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MODERN FOLKS AND FOLK MODERNS:
MEDIA, MODERNITY, AND THE MIGRATION OF REAL AMERICANS

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Literary modernism and the historical study of folklore entered American cultural life at the same time as responses to similar anxieties regarding the national present. This dissertation argues that the overlap at the beginning of the twentieth-century between these seemingly contradictory movements—the “modern” looking forward and the “folk” backward—explains a broader cultural shift in American self-representation in the ensuing decades. As other scholars have shown, there is often little to distinguish the projects of early twentieth-century literary and artistic modernists from those of anthropologists and folklorists. However, as both movements developed, the notion of who and what counted as “folk” became incrementally detached from its social-scientific origins to become the stuff of myth. The formal experimentation of modernist style broke down older ideas about the “authenticity” of folk culture by showing its malleability. Popular culture inherited this deconstruction, but now, with the exigencies of the mass market in radio and film, it began to insist once again on folk authenticity and promote it as a national ideal. By the 1920s and 1930s, the folk was increasingly emptied of its ethnographic specificity and transformed into a commonly used term with little actual content. The “American folk” was born.

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Introduction

Neither “Mongrel Breeds” Nor “Primitives”: A Survey of the Modern American Folk

Crèvecoeur’s Big Question

In his *Letters From an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur looks to answer the age-old question that, in 1781, was only five years old: “What is an American?”¹ Crèvecoeur, born into a noble but poor family in Caen, France, had come to the colonies in his young adulthood, and by the time of his departure shortly after the Revolution, he had created one of the first catalogues of American life. His classic work, the popularity of which has ebbed and flowed throughout its history, may not have been the first anything, but it was an early number of things: ethnographic field study, folklore collection, and local-color sketch. And while it is probably not reasonable to suppose that Crèvecoeur set the terms for a particular discussion of national identity and character, his work shows the ever-fraughtness of the question of American identity, between the local and the national, and later the national and the international. Working in the same mode as Johann Gottfried von Herder, whose concept of *Volksgeist* would thrill American thinkers in the following century, Crèvecoeur wanted to produce the big concept that would settle the question of Americanness for the ages. The new questions that he found instead—Are the Americans here where I am, or out where I am not? Am I a typical American? Is anyone?—continue to circulate, despite all the forms that social, economic, political, cultural, and technological change have forced upon them.

At first, the question of American culture seems to be one of temperament. Americans, Crèvecoeur suggests, share a certain spirit: “The Americans were once

scattered all over Europe; here they are incorporated into one of the finest systems of population which has ever appeared, and which will hereafter become distinct by the power of the different climates they inhabit” (70). Here, “American” preexists the Americans, and those who come already possess the appropriate spirit, one that will be “incorporated” into the collection of likeminded ur-Americans. This side of Crèvecoeur might have found a likeminded thinker in the twentieth-century anthropologist Ruth Benedict, for whom, “What really binds men together is their culture,--the ideas and the standards they have in common.”²

At other times, however, Crèvecoeur would seem to be equally sympathetic to Edward Tylor, one of the targets of Benedict’s critique. For Crèvecoeur, one of the American landscape’s charms lies in its infancy: “England, which now contains so many domes, so many castles, was once like this: a place woody and marshy; its inhabitants, now the favourite nation for arts and commerce, were once painted like our neighbours. This country will flourish in its turn, and the same observations will be made which I have just delineated” (87-88). England is just further along. Give it time, and the Americans will get there, just as the “backwards” people of Africa or aboriginal Australia would become, for Tylor, the West’s infant ancestors along “a definite line along which to reckon progression and retrogression in civilization.”³

If Crèvecoeur seems a bit confused on the question of “culture,” or in this case the adjectival form of “American,” his answers for the nominative form, *the* “American,” are no less confused. At once, the American is homegrown: “Men are like plants; the goodness and flavor of the fruit proceeds from the peculiar soil and exposition in which they grow” (71). Whatever is peculiar about the land here is also peculiar about its

people, who could not have been formed anywhere else, who had to be experienced, like John Locke's pineapple, in their New-World surroundings to be understood. The American is the new man, born of his new environment, and bound for glory.

The complication to such an idea is that, as with Crèvecoeur himself, most of the new Americans were not indigenous plants. (Those who *were*, after all, were the "Indians," certainly not yet "Native Americans," who had to be educated in this new American spirit.) These Americans "are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed, the race now called Americans have arisen" (68). In other words, not only the whole, but the parts, and even these parts, we learn, contribute in unequal measure, as "out of twelve families of emigrants of each country, generally seven Scotch will succeed, nine German, and four Irish" (85). The "What is an American?" letter concludes on the particular rather than the general note, with the "History of Andrew, the Hebridean." The only real "American," it seems, is the French Crèvecoeur's fictional mouthpiece, the farmer James.

With stodgy civilization and savage nature as its poles, the middle way is also the most undesirable one. The hunter, that man who is too idle to do the difficult agricultural work in the fields and too isolated to enjoy the benefits of social agreement, is a man of "mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage" (77). The hunter does not know the land well enough to till it, nor does he know custom well enough to practice it. He is the dark side of Old World and New World contact, and while he may be the most visible intersection of man and savage, "the manners of the Indian natives are respectable" compared to his, and one can only hope that the true American will find a way to combine the merits of both rather than the faults (77).

The question of the “mongrel breed,” of the savage and civilized, continued to trouble American writers and thinkers well into the nineteenth century, now with the help of Rousseau’s influence, evident in everything from the noble savages and wild men in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* tales to the lexicography of Noah Webster, who sought a purer, more natural kind of language than the overblown tongue of England. The question that troubled Crèvecoeur carried into the nineteenth century, and a writer like Henry David Thoreau would speak a common language with his audience when he asked, in the first pages of *Walden*, “Is it impossible to combine the hardiness of these savages with the intellectualness of the civilized man?”⁴

At the root of such a question are more difficult terms: purity, authenticity, spirit. America’s supposed promise was, these writers supposed, built on the idea that a nation could be perfected: whether in its perfect religious tolerance, its perfect founding principles, or its perfect equality. The question, which dogged both Crèvecoeur and Thoreau, which Hawthorne thought could be answered in colonial Boston, and which Melville thought could be answered somewhere on the South Seas, was where to find the real Americans who could give the right answers and set things back on the right course. Unfortunately, the impostors—the hunters, the slaveholders, the Puritans, the money men, the Anglicized Northerners—thought the place belonged to them.

While the question of “real Americanness” is unanswerable (and, in our own era, unfashionable), certain American historical moments have provided some compelling hypotheses, and those hypotheses have informed American cultural production in some telling ways. In the chapters of this dissertation, I follow two strands of intellectual life—the folk and the modern—through one such major transformation in American self-

understanding, the “migration of real Americans,” as I have called it, from “out there” (in the fields, in the remote places, in the Midwest) to “right here” (to the end of particularity, to a common American language, to racelessness and regionlessness). I provide four cases that show a gradual shift in the way the folk was used and configured throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

What produced this shift, I argue, was a confluence, overlap, and occasional conflation of the “folk” with the “modern,” an intertwining of the new and the primevally old, not only in the sense that the industrial is new and the agricultural old, but also in the sense that the self-conscious and experimental novel is new and the local-color sketch is old, or later that radio and film are new and that traditional print media are old, or much later in the sense that “Americans” are old and hyphenated-Americans are new (or are they the oldest of all?). These dichotomies are influential and complex because “old” and “new” do not function exclusively as qualitative terms: the “folk” is just as viable as the “modern.”

Instead, the period I am describing, from approximately the 1880s to the 1940s, is one of what Crèvecoeur would call “mongrel breeds.” In fact, if D.H. Lawrence, one of Crèvecoeur’s major twentieth-century boosters, is correct in saying that “Crèvecoeur wanted to be an *intellectual savage*,” who “wanted his ideal state. At the same time he wanted to know the other state, the dark, savage mind”⁵, Crèvecoeur may not only have been one of the first to discover the unanswerable question of Americanness, he may also have been one of the first sufferers of its attendant identity crisis. So while I will not be able to answer Crèvecoeur’s big question, “What is an American?”, I hope to point toward some of the ideas that influence what it means to ask that big question. In this

dissertation, I identify authors, playwrights, and radio performers who wrestled with these questions, particularly in the seemingly contradictory intersection between ideas of folk and modern, traditional and formally innovative, and regional and national.

The American Primitive and the American Primitivist

These “mongrel breeds” and “dark, savage minds” might, in a different context, point us toward the concept of Modernist primitivism, and a good deal more Lawrence. It is after all precisely in the period I am describing that Modernist primitivism flourished in Europe and among the American expatriates who lived abroad. It is therefore worth outlining the primitivist paradigm here, especially as it can help to show why “folk” is a better way to think about American cultural production in the purportedly “primitivist” era. As I will suggest in the following paragraphs, traditional modernist primitivism is a European development, rooted mainly in the logic of colonialism. Because American history, despite its own colonial endeavors, was not nearly as rife with colonialism as was European history, we must necessarily shift the focus away from predominantly African and Asian primitives toward something more appropriately indigenous.

The first major book on primitivism, Marianna Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive*, argues that the fascination with “primitive” peoples in Edgar Rice Burroughs, D.H. Lawrence, Joseph Conrad, and others is born of a crisis of identity in Western culture. Following a thread of argument begun by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Torgovnick makes the case that although the ostensibly primitive peoples do have referents out in the world, the versions of themselves explored in Modernist literature and art are nothing more than projections of the Western selves who create that art and the Western world that creates the artists. As Torgovnick argues, “The real secret of the

primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be-- has been, will be (?)--whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us.”⁶ The heart of darkness, then, is not in the Belgian Congo but in the Western self.

Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush take this argument further. Rather than concede any pseudo-ethnographic qualities in the primitivist fascination, Barkan and Bush take true representation off the table altogether: “As for 'primitives,' they never existed. Only Western 'primitivism' did.”⁷ While one could potentially see this claim as an outgrowth of Torgovnick and Said’s arguments rather than a challenge, Barkan and Bush are also invested in trying to remove the paternalistic, almost patronizing, strain in the work of Torgovnick. As Marjorie Perloff argues in the same collection, “Ironically, then, we are now witnessing an increasing body of scholarship on oppressed groups that, in its zeal to track down the oppressors, reinscribes the very oppression and subordination it seeks to descry.”⁸ Rather than merely coming to the defense of the slighted peoples, says this critique, Torgovnick and others end up speaking *for* these groups in similarly hegemonic ways.

The solution, then, at least the one toward which modernist critics continue to work, is to attempt to uncover the dynamism of this contact: to understand the relationship as one of exchange rather than mere appropriation. As Virginia Lee-Webb would have it in her discussion of English colonial photography, “All European contact had an effect on the cultures of the Pacific; the cross-cultural appropriation in both directions was, and is, significant to both cultures.”⁹ Otherwise, critics like Torgovnick end up with a teleology that silences the voice of the Other: in making the modernist

artwork the terminal point, any exchange or any recirculation of the art object is shut off.

It is worth at least positing that exceptional artists and authors can take radical positions within a culture built on a certain racist or hegemonic logic. Particularly in a postcolonial society, much national self-understanding is based on an imaginative and imagined identification with oppressed cultures. Crèvecoeur longed for a real American that he himself was not. Thoreau's savage would also be fluent in Ancient Greek. While Indian extermination was considered a heroic necessity, American readers identified with Cooper's Natty Bumppo, a man who seemed to combine the manners of white America with the skill set and ruggedness of the targeted Indian population. The race whose dehumanizing enslavement seemed, to those who supported it, an obvious fact of evolution was also the one who taught the nation devotion and empathy, freed that nation from itself on the stage, and was in a sense the embodiment of the common American soul. The middle American farmer, increasingly marginalized by monopoly capitalism, industrial farming, and an economic system headquartered on the coasts, was still understood to preserve the American heartland, the way "we" all are underneath our seemingly contradictory exteriors. The primitivist mode at its most critical exposes the fallacies underneath such truisms, leveling a critique not only at the modes of representation that uphold those truisms, but at the national character that accepts them so readily.

It may seem odd to include characters like Crèvecoeur's American or the Midwest farmer in a list of "primitives," and that is precisely because the field of American primitives is different from the field traditionally associated with studies of primitivism.

In short, the transatlantic applicability of authors like Torgovnick or Barkan and Bush can be rhetorical or conceptual, but that applicability to specific authors or specific primitives needs a shift in emphasis if it is to move to the American context. The touchstone for primitivist criticism in nineteenth-century British literature is Joseph Conrad, in whose work the primitive is nearly always dark-skinned and geographically far removed. By placing Conrad first in these literary-historical schemes, critics implicitly argue for primitivism as an outgrowth solely of European colonial expansion. As such, the American authors who receive treatment in these texts--Edgar Rice Burroughs, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot--are either expatriates or authors whose work deals with European colonial themes, as in the case of Burroughs.

An author like Thomas Hardy, who was just as influential on the course of the twentieth-century novel, is thus not considered “primitivist” at all because his primitives have a tendency to be not only close to home but white. We should pause over Hardy’s omission from the primitivist designation because it shows the particular focus of that designation. As such, primitivist logic comes to seem one post-colonial, racist part in a much larger whole that includes not only African primitivism, but early pastoral, Rousseau’s “noble savage,” Tylor’s stadial evolution, and later local-color. If Hardy were to be given primacy in a description like Torgovnick’s, the structure of the argument could remain similar, but those described would have to come in a different mould: Lawrence might be replaced by Sherwood Anderson, Picasso by Thomas Hart Benton, and Claude Levi-Strauss by Alan Lomax or Joel Chandler Harris. Whatever the decline in quality such a study would produce, this hypothetical list should at least show the rhetorical power that Conrad has wielded over the entire primitivist argument, just as an

American literature beginning with Cabeza de Vaca is defined by a set of terms that doesn't share much in common with an American literature that begins with James Fenimore Cooper or Mark Twain.

Instead of "primitive," therefore, I argue that a more suitable term for the corresponding American phenomenon is "folk." While it is true that American imperialism has been an ongoing process since the founding of the nation, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century authors were much closer in space and time to their "others": the darkest Philippines were not to the American imagination what darkest Africa was to the English or the French. American authors were far more likely to pluck subjects from their own national contexts, with often surprising results: African-Americans, Native Americans, Southerners, Midwesterners, Mexicans, non-urban or pre-industrial whites, all of these and others were to be the American equivalents of those primitives projected from European shores. These American equivalents would be precisely the objects of study when professional folklorists went out into the field in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The persistence of the European-styled "primitive" is nowhere more apparent than in the text often considered the gold-standard study of American primitivism: Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, which takes up various authors' attempts to create an indigenous American language and literature, and the complex racial politics that often informed this supposed creation. North is particularly interested in "racial masquerade,"¹⁰ where white authors will take on the voices of racial others in the search for their own "authentic" voices. More often than not in North's study, this racial other is the African-American, as chapter titles like "Old Possum and Brer Rabbit: Pound and Eliot's Racial

Masquerade” and “Two Strangers in the American Language: William Carlos Williams and Jean Toomer” indicate. Only a single chapter in the volume, “Modernism’s African Mask: The Stein-Picasso Collaboration,” deals substantially with “primitives” found outside the United States.

While North’s study is in many ways the model and inspiration for my own, I hope to add a few elements. First, because North is primarily interested in how Modernist authors appropriate materials from African-American speech and culture, he inherits many of the same teleological conclusions as Torgovnick. Given his transatlantic focus, North begins with an English author, but his choice of that author, Joseph Conrad, is telling, as it situates the book within the racist imperialism of its European counterpart. More interested in probing the mystery of Colonel Kurtz’s final words than in interrogating the speakers of Kurtz’s obituary, “Mistah Kurtz, he dead,” this primitivist version of events must necessarily be unidirectional and appropriative. Interested in what Picasso and Stein have used from African Art, North is less interested in what African Art has then taken from Picasso and Stein. In what follows, I note these appropriations as they occur, but I am equally attuned to how these appropriated cultural objects are then recirculated and reappropriated by others. Part of this will include an exploration of the media in which these art objects circulate and the means by which these media, often mass or popular media, complicate any kind of simple or unidirectional transmission.

Equally important, though, I would like to broaden the field of candidates for this supposed “masquerade” to include a wider swath of the American folk. Since North’s text was published, it has become almost a default position that the folk and the modern are intertwined in African-American culture, even to African-American authors

themselves. This is partially due to North's focus, and to Eric Sundquist's discussion of the intertwining of African-American and American cultures in *To Wake the Nations*, but equally due to the stated interest of African-American cultural critics like W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke, who addressed these topics head on, or to figures like Zora Neale Hurston and Sterling Brown, whose professional careers modeled the combination of literary modernity with a folk past as they purported to study that past and keep it alive in the present. Following in this vein, Daphne Lamothe's *Inventing the New Negro* interrogates some twentieth-century African-American authors' critique of "the colonizing gaze on the racialized subject, intersecting and shifting the presuppositions of both literary modernism and modernist anthropology."¹¹ Whether a result of a more visible legal segregation, or the legacy of a primitivist study that has emphasized racial others, this critical focus on the appropriation and exchange between white and black authors has tended to overshadow the roles of other groups in a similar type of interaction. African-Americans have not been the only ones to be projected as the bearers of our truest selves (e.g., Uncle Remus's stories as "part of the domestic history of every Southern family"). In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison famously claims, "I use folklore in my work not because I am Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance."¹² At first glance, the claim requires some easy concessions: Ellison is influenced by Eliot and Joyce and wants to be considered alongside them, and Ellison uses his folk inheritance as a means to achieve Joycean or Eliotic effects. The tougher concession, and the one so often ignored, is that authors like Eliot and Joyce write with a "folk inheritance" akin to Ellison's. Joyce is perfectly willing to concede the role of Irish folklore in *Ulysses* and

Finnegans Wake, but the problem is slightly more difficult with Eliot. To be sure, a solely African-American account of that folk inheritance will not suffice for the American Eliot, even in Eliot's most explicit play with American folk types in "Sweeney Agonistes." We should not forget, for instance, that Eliot was 16 years old when the World's Fair came to his hometown of St. Louis. At this fair, held in America's true heartland, as close to its geographical center as possible, 43 of the then 45 states had exhibits, among which were the State of Maine Building, a rustic cabin inspired by the woodsmen of the northern state. While a proper account of Eliot is outside the scope of this study, even this small instance should remind us that "folk inheritance," as Ellison calls it, has a much larger set of potential sources than exclusively racial ones.¹³

Instead of the primitive, American writers had the "folk," who had both the advantage and disadvantage of living among them, of being their neighbors, or in some cases, families. When T.D. Rice wanted to find a new dance, he did not, like his Dada counterparts seventy-five years later, invent a *danse africaine* that was about as African as the language of "Gadji Beri Bimba." Instead, Rice could walk down the street in Cincinnati to see his very own primitives, whom he might just as well have seen in contexts not quite so Dionysian. At the end of the century, folklorists would head out of urban centers and universities, not for the steamer to Europe or Africa but for the train that would take them to the supposedly untouched parts of the United States. Later, when Willa Cather wanted to talk about "primitive" people, she had only to go home to Nebraska or to vacation in Santa Fe. The logic of appropriation here is similar to that of primitivism, but it is not the same. Its American practitioners did not have to look as hard as their European counterparts, because the Americans were looking at a very particular,

if just as invented, version of themselves. The folk is a more apt term than the primitive in the American context, therefore, because it captures the very proximity and diversity of the “others” who inspired the American cultural production that was the analogue to European primitivism.

The Folk and Folklorization

There is likely no better summary of the variety of this national folk than that presented in Hamlin Garland’s *Crumbling Idols* (1894). A rallying cry in favor of local color as a means to wrest American literature from the death grip of European models, *Crumbling Idols* offers not only a plea but a variety of usable models:

Our wild animals have already found a great artist in Kemeys. The Indian and the negro also are being spiritedly handled, but the workman in his working clothes, the brakeman, the thresher on the farm, the heater at the furnace, the cow-boy on his horse, the young man in the haying field, offer equally powerful and characteristic subjects.¹⁴

In this short list, Garland offers a catalogue of what he sees as purely American types, the variety of types out of which a purely American literature will be created. And thus, according to Garland, “our national literature will come in its fulness when the common American rises spontaneously to the expression of his concept of life.”¹⁵

If political campaigns are any indication, this list is still very much an apt representation of the types commonly acknowledged to be “American.” The image of Ivy-League presidential hopefuls clad in construction uniforms and hard hats speaking to a collection of working-class constituents is familiar exactly because of the necessity for these campaigners to get in touch with Garland’s “characteristic subjects,” or what goes on Fox News by the name “real Americans.” The persistence of such types can make

them seem inevitable, as if they were real American types because they are in fact real America. But clearly, Garland's list is not merely a reflection of reality but a creation of a version of that reality, informed as much by Garland's own prejudices, choices, and omissions as by his observation.

Garland's position relative to his subjects was ambiguous—he was himself neither fully outside the list nor fully included in it. A more self-conscious and sympathetic version of this inside/outside dynamic comes from the folk/modern author *par excellence*, Zora Neale Hurston, whose *Mules and Men* (1934) brandishes the folk-modern dichotomy on its first pages. Hurston writes,

In a way [collecting Negro folklore] would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.¹⁶

Hurston thus identifies her ideal position not only to hear the real folklore of “mules and men” but also to give those real findings back to the world as *Mules and Men*. On the one hand, she is the folk she is describing: she comes from the “crib of negroism” and internalizes that oral folklore in a purer pre-literary way, amid “the earliest rocking of my cradle.” On the other hand, however, she is the modern woman: educated both by the tidal wave of cultural relativism at Columbia University and the folk-inflected renaissance in Harlem. The “spy-glass of Anthropology,” that new way of seeing, provides her a place at the exact middle, dispensing with qualitative or evolutionary distinctions altogether. Whether she was aware of Garland or not, Hurston was a much better replacement for the “crumbling idols” of the stodgy nineteenth-century literary

establishment than she would be a torch-bearer for Franz Boas's cultural relativism, which, her own example showed, could have commendable intentions but limited access.

Hurston is not a primitivist, precisely because of this complicated relationship with her subject matter. Negro folklore can exist in its purest form elsewhere, and it is worthy of study, but Hurston's characterization lacks the distance, often situated as self-criticism in the vulgar-Freudian mode, of the primitivists, who came to the primitives in order to learn about themselves. Her characterizations in *Mules and Men* are saturated with celebration rather than atavistic nostalgia, and she sets Eatonville, FL, as one place among others (certainly a holdover of the cultural relativism she learned from Boas), not one that is necessarily worthy of imitation or, for most of her readers, one that is or was shared in common. Both the form and the content of *Mules and Men* provide models for Hurston's real subject: her own both-and-neither position.

Garland, by contrast, keeps a distance. Although his own collection of stories, *Main-Traveled Roads* (1891), suggests a certain familiarity with Wisconsin agricultural life, that life is nonetheless characterized as decidedly worse than that of its now-urban, now-educated author, characterized as the rural life is by difficulty, depression, and distrust. If the Garland of *Crumbling Idols* is much more optimistic about the worth of Midwesterners and others, this is because he situates them *en masse* within a collage of the American folk, a collage, that is, of subject matter rather than living people. Whatever Garland is wearing, it's not a chemise, tight or otherwise, that he's had on since his childhood. He instead seems to issue a challenge that it will take someone like Hurston to fulfill—he sets the terms but does not accept the challenge himself. Still, even if

Garland's execution is not quite so expert as Hurston's, his list provides an informative blueprint for how the folk type functions and will function within American literature.

Because it may seem overstated to describe Garland's list as one of "folk" types, it is worth interrogating what exactly we mean when we refer to folk types. The immediate association with the word "folk" is typically something like the Uncle Remus figure: preindustrial, poor, immobile, uneducated. It is slightly more difficult to conjure a version of the "white" folk, but many of the same conditions likely apply. Still, there are folkloric representations, in Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* and elsewhere, of types that don't fit this mold: Henry Ford himself can figure as a folk villain, and the heroes can just as well include the working poor of urban centers and industrial towns, ethnically-coded mothers and fathers, even salt-of-the-earth toilers of the Midwest. While we could make the case that each of these figures shares at least one characteristic with the original Uncle Remus characterization, we would be at a loss to find a common rubric that could contain all of them under the heading of "folk."

Instead, we should be reminded of Barkan and Bush's observation, cited above, "As for 'primitives,' they never existed. Only Western 'primitivism' did." Folklore historian Regina Bendix even goes so far as to argue that "authenticity," particularly as articulated through folklore, "is generated not from the bounded classification of an Other, but from the probing comparison between self and Other."¹⁷ The folk, then, is always a collaborative production, with the folklorist as participant as well as observer. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett insists that the folk does not exist out in the world; instead, "All folklore is made, not found," and it is made so by the process of "folklorization."¹⁸ In other words, just as primitiveness is a projection of the Western

author or artist, so too is folk-ness a projection of the folklorist. Folk is in the eye of the beholder, and American observers typically did not look too far for what they wanted to behold.

As with Barkan and Bush, though, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is more interested in the consequences of this process than in the mechanics of the process itself. Just taking Garland's list of American folk types, we can begin to see that all "folk" have undergone a similar process. I posit that "folklorization" requires four related actions:

First, folklorization requires an Othering, a separation of the "folk" subject from the self. Simon Bronner offers the following observation in his history of *American Folklore Studies*: "As society felt itself transformed suddenly into a modern industrial age, a new professional, the folklorist, helped it to understand what it was leaving behind. The folklorist collected and explained the lore of groups still operating with preindustrial ideas."¹⁹ As such, folklore, whatever its later permutations, was founded on a principle of difference: *we* have industrialized, so let's see what *they* who have not are like. Even when there is identification with the Otherized groups, there is still some difference that makes the folklore exercise possible. In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston is given entree into Eatonville by the fact that she is from there, but it is only the "spy-glass of anthropology," which she has and the others do not, that differentiates her and enables her to understand her subjects as they cannot understand themselves. Crèvecoeur, too, employs such a spy-glass, though "anthropology" and "folklore" would not have been familiar terms to him. "Here are... a number of people driven by poverty and other adverse causes to a foreign land in which they know nobody,"²⁰ begins the story of Andrew, a Scottish immigrant, a story that only someone *not* on the boat from

Europe, someone who may *never* have come over on the boat at all, could tell.

As Hurston's anthropological double consciousness suggests, the folklorist is also separated from his or her subjects by a level of self-consciousness. Ellison's critique of Richard Wright that Wright could know Bigger Thomas but that Bigger Thomas could never know Richard Wright is an apt model.²¹ The folklorist has a consciousness of self (one often seen as "requiring" objectivity, or the ability to go outside oneself) which the folk subject can never have, lest that subject become a self-conscious and thus inauthentic version of himself. The move in folklore studies since the 1970s and 1980s has been toward the study of performance, because it is only in the unrepeatable and un-self-conscious acts of performance (often what one performs *despite* him- or herself) that true authenticity can emerge.

The folk must be taken out of time. Except along very narrow lines, no folk character is allowed a past or future, at least one distinct from his or her present. Uncle Remus is an ideal character in this sense in that he is always old. Even as the South becomes "new," Uncle Remus seems neither to age nor to change. Moreover, folk characters must be understood to be unchanging even if they exist at different points in history, and for authors like W.E.B. DuBois, this folk spirit is timeless and transcends social position and geographical location. Even for Hurston, who notes many more spontaneous and adaptable "Characteristics of Negro Expression," spontaneity and adaptability are themselves timeless features of Negro expression.

One among countless examples, Ruth Suckow's 1926 novel *The Odyssey of a Nice Girl* provides a telling instance of how time and change violate the terms of the folk: the eponymous nice girl Marjorie Schoessel leaves her Iowa homestead to attend an art

college in Boston, and she loses all sense of her identity. In Marjorie's case, the fact that Boston corrupts her leaves her with no identity at all, nothing to which to be authentic or faithful, nothing to replace her Iowan-ness, and therefore a rootlessness that slowly ruins her life. A folk character, one like Uncle Remus, is capable of no such transformations, whether he's on his ex-master's farm or in a newspaper office in Atlanta. The separation between his own life and the modern one may be charming or tragic, but the separation continues to exist: whether the folk character has something to tell modern society, modern society could not possibly expect to tell anything to the folk character.

Not only must the folk be perceived as impervious to the influences of time, the folk must also be impervious to the influence of the social world. Robert Stepto's theorization of the African-American "immersion narrative" requires that the South in which characters immerse themselves be untouched by outside influences.²² In DuBois's own immersion in *The Souls of Black Folk*, he must leave the social, modern world of the North and immerse himself in the southern Black Belt, where the souls of these black folk exist in their purest form. Therefore, if a folk character does have a place in that society, that place does not change, and the character is often associated to the point of exact identification with the thing that he or she does. Sponge Martin in Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* (1925) works in the urban North, but his job does not change, and it is impossible to imagine him in any other context, because he is defined only by how profoundly in tune he is with his job. Folk characters will often be identified with specific places (former slaves in the South, farmers in the Midwest, b'hoys in New York City), but here too there is an identification of these characters with these places which suggests the characters would cease to exist if they did not have this regional tie. To be

sure, such a process itself requires a folklorizing of the region itself, similar to that described by Leigh Anne Duck in her thesis that the South is the “nation’s region” or in the local color fiction of the 1880s and 1890s.

The Folk and Modern Media

Apart from us, un-self-conscious, out of time, out of the social: these are the features of the folk. As such, it is possible for any character to be folklorized, because as the process suggests, there is no “essential” folk experience, only folklorized people, places, and things. Folklorization is never a neutral process: it is produced for reasons (even if the producer is unaware of those reasons) in specific times and places.

Folklorization is instead a means employed by various media of production—including but not limited to folklore and ethnography, literature, film, and radio. In the United States, those specific times, places, and media were inevitably modern: the folklore boom became codified in magazines and journals in the 1870s and 1880s, perhaps culminating in the founding of the American Folklore Society (AFS) in 1885 and reaching its mass audience, though in an altered form, through the media of radio and film in the middle of the following century.

The period I will discuss begins around the founding of the AFS, a high-time for antimodern sentiment, amid a boom of local-color and regional fiction. Robert Wiebe’s hypothesis that the postbellum United States was characterized by a *Search for Order* (1966) lays the groundwork for Jackson Lears’s exploration of “antimodern” impulses in *No Place of Grace* (1981). In this work, Lears outlines many of the cultural consequences of the social and economic changes brought on by this search for order, or as Lears calls

it, the “crisis of central authority,”²³ beginning in the 1880s and 1890s. Lears is primarily interested in analyzing this emergence of cultural attitudes through the prism of “antimodern” sentiment, the variety of reactions which countered notions of the corrupt present with some idealized version of the past:

Transatlantic in scope and sources, antimodernism drew on venerable traditions as well as contemporary cultural currents: republican moralism, which promoted suspicion of urban ‘luxury’; romantic literary convention, which elevated simple and childlike rusticity over the artificial amenities of civilization; a revolt against positivism, gathering strength toward the end of the century, which rejected all static intellectual and moral systems, often in the name of a vitalist cult of energy and progress; and a parallel recovery of the primal irrational forces in the human psyche, forces which had been obscured by the evasive banality of modern culture.²⁴

Lears’s goal is to show that post-World War I malaise and alienation were not abrupt aftereffects of the shock of war, but were born in the “turmoil of the late nineteenth century.”²⁵ That they became cultural standards after the Great War Lears does not dispute; rather, these cultural attitudes were often latent or subcultural in the period between the wars and became more widespread after the war.

But equally important is Lears’s contribution of the term “antimodern” to the larger discourse of modernity, and its offshoots “modernism” and “modernization.” As each of the pairings in the section quoted above demonstrate, antimodern and modern are not mutually exclusive categories. In fact, any of the antimodern sentiments named above only makes sense when paired with its supposed opposite: republican moralism only makes sense in opposition to urban luxury; vitalism only makes sense as a response to positivism; and so on. As such, antimodern sentiments, in whatever form they may take, cannot be divorced from the modern moments in which they are produced. To

adapt a well-known critical adage from Walter Benn Michaels, the only relation the antimodern as such has to the modern as such is that it is part of it.

While Lears does not address the emergent disciplines of folklore and anthropology, his discussion of the complexity of antimodern sentiment has clear implications for these sciences. Anthropology, and its sub- and later separate field folklore, traded (and at times still trade) in preservation or, in Jacob Gruber's formulation, "salvage."²⁶ Particularly in the 1880s and 1890s, these disciplines were built on the premise that cultures, premodern societies, folk societies, and often the folk themselves were vanishing, both to their own obvious peril and to our own. It was the responsibility of the collector to salvage whatever objects he or she could from historical oblivion. Particularly with the official recognition of these disciplines by universities and professional organizations, there emerged a sense that such a past could be accessed with scientific objectivity and that cultures could be understood as in themselves they really are.

Scholarship since the 1960s, though, has emphasized the impossibility of this task, perhaps most succinctly in James Clifford's formulation of the "predicament of culture": the "state of being in culture while looking at culture."²⁷ What is observed, that is to say, is never independent of the observer, and one's own moment, language, education, and attitude inform--even compromise--the clarity with which one sees the objects of observation. Clifford is thus interested in seeing anthropology as a kind of creative medium, albeit without the creator's awareness. Clifford pairs the work of Joseph Conrad and Bronislaw Malinowski, or the work of French surrealists with that of museum ethnographers, to show a similarity of method and often a similarity of result.

Following Clifford's "predicament" even further, Alison Griffiths offers an analysis that begins to prioritize the mediation of this process by new technologies of representation. In *Wondrous Difference* (2002), she tracks the confluence of anthropology, museum-going, cinema, and visual culture. Griffiths shows the ways in which museum displays often borrowed from more popular forms of display, and the ways in which this borrowing of forms helped to popularize a form that might otherwise seem overly dull or pedantic. For both producer and consumer, however, these new forms of the presentation of racial and cultural alterity had some unintended consequences. For spectators, whether in a moviehouse, museum, or on the Midway at a World's Fair, there was a "recurring ambivalence between the spectator's desire for immersion on the one hand and for separation and distance from the threat of alterity on the other."²⁸ For those creating the exhibits, the fear was not one of the alterity that they were presenting, but rather of the looming presence of the popular visual culture that would inevitably compromise their scientific productions. According to Griffiths, however, the irony is that any such presentation is already bound in a matrix of unacknowledged cultural preconditions. Offering an example from early ethnographic film, Griffiths writes, "The experience of watching actual footage of South Asian dancing for the average spectator may, then, have differed little from gazing at a fictional rendition (or even looking at a film poster), as both involve the sensation of 'having already witnessed' a phenomenon."²⁹ In other words, even if the exhibitor can wrest his exhibit from the Scylla of the masses, he will only be doing so from a Charybdis of whose existence he is not even aware.

To return to Lears, then, the antimodern is only intelligible in terms of the mediated modern perspective from which it is produced. Lears's great contribution in this work, particularly when seen of a piece with that of Clifford and others, is to show that terms which seem to exist in ontological distinction from one another actually, in this moment of American history, exist in a relationship more symbiotic than antonymic. If we then take the next step into related topics, we begin to see that even the more specialized avatars of "modern" and "antimodern" intertwine in complex ways that may at first seem incongruous. Lears himself offers as instances of the antimodern vitalist movements, realist literature, republican moralism, renewed interest in the Middle Ages and Catholicism. I have added to this list the disciplines of anthropology and folklore, and we might extend even those to include preliterate societies, oral literature, and non-urban peoples and spaces. Alongside these, industrialization, urbanization, literary formalism and Modernist and avant-garde experimental literature and theater, mass media such as cinema and radio, and international cosmopolitanism seem unrelated terms. But in arguing for the close alliance of two of these in particular--folk and modern--I hope to show of the ways the terms were mutually constitutive and to demonstrate how a variety of media conditioned that relationship.

Moreover, if we accept the idea that the antimodern is a product of the modern, we must accept the mutually-productive role of the "folk" with the "modern," or in more writerly terms, the "folklorist" with the "modernist." The folk is only ever modern: echoing Matei Calinescu, whose *Five Faces of Modernity* covers five separate cultural outgrowths of nineteenth and twentieth-century socioeconomics, we might call the folk in some sense the sixth face of modernity.³⁰

Bearing all of the above in mind, it should not seem so strange to place the folk alongside Calinescu's other five faces: modernism, avant-garde, decadence, kitsch, and postmodernism. All five of these, and the folk as the sixth, are simply media of cultural production born in the same moment and responding to overlapping cultural anxieties. Interested in anthropology rather than just the "folk," Susan Hegeman has already made this point in *Patterns for America* in describing anthropology as "fundamentally modernist in its conception."³¹ Each of these disciplines, genres, and movements becomes the expression of a single (though multiple and complex) historical moment, one outcome of the logic of that moment.

As Hegeman's study also suggests, we should be careful not to overlook the differences between the objects being described. Whatever the larger conceptual similarities, different media do different work, usually for different audiences, and although folklorization as a process is consistent across a variety of works in a variety of media, those works nevertheless use different means toward a similar end. Indeed, the variance of the term "modernism" itself, described as "many modernisms" by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, should remind us of the multiplicity of simultaneously "modern" work.³²

Nonetheless, there is a particular aspect of the "modernist" designation that I preserve in this dissertation, emphasizing as it does a special attention to form and medium specificity. No one, for example, would dispute that James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot are "modernists," no matter what the definition, and not merely by the fact of coeval publication. Though partially a critical tradition, this is the case equally because of one of the cornerstones of modernism: an increased attention to literary form

as an end in itself, or as Howe couches in terms of the Symbolist movement, “to make the writing of the poem itself into the dominant matter of the poem.”³³ Though it does not use the term “modernist” as frequently, Mark McGurl’s *The Novel Art* (2001) describes a similar process, starting with Henry James and others in the 1880s, of elevation of the form of the novel, “separating the most ambitious artifacts of modernist fiction from the popular fiction that was most nearly—too nearly—proximate in form to itself.”³⁴ Though the book goes on to complicate this simple dichotomy between modernist and popular, it nonetheless insists that the novel became an art at this moment because it started to pay attention to itself as an art, to produce “distinction” (in both senses of the term) by becoming itself a companion of the “fine arts.”

In part, I am interested in preserving this aspect of modernism because it seems, of all the “faces of modernity,” specific only to modernism. Particularly alongside the folk, supremely literary self-consciousness doesn’t seem to have a place. But what I will suggest throughout this dissertation is that in the United States, many authors coupled a nationalist project (the question for *American* literature) with this more explicitly international Modernist project (often under the influence of Joyce, Eliot, Proust, and others), and did so by way of a profound engagement with and complication of the American folk. In other words, if we accept that modernism is a particular self-conscious attention to form and, as often, an attempt to use a medium (music, film, literature, and so on) to transcend the limits that medium itself, we can begin to see that the means toward this transcendence, the material of this self-consciousness, was precisely the American folk. In this sense, the particularly elusive concept of “American modernism” can be clarified by attending to its combination of seemingly irreconcilable elements that

collapses not only any remaining distinctions between “high” and “low” but also any distinctions between high European forms and low American types. In hopes of clarifying this combination of the irreconcilable, I show four cases in which a modern author (or modern medium, in the case of radio) uses the American folk in a particular way to achieve some larger aesthetic or economic goal.

In attempting to demonstrate this symbiotic relationship between “folk” and “modern,” I use a variety of media, both modern and otherwise, to show how the definition of the folk was to change over the course of the early twentieth century and the process of that folk’s “modernization,” though without the teleology that such a term may imply. Here in particular we see how James Clifford’s “predicament of culture” and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s “folklorization” are of a piece. If the anthropologist can only ever look at culture from a position of culture, then he or she necessarily applies that culture in “folklorizing” subjects and practices. If American producers and consumers needed a vast and diverse “folk” in the 1880s, these same producers and consumers needed “just plain folks” in the 1930s and 1940s, and the various media the producers produced and the consumers consumed helped the transition along.

