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**Culture as Talk:  
American Literature and the Ethnography of Utterance, 1880-1945**

**By**

**Alexandre Nicolas Benson**

**A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the**

**requirements for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**in**

**English**

**in the**

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**of the**

**University of California, Berkeley**

**Committee in charge:**

**Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair**

**Professor Bryan Wagner**

**Professor Michael Lucey**

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## Abstract

### Culture as Talk: American Literature and the Ethnography of Utterance, 1880-1945

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Accounts of the American literary field at the turn of the twentieth century often emphasize its fascination with everyday speech, explaining this fascination in terms of a widespread popular interest in folk cultures. This dissertation, working between literary history and the history of anthropological linguistics, argues that we can reverse the direction of these accounts, using the literary representation of speech to explain the history of the culture concept. It's well known that anthropologist Franz Boas and his students relativized the idea of culture during this period, championing a new pluralistic theory of difference. What's less well known is that this theory owed many of the particulars of its elaboration to the practical obstacles ethnographers faced in transcribing folk speech. "Culture as Talk" links these productive difficulties of ethnographic method to features of literary form by viewing them as aspects of a single technical problem, the textual representation of "talk"—a term adopted here for its connotation of discourse that is socially embedded and that stands at a slant angle to the standard. If these pragmatic and vernacular qualities make talk key to writing about ethnic affiliation and alterity, they also make it a complex object to entextualize. How does one inscribe both the social universe indexed by a given speech act and, at the same time, the tonal idiosyncrasies of the particular voice that produced it? In the literary field, this questions play out across a wide range of genres and traditions, as the project demonstrates through close readings of John Oskison's Indian Territory fiction, Helen Keller's memoirs, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Claude McKay's dialect poetry. Drawing on social-scientific theories of transcription, these readings qualify the commonplace opposition in literary studies between cultural studies and formalism by showing that, from the late nineteenth century on, the history of the culture concept has been, in part, a record of the formal effects produced when texts hit their limits at the object of talk.

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## Acknowledgements

In the following pages I'll put pressure on William James's idea that "all human thinking gets discursified." But the phrase could hardly do a better job of describing how this dissertation came into being—namely, through a lot of "discursifying" with professors, peers, students, and friends. Thanks go first and foremost to my advisor, Dorothy Hale, for her counsel and support throughout my graduate-school career, and especially for her ability to give the most fine-grained feedback while also posing all the right big questions. This project was initially envisioned during a semester in which I was taking courses from Bryan Wagner and Michael Lucey, and since then, as the other two members of my committee, they've been the most acute and responsive of readers.

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## Introduction

### The Culture-as-Talk Model

Your paper is perfectly charming. . . . You've got an uncommon feeling for talk—I hear your people.

—William Dean Howells to Sarah Orne Jewett, 1875<sup>1</sup>

In a brief article published in London on July 9, 1898, Henry James described “the invasive part played by the element of dialect in the subject-matter of the American fiction of the day.”<sup>2</sup> With similar phrasing James Clifford, ninety years later, imagined a kind of “ethnography . . . invaded by heteroglossia.”<sup>3</sup> What Clifford had in mind were the humanistic possibilities of social science after the interdisciplinary influence of Mikhail Bakhtin’s work in narrative theory, which considered the discursive structures of literary texts in ways that proved amenable to the anthropological theorization of discourse and of the politics of representation. But we can backdate this idea of an ethnography invaded by a multiplicity of voices at least as early as the moment of the heteroglossic invasion that Henry James describes. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, linguistic plurality played a key role not only in American literature but also in the ethnographic imagination. Taking this confluence as a starting point, this dissertation will argue that as authors—poets, novelists, memoirists, short story writers, ethnographers, linguists—grapple with the representation of talk, with how to inscribe discourse in all its social embeddedness and its unpredictable relationship to linguistic standards, they also grapple with the conceptualization of culture, a concept that was undergoing radical revision at the turn of the twentieth century; they negotiate, in other words, the relationships and slippages among the key operant terms in the editorial note that William Dean Howells writes to Sarah Orne Jewett (and that I place as an epigraph above): people, paper, and talk.

While the interface of anthropology and literature will provide this dissertation with its fundamental framework, it will also draw on texts that stand adjacent to those discursive fields (which were, after all, not as clearly defined as they have today become—and the process of this definition is part of what will be in question here). A 1907 essay in pragmatist philosophy, for instance, by the elder James brother, William, gets at some of the core concerns of this study. “All human thinking gets discursified,” he writes:

we exchange ideas; we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by means of social intercourse. All truth thus gets verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone. Hence, we must TALK consistently just as we

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<sup>1</sup> William Dean Howells to Sarah Orne Jewett, quoted in Paula Blanchard et al., *Sarah Orne Jewett: Her World and Her Work* (Addison-Wesley, 2002), 59.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, “American Letter,” quoted in Rob Davidson, *The Master and the Dean: The Literary Criticism of Henry James and William Dean Howells* (University of Missouri Press, 2005), 259.

<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 51. Hereafter cited as *PC*.



must THINK consistently: for both in talk and thought we deal with kinds. Names are arbitrary, but once understood they must be kept to. We mustn't now call Abel "Cain" or Cain "Abel." If we do, we ungear ourselves from the whole book of Genesis, and from all its connexions with the universe of speech and fact down to the present time. We throw ourselves out of whatever truth that entire system of speech and fact may embody.<sup>4</sup>

The fundamental question with which James is engaging here has to do with the arbitrariness of the sign relation. Those are terms that are less close to James, perhaps, than to the other twentieth-century theorists of language who will take up this question, including Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The latter, offering a correction to Saussure's philosophically seminal theorization of the profoundly conventional character of symbolic relations, famously made the same point that James makes above: "the linguistic sign is arbitrary a priori, but ceases to be arbitrary a posteriori."<sup>5</sup> Once you have a history of talking about Genesis in a particular way, that is, you can't just change your terms without any consequences. This is because, as one commenter has glossed Lévi-Strauss's point, "signs are ontologically but not socially or historically arbitrary." They function not only as signifiers of objects in the world, in other words, but also as indices of what we have come to call culture. James's articulation of this same point raises several questions that will be key to this study—and that, it will argue, were also key to the radically fluctuating conceptualization of culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What defines, enables, and obstructs "social intercourse"? What is the relationship, what processes of causality obtain, between talk and thought? Is it necessarily the case that in discourse we deal exclusively with "kinds," with classification? What are the internal relations of what James calls a "universe" or "system of speech and fact" (a phrase that anticipates Clifford Geertz's understanding of culture, drawn in part from Max Weber, as a "semiotic system") and on what basis do humans and other animals find themselves inside or outside such systems, such universes?

But the central problem at issue here has to do with a subtle slippage in James's phrasing. From the premise that "all truth gets . . . verbally built up," he then asserts that "we must TALK consistently." Why does the verbal so quickly transform into the vocal? What is so distinctive about "TALK"? All those uppercase letters seem mimetic—as do the italics of Howells's "*talk*"—of an implicit point: the medium of spoken language fulfills some special social function, and in doing so it threatens to exceed the representational capacity of a line of text.

The philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce, James's intellectual collaborator, famously developed a distinction that underlies the latter's reflections in this passage—namely, the distinction between the *type* and the *token*, where the former refers to general concepts in the abstract and the latter refers to the particular instantiations of those general categories in the world. The distinction holds an important place in the philosophy of language, in analytic logic, and also in the history of claims for the difference of the human from other animals. "When a monkey goes

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<sup>4</sup> William James, *Pragmatism, A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking; The Meaning of Truth, a Sequel to Pragmatism* (Harvard University Press, 1978), 213-14.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Basic Books, 1974), 91.

from one nut to another,” asks Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754), “are we to conceive that he entertains any general idea of that kind of fruit, and compares its archetype with the two individual nuts?”<sup>6</sup> The answer for Rousseau is, “assuredly,” no. Only humans, to return to James’s phrase, “deal in kinds.” It seems worth asking in passing (if only so as to signal that this study will aim to put pressure on such forms of exceptionalism) whether a human going from one nut to another in fact bothers with conceptual archetypes any more than Rousseau’s imaginary monkey does. But the underlying distinction that Rousseau is working with here is of course widespread in its application, and not only in Peirce’s theory of logic. In the context of linguistics, for instance, Saussure’s investment in studying *langue* (language in abstract from its use, as a system of mutually differentiated concepts) through the evidence of *parole* (the actual use of words as they are uttered) roughly correlates with this distinction: types occur only at the (non-observable) level of *langue*, while *parole* is made up of tokens, of iterations. The latter is the level of discursive history, of the acts of utterance that as James writes have forged all those “connexions with the universe of speech and fact down to the present time.”

Yet Peirce also uses a third term, one rarely mentioned, to describe the relationship between type and token: namely, *tone*, which he defined as “the mere quality of an appearance” of tokens, a quality that is variable with each iteration.<sup>7</sup> Type, token, and tone describe semiotic functions that are not limited to the spoken or the auditory realm, and yet this “tone” of course has specific connotations related to the voice. If the mental ability to conceptualize types (to “THINK consistently”) has sometimes been seen as the crucial factor in the distinction of the human, at the same time the specific medium of the voice, the medium that gives us *tone*—which in its variability threatens to make talk *inconsistent*—has also played a crucial role in the anthropological understanding of how (and whether) to differentiate the “types” of human ethnicity. For instance, in late-nineteenth century debates about the confounding phenomena of “alternating sounds,” which I will describe in the first chapter, the question of “the mere quality of an appearance” of a given phonetic unit becomes crucial to the articulation of a relativist theory of linguistic, and by analogy cultural, difference.

Despite James’s curious emphasis on talk, though, it bears mentioning that in his example of calling Cain Abel—of distorting a discursive token’s quality of appearance so radically that it begins to invoke a different conceptual type—he is referring to literature, to a textual tradition. If his reference to a “system” rhymes with Geertz’s idea of culture, so does this investment in textuality (if not the emphasis on talk) seem to have something in common with Geertz’s “culture-as-text” model—on which of course this dissertation’s title, *Culture as Talk*, plays. In his essay titled “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (which will come into play in the third chapter), a piece that has perhaps done more than any other to enable work across the divide of the humanities and social sciences over the last several decades, he draws on Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between, on one hand, the *noema* or “meaning of the speech event,” and, on

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,” in *The Social Contract; & Discourses* (J. M. Dent & Sons, 1920), 192. Hereafter cited as “OI.”

<sup>7</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted in Kelly A. Parker, *The Continuity of Peirce’s Thought* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1998), 156.

the other, the “event as event” in order to clarify the literary quality of ethnographic writing:

The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted.<sup>8</sup>

For Geertz as for Ricoeur, inscription means relative permanence and it does not erase but enables the production of meaning. But this transformation from event to account is, of course, not necessarily a neutral practice. In an important essay on transcription in child psychology, “Transcription as Theory,” Elinor Ochs reflects on the limits and the epistemological functions of transcription practices. She elaborates in particular on the idea of “sound play,” a kind of childhood linguistic practice in which “the shape, rather than the content of utterances is foregrounded and the function of language is playful and phatic (in the case of sound-play dialogue) rather than information: where the researcher uses standard orthography, not all instances of sound play can be easily seen.”<sup>9</sup> Just as Jewett’s nonstandard orthography let Howells “hear” the people in Jewett’s paper, it would ideally let Ochs better hear the “sound play” of children.

Yet of course the ideal of transparent transcription often remains unrealized. In the chapters that follow I’ll attend to moments at which apparently irreducible features of the “event as event” seems to haunt the inscription of social discourse (and additionally to moments at which the notion of the “reconsulted” account, the mimetic or the inscribed, seems to structure the event). I adopt “talk” as my central term in part for the historicist reason of indicating the centrality of linguistic study to the foundations of American anthropology, but also because it begins to hint at this kind of haunting.<sup>10</sup> Because transcription typically involves a conversion of the auditory to the

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<sup>8</sup> Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 2000 [1973]): 3-30. Hereafter cited as “TD.”

<sup>9</sup> Elinor Ochs, “Transcription as Theory,” in Adam Jaworski and Nikolas Coupland, eds., *The Discourse Reader* (Routledge, 2006): 167-82.

<sup>10</sup> The technological history of the turn of the century also bears on the term. This was precisely the era of the invention, commercialization, and occasional ethnographic use of new sound recording devices: most importantly, the phonograph or “talking machine,” in its several forms (alongside other sonic technologies like the telephone and radio). Phonographs were not used for research with any regularity until the 1930s—when, for instance, Zora Neale Hurston (Boas’s student) and Allan Lomax toured Maryland together collecting stories and songs—but in 1890 Jesse Fewkes had already used them in his studies of Native American languages. As a result, as Erika Brady argues in *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography* (University Press of Mississippi, 1999), fieldworkers were aware of these devices’ availability, with potential effects on their theories of method. While the new medium thus may have played a role in shaping ideas about mediation, I subordinate the story of this technology’s influence to a story of the discursive formations in which its use was embedded; the preoccupation with “talk” was less the result of “talking machines” than the sensibility that caused them to be so marketed. The new medium made it possible to “hear” absent people “talk.” Yet—resisting a media studies approach that would follow

visual, I attend to moments of “visual culture”; and because it also involves a conversion from embodied to entextualized language, I attend to moments at which the body seems to reassert itself. “Talk” is a valuable term for organizing the kinds of attention I want to pay to texts for two reasons—one related to function, the other to form. First, “talk” implies the social and pragmatic functions of discourse, dimensions that (because the social universe indexed by a speech act, its illocutionary and perlocutionary contexts, can be vast and shifting) prove difficult to transcribe. Second, “talk” connotes a kind of language whose form is at a slant angle to the standard; it hints, in other words, at the tones of vernacular tradition. (It is for the same reasons, I suspect, that talk has served as a central but typically undefined term—less a term of art than the emblem of an ethos—across a number of fields, from Henry James’s cultural criticism to the folklore of the Sea Islands and from African American literary theory to late-twentieth century pragmatics and sociolinguistics.)<sup>11</sup>

This set of questions arises from the observation of a simple historical confluence: the period of American literature most profoundly invested in the plurality of spoken language—leading to the invasion of dialect writing, as James wrote in 1898—is coeval with the social-scientific development of a pluralistic concept of culture. And so a word about periodization is in order. Although the core texts on which I focus are written in the first quarter of the twentieth century (a memoir from 1903, a short story from 1907, a poem from 1912, a novel from 1925), I set these texts within a somewhat broader stretch of time, looking back to texts written in the 1880s (a seminal essay by Boas on linguistics, studies of walking by Gilles de la Tourette) and forward to the 1930s and ‘40s (Oskison’s and Fitzgerald’s final novels were written in the 1940s, for instance, while David Efron’s study of gestures was conducted in the 1930s and published in 1941). My periodization does not represent a strict claim for a bounded period of literary history (and indeed, for example, in the first chapter I look back briefly to Sequoyah’s invention of the Cherokee syllabary in the 1820s). After all, literary interest in the vernacular was not entirely new to American literature at this moment; witness Stowe and Cooper. Yet there is no doubt that, on the one hand, the readership for local voices was particularly thriving at the turn of the century and, on the other, the theory of culture underwent unusually explicit revisions during the same period.

Franz Boas and his students are typically identified as the primary agents of the relativist shift away from nineteenth-century racial science and social evolutionism,

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Friedrich Kittler, for instance, in locating this particular technology as the source of an entire discursive formation around “talk”—this study will proceed by noting that this was also an old possibility; it was just what Howells described Jewett’s “paper” as doing two years before Edison’s invention. And it was a possibility enabled, at least imaginatively, by other technologies as well; the “wonderful talking board,” or Ouija board, also became popular in the 1890s.

<sup>11</sup> See Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech; The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston, 1905), 10; Elsie Clews Parsons, ed., *Folk-lore of the Sea Islands* (American Folklore Memoirs, 1923), 17; Henry Louis Gates Jr., “Talkin’ That Talk,” *Critical Inquiry* 13, no. 1 (Autumn, 1986): 203-10; and John Gumperz and Jenny Gumperz-Cook, “Introduction: Language and the Communication of Social Reality,” in *Language and Social Reality*, ed. John Gumperz (Cambridge University Press, 1983): “Talk itself is constitutive of social reality,” write Gumperz and Gumperz-Cook (3).

championing instead a new pluralistic and relativist idea of cultural difference. This idea became dominant as, by 1920, every anthropology department in the U.S. came to be chaired by one of Boas's students. Yet it still coexisted both with scientific racism and with Arnoldian ideas of high culture. While that coexistence is important to this project, I do not attempt to offer here a historiography of American anthropology. George Stocking, Regna Darnell, Dell Hymes, and others have well documented the core features of the Boasian project: a turn to fieldwork, to empirical rather than philological linguistics, and to a relativistic "historical particularism" instead of an evolutionary comparativism. Instead, tracing several literary histories in which its effects can be felt, my work joins recent scholarship that seeks to identify both continuities and disjunctions between this gradual emergence of pluralism and the literature of the period—beginning before the particularist culture concept came into currency, and also looking later in order to see how, despite its ostensible consolidation, it did not exercise a monopoly on the understanding of difference. Critical debate about the legacy of the Boasian theory of culture has often pivoted on the point of essentialism, central for Boas himself. Rejecting theories that placed too much emphasis on physiological "type" and simplistically conflated race, language, and culture (and defining the last as anthropology's principal object), he claimed that cultures developed according to historical processes of imitation and diffusion. Yet, goes the common critique, the Boasian culture concept may simply have reproduced the taxonomical essentialisms of "race" under another name (and hence the limitations of "multiculturalism"). This crux may be what have most motivated literary studies' engagement of American anthropology. Nancy Bentley and Michael Elliott read late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American literature as what Elliott calls "culturalist," representing difference in ways isomorphic with these trends in anthropology.<sup>12</sup> Brad Evans, in *Before Cultures*, complicates the field in provocative ways, challenging received narratives of Boas's intervention and arguing for a more varied field of notions of difference in play at the turn of the century—and Alan Braddock's *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity* explicitly builds on Evans's work, showing how Eakins's paintings were shaped by a confusion of theories of difference that cannot be reduced to multiculturalism.<sup>13</sup>

These studies, particularly Evans's and Braddock's, take a concept that was crucial to the Boasians—the kinds of circulation of practices and artifacts that have gone by the name "diffusion" and "circulation"—as, somewhat ironically, a concept that can also help to argue against strong versions of particularism. In this way they align with recent calls, such as Shelley Fisher Fishkin's, for greater attention to the transnational in literary studies. That said, as the title of Fishkin's highly influential 2005 address to the American Studies Association—"Crossroads of Cultures"—implies, she remains committed to the notion of multiculturalism that this new historiography of the culture

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<sup>12</sup> Nancy Bentley, *The Ethnography of Manners: Hawthorne, James, Wharton* (New York, 1995); Michael Elliott, *The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002). Hereafter cited as *CC*.

<sup>13</sup> Brad Evans, *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865-1920* (University of Chicago Press, 2005). Hereafter cited as *BC*. Alan Braddock, *Thomas Eakins and the Cultures of Modernity* (University of California Press, 2009). Hereafter cited as *TE*.

concept seeks to problematize.<sup>14</sup> This doesn't seem entirely coincidental; just as "multiculturalism" seems to assume the basic unit of a culture, "transnationalism" seems to assume that the relevant unit of analysis should be, if not the nation, then multiple nations still understood as discrete units. By contrast, terms such as *diffusion*, *circulation*, or even the older *diaspora* might help us to shift focus toward the material processes that produce (and subvert) those units.

Diffusion is therefore a key aspect of my argument here both on the levels of substance—I'm interested in how creative writers and ethnographers represent and imagine processes of diffusion—and on that of methodology: I look for links between, for instance, the Cherokee nation and the American "mainstream," between French sociology and American deaf education, between the Jamaican press and the New England literary sphere. Yet it seems to me that to focus on the circulation of literature primarily in terms of the historical and geographical itineraries of material culture is to miss an opportunity to engage with what is distinctive about literature—namely, the way that it objectifies language. For this reason the aspects of anthropological history on which I draw in order to motivate and contextualize my readings of texts have to do with its conceptualization of language—as something that must be studied empirically in the "field" rather than philologically by the book; as something that is acquired through process of imitation; as something that is embodied. These notions both inform and produce friction with the literature of the period, and each of the following chapters looks at moments that trouble each of these axioms, that force us to reflect on the politics of ideas about language.

As Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman have suggested in *Voices of Modernity* (2003), the basic political function of the culture concept as it was elaborated in the twentieth century—more fundamental than its disputed reproduction, for instance, of racial essentialism under another name, or the way it undergirds global capitalism—may have been the way it constructed linguistic authority. Bauman and Briggs attempt to recast the debate over the Boasian culture concept by shifting discussion away from the usual poles of reification and openness—fixity and flow—and toward a view of the culture concept's metadiscursive function.

The basic problem . . . is not whether culture is bounded, homogenous, and stable [as opposed to heterogeneous, shifting, and porous]—Boas didn't think so, and neither do most contemporary anthropologists. What is at stake here are questions of cultural determinacy and authority . . . Culture, for Boas, operates unconsciously; when its bearers attempt to grasp or represent it, they produce distortions. . . . and anthropologists must learn to set native representations aside and come up with their own. The question is not that Boas was wrong about culture. It is rather that he told anthropologists that they are the only ones who are right.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Crossroads of Cultures: The Transnational Turn in American Studies: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2005): 17-51.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, *Voices of Modernity: Language Ideologies and the Politics of Inequality* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 297.

There are echoes here of Clifford's investment in a new heteroglossic politics, but in general this concern with discursive hierarchies has been less central to the history of anthropology than to study of the vernacular in literature. In *Strange Talk* (1999), a historicized study of dialect writing's relation to contemporaneous linguistics and verbal criticism, Gavin Jones argues for dialect's political duality, its conservative and subversive uses.<sup>16</sup> Like Jones's, my project does not focus on a "particular" "cultural" tradition (doing so would beg its central questions), yet much of the work informing it centers on African American literature, including scholarship by including Henry Louis Gates Jr., Barbara Johnson, Michael North, and Eric Sundquist. In *Playing in the Dark* (1992) Toni Morrison wrote that critics ought to attend to how "an Africanist idiom" marks difference, "how the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize it; how Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness; how it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text."<sup>17</sup> And indeed these are the central questions of this study, though ones that it argues also apply in traditions that have not been understood as Africanist. How, this study will ask, does the textual materialization of such ideological constructs—in terms related to Bauman and Briggs, such metadiscursive frameworks—shape, and get shaped by, the theorizations of difference that constitute anthropological thought? I've chosen to work on authors who highlight various aspects of the history of that thought, and who do so from positions marginal to it—positions that can broaden our sense of who may have been "right" (in Bauman and Briggs' word) about culture and that, perhaps as importantly, can help us to make the historiography of the culture concept more germane to fields such as animal studies, disability studies, and poetics.

The first chapter, "Harjo's Brand: Americanist Linguistics and the Fiction of Cultures," situates John M. Oskison's fiction in relation to the anthropological linguistics of Boas and his students. I draw in particular on the theory of phonemic relativism espoused by Boas in his seminal essay "On Alternating Sounds" (1889) and elsewhere. But I approach this theory through a telling detail in John Oskison's 1907 piece "The Problem of Old Harjo": a peculiar image embedded directly in the text of the story. The image represents (or perhaps reproduces, and the difference is partly what's in question) the brand of the central character, a Creek Indian rancher whose combination of Christian faith and polygamy produces a dilemma for the missionary tasked with his conversion. His brand, I argue, reflects his predicament—and with it the imperial predicament that went by the name of the "Indian problem"—both iconically and in the fact of its stubborn graphic materiality. Resisting integration into the text, it raises questions of semiotic plurality related to those that occupied Boas as he sought to articulate a new model of cultural particularism. Playing Oskison's early fiction against a 1922 volume of short stories by academic anthropologists (*American Indian Life*, edited by Boas's student Elsie Clews Parsons), the chapter also looks ahead to his posthumously published novel, *The Singing Bird* (c. 1945). In this historical novel Oskison pursues not only a story of frontier contact like those in his early work, but also

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<sup>16</sup> Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age American* (University of California Press, 1999). Hereafter cited as *ST*.

<sup>17</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 52.

the story of the Cherokee syllabary invented by Sequoyah in the 1820s, a crucial event in the nineteenth-century history of transcription but one that remained largely absent from the anthropological discourse about American Indian languages. By placing Oskison's interest in local forms of graphic media in dialogue with that discourse, I argue that he offers an early account of the political limitations of particularism.

With the second chapter, "The Impulse to Utter: Oralism, Imitation, and Helen Keller's Handwriting," I turn from Oskison's sense of the culture concept's silencing effects to the pressure exerted on that concept by the problem of linguistic and sensory impairment, as it is both exemplified and theorized by Helen Keller. Understanding vocalicity as crucial to her integration into human society, Keller embraces the oralist (speech-based) rather than manualist (American Sign Language-based) position in debates over deaf education. In this she concurred with her patrons, Alexander Melville Bell and Alexander Graham Bell, who developed the ostensibly universal phonetic alphabet of "visible speech" in order to facilitate the vocal instruction of the deaf. I show how Keller's commitment to the specific medium of the human voice (a commitment that would come to be called logocentrism) produces problems of mediation in which the function of "culture" to distinguish humans from nonhumans becomes confused with its function of distinguishing particular linguistic groups from each other. Through readings of contributions to an anthology of encomiums to Keller entitled *Double Blossoms* (1931), I show how the particularities of Keller's sensorium make her both a pure medium for culture, and also seem to place her necessarily outside it. This argument concludes with a reflection on the kinds of analogy between speech and writing that run through work by and about Keller. Curiously, while she insists on the social necessity and even the essential humanity of speech, her editors often fixate on her handwriting, reproducing and circulating images of Keller's distinctive hand with surprising frequency. I argue that both Keller's oralism and this fascination with her handwriting stem from a similar ambivalence about the role of imitation in the individual's relation to culture.

The third chapter, "Gatsby's Tattoo: Gesture-Language in the Jazz Age," extends the second chapter's discussion of the relationship between embodiment, discourse, and socialization. Fitzgerald's representation of discursive interaction relies heavily on characters' gesticulations, and in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) Nick Carraway famously rhapsodizes about the success of Gatsby's gestures. But Fitzgerald is equally invested in unsuccessful gestures and in tics. The distinction between gesture and tic is a major one in twentieth-century ethnography; it plays a key role, for instance, in the idea of "thick description." This is the framework I use to elaborate the significance of the "tattoo" I refer to in the chapter's title. Not an ink inscription but rather a restless beat drummed on the floor by Gatsby's foot, it is a behavioral event that ambiguates the categories of gesture and tic. By relating the representation of the socialized body in Fitzgerald's work more broadly to the ethnography of gesture, especially David Efron's ambitious 1930s study of New York City immigrants' gestural habits, I argue that the novelist, like the Boasians, understands gestures as historically determined within local semiotic systems, as fundamentally linguistic rather than biological. Yet for behavioral and aesthetic forms to be locally determined means, for Fitzgerald, that their travel across the lines of color and culture, their diffusion, has the sometimes stimulating, sometimes anxiogenic effect of ambiguating the particular and the pathological.



The chapter that closes the dissertation, “Fresh from the Lect’: Descent and Discourse in *Songs of Jamaica*,” likewise focuses on the circulation or diffusion of forms of talk. A key text here is McKay’s 1912 poem “Cudjoe, Fresh from de Lecture,” which takes the form of a Jamaican’s report, in a densely patterned representation of Creole, of an evolutionist’s talk. By playing this poem against the volume’s preface by folklorist Walter Jekyll, the chapter argues that McKay offers an alternative to the social evolutionary thinking that shapes Jekyll’s framing of his poetry—as well as the imperialist historiography of slavery—and that the Boasians were so invested in rejecting in favor of cultural diffusionism. Yet McKay doesn’t reject evolutionism; rather, he sees the circulation of cultural objects as linked to evolutionary processes by the principle of contingency. If this principle is what lends evolution a kind of counterfactual revolutionary force, as “Cudjoe” implies, it is also a feature of discursive iteration, including, as McKay’s work helps us see, the act of reading poetry out loud. This perspective allows us to rethink a central concern in the tradition of dialect literature, one I trace through the American tradition and particularly Paul Laurence Dunbar (especially his “When Malindy Sings”) and back to McKay: the question of the dialect text not as a transcript of speech but as a script for performance, a script available for iteration in an unpredictable range of contexts. On this view the dialect text does not so much reify cultural particularity as make possible the proliferation of new discursive forms.

The four central authors around whom I organize this study—Oskison, Keller, Fitzgerald, and McKay—probably knew each others’ names; even the least well-known today, Oskison, published prolifically during his lifetime. And some had mutual acquaintances. But they did not engage each other in writing. Nor were they explicitly invested in the problems that occupied the social scientists of their time. The story I want to tell here is thus not about a tight-knit creative or intellectual milieu. Rather, it’s about the set of surprising formal, conceptual, and historical connections—connections having primarily to do with the problem of transcription—that authorize us to read across these author’s texts. Nor, it should be clear at this point, is the payoff of this kind of reading a straightforward affirmation of “multiculturalism.” What unites these figures is not that they move within the context of a multicultural, transnational American literary sphere. It is rather that in grappling with people, paper, and talk, they implicitly engage and sometimes resist the ideas of social and linguistic difference, emergent at the time of their writing, that make possible the very idea of multiculturalism—and they do so, I’ll suggest, because they are each attuned, in different ways, to the kinds of violence that certain formulations of that idea (despite the crucial critical perspective that initially motivated it) can underwrite. This attunement becomes most visible at moments in which the act of transcription becomes visible or problematic, for—as I hope to show—from the late nineteenth century on, the history of the culture concept and its discontents has been, in part, a record of the formal effects produced when texts hit their limits at the object of talk.

## Chapter 1

### Harjo's Brand: Americanist Linguistics and the Fiction of Cultures

#### 1. Incongruousness

John Milton Oskison's 1907 short story "The Problem of Old Harjo" centers on an impossible conversion. It isn't that the titular character, a Creek rancher in the Indian Territory, lacks Christian faith. Harjo is a believer. He wants to join the ranks of the small congregation established by missionaries near his ranch. What prevents him from doing so is his marriage, are his marriages, to two women. In the eyes of the church, polygamy is a practice beyond toleration. But even Miss Evans, the young missionary whose enthusiasm inspires Harjo to convert and who tries to persuade him to do away with one of his wives, comes to think that to dissolve either of Harjo's unions would be to do social harm to his community. The story remains the best-known of Oskison's early stories—others of which I'll discuss in this chapter—because, in these ways, it revolves around questions about the relationship between institutional norms and practical ethics; about how it feels, to borrow W. E. B. Du Bois's phrase from a decade earlier, to be a problem; and about what one might, anachronistically, call "intercultural" contact.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the most curious thing about the piece is that it includes, in the middle of a sentence, the miniature image of a cattle brand. Perhaps because it seems like a throwaway moment, this visual detail has not received critical commentary. My primary concern in this chapter will be with something that is not obviously at issue in this image: namely, with the relationship between the conceptualization of culture and the transcription of everyday speechways in both fictional and ethnographic literature, especially at the points of overlap or indistinction between these modes of writing. But the figure of the brand makes for an apposite starting point for this topic because it opens up the questions of graphic materiality and semiotic iteration that are central, I hope to show, to this relationship between ideas of difference and methods of transcription. The brand is referred to at only a single point in Oskison's story. When the missionary Evans first visits Harjo's ranch, she notices that "Three cows, three young heifers, two colts, and two patient, capable mares bore the Harjo brand, a fantastic 'HH' that the old man had designed" (236).<sup>2</sup> The brand serves no role in the story's plot. Why bother to include it? To get at why it appears, one can start with how it appears. As it was printed in *The Southern Workman*, the Hampton Institute journal that first published the story, the brand looks, roughly, like an *H* and a half (fig. 1).

In the parlance of brands and artisanal insignia, this is close to a "conjoined HH"; only close, though, thanks to a small gap just right of center. Referencing Harjo's name in initial, it seems iconically to register something about his predicament as well. I'll

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (1897): 194-98.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Oskison, "The Problem of Old Harjo," *The Southern Workman* 36 (April 1907): 235-41.

# Harjo brand, a fantastic “HH”

Fig. 1.1. The Harjo brand.

return at the end of the chapter to the question of just what it might register, but, to begin with, perhaps one could say that the letter's doubled and disjointed form marks a state of conflicting subjectivities or DuBoisian double consciousness, the experience of the subject who has been interpellated as (in Harjo's case) the embodiment of the “Indian Problem.”

Perhaps. But to commit to such a reading of the brand is to undertake a problematic conversion of another sort, taking rough graphic resemblance and turning it into smooth semiotic commensurability. For while the components of the brand clearly evoke characters in the Latin alphabet, it is less clear that the image is composed of them, that it belongs to the same graphic system as the text surrounding it. Compare the *H*-like left half of the brand to the first letter of “Harjo” in the same line. The typeface doesn't match. This seems to be a case of “matter out of place,” as William James puts it when, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), he uses dirt as a trope for “evil” or “those elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements.”<sup>3</sup> Eliding the disjunction of form between brand and text and therefore eliding the question of whether they constitute a rational whole, my quotation of the line in the paragraph above is not, then, completely faithful. In my defense, it isn't immediately clear that such a thing is possible. As the inverted commas with which Oskison sets it off ironically underscore, this figure resists quotation both in speech and in text. Momentarily shifting the mode of the text from typographic to photographic, the brand seems to require reproduction as an image. Yet reproduction is hardly less complicated. Surely the proper way to reprint the brand, to re-entextualize it, is as it first appeared in the 1907 magazine. Given, though, that pages run off from a press will tend to show a slight variability in ink distribution, no two copies of the issue are likely to have printed the brand identically, as we can see by examining a second image of the brand scanned from a different copy of the journal (fig. 2).



Fig. 1.2. The Harjo brand 2.0.

In this second version, notice how the lines of the image appear slightly cleaner, slightly trimmer. The central column does not smudge to the left as it does in the first version.

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<sup>3</sup> William James, *Varieties of Psychological Experience*, in *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. (Library of America, 1987), 126. In the 1960s structuralist anthropologist Mary Douglas made James's trope central to her argument about taboo; see *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, vol. 2 (Psychology Press, 2003), 165.

Which of these two images, then, can we say rightly represents the brand? By what principle does one determine whether, for instance, that leftward smudge is essential to the form of the figure or is, like James's dirt, "irrelevance and accident"?

More fundamentally, does it matter? After all, such questions about matter out of place, about the various iterations of the image, seem unlikely to have arisen for the 1907 *Southern Workman* reader who perused a single copy of the journal and who was therefore only confronted with a single "print" of the brand. No doubt it struck some such readers as an object worth puzzling over. But that act of puzzling would not necessarily have been complicated by the prospect of the object's ontological instability. These questions are only likely to arise for interpreters who have a certain investment, conscious or unconscious, in the principles of textual ontology that centrally occupy literary theorists. In *The Shape of the Signifier* (2005), Walter Benn Michaels argues that our positions with regard to such apparently rarefied principles in fact have significant political stakes, stakes that, as it happens, have everything to do with the central concerns of Oskison's work. The argument is worth briefly outlining here because it makes an ambitious (and polemical) case about the relationship between our understanding of cultural difference and how we deal with the problems of graphic materiality produced by, for instance, Harjo's brand. According to Michaels, it is authorial or artistic intention that is the principle readers use in making determinations about what counts as part of an aesthetic object's form, however phenomenological or materialist those readers' proclaimed methodologies might be. To make this claim, Michaels sets up a zero-sum semiotic equation: the stronger one's commitment to the particularity of the graphic mark, the weaker one's ability to interpret it. To wed significance to materiality is to subordinate an author's intention to the infinite plurality of readers' responses; it's therefore to adopt, at least in theory, a relativistic hermeneutics. Michaels thus argues that

anyone who thinks the text consists of its physical features (of what Derrida calls its marks) will be required also to think that the meaning of the text is crucially determined by the experience of its readers, and so the question of who the reader is—and the commitment to the primacy of identity as such—is built into the commitment to the materiality of the signifier.<sup>4</sup>

These commitments are what connect axioms of textual interpretation to multiculturalism (in which all cultural perspectives, such as religious beliefs and the norms governing marriage arrangements) are assumed to be equally valid in principle, and neoliberal capitalism (in which all possible practices are valid or invalid, allowed or disallowed, only insofar as they affect the efficiency of production). In other words, for Michaels, a post-structuralist commitment to the signifier's irreducible shape turns out to be closely aligned with the insidious neoliberal functions of multiculturalism, producing surprising bedfellows: "figures whose deepest commitments are to categories of racial or cultural difference (e.g., the political scientist Samuel B. Huntington and the novelist Toni Morrison) belong to the same formation as someone like de Man, who couldn't have cared less about culture" (*SS*, 13). The fundamental move of each of these

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13. Hereafter cited as *SS*.

worldviews is to indiscriminately grant validity to all possible subject positions. Thus these systems, abandoning the possibility of common discursive ground and so abandoning the possibility of reading and engaging with another's intentions, allow for perspectival difference but not for political disagreement. The reader's relationship to the mark—to, for instance, a particular iteration of the brand—turns out to be just as free as the consumer's to the market.

But this argument is based on a semiotic distinction that is difficult to sustain, as Orrin N. C. Wang noted in a critical review of Michaels's book and as Derrida would, no doubt, likewise object.<sup>5</sup> The hard opposition Michaels draws between meaningful signification and "mere resemblance" insufficiently accounts for the way that resemblance can function as a kind of meaning—suggesting the kind of dialectic between reproduction and representation that, I want to argue, is put into play by the brand. While its structure no doubt invites a reader to see it as an icon of Harjo's predicament, to simply accept that invitation is thus to beg the more primary questions that Oskison raises by embedding image in text. These questions have as much to do with medium as with message, as much to do with forms of linguistic representation as with ideas about group-based difference. Although problems of textual ontology motivate my exploration of these questions, my primary claims in this chapter will be less theoretical than literary-historical. By situating Oskison's fiction in relation to the paradigm shift that occurs in ideas about linguistic and cultural difference at the turn of the last century, I aim in this chapter to historicize the crux of meaning and non-meaning, of iconicity and indexicality, that this moment in "Old Harjo" urges us to reckon with.

In a 1992 piece on Raymond Williams and the culture concept, Catherine Gallagher writes that the way things slip between signification and immanence, the way they slip toward particularity and "refuse integration into signifying systems is historically specific."<sup>6</sup> Gallagher's phrasing is helpful in framing the two claims whose relationship I want to negotiate here. First, that Oskison, in the way he emplots Harjo's refusal of integration into the signifying system of the church (itself a proxy for the expansionist state), implicitly critiques the pluralist conceptualization of culture that is emergent at the moment of his writing. And second, that the way Harjo's brand refuses integration into the signifying system of the text reflects a broader concern with the problem of transcription and graphic plurality (a problem that plays a generative role in the process of that conceptualization of culture, through turn-of-the-century anthropological debates about the observation of American Indian speech). If the first of these claims operates at the level of the allegorical critique Oskison's story has to offer, the second operates at the level of that critique's formal corollaries, corollaries that ramify across the discursive fields of the literary, the linguistic, and the ethnographic. In order to make these claims I will be moving through several areas, most importantly: the politics of culture in other texts by Oskison, related debates in the history of anthropology (including debates about linguistic observation and about nomenclature), and the relationship between ethnography and regionalist writing. Toward the end of

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<sup>5</sup> Orrin N. C. Wang, "Against Theory beside Romanticism: The Sensation of the Signifier," *Diacritics* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 3-29.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Gallagher, "Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies," *Social Text* 30 (1992): 79-89, 88.

the chapter, after having traced an interrelated set of semiotic problems through these areas, I'll return to the significance of Harjo's brand.

But we can begin to get a sense of its significance for Oskison by noticing that the question its presence on the page raises—why print a cattle brand in a periodical?—is just what is at issue in the opening of another story he had written a few years earlier. Published in both *The Century Magazine* and *The Overland Montly* in 1904, “The Quality of Mercy’: A Story of the Indian Territory” begins with an ironized gripe about the provincial print culture of the region in which Oskison grew up. After finishing school in St. Louis, Miss Venita Churchfield finds herself living in Black Oak, Missouri. She becomes friends (and at the end of the story more) with the editor of the local paper, the “Sachem” (Chief), but she wishes that it were more cosmopolitan, less given over to stories about, for instance, “Missouri Bob” the cattle thief. Particularly irksome are the front page’s “three columns of cattle-brands displayed on splotchy black cuts of steers,” which “occupied a considerable share of the four pages devoted to keeping the little prairie town of Black Oak informed of the world’s doings.”<sup>7</sup> But the editor, Mr. Efferts, insists that “spreading the knowledge of a brand throughout the country” should take priority over “editorials about Ruskin”—over, to put it in Matthew Arnold’s words, “getting to know . . . the best which has been thought and said in the world”—so that the high-low mismatch between the story’s title (from *The Merchant of Venice*) and its genre (local color fiction) is played out in its characters’ dispute about the social function of print.<sup>8</sup> Efferts sees the branding-iron page as crucial to preventing theft and thereby sustaining the cattle industry. But if Churchfield had her way the “Sachem” would do away with the brands and instead devote itself to the publication of articles promoting the spread of “culture—an exceedingly vague something, meant, for one thing, to suppress the unseemly shooting at sign-boards when, on occasion, cow-boys, full-bloods, half-breeds, and whites came in at night to ‘paint the town’” (178).

