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By
Kanayo Jason Agbodike

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
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Graduate Division
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University of California, Berkeley

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Professor Abdul JanMohamed, Chair
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Abstract

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by

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Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Abdul JanMohamed, Chair

Race Across Borders: Transnationalism and Racial Identity in African-American Fiction, 1929-1945, examines four African-American literary texts that employ transnational themes and aesthetics as a means of resisting a logic of racial essentialism that governed the production and reception of black literature in the United States during the early 20th century. I examine the ways in which *Dark Princess* by W. E. B. Du Bois, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* by Claude McKay, and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by Chester Himes employ various formal and stylistic techniques to critique and reconfigure the dominant codes of racial identity that shaped their context. I argue that each of these texts exemplifies a conflict between a nationalist mode of racial representation and a transnational orientation that destabilizes received notions of race. Whereas the cultural field in which interwar African-American novels were situated involved a manifest nationalist topography which reproduced a racially divided polity, these texts inscribe transnational forces that disrupt the racial underpinnings of the 20th-century American national narrative. Because of the hegemonic status of the nationalist framework, the critique of that framework tends to appear in the formal aspects of the novels rather than their explicit contents.

The first chapter considers how *Dark Princess* explores the intersections between African-American and anti-colonial politics by way of the story of a romantic relationship between an African American man involved in local politics and an Indian woman involved in an international Third World liberation movement. I consider how the juxtaposition of national and transnational forms of solidarity within the text is paralleled by a tension between naturalism and romance in its formal economy. While the techniques of naturalism tend to characterize the parts of the novel that represent national and racial politics, the parts that imagine a transnational anti-colonial movement draw on the codes of literary romance. Through this utopian gesture, the novel gives shape to the conflict between national and transnational perspectives on minority politics without offering a clear resolution to that conflict. The second chapter challenges dominant critical interpretations of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which construe the novel as a written representation of African American oral tradition. While such readings are illuminating,

they overlook significant aspects of the text's racial thematic by emphasizing how it presupposes racial forms of identity. Although the novel does reproduce such forms, I argue that it simultaneously resists them, particularly in some of its more marginal characters and moments, and that it is precisely through the representation of dialect speech that these hidden resistances become visible.

The third chapter examines McKay's use of the aesthetic concept of the sublime in articulating the problematic gulf separating modern Blacks from metropolitan culture and society. In *Banjo* the sublime mediates between these terms rather than the rationally free subject and a causally determined Nature. *Banjo* differs from the mainstream European realist novel by denying the teleological narrative of reconciliation as unsuitable to the concerns of a radically excluded black collective. By taking as his protagonists an international band of black vagabonds based in the cosmopolitan French port city Marseilles, McKay imagines an alternative to the grand narrative of national identity. The final chapter focuses on notions of embodiment and psychological affect within Himes's narrative of thwarted integration. Simultaneously foreclosing on both a successful outcome for such a project and the death of the protagonist, the novel moves towards an ambivalent and open-ended reflection on the possibilities of social transformation. In light of this ambivalence, I view the brief but frequent points at which the protagonist identifies with marginalized Mexican-Americans and Japanese-American internment-camp prisoners as moments that both disrupt the received black/white binary as a schema for American social reality and contrasts a trans-national anti-colonial solidarity with racial nationalism as an alternative mode of political agency.

Preface

Race Across Borders: Transnationalism and Racial Identity in African-American Fiction, 1929-1945, examines four African-American literary texts that employ transnational themes and aesthetics as a means of resisting a logic of racial essentialism that governed the production and reception of black literature in the United States during the early 20th century. I consider the ways in which *Dark Princess* by W. E. B. Du Bois, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* by Claude McKay, and *If He Hollers Let Him Go* by Chester Himes employ various formal and stylistic techniques to critique and reconfigure the dominant codes of racial identity that shaped their context. I argue that each of these texts exemplifies a conflict between a nationalist mode of racial representation and a transnational orientation that destabilizes received notions of race. Whereas the cultural field in which interwar African-American novels were situated involved a manifest nationalist topography which reproduced a racially divided polity, these texts inscribe transnational forces that disrupt the racial underpinnings of the 20th-century American national narrative. Because of the hegemonic status of the nationalist framework, the critique of that framework tends to appear in the formal aspects of the novels rather than their explicit contents.

The first two chapters consider the intersection between fiction and historiography within the transnational imaginaries of two prominent interwar writers. The chapter on Du Bois begins with a reading of *Black Reconstruction*, his history of the Civil War, with a focus on the role of narrative within cultural projects of resistance to racist representations of Blacks in the United States. I then argue that his turn to the novel was involved in his project of surpassing the nationalist assumptions that characterized contemporary historical and racial discourses, as well as some of his own writings. *Dark Princess* explores the intersections between African-American and anti-colonial politics by way of the story of a romantic relationship between an African American man involved in local politics and an Indian woman involved in an international Third World liberation movement. I consider how the juxtaposition of national and transnational forms of solidarity within the text is paralleled by a tension between naturalism and romance in its formal economy. While the techniques of naturalism tend to characterize the parts of the novel that represent national and racial politics, the parts that imagine a transnational anti-colonial movement draw on the codes of literary romance. Through this utopian gesture, the novel gives shape to the conflict between national and transnational perspectives on minority politics without offering a clear resolution to that conflict.

By examining questions of language in connection with race, nation, and modernity, the chapter on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* challenges dominant critical interpretations of the novel, which construe the novel as a written representation of African American oral tradition. While such readings are illuminating, they overlook significant aspects of the racial thematic of the text by emphasizing how it presupposes racial forms of identity. Although the novel does reproduce such forms, I argue that it simultaneously resists them, particularly in some of its more marginal characters and moments, and that it is precisely through the representation of dialect speech that these hidden resistances become visible. By showing that the speech patterns

of the few minor white characters in the novel are scarcely distinguishable from those of the black characters, and that when speech patterns do vary they tend to represent differences between different black communities, I question the assumption that racial identity is the text's primary object of representation, and argue that it also portrays the American South as a region. By situating *Their Eyes* within the context of the contemporary modernizing cultural movement known as the Southern Renaissance, and considering Hurston's correspondence with prominent members of that movement, I conclude that the text undermines the clear racial boundaries it seems to reiterate by producing an irreducible ambivalence between race and region as determinants of American identity.

The third chapter examines how McKay enlists the aesthetic concept of the sublime in articulating the problematic gulf separating modern Blacks from mainstream metropolitan culture and society. Divested of its metaphysical trappings, in *Banjo* the sublime mediates between these terms rather than the rationally free subject and a causally determined Nature. *Banjo* differs from the mainstream European realist novel by denying the teleological narrative of reconciliation as unsuitable to the concerns of a radically excluded black collective. By taking as his protagonists an international band of black vagabonds based in the cosmopolitan French port city Marseilles, McKay imagines an alternative to the grand narrative of national identity. This alternative involves an emphatic departure from the traditional bildungsroman narrative of integration into the national community as a solution to the conflicts that both threaten the coherent identity of the subject and motivate the narrative act. By bringing into the light those whose exclusion structures national identities, McKay replaces a teleological movement towards closure in the form of inclusion with an everyday practice of improvisation on the musical model of Jazz as a means of perseverance for marginal subjectivities. The inscription of this modernist cultural practice, which combines African and European elements, involves an imaginative revision of the concept of the sublime, which shifts its logic from imperialist control to subaltern resistance.

If He Hollers Let Him Go tells the story of a black engineer working at a racially divided Los Angeles shipyard during World War II, whose problems adapting to the racist conditions both at work and in the larger society ultimately frustrate his ambitions to assimilate into the American middle class. My reading of the novel considers how notions of embodiment and psychological affect illuminate the narrative's trajectory of thwarted integration. I consider how *Hollers* involves a critical re-articulation of elements from Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Both novels confront the problems of black embodiment within a racially segregated society in connection with the importance of containing aggressive affects and the consequences of a failure to do so. However, while the latter novel presents the role of such affects in preventing the formation of a stable ego in its protagonist, the former is organized around a project of avoiding such a result by imagining a black subjectivity in which aggressiveness is effectively managed by a stable ego. Simultaneously foreclosing on both a successful outcome for such a project and the death of the protagonist, the novel moves towards an ambivalent and open-ended reflection on the possibilities of social transformation. In light of this ambivalence, I view the brief but frequent points at which the protagonist identifies with marginalized Mexican-Americans and Japanese-American internment-camp inmates as moments that both disrupt the

received black/white binary as a schema for American social reality and contrasts a transnational anti-colonial solidarity with racial nationalism as an alternative mode of political agency.

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The dissertation is dedicated to my family.

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Black Prometheus: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Politics of Narrative

Reader of dead words who would live deeds, this is the flowering of my logic: I dream of a world of infinite and invaluable variety; not in the laws of gravity or atomic weights, but in human variety in height and weight, color and skin, hair and nose and lip. But more especially and far above and beyond this, in a realm of true freedom: in thought and dream, fantasy and imagination; in gift, aptitude, and genius--all possible manner of difference, topped with freedom of soul to do and be, and freedom of thought to give to a world and build into it, all wealth of inborn individuality.

--W. E. B. Du Bois

In his essay "Black Orpheus," Jean-Paul Sartre examines the sources of the extraordinary quality and volume of poetry produced by the black francophone poets of the Negritude movement. He develops his argument by comparing the situation of colonized blacks to that of the European proletariat: whereas the chief problem faced by the latter is that of its situation within the institutions and technologies of an industrial production which, although it oppresses them, does not deny their basic humanity, the former suffers first and foremost from a dehumanizing ideology that views them as sub-human "beasts." Therefore, Sartre speculates, the concerns of the proletariat are of a mainly objective nature, their task being to act as the agents of a technological transformation of the means of production which will achieve the abolition of class differences; whereas colonized peoples strive for the primarily subjective goal of demonstrating their humanity to themselves and the world.¹ This explains why, although the movement of European

¹ "Black Orpheus" in Sartre (ed. Stephen Ungar) *"What is Literature?" and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 289-330.

socialism did not excel in literature, "black poetry in the French language is, in our time, the only great revolutionary poetry."² As an image of the artistic impulses of subaltern politics, Sartre evokes a figure from ancient Greek tragedy: "And I shall call this poetry 'Orphic' because the Negro's tireless descent into himself makes me think of Orpheus going to claim Eurydice from Pluto. Thus, through an exceptional stroke of poetic good luck, it is by letting himself fall into trances, by rolling on the ground like a possessed man tormented by himself, by singing of his angers, his regrets, or his hates, by exhibiting his wounds, his life torn between 'civilization' and his old black substratum; in short, by becoming most lyrical, that the black poet is most certain of creating a great collective poetry."³

More than a decade before the publication of "Black Orpheus," W. E. B. Du Bois had also looked to Greek mythology for a symbolism to illuminate the political situation of blacks, by introducing the final chapter of his revisionist history of the Civil War and Reconstruction with the following words: "How civil war in the South began--indeed had never ceased; and how black Prometheus bound to the Rock of Ages by hate, hurt and humiliation, has his vitals eaten out as they grow, yet lives and fights."⁴ The difference between his image and Sartre's is revealing: On one level it speaks to the material and historical situation of African Americans as compared to francophone African and Caribbean societies; but it also reflects Du Bois's own individual sensibility, which, while at moments containing elements of the lyrical, is not primarily shaped by it. Yet his sense of the tasks facing black culture were in many ways analogous to Sartre's.⁵ Throughout his works, literary writing performs the function of contesting the dehumanizing representations of blacks that were so prevalent at the time. As I will argue, for Du Bois the literary mode most appropriate to black struggles is narrative.

Much of the literature on Du Bois is limited by its tendency neatly to separate out the vast multiplicity of forms, styles, and methodologies that he habitually combined into volatile admixtures in his relentlessly experimental writings. In this sense, to construe him as "purely" a sociologist, a historian, or a man of letters is to occlude the most powerful dimensions of his thought by mistaking as predominant an academicism which for him was always conditional and ancillary.⁶ Rather than seeking to reduce the

² Ibid., 294.

³ Ibid., 300.

⁴ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 670. This image may not be original to Du Bois. The July 1927 issue of *The Crisis* (p. 148) includes a drawing by one M. Crump, entitled "The Black Prometheus Bound," which depicts vultures bearing the names of southern states descending on a black figure chained to a rock. The drawing is reprinted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 92.

⁵ In fact, Du Bois's book *The Souls of Black Folk* is an important reference throughout Sartre's essay, as in the following passage: "But since the selfish scorn that white men display for black men--and that has no equivalent in the attitude of the bourgeois toward the working class--is aimed at the deepest recesses of the heart, black men must oppose it with a more exact view of black subjectivity; consequently race consciousness is based first of all on the black soul...." "Black Orpheus," 297.

⁶ "Though his ideological outlook changed during his long life from Darwinism through elitism to socialism, from pan-Africanism through voluntary self-segregation and eventually to official communism, Du Bois was a political activist who managed to combine these oppositional commitments with serious scholarship even when universities snubbed him and ignored his extraordinary

constitutive multiplicity of his thought to one or another of the formal codes between which he continually shifted, the most insightful of the recent criticism has tended to foreground this shifting multiplicity as itself the defining condition of his output. In light of this fruitful trend, the present essay will seek to shed light on important aspects of Du Bois's work by focusing on the connections between his numerous fictional and historiographical writings.

Though often illuminating, analysis of Du Bois's novels and histories has almost invariably considered these two topics separately, only rarely raising the question of their interconnections and even then only in passing. However, the fact of his prolific output in both the historical and the fictional modes of narrative raises a number of questions that repay sustained consideration.

The first thing to notice is the striking singularity of his dual proclivity. Although the historical novel has long reflected on history and the limitations of its academic study, it is rare for a single author to produce notable works of both fiction and scholarly historiography. This particular division of labor is only one instance of the well-known differentiation of separate and autonomous spheres of activity that characterizes modernity.⁷ Viewed alongside another of the paradigmatic modern partitions Du Bois evaded, namely that between cultural and political endeavors, his simultaneous participation in both fictional and historiographical discourse appears as a sign of his stance as an *engagé* intellectual and reveals the ways in which his formal experimentation expressed his political dissent.

These connections are multifaceted and extensive, and furthermore contribute much to the understanding of both the thought and activism of Du Bois. Thus, in what follows I will use the word 'narrative' in a general sense intended to encompass what Paul Ricoeur has argued to be the fundamentally dual structure of narrative, namely its division into dialectically related fictional and historical modes.⁸ Such a usage will open an illuminating prospect on the various ways in which Du Bois uses these two modes simultaneously, playing them off against each-other, sometimes relinquishing one for the other, at other times combining both into a single experimental text, always with an eye towards his political aims.

Even a cursory survey of his life and works reveals a persistent and inextricable narrativity which informs his voluminous writings throughout: He received a PhD in history from Harvard in 1895, and a year later published his dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* as the first volume of Harvard's Historical Monograph series; he would go on to produce numerous books of history, the most scholarly of which is *Black Reconstruction*, but which also include *The Negro*, *The Gift of Black Folk*, and *The World and Africa*, among others; he wrote a total of five novels over a span of five decades; and most of his works that are not primarily narrative--such as *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*--nonetheless contain

productivity." Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 117.

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, transl. Thomas Burger, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, transl. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, *Time and Narrative* (University of Chicago Press, 3 vols., 1984-1988).

significant narrative passages.

A comparative, side-by-side analysis of his fictional and historical works, taking them as two separate but related sets of texts, will shed light on the meaning and value that narrative held for Du Bois in so much of his work. While attempting to do justice to the sheer volume of his output of both novels and historical studies, for the sake of coherence I will focus mainly on what are generally taken to be his most significant accomplishments in each genre: *Dark Princess* in the case of the former, and in the latter, *Black Reconstruction in America*. My approach will be to marshal together the numerous themes, aims and techniques which the historical and fictional texts have in common so as to explore how they mediate and articulate both the differences and the relations between the two terms of his dichotomous narrative production.

Of the topics that inform both of these spheres, I consider the most prominent to be propaganda, tragedy and identity. These topics appear consistently and conspicuously across each of the two fields of discourse I am defining according to the type of narrative they involve. Each in its binary manifestation reveals in Du Bois's writing a complex continuity between the historical and fictional modes of narrative, which is nonetheless punctuated by crucial differentiations; the fluid and porous, but at times crucial divisions Du Bois drew between fiction and historiography played significant roles in his political and rhetorical strategies throughout his long career. In this chapter I will examine these three topics in turn, situating them in the context of Du Bois's ceaseless political activism. Although each case calls for a detailed analysis that allows its specificity fully to emerge, I will argue that there is a unifying thread that interlinks Du Bois's reflections on propaganda, tragedy and identity, and that it is precisely in the relation between fiction and history that these connections inhere. In all three of these exemplary topics, it is by means of the history/fiction binary that Du Bois formulates his working notions of temporality--of the the well-known articulation of time, indispensable to all political thought and action, into past, present and future; and furthermore, that among the most substantive differentiating lines through which this binary functions involves Du Bois's view of history as a discourse whose objective is the establishment of facts which, though open to interpretation, are mainly immutable, in contrast with fiction, through which he sought to imagine effective means of resisting and transforming factual regimes. Although this distinction is highly characteristic of Du Bois, it was precisely by questioning its divisions and blending its terms that he was able to create such extraordinary narrative texts.

Debates over Du Bois's notion of propaganda have focused mainly on two of his essays: "The Propaganda of History" and "Criteria of Negro Art." Due, however, to the above-mentioned fissure within the critical tradition, these two essays are rarely discussed in connection. What emerges from a reading which allows the two texts to reflect on each-other is a thorough problematization of the very notion of any clear distinction between scholarly historiography and imaginative fiction. For Du Bois, history properly practiced has an artistic side, while art in general can only pretend to escape its firm connections, not only with social reality in general, but more specifically with the facts of history.

Before turning to a textual analysis of each essay in turn, some preliminary notes concerning what Du Bois meant by "propaganda" are in order. Though he openly avowed the propagandistic thrust of his own writing, it would be a mistake to infer from this that he attached an unconditionally positive value to the notion. He viewed both the cultural and scientific fields as always already saturated with propaganda, which in a regime of white supremacy is of a predominantly racist inflection. He thus saw no alternative to the inscription of a counter-discourse that would contest the endemic defamation of black people.

Black intellectuals had been conscious of such circumstances since the beginning of Reconstruction.⁹ What sets Du Bois apart, however, is his acute awareness of the emergent rhetorical strategies that were transforming the discourse of his age, which Eric Hobsbawm has suggestively labeled the "Age of Extremes." Hobsbawm argues that the twentieth century was characterized above all by its ideological nature, in the sense that real politics came to be structured and driven by totalizing ideological systems incapable of recognizing or communicating with the claims of competing systems.¹⁰ Such conditions inform the well-known rhetoric of impartial neutrality that came to dominate the political, intellectual and social discourses of the twentieth century, though it had a prior genealogy going at least as far back as Kant. Du Bois's theory of propaganda should be situated within the context of a white supremacist regime that projected its own values in such universalist terms as fact, nature and reasonableness while dismissing all dissent as "propaganda."

The term's stigmatization has tended to obstruct not only the sense of Du Bois's argument, but also its considerable originality. Du Bois was ahead of his time in perceiving the falsity and, from a minority standpoint, the futility of all claims of impartial objectivity, as well as the hidden allegiance of such claims to disguised particular interests. His claim that "all art is propaganda and ever must be"¹¹ exposed him to charges of from his contemporaries of a reductive instrumentalization of art.¹² But if his essays on propaganda continue to speak to us today, it is in part because of the striking affinities between the unconventional meanings he attached to the word and what the notion of ideology has come to stand for in contemporary critical theory.

Du Bois was working with a post-Marxian notion of ideology comparable to the

⁹ "Inevitably, it had occurred to some members of the Black *petit bourgeoisie* that their disadvantage in the ideological fray lay in part with their failure to engage the American legend. In the midst of a country whose ideationists were desperately attempting to forge an historically-grounded national identity, their lot was reduced to an identification with the horror with which slavery had been concluded....The aspirations of the Black middle class required a history which would, at once, absolve their guilt by association with the catastrophic ending of slavery; lend historical weight to the dignity they claimed as a class; and suggest their potential as participants in the country's future....Black history thus began in the shadow of the national myths and as their dialectical negation." Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983), 270-71.

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes* (New York: Vintage Press, 1996). More precisely, there were exactly two systems, which were of course free market capitalism and communism.

¹¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 1000.

¹² "Readers at the time and since isolate this sentence as proof that Du Bois had nervously retreated from the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance toward a politicizing of art inspired by his enthusiastic visit to the Soviet Union in the autumn of 1926." Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 139.

influential concept of "hegemony" that Antonio Gramsci was developing around the same time, according to which power is exercised not only through material domination but also by means of ideologies vying for control of various institutions and communicative channels.¹³ Hegemony, not reducible to political and economic coercion, exercises power through the propagation of ideas and images; and unlike a marginal ideology, a hegemonic one cannot be ignored by those it antagonizes. Underpinning his famous differences with leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance was a view of white racism as a hegemonic ideology and a consequent sense of the limitations such a state of affairs necessarily imposed on black expression. He also saw in many of the period's most talented black artists a tendency to disavow this grim reality, and sought in his writings to discourage such tendencies by critiquing them as a false consciousness.

Du Bois composed "The Propaganda of History" as an appendix to *Black Reconstruction*. What emerges from this powerful essay is a narrative of the factors that motivated him to undertake a major revisionist account of the Civil War and Reconstruction. It is important to note that the original impetus for the project came to Du Bois by way of an experience, a direct and personal encounter with the forces of censorship then operative in the field of American historiography:

The editors of the fourteenth edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica asked me for an article on the history of the American Negro. From my manuscript they cut out all my references to Reconstruction. I insisted on including the following statement:

"White historians have ascribed the faults and failures of Reconstruction to Negro ignorance and corruption. But the Negro insists that it was Negro loyalty and the Negro vote alone that restored the South to the Union; established the new democracy, both for white and black, and instituted the public schools."

This the editor refused to print, although he said that the article otherwise was "in my judgment, and in the judgment of others in the office, an excellent one, and one with which it seems to me we may all be well satisfied." I was not satisfied and refused to allow the article to appear.¹⁴

This encounter with the concrete techniques of censorship incited Du Bois to undertake a broad survey of the prevalent literature on Reconstruction, which led to the conclusion that "I write...in a field devastated by passion and belief" and that "I stand at the end of this writing, literally aghast at what American historians have done to this field."¹⁵

In presenting his survey, he considers both secondary school textbooks and academic studies--of the latter particularly those written by the faculties of the thriving history departments at Columbia and Johns Hopkins.¹⁶ He opens the essay with the question: "What are American children taught today about Reconstruction?" Drawing on a published study of textbooks, he notes "three dominant theses:" that "all Negroes were

¹³ Antonio Gramsci, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

¹⁴ *Black Reconstruction*, 713.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 725.

¹⁶ "The real frontal attack on Reconstruction, as interpreted by the leaders of national thought in 1870 and for some time thereafter, came from the universities and particularly from Columbia and Johns Hopkins." *Ibid.*, 718.

ignorant;" that "all Negroes were lazy, dishonest and extravagant;" and that "Negroes were responsible for bad government during Reconstruction."¹⁷ Turning to the scholarly literature, he then catalogs the systematic defamation of blacks which inundates almost the entirety of the field. He describes in detail the techniques of character assassination that typified this literature: "Wherever a black head rises to historic view, it is promptly slain by an adjective--'shrewd,' 'notorious,' 'cunning'--or pilloried by a sneer; or put out of view by some quite unproven charge of bad moral character."¹⁸ His documentation is exhaustive, and leaves no doubt that in the early twentieth century the discipline of history was as in thrall to racism as were the sciences of biology, sociology and anthropology.

Du Bois, then, had a clear and theoretical awareness of the concealed political subtexts of knowledge production that was ahead of his time in its precision and insight. This did not, however, lead him to a vulgar postmodernist relativism, the essentially reactionary motivations of which were obvious to him. He did not deduce from his exposure of the economic, political and psychological motives behind particular historical interpretations presenting themselves as objective, the invalidity of all truth claims or of the very notion of truth. Rather, he redoubled his commitment to the legitimacy of the discipline in which he received his training, insisting only that the bar be raised for the standards of validation and proof applied to statements about past events. In other words, academic historiography remained too mythological and literary and would have to do more to justify its pretensions to scientific status.

Du Bois often highlighted his adherence to the notion of truth by capitalizing the word. For example, in the course of reflecting on a tendency in the wake of the Civil War to sanitize various discourses of the painful topic, he asks: "But are these reasons of courtesy and philanthropy sufficient for denying Truth? If history is going to be scientific, if the record of human action is going to be set down with that accuracy and faithfulness of detail which will allow its use as a measuring rod and guidepost for the future of nations, there must be set some standards of ethics in research and interpretation." "If," he continues, "we are going to use history for our pleasure and amusement, for inflating our national ego, and giving us a false but pleasurable sense of accomplishment, then we must give up the idea of history either as a science or as an art using the results of science, and admit frankly that we are using a version of historic fact in order to influence and educate the new generation along the way we wish." "It is propaganda like this," he concludes, "that has led men in the past to insist that history is 'lies agreed upon'; and to point out the danger in such misinformation."¹⁹ Here we see Du Bois ambiguously juxtaposing the concepts of science and propaganda, just as he does with art and propaganda in a text to which I will turn presently. He sets up an apparently

¹⁷ Ibid., 711-12.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 721. On p. 719 he writes: "The Columbia school of historians and social investigators have issued between 1895 and the present time sixteen studies of Reconstruction in the Southern States, all based on the same thesis and all done according to the same method: first, endless sympathy with the white South; second, ridicule, contempt or silence for the Negro; third, a judicial attitude towards the North, which concludes that the North under great misapprehension did a grievous wrong, but eventually saw its mistake and retreated."

¹⁹ Ibid., 714.

straightforward dichotomy between true and false history, between history grounded in fact and history intended as propaganda. Propaganda, then, is writing that does not respect the limits imposed by fact and reason, which recognizes only wish and desire as standards of truth.²⁰

But it is not as simple as this, for as soon as Du Bois has set up this opposition he goes to work dismantling it. After concluding a devastating polemic against the lack of intellectual conscience among his contemporaries, he tempers the severity of his charges by allowing for degrees of scholarly mendacity, ordering these degrees into an enumerative blazon:

There are certain of these studies which, though influenced by the same general attitude, nevertheless have more of scientific poise and cultural background....Ficklen's 'Louisiana' and the works of Fleming are anti-Negro in spirit, but, nevertheless, they have a certain fairness and sense of historic honesty. Fleming's 'Documentary History of Reconstruction' is done by a man who has a thesis to support, and his selection of documents supports the thesis. His study of Alabama is pure propaganda. Next come a number of books which are openly and blatantly propaganda, like Herbert's 'Solid South,' and the books by Pike and Reynolds on South Carolina, the works by Pollard and Carpenter, and especially those by Ulrich Phillips. One of the latest and most popular of this series is 'The Tragic Era' by Claude Bowers, which is an excellent and readable piece of current newspaper reporting, absolutely devoid of historical judgment or sociological knowledge. It is a classic example of historical propaganda of the cheaper sort.²¹

By allowing for the notion of a "propaganda of the cheaper sort," this blazon suggests the addition of a middle term between the poles of his science/propaganda binary which shares in the qualities of both, and skeptically interrogates the possibility of a pure scientific objectivity while at the same time finding no clear way of dissociating itself from the stigma of unethical scholarship. The argument becomes a bit confused at this point, for Du Bois is equivocating between two qualitatively distinct notions of propaganda, as is indicated by his reference to multiple "sorts" or determinations of it: there is the simple type of propaganda as sheer deceit, antithesis of science, a discourse of expediency and indifference to fact; and some other type, evidently less "cheap" than this one, yet which Du Bois does not specify anywhere in the pages of "The Propaganda of History." This ambiguity provides the occasion for a transition to the other of Du Bois's two principle statements on the present topic, "Criteria of Negro Art." For it is precisely through recourse to art that Du Bois elaborates a more nuanced, less Manichean concept of propaganda.

"Criteria," published in the *Crisis* in 1926, is among the most challenging and meticulously crafted of Du Bois's shorter works, and has been the object of much criticism and debate. In what is by far the essay's most frequently cited passage, Du Bois writes: "Thus 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

²⁰ "In the first place, somebody in each era must make clear the facts with utter disregard to his own wish and desire and belief." *Ibid.*, 722.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 720-21.

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."²² In literally equating propaganda with art, Du Bois is clearly using the former term in a sense radically distinct from the one just reviewed; but the extraordinary density and ambiguity of his words defy any attempt at assigning a clear and determinant content to this alternate usage. Ross Posnock is certainly correct in observing that "In stating that 'all art is propaganda,' Du Bois forces opposites to collide into each other, with the effect of setting both words into motion, releasing less conventional meanings."²³ But his overemphasis on the influence on Du Bois of James, Dewey, and pragmatist philosophy in general leads him to focus inordinately on dubious connections between "Criteria" and the works of these thinkers, at the expense of the specific context and controversies informing the essay's subject matter.

As the Cold War gathered momentum in the wake of the Bolshevik ascendancy, the word 'propaganda' became a highly charged signifier: a kind of verbal weapon used to discredit any ideas that might be associated with communism, in a contest in which contending parties fought over the high-ground of representing universal and rational values, from which adversaries could be cast as advocating narrow or unwholesome principles. In a climate in which educated blacks were practically synonymous with communism in the minds of Cold War crusaders,²⁴ it is not surprising that black activists found their political and cultural discourses frequently characterized as propaganda in the mass media.²⁵

This rhetoric was absorbed into numerous African American discourses, and propaganda became a recurrent theme in controversies over the question of art. Just as Du Bois cast propaganda as the other of science in his historical writings, it became the

²² *Writings*, 1000.

²³ *Color and Culture*, 142.

²⁴ On the effects of this mentality on Du Bois, who in 1951 was indicted and acquitted as an "unregistered foreign agent," see Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944-1963* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), esp. ch. 16. For a more general account of the situation of black intellectuals during the Cold War, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

²⁵ "...Harlem artists who dared to paint images of dignified racial difference were branded as 'propagandists' precisely because their stories undermined or indicted (racist) conventional wisdom promoted by 'pure art.' For example, in 1924, *The New York Times Book Review* commented on Jessie Fauset's first novel, *There is Confusion*. Her narrative about the black bourgeoisie was criticized for having 'the usual faults of the propaganda story' because it spoke of black middle-class struggles against racism. And so at this point one is introduced to a catch-22. One could speak as 'propagandist' and be sanctioned (and potentially silenced) by the literary elite. Or, as Hughes notes, one could give in to the 'urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization' and present a public voice that was 'as little Negro and as much American as possible.' Consequently, during the Harlem Renaissance, black speech was increasingly delivered through a mode of public expression that either rendered it 'inauthentic' (propagandistic) or bound some speakers to (pure artistic) practices that negated their *voices as black* intellectuals." Eric King Watts, "Cultivating a Black Public Voice: W. E. B. Du Bois and the 'Criteria of Negro Art' in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 4:2 (July 2001): 182.

antithesis of art in debates over aesthetics, again occupying the negative pole of a Manichean binary. There is a sense in which black activists were perpetuating a technique for their own suppression by folding its structure into their idioms; however, they effected a truly subversive appropriation of the figure of propaganda, for a prominent trend within this appropriation was precisely the deconstruction of the art/propaganda opposition that was being mobilized to vitiate their culture.

Although there were real differences on the issue, and as prominent a writer as James Weldon Johnson promoted an aesthetic of "art for art's sake," many of those who weighed in on the issue did so from a "pro-propaganda" position, in the sense of affirming the explicitly political use of art.²⁶ In 1921, Eric Walrond wrote:

Mer. Johnson tells us there is a tendency on the part of Negro poets to be propagandic. For this reason it is going to be very difficult for the American Negro poet to create a lasting work of art. He must first purge himself of the feelings and sufferings and emotions of an outraged being, and think and write along colorless sectionless lines. Hate, rancor, vituperation--all these things he must cleanse himself of. But is this possible? The Negro, for centuries to come, will never be able to divorce himself from the feeling that he has not had a square deal from the rest of mankind. His music is a piercing, yelping cry against his cruel enslavement. What little he has accomplished in the field of literature is confined to the life he knows best--the life of the underdog in revolt.²⁷

When he wrote "Criteria," then, Du Bois was contributing to an already long-running dispute.

Critics generally agree that his allusion to the "wailing of the purists" is aimed at Harlem Renaissance luminary Alain Locke, who in his introduction to *The New Negro*, the foundational book of the Renaissance, wrote that the "newer motive for being racial is to be so purely for the sake of art."²⁸ It was Locke himself who initiated the polemic with Du Bois, painting the New Negro movement as a generational transition from an era defined by Du Bois's policies of racial uplift to be accomplished by a Talented Tenth, trained in the Western protocols of administration:

So for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being--a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.²⁹

²⁶ See Tony Martin, *Literary Garveyism: Garvey, Black Arts, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Dover, Mass.: Majority Press, 1983), ch. 4.

²⁷ Eric Walrond, "Art and Propaganda" in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett (eds.) *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 255.

²⁸ Alain Locke (ed.) *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4. Cf p. 11: "He resents being spoken of as a social ward or minor, even by his own, and to

Here Locke defines himself against his adversary through an implicit critique of the latter's espousal of a politics based on the related principles of elitism and representation. Du Bois's moral and conceptual procedure, claims Locke, produces rigid simulacra of living black people, which become their straitjackets: regardless of whether it is employed by those seeking to oppose or to aid black advancement, it is the form itself of the representational approach that actuates racial repression. Locke's antidote to this is an expressionist aesthetic that substitutes vital artistic creativity for rational planning and direct political action towards the state structure as the means of racial progress.³⁰

Before turning to a reading of "Criteria," a look at Locke's reply to Du Bois's reply to *The New Negro* will clarify the point on which the two fundamentally differed on the question of art. In 1928 Locke published an essay entitled "Art or Propaganda?" in which he elaborates on his notion of expressionism. "My chief objection to propaganda," he writes, "is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it. For it lives and speaks under the shadow of a dominant majority whom it harangues, cajoles, threatens, or supplicates....Art in the best sense is rooted in self-expression and whether naive or sophisticated is self-contained." To contest the slanders of racism, Locke argues, is to perpetuate them; and he proposes a "self-contained" art which, purged of political intentions defined by a defensive relation to white supremacy, will create possibilities for a greater degree of racial autonomy, somehow providing a line of flight from "the shadow of a dominant majority." Du Bois certainly did not attribute any such powers to art. Locke follows this up with a somewhat troubled passage:

The literature and art of the younger generation already reflects this shift of psychology, this regeneration of spirit. David should be its patron saint: it should confront the Phillistines with its five smooth pebbles fearlessly. There is more strength in a confident camp than in a threatened enemy. The sense of inferiority must be innerly compensated, self-conviction must supplant self-justification and in the dignity of this attitude a convinced minority must confront a condescending majority. Art cannot completely accomplish this, but I believe it can lead the way.³¹

According to this stance, art is a means of closing ranks in the face of an entrenched racism that will not listen to reason, and which thus renders reason useless to blacks seeking to better their condition. In seeking an alternative to Du Bois's problematic strategies of resistance, Locke develops an elusive concept of group inwardness and substitutes mortal combat for rational communication as the mode of interaction between minority and oppressive society. This is of course not an advocacy of violence, as the dueling imagery refers to the powers of art. Rather, Locke's evocation of David and

being regarded a chronic patient for the sociological clinic, the sick man of American Democracy."

³⁰ "Of the voluminous literature on the Negro, so much is mere external view and commentary that we may warrantably say that nine-tenths of it is *about* the Negro rather than of him, so that it is the Negro problem rather than the Negro that is known and mooted in the general mind. We turn therefore in the other direction to the elements of truest social portraiture, and discover in the artistic self-expression of the Negro to-day a new figure on the national canvas and a new force in the foreground of affairs." *Ibid.*, 1.

³¹ Gates and Jarrett (eds.), *The New Negro*, 260.

