

‘The Problem of Amusement’: Trouble in the New Negro Narrative

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ABSTRACT

‘Minstrel Trouble’

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This dissertation examines black writers' appropriations of blackface minstrelsy as central to the construction of a New Negro image in the early twentieth century U.S. Examining the work of artists who were both fiction writers and pioneers of the black stage, I argue that blackface, along with other popular, late-nineteenth century performance traditions like the cakewalk and ragtime, plays a surprising and paradoxical role in the self-consciously “new” narratives that come to characterize black cultural production in the first decades of the twentieth century. Rather than rejecting minstrelsy as antithetical to the New Negro project of forging black modernity, the novelists and playwrights I consider in this study—Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson—adapted blackface and other popular performance traditions in order to experiment with narrative and dramatic form. In addition to rethinking the relationship between print and performance as modes of refashioning blackness, my project also charts an alternative genealogy of black cultural production that emphasizes the New Negro Movement as a cultural formation that precedes the Harlem Renaissance and anticipates its concerns.

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For my family, those living and departed

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Introduction

The Afterlives of Minstrelsy

An ornate cover design of gold letters graces the cover of *A New Negro for A New Century*. Booker T. Washington's stoic face offers a solitary headshot framed by two American flags acutely placed on either side of him. The cover signals a subtle yet definite message about the nationalism of the neatly bound volume. The introduction to the volume announces the following claims:

This book has been rightly named 'A NEW NEGRO FOR A NEW CENTURY.' The Negro of today is in every phase of life far advanced over the Negro of 30 years ago. In the following pages the progressive life of the Afro-American people has been written in the light of achievements that will be surprising to people who are ignorant of the enlarging life of this remarkable people.¹

Perhaps in accompaniment to the ambitious design of the cover, *A New Negro for a New Century* makes clear recourse to a prosperous and thriving portrait that differentiates itself historically from the era just before it. This difference is marked through time ("far advanced over the Negro of 30 years ago) and language ("the progressive life", "the enlarging life"). Published in 1900 and edited by Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood, the collection of essays lauded the accomplishments of soldiers, women, teachers and intellectuals by positing a history that attests to the "achievements" of black men and women in a heroic light:

¹ Booker T. Washington, Fannie Barrier Williams, and N.B. Wood eds. *A New Negro for a New Century: An Accurate and Up-to-date Record of the Upward Struggles of the New Race* (1900).

In the succeeding pages, both History and Reminiscence of the Afro-American have been collected in attractive form. The stories given have been gathered from the lips of the heroes themselves. Stories which once woven into the text-books of the Nation, will obtain for the brave contemporaries of our own times places in history along with those of our heroic forefathers. To these reminiscences gathered fresh from the field, the colored pupil and historian of the new Century must turn for their narrative.

Dedicated to both “history and reminiscence,” the editors of *A New Negro for a New Century* strive to offer an alternative for readers who might witness a new “narrative” within its pages. *A New Negro for a New Century* is not unique in its deliberate rhetoric for modeling newness to the men and women of the twentieth century. I read the mission of these early introductory remarks not to exemplify exception but to present the language that, as scholars have shown, marks some common strategies of turn of the century black men and women to self-consciously inaugurate newness. I alert us here however, to the ways in which modeling such newness becomes only legible through a series of gestures that flicker between presence and absence, success and failure, hypervisibility and erasure. The “New Negro” of the introduction counters the little remarked upon “Negro of 30 years ago,” an image that, despite its temporal specificity, conjures an abject past far murkier than the authors seek to describe. For turn of the century intellectuals and contemporary scholars alike, the specter of the “old Negro” is an inconvenient element of history,² spurred by those “ignorant” to the truer stories of heroism and uplift. Given the

² Perhaps what marks the difficulty, or trouble with the figure of the “old Negro” is precisely are inability to define him and the constantly shifting necessity for reading such figures as not fixed, but as dynamic as the social and political needs of those using the designation as they see fit. This highlights both a difficulty and productive opportunity for this project in reading the dynamism between various iterations of these purportedly “old” and “new” figures.

popularity of literary and stage “narratives” that purported to be accurate histories of black life before and after the war, the “negro of 30 years ago” symbolized a problem not so much in the (in)accuracy of its representation, but in the lingering stigma that the old Negro of the plantation bore for the shaping of his new, exceptional counterpart. The progressive history “collected in attractive form” thus does little to attend to the more cogent rifts between how black folk imagined newness against insurmountable odds. Simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed, the “old Negro” is defined by his hazy relationship to historical specificity and a lurking omnipresence, one which ever threatens to undo the progress and the attractiveness of the narrative.

Nowhere were the anxieties between “old Negro” and “New Negro” played out more vigorously than in the narratives of black life that circulated between the stage and postbellum fiction. Leveraging a thriving demand for black popular culture, black artists pioneered routes of creative exchange and professional mobility between literary and theatrical forms. Unlike the traditional “narratives” of New Negro fashioning posited by intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington and others, a small group of writer-playwrights sought to conceptualize the space between the old and the New Negro as one that could be imagined by positing an alternative trajectory for history and black life. To be clear, discussions of the emergent “New Negro” could not successfully articulate their difference or their desire without the counterbalanced weight of the “old Negro.” But my interest is less here in the necessity of the putative boundaries between old and new as a method of buttressing white supremacist rule. Rather, I want to focus on the space of the new as a category that emerges only when we consider that that newness is a strategy for disrupting the not-so-distant expanse between the quotidian and performative spaces of freedom and slavery. Put differently, what would it mean if we considered the New Negro

emerging not from a supposed rupture between plantation and freedom, but from the paradox of their proximity?

Armed with differing strategies for embracing and troubling our understanding of the modern, I contend that black cultural producers enacted multiple strategies of address and reform, while simultaneously marking their participation and negotiation with popular forms and audiences. As activists, reformers, writers, composers, playwrights, and performers themselves, the black cultural producers I examine within this project refused to be content with a singular narrative of newness and instead considered the conjuncture between literature and performance as a vehicle for exploring and critiquing the conceptual, creative, and political force of black cultural forms. Understanding performance and literature to be both resources and models for enacting new forms of social life for black communities, these writers provide strategies of humor, redress, and refusal alongside revisionary practices of writing, performing, and reading blackness.

Reading Minstrelsy's Afterlife

Minstrelsy has an afterlife. While scholars have struggled to date blackface minstrelsy's decline in the mid to late nineteenth century, it is perhaps more appropriate to suggest that the effects of minstrelsy in popular and literary culture enjoy a legacy that is still "rich in black fun." By afterlife, I am building on Saidiya Hartman's challenge to black theorists to consider the prevailing effects of slavery within a post-emancipation society.³ I extend Hartman's concern for the continuities of performance that revisit the basic assumptions that undergird our

³ See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 116-118.

understanding of plantation and minstrel performances as “dead”, “old” or unproductive for considerations of the modern narrative. Indeed, the to attend to the afterlife of minstrelsy means to ask questions about when and how blackface reconstitutes our notions of freedom, performance, and modernity when performed and recalibrated by black artists. It does not, as some scholars have posited, presume a negation of agency in black performance, nor do I mean to suggest an overtly “tragic” reading of black social life.⁴ If anything, the afterlife of minstrelsy suggests that we read beyond the tropes of celebration and defeat in order to understand the overlapping contexts of black innovation.

In referring to minstrelsy’s afterlife it is not my aim here however to point to all of the ways in which minstrelsy has continued to shape the character of transatlantic performance. Numerous studies have already taken up such a task. I am interested however in examining the value of minstrelsy’s afterlife for a particular understanding of novelty for black writers and performers of the early twentieth century. These skilled artists mark the complex transactions of inter- and most importantly intra-racial negotiations of the blackface stage across their modern narratives, and as such, suggest that there is an afterlife to minstrelsy that critically adapts artifice to interrogate rather than assume essentialized notions of authenticity.

Significant scholarship on minstrelsy uncritically rehearses the common tropes of authenticity and essentialism. In Robert Toll’s now foundational text on minstrelsy entitled *Blacking Up*, black performer’s entrance onto the popular stage heralds opportunity for authentic folk performances. More recently, David Krasner considers the “authentic possibilities” of black

⁴ See Jared Sexton, “Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism.” *InTensions* Issue 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 23.

performer's entry into show business. Eric Lott's approach to minstrelsy attempts a more nuanced approach to "the seeming counterfeit" but his analysis does not focus on the pivotal period when black cultural producers formed and reconstituted their own relationship to modernity through black strategies of the popular stage.

Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* poses one exception to the earlier scholarship on minstrelsy and usefully attempts to situate the minstrel mask as a trope for "sounding out" black's relationship to modernism and the Harlem Renaissance. For Baker, Booker T. Washington exemplifies the quintessential figure who heralds an "Afro American modernism." In Baker's words,

The form, array, mask that I have in mind is the minstrel mask. That mask is a space of habitation not only for repressed spirits of sexuality, ludic play, id satisfaction, castration anxiety, and a mirror stage of development, but also for that deep-seated denial of the indisputable humanity of inhabitants of and descendants from the continent of Africa. And it is, first and foremost, the mastery of the minstrel mask by blacks that constitutes a primary move in Afro-American discursive modernism.⁵

Baker's work marks a seminal contribution to understanding the circulating forms of blackface minstrelsy within a tradition of black literature and performance; but still, his frameworks ("the formation of mastery" and the "deformation of mastery") continue to align black cultural production along the polarizing lines of Booker's status as a public national figure versus the strategies of the individual artist.⁶ Along these lines artists such as Paul Laurence Dunbar can

⁵ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press 1987), 17.

⁶ Baker, 37.

only be read as figures who suffer “a tragic hemming in of artistic aspiration” that could not possibly hold “the general progress of the Afro-American populace” as one of his goals.⁷ By elevating one kind of modern work over the other, Baker effectively performs his own kind of policing of the modern black image in literature. This rubric makes it difficult to read the alternative strategies of turn of the century black writers and performers who similarly worked within constricting commercial climates. “The Problem of Amusement” thus alleges that there are other ways of critically understanding the modes in which black writers and performers “played the game” to the extent that such language posits false values on how we interpret success, failure, humor, skill, and artifice within the production of New Negro identity.

Trouble

In many ways, this project invokes trouble as a form of productive reading and resistance to a popular discourse around blackface minstrelsy. This project begins its analysis of the New Negro narrative precisely at the moment when blacks begin to enter show business in large numbers, which coincides with the increased circulation of the term “New Negro” at the turn of the twentieth century. My interest and thus, the impetus for this project raises questions around how turn of the century thinkers and artists theorized and troubled the problem of representation that lurked behind definitions of the New Negro in literature and performance. I use the term “narrative” loosely across this dissertation, in part to allow for the flexibility of reading the shared strategies between fiction and performance that actively attempt to reconstruct the way in which

⁷ Baker, 39. We should note that Houston Baker’s disdain for Paul Laurence Dunbar does not foreclose his positive assessments of early black performers such as Billy Kersands and Bert Williams.

stories of black life are told and imagined. I use the phrase “New Negro narrative” to signify two things. On the one hand, the phrase indexes the more common constructions of the New Negro across historical pamphlets, essays, literature, and performance. These narratives self-consciously construct the “New Negro” as a figure of deliberate design, deployed in response to Jim Crow that attempts to describe a teleological tale of progress and success. Most often the New Negro narrative reflects similar desires such as the one purported through Washington’s *A New Negro for a New Century*, and the politics of respectability and competing strategies of racial uplift often converged to produce well-crafted stories that mobilized reward, success, and political prowess. To the extent that such narratives performed a certain function within black communities, they also projected and policed what kinds of stories and strategies were best suited for the image of “the New Negro.” Thus, rejecting allegations of black inferiority, New Negro narratives eschewed blackface, humor, and other “dubious” popular forms related to the minstrel stage.

It is however, towards a second characterization of the New Negro narrative to which I am most drawn. Each of the writers-playwrights I study here sought to revise the New Negro narrative in terms that disrupted the ease through which blackness was consumed, policed, and appropriated by black and white folks alike. The New Negro narratives of Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson problematized the rigid distinctions of form, genre, and temporality by reconstituting newness through literature with gestures and forms animated by the blackface stage. In ways different and alike, these writers make evident what we might describe as the afterlife of minstrelsy, propelled by the desire to imagine under what terms could blackface produce new forms of social life within the novel.

Certainly, such questions and desires generate a certain kind of trouble, one that runs the risk of uncritically replicating the violence enacted upon black life through representations in popular and stage culture. Still, turn of the century writers understood the novel as a site in which the anxieties of blackface performance could provide critical interrogation. Although not a playwright, novelist Charles Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* works along a similar trajectory as the writers of this dissertation, and carefully attends to the ways that black life found itself imperiled by "modern" performances of "the good old Negro." This dilemma becomes most apparent in the cakewalk chapter of novel, which opens with the following sense of foreboding: "Old Mr. Delamere's servant, Sandy Campbell, was in deep trouble." In Chesnutt's *Marrow of Tradition* the cakewalk the scene that anticipates the greater "theft" and trouble of the plot. Early in the chapter we read,

In order to give the visitors, ere they left Wellington, a pleasing impression of Southern customs, and particularly of the joyous, happy go lucky disposition of the Southern darky and his entire contentment with existing conditions, it was decided by the hotel management to treat them, on the night of their visit, to a little diversion, in the shape of a genuine negro cakewalk.

Chesnutt's impulse to include a cakewalk within a historical novel set just before the turn of the century bears pause here. What does such a scene engender for Chesnutt, the characters, and the plot? We might consider the "trouble" Chesnutt produces within his novel here to be an elaborate staging of precisely the difficult terms under which the New Negro asserts his definition. This is to say that I am interested in more than simply the "theft" that constitutes the cakewalk scene of Chesnutt's novel. Significantly, the chapter functions as a "little diversion"

which has deep consequences for the characters and structure of the novel. Such little diversions characterize what Saidiya Hartman has described as the “stage of sufferance” and re-enact the tensions at play beneath the conditions under which modern amusement was constructed. Chesnutt, however, tempers the indulgence of such “pleasing” performances by wryly inverting the audience’s expectations in the upcoming scenes. Contrary to a “genuine negro cakewalk” the visitors become spectators to Delamere’s “overdone” enactment of the “comic Negro”

The cakewalk was a great success. The most brilliant performer was a late arrival, who made his appearance just as the performance was about to commence. The newcomer was dressed strikingly, the conspicuous features of his attire being a long blue coat with brass buttons and a pair of plaid trousers. He was older too, than the other participants, which made his agility the more remarkable. His partner was a new chambermaid, who had just come to town, and whom the head waiter introduced to the newcomer upon his arrival. The cake was awarded to this couple by a unanimous vote. The man presented it to his partner with a grandiloquent flourish, and returned thanks in a speech, which sent the Northern visitors into spasms of delight at the quaintness of the darky dialect and the darky wit. To cap the climax, the winner danced a buck and wing with a skill and agility that brought a shower of complimentary silver, which he gather up and passed to the head waiter.

Chesnutt’s representation of the cakewalk here performs a specific function. As Eric Sundquist has argued, it “constitutes a charade of several dimensions” and centralizes the major problems

of the novel.⁸ But Chesnutt's cakewalk must also be examined beyond its re-staging of "theft" here. By staging the cakewalk as a central site of interrogation within the novel, Chesnutt draws the modern stage and the old plantation into close proximity and implicates the serious consequences it bears for the status of literature and the modern novel. Chesnutt's novel contemplates modernity precisely by reading the fissures between old plantation logic and modern rituals of performance.

Trouble becomes an operative word across this dissertation as well. I highlight the productive reading strategies that emerge when characters and plots generate or embody various kinds of trouble for their audiences. I consider novels and plots that seemingly fail to comply with normative New Negro standards of representation and storytelling in an effort to critically evaluate the use of the often-unapparent strategies of resistance and refusal at work in these narratives. Trouble registers a high visibility as well as invisibility for the artists I study here. I have chosen canonical artists who negotiate their high visibility in unexpected ways to re-evaluate the value ascribed to certain kinds of stories as well as the forms of policing that those strategies sought to address. While it is certainly not my aim to romanticize trouble here by any means, it becomes increasingly important to consider why and how Hurston, Dunbar, and Johnson generate trouble in meaningful ways for their audiences.

"Minstrel trouble" is also Tavia Nyong'o's phrase for attending to the instability of the minstrel icon across antebellum popular culture. In Nyong'o's estimation minstrel trouble launches a powerful picture that moves beyond overly simplistic and binary assessments of

⁸ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Harvard University Press 1993), 273.

minstrelsy within black culture. “Rather than hastening to add minstrelsy to the old weird America” writes Nyong’o, “we should investigate the performance of ‘negro eccentricities’ figured into the building of an antislavery wall.” Although Nyong’o’s interest is in early minstrelsy, his remarks might be usefully extended for defining the kinds of *trouble* that this project is invested in.

Within what Nyong’o calls the “funhouse mirror of liberty” the stakes of analyzing claims to blackness made on the popular stage extend even to our discussions of the modern. He writes, “In our contemporary moment, to speak of a performance as minstrelized is to refer to a felt residue of the subservient, ingratiating, and degrading still clinging to present-day performance, a lingering half-life emanating from minstrelsy’s radioactive core.” Like W.H. Lhamon’s blackface lore cycle,⁹ Nyong’o makes possible an analysis of minstrelsy and modern performance that eschews replicating rehearsed questions of minstrelsy in terms of binary of artifice and essentialism. As others such as Louis Chude-Sokei have argued, these distinctions obscure black writers and performers critical responses to the stage, and ignore the complex recalibrations of history, value, and form that emerge from those gestures and strategies.¹⁰

In his groundbreaking work on black minstrelsy and the diaspora, Louis Chude-Sokei writes, “the complex modes of memory and forgetting at work in American and African American literary, cultural and performance histories...reveals not only a rich and problematic set of perspectives on what is known about modernism” but also “how the mechanism [of]

⁹ W.T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Harvard University Press: 1998).

¹⁰ Louis Chude-Sokei *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2006).

forgetting has in fact been constitutive of how that period has been canonized.”¹¹ Sokei’s remarks here help to set the stage upon which much of this project is built, but moreover, it directs our attention to the layers of historical and cultural analysis that minstrelsy demands. As both a continuation of and a departure from Chude-Sokei’s work this project extends the question: How might we understand these genealogies of (black) minstrel performance as they engage the competing political and aesthetic values of a “modern” black cultural production? How do we understand these highly contested constructions of race as they dramatize and announce the onset of a modern era?

In order to avoid replicating the overwrought critical analyses that have for some time been a cornerstone of discussion in black performance studies, I use Daphne Brooks’s theoretical framework of afro-alienation acts to analyze the “trouble” produced by black artists. This framework seeks to highlight not white responses of confusion or perplexity, but to rigorously examine how black producers de-stabilized racial, gendered, and class values in order to re-imagine their relationship to modernity. These strategies of de-stabilization constitute my analysis of black novelty, and suggest that black writers understood their relationship to the novel as one that was decidedly also produced through the shared gestures of the stage that refused the limitations of an overwhelmingly racist, commercialized culture.

Showing how strategies of late nineteenth century black theatrical performance were co-opted as literary innovations, I reveal the formal experiments of black writers across genres—using blackface, ragtime, and the cakewalk—as popular performance traditions that are central to the development of an emergent black literary aesthetic that develops in concert with the

¹¹ Sokei, 3.

proliferation of these popular forms across literature, performance, and visual media. Rather than read these scenes as antithetical to the novel, I offer “black novelty” as an alternative framework for interpreting these works as key interrogations of race and modernity in order to place these forms and strategies in conversation with each other and the performances they cite.

The Problem of Amusement

Borrowing the title of an 1897 speech by W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Problem of Amusement” extends nineteenth century conversations around humor, black cultural forms and self-fashioning in order to re-imagine the subversive potential of what were deemed “improper” forms of leisure and cultural expression. Speaking to a congregation of black leaders, preachers and intellectuals, W.E.B. Du Bois considered in depth what he termed “the problem of amusement.” For Du Bois, the problem of amusement was inextricable from questions of modern black identity and sociopolitical status in the black community. It defined a series of tensions within black secular and non-secular life that failed to address the necessity of recreation, indulgence and pleasure as crucial aspects of black life. Giving voice to what has “hitherto received scant notice,” Du Bois’ remarks place black amusement within the context of a growing modern sensibility that sought balance between the interstices of racial uplift projects.

Building on Du Bois’s use of the term, this dissertation explores the problem of amusement through a series of responses by black cultural producers whose work signals the tension within New Negro narratives. Thus, while the problem of amusement delineates a mode of attending to intra-racial representation, it also becomes a way of understanding the legacies of black life bound to historical processes of commodification, performance and subjection. On the one hand it seems crucial to tend to the ways Du Bois’s term describes “a phase of development”

in black life. Indeed, the problem of amusement for Du Bois defines a distinct period in turn of the century America. But it seems more important to also consider the ways in which Du Bois's term indexes a set of processes and responses that are layered within his use of the phrase as a description for black modern life. In this way, I am delineating the problem of amusement more along the lines of what David Scott has generatively termed "problem-spaces." Scott describes "problem spaces" as a conception of temporality that demarcates discursive contexts. For Scott, the problem space is an enabling query for knowledge production. He describes the problem space as

...more than a cognitively intelligible arrangement of concepts, ideas, images, meanings, and so on—though it is certainly this. It is a context of argument and, therefore, one of intervention. A problem-space, in other words, is an ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs. That is to say, what defines this discursive context are not only the particular problems that get posed as problems as such (the problem of "race," say), but the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having. Notice, then, that a problem-space is very much a context of dispute, a context of rival views, a context, if you like, of knowledge and power.¹²

In this way, attending to what Du Bois calls the "problem of amusement" generates a series of interlocking queries that focus our attention on what ideological and social evaluations become evident within such disputes of value and black representation. The black writers and performers

¹² David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* (Duke University Press, 2004), 4.

of this study enrich Du Bois's original discourse and perform their own responses to a larger critical apprehension with black performative tactics.

Thus, it might be argued that Du Bois' problem of amusement indexed far more about the intersections of black life, iterations of black pleasure, and the values and goals of political and social uplift than he could have ever realized in 1897. Indeed, the problem of amusement seems inextricably bound to Du Bois' more popular delineation of the problem of the twentieth century and perhaps even further so of the question of laboring black bodies and minstrelsy. If the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line, as Du Bois famously argued in 1900, then the artists whose work I tend to in this project consider the ways in which iterations of black pleasure, its presence *and* absence, negotiate the tensions of being black in the modern world with such stark lines drawn around performing specific models of blackness.

Complimented by and complicated through the work of James Weldon Johnson, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, and various performers within the Williams and Walker company, Du Bois' problem of amusement becomes a way to engage the work of artists who deploy, critique, and revise the relationship between blackness and humor. Through these artist's work, we come to explore iterations of black amusement as a crucial way for thinking about the various and often incongruous values at work in the shaping of turn of the century models of race and black cultural production.

One crucial task of the project includes defining precisely what constitutes black pleasure, amusement and humor. Even as Du Bois attempts to describe the problem of amusement, it remains unclear precisely what parameters may help us in determining any strict definition. In part, I am describing the ways that African Americans portray themselves as participating within

a culture of amusement that delineates the experience of self-making/definition and modernity in the early twentieth century. For some that is the experience of modernity or becoming modern—a mode of careful and deliberate self fashioning. But black amusement also signals a need to tend to the contesting ideas around how black life should be represented. These questions/concerns overlap with Gates's "curious heritage of the New Negro" and the long history of Reconstruction that we might consider extending into (and beyond) the Harlem Renaissance. Moreover, when Du Bois characterizes a "problem of amusement" in 1897, he unwittingly describes the problem of representation at the forefront of early twentieth century racial politics.

At the very most Du Bois articulates that “[p]roper amusement must always be a matter of careful reasoning and ceaseless investigation, of nice adjustment between repression and excess.” In part, this evasion archives the elusive nature of black amusement as it expresses conflicting class values and racial feeling. In another way, it exerts a kind of useful pressure on how I will use the above mentioned artists to theorize trouble as a way of understanding black pleasure and amusement as a tentative but fruitful site for imagining black modernity and affect.

Each chapter explores the subversive characters and plots that give rise to and confound New Negro narratives. The “happy darky” and the “tragic mulatta,” for example, become key caricatures that writers such as Paul Laurence Dunbar and Zora Neale Hurston seek to revise. I argue that these caricatures and their pervasive legacy within American modernity become the currency under which experiences of urbanization, technological advancement and spectacle are consumed. Within these overlapping contexts, the strategic literary tropes and techniques of black writers raise increasingly profound critiques on the language of “newness” within the modern era. In my first chapter, “Troublin’ Folk: Re-assessing Hurston’s *Color Struck*,” I demonstrate that Hurston uses the cakewalk and other black popular “struts” in essays and plays

to re-imagine how gendered black bodies move through time and space. I read Hurston's "choreography" of dancing black female characters in essays such as "How it Feels to Be Colored Me" and plays such as *Color Struck* in order to foreground the varying degrees of physical, temporal, and aesthetic mobility that undergird Hurston's black modernism. Pointing to Hurston's opaque stage directions of the cakewalk in *Color Struck*, I argue that Hurston uses black female corporeality to challenge the legibility of the cakewalk and the literacy of modern readers, thus offering a kind of counter-narrative to the histories of racial mimicry and spectacle typically associated with the cakewalk's legendary evolution from the plantation through silent film.

My second and third chapters expand in greater detail the broad and overlapping archives of black writers who were experimenting with various modes of re-invention even as they worked doubly as pioneers of the black stage. For example, in "Low Lives: Reading the Blackface Sign," I read Dunbar's pivotal work with black musical comedy as it informs his fiction. The first turn of the century novel to depict the city as a prominent site for imagining black modernity, Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* (1902) uses a blackface aesthetic to disrupt the frames of power and authority forcefully organizing black urban life. While Dunbar offers no simple or romantic claims to black agency, I argue that we might locate a strategically subversive alternative in the vagrant figure of Sadness Williams, Dunbar's sly revision of common minstrel figures such as the "happy darky" and the Zip Coon. Sadness Williams constitutes a significant intervention in the discourse of minstrelsy in literature and performance and in this chapter I show that Sadness signifies a blackface melancholy that irrevocably connects Dunbar to the comic genius of Bert Williams. In my final chapter, I continue by charting the ways in which a genealogy of blackface performance was also mediated by technologies of sound and sight. In

“James Weldon Johnson and the Black Joke(r),” I read James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912) alongside and against his popular songwriting career in early vaudeville and ragtime. I examine Johnson’s ragtime narrator and his construction of “the joke”—a narrative device that thwarts our attempts to read racial history and meaning. Situating black laughter as it developed distinct meaning through the phonograph, I trace the production of race across sound to outline Johnson’s phonographic and ragged approach to writing. For Johnson, ragtime affords a stylistic revision of historical time and representation that willfully distorts realism as an objective category of racial knowledge.

The “Problem of Amusement” invites its readers to re-think the deliberate aesthetic relationships between literature and performance, even as we consider the radical possibilities for reading a complex tradition of black humor and pleasure that distorts and re-orientes hegemony and its claims to power. Reading these traditions and their capacity for “trouble” as a productive interrogation of modern forms and aesthetics, this dissertation highlights the tensions that animate nineteenth and twentieth century ideas of race.

Chapter One

Troublin' Folk: Re-Assessing Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck*

Describing the voyeuristic gaze of white Northerners who “liked to hear her sing and...dance” as a young girl in the South, Zora Neale Hurston’s 1928 essay, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” initiated a swift response from members of the black intelligentsia.¹³ At once seemingly candid, unsettling, and revealing in its depiction of a racial and personal politic, Hurston’s essay offered an unpleasant, if not complicit relationship to racialized caricature, spectacle, and the troubling marketplace of an American culture hungry for primitive and minstrel tropes of blackness. The shock value of Hurston’s essay did not go unnoticed by black intellectuals such as Alain Locke, who swiftly deemed the essay “a mistake.”¹⁴ In a letter to Hurston just days after the publication of “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” Locke explains his concern for the way in which the essay overstepped the boundaries of propriety and no doubt conjured the very images of antiquated minstrel performance that his New Negro anthology¹⁵ was meant to combat. Locke’s palpable concern for Hurston’s essay highlights his desire for a stricter New Negro image that effectively policed forms of black representation to white audiences. It also significantly highlights his fear that Hurston’s essay had committed an irreparable act of revelation that provided far too much access to black interior life to outsiders.

¹³ Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” *World Tomorrow* 11 (May 1928). Further citations will be from Hurston’s collection of essays edited by Alice Walker. See Walker, *I Love Myself When I am Laughing*, (New York: Feminist Press, 1979).

¹⁴ Alain L. Locke, letter dated 2 June 1928, box 164, folder 38, Alain Locke Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Library, Howard University.

¹⁵ See Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* 1925; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1968).

Taking Locke's remarks against Hurston as a critical point of departure, I'd like to sit with this notion of the "mistake" that Hurston commits as one that is a productive and deliberate site of transgression. I want to suggest that Hurston traffics not simply risk by deploying the figure of the singing and dancing black figure, but that such troubling images also function as a cipher for teasing out something far more intangible for black and white audiences and their understanding of modern subjectivity.

In the letter, what Locke deems as Hurston's professional misstep is later tempered with caution and concern. We read,

I realize that you had opened up too soon. I had that feeling because I had myself several times made the same mistake. The only hope is in the absolute blindness of the Caucasian mind. To the things that are really revolutionary in Negro thought and feeling they are blind.¹⁶

Here, Locke identifies what he perceives as the inability of white audiences to fully interpret the nuances of black thought and feeling. His statement, "[t]o things that are really revolutionary...they are blind" implores Hurston to consider the ramifications of publishing an essay that perhaps was too "revolutionary" or radical for its white audiences. While Locke does not elaborate on this point further, it seems significant to consider the nature of Hurston's trespass and the way in which it foregrounds and influences the strategies she would later employ across her drama and literature. I enact such an analysis not to recuperate Hurston as a "revolutionary" figure,¹⁷ but to read against the ways in which particular elements of her

¹⁶ Alain Locke letter to Zora Neale Hurston, 2 June 1928.

¹⁷ While I do posit that Hurston models a singular method for reading across time, genre, and space here it is not my aim to collapse all of her work into one category of "revolutionary" or "radical"; rather, Hurston's dramatic work suggests that its force relies less upon recuperating caricature than it does in

dramatic work have been misread and overlooked as simplistic, degraded, atavistic forms of black life. Indeed, the little remarked upon Locke-Hurston letter¹⁸ reveals that Hurston had already begun developing a theory on the “drama” of black life well in advance of her popular treatise “Characteristics of Negro Expression”. Hurston’s essay brazenly wields a performance of pleasure (articulated in the essay as her “own joyful tendencies”) in service of economic and social capital. In this chapter I contend that this is precisely the *trouble* that Hurston’s discourse of the folk readily activates. What marks Locke’s trepidation after reading Hurston’s essay seems to be the proximity of these “performances” to the discourse of minstrelsy and the plantation. Given such concerns, Hurston’s work poses a query: is it possible to imagine the folk as a resource for modern black pleasure through vernacular forms? Hurston’s essay and folk drama *Color Struck*, I argue, seem to lend not only an answer, but also lend a map and method for answering such difficult inquiries.

Although Hurston’s essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” is most often read as a defining performance manifesto, I argue that we see Hurston developing her central relationship to black performance as early as her folk drama, *Color Struck*, published in 1925, and “How it Feels to Be Me” published three years later in 1928. Both of these pieces precipitate the

complicating the potency and generative life of such forms and figures. If Hurston’s work is radical, it is so through its enactment of conserving black folk life in ways that refuse the ease of other teleological New Negro narratives. Put simply, I am less interested in rescuing Hurston from Locke’s palpable cringing and more interested in reading what that aversion seeks to repress.