An exceedingly vague something. What could more efficiently send up the obscurity of E. B. Tylor’s seminal description of culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”?<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the long list with which Tylor attempts to encompass culture “in its wide ethnographic sense,” Oskison’s narrator shrugs off the task of definition. In the terms of linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein, metapragmatics, the specification of the social function of a given instance of discourse, trumps metasemantics, the specification of its conceptual reference; what matters about “culture” here, in other words, is less what it means than what it is “meant” to do: prevent vandalism and unruliness. Yet if painting the town is opposed, on a pragmatic level, to Churchfield’s (and Arnold’s) sense of culture, it falls

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<sup>7</sup> John Milton Oskison, “‘The Quality of Mercy’: A Story of the Indian Territory,” *The Century Magazine* 68, no. 2 (June 1904): 178-181, 178. Publishing local brands on steer-shaped splotches in the paper, so as to help identify and return strays (and deal with theft) was an 1870s Texas ranching innovation: J. C. Loving published *Stockman’s Guide and Handbook* in 1880 and then *Cattle Brands*—a title Andy Adams adopted for a 1906 collection of short stories—in 1884.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. D. Wilson (London, 1960 [1869]), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom* (London, 1871): 1:1.

well within the broad semantic compass of Tylor's "other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." The line thus brings divergent understandings of what Raymond Williams calls "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" into unresolved antagonism.<sup>10</sup>

In this it is of its moment. The "modern anthropological culture concept" that guided the work of Franz Boas and his students had achieved the status of a new paradigm by 1920, when every anthropology department in the U.S. was chaired by one of his students, and it sustained that status for most of the twentieth century. Although it has always lacked definitional consensus, this sense of culture has generally been characterized by a pluralized and relativistic understanding of group practices as socially constructed and locally, historically conditioned. Boas's central motivation in studying culture according to the principle of historical particularism, as opposed to the comparativist methods that he criticized for presupposing a simplistic social evolutionism, was the disarticulation of "culture" from "race." The latter, he continually argued, in no way determined the kinds of practices and artifacts associated with the former. But while Boas was making this argument as early as the late 1880s, it was not until a few decades later that what we now think of as the Boasian paradigm shift took hold. In a well-known and controversial article published in *American Anthropologist* in 1917, Alfred L. Kroeber, Boas's first doctoral student, could still refer to the antagonism between social evolutionary and particularist understandings of group difference as "this *current* confusion of the organic and the social."<sup>11</sup> Churchfield's complaint is once again illustrative. Consider her list of rowdies: "cow-boys, full-bloods, half-breeds, and whites." Churchfield smiles wryly at Efferts's embrace, reflected in the content of his newspaper, of these locals' "incongruousness." Yet what makes this list incongruous is not its heterogeneity as such but rather the overdetermination of that heterogeneity. To follow "cow-boys" with "full-bloods" is to imply the fungibility of culture with race: cow-boy is an alternative to full-blood, occupation substitutable for extraction. But then to round out the list with "half-breeds" and "whites" destabilizes this commensurability: according to the logic that made it a "paradox" for Oskison's close friend Will Rogers to call himself an Indian cowboy—the logic, that is, the Boasians were aiming to deconstruct—"white" does not follow "cow-boy" in the same way that "full-blood" did, as an alternative, but as a redundancy.<sup>12</sup> Lapsing into category confusion, the list's trajectory parallels the deconstruction of social-evolutionary accounts of racial difference. Such category confusions play a key role in Oskison's regionalist fiction as well as in the turbulent ethnographic imagination of his moment,

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford University Press US, 1985), 87.

<sup>11</sup> A. L. Kroeber, "The Superorganic," *American Anthropologist* 19 (1917): 163-213. While Kroeber's article is canonical in the history of American anthropology, my attention is drawn to his reference to a "current confusion" by Braddock, *TE*.

<sup>12</sup> See the introduction to *The Papers of Will Rogers: The Early Years: Volume One: November 1879-April 1904*, ed. Arthur Frank Wertheim and Barbara Bair (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996-).

and they are intertwined with the methodological problems entailed in transcription.<sup>13</sup> For this reason it is apt that, in “The Quality of Mercy,” the antagonism of culture concepts should be figured as the convergence of various forms of graphic representation: not only the bullet-riddled signboards and the “painted” town, but also the competition between type and cattle brands for column space in the newspaper.

Of course, part of what the brands represented semantically in that story, as well as the one represented iconically in “Old Harjo,” do is to produce the kind of authenticity effect that is so central to regionalism and that Oskison had the background to provide; some of his teenage years were spent on a cattle ranch outside of Vinita, Oklahoma, the town from which he signs off at the end of “The Quality of Mercy.” Yet there is also justification for the claim that objects like the brands do not only function as realist machinery but also—things with ideas, to adapt William Carlos Williams—contribute to a metadiscourse on concepts like “authenticity” themselves, and thus that Oskison’s fiction is engaged with a broader problematic having to do with forms of representation. In his unpublished autobiography, “A Tale of the Old I.T.,” Oskison describes growing up outside Tahlequah, where his family lived before moving to Vinita. “The Indians [my father] knew were not all like the nomadic hunters he had seen on the plains,” he writes. “Among the tribal judges, senators, and councilmen were other graduates of eastern colleges, Dartmouth and Princeton. They published *The Cherokee Advocate*.”<sup>14</sup> This newspaper printed three of its four pages in the Latin alphabet, but one of its pages was devoted to the Cherokee syllabary, a system of eight-six characters invented in the nineteenth century for representing the sounds of spoken Cherokee in writing.<sup>15</sup> One to four: precisely—and, while I can do no more than speculate on this point, perhaps not coincidentally—the ratio of brands to type in the Black Oak “Sachem” that Oskison imagines in his 1904 story. While my aim is to show that Oskison’s fiction engages with the same problems of linguistic reproduction and group-based difference that were at stake in anthropologists’ debates over, for instance, “alternating sounds” (on which I’ll soon comment), perhaps the most conspicuous evidence of his

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<sup>13</sup> See Regna Darnell, *And Along Came Boas: Continuity and Revolution in Americanist Anthropology* (J. Benjamins, 2000) and *Invisible Genealogies: A History of Americanist Anthropology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Although the autobiography will soon be published by the University of Nebraska Press, as of this writing it exists only as an unpublished typescript at the University of Oklahoma library; I quote here from the introduction by Timothy Powell and Melinda Smith Mullikin to John M. Oskison, *The Singing Bird: A Cherokee Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), xx. Hereafter cited as *SB*.

<sup>15</sup> The *Advocate* was the only paper at the turn of the century to print in the Cherokee language, according to *The Dauchy Co.'s Newspaper Catalogue: A List of the Newspapers and Periodicals Published in the United States and Territories, and Canada, with Date of Establishment, Frequency or Day of Issue, Politics, Denomination, Nationality or Special Character, etc.* (Dauchy & Company, 1904), 644. It ceased publication in 1906 but has since been revived and publishes out of Tahlequah. For histories of the American Indian press, see James Emmett Murphy and Sharon Murphy, *Let my People Know: American Indian Journalism, 1828-1978* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), and John M. Coward, *The Newspaper Indian: Native American Identity in the Press, 1820-90* (University of Illinois Press, 1999).



engagement with such problems is his interest in something that seldom features in those debates: the syllabary.

## 2. The Theory of Our Alphabet

4<sup>∞</sup>∞, Sequoyah, George Guess, “the American Cadmus”: this is a partial list of the names of the inventor, in the 1820s, of the modern Cherokee writing system.<sup>16</sup> *The Cherokee Phoenix, and Indians’ Advocate*, the precursor to the *Advocate* published during Oskison’s lifetime, was a four-page weekly journal founded in 1828 that printed articles in both English and the Cherokee syllabary. On July 29, 1829, the *Phoenix* ran an excerpt from a lecture by Samuel L. Knapp describing his meeting with Sequoyah, who was in Washington, DC, with a tribal delegation.<sup>17</sup> “The Indians themselves are becoming philologists and grammarians,” Knapp writes, noting the philosophical excitement generated by Sequoyah’s invention, “but as I have not as yet seen any satisfactory account of the progress and history of this greatest effort of genius of the present day, I will state what I know of it, from the lips of the inventor himself.” This is a half-truth. Sequoyah, who did not speak English, communicated with Knapp through interpreters. In fact, as the linguistic component of the delegate’s apparently authentic Native habitus—Knapp approvingly comments on Sequoyah’s tribal dress (as opposed to the other delegates, who apparently wore some Euro-American attire) and adherence to tribal decorum—the fact that the delagate does not speak English seems to appeal to Knapp,

A few months after this excerpt ran in the *Phoenix*, the lecture was published in full in Knapp’s 1829 book *Lectures on American Literature: With Remarks on Some Passages in American History*. In the fuller context of the book, the enthusiastic account of Sequoyah and the syllabary sharply contradicts a celebration of the expansion of English—“our mother tongue,” Knapp writes, “is becoming the triumphant language of mankind”—and his description of tribal peoples as petty obstacles to the colonists’ imperialist ambition: “Nothing but a thinly scattered race of rude men stood in their way to the founding of an empire larger than the world had ever seen.”<sup>18</sup> These apparent contradictions—the individual excellence of “the inventor himself” despite his belonging to a “race of rude men”; the celebration of “this greatest effort of genius,” despite the desirability and inevitability of the English language’s universal dominion—might be explained in terms of primitivist-romanticist desire as well as in terms of the rhetorical gesture of particularizing the invention as an act of “native genius” that because of its stubborn alterity does not, even in its utmost achievement, threaten to participate directly in national politics. But these contradictions also have to do with a linguistic quandary particular to the “American” self-conception: if the continuity of

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<sup>16</sup> There is some controversy about the historical record of this invention. See *SB* xlvii n. 34 and n. 36, and Traveller Bird, *Tell Them They Lie: The Sequoyah Myth* (Westernlore Publishers, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> “See-quah-yah: The Cherokee Philosopher,” in *The Cherokee Phoenix, and the Indians’ Advocate*, New Echota, Wednesday, July 29, 1829 (vol. 2, no. 17) P. 1, col. 4a- P. 2, col. 2a.

<sup>18</sup> Samuel L. Knapp, *Lectures on American Literature: With Remarks on Some Passages in American History* (Elam Bliss, 1829), 22, 37. Hereafter cited as *LAL*.

Anglo-American language and ethnicity was the necessary premise for claims of higher civilization, it also stood in the way of claims for a distinct new national voice.<sup>19</sup> The impossibility of such a voice is projected onto the figure of the exceptional native because the Cherokee nation seems to have done what the “American” cannot: invent an autochthonous linguistic medium.

Knapp represents this invention as the product by a Cherokee desire for civilization, for a more elevated position on the great chain of being or evolutionary ladder. “The literature of a nation,” begins the lecture on Anglo-American literature that immediately follows the account of Sequoyah, “affords the best criterion, by which may be judged the principles and powers of a people, as well as their rank in the scale of civilization” (*LAL*, 29). But other accounts point to political motivations. If the syllabary served as a good screen on which to project the contradictions of American national self-conception, it more obviously served a material function within the Cherokee nation. The same issue of the *Phoenix* that printed the excerpt from Knapp’s lecture included a brief note by editor Elias Boudinot—executed by “conservative” (anti-Removal) Cherokees in 1839 for eventually coming to advocate acceptance of Andrew Jackson’s plan—appending a few of its own comments about the syllabary, comments clearly intended to provide a slight corrective to Knapp’s account. “Se-quo-yah certainly deserves to be held in remembrance by all who respect native genius, but more particularly, by his country-men,” Boudinot writes. In an implicit inversion of imperialist racial hierarchy, he goes on to note that “reading and writing are as common here as among the neighboring whites, and certainly those Cherokees who have attended to their Alphabet one week, write more correctly, than the English scholar who has been steadfast to his book two years.” Finally, in a brief “P.S.,” Boudinot touches on the material conditions of his paper’s production: “The font of type now used in this place was not procured by the general government, but at the public expense of the Cherokee nation; though it is true the U. States have appropriated, (not however altogether gratuitously) one thousand dollars, for the establishment of a press among the Cherokees of the Arkansas.”<sup>20</sup>

The conditions to which Boudinot alludes are treated explicitly in *The Singing Bird*, in which both he and Sequoyah feature as characters and the circulation and use of the syllabary as key plot elements. Unpublished until 2007, Oskison probably composed the novel in the early 1940s, soon before his death. It takes place, though, a century earlier. Its plot centers on the relationships among a group of missionaries, Cherokee tribal leaders, and other Indian Territory figures from the 1830s until the Civil War in the wake of the Indian Removal Act.<sup>21</sup> By setting the novel at the moment *after*

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<sup>19</sup> For a likeminded argument see Marietta Messmer, “Reading National American Literary Historiography Internationally,” *Comparative Literature* 52, no. 3 (July 1, 2000): 193-212.

<sup>20</sup> *Cherokee Phoenix, and Indians’ Advocate*, July 29 1829, p. 2 col. 4.

<sup>21</sup> The use of translation for the purpose of conversion (for instance, converting the Bible into native languages) is part of what makes Sequoyah’s syllabary an important aspect of this plot, but this story also has to do with the relationship between print culture and the construction of a public sphere. See Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Harvard University Press, 1990).

Sequoyah has invented the system, rather than treating the moment of invention itself, Oskison is able to shift emphasis away from the invention of the language—stories about which often tended to play into the primitivist romanticism of, for instance, Longfellow’s Hiawatha painting ideograms “on the smooth bark of a birch-tree”—and toward the material and political difficulties involved in getting font sets made and presses and printing paper transported.<sup>22</sup> He is moreover able to tell the story of Sequoyah’s quest, a story that has links to history but is here largely fictionalized. The other characters of *The Singing Bird* do not know the details of the mission Sequoyah takes up, but it seems that he has set out in search of the “sacred symbols” of the Cherokee, encased in an Ark held to have been stolen by the Delaware. This undermines accounts, like Knapp’s, of Sequoyah’s invention as the Cherokees’ first and sudden entrance into graphic modernity. One 1717 account of Cherokee tradition tells of “writting but not one paper as you doe but one white deare skins and one the shoulder bones of buflow for several yeares but the . . . writing was quite lost and could not be recovered againe” (*SB*, xxxix). Timothy Powell and Melinda Smith Mullikin argue that the “continuum, however imperfect, between ancient symbols, the oral tradition, and contemporary print culture offers an important lesson for Americanists, who continue to struggle with the fact that non-alphabetic forms of writing and/or material artifacts provide invaluable insights into American literary history before European contact.” Thus Oskison’s account of Sequoyah’s quest “offers a critically important counternarrative, suggesting that the origins of the Native American tradition (and American literature) can be traced back hundreds, if not thousands, of years before the colonial period.”<sup>23</sup>

The reasons for Americanists’ historical inattention to ancient American tradition—or, more accurately, traditions—surely include both the blind spots of ethnocentrism and the practical contingencies of linguistic competency, but this reference to “origins” points, indirectly, to the possibility of a third, intellectual-historical explanation. In 1829 Knapp notes that those studying American languages—not just “a few learned men,” but also “many of those engaged in professional business”—have “made considerable progress in the examination of the languages spoken by the various tribes of North American Indians; and it is now fully believed, that this examination will afford the only clue to their origin, if ever one is found” (25). But by the late nineteenth century, with the professionalization of linguistics as a science, those academics who were studying tribal traditions had turned away from the investigation of linguistic origins—often associated with the outmoded methods of philology, and famously banned at the 1866 meeting of the Linguistic Society of Paris—in favor of the empirical study of spoken language.<sup>24</sup>

The methodological issues raised by this empirical turn were concentrated in the phenomenon of “alternating sounds” for Americanist anthropologists, and the positions that they took in accounting for this phenomenon reflect a broader debate about the

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Song of Hiawatha,” in *Poems and Other Writings*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Library of America, 200), 228.

<sup>23</sup> *SB*, xxxix. Powell and Mullikin’s argument on this point has some affinities with Wai Chee Dimock’s concept of deep time; see “Deep Time: American Literature and World History,” *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 755-775.

<sup>24</sup> See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Roots, Races, and the Return to Philology,” *Representations* 106, no. 1 (2009): 34-62.

sources of human variation. When Daniel Garrison Brinton addressed the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia on October 5, 1888, his title was “The Language of Palaeolithic Man” but his topic the language of American tribes. The idea is to learn about the former by studying the latter. “By an attentive consideration of some of these lowest [linguistic] stocks,” Brinton asks, “can we not form a somewhat correct conception of what was the character of the rudimentary utterances of the race?”<sup>25</sup> Placing groups subjugated by colonialism on the lower rungs of an imagined evolutionary ladder is, of course, a familiar move in late nineteenth century anthropology. But with regard to the question of speech Brinton frames his argument as a departure. Rejecting Ernst Haeckel’s category of *Homo alalus*, a phase of human life preceding the evolution of the linguistic faculty, he describes the idea of “speechless man” as “a scientific romance that has served its time” (4). Since archaeology shows that even Paleolithic man worked collectively, it’s “improbable that he was destitute of vocal powers.” It’s just that, for Brinton, these powers were undeveloped in the past, as they are in “these lowest stocks” of the present. “If in English we were to pronounce the three words, *loll*, *nor*, *roll*, indifferently as one or the other, you see what violence we should do to the theory of our alphabet,” Brinton remarks. “Yet analogous examples are constant in many American languages. Their consonants are ‘alternating,’ in large groups, their vowels ‘permutable.’”<sup>26</sup> This constant inconstancy—a discursive tendency toward “irrelevance and accident,” the vocal analogue of smudges on the various iterations of Harjo’s brand—inspires Brinton’s awkward figuration of Native languages as “the baby-talk of the race” (213). The quip evokes Haeckel’s biogenetic law: ontogeny, the development of the individual, recapitulates phylogeny, the evolution of the species. But Brinton’s line runs the law backward. Here phylogeny recapitulates ontogeny. The rhetorical risk of this reversal is to treat the basic operation of social evolutionism—the application of an evolutionary model to dimensions of human experience (here, the variability of linguistic structure) that are not primarily determined by biology—as a trope, arbitrary in its construction and therefore vulnerable to critique as yet another “scientific romance.”

Such critiques are central to the shift in anthropological thought that takes place from the late 1880s to the 1910s, displacing the paradigms that govern Brinton’s understanding of linguistic difference. A few months after Brinton’s talk in Philadelphia, Boas publishes a brief piece, “On Alternating Sounds,” that responds to Brinton’s and others’ claim that one can find an index of racial development in the “vague and fluctuating” phonetics of American languages.<sup>27</sup> Relativizing the terms of the discussion, Boas runs the phenomenon of “alternating sounds” against that of “sound-blindness”—Sara J. Wiltse had recently published research on this syndrome—in order to argue that what appear to be inconsistencies are in fact artifacts of transcription.<sup>28</sup> In

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<sup>25</sup> Danniell Garrison Brinton, “The Language of Palaeolithic Man,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 25 (1888), 212.

<sup>26</sup> Also see Horatio Hale, “On Some Doubtful or Intermediate Articulations: An Experiment in Phonetics,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 14 (January 1, 1885): 233-243.

<sup>27</sup> Franz Boas, “On Alternating Sounds,” *American Anthropologist* 2, no. 1 (1889): 47-54.

<sup>28</sup> “Abnormal Sense Perceptions,” *The Scientific Monthly* 12, no. 301 (1919): 222-23.

American languages as in all languages, Boas argues, there will often exist some single phoneme the range of whose pronunciation requires at least two phonetic characters, two graphemes, to represent in the graphic order of the observer—in the case of Brinton and Boas, the Latin alphabet. When the units of phonetic representation are incommensurable with the phonetic structure of the language under observation, it isn't utterance in itself but rather the observation and then transcription of utterance into the "sound-blind" ethnographer's own graphic order that produces inconsistency. And so in the case of Americanist anthropologists like Brinton and Boas, the latter argued, it is in fact the clumsy application of the Latin alphabet that leads to the variability in transcribed Native speech. Epiphenomena of "alternating apperception," alternating sounds don't really alternate.<sup>29</sup> They don't exist. "Clearly the trouble comes from the difficulty, first, of apperceiving the elements of the word, and, second, of expressing them in proper notation," wrote ethnomusicologist Charles K. Wead in a brief 1900 essay reflecting on the implications of Boas's argument about alternating sounds for the study of music ethnomusicologist. "Our standards both of recognition and expression are incommensurable with those of the stranger."<sup>30</sup>

If it seems strange that neither Sequoyah's syllabary nor any of the other (less widespread and well known) native alphabets devised in the nineteenth century—in other words, the very "standards . . . of recognition and expression . . . of the stranger"—should feature anywhere in these discussions of alternating sounds, it is perhaps because such invention did not fit the conception of ethnography as the transcription of the local and particular into a universal order of representation. The movement of the syllabary is, from the view of the ethnographer who wants to be able to transcribe all native speech, only from particular to particular; it is, in other words, a written language (in this case, one customized for the spoken sounds of Cherokee) rather than a meta-linguistic system designed to accommodate all speechways, all forms of talk. As resistant to loose judgments and theoretical generalization as Boas may have been—"News on the discovery of America would be given by Boas as a disproof of the hypothesis on a shorter way to India," Roman Jakobson quipped in 1944—the notion of ethnographic practice as the contextualized transcription of the local and particular has as a paradoxical corollary the idea of a graphic order capacious enough, universal enough, to represent all particularities.<sup>31</sup> (Alexander Melville Bell's system of "visible speech," which I'll discuss in the next chapter, represents another attempt at such a graphic order.) And his reluctance to theorize notwithstanding, Boas's intervention in the observation of phonetics passed quickly into the common sense of the discipline. Over the course of the twentieth century, and particularly through the work of George Stocking Jr., the piece has been canonized in the historiography of anthropology, perhaps to the point of ossification. "Along with a point about Boas's argument with Smithsonian curator Otis Mason over the arrangement of museum displays," Brad Evans has noted, "alluding to alternating sounds has become a way to shorthand the emergence of pluralist thought in

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<sup>29</sup> George Stocking, ed., Franz Boas Reader: *The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911* (Chicago, 1989), 77.

<sup>30</sup> Charles K. Wead "The Study of Primitive Music" in *American Anthropologist* 2, no. 1 (Jan., 1900): 75-79.

<sup>31</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Franz Boas's Approach to Language," *International Journal of American Linguistics*, 10, no. 4. (October 1944): 188-95, 194.

American intellectual history.”<sup>32</sup> However, this scholarly shorthand has often tended to spell out neither the significance of the context that occasioned the debate—the observation of native languages—nor the fact that, paradigm shift or no, the problem of notational methodology persisted as a live topic of debate.<sup>33</sup> It’s important to situate these efforts not only within a theoretical turn but also within the material context of a newly professionalizing discipline. The turn of the century is the moment of American anthropology’s self-conscious scientization, when the study of man models itself on the rigor of the hard physical sciences so as to distinguish itself from the pseudo-science of nineteenth-century social evolutionism, scientific racism, and the amateur ethnological efforts of travel-writers, missionaries, and literary artists. Putting an empirical linguistics at the core of ethnographic methodology is important to this disciplinary formation, with the corollary that systems of phonetic notation become key to writing culture. And so from J. W. Powell’s edition of the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* in the 1890s to Boas’s edition and then to Edward Sapir’s contributions in the 1920s, one can track the elaboration and refinement of some of the typographic techniques ethnographers and linguists are developing throughout the early twentieth century (as the Americanist system of phonetic transcription, as opposed to the International Phonetic Alphabet, starts to be elaborated), with a proliferation of symbols and diacritics augmenting the Latin alphabet in order to indicate glottals, fricatives, and the like in native speech.<sup>34</sup> The methodological response to particularity is,

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<sup>32</sup> Brad Evans, “Introduction: Rethinking the Disciplinary Confluence of Anthropology and Literary Studies,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (2007): 429-45.

<sup>33</sup> The alternating sounds debate has entered the field of literary criticism principally through Eric Sundquist’s argument that, in for instance the case of Charles Chesnutt’s conjure tales, the Boasian recognition of linguistic particularity supports a view of dialect representation as not just minstrelsy but as, potentially, the sign of a culturally alternative and politically resistant position. Oddly, though, Sundquist’s account of the alternating sounds debate effaces the context of tribal anthropology, making only the most cursory mention of native languages or their observation. It seems telling that Sundquist refers offhandedly to the *Southern Workman*, which published Oskison as well as Charles Chesnutt, as a “black magazine” (313) when its mission, in accordance with its sponsoring institution, the Hampton Institute, was to support the education and social equality both of blacks and of American Indians. Without denying the imbrication of ideas about black and native speech in the imagination of the moment (as part of the history of the construction of race, this topic deserves continued reflection), and without basing a rigid distinction between them based on the dichotomy of dialect and language (a difference of degree and not kind, as Whitney argued as early as 1875), it is worth exploring the perspectives that get lost in this contextual elision—one of which, as we can see with Oskison, argues that culture’s pluralization might not be strictly liberatory. Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1993). William Dwight Whitney, *The Life and Growth of Language* (H. S. King, 1875).

<sup>34</sup> In his seminal introduction to the 1911 *Handbook of American Indian Languages* Boas recapitulated his argument about alternating sounds: he notes that “the Pawnee language contains a sound which may be heard more or less distinctly sometimes as an *l*, sometimes an *r*, sometimes as *n*, and again as *d*, which, however, without any

paradoxically, a phonetic technics that aspires to, sometimes with the acknowledgement that it cannot attain, transparent universality. If, as Wead noted, “transliteration may be made approximately in various ways, and is at best imperfect even with the copious scientific alphabets,” the sense of such a limit didn’t prevent social scientists from striving to fashion a more perfect alphabet. Although in Wead’s telling it was almost at random that he stumbled on the piece—“In an old number of the *American Anthropologist*, I have chanced on an article by Dr Boas”—he also notes, a mere decade after “On Alternating Sounds,” that Boas’s “remarks concerning strange words seem nowadays mere truisms.” They did not enter popular discourse so quickly, but by the end of Oskison’s career, in *The Singing Bird*, the kind of phonetic particularism that Boas’s remarks advocated was available as a commonplace, one closely connected to the politics of the novel. Before moving on, that connection bears some elaboration.

Oskison’s interests in the distribution of Sequoyah’s new Cherokee writing system and in his quest for ancient Cherokee texts—both of which can be brought under a nationalist tribal program—are counterbalanced by the representation of language acquisition in a bilingual situation. One of the central characters, Eula, runs the Indian Territory schoolroom:

Only in the schoolroom was the resourcefulness of her language revealed. She had as many ways of explaining, in English and Cherokee, the meaning of words in Webster’s Speller and Cumming’s First Lessons in Geography as a woods cat has for catching birds. She made the scholars laugh with her at their attempts to pronounce the difficult consonants of our language. She would say, “It is just as hard for me to speak your words, for I must keep my lips apart while you must learn to close your lips and teeth on many of our words. Now, you, John Knox Witherspoon, say your English name very slowly, then I will try to say the name of the boy next to you, Uh-lah-gah-ti . . . See, I can do no better than you! We will try again. (*SB*, 39).

The odd animal analogy here naturalizes “the resourcefulness of [Eula’s] language”—and here “her language” refers neither to English nor to Cherokee but rather to the creative ability to gloss the one in terms of the other—as a fundamental human trait, as innate as catching birds to a cat. This moment of mutual language-learning—“We will try again”—and mutual mockery seems to share the sanguinity of philosopher Kwasi Wiredu’s sense of the possibility of inter-cultural communication. In *Cultural Universals and Particulars* (1996), Wiredu writes that, even if one grants that “differences in languages often reflect and are reflected in differences of world view and that these can exercise the most profound constraints on intercultural communication,” this constraint does not constitute any “*ultimate* bar to intercultural communication.” Because “language is a system of skills fundamental to being human,” any language is in principle learnable; thus “barring the impairment of faculties, any human being will

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doubt, is throughout the same sound, although modified to a certain extent by its position in the word and by surrounding sounds.” Franz Boas, “Introduction,” *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (Bureau of American Ethnology, 1911), 16-17.

necessarily have the capacity to understand and use a language.”<sup>35</sup> (In the next chapter I’ll pursue this problem of the human in relation to education and impairment—which seems here to constitute an ultimate bar where, ostensibly, there was none.) But for Oskison in *The Singing Bird*, such education is inextricable from the material context of domination. Eula’s woods-cat analogy—which tropes semantic glossing as a kind of predation—thus begins to seem more apt. As Silverstein argues, metasemantic discourse also always has a pragmatic function, and this novel implies that one of those functions is forced acculturation. This becomes apparent in one of the novel’s most explicit reflections on pluralism. The narrator, Paul, recalls his sense of life in the Indian Territory:

Like others who had come to the Cherokees from a world troubled by politics, ranting religious hypocrisy, and greed for land, I had thought that the red men lived more sanely than the whites. They had held more firmly to their tried beliefs and customs, had been more diligent in putting first things first. I had thought sometimes, Perhaps we are the heathens. (*SB* 22)

Yet what immediately follows this relativist epiphany—one in which tribal adherence to custom is the mark of sanity rather than simply superstition (these are not, as Knapp has it, “rude men”)—is the assertion of its limit: “Dan [the missionary] was right when he said that, like it or not, the Indians must learn our language and adjust themselves to what we called Christian civilization” (*SB* 22). As in the “exceedingly vague something” that is “culture” in “The Quality of Mercy,” here in the sardonically vague referent of “what we called Christian civilization” the narrator subordinates the semantics of group-based difference to the (perceived) pragmatic necessity of language-based assimilation. The irony here is that the language that must be learned is one that works poorly, one in which the sign relation is not only arbitrary but misleading—“what we called Christian civilization.” It is not the superiority of the linguistic stock but rather the power it irrelevant that means that “the Indians must learn our language.” The Boasian flattening of the linguistic hierarchy that led Brinton to refer to “these lowest stocks” doesn’t solve this problem; it isn’t a problem for the “we” assumed in this line that the English language doesn’t have access to the romantic notion of the “red men . . . putting first things first” and staying true to “tried beliefs and customs”; in fact this lack seems to serve as an index of political power. Far from the only broken pact in the historical narrative through which Oskison’s novel interweaves, the broken bond between speech and fact does not so much undermine as mimic the logic of settler power.

In this way, in his final novel, Oskison continues to reflect on “the Indian question” that had occupied him since the first decade of the century, at the beginning of his career. His 1903 *Southern Workman* article on the “Outlook for the Indian” seems in some ways deeply assimilationist, on occasion (as if taking on board Brinton’s argument about “baby-talk”) representing tribal life as child-like.<sup>36</sup> Yet there’s also language in it that suggests a countervailing impulse. A closing reference to the “tribe” as the form of

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<sup>35</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>36</sup> John M. Oskison, “Outlook for the Indian,” *The Southern Workman* 32, no. 9 (1903): 270-72.



society toward which the U.S. is headed, for instance, suggests that it's in fact a native paradigm that will prevail. This gesture, of course, can still be read as Natty-Bumpo-style assimilation: the dominant culture wipes out the minority culture even as it "goes native," subsumes a few of its ideas and calls itself a "tribe." Due to such rhetorical ambiguities, Oskison's politics have been hard to pin down.<sup>37</sup> In the foreword to *The Singing Bird* Jace Weaver writes that they are "fundamentally assimilationist" (*SB*, xi) while in the introduction of the same book Powell writes that Oskison "challenges . . . deeply entrenched assumptions about the inherent superiority of Western society . . . by exposing the violence that lurked just under the rhetorical surface of U.S. policy and by highlighting the Cherokees' own sophisticated sense of civilization" (*SB*, xxix)—the sense, in other words, that is implicit in Sequoyah's quest for the missing relics. But if we can't pin down Oskison, it's perhaps in part because our terms are inadequate, our pins too blunt. Rather than make the argument on biographical grounds, we can sharpen them by attending to his fiction and in particular to his fiction as it interfaces with the ethnographic imagination. To be clear, I am not arguing that Oskison responded directly to or in full awareness of social scientists' internal debates. I am, however, arguing that staging an encounter between his work and anthropology can help to illuminate some of the problems posed in the theorization of difference by the multiplicity of orders of graphic representation.

In the next section, by moving between brief discussions of nomenclature—a key aspect of anthropological professionalization and a problem that is always implicitly if seldom explicitly tied to alternating sounds (alternating sounds having to do with the consistency of others' discourse, nomenclature with the consistency of one's own)—and works of ethnographic fiction, I hope to locate some of the points of connection and discontinuity that structured the interface of anthropology and literature at one of the key moments in the ongoing history of culture's reconceptualization.<sup>38</sup> This approach reveals a more antagonistic relationship between the two fields than scholars, often emphasizing the overlap between the ethnographic and the regionalist representation of folkways, have tended to notice.<sup>39</sup> This is not to deny that the discursive flattening of the

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Heath Justice briefly comments on the question of Oskison's politics in *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> See Brad Evans, "Howellsian Chic: The Local Color of Cosmopolitanism," *ELH* 71, no. 3 (2004): 775-812, and Walter Benn Michaels, "Local Colors," *MLN* vol. 113, no. 4 (1998): 734-756.

<sup>39</sup> An example of this overlap in non-scholarly writing: In 1990, a *New York Times* review of a new collection of early American Indian short fiction that included "Old Harjo" described the "comic touch" with which Oskison's story treats its theme of "[i]ncompatible cultural values." The story's "literary merit" sets it off, the review goes on, from some of the volume's weaker entries, "but even the weakest provide fascinating ethnographic data. Reading this collection is like visiting a well-appointed period room in a museum." The description of literary material takes a couple of curious turns here. First the theme of intercultural encounter migrates from the content of the textual object ("[i]ncompatible cultural values") to the structure of the reader's subjective relation to it ("ethnographic"). And then the analogy slips from anthropological observation to historical display—a slip, however, that confirms the commonsense view

relativist moment exemplified by the —understanding the representation of “low” culture as, now, the representation of “other” culture, and understanding “inconsistent” speech as in fact consistent with an unfamiliar standard—may have served as one of the key conditions enabling the widespread publication and circulation of local, folk, or regional literatures. Nor is to suggest that their proliferation and popularity did nothing, in turn, to cement the pluralist culture concept. It is simply to take note of the ways in which such texts sometimes exceeded and even exploded the paradigm that occasioned their production.

### 3. Rather than the Romance

However much we’ve heard in the late twentieth and twenty-first century academy about interdisciplinarity, it would be difficult to imagine today’s most prominent anthropologists collaborating on a volume of short stories. But it happened in 1922. Edited by Elsie Clews Parsons and introduced by Kroeber, *American Indian Life: By Several of Its Students* featured original fiction by Boas, Stewart Culin, Robert Lowie, Edward Sapir, and Leslie Spier, among others. The collection aims to bridge the gap between the rarefied and the romantic in accounts of tribal custom and experience. So, anyway, writes Parsons in her preface. She opens by quoting an exchange, presumably but not explicitly her own, with a New Mexico missionary’s wife.

“Where did you get your impressions of Indians before you came here?”  
“From Fenimore Cooper.”<sup>40</sup>

The shortcomings of this source do not require a lot of editorial clarification by the 1920s. Consider a couple of famous potshots from three decades earlier: Stephen Crane undermines James Fenimore Cooper’s depiction of Uncas as a noble savage by appealing to the authority of “folk-lore” (meaning the oral history of the town where Uncas, of *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757*, lived and died) while Mark Twain in 1895 mocks Cooper’s representations of Indians and points out his weakness “in the construction of dialogue. . . . He even failed to notice that the man who talks corrupt English six days in the week must and will talk it on the seventh, and can’t help himself.”<sup>41</sup> In his introduction Kroeber affirms the literary-realist paradigm that shapes such criticisms, comparing the anthropologists’ method in writing fiction to “that of the historical novel, with emphasis on the history rather than the romance” (13). The motivation of this emphasis, and of Parson’s reproduction of the conversation about Cooper, comes into sharper perspective when one takes into account the exigencies of a

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of ethnography as salvage, as preserving something disappearing into the past. Constance Decker Thompson, “The Singing Spirit: Early Short Stories by North American Indians. Edited by Bernd C. Peyer. (University of Arizona, \$24.95),” *New York Times*, Arts section, February 11, 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Elsie Clews Parsons, ed., *American Indian Life*, illus. C. Grant LaFarge (University of Nebraska Press, 1967 [1922]), 1. Hereafter cited as *AIL*.

<sup>41</sup> For reprints of these pieces see R. W. Stallman, “Stephen Crane and Cooper’s Uncas,” *American Literature* (1967), and Mark Twain, “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” *New England Quarterly* (1946).

nascent academic discipline attempting to establish the borders of its terrain. The opening dialogue frames the volume by setting it against both missionary experience and literary romance, two of the modes of knowledge—along with travel writing—from which anthropology needed to differentiate itself in order to stake its claim to the status of a science.

The question of discursive consistency played an important role in this disciplinary formation; for this reason, before returning to the question of the literary, I'd like to briefly discuss the problem of nomenclature, which becomes a focal point in the attempt to define the anthropological science. Because it can refer to the nomenclature used by both scientists' objects (i.e., the nouns and names used by natives) and scientists themselves (i.e., the nouns and names used by ethnographers) it offers a useful term for thinking about the limits of this definitional attempt. Kroeber's anthropological work both in North America and in the Philippines is well known for how it uses nomenclature to explore the relationships between signs and social relations—or to adapt James's phrase which I quoted in the introduction, the relationships that constitute "systems of speech and [social] fact." ("Both in talk and thought we deal in *kinds*," James wrote; my emphasis.) In essays published in the first two decades of the century Kroeber explores what terms of kinship and of religion have or don't have to do with customs and institutions, arguing that names allow a historically-oriented anthropologist to get good information about trajectories of cultural diffusion:

A specific religious element held in common by two nations, is obviously the result of their having at some time come under a common cultural influence. Among such elements, names are the best indices. Rites or beliefs become modified, or may be only partially similar, so that information must be detailed before they can be adjudged as belonging to one or to more classes. Names, after their dialectic alteration is allowed for, are either the same or wholly different. Distinctly proper names, such as the designations of deities and ceremonies, are particularly valuable, since their original identity remains beyond suspicion even when their meaning changes radically.

In other words, to extend James's example about calling Cain Abel, if one were to discover "Cain" and "Abel" being referred to in some alien religious or mythic system, even if these names were being used in some other way, one would have a good starting point for tracking the history of their diffusion. For Kroeber names are epistemologically useful traces; even when their referent shifts, they remain "the best indices" of linguistic influence, the stickiest surfaces for the residue of discursive history. Nomenclature thus becomes a channel for articulating, on one hand, claims about the synchronic internal structures of cultures—that is, the relationship between terms and social structures—and, on the other hand, claims about diachronic interaction between and across cultures.

But nomenclature also interestingly becomes important for claims about anthropology itself as a discursive field, as we can see if we turn to the paper—"Systematic Nomenclature in Ethnology"—that Kroeber delivered in abstract at the first meeting of the American Anthropological Association on the west coast on August 31, 1905 (a presentation that led to the formation of a committee with the task of reporting

“on the most desirable nomenclature for Indian linguistic families north of Mexico”).<sup>42</sup> The meeting was first scheduled to take place in Portland until Kroeber successfully lobbied to get it moved down to the Bay Area, where the University of California anthropology department was only a few years old (and was in dire financial straits that may have motivated the thrust of Kroeber’s paper). Kroeber opens by praising a seminal 1891 report on *Indian Linguistic Families Of America, North Of Mexico* by John Wesley Powell, director of the Bureau of American Ethnology until his death in 1902.<sup>43</sup> The only lamentable fact about Powell’s research, Kroeber writes, is its inconsistent and ill-chosen nomenclature. The fact that many of the anthropological terms “that owe their life and continuance entirely to Powell are long, difficult to pronounce, and in barbarous and unphonetic orthography—an orthography which on other occasions Powell himself denounced vigorously and effectively—is perhaps a minor consideration, but one that has also been of consequence in preventing their acceptance in many quarters.”<sup>44</sup> And as a result references to tribes, places, and languages are, in Kroeber’s view, woefully inconsistent. What’s needed is standardization.

Given that need, the next question becomes: by what principle does one standardize? The answer Powell had given, citing the precedent in biology, had been the law of priority, according to which the name to be used in publication would be the one designated by the first scientist to identify and classify the object in question. But noting that the law of priority had produced confusion and contention, rather than the desired effect of consistency, Kroeber argued for the necessity of using terms in anthropology that were consistent with “general usage,” the terms used in everyday discourse. But in Kroeber’s account it doesn’t make sense to simply import the methodologies of other sciences, for the question of terms is not in fact just a metasemantic question—in other words, by what rules should we standardize our terminology? It’s also a metapragmatic one: What kind of discipline are we, and to what public do we desire to speak? “The biological sciences may constitute themselves as an independent entity sufficient unto themselves,” Kroeber writes, but “ethnology cannot afford to do so [and he’s in a position to perhaps mean that literally]. Its last court of appeal will always be, not the opinions of a small body of professional anthropologists, but the opinion of the world at large” (“SNE,” 593).

Even though Kroeber began his essay by complaining about the ugly orthography of many of the terms that Powell put into circulation, he makes it clear in the essay’s conclusion that the popular acceptance of a term should trump any of its other intrinsic qualities. “Every consideration of form, including that of correctness, is subsidiary [to general usage], and should be unhesitatingly sacrificed where the case is otherwise clear.” Yet he’s careful to note that there are some instances in which the case is not so

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<sup>42</sup> Sessions of August 31, 1905 AAA meeting (“Proceedings of the California Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, August 29-September 2, 1905”), *American Anthropologist* 7 (1905): 737.