The folk and the modern regularly collide in these modern media, but this variety of media--magazines, books, theater, film, radio—has also facilitated this collision. The medium in which an art object was produced or published inevitably influenced the reception of that art object. A black face on the stage or on screen in O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920) could not but invoke the other black faces the audience knew from stage and screen. As Shawn Michele Smith argues of photography in *American Archives*,

medium itself can play a creative role as it not only transfers but *produces* types and modes of interiority and spectatorship.³⁵

As Brad Evans, Richard Brodhead, and others have shown, literary magazines of the late-nineteenth century were not merely the conductors for what they published: instead, they catered to a public equally interested in science, politics, local color, folklore, and high literary production. Charles Chesnutt's first dialect story "Dave's Neckliss" appeared in the September 1889 *Atlantic Monthly* alongside a section of Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* and William Cranston Lawton's "The Closing Scenes of the *Iliad*." The magazines provided the venue for modernity to show many of its faces at once. Theater, too, provided a stage for many seemingly disparate elements to flourish. The same greasepaint that covered a prestigious Othello in the midtown theaters in New York would cover T.D. Rice's *Otello!* on the Bowery. And in between the two of them, a new American avant-garde, led by the Provincetown Players was taking the seriousness of European avant-garde theater and combining it with the nationalist types that peopled the popular stage.

The novel, too, was newly appreciable as its own unique medium in the twentieth century. As Mark McGurl's study only begins to suggest, the "novel" itself at the beginning of the twentieth-century is every bit as much as a medium as it is a genre of writing. Particularly for writers like Willa Cather, publishing in novel form was a way to avoid publishing in what was perceived as the more homogenizing form of the magazines (and a similar stigma later attached to trade paperbacks). But even so, the novel only began to wrest itself from its lowbrow stigma at the very end of the nineteenth century: until that time, "novel" was a capacious term (as it still is) that included the work of

James and Thackeray alongside the dime-novel ephemera such as Diamond Dick or Frank Merriwell. For Willa Cather, and later for William Faulkner and Ralph Ellison, among others, the capacity of the novel was essential for the grandness of their vision. With the help of the experiments that each was conducting with the form, each could tell the proper story of the American folk, just as these authors were trying to move away from the low-cultural baggage that seemed to attach to the form.

Film manifested this troubled inheritance, of the low and high, perhaps better than any other medium. Allison Griffiths demonstrates the overlap between popular cinema and ethnographic film: “The countless fragmentary and ephemeral cinematic glimpses of non-Western peoples screened by nickelodeon operators and by itinerant lecturers who depended on the lure of the exotic for their livelihood are reminders of the common ground between a modern culture of curiosity and the emerging science of ethnography.”³⁶ Modes of spectatorship remained the same whether the topic was science or mere entertainment, and while popular entertainments would gleefully pastiche whatever elements seemed germane to the moneymaking enterprise, empirically-minded ethnographers found that they too were written into media scripts they could not escape. The continued double meaning of the word “film critic” points directly at this confusion, referring as the term does to both the academic sophisticate and the small-town-newspaper hack.

Radio inherited all of these modes: part serial novel taking characters from the dime-store shelves, part theater (of the mind), and part democratization of the glamorous world of film, radio created a mass audience like nothing had before. “The voices,” writes Neil Verma, “of Amos ’n’ Andy, Jack Benny, and the Shadow lived in American

collective experience only by existing in tens of millions of mutually isolated theaters at once.”³⁷ A level of commonality, of sharedness, like the nation had never known before, whether by barriers of literacy, urban access, race, or gender, saw the United States through to its most capacious (but least precise) definition yet. Radio dispensed with all the visual cues that had once done so much to help particularize places and people. There were no landscapes, whether mountains, mesas, or magnolias; the visual aspects of race were impossible to see and were swallowed up into funny accents, not necessarily regional ones, and certainly not the precise ones the stodgy folklorists were off transcribing; and the “American” melded into a single heroic accent, or *non*-accent, the one that Kansas’s Wild West sheriff Matt Dillon had in common with New York’s ace detective The Falcon and Waukegan’s funnyman Jack Benny. The bit players could be from anywhere, but the central roles, the ones for whom the listeners were *really* rooting, spoke for all of those listeners because they spoke *as* none of them in particular.

In sum, then, this dissertation will be interested in tracing the parallel trajectories of the “folk” and the “modern,” particularly as these terms are expressed through different media, as divergent but often overlapping responses to the social, political, and economic realities of the United States from approximately 1880-1945. These trajectories will be anchored in a particular medium in each chapter. At stake in such a discussion is first a potentially clearer understanding of the authors described, more sensitive to their works as responses to an idea- and mediascape which has previously gone unrecognized. Second, I hope that this study will in a sense help to refine the concept of a specifically “American” modernism, around questions of European inheritance and formal experimentation.

Inherent in all of this is a third, and potentially larger, story, that of what I call the “migration” of the American folk. In the 1880s, in the early days of the American Folklore Society and at the height of the local-color movement in literature, the folk was elsewhere—not in the literary salons of Boston and New York but scattered about the country in remote places untouched by the scourge of modernization. “Real” Americans worked on farms in Wisconsin, not in high-rises in New York. “Real” Americans worked on Winesburg, Ohio’s newspaper, not Philadelphia’s. And the “real” living history of America lived not in Boston but in small towns like Sarah Orne Jewett’s South Berwick, Maine. By the 1940s, Americans were no longer *there*, they were *here*, and we should all be so lucky as to be considered “good folks.” Now, in the age of mass media outlets speaking “General American” and the supposed relocation of “real America” to the suburbs, the American folk had become a single entity, defined by what it was not as much as by what it was. Not racialized, not urban, not dialected, this new American “folk” could only be defined by tautology.

My first chapter will take up Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899), a collection of “plantation romance” sketches. In this genre, a staple of nineteenth-century magazine culture popularized by Joel Chandler Harris’s Uncle Remus, a former slave tells stories (usually “folk” tales) to a white audience. My chapter seeks to understand why an African-American author like Chesnutt would use this potentially racist form as his own entrée into the world of letters. I argue that Chesnutt critiques the plantation romance by turning the genre against itself. In the process, Chesnutt is able to demonstrate that the trope of the nostalgic former slave (promoted by folklorists and anthropologists as well as literary artists) is an artificial, politically regressive

construction. Moreover, Chesnutt is able to do so through a proto-modernist literary style, which was beginning to celebrate complexity and difficulty as ends in themselves in the works of authors such as Henry James and Stephen Crane. What is often downplayed in the criticism about Chesnutt is his milieu, that of the high-cultural magazines in which authors like James and Crane were publishing. Chesnutt is ostensibly satisfying a public taste for local color and folklore, but he is doing so in a medium that prizes literary experimentation and elevation as well. The Chesnutt chapter is first chronologically, but it is also first in my dissertation because it provides a foundational instance of the intersection between the folk and the modern. Chesnutt's early melding of the folk tale with a Modernist's attention to literary style, and the fact that he does so around the highly wrought and ambiguous question of race, lays the groundwork for the remaining chapters of the dissertation.

The second chapter moves to the theater in an attempt to understand the context surrounding Eugene O'Neill's controversial race play *The Emperor Jones* (1920). Treating the play either as a tragedy in the German expressionist mode or a demeaning primitivist fantasy, critics have overlooked the persistence of the popular theater tradition of blackface minstrelsy, a disturbingly vibrant form well into the twentieth century. Following Daphne Brooks's work and Louis Chude-Sokei's study of performer Bert Williams, I suggest that *The Emperor Jones* offers a unique instance of racial exchange and cooperation. This exchange is best understood as a combination of Modernist trends in the theater and the more traditional, monochromatic representations of American types on the popular stage and in the press. O'Neill's play uses the avant-garde theater in Europe to explode the popular misrepresentations of African-Americans, and in the

process, *The Emperor Jones* uses those popular misrepresentations to Americanize the European forms.

The third chapter moves into more explicitly canonical territory with Willa Cather's experimental novels from *My Antonia* (1918) to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). This and the last chapter look to broaden the scope of the folk beyond the contours of the color line. More important, however, they begin to show some of the aftereffects of the previous authors' hollowing out of the American folk. Authors like Chesnutt and O'Neill showed that the folk types the American public held dearest were cruel and dangerous constructions, and Cather's work pushes toward a more capacious understanding of what Americanness could be. As with Chesnutt, Cather begins with the familiar frame of "local color" fiction popularized in the late nineteenth century. Like folklore, local color offered portraits of distinct regions of the American landscape and its idiosyncratic inhabitants, claiming to depict the lives of "real Americans," particularly after the fractious period that produced the Civil War. But Cather strategically forgets her folkloric aspirations very quickly, as the best places are the emptiest ones, or to use Cather's terms, the places *démeublés*, unfurnished so something like the human spirit can flourish. The ideal American for Cather is no longer simply the Nebraska farmer who never leaves, but a boy like Pardee, New Mexico's Tom Outland in *The Professor's House* (1925), whose greatest moments come by himself amid the ruins of a dead Native American civilization, where he, by starlight, reads Virgil in the original Latin. These good American boys, who could actually come from anywhere and could also be girls, also do it all: they're artists, scientists, adventurers, friends, lovers, warriors, and peacemakers. This is what that belief in the pioneer spirit, in American ingenuity, can do,

and it lives in every small town, not just the remote ones. *This* is the new local color, and we are all locals now.

The fourth chapter looks to the mass media of the mid-twentieth-century to understand how mass culture inherited this hollowed-out version of the folk. In particular, I am interested in radio serials from the mid-twentieth century, a growing field in which very little work has been done so far. In radio, this decidedly “modern” medium, the stage has been “bared” and the audience non-descript as it has never been before, so the complications and new emptiness of the trusty folk types are unimpeded by regional difference. Early radio produces some odd results, confusing holdovers from the earlier American self-understanding: in a 1939 episode of the Western serial *Lonesome Jim*, an 1870 westbound train is robbed in typical Wild West fashion, but when the robber is given voice, his is not the voice of a brusque cowboy, but instead that of the New York tough popularized in film and other radio programs. How, then, have these American types been so readily plucked from their local and historical contexts and placed in an ambiguous space of the “American past”? They’ve been plucked because region and place don’t make the same kind of sense that they once did: the Brooklyn tough may exist, but Brooklyn isn’t what it used to be, and the 1870s frontier has become a ramshackle enough place, not pestered with any roots or longtime residents. The central program discussed in this chapter, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, spans early radio to late, as the eponymous couple’s trials and travails in Wistful Vista (about an hour from pretty much anywhere you could think of) remind us so much of “our” own, especially once Molly sheds her Irish brogue in the early 1940s and Fibber wins a Gallup Poll for the “Most Average Man.” As I argue in this chapter, radio is one of the major sites of the

migration of the American folk, where the specific types Chesnutt and O'Neill excoriated and Cather used but quickly forgot about become generalized into the "real Americans" on which so much of our contemporary political discourse is based. In this sense, the fourth chapter shows how a different "folk" lived. The nineteenth-century folk may have persisted into the twentieth, but the modern and modernist twentieth generalized that folk, in much the same way that linguists took the varied dialects of the United States and created "General American" English.

¹ J. Hector de Saint-John Crèvecoeur, *Letters From an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America* (1781; reprint, New York: Penguin Classics, 1986), 66.

Further citations appear in the text.

² Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1934; reprint, Boston: Mariner, 2005), 16.

³ Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Culture* (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1871), 23.

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Modern Library Classics, 2000), 12.

⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1971), 38, 36.

⁶ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 9.

⁷ Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2.

⁸ Marjorie Perloff, "Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivism and Postmodern Pieties," in Barkan and Bush, *Prehistories of the Future*, 340.

⁹ Virginia Lee-Webb, "Manipulated Images: European Photographs of Pacific Peoples," in Barkan and Bush, *Prehistories of the Future*, 197.

¹⁰ This term appears throughout Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹¹ Daphne Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro: Narrative, Culture, and Ethnography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 5.

¹² Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994), 58.

¹³ David Chinitz's study *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (2005) provides a thorough and unique study of Eliot's fraught relationship with low- and middlebrow culture.

¹⁴ Hamlin Garland, *Crumbling Idols* (Chicago: Stone and Kimball, 1894), 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁶ Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; reprint, New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 1.

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- ¹⁷ Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 17
- ¹⁸ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Folklore's Crisis," *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 111, No. 441 (Summer 1998), 305.
- ¹⁹ Simon Bronner, *American Folklore Studies* (Lawrence: The Press of the University of Kansas, 1986), xi
- ²⁰ Crèvecoeur, *Letters*, 94.
- ²¹ Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," *Shadow and Act*, 89..
- ²² Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
- ²³ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ²⁶ Jacob Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist*, 72 (December 1970): 1289–1299.
- ²⁷ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9.
- ²⁸ Allison Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn of the Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 73.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ³⁰ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).
- ³¹ Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 19.
- ³² Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
- ³³ Irving Howe, "The Idea of the Modern," *Literary Modernism*, Irving Howe, ed. (New York: Fawcett Premier, 1967), 29.
- ³⁴ Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.
- ³⁵ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- ³⁶ Griffiths, *Wondrous Difference*, 172.
- ³⁷ Neil Verma, *Theater of the Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 2.

Chapter 1

“It’s all in de tale”: Dialect and Experimentation in Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman*

The early returns were good to Charles Chesnutt. He received no higher praise than that of literary kingmaker William Dean Howells. Howells had established his voice as public critic as editor of *The Atlantic* from 1871 to 1881, and he was a regular contributor for decades afterward. It was therefore almost inconceivable that he should choose a relative unknown for the subject of his 1900 critical essay. And even with this unlikely harbinger of Chesnutt’s overnight success, Howells put Chesnutt in a literary company nearly unthinkable for an African-American prose author, for many the first and only of the period. Writing on Chesnutt’s three published works to date,¹ Howells suggests, “for far the greatest part Mr. Chesnutt seems to know quite as well what he wants to do in a given case as Maupassant, or Torguénief [Turgenev], or Mr. James, or Miss Jewett, or Miss Wilkins, in other given cases, and has done it with an art of kindred quiet and force.”² And as if to push the racial question aside altogether, Howells insists, “It is not from their racial interest that we could first wish to speak of them, though that must have a very great and very just claim upon the critic. It is much more simply and directly, as works of art, that they make their appeal.”³ In a move truly remarkable given the state of race relations at the turn of the century, Howells reads Chesnutt in terms in which he would rarely be read again: not only as an African-American writer but also as a writer, subject to many of the same foibles and weaknesses, but also capable of the same depths of feeling, as the great writers of his day. Howells’s claim is one that he

could never quite summon about other African-American writers who appeared during his unofficial tenure as the Dean of American Letters.

The singularity of this appraisal of Chesnutt is even more pronounced when we put it alongside Howells's introduction to Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, published four years earlier in 1896. As he had with Chesnutt, Howells insists, "I think I should scarcely trouble the reader with a special appeal in behalf of this book, if it had not specially appealed to me for reasons apart from the author's race, origin, and condition."⁴ Throughout this introduction, though, Howells refers again and again to the unique details of Dunbar's biography, in awe of the fact that Dunbar is "the first instance of an American negro who had evinced innate distinction in literature."⁵ Dangerously close to the condescending white supremacist language that thrived on listing some of what it perceived as African-Americans' less savory "innate distinctions," Howells cannot get past the novelty of the fact that Dunbar has written at all. In the end, "if he should do nothing more than he has done, I should feel that he had made the strongest claim for the negro in English literature that the negro has yet made."⁶ The list of literary luminaries that appears in Howells's review of Chesnutt is nowhere to be found in his introduction to *Lowly Life*, and not because of his belief in Dunbar's singular genius.

The relationship between Howells and Chesnutt would become increasingly complicated in the years to follow. Howells would refer to Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901) as, "in fact, bitter, bitter."⁷ As Howells's review coincided with the rise of Chesnutt's literary star, so did his denunciation of *Marrow* coincide with its fall only a few years later. In light of Chesnutt's political epic detailing the recent race riots in Wilmington, NC, Howells seemed to have reversed his whole perspective: "'The Marrow

of Tradition,' *like everything else he has written*, has to do with the relations of the blacks and whites, and in that republic of letters where all men are free and equal he stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it." (my emphasis)⁸ "Like everything else he has written," "his own people": Chesnutt, it seems, was no different from Dunbar, except a bit angrier.⁹

I would suggest, however, that we should not trust Howells's full reversal on the question of Chesnutt's status as author. Chesnutt was no doubt interested in questions of race, but he was equally motivated to become a gentleman of letters. Chesnutt was light-skinned enough to pass, and in fact, he did not publicly identify as an African-American until the late nineteenth century with the book publication of his first three works. These competing desires have largely been overshadowed by the racially controversial novels Chesnutt published in the early twentieth century—*The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* (1905)—but they nonetheless represent a contradiction whose full import has yet to be explored.

In what follows, I attempt to find the space between Howells's opposing characterizations of Chesnutt. Neither exclusively a "bitter" race writer nor a member of some raceless republic of letters, Chesnutt, I argue, used both the political and the aesthetic together rather than in isolation. In employing many of the tropes of racist discourse that imbued American culture at the turn of the century, Chesnutt explodes these tropes not through explicit political attack but through the subtler medium of elevated literary form. In so doing, Chesnutt creates an early melding of the "folk" (in this case, the figure of the "plantation darky") with a proto-modernist attention to elevated language and form. Chesnutt is certainly interested in political topics, but this

interest is always intertwined with his devotion to the craft of writing. In what follows, I attend in particular to aspects of his craft in order to better understand his importance to the evolution of the folk idea in the practice of modernist art and the role that the folk could play in modernism's attempts to push beyond the limits of its available media.

In order to see how Chesnutt has been characterized since his resurgence in the 1980s, I show first the way in which Chesnutt's earliest successes were very different from his contemporary ones. Richard Brodhead reminds us, "Chesnutt, like his high-cultural white contemporaries, dissociates literary art from such transliterary aims and makes it more of an end: Chesnutt's aims as a writer, most unlike [those of] Washington, or Harper, or Frederick Douglass, or Harriet Jacobs, is to *have a literary career*, through the mastery of writing."¹⁰ Even if it seems overstated to say that Chesnutt's aims were "most unlike" those of Douglass, there is no doubt that Chesnutt's aims were different from those of the other authors, not least because the context of his work (both the context he wanted and the context he had) were so distant from those of earlier periods. If the complexities of Chesnutt's racial politics were not adequately genteel in his contemporary moment, his literary gentility can seem merely incidental in ours.

The Archaeology of Chesnutt criticism, and the Role of the Literary

Chesnutt fell into relative obscurity after the publication of *The Colonel's Dream* in 1905. In Alain Locke's collection celebrating the renaissance in African-American literature and culture, *The New Negro* (1925), Chesnutt is honored with only a paragraph and a few lines of bibliography. Surveying "The Negro in American Literature," William Stanley Braithwaite laments that the work in fiction by African-American authors had to

that point been “one of the repressed activities of our literary life.” Chesnutt is offered as a novelist of talent and one who displays the race problem with honesty and vigor, but ultimately, “The American public preferred spurious values to the genuine; the coinage of the Confederacy was at literary par. Where Dunbar, the sentimentalist, was welcome, Chestnutt [sic], the realist, was barred.”¹¹ The misspelling here is symptomatic: whatever his accomplishments, Chesnutt is a minor novelist, a tragic hero at best, and no one is likely to catch the error.

In Carl Van Vechten’s controversial novel of the era, protagonist Byron Kasson knows Chesnutt is a figure “strangely unfamiliar to most of the new generation,” even as Kasson admires “the cool deliberation of its style, the sense of form, but more than all the civilized mind of this man who had surveyed the problems of his race from an Olympian height and had turned them into living and artistic drama.”¹² By the time of Chesnutt’s death, W.E.B. DuBois could lament the loss of “a fine intellect, a keen sense of humor and a broad tolerant philosophy” without naming any of Chesnutt’s works or his contribution to the race literature of which DuBois was such a supporter.¹³ Despite its popularity in our own day, *The Marrow of Tradition* was not given a second edition until 1968, and indeed the only of Chesnutt’s works to be reprinted between their initial publication and the gradual rediscovery of Chesnutt during the Civil Rights movement were his Douglass biography in 1912 and *The Conjure Woman*, of which Houghton-Mifflin issued a small run in 1928.¹⁴

The Chesnutt revival began with the reprint of his major works by Gregg Press (best known now for its edition of science-fiction reprints) in 1968. Since that time, most of his major works have been reprinted at least once each decade. The revival of critical

interest in Chesnutt began with William L. Andrews's *The Literary Career of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1980).¹⁵ Neither Andrews nor any of the critics who follow him chastise Chesnutt for his "bitterness" as Howells did, but by the same token they give the most attention to Chesnutt's achievements and social importance, to the extent that a comparison to Turgenev or Jewett would seem irrelevant and, to some extent, sterilizing. While Andrews and others are interested in Chesnutt as a literary writer, particular in his ability to use racist literary forms against themselves, they are somewhat less attentive to what Van Vechten's protagonist called "the cool deliberation of [Chesnutt's] style, his sense of form."

For Chesnutt's major critics in the 1980s—William Andrews and Houston Baker¹⁶—the main question raised by *The Conjure Woman* is one of genre. Why would an African-American author use an implicitly racist form, the plantation romance, the form that thrived on portraying idealized versions of the slave plantations and pre-war relationships between Southern blacks and whites, as his own entrée into literature? For Andrews, Chesnutt's motivation was both stylistic and practical in that it was characterized by a balance "between the demands of popular local color realism and the obligation of the committed artist to portray 'truth to nature' despite the conventions, stereotypes, and prejudices of the literature of his own day."¹⁷ The Brechtian language of "commitment" and "realism" is not accidental here. Andrews offers a portrait of an author who respects conventions but filters them through a very specific kind of realism, which for Brecht means "laying bare society's causal network/showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators" and so on.¹⁸ Plantation romance thus offers a familiar and marketable form, but one that can be manipulated to show more

“reality” than readers had come to expect from its best-known purveyors, Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page.

In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, Houston Baker considers Chesnutt as a “modernist,” though in a newly established context. Whenever Euro-modernism might be said to start, for Baker, African-American modernism starts with Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Exposition address. This is a modernism defined in particular by a masterful “mis”-appropriation of forms: by mastering the forms of white politics and literature, African-American artists are able to mask the true meanings and import of their works so that those meanings reach the broadest possible audience. Rather than merely inheriting a form amenable to African-American storytelling, Chesnutt uses the plantation romance as a kind of masquerade, “tricking” the white readership into facing the racial demons that readership has strategically ignored. For Baker, “Chesnutt’s effectiveness as a ‘modern’ lay in his ability to give the trick to white expectations, securing publication for creative work that carries a deep-rooted African sound.”¹⁹ Almost a kind of Trojan horse, Chesnutt’s plantation fiction is the vessel gladly received that contains untold dangers.

For Baker, the pillars of this newly formulated Afro-modernism are Washington, DuBois, Chesnutt, and Locke. Establishing this lineage posits a separate modernism that is not tied to the white, Euro-centric canon. In insisting on this separateness, Baker removes the faulty comparison that compares African-American Modernists to their white European counterparts in an inevitably unfavorable light. As in Andrews, Chesnutt’s context is thus largely a political one, and what he does in giving the “trick” to white expectations receives more attention than does how he performs this trick. Given

the variety of genres represented in the list of Afro-modernism's forebears—Washington, DuBois, Chesnutt, Locke—Chesnutt cannot help but seem a social theorist or historian defined by the same goals as his more explicitly political counterparts. Masking can apply to all of these authors because it exists as a trope, whatever the register of language being used, and Chesnutt's work on the sentence level does not receive a great deal of attention.

Employing Baker's concept of "masking" as a central trope in Afro-American modernism, Eric Sundquist announces Chesnutt's complex interplay with popular entertainments of the day in the chapter title, "Charles Chesnutt's Cakewalk," from *To Wake the Nations* (1993). It is impossible to miss the echoing of Baker in Sundquist's claim that Chesnutt "wore the necessary mask of whiteness (and, like Homer Plessy, could have worn it without detection), but he claimed his African American heritage in promoting the authenticity of his literary voice. In doing so, he inserted tricksterism into the calculated game of the American literary market."²⁰ Sundquist has the added benefit of Henry Louis Gates's terminology from *The Signifying Monkey* (1989) in referring to the "conjure tales' ability to signify upon and destroy, even while wearing the disguise of, plantation literature and the racial conceptions that supported it."²¹ It is in Sundquist's conception that we can see clearly the relationship between Gates's "signifyin(g)" and Baker's "mastery of form": in both instances, the black artist "repeats" the form but in the process changes that form beyond recognition.

For Sundquist, the primary medium of Chesnutt's success is his prevalent, almost relentless, use of dialect. Chesnutt's use of dialect, Sundquist argues, should be "taken in part as a subtle, self-conscious examination of his relation to both the white plantation

tradition and to those black writers who may have pandered to the public taste for ‘darky’ language. More than that, however, it was a means for him to explore the ways in which language is perspectival and coded with assumptions of hierarchy and power.”²² Thus dialect, like the cakewalk itself, is the result of melding seemingly contradictory parts: a black mode of speech, appropriated by white authors for hegemonic ends, and then *re-*appropriated by self-conscious black artists as a dual marker of authenticity and artificiality. If we follow Sundquist’s argument to its logical end, Chesnutt becomes an essential figure in the transition. While working within the parameters of a racist local-color tradition (“signifyin(g)” upon that tradition), Chesnutt prefigures the reclamation of the folk voice that would become a cornerstone of works by authors such as Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s and 1930s.

The difference for Chesnutt, though, was that he did not share these later authors’ belief in African-American authenticity. Because the concept of racial authenticity is so rooted in the cultural relativism that informed the Harlem Renaissance—but not the 1890s—Chesnutt inevitably works with a goal other than demonstrating African-Americans’ authentic selves. In addition to a conceptual vocabulary that did not include the idea that cultures were distinct and equally viable, this difference is due in large part to Chesnutt’s lack of commitment to the collection and dissemination of traditional Negro folklore; this in contrast to Brown, Hughes, Hurston, and others, whose actual work as folklorists and anthropologists supplemented or informed their creative work, as well as to folklorists from his own time, like Joel Chandler Harris and other founding members of the American Folklore Society. Chesnutt’s statement in *Modern Culture* on African-American folklore in “Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South” (1901) is tellingly

ambiguous. Playfully suggesting that he once thought his conjure tales the pure product of his imagination, Chesnutt concedes that the tales “were after all but dormant ideas, lodged in my childish mind by old Aunt This and old Uncle That, and awaiting only the spur of imagination to bring them again to the surface.”²³ This notion of dormant ideas has led critic Neill Matheson to posit an affinity between Chesnutt and anthropologist Edward Tylor, who, for Matheson, “points towards a kind of historical unconscious, in which our formerly meaningful fragments of forgotten history are embedded in our modern lives.”²⁴ This is no doubt true in Chesnutt: even if John and Annie are somewhat historically ignorant, Julius is seemingly an endless supply of lived or inherited experience, and the fact that the three characters connect over the basic humanity of the stories suggests a commonality between the characters. Even the grapevines in “The Goophered Grapevine” and the horse in “Hot-Foot Hannibal” seem to have a historical consciousness, and Julius is often able to convince his white interlocutors of one thing or another by the vividness with which he depicts the continued existence of slave times on the postbellum plantation.²⁵

These anthropological resonances might seem a contradiction to Chesnutt’s later statement that “the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the Uncle Remus stories which are avowedly folk tales.”²⁶ But we should note that the earlier quote does not contain any real claims to folkloric authenticity; in fact, the former statement squares relatively easily with a typically Romantic view of artistic inspiration. This attitude is underlined in his citation of “old Aunt This and old Uncle That” as the sources for these tales, in the implied repudiation of the scientific doctrines that inform the footnoted, prefaced volumes of Harris and Mary Alicia Owen.

Matheson's argument for the resonances between Chesnutt and Tylor are true in describing many of the attitudes that inform Chesnutt's racial politics, but there is still a remainder in the form of Chesnutt's continued insistence on the literary imagination.

In this sense, Chesnutt is separate from the later authors in his attitude toward race authenticity. One might argue that Chesnutt reappropriates the African-American dialect from Harris, Page, and Owen, and in a sense, does it right, or at the very least, returns it to its rightful owner. But the tremendous variety of African-American speech throughout his oeuvre, especially in the polyphony of dialects within *The Marrow of Tradition*, would suggest that questions of who owns proper or improper speech are beside the point. Were these his central questions, Chesnutt would have made his point far too subtly, particularly given that there is no real sign that Chesnutt sides with (or is represented by) Uncle Julius any more than with the narrator John, except by a tenuous racial association. John is the figure most often ironized in the sketches, but Julius is ironized as well: that Julius's stories may contain some deep well of truth does not necessarily discount the fact that he tells them for some less-than-noble gain. For Sundquist, the mystery of Chesnutt's conjure tales is that "the tales are so strongly felt, so completely steeped in the reality of conjure, despite their deliberate containment within a skeptical frame that pits oral and written cultures in ironic combat."²⁷ In other words, regardless of the tale's or skeptical frame's "truth," neither Julius nor John nor Annie is any kind of exact personification of Chesnutt.

But this depersonalization brings us back to the question of dialect. Why, again, would an African-American author subject himself and his audience to pages upon pages of this supposed "darky" dialect? Sundquist's reading squares with that of Gavin Jones,

whose *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded-Age America* (1999)

offers the most comprehensive reading of the variety of dialects used in the period. For

Jones,

Dialect writing was not always a proof of hegemonic command. It could also register an anxious, constantly collapsing attempt to control the fragmentation and change that characterize any national tongue. And dialect could encode the possibility of resistance, not just by undermining the integrity of a dominant standard, but by recording the subversive voices in which alternative versions of reality were engendered.²⁸

In other words, dialect literature expressed the intertwined, often contradictory,

discourses and attitudes of its era. The basic assumption of the era was that dialect was a

form that purported to be a neutral transmission of the patterns of oral speech, in some

ways the linguistic buttress that supported nineteenth-century realism's mimetic credo.

For Jones, though, dialect is never neutral, and is in fact based on a series of paradoxes: a

move to include "non-standard" ways of speaking in a generous definition of the

American language was by the same token an expression that the standard was always

under attack from the non-standard; the otherized language that was used to enforce the

linguistic standard was used by these same "others" to assert a kind of cultural autonomy.

Jones's book does not address Chesnutt at length, but it offers a comparable

instance in Paul Laurence Dunbar. In Dunbar, Jones suggests, dialect has ceased to be a

"medium of access to some purported black experience." The speaker in Dunbar's poetry

instead wears the mask, as "dialect is employed to make a political point" of the

"pervasive presence of black expression within Western culture generally and American

culture specifically."²⁹ In other words, Dunbar *uses* dialect in order to critique the more

pervasive *use of* dialect in writing on African-Americans. We should note the similarities

here between Jones's and Sundquist's perspectives. For both critics, dialect's mimetic

qualities are beside the point. Instead, dialect is used to signal a relationship to a larger tradition, to mark the author's awareness of that tradition as a way to critique it from within.

Literary style and the mechanics of such a style, however, are often downplayed in studies of Chesnutt, a lawyer whose knowledge of the injustice of race laws was particularly acute, and the inspiration for such well-known essays and speeches as "What is a White Man?" (1889), "The Disenfranchisement of the Negro" (1903), and "The Courts and the Negro" (1908). To be sure, Andrews, Baker, and Sundquist have offered a compelling portrait of the author, but in what follows, I would like to shift Chesnutt's context to one that was not particularly friendly to the kinds of political critique that Andrews, Baker, and Sundquist have identified. Through this context, we can begin to see the actual mechanism of Chesnutt's "trick." The separation between the aesthetic and the political is thus not one of "dissociation," as Richard Brodhead has identified, but a unique combination, defined as it is by its seemingly contradictory content and form—the folk type and the proto-modernist attention to language.

Charles Chesnutt and the Magazine Art

After all, local color and dialect literatures were not the only things going in the late nineteenth century in the United States. Even for some of those who might be considered local-colorists under the genre's broadest definition, such as the early James of *The Bostonians* or the slumming Stephen Crane of *Maggie*, there was often a different motivation. Of this growing interest, Henry James wrote in 1899, "It can simply do everything, and that is its strength and its life. Its plasticity, its elasticity are infinite; there is no colour, no extension it may not take from the nature of its subject or the temper of

its craftsman.”³⁰ “The Future of the Novel” was James’s victory lap. It came fifteen years after his landmark essay “The Art of Fiction,” an attempt to buck the trend of the novel’s sad state of having “no air of having a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it—of being the expression of an artistic faith.”³¹ By 1899, however, “The novel is older, and so are the young,” and James’s prose experiments in the new century would be “older” still.

James’s insistent self-consciousness makes him a primary figure in what Mark McGurl terms the rise of the “novel art.” In this model, James is the first modernist, where modernism is “reflective of the notion, associated with professionalism, that there might be pleasure *in* work and, specifically, in the particular kind of intellectual work that reading the difficult modernist text is said to require.”³² Though, McGurl concedes, few of the writers of the modernist period *sound* like James, many have nonetheless inherited his sense of formal difficulty as an end in itself. Moreover, this bourgeois “work” is the very precondition for having “a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it.” With James as anchor, McGurl’s study goes on to trace the “novel art” through some obvious channels (Faulkner, Crane) and some less obvious ones (Anita Loos, Dashiell Hammett). *The Novel Art* is thus the twentieth-century Americanist’s augmentation of Michael McKeon’s *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987). Where the earlier study sought to dislodge the popular consensus that the novel was always around by showing the socio-political milieu from which it emerged, McGurl’s study is similarly interested in dislodging the commonplace that novels have always been considered “great works.”

If we look closely at McGurl’s case studies, however, it becomes clear that the rise could not have happened on the strength of “the novel” alone. One might even say

that a more apt title for McGurl's study would have been "The Magazine Art," given the persistent role magazine culture played in bringing the novel to prominence. The book's very anchor, James's "The Art of Fiction," was printed in the volume *Partial Portraits* (1888), but this was a reprint of the essay, which initially appeared in *Longman's Magazine* in September 1884. In fact, most of the authors in McGurl's study had formative experiences with the magazines: Crane's journalistic endeavors are well known, Faulkner published over twenty of his stories in *The Saturday Evening Post* (including "The Bear"), Loos's *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* began as a series of sketches in *Harper's Bazaar*, and Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* was first serialized in mystery magazine *The Black Mask*. Thus in the rise of the novel art, the novels themselves were only the final products: the hard work, tinkering, and tampering happened in the magazines.

This was even more so in Chesnutt's era, when fewer magazines could boast national circulation. Because of his close relationship with Howells and turn-of-the-century editor Walter Hines Page, Chesnutt would most often publish his short fiction in *Atlantic Monthly*,³³ though he also established affiliations with *Overland Monthly*, *The Independent*, *Southern Workman*, *Century*, and, later, *The Crisis*. I will focus on *The Atlantic* here, because it was Chesnutt's most frequent journal.

It should be noted first that the contents of *The Atlantic*, particularly in the early parts of Chesnutt's career, are even more of a testament to his profound achievement. In an issue of approximately 140 pages, the standard format of the magazine would allow space for about five or six full-length prose pieces (essays, stories, serializations), two poems, three pages of book reviews, and approximately five to ten pages from the

“Contributors’ Club” (much like *The New Yorker*’s “Talk of the Town” today). Thus although Chesnutt’s stories never acquired lead status, they were in a small enough company that the importance of his *Atlantic* publications is difficult to overestimate.

Moreover, the writing published alongside Chesnutt’s stories is seldom what we might expect. Heather Tirado Gilligan’s recent article “Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt’s ‘Uncle Julius’ Tales” offers a new context for Chesnutt’s conjure stories, not as entries in some popular but marginalized form of light literature, but as an essential fixture of nineteenth century magazine and literary culture. Gilligan’s discursive analysis of plantation fiction in the elite magazines of the latter half of the nineteenth century begins to reconfigure *The Conjure Woman* “not in a tradition of folklore or subtle subversion but rather at the heart of late nineteenth-century literary culture.”³⁴ A look back at the issues of *The Atlantic* in which some of Chesnutt’s early stories were published bears out Gilligan’s claims. In the August 1887 issue of the magazine, Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine” appears alongside articles like William Lawton Cranston’s “The Alkestis of Euripides” and Harriet Waters Preston’s “The Spell of the Russian Writers.” In the May 1888 issue, “Po’ Sandy” appears alongside the third and final installment of Henry James’s *The Aspern Papers* and reviews of Charles Brockden Brown and John Ruskin. In the October 1889 issue, “Dave’s Neckliss” appears alongside William Lawton Cranston’s “The Closing Scenes of the *Iliad*” and Chapters XXVIII-XXX of Henry James’s *The Tragic Muse*.³⁵

It is true that Chesnutt did not select this group of writers specifically, but this is as literal a “context” for the early Chesnutt as we are likely to get. This is only emphasized by the fact that “The Goophered Grapevine” is his first published work, not

the republication of something already made famous in another context. Thus if we do accept that “the novel art” was born in the magazines, it necessarily follows that Chesnutt is deeply ingrained in the contexts that produced the novelistic experiments of Henry James. Given the publication of his works alongside passages from the *Iliad* and the high-art musings of Victorian essayist John Ruskin, Chesnutt wrote within a magazine culture that necessarily placed his racial politics in the context of a broader literary debate about aesthetics. The contact was not merely incidental, as Chesnutt was every bit as engaged with the big aesthetic questions as were his more famous and vocal contemporaries.

Moreover, Chesnutt’s use of dialect, the most reliable signifier of the magazine local-colorist, is not only that of a local colorist. Indeed, while Gavin Jones’s emphasis is on dialect literature’s reflections of the linguistic discourses of contamination (which themselves reflect larger political concerns of race, immigration, and education), this is not the only way to think of dialect literature. An early work of Americanist criticism, Richard Bridgman’s *The Colloquial Style in American Literature* (1957), shows a different way. For Bridgman, a distinctly national style, most in evidence in the work of Mark Twain and Ernest Hemingway, is born in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors’ work with dialect literature. “American writers,” argues Bridgman, “learned how to reproduce the unique qualities of speech in a special arena fenced in by quotation marks.”³⁶ American literature, in other words, is born in oral speech, and once its extremes are tamped down, once it becomes more accessible as a fully readable style, authors like Twain, James, Stein, and Hemingway can help to advance a form that has dialect as its very foundation.

There are many reasons to prefer Jones's argument to Bridgman's. Bridgman's is deeply compromised by its relatively stable use of an unquantifiable, arbitrary definition of "American," which is capacious enough to include a wide range of authors from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but narrow enough that he can thread a consistent narrative through the bulk of it. Moreover, the teleological aspects of the study, the sense that Hemingway has done something right that the others have not, or has "improved" on his predecessors, is a deservedly outmoded style of criticism. Finally, the limitations of the traditional canon become extremely visible in Bridgman: without the contributions of African-American writers and the broad spectrum of others that peopled the literary scene at the end of the 1890s, Bridgman's study cannot but paint a very compromised picture of "American literature." In a telling oversight, the only African-Americans even glossed in the study are the characters Melanctha and Uncle Remus.

Nonetheless, Bridgman's study leaves us with the important reminder that dialect is not only a political or ethnographic tool: dialect is a *style*, a way of writing. That Chesnutt's works are more infused with dialect (and the particular dialect of African-American southerners) than those of some of his contemporaries simply means that Chesnutt's style is defined by its complex use of dialect in the same way that James's style is defined by its complex syntax or Stein's is defined by repetition. It is not likely that Bridgman would've thought much of Chesnutt. American literature couldn't exist without its dialect authors, but there must be limits:

Uncompromising dialect is exasperating to read. Deciphering it exhausts the attention so rapidly that the short work is virtually the exclusive domain of dialect--the humorous anecdote, the tall tale, the elaborate practical joke. An Uncle Remus novel is unthinkable. If *Huckleberry Finn* is the first full-length American narrative told in dialect, it is because the dialect in that book is minimal.³⁷

Though *The Conjure Woman* is not quite a novel, its 200 odd pages do nonetheless contain about 160 pages of “uncompromising dialect” from Uncle Julius. Still, aside from readerly exasperation, what might make such an achievement “unthinkable”? Jones may have the answer:

Howells may have seen dialect writing as part of realism’s rejection of the conventional literary language and traditional style that he considered ‘aristocratic.’ Yet in another sense such writing represented an even more intricate and artificial form of stylization that made literature at times seem as challenging and inaccessible as any ‘aristocratic’ creation. The type of interpretive obscurity seen as marking the collapse of literary realism at the end of the century was already present in realism itself.³⁸

When described by words like “intricate and artificial form of stylization,” “challenging,” “inaccessible,” and “interpretive obscurity,” dialect sounds a good deal more like traditional High Modernism than it does the charming frolic of a genteel nineteenth-century readership.

