GOVERNING AESTHETICS: FORM AND POLITICS IN BLACK HEMISPHERIC LITERATURE

By

ARIEL FRASER MARTINO

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Governing Aesthetics: Form and Politics in Black Hemispheric Literature

By Ariel Fraser Martino

Dissertation Director:
Dr. Carter Mathes

Governing Aesthetics argues that literature provides a generative testing ground for theorizing the formation of political subjectivity. This is, in part, because the flexibility of literary form allows Black authors to balance and re-balance the calculus of inclusion in and diversion from nationalist paradigms. I read a range of authors from the United States and Caribbean, including C.L.R. James, Zora Neale Hurston, Angelo Herndon, Hosea Hudson, Nate Shaw, Jacques Roumain, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker. These writers use literary forms like the novel, the autobiographical narrative, the lyric poem, and tragic drama that traditionally centralize a singular protagonist, adapting established forms in order to posit alternate models of political participation that challenge notions of liberal individualism. I look to texts that seem to value masculine exceptionality, uphold the tenets of Western Enlightenment, or challenge radical political praxis to argue that the authors present structural complications that are incipient theorizations of political alternatives. These theorizations provide more complete ideological and historical context to the gains and upheavals of the 1960s and, in returning to a historical moment when these ideas were still in formation, I uncover some assumptions that undergird them.
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INTRODUCTION

In 1968 the Arno Press introduced a new series called “Mass Violence in America,” edited by Richard E. Rubenstein of the Adlai Stevenson Institute and Robert M. Fogelson of the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies. Weary of the shortfalls that the pair of scholars saw in historical, sociological, and psychological theories of mob violence, they sought to fill an intellectual void by representing the “feel” and “flavor of past eras of civil disorder.”¹ The archive that came to comprise “Mass Violence in America” stretched from colonial-era accounts of the “western insurrection” to the series’ present, stopping along the way to rescue a little-known report on the 1935 Harlem Riot from obscurity. Rubenstein and Fogelson begin their introduction with a thinly-veiled indictment of the attempts to keep such documents concealed. They write, “Nations, like men, are sometimes interested in burying the past.”² The series generally—and the report on the Harlem Riot in particular—aimed to redress a collective internment that was preventing the United States from contending with its tumultuous and violent past.

However, the 1935 uprising in Harlem was far from an unknown or undocumented event.³ It lived vividly in the memory of Harlem’s residents and had been documented in the press, most notably in 1936 in the New Amsterdam News, which had

² The Complete Report, 7.
³ I’ll use the word “Riot” when quoting or referring to the event as it is designated in other sources. Otherwise, I refer to these events as “uprisings.” This is a practice adopted from Donna Murch, who notes the way that the word “riot” has been racialized and used to underplay the political ideals behind demonstrations perceived as Black violence. Donna Murch, Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 92.
first published the report in installments. Further, the very “feel” and “flavor” that Rubenstein and Fogelson claim to capture were ongoing lived realities of being Black in Harlem. The long, hot summer of 1967 had seen uprisings in Newark and Detroit and 1968 saw Chicago, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and other cities erupt with violent resistance to systemic inequality felt acutely in urban centers. The original report published in the *New Amsterdam News* describes not only the tense atmosphere of Harlem in the 1930s, but also outlines specific causes—housing inequality, over-policing, and discrimination in employment—for collective frustration. Composed by a committee that was staffed by Black luminaries of the time including Countee Cullen, E. Franklin Frazier, and Louise Thompson and headed by Arthur Garfield Hays, a civil rights lawyer known for his work on the Scopes trial and the Sacco and Vanzetti case, the report describes the riot as a “spontaneous outbreak” that “was symptomatic of pent-up feelings of resentment.”

One of the implicit goals of the report was to vindicate the Black residents of Harlem of charges that circulated in the press of brutality. Rather than an act of inhuman, unthinking violence, its authors contended that the events were the logical conclusion of a community that felt totally dehumanized.

The uprising had reportedly begun on March 19, 1935 after police arrested a Black Puerto Rican teenager named Lino Rivera for alleged shoplifting. The police claim that a group of white Communists took the opportunity to foment a crowd of Black people by misinforming them that Rivera had been killed. Subsequent accounts suggest that the events stemmed from an incident on March 13 where police attacked and

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partially blinded a man standing in a relief line.\textsuperscript{5} Whatever the inciting incident, the thirty-six hour melee resulted in four deaths, hundreds of injuries and arrests, and two million dollars in damage.\textsuperscript{6} In the wake of the uprising, that last statistic was the most circulated and even more police were dispatched to the business district, communicating the prioritization of property over life. The authors of the report comment, “To Harlem this show of force simply signifies that property will be protected at any cost; but it offers no assurance that the legitimate demands of the citizens of the community for work and decent living conditions will be heeded.”\textsuperscript{7} Reinforcing a collective desire for subsistence, the report correctly identifies the force inflicted by the police department as ill-suited to address the resentment at the root of the uprising. On its face, the passage sets out work and habitable housing as its main appeals, but those concrete asks underwrite a more abstract yearning for inclusion. Just six years after the Stock Market Crash, after surviving an unprecedented economic depression, the residents of Harlem were asking to be seen as American citizens. The 1935 uprising in Harlem was as much a symptom of persistent and ongoing frustration as it was a marker of just how much dispossession the community could tolerate. The committee avers that “so long as these conditions persist, no one knows when they will lead to a recurrence, with possibly greater violence, of the happenings of that night.”\textsuperscript{8} In fact, a recurrence would take place in just eight years.

The discrepancy between the argument of the original report on the 1935 Harlem uprising and the goals of the Mass Violence in America volume reveals an assumption

\textsuperscript{5} Jackson, \textit{The Indignant Generation}, 44.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{The Complete Report}, 140.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 140.
about the discrete nature of moments of unrest. Rubenstein and Fogelson recover the “forgotten” history of the uprising to better inform a new age of political upheaval in the United States. This project of historical reclamation, however, minimizes the ways in which later revolutionary moments are informed by and made possible because of radical practice that has not been forgotten. The story I aim to tell is one of carefully-articulated understandings of the systemic nature of racism, the ways in which it constrained Black life, and the exploration of political alternatives through literary form. Such theorizations were not buried as much as they were overlooked so that triumphal narratives of progress could center the 1960s and more spectacular forms of Black resistance. Although it would take mainstream, white America thirty years to face the events in Harlem, Black writers were contending with the exclusions at the heart of the discontent that boiled over that day. Literary historian Lawrence Jackson would name the period from 1934 until 1960 the “indignant generation,” identifying the critic J. Saunders Redding’s “immobilizing feelings of guilt toward his ethnic inheritance, self-loathing, distorted patriotism, and rage” as the prevailing collective feeling.9 I am less interested in characterizing the ethos of the years between the Stock Market Crash and the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and decolonial movements in the Caribbean, and more interested in revisiting the literature of the period to mine the experiments in literary form for the ways in which they model or imagine forms of political inclusion. The committee’s writing about the 1935 uprising in Harlem reveals both the indignant affect underlying the event and the ambivalent desire embedded in such indignation. At the heart of the violent refusal of that day was the wish for ownership and honest work,

markers of the conventional American dream. Those desires are part of a larger claim about what citizenship entails and, in articulating the demand for livable conditions for Harlem’s Black residents, the authors of the report are also articulating a call for a form of inclusive Black citizenship. The goal of this project is to excavate a decades-long conversation about the furtive longing for national belonging, which was always in tension with impulses towards racial separatism, Black radicalism, and Black nationalism. Rather than setting the desire for belonging in opposition to more overt departures from extant political structures, I see the conversation about nation-building and Black inclusion as one that, at times, seeks to incorporate radical politics into those existing structures. By examining political radicalism in unlikely places, we gain a more capacious, nuanced sense of Black radical thought in the 1930s and 1940s.

My dissertation argues that literature provides generative testing ground for theorizing the formation of political subjectivity. This is, in part, because the flexibility of literary form allows Black authors to balance and re-balance the calculus of inclusion in and diversion from nationalist paradigms. I read a range of authors from the United States and Caribbean, including C.L.R. James, Zora Neale Hurston, Angelo Herndon, Hosea Hudson, Nate Shaw, Jacques Roumain, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Margaret Walker. These writers use literary forms like the novel, the autobiographical narrative, the lyric poem, and tragic drama that traditionally centralize a singular protagonist, adapting established forms in order to posit alternate models of political participation that challenge notions of liberal individualism. I look to texts that seem to value masculine exceptionality, uphold the tenets of Western Enlightenment, or challenge radical political praxis to argue that the authors present structural complications that are
incipient theorizations of political alternatives. These theorizations provide more complete ideological and historical context to the gains and upheavals of the 1960s and, in returning to a historical moment when these ideas were still in formation, I uncover some assumptions that undergird them.

The 1935 uprising in Harlem was the crest of a tidal wave of upheaval initiated by the Wall Street Crash of 1929. And though the discrete event of Black Friday, which took place on October 25, 1929, might serve as a concrete marker of periodization, the ripples that began that wave date back to the turn of the century and the ascendance of Black internationalism, a movement enabled by the relative facility of travel and a growing body of Black intellectuals. Harlem served as a capital of Black internationalism, famously heralded as the culture capital; James Weldon Johnson wrote, “Harlem is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious and the talented of the whole Negro world.”

Johnson’s description emphasizes the centrality of Harlem as site of pleasure and commerce, highlighting the diverse Black community that had cohered. Migration resulted in unprecedented cross-national racial identification, as well as the initiation of conversations about the conditions of dispossession that Black people faced across the world. On a more positive note, a sense of cultural continuity also emerged, as students, writers, artists forged a transnational form of Black identity. However, as Brent Hayes

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Edwards points out, any conception of Black internationalism “takes form not as a single thread, but through the often uneasy encounters of peoples of African descent with each other.”12 Within this outwardly communal movement toward a collective Black identity there were already fissures.

The tension between international solidarity and the particularity of different national spaces came to a head by the end of the 1920s, with the hardships of the 1930s ushering in a pressing interest in domestic working conditions in the United States and distinct struggles for self-determination in the colonized Caribbean. I do not intend to suggest that Black internationalism halted in the 1930s or 1940s, in fact, there a body of recent scholarship that has shown how Leftist, Black international movements sustained domestically-focused struggles for civil rights in this period.13 Instead, I aim to index a shift from the abstract coalitions occasioned by the transnational solidarity of the 1910s and 1920s to the more concrete realities of United States imperialism the 1930s and 1940s. The journal *The Negro Worker* emerged in 1928, an outgrowth of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, which reproduced the imagery of the American Negro Labor Congress: a muscular Black worker breaking a chain that stretches from the United States to Africa. This image indicated the emerging precedence of the image of the Black, American worker as emblematic of the international struggle

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for Black rights. Though the image promised transnational liberation through work, it also “invoked the notion of a more advanced African American worker who stood at the vanguard of black liberation worldwide.”\textsuperscript{14} Black radicalism in the 1930s and 1940s, then, had to contend with the centralization of the African American worker as its primary subject.

Studies of the 1930s and 1940s, in turn, have to contend with the centralization of the worker as a privileged subject. I began with the uprising in Harlem because of its essential misinterpretation in subsequent historical contexts, epitomizing an ongoing misuse of Black history in service of progressive, academic liberalism. Its description also evinces the interrelatedness of discourses related to labor and those related to subjectivity. The uprising demanded the recognition of Harlem residents as citizens, a recognition made possible by the ability to work. The report’s authors adjoin work to citizenship in a way that reflects broader trends of the period, especially the tight association between Black radicalism and the political Left.\textsuperscript{15} This association naturalizes the notion that to consider oneself a worker is a step towards political enfranchisement. Reflected by the dissipation of treatments of labor and laboring subjects in literature, film, and culture more broadly, the worker-as-subject signified the pinnacle of empowerment.\textsuperscript{16} The ability to earn a living wage suddenly synonymous with self-

\textsuperscript{14} Makalani, \textit{In the Cause of Freedom}, 138.


\textsuperscript{16} For the most thorough treatment of Leftism in literary culture, see Michael Denning, \textit{The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century} (New York: Verso, 1997); and Alan Wald, \textit{Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For more general histories of Black involvement in Communism
determination, writers began to centralize the right to work free of discrimination, access to safe working conditions, and fair compensation as the central tenets of political freedom. As a result, the conception of freedom shifted from more abstract theories of advancement, promoted by figures like W.E.B. Du Bois at one pole and Marcus Garvey at another, to a concrete sense of progress through collective sovereignty.\(^{17}\) Black writers, thinkers, and workers began to believe that the path towards equality ran through the masses.

This shift towards a wholesale valuing of the collective had implications for both the geographical networks fostered in the period and the kind of literature that writers produced. The writers examined in this project worked in uneasy relation to the promise of the Black solidarity, but without the sense of foreclosure that characterized the 1950s.\(^{18}\) Black people found themselves torn between a sense of the possibilities that transnational collaboration might hold and deeply-held attachments to their national contexts. They were also poised on the brink of a World War that would, especially for citizens of the United States, only intensify the desire for full citizenship and ignite movements toward decoloniality and self-governance in the Caribbean and Africa. The two decades that I cover found writers thinking in contradictory, confounding ways about

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\(^{17}\) For a detailed description of Garvey and his critique of Du Bois’ incrementalism, see Colin Grant, *Negro With a Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Du Bois, for his part was becoming increasingly radical in this period, and texts like *Darkwater* (1920) and *Black Reconstruction* (1935) reflect a move towards Leftism and a centralization of the worker. Both Du Bois and Garvey, however, are examples of the individualistic, virtuoso leadership that I argue writers in this period were questioning. See: Cedric Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (1980; Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

their political futures. But it is worth paying attention to their attempts to theorize those futures, for the way that they redraw the national borders that might constrain political reconfigurations and for the way that they remake the Black literary tradition. The writers I write about are often seen as compromising or compromised politically; I aim to contextualize the compromises they make, positioning their writing as radical acts of imagination from within oppressive literary and political structures. The desire to work with and within existing structure was not a failure, rather it was reflective of a historical moment that encouraged the preservation of collectivities, which they imagined would lead towards eventual inclusion within the democratic state. Although that was not the future that we inherited from the writers and thinkers of this period, their writing shapes the way we think about Black literature to the present. A full account of the compromised 1930s and 1940s helps us construct a full account of the Black radical literary canon.

As I have suggested, the 1930s saw a shift in conceptions of transnational Black identification. Although the decade encompassed the migration of Caribbean intellectuals to Paris, London, and New York, as well as African American transit between the United States and the Soviet Union, there was a growing recognition of the particularity of the political situation in different colonial and national contexts. This project is concerned with a hemispheric geopolitical interrelationship between the United States and the Caribbean and how ideas of American democracy inflect ideas of political collectivism. Walter Mignolo, Edmundo O’Gormon, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Anibal Quijano have all articulated America, or the Americas, as an “idea,” a construct that enabled the
necessary exclusions that underpin conceptions of a unified American identity.\textsuperscript{19} Since O’Gormon’s early intervention, the weight of this process of invention fell on the historical narratives that impose contained, nationalist histories on other countries, setting them off against conceptions of American exceptionalism. Hemispheric studies, at its broadest level, complicates those histories, revealing alternate associations, histories, genealogies, and traditions. In the introduction to \textit{Hemispheric American Studies} Caroline Levander and Robert Levine posit the field as uniquely able to inquire into “what happens if the ‘fixed’ borders of a nation are recognized not only as historically produced political constructs that can be ignored, imaginatively reconfigured, and variously contested but also as component parts of a deeper, more multilayered series of national and indigenous histories?”\textsuperscript{20} By shifting the emphasis from a simple refiguration of existing national borders, hemispheric studies decentralizes the consolidation of histories that produce nations. Within this framework, the idea of nation becomes contingent and subject to the kind of ideological reworking that the writers in this project perform to posit Black radicalism as a constituent part of America’s history.

I find the hemispheric framework particularly generative for its move from earlier iterations of transnational American studies; the transnational framework tends to prioritize the character of American peoples, whereas the hemispheric model considers the political structures that govern American life. Amy Kaplan identifies one goal of the pathbreaking collection \textit{Cultures of United States Imperialism} as exploring “how such


diverse identities cohere, fragment, and change in relation to one another and to ideologies of nationhood through the crucible of international power relations.” Two years later Cathy Davidson and Michael Moon sought to reframe the idea of citizenship in *Subjects and Citizens*, emphasizing “the interplay…between various forms of traditional political ‘subjection’ and the more nearly reciprocal obligations that are supposed to obtain between a citizen and the state in a democracy.” Both collections show how American studies became variegated by virtue of its inclusion of a variety of subjects. By the time *Hemispheric American Studies* is published more than a decade later, it is the Americas themselves that are variegated. The American Studies of the earlier collections invents an idea of America, if a more capacious one, while hemispheric studies creates the space for alternative identifications to cohere.

It is no accident that some of the most useful articulations of these geospatial alterations to American studies come from anthologies. The methodological shift that transnational and hemispheric American studies occasioned is one that celebrates the vast range of scholarship being done on literature of the Americas. My project is more focused in its scope, and does not account for important work being done in Latin American studies, Indigenous studies, and Canadian literature. By focusing on the

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relation between the United States and Caribbean, I sketch the outlines of a spatial relationship that exceeds national boundaries but remains framed by the material conditions of economic and juridical interrelation. The Caribbean writers I study did not only spend time in the United States, or exchange ideas with African American authors; they were also employed by American institutions, lived in countries that were occupied by the U.S. military, worked on projects funded by the U.S. government, and were attuned to the total imbrication of the United States and the Caribbean as a region. The time period is operative as well. Peter Hudson shows how the speculative banking that preceded the Stock Market crash of 1929 also contributed to growing imperial interest in the Caribbean. Finance, he writes, “intersected with questions of national sovereignty, political governance, and the political economy of race, labor and citizenship.”

Ricardo Salvatore also historicizes the rise of this interrelationship as endemic to the twentieth century, more precisely to the age of mass consumerism, resulting in an “Americanization,” or singular, United States-focused definition of American character. Together, these authors show how the United States and Caribbean are linked structurally through imperialistic economic relations, demonstrating that Caribbean sovereignty was configured in relation to United States imperialism.

Hemispheric studies is also a more precise term to name and historicize the geographical relationships than “diaspora,” another privileged concept in Black studies. Paul Gilroy advances a theory of the Black Atlantic world that is “a webbed network”

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that “challenges the coherence of all narrow nationalist perspectives.”\(^{27}\) Stuart Hall articulates diaspora as a cultural identity constituted by “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity.”\(^{28}\) Like the early iteration of transnational American Studies, both conceptions foreground identity, although Gilroy’s study radiates from a cultural identity out to the culture produced by writers and artists that share that identity. Brent Edwards finds diaspora useful for the ways that it alleviates some of the tension of Black internationalism, arguing that diaspora “makes possible an analysis of the institutional formations of black internationalism that attends to their constitutive differences.”\(^{29}\) In the hands of literary scholar Samantha Pinto, Edwards’ diasporic reading practice “becomes not only a set of physical movements…but also a set of aesthetic and interpretive strategies.”\(^{30}\) While I am attentive to the distinctions between the United States and the Caribbean, and even to important differences from within the United States, I use the term “hemispheric” to collate some of the similarities between the two spaces, forging a Black hemispheric canon that showcases writers considering the associated realities of colonialism, imperialism, and systemic racism that barred Black people from full political participation. In doing so, I note the shared conditions of structural racism and civic marginalization that unite Caribbean movements for national freedom with African Americans concurrently theorizing a route to full citizenship without making the claim that a movement for civil rights in the United States is identical to the decolonial movements in the Caribbean. Reading across these political movements


reveals the continuities—and also the productive ruptures—in the way that writers imagine freedom, suggesting that conceptions of governance, liberation, and radicalism happened through an informed, multi-national exchange of ideas.

Because no individual can resolve the messiness of abstract concepts like freedom, governance, and sovereignty the readings in my dissertation focus on the process of working through the problems that are foundational to such concepts. The writers that I study are historically and geographically embedded and offer solutions that reflect their circumstances. As a result, any political “solution” that we might think their writing offers is akin to what Raymond Williams termed “the structure of feeling,” revisions to a status quo that are “at the very edge of semantic availability.”31 Their work gives “the sense of a generation or period,” even if it is one that just evades articulation. Writers used literature to articulate and rearticulate revisions to political concepts, arriving closer to visions of historical, political, and aesthetic inclusion. The decision to deploy existing literary forms or to disrupt formal expectations to arrive at such divergent visions—what Houston Baker calls the blending of “mastery of form” and “deformation of mastery”—is an ongoing tension throughout.32 In certain cases, recognizable literary form lends an author’s experimentation authority, or situates it in a larger ideological tradition. Walter Benjamin has shown the importance of aesthetic structures—what he calls “form”—in retaining the “irreducible multiplicity” that he finds essential in modern

art.\textsuperscript{33} In order to imbue literature with the political content that might point the way to Black empowerment, all of the writers in this project had to contend with form.

Rather than viewing literature as a simple reflection of its time period, I see form as a refraction, offering a prismatic version of its social field.\textsuperscript{34} Black literature metabolizes the material reality of exclusion as well as the linguistic, intellectual, literary exclusions that come from generations of being thought inhuman. The texts I examine in this project mediate these many exclusions, producing their own histories and drawing their own lineages. Often writers articulate the need to turn back in order to move forward. Edouard Glissant writes, “The poetic work of Césaire, the political act of Fanon, led us \textit{somewhere}, authorizing by diversion the necessary return to the point where our problems lay in wait for us.”\textsuperscript{35} Collapsing poetry and politics, Glissant suggests that the way out of a morass of disenfranchisement is a sense of the past that can only be gained from a return to the “point of entanglement.” But the Black literature of this period was not simply a recovery of forgotten or silenced history. Instead, it contains impressions of the present interposed with the past to speculate about potential political futures.

The Black aesthetic that I expound throughout this project is as slippery as Williams’s conception of the structure of feeling; it remains contested, undefined, and in formation throughout. I depart from treatments of the mid-century that regard African American literature as inherently realist and gravitate around the tent poles of African

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\textsuperscript{33} Walter Benjamin uses this standard to differentiate German Romanticism from modernity, and argues that, in retaining form, modern art is able to communicate a politics. Walter Benjamin, \textit{Origin of the German Trauerspiel} trans. Howard Eiland, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 21-25.
\textsuperscript{34} I am indebted to Theodor Adorno for this concept of form: “the content is mimetic impulses that are drawn into the world of images that is form.” Theodor Adorno, \textit{Aesthetic Theory}, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 142.
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American letters: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin. Writers like C.L.R. James, Zora Neale Hurston, and Gwendolyn Brooks think more capaciously about the promise of aesthetic representation, sometimes departing from the strictures of narrative. Sonya Posmentier encourages us to think about how “writers [have] gone beyond the ‘story-form’ in imagining forms that can account for the conflicting experiences of constraint and generation that emerge within the plantation zone.” For so long Black art that is political is synonymous with protest and Black art that does not seem to protest is seen as apolitical. The challenge of my dissertation is to consider both sides of the equation and reinvigorate conversations about Black radicalism in the process. The historian Robin D.G. Kelley writes, “the most radical art is not protest art but works that take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling.” This project is an invitation to re-envision our political future.

My reading practice offers a method of analyzing the formal means by which writers articulate possibilities for future political subjectivity. I do not claim that the writers of this period came to a coherent formulation, or that they adequately addressed the historical disenfranchisement of Black people. Instead, I argue that they developed a set of critical and intellectual tools that could critique the status quo and begin to posit alternatives for more egalitarian models of political participation. I look at texts that

37 Sonya Posmentier, Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 17. Her archive, which also includes the U.S. and Caribbean, is united by the shared history of enslavement that Black writers depict through the lyric.
present a structural challenge to existing formal mandates to demonstrate that formal critique belies a larger critique of shared hegemonic realities. I further look to instances where writers depict collectives within a larger society—rural villages, religious communities, newly-formed states, radical political parties, and urban neighborhoods—and argue that these collectives represent an effort to imagine a system of governance that is more democratically-organized.

In the first half of my dissertation I argue that authors manipulated literary form to refigure the language of domination, imperialism, and nationalism so that it could apply to the constitution of a Black political subject. In both chapters, I read a single author across several different genres to show that the process by which the author arrives at a theorization involves an attempt to reimagine form. In my first chapter, I examine C.L.R. James’ writing from the 1930s, including the overtly political texts The Black Jacobins and World Revolution, as well as a dramatic tragedy entitled Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History; A Play in Three Acts, and a novel called Minty Alley. In writing these texts, James “drafts” his way into a provisional understanding of Black sovereignty that is characterized by a shifting and uneasy relationship between an exemplary individual and the masses that he aims to represent, serve, or liberate. Minty Alley, in particular, represents a form of sovereignty at its most nascent; it is a form that solidifies into the masculinized and individuated mode of Black sovereignty perpetuated through Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement, but thinking about the form from the vantage of its flexible origin point reveals how it might have accounted for more capacious conceptions of a sovereign subject.
Recognizing that flexible origin is not to dispense with the currents of Black radicalism that were already nationalist and masculinized in the 1930s; and I view the work of Zora Neale Hurston as a critique of that masculinization. In my second chapter, I show that writing is preoccupied with questions about how the masses are governed and she uses religion as a metaphor to explore the relationship between a leader and their followers. In her anthropological work she establishes the preacher as a literary subject, while in novels *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* she critiques the gendered exclusions in constituting that subject. Alongside her critique of masculinity, however, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* envisions a radical but unrealized form of freedom, one that prioritizes the will of the people. That freedom is formally reflected in Hurston’s writing on contemporary Haiti in *Tell My Horse* where practices of storytelling and belief in voodoo construct a version of Haitian history and politics that reflects popular will. In building her text in this way, Hurston suggests that political formations might be similarly constructed.

The second half of my dissertation considers the process by which authors adapted radical political ideologies onto accepted literary forms. I argue that this was not an inherently conservative gesture and, instead, allowed writers to work through complex systems of belief while debating their fitness in addressing Black disenfranchisement. My third chapter tracks “narratives of involvement” in depictions of the Communist Party, which become analytical tools that authors use to map the far-reaching ideals of the Party platform onto the lived reality of the Black worker. I read autobiographies by members of the Communist Party in Birmingham, Alabama alongside *Masters of the Dew* by Jacques Roumain and the recently discovered *Amiable with Big Teeth* by Claude McKay to show
how literary form can mediate a radical Black politics that is as complex and dynamic as the various types of Communist Party involvement.

Strident political activism is often associated with male writers, while women writing in this period are often associated with the domestic. My final chapter challenges that assumption looking at two female poets whose work was celebrated by elite literary prizes. When Margaret Walker won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition in 1942 and Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 each became the first Black woman to do so. I argue that the practice of craft that make each women’s poetry legible to multiple audiences corresponds to process of crafting a subject capable of politicization. Rather than seeing their literary subjects as contained within domestic space, I contend that the subjects enter the politicized space of appearance through relation to other figures. Intersubjective exchange underwrites an emergent politics, one in which Black women exercise political power.

In bringing together these writers, I aim to show how ideas of sovereignty, governance, and freedom emerged from an extensive reckoning with problems of collective representation, both political and literary. That act of reckoning cannot be disarticulated from the hemispheric American context, which exceeds national boundaries, but remains attentive to the material conditions of economic and juridical interrelation between the United States and the Caribbean. These writers shape a set of concerns aimed to redress structural racism and civic marginalization, uniting Caribbean movements for national freedom with African Americans concurrently theorizing a route to full citizenship. In highlighting the role of literary form within a broader movement towards Black freedom, I hope to complicate the binary between artistic and political
action. Furthermore, attention to expressions of political futurity that are complex, contradictory, and subtle allow us to widen the horizon of what we consider Black radical expression.
CHAPTER 1:
Drafting a Subject: Incongruous Sovereignty in the Early Work of C.L.R. James

In his 1963 autobiographical-critical reflection *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James makes the startling claim that, “Thackeray and not Marx bears the heaviest responsibility for me.” Surprising for its emphasis on an English novelist over a political theorist, this stated intellectual debt raises questions about the bearing that the novel has on James’ political thought and practice. Existing critical accounts acknowledge a “love of narrative” that runs through James’ writing; in addition, they portray James’ relationship with Thackeray as one marked by a characteristic ambivalence about the role of English culture and education in his career. But if we are to take James at his word, we must consider the extent to which his responsibility to Thackeray also shaped his ideology. What is it that Thackeray articulates that Marx does not? And how does that map onto an ideological project? Expanding upon recent criticism that posits the novel as central in James’ formulation of a critique of imperialism, I contend that James’ responsibility to Thackeray is partially a formal one. Like Thackeray, James admires the novel for its twinned ability to represent a field of social relations and to comment on those relations. But James took his project one step further, using the novel as a space to...
sketch out new relations that, in turn, might be scaled up to constitute a politics. James’ only completed novel, a slim volume first published in 1936 called Minty Alley, charts a set of relations between residents of a barracks yard in Trinidad, paying particular attention to the way that divisions of race and class inflect those relations. Belying a Marxist interest in the working class, James finds the novel adept at representing the fact of those social relations, and embedding them in a larger imperial order. He thus critiques an existing political regime—one in which Black, colonized subjects are disenfranchised—and uses the novel to posit an alternate sociality. I argue that these new social relations are the basis for an emerging decolonial politics and that Minty Alley shows James developing a model of a sovereign, Black subject from the start of his writing career.

James’ early career is particularly generative for examining modes of political subjectivity in the making: it is historically concurrent with a burgeoning period of anti-colonial writing and political activity and also with a period of formal experimentation in James’ corpus. While much of his writing can be said to employ genre-defying strategies, the 1930s are unique in that, in addition to Minty Alley, James produced a number of significant works that include World Revolution (1937), a Trotskyist history of global conflict; Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History (1934), a dramatic tragedy that depicts the founding of Haiti; and his masterwork The

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42 My use of the term politics follows Jacques Rancière’s constellation of the political, the social, and the literary. He argues, “Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality….They thereby take hold of unspecified groups of people, they widen gaps, open up space for deviations, modify the speeds, the trajectories, and the ways in which groups of people adhere to a condition, react to situations, recognize their images.” Jacques Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, Translated by Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006), 39.
Black Jacobins (1938), a history of the Haitian Revolution. In this chapter I aim to show how reading these works together reveals C.L.R. James in the process of working out a concept of Black sovereignty. While some scholarship about James’ early career tends to differentiate between his straightforwardly political texts and his more literary pursuits, I argue that James attempted to approach a set of political questions from varied forms. Caroline Levine argues, “forms do political work…because they shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context.” In one way, the use of set form limited James; he had to contend with the conventions of the novel, the dramatic tragedy, or the historical document, even those conventions that remain dangerously interconnected with the practices of imperialism that he otherwise critiqued. But when James uses each form to represent Black subjects, the formal affordances—to use a term that Levine supplies—lend the subject gravity and structures the set of problems being addressed, adding an undeniable political charge to the social relations described. When James experiments with prescribed forms, he demonstrates that the adaptation of Black life to fit existing form is a complicated negotiation between the potential embedded in

43 In this chapter, I read these texts out of chronology to imply that James was working on them all, in some way, concurrently. For more detail on the chronology of James’ career, see Paul Buhle and Paget Henry, C.L.R. James’ Caribbean (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992); Aldon Nielsen, C.L.R. James: A Critical Introduction (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997); and Anna Grimshaw The C.L.R. James Reader (Cambridge: Blackwell Press, 1992).
44 More recent work on James’ early career thinks across generic boundaries to make claims about how his politics was shaped by, or animates more literary texts. Jeremy Glick; and Christian Høgsbjerg discuss the link between Toussaint Louverture and James’ notion of history and self-determination; Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard links James’ political pamphlet The Case for West-Indian Self Government and his novel Minty Alley to claim that both use the space of the barracks yard as a microcosm of Trinidadian politics as the colony makes its case for independence. See: Jeremy Glick, The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Christian Høgsbjerg, C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Kaneesha Cherelle Parsard, “Barrack Yard Politics: From C.L.R. James’ The Case for West-Indian Self Government to Minty Alley.” Small Axe 22, no. 3 (2018): 13-27.
existing forms and the desire to formulate something new. In an essay on Minty Alley, the philosopher Sylvia Wynter describes James’ literary practice as “counterdoctrine,” a practice that involves adhering to the conventions of a master discourse so that it reveals its flaws and contributes to its undoing. Viewed strictly through this lens, it is tempting to see Minty Alley’s use of realism as a method by which James uncovers its inability to represent Black subjects, disassembling the form in the process. Instead, I argue that James’ work occupies a more ambivalent space between adoption and subversion. He is invested in the fact that the novel can capture the social relations that inhere in the mostly-Black space of Trinidad, even as he sketches those relations as inadequately contained in their colonial frame. Just as the novel has a doubled function of representing and critiquing its subject matter, the novel form can be similarly doubled such that James capitalizes on its affordances without adopting its politics wholesale. So, just as a pamphlet or a speech served James and his contemporaneous budding decolonial theorists well in communicating a rejection of colonial authority, the novel and its ability to account for an interlocking set of relations could best communicate the reality of imperial imbrication.

James theorized these shifting relations to colonial power as forms of sovereignty, and his corpus from the 1930s was concerned with its redefinition so that it could account for the Black subject. At least since Giorgio Agamben, conceptions of sovereignty have

47 Cedric Robinson quotes James’ contemporary T. Ras Makonnen, a Guyanese-born, Pan-Africanist, as saying of the 1930s in London: “Imagine what it meant to us to go to Hyde Park to speak to a race of people who were considered our masters, and tell them right out what we felt about their empire and about them… write any tract we wanted; to make terrible speeches.” Cedric Robinson, Black Marxism 263.
acknowledged the tension at the heart of the term. Agamben names this problem as the paradox of sovereignty, the paradigm in which the sovereign is “at the same time, inside and outside the juridical order.”48 In highlighting this paradox, Agamben shows that sovereignty can be seen as an unsettled social relation, one in which the sovereign subject is at once related to a collective and also exempt from it. Yarimar Bonilla disarticulates the concept of sovereignty further from the stable, Western European paradigm arguing that it and “terms such as freedom, democracy, revolution, and even modernity and universalism itself speak not just to a European experience but more precisely to what Europe claimed and sought to be.”49 Building on Bonilla’s work, I suggest that James enters into debates about sovereignty to stake a parallel claim to what the decolonized Caribbean could be. He understands that the terms had taken on a prescriptive quality in their imposition by European colonial powers, but nevertheless sees expressive potential in reimagining social relations under the auspices of sovereignty.

Sovereignty is a multivalent term that, even in its most complex and contradictory connotations, describes and structures socio-political relations. Sylvia Wynter schematizes the unseen, unarticulated forms of sovereignty, setting them off against the more familiar versions:

Now, we know about political sovereignty, especially with the rise of the state. We know about economic sovereignty, with the dominance of the free market all over the world, together with its economic organization of reality. We do not know about something called ontological sovereignty. And I’m being so bold as to say that in order to speak the conception of ontological sovereignty, we would have to move completely outside our present conception of what it is to be human, and therefore outside the ground of the orthodox body of knowledge which institutes and reproduces such a conception.50

50 David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter,” *Small Axe*, no. 8
Wynter differentiates political and economic sovereignty from ontological sovereignty, the latter of which describes a condition of being. She articulates a need to move away from existing bodies of knowledge in order to produce an ontological sovereignty that is not predicated on the structures of domination that produce and reproduce colonization and racism. Like Bonilla, Wynter identifies the constraining nature of the term, identifying the ways in which familiar formations like the political and economic override more speculative associations. Bonilla argues that this tendency delimited the project of decoloniality in the Caribbean, resulting in uneven and inequitable forms of freedom throughout the region. She states: “decolonization also operated as part of a larger project that sought to naturalize the idea of a nation-state as discrete and necessary units of political and economic organization, while silencing and foreclosing other alignments.”

State sovereignty became the ideal in movements toward Caribbean sovereignty, at the cost of movements like the West Indian Federation. Bonilla and Wynter suggest that triumphal narratives of nation-building and economic prosperity have eclipsed the kind of affinities that might be made clear through an enriched understanding of a shared, regional ontological sovereignty. I read C.L.R. James’ experiments in form as an attempt to formulate an ontological sovereignty that imagines affinities through the altered lens of an unsettled social relationship.


51 Yarimar Bonilla, Non-Sovereign Futures, 11.
I call this unsettled social relation incongruous sovereignty, drawing attention to
the fact that the autonomous subjects of the novel are circumscribed by forces that both
enrich our understanding of their political potential and contextualize them within a
moment where Black freedom remained unimaginable. Incongruity names the disjuncture
between the Black subject and the structures that otherwise conceive of that subject as an
object. The term acknowledges the extent to which the subject is constrained by a number
of factors—most significantly geographic marginality and racial disenfranchisement—and argues that the colonized, Black subject represents those constraints as ill-fitting for
describing lived modes of relation. Existing in the liminal space between colony and
metropole, between a colonial education and a Marxist orientation, I argue that James
turns to the novel to theorize an unsettled, almost unimaginable political subject. Minkah
Makalani reads Marxist writing from James’ career as preoccupied with imagining future
governmental formations that better fit Black social relations; I add that the novel is a
particularly germane space from which James could develop “unimaginable forms of
political association and governance, futures for which [he] lacked any model or
theoretical language to conceptualize.”

Minty Alley, for example, embeds several layers
of thematic and aesthetic incongruity: incongruities between colony and metropole,
between working and middle class, and between existing and new literary form. These
incongruities do not coalesce into a form of sovereignty that resists hegemonic Western
definitions, but they gesture towards an alternative. Incongruous sovereignty describes a
political position, one that does not perform concrete political action, but one that does
describe a relation between subjects as they redistribute power and attempt to imagine

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decolonial political formations. I read Minty Alley as an origin point in a genealogy of Caribbean intellectuals developing a form of political subjectivity particular to the region. The provisional, unfinished nature of that subjectivity indicates how much potential the historical moment of the 1930s held for theorists like James.

Although James’ writing does not have to contend with the perceived failure of decoloniality that Bonilla describes, he is preoccupied with an earlier political failure: the Haitian Revolution. That historical moment is importantly complicated for its twinned project of making a nation and emancipating Black people from slavery.\(^{54}\) Saidiya Hartman writes about the difficulty of construing the formerly enslaved person as a subject, which she indicts as the central ideological failure of Reconstruction in the United States. She states, “the barbarism of slavery did not express itself singularly in the constitution of the slave as object but also in the forms of subjectivity and humanity imputed to the enslaved.”\(^{55}\) Hartman elucidates the shortcoming of equating freedom with emancipation; true freedom, she suggests could only come when the Black subject was thought to have subjectivity. Thomas Holt identifies a similar dynamic in post-emancipation Jamaica where he notes that newly freed Black people “would be free, but only after being resocialized to accept the internal discipline of the existing social order.”\(^{56}\) Freedom is, again, limited by the imposition of a social order. Though, Holt’s historical account focuses more on the juridical disenfranchisement of the formerly enslaved than on the subjectivity that Hartman locates in her study, both writers convey

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the hindrances to full freedom that the Black subject negotiates. The precedent of the 
Haitian Revolution collapses political sovereignty and freedom, suggesting that an 
articulation of Black subjectivity must contend with overlapping forms of dominance. 
In the space where the two terms adjoin, however, we can also see a version of what 
Wynter calls ontological sovereignty emerge: a more complicated horizon of liberation 
that combines the political sovereignty of nationhood and the existential freedom of 
equality. In this respect, James remains unable to fully articulate ontological sovereignty, 
but we might read incongruous sovereignty as a movement towards that unarticulated 
ideal.

This chapter follows James’ movement from Trinidad to London until his 
departure for the United States in 1938 arguing that he employs a number of literary 
forms to find the one most fit to express a new form of sovereignty. In reading this way, I 
resist the temptation to overstate James’ attachment to Enlightenment humanism, or 
emphasize the ways in which he was a confessed Victorian. James repeated tropes, 
forms, and ideas drawn from a variety of sources in step with how Antonio Benítez-Rojo 
understands repetition in the context of Caribbean cultural production. Benítez-Rojo

57 For other work on the problem of freedom see Frederick Cooper, Thomas Holt, and Rebecca Scott (eds.), 
*Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies* (Chapel Hill: 
58 I am indebted to Bonilla’s articulation of the inextricability of sovereignty and freedom. She writes: 
“throughout the Caribbean the problems of freedom and sovereignty are parallel and entwined: both have 
hinged upon abstract promises of codified equality accompanied by a careful escort into codified systems 
59 For an extensive treatment of James’ interest in humanism, see Andrew Douglas, “C.L.R. James and the 
Struggle for Humanism,” *Constellations* 20, no. 1 (2013): 85-101; for details on James’ education and 
identification as a Victorian, see Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean 
60 I draw on Michelle Wright’s argument about the co-constituting nature of Black subjectivity and 
Enlightenment modernity’s conception of the subject. She contends that there is a “twentieth-century 
intellectual tradition of African diasporic counterdiscourses of Black subjectivity that is defined not by a 
common history but by a particular theoretical methodology… [that] moves between a variety of specific 
Western theoretical formations. Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African*
cautions against trying to identify cultural elements as either intrinsically Caribbean or not, noting that “as soon as we succeed in establishing and identifying as separate any of the signifiers that make up the supersyncretic manifestation that we’re studying there comes a moment of erratic displacement of its signifiers toward other spatio-temporal points.” In his treatment of the Haitian Revolution, as we will see, James draws on Enlightenment discourse, thinks about the American Revolution, considers the particularity of Haiti, and tries to constellate all of these sources with reference to his present moment. In the first section, I argue that James conceived of the 1930s as another age of revolution and sought to identify its conditions in *The Black Jacobins* and *World Revolution*, two historical texts that look back on previous revolutionary epochs. The second section shows how the question of exemplarity—specifically, the role that Toussaint L’Ouverture played in the Haitian Revolution—presented an intellectual impediment in conceptualizing a radically new form of revolution. I then turn to the novel, arguing that its unfixed subjectivity allows James to experiment with social relations that underwrite the political unimaginable. In the third section, I demonstrate that the genre of yard fiction—a genre that James was instrumental in developing—complicates the divide between the protagonist and the other characters, creating an incongruous relation. *Minty Alley* is first in a line of literary and theoretical explorations of what a sovereign Black subject might look like and while that tradition remains decidedly masculine for at least a generation following James, I suggest that the novel

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provides a strikingly flexible origin point from which other forms of political and literary subjectivities might have been constituted.

I. Another Age of Revolution

As James began his project of remaking the Black subject at the start of the 1930s, it was no wonder that he found parallels between the tumult of his current moment and the Age of Revolution. In turning back to the Haitian Revolution, James sought to apply a test case to project a revolution that would result in Black sovereignty. His work on the Haitian Revolution, and on revolutionary theory more generally, has been critiqued for its reliance on Enlightenment paradigms of the subject.62 Such accounts, however, think about *The Black Jacobins* as a historical text whose central intervention was to add a full account of the Haitian Revolution to universal history.63 They emphasize the continuities from the American and French Revolutions, as well as the importation of Enlightenment ideals as the impetus for the revolutionary period in Haiti. James undeniably incorporates elements that support such readings; however, he is also interested in the particularity of Haiti’s circumstances. His reliance on the ideological predecessor of the French Revolution was counterbalanced with a sense of Haiti’s distinct character. David Scott distills James’ use of Western models as a way to rethink his decision to turn to the

62 See, for example, Clinton Hutton who argues that there was a distinctly African character that is overlooked by writers like James who see the revolution as connected to the French Revolution. Clinton Hutton, “The Haitian Revolution and the Articulation of a Modernist Epistemology,” *Critical Arts* 25, no. 4 (2011): 529-554.

Haitian Revolution in the first place. He writes, “The problem about eighteenth-century France for James was less as a context for thinking about the universality of rights than as one for thinking about the universality of revolution.”

Scott shifts the emphasis from the historical to the revolutionary, arguing the central project of *The Black Jacobins* was to narrativize the revolution for use in James’ present. In the preface to the 1962 edition of *The Black Jacobins*, James writes, “I have retained the concluding pages which envisage and were intended to stimulate the coming emancipation. They are a part of the history of our time. In 1938 only the writer and a handful of close associates thought, wrote and spoke as if the African events of the last quarter century were imminent.” Here James announces his own foresight, bringing the events of the 1930s into relation with those of the eighteenth century and into the explicitly revolutionary moment of the postcolonial 1960s. He views *The Black Jacobins* as both descriptive of a revolution in progress in the 1960s, and capable of inciting revolution at the moment of composition. His recollection of the foment behind its writing announces the text as one that is at least as forward-looking as it is concerned with the conditions of the past.

In his early career James foregrounded revolution as an essential aspect of subject formation: it was revolution that James predicted would bring about self-determination. Self-determination, like ontological sovereignty, is a twinned process of subject formation wherein the individual becomes autonomous through the exercise of individual will and understands themselves to be autonomous and free to exercise that will. As this

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definition suggests, the process can work at the level of the individual subject, or on the level of national self-determination, a slippage that James makes repeatedly. He wants to plumb the events of the Haitian Revolution for their instructive insight into how to configure self-determination for the Black subject and the imagined Black nation, which is a confederation of such subjects. Jeremy Glick describes self-determination as a process, delineating “a determination that ‘resolves or completes a process’ but only to begin anew another process (the furthering of revolutionary goals) at another plane of struggle, accompanied by another set of problems, another set of contradictions, and, yes, another set of questions.” Within this framework, we can read James studying the Haitian Revolution for its lessons on self-determination, only to open up onto questions and dilemmas that would result in a new self-determination for his moment.