<sup>43</sup> John Wesley Powell, *Indian Linguistic Families Of America, North Of Mexico* (Bureau of American Ethnology, 1891). In a related project James Mooney collected a “synonymy” of American tribes before having any professional affiliation with an anthropological institution; the work got him a job under Powell at the BAE.

<sup>44</sup> A. L. Kroeber, “Systematic Nomenclature in Ethnology,” *American Anthropologist* 7 (1905), 581. Hereafter cited as “SNE.”

clear, in which two or more names for the same ethnological object happen both to be used in wide circulation. He writes

But where the scale is nearly in the balance, or where there is reason to believe that the tendency of the future will be toward the name which is at present less used but which is inherently better, it will be well to pause before rendering a definite verdict. It is a disadvantage of usage as a canon that it is at times indeterminate and that no vote or poll is possible or desirable; and for this reason, with usage as a guide, we shall always have a few terms on which opinions will differ. But, to compensate, is the fact that this occasional indeterminateness leaves room and provides opportunity for improvement, for the substitution of the better name for the worse, and of the better form for the inferior. It is well, therefore, to go slowly and consider maturely. Sooner or later the cases that seem most indeterminate will solve themselves; and while the one essential criterion should always be usage, it will be worthwhile at least to consider correctness and appropriateness of names. ("SNE," 590)

There's some strain here between the statement that the indeterminate cases "will solve themselves," on the one hand, and the exhortation, on the other hand, that scholars should proceed with care and maturity in deciding when it is appropriate to pause before rendering their terminological verdict. Kroeber cedes authority to the discursive forms that seem to be ensconced in everyday discourse, while holding on to a claim for the ability to discern what forms might be emergent. While Kroeber acknowledges that "It is a disadvantage of usage as a canon that it is at times indeterminate," this indeterminacy is not, for him, what throws the speaker outside the "universe" or "system of speech and fact"; it is the very marker of such a system's felicitous continuity with everyday discourse. For Kroeber, making everyday talk rather than scientific priority one's guideline in nomenclature necessarily means that some terms will remain under dispute. But the potential heteroglossia of ethnographic discourse, "the scratching of other pens" in James Clifford's words, does not mark a "crisis of representation" (*PC*, 26). After all, Kroeber writes, "when the final tale is told, when a generation or a century has passed, and the reckoning is made, who can doubt which would prevail,—the terminology of mankind as a whole, or the reactionary and isolating terminology of a small body of professional anthropologists?" ("SNE," 590). Here the abnegation of scientific distinction functions as a claim for the expansiveness of the discipline and so a paradoxically a way of grounding of authority in everyday discourse.

Parsons's preface to the 1922 volume of anthropological short stories, *American Indian Life*, proceeds in terms remarkably similar to Kroeber's commentary on nomenclature. "Appearances to the contrary," she wryly notes, "anthropologists have no wish to keep their science or any part of it esoteric." Quietly suggesting a parallel between (to repeat William James's phrase) the "system of speech and fact" that is anthropological research and those that are "tribal cultures," Parsons then invokes the trope of the vanishing Indian not only to justify the value of anthropological pursuit but also, implicitly, to figure its own potential extinction: anthropologists "are too well aware, for one thing, that facilities for the pursuit of anthropology are dependent more or less on popular interest, and that only too often tribal cultures have disappeared in America as elsewhere before people became interested enough in them to learn about

them.” The motivation for the volume is the conservation not of tribal cultures (their disappearance presumed inevitable) but of funded researchers. Those researchers, Parsons writes, have the opportunity to inform a reading public, if only they’d be willing to modify the form of their discourse. After all, between the “legends” of Cooper’s novels and the “forbidding” tedium of academic monographs, “what is there . . . to read for a girl who is going to spend her life among Indians or, in fact, for anyone who just wants to know more about Indians?” (*AIL*, 1). There are, of course, straightforward answers to this rhetorical question, in the form, for example, of fiction and folklore by American Indian writers. Native writing from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries may have become more readily available with the anthologies that have been published since the late 1960s, but the fact that such anthologies were not ready to hand in 1922 does not so much make the choice to pursue a different editorial project self-evident as it does underscore the motivation of that choice. To adopt the terms of the sociologist of science Bruno Latour, in positing this chasm between rarefied and romantic, Parsons construes the field of literary production into a polarity between pure and contaminated that then justifies the production of a hybridized ethnographic fiction. Through this purification and hybridization, the double gesture that Latour argues is constitutive of the idea of a “modern” epistemological position, the field of scientific professional discourse enters back into relation—but carefully, on its own terms—with the contaminated and subjective, with the literary.<sup>45</sup>

Framing the volume in this way has the effect of effacing texts and traditions that might offer a better fit than do monograph or romance, an effacement along two axes. The first is ethnic; Kroeber’s introduction admits that because outsiders can’t get humor right the anthropologists’ stories aren’t particularly funny, but there are of course stories out there at this moment by “insiders.” Insisting on the value of modern anthropology’s inductive process, Kroeber nevertheless writes that the mode of fiction “allows a freedom in depicting or suggesting the thoughts and feelings of the Indian, such as is impossible in a formal, scientific report.” After all,

every American anthropologist with field experience, holds in his memory many interpretations, many convictions as to how his Indians feel, why they act as they do in a given situation, what goes on inside of them. This psychology of the Indian has been expressed by the frontiersman, the missionary and trader, by the man of the city, even. But it has been very little formulated by the very men who know most, who have each given a large block of their lives to acquiring intensive and exact information about the Indian and his culture. (*AIL*, 14)

Again one can see the double move that was apparent in Kroeber’s early essay on nomenclature, in which it becomes desirable for anthropological discourse to be continuous with the everyday, with the stories told “by the man of the city,” and yet to retain some authoritative power of judgment, a power that is in this case grounded precisely and paradoxically on the adherence to “intensive and exact information.” As in the distinction between ceding terminological authority to general usage while claiming powers of discernment as to what forms might emerge in the future (a claim based on

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<sup>45</sup> See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, 1993).

the very adherence of correctness that one had given up), here we see a parallel move in the ethnographer's entry into the literary field: recognizing the need to abandon scientific purity while also citing it as what authorizes one to do so. The second effacement is generic; oddly, Kroeber stretches to the historical novel rather than to, say, the regionalist short story as a generic model for these short stories. As both Amy Kaplan and Richard Brodhead have argued, these two axes are in fact conflated in the very term "regionalism," differentiated from "realism" primarily on the basis of its marginalized or racialized position.<sup>46</sup> Because it is the anthropologist's task to explain the condition of such marginal subjects, regionalism has to be effaced as a potential competitor. Trying to maintain scientific authority while admitting to the continuity of one's discourse with the everyday requires disavowing the potential theoretical agency of other "folk" discourse (to recall the argument by Bauman and Briggs that I cited in the introduction).

The editorial vision set out by Parsons and Kroeber in framing *American Indian Life*, however, fails to contain the variability of the stories that make it up. (Michael Elliott has insightfully commented on Boas's single contribution, a commentary to which I'll return later, but because he only discusses the single story he doesn't fully communicate the volume's heterogeneity.) Their narrative modes range from storytelling cliché—at the end of one of Lowie's contributions, the woman who has been telling the tale reveals herself, ghost-story fashion, as also its protagonist—to social scientific pronouncement. "The tabus are largely preventative measures," notes Sapir in an interpretive digression (*AIL*, 309), while Parson's own contribution, previously published in 1919 and identified in a footnote as the prototype for the volume, gives its central character a name only to describe her life in generalities. "Waiyautitsa will give birth to three or four children, probably not more," she writes, using not the standard past tense of fictional narrative but instead the future tense of sociological probability, "and then, as she approaches middle age, we may suppose that she falls sick" (*AIL*, 169). In the story's conclusion, Parsons explicitly comments on the instrumentality of this cautious biography for the theorization of culture: "Were we to understand the interplay of all these factors in the life, shall we say, of Waiyautitsa, we might be a long way towards understanding the principles of society, even other than that of Zuñi" (*AIL*, 173).<sup>47</sup>

It's important to note that Parsons's eye remains on the universal, on finding the universal in the particular. If this seems to imply a stance of interpretive objectivity, that stance is curiously at odds with the affiliation with which Parsons identifies herself in the table of contents: while most of the authors' names are followed by their academic positions, Parsons identifies herself as "Member of the Hopi Tribe," invoking the authority of experience rather than interpretation.<sup>48</sup> This identification is a thumbnail

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<sup>46</sup> Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire" in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliot (Columbia University Press, 1991), 240-66; Richard H. Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>47</sup> Elsie Clews Parsons, "Waiyautitsa of Zuñi, New Mexico," *AIL*, 157-73.

<sup>48</sup> There are two other exceptions in the same table of contents; "A. M Stephen, Sometime Resident Among the Hopi and Navaho," and "By T. B. Reed and Elsie Clews Parsons. Mr. Reed is an Alaskan (Ten'a) student in Hampton Institute."

version of a going-native theme that features in some of the volume's odder entries. In M. R. Harrington's "The Thunder Power of Rumbling-Wings," the narrator, on discovering "pre-historic" remains, asks: "What archaeologist has not sat upon the brink of a newly uncovered grave and wished that the fleshless jaws before him could speak and tell their story? Or wished that he himself could be transported backward in time for a brief space to learn something of the life of a bygone day? So I sat and so I wished" (*AIL*, 107), and when he is struck by lightning (the mode of time-travel H. G. Wells dismissed as foolish romance in *The Time Machine* [1895]), the wish comes true. The archaeologist "assume[s] the body and belongings of the Indian whose skeleton we had unearthed" and finds himself living as a member of a "pre-historic" tribe and learning their beliefs and customs. Not their skills, though: in contrast to the holocaust bang of modern weaponry that concludes Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, the archaeologist's incompetence with a bow and arrow leads to the whimper of his adopted household's slide into privation (until, finally, a second strike of lightning sends him back to the future [*AIL*, 125]). The story offers a fantasy version of the understanding of ethnography as a kind of time-travel, an understanding that is commensurate with—indeed, that assumes—a social-evolutionary framework according to which societies can to be compared on the basis of their progress along a universal timeline from simple to complex, savage to civilized. The fact that Harrington had been trained by the most insistent critic of this perspective, Boas, only exemplifies the kinds of confusion and continuity that marked a period we have often understood in terms of a sharp and total transition from one paradigm to the next.

Likewise, the contribution that might, surprisingly, strike a reader as the most "relativist" of the volume (insofar as it takes an ethnographic observer as the object of its narration, rather than pretending to the possibility of disembodied observation, as most of the entries do) is Stewart Culin's "Zuñi Pictures"—surprisingly, perhaps, because as a University of Pennsylvania anthropologist of the previous generation, Culin had for most of his career proceeded on the premises of social evolutionism, premises that one can discern in the comparative methodology of his studies of games.<sup>49</sup> Yet as Adrian Greci Green has pointed out, the diffusionist focus of Culin's studies, their attention to the spatial transfer of practices and artifacts as an historical process, anticipated a key aspect of particularist methodology.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Frank Hamilton Cushing, Culin's colleague from Philadelphia and the central figure in his contribution to *American Indian Life*, has attracted scholarly interest recently for the way that his thinking seems to mark the "end of . . . that stalled period before the paradigmatic shift from social-evolutionary to cultural anthropology, from a universalistic understanding of tribes like the Zuni as ancient ancestors of modern western civilization to a relativistic understanding of them as having a local and particular historical trajectory and complex social organization" (*BC*, 35). But Cushing has of course also long attracted interest for the performativity of his ethnographic practice—he became famous in the early 1890s with his widely read magazine accounts of his "adventures among the Zuni"—and this performativity is at the heart of Culin's posthumous representation of him in the 1922 story, the main text of which refers to Cushing only by his Zuni name, Tenetsali. (A

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<sup>49</sup> See Stewart Culin, "American Indian Games," *American Anthropologist* 5, no. 1, New Series (January 1, 1903): 58-64.

<sup>50</sup> Adriana Greci Green, untitled review, *Ethnohistory* 41, no. 2 (April 1, 1994): 333-335.



footnote reveals his non-Zuni identity.) A curious observer of local custom who may as well be Culin, the narrator describes a conversation with a “farmer-agent” in whose home “Tenetsali had remained concealed in the long interval from the time he rode out so debonairly on the war-path to take a scalp, and the arrival of a scalp from Washington.” He needed to take a scalp to become a member of the Zuni bow priesthood, but since “he would not secure a scalp in the orthodox way, he had to get one as best he could. It was a very old scalp, one from the National Museum collected by Lewis H. Morgan many years before” (*AIL*, 175).<sup>51</sup>

At this point it is worth returning to Oskison, an early story of whose—“The Biologist’s Quest” (1901)—plays on similar tropes of collection, classification, and cultural performativity.<sup>52</sup> Lake, “a collector of small mammal skins for the Smithsonian authorities in Washington and for the British Museum,” is seeking a “certain species of short tailed rat.” It is not certain that this species even exists, but “[t]he Smithsonian authority believed that it did, from reports sent in by Aldrich, who had collected in the Southwest until 1893, when he was killed by a superstitious Mexican”; and if it does exist, this makes it “a curious survival, and the scientist who could secure and classify it would earn an enviable reputation.” After wandering away from his Mexican and Yuma guides in the Baja heat for a day, Lake himself winds up near dead, abandons collecting, gives his tools to the guides (who later sell them to another collector), and moves to San Francisco. “Professor McLean, of the Pennsylvania Scientific Society, published a pamphlet in the fall of 1897 to show that the short-tailed rat described by the Smithsonian authority never existed except in the imagination” (“BQ,” 52). Indeed, the only appearance made by “the wonderful short-tailed rat” is in Lake’s sun-addled reverie. He sees the rodent “swimming forever from bank to bank of a sluggish salt pool that rose and fell as the tide crept in and out” (“BQ,” 55). The story depicts inquiry’s inevitable conclusion in incoherence and hallucination, in alternation: bank to bank, rise and fall, in and out. But seen through another perspective—the native tradition of the vision quest—the pun of the title introduces another possibility. The dream of the rat is either an encounter with a guardian animal in a vision quest or a dehydrated hallucination that parodically takes the form of a vision quest. The text does not give its reader sufficient evidence to determine which metasemantic framework to apply to its title, which is of course precisely how a pun works: playing on the indeterminacy of its semantic reference, it invokes more than one metalinguistic framework so as to induce a state of “alternating apperception.” The short tale reader is left, like the short-tailed rat, “swimming forever from bank to bank.”

In the main text of the story, the kind of oscillation between “system[s] of speech and fact” at play in its title is also at play in the description of Lake’s Yuma guide:

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<sup>51</sup> Stewart Culin, “Zuni Pictures,” in *American Indian Life*, ed. Parons, 175-78. ). The story ends: “It grew dark and I left the plaza, in a daze. What did it all mean—the painted box, the swallowed trees, the white mask?” (*AIL*, 178). Culin introduced Cushing to Thomas Eakins, which led to Eakins’s well known portrait of Cushing in tribal dress (*Frank Hamilton Cushing*, 1895). See Braddock, *TE*, for the best-developed discussion of this portrait.

<sup>52</sup> John Oskison, “The Biologist’s Quest,” *Overland Monthly* 38 (July 1901): 52-57. Hereafter cited as “BQ.”

Kitti Quist told the collector tales of the glory which had been Yuma's years before. He said he had been the most feared medicine man in the Southwest. He had laughed in those days at the timorous Yaquis who danced their snake dance with serpents that were young. He had done that dance with five big rattlesnakes twined on his arms and around his neck. But the Yumas grew poorer, less energetic, and careless of the fame of their great man. He had been compelled to go up to Yuma and do tricks for the tourists when the railroad came crawling in from the plains. Then he had guided prospectors to the mountains, and looked on with a smile when they came back half starved and cursing the day they were born. After that he had cured an Arizona Governor of the rheumatism by sucking the man's knee-joints and shoulder blades, and he had become a self-important white man's medicine doctor. But he neglected to advertise and business fell off. Now he was going to help the new doctor catch rats—for what he knew not. And next he would be?—well, he didn't know. ("BQ," 52-53)

Taken together, the two unanswered questions at the end of this passage—what is the purpose of Lake's quest, and what is the trajectory of Kitti Quist's strange career?—allow the story to signify on the trope of the scientific observer gone native. Signify on, rather than simply deploy, not only because it is without any intention that Lake stumbles into an ambiguous vision quest that he may not even understand as such, but also because the itinerant career of the story's central "native," a career that has as much to do with marketing as with folkways, seems to destabilize that very category. Such forms of performativity, undercutting essentialism, have played a part in recent critiques of the culture concept, but in an important essay on "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal" (1995), Sherry B. Ortner has argued that this is an ethically compromised move. Making a provocative bid for the continued value of the notion of "authenticity," Ortner urges scholars interested in resistance to recognize that subalterns have "an authentic, and not merely reactive, culture." While the latter concept has also been subject to strong critiques, it can likewise, for Ortner, be rehabilitated—indeed, must be, since

The only alternative to recognizing that subalterns have a certain prior and ongoing cultural authenticity, according to subalterns, is to view subaltern responses to domination as ad hoc and incoherent, springing not from their own senses of order, justice, meaning, and the like but only from some set of ideas called into being by the situation of domination itself.<sup>53</sup>

Yet neither alternative offers, on its own, an adequate framework for reading Kitti Quist's career, which takes shape not only as an expression of the "authentic" political, ethical, and practical resources of the Yuma, nor only as a random series of responses to the situation that have nothing to do with the relative ("relative" because the story goes out of its way to mention, for instance, what Wittgenstein would call the family resemblances, if also the differences, in snake-dancing practices across tribes) particularity of Yuma traditions.

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<sup>53</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, "Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (January 1, 1995): 173-93.

In its interwoven themes of animal capture, ethnographic knowledge, and the difficulty of distinguishing natural ecologies and systems of cultural circulation, “The Biologist’s Quest” seems to respond directly to another well known work of regionalist short fiction, Sarah Orne Jewett’s “The White Heron” (1886). In it a hunter comes to a rural New England enclave in search of a rare bird, and a young girl, Sylvia, helps him look for its nest. In the end she finds the heron, but when it’s time to report she becomes “dumb,” she feels “she must keep silence,” she “cannot speak” else “the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!”<sup>54</sup> Sylvia’s refusal reflects not only what Ortner would describe as an “authentic” identification (so authentic it is encoded in the etymology of her name) with “the dumb life of the forest,” but also an “ad hoc and incoherent” resistance to the ordering pressure of the collector’s quest. In Jewett’s story silence seems to provide the bridge between a political affiliation with the “dull little life” of the ethnic enclave and a natural affinity for the “dumb life of the forest.” Speechlessness plays an important role in Oskison’s work—in *The Singing Bird*, Ellen (like Parsons’s interlocutor in the preface to *American Indian Life*, a missionary’s wife,) lapses late in the novel into a multi-year silence, while “The Problem of Old Harjo” concludes with an unsettling moment of “mute appeal.”

I’ll return to that moment in the next section, but first, with this thematic of silenced ethnicity in mind, it bears mentioning that in Boas’s contribution to *American Indian Life*, a story titled “The Winter Village,” the protagonist is named “No-tongue”—the connotations of which are singled out for attention by the fact that it’s in fact almost the only name in the story rendered in English. (How, to pick up Kroeber’s argument about nomenclature once more, can a name be the best index of cultural diffusion when it’s been translated?) In his 2002 book *The Culture Concept* Elliott discusses a song that, in the middle of the story, No-tongue sings when he is stranded on an ice floe, suggestively reading this moment as an indication of Boas’s potential awareness of the culture concept’s capacity both to give voice to and to silence the ethnographic subject. These themes emerge again, though, and somewhat more conspicuously and complexly, in the second song that No-tongue sings as he leaves the winter village for an uncertain future. I quote the song, which concludes the story and the volume, in full:

Ayaya, beautiful is the great world when summer is coming at last!  
 Ayaya, beautiful is the great world when the caribou begin to come!  
 Ayaya, when the little brooks roar in our country.  
 Ayaya, I feel sorry for the gulls, for they cannot speak,  
 Ayaya, I feel sorry for the ravens, for they cannot speak.  
 Ayaya, if I cannot catch birds I quickly get plenty of fish.  
 Ayaya! (*AIL*, 378)

No-tongue gets the last word in Boas’s story, and this is it. What to make of this “ayaya”? It organizes No-tongue’s first song in the same way, but Elliott makes nothing of its appearance there. As I’ll suggest in a moment, this may be less a matter of critical

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<sup>54</sup> Sarah Orne Jewett, “A White Heron,” in Louis A. Renza, *A White Heron and the Question of Minor Literature* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), xx.

neglect than a reasonable readerly response to the logic of the text. The first thing to note is that the ayaya song is an Inuit form with a long tradition. And so its presence here serves as the index of something culturally particular. Here it is ayaya that seems to be the best index of some cultural origin. But why does that mean that this particular locution should be singled out as the one untranslatable element of No-tongue's song? (One could imagine, for instance, a translation of "ayaya" as the "O" of English lyric.) Or to put the question the other way, how does the untranslated status of ayaya—the mirror image of its utterer's exceptionally translated name—signify its status as culturally particular?

The rest of No-tongue's song allows us to work toward an answer. Notice how the anaphoric repetition of "ayaya" at the beginning of each line tracks the speaker's movement from the visual appreciation of dumb life ("beautiful is the great world") to the pathos of its speechlessness ("I feel sorry") and then to the material exigencies of surviving as a part of it ("get plenty of fish")—from, in other words, aesthetics to affect to bare life. It makes sense, then, for this progression to end, in the seventh and final line, with that last lone "ayaya," the kind of cry or non-semantic vocalization that is often understood to articulate human and nonhuman, culture and nature.<sup>55</sup> In the movement of the song, the discursive marker of something culturally particular empties of symbolic signification, reduces to immanence. And this is perhaps why Elliott doesn't say anything about it: because what there is to say is that it doesn't mean much, at least not semantically. The print index of a tonality that resists print, it's therefore apt that this sound is literally (if only in the sense that it's composed of letters) an alternating sound: a-y-a-y-a. Thirty-odd years after demonstrating their nonexistence, Boas keeps writing them.

#### 4. Silent Letters

In order to put more substance on that last point, let me turn once again to Wead's 1900 essay extending Boas's argument about alternating sounds to the field of ethnomusicology. He goes on to claim that Boas's argument "has a suggestiveness and significance in a direction quite different from that considered by the author"—namely, in the direction of musical notation. Wead is interested in how the problem of apparent tonal inconsistencies in "primitive" musical performances might in fact be resolved through a more sensitive system of notation, one more subtle than the five-line Western staff (so as to be able to represent semi-tones more accurately). But this use of Boas's idea is more apt than Wead realizes. In Boas's first monograph, *The Central Eskimo*, published in 1888—the year before his essay on alternating sounds—he did in fact go in the direction that Wead claims is a departure. Boas's monograph concludes with examples of the tradition of Inuit "a-jaa-ja" or "ayaya" songs and with a discussion of the difficulty of properly transcribing the tonalities of Inuit music, which often uses intervals of a half-tone or less and which tends to be difficult to notate with the key system of Western music. Introducing a set of Inuit songs—several of them in the tradition of ayaya chants—that are printed in the volume on the five-line staff and with the usual Western notational apparatus, Boas suggests, in closing, that this apparatus—

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<sup>55</sup> See Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

particularly, the Western key system—is incommensurate with the conventions of the context from which the songs are drawn (244).

Wead's piece concludes with a reflection on the question of whether accuracy of tone matters in all musical traditions. "It is sometimes asserted that the deviations of, e. g., Indian music from our scale are immaterial and of no significance," Wead writes, "but the people who say so furnish no facts." Wead argues that it is key to approach the question inductively and with a sense of contextual variability:

Unquestionably the deviations of some Negro songs and of many Oriental tunes are material and intentional, and are as significant of history and relationship as the silent letters in many English words. If, however, the deviations in the tunes of any people should be proved to be non-significant, we shall learn therefrom that the enjoyment of music is not generally dependent on that most modern demand of the harmonic musician—accuracy of intonation—and that the simple music of primitive peoples does not need the firm harmonic foundations of German folk-song or modern music. (79)

In this passage one can see an interesting collision between, on one hand, Boasian relativism and, on the other, the tacitly social-evolutionary hierarchy that would differentiate "modern" harmonics from those of the "simple primitive." Here we have the "confusion" Kroeber will describe in 1917. But what draws my attention is the question we started with (and to which Michaels offers his polemical answer) in reference to the iteration of the brand: do the particulars of form always matter, and for what reasons? For Wead, the very construction of the binary of intentionality and accident through which we often apprehend aesthetic form is itself fully dependent on cultural context. With this in mind, I'd like to return to the silent lettering of Harjo's brand, whose function, the ordering of inarticulate life, and whose form, a grapheme reflected and cut, might like "ayaya" start to evoke the phantom object of the alternating sound—the object that seems to require reproduction even as it resists representation.

Let me get there by way of the plot. Harjo attends weekly service and desires to become a member of the church. Miss Evans is determined to bring him to salvation. To do so, her superiors remind her, she'll need to convince the stubborn bigamist to part with one of his wives, 'Liza or Jennie. Thinking it best to go to "the Creek's own home where the evidences of his sin should confront him as she explained," Evans goes to visit Harjo, who at first thinks she must be speaking "in fun." He and his wives joke about running a race to decide which will stay and which will go. Evans has to assure Harjo that she's serious: "The church cannot be defiled by receiving a bigamist into its membership." But she finds herself impressed by the symmetry and sympathy that structure this union, eventually coming to the conclusion that to pull it apart would be "cruel and useless." When she arrives at the ranch, Harjo's first line of quoted dialogue, "These two my wife," the broken form of his syntax seems to mimic the alterity of his customs ("OH," 237). And yet the resolution of Liza and Jennie into the singular "wife" also suggests, for Evans, a surprising coherence. Boas argued that it's precisely through reference to a native context that apparent phonetic inconsistencies will resolve themselves, and the same move, at least at first glance, is made here. Just as the contradiction of an alternating sound resolves itself within the coherence of an

alternative phonemic order; the contradiction of alternating wives, viewed in context, resolves into a simple unit.

Early in the story Harjo's appearance, with his long hair, reminds Evans of the patriarch Abraham, but Liza and Jennie have none of the strife of Sarah and Hagar. Would it be possible for this story to represent an instance of polygamy that's *less* happy? That includes patriarchal violence? In my reading, it would not. The story needs an example of difference that's available to the missionary's sentimental identification in order to make her relativistic turn plausible. We have difference here. We don't have disagreement. Thinking of cultural systems as such—that is, as particular integrated wholes—closes off questions of social stratification, goes a familiar critique; questions of power disappear in the solvent of a functional cultural unity. As Michaels puts the point, "culture . . . has become a primary technology for disarticulating difference from disagreement [and] for disarticulating difference from inequality" (SS, 16-17). If in Oskison's story a fictional ethical equivalence provides the necessary condition for the thought experiment of cultural particularism, that experiment ends up, in the conclusion of the story, condemned for the inconclusiveness of its effects. After Evans visits Harjo, the story plays out its central tension for a while; he comes to church services, she agonizes over how to proceed. But then it just ends, not with the dialectical sublation of particulars but rather in a problem so particular that its resolution can't be imagined. Talal Asad writes that what we study when we study conversion are "the narratives by which people apprehend and describe a radical change in the significance of their lives."<sup>56</sup> If Oskison's story is such a narrative, it is one in which the radical change at hand is not conversion but conversion's failure, a failure that seems unredeemable. Here is the story's conclusion:

Month after month, as old Harjo continued to occupy his seat in the mission meetings, with that mute appeal in his eyes and a persistent light of hope on his face, Miss Evans repeated the question, "What can be done?" [. . . ] Harjo was her creation, her impossible convert, and throughout the years, until death—the great solvent which is not always a solvent—came to one of them, would continue to haunt her.

And meanwhile, what? ("OH," 241)

It's a rich moment, with the image of the "solvent" suggesting the intersection of violence and capital—"Materially, Harjo was solvent," the narrator informs us earlier ("OH," 236)—and with the curious logic of a haunting that occurs not after but *until* death. But I'd like to draw particular attention to the abrupt and incomplete closing interrogative—"And meanwhile, what?"—with which Oskison grammatically concretizes that sense of haunting. The text's final open-endedness at the level of plot is reproduced here as an ambiguity at the level of voice: it's unclear to what extent the free indirect discourse of the question ventriloquizes Evans's experience of ethical crisis, a social dilemma with no solution, and to what extent it voices the position of the narrator at the

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<sup>56</sup> Talal Asad, "Comments on Conversion," in Peter van der Veer (ed.) *Conversions to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity* (London: Routledge, 1996). On the analogy between conversion and translation, see also Gil Anidjar, "Muslim Jews," *Qui Parle* 18, no. 1 (October 1, 2009): 1-23.

center of a crisis of emplotment. Both are live possibilities, and the latter functions, I think, as a reflection of the former (as Oskison begins to suggest through the analogy with literary production implicit in the phrase “her creation”). In other words, the plot comes to this dead end because it’s structurally necessary for it to do so—because, for Oskison, this state of epistemological unfocus and interruption marks the limit of the particularist conceptualization of culture that has subtended the story’s apparent relativism.

In a 1966 talk before the American Anthropological Association, Paul Kay remarked that in the conceptualization of language and culture—a conceptualization that, because language is both a part of and like culture, takes the form of an unusually apt synecdoche, a synecdoche that is also a metaphor—it’s useful, even heuristically necessary, to “ignore the boundary or marginal-speaker problem.”<sup>57</sup> This is precisely the problem of old Harjo, the problem Oskison doesn’t allow Evans or the reader to ignore. Kay’s may be an especially acute version of particularist thinking, one that would be tempered in the coming decades by, for instance, sociolinguists’ increasing attention to pidgins and creoles in the 1970s and by Mikhail Bakhtin’s broad theoretical influence in the 1980s. But Kay’s understanding of ethnography as a practice that thrives on abstraction, allowing for heterogeneity but not for incongruousness—for multiculturalism but not its deconstruction—exemplifies a way of thinking that is made possible by—some critics would argue, that fulfills—a conceptualization of culture that comes about during Oskison’s early career and of which his fiction seem wary. Kay goes on to note that the observation of culture is devoted to describing the rules of possibility that govern a given context, even though one may recognize perfectly well that “impossible” behaviors take place “all the time”—socially proscribed acts, the utterance of bad grammar. In the conclusion of “Old Harjo” Oskison’s story redirects our attention not to normative rules of possibility but to a figure who alternates between more than one “system of speech and fact” and who therefore becomes, Evans laments, “her impossible convert.” If Harjo is, like his brand in the text, “matter out of place,” the embodiment of category confusion and taboo, the categories he confuses are “cultures” themselves and his brand the mark of what a particularist conceptualization of culture can’t articulate.

One is left here with a proliferation of dual commitments: Harjo committed to two wives; Harjo caught in the contradiction of two normative systems; Evans torn between her sympathetic, proto-multi-culturalist sympathy toward the marriage and the institutional imperatives of salvation. So Harjo’s brand presents a structurally apt icon of the double binds that the story is intent on multiplying.<sup>58</sup> It includes multiple

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Kay, “Ethnography and Theory of Culture,” *Bucknell Review* 14 (1966): 106-114.

<sup>58</sup> Like marking of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, frequently referred to by Hawthorne (whose granddaughter Hildegarde, incidentally, Oskison married in 1920) as a “brand,” the implication is that Harjo’s brand reveals something about his identity or his position—perhaps even his “crime.” The connection is echoed by a moment in *The Singing Bird* (although, again incidentally, by this point he and Hildegarde were divorced). Ellen, who has committed adultery, says: “I’ve been naughty, and must be stood in a corner—not with a dunce’s cap on my head, but—Paul, do you happen to have an iron for branding on my forehead the letter ‘A’?”

bisections but manages not to include a single cross, neatly visualizing the frustrated conversion toward which the story tends. But the more trenchant problem at hand is whether there's anything to be said about the parts of the brand that aren't so neat—about, say, the way that in one extant copy of the journal, the base of the middle column of the brand smudges slightly to the left. Are these elements as “significant of history and relationship,” to borrow Wead's words, “as the silent letters in many English words”—of which the letter *H* happens to be a quintessential example? Oskison doesn't help us answer the question but points to its inextricability from the politics of culture. While his work seems to share with critics of particularism a deep wariness about the value of pluralism, about what comes to be known as multiculturalism, the presence in his text of Harjo's brand also suggests that we might counterbalance that wariness with a positive attachment to aesthetic singularity—to a kind of particularity that, like the grain of the voice, is not fully fungible within an imagined economy of cultural particularisms. While this mark may remain as mute as the impossible convert's appeal—like a taboo, the brand can't be uttered—it nevertheless does remain.

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“‘The Scarlet Letter?’ No; we don't even brand our cattle. Farley says we have lost none yet; the Cherokees seem to have convinced the cattle thieves that it would be bad luck to steal from us.” (*SB*, 165)



## Chapter 2

### “The Impulse to Utter”: Oralism, Imitation, and Helen Keller’s Handwriting

#### 1. Anything That Made a Noise

In his introduction to *Sounds and Their Relations* (1887), Alexander Melville Bell presents a refinement of the phonetic alphabet—the “cosmopolitan scheme of speech-symbols”—that he had invented two decades earlier and given the name “Visible Speech”; his son, Alexander Graham Bell, among other roles the patron of Helen Keller, also contributed to the project. The alphabet consists of a set of characters that represent the positions of the speech organs in the act of uttering a given sound, a system that is meant both to achieve maximal applicability across human linguistic communities (assumed to have essentially the same physiology) and at the same time to facilitate the teaching of speech to those who, for reasons especially of auditory impairment, do not acquire it through imitative practice during their childhood years. Although the system was never adopted on any significant scale, the Bells held great ambitions for its potential application. In the opening of *Sounds and Their Relations*, Bell describes a problem that is remarkably similar to that which confronted Boas in his 1889 essay “On Alternating Sounds”:

All attempts to show the phonetic elements even of a single language by means of ordinary letters require the use of key-words, diacritic signs and arbitrary distinctions to a very inconvenient extent; and after all has been done that can be done, the result is imperfect, complex, and difficult of application; while the extension of the scheme to other languages is impracticable.

The solution to this problem, Bell writes, is Visible Speech, by means of which “all possible phonetic elements, and all the organic, mechanical and other relations of sounds, are expressed by symbols which have an absolute and uniform value in every context, so that speech of any variety is made legible in *fac simile* by readers in all countries.”<sup>59</sup>

Yet the initial application of the system, and the one to which the Bells remained primarily committed, was the instruction of the deaf in vocalization—in, that is, “vocal culture.” This commitment was the result of their taking a particular stance with regard to a debate that lasted from the mid-nineteenth century to the early-twentieth—namely, that between the oralist (or speech-based) rather than manualist (or American Sign Language–based) position in debates over deaf education.<sup>60</sup> What Bell sees as the cosmopolitan implications of a system designed for the vocal instruction of the deaf,

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Melville Bell, *Sounds and their Relations: A Complete Manual of Universal Alphabets: Illustrated by Means of Visible Speech: and Exhibiting the Pronunciation of English, in Various Styles, and of Other Languages and Dialects* (Edgar S. Werner, 1887).

<sup>60</sup> See R. A. R. Edwards, *Words Made Flesh: Nineteenth-Century Deaf Education and the Growth of Deaf Culture* (New York University Press, 2012).

others would see as totalizing. Oralism is now a position that is anathema to much of the Deaf community; indeed, the very idea of Deaf-with-a-capital-D culture, as a group determined by “cultural” affiliation rather than “natural” disability—or to put it historically, as a group that has taken on board the last few decades’ critiques, both by activists and academics, of the very idea that disability is a physical rather than socially constructed category—is typically premised on the rejection of oralism. Article 30.4 of the United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) makes the association of cultural with linguistic particularity unusually explicit: “Persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their *specific cultural and linguistic identity*, including sign languages and deaf culture.”<sup>61</sup>

Keller’s attitudes were closer to Bell’s than to this Convention’s. Even if spoken language was not in fact a major component of her everyday linguistic practice, in her view it was a privileged medium of social relation—a logocentric attitude that retrospectively complicates her relationship to what has come to be known, over the course of the twentieth century, as Deaf Culture. Keller was not opposed to the use of sign language and the manual alphabet; she relied primarily on the latter throughout her life. But even though learning that alphabet was a transformative event for her—as Anne Sullivan wrote on April 5 1887, when Keller was six, “She has learned that *everything has a name, and that the manual alphabet is the key to everything she wants to know*”—Keller still felt that “One who is entirely dependent upon the manual alphabet has always a sense of restraint, of narrowness.”<sup>62</sup> Understanding speech as particularly important to her integration into human society, she insists throughout her career on the primacy of speech. “It was truly a sound from the Divine when the word ‘man’ was pronounced,” she said in a 1947 talk titled “The Power of the Spoken Word.” This utterance was “his exodus from the animal state to conscious thought and speech.”<sup>63</sup> The transformative power of speech was already a theme of her first memoir, *The Story of My Life*, published serially in 1902 and in book form in 1903. “The impulse to utter audible sounds had always been strong within me,” she writes of her early childhood self—the self that she will later term “Phantom” because it seemed to her in retrospect to have dwelled in the shadowy margins of humanity. “I used to make noises, keeping one hand on my throat while the other hand felt the movements of my lips. I was pleased with anything that made a noise and liked to feel the cat purr and the dog bark” (*SML*, 47). While it is not visible speech but tactile noise that Keller presents as the gateway to spoken language, the priority of the physical medium is constant.

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<sup>61</sup> “Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” available online at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml>. Accessed August 1, 2012. My emphasis.

<sup>62</sup> Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life: The Restored Edition*, ed. James Berger (Modern Library, 2004 [1903]), 230, 48. Hereafter cited as *SML*.

<sup>63</sup> Helen Keller, “The Power of the Spoken Word, delivered before the National Institute of Arts and Letters at New York, New York (May 22, 1947)”; transcript available at the website of the American Foundation for the Blind, <http://www.afb.org/section.aspx?Documentid=1162>. Accessed August 1, 2012.

Keller makes no distinction here, it would seem, between her own early vocalizations—she began learning to speak in 1890—and those of her household animals. This points to an irony that also underlies her reference to “the impulse to utter.” It is by responding to this impulse that Keller understands herself to gain access to human community, moving into it precisely by bringing herself out (“utter” and “out” are etymological cousins) in the kind of expressive “exodus from the animal state” she will again describe in 1947. But there is a long tradition of thinking that it is the purview of the animal and not of the human to succumb to an “impulse” because of the strength with which one feels it, rather than because of the force of one’s own reasoned intentions. “Nature lays her commands on every animal, and the brute obeys her voice,” writes Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1754); “Man receives the same impulsions, but at the same time knows himself at liberty to acquiesce or resist” (“OI,” 84). It is in part this association of “impulse” with brute physicality, as well as with kinetic force and electric current, that leads to its appearance in more mechanical descriptions of the linguistic faculty. “The impulse to speech,” writes Boas’s student Edward Sapir in his introduction to *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (1921), “first takes effect in the sphere of auditory imagery and is then transmitted to the motor nerves that control the organs of speech.”<sup>64</sup> This sense of “transmission” complicates the term communication itself: Derrida writes in “Signature Event Context” that “one characteristic of the semantic field of the word *communication* is that it designates nonsemantic movements as well. . . . one can, for instance, *communicate a movement* or . . . a tremor [*ébranlement*], a shock, a displacement of force”—and one could add impulse—“can be communicated—that is, propagated, transmitted.”<sup>65</sup> (Indeed, in Keller’s description of her first meeting with Alexander Graham Bell in Washington, the two senses of “communication”—that is, interlocution and passageway—are in play, the latter a metaphor for the latter: “He understood my signs, and I knew it and loved him at once. But I did not dream that that interview would be the door through which I would pass from darkness to light, from isolation to friendship, companionship, knowledge, love.”)

As Rousseau is careful to argue, it is less the ability to resist an impulse—troped by him as itself the “voice” of Nature—than the *consciousness* of possessing that ability that distinguishes man from brute (“OI,” 84). And Keller herself, in *Story*, is careful to emphasize her awareness in responding to the impulse she felt: “I had known for a long time that the people about me used a method of communication different from my own,” she goes on in her account of her initial impulse to utter, “and even before I knew that a deaf child could be taught to speak, I was conscious of dissatisfaction with the means of communication I already possessed.” This dissatisfaction may strike us today as vexingly assimilationist, if not an acquiescence to brute natural impulse then one to a structure of social distinction, namely to the linguistic hegemony of what Keller herself called the “Empire of the Normal.” If shifting the discussion of racial “types” from essence to discourse was an important aspect of the development of the modern culture concept—if, in other words, to see culture as talk is to refute culture as race—this

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<sup>64</sup> Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (Harcourt & Brace, 1921), 17. Hereafter cited as *LAI*.