And this ambiguous line between realism and its rejection in Modernism is nowhere more pronounced than in the dialect stories of Charles Chesnutt.³⁹ In the high-culture magazines of the late nineteenth century, Chesnutt uses the folk form of the plantation romance, popularized by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page, in order to critique that genre and to conduct experiments with the formal limits of the dialect genre. The ex-slave dialect in Chesnutt becomes a densely crafted, complex literary language in the mode of later modernists, for whom literary form, the uses and misuses of writing, became a primary object of focus. Chesnutt thus shows his technical skill in the story and dialect forms, relativizing language itself: showing that the “high” and “low” forms of speech and language are equally capable of affect and artificiality. In

this sense, Chesnutt is one of the earliest figures to combine the emergent, seemingly unconnected, forms of the folk and the modern at the end of the nineteenth century.

As Gilligan has noted, the “authentication” of narrative in post-war plantation tales was a necessary device “because of the advent of realism, which was strongly advocated in *Harper’s New Monthly* and the *Atlantic Monthly*,” two of the major magazines in which plantation fiction was published.⁴⁰ Harris’s mode of authenticating is ethnographic. While Uncle Remus himself is a composite character, both his tales and speech, claims Harris, are based on deep anthropological research. “My purpose,” writes Harris, “has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect... through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family.”⁴¹ Harris’s empirical determination is what enables him to “collect and verify the folklore included in this volume” (45). The crucial word here is of course “collect,” rather than “imagine” or “create.” In fact, it is only the “negro” himself who is described as in possession of the “poetic imagination”; Harris’s intention is merely to “reproduce the form... and the essence” of this imagination (39). Harris is playing to both the realist and ethnographic crowds, presenting a tale taken from life itself, by way of the dialect, told, as if aloud, by an “authentic” narrator.

Even if we are to take Harris at his word regarding the tales, the fact remains that Uncle Remus is not a “real” character, and so his dialect is necessarily a composite, an invention, as well. Although Harris decries the “intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage” (39), his Uncle Remus tales contribute to a broader misrepresentation in “dialect fiction”: fictions-in-dialect spoken in a fictional dialect. Unfortunately, as Lisa

Cohen Winnick notes, the “representations of black dialect that were endemic to the stories of the plantation tradition, along with the dialect performed in minstrel shows, became in many white minds inextricably linked with reality and accepted as symptomatic of black inferiority.”⁴² Even in their diversity, the broadly popular entertainments of the minstrel stage dating back to the 1830s and the relatively high-cultural plantation tradition, dating back at least to the early 1870s with Thomas Dunn English’s “Caesar Rowan” in *Scribner’s Magazine*, helped to create a nearly unified popular representation of African-American dialects with a combination of realism and hyperbole. Despite its older iterations, dialect fiction gained its greatest popularity in the magazines in the late 1880s and 1890s. In this sense, dialect’s heyday coincided with the founding of the American Folklore Society, and in the 1880s and 1890s in particular, writers of dialect began to insist on authenticity in a way that they had not before. By the early 1910s and 1920s, particularly within popular culture, dialect would often come to be characterized by a basis in dialect literature and theater (by convention, in other words) rather than a first-hand transcription of a dialect speaker.⁴³ Chesnutt fell between these two modes, and we can begin to see his particular “trick” on them in the way he adapts and rewrites the work of his plantation-romance contemporaries

Although Harris provides the “Uncle” template, Chesnutt’s much nearer antecedent is Thomas Nelson Page. Page came to national prominence with the 1887 publication of the short story collection *In Ole Virginia, or, Marse Chan and Other Stories*. Page’s volume opens with the generic authenticating move. In the opening “Note,” Page writes, “The dialect of the negroes of Eastern Virginia differs totally from that of the Southern negroes, and in some material points from that of those located

farther west.”⁴⁴ The short preface ends with a kind of note from the translator: “The sentence, ‘It was curious, he said, he wanted to go into the other army,’ would sound: ‘‘Twuz cu-yus, he say, he wan’(t) (to) go in(to) ’turr ah-my.’” That the remainder of the text will not carry with it this scientific heft is irrelevant: even for those texts that are, to use Chesnutt’s phrase, “the fruit of [the author’s] own imagination,” the plantation and local color forms demanded the generic practice of folkloric authentication. These are not folk tales, except insofar as they are told by the “folk” themselves, but rather stories, as in *The Conjure Woman*, of slave times.

But where the next obvious move would be to situate his subjects in a distinct time and place, Page removes those questions altogether. “Ole Virginia” very quickly becomes a utopian space, because the new Virginia has no existence except as a shadow of its former self. The unnamed white narrator comes upon the scene to find it peopled almost entirely by former slaves, who have in large part literally replaced their white masters, now as the owners of the mansions that have fallen into disrepair. “Distance,” the narrator writes, “was nothing to this people; time was of no consequence to them. They desired but a level path in life, and that they had, though the way was longer, and the outer world strode by them as they dreamed” (1). This is a world without meaning for its lowly former slaves in the absence of white masters. The former slave and eventual narrator of “Marse Chan” speaks volumes as he says, “‘Dey don’ nobody live dyar now, ’cep niggers... I lives down de road heah, a little piece, an’ I jes’ steps down of a evenin’ and looks arfter de graves” (3-4). The current residents in question are, to Sam, “nobody,” and his time is best spent tending to the graves of his dead masters, waiting for the moment when he can join them.

But of course, tending to the graves of his former masters is not Sam's only use: he is also the bearer of their living memories, and those of a south that white America has moved too quickly to forget. As in Chesnutt's conjure tales, the white frame narrator disappears quickly, and although the former slave's narration appears in quotation marks, it is nonetheless uninterrupted for the bulk of the story. Even for the Virginian narrator, the story of "Ole Virginia" is almost entirely in the hands of the former slaves now. "Marse Chan" can't be expected to remember his story with any precision: he was living it, going off to war, going blind, dying a lonely death. Instead, his story lives with his constant observer, his "body-servant" who lives for no reason but to provide for his master's needs.

The slaves shadow their masters more literally as well, as the black silhouettes cast in those masters' images. In "Marse Chan," Sam is not only "boys togerr" (4) with his master, though Sam is eight years older, he also marries the maid of his master's eventual wife, Miss Annie. And as if the lag between the two men needed any more emphasis, Sam goes off to war with Marse Chan, but wears an old uniform from the Mexican-American War as Marse Chan wears the Confederate gray. In "Unc' Edinburg's Drowndin'," Uncle Edinburg describes himself and his narrator as if the two are twins: "I was born like on a Sat'day in de Christmas, an' he wuz born in de new year on a Chuesday, an' my mammy nussed us bofe at one breast. Dat's de reason maybe huccome we took so to one nurr" (41). This doubling, which occurs throughout Page's stories, is thus on the one hand a way to emphasize slavery's paternalism, the idea that the slaves were part of a family that they had lost in Emancipation. On the other, though, and this is the essential part of Page's nostalgia, the slaves become the antebellum southerners who

never had to grow up. They are not only the living remnants of the antebellum south, they are its living examples.

In this sense, it is not difficult to see how Page's readers could ignore the virulent racism lurking in his texts. Nor is it difficult to see how a sensitive reader might be able to expose Page's edenic portrait for the construction that it is. The most obvious method would be to show the brutality of slavery. In the ghost story "No Haid Pawn," Page's narrator offers a token concession to the peculiar institution: "Even the runaway slaves who occasionally left their homes and took to the swamps and woods, impelled by the cruelty of their overseers, or by a desire for a vain counterfeit of freedom, never tried this swamp, but preferred to be caught and returned home to invading its awful shades" (164). More a means to advance the ghost story in which it is couched, this quote makes slavery's cruelty seem as much an anomaly as the cruel overseer, and never lays the cruelty at the foot of the family or the institution of which the slave was victim. The plots and actions in Chesnutt's stories are inconceivable in a volume like *In Ole Virginia* for their fundamental disagreement as to whether slavery was good or bad for the slaves. Chesnutt's "The Passing of Grandison" (1899) takes up this fundamental misunderstanding, narrating the tale of an aged slave who seems to be so loyal that his owner can't *force* him to run away, when all the while the slave is plotting a much more elaborate and inclusive departure from the plantation.

But there are more subtle places to attack Page's nostalgia as well. As we read Page backwards through Chesnutt, through the conjure stories as well as his contemporaneous color-line stories, we cannot help but be struck by the ambiguity of the family ties that pervade *In Ole Virginia*. In "Mars Chan," Sam reminisces, "'Yo' know

Marse Chan an' me--we wuz boys togerr. I wuz older'n he wuz, jes' de same ez he wuz whiter'n me'" (4). For Chesnutt in *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, Harper in *Iola Leroy* (1891), or Twain in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), the question of who "wuz whiter'n" whom became the very crux of indicting the slave system and the politics that carried over from it into the Reconstruction era. The mysterious similarities in physiognomy that motivate many of these later anti-racist texts are rooted in the very same family ties that Page is at such pains to celebrate. Given the absence of slave fathers, Page's "paternalism" is no doubt farther reaching than he may have been willing to acknowledge.

Critics have treated Chesnutt's similarities to Harris much more exhaustively than they have treated his relationship to Page, possibly for the simple reason that Harris's work has outlasted Page's in print and popular culture. Moreover, Chesnutt's books were marketed to Harris's readership: the first edition of *The Conjure Woman* has a graphic of an aged slave flanked by two mischievous looking rabbits, though rabbits do not figure with any prominence in Chesnutt's text.⁴⁵ Still, Chesnutt was equally conscious of Page, and on a very basic level, Chesnutt's tales denote an "anxiety of influence" from Page much more than they do one of Harris: the structure, the insistent fictionality echo Page's works much more than they do Harris's. In addition, Page's politics are so much more explicit than Harris's, which are often conveniently hidden or obscured in the discourses of journalism and social science that permeate the Uncle Remus volumes. Chesnutt shares a more direct lineage with Page because one can actually interpret his and Chesnutt's stories as stories with authors. In Harris, the tales themselves are ethnographic and obscure as to authorial intent (if they could be said to have "authors" at all), thus the

difficulty of interpreting them. With Harris, the main objects of interpretation are the form and the frame; with Chesnutt and Page, one can use the form, the frame, the tales, and the relationships between them.

In *The Conjure Woman*, Chesnutt emphasizes the difference between his text and generic plantation romance by drawing attention to it as a formal construction. On the surface, *The Conjure Woman* is structured much like the earlier frame tales. An aged, ex-slave shares his stories with a white audience, variously prompted by their questions and encouragement. In this case, the ex-slave is Uncle Julius McAdoo, and his tales are told in a heavy North Carolina dialect. The content of the stories is firmly situated in the antebellum plantation south. From the start, though, the text signals its own problematizing relationship to the earlier plantation-romance texts. As in all of Chesnutt's subsequent fiction, the narrative raises questions about the very term "negro" the moment Uncle Julius is introduced. When John and Annie first see Julius, John writes, Julius "held on his knees a hat full of grapes over which he was smacking his lips with great gusto, and a pile of grapeskins near him indicated that the performance was no new thing."⁴⁶ The word "performance" should be underlined here, as this introduction suggests a character pulled straight from the minstrel stage: lazy, mildly gluttonous, and sitting in a recognizably antebellum Southern scene on a "pine log, under a spreading elm" (8). Even his demeanor harkens back to the earlier era as he "respectfully rose as we drew near, and was moving away" (9)—a living, breathing stereotype, perfectly "in his place" in both senses of the phrase.

But the realities of the situation surface very quickly, and the plantation scene or the minstrel stage-set we expect has been made unfamiliar. As if caught off guard, John

writes, “He was not entirely black, and this fact, together with the quality of his hair, which was about six inches long and very bushy, except on the top of his head, where he was quite bald, suggested a slight strain of other than negro blood. There was a shrewdness in his eyes, too, which was not altogether African...” (9-10). The suggestion of a racial ambiguity written on the body—“not entirely black” skin, the other-than-negro “quality of his hair”—introduces some of the ambiguities that the earlier modes either ignore or literally cover with jet-black make-up. The narrator’s indication that things are essentially not as they should be signals the narrative’s rejection of the pitch blackness of the “tar baby” of Harris or the burnt-cork makeup of the minstrel stage. Merely by hinting at the prospect of miscegenation, the narrative recognizes but ultimately breaks with the earlier traditions with which it is associated.

As the word “performance” indicates, or as the conscious deconstruction of burnt-cork blackness suggests, Chesnutt’s text is rife with subtle references to the artificiality of genres and representations. As the frame narrative begins to move toward the embedded tale of “Mars Jeems’s Nightmare,” the narrator John cautiously admits of Julius’s tales, “we might as well put in time listening to Julius as in any other way. We had found some of his plantation tales quite interesting” (70). The line is doubled in the following tale as John writes, “The prospect of a long, dull afternoon was not alluring, and I was glad to have the monotony of Sabbath quite relieved by a plantation legend” (108). Earlier, he speaks of his wife as one “who takes a deep interest in the stories of plantation life which she hears from the lips of older colored people” (41). With this line, we are reminded of the promise of dialect—a formal mechanism that enables the readers to hear from the mouths of the tellers themselves.

Alongside this promise, however, the use of such terms, rather than the simple “tale,” or, as Harris would have it, “folktale,” indicates the narrator’s awareness that Julius’s stories are essentially genre tales. When John speaks of himself and Annie “occupying ourselves with the newspapers and magazines” (103), his engagement with the magazines carries with it the clear implication that the “plantation tale” or “legend” has as its main referent the plantation tales that appear in those magazines. Rather than recording and reporting tales from the plantation and the dialect in which those tales are told, *The Conjure Woman* becomes a text that records and reports “dialect fiction.” By the end of the book, John is even able to describe Julius’s tales as a body of work:

It was not difficult to induce the old man to tell a story, if he were in a reminiscent mood. Of tales of the old slavery days he seemed indeed to possess an exhaustless store,—some weirdly grotesque, some broadly humorous; some bearing the stamp of truth, faint, perhaps, but still discernible, others palpable inventions, whether his own or not we never knew, though his fancy doubtless embellished them... (167-168).

The Conjure Woman thus contains within its very ontology the mode of critique that critics have noted within the content of the tales. In identifying the genre of the “plantation romance” *as* romance, or *as* genre, the text undercuts Harris’s and others’ claims to realism and authenticity. Chesnutt shows that the Uncle Remus mode is inherently fictional, despite Harris’s anthropological rhetoric, and thus looks to divorce the perceptions of blacks from these injurious misrepresentations.

This process has more positive formalist consequences as well. By representing Julius’s tales as genre tales from newspapers and magazines, by drawing attention to their literariness, Chesnutt draws attention to his own stylistic achievement. Chesnutt wrote in “Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem” that the frame tales “were written in the best English I could command.”⁴⁷ With John’s hypercorrectness and his own literary interests, on display as

he reads a large passage from Herbert Spencer aloud, Chesnutt's claim is borne out throughout the text. John's language, too, is a kind of non-standard English, thus removing the linguistic center from the text and lodging the linguistic authority with the author's mastery of all shades of language.⁴⁸ And as Minnick demonstrates quantitatively in *Dialect and Dichotomy*, Chesnutt's renderings of dialect are particularly notable for the "meticulousness with which they are constructed." Indeed, as Minnick goes on to argue, one might even trace the polyphonous influence of Julius's own racial ambiguities through the richness of allusion in his speech.⁴⁹

As with the stories' complex relationship to plantation romance, the literary qualities of the tales are highlighted by a process of naming. In the opening part of "The Goophered Grapevine," John even goes so far as to call Julius's tale a "narrative," and describes the story as having "perspective and coherence" (12). The true highlighting of densely rendered prose, however, comes by implied comparison. In "The Grey Wolf's Haunt," before Julius has appeared on the scene, Annie is overwhelmed by the boredom of their southern lifestyle. "I wish you would talk to me, or read to me—or something," she says. "I'll read to you with pleasure," John replies, beginning "where I had found my bookmark":

The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless [... Two more sentences of similarly dense philosophical language...] Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is in itself one, it present to our intelligence—⁵⁰

Annie speaks for the reader well as herself when she interrupts, "I wish you would stop reading that nonsense and see who that is coming up the lane" (163-164).

It is Julius coming up the lane, of course, and fresh from Herbert Spencer, who is hand-picked to make our eyes roll into the backs of our heads, the text moves to Julius: “It’s bad luck, suh, ter raise a’ umbrella in de house, en w’iles I dunno whuther it’d bad luck ter kyar one inter de piazzer er no, I ’lows it’s alluz bes’ ter be on de safe side” (165). By the end of the dialogue between the three principal characters, Annie decides, inevitably, “Tell us about it, Uncle Julius... A story will be a godsend to-day” (167). This from the character who could not bear to hear her husband read another word three pages ago.

For Werner Sollors, John’s insistent erudition is evidence of a more profound denial. Sollors draws attention to the fact that the Spencer passage is merely a pseudo-rational accounting for metamorphoses, the very processes at which John scoffs in Julius’s stories. Sollors argues, “The Pharisaic John reads abstractions about metamorphoses—in order to build a static sense of stable selfhood and to feel superior to Julius as well as to his wife who empathizes with Julius’ stories of victims of metamorphoses. Julius, not John, is the new Ovid.”⁵¹ In other words, John believes himself to be the rational party, supported by an aloof erudition, but Julius is the true creator, the one putting those theories into practice. In this sense, the men are merely two sides of the same coin, but John’s supposed “learning” has alienated him from the conjure tales’ true import as both historical rendering and relativizing of his supposedly superior position in the world. John thus tells a truer story than he is aware.

But if we take Sollors’s claims a step further, Julius’s story becomes a substitute for the various other kinds of books throughout the text. Julius’s tales might seem at first a kind of escapism, and to be sure, John himself wants his reader to see that Annie could

never be interested in the serious pursuit of philosophy, “even when presented in the simplest and most lucid form” (164). For the reader of *The Conjure Woman*, however, the orthographically modified, constantly neologized form of the dialect is in fact no reprieve from the difficult philosophical language of Spencer. In this instance, Chesnutt has not only shown us that the conjure tale is the surrogate for a more high-cultural type of reading, but he has reminded us of the rendered difficulty of his own prose. The reader may have forgotten that initial difficulty, but so too has John forgotten the almost unconscionable difficulty of the text he is reading. The black arts, it seems, have intersected with the novel art.

In Chesnutt’s most anthologized non-conjure story, “The Wife of His Youth” (1898), questions of form, style, and genre are raised even more explicitly. In this story, Mr. Ryder and other members of the elite, near-white Blue Vein Society plan a society ball. Ryder has chosen to spearhead it, with the ulterior motive of asking the beautiful widow Mrs. Dixon for her hand in marriage. As part of the literary programme of the evening, Ryder chooses “A Dream of Fair Women” by his favorite poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, but changes it to Tennyson’s ode to Guinevere when he realizes that Mrs. Dixon will likely not be the “fairest” woman at the ball. But things change with the appearance of Liza Jane, “so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue,”⁵² not a Blue Vein at all, a blue gum. She tells Ryder a story of her husband, Sam Taylor, whom she hasn’t seen since Emancipation but has been seeking ever since. Ryder looks into her proffered daguerreotype and sees an image of his younger self overlaid with his reflection. The question Ryder ultimately

asks his audience at the ball is the story's central question as well, "Shall you acknowledge her?" (112)

As a result of Liza Jane's visit, Ryder's literary programme ends up being much different from what he had intended. He does not ultimately read the Tennyson poem, moved as he is by the story he had heard that day, "History of full of examples, but has recorded none more striking than one which only to-day came under my nose" (110). Just as Julius's tale is offered as the substitute and equivalent of the dense philosophical Spencer, in "The Wife of His Youth," Liza Jane's story will become the substitute for Tennyson's ode. Moreover, although it is not a proper dialect story, Chesnutt nonetheless reminds us that dialect is a form, a style, and even Liza Jane's lowly tale is more than its content. After some opening remarks, Ryder "then related, simply but effectively, the story told by his visitor of the afternoon. He gave it in the same soft dialect, which came readily to his lips" (110). A literary voice, a *style* of telling even under what would seem the most pressing conditions. Ryder will show his moral sophistication by acknowledging the woman who has been searching for him (and the past he has been trying to outrun), but he has already shown another kind of sophistication. Ryder can shuttle between these registers of dialect—Liza Jane's uneducated speech, his own conversational American English, Tennyson's refined British. Uncle Julius and Liza Jane could not speak any other way; John can write it; but only Chesnutt and Ryder have the sensitivity to see all registers of speech relative to one another.

With this emphasis on Chesnutt's reflexivity, it becomes possible to situate him in a tradition coincident with that of the rise of the novel art, the rise of the avant-garde. For Peter Bürger, the rise of the avant-garde in the late nineteenth century was the result of a

paradigmatic shift in representation. Before the shift, in the realist mode, popular in both literature and the visual arts, the art object was “the medium of a reflection about the relationship between individual and society.”⁵³ With the rise of late-century Aestheticism, however, came an art divorced from the “praxis of life,” “autonomous” in Adorno’s sense of the term. In the Aestheticist mode, art’s symbiotic relationship to reality breaks down, and the very institution of art (the “system” of art) enters a phase in which it is no longer purely mimetic of its contemporary realities, but an art for art’s sake. In the process, art itself becomes explicit *as* a system, of which an “objective understanding” becomes possible. With this “objective understanding,” art develops the capacity for self-criticism because its parameters as a system have become explicit. *Avant-gardisme* is the instantiation of this self-criticism: art based on art, not “reality,” in which “institutional frame” (the system of art) and “content” (the subject matter of specific art objects) come to be one in the same. The avant-garde is thus essentially a critical mode, critical of the apolitical nature of Aestheticism, and seeking to reconnect art with the praxis of life.

Bürger’s own model for the avant-garde is Dadaism, and the relationship there is clear enough, but how might we begin to understand this shift in less overtly reflexive works of art? A similar shift, after all, occurs in American literature at the turn of the century: the realism of William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, and others gives way to the avant-garde experiments of Gertrude Stein and the Imagist poets. As I have attempted to show above, Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* enacts a similar move toward plantation romance and local color more generally. In emphasizing the genre of the “plantation romance” *as* romance, or *as* genre, the text undercuts Harris’s and Page’s

claims to realism and authenticity. Chesnutt's tales do not have the scene of folklore collection as a basis for imitation; instead, they have the plantation romance as a basis for imitation, with the intention of exposing the romance for the fabrication that it is.

Interestingly, however, Chesnutt's proto-*avant-gardisme* offers an alternative mode of critique to that which Bürger identifies in Dada and other European avant-garde movements. For Bürger, the "avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences."⁵⁴ For Chesnutt, however, *The Conjure Woman* enacts a nearly opposite critique. Instead of reintegrating the plantation mode into some kind of practical attitude toward race, Chesnutt's tales show that the plantation romance has never been based in any kind of tenable, imitable reality. The tales show that Harris's anthropological rhetoric and Page's insistence that the former slaves are orphaned members of a fractured family are inherently fictional, and no basis for a Reconstruction-era "praxis of life" that romanticizes the past in order to justify the violence of the present and future. In this sense, Chesnutt enacts the political critiques suggested in Baker and Andrews but he does so through a seemingly apolitical kind of aestheticism. It is precisely through this "apolitical" attention to literary style and refinement, however, that Chesnutt disconnects the "plantation darky" from the reality that trope is supposed to represent. We can see, too, the beginnings of a modernist engagement with style emptying out the various folk signifiers near and dear to American hearts. By the time we get to O'Neill in the next chapter, we will see that the two sides of such a collision, both the folk and the modern, are much more explicitly identified.

The Conjure Man Dies

By the time of Chesnutt's death in 1932, African-American literature had moved on from his achievements. As mentioned in the earlier parts of this chapter, Chesnutt received some quiet, respectful tributes from the likes of W.E.B. DuBois and Carl Van Vechten, but his influence did not loom large among the new crop of writers. Writers under Alain Locke's influence had a different relationship to the folk: where Chesnutt was forced to use an unwelcome form as the material for both his political critique and his literary achievement, the Renaissance writers had a much more inclusive relationship to what they now considered a shared and authenticating past. On the other side of James Weldon Johnson's *Book of Negro Poetry* (1922), dialect, too, had been accepted for the stylistic feat that Chesnutt was at such pains to show that it was. Renaissance writers, energized by an idea of folk culture that had taken shape in the intervening years, could embrace dialect and authenticity as political and cultural tools. They inherited the combination from Chesnutt, but the politics of folk authenticity had changed in ways making it available for literary use.

Rudolph Fisher's novel *The Conjure-Man Dies* appeared in 1932, almost as if it were an obituary for the previous century's "conjure" man. This time, the dialect is everywhere, set as the story is among "the bright-lighted gaiety of Harlem's Seventh Avenue."⁵⁵ And because this contemporary scene is so vividly rendered in the first few pages, it's no surprise when the first line of dialogue, "Is—is you him?" (376), is in dialect. At this point, dialect has been fully reclaimed by African-American authors. In the works that use dialect (Richard Wright's are a notable exception), the inauthentic characters, those with something to hide, are the ones who *don't* speak the language.

In *The Conjure-Man Dies*, that oddball is Frimbo, the conjure-man himself, who has faked his own death, and who returns with the words, “Yes, I am alive” (492). He goes on, “Physically, I *was* murdered. Mentally I could not be, because mentally I was elsewhere. Do you see?” (494). This is not the language of Fisher’s novel. Its very “correctness” is disorienting, and this conjure man is not the hidden center of the community, as someone like Aunt Peggy is in Chesnutt’s story cycle. Frimbo is an aberration, and we soon learn that Frimbo is an African King, exiled from Buwongo, Uganda, who, since living in the United States, has attended Harvard University and become a conjure man in Harlem. Neither a noble king throughout his trials and travails (in the mode of Equiano) nor the folk-hero conjure man, Frimbo is dangerous, and it is his confounding influence that turns the setting of the novel from “brightly-lighted gaiety” to the subtitle’s “Dark Harlem.”

Biographies like Frimbo’s are impossible in Chesnutt’s literary world. Chesnutt’s racial politics, particularly in his earlier works, were defined by the Jim Crow laws, and he was particularly inspired by those interstitial spaces where law, race, and kinship became most ambiguous. By 1932, however, the actors and the scene have both changed beyond recognition. When one walks down Seventh Avenue, Fisher’s novel seems to suggest, one sees only brownstones and black faces, but what is behind either of those cannot be known. Harlem, in this sense, has become a kind of bare stage, wherein the folklorized links between character and setting (as between “plantation” and “plantation darky” in the 1880s) have dissolved. The folk ideal is, on the one hand, reappropriated and celebrated, but by this point, its constructedness has been taken for granted and emptied of its racist absolutism. As characters like “Spider Webb” should indicate, no

one is trading in real identities in this new Harlem, and no one's quite sure what any of that would even mean. The era of the conjure man, that previous century's moment, had died. Here was something new—a mystery full of red herrings, each of which has its own specious claims to authenticity. Some of the topics remained the same, but the attitude toward those topics had changed. The next chapters will attempt to chart the motivations and results of that change.

¹ *The Conjure Woman* (1899), *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899), and *Frederick Douglass: A Biography* (1899). The first two were collections of stories published in *The Atlantic* and elsewhere starting in 1887, and the third was a slender volume published as part of the “Beacon Biographies” series.

² William Dean Howells, “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories,” *The Atlantic* (May 1900). <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/190005/chesnutt-howells> (accessed October 22, 2008).

³ Ibid.

⁴ William Dean Howells, “Introduction,” *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (Boston: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1896), xiii.

⁵ Ibid., xvi.

⁶ Ibid., xx.

⁷ William Howells, “A Psychological Counter-Current in Fiction,” *North American Review* 173 (December 1901), 832.

⁸ Howells, *NAR*, 832.

⁹ The relationship between Chesnutt and Howells is detailed at length in Joseph P. McElrath’s “W. D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnutt’s Disappointment of the Dean,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* (March 1997). McElrath’s analysis is particularly useful in charting the careerism of both men, suggesting that their relationship with one another was formative in its full range of motivations and contradictions.

¹⁰ Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 178.

¹¹ William Stanley Braithwaite, “The Negro in American Literature,” *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; reprint, New York: Touchstone, 1997), 43.

¹² Carl Van Vechten, *Nigger Heaven* (1926; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 176. In “Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem,” Chesnutt writes of the controversy surrounding *Nigger Heaven*, “I was prejudiced in its favor for reasons which those who have read the book will understand” (911). Certainly he was referring to Byron Kasson’s rhapsodic praise.

¹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, reprinted in *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1234.

¹⁴ These conclusions are based on personal research and supported by Library of America’s “Notes on the Texts” and the Chesnutt bibliography provided by the Chesnutt Archive’s website, <http://www.chesnuttarchive.org/bibliography.html>

¹⁵ Amid the relative silence, Chesnutt’s daughter Helen published a biographical volume entitled *Charles W. Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* in 1952, though the book was

not a popular success. Two other studies, now out of print came on the heels of the Gregg publication: Sylvia Lyons Render's *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt* (1974) and Frances Richardson Keller's *An American Crusade: The Life of Charles Waddell Chesnutt* (1978), but neither had the impact on Chesnutt scholarship that Andrews's volume was to have.

¹⁶ The third well-known critic from this decade would be Werner Sollors, whose "The Goopher in Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: Superstition, Ethnicity, and Modern Metamorphoses" appeared in 1985 and was later incorporated into his study *Ethnic Modernism* (2008). However, the publication of the initial article in the Italian journal *Letterature d'America* meant that its circulation in the US was limited, and it does not occupy a central place in any of the major Chesnutt studies since that time.

¹⁷ William Andrews, *The Literary Career of Charles Chesnutt* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 73.

¹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, "The Popular and the Realistic," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, Edited and translated by John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 109.

¹⁹ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 49.

²⁰ Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 360.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 450.

²² *Ibid.*, 305.

²³ Chesnutt, "Superstitions and Folk-Lore of the South," in *Stories, Novels, and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 2002), 865.

²⁴ Neill Matheson, "History and Survival: Charles Chesnutt and the Time of Conjure," *American Literary Realism* 43.1 (Fall 2010), 2.

²⁵ Werner Sollors offers a graph, borrowed from a 1975 lecture by Robert Bone, that schematizes the layering in any given Chesnutt conjure tale. Each "has a magical transformation at its center," with Aunt Peggy (the eponymous conjure woman) and slave times offering a kind of anchor for the frames that contain it. The next level, "the inside story," is told by Uncle Julius and reflects on the "slavery-then" transformation in a "reconstruction-now" frame. Then, containing it all in the "outside story," are John and Annie. "The Goopher in Charles Chesnutt's Conjure Tales: Superstition, Ethnicity, and Modern Metamorphoses," *Letterature d'America* 6 (1984), 115.

²⁶ Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem," 907.

²⁷ Sundquist, 368.

²⁸ Gavin Jones, *Strange Talk* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.

²⁹ Jones, 186.

³⁰ Henry James, "The Future of the Novel," *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. Roger Gard (New York: Penguin, 1987), 105.

³¹ Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," *The Critical Muse*, 44.

³² McGurl, *The Novel Art*, 11.

³³ "The Goophered Grapevine" (August 1887), "Po' Sandy" (May 1888), "Dave's Neckliss" (October 1889) "The Wife of His Youth" (July 1898), "Hot-Foot Hannibal" (January 1899), "The Bouquet" (November 1899), "Baxter's Procrustes" (June 1904).

³⁴ Heather Tirado Gilligan, "Reading, Race, and Charles Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' Tales," *English Literary History* 74 (2007), 196.

³⁵ It has been notably overlooked, for example, that two of the families in *The Marrow of Tradition*, Delamere and Carteret, share names with characters from *The Tragic Muse*. It is unclear whether Chesnutt borrowed these names from James directly, but the overlap is nonetheless striking.

³⁶ Richard Bridgman, *The Colloquial Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 46.

³⁷ Bridgman, 51.

³⁸ Jones, 50-51.

³⁹ Gilligan's study suggests, "Chesnutt's 'Uncle Julius' tales openly stage a confrontation between sentimental and realist modes of reading race" (203). This argument is probably more in keeping with Chesnutt understood his own project, and not merely because Chesnutt's later work would fall so squarely into the "realist" camp. In "Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem" and elsewhere, Chesnutt names Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand*. A case could be made that these texts also stage a confrontation between the sentimental and the realist. Tourgee's text couples an almost journalistic description of post-war southern attitudes with the national-reconciliation narrative popularized by northern and southern writers alike. Even Stowe's text, regularly cited as a sentimental text par excellence, could be considered a kind of proto-realist text in its insistence on a wide variety of types and social classes and its attitude toward violence.

⁴⁰ Gilligan, 202.

⁴¹ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1982) 39. Further citations appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴² Lisa Cohen Minnick, *Dialect and Dichotomy: Literary Representations of African American Speech* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004) 11. It is also worth noting that minstrelsy went to lengths to authenticate its dialect (see W.T. Lhamon, "Introduction: An Extravagant and Wheeling Stranger," *Jump Jim Crow!*, 1-93).

⁴³ I take up this idea in my chapter on Eugene O'Neill, where I argue that "old-time" minstrelsy became as much an impersonation of older minstrels as it was of the "old-time" south.

⁴⁴ Thomas Nelson Page, "Note," *In Ole Virginia* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), n.p. Further citations appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁵ Chesnutt was not the only author marketed as a Harris acolyte. Mary Alicia Owen's popular volume, *Old Rabbit, The Voodoo, and other sorcerers* (1893) contains only a very small portion of actual rabbit stories, despite the prominence of the rabbit in its title.

⁴⁶ Charles Chesnutt, *The Conjure Woman* (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1969) 8-9. Further citations appear parenthetically in the text.

⁴⁷ Chesnutt, "Post-Bellum—Pre-Harlem," 543.

⁴⁸ In *The Marrow of Tradition* in particular, Chesnutt explores the consequences of an American English with no standard speaker. African-American doctor William Miller's English is as pure as that of the aristocratic Mr. Delamere, just as the dialected speech of Josh Green is as impure as that of former overseer Colonel McBane. This move to displace white speech as the standard of American English has roots in earlier African-American texts as well, most notably Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

(1861), in which Linda Brent speaks an unaltered English to the subtly dialected speech of her low-class, Southern white aggressors.

⁴⁹ Minnick, 86-98.

⁵⁰ The text itself comes from Spencer's *First Principles* (1867) and the chapter has the wonderfully obscure title "The Instability of the Homogeneous." Although there's of course quite a lot to say about the use of a Social Darwinist in the middle of such a text, this is not my focus here. Clearly, such a character as the hyper-industrious John *would* read Spencer, but there seems to be something more profound behind the choice of *this* author in *this* of all books. We might even say it goes so far as to emphasize the "dying South" quality of the book—the very inactivity of the text, the boredom which constantly puts John and Annie in position for the tales, could certainly be part of this.

⁵¹ Sollors, 126.

⁵² Chesnutt, "The Wife of His Youth," *Stories, Novels, and Essays*, 105. Further citations appear parenthetically in the text.

⁵³ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant Garde*, translated from the German by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 23.

⁵⁴ Bürger, 22.

⁵⁵ Rudolph Fisher, *The Conjure Man Dies*, in *Harlem Renaissance: Four Novels of the 1930s* (New York: Library of America, 2011), 375.

Chapter 2

“No use’n you rakin’ up ole times”: *The Emperor Jones*, Minstrelsy, and the Birth of the American Theater

Brutus Jones retreats. In Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* (1920), the emperor’s reign of terror has come to an end. Jones, an escaped convict, flees punishment from a series of crimes committed in the United States and comes to the West Indies where he has managed to subdue the natives of an unnamed island. But now, in the first scene of the play, Jones learns that the native leader Lem has begun a rebellion against his rule. Again, Brutus Jones retreats, but only to try to go back from whence he came. He lives his race’s life in backwards vignettes, but what awaits him if his escape to the United States is successful? Only a silver bullet from a rebel gun forecloses this endless retreat: from Africa to the United States to the Caribbean back to Africa to the United States...

Following suit, the large body of criticism on *The Emperor Jones* has been a retreat from one thing or another as well. In a sense, it’s almost as if this short play is so internally contradictory that it cannot be praised or blamed as a whole. The dominant thread in O’Neill studies comes from Travis Bogard’s *Contour in Time*. Bogard concedes, “Taken as an ethnic study displaying the racial characteristics of the American Negro, the part by present-day perspectives is an unacceptable stereotype of the Negro in terms of a crap-shooting razor-cutting Pullman porter.”¹ Thus, in order to make the play square with these present-day perspectives, Bogard must remove race from the play altogether and instead praise it as a “theological melodrama” and “the first major American drama in the expressionist mode.”² Normand Berlin is willing to reinsert race

into *The Emperor Jones*, but only so far as to see Jones's major antecedent as Shakespeare's Othello, but even this only in the service of "asserting truths about the black man in particular and all men in general."³ Necessarily retreating from the more sensitive racial issues of the play, this school of criticism offers a landmark play *despite* race.

A second strand of O'Neill criticism offers biographical readings of Jones, and many of O'Neill's other characters. In some sense a result of O'Neill's nearly legendary fame and pedigree (his father, James O'Neill, was a noted actor in the late nineteenth century), this school of criticism found a particular heyday with the rise to prominence of psychoanalysis in the United States and in literary criticism. In O'Neill criticism, the major book in this vein is Louis Sheaffer's *O'Neill: Son and Playwright* (1968), though recent studies have picked up the thread, uncovering much about O'Neill's outsider position as an Irish Catholic in staunchly Puritan New England. Most notably, Shannon Steen's "Melancholy Bodies: Racial Subjectivity and Whiteness in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*" (2000) has argued that Jones is a black cipher, and that "O'Neill uses this segregated body to represent his own frustrations with the social status quo."⁴ O'Neill's interest in race issues in the 1920s is seen merely as the precursor to his later fascination with Greek masks. Race is thus removed from this discussion as it becomes an incidental projection of a deeply personal psychology.

The other side of the controversy, less interested in O'Neill's genius and oeuvre, attacks the race question head-on. What for Bogard is a concession becomes for generations of critics starting with William Stanley Braithwaite in *The New Negro* (1925) an indication that "in spite of all good intentions, the true presental [sic] of the real

tragedy of Negro life is a task still left for Negro writers to perform.”⁵ Thus finding fault with what seem the racist politics of the play, critics such as Braithwaite, and in more recent scholarship Carme Manuel, find that the racist cons outweigh the expressionist pros. Instead, O’Neill’s play becomes another instance of American modernist primitivism, the dramatic counterpart to Sherwood Anderson’s *Dark Laughter* (1925) and Waldo Frank’s *Holiday* (1923). Rather than a sensitive treatment of racial issues, *The Emperor Jones* exploits “the Negro” as the means to its own primitivist end.

Each line of criticism is useful, but each has its limitations. Reading *The Emperor Jones* as mere primitivism can offer a useful frame for understanding how the play was produced and attach it to coeval movements in American modernism. The reading cannot, however, account for *Emperor Jones*’s importance to the American theater or O’Neill’s (and Provincetown’s more generally) debt to experimental European theater. On the other hand, the Expressionist reading is useful in that it explains the histrionic functions of the play by demonstrating how Jones’s story is “our” story, but in so doing, this reading takes the race question out of the play entirely. The history presented in this body of criticism remains incomplete, therefore, if it begins with *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 or puts the play’s literary ancestry exclusively in Europe. Since 1920, then, criticism of *The Emperor Jones* has had to retreat in one direction or the other: from theater to talk about race, or from race to talk about theater.

One of the ironies of *Emperor Jones* criticism is that as it becomes more racially progressive, the sides of the color line become more firmly entrenched. O’Neill’s condescension becomes the occasion for Gilpin’s or Robeson’s (or the Harlem audience’s) acts of resistance. We should remember, though, that these modes of

criticism reflect more about *The Emperor Jones*'s contemporary status than about the context of its initial performance. The play is almost uniformly praised in Locke's *The New Negro*. And, though the book is now largely forgotten, Van Wyck Brooks's *The Confident Years: 1885-1915* (1950) offers one of the only treatments of Washington, DuBois, Chesnutt, Locke, Dunbar, and others in the era of near silence about African-American authors between World War II and Civil Rights. The chapter in which these authors are discussed? "Eugene O'Neill: Harlem."⁶ It is worth noting that these authors would not be treated together at any length again until Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1984), which insists, "the very *histories* that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism, especially the *discursive* history of such modernism."⁷ With such lines drawn, the divide between Afro-American and Anglo-American modernisms seems quite simply unbridgeable. Some more recent studies, such as Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995) and Werner Sollors's *Ethnic Modernism* (2008), have attempted to complicate other ethnic lines that may have been drawn in the American literary scene in the early part of the twentieth century, but they have left Baker's race delineation largely untouched.