Goliath is an affirmation of the policy of essentially ignoring the goings-on of domination for the sake of fostering a group confidence that will enable David to face Goliath with a defiant poise. David's task is neither to know Goliath nor to persuade him towards some mutually acceptable peace; it is to prepare himself for victory against a bigger and stronger adversary.

In responding to Du Bois, Locke thus re-establishes a strict opposition between art and propaganda, thereby in his own way perpetuating one of the tools of white racism: "In our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression,--in a word must choose art and put aside propaganda."³² There is no question that he fetishizes art by defining it as the other of propaganda conceived as rational political discourse. But despite the vagueness of his concept of expression, as well as his inadequate grasp of the complexity of Du Bois's thought, he has located a real problem in his interlocutor's position vis-à-vis art. Locke's complaint that Du Bois's instrumentalization of art imposes considerable limitations on the possibilities of black expression, as well as pleasure, is not unwarranted. Du Bois's classical tastes³³ ran counter to the Dionysian impulses so characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the rising popularity of jazz.³⁴

Du Bois's response, implicit throughout his writings, is that it is not he but social reality that imposes those constraints, and that Locke is making of art an avenue for escapism and self-deception. I have already noted that Du Bois was committed to a notion of hegemonic ideology which cannot be evaded and must be contested--even, at least partially on its own terms. Not unlike the field of Cultural Studies today, he insisted that art was no mystical exception to this rule, that it too was a discourse inescapably engaged in the contest over social meanings and values, such that to ignore the forces of racism is to submit to them.³⁵

For Locke, then, art should maintain its independence from representation,

³² Ibid.

³³ "The conclusion of Du Bois's magnificent effort to define Afro-American art betrays a weakness which gives a curious ambivalence to his criticism. He could identify the substance of that art but not the spirit. Wherever the spirit manifested itself in an exuberance which offended his temperament--his personal preference for decorum--Du Bois, wincing, felt compelled to excuse or denounce the work." Darwin T. Turner, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic" in Kramer (ed.) *Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined* (New York: AMS Press, 1987), 51.

³⁴ "Du Bois was trying hard to understand folk and popular culture, and perhaps he was succeeding; but he simply did not seem to have much natural affinity to the spirit of jazz." Wilson J. Moses, "Culture, Civilization, and the Decline of the West: The Afrocentrism of W. E. B. Du Bois" in Bernard W. Bell, Emily R. Grosholz and James B. Stewart (eds.) *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 249. An ambivalent but mostly disapproving attitude towards jazz is one of the many striking affinities between Du Bois's views and those of German philosopher Theodor Adorno, whose work he does not seem to have known. See Christian Bethune, *Adorno et le jazz: analyse d'un deni esthetique* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003).

³⁵ "The negative propaganda on one side of the 'veil' described by DuBois should occasion a resistant form of proselytizing. Inherent to this point of view is the realistic mode, for art that provides merely vicarious escapism will not suffice. Real human inequities have to be exposed, and proper attitudes and values need to be molded. Art, therefore, is conceived as a social institution, akin to government, religion, and law." Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 51.

reflection and manifest moral purpose; its function was not the portrayal of black identity, but its very formation through a dynamic and corporeal process that freed black bodies for experiences of pleasure and fulfillment systematically denied them by the status quo. For Du Bois, art was weighed down with moral responsibility and entailed no categorical distinction from the task of political activism: as is evident from the style in which he wrote his autobiographies, art and politics were two aspects of the singular phenomenon that was his life.

Du Bois's moral seriousness tended to alienate him from some of the most gifted artists of the Harlem Renaissance. It exposed him to charges of prudery and even philistinism. In response to a negative review in the *Crisis* of Claude McKay's first novel *Home to Harlem*, which focused on its moral and sexual decadence, McKay replied to him that "you mistake the art of life for nonsense and try to pass off propoganda as life in art!" and that "nowhere in your writings do you reveal any comprehension of esthetics and therefore you are not competent nor qualified to pass judgment upon any work of art."³⁶ Although Du Bois never fully overcame his New England Puritan upbringing, such charges were not entirely fair. He himself was fully aware of the problems involved in an ethical approach to the creation and evaluation of art. In one of his frequent allusions to Greek mythology, he stresses the importance of avoiding both "the Scylla of prudery and the Charybdis of unbounded license."³⁷ As will emerge from a consideration of "Criteria" and *Dark Princess*, his asceticism was anything but absolute or simple.

In so fraught an atmosphere as this, it is clear that Du Bois intended to scandalize the literati with his bold, counterintuitive, and seemingly self-undermining equation of art and propoganda. And scandalize it did, inciting resounding rebukes of the type just outlined. Yet his contemporaries missed the subtlety of his statement, which it would take criticism some time to discern. What they could not or would not see was that an equation of art and propoganda can be read just as much as an aestheticization of propoganda as a propogandization of art. If the latter was the predominant strategy within the politics of accusation, then the subversive thrust of "Criteria" can be characterized as an emphatic turn to the former.

I have already pointed out that Cold War polemics involved a portrayal of the adversary's discourse as skewed and partisan, and one's own as regular; and that this strategy was frequently aimed at Du Bois, as well as African American activism in general. Rather than stridently oppose this rhetoric, Du Bois simply made it his own, and thereby took away everything they had. The import of "Criteria" is not to reduce art to crass political wrangling, although Du Bois deliberately potentialized this obvious reading; but to introduce art into the field of politics, to make something fresh out of the cliché-word "propaganda" by demolishing its opposition to a fetishized notion of art.

This aestheticization of politics involved nothing of the Kantian tendency to reduce art to the cerebral category of judgment. The art Du Bois infused into politics did not pretend to be without interest; it was full of interest, not only political but personal as well. Perhaps in order to defend himself from the incessant charges of Grundyism, he

³⁶ Herbert Aptheker (ed.) *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. I (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 374-75.

³⁷ *Crisis* 34 (September 1927), 240.

incorporated into his 1928 novel *Dark Princess* an eroticism that almost goes too far. More than any other of his books, *Dark Princess* charts the precarious path he sought to travel between the hazards of a Victorian propriety which buttressed conditions of sexual repression, and stereotyped caricatures of depravity that fed the demands of a racist culture industry.

In Du Bois's improbable romance, Matthew Towns, the African American protagonist, goes into European exile after he is denied a medical degree for clearly racist reasons. There he meets an Indian Princess, Kautilya, who introduces him to a secret international cadre of non-whites seeking to organize a revolutionary movement of the "Darker World" against Western imperialism. Towns falls instantly in love with the princess, but his feelings are reciprocated only after a long series of events, in the course of which Towns had married a corrupt political opportunist and, through separation from his beloved, forgotten his revolutionary goals and devoted himself to unscrupulous personal ambition. Upon their reunion, the two become involved in an extramarital affair as Towns reaffirms his ideals and tries in vain to get a divorce. The story concludes with the birth of their son, who is received with much fanfare in the novel's concluding lines:

Then from the forest, with faint and silver applause of trumpets:

"King of the Snows of Gaurisankar!"

"Protector of Ganga the Holy!"

"Incarnate Son of the Buddha!"

"Grand Mughal of Utter India!"

"Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!"³⁸

Du Bois wrote *Dark Princess* at a moment when novels like *Home to Harlem* and Carl Van Vechten's unfortunately titled *Nigger Heaven*, which portrayed black sexuality in a lewd and decadent light, were enjoying wide popularity. Considering his outspoken reproach of such portrayals, together with the fact of their broad appeal, it seems likely that in writing *Dark Princess* he sought to direct into new channels the desires that such representations gratified. By weaving unconventional and provocative sexual behavior into an overarching narrative of political purpose, he may have sought to foster what he considered to be more responsible cultural standards for black literature. If such an intent did inform the composition of the novel, it did not lead to success, for the book fared poorly both financially and critically. Nonetheless, it sheds light on the ways in which he aestheticized "propaganda": in light of its strategy of fusing politics and pleasure, *Dark Princess* can be read as an artistic illustration of the theoretical stance Du Bois enunciates in "Criteria," to which I will now turn.

"Criteria of Negro Art" is a short essay but a true forcefield of ideas; a text of multiplicities, as its very title suggests. Its multifaceted surface and non-linear argumentative structure tend to frustrate the task of the interpreter, resisting all efforts at reducing it to any particular one of its meanings or implications. It is precisely the juxtaposition of contradictory meanings Du Bois so intricately performs in its pages that invalidates the practice, widespread among critics then and now, of substituting one or another of its literal significations for the text's overall import. My intention is not to

³⁸ Du Bois, *Dark Princess: A Romance* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 311.

clarify the latter, but rather to index some of the essay's most salient deconstructive powers; and in particular, given my topic, its compelling but seldom-noted blurring of the line between history and fiction. Close reading is not adequate to such a task; in its place I will apply the method of quantitative analysis.

Behind all the positive contents to be found in the text, beside the equation of art and propaganda, over the linking of Truth and Beauty, stands a remarkable use of narrative. Throughout it runs a proliferation of discrete narrative units that is subtle enough to evade immediate detection but, once noticed, calls stringently for explanation; a consciousness of it suddenly impedes the flow of the argument, and heads turn to peer at it in silent consternation. Even according to a conservative definition of the word "story", there are no fewer than thirteen discrete, independent stories to be found within the essay's ten pages--looser criteria make the text even more interesting, but this would lead too far afield. Given such quantity, the brevity of "Criteria" requires a clipped, minimalist tempo in the inscription of these narratives, which allows for maximal dispersal. There is also a plurality of genre: the accounts range from the biographical, to the autobiographical, to the historical, to the imaginative. Why does Du Bois here assemble such a conspectus of the range of story-telling, this schematism of the ways of recounting events?

I cannot present all thirteen or fourteen, but one passage, in which three separate narratives are related in succession, is representative:

In New York we have two plays: "White Cargo" and "Congo". In "White Cargo" there is a fallen woman. She is black. In "Congo" the fallen woman is white. In "White Cargo" the black woman goes down further and further and in "Congo" the white woman begins with degradation but in the end is one of the angels of the Lord.

You know the current magazine story: A young white man goes down to Central America and the most beautiful colored woman there falls in love with him. She crawls across the whole isthmus to get to him. The white man says nobly, "No". He goes back to his white sweetheart in New York.³⁹

Here Du Bois draws on works by other writers in order to illustrate how art participates in propaganda; elsewhere, with other purposes in mind, he invents his own vignettes. By juxtaposing so many abbreviated plots of so many types, he invites reflection on how different genres of narrative interrelate: he explores the connections between these forms, and above all those between history and fiction.

In light of this, I want to focus on a passage usually overlooked by interpreters of "Criteria":

Have you heard the story of the conquest of German East Africa? Listen to the untold tale: There were 40,000 black men and 4,000 white men who talked German. There were 20,000 black men and 12,000 white men who talked English. There were 10,000 black men and 400 white men who talked French. In Africa then where the Mountains of the Moon raised their white and snow-capped heads into the mouth of the tropic sun, where Nile and Congo rise and the Great Lakes swim, these men fought; they struggled on

³⁹ *Writings*, 1000.

mountain, hill and valley, in river, lake and swamp, until in masses they sickened, crawled and died; until 4,000 white Germans had become mostly bleached bones; until nearly all 12,000 white Englishmen had returned to South Africa, and the 400 Frenchmen to Belgium and Heaven; all except a mere handful of the white men died; but thousands of black men from East, West and South Africa, from Nigeria and the Valley of the Nile, from the West Indies still struggled, fought and died. For four years they fought and won and lost German East Africa; and all you hear about it is that England and Belgium conquered German Africa for the allies!

Such is the true and stirring stuff of which Romance is born and from this stuff come the stirrings of men who are beginning to remember that this kind of material is theirs; and this vital life of their own kind is beckoning them on.⁴⁰

Du Bois never returns to this topic: immediately after his striking claim that history is the material from which romance or imaginative fiction is made, the soil in which the artwork grows, he moves on to another point without elaborating, leaving the reader to ponder his intent. As I will show, the sense of this passage can only be grasped by reading "Criteria" alongside his historical writings. For in it, a decade before the publication of *Black Reconstruction*, he questions the boundaries between art and history in a statement inseparable from his blending of art and propaganda.

In fact, this latter admixture is only one manifestation of a more general deconstruction of the divide between the aesthetic and the discursive, of which yet another prominent instance in the essay is that between Truth and Beauty. After insisting the two are "inseparable,"⁴¹ he continues:

This is brought to us peculiarly when as artists we face our own past as a people. There has come to us...a realization of that past, of which for long years we have been ashamed, for which we have apologized. We thought nothing could come out of that past which we wanted to remember; which we wanted to hand down to our children. Suddenly, this same past is taking on form, color, and reality, and in a half shamefaced way we are beginning to be proud of it. We are remembering that the romance of the world did not die and lie forgotten in the Middle Ages; that if you want romance to deal with you must have it here and now and in your own hands.⁴²

Through artistic creation, Du Bois insists, history "takes on form, color, and reality," a kind of aesthetic reality that gives meaning to lived experience and shapes action both personal and political. It is in this sense that history is the material, the inescapable referent of all imaginative art. According to such a view, the artwork is not radically original (although it may present itself as so), does not invent a wholly new world out of a vacuum; instead, it contributes to the painstaking transfiguration of traumatic memory.

The essential consequence Du Bois draws from this is that art is bound to respect strict limitations not of its own choosing: "The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice; and slavery only dogs him when he

⁴⁰ Ibid., 997.

⁴¹ Ibid., 995

⁴² Ibid., 996.

is denied the right to tell the Truth or recognize an ideal of Justice."⁴³ He encodes these limitations in a variety of registers: truth, fact, science, morality; but in his writings the most characteristic and extensively elaborated determination of these limits is expressed in terms of history, under which these other codes are generally subsumed.

There is no absolute distinction between fiction and history; yet it would be unwarranted to accuse Du Bois of leveling all differences: in unsettling these differences Du Bois mobilized them for various uses within his many projects. If anything, he was unusually insistent that the two be kept separate, for history can do things literature cannot and vice versa. He did not content himself, as many self-consciously stylizing left-theorists do, with writing aesthetic theory or aesthetic history. Du Bois simply could not get by without writing both books of history *and* novels; over a span of five decades, he was driven again and again back to the novel, and even his middling talent for the form could not keep him from writing them one after another. It was the differences far more than the similarities between the two that proved so productive for him.

If beauty is the focus when Du Bois considers the relation of narrative to propaganda, in his reflections on tragedy the sublime comes to the fore. His work is characterized throughout by a powerful sense of the tragic, and as elsewhere this sense emerges through a parallel distribution across the two primary modes of narrative. In his historical writings he draws on the tragic tropes of suffering and heroism to render the past experience of blacks and their struggle against all odds for agency and self-affirmation; in the case of the novel, I will focus on his use of *Hamlet* in confronting the problem of action in the present.

Few words have been so contested in their meanings and implications in modern times as has the word 'tragedy'. A prominent interpretive tradition has argued that fatalism is the form's ultimate import, that the death of the hero signals the futility of all attempts at transcending certain timeless and universal laws, one of which is the law of hierarchy and inequality. Leftist critics have tended to condemn such a worldview as reactive without offering an alternative interpretation, dismissing tragedy in general as antithetical to progressive political goals. But against the hermeneutic of suspicion the genre has received, some of the most consistently leftist theorists have sought to rehabilitate tragedy's political reputation by demonstrating its extensive affinities with radical projects.

New Left theorist Raymond Williams and, more recently, Terry Eagleton have sought to locate behind the elitist trappings of the canon of tragic literature a more authentic core of content which, unlike the convention of the death of kings, exhibits a continuity extending from the genre's ancient Greek origins through to modern tragedy as written by the likes of Ibsen and O'Neill. For Williams, this content refers to the enduring reality of socio-political disorder, the conditioned nature of all existing regimes, and the revolutionary forces and attendant violence that have menaced every form of domination that has come into being throughout history. Eagleton is less overtly political: for him tragedy is a response to the kinds of suffering and dissolution to which all people, rich

⁴³ Ibid., 1000.

and poor, have always been prone.⁴⁴ This line of tragic theory can begin to account for the extraordinary frequency of Du Bois's allusions to tragic themes and texts, despite the conventional association of the form with privileged social strata.

Black Reconstruction is in many ways a singularity among Du Bois's historical writings. Nowhere before or after do those works display so pervasively tragic a tonality. In addition to this general mood, specific references run throughout the book: "The tragedy of the black slave's position was precisely this; his absolute subjection to the individual will of an owner and to the 'cruelty and injustice which are the invariable consequences of the exercise of irresponsible power, especially where authority must be sometimes delegated by the planter to agents of inferior education and coarser feelings."⁴⁵ Elsewhere Du Bois writes: "Like Nemesis of Greek tragedy, the central problem of America after the Civil War, as before, was the black man: those four million souls whom the nation had used and degraded, and on whom the South had built an oligarchy similar to the colonial imperialism of today, erected on cheap colored labor and raising raw material for manufacture."⁴⁶ In an allusion to Hamlet's famous soliloquy he notes that "the profit and greed of the slaveholder which caused the whole catastrophe, and of the planter who forced an unjust and still dangerous solution, has been sicklied o'er with sentiment."⁴⁷ And to cite just one more example, he begins the book's conclusion with the following passage: "The most magnificent drama in the last thousand years of human history is the transportation of ten million human beings out of the dark beauty of their mother continent into the new-found Eldorado of the West. They descended into Hell; and in the third century they arose from the dead, in the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen. It was a tragedy that beggared the Greek; it was an upheaval of humanity like the Reformation and the French Revolution."⁴⁸ This survey should provide a sense of the multiple and striking uses Du Bois makes of tragic resonances throughout the book. It remains to explain how these uses function within his larger argument.

Hayden White's influential book *Metahistory*, which remains controversial to the present day, can illuminate this question. White explores the problematic nature of the claims modern historians have made for the objective, scientific nature of historical scholarship. He argues that history is in fact "a protoscience with specifically determinable nonscientific elements in its constitution," and that these nonscientific elements result from history's imputation of narrative form to past events, which in themselves bear no inherent meanings or tendencies.⁴⁹ On the one hand, even the

⁴⁴ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2006). Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (London: Blackwell, 2003).

⁴⁵ *Black Reconstruction*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 237. cf. Jean-Pierre Vernant's claim that in tragic drama "within the space of the stage and the framework of tragic representation, the hero is no longer put forward as a model, as he used to be in epic and in lyric poetry. Now he has become a problem. Now, as the action unfolds and through the interplay of the dialogue, what used to be praised as an ideal, the touchstone of excellence, is brought into question before the public." Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (trans. Janet Lloyd) *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 242.

⁴⁷ *Black Reconstruction*, 353.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 727.

⁴⁹ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore:

scientific side of history is itself perspectival and based on how the historian views the present world,⁵⁰ on the other, by shaping narratives of the past into plots bearing the kinds of aesthetic unity through which literary texts suture their meanings, history makes claims that are not only epistemological, but ethical as well: "I consider the ethical moment of a historical work to be reflected in the mode of ideological implication by which an *aesthetic* perception (the emplotment) and a *cognitive* operation (the argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones."⁵¹ Through this double articulation, history stakes out positions within the ideological disputes of the present.

White then enumerates in tabular form the various types of literary genres and epistemologies that historians combine, and the spectrum of ideologies that result from these combinations.⁵² Rather than summarize his entire structuralist grammar of historical discourse, which in any case is problematic, I will draw on those elements of it that are of relevance to *Black Reconstruction*.

He lists four literary types: romantic, tragic, comic and satirical. (Comic, here, in the sense not of "humorous" but in the Dantean sense of a plot ending in unity and reconciliation.) Now there is not a hint of satire anywhere in Du Bois's writings; they do, however, combine elements of romance, tragedy, and comedy throughout. Of the four scientific viewpoints White lists, the mechanistic and organicist apply to Du Bois.⁵³ Different combinations of these modes suite a number of ideological stances, which include anarchist, radical, conservative and liberal.

In terms of this grammar, White analyzes the works of such major nineteenth century historians as Jules Michelet, Leopold von Ranke, Alexis de Tocqueville, Jacob Burckhardt, and Karl Marx. Of these, Ranke and Marx are the two most significant references for Du Bois.

According to White, Ranke, who established the standards of realism and empirical rigor that remain dominant among today's professional historians, practiced a conservative historiography based on an organicist epistemology and narrated in comedic

Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 21.

⁵⁰ "...the very claim to have distinguished a past from a present world of social thought and praxis, and to have determined the formal coherence of that past world, *implies* a conception of the form that knowledge of the present world also must take, insofar as it is *continuous* with that past world. Commitment to a particular *form* of knowledge predetermines the *kinds* of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kinds of knowledge one can have of it, and hence the kinds of projects one can legitimately conceive for changing that present or for maintaining it in its present form indefinitely." Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² Ibid., 29.

⁵³ "The Organicist attempts to depict the particulars discerned in the historical field as components of synthetic process. At the heart of the Organicist strategy is a metaphysical commitment to the paradigm of the microcosmic-macrocosmic relationship; and the Organicist historian will tend to be governed by the desire to see individual entities as components of processes which aggregate into wholes that are greater than, or qualitatively different from, the sum of their parts." Ibid., p. 15. "Ultimately, for the Mechanist, an explanation is considered complete only when he has discovered the laws that are presumed to govern history in the same way that the laws of physics are presumed to govern nature. He then applies these laws to the date in such a way as to make their configurations understandable as functions of those laws." Ibid., 17.

form. Although he insisted that historical research must start from particulars not universals, his own work was guided by a notion of a teleological purpose that governs the development of history over time, leading eventually to the perfection of society.⁵⁴ Like Ranke, Du Bois sought a theory of history that would allow for the possibility of future progress; at the same time, however, he found Ranke's recourse to natural teleology untenable. In a collaborative book review, Du Bois and Rushton Coulborn insist that causation must be "conceived in truly humanistic, dynamic terms" and that in Ranke's system it had "become so exaggerated as to tend to dehumanize it."⁵⁵ Marx's view of history was more compatible with the premium Du Bois placed on human agency.

I find White's account of how tragedy functions in Marx to be on some points descriptive of Du Bois, and will therefore cite it at length:

A set of events emplotted as a Tragedy may be explained "scientifically" (or "realistically") by appeal to strict laws of causal determination or to putative laws of human freedom, as the case may be. In the former case the implication is that men are indentured to an ineluctable fate by virtue of their participation in history, whereas in the latter case the implication is that they can act in such a way as to control, or at least to affect, their destinies. The ideological thrust of histories fashioned in these alternative ways is generally "Conservative" and "Radical" respectively. These implications need not be formally drawn in the historical account itself, but they will be identifiable by the *tone* or *mood* in which the resolution of the drama and the epiphany of the law that it manifests are cast. The differences between the two kinds of historiography thus distinguished are those which I conceive to be characteristic of the work of a Spengler on the one hand and a Marx on the other. The Mechanistic mode of explanation is used by the former to justify the tone or mood of histories emplotted as Tragedies, but in such a way as to draw ideological implications which are socially accommodationist. In Marx, however, a similarly Mechanistic strategy of explanation is used to sanction a Tragic account of history which is heroic and militant in tone.⁵⁶

Here is manifested, in the field of historiography, the schism I described earlier between conservative and leftist interpretations of tragedy. Though Du Bois did not share Marx's militant leanings, the tragic key in which he writes *Black Reconstruction* bears comparison with the presence of tragedy on both the analytic and stylistic levels of Marx's historical writings.

Far from basing his historical arguments on a mechanistic notion of the historical process, Du Bois was arguing precisely against such a notion insofar as it typified the work of the historians he sought to discredit, motivated as they were by the goal of proving the impossibility of achieving black equality. This does not mean that he did not allow for the existence of patterns, and even of laws conceived in a conditioned sense, to

⁵⁴ "...The process indicated [by Ranke] is not a simple coming into being and passing away of things in time, in their own time. Time itself is endowed with value by virtue of the perception of a progression toward a goal, even though the goal itself remains unspecified and is characterized only as the achievement of formal coherence in general." Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵ "Mr. Sorokin's System" in *Journal of Modern History* 14 (1942), 512.

⁵⁶ *Metahistory*, 27.

the historical phenomena he sets out to interpret. The trope of Prometheus as the image for the situation of blacks in American history itself figures Du Bois's sense of racism as a potent social force whose cyclical returns are exceedingly difficult to escape; but at the same time, Prometheus's eventual release according to the myth can be read as a sign of Du Bois's affirmation of the possibility of the cycle's eventual supersession.

The theme of racism's power to reconstitute itself in the wake of every assault on its dominance permeates *Black Reconstruction*. In one of the many passages of the book in which Du Bois glancingly refers to the present, he writes:

It is always difficult to stop war, and doubly difficult to stop a civil war. Inevitably, when men have long been trained to violence and murder, the habit projects itself into civil life after peace, and there is crime and disorder and social upheaval, as we who live in the backwash of World War know too well. But in the case of civil war, where contending parties must rest face to face after peace, there can be no quick and perfect peace. When to all this you add a servile and disadvantaged race, who represent the cause of war and who afterwards are left near naked to their enemies, war may go on more secretly, more spasmodically, and yet as truly as before the peace. This was the case in the South after Lee's surrender.⁵⁷

Here Du Bois highlights the tendency of a traditional social order to perpetuate itself in spite of apparent reconfigurations. The language in which he argues that the economy was "founded on" the exploitation and degradation of blacks at times resorts to characterizations of the status quo as something approaching a law of nature. But at the same time, the quasi-mythological imagery through which he describes those laws strips them of the kind of mechanistic certainty attributed to more strictly scientific laws such as gravity or thermodynamics, which more conservative historians have tried to mobilize in their claims for the necessity of inherited conventions. By placing human agency in opposition to the weight of the past, Du Bois allows for the possibility of overcoming that burden without providing a guarantee of its future occurrence. This envelopes the agents within his account in an aura that is tragic without being simply pessimistic.

White also discusses Marx's strategy of mixing tragedy and comedy as a way of imagining a utopian future.⁵⁸ Du Bois's relation to Marx is less clear in this area, but repays consideration. I have already quoted the messianic ending of *Dark Princess*, with its clear utopian registers. Although, as I will discuss later, Du Bois would go on to negate the messianic quality of his fiction in the *Dark Flame* trilogy, that quality appears at many points in his texts. However, one particular manifestation of Du Bois's tendency to divide his narrative works into historical and fictional modes is a consistent tendency to restrict the utopian thematic to the latter, which allows him to imbue a book like *Black Reconstruction* with a powerful and unalloyed sense of the tragic. Nowhere in this book

⁵⁷ *Black Reconstruction*, 670.

⁵⁸ "...Marx emplotted the historical process in two modes, Tragic and Comic, simultaneously, but in such a way as to make the former emplotment a *phase* within the latter, and so as to permit himself to claim the title of a 'realist' while sustaining his dream of a utopian reconciliation of man with man *beyond* the social state. The sublation of the Tragic condition, which has prevailed in history since the fall of man into society through the division of labor, constituted, in Marx's thought, the scientific justification of the *Radical* political position he purported to derive from his study of history." *Ibid.*, 310.

does one find the kind of utopian rhetoric that pervades the third volume of *Capital*. For the most part Du Bois does not speculate in its pages on any future triumphs that might await the causes of black emancipation and true democracy, but rather focuses on the implications of the past, and its revisionist interpretation for the sake of present purposes. This is as much as to say that in constituting the relations between past, present and future, so important to his thought, he consigns the first two to historiography, while making the second and third of these terms the concern of imaginative fiction. Granted, this is a schematic characterization of his narrative strategies, and such a structure really sheds light on his texts only when one considers the ways in which they resist and render problematic its categories; yet it is an important factor in understanding the crucial distinctions between his historical and his fictional uses of tragedy. And finally, I would add that even in his fiction, and throughout his writing generally, the utopian theme is not as characteristic of him as it is of Marx, that it was largely vestigial to his outlook, and that he came to realize this by the time he wrote the *Black Flame* trilogy. I will elaborate on this point in my discussion of identity.

The tragic mood, then, pervades *Black Reconstruction*: all of the events it recounts and the historical figures it depicts are bathed in its light; it guides Du Bois's decisions about which phenomena are historically significant and which are irrelevant, and regulates the formal coherence into which the empirical data are composed. Numerous factors made the form suitable for his purposes. The figure of the tragic hero provided him with an image for the kinds of active roles he sought to attribute to blacks in response to establishment historians' denials of such roles, as well as for the tremendous obstacles they faced in their transition from slavery to citizenship; the violence found so ubiquitously throughout the canon of tragedy well suits the topic of war; and the defining theme of suffering resonates powerfully with his subject matter.

In fact, given the magnitude of the catastrophe that was the Civil War, Du Bois saw fit to imbue *Black Reconstruction* with a sense of pathos that extended to all who figure within its pages, black or white--including even the villains of his narrative, such as Andrew Johnson:

Because he could not conceive of Negroes as men, he refused to advocate universal democracy, of which, in his young manhood, he had been the fiercest advocate, and made strong alliance with those who would restore slavery under another name.

This change did not come by deliberate thought or conscious desire to hurt--it was rather the tragedy of American prejudice made flesh; so that the man born to narrow circumstances, a rebel against economic privilege, died with the conventional ambition of a poor white to be the associate and benefactor of monopolists, planters and slave drivers. In some respects, Andrew Johnson is the most pitiful figure of American history. A man who, despite great power and great ideas, became a puppet, played upon by mighty fingers and selfish, subtle minds; groping, self-made, unlettered and alone; drunk, not so much with liquor, as with the heady wine of sudden and accidental success.⁵⁹

The tragic theme is present throughout Du Bois's novels, in which he puts it to

⁵⁹ *Black Reconstruction*, 322.

various experimental uses. His first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, thematizes the tragic mythological figures of Jason and Medea, to whom its title alludes; *Dark Princess*, which will be my focus, puts the genres of romance and tragedy into tense conflict as Du Bois negotiates a number developments in his cultural and political views; the *Black Flame* trilogy, written during the last years of Du Bois's life, leaves behind romance and expresses a powerful tragic view comparable to that of *Black Reconstruction*, even though these novels do not equal that book in the quality of their execution.

The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911) is the first and, most critics agree, the least accomplished of Du Bois's novels.⁶⁰ It recounts a tumultuous love affair between the protagonists, Bles Alwin and Zora, situating it within racially inflected political and economic themes. The novel's overall arc is comic, ending in marriage, although the happiness of this ending is tempered by its location within Jim Crow America. Bles and Zora are poor residents of Tooms County, Alabama, a fictional cotton-growing town dominated by a white patriarch named Colonel Cresswell. As the protagonists become educated and politically conscious, the setting moves to the larger worlds of Washington, D.C and New York, where Bles is tempted by political corruption and financial self-interest but is eventually saved through Zora's intervention; they return to Alabama to confront the more authentic task of racial uplift in the South. The presence of tragedy does not become prominent and effective in Du Bois's thought and writing until the late twenties; but already in *Quest* his interest in the genre is apparent and in many ways revealing.

The novel begins with Bles arriving in Tooms County from his home in Georgia, sent by his parents to study at the school there. He encounters Zora for the first time while passing along the edge of a swamp, in which she lives in a near-outcast condition with her mother Elspeth:

Then of a sudden up from the darkness came music. It was human music, but of a wildness and a weirdness that startled the boy as it fluttered and danced across the dull red waters of the swamp. He hesitated, then impelled by some strange power, left the highway and slipped into the forest of the swamp, shrinking, yet following the song hungrily and half forgetting his fear. A harsher, shriller note struck in as of many and ruder voices; but above it flew the first sweet music, birdlike, abandoned, and the boy crept closer.

The cabin crouched ragged and black at the edge of black waters. An old chimney leaned drunkenly against it, raging with fire and smoke, while through the chinks winked red gleams of warmth and wild cheer. With a revel of shouting and noise, the music suddenly ceased. Hoarse staccato cries and peals of laughter shook the old hut, and as the boy stood there peering through the black trees, abruptly the door flew open and a flood of light illumined the wood.

Amid this mighty halo, as on clouds of flame, a girl was dancing. She was black, and lithe, and tall, and willowy. Her garments twined and flew around the delicate moulding of her dark, young, half-naked limbs. A heavy mass of hair clung motionless to her wide forehead. Her arms twirled and flickered, and body and soul seemed quivering and

⁶⁰ "[*Quest's*] major failure stems from Du Bois's inability to weave all the strands of multiple plot into a coherent whole." Richard Kostelanetz, "Fictions for a Negro Politics: The Neglected Novels of W.E.B. Du Bois" in William L. Andrews (ed.) *Critical Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1985), 174.

whirring in the poetry of her motion.

As she danced she sang. He heard her voice as before, fluttering like a bird's in the full sweetness of her utter music. It was no tune nor melody, it was just formless, boundless music. The boy forgot himself and all the world besides.⁶¹

Here the liquid region of the swamp is associated with the dissolution of subject and object, occasioned by a scene of Dionysian frenzy. Throughout the rest of the novel, the swamp is set in opposition to the solid ground of the cotton plantation.⁶² When Bles sees Elspeth in the swamp, Du Bois describes her in quasi-supernatural language as "short, broad, black and wrinkled, with fangs and pendulous lips and red, wicked eyes."⁶³ Later, after having learned in school about Greek mythology, Bles associates Elspeth with Medea.⁶⁴

Du Bois reiterates the link between tragic myth and the unmooring of selfhood--this time a specifically racialized selfhood--in another scene. During a conversation between Bles and his white teacher, Mary Taylor, about the beauty of the cotton plant, it suddenly occurs to the latter to compare the crop to the Fleece of legend:

She bent wondering over the pale plants. The poetry of the thing began to sing within her, awakening her unpoetic imagination, and she murmured:

"The Golden Fleece--it's the Silver Fleece!"

After they part, "She began to realize that in this pleasant little chat the fact of the boy's color had quite escaped her; and what especially puzzled her was that this had not happened before. She had been here four months, and yet every moment up to now she seemed to have been vividly, almost painfully conscious, that she was a white woman talking to black folk. Now, for one little half-hour she had been a woman talking to a boy--no, not even that: she had been talking--just talking; there were no persons in the conversation, just things--one thing: Cotton."⁶⁵ Here aesthetic experience--in this case of beauty in nature rather than art--involves a loss of self and a forgetting, even if temporary, of the codes of racial caste. I have already shown how by the twenties Du Bois had come to advocate a firmer connection between art and political activism, or rather had more rigorously worked out those connections, which had already guided him in writing *Quest*. This alternate sense of the function of art, and in particular of tragic art, would nonetheless continue to inform his subsequent work in submerged and indirect ways.

Dark Princess is a more complicated and ambitious novel than *Quest*. It does, however, bear a number of similarities of plot and character with its predecessor: both

⁶¹ Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 1-2.

⁶² "*The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is structured upon the clash of two opposing world views, that of the Swamp and that of the Plantation. The Swamp represents all that is free, wild, joyful, and loving, the Plantation, all that is self-serving and exploitative....Nor does Du Bois paint the Swamp mentality as all good and the Plantation view as all evil." Arlene A. Elder, "Swamp versus Plantation: Symbolic Structure in W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*" in Harold Bloom (ed.) *Modern Critical Views: W. E. B. Du Bois* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 23-4.

⁶³ *Quest*, 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

texts involve a troubled love affair between two politically committed minorities, in which the male character is tempted by political corruption but eventually redeemed by his beloved. To his second novel Du Bois brings an improved facility with the form and an expanded range of literary references, as well as an international geography.

In an insightful essay, Claudia Tate argues that Du Bois brought to the writing of *Dark Princess* a chivalric rhetoric he had developed in earlier writings as a form of resistance to the chivalric posturings of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan.⁶⁶ Tate notes that the adventures of Matthew Towns reflect the conventions of courtly literature, in which the knight performs virtuous services for a noble lady in order to win her favor.⁶⁷ She then applies the psychoanalytic concept of the "fantasmatic" to explore the ways in which these chivalric codes guided and shaped Du Bois's thought:

To explain, analyze, and appreciate the deep meaning of these hermeneutic equations in *Dark Princess*, it is useful to engage the psychoanalytic model of the "fantasmatic." A fantasmatic is a "structuring action" or a recurring pattern of an individual's fantasies that "lie[s] behind such products of the unconscious as dreams, symptoms, acting out, [and] repetitive behavior." The fantasmatic is not only an internal or masked thematic that determines a subject's unconscious associations; it is also a dynamic formation that seeks conscious expression by converting experience into action....⁶⁸

Tate is certainly correct in claiming that the formulas of romance play a substantial role in the novel's thematic structure, and I cannot get into the details of her psychoanalytic elaboration on these facets of the text. But her exclusive focus on romance overlooks, as has much of the criticism, a conflicting current of tragedy adds a crucial level of meaning to *Dark Princess*.