¹⁸ In his study of the New Negro Movement, Eric King Watts examines Locke’s letter to Hurston. For Watts, Locke’s “mild tiff with Hurston opens up a number of key constraints on New Negro artistic sensibility and practice.” Where Watts examines how Locke sought to theorize the “keenly felt matters of taste” used to model the evolution of the trope of the New Negro from “old to new,” I am interested here in taking Hurston for my object of analysis. Locke’s *New Negro* may have posited the trope of the New Negro as “a maker of ‘new’ objects [and] as a subject productive of alternative modes of valuing,” but it is Hurston who staged the most dynamic and complex re-assessment of aesthetic value and subjectivity. See Eric King Watts. *Rhetoric Culture and Social Critique : Hearing the Hurt : Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement*. (Tuscaloosa, AL, USA: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 74-77.

publication of “Characteristics” in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology* by more than five years. In both of these early pieces, Hurston compels new readings of what she would later define as the “drama” of black life¹⁹ by turning explicitly to vernacular dance forms and the folk as a cultural resource for conceiving black modernity. Hurston’s commitment to drama precipitates her novel-work in many respects, and yet *Color Struck* along with her other folk dramas have received tellingly less critical attention than her later works.²⁰ I turn to Hurston as a key figure for considering the conjecture between dramatic literature and the reading strategies engendered therein in order to suggest that Hurston models a complex trajectory of *re-vision* and *mobility*.²¹ I examine Hurston’s relationship to black performance and her infamous folk-drama *Color Struck* to suggest that Hurston actively produces new ways of (un)reading²² the black female body across

¹⁹ Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression”, 24.

²⁰ As there are only a handful of scholars who have written on *Color Struck* and Hurston’s folk dramas, I list the exceptions to this observation in their entirety. See Sandra L. Richard’s “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African American Literature,” in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (New York: Routledge, 1995), Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), Jennifer A. Cayer, “Roll yo’ Hips, Don’t Roll yo’ Eyes: Angularity and Embodied Spectatorship in Zora Neale Hurston’s Play, *Cold Keener*” *Theatre Journal*, Volume 60, Number 1, March 2008, pp. 37-68., Soyica Diggs-Colbert, *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Nicole Fleetwood’s “Her Own Spook” in *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and David Krasner’s “Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Color Struck* and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance” in *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance*, (Palgrave, New York 2002).

²¹ I use revision and mobility here to anticipate my later framework for reading Hurston’s coded “color struts”. As I later show, my framework borrows from Jayna Browns discussions of mobility and the black female body and Jacqueline Stewart’s definition of “reconstructive spectatorship.” See Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (University of California Press, 2005) and Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

²² I draw upon Ann DuCille’s practice of “unreading” the “always-already-read” interpretations of a text. See *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 10. Daphne Brooks discussion of the black female body is also instructive in this instance where she writes, “black women’s bodies continue to bear the gross insult and burden of spectacular (representational) exploitation in transatlantic culture. Systematically overdetermined and mythically configured, the iconography of the black female body remains the central ur-text of alienation in transatlantic culture. . . .

embodied performance and literature. Hurston's editorial and performance strategies thwart and reconfigure the expectations of white *and* black readers and spectators while also positing alternative practices for transfiguring hypervisible blackness into a critical discourse of prowess and pleasure.

Hurston's career and criticism has consistently balanced a tightrope of high visibility and obscurity. As a result, assessments of Hurston's work have variously considered Hurston as a figure overlooked, and simultaneously made hypervisible by her renewed popularity within the canon.²³ Questions of publicity and privacy plague scholarship on Hurston and this tension marks a significant opening through which we might read Hurston's ambiguous relationship to black vernacular forms and a literary tradition. In this light, perhaps no other author takes up the "problem of amusement" across the body of their work so boldly and yet so precariously as Zora Neale Hurston. Accused of "pandering" and playing "the happy darky role" for white patrons, Hurston's oeuvre spectacularly performs the very tensions of white/black spectatorship and the various ways that black writers refused and negotiated the overt commercialization and negation of black social life. Put differently, I am interested in reading Hurston's drama for her attempts to preserve and protect "a living culture."²⁴ Hurston's efforts consistently made trouble for black

Yet there are ways to read for the viability of black women making use of their own materiality within narratives in which they are the subjects." Taking Brooks's attention to opacity as a strategy for unreading, I glean alternatives for reading what Brooks refers to as the viability of black female narratives. See Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 7.

²³ See Mary Helen Washington, "Zora Neale Hurston: A Woman Half in Shadow" in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (New York: Feminist Press, 1979). For more recent discussions of Hurston see Glenda Carpio and Werner Sollors, "The Newly Complicated Zora Neale Hurston" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2 January 2011.

²⁴ Both David Krasner and Barbara Johnson understand Hurston to have "deplored the appropriation, dilution, and commodification of black culture." It is important to consider Hurston's resistance to urban, mass culture (as other such as Hazel Carby have instructed), but Hurston mediates her implication and investment in both worlds more astutely than we give her credit for. For discussions of Hurston and her resistance to elite urban Northern culture see Hazel Carby, "The Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and

and white audiences alike, striving consistently to trouble the boundaries of how that living culture could be represented and utilized. It is the quality of this trouble that I turn to here in order to make sense of her method and sensibility.

For Hurston, the problem of amusement took on a different perspective than it did for Du Bois some thirty years prior. In the midst of a black cultural renaissance, Hurston's subjects trouble the values of "proper" amusements in the modern twentieth century and demand that we interrogate the limitations embedded within what both Nicole Fleetwood and Anthea Kraut have described as competing regimes of value. The interplay across Hurston's folk drama often further compounds such putative boundaries by highlighting precisely the forms that remained unsettling for arbiters of the New Negro image. Unlike Du Bois's 1897 essay, Hurston is not so much concerned with "proper amusements" that function along strict codes of social and religious propriety. Instead, we might discern how Hurston proves herself committed to another "noble" cause: an active re-working of where and how pleasure might be gleaned to re-assert a diverse body of black practices. That Hurston highlights vernacular and folk forms to prominently do this suggests her interest in portraying dynamic portraits of folk life as symbols of black modernity.²⁵ In this way, Hurston suggests that pleasure and the folk require a complex series of negotiations and reading practices, some shared and some exclusively positioned for discerning audiences. For Hurston, black pleasure and its representations through the folk demands its own

the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston" in *New Essays on Their Eyes Were Watching God*, ed. Michael Awkward (Cambridge, Cambridge U Press, 1990) David Krasner, "Migration, Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance", and Barbara Johnson "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" in *A World of Difference* (John Hopkins U Press, 1987), 157.

²⁵ Hazel Carby explains that Hurston's artistic representation of the folk is "not only a discursive displacement of the historical and cultural transformation." For Carby Hurston's investment in the folk reclaims overdetermined versions of urban mass culture. See Carby, "The Politics of Fiction", 75-77

complicated archive, one which continuously cites the problematic and the possibility at work within the politics of black modern literary production and performance. As Anthea Kraut has noted, such tension remained evident throughout Hurston's folk dramas.²⁶ Remarking on Hurston's drama *The Great Day*, one reviewer would remark that it was "of no great benefit to the Negro".²⁷ Similarly, Robert Hemenway reminds us that Hurston rarely mentions the New Negro movement in her autobiography, most likely in fact because "many of the Harlem literati mistook her interest in performance as a lack of serious intellectual commitment."²⁸ Unconventional and ever the iconoclast, Hurston's drama relishes in such difficult terrain.

Such irresolution however has often been misread and harshly judged according to standards of serious literary innovation. Hurston's turn to folk forms lent itself to no easy interpretation, and swift criticism followed her use of the folk from her early drama to her novels. For example, Richard Wright notoriously critiqued Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for swinging too precariously near minstrel tropes. Under different circumstances, Wright replicates Locke's concern for Hurston's misstep into minstrelsy. Writing in the *New Masses* in October of 1937, Wright would assert that, "Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction."²⁹ Although Wright's critique of Hurston has been heavily remarked upon in criticism, I turn to it here not to rehearse Wright's embittered comments, but rather to begin to think through the ways that Hurston's literary method transposes the commercialization of black vernacular forms into complex renditions of modern black folk life. Where Wright complains of Hurston's "highly charged language" and "facile

²⁶ Kraut, *Choreographing the Folk*, 6.

²⁷ As quoted in Kraut, 6.

²⁸ Hemenway, x.

²⁹ Richard Wright, *New Masses*, 5 October 1937, 22.

sensuality”, such condemnation highlights the value placed on methods of literary representation.³⁰ In what has been read as the most damning and popularized assessment of Hurston’s novel, Wright continues,

Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the "white folks" laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears.³¹

Interestingly, Wright takes issue with Hurston for the way in which her novel allegedly reproduces stage traditions within literature. It posits black representation through the familiar poles of minstrel melodrama, and in so doing, identifies a lack within the work of Hurston. We need not however reproduce such limitations on Hurston’s work ourselves. It is possible to read Hurston’s creative movement within and against such poles as a mobility that originates through the interchange of “authentic” forms and their (re)appropriation.

Making New Negroes

Before turning to Hurston, it is important to consider the historical and aesthetic moment into which *Color Struck* is produced. Hurston’s sly maneuvering of the cakewalk in *Color Struck* challenges how we assess the role of black vernacular forms and pleasure within New Negro narratives. Indeed it continues to call attention to the rubric for which texts can be gathered

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

under such umbrella. Like the other writer-playwrights I analyze in this dissertation, Hurston constantly pushes against the limits of this category.

Concerned as it was with re-presenting the race, New Negro narratives utilized teleological narratives of progress and success as evidence that the stage Negro was not only a false representation, but indicative of an “old,” “inauthentic” and “outdated” mode of thinking.³² By 1925, the year that Hurston first submits *Color Struck* to an *Opportunity* contest, the vogue of the “New Negro” was already in full swing. As early as March that year, Alain Locke’s “Harlem” essay in *Survey Graphic* re-established the currency of a New Negro lexicon that sought to give name and purpose to the “metamorphosis” he dubbed as currently seizing hold of black life.³³ An expansion of that essay, Locke’s now canonical *New Negro* anthology would codify the phrase into a popular model of black “reconstructive” thought that in many ways would provide a vocabulary for understanding the rubric of modern black sensibility, creativity, and bourgeois values.

Locke’s *New Negro: An Interpretation* collectively showcased a willful re-presentation of black life creatively imagined across fiction, poetry, drama and prose essays. Each section showcased a natural progression of black arts as evidence of a prolific and exciting “new spirit.”³⁴ Locke’s project effectively situated itself alongside a growing number of works tailored for various strands of racial uplift; works that sought to reposition the sociopolitical landscape of blackness in the twentieth century. As such, Locke’s project function within this larger scope of racial uplift and

³² For more on the evolution of the New Negro and its vocabulary of progress see Henry Louis Gates, “The Trope of the New Negro” *Representations* No 24 Special Issue: America Reconstructed (Autumn 1988).

³³ Alain Locke, “Harlem,” *Survey Graphic* VI (March 1925)

³⁴ Locke, 2.

New Negro ideology, one which we must consider as gaining broader currency once Locke's anthology is published.

Locke's introductory essay to the anthology entitled, "The New Negro" remains one of the most important contributions to the concept of a creative Negro renaissance. The essay heralds the very transformation it describes and frames a "new dynamic phase" of black life by consistently referencing a vocabulary of newness, buoyancy, and urbanity.³⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, Locke's essay utilizes this language of newness and vibrant feeling to lay claim to the "new psychology" "suddenly" seizing hold of the black masses.

It is crucial to note however that while Locke's *New Negro* depended upon conceptually re-imagining blackness as a newly defined and unified spirit endeared to progress and self-determination, that language of newness was one that necessitated stark distinction from an "old" Negro characterized by "Mammy" figures, dialect, and caricature from the minstrel stage. Locke's language of vitality and willed revision continuously stages the key tropes of a black reconstruction heavily laden with antinomies. For Locke, "a new spirit" had been conjured, one stirred to life by the burial of the old. This desire to break from distorted, sentimentalized figures scripts Locke's project.

Significantly, Hurston's role within the "New Negro" era is an interesting one. Hurston and Locke shared wealthy benefactors and Hurston studied for a time under Locke's tutelage. At the time of Locke's publication of the *New Negro* anthology, Hurston completes *Color Struck* and submits her short story *Spunk* for inclusion in the anthology. It would be interesting to consider

³⁵ *ibid*

why Hurston submits the piece to *New Negro* and not her newly completed drama. While Hurston submits the play to *Opportunity* to successfully win second place for a fiction award, it is in *Fire!!* that ultimately *Color Struck* finds a worthy home. Hurston's inclusion in *Fire!!* is suggestive given the subversive aims of the magazine and its desire to overthrow the expectations of its audiences. I turn here to *Fire!!* in order to consider *Color Struck's* refusal to the traditional "regimes of value" orienting black and white audiences.

Characterizing her time in Harlem, Hurston grew increasingly close to a group of artists who dubbed themselves, "The Niggerati." Meant as a subversive swipe at the propriety and class tensions amidst the aesthetic arbiters of the period, the Niggerati gathered over the summer of 1926 to develop and ultimately prepare what would become *Fire!!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists*. Along with Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Aaron Douglass, Gwendolyn Bennet, Richard Nugent and Countee Cullen, Hurston would publish *Color Struck* in *Fire!!!* with the intention of supporting the happily defiant theme of the journal. As Langston Hughes describes, the journal was meant to "burn up a lot of the old dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past...into a realization of the existence of the young Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing." From its inception, *Fire!!!* was meant to offend and shock, subverting the stiff values of an "old[er]" generation. It is the greater work of this chapter to consider Hurston's *Color Struck* through these apparent frames of offense and subversion, so as to re-assess Hurston's tools of folk revision.

The Pleasure Principle

Hurston takes up questions of black representation, pleasure and performance as early as the 1920's when she first moves to New York. Her earliest stories and dramas attempt to theorize question around blackness staged for various audiences. Consequently Hurston's early work embraces both what might be called the racial protest spirit of the New Negro, as well as a distinct attempt to revise the tropes, methods, and values that comprised the New Negro vision.

Two of Hurston's earliest works for example make such questions apparent. In *Meet the Mama*, Hurston's first musical folk play, Hurston centralizes black comic skits and jokes, contributing to a "gleeful" representation of "vivacity and fun". While I do not examine *Meet the Mamma* or some of Hurston's later folk plays in this chapter (consider for example Hurston's *Great Day* or *Fast and Furious*) they are significant for the ways in which Hurston consistently foregrounds representations her performance of the folk within a comic context, even in some of her more somber folk pieces, Hurston carefully limns blackness and amusement as available lenses for interpreting modernity. Her short story, "Drenched in Light" similarly invites questions around what it means to deploy "joyful" versions of blackness for different white and black audiences.

Hurston's work thus demands that we consider the possibility of blackness performed for ourselves: as necessary parts of our autonomous development as modern subjects. Consequently, we should read Hurston as consciously working through these questions in order to navigate the issues of race, class, and gender. In an essay titled, "Black Pleasure, Black Joy" Gina Dent attends to the difficult categories that pleasure and joy interrogate for writers and scholars. For Dent, black pleasure and black joy are elusive phrases within the context of black popular culture, but

they present an opportunity to think through collective experience and the production of knowledge. Citing Cornel West's distinction between pleasure and joy, Dent writes,

Joy, as West says, is a collective experience, or at least provides the possibility of one. For me, this definition revises the discussion of women's pleasure inherited from feminism and psychoanalysis and places it within a black progressive context. Like pleasure, joy still speaks, though not exclusively, to that locus of sensation and activity around which so much contemporary black anxiety is produced...³⁶

For Dent, black pleasure and joy (although not the same, and certainly not mutually exclusive) constitutes a confusing though vital centerpiece in the black diasporic intellectual tradition. Rather than assume joy as monolithic and essentializing, Dent's analysis of Alice Walker's novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* argues that we should be critical of paradigms that assert a "choice between modern, feminist, U.S.—based black culture and traditional African culture." Dent asserts a strategy of unreading these paradigms in order to glean the currency of black pleasure and black joy as operative terms of political and individual agency. Though Hurston does not necessarily replicate Dent's distinction between terms like joy and pleasure, Hurston's relationship to amusement does in fact seek to dispose of the false distinctions placed upon representations of black folks enjoying themselves. Black vernacular dance becomes Hurston's trope for exploring the many facets of such concerns.

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³⁶ Gina Dent "Black Pleasure, Black Joy: An Introduction" in *Black Popular Culture* (Bay Press, 1992), 2.

No other work would dramatize Hurston's desire to depart or transgress a New Negro vision more vividly (or literally) than *Color Struck*. Written in 1925, the very year Hurston enrolls in Barnard College, *Color Struck* seizes vision, mobility, and amusement as substantial tropes of black modern self-making. *Color Struck* reconsiders the cakewalk as a symbol as the centerpiece of black communal experience. For Hurston's characters, the cakewalk engenders participation in a ritual of pleasure and fun-making, thus marking the ways in which Hurston seizes upon such tropes as constitutive parts of self-making and black modern subjectivity. Despite what we might read as these tools of transgression and self-fashioning, the play darkly contemplates the consequences of these tools and forms left unrealized.

Set in 1900 at the turn of the twentieth century, *Color Struck* reconsiders the cakewalk as a symbol for modern embodiment within a rural black community. The practice/praxis/pleasure of the cakewalk— of the lively participatory ritual it suffuses with tradition of southern plantation innovation and irony— inscribe layers of meaning onto Hurston's use of the dance. But moreover Hurston's use of the gesture as a symbolic centerpiece of the play grows as we consider the main character Emma's halted exclusion from the dance. How do we understand Hurston's unique depiction of the cakewalk as it theorizes a relationship to turn of the century modes of group participation/representation and blackness? Furthermore, how might we understand Hurston's deployment of the cakewalk as a means of tending to and critiquing the very models of progressive New Negrohood circulating at this period?

By creatively re deploying the cakewalk, defined by some as the single most troubling gesture of the twentieth century that cited an antebellum and minstrelized past, Hurston indeed situates a "problem" at the center of her text. Who is allowed to invoke the return of these

troublesome forms and gestures, and for what purpose? Hurston's use for the cakewalk is productive as a site of contemplation precisely because it engenders a series of questions about the stakes of representation and performance. How might we imagine the various ways/limits of reading/seeing/performing blackness in the twentieth century? Is blackness "always already" linked to the blackface? What happens to blackface when it is re-deployed in the service of black pleasure or black tragedy? But most importantly, what happens to blackface when it undergoes a series of radical changes of form? While previous literary critics have read the problem of Hurston's text as manifested differently through Emma's character, my analysis of Hurston's play reads against these interpretations to understand a larger aesthetic within Hurston's work that accounts for the contextualized debates of the period. Thus, Hurston's play dramatizes the compelling forces shaping black aesthetic production; indeed, exposing the problematic, limiting ways in which New Negro conceptions of blackness sought to mold black traditions.

A quick overview of the plot helps to clarify the stakes of Hurston's play:

The play revolves around Hurston's main character Emmaline, a dark skinned black woman, her beau John, and Effie, a lighter skinned character as they travel with other couples to a grand cakewalking competition in the South. Together, Emma and John are recognized as a skilled cakewalking couple, and the most likely to "take the cake" at the large cakewalking ball that they are en route to. Despite their skill however, John and Emma's frequent public displays of affection are punctuated by Emma's increasingly obsessive reproaches of John's flirtatious behavior towards the lighter skinned "yaller" character, Effie. As Emma continuously reprimand's John for "grinning...jes' lake o ole chessy cat" at Effie, the play builds towards the central cakewalking climax which ultimately ends in Emma's arrested inability/refusal to

perform. Emma's stillness bears heavily on the play, as it sets in motion a series of consequences. Ultimately, John and Effie emerge as the unexpected winners of the cakewalk ball, leaving Emma ominously still at the close of the third scene. The fourth and final scene, taking place a full twenty years later, reveals a destitute and impoverished Emma struggling to care for a "very white" daughter. The devastation wrought from Emma's nonperformance of the cakewalk is extended and heightened by the close of the play, which mirrors Emma's piqued sense of a stilled, halted, and incoherent self. This inability to move and speak ultimately renders Emma's character an illegible figure by the conclusion of the play. What's more, the play concludes on Emma's haunting last words: "couldn't see".

For Hurston's main character Emma, the ability to fully participate in the climatic cakewalking ball at the center of the play is interrupted through an inability to move beyond her own halting conception of color consciousness. In Nicole Fleetwood's compelling assessment, Emma's inability to "see" constitutes a "failure of vision". But we might ask, by extension, precisely what is it that Emma fails to see and what that failure of vision enacts for our reading of the play? Indeed, Emma's last remarks in the play hinge upon her inability to "see" but this empirical field of observation obscures the other realms of possibility foreclosed by a singular attention to vision in the play. Emma's inability to see emerges from a larger "failure of vision" that fails to recognize the nexus of value and pleasure that can be had from taking part in the cakewalk ball. Emma's inability to see replicates her inability to move earlier in the play and thus disallows her to participate in the ritual of dance and pleasure-making engendered by the cakewalk. Emma's overarching reliance upon an empirical standard of beauty and worth fails on multiple levels, but most importantly, it disregards the significant ways in which black folk lay claim to modernity through acts of their own pleasure and amusement. This concern is central to

Hurston's representation of the folk and becomes arrestingly clear when we return to Hurston's investment in "taking the cake".

If Emma's "failure of vision" constitutes her inability to "see" value in her darkened skin, it also significantly constitutes her inability "see" the value of old cultural forms. Hurston's play thus dramatizes the debates of value, form, and New Negro posturing that would come to mark the trajectory of Hurston's career. Through Emma and her *exclusive* depiction of the cakewalk, Hurston comments upon the "failures of vision" that mark New Negro narratives and suggests that alternative practices for recognizing and appreciating the value of old forms are required skills for modernity. Emma's failure to see is also a failure to read the self-reflexive, generative qualities of black expressive forms. We might read *Color Struck* for this highlighting the epistemological, practical, and affective work of revision.

In *Color Struck* Hurston centralizes black expressive gestures as cultural resources for individual and communal pleasure and then leverages those forms as tropes for interrogating what values, figures, and strategies occupy our political and social horizon. As a result, Hurston's play makes questions of gender, race and class consciousness integral questions that inaugurate the opening of the twentieth century by moving the locale and year of her play back to the South to the year 1900. This capacity to mobilize the seemingly disparate gestures, bodies, and places that most influence our modern imagination signifies, I argue, the play's most telling act of re-vision,³⁷ despite what appears to be the play's tragic end.

³⁷ Unlike more recuperative uses of revision, I use re-vision here to compel attention to the ways in which Hurston mobilizes seemingly incommensurate forms within her portrait of modern black life. Hurston's revisionary practice thus makes use of dissonance. If dissonance can be defined as the combination of two disharmonious or unsuitable elements, it is this "unsuitability" to which my reading of Hurston's revisionary practice is tailored.

Enter Zora

However tragic its ending, *Color Struck* offered Hurston and her audiences a self-defining moment of grand possibility and promise.³⁸ Having arrived in New York City just months prior, Hurston's prize-winning play found its first celebration at a dinner for *Opportunity* magazine in 1925. The play, along with Hurston's short story, [z], won attention in a literary contest that hosted by Charles S. Johnson. The dinner, and Hurston's triumphant arrival as she entered the party, is one of the more enduring Hurston anecdotes:

She had received a second place prize for her play *Color Struck*, and she was not hesitant about reminding people. A long bright colored scarf hung over her shoulder, and as the party paused to note her arrival, she flung the scarf around her neck, dramatically calling out, 'Calaaaaah Struuuck!'

With nothing short of dramatic flair, exuberance, and none of the withholding that so marks the climax of the play, Hurston's show stopping entrance invokes *Color Struck* as a defining proclamation of her arrival on the literary scene. Embodying the dynamic wit and vivid brilliance that one might associate with the beginning of the play or Hurston's other dramatic material, Hurston captures center spotlight for her play with pride. Variations of this anecdote are interesting for the ways that they highlight the various (and often competing) memories of Zora Neale Hurston's dramatic entrance. But ultimately I am less interested in securing a single

³⁸ Michael North makes a similar point about *Color Struck* and the inauguration of Hurston's literary career. See Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

coherent portrait of Hurston as true/untrue. It seems more useful to consider how a cultural memory of Hurston is able to function within multiple spaces of literary and performative flair. The self-proclaimed, ‘Queen of the Niggerati,’ I am most interested here in thinking through the ways Hurston navigates his space of persona and performance through her willful crafting of a literary unruliness often read as an uncritical adaptation of a minstrel legacy. Put another way, Hurston provides a way to read modern modes of self-fashioning through performative gestures on and off the page. These acts—what I later call refer to as Hurston’s “speak pieces”—accompany her dramatic and prose narratives and allow us to understand her appropriation of vernacular forms as transposable methods for challenging the production of meaning in various ways. Such revisions are integral to Hurston’s deployment of the cakewalk and other black struts.

St(r)uck, or Hurston ‘Takes the Cake’

Hurston’s cakewalk differs from other literary representations of the form. Excising white surveillance from the lively ritual, Hurston’s cakewalk seemingly strips away the layers of meaning inscribed onto the dance. Despite, and most especially *through* this difference, Hurston’s cakewalk still raises key epistemological questions around the dance’s genealogical claims to southern innovation, urban spectacle, and self-reflexive irony. What does it mean to re-coup the cakewalk and what differs in its redeployment?

In his 1977 literary biography of Zora Neale Hurston, Robert Hemenway writes briefly on *Color Struck*. Dismissing the work as “not very effective” and an “apprentice” work, Hemenway frames Hurston’s drama as one of little significance whose “only memorable scene is [the]

cakewalk”. Briefly outlining the plot as pivoting around the main character’s obsession with colorism and self-hatred, Hemenway’s reading of *Color Struck* is not atypical in this regard. Literary engagement of Hurston’s play has remained scant until only recently, given attention by a small handful of performance scholars.

Some have read Hurston’s depiction of the cakewalk in the play as the single most entertaining action of the play, failing to recognize the significant ways in which the dance is both altered significantly and obscured within Hurston’s representation of the dance.³⁹ Others leave absent any sustained critique or commentary engendered by the historic dance, and instead focuses merely on its presence within the play as an amusing or quaint preservation of folk forms.⁴⁰ I contend that such misreadings erroneously posit the cakewalk as convenient spectacle within Hurston’s drama and sound a perverse tinge of irony for our assessment of the creative license that Hurston employs by re-presenting the dance within her drama. Rather than re-deploy the cakewalk as a trite and amusing spectacle, Hurston in fact de-familiarizes the dance by significantly troubling the ease with which the dance is represented on the page.

For the most part, we might read these interpretations as commenting however usefully on the plot of the play, limited in considering the significance of the play as an aesthetic instrument of critique and commentary. By excluding the very layers engendered by the context of the play—its publication, symbolic deployment of the cakewalk and character development—these readings remain in large part, like Hurston’s main characters, stuck, and without recourse

³⁹ See Krasner, “Migration, *Fragmentation, and Identity: Zora Neale Hurston's Color Struck and the Geography of the Harlem Renaissance*” *Theatre Journal* 53.4 (December 2001): 533-550.

⁴⁰ See Jean Lee Cole & Charles Mitchell ed. *Zora Neale Hurston, Collected Plays* (Rutgers University Press, 2008).

to a broader, potentially rich and fluid engagement with other discursive possibilities. Hurston was all too aware of the risk that accompanied black popular stage forms and the use of vernacular traditions. With this in mind, Hurston places an ironic twist on her own representation of the dance, obscuring its performance on the page, just as readers were piqued for its delivery.

The climax of Zora Neale Hurston's 1925 folk-drama *Color Struck* reveals a curious editorial decision in its depiction of the grand cake-walk scene that motivates the plot of the text. Unlike the previous two acts which revolve around dialogue as the significant vehicle for the plot of the play, Hurston's much anticipated cakewalk scene is deployed through a brief montage of stage directions:

(Music changes to "Way Down in Georgia." Orchestra sings. Effie takes the arm that John offers her and they parade to the other end of the hall. She takes her place. John goes back upstage to the platform, takes off his silk hat in a graceful sweep as he bows deeply to Effie. She lifts her skirts and curtsies to the floor. Both smile broadly. They advance toward each other, meet midway, then, arm in arm, begin to "strut." John falters as he faces her, but recovers promptly and is perfection in his style. (Seven to nine minutes to curtain.) Fervor of spectators grows until all are taking part in some way-either hand-clapping or singing the words. At curtain they have reached frenzy.)

QUICK CURTAIN

For audiences anxiously awaiting the performance of John and Effie's cakewalk virtuosity, the cakewalk is obscured from view just as they begin to "strut". Hurston's stage directions move swiftly over the description of the dance, which we read takes a full "seven to nine minutes to curtain". By the end of the scene, what little we know of the dance comes from the last two lines,

which describe the “frenzy” and the “fervor of spectators” just before a “quick curtain.”

Hurston’s deliberate staging of the cakewalk in this way makes apparent a number of key differences from other literary examples of the cakewalk that devote copious amounts of time to describe the dance, the movements of its performers, and its often “frenzied” spectators.

Hurston’s portrayal of the dance is so limited in fact, it seems to resist description, relying instead on an assumed familiarity with the dance and its performers. That Hurston curtails our view of the performance just as she announces its climactic denouement is significant. The cakewalk is struck from view, straining even to the most discerning readers of the play. This puzzling scene and the abrupt way in which it (comprising nearly the entire action of the act) comes to a close is further compounded when we recall Emma’s last words: “couldn’t see.”

Hurston’s cakewalking scene is significant for the ways in which it excludes the cakewalk from view. Such a move might appear counterintuitive given Hurston’s desire to represent the folk. Why remove the most potent action of the play at the very moment when its main characters, and perhaps even its audiences presumably needed it the most? What, if anything does Hurston’s play cite given such strategies of exclusion and self-enclosed participation? It is precisely these queries that provide the most exciting and yet incommensurable aspects of Hurston’s play. Sandra L. Richards similarly acknowledges the “absent potential” of Hurston’s play, but focuses on the meanings produced by the unacknowledged interactions between material bodies that interact on the stage and in the audience. Richards defines this absent potential through the following method of attending to Hurston’s folk drama:

Not only should we analyze what is ‘there’ on the page, that is scrutinize those meanings we produce based upon the multiple discourses in which we and the script are embedded,

but we also need to imagine and to write into critical discourse how these interpretations imply contradictory positions that are likely to result from the materiality of the theater, that is, from the semiotics of the movement, tones, silences, costumes, and spatial arrangements on stage, as well as from the reactions of spectators in the auditorium.

Richards remarks usefully provide a framework for interpreting Hurston's work with and against typical representations of the cakewalk and engender for a fuller analysis of precisely what subversive work arises from the cakewalk's obscure portrayal in the third act. If we extend Richards framework, the "absent potential" of Hurston's play is not simply based in questions of its performance or nonperformance, or material construction. It must also follow that Hurston's cakewalk challenges the vernacular literacy of her modern audiences.

The question of Hurston's cakewalk has been plagued with questions of audience and whether or not the drama was ever actually staged. For Richard's the cakewalks absent potential resides within this space of nonperformance, having seemingly never been staged. More recently, David Krasner has asserted that in a letter dated 10 November 1929 to Annie Nathan Meyer, Hurston describes *Color Struck* as part of an upcoming playbill at The Negro Art Theatre of Harlem.⁴¹ While it appears difficult to assess whether or not Hurston intended her play to be read and performed for exclusively white or black audiences, we are able to discern that Hurston recognized the complexity of intraracial class conflict as much as she understood the tenacity of white supremacist values. By suggesting that *Color Struck* challenges the literacy⁴² of her modern

⁴¹ Krasner, 118.