If we return to *The Emperor Jones*'s moment, however, it becomes very clear that one cannot discuss the play's racial attitudes without discussing its debt to European movements in theater. While the Provincetown Players experimented with Ibsenian realism and German expressionism, a renaissance was getting underway in Harlem; while high drama continued to flourish in midtown theaters, more popular entertainments (now

with cinema as newcomer) thrived along the Bowery. For Travis Bogard, “Not only the literate American drama, but the American theatre came of age with this play” (134). For Bogard, this coming of age is made possible by O’Neill and Provincetown providing American theatergoers with a credible alternative to the British mode which continued to dominate prestigious theater productions into the twentieth century. What was the substance of this national alternative?

It is arguably true that *The Emperor Jones* was the first major drama to begin the displacement of the type of dominant classical, primarily British or anglophilic, theater in the early twentieth century. The play was only able to achieve such a feat, however, by drawing on contemporary happenings in popular theater and race relations. After all, even if *The Emperor Jones* was the first major drama to feature a black actor in the lead role, it was not by nearly a hundred years the first to feature a black *character* in its lead role. When Carl Wittke discusses “the first entertainment in which a blackface performer was not only the main actor, but the entire act,” he is not talking about Charles Gilipin in *The Emperor Jones* but about T.D. Rice as Jim Crow in the 1830s.⁸ In this chapter, then, I would like to reinstate blackface minstrelsy as an important term in understanding the controversy and success of *The Emperor Jones*. This may seem an odd move given the commonly held belief that minstrelsy was swallowed up into vaudeville by the 1890s, or if we think of O’Neill as a “high” modernist who could have no interest in the “low” theater. As I hope to show, though, minstrelsy continued to be a vibrant form into the 1920s, and even if O’Neill wasn’t a regular attendee at minstrel shows, he could nonetheless not avoid the discourses of authenticity, nationalism, and nostalgia that surrounded them.

The Age of the Death of Minstrelsy

Cultural criticism has demonstrated a resurgence of interest in the blackface minstrel. For much of the twentieth century, the major books on minstrelsy were those initially published in the 1930s: Constance Rourke's *American Humor* (1931), Carl Wittke's *Tambo and Bones* (1930), and an earlier treatment from Edward Le Roy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date* (1911). Each in its own way purported to be the final word on minstrelsy: the field was dead or dying, and it was thus the appropriate time for a eulogy. Rice's "Introduction" opens with the question, "Is Minstrelsy dying out?"⁹ Wittke's conclusion is surer. Referring to Al G. Field's touring minstrels, Wittke avers, "The show which had carried his name throughout the nation closed in Cincinnati, in 1928. It was the last of the great minstrel companies."¹⁰ What more could there be to say?

More contemporary accounts of blackface minstrelsy have accepted this timeline in large part and narrowed their focus to minstrelsy's supposed heyday from the 1850s to the 1870s. Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (1994) concludes with the minstrel productions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s. W.T. Lhamon's *Jump Jim Crow!* (2003) is mainly concerned with the career of Jim Crow's creator, T.D. Rice, and thus ends with Rice's death in 1860. The predominant accounts of postbellum minstrelsy come from Daphne Brooks and Louis Chude-Sokei and, where minstrelsy is concerned, are particularly interested in Bert Williams's and George Walker's production of *In Dahomey* (1903-1904). Even if Chude-Sokei's study is ironically titled, his sense of Bert Williams as *The Last "Darky"* squares with the earlier critics' sense of minstrelsy's disappearance.

Like any legend, that of the minstrel stage has its ambiguities. Oddly, though, the ambiguity in the legend is not around when the institution begins. There is debate surrounding who the flesh-and-blood Jim Crow really was, and where Rice first donned the burnt cork and jumped the eponymous dance. There's no debate about Rice's legacy, though: he was the first in a long and prestigious line of Negro minstrels, commencing great tradition in the early 1830s, probably in Cincinnati. As the legend goes, substantiated by Wittke and others, a border city like Cincinnati gave Rice easy access to the genuine article across the river in Kentucky. For those who aren't willing to call Rice's "Ethiopian operettas" true minstrelsy, their great founder is Dan Emmett, whose four Virginia Minstrels first blacked up for audiences in New York in 1843.

The beginning of the minstrel legend is relatively fixed; the end, however, is a different story. As noted above, Edward Le Roy Rice asked in 1911, "Is Minstrelsy dying?" and Carl Wittke pronounced it definitively dead in 1928. But when *did* minstrelsy die? Did Rice take it to his grave in 1860? Or did the combination of Emmett's death and the all-black *In Dahomey* in 1904 kill it once and for all? Was the final curtain on Al G. Field's Minstrels in 1928 the final curtain on the institution? Did minstrelsy end with *Billboard's* discontinuation of its minstrel column in the late 1930s? Or do we wait until *The Amos 'n' Andy Show* goes off the air in 1955? Or until *The Black and White Minstrel Show's* end in 1978? With every attempt to declare minstrelsy completely defunct comes another to show that it is still alive and well. Into our own century, Spike Lee's film *Bamboozled* (2003) posits the continued existence of latent minstrel attitudes, ready to resurface with the least provocation.

A look at the surviving material in the minstrel archives only further complicates the attempt to fix a date. On April 18, 1909, *The North American* in Philadelphia declares,

Last night the curtain fell forever upon negro minstrelsy at the Eleventh Street Opera House: the light of laughter that had beamed upon four or five generations of Philadelphia, and had led them into the pleasant paths of forgetfulness of the cares that infest the day, by its innocent mirth, went out, never to glow again.

Perhaps. This would be a word of consolation, if it might be used in connection with the statement that the last permanent home of minstrelsy in the world has ceased to be. But, as matters stand, it does not now seem possible, and the curtain is down to stay.¹¹

A local description to be sure, but one with national ramifications in one of minstrelsy's last strongholds. If there were any doubt that the end of Dumont's Minstrels signals the end of minstrelsy in general, *The Public Ledger* declares in its 1919 obituary that "Mr. Dumont was the dean of minstrels and the last survivor of the golden days of minstrelsy before it was for a great part supplanted by vaudeville."¹² The same year, New York's *Evening Post* declares, in a separate obituary, "George H. Primrose was the last survivor of the old song-and-dance minstrels, of which [William H.] Delehanty and [Thomas M.] Hengler, Dave Reed and [James F.] Mackin and [Francis] Wilson were shining examples in the early seventies."¹³ Minstrelsy, it would seem, dies in 1919.

Until it dies again in 1928. This is Wittke's year, as it marks the death of Al G. Field. The archive shows that one more minstrel, W.P. Sweatnam, is around to reminisce, but he, the article suggests, is certainly the last. "Why did it pass, the minstrel show, that great American entertainment?" asks the interviewer. Sweatnam, conceding and nearly unable to breathe from the strain of age, answers, "Vaudeville and farce comedy and musical comedy took its place, absorbed the talent that used to go into its ranks."¹⁴ Thus it would seem that every time minstrelsy dies, it is outlived by one more

“original” minstrel, himself not long for this world. This collection of pronouncements not only doesn’t answer our original question; it raises all kinds of new ones. I started by asking, When does minstrelsy die? To that question now we have more answers than ever: 1860, 1870, 1904, 1909, 1919, 1928, 1930, 1955, 1978. This, too, is only a small selection of the range of dates of death. If this question then seems unanswerable, we are necessarily confronted with new questions: can minstrelsy outlive its minstrels? Did it ever die? What are the political stakes of proclaiming its death?

In order to begin to answer these questions surrounding minstrelsy’s disappearance, it is useful to remember that, particularly after the Civil War and abolition, minstrelsy’s success is partially produced from the desires inhering in the nostalgic remembrance of a dead or dying antebellum way of life. We saw in the previous chapter that much of Thomas Nelson Page’s success was built on showing the ex-slave as the living legacy of the antebellum past, as the “boy” who never had to grow up to the adulthood of the postbellum era. The “plantation darkey” is a thing of the past, and the death of such a figure signifies the death of a simpler, purer way of life. In these plays and in plantation fiction, argues Kenneth Warren, “The promise of black America was an assurance that old ways and old pleasures were recuperable.”¹⁵ Thus the descriptor “old-time” comes to be attached to the practice of “minstrelsy” after the Civil War, to the point that in the 1880s, it is rare to hear them apart.¹⁶ Like the emergent discourses of folklore collection at this time, minstrelsy positions itself as preserving a dead or dying way of life, one that only its performers (or recorders in the case of folklore) know in its pure state. The closest you the viewer can get, because you can’t after all go so far back in time, is to watch the show.

If we then rejoin the earlier discussion of minstrelsy's death, we can see that the designation "old-time" actually has a double meaning. There is the first obvious meaning signifying that the "Negroes" being represented onstage are necessarily "old-time," because they come from the old times before the Civil War. But with increasing frequency toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, "old-time" also refers to the form of entertainment itself. An article about George Wilson, published in *The Billboard* in 1928, suggests, "He is the last surviving member of the 'Famous Four' that helped to make old-time minstrelsy the popular entertainment it was." In a single stroke, the minstrel show is nostalgic not only for some imagined pure plantation Negro, but also for minstrelsy's purest self before the war. By 1910, it was not out of the ordinary for a group such as Gus Hill's Minstrels in Perth Amboy, NJ to perform a first part entitled "The Rise and Progress of Minstrelsy." Minstrelsy had to be constantly dying in order to survive, and it could gain new life in always performing its own life in death.

Minstrelsy's date of death is so hard to pinpoint after the Civil War because minstrelsy thrived on a discourse of disappearance. The nostalgia for the Negro, or the antebellum South on which it had thrived for so long, became a nostalgia for its own sake. Sharing an almost ethnographic interest in attempting to "salvage" the old-time darkey, minstrelsy came to evince a similar interest in salvaging itself. If it seems odd to read forty years of obituaries declaring the death of the last old-time minstrel, it is only because after a time, every active minstrel was the last old-time minstrel. And with the additional valence given to the genre, "the only form of amusement enterprise typically American," this disappearance had begun to take on a national significance.¹⁷ Not

merely the Negro or the antebellum South, not even merely the minstrel form of old-time entertainments, but the pure product of a pure nation was at stake in minstrelsy's demise.

The loss of the pure minstrel brought with it a parallel belief in the loss of the pure Negro. In fact, increasing numbers of performers and critics came to explain minstrelsy's death by its movement away from simple Negro mimesis. In "The Negro on the Stage" from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1889, Laurence Hutton offers a portrait of American "stage Negroes" from early performances of *Othello* to the article's contemporary moment. The actors who receive the highest praise, mainly early minstrels such as Dan Emmett and George Washington Dixon, are those whose performances are the most "authentic." Moreover, the birth of the American minstrel form lies not with Rice but with Rice's source for imitation. In Rice's early days performing around Kentucky and Ohio

was a livery stable kept by a man named Crow. The actors could look into the stable yards, and were very fond of watching the movements of an old and decrepit slave who was employed by a proprietor to do all sorts of odd jobs. As was the custom among the Negroes, he had assumed his master's name, and called himself Jim Crow. He was very much deformed—the right shoulder was drawn up high, and the left leg was stiff and crooked at the knee, which gave him a painful, but at the same time ludicrous, limp... Rice closely watched this unconscious performer, and recognized in him a character entirely new to the stage.¹⁸

This passage is worth quoting at length because it demonstrates the extent to which minstrelsy was, from its inception, so based on imitating what was perceived as the truly "authentic" Negro. In this passage alone, four sentences (and two more long sentences which I've omitted) discuss the source and only one the famed result.

Even before Rice, American actor Edwin Forrest, famed for both his blackface caricatures and Shakespearean leading roles, performed in blackface in Sol Smith's *The*

Tailor in Distress (1823). Hutton's article describes Forrest as "singing and dancing, and winning the compliment from a veritable black in his audience that he was 'nigger all ober!'"¹⁹ What higher praise could there be than that of a "veritable black" complimenting the stage black's authenticity? Although Forrest's Shakespearean leading roles couldn't pass the authenticity test as they were greeted with hisses in London, Forrest passed another authenticity test on the banks of the Ohio. In an earlier incident, narrated by Constance Rourke in *American Humor* (1930), a blacked-up Forrest walks the streets of Cincinnati and fools a black woman into thinking that he is one of her friends. "This little sketch seemed unimportant," she writes, "but Forrest had studied the Negro character; he inaugurated a tradition for faithful drawing."²⁰ Whether Hutton in the 1880s, Field in the 1890s, or Rourke and Wittke in the 1930s, critics found themselves longing for the days when Negroes were Negroes, and minstrels were "Negroes," too.

This commitment to mimesis persists well into the twentieth-century, and is in large part what informs Carl Wittke's assessments in *Tambo and Bones* in 1930. "Without negro slavery," the book begins, "the United States would have been deprived of perhaps the only and, certainly, the most considerable body of song sprung from the soil, which properly can be called American folkmusic" (3). In the absence of a qualitative assessment of slavery itself, Wittke does suggest throughout his introduction that the institution of Negro slavery was a boon to Negroes' "innate and irrepressible fondness for rhythmic and musical expression" (6). Moreover, "From the pathos and humor of the Negroes, their superstitions and their religious fervor, their plaintive and their hilarious melodies, their peculiarities of manner, dress and speech, the white

minstrel built his performance” (7). This portion of Wittke’s history draws in large part from Francis Pendleton Gaines’s 1925 study *The Southern Plantation: A Study in the Development and Accuracy of a Tradition*, which assesses popular representations of the plantation in literature and on stage favorably. In both studies, however, it is worthwhile to note how quickly “the Negro’s” innate capacities become separated from his historical situation. Antebellum slavery is a kind of springboard for Negro minstrelsy, but the almost seventy years to have elapsed between the end of slavery and Wittke’s book do not seem to have made a substantial change in that representation. Instead, what persists is a representation of some mythic slave south with none of the inconvenient baggage that that slave south entails. Even Hutton’s description of the original Jim Crow is notably silent on the source of Crow’s physical maladies.

The irony of this hypersensitivity to Negro authenticity is that it came at a time when postbellum US race relations were at their worst. Rather than models worthy of praise and impersonation, contemporary African Americans instead became the poor imitations of these supposedly pure antebellum selves. The old-time minstrels themselves were the “nigger[s] all ober” as flesh-and-blood African Americans were denied the protection of the law and representation in government. Thus Houston Baker’s analysis of minstrelsy: “The device is determined to remind white consciousness that black men and women are *mis-speakers* bereft of humanity—carefree devils strumming and humming all day—unless, in a gaslight misidentification, they are violent devils fit for lynching, a final exorcism that will leave whites alone.”²¹ This assessment takes on an additional valence after Reconstruction when, with the aid of minstrelsy, blacks were seen not merely as *mis-speakers* of American English but of the quaint

antebellum Negro English in its purest form. Such a dual alienation results in a dual dehumanization, as contemporary African Americans become not only not white, but also not even properly black.

As a result, postbellum minstrelsy had become such an institution, with a set of expectations both for its format and impersonations, that many of the potentially revolutionary or progressive capacities of its antebellum days had become hardened into deeply conservative political tendencies, reflective of an increasingly binaristic national ideology. Eric Lott describes minstrelsy, particularly in the 1840s: “It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.”²² He goes on to describe minstrelsy’s conflicting capacities: “Blackface minstrelsy, I would argue, was founded on this antinomy, reinstituting with ridicule the gap between black and white working class even as it reveled in their (sometimes liberatory) identification.”²³ Eschewing an apologist reading of minstrelsy’s racial politics, Lott shows that in its early days, minstrelsy was nonetheless a deeply conflicted, and not by any means unidirectional, medium. Part of what makes Lott’s claims difficult to take, though, is how quickly this potentially “liberatory” capacity of the medium hardened into the tool of racist oppression that it was and is. In other words, by the 1880s, on the other side of a Civil War, this popular form that had historically thrived on love and theft had fallen out of love.

All that remained was a caricature that had only deformed since its early days as it had become impervious to the historical challenges of emancipation and the new violence

of the late nineteenth century. Constance Rourke suggests, “Minstrelsy kept its Negro backgrounds until after the Civil War: then, if the Negro was set free, in a fashion his white impersonators were also liberated.”²⁴ Whatever the accuracy of these “Negro backgrounds,” it is nonetheless true that by the 1880s, minstrelsy had become less about imitating supposed “Negroes” and more about imitating former minstrels. In the process, the minstrel had become in a sense a “timeless” figure, and the era before the Civil War such a remote time that it was itself almost no time at all. Even if emancipation is not referred to specifically as a mistake, it can nonetheless take the blame for removing these happy-go-lucky figures from their purest state. It is no mistake that the word “slavery,” itself obviously carrying a negative connotation, is pushed into the background of any account of Negro impersonation: where “slavery” should be, Wittke, Hutton, and the minstrels themselves are much more content to use “plantation,” and as if to erase any negative traces from this essentially comforting picture, “old-time” takes the place of “antebellum” or “before the war.”

In this context, thickening the one presented in the previous chapter, it becomes clear how an author like Joel Chandler Harris could state his intention to use his Uncle Remus stories to write against “the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage” but contribute to these misrepresentations nonetheless.²⁵ Whether or not Harris’s story cycle is “phonetically genuine,” it shares with minstrelsy the revisionism that asserts the “genuine flavor of the old plantation” as an ahistorical setting and the Negro himself as an ahistorical character. William Stanley Braithwaite’s section of *The New Negro* recognizes the threat of such historical amnesia in suggesting, “It must be sharply called to attention that the tradition of the ante-bellum Negro is a post-bellum product” and that

these persistent representations of “ante-bellum Negroes” into the 1920s “have degenerated into reactionary social fetishes, and from that descended into libelous artistic caricature of the Negro.”²⁶ In this sense, the evacuation of history from the minstrel and plantation characters itself has a kind of “libelous” effect. Thus whether minstrel or “Uncle” characters have real life sources becomes immaterial as it is those characters’ removal from historical context that produces the deleterious effects of minstrelsy. While Rourke’s analysis of minstrelsy’s remove from its “Negro backgrounds” does posit a kind of “freedom,” by the same token it reflects an entrenchment of racial prejudices that the dynamism of the earlier form could still occasionally undermine.

In sum, minstrelsy’s disappearing act was bound up with, even partially constitutive of, the racist discourses of Jim-Crow America. The minstrels were dying, and with them the last vestiges of an Edenic America were dying. By the twentieth century, even if minstrelsy had been partially swallowed up into vaudeville, it was still the imaginative repository of authentic American performance, and in this repository one could find endless justification for contemporary violent practices. The genuineness or authenticity of what they were representing was beside the point: in the ultimate trick of stagecraft, life had become the poor imitation of art.

“Talk polite, white man!”: O’Neill’s rebuke

It may seem to odd to have read all of the above with no reference to O’Neill, the ostensible subject of this chapter. It may seem doubly odd to suggest that O’Neill was somehow connected with all the “low” theater that minstrelsy represented. But it is precisely this minstrel context, as it seemed to exist in a sphere completely separate from O’Neill’s, that can help to show the complexity and contradiction of O’Neill’s

achievement. Amid this minstrel context, *The Emperor Jones*'s theatrical, racial, and national valences are no longer interacting onstage *despite* one another, but are instead interdependent in ways for which neither the primitivist nor Expressionist readings can fully account. Instead, O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* places a black body at the center of a stage that had been blackening faces for over a century. In the process, *The Emperor Jones* offers a critique of a viscous American theater, deeply conservative American nostalgia, and oppressive racial politics.

Shannon Steen's "Melancholy Bodies" has already shown some of the personal stakes *The Emperor Jones* might have had for O'Neill. For Steen, O'Neill identifies with "the social position of black Americans. O'Neill experienced this identification so strongly that in *The Emperor Jones* he used the black body as a surface on which to project his own alienation and melancholia."²⁷ To Steen's hypothesis that Jones is a conduit for O'Neill's own racial and social anxiety, we might also add that O'Neill's deep ambivalence toward the American theater had a more personal component as well. Eugene was James O'Neill's son, and he knew firsthand some of the emotional hucksterism and perceived national dishonesty of the American theater of the early twentieth century. O'Neill's European inspirations sought much more ambiguous emotional effects, and, as Travis Bogard has suggested, "James O'Neill would never have understood a performance that did not seek to make the audience weep, cringe, cry out or cheer."²⁸ Both "son and playwright," as Sheaffer's classic study would have it, had good psychological reasons for wanting to found a new kind of theater.

It is too easy to fall into this dichotomy of Shakespeare and O'Neill *père* against Strindberg and O'Neill *fils*. While O'Neill's sea plays are often seen as his first work, in

fact O'Neill's first play was the vaudeville farce *A Wife for a Life* (1913), inspired by his time accompanying his father on the Orpheum circuit. O'Neill had even more direct connections to the popular theater as his brother starred in James Forbes's *The Traveling Salesman* (1908), which featured blackface comic relief from the hotel waiter Julius. And Steen offers the important reminder that the Irishman was himself a stock character in these popular entertainments. Harry Lee Newton's *The Irishman and the Coon* (1915) is just one of many such plays.

Still, O'Neill was not only a member of his family, nor only a high-minded playwright, nor only an Irish Catholic in Puritan New England. Criticism of O'Neill, particularly since his receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1936, has traded on the idea of O'Neill as a solitary genius, locked away from friends and family to pore over the Scandinavian masters and classical Greek tragedians. What is often overlooked in this account is that O'Neill was trying to make a living in the entertainment and performance capital of the United States, not just of theater in this period but also of cinema and, later, radio. After the tremendous success of *Ah, Wilderness!* (1933), Jack Benny and the other members of *The Jell-O Program* asked permission to do a fond lampooning of O'Neill's play. Rather than scoffing or ignoring the request entirely, O'Neill responds in a wire to his lawyer Harry Weinberger:

GIVE BENNY MY CONSENT TO GO AHEAD WITHOUT CHARGE STOP
DONT AGREE WITH YOU THINK BENNY VERY AMUSING GUY AND
BELIEVE KIDDING MY STUFF EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE HAS VERY
HEALTHY EFFECT AND HELPS KEEP ME OUT OF DEAD SOLEMN
ILLUSTRIOUS STUFFED SHIRT ACADEMICIAN CLASS = GENE²⁹

Thus in thinking of *The Emperor Jones* as a major play in the emergence of the American theater, we should be careful not to limit our understanding of what that theater is.

O'Neill is undoubtedly interested in adapting these European avant-garde movements to his own context, but this is a context of the folk types and popular caricatures of the American scene. Furthermore, O'Neill uses these American types not only to unlock new potential in European avant-garde theater; he also uses the European avant-garde theater to unlock new potential in these American types.

Seen in this light, *The Emperor Jones* uses a Strindbergian mise-en-scene (which will be discussed more below) in order to complicate the figure of the stage Negro. The play offers a critique of race discourses in the early twentieth century, especially in the ways race is represented on stage. Such a critique is possible in the play's careful manipulation of its audience's expectations, by meeting these expectations but slowly complicating them. In reattaching the history of slavery to the seemingly ahistorical minstrel character, *The Emperor Jones* shows that the burnt-cork representation cannot bear the weight of historical reality and that white audiences perpetuate this representation not only to African-Americans' detriment but to their own.

Working alongside the uptown renaissance in Harlem, O'Neill contributes does his part for "New Negro" resistance to white hegemony over black character, complicating the minstrel mask and the old-time darkey in much the same vein as George Walker's and Bert Williams's *In Dahomey*, Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask," and Charles Chesnutt's dialect tales. All of these works attempt to break down the supposed verisimilitude between performance and reality. As Louis Chude-Sokei has suggested of Bert Williams, "he was a black man who came to fame masquerading as a white racist caricature of a 'black man' which ultimately mocked and erased that primary caricature."³⁰ That is to say, in performing the white audience's expectations, Williams

was able to demonstrate that this “darky” figure was indeed just that, a performance. *The Emperor Jones*, too, in reattaching historical traumas to a seemingly ahistorical plantation darky, shows that darky figure to be a gross misrepresentation.

Though it would have been a perfectly viable option in 1920, O’Neill and the Players chose not to black up one of their white repertory actors. Instead, the troupe cast a black actor, Charles Gilpin, to play the lead role. After the show’s initial run, Gilpin was replaced by Paul Robeson. Chude-Sokei notes that Bert Williams had hoped to be considered for the role, and the “selection of Gilpin, a minor actor, was perhaps the final blow in a career trapped behind the black mask of a tragic longing for respectability.”³¹ Williams, it seemed, was only ever the means toward a more potent black liberation that not only forgot him but often actively scorned him.

One of the strange ironies of Williams’s tragedy, however, is that Brutus Jones does not black his face, but he still carries with him the freight of the stage-Negro mask. A famous altercation between Gilpin and O’Neill has Gilpin softening some of the dialect and racial epithets in Jones’s lines. Biographers Arthur and Barbara Gelb narrate a scene that has O’Neill storming backstage to Gilpin to announce, “If I ever catch you rewriting my lines again, you black bastard, I’m going to beat you up.”³² Because there is so little else to go on, this remark has seemed to be as definitive a statement as O’Neill would ever give regarding his racial attitudes. While I am not looking to excuse O’Neill’s slur, I would instead like to emphasize O’Neill’s complaint that Gilpin was “rewriting [his] lines.” After all, it is exactly this tension between the scripted lines and the black actor’s “real” speech that get at the root of something essential to the play’s larger political

goals: the play depends on the burnt-cork reading of the lines. The lines must be performed *as* inauthentic so as to be heard as minstrelsy.

The unsettling irony at the heart of Chude-Sokei's study, a black man wearing blackface, operates linguistically in *The Emperor Jones*. If the goal were verisimilitude, then what possible objection could O'Neill have to Gilpin changing his lines? More to the point, dialect is a language of print, modified to produce the effect of speech. If an African-American speaker is delivering the lines, why fill the script with the orthographic cues of "Negro English"? Why, to bring the analogy with Williams even closer, cover the speech of a black speaker in burnt cork? The answer, simply put, is that verisimilitude was not the goal. Instead, *The Emperor Jones* has a black actor speaking "black" dialect to show the incongruity between the representation and the reality. Chude-Sokei notes the curious fact that Williams's West-Indian upbringing meant that he had to learn black English. What this argument overlooks, however, is that minstrel dialect is not black English (if such a thing can be said to exist at all), so even the supposed "actual" speakers of the dialect had to learn it as well. That O'Neill later wished to stage the play with masks only underlines this trope of masking, even if his later interest is more in classical Greek tragedy than in race relations.

O'Neill's next race play, *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), addressed these issues of language and race relations even more directly. Here, Jim Harris, played by Paul Robeson in the original production, speaks in a mild dialect as a child and later loses it, but he demonstrates a profound understanding of how language and turns of phrase can harden into real racial prejudice. Jim grows up in a diverse part of New York City and after graduating from high school wants to become a Member of the Bar. His

immediate context, however, which includes his white wife Ella, has set boundaries evidenced in his nicknames “Jim Crow,” “Uncle Jim,” and eventually, “Nigger Jim.” In the end, Jim cannot pass the Bar as his wife’s deteriorating mental health turns her into a mouthpiece for prevailing white-supremacist discourses of the day. Jim himself gives voice to these discourses in the final scene: “Pass? Me? Jim Crow Harris? Nigger Jim Harris—become a full-fledged Member of the Bar! Why the mere notion of it is enough to kill you with laughing!” (*Wings* 313).

Beginning when Jim and Ella are children taunted as Jim Crow and Painty Face, the play narrates its main character’s attempts to escape his environment’s discourses of race only to be ultimately overcome by them. In the process, the play undergoes a major shift in vocabulary. Where Jim is “dat Jim Crow” when he first steps on the scene, by the end he has become “old Uncle Jim,” moving from one minstrel extreme to the other (280, 315). Related, but more important, is how the dominant modes of address change over the course of the play. When they are children, Jim warns Ella of the perils of blacking up: “Dey’d call you Crow, den—or Chocolate—or Smoke... Dey’d call you nigger sometimes, too” (281). This move from playful nickname to malicious slur predicts the move in the play at large in which Jim himself is addressed first as “Jim Crow” and later as “dirty nigger” (312). In this sense, the play literalizes Braithwaite’s concern in *The New Negro* that the minstrel representation can move very quickly from a “reactionary social fetish” to a “libelous artistic representation of the Negro.”

The Emperor Jones is not so quick to name its antecedents, but the black figure on stage, shrouded in a heavy stage dialect, cues the audience to a certain set of minstrel expectations. Even before the curtain rises on the play, though, its very title has begun to

raise some of these expectations. The honorific, “Emperor,” and later the first name, “Brutus,” suggest an older tradition of high theater, particularly Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. But the register changes with the name “Jones,” and we move, with the monosyllabic name, to the space of the American vernacular. The name of “Guillame Sam,” or “President Sam,” the Haitian leader on whom the character is partially based, enacts a similar disparity.³³ Moreover, although it has a modern-sounding connotation (more modern than, say, slave or barber), the position of Pullman porter also helped to reify a kind of antebellum fantasy about Negro “nature” and pleasure in servitude. In Joseph Husband’s *The Story of the Pullman Car* (1917), the first history of George Pullman’s industry and achievements, a number of pages are devoted to romanticizing the make-up of Pullman’s workforce. The porters in particular come in for high praise: “Trained as a race by years of personal service in various capacities, and by nature adapted faithfully to perform their duties under circumstances which necessitate unfailing good nature, solicitude, and faithfulness, the Pullman porters occupy a unique place in the great fields of employment.”³⁴ To be sure, the same social attitudes that informed Wittke’s discussion of the Negroes’ natural rhythm and gregariousness are at work here, and O’Neill’s use of the cultural status of the Pullman porter works of a piece with the other symbols of African-American “nature” on the minstrel stage and in plantation romance.

Even the set itself borrows some major tropes of the minstrel stage. By the early twentieth century, the scene of the minstrel show had expanded from the plantation and occasionally the “salon” (for the dandified minstrel figures) to the Caribbean. An 1899 edition of *The Boston Herald*, reviewing “A Gem in Amateur Minstrelsy” by the

Roxbury Club Minstrels, describes an exotic scene: “The setting for a background was a light and airy oriental or tropical interior, with the interlocutor seated upon a throne-like chair.”³⁵ Jones’s palace bears an uncanny resemblance to this charming interior, as it is placed high on a mountain with “a vista of distant hills, their summits crowned with thick groves of palm trees. In the right wall, center, a smaller arched doorway leading to the living quarters of the palace. The room is bare of furniture with the exception of one huge chair made of uncut wood which stands at center.”³⁶ On that night in Washington Square, it would seem, a throne waited for its interlocutor.

Brooks McNamara’s breakdown of the traditional minstrel show is useful here:

This so-called First Part featured songs by the company and a barrage of jokes... among Interlocutor, Tambo and Bones. It finished with a ‘cakewalk’ finale, during which each member of the company presented a brief musical or dance specialty. The Second Part or ‘olio’ offered longer specialty numbers, and the Third Part was generally an afterpiece, a sketch or short play involving some or all of the company—perhaps a burlesque of Shakespeare or some other serious author, or a brief musical comedy about life in the Old South called a ‘plantation scene.’³⁷

As I will show in what follows, *The Emperor Jones* is not only aware of these conventions but is structured by them. The first scene takes place between Jones and Smithers; the middle scenes offer a kind of olio of Brutus’s historical and prehistorical experiences; and the final scene, the afterpiece, brings all characters onstage, in a South deeper than that of Dixie, for a final mock-lament.

The play’s first interaction, seemingly a non sequitur, pushes this familiarity with minstrelsy a step further. “As the curtain rises,” say the opening stage directions, “a native negro woman sneaks in cautiously from the entrance on the right. She is very old, dressed in cheap calico, bare-footed, a red bandana handkerchief covering all but a few stray wisps of hair” (5). Everything is in place for the opening of a minstrel play. An

almost Jemima-esque figure appears in this familiar scene, and it is thus no surprise that when she speaks, she does so in a heavy dialect, though this time not the stage-Negro dialect, but the similarly stock dialect of the African native. As Jones's Cockney underling Smithers finds her creeping around the palace, the woman pleads, "No tell him! No tell him, Mister!" (6). A brief exchange, comic in most other contexts, ends with Smithers trying to pump the woman for more information and threatening her with his revolver. He gives up, ultimately, with a resigned, "Pop orf then, if yer like, yer black cow" (7). This scene seems like an odd way to open the play. The woman does not return, but she is one of only four characters in the tragedy with spoken dialogue, suggesting the huge importance of this opening moment. Indeed, Smithers does to the stock minstrel character what the play more broadly will do to minstrelsy itself. *The Emperor Jones* finds minstrelsy lurking in the corners of the theater, and the play chases it off only to set the stage for its eternal, uncanny return.

Therefore, when Brutus Jones steps on stage and rages at his white underling, "Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I'm boss heah now, is you fergettin'?" (9), the white audience's expectations have been displaced to such a degree that the familiar space of the play is made immediately unfamiliar. As the drama progress, the conventions erode, and the audience is forced to take a more active cognitive role in making sense of the play and in identifying its relation to the main character. In Scene Two, Jones's journey towards the coast begins, and with it comes a hallucinatory journey through time, ending with the dance of the Congo witch-doctor. Carme Manuel has argued that Jones's final sequence offers "a face-to-face confrontation with his original ancestry of savagery and superstition that he has vainly tried to

ignore.”³⁸ In this reading, *The Emperor Jones* becomes the African-American journey to the heart-of-darkness, revealing that Jones is no different from “dese, fool, woods’ niggers” once the artifice of his Emperor title and Pullman uniform are stripped away (9). You can take the Negro out of savagery, but you can’t take savagery out of the Negro. Or in the post-colonial reading offered by Cedric J. Robinson, “The import of *The Emperor Jones* was to confirm that Black sovereignty was doomed and chimerical.”³⁹

But this reading is undercut if we bear in mind that this journey does not move directly from the Pullman coach to the dark continent as it does in the 1933 film adaptation, which I will discuss in more detail below. *The Emperor Jones*’s atavistic series of visions does not take place on such a straight, uninterrupted historical line. In Scene One, as Jones discusses his past life with Smithers, the audience is given the information it needs to make sense of the hallucinations in Scenes 3 and 4. Jones remembers, “Maybe I goes to jail dere for gettin’ in an argument wid razors ovah a crap game. Maybe I gits twenty years when dat colored man die. Maybe I gits in ’nother argument wid de prison guard was overseer ovah us when we’re wukin’ de road. Maybe he hits me wid a whip and I splits his head wid a shovel and runs away...” (14). Of course, “razors ovah a crap game” foreshadows Scene 3, and “splits his head wid a shovel” foreshadows Scene 4.

But there’s a problem here. If the sequence of hallucinations in the play, each given a single scene, takes on the appearance of a backwards journey through time, then the murder scenes narrated above have been reversed sequentially. With this subtle move, the play asserts an alternate temporality. This temporality is consistent not with historical memory but with the order of narrative telling. In other words, the two murder

scenes represent events in the order in which they are narrated in the play, against the seeming “historical” order of the remainder of the scenes. In putting both temporalities in play at once, *The Emperor Jones* establishes a space in which neither mode is privileged. Because the relationship between historical reality and narrative telling is constantly in flux, the play comes to represent the ways in which historical reality and narrative telling become confused to the degree that one is not recognizable from the other.⁴⁰

This confusion of temporality is actually latent in the play’s scenery. The scenery that cues an innocuous minstrel play at the beginning is the same scenery that, by the end, seems to be attacking Jones from all sides. In this, O’Neill and the Provincetown Players seem to have borrowed a tactic from August Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata* (1907).⁴¹ In this play, an innocuous setting becomes increasingly uncanny throughout the play. *The Ghost Sonata* opens on a modern apartment building, but some subtle hints in the opening mise-en-scène foreshadow the ways that this scenery will become less and less neutral. “When the blinds are raised a white marble statue of a young woman is visible through the open window of the round drawing-room, surrounded by palms and brightly lit by sunlight” (252). Palm trees show out of the window of an urban building in Scandinavia, and the bizarre placement of the white statue would find its full exploration in the work of Giorgio de Chirico in the following decade. *The Emperor Jones* enacts a similar destabilizing move with its shock of color against “bare, whitewashed walls” (6). Against these walls, “one huge chair” is “painted a dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet. There is a brilliant orange cushion on the seat and another smaller one is placed on the floor to serve as a footstool” (6). It is too early to know the extent to which this “eye-smiting”

predicts the effects of the play, but the contrast is nonetheless apparent from the first scene. Moreover, early scenes of both plays feature ambient, diegetic sounds that are unremarkable at first but increasingly take on an almost deafening tone. For Strindberg, “A steamship bell can be heard, and now and then the silence is broken by the bass notes of an organ in a nearby church” (252). For O’Neill, at the beginning of Jones’s escape, “From the distant hills comes the faint, steady thump of a tom-tom, low and vibrating. It starts at a rate exactly corresponding to normal pulse beat—72 to the minute—and continues at a gradually accelerating rate from this point uninterruptedly to the very end of the play” (17-18). Both plays increase audience participation in the hallucinatory qualities, not only by representing those hallucinations on stage, but also by showing them against a largely unchanging scene and setting them against a subtle but constant ambient noise.

In so doing, the play shows the discontinuity between the stage representation and the historical reality. Were the play to continue to follow its time line, in reaching back to Jones’s first murder and coming forward again in time, the play would create much the same loop created by popular, ahistorical Negro characters. In fact, Jones’s violent behavior in Scenes 3 and 4 would not have been at all unfamiliar to an audience aware of the more grotesque representations of Negroes in theater and film, perhaps best remembered in D.W. Griffith’s black menace character in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Where the play begins to assert its break with conventional representations is in placing Jones on an auction block (Scene Five) and a slave ship (Scene Six), reminding the audience of a black history that complicates a simple rendering of Jones. With a slave past, Jones cannot be merely the black menace, the dandified Jim Crow strutting in the

rags of his garish Pullman/Emperor's uniform, or, to be sure, the picturesque Uncle Tom in the countless restagings and (increasingly loose) adaptations of Stowe's 1851 novel.⁴²

Nowhere is this effect more jarring than in Scene Six, which takes place on "some ancient vessel," the slave ship (34). Here, the play stages its most direct refutation of minstrel convention by dismantling the minstrel show's "olio." But in this play, the olio is in the service of something very different: rather than a reinforcement of an Edenic plantation myth, *The Emperor Jones*'s olio shows the brutal slavery that minstrelsy requires that we forget. Scene Five puts Jones on a stage within a stage, and even the stage directions heighten the sense of theatricality in this scene: "*Look at that back. Look at those shoulders. Look at the muscles in his arms and his sturdy legs*" and indeed, "*The bidding is lively, the crowd interested*" (33). This is the performance, we are meant to understand; this is what we ignore in perpetuating the disconnect between stage representation and historical reality. Dance was also a regular feature of the olio, and Rice's own fame was largely a product of his ability to dance, or to "jump Jim Crow." As "The Original Jim Crow" and most later iterations sing, "Weel about and turn about and do jis so,/Eb'ry time I weel about and jump Jim Crow" (Lhamon 96). In *The Emperor Jones*, however, no such wheeling is possible, as Jones "*flings himself full length, downward on the ground, panting with exhaustion*" (EJ 35). Jones is stripped of his ability to "jump Jim Crow," and instead of the joyous song, can emit only a wail "*as if under some uncanny compulsion*" as his "*voice reaches the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation*" (36). The central motif in the minstrel show is thus replaced with a scene of profound suffering and despair. Jones's powerlessness is amplified in this scene: it is the

only scene from the “olio” section in which no shot is fired to chase the historical demons away.