Although present throughout the narrative, it is only towards the end that this current rises to the surface. In this case the focus moves from ancient to modern tragedy, and particular to *Hamlet*. After abandoning his involvement in political corruption, Matthew takes a job as a ditch digger for a subway construction project, as a way both of atoning and of forging solidarity with workers. In a letter to Kautilya he describes reading *Hamlet* before going to work in the morning:

Yesterday I arose with the dawn before work and began reading. It was a revelation of joy. I was fresh and rested and the morning was bright and young. I read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I am sure now that I never read it before. I told people quite confidently that I

⁶⁶ "Chivalric idealization of female sexuality was the means for inciting and representing both the Klan's racist propaganda for white supremacy and Du Bois's counterpropaganda for racial equality in *The Crisis*. The Klan enhanced the esteem and political power of the working-class whites who largely comprised its membership, by relying on displaced persecutory fantasies to police white female sexuality and to denigrate as well as exploit black people in general. Du Bois retaliated by using *The Crisis* to (re)appropriate chivalric imagery so as to idealize himself and others fighting for racial equality." Claudia Tate, *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels: Desire and the Protocols of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 49.

⁶⁷ "The 'dark princess' of the title commands the protagonist's valiant fight against racism" Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Tate's citation is from Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: American Psychoanalytic Association and Yale University Press, 1990), 317.

had. I looked particularly intelligent when *Hamlet* was discussed or alluded to. But if this was the truth I must have read *Hamlet* with tired mind and weary brain; mechanically, half-comprehendingly. This morning I read as angels read, swooping with the thought, keen and happy with the inner spirit of the thing. Hamlet lived, and he and I suffered together with an all too easily comprehended hesitation at life.⁶⁹

This passage is one of many indications suggesting that Du Bois himself had experienced a particularly powerful reading of *Hamlet*, probably not long before the writing of *Dark Princess*. For starting around this time, allusions to the play become regular occurrences in his writings. Although he, like many writers, refers to numerous Shakespearean texts, *Hamlet*, even more than *Othello*, occupies a particularly prominent and, I claim, significant presence in his work.

I have already cited one such allusion from *Black Reconstruction*. A year after the publication of that book, in a column written for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, he quips: "To starve or not to starve, especially before election, is just now the major problem of Washington and the unemployed."⁷⁰ Such topical references are frequent, and there is no need to catalog them; but it is important to note that the presence, quantity and sense of such references are of more than ornamental significance.

Among the themes that might have led Du Bois to such a pronounced interest in *Hamlet*, and which may have enabled the text to influence his unconscious thought processes to the extent that it did, is that of the conflict between thought and action. The play, which powerfully stages the crisis of action in modern times,⁷¹ has spoken to the concerns of numerous African American writers.⁷² Due to his position as a prominent race leader, Du Bois was constantly reflecting on the problem of effective action in the face of formidable political obstacles, and more specifically on Hamlet's dilemma of how to unite thinker and doer in the same person.⁷³ But alongside the problem of action, and in some ways connected to it, is Du Bois's use of the *Hamlet* text as a matrix through which the racist-colonial regime takes on a concrete and thus contestable appearance.

In *Worlds of Color*, the final installment of the *Black Flame* trilogy, the protagonist Manuel Mansart, at an academic conference, meets an unnamed character

⁶⁹ *Dark Princess*, 270.

⁷⁰ Herbert Aptheker (ed.) *Newspaper Columns by W. E. B. Du Bois* (White Plains, New York: Kraus-Thomson, 1986) vol. 1, 58.

⁷¹ "In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare dramatizes the problem of surviving and acting in a world that the prince has inherited, in which competing and contradictory ideologies make cognitive clarity difficult, if not impossible." Meera Tamaya, *An Interpretation of Hamlet Based on Recent Developments in Cognitive Studies* (Lewiston: E. Mellon Press, 2001), xi.

⁷² "In the soliloquies of both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* there is rational assessment of the action to be committed--a weighing of both the good and evil that might come as a consequence of action. Such deliberations figure in the tragic outcomes for both heroes. They represent the ability of the protagonist to direct his destiny by exercising his will....It can be argued that the intensity of suffering reflected in the literature of modern black authors follows both the Christian and Renaissance examples of the tragic experience." Chester Hedgepeth, Jr., *Theories of Social Action in Black Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 26-7.

⁷³ "The man who thinks and talks is not called upon to do anything. If, of course, once in a blue moon the Planner and the Doer are one, they may work in unison; which usually results in the disappearance of one or the other. The Executive dreams and the Dreamer dies." *Newspaper Columns*, vol. 1, 231.

known only as the "Dark Dane." The colleague who introduces the two explains to Mansart "just what a Dark Dane was" as follows: "The Danes, when they owned the Virgin Islands, used in certain cases to decree that individual Negroes of distinction were legally 'white,' with all the rights of Danes. Some descendants of such families still live on the islands and usually occupy high positions."⁷⁴ Mansart befriends the Dane, who proceeds to recount to him the colonial history of the West Indies, framing it as the tragedy of a paradise spoiled by European colonization: "Here Poverty, the scourge of Man, was to be conquered and Eternal Life achieved. Over these fortunate isles, out of Atlantis, the best of men started toward fabulous Asia, mother of human culture. But into this paradise the Serpent of Greed entered, and instead of an Eden for its own dark people and their European guests, arose Hell for the Indian, in blind effort to build a white heaven."⁷⁵

Given the importance of *Hamlet* for Du Bois, it seems reasonable to compare this Dark Dane of "high position" to the Prince of Denmark; and the language of the passage just cited further suggests such a connection. The context in which Du Bois evokes the Garden of Eden recalls Shakespeare's use of the trope in the ghost of King Hamlet's description to his son of his murder at the hands of Claudius:

'Tis given out that, sleeping in mine orchard,
 A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark
 Is by forgèd process of my death
 Rankly abused. But know, thou noble youth,
 The serpent that did sting thy father's life
 Now wears his crown.⁷⁶

In filtering the narrative of colonial domination through a Shakespearean prism, Du Bois gives to the subaltern subject position a unique shape bearing specific implications for the kinds of projects for action that can be envisioned for such subjects.

Tate's recourse to the concept of the "fantasmatic" sheds light on the ways in which Du Bois's use of *Hamlet* is structured through an Oedipal triangulation. She claims that chivalric symbolism acts as Du Bois's "fantasmatic template for encoding racial activism--that is, his unconscious pattern of consolidating the libidinal economies of desire and freedom."⁷⁷ She then argues that "*Dark Princess* depicts an oedipalized story; it is a messianic narrative about a black son's conflict with the white patriarch. But instead of idealizing the paternal imago and making reparations to it, as discussed in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, *Dark Princess* idealizes the maternal imago and makes the lost mother the object of the son's reparations."⁷⁸ Although her argument is persuasive, Tate focuses excessively (though not exclusively) on Du Bois's personal biography in her reading of the function of romance in his writings. Biography certainly forms a large part of the material on which any writer draws in composing a text, but of more interest to the

⁷⁴ Du Bois, *Worlds of Color* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 57.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 661.

⁷⁷ *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 50-51.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

reader are the social meanings that emerge from the incorporation of personal data.⁷⁹ If the Freudian theory of the Oedipal complex still has any value today, it is in its revisionist interpretation as a mechanism through which subjects are articulated into a political regime.⁸⁰

In accounting only for the maternal side of Du Bois's "oedipalized story," Tate sees only half the picture; and yet she herself suggests the other, the paternal half, without specifying the literary codes in which it is expressed. Her exclusive focus on chivalric symbols enables her to analyze in detail the maternal side of the Oedipal triangle, but scarcely to name the "white patriarch" that plays so crucial a role in *Dark Princess* and many of Du Bois's other writings. As is clear from the Dark Dane passage, this patriarch has much less to do with Du Bois's personal life than with the white patriarchal regime of European colonialism. Du Bois figures this theme in terms not of romance but of tragedy, and more specifically through the textual matrix of *Hamlet*.

Without grasping the full extent of its presence in *Dark Princess*, Tate identifies the role of white patriarchal power in the frustrating event that catalyzes Towns's involvement in anti-colonial politics when she notes that "Matthew experiences hard-won pleasure at a northern white medical school, which supports his self-esteem. But his success comes to an abrupt end when the racist white patriarch forbids his advancement. Racism thus presents an oedipalized assault on Matthew's ego, and he must find a way to obliterate this new threat...."⁸¹ The stupid doctors who thwart Towns's professional ambition operate the levers of white supremacy. When viewed through the lens of *Hamlet*, they appear as the image of Claudius, the target of Hamlet's destructive rage. Du Bois drew on *Hamlet* in order to present the white patriarch as the locus of illegitimate power, and the subaltern as an active and resourceful avenger.

I have shown how, in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, tragedy functions as an agent of disintegration, a dissolution of fixed identities untempered by the preserving force of representation; and how, in his subsequent development, Du Bois veered away from such a notion of art due to moral and political concerns. And yet the tragic element continued throughout Du Bois's life to course through his work--though less visible, the swamp seeps into *Dark Princess* and the *Black Flame* trilogy, as well as the various other writings through which he sought to imagine new forms of identity.

In a sense, the temporal differentiation between historical and fictional narrative which is so crucial for Du Bois--in one the reinterpretation of the past from the

⁷⁹ I am not accusing Tate of being apolitical in her reading of *Dark Princess*--the passages I cite make it clear this is not the case. But there are considerable problems involved with her claim that, in the tension between private and public spheres, the latter comes to dominate the novel: "While the tension between Matthew's political commitment and sexual desire is the source of power in the novel, the schema fails to make the eroticism serve the racial politics. As a result, the alignment between the 'beautiful, beautiful' dark woman as the inspiration for racial propaganda splits off from the racial plot and becomes a full-fledged love story in its own right." *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 72.

⁸⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

⁸¹ *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels*, 65.

perspective of present exigencies, in the other a view of the present under the light of future possibilities--becomes particularly clear when one considers the question of identity. On the one hand, there is a firm continuity linking the two; here as elsewhere Du Bois refuses an absolute distinction between the genres of historiography and the novel, and his imaginings of the hitherto unthinkable invariably look to the past for their grounding. Yet there is a very concrete sense in which a novel like *Dark Princess* sets itself a task beyond the capabilities of empirical history as practiced in *Black Reconstruction*. To wit, whereas historiography, despite its freedom of interpretation and literary framing, remains decisively limited by the facticity of the past, imaginative fiction, though still bound in indirect ways by the inescapable referent of history, can claim for itself specific freedoms vis-à-vis the limits of the already-achieved.

At the early twentieth century moment in which Du Bois wrote, modern history was overwhelmingly national history: the nation, along with the categories of race, class and gender, in whose terms it was articulated, stood as the dominant agent of the historical process, the ultimate horizon within which events took on meaning and political projects were planned and carried out. For this reason, *Black Reconstruction* projects images of black identity in a decidedly nationalist idiom, at the same time that these images are informed by his international and cosmopolitan interests, of which he was fully conscious when he wrote that book, years after the publication of *Dark Princess*.

Although motivated by the same overarching set of interests, *Dark Princess* enunciates an emphatically international topography of political action, at which Du Bois gradually arrived as a result of the obstacles he encountered in his earlier, nationally defined projects.⁸² The sheer newness of these international forms of association, the fact that he was living through the process of their emergence, made the historical mode of narrative unsuitable for the task of their articulation and eventual institutionalization. The freedom of the historian is limited to discovering (or creating) invisible links between forms of identity as they have already existed. At its best, this kind of history can disclose new visions of past and present which expand the range of the possible; but its contribution to projects which would forge radically new subjectivities is constrained by its methodological commitments, and it is precisely in this area that Du Bois located the specific advantage of the novel.

An international conception of radical politics was of course not entirely new to the twentieth century--it goes back to the communist theories of Marx and Engels, and the concrete, institutionalized form those theories were taking on in the Soviet Union

⁸² "Though Du Bois evidently hoped when writing *Souls* that acknowledgment of black America might be foreseeable in the near future, over a quarter of a century later his optimism was significantly dampened. Three decades of lynching, Jim Crow, and other forms of state-sanctioned racial violence had taken their toll. Rather than battle exclusively for national recognition of black men and women, by the 1920s Du Bois began to turn to the larger world: toward Marxism and toward an understanding of the interconnection between struggles for racial justice fought in the United States and those fought against imperialism and colonialism elsewhere....Whiteness, Du Bois argues, signifies class as much as race, and thus in discussing whiteness as a world economic power, he develops a critique of colonialism as a form of international capital expansion that is linked directly to racial oppression in the United States." Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Reproducing Racial Globality: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Sexual Politics of Black Internationalism" in *Social Text* 67 (Summer 2001): 25.

informed Du Bois's thinking in ways that are difficult to overstate. Yet, as recent criticism has shown, in spite of its anti-colonial rhetoric Marxism remained tethered to Eurocentrism.⁸³ Keenly aware of the limitations of Western Marxism, Du Bois sought to articulate a cosmopolitan politics which would be truer to the concerns of those marginalized by racism and colonialism; and which was unthinkable without recourse to new modes of consciousness--in part a class consciousness, but not reducible to this--and new formations of identity that would present themselves as alternatives to nationalism.

For an understanding of Du Bois on these questions, it is important to distinguish between two distinct and largely incommensurable notions of identity, which can be labeled the "essentialist" and the "discursive." According to the essentialist notion, identity is an innate substance, an ultimate ground of being from which all particular qualities and propensities emanate. In the case of racial identity, for example, one's capacities and historical legacy, and therefore one's social entitlements, are determined by the racial group into which one was born. The discursive notion, which developed largely as a critique of essentialism, views identity as a dynamic and historically conditioned element within a field of socio-political practices, not an ontological entity but rather the grammatical subject of speech acts which structure and regulate collective praxis. According to such a view, identities are not pre-given and permanent, but are shaped and modified with an eye towards specific goals and outcomes; always conditioned, never complete, they are involved within a historical process that overflows the bounds imposed by any purported absolute origin or ultimate *telos*.

Although Du Bois tended to equivocate between these two types of identity, at times veering into essentialism in his ideological writings about black Africa as the original fount of culture and civilization, his most innovative work is predicated on the discursive concept. As an historian, he was aware of the contingent, non-linear processes through which dominant identity formations like the nation state and biological race emerged, and therefore that they were not timeless or necessary categories; and therefore equally aware that, since those forms at one time emerged as something new and unfamiliar, they could themselves be displaced in the future by yet newer identities. His political activism was largely motivated by such an awareness. Both his histories and novels proceeded from a conscious intention of contributing to the articulation of new subject positions optimally suited for the aims of racial and colonial emancipation.

It is oversimplifying, however, to posit a clean divide along these lines between the fictional and historical texts, as it is also to view his development as an inexorable *progressus* from a nationalist to an internationalist mindset. Although the subject matter of *Black Reconstruction* commits it to a decidedly nationalist orientation, it is clearly situated within a global Marxian world picture at the same time that it works at de-centering that picture. On the other hand, a broader consideration of Du Bois's novels that includes not only *Dark Princess*, but also *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* and the *Black Flame* trilogy undercuts any attempt at neatly distinguishing novel from history in terms of a nationalist/cosmopolitan binary. Not only is the earlier *Quest* of a relatively national scope, but the trilogy, which Du Bois wrote in the sixties during the last years of his life, marks an unmistakable retreat from the vast global theater in which *Dark Princess*

⁸³ Cedric Robinson, *Anthropology of Marxism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

unfolds: all of its major characters are American, and although the scene occasionally shifts to other national settings, the geographical focus remains consistently confined to national borders.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the difference between the formal capacities of novel and history, between the types of statements each is capable of making about matters of identity, is generally valid and sheds light on the ways in which Du Bois brought the two genres into productive relations.

In both his historical and his fictional writings, then, Du Bois seeks to imagine a black identity beyond the color line. In this sense, all his narrative works are united by this shared purpose. But the two sets of texts are at the same time differentiated in that one focuses on national, the other on international determinations of identity. There is nothing contradictory in this, for it can be read in terms of the multiplicity of identities within a single person, the overcoding of subjectivities that is so characteristic of modern times. By participating simultaneously in both reinscriptions of the past and speculations on what is possible in the future, Du Bois enunciated thoroughgoing reflections on the complexities of modern black selfhood on both the local and the global scale.

The agency Du Bois attributes to blacks in response to the whitewashing to which the academic establishment had subjected American history attains completion only through a more specific rendering of the nature and tendencies of that agency; and throughout *Black Reconstruction* that agency takes the form of a mass labor movement. A key element within his strategy for recasting the historical image of the African American from passive commodity into leading agent of revolutionary transformation involves a transcoding of agents and events into an explicitly Marxian idiom. His use of the term "black worker" in place of "slave" forwards this strategy, as does his famous description of the mass defection of slaves to the Union armies as a "general strike against slave labor."⁸⁵ As one critic has observed, "By calling this movement a general strike, Du Bois, like [C. L. R.] James, made the slaves into a different social category."⁸⁶ A consideration of the rhetorical techniques through which Du Bois effected this reconfiguration can shed light on the topic of identity as it appears specifically in his historical works.

Herbert Aptheker has pointed out the crucial importance of perspective and point of view in these works: "Du Bois was explicit in his belief that while living behind the Veil might carry the danger of provincialism, it had the great advantage of helping disclose truth or neglected aspects of reality exactly because its point of observation differed. There was something else. Du Bois not only held that a new vantage point offered new insights, but also that a racist viewpoint was a blighted one; that it could not fail to distort reality; that an explicitly antiracist viewpoint was not only different but better."⁸⁷ A striking feature of *Black Reconstruction* is that in it the condition of perspectivism applies doubly: both to the historian who would discover truths about past events, and to all those portrayed as playing significant roles within the narrative. For Du Bois, it is not only the historian who faces the dire problems of knowledge, but anyone

⁸⁴ Note, however, that the trilogy consists of historical novels, which are just as prone to the limitations I have outlined as is historiography.

⁸⁵ *Black Reconstruction*, ch. 4.

⁸⁶ Anthony Bogues, *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.

⁸⁷ Aptheker, *Afro-American History: The Modern Era*, 49.

involved in significant action. He develops a sense of partial and competing perspectives through the deployment of themes of perceiving and knowing, which appear as motifs throughout his account--especially in the chapter on the "general strike," the central question of which is what the war *meant* to its various participants.

Du Bois sets up this thematic in the chapter's opening paragraph: "When Edwin Ruffin, white-haired and mad, fired the first gun at Fort Sumter, he freed the slaves. It was the last thing he meant to do but that was because he was so typically a Southern oligarch. He did not know the real world about him. He was provincial and lived apart on his plantation with his servants, his books and his thoughts. Outside of agriculture, he jumped at conclusions instead of testing them by careful research. He knew, for instance, that the North would not fight. He knew that Negroes would never revolt."⁸⁸ The image depicted here, of an historical agent whose deeds produce results other than those intended due to partial and inadequate knowledge of social reality, is central to the argumentative procedure Du Bois applies throughout the chapter and the book as a whole. He presents the war itself as leading to an outcome hardly anyone intended at its outset: "When Northern armies entered the South they became armies of emancipation. It was the last thing they planned to be. The North did not propose to attack property. It did not propose to free slaves. This was to be a white man's war to preserve the Union, and the Union must be preserved."⁸⁹ This divergence between intention and outcome ensued directly from racist assumptions about blacks which events proved to be false: "Both sections ignored the Negro. To the Northern masses the Negro was a curiosity, a sub-human minstrel, willingly and naturally a slave, and treated as well as he deserved to be."⁹⁰ It was due to this kind of uninformed action on the part of whites that blacks were able to seize the initiative and force the issue of emancipation.

But Du Bois does not for all this attribute clairvoyance to black participants, whose situation was far from ideal for the acquisition of knowledge. After raising the question, "What did the war mean to the Negroes, and what did the Negroes mean to the war?" he mentions two prevailing hypotheses: "...the one that the Negro did nothing but faithfully serve his master until emancipation was thrust upon him; the other that the Negro immediately, just as quickly as the presence of the Northern soldiers made it possible, left serfdom and took his stand with the army of freedom." He rejects both these theories, noting that "It must be borne in mind that nine-tenths of the four million black slaves could neither read nor write, and that the overwhelming majority of them were isolated on country plantations. Any mass movement must materialize slowly and painfully. What the Negro did was to wait, look and listen and try to see where his interest lay."⁹¹ Like racist delusion did to whites, isolation and large-scale illiteracy deprived black agents of the degree of knowledge required for rationally planned action. Such a situation left them no alternative to looking, listening and attempting to see their true interests. In this and other passages, perception functions as a metaphor for the kinds of partial and uncertain awareness available to those involved in a chaotic war. Although there are degrees of relative blindness and insight, no single perspective is absolute and

⁸⁸ *Black Reconstruction*, 55.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

omniscient, so that the figure of perception applies as well to the better informed: "The Negroes of the cities, the Negroes who were being hired out, the Negroes of intelligence who could read and write, all began carefully to watch the unfolding of the situation."⁹² In addition to obstructions imposed by material circumstances, the problem of knowledge and decision for the slaves was augmented by the effects of propaganda, which, like perspectivism, Du Bois applies both to the craft of the historian and to the people and events that constitute his subject matter: "The South was not slow to spread propaganda and point to the wretched condition of fugitive Negroes in order to keep the loyalty of its indispensable labor force."⁹³ Blinded by ignorance, enveloped in a cloud of false representations, the actors on the stage of history remained unable to attain to an awareness of their own interests, and thus to take immediate and decisive action towards the fulfillment of those interests.

And yet, despite all these obstacles, Du Bois characteristically continues to insist on the possibility of scientific and objective knowledge. After discussing the crucial role played by slaves defecting to the Union forces, he notes: "This but emphasized and made clear a truth which ought to have been recognized from the very beginning: The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the southern black worker raising food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white. This was so clear a fact that both sides should have known it."⁹⁴ In this passage, the word 'truth' clearly functions in the Marxian sense as denoting the objectively determined interests of the various factions involved in economic and political conflict. Had they been better informed about the social landscape in which the war took place, as they "should have," the Union could have acted more rationally and efficiently.

Alongside scientific "research," cited earlier as a means of attaining true knowledge, stands intuitive "insight," which Du Bois at points attributes to Abraham Lincoln: "The slave, despite every effort, was becoming the center of the war. Lincoln, with his uncanny insight, began to see it." "In August," he continues, "Lincoln faced the truth, front forward: and that truth was not simply that Negroes ought to be free; it was that thousands of them were already free, and that either the power which slaves put into the hands of the South was to be taken from it, or the North could not win the war. Either the Negro was to be allowed to fight, or the draft itself would not bring enough white men into the army to keep up the war."⁹⁵

Beneath the swarm of partial, contentious, and generally blind viewpoints on the events and issues of the war, Du Bois argues, is an objective Truth which, at least to a significant extent, determines outcomes regardless of what particular participants consider, in most cases mistakenly, to be the reality of things. It is this argumentative structure that enables him to claim that, despite the fact that no one at the time saw it as such, the Civil War was in fact a "general strike" against the slavery form of labor exploitation. His highly informed, thoroughly researched perspective on the matter, together with a viewpoint that is not benighted by the cataract of racism, puts him in a position to demonstrate this.

⁹² Ibid., 59.

⁹³ Ibid., 61.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 82.

What does all this have to do with identity? It is my claim that, *specifically within the historical writings*, the uses of the figure of truth outlined above constitute a key component in Du Bois's projects of criticizing and re-configuring prevalent notions of black identity. It is in a rhetoric of sound, unbiased scholarship that Du Bois grounds his attempt at discrediting the image of Civil War-era blacks as passive objects born for slavery and replacing it with that of a revolutionary agent within the historical process. His portrayal of blacks as a "dark proletariat"⁹⁶ is not, he claims, just one position among many within a dissonant chorus of incommensurable voices, but corresponds with the underlying reality of the events he interprets, and thus has more validity than the uncritically biased claims of racist historiography.

This has a number of implications. His adherence to a notion of history as a scientific discipline whose object is Truth imposes limits on Du Bois *qua* historian in his task of contesting and reconfiguring hegemonic identities. Insofar as identity is aligned with group interest, which in *Black Reconstruction* it undoubtedly is, and group interest is mainly determined by objective conditions which were what they were, identity in history is a quality that can be discovered but not modified. This is not to say that there was not also a subjective element, and I have just shown how Du Bois accorded much significance to the subjective impressions those involved had of their situation. But the location of those subjective positions in the past, by virtue of their pastness, consigns them to the objective materiality of the document. On matters of identity, historiography as practiced by Du Bois can invalidate claims that do not correspond with the factual record, but cannot do the work of forging new identities in accordance with the demands of the present. Since the present does not share with the past the constraint of being irrevocably fixed, a discourse whose primary referent is the present in its motion towards the future, opens onto possibilities not available to the historian. In his novels, and particularly *Dark Princess*, Du Bois availed himself of these possibilities in order to move beyond the limits of history.

Black Reconstruction, then, confines itself to the horizons of consciousness that characterize its nineteenth century setting, which in spite of an already global marketplace was predominantly national as far as the varieties of experience available to most people are concerned. Although at points Du Bois refers to the dawning of high imperialism, and thus to the kinds of transcultural encounters unleashed by that development,⁹⁷ the main lines of the narrative are set within a decidedly national topography.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁷ "...Americans saw throughout the world the shadow of the coming change of the philanthropic attitude which had dominated the early nineteenth century, with regard to the backward races. International and commercial imperialism began to get a vision. Within the very echo of that philanthropy which had abolished the slave trade, was beginning a new industrial slavery of black and brown and yellow workers in Africa and Asia. Arising from this, as a result of this economic foundation, came the change in the attitude toward these darker people. They were no longer 'Brothers in Black'; they were inferiors. These inferiors were to be governed for their own good. They were to be raised out of sloth and laziness by being compelled to work. The whole attitude of Europe was reflected in America and it found in America support for its own attitude." *Black Reconstruction*, 632.

With *Dark Princess* it is quite otherwise: its primary referent is unmistakably the twentieth century present in which it was written; and while it confronts the legacies of the past, its main concern is with changing the conditions that motivated its writing, rather than scientifically ascertaining the facts about them. For an understanding of how the novel undertakes this task, it is crucial to read it in light of those aspects of Du Bois's activism which pertain directly to its international and anti-colonial subject matter. In fact, Du Bois saw his writing activities in general as inextricably involved in his socio-political tasks. For him, writing was one component among many within the overarching project of resisting racial domination.⁹⁸

The Afro-Asian coalition Du Bois imagines in *Dark Princess* has a correlate in a real-world anti-colonial movement in which Du Bois was actively involved. The early years of the twentieth century mark the emergence of a growing consciousness among colonized peoples of a community of interests that cuts across both national and ethnic boundaries. A landmark event in this development was the Universal Races Congress, held in 1911, which Du Bois attended.⁹⁹ The leading role he played in one such movement, namely Pan-Africanism, is well documented and has received copious discussion.¹⁰⁰ More recently, much critical attention has been focused on his interest in Asian liberation movements, his participation in such movements and the influence they had on his own thought and activism.¹⁰¹ Such activities contributed to his goal of establishing an effective political unity among all peoples that had suffered adverse effects from the European global domination which resulted from the industrial revolution, a vast international collective Du Bois frequently referred to as the "Darker World."

While this notion of subaltern solidarity bears many similarities with Pan-Africanism, it differs from it in significant ways: It involves an extension of the logic implied in Pan-African and Pan-Asian identities, in so far as it is more inclusive and does not define membership in terms of a single one of the racial categories posited by nineteenth century raciology. This creates demands for alternative criteria of

⁹⁸ See Adolph Reed, *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 4. In this chapter, Reed discusses "the unity of scholarship and activism" in Du Bois. A similar argument can be made about Du Bois's literary writings.

⁹⁹ "According to Du Bois, 'the tangible result' of the meetings was the creation of an 'international committee,' which was charged with effecting world peace through interracial cooperation." Elliot M. Rudwick, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Universal Races Congress of 1911" in *Phylon* 20 (1959): 374.

¹⁰⁰ Kwadwo O. Pobi-Asamani, *W. E. B. Du Bois: His Contributions to Pan-Africanism* (San Bernardino, California: The Borgo Press, 1994).

¹⁰¹ "W. E. B. Du Bois's lifelong advocacy for the liberation and independence of Asian countries is both the least appreciated aspect of his political career and the one perhaps most central to its leftist trajectory. Between his support for Japan in its 1904 war with Russia and his second and final trip to Maoist China in 1959, Asia was for Du Bois a literal and figurative site of his intellectual evolution from "fabian socialist" ...to revolutionary Marxist. Asia was the twin pole of Du Bois's black intellectual world: after 1900, he imagined the U.S. "color line" as the "world color line," extending into China, Japan, and India, and he considered Pan-Africanism and Pan-Asianism as mutually constituting global struggles. Du Bois's attention to and support for radical Indian political movements near the turn of the century was likewise his first serious intellectual identification with Marxian politics." Bill V. Mullen, "Du Bois, *Dark Princess*, and the Afro-Asian International" in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11:1 (April 2003): 218.

identification, namely a shared opposition to Eurocentrism, and adds to the difficulties of forging bonds of association and cooperation across ethnic, linguistic and geographical differences.

In addition to this, the extraordinarily innovative nature of such a project places formidable obstacles in its way. What is so fascinating about the idea of an Afro-Asian coalition is that it shares with the racial and continental solidarities the ambition of becoming a real geopolitical force to be reckoned with, embodied in concrete institutions and organizational structures, but does not have the same grounding in reality. That is, the geographical proximities and shared regional interests that have allowed a degree of success to various transnational continental unions are scarcely available to a more global and less geographically defined form of international solidarity. Whereas any attempt at surpassing the boundaries imposed by nationalism will at times tend to speak in the subjunctive mood of speculation, this tendency will be all the more pronounced to the extent that a movement's conditions of possibility are not in existence, and therefore must be achieved by means of purposive action. The markedly imaginative realm in which an Afro-Asian coalition existed when Du Bois was writing *Dark Princess* may account in part for why this, and not Pan-Africanism, appeared to him as fitting subject matter for his most important novel.¹⁰²

Du Bois brought two contradictory but connected strategies to this problematic; in addition to corresponding to the essentialist and discursive types of identity outlined earlier, these strategies are also distributed across the history/fiction divide in narrative modes, which informs so much of his work. The first strategy, which he expresses in historical terms, seeks to locate beneath the cultural and historical divergence between Africa and Asia a more fundamental unity that issues from a primordial origin. This argument, in which Du Bois drew on a number of precursors,¹⁰³ finds its most elaborate

¹⁰² Such a coalition would indeed eventually make its presence felt in the world: "In January 1949, when the Dutch took 'police action' against Indonesia, the response of 15 [*sic*] Asian and African governments of meeting in New Delhi to publicly denounce this action signaled the awakening of not merely Asia, and not even Africa in addition to Asia, but of a nascent entity that I term 'Asia-Africa.' According to Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, 'that crucial demonstration of Asian-African solidarity helped ensure the survival of our young Republic. Indonesia may therefore be regarded as the first child of Asian-African solidarity....' Indeed, this was a new moment in the building of a 'deep sense of kinship among Asian and African nations.' With the action of 1949, these countries began to consult each other and coordinate their actions in international forums, forming the basis of the emergence in the UN of what has been termed the 'Afro-Asia bloc.'" Vrushali Patil, *Negotiating Decolonization in the United Nations: Politics of Space, Identity, and International Community* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 48.

¹⁰³ "The first cultural and intellectual contact points were established by nineteenth-century African American nationalists looking to Asiatic sources in antiquity as a means of recuperating a racial identity beyond the sphere of classical 'Western' models....Black 'contributionist' and Egypocentric [*sic*] thoughts of the nineteenth century were predicated on analyzing Egypt, North Africa, and the Mediterranean region as crossroads of Asiatic and African cultures. Jupiter Hammon, Alexander Crummell, and even Frederick Douglass used Asian antiquity as a touchstone for the 'roots' of AfroAsiatic civilization. Their interest in 'Eastern' byways for the development of Black culture was often linked to a restorative conception, in particular of Ethiopia as the ancestral home, or 'Zion,' of the Black diaspora. These linkages...underpinned much of the imaginative work of early Black nationalists to conceive of a racial nation with nonwhite sources at its root." Bill V. Mullen, "Persisting Solidarities: Tracing the AfroAsian Thread in U.S. Literature and Culture" in Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen (eds.)

formulation in *The World and Africa*. In the second strategy, which appears most dramatically in *Dark Princess*, the focus shifts from an identity grounded in origins to one brought into existence through socio-political process. Stuart Hall has noted the appropriateness of narrative for the articulation of identities conceived as mutable and contingent: "...identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one's own self."¹⁰⁴ In *Dark Princess*, narrative works as the indispensable medium through which it becomes possible for Du Bois to imagine the kinds of transnational community that would suit the anti-colonial project of his times.

But this is not all there is to be said about his recourse to the novel as a means of forwarding the struggle for racial uplift. First, it is revealing to note an important difference which this recourse marks between Du Bois's methods and the Marxist-Leninist internationalism with which they meld on so many points: namely, a principled refusal of the means of violence. Du Bois frequently argued that those who have suffered the effects of imperial violence are in a privileged position for grasping the futility of violence as a means of resisting oppression, which is difficult even to distinguish from violence as a concept.¹⁰⁵ To quote Phillis Wheatley:

Steeled was that soul and by no misery moved
That from a father seized his babe beloved:
Such, such my case. And can I then but pray
Others may never feel tyrannic sway?¹⁰⁶

His advocacy of peaceful means accounts in large part for the differences between Du Bois and so many of his radical contemporaries on the question of the role of art in revolutionary politics.

In addition to this, he believed in the positive strategic value of literature. There are many indications that Du Bois, over the course of long experience in radical international activism, arrived at a sense of the limits of rational planning and institutional architecture vis-à-vis the task of bringing disparate ethnicities into new relations of cooperation. How, after all, is any idea of unity to be realized when groups and individuals remain divided by such factors as prejudice, fear and miscommunication? Rational planning, important as it is throughout Du Bois's works, finds its effectiveness mainly in the objective realm; Du Bois, painfully aware of the inertial forces exerted by racial subjectivities, was drawn to literature in part by its location on the plane of subjectivity, its ability to reflect upon, imagine, and perhaps even create new complexes of emotion and perception. However successful a novel like *Dark Princess* may or may not have been in achieving such effects, it is of much interest on account of the

AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 248.

¹⁰⁴ Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities" in Anthony D. King (ed.) *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1991), 49.

¹⁰⁵ Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁶ *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1997), 58.

theoretical positions it yields when read in the light of Du Bois's goals as an activist. I will conclude the present essay with a consideration of how Du Bois brought his novel to bear on the task of drawing diverse ethnicities into the forum of transnational and transracial cooperation.

Early in the novel, at the dinner in Berlin to which Kautilya has invited Towns in order to introduce him to her anti-colonial cadre, Towns is surprised to encounter an atmosphere of racial tension similar in kind, if not degree, to the racism he had experienced in America. Among a group consisting of Japanese, Indian, Chinese, Egyptian and Arabic members, he is the only black at the table. Soon the conversation turns to the absence of black members from the organization, when Kautilya says: "You will note, Mr. Towns, that we represent here much of the Darker World. Indeed, when all our circle is present, we represent all of it, save your world of Black Folk." To which the Egyptian adds, "All the darker world except the darkest."¹⁰⁷ As some of the diners begin to show signs of discomfort with the subject of race, the topic abruptly switches to art, and Towns listens in admiration to a sophisticated discussion about cubism, Proust, and Benedetto Croce's *Aesthetic*, until Kautilya eventually reminds the party of its former topic: "Then easily, after the crisp brown fowl, the Princess tactfully steered them back to the subject which some seemed willing to avoid."¹⁰⁸ When Towns insists that "we Negroes belong in the foremost ranks" of the fight against colonialism, a Japanese man responds: "Need we say that for these peoples we have every human sympathy? But for us here and for the larger company we represent, there is a deeper question--that of the ability, qualifications, and real possibilities of the black race in Africa and elsewhere."¹⁰⁹ After this thoughtless remark, it dawns on Towns that "Suddenly now there loomed plain and clear the shadow of a color line within a color line, a prejudice within prejudice, and he and his again the sacrifice. His eyes became somber and did not lighten even when the Princess spoke."¹¹⁰ Towns is temporarily unhorsed by his discovery that the dysosmia of racial anxiety is not limited to the white world, that the stigmatization of black people has a more global reach than he had imagined. This realization dampens his cheerful mood and cancels his feeling of elation at finally having found a place where he belongs.