⁴² By literacy I am suggesting that Hurston tests the limits at which her black and white audiences could comprehend, read, and make sense of performances of blackness removed from the context of white amusement and commercialization. Removed from this context, Hurston forces her audiences to develop

audiences, I identify both black and white audiences as the intended targets of Hurston's challenge to spectatorship.

Black film critics have worked substantially to develop new paradigms for thinking through how black viewers have resisted, reconstructed, and reconstituted the racist images propagated across visual culture and public spaces. Turning briefly to theories of black spectatorship here, allows me to engage Hurston's own strategic methods of obscuring and present black bodies through her staged folk drama. Particularly for *Color Struck* it allows us to consider how Hurston's play is attuned to creating her own practices of looking and knowing within the play. Hurston's attention to what is visible and what is productively *invisible* across the play provides a rich space for considering the role of spectatorship alongside the cakewalk in *Color Struck*.

For black critics such as bell hooks, Manthia Diawara, and Jacqueline Stewart black spectatorship interrogates and refuses the classic "gaze" of white supremacy in visual culture. To films that privilege white, racist, hegemonic values and perspective, black cultural producers and viewers alike have responded in many ways by "looking back", and reconstructing their own relationship to viewing practices, leisure and pleasure. Specifically, I am most interested in Jacqueline Stewart's model of black spectatorship that posits a "reconstructive" relationship to classical systems of visual hegemony. Reconstructive spectatorship allows us to examine "literal and symbolic spaces in which African Americans reconstructed their individual and collective identities...enabling feelings of community and race pride...while disrupting the presumed

new methods for interpreting the movement of black bodies. Such re-positioning, I argue, reconstitutes a white hegemonic gaze in service of a vernacular literacy for interpreting shared acts of ritual engagement.

pleasures of classical absorption and distraction.” Hurston’s struck cakewalk scene allows us to witness a simultaneous function in this regard. We witness both the reconstruction of collective identities (symbolized by the black spectators who sufficiently reach “frenzy” just before curtain) and the halted displeasure of Emma, who fails to reconstitute her relationship with the hegemonic values that orient her looking practice.

Contrary to the spectacles of cakewalking excess that graced urban stages, stadiums and walkways, Hurston’s cakewalk challenged the accessibility of the dance and refused the ease of identification currently entrancing white elite audiences. Hurston’s cakewalk excludes rather than invites, and challenged spectators’ knowability of the dance by obscuring it from view. Hurston’s trick here is remarkable in its design. Trading excess for restraint, Hurston’s stage directions refuse empirical observation instead relying upon the shared knowledge of the dance to those who presumably already know its defining features. This apparent care for negotiating the knowability of the folk away from the inauthentic gazes of black and white audiences becomes apparent in Hurston’s unpublished essay, “You Don’t Know Us Negroes”. In the essay Hurston is unforgiving in her assessment the “oleomargarine era in Negro writing,” a decade where black writers and white editors and readers “were holding a looking glass to the Negro [that] had everything in them except Negroess.” Hurston is equally critical in her charge against inauthentic folk representation, leveraging acerbic humor (“you see a lots of folks have never tasted real butter”) and lampooning (“show some folks a genuine bit of Negroess and they rear and pitch like a mule in a tin stable”). Of her white audiences, Hurston writes, “most white people have seen our shows but not our lives.” Later in the essay, Hurston delivers her most skepticism in the form of an anecdote and quandary:

This near-Negro literature is the consequence of the hasty generalization that we Negroes are obvious and simple because, at a glance, we seem to be so. It is assumed by most outsiders that we were the very first commodity to be wrapped in cellophane. They think that if a person opens his mouth to laugh, the casual by-stander may glance down the laughing throat and see all the deep-set emotions, including the liver. After the glance, of course, the peeper knows all, and tells more. But roughly to paraphrase Josh Billings, it's better not to know so much, than to know so much that aint so. Even Belasco was wed to the formula. He commissioned Wallace Thurman to dramatize a Negro novel, but when Thurman turned in the finished work, Belasco rejected it with the statement: It does not contain the simple Negro that *we all know*.

So landing at the heart of her query, Hurston asks, “*what is actually known about us?*” As discussed in the introduction, Hurston’s query effectively deconstructs the imagined propensity between *knowing* blackness and the performed caricatures of laughter and happiness that so popularly gripped white imaginations. It is better, according to Hurston, to not know so much, than to subscribe to such ineffective and singularly uncreative models. Hurston’s resistance to such knowability becomes clear in the next lines: “What is actually known about us? Very little. Certainly little that we do not wish to tell.” Thus, Hurston’s cakewalk work in *Color Struck* might be said to perform a certain kind of resistant spectatorship that leverages the oppositional gaze of the folk and the powerful modes of looking that re-orient attention away from the visible and towards other modes of reading the black vernacular.

As we have seen in part earlier, Hurston’s penchant for trouble and audacious play is revealed in her short essay, “How it feels to Be Colored Me”. The essay, like *Color Struck* is

deceptively revealing; its very title suggests that audiences will get precisely the show they are looking for. After a spectacular debut on the Harlem literary scene barely three years prior, Zora Neale Hurston's 1928 essay, "How it Feels to Be Colored Me" dramatized an unexpected portrait of the racial artist for the unwitting readers of *World Tomorrow*, an American political magazine that catered to a white reading public. The disarmingly simple aims of the essay's title promised the veneer compressed personal prose in short but honest glimpses into the lived experience of a black woman in America. Unlike Langston Hughes's "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and W.E.B. Du Bois's "Criteria for Negro Art", Hurston's essay made no explicit claims to speak on behalf of the race, bordering instead on a parody of the personal expose. Hurston's essay and its discomfiting "tell-all" approach is typically excluded from discussions on the defining manifestos of the period, which we might read as an extension of the larger trepidation around which gendered narratives signify black modernity. Rather than read Hurston's essay as positing an over-simplistic relationship to gender and interiority, I examine Hurston's deliberate transgression as a manifesto on black female performance. In this essay more than anywhere else Hurston wields black women's interiority as a tool of dynamic displacement and obscurity that shifts the role of spectator and performer.

"I remember the very day that I became colored..." writes Zora Neale Hurston in the opening lines of her essay. Capturing her audience with the promise of divulging *how it feels to be colored*, Hurston's essay is staged from its very opening. The title suggest, and builds even, upon the anticipation garnered from the title's prompt, with the expectation that the author will provide some racially "authentic" personal insight on race relations. We should consider however, how Hurston's title ruptures the very expectations it seeks to play into. The awkward syntax of the title highlights this interpretive break, calling attention to how we read the emphasis

on Hurston's use of the word *colored*. Are we to read it as *how it feels to be colored me* or *how it feels to be a colored me*? Is *colored* the stable description of the author's condition or are there other possibilities for reading color within the text? Anticipating her later claim that drama is elemental to black life, Hurston's work in "Colored Me" revises the implicit fixity of colored as a noun and re-casts its potential to act and enact through performance. Through this frame we can understand color as a verb that describes the author as an actor—an agent of action and motion who demands that we continue to hold the following question in tow: who is color acting upon and who is enacting/exacting it?

Across the essay Hurston plays with the slippage afforded through these questions of meaning and positionality. The succinct and irrefutable fact of blackness that launches the essay: "I am colored" is thrown into tension with the "day that [she] becomes colored." These "shifts" which persist across the essay in alternately playful and discomfiting ways, construct a narrative around the speaker's unmoored positionality of color as the site of performance and racial meaning. Revealing, for example, her dizzying kaleidoscopic play with color, Hurston's descriptions fluctuate dependent upon the context of each racial encounter. We read,

I do not always feel colored. Even now I often achieve the unconscious Zora of Eatonville before the Hegira. I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background. For instance at Barnard, 'Beside the waters of the Hudson' I feel my race. Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all I remain myself. When covered by the waters, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.

For Hurston, to “feel” colored is to activate the simultaneity of being fixed and mutable across racial encounters. Becoming colored, uncolored, re-colored, and “so colored” Hurston’s performance sweeps between moments when the “color comes and others when the color is fixed, “warranted not to rub or run”.

My attention to Hurston’s subtle turn of tricks here calls for a reading of Hurston’s colorful (or coloring) practice as one that takes on further layers of meaning when read as a manifesto on black performance.⁴³ It is in this light that Hurston enables additional reading of her text, taunting misapprehension and daring her audience to challenge what they presume to know about racial difference. Hurston coyly describes the following scene:

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gate post. Proscenium box for a born first nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show but I didn’t mind the actors knowing that I liked it.

Claiming the best seats in the house for herself, Hurston transforms the space of the Southern front porch into a space of inter-regional performance exchange. What is precisely “daring” about Hurston’s approach here is that it appropriates the domestic space of the porch as a space for negotiating a gendered, racial gaze and leverages that space as one of pleasure and power. Locke’s concern for the breach of privacy in Hurston’s text finds its significance in moments such as these where Hurston threatens to reveal intraracial tensions within black cultural production and performance. In choosing to speak and enjoy her own “joyful tendencies” for herself,

⁴³ Might we consider “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” a modern treatise that deconstructs how artists “black up” in one regard, and launch an affective critique of modern blacking up?

Hurston seizes the proscenium box for self-pleasure and in so doing, appropriates the gaze traditionally marked by legacies of minstrel caricature for herself.

Hurston goes even further later in the essay to consider the ways in which this performative exchange is one that is full of shifts and masked “negotiations”:

The [white people] liked to hear me ‘speak pieces’ and sing and wanted to see me dance the parse-me-la, and gave me generously of their silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn’t know it.

To suit her purposes, Hurston envisions herself as an actor, performing ‘speak pieces’ and pas mas las. Unabashedly, Hurston’s performance signifies upon performance histories of minstrelsy and caricatured dance, the very forms of representation that Locke and others so carefully constructed their New Negro respectability against. Hurston’s willingness and delight in performing the pas ma la immediately references the popular caricatured dance of the nineteenth century, along with the racial tensions that accompanied such performances. That Hurston figures her own performance within a performance here, is crucial for how Hurston manipulates the personal essay as both a site of disclosure and stylized performance. The Pas Ma La’s use here, symbolizes Hurston’s desire to break antinomies of new/old, serious/comic, past/present that putatively performed the most efficient path way for the New Negro.

Walk This Way

Created by Ernest Hogan, the pas ma las was a comic dance often performed in blackface that consisted of a walk forward with three steps backward. The dance gained increasing popularity when Hogan published his 1895 hit, “La Pas Ma Las.” The chorus is as follows,

Hand upon yp’ head, let your mind roll back,

Back, back back and look at the stars

Stand up rightly, dance it brightly

That’s the Pas Ma La.

Well aware of her complicity in invoking the minstrel type of the “happy darky” who dances brightly for white amusement, Hurston invokes multiple layers of performative subversion here. On one level we should read Hurston as deploying a form of ironic reversal; one where voyeuristic desire shifts in the service of the performer herself. Here Hurston represents caricatured performance with an assumed agency fueled by her own desire for pleasure. Head back, and eyes looking upward “at the stars”, Hurston’s layered performance codes ambition and upward mobility by co-opting the pleasure politics of the scene. Later Hurston builds upon the power of this reversal claiming, “[i]t is quite exciting to hold the center of the national stage, with the spectators not knowing whether to laugh or to weep.” It is precisely this discomfort; a multi-faceted surrender to, and refusal of spectatorial desire that Hurston consistently plays with as she represents a “colored me” in this essay. Hurston’s deliberate crafting of a black modern aesthetic utilizes the black woman’s voice to launch a critique of intraracial and interracial proportions. Read as a collection of “speak pieces” Hurston’s willed stagings of color throughout the essay and across her body of work more broadly vocalizes the dissonant, playful and often rebellious strands

of performance that encourage the mobilization of color as dynamic, lived experience. We might read the entire essay as an exercise in encountering Hurston's discursive edge, one in which she is always "busy sharpening her oyster knife."

Given this context, Hurston's maneuvering around color in "How it Feels to Be Colored Me" transforms fragmentation into performative excess and theorizes aesthetic quality as a theory for re-examining black modernism. Thus seizing an opportunity to speak meaningfully on the construction of black modern identity and the psychic interiority of black life, Hurston's essay echoed the strains of Du Boisian complaint (how does it feel to be a problem?)⁴⁴ and mobilized it through a refraction of black and white performative encounters. Hurston's sly response to the "problem of the color line", was thus to articulate the problem of perceiving and staging color. Rather than rehearsing race simply as fixed, naturalized experience, Hurston's dissembling performance within the essay unhinges a fixed notion of race in service of a fluctuating, fractured, and pliable vision for a black (female) experience. Below I define these practices within a larger tradition of stage performance. I term such moves across space and time *color struts*.

Color Struts

As Hurston would do some twenty years later, Ada Overton Walker directed her creative energy towards the stage as a site for addressing the concerns, tensions and futurity of a "New Negro" modernity. Noted for her skill as not only actor-performer but choreographer as well, Overton Walker orchestrated the moves of the modern cakewalk craze. By imagining her work on the stage as a form of political and social necessity, Overton Walker imagined a futurity for

stage performance; one that leveled a critique and simultaneously negotiated the space and possibility of black performative pleasure.

Called “The Queen of the Cakewalk”, Ada Overton Walker seized hold of the spotlight at the turn of the century to perform her very own cakewalking coup. As we have noted previously, the cakewalk existed across multiple spaces of individual innovation and stylistic improvisation. The numerous readings, performances, and riffs on the cakewalk notwithstanding, Overton Walker’s transatlantic project of racial uplift spanned the stages, rooftops, ballrooms and parlors of black *and* white spaces to re-imagine black cultural production through the tools of stylized performance.

Scholars such as David Krasner, Jayna Brown and Daphne Brooks have written provocatively on Ada Overton Walker’s role as “the bright star” of the cakewalk craze. Their work has situated Walker within a tradition of black female performance that is elemental to my own work. My focus on Ada Overton Walker seeks to discern a much subtler, yet significant aspect of her “activism” as one that negotiates the spectacle of black amusement and imagines recourse to an affective terrain of “happiness” as essential to a black modern sociality. Specifically, I am arguing that precisely what is so radical about Ada Overton Walker’s performance legacy is that her model of racial uplift worked through and against the spectacular excess of minstrelsy to trouble and reclaim that which the auction block, the plantation, and the minstrel stage obscure: the capacity for black pleasure and joy. Her cakewalking coup, if we can call it such, is one that although divergent from Hurston, shares these concerns.

By placing Hurston alongside Walker, I am not suggesting that they are to be reduced to their mere similarities. It is to assert rather, the divergent ways through which these performers

and writers shifted the terrain of black cultural production to include and assess black pleasure as elemental to the “modern”. Consequently, both Hurston and Walker perform a kind of *color strutting*, a performative stance enacted through subversive display and dissemblance, to critique, shift and alter power dynamics of the modern era. As we shall see, color strutting is about harnessing stylistic gestures, on the page and off the page, to move, essentially utilizing multiple vantage points, to revel in the possibility of black pleasure as co-optive, mobilizing and multi-signifying.

Although largely popular for her stage performances within Black Patti’s Troubadours and the Williams and Walker Company, Ada Overton Walker found herself navigating the tricky terrain of turn of the century class, gender and racial politics. As David Krasner posits, Overton Walker “Walker hoped to mollify middle class blacks suspicious of cakewalking, and simultaneously, to make cakewalking acceptable to that part of white society interested in transgressing racial boundaries. If black society had cast a shadow of doubt over cakewalking, Walker attempted to allay its fears that cakewalking was representative of racial stereotyping; and as white elite society wanted to learn about black dance, Walker emerged as cakewalking’s most popular practitioner”.⁴⁵ After the success of *In Dahomey* in Britain and the U.S., the Williams and Walker company for which Ada in many respects, co-wrote, co-performed, and choreographed opened new possibilities for the black stage. George Walker explains the shift, relating:

Managers gave but little credit to the ability of black people on the stage before the native African element was introduced. All that was expected of a colored performer was singing and dancing and a little story-telling, but as for acting, no

⁴⁵ Krasner, 44.

one credited a black person with the ability to act. With a show behind us, Williams and Walker were able to put a premium on Cake-walking, and at one time...we had all New York and London doing the Cake-walk.⁴⁶

Like the performances of Black Patti's Troubadours etc., the Williams and Walker company staged a lavish production, deploying elements of black performance that proposed racial uplift in the form of class mobility and agency, but that did so also using minstrel show techniques, such as the cakewalk, crude humor, and derogatory- primitive stereotypes that lampooned black aspiration. As one of the primary actresses of *In Dahomey*, Overton Walker stylized black ambition across the tradition of minstrel performance that cut against the grain of mere stereotypes. As Daphne Brooks observes of Overton Walker's show stopping comedic performances, "in three of *In Dahomey's* best known numbers, Rosetta's character leads or enables the charge to 'climb'".⁴⁷

Overton Walker continued to transform the cakewalk as a medium of modern class, style and elegance off the stage as well. Using her success as "The Cakewalking Queen", Overton Walker marketed herself as a private instructor to wealthy whites whose commissioned instruction signaled an elite class standing and/or participation in the most modern forms of leisure. Providing "access" in this way, Overton Walker nurtured the cakewalk craze but in turn, re-situated a modern body politic as one that was decidedly dependent upon black expressive gestures as the vogue of the modern era. In a published essay from 1906, Walker remarks tangibly on this notion of access, granting that "It has been my good fortune to entertain and instruct, privately, many members of the most select circles—both in this country and abroad—

⁴⁶ Walker, George.

⁴⁷ See Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 261.

and I can truthfully state that my profession has given me entrée to residences which members of my race in other professions would have a hard task in gaining if ever they did". Describing here the mode of entry into the professional theatre that the stage offers, Walker's remarks here also signify crucially on access gained to white domestic spaces. Speaking specifically to her instruction in the homes, parlors and living rooms of a white elite, Walker's remarks position the cakewalk as a symbol of not only racial mobility, but racial pride as well. Offering the names and events of some of the most prominent elite, Walker humbly describes the "lasting impression" and "the credit" these tutorials and performances have upon the race.

Overton Walker not only worked to transform the cakewalk into a dance of social promise and grace, but she also redefined the concepts of leisure and pleasure associated with the cakewalk and how it would become translated in the service of race, gender and class. According to Jayna Brown, "The Victorian ethos of bourgeois manliness and the cult of true womanhood were giving way to new mores of class behavior based in leisure pursuits. The gendered body became a key terrain for these shifts in meaning".⁴⁸ Unlike its original association with labor and harvesting rituals on the plantation, the modern cakewalk craze become synonymous with leisure and class distinction. With Overton Walker's careful tutelage, scores of elite men *and especially* white women, danced with "new" fervor and grace.⁴⁹

Overton Walker also continued her double-pronged project of racial uplift by soliciting more black female actresses to the professional stage. Singlehandedly overturning some of the moral claims made against women entering the theatrical profession, Overton Walker solicited a

⁴⁸ See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 131.

call for the presence of skilled black actresses in a published piece entitled “*Opportunities the Stage Offers Intelligent and Talented Women*” in the *New York Age* in 1908. Claiming these women could be an asset to their race, Overton Walker places a call of sorts out for “capable” actresses, able and willing to transform the world of the stage. It is significant that Walker envisions a futurity of the stage that is not singularly defined here. Walker presents the stage as a space for young women to benefit mentally, artistically and economically in a way that directly challenges popular opinions in the press and elsewhere that posited the stage as a site of vice and buffoonery. Walker writes,

“the study of the stage and the things that go to make an artist will certainly improve anyone mentally. You...have the advantage of traveling and you come in contact with a number of people of different classes, which in due time will certainly make you more broadminded, and a better judge of human nature.”

Walker’s invitation is one that continuously contributes encouragement and racial pride directed at “young intelligent women”. Her consistent reference to the pride (“you will feel proud and your friends and race will feel proud of you”) to be achieved through stage study is telling in the way that it forwards a message of racial uplift that is ever vigilant.

Happy Feet

In an interview with the *London Tattler*, Ada Overton Walker gives a curious but fascinating discussion of the cakewalk as a matter of temperament and countenance. While dancing the cakewalk, Overton Walker encouraged her fellow performers *and* pupils that to

dance the cakewalk properly one must hold “sunshine in [their] hearts. Think of moonlight nights and pine knots and tallow dips, and of lives untouched by the hardness of toil”. Walker’s comments addressed the need for a proper form when performing the dance, asserting “the success of cakewalking depends largely on temperament”.⁵⁰ Walker’s instruction, to hold sunshine and moonlight in your heart, offers a radical component to the genealogy of amusement as spectacle and modern performance here. In linking the cakewalk with a decidedly proper and classy form, Walker re-positions the cakewalk’s legacy within one of comfort, relaxation and decidedly, modern leisure. In thinking of moonlight nights and “lives untouched by the hardness of toil”, Walker appropriates the cakewalk for a modern audience. Where the cakewalks origins place it within a space of abject, plantation labor and toil, Walker’s cakewalk moves the trajectory of the cakewalk to inhabit a space of leisure, a gesture used to establish or raise ones class to that of modern consumer.

But we should take care to read Overton Walker’s “happy” politic as one that is uncritically based in a politic of racial authenticity and primitivism. Even as the interviewer frames Walker’s instructions of cakewalking as “a characteristic of a cheerful race”, the interviewers paraphrase of Walker’s remarks sound gratingly ironic when read in light of Walker’s comedic oeuvre:

The step of the cakewalk is light and elastic, after it had been learned, fancy steps may be practiced. Some are very intricate; but the success of cakewalking depends largely on temperament...the faces must be interested and joyous, and as the

cakewalk is characteristic of a cheerful race to be properly appreciated it must be danced in the proper spirit.

The required “interested and joyous” faces so necessary to the cakewalks success seem to elide the history of subjection bound to slave narrative accounts of the auction block as one the sites in which the conflation of suffering and staged amusement were forced to play out. And yet, there seems to be yet another fancy maneuvering occurring here between Ada Overton Walker, the interviewer, and the audience. Carefully performing the very spectacle inherent to the cakewalks legacy of conflated subjection and pleasure, Overton Walker performs her own dissembling act, one dependent upon satirical performance. The cakewalk as “merry” performance becomes yet another form of color strutting here, where Walker instructs audiences on how to perform parody. Performing “cheer” for a dance that ironically satirizes its own celebratory ritual, Overton Walker’s instructions loop back and cannot be contained. As Jayna Brown articulates, “Ada’s lesson is quite clever. Coding the dance as the effortless expression of a cheerful race hides the many articulations of resistance and parody the dance is capable of evoking” (51).

Overton Walker’s interview in which she contributes “instructions” for how to dance the cakewalk should be read as an example of Overton Walker’s own subversive color strutting. Like the “speak pieces” of Hurston’s “How it feels to be Colored Me”, Walker’s interview implicitly alleges “insider” knowledge based on racial difference. Looking at Overton Walker’s comments alongside her comedic performance within *In Dahomey* cuts *against* that reading to suggest that Overton Walker is deploying a performative strategy much like her character within the play.

As Rosetta Lightfoot’s character, Ada Overton Walker instructs her audience during one of the closing numbers of *In Dahomey*’s “That’s How the Cakewalks Done” to

Bow to the right, bow to the left/ Then you proudly take your place./ Be sure to have a smile on your face/ Step high with lots of style and grace/With a salty prance do a ragtime dance,/Step way back and get your gun./ With a bow, look wise, make goo-goo eyes,/ For that's the way the cake walk's done.

This “late-style cakewalk” depended entirely upon being able to commodify and reap the rewards of a conflated stereotype re-deployed through gestures honed and crafted through the modern stage. Thus we might read Overton Walker’s “happy” instructions as simultaneously citing the problem of amusement, even as she works to instill a joyful racial pride that co-opts and plays within the space of that spectacle.

The Looking Glass of Black Comedic Performance or, Topsy-Turvy

Another element of color strutting which I am interested in returning to here is the Topsy trope so useful to us in our discussions of Zora Neale Hurston. The role of the black female body in relation to the performance of these (minstrelized) gestures continues to create layers of meaning that need to be tended to. These gestures generate different meanings when we consider the body that enacts them and the way that gender constructs meanings through and around those performances. In both Hurston and Ada Overton Walker, the black female body is becomes a site/cite of futurity and bondage, one through which modernity must indelibly be understood.

If we recall Hurston’s own color strutting performance in “How it Feels to Be Colored Me”, there is a pleasure to be gained from the subtle disarming shifts between spectator and

performer. In some of the most gripping points of the essay Hurston disassembles herself, admiring her position as looker-observer, and deploys a version, or reflection of what her audience perceives to be authentic, “natural” behavior. In these scenes, unsure of whether we are the fools, or the spectators, we are at the mercy of Hurston’s edge, “unsure of whether to laugh or to weep”.

The very instance of doubling is not enough to tend to our understanding of black female performance and the subterfuge that color strutting provokes. To color strut is to dance in the reflection of Topsy’s legacy, harboring that “fearful progeny” as a performative tool that invokes the unruly, uncontrollable and gravity defying spins of black expressive gesture.

Pointing us to a relevant scene in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Jayna Brown argues that the potential for reading Topsy as a cipher for the ways that black women’s acts are capable of multiple articulations [and] coded struttings within the terms of bondage. I would go even farther to suggest that we can read black female performance *as* coded struttings; sites of meaning produced through spectacles of movement and pleasure performed and negotiated through the individual and the audience. Reminding us of a scene in which Topsy plays dress up with Miss Ophelia’s Indian crepe shawl, Brown reconstructs the moment: “[creating] a carnival of confusion...instead of making the bed, [Topsy] amuse[d] herself...she would clime the posts, and hang head downward from the tops...and enact various scenic performances with that—singing and whistling, and making grimaces at herself in the looking glass...”.

Topsy’s pleasure seeking performance is one that dramatically turns the “spectacle” of amusement on its head by “amusing herself”. The “carnival of confusion” rendered in this simple act, is problematic, unruly, and messy in the eyes of Miss Ophelia. And yet, Topsy’s “show”

enacts “various scenic performances”, which we might read as various vantage points of possibility and resistance even in the face of her inevitable conversion.

In her comedic performances, Ada Overton Walker continued to trouble this space. As Rosetta Lightfoot one of Overton Walker’s most praised performances was her pantomime with a “looking glass” in *In Dahomey*. Rosetta’s comic “business” with the looking glass satirizes the higher aspirations of black fame with the song, “I Wants to be an Actor Lady”. As she plays with the looking glass, Rosetta sings the following chorus:

I wants to be a actor lady/
Playing, you know/
Star in the show/
Spotlight for me; no back row shady/
I’m the real thing; I dance and sing

Rosetta’s “playing” is more than doubled here. Singing for the looking glass, Rosetta’s character signifies the multi-vocality of female blackface minstrelsy. Appropriating the blackface mask for herself, Rosetta demands spotlight. She is the “real” thing, able to perform an “authenticated” version of blackness through her dancing and singing. Rosetta’s lyrics take up the blackface mask for her own means of bald social climbing, claiming “Miss Mary Moore is splendid truly/ But she can’t warble ‘Mister Dooley’”. Not unlike Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask”, Ada’s character evinces a form of masking that is both pragmatic and comical. But what makes the scene so successful in its rendition of the comic blackface mask that disturbs even as it delights? Overton Walker’s performance pivots on the recognition that even as she sings she has constructed layers of her performance, doubled and doubling over through a second-hand reflection of a mirror. It

is no longer simply the blackface mask; it is the female comedienne, mocking and taunting a white audience in her performance of “real” blackness. Like Topsy’s troublesome song and dance before the mirror, Overton Walker performs Rosetta Lightfoot as the unruly “enfant terrible” of the play, making ruin and “raising Cain” as she steals the show.

The Pursuit of Happiness

Perhaps it could be argued that a “pursuit of happiness” within the tradition of African American letters and performance is trite and overrated. It seems almost too easy; too simple of a consideration to a question formed around how to fashion black subjects that distracts from the more immediate questions about survival and redress. Certainly Du Bois articulates this point at the beginning of his remarks in “The Problem of Amusement” stating: “I do not pretend that this is one of the more pressing of the Negro problems, but nevertheless it is destined as time goes on to become more and more so...”. Du Bois remarks are appropriate. During the time when his speech is circulated, lynching reaches its peak in the 1890’s. The spectacle of black suffering abound, it becomes harder and harder for blacks to imagine themselves as “free”, let alone equal subjects under the law.

And yet, even if we are wary of posing a solution or a conclusion to this question, it does seem that we must return again and again to how “a pursuit of happiness” as it relates to blackness, acts to mobilize a kind of civic belonging and collective identification across shared gestures. Both Ada Overton Walker and Zora Neale Hurston do different work for interrogating blackness and the modern civic body, but they also seem to be positioning their work along a

larger project that imagines the black body as enacting its own kind of citizenship, in pursuit if you will, of a happiness long overdue, and well-deserved.

The cakewalk, as “national pastime” and modern dance craze performs a pursuit of happiness in its own right. For Hurston, the cakewalk directly enables a mode of civic participation that has tragic consequences for those left outside of that scope. For Overton Walker, the cakewalk becomes an opportunity for self-fashioning on an international scale, one spanning both sides of the Atlantic and taken up by different races excited to perform their “new” Americanness. Like the blackface mask used by immigrants to solidify their relationship as modern Americans, the cakewalk “performed the paradox of ‘national representation’.⁵¹ This paradox, experienced through the very bodies to which “happiness” is ostensibly denied, unsettles any discerning witness. But perhaps the performance of blackness is this struggle of ongoing pursuits; this persistent striving for freedom played out through black expressive form.

⁵¹ Brown, 135.

Chapter Two

Low Lives: Reading the Blackface Sign in Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods*

"I have aspired to the depths without ever fully being able to reach them"

--Sadness Williams, *The Sport of the Gods*

So remarks Sadness Williams, pauper extraordinaire of Paul Laurence Dunbar's final novel *The Sport of the Gods*. Tinged with the melancholic, satirical force that marks his errant philosophy and disposition, the epigraph above merely hints at Sadness Williams' carefully crafted performance of New Negro aesthetics by staging multiple histories of dispossession and blackface signifying within his monologue. Replacing racial uplift aspiration with an aspiration to "the depths," Williams' directs our attention to the alternative spaces and desires of New Negro production that seem to remain elusive and just beyond our reach. I turn to Sadness Williams as a key figure in reading through and against New Negro literature and performance in an attempt to make sense of how these contradictions identify "a blackened aesthetic" beyond the horizon of a New Negro vision. Complete with the reversals, slippages, and stump-speech sermonizing that so characterized the shifting blackface aesthetic of turn of the century black performers, Sadness Williams boldly re-orient the formal and spatial trajectory of a New Negro image to theorize the outsider-status of turn of the century black life.

Sadness Williams characterizes the vagrant spirit of Paul Laurence Dunbar's novel, *The Sport of the Gods*. Notable for its complex portrayal of black urbanity in the Tenderloin's theatre district, *The Sport of the Gods* complicated the stakes of a black modern aesthetic fixated on progress

and upward class mobility by concentrating its portrait of the “New Negro” on the movement’s most unseemly forms and figures. Peopled with “swaggering, sporty young negroes,” showgirls, blackface performers, gamblers, slummers, and con artists, Dunbar’s *Tenderloin* recorded the fringes of black modern life, thus making visible a set of divergent practices that undergird the production and performance of modernity.

Grounded in a discourse of the “New Negro,” Paul Laurence Dunbar’s novel stages a shift between a lexicon of “old” and “New Negro” identity. Moving from the vestiges of a Southern plantation to New York’s infamous Tenderloin district and its vibrant stage and leisure culture, the novel tells the story of the Hamilton family whose flight to New York is prompted after Berry Hamilton is falsely accused of theft and imprisoned by his slave-master-turned-employer, Maurice Oakley after years of service following the Civil War. The world of the model “New Negro” family is thus turned upside down as the story charts the “decline” of the remaining Hamiltons—Berry’s children Joe and Kitty, along with wife, Fannie Hamilton—as they navigate the pleasures and dangers of the urban landscape. As each of the characters “fall” lower and lower into the recesses of moral and social abjection—Kitty succumbs to the “seductions” of the stage and becomes a chorus girl, Fannie takes up a new “husband,” and Joe, wooed by the “sporting life,” kills his lover in a rage—the personalities of the Tenderloin’s low lives emerge as key signs that articulate the strategies of the dispossessed and their constitutive relationship to a black modernity.

