continued it at the request of the publishers of *Harper's Bazar*. Accordingly, at the very beginning of the second chapter (and second installment), Lorelei writes that Dorothy "does nothing but waste her time and yesterday, which was really the day before we sailed, she would not go to luncheon with Mr. Goldmark but she went to luncheon to meet a gentleman called Mr. Mencken from Baltimore who really only prints a green magazine which has not even got any *pictures in it*" (*GPB* 19, italics mine). At this juncture, effectively authorized by Mencken in the same way Loos's original story was authorized by him, Dorothy becomes a satiric force in the novel. Given the choice between the film producer Goldmark and the biting social commentator and author of *The American Language*, it is unsurprising that the witty and linguistically agile Dorothy chooses to dine with Mencken, despite the fact that his magazine lacks "pictures."

From this point on, Dorothy's presence in the text becomes more notable. Lorelei begins by chastising her for using so much "slang," continues by paraphrasing some of Dorothy's one-liners, and eventually ends up ceding a significant portion of textual

commentary to Dorothy (*GPB* 22). By the end of the novel, Dorothy's revealing quips compete with Lorelei's concealing gaffes for the reader's attention. The most notorious of these "unrefined" moments occurs at the "Foley Bergere" in Paris, where Dorothy says of one performer, "[s]he is slipping it over on you Louie, because how could a girl get such dirty knees in only 18 years?" (*GPB* 66). This, like Dorothy's earlier overuse of slang and multiple innuendoes, is dismissed by Lorelei as "unrefined." This word (as well as Lorelei's fear of the corrupting power of Dorothy's slang) recalls nineteenth-century debates about class status and proper language, detailed in Kenneth Cmiel's study of nineteenth-century debates about American language, *Democratic Eloquence*. But Lorelei's constant invocation of obsolete cultural hierarchies also operates as a critique of "sophisticated" and "refined" realist fiction, demonstrating the emptiness of these categories by the mid-1920s. Ironically, though, as much as Lorelei rejects the "unrefinement of Dorothy," she increasingly includes her comments in her diary, unlike Lorelei's own innermost thoughts. Dorothy's comments, because they are suggestive (but not explicit) in the fashion of the "Anita Loos school," are qualified for inclusion in Lorelei's narrative but always with some critical dismissal by Lorelei. As Lorelei notes, "Dorothy never overlooks any chance to be unrefined" (*GPB* 96).

In a sense, Lorelei's concern with Dorothy is that of the misguided reformer. In one of her Paris entries, she notes, "I mean I really try to make Dorothy get educated and have reverence" (*GPB* 52). In the end, however, Dorothy's "unrefined" comments become one of the means by which Lorelei manages to negotiate the textual realities of the world. Pursued by the Lady Francis Beekman, whose husband has bought Lorelei a \$7,500 diamond tiara, Lorelei relies on Dorothy to diffuse the situation: "I mean I always

encourage Dorothy to talk quite a lot when we are talking to unrefined people like Lady Francis Beekman, because Dorothy speaks their own language to unrefined people better than a refined girl like I" (*GPB* 59). As in film narrative, Lorelei recognizes the necessity of speaking to those "unrefined" people via subversive "language." Though Lorelei, as the object of the visual gaze, does not endorse vernacular textual manipulation, she depends on it not only to elude Lady Beekman but also to negotiate marriage with Henry Spoffard on her own terms.

Ultimately, *Blondes* ends up much where it began: in the world of Hollywood. Of her two potential professions, Lorelei ends up as a "cinema star," a return for her to the world of the purely visual. Naturally, Dorothy comes along, but her place in Hollywood is appropriately situated somewhere between the visual and the textual. Lorelei notes, "Dorothy says that she was at the studio yesterday and she says that if the scenarios those extra girls have written around themselves to tell Henry could only be screened and gotten past the sensors, the movies would move right up out of their infancy" (*GPB* 122). Direct quotation of Dorothy's language has once again been suppressed, which should not be surprising, given the fact that Lorelei is on the verge of a purely visual identity as a "cinema star." However, Dorothy's association with the "scenarios" reinforces her links to textuality and takes us back to Loos, whose work in scenarios and film narrative played a major part in helping "the movies [to] move right up out of their infancy."

The complex practice of negotiating the highly subjective and vernacular narrative of Lorelei and the running commentary of Dorothy places *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* in the modernist realm of the "fragmented" narrative, requiring, like the work of Lardner, a smiling, but "grim" reader who can put the elements of the story together, read

both between the lines and past Lorelei's linguistic gaffes for the story behind the text. The narrative has not only enabled the film industry to "move right up out of [its] infancy," but it has also pushed the limits of experimentation possible in literary humor. Loos expands on Lardner's model, complicating the single subjectivity that drives *You Know Me Al* and advancing the principles of vernacular modernism. Her text takes part in these major cultural tensions—between high- and low-brow entertainment, between film and literature, and between text and image in a modern world where the potential is emerging for text to be completely overrun by images.

Loos's later fictional work, including the sequel *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* and the serialized novel *The Better Things of Life* (1930-1931, heavily revised version published in 1963 as *No Mother to Guide Her*), continued to examine the friction between text and image and utilize the vernacular aesthetic that made *Blondes* so successful.⁸⁶ But *Blondes* remains monumental; its vernacular modernist aesthetics foreground the textuality of Lorelei's diary and its complex incorporation of the narrative devices of silent film far surpasses other attempts at cinematic storytelling by high modernists like Dos Passos and Joyce. Though contemporary critics rarely see this text as a document of modernism, it was the centerpiece of highbrow discussion in the 1920s. A favorite of both Wharton and Faulkner, Loos even received a backhanded compliment from Wyndham Lewis, in which he compared the seemingly formless (though tightly woven) vernacular narration of Lorelei to the work of Gertrude Stein.⁸⁷

Ultimately, though, Loos, like Lardner, constructs a brand of humor that is decidedly a work of twentieth-century vernacular modernism that stands in stark contrast to the dialect humor of the nineteenth century. Lardner and Loos demonstrate just how

aesthetically experimental and complicated popular writing can be; these works are self-conscious textual artifacts, invested in subjective forms of vernacular narration that reject both an aesthetics of realism and the realist mediation of nineteenth-century humor narratives. The fact that vernacular modernism first emerges in humor is predictable; after all, humorists lack "reverance" for received forms, particularly forms that betray a pompous gentility. But the vernacular modernism they inaugurate is not always full of laughs. Still, their aesthetic innovations and focus on vernacular language carry over into the bittersweet and decidedly earnest tales of Jewish-American ghetto life in the work of Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold.

¹ Ring W. Lardner, *How to Write Short Stories (With Samples)* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925), v.

² Henry James, *Hawthorne* (1879, repr. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1901), 43.

³ In addition to Twain, the work of Charles Farrar Browne, writing as "Artemus Ward," might also be a reference point for James in this quote. Browne's writing, like Twain's, turned on the relative illiteracy of his literary persona in such works as *Artemus Ward: His Book* (1862).

⁴ See, for example, Pound's "Credo" and 1918 essay "Henry James." Ezra Pound, *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 9, 295-338. See also Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era*, 3-23.

⁵ On Twain's "black" speech, see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black?* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

⁶ Finley Peter Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), vii.

⁷ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931, repr. New York: New York Review Books, 2004).

⁸ Compare, for example, David S. Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988.

⁹ Rourke, 209-236.

¹⁰ See, for example, Mark Twain's first published sketch "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter" (1852).

¹¹ The misspellers created texts—often letters or other ostensibly written documents—purported to originate from the pens of pseudonymous alter egos. The works of pseudonymous authors Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne), Josh Billings (Henry W. Shaw), Petroleum V. Nasby (David Ross Locke), and Bill Arp (Charles Henry Smith) exemplify this tradition. For brief histories of both groups, see Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (San Francisco, Chandler Publishing Company, Inc., 1960), 102-124.

¹² His focus on the work of Browne/Ward suggests that at least this one writer emphasized a particular kind of social and political satire of the moral failures of the Civil War era. Brom Weber, "The Misspellers," in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1973), 128.

¹³ For an extended discussion of Ade, in a project that charts the social context surrounding his work, see Timothy B. Spears, *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871-1919* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005).

¹⁴ Not discussed here, but certainly important to these questions of dialect, humor, and Chicago writing is James D. Corrothers, whose *The Black Cat Club* (1902) is briefly discussed in Chapter Four.

¹⁵ Finley Peter Dunne, *Mr. Dooley in Peace and in War* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Company, 1898), vii.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), xxxi-xxxiii.

¹⁸ I am thinking quite specifically here of Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus* stories and Charles W. Chesnutt's *Conjure Tales*.

¹⁹ Dunne, 1.

²⁰ A similar effect would appear to readers encountering "Dooley's" articles in the newspaper, surrounded by other articles in standard journalist prose.

²¹ Dunne, x.

²² Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. 2nd ed. Ed. Donald Pizer (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991), 3-4, 402-405.

²³ H.L. Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection*, (1958, repr. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006), 14.

²⁴ E.F. Bleiler, "Introduction" to George Ade, *Fables in Slang and More Fables in Slang* (New York: Dover, 1960), vii. Bleiler actually compares Ade with Josh Billings, Bill Nye, and "Mr. Dooley." Bleiler's conflation of the humor styles of Billings, Nye, and Dunne is problematic. Unlike Billings and Dooley in particular, Ade does not exploit the conventions of dialect to their fullest extent.

²⁵ While Ade's work involves these conventions of the fable, it also calls them into question, as the stories themselves do not actually work as fables; rather, they are generally satires on small-town, middle-class values. Another realist trope, this anticipates the work of Sinclair Lewis, whose attack on small-town life was a great deal more sinister in early 1920s works like *Main Street* (1920) and *Babbitt* (1922). A clear linguistic descendent of this style of writing is Carl Sandburg's *Rootabaga Stories* (1922).

²⁶ George Ade, *Fables in Slang and More Fables in Slang* (New York: Dover, 1960), 52.

²⁷ Jason Camlot, "Early Talking Books: Spoken Recording and Recitation Anthologies, 1880-1920," *Book History* 6 (2003): 164-165.

²⁸ Jacob Smith, "The Frenzy of the Audible: Pleasure, Authenticity, and Recorded Laughter," *Television & New Media* 2 (2005): 33. While there was a certain parallel between the listener's successful negotiation of modernity (in the phonograph) and Uncle Josh's similar failures, the difficulties of identification persist.

²⁹ Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters: An Historical Comedy* (1968, repr. Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 43-67; Michael North, *Machine-Age Comedy* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009); Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space/Frame/Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: BFI, 1990), 57.

³⁰ Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907 to 1915* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 179.

³¹ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1945), 36.

³² Gilbert Seldes, *The 7 Lively Arts* (1924, repr. Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 117.

³³ For another example of this characterization of Lardner's output, see Walton R. Patrick, *Ring Lardner* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1963). Maxwell Geismar, ed. *The Ring Lardner Reader* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), xxix.

³⁴ Edmund Wilson, *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1952), 97.

³⁵ For an example focusing primarily on *Round Up*, see Brian T. Cowlshaw, "The Reader's Role in Ring Lardner's Rhetoric," *Studies in Short Fiction* 31 (1994): 207-216.

³⁶ "Three Stories a Year Are Enough for a Writer," *New York Times* March 25, 1917, SM8.

³⁷ Merritt Moseley, "Ring Lardner and the American Humor Tradition," *South Atlantic Review* 46.1 (January 1981): 54.

³⁸ It is strange that Fitzgerald seems to fault Lardner here for cynicism, especially considering that Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1934), one of the most cynical takes on the 1920s, would be published in the following year.

³⁹ Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, 38.

⁴⁰ Lardner parodies this in the pseudonymous forward to his burlesque autobiography, *The Story of a Wonder Man* (1927): "The publication of this autobiography is entirely without the late Master's sanction. He wrote it as a pastime and burnt up each chapter as soon as it was written; the salvaging was accomplished by ghouls who haunted the Lardners' ash bbl. during my whole tenure of office as night nurse to their dromedary" (v). For a discussion of this, see William Keough, *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 86.

⁴¹ For an excellent discussion of Seldes, *The Dial*, and *The Seven Lively Arts*, see Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 140-172.

⁴² Virginia Woolf, "American Fiction," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 4: 1925-1929*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 276.

⁴³ Ibid, 119.

⁴⁴ In an essay on Woolf and Lardner, Todd Avery takes for granted the "aesthetic affinity between this pair of innovative modernist fiction writers" and explores their similar interests in the politics of sport. See Todd Avery, "'The Girls in Europe is Nuts over Ball Players': Ring Lardner and Virginia Woolf," *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 13.2 (Spring 2005): 45.

⁴⁵ Woolf, "American Fiction," 276.

⁴⁶ Moseley, 55.

⁴⁷ An earlier example of this mode of writing, Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* (1839), does not explicitly use the epistolary form, but retains its discursive function.

⁴⁸ Moseley, 57.

⁴⁹ Ring Lardner, *Selected Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 15. One of the other interesting characteristics of these stories is the use of real players from the 1914 baseball season: from the White Sox, catcher Ray Schalk, third baseman Harry Lord, and outfielder Ping Bodie; from the Detroit Tigers, outfielder Ty Cobb, outfielder Bobby Veach, and third baseman George Moriarty.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 14.

⁵¹ Ibid, 7.

⁵² Ibid, 237.

⁵³ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁴ Poirier, 130.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Yardley, "Introduction" to Ring Lardner, *Selected Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1997), xiii.

⁵⁶ Mencken, *Prejudices: A Selection*, 197-198.

⁵⁷ On the reference to *The Young Visitors*, see Jonathan Yardley, *Ring: A Biography of Ring Lardner* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 222-223. See also Daisy Ashford, *The Young Visitors* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919).

⁵⁸ Ring Lardner, *The Young Immigrants* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1920), ix-x.

⁵⁹ Interestingly, this kind of preface in a child's book reinforces the notion that similar practices in African-American autobiography (especially slave narratives) serve the function of infantilizing these authors.

⁶⁰ This is, once again, a kind of reference to the Ashford book, where a facsimile of the first page of the book—in her own handwriting—appears opposite the first page of Chapter 1.

⁶¹ See T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land, a Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts, Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971).

⁶² Lardner, *The Young Immigrants*, 62.

⁶³ Ibid, 34, 78, 44, 76.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 61.

⁶⁵ Joseph Blotner, ed. *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), 32.

⁶⁶ Of course, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851) inspired a veritable industry of adaptations, which ran well into the 1920s.

⁶⁷ Until 1929, the magazine later known as *Harper's Bazaar* was titled with the odd spelling *Harper's Bazar*. Since this essay deals with fiction published prior to the name change, the magazine will be consistently referred to as *Harper's Bazar* (with one exception—a quote by Loos herself).

⁶⁸ Loos published as many memoirs as novels. These include *A Girl Like I* (1966), *Kiss Hollywood Good-bye* (1974), *Cast of Thousands* (1977), and *The Talmage Girls: A Memoir* (1978). Other biographical material appeared in the posthumous *Fate Keeps on Happening: Adventures of Lorelei Lee and Other Writings* (1984). Gary Carey's biography *Anita Loos* emphasizes the "gossipy" side of Loos scholarship as does the recent *Anita Loos Rediscovered: Film Treatments and Fiction by Anita Loos*, edited by Cari Beauchamp and Mary Anita Loos. Neither of these latter two books contains an incredibly helpful scholarly apparatus or, importantly, a bibliography of Loos's short fiction.

⁶⁹ Anita Loos, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 96. Hereafter, the novel will be cited in text as *GPB*.

⁷⁰ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 18, 26. In this slim and straightforward volume, Emerson's name precedes Loos's on the title page, though Loos probably composed the majority of it. According to biographer Gary Carey, an ostensible commitment to dual

authorship was a convention of all Loos's early film work. Biographical data about the couple, however, would suggest that Loos served a more primary role in both the writing of the photoplays and in the composition of this volume. For some background on the gendered intellectual division of labor in early Hollywood, see Anne Morey, "'Would You Be Ashamed to Let Them See What You Have Written': The Gendering of Photoplaywrights, 1913-1923," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17.1 (Spring 1998): 83-99 and Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (New York: Scribner, 1997). For an early feminist history of Hollywood, see Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movie & the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan: 1973).

⁷¹ John Emerson and Anita Loos, *How To Write Photoplays* (New York: McCann, 1920), 4.

⁷² Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1922, repr. New York: Modern Library, 2000), 9-10. See also Karl Schmidt, "The Handwriting on the Screen," *Everybody's Magazine*, May 1917: 622.

⁷³ Emerson and Loos, 39.

⁷⁴ John C. Tibbetts and James M. Welsh, *His Majesty the American: The Cinema of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.* (South Brunswick, NJ: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1977), 91.

⁷⁵ Schmidt, 623.

⁷⁶ Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), 53.

⁷⁷ The importance of Mencken's approval of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to Loos is laid out in Richard J. Schrader's "'But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes': Anita Loos and H.L. Mencken," *Menckenia* 98 (Summer 1996): 1-7.

⁷⁸ The serial installments were literally buried deep in the pages of *Harper's Bazar*, a fashion magazine in the 1920s in which the table of contents routinely appeared after fifty or more pages of advertisements. Mencken's suggestion forms the centerpiece for Sarah Churchwell's essay "'Lost Among the Ads': *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and the Politics of Imitation" in *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*, ed. Lisa Botschon and Meredith Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 135-166. Churchwell reads the intertextuality present in the original magazine publication of the novel, emphasizing the ways in which the visual representations of Lorelei in the *Harper's Bazar* illustrations seem linked to the visuality of the ads. For another reading that focuses on the emerging "discourse of expertise" in cosmetics and fashion, see Jean Marie Lutes' "Authoring *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: Mass-Market Beauty Culture and the Makeup of Writers." *Prospects* 23 (1998): 431-460.

⁷⁹ Interestingly, these contrasting images of the tiny, bookish brunette and the "hearty" blonde recapitulate discourses surrounding race and ethnicity in the late 1910s and early 1920s. In particular, these images are reminiscent of the ideas of Lothrop Stoddard and, most specifically, Madison Grant, whose delineation of the Caucasian types—Nordic, Mediterranean and Alpine—in his *The Passing of the Great Race* emphasizes the size and strength of blond Nordics while viewing the other Caucasian types as smaller and, importantly for this discussion, brunette. Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race* argues that the fundamental "influences [of racial superiority] are so deeply rooted in everyday consciousness that the average novelist or playwright would not fail to make his hero a tall, blond, honest, and somewhat stupid youth, or his villain a small, dark, and exceptionally intelligent individual of warped moral character" (229). The fact that *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* emerges in a cultural moment when these discourses maintained some dominance in American society is a noteworthy and, thus far, unexplored topic in Loos scholarship. I am in debt to Adam McKible's unpublished lecture "Lothrop Stoddard and Racial Pseudoscience in the 1920s" for the summaries of Stoddard's and Grant's ideas.

⁸⁰ For a compelling argument that sees Lorelei's performance as liberatory, see Laurie J. C. Cella, "Narrative 'Confidence Games': Framing the Blonde Spectacle in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984)," *Frontiers* 25.3 (2004): 47-62.

⁸¹ Lorelei's use of language at times approximates the language used by title card writers struggling to avoid the censors. Text, in many cases, can suggest in ways that images cannot and Lorelei's diary frequently operates at this level.

⁸² Susan Hegeman, "Taking Blondes Seriously," *American Literary History* 7.3 (Autumn 1995): 525-554. For the earlier correspondences, see T.E. Blom, "Anita Loos and Sexual Economics: *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 7 (1976): 39-47.

⁸³ John Kobal, *People Will Talk* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 179.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁸⁵ Joseph Blotner, ed., *Selected Letters of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1977), 32.

⁸⁶ For a longer discussion of Loos's investment in cinematic narrative in both *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* and *But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, see my forthcoming *PMLA* essay, "'Any Chance to Be Unrefined': Cinematic Modes in Anita Loos's Fiction."

⁸⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 69-81. For a discussion of Loos and Stein, see Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity, and Literary Culture Between the Wars* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2007), 55-75.

CHAPTER TWO

"I didn't understand the words, but my voice was like dynamite": Anzia Yezierska, Mike Gold, and the Jewish-American Break With Realism

It has taken the artists and poets to rediscover this life of the ghetto. The life in the ghetto was probably always more active and teeming than life outside. The ghetto made the Jews self-conscious. They lived on the fringe of two worlds: the ghetto world and the strange world beyond the ghetto gates.

Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (1928)¹

Realism's political valences proved immensely important to immigrant writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While humor had begun to destabilize the objectivity inherent in realist aesthetics, immigrant writers continued to struggle with realism's conventions for a number of important reasons. Since the majority of realist texts posited cultural difference as visible linguistic difference in the text, immigrant writers—like the generation of African-American writers in the 1890s—attempted to use the conventions of realism against these norms. As Thomas J. Ferraro has noted, "The ethnic writers of the teens and twenties had sharpened their imaginations in their late youth and early adulthood by reading Dreiser, Crane, Howells."² These realist conventions became a means of textually demonstrating both the humanity and the Americanness of immigrants. In other words, if realism depended on an objective narrator that defined genteel American language (and, by extension, American identity), the use of realism by immigrant writers, and, specifically, Jewish-American immigrants, became formative in showing the American reading public how similar this genteel public was to the poor, slum-dwelling immigrants that populated many of these books. While popular realist texts of the nineteenth century marked Jews as fundamentally different creatures, the work of writers like Abraham Cahan and Mary Antin explicitly

confronted the cultural hierarchies of many realist writers by showing their own characters speaking and thinking in the genteel language of realism.

The question of language and Jewish identity looms large in the late realist period. With the enormous influx of Eastern European Jews into the United States in the 1880s and 1890s, cultural depictions of these immigrants approached the stereotypes used to characterize African-Americans during the same era. From sound recordings utilizing Jewish stereotypes to ethnographic depictions of Jewish neighborhoods for Middle American nickelodeon audiences, Jews found themselves constantly marked as different, exotic, and potentially sub-human.³ Most importantly, however, these fears became bound up with concerns about language. Here, one need think only of Henry James's bewildered stroll through New York's Lower East Side, as depicted in his *The American Scene* (1907), as well as his anxieties about the devolution of the American language described in his lecture "The Question of Our Speech" (1905).⁴ Jewish immigrants, residing largely in insulated, ghetto-like communities in large metropolitan areas like New York, posed explicit problems to projects of immigrant "Americanization" because of their unwillingness to relinquish markers of cultural difference. James's fear of the Yiddish-speaking hoards that surround him in the Lower East Side is one example of this, while the linguistic caricatures of Jewish figures in the realist fiction of the era served to further deemphasize the possibilities of assimilation.⁵ The linguistic hybridity of these dialect characters—their jagged syntax, mispronounced words, and direct substitution of Yiddish for English—marked them as racialized others, in a realist context that privileged objectivity and gentility through norms of narration. By the 1920s, however, this same linguistic hybridity was adopted and transformed by Anzia Yezierska and, in a slightly

different form, Michael Gold, into another example of vernacular modernism that explored the way in which cultural assimilation could be thematized as a form of aesthetic assimilation.

"My own linguistic psychology": Realism and Assimilation

Prosperity is prosaic.

Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912)⁶

The first major Jewish-American writer to grapple with these representational concerns was Abraham Cahan, longtime editor of a Yiddish-language newspaper in the Lower East Side and ostensible cultural diplomat for the Jewish-American population. When H.L. Mencken was investigating Yiddish words that had made their way into popular usage for the first edition of *The American Language*, he contacted Cahan. Still, Cahan has become most well known for two novels he published in English: *Yekl* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). Cahan's work established some important paradigms for the work that followed it, adapting (especially in *The Rise of David Levinsky*) the Benjamin Franklin narrative to a mode of cultural assimilation, all while suggesting a kind of nostalgia for an innocent past, both pre-modern and, in a sense, pre-pubescent.

Language, in these texts, operates according to a straight realist mode, where a genteel frame contains substantial dialect. In *Yekl*, Cahan employs a technique by which characters' Yiddish is rendered in a "fluent" English translation while uses of English are singled out (essentially marking this language as outside the realm of conventional usage). A footnote in *Yekl* reads, "English words incorporated in the Yiddish of the characters of this narrative are given in italics."⁷ In addition, this text occasionally

includes "translations" of particularly difficult English dialect in parentheses. To emphasize more strongly the difference between language as it is spoken and the genteel language of the realist narrator, Cahan italicizes and misspells English words that his characters grossly mispronounce, words that they drop into their Yiddish exchanges. The effect of this—the Yiddish sentences fluidly translated into English, interrupted by italicized English mispronunciation—is linguistic alienation, much like the capitalization and italicization in the comic work of George Ade. Rather than give the impression that these characters share some relationship with the reader, Cahan lures the reader into some comfort with the language, only to short-circuit that relationship with a mark of dialect that the reader must almost pronounce aloud in order to discover its connection to the standard representation of the word. Thus, italics and phonetic spelling operate as markers of distinct ethnic, cultural, and, most importantly, linguistic difference.

While this mode—in Cahan's first extended work of fiction in English—is complex, he smoothes over the rough edges of this dynamic in the *Bildungsroman* that appeared two decades later. *The Rise of David Levinsky* uses a first-person narrator, itself a kind of interruption in normal realist discourse. However, this nostalgic narrator is emblematic of the already assimilated immigrant. The text gradually uncovers the price of this assimilation—spiritual, creative, social, and romantic. However, the reader's experience of this text is from the reflective point of view of a character with whom s/he can linguistically identify. It matters little that the acquisition of an American identity for Levinsky entails both the loss of a rich and rewarding ethnic identity and the addition of a linguistic (and narrative) facility with English. From an aesthetic standpoint, Cahan has recognized the still politically and socially valuable strategy of realist representation. As

one critic has noted of writers like Cahan, "[f]or social power they sacrificed literary authority—that is, the prospect of passage into the community of self-proclaimed leaders of American letters."⁸ For Cahan, acceptance in the eyes of a popular American audience was far more important than breaking down aesthetic boundaries.

Following Cahan, Mary Antin's work—specifically, her loosely fictionalized memoir *The Promised Land* (1912)—also partakes in a standard realist discourse. *The Promised Land* opens with a memorable description of assimilation:

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell. Physical continuity with my earlier self is no disadvantage. I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for *she*, not *I*, is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began.⁹

Antin's insistence here on a narrative and discursive separation highlights the degree to which immigrant writers could reinscribe the realist relationship of genteel observer to object of study. Antin is writing about "*she*"; Antin could write "in the third person." Both of these signal a complete alienation from the pre-assimilated identity, along with a wholesale identification with newness, assimilation, Americanness, and "standard" English usage.

In the case of both Cahan and Antin, what is communicated by the language of the past and the language of the present may differ, but the necessity of transitioning between these two languages is of the utmost importance. Antin's autobiographical persona can speak "as if I were dead," because the parallel projects of realism and Americanization have enabled her to turn her past into a "third person," something almost wholly unrelated to the person she is now. For Cahan, though this past may at some level

be desirable, it remains unrecoverable for David Levinsky, a fact demonstrated through his performance of a mastery of English. As Levinsky learns English by questioning his co-workers, he meditates on the link between language, culture, and psychology: "It did not occur to him that people born to speak another language were guided by another language logic, so to say, and that in order to reach my understanding he would have to impart his ideas in terms of my own linguistic psychology."¹⁰ Levinsky's performance of a nostalgic, fluent English throughout this novel suggests that he has done the inverse, transferred his own "linguistic psychology" and "language logic" to that of English. This loss (of language, culture, connection) is what haunts him at the text's conclusion, but, paradoxically, it is what enables him to tell the story. In a sense, *The Rise of David Levinsky* becomes a critique of realism, only possible from within realism's aesthetic boundaries.

The erasure of linguistic difference in the narrative voices of Antin and Cahan suggests that the Jewish-American writers of the 1910s were struggling with the politics of representation that also became central among African-American intellectuals in the mid-1920s (see Chapter Four). In opposition to the large amount of popular culture productions that exoticized Jews as ethnic and racial others, Antin and Cahan worked to stress a *sameness* through the realist language of bourgeois gentility. Their aesthetic approach is somewhat understandable, given the tendency of many writers of the era to exploit racial difference. In 1910, journalist Hutchins Hapgood, for example, suggested to writers that ethnic exoticism might be the solution to writers' block: "Instead of inventing your plots, if you are a novelist, you can take them from the lips of common people, provided you are interested enough in low life to put yourself in touch with the next best

'gorilla' or 'spieler' you may meet. You can take not only your plots from the lives of these people, but you can also derive the vigor and vitality, the figurative quality, of your style, from the slang and racy expressions of your lowly friends."¹¹ Certainly, the obsession with dialect and difference inspired many major writers to begin experimenting with language, as Michael North has charted in *The Dialect of Modernism*, but when ethnic writers experimented, as Werner Sollors has argued, they tended to cling "to old-world languages and yet be more modern than their Americanized and American counterparts."¹²

Sollors's characterization is a more-than-accurate description of the aesthetic environment that produced Cahan and Antin. By 1920, the immigrant narrative—taking its origin point in both Eastern and Western Europe—had become a valued cultural commodity. An excellent example of this is Netherlands-born editor Edward Bok's bestseller *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920). This text, part Franklinesque success story, part critique of America and the hollow nature of its success, was a bestseller and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1921. However, in the same year Edward Bok's celebrated autobiography appeared, it is possible to see the beginning of a fragmentation of the strategy of realist representation among immigrant writers in English.

In *Beyond Ethnicity*, Sollors suggests that "[l]iterary forms are not organically connected with ethnic groups; ethnicity and modernism form a false set of opposites; and the very desire to transcend ethnicity may lead writers back into the most familiar territory of ethnogenesis and typology."¹³ While Anglo-American writers consistently mined the language and culture of ethnic others to achieve some kind of new form or aesthetic, for a couple of decades Jewish-American writers in particular remained

suspicious of how embracing hybrid linguistic forms could advance a new aesthetic practice. It is really through the concept of vernacular modernism that the first potential for a radical aesthetic practice emerges in Jewish-American writing. This brand of vernacular modernism, as practiced in the 1920s by writers like Anzia Yezierska and Michael Gold, utilizes a previously ghettoized language as a means of creating aesthetic distance, as opposed to creating social ostracization. To use the Yezierska metaphor that provides the title to this chapter, this vernacular modernist language served as a kind of aesthetic dynamite that destroyed and completely reshaped the understanding of how a multilingual and multicultural subject might accurately describe experience.

"Slipping back into the vernacular": Anzia Yezierska and the vernacular modernism of assimilation

"Poems of Poverty!" cried Mother. "Ain't it black enough to be poor, without yet making poems about it?"

Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925)¹⁴

I envy the writers who can sit down at their desks in the clear calm security of their vision and begin their story at the beginning and work it up logically, step by step, until they get to the end. With me, the end and the middle and the beginning of my story whirl before me in a mad blurr [*sic*]. And I can not sit still inside myself till the vision becomes clear and whole and sane in my brain. I'm too much on fire to wait till I understand what I see and feel. My hands rush out to seize a word from the end, a phrase from the middle, or a sentence from the beginning. I jot down any fragment of a thought that I can get hold of. And then I gather these fragments, words, phrases, sentences, and I paste them together with my own blood.

Anzia Yezierska, "Mostly About Myself" (1923)¹⁵

In the mid-1910s, shortly after Mary Antin published *The Promised Land* and around the same time that Abraham Cahan published *The Rise of David Levinsky*, stories by a young writer named Anzia Yezierska began appearing in mainstream literary magazines like *Forum* and *Metropolitan*. By 1920, Yezierska had become a literary

celebrity with her short-story collection *Hungry Hearts*; she would go on to publish a number of books, with varying success throughout the 1920s. Yeziarska's rediscovery by literary critics in the 1970s and 1980s (with the republication of *Bread Givers* [1925] in 1975, the collection *The Open Cage* [1979] and the 1985 edition of *Hungry Hearts* [1920]) came on the heels of an increasing interest in narratives of working women by feminist scholars.¹⁶ As Mary V. Dearborn has noted, Yeziarska's "fiction is welcomed, in short, because it provides valuable documentary evidence that ethnic women existed."¹⁷ Such documentation, to both feminist and labor historians, was crucial to the expansion of labor histories to include more diverse voices in the understanding of twentieth-century labor.

Strangely, though, Yeziarska's name remains left out of many discussions of Jewish-American literature. One of the reasons that Yeziarska's work has not translated well into the history of Jewish-American literary aesthetics is that her recovery was not driven by literary concerns, but by historical ones. Historian Alice Kessler-Harris spearheaded the 1975 republication of *Bread Givers* in the interest of recovering working women's histories, and her introduction to the novel de-emphasizes Yeziarska's aesthetics. To the extent that Yeziarska's work has been engaged from a literary critical perspective, it is, as with historians, under the aegis of working class and feminist literary critical practice. For a long time, Yeziarska's works were completely ignored by critics of American literature and even dismissed by literary historians of Jewish-American literature. In an early survey called *The Jewish Writer in America* (1971), Allen Guttman groups Yeziarska with Samuel Ornitz, noting that "neither writer can be termed major, except perhaps within the realm of Jewish writing."¹⁸ Even Guttman's

study does not seem to consider Yeziarska major; covering Yeziarska's career in a scant two pages (in a section called "Interlude"), he emphasizes that she is "more fluent but less profound than Abraham Cahan."¹⁹ Literary critical works on Jewish-American writing have continued to ignore Yeziarska, frequently skipping from early twentieth-century pioneers like Antin and Cahan to more conventional modernist figures like Henry Roth and Saul Bellow, with occasional forays into the left-wing writing of Michael Gold. The Jewish-American canon, then, remains inordinately male and tilted toward the middle of the twentieth century. Marcus Klein's influential *Foreigners: The Making of American Literature, 1900-1940* (1981) and Hana Wirth-Nesher's recent *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Writing* (2006) emphasize, to slightly varying degrees, the same canon that Guttmann does in his early study.

The problem with Yeziarska's place (or lack of one) in the Jewish-American literary canon comes from her own unconventional aesthetic. The writers most frequently assessed in these studies conform to relatively conventional literary models: Antin and Cahan emerge from late nineteenth-century realism, while later writers Henry Roth, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth exhibit strong affinities to commonly understood modernist aesthetics. By conforming to the outdated modes of realism, early twentieth-century Jewish-American writers (to varying degrees of self-consciousness) placed themselves outside the literary avant-garde. Interestingly, while Ferraro lumps Yeziarska into the realist group of writers including Antin and Cahan, most literary histories leave Yeziarska out of this group, precisely because her aesthetic is not sufficiently realist.²⁰ Unlike Antin and Cahan, who were relying almost exclusively on realist models, and later writers like Henry Roth, who were drawing heavily on the models of European high

modernism, Yeziarska's ghetto fairy tales do not explicitly participate in either aesthetic discourse. In addition, the narration of her texts—particularly the short stories in *Hungry Hearts* and the novel *Bread Givers*—exhibits a reliance on Yiddish syntax, code switching, and elusive suggestion. With this approach, Yeziarska extends the vernacular modernism of Lardner, and uses this aesthetic to demonstrate the self-conscious and problematic project of linguistic Americanization.