A little further on occurs an exchange which becomes an important stage in the development of love between Towns and Kautilya. It involves Towns's ambivalent response when an Indian member of the group implies an equivalence between African Americans and the "lower classes:"

He had started to say, "I reckon there's as much high-born blood among American Negroes as among any people. We've had our kings, presidents, and judges--" He started to say this, but he did not finish. He found himself saying quite calmly and with slightly lifted chin:

"I reckon you're right. We American blacks are very common people. My grandfather was a whipped and driven slave; my father was never really free and died in jail. My mother plows and washes for a living. We come out of the depths--the blood and mud of

¹⁰⁷ *Dark Princess*, 19.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 21. It is rarely if ever noted by the numerous commentators on the conversation on art that it is motivated by a disavowal of racial antagonism and an avoidance of explicitly political subject matter.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

battle. And from just such depths, I take it, come most of the worth-while things in this old world...."¹¹¹

Towns's speech is received in tense silence by his aristocratic audience, until Kautilya murmurs, "I wonder--I wonder," "almost catching her breath."¹¹² In a sense, the aristocratic and democratic ideologies between which Towns equivocates constitute the central binary of the novel, whose opposed terms it seeks to mediate throughout its unfolding. But alongside the aristocratic theme (which stems mainly from a choice of genre that has baffled many critics¹¹³) in contrast with egalitarianism, in the dinner scene and throughout the novel, stands the issue of racial divides and how to mitigate them.

For the rest of the novel, the love between Towns and Kautilya develops in parallel with the reconciliation of the two ideological positions put into conflict in the dinner scene. Thus, as they lay in each other's arms after a long separation discussing what they had been doing while apart, she relates how through his influence she and her organization had arrived at a striking but problematic meritocracy that combines elements of elitism with egalitarianism:

We met in London, the leaders of a thousand million of the darker peoples, with, for the first time, black Africa and black America sitting beside the rest. I was proud of the Negroes we had chosen after long search. There were to be forty of us, and, Matthew, only you were absent. I looked for you to the last. It seemed that you must come. We organized, we planned, and one great new thing emerged--your word, Matthew, your prophecy: we recognized democracy as a method of discovering real aristocracy. We looked frankly forward to raising not all the dead, sluggish, brutalized masses of men, but to discovering among them genius, gift, and ability in far larger number than among the privileged and ruling classes. Search, weed out, encourage; educate, train, and open all doors! Democracy is not an end; it is a method of aristocracy.¹¹⁴

As this passage suggests, the overall movement of *Dark Princess* is towards a transformation in the identity of the Darker World, from one that is elitist, exclusive, and partially under the spell of European racism, to one that is democratic, inclusive, and more consistently anti-racist. The shift in the macrocosmic level of the collective is doubled at the microcosmic level in, and also in a way caused by, the personal changes undergone by Towns and Kautilya as a result of their relationship. The terms in which Du Bois represents personal change are crucial for an understanding of how he viewed processes of socio-political progress. These terms emerge for the most part from Kautilya's first person account of her subjective transformation.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ "Perhaps the sentimentalism of *Dark Princess* is a careful generic choice made to enable Du Bois to squeeze out of, and ultimately evade, the tough scrutiny to which he would have subjected this text had it been expressed in another idiom. Regardless of Du Bois's intent, the novel clearly lacks critical perspective on its own strategy of narrative resolution." Alys Eve Weinbaum, "Reproducing Racial Globality: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Sexual Politics of Black Internationalism" in *Social Text* 67 (Summer 2001): 37.

¹¹⁴ *Dark Princess*, 225.

This account follows upon their reunion, and Kautilya's statement to Towns that "there are so many things I want to tell you of myself. I want to tell you all the story of my life..."¹¹⁵ The contents of her narrative center around the series of encounters that gradually lead both to her love for Towns and her political realignment, which Du Bois presents as inextricably intertwined.

This series of encounters begins with her meeting Towns in Berlin, on which she reflects retrospectively: "The curious and beautiful accident of our meeting, after my committee had discussed and rejected the Negroes of America as little more than slaves, deeply impressed me."¹¹⁶ She continues: "Before I saw you, I, with most of the others except the Chinese, had thought of our goal as a substitution of the rule of dark men in the world for the rule of white, because the colored peoples were the noblest and best bred. But you said one word that night at dinner...It was a great word that swung back the doors of a world to me. You said that the masses of men of all races might be the best of men simply imprisoned by poverty and ignorance. It came to me like a great flash of new light, and you, the son of slaves, were its wonderful revelation."¹¹⁷ With the exception of the Chinese, whose difference in outlook Du Bois seems to imply stems from a Confucian intellectual legacy, the organization's elitist leanings constitute a mindset which Kautilya is able to escape only through the sighting of one who embodies a worldview which contradicts the assumptions of the society with which she is familiar.

The next stage in her transformation occurs when she meets Towns's mother. At one point in the novel, when Towns is sent to prison for a year for his involvement with a militant anti-racist organization, he asks Kautilya, who visits him during a trip to America, to deliver a message to his mother in Virginia. She later recalls being very moved upon meeting her:

And then came what I shall always know to have been the greatest thing in my life. I saw your mother. No faith or religion, Matthew, ever dies. I am of the clan and land that gave Gotama, the Buddha, to the world. I know that out of the soul of Brahma come little separations of his perfect and ineffable self and they appear again and again in higher and higher manifestations, as eternal life flows on. And when I saw that old mother of yours standing in the blue shadows of twilight with flowers, cotton, and corn about her, I knew that I was looking upon one of the ancient prophets of India and that she was to lead me out of the depths in which I found myself and up to the atonement for which I yearned.¹¹⁸

Here as with Towns, the sense of sight plays a pronounced role in a process through which ethnic differences are traversed. It is through an interaction between the raw act of perceptual apprehension and the cognitive operation of the cultural codes into which Kautilya has been socialized that a racial other enters into her world of relationships. She, an Indian heiress, makes sense of an encounter across lines of class, ethnicity, and geography, by reading the figure of a poor African American single mother into the religious lore of her "clan and land," conferring upon her the role of guidance for which

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 220.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 247.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 248.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 221.

she feels a need.

Towns's mother responds positively to Kautilya's act of transference; they engage in a dialogue which involves a syncretic fusion of non-Western religious creeds: "We talked it all out together. We prayed to God, hers and mine, and out of her ancient lore she did the sacrifice of flame and blood which was the ceremony of my own great fathers and which came down to her from Shango of Western Africa." This dialogue leads Kautilya to a life-changing decision: "You had stepped down into menial service at my request--you who knew how hard and dreadful it was. It was now my turn to step down to the bottom of the world and see it for myself. So I put aside my silken garments and cut my hair, and, selling my jewels, I started out on the long path which should lead to you."¹¹⁹ She notes the numerous other encounters by which she was personally affected while working at these menial jobs: "Think of what I learned of the mass of men! I got to know the patrons: their habits, hardships, histories."¹²⁰ The chain of personal interactions through which she passes plots out the coordinates of a trajectory directed toward a shift in her subjective orientation and her relationship with tradition. It involves not an abandonment of tradition but a rearticulation of its symbols which broadens her personal and political horizons.

Ever believing in the validity of her instincts and desire, Kautilya gradually arrives at a new sense of herself and the world in which she lives. "I am changed," she says to Towns upon their emotional reunion.¹²¹ In the narrative of Kautilya's journey, Du Bois presents an image of the kind of experience he thought could foster the emergence of new and powerful agencies on the world stage. Convinced of the inadequacy of formal organization and abstract institutional blueprints on their own, keenly attuned to the psychological inhibitions which stand in the way of the realization of ideals, he found in the novel an effective supplement to his activism.

In this chapter, I have sought to convey a sense of how pervasively, if at times obliquely, narrative informs nearly every aspect of Du Bois's thinking, writing and doing. A focus on its prominence in his texts opens a unique perspective on his intellectual development--both diachronically in the successive stages of his transit through history, and synchronically insofar as his earliest works are already saturated with narrative transitions.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 223.

¹²¹ Ibid., 209.

2

Jazzing to Forget: Claude McKay's Anti-Colonial Sublime

In his autobiography, Claude McKay relates a visit, during his attendance of the Fourth Congress of Soviets, to the Moscow apartment of Karl Radek, at the time a ranking member of the Politburo; and how a debate between himself, Radek and an African American “mulatto” delegate on the role of literature within communist politics was interrupted by the crying of Radek's infant child, which in turn led to an unlikely sociological experiment:

At this point an infant wailed and Radek said, “My baby comes first.” He left the room, to return a few minutes later with the maid, who brought in the baby. Radek and Mrs. Radek kissed and fondled the child. The maid then brought the child to the mulatto, who touched its hand and patted its hair. From the mulatto she brought the child to me, but it shrank away, hid its face, and began to cry. Radek was interested and told the maid to take the child to the mulatto again. The mulatto took the child in his arms and it stopped crying, but when the maid tried me again, the child hid its face and cried. The maid retired with the child, and Radek said: “Now I understand the heart of the difference between white and black in America. It is fear. The Americans are like children, afraid of black complexion, and that is why they lynch and burn the Negro.” I told Radek that his deduction was wrong; that in the South, where Negroes were lynched and burned, the black complexion was not a strange thing to the whites, and that the majority of the children of the better classes of the South were nursed from their birth by black women, and that those children were extremely fond of their black foster mothers. Radek said that that was a strange thing.¹²²

McKay's objection to Radek's naturalizing assumption that “children” instinctively fear dark skin recalls a famous passage in which Edmund Burke draws philosophical conclusions from a similar naturalization of color-phobia, based on “a very curious story of a boy, who had been born blind, and continued so until he was thirteen or fourteen years old....” After regaining his sight, Burke continues, “the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and...some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight. The horror, in this case, can scarcely be supposed to arise from any association.” Burke cites this story as evidence for his theory of the sublime, according to which darkness is “terrible in its own nature” and thus among the causes of sublime aesthetic experience.¹²³

¹²² *A Long Way From Home: An Autobiography* (London: Pluto Press, 1985), 183-4.

¹²³ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford UP, 1990), 131.

McKay's ironic evocation of Burke's racialized sublime, whether intended or not, provides a striking example of the trope, frequent throughout his writings, of signifying upon the submerged colonizing forces that pervade Western culture, even in its most politically radical manifestations. In fact, references to the sublime, both explicit and indirect, appear frequently in his work, albeit evincing more a diverging logic of rhetorical play than the converging movement characteristic of the systematic elaborations of the concept associated with Burke, Kant, Hegel and other philosophers. This divergent quality of McKay's use of the notion, which in its unfolding traverses a multiplicity of determinations in both philosophy and Romantic poetry, places obstacles in the way of any attempt to distill from it a coherent and unified theory of the sublime. However, when placed within the larger context of his experience, historical situation, and literary aims, the theme of the sublime in his work reveals a more substantial and illuminating significance within it than might appear from its scattered and varied instances.

While avoiding as much as possible a reduction of the multiplicity that constitutes one of the most valuable qualities of McKay's writing, in this chapter I will consider how in his novel *Banjo* his specific interest in the sublime and his larger vision of art and politics mutually inform one another. Such a consideration offers a revealing vantage upon the global process of diaspora during the volatile inter-war years.

The very claim that the sublime is of any relevance to black writers may at first sight appear dubious. The well-known complicity of the concept with racist and colonial projects would seem to argue against it. Although McKay uses the term frequently, his explicit engagement with the discourse of the sublime is something of an anomaly among inter-war black writers. This does not, however, mean that that discourse did not have an implicit presence and significance within twentieth century black culture.

Of the handful of critics who have raised the question of such a presence, Paul Gilroy's influential theory of the "slave sublime" is particularly relevant to the present essay, due both to his transnational approach and his discussion of the sublime in close connection with the novel form. Gilroy finds a sublime economy at work in the mediation between the conflicting values of tradition and modernization in the culture of the African diaspora. As an historical trauma involving "terrors that exhaust the resources of language," the memory of slavery threatens to sever post-emancipation blacks from an independent and vital tradition rooted in the sovereign cultures of pre-slavery Africa. At the same time, a disavowal of the fact of slavery, to which Gilroy seems to suggest all essentialist formulations of blackness amount, creates a false separation between black subjectivity and the experience of modernity.¹²⁴ As a response to this cultural aporia, he advocates a notion of race "that doesn't try to fix ethnicity absolutely but sees it instead as an infinite process of identity construction" in which tradition is both preserved and transformed.¹²⁵

Gilroy argues for a resonance between this sublime dialectic and the novel form, which accounts in part for the fraught but enduring role the form has played within the

¹²⁴ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), ch. 6.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 223.

Black Atlantic at numerous points in its history. By way of a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, he finds in the black novel a “contradiction, constituted by the tension between the racial self and the racial community.” Of the two poles of this contradiction, “One is the dilute product of Africa, the other is an antinomian expression of western modernity.” “The desire to return to slavery and to explore it in imaginative writing,” he continues, “has offered Morrison and a number of other contemporary black writers a means to restage confrontations between rational, scientific, and enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive outlook of prehistorical, cultureless, and bestial African slaves.”¹²⁶ In this way the sublime gulf that alienates blacks from the very modernity in which they are uniquely implicated, and which Gilroy constructs in terms of Du Bois's concept of “double consciousness,” finds in the novel a fitting occasion for expression.

Gilroy's theorization of the racial sublime as “an infinite process of identity construction” that takes the novel as its locus sheds light on many facets of black culture and widely informs my reading of *Banjo*. However, as I will discuss later, Gilroy's exclusive focus on contemporary fiction, compounded by his claim that such literary strategies respond to “present conditions” and “bolster contemporary political aspirations”¹²⁷ overlooks the relevance of his argument to earlier phases of black literature, in particular the unprecedented rise in the number and quality of black-authored novels published during the interwar decades.

Still more troubling is his silence on the role played by the discourse of the sublime throughout its modern history in the articulation of racist and colonialist practices, a fact of crucial importance to an understanding of the significance the concept has held for subaltern writers. By focusing on those elements such as freedom, autonomy and modernizing transformation that would be expected to imbue the sublime with a positive appeal to minorities and their programs of resistance, to the exclusion of the legacy of complicity that haunts its archive, Gilroy's account does not register the ambivalence that marks the subaltern revision.

Although it is a revision of an imperialist determination of the sublime which it negated as a hegemonic discourse, the post-colonial sublime has a genealogy reaching back to Longinus's *On the Sublime*, which the romantic-imperialist configuration itself had to efface in order to present itself as logically primary; a distortion often overlooked even by those critics of the sublime who recognize its associations with empire. In an insightful essay that constitutes an exception to this tendency, Laura Doyle observes that “It is a fact too little noticed that Longinus's *Peri Hypsous* is permeated by his imperial situation—as a Greek writer in imperial Rome” and that Longinus “enlists sublimity, both formally and thematically, as in instrument of political resistance to an imperialism structured along ethnic lines.”¹²⁸

Doyle shows how the modern discourse of the sublime did not begin with its imperial phase, but that this phase was preceded by an “early Romantic sublime” that emerged in the context of the struggle of emergent republican forms of government

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 219-20.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹²⁸ “Sublime Barbarians in the Narrative of Empire; or, Longinus at Sea in *The Waves*” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 42:2 (Summer 1996): 326-28.

against the dominant aristocracy in Early Modern Europe, and was thus aligned with a politics of resistance; and that the imperialist construction that found its classical articulation in Kant's *Critique of Judgment* appeared only after the triumph and consolidation of the modern nation-state form. She then demonstrates a link between the colonial project that ensued from this event and an imperialist racialization of the sublime: "Thus does the sublime form the inscape of an emergent imperial self in willed confrontation with a vast world beyond its immediate perception yet over which it claims dominion. This self is a narrated self, a self in extension and transformation, a self born of violent colonization and then converted into colonizer."¹²⁹

Doyle's discussion of the sublime as involving two contending determinations evincing a narrative logic of historical succession has clear implications for the question of a twentieth-century post-colonial sublime. McKay's recollection of a conversation in which his editor Frank Harris criticizes his early sonnet "The Lynching" reveals the significant place such an "early Romantic" sublime had in his sense of the notion, as well as its importance in his conception of his own literary destiny:

You should have risen to the heights and stormed heaven like Milton when he wrote "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont":

Avenge, O Lord! thy slaughtered Saints whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold....

There you have the sublime human cry of anguish and hate against man's inhumanity to man. Some day you will rip it out of your guts.¹³⁰

Due to its very "earliness", its location at a moment in which the modern state is struggling for its autonomy *vis-à-vis* a still-dominant antagonist, the sublime as it is inscribed within McKay's literary project occupies what Homi Bhabha has described as "the site of a strange forgetting of the history of the nation's past: the violence involved in establishing the nation's writ."¹³¹ McKay's recuperation of an insurgent sublime which a later colonial variant found it convenient or necessary to suppress, his folding of the pre-imperial sublime into his anti-colonial project, goes some way in accounting for the appeal this specific configuration of the aesthetic notion held for him: at the same time that it provides the materials for an effective answer to the racist formulations of the philosophical canon, it lends itself to a compelling articulation of the strategies, perils and experience of black liberation.

Doyle stresses the nationalist determination of the "Early Romantic" sublime she documents; and post-colonial critics often stress the nationalist rubric in which much of more recent political dissidence is articulated. In light of the historical prevalence of nationalism within emancipatory movements, McKay's work is distinguished for the striking near-absence from his thinking of the claims and assumptions of nationalism, in *Banjo* perhaps more than in any other of his works. As will emerge in detail, the novel's

¹²⁹ Ibid., 329-37. Emphasis in the original.

¹³⁰ *A Long Way from Home*, 21.

¹³¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 229-30.

protagonists are either unwilling or unable to frame their political struggle as one between a nation to which they belong and an antagonist nation. Rather, and it would seem more radically, the conflict in which they are locked takes place between the logic of nationalism itself, and those whom it excludes. McKay himself, a Jamaican émigré who was never to find a stable home, drew on his own experience in giving literary shape to such a conflict in the pages of *Banjo*; and, I will argue, in so doing he developed a highly inventive, anti-colonial use of the sublime.

McKay's deformation of the nationalist aesthetic is one instance of a more general predilection on his part towards the margins of the national narrative. The refusal of all grand narratives is announced in the subtitle of *Banjo*, "A Story Without a Plot," just as it is presented in the novel's musical structure, which re-replaces *telos* with rhythm. Eschewing the goal of founding yet another nation, whether as impossible or undesirable, *Banjo* follows the nomadic movements of a group of quasi-stateless vagabonds based in the cosmopolitan port-city of Marseilles as they strive to achieve and maintain a degree of community outside the territorial matrix of the State, which has rejected them as its excrescent surplus. These circumstances, informed by McKay's own experience as an émigré turned international poet-dissident, define the post-national chronotope that guided his radical revision of the novel form.

Furthermore, the revival of interest in McKay, beginning with his critical rediscovery in the 1970s and continuing up to the present, must be in large part due to his remarkably prescient chronicling of the disruptive forces that menace the nation-form from both its extreme limit and the very site of its constitution. Donald Pease has sketched the contours of a postnational canon in which it might be useful to situate McKay. Pease defines a notion of postnational narrative against the national narrative conceived as metanarratives which "recast the reason of state as a teleology" intended to "recover a lost national origin whose projection onto a national future organized an individual quest in the form of a sequence of purposive events..."¹³² By way of Etienne Balibar,¹³³ Pease develops a theory of the formation of nationalist identity, according to which the members of a national community disavow the limits of the nation-form by displacing the markers of those limits, namely the abjection of the subject by the sovereign power of a state which falsely identifies itself with the "people," onto the included exclusion of an internal racialized Other.

Postnational narratives emerge when the "stateless (racialized) persons" who are the necessary product of nationalism write their own experience at the margins of the nationalist order. Their narratives are "postnational" precisely because they express the knowledge which nationalism must disavow. As the "bearers of the knowledge (of state power) in whose disavowal national narratives were constituted," they "have struggled to make visible the incoherence, contingency, and transitoriness of the national narratives..." The situation of such stateless subjects implies a condition of radical estrangement from the hegemonic form of the national narrative and motivates the formation of a counter-discourse: "Because postcolonial subjects knew, beyond the

¹³² Donald E. Pease, "National Narratives, Postnational Narration" in *Modern Fiction Studies* 43:1 (Spring 1997), 4.

¹³³ "Racism and Nationalism" in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 37-67.

possibility of disavowal, of the state practices (abjecting/subjecting) that national orders had foreclosed in order to cohere, they could neither become assimilated within pre-constituted categories of any national order nor withdraw their demand for a non-exclusivist nationalism (a nationalism, in other words, that was not one).”¹³⁴

By defining the postnational, not as the chronological successor of the national but rather a logical limit internal to the national itself, Pease opens the possibility of discovering a canon of postnational narratives including texts dating from the very apex of nationalist culture. Although he traces a postnational narrative discourse back to the *Pequod's* motley company of sailors, one can find even earlier manifestations in the picaresque narratives that emerged simultaneously with the classical novel in the context of the Early Modern origins of the absolutist state.

If, as much of the most perceptive recent criticism suggests, it is valid to attribute the ongoing McKay revival to a resonance between his work and an increasingly pervasive debate on the limits of nationalism, then now is certainly a fitting time to look more closely at his uses of the sublime; for these uses are pervasively informed by his radical views on the relationship between the colonized subject and the national orders that seek to administer him or her, views which speak both to the vastly *international* scale of diasporic identity and to the plight of being a refugee without asylum, an indefinitely stateless and placeless subject within the modern world-system. In light of the abjection experienced by those outside and between nations, the fittingness of the sublime to a representation of their experience should be clear. McKay makes the connection explicit in *Banjo* in a reflection on the theme, central to the novel's maritime setting, of commerce:

Commerce! Of all words the most magical. The timbre, color, form, the strength and grandeur of it. Triumphant over all human and natural obstacles, sublime yet forever going hand in hand with the bitch, Bawdy. In all relationships, between nations, between individuals, between little peoples and big peoples, progressive and primitive, the two lovers spread and flourish together as if one were the inevitable complement of the other.¹³⁵

In availing himself of the concept of the sublime, McKay both explores the experiences of marginal communities and responds to questions not only of the contents but also the form of postnational discourse.

Despite both its hasty composition and the well-known conflict between its author and McKay, Du Bois's one-page review remains one of the most insightful and appreciative discussions of *Banjo*, and will provide my point of entry into the text. It has become a convention in the subsequent criticism to cite it in passing without registering the deep rift it signals between two of the most important black intellectuals of the twentieth century. Yet it repays a closer reading than it usually gets, as it sheds considerable light on both the intrinsic meanings of the novel and its controversial reception.

Du Bois opens his review, which includes works by two other writers, with the following prefatory remarks: “I have just read three novels: Claude McKay's *Banjo*, Nella

¹³⁴ Pease, “National Narratives, Postnational Narration,” 6-10.

¹³⁵ Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1929), 307.

Larsen's *Passing*, and Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*. The first two novels are second adventures in fiction; the one by a poet; the other by a new writer."¹³⁶ In turning to *Banjo*, he assumes the condescending tone in which he habitually addressed McKay, both in his published writings and their correspondence.¹³⁷ Referring to McKay's previous novel, to which he had given a caustic review, he concedes that "...*Banjo* is a better book than *Home to Harlem*." From this slight praise, he proceeds to question McKay's credentials as a novelist: "It is described as 'a story without a plot', but it is hardly even that. It is in no sense a novel, either in the nature of its story or in the development of character. It is, on the one hand, the description of a series of episodes on the docks of Marseilles; and on the other hand a sort of international philosophy of the Negro race. It is this latter aspect which seems to me to make it of most value."¹³⁸ Du Bois's crucial insight lies in his disjunctive characterization of *Banjo*, his division of it into an unstable combination of traditionally "literary" and explicitly ideological components. Those critics who have since considered the prominence of manifest political content have tended to overlook the former in their usually negative preoccupation with the latter.

More questionable is Du Bois's assumption that McKay's iconoclastic juxtaposition of two incommensurable discursive forms constitutes a lack or flaw in the text, to which the only redeeming response is to choose one or the other in a salvaging gesture. Part of my task here is to question that assumption by attempting to read the irreducible rupture within *Banjo's* form as enabling a complex and revealing exploration of the cultural horizons of the African diaspora amidst the massive transformative forces unleashed during the first decades of the Twentieth Century; and in turn to suggest that, far from marking the partial failure of the novel, McKay's formal ambivalence gives shape to these forces and their effects.

In what almost seems like a strategic disavowal of novel's true scope, Du Bois suggests such a reading only to foreclose upon it summarily. He does so by pointing to the frequently overlooked diachronic relationship between the two elements he identifies, an unmistakable movement over the course of the novel from the more familiarly literary quality of the beginning towards the increasingly polemical debates over the "philosophy of the Negro race." In comparing the former to the salacious contents of *Home to Harlem*, he writes: "The first aspect of the book is negligible. It is really a continuation of experiences like Jake's in *Home to Harlem*. Here are a lot of people whose chief business in life seems to be sexual intercourse, getting drunk, and fighting." Having dismissed this "negligible" "first aspect" of the novel, Du Bois continues: "The race philosophy, on the other hand, is of great interest. McKay has become an international Negro. He is a direct descendant from Africa. He knows the West Indies; he knows Harlem; he knows Europe; and he philosophizes about the whole thing." Then, in expanding on his evaluation of the novel's two "aspects," he construes their interrelationship as an evolution: "As a book of racial philosophy, *Banjo* is most inspiring. And for this very reason perhaps *The Home to Harlem* [sic] aspect,—the dirt of the docks and the maudlin indulgence, fades away as the book evolves...."

¹³⁶ *Book Reviews by W.E.B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Millwood, NY: KTO Press, 1977), 136.

¹³⁷ *The Passion of Claude McKay: Selected Prose and Poetry, 1912-1948*, ed. Wayne Cooper (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 148-50.

¹³⁸ *Book Reviews*, *ibid.*

Du Bois's awareness of the gradual appearance of the polemical element against the background of a romantic portrayal of bohemian slum life, attests to a careful reading on his part. However, his interpretation of it as an involuntary evolution, as something McKay fortuitously hit upon as he wrote, is belied both by the novel itself and McKay's own account of the time and effort he put into writing and revising it: "I am a poet and have always striven conscientiously to find words to say exactly what I see and feel. I took a long time to write 'Banjo' in the face of real difficulties, writing and re-writing to find the right words to render the atmosphere and the types that moved in it..."¹³⁹ The most insightful of the recent criticism bears out McKay's claim that *Banjo* is a meticulously crafted and finished work. Why did Du Bois pretend not to know this? And what did McKay seek to capture in the contradictory movement depicted in its pages?

Despite the laudatory moments of the review, its descriptions of certain features of *Banjo* as "of great interest" and "inspiring," one need not look very far beneath its surface to detect the strain of antagonism that colors it. This antagonism becomes more understandable in light of the pointed, sometimes even personal attacks directed at Du Bois—such as frequent ironic use of the word "uplift" and a generally disparaging attitude towards the African American middle class of which Du Bois was a leading representative—throughout the novel, which, although he nowhere mentions them, he could not have missed. The differences between McKay and Du Bois, the scope and significance of which should emerge from a close reading of *Banjo*, were far from incidental, and shed much light on both writers.

As is evident from its subtitle, *Banjo* obviates the task of plot summary, even despite the persistent scarcity of its readership. The novel relates the everyday lives of a band of black vagabonds existing parasitically off of the maritime industry in the Mediterranean's principle port city. Coming from Francophone and Anglophone Africa, the United States and the Caribbean, this group forms a microcosm of the African diaspora. The closest the novel comes to an organizing *telos* is Banjo's dream of forming a jazz band out of the gang of vagabonds he joins in Marseilles, a dream which is never fully realized.

Although the story is, in a sense, "without a plot," there is a sustained process that unfolds across its pages. In naming its own plotlessness, the text signals not a lack of any movement whatsoever, but rather its non-conformity to the prevalent norm in realist fiction of locating that movement in the development of individual characters. I have just shown how Du Bois acknowledges this movement at the same time that he disqualifies it by reason of its divergence from expectations about "the development of character;" and suggested that, far from being a fortuitous "evolution," it presents and reflects upon themes of historical change.

Critics have rarely discussed the significance of *Banjo's* form—its division into three "parts" and the relations of those parts with each-other and the whole. Yet there can be little question that the formal division into differentiated parts serves to articulate the diachronic becoming that is so crucial to its contents. Like a dialectical argument divided into phases of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the novel's tripartite form gives shape to a becoming. This becoming involves a transition from the more apolitical discourse of the

¹³⁹ Letter to Eugene Saxton, quoted in Wayne Cooper, *Claude McKay*, 253.

“First Part” to the increasingly polemical and race-conscious tone of the second and third parts. In other words, it dramatizes on an international scale the separation of black literature from prevalent bourgeois literary protocols in order to imagine a dissident minority modernism grounded in what Houston A. Baker has described as a culture of “radical maroonage.”¹⁴⁰

The absence from the “First Part” of a manifest political thematic is in stark contrast with the incessant political debating that makes a sudden appearance at the beginning of the “Second Part” and continues uninterrupted until the novel's end. Once it appears, the political discourse has such a relentless quality to it that in denouncing this “lecturing” as an unliterary trait critics have consistently overlooked the fact that it is carefully distributed and arranged within the text and not simply the result of an inadequate grasp of the novel form. Blind to this crucial difference in the “First Part,” such critics have missed how in this section of the novel McKay anticipates his detractors by deliberately thematizing the kind of “correct” fiction they demand of him, only to displace it in subsequent parts, thereby raising the question of its suitability for black writers in the post-War era.

McKay's literary agent, William A. Bradley, complained of the “shotgun manner in which McKay introduced his characters at the start of the novel.”¹⁴¹ Yet Ray, at least as significant a character as Banjo himself, is not introduced until the first chapter of the “Second Part,” and Goosey makes his appearance in the immediately following chapter. Furthermore, it is precisely with these middle-class characters that the element of race-consciousness enters the text. The working-class blacks who dominate the “First Part”—Banjo, Malty, Ginger and Dengel—are the ones Du Bois seems to have exclusively in mind in describing the behavior of the novel's characters in general.

In fact, this part of the novel can be described as a gratifying and somewhat conventional picaresque of low-down Bohemian life. But in light of what follows, it can be read as an idealized depiction of an organic form of international black community threatened by historical forces that were producing fascism in Europe and intensifying segregation in America. Indeed, the ideological disputes between the vagabonds is closely associated with the dissolution of their group cohesiveness, both of which begin with the “Second Part.”

It is not that the fact of racism never arises in the conversations that take place between the characters who fill novel's opening section. When it does, however, they generally view it as a part of the natural order of things rather than as a historical phenomenon calling for critical explanation and strategies of resistance. When they find themselves caught up in a fight that breaks out between black and white workers, Buggy, who is from the American South, proclaims: “But Gawd in heab'n!...I almost got like feeling I was in Dixie with the fire under mah tail.” To which Banjo replies: “H'm. If it was in Dixie, you wouldn't be sitting there now, blowing a whole lot a nonsense off'n you' liver lips.” This exchange, in which the Jim Crow South appears dimly as a fixed landscape, and only as such is able to ground Buggy's metaphor, is in stark contrast with a

¹⁴⁰ Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁴¹ Tyrone Tillery, *Claude McKay: A Black Poet's Struggle for Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 107-8.

conversation in which the Haitian intellectual Ray, who has just entered the narrative by befriending Banjo, participates: “Ray was talking to the proprietor of the bar and a Senegalese, who was explaining that the trouble arose out of differences between the Italian dock workers and the Senegalese. There was much jealousy between the rival groups and the Senegalese aggressively reminded the Italians that they were French and possessed the rights of citizens.”¹⁴² This passage, appearing towards the beginning of the “Second Part,” is perhaps the first in which a character discusses racism in connection with its political and material correlates, and marks the beginning of the overt political argument that continues throughout the rest of the novel. Racism does appear prior to it, but as a reality to which Banjo and the other “beach boys” adapt themselves so as to be able to enjoy their free-wheeling existence. Even if there is a political critique implicit to their practices, it does not receive conscious expression.

This crucial passage also marks the point at which internal differences emerge and begin to disrupt the cohesiveness that had persisted among the black vagabonds in the opening chapters. Once the race debate breaks out under the influence of Ray, as well as Goosey, the previously disengaged vagabonds are drawn into the dispute, a development which contributes to the gradual dissolution of the group which is complete by the end of the “Second Part.”

Yet the racial controversy is not simply the cause of the group's dispersal. Rather, the novel presents both as symptoms of the historical forces to which McKay frequently alludes, the effects of which are to undermine the conditions that had enabled the vagabonds to maintain their transgressive lifestyles at the fringes of global commerce. The entire narrative is set against a background of transition, to which McKay frequently alludes: “Ginger thought the police were getting more brutal and strict, quite different from what they were like when he first landed on the beach.”¹⁴³ But despite such observations, the less informed drifters remain unaware and unconcerned about the causes of the changes they sense with vague anxiety:

They did not know that the Radical government had fallen, that a National-Union government had come into power, and that the franc had been arrested in its spectacular fall and was being stabilized. They knew very little about governments, and cared less. But they knew that suddenly francs were getting scarce in their world, meals were dearer in the eating-sheds and in the bistros, and more sous were necessary to obtain the desirable red wine and white, so indispensable to their existence. However, some of them had an imperfect commonsense knowledge of some of the things that were taking place in the important centers of the world, and that those things were threatening to destroy their aristocratic way of life. Great Britain's black boys, for example. They observed that colored crews on British ships west of Suez were becoming something of a phenomenon. Even the colored crews on the Mediterranean coal ships, of which they had a monopoly in the past, were being replaced by white crews.¹⁴⁴

Under the pressure of growing nationalism and a shrinking supply of money, the practices that have long worked for them, such as panhandling and the routine evasion of

¹⁴² *Banjo*, 72-3.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 222-23.

citizenship laws, become increasingly problematic. These pressures produce not only higher degrees of racial antagonism between blacks and whites, but internal disputes within the group about questions of black identity, which they had previously felt no need to raise. In light of these passages, the gradual emergence of a philosophical dimension in *Banjo* appears not so much as a haphazard “evolution” as a studied and crafted reflection on the historical conditions underpinning newly emergent forms of black identity, in the articulation of which McKay himself played a leading role.¹⁴⁵

To view this development as a significant feature is also to respond to critics who have emphasized the novel's apparently didactic quality, misconstrued the character Ray as McKay's propagandistic mouthpiece, and read the text (whether approvingly or disparagingly) more as a manifesto than as a novel. In light of what follows it, the “First Part” has a framing effect on the voluminous ideological speculation it precedes, transforming it from a direct to an indirect mode of discourse. It opens a space of critical distance between the text as a whole and the positive meanings of the political assertions that pervade it, creating more a critical survey of an emergent discursive formation than a determinate statement on the race question.

For all the disparate paths along which the black drifters have found their way to Marseilles and into McKay's narrative, they have in common a certain relationship to the forces just outlined, which can be described as a situation of radical dislocation vis-à-vis the global system of nation-states and their increasingly rigid borders. The Nigerian guitar-player Taloufa's case is exemplary. Driven from Africa by imperialism, he relocated to America, only to be displaced again: “He lived in the United States until after the passing of the new quota immigration laws, when, the fact of his entering the country illegally getting known, he was arrested and deported.”¹⁴⁶ As these exiles gather in Marseilles, they bear witness to the tendency of nationalism to create a growing surplus of stateless refugees as it polices its borders with growing rigor.