I argue that this processual work toward a revolution that would occasion self-determination is exemplified by the way that James works through genres. Reading *The Black Jacobins* and *World Revolution* reveals a shift in the way that James constructs a revolutionary actor, evincing the slight distinction between how he understands the self-determination of Haiti and how he imagines postcolonial self-determination. This distinction has been underexamined because of the moments of presentism that eclipse the differences James sees between two time periods. In the preface to the original edition of *The Black Jacobins* he argues: “The violent conflicts of our age enable our practiced vision to see into the very bones of previous revolutions more easily than heretofore. Yet for that very reason it is impossible to recollect historical emotions in that tranquility which a great English writer, too narrowly, associated with poetry alone” (xi). James

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comments on the connection between historical moments, but he does not collapse them. Instead, he contends that the present helps us to understand a past that is still rendered distinct. The central object of his critique is a generic one, wherein he lambasts the tone of poetry about the revolutionary moment.\textsuperscript{68} History, he argues, is the only form that can make evident the distinct contexts while also rendering the revolutionary energy that binds them together. This contention is different from a history of the present, which takes another step to suggest that the relation of historical event has a direct analog in the present.\textsuperscript{69} Instead, James is interested in the way that the present can be invigorated by the past and is searching for the most exciting form from which to theorize a revolutionary future.

The narrative structure of history allows James to “see into the very bones of previous revolutions,” patterning the revolution he sees stirring in colonized Africa on an earlier revolutionary moment. Hayden White famously names this relationship “metahistory,” drawing out the ways in which a historical account encodes an authorial imprint. He writes that metahistory is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the

\textsuperscript{68} I read this moment as a specific critique of William Wordsworth whose sonnet “To Toussaint L’Ouverture” ends with the lines, “Thy friends are exultations, agonies / And love, and Man’s unconquerable mind.” Wordsworth had heard of Toussaint’s imprisonment and speculated about the “historical emotions” he felt in exile. William Wordsworth, \textit{The Major Works}, Edited by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 282.

interest of explaining what they were by representing them.”

“flares” of revolutionary milieu that also bring their environment to a boiling point.

Narrativization, it seems, imposes some kind of order on the chaos and allows a writer to prosecute an argument about the making of a revolution.

The space between *World Revolution* and *The Black Jacobins* allows us to see James moving from a doctrinaire adoption of Trotskyism to the new form of revolution that he writes into *The Black Jacobins*. The later revolutionary form is, as we will see in the next section, imperfect in that James is working through the issues of exemplarity that his Marxist training has told him are antithetical to a proletariat-led revolt, but which he cannot quite leave behind. As a Trotskyist, James believed in permanent revolution, a paradigm by which societies that had not yet developed into a state of advanced capitalism could nonetheless experience a mass-led revolution. This was consequential to a number of Marxist thinkers from colonized spaces because it allowed them to imagine a proletariat in contexts that, according to Marx, did not constitute one.71 *World Revolution* narrates the circumstances of Marxist revolutions from 1917-1936 to analyze how permanent revolution might take hold in the succeeding decades. He also examines the splintering Communist Party and laments Stalin’s totalitarian governance. Though James’ examples are contextually specific, he also includes some calls for sweeping global change:

> All the world must fight against Hitler and Japan. The African enslaved by the Kenya settler and French colonist, the starving millions of India whom for nearly twenty years they have called to struggle for their national independence, these who also are summoned to fight for the peace-loving democracies against war-making Fascism. In 1914 it was the war for the independence of small nations and

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71 For a further discussion of James’ Marxism, see: Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*; and Brett St. Louis, *Rethinking Race, Politics, and Poetics: C.L.R. James’ Critique of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
the pledged word of the allied nations. Today it is the same, except that the pledge is to be sanctified at the altar of Geneva, revised version or unreformed.72

This passage overtly mobilizes the countries of the world against the growing power of fascism, paralleling the text’s critique of Stalin. He sees the inevitable war against Hitler and Japan as following directly from the events of the First World War, and paralleling the Soviet Union’s fall into totalitarianism. Distinctly materialist in his outlook, James characterizes history as a process devolving from freedom into despotism. For James, the encroachment of Hitler is not different from the violence of colonialism; instead, they are distinct points along a trajectory. He believes that the only remedy for these devolutions into violence is worldwide, class-based struggle. So, while this passage might suggest that James wants to put aside the anti-colonial struggle in Kenya and India, he is actually schematizing how those revolutions will undergird a worldwide movement toward freedom. Even as James thinks about revolution on the global scale, this passage suggests the presence of individual actors. The imperative “must” is directed at a subject, and the imagined African exists individuated from the “millions of India.” At their roots, James suggests, revolutions are made up of individuals that are good readers of history.

The authorial interventions in *The Black Jacobins* reveal James to be one such reader. With world-historical contest on the horizon, James positions himself as clear-sighted about the ideals that should be upheld by a post-revolutionary society. But, in setting himself apart from others who misapprehend the revolutionary precipice, he reinstall the individual at the heart of a movement that is meant to be leaderless. This initiates a gap between reality and ideal that becomes overfilled by the specter of

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Toussaint L’Ouverture. In a representative moment where Toussaint is not even mentioned, his ability to see through the central hypocrisies of the contemporary slave-holding revolutionaries marks him as a visionary and affirms his capacity for leadership. This passage mentions a British official named Thomas Maitland, who had become governor of the colony after the British seized power from the French in 1794. It also mentions Gabriel, comte d’Hédouville who, after Toussaint expels the British in 1797 because he believes they will try to reinstate slavery, becomes the governor of San Domingo. Both French and British soldiers remained in San Domingo for the duration and incited riots in the rural, northern provinces to keep Toussaint occupied. When Toussaint discovers their alliance, he declares war on both, effectively beginning the Haitian Revolution. As James reflects on this sequence of events, he critiques a historian that would regard Maitland and Hédouville as products of their time and unable to envision a society without slavery. Instead, he argues that they were deeply devoted to colonial order and traitorous to the impulses of an era that was, at its core, revolutionary.73 James writes:

Hédouville and his superiors belonged to the same breed as Maitland and his. Uninhibited, they wallowed with zest in the filth and mire of their political conceptions and needs, among the very leaders of their society, but nevertheless the very dregs of human civilization and moral standards. A historian who finds excuses for such conduct by references to the supposed spirit of the times, or by omission, or by silence, shows thereby that his accounts of events is not to be trusted. Hédouville after all was a product of the great French Revolution. Voltaire and Rousseau were household words and died before the Revolution began. Jefferson, Cobbett, Tom Paine, Clarkson and Wilberforce had already raised banners and were living lives which to Maitland and his kind made them into subversive enemies of society. They had their reasons. So have their counterparts of to-day. They fill our newspapers and our radios. The type is always with us, and so are their defenders (223).

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James insists that it is not the circumstances of the moment that make Maitland and Hédouville design the brutal colonialist regime that push Toussaint to the point of breaking a previously-unfailing allegiance to the French state. These were men who came up in the same cultural milieu that Toussaint did, who read the same Enlightenment texts that Toussaint did, and whose home nations, at least in the case of Hédouville, were proponents of individual liberty. By pitting Maitland and Hédouville against the list of “subversive enemies of society,” James underscores the hypocrisy in promoting a colonialist agenda under the auspices of Enlightenment rhetoric. He asserts his account as one to be trusted in his willingness to expose these men for what they were: opportunists who employed divisive tactics to achieve their ends in an ideological void. The parallel to the counterparts of James’ day, then, becomes even more pointed than simply accusing present-day colonialists of expected colonialism. It becomes an indictment of actors who operate without any reference to ideology. Ultimately, James finds it most unforgiveable to act in accordance to one’s “political conceptions” as opposed to the ideology that he ties to “human civilization and moral standards.” It is people like Maitland, Hédouville, and their defenders that allow the slide into totalitarianism and it is up to cognizant individuals to fight it. In this moment, it is only James that can see clearly but elsewhere Toussaint fulfills that function.

II. “A Toussaint from every tree”

The figure of Toussaint Louverture loomed large for C.L.R. James in the years before he emigrated to England, representing an ideal Black revolutionary even before his own conceptions of that ideal had solidified. In 1931 James responded to an article in the *Beacon* entitled “Racial Admixture,” which had been written by a racialist scientist
named Dr. Sidney Harland. In it, Harland classifies a range of black figures including, Toussaint, who he places as a “Class F,” the lowest among the superior classes. Harland’s argument, which was based on the essay *On the Inequality of Human Races* by Joseph Arthur, comte de Gobineau, argues that the white race was first to develop “culture” and, as a result, also the first to absorb and appreciate it. James’ response, which he titled “Intelligence of the Negro,” takes on the specious logic of Harland’s essay, situating his refutation in what he figures as a privileged position of the West Indies. He writes:

Let us suppose then that Dr. Harland, having lived in the West Indies a long time, had used his eyes and observed the relative intelligences of the people around him. Surely quite casual observation would be enough to tell him that in no field of human enterprise where the competition is open can the negro’s intelligence be considered inferior. In the open professions, law and medicine, in the sphere of higher education, in the Civil Service, in politics, in journalism, the negro’s record, especially when one considers his immense intellectual disadvantages, shows intelligence second to that of no other race.

The colonial margin, where James still lived, provides a backdrop for more measured observation. James is careful to point out the disadvantages that the colonial subject experiences, the lack of education and opportunities on a small island. Yet, he is also adamant in proving the extent to which Black professionals have more than measured up to such challenges. James deviates from his purported purpose of demonstrating Black excellence in his current moment, however, to dwell at length on the remarkable story of Toussaint Louverture who went from coach driver to revolutionary leader after the age of fifty. Harland’s classification states that a man of Toussaint’s ability occurs once in every 74

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4,300 men, a claim that James replies to with, “He will pick a Toussaint from every tree. According to this theory Port-of-Spain has fifteen such men, San Fernando two, there is one between Tunapuna and Tacarigua. Or if Dr. Harland prefers it that way there are about 80 in Trinidad today. I need carry this absurdity no further.” In ironically enumerating the potential Toussaints in a series of increasingly marginal sites James undercuts Harland’s system of classification. However, he also implies a divide between the men who are like Toussaint and the other markers of Black professionalism that he previously discusses in the essay. The essay suddenly has two theses: one about the general ability and equality of Black men, and another about the existence of truly great men among that body of the equal and able. James goes on to discuss a number of contemporary thinkers and luminaries that include James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Booker T. Washington, but ends the essay with “I would have far preferred to write on Toussaint Louverture for instance.” By the end of the decade he would have written on Toussaint twice, and in both works he struggled to negotiate the relationship between Toussaint the exemplar and the masses that he freed, but from which he was persistently distinguished.

Both the dramatic tragedy, written in 1934 and first performed in 1936, and *The Black Jacobins*, which is published in 1938 bear the traces of this problem of exemplarity. James allegedly closed *Toussaint Louverture* and significantly revised it after its short run because he was troubled by the charismatic sway that Toussaint—played by Paul Robeson—exerted. Writing about James’ adaptation of Enlightenment

76 C.L.R. James, “The Intelligence of the Negro,” 196.
77 Ibid., 198.
ideals, Paul Miller argues, “Toussaint is such a fascinating figure for James precisely because he promises—and, as James is painfully aware, fails to deliver—a bridge between [the] popular masses and the enlightened few.” I want to suggest that James is not as aware of this perceived failure as Miller suggests, and that he distributes the role of the protagonist in *Toussaint Louverture* and rhetorically stresses the collective nature of the revolution in *The Black Jacobins*. James states that the central point of interest in the Haitian revolution is, “the transformation of slaves, trembling in hundreds before a single white man, into a people able to organize themselves and defeat the most powerful European nations of their day” (*Black Jacobins* ix). In tracking the transformation of a mass into a people, James seeks to emphasize the inherently collective nature of the revolution. He suggests here that the slaves organized themselves without the imposition of a singular leader. But a moment later, he refers to Toussaint as “one of the most remarkable men of a period rich in remarkable men” (*Black Jacobins* x). And while the circumstances of Toussaint’s life and his role in the Haitian Revolution are undoubtedly remarkable, it is this very privileging that contributes to the text’s limitation in imagining a truly collective revolution. James is stuck at the level of seeing the revolution as one that is particular to Toussaint and one that is entirely shaped by his efforts. James contends, “Toussaint did not make the revolution. It was the revolution that made Toussaint” (*Black Jacobins* x). What seems to be a denial of Toussaint’s individual centrality to the revolution actually serves to reinforce his imbrication in it. In asserting that the revolution made Toussaint, James is superficially referring to the fact that, before the revolution, Toussaint was a gifted but anonymous slave among thousands of slaves.

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Through his involvement in the revolution he became the icon James tries to represent through the play and historical text.

The title of *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only Successful Slave Revolt in History* already contains the play’s central dilemma: it is both the story of Toussaint’s tragic fall and also the story of a successful revolution. James structures the play around Toussaint and Dessalines, two protagonists that each embody one of the narrative strands. Dessalines is paired with Toussaint at two integral moments in the play; the first in an argument the two have before the British occupation in 1794. Toussaint has just been offered a position as king of Haiti, which he turns down out of loyalty to France. While Dessalines sees the white colonists as abhorrent, not to be trusted, and an element that must be destroyed and expelled from the free nation-state, Toussaint imagines a mode of freedom that preserves a connection to the colonial power:

**Dessalines:** You know and yet you talk of loyalty to France. The people know too. They are restless, confused. All we want is freedom. Finish with all this loyalty, Toussaint. They will fight for freedom to the last man.

**Toussaint:** Freedom—yes—but freedom is not everything. Dessalines, look at the state of the people. We who live here shall never see Africa again—some of us born here have never seen it. Language we have none—French is now our language. We have no education—the little that some of us know we have learnt from France. Those few of us who are Christians follow the French religion. We must stay with France as long as she does not seek to restore slavery.

**Dessalines:** Education—religion—Toussaint, always the white man’s religion, the white man’s education. When the white planters put the slaves in prison and they call for food they cut off his flesh and give it to him to eat. I, Dessalines, was born on the Congo and lived there, but never saw such things. It is the white men in San Domingo that show them to me.
Toussaint: We cannot remember these things always. White men have knowledge that we need. We must forget the past.

Dessalines: Forget! Look at my skin—marks of the whip. You have not got them. I shall carry them to my grave. Every slave in San Domingo carries marks like these. Who gave them to us? White planters—men with your white religion. You forgive them, Toussaint. You say come back to work for San Domingo—they salute you—General Louverture, Commander-in-Chief—they say, “How are you, General Dessalines? Come to dinner.” But Toussaint, in their hearts they hate us. We were the slaves—now we are the masters. You think they like it? For every white man a Negro is only fit to be a slave.80

Dessalines asserts an indissoluble difference between Black and white men, a difference that will lead him to kill or expel every white person from Haiti upon declaring its freedom. His vision of the sovereign nation state is one that is completely divorced from the history, culture, and rule of the colonial powers. The detailed descriptions of colonial violence set apart from the total absence of such violence in the Congo, a space more conventionally associated with such violence in the Western imagination, insist upon the barbarism that the systems of slavery and colonialism cultivate in all of its practitioners. He further develops this description of violence in the invocation of the marks of the whip that will be on his body until the day that he dies. These corporeal reminders of the violence of slavery are linked to the hatred that he projects onto the white colonialists who would prefer to see him enslaved forever. The mutuality of this hatred conditions a vision of freedom that can only exist in a state of violent refusal of white colonialism.

The emphasis placed on forgetting in this passage, which is linked to the imagination of freedom, is reversed. Dessalines says that to forget the violence the French imposed on the enslaved people of Haiti is to remain enslaved forever. His notion of freedom is

counterintuitively linked to remembering, not to remembering the language and culture of the French, but to remembering their violence and feeding an ongoing hatred with that memory.

Toussaint, on the other hand, advocates for forgetting that violence, and his mode of freedom is built on an instrumentalization of the aspects of French culture that are most useful to him. In his acknowledgement of a total rupture from an African past, Toussaint suggests that the only way toward freedom is to recognize the extent to which his understanding of the term is indebted to France. For Toussaint, the act of forgetting enables him to embrace these potentially generative cultural links in order to imagine a freedom that is indigenous to the particular circumstances of San Domingo. Toussaint ends this exchange by declaring, “We need the French as much as they need us. If they keep the faith with us, we shall keep the faith with them” (Toussaint Louverture 95). This resolution is in line with the refusal to completely cut ties with France and the acknowledgement of the utility of an entangled colonial past. In arguing that “white men have knowledge that we need,” Toussaint upends Dessalines’ imagination of an autonomously Black nation state. His imagined nation is politically sovereign, but ideologically imbricated. And, unlike Dessalines, he does not see this indebtedness to the colonial power as an impediment to revolutionary transformation.

These competing modes of freedom recur at the end of the play when Dessalines’ victorious founding of Haiti is set off against Toussaint’s death in prison. Although the inclusion of these multiple storylines appears to problematize the sense that one figure is the protagonist over another, the weight and significance of dramatic tragedy suggests that Toussaint is the privileged figure. The play ends with a monologue delivered by
Dessalines, which is interrupted by the news that the French army is on the brink of surrender and that only one battle stands between his forces and freedom in San Domingo. He declares:

**Dessalines:** To arms, friends! No rest, no sleep till we drive every Frenchman into the sea. From this minute San Domingo is a free country—no. San Domingo no more. Haiti! The old name the island had before these Europeans came to bring slavery and degradation. Haiti!

*(There is wild cheering.)*

Haiti no colony, but free and independent. Haiti, the first free and independent Negro state in the new world. Toussaint died for it.

*(He grips Pétion and Christophe on either side.)* We shall live and fight for it! Bring me that flag.

*(Verny steps forward and hands him the flag on his sword. Dessalines is about to rip it vertically, when he changes his mind. Instead he rips the white off and throws it on the table.)*

*(Pointing to the black)* This is for the blacks, and this *(pointing to the red)* is for our mulatto brothers. Black and red. But this *(pointing to the white)* I trample under my feet. *(Frenzied cheering.)* Henceforth, this, our flag! And now, friends, to the attack!

This scene stages Dessalines’ creation of the nation of Haiti as the audience watches. In naming the new nation, he turns to the island’s pre-colonial history, connecting its future to an imagined prelapsarian past that was free of degradation. Even as that past Haiti is imagined as unencumbered by colonial influence, there is still the sense that the future Haiti cannot return to a state of innocence. Dessalines’ imagination of freedom includes violence foreshadowed in his disagreement with Toussaint; his language of “driving every Frenchman into the sea” evokes the historical fact of expelling white people from Haiti. The construction of the flag, even as it stages the unification of Black and mulatto forces, a unification that made freedom in San Domingo possible, it also stages the
destruction of the island’s white population and suggests that a free Haiti depends upon that destruction. Dessalines’ invocation of Toussaint’s name in this moment is especially jarring, given their earlier discussion. The Haiti that Dessalines has created is not the nation that Toussaint imagined in their conversation.

Although their preferred forms of political sovereignty differ, the core question of emancipation is the same. Dessalines chooses the name Haiti because it predates slavery, and Toussaint dies declaring that slavery will never be reinstated. Toussaint’s death is staged just before Dessalines’ victory. He is alone on stage muttering “Slavery in San Domingo? Never – never” before trailing off. The stage directions indicate, “He sinks back exhausted into his chair” (Toussaint Louverture 127). In a reversal of the exuberance and violence of Dessalines’ speech in the scene that will follow, this last appearance of Toussaint stages him as literally fading into silence. The repetition of the word “never” doubles Dessalines’ imagination of a Haiti in which slavery has “never” existed. What is more, Toussaint’s final words are “Oh, Dessalines! Dessalines! You were right after all!”, this time rendered in an anguished roar (Toussaint Louverture 128). On the surface, it seems that Toussaint is capitulating to Dessalines’ vision and advocating a pre-slavery model of nation. But, if we consider the structure of the play and the way that it asks us to think about history, we see a more contested notion of what it means to be free. I suggest that in stating that Dessalines is right, Toussaint is acknowledging something admirable in the imagination of an autonomous Black nation. It is a charismatic cause around which Dessalines faces little difficulty rallying crowds, as seen with the “wild” and “frenzied” cheering in the play’s last scene. The San Domingo that Toussaint dies for is more complicated. It is a nation that forgets its history of
colonial subjugation to retain its cultural indebtedness to France, but that also charts a form of freedom that is ideologically grounded.

James believes that only Toussaint is able to imagine that freedom, and although Dessalines is victorious in liberating Haiti, the trajectory of the Haitian Revolution is tragic. In a striking reversal of form, James insists upon the will of the masses in the play only to reassert Toussaint’s exemplarity in the collective history. Just before he dies in the play, Toussaint is confronted by General Caffarelli, an officer in the French army who believes Toussaint has hidden wealth in the Haitian countryside. Caffarelli erroneously claims that they will reinstate slavery, to which Toussaint replies, “You can defeat an army, but you cannot defeat a people in arms. Do you think an army could drive those hundreds of thousands back into the fields? You have got rid of one leader. But there are two thousand other leaders to be got rid of as well, and two thousand more when those are killed” (Toussaint Louverture 127). James’ tragic hero abdicates his place at the vanguard of the revolution, insisting that the will of the people will keep slavery obsolete. Caffarelli replies that he will place Toussaint in chains, which is met with his portentous rejoinder that, “I wouldn’t wear them long.” Toussaint’s acquiescence to chains in this moment suggests a willingness to wear them until his imminent death. This is an act of surrogacy by which he is imprisoned so that Haiti can become free. Even as Toussaint describes a leaderless rebellion, James transforms Toussaint’s imprisonment into a singular heroic act. Yet, that relationship to the people he is sacrificing himself for is not a stable one. It presents the same tensions between Toussaint as representative and

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81 My use of the word tragic here is different than David Scott’s reading of tragedy in The Black Jacobins. Scott argues that James’ revision of The Black Jacobins was tragic in that it saw the colonial possibility of 1938 as foreclosed in 1962. I will discuss this in more detail at the close of the chapter. David Scott, Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
Toussaint as exemplar that are present even in James’ earliest writing on Toussaint in “Intelligence of the Negro.” In fact Toussaint’s own language of two thousand leaders waiting in the wings echoes Dr. Harland’s claim about Toussaint’s replicability. In reading the texts together, the scene takes on a sense of irony: we know that James believes that there are not two thousand, or four thousand other leaders of Toussaint’s caliber in San Domingo. Having Toussaint speak this fallacy confirms the self-effacing nature of his heroism and parallels James’ difficulty in decentralizing him in The Black Jacobins.

One of the central events of the Haitian Revolution comes in 1797 when Toussaint writes to the French Directory, ultimately pledging his allegiance but also expressing his steadfast devotion to San Domingo remaining free of slavery. James calls this letter a “milestone in his career” and sees it as a masterwork of political negotiation. He writes, “his declaration is a masterpiece of prose excelled by no other writer of the revolution. Leader of a backward and ignorant mass, he was yet in the forefront of the great historical movement of his time” (The Black Jacobins 198). Recourse to the language of “leader” in contrast to the “backward and ignorant mass” destabilizes James’ earlier claim that any member of that mass could have led the revolution. Here he unabashedly celebrates Toussaint for his accomplishment, his political acumen, and his single-mindedness. The letter itself is not remarkable; it is a well-composed dispatch that defers to France as a “triumph of liberty and equality,” but James’ reading of the letter has much to suggest about what he found particularly exemplary about Toussaint. James writes:

Pericles on Democracy, Paine on the Rights of Man, the Declaration of Independence, the Communist Manifesto, these are some of the political
documents which, whatever the wisdom or weaknesses of their analysis, have moved men and will always move them, for the writers, some of them in spite of themselves, strike chords and awaken aspirations that sleep in the hearts of the majority in every age. But Pericles, Tom Paine, Jefferson, Marx and Engels, were men of a liberal education, formed in the traditions of ethics, philosophy and history. Toussaint was a slave, not six years out of slavery, bearing alone the unaccustomed burden of war and government, dictating his thoughts in the crude words of a broken dialect, written and rewritten by his secretaries until their devotion and his will had hammered them into adequate shape. Superficial people have read his career in terms of personal ambition. This letter is their answer. Personal ambition he had. But he accomplished what he did because, superbly gifted, he incarnated the determination of his people never, never to be slaves again (The Black Jacobins 197-8).

Two main threads emerge from this argument: the situation of Toussaint as an important political thinker amongst a cohort of other important political thinkers, and the insistence on his advocating for the kind of personal liberty that these other thinkers espouse. That first argument is concerned with putting Toussaint’s prose on the level of these other men, if not for its analysis, then for its effectiveness. This insistence on the power that these writings have to energize an imagined mass echoes James earlier formulation of Toussaint as one leader among the mass, both part of it and separate, but here he is more straightforwardly set apart. His uniqueness rests on the second premise of James’ argument: Toussaint’s absolute and unwavering commitment to freedom. His letter is aligned with the other texts because it promotes the selfsame ideals of self-governance that they do. There are several radical gestures in James’ catalogue here, not the least of which is aligning Marx and Engels with the other blueprints for democracy, but the one that resounds most forcefully in this passage is his argument that Toussaint’s vision of a free San Domingo was at the same level as any Enlightenment-era state.

Lurking just beneath that argument is another claim, equally radical, although never directly stated as such. James believes that Toussaint’s status as formerly enslaved gives him even more purchase on the concept of freedom than these men who had never
been enslaved. By referring to Toussaint as an “incarnate[ion]” of a “determination” shared by the masses that he leads, James highlights the extent to which Toussaint’s personal desire for freedom exists in relation to that shared desire among the other formerly enslaved. In situating this sentence after the invocation of his personal ambition, which is repeated twice, a will towards a self-determined state is collapsed into Toussaint’s personal desire for freedom. James states that the determination is “of his people,” which syntactically distances it from Toussaint’s desire. It is another moment of the complicated relation of the individual to the mass, and while James again blurs that distinction, he also insists upon Toussaint’s individuality in referring to him as “superbly gifted” and describing him as desire incarnate. By representing Toussaint as the distillation of a shared desire for freedom, James refuses to fix him in relation to the mass. He is at once representative and exemplary, a thought experiment in James’ calculation of sovereignty. The fact that James cannot solve the problem of sovereignty in his writing about Toussaint Louverture indicates the need for new models of sovereignty that will resist absolutist hierarchies between the sovereign and the mass. In his novel, we will see James experimenting with social relations, sketching a form of sovereignty that can account for a form of subjectivity in the making.

III. The Subject and the Yard Novel

As the story goes, when C.L.R. James arrived in England in 1932 he brought a draft of *Minty Alley* in his suitcase. He had composed most of the novel in 1928 and, though it is not an overtly revolutionary novel, it is of a piece with the collection of texts that James brought to Britain to theorize Caribbean sovereignty. Cedric Robinson

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82 Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*, 33
identifies James’ early work as illustrative of “a generation of Black intellectuals that—at their historical juncture—presumed or perhaps understood that the project of anti-imperialism had to be centered in the metropole. After their time and because of their work, decolonization and Black liberation would return to their native lands.”83 Robinson identifies the project of radical political reframing as an ongoing one, noting how it moves through distinct stages and localities. He argues that the colonial metropole was a necessary backdrop for early conceptualizations of decoloniality. Through Minty Alley, James moves beyond mimetic representation of individual characters and toward an assertion of a national identity. Criticism about Caribbean literature tends to dwell on the former, exploring the ways in which literary form accurately renders Caribbean people, their history, and their culture.84 There is undoubtedly a politics in this project, resulting from the resistance to formal mandates in order to best describe the hybridity that characterizes Caribbean identity. Stuart Hall identifies narrative form as particularly suitable for capturing these hybrid identities and posits literature as a political frontier in the ongoing struggle for decoloniality.85 In valuing hybridity, critics like Hall carve out important space for robust portrayals of marginalized identities, cultivating a politics that redresses structural inequality through practices of inclusion. From the vantage point of the field of cultural studies in the 1980s and 1990s, progress from within existing structures felt conceivable, especially as Caribbean literary study was becoming a

bonified field unto itself. But from James’ position in the 1930s, and from other critical positions along the way, there have been concerted efforts to rethink the structures themselves, to question the ways in which identities—even hybrid ones—become codified. Though Paul Buhle and Paget Henry distinguish James as “one of the creative artists in whose imagination the identity of the region came to be,” Minty Alley is not a novel overtly concerned with identity.\(^86\) It is focalized through a young bookseller that remains strikingly opaque, and it concerns his surface-level observations of his neighbors; its subject material might better be described as the relations that the space of the barracks yard enables, rather than any concrete sense of a uniquely Trinidadian identity. The novel leaves those relations flexible, resisting the “filial violence” that Édouard Glissant identifies as constitutive of “rooted identities.” He argues instead for relational identities, more inchoate, processual, ongoing constructions that are “linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures.”\(^87\) Glissant’s focus on the almost-ineffable rubric of experience coupled with the relational model by which multiple experiences come into contract to create an identity that is shaped by myriad factors. In Minty Alley, James prefigures these theorizations of relational identity, and uses the communal space of the barracks yard to sketch how a group of intertwined subjects give rise to collective identities. Because James wrote the novel at a moment when Trinidad and other colonies across the Caribbean launched anti-colonial movements, I read the development of collective identity as an early expression of national identity.

\(^{86}\) Paul Buhle and Paget Henry, *C.L.R. James’ Caribbean*, ix.

Relationally-constructed identities better reflect the singular network of subjects around which they cohere, and promise a version of nationalism that is shaped by popular will. This construction of nationalism is, perhaps, at odds with the historical articulations of Caribbean sovereignty of the 1930s. Michelle Stephens shows how Black political subjectivity in this period included both radical and reactionary impulses; sovereignty was both a horizon on which Black enfranchisement could be glimpsed, and also an exclusionary trope that delimited the kinds of subjects that can access freedom. She argues that an “investment in sovereignty created the space for highly masculine definitions of racial freedom, embodied in varying male figures and tropes for the black, revolutionary hero.”88 James’ writing clearly struggles with this paradigm: his writing on the Haitian Revolution, in particular, ambivalently suggests a causation between masculine heroism and the founding of a Black nation. But it is in Minty Alley where he most successfully creates space for overlapping notions of sovereignty. His characters both repudiate the disenfranchisement of colonialism and assert their agency in establishing a version of sovereignty that is capacious enough to include a range of subjects. Wynter articulates this dynamic, arguing that James’ characters “refuse to accept their value of nothingness. Their lives are spent in constant combat to refuse this negation of their being, to affirm, by any means, fair or foul, usually the latter, that they have powers that must be realized.”89 She gives voice to both the violent refusal and constructive affirmation that the sovereign subject must go through to be recognized as such. Wynter’s formulation promises a subject free of imperial subjugation, but the

89 Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception,” 76.
characters in *Minty Alley* have not reached such freedom. Rather than considering that fact a failure of James’ politics, or a limitation of the novel form, I argue that the limited sovereignty that the characters convey represents a political position. James’ novel presents flexible intra-communal relations embedded within the frame of geopolitical imperialism, producing a subject that is simultaneously bound by coloniality and autonomous in spite of it.

The subjectivity that is caught between colonial dispossession and anticolonial self-actualization is reflected in the form of the novel itself. *Minty Alley* bares the signature traces of yard fiction, a genre developed among the educated, interracial, middle class in Trinidad. The “yard” of yard fiction refers to a barracks yard, or tenement house, a common living situation for the working class in urbanizing Trinidad at the turn of the twentieth century and onward. In his famous story “Triumph,” James describes the yard as, “a narrow gateway, leading into a fairly big yard on either side of which run long low buildings, consisting of anything from four to eighteen rooms, each about twelve feet square. In these live and have always lived the porters, the prostitutes, carter-men, washer-women and domestic servants of the city.”

The fiction that described these spaces and their inhabitants capitalized on the class difference between the reader and the subjects of the stories and was published between two literary magazines called *Trinidad* and *Beacon*. James was the co-editor of *Beacon* and he contributed several stories over

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91 The body of writing that comprises yard fiction is relatively limited. James and Alfred Mendes, a member of the Portuguese community that dominated the urban middle class, started a literary journal called *Trinidad*, which published six stories between two issues published in 1929 and 1930; *Beacon*, a journal subsequently started by Mendes and Albert Gomes, published fifteen stories between 1931 and 1933; a handful of novels, including Mendes’ *Black Fauns*, published in 1935, also came out in the following decade. Mendes is credited with sketching the parameters of the genre and defining its focus on the “ordinary.” Leah Rosenberg, *Nationalism and the Formation of Caribbean Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 133.
the journal’s short run. The overarching goal of yard fiction was its portrayal of “ordinary” life, though it drew critique for its purportedly coarse subject material.\(^{92}\) And while accounts of the more lurid aspects of working-class life might descend into a form of literary voyeurism, I argue that the structural divide between middle class readers and the working-class subjects emphasizes the autonomy that the latter group asserts. Yard fiction is less about the unidirectional act of observing an alien other, and more about examining the working class as a site of political subjectivity. To achieve these more transformational ends, the writers of yard fiction diligently constructed the working class as more than objects of interest, demonstrating their potential as active subjects.

In *Minty Alley* James makes the enfranchisement of the working class both a thematic and structural concern. The novel begins as its young protagonist, a Black bookseller named Haynes decides to take a room in a barracks yard that is mostly occupied by members of the working class. We are told that his mother has just died and her protracted illness has made his emigration to London financially impossible. Over the course of the two years that he spends there, he becomes acquainted with the residents of *Minty Alley*: Mrs. Rouse, the landlady who moonlights as a baker to keep herself financially stable; her lover Benoit who lives off of her earnings; Nurse Jackson, Benoit’s erstwhile lover and a resident who enjoys a slightly elevated social position due to her mixed racial ancestry; Philomen, the residents’ cook who is of East Indian descent; and Maisie, the opinionated niece of Mrs. Rouse who works as a servant. Haynes is ambivalently involved in the interactions between the other characters, often observing them from a distance, noticing and remarking on their behavior, but remaining resistant to

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participate. By setting Haynes up as a frame through which the reader accesses Minty Alley, James doubles the remove that we have from the space and its residents. And though the action is focalized through James, the narrative distance makes Haynes’ observations visible and open to scrutiny. When Haynes first finds the advertisement for a room for rent at No. 2 Minty Alley, his housekeeper Ella attempts to discourage him from renting there. She tells him, “They are ordinary people, sir. Not your class of people.”

After mulling it over, he replies with pleasure, “So much the better. I am sure I will like it” (24). Ella’s warning reinforces the class difference, one of the most commented-upon aspects of the novel. Her use of the word “ordinary” invokes the generic objective of the yard novel, suggesting that life in Minty Alley is adequate material for the novel. Haynes extends this suggestion with his reply: his assurance that he will like it rests on the knowledge that he will not be “ordinary” like the other residents, but that he will still enjoy observing their lives. His position mimics ours as readers, intrigued but secure in our removed class position. But because we are granted distance from Haynes’ evaluation, we can question the mechanisms that make Haynes’ pleasure possible. In the space between Ella’s concern and Haynes confidence, we see and interrogate the impulse to regard the “ordinary” people of Minty Alley as objects of readerly interest.

James further complicates the relationship between Haynes and the residents of Minty Alley, refusing to characterize Haynes in such a way that he becomes the novel’s protagonist, in the strictest sense. In the opening scene, James employs tropes associated

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with a developmental novel, suggesting that Haynes will move to Minty Alley and fundamentally change. As Haynes considers the questions of whether to move to Minty Alley, but before he verbally replies to Ella, he tells himself, “Yes, he would leave and go and live somewhere else, save some money and do something. It was time. He was twenty. Twenty—and his life still a blank page” (23). Free indirect discourse offers some account of Haynes’ interiority: we are both privy to his reflections and also removed from his total mediation. While this expression of youthful potential asserts Haynes’ place as the novel’s protagonist, his failure to make good on the promise of growth leaves us to question his function within the social system of the novel. By novel’s end, he is as much of a blank page as he is at the beginning, and he has not achieved the nebulous aspiration to “do something.” The novel therefore makes a promise that it does not keep, reneging on its assurances of interiority and development, even though it retains its focalization through Haynes. We cannot ignore the privileged position that Haynes enjoys as the novel’s protagonist; as Alex Woloch notes, “in the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel, any character can be a protagonist, but only one character is.” But his blankness denies some of the identificatory satisfaction that otherwise results from readerly proximity to the protagonist. The novel then offers a host of other characters in the form of the working-class residents of Minty Alley, inviting alternate sites of identification. Woloch goes on to argue that “the claims of minor characters on the

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95 In her reading of Minty Alley, Sylvia Wynter argues that the central development of the novel is a movement towards a greater awareness of classism. She argues this happens at the level of the plot as Haynes grows relationships with the residents of Minty Alley, especially Philomen the cook, and also at the level of the text, which she argues adopts a “popular conceptual framework.” Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception,” 79-80.

reader’s attention….are generated by [a] democratic impulse.” The fact that the majority of readerly attention is drawn away from the protagonist and toward the other characters, reveals James’ intention to represent minor characters more fully. *Minty Alley* recalibrates the balance between protagonist and minor characters to assert their positions as equal subjects.

In a scene about halfway through the novel, our narrative distance from Haynes affords both a critique of his self-fashioning as a participant in the drama taking place at Minty Alley and a glimpse of Mrs. Rouse, otherwise a minor character, as a subject. Though the encounter is focalized through Haynes, the disjuncture between his reading of Mrs. Rouse and the reality of her situation evinces his observational failure. The gap between Haynes’ misreading and Mrs. Rouse’s sorrow corresponds to an incongruous social relation that forms the bedrock of a politics. When Mrs. Rouse becomes suspicious of the affair going on between Benoit and Nurse Jackson, she approaches Haynes entreatsing, “Mr. Haynes, you live here and you see and know everything” (73). The formal address belies the implication that Haynes is an involved party; she is requesting his intervention because he has maintained an observational remove. As the scene unfolds, the narrative marks that remove in Haynes’ detached reflection:

Haynes looked at her lying on the sofa. Forty-five, fat, and ageing, weeping, fainting, in hysteric over the defection of her paramour, a hero of forty, who was in ardent pursuit, or rather possession, of a woman who had had so long a string of lovers and in such quick succession as to justify any title which one might choose to apply to her. And he, Haynes, held her by the hand and was in the thick of it. He was uncomfortable, and wished he was elsewhere. But it was life, he thought (73).

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97 Ibid., 31. Emphasis in the original.
We know from the formality of Mrs. Rouse’s address above that Haynes is not “in the thick of it” and his quick dispensing of the central characters in this love triangle—he clearly sees Mrs. Rouse as pathetic, Benoit as past his prime, and Nurse Jackson as disreputable—reinforce the sense of propriety that he retains despite his time at Minty Alley. Though he maintains an outwards appearance of empathy, the posture is undermined by the discomfort he expresses. By wishing he was elsewhere, Haynes recalls the earlier scene where he chooses to move to Minty Alley. Because of his elevated class position, he has made a choice to live in the barracks yard, a choice that was not available to the other residents. Hazel Carby argues that this imbalance of agency is indicative of the “problem of negotiating, within a fictional landscape, the difficulties of establishing a political alliance between intellectuals and the masses.”

Haynes’ desire to be elsewhere exemplifies this difficulty; he cannot find himself in genuine solidarity with Mrs. Rouse. As readers, we adopt a position of watching him watch her, seeing both her pain and his dismissal of it. When Haynes asserts “it was life” in response, his assuredness almost masks the absurdity of the statement. Though Haynes is witnessing the content of Mrs. Rouse’s life, his detached position makes his evaluation of it flawed. With both the statement and our understanding of how Haynes’ lack of sympathy undermines the statement, we can better apprehend the complexity of Mrs. Rouse’s situation, complexity that the neatness of the word “life” does not quite capture. The suggestion of that complexity, an interiority obscured by Haynes’ observation of her fainting and state of hysterics, reveals Mrs. Rouse as a subject in her own right. Placing her on more equal grounds with Haynes establishes a social relation in which the working

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class can interface with the intellectual, addressing the concern that Carby raises. Though it is not a redress to social inequality, it is a developing model for a politics that enables contact between classes, even as it acknowledges the incongruity between them. Put another way, the evocation of this social relation proffers a lens through which we can see a political affinity, but it leaves that affinity out of focus.

At the level of the plot, James makes the incongruity between Haynes and Mrs. Rouse obvious, capitalizing on the formal demands of the yard novel to depict class difference. But the incongruity is also structural, constraining Haynes from solidarity with the residents of Minty Alley and demanding that he mediates the readerly encounter with the working class. Incongruity can characterize a number of relations that might exist between Haynes and other characters, while acknowledging Haynes’ privilege as the novel’s protagonist. It can also acknowledge the inability of the novel’s form to fully account for these sets of relations. The moments during which the incongruities between subjects become most apparent are, like the scene above, moments of arrest. Dwelling in Haynes’ reflections and not moving toward narrative closure, the descriptions open up onto an unassimilable distinction between subjects. The term incongruity preserves that distinction, deferring any reconciliation between subject to an uncertain future. Unlike Derridian *différance*, which defers meaning, at once balancing a “relation to an impossible presence” with a return “to the pleasure or the presence that have been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) calculation,” incongruity points toward resolution.\(^9^9\) I use incongruity to identify a formal problem—having to do with both political formations and also literary forms—by combining the ontological horizon of

difference with the materialist concern for collective representation. An incongruous relation, then, is one where the expression of individual life incorporates an accounting for difference. The misrecognition between Haynes and Mrs. Rouse exemplifies a social relation structured by both the material difference of class, and the recognition that she is a subject unknowable to him. In locating Haynes as a filter through which such misrecognitions can proliferate, James shows how an entire field of social relations can be built around incongruities. Rather than regarding these incongruities as an impediment to the kinds of sociality that coalesce into political action, I argue that incongruity undergirds a form of political action still in the making.

James develops this incongruous social relation through Minty Alley to reveal a political subject caught between the developing notions of transnational Blackness and a desire for nationalism. Incongruity works on three levels: describing the relation between subjects within a novel, the relation between the novel form and its content, and, finally, a subjectivity in incongruous relation with existing modes of political identification. I argue that James begins to formulate a new Black subject in the aperture between a coherent national identity and the diasporic solidarity that he encounters upon moving to London. In characterizing this politicized relation as incongruous sovereignty, I draw out the emphasis on self-determination that works toward the definition of a distinctly Trinidadian identity, even as James and his contemporaries also solidified cross-national

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100 I am paraphrasing Marx and Engels’ contention in *The German Ideology* that “as individuals express their life, so they are.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited by C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 42. Anna Kornbluh further glosses the definition of materialism in *The German Ideology* as “an approach to constructing knowledge not from the vantage point of the individually lived experience of consciousness, but instead from the vantage point of the collectively lived experience of social relations.” Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 19.
allegiances to formalize West Indian and transnational Black identities. Ralph Mentor, a
contributor to *Beacon* believed that yard fiction was “a means to address “the belief that
the people of the West Indies must develop a literature and philosophy of their own and
make a suitable contribution of the sum total of the world’s progress.” This doubled
aim—to establish a national literary tradition and situate it within a global tradition—
reflects the compound goal of securing distinction for Trinidad and demonstrating
Trinidad’s significance in the world. Writers pursued that goal by accessing the social
realist tradition, altering the form to contain a sense of Trinidad’s unique character. The
inextricable link between the development of a literary genre and burgeoning
nationalism shores up the connection between the particular brand of literary realism that
Trinidadian authors write in the late 1920s and incipient political theorizations. So, while
*Minty Alley* is minimized in favor of James’ more obviously political texts, its self-
conscious positioning as a yard novel marks a definitive, if ambivalent, politics. To the
extent that the novel has been canonized in any literary tradition, it is most often used to
exemplify James’ unshakeable “Victorianism,” or held up as an example of the “Black
Atlantic” adaptation of the modernist novel. Both accounts underplay the central
tension of the novel: its desire to be simultaneously local and transnational. For James,
the constitutive feature of the Black subject was his interstitiality.