Like Antin and Cahan before her, Yeziarska's central concerns involved the personal and spiritual prices of assimilation; her novels *Salome of the Tenements* (1923) and *Arrogant Beggar* (1927) both engage this question directly, even polemically, utilizing an aesthetic much closer to the realism of these successful earlier writers. Her more well-known works, the short-story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and the novel *Bread Givers* (1925), also weigh in on similar questions, but rather than present these questions in the objective narrative form of most realist writers, Yeziarska foregrounds an immigrant consciousness constantly in development. While stories of assimilation are frequently narrated from a first-person perspective, they often emphasize their narrator's status as an already assimilated figure. Thus, in Mary Antin's autobiographical *The Promised Land*, Abraham Cahan's fictional *The Rise of David Levinsky*, and other successful narratives of Americanization (such as Edward Bok's bestselling *The Americanization of Edward Bok*), the storyteller stands above his or her life, on par with the genteel reader. Yeziarska's early fiction flies in the face of these conventions and demonstrates her peculiar aesthetics that aim to alienate the reader from a language s/he should feel some affinity with, simultaneously complicating notions of linguistic purity and syntax in ways analogous to high modernists like Gertrude Stein.²¹

A number of critics have interrogated Yeziarska's language from a variety of perspectives. Ruth Bienstock Anolik has emphasized the ways in which the female "bread givers" of Yeziarska's most famous novel must occupy the assimilating linguistic space of Americanization as the patriarch remains staunchly a scholar of Hebrew.²² Others have argued for the centrality of both linguistic and cultural hybridity, not only to Yeziarska's work but also to her position within a modernist moment.²³ Delia Caparoso Konzett has associated Yeziarska with other women writers (Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Rhys), calling their work "ethnic modernism" in a study that "raises the combined question of dislocation and ethnicity as a key feature of modernism, one that is still too-often dealt with in discreet separation."²⁴ While Konzett, Anolik and others tend to foreground gender and ethnicity as the determinants and, perhaps, the "signs" of Yeziarska's modernism, wedding these components to larger concerns of aesthetic choices strips the concept of "modernism" of its major signifying force, its aesthetic innovation. All of these critics have done important work in conceiving of Yeziarska as a kind of modernist, but their emphasis on gender and ethnicity as prerequisites for such attributions comes dangerously close to keeping Yeziarska's writing within the proverbial literary ghetto, unable to assert its aesthetic value in a larger literary context. By drawing on the important work of these critics, but recasting the linguistic experimentation in Yeziarska under the rubric of "vernacular modernism," it becomes possible to see her as engaged with modernist aesthetics, but arriving at this experimentation through both linguistic expatriation and cultural transformation.

Running throughout Yeziarska's work, in a variety of manifestations, is a concern with the interstitial language of the American immigrant. Whereas Cahan and Antin

adopted quite completely the assumptions of realism—the largely objective narrator, the classification of characters through linguistic difference, etc.—Yeziarska's work demonstrates an acute awareness of how language functions in the mouths of her assimilating characters. Indeed, what marks Yeziarska as a vernacular modernist is her hyper-awareness of how language constitutes her characters as her characters simultaneously constitute their language out of fragmentary snatches of English and Yiddish. The words in the mouths of her characters and narrators reject realist standards in favor of a vernacular form that disturbs the relationship between signifier and signified in ways analogous to modernism. Yeziarska's modernism, unlike that of Lardner and Loos, is not only about subjectivity, but also about the process of assimilation and the ways in which an aesthetic of language can dramatize this process. Her characters, always striving to become American, find themselves drawn back to their Lower East Side, Jewish roots even in the syntactical construction of their language.

The story that most clearly demonstrates Yeziarska's self-conscious use of this aesthetic is "To the Stars," a story published in her second, lesser-known 1923 collection *Children of Loneliness*. In "To the Stars," Sophie Sapinsky dreams, like Yeziarska herself, of becoming a writer.²⁵ The dean of her college and the creative writing professor both discourage her. The dean claims, "What chance is there for you, with your immigrant English? You could never get rid of your foreign idiom" (*HIFA* 162). Undeterred by their lack of faith in her abilities and encouraged by an advertisement for a short-story contest, Sophie writes her story. Her determination is palpable: "Centuries of suppression, generations of illiterates clamored in her: 'Show them what's in you! If you can't write it in college English, write it "immigrant English!"'" (*HIFA* 164).

Encouraged by the president of the college (a believer in "democracy in education" and a clear stand-in for John Dewey), Sophie takes her story to a creative writing class.²⁶ While the president has told her that "[t]here are things in life bigger than rules of grammar. The thing that makes art live and stand out throughout the ages is sincerity. Unfortunately, education robs many of us of the power to give spontaneously, as mother earth gives, as the child gives. You have poured out not a part, but the whole of yourself. That's why it can't be measured by any of the prescribed standards. It's uniquely you" (*HIFA* 171). The president's belief in the sincerity and uniqueness of art translating experience above formal rules is not echoed by the creative writing class, which savages Sophie's story. The criticisms there are notable: "'It's not a story; it has no plot'; 'feeling without form'; 'erotic, over-emotional'" (*HIFA* 172).

In this multivalent moment, Yezierska accomplishes a number of things. First, it is clear that the standards of this creative writing class are those of the realism practiced by Cahan and Antin. Plot, formal construction, and emotional distance in narration all characterize this kind of writing. At the same time, Yezierska has subtly aligned Sophie (and herself) with high modernism, a mode of creation that faced exactly the same kinds of criticisms. In addition to the frequent rejection of grammatical rules, high modernists also valued individual creative vision and interiority over received cultural forms as well as a collapsing of the distance between narrator, character, and reader.²⁷ While the high modernists reached this revolution in aesthetics through a sophisticated critique of nineteenth-century literature, Sophie and Yezierska have arrived at an analogous point through the inherent linguistic alienation in the immigrant experience. Undeterred by the class's criticism, Sophie sends off the story "for a judgment of a world free from rules of

grammar," and, not so surprisingly, wins the first prize in the short-story contest (*HIFA* 172). The "sincerity" of her work, as the college president calls it, rises above the rules and regulations of language, a kind of case in point of William Carlos Williams's call for "not 'realism,' but reality itself" in *Spring and All*, published the same year as "To the Stars."

Throughout her work, Yeziarska takes up the call of the "real" and the authentic in many guises. This appears most explicitly in her use of first-person narration. While both Cahan and Antin use this narrative point of view, they do so in forms fully recognizable to early twentieth-century audiences. Yesierska's use of the first person is more complex, and, in a way, more challenging than these earlier writers. Rather than translating her linguistic experience whole cloth to something easily digestible for readers accustomed to standard English, or using the trope of the dialect figure (which appears in Cahan's *Yekl*), Yeziarska opts to occupy a third space, a liminal point both between these two options and outside them completely. This is most apparent in her earliest work, the story collection *Hungry Hearts*. Later in her career, Yeziarska would, like Lardner, gravitate toward more conventional forms, utilizing the third person in a novel of social critique, *Arrogant Beggar*. Importantly, though, Yeziarska always mixed first- and third-person narration, and the structure of *Hungry Hearts* demonstrates the kind of self-conscious use of these techniques later theorized in the story of Sophie Sapinsky.

The ten stories in *Hungry Hearts* are split evenly between first- and third-person narratives. The collection opens with three third-person pieces in the tradition of the realism of Cahan. The narrative voices of "Wings," "Hunger," and "The Lost 'Beautifulness'" approach the objective stance of the realist narrator, while the

characters, Shenah Pessah (of "Wings" and "Hunger") and Hanneh Hayyeh (of "The Lost 'Beautifulness'") speak like the unassimilated figures in Cahan's fiction. These three stories are followed by a block of four first-person narratives, occupying the center of the book, one might say the "heart" of *Hungry Hearts*. In this block of stories, Yezeierska's strategy—the aesthetic approach that will drive her most celebrated novel, *Bread Givers*—begins to emerge. This group of unconnected narratives thematizes cultural and linguistic assimilation through its use of vernacular language.

This block of stories begins with Yezeierska's first published story, "The Free Vacation House," which originally appeared in *Forum* in 1915. The unnamed narrator of this story opens the tale in quintessential Yezeierska fashion: "How came it that I went to the free vacation house was like this."²⁸ The abruptness, the unconventional syntax, and the seeming substitution of Yiddish sentence structure for English immediately throw the reader into a realm in which the standard realist narrator is nowhere to be found. The narrator of "The Free Vacation House" commands the reader's attention in a line that implies a kind of intimacy, that of the occasional or informal storyteller, a radical move in a genre of literature where conventions generally demanded an aesthetic distance between the reader and the working-class characters. This break is more striking in that it directly follows three stories with a fairly conventional relationship to these standard narrative practices. Throughout "The Free Vacation House," the narrator remains in this vernacular register, making biting commentary about the "Social Betterment Society" along the way (*HH* 62). "When she is gone I think to myself, I'd better knock out from my head this idea about the country. For so long I lived, I did n't know nothing about the charities. For why should I come down among the beggars now?" (*HH* 64). At certain

points, "The Free Vacation House" inverts the conventions of realism, placing the vernacular figure in the narrator's position while having her accurately report the "standard" speech of the women from the charity office. The narrator's exact replication of the speech of these "higher ups" implies an awareness and rejection of standard language in favor of something more appropriate—in spite of its grammatical irregularities—to the narrator's experience. Because of its rejection of received forms, the liminal space of "immigrant English" (as Sophie calls it in "To the Stars") provides a more authentic narrative experience.

The two stories in *Hungry Hearts* that follow "The Free Vacation House" continue the emphasis on linguistic development and cultural assimilation. These two stories also seem almost to share a narrator; in "The Miracle," the first of these two stories, the narrator is Sara Reisel, while "Where Lovers Dream" is narrated by someone named only "Sara." The appearance of the same characters in multiple stories runs throughout *Hungry Hearts*, creating the impression of a fictional community larger than the individual stories and connecting the collection to modernist short-story sequences like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and later volumes like Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925). Indeed, when *Hungry Hearts* was turned into a film by MGM, elements of the stories were combined into a single narrative involving a protagonist named Sara and a love interest named David (seemingly drawn from "Where Lovers Dream").²⁹ Other characters make repeated appearances throughout Yezierska's fiction: Hannah Hayyeh, the protagonist of the third-person narrated "The Lost 'Beautifulness,'" has a minor role in "The Miracle," while the first two stories of the collection both involve Shenah Pessah.³⁰

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Insisting on the cross-textual importance of characterization might seem, at first glance, trivial. However, the fact that "The Miracle" and "Where Lovers Dream" both have a protagonist named Sara, coupled with their adjacent position in the collection, naturally leads the reader to see these stories as not merely connected, but in some way continuous. Internal evidence, such as the personal histories of the characters and the location of each Sara's parents, makes this direct continuity impossible, but their adjacency, combined with the ways in which the collection has already demonstrated cross-textual appearances of characters, closely links these two Saras. These two stories, located at the center of the volume (the fifth and sixth stories in a ten-story collection), create a crucial hinge on which the collection—and Yeziarska's aesthetics—hinge. While Sara Reisel (of "The Miracle") narrates her own experiences along the vernacular lines of "The Free Vacation House," Sara (of "Where Lovers Dream") moves somewhat closer to linguistic assimilation, a process completed in "Soap and Water," the last story in this four-story unit at the center of *Hungry Hearts*. The two stories that feature narrating Saras, however, suggest an ever-increasing awareness and sophistication in the use of English.

In both of these central stories, Sara's narration already demonstrates a kind of linguistic assimilation beyond that of the narrator of "The Free Vacation House." In "The Miracle," Sara Reisel's family sends her to America to improve her marriage prospects. She tells her mother, "All I need is a chance. I can do a million times better than Hanneh Hayyeh. I got a head. I got brains. I feel I can marry myself to the greatest man in America" (*HH* 76). The story concludes with Sara realizing "the miracle of America come true" when her English teacher falls in love with her (*HH* 87). This often romantic

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obsession with the teacher/philanthropist figure dominates much of Yezierska's fiction, and has its roots in her own brief and tortured relationship with philosopher John Dewey.

What Yezierska injects into this conventional romance plot is a fascinating sense of linguistic malleability that occasionally arrives at moments of modernist experimentation. Her description of the trip across the Atlantic, including her fantasy about meeting some great lover, demonstrates a host of these experimental techniques: the repetitive forms of Gertrude Stein, the understatement of Hemingway, and the exploration of subjectivity that dominates an enormous amount of modernist fiction.

I did n't see the day. I did n't see the night. I did n't see the ocean. I did n't see the sky. I only saw my lover in America, coming nearer and nearer to me, till I could feel his eyes bending on me so near that I got frightened and began to tremble. My heart ached so with the joy of his nearness that I quick drew back and turned away, and began to talk to the people that were pushing and crowding themselves on the deck.

Nu, I got to America. (*HH* 79)

While the syntax of this passage remains relatively conventional, it shows the ways in which vernacular modernism can also emerge in word choice despite the use of standard grammatical forms. In this way, Yezierska's vernacular modernism occasionally veers closer to high modernist style than do the other vernacular modernists.

Immediately following "The Free Vacation House" and "The Miracle" Yezierska includes "Where Lovers Dream," another story that occupies this space between total linguistic assimilation and immigrant vernacular. With its lyric opening, the text seems to have veered more in the direction of Mary Antin's prose: "For years I was saying to myself—Just so you will act when you meet him. Just so will you stand. So will you look on him. These words will you say to him" (*HH* 88). This syntactically sophisticated opening soon gives way to another one of Yezierska's vernacular narrators, Sara, whose

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boyfriend David Novak serves as the story's male ideal and assimilating agent. David, says Sara, "was learning me how to throw off my greenhorn talk, and say out the words like the American" (*HH* 90). The contrast between the lyrical opening and the rest of the narration underscores the ways in which language, identity, memory, and narration are compounded in these stories at the center of *Hungry Hearts*. Marked by poverty—and in the text by language—Sara and her family are ultimately shunned by the young doctor David, whose wealthy uncle makes his support contingent upon David's abandoning his greenhorn girlfriend.

In "Soap and Water," the story that follows "Where Lovers Dream," the narrative voice approaches the standard narration of "How I Found America," the well-known first-person narrative that concludes *Hungry Hearts*, as well as the objective narration of the other, third-person stories that make up the remainder of the collection. Importantly, "Soap and Water" is told from the perspective of an unnamed immigrant graduating from college with a teachers' certification. Like Sara Smolinsky of *Bread Givers*, this narrator demonstrates complete control over conventional language, a mark of her education as well as her assimilation. The story thematizes this assimilation; the narrator's inability to appear clean according to bourgeois standards (her lack of "soap and water") erases her education, itself indicated by the language in which the story is narrated. "Soap and Water," placed in the collection after a number of powerfully emotional stories told in varying degrees of vernacular, turns the conventions of realist language on its head, pointing toward the emptiness of the standard language which cannot, ultimately, help the narrator transcend her identity. The fear that the adoption of bourgeois American culture and realist language might not enable the narrative of success or an emotionally and

aesthetically challenging fiction lies underneath Yeziarska's later fiction in the form of a muted, though still present, vernacular modernism.

Much of Yeziarska's later fiction relied exclusively on third-person narration, rejecting the intense subjectivity of these stories in *Hungry Hearts*. Two of her novels of the 1920s, *Salome of the Tenements* and *Arrogant Beggar*, draw back into more conventional modes of melodrama and social critique. However, her most frequently studied work, *Bread Givers*, demonstrates an aesthetic that sits between the hyper-subjective first-person vernacular narrative and the language of the already fully assimilated character. In a way, *Bread Givers* provides a kind of aesthetic missing link between the stories "When Lovers Dream" and "Soap and Water." Told by yet another Sara, this time Sara Smolinsky, *Bread Givers* articulates a harsh critique of traditional Jewish patriarchy, a trend in Yeziarska's work noted by both Thomas J. Ferraro (in *Ethnic Passages*) and Magdalena J. Zaborowska.³¹ As a young girl, Sara watches her religious father ruin the romantic prospects of her sisters only to match them with men who, in varying ways, make their lives miserable. Sara, determined to break the cycle of traditional repression, strikes out on her own, with ambitions to become a schoolteacher.

As with "Soap and Water," the narration of *Bread Givers* emerges from the already-assimilated figure of Sara Smolinsky. It is clear that Sara's complex impressions of the world around her at ten years old are not to be taken as a literal replication of a young girl's consciousness. In this way, the narration resembles that of Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* in its reflective mode; however, reflection and nostalgia are not the only registers in which Sara's narrative voice expresses her history. Indeed, Sara's emotions often overwhelm the mostly realist aesthetic modes. Such moments emerge in

forms that resemble the Yiddish-English narration of the vernacular stories in *Hungry Hearts*. As Yeziarska claims in the autobiographical piece "Mostly About Myself," published in *The Children of Loneliness*, "With me, the end and the middle and the beginning of my story whirl before me in a mad blurr [*sic*]. And I can not sit still inside myself till the vision becomes clear and whole and sane in my brain. I'm too much on fire to wait till I understand what I see and feel. My hands rush out to seize a word from the end, a phrase from the middle, or a sentence from the beginning. I jot down any fragment of a thought that I can get hold of. And then I gather these fragments, words, phrases, sentences, and I paste them together with my own blood" (*HIFA* 132).

Yeziarska's description of her working practice, in which "fragments, words, phrases, [and] sentences" are "paste[d]...together with my own blood," echoes many of the central concerns for the high modernist artist. If the fragmentary nature of reality has become blatantly apparent in the modernist era, the modernist artist struggles to bring these disparate pieces of existence together in some coherent form, to "paste them together." In acknowledging both the fragments of individual consciousness of experience and the fragments of language that go into the literary means of capturing and communicating that experience, Yeziarska aligns herself with the core of modernist experimentation. Importantly, though, she has come to this particular understanding through second-language acquisition. When Yeziarska's narrators speak in a fragmented form, they expose their own interstitial existence between languages. Yeziarska's characters—and her narrators—use a hybrid combination of English words, Yiddish syntax, English translation of Yiddish expressions, and a number of untranslated Yiddish words. When she declares that she unites the fragments of language "with my own

blood," Yeziarska acknowledges the profound effect that ethnic heritage has, not just on the development of her characters (as in Cahan and Antin), but also on the very way in which she constructs language, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence. As Sara in *Bread Givers* notes about her first intimate conversation with Hugo Selig, "After that, all differences dropped away. We talked one language. We had sprung from one soil."³²

The association of a particular creative practice with "blood" and "soil" has the potential to veer rather close to racial essentialism (as it does most clearly in Yeziarska's *Salome of the Tenements*); in her other works, however, Yeziarska emphasizes both the ability of her characters to become American and the important heritage that will always frame that Americanness. *Bread Givers* demonstrates this complex assimilation through its strategic placement of moments of vernacular modernist effusion, moments in the text when Sara cannot rein in her emotion and remain reflective in her narration.

These moments appear more frequently in the early parts of the novel. These sections involve more dialogue—all of which Yeziarska renders in the vernacular—and less of the dominant, reflective voice that Sara begins to adopt near the novel's conclusion. In the opening moments, the juxtaposition of these voices immediately confronts the reader: "I was about ten years old then. But from always it was heavy on my heart the worries for the house as if I was mother" (*BG* 1). In these two sentences the two narrative registers appear clearly. The matter-of-factly stated "I was about ten years old then" contrasts strongly with the sentence that follows it; this second sentence describes an emotional state that Sara finds it difficult to render in standard syntax. At times, this explosion of vernacular language, the only means of communicating the

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consciousness of certain emotional experiences, even shifts tense to reflect time-specific thought patterns: "More and more I began to think inside myself. I don't want to sell herring for the rest of my days. I want to learn something. I want to do something. I want some day to make myself for a person and come among people" (*BG* 66).

Clearly, both Yeziarska and Sara convert language into central metaphors of the immigrant experience. When Sara refuses to engage in the coarse humor of her classmates at college, she feels "shut out like a 'greenhorn' who didn't talk their language" (*BG* 180). When she asks someone about how he managed English words as a street vendor on his first day in America, he tells her, "To me it was only singing a song. I didn't understand the words, but my voice was like dynamite, thundering out into the air all that was in my young heart, alone in a big city" (*BG* 189). In a consideration of another Yeziarska novel (*Salome of the Tenements*), Michael North has noted the political valence of the link between dynamite and ethnicity, connecting this to cultural tropes of "political anarchy and violence."³³ That dynamite can operate as a metaphor both for a dangerously emotional ethnicity and for the power of second-language learning only serves to confirm the intimate connection between ethnic identity, linguistic experimentation, and conventional notions of about modernist threats to culture. The experience of culture, the experience of life is, for Yeziarska, the experience of language, an experience that will always be consciously mediated by language and linguistic difference. While the narration in *Bread Givers* largely demonstrates a cultural and linguistic savviness over that of some narrators in *Hungry Hearts*, Sara finds herself "slipping back into the vernacular myself" when emotionally overcome while teaching pronunciation to her Lower East Side students (*BG* 272).

In Yezierska's work, the vernacular lurks beneath her narrators' standard language, always ready to emerge in moments where "realism" cannot effectively capture the mental or emotional experience. Her vernacular modernism appears not just as a means of aestheticizing the process of assimilation, but also as a cultural marker. The unassimilated, and indeed the "unrefined" elements of her characters are also those signs of modernism; as much as the betterment societies and settlement houses strive to mold her characters into models of nineteenth-century bourgeois gentility, these characters retain hostility to that gentility, as well as to the genteel language of nineteenth-century realism. As with so many high and vernacular modernists, Yezierska fights this gentility with linguistic experimentation.

"The broken talk came through the airshaft window": Michael Gold and Vernacular Expressionism

I will not deny the World Revolution provides a *Weltanschauung* that exfoliates a thousand bold new futurist thoughts in psychology, art, literature, economics, sex. It is a fresh world synthesis—the old one was killed in the war, and long live the new!

Michael Gold, "Let It Be Really New!" (1926)³⁴

While placing Yezierska and her vernacular first-person narratives in the orbit of vernacular modernism might seem relatively plausible (especially given her close association with John Dewey and her pilgrimage to Gertrude Stein's Paris apartment), doing the same with Michael Gold is anything but an easy task. Gold was well known for his relentless critiques of modernist writers and his celebration of the Communist party-line aesthetic of "socialist realism" in his 1930s column "Change the World."³⁵ His notorious attack "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot" took a clear stand on the kinds of literary modernism emanating from Paris. Gold called Stein's work "an example of the

most extreme subjectivism of the contemporary bourgeois artist, and a reflection of the ideological anarchy into which the whole of bourgeois literature has fallen.”³⁶

Modernists, Gold claimed, “destroyed the common use of language... They went in for primitive emotions, primitive art. Blood, violent death, dope dreams, soul-writings, became the themes of their works” (*CTW* 25). While Gold admired Hemingway’s style, he still characterized Hemingway’s writing as the “heartless” work of “a white collar poet.”³⁷

Gold’s positions on aesthetics and politics had become firmly entrenched during the 1930s, and his most vitriolic statements on modernism are, in large part, from this period. Earlier in his career, Gold was much more closely allied with experimental art forms. This included work with the aesthetically progressive Provincetown Players and New Playwrights Theatre, which led to productive associations with major figures in both theatrical and literary modernism, including Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, and John Dos Passos.³⁸ His most ambitious and experimental dramatic work, *Hoboken Blues* (published 1927, performed by the New Playwrights’ Theater in 1928), attempts to grapple with the history of American racial injustice and capitalist exploitation in a form derived from Soviet constructivist theater. What remains lacking in criticism of Gold’s work is any coherent picture of his career. How does one bring together communist polemics and experimental theater with Gold’s most celebrated work, the fictionalized East Side memoir *Jews Without Money* (1930)? Such disparate creative productions seem to emanate from altogether different writers—with completely different assumptions about the role of art in society. In a sense, Gold had investment in most of the major strands of literary production during the 1920s. His poetry rejects most received forms,

but remains explicitly derivative of Whitman. Gold's devotion to Whitman's aesthetic already puts him in a kind of oppositional relationship to canonical modernists like Ezra Pound, who sought to reject Whitman's influence in American poetry. Gold's short fiction vacillates between experimentation (in, for example, "Love on a Garbage Dump" and "Faster, America, Faster!") and polemical pieces in the tradition of literary naturalism. His plays can be decidedly naturalistic, clichéd, or experimental—sometimes all in the same text (as is the case with *Hoboken Blues*). And, his one extended work, *Jews Without Money*, is alternatively nostalgic and horrifying, naturalistic and overly poetic.

Rather than ignoring Gold's experimental work and reading him exclusively as a proletarian memoirist or chalking his varied output up to political and aesthetic incoherence, it is useful to import two interlocking concepts into the study of Gold's work: vernacular language and expressionism. Gold's fascination with vernacular language and culture cuts across ethnic groups, appearing in *Jews Without Money* as well as the plays *Money* and *Hoboken Blues*. In addition, Gold's work across genres draws heavily on European expressionism, broadly conceived as a literary, dramatic, and artistic form. For expressionist playwrights, "strength of feeling and pathos of expression meant more...than mastery of form...The unrestrained outpourings of the Expressionist actor showed a human being in a state of delirium seeking to reach his or her audience with a liberating, primeval cry."³⁹ In fact, with this concept in mind, it becomes possible to see Gold's work as—if not a form of vernacular modernism *per se*—a form of vernacular expressionism, still profoundly interested in language, but also invested in techniques used in Europe (by figures like Brecht and Meyerhold). In a sense, Gold's strange uses of

dialect and vernacular language in his 1920s expressionist theater and of a hybrid, though muted Lower East Side language in *Jews Without Money* form a kind of continuity around vernacular and expressionist incarnations of the grotesque. With an emphasis both in the expressionist grotesque and in reviving Whitman's street-level aesthetics, Gold's own approach seeks to negotiate the aesthetic threshold between realism and modernism, politics and literature, prose poetry and narrative. Rather than reading Gold's work through his programmatic 1930s column "Change the World," considering his creative output and his statements on art in the 1920s can enable a new reading of Gold, one which puts him more comfortably in the realm of the vernacular, the expressionist, and the modernist.

Gold's own positions on art throughout the 1920s are in more constant conflict than critics usually admit. There are, during this period, a number of Gold's statements on aesthetics and politics that form a trajectory from the self-described "mystic" manifesto "Towards Proletarian Art" through the nine-point proscriptive description of "Proletarian Realism" that codified his thinking at the beginning of the 1930s. Critics have tended to read these two texts as inherently related, even seeing the latter as "a rationalization and codification" of "Towards Proletarian Art" (*LA* 203). But articles and editorials published in *New Masses*, the radical literary magazine Gold edited beginning in 1926, present a more complex evolution of his thinking about the relationship between aesthetics and politics.

In "Towards Proletarian Art," Gold's first manifesto, he collapses a number of strands in early twentieth-century literary discourse. On the one hand, Gold opposes received forms, both of art and of artists, which he links to capitalist oppression. "The old

moods, the old poetry, fiction, painting, philosophies, were the creations of proud and baffled solitaires. The tradition has arisen in a capitalist world that even its priests of art must be lonely beasts of prey—competitive and unsocial" (*LA* 65). While he notes this tendency of contemporary artists to see themselves as "the aristocrats of mankind," his linkage of this tendency to the past is important in his desire to see proletarian art as a new form for a new world (*LA* 65). At the same time, Gold evokes the modernist moment, claiming in one of his more mystic flourishes that "[i]t is the consciousness that in art Life is speaking out its heart at last, and that to censor the poor brute-murmurings would be sacrilege. Whatever they are, they are significant and precious, and to stifle the meanest of Life's moods taking form in the artist would be death" (*LA* 64).

Gold's faith in the artist's individual vision (those "poor brute-murmurings") and his insistence that the new artist be both social and socialized stand in partial conflict to one another, especially since Gold later maintained such hostility toward the "brute-murmurings" of modernist writers like Stein. But, more than anything else, it is Gold's own admitted "primitivism" that makes "Towards Proletarian Art" such a puzzling example of proletarian literary theory. While "intellectuals have become bored with the primitive monotony of Life—with the deep truths and instincts,"

The masses are still primitive and clean, and artists must turn to them for strength again. The primitive sweetness, the primitive calm, the primitive ability to create simply and without fever or ambition, the primitive satisfaction and self-sufficiency—they must be found again. (*LA* 66)

This equation of the working class (the "masses") with primitives remains one of Gold's stranger claims in this essay, particularly given the impetus in most proletarian writing of humanizing the masses (in spite of their dehumanization by capitalist production). In effect, he is suggesting here that politically committed writers relinquish interest in other

fetishistic forms of primitivism in bohemian literary culture and begin to write about some "real" primitives: the working-class (!). Gold's claims, then, create a strong bridge between his interests (in the primitivism of the masses) and larger concerns of primitivism in the work of high modernists like Stein, Eliot, and others.⁴⁰

While editing *New Masses*, Gold often saw parallels between the aesthetic and political avant-garde. While the magazine routinely published work by John Dos Passos, early issues sought to establish modernist credibility by featuring work by William Carlos Williams, D.H. Lawrence, Alfred Kreymborg, and even Ezra Pound. In the magazine's second issue, Gold claimed that "the World Revolution provides a *Weltanschauung* that exfoliates a thousand bold new futurist thoughts in psychology, art, literature, economics, sex," and that he "would like the *New Masses* to be the bridge to this world for American artists and writers, which means it will not be a magazine of Communism, or Moscow, but a magazine of American experiment—only let's not experiment in the minor esthetic cults."⁴¹ This contempt for what Gold calls "the minor esthetic cults" drives his later critique of modernist writers like Stein, but for much of the 1920s he praised modernist little magazines, singling out *transition* and *The Little Review* as positive examples of literary experimentation.⁴² Also during this period, Gold would praise such high modernists as Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce, calling *Ulysses* "one of the few masterpieces of our times."⁴³

It is these complex articulations, and *not* Gold's programmatic comments on "Proletarian Realism," that inform the majority of his creative work, which largely dried up after this second manifesto was published in September of 1930.⁴⁴ During this creative period, Gold maintained an obsession with avant-garde elements in European theater; he

constantly invoked terms like "futurism" and "constructivism," and, in 1925, he published an essay in *The Nation* on Meyerhold's constructivist experiments in the Soviet Union, something Gold called "the neo-primitive stage."⁴⁵ Gold's "futurism" is almost certainly not the proto-fascist futurism of Marinetti, but another way of rendering the concept "avant-garde" (without the implication of "minor esthetic cults"). This obsession with avant-garde theater has, in part, caused at least one critic to link Gold with Bertolt Brecht. Morris Dickstein, in an essay on the legacy of Gold's *Jews Without Money*, suggests that "[w]ith his tough-guy manner and hard-boiled, telegraphic prose, Gold could have become an American Brecht, but he lacked the German playwright's instinct for survival and his canny ironic temperament, which complicated every proletarian pose into an avant-garde gesture."⁴⁶

Though Gold's theatrical work has largely escaped the notice of critics, it establishes some important foundations for thinking about *Jews Without Money* and demonstrates his interest in vernacular language as a central theme. His earliest surviving play, *Money*, was one of three one-act plays produced by the Provincetown Players in the late 1910s. The story of a group of Jewish-American roommates and a bundle of missing savings, this play remains relatively realistic, but at least one linguistic element anticipates Henry Roth's modernist novel *Call It Sleep* (1934). When the roommates are talking among themselves, they speak fluently, but when a police officer arrives to investigate, Abram, the only English speaker in the group, speaks "in singsong, broken Ghetto English."⁴⁷ The policeman speaks an equally thick urban vernacular, explaining his arrival: "Why, a feller just come up to me on my beat and told me there was a lot of Yits down here fighting like cats and dogs."⁴⁸ Gold's shift from the dignified fluency of

the insulated community to the vernacular cacophony of the mixed social environment in *Money* parallels the linguistic and modernist differentiation between speech and internal monologue in Roth's *Call It Sleep*.

But Gold's interest in language and the theater was not limited to stories of the Lower East Side. His most ambitious play, *Hoboken Blues*, first published in the modernist anthology *The American Caravan*, explicitly attempts to combine the constructivist experiments of Meyerhold with a satire of American blackface minstrelsy.⁴⁹ Appearing in 1927, the year of Alan Crosland's *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson, and the year in which the radio program *Amos and Andy* debuted, Gold's play has escaped the attention of critics like Michael Rogin, whose study *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* outlines the complex ways that Jewish performers related to blackface performance.⁵⁰ While *Hoboken Blues* tries to undercut the racist stereotypes associated with blackface, it is rather telling that the only critical essay published on *Hoboken Blues* to this point is subtitled "an experiment that failed."⁵¹ Given the ideologically-inflected stage directions (i.e., "NOTE: No white men appear in this play. Where white men are indicated, they are played by Negroes in white caricature masks"), Gold clearly wanted to write an advanced constructivist play about the nexus of racism and capitalism in the United States.⁵² If anything, *Hoboken Blues* is Gold's most explicit avant-garde gesture, a text focused on the collision of constructivism and black dialect, of European and American forms of linguistic and aesthetic experimentation.

Part of the struggle evident in *Hoboken Blues* is Gold's attempt to wed the racist grotesquerie of the minstrel tradition to a constructivist aesthetic that he describes in detail in "Theater and Revolution": "Machinery has been made a character in the drama.

City rhythms, the blare of modernism, the iron shouts of industrialism, these are actors. Paradox is an honored guest at the feast. Vitality and youth and courage are Three Graces. And futurism is the fantastic godmother of this swarm of new theaters in Russia; futurism, the cult of a few odd persons in New York."⁵³ The desire to unite the popular form of the minstrel show with constructivism, clearly seen as an elitist "cult of a few odd persons in New York," encounters further problems with Gold's insistence on presenting his vernacular characters as less sympathetic and more grotesque in the fashion of the German Expressionist drama of the turn of the century. As Alan Wald writes, "Gold's clumsy efforts at Black dialect and his depiction of African American stereotypes in *Hoboken Blues* seem somewhat inexplicable in the context of Gold's militant antiracism... What seems likely is that Gold was attempting to recreate Black urban culture with the same humor and earthiness with which he was depicting Jewish ghetto culture in his East Side novel; but the effort failed due to his lack of intimate familiarity with the materials and his primary focus on producing a Futurist spectacle."⁵⁴ Clearly, constructivism valued paradox, but Gold's literary talents were stretched beyond a breaking point in attempting to stuff all of these paradoxes into a single theatrical production.