While Sadness Williams occupies a seemingly minimal role in the text, his presence foregrounds Dunbar’s focus on dispossession, race, and agency throughout the novel. Doubly the outsider, Dunbar deliberately places Sadness Williams outside the narrative frame of the major

plot, only to reveal his centrality to the text's (dis)articulation of modernity. As part of a larger cast of outcasts and social misfits in the text, Sadness Williams characterizes the vagrant spirit of Paul Laurence Dunbar's novel and allows us to consider the ways in which the text embraces the failed New Negro as a key figure of modernity. In this light, I examine the ways in which Dunbar's novel productively fails to "fit" the static, rigid parameters outlined as a New Negro aesthetic, and instead turns to a vagrant poetics to think through blackface minstrelsy's roving presence within the text.

That Dunbar inaugurates the turn of century with such an unexpected portrait of black modern life by publishing *Sport of the Gods* in 1901, signifies his relationship to an era characterized by a burgeoning aesthetic of overlapping dramatic and literary production that utilized the various manifestations of the (black) blackface stage to renovate the form of the novel as a sign of black modernity. Analyzing his formative relationship to the black stage as constitutive of his black literary modernism in *Sport of the Gods*, I argue that Dunbar seizes the strategies of blackface performance to interrogate the very forms that signal modernity. By using the novel to think through and across a performance of blackness that implicates the blackface sign within the very constructions of modernity, Dunbar invokes what might be called an approach to black novelty. Across this chapter I explore Dunbar's particular design of the novel as a space for re-thinking the history of alterity, performance, and commodity that mark black life. Dunbar's publicity across the genres of performance and literature underscore my reading of his approach to black novelty. To that extent, I examine how Dunbar wields novelty—with its overlapping questions of form, alterity, and newness—to interrogate and unravel popular constructions of race.

Black Novelty

The opening lines of Dunbar's novel, *The Sport of the Gods*, vividly exposes a crisis in literary representations of black life. "Fiction" writes Dunbar, "has said so much in regret of the old days where there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves." Exposing the well-worn popularity of plantation nostalgia and minstrel imagery dominating turn of the century literature and culture, Dunbar reveals the novel's limited capacity for representing black life beyond the caricatures of the plantation and establishes a desire for an altogether different model of representation within the literary genre. Yet Dunbar's attempts to frame the state of literature as one that is rife with misrepresentation situates more than just the entrenched patterns of caricature subsumed within the novel. Embedded within Dunbar's critique of fiction is also a critique of the claims to realism made through the popular and literary figures of plantation life. By marking the ways in which the modern black novel must appropriate such claims to the "real" for itself, Dunbar lays the groundwork for a literary strategy that reconfigures the place of blackface minstrelsy within the novel.

Dunbar's approach to fiction is grounded within a contested tradition of realism's ability to represent race in early twentieth century literary and popular culture. If we reconsider the blackface minstrel show's reliance upon an authentic guise of racial performance, the language of realism that appears within twentieth century black performance and literature becomes laden with meaning and subversion. Working doubly as the representative "poet laureate of the race" and a prominent lyricist for the popular black musical comedies that defined the early twentieth century, Dunbar knew all too well the conditions under which modern black representation suffered under the guise of realism. Below I use Dunbar's collaborative efforts on the black

musical stage to situate black novelty as a method for carving out a performative space within the modern black novel.

While the Tenderloin figures as the novel's most contested terrain for the negotiation of black modernity later in the text, the Tenderloin is also the site where Dunbar and a group of black artists would interrogate realism and the opportunities for re-presenting black life on the modern stage. Meeting in the Marshall Hotel on 53rd street or in the flat of the dynamic stage duo, Bert Williams and George Walker, Paul Laurence Dunbar joined performers and composers Aida Overton, Abbie Mitchell, Jessie Shipp, Ernest Hogan, Will Marion Cook, James and Rosamund Johnson, Bob Cole, and Harry Burleigh among others to debate black performance as a space of radical possibility and reform. Both the Marshall Hotel, and then later, the Williams and Walker flat, would serve as a pivotal testing ground that gave life to these burgeoning aesthetic strategies.⁵² As George Walker would eloquently describe in a 1906 article for *Theatre Magazine*: “[the flat] would soon become the headquarters of all the artistic young men of our race who were stage struck.”⁵³ A starkly ambitious and multi-talented group, the black bohemians sought to counter the primary obstacles of the black artist: “There were many [...] barriers in the way of the black performer [because] with the exception of the Negro minstrels, the black entertainer was little known throughout the Northern and Western States...[W]hite comedians who ‘blacked up’ stood in the way of the natural black performer.”⁵⁴ Thus appropriating the “counterfeit” acts of white performers who “blacked up” for commercial gain, the black bohemians of the Tenderloin critiqued white minstrel’s claims to authenticity and seized the form to make way for a blacking up

⁵² Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last Darky: Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 26-27.

⁵³ George Walker, “Negro on the American Stage,” *Colored American Magazine* (1906), 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

that was socially and politically motivated towards re-presentation across literature, music, and the stage. Walker continues on to describe the following premise for the group approach to blackface reform:

...Over and above all the money and prestige which move [us], is a love for the race. Because we felt that, in a degree, we represent the race and every hair's breath of achievement we make is to its credit. For first, last and all the time, we are Negroes.

Leveraging such race pride simultaneously as an authenticating device as well as a strategy for innovation and originality, Walker deconstructs the category of the “natural” as one that must be situated within the economies of performance and opportunity:

When we were not working we frequented the playhouses just the same. In those days black faced white comedians were numerous and very popular. They billed themselves ‘coons.’ Bert and I watched the white ‘coons’ and were often much amused at seeing white men with black cork on their faces trying to imitate black folk. Nothing about these white men’s actions was natural and therefore nothing was as interesting as if black performers had been dancing and singing their own songs in their own way.⁵⁵

Noting the tension between popularity, novelty, and authenticity as constructed by the gimmick of “real coons,” it is Dunbar’s formative revision of the “real” in his poem, “We Wear

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

the Mask” that ultimately seizes a blackface aesthetic as a literary experiment of black modernism that explodes and inverts the relationship of realism to the black aesthetic.

When Dunbar published his poem “We Wear the Mask” in his 1896 collection titled *Lyrics of the Lowly*, he reconstituted the uses of the blackface mask in service of a divergent black literary modernism. The mask, with its discursive symbolism, situates a curious dynamic between the simultaneous emergent black theatrical tradition and a “New Negro” aesthetic that heralded the break from the derisive caricature of the “old negro”. Turning to blackface minstrelsy as a resource and a strategy for negotiating the terrain of a modern black aesthetic thus registers a useful tension/paradox in Dunbar’s attempts to stage the modern—one that utilizes the disavowed forms of the “old” negro for the terms of black inventiveness.

In 1898, along with Will Marion Cook, Paul Laurence Dunbar would continue to wield novelty as a tool of modern critique and engagement with form by creating and producing Broadway’s first all-black musical sketch. The sweeping success of *Clorindy: Origins of the Cakewalk* at the Casino Theatre’s Roof Garden signified another form of novelty for Dunbar, one which revised the design and goal of the minstrel show as political and artistic statement. Rather than the typical white-owned minstrel shows, designed largely for a consumption of white audiences in mind, *Clorindy* was intended to be a comedy “based on black folk culture” that “resisted the urge to write for whites.”⁵⁶ The collaboration between Dunbar, Cook, and performers Ernest Hogan

⁵⁶ Richard Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness in African American Theatre, 1895-1910* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997), 55-56.

and Belle Davis, was so successful that it ran for that entire summer despite alleged tensions between Dunbar and Cook.⁵⁷

Clorindy's success translated into a break from the blackface minstrel shows of the nineteenth century by commenting on the abilities of black artists to perform and critique previous methods of blackface performance. James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan* cites *Clorindy* as offering Broadway "something entirely new":

It was the first demonstration of the possibilities of syncopated Negro music. Cook was the first competent composer to take what was then known as rag-time and work it out in a musicianly way. [The] choruses and finales in *Clorindy*, complete novelties as they were, sung by a lusty chorus, were simply breathtaking.⁵⁸

Although *Clorindy* maintained its popularity through its controversial use of "coon songs" with hits such as "Darktown is Out Tonight" and Dunbar's "Who Dat Say Chicken in this Crowd," it revised the tradition of the white-owned minstrel show by ushering in what Allen Woll has termed "the birth of black musical comedy"—a trafficking in of subversion and revisionary representation.⁵⁹ Scholars such as Daphne Brooks have written about this pivotal period in black musical culture as one that reveals the coon song phenomenon "as an aesthetic instantiation of black social mobility even within the context of the 'colored' minstrel show...paradoxically [...]"

⁵⁷ Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 7.

⁵⁸ James Weldon Johnson *Black Manhattan*, 103.

⁵⁹ Woll, 6.

nurturing and funding a newly moneyed class of artists intent of developing a black musical theatre of an entirely different order.”⁶⁰

Such novelty—as simultaneously playing upon form and newness—is precisely the gesture that allows Dunbar to transfigure dispossession within the novel as a performative strategy of black modernity. Dunbar’s approach to novelty, although riddled with its own contradictions and ambivalences, make apparent the developing dramatic and literary aesthetic that emerges precisely as the political and creative stakes of the New Negro begin to be popularized. Leveraging the popularity of blackface types and its purported relationship to the “real,” blackface allows Dunbar to innovate a set of revised strategies for his work within *The Sport of the Gods*. As with *Clorindy, In Dahomey*, and *Jes Lak White Folks*, *The Sport of the Gods* stages blackface’s centrality to the modern narratives of racial progress and uplift, thus marking the incommensurable and ironic strains of black life as a tool for addressing and confronting the modern condition.

In *Sport of the Gods*, the stage makes apparent uplift’s most divergent and paradoxical elements, as blackface reform registers uplift’s defiant departure from minstrelsy and its radical recuperation and revision. These aspects make their way into a scene in *Sport of the Gods* where Dunbar describes the black theatre and the spectators’ racial pride and “proprietary interest” in the success of the show:

When the men of the orchestra filed in and began tuning their instruments, it was the signal for an influx of loiterers from the door. There was a large number of

⁶⁰ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*, 214-215.

colored people in the audience, and because members of their own race were giving the performance they seemed to take a proprietary interest in it all. They discussed its merits and demerits as they walked down the aisle in much the same tone that owners would have used had they been wondering whether the entertainment was going to please the people or not. (57)

Here Dunbar's theatre marks a site of racial pride and social mobility as spectators imagine the performance and their own investment in racial representation and success. *Clorindy* no doubt triggered similar responses even as it negotiated the popular, often derisive terrain of coon songs.⁶¹ Nonetheless, Dunbar's black theatre is defined by its "alternate spaces of light and shade": the subtle yet remarkable highlighting of both the uplifting and the "garish" possibilities of blackface re-form (*Sport*, 55).

Such irresolution proved difficult for critics of the text who struggled to place the role of blackface and nightlife in the text. Indeed when the novel was first released in the spring of 1901, and then subsequently published by Dodd Mead & Co. in 1902, critics harshly reviewed the text

⁶¹ Recounting what has become a famous scene in the interpretation of Dunbar's career, Addison Gayle ascribes the following reading to Dunbar's reaction of *Clorindy*:

"Dunbar and his wife were present [at *Clorindy*] on opening night...As Dunbar listened to the lyrics he had helped to write, he felt a sense of embarrassment. The musical was in the worst of the minstrel tradition. Not only were the black people laughing at themselves, they were...offering themselves as objects for the laughter of others.... Dunbar despaired over his contribution to the musical...and he vowed that... *Clorindy* would be his last "coon show." (87-88).

According to Jonathan Daigle, however, this attribution would appear unfounded given that Dunbar premieres his next play *Uncle Eph's Christmas* two years after *Clorindy*, in addition to letters between Paul and Alice that evince that Dunbar never actually saw the play and thus was never at the show's opening night. This key critical mis-conception overinvests in tragic readings of Dunbar's shame with the stage and dialect as "filled with disgust." Building from Daigle's argument, I read Dunbar's various contributions to the stage as an uplift strategy that manipulates the constrictions of market demand and genre performance. See Daigle, Jonathan (348).

for its inability to offer any solutions to the infamous “negro problem.”⁶² Critics decried the novel for its seeming uselessness, its fatalistic overtones, and the bleak, grim portrait it painted for race relations. *Sport*, writes one critic, is “[a] story of unrelieved woefulness.”⁶³ Another critic offered that the novel was a “wretched narrative” that “fails to win either sympathy or conclusion.”⁶⁴ While such reviews testify to a particular reading of Dunbar’s book, the novel as curiously irresolute and “unrelieved” highlight precisely the way in which the blackface sign operates across the text as a tool of critique that exposed the challenges of reconciling modernity and form.

Disturbing The Peace

“Happy Hollow, are you wondering where it is?”

-Paul Laurence Dunbar, Happy Hollow

The opening lines of Dunbar’s *Sport of the Gods* move quickly to establish the wry, sardonic tone that characterizes the narrative voice punctuating the novel. Weary from the “tiresome iteration” of the “old days” of plantation life in fiction, Dunbar’s narrator remarks, “Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton’s, if for no other reason than that it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration.” “Fiction” plays a

⁶² One reviewer remarked, “Mr. Dunbar has chosen an isolated case and presented it as a type. His book will do nothing to help the Negro cause” (“Plea for the Negro”).

⁶³ “More Fiction,” *The Nation*, 5 June 1902, 449.

⁶⁴ “Paul Dunbar’s Book a Plea for the Negro,” *New Orleans Item*, 15 June 1902, 23.

significant role in Dunbar's critique here, as the narrator focuses on the influence that genre and form have in shaping popular representations of characters. The necessary distinction between the "old days" of "plantations and overseers and masters and slaves" and Berry Hamilton's more "modern" configuration, suggests the desirability for discernable differences between old/new binaries of racial representation. As we will see, these easily discernable racial fictions are quickly thrown into doubt. Such narrative distinctions consciously cited the language of racial uplift and black elites' strategic efforts towards self-fashioning along the class distinctions of "old" and "New Negroes." Utilizing such popular distinctions within the opening lines of the novel suggest Dunbar's awareness of the degree to which "fiction" and its capacity for realist representation suffered under the pernicious, monotonous reign of caricatured black life. Moreover, it exemplifies Dunbar's capacity to expose the limits of form and representation by reconstructing uplift ideals within his work as a multi-layered response to the literature of plantation nostalgia. Consequently, the narrator's "relief" from the "tiresome iteration" of "...masters and slaves" in plantation fiction signals the ways in which we might anticipate Berry's "difference" from such paradigms of control and caricature as anything but.

Dunbar's staging of the plantation tradition in *The Sport of the Gods* is crucial to the layers of critique at work within the novel. The opening scene of *The Sport of the Gods* is replete with descriptions of the Hamilton home as oddly "old" and "new." Curiously, the Hamilton home is a "neatly furnished modern house" that is "in the manner of the old cabin" and "sits back in the yard some hundred paces from the [Oakley] mansion." Thus likened to the "old cabin in the quarters," the Hamilton home is peculiarly situated as a symbol of the plantation idyll as well as an indication of Berry Hamilton's [pragmatic hard-work ethic] and modernity. Turn of the century audiences would have immediately recognized the "old cabin" staple of plantation

literature, a symbol of reinforced hierarchal structures of distance, production, and domination in antebellum plantation life. Beyond such idyllic scenes lingered an entire industry of plantation nostalgia, a mass-market that cultivated desire for the restored “order” of the Old South. All too familiar with the demands of such markets and their swift proliferation across publishing houses, literary magazines, and popular performance, Dunbar’s depiction of the Hamilton home re-stages these scenes of contentedness in order to expose the facade of security and reciprocity that simulate the extension of the “big house” influence that looms over the Hamiltons.

The Hamilton home is described in the terms of its pastoral idyll: “Over the door of the little house a fine Virginia creeper bent and fell in graceful curves, and a cluster of insistent morning-glories clung in summer about its stalwart stock.” A sunlit “bower of peace and comfort,” the Hamilton cottage reproduces the idealized landscape of the pastoral by depicting the beauty and calm of the Southern scene in its most picturesque. The “stream of years flow pleasantly” between the Hamiltons and the Oakleys as the Hamiltons enjoy the “upward tendency” of their linked fortunes. As a result, the Hamiltons are figured as a model uplift family, exemplifying the very ethos of an uplift program:

As time went on, the little cottage grew in comfort. It was replenished with things handed down from “the house” from time to time and with others bought from the pair’s earnings. Berry had time for his lodge, and Fannie time to spare for her own house and garden. Flowers bloomed in the little plot in front and behind it; vegetables and greens testified to the housewife’s industry.

This passage is revealing for a number of reasons here. Both Berry and Fannie exemplify uplift “industry” within the domestic space as Berry has time for his “lodge” and Fannie tends to the

beautification of her house and garden. Growth and progress mark the nature of Berry and Fannie's social mobility as it is depicted through their material and moral wealth. Additionally, the Hamilton home is a well-furnished near-replica of the "big house" that "grows" in comfort from the seemingly reciprocal relationship between Berry Hamilton and Maurice Oakley. Berry fashions himself under the auspicious influences of the "big house" as we learn how indebted Berry's "utilitarianism" is to Maurice Oakley's own belief in "systems":

With a rare genius for adapting himself to new conditions, he accepted the changed order of things with a passive resignation, but with a stern determination to make the most out of any good that might be in it. It was a favorite remark of his that there must be some good in every system, and it was the duty of the citizen to find out that good and make it pay. He had done this. His house, his reputation, his satisfaction, were all evidences that he had succeeded.

Seizing the "upward" rise of such benevolent systems, the success of Berry's character within the first few chapters of the novel reflect Berry's attempt to fashion himself as dutiful citizen, model of successful uplift.⁶⁵ Remarking that "It's de p'opah thing fu' a man what waits on quality to have quality manna's an' to waih quality clothes" Berry emphasizes his class distinction through his proximity to his employer, the big house, and material wealth. The Hamiltons in home and habit thus exemplify black uplift's aim for class and moral distinction. It is within this space of

⁶⁵ At one point in the novel, Maurice Oakley comments on Berry's capacity to "follow in [his] example" by courting and marrying at the same time as he. This "joking prophecy" further emphasizes the ways in which Berry fashions himself after his employer, while also revealing the kinds of "influence" that Dunbar's staging of the plantation idyll has for what Saidiya Hartman has named the "social landscape of the pastoral" in which neither master nor slave could express the simplest human feelings without reference to the other (Hartman, x). Thus, the master and the slave are seen as, if not peacefully coexisting, at the very least enjoying a relationship of paternalistic dependency and reciprocity.

contentedness and success that we must understand the Hamilton home as a staged “bower of peace and comfort.” Consequently, Dunbar’s descriptions of the “little cottage” as simultaneously “old cabin” and “modern house” suggest the peculiar ways in which the elaborate staging of the Hamilton home emphasizes the artificial mechanics of a modern plantation idyll at work within the first half of *Sport*.

We should be suspicious however of the ways in which Dunbar lures us into the post-bellum paradise of the Hamilton’s happy living. While the Hamiltons exemplify the model of black uplift success, we cannot ignore the ways in which the happy Hamilton home exists peacefully “in the manner of the old cabin...which usage as well as tradition had made both master and servant familiar.” In both figurative and literal terms, the Hamiltons live within the tradition of antebellum practice, albeit in a post-emancipated South. Such nods to “tradition” should not escape our attention here as they subtly disturb the peace of the plantation idyll by highlighting the perverse if not violent racial economy of antebellum order in a modern context. Saidiya Hartman describes these scenes of subjection as intimately linked with the language of sentiment and plantation nostalgia. Hartman explains,

The lure of the pastoral is in reconciling sentiment with the brute force of the racial-economic order. Thus the brutality and antagonisms of slavery are obscured in favor of an enchanting reciprocity. The pastoral renders the state of domination as an ideal of care, duty, familial obligation, gratitude, and humanity. The ruthless use of labor power and the extraction of profit are imagined as the consensual and rational exchange between owner and slave. This is accomplished

by representing direct and primary forms of domination as coercive and consensual--in short, by representing slavery as a hegemonic social relation.

Utilizing the framework of such an “enchanted” landscape for his larger commentary on what “traditions” persist into the post-Reconstruction South, Dunbar subtly emphasizes the Hamilton’s odd placement within a tradition that reveals itself to have damning consequences for each of the Hamiltons. As a result, the very system that portends to do “good” for the dutiful citizen is revealed to be the same system that oppresses and confines Berry Hamilton once he is framed for theft and labeled criminal. Rendered unfree, physically, politically, and socially Berry Hamilton’s pastoral paradise is quickly exposed as a flawed system of unjust rewards.

Blackening 'Up': Racial Uplift, Early Black Musical Theatre, & Blackface Reform

In 1896, Paul Laurence Dunbar gathered with a number of black intellectuals to discuss and form what would become the American Negro Academy. The objective of the academy was “the development of Negro genius,” and it sought to produce material that would resist the vicious de-humanizing representations of African Americans across popular culture. Dunbar, along with the likes of men as established as W.E.B Du Bois, John W. Crummel, Archibald Grimke, and Arthur A. Schomburg, would pen the following statement of purpose:

To promote the historical and literary works of Negro authors. To gather in its archive valuable data, historical or literary works of Negro authors. To aid, by publications, the vindication of the race from vicious assaults, in all the lines of

learning and truth. To publish an annual collection of original articles. To raise the standard of intellectual endeavor among American Negroes.

As the “poet laureate of the race” Dunbar’s high-profile membership within the academy situated him within the larger context of uplift activists and intellectuals that actively sought to transform the debasing imagery of African Americans. I want to suggest however that Dunbar’s investment in racial uplift went beyond the conservative agenda of black elites to experiment with the popular stage as an additional site that could “archive” and “promote...valuable data, historical, or literary works of Negro [artists].” Thus in line with Dunbar's early subversions of plantation fiction, Dunbar's engagement with black musical theatre serves as a useful point of intersection for considering the ways in which Dunbar experiments across a variety of forms and partnerships to re-imagine the stakes of racial uplift and blackface performance.⁶⁶

Nobodies

Despite popular culture’s obsession with the figure of the urban black male across minstrelsy and coon songs, the subject of the black urban experience weighed very little on the

⁶⁶ Despite Dunbar’s work within black musical theatre and what I am terming blackface reform, scholarly reception of Dunbar has been limited to the ways in which Dunbar was “trapped” within the plantation sounds and imagery of turn of the century cultural production. Popular and scholarly reception of Dunbar has revolved around his representation as a “trapped” artist, disgusted with his role in popular theatre and unable to exceed the limitations of dialect and genre placed upon his art. Houston Baker has famously described Dunbar as such (See Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*). Despite such characterizations however, Dunbar's popular archive reveals the multifaceted ways that Dunbar creatively negotiated the strictures of racist representation, even as he protested the limitations of those bounds. Comprehensive work that considers Dunbar's full archive as a negotiation of popular and literary pursuits has only begun to reveal the ways in which, as Daigle puts it, "Dunbar experimented with form." Building upon this ignored terrain of Dunbar reveals the nuance of his work as poet laureate and alters how we understand the context of turn of the century racial uplift as mobilized by precisely the emergent popular forms that it sought to deny and create distance from.

minds of an American public. Describing the almost invisible status of urban blacks in 1887, the *New York Freeman* remarked that, “the Northern white man knows practically nothing of the Negro.”⁶⁷ Similarly, Charles Chesnutt would famously describe the 1890’s as a period in which African Americans were “social outcasts” and all but ignored in the most popular work of the decade. Such curious effacement is particularly striking given the spectacular investment in caricatures of urban blackness at the turn of the century. While the 1899 publication of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *Philadelphia Negro* marked the first major contribution to the study of black urban life, I argue that Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, was the first novel to represent the black urban underworld as well as the first novel to explore the sociopolitical limitations and possibilities of the black city space.⁶⁸ While other scholars have remarked on Dunbar’s use of the cityspace as a rhetorical strategy for shifting the literary possibilities of black representation, I am particularly interested in reading across Dunbar’s specific attention to the “depths” in *Sport* as a de-familiarization of urban black life.

Anticipating the vast numbers of African Americans that would migrate from the South to Northern cities, Dunbar’s *Sport of the Gods* radically re-considered the place of the Southern black migrant within a black literary tradition at a time when the Southern migrant faced

⁶⁷ Unknown author, 1887 *New York Freeman*.

⁶⁸ Treatments of the black city in African American literature that preceded Dunbar’s novel include Pauline Hopkins’s short stories published in *The Colored American Magazine*; “General Washington” (Dec. 1900), “Bro’r Abr’m Jimson Wedding” (Dec. 1901), Ruth Todd’s “Florence Grey” (1902) published in *The Colored American Magazine*. Notably, Frank Webb’s *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), the second novel published by an African American, explored the lives of free Blacks in the North. I argue however that Dunbar’s strategic use of the black city space is the first to consider the city in the shaping of a black modernity. Dunbar’s project is the first to explicitly differentiate the city in the shaping of a black modern project and rhetorically explores the racial fictions of “The Negro Problem” as he geographically moves his characters from South to North. For more on scholarly treatments of the black city see Thomas Morgan. “The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “Sport of the Gods” and James Weldon Johnson’s “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man” *African American Review*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Summer, 2004); Smethurst, James. *Roots of African American Modernism*.

unprecedented inter and intra-racial discrimination and neglect. Characterized by leaders of the black and white elite as the “hoodlum element,” as “rovers”, “wanderers”, “criminals” and “vagrants” in “search of [the] sporting life”, black migrants to cities such as New York arrived to find the glamour and promise of the urban North riddled with the realities of urban poverty, vice, and racial bias. As I explore later in this section, the publication of Dunbar’s novel *Sport* would initiate a series of conversations around the status of the black Southern migrant and the threat a black urban underclass posed to the moral and social reform espoused through programs of racial uplift. After offering a review of *The Sport of the Gods*, one astonished commentator provided the following observation: “Do we ever think of how such people live? [I]t is a whole stratum of society of which all of us are densely ignorant and of whose very existence most of us are wholly unaware” (Osofsky, 41). Within this context, *The Sport of the Gods* offers a portrait of the dispossessed, a task whose subject matter alone ran the risk of offending the rigid racial uplift programs of black elites.

Just as Dunbar disturbs the peace of the Southern idyll, so too in a chapter fittingly titled “Outcasts” do we witness the Hamiltons flight North and their exchange of one racial fiction for another:

They had heard of New York as a place vague and far away, a city that, like Heaven, to them had existed by faith alone. All the days of their lives they had heard of it, and it seemed to them the center of all the glory, all the wealth, and all the freedom of the world. New York. It had an alluring sound. (*Sport*, 43)

Likened to heaven—an epitomized state/site of moral purity, bliss, and justice—New York for the Hamiltons offers a promise more potent than the security of their Southern pastoral with the

allure of glory, wealth, and freedom. But the Hamilton's willingness to indulge in the "alluring" mysteries of an urban paradise are quickly undercut by Dunbar's facetious narrator who describes the fate of those who succumb to the enticing and bewildering temptations of the city: "...he is hopeless, and to live elsewhere would be death. The Bowery will be his romance, Broadway his lyric, and the Park his pastoral, the river and the glory of it all his epic, and he will look down pityingly on all the rest of humanity" (*Sport*, 46). For the "ignorant and unknown", Dunbar's narrator exposes the glamour of New York as fabricated inventions of familiar genres. The romance, the lyric, the pastoral and the epic all function to reveal the conventional modes of decadence and consumption driving New York's "glamour". To the unlearned, New York offers little save these fictions, and traps the "provincial" "unknown" migrant behind a curtain of illusion and fantasy.⁶⁹

But Dunbar's Tenderloin chapters also reveal as much about Dunbar's moral mapping as it does the Hamilton's indulgence in urban spectacle. New York not only re-positions the physical location of the Hamilton's, it also dubs them as part of the new "lower" class of the "ignorant and the unknown" and thus makes them vulnerable to moral corruption. By transforming the moral and physical geography of the black Southern migrant through his representation of the Hamilton family, Dunbar forces both his characters and his readers to test the limits of romanticized racial fictions as impossible caricatures of Southern and Northern spectacle. Neither the South, nor the North will/can provide the kind of utopic haven that the Hamilton's seek. Dunbar's manipulation of spatial and moral ordering serves as a kind of moral mapping—a

⁶⁹ Dunbar's famous New York chapter has been frequently read as one of the experiments of African American naturalism. Scholars have continuously noted the stark similarities between Dunbar's New York description and Stephen Crane's own naturalist portrait of New York City in *Maggie, Girl of the Streets*.

method of representation that privileges spatial and moral arrangement into hierarchies of value. This rhetorical investment and its subsequent unhinging—a kind of literal dis-placement—is explored throughout the text as the Hamilton’s become social outcasts in both the South as well as the North.

The Hamilton’s move to the four-storied brick dwelling on 27th street—the heart of the black Tenderloin—thrusts them into the underworld of a diverse “lower” class. Peopled with “swaggering, sporty young negroes,” prostitutes, gamblers, drinkers, chorus-girls and slummers, Dunbar’s black Tenderloin records the fringes of black life across racial uplift’s most dubious sites. Thus, the theater, the saloon, the gambling parlor, and the nightclub become key spatial and moral sites of negotiation within Dunbar’s urban underworld. As physical and moral markers, these sites expose the “demoralization” of the Southern migrant and challenged representations of black modernity that focused only on the more “proper” and “refined” elements of the race. As with Dunbar’s earlier strategies of subversive uplift, his moral mapping is made most apparent through the narrator, who functions as a kind of moral guide *and* ironic jester who ultimately undermines even Dunbar’s most rigid attempts towards racial uplift.

Defined by most scholars in terms of its “problematic” relationship between author intent and audience reception, irony’s difficulty is typically read as a series of “misfires” between the qualitative value of those who “get it” and those presumably, who don’t. Such binaries preemptively exclude the nuanced and subversive work of Dunbar’s critique of realism as it negotiates the performative and resistant aesthetics of black modernity. If, as Linda Hutcheon implies, we consider the scene of irony—irony “not as isolated trope to be analyzed by formalists means” but through its social and political power relations—then Dunbar’s ironic portrayal of

the Hamiltons and their co-habitants highlights the affective and signifying dimensions of the black Tenderloin's quotidian experiences. That Dunbar uses irony to negotiate the moving parts of revelation and obscurity within his text tests the limits and degrees of "knowing" any fixed or static claims on the black Tenderloin, and critically invests in irony's misfires and misapprehensions as signifying practice.⁷⁰

The Negro Problem in Vogue

When the so-called "Negro problem" first gained traction as a popular moniker and general descriptive for the challenges of postwar assimilation and racial strife, social commentators used the phrase to explore the question of what precisely was to be done with the masses of unemployed, wandering black men and women that posed a threat to the nation's fragile sense of progress and unity. To a large degree, post-Reconstruction uses of the "Negro problem" delineated these questions as a uniquely Southern concern exacerbated by the rising forms of mob violence and exploited labor practices across the regions most heavily populated by blacks in the South. The North vaguely epitomized economic promise, mobility, and opportunity for many African Americans who struggled to imagine the contours of possibility available amidst the pressures of de jure and de facto Jim Crow segregation.

Although Dunbar has been most readily recognized for his provincial portraits of black Southern rural life, much of Dunbar's most critical material re-orientates our interpretation of black modern life by pushing a definition of black modernity beyond the confines of romanticized

⁷⁰ Linda Hutcheon, *Ironys Edge*, 3.

