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**POETICS OF INTERRUPTION:
MEDIA AND FORM IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE**

A Dissertation in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

Poetics of Interruption: Media and Form in Twentieth-Century American Literature examines twentieth-century literature's engagement with other media. The texts studied here use the sonic/aural to "cut" the visual, the image to disturb language. These other media—jazz, photography, cinema—exert an interruptive force in the texts, jolting, slowing down, and distorting the reading process, estranging and disorienting readers. This estrangement of form works to disrupt historiography and identity more generally. In examining these multimedia and intermedia texts, my project interrogates the relationship between aesthetics, radical politics, and identity and imagines the political possibilities of experimental literature. The first chapter examines jazz aesthetics, improvisation, and pragmatism in Claude McKay's *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* (1929), the second develops a genealogy of photographic poetics from Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes to contemporary Dark Room Collective poets, and the third chapter investigates CLR James' and Maya Deren's use of cinematic aesthetics in constructing a radical new kind of cultural studies. Ultimately this project not only suggests an alternative literary genealogy of twentieth-century African American and American literature, but it also illuminates and offers alternatives to shallow engagements with minority literature.

Poetics of Interruption suggests that the disciplines of literary and cultural studies are hampered by our expectations that African American literatures (and minority literatures more generally) operate as vessels or data storage containers for information about black American subjects. Recently, a growing number of scholars have highlighted this tendency to evaluate minority literature for its accurate representation of minority communities as symptomatic of the narrow ways in which we yoke aesthetics and racial politics. Minority literature in particular bears the burden of racial-political representation, often conceived of as or yoked to uplift politics and the demand for positive

portrayals of black characters and communities, leading to a curious obsession with authenticity policing. Such readings instrumentalize and flatten minority literature.

While this instrumentalization is in many ways unique to the ways we read minority literature, the problem of flattening critical methodologies is in many ways extrapolatable to our profession more generally. Recent critical trends in humanities scholarship increasingly rely on positivism—which favors the gloss or paraphrase rather than the elements of literature that cannot be paraphrased—denying that literary texts are necessarily any different from historical or sociological artifacts. These positivistic approaches ignore what is specific about literary form, what exceeds the paraphrase. A commitment to what Tom Eyers calls “poetic unevenness” exposes the gaps between literary and political forms, creating a productive dissonance. Rather than evaluating texts for their mimetic or representational ability and viewing them as closed, fixed objects, my project views these engagements with other media as necessarily experimental, and, therefore, rough, uneven, marked by failures, inconsistent, unfinished, open.

Most projects on media and literature trace literature’s obsession with, desire for, or anxiety about technology and mediation. This project is not interested in developing a programmatic politics or viewing media writ large as either liberatory or enslaving. Instead, I trace texts’ attempts to *think through* other media in order to estrange these forms and media, estranging us from and then reorienting us toward our assumptions, the givens of our disciplines. I want to focus on how such cross-media or multimedia experimental works are well equipped to interrupt, disrupt, and shift our reading practices and interpretive categories. They don’t simply register our responses to technology, but they attempt to think through other media. They ask, What is the thought enabled by different media? How does temporarily inhabiting or playing with the techniques of other media open up new avenues and forms of thought? *Poetics of Interruption* explores the techniques of different media and the othering that occurs when literature *thinks through the apparatus* or *uses the techniques* of other media.

Mediums' techniques produce or tend toward certain approaches to the form, movement, and development of thought. Literature that seriously engages with the thought of other media is able to other itself—to make the literary strange, to alter the ways that we read, and, by extension, the ways that we read history, identity, and political thought.

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Introduction: Interruptions

This project is a meditation on interruption, an accumulation of interruptions. First, I interrupt narratives of experimental literature and poetics that discount race and black writing, at the same time disrupting conversations in African American literary studies that neglect form and formal experimentation. And second, I use critical race theory to interrupt the expanding, but still largely white-washed, field of media studies, at the same time suggesting the ways in which literary and media studies can learn from and inform one another. In this set of interruptions, I argue that though it is often invisible or discounted, blackness is always already present—in fact, formative and constitutive—in poetics and media studies. This complicates conversations about the politics of form at the same time that it undoes and re-energizes a tired debate in media studies over media’s liberatory or enslaving potential.

Poetics of Interruption: Media and Form in Twentieth-Century American Literature examines twentieth-century literature’s engagement with other media. The texts studied here use the sonic/aural to “cut” the visual, the image to disturb language. These other media—jazz, photography, cinema—exert an interruptive force in the texts, jolting, slowing down, and distorting the reading process, estranging and disorienting readers. This estrangement of form works to disrupt historiography and identity more generally. In examining these multimedia and intermedia texts, my project interrogates the relationship between aesthetics, radical politics, and identity and imagines the political possibilities of experimental literature.

Any project on experimental African American literature, and minority literature more generally, is dogged by a long history of double exclusion. On the one hand, as scholars like Geoffrey Jacques, Anthony Reed, Evie Shockley, Aldon Nielsen, and Phillip Brian Harper have pointed out, histories of avant-garde and experimental writing (and abstract visual art) frequently neglect African American and black diasporic contributions despite a long tradition of radical black

experimental writing. (Parallel conversations are taking place in Asian American studies, led by scholars like Kandice Chuh, Dorothy Wang, and Viet Thanh Nguyen, among several others.) And often when studies of avant-garde or experimental literature include minority writing, they examine this writing exclusively for its form or “putatively ‘raceless’ experimental techniques,” as Anthony Reed puts it (3). Dorothy Wang and Reed both remind us that though critics typically treat minority experimental writing either exclusively in terms of race or formal techniques, these two elements are mutually constitutive.

On the other hand, experimental black writing is rarely placed in studies and syllabi on African American literature. Readers and critics, in the words of Mackey in *Discrepant Engagement*, place “far too much emphasis on accessibility when it comes to writers from socially marginalized groups” (17) and under-theorize the connections between race, aesthetics, and perception. We often approach minority literature sociologically, valuing it for its accurate representation of historical or contemporary minority populations, or denigrating it for its pathologizing exaggeration or untruthfulness.

For our students, this desire for sociological representation often gets expressed via that dreaded term, “relatability.” During one semester of teaching women’s literature, I assigned Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* back to back, hoping that the two together would complicate our conversations about historical representation, aesthetic form, and racial and gender identity. While the students almost universally loved *Kindred*, they expressed frustration with (or, worse, disinterest in) Morrison’s novel. When I pushed them, my class (30 students, 26 of whom were white women) suggested that *Kindred*, a novel about a black woman in California in the 1960s who travels back in time to slave-holding Virginia, is more relatable. It became clear that what they really meant was that despite its science fictional genre, the style is realistic, by which they meant it represented history according to how they imagined it might have happened. It was incredibly

difficult for them to either see the pitfalls in identifying with the main character or to notice the moments when the novel actually pushes back against their ideas about historical representation and realism—when the novel gestures toward the impossibility of accurately representing the traumas and day-to-day experience of slavery, for example, and when it suggests that the characters’ attitudes toward and experiences of slave-holding Virginia are shaped by their contexts. As a teacher, it was my responsibility to interrupt their reading practices—to help them discover the ways in which both texts adopted strategies to reorient their understandings of (mediated and aesthetically experienced) representation, identity, and history.

While it might be easy to dismiss our students’ affection for “relatability” as a symptom of their naïveté or poor taste (though that would be unfair), it’s more difficult to acknowledge how the disciplines of literary and cultural studies are still hampered by our expectations for African American literature (and minority literature more generally) to paint us accurate portraits of communities of color. Recently, a growing number of scholars have highlighted this tendency as a symptom of the narrow ways in which we yoke aesthetics and racial politics. In *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*, Phillip Brian Harper writes that African American expressive culture is often defined as works produced by African Americans that “in some way represent the experiences of African American people while also illuminating and appraising the racial-political context in which those experiences occur. Conceived in this way, African American culture effectively *compels* polemic, in that it forces the perennially contestable question of how best to make a racial-political stand” (1, original emphasis). Such a narrow political definition of literature implicitly relies on a realism that has been reduced to sociological representation. This definition, as well as responding cries for African American culture to defiantly abandon any efforts at racial representation, illustrates “the peculiar effects of African American culture’s having been conceived at all as a political project” (Harper 1-2). Within African American

literary criticism, this privileging of realism is often implicitly or explicitly yoked to uplift politics and the demand for positive portrayals of black characters and communities, leading to a curious obsession with authenticity policing.

As the first chapter illustrates, the thirst for versions of realism that will satisfy uplift ideology produces a narrow, rigid, binaristic conversation about resistance and complicity. As Viet Thanh Nguyen points out, even when texts demonstrate many overlapping and flexible strategies and views of resistance and complicity with racialized-capitalist institutions and logics, ethnic studies as a discipline (or disciplines) remains wedded to a narrower, more rigid resistance-complicity binary. On the one hand, this means that we lack the vocabulary for interpreting attempted resistance that reproduces or is incorporated by global capitalism. In other words, the resistance-complicity binary frequently dismisses or misreads how modes of resistance are often already part of the structure and logic of capitalism while also often misunderstanding that strategies of criticism and evasion are usually ephemeral rather than complete, final, and lasting. Resistance has become a flattening paradigm for reading literary works.

Whence the hegemony of sociological-representational approaches to ethnic literature? Much of this can be traced to the business-professional status of ethnic studies departments within university systems. Under pressure to remain relevant to universities (or departments housed in universities) that increasingly question the “use value” of humanistic inquiry, ethnic literary studies is frequently justified in socio-political language. The radical impulses and origins of ethnic studies departments are at odds with their professional status and survival instincts. As Nguyen puts it, “its oppositional theories are the currency that enables its institutionalization and survival. . . . [It is] built simultaneously upon the critique of racist capitalism and the disavowal of its own capitalist practice” (Nguyen 14). Put another way, as Kandice Chuh suggests in *Imagine Otherwise*, ethnic studies departments are torn between acknowledging deconstruction’s insistence on the fracturing of the

subject and maintaining a version of strategic essentialism necessary for activism. (This activism is particularly foregrounded when we locate the origin of ethnic studies in the movements of the 60s and 70s.) Though the institutionalization of ethnic studies programs occurred alongside the rise of deconstruction in the academy, ethnic literary and cultural studies have yet to fully reckon with the consequences of the insights of deconstruction (Chuh 5). Asian American studies, and ethnic studies more generally, faces a double bind: at the same time that the theory insists on fracturing of subjectivity and the non-referentiality of language, the field faces “the pressure of its curricular and programmatic expansion” (94). The current position of ethnic studies then becomes characterized by what Lye calls a “default additive status”—the understanding of ethnic literature as “something that exists only as the sum of various ethnic parts” (Lye 95), a status that seems to be at odds with new formalist impulses.¹ This “default additive status” privileges a diversity and inclusivity without necessarily examining the underlying relationships between and assumptions about ethnic literary studies and the university system.

In practical terms, this means that those of us who teach African American or multicultural literary studies are implicated in the business of promoting the literature we study and teach. The “default additive status” manifests directly in approaches to curriculum. We justify ethnic studies to our departments and universities by suggesting that we need ethnic literature to broaden our (white) students’ perceptions of the world and to better represent the backgrounds and interests of our

¹ Lye further explains, “The anthological format—wherein individual essays tend to study a single author or single ethnic literature—is a fitting vehicle for the scholarly representation of Asian American identity’s current default additive status (as something that exists only as the sum of various ethnic parts), which is why academic publishing in the field is richer in the genre of the anthology than the monograph. This holding pattern can serve for only so long to substitute for a wholesale renovation of the grounds for the field’s integrity.” (95)

students of color. Further, we add, the racial and cultural makeup of this country is changing rapidly, and our curriculum should reflect that.

Again, I don't mean to suggest that this role or facet of minority literary studies isn't valuable and important. The battles for more inclusive curriculum of the 1960s and 70s were crucial in reshaping the literary-critical landscape. However, if we add texts to our curriculum based solely, or even mainly, on their sociological value—their ability to accurately and “authentically” represent the present or historical experience of minority communities—we dangerously limit the range, effects, and interests of minority literature. Also, we begin to suggest to our students that literary texts are valued and evaluated using the same criteria as sociological and historical texts, undermining the unique contributions and status of literary studies. We ought to be modeling to our students how texts formally and aesthetically present and work through questions of identity, for example, rather than assuming that racial form always exists in service of sociological or historical representation.

In an attempt to unyoke sociological representation and minority literature and correct such narrow readings of racial form, several scholars in ethnic literary studies have (re)turned to formalism—to foregrounding formal elements rather than “sociological and cultural materialist approaches” (Lye 92). While such a turn toward formalism isn't new, interest in formally experimental literature would seem to have increased exponentially, if the spate of new publications on experimental black literature by Anthony Reed, Phillip Brian Harper, GerShun Avilez, Evie Shockley, and several others is evidence to go by. Anthony Reed writes that “In its conjunction of the social languages of ‘race’ and experimental practice, 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 its aesthetic demands the outlines of new forms of community and thought” (2). In “Racial Form,” Colleen Lye traces a formalist turn in Asian

American studies by noting that recent anthologies have more clearly foregrounded aesthetics.² In many ways, this turn marks a reaction against rigid ideas about genre and race or critical approaches that set up a dichotomous view of aesthetics and identity politics. Lye acknowledges that the “turn to form is fundamentally less a reaction against historicism than against instrumental reading.... [A] tradition of criticism dominated by political prescriptiveness is held to account for a constricted imagination of Asian American literature’s potential power” (93). So this “formal turn” marks an attempt to de-instrumentalize ethnic literature—to bring together both aesthetic and political critique in minority literary studies.

But there is still a long way to go. As both Colleen Lye and Dorothy Wang point out, criticism that highlights formal innovation and experimental minority literature often lacks a robust understanding of critical race theory and the ways in which racial formation interacts with form. This leads to what Lye calls “the scrupulous deferral of the political” (94). In other words, some formalist readings jettison questions of racial identification and politics altogether.

² The anthologies Lye points to are “Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi’s *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (2005), Keith Lawrence and Floyd Cheung’s *Recovered Legacies: Authority and Identity in Early Asian American Literature* (2005), and Roci’o G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee’s *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* (2006). *Form and Transformation* would foreground the ‘formal aspects of literature as an integral part of ideology,’ ‘shifting away from a thematically oriented approach’ that has proceeded in terms of ‘fixed cultural boundaries and hierarchies of race and gender.’ *Literary Gestures* positions ‘issues of literary aesthetics and formal analysis’ at the center of its practice of Asian American literary studies in order to ‘counterbalance the prevailing dominance of sociological and cultural materialist approaches in Asian American literary criticism.’ *Recovered Legacies* is geared toward the historical recovery and reevaluation of early Asian American literary texts, but its editors too recognize that ‘to the extent that we have closely and carefully delineated the texts we write about, we have indeed adhered to what might be termed, in the broadest sense, a ‘formalist’ approach” (92-93).

Even readings that attempt to approach race and form as mutually constitutive—to escape narrowly instrumentalized reading without contributing to a “default additive” methodology—often consciously or unconsciously sneak sociological representation in through the back door (a concept I elaborate on in chapter one). For example, at the moment in her article when Lye promises to theorize the intersection between identity and aesthetics, she re-introduces historicism:

If literature is a privileged medium for the documentation of subjectivity, literary criticism’s significant contribution to Asian American studies may lie in its ability to theorize the historicity of the Asian American subject, to ask, What is its historical status? What are the subject’s temporal and spatial locations? What are its determinate conditions of existence, the varieties of its social effects, the range of its political interests? [...] The significance of this historicity can be gauged by placing Asian American subject-formation in relationship to other developments, be they economic, political, sociological, intellectual, or cultural—and whether they belong under the recognizable heading of “Asian American history” or other kinds of history. (95-6)

Lye is rightfully interested in asking how literature may help us understand “race [as] an active social relation rather than a transhistorical abstraction” (99). But her description of literature as a “documentation of subjectivity” (a phrase that smacks of bureaucratic or social scientific language) suggests that she is still approaching literature for its sociological-historical value rather than its status as aesthetic object.

I certainly don’t mean to suggest that history and historical context are unimportant. But we impoverish our conversations about literature when we reduce it to a container for sociological information or evidence. Shouldn’t we, as literary critics, instead ask, What is unique about literature’s aesthetic navigations of and contributions to questions of racial formation or global

capitalism, for example? How do our literary experiences of these questions reshape and reform our historicist or sociological exposures to identity?

I'm not suggesting we lose sight of the activist or political work that scholars like Nguyen and Lye want to retain. In fact, I hope that the interruptive (rather than additive) approach to literary studies points to more nuanced political possibilities. I'm not interested in developing programmatic politics, but using intermedia work to trace the emergence and movement—the coming-into-being—of political thought. Further, sneaking sociological readings back into our interpretations of literary texts, particularly texts that formally push back against representational logic, isn't dangerous because it somehow taints the purity of literature or literary studies. (In fact, in examining literature's engagement with other media, this project is necessarily interdisciplinary.) Rather, such readings are dangerous because they reinscribe the logic of white Western modernity. More troubling and entrenched than a problem of its institutionalization, ethnic studies continues to reproduce flattening sociological frameworks for literary texts because of received historical understandings of “primitive” peoples as both erased from history and objects of history, and, therefore, as somehow more legible and accessible. This is why Glissant forcefully declares, “We demand the right to obscurity” (*Caribbean Discourse* 2). Glissant, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Cedric Robinson, CLR James, and W.E.B. Du Bois all highlight the simultaneous erasure and “thingification” of diasporic black history and bodies at the same time that they demonstrate that blackness is the absent presence, the invisible propeller and core of western modernity. This paradox—blackness as central to and erased from the history of modernity—suggests that the relationship between black diasporic subjects and the broader movements of history is somehow transparent, ready at hand. The Negro, writes Cedric Robinson, “was both a negation of African and a unity of opposition to white. The construct of Negro... suggested no situatedness in time, that is history, or space, that is ethno-or politico-geography. The Negro had no civilization, no cultures, no religions, no history, no place,

and finally no humanity that might command consideration” (Robinson 81).³ The black subject is transparent because of her status as history-less object. Black diasporic approaches to history are therefore inherently interruptive of Western historiography and foundational myths of modernity. This interruptive methodology doubles or echoes the more violent and literal rupture enacted by the Middle Passage.

Therefore, we have to foster reading practices that don’t just present us with different visions of race, history, or identity, or add more diversity to a pre-existing critical and curricular framework (though again, this work is important), but that interrupt and force us to re-evaluate the givens, the taken-for-granted assumptions we’ve inherited. I think this is what Franz Fanon alludes to, almost in passing, in *The Wretched of the Earth*. He castigates certain postcolonial figures for latching onto the “mummified fragments” of the past—cultural objects like old-fashioned African dress or bits of pottery—and insists that we need to let these objects instead resonate in the present (160). Rather than turning to texts as evidence of sociological representation, our reading practices should wrestle with and illuminate forces, traces, resonances in literary and artistic works, looking for affinities, harmonies, and moments of dissonance.

This is why an additive methodology—one that advocates for minority literature by demanding it be added to more syllabi, more fields and disciplines—is necessary, but insufficient. Additive approaches do not change the broader inherited structural and historical assumptions about the place of blackness in history. We need to cultivate readings and writings that interrupt the instrumentalization of ethnic literature in a way that also reveals and pushes back against the given.

³ Later, Robinson writes, “Black history thus began in the shadow of the national myths and as their dialectical negation. Consequently, it contained its own contradictions... while enveloping those that occurred within the dominant American history” (190).

Experimental literature that engages with other media performs this kind of interruptive work, pushing up against the limits of language and thought in order to make us examine our reading practices and the way these reading practices produce certain ways of viewing the movement of history and the formation of identity. This project argues that twentieth-century literature's attempt to think through jazz improvisation, photography, and cinema not only enables us to examine the assumptions and logics we take for granted, but also opens up a space for new ways of thinking.