With the contradictions of Gold's ambitious but failed constructivist-expressionist theatrical experiments in mind, the complexities of his most lasting work, *Jews Without Money*, should become a bit more understandable. Often cited as one of the pioneering examples of the proletarian novel, *Jews Without Money* resists many of the generic standards of this genre (strikes, conversion narratives, etc.), limiting its most explicit political engagement to the final pages. As a result, the text was lauded by notorious anti-

leftist critic H.L. Mencken as “one of the most eloquent stories that the American press has disgorged in many a moon,” and certain sections were published in Mencken’s *American Mercury* (as well as in Gold’s own *New Masses*) while Gold worked on the book through the 1920s.⁵⁵ In 1965, the book was even reprinted without the last half-page, where the fictional narrator “Michael” undergoes a political radicalization and praises the “workers’ Revolution” as “the true Messiah.”⁵⁶

But Michael’s conversion at the book’s conclusion has struck many critics as an afterthought to a narrative that nostalgically revels in the grotesquerie of the vernacular culture and language of New York’s Lower East Side. Though the search for a messiah dominates the text and provides thematic coherence, the stylistic shift of this final chapter makes it, at least at the textual level, incongruous. While critics have characterized this novel as a “proletarian fictional autobiography” or a “ghetto or tenement pastoral,” the strange, lingering nostalgia in Gold’s text seems to push against any such cut-and-dried reading of the politics of the text.⁵⁷ With its endless delay of radicalization in favor of nostalgia, the text refuses an exclusively political reading; with its harsh and grotesque character types, it never quite seems as comfortably pastoral as Michael Denning suggests. *Jews Without Money*, then, is stuck between the nostalgic memoir and the depiction of the brutalities of capitalism, never quite comfortable with either. It is for this reason that reading this text through Gold’s earlier experiments—especially *Hoboken Blues*—can open up new avenues for understanding Gold’s project.

Because one of Gold’s primary aesthetic strategies throughout the 1920s was of a kind of European expressionism blended with the vernacular and dialect modes of the minstrel tradition (as in *Hoboken Blues*), it is possible to see *Jews Without Money* as an

extension of this project, to see it, in effect, as a kind of vernacular expressionism, rooted in the language and culture of the Lower East Side, but with an emphasis on the grotesque that keeps the fictionalized memoir in a realm of aesthetics that seem frequently out of line with his later descriptions of "Proletarian Realism." *Jews Without Money*, with its monstrous figures, its brutal and horrific descriptions of poverty, all accompanied by Howard Simon's expressionist woodcuts, takes a strange turn away from the mode of Yeziarska (as well as from Cahan and Antin). If Yeziarska's stories turn ghetto life into fairy tales of linguistic self-construction, Gold's major work moves in the opposite direction, emphasizing community languages over individuals and turning every experience into a kind of grotesque nightmare.

Gold's characters, while not imbued with the same hybrid speech as those in Yeziarska's work, still speak what the narrator calls "Jewish talk."⁵⁸ In this way, he emphasizes the communal language of the East Side ghetto, rejecting the individualist, assimilationist project that Yeziarska demonstrates in so many of her texts. In many spots this social vernacular is implicit, though Gold does import some Yiddish expressions into the text. In one of *Jews Without Money*'s most kaleidoscopic moments, Gold merges suffering, grotesquerie, and talk: "The whole tenement was talking and eating its supper. The broken talk came through the airshaft window. The profound bass of the East Side traffic lay under this talk. Talk. Talk. Rattle of supper dishes, whining of babies, yowling of cats; counterpoint of men, women and children talking as if their hearts would break. Talk. Jewish talk" (*JWM* 113). Later, this talk becomes more explicitly sutured to a long history of suffering; the talk itself assumes an immense, mythical proportion: "Then talk, talk, talk again. Jewish talk. Hot, sweaty, winey talk. A sweatshop holiday. Egypt's

slaves around a campfire in the shadow of the pyramids. They drank wine even then. Thousands of years ago. And talked as now. The Bible records it. And their hearts were eased by it. And Moscovitz played the Babylonian harp" (*JWM* 116).

The "broken talk" of the Jewish community mingles with a cacophony of other broken sounds, but also speaks to a long legacy of Jewish social history.⁵⁹ This language, more described than demonstrated, is to a certain degree like Woolf's description of Lardner's work, "twisted at the root." While earlier Jewish-American novelists and memoirists emphasized the individual's struggle to adapt to the new American realities, often using language acquisition to thematize this transition, Gold's interest is not in the language learning of his central character, but in the linguistic community he inhabits, the world of "Jewish talk." This "hot, sweaty, winey talk" becomes "a sweatshop holiday," highlighting the ways in which their vernacular language is the only respite these figures have from the sufferings of capitalist oppression. That the community bands together, telling ancient stories in an ancient language implies a kind of linguistic wholeness that eludes many of the vernacular modernists.

But Gold's emphasis on the "brokenness" of the language, as well as the broken hearts the "Jewish talk" describes, complicates this notion of coherence; as with the characters of Yeziarska and Cahan, the social protagonist of this scene in *Jews Without Money* inhabits a space that is fundamentally shattered, fractured, and incoherent. The incomprehensible wailing (of men, women, children, and even animals) drifting in the window helps to politicize the vernacular language of the novel, as it becomes the only means of expression in a world where the economic structures continue to close in on families. Whereas Yeziarska's protagonists escape poverty through education and self-

transformation, Gold's characters—for the majority of the novel, at least—can only emit a collective vernacular wail into the wilderness.

The broken nature of the language of *Jews Without Money* provides a central means of understanding the novel's odd structure. Gold worked on this book through much of the late 1920s, routinely publishing excerpts from it subtitled "From A Book of East Side Memoirs" in *New Masses*. Though the first of these was titled "Jews Without Money," this piece does not begin the book-length version. The excerpts operate partially as a serial (since they appeared every couple of months from June 1928 through the book's publication in 1930), but they operate according to a logic much more associative than serial or realist. Serial narratives imply continuity and plot-driven narration, while the memories published here operate in more impressionistic ways. In *Jews Without Money*, memories come back to the narrator in profound ways, and are figured as impressions, rather than as parts of a highly-structured realist narrative along the lines of Antin or Cahan's work. Indeed, the novel lacks a central storyline: memory after memory is piled up, and the narrator Michael's Communist conversion at the novel's conclusion is the only example of a forward-moving narrative device.

More a collection of memories than a single narrative thread, Gold's text refuses the developmental mode of the *Bildungsroman*—popular with both realists Cahan and Antin and vernacular modernist Yezierska—in favor of a set of associative memories organized around the poetic structures of remembrance. He foregrounds this strategy in lines like, "I can see, in the newsreel of memory, the scene on our roof when I first heard this story" (*JWM* 84). His structures follow not the realist models of linear narration, but a technique of impressionistic symbols reminiscent of Proust.⁶⁰ For example, Gold

explicitly references seasons (summer/winter in chapters four and nineteen) while focusing on recursive moments and figures. The narrator Michael's friend Joey Cohen dies in a horrible street car accident early in the text but returns later on without any cue, signaling that the text is not following conventional narrative time. Like the "Jewish talk," the realist narrative assumptions of the Jewish-American memoir have also been "broken" in *Jews Without Money*.

But this brokenness assumes a new, poetic form in *Jews Without Money*, as Gold alternates moments of realist narrative and modernist memory with the elevated language of Whitman's poetry. Throughout the text, Gold also inserts Whitmanesque lists to provide an accumulative impact of impressions. In the opening pages, he writes

People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried.

A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang.

At the livery stable coach drivers lounged on a bench. They hee-hawed with laughter, they guzzled cans of beer.

Pimps, gamblers and red-nosed bums; peanut politicians, pugilists in sweaters; tinhorn sports and tall longshoremen in overalls. An endless pageant of East Side life passed through the wicker doors of Jake Wolf's saloon. (*JWM* 13-14)

Here, individual images merge into an overall impression of poverty, emphasizing the dark, the grotesque, and the repulsive aspects of the environment while retaining a sense of nostalgia. This is not Whitman's colorful and dynamic humanism of the streets, but a kind of grotesque vernacular, full of an "endless pageant" of hee-hawing and beer-guzzling. While other Jewish-American writers emphasize the ability of their protagonists to emerge from the poverty of their surroundings, Gold revels in the grotesquerie of his childhood: not surprising,

since he routinely listed Sherwood Anderson as one of the most important writers of the 1920s.

Still, Gold's interest in the grotesque does not always diminish the romance of his memories. At one point, again channeling Whitman, he writes a kind of ode to the ugliness of his childhood home: "Shabby old ground, ripped like a battlefield by workers' picks and shovels, little garbage dump lying forgotten in the midst of tall tenements, O home of all the twisted junk, rusty baby carriages, lumber, bottles, boxes, moldy pants and dead cats of the neighborhood—every one spat and held the nostrils when passing you. But in my mind you still blaze in the halo of childish romance. No place will ever seem as wonderful again" (*JWM* 46). In Gold's text, the "home of all the twisted junk" is also the home of "childish romance"—the two are closely intertwined in ways that make the nostalgic grotesque and the grotesque nostalgic.⁶¹ Unlike Yezierska, whose characters are frequently compelled to transform their domestic circumstances into some semblance of bourgeois propriety (see, for example, the obsession with "Soap and Water"), Gold's narrator revels in exposing every obscene and disturbing element of his childhood home. He understands the Lower East Side "as a jungle, where wild beasts prowled, and toadstools grew in a poisoned soil—perverts, cokefiends, kidnapers, firebugs, Jack the Rippers," and as "a spectral place, a chamber of hell, hot and poisoned by hundreds of gas flames. It was suffocating with the stink of chemicals" (*JWM* 60, 306).

These descriptions, along with the woodcuts by Howard Simon, help identify *Jews Without Money* as an unabashedly expressionist text—one explicitly connected to Gold's avant-garde theater of the 1920s (including *Hoboken Blues*).⁶² This expressionism, melded with the interest in vernacular language (the "hot, sweaty, winey

talk" of his Jewish family and friends), situates Gold in an anti-realist mode, one that distorts representation, both linguistically and impressionistically, and results in a kind of "vernacular expressionism." Certainly, Gold's Lower East Side upbringing contained many of these horrors, but Gold, with this peculiar almost anti-realist aesthetic, deviates from the conventions of Jewish-American memoir writing through the extreme nature of his descriptions. For example, Fyfka the Miser, a boarder in the narrator's family's apartment, becomes a "thing," "this yellow somnambulist, this nightmare bred of poverty; this maggot-yellow dark ape with twisted arm and bright, peering, melancholy eyes; human garbage can of horror" (*JWM* 76). Calling Fyfka a "thing," a "maggot-yellow dark ape," and a "human garbage can of horror" explicitly hearkens back to Gold's youthful injunction to discover the primitive not in the exotic, but within the working class. It also seems to contrast strongly with one of his later injunctions about "Proletarian Realism": "Away with drabness, the bourgeois notion that the Worker's life is sordid, the slummer's disgust and feeling of futility. There is horror and drabness in the Worker's life; and we will portray it; but we know this is not the last word; we know that this manure heap is the hope of the future" (*LA* 207).⁶³ There seems little hope for Fyfka or for any of the characters within Gold's text; for this reason the messianic ending has often been read as incongruous to the rest of *Jews Without Money*.

In Gold's varied output, it is possible to see a nexus of experimental European forms (constructivism and expressionism), vernacular language (minstrel dialect and "Jewish talk"), political commitment, and an increasing interest in the grotesque depiction of urban environments. Gold's literary career during the 1920s suggests something of a failed struggle to wrestle these competing forms into some kind of

coherence. However, Gold's work demonstrates how wide the net for the representational mode of vernacular modernism might be extended. Gold's work is certainly a break with the realist traditions of Cahan and Antin, but his emphasis on the grotesque and violent separates him from Yezierska and places him far closer to another genre experiencing a vernacular modernist revolution in the 1920s: hard-boiled crime fiction, with its mean streets, thieves' cant, and cast of grotesque street figures.

¹ Louis Wirth, *The Ghetto* (1928, repr. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1956), 36.

² Ferraro, "Avant-Garde Ethnics," in *The Future of American Modernism: Ethnic Writing Between the Wars*, ed. William Boelhower (Amsterdam: Free UP, 1990), 3-4.

³ For early recordings see the recent compilation of early wax cylinder recordings *Jewface* (Reboot Stereophonic, 2006). The Edison Company produced two well-known films documenting New York's East Side Jewish Community: *Move On* (1903), depicting a Jewish merchant being accosted by a policeman, and *New York City Ghetto Fish Market* (1903), showing a panorama of an Essex Street market.

⁴ Amanda Adams's unpublished talk "The Voice of the Master: Henry James and 'The Question of Our Speech'," given at the Modern Language Association's Annual Meeting in 2007, was particularly instructive on this latter point.

⁵ For more information, see Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk*.

⁶ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912, repr. New York: Penguin, 1997), 41.

⁷ Abraham Cahan, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1896), 3.

⁸ Ferraro, "Avant-Garde Ethnics," 3.

⁹ Antin, 1.

¹⁰ Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917, repr. New York: Penguin, 1993), 134.

¹¹ Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1910), 22.

¹² Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford UP, 1986), 247. Sollors follows with a fascinating discussion of Yiddish language modernism.

¹³ Sollors, 258.

¹⁴ Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925; repr. New York: Persea Books, 2003), 67.

¹⁵ Anzia Yezierska, *How I Found America: Collected Stories of Anzia Yezierska* (New York: Persea Books, 1991), 132. Hereafter, the collection will be cited in text as *HIFA*.

¹⁶ A number of other texts of working women's experience appeared at this moment as well: Agnes Smedley, *Daughter of Earth* (1929, repr. 1973), Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (written in the 1930s, published in 1974), Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (published as stories 1935-1945, as a novel 1978).

¹⁷ Mary V. Dearborn, "Anzia Yezierska and the Making of an Ethnic American Self," in *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 108.

¹⁸ Allen Guttman, *The Jewish Writer in America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971), 33.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ See Thomas Ferraro, "Avant-Garde Ethnics," in *The Future of American Modernism: Ethnic Writing Between the Wars*, ed. William Boelhower (Amsterdam: Free UP, 1990), 1-31.

²¹ It is difficult to argue that Stein's poetics influenced Yezierska, but, when traveling to Paris after her well-documented Hollywood debacle, Yezierska sought out writing advice from Stein. According to her biographer and daughter, Louise Levitas Hendricksen, Stein told Yezierska, anxious about how to continue writing, "Why worry? Nobody knows how writing is written, the writers least of all!" See Louise Levitas Hendricksen, *Anzia Yezierska: A Writer's Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1988), 195.

²² Ruth Bienstock Anolik, "'All Words, Words, About Words': Linguistic Journey and the Transformation in Anzia Yezierska's *The Bread-Givers*," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 21 (2002), 12-23.

²³ See Lori Harrison-Kahan, "'Drunk With the Fiery Rhythms of Jazz': Anzia Yezierska, Hybridity, and the Harlem Renaissance," *Modern Fiction Studies* 51.2 (Summer 2005), 415-436; and Philippe Codde, "'A Willing Embrace of the Shadow': Cultural and Textual Hybridity in Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers*," in *"Lost on the Map of the World": Jewish-American Women's Quest for Home in Essays and Memoirs, 1890-Present*, ed. Phillipa Kafka (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 7-21.

²⁴ Delia Caparoso Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yezierska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 4.

²⁵ Sophie also appears as the fledgling writer in the story "My Own People" from *Hungry Hearts*.

²⁶ Many critics have discussed the importance of the Yezierska-Dewey relationship. The most comprehensive take on this is Mary V. Dearborn, *Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey* (New York: Free Press, 1988).

²⁷ The class's critique of Sophie's writing also suggests an affinity with Romanticism, but it is important to remember how closely modernism was linked to the Romantics in early texts like Wilson's *Axel's Castle*.

²⁸ Anzia Yezierska, *Hungry Hearts* (1920, repr. New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 62. Hereafter, the collection will be cited in text as *HH*.

²⁹ For an excellent discussion of the film adaptation, see Konzett, 56-58.

³⁰ Some characters also cross not only boundaries within the collection, but pass into other books entirely, suggesting that Yezierska's fictional version of the Lower East Side is, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, larger than any individual work.

³¹ Importantly, this critique turns in on itself in what Zaborowska calls the "Hollywood-style reward featuring love and reconciliation with Sara's ailing and widowed father." See Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1995), 149. Ferraro notes, "What is most provocative about Yezierska's interrogation is not that she identifies a psychologically operative patriarchy, but that she shows how a specifically Jewish and feminine socialization allows patriarchy to catch up with even the most rebellious of daughters." See *Ethnic Passages*, 83.

³² Anzia Yezierska, *Bread Givers* (1925, repr. New York: Persea Books, 2003), 278. Hereafter, the novel will be cited in text as *BG*.

³³ Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 99.

³⁴ Michael Gold, "Let It Be Really New!" *New Masses* 1.2 (June 1926), 20.

³⁵ A certain hostility toward aestheticism characterized Gold's early 1920s editorship of *The Liberator*, as well. For an interesting discussion of this, see Adam McKible, "'Life is real and life is earnest': Mike Gold, Claude McKay, and the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven," in *Little Magazines and Modernism: New Approaches*, eds. Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 197-213.

³⁶ Michael Gold, *Change the World!* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 23. Hereafter cited in text as *CTW*.

³⁷ Michael Folsom, ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 160. Hereafter cited in text as *LA*.

³⁸ The Provincetown Players produced three one-act plays early in his career—*Ivan's Homecoming* and *Down the Airshaft* (both 1917) as well as *Money* (1920, anthologized in 1929). Gold also had *La Fiesta: A Comedy of the Mexican Revolution in Three Acts and a Prologue* produced by a substantially different version of the Provincetown Players in 1929, after the play was banned in Boston. *Ivan's Homecoming* and *Down the Airshaft* are lost, though Alan Wald refers to a Yale University doctoral dissertation (by Robert Sarlos) that provides plot summaries of them. See Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2002), 345n45. *Money* has seen two publications (both under Gold's name, even though the play was performed under the name Irwin Granich). One is a Samuel French edition; the other is in Barrett H. Clark and Thomas R. Cook's 1929 volume *One-Act Plays*. *La Fiesta* is held (in two typescript versions) at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

³⁹ Günther Berghaus, *Theater, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 59-62.

⁴⁰ See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*.

⁴¹ Gold, "Let It Be Really New!", 20, 26.

Chapter Two: "I didn't understand the words"

⁴² See Michael Gold, "3 Schools of U.S. Writing," *New Masses* 4.4 (September 1928), 13-14 and Michael Gold, "Notes on Art, Life, Crap-Shooting, Etc.," *New Masses* 5.4 (September 1929), 10-12.

⁴³ Michael Gold, "Floyd Dell Resigns," *New Masses* 5.2 (July 1929), 10.

⁴⁴ Michael Gold, "Notes of the Month," *New Masses* 6.4 (September 1930), 3-5.

⁴⁵ Michael Gold, "Theater and Revolution," *The Nation* 121 (11 November 1925), 536. For a discussion of constructivism, a mode that "purged the theatre of its naturalistic clutter and aesthetic ornaments," see Berghaus, 193.

⁴⁶ Morris Dickstein, "Hallucinating the Past: *Jews Without Money* Revisited," *Grand Street* 9.2 (Winter 1990), 158.

⁴⁷ Michael Gold, *Money in One-Act Plays*, ed. Barrett H. Clark and Thomas R. Cook (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1929), 227.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 227-228.

⁴⁹ The table of contents of this edition of *The American Caravan* includes, in addition to a number of names that have disappeared from most literary histories, an enormous number of major American modernist writers of the era: Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, William Carlos Williams, Edmund Wilson, John Dos Passos, Yvor Winters, Gertrude Stein, Louise Bogan, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Hart Crane, and Eugene O'Neill.

⁵⁰ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996). Absolutely essential to any understanding of the phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy is Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

⁵¹ Richard Tuerk, "Michael Gold's *Hoboken Blues*: An Experiment That Failed," *MELUS* 20.4 (Winter 1995), 3-15. This essay contains an excellent history of the (failed) production of Gold's drama in 1928. For more production history, see also Mardi Valgema, *Accelerated Grimace: Expressionism in the American Drama of the 1920s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1972), 88.

⁵² Michael Gold, *Hoboken Blues* in *The American Caravan: A Yearbook on American Literature*, ed. Van Wyck Brooks et al. (New York: The Literary Guild of America, 1927), 549. This particular stage direction was not followed in the New Playwrights Theatre production of *Hoboken Blues* and white actors played black characters in blackface, which some critics cite as a reason the play fared so poorly. In *New Masses*, John Dos Passos (whose *Airways, Inc.* appeared in the same season), wrote of *Hoboken Blues* that "nobody would take for granted the rather childish but unpretentious blackface minstrelshow method of presentation." See John Dos Passos, "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" *New Masses* 5.3 (August 1929), 13.

⁵³ Gold, "Theater and Revolution," 536.

⁵⁴ Wald, 53-54.

⁵⁵ H.L. Mencken, "The Life of the Poor," *The American Mercury* 19 (March 1930), 381.

⁵⁶ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (1930, repr. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 309.

⁵⁷ On the "proletarian fictional autobiography," see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 284-320. On "ghetto or tenement pastoral," see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), 230-258.

⁵⁸ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (1930, repr. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004), 113. Hereafter cited in text as *JWM*.

⁵⁹ The notion of "broken talk" also connects quite strongly to the concerns of African-American writers during the 1920s in the debates over the politics of dialect writing. See Chapter Four for a discussion of these debates.

⁶⁰ Ironically, the *New Masses* review of Gold's first collection of fiction and poetry, *120 Million*, appeared on the same page of the March 1929 issue of the magazine alongside a review of a translation of Proust's *Swann's Way*.

⁶¹ Of course, this image recalls other modernist images of decay and destruction, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the valley of ashes in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

⁶² Even the excerpts of Gold's novel published in *New Masses* were accompanied by expressionist-inspired artwork. Howard Simon's woodcuts for *Jews Without Money* evoke the expressionist work of German artist Kathe Kollwitz and work as direct references to the woodcuts in Louis Wirth's 1928 sociological study *The Ghetto*. In *The Ghetto* the woodcuts by Todros Geller work as modernist compositions (particularly "Holy

Emissary" and "Street Musicians"), but they also serve to elevate their subject with a degree of dignity. Simon's woodcuts work with Gold's text against any kind of sentimental description of poverty. In two of the woodcuts, women figure prominently in the foreground, but in a grotesque fashion. One of these (opposite page 57) seems linked to the short descriptive paragraph: "In the maelstrom of wagons, men, pushcarts, street cars, dogs and East Side garbage, the mothers calmly wheeled baby carriages. They stopped in the shade of the Elevated trains, to suckle their babies with big sweaty breasts" (*JWM* 57). In another woodcut (opposite page 176), Simon foregrounds a woman being groped from behind by a grim-looking man while a child looks on in shock. Commercial transactions occur in the background among figures apparently unconcerned with the behavior of the couple in the foreground. Though this image appears opposite Gold's description of the appearance of gypsies on the East Side, the image itself does not seem to have any direct reference to a passage in Gold's text. The grotesque sexuality here enhances the suggestions of the added strangeness that the gypsies bring to the neighborhood.

⁶³ Of course, the majority of characters in *Jews Without Money* are *not* workers in any traditional Marxian sense; they are much closer to the *lumpenproletariat*. Still, Gold's categories do not ever seem to be as fast and loose as this (especially as concerns his upbringing on the East Side), so the "messiah" of Communism is seen as not only salvation for conventional workers, but also for the denizens of this neighborhood.

CHAPTER THREE

"Say It With Lead":

Carroll John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, and the Modernist Detective

It is very curious but the detective story which is you might say the only really modern novel form that has come into existence gets rid of human nature by having the man dead to begin with the hero is dead to begin with and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins.

Gertrude Stein, "What are Master-pieces and Why are There So Few of Them" (1935)¹

At the opening of his seminal essay on detective fiction, "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944), Raymond Chandler claims that "fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic."² His essay continues by laying out the distinction between the English school of detective fiction and the American, or hard-boiled school. Joseph T. Shaw, influential editor of pulp magazine *Black Mask*, where the hard-boiled style was born, had much the same thing to say about hard-boiled fiction and realism in the introduction to his retrospective anthology *The Hard-Boiled Omnibus* (1946): "These writers observed the cardinal principle in creating the illusion of reality; they did not make their characters act and talk tough; they allowed them to. They gave the stories over to their characters, and kept themselves off the stage, as every writer of fiction should."³ At some level, Chandler's and Shaw's point in these texts is to argue for the heightened realism (in content, at least) of hard-boiled detective writers. Chandler contrasts his (and Dashiell Hammett's) "realistic" fiction with that of the so-called Golden Age detective writers, whose work he feminizes as domestic and overly genteel.⁴ In a sense, these claims to realism in hard-boiled fiction are much like those claims made by the realists of the late nineteenth century in America.

However, the distinctions Chandler, Shaw, and others have made about what constitutes realism are problematic. In his study *The Real Thing: Imitation and*

Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (1989), Miles Orvell has compellingly argued that, when realist writers argued for the depiction of "life not literature...what they in fact meant was blood, sex, money, grime, garbage, immigrants, and killing snowstorms—a recognition of experience previously excluded from polite literature."⁵ But these new, harsher elements—made into expressionist grotesques by twentieth-century writers like Michael Gold—were just as stylized in the realist writing of the nineteenth century. This peculiar definition of gritty reality also appears in Chandler's paean to Hammett: "Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley...He wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street."⁶ Chandler's claims could be extended to the entire hard-boiled school of writers, all of whom foregrounded violence and "gave murder back to the kind of people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse."⁷ For Chandler, as for the nineteenth-century American realists and naturalists, the presentation of the "seamy side of things" equals realism. To a degree, if indeed "fiction in any form has always intended to be realistic," then the true test of realism, according to Chandler, is in that fiction's content more than in its style or aesthetic.

Given the concerns of "You've Got to Be Modernistic," such a simple characterization of "realism" seems problematic. Is this an accurate term for what Hammett and other hard-boiled writers were attempting? Aesthetically speaking, the term seems misapplied. After all, there is little resemblance between the language and style of the hard-boiled writers and the work of William Dean Howells or Henry James. Instead,

the pulp writers seem to forge a new mode of writing, one where language itself maintains a harsh relationship to the world it describes, where signifiers and signifieds do not cleanly line up, and where genteel language becomes a sign of social corruption. This hard-boiled style, full of slang and grotesque swaths of violent imagery, bears striking resemblance to the experimental language and form in modernist writing. Indeed, the obsessive realism of the detective story begins to fracture with the emergence of the hard-boiled detective.⁸ Far from being an example of aesthetic realism, this new movement exhibits important stylistic and narratological techniques that call into question the aesthetic and epistemological assumptions of realism and classical detective fiction; this questioning serves as another vital example of vernacular modernism.

"The ensuing crime, or its threat, is incidental": Detecting Modernism in *Black Mask*

[W]e have an idea that detective fiction as we view it has only commenced to be developed. As a matter of fact, we expect the greatest and most noteworthy development in this particular field of literature than will be seen in any other. All other fields have been worked and overworked. This, as we visualize it, has been barely scratched.

"The Aim of *Black Mask*" (1927)⁹

Aficionados of detective fiction have no lack of histories of this genre, which is one of the most well-documented of any other example of popular fiction.¹⁰ As a result, its history is a largely settled affair: beginning with the Dupin stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the genre moves through the work of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, into the Golden Age writers of the early twentieth century, and finally arrives at the hard-boiled style of the 1920s and 1930s, first popularized in the pulp magazine *Black Mask*. The story of detective fiction is insulated; as a result, the genre exhibits a coherent developmental

model. What remains strange is the inability of these genealogies to engage or reflect on any writing outside the genre, especially considering the investment many canonical figures placed in both the reading and writing of detective and crime fiction. Despite the fact that the genre virtually originates with the work of Poe, a major figure in the American literary canon, the histories of literary fiction and of detective fiction rarely cross paths. The fact is, however, that the popularity of detective fiction was constantly exerting an influence on fiction within the canon, and developments in canonical fiction were themselves showing up in the work of mystery writers. From Mark Twain (*Pudd'nhead Wilson* [1894]) to Gertrude Stein (*Blood on the Dining-Room Floor* [1933]) to William Faulkner (*Intruder in the Dust* [1948] and *Knight's Gambit* [1949]), canonical writers produced many novels and stories that explicitly drew on the conventions of detective and crime writing. At the same time, many concepts present in the world of "literary" fiction appeared in popular detective fiction: Sherlock Holmes's *fin de siècle* decadence, Philo Vance's appreciation of psychoanalysis and modernist art, the "literary" poet and writer characters of Hammett's stories and novels.¹¹ Still, the high/low dichotomy separating highbrow fiction from genre fiction was so strongly maintained that the most popular American detective novelist of the 1920s, the former literary editor and expert on modernist art Willard Huntington Wright (who wrote under the pseudonym S.S. Van Dine), reflected on his popular success in a short autobiographical piece entitled *I Used to Be a Highbrow, But Look at Me Now* (1929).¹²

Van Dine's pithy title suggests an inability to "look at" the detective writer as anything but lowbrow, and this particular dichotomy remains normalized in the scholarship to this point. While critics generally conceive of "literary" fiction as

exhibiting a particular genealogy that moves from romanticism through realism, naturalism, and modernism, historians of the detective and crime story see shifts of a different nature. Howard Haycraft's early construction of detective fiction history moves from "the Romantic Era" through "The Golden Age" and "The Moderns" (though at times his distinction between the Golden Age and the Moderns is difficult to discern). While Julian Symons's history is a bit more nuanced, his categories are much the same. John G. Cawelti collapses these distinctions into two competing strands: the classical detective story and the hard-boiled detective story. Yet none of these critics address the larger literary context in which these writers were publishing. From the side-by-side magazine publication of writers like Van Dine and Sinclair Lewis in *Cosmopolitan* to the Modern Library publication of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), detective fiction has always demonstrated a strong affinity with the larger world of literary fiction. When some connection is noted by critics, their tendency is to identify one or two of the most "literary" figures from the crime fiction canon (usually Hammett, Chandler or James M. Cain) and elevate them to the realm of the literary, separating the proverbial wheat from the chaff much like Edmund Wilson did in his 1945 essay "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?"¹³ To see a small handful of writers as exemplary and deserving of literary attention is also to miss some of the fundamental interrelationships between detective fiction and the larger trends of literary history.

At its very root, detective fiction is dependent on two competing nineteenth-century literary forms: realism and romanticism. For classical (or ratiocinative) detective fiction to function properly, the writer must insert a Romantic individual into a Realist world.¹⁴ The protagonist is generally the exemplary model of reason, but, as in the case of

Dupin, Holmes, and others in the same vein, the application of reason appears so highly idiosyncratic that its results remain difficult to replicate. This romantic figure (in Poe) becomes the figure of late Victorian decadence (in Doyle) and frequently retains her/his decadent sensibilities (though modifying them with modernist tastes) in the work of classical detective writers of the 1920s and beyond.¹⁵ While the characterization is firmly Romantic, the fictional world of the classical detective story exemplifies the emerging late nineteenth-century standards of American Realism. In these stories, the world is finally a legible environment, even if the reader may need the mediator of the amateur genius to demonstrate the legibility of this world and to prove that it is—in spite of any initial doubts—coherent, representable, and comprehensible.¹⁶ William W. Stowe has called the classical detective's approach to detection a "practical semiotics," in which the crime provides a series of signifieds that must be properly decoded.¹⁷ As a result, detective and mystery writers in the classical mode have consistently been obsessed with the notion of "fair play," a concept dependent on the ideas espoused by realism: the environment must be accurately described by a disinterested third party so that the reader will have an equal opportunity to solve the mystery.¹⁸ Often, the classical detective writer uses a Watson character, who functions as a stand-in for the reader and whose sensibilities (in contrast to the detective) are anything but exemplary; at other times, the stories are told in the third person to preserve objectivity.¹⁹

The emergence of the hard-boiled detective story in the early 1920s, then, changes far more than just the subject matter (as Chandler argues). This new form throws the most basic elements of the classical detective story into doubt. Here, the detective does not complete his job by demonstrating a superior intellect. His (and it is almost always "his")

manner of investigation is frequently predicated on a trial-and-error model. In looking at a number of these texts, it becomes clear why such an approach is necessary: the world is not legible according to the principles of realist fiction. Networks and associations are not only better hidden, but they also extend far beyond the reaches of the English country house that provides the setting for so many classic mysteries. Crimes in the hard-boiled story are rarely isolated incidents of violence in a world of order. Rather, they often seem to be mere symptoms of a much larger social disease of twentieth-century crime. Murders and other violent acts come and go, as do solutions. But the focus is less frequently on resolution as it is on the survival of the detective in a continually hostile and unpredictable environment. Stowe contrasts the "practical semiotics" of the classical detective story with the hard-boiled "hermeneutical interpreter," whose "interpretative process [is] a dialogic investigation rather than the application of a method."²⁰

Far from exhibiting the facility with reason seen in figures like Dupin and Holmes, the hard-boiled detective's encounter with the world is usually physical and often violent. In opposition to the privileged position of rational observer of realistic details that the classical detective inhabits, "the hard-boiled story...typically implicates the detective in the crime from the very beginning," suggesting that the boundaries between subject and object have become unstable in the twentieth century.²¹ As the subjectivity of the detective gets closer and closer to the world he is investigating, the details of that world begin to appear more difficult to discern objectively and the description of them frequently lapses into the grotesque. Paramount in the hard-boiled story is the detective's active engagement with the world, both through his physical

action and through his linguistic and narratological control over how the story is experienced.