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103 Critics identify *The Case for West-Indian Self Government* as James’ clearest articulation of Trinidadian
nationalism and earliest decolonial text. He had drafted a version of it before his arrival in London as *The
Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West Indies*, which was published in
1932. *The Case for West-Indian Self Government* was released as a pamphlet by the Hogarth Press. Bridget
Brereton, “Introduction” *The Life of Captain Cipriani: An Account of British Government in the West
104 Christian Høgsbjerg, *C.L.R. James in Imperial Britain*, 27; and Anna Snaith, “The ‘black Atlantic’ and
the modernist novel,” In *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*, edited by Morag Shiach
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 211.
When James spoke about *Minty Alley* and his other novel, begun in the 1930s but never completed, his comments reflected the undecidable calculation between the literary and the political, as well as the tension between the national and universal. In one interview he remarks on the surprise readers familiar with his other work express when they encounter *Minty Alley*: “The ‘human’ aspect of it which surprises so many people is the basic constituent of my political activity and outlook.”\(^{105}\) James insists on a parallel between the “human” content of the novel and a similar emphasis in his political writing. In doing so, he justifies the political underpinnings of the novel, linking it to both the ideology implicit in his “outlook,” as well as the concrete “activity” of his career. Elsewhere, however, he sets up his literary writing as diametrically opposed to such activity, implying that he could never have become the political thinker that he was if he had persevered in writing novels. On the second novel that he began but never finished James expresses wistful remorse for abandoning the project, stating, “I don’t regret it [not finishing the novel] but I am sorry. I am not miserable about it because I left all this writing to take part in political activity.”\(^{106}\) James admits to being sorry while also denying that he has any regret, a contradiction that belies the ambiguity around the kind of political “activity” that he believed the novel could accomplish. Together, these quotations show that the ideology that animates political activity could also underpin a novel even if, in James’ estimation, it does not constitute political activity in itself. Put another way, the novel contains a politics but does not perform political action. James’ use of the novel form, then, falls in line with what Raymond Williams calls “mediation,”

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\(^{105}\) Anna Grimshaw, *The C.L.R. James Reader*, 94.

defined as “a positive process in social reality, rather than a process added to it by way of projection, disguise, or interpretation.”¹⁰⁷ So, while other critics have identified ways in which James adapted the novel form to examine new subjectivities, I add that he also admired the novel’s affordances as a mediating technology.¹⁰⁸ To see Minty Alley as a site of mediation is to acknowledge the incongruous sovereignty embedded in the form of the novel—its subject’s status as, at once, autonomous and imbricated in a system of global capital—and to link that sovereignty to an existing social relation.

The novel reflects a colonial relation, one in which the network of characters is nested in a form of imperial dispossession. Its mediation precedes this reflection, sustaining an insurgent stance toward domination such that the novel enacts processual resistance. The politics that it performs involves asserting some autonomy, not as opposition, but instead as incongruous sovereignty that positions the world of the novel as incommensurate with the colonial order that would contain it. As the novel’s point of focalization, Haynes exemplifies this incongruous position, as he remains unable to formulate a sense of sovereignty outside the frame of coloniality. At the beginning of the novel, as Haynes turns inward to debate living at Minty Alley, he recalls an exchange he had with his mother before her death. His mother implored him to become a professional,

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¹⁰⁷ Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, 98-9.
¹⁰⁸ Many of the arguments that follow these contours focus on James’ 1952 study of Herman Melville called Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways. Donald Pease argues that James theorizes Moby Dick as a series of interrelated “unnarrated memories,” establishing the novel as a form capacious enough to narrate a collective history. Donald Pease, “C.L.R. James, Moby-Dick, and the Emergence of Transnational American Studies,” Arizona Quarterly 56, no. 3 (2000):106. In a more recent article, Joseph Keith adds to Pease’s argument stating that James aimed to “decentre the realist novel as the privileged form of postcolonial representation and articulate a different representational mode.” Joseph Keith, “At the Formal Limits: C.L.R. James, Moby Dick, and the Politics of the Realist Novel,” Interventions 11, no. 3 (2009): 355. I agree with both authors that James was interested in theorizing alternatives, but contend that in this earlier moment, he was still interested in the politics embedded within the realist novel, and aimed to construct a Black subject using an existing form.
arguing, “You are black, my boy. I want you to be independent, and in these little islands for a black man to be independent means that he must have money or a profession” (Minty Alley 22). Rather than responding verbally, Haynes further reflects, “In the West Indies to get a profession meant going to England or America, and his mother had decided to send him to England” (22). His mother’s conception of independence is routed through a process of professionalization that is, in turn, routed through the colonial seat of power. It is a vision of independence that is predicated on a system of imperial power that requires Haynes to define himself as a colonial subject, rather than a sovereign subject. On the one hand, the suggested emigration that his mother maps reflects the publication history of the novel, as well as the real-world movements of its author, seemingly advocating for Haynes’ eventual flight from Trinidad. On the other hand, Haynes importantly does not chart the course his mother lays out for him, at least not within the temporal space of Minty Alley. Even in the space of the conversation, his failure to respond corresponds to a practice of inaction that is not quite resistance, but nonetheless indicates that he does not fully buy into the given form of professionalization. The teleological frame has been presented to him, and rather than rejecting it outright he passively chooses not to fit.

The fact that James closes the novel with Haynes still in Port of Spain—though not still living in Minty Alley—is the novel’s most significant resistance to the expected telos of emigration, professionalization, and incorporation into the metropole. Haynes’ stasis might be regarded as failure, or as developmental arrest; but given the suggestion that to emigrate is to participate in the colonial system, the novel’s end is more complicated than that. The last scene describes Haynes as he is still planning to leave for
England, though with no decided departure date. The familiar residents have dispersed: Mrs. Rouse has sold the building, Benoit has died, Nurse Jackson has taken a new lover, and Maisie has departed for the United States. Though Haynes regularly passes by Minty Alley without giving it a second look, the novel closes with him casting an extended, longing gaze:

One night, however, he was walking along Victoria Street and almost instinctively came to a halt when he reached Minty Alley. The front door and windows were open, and from the street he could see into the drawing-room. Husband and wife and three children lived there and one of the children was sitting at the piano playing a familiar tune from Hemy’s music-book. Over and over she played it, while he stood outside, looking in at the window and thinking of old times (244).

The observational dynamic of the two years that Haynes spent at Minty Alley is metaphorized by the open window through which he views these strangers. The conventional, nuclear family that he observes contrasts so starkly with the figures that served as the object of lurid fascination. There is the suggestion that what he sees now is a version of the “ordinary” life that yard fiction seeks to represent. The repetitive nature of the song that the child plays on the piano and the indeterminate period of time Haynes stands watching them contribute to the scene’s sense of stasis. Time at once stands still, but we also know that Haynes is thinking of old times, transforming the moment into a retrospective one. This backwards glance resists the teleology set up at the beginning of the novel, which would result in Haynes’ departure for England at the novel’s end. But Haynes does not go to England because the “independence” that is promised to him there will not make him a sovereign subject. He also does not become a sovereign subject through a heroic resistance to the colonial order and an avowed permanent residence in Trinidad. The simultaneously static and retrospective temporality refuses any positive political stance, either to vehemently oppose or endorse imperialism. Instead, it shows the
unfitness of that binaristic construction of sovereignty, suggesting that there are a range of ways to define the sovereign subject. Though incongruous sovereignty is not oriented toward action, it escapes ascribing to hegemonic political forms. The novel’s undecided ending signals the more radical possibilities that might extend from this kind of escape, the possible social relations that can cohere alongside the often-traversed colonial circuits between the colony and metropole. It would be an overstatement it to say that the novel’s end subverts the colonial system in which it is embedded—after all, Haynes is quite resolved that he will go to England—but it does call attention to the space between adoption and rejection; which I argue is the space of incongruity. There is a shadow of possibility in the unknowability of Haynes’ fate and the suggestion that he might reject the life that has been imposed on him; however, there is also a disappointment in his inability to do more than watch and remember in this moment ripe with potential.

Ultimately, incongruity gets us to the point at which we understand the forms of thought that are unfit for Black subjectivity in formation. This more flexible sovereignty was overshadowed by oppositional, heroic, male sovereignty elsewhere in James’ writing, but we can begin to imagine some of the possibilities afforded by this nascent sovereignty.

In a series of lectures James gave on the eve of Trinidad’s independence, collected as *Modern Politics*, he distills years of thinking and writing on the relation of the political subject and his state to an unbridled endorsement of the ancient Greek City-State, which “achieved a balance between the individual and the community that was never achieved before or since.”\(^{109}\) In doing so, he establishes sovereignty as a dialectic between individual freedom and the governing power of the state. As we have seen, *The Black*

*Jacobins* was also concerned with this calculation; in that text James is uneasy in his assertion of Toussaint’s exemplarity and the extent to which that exemplarity overshadows the collective he aims to consolidate as the nation of Haiti. The paradox that Toussaint confronts is particular to his experience as a Black, colonized subject; he is not simply replicating the example of Enlightenment. He is indebted to the ideology of colonial France, but also recognizes the unfitness of those models in the creation of a new political and subjective order. James characterizes this disconnect as Toussaint’s central failure:

Toussaint’s error sprang from the very qualities that made him what he was. It is easy to see to-day, as his generals saw after he was dead, where he had erred. It does not mean that they or any of us would have done better in his place. If Dessalines could see so clearly and simply, it was because the ties that bound this uneducated soldier to French civilization were of the slenderest. He saw what was under his nose so well because he saw no further. Toussaint’s failure was a failure of enlightenment not of darkness (*The Black Jacobins* 288).

This moment is often regarded as the crux of Toussaint’s tragic limitation, he fails because of an unflagging belief in Enlightenment definitions of sovereignty. Rejecting French civilization wholesale, Dessalines represents a total repudiation of colonial power, revolutionary sovereignty as its most pronounced. Toussaint retains a more ambiguous relationship to France; the pun on “enlightenment” highlights his ongoing connection to its ideals, even as his failure solidifies the fact that those ideals could not be transplanted to define sovereignty in Haiti. James turns back to the moment of the Haitian Revolution in order to show that state sovereignty cannot be achieved without some recourse to the individuated discourses that underwrite it. It is tempting to think that old notions of sovereignty, corrupted by their proximity to colonialism, might be cast off and new ones might rise in their place. After all, the ultimate lesson of Toussaint’s “failure of
enlightenment” seems to be that, at some point, we must see beyond the paradox and begin to form something new. Toussaint cannot because he is too much a product of his time. David Scott distills Toussaint’s historical limitation stating that he “could not choose not to be modern.” He goes on to claim, “James’ concern is to underline the fact that the West Indian is, in a fundamentally original way, both an object of modern power and the subject of modern life.”110 This compounded subjection made it so that Toussaint could not move beyond the paradox of sovereignty that perplexed him and stymied all action. But in describing Toussaint’s limitation through modern frameworks, there is a suggestion that James might overcome them. At the very least, we can see the value in engaging with ideological progenitors that are not as liberatory as we might like them to be. In doing so, we might come to regard literature as a useful tool in conceptualizing, practicing, and working through the subjectivities that define concrete political action. The incongruous subject position contains the flexibility to imagine multiple manifestations of that subjectivity and also invites us to see literary form as adding something useful to our understanding of the political work. I want to suggest two possibilities through which this incongruous subjectivity might contribute to other intellectual genealogies.

The first possibility has to do with the question of a gendered subject. Mrs. Rouse’s niece Maisie is largely unmentioned in this chapter, but she is an irrepressible presence in the novel and the one who seems to achieve the “independence” that Haynes’ mother outlines when she leaves for America at the novel’s end. Strikingly candid and patient with Haynes, she tells him most of the information about life at Minty Alley and

110 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 129.
they strike up a seemingly genuine friendship and, eventually, a sexual relationship, although she continues to refer to him as Mr. Haynes throughout. Critics have commented on Maisie’s centrality to the text, positing her as another alter-ego for James and noting Minty Alley’s careful treatment of gender in contrast to his other writing.\footnote{Hazel Carby comments on the sexual relationship between Maisie and Haynes, demonstrating that their class difference is never breached. Hazel Carby, \textit{Race Men}, 126; Frank Rosengarten reads Maisie as Hayne’s double and as another double to James. Frank Rosengarten, \textit{Urban Revolutionary}, 167-8.}

Indeed, as she leaves she expresses a goal that stands in stark contrast with Haynes’ aimlessness. She says, “Mr. Haynes. I want a job and I am going to get it. The captain and the whole crew can’t get anything from me unless I want to give them” (\textit{Minty Alley} 226). Her resolve to get a job is coupled with a reminder of her sexual freedom and autonomy. We might imagine an alternate novel with Maisie at its center and incongruity provides the framework through which the development of a radical, female subjectivity could develop differently.

The second possibility concerns the kind of literary tradition that might have followed from a more flexible iteration of Black subjectivity. \textit{Minty Alley} serves as the origin point for a genealogy that includes a generation of male Caribbean authors in the decades after its publication, many tracing the emigration from the colony to the metropole that Haynes plans to undertake. These novels position the Caribbean subject as a worthy literary subject and they self-consciously participate in a tradition of aesthetic modernism to shore up that subject’s claim to aesthetic elevation. George Lamming theorizes “the sovereignty of imagination” to deny critiques that this body of Caribbean literature is overly responsive to the formal mandates and thematic concerns of Western novels. The sovereignty of the imagination involves placing the other into concerted
relation with the self and achieving sovereignty not through the denial of the other, but through the relegation of the other into a role that constitutes the self. Lamming writes, “While I cannot erase or deny the Other, what I can do is express a sovereignty of self which places the Other in a perspective that I want it to be placed in at an individual level.” For Lamming, this transformation happens through literature, where the Caribbean subject asserts himself by assigning the place of the Other. It is, however, a model of oppositional sovereignty, one in which the “I” of Lamming’s formulation understands himself in contradistinction to the “Other.” Whereas Minty Alley sketches a series of relations that are more unfixed, Lamming is intent on settling the relation between the self and the other. The residue of James’ interest in social relations as a basis for a politics remains in Lamming’s theory, but it has reified into a rigid, Manichean structure.

Together these examples consider the unlikely inheritors of the incongruous sovereignty that we see in James’ early work. Though the literary tradition that grew in the wake of Minty Alley was masculine and evinced a binary between the adoption or rejection of colonial power and Western aesthetics, the undecided social relation of the novel leaves space for alternate orientations toward existing systems of power. Regarding Maisie as a subject in her own right, if an unexplored one, restores some of the novel’s democratic promise and suggests it could represent a range of subjectivities. And thinking of Minty Alley as participating in a more diffuse tradition of political resistance suggests that those subjectivities might have unexplored political orientations. Ultimately, in paying attention to C.L.R. James’ experiment with the novel form, we have a more

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capacious sense of the range of subjectivities that he theorizes through his writing. The novel adds new forms of sovereignty to our critical vocabulary, enabling new forms of political action.
CHAPTER 2:
“Awake to the Beautiful Spirit”: Zora Neale Hurston and the Problem of Governability

In 1939 Sigmund Freud published *Moses and Monotheism*, a book that shocked the reading public with its contention that Moses had not been a Hebrew, but instead was born to a royal Egyptian family and subsequently murdered by the Hebrew people in the wilderness. Divisive in its representation of the origin of the Hebrew nation as a singularly violent event, the book was largely ignored by Freud’s contemporaries. That same year Zora Neale Hurston published her own exploration of the Mosaic myth, a text that was also forgotten. Her effort, a magisterial novel entitled *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, combined Black vernacular, folklore, and scripture to imagine Moses’ deliverance of the Hebrew people. Hurston spent the better part of a decade working on the novel, developing a conception of Moses as a markedly flexible figure through short stories, and in her highly-regarded collection of folktales *Mules and Men*. By exploring the significance of Moses in such generically diverse venues, Hurston signals an abiding interest in the way that Moses could signify differently in different contexts. Throughout, however, she maintains the centrality of Moses as a figure in black expressive culture, and even suggests black ownership over the figure. In her introduction to the novel, she writes:

Moses was an old man with a beard. He was the great law-giver. He had some trouble with Pharaoh about some plagues and led the Children of Israel out of

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Egypt and on to the Promised Land. He died on Mount Nebo and the angels buried him there. That is the common concept of Moses in the Christian world.

But there are other concepts of Moses abroad in the world. Asia and the Near East are sown with legends of this character. They are so numerous and so varied that some students have come to doubt if the Moses of the Christian concept is real. Then Africa has her mouth on Moses. All across the continent there are the legends of the greatness of Moses, but not because of his beard nor because he brought the laws down from Sinai. No, he is revered because he had the power to go up the mountain and to bring them down.\textsuperscript{115}

Hurston reduces the specificity of the book of Exodus to a series of abstract details. The evocation of “some trouble with Pharaoh” and “some plagues” minimizes the monumental events that precipitate the formation of modern Judeo-Christianity. The “common concept” that undergirds institutionalized religion gets immediately subordinated to the others, conceptions so varied that they call accepted doctrine into question. But, rather than dispensing wholesale with the Biblical account, Hurston emphasizes alternate aspects of the story, adapting the significance so that it aligns with the interests of its African interpreters. The process of thematic reformulation that this passage describes demonstrates Moses’ fungibility, even as it locates black oral culture as a site of his making and remaking.

Hurston identifies Moses’ power as the central point of interest in African retellings. Rather than the iconography of the staff and beard, or his delivery of the Ten Commandments, Africa is fascinated by Moses’ proximity to God. Moses was, at the time of Hurston’s writing, already a flexible site of fabulation, anchoring Freud’s text to Hurston’s, and to others that reimagined Exodus for their own purposes.\textsuperscript{116} Also notable


are Lincoln Steffens’ *Moses in Red* (1926), a study that mines Exodus for its instructive potential in theorizing twentieth-century concept of revolution, and *Moses, A Novel* (1928) by Louis Untermeyer, a literary interpretation of Exodus. Though the texts span different genres and communicate distinct political leanings—Steffens and Untermeyer were avowed Leftists—they all demonstrate the trope of using Moses as a prism through which authors could think through the formation of a modern state. Poised, as he was, at the founding of the Hebrew nation, Moses’ practices of leadership define the character of his fledgling nation. The fact that his power is buttressed by direct interchange with God creates a nation of followers that also enjoy proximity to God, even if removed by one degree. When African people circulate stories about Moses, as Hurston contends they do, they reinforce a shared interest in the uses of power at this foundational moment of state formation. The nation that coheres at the juncture of belief and capitulation to power is a problem space that Hurston returns to throughout her writing to better understand the nature of governance.

This chapter argues that Zora Neale Hurston writes about religious leadership as a way of imagining a more democratic form of governance. Although Hurston does not articulate a call for new governance, or propose a liberatory alternative, reading her as a political theorist allows us to see the dialectical relationship between democratic sociality and despotic leadership at play when defining Black political collectives. Even as she explores collectives governed democratically and despotically, her critique does not adhere to neat binaries. Though she is critical of patriarchal leadership, she does not see a female leader as immune to the pitfalls of governance. Similarly, although voodoo carries

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the exciting charge of being a uniquely Black form of cultural production, it also reproduces power dynamics that imbue its leaders with knowledge that exists in constitutive distinction from the uninformed participation of the masses. Literary form is a lens through which Hurston can negotiate the tension between centralized and distributed power; although, I use that term in a loose sense. This chapter reads across Hurston’s output, considering texts that have been traditionally read as anthropological, and those read as literary, as well as some interesting test cases that might be read in either direction. My intent is not to treat her writing binaristically, but instead to continue work being done that considers the anthropological and literary aspects of her writing across genres. María Eugenia Cotera, for example, argues that Hurston’s writing “dodges and feints, moves in and out of discursive guises and narrative genres. Hurston doesn’t simply rewrite any number of narrative norms; she writes between them, deploying key signatures of authorship and authority from folklore scholarship, Boasian anthropology, literature, and the Black vernacular tradition.” The porousness of genre in Hurston’s writing makes specific claims about the nature of truth and authority, which have ramifications for the way that she theorizes governance. Her anthropological writings complicate facticity by placing moments of authority in dissipated collectives, thereby resisting notions of absolute truth. Government, historical events, and the details of leadership become the subject of gossip and speculation. In her novels, Hurston works from the other direction: reining in the proliferating gossip with narratorial commentary that signals the need for new forms of leadership. Through both techniques she communicates critique or theorization through the deployment of narrative, paying

particular attention to the structuring, sequencing, and juxtaposition between fact, fabrication, myth, folklore, observation, and the other constituent elements that make up her hybrid literary-anthropological writing practice.

In Hurston’s writing about religion, she reveals a hybridized version of Christianity that incorporates elements of African religious practices that corresponds to a Black collective. Hurston capitalizes on the community-building elements of religious practice, configuring the imaginary collectives that she describes in writing through an exploration of their shared beliefs.\footnote{Hurston adapted the prevailing definition of a religion from Emile Durkheim, who argues, “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Elementary Forms of Religious Life}, translated by Karen Fields (1912. New York: Free Press, 1995), 62.}

Anticipating scholars of Black religion like Albert Raboteau, Hurston’s work demonstrates the elements of religious understanding that are linked to Black cultural practices.\footnote{Albert Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).}

These elements were neither “purely” African, nor “Euro-American;” instead, as Lawrence Levine argues “culture is not a fixed condition but a process: the product of an interaction between the past and present.”\footnote{Lawrence Levine, \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom} (1977. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.}

Levine goes on to argue that this process of syncretism underwrote the movement toward Black consciousness, locating the folktale, spiritual, and secular songs as the essential cultural elements that produced such consciousness. Levine, Raboteau, and, later, Sterling Stuckey show how Black cultural consciousness undergirds the movement towards freedom for all Black people. Writing on W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of Black nationalism, Stuckey argues, “he brought an unusual grasp of the spiritual life of African people to his Pan-African concerns, and he used black folklore as an important index to their spiritual
condition.” Stuckey regards Du Bois as one exemplar of the method of constructing a conception of Black nationalism around attention to the Black cultural imaginary. The “spiritual condition” that Du Bois indexes in his writing reveals the desire for Black national forms. While Levine and Raboteau focus on collective forms, Stuckey’s intervention was to think about how those forms are mediated through the political thought of figures like Du Bois, David Walker, Henry Highland Garnett, and Paul Robeson. By drawing this genealogy and excluding Zora Neale Hurston, he produces a conception of Black nationalism that rests easily on a masculine, individual subject that can successfully mediate the cultural production of the masses. In paying attention to Hurston, I aim to unsettle this model of nationalism and suggest that Hurston’s work allows us to see similar questions and negotiations at play as she seeks to define an individual’s relationship to a collective. In rejecting notions of liberal individualism that lie at the heart of Stuckey’s model of Black nationalism, I argue that Hurston is radical in her search for governmental forms that would distribute power more democratically.

I track the narrative movement that allows Hurston to compose narratives that asymptotically tend towards an imagination of representative structures of governance. This term describes narrative as being in process, and captures the way that Hurston stitches together multiple elements for both generic and thematic instability. Formally her writing reflects the impossibility to define or locate a site of Black democratic governance, one that she suggests would adequately represent the collective politically and aesthetically. That tension has been live since the start of Hurston’s criticism. Hazel Carby identifies a “discursive displacement of contemporary social crises” that centers

the aestheticized folkloric production of rural Black people while ignoring the urgent concerns of a growing Black urban population.\footnote{Carby goes on to argue, “Hurston could not entirely escape the intellectual practice that she so despised, a practice that reinterpreted and redefined a folk consciousness in its own elitist terms. Hurston may not have dressed the spirituals in tuxedos but her attitude toward folk culture was not unmediated; she did have a clear framework of interpretation, a construct that enables her particular representation of a black, rural consciousness.” Hazel Carby, “Politics of Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk,” in New Essays in Their Eyes Were Watching God, edited by Michael Awkward (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 76; 121.} Carby’s claim is limited by its positioning at the vanguard of scholarship on Hurston, a period during which the work discussed was limited to rural communities in the United States, but she is right to point to Hurston’s deliberate mediation in depicting black life. The choices that Hurston makes—to adhere to generic mandates or to rebuke them—add up to a discursive practice that describes a democratic form of governance. That form remains unseen, but reading across literary form makes visible the ideological struggle, negotiation, and impossible tensions that animate black representation.

This chapter begins with the Lovelace Sermon, a speech that Hurston recorded in 1929, and that appears subsequently in a number of forms. The first section contrasts the sermon as it appears in a play called The Sermon in the Valley and in Nancy Cunard’s Negro Anthology, demonstrating a process of authorial mediation set against a desire for cultural accuracy that animates the text. I then read Hurston’s 1939 novel Moses, Man of the Mountain as an expansion on this authorial practice, but contend that by this point Hurston has widened the scope of her criticism and suggests that the structure of leadership itself might need to change in order to serve the needs of the masses. I suggest that the disillusionment that comes through by the time she writes Moses is inflected by her time in Haiti, and the work she does writing Tell My Horse. The structural and generic difficulty of that text maps onto a larger difficulty in its dealing with questions of
governance. I dwell on the book’s middle section, called “Politics and Personalities of Haiti,” arguing that it presents a challenge to readers of the text that want to posit Haitian voodoo as liberatory. Hurston validates the United States’ occupation of Haiti, suggesting that the route to democracy might most expediently go through an existing model. Yet, she also values voodoo as a space of spiritual expression and representation. What results is an entangled vision of Black governance that cannot slip the yoke of American exceptionalism, even as it includes potentially political formations that gesture towards an alternative. In the chapter’s coda, I read a sketch about Mother Catherine, a spiritualist leader from New Orleans, with whom Hurston studied, and who she seems to offer as a model for that alternate form of governance. Mother Catherine, however, remains both contained in her religious enclosure and structurally constrained by an inassimilable tension between her representativeness and exceptionality. Taken together, Hurston’s writing shows that the new governmental formation that might best account for Black life must work through the problem of leadership. It is not a tension that Hurston can resolve, but she shows how literary form becomes a prism through which we can appreciate the act of theorizing.

I. The Lovelace Sermon

The complicated, intersecting, and contradictory links between Hurston’s commitment to Black representation, her white patrons, and her academic training collide in the first line of Mules and Men. Hurston writes, “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore.’”

124 She leaves that “somebody” purposefully

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124 Zora Neale Hurston, Mules and Men, 1.
unclear, though she references both anthropologist Franz Boas and her patron, Charlotte Mason. With their academic backing and financial support, Hurston makes several trips to Florida between 1927 and 1929, most at the expense of Mason, and much of which is chronicled in *Mules and Men*. In May of 1929 in Eau Gallie, Florida, Hurston heard a sermon by a preacher named C.C. Lovelace. Though the sermon does not make it into *Mules in Men*, it does get reprinted and repurposed in a number of different forms, appearing first as part of a play in 1931, then as a stand-alone sketch in Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology* in 1934, and finally in Hurston’s debut novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* later in that same year. The text of the sermon, as well as Hurston’s transformation of it to fit distinct generic shape, show Hurston trying to resolve an uneasy relation between the performative mastery of the preacher and the potential silence of his followers. Contextualizing that tension as one that, in this early moment of her career must be played out in front of the white patrons that support, stage, and publish this work, places further pressure on the power relation. Hurston’s adaptation of the sermon must attend to an imposed sense of “authenticity” wherein her writing reveals some central “truth” about Black religious practice. Among the many reasons that notions of “authenticity” were and remain problematic is the fact that that evaluation assumes some level of stability: that whatever “truth” is revealed depends upon a fixed set of conditions, and a fixed relation

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125 On Boas, she writes, “Dr. Boas asked me where I wanted to work and I said, “Florida”; she subsequently thanks Mason at the end of the introduction, writing, “Before I enter the township, I wish to make acknowledgements to Mrs. R. Osgood Mason of New York City. She backed my falling in a hearty way, in a spiritual way, and in addition financed the whole expedition in the manner of the Great Soul that she is. The world’s most gallant woman.” (*Mules and Men* 4). Both acknowledgements preserve Hurston’s autonomy over the expedition, especially her mention of Boas who gives her the choice about where she wants to conduct fieldwork. Reference to Mason’s financial patronage is key—it reveals the extent to which Hurston was dependent upon Mason’s particular interests to finance her work.

between preacher and congregants. The fact that Hurston’s writing preserves that instability demonstrates that the problem is irresolvable and posits the condition of Black leadership as one in which that relation remains unfixed and ever-changing.

The Lovelace sermon is first presented to the public as a play called *The Sermon in the Valley*. With a title that invokes the Sermon on the Mount, the play stages a preacher giving the sermon to a group of congregants. It was first performed in 1931 by the Gilpin players in Cleveland, Ohio, a theater that catered to a white audience, but that also encouraged, and in some cases edited, the work of emerging, Black playwrights.\(^\text{127}\) In Hurston’s case, her transcription of the sermon was edited and supplemented by white editors Rowena and Russell Jelliffe who added characters and shifted the emphasis of the sermon to be about redemption.\(^\text{128}\) Placing the sermon on the stage and adding other characters concretizes the situation in which a sermon happens. It makes evident the fact that there is an audience and, in the case of *The Sermon in the Valley*, allows them to talk back. For example, Brother Ezra, the character that delivers the Lovelace sermon, is interrupted by an individual character named Caroline, and also the collective flock of parishioners:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Brother Ezra:} \\
\text{Then Jesus sat down on the rim of the ship,} \\
\text{Took the hooks of His power and lifted the billows into His lap,} \\
\text{Rocked the winds to sleep on His arm saying,—} \\
\text{“Peace, be still.”} \\
\text{And the Bible says there was calm.}
\end{align*}
\]


\(^{\text{128}}\) In *Collected Plays* editors Cole and Mitchell summarize the differences between the play and the sermon’s incorporation into *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* as follows: “A comparison between *The Sermon in the Valley*, Hurston’s transcription, and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* indicates that Jelliffe created the character of Brother Ezra and Caroline, as well as reframing the sermon itself into one that emphasizes redemption rather than betrayal....The redirection of the sermon toward redemption is consistent with the integrationist aims of Karamu House.” *Collected Plays*, 192.
He said He would calm the ocean.
Caroline: *(Sings)*
   He said He would calm the ocean
Flock: *(Sings)*
   Oh yes He would
Caroline:
   He said He would calm the ocean
Flock:
   Oh yes He said he would
Caroline:
   He said He would calm the rollin’ seas
Flock:
   He said He would.

Dramatic structure and the addition of dedicated characters make the participatory nature of the sermon explicit. It shifts the virtuosity of the performance from its sole vestment in the preacher-performer and onto the other members of the congregation. The repetition of “He said He would calm the ocean” and the “He said He would” shows Caroline and the congregants picking up on the language of the sermon, repeating and reformulating it for musical and vocal interpretation. It holds their performances on an equal plane with the preacher’s. We might, for example, imagine the expressivity with which the Caroline character might sing her line. That dynamic, improvisatory performance will capture the audience’s attention to the same, or an even greater, degree as the preacher’s words. Further, the act of repeating the preacher’s words invests the congregants with ownership of those words. Rather than portraying Brother Ezra as being in a state of privileged communion with scripture, collective repetition of the sermon’s phrases invests all of the speakers with the same sense of communion. This sermon cannot be disarticulated from
its setting, and its setting is equally performative and virtuosic. As such, Hurston’s
dramatic interpretation of the sermon presents a version of egalitarian interplay between
preacher and congregants, one in which everyone is granted the right to perform. The
play resists static interpretation of the preacher’s word, and also denies that there is any
stable, authoritative relationship between the preacher and the flock.

This almost utopian egalitarianism is drama’s prerogative; all of the bodies on the
stage are capable of commanding attention to essentially an equal degree. When Hurston
set down the sermon in more textually-bounded forms, the congregants were forced to
fall away, thereby reinvesting the preacher with attention and, unfortunately, authority.
That authority is problematic in the ways that it fixes the preacher in a position of power
over his congregants and the extent to which it values his individual, exceptional ability
to preach. The fact that Hurston sees and writes drama with this sense of potentiality, it
should be noted, is not the result of conventions of her time. In fact, most of the work that
was staged in the 1920s was social realist and naturalist drama, bleak and often over-
wrought performances of modernity’s alienation. Hurston was unique in both what she
chose to stage in her drama, and also in her ongoing, persistent contention that the
everyday stuff of Black life was always already dramatic.¹²⁹ Elin Diamond connects that
contention to Hurston’s inter-generic writing practice. She writes, “Counter to the
notion… that Hurston’s social science training did battle with her creative impulses, I
would suggest that it was precisely [Franz] Boas’s diffusionism and [Ruth] Benedict’s
‘configurations’ that allowed Hurston to breach mainstream drama’s naturalistic

¹²⁹ In her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston begins with a section titled “Drama” in
which she contends, “Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized.” Zora Neale Hurston,
Library Digital Archive, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2c6248c0-4abd-0134-9255-00505686a51c
stranglehold and invent a new idiom for theatrical performance.”¹³⁰ I suggest that this dynamic worked for Hurston in the other direction. Because of her work as a dramatist, even her prose leaves space for the interjection of the collective in depictions of what seem to be exceptionality. Hurston’s theatrical intuition allowed her to break with the expectations of authority indigenous to anthropological practice.

The contributions that Hurston makes to Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology*, published in London in 1934, are purportedly authoritative representations of Black life, though the vastness of the anthology seems to structurally resist any claims to a monolithic representation of Blackness. Cunard was a British writer and heiress who lived most of her life in Paris and was a longtime activist for racial equality, anti-fascism, and pacifism. Her ambition in compiling the anthology was to capture the reality of Black political struggle, as well as creative output, pairing achievement with pain as a way to work towards political change. The anthology’s foreword states, “It was necessary to make this book—and I think in this manner, an Anthology of some 150 voices of both races—for the recording of the struggles and achievements, the persecutions and the revolts against them, of the Negro peoples.”¹³¹ Cunard’s editorial statement marks the anthology as the form apt to concatenate the history, art, and essays on Black culture. It also seems particularly adept at making cross-national continuities and distinctions evident. Brent Hayes Edwards identifies *Negro* as “an attempt to document discourses of black internationalism in a manner that would combine the political—and more particularly the communist—with the poetic, the musical, the vernacular, the historical.

¹³¹ Nancy Cunard, *Negro Anthology*, iii.
the sculptural, and the ethnological.” Hurston’s participation in Cunard’s project imbues that writing, which might be called ethnographic, with a political charge. It is what Rachel Farebrother identifies as the “productive juxtaposition for the purposes of political critique.” The anthology has enormous potential for bringing together distinct voices speaking about the condition of Blackness worldwide, and making a case for racial equality.

The way that the anthology, and specifically Hurston’s contribution to it, is organized further elucidates the productive juxtaposition Cunard uses to connect religious expression to a wider sense of Black expressive culture. The anthology has seven sections, “America,” “Negro Stars,” “Music,” “Poetry,” “West Indies,” “Europe,” and “Africa.” Hurston offers six essays to the third chapter of the “America” section: “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” “Conversions and Visions,” “Shouting,” “The Sermon,” “Mother Catherine,” which describes the leader of a New Orleans spiritualist church; and “Uncle Monday,” which details a practitioner of voodoo. With the exception of “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” there is an overt focus on forms of religious expression across Hurston’s contributions. In her foreword, Cunard notes, “Zora Neale Hurston has contributed some studies which portray the background of Negro folk-

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imagination, the poetic and rhythmic intensity of their religious expression, the sole emotional outlet that was permitted in slavery days (Negro iii)” Cunard’s assessment does a lot of synthetic work, tying Black religious and expressive culture to the history of slavery and noting that the hybridized African-Christian forms are descended from the restrictions placed on enslaved Black people. She makes the implicit argument that Hurston’s depictions of religion transcend the literal practice of a religion to say something about the “folk-imagination” and “emotional outlet” of Black Americans. This is, perhaps, where “Characteristics of Negro Expression” fits in among a series of other essays that explicitly deal with religious practice. Without specific reference to religion, “Characteristics” makes evident the connection between religious content and the dynamic process of making folklore, a process that Hurston argues “is still in the making.” She further describes folklore as a realm in which “the angels and apostles walk and talk like section hands. And through it all walks Jack, the greatest culture hero of the South; Jack beats them all—even the Devil, who is often smarter than God” (Negro 42). Likening angels and apostles, not only to human beings, but to the Black laborers that works sections of the expanding railroad, shows the way in which religious culture and folk culture have fused. What constitutes religion and what constitutes the folk cannot be easily separated, and the anthology’s form upholds this generic slipperiness.

Cunard refers to Hurston’s contributions as “studies,” and includes her essays in a chapter with an essay called “Negro Folklore in North Carolina,” which itself suggests that Hurston is meant to be read in an anthropological mode. “Negro Folklore in North Carolina” was written by an amateur folklorist and graduate student at the University of North Carolina named Anthony Buttitta, who would go on to found the literary magazine
Contempo and travel in circles that included Ezra Pound, William Faulkner, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Buttitta’s essay sets up a paradigm of the “all-believing Negro” that ascribes to the tenets of Christianity and a more imaginative form of folk culture. From his observations, he concludes that, “The Negro is not as all-believing as he has been shown to be; he is even moving away from the church” (Negro 66). Such dichotomous thinking was in line with prevailing discourse about Blackness and its relation to modernity: part of the project of Negro was to posit the Black person as a modern subject. In contrast to Buttitta and other anthropologists, Hurston does not practice such dichotomous thinking. Black people, she suggests, are modern because of their ability to combine elements of cultural—religious, secular, historical, popular—to create new folkloric forms.

“The Sermon,” as it appears in Negro is an example of such a new form. Though the sermon bears traces of Hurston’s process of anthropological collection, we can also see Hurston’s mediation, which is literary and highlights the preacher’s exemplarity. The text becomes at once fact and fiction, a celebration of an ongoing and collective practice of folkloric performance, and also documentation of one, individual performance. The sermon is recorded as four short paragraphs of prose with specific reference to the bible, titled “Introduction,” and includes an annotation that it is “(spoken)” followed by what Hurston marks as the Sermon, a 220-line poem that bears the traces of its virtuosic performance through the insertion of “Ha!” and “Ah!” throughout.

137 See Negro, 50-54 for the specific notations. For my readings of these vocal intrusions, I am indebted to Ashon T. Crawley and his notation of “noise” with its disruptive possibilities. He reads the “joyful noise” of the congregants and preachers as “a critique of the given world, a political economy of austerity and exploitation.” Ashon T. Crawley, Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016), 144.
is evidence of the aesthetic prowess of this preacher, Hurston makes a number of choices in how to set her observations down on the page, rendering her artistically engaged in producing the hybrid oral-written document. Eric Sundquist observes, “Here and elsewhere, her use of enjambment, repetition, assonance, and a metrical scheme based on breathing rather than syllabic count drive the verse into a form that is ‘readable’ only to the degree that it is ‘heard.’”

Sundquist emphasizes the formal choices that Hurston makes in order to render the text recognizable as oral. Marking it readable only to the degree that it is heard, however, minimizes the extent to which Hurston’s choices were oriented towards translating that oral performance into written expression that stretches across a number of literary genres. It denies that Hurston herself exercises creative agency, or that she might make a comment on the preacher and his relation to his congregants.

While the sermon in its written form leaves the participatory dynamics of the church scene that are rendered so energetically in the play version opaque, it captures the performative flourishes that the preacher has adopted to engage an audience. Although there is no audience responding to his words, it is clear that the words are meant to incite a response. Both Robert Hemenway and Eric Sundquist detail Hurston’s correspondence with James Weldon Johnson as she was adapting the sermon for inclusion in her novel *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*. Johnson’s volume *God’s Trombones*, which was published in 1927, had captured the practice of Black preaching without the use of dialect.

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140 This authorial choice came at Johnson’s assessment that “dialect had typically been the medium of picturesque racism.” Eric Sundquist, *Hammers of Creation*, 56.
Hurston’s choice to use the vernacular alongside quoted passages results in preacherly code switching, a practice by which the preacher asserts his discursive control over both the Biblical content and the performative energy. Picking up at the moment where I left off in the reading of the play, the sermon transitions into an ecstatic vision of Jesus calming the proverbial storm:

I can see him wid de eye of faith.
When He went from Pilate’s house
Wid the crown of seventy-two wounds upon His head
I can see Him as He mounted Calvary and hung upon de cross for our sins.
I can see-ee-ee
De mountains fall to their rocky knees when He cried
“My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?”
The mountains fell to their rocky knees and trembled like a beast…. (Negro 53).

Lovelace’s vision of the crucifixion oscillates between granular detail that demonstrates his command of Biblical source material and discursive gestures that suggest the sermon’s inextricability from its performed context. Hurston’s use of the vernacular has been widely commented upon, and here it is striking how dialect stands in contrast to the passage’s quoted line, “My God, my God! Why hast Thou forsaken me?” Arguably the most famous and repeated line in the entire New Testament, the invocation of Biblical language signals facility with the scriptures befitting a preacher. His ability to code switch, or move between registers of Black vernacular, ecstatic performative gesture, and scriptural citation, marks the preacher as uniquely gifted in both the religious and performative arenas of his work. The repetition of the image of the mountain falling to its knees further demonstrates the preacher’s subtle command over language. In its first utterance, he uses “de,” a marker of dialect, and the mountains “fall” in the present tense. By contrast, the second instance uses “the,” eschewing dialect and the mountains “fell” in the past tense, linking the image directly to the scene of crucifixion invoked by the
quoted line that precedes it. This repetition with a difference reveals the multiple systems of knowledge at play in the invocation of biblical verse. It confirms knowledge of the text, even as it asserts verbal mastery in communicating that text, and it positions the sermon’s speaker a master of both.

Hurston’s transcription of this sermon tests the limit of the preacher’s purported mastery. In addition to textual, performative, and linguistic facility, the passage also positions the preacher as exceptional because of his access to the divine vision that his sermon narrates. Though the passage’s first line implies that other congregants can also see through the “eye of faith,” the climactic moment, “I can see-eee-ee” belongs to the preacher alone. Here virtuosic performance collapses onto divine vision and, unlike the play version, there is no intrusion by the congregants to remind us that this vision might be collective. Even Hurston’s authorial presence seems to fall away, giving the appearance of unmediated religious ecstasy. But the inclusion of the unpunctuated line “I can see-eee-ee,” an anomaly amongst longer lines, and lines without vocal inflection rendered on the page, was ultimately Hurston’s choice. Intentional or not, it structures the passage around the singular vision of the preacher, betraying Hurston’s ongoing interest in exceptionality. That exceptionality is uneasily contained within the structure of the anthropological transcription: the preacher’s gift is held up as an iterable example of Black expressive culture, even as it is marked unique.

Recalling the “The Sermon’s” place as one of several essays Hurston contributed to *Negro* and the “productive juxtaposition” that allows us to see continuity and commentary across the anthology, the essay “Shouting” adds accounts of only the verbal intrusions of the congregants. Without the preacher figure, Hurston’s catalogue of
outbursts turn attention to the reactions to the religious service, suggesting that ecstasy can be a performance too. In one example, Hurston observes: “During Sermon. Man quietly weeping: nineteen seconds. Cried “Lawd! My soul is burning with hallow-ed fire!” Rises and turns around six times. Carried outside by deacon” (Negro 50). Her manner of recording the location, duration, and content of the outburst lends the experience quantifiability. It is as if by capturing the granular details of twelve episodes of religious ecstasy she can express something about the quality of the Black religious experience. Writing in this informational mode suggests communicability innate to this mode of expression. It offers religious experience as data points that build towards a larger case for the importance of Black expressive culture. It additionally asserts that, to understand Black expressive culture more fully, the data points must include the cultural production of the masses. Placing the shouts of congregants on an equal plane with the performance of the church’s preacher narrates the service from the bottom up. In doing so Hurston models a way of valuing the oral practices of the collective, noting that those practices are what coalesce into the organizing principles that define communities, whether they are bound by locality or by race. It is exactly this adaptive practice that she will turn to through the rest of her writing career to theorize leadership and governance.

II. Moses, Man of the Mountain

Lovelace’s place at the head of a congregation epitomizes the fragile balance between the leader and the mass, suggesting that democratic leadership practices can problematize but not completely disrupt the calculus of control. When Hurston shifts to write about Moses, a man ordained by God to rule, the novel should model the founding of an ideal democratic nation. But it does not. Hurston’s Moses is plagued by uncertainty:
an irresolvable mystery about his parentage, dissenting Hebrews, conflicting religious alignments, and an uneven relationship with God. Set against a Mosaic myth that emphasizes Moses’ divine knowledge and his heroic deliverance of the Hebrew people to Israel, this uncertain and ambivalent Moses reveals the point at which divine leadership cracks. If leadership that is destined by God fails, then what form of leadership can construct a workable form of governance? Is liberatory leadership possible? Two recent considerations of the novel grapple with these questions. Erica Edwards focuses on the gendered dynamics of Moses’ leadership, arguing that he supplants the ecstatic, contestatory performance of his sister Miriam. Using the trope of the gothic novel, she casts Miriam as the madwoman in the attic and Moses as the transformed monster, torn between tyranny and democracy, “a type of Frankensteinian monster, created for good but trapped in evil.” For Edwards, Moses’ leadership is flawed in its highly-gendered exclusion, but also and more persistently for its denial of democratic participation. Because of Moses’ supernatural power—ordained, it seems, equally by God and Hurston’s Jethro, a sort of voodoo priest—he cannot account for his Israelite followers, and his governance becomes an accrual of power. Rather than casting Moses as liberator, Edwards argues that he is made a dictator.

James Edward Ford shifts Edwards’ emphasis from the monstrous construction of Moses, to his use of power; he aptly identifies one of the novel’s central concerns as the ability for a mass to exert some agency against the force of authoritarian leadership. Using a psychoanalytic frame, Ford understands the relationship between the mass that he calls the “dark proletariat” and its leader as one characterized by guilt brought about

by transference; the dark proletariat’s desire for a savior and leader is both fulfilled by Moses, but also stymied by his inability to “deliver” them to a more democratic future: “Hurston writes Moses to understand how the ‘drama’ that ‘permeates’ black life grapples with the illusions of a political messiah who will single-handedly rescue it from Western racism, class and gender exploitation, or—most importantly, from itself.”