For example, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* splices photographs into the narrative, and the photographs—along with his coupling of fictional and real characters; his choice to mark some quotes with quotation marks and some without; and the frequently staccato style of his prose—work to slow down and then jolt our reading, to displace easy readings of history and undermine the passivity with which we usually receive things like plot and character and, by extension, history. Similarly, the television screens and photographs in Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (2004) do a similar kind of work, making our reading process uneven, unstable. The photographs both disclose and reveal; rather than including a photo of a moment of white-on-black violence the text meditates on, the photograph instead depicts four sets of legs and feet standing near a pool of what might be blood (a pool of liquid partly dark, and partly, oddly, bright, perhaps reflecting the flash of the camera), a hauntingly indirect image that reproduces the “non-reporting” of the event (21). In other words, the images that interrupt the text both are and are not referential, just as the text references and then departs from historical event. And the snow on the TV screens, which are strewn throughout the poem, reminds us both of our mediated experiences of race and violence and of the imperfection of that mediation. The screens push us away, disclosing nothing. Or, sometimes, they disclose the surface of some traumatic or violent event but fail to draw us into it. It is this gap which Rankine dances on and draws our attention to—the gap between embodied

experience and transmitted depiction, between event and the mechanical copy or portrayal of the event. Her text attempts to make us attuned to the flattening effect of (uninterrogated) transmission, to our frequent misreadings or shallow readings of medium and apparatus. Both Rankine's and Reed's styles are unsettling; their sometimes-photographic, sometimes-cinematic style defamiliarizes narrative in the same ways that Deleuze and Guattari suggest minor literatures defamiliarize language, making it strange to itself.

While most media studies work that takes up literature is interested in tracing textual desire for or obsession with mediation and new media, I want to focus on how such cross-media or multimedia experimental works are well equipped to interrupt, disrupt, and shift our reading practices and interpretive categories. They don't simply register our responses to technology, but they attempt to think through other media. They ask, What is the thought enabled by different media? How does temporarily inhabiting or playing with the techniques of other media open up new avenues and forms of thought?

In "Rimbaud's Method: Interruption," Alain Badiou traces the interruptive force of prose that occasionally emerges in Rimbaud's poetry. This "interruption consists in the brusque rise to the poem's surface of the ever possible prose it confines.... It is as though Rimbaud wished to have the resources of prose in store within the poem in order to interrupt it. And so also a store of deception and disappointment" (71). The movement back and forth between prose and poetry is destabilizing, disappointing, deceptive, and the interruption of one form by the other "attests to the radical doubt that besets the epiphany" (72). This reflection of Badiou's is already inflected by not just different literary genres, but also multiple media; he writes that the prose lying in wait in the poetry is "engendered... above all by means of the instability of images, of their always evasive associations" (71). Such a collision between prose and poetry, language and image, opens up space for the

“thought of the undecidable” (Badiou 73). The images and the prose cut the poetry, allowing for doubt and, therefore, for the “undecidable,” the unfamiliar.

I want to note here that while I’m suggesting there’s a great deal of interruptive potential in intermedia or cross-media work, I’m not claiming this is the case for all such projects, nor am I interested in arguing that there is anything inherently more or less radical in certain media. In fact, it is my hope that just as this project complicates the resistance-complicity binary prevalent in literary studies, it also undoes and re-animates the utopian and dystopian views of technology in media studies. Where Thierry de Duve argues that the medium “is the site of otherness as such” (qtd. Goble 17), and Burke insists that certain media are better suited for certain kinds of content, I’m interested in the *techniques* of different media and the othering that occurs when literature *thinks through the apparatus* or *uses the techniques* of other media. In some ways, this is an argument evocative of Clement Greenberg’s insistence on medium specificity—a “commitment to the physical constraints and artistic conventions of individual mediums—so that to engage with their materiality is not just to discover but to delimit their ideal realms of practice and technique” (qtd. Goble 8). Mediums’ techniques produce or tend toward certain approaches to the form, movement, and development of thought. Literature that seriously engages with the thought of other media is able to other itself—to make the literary strange, to alter the ways that we read, and, by extension, the ways that we read history, identity, and political thought.

To illustrate the two main poles of literature’s approach to media, I’d like to briefly turn to a comparison between two African American texts produced in collaboration with photographers. Published fifteen years apart, Langston Hughes’s and Roy DeCarava’s *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) and Amiri Baraka’s and Billy Abernathy’s *In Our Terribleness (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* (1970) take radically different approaches to intermedia collaboration. Langston Hughes turns to DeCarava’s photographs of Harlem and imagines the life of a fictional black family, as narrated by

the aging matriarch, Sister Mary Bradley. The portrait photographs are read referentially; next to a photograph of a woman emerging from a subway, Hughes imagines the matriarch's commute to and from work. The other figures in the photographs are introduced to the reader by Sister Mary Bradley as her children and grandchildren. The texts' assumption of a certain kind of referentiality (even though it's representation of the fictional) is reinforced by DeCarava, who writes, "I am still amazed today at the accuracy of his perceptions. It was almost clairvoyance the way he characterized the people in the photographs. 'Rodney' was a good friend of mine, and he was just as Hughes described him. He had hit the nail on the head, and this happened again and again throughout the book" (Alinder). The photographs are lovely, and the narrative is engaging, but the text isn't interested in thinking through the techniques and effects of photographing or the photographic image. Neither text nor image are estranged or made new in contact with one another.

In stark contrast, Baraka's *In Our Terribleness* attempts to think through and call forth the force of a photographed black face gazing back at the viewer through the page. Next to a photograph of a young black man posing happily, perhaps mid-dance, with his arms outstretched, Baraka's text reads:

Revelation

As a

fact

The Pictures

The Images

The Lovers THEMSELVES

LOOK AT THEM

force
at YOU

The living force (2)⁴

This force, this electricity, runs through the text. Baraka tries to draw on the animating tension in portrait photographs—the sometimes defiant, plaintive, moody faces that stare back at the viewer from the page, the electricity that transmits through the page. It’s a surreal prose poem—part manifesto, open letter, prophecy, call to action (or call to arms), it looks toward the future and calls for new forms and forces at the same time that it suggests that the past speaks through the poet. The poem not only seeks to usher in new black consciousness, but new media, new forms, to produce or craft that consciousness. In one moment, after reflecting on the importance of the Koran and the Bible, he suggests, “We need our own heavy book. Maybe it’ll be a heavy ‘television’ series or metaphysical ‘45s. We must have our own doctrine, our new black quran to save us to lift us.” And later, the narrator-speaker claims:

Ideology and style are the same thing. You think Marx ever dressed like this dude in the black. Its about that. How to explain Trane to Trotsky. The feelin intended. Sun Ra is to teach Freud not the reverse. Freud is a child. We know old niggers hummin in the hall way, what can Shakespeare do with that, except Raise! Dig it.

S’ funny what all this means. What these images mean. I wanted you to see the Blood. I wanted you Blood to see you, swiftest man. What is natural and existent can

⁴ The pages in the text are unnumbered. This citation refers to my count, starting with page one as the first page with text (which appears after the blank black page).

be focused using the best as reference thru the value system, the attention to, blackness.

This poetry is sometimes ekphrastic, and at other times it doesn't directly reference the photograph at all, instead thinking about the act of photographing, the simultaneous embalming and electric element of still photography. Baraka's text asks, What does it mean to photograph a face, and to have that face look back at you through the page? The text causes us to read the photographs differently, while the photographs estrange us from the text, forcing us to read that differently, too.

The texts covered in this project trouble the line "between noise and articulate speech" and therefore ope[n] up a space for "saying the impossible," "holding open a place for the unthought, for what is unassimilable to the prevailing regime of power and, most generally, its positive claims and demands" (Anthony Reed 3, 5). They attempt to enact aesthetically the effective history that Foucault calls for in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"—an attitude toward history (or in this case, literature) that "introduces discontinuity into our very being"; it destabilizes us and causes us to reexamine our underlying assumptions, the taken-for-granted realm (*Foucault Reader* 88). Knowledge should continually contribute to this "cutting," this destabilizing and discontinuous process, rather than to an increasingly sedimented, rigid accumulation of facts and assumptions. But as each chapter in this project demonstrates (repeatedly, but with a difference each time), such methods for destabilizing our thinking are necessarily ephemeral; they must be continually adapted as each becomes too familiar, taken for granted.

This constant search for new, effective methods or techniques of estrangement and defamiliarization produces a certain openness or unfinished quality in the texts studied here. This intermedia experimentation is not a smooth, seamless project, as chapters one and three particularly suggest; it is frequently imperfect, clunky, out of sync, straining. Rather than being a drawback, such imperfection draws our attention to media's failures of transmission and to what Nathaniel Mackey

calls the creaking of the word: the creaking of our taken-for-granted categories of/for thought (I develop this concept more in chapter one). In writing through the collision between writing and other media techniques, the writers I study produce works that are necessarily open—always unfinished, often productively amateurish (productive because it prevents mastery and totalizing narratives). In other words, as John Keene suggested when I interviewed him in June 2015, intermedia work is an experiment with failure, an experiment in continually attempting to push up against the limits and constraints of form(s).

This project ranges, discontinuously, from the 1920s to the 2000s (even touching down as recently as 2014 in the coda). The order of the chapters does not follow chronology, nor does it suggest a media hierarchy that begins with jazz and culminates in cinema. Partly this nonlinear arrangement is intended to evoke the interruptive methodology I develop in this project. But this structure does suggest a widening scope; the chapters telescope out, from close reading of jazz improvisation's form to literature's relationship to history and the photographic archive to the role of the panning, cutting movement of non-nativist criticism. Each chapter, in discussing the collision between literary texts and other media, attempts to not simply reflect on, but also build toward interruptive modes of criticism that help reorient literary and cultural studies from sociological representation and nativism to ephemeral, contingent, unfinished, fugitive openings outward.

Chapter 1: Improvisational Aesthetics

The Elusive Undertone

“Afro-diasporic improvisation is an art of interruption. It teaches performers to prepare for rupture and respond to it. It is not simply an aesthetic practice but rather an epistemological and ontological imperative. Improvisation entails distinct ways of knowing and ways of being. It emerges from insubordinate spaces and creates emancipatory temporalities.” – George Lipsitz, “Improvised Listening: Opening Statements: Listening to the Lambs”

Though James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* stages ragtime as a disruptive musical form, the novel’s narrator continually misreads ragtime’s improvisation. After leaving his patron in Europe in order to strike out on his own and “bring glory to the race” (and just before a lynching shocks him into abandoning this plan in order to pass for white), the mixed-race narrator visits a large church gathering led by a famous preacher, John Brown, and lead singer, “Singing Johnson.” An adept classical and ragtime pianist, the narrator is intent on setting down the “themes and melodies” (173) of ragtime songs (in order to convert them to classical pieces). In his efforts, as critic Bruce Barnhart points out, the narrator ignores how the performances he admires are dependent both on context and the performer’s ability to read and respond to the audience/congregation. Not only is the narrator unable to account for Brown and Johnson’s improvisational abilities, but he also, more importantly, fails to understand the centrality of improvisation to ragtime more generally. The narrator’s descriptions touch upon the contextual

nature of the church service; when talking about the contagious emotional effects of the preacher's style, he notes, "To the reader this may sound ridiculous, but listened to under the circumstances, it was highly and effectively dramatic" (177). And the narrator is openly impressed with Johnson's ability to "improvise at the moment lines to fit the occasion" and "kno[w] just what hymn to sing and when to sing it" (178). The narrator understands that Johnson's singing is a dynamic call and response with the rest of the congregation: "The solitary and plaintive voice of the leader is answered by a sound like the roll of the sea, producing a most curious effect" (179). However, something in the performance continues to elude him despite his eagerness to set these "themes and melodies" down. He notes, deaf to his own misunderstanding, "And so many of these songs contain more than mere melody; there is sounded in them that *elusive undertone*, the note in music which is not heard with the ears" (181, my emphasis). Though the narrator is eager to set down the themes and melodies he hears in this church service, the two elements which linger with him remain elusive: the improvisation and the "undertone" of this musical collaboration between preacher, lead singer, and congregation. On the one hand, as a proficient musician, the narrator technically understands that this undertone (or combination of tones) is produced by the call-and-response—the congregation's voices interacting with and responding to the lead singer's. The church together (including the narrator, on this occasion) produces this undertone. On the other hand, the narrator thinks doesn't understand that his recordings and compositions can't reproduce this socially- or collectively-produced undertone. He's given up on being part of this undertone.

This undertone, unrepresented and elusive through the end of the novel, suggests a kind of fugitivity in the form of the music itself inaccessible to the narrator and available only in the performative encounter between performer and audience/congregation—something untranslatable into sheet music. By fugitivity I mean to evoke Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten's terminology, the "freedom drive" of black art's formal resistance to objectification, a resistance that occurs in the

event of performance, or the encounter between performed music and its reception (as well as an encounter between ritual and improvisation, which will be explored more fully in chapter three). While the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* stages multiple attempts at reading these encounters—and multiple misreadings—such encounters ultimately escape the narrator and readers somewhere in the ironic distance between narrative and narrator.

This chapter begins where this reflection on *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* ends, taking up the improvisational encounter as a central provocation. While Johnson's novel points to, but never discloses, the fugitive form of black musical innovation, Claude McKay's *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* (1929) is an experiment in writing *through* jazz improvisation. In other words, McKay's novel attempts to use the fugitive encounter as a formal device. I argue that *Banjo's* disjunctive jazz aesthetic forces us to read differently. The novel presents us with a series of riffs—scenes, sounds, and images that are revised and repeated with a difference—rather than a linear, progressive plot with characters who develop through the course of the text. This produces a radical aesthetic not assimilable into preexisting political categories. The experimental form points to new ways of reading and thinking that are attuned to elusive undertones. Instead of propping up or being symptomatic of particular political programs, improvisation attempts to push the limits of the knowable and sayable—the coming-into-being of thought.

This chapter ends, as each subsequent chapter does, with a reflection on the metacritical implications of this analysis. Reactions to McKay's *Banjo* reflect continuing limitations of the ways that we approach literary form, particularly black literary form. Experimental form often works against or attempts to avoid representation in order to help readers shift the way we view the world around us. The instrumentalized readings to which *Banjo* is subjected often signal failures of close reading—failures to attend to the jazz aesthetics of the novel. Such scholarship often ends up reading representational politics back into the novel, suggesting that we can't let go of representation

(and particularly sociological representation) as the dominant approach to literary criticism and to ethnic literature in particular. The experimental form of texts like *Banjo* should point to different ways of reading—reading as radically interruptive, attuned to dissonance and to the agonistic relationship between dominant melody and “undertone.” Such a reading process helps us examine the “instinct of civilization,” the taken-for-granted assumptions that undergird our aesthetic and political categories.

The Shifting Form of Claude McKay’s Radicalism

In 1912, Claude McKay immigrated to the US from Jamaica, after which he left the country several times for trips to England, the USSR, France, and Morocco before finally obtaining US citizenship in 1940. His second of three novels published during his lifetime, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* is marked both by this internationalist outlook and his ambivalent politics; it was written in a period between the height of his involvement and then subsequent disillusionment with communism. His first and third novels, *Home to Harlem* and *Banana Bottom*, are ambitious, but less experimental in form; while *Home to Harlem* is episodic, *Banjo* is disorienting, plotless. *Banjo*’s experimentalism isn’t simply representational, though. I don’t want to read the form of McKay’s novel as evidence of its heightened realism—its formal, sociological representation of itinerant black men in the 1920s in France—or as merely symptomatic of McKay’s transition from communism to an unaligned socialism. Instead, *Banjo*’s form points to an ephemeral, provisional aesthetics and ethics.

By 1914, McKay had quit both Tuskegee and Kansas State College and settled in Harlem. Though he had previously published poems in Jamaica and the US, the publication of “If We Must Die” became a manifesto of black radicalism and established him as a cornerstone of the Harlem Renaissance. And though McKay continued to publish foundational Harlem Renaissance texts—including *Harlem Shadows* (1922), one of the first books published during the movement, and *Home to*

Harlem (1928), the first African American novel to become a bestseller—he had a complicated relationship to the leaders and ideological underpinnings of the Harlem Renaissance (Ramesh and Rani 5).

McKay was dissatisfied with middle class African American nationalism and bourgeois politics that, in the words of Smethurst, “in many respects reified a new artistic version of the old model of the ‘triangle trade’ among Europe, Africa, and the Americas” (“Black Radicalism” 358-9). This dissatisfaction produced multiple, shifting allegiances to sometimes competing, sometimes aligned transnational black radicalisms; McKay brought together “Greenwich Village-, Harlem-, and Moscow-style Leftisms” (Maxwell, “F. B. Eyes” 41). These shifting affiliations suggest that McKay bridged divergent articulations of anticapitalism, resisting identifying with a single party out of dissatisfaction with purely nationalist Marxisms. (This circulation, along with his queerness and foreignness, made him a prime target of Hoover’s FBI surveillance.⁵) Global communism and black radical internationalism promised to link black oppression in the Americas to global capitalism and imperialism. McKay’s uneasy relationship with other Harlem literati, his itinerant lifestyle, and the reception of his writing from the publication of *Home to Harlem* onward, all contributed to his subsequent displacement from the center of the Harlem Renaissance, both historically and until more recently.

While McKay’s early political radicalism, coupled with his international travels, set him apart from the more moderate of Harlem intellectuals, his first published novel alarmed them. *Home to*

⁵ In “F. B. Eyes,” Maxwell compiles convincing evidence from McKay’s archival materials as well as released FBI documents that demonstrates that McKay not only contributed to multiple significant black radical journals, but also circulated among “the young Communist Party, the International Workers of the World, and the African Blood Brotherhood, lumping together diverse anticapitalisms nearly as energetically as Hoover.” This was further complicated by McKay’s queerness; “McKay’s thinly cloaked bisexuality exposed him to Hoover’s ironic association of Leftism and licentiousness” (43).

Harlem follows Jake, who deserts the US army when it becomes clear that instead of fighting, his roles are menial. He travels to England, then returns to Harlem, where he sleeps with a prostitute, Felice, promptly forgets her address, and spends much of the rest of the novel searching for her. Jake works intermittently and enjoys the Harlem cabaret scene with other working class black men and women. He leaves Harlem temporarily to work on the railroad as a cook, where he meets Ray, a Haitian-born intellectual. When he returns to Harlem, he finds Felice, and the two commit to one another together, fleeing to Chicago for fear that Jake will get jailed for deserting the army. Ray, on the other hand, leaves his girlfriend to travel the world. The novel's structure is episodic, but straightforward, and establishes McKay's interest in black male homosociality and proletarian politics. W.E.B. Du Bois panned *Home to Harlem* for giving in to "that prurient demand on the part of white folk for a portrayal in Negroes of that utter licentiousness which conventional civilization holds white folk back from enjoying" and "paint[ing] drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint in as bold and as bright colors as he can." Du Bois even went so far as suggesting that he needed to take a bath after reading the "filth" of *Home to Harlem* (qtd. Vogel 132).

McKay's second novel, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*, was criticized for similar reasons as well as for the "incoherence" of its plot; the loose, winding narrative, the strange narrative voice (not quite objective or omniscient, but also not locatable as one of the beach boys, it sometimes aligns with the perspectives of the characters, but often doesn't). Early 20th century dismissals of McKay's novel associated its plotlessness or "formal anarchy" with an alarming "lack of propriety" (Holcomb 146). In such dismissals, "formal anarchy" is implicitly yoked to primitivism, while formal coherence—specifically, a kind of non-experimental realism depicting respectable black ideals—is yoked to uplift politics. In other words, politics is grafted onto the formal experimentation of *Banjo*; its plotlessness is read as symptomatic of its politics.