Southern caricature. An astute and prolific commentator, Dunbar's articles on the black urban experience re-configure the "Negro problem" as *national* in scope, taking into account the broad and sweeping effects of a black urbanity defined through the class stratification and moral mapping of Southern migrants, high society elites, industrial and domestic workers, and namely, through New York's black underclass.⁷¹

Dunbar's essays on black urbanity,⁷² particularly his "Negroes of the Tenderloin" are instructive for examining his turn to the black underworld as a meditation on black aesthetics within the uplift tradition. Unsurprisingly, Dunbar's work would have resounding effects for contributing to the morality-driven imaginations of writers and reformists alike. As part of this historical moment and sweeping vogue, Dunbar's work on black life in the North significantly highlights the intertwining threads of literary and sociological production as increasingly popular modes for attending and responding to the "Negro problem."

By the time Dunbar pens the "misdeeds of the Tenderloin," the Negro problem was in vogue. Scores of social commentary from both sides of the color line contributed to the popularity of the Negro problem as one of the most popular references in turn of the century racial thought.⁷³ Dunbar's definition of the moral panic that focused its attention on black life

⁷¹ I define my reading of Dunbar's class stratification and moral mapping later in the next section by reading his work within the sociological reformist arm of racial uplift.

⁷² Although I do not present an extensive close reading of them here, Dunbar's other essays on black urbanity include "The Hapless Southern Negro" and his lengthy Washington D.C. reflections on black high life. See "Negro Society in Washington" and "Negro Life in Washington".

⁷³ See for example Booker T. Washington's anthology *The New Negro* (1903), Thomas Nelson Page's *The Negro: A Southern Problem* (1904), William Elwang's *Concrete Study of the Race Problem* (1904), Benjamin Tillman's "The Negro Problem and Immigration" (1908), J.A. Cunningham's *Solution of the Negro Problem* (1889), Felix Adler's *Negro Problem in the United States* (1904), Edward Eggleston's *Ultimate Solution of the Negro Problem* (1912), William P. Pickett's *The Negro Problem: Abraham Lincoln's Solution* (1909) among many many others.

made a careful distinction that widened the boundaries around limited constructions and depictions of the Negro problem:

Our fathers before us have made a statement or issued a dictum, and we keep on repeating it day after day and year after year, however meaningless the events of time may have made it. So we have been in the habit of saying that the South has a Negro problem, and we have looked on listlessly and wondered how she was going to solve it. Our eyes, turned away from home, did not perceive that much the same problem was creeping to our very doors. But it is so. (“Tenderloin”, x)

Dunbar’s essay broadened the parameters of postbellum black life beyond the scope of the South and criticized what he perceived to be the over-exposed, yet ill-conceived approaches to addressing *and* solving the “negro problem.” Thus, for Dunbar, the “negro problem” had to be distinguished from time-worn modes of thought that contained the issue to a Southern concern and merely speculated on the topic without formidable action or solution. Revealing the North as a neglected yet crucial component to the social advancement of black life, Dunbar’s “deep reflection” on the Tenderloin redeployed the vogue popularity of the “negro problem” in service of a moral and reform-based call to action.

To consider the role of the urban black experience and the particular consequences surrounding the formation of an urban underclass was no simple task for a turn of the century black author. To do so Dunbar risked condemnation and critique both from white supremacists and black reformists who argued that urban blacks posed the ultimate threat to moral purity, progress, and cleanliness. Dunbar’s own credibility as respectable “New Negro” and “poet laureate of the race” was also undeniably at risk as revealed in a letter from then fiancée Alice

Dunbar-Nelson who warns him about “going anywhere in the neighborhood” of the Tenderloin and begs him to be cautious of associating with the “sporting” set therein: “I want you to be dignified, reserved, difficult to access. You cheapen yourself too often by being friendly with inferior folks.”⁷⁴ Alice Dunbar’s reservations reveal in part, the extent to which racial uplift for many black elites involved the strategic differentiation and distinction from an “inferior” or “lowly” class that threatened to re-affirm the racist beliefs surrounding black labor and leisure that circulated in Progressive era journalism, performance, and popular culture. Dunbar’s turn to the “misdeeds of the Tenderloin” as a “duty” that must be considered in order to produce the “better brains and better souls” necessary for a notion of black “posterity” must be read as assuming various levels of risk and exposure to uplift class ideals.

“Negroes of the Tenderloin” appears to reveal Dunbar as a staunch critic and proponent of uplift normativity. Describing the “crowds of idle, shiftless Negroes” as posing a direct threat and “menace to our institutions,” Dunbar unflinchingly uses the rhetoric of contemporary uplift elites who warned that vice and laziness would be the undoing of the race. Succumbing to the “blotting of moral sense,” Dunbar’s Tenderloin pointed to environmental effects that the Tenderloin posed to the advancement of racial progress and determined that black urban youths were being “deceived by the glare and glitter of the city streets” and thus “cheated out of their birthright.” In the exchange of the “fields for the gutters,” Dunbar criticizes black migrants who “bartered the sweet-smelling earth of their freshly turned furrows for the stench of metropolitan alleys.” The denizens of the Tenderloin thus “creep like vermin” and “ashamed of all the old

⁷⁴ *Talk with you like a woman* (62); *Frantic Panoramas* (206).

simple delights” cease to play the simple melodies of the banjo in exchange for “rags” on the piano. He writes,

Many of them are from the small towns of the South. They have been deceived by the glare and glitter of the city streets. They are great, naughty, irresponsible children. Their highest ideal is a search for pleasure, and they think they have found it when they indulge in vice. I pity them because they have come to the city to lose so much and to gain so little. (Tenderloin, x)

Such hard-edged moral rhetoric was meant to dissuade the masses of urban youths who were beginning the mass-scale migrations towards the North, but it also reveals Dunbar within a larger group of black intellectuals who were carefully considering the role of labor and leisure in perceptions of black modernity. Not unlike Du Bois’ own moral tract on urban migration and the call for “proper” amusements in 1897, Dunbar’s essay sounded apprehension around the everyday practices of pleasure and leisure that threatened to undo uplift respectability. More than any other space, the black Tenderloin marked the terrain where the fiercest debates over black modernity would be waged. These ideological clashes starkly portrayed the entangled nature of the popular and the quotidian as blackness and leisure came not only to dominate the discourse of racial uplift, but also continued its reign as the foundation for the cross-racial encounters enabled through slumming and the emergent cultural forms negotiated across those exchanges.

Despite its subversive undercurrents of blackface philosophizing, experimental naturalism, and sociological critique, *The Sport of the Gods* provided a model text for African American reformists and intellectuals who pointed to the ills of the city for black migrants. Du

Bois would return to Dunbar's novel again and again as an exemplar of sociological fiction writing in his essays including "The Black North 1901" (perhaps inspired by Dunbar's "Negroes of the Tenderloin") which noted that the "negro problem is not the sole property of the South...from the earliest settlement of Manhattan...New York has had a negro problem."⁷⁵ Du Bois would point to Dunbar's novel to describe the "conditions which these new immigrants are now received." He continues, "[I]t is of such a nature that very frequently the good are made bad and the bad are made professional criminals. One has but to read Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* to get an idea of the temptations that surround the young immigrant". Likewise, W.S. Scarborough's allusion to Dunbar's novel in his 1903 "The Educated Negro and his Mission" would illustrate the ways in which Dunbar's novel shaped the political, social, and popular debates around portraits of urban blackness and reform:

I have said that the educated Negro (and I include both sexes) leads by the inspiration that is radiated. Much as we regret it we cannot refuse to face the fact that grows upon us daily—the fact that there are too many Negro youths to-day, who seem lacking in ambition, in aspiration, in either fixedness or firmness of purpose. We have too many dudes whose ideal does not rise above the possession of a new suit, a cane, a silk hat, patent leather shoes, a cigarette and a good time—too many in every sense the "sport of the gods." It is the mission of the educated Negro to help change this—to see that thoughtlessness gives place to seriousness. Ruskin spoke a basic truth when he said that youth is no time for

⁷⁵ In addition to "Blacks in the North", Du Bois turns to Dunbar's work frequently across his career.

thoughtlessness; and it is especially applicable to the youth of a race that has its future to make.⁷⁶

Scarborough's attention to the figure of the urban dandy that is "in every sense the sport of the gods" makes apparent the ways in which Dunbar's novel epitomized the tensions of the black dandy against the aims of a racially motivated "thoughtful" mission of group uplift.

Playing Sport: A Mis-Education

For those seeking an "education in New York clubs," *The Sport of the Gods* offers a little in the way of spectacle. Rather than an "education" of New York's black urban underworld, I want to encourage an alternative reading of Dunbar's novel as strategic mis-education. The Banner Club, the cabaret which provides the space for much of the novel's key developments, pivots less around descriptions of dancing, singing black bodies than it does the curious versions of "philosophy" shared between Sadness Williams and the visitors of the Banner Club. The sage and yet "sadly gay" advice of Sadness Williams defines the Banner Club's social design as it serves as an "institution" of learning but not quite in the way that we expect it. Instead, the Banner Club is described as "...a substitute—poor it must be confessed—to the many youths for the home life which is so lacking among certain classes in New York." Further descriptions of the Banner Club follow below:

The Banner Club was an institution for the lower education of negro youth. It drew its pupils from every class of people and from every part of the country. It

⁷⁶ W.S. Scarborough, "The Educated Negro and his Mission", 1903.

was composed of all sorts and conditions of men, educated and uneducated, dishonest and less so, of the good, the bad, and the—unexposed. Parasites came there to find victims, politicians for votes, reporters for news, and artists of all kinds for color and inspiration. It was the place of assembly for a number of really bright men, who after days of hard and often unrewarded work came there and drank themselves drunk in each other’s company, and when they were drunk talked of the eternal verities...Here too came sometimes the curious who wanted to see something of the other side of life. (*Sport*, 65).

In the “lower education” of its pupils, the Banner Club provides an alternative mode of instruction and exchange that stood for the “stranger and the man and woman without connections for the whole social life” (65). In this sense the Banner Club re-ordered some of uplifts most rigid definitions of education even as it highlighted the broad practices of “slumming” from all walks of life. And yet, Dunbar’s Banner Club moves beyond the paradigm of mere access or indulgence for curious poachers and “parasites” by figuring Sadness Williams as its ironic key figure. Joe’s first introduction to the Banner Club and Sadness Williams is anything but straightforward:

Sadness was introduced...He bowed to Joe’s ‘Happy to know you, Mr. Williams’. ‘Better known as Sadness’, he said, with an expression of deep gloom. ‘A distant relative of mine once had a great grief. I have never recovered from it’. Joe was not quite sure how to take this; but the others laughed and he joined them...
(*Sport*, 65)

With Joe's introduction to the Banner Club comes the sardonic wit of Sadness Williams, an ironic posturing that frustrates even the most diligent attempts to "know" any representative ideal of the black urban underworld. A curious inversion of the happy ducky, Sadness's "performance"⁷⁷ signifies upon the "great grief" of a distant relative by adapting that grief as his personified namesake. If we think beyond the immediate relations of Sadness's later revelation about his father's lynching, we might imagine the ways in which Dunbar uses Sadness to theorize a broader diasporic performance of collective affect. Sadness's "great grief" from a distant relative teases the effects of slavery and Jim Crow violence, expanding notions of kinship and historical time, and bring us to a deeper understanding of the intimate complexity at work within Dunbar's irony. Such revelation however, is lost on Joe and the patrons of the Banner Club who consistently mis-interpret Sadness's irony as facile humor. As Joe consistently receives "instruction" on the traditions of the "sporting life", he and the other characters struggle to make sense Sadness's "peculiar" brand of melancholy wisdom. Sadness reserves his most complex "lesson" for Joe:

⁷⁷ We should read Sadness's interactions with Joe as predicated on a series of "acts" intended to convince Joe that he is participating in the high culture of the "sporting life"—what James Weldon Johnson describes in *Black Manhattan* as the black sporting and stage professionals of the Tenderloin who "earned and spent large sums of money". Calibrating the degrees of his performance for Joe, Sadness declares his commitment to "act" the "part" intended to leverage money from Joe:

"Do you think he would stand for a touch on the first night of our acquaintance?"

"Don't you dare! Do you want to frighten him off? Make him believe that you've got coin to burn and that it's an honour to be with you." [...]

"A smart man don't need to show nothin'. All he's got to do is to act."

"Oh, I'll act; we'll all act."

“For a fellow who has had for a full year the advantage of the education of the New York clubs, you are strangely young. Let me see, you are nineteen or twenty now—yes. Well, that perhaps accounts for it. It’s a pity you weren’t born older. It’s a pity most men aren’t. They wouldn’t have to take so much time and lose so many good things learning. Now, Mr. Hamilton, let me tell you, and you will pardon me for it, that you are a fool. Your case isn’t half as bad as that of nine-tenths of the fellows that hang around here. Now, for instance, my father was hung”.

Joe started and gave a gasp of horror.

“Oh, yes, but it was done with a very good rope and by the best citizens of Texas, so it seems that I really ought to be very grateful to them for the distinction they conferred upon my family, but I am not. I am ungratefully sad. A man must be very high or very low to take the sensible view of life that keeps him from being sad. I must confess that I have aspired to the depths without ever being fully able to reach them.” (*Sport*, 82)

Unable to place the meaning in Sadness’s monologue, Joe’s mis-education encourages us to reconsider mis-education in at least two ironic usages. On the one hand Joe’s “moral and mental astigmatism” prevent him from understanding the inner workings of the Tenderloin as a pressurized mixture of social forces shaped through self-interest and demarcated racial boundaries. It forces him to misread the words and deeds of Sadness and the other patrons of the club as a skewed induction into the hypermasculine world of the “sporting set.” That Joe feels a sense of “false bravery” at Sadness’s speech conveys the misunderstanding that propels his further

devolution in the text. There is however, another reading of *miseducation* at work here, one which reads Sadness's sphinx-like riddles as willed misdirection and coded defiance. Unlike the sensational response to his father's lynching represented through Joe's gasp of horror, Sadness's humor resists sentimentality and ironizes the event into an affectively charged theory that revises Dunbar's original versions of moral mapping offered earlier in the text. Embracing the signifying properties of his mourning as a recalibrated view of ascent, Sadness situates himself within an alternative space of uplift; one that "aspires to the depths" without settling on a fixed destination. Such positionality starkly differs from the spectacles of blackface performance rendered visible by white minstrels and challenges black uplift's more traditional aims up the hegemonic ladder of respectability.

Low Frequencies, Low Lives: Vagrant Acts and the Subversions of Black(face)

Amusement

Dunbar's ironic use of Sadness Williams not only gestures towards a more subversive reading of *Sport*, it also reconsiders the project of black modernity as one that challenges the teleological narratives of progress designed to highlight the strict break between "old" and "New Negro." Dunbar significantly makes both the plantation and the city a site for contemplating what become the obvious proximities between plantation and stage, enslaved labor and free labor. His implication of leisure culture further builds upon the ways in which newness gets reconfigured across the novel as a meditation on how characters negotiate their newness from antebellum systems of work and amusement.

Although many scholars have read Dunbar's shifting, competing representations of turn of the century values as "ambivalence" and shame with regard to stage and dialect work, what

emerges out of this irreconcilatory aesthetic is something more acute and more nuanced than ambivalence. I want to suggest that what we have been witnessing in Dunbar's work, although surely limited by the constrictions of a demanding market, negotiates ambivalence as experimental and creative mobility. Readings of the text that divorce Dunbar's complex iterations of a revised New Negro aesthetic from his stage collaborations and his literary endeavors⁷⁸ fail to address the idiosyncrasies of Dunbar's broader project around black modernism and furthermore leaves absent an entire archive of Dunbar's work on racial consciousness and emergent popular culture. Elemental to this turn of thought is the issue of how we think through Dunbar's configuration of a dual consciousness as elemental to his project of black modernity. As we have established, Dunbar's masking aesthetic cannot be read simply as expressive lament or self-effacing performance. I return now to Dunbar's masking aesthetic in order to detour through its itinerant manifestations as it relates to migrant blackness and the circuits of blackface performance.

The migrant black figure in *The Sport of the Gods* underscores the apparent hostility and apprehension around black mobility and vagrancy. Vagrancy statutes in the North viciously rehearsed the compulsory labor systems that grew out of the transition from slave labor to the subjugation of free labor. To borrow Saidiya Hartman's eloquent turn to these "idle concerns" in her study on the forms of subjection engendered through narratives of terror, consent, and emancipation, the discourse around black idleness labeled a range of "itinerant and intemperate practices [...] subversive to the social order." Thus "...the issue was not simply whether ex-slaves would work but rather whether they could be transformed into a rational, docile, and productive working class--that is, fully normalized in accordance with standards of productivity, sobriety,

rationality, prudence, cleanliness, responsibility, and so on.”⁷⁹ The profound ironies that riddled such claims to labor, freedom, and emancipation continue to be a defining aspect within turn of the century constructions of black uplift and popular amusements.⁸⁰ In fact, anxieties around black indolence, recreation, and productivity directly shaped the discourse around urban leisure and constructions of “proper”/”improper” indulgence. Bert Williams’s remarkable blackface performances of the shambling, shuffling darky in ripped, tattered top hat and garb seize the notions of productivity, labor, and respectability as tools for a different model: a subtle (counter)investment in fashioning the black modern image.⁸¹ A re-animation of postbellum’s distinct incongruity, together Williams and Dunbar invite the alternative space of black vagrancy as symbolic subversion.

Before turning to Bert Williams, however, I want to sit with Sadness Williams and the notion of black vagrants within the text. Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* emphasizes the key debates around black vagrancy in the North and places the black men and women of the Tenderloin at the center of tensions around prescriptions of amusement, leisure, and pleasure. One scene in particular places the concerns of the black elite directly into the text by imposing a particular version of vagrancy onto Sadness Williams’s character:

⁷⁹ Hartman, 127.

⁸⁰ “However incongruous and inconceivable, nearly three centuries of black servitude could not relieve the nation’s anxiety about the productivity of black labor or assuage the fear that the freed would be idle if not compelled to work. Thus the advent of freedom was plagued with anxieties about black indolence that hinted at the need to manage free black workers by perhaps more compelling means. From the vantage point of abolitionists, policy makers, Freedmen’s Bureau officials, and Northern entrepreneurs, the formerly enslaved needed to be trained as free laborers since they had never worked under conditions of consent and contract and were ignorant of the principles of self-discipline and restraint” (Hartman, 127).

⁸¹ I am particularly interested in the degree to which Williams (and at times seemingly Dunbar) appear to invest in counterintuitivity as a method for exploring the reversals and negotiations inherent in modern performances of race, nation, and class. I explore Bert Williams particular brand of counterintuitivity later in the chapter.

There was no lie in all that Sadness had said either [...] to their crime or their condition. He belonged to a peculiar class,--one that grows larger and larger each year in New York and which has imitators in every large city in this country. It is a set which lives, like the leech, upon the blood of others,--that draws its life from the veins of foolish men and immoral women, that prides itself upon its well-dressed idleness and has no shame in its voluntary pauperism. Each member of the class knows every other, his methods and his limitations, and their loyalty to one another makes them a great hulking, fashionably uniformed fraternity of indolence. (*Sport*, 84).

This description of Sadness Williams and the “uniformed fraternity of indolence” to which the urban vagrant is classified makes visible the language of labor and productivity undergirding fears about post-emancipation black lifestyles. The vagrant is made identifiable through his “well-dressed idleness” and his position as a social pariah that (“like a leech”) lives off of the community of pleasure-seeking men and women. Such rhetoric was bound within the language of uplift and thus denotes Sadness’s non-normative lifestyle as “peculiar” and indolent.⁸² The configuration of Sadness Williams’s vagrancy as “voluntary pauperism” reveals the long arc of vagrant acts that seize peculiarity and self-fashioning to their own ends.⁸³

As artful beggar, local philosopher, and pauper extraordinaire, Sadness Williams is the novel’s enigmatic response to the various forms of discipline operating upon black labor and

⁸² Dunbar’s use of “peculiar” here is especially significant given the way in which vagrancy statutes according to Saidu Hartman, revealed the “forms of conduct and behavior at odds with the requirement of a free labor system given all the anomalies of the post-bellum context” (127).

⁸³ We might also consider here how Dunbar is recuperating the figure of the black dandy here. For more on representations of the black dandy see Monica Miller *Slave to Fashion* and James Smethurst *Roots of Black Modernism*.

movement across urban space. A local "hanger on" of the Banner Club, Sadness is within the class of "parasites" who manipulate the social dynamics of the leisure club to satisfy his material needs and desires. Excited at the prospect of meeting a new "lamb for shearing", Sadness flippantly yet earnestly remarks, "This is what I've been looking for for a month. My hat was getting decidedly shabby...". Such self-interest is neither the "representative negro" of Dunbar's essays,⁸⁴ nor does it fit a romanticized model of resistance. Using the material culture of the sporting life to solicit from patrons of the club, we should read Sadness's social and affective positionality (evidenced by his commitment to "act" the part) as errant performance. Although the text is not explicit to the degree in which Sadness is punitively identified as a vagrant, turn of the century laws would certainly have dubbed him as such.⁸⁵ As product and perpetrator within a system that easily conflated blackness and criminality through specific codes of identification and value, Sadness Williams's self-defining "acts" within the Banner Club revise the discourse of uplift within the context of state reform and policing. Consequently, vagrancy and the surplus lives and performances that fall outside of the normative values of uplift and containment become as much a significant product of Dunbar's subversive project as the text itself.

The itinerant life of the "vagrant" complicates notions of agency and resistance because it challenges the power/powerless dynamic within systems of oppression and discipline. Making particular use of this classification Sadness sardonically remarks, "Only the rich are lonesome. It is only the independent who depend on others" (84). Ironically, Sadness's use of the word "rich" and "independent" create a myriad of inverted interpretations and seem to function more as a

⁸⁴ See Paul Laurence Dunbar "Representative Negroes" in *The Negro Problem* ed. Booker T. Washington (1903).

⁸⁵ See *Secretary of State Annual Reports on the Statistics of Crime* 1896, 1898.

critical observation that expresses the paradox of vagrancy. The rich are lonesome because they ostensibly have no need to rely upon others but the vagrant is independent so much as he is his own agent of labor and movement. Both are constrained within systems that shape their circumstance and their roles and reliance upon community. The constrained natures of both make visible the obscured relationships of value and dependence inherent within each label.⁸⁶

Bound to the language of criminality, vagrancy exceeds uplift's respectable posturing and middle-class aspiration by depending upon alternative forms of sustenance for survival. Consistently admonished by the other members of the Banner Club to "be respectable," Sadness Williams opines on the guise of respectability and remarks, "'I wont,' he replied. 'Being respectable is very nice as a diversion, but its tedious if done steadily'" (64). Challenging the notion of respectability as foundational pillar of uplift, Sadness's refusal whimsically denounces respectability as a tool for social advancement and instead embraces vagrancy as an act of renunciation and self-definition. Interestingly enough, Sadness's smart inversion of respectability and "diversion" plays precisely on the definitions of value and respectability that exclude other forms of progress and sustainability.

These odd and peculiar "acts" of Sadness Williams cohere around echoes of another familiar errant philosopher-performer of the black experience: Bert Williams. Sadness Williams anticipates the somber performances of Bert Williams and re-deploys the characteristic melancholy of Bert Williams's comic oeuvre throughout the text. Dunbar's rich professional relationship with the Williams and Walker Company as popular lyricist *and* "poet laureate" who

⁸⁶ While Joe's reaction to Sadness's sermon is to feel "wonderfully in it," Sadness's sarcasm remains undetected by Joe, who can only revel in what he assumes is an invitation into the vagrant subculture of the sporting class.

penned the significant formulations of masking and dual consciousness throughout his poems⁸⁷ leave room for a reading of both Sadness and Bert Williams as generative products that make visible the negotiations of black modern subjectivity in formation and under dispute. By mobilizing the blackface mask in service of the vagrant—a turn that mobilized the “lowly” forms that racial progress sought to distinguish itself from—both Dunbar and Bert Williams expose the incommensurable, yet profoundly decisive strands of a New Negro image.

Lyrics of the Lowly

⁸⁷ Consider in light of this recent discussion on dual consciousness and vagrancy, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem titled “Vagrants,” in which a speaker describes the doubled competing consciousness shared between himself and his “soul” as they journey together towards an unknown destination:

Long time ago, we two set out,
My soul and I.
I know not why,
For all our way was dim with doubt.
I know not where
We two may fare:
Though still with every changing weather,
We wander, groping on together.

We do not love, we are not friends,
My soul and I.
He lives a lie;
Untruth lines every way he wends.
A scoffer he
Who jeers at me:
And so, my comrade and my brother,
We wander on and hate each other.

Ay, there be taverns and to spare,
Beside the road;
But some strange goad
Lets me not stop to taste their fare.
Knew I the goal
Toward which my soul
And I made way, hope made life fragrant:
But no. We wander, aimless, vagrant!

Rich with the “myriad subtleties” that both the mask and its slippage provides, Dunbar’s poem charged the black grin with the potential to “hide” and “shade” the “tears and sighs” of a burdened subject. Situating the juxtaposition between the mask and the “otherwise” feelings that the mask conceals, Dunbar stretches the affective and generative possibilities of the blackface mask as cross-racial encounter and staging. Anticipating Du Bois’ configuration of the “gift and the curse” of double consciousness, Dunbar’s trope of masking makes apparent the tension between a subject “torn” between himself and “the world.” The black/face mask as a strategy of both disclosure and concealment are key to our considerations of vagrant acts, as the blackface mask prefigures the relationship between a subject and a burgeoning split consciousness, even as it anticipates the spectatorial desires of its audience and makes apparent the self as both spectator, spectacle, and witness in the process. Vagrant acts—particularly those grounded in the blackface performances of Bert Williams—reveal the degree to which both vagrancy and masking operate as a kind of *low symbolism*, smuggling survival through practice and art.

I am attempting to theorize a “sub-version” of uplift, one which turns to emergent popular forms (the very forms that pose a threat to uplift’s respectable and “high” aspirations) as a method of interrogation and critique. Low symbolism, or sub-versioning allows me to acknowledge the inverted practices of signification that re-imagine precisely what is “low”, criminal, unseen, or obscured as configurations of survival and self-definition. I invite the informal riffs on low theory and its multiplicitous associations. From A Tribe Called Quest’s *Low End Theory* to Dunbar’s *Lyrics of the Lowly*, the sly and often explicitly charged subversions of black popular culture are informed through these calls to signifying practice.

Thus marking a revision of Dunbar's masked grin, Bert Williams' 1905 performance of "Nobody" and its subsequent renditions would invert the uses of the blackface mask and expand the transgressive potential of a black face and sound that refused to align itself as normative uplift. Between 1901 and 1922, Williams recorded over eighty songs, many of which would be re-recorded over time as consistent hits. No song however would perform as commercially well as Bert Williams's infamous "Nobody". Originally penned in 1905, the song would become the sonic stamp of William's career, demanded of him repeatedly at nearly every performance throughout his career. The lyrics revise what had become a stock character of Williams: the Jonah Man, the down-on-his-luck man whose abjection provides a basis for comedy. The allure and prominence of 'Nobody' lay perhaps in its obscure and defiant nature:

When life seems full of clouds and rain
And I am full of nothin' and pain
Who soothes my thumping, bumping brain, uummm?
Nobody!

When winter comes with snow and sleet
And me with hunger and cold feet
Who says, "Here's twenty-five cents, go ahead and get somethin'
to eat, go on why doncha"?

Nobody!

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody
I ain't never done nothin' to nobody, no time
So until I get somethin' from somebody sometime

I'll never do nothin' for nobody, no time

When summer calls all cool and clear

And friends see me drawing near

Who tells me come in have some beer

Hmm, nobody!

When I was in that railroad wreck

And thought I'd cashed in my last check

Who took the engine off my neck?

Not a soul!

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody

I ain't never done nothin' to nobody, no time

So until I get something from somebody, sometime

I'll never do nothin' for nobody, no time

One time when things was lookin' bright

I started to whittle on a stick one night

Who cried out, "Stop now, that's dynamite"?

Not a soul!

“Nobody” is a kind of Vagrant Anthem, the subversive refrain of uplift’s residual class; woeful lament and defiant proclamation. Facing the dehumanizing pain of abjection and neglect, Bert Williams’s “Nobody” performs the psychic and physical pain of the black vagrant whose self-actualization comes through his disparaged (“lowly”) status.

The genius of Williams’s “Nobody” can perhaps be described as negotiating this space of performativity and subversion even as it exceeds those limitations. Despite his reluctance to perform the hit so frequently (at encores for every performance for seven years), “Nobody” laid bare the comic genius and melancholic racial satire at the heart of Williams’ career. Ann Charters describes the performance as follows,

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

Charters’s careful re-staging of Williams’s “Nobody” is useful here because it highlights for our purposes an elemental characteristic of Williams’s performative oeuvre. Complete with pauses

and shrugs, Bert Williams's stuttering performance here is punctuated with the physicality/visibility of the black body in minute gestures of hesitation, pauses, and incompleteness. His performance depended on the manipulation of an unprepared, ragged character, unsure, reluctant and awkward in movement. Williams's dissembling performance on stage would mirror the stuttering, awkwardness of his recordings, willfully re-directing attention to the contrast between sound and lyric.

A master of pantomime and slow subtle gestures, we might think of Bert Williams's "Nobody" performance as a kind of vanishing act; the kind that de-spectacularizes the black body, temporally/temporarily unhinging it from the trappings of any singular gaze. While scholars such as Louis Chude-Sokei have argued that Williams's "Nobody" performs a kind of erasure; theorizing the role of the absent black body, I would add that it seems also that Williams's performance calls to the fore the questions of black subjectivity and community, mobilizing a kind of subversive re-ordering of uplift's focused gaze, even as it challenges the assumptions of its expectant white audiences. Where Williams' invokes the denial of black subjectivity that so characterized the legacy of slavery's aftermath with his woeful refrain of "nobody", he playfully inverts this tradition by making his group exclusion a defiant refusal to assimilate to traditional group values. Using the very terms of his own exclusion to re-assess the logic of reciprocity, productivity, and exchange, Bert Williams intricately articulates a poetics of refusal by marking its strategic uses to address his multiple audiences on a national stage. By refusing to "do" until he "gets," Williams follows the absurd logic of a popular tradition of Jim Crow logic and manipulates it. Williams's irony here persists in this negation as he exerts his will over an audience who has rendered him unspeakable, invisible and unable to act as his own agent.

The genius of Bert Williams's seemingly counterintuitive acts make apparent the design of an alternative vision for uplift, one that considers refusal and its poetic excess as the very tools of citizenship and critique.⁸⁸ Indeed, what is made possible by such refusal moves towards a re-ordering of what is valued as power. Such multiple registers of address and implication confound the dynamics of authority, control, complicity, and acquiescence by literally re-marking the very designs of power.

But perhaps another reading of Bert Williams's "Nobody" performances are useful given its context as a performed blackface act and popular song circulated and re-calibrated well beyond Bert Williams's lifetime, one that Dunbar perhaps recognized as he penned *Sadness* Williams to the tune of his own vagrant-comic intellect. More than erasure, Bert Williams's unconventional acts—the stuttering, shambling movements in stage and sound—contribute to his own opaque strategies of performance. As Saidiya Hartman has suggested, we might read black song not as an index or mirror for black contentment and feeling but rather as a form of opacity; a willed concealment that is in itself a mode of resistance.⁸⁹ In this light, Bert Williams's performance of the lowly embraces the opacity of black song by providing glimpses of precisely what cannot/refuses to be seen by his audiences. The blackface mask and the black vagrant are

⁸⁸ Consider for example, Fred Moten's discussion of refusal and citizenship in "Gestural Critique of Judgment" where he writes, "What does it mean to have the right to refuse the rights that have been refused to you? What does it mean to be against or outside of the law of the home and the state, the home and the state that you constitute and which refuses you? What does it mean to refuse that which has been refused you? What new infusion is made possible by such refusal?"