In this context, *The Emperor Jones* looks less like a primitivist fantasy and more like one of the “performances of race and freedom” described by Daphne Brooks in *Bodies in Dissent*. Gilpin’s or Robeson’s performance, combined with O’Neill’s script and the Players’ mise-en-scène, takes on the form of a cross-racial and collective “Afro-alienation act,” in which, for Brooks, “the condition of alterity converts into cultural expressiveness and a specific strategy of cultural performance. Afro-alienation recurs as a trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions as well as a tactic that the marginalized seized on and reordered in the self-making process.”⁴³ The self-making process described here occurs in *The Emperor Jones* through its exposure of the linguistic masking of the minstrel form and, in the process, shows the historical realities underlying the culturally amnesiac stage representations. The minstrel performance is “reordered” in such a way as to separate it from its supposed racial mimesis. As with Brooks’s other performers, then, the Emperor offers a “dissonantly enlightened performance,” and his retreat from the white audience not merely a side effect of the fourth wall but an explicit acknowledgment of the white audience’s complicity in his terror.

In a single stroke, then, Eugene O’Neill, Charles Gilpin, and the Provincetown Players, have attacked three interconnected discourses of American nostalgia. The violence and oppression hidden behind the minstrel mask are unmasked. The omissions required for antebellum nostalgia are reasserted on stage with a vengeance. And the cherished object of the American theater, along with one of its most cherished figures, implodes under the scrutiny and complexity of European avant-garde influence. If a

socially-conscious theater is born with *The Emperor Jones*, it is because O'Neill and Provincetown remind us that social consciousness lives in the theater, often undetected or, at its worst, uncritically admired. Where Brutus Jones retreats, *The Emperor Jones* puts itself on the front lines.

Retreat: The Emperor Jones on the silver screen

“For the past six weeks,” announces a July 1933 edition of *The New York Times*, “the ominous throb of the tomtom has been heard on the plains of Astoria.” Not to worry, Queens residents, it’s not “an uprising of the Arapahoes or a pillaging expedition of the crafty Sioux.”⁴⁴ No, the throb of the tomtom is coming from Eastern Service Studios where shooting has begun on *The Emperor Jones*.

By 1933, the play had achieved a success beyond what its original staging could ever have foretold. Leaving its Washington Square home within a year after its first production, *The Emperor Jones* played all over New York. By 1924, Paul Robeson was riding the role to stardom as the company toured the United States. In this same year, Rutherford Mayne in Ireland and Oskar Homolka in Germany were blacking up to play the role of the now internationally famous play. In 1927, the play was translated for its first French performance at the Odeon Theater in Paris, with Benglia, “the French colonial negro,” in the title role. If the audience was occasionally bewildered by some of the national nuance, Benglia’s performance and the Odeon’s production “raised American playwrights one step higher in the estimation of the French.”⁴⁵ A 1926 orchestral “impression” of *The Emperor Jones* by William A. Schroeder paved the way into a new medium for the *Emperor Jones* opera by Louis Greenberg and Kathleen de Jaffa in 1933. A separate chapter would be needed to give all of these various

adaptations their warranted treatment, but one thing to note about all of them is that even as they change national and racial contexts, they still operate in a kind of standard high-art sphere. Shuttling back and forth between plays at prestigious playhouses or art-house theaters (as in the case of the Homolka production) and the hallowed spaces of orchestral and operatic music, *The Emperor Jones* language or medium may have changed, but the substance of the play did not.⁴⁶

But in Queens in 1933, with a studio planning the film's national release, the play as it was couldn't stand. Not only was an uncut *Emperor Jones* not likely to play in Peoria, it was even less likely to play in Atlanta or Jackson. Producers John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran wanted to cash in on the international success of O'Neill's play but had to find a way to do so without alienating the American public. Robeson had gained stage successes in a number of venues: as Brutus Jones in *The Emperor Jones* and Jim Harris in *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and further uptown as the stevedore Joe in *Show Boat*, featuring what would become the most famous song of Robeson's career, "Ol' Man River." Still, these were stage successes and necessarily only local, and Krimsky and Cochran were film producers with national goals. How could the producers preserve Robeson's and O'Neill's legends without alienating their audience, and losing money in the bargain?

The solution to the problem seemed to come in the form of DuBose Heyward. Heyward had become a major figure in racial crossover. His novel *Porgy* (1925) received almost universal praise from both sides of the color line. It was in fact W.E.B. DuBois who wrote in *The Crisis*, "DuBose Heyward's little novel of colored Charleston life, 'Porgy', is a beautiful piece of work... Seldom before has a white Southern writer

done black folk with so much sympathy and subtle understanding.”⁴⁷ The praise is qualified at the end to say that Heyward has only sketched one type of black character, but that he has done that character admirably well. Heyward seemed the best choice then: he was O’Neill without the controversy, and he did not have the polarizing presence of someone like Carl Van Vechten, whose *Nigger Heaven* (1926) earned equal parts scorn and praise on both sides of the color line.

Moreover, the running time of *The Emperor Jones* on the stage was only an hour, and given the necessary omissions to adhere to public taste, the film would be far too short. Heyward then is brought in to “elaborate” Jones’s story. *The New York Times* is excited by this necessary step, “It is through this elaboration of Mr. Heyward’s that the Messrs. Krimsky and Cochran believe that the previous prejudices against ‘The Emperor Jones’ as a potentially popular picture have been overcome. For here, they believe, they have shown the juicy, salty stuff of which films ought to be made—romances and rows and humor and violence in turn, with Paul Robeson’s organ voice frequently raised in song.”⁴⁸ Romance and voices raised in song put the play in a place very distant from Jones’s remote island. When *The Emperor Jones* came to the screen, it would meet its audience half way, giving them the prestige of the original play but with the spectacle that Hollywood cinema led them to expect from a film.

The film adaptation of *The Emperor Jones* is very different from the play. I am not interested here in railing against the film for this reason, because its supposed infidelity to its source material is not in itself cause for criticism. Instead, the film adaptation of *The Emperor Jones* offers an interesting counterpoint to the play itself. What happens, the comparison encourages us to ask, when O’Neill’s racially progressive

play is softened for more general, regionally non-specific consumption? How, in other words, can *The Emperor Jones* be made to square with the national sensibilities about race that the 1920 production of the play was so bold to challenge?

The most obvious change to the film is in its length. In this seventy-six minute film, only a third of the running time is devoted to Brutus's travels through the jungle (i.e., O'Neill's play). The first half of the film gives a realist portrayal of Jones's life as a Pullman porter and a literal representation of his two murders. Travis Bogard's accusation that *The Emperor Jones*'s title role is "an unacceptable stereotype of the Negro in terms of a crap-shooting, razor-cutting Pullman Porter" (qtd. in Shaughnessy 89) is a particularly apt reading of the film, which catches its protagonist in the acts of crap-shooting, razor-cutting, and working the Pullman cars. Furthermore, Bogard's claim that the play "suggests that the Negro is... only a step removed from the brute" is made literal in the film's opening dissolve in which an African tribal dance is rhymed with a Baptist church scene (figs. 1, 2, and 3).



(fig1)

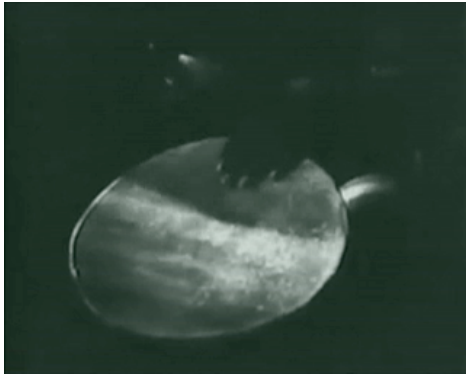


(fig2)



(fig3)

Savage prehistory to savage modernity in a single dissolve. And, the dissolve tells us, it's not just an economical trick of the cinema. The negro's dark past is alive today: savage Africa has simply been transplanted to the contemporary United States with no intermediate steps. Moreover, the tomtom that pulsates behind Jones as he escapes through the jungle is foreshadowed with the African drum of the film's first shot (figure 4). Within four and half minutes, Robeson's Jones is singing a hymn in this same church, dressed in his full Pullman regalia. The opening scenes of the film place as much in the world of *Shuffle Along* as in *The Emperor Jones*, and the regularity with which the rest of the film's scenes are introduced or punctuated with songs or dances does not nothing to dispel this sense. Robeson's next song has him shirtless in a rock quarry, leading the other conflicts on his chain gang in song (fig. 5). That Woody Allen could parody the image without explicit reference as late as 1969's *Take the Money and Run* is an indication of its potency as well as its comfortable dispersal.



(fig4)



(fig5)

In the following scenes, which document Jones's arrival on the island and his eventual rise to power, familiar minstrel tropes set the scene quickly and efficiently. A black administrator, Lem, behind an ornate table covered in papers, is fanned with a palm frond as he sleeps on the job. A top hat completes the absurd picture as Lem welcomes Mr. Smithers (fig. 6). "Oh no," he responds to Smithers's shady deal and price gouge, "I got de contract dis time. De contract, he say, three hundred." Within days, and with Mr. Smithers's help, Jones is teaching the natives to play dice, and only a short time later, is greeting nobility with full pomp and circumstance (fig. 7). Partially a parody of Marcus Garvey's ornate reclamation and titling of African royals, the scene also parodies the well-known trope of the black dandy, and the actor who plays Lem, George Stamper, bears an eerie resemblance to Jack Benny's valet Rochester van Jones. As Monica Miller argues, "Best known from the minstrel stage, the blackface dandy was one half of the 'dandy and darky' team that precisely exemplified white fears of black social and cultural mobility in a world in which most blacks were making the transition from slavery to freedom."⁴⁹ Thus in some sense the equivalent of *The Birth of a Nation's* take on a South-Carolina congress overtaken with black delegates, this scene offers proof, if any

were really needed, that blacks are unfit to govern or even, lest this become the eventuality, participate in civil government.



(fig6)



(fig7)

If it seems like this discussion has moved to a different work entirely, that's because it has. How is it possible that this racially progressive work could lend itself to such a regressive retelling? While it may seem that Heyward was brought in simply to extend the play to feature-film length, he has clearly done much more. Certainly, he seems to have literalized a back story told only in associations. He has censored some of the more offensive language of the play, in particular the word "nigger." He has added songs and dances to a play that before then had only groans of "the highest pitch of sorrow, of desolation."

But more important than all of this, Heyward has not simply written a long prologue to O'Neill's play. In fact, in a strange twist, in the act of lengthening the play to feature length, he has been forced to omit large portions of O'Neill's original play. The opening dissolve is telling. From the heart of darkness in Africa to the contemporary United States, the opening dissolve erases the white audience's complicity in Jones's struggle by eliminating the historical realities of slavery from the original script. The scenes that show Jones on the auction block and in the middle passage are omitted from the film entirely. The film adaptation thus eliminates history from *The Emperor Jones*,

turning O'Neill's play into the textbook of racist primitivism that it is so often understood to be. As the scene of reception changes and broadens significantly, the play's more challenging elements need to be subdued. In subduing those elements, though, the film can't fulfill its purpose: originally meant to bring O'Neill's revolutionary work to a national audience, Heyward's film was instead something that audience knew all too well.

Heyward's adaptation throws O'Neill's progressive original into relief, but perhaps more important, it shows what happens when folk and modern intersect in the wrong ways. Offering a dissolve that would be as at home in Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* as it is at the beginning of this film, Heyward's *The Emperor Jones* shows that primitivism need not be the province only of the self-conscious high modernist. Borrowing costumes, expressions, language and attitudes from the minstrel stage, Heyward's *The Emperor Jones* shows how quickly the stage darky can detach from history and become a stock type again. Perhaps most important, Heyward's *The Emperor Jones* shows that modernist primitivism and twentieth-century minstrelsy are borrowing from the same types and contemporary racial discourses. O'Neill's achievement, by contrast, was to find the places where the folk and the modern complicate one another and to produce something that challenges both.

¹ Travis Bogard, *Contour in Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 139.

² Bogard, 142-143.

³ The quote is from Berlin, *Eugene O'Neill*, 1960. A longer treatment of Jones's relationship to Othello comes in Berlin's *O'Neill's Shakespeare*.

⁴ Shannon Steen, "Melancholy Bodies: Racial Subjectivity and Whiteness in O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*," *Theatre Journal* 52 (2000), 357.

⁵ Braithwaite, "The Negro in American Literature," *The New Negro*, 35.

⁶ There is no better emblem of this than the publication history of now perhaps the most widely read book written by an African-American: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the*

Life of Frederick Douglass (1843). Partially due to Douglass's retreatment of his autobiography in 1855 and 1881, it is nonetheless telling that the first edition to be printed in the twentieth century was Benjamin Quarles' edition of the *Narrative* in 1960. This is an extreme case, to be sure, but it is worth remembering that even Sundquist's *To Wake the Nations* (1993) was working to put the then under-read W.E.B. Dubois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) back into its central place in African-American letters. If it seems inconceivable given the contemporary prominence of this book that there was ever a time when people were *not* reading it, this is at least partly a byproduct of Sundquist's efforts. The same is true for the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston prompted by Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983, though many of the essays were published earlier).

⁷ Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, xvi.

⁸ Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1930), 20.

⁹ Edward LeRoy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy: From "Daddy" Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing Company, 1911), np.

¹⁰ Wittke, 257.

¹¹ [Harvard]

¹² [Harvard]

¹³ [Harvard]

¹⁴ [Princeton, citation unclear]

¹⁵ Kenneth Warren, *Black and White Strangers* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 78.

¹⁶ In the Princeton archives, I found numerous instances of the term and all from materials created after 1890. The same held true in the collections at Harvard's Houghton Library. The term comes up with particular frequency in the histories and obituaries listed above.

¹⁷ [Princeton, George Wilson]

¹⁸ Laurence Hutton, "The Negro on the Stage," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 79:469 (June 1889), 137.

¹⁹ Hutton, 135.

²⁰ Constance Rourke, *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2004), 72.

²¹ Baker, *Renaissance*, 21.

²² Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 6.

²³ Lott, 71.

²⁴ Rourke, 89.

²⁵ Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, 39.

²⁶ Braithwaite, *New Negro*, 31-32.

²⁷ Steen, 352-353.

²⁸ Bogard, 143.

²⁹ Eugene O'Neill, *Letters*, ed. Travis Bogard, #391 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 443.

³⁰ Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darkey"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

³¹ Chude-Sokei, 210.

³² Cited in Steen, 346.

³³ See Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film Before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University North Carolina Press, 2007), 345.

³⁴ Joseph Husband, *The Story of the Pullman Car* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1917), 155.

³⁵ [Harvard]

³⁶ Eugene O'Neill, *The Emperor Jones*, from *Anna Christie/The Emperor Jones/The Hairy Ape* (New York: Vintage, 1995), 5.

³⁷ Brooks McNamara, *American Popular Entertainments: jokes, monologues, bits, and sketches* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 17.

³⁸ Carme Manuel, "A Ghost in the Expressionist Jungle of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*," *North American Review* 39.1-2 (2005), 79.

³⁹ Robinson, 347.

⁴⁰ As Paul Ricoeur will later argue, "The reconstruction of the past... is the work of the imagination. The historian, too, by virtue of the links mentioned earlier between history and narrative, shapes the plots which the [historical] documents may authorize or forbid but which they never contain in themselves. History, in this sense, combines narrative coherence with conformity to the documents. This complex tie characterizes the status of history as interpretation" ("On Interpretation" 181).

⁴¹ Citations come from August Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, translated by Michael Robinson, Oxford World's Classics, 1998.

⁴² It is outside the scope of this paper, but it does seem that it would be useful to chart the development of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* from anti-slavery novel into minstrel show. James Baldwin's essay "Everybody's Protest Novel" suggests that the ahistorical minstrel elements were present in the novel to begin with, but it seems to me more likely that the stage show was so radically popular not for its political message but because it had in large part removed the political message, reifying the Southern plantation and the old-time darkey stereotype, which itself was a projection of the postbellum era.

⁴³ Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

⁴⁴ "Brutus Jones in Astoria," *New York Times* 16 (July 1933), X2.

⁴⁵ "'Emperor Jones' in Paris," *The Literary Digest*. (December 29, 1933), 24.

⁴⁶ This is not to say, of course, that every audience in every country saw exactly the same play. To take the most obvious example, the French production carried with it a colonialist baggage in the body of its star that the Provincetown production downplayed. Putting the leading man in blackface, as in the Irish and German productions, must have put the emphasis more on the everyman than on the black man, a fitting return to Germany at least from whence came some of O'Neill's most important Expressionist influences.

⁴⁷ DuBois, *Writings*, 1215.

⁴⁸ "Brutus Jones in Astoria."

⁴⁹ Monica L. Miller, "The Black Dandy as Bad Modernist," in Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*, 188.

Chapter 3

**The Emptying of American Regionalism: The Folk, The Modern, and Everything
Willa Cather is Not**

Willa Cather famously flubbed her first novel. That book, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), the story of a London architect's society romances, reads like a poor imitation of Edith Wharton. All of this according to Willa Cather herself, who confessed, in "My First Novels (There Were Two)" (1931), wherein she confesses that *Alexander's Bridge* had begun to seem "more unnecessary and superficial" after she started her *real* life's work in *O Pioneers!* (1913). Nearly twenty years on, Cather finally recognizes her error: "I still find people who like that book because it follows the most conventional pattern, and because it is more or less laid in London. London is supposed to be more engaging than, let us say, Gopher Prairie; even if the writer knows Gopher Prairie very well and London very casually."¹ With this dismissal of London, we have the traditional picture of Cather—the chronicler of Nebraska rather than of the major city, more interested in the fields and the pioneers than in the skyscrapers and the urbanites. We are back, it seems, to the late nineteenth century moment of local color, where the "real" people lived, and which was full of, what Cather herself would call, "old neighbors, once very dear" (964).

We are reminded here of the list from Hamlin Garland quoted in the Introduction to this dissertation: "Our wild animals have already found a great artist in Kemeys. The Indian and the negro also are being spiritedly handled, but the workman in his working clothes, the brakeman, the thresher on the farm, the heater at the furnace, the cow-boy on his horse, the young man in the haying field, offer equally powerful and characteristic subjects."² Despite the obvious language of superiority and exploitation here, Garland also seems to allow a way out of the exploitative cycle. Of U.S. history Garland writes,

“Its political freedom was won, not by its gentleman and scholars, but by its yeomanry; and in the same way our national literature will come in its fullness [*sic*] when the common American rises spontaneously to the expression of his concept of life.”³ It is tough to miss the pastoral move here: American independence and culture come not from gentlemen and scholars but from the yeomanry and common Americans. We could accuse Garland of being a scholar in yeoman’s clothing, and we would not be far wrong. No idyllic yeoman, no thresher, no brakeman, at least not one who was any good at his job, could write *Crumbling Idols*.

Garland’s argument, however, is that they would, could, and *will*. We should not overlook the agency that Garland ascribes to the “yeomanry” and the “common American.” Even “the negro,” the most seemingly inert of all local-color materials, is encouraged to speak back: “The negro will enter the fiction of the South, first, as subject; second, as artist in his own right... He will contribute a poetry and a novel as peculiarly his own as the songs he sings.”⁴ However much we might object to the ghettoizing gesture of “peculiarly his own,” “the negro” for Garland is only part of a much broader field encapsulated by the word “American.” The emphasis is thus taken off the appropriation of a particular group or race and placed on the voice and contribution of that particular group.⁵

Given Garland’s many declarations, there would seem to be no greater replacement for the “crumbling idols” of the past than Willa Cather, sprung as she is from American soil, conversant in the practices of pioneer life, and interested in presenting an insider’s point of view on the group, Czech and Swedish farmers in Nebraska, on whom she had a special perspective.

To return to Cather's own terms, then, Cather is thus the novelist "Gopher Prairie" has been waiting for. There's only one problem: Gopher Prairie is not a real place. It might be the fictionalized version of Sauk Center, Minnesota, that appears in Sinclair Lewis's bitter satire *Main Street* (1920), in which both the small-mindedness of the place and of the recently urban Dr. and Mrs. Kennicott who try to class it up. Or it might just be a rhetorical device, a name that sounds funny and almost parodically Midwestern. Once we get to the opening lines of *O Pioneers!*, that celebration of "Gopher Prairie" (this time in the guise of Hanover, Nebraska), things become even more complicated: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away."⁶ This hardly sounds like the American heart and hearth of older local-color fiction, certain as it is to be "blown away" from the "tableland," not the earth, which might send up some vegetation to bind the town to itself. Clearly, the separation that Cather established between refined London (and "Mr. James and Mrs. Wharton") and Gopher Prairie cannot hold. As I will argue in this chapter, Cather uses the medium of the novel to navigate a third way through this divide because, as we shall see, she was no more the champion of the hay bales of Gopher Prairie than she was the champion of the rattling teacups of London.

Even the sites on the Willa Cather tour in Red Cloud, NE, show some confusion about what exactly it is that they are representing. The format of the tour itself is strange: one drives behind the tour guide's vehicle, and everyone gets out to discuss this or that site before getting back in the car and going to the next. This was particularly strange when I went because I was the only one on the tour. But the sites themselves are the real curiosity: they straddle an odd borderline between fact and fiction. Cather's life is

blended with the plot of *My Ántonia* (1918) and *The Song of the Lark* (1915) to produce what seems a historical tour of those books as much as a historical tour of a famous author's life. The plaque in front of the St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church provides a particularly notable instance:

The St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church was built in 1883 of brick fired at Red Cloud. It served Red Cloud's Catholic congregation until 1906 when it was sold and converted into a private residence. Here, Annie Pavela, the Antonia of Cather's well-loved novel *My Ántonia*, was married, and here her first child was baptized. Restored and donated by the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation. (See Figure 1)

The description of the events in Annie Pavelka's life is where things get a little confused and confusing: we are not on the Pavelka memorial tour after all, and yet the sites of her relatively undistinguished life are all over the tour.

Of course, I am overstating my confusion at all of this. In a moment when guides show the famously impoverished sites of *The Wire* in Baltimore and *The Sopranos* in Northern New Jersey, these types of tours are very familiar. In addition, it would be silly to suggest that Cather did not draw on these very brick-and-mortar sites in her works. What strikes me about the tour, though, is the fact that Cather disappears here as well. As in the major critical biographies, it is a point of contention where the biographical author ends and the literary text begins or whether the two have the productive relationship that we believe they must. Every time we go looking for Cather, we seem to find less and less.



Figure 1

Cather remains one of the least understood of American writers, and of her many novels, only three are particularly well known. Part of the difficulty has to do with her intensely private life. Andrew Jewell of the Cather archive and Cather scholar Janis P. Stout have collaborated on *A Calendar of Letters*, a print-then-digital collaboration that attempts to give scholars some grounding in Cather's rich correspondence. *A Selected Letters* was finally published in April 2013, though it was so respectful of her privacy and opinions that it is not likely to clarify many of the mysteries that surround her.

Because of her tight control over these private materials, Cather has left scholars with a , “*vie démeublée*,” to adapt one of her own terms Cather writes, in her famous essay “The Novel Démeublé,” “Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created.”⁷ The essay goes on to discuss “the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” as giving “high quality to the novel or the drama.” Cather’s life has been given to critics with a similar amount of ambiguity and

omission. This exceptional lack of personal information has led to a criticism filled with speculations as to Cather's intentions and, in the last few decades, her sexuality. The bulk of book-length studies on Cather comes in the form of critical biographies, and those written since 1980 have been particularly interested in turning the "thing not named" in Cather's life into the love that dare not speak its name.⁸

Her place in twentieth-century fiction has been similarly difficult to pin down. In the absence of more detailed information from her letters (even with the publication of the new collection), most of Cather's literary opinions come from two sources: her early journalism and her late collection of essays, *Not Under Forty* (1936). All of the pieces in the latter collection had been published earlier and elsewhere, but they do not address the authors and movements of the 1920s and 1930s in quite the ways we might expect. Rather than discuss the authors for which the 1920s are known (notably the "modernists"), *Not Under Forty* spends more time with the French nineteenth century in Flaubert and Balzac, the German early twentieth with Thomas Mann, and the American *fin de siècle* with Henry James and Sarah Orne Jewett. The closest she gets to the modernists is Katherine Mansfield, a slightly younger contemporary who died in 1923. If we are to discount *Alexander's Bridge* (1912) (as Cather's own essay asks us to do), then the only author with any real connection to Cather is Jewett, who was also a regionalist and who pushed Cather in the direction that made her famous. In short, Cather's not much help on the subject of her influences.

Cather is a famously opaque object of study, with little ideological unity in her work and little specific personal detail on which to hitch critical interpretations. Cather has been part of the American canon essentially since she won the Pulitzer Prize for *One*

of Ours in 1921. By the time of her death in 1947, Cather was already appearing in books about the highlights of American literature, where she was listed alongside other living luminaries Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Cather was given her own chapter in Malcolm Cowley's *After the Genteel Tradition* (1937), and she was given double billing with Ellen Glasgow in Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* (1942) and Frederick J. Hoffman's *The Modern Novel in America* (1951). In our own moment, book-length studies of Cather have fallen off a bit, but she is still the subject of a yearly conference and volume of essays produced by the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

As I will argue in this chapter, Cather has been so difficult to place precisely because of this withholding. Her lack of biographical openness, her lack of commitment to single regions within her novels, her lack of consistent ideological convictions: these make it easier to describe what Cather is *not* than what she *is*. In what follows, however, I hope to show that Cather was interested precisely in these questions of non-specificity at a moment when national self-imagining, particularly in film and radio, was moving toward a newly “mass” audience, one devoid of all the hallmarks of specificity that characterized the earlier era. Although Cather was dismissive of the new media and staunchly committed to her own, the novel, she was nonetheless abiding by much of the same logic that pushed the particularized, rooted “folk” of ethnography to the “just plain folks,” who would gather around the radio, millions at a time. While Cather may be considered one of the last strongholds of the old regionalism and the old local color, in fact, I argue, her novels present a new kind of regionlessness—that both her “vie démeublé” and “novel démeublé” led to a new kind of “région démeublée.”

Cather's Modernism and the Quest for a Suitable Pair

Because of the span of her career, and because of her obvious commitment to craft, Cather herself seems a reasonable candidate for the canon of American modernism. The most explicit move in this direction has been Jo Ann Middleton's 1990 study *Willa Cather's Modernism*. In this study, Middleton advances the concept of the "vacuole," a term borrowed from cellular biology, as a means to understand the absences or omissions, the "démouillé" quality in Cather's work. For Middleton, the vacuole is a helpful analogue in that it "appears empty but is not actually empty (though not full); as 'empty' it allows a larger structure than might be expected, and as 'not-empty' it performs such functions as storage and digestion, which is suggestive for the apparent absences in Cather's work that are nevertheless full of meaning."⁹ This vacuole method, suggestively and perhaps polemically referred to as Cather's "theory of reader response," then cements Cather's status as a modernist.

Middleton's reading adds a certain richness to Cather's oeuvre, particularly to the famous puzzle *My Mortal Enemy* (1926). Middleton's study reclaims *My Mortal Enemy* as Cather's triumph in unfurnishing. "In this novel," writes Middleton, "Cather practices all the methods she has developed to simplify and cut away all excess detail, and yet she makes clear to the reader all that is not recorded on the page."¹⁰ Although the connection between *My Mortal Enemy* and "The Novel Démouillé" had been sketched before—E.K. Brown, in the first critical biography of Cather, called *My Mortal Enemy* "the boldest experiment she had made in leaving out"¹¹—Middleton describes Cather's accomplishment with a new kind of breadth. For Middleton, *My Mortal Enemy* has Cather "using her readers' common intellectual background, a multiple viewpoint point

of view that differs from the one she used in *A Lost Lady*, and internal juxtaposition that produces reader-controlling vacuoles.”¹² And it is these “vacuoles” that enable Middleton to produce such rich readings of Cather’s more experimental work.

Interestingly, however, as Middleton gets further from the introduction of the vacuole, “modernism” itself seems to disappear. In the chapter on *My Mortal Enemy*, in fact, “modernism” does not make a single appearance in the body of the text. Middleton defines modernism as “the outlook that views the world in its complexity, refuses to accept simple or conventional solutions, and then experiments with new answers and radical suggestions.”¹³ The difficulty of such a definition is that without a firm grounding in particular works, artists, or eras, it might refer to any great work that breaks with earlier conventions, as no great artist in history has ever quite accepted the world as a simple place. In this sense, we are left with the comforting knowledge that Cather is one among these great artists but with the lingering sense that she is still a Modernist on less adulterated terms if we could only figure out what those terms are.

Cather scholar Merrill Maguire Skaggs works in a more experimental mode in *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner* (2007). Because of Faulkner’s undisputed status as “modernist,” such a pairing has clear ramifications for Cather’s place in American Modernism, though Skaggs places the emphasis more on conceptual symbiosis than on the fraught term of “modernism,” leaving the latter term out of the work altogether. Skaggs opens with the tantalizing claim that “By the end they seem almost to have invented the other, if only by constant goading. I think no other literary relationship was ever so surreptitious, so enduring, so intense, or so profoundly productive.”¹⁴ But as the book’s nine chapters demonstrate, there are few direct links between the authors, and

there is the historical problem that Faulkner's earliest masterpieces were not written until after the major part of Cather's career was over. Skaggs's conclusion is compelling:

"Finally, in their last fictions [Cather's "Before Breakfast" and Faulkner's *The Reivers*], they played the other's hand: Cather rooted a man on his own little postage stamp, and Faulkner described cross-country movement so swift that he set a new standard."¹⁵

While this swapping of places does occur in one sense, Skaggs's reading contains a few strategic omissions, the main omission being that these final works can be better explained with a logic internal to each respective author's career. Faulkner, in particular, referred to *The Reivers* as the "Golden Book of Yoknapatawpha County" in an interview with the *Paris Review*. Faulkner considered the novel a capstone and conclusion to his life's work, adding that once it was finished, "Then I shall break the pencil and I'll have to stop."¹⁶ *The Reivers* not only revisits the fictional location Faulkner created and populated throughout his career, it also takes up the characters and relations of an earlier novel/collection, *Go Down, Moses* (1942).

Cather, too, put a good deal of accrued energy into her final story. The main character, Henry Grenfell, is in a sense "rooted... on his own little postage stamp," but the emphasis should be placed more on the word "rooted" than on the words "postage stamp." Cather had been interested in small locales throughout her career, and her canvases became a good deal smaller in her late career, from the small-town 17th century Quebec City in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) to the single Virginia plantation of her last novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). But even from her earliest novels, Cather tried to push toward a more permanent place beyond the regions and towns she described, "the road of Destiny," as *My Antonia* would have it, "which predetermined for us all that we

can ever be.”¹⁷ The central figure in “Before Breakfast” is not the unnamed “little island off the Nova Scotia coast” but the “Serene, impersonal splendour. Merciless perfection, ageless sovereignty” of the earth and sky.¹⁸ Like Professor St. Claire in *The Professor’s House* (1925), Grenfell is estranged from his children, but the conflict is not this time between money and value; rather, the conflict is between permanence and change. Grenfell is ashamed of his physicist son but is enthralled with the daughter of a geology professor. “Perhaps he was a throwback to the Year One,” says the narrator of Grenfell, suggesting that the protagonist himself may be a geological specimen rather than a physical one (403). Indeed, in the end, as Grenfell watches the young girl swim on the beach, his is not the masturbatory fantasy of Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, but a paean to the sea: “Crazy kid! What does she think she’s doing? This is the North Atlantic, girl, you can’t treat it like that!” (406). This sentiment is no more a response to Faulkner than to Cather’s own body of work, for in Faulkner, the world’s most powerful forces are never so impersonal.

Still, the pairing with Faulkner does persist in writing about Cather, even if it is not as ambitious as that of Skaggs in trying to force a more literal connection. In a contemporaneous work by John N. Duvall, “Regionalism in American Modernism,” the definition of modernism has changed from that of Middleton’s *Willa Cather’s Modernism*, but Cather’s relationship to it remains distant. Duvall suggests that modernism be considered “all imaginative writing that responds to the intense forces of modernization that occur from the 1890s to the eve of World War II.” With this broadening of the definition of modernism, “we might speak of a broader range of writers, often those whose regionalism is associated with realism and naturalism, who

contribute to an understanding of modernism.”¹⁹ More interested in the period than the conceptual frame, Duvall’s definition of modernism helps to problematize the lead term in his article’s title, “regionalism,” which itself would be a holdover from an earlier era. To present authors such as Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, and Edgar Lee Masters as regionalists helps to emphasize the shift in attitude toward the region itself, a shift away from showing the region to the world, and toward showing the world to the region. As through Hurston’s “spy-glass of Anthropology,”²⁰ the new regionalism is just as interested in showing the region as an insular place as it is in showing the region as a world all its own.

As is typical of a good deal of Cather criticism, however, Cather can never quite be made to fit the mold. “Cather’s fiction draws on the strategies of realism,” writes Duvall, “though there can be decided modernist tendencies.”²¹ In other words, Cather is neither a realist nor a modernist, and she is mainly a regionalist for the role biography plays in the construction of her writerly persona. Duvall’s article is too short to mention all the exceptions to the Cather-Nebraska equation (he discusses only *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* at length), and the one he does mention, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, is boiled down to its regionalism, as it becomes the novel in which “Cather explores the Southwest of the nineteenth century.”²² For Duvall, then, Cather is fundamentally a regionalist writing in the modernist era, and her closest contemporary is not William Faulkner or Zora Neale Hurston but Ellen Glasgow, who was to Virginia what Jewett was to Maine or Booth Tarkington to Indiana.

The pairing of Cather with Glasgow is as old as Cather criticism itself. In Alfred Kazin’s foundational *On Native Grounds* (1942), the authors appear together in a chapter

entitled “Elegy and Satire: Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow.” Kazin is such a thoughtful and subtle critic that I am reluctant to accuse him of a simple sexist rendering of the two authors here, though certainly the fact that both are white women with ties to a particular region is a ready shorthand.²³ Kazin does at least seem relatively cognizant of this potential for shorthand. He writes, “Yet their craftsmanship had no gestures, no tricks, and—this is less true of Ellen Glasgow—no glitter. They were good, almost too serenely good; it was always so easy to put them into their placid niches.”²⁴ Kazin goes on to say that “what isolated them both was the fact that they brought the resources of the modern novel in America—and frequently not a little of the bitterness of the postwar spirit—to the persistent exploration and evocation of the past.”²⁵ Unfortunately, the pairing of the two, particularly as set apart from others older than the “lost generation”—Sherwood Anderson, Irving Babbitt, H.L. Mencken—does operate as one of these “placid niches” and feminizes an “evocation of the past” that was much more prevalent in the generation than this description of Cather and Glasgow allows.

Glasgow was a more direct descendant of the Howellsian school of realism. Her major early novel, *Virginia* (1913), published in the same year as Cather’s *O Pioneers!*, begins in 1884 and concludes around the time the novel was published. Glasgow insists on the contemporary moment by investing the novel’s descriptions with temporal and geographical specificity. *Virginia* begins, “Toward the close of a May afternoon in the year 1884, Miss Priscilla Batte, having learned by heart the lesson in physical geography she would teach her senior class on the morrow, stood feeding her canary on the little square porch of the Dinwiddie Academy for Young Ladies.”²⁶ The details here may verge on the superfluous, particularly in light of the fact that Priscilla Batte is a minor character

in what is to come, but such detail is particular to Glasgow's descriptive mode, one that is more interested in providing "real" descriptions than ideal ones. Howells's notion of the "ideal grasshopper" had an additional valence for Glasgow, for whom a picture of the "ideal South" or the "ideal Virginian" would have dire consequences not limited to the state of national literature.

The dual risk is contained in the novel's title. Glasgow was well-known as a local colorist by 1913, so a reader would have expected that the title of this novel would refer to the state for which Glasgow and Thomas Nelson Page were the main literary representatives. In this novel, though, "Virginia" refers almost exclusively to the heroine, Virginia Pendleton, and the commonwealth is only implied in references to Richmond and the main setting of the book's action, Dinwiddie. The only state mentioned with any frequency, in fact, is New York, where Oliver Treadwell takes up his eventual residence and, after earning a reputation as a playwright, leaves Virginia in her home state.

"Virginia" thus becomes a multilayered signifier for cultural backwardness, contrived innocence, outmoded femininity, and regressive social attitudes. The doubling of the heroine's name and the state's name, and the aspect of pure womanhood implied in the name "Virginia," help to emphasize the novel's social critique, which focalizes the region's hypocrisy and delusion through the lens of a single, unremarkable character.

The social, contemporary undercurrent of Glasgow's *Virginia* becomes particularly clear when we set it alongside Cather's novel of the same year. The first line of Cather's novel, quoted above, reads as follows: "One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away."²⁷ The sentences open with almost identical information: a month, a year

(nearly the same year as *Virginia*'s, presumably), and a place. In both sentences, the subject is couched in an almost appositive punctuation, emphasizing the subject's context rather than the subject him- or herself. For Glasgow, this means situating Miss Priscilla Batte firmly in her year and place, even on a particular street corner in a particular month. For Cather, though, the subject is the town of Hanover, the only real feature of which seems to be impermanence. It is "anchored," "trying not to be blown away" from the Nebraska tableland, curiously oceanic for how landlocked it is. Although it is set in a particular state at a particular moment, *O Pioneers!* follows the Whitman poem to which it alludes in relativizing that western American action as occurring on a timeless stage: "We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and the lesson, Pioneers! O pioneers!"²⁸

In this sense, one of the major differences between Cather and Glasgow can be summed up in the titles to their 1913 novels. Where Glasgow's title emphasizes the relation of person to place, Cather's emphasizes the relation of people to art. Even if a reader does not catch the particular reference in the title, the "O" and exclamation point in the title signify that the title alludes to something.²⁹ For both authors, then, regionalism is a starting point, but the similarities end there. Both authors still remain tied to particular places, but Cather is more interested in using the region to move toward something regionless, something not restricted to any time or place.

Cather's attitude is best summed up in that holy grail of Cather intention, "The Novel D  meubl  ." In defending her theory of the unfurnished novel, Cather turns to Tolstoy, one of the most elaborately furnished of all novelists. Cather returns to region here in clear preempting of the critical voice that would accuse her of furnishing the plains of Nebraska with more than she was letting on. Comparing Tolstoy to Balzac,

Cather writes, “But there is this determining difference: the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of those old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author’s mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves.”³⁰ The Moscow houses exist not in Moscow, in other words, but in the emotional world of the novels.

With this emphasis on removal, Cather’s aesthetic seems to be one of proto-minimalism, but Cather is no minimalist, and the connections between her method and Hemingway’s are far-flung at best. Janis Stout suggests that Cather “formulated a theory of minimalism in the very years when Hemingway was coming to ascendancy.”³¹ Hemingway’s emphasis was on the removal of detail, or the burying of deep meaning within his sparse texts. Cather emphasizes a removal of detail as well, but she does so in a way much more concerned with relaying her grand artistic vision. Hemingway’s oft-cited iceberg theory, after all, appears in an essay entitled “The Art of the Short Story,” but that title hardly lives up to its promises. If one cites the iceberg theory out of context, one overlooks the sarcastic, dismissive tone of the essay in which the theory appears. “I dislike explainers,” scoffs Hemingway, “apologists, stoolies, pimps. No writer should be any one of those for his own work. This is just a little background, Jack, that won’t do either of us any harm.”³² And as if the injunction to Jack were not enough, Hemingway continues a page later, confusing his own story with its film adaptation: “You like ‘The Killers’? So good of you. And why? Because it had Burt Lancaster and Ava Gardner in it? Excellent. Now we are getting somewhere.”³³ If some seriousness does seep through

these pages, it is still rather a risk to compare the artistic ethos of Hemingway to that of Cather, as if there is adequate information to do so.