Set in the 1920s in Marseilles, Claude McKay's *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* recounts the experience of a group of international black men, or "beach boys," who self-identify as vagabonds. They frequently "bum" for food in order to indulge in a decadent routine, sharing their spoils in bars and clubs and reveling in lively music, wild dancing, heavy drinking, and women. The two key characters, Lincoln Agrippa Daily (an African American man who has left the US for Canada and then Marseilles, France and who goes by Banjo, after his instrument of choice) and Ray (the Haitian-born intellectual from *Home to Harlem*), strike up an unlikely friendship against the backdrop of Marseilles's decadence. Banjo dreams of organizing an orchestra of international black jazz musicians in Marseilles. Though they successfully play together and are well-liked by the inhabitants of Marseilles, the band quickly dissolves.

The text is structured as a series of vignettes and conversations, many of which seem to repeat or echo each other. Though significant events occasionally occur (a handful of encounters with the police and prison; a few rousing bar fights; illnesses; a death), most of the vignettes are insignificant, mundane. Throughout the text, the men frequently debate the relative racism of France and the United States and the possibilities of a functioning, radical black internationalism. But these debates are never resolved, and by the end of the novel, Banjo and Ray are not committed to a recognizable politics or a national affiliation, set instead on leaving Marseilles for some other temporary habitation.

While *Home to Harlem* was criticized by the Harlem elite but was commercially successful, *Banjo* was unsuccessful critically and commercially. However, *Banjo* was important to Negritude founders, Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor. Césaire writes that *Banjo* was "really one of the first works in which an author spoke of the Negro and gave him a certain literary dignity" (qtd. Ramesh and Rani 112). "Claude McKay can be considered rightfully as the true inventor of *Negritude*," writes Senghor. "I do not mean the word, but the values of *Negritude*" (qtd. Ramesh and Rani 112). While

the novel didn't immediately make an impression on American audiences, beyond a smattering of negative reviews, it was rediscovered during the Black Power movement.

Celebrations of *Banjo* by the Negritude and Black Power movements, as well as recent recuperations, reject Du Boisian respectability politics. In fact, it's worth noting that contemporary critics' recovery of *Banjo* often echoes Negritude and Black Power arguments about its radical politics; contemporary scholars read the "formal anarchy" as symptomatic of black radical politics and point in particular to the scenes of musical performance and collective, frenzied dancing as radically utopian. Banjo's fleeting orchestra—his "embrace of this 'mad, contagious music'—becomes a symbol for the reclamation of self-determination and community by blacks" (de Barros 316). However, these contemporary, celebratory readings also strangely misread the formal experimentation of the novel. Such interpretations often try to parse the characters' numerous debates about the possibilities of black internationalism and the comparative racism of France and the United States in an effort to firmly pin down the radicalism of McKay's text, either labeling it as a dangerous (and sexist) celebration of primitivism or a radical embrace of black internationalism. But *Banjo* is fraught with contradictory abstract intellectual conversations; critiques of French racism and celebrations of American vitality and openness are juxtaposed to scathing criticisms of inequality in the US. Banjo in one moment expresses radical itinerant politics and in the next airs racist opinions about the Senegalese or West Indians. To develop a consistent radical politics from the text would necessitate aligning with a particular character in the novel, a poor reading strategy that the novel's structure already anticipates and undermines.

Recuperations of *Banjo* coincide with a recent resurgence of scholarship on black internationalism, particularly with the publications of Michelle Ann Stephens's *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914-1962*, Brent Hayes Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, and a host

of other texts investigating twentieth century Pan-Africanism and black nationalisms. Such work has been invaluable in tracing various mid-century articulations of black radicalism as well as in looking back toward the early years of the twentieth century to demonstrate that the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro movements, which had largely been understood in domestic US or local contexts, were always already internationally inflected. Michelle Stephens points out that the internationalism of Marcus Garvey, CLR James, and McKay was formed in reaction to the nation as the dominant paradigm for understanding political allegiances and international politics in the years leading up to and following World War I. Against this paradigm, black intellectuals, activists, and artists barred from national belonging, proposed other affiliations and models “outside of the colonial and Western imperial order... [T]hey attempted to construct an oppositional form of black nationalism and political representation in an international imperial world that did not yet recognize black colonial subjects as national peoples” (Stephens 3). Arguments about *Banjo*’s radicalism usually stress that the black community in *Banjo* is multinational and itinerant, unaffiliated nationally and anticapitalist (anticapitalist because of the characters’ disinterest in steady labor and their willingness to “bum” for money and food).

McKay’s shifting political allegiances make it tempting to argue that the experimental structure of *Banjo* is merely symptomatic of his personal and political commitments. Scholars like Bridget T. Chalk argue that the “nonlinearity” of the text more accurately represents the lived reality of displaced, lower class global black subjects in the twentieth century than linear narrative can. In other words, experimentalism here works in service of heightened realism, more accurate representation (a claim this chapter will return to in the last section). These arguments are convincing, particularly in the case of *Banjo* (and especially if we give weight to claims of representation McKay makes in his 1937 autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*), and I’m not interested in dismissing them out of hand. But in the interest of opening the text up to other

possibilities, other interpretations, this chapter asks: What happens when we don't start with the assumption that the aesthetics or form of the text are symptomatic of a particular political stance? What happens if we approach the form on its own terms, with openness? This isn't to say that form isn't political, or that experimental form isn't often radical. But what is the form trying to do—what does it want to effect? How does it want us to read?

***Banjo*: The Shape of Jazz Improvisation**

Banjo opens with rhythm, a drunken, seasick, frenzied rhythm: “Heaving along from side to side, like a sailor on the unsteady deck of a ship, Lincoln Agrippa Daily, familiarly known as Banjo, patrolled the magnificent length of the great breakwater of Marseilles, a banjo in his hand” (3). This opening line simultaneously evokes the pitching of the sea, the rhythm of dance, and the possibility of vomit and other forms of bodily overflow. This “heaving,” side-to-side motion permeates the novel. Though, as the subtitle explicitly forecasts, it is “a story without a plot,” the text is infused with an excess of frantic motion and sensory overload. *Banjo* is replete with contradictory viewpoints, and the tensions implicit in the text multiply as it draws to a close. Heavily influenced by jazz improvisation, *Banjo* evinces a vagabond aesthetic that is itinerant, ephemeral, and disorienting.

Both approaches to the novel that I've outlined in the previous section—the critique of its impropriety or the utopian celebration of its radicalism—risk ignoring the aesthetic of contradiction, doubt, and vertigo that pervades the novel. The vagabondage of McKay's text is not a freeing, utopian opening, but a pragmatic, ephemeral strategy. Scholars who turn to *Banjo* to find symptoms of McKay's particular brand of black radicalism often mistakenly separate the dizzying opacity of his musical and sensory descriptions from the intellectual debates of the beach boys, focusing on a particular scene or debate or character in the book in order to “prove” McKay's black internationalism.

Rather than envisioning the vagabond jazz aesthetic in *Banjo* as “the very symbol of personal freedom itself” (de Barros 313), if we understand the text’s debates about racial and national politics through the lens of the ragged, disjointed music of Marseilles, then we recognize the improvisational, jazz-based underpinning of the novel’s philosophy. Brent Hayes Edwards’s work eloquently reads the slipperiness of the novel as well as its uneven commitment to internationalism and radical politics. He reminds us that though the “sporadic, ephemeral attempts” to create an orchestra are “the closest the book comes to espousing any form of black internationalism,” Banjo’s dreams of an orchestra are also inherently both “mirage” and “delusion” (Edwards 220). I want to begin where Edwards’s chapter ends: with the notion that the ephemeral music in *Banjo* “riffs across difference” (240). Viewed this way, the text does not espouse a particular political or social program. Rather, it stages, plays with, improvises on, and revises attitudes about race, nationalism, ethics.

African American improvisation is not a luxury, but “developed out of a ‘counter-culture of modernity,’” a counter-culture that “used what it had at hand to critique modernity from within” (Wallace 2-3). The end of the novel, which is far from a utopian realization of black internationalism, showcases this counter-culture: Banjo takes a week’s wages for a sailing job and then refuses to join the ship. He explains to Ray, “I know youse thinking it ain’t right. But we kain’t afford to choose, because we ain’t born and growed up like the choosing people. All we can do is grab our chance every time it comes our way” (319). Ray sympathizes with Banjo, for he understands that the black subject has received a moral code from the very “society in which he was, as a child and would be as an adult, denied any legitimate place” (319). As Ray explains to one of the beach boys, “The two go-getting things in this white man’s civilization are force and cunning. When you have force or power you make people do things. When you haven’t you use cunning” (241). The improvisational aesthetic of the beach boys is restless and itinerant, playing with—rather than merely echoing—the pragmatic philosophy William James describes as “ambulatory thought”; the ‘roaming’

of human consciousness, discovering ideas along the way” (qtd. Wallace 19). The revolutionary aim of the text is not to advance an argument for or against nationalism or black internationalism; these arguments fail multiple times in the text. Rather, McKay’s novel experiments with and in pragmatic, provisional ethics.

This improvisational experimenting marks an attempt to think differently. Despite a popular understanding of improvisation as spontaneous creation in performance, Ingrid Monson reminds us that a better definition is “elaborating upon something previously known” (114).⁶ The soloist’s ability to improvise is dependent on both repetition and spontaneity, rupture; she must study the composition and its many previous performances (as well as basic chord progressions, a host of musical history and theory, etc.), learning from past solos but launching outward from them to craft a new improvisation. The constant change of the solo works in tension with the predetermined structure of the composition.

This tension between repetition and break, structure and fugivity, has broad implications for our theory of the work of art as well as the movement of thought. Jazz improvisation offers other ways of thinking and knowing somewhere in the space or break or exchange between ritual and

⁶ Several definitions, histories, and theories of jazz improvisation have been penned over the years. A good place to look first for an introductory, but technical overview of jazz improvisation might be Ingrid Monson’s essay in *The Cambridge Companion to Jazz*. She explains that two of the most important elements of jazz are swing and improvisation. Swing is “forward propulsion through time resulting from the interplay between a fixed underlying pulse and the unevenly articulated subdivisions of that pulse which must ultimately be shaped into convincing phrases” (114). Improvisers perform in call-and-response form with the rhythm section. Improvisers usually study a composition and often memorize previous performances, solos, and improvisations in order to draw upon such study and memorization when improvising in performance. Each improvisation, then, is informed by previous performances and improvisations. An artist’s subsequent improvisations may only vary slightly during each subsequent performance, or they may vary greatly.

spontaneity, dependent as it is on musical history, traditions, and memorization as much as it is on the willingness to break with and improvise on this history. Such improvisation opens up the music to its own unfinished-ness, its otherness—the continual possibilities for interpretation, re-interpretation, revision (Muyumba 20). Improvisation reminds us that song or music is event rather than object or noun. At the same time, jazz improvisation puts under pressure “the public expression of the self as performative” (Muyumba 20). “The aesthetic practice best suited for negotiating the relationship between the antifoundational, abstract self and the socially necessary black identity is improvisation” (Muyumba 17).

The repetitive structure and “heaving” vertigo of the McKay’s second novel point toward an understanding of improvisation as “an openness to ‘knowing what it feels like not to know’” (Porter Abbot, qtd. Rob Wallace 18). In describing his music, Sun Ra states that his improvisational forms gesture to “unknown things,” to “the other side of nowhere” (qtd. Fischlin and Heble 1). A jazz improvisational approach to novel-writing, then, is one that searches after this kind of othering of thought. While *Home to Harlem* depicts the cabaret scene and the performance or event of black music, *Banjo* attempts to *formally* invoke this event.

The kind of othering of thought in improvisational music and writing that *Banjo* reaches toward is necessarily disorienting, relying on impurities and disjointed sound, aimed at vertigo rather than harmony. While Pater notes that the effect of the musicality that permeates the school of Giorgione is a sort of purified air—“all impurities being burnt out of it, and no taint, no floating particle of anything but its own proper elements allowed to subsist within it” (97)—it is precisely the impurities and “floating particles” that produce the jazz aesthetic in McKay’s *Banjo*. Rather than a musicality that produces harmony or “modulated unison” (Pater 98), the musicality of *Banjo* is frequently discordant. For example, while reflecting about comic opera, Ray notes, “It gave him such a perfect illusion of a crazy, disjointed relationship of all the arts of life. Singing and acting and

orchestra and all the garish hues. Fascinating *mélange* of disorder. No one part ever equal to the other. Like life . . . like love” (McKay 173, original emphasis and ellipsis). Speaking in fragments and ellipses, Ray revels in the “garish hues” and discordant sounds of the “bawdy” part of Marseilles, the ways in which operatic notes are often interrupted by the debauched and criminal sounds of life in the town: “It was nonetheless lovely if the melody was broken by a volley of bullets tearing down some dark alley and scaring the Ditch to cover. That enhanced the color of the place as a theater. That endeared the Ditch to him” (174).

Such impurities echo what Nathaniel Mackey calls in *Discrepant Engagement* and *Paracritical Hinge* “the creaking of the word” or “discrepant engagement”: making our categories—the categories by which we organize our thought—creak. This forces us to listen for the coming-into-being and the deforming of categorization. Jazz is particularly important in Mackey’s theory of discrepant engagement because of the history of boundary crossing in jazz (for example, the emergence of New Orleans jazz out of unprecedented associations between lower and middle class black Louisianans). Improvisation forces us to listen not just for melody or harmony, but to listen to and for the agonic relationship between performers, composition, and setting—for the grainy or creaking imperfections that draw our attention to the forms, the mediations, through which we encounter the world.

Experimental art that thinks in and through multiple disciplines and genres generates productive dissonance; this “creaking of the word” is necessarily an unsteady, meandering, often abrasive process. Both Mackey and Fred Moten obsessively return to moments of impurity in jazz, the sliding notes, asthmatic or grainy sounds, the catch or strain in the voice—for example, the itinerant sound, the “outness or uncontrollability” of Billy Strayhorn’s voice and horn (Moten, *In the Break* 35), or the moment when Coltrane beats his chest, yells, and yodels because he “ran out of horn” (Mackey, “Far Side” 188). Such moments of impurity suggest a willingness to push the limits

of artistic mastery, to “unlearn” music and language in order to warp or shed the given, the taken-for-granted elements of their trade, their philosophy, their thinking. This is an unsettling, uneven process. Amiri Baraka recalls hearing Coltrane playing “Confirmation” (a recollection crucial to Mackey’s theory of fugivity and the creaking of the word): “he took just the head of the tune and played it in all kinds of different variations. You know, he was playing it on an outrageous number of chords. Baraka said it was kind of scary, because it was like listening to a man learning how to speak” (Mackey, “Far Side” 187). This is what Mackey means when he suggests that unlearning is essential to radical experimental art, to fugitivity, the text’s or music’s impulse to “fly away from the given.” The site of possibility is

where virtuosity meets unlearning, where virtuosity, in fact, mimes its opposite....

[I]t’s the point at which the singer is not content any longer with mastery and wants to go beyond mastery.... Mastery is under revision and even under attack. To begin with what the horn will not do or, in the case of writers, with what words will not do is to write out of a discontent with what virtuosity can achieve, what mastery can achieve, with what achievement is.... I call it the far side of mastery.... [A]s much as you work at getting the instrument, in my case language, to do what you want it to do, to say what you want it to say, to sound the way you want it to sound you can’t be content with that. You have to push for what it hasn’t done yet and maybe can’t do. That’s unlearning, which is also new learning and relearning, retooling. (“Far Side” 187-188).

Such discontent and the willingness to “unlearn” language or music, in attacking mastery and relying on impurity, “break[s] the spell” of “regimes of purity” (“Far Side” 189).

Writing informed by the radical unlearning of jazz improvisation doesn’t simply recount scenes of music-making, then, but formally experiments with and registers impurity and a discontent

with virtuosity. An excellent example of this improvisational experimentation is Langston Hughes's *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1969), a lesser known, twelve-part epic poem inspired by jazz and the dozens and scored with musical cues from a wide array of traditions: blues, Dixieland, gospel, bebop, progressive jazz, free jazz, Afro-Cuban mambo, German lieder, Jewish liturgy, West Indian Calypso, and African drumming. The poems, printed in all caps and justified on the left, with the musical cues printed along the right margin, use the part-ritualistic, part-spontaneous humor of the dozens as well as jazz rhythms. The twelve sections of the poem repeatedly return to dominant word sets and phrases, breaking them down and building them up and often returning to them before the narrator completes a thought. For example, the poem opens: "IN THE / IN THE QUARTER / IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES / WHERE THE DOORS ARE DOORS OF PAPER" (8). Elsewhere the text performs the reverse, breaking the phrasings down: "SHOW FARE, MAMA, PLEASE. / SHOW FARE, MAMA. . . / SHOW FARE!" (83, original ellipsis). Many of the poems repeatedly invoke the phrases "IN THE QUARTER OF THE NEGROES" AND "IN THE SHADOW OF THE NEGROES." The repetitive phrasing sometimes propels the reader forward, rhythmically, and sometimes forces her to slow down. Such experiments with repeated rhythms and phrases, and the undoing of those rhythms and phrases, is accentuated by the poem's several references to technological impurities and breakdowns: the TV "snows" (25, 37, 83) and the music is "BORROWED FOR THE HORNS / THAT DON'T KNOW HOW TO PLAY / ON LPs THAT WONDER / HOW THEY EVER GOT THAT WAY" (36). Such technological and artistic misfires draw attention to mediation and to the imperfections of and slippages in our categories, the way we organize our aesthetic expectations.

In *Banjo*, this slippage or creaking leads to rather straightforward accounts (of wild dancing, for example) that are interrupted by short, strange phrases or images that are discordant with the rest of the text: "Tem, tem, ti-tum, tim ti-tim, tum, tem. Banjo and the boys were chording up. Back . . .

thing . . . bed . . . black . . . dead . . . Oh, shake that thing. . . Jelly-r-o-o-o-o-oll!” (54, original ellipses). (Other moments include untranslated passages in French, or untranslated 1920s seamen’s slang.)

Banjo formally produces jazz improvisation in several ways. In repeatedly staging, shifting, and slightly rearticulating similar debates about colonialism, racism, and internationalism (in which the characters voice strong opinions and are just as vehemently rebuffed or ridiculed by others), the text riffs on political and racial attitudes without resolving irreconcilable tensions and differences. Ray reflects on these unresolved differences, hinting at the openness to not knowing that Sun Ra articulates: “The grand mechanical march of civilization had leveled the world down to the point where it seemed treasonous for an advanced thinker to doubt that what was good for one nation or people was also good for another. But as he was never afraid of testing ideas, so he was not afraid of doubting” (325). The end of the novel opens up to an endless play of “testing ideas” and “doubting.”

Stylistically, the text attempts to produce this kind of doubt and disorientation for the reader. McKay’s prose is riddled with such lists, repetition, and word play, and frequently varies long, incantatory sentences with short, forceful fragments, producing the text’s improvisational feel. Take, for example, this repetitive description: “Banjo was a great vagabond of lowly life. He was a child of the Cotton Belt, but he had wandered all over America. His life was a dream of vagabondage that he was perpetually pursuing and realizing in odd ways, always incomplete but never unsatisfactory. He had worked at all the easily-picked-up jobs—longshoreman, porter, factory worker, farm hand, seaman” (11). This sort of list set within a repetitive structure—vagabond, wandered, and vagabondage—occurs throughout the novel: “Banjo had no plan, no set purpose, no single object in coming to Marseilles. It was the port that seamen talked about—the marvelous, dangerous, attractive, big, wide-open port. And he only wanted to get there” (12). Frequently the

phrasing is repeated, as it is here with the no clauses and the list of adjectives, or elsewhere with descriptive clauses that begin with “It was as if...” The repetition of this phrase brings together a sort of jazz riff style with the speculative subjunctive.