Detectives whose primary means of investigation involved action over cognition were not new to mystery fiction readers of the 1920s. While the late nineteenth-century detective is most frequently assumed to be cast in the same mold as Sherlock Holmes, one American detective made far more appearances than Holmes, beginning in 1886 (a year before Doyle created Holmes): Nick Carter, "Master Detective." Carter was a series character whose adventures were imagined by a host of in-house writers for dime-novel publishers Street & Smith. Carter's exploits were far more like the melodramatic adventure tales that populated dime novels throughout the late nineteenth-century than the measured, ratiocinative tales of Holmes. Carter, a master of disguises known as "the little giant" to the underworld, tracks criminals through late Victorian New York City, in stories where he is frequently captured and escapes with an expert use of timing and violence.²² Like the later hard-boiled figures, Carter infiltrates the criminal underworld, is occasionally knocked out ("without any warning whatsoever, he received a violent blow on the head and sank senseless to the deck"), and fights his way out of trouble.²³ Still, Carter's relationship to crime is that of the incredibly talented amateur. Like Holmes and Dupin, Carter is consulted by the police after they have exhausted all possibilities in attempting to solve a particularly perplexing crime. His manner—when not in disguise—suggests all the refined sensibilities of a late Victorian gentleman, and, like a host of dime-novel protagonists, his speech exemplifies a kind of natural aristocracy.²⁴ Nick Carter's city is certainly a dangerous one, but with the proper manipulation of costume, language, and violence, the detective will solve the crime.

In transforming detective fiction from its ratiocinative coldness, the hard-boiled writers looked back to these action-packed adventure novels, but began to subvert their realist assumptions with a variety of new strategies that paralleled the aesthetic shifts of modernism. As with the other writers discussed in this study, many of the thematic and topical concerns were quite contemporary: the new sexual codes and gender roles of the "Jazz Age"; the increasing fascination with twentieth-century urban spaces; the emphasis on psychology; the complicated relationship to capitalism and other forms of power (gangsterism, fascism, etc.). However, as with other examples of vernacular modernism, the most important transformation in the hard-boiled story is not necessarily the story's content, but how it negotiates its content via narration. As Shaw noted in the introduction to *The Hard-Boiled Omnibus*, "The formula or pattern [of the hard-boiled story] emphasizes character and the problems inherent in human behavior over crime solution. In other words, in this new pattern, character conflict is the main theme; the ensuing crime, or its threat, is incidental."²⁵ The crime itself, with its entire 1920s context, is far less important than how the characters perceive, interact with, and ultimately represent that world. In this sense, the hard-boiled detective story becomes identifiable when its relationship toward the world is much like that of the high modernists—as a form of self-conscious textual mediation of "reality."

A number of critics have gestured toward the idea that the hard-boiled detective story (particularly as exemplified by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler) is itself a form of modernism. In many cases, critics see the hard-boiled style as a kind of watered-down version of the modernism of Ernest Hemingway.²⁶ Fortunately, recent criticism has acknowledged that the emergence of the hard-boiled style in the pages of

Black Mask preceded Hemingway's earliest American publications by over two years, and that hard-boiled mainstays like Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett had each published over twenty stories in *Black Mask* before Hemingway's first undeniably hard-boiled short story, "The Killers," appeared in *Scribner's* in March 1927. Ken Worpole, critic and historian of British working-class reading practices, has a much more nuanced consideration of this relationship, noting that "Hemingway's style itself had developed in a continuous relationship with the 'toughguy' school of thriller writing and could not be separated from it."²⁷ While Hemingway was earning his modernist credentials by typing Gertrude Stein's nearly 1000-page epic *The Making of Americans* (1925), the hard-boiled writers, like other writers in this study, were working through literary transformations in the American vernacular language as most clearly exemplified in the work of Ring Lardner.²⁸ And while Hemingway remained occupied with an obsession to write "one true sentence," the hard-boiled pulp writers churned out thousands of words a day—a practice that is tempting to think of as a commercial form of "automatic writing."²⁹ The approach was certainly different, but analogies drawn between Hemingway and the hard-boiled writers often have as much to do with their similarity in ideological outlook as they do with their minimalist prose style.

Like other forms of popular culture considered by modernist critics, the hard-boiled detective story has received attention from critics wishing to frame this writing as modernist. These critics have not been concerned with the aesthetics of modernism, but, following the general tendency of New Modernist Studies, the wider purview of an amorphous "modernist ideology." Certainly, the hostile urban environment and its accompanying corruption and decay that provide the background for much of hard-boiled

writing replicates the dismal outlook of modernism itself. James Naremore, for example, has claimed that Hammett's *The Glass Key* is "better described as Hammett's *The Waste Land*," primarily because of its ideas about stability and identification in a modern environment, something Eysteinsson describes as a "pessimistic view of modern culture often associated with modernism (which its adversaries sometimes call 'wastelandism')," a worldview not limited to the modernists, nor especially characteristic of all modernist writing.³⁰ Like Naremore, Jon Thompson sees Hammett as the exemplary hard-boiled modernist, not because of his style, but because of "his skepticism toward bourgeois law and order, his philosophical and ideological relativism, the contradictory sexual politics of his fiction, and his rejection of rationality."³¹ What Thompson describes might effectively be characterized as an anti-modern or anti-rational response to modernity, but such a response does not guarantee modernist representation.

Thompson's interest in "relativism" and the "rejection of rationality," however, points toward a more comprehensive means of thinking about the hard-boiled detective story as a form of modernism. In the first place, these terms bring the discussion into the realm of epistemology. The detective story has always depended on certain assumptions about what the characters in the story actually know and how they understand the world around them. Indeed, for the ratiocinative detective, the acquisition of knowledge and proper interpretation of this knowledge are crucial in the solution of the crime. As in modernism, this ability to know (and, especially, to know "for sure") breaks down in the hard-boiled detective story. Nothing in the world of Hammett, Chandler, or other hard-boiled writers is "elementary, my dear Watson." The detective in this genre is placed in the epistemological position of the modernist subject; knowledge is always conditional,

relative and fragmentary, and the subject's function (like that of Poirier's "grim reader" of the high modernist text) must necessarily try to make sense of the incredibly incomplete and often inadequate set of information given to her/him.

When knowledge is fragmented, and the world is illegible by traditional methods of "semiotic" detection, the hard-boiled detective is frequently forced to "stir things up" (as Hammett's Continental Op self-consciously does in *Red Harvest*) in order to gain answers to his questions and move towards what ultimately becomes a provisional solution, at best. This involvement, often violent and usually illegal, breaks down the subject/object division that underscores the classical detective story, the conventions of realism, and the stable division between law and order. The classical detective story insists that the subject (whether narrator or detective) remain distant from the details of the crime; moving evidence, for example, to gain a conviction would be out of the realm of possibility in a Holmes story. In the hard-boiled detective story, such techniques are common. Because the crimes themselves are not neat and insular semiotic puzzles in the hard-boiled story, the detective, like the modernist artist or reader, must remake the text of the world into something that resembles, if only fleetingly, coherence. In other words, the world is never completely comprehensible in objective terms in either the high modernist text or the hard-boiled detective story. In both cases, some aesthetic intervention, whether a thick layer of classical allusions (on par with Eliot and Pound) or the stylized violence of "stirring things up," remains necessary for any proper understanding of contemporary modernity.

In addition to having an active, "hermeneutic" engagement with the world, the hard-boiled detective also occupies the aesthetic subject position in the majority of hard-

boiled fiction. Plenty of texts that preceded the 1920s used violence as a means of engaging the world.³² A fundamental change in this newly formed genre is that the hard-boiled detective becomes the means through which the story is narrated. Rather than using a third-person or removed first-person narrator, these writers largely depend on the compromised subject position of the heavily invested first-person detective. Almost inevitably an unreliable narrator, the hard-boiled detective unfolds the clues (and the accompanying confusion) as he finds them; there is no objective authority or plot device that will reveal the criminal mastermind's nefarious plot at the story's conclusion. Instead, the highly subjective narration of the detective is the reader's only entrée to both the crime and the world in which it occurs. In such a narrative style, the reader *knows* that the information received through this narration is necessarily incomplete, but the epistemological assumptions of the genre—and, I might add, of modernism—recognize that any story, told by anyone, is always incomplete, partial, and highly subjective. Only the hard-boiled detective—or the modernist artist—can, however briefly, bring the chaos of the early twentieth century into focus long enough for there to be any pretense of aesthetic coherence.

This subjectivity is underscored by the stylistic narration of the hard-boiled detective. The major shift in the genre, the one which qualifies it as a form of vernacular modernism, is its insistence on utilizing characters who speak with a combination of bravado, thieves' cant, and professional argot. The language of the detective (or occasionally, criminal) narrator is fundamentally compromised because he is speaking or writing, not in a language that insists on its objectivity, but rather in the corrupted language of the figures he is investigating. This distinction is crucial; in effect, it rejects

the idea that some kind of realist discourse is an appropriate tool for the representation of this environment. As with other vernacular modernists, this language is not objectively descriptive, and rather creates another world, a textual world that exists on its own terms. Hard-boiled figures invent their own phrases and adopt particularly inventive expressions from the underworld to describe the kinds of environments that standard realist aesthetics is incapable of handling.

Despite this celebration of innovative and experimental street language, pulp literature has been closely aligned with the almost machine-like output of dime novels and thus seen as antithetical to the "well-wrought urn" idolized by modernist critics. Michael Denning and others have called the work of dime novelists "anonymous, 'unauthored' discourse," as if the demands of production themselves were so intense that writers were unable to put any stylistic stamp of individuality on their fiction.³³ Much the same could be said of many of the pulp magazines published in the first half of the twentieth century, but countering this trend was the nearly ubiquitous acknowledgement and celebration of authorship on magazine covers that began to dominate the pulps in the mid-1920s. Certainly, the consistent featuring of authors' and characters' names on pulp covers suggested that writers had developed a sense of personal craft and an identifiable style. The sign of authorship, almost a fetish among modernists, was in full effect in the pulps, and writers became known not only for the use of series characters, but also for the employment of unique stylistic tropes. Nowhere was the issue of authorship more prominent than in the pages of *Black Mask*, the pulp magazine which saw the birth of the hard-boiled style and jump started the careers of some of the most well-known names in twentieth-century American detective and crime writing.

Founded in 1920 by H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan as a quick means to recoup losses from *The Smart Set*, *Black Mask* spent its early years searching for an identity among the enormous number of pulp magazines on the marketplace. Of all these magazines, *Black Mask* has received the most attention from critics and scholars of detective fiction, in large part because it produced so many important genre writers. Such criticism has generally focused on the individuals whose names graced the covers with regularity. But while individual writers became known for their own quirks, the magazine as a whole also began to move toward its own self-conscious deployment of style by the late 1920s, under the editorship of Joseph T. Shaw. To a great degree, the critical attention on *Black Mask*, as opposed to many of its contemporaries, is warranted. While other pulp magazines specialized in genres—Romance, Western, Airplane, Mystery, etc.—*Black Mask* took its specialization even more seriously. Over and above specializing in a single genre, *Black Mask* promoted a particular style of detective story, making it the only major pulp magazine to self-consciously address not just what content its stories contained, but *how* those stories would be told.

While this editorial transformation began to take shape when Shaw took over the editorship in November 1926, the most explicit statement of editorial principles appeared a few months later, in June of 1927. "Black Mask has a definite purpose and a definite aim," begins the editorial "The Aim of Black Mask." The piece proceeds to delineate "our requirements of plausibility, of truthfulness in details, of realism in the picturing of thought, the portrayal of action and emotion. All stories submitted to Black Mask are judged and selected with these cardinal requirements in mind, together with the necessity for swift movement in starting and in the development of the plot." The ratiocinative

school of detective fiction is the subtle target of the critique that follows: "The reader of today gets his impression quickly. He judges the character of a man by what he does and not, as formerly, by the author's description of his physical appearance."³⁴ Two major characteristics of the hard-boiled story are referenced here: the privileging of action over objective, realist description and the emphasis on implied interiority in the phrase "realism in the picturing of thought." Although by the late 1940s, *film noir* had all but turned this interiority into a caricature with the man of action and a constant voice-over narration, by mid-1927, hardly more than six months into his editorship, Shaw had identified and articulated the direction that the emerging genre, and his magazine, would take.

By October of 1929, after Shaw had spent nearly three years at the helm of *Black Mask*, the hardback publication of Hammett's work by Knopf made the editorial voice even clearer in its proclamation of a new era in detective fiction. "The day of the Sherlock Holmes type of story is practically ended. Despite the fact that the Fu Manchu and Philo Vance stories have been quite popular, the trend is all toward the serious and realistic presentation in fiction of crime, criminals, the underworld, and police and detective methods as they actually are in real life." Shaw's obsession with depicting the "real" in a magazine that sought to highly stylize the world of crime should not confuse us here; his push toward realism is a kinesthetic one, which rejects the static description of nineteenth-century writing for a "realism" of action and narration. Later in the same piece, he focuses on what particular elements of the "real" he sees as primary: "In few stories are the characters fantastic creations of the writer's imagination. Nearly always they are figures drawn from real life, thinking and speaking and acting as real men think

and speak and act."³⁵ These three emphases, "thinking and speaking and acting," essentially define the world of the hard-boiled. Any encounter with the environment is almost inevitably mediated through a highly individualized thought, speech, or action, as the first-person narration of so many hard-boiled stories makes clear.

Shaw's acknowledgement of the character-driven elements of the hard-boiled style is crucial; not only do we find that "character conflict is the main theme; the ensuing crime, or its threat, is incidental," as Shaw would later write in *The Hard-Boiled Omnibus*, but the characters themselves also become mediators of the fictional reality, frequently implicated in the crimes they are purportedly working to solve.³⁶ Thinking and speaking precede acting, and are the self-conscious medium through which the action is experienced by the reader. Importantly, however, Shaw had clearly identified these changes by the end of the 1920s, at the moment when Hammett and others (such as Carroll John Daly and Raoul Whitfield) began to cross over into the hardback publishing market. The vision for what the detective story could become was itself a product of the 1920s, the decade most clearly associated with modernism.

As Ron Goulart writes in *The Dime Detectives*, "[a]lthough the twenties was a transition period, it was not the heyday of the hard-boiled private eye."³⁷ Goulart's history of the pulps spends the majority of its time on the 1930s, when the hard-boiled transformations of *Black Mask* began to be disseminated over the scores of other detective pulps on the market. Certainly, his estimation is correct; the twenties were a period of experimentation in detective and crime writing, rather than the moment of the full fruition of the hard-boiled style. It is this experimentation, however, that lines up almost uncannily with the transformations of high modernism. There is a great value in

examining the detective stories of the early *Black Mask* stars in order to see exactly how this mode emerged both stylistically and epistemologically. The two most popular *Black Mask* writers in the 1920s were undoubtedly Daly and Hammett. In a 1924 Readers' Poll, the editors hesitated to announce a favorite: "Two authors ran such a close race in the voting that we will not tell which actually got first place. They are Carroll John Daly and Dashiell Hammett."³⁸ A close examination of the 1920s work of these two writers will provide a window into exactly what hard-boiled writers were doing in this watershed transformation of the detective genre, and how this new style of detective and crime writing demonstrates another example of vernacular modernism.

"A halfway house between the dicks and the crooks": Destabilizing realism in the work of Carroll John Daly

I define a hack as a man who refuses as a matter of principle to improve the production apparatus.

Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1934)³⁹

There is nothing subtle about the methods of Race Williams.

Review of *The Amateur Murderer* (1933)⁴⁰

If there is one figure that complicates the purported highbrow aspirations of the hard-boiled detective story, it is Carroll John Daly. If the style had been pioneered by the more or less canonical Hammett, then the genre's history would become a great deal easier to see as somehow "literary." Daly, on the other hand, has been savaged by critics of the genre; few scholars have any positive things to say about him or his popular series character, Race Williams. One of the only scholarly publications on Daly sums up his career by calling him "a third-rate word-spinner who hatched a second-rate protagonist who did his thing in these fourth-rate productions best left on the broom-closet's top shelf

in the back.”⁴¹ Philip Durham called him “a careless writer and a muddy thinker who created the hard-boiled detective, the prototype for numberless writers to follow.”⁴² And, in his seminal history of pulp detective fiction, Ron Goulart rightly notes that Daly “has been for most historians and critics of the hard-boiled detective field a somewhat embarrassing founding father. He’s a key figure, the creator of an important character, but he was not a very good writer and, for a man said to have a sense of humor, he seemed completely unaware of how silly both he and Race Williams sometimes sounded.”⁴³ Even long-time devotees of the hard-boiled such as E.R. Hagemann and Robert Weinberg have lamented Daly’s sub-literary output. In the important anthology *The Black Mask Boys*, editor William F. Nolan described Daly’s first Race Williams novel *The Snarl of the Beast* thus: “The writing was impossibly crude, the plotting labored and ridiculous, and Race Williams emerged as a swaggering illiterate with the emotional instability of a gun-crazed vigilante.”⁴⁴ While the presence of a Race Williams story in an issue of *Black Mask* reportedly boosted sales of the magazine by fifteen percent during his editorial tenure, Joseph T. Shaw chose not to include Daly in his seminal anthology *The Hard-Boiled Omnibus*, the first attempt at creating a hard-boiled canon.⁴⁵

One of the reasons Daly has been so roundly maligned by the historians of the genre is the tendency to collapse author and narrator, a mistake seldom made in the study of “literary” fiction but often made in the realm of popular fiction. If Daly’s characters were nearly illiterate, such an approach suggests, Daly must also be illiterate. In fact, editorials in *Black Mask* consciously played with and satirized this idea. In a letter about his first Race Williams story, “Knights of the Open Palm,” Daly sends “even the best of

wishes to H.C. North, the associate editor, who makes ungentlemanly remarks [*sic*] about my spelling," prompting the editors to reply: "We are pleased that Mr. Daly is not offended at our *remarks*."⁴⁶ In spite of this tongue-in-cheek banter, Daly's letter also emphasizes his attention to the craft of writing, especially in the revision of his stories, which he calls "the bread and butter of the fiction builder." Daly's comments on revision may be a sort of posturing, but the work that precedes his hard-boiled writing suggests that his move to the vernacular style was a very self-conscious choice, grounded in his own understanding of narration.

Regardless of attempts to dismiss Daly, he remains a force to be reckoned with in the history of the hard-boiled detective story. Erle Stanley Gardner, one of the most prolific *Black Mask* writers of the 1920s and 1930s, called Daly the "originator" of the style and modeled some of his own early characters (such as Ed Jenkins and Bob Larkin) on Daly's popular character Race Williams.⁴⁷ The first identifiably hard-boiled story by Daly, "The False Burton Combs," appeared in the December 1922 issue of *Black Mask*, while Hammett was still trying to break through in more high-brow magazines like *The Smart Set*.⁴⁸

While "The False Burton Combs" featured Daly's first hard-boiled narrator, his first publication in *Black Mask* was anything but hard-boiled. In October 1922, Daly published the psychological terror story "Dolly," a tale of murder and madness told by a borderline insane narrator. "Dolly" is an example of what Christopher Breu has termed "psychological *noir*" in the early years of *Black Mask*.⁴⁹ After all, the original subtitle of the magazine was "An Illustrated Magazine of Detective Mystery, Adventure, Romance and Spiritualism"; the presence of the supernatural and psychotic loomed large in the

early years of *Black Mask*. This kind of writing dominated the magazine in its first five years, as indicated by the numerous publications by Harold Ward under both his own name and the pseudonym Ward Sterling (45 stories and serial installments between the two names in the first 40 issues of the magazine). Ward's specialty was the tale of psychological terror, and he clearly references his influences in "Under the Crimson Skull," when he writes "a setting fit for the description of a Dante—a Poe—a De Maupassant."⁵⁰

Daly's "Dolly," like the work of Harold Ward, draws heavily on the first-person style of Poe. In this story, the unnamed narrator, the son of "a well-known alienist," becomes morbidly obsessed with the throat of a woman.⁵¹ To obtain his father's consent to marry Dolly, he hatches a plan to feign an insanity only cured by Dolly's presence, keeping a journal which he

filled...day after day with thoughts of Dolly; weird, uncanny thoughts—thoughts that could only come from a disordered mind. It was mostly about her throat and the fascination which it held for me; that if Dolly was not for me she would be for no one else. For when my fingers played along that soft, white surface came a desire—a desire which I knew I could not long control—to close my fingers tightly about that warm flesh, and crush forever the breath from that beautiful body.⁵²

In a truly Poe-inspired conclusion, the narrator's initial performance of insanity overcomes his ability to reason, driving him to kill Dolly. In both content and style, Daly looks back to the work of Poe and to the contemporary work of H.P. Lovecraft, who began publishing "weird, uncanny" tales in amateur fiction magazines in 1916.

While the narration and subject of "Dolly" are anomalous among Daly's other publications in *Black Mask*, this piece is crucial in understanding both Daly's development as a writer and the emergence of the hard-boiled style in general. This is the

last time that Daly would publish in an overwrought style, reminiscent of the nineteenth-century gothic novel. One consistent aspect of Daly's work is the privileging of the first-person, the primary component Breu uses to identify the elements of "psychological noir," a precursor to the hard-boiled that included stories "reflect[ing] the legacy of...gothic true-crime and fiction narratives."⁵³ The introduction of a narrative subjectivity suggests the importance of the individual experience of the world, but this shift alone does not push Daly's work toward any form of modernism. In addition to the gothic narrator of "Dolly," Daly would also experiment with third-person narration (in his first novel, *The White Circle* [1926], for example), but the vast majority of his publications after "Dolly" demonstrated significant shifts in voice and tone. Gone from his fiction was the voice of the bourgeois narrator in the mode of psychological Romanticism, rooted in late nineteenth-century notions about society and psychology. After "Dolly," his characters would be thrust into the twentieth century by their very explicit use of the American vernacular.

Leaving the style of "Dolly" behind, though, was not necessarily a commercial or an editorial choice on Daly's part. While editors used "Dolly" to premiere the short-lived "Daytime Stories" series ("not to be read at night by people with weak nerves"), readers praised the story for months afterward.⁵⁴ Published in October 1922, the last reference to "Dolly" in the readers' column appeared in the 15 July 1923 issue, fifteen issues later.⁵⁵ In the meantime, Daly had published "The False Burton Combs" and debuted two new hard-boiled characters, "Three Gun" Terry Mack and Race Williams. If the readers' letters are any indication, their tastes in early 1923 remained conflicted: continuous praise of "Dolly" suggested a preference for melodramatic, psychological nineteenth-century

narration, while a letter published in the same issue as the debut of Terry Mack noted that "[s]ince the new editor has taken charge the magazine has greatly improved—masculine logic in choosing detective fiction beats feminine curiosity—no offense to the fair sex intended."⁵⁶ The reader's letter oddly references the brief editorship of George W. Sutton, Jr., whose editorial tenure ended in this issue, to be followed by Phillip C. Cody. Under Cody's editorship, the emphasis fell even more squarely on this "masculine logic," as Cody began publishing Daly, Hammett, and Erle Stanley Gardner with increasing frequency.

Daly's place in this transformation of the editorial policy of *Black Mask* is central, but one commonly repeated mistake suggests that Daly's work was so poor that even the pulps published him reluctantly. At one point, Cody reportedly told Daly, "I don't like these stories—but the readers do. I have never received so many letters about a single character before. Write them. I won't like them. But I'll buy them and I'll print them."⁵⁷ As the exclusion of Daly from the canonizing *Hard-Boiled Omnibus* implied, Joseph T. Shaw, editorial successor to Cody, also disliked Daly's work. Still, Daly's name and his characters' names were almost always featured on the magazine's cover; Daly's stories routinely provided inspiration for the cover painting, as well. If the editors did not like Daly's work, readers certainly did, but this evaluative discrepancy serves to reinforce negative stereotypes about the readers of pulp magazines, a group *Vanity Fair* called "those who move their lips when they read."⁵⁸ If these highly problematic cultural hierarchies are to remain intact, Daly's work, disdained even by pulp editors, would certainly have no place among a "literate" audience.

What complicates this, however, is the fact that Daly was not published exclusively in the pulps in the early 1920s. Like Hammett, who published early work in *The Smart Set* before shifting to what he pejoratively called "blackmasking," Daly attempted and succeeded in publishing at least one story in the slick magazines. In April 1923, Daly published "Paying an Old Debt" in *The American Magazine*, one of the more successful competitors with *The Saturday Evening Post* for the middlebrow marketplace. Unlike Hammett, however, Daly's pulp and slick writing were not fundamentally different in their style. This story, published four months after "The False Burton Combs" and a month before "Three Gun Terry," utilizes virtually the same vernacular narrator that all of Daly's pulp stories would use beginning in the next month. In "Paying an Old Debt," subtitled "A burglar's story," the narrator is a thief who reforms when taken on as a servant by a rich man. Thematically, this story differs from Daly's pulp work, where the righteous vigilante never regrets his use of violence, but like the semi-literate narrators Terry Mack and Race Williams, the unnamed narrator of "Paying an Old Debt" acknowledges his linguistic insufficiencies: "Why, if I was to write the way I talked no one could understand me."⁵⁹ The appearance of Daly's work in *The American Magazine* suggests the degree to which the vernacular narrator pioneered by Lardner in *The Saturday Evening Post* was part of the mainstream of American magazine fiction.

While Lardner exerted a vast influence on slick fiction in the early 1920s, it is difficult to find many stories with vernacular narration in the early years of *Black Mask*. Few stories were published using any kind of vernacular narrator, while the majority of them feature the gothic narrative style of "Dolly" or the third-person conventions of the action-packed melodrama. One exception to this was C.S. Montanye's "Looking Out for

Orchid," published in the second issue of the magazine (May 1920). In both style and content, Montanye's piece is incongruous in this issue. Clearly derivative of Lardner, this story features narration by a "wardrobe mistress" who tries to protect a young female vaudevillian star from the advances of an admirer. The narrator utilizes slang and misspelling, and even appropriates sports metaphors that echo Lardner's own technique: "They was more curves to her than they is to any big league pitcher livin', or them relics of the happy days of yestereen—corkscrews."⁶⁰ Not only an exception in the magazine, this story is a unique piece in the larger body of his *Black Mask* work; in his other publications in the magazine, Montanye produced detective stories, largely of the Golden Age variety.

Lardner's influence looms even larger and far more explicit in Daly's own "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley" (1 September 1923). Another rarely cited Daly piece, this first-person narrative follows the brief career of a boxer whose fame stems from his ability to be knocked down in the ring. When his manager suggests he take on the nickname "Kiss-the-Canvas" Crowley to drum up publicity, he assents: "I'm a student and have read the books, so I took a leaf from one of the old proverbs: 'When in Rome do as the Italians do.' So I let 'em book me under the new moniker."⁶¹ After his career is over, Crowley turns manager himself to get revenge on Billy Tiernan, the manager who ended his career. Crowley's discovery, a rural fighter he calls "Special Delivery Smitty" after Smitty knocks him out in a Pennsylvania roadhouse, turns out to be much weaker than Crowley thought. His plan to double-cross Tiernan by winning a fight he had agreed to lose is foiled, and Crowley gets paid by Tiernan, who knows that "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley is honest to the core." As Tiernan and his winning fighter leave his office, Crowley muses,

"Somethin' tells me that it ain't no time for speechmakin'. When they leave me I'm standin' there all alone and I do a smile. The old proverb is right. 'Honesty is the best insurance' after all."⁶²

An odd humorous outing for Daly, this story highlights the crucial connection between the vernacular humor of Lardner and the hard-boiled narration on which Daly would begin to focus exclusively after this publication. Set in the world of sports, Daly's story allows the athlete to narrate the experience. Lardner's "Champion," a far more sinister boxing story that appeared in 1916, may have been part of the inspiration for Daly's work.⁶³ The narrator Crowley, though, exhibits many of the narrative attributes of both the Lardneresque humor figure and the Terry Mack/Race Williams character type that would dominate Daly's writing. The constant reference to and misquotation of proverbs looks directly at the humorous tradition of Lardner and Loos; the suggestion is that these clichéd phrases mean very little, which results in their frequent misuse or perversion via language. Clearly, Crowley (like Loos's Lorelei Lee) has heard these phrases, and recognizes their importance, but ultimately his memory fails him and he provides a colorfully inaccurate version of the proverb, suggesting a kind of bankruptcy of meaning in overused language of this sort. At the same time, Crowley engages in an obsessive self-questioning, a technique that is a hallmark of the Race Williams stories: "What did I say? I didn't say nothin'. What did I do? I did a-plenty. I just took one clout at his ugly mug."⁶⁴

While "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley" provides a crucial link between the late-1910s humor writing of Lardner and Daly's own transformation of style, Daly's first few stories in the hard-boiled vernacular utilize this kind of language to different, though related

ends. It is here that the critique of the realist detective stories of the so-called Golden Age begins to develop. In these stories, as in "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley" as well as in Lardner's work, the use of the vernacular distances the words themselves from their referent, creating a kind of synthetic, purely textual environment in which language strips away its realist relationship to the world. In the hard-boiled style, it is the language of violence and, in Daly's case, of masculine bravado that replaces the realist language of a disinterested spectator, whose meticulous concern with the faithful recording of the facts implies a possibility of accurately interpreting the world as a legible text. As the title of one Daly story would have it, the hard-boiled figure must "Say It With Lead," not with realist language.

The origins of the hard-boiled detective can be traced to Daly's second publication in *Black Mask*, "The False Burton Combs," published in December 1922, the year Michael North has called "the scene of the modern."⁶⁵ In this story, the unnamed narrator, "a gentleman adventurer," agrees to impersonate a reformed bootlegger who expects his silent and anonymous partners to make an attempt on his life. The story opens with a direct engagement of the narrator's class position: "I had an outside stateroom on the upper deck of the Fall River boat and ten minutes after I parked my bag there I knew that I was being watched." While the protagonist's social and economic identity—as both "gentleman adventurer" and the occupant of a stateroom—may recall the genteel amateur of Sherlock Holmes or Nick Carter, his narrative position and his choice of language indicate a very different genealogy, the man of the street. When the narrator senses that he's being followed, he notes, "there was nothing to be nervous about—my little trip was purely a pleasure one this time. But then a dick getting your smoke is not pleasant under

the best of circumstances": not exactly the language of nineteenth-century gentility.⁶⁶ It is in this shift in language, so clearly distinct from the language of both adventure and detective fiction of the first two decades of the twentieth century, that hard-boiled detective fiction begins to display its own brand of vernacular modernism. For, after all, what does the narrator mean when he speaks of "a dick getting your smoke"? Daly's 1922 readers, unaccustomed to reading this sort of language in any sort of fiction (and particularly in *Black Mask* fiction of the time), must have spent some time puzzling through this phrase on first encountering it. Daly pulls the language away from its normal referent, forcing his readers to become "grim readers" of vernacular modernism: to put together pieces of a broken and rearranged language that seems almost foreign.

"The False Burton Combs" is laced with a variety of contemporary slang terms, many of which have passed into the common vernacular through the immense popularity of crime fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Still others seem highly idiosyncratic and dated: "if things got melodramatic why I guess I could shoot as good as any bootlegger that ever robbed a church. They're hard guys, yes, but then I ain't exactly a cake-eater myself."⁶⁷ As with Lardner's humor, the language of Daly's character works to reshape the world through text; language is important as a marker of class, but it also suggests a profound difference between text and the world. Unlike the realist detective stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "The False Burton Combs" is not a text in which language provides a transparent means of engaging reality. Instead, the entirety of the experience of the world is heavily mediated and aestheticized through slang-inflected narration.

What emerges in a nascent form in "The False Burton Combs" becomes far more explicit in stories featuring Daly's most popular series character, Race Williams. Appearing first in June 1923, Williams would ultimately be featured in fifty-four stories in *Black Mask*; nearly half of these became the basis for seven novels published between 1927 and 1935. After leaving *Black Mask* in 1934, Daly continued to publish Race Williams stories through the 1950s in other pulps, including *Dime Detective*, *Thrilling Detective*, *Popular Detective*, and *Smashing Detective Stories*. The first decade of these stories, however, all published in *Black Mask*, demonstrate the vast changes that the genre was undergoing in its shift toward the hard-boiled. As the few scholars who have discussed Daly's work have shown, his Race Williams stories are fascinating in the ways in which they engage a number of 1920s obsessions: the Ku Klux Klan ("Knights of the Open Palm"), trade union corruption ("Three Thousand to the Good"), live radio broadcasting ("I'll Tell the World"), the swindling of Native Americans out of oil revenues ("Half-Breed"), and other contemporary social issues.⁶⁸

While critics like Sean McCann have convincingly argued for the importance of social engagement found in the Williams stories, an even more crucial legacy of these stories in crime and detective fiction is the wholesale transformation of narrative situation and choice of language. In the opening of "Knights of the Open Palm," Williams makes the famous claim that he would repeat in some form in almost every story he narrated:

As for my business, I'm what you might call a middleman—just a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks. Oh, there ain't no doubt that both the cops and the crooks take me for a gun, but I ain't—not rightly speaking. I do a little honest shooting once in a while—just in the way of business. But my conscience is clear; I never bumped off a guy what didn't need it. And I can put it over the crooks every time—why, I know more about crooks than what they know about themselves. Yep, Race Williams, Private Investigator, that's me.⁶⁹

By the time Daly published "I'll Tell the World" in 1925, Williams would insist on being called a "confidential agent" (as opposed to "Private Investigator") to avoid any association with detectives, though he would later return to calling himself an "investigator." The distinction here is a crucial one. At one level, it suggests an affinity with pulp adventure fiction (and a continuity with the "gentleman adventurer" of "The False Burton Combs"), as opposed to the ratiocinative detective story. At the same time, it privileges an individual agency in the action of the character. Rather than merely detecting or investigating, an agent actually acts within her/his world. As "a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks," Williams begins to destabilize the assumptions of the realist detective story not only by problematizing the binary between the law breaker and the law enforcer, but by doing so in a language that also sits between these two binaries and questions their fundamental differences.

In the classical detective story, "the dicks and the crooks" are usually identifiable.⁷⁰ While a uniformed police officer (such as the Prefect in Poe's Dupin tales) might have some difficulty understanding the differences between the two, the amateur detective (frequently in the employ of the police) will lend his talents to the legal authority and resolve any confusion in these identities. Nick Carter, on the other hand, might be quite adept at using disguises to infiltrate criminal gangs, but his identity as a detective is never compromised in these adventures. Race Williams, however, demonstrates an identity that does not necessarily presuppose two separate and opposed positions.