In fact, a more substantive comparison may come from another of Hemingway's dismissive assessments, this in a 1923 letter to Edmund Wilson and discussing Cather's *One of Ours* (1921). "Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode, Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere."³⁴ Given Cather's antipathy toward the cinema, and particularly the crossing of media boundaries, Hemingway's remarks might have had an especially cutting significance if they ever reached her. Cather's critics have tried to turn Hemingway's remarks back on him: Jean Schwind has suggested in "The Beautiful War in *One of Ours*" that this idealization of war is not Cather's but her protagonist Claude Wheeler's, and that the final battle scene is not intended to be strictly representative, but is "romanticized and saturated with 'glorious war' rhetoric."³⁵ Janis Stout adds that Claude's beautiful death in a beautiful war is an "ironic touch" on top of "masculine delusions she held at arm's length."³⁶

While these assessments seem true to Cather's oeuvre, they can't be entirely correct because *One of Ours* was Cather's most insistently contemporary novel, and it attacked a contemporary trauma that was still fresh in the popular mind. Instead of simply suggesting that Hemingway was wrong or that he spoke truer than he knew, I take Hemingway's critique as a true basis for comparing his style of literary withholding from Cather's. Hemingway insists that "If you leave or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless."³⁷ Hemingway's emphasis is thus much more on *knowing*, and by these terms, Cather's *One of Ours* is certainly a failure because she had

no first-hand experience of the war. But these are clearly not Cather's terms, as evidenced particularly by her historical works *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. In fact, the kind of minute detail that Hemingway's work requires (even if that detail is ultimately removed) is exactly the kind of temporal minutia of which Cather wants to "unfurnish" the novel. She asks, "Is the story of a banker who is unfaithful to his wife and who ruins himself by speculation in trying to gratify the caprices of his mistresses, at all reinforced by a masterly exposition of banking, our whole system of credits, the methods of the Stock Exchange?"³⁸ Cather's answer is no, because such things have no "proper place in imaginative art." For Hemingway, however, they do, if not on the page then firmly in the mind of the writer.³⁹

Cather's objection is not to detail but to detail for its own sake. Thea Kronborg remembers the silver stove at her family's hearth; "Old Mrs. Harris" is soon immobilized in her sickbed; Claude Wheeler's fate is in some sense determined by his automobile; Oswald Henshawe receives a mysterious pair of topaz cufflinks. In each instance, however, the thing is unimportant in itself: the silver stove is the central image in Thea's life with her father, the bed defines the limits of Old Mrs. Harris's life in infirmity, the automobile kills Claude's Nebraska home life just as a very modern World War will kill him in a more literal way, and the "mortal enemy's" cufflinks are an emblem of the Henshawes' more general infidelity to one another and of their longing for luxury. The details in these books are central, and Cather rarely addresses the larger issues in her novel head-on.

Willa Cather and Depersonalization

As we have seen, then, any attempt to make Cather a “modernist” in traditional terms, or any attempt to compare her to other authors, is fraught with the peril of overstatement. Cather slips beyond our critical grasp and leaves us no real clues for where we should be looking instead. I would suggest, however, that we use this very disappearance, this *vie démeublée*, as the starting point rather than the frustrated and inevitable end. Indeed, it is Cather’s very ability to disappear within her works, to hide in the folk types of many ages and regions, that marks her contribution to American modernism. Her relationship to the folk necessarily follows, and we look in vain for the traditional hallmarks of regionalism and local-color in her work because she is working in a materially different way from that of her predecessors.

If the hall-of-mirrors effect of Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* is on full display within those poems, in Cather it is much more subtle because it ranges so much farther and wider. For Pound, we have no trouble seeing the poet in John Adams, Sigismondo Maltesta, Charles Adams, Cavalcanti, and numerous others, but this is because we know fundamentally who the biographical poet is and what his political beliefs are. Cather has been much more difficult to pin down in this way, though it is difficult to miss her in artist figures like Paul of “Paul’s Case” (1905) and the diva Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* (1915) or in the disaffected academics Godfrey St. Peter of *The Professor’s House* and Henry Grenfell of “Before Breakfast.” And the very control that she exerted over the presentation of format of her novels and stories, all the way from the cover designs to the absolute refusal of rights for film and radio productions, leaves us with none of the productive ambiguities that give us an entrée into understanding some of her more explicitly multiple-personalities contemporaries.⁴⁰

Pound's and Eliot's proneness to quotation, Faulkner's use of the disabled and the depraved, Proust's insistence on memory and personality with an almost Berkeleyan commitment to solipsism, none of these exist for Cather. Her name is never hidden, her works never heavy on quotation, her artistic control never in question, yet her intense privacy meant that the public could lionize her without making her a celebrity in the traditional sense. In *Authors, Inc.: Literary Study in the Modern United States* (2004), Loren Glass notes the irony that "the entire modernist 'lost generation' was absorbed into American mainstream culture through a bombardment of gossipy memoirs that affirmed the mass cultural cachet of the personalities behind these persistent assertions of 'impersonality.'"⁴¹ Glass's study pays particular attention to authors like Twain, Eliot, and Stein. Cather is notably absent from this crowd, despite the scale of her posthumous glorification in Lincoln and Red Cloud, NE. Cather, it seems, was able to achieve the odd feat of remaining private in an age of celebrity, and without the mythic hermeticism of authors like Thomas Pynchon or J.D. Salinger.

Therefore, even though Cather is indisputably the author of her books, and a respected American author, eventually a Pulitzer Prize Winner (1922 for *One of Ours*), Cather herself remains elusive in her own texts. This elusiveness is aided by her attitude toward the form and medium of the novel itself. Cather was so averse to adaptations of her novels to film or radio that she included a stipulation in her will that prohibited such adaptations even after her death. In a 1942 letter to a woman who wanted to adapt *My Antonia* for the radio, Cather replied, "My books are written for an old-fashioned form of entertainment—namely, to be read with the eye. They are not written to be seen on the stage or to be interpreted by even the most friendly voice—over the radio. In making

such an arrangement as you suggest; i.e., a three or five-day weekly radio program constructed from MY ANTONIA, you would become my collaborator—you must see that.”⁴² The works, in other words, are completely her own, and just as it would mean collaborating with another person, so too would adaptation mean diluting the pure novel.

Cather had an antipathy toward more explicitly literary matters as well. During her lifetime, Cather’s works were never published in paperback, and the hardcovers were under her own design. When she was approached about a Viking Portable edition of her works, she responded negatively, insisting that they “seem to be the last derivative of the torrent of anthologies which very nearly wiped out all the dignity and nearly all the profits of the legitimate publishing business. After the war everybody wants to ‘get by’ easy; schools, teachers and pupils.”⁴³ We can see the same resistance to “collaboration” that influenced her views on radio and film adaptations of her work. As a result, the standalone book, usually the novel itself, in Cather’s works should not be overlooked. Not troubled by the collaborative nature of theater or radio, not placed in potentially unwelcome company in literary magazines or anthologies, Cather’s books present an untainted version of authorial intention in a moment when authors were rising to an as-yet unseen prominence.

One of the central contradictions in Cather’s iron-fisted control over the material book is that Cather herself was nowhere to be seen in the books themselves. In fact, Cather did not “write” her most famous book at all. The “I” who speaks throughout *My Ántonia* (1918) is that of Jim Burden, a New York lawyer overflowing with his childhood memories of Nebraska and of his Bohemian neighbor and first-love Ántonia Shimerda. “I first heard of Ántonia,” the novel begins, “on what seemed to me an interminable journey

across the great midland plain of North America.”⁴⁴ It would be far overstating the case to say that Cather is the first author to write in the first person in a voice other than her own. Indeed, the epistolary novel popularized by Samuel Richardson would even suggest that this first-person misalignment is central to the founding of the English novel, gender cross-identification and all.

My Ántonia, however, takes this remove a step further. In fact, the first line quoted above is not that of Cather’s *My Ántonia* but of Jim Burden’s “Ántonia,” which at the last moment was renamed “My Ántonia.” The manuscript itself has a backstory. The idea for it was conceived on train in Iowa, where Jim Burden and some nameless author are traveling companions from New York to their hometown in Nebraska. Their “talk,” says the author, keeps “returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had known long ago and whom both of us admired” (3). Both the author and the non-literary lawyer agree that the girl “seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood” (3). At once a person from their pasts and a symbol of all that it means to have a past, Ántonia seems to inspire them both to something beyond themselves. And it is Jim Burden, in fact, who produces the authorial effects on the narrator: “He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her” (4).

The narrator and Jim Burden strike an agreement. After Burden asks why she (the gender is actually never specified) has never written about Ántonia, the narrator proposes a kind of competition: “I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her” (4). Then a curious thing happens. The time shifts to many months later, and Jim has returned triumphant with his

manuscript. “I had to confess,” says the narrator, “that mine had not gone beyond a few straggling notes” (5). The narrator, the figure closest to Cather in all of her fiction, therefore, is explicitly *not* the writer of the bulk of *My Ántonia*. This displacement has been universally missed in criticism on the novel, despite the common recognition that Jim Burden is one of Cather’s many male alter egos. Still, this insistence that “I the writer” could not write this novel, that it required a non-literary man, depersonalizes to a new degree.

This depersonalization actually carries over into the narrative. I quoted above from the first line of Jim Burden’s manuscript, but I did not include the mysterious footnote that intrudes upon this insistently first-person first line. At the first mention of Ántonia’s name, the text adds the following footnote: “The Bohemian name *Ántonia* is strongly accented on the first syllable, like the English name *Anthony*, and the *i* is, of course, given the sound of long *e*. The name is pronounced An’-ton-ee-ah” (9n). Within the first pages of the novel, the narrative voice is displaced, and within the first words of the “manuscript,” the narrative voice is displaced again. The footnote comes from a non-specified source, and we have no reason to believe that Jim Burden should have annotated his own informal manuscript, which is after all, merely loose sheets in a “bulging legal portfolio” (4). At Jim Burden’s introduction of Ántonia a few chapters later, he gives his own phonetic rendering of the name: “The little girl was pretty, but Ántonia—they accented the name thus, strongly, when they spoke to her—was still prettier” (24). Again, the suggestion of authorial ambiguity, and this in an author whose very aesthetic is one of suggestion, becomes explicitly rendered with this return to the pronunciation of Ántonia’s name.

If the “Cather” character has intervened, she has done so not as author or editor, but as something more like historian or folklorist. And the scientific-sounding tone produces little more than the ring of local authenticity: the note doesn’t do any clarifying as to how the name should actually sound, suggesting as it does a dual accent “Á” and “ee” but giving a single-accented name, “Anthony,” as the primary example. In the first pages of this seemingly innocuous regionalist narrative, then, Cather has given a preliminary exercise in the modernist depersonalization that would become so important for her contemporaries such as T.S. Eliot, in whose *The Waste Land*, the word “I” is always an ambiguous pronoun because it has so many potential antecedents, which themselves are obscured or appear nowhere in the text.

Moreover, the places where we might expect to find the Cather equivalents provide no such exactitude. Prior to 1918, Cather seemed to show a special kinship with the artist who moves East after being misunderstood in the Midwest. The longest such explication came in *The Song of the Lark*, the story of Thea Kronborg, a girl who grows up in a Red Cloud, NE, duplicate called Moonstone, CO, and eventually becomes an opera singer known throughout Chicago, the East, and Europe. This story of the young Midwestern girl who makes good (or who makes art) has an obvious sympathy with Cather’s own life, and in fact, the Willa Cather Foundation’s tour of Red Cloud is split about evenly between the real-life sites of *My Ántonia* and *The Song of the Lark*. To be sure, Cather’s first collection of stories has many such figures, the most famous of which is the thwarted schoolboy of “Paul’s Case” (1905, rep. 1920) wherein a repressed Midwestern boy escapes to New York to live the life of *flânerie* of which he has always implicitly dreamed.

From the same collection, “A Sculptor’s Funeral” offers an even more biting vision of the oppressive small town. In this case, Sand City, Kansas, is the boyhood home of Harvey Merrick, an accomplished sculptor who is being returned home for burial. The artistic set accompanying his body are shocked and appalled at the conditions of Merrick’s upbringing, and only Sand City’s lawyer has the integrity to be appalled by it all as well. In the end, he chastises his fellow townspeople for their pettiness: “Harvey Merrick wouldn’t have given one sunset over your marshes for all you’ve got put together, and you know it. It’s not for me to say why, in the inscrutable wisdom of God, a genius should ever have been called from this place of hatred and bitter waters.”⁴⁵

Hateful and bitter though such descriptions are, there is a kind of pleasant familiarity in them as they fit perfectly into what Tony Hilfer has described, following Carl Van Doren, as the “revolt from the village” of authors like Sinclair Lewis (whose *Gopher Prairie* is mentioned above), Edgar Lee Masters, and Sherwood Anderson. Cather’s early work, particularly that of *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of stories, fits squarely within this designation.

However, as I have begun to show, assigning this kind of consistency to Cather is risky business indeed. If we return to *My Ántonia*, the placement of value seems to have shifted significantly. It is no longer heroic in this novel to champion art above all things, and the attitude toward Black Hawk, Nebraska (as Red Cloud is reimagined in *Ántonia*), is no longer one of haughty disdain. In fact, that attitude seems to receive a direct repudiation in the character of Ántonia’s father, Mr. Shimerda. The narrator’s initial description of the man contains all the hallmarks that would typically describe a Cather hero or heroine: “He looked at us understandingly, then took grandmother’s hand and

bent over it. I noticed how white and well-shaped his own hands were. They looked calm, somehow, and skilled.” “Everything,” the narrator concludes some lines later, “about this old man was in keeping with his dignified manner” (25). But this is not the story of the sensitive European man, and Mr. Shimerda commits suicide, unable to summon the pioneer spirit and crippled by the weight of his homesickness. If *My Ántonia* had been one of Cather’s early works, the story might have ended here, the sensitive European defeated by the smallness of the small town. But as Jim Burden reminds the reader at different points throughout the text, Ántonia’s Case is not “Paul’s Case” and Mr. Shimerda’s Funeral is not “The Sculptor’s Funeral.” What artist, after all, could make the philistine’s pronouncement that “I got ‘Robinson Crusoe’ and tried to read, but his life on the island seemed dull compared with ours” (83)? Shouldn’t the artist always want to escape his or her provincial backwater for Crusoe’s island, particularly for Defoe’s rendering of it?

These counterpoints exist throughout Cather’s career. Hermione Lee and Janis Stout have drawn attention to *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart* (1934) as two sides of the same coin, the latter heroine’s failure seemingly coming from the same source as the first’s success. The inherent oxymoron in the “glories of war” is discussed above in relation to Hemingway. But Mr. Shimerda’s case opens up some more destabilizing counterpoints, putting in to question the very firmness of Cather’s own position. The sensitive artist, Mr. Shimerda serves to remind us, is not always the tragic hero.

A similar reversal occurs between “A Wagner Matinée” (1905) and the later novel *My Mortal Enemy*. In “A Wagner Matinée,” the narrator and main character Clark

Carpenter has moved to Boston from his boyhood Red Willow County, Nebraska. He receives a letter from one of his uncles announcing that his Aunt Georgiana, a Boston native who has moved out west, will be coming east to claim a small inheritance from one of her dead relatives. In Clark's early days, this aunt brought her Bostonian refinement to Nebraska, teaching the young boy about Shakespeare and opera. In the story's present day, Clark plans to return the favor with a Wagner matinée on his aunt's return to Boston. But the thirty years away have changed her. She doesn't seem to remember Boston as a familiar place, and in the concert hall, her eyes have "the same aloofness [as those of] old miners who drift into the Brown hotel at Denver, their pockets full of bullion, their linen soiled, their haggard faces unshaven."⁴⁶ Her transformation to corn-husker's wife, it seems, is complete. During the "Prize Song," though, Clark sees tears streaming down his aunt's face, and he understands, "It never really died, then—the soul which can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only" (195). When at the final curtain Aunt Georgiana pleads, "I don't want to go, Clark, I don't want to go!", the young man knows that she refers not to the streets of Boston outside the concert hall but the soul-crushing fields of Red Willow County (196). As in many of Cather's early stories, the message is clear: the only chance in the world comes for those who can escape, and Aunt Georgiana's move from the height of civilization to the depths of savagery is a fate worse than death.

In *My Mortal Enemy*, the roles have switched. Now it is the traveler who wishes for home, and the homebound girl who has the moral upper hand. Myra Driscoll marries for love over and against the wishes of her uncle. As she and her husband, the German free-thinker Oswald Henshawe, run off to New York, John Driscoll disinherits his niece

and leaves his money to the Catholic church. By the time of the narration, Myra is established in New York, and her story in her hometown Parthia, IL, has become the stuff of legend. "I first met Myra Henshawe when I was fifteen," writes narrator Nellie Birdseye, "but I had known about her ever since I could remember anything at all. She and her runaway marriage were the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told in our family, on holidays or at family dinners."⁴⁷ One can imagine a similar grandiosity attached to Clark Carpenter of "A Wagner Matinée" as he has moved east, but in *My Mortal Enemy*, the myth surrounding Myra Henshawe is exposed time and again as a cruel misrepresentation of her actual dingy circumstances. The narrator sees Myra in her day-to-day activities, and after her first visit to New York, she feels a new sympathy for Myra's uncle. Comparing John Driscoll's lavish (Nebraskan) funeral to Myra's current (cosmopolitan) state, the narrator wonders, "Was it not better to get out of the world with such pomp and dramatic splendour than to linger on in it, having to take account of shirts and railway trains, and getting a double chin into the bargain?" (16). The illusion of Myra Henshawe has been cast off, and Nellie becomes aware how much of her own aimlessness has been guided by this illusion, by an inexplicable push to the east, for refinement, for dime-novel romance.

In the end, the bitterness belongs not to the woman who has stayed but to the woman who has escaped. Myra's famously enigmatic question calls upon all of this bitterness: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?" (78). Although the obvious candidate for this sobriquet is her occasionally unfaithful and flirtatious husband Oswald, the narrator Nellie never quite pins the title on him. She writes, "I had never heard a human voice utter such a terrible judgment upon all one hopes for." Coming back

to the comment now, she “understand[s] a little of what she meant, to sense it was with her. Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves ... against themselves and all their idolatries” (78). After Oswald’s profound humanization throughout the novel, one that must be much more humbling for his wife Myra than for the diminutive narrator, Nellie does not even suspect that such a grandiosely dismissive term could apply to him. Because her image of Myra is already so large, she must imagine that Myra’s very human bitterness must itself be a more cosmic rejection than a mere barb at her pathetic husband. Myra has risen to the greatest possible heights in the popular imagination of her town—has arguably achieved all that she set out for, has even earned the implicit forgiveness of her uncle—but in the end, the steadiness and dullness of the town win the day. Nellie is the one who tells the story, not Myra, because all that a person can be made out to be is ultimately greater than that flesh-and-blood person could ever be.

The most detailed reading of this short novel comes from Deborah Carlin, whose *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (1992) takes the daring tack of beginning with *My Mortal Enemy* and going through to the end of Cather’s career. For Carlin, the novel has long been considered a “disturbing and unsatisfactory” read for critics because of a “textual disjunction, felt rather than analyzed.”⁴⁸ Carlin roots this disturbance in the text’s problematization of reading itself, the text’s “multiplicity of misreadings,” and the difficulty thereby created in trying to generate a real meaning or moral.

This lack of clarity makes sense given the novel’s intense thematization of sparseness. It is a very short novel indeed that has fewer than 18,000 words.⁴⁹ Cather’s choice to publish *My Mortal Enemy* as a novel seems to further insist on the work’s

length and depth, particularly as other works of approximately the same length (“The Bohemian Girl” (1913) and “Old Mrs. Harris” (1932)) were included in short-story collections. The novel medium adds extra credence to the claims by Brown, Stout, Lee, and others that *My Mortal Enemy* is Cather’s “novel démeublé” fully realized. Although, as Carlin suggests, some readers wish that Cather had furnished *My Mortal Enemy* just a bit more, there can be no doubt that the short novel is one of Cather’s most experimental fictions, or at least the one tied most to an aesthetic theory.

Carlin’s study, however, gives us a way out of talking about the book in terms of the success and failure of Cather’s application of aesthetic principles. Carlin’s study instead asks us to focus on the character of Nellie Birdseye, the novel’s narrator. Because Nellie is such a retiring character, and because we know so little about her life, it is easy to forget the narrator’s framing presence in all the narrated events and perceptions. For Carlin, therefore, *My Mortal Enemy* is not about a Rosebud-like discovery of the enigmatic words in the title. It is instead the story of Nellie’s understanding and the maturity she gains in puncturing the illusion of Myra Henshawe.⁵⁰ Nellie will never achieve Myra’s legendary status, but she may at least be saved from the destructive effects of that legend.

Nellie’s ignorance creates an interesting conundrum, however. Of Cather’s first-person narrators (Jim Burden and Tom Outland being the other two from the novels), Nellie is also the least refined, the least mature, and the least intelligent. When Nellie and her Aunt Lydia come to New York, Myra takes it upon herself to improve the girl. During the Christmas season, says Nellie, Myra “said that meeting so many people would certainly improve my manners and my English. She hated my careless, slangy, Western

speech” (32). The reason Nellie lacks this refinement, in the later moment of part 2 as well, is that she has never left Parthia, IL, and so has not had Myra’s advantages, the advantages of Jim Burden the New York lawyer, or Tom Outland the innovative chemist. Such a homebound sense helps the reader to understand the size of Myra’s legend. To repeat a quotation from above, “I first met Myra Henshawe when I was fifteen, but I had known about her ever since I could remember anything at all” (3). Nellie “had known about her” because Myra had so absorbed the way her town discussed this larger-than-life woman, and this knowledge informed her as it formed her. Although she does not meet Myra until she is fifteen years old, she has already known Myra the whole time.

Nellie’s uncouthness, or at least her immaturity, creates a new problem when we link it back to the idea that she is narrating Cather’s most experimental work, her true “novel démeublé.” Here again, Cather has moved the target. Her modernist experiment, arguably her rejoinder to a generation that by 1926 had become enamored with Hemingway’s style of omission, comes not from the author of the hyperliterary essay but from the pen of a confused, provincial young woman, who would probably not understand the title of Cather’s essay, let alone its contents. As such, Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy* is a pastoral-primitive book, in which the unrefined character is the source of major innovation, in which the style is “démeublé” both by virtue of its aesthetic motivations and by the intellectual limitations of its narrator. And here, because Nellie is not one of the marginalized figures of primitivism, not quite “primitive” at all, *My Mortal Enemy* is better described as a modernized folk tale, the modernist experiment of an unexceptional Midwestern schoolteacher. As he comes to know her, Myra’s priest

observes to Nellie, “She’s not at all modern in her make-up, is she?” (76). Not so much, we might be compelled to answer, as Nellie herself.

Cather’s next novel, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), takes this divide to another extreme. The novel is spatio-temporally more distant from Cather’s early-century Nebraska than any work of hers to date. In this novel, French clergyman Jean Marie Latour comes to the southwestern United States shortly after the Mexican-American War to begin the work of Christianizing the Native Americans and Mexicans displaced by war. In a letter to the editor of the *Commonweal*, Cather explains the book’s personal and historical origins, but when she turns to the book itself, her comments have most to do with style: “I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment.” She compares this style of writing to early church frescoes, “something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition.”⁵¹ This language of “without” and “with none” should remind us again of Cather’s “démouillé” aesthetic, as should the “style of legend,” which is not only without embellishment but often without a discernible author.

In other words, Cather attempts to create a style of stylelessness, a style that is no style at all. David Stouck points to exactly this contrast as he suggests that the novel “was written with an ease and flawlessness that few books ever achieve; yet in no other novel does Willa Cather so constantly draw the reader’s attention to the book’s form and to the particular style she has adopted.”⁵² The distance from authorship, the distance from Willa Cather as author, with which she had been working in all her first-person narratives achieves another degree of remove here. In creating the style of legend, Cather achieves her most complete disappearing act, an almost authorless text, and yet this very

accomplishment emphasizes the author's stylistic achievement, turning stylelessness into one of the most coveted styles of all.

The contrast is doubly emphasized when we consider that Cather was performing this stylistic feat on her most "démouillé" stage. In the first pages of the novel, the Vicar Apostolic is lost "somewhere in central New Mexico." The problem in trying to navigate this uncertain location, the very thing that makes it uncertain, is that "the country in which he found himself was so featureless—or rather, that it was crowded with features, all exactly alike."⁵³ As with the style of the novel, the region's main feature is its featurelessness. In this sense, the New Mexico desert provides precisely the "room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended" (837). In a place with no distraction, with only a few human beings, the basic emotional interactions of people take on a cosmic significance that the realist novel, just as the realistic world we live in, is too busy, too furnished, to see.

Although this was Cather's first novel set entirely in the Southwest, and the only mid-19th-century novel she would write until her last, the region had been playing a significant role in her fiction for over a decade before. Both *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *The Professor's House* (1925) feature substantive visits to the Southwest, to visit a civilization much older than Father Latour's: the Cliff-Dwellers or, as they are called in *Song of the Lark*, the "Ancient People." In both novels, an exceptional protagonist feels a special kinship with the extinct civilizations that once peopled the cliffs in the American Southwest. These extinct civilizations have left only their craftsmanship behind and merely being among these ruins (which itself seems the wrong word) has an almost oracular effect.

If *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is Cather's ultimate experiment in the atemporal, the Cliff-Dweller scenes show that this has been a persistent concern for much longer before. After Thea's floundering in Chicago's music world, she retreats to the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona. When Thea arrives, she starts moving back in time very quickly. By the end of the first short chapter, "She was getting back to the earliest sources of gladness that she could remember."⁵⁴ As if cementing those "earliest sources," the text adds, "Darkness had once again the sweet wonder that it had in childhood" (272). But Arizona is not Thea's home. In fact, it is not anyone's home anymore, except for a small group of Navajo who live at the base of the mountain. Therefore, Thea's backward movement cannot stop at her own childhood but must in a sense inhabit the dead city. Although Thea has been engrossed in music for many years, she finds something much more primal among the former Cliff-Dwellers: "She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged" (275). This "sensation" is that deferential bowing to the past, a stoic renunciation of the modern world, but by 1915, it was already probably a little dull.

The difference comes in the fact that Thea's focus turns forward shortly after she arrives at the Peaks. This is not a nostalgia trip, and even though she is charmed by the "timid, nest-building folk, like the swallows" (277), Thea goes to this ancient, folk place in order to find modern answers. "All her life she had been hurrying, and sputtering," thinks Thea, resting on one of the rocks, "as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up" (275). It would seem rather an odd move, then, to catch up at a place where there is no time at all. Thea comes to the Peaks not to retreat from the

modern but to find the tools to cope with it. She retreats to the ancient place in order to do modern things. Thea's belief that "The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past" is therefore a contradiction (282). On the one hand, the Cliff-Dwellers have linked her to something beyond herself and her own moment, have made her part of a long history and prehistory. On the other hand, though, a "lengthened past" signifies a maturity, a longer experience of the contemporary world, and the fortifications to deal with it. Thus at the moment she identifies most closely with the Ancient People, she makes her own decision: "Thea at last made up her mind what she was going to try to do in the world, and that she was going to Germany to study without further loss of time. Only by the meanest chance had she ever got to Panther Cañon" (282). Such a juxtaposition no longer seems so strange when we consider that the world is not only a very ancient place, Panther Cañon is apparently a very modern one.

In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland is much more interested in preserving the historical authenticity of his Southwestern cliff-dwellers. He and traveling companion Rodney Blake find an abandoned cliff city, full of pristine artifacts touched only by the sun. As it becomes very clear that the artifacts of the Cliff City could be turned in to tremendous amounts of cash for the discoverer, Tom and Henry become protective: "We didn't want to make our discovery any more public than necessary. We were reluctant to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar curiosity."⁵⁵ The language of "exposure" and "vulgarity" echoes James Clifford's insistence on the purity of ethnographic artifacts. As I argue in an earlier chapter, just as minstrel performers fashioned themselves as the true "negroes," so too did anthropologists and the discoverers of these ancient artifacts fashion themselves as the true protectors of

authenticity. The irony runs throughout “Tom Outland’s Story” as well, wherein the man most adamant about preserving the authenticity of the Cliff City (which, to preserve its authenticity, must remain hidden) is also the man who tries to show it to the entire nation by way of the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

Like Thea Kronborg’s Panther Cañon, however, Tom Outland’s Cliff City is not a place that exists exclusively in the past. Because “Tom Outland’s Story” is such a compelling piece of *The Professor’s House*, the “turquoise set in silver,” it is easy to disconnect it from the rest of the narrative and the rest of what we are told about Tom Outland. The fact that the section was written well before the other two helps to emphasize its separation from them. But in the present of the novel, Tom Outland has been long dead. He lives on in the professor’s memory and through the money that a patent of his has generated for Rosamond St. Peter, the professor’s daughter and Tom Outland’s fiancée before his death in the war.

Though Tom Outland is known to Cather’s readers as the discoverer of the Cliff City and as the apple of Godfrey St. Peter’s eye, he is known to the world of the novel as the inventor of the Outland engine. Rosamond’s husband, Louie Marsellus, explains, “Before [Tom] dashed off to the front, this youngster had discovered the principle of the Outland vacuum, worked out the construction of the Outland engine that is revolutionizing aviation” (30). But the philistine Louie cannot appreciate the design, lamenting only that “Outland got nothing out of it but death and glory,” as if an invention that does not make money is scarcely worth the effort (31). Trying to right this wrong in the only way they know how, the Marselluses build a house, which they call Outland, “as a sort of memorial to him” (31).

Rosamond and Louis Marsellus cannot appreciate the engine in the way that it should be appreciated, as the artwork that it is. Only we, who have access to Tom Outland's own words, can get close. With the language that Tom uses in his narrative, a narrative written before his discovery of the Outland engine, it seems almost as if he finds the invention written in the cliffs themselves. "It all hung together," he writes, "seemed to have a kind of composition" (179-180). He ascribes an authorial control to the city itself: "they hadn't built their town in a hurry. Everything proved their patience and deliberation" (190). And in his pitch to the Smithsonian, Tom says, "There is unquestionably a distinct feeling for design in what you call the Cliff City" (197). In Tom's constant insistence on plan and design, we hear the language of scientific discovery, and some of the ways that scientific discovery overlaps with artistic discovery. No wonder, then, that Godfrey St. Peter feels closest to Augusta, the family seamstress, who likes nothing better than to work with her "patterns" (8, 13, 14).

Cather's work with the Cliff Dwellers has been the subject of a number of critical studies. The best known of these comes in Walter Benn Michaels's study of race and diversity discourses *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995). For Michaels, Cather's insistence on the extinct Indian populations of the cliffs is a way of asserting the modern American identity, one rooted genealogically in those populations but separate from them.⁵⁶ Deborah Lindsay Williams, following Michaels, emphasizes the disappearance of these Indian populations: "the mesa becomes the *tabula rasa* on which [Tom] can write anything he wants."⁵⁷ For both authors, the Indian extinction leaves a void into which characters like Tom Outland and Thea Kronborg can step without the baggage of their own civilizations. For Williams in particular, the artifacts

from the cliffs can only be appreciated by a select few, because they require a kind of creative understanding, one that can see the beauty in timelessness and can understand the ruins as pieces of their own struggle for expression.⁵⁸

My own reading is indebted to these readings, and I would push them a step further by taking their emphasis off of Native Americanness altogether and projecting that emphasis on to Cather's project more generally. The cliffs are certainly spurs to creativity, but they are also spurs to the depersonalized aesthetic that runs through Cather's texts from *O Pioneers!* onward. Where Michaels and Williams suggest that the Native Americans allow for the projection of a new identity or the assertion of a new creativity, I would suggest instead that the native populations and their ancient civilizations relativize the very notion of identity itself, allowing for a kind of depersonalized creativity, one that is not quite anonymity but something closer to what Eliot would refer to as the intersection of tradition and the individual talent. Like Cather's novels themselves, the cliff cities are able to exist outside of any particular contexts, and only those who take the trouble to find them will find miniature civilizations, but those readers will be untroubled by the disappeared presence of Cather herself.

Like Thea, Tom Outland finds a special kind of solace in the Southwest, but he uses this solace to do undeniably modern things. Cather does the same with the timeless spaces of the Mid- and Southwest. Hers is an ancient or backward subject, but this very backwardness becomes the raw material of her literary experimentation. Like Tom Outland, she finds the patterns and the designs in these seemingly haphazard places, without which she could not fuel the Cather engine itself, from which there is no sweeter reward than death and glory. When Cather wrote in 1921 that the story "is finished, and

that no new story worth to take its place has yet begun,” she was not referring to the Indians but to the Nebraska pioneers in “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle.”⁵⁹ This, too, was rather disingenuous on her part, because she was the one who had been creating the story all along.

Conclusion: Willa Cather D  meubl  e

The difficulty in characterizing Cather, then, comes from her break with the regionalist mode. If she were a good regionalist or local-colorist, she would go back to Red Cloud or somewhere else in Nebraska and find all that modern civilization had lost. If she were a good anti-regionalist (in the “revolt from the village” mode), she’d still go back to Red Cloud, but all she’d ever find there would be bitterness and closed-mindedness. In fact, when Cather goes back to Red Cloud—or to Moonstone, or Santa Fe, or Gore, or Quebec—she finds something much more difficult to conceptualize: nothing. Wherever she starts, and she always does seem to start *somewhere*, that place is very quickly beside the point. Although stories like “A Wagner Matin  e” and *My Mortal Enemy* would seem to have the city and the country in common, they don’t need either extreme to make their larger points. We pair the two stories not because they discuss “small-town disappointment” or “big-city disappointment,” but because they concern themselves, quite simply, with *disappointment*.

Cather’s “novel demeubl  e” would give authors a bare stage. None of the regional shorthand that said Midwesterners look you in the eye or that New Englanders are cold. Cather wanted to push beyond the folk and the regions they inhabited to move toward something much larger, something universal. Cather’s great hero Tom Outland is of

uncertain origin. He might or might not be from a small town in New Mexico, but he reaches a maximum of human potential at his least rooted moment: reading Virgil in the original Latin on the ancient, abandoned city of some Native American population. *Here* is the man for our time, because he is the man of no time in particular, freighted with no particular historical baggage other than his intelligence and sense of adventure. Tom Outland is the real American, the one who will fight and die for his country, who will contribute to the advancement of science, and whose name will be sullied by the money-grubbers who carry on his name in search of gain. And worst of all, they'll probably fill that new house, Outland, with all kinds of tacky furniture.

Although Cather was openly contemptuous of the new mass media, she was nonetheless a kind of high-art proponent for its leveling of audience. Her difficult style was a barrier of entry in a way, but her heroes, just as her readers, were not necessarily Nebraskans, they were Americans, all of whom must've come from a small town, any small town, just like she did. And this meant that the next Tom Outland, or the next Willa Cather, could come from anywhere, regardless of origin. But, as Cather's strict guardianship of movie and radio rights reminds us, it also meant that many millions, those who were tuning in to the same programs every night and going to the same movies, had no distinction at all. Their specific regions became mere "small towns"; their holdover accents curious aberrations from general American; and each region's folk a collection of "good American folks."

¹ Willa Cather, "My First Novels—There Were Two," in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America), 963.

² Garland, *Crumbling Idols*, 138. See introduction section "The Folk and Folklorization" for more in Garland.

³ Garland, 60.

⁴ Garland, 71.

⁵ This may also be the appropriate rejoinder to Walter Benn Michaels's argument in *Our America*, that the reclamation of cultural identity requires a reassertion of racial essentialism on a par with the most vehemently racist ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this concept does make a kind of sense with Garland's reading (the sense, in *Crumbling Idols*, that "the negro" will become useful to culture when he shares his pure negroness), it also requires a non-otherized center, a group from whom all the rest are diverse. With Garland's long list, culture essentialism is all about difference but of a much less hierarchical variety. There is no standard, no center, so "difference" becomes less derogatory.

⁶ Cather, *O Pioneers!*, in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, 1.

⁷ Cather, "The Novel Demeuble," from *Not Under Forty*, in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, 837.

⁸ I am thinking in particular of the three major scholarly biographies to appear in the last twenty-five years: Hermione Lee's *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (1989) and Janis P. Stout's *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (2000).

⁹ Jo Ann Middleton, *Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹ E.K. Brown with Leon Edel, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Avon Books, 1953), 190.

¹² Middleton, 119.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ Merrill Maguire Skaggs, *Axes: Willa Cather and William Faulkner* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), xvi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

¹⁶ "The Art of Fiction, No. 12," *The Paris Review*, 1958, <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4954/the-art-of-fiction-no-12-william-faulkner>

¹⁷ Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (1918; reprint, New York: Bantam, 1994), 289.

¹⁸ Willa Cather, "Before Breakfast," in *Collected Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 397.

¹⁹ John N. Duvall, "Regionalism in American modernism," in Kalaidjian, *Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, 243.

²⁰ Hurston, *Mules and Men*, 1.

²¹ Duvall, 248.

²² Duvall, 248.

²³ In Frederick J. Hoffman's *The Modern Novel in America* (1951), the tandem is reproduced but with less thoughtful results. Hoffman concludes the chapter by contrasting Glasgow and Cather thus, "Unlike Miss Cather, whose artistic concern resulted mainly in a retreat from her subject, Miss Glasgow is too much with hers. Pruning and arranging, grouping and ungrouping, always anxiously directing our attitudes toward it, she too often defeats her most conscientiously attended purpose" (81-82). It is a different age of criticism that comments so willingly on a book's structural or artistic failings in this a way, and it is tough to miss the gender bias that turns both novelists into floral arrangers with "pruning and arranging, grouping and ungrouping."

Hoffman tips his hand a bit further with his conclusion that “With the same kind of intelligence, Mrs. Wharton was able, in her occasional successes, to achieve a sounder and much more valid work” (82) as the Cather/Glasgow chapters give way to another on Gertrude Stein.

It seems to me that much of the confusion in Cather scholarship from exactly this mid-century preference for certain types of femininity over others. As these books suggest, Cather has never been outside the canon, but she has been implicitly marginalized by critics’ choice of literary ancestors. Cather’s first novel, *Alexander’s Bridge*, is seen as a paltry imitation of James and Wharton, both in substance and in style. It is not until Cather elects Sarah Orne Jewett as her new artistic patron saint that she produces the great works for which she is known. But the alacrity with which criticism accepts this literary lineage should make us wary. Wharton is always paired with James and thus given a kind of masculine (or at least a sexless) insurance policy, and Stein has no female contemporaries, whereas the mention of Jewett’s name always conjures something much more particularly feminine and thus marginalized.

When Alice Walker went in search of Zora Neale Hurston’s grave in the 1970s, she went to reclaim an author who was dismissed from the canon for being too feminine, and not racially political enough. Walker was to bring Hurston’s work back into a more receptive moment, a moment when feminism could mean a celebration of the feminine, and anti-racism could be determined by contours other than the color line. Cather was not so fortunate. She was not to have an Alice Walker because the need for one was not so clear. Cather’s books remained in print, she was lionized in scholarly monographs and archives, and not only was her grave adequately marked in Jaffrey, NH, her birthplace was marked in Gore, VA, and her childhood home and all the relevant places of her girlhood were marked in Red Cloud, Nebraska. Cather was never to have Hurston’s type of rebirth, and in fact her very canonization has limited the way we read and understand her works.

²⁴ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of American Prose Literature* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), 248.

²⁵ Kazin, 248.

²⁶ Ellen Glasgow, *Virginia*, in *Works IX* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1938), 3.

²⁷ Cather, *Pioneers*, 1.

²⁸ Walt Whitman, “Pioneers! O pioneers!,” in *The Complete Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1975), 257.

²⁹ James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers* (1823) is the obvious counterpoint in providing a title that may be descriptive of its characters but is not necessarily alluding to anything outside itself.

³⁰ Cather, “Novel D  meubl  ,” 834.

³¹ Janis Stout, *Willa Cather: The Writer and Her World* (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia, 2000), 259.

³² Ernest Hemingway, “The Art of the Short Story,” in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 9.

³³ Hemingway, “Art,” 11.

³⁴ Hemingway, to Edmund Wilson, 25 Nov 1923, from *Selected Letters 1917-1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Scribner, 1981), 105.

³⁵ Schwind, 55.

³⁶ Stout, 181, 180.

³⁷ Hemingway, 3.

³⁸ Cather, 835.

³⁹ Ralph Ellison would say of Hemingway, "I read him to learn his sentence structure and how to organize a story. I guess many young writers were doing this, but I also used his description of hunting when I went into the fields the next day. I had been hunting since I was eleven, but no one had broken down the process of wing-shooting for me and it was from reading Hemingway that I learned to lead a bird. When he describes something in print, believe him; believe him when he describes the process of art in terms of baseball or boxing; he's been there." ("The Art of Fiction, *Shadow and Act*, 168) Whether or not such a claim is literally true, it is certainly in line with Hemingway's self-image and very much beside the point for Cather. If we turn to Hemingway for the way to lead a bird, we most certainly do not turn to Cather for the best way to raise a barn or for the workings of the Outland engine (whatever that is). Although Steven Trout's "Rebuilding the Outland Engine" (*Cather Studies* 6) attempts to take the engine seriously, the essay is forced to spend the bulk of its time figuring out what the engine is and what it is supposed to do. Hemingway and Cather both might be said to teach us how to live, but Hemingway's emphasis is much more on "living" while Cather's is on "life."