The repetitive “riffs” throughout the novel take on a spiraling motion. When Banjo first arrives in the town, the narrator lists the jumble objects and people in the town, describing it as a place “where fish and vegetables and girls and youthful touts, cats, mongrels, and a thousand second-hand things were all mingled together in a churning agglomeration of stench and sliminess” (13). The narrator continues,

It was Banjo’s way to take every new place and every new thing for the first time in a hot crazy-drunk manner. [...] And now the first delirious fever days of Marseilles were rehearsing themselves, wheeling round and round in his head. The crooked streets of dim lights, the gray damp houses bunched together and their rowdy signs of many colors. The mongrel-faced guides of shiny, beady eyes, patiently persuasive; the old hags at the portals, like skeletons presiding over an orgy, with skeleton smile and skeleton charm inviting in quavering accents those who hesitated to enter. Oh, his head was a circus where everything went circling round and round” (13).

Passages like this occur throughout the novel. The “and lists (“vegetables and girls and youthful touts”), again with their numbing, propulsive force capturing the endless divisions and accumulations of global trade, are then made strange by the intrusion of “the churning agglomeration of stench and sliminess” that then gives way to surreal imagery like the “skeleton smile and skeleton charm” of this passage. In other words, just as the text takes on a kind of grandiose energy, a propulsive investment in modernity’s rhythms, any grandiose sentiments are inverted and undercut by the slime, the vertigo, the garbage that seeps in. The effect of riffing and

revision—this improvisation—is frequently disorienting; to read *Banjo* is to be awash in sound, to be disoriented and, perhaps, like both Ray and Banjo, “feverish.”

Much of *Banjo* is characterized by this excessive, feverish sensory overload—a kind of descriptive overflow that seems to parallel the riotous style of the port town. This produces what Brent Hayes Edwards refers to, in passing, as “linguistic vertigo” (221). Take, for example, this early description of Marseilles:

The quarter of the old port exuded a nauseating odor of mass life congested, confused, moving round and round in a miserable suffocating circle. Yet everything there seemed to belong and fit naturally in place. Bistros and love shops and girls and touts and vagabonds and the troops of dogs and cats—all seemed to contribute so essentially and colorfully to that vague thing called atmosphere. [...] It was as if all the derelicts of all the seas had drifted up here to sprawl out their days in the sun (18).

Verbally, this passage seems to imitate a kind of jazz-based riff, an almost repetitive, spiraling form. Here, the riff is the “and and and” structure that in its repetitiveness produces a sort of propulsive, accumulating force. Though elsewhere Ray refers to Marseilles as a “fine big wide-open hole” (68), here it is characterized by congestion and excessive, frantic movement, a chaotic amalgam of color and people. This chaos produces “a nauseating odor”; the town is permeated by bodily excess and waste, again creating a sort of “heaving” sensation. But while the repetition pushes the passage forward, inviting swift reading, a closer reading reveals the internal contradictions: the port is, on the one hand, “nauseating,” “congested,” “confused,” “suffocating,” and, on the other, each part is arranged just as it should be. The tone also shifts from a kind of claustrophobia to an amused appreciation (“that vague thing called atmosphere” is, I’m sure, a line in a travel or party planning

book), from frantic, chaotic movement to the stillness of sunbathing “derelicts.” These differences and shifts in tone and rhythm are not subordinated or justified.

Just as the excerpt above contains a repetitive riffing strain upon which the narrator improvises, the novel continues to riff on this dizzying description of Marseilles several times. Each time the narrative returns to such description, it echoes and revises the image of the port town and a subset of the town, the Ditch (the disreputable part of town), repeatedly evoking the “nauseating odor,” sensory overload, the “wide open hole” or “pit,” the images of frenetic motion juxtaposed to the derelicts washed up like driftwood. In the pages that follow, I’ll quote at length from the novel to show how it returns again and again to similar themes and rhythms, each time shifting or revising these scenes. I want to note that unlike most scholars of *Banjo*, I don’t want to focus on the scenes of music playing (reportage of the event of music), instead focusing on repeated returns to the cinematic setting of the port town, descriptive returns that attempt to enact the event of reportage. Quoting these long passages one after another might make it seem like these repetitions and improvisations are obvious, but these passages are scattered throughout the book in a way that would be easy to miss. Our reading has to be attuned to both the internal repetition within passages and to the broader rhythms of the narrative, the repetitions that are scattered over time.

The port was a fine big wide-open hole and the docks were wide open too. Ray loved the piquant variety of the things of the docks as much as he loved their colorful human interest. And the highest to him was the Negroes of the port. In no other port had he ever seen congregated such a picturesque variety of Negroes. Negroes speaking the civilized tongues, Negroes speaking all the African dialects, black Negroes, brown Negroes, yellow Negroes. It was as if every country of the world where Negroes lived had sent representatives drifting in to Marseilles. A great

vagabond host of jungle-like Negroes trying to scrape a temporary existence from the macadamized surface of this great Provencal port.

[...]

There was a barbarous international romance in the ways of Marseilles that was vividly significant of the great modern movement of life. Small, with a population apparently too great for it, Europe's best back door, discharging and receiving its traffic to the Orient and Africa, favorite port of seamen on French leave, infested with the ratty beings of the Mediterranean countries, overrun with guides, cocottes, procurers, repelling and attracting in its white-fanged vileness under its picturesqueness, the town seemed to proclaim to the world that the grandest thing about modern life was that it was bawdy. (68-9)

The repetition of "wide-open" and "Negroes" (the latter is used an excessive nine times in the first paragraph) gives the passage a propulsive rhythm, while the image is both celebratory and violent. Differences are accumulated and listed, but then flattened into a "vagabond host of jungle-like Negroes" struggling atop the "macadamized surface" of the "overrun" town. This is a "romance," but a "barbarous" one characterized by a series of oppositions and counterpoised forces or motions: the port is "discharging and receiving," "repelling and attracting in its white-fanged vileness under its picturesqueness." Again, the passage also juxtaposes a desperate claustrophobia with the inoffensive, pleasantly empty language—"piquant variety" and "colorful human interest—of tourists' guide books.

These internal contradictions within these paragraphs, particularly the opposing moods, styles, and rhythms, structure the novel as a whole; these passages perform on a micro level the overarching structure and style of the novel. Reading these repetitive riffs and improvisational

contradictions and revisions requires listening “from the bottom up,” as Ingrid Monson suggests—listening for the agonic relationship between soloist, rhythm section, composition, and audience. Listeners and readers have to listen simultaneously to the propulsive rhythm or underlying structure and to the soloist’s reinterpretations and revisions.

To repeat these insights differently, or to riff on this notion of listening “from the bottom up,” I’d like to suggest that the lists imbedded in many of these descriptive passages perform the interruptive work of improvisation that George Lipsitz highlights. Like the most interesting jazz pieces, *Banjo*’s form forces us to listen for repetition and rupture. Several catalogues appear throughout the novel, and they often simultaneously propel the passage forward and interrupt our reading. We read these lists for their rhythm rather than their content (often actually becoming rather numb to their content). However, they also often cut into the exclamatory or frenetic moments (often sentences describing spiraling motion, for example) of *Banjo*’s prose. And they highlight Mackey’s “creaking of the word”; they cause us to hear something like categorization.

It was a few yards of alleyway with a couple of drinking-dens, a butcher shop, and hole-in-the-wall rooms where the used-up carnivore of the city find their final shelter. Dismal, humid rooming-houses inhabited by youthful scavengers of proletarian life—Provencales, Greeks, Arabs, Italians, Maltese, Spaniards, and Corsicans.

A slimy garbage-strewn little space of hopeless hags, hussies, touts, and cats and dogs forever chasing one another about in nasty imitation of the residents. The hub of low-down proletarian love, stinking, hard, cruel. A ditch abandoned by the city to pernicious manure, harmless-appearing on the surface. (86-87)

Here the narrative again reminds us that the town is both a “hole” and a swarming, congested epicenter, both “harmless-appearing” and carnivorous. The lists interrupt and propel our reading,

and they also complicate one another. While the first list classifies the national allegiances in the Ditch, the second seems to morally categorize them: “hopeless hags, hussies, touts...” Do these two categorizations overlap with, revise, or undo one another?

These lists of establishments and people groups colliding in the port town occur frequently in the novel, often juxtaposed to lists of products imported and exported from the docks. These sections are both celebration and critique of global capitalism, both repetition and rupture from colonial order. Sometimes these passages describe the beach boys in glowing, heroic terms, while at other times the descriptions are bleak, the men cast as refuse, the byproduct of global capital and the triangle trade.

The Bum Square was a close, bustling place when the boys returned there. There were many ships in port—American, English, Norwegian, Italian, and others—and all the common seamen had come to the quarter for amusement. It was like a pit with all things in it—men, women, aged, infirm, boys, touts showing their girls with ghoulish gestures, children, dogs, and cats—all boiling with desire. But there was no free, wild bubbling over. It was a boiling as of purchased food put in a caldron and carefully fed with fire to a certain point. A boiling exhibition for a strong smell of change was in the Bum Square. Loveless eyes told and hounds’ voices barked without words the price of the circus—boxes, balcony, gallery, parquet, pit, front and rear. (298)

This passage again compares Marseilles to a pit, and again employs listing to convey a sense of constant, chaotic motion. The repetition of boiling, the sensory overload, the noise/sound (a “bark[ing] without words” that also conveys information?)—all refer back to and revise earlier descriptions of the port. Now there is “no free, wild bubbling over.” Now the sounds, frenetic motion, and images seem less riotously joyful.

A few pages later, the narrator again describes the dock through repetitive lists and fragmented sentences, though this time the description is more obviously focused on the port as a hub for global commerce. The narrator lists, in short bursts, the raw materials coming into the port from Africa and Asia, before reflecting on the symbiotic relationship between civilization and “the bitch, Bawdy” (307). This reflection echoes one that occurs early on in the novel—here, too, the narrator describes, in slightly more awed, celebratory language, the imports and exports moving through the port. After listing the imports and exports, this earlier passage takes on an increasingly exclamatory, then almost incantatory tone:

Barrels, bags, boxes, bearing from land to land the primitive garner of man’s hands. Sweat-dripping bodies of black men naked under the equatorial sun, threading a caravan way through the time-old jungles, carrying loads steadied and unsupported on kink-thick heads hardened and trained to bear their burdens. Brown men half-clothed, with baskets on their backs, bending low down to the ancient tilled fields under the tropical sun. Eternal creatures of the warm soil, digging, plucking for the Occident world its exotic nourishment of life, under the whip, under the terror. Barrels . . . bags . . . boxes. . . Full of the wonderful things of life (66-67, original ellipses).

This passage not only echoes others in the novel describing the busy movement of goods and labor into and out of the port, but it also echoes internally. The last line returns to the first line of this section, but with a slower, more interruptive (more tentative, or simply contemplative?) rhythm. By riffing on and continuously revising a similar set of observations about the port town, McKay’s novel implicitly connects the beach boys’ vagrancy—their homelessness and itinerancy, as well as their status on the fringes of the legal and labor worlds—to the raw materials coming into the town, traded for commodities exported back out. Coupled with the descriptions of brown and black men

laboring to load and unload these goods, the passages implicitly suggest a continuation of the triangle trade as both occurring in the present and “eternal.”

As the above passages suggest, the men’s (and capital’s) circulation is liberatory at one moment, parasitic and paralyzing the next. These comparisons are irregular and continuously revised. Again, though, neither image nor argument is subordinated to the other. This pragmatic improvisation holds in tension repetition and rupture, equally emphasizing fugitivity and oppression, the freedom of the soloist and the constraints of the composition, the radical itinerancy of the beach boys and the “eternal” logics of racialized legal and economic systems.

Just as McKay’s novel juxtaposes gunshots and opera, he frequently splices glorifications of vagabondage with scenes in which the beach boys are punished for their homelessness; he holds legal and aesthetic definitions of vagabondage in tension throughout the text. They do not identify with any nationality in particular, but each sometimes “pose[s] as this or that without really being any definite thing at all” and “finds individuals and things to love in many places and not in any one nation” (136, 137). Readings of *Banjo* that too readily point to the radical potential of its vagabond aesthetics risk misreading the text’s radical ambivalence, the opacity resulting from McKay’s “heaving” novel. When McKay juxtaposes the legal definition of vagabondage to the aesthetic, he makes it impossible to read vagabondage as wholly liberating or utopian. The narrator’s description of the beach boys as flotsam echoes twentieth-century European writers such as André Levinson of the French press, who claimed that the French were too indulgent toward the “*lazzaroni noirs*, the scum of two continents’ [who] were living quite a ‘benign poverty’ (*misère bénigne*) that would only be possible there, in the ‘land of plenty’ (*pays de cocagne*)” (qtd. Edwards 200-201). The word *lazzaroni* alludes to “a familiar European catalog of epithets for those outside the labor pool” (Edwards 201). The beach boys are modernity’s parasites, sitting on the margins of the modern global capitalist machine. The novel suggests that this parasitism is both a radical, revolutionary critique of global

capital and neocolonialism and an unavoidable, oppressive byproduct of global capital. At each moment when the text seems like it might achieve radical utopianism, black internationalism breaks down, groups disband, disputes erupt, or the force of European law quells and disperses the beach boys.

The presence of the French legal system manifests throughout the novel, and western civilization is implicated in the vagabonds' parasitism. Our first encounter with the word "vagabondage" in the novel occurs when we are introduced to Ginger, an "English-speaking Negro" who had been thrown in jail for vagabondage "and served with a writ of expulsion" (5). The very homelessness and poverty of this international black community is legally punishable, pointing to a threatening form of deracination and exile operating in the text:

They were all there on the beach, and there were many others besides them—white men, brown men, black men, Finns, Poles, Italians, Slavs, Maltese, Indians, Negroids, African Negroes, West Indian Negroes—deportées from America for violation of the United States immigration laws—afraid and ashamed to go back to their own lands, all dumped down in the great Provençal port, bumming a day's work, a meal, a drink, existing from hand to mouth, anyhow any way, between box car, tramp ship, bistro, and bordel. (6)

These men are "ashamed," "dumped down" in Marseilles. Toward the end of the novel, the law looms increasingly over the beach boys, many of whom are threatened with papers declaring them to be of "Nationality Doubtful," papers that deny them citizenship or claims to a homeland. Several of the black men in Marseilles are forced out of France or denied entry to England, threatened with deportation to their "homelands," countries the men no longer remember.

In the end, the black vagabonds of Marseilles have become the "stateless" subjects Hannah Arendt describes in *On Totalitarianism*—not merely exiles, but stripped of any nationality. The West

African Taloufa, for instance, is labeled “a ‘Nationality Doubtful’ man with no place to go” (McKay 313). Near the end of the novel, Senegalese men resort to eating scraps of garbage disdainfully thrown to them by a ship’s crew. They are forced to live outside of the law, dumped in Marseilles like pieces of debris left by the tide.

I’ve turned here toward the increasing specter of racialized national law in the novel to suggest that improvisation and statelessness are in continuous tension. While, as de Barros points out, jazz improvisation is often associated with presentism and a sort of “seize the day” philosophy (de Barros 313), Albert Murray reminds us that jazz and the blues are “highly pragmatic and indeed fundamental device for confrontation, improvisation, and existential affirmation: a strategy for acknowledging the fact that life is a lowdown dirty shame and for improvising or riffing on the exigencies of the predicament” (qtd. Muyumba 1). Pragmatic improvisation emerges from the intersection between a careful study of the past, the limits imposed by racialized logic, laws, and economics, and always ephemeral, shifting possibilities of fugitivity. “There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go,” Amiri Baraka suggests in *Blues People*. “It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man’s land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music” (80). Or, as James Baldwin’s narrator reflects in “Sonny’s Blues,” the listener might only hear echoes of “personal, private, vanishing evocations. But the man who creates the music is hearing something else, is dealing with the roar rising from the void and imposing order on it as it hits the air” (qtd. Rob Wallace 20). The tension between cultural or artistic traditions and this no man’s land produces the continuous kinds of experimentalism and innovation we find in some of McKay’s work. *Banjo* is an experiment in writing through this tension—through the repetition and rupture of history. (In fact, *Banjo*’s initial feverish reaction to Marseilles is spurred by and defined against the image of

“black bodies dropping” out of a hole in a box car—a hole suggestive of the void Baraka and Baldwin address.)

Though much of the continuous innovation, itinerancy, and repetition of the novel’s improvisational aesthetic appears to call to mind or reproduce the restless, machinic repetition of capitalism, the moments of waste and excess gesture toward elusive, ephemeral, fugitive material (elusive and fugitive up until it is re-incorporated into capitalism’s repetition machine). The beach boys’ excessive experimentation with language is one example of this. In its most metafictional moments,⁷ the novel reflects on its own experimental use of language, just as it betrays an awareness of how it will be marshalled in service of Communist politics, or criticized for failing to buttress respectability politics. Near the end of the novel, Ray reflects on the beach boys’ innovative use of language:

He loved their tricks of language, loved to pick up and feel and taste new words from their rich reservoir of niggerisms. [...] [H]e admired the black boys’ unconscious artistic capacity for eliminating the rotten-dead stock words of the proletariat and replacing them with startling new ones. There were no dots and dashes in their conversation—nothing that could not be frankly said and therefore decently—no act or fact of life for which they could not find a simple passable word. He gained from them finer nuances of the necromancy of language and the wisdom that any word may be right and magical in its proper setting. (321)

As Ray contemplates leaving Marseilles and saying goodbye to his fellow vagabonds, he reflects on their “unconscious artistic capacity” for innovative language, arguing that they eliminate overused or

⁷ Another delightful metafictional moment occurs toward the end of the novel, when one of Ray’s old friends, a character from McKay’s previous novel, appears in Marseilles. Moments like this raise interesting questions about the narrator or narrative voice: “and there was *Home to Harlem* Jake drinking with a seaman pal at the bar (291-2).

dead language and create new words, living languages. Ray aligns dots and dashes in others' speech with the kind of faux-sensitivity of 1920s censorship, perhaps nodding here to the demands of respectability or uplift politics (which are lambasted several times in the novel). However, even this paragraph is slippery, easy to read out of context as an argument for some kind of innate creativity in lower and working class black (male) communities. Though here Ray suggests this capacity is "unconscious," the boys reflect earlier in the novel about the words they use as coded language that are continuously discarded for new ones as white Americans cotton on to the phrases, leading to an endless chain of new, innovative languages. Further, the novel itself is replete with dots and ellipses which, rather than gesturing toward censored words, seem to point to the unsaid and to the creaking of categorizations. For example, just a few pages before, Banjo says to Ray: "And Ise gwine beat it outa this burg some convenient time this very night, pardner. Tha's mah ace a spades so sure as Ise a spade. You come along with me?" Immediately afterward, in the next line of text, the narrator (or Ray?) repeats Banjo's words in truncated phrases: "Not going on the ship. . . . Beat it. . . . Come along with me" (318, original punctuation). Often, these dots or ellipses evoke a propulsive rhythm outside of the narrator's or characters' abilities to follow or narrate.

This excess, this rhythm outside of the characters' or narrator's ability to articulate, points to the excess or "waste" of jazz improvisation. Walton Muyumba notes that improvisation is more than "embellishment"; it is not enough for the jazz musician to merely play the notes written on the page because he is "bound to contribute a certain excess" (Michael Jarret, qtd Muyumba 19). Banjo's entrance into the port town is immediately characterized by just such excess or "waste": "Unstintingly Banjo gave of himself and his means to his girl and the life around him" (13). As the

beach boys are the flotsam,⁸ the waste, of civilization, they embrace waste. Anytime they earn a little money from bumming or odd jobs, they share it and splurge on wine and music and women. When a friend of Banjo and Ray dies, Ray initially objects to buying a wreath, thinking, “It was nonsense and wasteful.” But after some persuasion, he changes his mind, reflecting, “Nonsense and waste he had said. But nonsense was often pretty. [...] No, he did not resent waste. [...] There was something sublime about waste. It was the grand gesture that made life awesome and wonderful. There was a magical intelligence in it that stirred his poetic mind. Perhaps more waste would diminish stupidity” (260). Black culture was often figured as “the ‘excretion’ or waste produced by the Western ‘civilizing machine’ during the process of assimilation to the standard of capitalist accumulation” (Edwards 224). The beach boys’ celebration of waste and refusal to horde, then, becomes not only an ironic reversal of criticisms of black culture, but a material and aesthetic practice that, briefly, escapes capitalism’s machinic regime.