As a hub of international commerce, Marseilles is a space at the limits of nationalist logic, and as such a gathering-place for those such a logic excludes. In a groundbreaking essay, Brent Hayes Edwards argues that the radical project at the core of *Banjo* is that of imagining the formation of an autonomous society from the human surplus that escapes the totalizing logic of the modern world-system, of which it would be both the product and the antithesis. He thus maintains that “*Banjo* attempts to locate what eludes or exceeds the logic of capitalist civilization” and “announces a fascination with the flotsam and jetsam of life, the goings-on at the margins, the pungent and busy 'wide-open dumps' of whatever any system must reject and extrude in order to function.” As capitalism's unassimilable excess, “black culture ends up being portrayed not in juxtaposition to modern civilization, but as resistive expression that evades the 'civilizing machine.’”¹⁴⁷ He goes on to characterize such culture as involving what he calls, echoing a

¹⁴⁵ Aimé Césaire praised *Banjo* as “really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity.” Léopold Sédar Senghor affirmed that “Claude McKay can be considered rightfully as the true inventor of Negritude.” Both passages quoted in Kotti Sree Ramesh and Kandula Nirupa Rani, *Claude McKay: The Literary Identity from Jamaica to Harlem and Beyond* (North Carolina, 2006), 112.

¹⁴⁶ *Banjo*, 101

¹⁴⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black*

phrase from *A Long Way from Home*, “bad nationalism:”

A “bad nationalist” is not exactly a “cosmopolitan,” nor is it a “flexible citizen.” It would seem to describe a subject that is mobile and loosely transnational...;but more pointedly, it indicates a subject who doesn't *perform* nationalism, who doesn't follow the protocol, who doesn't register. A 'bad nationalist' is a subject defective for nationalism—stubbornly, McKay insists on locating internationalism against the grain of nationalism without grounding it in any alternate universalism (an internationalism of the “human” or an internationalism of the “proletariat,” for instance). This is an internationalism of the defective: the unregistered, the undocumented, the untracked—an ab-nationalism, as it were, of all the “Doubtful.”¹⁴⁸

Edwards' essay marks a watershed moment in McKay criticism for its disclosure of the extraordinary scope and comprehensiveness of McKay's cultural and political vision. Beneath the writer of distinguished but formally conventional poetry, the purportedly flawed novelist, the alleged panderer to white demands for racial stereotypes,¹⁴⁹ Edwards discovers an astute critic of Marx, a fellow traveler of Georges Bataille, and an important early figure in the formation of the African American novel.

Edwards' argument is relevant to my own insofar as the situation of the community depicted in *Banjo* as capitalism's discarded excess is associated with the sublime, in a passage in which Ray ponders the values of waste: “There was something sublime about waste. It was the grand gesture that made life awesome and wonderful. There was a magical intelligence in it that stirred his poetic mind. Perhaps more waste would diminish stupidity, which was to him the most intolerable thing about human existence.”¹⁵⁰ As these words metaphorically suggest, McKay found the versatile notion of the sublime amenable to his exploration of the experience and subjectivity of civilization's refuse.

Banjo articulates an anti-colonial sublime that is both innovative and complex. At the same time that it channels the emancipatory energies of the Early Modern sublime discussed earlier, it is thoroughly informed by Kant's allotment to the sublime of a crucial place within the formation of modern subjectivity. Although a certain indefiniteness is doubtless an irreducible part of the very contents of McKay's sublime, analysis shows that in *Banjo* it is guided by a double logic consisting of two connected but contradictory functions: one involved in the formation of group identities, the other with the position of the individual relative to the collective.

Such figurations of the sublime illuminate the ways in which it speaks to the

Internationalism (Harvard, 2003), 224.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 239. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁴⁹ “No other Harlem Renaissance novel did as well as McKay's, because none responded so well (even though inadvertently) to what white America wanted to read. It is therefore not surprising that most of the post-Harlem Renaissance criticism on McKay by black and white critics makes valiant attempts to salvage his reputation, to excuse the artistic flaws in *Home to Harlem* and *Banjo*. My position is that it is unfortunate that such poor works were published, that they should be seen as apprenticeship works, published before they had been properly crafted.” H. Nigel Thomas, “Black American Writers and White Readers: *Home to Harlem*” in A. L. McLeod (ed.) *Claude McKay: Centennial Studies* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), 170.

¹⁵⁰ *Banjo*, 260.

experience of a group of refugees striving to forge a makeshift community at the margins of a Western metropolis. Transplanted from familiar places and societies, thrown into contact with people who, though of similar complexion, represent a wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, the drifters who find an unofficial asylum in Marseilles enter a space in which diasporic bonds are being forged under the emergency conditions created by the effects of colonialism, and thus in which all identities are in a state of permanent revolution. Such are the conditions informing the text's reflections on identity, difference, and the self's relation to its Outside.

I have shown how, under the pressure of their decidedly modern situation of displacement, McKay's "black gang" gradually fall under the spell of political debate. But even before these ideological disputes break out with Ray's arrival, the vagabonds show a tendency towards philosophical reflection on such questions as the instability of their identities and their fraught relationship with a world in which they occupy a perilously marginal position. At one point Ginger relates how, after going broke, rather than taking a job on a ship and leaving Marseilles "he remained on the beach to become a bum and a philosopher."¹⁵¹

The philosophy of the beach is one of unconditional openness towards otherness: "With their wide experience and passive philosophy of life, beach boys are adepts at meeting, understanding, and accepting everything."¹⁵² Such an openness towards "everything" responds to the needs produced by their situation. The absence of a shared background, which is intrinsic to the concept of diaspora, requires it for the purpose of forging community across pronounced cultural difference. Another, more economic motivation is their dependence on panhandling, to which the text assigns a mediating effect: "The Africans did not understand the art of panhandling as did the American and West Indian Negroes. When they could get no work on the docks they would not beg food of any ship that was not manned by their own countrymen speaking their language. Seamen who came in with money would help their fellows ashore. But outside of their own primitive circle the African boys were helpless."¹⁵³ As an "art" of mediation, begging requires for its "adept" performance a facility for communication across cultural and linguistic barriers, and implies the formation of an expansive, polyglot subjectivity opposed to a primitiveness defined more in terms of ethnic exclusivity than proximity to nature.

The vagabonds' minority modernism asserts itself in stark contrast with the prevailing mode of modern subjectivity, the individual, whose predicates it reverses point by point, and in so doing delineates an alternative sublime. Thomas Weiskel has noted that "We hear in the background of the Romantic sublime the grand confidence of a heady imperialism, now superannuated as ethic or state of mind—a kind of spiritual capitalism, enjoining a pursuit of the infinitude of the private self."¹⁵⁴ As a template for the rational domination of nature, the logic of the individual is implicated within the colonial project, and tends to exclude the colonized from its modes of selfhood. Denied

¹⁵¹ *Banjo*, 39.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 31-2.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 309-10.

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 6.

acknowledgment of and the material means for the status of the “civilized” individual, McKay's black bohemians develop an art and philosophy through which they contest their consignment to the status of “primitive.”

Such a “passive philosophy” implies a sublime that is in a sense a reversal of Kant's version and its imperialist subtext. Whereas Kant describes transcendence over a threatening exteriority being accomplished through an act of identification in which the outside is assimilated to the domain of the rational autonomous subject, McKay inscribes a counter-sublime in which, faced with the naturalized terror of the imperialist state, the racialized subject overcomes the threat posed by his marginal position within its territorial regime by way of a mimetic openness to the very powers that antagonize him, but also to the various forms of otherness he encounters within his own diasporic collective. Due to its performative quality, this stance is never as simple as a surrender of the ego. Furthermore, although it clearly echoes the concerns of the metaphysical sublime, its openness involves an element of affirmation that opposes the negative outlook inherent to the project of subjective autonomy. Hence, while *Marseilles* is presented as sublime throughout *Banjo*, it also appears as beautiful, though not without ambivalence: “And of all the great ports there was none so appealing to seamen as Marseilles in its cruel beauty.”¹⁵⁵

In light of this it may be more fruitful to read Wordsworth instead of Kant as McKay's principle intertext in his uses of the sublime, which share with Wordsworth's celebrated “egotistical sublime” the kind of outward subjective movement just described. Albert Wlecke has found in Wordsworth (among the English poets “whom McKay at times more or less unconsciously imitated in his various moods”¹⁵⁶) “a structure of awareness in which the radical Cartesian divorce between mind and matter is *felt* to have been overcome” and in which “the mind, by subjectively sensing itself as extended, simultaneously senses itself *as if* it were an empirical object spread, like the material atmosphere, throughout space.” Such an awareness produces “extensions of consciousness” and attendant sensations of “being carried away from the world of ordinary, always confining localizations.”¹⁵⁷ It also involves a more fluid, indeterminate subjectivity than allowed for by Kant and other philosophers: “Sublime self-consciousness involves an intuition of the self *without* a principle whereby this self-awareness might be limited, either by a concept of the self or by an image of the self.”¹⁵⁸

If Wordsworth's outlook was indeed “at once revolutionary and hegemonic,”¹⁵⁹ a novel like *Banjo* suggests the radical potential inherent in his “sense sublime,” simultaneously realizing and reconfiguring it within an inventive post-colonial appropriation. Dispensing with metaphysical obfuscations, replacing nature with society as the subject's Other, the vagabonds cultivate a flexible notion of self in response to the demands and uncertainties of their diasporic situation. Their facility for “meeting and

¹⁵⁵ *Banjo*, 68.

¹⁵⁶ *The Passion of Claude McKay*, 332 n. 2.

¹⁵⁷ Albert O. Wlecke, *Wordsworth and the Sublime* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 52-4. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁹ Laura Doyle, “The Racial Sublime” in Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh (eds.) *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), 35.

understanding everything” implies both an ability to communicate effectively with the the varied inhabitants of their metropolitan setting, and constantly to adapt their consciousness and perceptions to a complex and changing reality. Their sublime favors an adaptation of the self to its surroundings, a kind of camouflage, over Kant's project of adapting nature to the categories of the rational self. Hence, it inscribes a mode of mediation from which the erotic is inseparable.

The sublime element in desire, its transgressive tendencies, appear metaphorically throughout the novel in the frequent outbursts of violence that disrupt the festivities to which Banjo and his friends are constantly drawn, and which frequently form around their musical performances: “The sallow-faced man appeared in the entrance and strode through the midst of it to the desk. Bomb! The fearful report snuffed out the revel and the dame tumbled fatly to the floor. The murderer gloated over the sad mess of flesh for an instant, then with a wild leap he lanced himself like a rat through the paralyzed revelers and disappeared.”¹⁶⁰ In scenes like this, which appear throughout the narrative as a motif, the association of sex and death highlights the risk and fragility that come with such open, adaptable lifestyles.

Ray admires the vagabonds he befriends for their resourcefulness in accommodating themselves to their harsh situation under a system in which they have no officially recognized place. Yet both he and Banjo cannot accept the consequences of some of their practices. Edwards claims that “Banjo, Ray, Bugsy, and Taloufa are men who would rather beg for food from sympathetic black crews on Mediterranean coal freighters than work under the racist capitalism that is the only available mode of labor relations.”¹⁶¹ But in including these first two characters, he seems to overlook a crucial difference in their sensibility. Banjo abstains from panhandling out of an aversion to insult: “He was not a regular panhandler like the other boys. He could not make a happy business of it like them. Because sometimes they were savagely turned down and insulted and he was not the type to stand that. He would have gone to work on the docks, as he had intended at first when he went broke, if his personality and his banjo had not fixed him in a situation more favorable than that of his mates.”¹⁶² As for Ray, “If he was not bold enough, when he was broke and famishing, to be a bum like Malty in the square, he was always writing panhandling letters to his friends....”¹⁶³ Both Ray and Banjo possess a sense of personal integrity that differentiates them from the group which nonetheless accepts them; and both find a degree of exemption from the necessity of panhandling through their artistic talents. Even if Ray must resort to a kind of begging, his “panhandling letters” written to the affluent friends he has made as a writer allow an alternative to the more physically degrading means adopted by the others in seeing to their bodily needs.

These differences emerge most dramatically in a chapter entitled “Hard Feeding,” in which “men of the beach, white and colored” are depicted fighting over the food discarded upon the docks by a ship's crew:

¹⁶⁰ *Banjo*, 54-5.

¹⁶¹ *The Practice of Diaspora*, 200.

¹⁶² *Banjo*, 39-40.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 65.

All the men rushed the food like swine, each roughly elbowing and snapping at the other to get his hand in first. While they were stuffing themselves, smacking, grunting, and blowing with the disgusting noises of brutes, the food all over their faces, a mess boy brought out a large broad pan half filled with sweet porridge and set it down on the deck. Immediately the porridge was stormed. A huge blond Nordic, who looked like a polar bear that had been rolling in mud, was tripped up by an Armenian and fell sprawling, his lousy white head flopping in the pan of porridge. The blond picked himself up and, burying his greasy-black hand in the porridge, he brought up a palmful and dashed it in the face of the Armenian. That started a free fight in which the pan of porridge was kicked over, whole boiled potatoes went flying across the deck, and Buggy seized the moment to slap in the face with a slice of beef a boy from Benin whom he hated.¹⁶⁴

More than anything else, the extremes of degradation to which these men reduce themselves in their edacious abandon signal the troubling limitations in the degree of autonomy afforded by their vagrant lifestyles. At the same time that their transgressive practices present a genuine and compelling “challenge” to the xenophobic order of nationalism by consistently exceeding its totalitarian net, when caught in the act of “feeding” they appear more as animals than free agents, and their alluring independence as a mirage.

In its extreme manifestation, the indiscriminateness of the vagabonds generates a degree of alienation between Banjo and the group. While standing “a little way off, watching the *mêlée* in anger and contempt,” Banjo overhears a white officer, apparently overlooking their diverse racial composition, refer to the feasting itinerants as “a damned lot of disgusting niggers.” When asked about his aloofness, Banjo explains: “I take life easy like you-all, but I ain't nevah gwine to lay mahself wide open to any insulting cracker of a white man.” When Malty boasts of his ability to brush off the insults that come with panhandling, Banjo replies that “you ain't got no self-respecting in you,” and continues: “Youse just a bum and no moh. I ain't a big-headed nigger, but a white man has got to respect me, for when I address myself to him the vibration of brain magic that I turn loose on him is like an electric shock on the spring of his cranium.” At this point the others pick up on Banjo's mock-philosophical language:

“Attaboy!” applauded Ginger, who loved big words with a philosophical flavor. “You done deliver a declaration of principle, but a declaration of principle is a dependant usynimous with the decision of the destiny of the individual in the general.”

“Gawd is the first principle, I done heard that said,” declared Malty.

Buggy grinned, saying, “And Gawd is in Boody Lane.”

This exchange is, on the one hand, another dig at the universal claims of Western metaphysics. But it is not insignificant that a philosophical discourse, however ironic, appears at a moment in which Banjo experiences feelings of alienation. In refusing the radical openness that is his group's credo, in enlisting the values of personal security and self-respect, Banjo shows an inclination towards the principles of bourgeois individualism and thus announces a rift within the community of vagabonds.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 40-41

The conflict here glimpsed in Banjo's character takes on a more conscious and elaborate form in Ray, whose private thoughts are described in detail throughout the novel. In addition to their privileged access to cultural work, Ray and Banjo are related in their ambivalence towards the values and practices of the vagabonds, who, as is only consistent with their philosophy, nonetheless accept them. This ambivalence, more than any positive race-dogma, is the defining concern of Ray's sprawling internal monologue, although he generally appears more dogmatic in his spoken dialogue with other characters.

Ray's double consciousness takes the form of a conflict between his Western education and his marginal situation, and stems from a sense that "it was not easy for a Negro with an intellect standing watch over his native instincts to take his own way in this white man's civilization."¹⁶⁵ Although in this passage McKay opposes the "civilized" white to the "native" and "instinctive" black, the fetishized image of the primitive is in uneasy conflict throughout the text with more concrete terms of ethnic difference.¹⁶⁶ It is in such terms that the Nigerian guitar player Taloufa's related dilemma is described: "Christian missionaries had educated him out of his native life. A Christian European had uplifted him out of and away from his people and his home. His memory of his past was vague."¹⁶⁷ As these two passages suggest, McKay tends to waver between cultural and quasi-biological language in his characterization of the deracinated situation of the displaced black, to equivocate between an African cultural legacy and a mysterious racial essence as the home from which he is adrift in the modern world.

Although the ethnic formulation allows for a clearer picture of these characters' situation, McKay's recourse to the primitivist discourse so prevalent when he was writing *Banjo* should not simply be dismissed as a misguided perpetuation of stereotypes. In any case, both versions suggest, surprisingly, that alongside the generation of collective political and cultural associations, the experience of the African diaspora involves powerful forces tending towards the formation of uniquely individual modes of consciousness. The paths along which McKay's vagabonds arrive at such consciousness are dramatically distinct from those which characterize the members of metropolitan bourgeois society; yet the situation to which those paths lead involves a confrontation with the problems that face the isolated individual under the conditions of modernity, problems of which Ray is keenly aware.

As is clear from the cases of Banjo and Taloufa, Ray is not the only of the vagabonds who at times feels isolated from the group of displaced blacks. However, his

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 164.

¹⁶⁶ David Louis-Brown stresses the importance of distinguishing between "dominant" and "alternative" forms of primitivism, aligning McKay with the latter variety: "Dominant primitivisms oppose the primitive to the modern, sometimes producing a nostalgia that evades a full recognition of the political processes of oppression (Sapir). Dominant primitivism can also promote the creation of a nationalist amalgam of European modernization and indigenous or African spiritual and artistic 'gifts.' In this scenario, dominant primitivism accepts folk expression but rejects self-determination by the marginalized....By contrast, alternative primitivisms align themselves with efforts at self-determination by specifying the dangers of modernization for the lower classes and racialized groups (Hughes, McKay, Masdeu)." *Waves of Decolonization: Discourses of Race and Hemispheric Citizenship in Cuba, Mexico, and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 199-200.

¹⁶⁷ *Banjo*, 311.

intellect and Western education exacerbate his sense of alienation: “He could not scrap his intellectual life and be entirely like them. He did not want or feel any urge to 'go back' that way.”¹⁶⁸ The conflicts ensuing from his simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the spheres of epistemological privilege, push him towards “oft-recurring solitary, idly-brooding moods” and “frequent fits of contemplation.”¹⁶⁹ And as a result of these conflicts, “He loved to pose as this or that without really being any definite thing at all.”¹⁷⁰

The above passages suggest that Ray's situation implicates him in the forms of alienated critical subjectivity described in Hegelian philosophy. His situation illustrates how the stateless subaltern can constitute a more concrete, not to say more radical instance of the modern subject as the locus of a difference whose effect is the dialectical negation of all existing positivities. The minority perspective on modernity implies that, shorn of its idealist trappings, the condition of alienation can be less an occasion for tranquil speculation than a life-and-death problem that is lived by subjects whose individuation takes the form of exile within the totalitarian system of nationalism: “For civilization had gone out among these native, earthy people, had despoiled them of their primitive soil, had uprooted, enchained, transported, and transformed them to labor under its laws, and yet lacked the spirit to tolerate them within its walls.”¹⁷¹ But if civilization “lacks the spirit” to recognize the identities that emerged as resistance to its imperialist practices, McKay suggests, those identities can generate a powerful knowledge of the limits of civilization itself.

On the one hand, Ray's proclivity towards critical negation corroborates the significance of *Banjo*, not only as a foundational text within the Negritude movement, but as a truly seminal moment within the formation of the black novel. Cedric Robinson has shown how “Even as early as 1937, [Richard Wright] had begun to argue that it was necessary that Blacks transform the Marxist critique into an expression of their own emergence as a negation of Western capitalism” and that “Wright was asserting that the Black revolutionary movement, in the process of transcending a chauvinistic nationalism, was emerging as a historical force that would challenge the very foundation of Western civilization....”¹⁷² As Robinson suggests, in Wright's work the form of the novel proved particularly well-suited to the articulation of black subjectivity as the radical negation of Western imperialism. *Banjo* anticipates such a conception of the black novel as exemplified in Wright's protagonists, as well as Ralph Ellison's invisible narrator.

The negating subjectivity inscribed in the novel also sheds crucial light on the importance of the sublime within McKay's sense of the projects and challenges facing the post-war African Diaspora. The function of the sublime in *Banjo* is not unconnected to the book's significance as a watershed black novel. I have already discussed Gilroy's argument that the turn in black culture from vernacular and oral forms to the novel is in large part a way of responding to the memory of slavery and the estrangement from

¹⁶⁸ *Banjo*, 322.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69, 138.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 313-14.

¹⁷² Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 299-300.

African cultural roots that resulted from it. But a text like *Banjo* suggests that such a cultural logic has a broader chronological scope than the contemporary historical fiction to which Gilroy confines it. Indeed, his argument seems to overlook the first large-scale production of black-authored novels that coincided with the inter-war years, in the United States and other parts of the world. If mid-century novelists like Wright, Ellison and Chester Himes eschewed explicit historical themes of slavery, memory and tradition in favor of a more direct focus on the present, this is by no means generally the case with novelists of the 'Twenties and 'Thirties. A partial list of examples would include Zora Neale Hurston's innovative work on black folklore, Jean Toomer's threnodic meditation on the waning of the Old South in *Cane*, stories of slave uprisings such as Arna Bontemps's *Black Thunder* and, even earlier, Charles Chesnut's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*. The ubiquity of such themes in the early Twentieth Century suggests that the appearance of the "slave sublime" in the 'Eighties can be more comprehensively viewed as being as much a re-vision of an earlier paradigm as a purely original emergence. Alice Walker's narration of her discovery of Hurston as a formative moment in her own development as a novelist gives particularly illuminating shape to these historical connections.¹⁷³

And yet *Banjo*, at the same time that it takes up the problematic of tradition and modernity, responds to it in a unique way, almost opposing itself to the literature of remembrance. Critics have tended to infer from the carefree ways of its characters that the text itself evades or falsifies the reality that must be the unavoidable concern of serious black literature, as when Du Bois describes them as "a lot of people whose chief business in life seems to be sexual intercourse, getting drunk, and fighting." On the one hand, such criticisms overlook the critical light in which I have shown the vagabonds are cast. But on its own this response, at the expense of rescuing *Banjo* from misrepresentations as tawdry entertainment, reinforces misconstruals of the novel as primarily "didactic." A fuller grasp of the significance of the indecorous behavior portrayed in the novel must read the critical element alongside the positive values associated with the vagabonds' practices, in all their inseparability. And in addition to the genuinely transgressive import of those practices discussed above, McKay attributes to them the further value of constituting a highly developed cultural strategy of coping with the horrors past and present that afflict the African diaspora. These strategies are consummately cultural, unthinkable without their sophisticated uses of artistic forms and performative conventions. Their most broadly defining quality is that in their orientation towards historical trauma they oppose a cheerful ethos of forgetting to a somber discourse of commemoration.

In a crucial passage, Goosey, who after a series of frustrations has decided to leave Marseilles and return to the United States, gets into a heated debate with Banjo over issues of race, politics and responsibility. Banjo, irritated throughout the novel with Goosey's constant talk about racism, accuses him of capitulation: "Yo' gwine back home to what you call them United Snakes after you done sweahs offer them. You was so

¹⁷³ Alice Walker, "Looking for Zora" in Ascher, DeSalvo and Ruddick (eds.) *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write about Their Work on Women* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 431-47.

bellyaching about race I knowed you'd bust.” To which Goosey replies: “I still hold to my opinion. I know what my race has got to buck up against in this white man's world, if you don't know and Ray with his talent don't want to.” The passage in which Banjo defends himself and Ray from Goosey's charges of ignorance and denial is highly revealing:

“And you think we don't care a damn about race, eh? Banjo turned seriously on Goosey. “Listen and hear me, Goosey. You evah seen a lynching?”

“No.”

“I guess you hadn't. Well, I seen one down in Dixie. And it was mah own li'l brother. Jest when he was a-growing out of a boy into a man and the juice of life was ripening a pink temptation kept right on after him and wouldn't let be until he was got and pulled the way of the rope. You didn't go through the war, neither?”

“No, I didn't.”

I knowed. Because you was too young. I did because I was jest young enough. I was in Kenada when I joined up and I remember a buddy a mine calling me a fool for it. I remember he said that he would only wanta fight if they was calling him to go to Dixie to clean up foh them crackers. But I joined up all the same, and went through that war, for I was just crazy for a change. And the wul' did too. And one half of it done murdered the other half to death. But the wul' ain't gone a-mourning forevah because a that. Nosah. The wul' is jazzing to fohgit.”¹⁷⁴

This striking moment contrasts with McKay's more naturalistic portrayals of racial traits. Provoked by Goosey's attacks, Banjo emerges momentarily from his easygoing persona to turn “seriously” on his accuser and reveal that he has lost a brother to racism and to discuss his war experience, both topics he habitually avoids. His sudden change in comportment discloses the performative nature of his and his associates' conduct—and, by implication, of racial identity—thereby suggesting that the text itself is more performative than propositional in its repetitions of primitivist images of blacks.

The phrase “jazzing to forget” makes explicit the crucial role played by art in this complex practice of active forgetting. In the course of their dispute, Banjo says to Goosey that “you done flopped so soon as you got left on you' own, 'causen you ain't got no self-makings in you.”¹⁷⁵ In a situation of radical dissociation from cultural “roots”, art, and more specifically modern art, becomes a powerful means of recuperating a sense of selfhood. The extraordinary importance of art within the African diaspora is a direct consequence of such dislocation: “A Chinese or Indian child could learn the stock [Western] virtues without being spiritually harmed by them, because he possessed his own native code from which he could draw, compare, accept, and reject while learning. But the Negro child was a pathetic thing, entirely cut off from its own folk wisdom and earnestly learning the trite moralisms of a society in which he was, as a child and would be as an adult, denied any legitimate place.”¹⁷⁶ In Banjo's speech, “jazzing” is explicitly opposed to “mourning” as a means of coping with the effects of traumatic loss. As McKay's use of Jazz as a paradigm for such self-making art suggests, forgetting does not mean the absolute renunciation of African folk culture. However, the dislocation inflicted on that culture as a result of slavery and colonization works against its effectiveness, in

¹⁷⁴ *Banjo*, 303-04.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 303.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 319.

its traditional forms, as a guide to action in the modern world. Under such circumstances, artistic innovation can be a matter of life and death.

For McKay's vagabonds, then, forgetting is both an aesthetics and a therapy: it defines the purposes and effects of art for blacks at the same time that it serves as an antidote to the risks of total despair. Seemingly carefree, they live constantly on the brink of disaster and death: “[Bugsy] lay there like a macabre etched by the diabolic hand of Goya. With clenched fists and eyes wide open, as if he were going to spring at an antagonist, even if he were God himself. He finished with life as he had lived it, a belligerent, hard-fisted black boy.”¹⁷⁷ Goosey's decision to leave Marseilles follows upon a grave illness that nearly claims his life. Banjo's ability to survive his own near-fatal illness and continue his vagabond ways to the novel's end can be symbolically read as the result of his gifts for self-making, which is to say modernist art. Furthermore, as a defense against the threat of nothingness, the vagabonds' lifestyle partakes, all but explicitly, of the sublime: “That this primitive child, this kinky-headed, big-laughing black boy of the world, did not go down and disappear under the serried crush of trampling white feet; that he managed to remain on the scene, not worldly-wise, not 'getting there,' yet not machine-made, nor poor-in-spirit like the regimented creatures of civilization, was baffling to civilized understanding. Before the grim, pale rider-down of souls he went his careless way with a primitive hoofing and a grin.”¹⁷⁸

“Jazzing to forget” names an aesthetic not restricted to music, a versatile expressive register that includes linguistic forms as well: “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.”¹⁷⁹ It can be described as a compensatory aesthetic which, faced with a reality of alienation, seeks to present not the image of that reality but its antithesis. If double consciousness is the sublime object of black experience, the vagabonds' culture can be viewed as a means of maintaining a viable subjectivity against the effects of the potentially destructive psychic rupture that is the inescapable condition of the colonized black mind. Thus, one cannot overstate the significance of the word “like” in Ray's reflection that “Close association with the Jakes and Banjoes had been like participating in a common primitive birthright.”¹⁸⁰ Upon close inspection, the text presents the social and personal unity of such characters, not as a state of nature, but as a compensation for a self-alienation that is never far from a crisis degree. Far from being an original endowment, the integral discourse “without dots and dashes” spoken by the vagabonds (or, more precisely, attributed to them by Ray for his own purposes) is the historical product of “the long life-breaking tragedy of Africa.”¹⁸¹

A tragic sense of Africa's modern history runs throughout *Banjo*. Even if it is often overlooked on account of its muted volume, it is crucial for an understanding of the novel's comic element: “Comic opera was ever a thing of great joy to Ray. It gave him such a perfect illusion of a crazy, disjointed relationship of all the arts of life. Singing and

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 259.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 314.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 321.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 322

acting and orchestra and all the garish hues. Fascinating *mélange* of disorder.”¹⁸² A comic view of disorder keeps tragedy always just out of view for the vagabonds and promotes the life-affirming illusions that enable the degree of fulfillment, however ephemeral, they have managed to find in their uncertain exile.

The language and logic of the sublime are discernible throughout *Banjo* and many other writings by McKay. Although his uses of the concept tend to be experimental and exploratory, and hence diverse and not theoretically determinate, there emerges from those uses a powerful and comprehensive sense of how the notion resonates with the experiences and concerns of displaced, subaltern and minority populations. The sublime, a concept whose main concern is formulating the means of the self's perseverance against threatening external forces, would seem to hold at least as much relevance for the subaltern subject as for any other.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 173.

3

**A Shadow on the Stairs: Region, Praxis, and the Location of Race in
*Their Eyes Were Watching God***

To change your language you must change your life.

—Derek Walcott

“What you gointuh do if de lake reach heah?”

“Go upstairs.”

“S'posing it come up dere?”

“Swim, man. Dat's all.”

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston's adeptness at undermining conventional dichotomies has been shown from a number of perspectives. Michael North has aptly characterized the radical nature and degree of these textual strategies: “Hurston does not reconcile or celebrate the divisions within her texts or within the African-American folk texts she found in her travels. Instead, she utterly redefines the dichotomies that seem to produce these divisions.”¹⁸³ This chapter considers the ways in which, rather than representing racial identities, *Their Eyes* questions their dichotomous logic by exposing and recasting the terms that go into their construction. As I will argue, two of the key elements of the representation of race in American literature that the novel interrogates and dislodges from their conventional associations are dialect and region. By playing these two elements off against each other, *Their Eyes* arrives at a notion of social praxis as the process through which both are constructed.

Their Eyes tells the story of Janie Crawford and her search for personal fulfillment, which takes her through three marriages and as many places of residence in the state of Florida. The story begins with a sixteen-year-old Janie living with her grandmother Nanny in West Florida. When Janie begins to show sexual interest in a poor neighbor, Nanny, worried about her granddaughter's social future, marries Janie against her will to Logan Killicks, a local small landowner. Not long into the unhappy marriage, Janie leaves Killicks for Joe “Jody” Starks, whom she meets when he passes by her house on his way to the recently founded all-black town of Eatonville, where they move

¹⁸³ *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 185.

together after getting married. As Joe becomes an increasingly influential figure in Eatonville, becoming both mayor and owner of the town store, the marriage becomes strained as Janie chafes under Joe's efforts at controlling her. When Joe dies Janie falls in love with and marries Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods and leaves Eatonville with him for an agricultural region in the Florida Everglades known as "the muck." They live together in both happiness and conflict until the muck is devastated by a hurricane, during which Tea Cake contracts a case of rabies that leads to Janie fatally shooting him in self defense. After Tea Cake's death Janie returns to Eatonville, at which point the narrative ends. I will now turn to a discussion of the use of dialect that so frequently interrupts the movement of the novel's plot.

Imagined Dialects: Representation or Symbol?

In *Their Eyes* reflections on questions of identity are mediated by the representation of spoken language. In an influential essay, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has interpreted the novel as a "speakerly text," which he defines as "a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition...."¹⁸⁴ According to Gates, this tradition is primarily racial:

The narrative voice Hurston created, and her legacy to Afro-American fiction, is a lyrical and disembodied yet individual voice, from which emerges a singular longing and utterance, a transcendent, ultimately racial self, extending far beyond the merely individual. Hurston realized a resonant and authentic narrative voice that echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling, true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness.¹⁸⁵

Although Gates's claims about the importance of represented speech to the novel are illuminating, subsequent criticism has raised problems for his attempt to ground this facet of the text in a racial subject. At the same time that Hurston participates in the discourses that construct racialized forms of identity, such criticism has shown in detail, she disrupts such forms through her conflicted textual strategies. Ross Posnock, for example, has argued that Hurston's emphasis on the individual implies a critique of racial categories.¹⁸⁶ Stephen Spencer, who notes Hurston's relevance to contemporary theories of hybridity, construes *Their Eyes* as an important early text in the canon of multiethnic literature.¹⁸⁷ Thus, while the technique of represented speech is a crucial component of the novel, it has been called into question whether the object of that representation is "ultimately

¹⁸⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 181.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁸⁶ Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), ch. 6.

¹⁸⁷ Stephen Spencer, "Racial Politics and the Literary Reception of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Multiethnic Literature and Canon Debates*, ed. Mary Jo Bona and Irma Maini (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), ch. 5.

racial.”

Furthermore, Hurston's training, field work, and writing as an anthropologist played a significant role in the development of her pluralistic notions of race and identity. While at Columbia, Hurston was a student of the anthropologist Franz Boas, a major figure in the emergence of American folklore studies¹⁸⁸ whose arguments for a cultural as opposed to biological understanding of race were influential. As his admiring student, Hurston became familiar with his controversial theories of “cultural diffusion” and “cultural integration,” which argued against notions of racial purity.¹⁸⁹

Although one of the more influential instances of reading the use of dialect in *Their Eyes* as a racially defined representation of a preexisting folk culture, Gates's is far from the only one. Elizabeth Meese has claimed that Hurston's “brilliant use of dialect, specifying pride and ownership, lends credibility to the novel's claim as a work for the black community.”¹⁹⁰ Karla F.C. Holloway contends that “Within the dialect, in its sound, its structures, and its meanings, the culture of a people is preserved and protected.”¹⁹¹ Michael North alludes to “an argument Hurston carried on throughout her life, as a novelist and ethnographer, on behalf of “Negro expression” against the forces of standardization.”¹⁹² And Gayle Jones's claim that Hurston “fulfills the possibility of what dialect might do when moved beyond the literary conventions and allowed more of the image and flexibility of authentic folk creation” maintains the received view of Hurston's use of dialect in terms of the codes of racial authenticity.¹⁹³

In fact, the assumption that Hurston's dialect refers solely to a racialized speaker goes back to Richard Wright's scathing 1937 review of *Their Eyes*, which revolves around his disapproval of Hurston's representation of Blacks, and in particular of their speech: “[Hurston's] dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes.”¹⁹⁴ Wright's hostility towards Hurston's use of dialect is reflective of a more general condemnation of the technique that preceded the publication of her novel, and had become an orthodoxy among the early figures of the Harlem Renaissance. James Weldon Johnson gave influential expression to the position in the preface to his 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry*: “The Negro in the United States has achieved or been placed in a certain artistic niche. When he is thought of artistically, it is as a happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being or as a more or less pathetic figure....Negro dialect is naturally and by long association the exact instrument for voicing this phase of Negro life....”¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *American Folklore Scholarship: A Dialogue of Dissent* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), ch 2.

¹⁸⁹ On the influence of Boas, as well as his student Ruth Benedict on Hurston, see Deborah G. Plant, “The Benedict-Hurston Connection,” *College Language Association* 46, no. 4 (2003): 435-56.

¹⁹⁰ “Orality and Textuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” in Harold Bloom (ed.) *Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 61.

¹⁹¹ *The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Greenwood, 1987), 114.

¹⁹² *The Dialect of Modernism*, 176

¹⁹³ “Breaking Out of the Conventions of Dialect” in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah (New York:Amistad, 1993), 152.

¹⁹⁴ Gates and Appiah, *ibid.*, 17.

¹⁹⁵ *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 2004), 713.