<sup>65</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1. Hereafter cited as “SEC.”

discursive turn might seem to find its limits in the non-vocal subject. Yet, without effacing those limits, I hope to show that for Keller, speech, in its ostensible singularity, in what Roland Barthes (describing the way that utterance functions on both linguistic and musical levels) calls the grain of the voice, represents the possibility of escaping that empire, of escaping the economy of cultural particularisms.<sup>66</sup>

As I claimed in the first chapter—through Oskison’s representations of the predicament of “native” subjectivities and through Boas’s views on the task of transcription—a certain form of strong commitment to cultural particularism tacitly entails or reduces to a more basic distinction between human and nonhuman. For this reason the affinities between the “problem” of a figure like Oskison’s old Harjo and that of a figure like young Keller begin to suggest how ethnic particularity and disability might—particularly when set within the matrix of concepts of culture at the turn of the twentieth century—occupy structurally parallel positions. It is, as I argued, Harjo’s commitment to multiple cultural formations that leaves him particularized to the point of isolation, “mute” in his appeal to institutional authority. A narrative that proceeds according to a particularist theory of cultures thus ends up displacing him to a position outside culture, to the position of dumb nature that No-Tongue (in Boas’s “Winter Village”) both sings about and occupies. Keller’s relation to the divisions internal to the field of the human (“race,” “culture”) is of particular interest in part because she is so often represented, in others’ writing and sometimes in her own, as a subject that is undeniably human and yet that persistently unsettles the division between that field and fields that are ostensibly external to it: the machine, the animal, and even the undead.<sup>67</sup> For this reason, if Keller’s case can in part be explained by what Kroeber called the confusion of theories of organic and superorganic variation at the turn of the twentieth century, she can also help us to set that local moment within a longer *durée* of thinking about language, embodiment, and ethnicity, from Enlightenment accounts of the human/animal distinction to twentieth-century disability and Deaf-culture discourse.

*The Story of My Life* is still the most well-known account of linguistic impairment and deaf education, if not of the experience of disability generally, and yet we’ve tended not to acknowledge that Keller’s work constitutes an important entry in the twentieth-century conceptualization of culture. Using the case of Keller to trace relationships between ideas of imitation, representations of sensory phenomena, and the formation of the culture concept thus allows us to connect her work to the history of theories of difference in ways that have not been pursued—surprisingly, given the vast popular readership of her writing, the contemporaneous scientific interest in her story, and the conceptual range and creativity of much of her autobiographical writing itself. Sam Halliday has recently written on Keller and both James brothers on the idea of “social relation,” an idea that is clearly important in the context of Tarde’s work, but otherwise scholars have not followed up on Keller as a key figure in our understanding of difference.<sup>68</sup> This leaves a good opportunity to expand on Georgina Kleeg’s remark

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<sup>66</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Hill & Wang, 1977), 184.

<sup>67</sup> In her later writing, she adopted the name “Phantom” when referring to her pre-linguistic childhood self.

<sup>68</sup> Sam Halliday, “Helen Keller, Henry James, and the Social Relations of Perception,” *Criticism* 48, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 175-201. What Keller shares with James (and Twain),” writes Halliday, “is an interest in what this article will call ‘social relations of

that Keller represented herself as belonging to a “culture of one.”<sup>69</sup> If Keller’s literary education (which, in some accounts, gave her a world mediated through and through by the canon) made her a pure product of literary culture in the Arnoldian sense, at the same time her disabilities threatened to set her outside the kind of cultural formation associated with a particular discursive community. Keller thus comes to stand as a singular example and theorist of cultural transmission and at the same time of cultural isolation, at precisely the historical moment at which the anthropological notion of belonging to a distinct culture comes into conflict, with special intensity, with that of serving as a medium for culture in the Arnoldian sense.

Differing accounts of the function of language are at the core of this conceptual conflict, a fact that Keller throws into high relief. Commenting on the notion of “The Empire of the Normal” in *The World I Live In* (Keller’s more phenomenological follow-up to her first autobiography, published serially in *The Century* and then in book form in 1908), Kleege writes that Keller “is making an analogy to cultural assimilation,” but “she is not really claiming to belong to a separate culture, as we would today use the term Deaf Culture to designate users of American Sign Language as a linguistic group. The manual alphabet Keller employed was a form of transcribed English rather than a true sign language” (“EN,” 322). Kleege concisely registers here the way that the term “culture” can be applied to a “linguistic group,” at the same time denying the analogy with a modern concept of culture. Keller is not moving from one culture to another but from non-culture to culture, or—in terms more fitting with the imperial analogy—from savagery to civilization, by means of a humanist education that is based largely on the texts of canonized literary “culture” in the Arnoldian sense. Some clunky lines by George Jay Smith (grammarian and occasional playwright and literary critic) in his contribution to *Double Blossoms: Helen Keller Anthology* (a 1931 collection of short tributes to Keller, to which I’ll return in the next section of this chapter) put the point succinctly:

Denied the fundamental opportunity that is everyone’s,  
The use of hearing, sight, familiar speech,  
She had become a person of culture, of trained mind.<sup>70</sup>

In Smith’s lines the mental “training” of culture substitutes for the sensorium and for “familiar speech.” It is true that the sensorium, as it relates to consciousness and to language—relationships that can only be articulated by analogy or metaphor, as it often seems in Keller’s work—is an important part of this story. If, as I’m arguing throughout

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perception,’ a rubric under which we can gather both sensory and cognitive transactions, together with those forms of selfhood—radically social, and socially distributed—that such transactions presuppose” (176). Halliday comments with regard to James’s *The American Scene* and “The Question of Our Speech” that while in Sharon Cameron’s account “relation” is an abstract term we can also see that “the term may also be bound up with concrete forms of sociality” (191)—I would only add that speech, which Halliday does not address, is in some ways the most crucial such form for Keller.

<sup>69</sup> Georgina Kleege, “Helen Keller and the “Empire of the Normal,”” *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2000): 322-325, 322. Hereafter cited as “EN.”

<sup>70</sup> Edna Foster, ed. *Double Blossoms: Helen Keller Anthology* (L. Copeland, 1931), 61. Hereafter cited as *DB*.

this dissertation, the act of transcription, which involves a conversion from the auditory to the visual field, is a key part of the development of the culture concept, then Keller's relatively unique position with regard to those sensory fields—which Smith curiously refers to as “opportunit[ies]”—makes her well positioned to contribute to that conceptual history.

But her contribution is not, as Smith's lines might suggest, so simple as a straightforward substitution in which cultural training compensates for the lack of natural sensory experience. Rather the sensorium is, for Keller, profoundly entangled with linguistic forms and with modes of thought. Touch takes on a particularly important role. For Keller, “in touch is all love and all intelligence,” as she writes in the opening of *The World I Live In* (1908), and in touch is speech as well: the vibrations of the vocal organs and the movements of the lips and tongue, even as they contribute to the voice's audible grain, also make the act of speech a tactile phenomenon, something that one can not only hear but also feel oneself and others do.<sup>71</sup> Diana Fuss, in *The Sense of an Interior*, traces Keller's accounts of how important touch was to her sense of the world, exploring “the critical role tactility plays in language and subject formation” (110).<sup>72</sup> Yet Fuss's insightful reading, for all its interest in “Keller's Hand” (the title of her chapter on Keller), does not touch on something that stands in curious tension with Keller's valorization of speech, and that also stands immediately at the interface of the tactile, the visual, and the linguistic—namely, the way that her editors and commenters often seem to fixate on the visual object of her handwriting. As I'll briefly discuss in conclusion, her distinctive handwriting is reproduced with surprising frequency—in the front of her first book, at the head of her first major magazine publication, in a 1906 article about her in *American Anthropologist*, and elsewhere. Like Harjo's brand, Keller's handwriting is an inscription that marks both the celebration and the denial—like the “fantastic” brand it is “incredible,” beyond belief—of the possibility of her acculturation. But what's at stake in that inscription will be more evident, I hope, after a discussion first of how the concept of imitation factors into her writing and her reception, and then of representations of her sensorium as both what intensifies and what pathologizes her relationship to culture.

## 2. All Originating in Imitation

“Am I socially related,” asks the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde in *The Laws of Imitation* (1890), “to an educated deaf mute who may closely resemble me in face and figure?” Without hesitation the answer: “No, I am not.” Neither education nor physical similarity, it appears, would be conditions sufficient to bring the “sourd-muet” into social relation.<sup>73</sup> This, anyway, is how the English translator—Elsie Worthington Clews Parsons, two decades before editing *American Indian Life*, the volume I discussed in the last chapter—renders Tarde's rhetorical question. The translation was published the same year, 1903, that Keller published her *Story of My Life*. At the time, Parsons was a

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<sup>71</sup> Helen Keller, *The World I Live In* (The Century Co., 1908). Hereafter cited as *W*.

<sup>72</sup> Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>73</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation* (H. Holt and Company, 1903), 67. Hereafter cited as *LI*.

lecturer in sociology at Columbia. She was in contact with Franz Boas there and would soon shift fields to anthropology, working with him more directly. Her translation of Tarde's volume, a text that "profoundly impressed" (as Robert H. Lowie wrote in 1937) and "definitely influenced" (as Alfred L. Kroeber wrote in 1956) Boas, represented an important professional step for a young academic within the transforming American social sciences.<sup>74</sup> In the lines I've just quoted, though, there's not only a bit of the translator's emphasis—Parsons doubles down on Tarde's rejection of the "deaf-mute," rendering "Non" as "No, *I am not*"—but also a simple error (one that hasn't been noted before and that bears mentioning, since, despite recent critical interest in Tarde's work by theorists including Bruno Latour and Gilles Deleuze, Parsons's remains the only English translation). In the French, the figure Tarde imagines encountering is, in fact, *uneducated*: "Suis-je en rapport social avec un sourd-muet *non instruit* qui me ressemble beaucoup de corps et de visage? Non."<sup>75</sup>

Parsons's tweaking of this line is more likely a typo than an editorial decision, but it's a significant one. At stake in the difference between the two versions of the line, a difference that turns on the negation of a single term, is a central crux of the oralism-manualism debates. If education is a key aspect of human socialization, and if talk is understood as a key social medium, what particular kind of instruction, asked educators, psychologists, and jurists, is necessary and sufficient for the socialization of subjects who do not hear or speak? Does spoken language constitute just one medium of socialization among many others, so that—as one could infer from Tarde's original text—education in general, including specific instruction in a non-vocal linguistic system such as the manual alphabet or American Sign Language, might make possible the integration of the "deaf-mute"? Or, conversely, as Parsons' version seems to imply and as some turn-of-the-century readers would have agreed, does spoken language have some sort of special claim to be the authentic medium of society and does linguistic impairment therefore make efforts at socialization by other means futile? To put the question otherwise, is there such a thing as a "mute appeal" (to borrow Oskison's phrase from the end of "Harjo"), or does the ability to talk—specifically, to talk using one's vocal organs—somehow constitute the *sine qua non* of social relation?<sup>76</sup>

These questions are of consequence not only within the history of disabilities discourse but also in the conceptualization of culture at the turn of the last century, particularly as that concept functions to distinguish humans both from each other and from the nonhuman. Keller was not, to my knowledge, aware of Tarde's work, but imitation plays a similarly central role in her own writing—a role marked by equivocations not unlike those produced by Parsons's typo, equivocations, that is, about what constitutes the sufficient conditions of acculturation. In Tarde's influential account

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<sup>74</sup> Robert H. Lowie, *History of Ethnological Theory*, (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1937), 106; A. L. Kroeber, "The Place of Boas in Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 1, New Series (February 1, 1956): 154.

<sup>75</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les Lois de l'Imitation: Etude Sociologique* (F. Alcan, 1904 [1890]), 72.

<sup>76</sup> Tarde's theory of social imitation has attracted the attention of recent theorists including Gilles Deleuze and Bruno Latour, who are attracted to Tarde's "radical pragmatism" and to his expansive definition of "society" (a concept that for Tarde includes both micro- and macro-formations—any set of objects, really, that exists in mutual relation—making it an apt precedent for Latour's actor-network theory).

the idea of a social group is dependent on the process of imitation, whether that process is direct and ongoing or simply evident in a resemblance that has been produced by a history of imitation: “De là cette définition du groupe social: une collection d'êtres en tant qu'ils sont en train de s'imiter entre eux ou en tant que, sans s'imiter actuellement, ils se ressemblent et que leurs traits communs sont des copies anciennes d'un même modèle.” If imitation is a necessary technology for the production of the acculturated human subject, particularly insofar as it allows for linguistic acquisition, imitation also, and by the same token, renders that subject partly prosthetic or alien to itself, partly nonhuman.

Keller endured a public scandal in 1892, when her first publication, a short story titled “The Frost King” and published first by *The Mentor* (a publication of the Perkins Institute for the Blind) and then by *The Goodson Gazette* (a publication of the Virginia Institution for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind) led to accusations of plagiarism; it bore too close a resemblance to a story titled “The Frost Fairies” by Margaret Canby. If these accusations were strange charges to level against an eleven-year old (as Kleege and Cynthia have Ozick noted) they also seem, in retrospect, virtually inevitable, given that the repetition of stories had been a key aspect of her education and moreover that many skeptics were primed to regard Keller, already famous at eleven, as a kind of puppet in the control of the ventriloquist Sullivan. The psychic effects were long-lasting; Keller describes the experience of not knowing whether her words were really hers.<sup>77</sup> But the immediate responses that the episode brought from some of those close to her are equally fascinating; they seek to transform what is a source of authorly anxiety into a general proposition about language. Twain wrote in a personal letter to Keller: “As if there was much of anything in any human utterance, oral or written, *except* plagiarism! The kernel, the soul—let us go further and say the substance, the bulk, the actual and valuable material of *all* human utterances—is plagiarism.”<sup>78</sup>

John Macy, Keller's editor and Sullivan's husband, makes a similar claim in his “Supplementary Account of Helen Keller's Education,” an appendix to *The Story of My Life*. (It's so similar, in fact, that one wonders whether Twain's letter was on his mind.) “All use of language is imitative,” he writes in his response to the “Frost King” scandal, “and one's style is made up of all other styles that one has met.” As a corollary, and here is where Macy's views decidedly depart from those of Twain,

any child may be taught to use correct English by not being allowed to read or hear any other kind. In a child, the selection of the better from the worse is not conscious; he is the servant of his word experience.

Whoever makes a sentence of words utters not his wisdom, but the wisdom of the race whose life is in the words, though they have never been so grouped before. (*SML*, 304)

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<sup>77</sup> Cynthia Ozick addresses these questions in “What Helen Keller Saw,” in *The Din of the Head* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). 11-32.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Dorothy Herrmann, *Helen Keller, A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 136. Hereafter cited as *HK*.



If the open syntax of English allows for infinite invention, since the words one uses may “have never been so grouped before,” the more crucial function of language for Macy is as a repository of racial memory; indeed, the way to access that memory is always only through discourse. Language in this account takes on an aspect of Bergsonian duration. Arguing that thought emerges from utterance and not the other way around, Macy offers an account of Keller’s plagiarism as an unintentional expression of “the wisdom of the race”: “Helen Keller writing ‘The Frost King’ was building better than she knew and saying more than she meant.” Keller for Macy isn’t quite a plagiarist, but she isn’t quite an author either; she is a medium. This is in effect the strong interpretation of William James’s idea that “all human thinking gets discursified.” In other words, for Macy here, all human thinking is only produced in and through discursification.

Sapir in his introduction to *Language* expresses a similar viewpoint, writing that thought can be seen as

the highest latent or potential content of speech, the content that is obtained by interpreting each of the elements in the flow of language as possessed of its very fullest conceptual value. . . . To put our viewpoint somewhat differently, language is primarily a pre-rational function. It humbly works up to the thought that is latent in, that may eventually be read into, its classifications and its forms; it is not, as is generally but naïvely assumed, the final label put upon the finished thought. Most people, asked if they can think without speech, would probably answer, “Yes, but it is not easy for me to do so. Still I know it can be done.” Language is but a garment! But what if language is not so much a garment as a prepared road or groove? It is, indeed, in the highest degree likely that language is an instrument originally put to uses lower than the conceptual plane and that thought arises as a refined interpretation of its content. (*LAI*, 14).

For Macy the “prepared road or groove” that is language is a romantic-nationalist one: when any child, whether hearing or deaf, gets language, he also along with it “gets the very stuff that language is made of, the thought and the experience of his race.” If Keller’s authorship of the story has a distinctive quality that makes it more than just parroting, this is principally because, as a child who does not consciously select better from worse, she minimally mediates this racial thought and experience. Her plagiarized story is a kind of “automatic writing,” but one motivated not by the spiritual but by the cultural. For Macy, then, while Canby’s “original” short story has a sort of inauthentic “manner of a fairy tale” told by a self-conscious adult for an audience of children, Keller’s story is “original in the same way [as] a poet’s version of an old story.” Her version is the true original, Macy implies, because it is a more authentic expression of the folk culture that is latent in the language. It is a text with “the imaginative credulity of a primitive folktale.”

This position leads Macy’s to an account of why he rejects sign language—principally on the grounds that as a modern construction it is not grounded in any particular folk. The language that one teaches a child, he writes,

must be one used by a nation, not an artificial thing. Volapük is a paradox, unless one has French or English or German or some other language that has grown up in a nation. The deaf child who has only the sign language of De l’Épée is an

intellectual Philip Nolan, an alien from all races, and his thoughts are not the thoughts of an Englishman, or a Frenchman, or a Spaniard. The Lord's prayer in signs is not the Lord's prayer in English. (*SML*, 304).<sup>79</sup>

This position is perhaps not a surprising one to follow from Macy's Arnoldian investment in "the selection of the better from the worse": after all, claims for the cultural "best" so often correlate with social-evolutionary and white-supremacist accounts of the superiority of the North. Yet Macy's reference to "selection" highlights the instability of this correlation: if one has some agency in "the selection of the better from the worse" in educating one's children, then the transmission of culture is not a matter of biological or geographical determinism. Tarde's theory of imitative linguistic acquisition goes further toward making this instability apparent. Whereas Macy's romantic nationalism is grounded in the "race whose *life* is in the words," his theory of social relation, rejects the "purely *vital*" as irrelevant to a feeling of kinship. This is part of the reason that his work was particularly influential in the Boasian project to debunk social evolutionary thinking: because it offered a model of how practices could undergo diffusion across ethnic or national lines, subverting the association of a racial type with a linguistic community and promoting the independence of cultural forms from biological transmission.

This independence has potentially radical consequences beyond the Boasian conception of the bounds of culture. Let me return to the passage with which I opened the chapter. In the sentence immediately following his exclusion of the "sourd-muet non instruit" from the possibility of social relation, Tarde offers a literary counterexample to demonstrate that the feelings of "social kinship" could, conceivably, cross not just racial but also species lines.

Inversely, the animals of La Fontaine's fables, the fox, the cricket, the cat, and the dog, live together in society, in spite of the difference in species which separates them, because they all speak the same language. We eat, drink, digest, walk, and cry without being taught. These acts are purely vital. But talking requires the hearing of conversation, as we know from the case of deaf mutes who are dumb because they are deaf. Consequently, I begin to feel a social kinship with everyone who talks, even if it be in a strange tongue, providing our two idioms appear to me to have some common source. This social tie may be weak and inadequate, but it gains in strength as other common traits, all originating in imitation, are added to it. (*LI*, 67-68)

Keller was "dumb because . . . deaf" and yet, around the same time Tarde wrote this (1890), did begin to learn to talk without "the hearing of conversation"; her acquisition of language thus required a distinctive process of imitation: "Miss Fuller's [a teacher at the Perkins Institute] method was this: she passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. I was eager to imitate every motion and in an hour had learned six elements of speech: M, P, A, S, T, I."

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<sup>79</sup> Volapük is the international language invented by Johann Martin Shleyer in the late nineteenth century; Philip Nolan is a character in Edward Everett Hale's "The Man Without a Country" (1863).

The way to learn speech is indeed to imitate another's use of it, but this is accomplished not as Tarde writes through "the hearing of conversation"—nor through the system of visible Speech, though the Bells did develop a version of it for the blind—but rather, in this case, through the touching of it.

In an address before the American Philosophical Society on April 13, 1917, the psychologist Lightner Witmer referred to some of these problems of mediated imitation in the linguistic education of the deaf.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps best known for his widely publicized training of an ape named Peter, to which and to whom I'll return at the end of the chapter, Witmer saw Keller's "training" (his word but also, recall, George Jay Smith's—"a trained mind") as the great culmination of certain educational practices with origins in the mid-eighteenth century. The argument that Witmer is trying to make before the Philosophical Society (and in *The Psychological Clinic*, where the text of the talk was published) is that the best form of education for both the "feeble-minded" and the "gifted"—in other words, for "children who resist educational treatment by ordinary methods"—is a program that is custom-designed for a given child and then carried out in one-on-one meetings (71). Witmer points specifically to what he calls the single most important "event in the history of education": Jacob Rodrigues Pereira's 1744 appearance before the Academy of Science in Rochelle, France, with "a boy born deaf whom he had taught to talk." What Witmer finds so important in Pereira's work with this boy is not just a practical point about pedagogical method, though, but also one about language itself: the case of this successful instruction demonstrated, he claims, "the analytic separateness of two of the important elements involved in language." The first element is the cerebral speech center, the "instinct for language" with which the child is "endowed at birth." The second element is the external stimuli that kick this instinct into action. In the case of a hearing child, these stimuli are the utterances of others. The sound of speech, in Witmer's account, produces "cerebral excitations" in the speech center. In response to this impulse, the muscular "speech mechanism" begins to produce "the child's first approximations to correct articulation." At this point the child's own acts of speech become objects of sensation themselves, exciting "motor or kinesthetic sensations which leave in the brain, and ultimately at the disposal of the child's volition, kinesthetic and verbal memory images."

For Witmer what is significant about Pereira's boy and also about Keller, then, is that the stories of their education show that this process can happen by means other than the auditory sense. "If the speech mechanism of a deaf child can be stimulated in some other way than through the reflect cerebration initiated in the hearing child by verbal perceptions," he claims, "the deaf child, like his hearing brother, will acquire the memory images of spoken words and when these are controlled by his attention and imagination he will show a similar voluntary control over language." Notice how this account of the interaction between the senses, language, and consciousness both aims for a mechanical and literal representation, and yet at the same time makes use of sensory metaphors such as "memory images." At the end of the chapter I'll return to some of the questions that are raised in these passages from Tarde and Witmer

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<sup>80</sup> Lightner Witmer, "Diagnostic Education—An Education for the Fortunate Few," in *The Psychological Clinic*, 11, no. 3 [May 15, 1917]: 69-78, quoted at 69). This was originally "An address delivered before the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pa., on April 13, 1917" [69]).

(particularly questions about linguistic reproduction and animal language), but in the next section I'll discuss this tension between, on one hand, the ironic and synaesthiac metaphors that are often deployed in describing Keller's world, and, on the other, the more literal attachments that she has to the specific media of touch and of voice.

### 3. Puny Sound and Sight

When a young W. E. B. Du Bois was studying at Harvard, a decade before the turn of the twentieth century, he and his professor William James paid a visit to the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts, where an even younger Keller was in residence with her teacher Anne Sullivan.<sup>81</sup> Decades later, in 1931—long after Keller went to Radcliffe and studied with James herself—Du Bois briefly mentioned his meeting with Keller in his contribution to *Double Blossoms: Helen Keller Anthology*, a collection of encomiums. In this section I'm going to discuss some of the entries in this volume, but especially Du Bois's, as a way of tracing some of the persistent themes in discourse about Keller's senses and of seeing how they emerge from (or run counter to) her own early autobiographical writing. Most of the entries are short poems, many of them written as direct addresses to Keller; Countee Cullen, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes are among the dozens of contributors. Du Bois, though, takes a more narrative approach, offering a single paragraph of prose. He refers to his early meeting with Keller at the Perkins institute as the beginning of his intense interest in Keller's career through the decades. "We stopped at the Blind Asylum and saw a young girl who was blind and deaf and dumb," he writes, "and yet who, by infinite pains and loving sympathy, had been made to speak without words and to understand without sound" (*DB*, 64).

Whether or not Keller can rightly be said to have been "dumb" at any point of her life, the condition didn't last; she soon learned to speak with her vocal organs. Even at the early moment to which Du Bois is referring, though—prior to her instruction in "vocal culture"—his description of her seems a little off. It isn't true, first of all, that Keller spoke without words. The manual alphabet that she primarily used to communicate, most often with Sullivan, is as Kleege notes in essence an ephemeral transcription of English. Beyond the practical level, words, in their function as vehicles of conceptual abstraction, occupy a mythical place in Keller's life story. In the famous scene with her Teacher at the well in the fourth chapter of *The Story of My Life*, she represents herself in transition from "wordless sensation[s]" to the world of thought, a transition that happens as a result of discovering that in every word exists a sign relation. "As the cool stream gushed over one hand [Sullivan] spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly," Keller writes.

Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! (*SML*, 20)

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<sup>81</sup> Because Du Bois notes that he and James were on their way "out to Roxbury," accounts of this meeting sometimes place the Institute there, but it's in Watertown.

In contrast to Du Bois's notion of Keller "speak[ing] without words," many contemporaneous commenters on Keller thought of her communicative capabilities as unusually limited to words, as having only a diminished access to the communicative channels of expression, gesticulation, and tone. Macy himself, for instance, writes that although "her face is animated" when she speaks, making use of "the expressions that make the features eloquent and give speech half its meaning," nevertheless "she does not know another's expression. When she is talking with an intimate friend, however, her hand goes quickly to her friend's face to see, as she says, 'the twist of the mouth.' In this way she is able to get the meaning of those half sentences which we complete unconsciously from the tone of the voice or the twinkle of the eye" (*SML*, 202). What Macy is describing is one of the ways in which Keller is able to use the sense of touch so as, in Du Bois's phrase, "to understand without sound" (even if Macy's claim is weakened by his choice to highlight two kinds of signifier, the "tone of the voice [and] the twinkle of the eye," that are unavailable to Keller's hand). But if non-vocal communication is part of everyday discursive practice—if it constitutes "half [the] meaning" of speech in general—this clearly takes away the rhetorical irony that Du Bois wants to give in applying that phrase to Keller in particular. To state the obvious that Du Bois elides, it's not unusual to understand without sound; there isn't only the manual alphabet but also gestures, expressions, sign languages, images, texts, and cognition for that.

Of course, "the tone of the voice" is an important feature not only of Macy's understanding of discourse but also of Du Bois's. In his famous account of the "sorrow songs" in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he discusses the way that many spirituals retain lexical elements from African languages—and with them something like the "wisdom" that Macy thinks is always embedded in language. Of one such song Du Bois writes: "two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music."<sup>82</sup> In representing Keller as "speak[ing] without words and . . . understand[ing] without sound," then, Du Bois makes her the precise opposite of the singer of the sorrow song. For the latter, the utterance of the foreign word, even in ignorance of its semantic content, enables a significant experience of sound, one that apparently isn't similarly available to a non-hearing person; by contrast for Keller, as Macy writes, on occasion the "notes" of her speech "are musical and charming," but in general she pronounces each word as a foreigner does when he is still labouring with the elements of a sentence," and "The principal thing that is lacking is sentence accent and variety in the inflection of phrases." In George Jay Smith's account of Keller's speech—a speech uttered "in her chanting strange voice / that voice from beyond some dark mysterious barrier" (*DB*, 62)—he makes the same point but implies a greater sense of monstrosity:

She stood and made her lips, laboriously taught, utter words,  
Words that came forth colorless, monotonously changed,  
Difficult to understand, for she could not sing the customary tunes of our  
language. (*DB*, 60)

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<sup>82</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press, 2007 [1903]).

Countee Cullen's entry in *Double Blossoms* presents an alternative sense of tone, one that comes closer to Keller's own views on the primacy of touch. Cullen repeats the commonplace denigration of "our puny sound and sight" in contrast to the "finer alchemy"—"Spirit Vision," as in the piece's title—of Keller's sensory experience. But what allows for this alchemy is not the equation of sensory lack with purity of thought; it is rather precisely the grounding of Keller's other senses in the sense of touch that allows for a finer sense of tone, "convert[ing] / The clanging brass to golden-pealed":

For lest we handle, lest we touch,  
Lest carnally our minds condone,  
Our clumsy credence may not clutch  
The under or the over tone. (*DB*, 45)

Du Bois's account of Keller's sense is somewhat more literal. He goes on to suggest that his personal investment in Keller's career may have had something to do with the fact that "she was blind to color differences in this world." He includes an example of this natural anti-racism from years after their initial meeting:

Helen Keller was in her own state, Alabama, being fêted and made much of by her fellow citizens. And yet courageously and frankly she spoke out on the iniquity and foolishness of the color line. It cost her something to speak. They wanted her to retract, but she sat serene in the consciousness of the truth that she had uttered. (*DB*, 64)

I'll return to the idea of being "blind to color differences" in a moment, but first the historical content here bears mentioning. The occasion of Keller's courageous commitment to the truth remains so vague in this telling as to take on the character of a parable. But in all likelihood Du Bois is alluding to an event with which he had some direct involvement. In 1916, while Keller was staying with her family in Montgomery, Alabama, he took an anti-segregationist letter that she had written to one of his colleagues in the NAACP (enclosed with a donation) and printed it in one of the organization's publications. As a result, Keller was condemned in an angry letter to a Selma newspaper of "advocating social equality between whites and Negroes, and of disloyalty to her fellow white Southerners" (*HK*, 205). The letter attracted attention. Even her mother urged her to explain herself (a burden with which Keller was more and more often forced to bear as, over the 1910s, she began to give more public expression to her socialist views). Keller—sitting serene, as Du Bois has it—published a letter in which she affirmed her commitment to "the equality of all men before the law."<sup>83</sup>

Both Keller's first meeting with Du Bois and their later interaction are known in the biographical literature on Keller, minor events that take on significance in part because they seem to connect her marginalized experience as a person with disabilities

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<sup>83</sup> Cited in *HK*, 205. At the same time, she remained cagey on the question of "social equality," referring with evident sarcasm to its "repugnance to all" and yet insisting, in defense against her critics, that her initial letter never advocated such equality in the first place.

with her outlook on “the problem of the twentieth century,” thus confirming her role as an exemplar of national conscience. Yet Du Bois’s brief account of his interactions with Keller is worth dwelling on for another moment because the terms and tropes through which it unfolds point to some key questions about the specific role played by language in both the process of her acculturation and in her experience of the world. Language takes on such a crucial role here in part because it is thought to compensate for Keller’s double sensory lack. In a twist that appears in much writing about Keller (in, for instance, many of the tributes to her in *Double Blossoms*), what made Keller most particular, these sensory impairments, also made her most attuned to the universal. If this dynamic sounds familiar in the wake of Spivak’s claim for the special insight of the subaltern, in Keller’s case this paradox that results in an ironic metaphoric of sensibility as sense perception.<sup>84</sup> Consider Du Bois’s references to vision. Keller is more comprehensive in her “spiritual insight,” he writes, than all those “wide-eyed people who stare uncomprehendingly at this prejudiced world.” This is a common theme in *Double Blossoms*: Keller is a kind of modern Tiresias. One contributor refers to Keller’s “magic vision . . . unburdened by an earthly sight”; “You see and hear with your spirit,” another writes; and a third echoes Du Bois’s language of serene sitting:

You sit in silence, beautiful, serene,  
Untrammelled by the fleeting lights that screen  
Our fettered eyes.<sup>85</sup>

Babette Deutsch, meanwhile, offers an astronomical metaphor: “You live in a country stranger than the moon / Where nothing casts a shadow,” she writes, and “Upon your barren star / You . . . do not see / Our coward ways.”<sup>86</sup>

What distinguishes Du Bois’s use of this commonplace in writing about Keller is that he relates the transmutation of Keller’s sense perception to the question of “color differences.” The ambiguity of the word “differences” would seem to allow the phrase to suggest either, on the one hand, differences within the social order (the “coward ways” of Jim Crow), or, on the other, those differences within the visual field on which those social distinctions are ostensibly grounded. But given that there is nothing to prevent Keller from understanding the former, it would seem to be the latter that is in question here. Du Bois’s celebration of Keller here thus seems to imply that her consciousness remains serene precisely because it does not have to contend with the sensory information of visible racial difference. That is, her courageous sense of basic equity

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<sup>84</sup> Even Robert Frost’s “Spring Pools” (written prior to *Double Blossoms* but reprinted there, and in this reprinting subtitled “For Helen Keller”; *DB*, 32) speaks obliquely to the problem of mediation; in this context the meditation on pools that “though in shadow” “still reflect,” the sky “almost without defect,” begins to sound like a meditation on Keller’s ability to see without sight. (This theme may not have been so intentionally tied to the sensorium when Frost wrote it, but it seems a probable cause for the selection of it for this volume.)

<sup>85</sup> Toscan Bennett, “To Helen Keller,” *DB* 41; Yone Noguchi, “To Miss Helen Keller,” *DB* 15. Jane A. Roulston, “To Helen Keller,” *DB*, 87. A footnote notes that this was first published in *Il Fuoco*, October 15, 1914.

<sup>86</sup> Babette Deutsch, “To Helen Keller,” *DB* 26.

seems to stem from an inability not only to see but also to visualize racial difference, as if—since prejudice, as part of what Deutsch calls “our cowardly ways,” is here understood as an objective feature of the world (“this prejudiced world,” Du Bois writes) rather than a matter of subjective consciousness—without the image of color differences Keller can’t imagine them. Her body makes her innocent.

A contrast may be illustrative. Whereas for Du Bois it is Keller whose untainted consciousness—untainted by the wordly matter of visible race—allows her to express the truth, for William Carlos Williams it is a “desolate” girl who expresses “with broken / brain the truth about us.” “The pure products go crazy,” goes the first line of Williams’s “To Elsie” (in *Spring and All*, 1923), in which the American ethnos is rendered as disparate and grotesque. “Mountain folk,” “deaf-mutes,” “thieves,” “slatterns,” and so on constitute a national milieu on par with the Missouri crowd of “cow-boys, full-bloods, half-breeds, and whites” in Oskison’s “Quality of Mercy.”<sup>87</sup> For James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture*, the content of this truth is the very fact of a modernity in which cultural transformation is accelerated beyond any point of return: Williams’s Elsie “stands simultaneously for a local cultural breakdown and a collective future,” a future characterized, in Clifford’s reading, by the loss of authenticity but not by any simple pastoral desire for the past: “If authentic traditions, the pure products, are everywhere yielding to promiscuity and aimlessness, the option of nostalgia holds no charm. There is no going back, no essence to redeem” (*PC*, 4). If Keller—as a “pure product” of high literary culture, as a figure that cannot, it seems, be imagined as promiscuous—seems to hold out the promise of going back, of redemption, she also seems to make that promise a crazy one, empty words, a speech act that cannot be grounded in illocutionary context because (ostensibly) its utterer has only secondhand access to any context at all.

In this way Du Bois’s encomium ironically shares the positivist and ableist premise of a criticism that was frequently leveled at Keller, especially in her early career: namely, that her powers as an author and interpreter of the world were limited by the fact that she experienced it from within the prison-house of language. She was confined to “mere verbalism” (a kind of extreme case of the literary “nature faker” that was such a vilified type at the moment of her first book), and as such her accounts of many experiential phenomena are not to be trusted, have the ring of falseness. As an infamous review of *The Story of My Life* in *The Nation* put it, her descriptions of the visual and auditory world constitute only “hearsay knowledge”; although “her very sensations are for the most part vicarious,” writes the reviewer, she vexingly likes to write “of things beyond her power of perception and with the assurance of one who had verified every word” (quoted in *HK*, 136). What for Du Bois is sainted unworldliness is for the *Nation* reviewer closer to Heidegger’s account of the animal as “poor in world.”<sup>88</sup> There are alternatives to this sense-based form of the positivist position; for example, in an essay on the blind beekeeper and scientist Francois Huber, Patrick Singy argues that the definition of observation in the eighteenth century could accommodate the verificatory

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<sup>87</sup> William Carlos Williams, “To Elsie,” in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher Magowan (New Directions, 1986), 217.

<sup>88</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (Indiana University Press, 2001): “the stone is wordless, the animal is poor in world, man is world-forming” (85).



faculties of a blind observer's "eyes."<sup>89</sup> (Moreover it is hard not to notice the parallel between Huber's relationship with his assistant—"the peculiarity of the eighteenth-century art of observation," writes Singy, "required Huber's mind . . . and Burnens's eyes . . . but mostly it depended on a combination of both"—and Keller's with Sullivan.) As William James noted in the passage from "Pragmatism's Conception Truth" with which I opened this study, "we lend and borrow verifications." And in *The World I Live In* Keller likewise defended herself against such charges of describing the world based only on specious "hearsay knowledge"; she defended, more specifically, her right to make use of the full English language by noting, on one hand, that her particular "limitations" did not in fact mean that her means of verifying, for instance, the color of an object, were so much weaker than those of the sighted, and on the other hand, that the language of the senses is called on metaphorically all the time by every English speaker:

Not only are the senses deceptive, but numerous usages in our language indicate that people who have five senses find it difficult to keep their functions distinct. I understand that we hear views, see tones, taste music. I am told that voices have colour. Tact, which I have supposed to be a matter of nice perception, turns out to be a matter of taste. Judging from the large use of the word, taste appears to be the most important of all the senses. Taste governs the great and small conventions of life. Certainly the language of the senses is full of contradictions, and my fellows who have five doors to their house are not more surely at home in themselves than I. May I not, then, be excused if this account of my sensations lacks precision? (*W*, 51)

While she did not similarly defend herself against Du Bois's compliment, she might have noted that her literal blindness to color differences did not mean she could not imagine or understand them. ("How literal-minded can people be?" asks Kleege [*BR*, 103].<sup>90</sup>) Yet when it comes to linguistic media Du Bois's account is not so literal-minded. The relevant moments in the Alabama story all happened on paper. But in Du Bois's parable the key medium seems to be speech. Keller "spoke out," he writes; "it cost her something to speak," to "utter" the truth. Deploying speech in this metaphoric sense—as political or aesthetic expression, whatever the linguistic medium—is a common trope in writing about Keller. It even shows up, interestingly, in some of her own arguments for the value of the specific medium of literal speech. In Philadelphia on July 8, 1896 she gave an address at a meeting of the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf. Noting her perplexity that there should be such a "wide difference of opinion among teachers of the deaf in regard to oral instruction," she describes the "*unspeakable* happiness of knowing that my family and friends rejoice in my ability to speak." Speech, she says, "brings me into closer and tenderer relationship with those I love, and makes it possible for me to enjoy the sweet companionship of a great many persons from whom I should be entirely cut off if I could not talk" (*SML*, 190). Perhaps not entirely cut off, but certainly, in her account, limited: "I can

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<sup>89</sup> Patrick Singy, "Huber's Eyes: The Art of Scientific Observation Before the Emergence of Positivism," *Representations* 95, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 54-75.

<sup>90</sup> Georgina Kleege, *Blind Rage: Letters to Helen Keller* (Gallaudet University Press, 2006). Hereafter cited as *BR*.

remember the time before I learned to speak, and how I used to express my thoughts by means of the manual alphabet—how my thoughts used to beat against my finger tips like little birds striving to gain their freedom” (*SML*, 290). She closes with an encouragement “to those who are trying to learn to speak and those who are teaching them”: “We shall speak, yes, and sing, too, as God intended we should speak and sing” (*SML*, 291).

Keller’s use of “unspeakable” in its metaphoric sense, as an intensifying adjective—“unspeakable happiness of knowing that my family and friends rejoice in my ability to speak”—is not an uncommon move for her. She describes her reaction to Edmund Burke’s “Speech on Conciliation with America” like so: “Burke’s speech was more instructive than any other book on a political subject that I had ever read. . . I wondered more and more, while Burke’s masterly speech rolled on in might surges of eloquence, how it was that King George and his ministers could have turned a deaf ear to his warning prophecy” (*SML*, 70). At first, it seems that what sets “Burke’s *speech*” above “any other book on a political subject” for Keller is the specificity of the genre, which is to say the medium: Keller finds the eloquence of the text superlative because it’s a “masterly *speech*.” She sets up a reader to expect that this rhetorical force has to do, in part, with the fact that it’s a text written to be delivered. And yet when she uses the metaphor of deafness, as so many contributors to *Double Blossoms* do, to describe not a physical but an attitudinal condition—“turn[ing] a deaf ear”—she also raises the question of whether the force of “speech” has anything to do with the specific medium of the voice. Indeed, she uses the same metaphor two chapters later to condemn the narrow sensibility of those who don’t value learning: “To know the thoughts and deeds that have marked man’s progress is to feel the great heart-throbs of humanity through the centuries; and if one does not feel in these pulsations a heavenward striving, one must indeed be deaf to the harmonies of life” (*SML*, 83). As Macy argued, it is through the specific medium of utterance that one can gain access to what Keller here calls “the great heart-throbs of humanity through the centuries”—“pulsations” linked to “the impulse to utter.” Yet when one puts this kind of weight on a form of discourse, when the control of a medium becomes the sufficient condition for “feel[ing] the great heart-throbs of humanity,” this opens up the boundaries of the latter category—humanity—in unpredictable ways.

#### 4. Bruit Humanity

Unlike Tarde, who—in the passage I cited at the opening of the chapter—used La Fontaine’s fables of interspecies communication as an imaginary example of the singular function of imitative interaction in the constitution of society, Keller didn’t much care for La Fontaine. “I read La Fontaine’s ‘Fables’ first in an English translation, and enjoyed them only after a half-hearted fashion,” she writes in *The Story of My Life*. When she read the French original she was not more enthusiastic:

in spite of the vivid word-pictures, and the wonderful mastery of language, I liked it no better. I do not know why it is, but stories in which animals are made to talk and act like human beings have never appealed to me very strongly. The ludicrous caricatures of the animals occupy my mind to the exclusion of the moral.” (*SML*, 86-87)

In contrast to Tarde's interest in La Fontaine—which is premised on a thoroughly de-naturalized idea of social ties as dependent on those “traits” that “originat[e] in imitation,” to the exclusion of the “purely vital”—Keller is resistant here to even the fable that discursive practice might dissolve the natural taxonomies of species. The realist complaint about the distortions of anthropomorphism (a common complaint during the “nature fakers” controversy that occurred at the same moment) is complicated in Keller's account by the way that she and others understood discourse as a crucial part of her entry into the field of the human. “She was to all intents a savage little animal” before Sullivan came to teach her, as Jean Sherwood Rankin writes in a 1908 article recommending Keller's education as a universal model for language teaching in elementary schools (and James Berger has recently discussed Keller as a kind of feral child); “but with the gift of language, gentleness displaced violence.”<sup>91</sup>

This commonplace is given incisive satiric treatment in Franz Kafka's “A Report to an Academy” (1917), a short story that takes the form of a talking primate's lecture to a scientific society about how he came to be captured, learned language, and joined the vaudeville circuit. The way into human community is, for “former ape” Red Peter, through human speech:

[I] called a brief and unmistakable “Hallo!” breaking into human speech, and with this outburst broke into the human community and felt its echo: “Listen, he's talking!” like a caress over the whole of my sweat-drenched body.