Improvisational Reading?

In the final section of this chapter, I want to turn to contemporary arguments about McKay’s work in order to suggest that the underlying logics of racial uplift and respectability politics continue to operate in literary criticism. Though Du Boisian reactions against novels like *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem* have (quite rightly) been complicated and critiqued following the 1920s, literary studies still hasn’t shaken the specter of representation or representational politics. The politics against which experimental art and literature strain are often read back into formal experimentation itself, suggesting that the terms and critical habits through which we approach literary studies are in need of revitalization. In other words, though experimental art attempts to challenge representation as the

⁸ In his autobiography, McKay describes the beach boys as “a transnational flotsam community of ‘beachcombers, guides, procurers, prostitutes of both sexes and bistro bandits—all of motley-making Marseilles, swarming, scrambling and scraping sustenance from the bodies of ships and crews” (qtd. in Edwards 198).

dominant way of “reading” or decoding art, our readings of experimentalism often sneak representation in through the back door.

Sociological readings haunted McKay’s writing before he composed *Banjo*. Shane Vogel eloquently traces the reception of *Home to Harlem* as a sociological-realist novel, a reception that he links to the treatment of Harlem Renaissance literature more generally. African American literature and art has been dogged by “sociological hermeneutics” since its origins, but the Harlem Renaissance had a particularly “close institutional relationship to social scientists and their disciplines” (Vogel 138). Despite the figurative language of McKay’s first novel, its descriptions of the cabaret scene in Harlem have been interpreted in terms of their realism—as either “realistic documentations” or dangerous exaggerations of early twentieth-century African American social life (Vogel 137). Some of McKay’s contemporaries even accused him of writing *Home to Harlem* in order to provide white Americans with a near-literal map of Harlem’s decadent cabaret scene, a map that worked at cross purposes with what Vogel calls “uplift sociology.”⁹

Uplift ideology envisions the struggle for civil rights and racial equality as tied to black middle class respectability, material achievements, and normative racial, sexual, and gender practices. Historian Kevin Gaines argues that 1920s theories of uplift relied on individualism or “self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth” (qtd. Vogel 4). This philosophy emerges as the negation of or opposition to a “pathological class” of (urban) African Americans, the “socially disorganized black masses” (Vogel 4, 134). (In other words, uplift sociology depends on not only rigid distinctions between black

⁹ Vogel continues, “At the center of Du Bois’s review of McKay’s novel, for example, is the problem of representation and normalizing distribution around a statistical mean. The novel is ‘untrue,’ Du Bois writes, ‘not so much on account of its facts, but on account of its emphasis.’ [...]By focusing on social outliers instead of averages, Du Bois concludes, both McKay and Van Vechten offer a skewed representation of Harlem’s population” (Vogel 137-8).

classes, cultures, and spaces of recreation and leisure, but on the existence of the very class it seeks to oppose.)¹⁰ “Du Bois and other New Negro social scientists helped establish the link between economic and sexual normativity by yoking questions of recreation, leisure, and expenditure to moral disposition under the objective imprimatur of sociology” (Vogel 137). In the literary-critical world, this was yoked to positive representations of respectable black characters, and aesthetic sophistication was yoked to racial progress.¹¹ The cabaret scenes that McKay’s *Home to Harlem* explores were therefore linked to the “pathological class” and cast as both deviant, unproductive, and threatening to the broader social and moral fabric of African American life (Vogel 134).

In response to such interpretations, *Banjo* contains a host of tongue-in-cheek jibes aimed at middle class black respectability politics. Several of the debates the characters have about race and racial progress touch on class distinctions. For example, one character, Goosey, encourages Ray to write about “race men and women” in Paris rather than the lower classes of Marseilles: “Our society folks are setting a fine example of a high standard of living for the race” (116). In response, Ray argues, “The best Negroes are *not* the society Negroes. I am not writing for them, nor the poke-chop-abstaining Negroes, nor the Puritan friends of Color, nor the Negrophobes nor the Negrophiles. I am writing for people who can stand a real story no matter where it comes from” (117, original emphasis). Later, Ray reflects that he prefers the beach boys’ company because “Among them was never any of the hopeless, enervating talk of the chances of ‘passing white’ and the specter of the Future that were the common topics of the colored intelligentsia” (321). In this

¹⁰ Uplift ideology depends on the very class it seeks to oppose and, eventually, annihilate. This is a fascinating instance of the autoimmunity paradigm—the dependence of an organism on the thing that might also kill it. But this is a topic for another essay.

¹¹ Here Vogel cites a 1924 editorial in the journal *Messenger*: “A race that hums operas will stay ahead of a race that simply hums the ‘blues’” (qtd. Vogel 6).

same passage, Ray suggests that the black intellectual class has a less creative relationship to language, less creative reading practices. But it also seems that the style and structure, which are more experimental than *Home to Harlem*, attempt to resist such sociological readings and representational logics.

While few contemporary scholars find it necessary or advisable to prop up Du Boisian uplift sociological readings (I don't think many contemporary critics believe that McKay wanted to provide white Americans with literal maps of the Harlem cabaret scene), the underlying reliance on representation as the dominant way of interpreting literature, especially minority literature, stubbornly persists. This tenacious afterlife of sociological representation, and uplift sociology in particular, has a great deal to do with the intractability of the resistance-accommodation paradigm in literary studies.

To illustrate this point, I'd like to turn briefly to Bridget T. Chalk's "Sensible of Being *Étrangers*": Plots and Identity Papers in *Banjo*." Chalk makes a convincing, insightful argument about how the formal structure of McKay's novel can be read as critique of "the complicity of linear narrative with dominant bureaucratic discourses of identity" (357). Chalk yokes form to content, suggesting that "there is a fundamental relationship between the text's plotlessness and its thematic engagement with contemporary questions of identity management" (357). Bureaucratic entities in the novel and in McKay's personal life¹² demand biographical accounts—coherent, linear plots—in order to gain citizenship and bourgeois mobility. In other words, while McKay claims in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, that he is at once "an American" and "an internationalist . . .

¹² During McKay's travels in France and Morocco, he was attempting to gain re-entry to the US. Chalk contrasts his letters to US government entities, which furnished these biographical accounts and examples of his loyalty to the US, to the plotlessness of his novel and even the wry tone of his autobiography. This comparison also in some ways prefigures chapter three's discussion of CLR James's outsider status and attempts to gain US citizenship.

a bad nationalist,” his novel formally registers this “bad nationalism” (*A Long Way from Home* 300; qtd. Chalk 361). But Chalk’s argument about *Banjo*’s radical form hinges on the assumption that the novel’s “shapelessness achieves greater verisimilitude” (362). The unusual form of the novel, according to this argument, more accurately depicts the reality for stateless subjects in the 1920s. Radical, experimental form, in other words, serves a clearly sociological purpose. Again, much of this work—reading form as essentially representational, symptomatic—is often done in the broader service of the resistance-accommodation binary in literary studies. And while arguments about resistance and accommodation, like sociological readings, aren’t inherently “bad,” they have a tendency, when so broadly and binaristically construed, to flatten out texts and leave little room for nuance or, for example, an overlap between accommodation and resistance.

As I have outlined in the introduction, recent scholarship by Anthony Reed, Evie Shockley, Phillip Brian Harper, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Colleen Lye, among several others, has demonstrated that readers and critics usually approach minority literature “as being symptomatic of ongoing historical concerns” for minority populations (Nguyen 3). Writing about Asian American literary studies, Nguyen suggests that literary texts approach the nexus of form and political strategy in a variety of flexible ways; “resistance and accommodation are actually limited, polarizing options that do not sufficiently demonstrate the *flexible strategies* often chosen by authors and characters to navigate their political and ethical situations.” However, despite this flexibility, “discourses of American racism and Asian American literary criticism that shape the reception and interpretation of the literature” remain narrow and rigid (4). Much of this rigidity has to do with the ideological positions and assumptions of critics: “criticism tends to read for signs of resistance or accommodation because critics are reacting to the demands of American racism” (5).

Sociological reading isn’t a problem in itself, but when it is mapped onto a text that is trying to evade, escape, or complicate the language of representation and resistance, it’s incredibly

flattening, stifling. As Philip Brian Harper points out, abstractionist art is self-conscious about its nonreferentiality; experimental art “*emphasizes* its own distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed or artificial character” (2). This distancing “invites us to question the ‘naturalness’ of our aesthetic and cultural assumptions, “thereby opening them to active and potentially salutary revision” (Harper 3). Experimental art has the potential to destabilize our “rotten-dead stock words” and ways of thinking by interrupting our reading practices.

The pragmatic improvisational form of Claude McKay’s *Banjo* attempts not just to undo uplift ideology and its attendant dependence on social-scientific representation, but to challenge the “instinct of civilization” more generally. Near the end of the novel, Ray expresses his disgust with a chauffeur who left his vagabond lifestyle behind in order to achieve middle class respectability.

That chauffeur will marry with a clear conscience from his scavenger money. He may [... become] a good taxpayer and supporter of a strong national government, with a firm colonial policy, while you and I will always be the same lost black vagabonds, because we don’t know what this civilization is all about. But my friend the chauffeur knows. It took over a thousand years of lily-white culture to make him what he is. And although he has no intelligence, he has the instinct of civilization, Banjo, and you and I just haven’t got it. (298)

The “instinct of civilization” does not examine the taken-for-granted aesthetic, political, and ethical practices and values. Experimental, improvisational work like *Banjo* is therefore crucial to retraining our reading practices, making us more attentive to the creaking of categorization. We learn to read for the becoming of political thought rather than for political program or platform. We allow ourselves to be disoriented by the text’s dizzying motions until, perhaps, we run up against the limits of the knowable and sayable.

Chapter 2: Photographic Poetics

Photographic Interruption

As I have suggested in the introduction, writing engages with photography in several different ways. On one end of the spectrum are texts like Langston Hughes's and Roy DeCarava's *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, with its interest in using portrait photographs of Harlem inhabitants to craft a fictionalized representation of the average intergenerational black family living in Harlem. This kind of literary engagement with photography (what we usually think of as ekphrastic writing) takes for granted the photograph's representational or indexical nature. And unless it allows space for self-reflection, this kind of photographic writing doesn't undo or complicate sociological representation as the dominant paradigm for reading literature. However, an interruptive approach to photography—like Baraka's in *In Our Terribleness*—is interested in exploring how writing through the apparatus of photography might change the given ways we think about representation, identity, and history.

Though photographic writing is often defined as densely descriptive naturalism, what might it mean to write photographically so as to push back against assumptions of photography's indexicality or referentiality?¹ What does it mean to compose poems through or with the apparatus

¹ Stuart Burrows suggests that most scholars, when they say a text is “photographic,” “mean an attention to detail and concern with verisimilitude supposedly imitative of photography.” He argues that this logic gets the direction of influence wrong; photographic texts, rather, “are only imaginable in an era dominated by mass-produced photographic images.... [C]onsciousness is not so much like a camera, it is a product *of* the camera.” In other words, such writing does not attempt to imitate the camera, but is produced by and imaginable only because of photography. Burrows describes the “crisis of identity in the photographic age,” arguing that “realist novels specifically saw consciousness in photographic terms.” For Burrows, photographic writing collapses similar—and even dissimilar—images; photographic writing sees in terms of mass commodified, reproducible images. “For what the ceaseless

of the camera? How does such a poetics intersect with critical race studies and racial optics? What might it mean for history or historiography to move or work photographically—according to the apparatus of the camera? Natasha Trethewey and John Keene, contemporary poets who have been significantly shaped by their involvement in the Dark Room Collective, reveal two different approaches to photographic poetics: one that looks to recover lost voices and moments from the archive, and one that attempts to use a photographic style to shift our approach to and understanding of the archive—of historiography and its relationship to race and identity.

The persona poems of Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002) meditate on E.J. Bellocq's photographs of brothels in nineteenth-century New Orleans in order to interrogate the economy of spectacle and the optics of race and representation, uncovering and recovering the silenced voices of mixed-race women lost to history, silenced in and by the visual archive. John Keene's *Annotations* (1995) moves beyond questions of representation and recovery. Sitting at the intersection of prose and poetry, it verges on a series of images collected and laid over one another, touching, overlapping, obscuring, and darting away from one another. The poem becomes a screen on which images appear and fade or dissolve, to be replaced by other, frequently disconnected images. *Annotations* suggests that to write and think photographically is to think through the seemingly irreconcilable tensions between the photograph's evidentiary power, its bent toward embalming, and its democratizing potential. Photographic poetry writes history and identity through these shifting tensions—through the camera's seriality and its depictions of the past as a set of frozen images that can nevertheless be wrenched from their context and rearranged. Keene's photographic style

photographic reproduction of modern life does is render equivalent everything and everyone, producing a world inhabited by people possessing the 'uniformity of facial expression' Walter Benjamin describes." Burrows' work implicitly links photographs and photographic writing to American naturalism and is ultimately still reliant on representational logic.

interrupts, halts, and reorients our reading, and, in so doing, estranges us from given approaches to historiography more generally, forcing us to re-see and re-read the construction and operation of history and identity.

This comparison between Trethewey's and Keene's photographic poetics help us better understand the additive and interruptive approaches to literature and its relationship to history, approaches I have outlined in the introduction. I begin with Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic photography of Haiti in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938) and suggest that her ethnographic approach to photography necessarily assumes a representational logic that carries over into Trethewey's contemporary photographic recovery work. By contrast, Keene's photographic style registers representation's impossibility and produces a vision of history and subject formation as discontinuous.

To illustrate this kind of photographic style, I'd like to briefly turn to the second volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. The graphic novel's writer-narrator (the son of a Holocaust survivor) has a nervous breakdown after his father's death. Just as the narrative grinds abruptly to a halt (ironically, in the section titled "Auschwitz: Time Flies"), we see the narrator, unable to write out of grief and guilt, sitting at a desk that rests on top of a heap of bodies (41). The page is riddled with ellipses, parentheticals, and the specter of remediation—of his graphic novel being made into a film or TV special. It is no coincidence that the heap of bodies under the narrator-writer's desk appears during one of the few moments when one of the graphic novel's main conceits—the drawing of Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, etc.—breaks down and the narrator is pictured as a human who dons a mouse mask. Several times, the narrator also turns to stare directly out from the page, gesturing helplessly at the reader while television and film producers and interviewers crowd around him. The bodies appear under the narrator's feet even as he walks down the street toward his psychiatrist's apartment. After his session with the psychiatrist, the mediation of the narrator's father's recorded

voice also intrudes more forcefully (47). The narrative breaks down—is forcibly interrupted—to slow our reading, to cause us to falter, stumble, halt, fumble around for the thread of the narrative again, now more conscious of the graphic novel’s structure, its conceits, the world it has constructed.

Near the end of *Maus II*, the heap of bodies under the narrator’s desk appears, momentarily, to have been replaced by a sprawling heap of photographs (114-115). The narrator’s father has given him a box of photographs, and initially they appear rather ordered, each labeled with name and date. However, they gradually take over and partially cover the panels, exceeding the gutters on the page of the graphic novel in the same way that they interrupt the historical narrative (115). Marianne Hirsch writes in “The Generation of Postmemory” that the photographs inserted earlier in *Maus*—photographs of Art Spiegelman’s mother—attest to the narrator-writer’s need for and obsession with authentication at the same time that they point to absence and loss. A photograph of Art Spiegelman and his mother “anchors and authenticates the work” and “solidifies the mother’s material presence even as it records her loss and suicide.” Hirsch continues, “Through the angle at which [the photograph] is drawn, it breaks out of the page, acting as a link between the comics medium and the viewer, drawing the viewer into the page” to work against the graphic novel’s “distancing devices” (221).

However, far from pointing to a desire for authentication, the intrusion of the photographs points to the *impossibility* of authentication and representation. Like the bodies that prop up (or lie under) the narrator’s desk earlier in the novel, the heap of photographs signals individual lives and moments that exceed Spiegelman’s story—that can’t be depicted or investigated here (and perhaps not anywhere). These photographs interrupt the story when the representational conceit of the graphic novel is particularly falling apart. These images, like the bodies under the narrator’s desk, register representation’s impossibility and the seductive impossibility of recovery-based approaches

to the archive. The photographs intrude when the narrative falters (or perhaps they accelerate its faltering), when it reaches its limit. Narrative, personal account, memory, historiography—all are inadequate to the Holocaust. And yet, they are the narrator’s and reader’s only means of accessing even the possibility of imagining the Holocaust—through the photographs, through the recording of the narrator’s father’s voice, through other mediated, recorded forms. As Georges Didi-Huberman argues in *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, photographs point to an event, the Holocaust, which is *only possible* as imagination—which cannot be accessed except through imperfect, partial images and accounts.

Ethnographic approaches to photography, as well as approaches aimed at recovering and representing stories and people from the archive, take this partiality as a problem to be fixed or overcome. Trethewey, like Hurston, takes representation and recovery to be the aim of historical and literary work. John Keene, on the other hand, leverages the fragmentary, dissociative potential of photography. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag points out (with a great deal of melancholy and foreboding) that photographs deny interconnectedness and continuity, and that, in a world dominated by images, borders and framing begin to appear arbitrary. John Keene’s prose poetry leverages this fragmentary, discontinuous, disconnected view of photography as a way to think through history and identity. Keene’s photographic poetics produce a view of history as not “continuously flowing,” but moving discontinuously, unevenly.²

² The idea of history as event emerges around the same time that photography is first developed (Baer 4). Ulrich Baer elaborates, “The medium of photography seemed to furnish evidence—by means of magnifications, shutter speed, and lighting—that the world of appearances is not continuous, not at all flowing, not a river. Instead, it seems to reveal a world in which time is splintered, fractured, blown apart. As if to respond to the challenge produced by the invention of photography, another conception of time and history was regaining prominence. The idea of historical time as continuous was countered with a notion of history that imagines time, in a striking image, as an invisible *event*, a decisive moment that requires a new conceptual framework” (4, emphasis in original).

Ethnographic Photography: Zora Neale Hurston in Haiti

Though Zora Neale Hurston took several photographs during her trip to Haiti in 1936, just two years after the end of US Occupation, the only copies that survive are the reprints published in *Tell My Horse*. Like Langston Hughes, who visited Haiti in 1931, Hurston does *not* include photographs of US marines or other signs of occupation (though she does briefly mention meeting a marine). Instead, Hurston practices ethnographic photography, particularly attempting to represent voodoo ceremonies and rituals.³ Her ethnographic photography attempts to recover and preserve denigrated and threatened indigenous folk cultures, an approach and methodology inextricable from a strangely ahistorical view of black diasporic life, an ahistorical view that verges on a conservative celebration of neocolonialism.