Since Wright's review, more recent criticism has continued to view dialect in *Their Eyes* as a representation of black folk culture and identity. While this was indeed one of Hurston's intentions, I will now argue, the use of dialect in the text simultaneously implies an immanent critique of the very categories of race on which any project of racial representation depends. Even if the novel seems oriented towards the literary representation of a racial group, its accomplishment consists more in disclosing the critically problematic nature of such a task than in fulfilling it.

Although, as will become clear, the plot of the novel is crucial for an understanding of the sense and implications of its reflections on spoken language, my concerns in this section are more with what Gates describes as "the sheer play of black language which *Their Eyes* seems to celebrate," though with the racial qualifier bracketed.¹⁹⁶ The narrative is frequently interrupted in its progress by extended interludes, such as the "lying sessions" that regularly materialize in Eatonville on the porch outside the store where Janie works, in which the participants engage in verbal games, performances of folk tales, and mock courtships. Though particularly evident and foregrounded, the linguistic play found in the passages dominated by oral performances overflows the confines of these scenes like the flood waters of the hurricane that hits the Everglades towards the novel's end, pervading the entire text and dislodging its apparently stable references. Even when the characters are going about their everyday business and engaged in more instrumental forms of communication, their speech shows as much concern with the style as with the contents of what is said, or what Hurston calls in another text the "will to adornment."¹⁹⁷ In this sense, like the social rituals enacted on the porch, the dialect in which the characters speak throughout the novel is an object of reflection in its own right as much as a means of communication.

The assumption of a more or less direct link between dialect and a black speaker in *Their Eyes* is understandable for at least two reasons. First, Hurston herself makes that assumption throughout numerous non-fictional writings, notably her folklore anthologies *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse*; and it could not be more evident than it is in the title of her often-cited essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in which she explicitly analyzes black dialect speech patterns on the basis of unmistakably racial categories. Secondly, the novel seems just as beholden to such a logic as the non-fiction: set partly in Eatonville, Florida, the all-black town in which Hurston grew up, it consists of an almost entirely black cast of characters. The racial exclusiveness that characterizes this set of characters would seem to apply as well to the particularized version of English inscribed in its pages.

My interpretation of *Their Eyes*, however, looks to the marginal points in the text at which racial lines are transgressed. While most of the novel's characters are indeed black, and most of the represented speech is spoken by black characters, there are a few minor white and other non-black characters who appear at various points in the narrative, some of whose speech is represented in the form of direct discourse. At the same time that it would be easy to dismiss these characters and their words as irrelevant marginalia,

¹⁹⁶ *The Signifying Monkey*, 194.

¹⁹⁷ Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 831-34. Henceforth referred to as *Writings*.

their very marginality makes them all the more conspicuous when viewed in light of their status as exceptions to the text's seemingly exclusive commitment to the representation of black speech. This would not be the case were the role of these non-black characters simply to provide a foil of linguistic difference, an example of what black speech is *not*, meant to define more clearly what it *is*. However, as will become clear, these characters are involved in a more complex network of meanings than one based on straightforward opposition.

The first instance in the novel of a white character speaking in direct discourse comes in the course of the story told by Nanny, Janie's grandmother. Nanny's story revolves around her experience of emancipation and its consequences. "Ah was born back due in slavery,"¹⁹⁸ she begins, only to skip immediately ahead to the last days of the Civil War, when her newborn daughter is a week old. The evening of the day her owner, "Marse Roberts," leaves for battle, his wife, "Mistis," comes into her cabin, suspicious that her husband had fathered the child, which apparently he had. At this point in her narrative, Nanny describes the altercation in the form of a dialogue in which both her own and her mistress' speech are represented in direct discourse. This passage is the only case in the novel in which a character represents the speech of a White, all other examples coming from the narrator.

As she relates the incident, Nanny shifts back and forth between her own speech and Mrs. Roberts's as she recalls it:

"By dat time I had done managed tuh unktivver mah baby enough for her to see de head and face.

"Nigger, whut's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair?' She begin tuh slap mah jaws ever which a'way. Ah never felt the fust ones 'cause Ah wuz too busy gittin' de kivver back over mah chile. But dem last lick burnt me lak fire. Ah had too many feelin's tuh tell which one tuh follow so Ah didn't cry and Ah didn't do nothin' else. But then she kept on astin me how come mah baby look white. She asted me dat maybe twenty-five or thirty times, lak she got tuh sayin' dat and couldn't help herself. So Ah told her, 'Ah don't know nothin' but what Ah'm told tuh do, 'cause Ah ain't nothin' but uh nigger and uh slave.'

"Instead of pacifyin' her lak Ah thought, look lak she got madder. But Ah reckon she was tired and wore out 'cause she didn't hit me no more. She went to de foot of de bed and wiped her hands on her handksheer. 'Ah wouldn't dirty mah hands on yuh. But first thing in de mornin' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back. One hundred lashes wid a raw-hide on yo' bare back. Ah'll have you whipped till de blood run down to yo' heels! Ah mean to count de licks mahself. And if it kills you Ah'll stand de loss. Anyhow, as soon as dat brat is a month old Ah'm going to sell it offa dis place.'"¹⁹⁹

The striking similarity between the patterns of Nanny's speech and that which she attributes to Mrs. Roberts raises a number of intriguing questions. The Robertses are the wealthy owners of a "big plantation close to Savannah,"²⁰⁰ whom one would expect to speak in, or at least attempt to imitate, an upper-class idiom. Even though they may have

¹⁹⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 16

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

little education (their social origins are not revealed), one would expect them to show at least a modicum of distinction from the speech patterns of their slaves, as well as poor whites. Yet Nanny represents her mistress' speech in a black dialect not easily distinguishable from her own, with the effect of a troubling incongruity between its form and content. The substitution of *Ah* for *I*, *de* for *the*, *dat* for *that*, and other marks of difference typify the speech of both mistress and slave, and are conventional signs of black speech in early twentieth-century dialect literature. This linguistic homogeneity is enigmatic and seems to raise doubts about Nanny's reliability as a narrator. An assumption that dialect functions in *Their Eyes* according to its familiar role of suggesting a realistic representation of ethnic, class, and regional differences would cue the reader to interpret the absence of such norms from Nanny's account as the sign of a lack in her narrative skills.²⁰¹ Such an interpretation would gain credibility from passages in which the main narrator demonstrates a more precise demarcation of such differences.

However, a search for such passages only further complicates the picture. For, although there are brief moments in which white speech is represented without being set off by the framing device of an interpolated narrative, these instances show the same quality of indistinction found in Nanny's discourse. The examples are few but telling.

After the population of the muck is decimated by a hurricane, Tea Cake is conscripted at gunpoint by a group of white men into a black work gang tasked with burying the dead. In this scene the dialogue between Tea Cake and the Whites is conveyed in direct discourse:

“Hello, there, Jim,” the tallest one called out. “We been lookin' fuh you.”
Mah name ain't no Jim,” Tea Cake said watchfully. “What you been lookin' fuh me fuh? Ah ain't done nothin'.”
“Dat's whut we want yuh fuh—not doin' nothin'. Come on less go bury some uh dese heah dead folks. Dey ain't gittin' buried fast enough.”
Tea Cake hung back defensively. “What Ah got tuh do wid dat? Ah'm uh workin' man wid money in mah pocket. Jus' got blowed outa de 'Glades by de storm.”
The short man made a quick move with his rifle. “Git on down de road dere, suh! Don't look out somebody'll be burying' you! G'wan in front uh me, suh!”²⁰²

This passage seems similar to Nanny's depiction of her mistress' speech, in that the language of these white men is almost indistinguishable from that of Tea Cake and other black characters. Apart from their use of the name 'Jim' as an insulting designator for any black man, their speech patterns are difficult to distinguish from Tea Cake's. The double negative “not doin' nothin'” and words like *dat*, *fuh*, and *dese* tend to blur rather than sharpen any such distinction.

Like Nanny, then, the main narrator does not straightforwardly follow the convention of using dialect to represent racial difference, and in fact seems to subvert it systematically. This feature of the text is overlooked in Wright's claim that “[Hurston's]

²⁰¹ On the role of dialect within the “politics of representation,” see Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1999), ch. 2.

²⁰² *Their Eyes.*, 169-70.

dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind;" in Gates's that the novel's inscription of speech refers to "the unwritten text of a common blackness;" and numerous other, similar claims.

Two doctors appear over the course of the novel, each at one of the two moments at which one of Janie's husbands dies. As Joe Starks is dying after his estrangement from Janie, Janie summons "a doctor from Orlando," who delivers his diagnosis in standard English: "Just a matter of time," the doctor told her. "When a man's kidneys stop working altogether, there is no way for him to live. He needed medical attention two years ago. Too late now."²⁰³ Having delivered his prognosis, the unnamed (and un-raced) doctor from Orlando quickly exits the stage. When, towards the novel's end, Tea Cake is succumbing to rabies, Janie calls in Dr. Simmons, the "white doctor who had been around so long that he was part of the muck" and "who told the workmen stories with brawny sweaty words in them."²⁰⁴ Simmons's long stay on the muck shows in his speech, as is evident from words in which he delivers his diagnosis: "Janie, I'm pretty sure that was a mad dawg bit yo' husband. It's too late to get hold of de dawg's head. But de symptoms is all there. It's mighty bad dat it's gone on so long. Some shots right after it happened would have fixed him right up." Simmons's manner of speaking brings out the difficulty of fixing identities through the medium of language. For him, essence and origin are completely obscured behind the effects of social interaction, his prolonged interaction with the residents of the muck.

The contrast in speech between these two doctors begins to suggest how race and region interact in the text. Because neither a physical description nor an explicit indication of race is given, the racial identity of the doctor from Orlando cannot be assumed. In presenting him in such a way, the text seems to be emphasizing that if he *seems* white to the implied reader of *Their Eyes*, this is only because he speaks in standard English, and because he is a doctor. However, black doctors are mentioned when Mrs. Turner, a self-loathing black woman who believes "We oughta lighten up de race," expresses her views on the topic: "Don't bring me no nigger doctor tuh hang over mah sick-bed. Ah done had six chillun...and ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors always gits mah money."²⁰⁵ The racial identity of this doctor, then, is left undetermined; and, considering that he serves the all-black town of Eatonville under conditions of Jim Crow segregation, is at least as likely to be black as white. In fact, the only concrete piece of information provided on his identity on the basis of which to account for his atypical use of standard English is his metropolitan place of residence. Elsewhere in the novel, Orlando is associated with banking, and thus the incursion of the capitalist institutions of the North into the southern landscape. After Tea Cake dies, "Janie had wired to Orlando for money to put him away."²⁰⁶ While Doctor Simmons is a white man who speaks the dialect and tells the stories of the muck, the physician from Orlando, who may be black, speaks the standard English of his urban milieu. In both cases, race is displaced by location as a determinant of speech. This is one instance of a textual strategy at work throughout *Their Eyes*.

²⁰³ Ibid., 83.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 175.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 140-41.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 189.

Linguist Lisa Cohen Minnick's systematic study of dialect in *Their Eyes* reveals crucial aspects of how the technique functions within the text. Employing empirical methods and computational tools, Minnick finds “little interspeaker variation” in both the phonetic features of characters' speech and the frequency with which those features appear in the speech of different characters: “Hurston represents her characters as sharing phonological features and even frequencies, which might not be expected, given the diversity in ages, levels of education, and social and geographical backgrounds of the characters—influences sociolinguists commonly point to as affecting language variation among speakers.”²⁰⁷ However, the comprehensiveness of her analysis is limited by the fact that she does not take race into consideration, together with class and gender, as an axis of linguistic variation. Like so many commentators on the novel, she completely overlooks the presence within it of white characters and the representation of their speech. As a result, she does not seem to notice that her insights have an even wider scope than she claims for them, encompassing racial difference as well. This oversight leads her to fall into step with the critics cited earlier, who assume race as the primary referent of the novel's use of dialect. Though she notes that linguistic commonality transects “intragroup racism” in the case of Mrs. Turner,²⁰⁸ she stops short of the even more striking fact, evident in the Nanny's narrative and Tea Cake's coerced labor, that it traverses inter-group racism as well.

Furthermore, despite the importance of the uniformity of dialect that characterizes most of the novel's dialogue, at the margins of the text this unity is offset by a movement towards multiplicity. In addition to the United States “black” English that dominates the dialogue, and the standard English passages already discussed, two other ethnic dialects, namely Native American and Afro-Caribbean, appear in moments that are both brief and charged with significance. The salient difference between the Seminole Indians and the Bahamian migrant workers that inhabit the muck involves the nature of their social interactions with the majority group of American Blacks.

The Indians tend to keep to themselves and show a reluctance to speak to non-Indians: “Every now and then they'd run across a party of Indians in their long, narrow dug-outs calmly winning their living in the trackless ways of the 'Glades.”²⁰⁹ Later, it is the Seminoles from whom Janie learns of the approaching hurricane, more through visual observation than verbal communication:

So she was home by herself one afternoon when she saw a band of Seminoles passing by. The men walking in front and the laden, stolid women following them like burros. She had seen Indians several times in the 'Glades, in twos and threes, but this was a large party. They were headed towards the Palm Beach road and kept moving steadily. About an hour later another party appeared and went the same way. Then another just before sundown. This time she asked where they were all going and at last one of the men answered her.
“Going to high ground. Saw-grass bloom. Hurricane coming.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004); 123, 126.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

²⁰⁹ *Their Eyes*, 130.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

On the one hand, the stereotypically taciturn speech of the Indians, with its clipped sentences and absence of articles and verb conjugations, reflects their naturalized portrayal as primitives in close communion with nature, whose symptomatic signs they are adept at deciphering. At the same time, their presence within the text functions within the processes of cultural amalgamation that structure its imaginative play of dialects. As ethnic others who keep to themselves, whom Janie sees without addressing until she feels compelled to do so, the Seminoles represent a group whose linguistic difference is conditioned more by social distance than racial essence.

The Bahamians, on the other hand, follow a trajectory from apartness to inclusion within the culture of the black workers: “Since Tea Cake and Janie had friended with the Bahaman workers in the 'Glades, they, the “Saws,” had been gradually drawn into the American crowd. They quit hiding out to hold their dances when they found that their American friends didn't laugh at them as they feared. So they began to hold dances night after night in the quarters, usually behind Tea Cake's house.”²¹¹ As a result of their befriending of the black Americans, the speech patterns of the two groups converge along with their dancing styles. The convergence appears in a conversation about the approaching hurricane:

One of the Bahaman boys stopped by Tea Cake's house in a car and hollered. Tea Cake came out throwin' laughter over his shoulder into the house.

“Hello Tea Cake.”

“Hello 'Lias. You leaven', Ah see.”

“Yeah man. You and Janie wanta go? Ah wouldn't give nobody else uh chawnce at uh seat till Ah found out if you all had anyway tuh go.”

“Thank yuh ever so much, Lias. But we 'bout decided tuh stay.”

“De crow gahn up, man.”²¹²

While similar to the novel's prevalent dialect, Lias's dialogue shows characteristics of Afro-Caribbean pronunciation, such as the frequent occurrence of *man* and the substitution of *gahn* for the standard *going*, which is normally pronounced in dialogue passages as either *gwine* or *goin'* throughout *Their Eyes*. Such a mixed dialect suggests a recent immigrant group still undergoing a process of linguistic acculturation.²¹³

Viewed in light of this dimension of linguistic difference within the black community of the muck, the similarity in speech between black and white characters becomes all the more remarkable. A triangulation of that similarity with the other two ethnic dialects inscribed in the text sheds light on Hurston's vision of race and culture as situated in the American South. If the more pronounced linguistic difference of the Seminoles is determined by their social distance from the other groups inhabiting the muck and their involvement in an autonomous if confined economy, and the convergence

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Ibid., 155-56.

²¹³ Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* while doing research in Jamaica and Haiti for her folklore anthology *Tell My Horse*, and had earlier done field work in the Bahamas while doing research for her earlier folklore anthology *Mules and Men*; so she would have had ample opportunity to hear the sounds of Caribbean English before and during the novel writing.

in modes of speech between the Bahamians and the black Americans is the result of social mixing, then the more complete consonance of oral expression between Blacks and Whites can only point towards their much longer history of coexistence. Like Doctor Simmons, who had “been around so long that he was part of the muck,” Hurston suggests, black and white residents of the South have forged a shared if divided culture over the course of centuries of contact.

In its refusal of realism, which would signify inter-character difference through variations of idiolect, the uniformity of the dialect in *Their Eyes* itself becomes a sign, detaching itself as a significant feature of the text and contributing to its meanings. This uniformity implies an overdetermined simplification of “real” speech patterns. Sylvia Holton has demonstrated that a degree of such simplification is necessary to all literary representations of dialect, because such representations are generally produced for readers who do not themselves speak the transcribed idiom. Because of this, too accurate a likeness could approach the limit of a foreign language and appear on the page as sheer gibberish; or, even if decipherable, would consume the reader's energy in efforts at translation, thus impeding the movement of the text.²¹⁴ In *Their Eyes* the motive of necessity is supplemented by a symbolic function as the intention behind its minimalist configuration of dialect, enabling it to juxtapose identities and both to link and differentiate communities of speakers in ways not beholden to the equivalencies of realism. In this way the sign of dialect mediates the novel's de-articulation of established modes of representation.

In his perceptive study of dialect in post-bellum American literature, Gavin Jones observes that “African-American dialect was a sign of black-white intermixture; it was a hybrid form with the force to infiltrate and adulterate the dominant language.”²¹⁵ The foregoing discussion should make clear the appropriateness of such a notion of black literary dialect to *Their Eyes*, in which dialect functions more as the sign of a dynamic process of cultural hybridity than the representation of a stable racial essence. To conceive of dialect as a symbol rather than as a semblance is to free it from the constraints of representation and open it to an expanded range of expressive possibilities, without which *Their Eyes* could not have been written. Hurston's exaggeration of the similarities between black and white southern dialect, which approaches the limit of indistinction, can only appear as a flaw according to the critical standards of realism, in which dialect has played a pervasive role in American fiction.²¹⁶ Yet Hurston put dialect to an entirely different and highly inventive use in her novel, according to which it does not represent the authentic so much as it disrupts the ossified assumptions transmitted through the codes of racial authenticity. At the same time that *Their Eyes* gestures towards a reiteration of the dominant racial paradigm of dialect, it disrupts the very category of race by positioning region as an alternative referent for dialect, imagining a

²¹⁴ *Down Home and Uptown: The Representation of Black Speech in American Fiction* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984), 56-57.

²¹⁵ *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.

²¹⁶ On the role of dialect in American realist fiction, see James Nagel, “The Literary Context” (Introduction) in *The Portable American Realism Reader*, eds. Nagel and Tom Quirk (New York: Penguin, 1997), xx-xxxii.

regional identity that transgresses racial boundaries.

To claim that Hurston's inscription of speech was not intended as a representation of the real is not to say that there is no historical basis to Hurston's fictional vision of the South.²¹⁷ On the contrary, Hurston's imaginative use of dialect implies a revision of the historical accounts of the South that were dominant during the 1930s, and which expressed the ideologies of Jim Crow segregation. I will begin to elaborate on this point by way of a discussion of Hazel Carby's influential critique of *Their Eyes* and its contemporary reception, which focuses on the intersection in the novel between region and racial representation.

Carby questions the privileging of *Their Eyes* within American literary institutions, which began with the “rediscovery” of Hurston in the late 1970s, by arguing that the novel has played a role in what she describes as “our own discursive displacement of contemporary conflict and cultural transformation in the search for black cultural authenticity.” Taking the urban North to be the primary setting of such conflict and transformation since the massive northward migration of Blacks following World War I, and construing *Their Eyes* as “a romantic vision of the folk,” Carby attributes to the novel “a representation of 'Negroness' as an unchanging, essential entity, an essence so distilled that it is an aesthetic position of blackness.”²¹⁸ “Hurston's representation of the folk,” Carby claims, “is not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation of migration, but also a creation of a folk who are outside history.”²¹⁹ The problem with Carby's critique is that it assumes a monolithic black American history in line with a Hegelian logic according to which historical transformation can only be located in one place at any given time, thus elevating the Great Migration to the status of a historical absolute. In assuming that after World War I the urban North was the only appropriate setting for relevant black literature, that a fictionalization of any other region necessarily involves a “displacement” of the real issues, Carby reproduces the familiar image of the South as an irrelevant historical backwater.

Gerald Creed and Barbara Ching have shown how an omission of rural space from mainstream cultural studies produces a lacuna in its accounts of identity resulting from the influence of what they describe as the “trinity” of race, class, and gender as the only recognized categories. Because the category of place “inflects” these others, its exclusion contributes to the reification of identities, a tendency they attribute to postmodern criticism: “Postmodern social theory's stable reference point has been the city; it unquestioningly posits an urbanized subject without considering the extent to which such a subject is constructed by its conceptual opposition to the rustic.”²²⁰

²¹⁷ “The process of racial integration in the South did not begin with the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. On the folk level, black and white southerners have been swapping accents and attitudes, songs, stories, and styles across the colour line for more than three centuries.”

Charles Joyner, “African and European Roots of Southern Culture: The 'Central Theme' Revisited” in *Dixie Debates: Perspectives on Southern Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 27.

²¹⁸ Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Casebook*, ed. Cheryl A. Wall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 132-33. Originally published in 1990.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

²²⁰ “Recognizing Rusticity: Identity and the Power of Place” in *Knowing Your Place: Rural Identity and Cultural Hierarchy*, ed. Barbara Ching and Gerald W. Creed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 7 and passim.

Hurston's splitting of dialect between race and region reveals the role of the technique in the naturalization of both categories, as well as the arbitrariness of its ideological uses. By switching between blackness and southernness as its seeming object of representation, *Their Eyes* points out the imbeddedness of both in the mobile operations of discourse. Connected to this theoretical sense of the contingency of regional identity was Hurston's perspective on her contemporary South as a site, not of historical inertia, but of ongoing socio-cultural transformation pervaded by racial controversy.

Far from accepting the naturalized representation of the South that was becoming the unquestioned basis of the North's self-image, in *Their Eyes* Hurston contests it by presenting a counter-narrative of southern history as an alternative to the dominant narrative of post-bellum backwardness and racial apartheid, a genealogy of the South which construes the region as a place with a past informed by ethnic grafting and a present imbued with cultural vitality. A habit of viewing New York as the primary context for the texts Hurston wrote during the 1930s has resulted in a tendency to overlook the extent to which she consciously maintained and cultivated her connections to her native South throughout her writing career. An assessment of her complex simultaneous involvement in the literary cultures of both the North and the South will shed further light on the play of region and race in *Their Eyes*. Towards this end, I will now turn to a discussion of how Hurston's affiliation with the Harlem Renaissance was conditioned by her veiled dialogue with a contemporaneous movement that has come to be known as the Southern Renaissance.

Which Renaissance? Between Harlem and the South

It should come as no surprise that the Harlem Renaissance is not frequently compared to the Southern Renaissance. However, despite the sizable differences of geography and ideology separating the two movements, a number of striking correspondences come into view immediately upon viewing them together. First, there are the similarities in rhetoric: New Negro and New South; color line and Mason-Dixon line; the appropriation of the term 'renaissance' itself. These rhetorical similarities overlap with further correspondences of content: a periodization beginning with World War I; an ambivalent nationalism; a cultural project simultaneously involving modernization and the preservation of an earlier folk culture; the position of a minority identity resisting the incursions of the American mainstream.

The differences are particularly evident in the contrast between the minority stances of the two movements. While far from identical with it, the Southern Renaissance had ties to the more conservative Agrarian movement of the 1920s, which viewed the minority position of the South as involving a violation by the North of its right to the continuation of the regime of white supremacy they claimed defined the South as a region. However, although the Southern Renaissance was far from pure of the South's racism, it involved a more complex and critical orientation towards that racism than that expressed by the Agrarians. On the other hand, the Harlem Renaissance was never completely autonomous vis-a-vis the relatively repressed racism of white publishers,

patrons, and negrophiles.²²¹ The differences, then, should not be glossed over any more than one should go too far in stressing them.

Under a critical paradigm that has tended to construe African-American and southern literature as two separate fields, Hurston's affiliations with the southern literary scene have not been frequently noted. The connection has not, however, gone entirely unnoticed. Jan Cooper has observed that "Most critics...have ignored the relation of Hurston's work, as well as the work of other Southern blacks, to another group of twentieth-century American writers, also credited with a reawakening, called the Southern Renaissance." However, in her claim that "...the characters of Hurston's novels populate a very specific kind of black Southern community," Cooper, whose discussion of the connection does not take into account the critical and historiographical discourses that formed crucial contexts for both renaissances, assumes the racially segregated image of the South which, as I will show, it was the aim of both the Southern Renaissance and Hurston to question.²²²

Thadious Davis has observed an unsettling of the color line in southern culture, but locates its beginnings in the 1980s.²²³ Although such a shift had become more established and widely recognized by that time, it can be traced back considerably earlier. I will argue that its emergence goes back to Hurston's time, but it is at the very least plausible to take the figure of Ralph Ellison as an instance. Ellison became friends with Robert Penn Warren after the latter's recanting of his earlier segregationist stance, and by 1959 Allen Tate, leading critic of the Southern Renaissance, had listed Ellison as one of its representative writers.²²⁴ Although the signs of a similar involvement of Hurston within a still earlier stage of the movement's history are less obvious, they also offer valuable insight for being located at such a formative moment.

Being both of southern origin and an active member of the Harlem circle, Hurston was well positioned to observe the connections between the two renaissances; and both her literary texts and her correspondence indicate that by the mid-1930s she had come to see those connections as a potential resource for her struggles to gain recognition as a writer. Her marginality within the Harlem Renaissance is well documented. With the exceptions of James Weldon Johnson and Charles Johnson, she was at odds with most of its leading figures. She had a conflicted relationship with Langston Hughes, which eventually led to a bitter dispute over the authorship of the play *Mule Bone*, on which they had collaborated. Richard Wright and Alain Locke both wrote negative reviews of *Their Eyes*, to which Hurston responded with characteristically hyperbolic and caustic

²²¹ In his influential study of the Harlem Renaissance, George Hutchinson insists on the importance of viewing the interracial composition of the movement's participants. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²²² "Zora Neale Hurston Was Always a Southerner Too" in *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, ed. Carol S. Manning (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); 58, 64.

²²³ "By the end of the 1980s...it became increasingly problematic and difficult to conceptualize and analyze southern culture as 'White Only.' What has occurred is an expansion of the definition of southern culture based upon an insistence that race and region are inextricable in defining a southern self, society, or culture." "Reclaiming the South" *Bridging Southern Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. John Lowe (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 60.

²²⁴ Allen Tate, "A Southern Mode of the Imagination" in *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1959), 578.

defensiveness.²²⁵ Her writings about the southern literary revival of the interwar years, as well as her communication with some of its participants, suggest that she responded to her persistently marginal position within the male-dominated Harlem Renaissance by seeking additional contexts and readerships.

In this section I will argue that considerable light can be shed on *Their Eyes* by situating it, not exclusively *in* either the Harlem or the Southern Renaissance, but *between* both movements. A strategic splitting and shifting between racial and regional paradigms constitutes an important stratum of the text's significations.

Both renaissances were theorized by their leading critics as involving the demystification of historical ideologies. Later I will discuss how the historians of the Southern Renaissance sought to expose narratives of an Old South defined by aristocratic European origins as pure fictions. In the case of the Harlem Renaissance, Alain Locke made similar arguments about the figure of the “Old Negro” in his contribution to the 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, which is among the founding texts of the Harlem Renaissance. Locke makes this point as an attempt to account for the seemingly sudden emergence of the New Negro:

Could such a metamorphosis have taken place as suddenly as it appeared to? The answer is no; not because the New Negro is not here, but because the Old Negro had long become more a myth than a man. The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical controversy. His has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism.²²⁶

According to Locke, the vitalism of the New Negro art and literature responds to a need to explode the constraints of such reified historical myths, to a sense that “The Negro...has idols of the tribe to smash.”²²⁷ By placing literature in dialectical relation to historiography, Locke attributes to artistic expression the power to demystify and transform hegemonic historical paradigms, thereby severing their grip on American society. Similar strategies were at work in the Southern Renaissance.

Allen Tate is generally credited with having coined the term “Southern Renaissance” in his 1945 essay “The New Provincialism,” in which he famously wrote: “With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world—but gave a backward glance as it stepped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present.”²²⁸ Ten years earlier Tate had already suggested the association without naming it by comparing the revival he saw in southern literature to “the outburst of poetic genius at the end of the sixteenth century when commercial England had already begun to crush feudal England.”²²⁹ Tate's construal of the material conditions of cultural rebirth in terms of the overcoming of a feudal regime recalls Locke's characterization of the New Negro movement as a transition “from

²²⁵ On Hurston's reception in the United States, see M. Genevieve West, *Zora Neale Hurston and American Literary Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

²²⁶ “The New Negro” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 3.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

²²⁸ *Essays of Four Decades*, 545.

²²⁹ “The Profession of Letters in the South” in *ibid.*, 533.

medieval America to modern,²³⁰ as both allude to the Civil War's destruction of the survivals of feudalism in the South.

Tate's "backward glance" thesis involves an account of the cultural implications of the bitter controversies over questions of whether and how to modernize the South following its defeat in the Civil War. In 1930 a group of twelve white male southern intellectuals known as the Agrarians, whose membership included John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Tate himself, published a collaborative manifesto entitled *I'll Take My Stand*, in which they advocated for the South a program of moderate modernization and a balanced economy involving both industrial and agricultural elements, in which the latter would remain dominant. In his contribution to the anthology, Herman Clarence Nixon stated the position as follows:

But the human civilization now based on Southern agriculture is in no little peril, and industrial civilization under the capitalist system does not offer a satisfying substitute in human values. If Southern farmers can be saved from exploitation and serfdom, it is possible for the South, which has had experience with slavery, to subordinate industrial processes to the status of slaves, not masters, and, thus escaping industrialism, to exemplify a cultural emergence from a too acquisitive society. The South is no longer a conquered territory, not quite conquered, but a protest, articulate and constructive, is needed against another conquest, a conquest of the spirit.²³¹

The language of anti-colonial protest espoused by the Agrarians highlights the strange line of convergence between the Southern Renaissance and the contemporaneous Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, this passage is representative of the Agrarians' tendency to articulate their difference from the North in terms of a culture based on qualitative elements like values and spirit as opposed to the quantitative logic of capitalist acquisition and expansion.

This opposition appears in Tate's 1935 essay "The Profession of Letters in the South," which is structured around his notion of "plutocracy:" "The East, bent upon making money, could tolerate, as it still tolerates, any kind of disorder on the fringe of society as long as the disorder does not interfere with money making. It did not know its own social mind; it was, and still is, plutocracy." According to this formulation, the primacy of financial interests in the North (or, in this instance, the East) has prevented it from developing a cultural identity, with the consequence of a dissociated subjectivity: "The 'message' of modern art at present is that social man is living, without religion, morality, or art (without the high form that concentrates all three in an organic whole) in a mere system of money references through which neither artist nor plutocrat can perform as an entire person."²³² Faced with the incursion of northern plutocracy, the task of the Southern Renaissance so conceived involves the rebirth of a holistic southern tradition under the centrifugal pressures of industrialization.

Tate's characterization of the differences between northern and southern culture in

²³⁰ "The New Negro," 6.

²³¹ "Whither Southern Economy," in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 199-200.

²³² *Essays of Four Decades*; 520, 529.

terms of two opposed signifying systems, one based on the homogenous order of capital and the other on the qualitative phenomena of “mind,” tradition, and identity, suggests a comparison with the often-cited metaphor of language as money from Hurston’s 1934 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression.” In this essay, Hurston theorizes various modes of signification in terms of the relations between different forms of currency and the goods for which they are exchanged: “Language is like money. In primitive communities actual goods, however bulky, are bartered for what one wants. This finally evolves into coin, the coin being not real wealth but a symbol of wealth. Still later even coin is abandoned for legal tender, and still later for cheques in certain usages.” Whereas metaphorical language exhibits the “very primitive” logic of barter systems, Hurston explains, “people with highly developed languages have words for detached ideas,” words bearing the traits of “legal tender.” Invoking the discourse of primitivism, Hurston racializes her evolutionary history of language by contrasting a black mode of expression characterized by “rich metaphor and simile” with a white one defined by the more abstract sign-types she associates with legal tender and writing: “So we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.”²³³

Like Tate, Hurston opposes pre-modern cultures in which wholeness and organic unity remain intact to advanced cultures whose discursive processes bear the abstract, homogenous traits of money economies. For Tate the organic unity of traditional culture results from the role of mind and spirit, as opposed to capital flows, in shaping its contours. For Hurston, it inheres in an epistemology grounded in metaphor, rather than abstract conceptual theorizing, as a mode of mediation between subject and world.

While the sliding movement between race and region as alternative identity categories is not evident in “Characteristics,” which, as its title suggest, follows a more strictly racial logic, the connection it draws between cultural paradigms and economic systems already begins to point towards the resonances between the Harlem and Southern Renaissances, of which Hurston would become increasingly conscious in the years leading up to the writing of *Their Eyes*, during which Hurston began to show in her letters an interest in positioning herself as a writer in the southern literary scene. While it remained relatively implicit in her published writings both fictional and non-fictional, the topic of the South became increasingly explicit in her letters, perhaps because of the freedom they afforded from the publishing industry’s preference for racial subject matter in black-authored texts.²³⁴

A letter Hurston wrote to her Scribner’s editor Burroughs Mitchell in 1948 from Honduras, where she had traveled in hopes of discovering an ancient Mayan city,²³⁵ reveals both this explicitness and the extent to which Hurston eventually came to displace race with region as a term of identity:

I assume tha[t] you have been noticing trends and by now you have noted the absorption of Negro art expressions into the national expression and the disappearance of it into the

²³³ *Writings*, 830-31.

²³⁴ Hurston discusses the racial norms of publishers in her essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print.” *Writings*, 950-55.

²³⁵ Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 301.

whole....The same thing has happened in Cuba and other Latin American countries. The dances and the music like the Rumba, Samba, Conga, etc. have been taken over from the former African slaves and made national, and are no longer associated with their origins. So far as idiom is concerned in the U.S., a brief s[t]udy will show that there is no such thing as a N[e]gro dialect in the U.S. It is southern, and from the influence of the black-face minstrels, anything quaint and humorous has been attributed to the darkies....I have been reading and reading in the last three months and I am astonished how pervasive the idiom is in southern literature and that of the early West.²³⁶

Here, echoing Charles Chesnut's claim that "there is no such thing as a Negro dialect,"²³⁷ Hurston equivocates between the South and the entire American landscape as the geographical extent of the diffusion of African cultural practices, simultaneously switching between dialect in the former case and "art expressions" in the latter. Interestingly, the example of Latin American national cultures seems to have suggested to her the idea of expanding the scale of her mapping of hybridity in the United States from the regional to the national. In this letter, "Negro expression" becomes "American expression," with a notion of "southern expression" also being implied. This further instance of how Hurston imagined a bridge between race and region as alternative referents for her linguistic renderings suggests how the differences she constructs between Black and White in "Characteristics" would inform both her representation of the South in *Their Eyes* and her involvement in the cultural field of the Southern Renaissance.

An earlier letter, sent by Hurston to scholar and librarian William Stanley Hoole in 1936, while she was writing *Their Eyes*, reveals a Hurston consciously seeking to position herself within that field. Librarian of the University of Alabama and publisher of numerous books on southern literature, including a history of theater in South Carolina and a biography of nineteenth-century humorist Johnson Jones Hooper, Hoole was actively involved in the articulation of a regional southern identity during the 1930s. In her letter to Hoole, Hurston describes a southern literary revival in which she implicitly includes herself as a participant:

I am glad in a way to see my beloved southland coming into so much prominence in literature. I wish some of it was more considered. I observe that some writers are playing to the gallery. That is, certain notions have gotten in circulation about conditions in the south and so these writers take this formula and work out so-called true stories. For instance, one Russian lady got hot under the collar and walked out of a party because I wouldnt [*sic*] say that I had suffered terribly down home. It seems that she had helped arrange the party for me to expose my sufferings and the real conditions in the south and when I said I lived pretty much the same in New York and Florida, she used that back-house word and walked out. Being poor myself I am heartily in favor of poor people getting hold of money but I fail to see the difference between an under-paid cotton-picker and an under paid factory hand. So why stress Alabama? The under dog catches heck everywhere. Nobody would love to see ideal living conditions for everyone more than I, but I sense insincerity when

²³⁶ Zora Neale Hurston: *A Life in Letters*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 567-68.