I'll say it again: imitating human beings was not something that pleased me. I imitated them because I was looking for a way out, for no other reason.<sup>92</sup>

Keller's attitudes toward the value of speech and the function of imitation are closely aligned with the one that Kafka represents in this story; for her too, speaking like others was a way out of a cage and a way into group. One difference is that Keller was pleased about it: “I shall never forget the surprise and delight I felt when I uttered my first connected sentence,” she writes in *The Story of My Life*: “‘It is warm.’ True, they were broken and stammering syllables; but they were human speech. My soul, conscious of new strength, came out of bondage, and was reaching through those broken symbols of speech to all knowledge and all faith” (*SML*, 48). In moving from “broken . . . syllables”

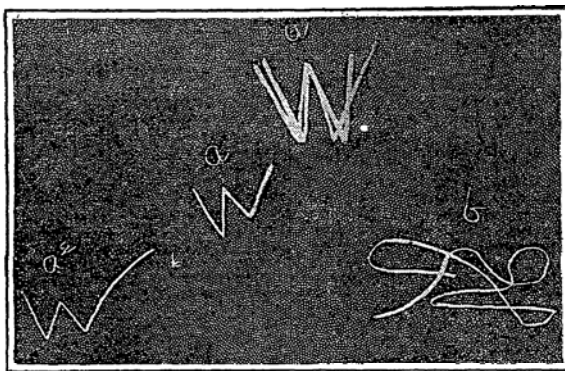
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<sup>91</sup> Jean Sherwood Rankin, “Helen Keller and the Language-Teaching Problem,” *The Elementary School Teacher* 9, No. 2 (October 1908): 84-93, 85.

<sup>92</sup> Franz Kafka, “A Report to An Academy,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York, 1971). In *Elizabeth Costello* (New York, 2003), J. M. Coetzee's titular character gives a talk about animal rights in which she refers to Kafka's story. Although Costello suggests that Red Peter may be based on experiments by Wolfgang Köhler, I'm convinced by Gregory Radick's suggestion in *Simian Tongue: The Long Debate About Animal Language* (University of Chicago Press, 2008) that it's Witmer's Peter that more directly inspired the story. Thus while Kafka's story has compellingly been read as a reflection on animal rights and on the condition of Jews in Europe, it also may have owed its conception in part to the history of deaf education: if Kafka was likely thinking about Witmer's Peter when writing his story, Witmer was likely thinking about Pereira and Keller when he trained Peter.

to “broken *symbols of speech*” Keller seems to transform her point about the specificity of the vocal medium, describing her own speech as if it were, in fact, writing (in the classic logocentric formulation in which writing is supplementary to—a secondary reflection or “symbol” of—speech). It is as if these initial utterances are only mimetic of speech itself—which is, of course, entirely commensurate with the strong sense she shares with Red Peter that imitation is the only way in. If this is the case, is speech one’s soul stammering out of bondage, or is it a broken symbol of others’ speech? The same question—when does the reproduction of language count as language?—is at issue too in her first use of the manual alphabet. “Running downstairs to my mother I held up my hand and made the letter for doll,” she writes. “I did not know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed; I was simply making my fingers go in monkey-like imitation” (*SML*, 18). While in general, as Kleege notes, Keller resented the comparison of herself to an animal, at moments like this—and, sardonically, in the reference to herself as a “self-recording creature” in the preface of *World I Live In* (xi)—she also meditates on it.

Kafka probably got the idea for his own imitating ape from an internationally famous trained ape named Peter who lived in the custody of Lightner Witmer, the psychologist who, as I discussed above, saw in the eighteenth-century educator Jacob Rodrigues Pereira the pedagogical ancestor of Anne Sullivan. “A Monkey with a Mind,” read the headline of a January 30, 1910 article in the *New York Times*. Witmer is quoted at length. He draws a comparison between Peter and Keller. “Helen Keller tells how she first grasped the idea that certain touches upon the palm of her hand were the name of the object water. Peter has already reached the stage where he comprehends, even though it be only to a limited extent, that certain sounds are the names of objects.”<sup>93</sup> For Witmer, although there is no proof that Peter could be made to use language as humans do, “[t]here can be no doubt that to some extent [Peter] already understands spoken language.” The next step to take in his linguistic education, then, is to get him to understand the connection between speech and writing. Toward this end Witmer began with a simple exercise, teaching Peter to copy out a single letter of the alphabet (fig. 2.1).



Letters Written by Peter at Prof. Witmer's Dictation.

Fig. 2.1. Peter’s writing lesson.

But what is it that would make Peter’s “writing” truly language, as opposed to the mere imitation of Witmer’s physical gesture? By what principle in other words does one know

<sup>93</sup> “A Monkey with a Mind,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1910.

the difference between signs and marks that resemble signs, between symbols and “broken syllables”?

This question, the one that concerns Michaels, is explicit in accounts of Peter’s training. But it’s also implicit in some responses to Keller’s education—in, for instance, reproductions of her handwriting. Consider the first magazine installment of *The Story of My Life*, which appeared in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1902. The article includes Keller’s descriptions of her early childhood, up until a first meeting with the younger Bell and her subsequent enrollment at the Perkins Institute. But what is particularly noteworthy is the image that runs at the top of the first page of the excerpt: a reproduction of a brief, one-sentence note from Keller, in her own handwriting, to the readers (fig. 2.2). “In the story of my life here presented to the readers of *The Ladies’ Home Journal*,” the note reads, “I have tried to show that afflictions may be looked at in such a way that they become privileges.”<sup>94</sup>

This is not the only place Keller’s handwriting appears. But—as was the case with Harjo’s brand—there is never commentary on the form of its appearance, nor is there ever editorial justification for its reproduction. So why, exactly, should one care what her writing looks like?<sup>95</sup>

## Helen Keller’s Own Story of Her Life

Written Entirely by the Wonderful Girl Herself

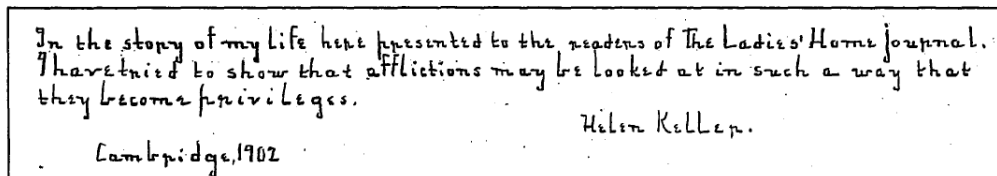


Fig. 2.2. Keller’s letter(s).

Partly the reason seems to be that the image of her handwriting provides evidence, visible proof, of her authorship—proof that the story of her life is, as the subtitle of the article suggests (more than a little redundantly) is “written entirely by the wonderful girl herself.” Because of the concerns about imitation that, as the last section discussed, marked many responses to her early career as a writer (and implicitly or explicitly to her very status as a member of the human community), the editor of the *Ladies Home Journal* felt it necessary to include not only the handwriting but also a brief note at the top of Keller’s submission that describes the precise manner of its composition:

<sup>94</sup> “Helen Keller’s Own Story of Her Life,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal* 19, no. 5 (April 1902): 7-8, 7.

<sup>95</sup> For an excellent account of (primarily nineteenth-century) ideas about the meaning of penmanship and the identification (or socialization) of the self, see Tamara Plakins Thornton’s *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (Yale University Press, 1996).

As the feat may seem almost incredible, it may be in order to say at the beginning that every words of this story as printed in *The Journal* has actually been written by Helen Keller herself—not dictated, but first written in ‘Braille’ (raised points); then transferred to the typewriter by the wonderful girl herself; next read to her by her teacher by means of the fingers; corrected; then read again to her, and in the proof finally read to her once more. (7)

Yet the handwritten note at the top of the page seems to offer a different kind of proof than this detailed account. In the description of the step-by-step composition of the actual text of Keller’s memoirs, multiple writing technologies and people come into play. The brief note at the top of the page, meanwhile, seems to give us the very hand of the author. There are reasons to be skeptical about the authenticating function of a signature. As Derrida writes in “Signature Event Context,” “I imitate and reproduce my ‘own’ signature incessantly. This signature is imitable in its essence. And always has been” (“SEC,” 34). Keller’s case is no different, to be sure, but it also calls up a specific set of questions about the sensorium. The status of the reproduction of her signature as visual evidence, that is, calls up the very questions that produced the “need” for evidence of Keller’s ability to write in the first place—her sensory impairments. For skeptics of Keller, being able to access visual proof is precisely what differentiates them from her; thus when a reader looks at Keller’s handwriting, part of what the reader sees may be the fact that the author cannot see it herself, and could not when she wrote it, which in turn offers a reminder that its attractive square lettering is a product not only of the author’s expressive individuality but also of the technology (a board with horizontal grooves) that she used to keep lines from crossing each other when she wrote with a pen.

If these anxieties about prosthesis are entirely irrelevant to the fact of her authorship of the text as a text, they are nonetheless overdetermined as features of the discourse about her position in relation to culture. In a way, then, for her editors the singularity of her handwriting represents the same thing that speech did for her, something that seems to come from outside of, that cannot be reduced to, the signifying system of a given culture but that instead connects one to divinity and to humanity broadly conceived. But this was perhaps, for some, a sign of the monstrous rather than the divine. What matters about her handwriting for those who fetishize it isn’t its portable semantic content but its index of her particularity.

But notice how the semantic content of what Keller writes in this brief note also puts pressure on that fetishization, resisting the reduction of her writing to mere reproduction. “I have tried to *show*,” Keller writes, “that afflictions may be *looked* at in such a way that they become privileges.” It is the kind of expression of positive overcoming that is so typical in writing by and about Keller, but it also slyly incorporates the kind of metaphoric references both to visual proof (“show”) and to perspective (“looked at”) that make it linguistically impossible to distinguish between what can and what cannot be verified visually. If one can show things by writing and look at things by reading, then the specificity of the visual loses its forces. The same logic threatens Keller’s own commitment to speech. Both Keller’s oralism and her readers’ fascination with, fetishization of, her handwriting—as an image of imitation, a reproduction of social reproduction—stem from a similar ambivalence about the embodiment of cultural particularity. There’s at least a superficial structural similarity, after all, between Keller’s

handwriting and her speech: both are largely unavailable to her sensorium, one of the implications of which is that she had to acquire facility in both of these channels of culture through an indirect or mediated imitation, through some form of prosthetic—a guiding device to learn to write, and a complex tactile procedure with her teachers to learn to speak. In the next chapter, on the problem of embodied discourse in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald, I'll continue to take up these questions about embodiment and “intercultural” imitation through a discussion of the textual representation of gesture, a kind of representation that is both made possible and problematized by gesture's continuity with talk.

## Chapter 3

### Gatsby's Tattoo: Gesture-Language in the Jazz Age

#### 1. *Voilà!*—A Gesture

Journalist Frank Thone opened an article in the September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936 issue of the *Science News Letter*, a popular science weekly, with a question: “Do you talk with your hands?”<sup>96</sup> The piece summarizes an ongoing study of New York City immigrants’ gestural habits conducted by Argentinean anthropologist David Efron under the supervision of Franz Boas. The answer to Thone’s question is yes, you do, and more than you think. But the “you” here is not, as you might guess, the generic second person, and the rhetorical upshot of this opening move is not the generalized claim that one talks with one’s hands. It is rather that the particular reader Thone more than once invokes, the “typical average American,” is guilty of the same kinds of gesticulation that he or she tends to associate with “foreigners.” Nearly echoing Dick Diver’s claim in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night* that “no American men,” other than Diver himself, have “any repose,” Thone writes that Americans “talk with their hands a good deal more than they realize.”<sup>97</sup> And it is precisely this unawareness, the fact that “we have become so used to our gestures that they ‘don’t count,’” that leads Thone to a more fundamental point, if one that remains largely implicit, about the relationship between gesture and discourse. The former does not only serve as an instrument of the latter; it is also structurally analogous to it. Gestures, Thone writes, “fit into the pattern of our lives as thoroughly as English speech fits in, or the habit of saying ‘yeah’ or ‘uh-huh’ instead of ‘yes’” (“TH,” 154). Like the vernacular, gestural habits take shape independently of reflection.

The quality of unconsciousness is one of the factors that made spoken language a privileged object in the Boasians’ study of cultural norms and practices. To look at gesture on a similar model is thus to accord it an important place in the consideration of “the pattern of our lives.” The payoff of Efron’s research on gesture, which offers both qualitative and quantitative accounts of the differences between the habits of “traditional” and “assimilated” Eastern Jews and Southern Italians in New York City, lies in its emphasis of the importance of environment over heredity in the shaping of bodily movement. Efron concludes that the behaviors of both assimilated groups “(a) *appear to differ greatly from their respective traditional groups*, and (b) *appear to resemble each other*,” indicating “that gestural behavior, or the absence of it is, to some extent at least, conditioned by factors of a socio-psychological nature” rather than “by biological descent.”<sup>98</sup> Efron’s monograph was published in 1941 as *Gesture and*

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<sup>96</sup> Frank Thone, “Do You Talk with Your Hands?” *Science News Letter* 30, no. 804 (September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1936): 154-56, 154. Hereafter cited as “TH.”

<sup>97</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 61. Hereafter cited as *TN*.

<sup>98</sup> David Efron, with sketches by Stuyvesant Van Veen and a preface by Franz Boas, *Gesture and Environment: A Tentative Study of the Spatio-temporal and “Linguistic” Aspects of the Gestural Behavior of Eastern Jews and Southern Italians in New York*



*Environment: A Tentative Study of the Spatio-temporal and “Linguistic” Aspects of the Gestural Behavior of Eastern Jews and Southern Italians in New York City, Living under Similar as well as Different Environmental Conditions.* As Paul Ekman notes in his preface to the 1972 reprint, the study was massively ambitious in its attempt to answer the question of whether gestures are culturally determined.<sup>99</sup> But it was also conceived under Boas’s skeptical watch, and “Tentative” is perhaps the key word in a title that hedges as many bets as this one does. The scare quotes around “linguistic” deserve particular attention, suggesting the unease with which gesture sits in relationship to language. Is this relationship one of ontology or resemblance? Is gesture linguistic or “linguistic”?

In this chapter I describe the role that these questions, about the ways in which the body both integrates itself into talk and resists such integration, play in Fitzgerald’s fiction, particularly in *The Great Gatsby* (1925). As in the last chapter, and as Efron’s study begins to suggest, the idea of imitation will play a significant if not primary role in my argument here. Whereas Keller’s complex attitudes toward discourse and embodiment are, I’ve argued, largely conditioned by the consequences of imitation for the category of the “human,” Fitzgerald’s own interest in embodied meaning as a privileged but resistant object of textual representation is most tightly bound up with the enthusiasm and anxiety of his responses to the encounters with cultural alterity produced by what Boasians—and other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century social scientists, from Tylor to Malinowski—referred to as *diffusion* (or sometimes, in Boas’s case, dissemination). This term has by now largely given way to others (including *transfer* in the history of technology and *circulation* in economics and some areas of literary study), in part because the analogy with particle diffusion seems problematically to imply that practices, ideas, and technologies grow thinner and weaker as, over time, they spread outward from a point of origin. For the purposes of my argument here, though, the term is apt not only for reasons of historicist fidelity but more importantly because these connotations correspond to an active current of Fitzgerald’s imagination. While, for him, the kinds of encounter and innovation produced by diffusion are often stimulating and vitalizing, they also on occasion threaten enervation, dissolution, entropy. In pointing to this ambivalence, I’m extending a line of scholarship that has described the complexities of Fitzgerald’s engagement with social history and with the politics of ethnicity, historicizing that engagement in terms of the contemporaneous theorization of culture. This is not to claim that Fitzgerald explicitly engaged with the social sciences of his moment. There is not extant evidence that he was aware of Boas in

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*City, Living under Similar as well as Different Environmental Conditions* (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1941), 136-37.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Ekman, “Preface,” in David Efron, *Gesture, Race, and Culture: A Tentative Study of the Spatio-temporal and “Linguistic” Aspects of the Gestural Behavior of Eastern Jews and Southern Italians in New York City, Living under Similar as well as Different Environmental Conditions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 8. Hereafter cited as *GRC*. This version of the study is more widely available in reprint than *Gesture and Environment* and has therefore been more frequently cited in scholarship on Efron, e.g., Deirdre Sklar, “Remembering Kinaesthesia: An Inquiry Into Embodied Cultural Knowledge,” in *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. Carry Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 85-112; see esp. 98-102.

the way that he was of, for example, Marx and Freud. Nevertheless, I'll argue, the representational strategies of his prose assume a modern anthropological view of discourse in which gesture and talk are, due to their similar embeddedness within local semiotic systems, profoundly commensurable. And when, in his fiction, those systems come into interaction, and when as a result cultural context begins to appear not as the common ground of discursive interaction but rather as a point of pragmatic negotiation, the effect on bodily behavior is to disrupt or problematize its semiotic function. What this means, I hope to show, is that by closely tracking Fitzgerald's attention to gestures, to tics, and to the kinds of narrative interference effected by the occasional indistinction of these two categories, we can defamiliarize our understanding of the early-twentieth-century literary imagination of the relationship between cultural contexts (newly seen as historically particular and constituted through processes of diffusion) and the formation of semiotic (gestural, linguistic, narrative) behavior.

Clifford Geertz memorably addresses the relationship between cultural contexts and behavioral forms in a seminal essay on the textuality of culture and the relationship between ethnography and literary study. For Geertz, making a gesture is an act of everyday alchemy: "a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and—*voilà!*—a gesture" ("TD," 6). Later in the chapter, I'll devote extended attention to a textual-gestural event that Geertz might call a speck of behavior and that I'm calling Gatsby's tattoo. Jay Gatsby does not, as far as a reader of *Gatsby* knows, have a tattoo on his skin. He drums one on the floor. The narrative mentions it only once, in a line as quick and clipped as the tattoo itself: "Gatsby's foot beat a short restless tattoo and Tom eyed him suddenly."<sup>100</sup> Part of what this chapter sets out to do is to account for Tom Buchanan's glance, offering a thick description that explicates this moment by reference to the contexts that shape it—in particular, to discourses related to the socio-aesthetics of nervousness and of jazz. In order to trace these relationships, I'll touch on a constellation of texts that inform or stand adjacent to the novel, including Fitzgerald's manuscript and in particular the revisions he makes to the event of the tattoo. Yet I also draw attention to that event for the quiddities of its structure. Narrator Nick Carraway describes "personality [as] an unbroken series of successful gestures" (*G*, 6), and more than one critic has seized on Nick's idea as an interpretive key. But the tattoo puts pressure on this provisional definition, not only because it is apparently less successful gesture than symptomatic tic but also because of its form: this interruptive staccato, patterned improvisatorily if at all, counterpoints the tenuous continuity of "an unbroken series." This formal tension recurs throughout the novel, the corollary to the author's uneasy sense of modernity as a

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<sup>100</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1992), 135. Hereafter cited as *G*. The two primary senses of the word "tattoo" are etymologically distinct (the inky one Polynesian, the rhythmic British) and Fitzgerald does not seem to be punning on them. It is certainly plausible, though, that he would have been aware, in using the word, of its quiet evocation of the link between writing and the body. I'll return to this evocation later in the chapter. See "tattoo, n.<sup>1</sup>," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 8 June 2010, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50247584>>, and "tattoo, n.<sup>2</sup>," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 8 June 2010, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50247585>>.

condition in which cultural context tends to crack up, a condition of reverse alchemy, gestures turned to tics.

A moment in Fitzgerald's 1923 story "Dice, Brassknuckles, & Guitar" pre-figures the event of Gatsby's tattoo as well as some of the concerns of Efron's study of gestures, bringing together the central questions of this chapter. The protagonist, Jim Powell, is a low-rent proto-Gatsby figure and a self-styled "Jazz Master." He drives up from Georgia to try his luck in the North for the summer, opening up a school that trains well-to-do New Jersey adolescents in the arts of modern socializing: shooting dice, playing guitar, fending off handsy dates, speaking in dialect. In the comic story of Jim's ad-hoc institution (and its quick demise), Fitzgerald reflects on the class functions both of racial masquerade and of segregation—of, that is, the impulse to see ethnic categories as, on one hand, performative, and, on the other, as stable objects of disciplinary control. But for now I'd like to draw attention to a curious moment of gestural interaction between Jim and the young woman of his affections, Amanthis Powell:

Jim began to tap his foot rhythmically on the porch and in a moment Amanthis discovered that she was unconsciously doing the same thing. "Stop!" she commanded, "Don't make me do that." He looked down at his foot. "Excuse me," he said humbly. "I don't know—it's just something I do."<sup>101</sup>

Like Thone's "typical average American," Jim's body is more active than he realizes; like saying "'uh-huh' instead of 'yes,'" tapping his foot is just something he does, part of the pattern of his life. Still, this behavior resists the kinds of functional categorization in which Efron's ethnographic study of gesture was invested. Perhaps Jim, the Jazz Master, is tapping out a beat. If so, then this behavior would properly be understood as the expression of a particular discursive system, making Amanthis's involuntary imitation the effect of a process of cultural diffusion to which she and Jim are party only unconsciously. But perhaps this is a nervous tic, an expression of Jim's precarious class position. Several years later, after all, in "Echoes of the Jazz Age" (1931), Fitzgerald uses "a nervous beating of the feet" as a figure for "widespread neurosis."<sup>102</sup> Fitzgerald doesn't bother to resolve these interpretive possibilities. Yet his work insistently returns to the problem of their intersection in ways that I'll identify in what follows.

## 2. Walking on Paper

In a brief essay titled "Notes on Gesture," Giorgio Agamben suggests that the advent of a mechanized modernity in the late nineteenth century fundamentally

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<sup>101</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Dice, Brassknuckles & Guitar," in *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989), 237-58, 241. Hereafter cited as "DBG."

<sup>102</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1956), 13-22, 19.

changed the relationship of the Western bourgeoisie to its bodies.<sup>103</sup> “An era that has lost its gestures is, for that reason, obsessed with them,” Agamben writes. Whether or not one accepts this sketchy account of an epochal shift, it’s hard not to see something of this loss and obsession in a letter about etiquette that a teenaged Fitzgerald writes to his younger sister Annabel in 1915. The contents of the letter—or, better, memorandum—are outlined alphanumerically and under section headings including “*The General Subject of Conversation*,” “*Poise: Carriage: Dancing: Expression*,” and “*Dress and Personality*.” At one point Fitzgerald exhorts Annabel to walk more elegantly:

Look what stylish walk Eleanor and Grace and Betty have and what a homely walk Marie and Alice have. Just because the first three deliberately practised every where until now it’s so natural to them that they cant be ungraceful—This is true about every gesture. I noticed last Saturday that your gestures are awkward and so unnatural as to seem affected.<sup>104</sup>

For Fitzgerald here, what’s at stake in “every gesture” that people make is whether it’s “natural to them.” Agamben uses the same phrases. “For people who are bereft of all that is natural to them,” he writes, “every gesture becomes a fate.” But in Agamben’s account of modern alienation, one can only find the natural by looking back over one’s shoulder, while for Fitzgerald one can look ahead to it. A gesture isn’t a fate but an opportunity for the perfection of style. “Practise anywhere,” he counsels Annabel. “Practise now.”

Agamben argues that in early film “a society that has lost its gestures seeks to reappropriate what it has lost while simultaneously recording that loss” (“NG,” 137). But this loss and obsession can already be made out, he implies, in a pair of medical studies conducted in the mid-1880s by Georges Gilles de la Tourette under the supervision of Jean-Martin Charcot. Like Fitzgerald in his letter to Annabel, Gilles de la Tourette is intensely interested in the forms of walking. They are the subject of his 1886 essay, “Clinical and Physiological Studies of the Stride: The Stride in Nervous System Disorders, Studied with the Imprint Method.” Here the physician observes kinetic detail with a precision, Agamben writes, that is “prophetic of the cinema” (“NG,” 135) (not unlike the near-contemporaneous photographic studies by Eadward J. Muybridge and Etienne-Jules Marey). The study involves laying long sheets of cheap, light-colored wallpaper on the floor; coating the soles of the subjects’ bare feet with a fine red dust; having them walk the length of the paper; and recording the footprints left behind by outlining, photographing, and measuring them (fig. 3.1).<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Notes on Gesture,” in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 137. Hereafter cited as “NG.”

<sup>104</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald to Annabel Fitzgerald, c. 1915, in *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli and Margaret M. Dungan, with the assistance of Susan Walker (New York: Random House, 1980), 15-18, 18; typographical errors *sic*. Hereafter cited as *C*.

<sup>105</sup> Georges Gilles de la Tourette, “Études Cliniques et Physiologiques Sur la Marche: La Marche dans les Maladies du Système Nerveux: Étudiée par la Méthode des Empreintes (Avec 31 Figures)” (Paris: Delahaye et Lecrosnier, 1886), 14-15. Hereafter cited as “LM.”

As important as the results thus gathered, Gilles de la Tourette insists, is the reproducibility of this method by future researchers (“LM,” 2). In describing the study as the first time that “one of the most common human gestures [had] been analyzed according to strictly scientific methods” (“NG,” 135), Agamben captures the spirit of this adherence to the experimental method—and, incidentally, echoes Fitzgerald’s intuition, twenty years before Marcel Mauss will cement the idea in social scientific thought, that walking should be categorized as a gesture.<sup>106</sup> (This is not a universally accepted position in the early twentieth century; in the introduction to *Language* that I cited in the last chapter, for instance, Sapir describes walking as one of those practices that are *not* learned by imitation.) Yet this description obscures the object of Gilles de la Tourette’s attention, which is ultimately less the “common” than the irregular or afflicted stride (figs. 3.1 and 3.2 offer partial views of Gilles de la Tourette’s “Tableau Comparatif des Divers Genres de Marche,” in “LM.”). The purpose of those sections of the study that concern the “marche normale” is to provide a controlled metric for the analysis of other forms of walking. As Gilles de la Tourette states in the first line of the study’s preface, many nervous disorders affect how one walks, and simply observing these effects can sometimes suffice for a diagnosis of the disorder that causes them (“LM,” 1). The sections of the study that concern the common stride serve as a control for its proper object. So to the extent that Gilles de la Tourette is interested in gesture here, it is as symptom—a theme he more famously treats in the second publication Agamben cites, “A Study of a Nervous Affection Characterized by Motor Incoordination Accompanied by Echolalia and Coprolalia (Jumping Latah Myriachit).”<sup>107</sup> There he describes several patients exhibiting, in Agamben’s words, “a staggering proliferation of tics, involuntary spasms and mannerisms that can be defined only as a generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere” (“NG,” 136). Gilles de la Tourette’s account of these phenomena, his diagnosis of the *maladie des tics*, is itself, in this telling, symptomatic of large-scale historical disorder; it is one of the signs that “By the end of the nineteenth century the gestures of the Western bourgeoisie were irretrievably lost” (“NG,” 135).

Fitzgerald’s letter to his sister, perhaps because it’s written from out of the effects of the epochal transformation Agamben loosely sketches out, differently casts the relation between gesture and nature. The casual cruelty and sociological ambition of Fitzgerald’s notes on walking pervade each topic the letter tackles. In format and tone the letter burlesques the generic conventions of the etiquette manual, while still affirming its basic assumptions. If, in this statement of early twentieth century teenage socialization, the “natural” is lost, it’s also potential as what William James describes as

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<sup>106</sup> “Thus there exists an education in walking,” Mauss writes (“The Techniques of the Body” [1934], trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 [February 1973], 70–88, 72). For recent scholarship on the ethnography of walking, see Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst, eds., *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>107</sup> Gilles de la Tourette, “Étude sur une Affection Nerveuse Caractérisée par de l’Incoordination Motrice Accompagné d’Écholalie et de Coprolalie (Jumping Latah Myriachit),” *Archives de Neurologie* 9 (1885): 19–42. See Howard I. Kushner, *A Cursing Brain? The Histories of Tourette’s Syndrome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

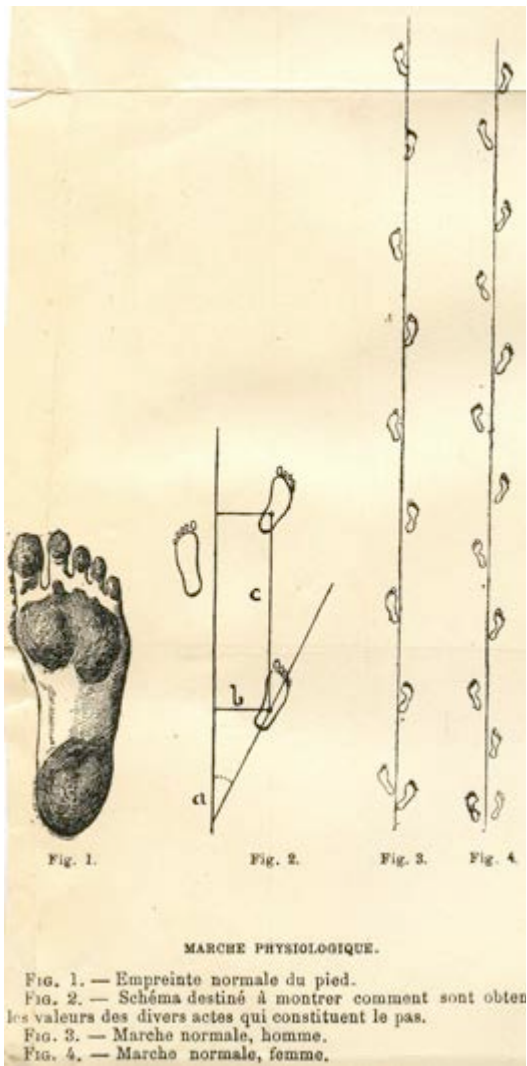


Fig. 3.1. A common human gesture.



Fig. 3.2. Afflicted strides.

habit or “second nature”; for Fitzgerald, the habitualization of grace entails the alignment of behavior with contemporary convention.<sup>108</sup> The concerns that thus occupy

<sup>108</sup> William James, “The Laws of Habit,” in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1907), 65. We are “mere bundles of habit,” James writes, “stereotyped creatures” (66). While James anticipates the objection that his account forecloses the formation of new habits—these “can be launched,” he insists, “on condition of there being new stimuli and new excitements” (77)—the view of humans as “imitators and copiers of our past selves” (66) would

him here—gestural grace and awkwardness, the performative proficiency of women, the focal points and blind spots of the male gaze—remain live issues for him throughout his career. In *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, the novel he was working on at his death, the protagonist, Monroe Stahr, watches his date, Kathleen Moore, walk across a room. He feels “half afraid that her body would fail somewhere and break the spell. He had watched women in screen tests and seen their beauty vanish second by second, as if a lovely statue had begun to walk with the meagre joints of a paper doll.”<sup>109</sup> The alternative to failure—to the unnatural position of statue or paper doll, as to the “homely walk Marie and Alice have”—is second nature, the habitualized conjuration of poise.

In “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” (1920), a short story about the social competition of a pair of teenage girls, Fitzgerald reworks material from the 1915 letter. Self-presentation remains the predominating theme. Late in the story he introduces a variation on it. The protagonist is dancing at a party. Another character, the college boy Warren McIntyre, “regarded her intently. She had that look that no woman, however histrionically proficient, can successfully counterfeit—she looked as if she were having a good time.”<sup>110</sup>

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nevertheless seem potentially anxiogenic for the young person striving to keep pace with the change of stylistic convention. In his book on the mistake as a necessary structural feature of the realist novel, Kent Puckett describes the etiquette manual in related terms: “the genre replaces particular ends . . . with the flow of protean fashion, a phenomenon defined by its necessary resistance to closure and . . . its need for ‘feverish change’” (*Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 20). My interest in the tic is by no means incommensurable with Puckett’s in the mistake—both tic and mistake tend to reveal something meant to be kept from sight—but in reading Fitzgerald it seems useful to maintain an heuristic distinction between the former’s symptomaticity and the latter’s failure.

<sup>109</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 90. Hereafter cited in the text as *LT*. Pearl James argues that Fitzgerald’s fiction, insofar as it responds to a crisis of masculinity in the wake of the Great War, associates performativity with femininity (“History and Masculinity in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 1 [Spring 2005]: 1-33). It’s a persuasive argument that helps describe the dynamics of moments like this one, even if, because it doesn’t discuss *Gatsby*, it doesn’t tackle the apparent counterexample of Jordan Baker’s masculinized self-presentation. For a more generalized account of Fitzgerald’s understanding of identity as performative, “refut[ing] the possibility of any identity, whether racial, class, or ethnic, as ‘the real thing,’” see Meredith Goldsmith, “White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 443-68, 444. On the limits of the male imagination in *Gatsby*, see Leland S. Person Jr., “‘Herstory’ and Daisy Buchanan,” *American Literature* 50, no. 2 (May 1978): 250-57.

<sup>110</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, “Bernice Bobs her Hair,” in *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1998), 24-57, 38. At some point after writing the story, Fitzgerald wrote “Basis of Bernice” at the top of his copy of the 1915 letter to Annabel (C, 15).

It's unclear whether the narrator or Warren imagines this limit to physical artifice. In either case, and regardless of whether Bernice is in fact having a good time, the judgment's premises should probably be read as false. The line between expressions of emotion as universal (and so natural) and gestures as local (and so conventional) is a well-trod topic of anthropological debate by the early twentieth century, and Fitzgerald is attuned to the common sense of the distinction. "It wasn't a gesture," he writes in *Gatsby*, describing Daisy Buchanan's appalled reaction to the spectacle of West Egg society, "but an emotion" (113). But his sense that "behaviorism" offers "the only guide to the validity of emotion" (as he wrote in his working notes for *The Last Tycoon* [LT, 198]) suggests that for him modernity calls for a vertical arrangement of these terms, emotional interiority subordinated to gestural behavior. Hence his advice to Annabel that she should make her face "almost like a mask so that she'd have perfect control of any expression" (C, 16) and hence *Gatsby's* tactical deployment of a smile that's the soul of fellow feeling. But there's a developmental limit to this malleability. As Boas similarly asserts in *Anthropology and Modern Life* (1928), adolescents' habits are relatively plastic, while for adults, "To change one's gait, to acquire a new style of handwriting, to change the play of the muscles of the face in response to emotion is a task that can never be accomplished satisfactorily." Fitzgerald closes his letter to Annabel by saying it's too late for him and their mother to modify their habits, only underscoring the urgency that his sister practice her own. It's logical, then, that "Bernice" should be about teenagers, the pattern of whose lives has yet to calcify.

The Franklinian schedule of daily activities that the boyhood *Gatsby* draws up for himself (exercise, practice elocution, study inventions) implies a sense of the urgency of his own plasticity. But by no means does the adult who resulted from that training always succeed at the natural gesture. The word "counterfeit" appears just once in *Gatsby*. As it does in "Bernice Bobs her Hair," it refers to the performance of a "look," though in this case one that aims for the natural and misses. Nick has arranged for the reunion of *Gatsby* and Daisy in his living room. *Gatsby*, anxious at encountering his old flame, "was reclining against the mantelpiece in a strained counterfeit of perfect ease, even boredom" (91)—an object lesson of Fitzgerald's advice to Annabel that affecting boredom is "hard to do . . . gracefully" (C, 16). The manuscript version of this line, before Fitzgerald revised it later in the course of production, was more explicit about the mechanics of body language; "in [a] strained *posture that was evidently meant to suggest* perfect ease," it read.<sup>111</sup> While posture has often been understood as "semantically neutral," in opposition to gesture, Raymond Firth has argued that in fact the forms of posture are similarly ritualized, cultivated, and significant; consider, he writes, military "postures of relaxation—'stand at ease,' 'stand easy,' which are not only patterned but bear a strict, formal relationship to the contrasting patterns of tension."<sup>112</sup> It's a narrow example for a generalized argument about the cultivation of postural (like

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<sup>111</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby: A Facsimile of the Manuscript*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Washington, D.C.: Microcard Editions Books, 1973), 129, emphasis added. In the manuscript itself the line saw some initial revision, *strained*, for instance, replacing the original *appalling*.

<sup>112</sup> Raymond Firth, "Postures and Gestures of Respect," in *The Body Reader: Social Aspects of the Human Body*, ed. Ted Polhemus (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 88-108, 89.



gestural) forms. But James too, seconding the Duke of Wellington's quip that "[h]abit is ten times nature," speculated that "the degree to which this is true no one can probably appreciate as well as one who is a veteran soldier himself," and when Dick Diver and his friends are observing restaurant patrons in *Tender*, what threatens to break the mold of the jumpy American is the West Point training of a "well-known general": "His hands hanging naturally at his sides, the general waited to be seated. Once his arms swung suddenly back like a jumper's and Dick said, 'Ah!' supposing he had lost control, but the general recovered."<sup>113</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, in *Gatsby*, military decorum informs both the gaze of the narrator—who desires a world "in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" and so enjoys Jordan Baker's way of "throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet" (6, 15)—and the habit of the character, Gatsby, like Nick a Great War veteran. While Daisy sits in Nick's living room "frightened but graceful," Gatsby stands at such strained ease that he knocks over a clock with the back of his head (91). For those whose physical composure tends to such awkwardness and evident counterfeit, Fitzgerald counsels Annabel in his letter—and if Gatsby at least has his winning smile, hers is "on one side which is *absolutely wrong*" (C, 16)—every opportunity to practice must be seized. "Cultivate deliberate physical grace. You'll never have it if you don't" (C, 18).

Efron's study was a seminal one in the theorization of gestural cultivation, but it was not alone. In 1942, the year after his study was published in book form, an article appeared in *American Anthropologist* on "Navaho Hotor Habits." In it, Flora L. Bailey describes a broad range of gestures, postures, and behavioral habits, among them the features of the Navajo gait. "The effect is that of ease, relaxation, and control in the walk," she writes. "Especially in the women, aided no doubt by the graceful swing of a long, full skirt, it is most pleasing. It contrasts decidedly with the gait of the Pueblo woman which, viewed from the rear, is a waddle from side to side."<sup>114</sup> The ethnographer's pleasure and distaste uncannily echo Fitzgerald's 1915 letter to his sister, with its evaluation of "stylish" and "homely" walks. Suggesting an equivalence between the kind of Anglo teenage socialization that concerns the young Fitzgerald and the kind of tribal differences that occupy Bailey—that is, claiming that the kind of difference that separates Eleanor's walk from his sister's is, for him, related to that which separates the Navaho woman's walk from the Pueblo woman's—might seem to confuse the problem of stylistic competency *within* a cultural context with that of stylistic convention *across* such contexts. But in Fitzgerald's work this confusion is often a narrative engine. If for him the aspirational idea that behavioral cultivation offers a way, the only way, to gain entrance to a social milieu, this idea has as its flip side the sometimes anxiogenic recognition of that milieu's porousness to *other* outsiders. Seen through the lens of that fiction, the echoes between his letter and Bailey's article are unsurprising. Consider "Bernice Bobs her Hair" once more. When the popular Marjorie Harvey's cousin Bernice arrives in town, she's awkward, reticent, and, in Warren's words, "sorta dopeless."

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<sup>113</sup> William James, "The Laws of Habit," *Popular Science Monthly* 30, no. 4 (February 1887): 443-50, 446. James revised the essay; the soldier appears here but not in the 1907 version cited above, while the line about "stereotyped creatures" appears in that version but not this earlier one.

<sup>114</sup> Flora L. Bailey, "Navaho Motor Habits," *American Anthropologist* 44, no. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1942): 210-234.

Marjorie contemptuously suggests to her mother that Bernice's social hopelessness may be due to her "crazy Indian blood." Mrs. Harvey dismisses the idea, but in the act that closes the story Bernice seems to confirm it: with a pair of scissors she sneaks up on the sleeping Marjorie and takes her scalp, or at least her long blond braids. "Scalp the selfish thing!" Bernice shouts as she leaves town. But of course the performance of scalping is less a sign of her blood than a sign that she is no longer dopeless; she has succeeded in cultivating the stylish norms of flapper impertinence that would make it perfectly natural to give one's uptight cousin an unwanted bob-cut while she sleeps.

One more feature of Thone's article "Do You Talk with Your Hands?" deserves comment here: a figure composed of two ink drawings by Stuyvesant van Veen, who assisted Efron in his study by making hundreds of sketches of gestures and conducting interviews out in the "field" of Manhattan's Jewish and Italian neighborhoods (fig. 3; "TH," 154). The illustration aims to visualize the overarching point of Efron's study, that gestural behavior is "environmentally" (i.e., historically and socially) rather than genetically determined. Yet the image can make this point only with the help of the caption explaining that both the "characteristically Jewish gesture" on the left and the stock-straight pose on the right are performed by men of Jewish descent. In the question and answer Thone poses here—"100 per cent American? Surely. Yet this upstanding, gestureless gentlemen is also a Jew"—he repeats the rhetorical move with which he opened the essay, overturning the assumed reader's expectations about the "typical average American." The drawing on the left was published in the book versions of the study (it's figure 21), but the drawing on the right appears nowhere in them. Perhaps this is due to the most obvious historical difference between the moment of the article (1936) and that of the book (1941): the outbreak of the Second World War. When he wrote the introduction to the book, Efron framed the study in part as a rejection of Third Reich racial science, and in the context of the American entrance into the war, the figure of an all-American German Jew would have been, to say the least, politically overdetermined.