⁸⁹ Hartman has described opacity as "...precisely that which enables something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the enslaved and which similarly troubles distinctions between joy and sorrow and toil and leisure. For this opacity, the subterranean and veiled character of slave song must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance. Furthermore, as Glissant advises, 'the attempt to approach a reality so hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications.'" (Hartman, 36)

precisely the signs that exceed uplift's upward trajectory and yet their fixed position are precisely what enables the "progress" by which audiences felt themselves elevated, or in the context of slumming, adventurously brought "low" to traverse "other worlds" and "other sides."

Low Frequencies, Low Lives

When Sadness Williams states, "I have aspired to the depths without ever fully being able to reach them," he articulates a subversioning of racial uplift's fixed gaze. If, as Nathaniel Mackey suggests, we understand versioning (like othering) as the black linguistic and musical practices that accent variance and variability, then Sadness Williams inverts the signs of "progress" and brings it low, placing a striking accent on the symbolic depths of a racial underground.⁹⁰ These linguistic and musical practices enable the swerve of what Mackey has called the "dislocating tilt of artistic othering" within the novel and privileges the opaque and fugitive echoes of uplift's striving spirit.⁹¹ The incommensurable strains of irony, bitter laughter, and tragedy that undergird *Sport* thus mirror the ineluctable performances of Bert Williams's odd humor and make apparent precisely the conditions of Mackey's unhinged verbal play: "the shadow such conditions cast makes for a brooding humor that straddles laughter and lament, [and] allows no easy, unequivocal foothold in either." Through subversioning, symbolic action and affect are mobilized as kind of tension across becoming and unbecoming. The Hamilton family is both made and un-made as a result of Dunbar's subversive re-ordering. Subversioning marks their dislocation and thus exposes the disorienting perversions of uplift's aspirational

⁹⁰ Perhaps this also hinges upon a critique of racial uplift that utilizes erasure over historical tradition.

⁹¹ See Mackey, 58. "A revolution of the word can only be a beginning. It initiates a break while remained overshadowed by the conditions it seeks to go beyond. The shadow such conditions cast makes for a brooding humor that straddles laughter and lament, allows no easy, unequivocal foothold in either. ...unresolved in tone or intent."

movement from “old negro” to “New Negro.” As Mackey makes clear, this “trouble” marks a threshold that produces an othered/othering eloquence, a stammering demand for new worlds and new language that make inarticulacy and invisibility speak.⁹² As a result of this linguistic-musical play the verb-value revels in the “low” not as romanticized escape, but as critical re-invention and strategy for survival. The turn to the “lowly” comments on these relationships and continuously reproduce themselves as the subterranean, lower frequencies of black modernity.

⁹² Mackey, 59.

Chapter Three

James Weldon Johnson and the Black Joke(r)

For the novel, his memoir, is one long, loud rant, howl and laugh.
--Ralph Ellison, *On Invisible Man*⁹³

Why Uncle Jasper why do you keep that Col. in front of your name. You're not a Colonel are you? "Lord, naw suh. Dat don't stan' fun no Colonel. Dat stan's fuh culled.

--Bert Williams, *Bert Williams Joke Book*

"...great comedians are far more scarce than mediocre tragedians; every amateur actor is a tragedian. However this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggling, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions.
--James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man*⁹⁴

Upon its original publication in 1912, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* caused quite the commotion. Released anonymously by the small Boston firm of Sherman, French & Company, audiences and critics alike struggled to settle on precisely what genre the book resided within. With no affixed author, the status of the text hovered between that of fictional narrative and "true" sociological record.⁹⁵ Critics, largely divided on the question of sociological merit, truth, and genre, offered a range of responses to Johnson's text upon its

⁹³ Ellison, Ralph. "Change the Joke Slip the Yoke." *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison. The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 111.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Most of the contemporaneous reviews of Johnson's text affixed the concept of "true"/ "truth" to the novel. Johnson's deliberate decision to withhold the affixation of any name to the text contributed to the interpretation of the text as a true narrative that described first-hand the complex portrait of race relations in America. For a consideration of the deployment of the term "true" with regard to this text see the reviews published by *The Crisis*, *The New York Times*, and Brander Matthews. Jessie Fauset was one of the earliest black reviewers to consider that the book may in fact be a work of fiction, but nevertheless, emphasized the book's dependency upon "hard fact[s]". See Fauset, "Review of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*" in *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson*.

initial publication. Major northern newspapers such as *The New York Times* offered lukewarm responses and appeared perplexed by the “curious” and “startling” attempt to describe the life experiences of the fair-complexioned eponymous narrator who decides to “pass” for white, while Southern publications such as the *Nashville Tennessean* offered an altogether more incredulous response, remarking that the work was a blatant “lie” and that “once a negro, always a negro.”⁹⁶

For some, the anonymity of the text only further increased the probability that the work was in fact a “human document”⁹⁷ based on truth and generated to give audiences a “glimpse” of what life on both side sides of the veil was truly like. For others, it was quickly received as the worst sort of fiction. Struggling to place the text as “true” or “untrue,” one reviewer of the *Times* balanced the “possibility” that the text was either the “product of some whimsical imagination” or a “dispassionate study of the race problem in the United States.”⁹⁸ Playing upon the “sensational” attention received by the text, Brander Matthews slyly intimated that the work may or may not be, “a record of actual fact, but it contains what is higher than actual fact, the essential truth.”⁹⁹ Matthews’s remarks fall in line with Johnson’s deliberate staging of truthfulness. Underscoring an altogether different definition of “truth” and “record,” Matthews would argue in his 1913 review that “[*Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*] has indisputable veracity, even if it is imagined rather than recollected.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ See Kenneth Price ed. *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* (G.K. Hall; 1997) and Eugene Levy’s *Black Leader, Black Voice* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1973).

⁹⁷ James Weldon Johnson, “Stranger than Fiction”, *New York Age*, 1915.

⁹⁸ Anonymous author, in *Critical Essays*.

⁹⁹ Brander Matthews, *Critical Essays*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

Other notable reviews continued to comment on the “remarkable” nature of the text in equally provocative ways:

If the story be a true one, it is more remarkable than any piece of fiction ever written of the colored race...That is just the puzzling thing about the book. It reads more like fiction than fact, yet there is a semblance of truth in it...It is an X-ray portraiture of the soul of the Negro...¹⁰¹

Numerous interesting points become evident through this reviewer’s remarks. The reviewer highlights that the most “puzzling” quality of the *Autobiography* is precisely its ability to read “more like fiction than fact.” This irony bears a similarity to later reviews that would exclaim that the book is “stranger than any fiction.” Another point bears remarking upon here. The reviewer describes the book as an “x-ray portraiture of the soul of the Negro.” Such a description should not escape our attention because it highlights the book as a technology for revealing the internal composition or “inner workings” of black life. The pairing of the book and the technology of the x-ray—a device that provides a photographic image of one’s interior parts—becomes interesting once we turn our attention to the black joke. Just as the x-ray makes some parts visible by increasing the contrast of light and dark, so too does Johnson’s narrator consider opacity as a function of his joking practice. What ultimately registers the narrator as an ex-colored man—as we shall see—is perhaps less a function of passing, and more a function of deploying the joke as a technology of modern self-fashioning.

¹⁰¹ As cited in James Weldon Johnson, “Stranger Than Fiction,” *New York Age*, 23 December 1915.

The substantial confusion generated by Johnson's publication ruse is significant here for a number of reasons. For one, it highlights the ways in which the ruse re-oriented the desires of expectant audiences on both sides of the color line. Making it difficult to reconcile "record" or "fiction", audiences found their sensibilities perturbed by the text's refusal to be categorized. Most importantly however, the confusion manifests our greater attention to Johnson's masterful approach to novelty (the mediation of black cultural practices across literary and popular performance) and the black joke. Johnson's elaborate staging of the novel as "truthful" record has not gone unanalyzed by scholars. Jacqueline Goldsby has provided extensive archival research to support Johnson's deliberate staging of anonymity. Goldsby hints towards Johnson's sly creative and business acumen, briefly describing him as a kind of "literary trickster" who took delight in willfully misrepresenting his novel as an ambiguous record of truth.¹⁰² In a similar vein, Donald Goellnicht has convincingly argued that Johnson's novel utilizes the trope of passing to also "pass" as autobiography.¹⁰³ No doubt such critical interpretations have informed my own work here, but these works forego the rich analysis of temporality, genre, and comic strategy embedded within a more holistic examination of the black joke as it is deployed across the novel and in Johnson's career as popular lyricist and theatrical composer. Similarly, less recent critical work on Johnson has focused on the trope of ragtime as a prototype for the modern novel but ignored the implicit parodic function of such popular forms within the novel. An overwhelming majority of these critical examinations fail to take seriously Johnson's strategic deployment of the

¹⁰² Jacqueline Goldsby, "Keeping the 'Secret of Authorship': A Critical Look at the 1912 Publication of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." *Print Culture in a Diverse America*. (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1998), 255-259.

¹⁰³ See Donald Goellnicht's "Passing as Autobiography: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." In *Critical Essays on James Weldon Johnson* ed. Kenneth Price & Lawrence J. Oliver (New York: G.K Hall 1997), 116-120.

“capital joke” that frames the text, and none therefore, allow us to fully comprehend the productive trouble engendered by Johnson’s sly revision of overlapping literary, sonic, and historical records. Drawing upon his integral work as archivist, lyricist, writer, activist, and playwright, overwhelmingly reveals Johnson’s overarching investment in various “records” and their destabilizing effects. Consequently, I turn to what I define as Johnson’s “ragged aesthetic” in order to discern the qualities of the black joke within *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man*.

Strategies of Joking: A Critical Overview

Despite the racist overtones within at least one reviewer’s characterization of Johnson’s novel as a “lie,” a “lie” indeed it was. Intent on using artifice to thwart caricatures of “authentic” blackness in popular media, Johnson’s novel parodied popular narratives of print and performance to theorize the strategies of black joking practices. Johnson’s career as a lyricist and playwright for the early black theatre suggests that he was clearly aware of the demeaning ways in which “authentic” blackness was trafficked across the minstrel and vaudeville stage.

Twentieth century scholarship on humor has attempted to offer various theoretical approaches to strategies of joking. Critics such as Constance Rourke and Joseph Boskin have provided extensive research into the rituals of joking that shape American humor.¹⁰⁴ More recently scholars such as Mel Watkins, Glenda Carpio, and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have varyingly provided insight to understanding the shape of humor within African American literature and performance. Focused nearly exclusively on joking practices that explicitly manifest themselves

¹⁰⁴ Significant studies on humor that have been foundational to the theoretical reception of black humor include Constance Rourke’s *American Humor* and Joseph Boskin’s, *Sambo*.

within an overtly comic vein, neither contemporary black criticism nor traditional sources of humor theory have been brought to bear upon Johnson's construction of the joke within the novel.¹⁰⁵ As a result, Johnson's strategies for portraying the black joke remains a kind of uncharted territory, insufficiently and only minimally explored.¹⁰⁶

Johnson and his masterful *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* are most commonly overlooked as not valuable enough within discussions of self-fashioning through humor. Scholars of humor and literature more readily recognize Charles Chesnutt as a novelist of satirical force than James Weldon Johnson. The following quote from Mel Watkins exemplifies this trend: "Although Charles W. Chesnutt is a prominent exception, there is little or no humor in the writing of 'talented tenth' authors such as Sutton Griggs, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson; their works may be fairly characterized as overwhelmingly serious and polemical."¹⁰⁷ Here, as in other texts on black humor, it becomes increasingly evident that a familiar, limited analysis of Johnson's work gets reproduced under the designatory terms of "serious" and "polemical." I want to suggest that it is possible to examine precisely the work of some of the most polemical, if not canonical figures, to suggest that there is a potential for reading these texts

¹⁰⁵ With the exception of Jacqueline Goldsby's extensive research on James Weldon Johnson, no single critique has explored the textual meaning produced through Johnson's representation of the joke. See Goldsby "Keeping the Secret of Authorship" and *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), .

¹⁰⁶ Johnson's participation as a "founding father" of the Harlem Renaissance, and well-accomplished "Talented Tenth" figure continues to foreclose and intimidate critical work that disturbs and/or complicates readings of Johnson as strategically deploying humor. For scholarship that eschews such normative readings of literature and performance, see for example, Shane Vogel *Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, and Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6-9. Although Johnson is an explicit focus for Vogel, his research models the kinds of readings that highlight the ways that normative readings of artists and performers obscure broader, varied methodologies for approaching their work.

¹⁰⁷ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2nd edition May 1999), 130. See also Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor and the Fictions of Slavery*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4-7.

against the forms of policing that inform New Negro ideology and uplift. While it is not my aim to recuperate Johnson as a “humorist” or “joker” in the traditional sense of the word, I do emphasize that Johnson’s text makes use of humor—a humor that needn’t be classified singularly as comical or in opposition to tragedy—in order to re-imagine the creative, temporal, and generic possibilities for the black modern novel.

In Glenda Carpio’s analysis of black humor, she describes the entrenched nature of what she terms “fictions of slavery” across antebellum and postbellum literature and performance. If, black humor is as Carpio describes, “[...] wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community” then we might do well to consider the ways in which Johnson’s novel (and his incredible career in musical comedy and theatre) attest to such attempts to wrestle with the paradoxes of freedom through strategies of distance and laughter.¹⁰⁸ Yet a discussion of Johnson’s innovative approach to literature and performance is glaringly absent from Carpio’s discussion of black literature and humor. Similarly, in Daryl-Dickinson Carr’s work on African American satire, Johnson appears only momentarily, his novel mentioned in passing.¹⁰⁹ My attempt to discern what I will later explore as Johnson’s “ragged aesthetic” acts as an intervention to these yet unfinished discourses. For Carpio and others, the contours of what I will define as the black phonographic laugh/joke do not register loudly enough to warrant substantial attention. Johnson’s novel makes evident these difficult attempts to discern and interpret strategies of

¹⁰⁸ See Glenda Carpio. *Laughing Fit To Kill*, 4.

¹⁰⁹ In resisting the urge to highlight the pun at work here, I will suggest that we at least recognize the irony of these brief critical attentions to Johnson’s technique. In many ways, as argued in another context by Donald Goelnicht, Johnson’s novel passes on multiple fronts. Such strategies have obscured the degree to which scholars themselves discuss the text’s potential for subversion and artifice. See Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, 130 & 411. See also Carpio, *Laughing*, 4.

humor and strategic self-fashioning, while raising questions around the cultural value of black laughter within a context of modern literature and performance. Rather than avoid what cannot be explained or reconciled within Johnson's novel, I adapt the difficult (and what I read as porous) nature of the text as an example of Johnson's novelty. I argue that when we consider the prominent ways in which Johnson himself mobilizes a strategy of parodic and satirical intent across his career as composer, writer, and chronicler within the black musical theatrical tradition, it becomes increasingly significant to discern the resonant uses of humor within and around the production of Johnson's novel.

I use phrases like resonant and echo as key terms for discerning the black phonographic laugh in Johnson's novel. These terms help me describe not only the immaterial inconsistencies of the novel's staged laughter, but also, it allows me to mobilize and interpret the various ways in which laughter, however subsumed within the text, is a persistent disrupting force mediated between author, narrator, and audience. The echo allows me to rethink a number of sonic and literary reproductions within the novel, alongside and against the commercial entertainment industry that Johnson himself makes "ragged" for his own subversive purposes. For Henri Bergson, strategies of joking and laughter "stand in need of an echo" and cannot materialize without its "social signification." I take seriously Bergson's points on laughter here, and the way in which they allow me to follow the traces (or echoes) of early twentieth century sound and musical comedy to make sense of Johnson's novel.

*

Set with an eye towards refuting the rigid, racist implications commonly circulated in early twentieth century press and popular culture, Johnson's novel thus seizes upon an overtly

sensational language to anticipate the ways in which the novel transforms a culture of novelty into a strategy of modern dissemblance and difference.¹¹⁰ The early pages of the novel exemplify this *turn* from mere titillation to strategic re-deployment:

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life, the secret for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possession; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it. I feel that I am led by the same impulse which forces the unfound-out criminal to take somebody into his confidence, although he knows that I am playing with fire, and I feel the thrill which accompanies that most fascinating pastime; and, back of it all, I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society (Johnson 3).

Compelled by the same impulse that motivates the “unfound-out criminal,” the narrator emphasizes not only his “thrill” here, but also most certainly the thrill of early twentieth century readers and spectators who, as previously discussed took delight in pleasures afforded through the blackface mask. As Saidiya Hartman has described, “the donning of blackface restaged the seizure and possession of the black body for the other’s use and enjoyment.”¹¹¹ No doubt aware of all of this, it is significant that our narrator here hones in on his own “diabolical desire.” This turn away from audience fulfillment and towards an act of deliberate and sardonic self-fashioning (that is, we must note, the result of careful collection and “gathering”)¹¹² prominently

¹¹⁰ Elsewhere in the project I have termed this turn the novelty of blackness or simply, black novelty.

¹¹¹ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 18.

¹¹² The narrator’s nod here towards gathering all the tragedies of his life for the purposes of producing a joke foreshadows the ragged practice that I explore later throughout the novel. As we shall see, ragtime might be defined as a social practice that “gathers” or sews together disparate suites of music for the purposes of a new composition.

foregrounds not only the novel's first iteration of the joke but also the narrator's explicit use of it as a generative re-casting of thematic and structural meaning. If we listen and read carefully, Johnson's joke only becomes legible in his attempts to tell his story after the fact. The literal *untimeliness*¹¹³ of the joke (both in its seemingly inappropriate manipulation of time, the unexpected yet right on time quality of a punchline and its "tragic" content) is a quality that I will return to later in the chapter, but it is worth mentioning here as Johnson (and subsequently his narrator) wields the joke as a device that allows him to move across time to simultaneously record memory and revise history. Johnson's joking practice thwarts the objectifying claims to black performance made impossibly rigid by minstrelsy's joke. Johnson's narrator offers us the first key to discerning the uses of the joke in these very early opening lines. It is not so much the content that makes the black joke resonant,¹¹⁴ but rather the joke's ability to take action with said content. Indeed, the secret of the joke lies in its ability to turn, transfigure, and transform content in unexpected ways that reveal the skill and artifice of the performer/joker. By this I mean to suggest that if Johnson's novel "lies" it does so by parodying the guise of "the real"¹¹⁵ as a strategy of popular black performance and black literary modernism. Mobilizing this generic and

¹¹³ Consider also that in a letter to Aaron Douglas Johnson describes that the book was published "out of time": "I published [this] book anonymously about fourteen years ago with a firm in Boston that went out of business during the war. I believe that the book was published out of time. Fourteen years ago there was little or no interest in the Negro. In fact we had reached the deepest depths of apathy regarding him so far as the general public is concerned." As cited in Goldsby, "In Keeping the Secret of Authorship," 246.

¹¹⁴ It is interesting to note however that Johnson's narrator wields tragedy in service of comedy here. We should consider my assertion that the joke is not so much about content as a strategy for troubling representation should not occlude the practices of gathering and collecting that the narrator uses to describe his construction of the "practical joke." I mean only here to suggest that Johnson's narrator emphasizes the resources of black joking strategies in what work they can "do" or perform rather than what they can "say" or describe. I elaborate on this idea later in the chapter.

¹¹⁵ Goldsby, .

aesthetic instability, Johnson harnesses the lie as productive to his construction of the black joke's potential for innovation and newness.

Reversing Minstrelsy's Joke

Minstrel joke-books continued to flourish well into the twentieth century. A rich catalogue of minstrel joke-books awaits the scholar who peruses the material and digital archives of blackface minstrelsy.¹¹⁶ In the years that Johnson composed *Autobiography* over twenty-five minstrel joke-books were published.¹¹⁷ Such prolific activity in the publishing industry no doubt suggests that there was indeed a hungry audience for minstrel humor despite the so-called "death" of minstrelsy. Simultaneously, the popularity of theoretical scholarship on joking also saw a groundbreaking rise during the turn of the century with Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* published just after Johnson begins working on his first draft of *Autobiography* in 1903. The 1905 publication of Freud's work, along with the seemingly healthy audience for minstrel humor cannot be ignored as contexts into which Johnson himself navigates throughout his novel. Therein, Johnson's narrator writes,

log cabins and plantations and dialect-speaking darkies are perhaps better known in American literature than any other single picture of our national life. Indeed, they form an ideal and exclusive literary concept of the American Negro to such an extent that it is

¹¹⁶ See Westbrook's *Burnt Coke Jokes* (1910), *Coon Jokes and Felicitations* (1910), *Wheeler's Up to Date Minstrel Jokes* (1902), *L&M Minstrel Guide and Joke-book* (1912), to name but a few.

¹¹⁷ I have counted from Johnson's first draft of *Autobiography* based on his work with Brander Matthews in 1903 to its original publication date in 1912. These numbers reflect my own attempts to represent but a snapshot of compiled archival research. I am sure in fact, that even given the gaps of the archive, there are a great deal many many more.

almost impossible to get the reading public to recognize him in any other setting; but I shall endeavor to avoid giving the reader any already overworked and hackneyed descriptions. (Johnson 100)

Here the narrator emphasizes the restrictive force of minstrel caricature within competing industries of performance and literature. What he later terms the “happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being” presents a wrought idealized image that makes *the recognition* of any other forms “almost impossible.” Making clear his desire to address and challenge what Ellison would later describe as the “negative sign”¹¹⁸ of the comic Negro, Johnson establishes his investment in changing the landscape possibilities of not only the image of the comic negro, but the terrain of literary representation. Given these concerns, what tools does Johnson’s narrator suggest are available to black cultural producers who would combat the “absurd caricature of white civilization” vividly represented in minstrel joke-books, songs, and stage life?

Before I suggest that Johnson’s musical and literary career offer a suggestion to this query, I want to qualify Johnson’s narrator (and Johnson himself) interest in novelty. Across the novel, Johnson’s narrator articulates his concern for the competing forms of novelty and the ways in which he performs within and in excess of those expectations.¹¹⁹ Thus, when we consider the value of Johnson’s turn to novelty here, it is not merely that Johnson seeks “to break the narrow limits of [a minstrel] tradition.” Rather, Johnson understands that out of the immense “impossibility” that minstrel caricature represents, it also constitutes the means by which “the

¹¹⁸ Ralph Ellison, “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke”, 104.

¹¹⁹ “Novelty” is an operative word for Johnson throughout the novel. The narrator uses it in a range of ways, signaling both the description of a popular hit or method. Significantly this language marks Johnson’s own attention to the ways in strategies of the new shape his own concern for the text. The new for Johnson’s narrator is always implicated within its relationship to time and strategy.

future Negro novelist and poet may give the country something new and unknown.” This is the secret and the joke simultaneously cast through a refracted performance of the minstrel figure that so plagues the New Negro narrative. In many ways Johnson’s novel stages a crucial intervention against texts like the minstrel joke books by situating itself at the forefront of an industry focused on jokes and cemented in codes of racialized humor and performance. We may in fact go further to suggest that Johnson’s novel provides the template in which new symbols of racial humor could be deployed and interrogated.

‘Under Cover of Broad Grins and Minstrel Antics’ or, Developing A ‘Sense’ of Humor

Through *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson might be read as a modern architect of the black joke. His unnamed narrator frequently imparts his developing “sense of humor” in order to make sense of the absurd ways in which racial difference is enacted throughout his experience, and tellingly, the most comical scenes of the text often become an index of the narrator’s ambivalence with strategies of joking and history. Scenes in which the narrator theorizes his sense of humor, become implicit strategies of coping that he uses to make sense of the more jarring, “tragic” scenes that mark the narrative. One such early scene comes just before the narrator realizes “the fact of his blackness” in the classroom scene. Immediately just before that scene, the narrator describes the following:

My school days ran along very pleasantly. I stood well in my studies, not always so well with regard to my behavior. I was never guilty of any serious misconduct, but my love of

fun sometimes got me into trouble. I remember, however, that my sense of humor was so sly that most of the trouble usually fell on the head of the other fellow. (Johnson 10)

Johnson's narrator here presents us what appears to be an acute sense of humor, which he describes as "so sly" that often "trouble" befell some other fellow. At first, such claims to wit and intelligence seem odd given what we later recognize as the narrator's proclivity for such trouble. Scholars have varyingly referred to these scenes and their dramatic inconsistency as the narrator's "unreliability." How it seems, that such a "sly" fellow moves throughout the narrative as the unknowing butt of so many tragic situations, appears puzzling, and ironic at best. The following scene, just after the above quote makes evident the disconcerting ways in which the narrator seems unprivity to the forces of class and race shaping his world:

One day near the end of my second term at school the principal came into our room, and after talking to the teacher, for some reason said, 'I wish all of the white scholars to stand for a moment.' I rose with the others. The teacher looked at me and calling my name said, 'You sit down for the present, and rise with the others.' I did not quite understand her, and questioned, 'Ma'am?' She repeated with a softer tone in her voice, 'You sit down now, and rise with the others.' I sat down dazed. I saw and heard nothing. When school was dismissed I went out in a kind of stupor.

Such scenes (characterized most often by the narrator's unaccounted for states of "reverie", "stupor", or "daze") obscures our relationship to the paragraph just before it. Not only is the narrator's sense of humor thwarted by similar scenes of racial difference, but *all* sense leaves him ("I saw and heard nothing"...). In such moments if humor persists, it becomes difficult to locate within a matrix of unintelligibility and racial difference. Significantly however Johnson's narrator

returns to develop his sense of humor through distance. If we recall Glenda Carpio's remarks on the function of distance and humor, this method renders the scene significant for providing a framework for interpreting the narrator's sense of humor. For example, the narrator returns to contemplate the "radical change" brought upon by that "fateful day" only after an undisclosed amount of time has elapsed. Through this distance, I argue, Johnson's narrator garners tools for his developing sense of humor. This understanding becomes clear only *after* the narrator has had time to "analyze" and record the "unhappy experiences" of said "fateful day." Indeed, we should read Johnson's description of the "dwarfing, warping, distorting" outlook of the world, as the moment in which his developing sense of humor returns to offer another perspective and strategy of interaction and contemplation. It is in this attempt to *make sense* of the processes of racialization through difference that Johnson's narrator turns to artifice, humor, and secrecy:

It is a difficult thing for a white man to learn what a colored man really thinks; because, generally, with the latter *an additional and different light must be brought to bear on what he thinks*; and his thoughts are often influenced by considerations *so delicate and subtle* that it would be impossible for him to confess or explain them to one of the opposite race. This gives to every colored man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race. I have often watched with interest and sometimes amazement even ignorant colored men *under cover of broad grins and minstrel antics* maintain this dualism in the presence of white men. (Johnson 14, emphasis mine)

Armed with the tools of "a sort of dual personality," Johnson's narrator emphasizes the cunning strategies of black performers and everyday men and women alike who, "under cover of broad

grins and minstrel antics” maintain their “dualism”. Such doubled effects are certainly not unfamiliar strategies to black cultural producers. In another context we might consider these as similar methods of diversion and dissemblance. But Johnson’s language here is specific. It is acting “under the cover of broad grins and minstrel antics” that most amuses and attracts the narrator here. Supplanted from the minstrel stage with critical difference, the blackface mask offers a viable option for Johnson’s narrator. It is one that inspires his excitement, and I argue, his own performance of concealment and wit, within the narrative. Notably, images of burnt cork and grinning black figures do not fit easily within the New Negro narratives endorsed by representatives of the “Talented Tenth,” and yet Johnson, himself a paragon of New Negro ideology, turns to “minstrel antics” as a resource for contemplating strategies of (the) “new” black(ness). Indeed such a turn is compounded when Johnson’s narrator emphasizes the dramatic potential of “dualism” to be “called up in detail [...] and lived through anew.”

Certainly, Johnson’s description of the “dwarfing, warping, distorting influence which operates upon each colored man in the United States” bears the trappings of Du Boisian double consciousness articulated a few years prior. Numerous scholars have outlined Johnson’s appropriation of the Du Boisian model for his fiction, but I want to also assert that Johnson’s narrator dramatizes Du Boisian double consciousness *with difference*. Johnson compels us to consider the ways in which the alterity of the black modern experience might be adapted from and through an interrogation of minstrel figures and tropes. For Johnson’s narrator, black modern identity necessitates the (ir)reconciliation of black life along these schisms. This is

necessarily different for Du Bois whose implicit references to minstrelsy signal a lack, or a negative sign for modernity.¹²⁰

For Du Bois, double consciousness affords the gift of “second sight” exercised through the “strange” and “peculiar” experience of that “other world”:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

While Du Bois suggests an enabling “twoness” that deflates the “amused contempt and pity” indexed by that “other world,” it is Johnson’s narrator that bridges the dramatic potential of “broad grins and minstrel antics” within a context of explicit generic play and artifice. Such play and joking strategies allow Johnson’s coy adaptation of dualism to utilize distance and subversive cunning to make sense of a sense of humor. Put another way, that Johnson’s narrator returns to contemplate and develop his sense of humor at the beginning of the narrative is telling. Perhaps drawing in part from the groundwork laid with Johnson’s novel and his own theoretical approach to humor, Ralph Ellison’s description of the laughing barrels proves instructive for contributing to this conversation on distance and the alienating affects/effects of developing humor as another sense or skill. The “old in group joke” of the laughing barrels, like Johnson’s narrator, centralizes the “hyper-subjective state” afforded through the disorienting experience of cathartic laughter. The development of this “extrasensory perception” becomes then an enabling experience, one

¹²⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co. (Cambridge: University Press, 1903).

that fosters not only awareness but an increased state of criticality. Taken together it becomes possible to read Johnson's sense of humor along similar lines, even in scenes which do not appear immediately comic. As a result a sense of humor works in service of even the narrators most difficult and irrational of scenes. Furthermore, as Johnson's narrator shows, we must consider the distance required for functioning theories of incongruity in humor, but it also suggests that the of humor throughout the text cannot be read without paying close attention to his subversive strategies of concealment ("under broad cover") and artful misdirection ("of broad grins and minstrel antics"). In this way, Johnson's coy adaptation of "dualism" is at once survival tactic and a struggle to secure the aesthetic and personal freedom required to skillfully redress the black image.

Johnson's theoretical approach to humor encompasses the broad strategies of the black performers who populated the turn of the century stage as harbingers of black modern theatre. The novel's veiled references to Ernest Hogan, Sam Lucas, and Bert Williams alongside W.E.B. Du Bois, Touissant L'ouverture, and Booker T. Washington clearly articulate Johnson's investment in the overlapping (and often competing, antagonistic) strategies of the black cultural producers' various attempts to establish and protect black livelihood in the modern era. Johnson's novel draws upon the revolving stages of New Negro ideology and black musical theatre as performative strategies that can be adapted as tools for redressing popular and historical records.

'Jes Grew' Songs: Ragtime's Overlapping Social Contexts

Ragtime is rarely analyzed within a context of parody and social practice despite its overt appropriation of comic material and its penchant for racial mimicry. While scholarship that situates Johnson as a crucial hinge between sonic and literary studies has increasingly grown popular over the last few years, ragtime continues to be read as a musical genre that is merely characterized as the syncopated music most closely associated with the turn of the century phonograph. The cultural practices associated with black performers and composers of ragtime suggest that ragtime has much more to offer than its status as a static genre of music. Scholars such as Katherine Biers have usefully argued ragtime's relationship to the archive, claiming, "There is no cultural form more closely connected to the question of the American archive."¹²¹ Others have remarked upon ragtime's unifying characteristics to achieve a coherent racial and musical identity.¹²² Yet ragtime's relationship to black modernity must be recalibrated through its relationship to parody and performance. Ragtime's concomitant rise with the phonograph is dramatically entrenched within the dissemination of coon songs and vaudeville records. An era of increasingly contested sonic and visual claims to "blackness," ragtime is hardly the static signifier or "archive" we assume it to be. Turning to ragtime and its implicit rise through coon songs and vaudeville, it becomes increasingly difficult to examine ragtime simply as an object of analysis or

¹²¹ "Syncopé Fever: James Weldon Johnson and the Black Phonographic." *Representations*. Vol. 96, No. 1 (Fall 2006), 100.