Hurston was greatly influenced by Franz Boas, who, though he was dedicated to anti-racist anthropological methods (particularly the refutation of biological definitions of race), nevertheless often implicitly suggests that “primitive” cultures are frozen in an ahistorical pastness. Roseanne Hoefel points out that though Boas sought to break with anthropology’s racist methodologies, he “was also an intellectual product of that tradition: by seeking the ‘pure’ precontact condition of indigenous peoples and recording the last remnants of an allegedly ‘dying’ or ‘disappearing’ culture, Boas fueled the nostalgia for the ‘primitive’ and the imperialist illusion of a ‘vanishing’ race” (Hoefel 183). And, as Brian Hochman points out, the Boasian desire to preserve the culture of vanishing primitives lies at the heart, the origin, of media innovation (in fact, the invention of photography is

³ Hughes’s photographs, by contrast, include no voodoo rituals. His scrapbook focuses primarily on the lower classes, or “people without shoes,” as well as the Citadel and Sans-Souci Palace, both built by revolutionary-turned-king, Henri Christophe.

tied to imperialist ethnographic practices).⁴ Hurston, like Boas, wanted to set down “vanishing” folk cultures using any available technology (in this case, primarily writing and photography). In communications with Boas, Hurston reveals an implicit faith in anthropology’s ability to preserve—freeze—vanishing folk cultures. For example, in a letter to Boas dated March 1927, she writes: “It is fortunate that it [black southern folklore] is being collected now, for a great many people say, ‘I used to know some of that old stuff, but I done forgot it all.’ You see, the negro is not living his lore to the extent of the Indian. He is not on a reservation, being kept pure. His negroness is being rubbed off by close contact with white culture” (*Letters* 97). Hurston’s photographs of voodoo rituals are aimed at this Boasian preservation. (The photograph on page 233 of a squatting, nude Haitian woman also hints not only at frozen indigeneity, but at the timelessness of a kind of National Geographic approach to female primitiveness.) This desire for preservation, produced by a theory of “threatened indigeneity,” produces what Hochman refers to as “salvage ethnography,” which turns cultures into museum objects frozen in time.

⁴ In *Savage Preservation: The Ethnographic Origins of Modern Media Technology*, Brian Hochman argues that early developments in photography (as well as other modern media technology) were intimately connected to ethnography, itself a discipline intertwined with the colonial project. In fact, photography was particularly suited for the kind of ethnographic work exploding in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for such ethnography relied on a notion of imperiled native groups whose languages and customs had to be “taken down” and “fixed” before they altered too much or faded away altogether. As Hochman points out, this line of thinking was particularly dangerous as it did not allow for indigenous populations’ flexibility and growth, instead assigning them a position of historical fixity, quaint objects or remnants of a past under threat of erasure. “This narrative of threatened indigeneity “performs important ideological work in the present, upholding the relationship between technological invention and cultural use as natural, even necessary, when the historical record tells a far less tidy story” (Hochman xi). Not only does this narrative place far too much faith in technology’s ability to objectively and reliably capture indigenous cultures, but it obscures the messy entanglement of race and the ways in which theories of history and theories of race are inextricably linked. In fact, the development of modern media and theories of race and culture developed in tandem.

Hurston's attitude toward photographing Haitians, then, is inextricable from her understanding of history and historical movement; her attitudes toward narrative and media, evidence and ethnography, are inseparable (determining and determined by) her theory of history. However, contemporary scholars (and her contemporaries) have had a hard time determining precisely what her theory of history is. On the one hand, she seeks in *Tell My Horse* to counter racist accounts of Haitian culture and “gran[t] black Atlantic folk cultures a scholarly legitimacy that white supremacist ideology had denied them” (Toland-Dix 139). Part of the way that she does this is by tracing historical and cultural connections among the people of the black Atlantic.⁵ Contemporary Haitian voodoo practices are traced in detail; Hurston repeatedly notes the particularity of practices in Haiti, their complexity and differences from other national-cultural religious rites. This is partly an attempt to counter other, racist interpretations and descriptions of voodoo in Haiti. This would seem to indirectly refute justifications of US Occupation, which usually stressed exaggerated stories of wild, savage, violent voodoo rites.

However, while Hurston juxtaposes Jamaican, Haitian, and American attitudes toward race, gender, and class in order to offer prescient criticisms, she remains curiously silent about the particularities of Caribbean history. And while her methodology may counter justifications for occupation, she never explicitly criticizes US intervention in Haiti. Though Hurston visited Haiti two years after occupation ended, *Tell My Horse* rarely mentions the marines (and never photographs them or the infrastructure built by US occupying forces). When the text does briefly mention US

⁵ Toland-Dix goes on to explain that Hurston's approach to black Atlantic culture was unique: “As an anthropologist, Hurston did groundbreaking research in establishing the cultural connections between West Africa, the Caribbean, and the American South. She was a pioneer in developing awareness of the African diaspora as ‘a transnational and intercultural multiplicity’” (140). According to Toland-Dix, the inconsistencies in Hurston's attitude toward US intervention in Haiti stems from Hurston's conflicted allegiance to both the black Atlantic and the United States.

involvement in Haiti, Hurston seems to locate American occupation as a positive turning point for Haitians. Hurston's celebratory attitude toward American occupation sets her at odds with her contemporaries (and most current scholarship on Haiti and African America), including James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Du Bois, all of whom wrote scathing indictments of the US marine presence in Haiti. For Johnson and others, occupation is situated in a long history of European and American imperialism and neo-colonialism. Hurston's celebration of American occupation, on the other hand, seemed to stem from an ahistorical view of not only Haiti, but colonialism and slavery more generally. An ahistorical mist frequently creeps into *Tell My Horse*.

This ahistorical mist is most pronounced when Hurston focuses on Haitian culture. The shift in style between the first sections of *Tell My Horse* and chapter 6, the beginning of the section on Haitian history, is abrupt, jarring. Chapter 6, "Rebirth of a Nation" (perhaps a reference to D. W. Griffith's controversial film), begins:

For four hundred years the blacks of Haiti had yearned for peace. For three hundred years the island was spoken of as a paradise of riches and pleasures, but that was in reference to the whites to whom the spirit of the land gave welcome. Haiti has meant spilt blood and tears for blacks.... A prophet could have foretold it was to come to them from another land and another people utterly unlike the Haitian people in any respect. The prophet might have said, 'Your freedom from strife and your peace shall come when these symbols appear. There shall come a voice in the night. A new and bloody river shall pour from a man-made rock in your chief city. Then shall be a cry from the heart of Haiti—a great cry, a crescendo cry. There shall be survivors, and they shall have a look and a message. There shall be a Day and the Day shall mother a Howl, and the Howl shall be remembered in Haiti forever and nations beyond the borders shall hear it and stir. Then shall appear a Plume against the sky.

It shall be a black plume against the sky which shall give fright to many at its coming, but it shall bring peace to Haiti. You who have hopes, watch for these signs. Many false prophets shall arrive who will promise you peace and faith, but they are lacking in the device of peace. Wait for the plume in the sky.' (65-66)

Here, Hurston abruptly shifts into the subjunctive, into an imagined past prophetic vision of the present and future. The "black plume with a white hope" (72) here is the American occupying force, the sign of freedom for Haiti. She temporally collapses colonization, the Haitian Revolution, and the American occupation and casts Occupation as prophetic fulfillment, a final moment of freedom brought by white outsiders to a country beset with revolution, violence, and in-fighting.

The surprisingly celebratory attitude she takes toward US occupation in "Politics and Personalities of Haiti" has prompted scholars like Hazel Carby and J. Michael Dash to heavily criticize her as "reactionary" (Toland-Dix 143).⁶ Hurston consistently displays a double, contradictory attitude toward Haiti; she separates her affiliation to Haiti from the corruption of the Haitian government, between Haiti's glorious past and current political crisis. Hurston celebrates Haiti's revolution but "counterbalances that with her conviction that 'oppression did not cease' when the 'white oppressors' were driven out; she argues that by the time of the American invasion, 'Haiti's internal foes' had become 'more dangerous to Haiti than anyone else.' With her terse summary of the current situation in Haiti, Hurston establishes the parameters and focus of her analysis and she strategically omits inconvenient facts that do not fit this version of events" (Toland-

⁶ In "Hughes' Dream to Hurston's Nightmare," Dash writes that Hurston's Haiti was "a nightmare world fit only to be probed anthropologically and to be rehabilitated militarily. Hurston's comments on Haitian folk culture are consistent with her reactionary politics. Other black writers could be forgiven because their sensationalist fictions were often motivated by the urgent need to establish a common folk heritage. Hurston's only motivation seems to have been unmitigated contempt" (qtd. in Toland-Dix 143).

Dix 146). Haitian corruption becomes the cause of US intervention in Hurston's account, while occupation promises Haitians a chance at "rebirth" and redemption. Though Hurston's contemporaries criticized US occupation and the violence of the marine presence in Haiti, Hurston omits such discussions and is also careful to sidestep US economic interests in the region.⁷

Hurston's curious silence about specific Haitian history and US involvement as well as her attitude toward photography stems from this view of frozen, ahistorical pastness. She is drawn to the mythological, the folk history, which often moves in sweeping generalizations, doublings, and stark contrasts. "Haiti has always been two places," she writes in the opening of "The Next Hundred Years." "First it was the Haiti of the masters and slaves. Not it is Haiti of the wealthy and educated mulattoes and the Haiti of the blacks." In the next paragraph, she condenses the history of the revolution into a few pithy sentences: "In 1791 under Boukman, Biasson and Jean-Francois, the blacks began their savage lunge for freedom and in 1804 they were free. Their bid for freedom had to have lunge and it had to be savage, for every man's hand was against them" (*Tell My Horse* 73). After describing the deaths of L'Ouverture, Dessalines, and Christophe, and the string of revolutions that followed, Hurston writes, "The occupation is ended and Haiti is left with a stable currency, the beginnings of a system of transportation, a modern capital, the nucleus of a modern army" (74). While Hurston is clearly familiar with Haiti's history—she names key revolutionary figures and is keenly aware of Haiti's racial politics—her compression of that history here is sly, laying both past glory and present economic and political difficulty at the feet of the Haitians and

⁷ This should be counterpoised to James Weldon Johnson's investigation of Haiti, which argues that US economic interests were central (if not the primary cause of) US Occupation. In his autobiographical and journalistic writings, Langston Hughes echoes Johnson's take on Haiti-US relations, even though Hughes, like Hurston, doesn't include photographs of US occupying forces in his scrapbook. Perhaps this is because Hughes wanted his scrapbook to contain only positive images from his trip.

almost entirely eliding European colonization and US occupation, except to implicitly credit US military forces for Haiti's "stable currency" and improved infrastructure (claims of improvement that are disputed by many writers since Hurston, who have insisted that the Marine presence had no or negative impact on Haiti's economy, school system, and infrastructure).⁸ Haiti's future, Hurston writes, depends on young Haitian men in politics, while "In the past, as now, Haiti's curse has been her politicians" (74).

Perhaps Hurston avoids historical specificity because she is aware how often this history is invoked for politically reprehensible ends. She writes that Haiti is plagued by not only those who "resor[t] to violence to improve their condition" but also by politicians who "spent [their] time waving the flag and orating on Haiti's past glory. The bones of L'Ouverture, Christophe and Dessalines were rattled for the poor peasants' breakfast, dinner and supper, never mentioning the fact that the constructive efforts of these great men were blocked by just such 'patriots' as the present day patriots" (75). Hurston then goes on to compare these politicians to African American orators, connecting Haitian politicians' use of the Haiti's proud revolutionary past to US "Race Men's" self-interested references to racial progress and revolutionary figures. Such references, Hurston argues, appease crowds. Triumphant individual history—the great men of Haiti and African America—and narratives of historical progress are used to block material changes.⁹

⁸ See James Weldon Johnson's "Self-Determining Haiti."

⁹ Hurston writes: "These talking patriots, who have tried to move the wheels of Haiti on wind from their lungs, are blood brothers to the empty wind bags who have done so much to nullify opportunity among the American Negroes. The Negroes of the United States have passed through a tongue-and-lung era that is three generations long. These 'Race Men's' claim to greatness being the ability to mount any platform at short notice and rattle the bones of Crispus Attucks; tell what great folks the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the constitution had made out of us; and *never* fail to quote, 'We have made the greatest progress in sixty years of any people on the face of the globe.' That always brought the house down. Even the white politicians found out what a sure-fire hit that line was and used it always

Hurston's curious attitude toward Haitian history is not specific to US-Haitian relations. Deborah Plant notes that Hurston's autobiography touches only glancingly on white oppression in favor of developing an optimistic, future-oriented image of self-empowerment. And this pattern is repeatedly echoed, on a broader scale, in her ethnographic works. Criticisms of oppressive imperialist history flash up momentarily, only to dissolve under the text's greater interest in folk practices. Plant writes that both Booker T. Washington and Hurston attempted "an emotional distance from the past that would allow them an emotional and intellectual space in the present. Both believed that too much contemplation of the past was just so much time taken from present endeavors, thus their ahistorical stance" (qtd. in Toland-Dix 147). Toland-Dix goes on to claim that this distancing from the past explains why Hurston "forecloses further discussion of abuses perpetrated by the American occupiers. Adopting a role that African Americans have claimed for themselves in the black Atlantic world, she admonishes the Haitians to focus on major internal problems Haiti must confront and overcome." Post-occupation Haiti, then, like post-Reconstruction

when addressing a Negro audience. It made us feel so good that the office seeker did not need to give out any jobs. In fact I am told that some white man way back there around the period of Reconstruction invented the line. It has only been changed by bringing it up to date with the number of years mentioned" (75-77). Hurston continues in this vein, suggesting that 1930s African Americans are no longer persuaded by this kind of rhetoric. "But America has produced a generation of Negroes who are impatient of the orators. They want to hear about more jobs and houses and meat on the table. They are resentful of opportunities lost while their parents sat satisfied and happy listening to crummy orators. Our heroes are no longer talkers but doers.... 'Race leaders' are simply obsolete" (77). Haitians have not yet reached this moment of dissatisfaction because fewer of them are literate. Again, she criticizes "the old-style Haitian who has his eyes closed to fact and keeps chanting to himself that Haiti has a glorious past and that everything is just lovely" (80). The sentiment in Haiti is beginning to turn, and Hurston can somehow feel this in the air. "They are refusing to see the glorified Haiti of the demagogue's tongue" (81).

America, is an opportunity for “rebirth” (Toland-Dix 147). Hurston’s criticisms of Haitians echo her comments about African Americans’ defeatism and entrapment in the past.¹⁰

Beyond the Limits of Hurston’s Ethnographic Photography?

As I’ve outlined above, Hurston’s particular brand of ethnography and attitude toward photography suggest an ahistoricism that relegates “primitive” cultures to a frozen pastness while attempting to accurately represent and preserve threatened indigeneity. However, several moments of imperfect, weird, or even “bad” ethnography fleetingly open up the text to other possibilities, to the moments of fugitivity I have discussed in the first chapter. Hurston’s ethnographic work is inconsistent—frequently playful, ironic, slippery, and elusive—causing Ishmael Reed to label *Tell My Horse* “the postmodernist book of the nineties” in his foreword to the 1990 reprint (xv). These odd moments make the categories of photography and ethnography “creak,” to again echo Nathaniel Mackey. And these moments push back on the overdetermined representational logic of the rest of the text, whether or not this is what Hurston intended.

The strangest, most playfully contradictory moment in the text occurs when Hurston recounts her experience photographing a zombie. She begins the thirteenth chapter thus:

What is the whole truth and nothing else but the truth about Zombies? I do not know, but I know that I saw the broken remnant, relic, or refuse of Felicia Felix-Mentor in a hospital yard.... I had the rare opportunity to see and touch an authentic

¹⁰ Hurston’s curiously ahistorical stance and ethnographic gaze in Haiti may have also partially stemmed from pressure Hurston faced from her publishers. In a letter to Franz Boas on August 20, 1934, Hurston describes Mr. Lippincott (whose firm was hoping to publish *Mules and Men*) as “conservative” and writes, “He wants a very readable book that the average reader can understand, at the same time one that will have value as a reference book” (Zora Neale Hurston, *Letters* 308). Such pressure for readability—particularly for an interwar American audience—necessarily limits stringent social or political critique.

case. I listened to the broken noises in its throat, and then, I did what no one else had ever done, I photographed it. If I had not experienced all of this in the strong sunlight of a hospital yard, I might have come away from Haiti interested but doubtful. But I saw this case of Felicia Felix-Mentor, which was vouched for by the highest authority. So I know that there are Zombies in Haiti. People have been called back from the dead. (179)

In the face of her own (performative? Performed?) skepticism, Hurston turns to photographic evidence and the broken body-as-object as the final proof of the existence of zombies, the only answer she can offer to the strange little question she poses. The body here—the subject-turned-zombie—is evidence only insofar as it has been made an object. Subject is clearly delineated from object—object as evidence and as spectacle—and Hurston is careful to explain that much of the evidentiary force of this broken body (or “wreckage” as she later calls it) lies in her ability to capture it on photographic film.

It is important to note that her description here repeatedly refers to this body as a “case,” a thing (note the repeated use of “it” rather than “her”). Even when Hurston refers to the zombie as “she/her,” she focuses on body parts in isolation, as if separating them from the subject. In a later section in the text, Hurston is obsessed with capturing the zombie’s face, its blank stare:

They had just set her dinner before her but she was not eating. She hovered against the fence in a sort of defensive position. The moment that she sensed our approach, she broke off a limb of a shrub and began to use it to dust and clean the ground and the fence and the table which bore her food. She huddled the cloth about her head more closely and showed every sign of fear and expectation of abuse and violence. The two doctors with me made kindly noises and tried to reassure her. She seemed to hear nothing. Just kept on trying to hide herself. The doctor uncovered her head

for a moment but she promptly clapped her arms and hands over it to shut out the things she dreaded.

I said to the doctor that I had permission of Dr. Léon to take some pictures and he helped me to go about it. I took her first in the position that she assumed herself whenever left alone. That is, cringing against the wall with the cloth hiding her face and head. Then in other positions. Finally the doctor forcibly uncovered her and held her so that I could take her face. And the sight was dreadful. That blank face with the dead eyes. The eyelids were white all around the eyes as if they had been burned with acid. It was pronounced enough to come out in the picture. There was nothing that you could say to her or get from her except for looking at her, and the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long. (195)

Hurston's relationship to Felicia here dramatizes—perhaps, consciously or not, even literalizes—the inherently violent, appropriative force of photography that Susan Sontag warns against in *On Photography*. The subject in the photograph is only briefly, tenuously a named subject, but as Hurston pushes her investigation and photographic endeavor further, the woman-turned-zombie ceases to be human and becomes object, “it.” Though she desperately attempts to hide from the camera's lens, even crouching against a far wall and covering her face with her hands and clothing, Hurston and the doctors eventually force her to expose herself to the camera.¹¹ Hurston initially seems to suggest

¹¹ There is no question of permission for the photographs here; Felicia is, like wildlife, first captured in her “natural position,” then posed, then forcibly held down so that Hurston can capture her face, her blank eyes. Like wildlife caught in photographs, Felicia is “always the observed.” Whether or not she also observes Hurston loses significance in the photographic transaction. In *About Looking*, John Berger writes about animals that are photographed: “They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are” (16). Berger continues, speaking of zoo photography in particular, “However you look at these animals, even if the animal is up against the bars,

that this photograph establishes her as a trailblazer, as having attained and proven some final, incontrovertible knowledge. Such an account is dependent on the assumed referentiality of the image.

If Sontag locates the duplicity of the photograph in its self-presentation as evidence, as a piece of the world rather than an interpretation of it, then this seems to be precisely the element of the photograph that Hurston embraces—its aggression, its unflinching honesty. Sontag claims that photography is simultaneously aggressive and passive, and that its “imperial scope” democratizes experience (7). In other words, the act of photographing is both predatory—it presumes a knowledge of people that they don’t have themselves and turns these people into objects—and distancing, shielding—“photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal [and] they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure” (Sontag 9). In a destabilizing situation—in the face of something that seems to threaten or undo us—the photograph can operate as a sort of shield from experience, a veil that protects us from suffering the instability and fracturing of our subjectivity.

In the sunny hospital yard in Haiti, Hurston is forcefully confronted by the zombie’s gaze (or non-gaze), and it is too much for her. “There was nothing that you could say to her or get from her except for looking at her, and the sight of this wreckage was too much to endure for long.” Is the camera a shield against the sight of the zombie, or against the zombie’s non-gaze, her blank, dead eyes? Is Hurston uncomfortable because the zombie cannot stare back—because interaction or transaction with the zombie is only possible as a one-way spectacle? Does this moment reveal the underlying operations and power dynamics of all of Hurston’s ethnographic and photographic work in Haiti? Hurston even suggests that readers of *Tell My Horse* will experience a measure of Hurston’s

less than a foot from you, looking outwards in the public direction, *you are looking at something that has been rendered absolutely marginal*, and all the concentration you can muster will never be enough to centralise it” (24, emphasis in original).

discomfort (and, by extension, perhaps her complicity) in viewing the photograph, for the burned-out eyes were “pronounced enough to come out in the picture.”