Ford makes a presentist claim, one that recuperates early commentary by Deborah McDowell and Blyden Jackson by centralizing Hurston’s views on nationalism, globalization, and political history. He shifts the readings of the novel that linger on Hurston’s treatment of gender, or on the unresolved question of Moses’ race and parentage, to a question of power. Ford and Edwards are right to read the novel as a portrait of power gone haywire, but their readings do not make enough of Moses’ introspection: the fact that he realizes that things have gone haywire. Thus, while his character does not solve these thorny questions around leadership, Hurston stages his process of working through the questions, and models a process of theorization that might arrive at a new, democratic form.

Throughout the novel, Hurston discursively aligns Hebrew identity with Blackness, though it is also true that the two categories operate differently. Using language that refers to furtive Hebrew origins in the royal family, she invokes the trope of

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mixed ancestry. Early in the novel a Hebrew elder remarks, “There is plenty of Hebrew blood in that family already. That is why that Pharaoh wants to kill us all off. He is scared somebody will come along and tell who his real folks are.” Rumors about mixed heritage plague the Pharaoh long before Moses’ birth and the accepted fact of union between Hebrews and Egyptians underscores the Hebrew claim to citizenship. The novel does not posit any racial difference along observable lines, as might be expected from Hurston’s background in anthropology. Instead, Hebrew identity is rooted in a claim of kinship. Moses’ becoming Hebrew is a discursive transformation: through being named as Hebrew, he becomes marked as a racial subject. Hurston renders Moses’ transformation as a “crossing over,” signaling the discontinuity between how he understood himself as an Egyptian subject and how he begins to reconfigure his identity as a liberator of the enslaved Hebrews. After killing an Egyptian overseer in defense of a Hebrew slave who was being beaten, Moses flees from Egypt. His movement out of Egypt is marked by the loss of citizenship. Hurston writes:

Moses had crossed over. He was not in Egypt. He had crossed over and now he was not an Egyptian. He had crossed over. The short sword at his thigh had a jeweled hilt but he had crossed over and so it was no longer the sign of high birth and power. He had crossed over, so he sat down on a rock near the seashore to rest himself. He had crossed over so he was not of the house of Pharaoh. He did not own a palace because he had crossed over. He did not have an Ethiopian Princess for a wife. He had crossed over. He did not have friends to sustain him. He had crossed over. He did not have enemies to strain against his strength and power. He had crossed over. He was subject to no law except the laws of tooth and talon. He had crossed over. The sun who was his friend and ancestor in Egypt was arrogant and bitter in Asia. He had crossed over. He felt as empty as a post hole for he was none of the things he once had been. He was a man sitting on a rock. He had crossed over (Moses, Man of the Mountain 78).

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Moses’ transformation is described first in terms of a loss of his Egyptian identity and then in terms of his regaining of a sense of his humanity. The act of crossing over is initially figured as a change in place, a recognition of the fact that he is no longer physically in Egypt. Then, the trappings of his former status a member of the court take on increasing meaninglessness. Though the language remains relatively neutral throughout the catalogue of things he has lost, the fact that Hurston notes both the loss of friends and enemies, renders the alternatingly exhilarating and terrifying reality of starting over. Identifying as “subject to no law except the laws of tooth and talon” signals Moses’ newfound freedom as much as it indicates an abnegation of the laws that governed his life in Egypt. That freedom is not as idealized as we might expect, as it is coupled with the bitterness of the sun and the emptiness that he feels in recognizing the loss of his identity. Moses has experienced an undeniable loss of status in the act of crossing over, and the repetition of that phrase as he reckons with all that he has lost reveals the permanence of that act. His movement from Egyptian to Hebrew leader is absolute. It does not depend on the truth of his former wife’s claims, nor on any truth claims about his parentage. Instead, it depends on this willed act of crossing over. Even as he gives up his identity and status as an Egyptian, he begins to discover his status as a man. Ending this passage with the image of Moses as “a man sitting on a rock” initiates the process by which he will construct a new style of leadership that is both supported and critiqued because of his status as a man.

Following the contours of the biblical myth, Hurston depicts Moses’ time in the desert as a pupil to Jethro. Moses’ interval away from Egypt stages a transformation from the hollowed out version of man that we see upon his act of “crossing over” to, as Moses
himself puts it, “a man that has been called” (130). In casting Moses as being conversant with God, Hurston complicates the critique of his claim to leadership. He is not, as Pharaoh is, a man continually and vainly shoring up an earthly show of power. Instead, his power comes through an ongoing exchange with God and his leadership is directed by divine decree. In the scene of the burning bush, Hurston describes Moses compelled to the direction of God, as if it had been predestined: “Moses, awed though he was, could no more help coming closer to try to see the why of the burning bush than he could quit growing old. Both things were bound up in his birth” (125). His attraction to the awe-inspiring sight of the burning bush is metonymic for the way that he is drawn into carrying out the will of God. The suggestion is that Moses, despite his still-undisclosed parentage, has been predestined for the role initiated by this encounter. He is given the walking stick that Hurston describes in the novel’s introduction, described as both “a walking stick carved in the imitation of a snake” and an object that he instinctively senses, “It was his, he knew by the feel of it. It was the rest of him” (127). The sense-knowledge of the stick furthers the sense that he has been predestined for this role. In many ways, it replaces the trappings of his Egyptian identity—for example, the sword—that cease to hold meaning after his act of crossing over. Emptied of the signifiers that made him an Egyptian, he is reinvested with the purpose of communicating the truth of God’s existence to the Hebrew people. God tells him, “You go on; I’ll go with you. Open your mouth and I’ll speak for you” (127). In this pivotal moment, Moses’ leadership is inextricably tied to God’s voice. Whatever comes after, can be read as the will of God and a form of governance indisputable in its heavenly provenance.
Moses’ power is thus constructed as antithetical to the shows of power embodied by the Pharaohs. His deliverance of the Hebrew people into freedom and his continued intercourse with God sustains the sense that his leadership is divinely decreed. It is seemingly beyond critique, but also removed from the people Moses is bound to serve. Hurston writes:

But still Moses led the people. He thought and led. He prayed and led. He wrote and had his moments of philosophy and led, even when he knew he would have been better loved as a King and more popular as a politician. But he chose to be a leader and he was. He stood in his high, lonely place and led. Jethro and Joshua glimpsed through the clouds that his the peak where he stood from the common herd, but that was all (*Moses, Man of the Mountain* 248).

Moses’ separation from those he has been tasked with leading becomes painfully evident in this passage. Even his closest confidant and his mentee, Jethro and Joshua respectively, are figured as catching only a glimpse of him. His role as leader is explicitly marked as distinct from the role of King or politician, with the suggestion being that those roles are earthly, while Moses’ status as a divine leader is not. The solitary actions of thought, prayer, writing, and reflection paired so intimately with his repeated action of leading demonstrates just how removed his leadership is from the “common herd” he is leading. Put another way, he leads in spite of a structural and unbridgeable divide between himself and his people. It is difficult to see this divide laid bare and resist questioning the fitness of his leadership. He has undoubtedly advocated for the freedom of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and it foundational in the formation of their new nation. But is Moses, and the divine intervention he embodies, an appropriate model for a liberatory form of governance? Can his leadership ameliorate hundreds of years of enslavement and create a nation-state that re-enfranchises a group otherwise seen as abject?
These questions, I argue, are at the fore of Hurston’s representation of Moses’ leadership. Deborah McDowell argues “in telling the story of a people’s deliverance into a new nation state—a Fatherland, if you will—Hurston says much about the relations between nationalism and masculinity and how, for both, the presence of the feminine is a problem.”¹⁴⁶ However, I add that Moses’ positionality in relation to the people he leads remains a provocatively open question that is related to the problematic of gender. Hurston seems uneasy with Moses’ divine status and its remove from the Hebrew people. Indeed, as the novel draws to a close, she enhances this divide, rendering Moses as not only non-Hebrew, but also non-human. In one of the text’s more brutal moments, Moses decides to execute his purported brother Aaron for lack of vision so that someone younger may hold the revered position of high priest. As Aaron pleads for Moses to spare him, Moses replies “No, Aaron, nothing and nobody has been spared to make this nation great” (Moses, Man of the Mountain 275). Pointing to the ruthlessness of Moses’ rule, this statement also suggests the fact that Moses himself has not been spared. He says as much when he declares, “I had to quit being a person a long time ago, and I had to become a thing, a tool, an instrument for a cause. I wasn’t spared, Aaron” (Moses, Man of the Mountain 274). Recalling the moment where Moses sees the burning bush, Hurston refigures what was previously read as a call as a sacrifice. Moses is forcing Aaron to make an analogous sacrifice for the betterment of Israel. In doing so, he suggests that true leadership and true vision requires an abdication of humanity. If one cannot remake himself from person to tool for the cause, then he has to die to make way for a new world order.

Moses’ leadership remains an open question to the point that the novel’s end leaves both his success and his status as a man oblique. As Moses begins to hand over the leadership of Israel to Joshua who will succeed him, he reflects on the nation he has created and whether freedom has any place in his vision of a unified state. He says:

You can’t have a state of individuals. Everybody just can’t be allowed to do as they please. I love liberty and I love freedom so I started off giving everybody a loose rein. But I soon found out that it wouldn’t do. A great state is a well-blended mash of something of all of the people and all of none of the people. You understand. The liquor of statecraft is distilled from the mash you got. How can a nation speak with one voice if they are not one? Don’t forget, now. If you do, you encourage all the stupid but greedy and ambitious to sprout like toadstools and that’s the end of right and reason in the state. Coddling and wheedling is not going to stop these destroyers. To a haughty belly, kindness is hard to swallow and harder to digest (Moses, Man of the Mountain 278-9).

Moses’ vision for a harmonious state takes distillation as its central metaphor, drawing on both its capacity for combination through the creation of mash and the purification and refinement associated with turning that mash into liquor. He reveals that his intention lies in creating a nation that is able to speak with one voice. The drawback of that intention is that each member of the new state cannot enjoy total freedom. His logic is directly descended from the social contract and what is at stake is the “end of right and reason in the state.” Situating right and reason as core values for the continuation of the state’s health prioritizes abstract ideals over the individualistic strivings, which he characterizes as toadstools. Individualism is the greatest risk to Moses’ vision and it threatens to overthrow the concept of human goodness. His instructions end with an aphoristic warning about the difficulty of accepting kindness. He suggests that if tenets like right and reason vanish, the basic quotidian acts of kindness that underwrite those loftier goals will go too. In doing so, he reintroduces a claim about the lived reality of the citizens of Israel, asserting that they will only enjoy basic kindness and civility through an
abnegation of individual desires in service of larger civic goals. He sets up a dialectical relationship between the theoretical and collective underpinnings of how the state is comprised and how individuals experience the state.

Yet that dialectical relationship is governed by Moses’ vision of a singular national voice that is both the voice of all of and none of the citizens. In the metaphor above, the voice seems to emanate from the people themselves, but we are reminded of Moses’ direction and his work to squash the ambition and greed that works against his purpose. He positions himself as uniquely shaping and defining that voice so that it is not only the combination of individuals, but also the result of careful philosophical consideration and statecraft. It is, in other words, Moses’ individual vision imposed on a collective that he is not part of. Although Moses imposes that vision individually, it is not depicted as his singular vision. He reminds Joshua that the vision is relayed directly from God:

> And don’t let the people take up too many habits from the nations they come in contact with and throw away what they got from God. They are blessed. Nobody else ever got a straight talk from God like we have. Don’t let ‘em throw it away. You know, Joshua, it ain’t everybody who can go right up and talk with God. And then, too, it’s less than that who can talk with God and then bring back the right word from the talk. It is so easy to mix up what you are wishing with what God is saying. You might not get another good interpreter. You better hold on to what you got (Moses, Man of the Mountain 279).

Moses reveals an anxiety about Israel’s future: namely, that it will not continue to be guided by the direct intervention of God. He marks God’s intercession as a special privilege of the Hebrew people, echoing and anticipating the language of a “chosen people.” Like Moses, the entire nation of Israel enjoys a proximity to God and His will, setting it apart from other nations. Moses’ fixation on the place of God at once distinguishes the national collective as one he is part of, and also insists upon Moses’
individuality. At first the ability to talk to God is one that “we have,” positioning Moses’ ability as oriented towards the public. Moses’ ability to speak to God becomes a shared national conversation with God. That conflation shifts, however, as the instructions progress. Moses’ individuality and his particular struggles with his role as interpreter come to the fore and we are reminded that it is only through Moses that the collective conception of God coheres. The admission that divine will can easily be mistaken for personal desire reveals a dangerous slippage between the will of God and the will of Moses. It introduces the possibility that Moses’ vision has influenced what might have otherwise passed as the will of God.

The ambiguous relationship between Moses and God opens up the possibility of critique through its questionable figuration of Moses’ role as interpreter. Has he, perhaps, confused God’s word for his own desire? If so, has it compromised his rule? In situating Moses as subject to human error in his interpretation of God’s will, Hurston reinforces the direction he has taken over the governance of Israel. Despite the purported divine governance, Israel is in many ways the result of Moses’ vision. As the novel closes, Moses solidifies this sense, casting that vision as one that has failed in his lifetime. Hurston writes:

His dreams had in no way been completely fulfilled. He had meant to make a perfect people, free and just, noble and strong, that should be a light for all the world and for time and eternity. And he wasn’t sure he had succeeded. He had found out that no man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. The outside signs were just signs and symbols of the man inside. All you could do was give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation (Moses, Man of the Mountain 282).

The promise of Israel is figured as Moses’ dream. The hope of making a “perfect people” aligns with his desire to create a unified nation that he earlier expressed to Joshua. Positing the Israelites as model citizens reflects his belief in their divine selection and
their duty to form a state governed by God. However, Moses also becomes strikingly self-conscious of his role in the formation of that government. When he returns to the language of freedom in his analysis of Israel he recalls his theorization of governance and the claim that some individual freedom must be given up in the formation of a state. Here, he flips the earlier formulation on its head and considers the possibility that he, as an individual, does not have the right to determine the freedom of others. It is communicated explicitly as his inability to give freedom to the Hebrew people, but extended to form a sense of skepticism about the ability for any individual to determine freedom for another. Instead, freedom becomes an individualistic expression, analogous to the singularized acts of kindness in Moses’ earlier-expressed vision of freedom. Again, there is a failure for the abstract concept of freedom to account for a lived experience of freedom. Moses locates his central failure as a leader in his misrecognition of that fact.

The emphasis on freedom as an individuated experience sets up a complicated critique of Moses’ leadership. It seems overly simplistic to say that Hurston was critical of Moses’ leadership because it is coded male. That was certainly part of it, as was his imbrication in the highly patriarchal system of Judeo-Christian genealogy. But Moses’ late-in-life revelation opens up a critique of the very nature of leadership itself. The warning against having a state of individuals chafes against the conviction that true conceptions of statecraft—like freedom—must come from the individual himself. Moses’ governance undoes itself; and in its productive failure, Hurston makes a statement, perhaps, for the unfitness of traditional governmental categories in defining or redefining the lives of formerly disenfranchised subjects. Importantly, in the quote, the individual must “make his own emancipation,” not “freedom.” The shift in vocabulary draws a
subtle distinction between what the individual can make, and what the state has failed to make for him. With the suggestion that the individual might emancipate himself, but not be “free,” Hurston downplays the centrality of politics as it exists in the abstract. Instead, true freedom lies in the individual’s experience of it. That formulation is circular and counterintuitive, as it has to exist in linguistic and ideological reference to the domination that it tries to avoid. But it gestures at a new horizon, one in which true freedom, a liberatory form of freedom, might be theorized.

III. Tell My Horse

If the elusive freedom that Moses just barely theorizes at the end of Moses, Man of the Mountain could be harnessed as a theory of governance, it would reinvest the governed with power. In fact, the novel narrates an irresolvable tension between the necessity of individual self-determination and notions of freedom. Placing that tension at the heart of what should be a national myth destabilizes Moses’ place as leader, just as it destabilizes the notion of a national myth itself. The year before Hurston published Moses, Man of the Mountain, she published Tell My Horse, her findings from about a year spent in Jamaica and Haiti on a Guggenheim Fellowship. Unlike her earlier fieldwork collected in Mules and Men, the form of Tell My Horse is more varied and complicated. Hurston asserts herself throughout; her observations about the relative merits of Jamaican society and Haitian politics structure the text. It is not a neat series of tales self-consciously collected by an anthropologist that is tantalizingly close to the subject material. Instead, Hurston seems to have crossed over, leaving an authorial imprint where it doesn’t belong, and reviews reflect that generic instability. Hurston’s
biographer Robert Hemenway calls *Tell My Horse* her “poorest book, chiefly because of its form.” A contemporaneous review in the *Saturday Review of Literature* understood the book as a “curious mixture of remembrances, travelogue, sensationalism, and anthropology.” In both cases, Hurston’s readers interpret the formal illegibility of *Tell My Horse* as a drawback, missing the ways that manipulation of form allows Hurston to make an incisive statement on the nature of leadership and the constituting power of national myth. In a section called “Politics and Personalities of Haiti” she interposes historical fact with gathered stories that are sometimes untethered from their political circumstances. In doing so, Hurston represents the process by which national myth is consolidated, suggesting that those myths are inevitably dynamic and changeable. If national myth configures models of governance as the form of Hurston’s text, then the democratic construction of national myth gestures to a new form of governance.

That new form of governance needs Haiti as a space of theorization: it offers a country with Enlightenment-inflected nationalist strivings and a stark divide between that model of nationalism and the masses that it purports to gather under its democratic banner. Hurston is intentional in her demarcation of Haiti as distinct from the United States. Ifoema Nwankwo cites Hurston as “an example of the shades of ethnocentrism that have continued to haunt transnational engagement between black people.” Similarly, Eve Dunbar is attentive to Hurston’s desire to assert and maintain a distinctly American identity while in the Caribbean, a desire that demonstrates the extent to which

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“she is still bound by mainland notions of modernity and power.” Both accounts emphasize the self-conscious gulf Hurston draws between herself and the Haitian and Jamaican people she observes and they pick up on the evaluative tone that Hurston takes in translating these observations to their written form. The transnational Hurston, then, is one that maintains an unchecked sense of American exceptionalism. They pick up on contentions like Hurston’s observation that “the most striking phenomenon in Haiti to a visiting American” is “that habit of lying.” Lying, Hurston continues, “is more than any other factor responsible for Haiti’s tragic history. Certain people in the early days of the Republic took to deceiving first themselves and then others to keep from looking at the dismal picture before them” (Tell My Horse 81). Nwankwo and Dunbar provide a framework to see this moment in the text as one in which Hurston capitalizes on difference. She positions herself as a generic “visiting American,” bound by a national identity to her text’s audience, and not by a racial identity to the text’s subjects. Through this prism of difference Hurston performs the role of anthropologist, telling us the feature of Haitian society that is most significant and tying that feature to Haiti’s failure of democracy, the central example that it is an inferior nation to the United States. But the operative term—lying—is not actually unique to Haiti or Haitian culture. Lies are also the folktales shared by African Americans and collected in Mules and Men, arguably a form of social refiguration that parallels what, in the context of Haiti, Hurston calls

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deception. Though the act of lying is configured differently in Haiti than it is in Florida, it suggests some continuity across otherwise-distinct nationalities.

While the lies in *Mules and Men* gain political traction through their insistence on a rural, Black modern subject, the Haitian practice of lying corresponds to the project of constructing a modern Black nation. Although Hurston uses the practice as a negative example—what *not* to do when constructing a national history—none of her writing on Haiti can be adequately considered without examining the fact that she structures her text around what she understands as lies. Put another way, Hurston recognizes that her anthropological practice is the practice of collecting lies. And, just as she forms a coherent narrative about the failure of Haitian democracy from those lies, she is equally interested in the structural processes by which those lies give rise to a national myth that has sustained an account of Haitian history and a theory of governance. Like the elusive freedom that forms the bedrock of Moses’ ideal form of governance, Hurston positions Haitian democracy as a process of cultivating freedom:

This freedom from slavery only looked like a big watermelon cutting and fish-fry to the irresponsible blacks, those people who have no memory of yesterday and no suspicion of tomorrow. L’Ouverture, Christophe, Pétion and Dessalines saw it as the grave problem it was. No country has ever had more difficult tasks. In the first place Haiti had never been a country. It had always been a colony so that there had never been any real government there. So that the victors were not taking over an established government. They were trying to make a government of the wreck of a colony. And not out of the people who had at least been in the habit of thinking of government as something real and tangible. They were trying to make a nation out of very diffident material. These few intelligent blacks and mulattoes set out to make a nation out of slaves to whom the very word government sounded like something vague and distant. Government was something, they felt, for masters and employers to worry over while one rested

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from the ardors of slavery. It has not yet come to be the concern of the great mass of Haitians (Tell My Horse 81).

Following her critique of the Haitian practice of lying, Hurston commiserates with the Haitian founders confronted with the “dismal” situation of founding a nation from “the wreck of a colony.” She implies these men did not lie; they saw clearly the problem of unimaginable freedom and attempted to make a government that could account for that conceptual shortfall. Though Hurston draws a marked divide between the “few intelligent blacks and mulattoes” from the masses “who have no memory of yesterday and no suspicion of tomorrow,” the ambiguous language she uses to describe the formerly-enslaved suggests that their inability to conceive of government was not a failure. Instead, her construction of government as “not yet… the concern of the great mass of Haitians” raises a larger question about the object of their concern. First depicted as a people outside of temporality, the mention of slavery historicizes their orientation towards slavery. Markers like “watermelon cutting” and “fish fry” connect the newly-achieved freedom to historical circumstance of United States emancipation. Hurston, like many anthropologists of the 1930s, was interested in the history of slavery and its afterlives among the dwindling number of survivors. It is notable that she connects the project of nation-building to an ambivalent proclamation of freedom from slavery, and not to the Declaration of Independence, or drafting of the Constitution, moments of formation of the United States that could also parallel the transition from colony to nation. Black freedom, she suggests, is most successful when achieved under the auspices of an already-formulated government.

But, as Hurston herself has noted, the systemic nature of racism belies a contradiction in the claims to Black freedom that, in this passage, seem uncontested.
Connecting Haitian freedom to the ongoing project of freedom in the United States serves the dual purpose of signaling the ways in which Hurston is thinking transnationally, using Haiti as more than a foil for an unimpeachable American democracy, and also formulating Black governance as a project that is ongoing across national borders. In the U.S., as in Haiti, a governmental formation that can account for Black life has yet to be achieved. In belaboring the distinction between the masses and the ruling class, Hurston further suggests that a key component of conceptualizing such a governmental formation has to do with the way that the Black collective is accounted for. Although, on the surface, this passage casts the Haitian national leaders as possessing revolutionary vision and governmental prowess and the formerly-enslaved as clueless, Hurston also aligns the latter group with the “diffident material” out of which the nation is made. This confirms the constitutive power of the mass in imagining Haiti as a nation, even as it characterizes them as unable to theorize its governance out of a profound sense of trust. Contrasted with the language of the “ardors of slavery,” suggesting passion, Hurston’s language depicts the governed mass as simultaneously reserved and exerted. Taken together, these characterizations dismantle opposing stereotypes about the Haitian collective. On the one hand, their diffidence disproves conceptions of the collective as unruly, suggesting that their oppositional stance was born from a reasoned lack of confidence. On the other hand, their ardor suggests a revolutionary passion since the time of slavery that parallels that of the nation’s founders. Rather than acting as an ignorant backdrop against which Hurston can examine the genius of Haiti’s founders, the formerly-enslaved contain the same governmental potential as the historically-recognized founders. Conversely, they also face the same pressures.
The form of *Tell My Horse* emphasizes this symmetry between the Haitian ruling class and the peasants that it purports to rule. The peasants are, importantly, just as capable of producing history, disseminating folklore, and constructing lies as the rulers. Hurston refuses to capitulate to an official notion of history, even as she critiques the accounts of history that she gleans from Haitians. Her complicated relationship to the United States occupation also permeates the text. Eve Dunbar’s work demonstrates the methods by which Hurston might have instrumentalized a critique of Haiti to adhere to the demands of a white publishing and academic machine that wanted to deny “Haiti as the seat of [a] generative racial revolution.”

Along similar lines, Daphne Lamothe and Amy Fass Emery tend to read moments in which Hurston capitulates to U.S. imperialist ironically, as moments of “indirection.” These readings see Hurston’s relationship to Haiti as fixed, one in which her place as an anthropologist from the United States is always at the fore. I want to suggest that Hurston’s relationship to Haiti was more dynamic: while she certainly does not abdicate her multiple subject positions, she is also interested in interrogating the distinct modes of Haitian governance that remain at odds with U.S. imperialism. She remains preoccupied with the capacity for Haitians to construct their own national history. Though this capacity is initially presented as “lying,” there is the further suggestion that those lies comprise a collective myth that undergirds a modern nation. Taking this model on board, Hurston’s method of collecting lies corresponds to a way of conceptualizing Black governance that remains unbounded by

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the historical record. Put another way, Haitian lies might be otherwise understood as imagining an alternative. Certainly there is an irresolvable tension between the imperialist values that cast Haiti as inferior and the imaginative qualities of the Haitian people that Hurston clearly admires. But *Tell My Horse* embeds a nascent theorization of mass rule—a way of collectively reconfiguring the nation’s foundational myth—up and against Western concepts of the state.

The section of the book called “Politics and Personalities of Haiti” is a history of the moment in time leading up to the 1915 occupation by the United States, a historical moment that seems to bear heavily on both the recollections of the Haitian people Hurston meets, and also her own understanding of Haiti’s contemporary situation in the 1930s. Unlike the section about Jamaica that precedes it and the lengthy section about voodoo, also set in Haiti, Hurston’s authorial and anthropological personae recede from the text. There are still moments of characteristic discursive flair, but the section does not contain representations of Hurston in dialogue with interlocutors, as the other two sections do. Formally, these practices align the section with historical accounts of Haiti. Hurston’s relation of historical events is idiosyncratic: she begins the section with the 1915 insurrection and overthrow of Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, which results in the U.S. occupation of Haiti, steps back to recount the history of the hundred years after the Haitian Revolution, divulges the sensationalist account of the 1908 administration of General François Antoine Simon and his controversial daughter, dubbed the Black Joan of Arc, and concludes the section with a discussion of Simon’s successor Cincinnatus Leconte, who rose to power in 1912 and who directly preceded Guillaume Sam.

Downplaying the significance of the Haitian Revolution, Hurston’s focus on the years
leading up to 1915 place a distinct emphasis on her understanding of Haiti as a modern nation. In line with the representational aesthetics of a more straightforwardly ethnographic text like *Mules and Men*, Hurston’s depiction of Haiti as both troubled and brimming with potential casts its Black residents as “neither exotic nor primitive.”

Haitian governance, Hurston argues, must account for this new, more complicated, mode of Blackness.

To posit that governance, Hurston interrogates Haiti’s national myth leading up to the U.S. occupation, drawing a structural parallel between the capacity to construct an account of history and the capacity to be a political actor. Paying particular attention to the processes by which history is constructed, Michel-Rolph Trouillot defines one involved class of people as subjects of history, or “voices aware of their vocality.” The subject of history is not necessarily in a position of power, or related to the historical context, but they are empowered through an ability to “define the very terms under which some situations can be described.” In Hurston’s work, the historical subjects are the Haitian and Jamaican people that collectively formulate their respective national histories. Any sense we have of the historical as such is deliberately marked as a collective narrativization of historical events. For example, when Hurston relates the 1912 assassination of Cincinnatus Leconte at the end of “Politics and Personalities of Haiti,” she highlights the fact that the event looms large in the collective imagination of Haitian people, even as she differentiates their retelling from “official” accounts. Hurston notes, “The history books all say Cincinnatus Leconte died in the explosion that

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157 Ibid., 23.
destroyed the palace, but the people do not tell it that way. Not one person, high or low, ever told me Leconte was killed by the explosion” (*Tell My Horse* 103). There is an immediate binary between what the history books say and what people tell Hurston happened. The discrepancy dramatizes the way in which people work as subjects to refigure the historical record. Much of the chapter is devoted to a narrative about Leconte’s murder, dismemberment, and the palace explosion used to cover up his ghastly death, which is sourced from collective knowledge. Hurston underscores the collectivity of these retellings by emphasizing the number of times she heard the story and the uniformity of its details: “so I came to hear from many people a story that was the same in all the essential points. Minor details differed of course. But the happenings that follow were repeated to me by numerous persons” (*Tell My Horse* 105). Leconte’s death becomes more authoritative through each successive retelling. And, although Hurston retains the outline of the version in which Leconte is killed in an explosion, it is ultimately silenced through the repetition of the alternative version.

Trouillot’s critique of the historical process lies in the way that silences are leveraged to consolidate power, but we might read *Tell My Horse* as an experiment in the ways that collective constructions of history might challenge more hegemonic ones. In particular, Hurston’s treatment of the 1915 assassination of Guillaume Sam—the incident that enabled the United States’ occupation of Haiti—reveals some of the ways in which Haitian collectivity undermines the colonizing force of the U.S. military and its construction of history. In returning to earlier-discussed debates about Hurston’s ambivalence towards imperialism, I do not mean to suggest that Haitian national myth entirely resists the occupation. Instead, I am interested in the way that Hurston embeds a
history that is produced by the masses into an otherwise imperialist account. She retains a
subject position that is marked as collective alongside and against a monolithic viewpoint
that privileges the U.S. occupation as enabling peace. Hurston begins narrating
Guillaume Sam’s assassination in a far-flung village from the standpoint of a Haitian
peasant. Describing an imagined little girl hearing the gunshots and running into the night
to identify their source, Hurston writes, “This night must say something, the political
situation was too tense to pass another day undefined, and every house in Haiti had an ear
strained with fear or with hope” (Tell My Horse 66). This indeterminate narratorial voice
straddles a collective hope for a peaceful resolution to the ongoing tumult and the implied
individuality of the first clause, which might be the child straining to hear something in
the night. Hurston imagines herself occupying both the individual and collective positions
to set up a historical narrative that operates on two levels. On the one hand, there is the
imposition of a “political situation” that is “too tense;” and, on the other hand, there is the
indeterminate collective feelings of hope and fear, the Haitians listening, gathering
information, and poised to become subjects of history.

When Hurston narrates the arrival of the Marines, she introduces a productive
tension between the peaceful and progressive age that the U.S. forces are ushering in and
the fractious Haitian population that resists containment. In a scene permeated by
violence, Hurston casts the gruesome murder and public mutilation of Guillaume Sam’s
corpse as a collective repudiation of an existing political order.158 With the violence of

158 From Tell My Horse: “They dragged General Jean Vilbrun Guillaume Sam, until the dawn of the day of
the massacre, president of the Republic, from his hiding place. They chopped his hand that tried in its last
desperation to save him from the massed frenzy outside the legation gates. They dragged him through the
door into the court and there a woman whose dainty hands had never even held a broom, struck him a
vicious blow with a machete at the root of his neck, and he was hurled over the gate to the people who
chopped off his parts and dragged his torso in the streets (Tell My Horse 72).
the scene, and the promise of ensuing democracy the passage presents an ironic argument for military invasion. The “black plume with the white hope” becomes an unlikely source of salvation:

They were like that when the black plume of the American battleship smoke lifted itself against the sky. They were like that when Admiral Caperton from afar gazed at Port-au-Prince through his marine glasses. They were so engaged when the U.S.S. Washington arrived in the harbor with Caperton in command. When he landed, he found the head of Guillaume Sam hoisted on a pole on the Champ de Mars and his torso being dragged about and worried by the mob. This dead and mutilated corpse seemingly useless to all on earth except those who might have loved it while it was living. But it should be entombed in marble for it was the deliverer of Haiti. L’Ouverture had beaten back the outside enemies of Haiti, but the bloody stump of Sam was to quell Haiti’s internal foes, who had become more dangerous to Haiti than anyone else. The smoke from the funnels of the U.S.S. Washington was a black plume with a white hope. This was the last hour of the last day of the last day of the last year that ambitious and greedy demagogues could substitute bought Caco blades for voting power. It was the end of the revolution and the beginning of peace (Tell My Horse 72).

The ghastly sight of Guillaume Sam’s dismembered corpse recurs through the first several lines of the passage, first at a distance and then right in front of Admiral Caperton. The slow naval approach progresses from a far-off moment of visual encounter to the more immediate encounter of discovering Guillaume Sam on the Champ de Mars. Hurston renders both positions—the observation of the black plume from Haiti and the vista of Port-au-Prince through the marine glasses. Through these two positions, two histories begin to emerge: a dominant strand that reads the U.S. occupation as necessary for the introduction of peace and democracy in Haiti, and another strand, a more elusive one, that values the violent will of the people. The more dominant historical narrative aligns Guillaume Sam’s corpse with a national monument, an apt image in service of constructing a national myth. Hurston sets up a genealogy from Toussaint L’Ouverture through Guillaume Sam, using voting power as Haiti’s crowning democratic achievement. The insurrection that L’Ouverture began at the start of the nineteenth
...century had finally concluded more than a hundred years later. The fact that Hurston refers to this duration as a revolutionary one, however, reveals the elusive strand of history, suggesting that, in spite of the ongoing violence, there was something radical in those hundred years of unrest. Rather than confining Haiti’s revolutionary period to a discrete set of years before the founding of the state, Hurston positions the process of state formation as an ongoing one. In this way, Guillaume Sam’s murder cannot be read as a senseless act of violence; it is part of the process of defining Haiti as a modern nation. While the invocation of “bought Caco blades” as a metonym for violent overthrow seemingly critiques insurrection as non-democratic, earlier descriptions of the mob’s treatment of Guillaume Sam’s body complicate that assessment. Caperton finds Guillaume Sam’s head “hoisted on a pole” and “his torso being dragged about and worried by the mob.” The image of a head on a pole is gruesome, but it mirrors Hurston’s commentary that the body “should be entombed in marble.” While the image of the corpse memorialized and at rest in a more permanent medium corresponds to an “official” founding of the Haitian state, the head on a pole is also a kind of memorial, one that reflects the immediate will of the people and commemorates their collective act of overthrow. The colloquial tone of the phrases “dragged about” and “worried” to describe what the mob does the Guillaume Sam’s torso underplays the physical violence. The word “worried,” which most nearly means “bothered,” but also connotes a more serious act of unsettling, takes on a doubled meaning in which the mob violence becomes at once less brutal, but also more politically potent. It might seem obvious to state that mass upheaval caused anxiety among the ruling class, but Hurston’s wordplay foregrounds the...
extent to which collective action presented a real and present threat to both the actors in positions of power and the dominant historical narrative.

The challenge that the masses posed to the ruling class is ultimately contained by Hurston’s recourse to popular representations of Haiti as inherently barbaric. Daphne Lamothe argues that the “Politics and Personalities of Haiti” section “reinforces Haiti’s reputation as a place of Black rage and violence.”\(^{159}\) Reading the scene cited above as justification for the U.S. occupation of Haiti, she argues that Hurston framed the section as responsive to prevailing ideas about Haiti as a failed state. But Hurston is importantly not uniform in her representation of Haiti. Lamothe further argues that Hurston employs “narrative dissonance,” combining moments of unmasked critique of the Caribbean with covert critique of U.S. imperialism, ultimately “dissembling, signifying, using irony and duplicity, and making it virtually impossible to pinpoint with precision her real views of Caribbean societies or international politics.”\(^{160}\) While there is undoubtedly irony in the passage’s treatment of the military occupation, and value placed in the will of the mass, neither quite coalesce into what could be called radicalism. Hurston’s commentary resists being pinned on either racist and imperialist structures, or on the ideological underpinnings of Haiti as a nation. Her evasive, bidirectional critique leaves space to consider the potential she undoubtedly sees in Haiti, its prized place as a Black nation, and its unique form of cultural production. But it does not contend with the extent to which Haiti also provided the material with which Hurston theorized new forms of governance.

\(^{159}\) Lamothe, *Inventing the New Negro*, 145.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 146.
Hurston formulates her most cogent theories of power and governance in reference to the practice of voodoo. There has been ample attention paid to Hurston’s treatment of voodoo, with many critics favoring the lengthy third section called “Voodoo in Haiti.” For these critics, it is only in her writing on voodoo that Hurston problematizes her role as an outsider commenting on a foreign society.\footnote{Barbara Johnson reads Hurston as a “commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside,” insisting that she resists taking a fixed position as an observer and disseminator of knowledge. Barbara Johnson, “Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston,” in Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993), 130.} Rachel Stein argues, “not only does Voodoo defy Western binary division, it also confounds realist objectivity and conclusive knowability.”\footnote{Rachel Stein, Shifting the Ground: American Woman Writers’ Revision of Nature, Gender, and Race (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 68.} For some, that resistance to knowability is linked to the flexible, multiple, and variable qualities of voodoo.\footnote{See Joan Dayan, “Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods,” Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean, eds. Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 13-36; Shirley Toland-Dix, “‘This Is the Horse. Will You Ride?’: Zora Neale Hurston, Erna Brodber, and Rituals of Spirit Possession,” Just Below South: Intercultural Performance in the Caribbean and the US South, ed. Jessica Adams, Michael P. Bibler, and Cécile Accilien (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 191-210; Annette Trefzer, “Possessing the Self: Caribbean Identities in Zora Neale Hurston’s Tell My Horse,” African American Review 34, no. 2 (2000): 299-312.} For others, like Amy Schmidt, voodoo itself is a site of resistance; she argues that “voodoo serves as resistance not only to the exploitation of the slave trade but also to that of colonialist projects, including those of the United States and its occupation of Haiti.”\footnote{Amy Schmidt, “Horses Chomping at the Global Bit: Ideology, Systemic Injustice, and Resistance in Zora Neale Hurston’s Tell My Horse,” The Southern Literary Journal 46, no. 2 (2014): 184.} Approaches to reading Hurston as dissembling, complicating, and critiquing a dominant political order are useful to the extent that they help to resist the tendency to read her discussion of Haitian history as conservative, and her writing on voodoo as progressive. But too much has been made of the demarcation between sections and readings like Schmidt’s tend to see Hurston’s
discussion of voodoo practices, especially the loa Guedé that gives the book its title as a primer for Black diasporic resistance. Hurston was undoubtedly interested in voodoo as a cultural practice, but she was also interested in it as a theory of power. Her desire to align a discussion of voodoo with a discussion of Haiti’s politics does not undermine voodoo’s alterity. Instead, it reveals the strategy by which Hurston attempted to redirect notions of power towards a more representational form of governance.

Hurston inserts a telling chapter called “The Black Joan of Arc” in the middle of “The Politics and Personalities of Haiti” section; and it is her most sustained discussion of the connection between political and spiritual power. The chapter narrates the story of Celestina Simon, a powerful voodoo priestess whose father General François Antoine Simon was president from 1908 until he was deposed by Leconte in 1912. While General Simon’s administration might have otherwise been consigned to the long, turbulent history of violence before Leconte, Hurston is adamant in retaining the importance it has to the Haitian public, “if Celestina and her father were driven out of power and public life, they have not lost their places in the minds of the people. More legends surround the name of Simon than any other character in the history of Haiti” (93). Using language that she will repeat in the following chapter to index the proliferation of stories about Leconte’s death, Hurston marks Celestina’s notoriety as popular will. And although Leconte is the one that drives Celestina from power, the passage suggests that she has actually retained more power than him, as evidenced by the ongoing repetition and

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165 Guedé is believed to “[‘mount’] a subject as a rider mounts a horse…the person mounted does nothing of his own accord. He is the horse of the loa until the spirit departs. Under the whip and guidance of the spirit-rider, the ‘horse’ does and says many things that he or she would never have uttered un-ridden” (Tell My Horse 220-1); Schmidt argues “Guedé, perhaps more than any other loa, illustrates how voodoo functions as resistance to exploitation” Amy Schmidt, “Horses Chomping at the Global Bit,” 185.
refiguration of her story. The passage contains a sly reversal wherein Hurston states that Celes
tina has been removed from “public life” while describing her life story as the material of ongoing, public discussion. This irony demonstrates that the power associated with the presidency is not necessarily the privileged mode of power; instead the power to capture imaginations, generate stories, and hold interest constitutes a more enduring legacy.

Shifting focus to Celestina’s ability to capture the imagination of the Haitian public is not to downplay the nationalist and imperialist resonances with Joan of Arc. Like the rest of the section, Haiti’s colonial past and its unwieldy adaptation of Western democracy are treated simultaneously ironically, critically, and generatively. Hurston’s comparison of Celestina to Joan of Arc invokes allusions to their shared divinity, militancy, and the lasting hold both have in the national imaginaries of their respective countries. Hurston writes, “Both of these young women sprung alike from the soil. Both led armies and came to unbelievable power by no other right than communion with mysterious voices and spirits. Both of these women stood behind weak, ruling chairs, and both departed their glory for ignominy” (Tell My Horse 93). Ending the connection between Celestina and Joan of Arc with a claim of their ignominy is striking, in that the latter had been made a Catholic saint in 1920 and Celestina remains a figure of popular interest in Haiti. By underscoring the extent to which both are infamous, however, Hurston solidifies their connection, casting the cult of personality that has coalesced around each woman as a mode of power. She is deliberate in describing both woman as national icons; when she claims that they “sprung alike from the soil,” she illuminates their shared background as peasants. The trajectory from one of the masses to the height
of power is enabled by another commonality—“communion with mysterious voices and spirits”—a comparison that also places voodoo on the same plane as Catholicism. By making Celestina the Black Joan of Arc, Hurston draws out the threads of religious mysticism and nationalism that cohere into a spiritual archetype. She also implies that Haiti is as much a nation as France and voodoo is as much an organized religion as Catholicism, further insisting that both societies are capable of producing a national myth. That national myth, when routed through the recounted refuguration of a storytelling public, can be marshalled towards a theory of democratic governance.

A combination of militancy and spirituality undergird Celestina’s bid for power; she is simultaneously ruthless and divine. The resulting argument that Hurston seems to make is that these qualities accord with a kind of national spirit that defines Haiti. Put another way, Celestina’s story is constructed to reflect shared values of the populace that repeats it. She is remembered as ambitious because that is a culturally-constructed trait that a leader must possess. Hurston notes “the young Amazon stirred something heroic in the hearts of Haiti for a time. She brought a whiff of the battle field with her as she came and made virile men think again of Christophe and Dessalines” (Tell My Horse 100). Likening Celestina to an Amazonian reinforces her militancy, as does the claim that she “brought a whiff of the battle field.”166 She is a military hero, embraced by storytellers that repeat her triumphs. But the passage contains a perplexing reversal, wherein Celestina’s heroism elevates spectators interested in her to an analogous heroic status.

166 Elsewhere Hurston more pointedly links her presence on the battlefield to her voodoo practice: “There are tales and tales of the services to the loa on that march from Aux Cayes to Port-au-Prince, especially the services that Celestina made to Ogun Feraille, the god of war, to make the men of her army impervious to bullet and blade....“The stories of Celestina’s part in the battles, of her marching in advance of the men and firing them by her own ferocious attack upon the enemy had all preceded the army to the capital. The populace therefore made a great clamor as she entered the city at the head of the men of arms and called her the black Joan of Arc” (Tell My Horse 95).
The “something heroic” that is being stirred is located in the “hearts of Haiti” and the “virile men” that associate Celestina with the nation’s founders. Hurston implies that they become heroic through recognizing Celestina’s heroism. The passage contains a trademark current of Hurston’s irony—both Celestina and her admirers are not conventionally heroic. Their shared heroism is less about valiance and more about the distinct modes of power each possess. Celestina has the power to command interest, while the Haitian people have the power to canonize her as a public saint. The dialectical construction of this power reveal that “heroism” itself is an empty term. Celestina is a hero because the public says she is.

In other moments Hurston evokes details of Celestina’s legend that are less flattering, thereby complicating claims of her heroism. Many such details are inflected by her gender. When she refers to Celestina as an Amazonian and identifies “virile men” as among her proponents, Hurston is starting to tease out the perplexing representation of Celestina’s sexuality. Part of Celestina’s mythology has to do with her inability to find a suitable husband. At times this is linked to her dark skin, while in other moments it is linked to her voodoo practice and an enduring, perplexing myth that she had married a goat named Simalo that accompanied her and her father as they ascended to the presidency. The implication of Celestina’s relationship with Simalo renders her both physically undesirable and non-human. Running counter to other language that suggests an erotic fascination, these lurid details construct a public interest in Celestina that places

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167 Expanding on this legend Hurston writes, “Rumor had it that years before there had been a “marriage” between Celestina and Simalo. A hougun had mysteriously tied them together for many causes and the power of each depended on each other” (Tell My Horse 96). Celestina and Simalo were subsequently divorced by a hougan, and Simalo died. One of the more notable escapades in President Simon’s presidency is his determination to secure a Catholic burial for Simalo, which is said to have occurred.
shifting emphasis on her status as a woman. Voodoo is associated with dissolving
gendered hierarchies, and Celestina’s status as a powerful priestess might point to a
parallel claim for her self-possessed womanhood. 

But Celestina’s prowess—in voodoo
and on the battlefield—undermines her femininity, while her gender, power, and
magnetism overlap in disquieting ways. In this way, just as “heroism” became a
culturally-determined signifier in the last passage, Celestina herself is a cipher, able to be
configured by the values and desires of the people that recount her story. She is a lot like
Moses at the close of Moses, Man of the Mountain; she has given up being a person and
begun to stand in for popular will.