By positing the existence of a "halfway house" between the two opposing groups that effectively define the genre of crime fiction, Daly has begun to tear down the realist

assumptions on which the classical detective story is based. The creation of a liminal space, simultaneously inside and outside the law, also begins to break down the distinction between subject and object that is so crucial to both realism and the detective story. What Williams's narration initiates is a fundamental distrust in the figure of the detective/narrator, whose complicity in violent acts and whose use of vernacular language make a mockery of the objectivity needed for both realism and the ratiocinative detective story. No longer is the language of the narrator a transparent conduit for representation of a "reality." Instead, the slang-filled stories of Daly create a textual environment that bears little resemblance to the world of nineteenth-century realism. As a result, Race Williams, the violent "confidential agent," creates a story whose narration calls into question the very accuracy of its contents. As Williams says at the opening of the first novel in which he appears, "[i]t's the point of view in life that counts," and Race's point of view, replete with slang and action, began to dominate the pages of *Black Mask* in the late 1920s.⁷¹

While many critics have been eager to dismiss Daly as a hack, the equivalent of an awkward growing pain that would be sloughed off with the emergence of Hammett as the dominant influence, a close look at Walter Benjamin's definition of a hack as "someone who refuses as a matter of principle to improve the production apparatus" might complicate this general understanding of Daly's work. Daly did not necessarily improve the means of production for pulp writers; in an economic sense, the magazines were much the same before and after he published in them. Still, if "production apparatus" is understood in an aesthetic sense, Daly did promote drastic changes to the way the genre of detective fiction operated. Far from replicating the hegemonic standards of the classical detective story or the tale of the gentleman adventurer, Daly sought a third

way, a twentieth-century "halfway house" in which binary oppositions between "the dicks and the crooks" came under question, and the means and narration of the detective assumed an aesthetic primacy over the "solution" to any mystery. While Daly's work is at times formulaic and repetitive, the formulas he established were indeed a new "production apparatus," one which launched the hard-boiled style and led to the more celebrated careers of writers like Dashiell Hammett.

"What's the use of getting poetic about it?": Dashiell Hammett's Vernacular Modernism

THE CLEANSING OF POISONVILLE is not a serial, but in reality is a series of adventures of the Continental detective who is drawn into a fight for life with the crooked bosses of a city, who have gone mad with the power of their own corruption. Outside of their gripping interest, these stories are remarkable if only for the fact that *their manner of telling points the way to a new type of detective fiction*, which in BLACK MASK is coming to take the place of the old, worn-out formula sort of gruesome-murder-and-clever-solution detective story.

Advertisement for the serialization of
Hammett's *Red Harvest* in *Black Mask*,
November 1927 (emphasis mine)⁷²

I'm one of the few—if there are any more—people moderately literate who take the detective story seriously. I don't mean that I necessarily take my own or anybody else's seriously—but the detective story as a form. Some day somebody's going to make "literature" of it...and I'm selfish enough to have my hopes, however slight the evident justification might be.

Dashiell Hammett to Blanche Knopf, 20
March 1928⁷³

While Carroll John Daly is understood as the first writer to utilize the hard-boiled style in his detective fiction, the far more well-known Dashiell Hammett is generally acknowledged to have served as a stylistic influence on countless writers that followed,

both in the pages of *Black Mask* and elsewhere. Hammett's engagement with the dichotomy of high and low culture, though, has been of frequent interest to scholars of both the detective story and of modern American writing. Critics struggle with how to properly understand Hammett's relationship to canonical literature. His novels were praised by reviewers of the time and published by Knopf, one of the leading publishers in modernist fiction. His most well regarded novel, *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), was published in a Modern Library edition in 1934, the same year the company published the first official American edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. If any American detective writer before World War II enjoyed credibility by association, it was Hammett.

Hammett's success in the realm of highbrow publishing, however, was not merely the result of a few publishers and critics enjoyably slumming in genre fiction. His work was taken quite seriously by the writers of far more canonical texts, most notably Gertrude Stein. When Stein returned to the United States in 1934 for the first time in over thirty years, she wanted to meet two cultural celebrities: Charlie Chaplin and Dashiell Hammett. Stein's literary celebrity had risen after the publication of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), prompting the publication of a reduction of her *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress* (1925) by Harcourt Brace as *The Making of Americans: The Hersland Family* (1934), as well as the 1934 production of her play *Four Saints in Three Acts* in New York City. As Stein describes their meeting in *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937), the host of the dinner was not quite sure who Hammett was: "She said yes what is his name. Dashiell Hammett said Miss Toklas. And how do you spell it. Alice Toklas spelt it...Ah yes said Mrs. Ehrman now what is he. Dashiell Hammett you know The Thin Man said Alice Toklas. Oh yes said Mrs. Ehrman

yes and they both hung up.”⁷⁴ At the dinner, Stein and Hammett discussed writing. In Stein’s version, she asks Hammett why it is that in the twentieth century, “men all write about themselves, they are always themselves as strong or weak or mysterious or passionate or drunk or controlled but always themselves as the women used to do in the nineteenth century...He said it’s simple. In the nineteenth century men were confident, the women were not but in the twentieth century the men have no confidence and so they have to make themselves as you say more beautiful more intriguing more everything and they cannot make any other man because they have to hold on to themselves not having any confidence.”⁷⁵

It should come as no surprise that Hammett and Stein discussed the differences between nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing; after all, these figures are two of the most important influences on twentieth century writing in their respective circles. In a lecture given the following year, Stein would even call the detective novel “the only really modern novel form that has come into existence,” and she worked through a significant period of writers’ block in 1934 by penning her own enigmatic and challenging detective story, *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*. While Stein thought about the relationship of detective fiction to ideas of the “modern,” Hammett would continually use literary figures in his work, sometimes as pretentious buffoons (“The Girl With the Silver Eyes” [1924]), sometimes as megalomaniacal killers (as in *The Dain Curse* [1929]), and sometimes as detective stand-ins (Robin Thin, the poet-detective, in “The Nails in Mr. Cayterer” [1926]).⁷⁶

This engagement with the literary has prompted critics to experiment with ways of allying Hammett’s work with modernism. Stephen Marcus’s seminal appreciation of

Hammett in *Partisan Review* called him a modernist in all but name: "What Hammett has done...is to include as part of the contingent and dramatic consciousness of his narrative the circumstance that the work of the detective is itself a fiction-making activity, a discovery or creation by fabrication of something new in the world, or hidden, latent, potential, or as yet undeveloped within it."⁷⁷ James Naremore called Hammett's prose "closer to the spirit of literary modernism" than Raymond Chandler's, and even went so far as to call *The Glass Key* (1930) "Hammett's *The Waste Land*."⁷⁸ Also keying in on Hammett's thematic concerns, Jon Thompson "explore[s] the ways in which the combination of a number of ideological elements—Hammett's individualism, his skepticism toward bourgeois law and order, his philosophical and ideological relativism, the contradictory sexual politics of his fiction, and his rejection of rationality—produced the hard-boiled modernism found in *The Glass Key* and Hammett's other fiction."⁷⁹ Indicative of more recent shifts in modernist studies, Christopher T. Raczkowski suggests that the work of Hammett engages "modernist concerns about (or sense of crisis in) vision and epistemology; especially as visual practices and ideologies impact society through the legal and criminal apparatuses of the state that vie for explanatory authority around the genre's many corpses."⁸⁰ Along a different set of lines in contemporary modernist criticism, David M. Earle has seen Hammett and other pulp writers as a part of a Foucauldian "subjugated knowledge" of modernism, a strain he calls "pulp modernism."⁸¹

While these critics all explore possible means by which Hammett might be included in the modernist canon, the only work to engage Hammett's obsession with the idea of the "literary" directly is Mark McGurl's *The Novel Art: Elevations of American*

Fiction After Henry James. Examining Hammett's letter to Blanche Knopf where he betrayed a desire to "make 'literature'" out of detective fiction, McGurl calls Hammett a "low modernist," a combination of terms that simultaneously rejects and embraces existing modernist hierarchies.⁸² This insistence on seeing him as "low" comes, in large part, from the inability of Hammett's work to match up with his optimistic plans, laid out in that same letter, where Hammett says, "I want to try adapting this stream-of-consciousness method, conveniently modified, to a detective story, carrying the reader along with the detective, showing him everything as it is found, giving him the detective's conclusions as they are reached, letting the solution break on both of them together." Certainly, Hammett's knowledge of stream-of-consciousness fiction and desire to emulate its method suggest that he had clear ideas of what he thought literary fiction was, and if he was going to "make 'literature'" out of detective fiction, he would have to move in this direction. Ultimately, he never wrote his stream-of-consciousness detective novel; later work like *The Glass Key* and *The Maltese Falcon* utilized different narrative strategies, eliminating all access to the characters' thoughts. While he calls this new method "something altogether different from the method employed in 'Poisonville,'" his Continental Op stories and novels (including *Red Harvest*, the novel "Poisonville" was to become) come the closest to realizing this goal of stream-of-consciousness detective fiction.⁸³

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Hammett had only begun to think about the concept of "literature" when the possibility of publishing *Red Harvest* with a reputable publisher like Knopf arose in 1928. Hammett's writing career in the 1920s had its own complex relationship to the idea of literature. Initially, Hammett attempted to get

published in Mencken and Nathan's *The Smart Set* with very little success. Still, Hammett's first publication, "The Parthian Shot," finally appeared in this magazine in October 1922 (the same month Daly published his first *Black Mask* tale "Dolly"). Shortly thereafter Hammett began publishing in the pulps, placing his first story in *Black Mask* in December 1922, quite possibly at the suggestion of Mencken, whose owning and editing interest in *Black Mask* had ended about a year earlier.

Hammett's shift to the pulps was not an eager one. When he began what he would later decry as "blackmasking," he used the pseudonym Peter Collinson, presumably to differentiate his "serious" work in *The Smart Set* from his more commercial fare in *Black Mask* and another pulp, *Brief Stories*.⁸⁴ Hammett clearly wanted to be a part of "the smart set," but his work found a more comfortable home in the pulps, and, after publishing two stories in the October 15, 1923 issue of *Black Mask* (one as Hammett, the other as Collinson), the Collinson pseudonym disappeared. Unable to break into the world of literary fiction, Hammett resigned himself to working as an ad man by day and a writer of pulp stories by night. Like many other pulp writers who harbored secret desires of literary success, though, Hammett would not stop thinking about what constituted literature. Instead, in articles devoted to the art of writing ad copy, he would theorize about the nature of the "literary," while exploring the practice of literature in the pulps.

While Hammett's later comments on his pulp writing have often dismissed any literary pretensions in his detective stories, in the late 1920s Hammett's own definition of literature was rather permeable. In the 1928 letter to Blanche Knopf, he considered the possibility of "making literature" out of detective fiction, turning pulp fiction into high art. Nearly two years earlier, after the publication of "The Creeping Siamese" in March

1926, Hammett had practically given up writing fiction entirely because of a disagreement with then *Black Mask* editor Phil Cody. For almost a year, Hammett stopped writing for the magazine. In the interim, Joseph T. Shaw took over the editorial duties and begged Hammett to return to the pages of the magazine. At this time, however, Hammett was working hard on his other career, his day job as a writer of advertising copy for the Samuels Jewelry Agency. Hammett's ad copy was creative and well-received, and critics have suggested important links between his work in advertising and his detective fiction writing.⁸⁵

While writing ad copy, Hammett was also theorizing about the nature of advertising in a series of articles published between October 1926 and March 1928 in *Western Advertising*, one of the more prominent trade journals on the west coast. The first of these, published during Hammett's absence from the pages of *Black Mask*, shows that, even when not publishing fiction, Hammett was thinking about the concept of "literature." Titled "The Advertisement IS Literature," this piece provides a fascinating glimpse into Hammett's reading practices in the mid-1920s, as well as into his own idea of what writers he perceived as sufficiently "literary" and what critics were reasonable judges of this quality. "The test by which advertising copy must stand or fall," Hammett writes, "is the test by which we evaluate every branch of literature. Goethe, Carlyle, Croce, Spingarn, Mencken are a few of the many who have put it into words. 'What has he tried to do? How well has he succeeded?'"⁸⁶ By concluding this list of critics with Mencken, Hammett not only references his earlier desire to be published in *The Smart Set*, but also sets up the remainder of the article, which argues that the language of advertising (as well as literature) should be clear, but necessarily stylized.

Also in line with his nod toward Mencken are his comments that suggest some familiarity with *The American Language* and the work of Ring Lardner. Hammett writes, "[t]he language of the man in the street is seldom either clear or simple. If you think I exaggerate, have your stenographer eavesdrop a bit with notebook and pencil. You will find this common language, divorced from gesture and facial expression, not only excessively complicated and repetitious, but almost purposeless in its lack of coherence."⁸⁷ The aestheticization of this complicated and incoherent language of "the man in the street" stands as one of the central concerns of Hammett's *Black Mask* fiction. In his stories, how people speak is generally more important than what they actually say; on top of this, the Op's slang-laden narration, while less abrasive than that of Race Williams, still suggests heavy mediation through the intricacies of a twentieth-century American vernacular. Hammett goes on to write, "[y]ou may read tons of books and magazines without finding, even in fiction dialogue, any attempt faithfully to reproduce common speech. There are writers who try to do it, but they seldom see print. Even such a specialist as Ring Lardner gets his effect of naturalness by skillfully editing, distorting, simplifying, coloring the national tongue, and not by reporting it verbatim."⁸⁸

Implicit in Hammett's comments here about the literary potential of ad writing lies a subtle critique of realism. The work of Lardner, for example, does not present a mimetic representation of everyday speech, but creates an "effect of naturalness" through a variety of forms of mediation. Hammett suggests that even Lardner's work, so frequently lauded for its accuracy in recording American speech patterns, has undergone "editing, distorting, simplifying, [and] coloring." If anything, what Hammett maps out here is not just a methodology for excellent ad writing, but also a kind of manifesto for

the literary aspirations of his own detective writing. Any form of textual representation necessitates a kind of stylization; there can be no unmediated representation of reality. When this assumption about the textual mediation of vernacular language is considered alongside the heightened subjectivity of Hammett's Continental Op stories, the self-consciousness of his vernacular modernism is clear.

Importantly, Hammett's fiction presents a world where the standards and conventions of the classical detective model, and by extension those of realism, have become useless. One early example of this is "Slippery Fingers," published in *Black Mask*'s October 15, 1923 issue.⁸⁹ This story was Hammett's last publication under the pseudonym Peter Collinson; in this case, the use of the pseudonym probably had more to do with the fact that Hammett had another story in the same issue published under his own name, especially since his letter to the editor identified the author of "Slippery Fingers" as "S.D. Hammett." While this early story does not yet display the mature style that would emerge in the late 1920s, the roots of Hammett's aesthetic approach are apparent from the story's opening paragraphs: "This Frederick Grover was a short, slender man of something under thirty years, and dressed like a picture out of *Vanity Fair*. His almost girlish features and voice did nothing to make him more impressive, but I began to forget those things after a few minutes. He wasn't a sap" (CS 22). Already present in this passage are a host of concerns that would dominate Hammett's entire writing career: the quick character sketch, the hostility toward the elitism of high culture and wealth, and the use of short, slang-laden sentences.

"Slippery Fingers" presents a relatively conventional problem for the Op. A rich man with a criminal past has been murdered and his son wants the murderer caught.

Fortunately, the murderer left fingerprints on a bloody knife at the crime scene.

Fingerprints have been a convention in crime fiction since at least Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), where the title character uses his interest in what he calls the "physiological autograph" to clear up the mystery of a murder as well as a case of infants switched at birth.⁹⁰ Following the appearance of fingerprinting in Twain, the physical marks themselves act as a kind of emblem of the scientific and semiotic nature of classical detective fiction. If one looks closely enough at a fingerprint, i.e. if one reads its details carefully, both its uniqueness and its authorship become clear. As with the criminal world that the detective investigates, the details are present and once the details are carefully read, "murder will out." The fingerprint, then, is a kind of microcosmic embodiment of the realist assumptions of classical detective fiction.

The fingerprints left by the murderer in "Slippery Fingers" are, quite literally, slippery. While the prints themselves are stable indicators of identity, the murderer doctors his fingers with gelatin when he's questioned and printed by the police, producing a set of fake prints. To a certain degree, this can be read as a fictional extension of part of Hammett's epigrammatic piece "From the Memoirs of a Private Detective," published in *The Smart Set* in March 1923: "Even where the criminal makes no attempt to efface the prints of his fingers, but leaves them all over the scene of the crime, the chances are about one in ten of finding a print that is sufficiently clear to be of any value" (CS 908). Hammett's focus in *The Smart Set* piece is, appropriately enough, the debunking of popular notions about what being a detective means. In "Slippery Fingers," fingerprints do work as signs, but the mimetic quality of the sign as signature has become compromised through artifice and mediation.

While "Slippery Fingers" posits a world that is no longer legible under the traditional methods of realism, Hammett's work under editor Joseph T. Shaw began to increasingly demonstrate the ways in which language could be used as an artificial form of representation. After he took time off from publishing in *Black Mask* and began theorizing about advertising in the trade magazines, Shaw lured him back to his "blackmasking" and Hammett published his most ambitious works to that point, the novella "The Big Knock-Over" (February 1927) and its sequel "\$106,000 Blood Money" (May 1927). These stories deal with the daring daylight robbery of a downtown San Francisco bank by a veritable "*Who's Who in Crookdom*" and the subsequent investigation and destruction (rather than capture) of the masterminds behind the crime (CS 555).

When the Op instigates a melee at Larrouy's bar in an attempt to break the case open, Hammett's narration begins to take on a decidedly modernist style, evoking the stream-of-consciousness mode that he would reference in the letter to Blanche Knopf just over a year later.

A bottle came through and found my forehead. My hat saved me some, but the crack didn't do me any good. I swayed and broke a nose where I should have smashed a skull. The room seemed stuffy, poorly ventilated. Somebody ought to tell Larrouy about it. How do you like that lead-and-leather pat on the temple, blondy? The rat to my left is getting too close. I'll draw him in by bending to the right to poke the mulatto, and then I'll lean back into him and let him have it. Not bad! But I can't keep this up all night. Where are Red and Jack? Standing off watching me? (CS 570)

Here, in a moment of extreme violence, the vernacular modernism latent in Hammett's earlier work solidly breaks through. The first three sentences here work as relatively standard narration for a bar fight in a hard-boiled detective novel; however, the minute the total change in the atmosphere becomes apparent (the "stuffy, poorly ventilated"

room), things begin to transform. The Op acknowledges the air quality in the room because the lights have been shut off; suddenly sensory information becomes distorted. The sense of smell trumps the sounds of fists and gunfire that surround the Op in a dilated temporal moment. What follows is a series of questions, comments, and reflections directed at a variety of people. The Op is clearly talking to himself, but doing so in the present tense, placing the reader in the barroom brawl. Rather than presenting a mimetic representation of the fight—impossible, since it is happening in the dark—Hammett presents a psychological impression of the Op's thoughts as he encounters his antagonists. The shifts in time (past, present, future), the shifts in audience (the Op himself, "blondy," and the reader), and the shifts between placing the reader in an external reality and in the head of the Op all point toward an American writer who would not begin seriously experimenting with this kind of unstable narrative viewpoint until 1929, William Faulkner.

"The Big Knock-Over" is also crucial in that it is the first story in which the Op clearly fails at the story's conclusion. Of course, this operates as a narrative strategy to set up the sequel, but it also calls into question one of the central assumptions of the ratiocinative detective story. In the classic form, the master narrative involves the righting of the world into which chaos has been introduced by crime. Daly, Hammett and the hard-boiled writers that followed did not only introduce the detective of action over reason, but they also complicated the notion that readers read detective stories for the satisfying conclusion of a "solution." The end of "The Big Knock-Over" does feature a solution to the question of who masterminded the heist, but the Op only realizes this in hindsight. The diminutive old man, Papadopoulos, fools the Op with his feeble

appearance and the Op lets him go: "I had been putty in his hands, his accomplices had been putty. He had slipped the cross over on them as they had helped him slip it over on the others—and I had sent him safely away" (CS 591). The Op's naïve reliance on "realist" appearances fails him in the end.

This dichotomy between the realist and the hard-boiled or vernacular modernist sensibility is set up as one of the themes in both stories, and emphasized in the sequel.

The Op's partner in both stories is the young Jack Counihan,

a tall, slender lad of twenty-three or four who had drifted into the Continental's employ a few months before. It was the first job he'd ever had, and he wouldn't have had it if his father hadn't insisted that if sonny wanted to keep his fingers in the family till he'd have to get over the notion that squeezing through a college graduation was enough work for one lifetime. So Jack came to the Agency. He thought gum-shoeing would be fun...A likeable youngster, well-muscled for all his slimness, smooth-haired, with a gentleman's face and a gentleman's manner, nervy, quick with head and hands, full of the don't-give-a-damn gaiety that belonged to his youthfulness. (CS 548-549)

Hammett's characterization of Counihan evokes the world of Fitzgeraldian romance, and Counihan himself seems like a character out of *This Side of Paradise* (1920). This characterization becomes increasingly important in "\$106,000 Blood Money," where Counihan is easily corrupted by the money Papadopoulos offers him for protection. The Op, already aware of Counihan's part in the conspiracy, has him dress the part in "evening duds...everything but the high hat" in an attempt to expose his flawed nineteenth-century romantic notions about crime (CS 618).

In the story's final showdown, Counihan gives a speech directly out of a classic detective story, ending it with "That, my dear Sherlock, about concludes the confession." The Op counters, though, exposing the truth behind Counihan's fiction. "You met the girl and were too soft to turn her in. But your vanity—your pride in looking at yourself as a

pretty cold proposition—wouldn't let you admit it even to yourself. You had to have a hard-boiled front. So you were meat to Papadopoulos' grinder. He gave you a part you could play to yourself—a super-gentleman crook, a master-mind, a desperate suave villain, and all that kind of romantic garbage" (CS 631). The Op's indictment of Counihan is simultaneously an articulation and a critique of the conventions of the classical detective story. Counihan has come to believe in the Sherlockian fictions of Conan Doyle (hence his reference to the Op as "my dear Sherlock") and acted accordingly. The Op's response "romantic garbage" is, in effect, the hard-boiled twentieth-century answer to the amalgamation of realism and romanticism in the nineteenth-century classical detective tradition. Counihan is no Professor Moriarty, and the notion that a "super-gentleman crook" could exist is downright ludicrous in the world of the Op's stories.

Hammett's repudiation of the super-detective/super-criminal dichotomy also represents a move away from Daly's adventure-oriented tales. While Race Williams, like other Daly characters, is certainly no super-detective ("a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks"), he is constantly battling criminal masterminds who provide the titles for many of Daly's novels (the title characters in *The Snarl of the Beast*, *The Hidden Hand*, *Man in the Shadows*, etc.). In Hammett's universe, virtually every character occupies Williams's "halfway house"; there are no moral absolutes, and the characters' drift between crime and crime prevention is often seamless and natural.

In a sense, however, Counihan's corruption is almost predetermined due to his particular use of language. A child of the wealthy, the cleanness and standardization of his speech suggests a dangerous artifice; at the very least, it signals the fact that he does

not belong in the world of the Op. Identification and relative integrity are often demonstrated via one's language in Hammett's work. The tougher one talks, the more trustworthy one generally is. The Op, though his actions occasionally cross the boundary into the morally questionable, performs his integrity through both his narration and his awareness of the power of language to alter reality through intensive stylization and manipulation.

As Hammett's career developed, the narrative stylization in his Continental Op stories intensified, culminating in one of the most expressionistic detective novels of the twentieth century, *Red Harvest*. Serialized in *Black Mask* from November 1927 through February 1928 under the title "Poisonville," and published in a slightly revised form by Alfred A. Knopf in 1929, *Red Harvest* operates as a total renunciation of nineteenth-century conventions of realism in the detective story.⁹¹ On the surface, this novel seems rather "pulpy": stitched together from four related stories that editors in *Black Mask* claimed were "not a serial, but in reality...a series of adventures," the Op never learns what his original job in the mining town of Personville was, and discovers the murderer of his original employer about a quarter of a way through the novel. What follows is a barrage of gang violence and political power plays that expose the ruthless capitalist underpinnings of the town's corruption and ultimately decimate the town, causing the National Guard to arrive at the novel's conclusion.⁹² Certainly the Op "solves" a variety of mysteries at various points during the novel, but the details of these mysteries recede into the background when juxtaposed with the wide swaths of violence that dominate the action of *Red Harvest*.

Central to the novel is the ability of language to make and remake reality. The novel's celebrated opening paragraph demonstrates how Hammett intends to thematize this aspect of the text:

I first heard Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the Big Ship in Butte. He also called his shirt a shoit. I didn't think anything of what he had done to the city's name. Later I heard men who could manage their r's give it the same pronunciation. I still didn't see anything in it but the meaningless sort of humor that used to make richardsnary the thieves' word for dictionary. A few years later I went to Personville and learned better.⁹³

Subjectivity is foregrounded here through the use of the initial "I" as well as the emphasis on memory and interpretation. More important, however, is the way in which language functions. The Op recognizes the limitations of his own perception and the differences in regional pronunciation that make for a Menckonian "American language," and suggests how these subtle differences can create wholly new meanings. At first, the Op thinks this is purely a case of localized mispronunciation; however, sometimes the way words are distorted by speech actually does have meaning (it is not just "meaningless humor").

Language can be molded and transformed to more accurately describe a reality. What the Op's initial investigation into this world of language suggests is a vernacular parallel to Pound's call to "make it new" through language. A naïve view of language, i.e. one with realist antecedents, would not fundamentally question the ability of received language to accurately represent.⁹⁴ In a realist universe—or even in a classical detective story—Personville would be Personville, plain and simple. In the world of the hard-boiled, the power of vernacular language actually transforms Personville to Poisonville (not just linguistically, but phenomenologically). But the Op does not take language at face value; he has "learned better" by peeling back the layers of linguistic artifice to find some kind of meaning that exists beyond language.

In contrasting this passage with the openings of novels by Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler, Dennis Porter argues that "the fact that Hammett forces the reader to pay attention to his medium suggests immediately that we are in the presence of a *texte de plaisir*."⁹⁵ Far from merely an example of Barthes's *jouissance*, Hammett's opening points toward one of the central concerns of *Red Harvest*: the ways in which the stylization and manipulation of language can actually alter the world it describes. As a result, characters that speak in an inflated, genteel language (such as the lawyer Charles Proctor Dawn) are examples of pure artifice. The "brittle" language of the hard-boiled narrator is both the acknowledgement that language is by nature a mediating force, and a baseline for the judgment of other characters' integrity. To a degree, Hammett extends this idea in the follow-up to *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse* (serialized in *Black Mask*, November 1928-February 1929; published between covers, 1929), in which the highbrow writer Owen Fitzstephan is discovered to be orchestrating his own melodramatic plot of murder. His facility with literary language is a key to his own corruption; when Fitzstephan asks the Op why he did not take his books, the Op replies, "I was afraid I'd read them and understand them...and then you'd have felt insulted" (CN 207). Like the elite cultural characters in *Red Harvest*, Fitzstephan's integrity is compromised through his literary abuse of language.

Similarly, in *Red Harvest* the Op short circuits the intentional obfuscation used by mine owner Elihu Willsson, who wants the town of Poisonville cleaned up. Willsson says, "I want a man to clean this pig-sty of a Poisonville for me, to smoke out the rats, little and big. It's a man's job. Are you a man?" Willsson's strategy here is two-fold; he is eager for the "crooks and grafters" to be run out of Poisonville, one way or another; his

use of metaphor is both a nod to the overblown language of the dime novel and a means of protecting himself from liability, since what he is requesting from the Op will most likely involve murder. The Op's response is typically debunking, bringing the language back to the level of the vernacular and away from Willsson's melodramatic metaphors: "What's the use of getting poetic about it?...If you've got a fairly honest piece of work to be done in my line, and you want to pay a decent price, maybe I'll take it on. But a lot of foolishness about smoking rats and pig-pens doesn't mean anything to me" (CN 38).

Once the Op concludes the case in *Red Harvest*, he is forced to come to terms with how to remain a loyal company man and simultaneously save himself from reprimand for his significant deviations from company policy. As he says, "I spent most of my week in Ogden trying to fix up my reports so they would not read as if I had broken as many Agency rules, state laws and human bones as I had" (CN 186). At some level this is a meta-textual commentary on *Red Harvest* itself. To a degree, the novel functions as a kind of vernacular modernist parallel to the Op's "report," complete with linguistic manipulation that never allows the reader to experience Poisonville outside of the Op's consciousness and highly stylized narration of the events. The Op's literary work, however, is all for naught as he claims in the novel's final sentences: "I might just as well have saved the labor and sweat I had put into trying to make my reports harmless. They didn't fool the Old Man. He gave me merry hell" (CN 187). As with high modernism, textual obfuscation can work, but not with a trained, sophisticated reader.

Hammett's later work, like that of other vernacular modernists, drifted in different aesthetic directions. In *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key*, texts that have already received attention as potentially "modernist" novels, he modifies the vernacular narration

utilized in the Op stories, turning it into an almost anti-subjective narrative form. Here, the reader is allowed absolutely no access to the consciousness of any of the characters. The wholesale rejection of the subjective suggests the opposite end of the modernist spectrum: the distanced poetics of Eliot and Pound, the emotionless narratives of Wyndham Lewis, and Roland Barthes's conception of "degree zero" writing. The narration, however, remains clipped and brittle, a kind of objective transformation of the vernacular style Hammett developed in the Op stories.

While the emotionally distanced mode of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key* was certainly influential, it was the vernacular modernism of his Continental Op stories that had the most profound effect on the genre of detective fiction. In works like "The Big Knock-Over" and *Red Harvest*, the foregrounding of language as part of an epistemological artifice, one that often conceals as much as it reveals, is at the heart of the hard-boiled. As writers like Daly and Hammett realized, the world, read through an individual's subjectivity, is not the objectively legible, realist environment of the classical detective story. Instead, it is filtered through one's consciousness and again mediated by the language used to narrate one's experience in that world. Not only do these writers suggest "the possibilities for writing in a modernist mode using the language of the streets," as Jon Thompson has argued; they also use the language of the streets to imply the necessary limits of all linguistic expression.⁹⁶ This complex attitude toward the "language of the streets," an attitude that invests the language of working-class figures with a self-consciously aesthetic and critiques the artificiality of the genteel, is a powerful element of vernacular modernism, an argument that also makes its way into the

treacherous debate surrounding the politics of linguistic representation in African-American fiction of the 1920s.

¹ Gertrude Stein, *Writings, 1932-1946*, (New York: Library of America, 1998), 358.

² Raymond Chandler, *Later Novels & Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 977.

³ Joseph T. Shaw, "Introduction" to *The Hard-Boiled Omnibus: Early Stories from Black Mask* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), viii.

⁴ Raymond Chandler, *Later Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 979. In her study *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, Erin A. Smith has noted how Chandler's argument works to gender the Golden Age writers (frequently British) as feminine against the American "man...who is himself not mean" with which his essay culminates. Erin A. Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000), 36-42. For another compelling look at the masculine gendering of the detective story in the 1920s, see Christopher Breu, *Hard-Boiled Masculinities* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006).

⁵ Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989), 240. Clearly, Orvell's description has as much to do with naturalism as it does with realism. However, it is important to remember that the theory behind naturalism emphasized the stronger power that social forces exerted in the lives of the poor.

⁶ Chandler, 988-989.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 989.

⁸ Of course, as with other literary genres, including "high" literature, earlier aesthetic modes continued to appear, and the success of S.S. Van Dine and Ellery Queen's "classic" work through the 1920s and beyond speaks to the ways in which an older mode is never clearly or cleanly supplanted by a new one.

⁹ "The Aim of Black Mask," *Black Mask* 10.4 (June 1927): iii.

¹⁰ Major examples of these include Howard Haycraft, *Murder For Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1941); Julian Symons, *Mortal Consequences: A History – From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); as well as broader studies like John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976).

¹¹ Even Joyce's *Ulysses* appeared as a topic of discussion in hard-boiled writer Raoul Whitfield's 1932 novel *The Virgin Kills*. For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Sean McCann, "'A Roughneck Reaching for Higher Things': The Vagaries of Pulp Populism," *Radical History Review* 61 (1995): 4-34.

¹² S.S. Van Dine, *I Used to Be a Highbrow, But Look at Me Now* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929).

¹³ As a case in point, the Library of America has produced two-volume editions of the work of both Hammett (1999 and 2001) and Chandler (1995), an effective canonization by one of the major cultural institutions in American literary studies. In addition, Chandler's story "Red Wind" appears in the most recent (i.e. 7th) edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

¹⁴ For an excellent description of the classical detective story, see John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1976), 80-138.

¹⁵ S.S. Van Dine's Philo Vance serves as an excellent example of what happens to decadence with the onset of modernism. Vance, the amateur psychoanalyst and collector of modernist art, has tastes that seem evolved from the late nineteenth-century sensibilities of Holmes. His affected manner of speech (dropping his g's and utilizing slang at inappropriate moments) points toward modernism (or at least toward a modern sensibility). But, if modernist at all, Vance seems to be a modernist character trapped in a series of rigorously realist novels.

¹⁶ Arguably, the environment Dupin occupies is (appropriately) one of Romanticism. From the dark parlor rooms where he and the narrator talk during the day to the cacophony of voices that confuse and disturb in "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin's Paris is only truly legible to Dupin, whose uncanny ability to get inside the criminal mind of his antagonist (as in "The Purloined Letter") speaks to the Romantic spirit of his works.

¹⁷ William W. Stowe, "From Semiotics to Hermeneutics: Modes of Detection in Doyle and Chandler," in *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 367.

¹⁸ For one example of a purely Romantic detective story, see Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly; or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799), in which the title character's investigation into the death of his close friend goes completely awry because the Romantic environment is almost totally illegible and incomprehensible.

¹⁹ Franco Moretti, in a structuralist/Marxist study of the genre, sees Watson as far less intelligent than the reader: "although we will never be as clever as the detective, we could never be as stupid as Watson. Detective fiction thus assigns the reader an intermediary role between the extremes of *passive reading* (Watson automatically records events that he does not understand) and of *writing* (Holmes, who narrates the *fabula*, emerges as the true author of the work: Poe affirmed that in writing short stories, one must always start from the solution)." See Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (1983, repr. London: Verso, 2005), 148.

²⁰ Stowe, 378, 380.

²¹ Cawelti, 146.

²² One of the more direct descendants of Carter in the pulps is Erle Stanley Gardner's Ed Jenkins, "The Phantom Crook," who appeared in nearly seventy-five stories in *Black Mask*. While Jenkins is not technically a detective (though he often masqueraded as one), he is a master of disguise along the lines of Carter.

²³ A Celebrated Author, "Nick Carter, Detective," *Nick Carter Detective Library* 1 (8 August 1891): 6. Compare this to Chandler's Philip Marlowe, who consistently sinks into a "black hole" when slugged from behind.

²⁴ For a discussion of how dime novels use disguise and disinheritance as ways of masking (and then unmasking) the natural nobility of working-class characters, see Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), esp. 167-200.

²⁵ Shaw, vii.