²³⁷ Letter, May 20, 1898, quoted in Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 309.

only one section of the country is held up for example. But I do feel that the south is taking a new high place in American literature. [Erskine] Caldwell, [Julia] Peterkin, and that new-comer [David Lewis Cohn]...are definite contributors to life. Not to mention Sherwood Anderson, whom I think is almost equal to Caldwell, if not equal.²³⁸

Here, once again, is Hurston blurring the boundaries between race and place. In what seems to be an intentional ambiguity on her part, it is difficult to tell whether the image of the South for which the “Russian lady” at the party is seeking confirmation encompasses both Whites and Blacks or applies only to the latter. In her account of the party, region tends to blur, complicate, and even erase racial lines of division. Furthermore, her allusion to “certain notions” about conditions in the South recalls Locke's critique of racial stereotypes and echoes the revisionist histories of the South that began to appear during the 1930s.

Her discussion of the southern literary scene has a similar effect. In case her claim for herself as a southern writer is not clear enough, she echoes the point in a postscript: “PS. I come of an Alabama family. Macon County.”²³⁹ By implicitly including herself in her list of leading southern novelists, Hurston imagines for her work an alternative context to that of the Harlem set. Even if such a vision of a racially diverse southern literary canon was not to become a reality during her life, her willingness to imagine such a culture illuminates her views on the intersections between race, region, and literature. It also suggests the ways in which Hurston sought cultural alternatives in the interstitial spaces between dominant paradigms.

The prominence Hurston attributes to Sherwood Anderson within the emergent southern novel she claims to be “taking a new high place in American literature” sheds light on her own sense of the problematic connections between race and American identity. In his 1925 novel *Dark Laughter*, Anderson presents the South as a region in which it is impossible to construe American identity in racially pure terms: “Was there such thing as an American?” asks Bruce, the novel's white protagonist in free indirect discourse during a visit to New Orleans. “If you are a canvas,” he continues,

do you shudder sometimes when the painter stands before you? All the others lending their color to him. A composition being made. Himself the composition.

Could he ever really know a Jew, a German, a Frenchman, an Englishman?

And now a nigger.

Conscious of brown men, brown women, coming more and more into American life—by that token coming into him too.²⁴⁰

The metaphor of identity as an artistic composition constructed on an originally empty canvas evokes the anti-essentialism frequently ascribed to many of Hurston's works, not least of all *Their Eyes*.

In her correspondence Hurston reveals an ambition to revise the terms of American and southern literary canons in ways that contest racial divisions. As the

²³⁸ Zora Neale Hurston: *A Life in Letters*, 367-68. Original underlining.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 368.

²⁴⁰ Sherwood Anderson, *Dark Laughter* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1960), 74.

preceding discussion shows, *Their Eyes* encompasses a related, subtly encoded vision of language and society in the American South. As a literary critic, Hurston ironically calls the implicitly racial logic of canonicity into question; as a novelist she unsettles racial identities through her exploration of the links between language and identity. Her letters raise the question of how the representation of race and region conflict with and mutually inform each-other in a text like *Their Eyes*.

The next year Hoole published a positive review of *Their Eyes* in the Waco, Texas *Tribune Herald*, in which he praised the novel as “an almost perfect story of blacks in the South.”²⁴¹ His review shows that Hurston's ambition for recognition within the southern literary scene had a real if limited basis. In 1934 Robert Penn Warren sent a letter to critic and novelist Andrew Nelson Lytle requesting that Lytle write a review of Hurston's folklore anthology *Mules and Men* for the *The Southern Review*, of which Warren was then editor. Though the review was never written, the interest of a leading Southern Renaissance figure in Hurston's book suggests the kinds of possibilities Hurston saw for a reception of her work in the South. If the interest in black writers shown by influential Whites in the South did not reach the scale of the “vogue” surrounding black culture in Harlem, Hurston nevertheless responded to the possibilities that were there and sought to define a place for black writers within a changing southern literary scene.

The intensely racist social reality of the South during the 1930s, which involved codified segregation and state-tolerated lynchings, certainly did not provide ideal conditions for the inclusion of black writers within southern literary culture. However, the transformation of the South envisioned by members of the Southern Renaissance, with whom I claim Hurston can be retrospectively associated, involved a critical if ambivalent disposition towards its racism. As Tiffany Patterson shows, rather than either demonizing or idealizing the South, Hurston saw it as “a place between home and horror.”²⁴²

Like the Harlem Renaissance, the Southern Renaissance was defined primarily by cultural practices and did not engage significantly in direct political action. Yet those cultural practices had clear implications for the racial politics of the South. In this sense, the Southern Renaissance can be viewed as part of the prehistory of the Civil Rights movement, in which even some of the Agrarians would eventually become participants.

Historical revisionism was one of the main currents of the Southern Renaissance, the membership of which included controversial historians like C. Vann Woodward and W. J. Cash. James Cobb has shown how Woodward's scholarship was motivated by the aim of exposing Jim Crow segregation as an “invented tradition” that emerged after Reconstruction, an aim in opposition to then-dominant historical narratives that falsely projected the segregationist regime into the origins of southern society.²⁴³ In his influential book on the Southern Renaissance, Richard King traces the development during the 1930s of a “new southern liberalism” characterized by “an important

²⁴¹ *According to Hoole: The Collected Essays and Tales of a Scholar-Librarian and Literary Maverick*, ed. Lawrence S. Thompson (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1973), 337.

²⁴² Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), ch. 3.

²⁴³ *Mind and Identity in the Modern South: Redefining Southern Culture* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 150-86.

reassessment of southern political culture.”²⁴⁴

Woodward's 1938 biography of nineteenth-century populist leader Tom Watson is indicative of the tendency of such revisionism to seek alternatives to images of southern identity grounded in racial separatism. The Populist movement of the 1880s and 1890s, which involved an alliance of both black and white small farmers against the interests of big planters, was violently suppressed by the planters in collusion with the Democratic party. Though at the cost of a degree of distortion on his own part, Woodward presented Watson as a symbol of the forces in southern history that opposed segregation, arguing that “Never before or since have the two races in the South come so close together as they did during the Populist struggles.”²⁴⁵ He presented the defeat of these forces as a historical tragedy at the same time that he implied the possibility of their revival within a modernizing South.

Hurston's own revision of southern history resonates with those proclaimed by the mainstream of the Southern Renaissance at the same time that it differs from that mainstream on account of its domination by white male liberals. While the conditions were not in place during the 1930s for a fuller participation by Hurston in contemporary debates over the South's identity as a region, her interest in those debates increasingly informed her writing over the course of the decade. In another letter to her Scribner's editor, written in 1947, Hurston wrote: “I do not know how much you know about the South, and I have risked boring you to show you the matrix out of which the story arises. How and why the characters are like they are.”²⁴⁶ The “story” to which she is here referring is her novel *Seraph on the Suwanee*, published in 1948, which portrays white southern characters. However, as my discussion of dialect in *Their Eyes* shows, by the earlier novel's time of writing the history of the South had already come to constitute part of the matrix that structured Hurston's fiction.

On one of its multiple strata, *Their Eyes* inscribes a counter-narrative in opposition to the hegemonic racialist histories of the South that were involved in the ideological legitimation of the Jim Crow regime. In so doing, the novel situates itself between the Harlem milieu and a southern matrix such that both contexts structure the text, shape its meanings, and disrupt its apparently stable adherence to the codes of racial authenticity.

This very disruptiveness in the text calls into question the adequacy of a racialist hermeneutic to the task of unpacking its meanings and identifying its literary strategies, since the text itself seems motivated by a questioning of such a hermeneutic. At the same time that *Their Eyes* seems to align itself with the conventions of racial representation, it exposes them as conventions, and the status of race itself as text rather than substance, by deploying race and region as interchangeable and thus contingent referents. The text's deconstruction of a racialist logic calls for the application of an interpretive framework itself not determined by racial categories. In the next section I will explore the possibilities offered by the concept of social praxis for the clarification of certain aspects of the novel that slip through the grid of those categories.

²⁴⁴ *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 242.

²⁴⁵ *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 222.

²⁴⁶ *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 562.

Tea Cake's Laughter

The action, themes, and style of *Their Eyes* are shaped in large part in connection with two distinct but interrelated modes of practice, which can be distinguished in terms of the notions of acquisition and expenditure. The relationships between characters are mediated by their stance towards these two modes. The course of Janie's life is shaped by her desire to escape the acquisitive values and associations imposed on her by her protective grandmother: "She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizon in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*."²⁴⁷ The distinction between people and things and the values associated with each tends further to destabilize that between racial identities.

Nanny initiates a defiant Janie into acquisitive practices by forcing her marriage to Logan Killicks and his "often-mentioned sixty acres."²⁴⁸ Janie's first attempt at escaping the life her grandmother had planned for her leads only to a repetition of a marriage based on financial gain rather than the romantic love she seeks. Joe Starks is "a cityfied, stylish dressed man" who "didn't belong in these parts." He had "Been workin' for white folks all his life" and had "Saved up some money—round three hundred dollars...."²⁴⁹ Here is another instance of region displacing race as a source of character traits. His lack of belonging within Janie's known world is the result of his urban demeanor. Yet in this passage both categories are shown to be the effects of practice, in this case acquisitive practice. Both the city and the white society with which Joe has long associated are figured as spaces of capital accumulation.

Joe's use of his money in Eatonville is clearly driven by a profit motive: "Janie was astonished to see the money Jody had spent for the land come back to him so fast. Ten new families bought lots and moved to town in six weeks." In addition to his real estate investments, he becomes a store-owner, a role which interferes with his activities as an orator: "Before the store had a complete roof, Jody had canned goods piled on the floor and was selling so much he didn't have time to go off on his talking tours."²⁵⁰ The marriage begins to break up when Joe prohibits Janie's participation in the folk performances of the Eatonvillers so that she can manage the store, which she "had come to hate."²⁵¹

The differences between Joe and Tea Cake show in their uses of money. Whereas Joe sees the gaining of money as an opportunity to make more, Tea Cake sees it as an occasion for expenditure. When Janie leaves Eatonville with Tea Cake, she conceals \$200 of her savings in her clothes, still suspecting he might be after her money. Shortly after they arrive in Jacksonville, he discovers the money while Janie is asleep, leaves their room with it, and does not return until the next day, after having spent all the money on buying a guitar and throwing a party. Tea Cake differs from Janie's previous husbands in

²⁴⁷ *Their Eyes*, 89. Original emphasis.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

that he does not see Janie as a source of income, and represents for Janie the negation of the bourgeois values originally imposed on her by her grandmother: “Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine.”²⁵² When Janie and Tea Cake spend money it is generally for purposes of enjoyment rather than investment. The characterization of the difference between Janie's various relationships in terms of the conflicting economic processes of saving and spending is one instance of a pervasive tendency in the novel.

But in *Their Eyes* practices of acquisition and expenditure are not limited to their economic manifestations. In his analysis of these concepts, Georges Bataille defines the notion of expenditure not merely as the outlay of money, but in terms of “activities which...have no end beyond themselves,” such as “luxury, mourning, wars, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)...”²⁵³ Bataille argues that bourgeois societies repress an irreducible human need for such activities by subordinating action to the demands of the production and conservation of resources. Reading *Their Eyes* in terms of the notions of expenditure and the interests that seek to limit it can shed light on how the text envisions processes of identity formation.

The novel pictures a regional landscape in which the specific practices of acquisition and expenditure exist in a relationship of inextricable symbiosis, the one enabling the other at the same time that it competes with it for the status of a controlling principle that organizes and deploys its counterpart. On the one hand, acquisition is an inevitable precondition of expenditure, and even Tea Cake, like all the rest of the suitors who pursue Janie after Joe's death, seems at moments to show the signs of a secret interest in her modest inheritance. On the other, the very commitment of the capitalist to the conservation of resources can become the stimulus of an obscene enjoyment, as when the sermonic rant Mrs. Turner delivers against the deficient business skills she attributes to Blacks drives her to an extreme of rhetorical excess:

“Ah don't go in no nigger store tuh buy nothin' neither. Colored folks don't know nothin' 'bout no business. Deliver me!”

Mrs. Turner was almost screaming in fanatical earnestness by now.²⁵⁴

While Joe is clearly motivated by the will to acquisition, Janie's preferences throughout the novel reveal a disposition that favors expenditure, which appears in both her relationship with money and her enjoyment of the “lying sessions” and other verbal games in which language is detached from its communicative function and becomes its own object. Her sexuality also shows a degree of “perversion” through an unspoken refusal of biological reproduction: over the course of three marriages she does not have a child or express any interest in doing so. Janie is one example of the tendency of the text to define its textual strategies, characters, and places through the conflicted interplay of

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁵³ *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. and trans. Sllan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 118.

²⁵⁴ *Their Eyes*, 141-42.

these two modes of practice.

The text itself tends towards a poetics of expenditure in its inscription of autotelic language games that refuse to contribute to the advancement of plot and development of character. In addition to the play of language, the comic contents of the plot are mixed with tragic elements that maximize sensations of horror and loss. Thus, rather than conveying the ultimate impossibility of Janie and Tea Cake's romantic escape by means of the painstaking, cumulative technique of realism, Hurston introduces a sensational *deus ex machina* in the form of a hurricane that devastates the muck and results in Tea Cake contracting a case of rabies that eventually inflicts on him an agonizing death. The sustained description of the hurricane incorporates sublime elements: "They looked back. Saw people trying to run in raging waters and screaming when they found they couldn't"²⁵⁵

As an embodiment of the values of expenditure, Tea Cake brings people together through the power of his musical skills and his contagious laughter: "Tea Cake's house was a magnet, the unauthorized center of the 'job.' The way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made people stop and listen and maybe disappoint the jook for that night. He was always laughing and full of fun too. He kept everybody laughing in the bean field."

Whereas Eatonville is a place of expenditure before Jody's arrival, Jody changes the scene through his capital investment, setting the listless town on a responsible trajectory of economic growth. Janie eventually leaves the capitalist enterprise of Eatonville for the migrant labor community of the muck, with its raucous culture of "Blues made and used right on the spot" and a disregard for fiscal responsibility: "They made good money...so they spent good money." Like the itinerant workers of Claude McKay's *Banjo*, the members of this community frequently partake in the unprofitable activities of drinking, fighting, and making love, albeit at the price of dependence on white landowners, and hence the undisturbed continuation of racist-capitalist relations: "But they had to pay the man whose land they slept on."²⁵⁶

The role of praxis in the novel implies a specific determination of space. Just as the various places depicted are defined by the practices in which their residents engage, those practices are always localized, necessarily situated within and shaped by a spatial setting. Unlike the abstract spatiality of identity categories, which exist simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, the location of praxis is figured throughout the novel in various instances of actual, physical spaces. As physical spaces they are potentially open to entry by anyone, and the novel presents cases of individuals gaining entry to places from which they are conventionally barred. These spaces tend to be distributed across the two modes of acquisition and expenditure.

One example of the former spacial logic is the Eatonville town store:

The store itself kept her with a sick headache. The labor of getting things down off of a shelf or out of a barrel was nothing. And so long as people wanted only a can of tomatoes or a pound of rice it was all right. But supposing they went on and said a pound and a half of bacon and a half pound of lard? The whole thing changed from a

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 161.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 130-32.

little walking and stretching to a mathematical dilemma.²⁵⁷

Working in the store makes Janie physically ill, and is a factor in the breakup of her marriage to Joe, who insists she remain there. However, the profits from the store eventually enable Janie to leave Eatonville with Tea Cake.

The scene of Janie's murder trial presents a chronotope of acquisition by linking inscriptions of both space and time:

“Gentlemen of the jury, it is for you to decide whether the defendant has committed a cold blooded murder or whether she is a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances who really in firing a rifle bullet into the heart of her late husband did a great act of mercy. If you find her a wanton killer you must bring in a verdict of first degree murder. If the evidence does not justify that then you must set her free. There is no middle course.”

The jury reaches a verdict of not guilty after being “Out five minutes by the courthouse clock.”²⁵⁸ The practice of law tends to exclude expenditure, due to the principle of equivalency between crime and punishment, of the latter as “payment” for the former. Its proceedings are structured by the abstract time of the clock, which does not apply to most of the novel's action. The court scene stands as a rare instance in the text of standard English being spoken.

Although, as the above examples show, acquisitive space is not completely excluded from *Their Eyes*, by far the majority of its action takes place within locations structured by the values of expenditure. Like the character Janie, the text inclines towards the latter while avoiding a simplistic Manichean opposition of the two. Indeed, the inextricableness and mutually constituting relationship of the two becomes evident through further examples. The porch outside Joe's store becomes a stage when the residents of Eatonville gather there for their “lying sessions” and mimetic performances:

“I god, Janie,” Starks said impatiently, “why don't you go on and see whut Mrs. Bogle want? Whut you waitin' on?”

Janie wanted to hear the rest of the play-acting and how it ended, but she got up sullenly and went inside. She came back to the porch with her bristles sticking out all over her and with dissatisfaction written all over her face. Joe saw it and lifted his own hackles a bit.²⁵⁹

Janie is able to occupy the stage for brief moments, even if only as a listener, despite her husband's insistence that it is not a place befitting the dignity of a mayor's wife. She leaves the stage when Joe orders her back inside the store.

In converting the porch of the store into a theatrical space, the Eatonvillers deterritorialize a site of exchange, appropriating its marginal zone for their own uses.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 54.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 188.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 70.

Another instance of the text upsetting the binaries that seem to structure it occurs during a brief description of the Civil War: “Den, one night Ah heard de big guns boomin' lak thunder. It kept up all night long. And de next mornin' Ah could see uh big ship at a distance and a great stirrin' round....The men was all in blue, and Ah heard people say Sherman was comin' to meet de boats in Savannah, and all of us slaves was free.”²⁶⁰

While the North is typically opposed to the South as a region defined by the instrumental reason of capitalist industry, it makes its sole appearance in the novel during Nanny's narrative, as a war machine engaged in the utterly wasteful practice of warfare.

Alongside racial categories, which *Their Eyes* tends more to transgress than to represent, these and other localized practices shape the text and condition its meanings. The novel's disclosure of the contingency of the link, on which race depends, between epidermal signifiers and cultural signifieds points to the radical forces at work behind the text's apparent reproduction of that link, thereby locating cultural practice on a stratum beneath the discursive process of racialization.

The constitution of identities through the operations of physically localized practices in *Their Eyes* conditions and enables the transgressions of racial boundaries that occur at the margins of the text. By presenting racial identities as the effects of such practices rather than as fixed essences, it links cultural crossings to the movements of bodies through physical space. Thus, despite the novel's mainly black cast of characters, the practical modes evade racialization, the stable binding of acquisition to whiteness. In saying of the whipping she intends to inflict on Nanny that “if it kills you Ah'll stand de loss,” the sadistic Mrs. Roberts participates in the practice of expenditure by valuing the satisfaction of revenge over its cost to her in human capital. Conversely, black characters like Joe and Mrs. Turner, who owns and runs a restaurant on the muck with her husband, are able to affiliate themselves with acquisitive practices, thus occupying a conventionally white social position. Unlike Joe in Eatonville, however, the Turners and their business enterprise are eventually rejected and expelled by the working black population of the muck, which successfully resists a transformation by the profit motive.

If the concept of praxis allows for a more consistent and tenable reading of *Their Eyes* than that of identity, this is in part because, like the novel, it does not conform to a logic of binary opposition. Whereas the notion of race always involves a dualism that can only be inadequately mediated by a concept of hybridity which inevitably re-establishes the opposed positions it claims to reconcile,²⁶¹ differing social practices can unfold in a more genuine relation of connectedness, while remaining in principle open to a multiplicity of identities.

A praxis constitutes a social space that precedes and shapes identities, and is open in principle to any identity seeking to participate and affiliate itself. Social reality, however, always posits the association of certain identities with certain practices, and bars the entry of certain identities into certain social spaces. In this sense, identity serves to bind and limit the potentially infinite proliferation of praxis.

The distinction between praxis and identity need not for all this be itself construed

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 18.

²⁶¹ Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 6.

as one of binary opposition, and does not function as such in *Their Eyes*. Rather, the two mutually shape each other, even if praxis plays a more fundamental and constituting role. By simultaneously signifying both the racism of American social reality and the possibilities for a broader inclusiveness inherent to the notion of praxis, the novel achieves an aesthetic presentation of the contingency of identity. At the same time that it acknowledges and portrays a reality of racial segregation, it discloses the provisional contingency of race by presenting it as an effect of praxis, whereas merely to represent racial identity would inevitably be to reinforce its dire logic.

Through her exploration of the constituting role of praxis, Hurston discloses the limits of racial representation. At the same time that *Their Eyes* revises the codes that structure both racial and regional identities, it sets down the terms for an alternative way of representing and imagining human communities, in which race plays a peripheral and potentially irrelevant role. This facet of the text presents the moving image of a society facing a multitude of possibilities.

Sovereign Power and Racial Politics in Chester Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go*

Chester Himes published his first novel, *If Hollers Let Him Go*, in 1945. Chronologically the latest of the novels considered in the present dissertation, *Hollers* reiterates the themes of racial inclusion that inform the novels discussed in previous chapters, while registering the displacement of that narrative paradigm in the postwar United States and looking forward towards the emergence of new aims and values within African American literature. One significant difference between the 1940s context and that of 1920s and 1930s is the increasing institutionalization of projects of racial integration. Prior to the Civil Rights Movement, such projects revolved mainly around labor movements. Whereas New Deal federal labor policy tended to remain silent on issues of racial discrimination with the effect of perpetuating and even intensifying racial inequalities,²⁶² the war economy created new incentives for the overcoming of racial antagonism among industrial workers. Thus, during the 1940s, unions increased their efforts at recruiting black members while the federal government established the Fair Employment Practice Committee, which “represented the first sustained federal intervention in the economy in behalf of African Americans since the end of Reconstruction.”²⁶³

At the beginning of *Hollers*, Bob Jones is working as the leaderman of a crew of black workers at Atlas Shipyard near Los Angeles. His supervisory role is rendered difficult by racial antagonism among the black and white workers. When he asks Madge Perkins, a female member of a white crew, to help a member of his crew complete a task, she refuses, insisting that “I ain't gonna work with no nigger!” After impulsively replying “Screw you then, you cracker bitch!” Jones is demoted from leaderman to mechanic.²⁶⁴ Later the same day he is again called a nigger, this time by a white worker named Johnny Stoddart. He becomes obsessed with the idea of murdering Stoddart, but although this obsession guides his thinking and behavior throughout the rest of the novel, he never commits the murder. Bob takes the next day off work, during which he tells his girlfriend, Alice Harrison, about his demotion and they get into an argument over what to do about it. While Alice, a social worker and the daughter of a prominent black doctor, believes

²⁶² Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2005).

²⁶³ Zieger, Robert H., *For Jobs and Freedom: Race and Labor in America Since 1865* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), 123.

²⁶⁴ Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go: A Novel* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986), 27.

that Blacks should try to avoid conflicts with Whites, Bob insists on a more confrontational stance. She demands that he apologize to Madge and ask his supervisor to reinstate him as a leaderman, threatening to leave him if he does not. When Bob returns to work the next day, a white male co-worker gives him Madge's address, suggesting that having sex with her would defuse the hostility between them. That night Bob shows up at Madge's hotel with the intention of seducing her, but leaves in disgust after Madge reveals her desire to act out a fantasy of being raped by a black man. The next day Bob meets Alice for lunch. They reconcile and she accepts his marriage proposal. Returning to work, he inadvertently enters a room in which Madge is sleeping, and wakes her up. After shutting and locking the door, she cries out as if she's being raped, and Bob is severely beaten by the white men who come to her rescue. Later that evening he wakes up in the shipyard infirmary to learn that he is being charged with rape. Assuming that he will be convicted and sentenced to a long prison term, he escapes custody, but is later caught by the police, who discover a gun in the glove compartment of his car. He spends the night in jail, and the next morning he receives a visit from a judge and the president of the Atlas Corporation. The latter says to Bob that Madge has agreed to drop the charges in order to avoid an escalation of racial tension at the shipyard. The judge offers to have the gun charges dropped if Bob agrees to join the army, and the novel concludes with Bob accepting this deal.

In his classic study on the novel, Rene Girard claims that the emergence of the modern novel involves a marginalization of physical violence; that “Stendhalian vanity, Proustian snobbism, and the Dostoyevskian underground are the new forms assumed by the struggle of consciousnesses in a universe of physical non-violence.”²⁶⁵ Such a claim, which is questionable even on its own terms, certainly fails to register the uncanny resonance the novel form has had within the cultures of various subaltern groups who have underwritten the formation of the non-violent universe of bourgeois society through their violent exclusion from it.

In African American novels the problematic of physical violence has played a constitutive role within explorations of black consciousness, and *Hollers* occupies an important position in this development. In a letter to writer John A. Williams, Himes recounts details about the process of the novel's production that shed light on the structuring role of violence within its composition. While describing the house in which he wrote it, he admits that “we got the house from a Japanese family who were sent to the stockades right after Pearl Harbor.” Hence, the very site of inscription is the scene of a crime in which the author is obliquely implicated.

Himes then gives a surprising description of the initial plans for *Hollers* as they developed in this violently constituted space: “It was there I wrote the first draft of *If He Hollers Let Him Go*. It was my original intention to write a mystery story wherein white people were getting killed all over town and no one could conceive of the motive. The motive was simply the compulsion making a Negro kill white people, most of whom he didn't know and had never seen, because they were white. But it turned out differently

²⁶⁵ *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 110.

and became *If He Hollers...*²⁶⁶ Here is another instance of the subterranean pull exerted on Himes by the forms of popular genre fiction during his “serious” phase of protest literature, and further evidence that the popular and engaged elements in Himes's writings cannot be so neatly separated into chronologically distinct periods. It is significant that Himes does not say he began this “mystery story” but subsequently abandoned the project to write *Hollers*, but rather that the former somehow “became” the latter, that the intentions of the early project continued to animate its later development. *Hollers* began as a “mystery story” about a black serial killer who contradicts the cliché according to which such criminals only prey on members of their own racial groups; a reverse Jeffrey Dahmer driven by a compulsion to kill across the color line.

In his wide-ranging study of the cultural phenomenon of the serial killer, Mark Seltzer has observed that “serial murder and its representations...have by now largely replaced the Western as the most popular genre-fiction of the body and of bodily violence in our culture.”²⁶⁷ In accounting for the genre's cultural resonance, Seltzer points to the effects of the “abnormal normality” of mass-mediated subjectivities: “The serial killer...is in part defined by...a radicalized experience of typicality within. Simply put, 'murder by numbers'...is the form of violence proper to statistical persons. That such a generalized experience of a generality within is insupportable may go some way to explaining the explosive violence through which it becomes visible and its localization...in the figure of the serial killer.”²⁶⁸ The notion of a subjectivity objectified through normalizing forces, or what Giorgio Agamben has theorized as the “biopolitical body,”²⁶⁹ as a motivating factor in cases of compulsive murder, suggests why the figure of the serial killer became involved in Himes's exploration of the relations between violence and racialized modes of subjection. In a sense, racial identity is the extreme limit of normalized subjectivity.

Himes's preoccupation with the reification of human life and its implications for the situation of racial minorities sheds light on his engagement with genre fiction. This engagement goes beyond his participation in the hard-boiled crime fiction genre, to which discussions of his “popular” writings are usually limited. His ambivalent interest in an emergent serial-killer genre is only one instance of a more multifaceted use of genre which involves a multiplicity of particular genres at the same time that it implies a reflection on the implications of genre fiction as a more general category situated in a relationship of opposition to “serious” literature. Himes was particularly attuned to significant transformations taking place in that relationship within a 20th-century context of the mass-mobilization of subjects in connection with the rapidly increasing technological sophistication of the State apparatus. An important aspect of those transformations, and one which points to the involvement of his writings within the emergence of postmodernism, is a further blurring of the boundaries between literature and pop culture.

The Himes criticism has tended to divide Himes's fiction into two main phases; one consisting of the early protest novels, the other of the detective fiction to which

²⁶⁶ *Dear Chester, Dear John: Letters between Chester Himes and John A. Williams*, ed. John A. and Lori Williams (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008), 22.

²⁶⁷ *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

²⁶⁹ *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1998).

Himes turned after the commercial failure of the early writings. The criticism is mainly divided into two groups, each tending to privilege one of these purported “phases” over the other: one group prefers the early novels for their manifest engagement with racial politics, lamenting Himes's turn away from engaged literature towards the more lucrative sphere of popular fiction; while the other celebrates Himes for his liberation from the restrictive codes of racial authenticity, his expansion of the field of African American literature into a genre from which black writers had previously been absent, and the sheer pleasure of the crime novels. Some state these preferences explicitly, while others imply them by ignoring the marginalized set of texts. A prominent example of the latter case is Henry Gayle's history of the black American novel, in which the significance of Himes's novels is presented as a development and expansion of the Wrightian protest novel, and in which, accordingly, the only of Himes's novels mentioned are *Hollers* and *Lonely Crusade*. In her argument for the centrality within Himes's work of the texts Gayle excludes, Pim Higginson explicitly states and argues for the emphasis she places on the later crime novels. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's critique of ethnography, she reads Himes's turn to crime fiction as a line of escape from the ideological labor that is imposed on overtly engaged black literature, and which can have the effect of reproducing the racial inequalities it seems intended to resist. Tracing Himes's influence on a number of African crime-novelists, Higginson situates Himes at a formative moment within the emergence of a trans-Atlantic, alternative black poetics in which the demands of racial representation are displaced by the appeal of pleasure, or the “frivolous literary.”²⁷⁰

While each side of the division in the Himes criticism has produced valuable insights into the body of texts it privileges, a less Manichean approach to Himes's work can illuminate significant implications and complexities involved in his negotiation of the line between serious and popular literature. A division of these two elements of his fiction into chronologically distinct phases overlooks a line of continuity that traverses much of his fictional output. Both the protest novels and the crime fiction problematize the division between engaged and popular literature, playing both off each-other rather than fully aligning itself with either. This practice of mixing the high and low modes that conventionally define literature through their opposition is a significant element within Himes's first novel. To view it as a compositional flaw rather than an intentional factor within the textual strategies of *Hollers* would be to overlook the crucial role it plays within the novel's complex and illuminating exploration of the intersections between race, culture, and politics.

A consideration of the numerous short stories Himes wrote and published prior to *Hollers* begins to reveal the implausibility of locating a turn to genre fiction after the appearance of his first two novels, *Hollers* and *Lonely Crusade*. These novels are usually (and problematically) classified in terms of the realism and manifest political engagement attributed to the fiction of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Yet they, and in particular *Hollers*, clearly incorporate elements of earlier stories written according to the codes of popular crime fiction, as well as other genres, rather than those of ideological engagement and racial authenticity.

²⁷⁰ *The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the Francophone African Crime Novel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), “Introduction.”

These stories themselves demonstrate an unstable distribution across the gulf separating race literature from the popular forms that tend to exclude politically controversial subject matter, similar to the gulf I am claiming informs *Hollers*. The bifurcated distribution of Himes's early writings is evident not only in their content, but in their publication history as well: The manifestly racial stories were published mainly in race-themed periodicals like *Opportunity*, *Crisis*, and *Negro Story*, while the genre fiction appeared in more mainstream journals such as *Esquire* magazine and the *Atlanta Daily World*, the mainly white readership of which would have had no way of knowing that the author was black. Most of the latter set of stories involve characters who are identified as white, either explicitly through description or indirectly through the use of the conventions of an implicitly white hard-boiled vernacular.

“Lunching at the Ritzmore,” which was published in *Crisis* in 1942, is exemplary of the race-themed fiction Himes was writing during the years leading up to *Hollers*. In this story, two white men get into an argument over whether or not there are restaurants that refuse service to Blacks, and one bets the other a dollar that a black man who had overheard the conversation and taken his side of the argument could find a restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, where the story is set, that would refuse him service. The three men set off to find a restaurant, trailed by a small crowd who had overheard the argument and followed out of curiosity. As they walk through a crowded Pershing Square the group continues to grow in numbers, becoming “more than a hundred” and then “almost a thousand people.” They decide to settle the bet at the Ritzmore, “swankiest of West Coast hotels,” shocking both staff and patrons when the three men walk through the hotel lounge and seat themselves in the dining room with a “smelly mob” of spectators trying to push their way in. After a panicked consultation the waiters decide to serve the group; but, since they are clearly in a hurry to disperse the crowd, the question about racism that motivated the bet remains unanswered. This story constitutes an early instance of Himes's use of a satiric voice and a sense of the absurd in his engagement with racial subject matter.

At the same time that Himes was writing within the parameters of race literature, he was living an authorial second life in the pages of *Esquire* magazine and other publications not overtly organized around racial topics. A prominent thread within this body of work consists of stories written in the mode of popular genres, including the hard-boiled crime genre in which he would later gain international recognition. One example is a story called “Strictly Business,” about a contract killer, nicknamed Sure, working for a New York crime boss named “Big Angelo Satulla.” Sure's whiteness is made explicit through the description of his “light straw colored [*sic*] hair” and “pale blue eyes,” and both characters and narrator speak in the gritty vernacular through which the criminal underworld was represented in both the pulp literature and Hollywood cinema of the 1940s. The text does not shy away from the clichés of that criminal argot, as when it states that “The way Big Angelo's mob operated was strictly on the muscle,” or when Sure explains to a police informant just before shooting him, “I ain't got nothing against you....It's business with me.”²⁷¹ “Strictly Business” is deliberately written in a style that

²⁷¹ *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, ed. Calvin Hemton (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 140-41.

obfuscates the racial identity of its author. In stories like this Himes signifies on the unstated racial codes of the literary field, demonstrating that the “whiteness” of an authorial voice is grounded not in the writer's phenotype but in the text's iteration of formal conventions.

At the same time that Himes distributed his early fictional output across both sides of the literary color line, he challenged the terms of the racialized cultural zones it produced by upsetting the racial expectations that structure those zones. “The Night's for Cryin',” published in *Esquire* in 1937, presents an early instance of the figure of the urban black criminal in American popular culture. In this story, a character named Black Boy spots his girlfriend getting into a car with another man and follows them in a Taxi to a hotel in a white neighborhood, where the woman works as a maid. When his girlfriend gets out of the car he viciously beats her and, when the other man comes to her defense, pulls out a knife and murders him. The police officers who arrest him remark that “You'd bring your nigger cuttings down on Euclid Avenue, would you....” The narrator recounts that “they gave him the electric chair for that” and the story ends with Black Boy awaiting execution on death row. Writing at a time before the figure of the black street-criminal had become a familiar cultural stereotype, Himes incorporated the formulas of hard-boiled crime fiction into his invention of that figure. The early hard-boiled writers, whom Himes read avidly in the pages of *Black Mask*, pioneered the narrative representation of a criminal underworld within the 20th-century American metropolis, and the violent forms of masculinity they imagined thriving within that world were conventionally associated with whiteness. In “The Night's for Cryin'” Himes disrupts that convention by darkening the complexion of the hard-boiled antihero.

“A Penny for Your Thoughts” bends the color line in the other direction, bringing a white protagonist within the traditionally white genre of the western to the pages of *Negro Story*. In this story, set in 1944, a white gunslinger named Cap Coty holds off a mob intending to lynch a black soldier accused of raping a white woman. The opening paragraphs seem deliberately to quote all the familiar landmarks of the western:

His name was Frank Hacket but people in Red River, Texas, where he lived, called him Cap Coty. He stood six feet-two, weighed two hundred, and at seventy years was still straight as a ram-rod and agile as a marine. He wore a big black hat and a cowhide vest and his trousers outside his boot tops; and when he spoke, which was seldom, it was always in a slow, courteous drawl.