While popular will can change, Hurston captures the prevailing version of
Celestina’s legend in Haiti in the 1930s. That version reveals a collective construction of
the kind of power the people want to see in a national hero. The multiple retellings of
Celestina’s story share a sense of gravity and a belief in the persistence of her power.

After he is deposed by Leconte, President Simon fled Haiti for Jamaica, but Celestina
stayed behind, remaining true to her nationalist roots and spurring rumors about her
ongoing, otherworldly influence:

The people laugh and laugh at the capers of President Simon in the palace. They
do not laugh at Celestina. She is today an elderly woman living in poverty in the
South and she is still to the thinking Haitian a sinister figure. The glory of the
days when she had a special military attaché of her own (General André
Chevalier) and wielded power absolute from the palace are gone. She is a surly
figure of the past. Some say that she pronounced a terrible curse against the man
whose victorious army drove Simon from power. So that when the palace was
blown up and Leconte killed, they said it was the power of Celestina still at work
(Tell My Horse 99).

168 For example, Rachel Stein suggests that voodoo repudiates patriarchal systems while also resisting the
characterization of black women as animalistic. She argues, “Voodoo challenges the degradation of black
women as donkeys.” Rachel Stein, Shifting the Ground, 54. See also Alessandra Albano, “Nature and
Black Femininity in Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Tell My Horse,” Journal of African
While her father’s reign is universally regarded as a joke, Celestina is “sinister” and “surly,” descriptors that heighten the sense of consequence surrounding her power. Her exile in the Haitian South, an area associated with Blackness, poverty, voodoo practice, and political unruliness solidifies the kind of Haitian peasantry that she has come to represent. Returning to the land from which she came rather than leaving Haiti confirms the sense that Celestina is a national figure. Furthermore, her status is doubly confirmed by circulating rumors that she is responsible for Leconte’s death, which in the trajectory of *Tell My Horse* has not been discussed yet. The fact that Hurston gives Celestina’s story pride of place, before even launching into the contested story of the palace explosion, as she will in the next chapter, suggests some authoritative claim to the tale of Celestina’s curse. We enter the story of Leconte knowing already that Celestina’s continued power as a voodoo priestess has led to his demise. Accusing Celestina of Leconte’s death is serious, and it is the seriousness of that accusation that lends her legend the gravity that Haitian people ascribe to it. One of the chapter’s most telling lines lies in Hurston’s claim that Celestina is “still to the thinking Haitian a sinister figure” [emphasis mine]. In foregrounding the act of thought, Hurston points to a curatorial ability that an individual possesses to digest and repurpose information and create a historical narrative. That narrative denotes a process of building a history from the ground up, borrowing elements of myth, folklore, gossip, religious practice, and “official” history. Stated differently, the story of Celestina was shaped by the fact of Haitian history, but its repetition and dissemination are the results of a collective belief in her power, and a shared impulse of discursive selection—one that Hurston participates in as well—that construct Celestina as integral to the understanding of Haitian politics.
The centrality of Celestina to Haitian history is a decision Hurston makes in the composition of *Tell My Horse*, and it is my contention that that decision maps onto an argument Hurston prosecutes throughout her work about the ways in which historical archives have occluded female leadership, and how a more representative future must include a recovery and use of female leaders as models for how to distribute power more democratically. The content and structure of Celestina’s story shows how a national myth can be constructed collectively. What Hurston advocates for on a more conceptual level is the rethinking of archival material that gets consolidated into national histories. Her work begs a question about how many historical accounts of Haiti include Celestina, and yet she is one of the most important figures to contemporary Haitians. Trouillot notes, “Archives assemble. Their assembly work is not limited to a more or less passive act of collecting. Rather, it is an active act of production that prepares facts for historical intelligibility.” Just as Trouillot calls attention to the power inherent to the construction of a historical archive, Hurston dramatizes that very archive being formed in her collection of stories. The individually-recounted tales comprise an archive that produces a collective vision of Celestina’s place in Haitian history. The stories also correspond to a democratic process of remembrance, one in which the act of retelling is a vote in favor of a story’s importance. In Hurston’s historiography, a national myth becomes ratified when enough votes have been cast in favor of a given story. In turn, political history is subject to the will of the people.

Coda: “Mother Catherine” and her children

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The figure of Celestina draws together her exemplarity as a powerful voodoo priestess and a collective fascination that makes her power seem popularly established. The fact that these two strands coalesce into a myth of ongoing female leadership is significant for what it implies about Hurston’s ideal form of governance. Using the model of the preacher figure, she has sketched a vision of a leader that has been called to lead a congregation. Building on that in her reimagination of the story of Moses, she envisions that leader as deeply invested in forming a nation that is responsive to the popular will of the people. Finally, in *Tell My Horse*, Hurston shows how a national myth can be constituted from a communally-sourced archive of stories. The Black nation she imagines is one that safeguards the freedom of its citizens and is sustained by the kind of mythological power that they value. Haiti is successful in the latter, and Hurston shows that the rich oral tradition and insurgent voodoo practices produce a national identity shored up by cultural practices and shared history. But her shifting critique of political governance suggests that Haiti does not protect the freedom of its citizens. Put another way, the Haitian peasant has power in the construction of a collective myth, but is not the subject of a government dedicated to their freedom. This limitation is reflected in the uneven form of *Tell My Horse*: once Hurston begins discussing voodoo, she does not return to a consideration of Haiti’s political situation. The cultural production surrounding voodoo surpasses the capacity for Haiti to act as a site for representative governance.

*Moses, Man of the Mountain* presents this problem from the opposite angle. Hurston’s Moses dies lamenting that he has been unable to create a nation of free citizens, underscoring the fixation that text has on popular political representation. But, while the text incorporates the Black vernacular, it cannot shed the framework of biblical myth and
Moses as protagonist, or tyrant, reigns at a remove from the Hebrew populace. Unresponsive, patriarchal governance supersedes the collective. Taken together, these texts reveal Hurston’s larger project to write herself into a form of governance that is both politically and culturally representative. From the vantage point of the 1930s, that took the shape of writing the unimaginable.

In a sketch called “Mother Catherine,” which is published in the *Negro* anthology alongside the Lovelace Sermon, Hurston comes closest to this idealized form of governance. If her fantasy is that a spiritual call would result in a form of egalitarian rule, then the figure of Mother Catherine Seale provides a model. Seale was the leader of a spiritualist church called the Temple of the Innocent Blood in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans.\(^{170}\) Known for her powers as a healer, Seale was infamous for her interracial congregation, her dedication to ministering to young women, and her elaborate ceremonies. Her church lasted from its founding in 1922 until her death in 1930, and she was celebrated with one of the city’s largest Jazz Funerals; her legacy lingered in other spiritualist churches, which often placed images of Mother Catherine on their alters, and she has been dubbed the “Lower Ninth’s patron saint.”\(^{171}\) Hurston likely visited the Temple of the Innocent Blood in 1927 or 1928 while on a folklore-collecting excursion funded by Charlotte Mason. Although much of her material that she collected while in New Orleans became part of her lauded work on hoodoo in *Mules and Men*, her writing about Mother Catherine is a standalone sketch, bearing traces of Hurston’s authoritative


anthropological training and also her literary flair. The undecidability of the story’s form mirrors the practice of writing the unimaginable. Hurston’s choice of a short, standalone form doubly suggests that Mother Catherine could not be implicated in the ambivalently-treated power structure of the novel, and she also could not be folded into a larger account of folklore and hoodoo in the American South.

Much has been made of the ways in which Hurston blurs the line between participant and observer in her anthropological writing, but the generic play in “Mother Catherine” gestures to a further degree to which Hurston’s writing is invested in disrupting anthropology’s power to codify knowledge. After she arrives at the temple Hurston stages a familiar scene of data collecting. Attentive to granular details about the appearance of the space, she describes her appeal to Mother Catherine for knowledge:

Catherine of Russia could not have been more impressive upon her throne than was the black Catherine sitting upon an ordinary chair at the edge of the platform within the entrance to the tent. Her face and manner are impressive. There is nothing cheap and theatrical about her. She does things and arranges her dwelling as no occidental would. But it is not for effect. It is for feeling. She might have been the matriarchal ruler of some nomad tribe as she sat there with the blue band about her head like a coronet; a white robe and a gorgeous red cape falling away from her broad shoulders, and the box of shaker salt in her hand like a rod of office. I know this reads as incongruous, but it did not look so. It seemed perfectly natural for me to go to my knees upon the gravel floor, and when she signaled to me to extend my right hand, palm up for the dab of blessed salt, I hurried to obey because she made me feel that way.

She laid her hand upon my head.

“Daughter, why have you come here?”

“Mother, I come seeking knowledge” (Negro 55).

Mother Catherine’s striking physicality emerges immediately from Hurston’s description, as does the strange way in which she arranges the physical space of the church. Hurston’s insistence that these qualities are “not for effect,” but are instead “for feeling” reveals the
extent of her own investment with the authenticity of Mother Catherine. Writing that
there is “nothing cheap and theatrical about her” recalls the depiction of the preacher
figure depicted in “The Sermon” who is entirely theatrical, even if not cheap. Locating
Mother Catherine as ruler of an imagined tribe, naming her as a matriarch, and insisting
upon her authenticity coalesce into an impression of her power as divine in a way that
seems to transcend the spiritual divinity that underwrites her church’s doctrine. This is to
say, spiritual divinity seems momentarily beside the point for Hurston. Mother Catherine
is an effective leader because she has access to knowledge, even as the conflation of that
knowledge with a pseudo-Christian divine knowledge is purposefully opaque. Details
that liken her to Catherine the Great and a tribal matriarch afford her secular power, or
power that exists alongside religious authority. Hurston comes to Mother Catherine not as
a convert to her religion, but hoping to understand something about the way that secular
and religious power work in concert to initiate a practice of governance that is unseen
anywhere else. Thus, when Hurston asks Mother Catherine for knowledge, she is seeking
wisdom about the consolidation and dispensation of power more than anything else.

If the sketch begins with Hurston’s appeal for knowledge, we might read the
subsequent series of seemingly-unconnected details and anecdotes as Mother Catherine’s
reply. The form of the sketch is distinct from others collected in the *Negro* anthology, as it
does not contain the same recourse to documentary facticity. The story is also notably
collected among Hurston’s short stories, further evidencing a generic instability even in
our contemporary readings of it. Hurston’s rendering of Mother Catherine is less a
demonstration of Black religious culture, although it is certainly that too, and more of an
exploration of an alternative relation between a religious leader and her followers. Part of
that intellectual exploration involves contending with the oppressive structures that are often incorporated into exercises of religious power. Hurston insists that, “Unlike most other religious dictators Mother Catherine does not crush the individual. She encourages originality. There is an air of gaiety around the enclosure. All of the animals are treated with tenderness” (Negro 55). Hurston first distinguishes Mother Catherine’s practice from other religious practices she has observed. Her use of the word “dictator” highlights the extent to which she couples political and religious leadership, while also reminding us of the incredible control that religious leaders have in the lives of their congregants. This distinction feels necessary because of the clear control she has over an insular population of vulnerable followers. Coming after the description of the church, the description of Mother Catherine herself, and the description of her sermons, Hurston is deliberate in her insistence that, despite the trappings of conventional religious practice, Mother Catherine is unique. Labeling more controlling religious leaders as dictators emphasizes their exercise of conventional power, while insisting that Mother Catherine is unique. Further, Hurston employs a digressive style in making this point, moving from her statement that Mother Catherine does not crush the individual into a tangentially related fact about the treatment of animals. That digression, imported from her anthropological training, offers the kind treatment of animals as pseudo-scientific evidence of Mother Catherine’s permissiveness. The unconnected nature of that evidence, however, is a marker of Hurston’s style. It functions like the preacher’s covert ownership over the proclamation “I can see-ee-ee” to show the limits of Hurston’s mastery over her material. Like Lovelace, the virtuosity of Mother Catherine’s claim to divinity overruns Hurston’s attempt to contain it in objective facts. Whereas the Lovelace sermon demonstrates the ultimate
performative mastery of the preachers over the written form, Mother Catherine’s representation resists communication through recognizable literary form.

Mother Catherine is like the male preacher in that she holds a position of spiritual power. Hurston recycles the language of “the call,” but renders Mother Catherine’s call distinct. It is not mediated through an institutionalized religion, and instead emphasizes her direct communion with God: “Mother Catherine was not converted by anyone. Like Christ, Mohammad, Buddha, the call just came. No one stands before her and God” (Negro 56). Presenting Mother Catherine’s calling as definitively not an active conversion lends her spiritual authority a sense of distinction. The passive arrival of the call suggests an easy, informal exchange with God. Mother Catherine’s spirituality seems to exist without the torment described in the Lovelace sermon and that structures Moses, Man of the Mountain. Already, Hurston is carefully distinguishing between the masculinized, institutionalized notion of a preacher’s call, and the true calling that Mother Catherine has experienced. This is furthered by the link Hurston draws between Mother Catherine and the religious leaders Christ, Mohammad, and Buddha. Though the figures are all male, they are also founders of major religions. In aligning Mother Catherine with them, Hurston makes a case for the legitimacy of her religious practice, arguing that it is on par with other recognized forms of organized religion. That claim is complicated by the extent to which Mother Catherine’s religious doctrine remains in dialogue with Christianity. Much like other syncretic practices discussed throughout this chapter, Mother Catherine’s religious doctrine repurposes tenets of Christianity, but refigures them in important ways.
Perhaps the most significant refiguration comes from the church’s matriarchal structure. But it is not only Mother Catherine’s position as a woman at the head of the church that Hurston seems to value, it is also her use of motherhood as a process to transform Christian teachings to more egalitarian purposes. Hurston quotes Mother Catherine: “I got all kinds of children, but I am they mother. Some of ‘em are saints; some of ‘em are concepts (convicts) and jailbirds; some of ‘em kill babies in their bodies; some of ‘em walks the streets at night—but they’s all my children. God got all kinds, how come I cain’t love all of mine? So says the beautiful spirit” (Negro 56). Mother Catherine’s stated love for all of her followers, saints and sinners alike, constitutes a radically accepting collective that practices social and spiritual redemption for all of its members. Her reference to abortion is particularly striking, as it contradicts her religion’s focus on motherhood and childbirth. The suggestion that she can forgive and love women that break her cardinal rule reveals the expansiveness of her love. But the reference to God’s love presents a complicated claim about Mother Catherine’s holiness. In many ways, this sentiment echoes a central Christian tenet about loving the most marginalized and abject members of society. She justifies her love for all of her followers by referencing God’s universal love for His followers. This link to Christianity muddles claims to novelty that her doctrine might contain, aligning her radical commitment to universal love with an already-extant religious tradition. However, embedded in her recourse to God’s love lies the implicit critique of other religious traditions that follow doctrinal mandates for this kind of love without putting doctrine into practice. In other

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172 Elsewhere, Hurston writes, “Mother Catherine’s religion is matriarchal. Only God and the mother count. Childbirth is the most important element in the creed. Her compound is called the Manger and is dedicated to the birth of children out of wedlock” (Negro 57).
words, Mother Catherine’s love for her followers both adapts Christian ideology and critiques the extent to which the church, as an institution, does not practice that ideology. Hurston’s validation of Mother Catherine comes both as the result of her disruption of the church’s patriarchal structure, but also from her intentional attention to the service of marginalized people.

Hurston’s description of Mother Catherine places a clear emphasis on the construction of an equitable religious community. While the model might be limited in its scope, this sketch comes closer than any other in its imagination of an alternative form of governance. At the center of that act of imagination lies a leader appointed by divine authority, but committed to the enfranchisement of her followers. The divine authority that Mother Catherine claims rests in uneasy tension with the power she wants to reinvest in her flock and the fragmentary form of her story leaves the relation undefined and open. Hurston chooses to end the sketch with an ambiguous description of how Mother Catherine came to be in the Manger, which is what she calls the Temple of the Innocent Blood. The story at once communicates the extent to which Mother Catherine’s interchange with God inflects her authority and also how that authority is oriented toward the service of her followers:

God sent her into the Manger over a twelve-foot board fence—not through a gate. She must set no time for her going but when the spirit gave the word. After her descent through the roof of the chapel she has never left the grounds but once, and that was not intentional. She was learning to drive a car within the enclosure. It got out of control and tore a hole through the fence before it stopped. She called to her followers to “Come git me!” (She must not set her foot on unhallowed ground outside the Manger.) They came and reverently lifted her and bore her back inside. The spot in the yard upon which she was set down became sacred, for a voice spoke as her feet touched the ground and said, “Put down here the Pool of Gethsemane so that believers may have holy water to drink.” The well is under construction at this writing (Negro 57).
Placing God as the subject of the first sentence reinforces the second sentence’s claim that Mother Catherine acts according to His will. Her presence in the Manger becomes proof of the power of her faith and of her chosenness. Hurston formally marks the weight of the prohibition against Mother Catherine’s leaving the hallowed space of the manger, by stating and restating the divine law. Her enclosure places Mother Catherine at God’s will, a position that allows her to intercede on behalf of her followers. The car accident that causes her to leave the Manger is a singular incident, one that confirms her divinity. The mandate that she not set foot on unhallowed ground confirms her direct communication with God for a third time. The sacred spot where her feet touch the ground acts as a device to reaffirm her access to the divine and also demonstrates her attunement to the needs of the congregation. The fact that the spirit directs its injunction towards a collective need for holy water characterizes Mother Catherine as a conduit towards the spiritual betterment of all of her followers. It is a moment that is riven with religious imbrication: God becomes the spirit, reference to the Pool of Gethsemane carries an association with Christ the night before the crucifixion, and the voice remains unassigned. But, no matter the religious associations, it is a moment that leverages Mother Catherine’s spiritual exceptionality for the good of her community.

The fact that the sketch ends in the continuous present signals the ongoing nature of Mother Catherine’s rule. It is an extending gesture that suggests both a potential for the continuity of the Temple of Innocent Blood, but it also gestures outward. Hurston seems to suggest that this existing model might be scaled up, replicated, and serve as an exemplar of representative governance that is oriented toward the service of the collective. In her depiction of Mother Catherine, Hurston articulates an ideal relation
between exemplarity and representativeness. This ideal involves a leader that uses her
singular abilities to intercede on behalf of her followers. While Hurston’s historical
moment lacked extant models of political formations that adhered to such a model, her
valorization of Mother Catherine demonstrates the fact that she found an important kernel
of a larger theory of governance in a modest New Orleans church. The fragmentary form
of the story limits the specificity of the theorization. But rather than viewing that
limitation as restricting, Hurston suggests the expansiveness of Mother Catherine as a
model. The story opens up onto wider, if still undefined, possibilities. With Mother
Catherine, Hurston shows that the project of writing the impossible can start from a
minor example, a small, marginalized spiritualist community, but the practices of
governance observed there can ramify across actual movements for Black nationalism,
Black literary expression, and lived Black experience.
CHAPTER 3:
Communism and its Discontents: Party Politics and Collective Social Mobility

In 1972 International Publishers, a small Marxist outfit based in New York, put out a slim book called *Black Worker in the Deep South* written by Hosea Hudson. In keeping with the press’s mission of publishing translations of foundational works of Marxist theory alongside memoirs of famous Communist Party participants, the edition offered Hudson’s firsthand account of his participation in the chapter of the Communist Party based in Birmingham, Alabama in the 1930s. At the end of the narrative, Hudson writes, “The major slogan among the Black people in these perilous times must be to unite. I repeat this again and again because I know how our enemies try to divide us.”

In his stirring call, Hudson makes a case for the relevance of his experience in the Communist Party to the moment of publication in the 1970s. Referring to the times as “perilous” links his present moment to the precarious circumstances through which Hudson fought, organized, and forged an ideological connection to the Communist Party. The call to unite carries associations with the Party, but also might be read as a general call for racial solidarity. In the book’s last line, he makes a case for his life as a kind of pedagogy, though the specific role of the Party remains opaque: “To sum up the meaning of my seventy years of living, I would say that four words are sufficient: Learn, Struggle,

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Organize, Unite.” Expanding upon the earlier directive to unite, Hudson crafts a narrative about the movement toward that unity. The terms he uses gain power in their generalization: it could just as easily be a move towards class-based unity as it could be a call for the unity of any disenfranchised group. He leverages the specificity of his life’s experience in service of a teachable moment about the outcomes of radical dissent.

Five years later the historian Nell Irvin Painter published *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: The Life and Times of a Black Radical*. At nearly four hundred pages, including two introductions, a preface, a bibliographic essay on preceding historical works detailing Black involvement in the Communist Party, extensive notes, and an index, the text immediately announces itself as both personal narrative and also an authoritative historical resource on Party activity in Birmingham. Painter is interested in telling a different story with the facts of Hudson’s life. She writes:

> Earlier in our work, Hudson gave the Communist Party credit for changing an ordinary, illiterate industrial worker into a national, even international, figure. He wrote me a letter saying that “The Party Made Me To Be Come To Be What I Am What Eaver It Is.” He spoke of his need to tell the story of communists in Birmingham. If he was exceptional because he was a survivor, he was no more than what the Party could make of any man.  

Painter describes Hudson’s understanding of himself as one in which he is a tool of the Party. In the 1930s his work afforded him the status of fighting inequity on an international scale; and in the 1970s he must communicate that privilege to others as service to the Party. His exceptionality, to whatever extent he might be exceptional, is rooted in his persistence. He is simply the Party’s most long-lasting tool. Painter seems unsatisfied with this conclusion and is careful to construct a narrative wherein this

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175 Ibid., 130.
moment of self-consciousness characterizes only the earlier part of her collaboration with
Hudson. Her introduction shifts from an understanding of the man as tool for the party to
one that recognizes the fact “that here the greatness was in the individual man, not in the
organization. The organization only provided the necessary tools” (Painter 35).” Directly
employing the language of tools, Painter refigures Hudson’s account as one in which he
goes through a process of self-actualization that transforms him from tool to user of a
tool. The fact that Painter marks her text explicitly as a narrative is significant in its
thematic and structural centering of Hudson. She positions Hudson in a long line of
exceptional men, who in using the narrative as a form of expression articulate similar
journeys into fully realized political actors.

I offer these parallel examples to show how the same source material—Hosea
Hudson’s life—can be transformed in the service of linked, but distinct narratives. Black
Worker in the Deep South is oriented toward a collective process of unification in service
of fighting oppression, while The Narrative of the Life of Hosea Hudson describes the life
of an exceptional man and his instrumentalization by the Communist Party in service of
fighting oppression. Both accounts agree on Hudson’s goals and on the tireless work he
undertook to achieve them, but they diverge in how that story is told. Careful attention to
the narrative patterns that these two texts take in describing Hudson’s life reveal their
different investments, and similar attention to narrative form demonstrates investments,
both authorial and critical, that shape how the Communist Party has come to be
understood in relation to Black radical politics. Because of the Party’s somewhat limited
organizing capacities in the United States, as well as more local factors like institutional
inefficiency and white chauvinism, the narrative that has come to define Black
Communist involvement is one of disillusionment. Studying the extent to which a text conforms to the arc of that narrative can both describe the real frustrations with the Party and also point towards other narrative arcs in places where disillusionment does not apply.

Because of the central place of *Invisible Man* and other accounts of Black Communist disillusionment, that narrative has prevailed, often at the expense of the diverse engagements with the Communist Party in Black literature. Since James Smethurst’s *The New Red Negro*, however, there have been some critical attempts at the recuperation of pro-Communist voices. Smethurst reads a constellation of Black Leftist poets as a way of codifying a new, hybrid form that resists the “programmatic anticommunism” of *Invisible Man*.\(^{177}\) Mary Helen Washington similarly reads Left-leaning artists as “represent[ing] the Left, including the Communist Party, in complex ways—often, but not always, positively.”\(^{178}\) Hybrid form, as described by Smethurst, is better able to account for the complexity that Washington reads into the artists in her archive. Finally, in her textual-historical analysis of the writing of *Invisible Man*, Barbara Foley depicts anticommunism as a discourse, “selectively shaped and articulated in conjunction with and in opposition to alternative discourses.”\(^{179}\) Her discursive model of political representation accounts for Ellison’s adaptation of *Invisible Man* to reflect his own growing anticommunism, capturing how the residues of other discourses and moments of Leftist involvement leave their traces on the text itself. The various lenses


that these critics use to understand Leftist writing are helpful in their insistence on a more expansive vision of the way that Black people practiced and wrote about their Leftist beliefs. However, each approach analyzes the text’s capacity to represent an authorial ideology. Their primary interest lies in how writers and artists understand themselves in relation to the Left, and how they are able to express that through literary form. While that is part of my interest in this chapter, I argue that writers who take Leftist ideology as their subject matter conform that ideology to fit existing narrative patterns. By analyzing those narrative patterns and the particular ways in which Party involvement must be altered to fit them, we can better attend to arguments that these authors make about the applicability of Communist ideology on the exigencies of Black life.

There are varying degrees of involvement described in the texts that this chapter analyzes, ranging from direct excurses on Party doctrine to the more abstract calls for collectivism that echo Hudson’s in *Black Worker in the Deep South*. This is as much the result of a historically specific range of possibilities for participation in the political Left as it is a feature of how those possibilities are configured in literature and art.180 In one of the most extensive studies of the American Left and its impact on literary culture, Michael Denning argues for a view of the Popular Front that is not a dogmatic or ideological movement, but is instead a “historical bloc” and a cultural formation.181 His theorization accounts for the emergence of the laborer as a central literary figure and for the prominence of working-class authors, but it also risks understating the centrality of

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180 Richard Pells argues makes a case for the diffuse cultural value of Marxism arguing, “the most attractive feature of Marxism to intellectuals in the 1930s was not its understanding of social crises but its recognition of the need for personal action and commitment.” Richard Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 126.

overt political doctrine in some of the literary work of the period.\textsuperscript{182} Despite the fact that Leftism in the period was sometimes divorced from specific Communist doctrine, for Black workers there was a very important tenet of the Party platform: racial equality. It is clear that in a society that was stratified by both race and class, the Communist Party was unique in its explicit advocacy for disenfranchised Black workers.\textsuperscript{183} The Party’s intercession in the famous Scottsboro case drew many Black members into the Party, and formed a vocal and well-documented community in Harlem.\textsuperscript{184} In part because of the famous writers associated with the Party and with the Left more generally, a narrative of involvement has coalesced around Black Communist involvement that depicts the Black worker’s attraction to political possibilities attached to the Party, only to be disillusioned.

The aim of this chapter is to think through alternate narratives of involvement by expanding the geographic scope of accounts of the Communist Party and taking seriously the literary value of accounts written by the working class. Communism’s internationalism is often downplayed in studies of the Party’s influence among African Americans, but the call for racial unity across national borders was undeniably appealing. In reading a novel from the Caribbean, I consider the possibility that transnational collectivism could be a generative form of involvement, and not one that detracts from

\textsuperscript{182} Denning’s emphasis falls on the cultural touchstones and not on the admittedly limited political advancements of the period. He writes, “The Popular Front public culture took three political forms: a social democratic electoral politics; a politics of anti-fascist and anti-imperialist solidarity; and a civil liberties campaign against lynching and labor repression.” In concretizing these three outcomes as the political goals of the Popular Front, Denning further emphasizes the extent to which even the most politically-minded goals of the Leftist movement were not tied to a strictly Leftist politics. It is particularly notable that these three movements are in line with, but not explicitly couched as part of the Communist Party platform.

\textsuperscript{183} Martha Biondi, To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). Biondi also traces the lines of economic support between the Communist Party and other Leftist organizations not strictly associated with the Party. She writes, “it devoted considerable resources to an array of anti-discrimination campaigns” (6).

\textsuperscript{184} Mark Naison, Communists in Harlem During the Depression (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 25.
the aims of Black workers in the United States, as the Party’s international efforts were sometimes characterized.¹⁸⁵ The Party’s activity in Birmingham, Alabama is similarly segmented from activity in Harlem, and placing a bit of pressure on the former’s historical treatment and the latter’s literary association allows us to see the extent to which each community inflects the other. In this way, I hope to use the Communist Party as a paradigmatic example of how entrenched narratives of involvement might be reconsidered in order articulate unseen political ends. Though Party involvement might be critiqued for its dependence on or imbrication in an existing institution, thus compromising its potential to result in a new political formation, it was one avenue towards immediate action. This chapter turns from the theorization of new and unimaginable forms of governance to the negotiation of liberation from within existing structures.

Reading across a hemispheric American archive of Communist literature demonstrates both diverse and far-reaching forms of involvement, and also how those modes of involvement are underwritten by simultaneous denial and assent. This is to say that the texts together show how aspects of Communist ideology and practice are alternately communicated and critiqued through text, providing a more complex vision of the field of involvement. My methodology is underwritten by notions of the diaspora that, as Brent Edwards has noted, “[make] possible an analysis of the institutional formations of black internationalism that [attend] to their constitutive differences.”¹⁸⁶ While Edwards’ work focuses on difference, and the processes of articulation that can communicate those differences, I am interested in the ways that representative practice

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 73.
¹⁸⁶ Brent Hayes Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora, 11.
inheres across distinct literary and regional traditions. As much as the set of Communist narratives differ from the novels discussed in this chapter, I argue that they gesture towards a shared desire to configure a form of active political involvement that resonates across disparate class and national positions. Samantha Pinto refines the definition of diaspora, positing it as “not only a set of physical movements…but also a set of interpretive strategies.”\(^\text{187}\) Building on this claim for diaspora’s ability to index shared interpretative practices, I make a case for those interpretive practices underwriting a form of radicalism that is often discounted as stymied by its proximity to a dysfunctional institution. This chapter interrogates the forms of Black radicalism that coalesce around questions of action, negotiation, and labor. While my readings of James and Hurston focalized the process of theorizing governance from the exemplar or leader towards the collective, this chapter thinks about the making of a collective through work. It is through a conception of work performed in disparate sites as inextricably linked that we begin to see a more full and complex picture of the lived reality of Communist involvement.

This chapter unsettles prevailing narratives of Black involvement in the Communist Party. I take involvement as a key term to understand various modes of engagement with Communist doctrine and think about how certain literary forms are more apt to communicate the realities of Party involvement than others. The first section reads a collection of narratives by members of the Communist Party and associated organizations operating in and around Birmingham, Alabama in the 1930s. This collection of three accounts demonstrates the act of leveraging conventional scenes from canonical narratives—namely the conversion scene—to contextualize and familiarize

\(^{187}\) Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas*, 4.
involvement in the Communist Party. They show both the intellectual intentionality that goes into involvement and also the critical desire, imposed a generation later, to recontextualize that involvement in a de-radicalized nature of Black dissent. The second section focuses on Jacques Roumain’s novel *Masters of the Dew*, which also employs a form of recontextualization, swapping specific Communist dogma for a generalized valuation of collective labor. The novel depicts involvement as invisible in the service of larger, more diffuse truths, constituting a narrative suffused with and uncritical of Communist ideology. Claude McKay’s recently-discovered novel *Amiable With Big Teeth* provides the counterpoint to that, as the novel makes Party ideology and institutional machinations hyper-visible, to the point that they obscure the connection between Party ideology and the good that it might serve Harlem’s Black community. The novel crafts a narrative of disillusionment that is undercut by the emphasis McKay places on the social, suggesting that there might be a horizon of possibility in some forms of collectivism, so long as they remain uncompromised by the damaging forces of institutionalization. Taken together, these very different texts demonstrate the difficulty in mapping the ideological onto the lived reality of the Black worker. However, they also posit models through which literary form can mediate an array of radical Black politics that is as complex and dynamic as the various types of party involvement.

I. The Culture of Understanding

The three men who write or collaborate on the most authoritative texts of the Communist Party’s rise in 1930s Birmingham, Alabama all held an unfailing belief in Party ideology and its internationalist scope and remained members of the Party for years
after the Popular Front had faded from view. Their ongoing allegiance to Communism complicates historical narratives that fit Black Party involvement into a meteoric rise in the early 1930s towards the realization of racial equality and a catastrophic fall just ten years later when injustice and chauvinism in the Party itself lead to mass disillusionment.¹⁸⁸ When we consider the party workers who continued to uphold ideology and who strongly advocated for its importance in the everyday lives of Black people, we must also construct a new narrative of involvement that does not tend towards disillusionment. Emphasizing working-class writers also allows us to attend to the underexamined fact that the narratives of Black Communist Party involvement are usually focalized through middle-class subjects; and decentering the Harlem chapter of the Communist Party reveals the distinct practices of political participation in other sites of involvement. This section argues that the three major Black Communist autobiographies centered in Birmingham, Alabama demonstrate a “culture of understanding,” which is predicated on intellectual engagement in the ideology of the Communist Party and its applicability in their daily life and work, despite their limited education. The genre of autobiography is uniquely adapted to show that culture of understanding as its narrative form can stage a scene wherein the protagonist makes a conscious and informed choice to join the Party based on his life experiences.

The transposition of the Communist Party to the United States happened through intellectual channels, and as a result the movement was routed through urban, middle-

¹⁸⁸ For a historical account of the trajectory of Communist Party involvement in Harlem see Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 3-57. In *The Other Black List*, Mary Helen Washington complicates that existing narrative, pointing to the ways in which Communism persisted in Leftist thought after the dissolution of the party itself. Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist*, 14.
class spaces even as Leftist literature depicted the working class.\textsuperscript{189} In the context of Black activism, this has led to a disconnect between Party involvement and later radical movements.\textsuperscript{190} It has also led to overwhelming attention on a narrow group of Black writers associated at one time or another with the Communist Party.\textsuperscript{191} Brian Dolner has outlined the networking function of what he names the “black cultural front,” which he argues “provided a network, both formal and informal, of contacts that helped many black writers and artists advance their careers.”\textsuperscript{192} Dolner’s observation explains some of this overrepresentation: the most successful Black writers of this generation made connections through their involvement in the Communist Party. As we will see in the next chapter, Leftist political organizations and the Works Project Administration form important backdrops for the early poetry of Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. But, rather than mining those texts for evidence of the culture of understanding, I turn to autobiographies by Angelo Herndon, Nate Shaw, and Hosea Hudson to better understand the platform’s resonance with the rural working class.

These narratives demonstrate their subjects finding the ideals of the Communist Party resonant with their daily experiences of injustice and viewing the party as a tool for

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\textsuperscript{190} For several recent studies that attempt to remedy this by bridging Communist involvement to later political movements, see: Cheryl Higashida, \textit{Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945-1995} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); and Amy Abugo Ongiri, \textit{Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic} (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

\textsuperscript{191} There have been a number of recent studies of Black Communist writing, but they all tend to gravitate around Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. See, for example: William Maxwell, \textit{New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), Lawrence Jackson, \textit{Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius} (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), and Nathaniel Mills, \textit{Ragged Revolutionaries: The Lumpenproletariat and African American Marxism in Depression-Era Literature} (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017).

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change. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley argues that Communism took hold in agrarian southern communities in part because there was already a “culture of opposition” rooted the quotidian strategies of resistance that formerly-enslaved peoples performed despite the crushing degradation of the institution of slavery. He writes:

The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petit bourgeoisie racial politics of the middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.\textsuperscript{193}

Two important strands emerge from this contention: the class dimension wherein the Communist Party becomes the vehicle to contest Black bourgeois values and imperatives, and the fact that education was not necessary to access that contestation. In the 1930s virtually all matters related to racial equality that reached the mainstream were brought forth by the NAACP or affiliated Black middle class citizens. This offered an extremely narrow view of the needs of the Black community at large and also demonstrated a very specific mode of contestation. The gentility and incrementalism of such movements came into immediate conflict with the more militant strategies of Black Communism and led to a deep divide between the Black middle and working classes. As a result, it is significant that the mode of contestation built in the Communist Party was available to the working class. The emphasis that Kelley places on active involvement in the passage above, using active verbs that denote intellectual engagement, shows that these Black Communists were not simply regurgitating memorized facts about the Communist Party. Instead, there is a clear reckoning with the ideas of the Communist Party platform, as well as the roots

of inequality that make Communism necessary. His reading evokes the culture of understanding, a context from which the participant understands the structuring forces that contribute to their own disenfranchisement and take an active and reasoned role in changing their circumstances. The culture of understanding is not unique to or limited to a discussion of Black Communist involvement. It provides a useful framework for thinking through other modes of Black radicalism, and Black political engagement. It is also an important paradigm to apply to subjects who, without the benefit of traditional forms of education, are able to participate in political discourse that has the potential to drastically improve their lives.

All three of the narratives foreground this culture of understanding, making it apparent through the inclusion of the trope of conversion in their narration of how they come to the Communist Party. The moment of religious conversion is a structuring element and often a turning point in the genre of the Black autobiography, as it is often associated with access to literacy.\(^{194}\) It represents a turning point when the autobiographical subject becomes aware of his circumstances and the inequalities that govern his existence. In transposing the trope of conversion from a religious to a political one, these authors call upon the generic resonances of conversion, placing their text in relation to these earlier narratives. They also encourage a structural parallel between the religious conversion and the moment of political revelation, which emphasizes the centrality of the scene in each text. If we have been trained as readers of the Black

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autobiography to find significance in the religious conversion scene, then we will find these political conversion scenes equally crucial. Importantly, all three scenes of conversion emphasize the extent to which the subject understands the circumstances of his disenfranchisement and, particularly, how exploitative working conditions are inextricably connected to racial inequality. The emphasis on such a synthetic understanding of Communist Party ideology undercuts espoused notions that Black members were conscripted without sufficient information.195 It further demonstrates the way in which we might read the culture of understanding as a constituent part of Black political praxis. The centrality of informed political action allows us to define a mode of political involvement in which action and ideology coexist.

*All God’s Dangers* depicts this adjoining of ideology and action through the depiction of its protagonist Nate Shaw as compelled to political action by a deep-seated sense of inequality. Shaw joins the Sharecroppers Union, which was financially supported by the Communist Party, in 1931 after hearing about it from a neighbor who is already involved. The fact that he is a member of the Sharecroppers Union is an important institutional distinction, especially when we consider the text alongside Hudson’s, which is deeply concerned with the machinations of the Communist Party itself.196 Shaw comes to the union through particular interests in his livelihood as a farmer and he is also a generation older than Hudson when he joins. These differences frame Shaw’s involvement in the Sharecroppers Union as at once practical and also aspirational. He is attempting to improve his working conditions based on two decades of

195 Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression*, 22.
196 For a more detailed distinction between the Sharecroppers Union and the Communist Party, see Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 125.
work experience, and he is also aiming to reclaim some of the educational opportunity that was stripped away as a result of the need to work. He describes his introduction to the Sharecroppers Union as follows:

And durin the pressure year, a union began to operate in this country, called it the Sharecroppers Union . . . and I knewed what was goin on was a turnabout on the southern man, white and colored ... And I heard about it bein a organization for the poor class of people—that's what I wanted to get into, too ... From my boy days comin along, ever since I been in God's world, I've never had no rights, no choice in nothin that the white man didn't want me to have—even been cut out of education, book learnin, been deprived of that.197

Here Shaw offers a condensed history of both the union and the circumstances that draw him to it. Notably his understanding of the Sharecroppers Union is rooted in its utility for “the poor class of people” and not in specific political doctrine. He emphasizes the extent to which he has been excluded from education and unable to engage with written discourse. He also frames his disenfranchisement as a specifically racialized phenomenon. The Sharecropper’s Union becomes a way for Shaw to imagine an alternative to the racist regimes that have shaped and limited the possibilities of his life. He emphasizes the interracial potential of the Union, but that is the closest that we get to the specificities of the Communist Party platform. There is a limited sense of the fact that it is for worker’s rights and, instead, the focus remains on a general sense of the betterment of a regionally-defined class of people. This simultaneous generality and specificity doubly undercuts a platform that works to unite workers worldwide. But it also reflects the aspects of the movement that draw him to it and as such, is invaluable in providing a realistic picture of union membership.

By contrast, Hosea Hudson joins the Communist Party when he is a young man and, at first, frames his conversion as much more of a conscription than an active and informed decision. Throughout the story of his first meeting, he insists that he joins the party without knowing any of its core tenets. However, as he reflects further on the events of that first meeting, he reveals the same systemic, if incipient, understanding of racism and its connection to the poor working conditions in Alabama indicated in Shaw’s recollection of his conversion. He narrates the conversation he has with Al Murphy, another black member of the Communist Party, who he repeatedly claims has more knowledge than he does. However, over the course of the conversation, he shifts to foregrounding his own understanding of their shared working conditions:

Murphy got to outlining about the role of the Party and the program of the Party—the Scottsboro Case and the unemployed and the Depression and the imperialist war. You had all that he was talking about that night. In the biggest part, I didn’t know what he was saying. All I know is about the Scottsboro case. He was explaining about how the Scottsboro case is a part of the whole frame-up of the Negro people in the South—jim crow, frame-up, lynching, all that was part of the system. So I could understand that all right, and how speed-up, the unemployment, and how the unemployed people wouldn’t be able to buy back what they make, that they was consumers and that it would put more people in the street. He went through all that kind of stuff, and I understood it. I understood that part” (The Narrative of Hosea Hudson 87).

The repetition of “understood” toward the end of the passage underscores the extent to which Hudson is aware of the interconnectedness of race and labor. The invocation of the Scottsboro Case—which was also part of Nate Shaw’s decision to join the Sharecroppers Union—provides an illustrative example of the way that racism structures Black life in the south. Connecting that case to the realities of unemployment, lynching, the framing of Black people for crimes that they did not commit, and, implicitly, to sharecropping demonstrates Hudson’s synthetic grasp of the way that daily exigencies relate to larger
ideological aims of the party. This situates the goal of racial equality within the broad internationalist context in the way that it is delineated in the Communist Platform. But it also localizes racial equality and makes clear the fact that those broad political goals are accessible through the everyday. It exemplifies the culture of understanding where the simultaneously global and local interests of the political organizer is borne out through intellectual engagement. Put another way, Hudson shows us that understanding is a constitutive part of political action.

Angelo Herndon’s narrative participates in the same culture of understanding that permeates Hudson and Shaw’s work, but that understanding is transformed by the fact that Herndon is able to read and write. Because of his access to literacy and the sole authorship of his text, he is able to much more consciously place the narrative of his conversion to the Communist Party in a lineage of autobiographical conversion scenes. The literary positioning of the event is immediately evident when he narrates a “sultry evening in June, 1930” where he and a friend come across a handbill, which has been trampled, but that nevertheless catches his eye. It reads, “Would you rather fight or starve?” The almost-novelistic stage-setting of the sultry night and the chaotic scene amidst which Herndon spots the handbill runs up against the precision he places on its time—June 1930—and its identification as a meeting of the Unemployment Council. These details serve to contextualize Herndon’s activities in a broader historical narrative, as scholars like Robin Kelley have identified the Unemployment Council as one organization, along with the Sharecroppers Union, that disseminated information about

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the Communist Party in the early 1930s. For Herndon, historical fact joins with his narrative fabulation to create a scene of conversion that is overtly related to an earlier religious conversion. He writes:

At the end of the meeting I went up to the platform and said to the white organizer:
“‘I’m with you with all my heart and I would like you to put me down as a member.’

Strange, only once before had I walked up to a speaker who had moved me so deeply and been converted. That was the time when my Uncle Jeremiah preached his first sermon and I had gone up to him, extended my hand and piped in my nine-year-old voice: “I know religion is in me, Uncle Jeremiah.” The emotional motivation in both cases was identical, but what a difference in their nature and in their aim! The change of my viewpoint was almost fabulous, emerging from the urge to escape the cruelties of life in religious abstractions into a healthy, vigorous and realistic recognition that life on earth, which was so full of struggle and tears for the poor, could be changed by the intelligent and organized will of the workers” (Let Me Live 78).

By linking the experience of political conversion to a religious conversion, Herndon marks his membership in the Communist Party as equally revelatory. Herndon distinguishes between the religious conversion and the political one, arguing that their “nature and aim” are distinct. Importantly, he roots the religious conversion in an “urge,” which underscores its automatic nature. We can understand how he might, at the age of nine, be moved to pledge allegiance to a system of belief that purports to rescue him from his impoverished living conditions. His political conversion, on the other hand, is predicated on “a healthy, vigorous and realistic recognition,” which reveals its root in understanding. Unlike the religious conversion, which seems to happen automatically, the political conversion requires a reckoning with ideology. The difference that he draws between the two conversions can also be read as an indictment of the passive adherence

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199 Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, 75.
to the church. By drawing a stark comparison between that and the “intelligent and organized will of the workers,” Herndon highlights the intellectual engagement that membership to the party demands. This scene also performs an important narrative function, and it is notable that Herndon, again, frames the historical fact of his joining the Communist Party with the narrative flair of his dialogue with the white organizer. What might have been a matter-of-fact statement of his membership becomes a heartfelt pledge and an interracial union between Herndon and a white worker. While Herndon is deliberate in his portrayal of the Party as largely a site of racial unity, staging his conversion in this way goes beyond an assertion of the importance of interracial cooperation. It also characterizes Herndon’s relationship to Party ideology as absolute and unyielding. In framing the conversion as one he undertakes “with all [his] heart” Herndon structurally echoes the dogmatic nature of a religious conversion, while also reinscribing it with political meaning.