²⁶ For an example of this, see Sheldon Norman Grebstein, "The Tough Hemingway and His Hard-Boiled Children" in *Tough-Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), 18-41.

²⁷ Ken Worpole, *Dockers and Detectives: Popular Reading, Popular Writing* (London: Verso, 1983), 35. Worpole's consideration of what he calls "the masculine style in popular fiction" anticipates the work of Erin A. Smith in *Hard-Boiled* and Christopher Breu in *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*.

²⁸ Hemingway probably did not encounter the hard-boiled writers in their original pulp context, though he later had an interesting relationship with the pulps. However, he certainly read Hammett's work, something he mentions in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932, repr. New York: Scribner, 2003): "So we were very careful about death for a while. My eyes were too bad to read and my wife was reading Dashiell Hammett's bloodiest to date, *The Dain Curse*, out loud and every time that Mr. Hammett would kill a character or a set of characters she would substitute the word umpty-umped for the words killed, cut the throat of, blew the brains out of, spattered around the room, and so on" (228).

²⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (1964, repr. New York: Scribner, 2003), 12. The economic conditions of production under which the pulp authors worked are most clearly articulated in two memoirs of the era: Frank Gruber, *The Pulp Jungle* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, Inc., 1967) and Harold Hersey, *The Pulpwood Editor: The Fabulous World of the Thriller Magazines Revealed by a Veteran Editor and Publisher* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1937). For a discussion of how these conditions impacted both aesthetics and ideology of writers in *Black Mask*, see Sean McCann, "'A Roughneck Reaching for Higher Things': The Vagaries of Pulp Populism." These conditions have their roots in the dime novels of the late nineteenth century. For a discussion of one related genre of dime novels and the conditions of dime-novel writers, see Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 1-36 and Denning, 17-26.

³⁰ James Naremore, "Dashiell Hammett and the Poetics of Hard-Boiled Detection" in *Art in Crime Writing: Essays on Detective Fiction*, ed. Bernard Benstock (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 67; Eysteinnsson, 30.

³¹ Jon Thompson, *Fiction, Crime, and Empire: Clues to Modernity and Postmodernism* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993), 135. See also Christopher T. Raczkowski, "From Modernity's Detection to Modernist

Detectives: Narrative Vision in the Work of Allan Pinkerton and Dashiell Hammett," *Modern Fiction Studies* 49.4 (Winter 2003): 629-659.

³² From the city mysteries of the 1840s to the adventure tales published in pulp magazines in the decades that preceded the emergence of the hard-boiled, characters often acted upon the violent, crime-ridden world around them. The connection between violence and detection and the hard-boiled detective story's debt to the Western are discussed in William Ruehlmann, *Saint With a Gun: The Unlawful American Private Eye* (New York: New York UP, 1974) and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998), 217-228. For Slotkin's discussion of city mysteries, see Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 151-158.

³³ Denning, *Mechanic Accents*, 24.

³⁴ "The Aim of Black Mask," iii.

³⁵ *Black Mask* 12.8 (October 1929): vi.

³⁶ Shaw, vii.

³⁷ Ron Goulart, *The Dime Detectives* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1988), 20.

³⁸ *Black Mask* 7.8 (October 1924): 40.

³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 94.

⁴⁰ "New Mystery Stories," *The New York Times* 23 April 1933, BR19.

⁴¹ Michael S. Barson, "'There's No Sex in Crime': The Two-Fisted Homilies of Race Williams," *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 2.2 (Fall-Winter 1981): 110.

⁴² Philip Durham, "The Black Mask School" in *Tough-Guy Writers of the Thirties*, ed. David Madden (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1968), 58.

⁴³ Goulart, 32.

⁴⁴ William F. Nolan, *The Black Mask Boys* (New York: The Mysterious Press, 1985), 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 39.

⁴⁶ "From the Author of Knights of the Open Palm," *Black Mask* 6.5 (1 June 1923): 127.

⁴⁷ Erle Stanley Gardner, "Getting Away With Murder," *The Atlantic Monthly* 215 (January 1956): 72.

⁴⁸ This December 1922 issue of *Black Mask* did contain Hammett's debut in the magazine, a short international adventure story called "The Road Home" (published under the pseudonym Peter Collinson), which contained nothing of the hard-boiled style that would appear later in his Continental Op stories.

⁴⁹ Breu, 46-55. This style would return to *Black Mask*, in a slightly more hard-boiled fashion, under the editorship of Fanny Ellsworth (December 1936 – April 1940) in the work of writers like Cornell Woolrich.

⁵⁰ Sterling Ward, "Under the Crimson Skull," *Black Mask* 3.1 (April 1921): 29.

⁵¹ The psychoanalytic undertones of the story are made explicit here, as the narrator's father is, in fact, a practitioner of the medical precursor to psychology.

⁵² Carroll John Daly, "Dolly," *Black Mask* 5.6 (Oct 1922): 57, 59.

⁵³ Breu, 47.

⁵⁴ "Something New For You," *Black Mask* 5.6 (Oct 1922): 65.

⁵⁵ In the interim, the magazine shifted from a monthly to a bi-monthly publication schedule, beginning in February 1923.

⁵⁶ C.P.O., "We Interest Him Strangely," *Black Mask* 6.4 (15 May 1923): 127.

⁵⁷ Carroll John Daly, "The Ambulating Lady," *The Writer's Digest* 27 (April 1947): 21.

⁵⁸ Marcus Duffield, "The Pulp: Day Dreams For the Masses," *Vanity Fair* 40.4 (June 1933): 26.

⁵⁹ Carroll John Daly, "Paying an Old Debt," *The American Magazine* 95.4 (April 1923): 15.

⁶⁰ C.S. Montanye, "Looking Out for Orchid," *Black Mask* 1.2 (May 1920): 105. Since Mencken was highly involved with the selection of manuscripts in the first year of *Black Mask*, it is unsurprising that this Lardneresque piece made it into the pages of the magazine, in spite of its incongruity with much of the rest of the issue's contents.

⁶¹ Carroll John Daly, "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley," *Black Mask* 6.11 (1 September 1923): 50.

⁶² *Ibid*, 61.

⁶³ Because of its close relationship to gambling and corruption and its own poetry of violence, boxing is the sport most frequently included in hard-boiled stories. Two notable instances are in Hammett's *Red Harvest* and Raoul Whitfield's "Murder in the Ring" (*Black Mask*, December 1930).

⁶⁴ Daly, "Kiss-the-Canvas Crowley," 61.

⁶⁵ Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

⁶⁶ Carroll John Daly, "The False Burton Combs" in *The Hard-Boiled Detective: Stories From Black Mask Magazine, 1920-1951* ed. Herbert Ruhm (New York: Vintage, 1977), 3.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 9-10.

⁶⁸ Sean McCann has written an excellent analysis of Daly's "Knights of the Open Palm" and its ideological critique of the Klan in the context of *Black Mask's* notorious Klan issue. See *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 39-86. For another consideration of this, see Quan Zhang, "Behind *Black Mask*: The Marketplace and *Black Mask* Fiction of the 1920s and 1930s" (PhD diss., University of Maryland – College Park, 1993), 105-151.

⁶⁹ Carroll John Daly, "Knights of the Open Palm" in *The Great American Detective* eds. William Kittredge and Steven M. Krauzer (New York: Mentor, 1978), 18.

⁷⁰ In his essay on crime fiction, "Raffles and Miss Blandish," George Orwell lauds the moral sensibility of earlier crime fiction over the equivocation of mid-twentieth century pulp fiction. See George Orwell, "Raffles and Miss Blandish," in *As I Please, 1943-1945* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968), 212-224.

⁷¹ Carroll John Daly, *The Snarl of the Beast* (1927, repr. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 1.

⁷² *Black Mask* 10.10 (December 1927): 33.

⁷³ Richard Layman and Julie M. Rivett, eds., *Selected Letters of Dashiell Hammett, 1921-1960* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2001), 47.

⁷⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (1937, repr. Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993), 2-3.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3-4.

⁷⁶ In addition, "Tulip," the unfinished manuscript Hammett left at his death, concerns the struggles of a writer late in his career.

⁷⁷ Steven Marcus, "Dashiell Hammett and the Continental Op," *Partisan Review* 41.3 (1974): 371.

⁷⁸ Naremore, 61, 67.

⁷⁹ Thompson, 135.

⁸⁰ Raczkowski, 651.

⁸¹ David M. Earle, "Re-covering Modernism: Pulp Modernism and the Prejudice of Form" (PhD diss., University of Miami, 2004), 113. Paula Rabinowitz uses the same term in *Black & White & Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002), but her interests here involve how the cinematic style of *film noir* actively engages both leftist and populist politics as well as ideas of race and gender in American history.

⁸² Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction After Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003), 175.

⁸³ Layman and Rivett, 46.

⁸⁴ Probably the most well-known example of a writer using a pseudonym in the pulps was Frederick Faust, who published poetry under his own name and became the "king of the pulps" under the pseudonym Max Brand.

⁸⁵ For one example of this, see William Marling, *The American Roman Noir: Hammett, Cain, and Chandler* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995), 93-147.

⁸⁶ Dashiell Hammett, "The Advertisement IS Literature," *Western Advertising* 9.3 (October 1926): 35.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 36. The connection to Stein's repetitious style here is obvious.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ I will be using the texts of Hammett's stories reprinted in Dashiell Hammett, *Crime Stories and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2001). Hereafter, stories will be cited in text with the notation CS.

⁹⁰ Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 114.

⁹¹ For a discussion of the changes Hammett made between *Red Harvest's* publication as a serial and between covers, see E.R. Hagemann, "'The Cleansing of Poisonville' to *Red Harvest*," *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 7.2 (Fall-Winter 1985): 115-132.

⁹² A great deal of criticism, including Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front*, has already attempted to fit *Red Harvest* into the paradigm of the proletarian novel. Like Gold's work, discussed in Chapter Two, Hammett's aesthetic is absorbed in the violence and corruption of the environment, and *Red Harvest* offers even less of a proletarian hope at its conclusion. Still, *Red Harvest* clearly demonstrates some element of

Hammett's political thinking that might be usefully connected to the vernacular expressionism of Gold and the work of other proletarian writers.

⁹³ Dashiell Hammett, *Complete Novels* (New York: The Library of America, 1999), 5. Hammett's novels will hereafter be cited in text with the notation *CN*.

⁹⁴ In James, language is rarely the problem; it is the characters who fail the language, not the other way around.

⁹⁵ Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1981), 137.

⁹⁶ Thompson, 146.

CHAPTER FOUR
"The necromancy of language":
The Re-emergence of Dialect as Vernacular Modernist Invention in the Work of
Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay

Maybe these Nordics at last have tuned in on our wave-length. Maybe they are at last learning to speak our language.

Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem" (1927)¹

The terms "vernacular" and "modernism" inflect themselves quite differently in the realm of African-American literary study than they do in the different strands of popular literature discussed to this point. While the bulk of "You've Got to Be Modernistic" has centered on the application of these terms to texts that have rarely been called examples of "vernacular" writing or of "modernism," these two words carry a different kind of weight in African-American literary theory. Both conjure up anxieties that run back to some of the earliest attempts by anthologies and critical studies to canonize the work of African-American authors, for example: James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry* (first edition, 1922; second edition, 1931), V.F. Calverton's *Anthology of American Negro Literature* (1929), and Robert Bone's *Negro Novel in America* (1958). Early versions of the African-American canon stood in the shadow of the larger canon of American literature, striving to find ways to articulate a kind of literary equality with mainstream white writers of the period. As a result, they rejected the tradition of nineteenth-century dialect writing, with Johnson noting in his 1927 introduction to *God's Trombones* that "*traditional* Negro dialect as a form for Aframerican poets is absolutely dead."²

At the same time, critics of African-American literature have investigated the question of a potential "black modernism," almost always measuring the achievements of African-American writers against the standards of white, European modernism. Indeed,

the Winter 1991-1992 issue of the journal *MELUS* confronts this question directly; subtitled "Black Modernism and Post-modernism," this issue begins with an editorial statement that notes "[t]he criticism of American literature has disconnected modernism, avant-gardism and postmodernism from the development of African American literature in the twentieth century."³ While the last two decades have seen an increasing critical interest in the crosscurrents between high modernism and African-American modernism, resulting in a host of studies, these critical works continue to define African-American modernism, particularly modernist prose, as a latecomer to the literary field. With one clear exception—Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923)—African-American writers did not "achieve" modernist prose, such studies suggest, until the emergence of the heavily psychoanalytic subjects of Chester Himes and Ralph Ellison in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴

This chapter examines the flaws in this literary historical characterization. Certainly, the majority of texts published by African-American writers in the modernist era subscribed to earlier realist aesthetics, but, then again, so did the vast majority of publications by white writers. The rubric of vernacular modernism allows for a productive re-reading of texts from this era. While African-American writers generally avoided the first-person narrative—one of the major elements of the vernacular modernist texts discussed to this point—the interest in language and self-representation remained paramount. More recently, African-American texts from this era have been worked into the traditional modernist paradigm. For example, critics have identified works by Nella Larsen as modernist, and the passing novel itself (including one important first-person narrative, Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* [1912]) resembles a kind

of ontological modernist document, where the phrase "make it new" applies to identities as well as texts.⁵

Passing novels, however, generally reject vernacular language in favor of bourgeois society as a central thematic. It is in other 1920s novels of the urban north, particularly the Harlem novels of Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay, where the tropes of nineteenth-century black dialect are resurrected, turned on their heads, and reborn as a form of vernacular modernism. In their fiction, Fisher and McKay reject the gentility of realist representation as well as the bourgeois environments and perspectives it implies; in its place, they promote an aesthetic that values the creative potential of Harlem street slang. Countering the "uplift" tradition in African-American literature that centered the narrative on virtuous, middle-class characters, both Fisher and McKay emphasize working-class characters, conflicts, and language. Their appropriation and transformation of black dialect position these two writers as vernacular modernists, suggesting a framework for understanding the experimental language in both poetry and prose of African-American writers in the context of larger literary developments in the United States.

"Sordid, foolish, and criminal": Realist Anxieties and Racial Representation

When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray?

"The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed"
(1926)⁶

At the turn of the twentieth century, major African-American fiction writers like Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, Frances E.W. Harper, and Paul Laurence Dunbar continued to use dialect to establish regional, educational and socio-economic hierarchies

among their characters. With the arrival of the New Negro Renaissance in the early 1920s, dialect poetry and dialect characters began to disappear. While debates over the "proper" forms of representation to achieve political progress raged in journals like *The Crisis*, fiction by African-American writers maintained a focus on the "talented tenth," a black bourgeoisie that consciously spoke without any racialized marker. This approach served as an explicit contrast to the inflammatory and essentialist depictions of African-American characters throughout American literary history in the work of white writers like William Gilmore Simms, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Dixon, and Octavus Roy Cohen. African-American critics of these writers are emblematic of what Madhu Dubey has called the "uplift" paradigm of African-American literature, viewing literature as an ideological battleground over representation.⁷ This tradition is most fully exemplified by Du Bois's statement that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists."⁸ As with other marginalized groups (such as the Jewish-American writers discussed in Chapter Two), literary texts became the location where African-American writers strove to demonstrate a common humanity through language; keeping in mind the potential of a white readership, these writers spun tales of a black middle-class existence that emphasized a similarity with the lives of many white readers.⁹

Opponents of this relatively rigid position included writers associated with the short-lived journal *Fire!!* (1926), as well as other writers of the Renaissance, including Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay. The denial of dialect and other folk forms, these opponents argued, amounted to a denial of "blackness" itself; in ridding African-American literature of dialect and other elements of black vernacular culture, writers were turning their work "white." Langston Hughes's well-known essay "The Negro

Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1925) stands as the most famous articulation of this position, but other writers in this camp made similar claims. In a 1927 essay entitled "Negro Artists and the Negro," Wallace Thurman set Hughes's poetry in opposition to works by Jessie Fauset and Walter White, who wrote "just the sort of literary works both Negroes and sentimental whites desired Negroes to write."¹⁰ By bringing the notion of sentimentality into the rubric, Thurman evokes the "matricidal" modernist critique of nineteenth-century American sentimental culture.¹¹

Interestingly, a number of critics, such as David Levering Lewis in the influential *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, have argued that the Harlem Renaissance was itself a failure because of its unwillingness to wholeheartedly embrace vernacular culture as opposed to assimilationist ideologies.¹² Lewis's evaluation speaks to the ways in which, in the larger narrative of African-American literary history, the advocates of dialect literature and vernacular culture ultimately won the ideological battle over representation begun in the 1920s. Johnson gave in and praised the dialect poems of Sterling Brown in his 1932 preface to *Southern Road*. The work of the Black Arts movement in the late 1960s, the recuperation of writers like Zora Neale Hurston in the 1970s, and the work of writers drawing on Hurston have recentered both dialect characters and vernacular narration in the African-American literary tradition as sources of identity and pride. African-American literary theory has followed suit. In the 1980s, the work of critics Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. posited vernacular theories of African-American literature.¹³

To a significant degree, however, anxieties remain constellated around these theories. The notion of a fundamentally different vernacular cultural form of African-

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American writing posits two dangerous assumptions. The first is that these writers were largely disengaged from literature outside the insulated African-American vernacular tradition. Such an assumption ignores the degree to which African-American writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were operating in dialogue with the rest of the literary marketplace, importing and transforming modes like melodrama, realism, and naturalism, and adapting genres like the adventure tale, the domestic novel, and the political thriller in their work.¹⁴ The most notorious example of this cross-fertilization is Ralph Ellison, who proudly claimed to have been exclusively influenced by European modernists in writing *Invisible Man* (1952).¹⁵ The same holds true for the early work of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, who in 1959 listed “Lorca, Williams, Pound and Charles Olson” as his “greatest influence.”¹⁶ Critics like Ann Douglas (in *Terrible Honesty*) and George Hutchinson (in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*) have stressed the crosscurrents that invigorated the cultural production of the 1920s on both sides of the color line. Hutchinson’s introduction is a particularly succinct discussion of the importance and complexity of the “interracial dynamics” of the era, a position that has gone into somewhat of an eclipse with the recent vogue for seeing the Harlem Renaissance as part of a transatlantic, diasporic vernacular culture.¹⁷

At the same time, the argument for an entirely separate thread of African-American vernacular culture veers dangerously close to a kind of racial essentialism. The explosion of black diasporic studies has, in its less thoughtful permutations, suggested this very thing. The notion that writers of African descent on four or more continents have shared the same experiences—and therefore have produced work that crosses enormous geographical, social, economic, and political boundaries is difficult to argue

convincingly. Adamant adherents of commonalities across the African diaspora must resort to strange logic in order to claim that African identity crosses these boundaries, without simultaneously suggesting any notion of racial essentialism. This is not to imply that all diasporic studies lapse into racial essentialism. Certainly, many African-American writers of the twentieth century and beyond found their work profoundly transformed by experiences abroad and developed relationships with intellectuals of African origin in other parts of the world, whether in the Caribbean, in Europe, or in Africa.¹⁸ By and large, however, I would suggest that the vast majority of African-American writers of the modernist era spoke first and foremost to the local and national conditions of African-Americans in the United States, and that they wrote for a domestic readership.

Hutchinson powerfully argues that a large number of Harlem Renaissance writers were full participants in an interracial project of building an American national identity, something more important to these writers than emphasizing diasporic ties to Africa.

In relatively recent scholarship, the issue of vernacular culture has intersected quite directly with theories of African-American modernism. Without a doubt, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* both announced themselves as modernist texts: Toomer's text through its modernist fragmentation and mixture of styles and Ellison's through its heavily psychoanalytic interiority. The problem, for many critics, has been the perceived absence of any sustained presence of modernist prose writing in the thirty years that separated the publication of these two books. The poetry of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, among others, has strong modernist connections (particularly with analogies to a jazz aesthetic); as Brent Hayes Edwards has written of Hughes, "the spoken black vernacular can provide the material of a modernist lyric

poetics—without mediation, without any of the rarefied quirks that are so often taken to connote ‘poetry.’”¹⁹ However, modernist fiction, in most articulations of African-American literary history, eludes writers until the mid-twentieth century.²⁰ The presumed lack of any bonafide modernist successor to Toomer’s experimental *Cane* has given critics of African-American literature pause, and has also, I would argue, contributed to the “separate but equal” status of African-American literary studies in the larger context of American literary studies. Since modern literary criticism and the literary canon were both organized around the aesthetic principles of modernism, the long-standing exclusion of pre-Ellison African-American fiction from the American literary canon has been systematic and suggestive of a hierarchical racial essentialism of its own.²¹

Realism and not modernism, critics argue, provided the most effective means of launching a racial critique of America. As George Hutchinson notes, “Adopting and adapting the tools that were most available, appropriate, and powerful in the context of the cultural fray, [Harlem Renaissance writers] affiliated primarily with a type of literature that critiqued, in a ‘realistic’ mode, the forms of American social hierarchy.”²² The prevailing notion, then, among these writers was that the mode of realism provided a window into images of racial injustice, unclouded by stylistic or formal obstacles, while modernism’s emphasis on form over content jeopardized these same critiques. Other critics have argued that social and political conditions imposed on African-Americans short-circuited any ability of African-Americans to conceive of themselves as modernist subjects in the same way that white writers did. The resulting emphasis on realism as the dominant mode of aesthetic representation in African-American fiction has become the critical orthodoxy when discussing the period before Ellison.

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Competing with the historical narrative of a realist/modernist dichotomy, a number of critics have proposed vernacular theories of African-American literature that begin to suture the ideas of the vernacular and modernism. The earliest of these is Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, where he articulates two interlocking concepts—the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery"—both of which posit a relationship to vernacular language (and specifically to dialect writing). According to Baker, these two strains of African-American cultural production derive from Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, respectively, and refer to the relationship each figure demonstrates to the received traditions of white hegemonic culture. Unable to completely upset white control over black representation, writers and performers in these two strands must either master the form (as in Washington's 1895 "Atlanta Exposition Address") or pervert the form itself by exaggerating particularly subversive elements of the received representation.

Baker works through a number of crucial texts and cultural figures in the African-American canon, arriving at an articulation of modernism that centers Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* as the quintessential modernist text (as opposed to Toomer's *Cane* or Ellison's *Invisible Man*). "The indisputably modern moment in Afro-American discourse arrives," Baker writes, "when the *intellectual* poet Brown, masterfully mantled in the wisdom of his Williams College Phi Beta Kappa education, gives forth to the deformative sounds of Ma Rainey."²³ For Baker, it is essential that the mastery of traditions and the willingness to "deform" those traditions both appear for an African-American modernism to emerge: "The blending...of class and mass—*poetic* mastery discovered as a function of deformative *folk* sound—constitutes the essence of black discursive modernism."²⁴

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Baker’s concept of “black discursive modernism” is historically grounded and firmly situated in the modernist era, suggesting an African-American modernism coexistent with European and Anglo-American modernisms.

Following Baker, critics like Edward M. Pavlić have attempted to articulate theories of African-American modernism that engage the vernacular. In *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture* (2002), Pavlić goes so far as to identify two black modernisms—not unlike Baker’s binary. “Afro-modernism,” for Pavlić, describes “black writing with close affinities for European and American modernist concerns,” while “diasporic modernism” “seeks alternatives.”²⁵ Pavlić’s central subjects are predictable: Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison become examples of “Afro-modernism,” while Hurston, in a reading that relies heavily on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s vernacular theory, serves as his sole example of “diasporic modernism.” Pavlić’s study suggests the immense difficulties for scholars of African-American literature to imagine something outside the strict binary of European forms of modernism or vernacular theories of culture to identify some form of black modernism in American writing.

Throughout “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic” I have been arguing that the values of the commercial literary marketplace are not necessarily antithetical to the kinds of literary experimentation—narrational, representational, etc.—associated with modernism. With African-American literature, these values more explicitly involve the politics of realist representation. Throughout the 1920s, African-American intellectuals debated about how black writers might write fiction that was both commercially successful and ideologically useful for the African-American community. Commercial success was not,

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as Pound or other high modernists might have claimed, anathema to literary goals; in fact, black intellectuals hoped for commercial success that would promote positive portrayals of middle-class African-Americans to a literary marketplace flooded with stereotypical images in virtually all forms of popular media. For many of these thinkers, most of them associated with the “first wave” of the Harlem Renaissance, the realist paradigm—with its belief in the mimetic quality of language—was best suited for the ideological project of uplift. By the mid-1920s, however, a younger group of artists had begun making inroads into the literary and intellectual journals of Harlem; these writers sought to represent a wider swath of African-American life, including facets previously excluded from “polite” fiction. Importantly, though, these writers strove not only to represent new elements, but also to find in these subjects new means of representation, experimental forms that rejected the assumptions of realism. At the center of these debates lies one of the most important discussions of the role and responsibility of progressive artists with respect to racial representation during this period.

In 1926, *The Crisis*, the W.E.B. Du Bois-edited journal of the NAACP, published a symposium entitled “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed.” Running on an almost monthly basis from March through November, the magazine asked prominent American authors and publishers a series of seven questions dealing with the sorts of “obligations or limitations” an artist might face in representing African-American characters. Respondents included a number of white authors who had published texts about black culture, including Carl Van Vechten (the very first contributor to the symposium), Du Bose Heyward, Vachel Lindsay, Sherwood Anderson, Haldane McFall, and Julia Peterkin. Important white social critics such as H.L. Mencken and Sinclair

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Lewis also contributed, and Alfred A. Knopf submitted a brief response. Major figures in the NAACP, *The Crisis*, and the Harlem Renaissance were also featured: these included Mary W. Ovington, J.E. Spingarn, Walter White, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Benjamin Brawley, and Countee Cullen. The narrative created by these responses is strange in its near universal agreement that, as Julia Peterkin put it, "for the most part I have small sympathy with propagandists of any kind or color. In my opinion, the minute any one becomes an advocate he ceases to be an artist."²⁶ Though some disagreed on some issues, for example that "the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes [was] convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid" or that there was "a real danger that young colored writers will be tempted to follow the popular trend in portraying Negro character in the underworld rather than seeking to paint the truth about themselves and their own social class," the freedom of the artist from any obligation or limitation still took precedence in virtually all of the responses.

It is in the context of this symposium that W.E.B. Du Bois's well-known polemic "Criteria of Negro Art" should rightly be understood.²⁷ Though not officially a part of the symposium, "Criteria of Negro Art" appeared in the October 1926 issue of *The Crisis*, the month immediately following the issue that contained Peterkin's response. After six months of the symposium (no responses appeared in July), there was very little disagreement among the contributors, excepting Haldane McFall's vitriolic response to a negative review he had received in *The Crisis*. Perhaps the leading questions in the questionnaire had not prompted the kinds of responses Du Bois, as editor of *The Crisis*, had hoped. Du Bois's essay famously declares that "all Art is propaganda and ever must

be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent."²⁸ The "purists" Du Bois references here are most certainly the black and white contributors to the symposium who deviated from the leading propagandistic questionnaire.²⁹

In effect, "Criteria of Negro Art" operates as a kind of explicit suspension of the symposium, halting it dead in its tracks. Read in sequence with the symposium responses, Du Bois's essay has an air of finality to it, ending the discussion that he clearly felt was missing the point about the politics of African-American representation in popular culture. Despite its conclusive tone, Du Bois's essay did not end the symposium, as it contained one more installment in the November 1926 issue of *The Crisis*. This response, by Charles W. Chesnutt, rearticulated many of the points that Du Bois had soundly criticized, and the inclusion of Chesnutt's response (after Du Bois's essay) suggests a feeling of editorial obligation to such an important and influential figure of the black American literary past.

Though the symposium officially ended with Chesnutt's contribution, its own narrative continued outside the bounds of the questionnaire in the December 1926 issue of *The Crisis*. With a scathing review of Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, Du Bois brings the discussion full circle: Van Vechten's response in the symposium was the first published in the March issue, and Du Bois's review of *Nigger Heaven* sees the novel as a kind of betrayal, claiming that "Harlem is no such place as that, and no one knows this

better than Carl Van Vechten."³⁰ Other African-American intellectuals would have more moderate opinions about the novel. In *Opportunity*, James Weldon Johnson defended the novel, claiming in interesting terms that "Mr. Van Vechten is a modernist. In literature he is the child of his age. In *NIGGER HEAVEN* he has written a modern novel in every sense. He has written about the most modern aspects of Negro life, and he has done it in the most modern manner; for he has completely discarded and scrapped the old formula and machinery for a Negro novel."³¹

Johnson's choice of words here, calling the novel "modern" and Van Vechten "modernist," is compelling in that it suggests how far the term has traveled in critical circles since 1926. While this positive review of *Nigger Heaven* suggests all the ways in which its subject and approach are new, Du Bois saw the text as politically reprehensible and retrograde in its representation of African-American life. In truth, the novel sits somewhere in between. Its representations are neither as old-fashioned and racist as Du Bois imagines nor as experimental as Johnson sees them. The fact that Van Vechten was the first person to write a "serious" and popular text that examined the underbelly of black urban life meant that the novel became a kind of Rorschach test for the politics of African-American representation in the mid-1920s. What is striking, though, is the degree to which *Nigger Heaven* actually follows the models established in other African-American fiction through 1926. While Johnson saw Van Vechten as a "modernist," the narrative and structural approach of the novel did not pose any significant challenge to the forms and models of realism; instead, it confirmed them.

His two protagonists, Byron Kasson and Mary Love, are both members of the educated, bourgeois class of African-Americans in Harlem. Byron, an aspiring writer,

cannot seem to get published without trafficking in black stereotypes. Mary, a librarian, falls in love with Byron but cannot keep him from sinking into debauchery after his failures as a writer. *Nigger Heaven* works as a modified passing tale, with Byron crossing not racial but moral boundaries when he cannot seem to find success in his own identity. Drawing on common tropes of realism in work by African-American writers, Van Vechten gives his representative protagonist a problem (racial representation and a kind of glass ceiling for black writers in the 1920s) and provides him with an unethical solution (sinking into the dissipated underground lifestyle in Harlem). Finally, Byron has a change of heart and unsuccessfully seeks out Mary for forgiveness, only to commit a desperate act at the novel's conclusion. All in all, the structure of Van Vechten's novel is not substantially different from the majority of fiction written by African-Americans to that point. Its only major innovation was its slumming in the Harlem underworld, something that was nearly absent from all African-American fiction (with the exception of Dunbar's 1902 naturalist novel *The Sport of the Gods*).³²

Ultimately, Van Vechten's representations of African-American culture were largely seen as in line with other racist white depictions, emphasizing the "sordid, foolish, and criminal" elements that Du Bois feared would dominate art about African-Americans. However, the subjects of working-class characters and language opened the doors for two black writers to challenge the realist conventions on which such racist tropes depend in 1928, two years after both *The Crisis* symposium and the publication of *Nigger Heaven*. This year was a crucial midpoint between Toomer's *Cane* (1923) and Brown's *Southern Road* (1932), the only two publications frequently identified as examples of African-American modernism before *Invisible Man*.³³ In *The Walls of*

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Jericho (1928) and *Home to Harlem* (1928), Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay demonstrate a particular brand of vernacular modernism, attuned to the specific conventions of the African-American novelistic traditions and to the politics of representation in the Harlem Renaissance. In their work of the late 1920s, Fisher and McKay seek to equate a black vernacular language with aesthetic experimentation and directly engage the anxieties surrounding racial representation that drove *The Crisis* symposium.

In doing so, Fisher and McKay both challenge the dominant narrative forms of the early Harlem Renaissance, as well as the conventions of African-American fiction since the mid-nineteenth century. Rather than focusing on an exemplary character that represents the possibilities of uplift in the black community, Fisher's novel *The Walls of Jericho* disperses narrative centrality, deemphasizing (and harshly parodying) the middle-class strivers while equating their experience with and even subordinating it to that of working-class figures. Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* (1929) provide an even more radical critique of these conventions, allowing the wandering vernacular figures of Jake and Banjo to dominate their narratives, while containing the normally representative intellectual figure's experience inside that of the working-class characters. In both cases, these writers demonstrate a particular kind of vernacular modernism, one that mostly backs away from a heavy focus on interiority but which ratchets up concerns with language and representation.

"Any language you had the ingenuity to devise": Dickties and Rats in Rudolph Fisher's Fiction

Despite the objections of the dickties, who prefer to ignore the existence of so-called rats, it is of interest to consider Henry Patmore's Pool Parlor on Fifth Avenue in New York.

Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928)³⁴

Of all the major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Rudolph Fisher remains one of the most enigmatic and least discussed. Like Wallace Thurman, Fisher died prematurely, but unlike Thurman, whose large-scale successes included the journal *Fire* (1926), the play *Harlem: A Melodrama of Negro Life* (1929), and the novels *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932), Fisher did not ever produce a major text that his contemporaries found fully representative of his talents. As a result, memories of him are tinted with a bit of regret as they suggest a writer who never had the opportunity to live up to his potential. In his first memoir, *The Big Sea* (1940), Langston Hughes eulogized Fisher in precisely this fashion: "The wittiest of these New Negroes of Harlem, whose tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor, was Rudolph Fisher, whose stories appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. His novel, *Walls of Jericho*, captures but slightly the raciness of his own conversation. He was a young medical doctor and X-ray specialist, who always frightened me a little, because he could think of the most incisively clever things to say—and I could never think of anything to answer."³⁵ Hughes's evaluation of Fisher's work here is telling; Fisher was well known for his lively banter (frequently in "swift and punning innuendo") that could never quite be translated into literary discourse.³⁶ In effect, the case of Fisher exemplifies the difficulty in the mid-1920s for African-American writers to recreate the vernacular language of everyday urban experience in fiction.

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Outside of Hughes's memory of his quick wit, Fisher is probably most well known for a set of small contributions to the history of the Harlem Renaissance. His short fiction and non-fiction, especially the story "The City of Refuge" (1925) and the essay "The Caucasian Storms Harlem" (published in the H.L. Mencken-edited *American Mercury* in 1927), frequently find their way into anthologies of Harlem Renaissance writing, and his second novel, *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932), is the only example of a Harlem Renaissance detective novel. While the novelty of *The Conjure-Man Dies* has led to a small amount of criticism on this novel, Fisher's first novel, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928), has effectively disappeared from the critical radar. This omission is disappointing, given the text's interest in setting itself within the debates around African-American linguistic representation, and its radical restructuring of the conventional bourgeois narrative of its contemporary models.