In Texas, where the babies teeth on gun butts, his marksmanship and speed on the draw were legendary. And what is more, he had a skyrocketing temper and a steady hand. During his twenty-seven years as a Ranger it is said he killed some sixty-odd badmen with his favorite gun, a pearl-handled, brass-lined .44, which he called 'Becky'.²⁷²

The description of Coty's stature and dress, his speech, his quickness on the draw and his affectionate relationship with his gun, all point towards a conventional reiteration of the western. Yet as the story unfolds it moves towards a playful reconfiguration of the genre's terms, motivated by the introduction of an explicit racial theme. The anachronistic 1944 setting occasions many of these reconfigurations: When Coty gets word by telephone of

²⁷² Ibid., 56.

the formation of a lynch mob, he makes the trip from his ranch house to the prison in a “Plymouth coupe” instead of on horseback. The World War II setting also enables the figure of the black soldier, whose military affiliation is what provokes Coty into preventing the lynching. After shooting a member of the mob, Coty explains: “Y'all understand, I don't give a damn 'bout the nigger; it's the uniform I revere.”

As “A Penny for Your Thoughts” indicates, Himes's interest in genre went beyond the crime fiction that would later become the focus of his popular writings. Other genres in which Himes wrote include war stories like “Two Soldiers” and “Heaven Has Changed,” and the prison genre, of which “Money Don't Spend in the Stir” is an example. The variety of genres represented in Himes's early work suggests how, in writing within established genres Himes was not so much seeking to position himself as a leading figure in any one of them as working out the significance within his writing of the cultural phenomenon of genre itself.

The outlines of an interpretation of Himes's meta-reflection on the phenomenon of popular genre fiction come into view in light of a feature of *Hollers* that makes it particularly difficult to separate it cleanly from his later crime fiction: the novel itself incorporates elements of the hard-boiled crime genre, in both style and contents. With its forays into seedy bars and clubs, its run-ins with and flights from the police, the plot has a dual trajectory which juxtaposes a lurid crime story with an earnest project of racial advancement. In connection with this split plot structure, the narrative voice switches back and forth between an earnest and meticulous account of suffering and conflict, and the cool, slangy lingo of the hard-boiled protagonist. This double logic of the novel continues the split affiliations of the set of stories that preceded it, only now under the pressure of the demands of formal unity. As long as Himes was publishing short stories in different periodicals, he could indefinitely evade the question of how, if at all, the two spheres of his literary production were related. But, since he chose to incorporate both spheres into his first novel, that question became a constituent problem within the text, informing its implicit reflections on the novel as a form and its place within African American culture.

The critical reception of *Hollers* as a protest novel has resulted in the muting of its hybrid structure and the dismissal of the crime-genre element as a formal flaw, something extraneous to its essential intentions. Yet reading the novel's refusal of the codes of formal purity as an intentional feature reveals unexpected meanings and implications of the text. If, according to the conventional understanding, the aim of popular literature is to entertain while that of serious literature is to edify, *Hollers* raises pointed questions about the motivations behind this (specifically modern) division of cultural labor and the stakes involved in transgressing the terms of that division. While remaining mindful of the multifaceted quality of the novel's formal experimentations and the importance of avoiding reductive interpretations of them, I want to focus here on the ways in which Himes folded the logic of mass-mediated genre fiction into his serious reflections on race by presenting that logic as pervasively involved in the constitution of racial identities.

As noted above, in his engagement with a variety of genres Himes tends to foreground the role of formula and cliché in their textual economies. At the same time, he presents the process of racialization as an objectification. The theme of the objectification

of the subjective phenomena of life and literary expression illuminates the connection in his writing between race and genre, insofar as the reification of literary expression involved in genre parallels the reification of life involved in modern political formations. Both these forms of reification (the cultural and the political) have reached unique extremes in their applications to racial minorities. Having covered the significance of genre in *Hollers*, it remains to examine how that significance shapes his presentation of the political situation of Blacks in wartime America.

With its parallel themes and characters, “A Night of New Roses” makes particularly clear the connections between *Hollers* and Himes's early stories. Like *Hollers*, “Roses” is set in wartime Los Angeles and narrated in the first person by a black man who has just lost his job at a shipyard as a result of a conflict with a white female co-worker. Apart from the difference in length, the story also differs from the novel in its relative foregrounding of subjective reflection over plot. Although Bob Jones frequently interrupts his plot to describe his emotional responses to various events, the meanings and effects of *Hollers* inhere mainly in the incidents and conflicts recounted. “Roses,” on the other hand, focuses on an uneventful drinking binge which the narrator goes on after loosing his job, describing his thoughts as he sinks into a despairing stupor and ending anticlimactically with him stumbling out of a nightclub. This reflective quality of the story sheds light on elements of Bob's subjectivity that become more submerged in the novel.

At one point in “Roses,” as Bob contemplates the possibility of being drafted as a result of loosing his job, he imagines how he would respond to an officer ordering him to risk his life for his country: “I wanted to tell the captain about what that senator had said about Jews *can't* be president and Catholics *can't* be president and Negroes are *excluded from being president*. I wanted to tell him just what I felt about that word excluded. I wanted to tell him just how much my life was worth to me in a country where life was about all I would ever have.”²⁷³ Here Bob describes his exclusion from the political sphere as a condition of bare life, recalling Walter Benjamin's claim that “with mere life the rule of law over the living ceases.”²⁷⁴

At another point in the story, Bob describes his anger over racism in the following terms: “I spent half my time thinking about murdering white men. The other half taking my spite out in having white women.”²⁷⁵ This phrase gives clear expression to the racialization of the primary drives within Bob's subjectivity; the investment of his libidinal energy in his desire for white women and the fixation of his aggressiveness on white men. Though never stated quite so explicitly, this sort of instinctual negation of racism informs Himes's first novel throughout. The criticism on *Hollers* has focused mainly on the libidinal half of Bob's economy of affects; it has tended either to overlook the element of aggressiveness, or to subordinate it to Bob's sexual obsession with white women. However, it is significant that in the above formulation Bob not only gives equal weight to his violent impulses, but highlights their difference from his sexual drives through the use of a parallel construction and division into distinct temporalities. While

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 127. Emphasis in the original.

²⁷⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 297.

²⁷⁵ *Collected Stories*, 126.

any plausible psychology must acknowledge the inextricability of sexuality and aggression, such an acknowledgment does not preclude the possibility of analyzing each on its own terms. By way of redressing the imbalance in discussions of Bob's motivations, a consideration of the murderous element in those motivations will be to the point.

I have already noted that, in its early planning stages, *Hollers* began as a novel about a serial murderer. Had Himes stuck to his original plans for *Hollers* and produced a novel as commercially successful as his later detective novels set in Harlem, he might have become a foundational figure within the serial-killer genre, making his contribution some years before the 1952 publication of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*, which Seltzer describes as a “prototype novel of compulsive killing.”²⁷⁶ Yet, even though *Hollers* ultimately unfolded as a negation rather than an instantiation of the serial-killer plot, there are remarkable parallels between it and Thompson's hard-boiled classic.

The most direct connection between Himes and Thompson is that, though they were not personally acquainted, they were both prominent members of the second wave of hard-boiled crime writers who worked within the patterns of the genre as established during the 1930s by crime novelists like Raymond Chandler, James Cain, and Dashiell Hammet.²⁷⁷ Although *Hollers* precedes Himes's later detective novels, a comparison of it with *The Killer Inside Me* reveals a significant presence within it of elements of the hard-boiled style in its manifestation as the “novel of compulsive killing.”

Seltzer notes that *Killer* is in a sense only “nominally, a first-person novel,” and that the name of the narrator, Lou Ford, figures him as the “mass-reproducible person.” Bob's estrangement from himself and blindness to key facets of his own story introduce a third-person element to his account. In its marked typicality, the name Bob Jones implies a similar erasure of individuality; although the association with the factory-produced automobile is not registered in the name itself, Bob's perversely exaggerated identification with his car suggests an element of personal indistinctness.

Hollers is informed on many levels by the symbolism of the automobile, from particular themes to its general textual strategies. In an essay entitled “Automobile Aesthetics,” Julian Stallabrass differentiates between modernist and postmodernist phases of car culture. With reference to Le Corbusier's 1920s transformation of the Parisian cityscape, he associates the former with a utopian vision of a city in which the automobile enabled an “experience of order and geometry” and a community in which “social order and efficiency, the harmony of the urban fabric and of society itself, could be experienced as well as known.” He shows how the failure of this modernist vision, which involved rampant pollution, high traffic fatality rates, and the domination of city planning by the auto industry, led to a more dystopian postmodernist phase characterized by smog, traffic jams, and adversarial relations between drivers “armoured...with metal exoskeletons.” He locates the emergence of the postmodern aesthetic in the 1960s, when “the decision to transform Britain into an environment fit only for the motor car was just being made.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ *Serial Killers*, 159.

²⁷⁷ Hime's place among these writers was acknowledged through the inclusion of his *The Real Cool Killers* in the the Library of America's *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s* (New York: Library of America, 1997).

²⁷⁸ *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996); 115, 122.

Yet *Hollers* testifies to the fact that this decision was made decades earlier in Los Angeles, inscribing an unmistakably postmodern experience of the automobile.

In moments of road rage, Bob's relationship with his car produces manifestations of his violent impulses towards Whites. If car ownership mediates Bob's social competition with Whites, that competition takes on a more directly aggressive quality when Bob is contending with Los Angeles traffic and evading the vigilance of predatory motorcycle cops. When describing the violent affects he experiences while driving, the narrator employs the graphically brutal idiom through which masculine self-sufficiency is often voiced in hard-boiled fiction, as when he describes his reaction to white pedestrians crossing the street in front of him: "I let out the clutch and stepped on the gas. Goddamn 'em, I'll grind 'em into the street, I thought. But just before I hit them something held me. I tamped the brake." Though the murderous language of this passage may seem more like a metaphorical description of frustration than an expression of actual intent, the addition that "just before I hit them something held me" suggests a more literal meaning. The effect of an inner restraint preventing him from acting on his impulses again appears when a white driver cuts in front of Bob without signaling: "A dozen times I had a chance to bump him into an oncoming truck. Then I began feeling virtuous and let him go." In recounting that "...all I wanted in the world was to push my Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's face," Bob is describing an emotional state that can make a serial killer.²⁷⁹

The "something" that restrains Bob's violent impulses, and of which he is only vaguely aware both as character and narrator, broadly informs the novel at the levels of both character and text. An awareness of the process through which *Hollers* began as a novel about a black man who acts on murderous compulsions and became one about the containment of those compulsions, illuminates its psychological and political coordinates. These coordinates become clearer through a comparison of *Hollers* with Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*.

Frantz Fanon makes one of the earliest of many comparisons of these two novels in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

In the end, Bigger Thomas acts. He acts to put an end to the tension, he answers the world's expectations.

It's the character in *If He Hollers Let Him Go* who does precisely what he did not want to do. That voluptuous blonde who is always in his path, succumbing, sensual, sexually available, fearing (desiring) to be raped, in the end becomes his mistress.²⁸⁰

One might accuse Fanon of not having read *Hollers* very carefully; considering the facts that Bob and Madge never have sex, and that their brief and persistently hostile relationship ends in a parting of ways entirely without ambivalence, his description of Madge as Bob's "mistress" is puzzling. Yet in distinguishing the two novels in terms of action and inaction, Fanon identifies a crucial aspect of Himes's critical use of *Native Son*: if Bigger Thomas is the character who acts on the impulses racism provokes in him, then Bob differs from Bigger insofar as he struggles, with only partial success, to contain those impulses so as to avoid the self-destructive consequences of such action.

²⁷⁹ *Hollers*, 13-14.

²⁸⁰ *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 118.

When during a discussion of *Native Son*, a character mentions “the selection of Bigger Thomas to prove the point of Negro oppression,” Bob replies: “Well, you couldn't pick a better person than Bigger Thomas to prove the point. But after you prove it, then what? Most white people I know are quite proud of having made Negroes into Bigger Thomases.”²⁸¹ This remark brings into focus how *Hollers* is animated by a critical revision of *Native Son*. While Bigger is emblematic of the forces that work to destroy the black male subject from within, Bob represents the project of containing those forces within a selfhood that can withstand the pressures of racism over the *longue durée* of a human lifespan. *Hollers* is throughout motivated by the aim of constructing a stable ego capable of governing the violent id that drives Bigger to self-destruction. This aim informs Himes's selection of a first person narrative voice, which would hardly have been thinkable for *Native Son*. A first-person narrative related in the past tense implies the protagonist's survival, even if Himes upsets this expectation in a later story entitled “One More Way to Die,” which ends with the sentence “The last thing I thought as I lay there on the goddamned ground and died was 'It just ain't no goddamned sense in you white folks killing me.’”²⁸²

As with Bigger, the most immediate danger facing Bob is the impulse to escape a racially imposed social death through committing one or both of the two ultimate crimes posited by white supremacy: killing a white man or raping a white woman. Bigger's act of murder has the effect of awakening in him a feeling of life that had previously evaded him: “He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.”²⁸³ By responding to Bigger's story with the question “then what?” Bob states his own position that that moment of life, no matter how intense, is not worth dying for.

Bob's rational leanings are opposed by the same impulses that control Bigger, though his conscious awareness of them allows him to manage them more effectively. After his initial altercation with Johnny Stoddart, Bob makes a conscious decision to murder him: “It was then that I decided to murder him cold-bloodedly, without giving him a chance....I wanted to kill the son of a bitch and keep on living myself.”²⁸⁴ Yet this decision has a complicated structure, and since he has still not acted on it by the time he is arrested and enlisted in the Army, the nature and seriousness of his intentions never become entirely clear. However, his homicidal obsession with Johnny seems to involve a psychological sleight of hand in which the intention becomes a substitute for the act, allowing Bob to benefit from the vitalizing effects of the crime without having to pay the price. Immediately upon resolving to commit the murder, “The sick, scared, gone feeling left my stomach.”²⁸⁵ The mere thought of the act has a therapeutic effect on him: “Just the thought of it did something for me; just contemplating it. All the tightness that had been in my body, making my motions jerky, keeping my muscles taut, left me and I felt

²⁸¹ *Hollers*, 88.

²⁸² *Collected Stories*, 380.

²⁸³ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 239.

²⁸⁴ *Hollers*, 35.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

relaxed, confident, strong.”²⁸⁶

But ultimately, the idea of an indefinitely postponed murder can only keep Bob's spirits lifted for so long; by the time he meets with Alice for lunch three days later, his murderous intent is half-forgotten and he is once again seething with resentment over his racist treatment. This meeting presents Bob with yet another possibility for adapting to the realities of American society. After a series of bitter arguments over what to do about Bob's demotion and his refusal to “live within the limits of the race,” Bob and Alice reconcile and decide to marry. During the conversation leading up to their reconciliation, Alice conveys her views on race in strikingly humanist terms:

“Love and marriage, children and homes. Those we control. Our physical beings, our personal integrity, our private property—we have as much protection for these as anyone. As long as we conform to the pattern of segregation we do not have to fear the seizure of our property or attack upon our persons....After all, darling, these are the important things in life. These things that are within us that make us what we are. And we can control them. Every person, no matter of what race, creed, or colour, is the captain of his soul. This is much more important, really, than being permitted to eat in exclusive restaurants, dwell in exclusive neighbourhoods, or even to compete economically with people of other races. It depends, darling, on our own sense of values.”²⁸⁷

Here a case is made for an acceptance of the racial *status quo* through recourse to the humanist concepts of inner integrity and soul, of an autonomous personal domain that transcends the effects of power and implies a rebuttal to Bob's statement that “I don't have anything at all to say about the way I live—nothing.”²⁸⁸

Alice's speech makes such an impression on Bob that he seems to remain under its spell long after hearing it. Even while recollecting it as a narrator, without apparent irony, he seems convinced of its validity: “If somebody had told me this a long time ago, made me see it in just this way, it would have saved me a lot of trouble. Because I was seeing it then for the first time. No matter what the white folks did to me, or made me do just in order to live, Alice and I could have a life of our own, inside of all the pressure, away from it, separate from it, that no white person could ever touch.”²⁸⁹ Yet this statement is another instance of Bob's unreliability as a narrator of his own experience, for as soon as he returns to work from lunch he undergoes a violent demonstration of the ability of an arbitrary power to disrupt the domestic sphere to which he has just turned for personal security.

When Bob inadvertently surprises Madge taking a nap at the shipyard, his behavior shows the effects of his recent engagement and the new set of priorities it involves. When she becomes confrontational, rather than responding in kind he apologizes and makes every attempt to leave the room. When Madge hears voices approaching, she shuts and locks the door and cries out, “Help! Help! My God, help me! Some white man, help me! I'm being raped!” After receiving a severe beating that one

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 38.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 169.

²⁸⁸ Ibid. 167.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 169.

critic has described as a “semi-lynching”,²⁹⁰ Bob wakes up in the infirmary and, recalling Madge's false accusation, vows that “I'd get that bitch fired if it was the last thing I did.”²⁹¹ Because he had “been thinking so hard about what was going to happen to her when the people knew the truth,” Bob is shocked when he learns that he is being arrested and charged for raping Madge. When it occurs to him that he is sure to be convicted and given the maximum sentence of thirty years because “the whole structure of American thought was against me,”²⁹² he decides that his only option is escape. Fleeing his guards, he manages to get to his car and drive off.

While on the lam, Bob calls Alice and asks her to help him leave the state, and their differences over race reemerge in a new form. Again, Alice is critical of the way in which Bob's immediate reaction has led him to respond to a racially charged situation, and she insists that he act in a less confrontational way. Her argument is again informed by humanist assumptions, in this case with an emphasis on the value and efficacy of truth. To Bob's statement that “I know if I go before trial I'll be convicted,” Alice replies “If you're innocent, Bob, you'll be acquitted.”²⁹³ This time they are not able to reach an agreement, and Bob hangs up after it becomes clear that Alice will not help him escape.

Just as Bob's earlier challenge to racism had resulted neither in success nor in the sort of total catastrophe that overtakes Bigger Thomas, but rather in something ambiguously between the two, in this case the result of Madge's false accusation falls somewhere in between Bob's and Alice's expectations: Bob is neither convicted nor exonerated. Instead, a back-room deal is arranged in which Madge agrees to drop the charges and Bob agrees to resign his job and enlist in the Army. Although not as extreme as a life sentence, this is a disastrous consequence for Bob, as is suggested by one character's claim that “as long as the Army is Jim Crowed a Negro who fights in it is fighting against himself.”²⁹⁴

The scene in which this deal is brokered at the behest of a judge and Mr. Houghton, the president of Atlas Shipyard, presents power operating independently of the spheres of truth and legality. After Houghton informs him that the rape charges have been dropped, Bob reflects: “I knew right off what had happened; they'd grilled Madge and learned the truth, or learned enough to guess at the rest. [Houghton's] conscience bothered him too much for him to let me take a strictly bum rap, but he'd never come right out and say it; he'd cover for her till hell froze over and make himself believe that he was doing it for the best.”²⁹⁵ Within a racialized power structure, power inevitably takes the side of whiteness, regardless of the facts. Even though the man in a position to decide the issue knows her charge to be false, Madge is able to have Bob punished and escape punishment herself because she “just happened to be born white instead of black.”²⁹⁶ This is another instance in which *Hollers* revises the terms of *Native Son*. Whereas Bigger's punishment results from charges grounded in truth in so far as he committed the murders

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²⁹¹ *Hollers*, 184.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

of which he is accused—however mitigating the social pressures that condition them—Bob's catastrophe results from factors that are less directly the result of his own actions. Through this revision, the text re-situates the role of choice and responsibility within its presentation of the situation of Blacks in 20th-century America.

Bob's point of view on the operations of power further illuminates his identification with Japanese-Americans who had been sent to internment camps. Jacques Lacan has observed how “in totalitarian societies, while the leaders' 'objective guilt' leads them to be treated as criminal and responsible, the relative effacement of these notions, which is signaled by the sanitary conception of penology, bears fruit for everyone else. The concentration camp is opened and, in determining who will fill it, rebellious intentions are less decisive qualifications than a certain quantitative relationship between the social mass and the banished mass.”²⁹⁷ The case of the mass-incarceration of an entire ethnic group, without the slightest pretense of any reason pertaining to individuals apart from membership in the group, enacts the erasure of a sphere of transcendence grounded in notions of responsibility and intention. It raises problems for the humanist racial politics that Alice advocates and casts in a questioning light her claim that “Our physical beings, our personal integrity, our private property—we have as much protection for these as anyone.” Arbitrarily deprived of personal integrity and private property, the incarcerated Japanese are an example of a stigmatized minority group that had no reliable protection for these purported rights. As a becoming-totalitarian of a capitalist democracy, this example reminds Bob of the radical conditionality of the values Alice considers inviolable.

Even prior to his dramatic experience, already at the novel's opening, Bob perceives an affinity between the condition of the interned Japanese and the patterns of his everyday life. In another echo of *Native Son*, *Hollers* begins with its protagonist waking up to the sound of an alarm clock. The moment of his awakening is followed by a description of a sense of fear that he wakes up with every day:

But I began feeling scared in spite of hiding from the day. It came along with consciousness. It came into my head first, somewhere back of my closed eyes, moved slowly underneath my skull to the base of my brain, spread through my groin with an almost sexual torture, settled in my stomach like butterfly wings....Every day now I'd been waking up that way, ever since the war began. And since I'd been made a leaderman...it was really getting me. Maybe I'd been scared all my life, but I didn't know about it until after Pearl Harbour.²⁹⁸

Bob feels a fear that is not specific to any particular object or event, but that is so pervasive a part of his psyche that it is coterminous with consciousness itself. Although the events referred to by the place name 'Pearl Harbor' provoked his awareness of that fear, they did not cause the fear itself. Yet the association between those events and his heightened awareness of his fear is significant.

Continuing his reflection on the origins of this feeling, or his awareness of it, the narrator speculates that it may have started just before Pearl Harbor, upon his arrival in

²⁹⁷ *Ecrits: The First Complete English Edition*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 119.

²⁹⁸ *Hollers*, 2.

Los Angeles “in the fall of '41.” In this case he associates the fear with the way Whites react to his requests for work:

It wasn't being refused employment in the plants so much....It was the look on the people's faces when you asked them about a job. Most of 'em didn't say right out they wouldn't hire me. They just looked so goddamned startled that I'd even asked. As if some friendly dog had come in through the door and said, 'I can talk.' It shook me....Maybe it had started then, I'm not sure, or maybe it wasn't until I'd seen them send the Japanese away that I'd noticed it. Little Riki Oyana singing 'God Bless America' and going to Santa Anita with his parents next day. It was taking a man up by the roots and locking him up without a chance. Without a trial. Without a charge. Without even giving him a chance to say one word. It was thinking about if they ever did that to me, Robert Jones, Mrs. Jones's dark son, that started me to getting scared.²⁹⁹

Bob's ambivalence about the sources of his fear suggests an understanding of the appearance of concentration camps in California, not as an incomprehensible singularity that erupts within a society whose norms and practices do not allow for an account of its possibility, but rather as an event that reveals a submerged truth about the American polity. The notion that something as quotidian as a white person's expression of shock when solicited for a job by a Black would provoke the same emotional response in Bob as the mass-incarceration of an entire minority group implies that the latter phenomenon renders visible and intelligible for him the motivations and implications of the former.

In this sense, *Hollers* registers the 20th-century developments in power structures that Agamben identifies by calling the concentration camp “the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity.”³⁰⁰ Focusing on the fascist regimes that came to power in Europe between the first and second World Wars, Agamben links the implementation of the camp to a form of sovereign power defined by a capacity to suspend the rule of law by way of a declaration of a state of emergency. The exercise of the sovereign decision empowers the state to imprison without trial anyone it declares a threat to national security. Pointing to the increasing militarization of the advanced nation-states during the 20th century, Agamben argues that under such conditions the state of exception ceases to be limited to specific conflicts and crises and becomes the permanent rule of political practice.³⁰¹

Related to these political transformations are changes in the modes of subjection through which power exerts its effects on bodies. Drawing on a term coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault, Agamben theorizes the political space whose paradigm is the concentration camp as a regime of “biopolitics” and claims that “the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power.”³⁰² The notion of a biopolitical body refers to the technologically mediated reification of life involved in modern forms of power. One important area in which Agamben goes beyond Foucault is in his acknowledgment of the fundamental importance of race within the operations of

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.

³⁰⁰ *Homo Sacer*, 123.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 166-180.

³⁰² Ibid., 6.

biopower. In theorizing the biopolitical body, he analyzes and documents “its twofold appearance as Jewish body and German body, as life unworthy of being lived and as full life,” and demonstrates how “the separation of the Jewish body is the immediate production of the specifically German body, just as its production is the application of the rule.”³⁰³ The formulation of the racialized body as “life unworthy of being lived” sheds light on the horror felt by Bob Jones when his request for employment from a white person provokes a reaction of shock: the principle underlying such a reaction is that the rationale behind the unemployment of Blacks is grounded not in the specific conditions of an economic recession, but in a perverse categorical imperative that construes the granting of a livelihood to a Black as an infringement of the moral law.

Although Agamben recognizes the role of race in articulations of the purportedly universal modes of subjectivity that structure modern nation-states, his Eurocentrism obscures the relevance of his insights to American political spaces. Due both to its transatlantic scope and its emphasis on popular culture, Paul Gilroy's discussion of the intersections between race and biopolitics can shed light on how they inform *Hollers*. In his book *Against Race*, Gilroy examines the emergence of what he calls “racialized biopolitics,” which he describes as “an outgrowth of the pattern identified as 'identity politics' in earlier periods...” He associates the emergence of racialized biopolitics with the erosion of a black public sphere, an erosion which he characterizes as a transition from a collective politics of freedom to an individualist participation in consumer culture.³⁰⁴ Read through this optic, the splitting between the engaged and popular modes that problematizes the formal unity of *Hollers* can be viewed as registering an ambivalent stance between a black public sphere in the early stages of its displacement and an emergent marketplace for culturally fetishized black bodies.

This ambivalence in the text manifests itself in the conflicts that shape Bob's character. His emotions and actions reveal a political awareness of which he himself remains mainly unconscious. This awareness encompasses both the precarious situation of minorities in relation to a racialized state power, and a sense of the types of resistance called for by such a situation. Closely connected to Bob's rejection of self-segregation on the part of Blacks as a response to racism, is an intuitive sense of the need for trans-racial coalitions. *Hollers* expresses a politics of trans-racial minority solidarity that appears more explicitly in the non-fictional texts Himes wrote during the early 1940s. In a letter to the editor of the communist newspaper *The People's World*, he advocates the independence of India from the British and claims that proponents of Indian independence were “the only ones who will fight for the political and economic equality of American Negroes.”³⁰⁵ In his first novel, this political program is presented as the logical consequence of a system of power whose paradigmatic metaphor is the concentration camp.

This political inclination appears in Bob's identification with Japanese-Americans,

³⁰³ Ibid., 173-74.

³⁰⁴ *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2000), ch. 5.

³⁰⁵ *The People's World* [California] 5 (August 14, 1942), 4. Quoted in Michel Fabre, Robert E. Skinner, and Lester Sullivan, *Chester Himes: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), xvi.

as well as feelings of solidarity with other oppressed minorities. In a particularly emphatic instance, the novel ends on a note that seems to evoke an idea of black-brown coalition. As Bob is being taken by the police from the jail to the Army recruiting station, he is accompanied by “two Mexican youths” who seem to have made extra-legal deals similar to his own, and whom he describes: “They were both brown-skinned, about my colour, slender and slightly stooped, with Indian features and thick curly hair.” As the novel nears its conclusion they leave the prison, “the three of us abreast and the cop in the rear.”³⁰⁶ The physical description of the Mexicans stresses similarity over difference; the description of them as “about my color” echoes Bob's earlier remark that “I was the same colour as the Japanese and I couldn't tell the difference.”³⁰⁷ Bob's perception of skin color is mediated by his feelings of solidarity with other racial minorities, so that the epidermal traits that separate them all from whiteness efface conventionally posited distinctions between black, brown, and yellow.

Bob's desires for trans-racial minority cooperation are not, however, without an element of antagonism. Fanon's insights into the tendency of aggression to turn inward within colonized groups can also shed light on antagonism between such groups. Thus, the similitude Bob perceives between himself and Mexicans is countered at points in the novel at which Mexicans are associated with whiteness. In one instance, as Bob is walking down a crowded street, he is slighted by two Mexican women: “Two little Mexican slick chicks passed; I caught them looking at me and they turned up their noses and looked away disdainfully.” During a conversation about race among Alice and her friends in which Bob participates, one character claims that “Mexicans are white in California.” Although Bob recalls that “what they were saying didn't have any meaning for me,” such a remark informs his description of his encounter with the Mexican women.³⁰⁸

If Bob's identification with the interned Japanese does not evince the ambivalence that complicates his identification with Mexicans, this difference results more from the consequences of the internment of the former than from their idealization. The text's description of resentments between Blacks and Mexicans places those resentments in close association with direct social interaction; a competitive, embodied co-presence within the crowded social spaces of Los Angeles. In contrast, the social absence of the Japanese resulting from their removal to the stockades allows their condition to function for Bob as a symbol of his own, without the interference of direct social antagonism.

This contrast also applies to Bob's interactions with the Jewish union representative, Herbie Frieberger. When Bob approaches Herbie about his demotion, the two get into a disagreement over how the union should get involved in the conflict: Bob demands that Herbie tell Madge that she will lose her job if she can't work with Blacks, Herbie insists that Bob go through official channels by writing a formal letter to the appropriate union authorities. The argument quickly takes on racial tones. When Herbie says to Bob “all you guys do is gripe,” Bob replies “come on, Jew boy, don't be so loud,” embarrassing him in front of a group of onlookers. This exchange leads to an argument

³⁰⁶ *Hollers*, 203.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*; 79, 84.

about racism in the union which leads to further disagreements.³⁰⁹

With a focus on Himes's second novel *Lonely Crusade*, Steven Rosen has observed that Himes's fiction involves an early literary treatment of a strain of black-Jewish antagonism that would become more outspoken in the racial discourses of later decades. Attributing a degree of anti-semitism to Himes himself, which he claims was partly justified by an element of anti-black racism among Jewish Americans, Rosen accounts for that anti-semitism in terms of Himes's constructions of gender. He argues that Himes's articulations of valorized black masculinity involve contrasts between his black male protagonists and male Jewish characters presented as lacking in the defining traits of that masculinity.³¹⁰ Whether or not it can fairly be attributed to the author of *Hollers*, there is certainly anti-semitism in the language of its narrator, as in his description of Herbie: "He was a tall, lean, stoop-shouldered guy in his early thirties with frizzly gopher-colored hair, a flapping loose-lipped mouth, and a big hooked nose."³¹¹

Yet in other passages Bob shows signs of an unconscious distaste for the culture of anti-semitism he encounters on both sides of the color line. Early in the novel, while driving his black co-workers to the shipyard, he presses one of his passengers to repay him some money he had loaned him, provoking a brief altercation:

"Aw, man, I'll give it to you Friday,' he grumbled. 'You raise more hell 'bout three lousy bucks—'

I mashed the starter and dug off without hearing the rest of it.³¹²

At the moment of Bob's using the noise of the car to interrupt him, the co-worker seems on the point of making a typical racist joke about Jewish parsimony. Such an interpretation becomes more plausible in light of a later passage in which Bob goes into a bar full of white patrons and orders a scotch, and reacts similarly to a joke told by a white man:

"Speaking of Scotch reminds me of a joke,' [the man] began. "Two Scotchmen went to a Jew store to buy a suit of clothes—"

I got interested in watching a guy down the bar balance a half-filled glass on its edge and didn't listen.³¹³

This intuitive discomfort with anti-semitic humor reveals in Bob a feeling of identification with Jews as a stigmatized group, a sense of his own implication in the condition of any oppressed minority. The parallel between Bob's identification with Jews and Japanese is not unrelated to the fact that both groups were targeted for mass-confinement in concentration camps during the Second World War. Although Bob is not as explicit on the topic in the case of Jews as in that of the Japanese, an awareness of

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 113.

³¹⁰ Stephen J. Rosen, "African American Anti-Semitism and Himes's *Lonely Crusade*," *Melus* 20 (1995): 47-68.

³¹¹ *Hollers*, 112.

³¹² Ibid., 11.

³¹³ Ibid., 40.

events in Europe is implicit throughout the text.

The fact that Bob experiences his political knowledge immediately as feeling and affect is significant within the novel's presentation of the political impasse it expresses. He senses instinctively the impossibility of any meaningful peace with the racial status quo, and the consequent need for resistance. Yet, in part because of his psychological evasion of political consciousness, the resistance he enacts takes the form of a confused mixture of inter-personal aggressiveness and bourgeois materialism. His physical assaults on Whites, both actual and fantasized, are supplemented by an economic competitiveness which, like his aggression, is mediated by his obsession with automobiles. He states the social significance his car has for him early in the novel: "I had a '42 Buick Roadmaster I'd bought four months ago, right after I'd gotten to be a leaderman, and every time I got behind the wheel and looked down over the broad, flat, mile-long hood I thought about how the rich white folks out in Beverly couldn't even buy a new car now and got a certain satisfaction."³¹⁴ Car ownership is the main basis of Bob's competition with Whites over material possessions. It is also involved in his sexual rivalry with Tom Leighton, a white co-worker of Alice who he suspects is trying to seduce her. When she attends an evening lecture with Tom, Tom's Pontiac figures prominently as Bob jealously imagines the two together: "...Halfway through [dinner] I got the sudden picture of Alice sitting in Leighton's coupé, smiling with appreciation at something he'd said."³¹⁵ The perverse degree to which Bob values his car becomes clear as, just after being demoted, he weighs the pros and cons of punching his boss: "I debated whether to go back and split him. I'd get a fine and some days, perhaps. Probably a sapping at police headquarters. I'd lose my car. I think that was what made me decide that my pride wasn't worth it. My car was proof of something to me, a symbol. But at the time I didn't analyse the feeling; I just knew I couldn't lose my car even if I lost my job."³¹⁶ Within his list of potential consequences, losing his car is a greater evil than being beaten by the police or becoming unemployed. He is not able to articulate the meaning of its importance to him; when he speaks of it it seems to function as a transcendent symbol which, of immeasurable value in itself, defines and ranks all his other priorities.

In a further development of his analysis of racialized biopolitics, Gilroy identifies a pervasive obsession with car ownership as the focus of black consumerism: "The private vehicle tunes us in to the new conditions characteristic of consumer culture. It provides a means to investigate the moral economy in which...the value of life is persistently specified along racial lines and car ownership remains an unspoken prerequisite for the exercise of substantive citizenship."³¹⁷ In this sense, the emphatically individualist space of the car's interior provides the setting for the erosion of the black public sphere and a movement towards a consumerism to which automobiles have been particularly central in American culture. Bob feels the pull of each of these incompatible value systems at an early moment in the process of their differentiation: at the same time that he intuitively grasps the need for organized political resistance on the part of

³¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 31.

³¹⁷ *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2010), 13.

minorities, he finds himself caught up in a rising tide of consumerism.

This conflict informs *Hollers* as a text as well as its protagonist. It places an engagement with issues of race, power, and subjectivity in fraught juxtaposition with the coordinates of crime fiction, a genre whose production and circulation were firmly situated within the profit-driven sphere of consumer culture. The rupture that divides the text on its formal, thematic, and stylistic registers can be interpreted on a number of levels. From a biographical point of view, Himes's "turn" towards popular fiction seems connected to his financial difficulties and the consistently disappointing sales figures of the novels he published prior to his Harlem detective novels. Even though such accounts overlook the fact that Himes was already incorporating crime-genre elements into those earlier novels, and even earlier into some of his first short stories, they certainly have a basis in the facts of Himes's life and his own remarks on what motivated him to focus his writing efforts increasingly on hard-boiled crime fiction.

Yet the biographical account raises questions that can't be answered on its own terms: How do the politically engaged elements of Himes's fiction relate to the popular elements? What was it about the emergent hard-boiled genre that initially provoked his interest, already in the 1930s? What were the conditions that enabled a black writer to succeed within a genre originally shaped according to the codes of whiteness, and thus to transform that genre? This chapter has pursued these questions through an examination of a novel in which the defining problematic of Himes's literary career found its first comprehensive articulation, and suggested that *Hollers* has much to say about key cultural and political issues of the twentieth century and beyond.