The conversion scene is closely followed by a scene in which Herndon reads The Communist Manifesto for the first time, again borrowing from tropes associated with the tradition of the Black autobiography. He recounts: “For my own edification I analyzed it paragraph by paragraph, reading passages over and over many times. I wrote a simple account of it in my own words for my own private use” (Let Me Live 82). The labored analysis of the text mirrors the painful physical labor that he has recounted in the first part of the narrative. It also counters the easy and automatic language of religious conversion, signaling the fact that sustained intellectual engagement happens slowly and painstakingly over time. Furthermore, the passage introduces a shadow text, the account of The Communist Manifesto that Herndon writes for himself. It prefigures the writing of
the narrative that will become *Let Me Live* and signals the importance of synthesizing the initial political text for personal use. In fact, Herndon reproduces a segment of his account in *Let Me Live* and both the conclusion he draws, as well as his framing of the excerpt are telling in their relation to Communist ideology. He writes:

Marx and Engels’ statement “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” impressed me as a very profound truth. Life and history approached in this light assumed a new and startling significance. It dazzled me beyond words with its truth. To quote a passage from this composition which I still have in my possession:

“The worker has no power. All he possesses is the power of his hands and his brains. It is his ability to produce things. It is only natural, therefore, that he should try and get as much as he can for his labor. To make his demands more effective he is obliged to band together with other workers into powerful labor organizations, for there is strength in numbers. The capitalists, on the other hand, own all the factories, the mines and the government. Their only interest is to make as much profit as they can. They are not concerned with the well-being of those who work for them. We see, therefore, that the interests of the capitalists and the workers are not the same. In fact, they are opposed to each other. What happens? A desperate fight takes place between the two. This is known as the class struggle.”

The idea seemed so self-evident now that I scolded myself for having been so stupid as not to have recognized it before (*Let Me Live* 82).

Herndon’s primer on *The Communist Manifesto* is preceded by amazement and followed by an insistence on their self-evidence. In framing his reading this way, he highlights the new knowledge accessed through the text while also making a persuasive argument for its applicability in his world. The unspooling of his observations of working conditions directly from the text reveal a structural fact of Herndon’s account: one sentence from *The Communist Manifesto* represents eleven of his. As a result, we can imagine the shadow text that Herndon produces as staggeringly long and also as representative of an overwhelming body of thought and synthesis. In providing an extract from this shadow text, Herndon shows his reader what an understanding of ideology involves. He
demonstrates the process of conversion to the Communist Party as one that is built around intellectual analysis. Herndon’s language is notably abstract, removed from the specific working conditions that he has described from the earlier points of his life. He adds factory labor to the kinds of agricultural and mining labor that we know he has performed, underscoring the necessity of thinking collectively about the labor movement. And he also includes the government, signaling the systemic nature of the oppression of workers that he hopes to combat.

His language further reveals the extent of his Marxist training, borrowing the phrase “class struggle” directly from the original text and including the phrase “desperate fight,” which seems to echo the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and its influence on the writings of Marx and Engels. This language acts as evidence of the analytical work he has performed in poring over the formative Marxist texts. It comes into apparent conflict with the language of “self-evidence” that frames his reading. The counterintuitivity of this rhetorical move is productive in that it allows Herndon’s reader to see the way that Communist ideology suffuses contemporaneous thinking about the nature of inequality. Though he performs the intellectual labor, he also dramatizes that labor and makes such labor unnecessary for his reader. Instead, we see the conclusion of his analysis as self-evident. He naturalizes Communist ideology, which might have otherwise been read as objectionable, and connects it directly to a movement for class equality more generally. While this moves away from the particularity of Communist doctrine as connected to the international Communist Party, it places that doctrine in the larger context of political movements for equality. Herndon’s translation of The Communist Manifesto, then, is particularly useful in its positioning of Communism as part of a broader imperative to
understand the systemic nature of disenfranchisement as a step along the path to alleviate it.

The text describes several events in Herndon’s life that allow him to apply the particularity of Communist ideology to a more general movement for equality. One such moment takes place after he has been charged with a bogus crime, imprisoned, and is put on trial in front of an all-white jury in Alabama. The scene is complicated in the way that Herndon layers the comedy of his impossible situation—proving himself innocent in a court that repeatedly demonstrates its racially-motivated contempt for him—with the weighty implication that if he is found guilty he will be put to death. He is on trial for a charge of insurrection, which dates back to a pre-Abolition moment, placing his alleged “crime” in a lineage of Black resistance to white supremacy. And, in the course of representing himself as innocent of the crime, he underplays the facts of the case itself, and instead defends the deeply-held convictions that have placed him in prison. In one of the most stylized moments of the text Herndon depicts his address to the courtroom. It is a moment that is prefigured by an intention to speak both to and for the movement that he is imprisoned for. He writes, “I saw a vision of millions of white and Negro workers, oppressed and hungry, listening to every word I was saying. It was they who were going to be my jury. By them I wished to be judged” (Let Me Live 235). In this statement he is distancing his trial and his alleged crime from the legal apparatus. Instead, he resituates his action in terms of the workers that his actions aim to represent. Through his imprisonment, he casts himself as representative of their struggles and depicts his actions as for their benefit. In giving them the ultimate power of judgment, he denies the juridical system its power and, in turn, gives that power to the workers he aims to represent. As he
goes on to describe his address, the full text of which is added in an appendix, the comedic mood and laughter that characterized the courtroom scene evaporates. Herndon becomes grave, serious, and insistent on the representative potential of his words. He writes:

There was a great silence as I spoke. Men and women sat pale and tense. I looked at them and they looked at me, and I felt that we were fused together by the deepest bonds of sympathy. A warm glow shot through my body and I tingled with the joy of it. The hard cruel faces of the state’s instruments of class injustice receded from me. The walls of the court house seemed to melt away and I walked the earth erect and free. I thought of the rugged beauty and greatness of the heart of the American people. It was to them that I was now speaking. Yet what I was saying could not be in the nature of a defense. Quite the contrary. It was a scathing indictment of the system. It was also a plea to the workers to rise and change the world. My words sprang from the heart and I directed them to the heart and the conscience of my fellowmen (Let Me Live 236).

The sympathy between Herndon and his audience harkens back to earlier discussions of genre and the text’s congruities with the slave narrative. That bond is set off against the “state’s instruments,” which are figured as a force of cruelty. This dichotomy underscores Herndon’s insistence on the humanity of the Communist agenda. He imagines the American people as conflated with the audience of the courtroom, which includes those sympathetic to his cause and the injustice of his arrest and also that the corrupt jailers, judge, prosecutor, and jury comprise the American public. Yet, he repeatedly describes the audience generously, dwelling on their “greatness of heart.” This seems to elide the forces working actively against him, attributing their motives to systemic injustice and emphasizing the corrupting power of a system that is broken. Put another way, he shifts responsibility from individual actors and, instead, indicts a system that is predicated on racism. His insistent focus on the structural quality of disenfranchisement recalls the conversion scene and demonstrates the fact that that structural understanding must
underwrite all political action. Furthermore, the positioning of the speech as a far-reaching ideological indictment of a broken system casts systemic change as his chosen form of political action.

When Herndon characterizes his address as something other than a defense, he discounts its utilitarian purpose in favor of an ideological one prioritizing his ideals over the reality of his imprisonment. Additionally, the identification of his words being “from the heart” and appealing to the “heart and the conscience of [his] fellowmen” further distances the speech from the purposes of his defense. It is an ideological appeal designed to shape the ideologies of his audience. In this way, the description of his address becomes metonymic for the text as a whole. The narrative is less about Herndon’s lack of culpability, as we might expect from the autobiography of a man imprisoned for a ludicrous crime. Instead, it is an intricate ideological defense of the Communist Party platform that, like the work he performs in the reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, demonstrates a degree of political understanding. Replacing a defense that might free him from prison with a systemic understanding of his own disenfranchisement shifts the register of his address from an appeal to a teachable moment. It furthers the sense, already established by his emphasis on intellectual engagement, that understanding is a constitutive part of political action. And if we read this text as itself a form of political action, Herndon’s emphasis on understanding shows us that that understanding must happen before recognizable political action can take place.

Herndon’s text is both more straightforward and more exemplary in terms of its authorship and its place in the literary landscape of its time. He composed *Let Me Live* while imprisoned, it was released in 1937, and it circulated widely in interracial radical
circles. By contrast, Hudson and Shaw’s narratives are co-authored and published forty years later. While all three texts are descriptive of political understanding and also prescriptive of political action—meaning that they model a mode of political action rooted in intellectual understanding—their genre is a bit more slippery. Certainly there is room in the tradition of the Black autobiography to consider different situations of collaboration: the authentication of slave narratives, co-authors and recorders of autobiographical testimony, fictional and fabricated autobiography all constitute texts that trouble the assumption that autobiography is a singular and individualist mode. In this way, we might see what some critics have termed a “problem of authorship,” not as a claim that the relationship between subject and scholar is necessarily problematic, but as a challenge to consider the formal tensions that are created when authorship is shared.

In the case of All God’s Dangers and The Narrative of Hosea Hudson those tensions reveal two competing sets of critical desires: the desire on the part of the autobiographical subject to preserve their experience for the historical record and the desire on the part of the academic to make the experience of the subject applicable and legible as part of a longer historical narrative of Black political resistance.

Hosea Hudson worked with historian Nell Irvin Painter while All God’s Dangers was compiled by white novelist and academic Theodore Rosengarten after a series of interviews with Nate Shaw. Painter and Hudson self-consciously frame their project as a joint endeavor, with each one writing an introduction to the text, and with Painter being

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201 Sidonie Smith argues that the black autobiography from the slave narrative onward involve an attention to the collective. Smith writes, “The break away from a community becomes the recoil from and rejection of white society; the break into a community becomes the acceptance of special black roles within the narrower black community.” Sidonie Smith, Where I’m Bound, x.
meticulous about marking the points at which she makes a scholarly intervention.

Rosengarten, by contrast, makes his authorial interventions invisible, foregrounding Nate Shaw’s voice, while also calling into question the extent to which the voice belongs to him at all. These two narratives are significant in their contributions to historicizing the period of Black Communism. But they are both composed in the 1970s—with Rosengarten publishing *All God’s Danger* in 1974 and Painter publishing *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson* in 1979. By publishing the texts nearly thirty years after the heyday of Birmingham Communism, they are structurally positioned as a backwards glance at a movement that is considered past and ripe for analysis. In this way, they are useful for understanding the dynamics of Party involvement—the routines of labor, the labor of organization, and the varied levels of engagement in the Communist Party. But I ultimately argue that their political efficacy is, if not limited, certainly inflected by the critical desires of the collaborators’ time. Namely, they reflect the desire to fit both of these narratives into a more diffuse story about Black resistance in the United States.

The release of *All God’s Dangers* in 1974 was framed as both a literary and historical event, with Shaw depicted as both a historian and a sort of poet. In a glowing review from the *New York Times* H. Jack Geiger claims that Rosengarten “found a black Homer, bursting with his black Odyssey and able to tell it with awesome intellectual power, with passion, with the almost frightening power of memory in a man who could neither read nor write but who sensed that the substance of his own life, and a million other black lives like his, were the very fiber of the nation's history.”202 This assertion ostensibly places Shaw at the center of the narrative, as does the claim that “every word

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[of the book is] his own. It insists upon the literary quality of his text and its integral contribution to historical narratives of the 1930s. The emphasis on his illiteracy, however, implicitly recenters Rosengarten, making his contribution to the literary endeavor visible. He does not include an introduction, or a note on the process of transcription, and the text is rendered in Shaw’s voice. But there is the persistent reminder that without Rosengarten’s intervention, the text would not exist. The implication that Shaw has been excluded from literary and historical accounts of the period echoes Herndon’s understanding of Communism as redress for the totalizing nature of disenfranchisement in the south. Both reflect the impossible conditions that the confluence of Jim Crow racism and globalizing capitalism present to the Black worker. And both represent that impossibility as an integral component of the historical record. Rosengarten’s determination to keep his authorial intervention invisible renders the book’s reception as particularly telling. Its feature in the New York Times Book Review and the fact that it won the National Book Award in 1975 cements its place as a cultural touchstone.\(^{203}\)

The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, by contrast, is framed as a historical intervention and written in an academic register. In her preface to the 1979 edition of the text Nell Irvin Painter represents Hudson’s apparent desire to have his story, and the story of Black involvement in the Communist Party more generally, reflected in this historical record. Yet, while her reflections center largely on the historical utility of such testimony, Hudson’s reflect on the uniqueness of the workforce, working conditions, and Jim Crow racism that give rise to such high Black membership in the Communist Party at that time.

\(^{203}\) The 1975 National Book Awards field was particularly competitive. All God’s Dangers beat All the President’s Men and Toni Morrison’s The Black Book. Cheryl Wall, “Reading the Black Book: Between the Lines of History” The Arizona Quarterly 68, no. 4 (2012): 105-130.
Hudson repeatedly claims that the 1930s were singularly “rough days” where the Communist Party was particularly organized and that workers had a central role in determining and disseminating the party platform (*Narrative of Hosea Hudson* 18). Painter, by contrast, claims that the “racial climate of the 1930s and 1940s, rather than a strategic failure on the part of the [Communist Party], provides much of the explanation for why Blacks left the party” (*Narrative of Hosea Hudson* 20). While both acknowledge a degree of historical particularity, Hudson’s understanding of the unique confluence of circumstances that give rise to Party membership dwells on the exemplarity of that moment and its possibility for true political self-determination. Painter, on the other hand, discounts the possibility that Hudson saw something unique in the 1930s and 1940s, emphasizing instead the racial segregation that is most distinct from her historical moment. This disconnect is indicative of Painter’s scholarly positioning: collaborating on this text at a juncture when Black studies was entering the academy, and the productive possibility of placing her cultural moment in conversation with Hudson’s. She imagines Hudson’s political action and, more specifically, his negotiation of racial segregation as informative for Black political praxis in an era when segregation was no longer sanctioned, but when the aftershocks of segregation and its attendant forms of disenfranchisement were being felt institutionally and societally.

In reading these texts as artifacts of both the 1930s and the 1970s we see how models of Black political involvement can be refracted over time to achieve different thematic ends. For Hudson and Shaw in the 1930s, what seemed most central was the recognition of the intellectual engagement that underwrote political action. Even if that engagement remained invisible to the reader, it nonetheless contributed to an
understanding of the circumstances of Black oppression as a systemic problem. That understanding is distinct from the aims of the scholars in the 1970s who see the texts as an opportunity for historical reclamation. These scholars read Communist Party involvement as a less successful precursor to the actions of the Civil Rights Movement. Both are depicted as a move toward Black self-determination and provide an important point along a timeline of Black resistance in the 20th Century. Noting the distinct nature of these two political goals, however, reminds us of the need to be vigilant about historical particularity. While it is certainly a political act to reclaim the forgotten efficacy of Black Communist action, placing it so easily within a generalized lineage of resistance risks losing the texture of that resistance as it exists in the 1930s and in relation to the Communist Party.

II. Protest and the Peasant Novel

While the autobiographies described in the last section are unique in their claims to working-class authorship, the working-class subject was a prevalent fixture in Black fiction of the period. Jacques Roumain’s Masters of the Dew takes place in a Haitian village and is a paradigmatic peasant novel, a genre that centralizes the agrarian working class. In its appeal to this generic convention, the novel depicts working-class life while making a case for the artistic importance of depicting such a life. The genre is not without its baggage, as it makes claims to the authenticity and purity of its subjects as structuring motifs in the text. These claims are themselves a form of ideology and

represent an anthropological mode that promotes looking backwards to more “primitive” modes of representation and expression. 205 This orientation towards the novel’s working-class subjects furthers the divide between an educated readership and a laboring subject, a divide that Roumain capitalizes on rather than critiques. Furthermore, unlike the authors of the autobiographies, the subjects of Roumain’s novel never profess any investment in the institution of the Communist Party. Instead, they seem to embody its spirit of collective work in a way that inextricably links work and political empowerment. The suggestion of the novel seems to be that if work is performed collectively, it is a vehicle for political self-actualization.

That suggestion seems particularly apt given the novel’s history and its development from a more overtly militant short story to the abstracted form of the novel. The story was first published in French in a Parisian magazine called Regards in 1937, immediately signaling the transnational scope of its circulation. 206 It details a conversation between two peasants who are waiting to join others in a militia that plans to skirmish with the U.S. Marines who are stationed in their town. The overtly anticolonialist subject matter of the story contrasts with the more oblique political positioning of the 1944 novel, which does not stage direct conflict between the peasants in the fictional town of Fonds Rouge. 207 Roumain himself was an avowed Communist, and after forming the Haitian Communist Party, he was exiled from Haiti in 1937 for

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205 Roumain was influenced by anthropological methods, specifically Melville Herskovits. Life in a Haitian Valley (New York: Knopf, 1937). In Life in a Haitian Valley Herskovits describes cultural customs, especially those involving voudou, as well as life and topographic features of the Haitian village of Mirebalais.


political insurgency. He spent several years in Paris before coming to the United States in 1940. In that same year he gave a speech at the Newspaper Guild Club that explicitly linked his artistic practice to his more overtly political ideology. The speech was later reprinted in *New Masses*, further demonstrating its connection to Leftist thought and literature. In the printed version, Roumain argues “the poet is at the same time a witness and an actor of the historical drama. He is engaged in it with full responsibility; specifically, at present, his art must be a first-line weapon at the service of the struggle of the masses.”

Even as Roumain emphasizes the duty that the artist has to serve the “masses,” he signals an irreconcilable divide between the representational subject and object. Even as the artist finds himself enmeshed in the object of his study, that object is separated from him through the dynamics of observation. In this way, the influence of anthropology on Roumain’s work remains visible, even as he dwells on the mandate to serve and to fight for worldwide enfranchisement of the masses. His vision further suggests that even a text that does not contain overtly political image might be used as a tool for political change. As a result, even when the politics remain embedded within the text, and possibly illegible to some readers, the suffusion of ideology can still be read as a form of political praxis.

Much like the culture of understanding, labor is a means by which the characters of the novel demonstrate and express ideology associated with the Communist party, albeit in a different way than the dedicated practice of translating the Communist platform into a form adaptable for Black life. This section maintains the distinction

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between involvement as understanding and involvement as labor while also keeping in focus the fact that labor is, in this case, mediated through literary form. Put another way, labor is a vehicle through which the meaning behind ideology is communicated without a direct invocation of the Communist Party. The form of the novel is essential in this reading, as it imparts a politics in ways that is a related to but distinct from the way that ideology gets imparted through autobiography. For Roumain, applicability to the daily existence of the Black worker is less central than the sense that the tenets of Communist ideology might unite any worker forced to labor in compromised circumstances. The novel centers on Manuel, a migrant worker who has returned to his home village in Haiti after an extended period in Cuba. Upon his return to Fonds Rouge, he notices the total devastation of the land as a result of extractive farming practices and plans to locate a mythological source of water, reinstate the collective labor practices that the community enjoyed in its prime, and save the residents from their crushing poverty. His goals are thwarted by a longstanding family feud that eventually causes his death. But he succeeds in finding water and there is a suggestion of futurity after his sacrifice. The novel’s construction of binaries between good and evil is perhaps best seen through the heroic actions of Manuel. However, because of Manuel’s assumed goodness the understanding of him as a character is necessarily limited. He cannot be read as a man, a representative of a working person in Haiti. Instead, he stands in for ideology itself: that work performed collectively is a method by which a community might achieve liberation. In order to achieve such dogma, the ethics of the novel are simplified such that it cannot be understood as realist novel in the way that we might understand James’ *Minty Alley* as such. In spite of its roots in anthropology, the novel is not invested in an accurate
depiction of Black life in Haiti, as Hurston’s work was. Instead, we might read Roumain as sublimating an argument about the responsibility the writer has to the masses into novel form.

*Masters of the Dew* was translated into English by Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook, a professor of French at Howard University.\(^{210}\) Hughes and Roumain were friends and colleagues and shared a prolonged correspondence that often centered on a shared interest in what Roumain referred to as peasants and what Hughes called the folk. Carolyn Fowler identifies their “bond” as rooted in a “shared vision of the writer as humanist, as the conscience and the voice of his people.”\(^{211}\) For Roumain, this vision situates the writer as uniquely able to achieve collective expression. It echoes the earlier-cited call that art be used in service of the advancement of the masses. While the text does not espouse specific tenets of the Communist Party, Manuel does describe an idealized version of collective action oriented towards political liberation. Manuel describes a strike as, “a *NO* uttered by a thousand voices speaking as one and falling on the desk of the boss with the force of a boulder. ‘No, I tell you! No, and I mean no! No work, no harvest, not a blade of grass will be cut unless you pay us a fair price for our strength and the toll of our arms!’”\(^{212}\) Collective action is inextricably tied to working conditions and the strikers demand to be compensated fairly. This conflates liberation with fair work rather than assuming that political betterment might involve the freedom to not work or ascension out of the working class. Despite the class divide between

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Roumain and the class he depicts, he theorizes a form of work that is itself political action. Like the studied analysis of the Communist Party platform, this work becomes a mode of political involvement. It is involvement removed from ideology, but underwritten by the unwavering belief that Black workers deserve fair working conditions.

In the context of the novel itself, the community elders can remember a period of prosperity. Manuel’s father Bienaimé reflects on past working conditions in Fonds Rouge and how times of plenty were linked to times of work performed collectively. Looking at a mountainside that he recalls as having once been lush and green he reflects, “they had been wrong to cut down the trees that once grew thick up there. But they had burned the woods to plant Congo beans on the plateau and corn on the hillside” (Masters of the Dew 8). The environmental devastation that defines their present existence is thus tied to irresponsible agricultural practices of the past, steps taken in order to subsist. We learn that it was the drying of the fields in the valley that necessitated using the surrounding land for agriculture. The dust that has so much power to limit and define their present circumstances is explicitly tied to agriculture and to the mis-application of labor. Yet, the shift that occurred between that time of plenty and the current moment’s deprivation is not solely rooted in the lack of water, it is also importantly connected to the manner in which they performed that labor. Bienaimé recalls the better time as “days when they all had lived in harmony, united as the fingers of the hand, they had assembled all of the neighborhood in collective coumbites for the harvest or the clearing” (Masters of the Dew 9). The collectivism of their work becomes its most admirable and important characteristic. Describing the work collective as “united as the fingers of the hand”
emphasizes its physical, natural, synergistic qualities. The metaphor suggests that the way that their work was governed by bodily knowledge and not by the organized and regimented labor associated with industrialization. There is also the suggestion that part of the “harmony” that structured this collective work is harmony with the natural world and Bienaimé goes on to relate an extended memory of work in the field that is in tune with the rhythms of nature. He recalls, “Into the field of wild grass they went, bare feet in the dew” (Masters of the Dew 9). This work is depicted as vigorous and almost restorative. Bienaimé describes a banding together of “twenty husky Negroes” setting off to the plot of land that is to be worked that day. As they take their positions, one man begins to drum, setting a rhythm that structures their work seemingly organically, and the work begins. Bienaimé recalls, “In a single movement, they would lift their hoes high in the air. A beam of light would strike each blade. For a second they would be holding a rainbow” (Masters of the Dew 10). Roumain aligns their work with natural imagery, making a case for the natural quality of collective labor. The image of the workers suspended in the moment just before they begin to work, fixes us in a description and resulting conception of work as utopic. Roumain suggests that when work is performed correctly, it does not take a toll. While it might cause sweat, and pain, the sweat is a sign of the worker’s vitality and the pain is usually muscular and temporary. Furthermore, this correctly-performed work is depicted as in being in accordance with nature, and with not causing the deleterious effects that led to the current drought. In characterizing the past with this vigorous and productive mode of work, Roumain makes a case for the value of this way of life, one that is challenged by the forces of modernization represented by the highway.
When Manuel returns from Cuba, the divide between what he remembers of Fond Rouge and present circumstances continue this sense that the land’s desolation is linked to its misuse through work. He also stakes a central claim to the land, suggesting that connection to the land—and importantly not possession of it—is part of freedom. As he surveys the land in a gesture that echoes Bienaimé’s, he “Seems like it’s been cursed now” (*Masters of the Dew* 21). The invocation of a curse again recalls the Biblical language attached to the feud and its fallout. But as he returns to his parents’ home, he attaches his work and his destiny to their land. He declares, “From today on, I’m here for the rest of my life. All these years I’ve been like an uprooted tree in the current of a river. I drifted to foreign lands. I looked hardship in the face. But I struggled until I found the way back to my own land. Now it’s for keeps” (*Masters of the Dew* 28). Manuel uses natural metaphors to describe his past in Cuba, which we know had been branded by racial inequality and physical brutality. The image of his uprootedness there stands in distinction from his resolve to stay on his ancestral land for the rest of his life. Importantly, he connects himself to the land, and not explicitly to his family or other members of the community. Though he feels a call to right the wrongs that have left his community is desolation, it is clear that that call begins and ends in the land.

That fact is made even clearer as Manuel delivers an extensive speech to his mother about the realities of life on earth. Through the course of this complex outlook, Manuel reveals a shifting relationship between himself and the earth: he at once desires mastery over it, but also recognizes the need to serve it in return. That relationship is likened to a relationship with God, furthering the religious undertones of the text, and
imbuing the relationship between land and worker with the same significance that is
granted to the relationship between devotee and deity. Manuel says:

I’m not talking nonsense, mama. There’s heavenly business and there’s earthly business. They’re two different things, not the same. The sky’s the pasture-land of the angels. They’re fortunate—they don’t have to worry about eating and drinking. Of course, they have black angels to do the heavy work—like washing out the clouds or cleaning off the sun after a storm—while the white angels just sing like nightingales all day long, or else blow on little trumpets like the pictures we see in church.

But the earth is a battle day by day without truce, to clear the land, to plant, to weed and water it until the harvest comes. Then one morning you see your ripe fields spread out before you under the dew and you say—whoever you are—‘Me—I’m master of the dew!’ and your heart fills with pride. But the earth’s just like a good woman: if you mistreat her, she revolts. I see that you have cleared the hills of trees. The soil is naked, without protection. It’s the roots that make friends with the soil, and hold it. It’s the mango tree, the oak, the mahogany that give it rainwater when it’s thirsty and shade it from the noonday heat. That’s how it is—otherwise the rain carries away the soil and the sun bakes it, only the rocks remain. That’s the truth. It’s not God who betrays us. We betray the soil and receive his punishment: drought and poverty and desolation” (Masters of the Dew 30).

In Manuel’s vision of heaven the complexities of daily life are mitigated by the fact that angels do not have the same bodily needs as human beings, thus the work that they perform is accordingly less taxing. However, a strict racial divide remains even in heaven, and the most onerous labor is performed by Black angels. This conception is informed by the illustrations Manuel has seen in church, gesturing at the coloniality of the Catholic Church and the degree to which it failed to represent its practitioners of color in colonized spaces. Yet, Manuel’s faith inheres and he seems to take for granted the fact that earthly hierarchies will be replicated in heaven. The hierarchies, however, are less pertinent on earth where the central relationship is between a man and his land. Manuel figures this relation as a violent one, characterizing it as a “battle” that contrasts with the idyllic pleasure and heavenly maintenance that he also describes. He imagines violent
work as an equalizer, insisting that “whoever you are” you could be master of the dew.

The most important thing is the work, the struggle, and the eventual mastery. Notably, this speech is addressed to his mother, who cannot in Manuel’s estimation achieve mastery. He establishes the gender limitations when equating the land with “a good woman,” suggesting the relationship between man and his land is as sacred to him as a marital bond. It also delimits the possibilities for women to participate in that relation and furthers the already-established pattern of relegating the female characters to supporting the men in their ongoing struggle. The likening of the struggle to marriage introduces a competing metaphor, one that is more dependent upon cooperation than strife. Recognizing the land’s ability to revolt, Manuel suggests that even within the space of mastery the land retains the ability to resist.

The resistance that Manuel describes is not agential; instead, it is a natural reaction to the misuse of the land. It becomes a necessary consequence of human error and in describing it that way Manuel demonstrates the necessity of cooperation both among men and also between men and their land. That cooperation is symbiotic, benefiting all parties equally and there is the suggestion that when cooperative balance is achieved both man and earth can thrive. Recalling the unfailing faith from the earlier part of the speech, Manuel insists that the community is not betrayed by God. He refuses to shift responsibility out of the hands of the residents of Fonds Rouge and instead dwells on their betrayal of the land. Despite his long absence, he includes himself in his own indictment, insisting that it is “we” who “betray the soil.” Including himself in the accusation marks that betrayal as collective and ties anyone with a connection to the land to the misuse of that land. It also ties that misuse to labor that is misapplied. Manuel’s
most notable function seems to be his ability to understand the way that labor can be performed in accordance with the natural world, and the fact that that labor is necessarily collective. His insistence on the organic nature of this relationship contributes to the sense that the novel embeds an ideology rather than describes it. Manuel comes to stand in for a particular mode of labor in relation to the land and is uncomplicatedly valorized, suggesting that we are meant to read that version of labor as inherently right.

While readings of the novel tend to leverage Manuel’s celestial metaphorization and his ultimate sacrifice for the good of his community towards a reading of his character as a Christ figure, my reading lingers on the fact that, even in his death he is identified with his work. This does not discount other readings, as work is integral to conceptions of divinity, particularly in Catholic theology, but it does shift the focus to Manuel’s performance of physical labor and his objectified status as a laborer. When he is stabbed by Gervilen, he refuses to name his assailant, fearing that it will reignite a feud. His sacrifice establishes his death as the means to communal salvation through work, suggesting that even work performed by Manuel was not sufficient for the reconciliation needed to establish a truly communal mode of labor. As Manuel is dying, he says:

If you send word to Hilarion, then that old Sauveur-Dorisca story will start again—hate and revenge will live on among the peasants. The water will be lost. You’ve offered sacrifices to the loas. The blood of chickens and young goats you’ve offered to make the rain fall. That hasn’t done any good—because what counts is the sacrifice of a man. The blood of a man. Go see Larivore. Tell him the will of my blood that’s been shed—reconciliation—reconciliation—so that life can start all over again, so that the day can break on the dew (Masters of the Dew 151).

Manuel explicitly ties his sacrifice to the further presence of water and, in turn, to the possibility of continued life in Fonds Rouge. The failed pagan sacrifices to the loas are put into direct conflict with his sacrifice. Repeating the word “reconciliation” both
directly references the reconciliation of the feuding families and also conjures
associations with the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation: a confession of one’s sins in
order to reinstate a relationship with God. Manuel ties this reconciliation to the possibility
of new life, recalling language around the sacrifice of Christ.\textsuperscript{213} In this way, Manuel’s
reading of his own death support the critical impulse to read him as a Christ figure. These
readings, however, tend to emphasize the ultimate bodily sacrifice without considering
the work that Christ and Manuel as Christ-figure performed over the course of their
respective lives. This is not to discount the theological or structural centrality of bodily
sacrifice, but only to consider the extent to which attention paid to work and Manuel’s
identity as a worker makes a case for the novel as a model for empowerment through
work. In other words, Manuel does not simply make a passive sacrifice, he also actively
works for the future of his community and repeatedly models and describes the way that
work should be performed.

That modeling of work is most clearly seen in the earlier-read speech he delivers
to Déîra, but it solidifies after his death, as characters remember him primarily for the
work he has performed. Looking at his lifeless body the assembled mourners muse:

It wasn’t Manuel, that great, cold, stiff, lifeless body. It was only his likeness in
stone. The real Manuel was walking through the mountains and the sunlight. He
was talking to Annaise. “My darling,” he was saying, taking her in his arms,
enveloping her in his warmth. The real Manuel was making a canal so that the
water might flow through the fields. He was walking in the harvests of the future,
in the dew of early dawn (\textit{Masters of the Dew} 156).

\textsuperscript{213} Roumain was highly critical of the Catholic Church and its “overbearing” influence on black and
indigenous Caribbean peoples. See Kathy Richman, “Militant Cosmopolitan in a Creole City: The
Their collective refusal of Manuel’s death and continued emphasis on his vitality dwells first on his connection with nature and his sensuality. Imagining his continued wandering and lovemaking, however, pales in comparison to the centrality of his identity as a worker. The canal, which he had planned to build from the water he discovered in the mountain just before his death, would connect the desiccated land of Fonds Rouge to much-needed water. That imagination, then, is rooted in earthly exigency, whereas the other image of Manuel “walking in the harvests of the future” is a more amorphous image of work. Recalling Manuel’s earlier imagination of heaven, that image presents a version of the afterlife that, for Manuel, must include work. Over the course of this catalogue, the imaginings of Manuel shift from the vital and embodied to the more abstract, suggesting that there is a reckoning with the fact of his death. The canal provides the hinge towards that acceptance, casting Manuel’s work as the necessary bridge between present and future. Just as his physical death structurally ushers in a new era, his work makes that new era possible. As he is buried, Délira insists that they “put his machete by his side;” adding that, “he was a hard-working peasant” (*Masters of the Dew* 156). His identity as both peasant and worker follow him into the afterlife where both imagined and actual work contribute to the sense that his moral goodness would be impossible without daily labor. Without directly invoking the doctrine of works, Roumain creates a character that so fully embodies an ethics of work that is diametrically opposed to capitalism. In doing so, he rebukes the capitalist forces at work outside of Fonds Rouge that contribute to the community’s poverty and that keeps its residents in a state of perpetual disenfranchisement. This refusal suggests that good work can be performed within a larger structuring system of oppression, as long as that work is collective.
Roumain demonstrates the way that ideology can be subsumed within the structures of the novel form itself, making the text enact rather than describe its own dogma.

III. The Narrative of Disillusionment

If Masters of the Dew enacts an ideology, then Claude McKay’s recently discovered 1941 novel Amiable With Big Teeth can be seen as a critique of ideology that is performed, and sometimes performed poorly. Much like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, McKay was highly skeptical of the Communist Party and especially so with regard to its treatment and perceived use of the Black community. Unlike Ellison and Wright, McKay had never actually joined the party, though he was involved with the Popular Front, and was among the Black writers investigated by the F.B.I. for his Leftist leanings. McKay’s political leanings were most evident in his depictions of black labor, which is in line with the proletarianization of literary culture that Denning identifies. His earlier novels Home to Harlem and Banjo focalize the Black worker and Amiable with Big Teeth adds a layer to that focalization by displaying the fraught relationship between Black workers and the institutions that purportedly advocate for them. However, we might read McKay’s party critique as more in line with Denning’s assessment of communism as an integral part of the cultural zeitgeist, rather than viewing it as a work that specifically targets Communist ideology. In the introduction to the novel, Jean-Christophe Cloutier and Brent Hayes Edwards argue “McKay’s mistrust of Communism emerged as a principled response to what he observed in the political currents of his time, rather than a knee-jerk reaction of Marxism or simple retreat from

215 Michael Denning, The Cultural Front, xvi
his previous affiliation with political radicalism in many forms.” McKay’s letters and essays from the last years of his life demonstrate a continued commitment to radical political causes, and even praised the Communist Party for improvements made to labor conditions in the United States as late as 1938. What drew his critique most in the body of the novel was the radical disjuncture between the machinations of an institution and the politics of an elite class that are both drastically removed from the Black working class.

*Amiable with Big Teeth* is, above all, a satire that places Leftists and the wealthy New York intelligentsia who support them in its crosshairs. Set in 1936, the main action of the plot pits two competing but complimentary organizations against each other—Hands to Ethiopia, which is an all-Black foundation based in Harlem and Friends of Ethiopia, an interracial organization associated with the Communist Party. Together the organizations host a diplomat named Lij Tekla Alamaya, who is tasked with raising awareness and funds for Ethiopia’s war with the Italian Fascists. Hands to Ethiopia is headed by Pablo Peixota, one of the wealthiest men in Harlem, while Friends of Ethiopia is headed by a supercilious white Communist named Maxim Tasan. The novel details the complicated in-fighting between the two organizations, including efforts to discredit Alamaya after he misplaces his documents from the king of Ethiopia. Eventually a mysterious Ethiopian princess appears on the scene, which turns out to be a ploy to seize attention and power by Maxim Tasan. He is thwarted, however, by an equally mysterious sect of mystics called the Senegambians who push him to his death. Structurally, the

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217 Ibid., xxv.
novel progresses from a fairly standard comedy of manners, with detailed descriptions of the drawing rooms of downtown bohemians and uptown Harlemites, as well as trendy Harlem clubs, and well-appointed hotel suites. It even incorporates a romance plot between Pablo Peixota’s daughter Seraphine and Alamaya. But its bizarre ending, and the growing sense that the novel’s characters might not be who they claim to be add an element of gravity to what might otherwise be read as farce. Ultimately, the novel’s orientation towards critique upholds a long tradition of skepticism towards the Communist Party’s treatment of its Black members. However, the granularity of that critique, and the way that the inner-workings of institutions that surround the party is unique among novels of its time. For this reason, it is an integral text in understanding the dynamics of the varying degrees of Party involvement and affiliation.

For McKay, political involvement is always a performance, as characters are perpetually being characterized as performing and assuming various roles. The emphasis on externality casts the movement for Ethiopian liberation as immediately superficial and performative, an important embedded critique that runs throughout the novel. In the opening scene, which takes place at a parade to welcome an Ethiopian envoy to New York, the serious and competent diplomat Lij Tekla Alamaya is quickly overshadowed by an eccentric Harlemite named Professor Koazhy. The latter is dressed up in an elaborate military uniform, which prompts Alamaya, who is wearing plainclothes, to wonder, “But why did Professor Koazhy choose to wear this barbaric fantastic costume, which was not symbolic of the new spirit of Ethiopia? And how puzzling that that uniform had made such a powerful appeal to the senses of the crowd.”

In raising the question, Alamaya

calls attention to the constructedness of the event. After all, he should be the focus, and is the only one who takes the stage to deliver any substantive information about the situation in Ethiopia. His puzzlement at the effectiveness of the uniform sets his informative style apart from the performative nature of Professor Koazhy. Rooting Koazhy’s success in an “appeal to the senses of the crowd” sets up a pattern that continues throughout the novel, which equates success with sentiment. In highlighting the disjunction between Alamaya’s expectation of what constitutes a successful rhetorical strategy and the sentimental and performative strategies that actually work, McKay initiates a divide between ideology and the material working of the liberation movement.

That emphasis on the performative is furthered when Professor Koazhy takes the stage to deliver his plea for funds. Whereas Alamaya’s speech focuses on the landscape, religion, and political situation of present-day Ethiopia, Koazhy conjures a reminiscence of Ethiopia’s past, which chafes at Alamaya’s description of the “new spirit of Ethiopia.” McKay writes:

Professor Koazhy clicked his heels, saluted, paid his respect to Lij Alamaya and the chairman and spoke in a deep kind of preacher’s voice. “Some of you here know who I am,” he declared, “but I know the majority are applauding this uniform. That is as it should be. For I did not wear this uniform for merely a gaudy show. I put it on for a purpose—a special purpose. This is the uniform of the Ethiopian warrior. I went through all the trouble and expense of procuring it so that you should have a dramatic idea of why you are gathered here. In this uniform I want you not to see me, but the great warriors of Ethiopia. A long line of them who have fought and died so that their nation should live (Amiable With Big Teeth 9).

Professor Koazhy’s uniform becomes a tool through which he is able to access collective sentiment. His insistence on the purposefulness of his costume choice replies to

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Alamaya’s earlier unspoken criticism. Yet, even as he insists upon the deliberateness of his attire, he does not refute the observed flair for the dramatic. The impression he gives of the Ethiopian warrior as a “dramatic idea,” removes it from the realm of accurate depiction. For Professor Koazhy, manufacturing a mythical and legendary sense of Ethiopia is more important than the social studies lesson that Alamaya offers. In his estimation, the crowd should be more moved by this past and imagined sense of Ethiopia. It is what allows the African American population of Harlem to access the plight of present-day Ethiopia. His strategy works because African American collectivity can be routed through an imagined but shared African past. Picking up on that fact, Professor Koazhy concludes his speech by encouraging the crowd to “come along with little pieces of money, dollars and quarters and dimes. Little things make big things. Individually we are a poor people but collectively we’re richer than we imagine” (*Amiable With Big Teeth* 11). This gesture joins the individuality of poor Black people in the United States to the collective destiny of Ethiopia. On its face, it is an exploitative attempt to get money from working class people who might better spend that money on subsistence. However, it rhetorically generates a collective and highlights their power as a collective. Koazhy’s speech is ambivalent, unable to be pinned down as either manipulative or inspiring.

Much of this has to do with the strange figure that Professor Koazhy cuts throughout the novel; he is revealed to be a character put to dubious ends. This introduction portrays him as calculated and with ambiguous intentions. After the speech, he is shown to be pleased with his own success and confused over the way that Alamaya and the other board members of the relief organization chose to handle the event. He thinks to himself: “Why, they have no imagination at all, no real insight into the minds of
their own people. Putting on a show like that without a first-rate actor. Why, if I had the management of it I would have hauled in five times as much money” (Amiable With Big Teeth 12). Immediately, he laments the amount of money he might have made if he had planned the event, a sum that we are not sure should be in his hands. This thought solidifies his insight into a collective Black mindset and shows that he is aware of this gift. The cynicism of this passage suggests that the aims of the organization might not be underpinned by an idealistic sense of collectivity and shared destiny. Professor Koazhy is a first-rate actor, so it is unsurprising that he can manufacture such positive feelings out of a desire for money and power. McKay subtly connects him with a tradition that stems from the Black church, an institution that he found particularly exploitative, calling his voice a “preacher’s voice,” in the earlier-quoted passage and revealing a brief stint in the Baptist ministry (Amiable With Big Teeth 12). He goes on to write, “His Christian name was Matthew—Matthew Preston—but he had changed it to Koazhy after his absorption in African fetishism. Koazhy was his version of Quashie, which he pronounced ‘Kwá-zée” (Amiable With Big Teeth 12-3). Riffing on the practice of renaming in a long history of African American self-fashioning, McKay also aligns Koazhy’s remaking with an “absorption” in African culture. “Fetishism,” as McKay uses it here, has to do with a belief in mysticism, a clear and deliberate parallel to his time as a Baptist. Framing his self-fashioning in this way suggests a way in which Professor Koazhy’s charismatic manipulations have only shifted form from the pulpit to the group he mentors in Harlem called the Senegambians. Indeed, his refashioning is even specifically pitched toward a new audience in Harlem, one that combines the working class people that the above speech is directed towards and the intelligentsia. McKay writes, “He [Koazhy] insisted
that African names often sounded ridiculous to Aframerican ears because they were pronounced badly and written wrongly. And so he had turned Quashie into Koazhy and prefaced it with ‘Professor’” (13). Here, the amended spelling addresses the masses, those who Koazhy imagines will have trouble pronouncing and spelling his name. The addition of “Professor” confers a degree of authority, one that is actually supported by degrees. But his insistence on both the African name made accessible and the academic title encapsulates the authoritative everyman persona he has worked to cultivate. That persona makes him both uniquely able to perform an imagined collective past and also allows him to be a vehicle through which McKay can critique such a figure. However, his ambiguous position within the novel—ultimately as the person who kills the exploitative white Communist Maxim Tasan—suggests that even as this figure draws critique, there might be something redeeming in the vision of Black collectivism that he peddles.

As the novel progresses, McKay repeats this language of performance in reference to other characters, furthering the sense that to hold a political ideology is essentially superficial. Because many of the other characters are depicted as both possessing good intentions and performing, we are left with the sense that performance may be a vehicle for potentially liberatory political practice. In a striking example Pablo Peixota, the chairman of the Hands to Ethiopia organization, comforts Alamaya who confesses his shame at failing in his mission to support the Ethiopian troops:

The shame is on our side,” said Peixota. “And if your mission is a failure, it is because we failed you. I think you acted your part with distinction. It was a difficult job. You were the representative of the government of a nation of people, accredited to a people with vague nationalist group yearnings but with no actual experience of what it means to be a nation. Between the white wire-pullers who understood the significance of the movement and their colored stooges who could not understand, you were like a man dancing on a tightrope and I think your performance was excellent (Amiable With Big Teeth 249-250).
Peixota’s conception of “we” is more expansive than Koazhy’s configuration of an imagined Black collective, in that it comprises an interracial community. The “white wire-pullers” are identified with the ideology and “significance of the movement,” a position that is depicted as unavailable to Black people. Further, the “people” that Alamaya was “accredited to” seems to be comprised of African Americans, and their inability to imagine a nation is figured as the greatest roadblock in assisting the movement for Ethiopian sovereignty. In identifying African Americans as a “people with vague nationalistic group yearnings” Peixota complicates the vision that Koazhy communicated of pan-African solidarity. The desire for nationalism does not preclude such internationalist solidarity, but it does point to a way in which the particularity of African American experience is removed from Black solidarity more generally. In other words, the novel suggests that the exigencies of Black marginalization in the United States and the specific experience of nationlessness renders Black Americans less able to attend to the exigencies of creating a Black nation-state.

A significant part of this suggestion comes from McKay’s critique of the Communist Party as an internationalist institution. Though he was sympathetic to Communist ideology, McKay found the machinations of the party exploitative and believed that its institutionalized form was corrupt. In the novel, this opinion becomes the center of Alamaya’s critique of the party. In an argument with Maxim Tasan he says:

It was the biggest mistake of my life when I joined the Party in Paris. But there was hardly any other alternative. I was sincere. We were all frightened by the sudden challenge of the Fascists—all of us who believed in the brotherhood of humanity. And I thought I was doing a progressive thing when I joined up. I felt that the future of our country depended on what we younger Ethiopians did. I believed that we should lead the older men who were conservative; that we
should tie up with progressive forces. I thought the Comintern was progressive, but I thought wrongly (*Amiable With Big Teeth* 215).