The critical invisibility of *The Walls of Jericho* stems from a number of sources. First, Fisher had the unlucky fate of publishing his first novel in the same year that Du Bois's *The Dark Princess*, McKay's *Home to Harlem*, and Larsen's *Quicksand* appeared. This was, by far, the most productive year in the publishing of novels to that point in the Harlem Renaissance, only matched in 1929 by published output.³⁷ In the literary historiography, Fisher's debut novel gets lost in the mix with McKay and Larsen's debuts, as well as with Du Bois's strange and ambitious internationalist novel. In fact, most critics merely group *The Walls of Jericho* with McKay's *Home to Harlem*, citing the second as the more interesting of the two books.³⁸ Actually published a few months after McKay's novel, Fisher's has become lost in the shuffle.

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A second reason that *The Walls of Jericho* has vanished is its reception by contemporary critics. The novel did raise the ire of some conservative black critics, who saw its emphasis on the working-class environment and questionable language of "Jinx" Jenkins and "Bubber" Brown as retrograde, but Fisher's moderation of these questionable characters with a variety of middle-class strivers and bourgeois "dickties" moderated the viewpoint of W.E.B. Du Bois, whose review in *The Crisis* claimed that "[i]f the background were as sincere as the main picture, the novel would be a masterpiece."³⁹ While Du Bois found the characters of Jinx and Bubber "only moderately funny, a little smutty and certainly not humanly convincing," and considered "the main story of a piano mover and a housemaid...a well done and sincere bit of psychology," other critical response was almost entirely opposed to Du Bois's perspective. An unsigned review in *The New York Times* called the central romance plot of "Shine," the piano mover, and Linda Young, the housemaid, "a rehash of regular late-nineteenth century stock melodrama," but praised the representations of the working-class, noting that "his piano movers, poolroom hangers-on, gamblers, bootleggers, 'kitchen mechanics' and other colored persons who are still permitted to talk their native dialect—however mixed with the special lingo of Harlem—have authentic quality and carry conviction."⁴⁰ The divisive issue of language is important here: for Du Bois, such language is merely "smutty," while the *New York Times* reviewer found it to be "authentic" and to "carry conviction." Like Lardner, Yezienska, and other vernacular modernists, Fisher merely "permit[s]" his characters "to talk their native dialect," allowing these figures to experiment with language on their own, outside of genteel restrictions.

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These competing reviews speak directly to the anxieties around racial representation that characterized "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Represented" in 1926. The problem with both these reviews actually lies in their insistence on seeing *The Walls of Jericho* as a text with a clear foregrounded narrative and a background full of "local color." Such formal constructions were commonplace in African-American fiction from the 1890s onward. The central narrative of the striving, upwardly-mobile figure dominated novels by Harper, Hopkins, Chesnutt, Johnson, White, and Fauset. If working-class or dialect characters appeared in these novels, they remained peripheral to the workings of the narrative itself, and were certainly not figures meant for reader identification. For all its controversial depictions of working-class life in Harlem, even Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* utilized central characters that were representative of social and economic mobility. In all these cases, the restrained aesthetics and thematics of the texts themselves are closely bound to their reluctance to venture outside the black bourgeoisie for central characters. As long as nonstandard language is considered as "dialect," it remains outside the center of narrative, always subordinate, always degraded. The narrative form, then, reinscribes certain linguistic hierarchies.

Fisher's fiction provided a significant alternative to these models from the very beginning. In his first short story, "The City of Refuge," published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1925, Fisher depicts Harlem as composed of a variety of interconnected classes, each speaking its own vernacular form, and tells the story from the perspective of someone not "above" or outside of these connections, but fully integrated within them. In this story, the central character, King Solomon Gillis, is a refugee from the South, where he "shot a white man and, with aid of a prayer and an automobile, probably escaped a

lynching.”⁴¹ While figures of the Great Migration would become central to the later work of African-American writers, especially those associated with modernism (Hurston, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, to name a few), the use of Gillis as the protagonist of this story is a radical choice for Fisher. Southern and uneducated, the refugee Gillis with his accompanying Southern language is the antithesis of black protagonists in African-American fiction through the mid-1920s.⁴² In addition, Fisher does not even attempt to explain or justify Gillis’s killing of the Southern white man; as a result, the story lacks the polemic of, for example, Walter White’s *Fire in the Flint* (1924). Both White’s novel and Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion* strive to make their central figures “representative” members of the black middle class, following Du Bois’s call for a Talented Tenth to lead the race. Even Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, frequently considered one of the great exceptions of the period, demonstrates the standardized voice of the light-skinned, highly educated Northern visitor in the exotic and culturally “other” rural South.⁴³

Gillis, however, is no leader and no symbol of African-American uplift. In fact, he is easily led astray by Mouse Uggam, another migrant from Gillis’s hometown in North Carolina. Uggam, also a vernacular character, exploits Gillis’s lack of streetwise sensibility and has him unwittingly become a distributor for narcotics. As Uggam tells his boss, the cabaret owner Tom Edwards, Gillis is “a baby jess in from the land o’ cotton and so dumb he thinks ante bellum’s an old woman.”⁴⁴ Fisher’s story, then, presents a wide swath of African-Americans: the green newcomer Gillis, the streetwise Uggam, Edwards, and, perhaps most importantly, the “cullud policemen” that astonish Gillis. Rather than merely tell the story of an exceptional middle-class figure surrounded by the “folk,”

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Fisher's story examines the ways in which the city reformulates identities and creates a diverse community—socially, economically, and linguistically. No longer is there a central, educated figure (designed for reader identification) surrounded by dialect characters that this protagonist is attempting to understand, control, or reform. Instead, migration to Harlem has created a new community with its own unique and malleable vernacular language and culture. The Harlem of Fisher's stories is not characterized by the social hierarchy of realism that privileges middle-class figures over working-class migrants. At its most radical Fisher's fiction tilts, as it does in "The City of Refuge," toward the working-class and its vibrant vernacular language. In his most ambitious work, though, Fisher creates a narrative structure that eschews a foreground/background dichotomy and equalizes the representation of vernacular figures like Gillis and the protagonists that dominated African-American fiction into the mid-1920s.

Whereas Carroll John Daly insisted that his innovative hard-boiled detective inhabited "a halfway house between the dicks and the crooks," Fisher's debut novel *The Walls of Jericho* creates a narrative that sits halfway between the "dickties" and the "rats," contemporary Harlem slang for self-important middle-class and poor African-Americans, respectively. As a result, the novel follows several different storylines. Most central is the romance between Joshua Jones, a piano mover known as "Shine," and Linda Young, a "k.m." (i.e. "kitchen mechanic," or maid) with aspirations toward becoming a secretary. Shine's friends and co-workers "Jinx" Jenkins and "Bubber" Brown provide comic commentary throughout the text and have an ongoing rivalry that reinforces a deep homosocial bond. The "racial conflict" narrative involves Fred Merrit, a light-skinned lawyer, who moves into a house on an all-white street near Harlem. Also

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figuring prominently are a host of bourgeois black and white characters including Agatha Cramp, a cold and unfeeling devotee of "Service" (*WOJ* 59). The novel's conclusion finds Shine and Linda together after the destruction of Merrit's house, not by fearful whites, but by Henry Patmore, the black owner of a Harlem pool hall and the long-time holder of a grudge against Merrit. In *The Walls of Jericho*, Fisher weaves a complex tapestry of life in Harlem, refusing to focus on a single group because of class or education and instead pushing a kind of narrative multiplicity that argues for a more representative treatment of all facets of life in Harlem.

While the novel largely classifies its characters as either "dickties" or "rats," Fisher himself is skeptical of these characterizations and plays with their implications at multiple points in the text. Still, the novel opens with a nod toward the class division in Harlem: "Despite the objections of the dickties, who prefer to ignore the existence of so-called rats, it is of interest to consider Henry Patmore's Pool Parlor on Fifth Avenue in New York" (*WOJ* 3). Fisher's invocation of middle-class objections to the depiction of "so-called rats" is itself an indictment of the unwillingness of African-American writers of the period to examine the working-class culture of Harlem, and another stab at Du Bois's anxieties over racial representation. These "dickties," presumably including many of the published African-American novelists of the early 1920s, effectively ignored the life and language of this vernacular culture. This invisibility is also a function of geography: while "there are proud streets in Harlem: Seventh Avenue of a Sunday afternoon, Strivers' Row, and The Hill," Fifth Avenue contains "bargain-stores, babble, and kids, dinginess, odors, thick speech" (*WOJ* 4, 3).

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The "thick speech" of Fifth Avenue is one of Fisher's central preoccupations in this text, as evidenced by the novel's appendix: "An Introduction to Contemporary Harlemlish, Expurgated and Abridged" (*WOJ* 295-307). To utilize one of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s signature theoretical constructs, Fisher is "signifyin(g)" heavily in this appendix. The primary object of this signification is Van Vechten, whose *Nigger Heaven* concludes with a somewhat staid two-page "Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases." Fisher's much longer "Introduction" also points to the increasing interest in African-American vernacular in linguistic and philological studies, expressly following Mencken's glaring exclusion of African-American influences on English in *The American Language*.⁴⁵ Additionally, reviews of novels by Fisher and McKay suggest that readers in the 1920s expected a glossary of terms in novels that utilized large degrees of vernacular speech.⁴⁶ Unlike Van Vechten's rather formal definitions in the glossary of *Nigger Heaven*, Fisher uses his "expurgated and abridged" glossary to emphasize the slipperiness of meaning in what he humorously terms "contemporary Harlemlish." For example, Fisher defines "ask for" as "challenge to a battle in terms that don't mean maybe," and explains "bring mud" as "to fall below expectations, disappoint. He who escorts a homely *sheba* to a *dickty shout* brings mud" (*WOJ* 297, emphasis in original).

In this "introduction" to the language of Harlem, Fisher is only slightly interested in familiarizing the reader with a "foreign" language (in the way that Van Vechten's literal definitions certainly do). Rather, Fisher sends his reader looking back and forth in the glossary, since terms are frequently defined by other terms, as the definition for "bring mud" does with the words "sheba," "dickty," and "shout." In certain cases, terms are not defined elsewhere in the glossary. The search for a final, ultimate signifier can

become a maze of linguistic referentiality.⁴⁷ At the same time, this suggests that the vernacular of Harlem does not exhibit a one-to-one correspondence with a "standard" language, indicating its own brand of inventiveness. The text of the novel itself emphasizes the modernist malleability of the vernacular. In George Patmore's pool room on Fifth Avenue, for example, "you could play for any stake and use any language you had the ingenuity to devise" (*WOJ* 5).

Fisher's text remains insistent that the language of "Harlemese" is self-consciously devised, rather than merely being some kind of transplant of Southern dialect. Indeed, this is Fisher's own version of vernacular modernism, most expressly presented in the dialogue between Jinx and Bubber, whose narrative opens the novel and provides a parallel plot that suggests more than a mere background "sub-plot." Jinx and Bubber, friends and rivals, engage in a variety of verbal battles throughout the text, including what may be the first explicit literary representation of playing (or "slipping" as Fisher terms it) the "dozens" (*WOJ* 9). One exchange between Jinx and Bubber in particular makes clear these characters' own self-consciousness about both the malleability of language and its migratory transformation in the geographically (and linguistically) diverse urban environment of Harlem.

An argument begins over the proper usage of the verb "smite" in the past participle form when Bubber notes that Shine "has been smote sho' 'nuff, though, don' it." Jinx insists the form is "smit" and the discussion develops over two pages. Bubber asks, "What you know 'bout language?" and Jinx responds "Mo' 'n you. Don' nobody talk language down yo' home in South Ca'lina." Instead, they "[d]on' talk 'tall. Jes' grunt," and Jinx finally tells Bubber that the "[f]act is, ev'y time you forgit you up nawth,

you start gruntin' in yo' native language" (*WOJ* 89). One of the funnier exchanges in the novel, Jinx and Bubber's conversation about Northern and Southern languages works on multiple levels. In part, this represents exactly the sort of characterization that both disturbed Du Bois and fascinated white reviewers of the novel, giving extended voice to African-American characters who are not explicitly part of an uplift tradition, but who nonetheless have complex and interesting linguistic lives. At the same time, this exchange flies in the face of notions that these characters are not highly self-aware; instead, they seem fully conscious of how their language operates to the point of debating its proper grammatical formulation. That one of these positions is technically "correct" is beside the point, since Fisher's goal in the novel is to highlight how vibrant and flexible the Harlem vernacular actually is. Far from the mere "gruntin'" of the "native language" of the South, the linguistic experimentation of Jinx and Bubber emphasizes the modernist invention of "any language you had the ingenuity to devise."

While Jinx and Bubber form the core of the linguistic humor of the novel, Fisher contrasts their inventive exchanges with the ridiculous and clichéd language of the middle-class dickties in the novel. Originally introduced as members of an informal club "superiorly self-named the Litter Rats," both a play on their own literary pretensions and a suggestion that the "rats" of Fifth Avenue (like Jinx and Bubber) are anything but literate, the novel's middle-class African-American figures are ruthlessly satirized throughout the text (*WOJ* 35). In contrast to the language of Jinx and Bubber, which self-consciously emphasizes its own inventiveness, the language of the dickties is ridden with clichés taken directly from bourgeois white culture. The first utterance of one of these figures is the exclamation "Preposterous!"—a sign of the preposterous and ridiculous

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nature of these characters and their language (*WOJ* 35). This explicit linguistic poaching is clearly outlined during the General Improvement Association's ball, when the "Litter Rats," occupying the box of Noel Dunn, "the Nordic editor of an anti-Nordic journal," watch the spectacle of the largely working-class characters on the dance floor. Dunn and Litter Rat member J. Pennington Potter exchange empty exclamations ("Marvelous!" "Wonderful!") during this scene (*WOJ* 102). Later, when a fight nearly breaks out between Shine and Patmore, Dunn repeats "Marvelous," "[a]nd after a moment, 'Marvelous!' cried J. Pennington Potter, like one who at last sees the light" (*WOJ* 132).

Potter may not literally have seen the light, but he has certainly heard and copied the flaccid language of the *white* figures that surround him. The larger suggestion in this scene is that Potter himself has little "ingenuity to devise" any kind of inventive or original relationship to language. Instead, the dickties of the novel are largely content repeating both linguistic and cultural tropes of the white middle-class, a critique made by a number of African-American writers of the era, including Langston Hughes in his well-known essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published in *The Nation* during the same summer in which *The Crisis* published its 1926 symposium on racial representation in art. Hughes ends his influential essay in manifesto-like fashion, claiming that "[w]e younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."⁴⁸ Hughes's

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statement about the need for African-American artists to embrace their own experiences, along with the linguistic exuberance of the working class-characters in Fisher's novel, provides a bold contrast to the presentation of dickties like Potter in *The Walls of Jericho*.

In a sense, the General Improvement Association's Annual Costume Ball, in the section of *The Walls of Jericho* titled "Uplift," creates a running commentary on the debates and anxieties surrounding "proper" representation of African-American culture. The G.I.A., a satire of an amalgamation of uplift organizations, holds the only ball in Harlem in which all sectors of society mingle. It also includes a significant amount of whites, represented by Agatha Cramp, the cold figure of charity; editor Noel Dunn; Tony Nyle, the young and flirtatious first-time visitor; Conrad White, "a writer of stories about Negroes" (*WOJ* 115); and his fiancée Betty Brown. These white figures are mingled among linguistically indistinguishable dicky African-Americans in two boxes: one contains the more straight-laced members of the "Litter Rats" while the other is full of aesthetes, clearly suggested as decadent in contrast to Potter's group. An exchange between Betty Brown and her host, the flamboyant Cornelia Bond, demonstrates Fisher's own hyper-awareness of the politics of racial representation in the late 1920s.

After the white writer Conrad White (likely a fictionalized version of Carl Van Vechten) claims that "Downtown I'm only passing. These...are my people," Betty and Cornelia discuss the writing of novels about African-American life (*WOJ* 117). Betty says, "I'm going to write a novel much better than anything else Con has ever done...and present it as the work of a Negro." Conrad responds that two things will assuredly come of this. First, "You can be sure some critic will call it the best thing ever done by a Negro," a comment to which Cornelia responds, "as if that's paying you a hell of a

compliment" (*WOJ* 118). Secondly, Conrad notes that "you can be sure that some fay will insist that it should have been more African." Cornelia glosses this comment by suggesting that "the critic's name...will probably be Rabinowitch" (*WOJ* 119).

The exchange here demonstrates the complex negotiations among black and white writers, African-American critics, and the popular white taste for the representation of an "African" primitivism. Betty's proposed novel, itself a kind of enactment of minstrel traditions ("I'm going to...present it as the work of a Negro"), could be hailed both for its authenticity of representation (as Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* was in certain circles) and simultaneously criticized for its lack of true African-ness. When Cornelia singles out a Jewish critic (Rabinowitch) as the most likely person to see such a novel as inauthentic, she speaks to the anxieties around both racial and ethnic representations of African-Americans in other art forms, as well. The drive for an authentic black representation helped to obscure the ways in which Jewish-Americans were already on the boundaries of whiteness.⁴⁹ By emphasizing a primitive African-ness in a work about African-Americans, the Jewish critic might deflect social concerns about her/his own marginal status as a "fay."⁵⁰

Thus, Fisher is negotiating a host of competing perspectives here. On the one hand, the "Litter Rats" merely parrot the bourgeois language of the whites involved in uplift organizations. Simultaneously, though, the decadent group of writers and artists parodies the white fascination with exoticism that many critics have seen as defining the Harlem Renaissance. The latter group, including white writer Conrad White, troubles notions of authenticity as claims are made that suggest the public debates around this concept (in the white press, at least) have no grounding whatsoever. When white (or in

this case, explicitly Jewish) critics become arbiters of black "authenticity," the very term is, as Potter might say, preposterous.

Importantly, though, this discussion occurs in the upper echelons of the Manhattan Casino. As Fisher writes, "[o]rdinary Negroes and rats below, dickties and fays above, the floor beneath the feet of the one constituting the roof over the heads of the other. Somehow, undeniably, a predominance of darker skins below, and, just as undeniably, of fairer skins above. Between them, stairways to climb. One might have read in that distribution a complete philosophy of skin-color, and from it deduced the past, present, and future of this people" (*WOJ* 74). The debates occurring in the boxes above have, for all intents and purposes, nothing to do with the "[o]rdinary Negroes and rats below," and it is significant that the novel's narrative primarily concerns the figures on the dance floor: Shine, Linda, Jinx, and Bubber. Of the bourgeois figures in the boxes, only the fair-skinned lawyer Fred Merritt plays any major role in the development of the novel.

In the context of most African-American novels published before 1928, Merritt would most certainly be the central figure of the narrative. A light-skinned lawyer determined to move into an all-white street near Harlem, Merritt has all the trappings of a protagonist in a text by Chesnutt, White, Fauset, or Johnson. Even the novel's title, *The Walls of Jericho*, suggests the destruction of physical walls of separation and racial segregation. As Fisher's other work (including the stories "The City of Refuge," "Ezekiel," and "The Promised Land") suggests, Fisher was fond of titles with biblical allusions. But, importantly, the reference to Jericho here is a bit of a ruse on Fisher's part. Instead of using the battle as a metaphor for interracial strife, the "walls" become

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psychologized and refer directly to the development of the piano mover Shine, whose real name is, appropriately enough, Joshua Jones.⁵¹ Shine's own internal battle is itself a kind of search for an individual authenticity; Linda recognizes that his tough attitude is primarily a kind of performance, and encourages him to plumb the depths of his own personality and tear down the walls that prevent him from experiencing life directly.

At its conclusion, *The Walls of Jericho* is the story of Shine's personal transformation from a member of a group of "rats" to an individual not wholly defined by his social circumstances; at the same time, it is an economic transformation from employee to manager of the piano moving company. Many walls come down at the novel's conclusion: Merritt's house is burned to the ground, not by racist whites, but by the resentful African-American pool hall owner Henry Patmore. Shine's disdain for the dickty Merritt cools, and Merritt partners with Shine in running the moving company. Most important to the narrative, however, is Shine's personal transformation—a kind of willed self-transformation that only really enters African-American fiction in the passing novel, itself a kind of modernist spin on interiority. Only by equating multiple narratives is Fisher able to achieve this kind of multi-layered conclusion. The various walls—themselves all surfaces—must come "tumblin' down," as the novel's epigraph declares. Simultaneously, Fisher's text seeks to bring down the walls of representation entrenched in African-American literary discourse. Through the elevation of not only Shine, but of Jinx and Bubber, the highly self-conscious "devisers" of the vernacular language of "Harlemese," Fisher's text points the way for other kinds of linguistic experimentation in African-American fiction.

"This heah language is most different from how they talk it": The Vernacular Modernism of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929)

He loved their tricks of language, loved to pick up and feel and taste new words from their rich reservoir of niggerisms. He did not like rotten-egg stock words among rough people any more than he liked colorless refined phrases among nice people. He did not even like to hear cultured people using the conventional stock words of the uncultured and thinking they were being free and modern. That sounded vulgar to him.

But he admired the black boys' unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones. There were no dots and dashes in their conversation—nothing that could not be frankly said and therefore decently—no act or fact of life for which they could not find a simple passable word. He gained from them finer nuances of the necromancy of language and the wisdom that any word may be right and magical in its proper setting.

Claude McKay, *Banjo* (1929)⁵²

With the interest in literary and cultural studies of the African diaspora consistently rising following the publication of Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* in 1993, scholarly interest in Claude McKay has increased exponentially. McKay's career is one of the most visibly international of all the writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance: born in Jamaica, he spent formative years in Harlem, traveled widely in Europe and North Africa, and made political visits to the Soviet Union. His literary output is also widely varied: he produced Jamaican dialect poetry; highly formal poetry in standard English; three novels that centered on working-class and poor communities in Harlem, Marseilles, and Jamaica; literary and political essays; and an important memoir documenting his travels. As a result, placing McKay at the center of what I have termed a national movement of American Vernacular Modernism seems to go against the grain of contemporary studies of McKay. By doing this, however, I do not seek to challenge the idea that McKay was an internationalist (he

certainly was), but to explore his heavy investment in the aesthetic and linguistic transformation of popular American writing during the 1920s.

McKay’s career began with a peculiar relationship to language. As Michael North has argued in *The Dialect of Modernism*, McKay’s work constitutes a series of “linguistic expatriations,” from the artificial donning of Jamaican dialect in his early poetry to rejection of that dialect for the “generalized language of empire,” to a later interest in dialect in his fiction.⁵³ The bulk of McKay’s work is itself a testament to the artificiality of language, its adoption and rejection, and its ultimate inadequacy for representation. In contrast to the dominant trend in African-American literary studies, North’s work situates McKay in the pantheon of Anglo-American modernists like Stein, Pound, and Eliot. Other critics of McKay see his work as primarily invested in a latent Romanticism or in the popular standards of 1920s realism.⁵⁴ In certain cases, McKay’s work operates as a perverse example of early proletarian literature, designed to radicalize the reader through clear depictions of social and economic injustice under capitalism.

To a degree, McKay’s fiction has elements of all these things—modernist, romantic, realist, and proletarian—and when his poetry is factored in, the equation becomes even more complex. For example, Gary Edward Holcomb has recently suggested that critical understandings of McKay fail to properly account for all of McKay’s tendencies, using the phrase “Queer Black Marxism” in an attempt to correct these overly compartmentalized misreadings.⁵⁵ Rather than trying to account for all of McKay’s work, my interest here is in coming to terms with how and why McKay shifted from the highly formal, almost Victorian language of his early 1920s poetry to the “earthy” prose of his later fiction. He destroyed his first novel, *Color Scheme*, after

failing to find a publisher around 1925. Relatively little is known about the contents of this novel beyond the frequently cited comment McKay made in a letter to Arthur Schomburg: "I make my Negro characters yarn and backbite and fuck like people the world over."⁵⁶ Using McKay's letters, McKay's biographer and posthumous editor Wayne F. Cooper has claimed that the novel was "a satire in 'black and white' that ignored the genteel traditions that had previously constrained earlier black novelists," and that American publishers rejected it because it was "uneven in quality and much too explicit in its sexual frankness and language to be published."⁵⁷

Many of the same criticisms were leveled at McKay's first published novel, *Home to Harlem*. White critics saw value in its "authentic" rewriting of Carl Van Vechten's controversial 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*. Many black critics derided it for the exact same reason. Unlike the major Harlem Renaissance novelists that preceded him—White and Fauset—McKay chooses a central protagonist who is not a member of the "talented tenth." Jake Brown is a working-class Harlemit who sets off for the prototypical modernist experience, the Great War. He soon discovers that African-American soldiers are given menial duty and he spends the majority of his time "[t]oting planks and getting into rows with his white comrades."⁵⁸ Like the major modernist figures of the era (such as Dos Passos and Hemingway), Jake becomes disillusioned with the war. However, Jake's feelings about the war are profoundly different from the white enlisted men who see their ideals crushed on the killing fields. Because of race, he never sees those battlefields; soon after his arrival he deserts the army and returns to manual labor in England by way of Havre. As he contemplates his return to Harlem, he asks, "Why did I

ever enlist and come over here?...Why did I want to mix mahself up in a white folks' war?" (HTH 8).

Critics have never been quite sure what to do with *Home to Harlem* and McKay's second novel, *Banjo*, in part because these novels run up against the standards of realism that supposedly form the foundations of their narrative technique. *Home to Harlem* has been called a "picaresque" by a number of critics, but it lacks the larger narrative drive and ideological work of the picaresque genre.⁵⁹ In fact, it operates more as a series of sketches with Jake Brown at the center: Jake's return to Harlem, Jake's friend Zeddy, Jake's friendship with Ray, Jake's syphilitic illness, etc.⁶⁰ The only thing that ties the novel together is the centrality of Jake to each of these sequences. In response to the difficulty of the novel's formal construction, most scholarship has shied away from the discussion of Jake, whose largely unchanging character refuses most readings, in part because he is drawn in a way that privileges performance and surface over attempts at psychological depth. Instead, critics have seized upon the character of Ray, the Haitian intellectual who appears in both *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* and is a thinly veiled stand-in for McKay himself. However, McKay's narrative strategy ultimately posits Ray as an outsider in both of these texts; his presence—especially in *Home to Harlem*—is fleeting.

While some critics have seen the narrative of *Home to Harlem* as "framed by an 'intellectual' perspective," the explicit framing device of the narrative is anything but intellectual.⁶¹ African-American fiction through the mid-1920s was always framed by intellectual discourse, whether that be a third-person realist narrator containing the voices—both elite and vernacular—or a first-person collector of stories (for example, Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* [1899] or James D. Corrothers's *The Black Cat Club*

[1902]), whose educated narration both interpreted and mediated the experience of folk culture. The politics of this discursive relationship are themselves the politics of realist representation; this practice serves to marginalize dialect characters in relationship to the standardized language of the narrator.

In radical fashion, *Home to Harlem* turns this framework on its head. In three parts, the novel devotes the first and third sections exclusively to Jake, dedicating the second section (and the middle of the text) to the relationship between Jake and Ray, as it develops during their employment on the Pennsylvania Railroad. Ray's presence in Part Two is actually further condensed when Jake contracts syphilis and the narrative shifts to his recovery in Harlem while Ray is still working as a porter on the train. The literal and formal frame of the novel, then, is not intellectual, but vernacular. Instead of reading Jake's experience through the intellectual lens of Ray (the standard mode of realist and regionalist fiction), the text asks its readers to consider Ray through the vernacular lens provided by Jake. McKay has moved beyond Fisher's work, which puts these two worlds on equal ground; here the formerly marginalized vernacular figure dominates the narrative, giving relatively brief space to the intellectual.

As a result, Ray occupies the simultaneously centralized and marginalized position commonly taken by the dialect storyteller in realist and regionalist fiction. Ray's position is clearly important; it is analogous to Uncle Julius in Chesnutt's stories. However, in being contained by Jake's story and experience (and by that of the title character in *Banjo*), his language and character are objectified, set apart from the normalized world of the frame. An outsider, Ray's comments shed light on the narrative. Indeed, Ray's comments about Jake's life provide an important window into

understanding the value of Jake's character. Still, the use of Jake (and not Ray) as the guiding character in the novel separates *Home to Harlem* from the majority of African-American fiction published in the 1920s. Even Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, an important precursor to *Home to Harlem*, allows Mary Love and Byron Kasson, two clear representatives of the black bourgeoisie, to dominate its narrative.⁶² The vernacular culture in Van Vechten's text is always filtered through the experience of these figures of the "talented tenth," replicating the standard realist experience of a strange and objectified environment.

Ray's position as the objectified intellectual in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* means that what he says is crucial, but it must always be understood in terms of the vernacular world that frames it. As a result, his literary aspirations and intellectual *ennui* have importance, but only in so much as they reflect on Jake's world. Near the middle of *Home to Harlem*, Ray rehearses the history of literary styles as a history of personal growth into an adult literary figure, a kind of *Bildungsroman* in miniature. Ray's childhood reading of mid-nineteenth century romance ("Les Misérables, Nana, Uncle Tom's Cabin, David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby, Oliver Twist") gives way to "free-thought pamphlets" and "the great scintillating satirists of the age," including many turn-of-the-century experimental writers (HTH 225). But the changing world—including both "the great mass carnage in Europe and the great mass revolution in Russia"—has altered the very way literary representation works (HTH 225-226). Ray has "lived over the end of an era," and he seeks some new form of writing: modernism (HTH 226).

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Though Ray does not use the term modernism, the examples he gives make it clear that he wants to write in the style of the high modernist writers of the late 1910s and early 1920s:

Dreams of patterns of words achieving form. What would he ever do with the words he had acquired? Were they adequate to tell the thoughts he felt, describe the impressions that reached him vividly? What were men making of words now? During the war he had been startled by James Joyce in *The Little Review*. Sherwood Anderson had reached him with *Winesburg, Ohio*. He had read, fascinated, all that D.H. Lawrence published...And literature, story-telling, had little interest for him now if thought and feeling did not wrestle and sprawl with appetite and dark desire all over the pages. (*HTH* 228)

Ray's—and presumably McKay's—desire to create modernist literature out of his experience speaks to a running theme in literature about the black artist in 1920s African-American fiction. However, no figure puts the desire to create so clearly inside the modernist pantheon as Ray does in *Home to Harlem*.

The tormented artist, struggling to cope with the world through an inadequate language, stands in stark contrast to Jake, whose facility with language is naturally impressive. On first meeting Ray and examining Ray's French edition of Alphonse Daudet's *Sappho* (1884), Jake comments that "[t]his heah language is most different from how they talk it," suggesting that Jake recognizes the artificiality of literary language and values the authenticity of vernacular social discourse (*HTH* 129). The levels of translation here are multiplied: Daudet's novel translates the themes of Sappho's works from Greek to French, and while Ray (a native French speaker) reads with facility, Jake, who has learned French in his brief stint during the war, reads and compares Daudet's text to his own experience learning the language as a social phenomenon. Literary language, language "how they talk it," and translation are all closely intertwined as Ray and Jake examine this novel.

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Simultaneously, he distances himself from the artificiality of literary language; Jake acknowledges the malleability of his own language in his daily life in Harlem, a phenomenon that McKay links directly to this fictional consideration of Sappho's poetry. Directly preceding his comment about "this heah language," Jake exclaims, "Bumbole!" Immediately, McKay explicates the importance of the word: "'Bumbole' was now a popular expletive for Jake, replacing such expressions as 'Bull,' 'bawls,' 'walnuts,' and 'blimey.' Ever since the night at the Congo when he heard the fighting West Indian girl cry, 'I'll slap you bumbole,' he had always used the word. When his friends asked him what it meant, he grinned and said, 'Ask the monks'" (*HTH* 130).⁶³ Jake's original response during this fight suggests a relatively sophisticated engagement with the linguistic: the West Indian women are fighting, "[i]n a language all their own" (*HTH* 97). The appropriation of language and the wholesale transformation of its referent, its reformation—or, as Baker might argue, its "deformation"—of meaning point toward a specifically modernist relationship to language.

Ray's search for a language that can accurately depict a world where "thought and feeling...wrestle and sprawl with appetite and dark desire all over the pages" fails in *Home to Harlem*. The answers to Ray's questions, though, are obvious and all over the text. By framing the narrative with Jake's experience, it becomes clear that Ray's search for a language that can adequately represent will not be found in the works of the European literati, but in the social discourse on the streets of Harlem. Accordingly, the most stylistically recognizable modernist moments in *Home to Harlem* appear when Ray (and presumably McKay as well) directly engages the elements of Jake's world. These

include Ray's experimentation with cocaine and his experience of jazz in a juke joint in Philadelphia.⁶⁴

Unable to sleep in the chapter "Snowstorm in Pittsburgh" and terribly depressed about being "black and impotent" in a racist society, Ray takes the "neatly-folded white papers" containing cocaine out of Jake's coat pocket, thinking they will help him sleep (*HTH* 154, 157). What results is a page of kaleidoscopic, stream-of-consciousness prose, rendered in free indirect discourse. His mind moves from visions of his home in Haiti, to his experience at Howard University, "a prison with white warders," to a fantasy of African royalty. He imagines himself as "a gay humming-bird," "an owl flying by day," "a young shining chief in a marble palace," "a blue bird in flight," and "a blue lizard in love" (*HTH* 157-158). Ray's intoxicated visions, where "[t]aboos and terrors and penalties were transformed into new pagan delights," replicate some of the stream-of-consciousness techniques used by Joyce, Woolf, and (later) Faulkner (*HTH* 158).

Likewise, Ray's experience of jazz at the sporting house in Philadelphia results in Ray being

lost in some sensual dream of his own. No tortures, banal shrieks and agonies. Tum-tum...tum-tum...tum-tum...tum-tum.... The notes were naked acute alert. Like black youth burning naked in the bush. Love in the deep heart of the jungle.... The sharp spring of a leopard from a leafy limb, the snarl of a jackal, green lizards in amorous play, the flight of a plumed bird, and the sudden laughter of mischievous monkeys in their green homes. Tum-tum...tum...tum-tum...tum-tum.... Simple-clear and quivering. Like a primitive dance of war or of love...the marshaling of spears or the sacred frenzy of phallic celebration. (*HTH* 196-197)

This modernist-primitivist fantasy emerges after the "piano-player had wandered off into some dim, far-away, ancestral source of music" (*HTH* 196). Grammatical structures and realist language fall away here in the face of the modernized primitive music of the pianist. The use of music as a means to open up representational norms was beginning to

emerge in African-American literature in the mid- to late-1920s. Langston Hughes's poetry, in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), used musical metaphors to ground experimental verse. In the same year that *Home to Harlem* was published, Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, experiences a similar modernist-primitivist moment when lost in the throes of musical passion.