The desire for knowledge Hurston displays in her encounter with the zombie is inherently violent—is connected to a second exploitation of the zombie. In other words, the aggression of the camera is contiguous with, bound up in, the desire for intellectual mastery of the unknown. The account of photography’s inherent aggression is well documented. In *The Miracle of Analogy, or, The History of Photography, Part I*, Kaja Silverman ties this account to “the beginning of a new chapter in the history of modern metaphysics—the history that begins with the *cogito*, which seeks to establish man as the ‘relational center’ of all that is, and whose ‘fundamental event’ is ‘the conquest of the world as a picture’” (1). Silverman goes on to suggest that typical challenges to the narrative of photography as imperial(izing) point to “the medium’s indexicality”—its evidentiary power. But such evidentiary power is nearly always located in the past—or, rather, it locates the viewer in the “anterior future,” as Barthes suggests. “By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future... I shudder... *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*” (*Camera Lucida* 96). In looking at a photograph, even if the subject is not yet dead, we are struck either with horror over the finality of the anterior future, or we experience a memorializing sort of melancholy.¹² For Hurston and her readers, such horror is doubled; we are struck not only by the

¹² Silverman provocatively meditates on this passage in Barthes: “But though there have been pitched battles between those who champion the evidentiary value of the photographic image and those who emphasize its constructedness, the former is only another way of overcoming doubt. If a photograph can prove ‘what was,’ then it is the royal road to certainty—the means through which we know and judge the world. And if what we see when we look at a photographic image is unalterable, then there is only one thing we can do: take ‘what is dead’ or ‘going to die’ into our ‘arms.’ Barthes’s mobilization of the future perfect in this and other passages in *Camera Lucida* renders the future as unchanging as the past. This account of the photographic image consequently both expresses and contributes to the political despair that afflicts so many of us today: our sense that the future ‘is all used up’” (Silverman 4).

anterior future of the photograph, but also by the woman's past life, which Hurston assures us is finished. In other words, we look across two times, from two directions, at the photograph: the past, now dead because the zombie has no hope of becoming woman; and the anterior future, the zombie's future death.

In Hurston, evidentiary and imperializing urges and uses meet, converge; her photograph is an index of what was once a woman and is now a zombie at the same time that it serves as the token, the sign, of her final knowledge of the reality of zombies, her achievement and proof of what had never before been proven, verified, documented visually. The zombie seems to stare back defiantly, her body pointed confidently toward the camera. But she is also incapable of an aggressive assertion of self—she is more brute force and will than soul, body without mind, lower, perhaps, than even an animal.

However, at the same time that it depends on the photograph's referentiality, Hurston's account of photographing the zombie reveals the impossibility of representation and recovery as the sole aims of literary texts. Even when Hurston attempts most forcefully to convince us that she has accurately represented the zombie, doubt creeps into her writing (whether this is intentional ironic doubt or an unintentional effect of the writing is impossible to tell). Much of the scholarship on race and photography emphasizes the push-pull dynamic of resistance and subjugation that visual representation particularly dramatizes. For instance, in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe*, Tina Campt suggests that while visual representation has served to solidify stereotypes of raced bodies, photographs can also operate as sites through which individuals and communities (re)shape their image. In other words, photography both documents and pathologizes;

it captures or freezes at the same time that it allows a space for staging and performance.¹³ But the language of representation and resistance stops short in the face of Hurston's ethnographic work. First, this zombie is the absolute other, incapable of granting permission or talking back. But even more importantly, Hurston can only answer her question about "the whole truth and nothing else but the truth about Zombies" with an equivocal "I do not know" but I do have this photograph.

What makes Hurston perennially interesting to scholars—and what prompts scholars to continually rise to her defense, to insist that her views of (Haitian) history are more progressive than they initially seem—is that her text itself opens up a great deal more complexity than her views on history or folk culture might suggest. In some ways, Hurston's photograph, and photography as a medium, is the perfect emblem for her project because of the way it encourages us to think about history and primitive culture as frozen in time. Almost since the inception of the technology, critics have been nervous about its interruptive, embalming nature, the way it frames and freezes its subjects, potentially converting subjects to objects. But readings of specific moments in Hurston depend on whether or not we read the framing devices in her texts sincerely or ironically. As Christopher Douglas points out, Hazel Carby's insistence that Hurston dangerously romanticizes rural folk in a particularly nostalgic, colonialist way is dependent on reading what Douglas calls the "salvage frame" of Hurston's anthropological work "unironically" (47). However, this interpretation of Hurston's text as "unironic" is ultimately not fully satisfactory because Hurston's views on folklore are rife with contradiction; at the same time that she gestures toward freezing or fixing folklore, she also acknowledges its adaptability: "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past. It is still in

¹³ For example, much of the scholarship on Frederick Douglass and photography emphasizes his desire to fashion and circulate his own public image; he crafts an identity as self-made man and gentleman through the circulation of his portrait.

the making. Its great variety shows the adaptability of the black man: nothing is too old or too new, domestic or foreign, high or low, for his use” (“Characteristics of Negro Expression” 837).

Similarly, at the same time that Hurston portrays an uncritical faith in the photograph as incontrovertible evidence, she undercuts this assumption. She never provides us an answer to the opening sally of the chapter—she admits that she cannot provide the whole truth, instead offering fragments, a photograph, and folklore, anecdotes, and myths wrapped in sweeping, universalizing language. Her use of photographs, then, corresponds to the ambiguity of her ethnographic approach more broadly. Conflicting, doubling impulses are apparent throughout *Tell My Horse*. Hurston repeatedly complicates and destabilizes sweeping assertions of myth with her admissions of her inability to piece together information; she gestures to a plethora of evidentiary anecdotes only to draw back and emphasize the silences and reluctance of her interlocutors to speak openly with her. While this inconsistency characterizes much of her anthropological work (in Florida and Jamaica, too), it seems most pronounced and most anxious in Haiti. And all of this is further complicated by Hurston’s stylistic splicing and generic blending; she plays the part of novice and cultural mediator or expert, objective anthropologist and subjective critic, while her writing is at times impersonal and personal, mythical and scientific, skeptical and naïve.¹⁴

¹⁴ This generic splicing and the strange position of Hurston as simultaneously an observer and participant/initiate, expert and novice, is most evident in her writing on Haiti. The section on Jamaica in *Tell My Horse*, which includes no photographs or images of any kind, incorporates history, comparisons to the United States, observations, and anecdotes. Like in *Mules and Men*, there are several moments when Hurston directly invokes her audience and aligns herself with them as voyeurs, saying things like, “It [Pocomania, a cult] is important to a great number of people in Jamaica, so perhaps we ought to peep in on it a while” (3). She describes in a rather straightforward way her interest in the cult, her observations of religious ceremonies, and the local religious leader’s explanations of the cult’s origins and the meanings of various rites and rituals. And the rest of Part I of *Tell My Horse* follows this structure

These stylistic contortions—the splicing of genres, methods, and positions—is in some ways reminiscent of Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, which addresses white and black audiences in both serious and parodic, historical and mystical language. As Paul Gilroy and others have pointed out, the pastiche-like quality of *Souls* allows Du Bois to not only avoid the pitfalls of strictly disciplinary discourse, but to expose the limitations and underlying assumptions of such disciplinary language. In other words, the generic creativity and instability of *Souls* defamiliarizes generic expectations, deterritorializes historical narratives. While Hurston’s attitude toward Haitian history is frequently problematic, there are moments in *Tell My Horse* that seem to evade, escape, or break away from this framework. In other words, the text in its experimentation and surreal juxtapositions of genres and perspectives suggests a certain fugitivity. Hurston’s text tests out and pushes the conventions and limits of ethnographic methods. But such moments of criticism or testing are almost hidden, elusive, near-buried, and they flash up briefly only to be subsumed by the text’s ahistorical mist. In this way, Hurston’s text not only incorporates photography, but adopts a photographic style: she presents multiple images and vignettes—scraps of stories and discourse—before the eyes of the viewer, only every now and then allowing a moment of historical specificity or sly, subversive commentary to flash up in between these images. (This photographic style carries over into John Keene’s writing, as we’ll see later in this chapter.) Readers engaging with *Tell My Horse* as merely a sincere piece of anthropology frequently gloss over these elusive, fugitive moments.

But while Du Bois’s *Souls* maintains historical specificity even while flitting between genres or styles, Hurston’s experiments with genre are more ambiguous, less clearly rooted in a particular stance on historical or political materiality—a fact that should make us question whether her style reinforces a dangerous, dismissive attitude toward history or the ways that narratives about history

fairly closely, including frequent moments in which Hurston reflects on her own subject position or compares cultural practices in Jamaica to America. The section on Jamaica does not contain a parallel historical-mythical chapter.

shape the present. Hurston's photographic style interrupts ethnographic discourse, drawing attention to the conventions and assumptions undergirding the discipline. When Hurston narrates photographing Felicia the zombie, she adheres to and then undermines anthropological procedure, simultaneously asserting the evidentiary and imperializing power of the photograph and acknowledging the impossibility of fully grasping not only the reality of zombies, but Haitian culture more generally. But is she, like Du Bois, then able to estrange us from historiography? Does the frequent ahistorical mist in *Tell My Horse* reinforce a pathological relationship to history, or a romanticized notion of present as somehow detached from past trauma?

While Hurston's refusal to discuss the colonial or slave history of the Caribbean in any detail appears disingenuous or naïve (particularly given her unwillingness to reveal the history of international interventions and economic burdens placed on Haitians, an unwillingness further highlighted by James Weldon Johnson's work), her photographic style and play with anthropological discourse slyly undercut the assumption that primitive cultures are frozen in an ahistorical past. Such moments also register representation's impossibility. And this, if we are attentive readers listening for those fugitive moments in Hurston's writing, should make us suspicious of both pathological and romanticized narratives of the past while revealing the insufficiency of recovery-oriented or preservationist attitudes toward the archive.

The Darkroom Collective's Investment in Media

Several African American writers since Hurston have been interested in the intersections between historical gaps or erasures, visual representation, and media. Christopher Douglas points out that Hurston's brand of anthropology has greatly influenced late twentieth-century and twenty-first-

century writers.¹⁵ Her interest in locating “retentions” or remnants of African culture in the Caribbean and black America, her insistence on recording and recovering folklore and local stories—these traits have continued to influence late-twentieth century writers since Alice Walker rediscovered Hurston in the 1970s.

In a review of Natasha Trethewey’s *Domestic Work* (2000) and *Bellocq’s Ophelia* (2006), Rafael Campo writes that the collection brilliantly examines “the unobvious yet gleaming details of daily life.” He continues, “If she yields perhaps a bit more to the anthropological approach of such concern to Campbell, she does so like a young Zora Neale Hurston, with such great empathy for her subjects that she can’t help but sing her soulful lyrics” (181). Though separated by several decades, Trethewey and Hurston are linked through their ethnographic impulse and interest in archival recovery. In fact, in the same way that recovery codes (and perhaps haunts) Hurston’s legacy as a result of Alice Walker’s influential narrative of rediscovery and black feminist (or womanist) heritage, Trethewey’s work is marked by an attempt to explore and recover historical gaps and erasures, gaps that are inflected by the intersections of race and gender as well as the loss of her mother. But like readings of Hurston, readings of Trethewey’s poetry can also be limited by this emphasis on recovery, and also like Hurston, underneath the ostensible accessibility of her narrative

¹⁵ Douglas goes on to argue that writers like Ishmael Reed and Toni Morrison choose a lineage or tradition that emphasizes Hurston over Wright, Ellison, or Baldwin because of an investment in the underlying logics of Hurston’s Boasian anthropology. He traces a certain version of contemporary multicultural politics (which, like Boasian anthropology, seek to replace theories of biological race with an emphasis on culture) back to Hurston. Douglas writes, “In understanding culture not as a description of what people actually were doing but rather as a prescriptive ambition for matching one’s practices and values to one’s already-existing racial identity, Hurston partakes of the nativist logic of the period” (43). Douglas suggests that when authors like Ishmael Reed turn to Hurston rather than other literary predecessors, they “fram[e] Hurston not just in terms of cultural nationalism, but also by the suggestion that culture should be hereditary” (34).

and persona poems, Trethewey's work—and particularly her turn to photography—is more playful and deceptive than it initially appears.

Trethewey's interest in visual representation, archives, and historical erasures and gaps is partly formed (or, at the very least, influenced by) the Dark Room Collective, a group of black artists in Cambridge and Boston from about 1988 to 1998. Several members of the collective play with visual representation and the visual archive, not only exposing racial optics, but examining how media interrupt and complicate historical narrative, in the process laying bare racialized reading practices.

The Dark Room Collective was formed from loss, a wound. When James Baldwin died in 1987, his funeral became the occasion for a reflection on African American collectivity and a catalyst for the formation of the collective, a group of poets that scholars like Meta Jones have called “as significant to the writing world as the New York School and the Black Arts Movement” (Jada F. Smith). As Thomas Sayers Ellis writes, “Baldwin died / and we became a church” (qtd. Brian Reed 727). For Sharan Strange and Thomas Sayers Ellis, two young black artists from Cambridge, Massachusetts, the loss of Baldwin seemed to double the invisibility of black culture in Boston and Cambridge. Baldwin's death left a vacuum, a vacuum that doubled the absence of black books on bookshelves, black poets at readings. At the same time that the younger poets at Baldwin's funeral mourned, they also felt that their sense of loss was mediated by a kind of generational distance. Strange writes, “We felt somewhat like distant young cousins of a family patriarch whose passing we felt as momentous but could be met without the deepest sorrow for we had known him only from a distance. Instead, our sorrow was suffused with a kind of energy, a desire to make something positive out of loss, and so we resolved that we wouldn't let another of our literary elders get away from us” (Strange). The Dark Room Collective's aesthetic project thus is propelled by and grows out

of a collective sense of loss, a wound from which springs a prodigious creative productivity—distance and intimacy, tradition and rupture, wound and creative output.

Founded by Strange and Ellis, the group was intended both to tie younger black writers to an older tradition of salons and to compensate for the invisibility of black poetry, particularly in Boston and Cambridge. For a brief period between 1989 and the mid-1990s, Cambridge became a vibrant center for black art, a countercurrent of American literature. The collective took its name from a library of black writing they gathered in an old darkroom in the Victorian house they rented in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Strange writes that they liked the pun (dark room, a room full of black books) and enjoyed the metaphor of “a place where images develop, brought from darkness into light. Incubator. Womb” (Strange). This origin story suggests not only their fascination with the visual archive, but also their engagement with history and memory. In this space in which the members of the Dark Room Collective shared their poetry, they consciously structured their work as a response to or outgrowth of the literary tradition, reading a poem in the tradition (or bringing in older, established writers) before reading their own written work.¹⁶

Each of the central figures from the Dark Room Collective is careful to emphasize the group’s diversity of backgrounds and aesthetic approaches. Unlike other collectives and schools, the Dark Room writers aren’t united by an identifiable aesthetic or approach to language. In fact, they are careful to assert an “irreducibly plural” understanding of blackness—one that resists narrow or essentialist views of race and African American literature (Brian Reed 731). From its inception, it was radically inclusive, a literary-activist way of responding to the “exclusion and occlusion” of black culture in the 80s and 90s. This inclusivity was also partly a byproduct of the informality of the

¹⁶ Each of the Dark Room writers mentions this; see interviews with Ellis, Strange, Trethewey, and Keene.

Also see Brian Reed’s “The Dark Room Collective and Post-Soul Poetics.”

group; it began as a reading series before it spun outward into a fully-fledged collective. When I interviewed John Keene in June 2015, he explained:

part of what was incredible about the Dark Room was that everybody was welcome. I learned about it in a barbershop. People who probably would *never* go to a reading would be *there*, just sitting on the stairs inside or outside, standing out front, listening through the windows. People of all races participated. The Dark Room Collective is usually thought of as a group of writers, but it was also a broader arts collective. There were musicians, visual artists, dancers, and of course there were scholars. But it was, for the most part, a non-hierarchical, non-standard institutional entity, which is also important. It was born out of that ethos of the 1970s, the ethos of collectives.... That dual aspect of addressing what was missing but also making an effort to bring those voices together—it was actually quite revolutionary and very exciting. (20)

Sharan Strange similarly reflects, “We weren’t organizing poetry slams but we were similarly populist in our ethos. We wanted to make room for more voices and to provide a venue where we could begin to diminish those common barriers to appreciation of a broader spectrum of voices: biases around race, class, gender, sexuality, culture, ideology, etc.” (Strange). For about ten years, the Dark Room Collective was a haven for black artists and scholars, a space that addressed gaps in representation.

Together the Dark Room Collective writers offer a counternarrative of contemporary American poetry. Strange writes, “Ultimately, the series helped to create a diverse artistic community where before a void had existed. And we noted, with great satisfaction, the reverberations beyond our house: other collectives were formed, new reading series sprang up, and Black writers started to come out of the woodwork” (Strange). However, this counternarrative is fleeting, ephemeral. After

about ten years, the group dispersed, and several of its key figures—Sharan Strange, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Tracy Smith, Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, and Major Jackson—now have jobs at fairly prestigious universities and have since become literary marketplace success stories, collecting two Pulitzers, a Guggenheim, and several other awards and accolades. This would seem to suggest that the countercurrent of American poetry has finally been assimilated into the world of mainstream literary prestige. John Keene suggests, “We, the Dark Room writers, parallel the rise of neoliberalism. It’s hard to exist outside a system that is incorporating everything around it. It’s like Cthulhu” (“Interview with John Keene” 24). He claims that though the group was activist and interested in countering literary climates at the time, they also weren’t cynical about the academy. Thomas Sayers Ellis suggests that when *Callaloo*’s decision to publish a special issue featuring the collective’s writing was both a blessing and a curse, for it opened the group up to a wider audience, but it also, of necessity, ended the group’s radical inclusiveness, for some writers made it into the journal, and some did not.

Though little has been written about the Dark Room Collective, and despite the difficulty of discussing the group in terms of a unified approach or aesthetic, we can trace in almost all of the members’ works an engagement with other media (jazz and hip hop, film, and photography in particular) and an insistence on seeing the present and imagining the future by way of historical, musical, and visual archives of the past. Brian Reed writes that several key Dark Room poets investigate “the role that media play in producing and policing social constructions of race, and they, too, tend to exhibit a wry self-awareness that signals a skeptical distance, not giddy immersion, in US mass culture” (Brian Reed 737).¹⁷ Citing Mark Anthony Neal, Reed suggests that each member of

¹⁷ This interest in media and mass culture is a crucial aspect of Reed’s argument that the Dark Room Collective is part of a group of “post-soul” African American writers who have been shaped by the aesthetics of hip hop—with its cutting, mixing, and remixing, for example—and the images of black Americans in popular culture.

the group understands that “blackness was largely mediated and thus determined by the mechanisms of mass consumer culture” (qtd. Brian Reed 733). Each frequently connects personal memory to national history and dwells on “the intertwined problems of technological mediation, racial representation, and poetic agency” (Brian Reed 737). For example, Trethewey’s *Native Guards* meditates both on her mother’s death and on the almost forgotten, erased presence of a black regiment in the Deep South during the Civil War, for whom there exists no monument. Kevin Young’s work similarly explores the loss of his father as well as the histories of the Amistad and black artist Basquiat.¹⁸ John Keene’s work, like his peers’, excavates the past and meditates on historical silences and erasures. Through Keene’s experimental writing, he pushes and exposes the thought and limits of different media.