¹²² "The Cultural Matrix of Ragtime in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an ExColored Man*." *Genre* 37.2 (2004): 225–44. See also Salim Washington's "Of Black Bards, Known and Unknown Music as Racial Metaphor in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*." *Callaloo* Vol. 25, Number 1, (Winter 2002).

as an index for stabilized racial meaning. By considering ragtime as an aesthetic practice, we discern its parodic function and its qualities of stylistic re-construction.

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Despite its proliferation into the ignoble popular class of coon songs, quite literally, classical ragtime was in the business of transformation. Mediating the values of racial uplift through values of propriety and an obsession with proper form; ragtime adapted familiar tunes of folk life and rewrote them as brief piano suites affectionately termed as “rags.” The re-visions of popular minstrel and coon song hits provided the inspiration, if not the content, for many of ragtime various iterations. The “rags” also known as brief suites or “anthologies” exemplified the process of “sewing small musical elements into an extended composition” that could be received as a “unified medley.” This characteristic of anthologized musical composition indexes the significant aesthetic and social construction of ragtime that re-imagines the space of black cultural production and commodification histories. It also, for example, re-orient us to the practice of recording that Johnson utilizes in the opening lines of his text. Just as the ex-colored man seeks to use writing as a means to record and “gather up all of the little tragedies of [his] life [to] them into a practical joke on society,” so too will this ragged aesthetic make its way into our formal analysis of the text. Later, we will see how James Weldon Johnson adapts this approach of extended composition and anthologizing within his larger project of racial uplift as a means to contemplate the discursive and performative terrain of a black modern identity.¹²³

¹²³ This will become increasingly evident not only through his *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man* but also with respect to the publications of his respective anthologies. We might consider the ways in which Johnson engages a practice of *ragged composition* that extends the work of *Autobiography* to his other publications.

Ragtime's significance as a cultural marker of the modern American era registers a number of sources that unite strains of urban and rural localities, black and white structures of feeling, and American, African and European influences of musical composition and performance. Viewed in this light, there is little claim to 'authenticity' that can be made with any regard to ragtime's diverse origins. Yet it is crucial for us understand ragtime as a climactic threshold for the variations of black creative genius that would inevitably publish their talent under the auspicious and yet narrow confines of the ragtime era. Evolving directly from the tradition of the minstrel stage, ragtime music combined the folk melodies of black plantation life with musical technique, organization and syncopation. The result was a series of musical formations, written explicitly for instrumental performance on the piano that derived from a brief quadrille like structure. At its core, ragtime was black dance music, composed and written for the piano that bridged the social and racial histories of a growing American public. In their indispensable book, *The Art of Ragtime*, William Schafer and Johannes Riedel comment on this quality of ragtime: "Ragtime, then, became a folk medium for transmitting the spirit and substance of black dance/folk tunes in the shape of a decorous and aesthetically interesting structure."¹²⁴ Thus composed with a specific eye/ear to structure and black feeling, the earliest ragtime composers sought to re-organize the performance of black life as it had been previously presented through plantation tunes on the minstrel stage. Schafer and Riedel describe this careful task as an aesthetic *and* social struggle at re-presenting black life even as early ragtime musicians were made complicit in their own debasement of the form through methods of popular publishing techniques. It is through this aim to re-present and re-construct elements of black style

¹²⁴ Schafer, 15.

and sound that places ragtime and the instrumentality of the phonograph to its circulation and success precariously within the scope of racial uplift.

In her article on ragtime and the black phonographic voice, Katherine Biers underscores the role of ragtime in our understanding of a burgeoning American modern culture. Biers observes, “Drenched in nostalgia, collected and displayed in the histories of ‘lost rags’ and ornate songbooks, and used as the seemingly required accompaniment to all early documentary film clips, ragtime ‘commences’, in the Derridean sense—it maternally conserves the ‘voice’ of America”.¹²⁵ It seems relevant to consider this notion of ragtime as rehearsing a form of archival practice that, much like Goldsby’s “cultural logic,” registers the complex ways of perceiving race and self in the modern era; but it also seems just as necessary, if not exciting, to consider the ways in which ragtime also *revised* the expectations of performing and perceiving an American archive.

While Biers’s observations on the role of ragtime in situating the black phonographic voice provide an extremely useful frame through which we might reconsider the role of the phonographic voice, it misses its definitive potential for subversion, play and irony. If the ragtime aesthetic is one that is entrenched within our sense of the phonographic, our definitions of the black phonographic voice must include a dialogue around the forms of affective rebellion mediated through the technology of modern sounds and their stylizations. In this regard the phonographic becomes a way of unmooring blackness from a fixed point of value, class, and feeling. James Weldon Johnson’s own literary phonography wrestles with these fixed points, culminating in the ragged composition of *Autobiography* and its dramatic reconfiguration of the

¹²⁵ Biers, 100.

capital joke—the barely audible, but persistent echo of a laugh that fleets in and out of the pages of the text.

Weaving a series of dramatic scenes together under the guise of an autobiography of a ragtime musician, Johnson formalistically utilizes a ragtime aesthetic to construct and deconstruct our expectations of the text as a static. As early as the preface, we learn that the function of the text will be to provide a “glimpse behind the scenes” of the “race-drama” waged on both sides of the color line. Indeed Johnson prepares his audience to receive a disparate set of scenes, recollected with careful jumps forward, digressions, and active omissions. Numerous chapters across the text posture the narrator in different voices; at times we receive the analytical vantage point of dispassionate “spectator” offering a “study” of a life lived, while other moments are rendered with tender delight or devastation on the “capital joke played upon society.” Rather than allowing the various shifts in narration to diminish what some have read as the credibility of the narrator, I suggest rather, that Johnson’s novel functions as an example of his ragged composition. Read as disparate parts of a text, composed and organized together for a unified performance, each of Johnson’s chapters provides difference and development upon what is presumed “unreliable” and “ambiguous.” Calling into relief the form and function of the novel, Johnson’s *Autobiography* makes ragged our attempts to read the text as anything but dynamic. It is simultaneously “curious tale” and a “biography of the race”; a “human document” and “work of fiction.” In this way, the text, as Katherine Biers suggests, is “porous, open, ‘ragged’, archiving black performances in a way that preserves their energy and originality, yet allow[ing] their discrepant forms to invade and transform the voice that seeks to contain them.”¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Biers, 118.

As a mode of process rather than precedent ragged composition interrogates these questions of form, style and content by also distinguishing itself as a practice that draws and departs from black musical forms. Where blues and jazz are typically characterized as improvisatory musics, ragtime aesthetics are “not improvisatory music, [and] not based on the principle of theme-and-variations which controls jazz performance.”¹²⁷ Edwards describes the dynamic possibilities of reading beyond the form/content divide with respect to a blues and black vernacular aesthetic, revealing, “part of the radical force of such writing might very well be that it subverts this structure/event without inverting it.”¹²⁸ In a similar way, ragtime, precursor and concomitant of the blues, utilizes disparate genres and forms that result in subversive performances that still bear the recognition of the structure itself. Ragtime music, already a form expressly concerned with form, dance and expressive motion embodies this subversive re-organization. Schafer and Riedel highlight this critical yet subtle stylistic point for us explaining that we must take care to appreciate the nuance in embodied in ragtime’s “quiet rebellion of irony.” They develop this idea of “reflexive irony” by quoting the ideas of one critic,

Yet while rag is a composed music, an emulation of white techniques that seems to belie the instinctual character of American Negro music, it is also in an odd way a parody music—like the cakewalk from which it had descended. And we cannot be sure whether it parodies the white man’s image of the Negro or the Negro himself.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ See Brent H. Edwards, “The *Seemingly Eclipsed Window* of Form: James Weldon Johnson's Prefaces.” In *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O’ Meally, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 585.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ As quoted in Schafer & Riedel, 17.

Within this complex reading of a ragtime poetics the potential for the black phonographic voice re-emerges as elements of parody and reflexive irony characterize the overlap of the formally composed *rag* and its suggestively subversive re-versioning. The looking glass effect here is doubled by the formalistic quality of ragtime, composed of disparate cultural and generic elements that *rag upon* the original version. From this angle, the process of raggin' becomes as much an artistic and formalistic re-construction as much as it becomes a quotidian practice of parody, satire and ironic reflexivity. To rag then is the verb that mobilizes the black phonographic voice. It is the movement engendered through Mackey's transfiguration from noun to verb—that enables affective terrain of the joke and its trembling laugh. Consequently, this layer of subterfuge anticipates the discussions of irony in Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and constructively complicates fixed readings of race in the modern era.

But it is crucial to emphasize here that ragtime was not only a vehicle for transmission but also provided a style—a social practice—of constructing and composing materials as well. Ragtime composers such as Scott Joplin were all too familiar with this practice. Joplin's *Ragtime Dance* and folk opera *Treemonisha* are exemplary in this regard with both serving as imaginative adaptations of formal genres (the ballet and the opera). To *rag* then, for Joplin and others, included this method of formal and stylistic re-construction into which he is able to weave and negotiate elements of black musical identity. William Schafer and Riedel comment on the way Joplin used his piano rags to expressively portray ragtime's "folk roots" while encouraging us to read his "persistent intention of organization his music as a complex art form." This method of organization and composition becomes the crucial way to re-read Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as we interpret his imaginative re-conceptualization of ragtime and race.

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Straddling an immense period of political and national unrest, ragtime develops and matures as a musical form most prominently between the years 1890 and 1915. During these years, known to most as the era “just before jazz,” ragtime occupies a transitional and simultaneously rapid ascension into American cultural memory. Dubbed the music that “grew up with the race”, and the music that “like Topsy, jes’ grew,” ragtime produces simultaneous competing discourses of progress and black roots. For James Weldon Johnson however, these two poles are not diametrically opposed. Johnson writes extensively on ragtime, its origins, and its social function in his prefaces to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* and *Book of American Negro Spirituals*. In the former, Johnson comments that ragtime “like Topsy, jes’ grew” and strives to reconstruct ragtime’s roving historical footprint. Seeking to reverse the tendency to “divorce Ragtime from the Negro” Johnson claims ragtime’s blackness, locating its “Negro origin[s]” across the “questionable resorts of St Louis, Memphis, and other Mississippi towns.”¹³⁰ Ragtime’s development across and between itinerant black performers who shared rather than transcribed their performances in clubs, salons, and street corners is suggested here by Johnson’s use of Topsy imagery. This “jes grew” reference appears throughout the preface and Johnson deploys the imagery to account for ragtime’s seemingly spontaneous development as well as its black roots. Johnson’s Topsy imagery further suggests the difficulty of placing ragtime within its appropriate context(s) of blackness and originality. For example, while Johnson describes the

¹³⁰ See James Weldon Johnson’s Preface to *Book of American Negro Poetry*, 12.

colored performers of the South that make up ragtime's black origins, he also describes the erasure of ragtime's "Negro origins" by white appropriation.¹³¹

That Johnson uses Topsy's imagery to describe ragtime throughout his preface should not be overlooked and it allows us to draw connections between the greater work of Topsy within New Negro narratives (as seen in chapter one). What does it mean that the figure of Topsy marks a site of renovation and innovation for black literature? Furthermore, what does it mean that Johnson's configuration of ragtime depends so heavily on upon the most visible female character of blackface minstrelsy? We must account for the ways in which these narratives of modernity utilize gender to appropriate power in various ways. It demands that continue to develop questions that extend the work of scholars such as Jayna Brown, whose exceptional work on black female performance undergirds an analysis of the modern. How do we account for the gendered history of ragtime through this image? For Brown, black women's invocations of Topsy on the stage harness Topsy as "expressive resilience."¹³² As a figure of "black female unruliness," Topsy's invocation embodies the "articulations of diasporic movement, [and] of technologies of time and displacement."¹³³ Through black performance, Brown instructs us to read the "multiple articulations" of Topsy's rebellious presence. That Johnson's preface re-deploys Topsy as a metaphor for thinking through the shifting, unruly, and heavily commercialized history of ragtime suggests that ragtime is not merely a recording era novelty. In fact, in Johnson's account, ragtime's 'jes grew songs' contain "something of the real poetry, of that elusive thing which

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Duke University Press, 2008), 57.

¹³³ See Brown, 58-59.

nobody can define and that you can only tell is there when you feel it.” Drawing upon Topsy’s resilient, “elusive”, and multiply signified recalibrations, Johnson situates ragtime’s capacity for commodification and subversion. The “elusive” and Topsy-eque qualities of ragtime tellingly echo Dollard’s remarks on black humor: “Negro humor is often so delicate that it is hard to locate, and one comes off with the baffled general feeling that the whites have been lampooned without knowing quite how.”¹³⁴

Johnson uses Topsy as a figure of black signifying to relay the subversive histories of black performance traditions. In aligning ragtime with Topsy’s provocative force, Johnson accomplishes much here. His appropriation suggests ragtime’s much obscured gendered history while also enacting minstrelsy and ragtime as productive resources for black cultural advancement. Ragtime’s origins may be elusive, troublesome, and slyly irreverent, but it (and its accompanying forms),¹³⁵ in Johnson’s estimation, is “a vast mine” worthy of the highest artistic praise.

Yet Johnson’s Topsy is not merely subversive because he invokes her name and image. Although we will do well to note the ways in which black female voices have been represented/usurped/obscured by sympathetic allies and hostile audiences alike, I want to suggest nonetheless that Johnson’s invocation of Topsy lends itself to a reading of the black joke as it, in Jayna Brown’s words, “rags the master’s time.” Johnson develops *Autobiography* within ragtime’s unruly contexts, and it is through ragtime that his concern for the black joke emerges.

¹³⁴ As qtd in Lawrence Levine, 313.

¹³⁵ The other forms to which Johnson writes extensively within his Preface bears brief remark here. In addition to ragtime, the cakewalk, the spirituals, and the folk tales of Joel Chandler Harris are “distinctive American products” that exemplify the “Negroes gift to America”. Johnson, 10.

At the center of Johnson's joke then, emerges the potential for reading his novels, lyrics, and writings with "expressive resiliency" and often, his comic strategies. Given that Johnson inserts a female figure within what I am reading as this ragged aesthetic, how do we read the black joke within Johnson's novel and recordings? At its core, the black joke appears predicated on the performance of a *gendered sonic history*.

Raggin' It

Johnson's joking strategies directly challenged minstrelsy's joke. Describing the context for the appropriation of black cultural forms, Eric Lott provides context for this dilemma in research on minstrelsy.¹³⁶

Minstrelsy divested blacks not only of their claims to representation, but also, and most significant to what I have been arguing throughout this project, it effectively disavowed forms of black sociality that could be enabled through the uses of humor and pleasure. The pernicious consequences of these forces subjected blacks to forms of policing, ridicule, and degradation by white audiences that was then reinscribed in damaging ways by ideologies of assimilation, uplift, and respectability politics. Too often Johnson is read as a mere observer or chronicler of the black expressive traditions that defy such readings. Taken together, Johnson's literature *and* lyrics exemplify the complex forms of black social life that emerge beyond the horizon of New Negro ideology. Johnson's active reconstruction of minstrel humor enacts precisely what Daphne

¹³⁶ See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Brooks describes as “rupture” in black musical theatre and performance.¹³⁷ To extend Brooks’s point, Johnson’s innovative approach enacts forms of *comic* dissonance¹³⁸ redeployed across sonic recording, stage, and print.

Johnson’s comic songs produced with Bob Cole and brother Rosamund lend themselves to precisely this mode of comic analysis. Combined, their ragtime and show recordings meaningfully intervene within this discourse and enable alternative readings of Johnson’s investment in “records.”¹³⁹ By analyzing but a few of these “ragged performances,” I expand on previous work that has suggested that Johnson’s work is phonographic. Taking these cues, I listen for the ways in which the black joke is reconstituted through phonographic performance in order to discern its elusive and dynamic qualities.

In 1898 Rosamund Johnson, James’s young brother, returned from The New England Conservatory of Music, having just played a prominent role in John Isham’s *Oriental America*, one of the first touring variety shows. Both Rosamond and Johnson has been raised in a home filled with books and musical instruction, with both emerging as capable instrumentalists and writers. Not surprisingly then, by years end Rosamond and James began writing the story and lyrics for the production of their first musical comedy, *Tolosa, or the Royal Document*. By 1899 the brothers

¹³⁷ See Daphne Brooks, 212-226. See especially 224.

¹³⁸ See Brooks’s discussion of dissonance on p. 222. For extended discussions on dissonance see also Brent Edwards, *Practice of Diaspora* and “Seemingly Eclipsed Window of Form”.

¹³⁹ Unlike Noelle Morissette’s most recent analysis of Johnson’s “soundscapes” within the novel, I am less interested in Johnson’s generic approach to sound and performance and I am more interested in the ways in which Johnson’s joke records and reconstitutes performances of the black self. See Noelle Morissette’s *James Weldon Johnson’s Modern Soundscapes, 1900-1938*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013), 49.

would meet some of the most prominent figures of the stage in their attempts to bring the production to life. It is during this time that they meet the likes of “stage giants” including Oscar Hammerstein, Will Marion Cook, May Irwin, Ernest Hogan, Bert Williams and George Walker. Most importantly however, the brothers would be introduced to Bob Cole, and together, they would successfully write and perform hits that would change the stage and recording industry.

Despite the brother’s best efforts, *Tolosa* was never produced on the stage. In *Along this Way*, Johnson implies that perhaps the score intimidated managers, writing, “It is possible that the managers were a bit afraid of it; the Spanish American War had just closed, and they may have thought that audiences would consider a burlesque of American imperialism unpatriotic.”¹⁴⁰ It may be possible that *Tolosa* serves as a kind of predecessor for the critiques of American imperialism that later take place in black musical theatre. Consider for example that of the over a dozen plays that dominate early black musical comedy, more than half of them land scathing critiques on U.S. imperialism, and an equally significant number of them were produced in part by some member of the Cole and Johnson trio.

James Weldon Johnson’s decision to move to permanently move to New York in 1901 officially launched his investment in black musical comedy as a viable business and creative decision.¹⁴¹ In *Along This Way* Johnson describes his “delight” in entering the world of a new

¹⁴⁰ Johnson, *Along this Way*, 151.

¹⁴¹ Scholars have speculated that Johnson’s near-lynching in Jacksonville prompted his flight to New York and perhaps even his career into the world of musical comedy. Both Goldsby and Morrisette describe Johnson’s preoccupation with his near-lynching as a catalyst for the ideas that crystallize across *Autobiography*. If such speculations are true, this perhaps suggests that Johnson’s turn to musical comedy proves to be not only a prudent business decision, but a creative outlet for working through life’s “tragic” elements. This is not to reduce or conflate the fictional work of Johnson’s novel with his biographical details but rather to understand the ways in which we might read the formative ways in which Johnson’s

Negro Bohemia. I quote Johnson's passage here at length to preserve the excitement and possibility Johnson attributes to the world of black musical comedy. We read,

These glimpses of life [...] showed me a new world—an alluring world, a tempting world a world of greatly lessened restraints, a world of fascinating perils; but above all, a world of tremendous artistic potentialities. Up to this time, outside of polemical essays on the race question, I had not written a single line that had any relation to the Negro. I now began to grope toward a realization of the importance of the American Negro's cultural background and his creative folk art, and to speculate on the superstructure of conscious art that might be reared upon them. My first step in this general direction was taken in a song that Bob Cole, my brother, and I wrote in conjunction in those [...] days. It was an attempt to bring a higher degree of artistry to Negro songs, especially with regard to the text. The Negro songs then the rage were known as 'coon songs' and were concerned with jamborees of various sorts and the play of razors, with gastronomical delights of chicken, pork chops, and watermelon, and with the experiences of the red-hot 'mamma' and their never too faithful 'papas.' These songs were for the most part crude, raucous, bawdy, often obscene. Such elements are frequently excellencies [sic] in folk-songs, but rarely so in conscious imitations. The song we did was a little love song called *Louisiana Lize* and was a forerunner of a style that displaced the old 'coon songs'. (ATW 153)

work across form (fiction, lyrics, autobiography, historical record) strives to “develop a [new] sense of humor” (Johnson 10). For more on the speculation of how Johnson's near lynching gets theorized across fiction and works see *Spectacular Secret* and *Soundscapes*.

Johnson's palpable excitement for the world of black musical comedy defines the "tremendous artistic potentialities" of working re-deploying strategies of racial humor for representation. Johnson's willingness to accept the "perils" of such an approach conveys his awareness to the ways that caricatures do a sort of violence to the possibilities of black life. Yet still, Johnson is inspired to "speculate on the superstructure of conscious art" that might be gleaned from working with the material. Johnson's desire to appropriate coon songs through a "superstructure of conscious art" complicates readings of Johnson that narrowly identify him as a unimaginative leader of the Talented Tenth. Indeed, it becomes significant to point out that Johnson does not simply re-imagine the ragtime coon song, rather, he transfigures the very nature of its novelty status thus putting into circulation an altogether different practice of composition. We might say here, that Johnson's achievement lay in reconstituting the joke; composing the new grounds and material which would be used in popular recordings and letters.¹⁴²

The partnership between the Johnson brothers and Bob Cole officially signaled their meteoric rise to fame. The years 1899 to 1902 proved especially successful for the Cole and Johnson trio, who by 1903, had published over thirty songs to popular acclaim. Over their career they would publish some two hundred hits together. By 1903, *The Washington Post* reported that almost every Broadway musical managed to feature one of the Cole and Johnson trio's songs, and in that same year *The New York Sun* would honorably dub them as "Those Ebony Offenbachs." The popularity of the Cole and Johnson trio during this time represented a

¹⁴² I certainly do not mean to suggest here that Johnson eradicates racist humor through his composition efforts, but as numerous scholars, reviewers, and artists have attested, "the work of the Cole and Johnson Brothers transformed the popular stage." See James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* and David Krasner *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*.

considerable achievement for the group not only as financial success, but for the ways in which it signaled an active interrogation of minstrel caricature.

In many ways, Johnson established various ways of working around, through and for the record. In *Along this Way*, Johnson records his career as a musical composer in strikingly positive terms, emphasizing once again the crucial role that these new compositions would have on the stage and recording industry:

At the end of another six months they gave us a check for an amount more than double that of the previous check, and we were at a height of popularity and success equal, at least, to that of any other writers of popular songs in America. We had a clean business record and a list of hits that included: *The Maiden with the Dreamy Eyes*; *Mandy*, *Won't You Let Me Be Your Beau*; *Nobody's Lookin' but the Owl and the Moon*; *Tell Me, Dusky Maiden*; *The Old Flag Never Touched the Ground*; *My Castle on the Nile*; *Under the Bamboo Tree*; and *Oh, Didn't He Ramble*. We had written a new song for Miss Cahill, *The Congo Love Song*, that she was to sing and to make as famous as *Under the Bamboo Tree*; and there were others still to follow. In the fullness of our vogue there were times when songs of ours were being sung in three or four current musical productions on Broadway.

Here the sheer influence of the Johnson and Cole trio alters the very content of Broadway. Together with Bob Cole, the Johnson brothers sought to harness black musical comedy, song, and stage life as viable alternatives for the advancement of black actors and composers. Bob

Cole's "Colored Actor's Declaration of Independence" helped shaped the demands of this new artistic production and significantly altered the space of comic compositions.¹⁴³

In some cases, such as *Louisianna Lize*, *Oh Didn't He Ramble*, and *Under the Bamboo Tree*, the Johnson brothers re-used material from older melodies to create new novelty hits. Other songs included readily within the stage material for musical comedy pieces explicitly vary their use of comic strategy to challenge white audiences. David Krasner describes this approach across a trio of co-authored comic material by Johnson and others that eventually contribute to *In Dahomey*:

The three plays can be seen as portraying degrees of black representation: *Jes Lak White Folks* satirizes black pretensions as well as white consumerism; *The Cannibal King* also uses satire, humor, and folk culture, but in a benign way—it offends neither blacks or whites; *In Dahomey* is a show for whites to enjoy, though it includes the innuendoes designed for the benefit of African Americans. By viewing the three plays as a continuum, we may be able to account for the appearance of some middle ground between outright parody of whites in *Jes Lak White Folks* to the combination of parody, self-satire, and general amusement in the other plays.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Cole's declaration should not be overlooked. In it he not only demands that there be "no divided [theatre] houses—our races must be seated from the boxes back" but he demands a new kind of creative effort for musical and stage composition: "We are going to have our own shows. We are going to write them ourselves. We are going to have our own stage manager and our own orchestra leader out front..." Cole's declaration called for blacks to write and compose shows *for other blacks* and anticipates Du Bois later calls for a black theatre run "by us, for us, near us, and about us." Signaling a deliberate turn away from white proprietorship in black musical comedy and stage revues, Cole successfully launched the first show produced, directed, and performed by black artists in 1898. See Bob Cole, "Colored Actors Declaration of Independence." Unknown source, (1898). For more on Bob Cole's influential role in shaping black musical theatre see David Krasner, *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness*, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Krasner, 66.

These varied approaches exemplify in part, the range of Johnson's turn from novelty object to strategic sociality and performance via various modes of comic art.¹⁴⁵ Johnson's involvement in all three plays¹⁴⁶ alongside the comic material of his recorded hits considerably postures a reading of Johnson as employing methods of parody, satire, and comic exchange across his other material. For example, Johnson's work on *The Cannibal King* and *Jes Lak White Folks* has been described as "full of inside jokes," and perhaps anticipates the "inside joke" of Johnson's novel *Autobiography*. Johnson's theatrical plays "attempted to create a comedy based on black folk culture."¹⁴⁷ *Jes Lak White Folks* for example, lampoons blacks who abandon their folk culture in an effort to imitate white standards of success and value. Parodic treatments in other stage and recorded hits such as "Leader of the Colored Aristocracy" and "Under the Bamboo Tree"¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Johnson has been in fact credited as an author, composer, and lyricist in all three plays across various accounts. *The Cannibal King* libretto housed at The Library of Congress indicates composer unknown yet cites both Bob Cole and James Weldon Johnson as authors. Similarly accounts for the inception of *Jes Lak White Folks* between Will Marion Cook and Paul Laurence Dunbar include Johnson as an active mediator and contributor of material for the play. See Marva Carter, *Swing Along*.

¹⁴⁶ There has been some confusion as to precisely which songs in *In Dahomey* were authored by whom. While some accounts distinguish James Weldon Johnson from the other lyricists and composers of *In Dahomey* (the musical), others attribute authorship simultaneously to Johnson, Will Marion Cook, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. I attribute such confusion to the often unattributed use of ragtime and vaudeville material so common to the era but also to more common interpolation and re-use of material. All three of these shows for example explicitly shared plot lines and lyrics. For more on the shared plots of these three shows, See Krasner, *Parody, Resistance, Double Consciousness*, 63. For conflicting accounts of *In Dahomey*'s authorship see Thomas Riis's *Music and Scripts of In Dahomey* which does not attribute Johnson as a composer or creator (xxi), while David Krasner, Marva Carter, and Cedric Robinson read Johnson's active participation within the evolution of material leading up to the play. Notably, James Hatch's *Black Theatre USA* does not list Johnson as lyricist of the show but merely states "lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and others." Given my research, I am more inclined to agree with David Krasner's assertion that all three were a collaborative effort. See Carter, *Swing Along*, and Robinson, *Forgeries of Meaning*.

¹⁴⁷ Krasner, 56.

¹⁴⁸ For example, Johnson's "Under the Bamboo Tree" utilized these strategies of parody to re-work the lyrics and melody to "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen." The comic hit emphasized the dusky maiden and primitive jungles common to turn of the century vaudeville hits, but highlighted the love story between a "Zulu from Matabooloo" and his "jungle lady." The chorus is as follows,

If you lak-a-me lak I lak-a-you
And we lak-a-both the same,

continue in this vein as Johnson wields parody and satire as a tool of social critique through sonic and stage performance. Critiquing “high society’s hypocrisy” and the uncritical ambition of blacks who aspire to whiteness, Johnson both celebrates and usefully interprets the comic strategies of popular song and stage.

Ragging Time, Passing Time

Johnson’s deployment of ragtime aesthetic in *The Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man* re-fashions its relationship to a black past and black futures by engaging a series of literary devices. Using some of the most popular antebellum devices of the nineteenth century, Johnson’s text draws from a number of tropes, practices and traditions that inform his ability to shape the text fluidly as a dynamic text that then participates in a modern/ist literary tradition. Houston Baker’s essay “A Forgotten Prototype: *The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man and Invisible Man*” is exemplary of this point. Describing Johnson’s Autobiography as a “prime example of twentieth century symbolism” that functions as both a history and a confession of the talented tenth, Baker describes Johnson’s text as ensconced within a black literary tradition stretching as far back as the slave narratives of William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass. Baker’s careful analysis does much to highlight Johnson’s use of a set of literary practices that borrow from a well-known black tradition of literature, including what is perhaps the most popularized trope of the era: the tragic

I lak-a-say,
This very day,
I lak-a change your name;
'Cause I love-a-you and love-a you true
And if you-a love-a me.
One live as two, two live as one,
Under the bamboo tree.

mulatto. But we must be careful to separate Johnson's re-deployment of such tropes as simplistic copies of these devices. What we have instead, are a series of carefully maneuvered revisions on the nature, form and style of these devices making autobiography an oftentimes unwieldy, inconsistent but profound bridge of nineteenth and twentieth century frames of black thought and identity.

Gracing the opening pages of Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex Colored Man* lies an inconspicuous yet provocative preface that frames for its readers just what they might expect from a text so strangely titled. The preface offers that the text will provide a "vivid and startling new picture of conditions brought about by the race question in the United States". Never before, according to the preface, have we yet had "a composite and proportionate presentation of the entire race, embracing all of its various groups and elements". Such lofty claims and framing gestures would certainly have been familiar to a nineteenth century reading public, who was well accustomed to the obligatory "preface" or "introduction" by an authenticating power. These stamps of approval, veracity and endorsement by white patrons were such a defining feature of slave narratives, that only a handful of texts exist without such devices. Johnson's use of a preface with regard to *Autobiography* is significant for a number of reasons but mainly in the way that it parodies the authenticating preface device of the nineteenth century. Under its auspicious anonymous publication in 1912, a preface signed THE PUBLISHERS, placed the text squarely in the tradition of nineteenth century slave narratives with a critical difference: Johnson himself penned the preface under the ruse of a publisher's note of approval. Johnson's decision to pen a preface in this tone and manner casts an ironic if not satirical light on the text as framing the circumstances for its own mode of passing. Indeed, passing itself off as autobiographical, Johnson

uses of the prefatory note to rag the expectations of genre and content as part of a strategic layering of irony and performativity at work within the text.

Johnson's careful framing of the text in this way necessitates precisely the kind of shrewd and careful critical reading audience that he describes in *Along This Way* and challenges how we might read this text as performative on a number of levels. It again points us to the way in which Johnson deploys a ragged aesthetic in his composition and construction of the text; one that informs his developing sense of black modern identity and musical performance. It tellingly reveals the excitement borne of working through prose, and "surmounting the technical difficulties" through the varying allowances the form offered. His operative terms: the "flexibility," "comprehensiveness," and "latitude" emphasize the pleasure and creative freedom that inspire his work with ragtime. In this way, ragtime emerges early on as a literary strategy that could confront the social and political implications of "newness" in the early twentieth century. His work with ragtime posits such freedom at the forefront of a black modern project.