The cumulative impact of these moments suggests a kind of solution to Ray's question, "What were men making of words now?" The problem that Ray has with coming into his own as a writer stems, in large part, from his inability to see the modernist value in Jake's culture. McKay's decision to frame the narrative with Jake makes this clear, and Ray's constant desire to, as he says, "lose myself in some savage culture in the jungles of Africa" speaks to his own need to distance himself from his identity as an intellectual (*HTH* 274). If Ray cannot discover how to become a kind of modernist writer in *Home to Harlem*, McKay certainly can. Only by having his alienated intellectual character experience the unmediated culture of Jake can McKay begin to move his own writing into a modernist realm. These experiential moments of the culture of a vernacular character like Jake provide the possibility, not only for Ray to escape his own feelings of inadequacy and impotence, but for McKay to experiment with representation. In effect, these moments are analogous to Jake's seamless adoption and transformation of the word "bumbole," as well as his constant use of dynamic and elastic vernacular throughout the novel.

Ray's recognition of the value and modernist aesthetic of black vernacular language coincides with his first successes as a poet in McKay's "sequel" to *Home to Harlem*, *Banjo*, published in 1929. *Banjo*'s narrative is heavily fragmented and even less

coherent than *Home to Harlem*; the subtitle of *Banjo* is appropriately "a story without a plot." Its central figure is Lincoln Agrippa Daily, alias Banjo, "a child of the Cotton Belt" (B 11). Banjo lives in Marseilles and carouses with a group of black expatriates from the U.S., the West Indies and Africa. As with *Home to Harlem*, the Haitian intellectual Ray enters the narrative in Part Two, but this time he remains in the text until it ends. Ray's presence through the novel's conclusion is possible, in large part, because he realizes that his desire to become a modernist artist depends on his experience of the vernacular language and culture of the black expatriate community.

The consequence of this realization is Ray's most explicit statement of his appreciation of and indebtedness to the vernacular language of Banjo and Jake. For Ray, "[c]lose association with the Jakes and Banjoes had been like participating in a common primitive birthright" (B 321). While this statement identifies the vernacular experience with two very distinct characters, McKay's emphasis on the social and communal nature of language and culture (a "common primitive birthright") acknowledges an alternative genealogy of modernism, one that emphasizes the collaborative over the radical individualist. Following these comments about his "birthright," McKay's text makes clear the connection between Ray's new knowledge of the "making" of words and the vernacular language of "the Jakes and Banjoes": "he admired the black boys' unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones. There were no dots and dashes in their conversation—nothing that could not be frankly said and therefore decently—no act or fact of life for which they could not find a simple passable word. He gained from them finer nuances of the necromancy of language and the wisdom that any word may be right

and magical in its proper setting" (B 321). These "finer nuances of the necromancy of language" are, in effect, the lessons of vernacular modernism. If neither Ray nor McKay has emerged fully as a modernist artist at the end of these two novels, it is because it takes them both until the final pages of *Banjo* to see the powerful relationship between the experimental nature of vernacular language and that of modernist forms of representation.

Michael North, in *The Dialect of Modernism*, has argued that there is, in modernist writers, "a realization that language exists and grows by inclusion, that it is most accurately placed not within land boundaries but somewhere on the high seas, in keeping of travelers and linguists. Language itself is in a condition of spiritual truancy, a condition that has been most apparent, in this century at least, to those who have been truants themselves. This realization of the malleability of language in general, and of the arbitrariness and relativity of particular languages, is the common property of all the expatriates considered here, and it is this realization that makes them all users of the dialect of modernism."⁶⁵ In this study, North includes McKay in an elite group of high modernists, a practice becoming increasingly more common in the study of American and Black Diasporic literature. Seeing McKay purely as an expatriate, in line with the hoards of Anglo-American writers that found their styles abroad, actually reinscribes the central hierarchies of modernist canonization, privileging the Parisian experience of internationalists. The reasoning follows that because McKay traveled widely in Europe during the 1920s (and experienced what North calls "spiritual truancy" and what Lukács might term "transcendental homelessness"), he must be a modernist.

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By contrast, I would like to flip the consideration of McKay back to the domestic environment of American popular literature and of the trend that I have described as "vernacular modernism." McKay's most explicit concerns were first and foremost with the American publishing scene, as his experience in 1925 with the aborted *Color Scheme* manuscript demonstrated. His desire to shock American audiences with a frank depiction of black vernacular culture ("I make my Negro characters yarn and backbite and fuck like people the world over") failed.⁶⁶ By 1925, experimental vernacular language had become mainstream in a number of genres, including comedy and memoir, and it was beginning to dominate the pages of pulp crime magazines. In African-American fiction, however, the relationship to vernacular language had more significant obstacles to overcome, such as the continuing use of dialect to reinforce racial hierarchies and pernicious stereotypes in the work of popular white magazine writers like Octavus Roy Cohen. After the 1926 publication of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (the book to which *Home to Harlem* was most frequently compared), the American popular readership was a great deal more amenable to (and even significantly titillated by) challenging depictions of black urban culture. McKay's texts operate in dialogue with Van Vechten's novel, removing the intellectual framework and suggesting the powerful modernist representational strategies in vernacular language.

What *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo* accomplish, however, is both to break free from the realist uplift tradition that dominates African-American fiction of the period *and* to challenge the racist depictions of popular white writers by imbuing working-class characters with a textual and linguistic self-consciousness all their own. Rather than borrowing models from the international crowd of white modernists, McKay explicitly

sees modernism within the black vernacular of Harlem and of "the Ditch" in Marseilles. While those white writers were struggling to rid themselves of "the rotten-dead stock words" of realist language (analogous to "the banal word" criticized in *transition*), Ray, McKay's stand-in in these texts, recognizes that the inventive black vernacular of the characters that surround him has already done this modernist work. In this sense, McKay's work, like the work of Fisher, sees an immense value in the spoken language of ordinary African-Americans; these two writers, then, prefigure the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, which eliminates the last vestiges of realist narration and gives itself over completely to the vernacular modernist voice.

¹ Rudolph Fisher, "The Caucasian Storms Harlem," *The American Mercury* 11 (August 1927), 398.

² James Weldon Johnson, *Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 9.

³ "Preliminaries," *MELUS* 17.4 (Winter 1991-1992): 1.

⁴ My argument against this particular perspective has developed out of ongoing discussions with Jon-Christian Suggs, to whom I am grateful for tough questions on why considering African-American literature "modernist" is important.

⁵ For an example of a study that sees Larsen as a "transitional" modernist figure, see Steven J. Belluscio, *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006), 212-246.

⁶ "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed: A Symposium," *The Crisis* 31.5 (March 1926): 219.

⁷ Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003), 6.

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32.7 (October 1926): 296.

⁹ The political use of bourgeois forms of representation permeates much of the fiction of the era, but the early 1920s works of Walter White and Jessie Fauset are perhaps the most obvious examples of this trend, which continues through the late 1920s in the work of writers like Nella Larsen.

¹⁰ Wallace Thurman, "Negro Artists and the Negro," *The New Republic* 52 (August 31, 1927): 38. Another example of this position can be seen in Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934).

¹¹ For comparison, see Ann Douglas's discussion of modernism's "matricidal" inclinations in *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).

¹² David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford UP, 1981).

¹³ See Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

¹⁴ Novels that engage these popular genres include Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1903), Du Bois's two novels (*The Quest for the Silver Fleece* [1911] and *The Dark Princess* [1925]), and Rudolph Fisher's mystery novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* (1932).

¹⁵ See, for example, Ellison's essay "Society, Morality and the Novel," in John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 698-729 and the interview "'A Completion of Personality': A Talk With Ralph Ellison," in Callahan, ed., 787-821.

¹⁶ Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 16.

¹⁷ George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1995), 1-28.

¹⁸ For nuanced readings along these lines, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003); and Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

¹⁹ Edwards, 60-61.

²⁰ This is true of most of the major works on African-American modernism. See, for example, James de Jongh, *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1990) and Michael Borshuk, *Swinging the Vernacular: Jazz and African American Modernist Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2006), where the modernism of the 1920s and 1930s is largely represented by Hughes's poetry. Jon-Christian Suggs's *Whispered Consolations: Law and Narrative in African American Life* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) also sees modernism only emerging in African-American texts only after the establishment of certain legal guarantees that allowed for the imagination of a narrative subjectivity. Other texts avoid the term modernism in favor of the more "cultural" and less "aesthetic" terms modern and modernity. See Eric J. Sundquist, *The Hammers of Creation: Folk Culture in Modern African-American Fiction* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992); David G. Nicholls, *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000); and Nathan Grant, *Masculinist Impulses: Toomer, Hurston, Black Writing, and Modernity* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2004).

²¹ On modernism and literary criticism, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996) and Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

²² Hutchinson, 117.

²³ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), 92-93.

²⁴ Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 93.

²⁵ Edward M. Pavlić, *Crossroads Modernism: Descent and Emergence in African-American Literary Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002), xii.

²⁶ "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed," *The Crisis* 32.4 (September 1926): 238.

²⁷ For an additional discussion of this essay and its contexts, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 176-182.

²⁸ Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," 296.

²⁹ As if to underscore his point, Du Bois's essay is set opposite a special feature of *The Crisis* called "Pictures of 500 Children," a multi-page project full of both candid and studio photographs of African-American children looking, for the most part, directly into the camera. The layout, with Du Bois's text and the photos on facing pages, suggests that the propagandistic art that Du Bois describes is, in fact, necessary for these children to have "the right...to love and enjoy" any aspect of their adult lives.

³⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Books," *The Crisis* 33.2 (December 1926): 81.

³¹ James Weldon Johnson, "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem – A Review," Review of Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, *Opportunity* 4.46 (October 1926): 316. Wallace Thurman also praised the novel, suggesting that he "would not be surprised should some of our uplift organizations and neighborhood clubs plan to erect a latter-day abolitionist statue to Carl Van Vechten on the corner of 135th Street and Seventh Avenue for the author has been most fair, and most sympathetic in his treatment of a long mistreated group of subjects." See Wallace Thurman, "A Stranger at the Gates," Review of Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven*, *The Messenger* 8.9 (September 1926): 279. Thurman's comments on the novel continue in the only issue of *Fire!!* See Wallace Thurman, "Fire Burns: A Department of Comment," *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* 1.1 (November 1926): 47-48.

³² James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* explores some of the same territory as Dunbar's novel, but, not surprisingly, it passed relatively unnoticed upon its original anonymous publication in 1912, while it received substantial attention when reprinted in 1927, the year between Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and the first novels of Fisher and McKay.

³³ "Only Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Langston Hughes's first two volumes of poetry, and Sterling Brown's *Southern Road* demonstrated the use of this black poetic diction, precisely because these poets were the point of consciousness of their language." Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 187.

Chapter Four: "The necromancy of language"

³⁴ Rudolph Fisher, *The Walls of Jericho* (1928, repr. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994), 5. Subsequent references will be noted in text as *WOJ*.

³⁵ Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940, repr. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 240.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ For a discussion of the publishing history of the Harlem Renaissance, see Carrie D. Wintz, *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance* (Houston: Rice UP, 1988), 154-189.

³⁸ Contemporary reviewers frequently made this comparison. In a review of Larsen's *Passing in Opportunity*, Mary Fleming Labaree lamented, "The pity of it!—if 'Walls of Jericho' and 'Home to Harlem' perched upon our bookshelves with 'Plum Bun' and 'Passing' nowhere to be seen." See "Our Book Shelf," *Opportunity* 7.8 (August 1929): 255.

³⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Browsing Reader," *The Crisis* 35.11 (November 1928): 374.

⁴⁰ "'The Walls of Jericho' and Other New Works of Fiction," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1928, p. 54.

⁴¹ John McCluskey, Jr., ed. *The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987), 3.

⁴² The only real exception to this is Paul Laurence Dunbar's fascinating 1902 novel *The Sport of the Gods*.

⁴³ The move in *Cane*, from South to North to South again, suggests a model more like *Home to Harlem*, where the bourgeois experience is somehow contained within the vernacular experience. However, the perspective of the poems and sketches in the first section, as well as "Kabnis," the dramatic poem of the last section, is most certainly that of the outsider, seeing the experience of Southern African-Americans as both romantic and grotesque (in the sense of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*). The trajectory of the text as a whole even implies that its perspective comes from figures like Kabnis and Lewis, both Northern "outsiders" in the Southern black community in that final section.

⁴⁴ John McCluskey, Jr., ed., *The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1987), 6.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Nathan Van Patten, "The Vocabulary of the American Negro as Set Forth in Contemporary Literature," *American Speech* 7.1 (October 1931), 24-31. It was only after the publication of Zora Neale Hurston's "Story in Harlem Slang" in the *American Mercury* in 1942 that Mencken finally acknowledged the importance of African-American contributions to the American language. See H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, Supplement II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 263-270, 710.

⁴⁶ See, for example, "'The Walls of Jericho' and Other New Works of Fiction," *The New York Times*, August 5, 1928, p. 54.

⁴⁷ This kind of referentiality, and the emphasis on the glossary as an often baffling source of "answers," should also be seen as a form of signifying on T.S. Eliot's notorious notes to *The Waste Land* (1922).

⁴⁸ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1994), 95.

⁴⁹ The cultural politics of Jewish performers enacting an African-American identity through minstrelsy on both stage and screen has been discussed in Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise*.

⁵⁰ Notably, in the year before Fisher's novel was published, well-known Jewish stage performer Al Jolson performed in blackface in the first widely-successful sound-synchronized film, *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland, 1927).

⁵¹ The novel's epigraph is from a spiritual: "Joshua fit d' battle ob Jericho/And d' walls come tumblin' down—"

⁵² Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), 321. Cited hereafter in text as *B*.

⁵³ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 110-123, 112.

⁵⁴ For a reading that emphasizes McKay's romanticism (especially in his poetry), see Josh Gosciak, *Claude McKay and the Romance of the Victorians* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2006).

⁵⁵ Gary Edward Holcomb, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism in the Harlem Renaissance* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007).

⁵⁶ Cited in Wayne F. Cooper, ed., *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Poetry and Prose, 1912-1948* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 26.

⁵⁷ Wayne F. Cooper, "Forward to the 1987 Edition" of Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1928, repr. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1987), xvi.

⁵⁸ Claude McKay, *Home to Harlem* (1928, repr. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1987), 4. Cited hereafter in text as *HTH*.

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⁵⁹ The picaresque, at least in its most formative instantiations, involves adventures of a lower-class figure that ultimately achieves some sort of success or redemption. At the same time, this genre mounts a critique of existing socio-economic realities: not surprising, as the genre emerged near the end of feudalism and leveled charges of hypocrisy at the church and aristocracy.

⁶⁰ Critics that have called the novel "picaresque" include Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992), 85.

⁶¹ James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 10.

⁶² It seems like Van Vechten wants create a similar vernacular frame in *Nigger Heaven*, particular in the prologue that deals with Anatole Longfellow, "alias the Scarlet Creeper." Ultimately, however, this framing device is jettisoned for a more conventional narrative form. See Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (1926, repr. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000), 3.

⁶³ "Monks" here is a contraction for "monkey chasers," an epithet used by Harlem-born African-Americans to describe immigrants from the West Indies.

⁶⁴ In this sense, Ray's experience is much like that of the hard-boiled figures of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whose most intensely subjective experiences emerge as a result of drugs or violence. See Chapter Three for a description of Hammett's "The Big Knock-Over."

⁶⁵ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 123.

⁶⁶ Cited in Cooper, ed., *The Passion of Claude McKay*, 26.

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CONCLUSION
“But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people”:
From Vernacular to Modernist

While the appearance of H.L. Mencken’s first articles on the American language provides the opening frame for this discussion of vernacular modernism, the 1936 publication of his fourth and final edition of *The American Language* marks its conclusion. The story of vernacular modernism, as described in “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic,” is primarily a story of the 1920s. The vernacular modernist work of the writers considered here—from Mencken’s earliest writing on the American language in 1910 through the late 1920s and early 1930s experiments of Gold, Hammett, and others—parallels what critics have acknowledged as the most influential moment of high modernism. For much of the 1920s, these two intertwined currents of modernism developed alongside one another, incorporating one another’s stylistic innovations. While the high modernist writing of the 1920s remained largely invested in narratives of artistic conflict and integrity, the vernacular modernists arguably took more from their high modernist counterparts during this period. Only by the end of the decade did high modernist writers begin to turn to vernacular subjects.

The more explicit adoption of vernacular modernist principles by high modernists in the 1930s did not mean the end of the development of vernacular modernism. Each genre discussed here continued to develop through the twentieth century, honing its experimentation in many of the same ways the high modernist writers would do. Humor writers like S. J. Perelman and James Thurber extended the experiments of Lardner and Loos and became even equally important influences on twentieth-century humor. The Jewish-American autobiographical fictions of Yeziarska and Gold led to more

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conventional modernist texts, like Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep* (1934) and later writing by Saul Bellow and Phillip Roth. The hard-boiled fiction of Daly and Hammett heavily influenced the now more-canonized work of Raymond Chandler as well as the self-conscious modernist psychopaths of Jim Thompson and Charles Willeford. And, in a way, it is possible to see the legacy of the Harlem novels of Fisher and McKay in the work of Chester Himes and Ralph Ellison, both of whom situate self-conscious figures with vernacular backgrounds in a black urban environment with experimental, and undeniably modernist results.

At the end of the 1920s, vernacular language and its attendant working-class culture became more interesting to high modernist writers. While many texts of the 1920s foregrounded the artistic experience, using artists or artist stand-ins as protagonists, with the onset of the 1930s, including the Great Depression in the U.S., American writers turned toward what Michael Denning has described as “the cultural front,” or “the laboring of American culture.” This included “the ‘proletarianization’ of American culture, the increased influence on and participation of working-class Americans in the world of culture and the arts.”¹ As Denning’s text argues, working-class figures, conflicts, language, and culture began to appear at the forefront of American literature and other creative production in the 1930s. Indeed, the artist protagonists of the 1920s largely disappeared in the early 1930s in favor of narratives of proletarian subjectivity and violent portrayals of life under American capitalism. Writing in the little magazine *Contact* in 1932, Nathanael West asked “Is there any meaning in the fact that almost every manuscript we receive has violence for its core?...Did not sweetness and light fill the manuscripts rejected, as well as accepted, by the magazines before the war, and Art

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those immediately after it?”² Even the little magazines that had helped nurture the aesthetics of high modernism throughout the 1910s and 1920s had turned toward the violent realities of class conflict.

In *Axel's Castle*, even Edmund Wilson hoped for a shift away from artist-centric narratives, warning in 1931 against the “symbolist” writers who “have tended to overemphasize the importance of the individual...have been preoccupied with introspections sometimes to the point of insanity...[and] have endeavored to discourage their readers, not only with politics but with action of any kind.”³ Wilson’s hope for a Hegelian transcendence of the binary between what he calls the Symbolists and the Naturalists is certainly related to this merger of modernisms in the 1930s. On the left, the value of modernist experimentation was becoming more hotly debated, particularly in the more experimental counterpart to *New Masses*, the New York John Reed Club’s *Partisan Review*. Here, Philip Rahv and Wallace Phelps attempted to articulate a political aesthetic that could draw on both proletarian realism and advanced narrative forms, arguing that “[t]he measure of a revolutionary writer’s success lies not only in his sensitiveness to proletarian material, but also in his ability to create new landmarks in the perception of reality.”⁴ While politically committed writers on the Left were imbibing modernist aesthetics, high modernists were increasingly drawn toward proletarian subjectivities and the vernacular language that accompanied them.

This shift of high modernist art toward proletarian commitment essentially signals the merger of the two strands of modernism that began this study: the high modernist strain, an extension of the psychological interiority of Henry James’s work, and the vernacular modernist strain, emerging from Twain’s brand of realism and its vernacular

linguistic exuberance. When high modernists began to investigate the consciousness of working-class characters, these writers imbued their interior lives with much the same depth they accorded their artist figures of the 1920s. This new interest in proletarian protagonists meant that high modernists attempted to capture the language of these characters, and, in doing so, they looked to the vernacular modernists for inspiration. The critical practice of identifying dialogic traces of popular writing in already canonized work is relatively conventional by this point. Turning toward major writers now risks retreading this well-worn critical path; however, using the concept of vernacular modernism—a mode at least as prominent in American culture as any form of high modernism—this re-reading of canonical figures can avoid emphasizing the cultural hierarchies at work in most dialogical criticism, and instead highlight the exchange of aesthetic practice between equal and coexisting forms of modernism.

Rather than comprehensively charting the depth of the vernacular modernist influence on 1930s writers, I would like to use this space to look briefly at exemplary and suggestive passages from three modernist figures. John Dos Passos, Zora Neale Hurston, and William Faulkner all represent different modes of thinking about modernism. Dos Passos’s work—simultaneously cosmopolitan and nationalist—has largely fallen out of critical favor, though his centrality to American modernism is undoubted. Hurston is a recent adoption into the modernist canon, following New Modernist Studies expansions of the definition of modernism with a focus on gender and ethnicity. Faulkner, perhaps the most famously “domestic” American modernist, remains profoundly important as both a regionalist and a high modernist. Looking at single, emblematic passages from each of these writers can demonstrate the ways that the concept of vernacular modernism

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helps frame the fascination with the American language and suggests new pathways for scholarship in American modernist writing.

John Dos Passos: Language and Nation

The most explicit example of the shift toward proletarian protagonists in high modernist texts is John Dos Passos’s monumental *U.S.A.* trilogy (1930, 1932, 1936). When Dos Passos was preparing for the publication of the trilogy in a single volume in 1937, he wrote “U.S.A.,” an opening sketch featuring a nameless “young man,” a kind of everyman embodiment of the transient, mobile, proletarian figures that dominate the trilogy. As the young man remembers what might be a kind of national, “collective” past, the prose fragments into a modernist organizational scheme more like the stream-of-consciousness “Camera Eye” sections of the novels. The young man remembers:

but in his mother’s words telling about longago, in his father’s telling about when
I was a boy, in the kidding stories of uncles, in the lies the kids told at school, the
hired man’s yarns, the tall tales the doughboys told after taps;
it was speech that clung to the ears, the link that tingled in the blood;
U.S.A.⁵

The vernacular voice—familial storytelling, children’s lies, jokes of workers—is “speech that clung to the ears,” and, by extension, “U.S.A.” itself. Following this, the narrator attempts a paragraph of definitions of U.S.A.—economic, social, and political. This paragraph ends with one of Dos Passos’s most famous lines: “But mostly U.S.A. is the speech of the people.”⁶

Before Dos Passos even composed this late-1930s sketch, critics were acutely aware of his investment in the American language. In a 1930 review of *The 42nd Parallel*, the first novel in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, Edmund Wilson writes, “For the method of *The 42nd*

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Parallel, Dos Passos has perhaps gone to school to Ring Lardner and Anita Loos; he is, at any rate, the first of our writers—with the possible exception of Mark Twain—who has successfully used colloquial American for a novel of the highest artistic seriousness...He still has moments of allowing his people to contract into two-dimensional caricatures of qualities or forces he hates; but, in general, we live their lives, we look at the world through their eyes.”⁷ What is striking about Wilson’s comment here is that he effectively sees Dos Passos as an extension of the “unfulfilled” promise of Lardner, whose failure to translate his talent into more ambitious works frustrated Wilson, Fitzgerald, and others (see Chapter One). Most critics would reject the notion that Dos Passos’s serious, high modernist aesthetic could be heavily influenced by the comic writing of Lardner and Loos. However, the connection becomes far more logical if the developments Dos Passos was drawing on are acknowledged as experimental in their own right. It is Lardner and Loos’s vernacular modernism that so heavily influences Dos Passos’s use of colloquial language in the high modernist *U.S.A.*

For Dos Passos, the equation of U.S.A. and the “speech of the people” suggests the connection between two radical projects present in the text. The elevation of vernacular speech to the realm of national modernist expression works as a parallel to Dos Passos’s own redefinition of U.S.A. along proletarian lines. By investing his characters with a kind of aesthetic self-consciousness, he unites the radical aesthetics of modernism and the goals of social and economic justice as a part of the “cultural front,” situating these objectives within the world of the proletarian vernacular.

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Zora Neale Hurston and the Vernacular Narrator

Zora Neale Hurston provides an interesting counterpoint to Dos Passos in understanding both the merger of modernist strains and the vagaries of critical interest. While Dos Passos's modernist credentials are clear, scholarship on his work has been scant in recent years. His profile in modernist studies has waned as interest in writers like Hurston, representing previously marginalized groups, has increased exponentially. Calling Hurston a modernist, though, is still a bit controversial. More recently, critics have begun to associate Hurston's work with modernist experimentation, much of this coming after Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s description of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) as a "speakerly text."⁸ A host of critics have since rushed to label Hurston "modernist," using various definitions for this designation.⁹

But unlike the more traditional modernists in the African-American canon (Himes, Ellison, Baldwin), Hurston's work is not invested in the psychoanalytic subject; as a result, it remains difficult to identify Hurston as a modernist in any conventional aesthetic sense. However, importing the concept of vernacular modernism into the discussion of Hurston's work makes her modernist approach almost self-evident. While she does not display the same interest in subjectivity that other modernists do, her fascination with the experimental power of language and vernacular storytelling is almost unparalleled in African-American fiction. From her first fragmented attempt at ethnographic storytelling, "The Eatonville Anthology" (1926), her work blurred the linguistic and structural boundaries between narrator and character, overtly rejected the realist precedents in African-American fiction, and paved the way for a new and experimental means of communicating African-American experience.

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The recent publication of Hurston’s unedited notes from her 1927-1929 fieldwork in Florida, Alabama, and Louisiana in *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States* (2001) helps to contextualize the initial publication of many of these tales in *Mules and Men* (1935). If anything, *Every Tongue* demonstrates the degree to which Hurston structurally manipulated the results of her fieldwork for aesthetic purposes. Tales are routinely reorganized and attributed to different sources in *Mules and Men*, where Hurston writes herself in as the ethnographic figure in the first part of the book, and, as the text moves forward, becomes more interested in the struggles of the fictionalized “Zora” to avoid danger, culminating in her escape from Eatonville in the dead of night in the last pages of the narrative. As with other Franz Boas-influenced ethnographic and anthropological texts of the era (Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* [1929], for example), the description of culture becomes a narrativization—even an aestheticization—of culture in Hurston’s work.¹⁰

With this in mind, Hurston’s composition of *Mules and Men* becomes more obviously a self-consciously aesthetic project. The tales themselves double as “folk tales” and as cryptic modernist objects, full of obscure allusions, difficult language, and hidden meanings. In this text, language proves to be a difficult medium, and the understanding of these folk stories becomes even more difficult. As one storyteller in *Mules and Men* says of these tales, “They all got a hidden meanin’, jus’ like de Bible. Everybody can’t understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained. They’s born wid they feet under de moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin’ of words.”¹¹ That “inside meanin’ of words” is at issue throughout Hurston’s work, and the continual invocation of obscure (often unexplained) sayings in *Mules and*

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Men, as well as in her first two novels, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, engages in an objectification of the language on the page, challenging the reader to seek out this “hidden meanin’.”

However, Hurston's interest in language does not necessarily make her a “dialect” writer, containing and mediating this vernacular voice. Throughout her work, the boundaries between the discourse of the narrator and that of the characters are permeable, even unstable. As the cadences of narration take on those of character speech, the realist paradigm begins to break down completely. What Rudolph Fisher and Claude McKay begin to do—equating the experience and language of working-class African-American characters with that of the “Talented Tenth”—Hurston takes to a new level. Hurston's sympathetic interest in “the Negro farthest down” meant that the linguistic logic and subjectivity of her rural subjects grew outside the boundaries of literary characterization, dominating her texts with a modernist sensibility truly invested in the vernacular.¹²

William Faulkner: Modernist and Vernacular, Familial Relations

William Faulkner, the canonical writer most associated with a domestic form of American modernism, is an appropriate endpoint to this study of vernacular modernism. Faulkner's engagement with popular culture is already the subject of a significant amount of criticism.¹³ He wrote a great deal of his own genre fiction, including the detective novel *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), detective stories published in the collection *Knight's Gambit* (1949), the sensational crime novel *Sanctuary* (1931), which he called “a cheap idea...deliberately conceived to make money,” and *Pylon* (1935), a meditation on his lifelong fascination with aviation pulps.¹⁴ In a recent consideration, Christopher Breu has

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even outlined the importance of the pulp construction of masculinity to one of Faulkner’s most celebrated novels, *Light in August* (1932).¹⁵ Critics have also noted how easily Faulkner’s work was appropriated by the mid-twentieth-century popular culture. Indeed, a number of Faulkner’s novels of the 1930s ended up in pulp paperback editions on drugstore racks in the 1940s and 1950s alongside the works of Jim Thompson and Raymond Chandler.¹⁶

From the Lardneresque letters in *Soldier’s Pay* (1926) to the variations on popular formulas he wrote in the 1940s and 1950s, Faulkner’s career demonstrates the straddling of both strands discussed in “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic”—vernacular and high modernism. As with the high modernists of *transition*, Faulkner seemed extensively aware of how the vernacular voice and the modernist voice create the interlaced whole that is American modernism. Indeed, Faulkner’s approach often makes the stylistic and syntactical boundaries between narration, interior monologue, and dialogue quite permeable. In the same year that *transition* declared the “Revolution of the Word” and that James P. Johnson recorded the song that gives this study its title, Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) appeared. Often considered one of Faulkner’s most difficult works, and one of the most exemplary texts of American modernism, this novel has not received as much attention in light of its connection to popular fiction. However, *The Sound and the Fury* demonstrates Faulkner’s acute awareness of the vernacular and high currents of modernism, and points the way toward the kind of union they achieve in the fiction of the 1930s.

Told in four different voices, *The Sound and the Fury* is generally seen to move from the most difficult and subjective narration (Benjy Compson) toward a more

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comprehensible, but perhaps less “truthful” third-person narration. This trajectory is certainly true, but the two central sections of the novel, those told from the perspectives of Quentin and Jason Compson, form the “heart” of *The Sound and the Fury*, and posit the stylistic adjacency of the high modernist subject with the vernacular modernist subject. Quentin and Jason, therefore, form two sides of the coin of American modernism: Quentin’s Joycean stream-of-consciousness sits beside Jason’s slangy, hard-boiled narration, suggesting the interdependence of these two modes. The story of American modernism remains incomplete without both strains represented.

While Quentin’s position as a highly subjective narrator in the mode of European high modernism has long been established, Jason’s status as a modernist narrative lens is less clear. His narrative, a kind of ineffectual detective story where he attempts to thwart his niece’s plans, opens with the slangy “Once a bitch always a bitch, what I say.”¹⁷ Alone, this reads as the confession of a misogynist, which Jason certainly is. However, it also strongly resembles the opening to Carroll John Daly’s 1923 slick magazine cross-over “Paying an Old Debt” (briefly discussed in Chapter Three), where the reformed criminal narrator begins, “Once a criminal always a criminal, there’s them that say that.”¹⁸ Jason has, for all intents and purposes, walked out of the pages of a pulp magazine and into one of the most celebrated novels of American modernism.

This interpretation of Jason is not meant to demonstrate yet another debt that Faulkner owes to popular culture. Instead, it opens the possibility of thinking about Faulkner—and, by extension, the rest of American high modernism—as fully aware of the experimental possibilities offered by vernacular writing. Like the “Slanguage” feature in *transition*, *The Sound and the Fury* brings high modernism into direct (in this case,

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familial) contact with its vernacular parallel. And the conceit of Faulkner's novel is that the "story" of the Compson family remains incomplete without these varied voices. While Jason's chapter might be easier to follow than Quentin's, Faulkner's placing of these two chapters together emphasizes that *both* are aesthetic constructions, and that Jason's vernacular language demonstrates an equal disdain for the staid conventions of realism. While these brothers and their two modernisms would have to be compartmentalized in 1929, the American cultural drive toward becoming both vernacular and "modernistic" would subtly unite these strands by the mid-1930s.

The Sound and the Fury, *transition*'s "Revolution of the Word," and James P. Johnson's "You've Got to Be Modernistic," all products of the year 1929, demonstrate the degree to which the language of popular culture and aesthetic notions of modernism were profoundly bound together during the 1920s. While modernism has long been associated with an international, elitist aesthetic, the American vernacular modernists strongly challenge such a characterization. Producing popular work that involved self-conscious stylistic experimentation and an acute interest in the aesthetic and linguistic power of American slang (the "Slanguage" of *transition*), these writers and their literary innovations have been critically ignored for too long. With hope, the concept of vernacular modernism can begin to correct the long-standing elitism toward popular culture in literary studies, and push the recent Modernist Studies trend toward formalism away from an exclusively canonical focus. The influence of these writers in American culture remains profound, both with respect to genre fiction and larger notions of literary modernism and postmodernism. These vernacular modernists revolutionized their

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respective genres, and, in doing so, created what might be the most exemplary texts of a truly American modernism, one wedded to the vibrant and experimental American language celebrated by H.L. Mencken.

¹ Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xvii.

² Nathanael West, "Some Notes on Violence," *Novels and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 399. Compare this to Warren Sussman's discussion of Robert Sherwood's *The Petrified Forest*, a critique of "types doomed to extinction by society." See Warren I. Sussman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 168.

³ Wilson, *Axel's Castle*, 235.

⁴ Wallace Phelps and Philip Rahv, "Problems and Perspective in Revolutionary Literature," *Partisan Review* 1.3 (June-July 1934), 9.

⁵ John Dos Passos, *U.S.A.* (1938, repr. New York: Library of America, 1996), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁷ Edmund Wilson, "Dahlberg, Dos Passos and Wilder," *The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1952), 447.

⁸ Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 170-216.

⁹ See, for example, Konzett, *Ethnic Modernisms*; Pavlić, *Crossroads Modernism*; Grant, *Masculinist Impulses*; Alicia A. Kent, *African, Native, and Jewish American Literature and the Reshaping of Modernism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Rita Keresztesi, *Strangers at Home: American Ethnic Modernism between the World Wars* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2005).

¹⁰ Boas's transformation of anthropological discourse turned the discipline into a kind of cultural New Criticism, one which approached cultures as self-conscious and independent "texts" that needed to be "read" and interpreted on their own terms. Susan Hegeman has discussed this connection in *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999).

¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 124.

¹² On "the Negro farthest down," see Hurston's memoir, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). Hurston, *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*, 689.

¹³ See, for example, Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and Popular Culture* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1990).

¹⁴ William Faulkner, *Novels 1930-1935* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 1029.

¹⁵ *Breu*, 115-141.

¹⁶ See David M. Earle, "Pulp Modernism."

¹⁷ William Faulkner, *Novels 1926-1929* (New York: Library of America, 2006), 1015.

¹⁸ Daly, "Paying an Old Debt," 13.

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