⁴⁰ As I attempt to show in the next chapter, her antipathy to these media was ironic because it was in these media, particularly radio, that her attitude toward the folk saw its fullest realization.

⁴¹ Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: literary celebrity in the modern United States, 1880-1980* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 5.

⁴² Cather archives, Hurtubise, 1942.

⁴³ Willa Cather, "To Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant," August 16, 1946, *Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, edited by Andrew Jewell and Janis P. Stout (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 662.

⁴⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 9.

⁴⁵ Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral," *Collected Stories*, 211.

⁴⁶ Cather, "A Wagner Matinee," *Collected Stories*, 193.

⁴⁷ Cather, *My Mortal Enemy* (1926; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1992), 3.

⁴⁸ Deborah Carlin, *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 58.

⁴⁹ *My Ántonia* has about 83,000, and the much shorter *O Pioneers!* has about 56,000. Most of Cather's novels fall within this range. *A Lost Lady* (ca. 34,000) and *My Mortal Enemy* are shorter, and *The Song of the Lark* is her longest at about 151,000. For a quick reference, *My Mortal Enemy* is a bit less than 1.5 times the length of this chapter.

⁵⁰ If this sounds like a Henry James novel, that is no coincidence. Critics from Brown forward have described *Alexander's Bridge*, Cather's first novel, as her Jamesian/Whartonian mistake, and from a content perspective, this is certainly plausible. However, from a style perspective, Cather never lost the Jamesian insistence on free indirect discourse or on understanding and consciousness as central terms in any

narrative. After 1921, as her stories and novels become more particularly focused on a single character, one might even say she is more in James's debt than ever.

⁵¹ Cather, "On 'Death Comes for the Archbishop,'" in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, 958.

⁵² David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 129.

⁵³ Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1992), 17.

⁵⁴ Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1916; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1990), 272.

⁵⁵ Willa Cather, *The Professor's House* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1990), 183.

⁵⁶ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 35-38.

⁵⁷ Deborah Williams, "Fragments of their Desire," in *Cather Studies* 9, 167.

⁵⁸ Michelle E. Moore takes a different tack, putting Cather's work in line with long-forgotten realist novelist Henry Blake Fuller, whose novel *The Cliff-Dwellers* (1893) operates on an analogy between the ancient civilizations in the Southwest and the modern civilization in Fuller's contemporary Chicago. Though Moore's article does not make precise book-historical links between Cather and Fuller's novels, it is certainly plausible that the young Cather would've encountered Fuller, particularly in her capacity as magazine editor. If there is a link between the authors, though, it is more likely one of critique. Fuller's portrayal of a particular Chicago apartment building as its own cliff civilization would certainly have chafed with Cather's sense of the cliff civilizations, which are exempt from much of the triviality that overfurnishes the realist novel, of which Fuller's is a prime example. Fuller's wish to give a "simple succession of brief episodes in the lives of the Cliff-dwellers" is quite different from Cather's, which is operating on a different time scale (5).

⁵⁹ Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, 7.

Chapter 4

Radio's Modern Folks: From Regions to Regionlessness

Like any star-struck tourist worth his salt, I visited one of the big studio lots during a 2007 trip to Los Angeles. I chose Warner Bros., because I knew that it had been the site of some of my favorite classics, including *The Maltese Falcon* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. But the real bits of interest came later in the tour, those parts of the lot that function as outdoor sets: the New York Street, the French and Midwestern streets, and the wooded back lot used for jungle and forest scenes. The lot had not always looked like this. Until 2004, there was another set, called “Laramie Street,” that had been used to film the studio’s Wild West scenes, both for film and television. By the time I took my tour in 2007, however, Laramie Street was no more: the glory days of such TV shows as *Little House on the Prairie* and *Cheyenne* were long gone, and the Western set had fallen into disuse and disrepair.

This is probably not surprising. What is even less surprising is what replaced it: Warner Village, half a street of green, neatly trimmed lawns separating the lots of about eight two-story houses. The Warner Brothers change is clearly based on the idea that movies and shows now have to come to the viewer, rather than the viewer to the movies and shows. The new set projects a geographical realignment that speaks to the folklorization of the “average” American type that I have described in the previous chapters. In this new folklorization, prompted by a shifting modernity, the movie subject is no longer “out there” in Laramie but has “come home” to Warner Village. Instead of some faraway wild west, an affluent suburban ideal reflects the studio’s presumed target demographic, one now positioned as “all Americans,” not least because of its non-

specificity. The change squares perfectly with how “America” is represented on the popular screen: the new, imagined public is being represented back to itself, and it then makes obvious sense to represent their small towns, their quiet streets, back to them. It doesn’t matter that the Warner Brothers lot already has a small-town set in its Midwest street, nor that most people don’t live in places like this. TV and movie listings cannot help but suggest that the American public loves to see this version of “itself” on screen.

But if we pause for a moment and apply this logic to Laramie Street, it doesn’t quite seem to work anymore. It’s not as if in 2004, many Americans had just moved from Wild West saloons to suburban homes. In fact, it is probably safe to say that no American had any real conception of what this “Wild West” would have been like without its codified representation in books, radio, television, and film. As we shall see, the same could be said of “everyone’s” home town in the suburbs.

There are at least two potential conclusions we could draw from this. The first is that we perceive the Wild West set as an imagined scene and Warner Village set as a realistic one, but actually, both sets are equally imagined. If the Village set has a clearer visual antecedent for some of its viewers, that doesn’t prevent a viewer from suspending disbelief: in fact, it might make him or her more prone to do so. This conclusion doesn’t require Baudrillard as its basis: it’s built into Hollywood’s very conception of its own mission, concretized as that mission is by the name “dream factory.”

But the second conclusion is potentially more interesting. Simply put, the way American viewers imagine themselves in relation to cultural objects has changed. It seems an obvious commonplace that we want to see ourselves represented onscreen today, but as Laramie Street reminds us, the “we” is subject to change. As the previous

chapters have shown, there was a time when Americans saw their purest selves elsewhere: in the forest and on the prairie with Natty Bumppo, on the city streets with Ragged Dick, on the Mississippi with Huck Finn, or in the Wild West with John Wayne.

I call this change the migration of the American folk. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as I have attempted to show above, the American “folk,” even when it was not labeled with this exact term, was elsewhere. Usually projected from the pens of urban white authors, that folk found itself in local-color fiction, projected onto the prairies or into factories, or projected into the bodies and voices of racial others. In the early part of the twentieth century, however, the folk had begun to hollow out, to detach from its supposed regional authenticity. As in the works of Willa Cather, the folk was something much more generalized, more American than regional, but also something filled with less specific content. By the late 1950s, after the end of radio’s “golden years” in 1953, the American folk had come much nearer to an imagined version of “us” than of “them.” This new folk was equally mythic, equally invented by the needs of modernity, but it purported to be *here*, where “we” are, rather than *there*, where they, those uncorrupted by civilization’s mixed blessing, lived authentic lives unperturbed.

In this chapter, I want to focus on the role radio played in this migration from *there* to *here*, particularly on its significance at the apotheosis of the transitional moment in the 1930s and 1940s. Amid this transition, we shall see, the old and new modes of national self-imagining were held in constant tension. Dialect and local color remained forces in popular culture: on radio, *Amos ’n’ Andy*, the blackface comedy, was on for twenty-one years, and *Lum ’n’ Abner*, about two Southern rustics, was on for twenty. But at the same time, attempts at standardization were underway: H.L. Mencken’s *The*

American Language (1936, 4th ed.) was attempting a synthesized portrait of the language. When Mencken refers to the “*Volkssprache*,” his version of the *Volk* is the “unaccented” American English that has come to us through newscasters and announcers as “General American.”¹ These instances and many others besides pulled the American folk, and American self-identification along with it, in two contradictory directions: on the one hand, toward that older moment of regional idiosyncrasy, and on the other, the newer moment of regionlessness.

Radio is the ideal medium in which to study this tension as the pivot around which the migration traveled. Indeed, the popular broadcast radio of the 1930s and 1940s achieved a level of popular usage that has not been seen by any major medium since that time. According to a survey conducted at the National Research Center at the University of Chicago in 1946, 91% of households in the United States had a radio in working order.² This number becomes even more significant when we consider that there were only four major networks for much of this period: NBC Red (later NBC), NBC blue (ABC as of 1945), CBS, and MBS (Mutual Broadcasting System), and most of the major programs appeared on NBC Red and CBS. Even if three of these four networks are still in existence, they do not hold the unique position of “national” network that they once had.

In addition to its unique national reach, the medium of radio also touted itself as containing all the media that preceded it, a claim similar to the one that television would make from the early 1950s onward and that the web makes today. The *Columbia Workshop* (1936 – 1947) and the *NBC University Theater* (1948 – 1951) presented classic works of literature, the latter with short analyses from “noted” literary critics and

college professors. The *Lux Radio Theater* (1934 – 1955), one of radio's greatest successes, offered hour-long adaptations of films not available in some of the country's more remote areas. Orson Welles's *Mercury Theater on the Air* (later *Campbell Playhouse*) (1938 – 1942) did both and added adaptations of Broadway's most popular shows. Although the other media have persisted in the popular imagination in a way that radio has not, it is nonetheless clear that radio was at the center of the mediascape in the 1930s and 1940s, with a particular prominence during World War II.

Finally, and perhaps obviously, radio is the most critically neglected form of mass media in the twentieth century. David Foster Wallace represents a popular consensus when, after discussing radio's self-referentiality, he confesses, "But once television introduces the element of watching, and once it informs an economy and culture like radio never could have, the referential stakes go way up."³ Given radio's limited role today, especially as the serial-narrative form it was in the 1930s and 1940s, it can be difficult to imagine a time when its cultural stakes were high or when mass media presented an alternative to the relentlessly visual. Aside from a small run of scholarly books (which I address below) published by the University of Minnesota Press in the past fifteen years and one particularly remarkable study (Neil Verma's *Theater of the Mind* in 2012), the major work on the history of radio remains Erik Barnouw's three-volume work *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, published from 1966 to 1970. But even this monumental work, still a touchstone for the history of the internal politics of broadcast networks and radio's broader significance to national politics, has been out of print for many years. In fact, the two Barnouw books that remain in print deal with the media that occupy much more critical attention, television and film. Barnouw's best-

known and best-selling works are *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television* (1990) and *Documentary: A History of Non-Fiction Film* (1993). This neglect has been largely due to the fact that radio plays and shows were difficult to access: most were stored on CDs or tapes (or worse) in libraries and museums, and many were believed to have been lost altogether, one of the perils of working in a medium that did not record its shows with any regularity until the late 1940s. Now, with a new forum for radio enthusiasts and collectors (not to mention librarians and museum curators), there exists an overwhelming amount of “new” radio material on the internet.

Radio's Discovery of the Average Listener

In the terms I have laid out in earlier chapters of this dissertation, radio provides a logical, if at times ambiguous, conclusion to my discussion of the migration of the American folk and the ways that modern media use and hollow out that “folk.” “Modern,” in this case, refers to the medium: radio, cinema, television, these are necessarily modern media, produced by technological developments in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. “Folk,” in the case of radio, is far more complicated. In his first autobiography, *Treadmill to Oblivion* (1954), comedian Fred Allen writes with typical biting incisiveness, “The coming of radio, and his access to the microphone, resulted in the average man’s discovery of his ego... Today, the Man in the Street does his broadcast hiding in a doorway. He is afraid to show himself in public. The minute his microphone is sighted a motley throng is on him.”⁴ The radio, Allen seems to suggest, was a popular medium in a newly literal way, “thronged” by the very populous that was once hidden in a darkened theater, at home, or separate from mass

media altogether in the strongholds of American provincial authenticity. Radio had the intimacy of printed media alongside the glamor of film, and its barrier for entry (even if only a brief entry) was much less imposing. The man-on-the-street interviews and call-in shows enabled a participation that was impossible in film and print and impossibly disorienting on the dramatic stage.

But much more bound up with the question of the folk is Allen's suggestion of "the average man's discovery of his ego." Who is the average man, and what is his relationship to the folk? For authors like H.L. Mencken, the average man *is* the folk: "In place of the discordant local dialects of all the other major countries, including England, we have a general *Volkssprache* for the whole nation."⁵ This *Volkssprache*, this folk speech, is the speech of the entire nation, and Mencken himself spent twenty years researching and revising this single linguistic standard, this "American language." For Allen, and likely for Mencken, radio represented the averageness of its perceived audience over the airwaves. Americans heard themselves for the first time, and ironically, this arbitrary "average" became a universal standard, stamping out the local idiosyncrasies on which it was supposed to thrive. Here was American speech widely available for the first time, and Americans everywhere wondered if they spoke averagely enough. Susan Douglas writes of the new pronunciation consciousness of the radio era, "prompting them to turn a book like *Thirty Thousand Words Mispronounced* into a best-seller and to flock to correspondence courses on how to speak."⁶ "Standard" pronunciations and General American were on the way.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to say that that American radio voices were completely standardized. Even before *Amos 'n' Andy*, some of the earliest shows on radio

were minstrel shows.⁷ Moreover, most of the comedy shows traded in the dialects that many hosts brought with them from vaudeville. The most famous of these is the “Allen’s Alley” segment of *The Fred Allen Show*, which featured Allen’s short conversations with the residents of the alley, who included a blowhard senator from the deep south, a New-England rustic farmer, and a Brooklyn-Jewish woman who couldn’t always keep English and Yiddish straight. The popular Western programs of the 1950s brought with them a Wild-West twang familiar from the Wild West shows of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mystery and crime programs, regardless of setting, usually had their criminals speaking a hyperbolic Brooklynese, which, if *The Sopranos* is any indication, continues to communicate toughness and criminality to this day.

As I suggest in the chapter on O’Neill and the blackface minstrel, these dialects may be easily recognizable as those of stage types, inherited from the popular and vaudeville stages, but they borrow a sense of “authenticity” from contemporary discourses of folklore. In most cases, these dialect voices are the work of voice actors who must learn to speak what seem the authentic locutions of a region or class. Even if Bert Williams was, to borrow Louis Chude-Sokei’s title, “the last ‘darkey,’” his attempts to learn “Negro English” were by no means the last such attempts by African-American actors to learn the language it was imagined that they spoke anyway. According to Erik Barnouw, the experience was nearly universal for black actors on radio:

Negroes who applied for auditions found only occasional servant roles, given to those who sounded sufficiently ‘Negro.’ ‘Wonderful’ Smith, who eventually acquired a role on the Red Skelton series, said: ‘I had difficulty sounding as Negroid as they expected.’ Johnny Lee, who became a comedy-lawyer on *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, said: ‘I had to learn to talk as white people believed Negroes talked.’ According to actress Maidie Norman, ‘I have been told repeatedly that I don’t sound like a Negro.’⁸

What becomes clear from these accounts is that even for those ways of speaking not classified as “General American,” an equally stringent set of standards still applied. If these standards are not supported by quite the academic rigor that seems to go into Mencken’s work and that of other philologists, its real-world repercussions are still largely the same. The standard is to be reproduced *as if it were* a quantifiable whole, *as if it were* supported by documentary evidence from linguists and philologists.

These two modes of speech, the *Volkssprache* of the general American and the inflected stage dialect of Vaudeville types, are the main cues identifying the “folk” on radio. The average man was relatively new, and its historical legacy is visible in Warner Village and in the glorification of the American suburb. The dialectical is much older, and is largely the inheritance of the nineteenth-century local-color and folklore traditions. What both have in common, though, is a tireless interest in the question, “Who are we?”, even when the more obvious question in the case of the heavily accented would seem to be, “Who are *they*?” To restate the claim with which I began, this overlap between the new and old modes of self-imagining, between the folklorization of different groups, was acted out in the aural medium of radio, a “bare stage” on a level of which Willa Cather could never have dreamed.

Radio equally emphasized both modes of speech, the average and the inflected, which can also be mapped as the “national” and the regional. Because of the extreme popularity of both of them, the privileged mode is never clearly identified. For Michele Hilmes, the use of minstrel and dialect characters “points to central sites of tension within U.S. culture, as the culturally undesirable was projected onto an easily identifiable, culturally devalued minority group.”⁹ While there is a certain undeniable truth to this

claim—it is after all implied in the concept of “unaccented” or “General” American—it does not tell the whole story.

I would argue instead that radio discourse did not merely model racial and cultural difference, as Hilmes suggests, but rather provided listeners with a new way to understand themselves as part of a common listening audience. Radio, that is to say, produced a new public—one whose politics could be either exclusive or inclusive. Many of these contradictions and complexities are explored in Jason Loviglio’s unfortunately slim volume, *Radio’s Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (2005). For Loviglio, radio “helped produce a new kind of social space--the intimate public--in which the terms ‘public’ and ‘private’ came to represent a complex web of social performances perpetually in play rather than distinct and immutable categories.”¹⁰ Loviglio goes on to discuss Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats, a series of daytime soap operas, and the popular superhero show *The Shadow*, but the central example for this intimate public is the audience-participation show *Vox Pop*. We should be reminded here of Fred Allen’s scathing critique of the “Man in the Street” programs, but Loviglio’s reading is more nuanced:

the *Vox Pop* interview revealed a public mind overwhelmed by the blooming, buzzing confusion of public life and ruled by essentially private, psychological motivations. The manifest public--the man in the street--was, by itself, inscrutable. Solving the riddle of public opinion required the use of radio, a cultural apparatus that gathered ‘the people’ together into an unprecedented national audience and then gave it a public voice.¹¹

A dual act of representation and creation, *Vox Pop* showed Americans to themselves. Regardless of the various “unaccented” announcers who hosted the show from 1932 to 1948, the men and women on the street came from a variety of regions and social strata.

Whatever the claim General American had on the populace, there was no denying that the voices of the men on the street were those of actual general Americans.

The identification of audience and performer was not merely the province of non-fiction. In Fred Allen's "Town Hall News," a predecessor to today's late-show opening monologues, fictional characters and absurd scenes were created and dramatized. And even with this explicitly fictional frame, says Allen, "Organizations and people began to identify themselves in our version of the news and our office became a shrine for nondescript members of the legal profession, eager to sue us on behalf of their greasy clients."¹² Perhaps even more significant, the fictional events on a broadcast could take on real-life significance in a more symbolic register. During his famed public feud with Fred Allen, Jack Benny spars with his black butler Rochester, and Rochester's first punch knocks the effete Benny out cold. As Benny rose from his stupor, some in the South took to their pens: "Thousands of indignant persons below the Mason-Dixon Line wrote in to complain that permitting my Afro-American butler to punch me in the face was an attack on the white race and the dignity of the South."¹³ Even when listeners were not being identified by name, it seems, they were always being represented. Where listeners did not represent themselves, they chose approximate representatives.

If these two examples might be mobilized as instances of representative democracy, this is not mere coincidence. For Barnouw and Loviglio both, radio's innovations were born out of political exigencies of varying degrees. For Barnouw, these developments came just as much in form as in content: many of the technologies that made radio an increasingly dynamic form were pioneered at Democratic and Republican political conventions prior to each election. *Vox Pop* began the man-on-the-street

interview in 1932 to get the “average man’s” take on the presidential race between Roosevelt and Hoover. More and more, radio and television booths became fixtures of these primaries, and as with the war they had become so influential in documenting, radio broadcasters supplanted the newspapers as Americans’ primary news source.

As Loviglio suggests, radio was soon perceived as the fullest expression of the political body. In this sense, radio operates as a “metaphor for the populist sentiment that ‘the people’ were welcome anywhere in national life. The proliferation of ‘average’ voices on the air seemed to suggest that the people, in all their simplicity and all their diversity, were themselves embodiments of and continuous with that nation.”¹⁴ The reverse was true as well: if radio listeners were more convinced that they were welcome anywhere in national life, so too did they perceive the national in new places in their own lives.

Here, too, we see a split between the realistic and symbolic registers, this time in terms of national participation. On one level, radio encouraged its listeners to buy war bonds, to play a personal role in funding the wars overseas. On another level, though, the average man’s average life and average home were invested with a new national significance. The “fireside” implied in Roosevelt’s famous chats, after all, was not a literal one, and was certainly not his own either in Washington or in Hyde Park. But more than this, American averageness became the rubric, both social and political, by which Roosevelt’s fireside chats would measure national progress. Loviglio quotes a portion of the “Arsenal of Democracy” chat from December 29, 1940. In it, Roosevelt begins with a self-referential moment, referring back to one of his earliest chats on the banking crisis: “I saw the workmen in the mills, the mines, the factories; the girl behind the counter; the

small shopkeeper; the farmer doing his spring plowing; the widows and the old men wondering about their life's savings."¹⁵ Loviglio offers this clip from Roosevelt's speech to preview the type of "potent images of 'the people' that would gain national currency throughout the war years."¹⁶ With the chat's "nearly universal reception" and Roosevelt's rhetorical repetition of these images, it is not difficult to imagine how this self-projection gained the "currency" that Loviglio assigns to it.

It is equally possible to imagine this listing of national types as the consummation of a nineteenth-century project begun in folklore and local-color fiction, but there is a striking difference. Roosevelt's list bears a striking resemblance to the one in Hamlin Garland's *Crumbling Idols* (1894), which describes the "types" that would help American authors to create a truly indigenous literature.¹⁷ Regardless of whether or not Roosevelt was referring to Garland's work directly, the rhetorical mode of listing American folk types bears an undeniable similarity.¹⁸ Implicit in both is the sense that nameless Americans must continue to complete their unindividuated tasks if the U.S. is to remain a strong nation. If for Roosevelt this meant a nation going to war or getting back to work and for Garland it meant the forging of a new national literature, the well from which the inspiration was to be drawn was largely the same. However, the difference lies in the implied audience: those reading Garland's *Crumbling Idols* were the same urban magazine readers who would recognize his list of types as definitively "out there." Roosevelt's audience, because so much broader, would themselves be included in his list, and his use of the radio enabled a mass audience, ideally a participatory democratic audience, in a way that *Harper's* and *The Century* never could. Again, then, we find radio on the cusp of a change in American self-imagining. A new, "nearly universal" audience

sits at the national fireside, ensured at once that each member is a member of a single national family, and that each member's national significance comes from his placement in a national constellation of folk types.

Nor did the relationship of politics to radio move in only one direction: radio could play just as central a role in political innovation as politics could play in radio innovation. Barnouw suggests that Louisiana governor Huey Long's rise to prominence would have been inconceivable without this new medium and his invocation of some of that medium's most popular successes. For Barnouw, Long "talked to the radio audience in a vernacular that carried no hint of condescension, and he could also quote Scripture in rippling streams... He was the hillbilly come to power. He played on their fears and prejudices. He was often the clown, calling himself 'the Kingfish' after the head of the lodge in *Amos 'n' Andy*."¹⁹ It would seem that the radio caricature that Long was to become in Kenny Delmar's Senator Claghorn (and later in Warner Brothers' cartoon chicken Foghorn Leghorn, voiced by Mel Blanc) was already built into the character of "Huey Long." And yet, we would be remiss if we did not add to the long list of successful radio personalities that of Franklin Roosevelt, who might have offered the only real challenge to Jack Benny's decades-long dominance atop the Hooper Ratings. Radio could thus be a medium of exclusion, as Hilmes argues; however, as Loviglio's study reminds us, it could just as well be one of inclusion. Whether politically neutral or politically amorphous, radio was unequivocally effective at creating a new sense of a radio public, one built on a new kind of participation or perceived involvement that the mass medium itself allowed.

Fibber McGee's Radio and the Search for the Average Man

This talk of the character of the average man was not merely implicit in radio. In many cases, the very confusion of “averageness” could motivate an entire character or show. In the 1946 film *Heavenly Days*, Fibber McGee has a vision: the fifer in “The Spirit of ’76” emerges from the painting to urge McGee to do something for his hometown Wistful Vista and the United States. Inspired, Fibber sets off for Washington, and after a meeting with Dr. Gallup of poll fame, he realizes that only an “Average Man” could solve the nation’s problems. Inevitably, Fibber can’t make the Average-Man application simple enough, and in his frustration with the whole enterprise, he gives it up and heads back to Wistful Vista. But he comes back to fanfare and town-wide celebration: it seems the Gallup poll has chosen Fibber McGee and Molly as “Mr. and Mrs. Average.”

The film flopped, with Albert Goldberg of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* sneering, “If this be satire, then I’m Dean Swift.”²⁰ As satire, the film failed, but taken another way, the film becomes a metaphor for the whole “Fibber McGee and Molly” enterprise. Who, after all, is the “Average Man” but the creation of a few men, one a sharp if occasionally overly-ambitious radio personage, and the other the savviest of all American pollsters? And no man seems quite average enough; in the end, only the creator of the category fits within that category’s parameters. How was this averageness produced in the first place?

The *Johnson’s Wax Program*, better known as *Fibber McGee and Molly*, provides an ideal avenue through which to pursue this question. Not only does the show constantly assert its own “averageness,” but it also has a kind of liminal status that has caused it to

be overlooked in large part in criticism of radio serials and comedies. Although it aired on Tuesdays at 9:30 pm Eastern time, it did not have the cultural status of the late-evening prestige dramas. Although the show can be broadly defined as a comedy, it eschewed guest stars and the squarely New York and Hollywood locales of other major comedians such as Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Although the show was vocally supportive of the war effort, Fibber and Molly were not USO regulars and stayed squarely on the home front. By the same token, while it shared a local-color heritage with the minstrel comedy *Amos 'n' Andy* or the hillbilly farce *Lum 'n' Abner*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*'s Wistful Vista was not set apart from the localities of its listeners. In fact, characters in the show often mention particular cities and towns, such as Fibber and Molly's previous home in Peoria, IL, but like Cather's "Gopher Prairie" and the Warner Village, these places are nowhere-in-particular. They could be anywhere in the American landscape.²¹

Moreover, what we might imagine as the standard path for the dissemination of cultural objects—from cities to towns to rural areas—is reversed in the case of *Fibber McGee and Molly*. In the June 13, 1937 edition of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, radio correspondent Larry Wolters delivered the results of a radio-listener survey recently conducted by the Cooperative Analysis of Broadcasting. For Wolters, the main interest lies in the survey's quantification of how "Country [and] Urban Tastes in Radio Programs Differ." In a list of the favorite radio programs in 1937, Jack Benny topped the lists of both the City and the Country, but *Fibber McGee and Molly* appeared only on the "Country" list, slightly ahead of another Country-only favorite *Amos 'n' Andy*.²² By the 1940s, though, *Fibber* would jump to the top of the charts and regularly vie for the top spot in both City and Country with Jack Benny and Bob Hope, whose USO work in

World War II and film collaboration with Bing Crosby propelled him to superstardom. By 1940, according to a *Time* magazine article, *Fibber McGee and Molly* was attracting 20,000,000 listeners every week. In other words, then, *Fibber*'s popularity moved from middle America out to the coasts rather than vice versa, as was the case with all its major competitors.²³

In what follows, I argue that *Fibber McGee and Molly* creates a template of American town-and-small-city middle-classness, with the principal characters themselves as "Mr. and Mrs. Average." In many ways, this is an uncontroversial claim, particularly as the press (not to mention the show itself) had been peddling this version of the story since the show's debut in 1936. In daily and weekly publications, *Fibber McGee and Molly* blend with their real-life portrayers, Jim and Marian Jordan, to create a complete domestic space not limited to radio. What is easily overlooked in many of the shows themselves, though, is the way in which radio is configured as the means toward that pastoral middle-class domesticity. Both a domestic appliance and a link to the national and international spheres, the radio in *Fibber McGee and Molly* becomes a metonym for the show's own mediation of domestic space and nation..

Fibber McGee and Molly was on the radio in some form from 1936 to 1956. It spawned a television show and three movies, and one of mass media's earliest spinoffs, *The Great Gildersleeve*, which itself had a long and varied media history. While it is easy to linger over *Fibber McGee*'s iterations in the visual and aural media of the time, equal parts of the McGees' Averageness were created in the popular press, especially in the three major newspapers of the 1930s and 1940s—*The New York Times*, *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *The Los Angeles Times*—and the national weeklies *Time* and *Life*.

This work was partly done on the radio program in which the McGees were from Peoria and Fibber had a vaudeville background, in line with their real-life portrayers. But it was in the press, in the dailies in particular, that a meta-combination of the McGees and the Jordans became the “average American family.”

“Just folks,” begins Carroll Nye’s May 16, 1937 *Los Angeles Times* article on *Fibber McGee and Molly*. “That’s my impression of Marian and Jim Jordan, who keep KFI listeners in stitches Monday nights, with their Fibber McGee and Molly antics.”²⁴ From even this early article on the duo, we can begin to see how these “folks” rose to the heights of Mr. and Mrs. Average so precipitately, and we are clearly in a space very different from that of the nineteenth century folk. “Just normal people,” “just average Americans” could stand in or, perhaps more appropriately, “just anyone” from anywhere in the United States. Moreover, Nye’s use of the telling detail works to very nearly mythologize the Jordans’ ordinariness. After mentioning the Jordans’ two children, Anita and James, Jr., Nye goes on, “It is typical of their mother that she would insist upon them standing in line to gain admittance to their dad and mother’s broadcast. No coddling in the Jordan family! When Catherine and Jimmy finally got inside the studio the uniformed N.B.C. ushers (unaware of their identity) kept them moving from seat to seat to make way for ‘important’ guests.” Nye’s description here is notable for two main reasons. First, use of the word “typical” alongside the everyday language of “dad and mother’s” and “the Jordan family” helps emphasize an affinity with the presumed readership, which presumably uses a similar vocabulary to describe its own “typical” activities. More important for this project, though, is the mini-anecdote about the NBC ushers making way for more “important” guests, the general public. Who but the most

“typical,” ordinary listeners could be of such “importance” to this group? Indeed, it seems an almost Orwellian paradox: all listeners are created average, but some are more average than others.²⁵

This ordinariness is embodied in the use of a kind of universalizing non-specificity. In the same article, Jim Jordan offers his take on the show’s content: “We’ve discarded topical material because it’s so easy to run into controversial things that are offensive to listeners. And we never try to get laughs at the expense of someone else—whether it be another member of the cast or an outsider.” This was particularly true in 1939, before the show became an active participant in keeping up morale on the home front during the Second World War. Even then, however, although the program did often stump for war bonds and the Red Cross and could mention ration cards and food shortages, most of its episodes remained squarely situated at Wistful Vista. In 1942, programs still concerned things like “Molly’s Lost Diamond Ring,” “Fibber’s Old Straw Hat,” and the “Mouse in the House.”²⁶

Louella Parsons of *The Washington Post* offers one explanation in suggesting that there is “something about Fibber McGee and his Molly that strikes a responsive chord in the heart of the American public. Some of our sophisticates might think the stories they tell on their air show are corny and their movies hokum, but the great rank and file of the people like the natural things in life... They want to hear about folk who remind them of their next door neighbors in their home.”²⁷ And to be sure, Parsons’s invocation of “the natural things in life” and “their next door neighbors in their home” is doing similar work to that of the McGees’ program: invoking a kind of American pastoral, a wistful vista to be sure, in only its vaguest outlines. Indeed, part of the media’s ability to switch back

and forth between the Jordans and the McGees was based on much of the same basic similarity that enabled the imagined “great rank and file” of American families to see themselves in the McGees.

A large part of establishing Fibber McGee and Molly as household names, and in reifying the *home* front, comes from the media’s insistence on placing them within literal households, part and parcel of the newspaper and magazine’s creation of “relatable” people through the genre of the human-interest story. “They come in to town to do their show,” writes Louella Parsons in the same article cited above, “and then go back to Marion’s [sic] flowers and Jim’s vegetables at their comfortable home in Encino. One luxury they allow themselves is a swimming pool and that is for Jim Jr., and young Katherine, their son and daughter, and the friends of the young Jordans.” Larry Wolters cites an extreme example in his 1947 *Chicago Tribune* “Fibber and Molly of Wistful Vista,” “Last fall a Chicago advertising man bought their home. The children had grown up and married and the Jordans felt a smaller place would do. They bought a six room house a few blocks away, and during the six months it was being refurbished they lived in a trailer!”²⁸ A year before, *Tribune* correspondent Marguerite Ratty asserted, “An interview with them is like a friendly look-in on the neighbors up the block.” But even before this, the beginning of the article moves straight to the domestic space: “Fibber McGee and Molly’s closet isn’t jammed with junk [unlike the closet on the radio show which is always famously crammed with junk]. Anyway, it wasn’t the other day when we were invited to meet the folks of 79 Wistful Vista.”²⁹ Like Fibber and Molly’s studio audience, the reporters seem to wait expectantly, on the simpler audience’s behalf, for the Jordans’ closet to explode.

The blurring of the line between fiction and reality here takes place in the materials of domestic space. Not only have the characters' names been given primacy over the actors' names, the domestic spaces of both pairs have been collapsed into one. The statement, "Fibber McGee and Molly's closet isn't jammed with junk" is actually false—the running gag on the show proves as much, but the illusion that the characters themselves are our neighbors up the block makes this point immaterial. Just as the closet in this dual domestic space is invariably the mythologized "Fibber McGee's closet," so too has Fibber McGee been unproblematically substituted for, even if born out of, both flesh-and-blood and Jim Jordan and the *Johnson's Wax Program's* Fibber McGee.³⁰

"Molly McGee" was more distant biographically from Marian Jordan. From a biographical standpoint, the character did not have the actor's vaudeville past, in what was a clear move to disassociate Molly from the workplace. This too was underlined in how she was represented in popular media, particularly in advertisements. In a 1949 advertisement in *Life* magazine, Enriched Bread and Flour asks a number of important personalities, "What's Your Favorite Picnic Sandwich?" Among the responses of Eleanor Roosevelt and the Cleveland Indians' Lou Boudreau, Fibber McGee and Molly give "Fibber's Favorite as Molly Makes It." Even here in what is ostensibly a recipe for a sandwich, the advertisement is equally interested in reminding readers of the home-centered relationship implied in such statement, underlined by the fact that they are the only pair and the only fictional characters in the advertisement—it seems that Miss America, Lou Boudreau, and Eleanor Roosevelt all make their own sandwiches.³¹



In addition, Molly's proximity to General American speech changes significantly during the 1940 summer break. What was a clear brogue in the earlier seasons has been reduced to a charming lilt, often imperceptible to the listener. The lilt would come back in a number of instances (such as her "Molly McGee speakin'!" on the telephone), but it would always be strategic, an accent that was decidedly put on for effect, as when Fibber has trouble with the police. The officer, always Irish, can be buttered up so easily with the sounds of the old country. The migration of the folk, we might say, is the migration of Molly's accent writ large.

Nevertheless, though we do peer into the McGees' living room and even have a sense of what's in their pantry, one piece of furniture that is almost never mentioned in the Jordans' household is a radio. The implication throughout Ray Barfield's oral history of the medium is that radio was often listened to (or fabled to be listened to) in definitively domestic spaces: the living room, the kitchen, the bedroom. While most American households would have had a radio in the 1940s, many radio programs would allegorize the disappearance of the appliance, or at least the move to hide it in plain sight.

Fibber McGee and Molly's success over radio could well be seen as an effect of making the radio disappear, or in insisting on the radio's unremarkable place in the domestic sphere, *Fibber McGee and Molly* could more effectively produce the illusion of continuity between their living room and the listeners' own. In a December 1947 episode entitled "Aunt Sarah's Fruitcake," announcer Harlow Wilcox makes this connection literal in his pitch for Johnson's Wax: "I'm sure most of you consider your radio more than just a gadget which provides you with listening pleasure. It's really an important piece of furniture. Well, how does it look to you? If it's been polished with genuine Johnson's Wax, it glows with a rich, warm luster. Now look at the rest of your furniture and your floors..." (0:30) In this sense, *Fibber and Molly*'s antics become not just heard but *overheard* in a kind of shared privacy between actors and listeners.

No wonder, then, that Marguerite Ratty reports in 1946, "Many Racine fans agreed that seeing the *Fibber McGee and Molly* program isn't quite as enjoyable as listening to it, because sight destroys the listener's feeling that he's eavesdropping on chatter in a cozy livingroom."³² In other words, *Fibber McGee and Molly*'s histrionic capacity can be understood in terms of its ability to equate the scene of the broadcast with the scene of reception. The absence of a visual equivalent for the action, as television provided (and it was often all it provided as many shows used the same scripts on radio and television in the 1950s), enabled listeners to lay the scene in their own living rooms, and just as the McGees' "average American family" collapsed into the Jordans' own "averageness" by way of their shared domestic object, so too did the McGees' living room blend into the "average American" living room by way of the shared space of radio.

In a 1947 episode entitled “New Radio”, the inclusivity of radio’s “cozy livingroom” is on full display. It seems the McGees’ radio has given out once and for all. They’ve just bought a new one, and it’s a vast improvement: “All we could get on the old one was static,” says Molly, “and then only under favorable conditions!” (2:20). First, they tune into “Esther Marblewhite’s Dilemma,” a fine program “if you don’t take it too serially” (4:05), but then comes a shocking newsflash. Four desperadoes have broken out of prison and have gone on a murderous rampage. Women and children are encouraged to stay in their homes, and able-bodied men are asked to report to City Hall immediately. McGee wrestles with his conscience throughout the episode, invoking civic responsibility to go and marital responsibility to stay. As he’s preparing, though, the McGees have a few visitors, none of whom seem to know that Wistful Vista is under siege. This is especially odd in the case of Mayor Latrivia, so the McGees flip the radio on again to hear the station identification: “This is station WHPO, Fort Worth, Texas” (25:45).

The McGees have had quite a scare: “Just imagine, four desperate killers loose in Wistful Vista. I won’t sleep a wink tonight, dearie” (5:03). Even though Wistful Vista has remained pleasantly intact, “New Radio” lays out some of the anxieties associated with life after World War II. In *Fibber McGee and Molly*, the radio had always been both the window to the outside world and the means of keeping that outside world out. In “New Radio,” we see those lines becoming blurred as the nation’s problems become more and more radio listeners’ own, regardless of place. The radio contains troubling multitudes; “Esther Marblewhite’s Dilemma” can give way to news of a harrowing jailbreak, and one’s own neighbors might not even know. The McGees are relieved at the conclusion of the episode that Wistful Vista is safe from murdering and marauding desperadoes, but the

possibility nonetheless remains now that regions are so readily collapsed. “My, radio’s a wonderful invention,” says Molly. “You can hear more things to worry about in five minutes than our grandparents heard about in five weeks” (15:35). But while a new radio expands the horizons of what one can hear and worry about, the act of listening, particularly the act of listening *together*, remains a kind of defense against outside change gone out of control. As “New Radio” brings the world to Wistful Vista, it seems to isolate Wistful Vista even more, inviting listeners’ nostalgia rather than simple identification.

An April 1943 episode entitled “Uncle Sycamore’s Radio Broadcast” allegorizes listening and listenership. Fibber’s Uncle Sycamore is the subject of a radio biography detailing his wild-west past and his role in helping to capture and civilize the state of Wyoming. The McGees’ radio has been on the fritz, but Fibber thinks he has it fixed well enough to tune in. While they can tune in to the opening minutes of the program, the radio acts “like a Republican... it can’t decide whether it’s going to run again or not” (5:40).³³ It does for brief intervals but is interrupted by the McGees’ regular visitors, whose door-slamming and bell-ringing cause the radio to malfunction. In the end, they hear only bits and pieces, missing even Uncle Sycamore’s special appearance.

At one point as the radio kicks back in, the narrator of Uncle Sycamore’s story tells, “On and on into the promised land of golden grain and grains of gold marched the hardy Argonauts.” Confused, Molly asks, “What’s an Argonaut?” “Search me, lady, I just read what they give me,” comes the surprising response from the announcer (9:20). Here, in a sense, we have the idealized space of *vox-pop* listening, a dialogue between radio and listener, a hearkening back to radio’s prehistory in telephony.³⁴ The announcer’s colloquial response helps to emphasize that those on the radio are normal folks, just like

the listeners. As such, the McGees listening to a program about a man named McGee is clearly doubling the radio listeners' own experience of listening to a radio program about the McGees. The McGees listen to Uncle Sycamore's radio broadcast, just as the home listeners listen to "Uncle Sycamore's Radio Broadcast."