Even in 1936, though, this diptych produces some strange effects. In an asymmetry that undermines the illustration's effort to display gestural "Contrasts," the traditional figures at left are in dialogue while the "upstanding, gestureless gentlemen" stands—as far as the viewer knows, and typo notwithstanding—alone. Does assimilation entail estrangement? More likely, for the designer of the diptych, it signals individuation and self-sufficiency: the use of "upstanding" to describe the figure's posture makes the same play that Nick Carraway does in his idea of standing at "moral attention," associating moral with spinal rectitude. Why, though, is the face of this upstanding American cast in shadow? Given the way that the rest of his body is shaded, minimally as it is, the dark patch of line shading across his face seems misplaced, a gratuitous disfiguration. By contrast, consider the faces of the "traditional" Jews on the left. Even as the shadows of their coats dissolve into the blank of the lower frame, Van Veen takes care to outline the racial stereotype of what Nick Carraway, referring to Meyer Wolfshiem, calls the "expressive nose" (*G*, 46). Here, if noses are expressive, what they express is heredity; linguistic expression, meanwhile, is not tied to mouths (unnecessary, left blank) but to hands, rendered in the left panel as distinctly as the noses. Yet in the right panel both face and hands, both "race" and "culture," are secreted away. It's as if the signs of heredity need first to be hidden in shadow in order for this

man to pass, with his gestural practice or his lack of it, as the “typical average American” and thus to stand synecdochically for, to embody, a whole category of “gentlemen.”

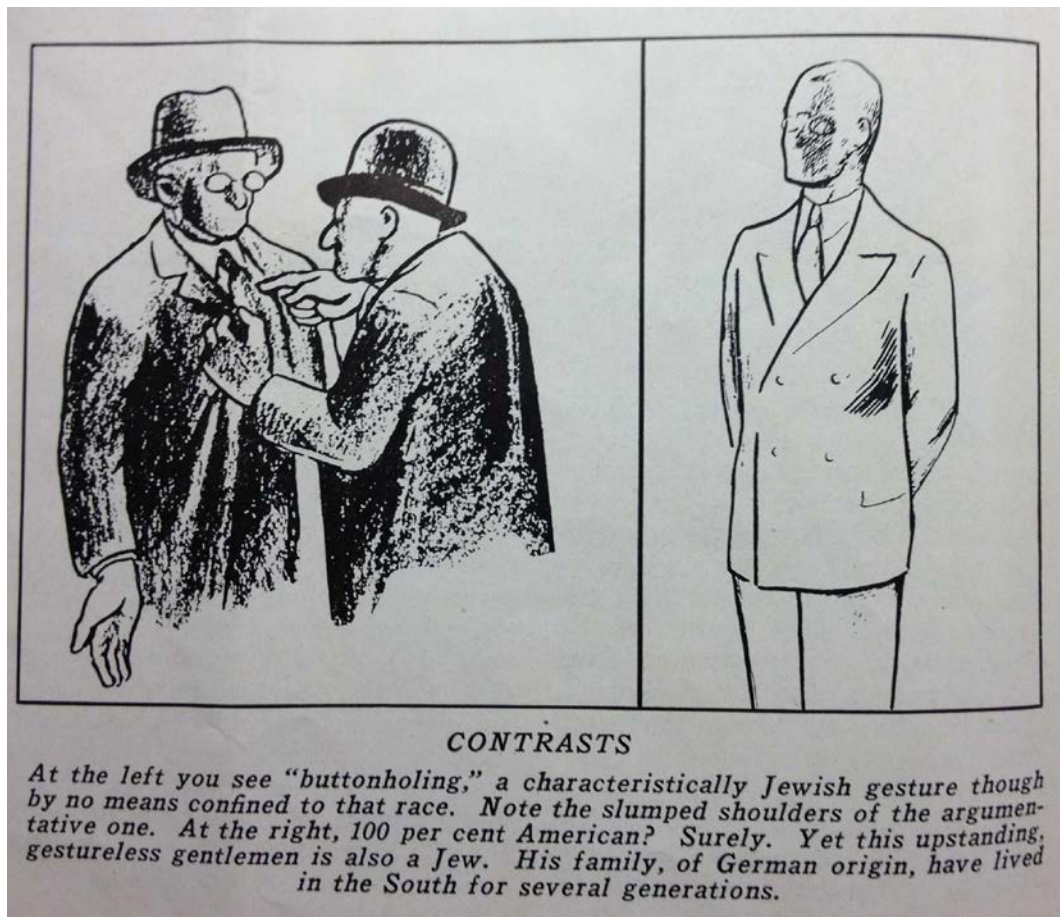


Fig. 3.3. Gestural “contrasts.”

The effect of this dual secretion, though, is to expose that embodiment as a contingent aesthetic effect. Elizabeth Abel’s recent study of the visuality of Jim Crow is helpful on this point. She notes that the Jim Crow sign’s attempt to essentialize racial difference in a diptych of WHITE/COLORED is undercut by its graphic materiality, by the way that it exposes racial categories as discursive constructs. Abel explains this tension in part through the historical moment of transition from scientific racism to Boasian cultural theory, which, she writes, offered “a new model for interpreting race as a cultural rather than biological construction.” Even as Jim Crow signs posit racial essentialism, she argues, they “also inadvertently, by virtue of their status as signs, attenuated the biological grounds on which they rested and unwittingly participated in the counterturn toward a cultural model.”<sup>115</sup> The *Science News Letter* illustration is

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times: The Visual Politics of Jim Crow* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 14. The idea of an “unwitting” participation in the

perhaps as close as one can get to a concretization of this Boasian response to the Jim Crow sign, echoing its structure—one side, dark with ink, frames the ethnically marked, the other, left nearly white, the unmarked—even as it explicitly negates Jim Crow’s essentialist premises. Yet the misplaced shadow on the figure on the right produces a dynamic that is the precise mirror image of the one Abel identifies. Here, the explicit Boasian critique of racial essentialism is implicitly undermined by a visual logic that assumes a viewer unable to think beyond race. Cultural difference, it would seem, can only become visible when heredity is placed “within the veil,” making the diptych one of what Anne Cheng calls “those murky moments of contamination when reification and recognition fuse.”<sup>116</sup> The shadow, meant to place the figure on the right in the unmarked position of a “typical average American,” inadvertently racializes him. His face is obscured in the full sense: hidden, to be sure, but at the same time marked, blackened.

In this dual obscurity Van Veen’s assimilated man begins to take on the shape of Jay Gatsby—the character whose appearance was rendered so vaguely that “the reader’s eyes can never quite focus upon him” (as editor Max Perkins wrote to Fitzgerald, who agreed) and whose uneasy relation to the category of the “American” is bound up, as other scholars have shown, with his ethnic ambiguity, with the sense that his social mobility depends on an act of passing.<sup>117</sup> If Gatsby’s physical appearance is underdetermined, his physical behavior is often overdetermined, subject to interference and obscuration by competing interpretive frameworks. In the next section I’ll begin to develop this argument about the novel in more detail, taking the distinction between gesture and tic as a starting point.

### 3. Tic Description

To construe the link between gesture and the natural either as an effect of cultivation or as forever lost is to view it as historically contingent. It’s, fundamentally, to decouple the two, making some variant of culture the primary background against which gesture is meaningfully defined. In this respect both Agamben and Fitzgerald fall within the mainstream of twentieth century theories of gesture, which tend, as does Efron’s study, to emphasize its historical determination within semiotic systems, making gesture a mode of praxis continuous with talk. Such an emphasis is of course consistent with the use of the body for persuasive effect in public discourse, as in the long humanist and classical traditions of rhetorical instruction. Yet the expansion of the referent of the term gesture from expressive gesticulation to the entirety of everyday

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cultural turn—and of the potential for the material histories of representations of human difference to undercut the beliefs about such difference held by those representations’ creators—is also an undercurrent of Braddock, *TE*.

<sup>116</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989 [1903]), 1; Anne Cheng, “Skins, Tattoos, and Susceptibility,” *Representations* 108, Special Issue: The Way We Read Now, ed. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (Fall 2009): 98-119, 101.

<sup>117</sup> Max Perkins to Fitzgerald, 20 November 1924, quoted by Matthew Bruccoli in *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 208. On Gatsby’s ethnicity see, for example, Meredith Goldsmith, “White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 443-68.

physical comportment, including walking, goes a step further. Consider, again, Geertz's article on thick description, in which he writes that even "zero-form twitches," physical behaviors that appear absent of content or convention, should be read "as a cultural category" ("TD," 7).

Geertz derives the concept of thick description from Gilbert Ryle's lecture "The Thinking of Thoughts: What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?," The gesture-tic binary plays a pivotal role in that lecture.<sup>118</sup> A gesture, writes Ryle, has "very complex success-versus-failure conditions"; a motion intended to signal something, for instance, can be misconstrued or ignored. But a twitch "is neither a failure nor a success." While "it may be a symptom . . . it is not a signal." Ryle offers the following illustration of the "immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink":

Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike. From a cinematograph-film of the two faces there might be no telling which contraction, if either, was a wink, or which, if either, were a mere twitch.

Unlike Agamben, for whom "[c]inema leads images back into the realm of gesture" ("NG," 139), Ryle argues that neither the photograph nor the moving picture suffices for distinguishing wink from twitch, gesture from tic. From this viewpoint, Gilles de la Tourette's diagrams of strides would belong to the "lowest or the thinnest of level description" in that they transform the complex cultural signs of walking into a series of symptomatic prints on paper. To really account for a gesture, to explain the difference between a wink and a twitch, Ryle proposes that one needs to offer a thick description explicating the act's conditions of success and failure and the meanings it carries for actor and audience. To demonstrate the potential complexity of this endeavor, Ryle adds to his example a third eyelid contraction whose meaning can't be captured by photography or thin description: the burlesqued wink, parodically citing its own conventions. Geertz refers to these examples as the kind of little fictions that "Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves" but nevertheless joins in, adding another twist that illustrates the multifarious stacking of cultural frames: the rehearsed parody wink, "practice[d] at home before the mirror" ("TD," 7). Fitzgerald's injunctions to Annabel come to mind. Practice anywhere. Practice now.

Early in *Gatsby* Nick likewise describes, in quick succession, two fairly swift contractions of the eyelids of one eye. Taken in sequence and in context, they offer different sorts of complication—narratological and political—to Ryle's and Geertz's examples. When Nick goes to the Buchanans' for lunch at the beginning of the summer, Tom turns conversation to a book he's been reading, Goddard's *The Rise of the Colored Empires* (a reference to Lothrop Stoddard's popular white supremacist tract *Rise of the Colored Tides*):

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<sup>118</sup> Gilbert Ryle, "The Thinking of Thoughts, What is 'Le Penseur' Doing?" University Lectures 18, 1968, University of Saskatchewan. Online at <[http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/CSACSIA/Vol14/Papers/ryle\\_1.html](http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/CSACSIA/Vol14/Papers/ryle_1.html)>. Accessed June 1, 2011.

“This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.”

“We’ve got to beat them down,” whispered Daisy, winking ferociously toward the fervent sun.

“You ought to live in California——” began Miss Baker but Tom interrupted her by shifting heavily in his chair.

“This idea is that we’re Nordics. I am and you are and you are and——” After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod and she winked at me again, “——and we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art and all that.” (17-18)

I’ll return to the semantic content of the conversation shortly, but first I want to point to the complex way in which Daisy’s winks register in Nick’s narration. Each wink is labeled as such, rather than as, say, a blink or a twitch—first Daisy “wink[s] ferociously toward the fervent sun” and then she “wink[s] at [Nick] again”—and so from the start they are subtly attended by the potential of irony or flirtation. But it’s not clear that Nick takes the first one as a gesture intended for him until his description of the second. Daisy may still be winking *toward* the sun but she is also now winking *at* Nick (and, as “again” indicates, has been from the start). Put otherwise, the first wink’s intentionality remains indeterminate until, with the second, Nick’s narration begins to thicken. A wink that could have been more or less a “zero-form twitch” (perhaps making Daisy one of those unfortunates who’ve had the latter taken for the former, as Geertz notes [“TD,” 6]), perhaps a symptom but not a signal, is resolved into a gesture with discursive effects.

What’s curious is that, as prose, the thin description is denser than the thick. “*Fervent*” echoes “*ferocious*”; all three of the sentence’s clauses, sonorously patterned, begin with *w*; and, in the ferociousness of the wink, which will reappear in the “ferocious delicacy” with which Meyer Wolfsheim eats his hash (75) and in St. Olaf college’s “ferocious indifference” to the drums of Gatsby’s destiny (105), Fitzgerald plays his usual trick of the unusual modifier. In comparison, “winked at me again” is bare. At the level of Nick’s narration, then, the potential tic has its own discursive effects. It may be precisely Nick’s doubt about Daisy’s first wink—and an attendant worry about misconstruing it, letting it fail—that generates this formal density. Uncertainty calls for heightened attention. Since Nick is describing the scene of Daisy’s winks three years after the fact, though, to ascribe the confusion to his character at the diegetic level may be to confuse the point. Rather, the counterbalanced epistemological and stylistic shifts here—from thin to thick and from lush to spare—seem to indicate something more basic about how Fitzgerald approaches the representation of gesture. It’s not quite that the interpretation of intent or cause, on the one hand, and the description of form or effect, on the other, form a zero-sum equation (more vertical plunging into depth, less horizontal scanning of surface, and vice versa); it’s rather that these modes occasion each other, a process made perceptible in the interplay of bodily comportment and discourse. Consider the balance of gesture and talk in the passage more broadly. Because “it is much easier to reproduce words than gestures,” writes Goffman, “sample

interchanges tend to rely on the verbal portion of a verbal-gestural stream.”<sup>119</sup> But the conversational stream Nick offers here is as physical as verbal: Daisy winks; Tom shifts in his chair; he hesitates and nods; she winks again. More movement is implicit in the verbal portion of the stream; when Tom says “and you are and you are and—” he no doubt uses his body in some way (pointing, glancing, nodding) that indexically differentiates his interlocutors.<sup>120</sup> And when he cuts off Jordan mid-sentence simply by shifting his weight—as when Kathleen in *The Last Tycoon* stands up, “changing the subject with her gesture as if she were afraid of it”—the text so emphasizes the discursive effects of gesture as to strain verisimilitude (*LT*, 90). “When gesture approaches language,” writes W. J. T. Mitchell in his introduction to a recent volume on sign language poetics, “it has the potential to interrupt discourse.”<sup>121</sup> Gesture and talk don’t just run parallel here but prompt and interrupt each other.

What there is of talk in this moment trades, sincerely and satirically, in a rhetoric of nativism and xenophobia based on a different understanding of the body’s relation to culture. Tom’s claim that Nordics created “all the things that go to make civilization” is, of course, a typical expression of social evolutionary racism. Jordan Baker, before his bulk interrupts her, seems about to turn conversation to immigrant populations in California. The year Fitzgerald was writing *Gatsby*, 1924, saw the passage of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which intensified immigration restrictions put in place four decades earlier with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, passed largely in response to anti-immigration agitation in California.<sup>122</sup> Stoddard wrote in 1920 that the need “for rigid Oriental exclusion is nowhere better exemplified than by the alarm felt to-day in California by the extraordinarily high birth-rate of its Japanese residents.”<sup>123</sup> In an essay that explains the structuring role such nativist discourse plays in the novel’s plot—intervening against accounts, from Lionel Trilling’s down, that view it as an expression

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<sup>119</sup> Erving Goffman, “Replies and Responses,” in *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 5-77, 36.

<sup>120</sup> As Adam Kendon notes “from a functional point of view, spoken utterances often only work because they are embedded in contexts of other forms of behavior, including gesture” (“Current Issues in the Study of Gesture,” in *The Biological Foundations of Gestures: Motor and Semiotic Aspects*, ed., Jean-Luc Nespoulous, Paul Perron, and André Roch Lecours [Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986], 23-47, 24).

<sup>121</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “Preface,” in *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman, Jennifer L. Nelson, and Heidi M. Rose (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006): xv-xxiii, xx. Gesture and interruption have been tightly linked in critical theory; see George Lukács, “The Foundering of Form Against Life,” in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), 28-41, and Samuel Weber, “Going Along for the Ride: Violence and Gesture—Agamben Reading Benjamin Reading Kafka Reading Cervantes,” in *Experimenting: Essays with Samuel Weber*, ed. Simon Morgan Wortham and Gary Hall (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 218-30.

<sup>122</sup> On the 1924 Immigration Act, see Mae M. Ngai, “The Strange Career of the Illegal Alien: Immigration Restriction and Deportation Policy in the United States, 1921-1965,” *Law and History Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 69-107.

<sup>123</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*, intro. by Madison Grant (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1920), 287.

of a timeless and apolitical “American dream”—Jeffrey Louis Decker argues that the story of Gatsby’s rise and fall is inextricable from the anxieties of Anglo-Saxon supremacism.<sup>124</sup> With this in mind, what I want to emphasize about this scene at the Buchanans’ is its representation of a pseudo-scientific discourse of racial essence both advanced and undercut in bodily practice—asserted in bulky shifts and slight nods, ferociously winked away. As the form of Nick’s narration suggests, understanding the discursive effects of a “speck of behavior” like Daisy’s wink (in this case, understanding its ironic relation to social evolutionism or to Tom’s scientific turn) depends on a determination, however provisional, of that behavior’s status as gesture or tic. These categories themselves, as they operate in Fitzgerald’s work, cannot be fully understood without reference to a historically specific constellation of ideas about nervousness, aesthetics, and social form, a constellation reduced to a kind of singularity in Gatsby’s tattoo.

Late in the afternoon on a sweltering August day, the novel’s principals are trying to cool off in a room at the Plaza. Tom, by now clued in to Gatsby’s affair with his wife, begins to challenge his rival by asking, dubiously, about his constant use of the idiom “old sport”; the implication is that Gatsby, who uses the phrase almost compulsively (a kind of verbal tic) is trying to pass counterfeit linguistic coin, using the expression as a false indicator of class identity (134). Soon noise from a wedding downstairs in the lobby brings conversation to the topic of another impostor, “Blocks” Biloxi, who collapsed in the heat while crashing the Buchanans’ wedding. Biloxi is outed as a fraud and Gatsby drums his tattoo:

“He told me he was president of your class at Yale.”

Tom and I looked at each other blankly.

“Biloxi?”

“First place we didn’t have any president——”

Gatsby’s foot beat a short restless tattoo and Tom eyed him suddenly.

(135)

The double m-dash after “president” signals the interruption caused by this tapping foot, pressing the limits of realism just as when Tom, simply by shifting in his chair, interrupts Jordan. The tattoo draws Tom’s attention and he now concentrates his critical energy, taking up in full earnest the effort to defame (that is, to “tattoo,” to brand) Gatsby.<sup>125</sup> He begins by comparing his academic career to Biloxi’s: “You must have gone [to Oxford] about the time Biloxi went to New Haven” (136). Gatsby proves able to explain the conditions of his tenure at Oxford: he spent a semester there through a G.I. program. And Nick claims at this point to have a “complete renewal of faith” (136). But Tom continues to press on Gatsby’s criminal connections, and in the end even Gatsby acknowledges that Tom “made it look as if I was some kind of cheap sharper” (159). Here “the man of suspicion carries out in reverse the work of falsification of the

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<sup>124</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, “Gatsby’s Pristine Dream: The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 28, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 52-71.

<sup>125</sup> “tattoo, v.2,” *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (1989), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, 8 June 2010, <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50247588>>.



man of guile,” as in Paul Ricoeur’s description of the hermeneutics of suspicion (34). Why, though, is it Gatsby’s tattoo in particular that draws Tom’s attention and catalyzes this hermeneutics?

The beginning of an answer lies in the modifier “restless.” Since at least the late eighteenth century, “[b]eating the ‘devil’s tattoo’” had been a “recognized mark of impatience,” as Herbert Spencer describes it in *The Principles of Psychology*.<sup>126</sup> And “a rapid tapping of the toe on the floor” similarly marks “impatience . . . rising into vexation” (545). Fitzgerald doesn’t specify that Gatsby is drumming the *devil’s* tattoo, but the connotations of the colloquialism, still alive in the 1920s, no doubt inform his choice of words. This foot-tapping, moreover, constitutes habitual behavior for Gatsby, who by Nick’s account carries himself with

that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand. (68)

Here the novel (whose author, according to one report, was in the summer of 1925 “constantly drumming a tattoo”) describes the “resourcefulness” and “grace” of an aesthetics whose place on the continuum of gestural modes is not far from chronic chorea.<sup>127</sup> Gatsby’s comportment, that is, would seem nearly to fit Agamben’s description of a “generalized catastrophe of the gestural sphere.” If Fitzgerald wasn’t thinking of Freud’s list of “extremely frequent chance and symptomatic actions” in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*—“playing with one’s watch-chain, fingering one’s beard . . . playing with a stick or scribbling with a pencil . . . jingling coins in one’s pocket, kneading bread-crumbs and other plastic materials, fiddling with one’s clothing in all sorts of ways and so forth”<sup>128</sup>—when he wrote this, it seems likely that he had it in mind in a moment he wrote a decade later in *Tender is the Night*. When Diver boasts that he’s the only American man with any “repose,” as I mentioned in the opening of the chapter, his dining companions test the theory against the behavior of other restaurant patrons.<sup>129</sup> One man’s hand “spasmodically rose and arranged a phantom bulge in his necktie,” another “endlessly patted his shaven cheek with his palm,” and a third “mechanically raised and lowered the stub of a cold cigar. The luckier ones fingered eyeglasses and facial hair, the unequipped stroked blank mouths, or even pulled desperately at the lobes of their ears” (62).

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<sup>126</sup> Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (D. Appleton and Company, 1906), 544.

<sup>127</sup> Sara Mayfield, *Exiles from Paradise: Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 113.

<sup>128</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901], trans. Alan Tyson, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 6, ed. James Strachey [London: The Hogarth Press, 1960], 194.

<sup>129</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), 61.

To the expatriate gang, this is pure pathology. But Nick's description of restlessness, the thing, he says, that brings him East after the Great War (7), is more ambivalent, and the explanatory framework he refers to less psychoanalytic (Freud) or physiological (Gilles de la Tourette) than sociological. Nick's account nearly celebrates Gatsby's restless bearing as a national style, an idea that does not align with Thoreau's idea of the "gestureless" American but rather with Harper's editor Charles Dudley Warner's 1891 assertion that what "really distinguishes the American from all others" is that "he can repose only in the midst of intense activity," or with George Beard's 1881 account of American nervousness as "pre-eminent and peculiar": "there are special expressions of this nervousness that are found here only; and the relative quantity of nervousness and of nervous diseases that spring out of nervousness, are far greater here than in any other nation of history, and it has a special quality."<sup>130</sup> "So peculiarly American," Gatsby's style constitutes the embodiment of an American exceptionalism defined by a "special quality" of youth and energy.

Yet in Nick's description this is a style whose status as "peculiar" at the same time suggests a form of experience that is alienated, estranged, or denatured. Note how these qualities bleed into Nick's narration here, structuring his description of Gatsby's resourcefulness. Never quite still, each positive formulation of this national habitus slides toward logical negativity: its sources are in absence and formlessness; its effect is to punctuate ("breaking through") punctiliousness; and in the description of how Gatsby embodies it, "never" gives way to "always" and then "always" gives way to an alternative that is itself an image of ticcing alternation: "or the impatient opening and closing of a hand." In the genitive construction of this clause, "the impatient opening and closing of a hand," the subject of the gesture is severed from the act. Likewise "a tapping foot somewhere." Somewhere? This is restlessness as dismemberment—something, as it happens, of a figurative and a formal thread in the text. It's worth noting the emphasis that Fitzgerald places on the dispensability of parts.<sup>131</sup> There's of course Myrtle Wilson's "left breast . . . swinging loose" after the accident (145), echoing the eery description of a driver extracting himself from a crash in the wake of one of Gatsby's parties: "part by part, a pale, dangling individual stepped out of the wreck" (59).<sup>132</sup> Dismemberment

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<sup>130</sup> George M. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: Putnam, 1881), 13. Beard's explanation of the peculiar American situation refers chiefly to the climate and to political life. In 1881 Gilles de la Tourette translated an article by Beard on "jumping" in Maine; see Kushner, *A Cursing Brain*, 237 n.45, n.48.

<sup>131</sup> A major anthropological paradigm of the 1920s conceives of culture as a functional unity in which any given artifact or behavior "represents an indispensable part within a working whole." Bronislaw Malinowski quoted by Alexander Lesser, *History, Evolution, and the Concept of Culture: Selected Papers by Alexander Lesser*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 46. The passage is from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but Lesser's commentary is of interest; he recalls Malinowski saying the same thing to Franz Boas and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown in a small meeting in 1926 or 1927—to underwhelming effect only because the latter already understood themselves to be operating within the same paradigm.

<sup>132</sup> In *The Day of the Locust* (1939) Nathaniel West pushes the same conceit closer to its extreme: Homer Simpson "got out of bed in sections, like a poorly made automaton, and carried his hands into the bathroom" (*The Day of the Locust*, in *Nathaniel West: Novels*

aply describes a recurring grammatical pattern in the novel as well, though: the displacement of an act from character to body part, the syntactic analog of all the Stuyvesant van Veen's diagrams of detached, gesturing limbs in Efron's study. Gatsby's foot drums the tattoo, rather than Gatsby, for instance. (Note also that Tom doesn't then look at him but eyes him.) It's a quiet idiomatic effect, but Fitzgerald makes regular enough recourse to it to draw attention; "eyes," for instance, appears as the subject of, by my count, thirty-six clauses (such as "his eyes fell upon") throughout the novel. Another metaphor for this synecdochal technique would be close-up. Ryle describes an analogous reduction, decontextualizing the part of the body where a gesture or tic occurs, when he likens thin description to a film that only records the faces of the winker and twitcher—no body, no context. The analogy has a limit. Presumably a lengthier or wider-frame film would better enable an ethnographer to distinguish winks from twitches. If one isolates Charlie Chaplin's face in one of the last few frames of *Behind the Screen* (1916), it's hard to say with certainty whether he's winking or convulsing. But anyone who has seen the film knows. Likewise, Nick's thin descriptions, his habitual decontextualizations, are embedded in narrative contexts bigger than clauses, allowing a reader to speculate as to the meaning of otherwise underdetermined gestural phenomena in the novel—locating that tapping foot at the end of Gatsby's leg, for instance, and locating his personal manner within the character of the nation.

Yet the frailty of synecdochal relationships, the tenuous embodiment of context, recurs as a problem in the novel, even troubling Nick's famous encomium to the gorgeousness of Gatsby's personality. I touched on this passage—the foil to his description of Gatsby's habitual tics—earlier but would now like to quote it more fully:

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away. This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament"—it was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness. (6)

A notion of personality as based on what Mead might call gestural "material"—rather than, say, a core of natural character—might seem cynical; when Nick describes Myrtle changing into a new outfit and with it a new "personality," for instance, this idea reaches its lurid extreme: "Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her" (35). But it's precisely this expansive gesturality that "exempt[s]" Gatsby from the revulsion Nick feels toward the novel's other characters (6).<sup>133</sup> This tension between

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*and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch [New York: Library of America, 1997], 239-389, 267).

<sup>133</sup> For a discussion of the terms "character" and "personality" in Fitzgerald's fiction, see James, "History and Masculinity": "The shift to a "performed and relatively unstable" notion of identity, James argues, appears in the lexicon of *This Side of Paradise* "as a move from 'character' to 'personality'" (3). While this sense of "personality" applies in the "unbroken series" passage, the distinction doesn't hold in *Gatsby*, where "character"

cynicism and adoration surfaces in the non-sequiturs of Nick's rhapsody: whether or not personality is as Nick says, Gatsby's gestures rarely succeed, and the metaphoric vehicle of the seismograph, posing his body as an object inscribed rather than a medium of gestural possibility, serves the tenor of his "romantic readiness" awkwardly at best. Critics have described such affective tensions in terms of Nick's personal ambivalence toward Gatsby, but I point to them once more because the binary of gesture and tic allows us see more precisely how they correlate with a formal tension between continuity and interruption.<sup>134</sup> In Sharon Cameron's account of "impersonality" in Emerson, she cites Derek Parfit's argument that "the existence of a person just consists in the existence of his brain and body, and the doing of his deeds, and the occurrence of various other physical and mental events."<sup>135</sup> The pressure of just such understandings of personality—radically pragmatist, cut off from the foundation of an essential self, mechanicalized in the doings of a brain and body—makes itself felt in the oxymoronic strain of Fitzgerald's phrase "unbroken series," in which "unbroken" tries to shore up the notion of a self-same essence against the tides of discontinuity implied by a "series."

This tension surfaces again in a letter to John O'Hara in which Fitzgerald reflects on his own ethnic identity, "half black Irish and half old American stock with the usual exaggerated ancestral pretensions"; associating these pretensions, on one side of the family, with the dictates of class, he goes on to refer to the "series of reticences and obligations that go under the poor old shattered word 'breeding' (modern form

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often refers to a performed self: Gatsby's stories of Europe make him sound like "a turbaned 'character'" (70); he calls Wolfshiem a "character" and Nick thinks this means he's an actor (77); and Catherine Wilson shows "character" by playing a part on the witness stand (171). For broader treatments of these terms, see Raymond Williams, "Personality," in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 233-35, and Warren I. Susman, "'Personality' and the Marking of Twentieth-Century Culture," in *Culture and History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 271-85. "Culture as personality" of course becomes a major mid-century anthropological trope, but in the 1920s the metaphor isn't widespread; as George Stocking notes ("The Ethnographic Sensibility of the 1920s and the Dualism of the Anthropological Tradition," in *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992], 276-341, 298 n.6), Ruth Benedict first uses the phrase "personality writ large" in a 1932 article.

<sup>134</sup> On Nick's ambivalence toward Gatsby, see Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel, 1850-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 201-210, and Scott Donaldson, "The Trouble with Nick," in *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 131-39.

<sup>135</sup> Derek Parfit, quoted in Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 79. Reflecting on the aging process, Ueno Chizuko makes the stronger version of the claim: "Integrity of identity is bullshit!" Cho Haejoang and Ueno Chizuko, "Speaking at the Border/Will These Words Reach . . .," trans. Teresa K-Sue Park and Miki Kaneda, *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* 18, no. 2 (2010): 55-120, 86.

'inhibitions')."<sup>136</sup> This figure lays the vertical lines of genealogy on their sides: the line of "breeding" here is horizontal and discontinuous, a series of responses to social norms within a lifetime rather than an uninterrupted biological transmission from one generation to the next, not nature but a corrupt second nature. The author is here more unequivocally cynical than Nick about parts and wholes. In his letter to O'Hara, Fitzgerald satirizes the designation of a series of discrete events under the umbrella of a singular concept. But for Nick, Gatsby's brand of "personality" has an appeal over the notion of "breeding": its orientation is outward and toward a future, "orgastic" (189) or other, and it consists in "the doing of . . . deeds" rather than in "reticences," readiness rather than obligation. Ultimately, though, its seriality similarly implies its construction and so its fragmentation and finitude. After Gatsby's confrontation with Tom in the Plaza, his chosen name ends up, like "breeding," another "poor old shattered word" in scare quotes, a personality undone: "'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice" (155). It becomes apparent to all that Cain has been going by "Abel."

Nick's initial sense of his neighbor "Mr. Gatsby" is shaped by "the secure position of his feet" as he stands on his property (25), so it's apt that a restless toe-tap, "a tapping foot somewhere," should mark the point at which that personality cracks. Staccato, arguably cinematic, the broken series of the tattoo's structure reverberates throughout the novel. [Ronald Berman notes these kinds of rhythms.] Consider "the satisfaction that the *constant flicker* of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye," "the sunlight through the girders making a *constant flicker* upon the moving cars," Gatsby's restlessness "*continually breaking through*," the "*endless drill* of police and photographers and newspaper men" that come to his house in the end, the "*relentless beating heat*" that confuses Nick in the Plaza and causes "*intermittent beads of sweat*" to race down his back, and lastly the "*intermittent cries of 'Yea—ea—ea'*" that accompany the jazz from downstairs (61, 73, 68, 171, 133, 135; emphases added). All internal repetition and fracture, this *yea—ea—ea*, which occurs moments before the tattoo, nicely embodies the formal principle I'm trying to get at. It's also an instance of jazz call and response. This deserves particular remark because the principles of continuity and interruption that structure Fitzgerald's sense of embodied personality are also at the heart of contemporaneous discourse about jazz aesthetics. In the next section, by reading Fitzgerald's revisions to the manuscript version of the Plaza Hotel scene, I'll argue that this is more than a loose homology: what Fitzgerald is writing when he inscribes the tattoo is jazz under erasure, an erasure determined by a particular sense of culture's form.

#### 4. Echolalia of the Jazz Age

In the final chapter of Edward Streeter's forgotten novel *Beany, Gangleshanks, and the Tub* (1921), the rascal protagonists come upon an electric organ, the kind that plays rolls of music printed on paper cylinders.<sup>137</sup> They select the hymn "Lead, Kindly

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<sup>136</sup> Quoted in Matthew J. Bruccoli and Scottie Fitzgerald Smith, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 23.

<sup>137</sup> Edward Streeter, *Beany, Gangleshanks, and the Tub* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921). I say "forgotten" because a search for the novel's title in the JSTOR, Project

Light” and pull one of the stops that control the organ’s output, listening to the song as a French horn solo (330). Unsurprisingly, they’re dissatisfied. They run through some other settings. Before long, they decide to open all the stops, max out the tempo, and push every button they can find, including two on the underside of the machine. Again no surprise: the organ malfunctions. The music accelerates “from hymn time to jazz, and from jazz to chaos. The volume of sound was remarkable. The organ trembled under the strain.” Beany and Gangleshanks respond ecstatically to the cacophony of the broken machine. “They beat a tattoo on the front of the organ with the palms of their hands and swelled the din with a barbaric chant which was their interpretation of the air” (332). Here jazz, an effect of malfunction, is situated along a musical continuum that slips quickly toward chaos, the appropriate response to which slip is a primitivist chant and a tattoo drummed, undextrously, with the palms of the hands. I point to this moment because it thus offers an intersection of a few of the commonplaces in the discourse on jazz aesthetics and literary modernism: rhythm trumps melody; primitivism intersects with mechanization; and, through improvisatory acts of cultural recontextualization, high and low culture collide.

Structurally prior to the operation of recontextualization is that of decontextualization, which for Fitzgerald is not simply a tropological effect (synecdochal dismemberment) or a narrative method (thin description) but also an affective mode of experiencing parts and wholes that is shaped by the socio-aesthetic upheaval of what he called the “Jazz Age.” Explaining Fitzgerald’s choice to excise from the *Gatsby* manuscript a lengthy passage describing the performance, at one of Gatsby’s parties, of “Vladimir Tostoff’s Jazz History of the World,” Mitchell Breitwieser argues that “the act of intentionally disconnecting things from their expressivity” is, for the author and for Nick, both a compelling and anxiogenic feature of jazz aesthetics.<sup>138</sup> If improvisation opens the door to formal innovation it also threatens to interrupt a holistic model of national belonging. In his anxiety about this interruptive capacity Fitzgerald seems to conform with ideas of jazz as “not . . . form at all, only outburst” (*NM*, 271) (recalling the “formless grace” Nick attributes to American physical culture). Yet a moment in *The Last Tycoon*, Breitwieser argues, suggests a fuller acknowledgement of “jazz’s cultural origins and motivations” (*NM*, 277): after talking about movies with a “negro man” on the beach, Monroe Stahr undergoes a kind of cultural-relativist turn experienced as the anticipation of “new music” that “would come in some such guise as the auto-horns from the Technicolor boulevards below or be barely audible, a tattoo on the muffled drum of the moon” (*LT*, 96).

Besides Gatsby’s tattoo, barely audible itself, this is, to my knowledge, the single other instance in Fitzgerald’s fiction where he uses the word “tattoo” in the sense of a rhythmic pattern. Each occurs in close proximity to an invocation of jazz aesthetics. Gatsby’s tattoo comes just a few lines after an outburst of jazz from the hotel lobby.

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MUSE, and MLA International Bibliography databases on September 21st, 2010, retrieved zero results.

<sup>138</sup> Mitchell Breitwieser, *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 268. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *NM*. Breitwieser confirms that the “Tostoff” piece is based on Paul Whiteman’s Aeolian Hall concert, “Experiment in Modern Music,” performed on February 12, 1924.

When the wedding reception begins downstairs, “a long cheer floated in at the window, followed by intermittent cries of ‘Yea—ea—ea!’ and finally by a burst of jazz as the dancing began” (135). Daisy says “We’re getting old [. . .] If we were young we’d rise and dance.” A few more remarks about Biloxi; then the tattoo. If we look at the facsimiles of the manuscript pages, though, we can see that initially, while there was no Biloxi and no tattoo, there was, in fact, dancing: “a long cheer drifted in from the ballroom, followed by intermittent cries of ‘Yea—ea—ea!’ and finally by a burst of jazz as the dancing began. Hilariously we danced, Daisy and I, Gatsby and Jordan, while Tom at the telephone watched with unrestful eyes” (193). Perhaps, when he revised the chapter in the galleys, hilarious dancing on an oppressively hot afternoon struck the author as improbable. Earlier in the day Nick notes that in the heat “every extra gesture seemed an affront to the common stores of life” (121). But the effect of replacing the dance with the extra gesture of Gatsby’s tattoo is to focus the sense of affront registered in the movement of Tom’s “unrestful eyes” in Gatsby’s body rather than diffusing it in a communal bacchanal. The affront has less to do with temperature, of course, than with tempo. From the perspective of a functionalist anthropology in which every artifact and behavior is, in Malinowski’s term, indispensable, the “extra gesture” is by definition impossible within the context of culture; but consider, as a counterpoint, what Fred Moten suggests in his discussion of Duke Ellington: “black performance has always been an ongoing investigation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus.”<sup>139</sup> Seen from this angle, extraneity begins to look like jazz’s ontological condition.

The music from the Plaza lobby is the novel’s second and last performance of this “peculiarly American” form, and the echolalic quality of the “long cheer” and “intermittent cries” that introduce it recall the first, the “Jazz History”: “There was the boom of a bass drum, and the voice of the orchestra leader rang out suddenly above the echolalia of the garden” (54)—an echolalia that, as Breitwieser writes, seems only to be intensified by the piece (*NM*, 268). And as in that passage, in the Plaza scene Fitzgerald modifies his representation of response to jazz performance, paying special attention in this case to bodily response. The narrator of James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) describes ragtime as “music that demanded a physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers or nodding of the head in time with the beat.”<sup>140</sup> When we begin to see Gatsby’s tattoo as the residue of that excised dance to the jazz from the lobby, it does not only seem to represent an expression of momentary impatience or a characteristic restless tic; it’s also an improvisatory “patting of the feet” in response to a jazz call. Close-up on Gatsby’s foot, cut to Tom’s eyes, and cue his “impassioned gibberish”: “I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. . . . next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” (138). It’s a response both to being cuckolded and to the black vernacular aesthetic whose traces he deciphers in Gatsby’s tattoo. Seen through the “unrestful eyes” of Tom’s threatened Nordicism, jazz is

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<sup>139</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>140</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson: Social, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Sondra Kathryn Wilson (Oxford University Press, 1995), 273-362, 314.

modern pathology—syncopated chaos, miscegenation, a broken organ—and the tattoo, overdetermined as aesthetic and pathological, its symptom.

The priority of rhythm over melody is a commonplace in early twentieth century representations of jazz and of modernist writing.<sup>141</sup> The narrator of *The Last Tycoon* claims that her father, a Hollywood producer, has “no more than a drummer's sense of a story” (28). To read this statement as anything other than a category confusion—why would drumming have either a negative or a positive relation to story?—one has to recognize the extent to which musical and writerly concepts overlapped in this milieu. Take the 1918 essay on “The Jazz Poet” in *The Independent*. The poet immediately at hand is Vachel Lindsay, but the essay's purview is wider, situating Lindsay's work within trends in modern poetry and music. Due to the influence of an “African impulse,” the author writes, one of modern music's main trajectories is “headed toward the tom-tom. . . the rhythm, the beat, has become the main thing, sometimes the sole thing.” Spontaneous by nature, jazz—like, for the speaker of Paul Laurence Dunbar's “When Malindy Sings,” Malindy's voice, to which I'll return in the next chapter—“cannot be printed on five lines,” as the author writes. If Fitzgerald's “yea-ea-ea” recalls the alternating sound that, as I argued in the first chapter, haunts the “ayaya” songs that Boas's No-Tongue, it is worth noting as well that this ostensible incommensurability with the Western system of key notation on five lines brings jazz directly into line with the “primitive music” for which Wead argued ethnographers needed more refined systems of transcription.