This history of Alamaya’s involvement with the party adheres to the contours of Black Communist involvement, especially in its appeal in the face of the rising forces of Fascism. Like Koazhy and Peixota, Alamaya constructs a collective, but his is possibly the most capacious in that it includes all “who believed in the brotherhood of the humanity.” The echoes of the Communist Party’s humanist and interracial platform is obvious, but that echo is undercut by the repeated insistence on the lack of progressivism in the party. And unlike the African Americans that Peixota describes, Alamaya has a nation to defend. He clearly misreads the Party as an avenue by which he might help to consolidate and strengthen national goals, and his major lament seems to be that he misjudged. These passages position Alamaya as a foil to Professor Koazhy: a performer whose performance is undergirded by conviction. The emphasis on the sincerity in Alamaya’s decision to join the Communist Party demonstrates a belief in ideology that has not flagged despite the failures of the institution. Alamaya is resigned to the fact that his failure is an institutional failure, an irreconcilable divide between ideal and reality. As a result, we might read his performance not as a failure, but as one that, like in the novel’s opening scene, remains ineffective for his audience.

Given Alamaya’s failure and Koazhy’s success in pitching a performance to their various audience, there remains a question about the ability for any character to imagine a mode of political progressivism. And, given the novel’s focalization of its male characters, as well as its portrayal of the Communist Party as a male-dominated space, it is notable that one horizon of progressivism is depicted through a conversation between two female characters. Yet, that progressivism is neither routed through the ideology of
the party that has let Alamaya down, nor is it performative and evacuated of meaning, like Koazhy’s. Instead, these two women offer the most stirring call for racial progress that is decidedly rooted in lived experience. The conversation takes place between Seraphine, the socialite daughter of Pablo Peixota, and her rival-turned-roommate Bunchetta Facey who is socially engaged with both Black and white radicals. Seraphine has just left her mother and father’s home and is trying to decide where to live. At the suggestion that she move downtown, a neighborhood conventionally associated with interracial communion, Seraphine communicates some skepticism. Speaking about the social dynamics of her interactions with white people she says, “They drink tea together or if it is a bohemian crowd they drink liquor. Everybody is very polite. But it’s like going to church and sitting beside a stranger and both of you listening to the sermon and singing hymns together. But colored people don’t live that way, nor white people either” (*Amiable With Big Teeth* 164). Here she points to a politeness that had been illustrated in an earlier scene that takes place at one such cocktail party. But Seraphine is essentially pessimistic about relations between Black and white people. Politeness seems to stand in the way of a more representative way of living, which seems to be reserved for all-Black or all-white spaces. Seraphine goes on to assert, “There can’t be any really normal social enjoyment and contact between people who have something and people who have nothing” (164). Differentiating between “normal” social enjoyment and another, implicit, form of sociality associated with unnatural politeness grounds Seraphine’s critique primarily in racial difference. She argues that while Black and white people can enjoy the same cultural pleasures, that enjoyment is tempered or limited when it happens together. In the characterization of Black people as “people who have nothing,” she elides class
difference, intimating a way in which her personal wealth is not a way to overcome racial
difference. In reality, she and her mother have access to the very interracial spaces that
she critiques by virtue of both wealth and also their lighter complexions. But through this
sentiment, she denies that privilege and claims solidarity with the poor Black people
commonly associated with Harlem.

Although we might be tempted to read Seraphine’s observations as naive and
misguided, her assertions about the limitations of Blackness reveal an interest in the lived
experience of Harlem residents that remains absent from Communist Party ideology, as
well as a horizon of possibility in interpersonal relation. Through her continued dialogue
with Bunchetta, it becomes clear that enjoyment is an integral part of their vision of
equality. They want to not only be tolerated in the all-white and interracial spaces south
of Harlem, but also to feel the same degree of enjoyment that they experience in the
intraracial space of Harlem. In their conversation, Bunchetta poses a question to
Seraphine about the possibility of her moving downtown, to which Seraphine replies:

Sure I would. But it’s because I want space to move around with freedom like
other people and enjoy life; it’s not because my heart is breaking to shake a white
person’s left hand. I’d like to sit and eat in any restaurant on Broadway with a
dark man, if I enjoy his company. I’d like to see him treated as an American, so
that I could be proud of him. In spite of his money Father has never had the
privilege to enjoy it and walk like a man with Mother along the American way of
life. Otherwise he would be different and not so ingrown and hard like a rock that
resists even dynamite. He wouldn’t be so buried in the racial movements
(*Amiable With Big Teeth* 164).

Seraphine’s characterization of her father as “ingrown” and “hard,” as well as her easy
equation of his intransigence with the movement for racial uplift seems to depoliticize
enjoyment. She suggests that if her father was able to move freely throughout the city that
he would be less invested in his political causes. For her, the ultimate goal of racial
equality is to enjoy the “American way of life.” Her invocation of nationalism here draws a parallel between whiteness and American identity and a further parallel between that American identity and enjoyment. Pleasure stands in for the recognition of a subject as an American. And, as such, the movement for racial equality is transposed onto a movement for equal pleasure.

On its face this is not a particularly radical stance to take, as it seems to undercut the gravity of the political movements in which Pablo Peixota is deeply invested. Those causes—the rights of workers, the movement for Ethiopian independence, and the alleviation of poverty—are represented as serious. But they are also masculinized, and the social spaces are the only ones that Seraphine has any purchase on in the space of the novel. As a result, McKay seems to frame her expression of political possibility by the sociality that she knows well. Bunchetta’s response, while somewhat dismissive, nonetheless takes seriously Seraphine’s desire for the equality of enjoyment. She responds, “The enjoyment of life is worth fighting for and a man must be hard as a rock either in his body or his mind to fight….If you had specialized like me in economics and sociology instead of music and interior decoration, you would understand that man was not born to the enjoyment of life--he has to fight to get enjoyment out of life” (*Amiable With Big Teeth* 164-5). Because of her training in the social sciences, Bunchetta is equipped to do the synthetic work that Seraphine cannot. In her estimation, the work that someone like Pablo Peixota is intrinsically linked to the enjoyment that Seraphine desires. It is through progress towards racial equality that Black people might enjoy the “American way of life” more fully. Bunchetta’s repeated use of the word “fight” to signify the work that must be done towards any form of equality likens Seraphine’s vision
to the one associated with the kinds of overtly political work that her father regularly
does. Her language legitimizes enjoyment as well worth the political struggle.

Even as enjoyment becomes politicized, we are reminded of the limitations of
Seraphine’s worldview and its attendant aims towards equality. Although she performs
the initial leveling gesture of likening herself to all of the working-class Black people,
that racial solidarity ignores the clear class distinction. Although Bunchetta affirms
Seraphine’s emphasis on enjoyment, we wonder how seriously we are supposed to take
her in her position as a slightly more educated socialite than Seraphine. In fact, the scene
ends with Seraphine yawning and saying, “I wish I wasn’t so plumb dumb about politics
and social problems. But you might be right, Bunchy, when you say I should associate
more with social-problem people. Maybe I’ll learn something for my benefit” (Amiable
With Big Teeth 165). From this conclusion, it is clear that their concerns have not quite
transcended the social and that both root their activism in an association with the “right”
kind of people. Furthermore, Seraphine’s aims are inherently selfish, oriented towards
personal enjoyment and individual betterment. But, in a novel that takes place almost
entirely in the rarefied drawing rooms of New York elites, in which the only working-
class Black characters are depicted as either demonstration or mob, this conversation
offers one of the only extensive considerations of the lived experience of Harlemites.
Thinking about how a Black person occupies space differently downtown and hoping for
a world in which that situation is improved represents the only imagination of a social
movement that is rooted in the Harlem community. Unlike the movement for Ethiopian
independence, which is figured through Koazhy’s taking money from working-class
Black people, this imagination exists in relation to an experiential reality that those
working-class Black people can access. It is unclear how seriously McKay wanted his reader to take this exchange—Bunchetta is a minor character and Seraphine’s previous political involvement is limited to overhearing a damning conversation between Maxim Tasan and another Black Communist at a party, but being too drunk to do anything about it. But the inclusion of this conversation clearly demonstrates the centrality of the social to all political considerations. Sociality clearly has its limitations, and those limitations are structurally paralleled by Seraphine’s entrapment in a hasty marriage to a white Communist. But it is through the social and through the dynamics of racial exclusion that Black people of very different classes can most easily imagine constituting alliances.

The social is, of course, also performative and in offering the only glimpse of the kind of racial equality that the Communist Party promised its Black members through an entirely performative lens, the novel depicts party aims as similarly superficial. Yet, reading this novel is useful for thinking through the ways in which a critique of party ideology can be both a thematic and structural feature of the text. In the elision of the Black working class and the total containment of the only two characters that begin to consider it, the text both depicts and enacts that silence. Furthermore, in thematizing the struggle between two organizations that are essentially working toward the same goal, but that see themselves as totally at odds, McKay demonstrates the petty institutional divides the keep the progressive movements of his time from accomplishing anything. Recalling McKay’s praise for the ideology of Communism and the early gains the party made for the rights of workers, we might see the novel as making a targeted critique about the particular challenges of institutionalization. It is when multiple foundations pop up under the auspices of Communism, when strict lines are drawn between Trotskyists and
Marxists, and when social climbing takes precedence over allegiance that we lose sight of the good that the Party might have been able to do. And although this novel dramatizes that process of disillusionment, it also points to some possibility in the realm of the social.

Landing, as we do, on this exchange between the two central female characters in McKay’s novel reveals the extent to which the narratives formed in accounts of Communist involvement are centered on men. The Communist narratives of the first section adopt a centralization of a singular figure from the literary form of narrative, and apply it to the working class lives of their subjects. The subjects, however, are three men and that fact minimizes the fact that women made myriad contributions to the Communist Party in Birmingham, and to Leftist movements more broadly.220 That silence lends itself to an understanding of the Party’s influence on the Black community—both its successes and its failures—as shaped by only male actors. Such a limited view minimizes the historical fact of women’s involvement in the Leftist movements of the 1930s, and it also contributes to a broader narrative that connects masculinity to expressions of political radicalism. The expectation inheres that involvement describes the action of a man in relation to a political organization, and his action in service of a politicized collective.

What happens when we pay attention to the way that women interpret and imagine political futures? In the scene from McKay’s novel, the political future seems, on its face, divorced from the political arena. The institutional in-fighting and internationalist Party

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220 Robin Kelley has an extensive discussion of the contributions of women to the Birmingham Communist Party, and to the Party more broadly. In Birmingham the prolific community gardens that provided food for striking workers were entirely operated by women. More broadly, women made regular contribution to Daily Worker, were essential operators in associated organizations like the Sharecroppers Union, and even wrote lyrics of some of the most famous workers’ songs. Robin Kelley, Hammer and Hoe, 156-9.
goals are associated with the men. But including a future-oriented vision with embedded political efficacy signals the fact that women have a capacity for their own forms of involvement. McKay centralizes a kind of abstract sociality as that avenue, but we can also see ways in which other modes of participation figure political formations that are excluded from masculinized narratives of radicalism. In my next chapter I will read prize-winning poetry collections by Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks to show how they reimagine the realm of the social as the basis of a liberatory politics. Their work refigures the interpersonal encounter so that Black subjectivity is fully acknowledged. While this chapter has illustrated a number of examples of fragmented modes of political involvements, Brooks and Walker theorize a way towards a full and complex Black subject.
CHAPTER 4:
Prized Subjects: Lyric Acknowledgement in Black Poetry

In 1952 some of the most famous voices in American poetry sat in a room together looking at photographs from the National Book Awards the previous year. Examining a picture of the award’s judges, which included Gwendolyn Brooks, Wallace Stevens asked, “who’s the coon?” His question was met with uncomfortable silence, but Stevens persisted in adding, “I know you don’t like to hear people call a lady a coon, but who is it?” Stevens used a racial slur to explicitly mark Brooks as an outsider in spite of the fact that she had won the Pulitzer Prize two years earlier for her collection *Annie Allen* and was subsequently recognized as a force in the poetry community. There is no way that Stevens did not know who Brooks was; the comment was an act of racial aggression that made manifest Stevens’ desire to exclude Black poets from the rarified space of prizewinning poetry. In the twenty-first century Major Jackson, a poet contending with Brooks’ place at the vanguard of recognition in Black poetry, speculates about the conversations that circled the topic of race in such committee meetings:

> Just as I am sure, Margaret Walker’s *For My People* was simply the best book to be awarded the Yale Younger [Poets Prize] in 1942, and just as I am absolutely sure that Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Annie Allen* was rightly awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for same reasons, I am also sure that the judge and committee, respectively, were aware of the potential controversy of acknowledging the strength of these books. I am also sure that in such a racial climate as the 1940s and 1950s, such awards must have spawned a series of hostile reactions like that

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221 These voices included Winfield Townley Scott, Selden Rodman, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, and William Cole, they were waiting for Peter Viereck to arrive. From Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens the Later Years* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 388.

222 Ibid., 388-389.

from Wallace Stevens, but will we ever know, for sure?224

Jackson’s conjecture highlights the anticipated bitterness that readers like Stevens experienced at the elevation of work by Black writers. Though there is, as he notes, no way we can know the content and tenor of these deliberations they undoubtedly contained some contention with the significance of awarding each award to a Black person for the first time. Focusing on the inevitability of backlash, Jackson defends the merits of Brooks’ and Walker’s work in the face of skeptics, epitomized by Stevens, that find the prospect of Black literary achievement impossible. His reading, however, does not focus on a more insidious exclusion that Stevens’ comments reveal. Jackson reads Stevens as excluding Brooks and Walker from the institutional realm of official approbation, prize committees, and award banquets, but his insistence on Brooks’ non-belonging also indexes a desire to deny her status as a subject. By denying her the dignity of recognition, he makes a claim about her lack of humanity and her resulting inability to write poetry. In this chapter, I examine how the award-winning poetry collections by Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker contend directly with the status of the Black subject.

When Stevens designates Brooks as non-human, he implicitly makes a claim about her capacity to access the “proper” poetic subjects. For Stevens, the selection of the poetic subject was not something that could be learned, it was “the problem of [the poet’s] mind and nerves,” and ultimately he believed that “poets are born and not made.”225 To be born in a racialized body, Stevens declares, is to be precluded from the

imaginative relationship to the world that would result in subjects that were profound, weighty, and worthy of universal elevation. In his own poetry, Blackness repeatedly serves as an insensate foil for white inspiration.\textsuperscript{226} His speakers “speak of blackness in language that denies it a fullness of being.”\textsuperscript{227} Taken together with Stevens’ prolific use of racial slurs, both in his writing and in conversation, this structural denial of Blackness inhibits Black subjectivity as much as it shores up Stevens’ subject position. In \textit{Playing in the Dark}, Toni Morrison writes of a “battle for coherence” staged between the white protagonist and a Black other; by announcing Brooks’ otherness at the deliberation, Stevens declared himself that much more intelligible as a subject.\textsuperscript{228} Morrison’s work reveals the complicated desire at the root of white appropriations of Black subjectivity, a practice that was near-ubiquitous in modern poetry. Michael North identifies this practice as an attraction to language and “its insurrectionary opposition to the known and familiar.”\textsuperscript{229} Just as Black presence can be used to confirm white identity, it can also be used to demarcate an “official” use of language against a vernacular other.

I linger on this anecdote, in part, because there was arguably no other living poet in 1952 that exerted more influence over the codes of modern poetry than Wallace Stevens.\textsuperscript{230} He was omnipresent in rooms like the one in which this comment occurred


\textsuperscript{230} See early studies of Steven’s work, which assert Stevens the most complex poet of his age. In the introduction to \textit{Critics on Wallace Stevens}, Peter McNamara calls Stevens a “poet of paradox, ambivalence,
and the reception and analysis of his work conditioned literary criticism. His poetry bridged the rigorous referentiality of high modernists like Eliot and Pound and the “free verse of the American mid-century, with its emphasis on delicate epiphany and personal contingency.” The success that winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 signaled was therefore success measured by a yardstick with increments marked out by Stevens. And despite Brooks’ demonstrated ability to meet such standards, her reception is often qualified in terms of its ambivalent treatment of race. Houston Baker, for example, notes that Brooks “writes tense, complex, rhythmic verse that contains the metaphysical complexities of John Donne and the word magic of Apollinaire [sic], Eliot, and Pound.” With this comparison he insists on the excellence of Brooks’ work, which he universalizes by linking her work with canonical—notably, all white and all male—figures. His claim of universalism is immediately complicated by Brooks’ subject material. Baker likens Brooks to W.E.B. Du Bois arguing that they share a synthesis of “‘white’ style and ‘black’ content,” invoking Du Bois’ famous tension between “two warring ideals in one dark body.” Brooks’ personal dilemma of double consciousness is one that allows her to depict Black life through the veil of poetic standards that are as exclusionary as Stevens’ comment suggests.

233 Ibid., 23.
Margaret Walker’s poetry was met with similarly qualified claims to universal “quality”. When Walker won the Yale Younger Poets Prize, as it was then called, in 1942 she joined the ranks of Muriel Rukeyser and James Agee, who had been awarded the prize in the preceding decade, and William Meredith, Adrienne Rich, and W.S. Merwin who would go on to win the prize in the next. The award demonstrated that her work was both up to the rigorous standards of the prize and also marked her as a poet who would continue to contribute to her field. Stephen Vincent Benét, one of the prize’s judges and an influential poet in his own right, edited and wrote the foreword to For My People. His essay conveys the overlap between literary achievement and the recognition of Walker’s racial subject matter, a confluence that Benét attempts to leverage to insist on Walker’s proficiency and to reinforce the collection’s unimpeachable quality. He insists that to value her work only because she is Black is “meaningless patronage,” and that “poetry must exist in its own right.” Benét goes on to praise Walker’s “sincerity,” her use of voice, and the impossibility of reading her verse “unmoved,” ultimately claiming that her poems are “the song of her people, of her part of America.” Together, his comments highlight the particularity of the Black subjects in Walker’s poems even as he maintains that such subjects are worthy of poetic elevation. Yet, the claim that Walker’s work “exist[s] in its own right” outlines the requirements of such elevation: formal excellence that produces poems about Black subjects that are, first and foremost, poetry. Benét ultimately admires Walker’s deft use of form and the effect it has on her reader.

These snapshots of the reception of Brooks’ and Walker’s prize-winning collections show two sides of the intersection of race and literary prestige. Baker’s Du Boisian interpretation of Brooks focuses on craft, speculating about how the poet feels writing about Black subjects in forms that are traditionally associated with white poets. Benét’s praise thinks about the reception of such work, focusing on the white readers that can better appreciate work by Black poets when it conforms to certain formal standards. Both perspectives emphasize the white readership, speculating on the costs and benefits of writing towards those readerly expectations. But, as critic J. Saunders Redding notes, the decade of the 1940s marked a shift where Black writers began to feel that they could effectively write for both audiences. He writes, “Facing up to the tremendous challenge of appealing to two audiences, Negro writers are extricating themselves from what has sometimes seemed a terrifying dilemma. Working honestly in the material they know best, they are creating for themselves a new freedom.” Redding calls the task of appealing to two audiences a “tremendous challenge” and “terrifying dilemma,” adopting the position of the Black writers who were challenging expectations of how to write about race. He traces a lineage from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Richard Wright, positing Wright as the turning point, a “powerful new pen… employing itself in stern and terrible material.” His celebration of new “material” in Wright’s work, and new African American writing more broadly, reflects his belief that the central barrier in an appeal to Black and white audiences has been an inappropriate approach to Black representation. Redding names Margaret Walker, Chester Himes, Willard Motley, and Frank Yerby as the emerging writers that most effectively depict elements of Black experience. Lamenting

238 Ibid., 147.
the practices of primitivism and commercialism ingrained in Black writing from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, he locates the “freedom” of the new writers in a renovated commitment to writing about the right things. Although Redding’s emphasis falls on the content of the work, he also suggests that writers enjoy the possibility of formal experimentation. He rehearses the sweep of African American literary history to contrast the limitations previous writers faced when not writing honestly with the boundless freedom of writers that could approach their material in novel ways.

Brooks and Walker wrote in this complex literary field where the exclusions and attractions of modernism clashed with increasingly experimental Black writing. They approached their work knowing James Weldon Johnson’s axiomatic claim in the preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry: “The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced.”239 However, they also approached the field emboldened by the sense of possibility that Redding’s essay expresses. Both For My People and Annie Allen formulate Black subjectivity as constructed through intersubjective relation. Brooks and Walker use their poems as a space to experiment with modes of relationality that might undo deeply-held hierarchizations, noting the particular capability for artistic expression to challenge systems of domination. Édouard Glissant articulates the potential for a poetics of relation to loosen some of the systems of domination that bear down on marginalized individuals, cultures, and languages. Like Brooks and Walker before him, he sees art as an arena to do this provisional, processual work: “Relation is learning more and more to go beyond judgments into the unexpected dark of art’s upsurgings. Its beauty springs from the stable

and the unstable, from the deviance of many particular poetics and the clairvoyance of a relational poetics.” In his intentionally opaque manner Glissant suggests that “art’s upsurgings” can point a way past the judgements that undergird oppressive practices. Relational poetics, he suggests, result from the incorporation of multiple “particular” poetics—which I take to be an incorporation of elements of multiple formal strategies, themselves in relation to each other—with the understanding that those poetics will be in simultaneously static and changeable relation to each other. Glissant uses “poetics” capaciously to refer to cultural artifacts and geographical spaces, but his theorization also elucidates the way in which Brooks and Walker integrate a range of forms to show that Black poetry is in relation with traditions more readily associated with white poets. On a formal level, this practice establishes Black poetry as an experimental space from which writers can imagine unseen alternatives. Anthony Reed argues, “black experimental writing urges an analysis of literary politics that looks beyond familiar terms of critique or protest that treat form as another kind of content in an effort to trace in it its aesthetic demands the outlines of new forms of community and thought.” Reed cautions us to not only read experiments like those in Brooks’ and Walker’s work as critical incursions into a field from which they had been excluded. Instead, the unstable mix of formal practices that constitute their respective collections reveal extended meditations on the centrality of interracial acknowledgement to their vision of a liberated future.

Both Brooks and Walker explicitly engage the techniques of modern poetry because they sense the potential in intersubjective exchange. Their work is invested in

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reminding readers that the root of systemic racism lies in the denial to regard others as human. Each collection stages moments of encounter with a Black subject that display their complexity. I refer to that complexity as subjective density and argue that Brooks and Walker construct poetic figures that self-actualize through the contradictory properties of being accessible and unknowable. As readers, we can access and acknowledge the poem’s Black subjects, but parts of their subjectivity remain beyond our grasp, confirming the fullness of their humanity. In this way, Walker and Brooks refine what Hannah Arendt terms the “human condition,” a schema in which “each individual in his unique distinctness, appears and confirms himself in speech and action.”

For Arendt, self-actualization is achieved through the work—speech, action, or labor—that an individual does to make himself visible and legible in the public sphere. The emphasis on the public falls short for the Black subject because of the ways in which Black presence is often spectacularized, as well as the way in which Black labor is objectified. Brooks’ and Walker’s work affirms that there is humanity behind the public appearance of the Black subject. Glissant calls this other dimension “opacity” and Darlene Clark Hine identifies a “culture of dissemblance” in Black women’s writing; both terms describe strategies that retain a fullness of being in the face of stereotypes and misunderstandings. This act of withholding counterintuitively allows the Black woman enter the public sphere while maintaining privacy.

Further, it reframes intersubjectivity as a mode of acknowledgement by which two subjects commune without the expectation that they will fully comprehend each other. It is a transitory encounter, but one that models a respectful form of interracial exchange.

Although it may seem limiting to base a politics on intersubjective exchange, Brooks and Walker use such exchanges as a point of departure from which they produce speculative modes of freedom. This chapter will examine the formal practices that each poet uses to construct a poetic subject, display their subjective density, and sketch their process of self-actualization. This is not to suggest that Brooks and Walker worked identically; Walker’s *For My People* is more deliberate in its use of the interracial encounter, both in its use of form and in its subject matter, while Brooks’ *Annie Allen* emphasizes the unknowability of its dense subjects. Taken together, their work revises what Mark McGurl identifies as “the autobiographical drama of heroic self-authorization” that characterizes prestigious post-World War II literature. McGurl argues that this drama is not merely the result of individualization, but part of a “larger cultural system geared for the production of self-expressive originality.”

Walker and Brooks are undoubtedly part of this cultural system, but their work refines this definition formulated with white, modernist standards in mind. *Annie Allen* and *For My People* centralize the Black subject, not only as a gesture of self-authorization, but also to represent those subjects imagining a form of freedom that might address the conditions of disenfranchisement and dehumanization that they experience and observe. This notion of freedom extends beyond a rejection of existing conditions and trades in the idiom of experimental poetry to both formulate something unseen and radically new, while also

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troubling the implicit binary between avant-garde literary work and work that considers the race problem. The chapter proceeds in three sections and a coda: the first section contextualizes the literary field that Brooks and Walker entered, particularly the outsized influence of Richard Wright; the second and third sections read Walker and Brooks’ individual collections to describe how the formal features of the collection posit new political possibilities; and the coda considers the afterlife of Brooks’ and Walker’s attempts to remake the Black subject in contemporary poetry.

I. The Form of Politics

Just as the Communist Party formed a backdrop against which the writers of the last chapter worked out questions of political involvement, the consolidating genre of protest literature delineated standards for what politicized writing looked like in the 1940s. In this historical moment, it is difficult to articulate the centrality of Richard Wright whose 1940 novel *Native Son* was a bestseller and who dictated the terms of Black social realism in a 1937 essay called, “Blueprint for Negro Writing.”\(^\text{245}\) As the title suggests, Wright’s essay defined a new direction in African American literature, but while Redding’s essay from more than a decade later was descriptive, Wright’s is prescriptive. In it, he calls for a rejection of the demonstrative aesthetics of the Harlem Renaissance in favor of writing that exposes the systemic nature of anti-Black racism. He writes, “a Negro writer must create in his readers’ minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street

\(^{245}\) For a full account of Wright’s influence on the Chicago literary scene, see Robert Bone, “Richard Wright and the Chicago Renaissance,” *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (1986): 446-468.
and take the fruits of her toil.” Underlining the fact that prosperity, inactivity, and accumulation happen at the expense of Black people, Wright insists that Black writing must reveal the conditions of global capital that connect the most abject to the most prosperous. Black literature is not only about mimetic representation of Black life; it is also about the structural conditions that delimit possibilities for the working class and, by turn, shape Black life. Drawn from the social sciences that were increasingly diverting resources to the study of Black people and the psychological realism that allowed the writer to explore the psychic consequences of racism, Wright’s brand of social realism promised representations of Blackness that reproduced the social forces that lead to racial disenfranchisement.

Brooks and Walker were intimately, institutionally connected to this literary scene, which spring up on the South Side of Chicago. The Great Migration, housing segregation, the reverberating influence of the Harlem Renaissance, new cultural institutions all converged in a neighborhood nicknamed Bronzeville by its citizens. Gwendolyn Brooks attended a writing workshop at the South Side Community Center funded by Inez Cunningham Stark, a poet and patron of the arts. Walker was a member

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247 In Black Metropolis Horace Cayton and John Gibbs St. Clair Drake name Bronzeville “a community of stark contrasts,” noting that, “within these narrow confines were found not only crumbling tenement buildings, dilapidated shanties, and storefront churches but also tidy little homes, stone mansions, imposing church buildings, and elegant nightclubs.” St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City (1945. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3. They further note Chicago’s black population had grown from 44,000 in 1910 to 230,000 in 1930 as a result of the Great Migration. The majority of that population lived in a segregated neighborhood that was bounded by 22nd Street on the north, 63rd Street on the South, Cottage Grove Avenue on the East, and the Rock Island Railroad Tracks on the West.
of the South Side Writers Group helmed by Richard Wright and also worked for the Works Progress Administration in 1936 and 1937.\footnote{Margaret Walker, “Preface” This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), xi.} Walker chafed at Wright’s principles and had fallen out with Wright by the time she departed Chicago for the Iowa Writers Workshop in 1939, and Brooks had a similarly complicated relationship with the influence he exerted over the Black literary scene.\footnote{Jackson, The Indignant Generation, 104.} When Gwendolyn Brooks sent her debut collection A Street in Bronzeville to Harper, the publishers turned to Wright for his editorial input. In his response, Wright offers a glowing review of Brooks’ work, highlighting its technical mastery, as well as its “authenticity.” He writes, “Only one who has actually lived and suffered in a kitchenette could render the feeling of lonely frustration as well as she does: — of how dreams are drowned out by the noises, smells, and the frantic desire to grab one’s chance to get a bath when the bathroom is empty. Miss Brooks is real and so are her poems.”\footnote{Cited in George Kent, A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 61.} Interestingly, Wright turns to the mimetic qualities of Brooks’ poetry in his recommendation. She is “real”; her poems are “real,” and both capture what it is “really” like to live in a kitchenette apartment. Focusing on the granular details of noise and smell alongside more abstract feelings like desire and frustration Wright maps out a readerly relation between sense-detail and conceptual reading. He directs the publishers to read the realistic rendering of life in a kitchenette as scaling up to a similarly realistic understanding of what it feels like to be a person living in such conditions. It is an interpretive move that Wright makes for the benefit of a white audience, and one that positions him as an interpreter of what is valuable in Brooks’ work for a broad audience that will include readers of all races. Ultimately, it is an assertion
that Brooks is valuable for her contributions to a realist mode of representing black subjects and that that representation will shed light on the larger systemic reality of racial disenfranchisement.

A closer look at the poem Wright references in his comments reveals that Brooks was already experimenting with an intersubjective construction of her poetic subject. Brooks certainly had a conception of the practices of segregation that gave rise to Chicago’s kitchenette buildings. In “kitchenette building,” she voices a tension between striving and the concrete, limiting factors that keep her poem’s speaker contained. Brooks begins the poem: “We are the things of dry hours and the involuntary plan, / Grayed in and gray. ‘Dream’ makes a giddy sound, not strong / Like ‘rent,’ ‘feeding a wife,’ ‘satisfying a man.’” Her repetitive invocation of “gray” casts the poem’s speaker as less vibrant because of an ongoing struggle with the material exigencies of survival. Brooks first emphasizes that grayness is a consequence of conditions beyond the speaker’s control; the speaker is not just gray, they are made to be gray because of their inability to dream. Though the word “strong” has a positive connotation, the activities associated with strength are set off against the preferable giddiness of the word “dream.” Further, the list of strong sounds devolves from pressing, concrete needs like rent and food to the more abstract “satisfying a man.” The speaker contrasts the pleasure of sex with the implied necessity of keeping a man in the house, pointing to the way in which the gratification of romantic partnership is subordinated to


survival in the speaker’s world. Dreaming, then, is the ultimate escape from the
disenchantment that surviving entails under such impoverished conditions. And, although
the poem concludes with the speaker reflecting on the possibility of nurturing a dream in
such an environment and deeming it an impossibility, the dream persists and constitutes
the bulk of the poem. The enduring presence of the speaker’s dream, even in its denial,
offers a bridge between the speaker and reader. It shows that even under indescribable
conditions of dispossession, the human impulse to dream of something better survives.
Within a poem that expresses the lived reality of systemic disenfranchisement, Brooks
creates a subject that exceeds their limited circumstances.

“Kitchenette building” provides an example of the kind of political reframing that
Brooks expands upon in *Annie Allen* and that Walker undertook in *For My People* three
years earlier. They imagine models of freedom that, in their inchoate quality, do not align
with Wright’s practical mandates for Black writing. Wright urges Black writers to “seek
through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do
other professionals.”

Although Wright warns to not be so concerned with the political
purchase of literature that the writer sacrifices aesthetic quality, he argues that Black
writing ought to correspond to the political conditions that shape Black life. In imagining
a critique that Wright might make of Brooks’ and Walker’s more abstruse politics, I do
not mean to reinvigorate debates about what does and does not constitute “political
poetry” in the context of Black literature.

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255 For two rigorous account of such debates, see: Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and
Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 1-7; and Keith
Leonard, *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (Charlottesville:
University of Virginia Press, 2006), 2-10.
interested in the possibilities inherent in literary form that were not available in other
professional ventures. More specifically, they find poetry an ideal form to express a mode
of Black subjectivity in ways that represent layers of systemic exclusion while also
theorizing the kind of social acknowledgement that might address such exclusions. Their
politics is one that idealizes interpersonal connection but, in doing so, affirms Black
humanity.

The formal properties of lyric poetry allow Brooks and Walker to express that
politics, as it is a form that explores subjectivity without the explanatory edge of
psychological realism. Recent scholarship has reframed the lyric from the privileged
mode of subject formation to an expression of contextual expression with socio-political
consequences. The definition of the lyric shifts from John Stuart Mill’s definition of an
“utterance overheard” to Hegel’s conception of the poem and poet as “a self-bound
subjective entity.” In both cases, the lyric as a privileged genre of Enlightenment
modernity underscores individual brilliance as interiority made exterior. Theodor Adorno
adds that the exteriorization of subjectivity is a social process arguing, “the lyric is
always the subjective expression of a social antagonism.” For Adorno, the lyric occurs
at the point where subjectivity and sociality come into contact, but rather than coalescing
into a community, that point produces conflict. The occasion of the lyric is seemingly
ideal for expressing the detriment of racial exclusion as the Black subject voices their
resistance to a social order that refuses to acknowledge them. But, as in “kitchenette
building,” the poetic speakers that Brooks and Walker construct are almost always more

interested in connection. Even as they express the conditions of exclusion and the larger systemic realities that contribute to such conditions, their speakers offer those expressions as evidence of discontent in a larger bid for acknowledgement. As such, their use of the lyric is akin to what Jonathan Culler identifies as the genre’s capacity “to generate a community that it addresses, to assert social values, to participate in a restructuring of the sensuous and affective domain of life.” Culler’s redirection from the assertion of social values to the sensuous and affective dimensions of human experience shows how the lyric speaker can cultivate collectivity from within their interior, psychic space. Together, Adorno and Culler sketch a theory of the lyric as a form that can account for both outward-looking social critique and the expression of the deeply-felt ramifications of society’s damage on an individual. In the hands of Brooks and Walker, the lyric becomes the ideal form for examining both the collective condition of racial dispossession and also highly individualized meditations on the cost of such dispossession. At that juncture of the collective and individual lies a resistance to total transparency, creating a subject that is unknowable, expressive, and human.

Interiority is a key feature in the poems I examine in the remainder of this chapter and I argue that the maintenance of interior spaces provides the imaginative territory on which Walker and Brooks draft forms of freedom. Unlike the psychological depth at the heart of Wright’s version of social realism, which leverages the interior for its explanatory power, Walker’s and Brooks’ interiority complicates and obscures. In their conception of Black subjectivity they refuse to reify what it means to be Black, or to prescribe a singular mode of Black resistance. Elizabeth Alexander defines the “black

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interior” as an “inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t, or should be.”\(^{259}\)

With this definition, Alexander claims a space that exists in spite of fantasies projected onto Blackness. Instead, the Black subject is able to constitute a sense of self in only glancing relation to the socio-political realities of the external world. Building on Alexander’s work, Kevin Quashie contends “the interior is expansive, voluptuous, creative; impulsive and dangerous, it is not subject to one’s control but instead has to be taken on its own terms.”\(^{260}\)

Brooks and Walker delineate such terms in their poetry, but they also build on the cloistered interiority that Alexander and Quashie describe. As we will see, their work develops the interior as a manner of engaging in the world. That engagement forms the basis of a politics that insists on the humanity of the Black subject.

II. “From the You to Me”

Margaret Walker described the year that she spent at the Iowa Writers Workshop from 1939 until 1940 as one that “almost killed her.”\(^{261}\)

While her Iowa degree won her a teaching position at Jackson State University and produced *For My People*, the difficulty she expressed with the intensive environment stemmed, in part, from the program’s restrictive curriculum.\(^{262}\)

Founded in 1932, the Iowa Writers Workshop was a program that prided itself on the diversity of its students and faculty, even as that faculty prosecuted an intensive system of revision aimed at developing the student’s “craft.”


\(^{261}\) Quoted in Lawrence Jackson, *Indignant Generation*, 104.

\(^{262}\) In a biography Carolyn Brown enumerates her sister’s illness, jealousy over Richard Wright’s literary success, and difficulty paying tuition as other hardships Walker faced at this time. Carolyn J. Brown, *Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 42-43.
McGurl describes craft as a process that “[begins] in ‘self’ but [ends] in disciplined ‘impersonality.’” The resulting body of literature achieved the modernist ideal of universality through the development of personal detail. McGurl and others credit the Iowa Writers Workshop and its early curriculum with the now-ubiquitous adage “write what you know.” Pairing the adage with the notion of craft, however, reveals the extent to which the pedagogy at Iowa directed and, at times, delimited what the student should be writing about. Walker was raised in a middle class family in Alabama and was recruited to attend the workshop as a southern Black writer, a task that required her to produce “authentic” representations of southern Black culture. She was recruited by Paul Engle, who would become the workshop’s most notable director, and her biographer recounts arguments they had about whether her work conformed to those standards. It was at Engle’s insistence that Walker wrote the folk ballads that comprise the second section of For My People; Walker initially thought that the suggestion was condescending and stereotyped her as a Black writer, but grew to enjoy working with the ballad form. Her personal relationship with Engle mirrored a prevailing attitude in the critical reception of Black literature, one that expected Black writing to always carry an explanatory representational charge. But For My People was not only a collection of vernacular ballads; the collection eventually grew to include a first section in free verse

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263 Mark McGurl, The Program Era, 131.
264 Faculty member Norman Foerster wrote, “writers who draw from their own experience and the life they know best are more likely to attain universal values than those who do not.” Quoted in Lorenzo Thomas, Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 82.
265 McGurl identifies two distinct poles at the Iowa Writers Workshop: the Midwestern regionalists that “looked outward and sought prestige through expansion” and the Southern regionalists that “insisted that the regionalist project must turn inward and achieve literary excellence through exclusion, through the willed imposition of limits.” McGurl, The Program Era, 151.
266 Carolyn J. Brown, Song of My Life, 42; also mentioned in “Conversations with Margaret Walker,” Maryemma Graham, Ed, Literary Conversations Series (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2002), 20.
that uses a speaker identified by an “I” pronoun, contains sweeping descriptions of the American South, and details African American history, the collection of ballads, and a sonnet sequence, which I will discuss in more detail. The formal diversity of the collection shows that, by the time For My People is completed, Walker has developed formal strategies that sidestep simplistic depictions of Black culture and expanded the possibilities for the representation of a radical, Black politics in her work.

Walker worked out her political radicalism alongside the purported radicalism of the regionalist artists at Iowa and the liberal literary establishment, as exemplified by Benét, who was a longtime champion of her work.267 The regionalists “share[d] a common faith in cultural radicalism” and were “devoted to artistic innovation and experimentation, to ungenteel subject matter and alternative forms of expression.”268 If we consider Walker’s use of the ballad through a regionalist lens, the emphasis of her project falls on her uptake of dialect, interest in Black folklife, and alteration of poetic form to accommodate those features. Experimentation in form combines with “authentic” subject matter to produce an art object that “announces the poetical vitality of Southern black speech.”269 This view reduces Walker’s poetics to a unidirectional importation of Black content into white form. Walker’s pleasure in composing ballads, however, suggests that she found something more substantive in the practice of adaptation. What I want to suggest is that her composition of folk ballads, as well as her use of other

267 In addition to writing the introduction to For My People, as discussed above, Benét advocated for the collection when Walker submitted it unsuccessfully to the Yale Younger Poet’s Prize the preceding year and encouraged her to reapply. Walker credited Benét with ultimately selecting the collection in 1942. Carolyn J. Brown, Song of My Life, 40-41.
recognizable poetic form, was an assertion of the existence of excellent Black literature that adhered to such traditions. Karen Jackson Ford identifies the ballad as “a form long associated with a popular and populist folk tradition” adding that “the ballad had a distinguished lineage in African American culture by association with spiritual, gospel songs, and the blues.”

Walker’s ballads, then, were not only an elevation of Black source material, in line with regionalist expectations, but also homage to generations of Black balladeers unrecognized by the faculty at Iowa. Walker undoubtedly knew this history and significance of the ballad in both the Anglo-European and African American contexts and in amplifying the connections between the traditions, she placed divergent contexts in conversation with one another.

Benét’s editorial footprint, as discussed above, is more oriented towards highlighting the “authenticity” of Walker’s verse, both in and out of ballad form. In his introduction he excerpts three long lines from the collection’s title poem, choices that foreground Walker’s exposition of contemporary Black life. He selects the poem’s third, fourth, and sixth lines, which describe, respectively the speaker’s “playmates in the dust and sand of Alabama”; the primal scene of discovering and becoming subsequently embittered by one’s Blackness; and the urban scene of “disinherited dispossessed” migrants to New York, Chicago, and New Orleans.

Benét’s selection highlights poverty, dispossession, and disillusionment, not unlike the stark social realism of Richard Wright. In doing so, Benét participates in the tradition of associating Blackness with

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abjection and suggesting that when Walker is at her most “real” she is representing privation. However, even within the lines of “For My People,” Walker crafts a stirring call for uprising that does not conform to the static representations of disenfranchisement that Benét favors. The last three lines of “For My People,” for example, depart from the temporality of the rest of the poem, leaving behind the long durée of black disenfranchisement that seems to stretch from slavery into Walker’s present. At the poem’s close, Walker concretizes the objects of her critique and suggests an alternative. Her movement from an abstract past into a concrete present and back out into an abstract future reflects an understanding of the systemic forces that enabled such disenfranchisement and her imagination of a more equitable future:

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies, associations and councils and committees and conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches, preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the adams and eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control (For My People 14).

Most of the poem is stubbornly atemporal, akin to the timeless “blundering,” “groping,” and “floundering” that Walker describes in institutions like churches, clubs, societies, and
schools. Her invocation of the institution as a site of distress and deceit levels a timely critique of respectability politics that privilege some members of the race—educated, light-skinned, middle class—over others.\textsuperscript{272} That critique shows the extent to which a privileged class not only eclipses a larger Black collective but also demonstrates that intraracial stratification undermines any hope of collectivity. The “facile force of state and fad and novelty,” “false prophet” and “holy believer” that actively prey on the people to which Walker addresses the poem are, in part, Black institutions that Walker argues collude with white supremacy willingly and unwillingly to keep certain Black subjects in a continual state of dispossession. Already, she has shifted from the descriptive mode of Benét’s favored lines to a more incisive social critique and, in the last stanza, where she shifts to a call for a new world order written in the future tense, her critique becomes revolutionary. Walker reconceptualizes her “people” as an active category that effect change on the unequal systems of the past to transform their future. She pairs a “beauty full of healing” and “strength of final clenching” to underline the point that such a future cannot be accessed without struggle. Although her vision is not without violence, it is utopian in its idea of a “race of men” who would remake the world as a more inclusive place.

Walker’s conception of this more inclusive political future is notable for the ways in which it anticipates the masculinist triumphal rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement. On the surface images like “bloody peace,” “martial songs,” and even her liberating “race

\textsuperscript{272} Beverly Guy-Sheftall writes persuasively about the relationship of respectability politics to Black feminism, identifying Anna Julia Cooper as a figure whose radicalism existed in tandem with more conservative notions of “true womanhood.” She quotes Mary Helen Washington: “Cooper, like all of her contemporaries … had a great stake in the prestige, the respectability, and the gentility guaranteed by the politics of true womanhood…. Burdened by the race's morality, black women could not be as free as white women or black men to think outside of these boundaries of 'uplift.’” Beverly Guy-Sheftall. “Black Feminist Studies: The Case of Anna Julia Cooper.” \textit{African American Review} 43, no. 1 (2009): 12.
of men” are aligned with violence that is coded male. The new age of freedom is one that still involves some degree of control, even as it is divested of its charge of white supremacy. Her language connotes the “messianic and autocratic leadership tendencies within the black community.” Those tendencies are overlayed with an assumption that community control is the provenance of men. This is not to suggest that Walker consciously called for a masculine leader; rather, it is to address the traces of what Erica Edwards calls the “charismatic scenario” in Walker’s liberatory vision of the future. Though the new world is capacious enough for “all the adams and eves,” Walker still narrativizes that future as one indebted to decisive leadership, as amorphous as it may remain. Edwards understands charismatic leadership as “a storytelling regime and a set of performative prescriptions, a compact of mythologies that covers over a matrix of liberatory and disciplinary impulses that both compel and contain black movements for social change.” In this way, we can see Walker’s call for comprehensive social change as the manifestation of conflicting impulses toward freedom, on the one hand, and the reinstatement of hierarchies, on the other. The tangle of liberation and domination evinces the difficulty in formulating the unseen political future, falling just short of envisioning this more equitable world.

This is not to suggest that Walker’s revolutionary project was a failure; instead, the inability to totally depart from existing political models might suggest a deeply-held desire to reform more familiar democratic values. Again, this is a tactic that would become central to the Civil Rights Movement. In his analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.