Above, I suggest that most *Fibber* programs require that the radio disappears. In this episode, the radio reappears to establish Fibber McGee and Molly as listeners, underlining the effect of a shared domestic space. This continuity is thematized through sound effects in the program as well. After neighbor Abigail Uppington says she can't bear to hear Western programs because the sound of gunshots scares her, immediately we hear the sound of gunshots. We might assume that these gunshots come from the Wild-West scene on the McGees' radio, but in fact it is Fibber who has unloaded some blanks from his horse pistol to make Mrs. Uppington leave. Later, the sound of a doorbell comes at a strange moment in the broadcast. "Lousy sound effect sounds like our doorbell," says McGee, but he's right: it *is* their doorbell, and in comes Teeny, a neighborhood girl voiced by Marian Jordan (15:45). The sound over the radio has blended with the sound of the domestic space to such a degree that the two can't be told apart, even in the world of the program. Again, we are reminded that in *Fibber McGee and Molly* radio is not just a medium for entertainment but a part of the home, both a link to the outside world and a means to one's cozy isolation from it.

This dual role is used for comedic effect throughout the episode, and while the radio plays intermittently while the McGees are alone, it is only playing once while they have a visitor. And even in this case, Mr. Old-Timer tries to talk over the broadcast but ends up showing us that we can't listen to both at the same time. Instead, door slams and

doorbell rings seem cues for the radio to turn on and off, emphasizing both radio's social role in peopling domestic spaces and its reification of the isolation of domestic space. In what reads as a paradox, the McGees must be alone to let the radio broadcast into their home; the radio seems to require an intimacy that face-to-face sociality precludes.

The dual role of radio helps to emphasize the double-meaning in Molly's offhanded quip, "You know, sometimes I wish the radio had never been invented. And then when I think how we both like to eat regularly, I'm glad it was" (9:10). The joke here, of course, is that Fibber and Molly's radio show pays the bills, but a claim about radio's status in the home lurks underneath this remark as well. Particularly if we place the emphasis of the remark on the word "regularly," the joke becomes a statement of radio's role in regularizing the lives of its listeners. Barfield's *Listening to Radio* contains a number of accounts of people who associate radio activity with other domestic tasks. For example, "Barbara Franklin remembers that after she and her siblings finished their chores on the family's Virginia farm, 'the reward we looked forward to was being able to listen to a comedy show that starred 'Beulah.'"³⁵ More telling is this anecdote from L. William Ice: "My kindergarten teacher was teaching the class to tell time by setting a 'clock' at various times and asking the class to tell her what time the clock indicated. She set the clock at 7:00 and asked what time it was, to which I promptly replied, 'Amos and Andy time.' It *was*, at our house and many others."³⁶ To live life "regularly," then, is to live life on the radio's time and to structure one's day around its programs. Not since the railroads had standardized national time zones in the 1880s had such a broad network restructured American time.

If this discussion of *Fibber McGee and Molly* seems commonplace, there's a good reason. This version of the "average" American has become the dominant mode of representation in popular culture. We might as well call Warner Brothers' Warner Village a second Wistful Vista. And in this sense, even if *Fibber McGee and Molly* shows the newer version of the American folk, with McGee himself as folk hero, we can't by any means call the show a progressive one. After all, we are regularly subjected to the deeply conservative consequences of this glorification of American averageness: whether it's in a middle-of-the-road Hollywood film or in the eight-year term of a president with whom the American people could imagine having a beer.

The Hidden Side of American Intimacy

The embrace of this new mode of intimacy was not universal, however. If we move from Wistful Vista to the equally wistful and fantastic space created in the pages of *The New Yorker*, we find many of the same concerns. First published in the May 17, 1947 issue of *The New Yorker*, John Cheever's "The Enormous Radio" offers a more troubling take on radio's role in the average household. The averageness of his protagonists is stated very clearly in the first lines: "Jim and Irene Westcott were the kind of people who seem to strike that satisfactory average of income, endeavor, and respectability that is reached by the statistical reports in college alumni bulletins."³⁷ Completely average, even eerily so, the Westcotts read the most popular books, go to the movies ("on an average of 10.3 times per year"), and spend a good part of their time at home listening to the radio.

When their radio dies, Jim decides radio is important enough to the household that he'll invest hundreds of dollars in a new one. At first, the radio is a bit of an eyesore, and

Irene can't seem to find the right place for it in her meticulously crafted living room. Soon, however, the Westcotts learn that their radio is a more valuable tool than they had initially imagined. Music cuts in and out abruptly, much as if the radio were playing the piano practice or the aimless record listening of the Westcotts' neighbors. In fact, this *is* what they're hearing, and many times it's not just music: Irene soon becomes privy to all her neighbors' secret vices and quarrels. Before long, though, the radio becomes more of a curse than a blessing, and Irene can't help but personalize the conflicts, hoping desperately that she and Jim aren't the same flawed characters they hear on the radio.

Beyond the narrator's insistence on the characters' averageness, "The Enormous Radio" presents an alternate take on many of the implicit claims in *Fibber McGee and Molly* as well. Rather than disappear from view, the radio destabilizes the living room and the inhabitants. Irene is "struck at once with the physical ugliness of the large gumwood cabinet. Irene was proud of her living room, she had chosen its furnishings and colors as carefully as she chose her clothes, and now it seemed to be that the new radio stood among her intimate possessions like an aggressive intruder" (38). The radio "intrudes" on her living room: its physical mass is undeniable as the radio refuses to disappear into the generalized space of the living room. Moreover, we soon learn that the fantasy of the story is motivated by exactly this intrusion into one of radio owners' "intimate possessions," their privacy.

After a time, the radio does disappear, but only after it has become the medium for Irene and Jim to listen in on the lives of their neighbors. It might seem a crucial difference that the Westcotts' neighbors don't know they're being overheard, but one of the central fallacies of any fictional program, *Fibber McGee and Molly* included, is that

they don't know either. Moreover, this connection between living rooms, implicit in the radio-centric episodes of *Fibber*, becomes a literal reality in "The Enormous Radio." The Westcotts' apartment building becomes a single, generalized living room through the medium of radio. Showing radio's new quest to document the lives of "average Americans," Cheever's story demonstrates that those lives may not be the collection of national pastoral that radio and political discourse might have made them seem. In "The Enormous Radio," radio's public has become too intimate, to the extent that even the space of the listener is available for public consumption. It is as if Roosevelt had aired all of a family's fireside business along with his political message.

The living room as a general space, the Westcotts as the "average" American family: these national self-imaginings which radio considered its greatest strengths and motivations have more sinister consequences. After many weeks of listening, Irene begins to crack: "But we've never been like that, have we, darling? Have we? I mean, we've always been good and decent and loving to one another, haven't we?" (45-46). The "average" families on the radio have reached the home, though now rather than wondering if she is average enough, Irene Westcott hopes that she is quite the opposite: a harrowing flipside to the popularity of a book like *Thirty Thousand Words Mispronounced* and the "un-accented" tones of General American.

Regionalism and the Disintegration of Region

With *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and many of the domestic comedies and dramas that populated the airwaves in the 1930s and 1940s, we find ourselves comfortably within our own moment. As mediated by the radio shows, the average family, whether urban,

suburban, or rural, is spiritually at home in the average: the small town, the Midwest (or the “Midwest street”). In this sense, radio is a medium custom-made for the middle of the twentieth century, as it ushers the American mediascape in its post-World War II, increasingly suburban mindset: uniting the boys overseas with the families at home in newly minted places like Levittown, NY.

We must not overlook, however, that radio is a transitional medium, one that contains a fortuitous combination of conventional features from past and present media, which themselves inhere in older modes of representation while pointing ahead toward new modes. If it is more difficult to talk about radio’s national self-imagining beyond the creation of an “average,” it is because those other types of self-imagining have more to do with the nineteenth century than with the twenty-first. Often, the nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century holdovers were direct: dime-novel favorites such as *Nick Carter, Master Detective* and *The Adventures of Frank Race* were turned into popular radio programs.³⁸ Many of the more typically canonical nineteenth-century works were adapted to radio by Orson Welles and others, with shows such as *The Weird Circle* adapting at least eight Edgar Allan Poe stories in its short three-year run. Many of radio’s famous comedians came from the vaudeville stage: the first incarnation of *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* featured Eddie Cantor, who had been a famous vaudeville and blackface performer as early as 1907.³⁹

Fred Allen’s career followed a trajectory similar to Cantor’s, though his first radio successes came a few years later. Allen’s vaudeville inheritance is writ large in “Allen’s Alley.” For Michele Hilmes, “The Alley was less a real neighborhood than a gallery of regional, ethnic, and class-based ‘types’ who responded to Allen’s questions related to

topics from the current news.”⁴⁰ Hilmes’s suggestion that the Alley is a “gallery” of types is clearly true, with each character identified, through accent and malapropism, with a certain region or class. This does not, however, preclude the Alley from being a “real neighborhood,” unlikely though such a collection of neighbors might be.

An episode of the Benny/Allen radio feud, takes the geographical space of the Alley seriously. The last episode of *The Jack Benny Program* in the 1946 – 1947 season parodies the Alley skit. Phil Harris is Senator Harris, parodying Allen’s Senator Claghorn; Dennis Day is Titus Day, “always so moody” (18:30), parodying Allen’s Titus Moody; Artie Auerbach plays Mr. Nussbaum, brother of Allen’s Mrs. Nussbaum; and Dennis Day comes back again as Dennis Cassidy, parodying Allen’s Ajax Cassidy. It’s a very faithful parody: the Benny characters borrow accents and turns of phrase from the Allen characters. But there’s a change, “Here’s a new house built at the end of the alley. I wonder who lives there” (22:00). The man who lives there is guest star Fred Allen, who proceeds to rib Benny and the other characters, before they introduce Benny’s summer replacement, a young Jack Paar. Allen’s position as new tenant is a fairly inconsequential moment, merely a vehicle to introduce the guest star, and perhaps the logical conclusion of the Alley parody. However, it raises questions of its own. What if, contrary to Hilmes’s assertion that the “Alley was less a real neighborhood than a gallery of regional, ethnic, and class-based ‘types,’” Allen’s Alley *is* a real neighborhood? In other words, what if Allen’s Alley is a real alley in New York, with a collection of characters from all over the country and the world?

Unlikely though this scenario may be, it would not be entirely new. A cast of regional and national types, anchored by a quirky Bostonian, set against the backdrop of

New York City: one could just as well be talking about William Dean Howells's realist novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889). In this novel, none of the main characters is a native of New York: March, Fulkerson, and Dryfoos are all from the West; the Woodburns are from the South; Lindau is from Germany. Moreover, their speech patterns, particularly those of the Woodburns and Lindau, are written in the overblown dialects that vaudeville had played so effectively for laughs. Although *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is not ultimately a comedic book, its setup is largely identical to that of Allen's Alley, and it paints a picture of "Americans" as a collection of regions and regional accents. If New York is the archetypal American city, it is merely because all regions of America are collected there.

In this sense, Allen's Alley *is* a real neighborhood, in a nineteenth-century tradition of representing Americanness through marginalized but representative types. This earlier way of representing nationality relied not on a single "American" but a gallery of American types, regardless of those types' actual national origins. Moreover, although Allen and his wife and sidekick Portland Hoffa lead listeners through the Alley, Allen is not the American everyman. Allen's famously unattractive countenance—overrun by wrinkles and bags under the eyes—and his nasal voice (Jack Benny puts a clothes pin on his nose when playing him) make Allen merely a character among characters in sharp contrast to the McGees, who for all their quirks are just like "you and me."

As I argue in an earlier chapter, this logic of marginalization and lionization was at work on the minstrel stage as well. The minstrel institution embodied a cruel irony in American culture of the late nineteenth century: it took one of the nation's most

brutalized and marginalized groups, African-Americans, and made them the basis for, as old-time minstrel George Wilson suggested, “the only form of amusement enterprise typically American.”⁴¹ Although the dialect-heavy programs of Fred Allen did not include minstrel characters, many radio programs featured the regular work of minstrel characters. “Over the radio,” wrote Carl Wittke in 1930, “the public has been introduced, often in the form of advertising schemes, to some excellent minstrel acts which depend for success wholly on the dialogue and the songs.”⁴² This is worth quoting particularly if we pay attention to the year: *Amos 'n' Andy* began its long run in 1932, and the lack of recording technology before this moment makes earlier radio history more difficult to document. Wittke’s assertion here shows that early-radio minstrelsy may have been even more prevalent than we suspect.

In fact, minstrelsy maintained an odd prevalence in later years of radio as well. I have already mentioned *Amos 'n' Andy*, and Michele Hilmes discusses the cultural significance of the program at length. I have quoted Barnouw’s descriptions of the persistence of the Negro stereotype in programs like *The Red Skelton Show*. There are many other examples as well. One of particular note is Beulah, who first came to national prominence as Fibber McGee and Molly’s maid in the mid-1940s. Head-writer Don Quinn discovered white, male minstrel performer Marlin Hurt on the 1940 *Show Boat*, where Hurt performed musical acts and minstrel-comedy bits. Quinn hired Hurt in 1944 as Beulah. From the character’s opening catch-phrase, “Did somebody bawl for Beulah?”, *Fibber McGee*’s studio audience invariably gave Beulah its most pronounced reaction—certainly from a combination of the incongruity of sight and sound, but also,

arguably, from the same strong proclivity for racial comedy that made *Amos 'n' Andy* such an enduring hit.

Hurt was given his own series with *The Beulah Show* in 1945, and he played Beulah, her boyfriend Bill Jackson, and himself. Hurt died suddenly, and Beulah was then voiced by Bob Corley for a short time until 1947 when the role was taken over, for the first time, by an African-American woman, Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel would also play Beulah in the television version of “The Beulah Show,” which aired from 1950-1953. Beulah provides a particularly pronounced instance of the embedded becoming disembedded: as with *The Great Gildersleeve*, a quirky peripheral character from *Fibber* is given his or her own show. The short run of *Beulah*, however, is a likely signifier of the passing of marginalized representatives for American character. *The Great Gildersleeve* was on radio for sixteen years, on television for two, and produced four films. It would seem that the visual component of television may have been too much for the earlier mode of national self-imagining to bear.⁴³

The major exception to the minstrel rule for black actors is Eddie Anderson’s Rochester Van Jones from *The Jack Benny Show*. While he was never given a spinoff,⁴⁴ Rochester was able to develop somewhat beyond the minstrel stereotype from which he is born. Anderson initially appears on the show as a Pullman porter, in Benny’s own words, “a traditional Negro dialect stereotype. He had a molasses drawl and he *yassuh-bossed* me all over the place.”⁴⁵ Anderson was later cast as Benny’s butler Rochester, and although he retained many of the features of the minstrel, he did eventually become a more rounded character than most of the other black characters on the radio. Rochester

became a star in his own right, and when the Waukegan-born Benny came to perform his show live in Chicago, the *Chicago Defender* listed the star as Eddie Anderson.

Benny defends the minstrel representation in his biography, essentially on the grounds that his heart is in the right place. “However,” he says whimsically, “in those days we were not aware of these racial aspects of comedy.” Then later, “But remember, you who look back with perhaps contempt or patronizing pity on the old radio programs that like most entertainers of that period I was brought up in another time and another place. I developed and learned my trade in vaudeville. In the golden days of vaudeville, there were blackface comics and there were black comics—like Bert Williams.”⁴⁶ Of course, *ignorantia juris non excusat*, but by the same token, Benny was not alone in believing that racial caricature was a matter entirely separate from lived racial realities. The ambiguity is built into the last sentence of the above quotation: “there were blackface comics,” “there were black comics,” and then a dangling modifier if ever there was one, “like Bert Williams.” Although Benny’s line seems to suggest that black and blackface were equally common stage types, he nonetheless seems to insist on their separateness. Where does this leave someone like Bert Williams? Or where, indeed, does it leave Rochester?

The implicit separation between the black and blackface performer is nowhere more in evidence than in a March 1942 episode entitled “Doc Benny’s Minstrel Show.” It was not Benny’s first minstrel episode: “Minstrel Show” aired March 25, 1934, and the first incarnation of “Doc Benny’s Minstrels” aired November 1, 1936. Both, however, were aired when the show employed no black actors. By the time the 1942 season rolls around, Rochester makes weekly appearances and has become an integral part of the

show. Don Wilson's announcement lists Mary "Sweet Stuff" Livingston, Phil "Honeyboy" Harris, Dennis "Sugarfoot" Day, and himself, Don "Blubberlips" Wilson. During the main skit, Benny is interlocutor and does not speak in dialect, and Phil Harris merely does an overblown version of his Georgia drawl. Dennis's, Mary's, and Don's dialects are more traditional. Don can't even get his commercial right: he spells, G-E-L-L-O.

Rochester, however, does not appear in the show until his normal time, about twenty minutes in, he comes out as, "that well-known minstrel man, Rochester Van Jones." He says, "Here I am, Mr. Interlocutor" to huge applause. This is Rochester's only spoken line before he does a rare musical number (rare because of his famously damaged voice), performing Bert Williams's "Somebody Else, Not Me." This would seem to be consistent with Benny's separation of the black and the blackface performers. Rochester doesn't interact with the interlocutor in the same way as the other characters: he's a black comic, not a blackface comic. After the song, however, the black and the blackface comic become strangely merged. Benny is asking Rochester about his expenses, suggesting that Rochester's makeup expenses seem high. Rochester responds, "Well, I heard you tell everybody to buy burnt cork for their faces, and then as much as I didn't need it, I bought a cork with a bottle of gin around it." (23:35) The play moves quickly to its afterpiece, a burlesque of *Romeo and Juliet*, and nothing else is said of Rochester.

The message, then, seems to be that there is no place for the black comic in the blackface play, but in any other context, the distinction between the black and the blackface comic can't help but fall. If "Doc Benny's Minstrels" offers a break in character for all of the other principals, for Rochester, it's another day at the office. *The*

Jack Benny Show would not do another minstrel show in the remaining fifteen years of its run. Benny explains, “When the black man’s fight for equal rights and fair play became an issue after the war, I would no longer allow Rochester to say or do anything that an audience would consider degrading to the dignity of a modern Afro-American. So Rochester had to stop eating watermelon and drinking gin on radio and television after 1945.”⁴⁷ But as Rochester’s position relative to Doc Benny’s Minstrels shows, watermelon and gin were hardly the point: Rochester didn’t need minstrelsy’s best-known accoutrements to be a minstrel character. Rochester’s move from “minstrel” to “character” is thus similar to that of O’Neill’s Emperor Jones, who also begins as a Pullman porter, though Rochester’s move happens over his fifteen year collaboration with Jack Benny. As a result, Rochester’s changes are more gradual and less obvious than Jones’s because they are changes to the accouterments of his character rather than its foundations. In addition, *The Jack Benny Show* does not attack the medium that contains Rochester’s action and speech, so the parts of that medium that support the minstrel character remain intact and recognizable.

If, in a sense, Rochester is a minstrel who has lost his minstrel show, Phil Harris, who plays Benny’s brash bandleader, is a southerner taken out of the South. His accent and forty-chorused song “That’s What I Like About the South” place Harris somewhere on the Southern-type spectrum between Senator Claghorn and the rustics *Lum ’n’ Abner*. But Harris, like Senator Claghorn, is displaced from the geographical location with which he is so fully identified. In fact, Benny’s entire cast of characters is in a sense regionally defined, even though all of them have converged upon the no-place that is Los Angeles: Benny is famously from Waukegan, IL; Mary Livingstone is from Plainfield, NJ (though

Sadie Marks was from Vancouver); Dennis Day is the first-generation Irish boy from New York; Don Wilson is from Denver, CO; Phil Harris is from Georgia; and Rochester is also from a state in the deep south. In a sense, then, this ensemble cast presents another Allen's Alley, a neighborhood of regional and ethnic types removed from their regions and ethnic homelands.

Thus one bizarre side effect of radio's status as an aural medium is that it continues to employ regional discourses, but without the visual aspects of theater or film, and without the descriptive wording of prose fiction, radio makes regions more or less disappear. Where the dialect stories discussed in the first chapter authenticate the characters' dialect by situating them regionally, radio has turned dialects into generalized signifiers of less defined regions by making them all part of an all-encompassing American landscape. A New-York-based broadcast will reference the noise from an elevated train passing overhead, or a Los-Angeles-based broadcast will joke about the smog, but the geographical anchoring so essential to local color—on both the page and the screen—is absent from radio. In this sense, even the programs most rooted in difference take place in a generalized space, both home and not home to all its regional characters. Thus, Fibber McGee and Molly live in a stateless place called Wistful Vista, but Lum and Abner also live in a stateless place called Pine Ridge.

This potentially paradoxical fact—insistently regional characters without a region—gives the best evidence of radio's role in mediating the migration of the American folk. It is not difficult to see how skits like Allen's Alley could operate, to use Jason Loviglio's phrase, as "a metaphor for the populist sentiment that 'the people' were welcome anywhere in national life."⁴⁸ This collection of all American types in New York

or Los Angeles could not help but underline the populist sentiment of a contemporary folk song like Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," written in 1940. A single definition of the American land, born of all disparate regions "from California to the New York island." Indeed, this intersection is nowhere more prevalent than in the Western programs of the 1950s: among them *Gunsmoke*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Luke Slaughter of Tombstone*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *Wild Bill Hickok*, and *The Six Shooter*. In each of these, a General-American-speaking cowboy plays the main role. The most famous is William Conrad's Matt Dillon, who speaks a tough, but generally "un-accented" English, but is flanked by Parley Baer's Chester and others whose accents anchor the show in its Dodge City, KS, locale. Baer's accent was so convincingly Wild-Western, in fact, that he played almost identical roles as the accented foil to a General-American protagonist in such shows as *Tales of the Texas Rangers*, *Fort Laramie*, *The Six Shooter*, and *Granby's Green Acres*.

This is not to say, however, that the dialect mash-up did not occasionally produce a jarring sense of discontinuity. In a 1939 episode of the early western program *Lightning Jim* entitled "Mad Killer Dirk,"⁴⁹ the announcer sets the scene: "A stagecoach rumbled along the stage trail as a masked rider suddenly came out from behind a protecting boulder" (1:45). The train robbery is a convention of the Western program, and as it has come down to us, it seems like stagecoaches were more often robbed than not. Moreover, the image of the masked rider is a familiar one from Wild-West shows, dime-novel covers, and early films such as Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). All of the elements are present for this particular episode of *Lightning Jim* to play out upon similar lines, and it will, but there's an odd twist. The masked rider speaks, "Put 'em up, driver!

Get down off a' that coach! And don't try ta reach fa' dem six shooters" (2:00). As my inept rendering of the dialect suggests, this is not the voice of a brusque cowboy, grumbling out the words from behind his red handkerchief. This is the voice of a New York gangster, bearing traces of Edward G. Robinson's Little Caesar from the film of the same name (1931). This gangster is a long way from home, and it must be tough for gangsters back in New York if they're robbing stages all the way out here. As I hope I have shown, though, this regional mash-up does have its own kind of logic. Radio programs could insist on place as their nineteenth-century predecessors had, but they also insisted that the voices within those places could come from anywhere.

Film director Robert Siodmak said on one episode *Screen Director's Playhouse*, "Hollywood has given the world two kinds of motion pictures which are typically American. They are the western and the gangster film." Siodmak was introducing the radio adaptation of his own film *The Killers* (1946), and presumably he meant to keep the two kinds of motion pictures separate. But as *Lightning Jim* shows, they are not quite so separate as they might seem. Establishing generic conventions of their own, each of these kinds of film and radio broadcast are no longer beholden to the historical moments that produced them. The historical exchange between the Samurai film and the Western is just one such instance of this non-specificity. Moreover, a single American nowhere-and-everywhere means that there's no reason these folk types can't coexist wherever it is convenient. By the logic of General American, they already do coexist. Indeed, if the masked rider's accent is indicative of anything, it is not his New-York upbringing but some inherent condition of his criminality. In a show contemporary with *Lonesome Jim*, *Boston Blackie*, the main character fights for good, but his past contains an unfortunate

turn as a jewel thief. The listeners don't doubt it at any point: they can hear the criminal hiding in his voice, in notes of the same accent as the masked rider, or as Little Caesar, or as any of thousands of gangsters in film noir or mafia films and TV shows ever since.

In this sense, radio might seem to be one of the last strongholds of the local-color mode of national self-imagining in the persistence of certain qualitative associations with different accents and with the very distinct character those associations have. However, as the move toward general American implies, these regional characters are always peripheral to the unaccented main characters as the medium of radio implied a central kind of American life that was imaginatively regionless, taking shape not in any one place but only over the airwaves. These dialected voices can only be the remnants of a particular way of American folk-expression, with all the possible meanings embedded in that term. Through radio, then, we can see the transition from regionalism to regionlessness, from "the folk" to "just folks," as the medium makes the varied American contexts intelligible for the first time as contested and malleable constructions. The *Volkssprache* would be another of these constructions, produced by a new modernity that needed a new prehistory.

¹ H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: An inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, fourth edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), 90.

² Even today, our era's own major medium, the internet, shows only 80% usage among adults. (<http://www.pewinternet.org/Static-Pages/Trend-Data/Whos-Online.aspx>). These data do, however, show that usage among adults aged 18 to 29 is 94%, which means the figures are likely to rise. Nonetheless, the data from the National Research Center study includes similar rates among younger demographics, so the 91% rate reflects a much broader radio ownership among older demographics. [Note: the number was 80% when I first checked in 2012. As of January 2014, the number had risen to 87%.]

³ David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1997), 33-34.

⁴ Fred Allen, *Treadmill to Oblivion* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1954), 134-135.

⁵ Mencken, *American Language*, 90.

⁶ Susan Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 102.

⁷ These included the *Maytag Minstrel Show* (1929) and the *Blue Coal Minstrels* (1931). Shows from this era are particularly difficult to track, because recording was done almost exclusively by amateurs. It is interesting to note, however, that Blue Coal would show up six years later as the sponsor of one of radio's biggest success stories, *The Shadow*, initially starring Orson Welles in his first star turn.

⁸ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, Volume II—1933 to 1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 110-111.

⁹ Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 21.

¹⁰ Jason Loviglio, *Radio's Intimate Public: Network Broadcasting and Mass-Mediated Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² Allen, *Treadmill*, 41.

¹³ Jack Benny and Joan Benny, *Sunday Nights at Seven: The Jack Benny Story* (New York: Warner Books), 107.

¹⁴ Loviglio, *Intimate Public*, xxv.

¹⁵ Quoted in Loviglio, *Intimate Public*, 17. Available as mp3 from Internet Archive: <http://archive.org/details/Fdr-TheArsenalOfDemocracy>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷ See pages xx and xx for earlier discussions of the list: "Our wild animals have already found a great artist in Kemeys. The Indian and the negro also are being spiritedly handled, but the workman in his working clothes, the brakeman, the thresher on the farm, the heater at the furnace, the cow-boy on his horse, the young man in the haying field, offer equally powerful and characteristic subjects."

¹⁸ Roosevelt and Garland would be united in the efforts of John Collier's Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. Inspired by Garland's views on Indian culture and autonomy, Collier was profoundly influential on Roosevelt's Indian policies. Sadly, for our purposes, this doesn't make the literary or rhetorical connection between Roosevelt and Garland any firmer.

¹⁹ Barnouw, *Golden Web*, 49.

²⁰ Albert Goldberg, "Fibber McGee Movie is Rated as Pretty Silly," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 6, 1944, p. 22.

²¹ Moreover, Peoria, Illinois, has doubled as the American no-place ever since the days of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century vaudeville circuit. The question, "Will it play in Peoria?" was asked in order to test a performer's readiness for "average" American audiences. Peoria was one of the later stops on the vaudeville circuit, and had one of the circuit's most famously conservative audiences. If a show could "play in Peoria," it was thought, it could play anywhere.

²² Larry Wolters, "Country, Urban Tastes in Radio Programs Differ," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 13, 1937, p. SW9.

²³ "Radio: Fibber & Co.," *Time*, April 22, 1940.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,763865,00.html>

²⁴ Carroll Nye, "Radio and Its Personalities: Air Comedy Team Just Plain Folks," *Los Angeles Times*, May 16, 1937, p. C11.

²⁵ It is outside the scope of this chapter, but the potential connection to totalitarian governments is not purely coincidental. The U.S. was at war for many of the years of *Fibber's* run, a war that was culturally as well as literally belligerent, and much of the discourse from this era on radio and elsewhere pitted Americanness against Germanness. It would not have been completely outside the realm of possibility for "Americanness" to have carried with it many of the deadly consequences that Germanness did. For an imaginative rendering of just such a set of consequences, see Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2001).

²⁶ See *How Fibber McGee and Molly Won World War II* by Mickey C. Smith, BearManor Media, 2010.

²⁷ Louella O. Parsons, "Radio Favorites Interviewed," *The Washington Post*, October 18, 1942, p. S12.

²⁸ Larry Wolters, "Fibber and Molly of Wistful Vista," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 5, 1947, p. C5.

²⁹ Marguerite Ratty, "Off The Air It's Molly Who is the Spokesman," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 10, 1946, p. SW14.

³⁰ This blurring of fictional and non-fictional lines was not limited to *Fibber McGee and Molly*. I have referred above to Jack Benny's sparring match gone awry, but his autobiography is full of instances in which fans blur the line between Benny (whose real name was Benjamin Kubelsky, though he discarded that name in later life) and his on-air personality. Benny is aloof on the subject, though one can detect a hint of the mischievous in his lines, "You think you're playing comedy and then you learn that some people think it's true life documentary" (103).

³¹ "What's Your Favorite Picnic Sandwich?" *Life* magazine, June 20, 1949, p. 20.

³² Ratty, "Off the Air," SW14.

³³ This is precisely the kind of near-topical joke popular on *Fibber*. It mentions the Republicans, yes, but not anything about them other than the fact that no one is sure who can beat Roosevelt. The joke has the sheen of a criticism or satirical remark, but it is in fact no such thing, because such a thing might offend "the average" listener.

³⁴ See Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* for a cultural-studies reading of the invention of radio.

³⁵ Ray Barfield, *Listening to Radio 1920-1950* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 1996), 147.

³⁶ Barfield, 138.

³⁷ Cheever, "The Enormous Radio," *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Ballantine, 1980), 37. Further citations appear in text.

³⁸ The first incarnation of the Nick Carter series was published in *Street and Smith's New York Weekly* in 1887. Beginning 1891, the *Nick Carter Library* (later *Nick Carter Weekly* and *Nick Carter Stories*) produced 1,261 issues. *Nick Carter, Master Detective* ran on the Mutual Broadcasting System from 1943 to 1955. The Frank Merriwell stories appeared in *Tip Top Library*, later *Tip Top Weekly*, from 1896 to 1915. *The Adventures of Frank Merriwell* ran on NBC from 1946 to 1949.

³⁹ Cantor was host and star of *The Chase and Sanborn Hour* from 1931 to 1934. He was replaced Jimmy Durante, who hosted until 1937, and then by ventriloquist Edgar Bergen

and his dummy Charlie McCarthy, who were the show's most successful hosts until its end in 1947.

⁴⁰ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 205.

⁴¹ [Princeton, George Wilson]

⁴² Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, 129.

⁴³ It is outside the purview of this chapter on radio, but one could make the argument that television had the capacity to be a progressive medium: Amos and Andy were portrayed by black male actors, Beulah by a black woman, Hayboy from *Have Gun Will Travel* was portrayed by Chinese-American actor Kam Tong while Ben Wright played him at the same time on the radio.⁴³ However, in my view, the relative dearth of representations by non-white actors, and the short runs of *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Beulah Show* suggests that Americans could imagine that they might have sounded like the racial others among them, but never that they looked like them.

⁴⁴ A pilot does actually exist for *A Day in the Life of Rochester*, but it was not picked up by the network, unlike *The Phil Harris and Alice Faye Show* and *A Day in the Life of Dennis Day*, which were Benny spinoffs that became very successful.

⁴⁵ Benny, *Sunday Night*, 100.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 104 and 108.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸ Loviglio, *Intimate Public*, xxv.

⁴⁹ No specific date is available.

Conclusion

Back to the Farm

“For legions of young couples,” begins a *New York Times* article from 2014, “there is no wedding venue more desirable than a barn in the country, with its unfussy vibe, picturesque setting and rural authenticity.” For many described in the article, particularly those who live in these rural areas, however, the barn wedding is not all it’s idyllically cracked up to be. “They blare music all night long, they have college students out there screaming, and everyone’s drinking...,” laments Laurie Tulchin of Iowa City. “Sometimes I just think, ‘What the heck happened out here?’”¹ Here, that Midwest folk, the farmers of Iowa, seem to have been restored to their place as the holders of American authenticity, through the new modern medium of folklorization: consumer goods. And it’s not only the Iowans. Throughout the country, the betrothed have resources like www.rusticbride.com and www.rusticweddingchic.com to help them plan the authentic wedding of their dreams. These and other websites promise that you can get married just like *they* did. But who are they?

In the world of commerce, rusticity is in. The coveted apartment buildings are no longer the modern “machines for living in,” but the Brooklyn brownstones of the 1880s. Carpet has been replaced by hardwood floors, and wallpaper has been replaced by exposed brick. The Ball Corporation, makers of the famed “mason jar,” or of Sylvia Plath’s cleverly mistitled “bell jar,” sold stock in January of 2000 for \$4.50 a share. In February of 2015, a share in the same company costs \$73.19. Because what better vessel could there be for a \$9 beer (brewed by real “beer people”) or a \$5 cup of coffee (single-origin sourced from the farmers pictured on the wall in the coffee shop)?

On the sketch-comedy show *Portlandia*, the pilot opens parodically with the promise that “The dream of the ‘90s is alive in Portland.” All that seemed to count in the 1990s was alive and well in Portland, Oregon. “It’s where twentysomethings go to retire.” But a season later, that promise has been revised. Fred Armisen’s character Jason visits a friend in Los Angeles, and he tells her about his great trip to Portland.

You remember the ’90s when everyone was pickling their own vegetables? And brewing their own beer? And people were growing out their mutton chops and waxing their handle-bar mustaches? [...] Everyone was knitting and sewing clothes for their children. People were wearing glasses all the time like contact lenses had never been invented.

“Wait,” interrupts his friend. “Are we talking about the 1990s?”

“No,” says Jason, “the 1890s,” cuing the update to the song: “The dream of the 1890s is alive in Portland.”

The whole thing is a parody, of course, but it does have an odd consistency with the barn wedding and the overnight success of the mason jar. In answer to the question, “What the heck is going on?”, we can respond that the folk is in the middle of another migration. The promise of the “real American” suburb seems to have failed, seems to have been too impersonal, so there’s a new longing for authenticity *out there*, but where *there* is doesn’t matter. Even if there’s no particular “there,” Gertrude Stein might have to say, there must be a *there* there. As standup comedian Marc Maron says of this bizarre conglomeration of style, “I saw a guy with a handlebar mustache *and* a fedora wearing jodhpurs... What is going on? It looked like he was interrupted during a shave in the mid-1850s and had to dress quickly as he ran through a time tunnel.” There must be something authentic here, or maybe a few things. But authentic to what?

Today's version of authenticity, of the folk, is not exclusively tied to rusticity, however. Take this early paragraph from Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001):

The anxiety of coupons, in a drawer containing candles in designer autumn colors. The coupons were bundled in a rubber band, and Enid was realizing that their expiration dates (often jauntily circled in red by the manufacturer) lay months and even years in the past: that these hundred-odd coupons, whose total face value exceeded sixty dollars (potentially one hundred twenty dollars at the Chiltsville supermarket that doubled coupons), had all gone bad. Tilex, sixty cents off. Excedrin PM, a dollar off. The dates were not even *close*. The dates were *historical*. The alarm bell had been ringing for *years*.²

Each detail, and there's at least one per sentence, exudes some particular version of Americanness. We don't have to wait for "Tilex" and "Excedrin" to be in the very specific world that they occupy: the "candles in designer autumn colors" are just as familiar. Franzen wants a world that is vividly recognizable through its things and its brands, but also one that's general enough for everyone reading to know intimately.

Franzen's approach uses consumer items as a kind of emotional shorthand. We are meant to infer a good deal about these characters by their "anxiety of coupons" and their candles. These are older, white suburbanites, who order things from catalogues and aren't that interested in the authenticity of what they own. They love saving money, even if they save it by buying things they don't need. Those candles and those coupons, the surface cleaner and the migraine medication on which they've squandered their coupons, these provide a particularity about the characters, a kind of completeness to their character description that mere emotional and psychological description can't capture, or would take too long to capture. Tell us whether the characters shop at Wal-Mart or at Target (or if they "shop local"), and we've got all we need to know. Franzen gives a prosperity of things of which the opening Keds shoes in John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960) could only dream.

The obvious critique of Franzen is that people are not merely what they own or what they buy, and a novelist should know that better than anyone. But here, it seems, Franzen's work responds that we *are* what we own, that these brand names *are* all that matters. Schooled as Franzen was in the Adorno-heavy world of Berlin in the 1980s, he sees a total eclipse of the culture industry. The things, he seems to suggest, are the only authenticity left in the world, and if we're to take any control of who we are, we're going to have to reconfigure our relationship to what we have. As novelist Tim Parks writes in the *New York Review of Books*, "Franzen's [characters] often seem barely distinguishable from a dense background cluttered with product names, detailed history and geography, linguistic tics, dress habits, and so on, all described with a mixture of irony and disdain, an assumption of superiority and distance."³ Parks's language is pejorative here, but Franzen could not have asked for a more favorable description.

Franzen understands the American scene through cataloguing. His more talented twin, David Foster Wallace, catalogues American minutia to the truly sickening levels Franzen doesn't have the stomach to achieve, and Wallace's feedback loop of ironic self-awareness is its own kind of earnestness. Whether we trace these writers back through Pynchon and Joyce in Wallace's case or through Roth, Updike, and Fitzgerald in Franzen's, what's clear is that the contemporary literary world produces its troubled authenticity through consumer goods and things and its emotionally honest moments despite them. These are novels, Willa Cather would scoff, "*remeubl  *." Put these characters on a bare stage, without their props, and what would they be? Whether we are charitable and say that global capitalism has eaten them all alive or we are uncharitable

and say that these writers create thin characters, we must see that the stage is so overstuffed with props that we almost don't need the characters at all.

For all his deep awareness, Franzen maintains a distance. "Unlike his characters," writes Parks, "Franzen knows everything, is aware of everything, and aware above all that redemption lies in withdrawal from the American public scene." His omniscience and the precision with which he documents his set-pieces show a deep awareness of the objects of his critique, but that awareness, we are meant to see, is fitting him like a tight chemise. Franzen, in this sense, stakes his claim on being the folklorist of a folklore-less age, and his "spy-glass" comes not from Boas but from Adorno and Foucault. The fact that the novel doesn't have a social-scientific claim to non-fiction is beside the point.

Whether Franzen's perspective is right or wrong, whether his critique is thick or thin, whether he's a mature novelist or an undergraduate who never grew up, the fact of his cover-story with the headline "Great American Novelist" in that arch-middlebrow publication *Time* shows that he has nonetheless struck a chord. To be sure, this earnest longing for authenticity, the same longing that has twentysomething urbanites spending \$50,000 for "rural authenticity," or that has made the Ball Corporation an early-century success story, shows that the migration of the American folk, the one that arrived at General American in the radio era, was incomplete.

Jonathan Franzen is the ironic counterpoint to the earnestness of rustic chic. Whether this finally sends us all back to the farm or back again, terrified, to the suburbs is anybody's guess. But the migration of the folk is not complete until modernity is. No matter what form modernity takes, it will need some explanation of how it got there and some salt-of-the-earth people on whose shoulders all of it was built.

¹ Julie Bosmas, “Neighbors Say Barn Weddings Raise a Rumpus,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2014. Web. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/04/us/neighbors-say-barn-weddings-raise-a-rumpus.html?_r=0

² Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 2001, 4.

³ Tim Parks, “Franzen’s Ugly Americans Abroad,” *New York Review Blog*, May 11, 2011. <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/may/11/franzens-ugly-americans-abroad/>

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