This ostensible resistance to standard notation seems to dictate the surreal silence, nightmarishly repetitive, of a jazz drummer—or rather, “all teeth and lips,” the blackface caricature of one—in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, published the year after *Gatsby*:

“ . . . . .” the drummer chanted. Then turned to his sticks.  
[ . . . ]  
I had the feeling as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated,  
something I had been through and that now I must go through, again.  
“ . . . . .” the drummer sang softly.  
[ . . . ]  
“ . . . . .” the drummer shouted and grinned.<sup>142</sup>

Despite its ostensible opposition to writing, jazz represents a vital analog for modernist writing, perhaps in part because of its association with the body.<sup>143</sup> As the author of “The Jazz Poet” writes, jazz “makes the heart beat and the blood run and the limbs move,” and with this new form “music has completed the cycle of its wander-years and returned to the dance that gave it birth.” This is an aesthetic mode that compels the body with unique force. And in the idea here of a “return” to ancient forms, this predominance of

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<sup>141</sup> For an account of rhythm in relation to literature and the racial sciences, though not to Boasian anthropology, Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>142</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (Simon & Schuster, 2006), 70-71.

<sup>143</sup> See Harold Segel, *Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).



the physical aspect—this extra-gestural quality—is bound up with the idea of the primitive.

Perhaps the closest analog in *Gatsby* to Hemingway's jazz nightmare is a scene that has little to do with jazz but everything to do with the principles of discontinuity, rhythm, and linguistic breakdown that are at issue here. On the way back from the Plaza after the confrontation catalyzed by Gatsby's tattoo, Tom and Nick stop at Wilson's garage, where Myrtle has just been run over by Gatsby's car. Frequent, droning repetition pervades *Gatsby's* scene of severest trauma. Nick describes "a hollow, wailing sound which issued incessantly from the garage, a sound which . . . resolved itself into the words 'Oh my God!' uttered over and over in a gasping moan" (145). When they go in and see Wilson in person, his eyes repeatedly "drop slowly from the swinging light to the laden table by the wall, and then jerk back to the light again," and now the phrase is orthographically deformed, both the aural texture of the "gasping moan" and the fact of its repetition, previously only described, now represented *inside* the quotation marks: "O my Ga-od! O my Ga-od! O Ga-od! O my Ga-od!" (146). It's a moment of ticcing that is only an extreme version of a general condition of linguistic breakdown. Tom tries to speak to a policeman to find out what has happened, but he is busy trying to transcribe a name:

"M-a-v—" the policeman was saying, "—o—"  
"No, —r—" corrected the man, "M-a-v-r-o—"  
"Listen to me!" muttered Tom fiercely.  
"r—" said the policeman, "o—."  
"g—."  
"g—" (146)

Poor old shattered words. When Tom moves from Wilson to the policeman, he moves from a scene of trauma as echolalia to a scene of writing (the transcription of a name, broken like that of Gatsby and "Ga-od") that follows something like a broken jazz-machine aesthetic of linguistic imitation gone to the extreme, in which a letter is uttered by one person and then mechanically repeated, sometimes incorrectly, by the other.

The sense of entropy here, the way that letters flatten into dashes and gestures reduce to tics, reflects both a historical moment and an aesthetic concern. In his 1931 essay "Echoes of the Jazz Age" Fitzgerald echoes Freud's statement, in *Psychopathology*, that "the borderline between the normal and abnormal in nervous matters is a fluid one . . . we are all a little neurotic" (278), but Fitzgerald localizes his collective nervousness in the arc of the 1920s.<sup>144</sup> He describes a young generation growing older and discovering, in 1926, that it was too "flabby" (the same adjective, recall, that Nick counterpoises against Gatsby's gestural personality) even for the game of golf, until "an emasculated form appeared and proved just right."<sup>145</sup> The next year, "a

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<sup>144</sup> As Howard I. Kushner has shown, such statements by Freud involved an implicit but *conscious* rejection, in agreement with his professional community, of Charcot and Gilles de la Tourette's theories about the hereditary aspect of tic pathologies ("Freud and the Diagnosis of Gilles de la Tourette's Illness," *History of Psychology* 9 [1998]: 1-25).

<sup>145</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Echoes of the Jazz Age," in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions, 1956), 13-22, 19.

wide-spread neurosis began to be evident, faintly signaled, like a nervous beating of the feet, by the popularity of cross-word puzzles” (19). Jazz, “associated with a state of nervous stimulation,” expresses this wide-spread condition (16). And yet stimulation gives way, as if entropically, to weariness. In the turn from sport to crossword, physical culture gives way to print culture, gesture to text. Daisy’s response to the jazz in the Plaza—“If we were young we’d rise and dance” (135)—resurfaces in the “Jazz Age” essay as the history of the mid-1920s. That is, Fitzgerald’s 1931 account of 1926-27 as a moment of physical decline, neurotic tic, and puzzling recapitulates a story that, in 1925, he had already set in 1922: Daisy declines to dance, Gatsby taps his toes, Tom takes up hermeneutics.

Daisy’s demurrals is expressed as the weariness of growing older, but such weariness also corresponds to critical calls, in the early and mid-1920s, for a turn away from jazz and toward neoclassicism. James Donald has recently described some of these critical turns, including Clive Bell’s vitriolic 1921 essay “Plus de Jazz”; for Bell, jazz, modernism minus thought and minus culture, is suited only for the indulgence of capricious youth.<sup>146</sup> Outburst without form, on this view, can only last so long. This attitude bleeds into the critical record on *Gatsby* with H. L. Mencken’s syndicated review of the novel, first published in the *Baltimore Evening Sun* on May 2, 1925. Mencken writes that Fitzgerald’s earlier fiction “suggested, only too often, the improvisations of a pianist playing furiously by ear, but unable to read notes.”<sup>147</sup> With *Gatsby*, though, “[t]he author wrote, tore up, rewrote, tore up again. There are pages so artfully contrived that once can no more imagine improvising them than one can imagine improvising a fugue” (113-14). Mencken’s analogy assumes a musicological hierarchy within which Fitzgerald’s writing progresses—or, chronologically, retrogresses—from jazz improvisation to fugue composition, from a restless, compulsive aurality, “playing furiously by ear,” to literacy, “read[ing] notes.”<sup>148</sup> The conceit persists in *Gatsby* scholarship; in 1964 Kenneth Eble writes that what separates it from the previous novels is a “developed and practiced ability to use everything for its maximum effect, to strike no note, so to speak, without anticipating all its vibrations.”<sup>149</sup>

Yet close attention to the extant traces of the author’s writerly practice—handwritten revisions to the galleys, and then a typed version of those revisions with further changes marked in pen, both available in facsimile—suggests that improvisation may in fact be the apposite analogue. The handwritten sentence where Gatsby’s tattoo—or, rather, “tatoo”—first appears, for instance, reads: “Gatsby’s foot beat a short restless

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<sup>146</sup> See James Donald, “Jazz Modernism and Film Art: Dudley Murphy and Ballet mécanique,” *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 1 (2009): 25-49, esp. 26-30.

<sup>147</sup> Mencken’s review was also published the next day in *The Chicago Sunday Tribune* (“Scott Fitzgerald and His Work,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, May 3, 1925, Magazine Section, 1, 3), and it’s the Chicago version—as reprinted in *H. L. Mencken On American Literature*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 111-14—from which I quote here.

<sup>148</sup> This movement parallels that of the Aeolian Hall concert, which as Breitwieser points out moves from the “depraved” (Whiteman’s word) rag of “Lively Stable Blues” to “Pomp and Circumstance” (*NM*, 272).

<sup>149</sup> Kenneth Eble, “The Craft of Revision: The Great Gatsby,” in *Critical Essays on the Great Gatsby*, ed. Scott Donaldson (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1984), 85-93, 88.

tattoo and, ~~struck by an idea~~, Tom ~~turned toward him~~ eyed him suddenly” (fig. 6).<sup>150</sup> There doesn’t appear to be any punctuation struck out between “~~turned toward him~~” and “eyed”; this suggests that the sentence was still incomplete when Fitzgerald changed his mind about it. He revised it at least once and perhaps twice mid-sentence, not after later reflection. Such evidence may bear out Mencken’s intuition about the way Fitzgerald “tore up” the drafts of his manuscript and then “tore [them] up again.” But it also problematizes the categories—fugue and jazz, composition and improvisation, continuity and chaos—that organize Mencken’s response. The galleys of *Gatsby* thus offer a kind of material simulacrum, a paper doll, of Geertz’s allegory of culture as an “acted document” and so of ethnography as “trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior” (“TD,” 10). What a reading of the inscription of Gatsby’s tattoo seems to suggest, though (as Geertz would acknowledge), is the unsustainability of this distinction between the “conventionalized graphs” of texts and the “transient” shapes of behavior. Writing relates to gesture both analogically and materially.

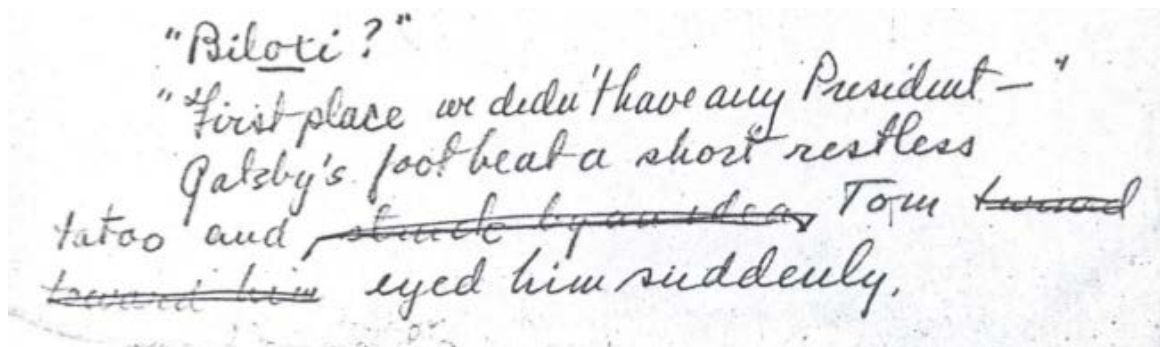


Fig. 3.4. The inscription of the tattoo.

Tim Ingold, for whom the distinction between handwriting and print is crucial, would put a finer point on that claim. Whereas Agamben looked to Gilles de la Tourette’s studies of tics and walking for evidence of modern gestural alienation, Ingold, in *Lines: A Brief History* (2007), argues that “[i]t was “the technology of print that broke [the] intimate link between manual gesture and graphic inscription.”<sup>151</sup> Modernity takes us from “the *trace of a gesture* [to] an assembly of *point-to-point connectors*” (*L*, 92-93), from texts composed of lines that, to paraphrase Paul Klee, go for walks, to texts composed of dotted lines. “If handwriting is like walking,” writes Ingold, “then the line of print (joining evenly spaced letters) is like the record of gait analysis (joining equidistant plots)” (*L*, 93). In Efron’s study of gestures, Van Veen’s were not the only illustrations included. In order to carry out a more quantitative approach to the study of

<sup>150</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby: The Revised and Rewritten Galleys*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1990), 127.

<sup>151</sup> Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 26. Hereafter cited as *L*.

gesture—one that has echoes of Gilles de la Tourette’s gait analysis—the ethnographer also took many hours of film of gestural behavior. Different subjects performed the same gesture; the film was analyzed frame by frame so that the motion of the hand and elbow could be plotted; and then these plots were translated into pure line drawings. Here we have the intersection of Agamben’s account of loss and obsession with Ingold’s account of the modern shift from writing to type.

Ingold’s account may posit an untenably strong ontological distinction between writing and type, one in which the latter doesn’t just involve different and more forms of mediation than the former but is denuded of any indexical traces of gesture; it also problematically seems to assume the primacy of the “common” gesture and the extraneity of the interruptive tic (as the supposition that footprints would be “equidistant” begins to suggest). But the valuable provocation of Ingold’s argument lies in its way of attending to the commonality between objects such as the syncopated series of staggered footprints and dragging insteps left behind on Gilles de la Tourette’s sheets of wallpaper and Fitzgerald’s improvisatory inscription of the tattoo.<sup>152</sup> In *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practiced among the Natives of the United States* (1933), Alfred Parry describes an electric machine “capable of making about three thousand jabs a minute as against one hundred and fifty to two hundred jabs of the hand tool.”<sup>153</sup> As Parry tells it, the making of a tattoo is precisely isomorphic with Ingold’s narrative of modernity as the transition from gestural trace to dotted line: the artist makes a tracing on the skin by hand and then applies the machine’s needle, “much in the manner of a sewing-machine needle, along the traced lines. . . . One saw only a shapeless spot or series of spots; the ink seemed to run all over the wound without following the lines of the design. In fact, the ink penetrated the skin only where the skin was punctured.” An event structured by the agonistic pairs of seriality and continuity, superficiality and penetration, trace and shapelessness, the inscription of such a tattoo is not so far from that of Gatsby’s.

The sort of late-twentieth-century anthropological—namely, the Geertzian—framework in which artifacts like Gilles de la Tourette’s wallpaper and Fitzgerald’s manuscript would begin to appear not only as artifacts of but also as figures for culture—that would understand the latter, in other words, as a discontinuous transcript of gestures and tics—is not impossible to find earlier in the century, in the moment of Fitzgerald and of Boas. Consider the controversy generated by Robert H. Lowie’s notorious reference, in the last lines of *Primitive Society* (1920), to “civilization” as “that planless hodge-podge, that thing of shreds and patches.” Pressed by critics, Lowie would later deny that this shrug of a definition was intended as a theoretical proposition about the form of culture, localizing it as his affective response to the Great War. (He would still later, in for example his obituary for Boas, return to the idea.) Like it did Nick, the

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<sup>152</sup> In the introduction to *Ways of Walking*, Ingold and Vergunst further distinguish the *impression* of a footprint, with its “changing pressure distributions,” from the trace of an *inscription* (8); but surely writing and type also involve shifting pressure and occasional indentation of the surface.

<sup>153</sup> Alfred Parry, *Tattoo: Secrets of a Strange Art as Practiced among the Natives of the United States* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933), 45, 46. Parry writes that tattooing “relates itself to the artistic impulse but basically is born of sex” (14), echoing Fitzgerald’s statement that jazz first meant “sex, then dancing, then music” (“E,” 16).

war left Lowie disillusioned—but also, as the rest of the paragraph makes clear, with a desire for clarity. He writes that the new historian of culture, abandoning “superstitious reverence,” “will realize better than others the obstacles to infusing design into the amorphous product; but in thought at least he will not grovel before it in fatalistic acquiescence but dream of a rational scheme to supplant the chaotic jumble.”<sup>154</sup> Connecting the dots has as its telos not nature but second nature; the desire here is not for the restoration of a pre-modern unity of experience but for the full elaboration of a modern episteme.

The shreds and patches model might seem a better fit for the fragmentation of a text like *The Waste Land*, a comparison drawn by Marc Manganaro, than for the relatively coherent scheme of *Gatsby*.<sup>155</sup> But note the resonance between Lowie’s parting description of the modern anthropologist’s dream and Nick’s parting description of Gatsby’s sustained belief in “the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . and one fine morning—.” The gesture that signals romantic readiness—stretching out one’s arms like Gatsby does toward the light, like Lowie does toward a theory of culture—then slides, in the next line, toward the peculiar restless repetition of the tattoo: “*So we beat on*, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (189, emphasis added). This resonance between narrator and ethnographer insinuates what I’ve aimed to show: that in Fitzgerald’s work, if the distinction of gesture and tic, a distinction based on gesture’s continuity with discourse—on the fact that you talk with your hands—if this distinction is what makes it possible to write culture, the act of writing also has a tendency to unravel that distinction. Put otherwise, if what makes gesture amenable to textualization is its continuity with the written word as an act of cultural expression, then the indistinction of gesture and tic—an indistinction associated, at the moment of *Gatsby*, with the influence of a jazz aesthetics whose appropriate expression is, ostensibly, a nervous tattoo—constitutes an interruption, however transitory, of culture’s description and conceptualization.

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<sup>154</sup> Robert H. Lowie, *Primitive Society* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), 441. Lowie writes in his preface to a later edition that this paragraph “has generally been misinterpreted. . . . It is true that I did not believe, nor do now, that *all* elements of culture are related by some organic bond; on the other hand, ever since 1915 my treatment of kinship terms ought to have absolved me from the charge of viewing culture as *only* a fabric of shreds and patches” (New York: Liveright, 1947, ix-x). The view Lowie disavows as “fatalistic acquiescence” anticipates Stephen A. Tyler’s account of post-modern ethnography, “fragmentary because it cannot be otherwise” (“Post-Modern Ethnography: From Document of the Occult to Occult Document,” in Clifford and Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture*: 122-40, 131).

<sup>155</sup> Marc Manganaro, *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 48.

## Chapter 4

“Fresh from the Lect”:

Descent and Discourse in *Songs of Jamaica*

### 1. Aloud Reading

The transcription of the vernacular; the affective and social functions ostensibly specific to the medium of the human voice, particularly as that voice mimics or imitates others; the highly localized embodiment and simultaneously the far-flung geographical diffusion of semiotic systems—the interrelated set of concepts that the last three chapters have sought to interrogate, and whose interrelation I will continue to explore in this concluding chapter on the early poetry of Claude McKay, all come together in William Dean Howells’s published recollections of his final visit with Mark Twain. At the end of his visit to Stormfield (Twain’s estate near Redding, Connecticut), Howells is driven to the train station in his friend’s carriage. It’s a creaky old vehicle. But for its owner, Howells imagines, it must have

swung low like the sweet chariot of the negro ‘spiritual’ which I heard him sing with such fervor, when those wonderful hymns of the slaves began to make their way northward. ‘Go Down, Daniel,’ was one in which I can hear his quavering tenor now. No one could read ‘Uncle Remus’ like him; his voice echoed the voices of the negro nurses who told his childhood the wonderful tales.”<sup>156</sup>

Writing in the spring of 1910, very soon after Twain’s death, Howells here rhapsodizes over the author’s voice. As Howells continues to write about Twain, a sense of the immediacy—even the eroticism—of the latter’s experience of the black voice, as well as of writing in dialect, comes to the fore. Twain “was a lover of the things he liked, and full of a passion for them which satisfied itself in reading them matchlessly aloud.” This “quavering tenor” is singular: “No one could read ‘Uncle Remus’ like him.” At the same time it is produced through a process of imitation: “His voice echoed the voices of the negro nurses.” In describing the echoes of this absent voice, with its paradoxically “matchless” mimicry, Howells himself echoes some lines of poetry with which he was, at one point at least, intimately familiar:

G’way an’ quit dat noise, Miss Lucy—  
Put dat music book away;  
What’s de use to keep on tryin’?  
Ef you practise twell you’re gray,  
You cain’t sta’t no notes a-flyin’  
Lak de ones dat rants and rings  
F’om de kitchen to be big woods  
When Malindy sings.

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<sup>156</sup> William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticism* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1910), 99. Also published in *Literary Friends and Acquaintances* (1911).

You ain't got de nachel o'gans  
 Fu' to make de soun' come right,  
 You ain't got de tu'ns an' twistin's  
 Fu' to make it sweet an' light.  
 Tell you one thing now, Miss Lucy,  
 An' I'm tellin' you fu' true,  
 When hit comes to raal right singin',  
 'T ain't no easy thing to do.<sup>157</sup>

These are of course the stanzas that open Paul Laurence Dunbar's "When Malindy Sings," included in his first collection of poetry, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). Fourteen years prior to Twain's death, Howells had published and introduced the volume. The seven stanzas that make up the remainder of the poem continue to describe the sublimity of Malindy's singing voice, a voice that takes turns and twists that "you"—"Miss Lucy" reading from her book of songs, but also, it would seem, Dunbar's reader reading from his or her book of lyric poems—cannot possibly follow. What Miss Lucy cannot do, make the sound come right, Twain, like Malindy, apparently can. "Let me listen, I can hyeah it," says the speaker about Malindy's voice, and, very nearly, Howells about Twain's; "sof and sweet, 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.'" Here the object of loss and obsession is not the natural gesture (as in Agamben's account of modernity) but rather the "nachel o'gans" of the ethnic voice.

On August 5, 1911—as McKay, the twenty-year-old poet and constable who would a year later emigrate from Jamaica to the U.S., was finishing his own first volume of poetry, a work that has a good deal in common with *Lyrics of Lowly Life*—the two stanzas I've just quoted appeared in an article titled "The Coloured Man" in the Kingston *Daily Gleaner*. If McKay had not already encountered Dunbar's book (he does not mention it in his later accounts of his teenaged reading material), he would have been almost sure to read them in the paper. This excerpt arrived in the pages of Kingston's most widely circulated newspaper by a circuitous route. Earlier in the summer of 1911, the London-based *T.P.'s Magazine* had published an essay by London-based Egyptian intellectual Dusé Muhamed titled "The Coloured Man in Art and Letters."<sup>158</sup> (McKay read *T.P.'s* as well—he once submitted a piece to one of its competitions—and so it's possible he would have seen the essay there first.) Making an argument for racial parity on the basis of examples of black literary excellence, Muhamed touches on works by authors from Alexandre Dumas to Alexander Pushkin. But Muhamed comments at particular length on the example of Dunbar, drawing extensively on Howells's introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. "When Malindy Sings" is the only literary work that Muhamed quotes in his essay, and he quotes a full three stanzas of it. A few weeks

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<sup>157</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (Dodd, Mead & Co., 1898 [Century, 1896]), 195-99; quotation at 195-196.

<sup>158</sup> Dusé Muhamed, "The Coloured Man in Art and Letters," *T.P.'s Magazine* (1911). The essay circulated widely; as Nico Slate notes, it was also reprinted in Gandhi's *Indian Opinion* on October 21, 1911 (*Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* [Harvard University Press, 2012], 69).

later, the *Gleaner* ran an editorial piece sympathetically commenting on Muhamed's work, and the paper's editor includes two of those stanzas.

Neither Muhamed nor the *Gleaner* editor offer any commentary as to why these particular lines of verse should be chosen to stand as the exemplar of the "coloured" contribution to art and letters, beyond the fact that, as the *Gleaner* writes, "we take pleasure in reproducing" them.<sup>159</sup> Of course, given that the idea of such reproduction ("lines and dots" on paper, in the phrase from "When Malindy Sings") as a kind of limited interface between oral and literary tradition is precisely what's at issue in the opening stanzas of Dunbar's poem, editorial commentary may have seemed beside the point: the poem already stands not only as an instance within but also a theorization of literary history, a reflection on the relationship between the idea of the black vernacular voice and the textual medium of dialect poetry. Some accounts of the poem, taking this reflection into account, have seen it as Dunbar's capitulation to a white readership's desire to experience the presence of the sublime black voice (a desire that, as this chapter will elaborate, is highly relevant to McKay's own early work). Disputing this view, though, Gavin R. Jones argues that

the very point of the poem is that [Malindy's] voice lies beyond the written medium. By emphasizing the resistance of black voices to literary representation in a dialect whose purpose it was to capture this very voice, Dunbar creates a massive irony that highlights dialect as an inadequate literary convention. (*ST*, 193).

Jones is right about Dunbar's creation of a massive irony in this piece. However, it does not seem so clear that this irony's object is the representational inadequacy of literary dialect, for the poem presents its own medium (by analogy with the book of music) as an inadequate convention not just at the moment of transcription but also, and much more insistently, at the moment of readerly performance; it isn't just that Malindy's voice will always be "beyond" but also that in working from "lines and dots" Lucy's voice will always fall short. To put it simply, the poem is less about writing than it is about reading.

These problems of textual representation and vocal reproduction are integral both to the content and to the editorial framing of the volume that McKay was composing at the same time that Dunbar's poem appeared in the *Gleaner*. In short order I'll turn to that volume and in particular to the poem "Cudjoe, Fresh from de Lecture," which, in ways I'll elaborate, plays on and revises the kind of linguistic (and poetically self-reflexive) scenario presented in "When Malindy Sings." But in order to open up these questions about the discursive politics of dialect literature, and in particular about how they operate in McKay's poem about a lecture on evolutionary history, I'd like to first point to a text that has nothing—nothing directly, anyway—to do with politics, dialect, or literature: an essay titled "The Lecture" by the sociologist Erving Goffman.

There Goffman sets himself the task of laying out the discursive and metadiscursive dimensions of the event of the public talk, devoting special attention to the subgenre of the academic lecture. What rhetorical moves, he asks, are typical of the format? How is the event of the lecture proper distinguished from the "custard of

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<sup>159</sup> "The Coloured Man," *Daily Gleaner*, August 5, 1911, p. 9.



interaction” in which it is embedded?<sup>160</sup> By what techniques, and to what pragmatic ends, does the lecturer mediate between her multiple roles as the figure who wrote the paper (“author”), who vocally performs it (“animator”), and who takes responsibility for its claims (“principal”)?” “The Lecture” was conceived as an instance of the category it describes: before he included it in the volume titled *Forms of Talk*, Goffman delivered it at the University of Michigan in 1976, as he notes in a playful preface to the printed version. And the piece itself involves his continual reflection on the relationship between the generic Lecture he describes and the particular lecture he enacts. As readers of the essay, the secondary transcript of an original oral event, we seem to find ourselves at one degree of remove from this situational recursion. Yet of course the event of Goffman’s talk was not itself a moment of pure origination. Before he spoke it, he wrote it.

Most of it, that is. In reading aloud, after all, one’s performance is never entirely determined by the text. (This is, obviously, part of what allows Howells to say that nobody could read Joel Chandler Harris like Twain; if it were all in the script, everybody would necessarily read aloud exactly as Twain does.) Indeed, while Goffman refers to various modes of delivering a lecture—extemporization (“fresh talk”), reading from paper (“aloud reading”), memorization—he pays special attention to the kinds of mediation made possible by the oral delivery of a pre-written paper. Through the use of gesture, tonal inflection, and extemporaneous aside, the animator of a paper performatively transforms the text she scripted in her role as author, taking up discursive stances or “footings” that are not entirely contained within that script. So what makes the lecture interesting as a genre is less the “textual stance” produced by the faithful transmission of a written paper than “the additional footings that can be managed at the same time, footings whose whole point is the contrast they provide to what the text itself might otherwise generate.” These contrasts, betraying the ostensibly primary task of faithful transmission, take the form of what Goffman calls “distance-altering alignments, some quite briefly taken, which appear as a running counterpoint to the text, and of elaborative comments and gestures which do not appear in the substance of the text but in the mechanics of transmitting it on a particular occasion and in a particular setting” (“TL,” 174). William James, in the passage I quoted in the introduction, suggests that because “All human thinking gets discursified,” it is imperative that we “TALK consistently,” but for Goffman it is tactical inconsistency that is in fact the most productive aspect of discursification.

The case of the academic talk about dialect in literature further complicates this account of the mechanics of text-to-talk transmission, in ways that Goffman does not fully elaborate and that are especially pertinent to McKay’s work (and also, of course, to critical work about him). While not all academic papers are fully pre-scripted, the texts to which scholars of language and literature refer as the evidentiary material for their claims are necessarily so. This most obvious fact bears mentioning because the discussion of dialect in literature defamiliarizes it. Quoting a passage of text marked as spoken in a particular way often entails judgments both about the nature of that particularity and about the extent of one’s responsibility to reproduce it. When an academic paper includes strips of quotative discourse that are marked, orthographically

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<sup>160</sup> Erving Goffman, “The Lecture,” in *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981) 160-96, 167. Hereafter cited as “TL.”

or otherwise, as linguistically particular or localized—as other than the “standard” English that might in other instances allow for a sense of formal continuity between the registers of literary tradition and professional criticism—the animator of that paper faces a set of choices. Accordingly, strategies for the vocal transmission of dialect literature vary widely. Does one, in giving a talk about, say, Dunbar, Hurston, or Robert Burns (to the last of whom young McKay was often compared), call on one’s scholarly or experiential knowledge of speechways in an effort to capture the inflections of whatever particularized voice a given passage of that author’s work might seem to invoke? Does one mediate that voice through “distance-altering alignments,” acknowledging and perhaps even reproducing a text’s deployment of some linguistic stereotype only to ironically undercut it?<sup>161</sup> Or does one pronounce the passage in one’s “own” voice, minimizing any potential deviations from the linguistic register in which one has delivered the non-quotative portions of the paper (and thereby side-stepping the pitfalls of mimicking another’s voice only to risk those of silencing it)? To what extent, in other words, does one attempt to do due diligence to the textual markers of the “nonstandard” (particularly in those cases where these include eye dialect, nonstandard spellings that invoke no discernible difference in pronunciation and thereby might seem to undercut the premise that dialect writing functions as the representation of orality at all)? Negotiating these questions in the act of reading a dialectal literary passage out loud, the lecturer takes up a performative footing that may, implicitly, involve dialectological claims about historical speechways; ethical claims about the politics of representation; social or identitarian claims about the speaker’s relation to a given region, class, or ethnicity; and literary-theoretical claims about the ontology of the text. In contrast, written scholarship might seem to neutralize at least some of the questions of discursive mediation that a lecture or talk highlights. Disembodied, we can recontextualize language without performing it.

But there’s reason to keep these questions alive, if abstracted, in print: the issues that coalesce in the event of reading aloud don’t pertain only to scholarly activity but are also internal to the literary field. Consider the preface to *Songs of Jamaica*, which exhorts the reader to read McKay’s poems out loud. This preface is written by Walter Jekyll—British expatriate, amateur folklorist, former Anglican priest, Fabian socialist, and, after McKay’s brother U. Theo, the poet’s most important intellectual mentor.<sup>162</sup> In presenting *Songs of Jamaica* to the public Jekyll seems to construe McKay’s verse less as literary work than as ethnographic commodity, cataloging the phonetic particularities of “the Jamaican tongue” in an effort to render McKay’s poems pronounceable even by a “refined” metropolitan audience.<sup>163</sup> The bulk of the front matter is given over to phonetic

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<sup>161</sup> For a convincing reading of how a dialect writer herself effects a parallel invocation and ironization, see Andrew Levy, “Dialect and Convention: Harriet A. Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 45, no. 2 (September 1990), 206-219.

<sup>162</sup> For perhaps the most thorough account of the complex relationship between McKay and Jekyll, see Josh Gosciak, *The Shadowed Country: Claude McKay and the Romance of the Victorians* (Rutgers University Press, 2006).

<sup>163</sup> As Gary Holcomb puts it in a short commentary on McKay’s poem “The Biter Bit,” the poems were treated more as anthropological artifact than art (“Claude McKay’s ‘The Biter Bit’: ‘Calalu’ and Caribbean Colonialism,” *Callaloo* 30.1 [Winter 2007]: 311-14).

instructions in the pronunciation of Jamaican Creole, with the implication that McKay's poetry is not in itself a full or self-sufficient representation of the language. As Macdermot wrote in his *Jamaica Times* review, "Mr. Walter Jekyll, in short space, but with the ease, clearness and effectiveness of the scholar does what can be done to place the English reader in command of the dialect in which Mr. McKay writes many of his poems."<sup>164</sup> The qualified assessment that Jekyll "does what can be done" effectively captures both Jekyll's effort at comprehensiveness and at the same time points to the difficulty of the project—to what Charles Bernstein, in an essay that comments on *Songs of Jamaica*, calls "the yammering gap between speech and writing."<sup>165</sup> It was Jekyll's sense that McKay might bridge this gap that led to the writing and publication of *Songs of Jamaica*. When he read some of McKay's first poetic efforts in 1907, he was indifferent about the teenager's work in standard English but he was highly enthusiastic about the dialect piece "Cotch Donkey." Jekyll declared the latter "the real thing," McKay later recalled, and urged the young writer to pen more like it: "Now is your chance as a native boy to put the Jamaica dialect into literary language. I am sure that your poems will sell."<sup>166</sup> This is part of what makes the exhortation to the reader in his preface to *Songs of Jamaica* so curious; the "yammering gap" that's at issue there is not the one that must be crossed in moving from speech to text but the reverse, for it is only through translating the "literary language" of the poems back into the reader's oral performance of the "Jamaica dialect," thus animating the text in performance, that a reader can gain access to something like "the real thing."

To understand the function of a document in this way is, implicitly, to deny it the kind of aesthetic autonomy that, since structuralism, humanist scholars have tended to associate with the term "text" (an object the essential features of which, insofar as it can be decontextualized and recontextualized—in other words, cited, without fundamental alteration of the meaning it first carried—is theoretically independent of any particular context). Or to put it otherwise, it is to make the moment of embodied recontextualization the moment in which the text becomes significant. This is to think of dialect writing less as a transcript than as a kind of script, in this case one that functions as an ethnographic medium through which the curious metropolitan gains the ability to give voice to native discourse and so to experience subaltern subjectivity. "Readers of this volume will be interested to know," Jekyll writes in the concluding paragraph of the preface, "that they here have the thoughts and feelings of a Jamaican peasant of pure black blood."<sup>167</sup> Even if one were to grant the possibility of racial purity (a possibility

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But the "art or artifact" binary needs complication, given that a work of art is, after all, a typical anthropological artifact. The more relevant kinds of distinction at work here would seem to have to do with the imputation or denial of the kinds of consciousness ostensibly indexed by formal complexity and discursive recursion.

<sup>164</sup> *Jamaica Times*, January 13 1912.

<sup>165</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Poetics of the Americas," *Modernism/modernity* 3, no. 3 (1996): 1-23. Hereafter cited as "PA."

<sup>166</sup> Claude McKay, "Boyhood in Jamaica," *Phylon* 14, no. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1953): 134-145, 142. Hereafter cited as "BiJ."

<sup>167</sup> Claude McKay, *Songs of Jamaica* (1912), in *The Dialect Poetry of Claude McKay: Two Volumes in One* (Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), 9. Hereafter cited as *SJ*.

McKay's poetic speaker Cudjoe denies when he notes that "from monkey we spring," buccra and quashie, colonist and colonized, alike), this is misinformation; McKay's mother, at least, was partly white.<sup>168</sup> As Michael North has noted, it is misinformation often repeated.<sup>169</sup> One reason that this false idea became such a commonplace may have been that it allowed McKay to be thought of in a particular line of artistic descent. It's a crucial point in Howell's well-known (and notorious) introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896), for instance, that Dunbar was of "pure black blood."<sup>170</sup> If this comparison is, perhaps, implicit in the front-matter of *Songs of Jamaica*, it is explicit in that of McKay's later collection *Harlem Shadows* (1922). In his introduction Max Eastman writes that while "we tried faithfully to give a position in our literature to Paul Laurence Dunbar," it was not until McKay that "a pure blooded Negro" had written poetry that "vividly enriched" "our literature."<sup>171</sup> This is precisely the kind of problematic comparison with, and opposition to, Dunbar's dialect writing that long informed the critical tradition on McKay's Creole poetry; in *Black Poets of the United States* (1962) Jean Wagner claims that "the dialect became an avowal of subservience in its use by Dunbar, most of whose readers were whites," and that "the themes treated in it had also been exploited by the former oppressors before Dunbar's arrival on the scene," whereas by contrast "in the case of McKay . . . everything is entirely and authentically Negro."<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> This point is made by the editor of *Phylon*, who criticized Eastman's "romanticised Biographical note" in *Selected Poems. McKay*, "'BiJ," 141 n.1. The line from "Cudjoe, Fresh from de Lecture" (*SJ*, 55-58) is at *SJ*, 55.

<sup>169</sup> Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1998). Hereafter cited as *DM*. North has also noted McKay's experience as a young writer of the burden of authenticity. In North's astute account of McKay's poetic career, such responses mean that any political import of the poetry is effectively, for the poet, neutralized—and that whatever subversive effect we might want to claim for dialect poetry, in the end it's neutralized by the way that the marketplace brings dialect writing within the scope of anthropological attention, meaning that even forms of subversive "double-speak" can be referred to the stereotyped folk figure of the trickster. This account grants too much interpretive power, I'd argue, to the text's (and in fact the author's) historical reception.

<sup>170</sup> William Dean Howells, "Introduction," in Dunbar, *LLL*, xiii-xx. Howells equivocates at length on the question of whether or not Dunbar's race plays a role in his writing—first claiming it doesn't, and that the poems are primarily evidence of human unity; then, in what seems to be a non sequitur, heralding the fact that Dunbar is the first "pure" African in America, with no European blood, to provide a really fine aesthetic document of this order. For Howells it's necessary that Dunbar's blood be *pure* African so that, for one thing, one can dispel the suspicion that the feeling of "common humanity" suggested by Dunbar's poetry results only from racial "mixture" (xiii). There is a fundamental anthropological paradox here: Dunbar's writing is evidence, for Howells, both for the general unity of humanity and for the specificity of the African race.

<sup>171</sup> Max Eastman, preface, in Claude McKay, *Harlem Shadows* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), ix.

<sup>172</sup> Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, trans. Kenneth Douglas (University of Illinois, 1973 [1962]), 205.

While a long association ties the literary genre of the lyric to the act of reading aloud, in the Americans in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries this association takes on a new function of racial authentication, one that Wagner here affirms. If in the second chapter I explored how the act of utterance serves, for Keller, a problematically humanizing function, in this context it also serves a racializing function. The Boasian project of disarticulating linguistic forms from racial types offers one way of rethinking or interrupting this function (an interruption to which McKay would have been sympathetic; as Michael North points out, he did not write dialect poetry after emigrating from Jamaica, likely because of his frustration at being asked to bear the burden of racial authenticity in his writing). The potential of the textual representation of “nonstandard” versions of spoken English to encode a political alternative—rather than simply a position of cultural inferiority, the “low” position in what sociolinguists describe in terms of diglossic hierarchy—has often, as in Eric J. Sundquist’s *To Wake the Nations*, been seen as enabled by the paradigmatic turn-of-the-century shift from social evolutionism to cultural particularism. And yet while that project is often framed, if too simplistically, as a rejection of social evolutionism and so as emphasizing the diffusion of cultural forms over and against the processes of evolution—in ways that become especially urgent in the light of the pseudo-scientific evolutionary discourse of imperialist histories of Jamaica—McKay implies the structural affinities of diffusion and evolution.

What this suggests is that the nexus of language and evolution provides not only the rhetorical foundations of imperialism but also resources for undermining it. Herbert S. Lewis has written that Boas’s argument “that what appear to be patterns or structures in a culture were not a product of conscious design, but rather the outcome of diverse mechanisms that produce cultural variation (such as diffusion and independent invention)” was in fact influenced by Darwin. In a 1909 lecture that makes reference to “Darwin’s discussion of the development of mental powers”—which “originated as variations, and were continued by natural selection”—Boas said that he “hoped to have succeeded in presenting to you, however imperfectly, the currents of thought due to the work of the immortal Darwin which have helped to make anthropology what it is at the present time.”<sup>173</sup> The lecture on evolution and anthropology that McKay imagines two years later develops the political consequences of this connection. If Jekyll’s preface seems designed, I hope to show, to discipline discourse as a way of containing the energies of potential decolonization, I also hope to show that the kinds of discursive proliferation that structure McKay’s early work and especially “Fresh from de Lecture” depict those energies’ diffusion. “Fresh from de Lecture” offers a kind of rehearsal of the scene of “When Malindy Sings”—with crucial differences (the reported voice is not that of the spiritual singer but rather the “clear open speech” of a scientist) but with the same effect of a meta-generic reflection on the racialized aesthetics of dialect poetry. In each case, this reflection is made possible by a scene of discursive mediation—the description of an absent voice—that mirrors or contrasts the qualities of the speaker’s own textual “voice” (and with it the poem’s, if not the poet’s), the mediated status of which voice thereby itself becomes an object of potential interrogation. In this recursive play, these

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<sup>173</sup> Boas’s lecture notes are quoted by Herbert S. Lewis in “Boas, Darwin, Science and Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology* 42(3): 381-406. See also See Franz Boas, “Evolution or Diffusion,” *American Anthropologist* 26, No. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1924): 340-44.

dialect poems are the verse analogues of Goffman's lecture on lectures. The imagination at work in "Fresh from de Lecture" seems to suggest that the relation between evolution and language shaped the production and politics of early-twentieth century literary dialect—in ways that have not been sufficiently acknowledged in the critical record, perhaps because we've so long understood the rejection of evolutionism as a core aspect of the culturalist paradigm through which we've interpreted the politics of such writing.

## 2. English which is Like a Howl

In the 1913 volume *Songs and Ballads of Greater Britain*, "poems are literally brought together," writes editor Edward Arthur Helps, "from the ends of the earth": South Africa, Canada, Australia, Ceylon, the West Indies, and other imperial dominions.<sup>174</sup> The first poem in the anthology is Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Positioned as an epigraph, it seems to express Helps's vision of the book as, on one hand, a showcase of the civilizing effects of empire (which has, in Helps's account, enabled the production of new literatures) and, on the other, a fascinating glimpse into the strenuous life of the distant colonial reaches. Perhaps more the latter than the former; "we may have written better poetry," writes Helps, but "they have lived it" (*SB*, v). The last poem in the anthology—one of the pieces, that is, for which Kipling's poem is meant to serve as a kind of frame—is "Fresh from de Lecture" (*SB*, 357-59). It had been published in January of the previous year in *Songs of Jamaica*. Like much of the verse in that volume, the thirteen quatrains of "Fresh from de Lecture" are written in a densely patterned representation of Jamaican Creole. The first major book publication by a Jamaican writing mostly in the rural vernacular, the release of *Songs of Jamaica* was "an event of note in Jamaica Literature," as Thomas Macdermot (a.k.a. Tom Redcam, a major editorial figure in that literature at the turn of the twentieth century) wrote in the *Jamaica Times* on January 13, 1912.<sup>175</sup> Yet if the book marks a moment of legitimization for a new national literary voice, some aspects of the volume also seem to affirm Kipling's version of the imperial imagination. The speaker of "Fresh from de Lecture," the titular Cudjoe, has just come from an evolutionary biologist's lecture; in reporting what he heard there to one "Cous' Jarge," he offers a digressive reflection on the history of slavery and at one point suggests that "I t'ink it do good, tek we from Africa" In a verse version of Creole, subaltern echoes colonialist.