Johnson's ragtime aesthetic reaches far beyond nineteenth century literary practices however. Robert Stepto has negotiated the "modern" status of the text with those of the nineteenth century as a "textual event... of differing degrees of newness."¹⁴⁹ Indeed we might consider the ways in which *Autobiography* participates in a modern context that reveals the construction and deconstruction race around the mass mediated technologies and inventions of the era. The "newness" of *Autobiography* may be in fact mediated by the roughness of its ragged

¹⁴⁹ Stepto, 44.

edges, by the ways in which it calls attention to itself as a work of performativity that dissolves and evolves just as we get near enough to it.

Alexander Weheliye's work in *Phonographies* offers a useful model for helping us think through the complex formulations of blackness, modernity and the ragtime era. Weheliye argues that "we need to probe the conditions for the im/possibility of modern black sounds: black sounds are made perceptible in the modern era by sonic technologies, and these technologies have been shaped significantly by black music."¹⁵⁰ Black musical performance, and by extension Johnson's ragtime poetics, must be considered as constitutive of and made possible by these conditions of (im)possibility and invisibility. As suggested by Johnson's deliberate title, the text conjures the im/possibility at the heart of these transformations of ragging and composition.

Johnson's ragtime poetics enables these imaginative ruptures at the site of racial legibility by performing the im/possibility of modern black sounds as they are transformed, disembodied and re-deployed. After witnessing a ragtime performer upon his visit to the New York scene, the ex-colored man describes being held in thrall by the ragged performance. The scene in all its sweeping description is worth quoting here at length as it reveals one of the building moments of the ex-colored man's ragtime aesthetic:

Then he began to play; and such playing! I stopped talking to listen. It was music of a kind I had never heard before. It was music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions often consisting of an

¹⁵⁰ Weheliye, 20.

abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect. And, too, the player,—the dexterity of his left hand in making rapid octave runs and jumps was little short of marvelous; and with his right hand, he frequently swept half the keyboard with clean cut chromatics which he fitted in so nicely as to never fail to arouse in his listener a sort of pleasant surprise at the accomplishment of the feat. This was ragtime music...¹⁵¹

Indeed this was ragtime music for Johnson's ex-colored man; this music that demanded physical response, full of intricate rhythms and audacious resolutions. Johnson's rousing description of ragtime depends as much upon a marked racial signature of a blackness as it does the subtle special effects of blackness performed. Thus the performance of ragtime here becomes a sign of blackness not through the noted "dark" skin of performer, but rather through the various effects of his performance that are read as elemental to a black musical tradition. Of the abrupt jumps and unexpected accents, Johnson's ex-colored man constructs a scene laden with his own readings of black performative musicality. Notably, it is a musicality that is "clean cut" with "chromatics" and rousing special effects. This technical attention also bears noting that chromatic effects also conspicuously calls attention to the one characteristic of racial difference that the novel interrogates as the primary marker of race: skin color. In terms of discerning a black musical tradition that inspires the ex-colored man's evolving aesthetic towards ragtime, the ex-colored man ironically deploys an attention to *chromatics*—a sly re-imagining of a black musical

¹⁵¹ Johnson, 61.

practice that occupies both the aural and the visual; an interrogation of embodied racial difference through sonic and visual effects.

More than half of the novel is spent working through the ex-colored man's musical development towards the goal of ragtime composition and performance but how might such musical development factor into the narrators understanding of humor? We have already seen Johnson's narrator developing a sense of humor early in the text. He continues throughout the narrative to sonically test the limits of his humor. One episode for example provides a shrewd example of the narrator's sly attempts to describe his disdain for duet performances. We read: "I have never been a really good accompanist because my ideas of interpretation were always too strongly individual. I constantly forced my *accelerandos* and *rubatos* upon the soloist, often throwing the duet entirely out of gear."¹⁵² Indeed we might read this as a moment that anticipates the absurdly comic discord that will inevitably figure so prominently in the end of the text, but in its more immediate significance, this scene emphasizes the ex-colored man's developing musical sensibilities as one that re-figures his relationship to an audience. Read as a revision of his mother's folk musical tradition, we might read this tendency of performing "too strongly" as one that the narrator characterizes as performative racial feeling, one that relied heavily upon the influence of his mother's training. At a crucial moment in the text Johnson's narrator describes this complex sense of racial feeling and (re)interpretation through performance:

"...I always tried to interpret a piece of music. Very early I acquired that knack of using the pedals which makes the piano a sympathetic, singing instrument; quite a

¹⁵² Johnson, 18.

different thing from the source of hard or blurred sounds it so generally is. I think this was due not entirely to natural artistic temperament, but largely to the fact that I did not begin to learn the piano by counting out exercises, but by trying to reproduce the quaint songs which my mother used to sing, with all their pathetic turns and cadences.”¹⁵³

A number of important aspects are brought forth in this short scene. Firstly, Johnson’s narrator underscores the role of interpretation and performative feeling during his musical performances by drawing our attention to the racial feeling he ascribes to folk musical performance. Learning to utilize the interpretation of music as a key component of his repertoire, the ex-colored man describes in detail how the “quaint songs” and “pathetic turns” of his mother’s songs simultaneously inform not only how he reads the music, but also how he transforms the overall effect of both the instrument and of his performance. In this mode, Johnson’s narrator re-ascribes racial feeling as not only a performative guise but also, he underscores and transforms the very instrumentality of black modern musical performance, making it as much a question of interpretation and legibility as it is a question of racial color and natural ability.

Scenes such as this one capture the seemingly elusive quality of embodied racial difference and feeling across this text. It reveals Johnson’s creative process as one that unravels the tenets of legibility, performance and racial authenticity and suggests that we re-imagine the methodologies of perceiving racial politics in a modern era. As we move deeper into Johnson’s development of ragtime as a symbol and as aesthetic practice our analysis gathers the force around a useful set of guiding queries: How do we understand Johnson’s “dramatic sketches” as

¹⁵³ Johnson, 17.

temporally discrepant ruptures that re-organize our relationship to reading/listening and perceiving blackness and whiteness? What are the mechanisms of visual and sonic modernity at work in this piece that become legible through the formalistic and stylistic qualities of ragtime?

Novel Forms

I have been arguing that Johnson's attempt to alter the reception of black records¹⁵⁴ emerges within the space of two overlapping social contexts. Johnson comes to recognize ragtime and black musical comedy as significant avenues for staging the critical intervention needed for not only the "image of the black in the white imagination" but also, for how blacks understood, perceived, and imagined themselves as "co-creators." In this section I point to the composition of *Autobiography* as one that directly corresponds to Johnson's ragged aesthetic—a practice limned with his concern for troubling the reception of *records* as official sites of knowledge *and* sonic scripts within a popular archive of "black" performances—but also to another figure that radically shapes how we understand the role of the phonographic across the development of black sonic modernity: George W. Johnson. Together, both Johnsons attune us to the various subversive

¹⁵⁴ In *Phonographies* Alexander Weheliye suggests the critical flexibility of the term "records" within a context of sonic Afro-modernity. The record is "a definition that stress writing, but does not exclude other modalities." Records conserve materials and transforms content by providing evidence, and also, exist within the means of sonic repetition and reiteration. Among the various definitions of *the record*, Johnson allows us to see the tension between script and sound, archive and reproduction outlined by Weheliye in his assessments of the record and phonograph. See Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, (Duke University Press, 2005) 23-24.

elements of black records by revealing what one level of novel work can do for the other. Put differently, I am most interested here in Johnson's development of the novel alongside and through the early phonograph's most popular recordings of black sound. Listening for the currents of meaning in George Johnson's popular turn of the century hit, "The Laughing Song," I extend trace one notion of these novelty songs and acts against (both) Johnson's more potent wielding of literary and sonic revision. In this way, novelty becomes a method of reading black modern practices across records as well as a way for attuning ourselves further for the punchline of the black joke.

The composition of *Autobiography* compounds Johnson's later interest in historical record. In *Black Manhattan* we see Johnson consciously writing the history of black musical theatre into a history of the city. Similarly, the composition of *Autobiography* shares a similar concern for mapping the currents of black image and sound. Like Johnson's interest in ragtime, prose writing affords a new and "alluring" vehicle for preserving "folk roots." Significantly, Johnson composes his first draft of *Autobiography* within this framework of increased "artistic potentialities" and sonic innovation. The very same year that Johnson shares a first draft with Brander Matthews during a creative writing class at Columbia University he also composes and stages *The Evolution of Ragtime*. Like Johnson's later attempts in *Black Manhattan*, his prefaces, and *Autobiography*, *The Evolution of Ragtime* reflected Johnson's attempt to "illustrate the growth of the forms of negro music from the old days of minstrelsy to the present day." A six-suite musical spectacular, *The Evolution of Ragtime* attempted to trace the development of black sound. A "lavishly staged extravaganza" with a cast of over five hundred, the show opened on December 2, 1903. According to Irvin Berlin, the Cole and Johnson trio pushed the limits of extravagance with "a dozen or more girls garbed in silk gowns of brown and gold" concluding in a climactic cakewalk. Each suite represented an

interpreted variation on a historical period of black musical production with the titles ranging from “The Voice of the Savage” to “Darkies Delights” to “Spirit of the Banjo” and “Sounds of the times.” Each suite was accompanied by a short introductory poem and reflected variations of dialect and verse. In his musical analysis of *The Evolution of Ragtime*, Irvin Berlin notes that each song acts as “building blocks” in preparation for the musical climax at the end of suite six. Despite its culmination in “the modern negro ballad in all its popular rhythm and haunting melody,” *The Evolution of Ragtime* in fact eschewed linear development, opting instead for an appreciation of black sound across distinct but loosely linked stages. If we recall the function of ragtime as formalistically bringing together disparate elements to create a unified medley, then the Cole and Johnson brothers *Evolution of Ragtime* offers an extended musical statement that places black musical production at the forefront of modern culture.

It is significant—as we have seen—that ragtime provides an audible soundtrack and creative opening for Johnson’s creative expression because it is within this environment of artistic growth and potential that the composition of Johnson’s novel emerges. In effect, Johnsons “black Manhattan” becomes the site of a brave new world of black bohemia and literary production. Within this context Johnson experiences the “flexibility” and “freedom of motion” that informs his desire to frame the joke of the text:

The use of prose as a creative medium was new to me; and its latitude, its flexibility, its comprehensiveness, the variety of approaches it afforded for surmounting technical difficulties gave me a feeling of exhilaration, exhilaration similar to that which goes with the freedom of motion. I turned over in my mind again and again my original idea of making the book anonymous.

Johnson's "exhilaration," grows as he considers the potential for the book's reception as a "human document" with no affixed author name. He describes in *Along This Way* his amusement and above all else, a growing sense of comic pleasure as a result:

When the book was published most of the reviewers, though there were some doubters, accepted it as a human document. This was a tribute to the writing, for I had done the book with the intention of it being so taken...I did get a certain pleasure out of anonymity, that no acknowledged book could have given me. The authorship of the book excited the curiosity of literate colored people, and there were [sic] speculation among them as to who the writer might be.

Notably, Johnson's relies on strategies of misrecognition and diversion to build layers of irony into not only the content of the novel, but the composition of the text itself. Such active attempts to obscure authorship and parody "the real" make evident the very tensions of ragtime's practice. As Schafer and Riedel have shown, Johnson appropriates a ragged practice in order to satirize the ironies that accompany producing black cultural records.

But Johnson's ragged composition is incomplete without the sounds of the phonograph's other major black producer and performer, George W. Johnson. Tipping their ears to the bulbed listening tubes of the early phonograph, turn of the century Americans found unprecedented amusement in the loud chortling laughter of George W. Johnson's hit, "The Laughing Song." Offering a seamless rolling chuckle for the duration of the chorus Johnson's hearty performance of cheer swiftly moved from national sensation to international spectacle. Launching a brief career as one of the first black artists to produce records for the explicit consumption of leisure and entertainment, Johnson's hit is a peculiar moment in the history of the phonograph because

it demands that we consider the cultural currency of black affective registers alongside experiences of modernity. Put another way, Johnson's phonographic laugh weds the immateriality of the black voice and its technological recalibrations and continuously asks us to consider how blackness and modernity become constitutive practices of one another. What for example does a black phonographic practice mean for how we imagine the feelings, sounds, and technological affects/effects that shape an era? Can it enliven our sense of the seemingly incommensurable parts of a "new" black identity? And what finally of the laugh, or, the disturbing essence of the joke that resides within these oddly placed cultural products—what can the phonographic do for how we read the development of a black popular and literary aesthetic?

In tuning ourselves to the phonographic practice of George Johnson and James Weldon Johnson, I argue that the problem of amusement previously articulated through Du Bois and other black intelligentsia, is re-imagined as a literary and performative mode of subversive self-fashioning that exceeds the frame of its initial articulation. That these enactments continuously stage the affective economies of racial uplift and popular commodification bear significance to this project here in ways that demand a re-evaluation of black affect as constitutive to modern displays of race, class, and production. Moreover, I am suggesting that we reacquaint ourselves to the unruly unexpected ways that "black fun" can work as stylized black affect and aesthetic practice to encroach forms of modernity and New Negro sensibility.

In order to be able to bring one form of sonic novelty to bear upon another record of sorts captured by James Weldon Johnson's joke, Alexander Weheliye's attention to "sonic Afro-modernity" proves exceptionally helpful. For Weheliye sonic Afro modernity "provides the venue for imagining and producing a variety of cultural practices," a range through which the "compounded materiodiscursive echoes in and around black sounds" might be recognized and

interpreted. I extend Weheliye's theoretical framework of sonic Afro-modernity by reading "the possibilities" occasioned through the disjuncture between sonic and written records. In listening for the ways in which the black joke is *phonographic*, I highlight the de-stabilizing effects of both records in concert of one another.

*

The history of the phonograph evolves across a series of transformations at the turn of the century. Notably, its earliest innovators' insistence upon its use as an office instrument that recorded legal and business proceedings did little once it began its more popular use as an "amusement machine". Affixed with coin slots, a mahogany and glass case, and listening tubes for private listening; the phonograph's first decade could very well be dubbed the recording industry's first and most influential foray into popular amusement. Efforts to re-market the phonograph as office instrument would fail to capture the hearts and wallets of American consumers, who much preferred to be dazzled by the musical sounds of the new "talking machine".

The phonograph's early uses must be read within this context of commodification, desire, and intent. Despite the alternative aims of The Edison company etc. the phonograph's most incipient and widely used purpose hinged upon the cultivation of a listening public hungry for "new" sounds. Throughout the 1890's "phonograph parlors" of all sorts sprung up within and around major American cities. These leisure spots featured multiple phonographs of the coin-operated variety distinctly marketed across boardwalks, city corners, and storefronts. Different

machines allowed listeners to experience short samples of a sonic experience within a public space that could be experienced through re-play again and again.¹⁵⁵

With its limited capabilities, the early phonograph was restricted to the reproduction of only a certain range of sounds. Indeed the first “talking machine” failed to talk at all and could only produce what one witness could describe as a “parody of the human voice”.¹⁵⁶

Improvements to the “talking machine” would soon allow its expanded capabilities to reproduce other sounds such as human voices but with still severe limitations.¹⁵⁷ Significantly, the phonographs later developments would see ethnographers attempting to lay claim to the phonograph as well, using it as an instrument that could assist in the recording of racial difference. Within this twinned context of archive and amusement emerge the tensions within what I am discerning as the black phonographic voice. That George W. Johnson’s laugh becomes the soundtrack of an American listening public’s substantial experience of modern sound suggests that we attune ourselves to the phonographic as a way of tending to the development of a black literary and political aesthetic.

George Johnson’s “Laughing Song” makes prominent the convergence of modernity through “special” and/or “curious” black effects/affects. I want to deliberately pause on the seemingly easy slippage between affectivity and effect here to anticipate a later argument of this chapter¹⁵⁸ that theorizes the relationship between black effects—the elements of production that shape our experience of a thing/event—and black affects—an ability to act and be acted upon

¹⁵⁵ Kenney, 25.

¹⁵⁶ Nasaw, David. *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (CT: Harvard University Press, 1998), 121.

¹⁵⁷ The next stage of improvements were rumored to have best recorded the sounds of animals such as dogs barking etc.

¹⁵⁸ See chapter two of this dissertation.

that re-organizes our approach to normalizing values and shared emotions of a particular movement/force. Significantly, George Johnson's hits were marketed across this mediation of affect and effect. Lauded as curiosity captured through technological marvel, Johnson's booming hearty laugh rehearsed an entertainment-driven American public's desire for commodified racial caricature. Hailed for how well he could sonically perform the role of "the happy darky," Johnson's laugh was deployed both as infectious humorous oddity as well as perceived racialized skill. The marketability of Johnson's "skill" has been read by scholars such as Brian Wagner as crucial to the advertisement of the phonograph as a technology that was "accurate" and "authentic." These impulses towards sonic fidelity influenced the degree to which phonograph was received as a successful technological instrument that fulfilled the pleasure of expectant listeners.¹⁵⁹ Wagner writes, "The *Phonogram*, went so far as to suggest that mechanical reproducibility was a racial dispensation. Like a 'barking dog' or 'neighing horse', the distinctive voice of the black performer made for 'good repetition on the phonograph'." (Wagner, 186). But if we are to define precisely what is distinct about the effects/affects of a black phonographic voice, we must get closer to Johnson's song itself and the laugh that inevitably ruptures how we perceive blackness in the modern era.

George Johnson's lyrics release a scathing howl that stretches the length of the song. Although brief, the lyrics describe the incredulity of a speaker who overhears a series of black characterizations which drive him to respond with seemingly uncontrollable bouts of laughter:

¹⁵⁹ Wagner, Brian. *Disturbing the Peace, Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power after Slavery*. (Harvard University Press, 2009), 186-188.

As I was coming round the corner, I heard some people say,

“Here comes a dandy darky, here he comes this way

His ears are like a snowplow, his mouth is like a trap,

And when he opens it gently you will see a fearful gap”

Chorus:

And then I laughed....[consistent laughing in tune with rhythm]

I just cant help from laughing...[laughing continues]

I just cant help from laughing...[laughing continues]

They said, “His mother was a princess, his father was a prince,

And he’d been the apple of their eye if he had not been a quince.

But he’ll be the King of Africa in the sweet by and by

And when I heard them saying it, why, I laughed until I cried.

Repeat chorus.

Uncontrollable as they may seem, Johnson’s paced, steady laughter sonically re-orientes our perception of the happy darky caricature. Johnson—rumored to have written the song himself—emphasized his performance of blackness by deploying a montage of slurred consonants and heavy dialect. The skill of the sustained laugh reproduced on individual wax cylinders for continuous sale couples with the deliberation of nonverbal marks to emphasize Johnson’s incipient form of pleasure-making. Indeed, Johnson’s hit teeters on a subversive edge; marking its fame in the same decade that ragtime and “coon songs” converge into the burgeoning recording industry, Johnson’s song might be read as a precursor to the infamous Ernest Hogan hit, “All

Coons Look Alike to Me” nearly six years later.¹⁶⁰ The depictions of the “darky” whose “ears are like a snowplow, and mouth is like a trap” prefigures the grossly exaggerated features derived from caricatures of minstrelsy—another form of amusement that fulfilled various white desires for spectacle, racialized curiosity, and nostalgia. If these lineages identify another “trap” of sorts for the figure of the black mouth that Johnson performs in his song how then do we come to a phonographic reading of “The Laughing Song”? While Johnson’s song rehearses these familiar tropes (the excessively wide mouth, the claim to African royalty, and not least of all the perpetually and naturally cheerful black man), the insistent rhythmic laugh that irrupts within the song bears the trace of an elusive *break*—an incommensurable force animated through and against the contemporaneous projects of uplift shaping its defiance. The phonographic, through Johnson’s recurring laugh, appears alongside what Nathaniel Mackey might term a “telling inarticulacy”, and what Fred Moten might term a fugitive outlaw sound.¹⁶¹

My specific attention to the laugh that animates Johnson’s most popular song is motivated by the tension between affective and effective registers of phonographic experience. The laugh transgresses the affective terrain of propriety organized through the idealism of a burgeoning “new” Negro Movement. Thus, when Moten describes the strained, fleeting sounds of a Du Boisian murmur, he elucidates a particular moment within the fugitivity of the black phonographic voice and its mobility as central to the project of racial uplift shaped by New

¹⁶⁰ 1896 had proved to be a crucial year for the modern stage and the “ragtime coon song” industry. In 1896 Ernest Hogan, who would become credited in part for initiating the ragtime era, recorded the infamous “All Coons Look Alike to Me”. An adaptation of a previous “All Pimps Look Alike to Me”, it was Hogan’s version, set to a cakewalk march syncopation, that would become the defining tune of the coon song era.

¹⁶¹ Moten, Fred. “Uplift and Criminality.” In *Next to the Color Line: Gender, Sexuality, and W.E.B. Du Bois* Gillman, Susan Kay, and Alys Eve Weinbaum eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Negro normativity. If my reading of Moten proves accurate, he identifies an affective critique within the limiting, organizing force of Du Bois's ambitious uplift design. This affective critique finds its expression within the phonographic—the technologically mediated sound of inarticulate black performance as an ontological im/possibility. I draw heavily on Moten's advice here to help develop my own reading here of Johnson's laugh as bearing the trace of a phonographic, ragged aesthetic akin to fugitivity:¹⁶²

“...[take] care to note how the voice and the instrument...mutually cut and augment one another in a way that illuminates their already given internal difference and multiplicity. Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It's a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument” (Moten, 336).

Johnson's laugh possesses this outside spirit, moving within and against the special effects of its own spectacular rehearsal and signifying.

Reading the various kinds of novel work that these cultural products enact upon one another allows for a reading of the black joke as phonographic. Just as Johnson's novel develops the joke through the after-the-factness of its recorded quality, so too George Johnson's laugh opens the possibility for hearing the submerged laughter emanating from the text. To listen for the black joke involves listening for the way in which black laughter evades and permeates the historical record.

¹⁶² I am interested in the ways in which Moten's work on fugitivity and Du Bois as outlined in his particular essay on “Uplift and Criminality” is useful for how I am considering Johnson's subversive sound as it operates simultaneously within the text as well as against/outside of it.

With his resounding phonographic black laugh George W. Johnson's joke re-scripts black laughter as ontological disruption *and* as a technology of Afro-modernity. These echoes become important to James Weldon Johnson's novel not simply because they are co-producers within the same era, but because both employ the black joke in strategic ways. Although there is no evidence to the claim that either Johnson influenced the other, I contend that they are still "co-creators" in various senses of the word. Indeed, both manipulate the (phonographic) record to strategically move within and against what Lindon Barrett has called the signing and signing voice.

Concerned as it with the act of recording, as much as it is in composing musical records, *Autobiography* stages the ludic potential between the signing and singing voice. For Barrett, the categories of the signing and singing voice afford an opportunity to assess the value assigned to literacy and orality in black literature and performance. Barrett offers a historical and cultural frame for reading the forces that mark the limitations of value within African American literary and oral traditions, but it is James Weldon Johnson's novel that articulates the dynamic of this interface between sound and sign most profoundly.

The Capital Joke

In the novel, the strongest articulation of the joke comes *after* the lynching scene in which the narrator describes,

The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor. I frequently smiled inwardly at some remark not altogether complementary to people of

color; and more than once I felt like declaiming, ‘I am a colored man. Do I not disprove the theory that one drop of Negro blood renders a man unfit?’ Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing (Johnson, 117).

Although Johnson’s hearty laughter is interrupted in the scenes of romance and tragedy that follow, these moments do not detract from the potency of the joke in this scene. Once again returning to the joke in order to make sense of the “anomaly of [his] social position,” the narrator returns again to re-articulate the joke. Here we might consider that the joke of the early first pages has taken on far more serious stakes and rewards for the narrator. His use of the word “capital” in this iteration of the joke underscores this very point and makes evident the narrators insistence that his joke affords not simply pleasure but also *value*. This function of the joke, marks the joker as the new arbiter of value, and inverts the assumed stability of both the narrative and the systems of value that have been thrown into crisis by the joke. For Johnson’s narrator the joke is renewed cultural capital, even if it cannot completely divest him of the melancholia that marks the ending of the text.¹⁶³

As George Johnson’s recorded laugh has shown, black laughter bears its own relationship to value and cultural capital. Reading Johnson’s narrator’s use of the joke in this way makes it difficult to read the text as solely replicating the assimilationist desires of a homogenous New Negro ideology. The joke provides a much broader reading than this that need not read passing

¹⁶³ Consider again Ralph Ellison’s description of the laughing barrels here. It is not simply that the joke always produces a laughter that consistently generates pleasure. In fact, Ellison refers often to the capacity of the joke to produce significantly complex reactions as well. In one such moment, he describes “my agony of laughter.” In Johnson’s novel the narrator too wrangles with feelings of despair and regret even as he “laugh[s] heartily” across the text.

as the ultimate joke of the novel. Rather, as I have been arguing across this chapter, Johnson's novel uses the black joke to interrogate a sustained mediation on blackness. If Johnson's novel is one that performs the assimilationist desires of the New Negro narrative, it is most certainly not only that.

Sons and Daughters of Laughter: A Coda

What constitutes the ultimate work of laughter within the shaping of black modernity? Such a question perhaps requires much more space than I dedicate to it here but I attempt in this concluding section to outline some of the crucial figures that like Johnson, shape our conception of the black joke. It is not the case that black laughter was of no interest to black leaders, thinkers, and performers of the early twentieth century. Nor is it accurate that the black grin become the sole cultural commodity of white performers. As I have been arguing here, the black joke becomes a technology for re-imagining and representing the self as a modern subject. Early twentieth century writers and performers alike drew upon this power, recognizing what Jessie Fauset would later describe as "the gift of laughter."

The black joke becomes an explicit subject of record and performance for Bert Williams throughout the early 1900's. With the help of Alex Rogers, Bert Williams ("the acclaimed "Son of Laughter") would fill three volumes of collected riddles, jokes, and puns over the years. The collected volumes provided yet another alternative to the still common minstrel joke books, and in it we find over three hundred jokes, lyrics, and comic stories. The jokes deploy dialect, domestic humor, love triangles, and advice in comic form, and like Johnson's novel, meaningfully constructs the black joke as a lasting vehicle for black re-invention. In the vein of comic

performers and writers that would follow in his footsteps such as Langston Hughes,¹⁶⁴ Moms Mabley, and Ralph Ellison, Bert Williams assumes the butt of the joke through his melancholic mode of storytelling and careful style of delivery. For Ellison, another modern architect of the black joke, black laughter contains a certain “extravagance,” an irreverent and confounding “spectacle” that creates a crisis of social disorder. Such disruptions remind us of Du Bois’s complaint about black laughter that at times it seemed to “[break] out in the wrong places.”¹⁶⁵

For our considerations of Johnson, such trouble continues to motivate alternative readings of *Autobiography*. Near the conclusion of the novel, Johnson’s narrator describes the condition of the comedian. His comments cogently align both the comedian and the writer as key agents for molding “something new and unknown” in the depiction of black life. We read,

...great comedians are far more scarce than mediocre tragedians; every amateur actor is a tragedian. However this very fact constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggling, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of traditions.

Of interest to me here is how Johnson situates the comic as a rare and undervalued artist who possesses the key to novelty. He thus elevates the comedian over the tragedian, imbuing the comic with a skill seemingly more advanced than the “mediocre” tragedian. Comedy, rather than tragedy offers the narrator his most potent mode of inquiry and discourse here. It provides a

¹⁶⁴ Williams’ Spruce Bigsby character in the joke-books uncannily anticipates Hughes’s Jesse B. Simple character and stories. See Bert Williams Joke Books, Vol 1- 3. Archival Source: Schomburg Center for Black Culture & Research.

¹⁶⁵ Qtd in Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: An Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18.

“new” future for the black novelist and poet, one that invests in the cultural capital of the joke and its phonographic qualities.

“Out of this ferment will emerge something new.”

-Ishmael Reed

Conclusion

The Return of the New Black

When the dubious yet alluring discourse of “The New Black” re-emerged as a twenty-first century category for racial critique and distinction, the response was as varied and as troubling as could be expected.¹⁶⁶ Scholars, novelists, and pop stars alike appropriated the term as a new moniker that with a slight turn of hand bore the potential for celebration or disavowal. The language invoked

These contemporary discourses of “the new” emphasize the power hold that such a lexicon holds upon our cultural imaginations. When fully attended to, the discourse of the “New Negro” demands that we interrogate the strategies and desires that undergird the production of race within modern narratives of progress. The black cultural producers of this project

¹⁶⁶ See Trey Ellis, “The New Black Aesthetic.” *Callaloo*, No. 38 (Winter, 1989): 233-243. See also Eric Lott’s “Response to Trey Ellis.” Most notable and oft-cited among this discourse is also Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s “The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black” published one year before Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic.” A resurgence in the discourse of the New Black has proliferated the term once again into popular culture, seen most readily by Pharrell’s infamous Oprah interview. See also literary and scholarly approaches to New Black, and New Negro discourse represented in Evie Shockley’s *The New Black*, Daphne Lamonthe’s *Inventing the New Negro*, James Wilson’s *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*, and Michelle Ann Stephens’s “The Conjunctural Field of New Negro Studies.” In *Escape New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem*. Davarian Baldwin ed. (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

understood that the lived experience of black modernity far exceeded what could be captured within a diametrically opposed lexicon of “old” and “new.” Rather than reproduce the rigid outlines of a socially and politically bereft vision of racial progress, the black men and women of this project hold the teleological narrative under suspicion and re-orient our antiquated notions of literary form, historical time, and cultural value. These narratives insist to be read differently, and deploy caricature and humor as a dissembling, unraveling mode of dynamic critique.

Read individually, each of the artists I study here—Zora Neale Hurston, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson—articulate a unique discomfort with the constricting politics of a New Negro vision. Taken together they forcefully assert a dynamic response to this “problem” as one that embraces rather than averts an engagement with blackface and popular forms of black representation. Drawing upon black performance traditions as a cultural resource for critiquing modernity, these black artists and their collaborators creatively enact return, refusal, and resistance.¹⁶⁷

The work of this dissertation identifies the generative space between black performance and literature as a site in which various iterations of return, refusal, and resistance are enacted. We see the extension of these traditions in the popular debates of the Harlem Renaissance. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, the “New Negro” again grew to encompass all of the ways in which blackness might exercise a fixed glance away from deviance, criminality, and slavery. Such aspirations indicate the desires of a people longing not only for political and creative

¹⁶⁷ The work of Ishmael Reed, Paul Beatty, Suzan Lori-Parks, and Brandon Jacob Jenkins are remarkable examples of this tradition as it extends to more contemporary engagements with the discourse of the New Black.

“freedom,” but more importantly it designates a desire for exuberant survival and re-making. It has been the work of this project to uncover the ways in which we might begin to see and appreciate the survival of those far removed from the gaze of the New Negro. In such readings, the alternative lives of black men and women striving to exercise the fullness of their experience comes to the fore. When we re-examine the work of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston for example, we see the work of black artists whose commitment to “the Negro farthest down” was no mere exercise in romanticizing poverty and struggle.

The novel and stage work of these writers continues the push against and instruct modern audiences on how we might address the strategic re-appropriation of black cultural forms as essential to reconstructing the literary landscape of the twentieth century. In such works the production of novelty depends less upon the “buying in” of particular categories, and more upon the innovation of literary form itself and the attendant forms of dramatic production that interact between those two forms. These cultural products thus range from inciting and irreverent to perplexing and confounding, and elicit new responses to the value of these cultural forms and in turn mark useful openings for how we might begin to reinterpret the so called Renaissance. What other narratives and acts of re/reading emerge from the folds of black cultural production?

These new critical approaches advance a new theory for approaching periodization and genre as tools for interrogation rather than fixed extensions that privilege certain cultural products over others. In this light, the questions of the New Negro become again relevant (albeit within a different context) to contemporary conversations that continue to assess the literary and cultural value of blackness.

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