275 Ibid., 16
Taylor Branch argues that “his oratory gave King authority to reinterpret the core intuition of democratic justice.”²⁷⁶ In spite of the dialectical relationship between Blackness and American democracy wherein ideals like freedom are defined by the racialized non-citizens that cannot access them, King does not dispense with the notion of freedom.²⁷⁷ Instead, his social critique is oriented towards the reformation of existing democratic categories. Like King, Walker is set on reforming existing political categories and, just as King’s reform relies on the enduring weight of the charismatic scenario for legitimization, Walker turns to literary form as a framework within which to undertake her reformation. The final poem in the collection’s first section is a jeremiad called “Today” that opposes an “I”-identified speaker against a more indeterminate “You.” The speaker rattles off a litany of complaints, in keeping with the conventions of the form, lamenting “slum scabs on city faces,” “bitter living flowing in our laughter,” and “cankerous mutiny eating through the nipples of our breasts” (For My People 28). These images echo the descriptions of simultaneous vitality and dispossession from “For My People” and also suggest the deleterious effects of racial in-fighting. However, the imposing presence of the “I” and its proximity to these images intensifies Walker’s critique. Here her speaker is not only making an appeal on behalf of her people, she is definitively part of the collective. In the second movement of the poem, Walker’s speaker addresses the “You,” set apart from the “I,” indicting the former for their indifference to the ongoing struggles of the latter. Walker writes: “You in Middle America distantly

removed from Middle Europe, no closer than morning headlines and evening news flashes, bothered by petty personals—your calories and eyemaline, your henna rinse and dental cream, washing your lives with pity, smoothing your ways with vague apologies” (For My People 29). The echo of “Middle America” and “Middle Europe” introduces a telling racial ambiguity at the heart of her critique. In one way, the line critiques the burgeoning suburbs for their spatial and political remove from the inner-city Walker describes as “slums.” The “You” is a homogenous body of white consumers, allied by the toiletries they share and the vague gestures of apology that replace concrete political action. Just as they are set apart from racialized bodies in urban spaces, they are also distinct from the Middle Europeans. By including “Middle” as a qualifier Walker reminds us that those not from Western Europe belong to ethnic groups, typically oppressed and segregated into urban spaces shred with Black residents. The divide she calls attention is one between classes: one that remains in the impoverished urban space, and another that has absconded for Middle America.²⁷⁸

This poem, perhaps more than any other, conveys Walker’s Leftist politics and calls for a political future that explicitly vindicates the working class. Her critique is in line with the American jeremiad, an iteration of the form that is especially concerned with the tension between America’s moral failure and its promise. In defining the form, Sacvan Bercovitch writes, “[the American jeremiad] posits a movement from promise to experience—from the ideal of community to the shortcomings of community life—and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward the resolution that incorporates (as it

²⁷⁸ Another reading that I do not pursue in this chapter is the critique about American indifference to the rise of Fascism in Europe, as the poem was drafted during 1939.
transforms) both the promise and the condemnation.”

Walker’s use of the jeremiad form knowingly draws the connection between structural racism and the discrete individual failures that take place at the quotidian level of everyday, middle class life. The poems of the first section set up a conflict between middle-class complacency—that is coded white—and the ideal of interracial, inter-class cooperation. I argue that the sonnet sequence that closes the collection attempts to resolve this conflict by modeling the kind of recognition that never comes in “Today.”

As she does in her ballads and the jeremiad, Walker employs the recognizable sonnet form to simultaneously write herself into an established tradition and assert the centrality of Black sonneteers to the tradition. She invokes the underlying tension of the sonnet—the restrictive pull of prescribed form and the broadening push of unending expressive possibility—to mark Black life as worthy of artistic elevation and political recognition. Hollis Robbins charts the long history of the African American sonnet, arguing that “with its venerated status, its genteel appeal for editors and publishers, and its comfortable fit at the bottom of a newspaper column, the sonnet form was the single most popular form for African American poets in the first half of the twentieth century.” Walker was undoubtedly aware of this literary history and her inclusion of a sonnet sequence amplifies the history of the Black sonnet and asserts its place in the longer history of the sonnet. Timo Müller adds that the sonnet can be “a space that can be occupied, reshaped, expanded,” drawing out the ways in which Walker consciously bends

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the form to accommodate her material. Her primary interest at the collection’s close is in interpersonal communication, conversation, and the forms of political recognition that might result from full social recognition.

In the sonnet sequence Walker forges formal links between poems through subtle linguistic cues that ask us to read the six poems sequentially and as part of a larger network of meaning. The images of one poem refer back to and alter those that came before, placing them in conversation with one another. The poems speak to each other in ways that parallel the social-political recognition Walker aims for. Her six sonnets begin in childhood, evoking the speaker’s youth in “low cotton country” buffeted by agrarian sprawl on one side and “grumbling” miners on the other, figures that come down from the hills to their camp and haunt the speaker’s nightly walks. The imposition of industry on the pastoral landscape would seem to set up a facile dichotomy between the evils of exploitative and extractive labor, and the more idealized, harmonious practice of farming. But Walker reminds her readers that cotton country is no paradise. Though she describes “ripe haystacks,” signifying the productivity of the region, she lingers on images of decay. Tree stumps, the rotting shacks of sharecroppers, “famine, terror, flood, and plague nearby,” all give the region a sense of fallenness with overt Biblical resonances. Walker connects that sense of decay to a regional moral failing, thematically echoing the content of her jeremiad “Today.” In the poem’s concluding couplet she writes, “where sentiment and hatred still held sway / and only bitter land was washed away” (For My People 53). The claustrophobic linking of the lines that result from the near-perfect rhyme of “sway” and “away” suggests that, rather than land, bitter sentiment might be

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washed away instead. Walker draws a grammatical link between the lines, leaving space for the second line to be transformed by the one that came before.

In the poem that follows “Childhood,” Walker uses the link to both continue the narrative of the speaker’s life—a movement from rural childhood to urban coming-of-age—and to make a comment on the gendered nature of work. The second poem is called “Whores” and, as the title suggests, comments upon a form of female labor that the speaker finds alternatingly horrifying and fascinating. The first line, “When I grew up I went away to work,” repurposes the narrative idiom of “when I,” just as “Childhood” begins with “When I was a child.” The repetitive openings of the poem reinforce their sequence: one is a poem of childhood and the second takes place after the child has become an adult. Further, Walker reuses the word “away,” the last line of “Childhood” in the first line of “Whores.” In the latter poem it locates the speaker in a place that is not the rural Alabama of her childhood; it also suggests that the speaker might have fled the sentiment and hatred that stymied her childhood landscape and found a more accepting place for work. The content of the poem proves otherwise, but the montage between the last line of one poem and the first line of the second maps an optimistic geography: the evacuation of the speaker from racism of the south to a north that she hopes will provide better opportunities. However, the northern landscape that the speaker inhabits is also marred by disenfranchisement. Like the miners of “Childhood,” the figures in “Whores” are “sullen” and “tireless,” characterized by their unending work, their movement through space as “whole armies through the nights” (For My People 54). Walker’s characterization of the “painted whores” she observes is riven with a contradictory mix of disdain and tacit identification. As the poem states at its beginning, the speaker has gone
away seeking work; and the whores are also, colloquially “working girls.” Drawn to them for this shared professionalism, the speaker describes them first as “fascinating sights.” After the volta the careful, measured observations of the poem’s first half give way to a lurid imagination of their collective death. “Perhaps one day they’ll all die in the streets / or be surprised by bombs in each wide bed,” the speaker conjectures (For My People 54). The image of a bomb, or field of bombs reactivates the suggestion that the whores comprise an “army,” but whereas the earlier invocation positions that army as threatening to the speaker, this repetition affirms their vulnerability. Through this shift in tone and implication, it becomes increasingly clear that the speaker sees her work as wholly distinct from the work of the whore. Concluding the poem, the speaker envisions the mass-murder of the whores as resulting in some moral reckoning: “…easy ways, like whores on special beats, / no longer have the gift to harbor pride / or bring men peace, or leave them satisfied” (For My People 54). The lesson to be learned, it seems, is one about the kind of work that one is able to take pride in. The final line—its call for men’s peace and satisfaction—pointedly denies a transcendent outcome for the kind of work that the speaker sees as degrading. Peace and satisfaction, then, seem to be what she is seeking in her own, unspecified work. On its face, this poem might be a classist condescension about the limitations of subsistence labor burdened by a lurking prudishness that devalues sexual autonomy. But the whores that the speaker describes are importantly only one form of the “easy ways” that she seeks to indict. Walker leaves an open question around the credibility of her speaker, allowing us to read her violent refusal of the whores as flawed in its divisiveness. Her devaluation of sex work falls out of line with the collection’s larger call for cross-class cooperation.
The final three poems in the sequence, “Memory,” “Our Need,” and “The Struggle Staggers Us” returns to the sweeping register of For My People’s first section and restore some of the sense of the necessity of coalition in making a more democratic future. The poems present a collective yearning for a life beyond struggling to make ends meet, addressing the twinned desires for peace and satisfaction that her speaker suggests the whores cannot fulfill. These more idealistic poems, however, are also more abstract in both their articulation of disenfranchisement and their imagination of unseen political formations. In “Memory” Walker describes “muttering protests” and “whispered oaths” that characterize the dispossession of people in cities (For My People 56). “Our Need” includes a call for “wholeness born of inner strength,” “the friendly feel of human forms,” “and earth beneath our feet against the storms” (For My People 57). While these moments effectively describe the condition of poverty and identify a need for change, they are devoid of concrete, actionable goals. The abstraction of even “earth,” which might be understood to be land—a callback to Reconstruction’s promised “forty acres and a mule”—resists being grounded in a specific need. The final poem, “The Struggle Staggers Us,” acknowledges the unbridgeable gap between survival and the promise of something more. “Simple dignity,” the poem states, “is more than fighting to exist; / more than revolt and war and human odds” (For My People 58). The speaker voices the difficulty in locating revolutionary potentiality in something as simultaneously humble and inarticulable as “simple dignity.” She also later tries to put language to the process, stating, “There is a journey from the me to you. / There is a journey from the you to me. / A union of the two strange worlds must be” (For My People 58). Embedded in those three lines, Walker delineates a politics that begins in individual lived experience, and
becomes politicized in the moment of encounter. The “union” that she imagines at the collection’s close is one in which the Black subject is recognized as human, treated with dignity. This recognition, as the sonnet sequence suggests, happens through formal linkages, as well as through interpersonal connections.

Walker’s poetry suggests that the way out of racial and economic inequality is human understanding and the recognition that all people are worthy of dignity. While this suggestion might seem trite, abstract, and devoid of a politics, it is importantly striking at the roots of racism in its most insidious form. Walker’s identification of “simple dignity” as what is most lacking in the ongoing struggle for freedom positions a restoration of Black humanity as the avenue towards equality and democracy. The politics of *For My People* restores the Black subject to the position of human, a position from which “a union of two strange worlds” can take place. In “Iowa Farmer” Walker stages exactly that union. As the third poem in the sequence, “Iowa Farmer” stands out as much for its unique content as it does for its anomalous form. Most of the other poems adhere closely to the Shakespearean sonnet form; only “Iowa Farmer” and “Memory” depart from a recognizable sequence of end-rhymes. While “Memory” is about dispossession and isolation in the city, “Iowa Farmer” is about the self-determination of the Midwestern Farmer. Importantly, Walker begins the poem by self-reflexively introducing her encounter with the farmer as a dialogue: “I talked to a farmer one day in Iowa” (*For My People* 55). The spareness of this overture gives the encounter an abstract, allegorical air. The farmer is reduced to type and the conversation—which is never recounted—constitutes the “journey from the me to you.” Though “Iowa Farmer” comes before “The Struggle Staggers Us,” the interrelation of the sonnet sequence asks us to read backwards
as well as sequentially. The glancing moment of connection that “Iowa Farmer” describes models a desired form of individual self-possession. The speaker recounts, “there was no hunger deep within the heart / nor burning riveted within the bone, / but here they ate a satisfying bread” (*For My People* 55). The envy in this description is almost palpable. The elements missing from the farmer’s life—hunger and burning—echo the language Walker uses to describe the condition of impoverished subjects elsewhere in the sonnet sequence, drawing a stark distinction between the farmer’s self-sufficiency and the precarity of life without land and livelihood. The conversation that takes place between the farmer and speaker is not recounted, but she gives us images of security and home throughout the sonnet that demonstrate the assuredness of his position. The farmer “knew his land”; there is “love for home / within the soft eyes of his son”; and, “His ugly house was clean against the storm” (*For My People* 55). Despite the lack of aesthetic appeal to his house, it is safe and functional, beloved by his children and provides the “satisfying bread” the speaker later admires. Her description projects a sense of security that extends beyond the farmer himself. The importance of the son—his love and security—cannot be understated. He offers both a vision of a stable family structure, absent in the rest of the sonnet sequence, and a sense of futurity. The speaker desires the farmer’s self-possession and the ability to pass that self-possession along to future generations.

Though race remains implicit in the poem, the farmer’s whiteness and his midwestern location are crucial to the larger form of intersubjectivity Walker sketches. The “journey” that forms the crux of her case for Black humanity depends upon a reformation and reclamation of traditionally American democratic values, making ideals like land ownership accessible to racialized and otherwise disenfranchised subjects.
Walker meets the farmer with genuine admiration and not scorn, imagining a world in which they are equals. Walker writes that the farmer “speaks with pride and yet not boastfully/ he had no need to fumble his words” (For My People 55). The specific poem narrates a moment of interpersonal connection, which we might see Walker’s speaker(s) throughout For My People performing in each poem. In terms of composition, the poet “fumble[s] [her] words” as she crafts the collection, but the strident, declarative tone throughout Walker’s work affirms her determination to state her case outright. Black life, she says, is worthy of admiration. Her encounter with the farmer models the “journey from the me to you,” but her collection models the “journey from the you to me” wherein the reader is invited into conversation with Walker. For My People, and particularly the sonnet sequence that ends it, may fall short in its abstraction, but it is radical in its imagining of an intersubjective construction of humanity.

III. Unknowable Annie

At the time Gwendolyn Brooks wrote Annie Allen she was struggling, much like Margaret Walker was at Iowa. Her editor Elizabeth Lawrence had just rejected the manuscript of her novel, tentatively titled “The American Family Brown,” finding it “too patently devised to demonstrate the social and economic aspects of Negro life, inter-race attitudes and relationships, racial discrimination, etc.”282 Lawrence’s criticism contains traces of the mandates Wright laid out in “Blueprint for Negro Expression,” but she penned her response a decade later and by 1947 the field of Black literature had shifted. Richard Wright had left America for France, James Baldwin had emerged as a prodigious

282 Lawrence Jackson, Indignant Generation, 323.
critic of old-guard social realist literature, and Chester Himes had been anointed as the next superstar of Black literature. Brooks waded into the masculinist, prose-oriented waters of publishing, attempting to produce a novel that would be more lucrative than her debut collection and make a mark in the national conversation about race. However, she also had ideas about how best to write poetry that might make such a mark. In a 1945 letter to Lawrence she wrote, “the public won’t accept, much longer, that pure propaganda dished out in broken-up lines and called ‘poetry.’” Here Brooks chafes against the expectation that she should sacrifice composition and aesthetic innovation for the explanatory function of “propaganda.” She imagines a future in which the literary audience will be in step with more daring experiments in form and willing to view the Black subject as multifaceted and not a stable object. Recognizing that Black life has singular potential to be translated into poetry, Brooks refers to Black people as “ready-made subjects.” In an essay published in 1950 in *Phylon*, just after she had won the Pulitzer Prize, Brooks elaborates: “The temptation sometimes encouraged by ignorance but more often by laziness, to let the mere fact of lofty subject, great drive and high emotion suffice; to present them as such fact as requires no embellishment, no interpretation, no subtlety.” She insists that the Black subject is already lofty and always worthy of artistic attention. The passage adds a call for artists to further elevate their subjects, moving them from factual representation into an ineffable state of aesthetic embellishment. Brooks suggests, by way of a logical feedback loop, that this aesthetic embellishment services the indescribable qualities of the Black subject. She writes, “His mere body, for that matter, is an eloquence. His quiet walk down the street is a speech to

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283 Ibid., 210.
the people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school.”  

In language that echoes Zora Neale Hurston, she describes an eloquence to the Black body that is both factual and also transcends mimetic representation. Brooks articulates the poet’s work as the synthesis of these two qualities: “The Negro poet’s most urgent duty, at present, is to polish his technique, his way of presenting his truths and his beauties, that these may be more insinuating, and, therefore more overwhelming.” The act of rendering Black experience as overwhelming involves a transformation of already-valuable subject matter into work of unimpeachable artistic value. That aesthetic project is at the core of *Annie Allen* and it signals the political potential of such a project.

In *Annie Allen* Brooks constructs a Black subject that exceeds mere transcription and asserts herself politically through an essential unknowability. The fact that we cannot fully apprehend Annie confirms her humanity, a category that is influenced by both a social experience of racial dispossession and individual self-determination. By focusing on Brooks’ construction of Annie as a complex, opaque, sometimes unintelligible subject, I aim to reframe our scholarly understanding of Brooks’ political contribution as a refutation of the Western literary and philosophical tradition. Eve Dunbar persuasively examines Brooks’ use of animal figures as “literary refusals to reinforce species hierarchies as a life affirmation.” She suggests that such refusals of hierarchies underlie a broader movement toward deconstructing existing power relations that enable

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285 Ibid., 312.

286 More specifically, it recalls the moment in “Characteristics of Negro Expression” where she claims, “Negro dancing is dynamic suggestion” Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression:” 84.


288 See, for example, Jill M. Parrott, “How Shall We Greet the Sun?: Form and Truth in Gwendolyn Brooks’s *Annie Allen,*” *Style* 46, no. 1 (2012): 27-40. Parrott reads Annie Allen as a search for “truth” in the tradition of Plato’s allegory of the cave, thus making room in such philosophical discourses for the Black subject.

segregation. Dunbar’s inquiry focuses on Brooks’ 1953 novel *Maud Martha*, which contains segments originally intended for “The American Family Brown.” Though *Annie Allen* and *Maud Martha* are often linked due to their similarly alliterative titles, their shared focus on a single Black woman and her domestic life, and their proximity in Brooks’ publication history, the texts are distinct in the construction of their centralized subjects. Kevin Quashie argues that the novel narrates “her [Maud’s] search not for her identity in social terms, but for her self in human terms.” Quashie sees this inherently quiet process as a refusal of the more spectacular forms of “black existentialism” practiced by writers like Wright, Himes, and Ann Petry, which he defines as “stories about an individual’s conflict with social institutions.” While Dunbar highlights Brooks’ use of literature as refusal, Quashie layers a refusal of specific literary genre atop that intervention. Brooks both denies the systemic exclusions and the form most commonly used to write against them. However, *Maud Martha* is a prose text more overtly invested in the conversations surrounding the canon of social realist, existential, and naturalist fiction; *Annie Allen*, as a collection of experimental poetry, occupies a middle space where Brooks imagines an intersubjective form of sociality that would result in Annie’s full recognition. Rather than resisting existential paradigms associated with Western modernity, or the racist undersides of those paradigms, *Annie Allen*’s protagonist models a subjective density that lies just beyond expression.

290 Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, 49.
291 Ibid., 48.
292 For this “middle space,” I am indebted to Sonya Posmentier’s reading of *Annie Allen* as a text where Brooks “works to redefine the natural” seeking “to hold the relationship between human and nonhuman productively in suspension within the space of urban blackness in order to foreground the black subject’s right to be in place.” Though I am less invested in questions of place than Posmentier, her idea of suspension here resists a refutation of existing categories of place as a way to reconceptualize what Brooks comes to see as “natural space.” Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe*, 91.
Brooks’ decision to cast Annie as a dense and complex subject counteracts the desire to regard Black people as inherently knowable, hypervisible, and as metonyms for social problems. Already several critics have commented on the way in which Brooks’ formal choices elevate the poetic subject, choosing to tell Annie’s full life story. In an essay called “New Poets” Margaret Walker praises the way that Annie Allen’s craftsmanship enables Brooks to compose “a fine delineation of a young Negro woman from childhood through adolescence to complete maturity.” She adds, “Coming after the long hue and cry of white writers that Negroes as poets lack form and intellectual acumen, Miss Brooks’ careful craftsmanship and sensitive understanding reflected in Annie Allen are not only personal but a racial vindication.”293 Walker’s essay appears in the same volume as Brooks’ earlier-quoted essay and, while Brooks sets out an aesthetic project for Black poets, Walker is more invested in praising the strong poetic work of the preceding half-century. Brooks is the zenith of the poetic achievement that Walker catalogues because of the recognition of her work that came with the Pulitzer Prize and the evident craftsmanship of the poems themselves. In Walker’s claim that Brooks’ work is a “racial vindication” we get a protean formulation of the political potential inherent in writing daring, experimental poetry about a Black subject. Walker links the deft exploration of Annie’s life story with Brooks’ technical brilliance suggesting that the coupled techniques assert the collection as important. Evie Shockley discusses the central long poem of the collection, a mock epic called “The Anniad,” which “staked its claim to the status of legitimate epic” and “held the potential to legitimize her [Brooks] as a poet in the eyes of the literary establishment.”294 Much like Walker’s claim of racial

294 Evie Shockley, Renegade Poetics, 27.
vindication, Shockley’s celebration of Brooks’ work includes a consideration of how her use of form places her work in sustained conversation with the poetic canon. Brooks’ intervention in the literary establishment is to insist that a Black woman’s life could comprise an epic poem. Or, as Lawrence Jackson put it more generally, Brooks’ achievement resulted from her ability “to enjamb the epic of African American life onto the complex syntax of the poetic line.”295 These accounts of “The Anniad” and *Annie Allen* emphasize the legitimizing power of poetry and point to the way that Brooks underlines the significance of Annie’s life. Annie is not only emblematic of disenfranchisement; she is a complicated poetic subject and her development across the poems that comprise *Annie Allen* suggest the depths of her subjectivity.

Brooks constructs Annie as an inherently unknowable subject as a way to draw her readership into conversation with her. While Walker stages an intersubjective exchange that asserts the humanity of her Black subjects, Brooks leaves the exchange to the imagination of her reader. She offers them glimpses into Annie’s fullness and subjective density in order to stage a readerly communion. The legitimizing power of form that critics like Shockley identify, then, expand this readerly communion so that Annie is in conversation with a poetic audience that is more commonly in conversation with a lyric “I” that is assumed to be white and male. Brooks begins “The Anniad” with a call to bring Annie to mind:

Think of sweet and chocolate
Left to folly or to fate,
Whom the higher gods forgot,
Whom the lower gods berate;
Physical and underfed
Fancying on a featherbed

What was never and is not.  

This opening stanza positions the poem’s central figure in relation to the reader. What has traditionally been read as an invocation to the muse is also an invocation to the reader’s imagination, a way of imprinting an image of Annie directly on their mind. The act of imagining is doubled: the reader is asked to “think,” or to imagine Annie while Annie is “fancying on a featherbed,” conjuring images of a lover she will never have. Therefore, despite the fact that Brooks marks Annie as poor and Black with the descriptors “chocolate” and “underfed,” she is invested in a form that would encourage anyone that encounters the poem to actively conjure Annie and her reality. The other descriptors used to represent Annie further insist on her concreteness and on her humanity. Calling her “sweet” marks her good nature, even as it connects itself to the physical descriptor, “chocolate.” The word “physical” works against “underfed,” insisting on Annie’s vibrant nature in spite of her poverty. This initial description casts Annie as imaginative, vital, and alive. As she continues to evoke Annie, demanding that the reader, “Think of ripe and rompabout, / All her harvest buttoned in,” Brooks makes clear the extent to which Annie exists in excess of what is on the page (99). It might have been eloquent to describe a young girl wrapped up in her fantasies about a lover that has not yet arrived, but Brooks puts an emphatic point on the fact that that girl is alive. In doing so, Brooks posits Black subjectivity in ways that exceed the bounds of the poem itself. As the poem progresses

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297 Evie Shockley adopts Karen Jackson Ford’s term a “poetics of excess,” claiming “[Brooks’s] poetry never became more explosively *excessive* than it was in *Annie Allen.*” Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics*, 43, 53 [emphasis in the original].
and Annie meets, marries, and is abandoned by her lover, the way that she is called into the reader’s mind shifts, but her vitality does not.

Annie is tightly associated with her romantic visions and desire for companionship, but it is in the moments of solitary reflection that this vitality becomes most clear. Those moments of reflection stand in contrast to the way that other figures apprehend her, especially her lover. She marries a man identified only as “a paladin” and “the man of tan,” who leaves to fight in World War II. Upon his return, he finds reunion with Annie unbearable: “Not that woman! (Not that room! / Not the dusted demi-gloom!) / Nothing limpid. Nothing meek” (*Annie Allen* 104). We momentarily inhabit his subject position, communicating the sense of constriction he feels in his life with Annie. Notably he rejects both his wife, and their shared space, an apartment that the poem’s speaker identified as “a lowly room” after their wedding. Then, too, the speaker uses the phrase “demi-gloom,” associating it with Annie, but also with a moment of passion: “In the beam his track diffuses / Down her dusted demi-gloom / Like a nun of crimson ruses” (*Annie Allen* 101). Brooks suggests that Annie has remained chaste during their courtship and engagement, but this passage comes after they have consummated their relationship and Annie is “contemplating by cloud-light” her new lover-turned-husband. Though Annie’s “demi-gloom” is contrasted with images of light, that light is tempered by cloudiness. The tan man is already not the idealized lover that Annie had previously believed. The conflict staged between language of chastity and language of passion is resolved in the ongoing religious metaphor, here casting Annie as “a nun of crimson ruses.” The virginal qualities of the nun collide with the implications of a “crimson ruse,” suggesting that the nun has not upheld her vow of celibacy. Annie is subsequently
described as “mak[ing] a chapel of” her shared apartment and “genuflect[ing] to love,” signaling her almost-dogmatic commitment to her lover. These lines cast Annie’s adoration of the man of tan as religious devotion, a commitment that is at once measured and ecstatic. Shuttling between the poles of measured, intentional piety and the passionate consummation of their relationship, which appears between the lines of the poem, Brooks depicts the consuming love that brings Annie into the kitchenette building and the eventually unhappy union with her lover.

When the man of tan rejects their shared life upon his return, he emphasizes Annie’s apparent “meekness,” aligning it with the “demi-gloom” of their living space. However, in connecting that word to an earlier experience of passion, his critique becomes more pointed. It marks a rejection of Annie’s sexuality and prefigures his search for a new lover, “a gorgeous and gold shriek / With her tongue tucked in her cheek” (*Annie Allen* 104). The resplendent goldenness contrasts with Annie’s darkness and gloominess and the shriek could not be more distinct from the image we have of Annie silently kneeling in devotion to her lover. What the man of tan wants, then, is the passion without the piety. But that piety reveals Annie’s deep patience and tolerance, qualities that individuate her. The man of tan’s evaluation misses the ways in which her grayness indexes other qualities besides meekness. He underestimates how valuable her love is and also how much her ability to love locates her as a subject. In the early phase of their courtship, as Brooks describes their apartment as a place where Annie “genuflects to love,” she goes on to describe:

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All the prayerbooks in her eyes
Open soft as a sacrifice
Or the dolour of a dove.
Tender candles ray by ray
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Warm and gratify the gray *(Annie Allen* 101).

Religious language runs through this characterization, reminding us of the more comfortable life Annie gave up to marry the tan man. Accordingly, the language of her love is bound up with sacrifice and pain, demonstrating that Annie’s devotion comes at a cost. The word “dolour,” in particular recalls the intense, ecstatic suffering of martyrdom, and is explicitly aligned with a dove, a stand-in for Christ. In spite her suffering, Annie tries to make their home livable. The candles both reference the chapel-like quality of their home, as seen through Annie’s eyes, and the warmth and light she brings to their relationship. In this moment gray references the space, but it also might reference the man of tan himself. Annie promises to “warm and gratify the gray,” thereby warming the space and also gratifying her new partner. The reversal of grayness in this moment is significant because it destabilizes earlier assertions that Annie is intractably marked by her grayness. Instead, it becomes a descriptor transparently applied by the man of tan, and elsewhere attached to other things. Creating distance between perceptions of Annie and the intentional, committed, passionate lover that she is elsewhere revealed to be undermines the man of tan’s reading of her as “meek”. We arrive at the realization of Annie’s status as a complicated subject capable of both ecstatic pain and pleasure through a miscalculation by her lover.

Brooks structures the poem around a miscalculation of Annie as simplistic, fixed, and apprehensible, while she also maintains through the technics of the form that she is actually unknowable, variable, and changeable. As readers we are tempted to take the man of tan’s assertion of her meekness at face value, to find poetry in the detailed account of a poor, meek, Black woman. Brooks undermines that readerly desire,
portraying Annie as a host of simultaneous, often contradictory categories, revealing an abiding concern for Annie’s humanity. By the end of the poem, after Annie has endured the man of tan’s abandonment and return, Brooks implores the reader to, “Think of tweaked and twenty-four. / Fuchsias gone or gripped or gray, / All hay-colored that was green” (Annie Allen 109). Reactivating the image of grayness, Brooks invites the reader to read Annie as entirely enervated from her life experience. She is likened to a plant that is sick, absent, dead, and dried out. But she is also only twenty-four, reminding us of the relatively small sliver of Annie’s life that the poem has covered. Though life experience has hardened her, the sudden emergence of calendar time points to a future into which Annie persists, her variable subjechthood intact. At the close of “The Anniad” Brooks includes a tender reunion between Annie and her lover, gesturing to a future in which they are together. Brooks writes, “Think of almost thoroughly / Derelict and dim and done” (Annie Allen 109), again tempting the reader to assign those descriptors to Annie. But the word “almost” is operative, showing Annie’s continued, if dormant, vitality. The poem’s final lines find Annie “Kissing in her kitchenette / The minuets of memory” (Annie Allen 109), an image that is meant to recall earlier versions of Annie fantasizing about a lover and pledging unfailing devotion to him when he arrives. It is a tender reminder of her capacity to forgive, a capacity that is in line with Brooks’ determination to render Annie as fully human.

While “The Anniad” produces its subjective density by way of excessive descriptive detail—meticulously cataloguing both Annie’s bodily and psychic qualities—Brooks’ shift to a more spare poetics in the “Appendix to the Anniad” signals a complementary strategy of encouraging readerly identification with its heroine. The
demarcation of the section’s three poems as an “appendix” continues the elevated, academic tone of the collection. Brooks suggests that they are supplemental, but just as erudite as “The Anniad.” Yet, the sequence’s final poem, “the sonnet-ballad” encodes other generic markers in its title: announcing itself as a sonnet formally, while potentially also stating its intentions toward the ballad. Brooks experiments with the sonnet form elsewhere in Annie Allen: most notably in the 14-line poems from the sequence “the children of the poor” and in “the rites for Cousin Vit.” While those poems play with expected rhyme schemes, “the sonnet-ballad” is a perfect Shakespearean sonnet. In adhering so tightly to prescribed form, Brooks emphasizes the congruence between the poem’s stated aim and its appearance on the page. Yet, she plays with the mandates of the sonnet subtly, suggesting that the ballad might be more apt for communicating the poem’s subject matter. For example, while the traditional sonnet form employs a volta, reversing the course of the speaker’s reasoning or argument, “the sonnet-ballad” begins and ends with the same line, “Oh mother, mother, where is happiness?” an explicitly speakerly effect that also recalls the repeated refrain of the ballad form.298 The tension she produces between adherence to form and divergence from it activates resonances associated with the sonnet and ballad, even as it marks Brooks’ experiment with form as distinct.

The “sonnet-ballad” is also the point at which Brooks introduces the lyric “I” in “The Anniad,” signaling a shift in how the subject is constructed in relation to the poem’s audience. While “The Anniad” employs a third-person imperative mode of address, evoking the reader’s imagination and encouraging a form of identification with Annie as

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a poem’s subject, the “Appendix to The Anniad” shifts first to an imperative “you,” then to the more inclusive “we,” and finally to the singular “I” in the “sonnet-ballad.” This progression moves us from the sweeping universalist experience of Annie considering war to her individuated experience of losing her lover. Brooks titles the appendix “leaves from a loose-leaf war diary,” which temporally locates the poems in the middle of “The Anniad,” before the man of tan has returned to Annie by the end of the epic. Brooks begins the appendix “you need the untranslatable ice to watch”; while the second poem outlines “The Certainty we two should meet by God” (Annie Allen 110-111). The impersonality of the “you” in the first poem describes the universal difficulty of contending with the violence, deprivation, and loneliness of wartime, while the narrowing into a “we two” in the second poem stages a more specific scenario of a hopeful reunion between lovers separated by battle. Finally, in “the sonnet-ballad” the particularity of Annie’s situation reemerges. At first, her lamentation might be mistaken for any couple separated by war. The poem’s speaker remarks, “They took my lover’s tallness off to war, / Left me lamenting. Now I cannot guess / What I can use an empty heart-cup for” (Annie Allen 112). Though “tallness” is a relatively generic descriptor, it echoes earlier characterizations of the man of tan. Further, the phrase “empty heart-cup” is highly evocative of the language Brooks has previously used to describe Annie. More than shoring up the continuity between the sequence of poems, this use of reverberating language links Annie’s voice in “the sonnet-ballad” with the discursive interiority of “The Anniad,” suggesting that the epic poem is not simply poetic embellishment of Annie’s thoughts, but that her interiority is as elevated, complex, and literary as poetry. This
makes Annie not just a subject worthy of poetic elevation, but underscores the poetry that animates her interior life.

Reading with this emphasis on Annie’s inaccessible psyche shifts our understandings of Brooks’ early work as inherently “domestic” in the sense that it relates only to the domestic space. Courtney Thorsson shows the radical nature of Brooks’ focus on the domestic space, arguing that her “black aesthetic of the domestic deserves attention as a distinct model of radical local black cultural nationalism.”299 In Thorsson’s account, Brooks’ localism sheds light on larger, more abstract concerns related to Black nationalism through precise attention to particular instances of oppression. Her reading accords with Mary Helen Washington’s portrayal of Brooks’ enmeshment with Leftist politics. Of the critique of marriage embedded in Annie Allen, Washington writes, “[Brooks] is aware of the emotional and psychic cost to women of staying in loveless or disappointing marriages because of financial dependence on their male partners.”300 Annie’s unhappy marriage reveals the underlying structures that keep Black women in unfulfilling and sometimes abusive partnerships; the poem becomes a treatise on gendered dispossession. But, as my readings of “The Anniad” have shown, Annie is a complex subject that resists both reduction to type and also abstraction to explain a problem. Her elaboration in Brooks’ collection anticipates what Denise Ferreira Da Silva calls “Black Feminist Poethics,” a term that describes a range of possibilities for existence. In specifying how this mode resists the objectification of the Black subject, Da Silva writes: “For the Black Feminist Poethics, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges

300 Mary Helen Washington, The Other Blacklist, 180.
the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization—that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives.”

While Da Silva’s emphasis falls on a recuperation of Black value in the wake of historical materialism’s extractive practices and dehumanizing rhetoric, she also describes Blackness as a site of creativity that can exceed a writer’s circumstances to imagine future models of Black expressivity, solidarity, and being. Though Da Silva turns to Octavia Butler for her archive that most closely practices Black Feminist Poethics, she might have connected Butler to Walker and Brooks who, just one generation before, sought to define unseen ways for Black women to exist in and engage with the world.

Coda: “This is how you are a citizen”

C.L.R. James, Zora Neale Hurston, the Communist Party autobiographers, Jacques Roumain, and Claude McKay use prose as a way to articulate forms of collectivity that might scale up to more inclusive political formations. Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker are anomalous in the archive of this dissertation for their use of poetry, and also for the fact that the basis of their radical politics lies in the complexity of individual interiority. Their work demonstrates the painstaking construction of a politically-recognizable collective from the unit of an individual subject. Each collection situates the recognition of Black subjectivity as the basis of a politics that would recognize Black people as fully human, carving out the possibility of freedom in existing political forms. The subjects of Walker and Brooks’ poetry may appear to dwindle into

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the hyper-specific in the moments where the lyric “I” emerges, but their poetic subjects imagine alternatives to the dismissals that still mar accounts of Black being.

Sixty-two years after Wallace Stevens’ racist comment Daniel Handler, acting as the M.C. of the National Book Awards, made a “wink-nudge joke about being black” while presenting Jacqueline Woodson with an award for her memoir *Brown Girl Dreaming.* After Woodson had made her acceptance speech, Handler quipped, “Jackie’s allergic to watermelon. Just let that sink in your mind.” Woodson’s prize-winning book recounts her family’s history from slavery through her childhood in the 1970s; its content was highly personal and winning the National Book Award marked a milestone in her career. Handler’s comment, its backlash, and the essay Woodson would write to address the controversy had to contend with both the systemic exclusion at the root of Handler’s “joke” and its personal cost. Woodson writes:

> In a few short words, the audience and I were asked to take a step back from everything I’ve ever written, a step back from the power and meaning of the National Book Award, lest we forget, lest I forget, where I came from. By making light of that deep and troubled history, he [Handler] showed that he believed we were at a point where we could laugh about it all. His historical context, unlike my own, came from a place of ignorance.

Handler’s ignorance overrides the rigorousness and care that Woodson took in recording her family history. Reducing Black culture to a moment of derision was seemingly meant to suggest that we have triumphed over past circumstances so much so that such a joke has become appropriate. For Handler to have arrived at that conclusion, however, required him to discount Woodson’s work and her commentary on her family’s history through that work. Although Handler’s comment may not carry the visceral violence of

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303 Ibid.
Stevens’ racial slur, the moments are strikingly parallel. Both comments require us to “take a step back,” as Woodson writes, to remember that the object of the comment is a Black woman and to reflect on her relationship to the institutional power associated with the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. In that moment of reflection, we catch a glimpse of men like Handler and like Stevens who are unable to see Black women as their peers.

Woodson and Handler were close friends, unlike Stevens and Brooks, pointing to a tragic failure of recognition from within an intimate friendship. In her essay, Woodson notes that Handler only knew about her watermelon allergy because of a dinner they shared at his house. Though Woodson remains more focused on the sting of Handler’s insensitivity to her historical material, this detail evokes the specific pain of personal betrayal. It is as if the “journey from the you to me” that Walker idealizes is abruptly halted by a racist joke. And the lingering question is whether the closeness, the journey begun, the overtures of intimacy make the joke hurt more. This question of racial misrecognition within intimate relationships is just one raised in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, the celebrated collection by Claudia Rankine, which was a finalist for the National Book Award for poetry in the same year. Rankine’s speaker describes a close friend who calls the speaker by the name of her Black housekeeper, an infraction that causes her pain but which she doesn’t speak about: “Do you feel hurt because it’s the ‘all black people look the same’ moment, or because you are being confused with another after being so close to this other?”

In parsing the pain, Rankine’s speaker sets the systemic—the perceived interchangeability of Black people—apart from the personal. She phrases the

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question as if the answer could be one or the other, but Rankine suggests in their pairing that the hurt comes from both. Perhaps more disturbingly, the speaker seems unsure of the validity of her pain. Rankine dilates the moment of injury, interpolating a speaker’s internal second-guessing: “What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?”

The hearer and speaker change positions throughout the series of questions, suggesting that either party has the ability to cause harm and calling attention to the relational quality of power and privilege. Each instance of hurt is at once symptomatic of existing hierarchies, but also particular and deeply personal to the individuals involved. By layering the systemic and the individual, Rankine presents commentary about the state of race relations in the United States, a practice that is well-documented in scholarship about *Citizen.* This reading is instructive in its insistence of the politics that undergirds the microaggression, but Rankine is doing more than just demonstrating racial disparities in the current moment; she is insisting on the subjectivity of both the speaker and hearer.

*Citizen* foregrounds the subject that experiences racial aggression as a way to balance the representational scales that have favored the white speaker. Readings that prioritize Rankine’s deft depiction of microaggressions risk regarding the text as an enumeration of wrongs and miss the constructive goal of imagining a form of Black citizenship.

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305 Ibid., 9.
“event” that “inscribes the desire of the subject to articulate itself as ‘nonmimetic’ in order to achieve a very basic political desire: to make the black subject audible, to make its voice heard; to give it a voice that is not drowned out, overlooked, ignored and made politically mute.” Farred’s account emphasizes the subject-making potential of being heard, emphasizing the political muteness of the silenced Black subject. He sees Rankine constructing a politics around the assertive, performative act of speech that confirms subjectivity by verbalizing the speaker’s political will. In Citizen, however, Rankine is concerned with the relationality between the speaker and their audience; so much so, that focusing on verbal assertion seems to be only half of the equation. She is doing more than expanding the lyric form to accommodate the Black subject. Instead, she is recalibrating our sense of interracial encounter as a site where real acknowledgement might take place.

For Rankine, an idealized mode of citizenship is one in which the Black subject is heard and seen by the other fully, cognizantly, and in a way that affirms their being. This form involves mutuality that Farred does not identify in his discussion of the text, but instead relies on the political utterance being heard and understood. Rankine’s speaker observes an incident that, again, blurs the boundaries between speaker and observer, but that ultimately reveals this desire to be acknowledged:

A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your own body wince. He’s okay, but the son of a bitch kept walking. She says she grabbed the stranger’s arm and told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and apologize. Yes, and

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309 In a recent essay on the whiteness of the lyric form Kamran Javadizadeh argues that this reformulation is precisely what Rankine achieves in Citizen. He writes, “For Rankine, if lyric was to avoid the replication of white supremacy, it would have to expand its sense of who, in the first place, could count as “someone,” and it would have to dismantle the cloistered form of the confessional lyric.” Kamran Javadizadeh, “The Roots of Our Madness,” The New York Review of Books, April 8, 2021, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/04/08/john-berryman-roots-madness/.
you want it to stop, you want the child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him, has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who is not a reflection of himself.\textsuperscript{310}

Rankine’s speaker sets the scene: a man—presumed white—commits a doubled act of harm against a child that does not look like him. The first act of harm comes when the man knocks the child over and the second comes with his decision to keep walking. When the mother demands an apology from the man she specifically requests that he look at the child, recognizing the harm he caused and recognizing that he caused harm to a subject. The presence of Rankine’s speaker overlays the incident, registering a bodily reaction to the relation of events. She winces and she wishes, in detail, that the child would be seen and cared for by the man. On the one hand, it is a moment of microaggression with clear political implications, while on the other hand, it is a moment where the mother asserts herself politically by insisting on being heard. But, even more than that, it is a glimpse of the possibilities inherent in a world where this man does see people that are not a reflection of himself. When the speaker imagines the man stopping and brushing off the little boy he harmed, she imagines a scenario in which the boy’s humanity is affirmed. This act of imagination appears minor, glancing, even insignificant in the context of other, more spectacular forms of racial violence; however, it is a lot like Brooks daring to center a poor, Black woman as an aesthetic and political subject, or Walker sketching the contours of full humanistic acknowledgement. Together these writers suggest that recognizing the Black subject as human is the most elemental form of political acknowledgement.

\textsuperscript{310} Claudia Rankine, \textit{Citizen}, 17.
By ending my dissertation with an exploration of the kernel of intersubjective acknowledgement that underlies the ongoing project to redefine sovereignty, freedom, governance, and political participation, I aim to reinforce the continuity between these writers who sought to reform existing categories to imagine unseen political futures. The lineage from Walker and Brooks in the 1940s through Woodson and Rankine in 2014 reveals a practice by which writers do not fully dispense with categories like the human, in spite of the fact that such terms are tainted by their association with Western hegemony. Recent work in Black posthumanism aims to rethink the category of the human altogether: Joshua Bennett’s *Being Property Once Myself* traces alternate forms of kinship between humans and animals to transform the Black subject and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s *Becoming Human* proposes we read Black representations of animality as a rejection of the human altogether. Both studies draw on Sylvia Wynter’s concept of the “politics of being,” which generates a shared concept of the human. She argues that the category of “Man,” a category inseparable from Enlightenment modernity, has overdetermined the politics of being, but she leaves the human open as a recuperable form of being. Towards the end of *Citizen*, Rankine professes “Yes, and this is how you are a citizen: Come on. Let it go. Move on.” This comes in a moment after the speaker has heard Trayvon Martin’s name and is afraid for her partner who wants to confront an angry driver. She articulates her citizenship as predicated on moving on, suggesting that

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313 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen* 151.
the internal space opened up in earlier moments by the repeated refrain of, “what did he just say?” must always be foreclosed by a willingness to let things go. However, the speaker is not willing to abdicate the category of citizenship altogether. Rankine formulates a version of Black citizenship that, at least in this moment, pessimistically denies the possibility of inclusion. Brooks, Walker, and the other writers examined in this dissertation imagine otherwise. They show how a Black politics of being can recuperate and radically reform existing categories. Although their imagined future does not align with the alienation at the heart of Rankine’s *Citizen*, rethinking the cultural milieu from which they wrote helps us to chart an alternative trajectory in Black art that retains humanism. This alternative trajectory reveals the political radicalism at the heart of formal experimentation. It prompts us to reevaluate the texts that best communicate Black subjectivity and offer a more capacious picture of Black life.
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