He echoes Phillis Wheatley, too. "Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land," she wrote, now infamously, in "On Being Brought to America from Africa."<sup>176</sup> In 1922

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<sup>174</sup> Edward Arthur Helps, ed., *Songs and Ballads of Greater Britain* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1913), v-xii, v. Hereafter cited as *SB*. Kipling's poem is not the only epigraph. Following the first title page, Helps also includes quotations from Arnold, Hazlitt, Shelley, and Bacon. Kipling's poem appears between the preface and table of contents (xiii-xiv), apparently linking those writer's generalized statements about poetry's elevating effect with the evidence that will follow (i.e., the poems) that this effect obtains as well, perhaps especially, in the colonies. Helps's volume is also published in 1912 as *Songs and Ballads from Over the Sea*.

<sup>175</sup> "Songs of Jamaica": Poems of Claude McKay," *Jamaica Times*, January 13, 1912, 12.

<sup>176</sup> Phillis Wheatley, "On Being Brought to America from Africa," in *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* [1773] (Denver: W. H. Lawrence & Co., 1887), 17.

James Weldon Johnson chafed at Wheatley's "smug contentment at her own escape" from Africa, and more recently Henry Louis Gates Jr. called Wheatley's apparent apology for the slave trade "the most reviled poem in African-American literature."<sup>177</sup> McKay's poem, at least in a line like this one, rankles in the same way. Yet one has only to notice that the name "Cudjoe" associates the poem's speaker with the eighteenth century leader of Jamaica's Maroon rebellions, Captain Cudjoe, to begin to wonder about the text's political complexities. As I'll discuss in more detail, if Cudjoe gives voice to the kind of social evolutionary rhetoric that seems to motivate Kipling's poem and Helps's volume as a whole, he also reflects on the potentially revolutionary implications of Darwinian thinking; and if McKay's representation of nonstandard English worked to satisfy metropolitan curiosity, it also subverted standards of literary form. In a parallel claim for the possibility of reading Wheatley's poem against the grain, Gates points out the surprising fact that its entire eight lines can be recast as an anagram whose content entirely opposes the sentiment of the published text.<sup>178</sup> And yet even if one accepts the provocation of this unusual critical thought experiment—might one use such a radical reorganization of a text to read it against itself?—it would seem to resist straightforward application in the case of dialect literature, where letters have already been arranged "otherwise" and where, therefore, it becomes difficult not to see a work's given orthographic particularity as one of its essential features.

Indeed, for some scholars, it's precisely in such particularity that McKay's volume pushes back against the kind of imperialist logic that seems manifest in Cudjoe's apology for the slave trade. Winston James writes that "It is difficult for today's Jamaicans"—and, one might add, students and scholars of Anglophone literature—"to appreciate how unprecedented and subversive of prevailing literary norms it was for McKay to write in Creole, but it was a revolutionary act."<sup>179</sup> While the fact of this choice is key to my own argument here, that argument will have to do less with the more local choices he makes in representing dialect than with how his work might offer terms with which to conceptualize the politics of such representation. In particular, I want to suggest that if we shift the way we view dialect writing away from questions of transcription and toward questions of performance, we can recover an insight in McKay's work about the relationship between the peculiar discursive status of the dialectal text—not only imaginary transcript and but also script for potential utterance—and the kind of counterfactual, even revolutionary, historical imagination that, as Cudjoe proposes in "Fresh from de Lecture," is enabled by Darwinian evolution. The title of McKay's poem plays on the idiom of a student "fresh from the lecture hall," just graduated, yet it also refers to the renewing effects, both affective and political, of the buccra (white colonist) lecturer's evolutionary critique of polygenetic theories of racial

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<sup>177</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley: America's First Black Poet and Her Encounters with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2003), 71. Hereafter cited as *TPW*. James Weldon Johnson, "Preface," in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, ed. James Weldon Johnson (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1922), xxvii. Hereafter cited as *BANP*.

<sup>178</sup> Gates credits Walter Grigo, a freelance writer, with the idea of the Wheatley anagram. *TPW*, 87-88.

<sup>179</sup> Winston James, "Becoming the People's Poet: Claude McKay's Jamaican Years, 1889-1912," *Small Axe* 7, no. 1 (2003): 17-45.

origin: “Him tell us ‘bout we self, an’ mek we fresh again.”<sup>180</sup> Marveling at the skeletons, “queer to deat’,” that the lecturer exhibits in support of the evolutionary view of common ancestry, Cudjoe notes that “Gahd was not fe blame” for historical injustice and that “change cause eberyt’ing fe mix up ‘pon de eart’” (*SJ*, 56)—an “eberyt’ing” that is inclusive both of the Creole that Cudjoe speaks and of the mixed-up orthography of its literary representation. What so intrigues Cudjoe about evolution is its way of flattening social hierarchy and producing a view of history as profoundly contingent, with the consequence that the kinds of discursive hierarchies imagined to determine the relation of standard to nonstandard, scientist to native, metropolitan consumer to colonized producer, are if not flattened then interrupted.

To characterize a literary work as interruptive or resistant—for James, whose assessment doesn’t represent a scholarly consensus, even “revolutionary”—with regard to a dominant discourse is to engage with a well established line of questioning in the study of dialect in literature: Does the textual representation of a “nonstandard” variety (or basilect) of English undermine the dominance of the “standard” (or acrolect) by registering the voices at its margins? Or does it reinforce it by negatively valuing those voices? And so does dialect in literature function conservatively, subversively, or both? (It’s the third option, both, that structures, for example, Gavin Jones’s argument in *Strange Talk*.) Unsurprisingly these question of political function featured prominently in a spike of interest in McKay’s earliest work in the 1970s, in the context of increasing academic interest in the history of post-colonial nationalist movement and in the wake of Jamaican independence in 1962. For scholars interested in these questions, McKay’s Creole verse has proved a stimulating, slippery object. In the lectures published as *History of the Voice*, Edward Kamau Brathwaite argues that because in *Songs of Jamaica* McKay’s poems fail to capture the rhythms of Jamaican Creole as it is spoken in everyday life, they remain mere “dialect”—i.e., linguistically stereotyped—as opposed to “nation-language,” which he describes as

the *submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English: but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave.<sup>181</sup>

Conversely, Charles Bernstein, writing as the transnationalist critical paradigm begin to gather steam in the 1990s, emphasized the “idiolectal” (centrifugal) over the “dialectal” (centripetal) aspects of McKay’s language; for Bernstein, what’s interesting is not whether McKay adheres to a given language-culture, whether he gives proper expression to its essential features, but rather how he transgresses those boundaries or describes their transformation. Yet certain aspects of the critical discourse remain consistent. For each of these two critics, the creative possibilities of the verse lie precisely in its success

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<sup>180</sup> To be clear, my approach here is not Literary-Darwinist but historicist: I’ll be constellating several turn-of-the-century texts in relation to McKay’s volume with the aim of making a localized claim about the implicit analogy between evolution and performance in his poetic imagination.

<sup>181</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (New Beacon Books, 1984), 13.



or failure in getting away from “dialect,” an object undefined except as politically and formally retrograde. Likewise, sociolinguists have taken on the term *lect* because it neutralizes some of the connotations of dialect. Although I’d suggest that there is more reason to explore than to neutralize those connotations, I invoke the term in the title of this chapter in part to signal an investment in the history of their production. But I also do so to emphasize the term’s continuity with a term at the heart, or more precisely in the title, of “Fresh from de Lecture.” In McKay’s poetry, *lect* and *lecture*, the form and the situation of discourse, are significantly related.

Sociolinguistics offers another term to describe the relation of form to situation: *register*. And, indeed, Brathwaite and Bernstein are both sensitive to the functions of literary register in McKay’s poems. Placing particular emphasis on the tension between the status of these texts as representations of oral linguistic form and as written verse—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that both critics are poets themselves—both critics discuss the work’s register in terms of a response to the situation of colonialism, as expressed not only in its lexical and phonetic features but also, and crucially, in its metric form. Brathwaite writes that the Creole poems are “dialect as distinct from nation [that is, nation-language] *because* McKay allowed himself to be imprisoned in the pentameter” (my emphasis) while Bernstein, at first commenting on Brathwaite, notes that “In McKay’s Jamaica poems, iambic pentameter is made the metrical mark of colonialism, the chains around a corrosive dialect” (“PA,” 15). Citing Michel de Certeau, Bernstein notes that for McKay “pentameter dialect is the ruse or wig that allows a running double play of ingratiating and defiance” (“PA,” 13). These are among the most insightful readers of McKay’s Creole verse, so this is a surprising misreading. Reiterating Brathwaite’s point about the “imprison[ing] pentameter,” Bernstein quotes this line from “Fresh from de Lecture”: “Him tell us ‘bout we self, an’ mek we fresh again” (“PA,” 9). The line has twelve syllables, six stresses: not iambic pentameter but alexandrine couplets. Indeed, very few of the poems in *Songs of Jamaica*—four out of fifty: “Quashie to Buccra,” “Heart-Stirrings,” “My Pretty Dan,” and “To Bennie (In Answer to a Letter)” (*SJ* 13, 69, 114, 127, and respectively)—are in anything approaching regular iambic pentameter.

This may seem like a trivial correction. The point takes on a lot more weight, though, when one recalls that the formal feature these critics have failed to accurately describe is also precisely the thing on which they seek to ground their argument about McKay’s relation to colonialism. It matters even more because this transformation of alexandrine into tetrameter is in fact relevant to the questions of performance that are substantively central to McKay’s work—and so it’s worth dwelling one moment more on this point. That these critics are themselves, as Brathwaite says of McKay, “imprisoned in the pentameter,” has to do not only with the reason they’ve attributed to McKay’s inner colonialist—that is, that iambic pentameter is the premier poetic form of the motherland England, that it’s the literary form that carries the greatest social distinction—but also, perhaps, with the commonplace understanding of iambic pentameter as the most “natural” meter for English.<sup>182</sup> In other words, this misreading seems likely to have as much to do with ideas about “language” as does with ideas about “literature”: if pentameter encodes “poetry” it also encodes “speech.” In contrast, the alexandrine is awkward to read out loud; although it is associated with folk traditions of

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<sup>182</sup> See Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (Routledge, 2003 [1983]).

epic poetry in France, it is typically understood not to translate smoothly into speech in English, leading the voice to devolve into what one critic calls a “monotonous jog-trot”—or, to repurpose a phrase from McKay’s poem, a “selfsame gallop.”<sup>183</sup> Cutting a foot off of McKay’s lines thus means transforming them from lines that, when read out loud, might sound like awkward sing-song to lines that, ostensibly, sound like speech.

It is one of the key features of dialect literature that it demands (and makes difficult) the underlying distinction here, that between the literary and the linguistic. Consider James Weldon Johnson’s seminal preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Johnson famously argues that literary dialect of the kind written, for instance, by Dunbar is “an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos,” and that therefore—that is, because this impoverished affective range reinforces a politically regressive stereotype of black expression (and indeed black consciousness) that accords with the minstrel tradition and with an anachronistic understanding of black culture as fundamentally rural—it deserves to be abandoned and new modes of vernacular representation need to be explored (*BANP*, xl). For Johnson, the signs of modernity do not include a dropped g. But this is a problem that has to do not with language but with literature: it is not, for Johnson, “dialect as dialect” that deserves indictment; it is rather “the mould of convention in which Negro dialect in the United States has been set.” What Johnson thinks poets would do well to break away from, then, is “not Negro dialect itself, but the limitations imposed on Negro dialect by the fixing effects of long convention” (*BANP*, xli).

Yet he is pleased to have discovered the dialect poems in *Songs of Jamaica*. “I was fortunate enough to run across this first volume” by McKay, he writes, “and I could not refrain from reproducing here one of the poems written in the West Indian Negro dialect.”<sup>184</sup> The volume’s geographical dislocation, its status as an itinerant textual object molded by traditions other than the American minstrel performance, seems to be the necessary condition for Johnson’s enthusiastic response; as North notes, for Johnson McKay’s poems seemed to “enjoy a greater geographical distance from the crippling stereotypes left behind by Dunbar” (*DM*, 108). To poignant effect, Johnson places “Two an’ Six,” from *Songs of Jamaica* (and earlier printed in the *Gleaner*), directly after the later “Flame-Heart,” a lament in standard English about having forgotten so much about the island since his departure for the U.S. in 1912: “So much have I forgotten in ten years, / So much in ten brief years; I have forgot” (*BANP* 143). It’s all the more apt an arrangement when one notes that in *Songs of Jamaica*, “Two an’ Six” had directly followed “My Native Land, My Home”; “My land I won’t feget,” its speaker declares (*BANP*, 84). Johnson’s own explanation for why he wanted to include some of McKay’s work in dialect, though, is twofold:

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<sup>183</sup> Parker Duchemin, “Drayton’s ‘Poly-Olbion’ and the Alexandrine Couplet,” *Studies in Philology*, 77 (Spring 1980): 145-60.

<sup>184</sup> *BANP*, xliii. If the function of the volume’s glossary or explanatory footnotes (most of them apparently by its editor rather than McKay) is metasemantic—serving to specify the meaning of a given lexical unit—then the text’s marking as dialect itself serves a metapragmatic function; it invokes certain norms by which to relate a strip of discourse to its social function.

not only to illustrate the widest range of the poet's talent and to offer a comparison between the American and the West Indian dialects, but on account of the intrinsic worth of the poem itself. I was much tempted to introduce several more, in spite of the fact that they might require a glossary, because however greater work Mr. McKay may do he can never do anything more touching and charming than these poems in the Jamaica dialect. (*BANP*, xliii-xliv)

The terms in which Johnson here endorses McKay's Creole verse suggest that for him it remains a commodity of limited value for the urgent cause of "the demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of [great] literature and art." If poems like "Two an' Six" "illustrate the widest range of the poet's talent," they nevertheless do so not by themselves encompassing a broad affective or technical range, but rather by serving as evidence that, in addition to the affective positions that McKay can occupy and evoke in his standard English work, he can also, in Creole, pull off the two stops of "touching and charming" exceptionally well. This is damning praise—a tweaked formulation of the commonplace reference to dialect as the vehicle of "humor and pathos."

But perhaps even more noteworthy than Johnson's repetition of this literary commonplace is his repetition of a linguistic commonplace. One of the effects of including McKay's poetry, and thus including a non-American form of vernacular writing in this book of "American Negro Poetry," was that it helped to correct "an error that confuses many persons in reading or understanding Negro dialect"—namely, "that it is uniform." The "comparison between the American and the West Indian dialect" enabled by McKay's poetry would seem to help correct this error. And yet Johnson's revisionist demystification of dialect soon doubles back to an account of linguistic form as a delightful effect of natural organs that differ according to racial type or, to borrow from Dunbar, "nat'chel organs": "The constant effort in negro dialect is to elide all troublesome consonants and sounds," Johnson writes. "This negative effort may be after all only positive laziness of the vocal organs, but the result is a softening and smoothing which makes Negro dialect so delightfully easy for singers" (*BANP*, xlvi).

This reference to "delight" repeats one of the most frequently used terms in the initial reception of *Songs of Jamaica*; reviewing the volume in *The Jamaica Times*, Macdermot describes one passage as "one of the most delightful bits of Dialect work we have ever read"; calls another as "a delightful snatch"; and refers to "the delightful little 'My native Land, My Home.'"<sup>185</sup> Yet in describing the "softness" of "negro dialect" and its easy amenability to vocal performance Johnson comes even closer to Jekyll's account of the "negro variant of English" in his preface to McKay's book. Here is the opening paragraph of that preface in full:

What Italian is to Latin, that in regard to English is the negro variant thereof. It shortens, softens, rejects the harder sounds alike of consonants and vowels; I might almost say, refines. In its soft tones we have an expression of the languorous sweetness of the South: it is a feminine version of masculine English; pre-eminently a language of love, as all will feel who, setting prejudice aside, will allow the charmingly naïve love-songs of this volume to make their due

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<sup>185</sup> "Songs of Jamaica": Poems of Claude McKay," *Jamaica Times*, January 13, 1912, 12.

impression upon them. But this can only happen when the verses are read aloud, and those unacquainted with the Jamaican tongue may therefore welcome a few hints as to pronunciation. (*SJ*, 5)

“Charmingly naïve love-songs” describes only a handful of the poems in the volume; the first poem to follow the preface, for instance, “Quashie to Buccra,” deals subtly with the politics of island labor.<sup>186</sup> Gary Holcomb, discussing Jekyll’s *Jamaican Song and Story* (1907), suggests that Jekyll’s folkloric work is characterized by a kind of “homoeroticism of Black Jamaican Creole”; this linguistic eroticism would find its ideal object, perhaps, in McKay’s expression of this “language of love,” even if the poet’s use of that language turned toward topics not limited to “love-songs.”<sup>187</sup>

Yet more than the editor’s desire for the poet is at stake here. Jekyll’s preface frames McKay’s work in terms of a particular view of human (and linguistic) difference. The description of the feminized softness of these “charmingly naïve love-songs” and the way that they express “the languorous sweetness of the South” invokes a specific topos in social evolutionary thinking, a field of thinking in which Jekyll was deeply embedded. He was a close reader of Herbert Spencer and, as McKay notes in *A Long Way From Home*, during the years that he knew Jekyll the latter “was translating Schopenhauer and I read a lot from his translation.”<sup>188</sup> In Jekyll’s image of the languorous South we can hear something of the evolutionary geography that appears occasionally in Schopenhauer’s work (and that finds echoes in Tom Buchanan’s Nordicism rant), and “Fresh from de Lecture” has often been read as an indication that McKay not only read but also agreed with this kind of geographical determinism, and with its association of whiteness with the civilization. In the next section, I’ll argue that in fact the poem puts pressure on such arguments, less through the kinds of critique advanced by Boasian anthropology than through the kinds of discursive slippage and irony enabled by the fact of the text’s literariness.

### 3. From Monkey We Spring

In *Black Jamaica: A Study of Evolution* (1900), William Pringle Livingstone writes that the North represents the “masculine part of nature” and in it “the strenuous process of evolution has gone on, and is still going on, in its highest and most energetic form,” whereas the “equatorial area” is characterized by “fecundity but not progress. It is the rich fount of life, but not the trainer and moulder of it. It is the feminine part of the earth’s surface. Producing man, it supports him without exertion, and he remains in the infantile stage of human evolution.”<sup>189</sup> Infantile, with its etymological connotations of a

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<sup>186</sup> Michael North offers an excellent reading of “Quashie to Buccra” in *DM*.

<sup>187</sup> Gary E. Holcomb, “Diaspora Cruises: Queer Black Proletarianism in Claude McKay’s *A Long Way from Home*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 719.

<sup>188</sup> Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>189</sup> William Pringle Livingstone, *Black Jamaica: A Study in Evolution* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1900), 9. Hereafter cited as *BJ*. A *Gleaner* notice in 1911 about a forthcoming volume by Livingstone to be titled *The Race Problem* (I have been unable to find this volume, if it was ever published) described him as “the author of

pre-linguistic state, is a key term here. Later in *Black Jamaica* Livingstone writes that the effects of the fecundity of the “equatorial area” can be traced in the language of the “old hill stock” of black Jamaicans, which

may be likened to infantile English with superficial differences—the foundation of dialect—due to mutual distance and isolation. Apart from inversion, there is clipping of words and slurring of harsh letters. This can be put down to temperature. Effort of mouth, like effort of every other kind, falls under the general law, and the easier bye-paths, the short cuts, are taken to expression. Right through the laconic, slipshod speech of the majority can be traced the effect of this climatic weathering and unconscious adaptation of a difficult vocabulary to their simple needs. But among the intelligent class, English is being spoken with increasing precision and affluence. (*BJ*, 222-23)

In the “slipshod” style of this passage itself, all passive voice and parataxis, it’s as if even Livingstone finds his crude account of the formation of pidgins difficult to articulate. Yet it’s of course not an uncommon position: as Suzanne Romaine writes, “The lack of highly developed inflectional morphology in pidgins and creoles” was, in early linguistics, long thought “to reflect primitiveness . . . [and] native mental inferiority,” associations that are implicit in Livingstone’s description of “infantile English,” “simple needs,” and in the binary opposition of the “majority” to the “intelligent class.”<sup>190</sup> Implicitly refusing a link between the functional process of linguistic reduction (pidginization) and race-based claims about the limited cognitive capacities of enslaved populations, Salikoko S. Mufwene is careful to note in *The Ecology of Language Evolution* that “although part of colonial history has tied the development of pidgins with slavery, the connection is accidental.”<sup>191</sup> The dissemination and evolution of linguistic elements was a consequence of new global markets, Mufwene suggests; slaves were one commodity among many others whose exchange led to new connections between different linguistic communities. Yet the social (de)valuation of new Englishes, if not their actual formation, no doubt had more than accidental connection to colonial history. As McKay wrote of his first conversation with Jekyll about the value of dialect poetry, “to us who were getting an education in the English schools, the Jamaican dialect was considered a vulgar tongue” (“BiJ,” 142).

So where does the McKay of a few years later, of *Songs of Jamaica*—with his fluid position between the Clarendon hills and Kingston society, with his fluency in both Creole and “English English,” with his reading of Schopenhauer and perhaps of

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‘Black Jamaica,’ Mr. W. P. Livingstone, sometime editor of the *Gleaner*.” “The Race Problem: A Book by Mr. W. P. Livingstone,” *Daily Gleaner*, July 3, 1911, p.14. Given that Livingstone held this position and that this was one of the few major works of Jamaican history at the turn of the century, it seems highly probable that Jekyll knew his book.

<sup>190</sup> Suzanne Romaine, “The Evolution of Linguistic Complexity in Pidgin and Creole Language,” in *The Evolution of Human Languages: Proceedings of the Workshop on the Evolution of Human Languages, Held August, 1989 in Santa Fe, New Mexico*, ed. John A. Hawkins and Murray Gell-Mann (Addison Wesley, 1992), 213.

<sup>191</sup> Salikoko S. Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

Dunbar—stand on these questions about language in relation to the history of racial domination? Patrick Bryan argues that “McKay, like most of the black intelligentsia, had thoroughly internalised the concept of a backward, uncivilised Africa.”<sup>192</sup> I want to dispute the thoroughness of this internalization, but there is no doubt that “Fresh from de Lecture,” on its face, registers such concepts. “Seems our lan’ must ha’ been a bery low-do’n place,” says Cudjoe, “Mek it tek such long time in tu’ning out a race.” And Cudjoe, as if in agreement with Wheatley’s image of Africa a “Pagan land,” suggests that the Middle Passage was a journey toward civilization, away from the “wile an’ uncibilise”:

Talk ‘bouten Africa, we would be deh till now,  
 Maybe same half-naked—all day dribe buccra cow,  
 An’ tearin’ t’rough de bush wid all de monkey dem,  
 Wile an’ uncibilise’, an neber comin’ tame.

Livingstone, too, depicts West Africa as a Hobbesian state of nature; it’s often assumed, he writes, that “the negroes for Jamaica . . . were torn from an idyllic environment,” but “In reality their lives were one long subjection to tribal law and the prey of untold terror and tragedy” (*BJ*, 17). George Wilson Bridges’s two-volume *Annals of Jamaica* (1828) similarly takes a long view of Jamaican bondage in order to demonstrate the wisdom of deferring emancipation; he points therefore to the “present improved condition of Africa’s transplanted sons” and notes that those who support the “wild and destructive scheme of sudden emancipation” irresponsibly fail to consider “the origin and progress of slavery in the British Indies, the gradual melioriation of its early conditions, and the present comparative lightness of its bonds.”<sup>193</sup> In Cudjoe’s words, better times:

Yes, Cous’ Jarge, slabery hot fe dem dat gone befo’:  
 We getting’ better times, for those days we no know;  
 But I t’ink it do good, tek we from Africa  
 An’ lan’ us in a blessed place as dis a ya.

“There is no irony in his words” here, writes Winston James of this stanza. McKay’s understanding of Africa would, “with time and education,” grow into a deeper appreciation, James writes. But here, in Cudjoe’s words, the poet can only offer an essentially primitivist understanding of Africa, an understanding “inherited from the colonial masters, which he did not transcend,” and in which historical processes are articulated (or confused) with the evolutionary process.<sup>194</sup>

“No irony in his words,” James writes.<sup>195</sup> The pronoun, whose referent remains uncertain, is telling. Whose words: McKay’s or Cudjoe’s? It makes a difference, for it’s

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<sup>192</sup> Patrick Bryan, *The Jamaican People, 1880-1902: Race, Class, and Social Control* (University of the West Indies Press, 2000), 256.

<sup>193</sup> George Wilson Bridges, *Annals of Jamaica*, vol. 1 (London: John Murray, 1828), 1:xi.

<sup>194</sup> Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica and His Poetry of Rebellion* (London: Verso, 2000), 128.

<sup>195</sup> For another argument that in “Fresh from de Lecture” McKay “emphasizes that assimilation into Western society . . . in many respects has been a positive gain for

precisely in the intermediate space between poet and speaker (as well as in those between speaker and the other perspectives he describes, such as the lecturer) that irony and what Goffman calls “distance-altering alignments”—the discursive things that allow us to read the poem not only as internalization but also as expression—reside. McKay didn’t have to assign a particular identity to the persona of this poem; the name “Cudjoe,” in fact, appears nowhere in the text but its title, and very few of the other poetic speakers in *Songs of Jamaica* are named. The choice of “Cudjoe” is motivated primarily by the historical reference encoded in it: it associates the poem’s speaker with Captain Cudjoe; it puts the poem on a certain historical footing.<sup>196</sup> “Jarge” is not an incidental choice either; George was both the name of the sovereign during Captain Cudjoe’s time, George II, and that of the king who came to the throne as McKay was composing the volume, George V, crowned in 1910 with wide publicity in the Jamaican press. Two anonymous “Dialect Jingles” that were printed in the *Jamaica Times* prior to *Songs of Jamaica* both referred to the new sovereign as “King Garge”—not precisely the same rendering of the name as the one that McKay uses in “Fresh from de Lecture,” but close enough to suggest that this association was a live one for McKay.<sup>197</sup> Thus in Cudjoe’s report of the lecture to “Cous’ Jarge,” it’s as if scientific authority newly allows the Maroon rebel to interpellate, to both stop and top (“Top one minute,” Cudjoe directs Jarge [*SJ*, 55]) the sovereign—a sovereign who is after all, according to a monogenetic theory of humanity, this subject’s distant cousin. At the same time, it’s also important to note that Cudjoe is not an uncommon name. Boas’s student Martha Warren Beckwith carried out ethnographic research on the island in the 1910s-20s. As she observes in *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folklife* (1929), it’s a nickname in Jamaica for males born on Monday.<sup>198</sup> This was a tradition that came from the Akan culture of West Africa, so that “Cudjoe” encodes (and thus subtly associates) both a revolutionary history and the transatlantic transmission of cultural forms.<sup>199</sup>

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blacks,” see William H. Hansell, “Some Themes in the Jamaican Poetry of Claude McKay,” *Phylon* 40, no. 2 (2nd Qtr., 1979): 123-39, 131-32.

<sup>196</sup> Scholarship on Captain Cudjoe is sparse; perhaps the most extensive biographical account—and one that takes significant speculative liberties—is Milton C. McFarlane *Cudjoe of Jamaica: Pioneer for Black Freedom in the New World* (Short Hills, NJ: Ridley Enslow Publishers, 1977). Mary Conroy seems to conflate Cudjoe and his interlocutor (Cous’ Jarge) when she suggests that Cudjoe is a nickname for cousin Joe (“The Vagabond Motif in the Writings of Claude McKay,” *Negro American Literature Forum* 5, no. 1 [Spring, 1971]: 15-23, 21).

<sup>197</sup> At least two entries in a *Jamaica Times* series of anonymous “Dialect Jingles” (numbers 5 and 8) referred to George V as “King Garge”; See “Long Lib King Banana,” *Jamaica Times*, November 26, 1910, p. 5, and “Quashie James—Fe Him Dream,” *Jamaica Times*, December 7, 1911, p. 7.

<sup>198</sup> Martha Warren Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1929).

<sup>199</sup> In McKay’s work a third sense of *cudjoe* comes into play: in nineteenth-century Jamaican English *cudjoe* carried not only the sense to beat, like *cudgel*, but also—and perhaps as a result of this verb form—could function as a noun meaning slave-driver, so that Cudjoe’s name, while it primarily associates him associated (through the proper noun) with the oppressed, also quietly evokes (through the improper noun) the

The richness of connotation with which McKay imbues this persona does not mean, though, that we need to take Cudjoe's words as the poet's; rather, over the trajectory of the poem, a reader finds an inconsistent alternation between the repetition and ironization of imperialist rhetoric. Cudjoe concludes his talk on a note of apparently deflated melancholy: "wrong will eber gwon till dis wul' en fe we." Yet while the basic fact of "'wrong' is pre-determined" (as Cooper writes), the same cannot be said for the "lowly status" of a given group. Moving from a biblical to an evolutionary explanation of biological difference, in Cudjoe's account, also entails a revisionist and counterfactual understanding of colonialism. The evolutionist's account proposes a social leveling based on biological universality (a welcome alternative, for Cudjoe, to biblical explanations of "black 'kin" as the effect of a curse): "For ebery single man, no car' about dem rank / Him bring us ebery one an' put 'pon de same plank." Cudjoe affirms that "Yes, from monkey we spring" (*SJ*, 57), and "Most hardship come t'rough accident o' birt'" (*SJ*, 56). Viewed through the parallax of writing and speech, this "t'rough," in which the dropped "h" makes the word a homophone for "true" even as it isolates the semantic unit of "rough," encodes Cudjoe's insight: recognizing the damages done by contingency does not lead to resignation in the face of nature's inexorability (as Cooper would have it) but rather provokes a consideration of overthrow and its potential cyclicity, of the rough truth of accident—top one minute, bottom the next:

It really strange how some o' de lan' dem advance;  
 Man power in some ways is nummo soso chance;  
 But suppose eberyting could tu'n right upside down,  
 Den p'raps we'd be on top an' give some one houn.'<sup>200</sup>

Disarticulated from the predetermination of God's will, a providential curse, the history of racial domination becomes instead a matter of historical accident: "nummo soso chance"—or, as Jekyll's footnotes glosses, "No more than pure chance"—and the procession of history is, like the "funny 'keleton[s]" (*SJ*, 56) that the lecturer displays, "really strange." In the untamed orthography of "wile an' uncibilise," McKay calls on the

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oppressor. See *cudjoe*, in *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, ed. Frederic Gomes Cassidy and Robert Brock Le Page (University of the West Indies Press, 2002). Hereafter cited as *DJE*. In an essay on Paul Marshall's *Diverse Daughters*, in which a character is named Will Cudjoe, Moira Ferguson cites "Fresh from de Lecture" as evidence that "Cudjoe is a familiar name in the Caribbean." This is true but effaces the specificity that causes both McKay and (I suspect) Marshall to use the name for these particular characters—certainly because they want to associate the specific historical figure of Captain Cudjoe with the revolutionary aspect of their characters, and perhaps because, as a lexical unit originating in the Akan culture of West Africa, its familiarity in the Caribbean is in fact a trace of a transatlantic linguistic history.

<sup>200</sup> *SJ*, 57. Jekyll's footnote glosses "give some one houn'" as comparable to the "British phrase," "Give some one beans," or to scold or reprimand (that is, perhaps, to *lecture*). But this doesn't seem to capture the force of Cudjoe's metaphor, given the poem's explicit discussion of the "hot" history of slavery and given its implicit reference to Maroon resistance. See the *Dictionary of Jamaican English's* reference to the idiom (under the entry "hound") "give some one houn' of a beating."



same irony that Twain does when Huck Finn resists the efforts of the Widow Douglas to “sivilize” him.<sup>201</sup> Given this ethos of rebellion, “neber comin’ tame” begins to seem like a positive possibility.

#### 4. Talkin’ Anyt’ing

This analogy between political and discursive discipline (and subversion) is not original to my reading of “Fresh from de Lecture”; it is, rather, internal to it. Concluding his account, Cudjoe notices that he has “lef’ quite ‘way from wha’ we be’n deh talk about . . . Just like how yeas’ get strong an’ sometimes fly de cark, / Same way me feelings grow, so I was boun’ fe talk” (*SJ*, 58). As the organic trope of yeast here begins to imply, then, accident is not only the engine of (natural) history; it’s also a feature of discourse. Cudjoe’s apology for digressing reverses the causal chain imagined in Jekyll’s preface; for Cudjoe feeling (and a range of feeling broader than humour and pathos) produces talk, while for Jekyll, in his injunction to read out the poems and experience the charm of native subjectivity, talk produces feeling. This enables us to make a certain sense out of the attempt to phonetically discipline the reader’s pronunciation of McKay’s poems: if talk produces feeling, than to allow the forms of talk to proliferate would be to cede control of their consequent affects.

And the audience of the volume would not be the metropolitan reader alone. The *Daily Gleaner*, in its review, like Jekyll thought that the performance of the poems would produce a certain affect, but it was one that would be experienced among the Jamaican diaspora: “we are confident that these poems will soon be recited and sung all over Jamaica. To our countrymen on the Isthmus and in Costa Rica they should be especially acceptable, as in reading these pages they will feel themselves once more in their old home.” The review goes on to suggest that it is best, as Jekyll of course thought it was, to read out the verse in the correct fashion, in the right voice. Describing the subtle humor of McKay’s “Fetchin’ Water,” where “the independence of the youngster is admirably depicted,” the review offers a brief performance note: “If this is read with right rhythm, putting the accent on the Den, and on thae [sic] first syllable of along, it has a delightful effect”:

Den all ‘bout de road dem ‘catter,  
Marchin’ along quite at ease  
Dat time listen to deir chatter,  
Talkin’ anyt’ing dem please.<sup>202</sup>

These lines are an ironically apt stanza for the *Gleaner* to select for its exhortation that one read with “the *right* rhythm”: what makes these youngsters “delightful” is precisely the way “deir chatter” does not conform to what is “right” but seems to operate free of linguistic discipline: “Talkin’ anyt’ing dem please.” Likewise, “Fresh from de Lecture” offers us an image of proliferating discourse: an imagined lecture first prepared and then delivered by a buccra scientist, then reported by Cudjoe to an interlocutor in a

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<sup>201</sup> Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (University of California Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>202</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, January 8, 1912, p. 4.

verse version of Jamaican Creole, and finally made available for performance and perhaps mispronunciation in a range of contexts as wide as the circulation of print culture. This imagined sequence of recontextualizations resists the disciplinary efforts of Jekyll's editorial framing not by refusing its insistence on reiteration but by reimagining its consequences (allowing us to consider the creative opportunities enabled by the dialect text's iteration and recontextualization without going to the critical extreme of, say, Gates's anagram).

As much as the phonetic guidelines of Jekyll's preface pretend to general applicability, at one moment they become interestingly circumspect. "In one breath," Jekyll writes, "the black man will pronounce a word in his way, and in the next will articulate it as purely as the most refined Englishman" (*SJ*, 7). Jekyll offers this remark "in passing," but it is crucial. If we take this as an empirical statement and neutralize some of the valued terms here (purely, refined), this may in fact seem like a fair description of actual language use in performative contexts; "almost any Jamaican," wrote Frederic G. Cassidy in 1971, "can speak or at least understand more than one type of the local speech, moving to left or right along the spectrum [between 'true creole' and 'Standard English'] as occasion requires."<sup>203</sup> McKay did so in his daily life; Jekyll in his folkloric work certainly moved along this continuum as well. While Jekyll's disclaimer here might seem to stymie the metropolitan reader who wants to know the features of the Jamaican voice with comprehensive, positivist precision—what good is knowing the rules if native speakers are always breaking them?—this news may also function to reassure that reader by short-circuiting the logic of mimicry: even if the "refined Englishman," pronouncing a poem, slips out of the patois and back into his or her own voice for a moment, this "error" is in fact the very kind of thing that "the black man" might have done himself. But more fundamentally Jekyll's qualification constitutes a momentary nod to the fact of performative contingency, taking the betrayal of transmission as a general principle of utterance. On this account the linguistic variations produced by decontextualization and reiteration—by diffusion and discursification—would begin to sound not just inconsistent or "alternating," but also, in both Goffman's and McKay's word, fresh.

McKay did not write dialect poetry after 1912, but he did include dialect in his later prose works. His 1929 novel *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, for instance, is set in a Marseilles that is the image of cultural diffusion, of "multiculturalism" at its most accelerated: it's an international port one of the signs of whose modernity is the rich variety of folk traditions and vernacular forms that come into contact and conflict within it. It's also the city where McKay was living at the time, having become the kind of cosmopolitan polyglot modernist who Jekyll might not have recognized (but who in fact seems from the very beginning to have been present) in the "native boy" who wrote *Songs of Jamaica*. One of *Banjo's* central characters, the American writer Ray—in some ways a proxy for McKay—meets a group of Senegalese boys midway through the novel. Curious about them, Ray "was trying to get some of the Senegalese to tell stories like the Brer Rabbit kind or the African animal fables from the West Indies." But as soon they

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<sup>203</sup> Frederic G. Cassidy, "Tracing the Pidgin Element in Jamaican Creole (With Notes on the Nature of Pidgin Vocabularies)," in *Pidginization and Creolization of Language: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of the West Indies Mona, Jamaica, April 1968*, ed. Dell Hymes (Cambridge University Press, 1971), 204.

learn that “Ray was a writing black,” the boys become reticent; “they were not willing to talk,” not willing to divulge the details of this folk tradition. They “became a little suspicious of Ray, imagining, perhaps, that he would write something funny or caustic of their life that would make them appear ‘uncivilized.’”<sup>204</sup> A long way from “home,” these boys, refusing to play native informant, are wise to ethnographic power, to the ways in which the discursive objectification of cultural formations can not only serve as the verbal evidence of rich cultural particularity (of a given history of truth that has been, in James’s phrase, “verbally built out, stored up, and made available for everyone”) but can also facilitate brutal social distinctions—can in fact do the latter in the guise of doing the former, can smuggle in disagreement under the name of difference. They’re cognizant, in other words, of the politics of cultural reproduction that are in play when, say, Twain reads out loud to Howells from Harris’s versions of the Brother Rabbit stories (the very tradition of stories that Ray is asking the boys about). Yet soon the dialogue in *Banjo* turns to a collective and combative exchange of stories; cultural diffusion comes to seem, as it sometimes did for Fitzgerald, less like entropy than intensification.

Later in his life, McKay, living in Morocco, thought back on the publication of his earliest poems, and he describes a scene that is not so unlike when Ray asks the Senegalese boys to talk to him. “I remember when my first poems came out, the market women stopped me by the roadside and asked me to read to them,” he wrote. McKay does not describe the voice in which he read them or the choices he made in these acts of “aloud reading.” Did his performance, one wonders, ever include what Goffman terms “fresh talk”? Did he improvise, draw on memory? We can no longer pose questions about the significance of differences between the various vocal iterations of these poems (as by contrast we are able to do about the various print versions of Harjo’s brand that are extant in libraries). They went unrecorded, and McKay mentions nothing about whether he adopted any particular vocal style—a quavering tenor?—or any particular linguistic register for the readings. Instead, he simply describes his affective experience of the act: “Those were the happiest readings I ever gave—I dislike audiences.”<sup>205</sup>

McKay’s memory of reading his texts out loud to these market women, in contrast to the audiences that he would later learn to dislike, seems almost too picturesque to be true, a romanticized view of the folk life of the green hills. It’s to some extent corroborated, though, by the Kingston press: on October 7, 1911, a few months before the publication of *Songs of Jamaica* but after McKay’s poems had begun to appear in the local papers, a piece in the *Gleaner* commented on the public’s fascination with McKay and its desire to hear him speak: he is “looked upon as a marvel, and large audiences are drawn to hear him in the country.”<sup>206</sup> One aim of this study has been to

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<sup>204</sup> Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1957 [1929]), 114.

<sup>205</sup> Quoted in Winston James, *A Fierce Hatred of Injustice: Claude McKay’s Jamaica and his Poetry of Rebellion* (Verso, 2000), 150-51.

<sup>206</sup> W. A. S., “The Work of a Gifted Jamaican—Story of Mr. Claude McKay Whose Volume of Poems Will Shortly Be Published Here—The Governor Appreciates Talent of Writer—His Poems Will be a Notable Addition to Island’s Literature, Says Mr. Jekyll Who Predicts Popularity for the Volume—Remarkable Versatility Displayed by the Young Author,” *Daily Gleaner*, October 7, 1911, p. 6.

consider why, at the turn of the twentieth century, the textual representation of forms of talk in the fullness of their particularity should become so compelling a representational mode across the fields of literature and ethnography, a mode that draws large audiences, large readerships, eager to “hear.” My answer to this question has been that such representation gave expression to, even as it played a role in the development of, a newly dominant—though by no means monolithic—way of conceptualizing cultural identity. Another of this study’s aims, though, has been to draw out the consequences of those moments of discursive or aesthetic singularity (of linguistic “marvel,” perhaps) that problematize that conceptualization, that disrupt the signifying system of cultural particularism—itsself as much a “universe of speech and fact” as the formations it purports to describe. Most richly theorized in the Boasian moment, this conceptual universe persists, and will likely continue to persist, as a major determinant of how we understand our differences from and our bonds with each other. It persists despite scholarly talk about leaving the cultural turn behind; in fact that talk demands to be seen in part as a symptom of that persistence. And so when the processes of entextualization and discursification that are the shared practices of ethnography and literature produce moments of linguistic or aesthetic singularity that can’t easily be accommodated by the semiotics of the modern culture concept, these moments seem to deserve, precisely because they resist, re-inscription.