Keene and Trethewey exemplify two important poles of contemporary black poetic engagements with photography. Trethewey’s work sits at the intersections of lyric and ekphrastic poetry and recovery-based models of humanities scholarship; her narrative and persona poems imagine the possibility of recovering the voices of anonymous women lost to and erased from the historical record. Keene’s poetry is not ekphrastic or even narrative-based; rather, Keene imagines photographic poetry—the poem becoming a screen on which discontinuous images appear and dissolve. Through this shifting, pulsing poetry, Keene asks us to imagine what history and identity look like through the apparatus of photography.

¹⁸ Brian Reed claims that Kevin Young “concentrates a reader’s attention on what mainstream media’s persistent subliminal association between blackness and animality has done to black artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, who find themselves treated like the ‘Gorilla in Topeka / Famous World Zoo / whose paintings go / for high / as ten grand / a pop,’ that is, like lower animals whose value goes up when they start imitating civilized behavior” (Brian Reed 736).

Perhaps because Keene's writing is more experimental, he is the least visible of the Dark Room writers. In light of most of the other Dark Room Writers' success, we should pause over the comparative invisibility of someone like Keene.¹⁹ His example fits the long history of doubly erasing or excluding experimental minority poetry—an exclusion eloquently discussed by Anthony Reed, Evie Shockley, Dorothy Wang, Aldon Nielsen, and others, and one that I've traced in the introduction. Such poetry is often excluded because it fails to provide readers with an example of a marginal subject speaking authoritatively about a minority community. Again, readers and critics frequently expect minority literature to be accessible and sociologically representative, an expectation that under-theorizes the connections between race, aesthetics, and perception. This exclusion or erasure is particularly dangerous given that experimental black poetry's radical potential stems precisely from its disruption of formal assumptions and desire for mimetic, representational depictions of racial identity.

However, it is important not to read Trethewey and Keene simply as foils for one another (and not only to avoid making the sort of dismissals of black female poetry advanced by the likes of Helen Vendler in her scathing review of Rita Dove's recent poetry anthology).²⁰ When scholars write about Trethewey, they frequently discuss her mother, her emotional investment in the archives she explores, the empathetic reading practices she tries to cultivate. Meanwhile, reviews of Keene's work dwell on its abstraction and theoretical sophistication. But the collaboration central to the Dark Room Collective suggests that each writer shaped the other's work. Though Trethewey's poetry is

¹⁹ Though this invisibility is beginning, finally, to change with the publication of Keene's *Counternarratives*, which has been receiving excellent press since its publication.

²⁰ Helen Vendler, "Are These the Poems to Remember?" *New York Review of Books* (November 24, 2011). Web. See also Marjorie Perloff's dismissal of Trethewey's "Hot Combs," a 2000 poem included in Dove's anthology, in a *Boston Review Forum* titled "Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric" (May 18, 2012).

narrative-based, its play with empathy and the figure of the mother is evocative of Roland Barthes' work, for example, and the text as a whole is an experiment in thinking through the optics of race. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Jacques cannot avoid using words like "voice" and "expression" when describing Keene's work, terms that Jacques suggests are usually left out of conversations about experimental poetry,²¹ and Keene himself is interested in the affective, personal, and material embedded in the abstract. Keene understands that the limits and possibilities of abstraction are at least partly determined by material, by labor—and often by black bodies and black labor ("Interview with John Keene" 19).

Though the Dark Room Collective dissolved after only 10 years, as many such collectives do, it would be a mistake to label the group a failure or a sellout. Strange writes, "What started as an "underground" venture, so to speak, may have capitulated to the museum and the university in the end, but not, I think, without changing those places in important ways" (Strange). When asked about the dissolution of the group, Keene reflects that the collective, along with the Black Rooster Collective and several other groups that took off in the mid- to late-1980s, "countered a lot of what was happening in the larger literary world" because with each moment of promise, there seems to be a backlash; the problem of racism in the literary community is cyclical, perennial. Keene continues,

We always have this problem. Groups like the Dark Room (and then of course, later, Cave Canem and Kundiman, the Asian American Writers Workshop and Canto Mundo, among others) come into being and exist because they are addressing oppression, and then they do this transformative work, just as the Harlem

²¹ See the Afterword to *Seismosis*. "My use of the term 'expression' and 'voice' in describing Keene's texts is deliberate and, to some extent, intended as a formal provocation. This provocation involves features that may mark contemporary experimental verse practices conducted by African-American poets—namely, a refusal to disavow voice while paying close attention to the materiality of language."

Renaissance did, and people call that a failure. Or the Black Arts Movement, people call that a failure. But in fact they aren't; even if we think of them in certain ways as having failed to survive, the work they do continues to resonate long past the actual temporal span of the group or organization in interesting ways. ("Interview with John Keene" 23)

This is the impact of the Dark Room Collective on contemporary literature: they point to bridges between experimental writing, networked artistic communities, and activism. Through the Dark Room Collective in the 80s and 90s, Keene and his peers addressed the invisibility of black writers in the contemporary arts and publishing worlds and forged connections to earlier generations of black artists, offering a counter-narrative or counter-institution of contemporary poetry. In that spirit, the group's writing, scholarship, and teaching not only cross disciplines, but interrogate issues of representation, race, and gender in art, politics, and culture. The Dark Room Collective, then, is an important intervention precisely because they understand that racial optics, the experience of blackness, the foundational institutions and paradigms of US and diasporic culture are inseparable from questions of aesthetics and mediation. Each of the Dark Room Writers challenges reading practices, in the process making us aware that such practices are racialized.

Photographic Recovery in *Bellocq's Ophelia*

The space and apparatus of the visual archive are central to several of the poets in the collective. Natasha Trethewey, one of the most successful poets to emerge from the Dark Rook Collective, makes central to her writing "the ability of mechanically-reproduced images to reveal, conceal, and reshape historical fact" (Brian Reed 739). Much of her work is ekphrastic, allowing her to ask questions about visual representation—about the ways black Americans, and especially black women, have been represented in art, history, and poetry. In Keith Leonard's words, this ekphrastic

work enables her to “interrogate the aestheticization by which painting and photography assert their claims to truth. . . artistic beauty—exemplified by poetry—can indeed remember what has been dismembered even though it often reinforces that dismemberment” (qtd. Jones, “Reframing Exposure” 413). In *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, Trethewey looks to E. J. Bellocq’s photographs of women in New Orleans’ notorious 19th-century red light district, Storyville. The poems reveal the visual economy of the brothel, one based not only on objectifying the women, but also on examining them to find evidence of their racial heritage, for this, Trethewey posits, was a house for men who fetishized light-skinned mixed-race women. The visual economy of the brothel is then reproduced and complicated by Bellocq’s photographic work. Trethewey reflects not only on the problem of seeing race and being interpellated racially, but also draws our attention to photography’s role in constructing and representing race.

The speaker of Trethewey’s poems is a composite persona—and not only is she a combination of the subjects of several different photographs taken by Bellocq, but she is also mediated by John Everett Millais’s painting of Ophelia, a painting on the cover of Trethewey’s high school copy of *Hamlet*.²² The opening poem of *Bellocq’s Ophelia*, a sort of prologue, frames the series of persona poems as an attempt to imagine an answer to the questions that the photographs demand, questions about the experiences of the women of Storyville. “How long did she hold there, this other / Ophelia, nameless inmate in Storyville, / naked, her nipples offered up hard with cold?” (3). Though silenced and anonymous, Trethewey imagines the subject’s almost-speech contained in

²² Trethewey reflected at a reading in 2008 at Auburn University, “When I first saw one of [Bellocq’s] photographs, I was struck by how much the photograph looked like a painting that I had seen, the painting by John Everett Millais of Ophelia, which had been on the cover of my ninth grade *Hamlet* text. So in this poem there’s a lot of ekphrases going on—it’s not just the response to Millais’ painting, but also to Bellocq’s photograph, and also to Hamlet and to Ophelia” (qtd. Jones “Reframing Exposure” 420).

the frame of the photograph, the speech just beyond the shuttering of the camera's lens: "Her body limp as dead Ophelia's, her lips poised to open, to speak" (3). And this almost-speech ushers us into a collection that turns to narrative poetry—primarily letters and diary entries—to fill in the historical gaps in Bellocq's visual documentation of the brothels in New Orleans. Her project attempts to explain what falls outside of the Bellocq's frame, to make up for the anonymity of his photographed subjects; the poems are fascinated with Susan Sontag's claim that "the camera must always hide more than it discloses" (a line from *On Photography* that also serves as an epigraph to Trethewey's collection). In fact, Trethewey has cited the importance of Sontag to her work, particularly Sontag's emphasis on the cruelty of photography. It is this cruelty as well as the silence of the visual archive that compels Trethewey's work: "I am overwhelmed by their—the subject, the black people's—gaze that comes out of those photographs through time to look at me. And I feel compelled and responsible to speak about the connection that I have to them" (qtd. Jones, "Reframing Exposure"). In short, she seeks to recover the voices of the women who look into the camera's lens, silent and, by now, forgotten—lost to history.

The poem's speaker is trained to think about herself as object for spectacle, and posing for Bellocq becomes an opportunity to lose herself and, simultaneously, to endlessly refashion and reimagine herself. The madam of the brothel instructs the women: "You'll see / yourself a hundred times. For our customers/ you must learn to be watched. Empty / your thoughts... Hold still as if / you sit for a painting.... See yourself through his eyes... Let his gaze animate you, then move / as it flatters you most" (11). Trethewey's emphasis on viewing and spectacle not only reveals her immersion in feminist theory (an immersion she has discussed in interviews), but also produces what Meta Jones calls "an aesthetics of witnessing" that makes the reader a voyeur, complicit in the objectification of Ophelia. The women in the brothel, "*octorooms*," are "spectacle: black women, / with white skin, exotic curiosities" (26). Jones traces this "aesthetics of witnessing" to James Baldwin

and the “photographic practices of other African American writers such as Lucille Clifton, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison” (Jones, “Reframing Exposure” 408). Importantly, this aesthetic approach unites formalism and activism *through* photography.²³ Jones points out that Trethewey reveals a history of dehumanized raced bodies, especially female raced bodies, but that she counters this “not by offering putatively ‘positive’ images as a counter to racist taxonomy. Instead, she exposes the process of ‘seeing blackness’ as the central problem; this “troubling vision” is manifest throughout *Bellocq’s Ophelia*” (Jones, “Reframing,” 408). In other words, Trethewey’s aesthetic and activist intervention is not to counter one set of images with another (and not to give into respectability politics’ demand for positive images), but to expose racialized practices of looking—to lay bare the processes by which racial identification and interpellation form and operate. In so doing, Trethewey is able to highlight racialized forms of reading and the arbitrariness and fluidity or changeability of such forms.

In the earliest poems in the collection, the speaker worries that she is suited for sex work because of her training in viewing herself as an object for spectacle, a training that began before she entered the brothel when her white father would come to visit and inspect her appearance. “It troubles me to think that I am suited / for this work—spectacle and fetish— / a pale odalisque.... I am a reversed silhouette / against the black backdrop where I pose, now” (20). But through posing for Bellocq and apprenticing herself to him, she begins to see differently. Posing, in other words, becomes an opportunity to lose self and, simultaneously, to endlessly refashion and reimagine the self. However, controlling the apparatus of the camera changes her habits of viewing:

angles I’ve just begun to notice. I see,

²³ One of the core missions of the Dark Room Collective was the unification of activist and aesthetic interests and practices; see “An Interview with John Keene,” as well as Sharan Strange’s and Thomas Sayers Ellis’s interviews about the Dark Room Collective.

too, the way the camera can dissect

the body, render it reflecting light

or gathering darkness [...]

I find myself drawn to what shines—

iridescent scales of fish on ice

[...]

like the camera's way of capturing

the sparkle of plain dust floating on air. (27)

Here, the camera is capable of seeing what the naked eye cannot—even the part of her heritage the speaker attempts to conceal. “In the negative / the whole world reverses, my black dress turned / white, my skin blackened to a pitch. *Inside out*, / I said, thinking of what I've tried to hide” (43). The negative—the inversion—can here be viewed as either revelatory of her racial identity or as exposing the artificiality of racial interpellation. At the same time, though, Ophelia is keenly aware of the way the camera both distorts and misses or obscures details, objects, people: “silverfish behind / the walls, the yellow tint of a faded bruise— / other things here, what the camera misses.” She is also aware of the power dynamics of visual representation; importantly, she knows that she will remain anonymous even as Bellocq's name is attached to photographs of her (*Bellocq's Ophelia* 39). She also juxtaposes a visit to a fellow sex worker dying of an unnamed sexually transmitted disease to a reflection on having her mugshot taken by the local prison officials, a juxtaposition that hints at Trethewey's sophisticated understanding of state surveillance and attempts to control minority and

female subjects, particularly subjects deemed indecent or deviant. These vignettes and images in *Bellocq's Ophelia* reveal photography and spectacle to be intersectional, contradictory, multivalent.

Scholarship on Trethewey, and particularly on *Bellocq's Ophelia*, repeatedly suggests that she “gives voice” to figures lost to history. For example, Annette Debo writes that “By naming [this composite character] Ophelia, Trethewey participates in the tradition of recovering mythic female figures denied a voice... Instead of insanity and death, Trethewey’s Ophelia is given a voice with which to recount lost American history” (Debo 200-201). Meta Jones argues that Trethewey “creates a ‘counter-archive’ of poems that provide a feminist or womanist perspective on sexuality, embodiment and labor within the body of visual art created by white men from an elite socioeconomic class and artistic milieu. She reframes sex workers’ exposure within fictive forms of literary enclosure” (“Reframing Exposure” 412). Such writing echoes the work of scholars like Tina Campt in stressing the ability of photographed subjects to resist, to claim agency in posing for and crafting their own visual archives. And such resistance, these scholars argue, implicates the viewers, forcing us to see differently, to become aware of our own racialized habits of spectatorship and consumption.

Therefore, while Trethewey is interested in imagining the voices of silent, anonymous women lost to history, she also probes that silence, suggesting that the women’s elusiveness does not rule out a certain kind of resistance. In positing that the women of Storyville were not merely objects of Bellocq’s photographs but also controlled, to some extent, their own images, she connects the visual politics of *Bellocq's Ophelia* to a tradition of photographic resistance. This tradition begins with colonial subjects photographed by visiting conquerors and ethnographers and continues with Frederick Douglass, who famously circulated images of his portrait as part of his self-fashioning as a gentleman. Ultimately, though, despite its artificiality and ability to tell “half truths,” photography is a memorializing vehicle that “fastens us to our pasts, makes grand / the unadorned moment” (30).

Trethewey's ethnographic recovery projects, like Hurston's, occasionally appear transparently accessible, naïve in its faith in the possibility of recovering lost voices and in the evidentiary power of photography. Scholars are perhaps partly responsible for such readings of Trethewey's poetry; tellingly, for example, Meta Jones labels Trethewey's aesthetic "empathetic expansiveness" and emphasizes poetry's ability to "heal," to become a memorial to the lost mother ("Reframing Exposure," 413, 424). Trethewey herself encourages such readings; she frequently mentions her mother in interviews and talks about the role poetry plays both in recovery and in memorializing the dead, lost, or absent. But what frequently gets lost in readings of Trethewey's poetry is its deceptiveness. In the same way that Hurston's work undercuts anthropological discourses and expectations, Trethewey's poetry occasionally subtly undercuts its project of empathetic reading. While the persona poems lure the reader into a kind of identification with the speaker, the collection's continual emphasis on what falls outside of the frame suggests that Trethewey's recovery project is incomplete, perhaps even impossible. And the poems themselves continually gesture toward this impossibility even as they hold out the promise of speaking for the anonymous, lost past.

Photographic Contingency in John Keene's *Annotations*

John Keene, another writer from the Dark Room Collective, shares Trethewey's fascination with visual art and the gaps and erasures in the historical record. But where Trethewey seeks to fill in historical gaps, using narrative and persona poetry to imagine lost and silenced voices speaking back from historical photographs, Keene's photographic poetics draws our attention to the ways in which the camera's lens simultaneously freezes and unmoors history, estranging readers from the text and asking us to re-examine historical narratives and visual archives.

Though less well known than Natasha Trethewey, Major Jackson, Kevin Young, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Tracy K. Smith, or Sharan Strange, each of whom has achieved literary success after the dispersal of the Dark Room, John Keene perhaps more than the other members of the collective attempts to produce poetry that thinks back and forth between the visual and the verbal or oral. His second collection, *Seismosis* (2006), is a collaboration with a visual artist, Christopher Stackhouse, in which poem and pen and ink drawing speak back and forth to one another. And his first collection, *Annotations* (1995), uses photographic language to interrupt its experimental prose poetry. While Trethewey engages with a photographic archive in order to unearth and recover women's silenced voices, Keene tries to think through the apparatus of the camera. Keene's photographic poetics draws our attention to the ways in which the camera's lens simultaneously freezes and unmoors history, estranging readers from the text and asking us to re-examine historical narratives and visual archives. Keene uses the photographic to dislocate identity from consciousness, to estrange viewer from text in order to provoke an interruptive reading, one that is indirect, halting, and open to the shocking assertions of the visual and sonic. In *Annotations*, photographic objects speak back, their musicality fracturing the subject-object split and pointing toward an aesthetic of radical reorientation.

Annotations is generically unstable, refusing to identify as fiction or autobiography, prose or poetry. Keene reflects that this collection "abstracts the autobiographical—it takes what could be read as a memoir and sort of filters it through the genre of poetry, or the intersection of poetry and fiction" ("An Interview with John Keene" 9-10). The collection reflects on growing up in St. Louis at the same time that it attempts to "foreground" a "certain understanding of marginality. It's about a kind of dialectic between a personal sense of being marginal in multiple ways and also a decentered self... But also within that dialectic is an understanding that personal experiences are always mediated by the social, by the discursive" ("An Interview with John Keene" 9). This understanding

of marginality is literalized in the form of the text: each section is composed of one long, unbroken paragraph that pulls you into and then pushes you away from a series of shifting images that flash up and dissolve. *Annotations* not only avoids stable lyric or prose forms, but also refuses to establish a clear center, a nodal point around which to pivot or focus the narrative. This is apparent from the title of the book to the last line of the text, when Keene's narrator writes, "And so, patient reader, these remarks should be duly noted as a series of mere life-notes aspiring to the condition of annotations" (78). It is a text layered with arrests, stoppages, and divergences, a text that frequently forces a halting, stumbling reading—a series of shifting, kaleidoscopic meditations on growing up in St. Louis, on history and art, tradition and memory.

Much of the text's drive toward both repetition and divergence stems from a reflection on memory and the simultaneous desire for tradition and historical rupture (a dynamic that should evoke or echo chapter one's interest in improvisation). In *Annotations*, John Keene plays with the archive, particularly turning to photography and the visual archive in order to meditate on the ways in which archived objects both erase and preserve memories. Keene explains:

With *Annotations* I wanted to give that sensation as you're reading it of a mind flowing. But at the same time it has the kind of metonymic movement (I think Samuel Delany pointed this out) of fiction, where you're getting glimpses of a life that by contiguous relation suggests these much larger stories, multiple lives. So there's a rhythm, there are the resources of poetry to keep pulling you forward, but... the sentences themselves keep darting like currents so that you're both pulled in and pushed away. ("Interview with John Keene" 12-13)

For example, in the first section, the speaker's birth, because of his supposed resemblance to an uncle, is cast as a sort of fulfillment or continuance of familial history: "In that way, a sense of tradition was upheld, one's place in the reference-chain secured. Digression" (4). However, just as

the speaker gestures toward continuity and tradition, the text departs, forcefully announcing its own “digression.”

Like Trethewey, Keene seeks to interrogate the conditions and limits of visibility and visual representation. Keene is both drawn to and repelled by this dissociative power of the visual archive. On the one hand, photography threatens to trap the being in the frame of a camera, to capture and freeze the subject as an object for viewers’ judgment and measurement. On the other hand, this dissociative power of photographs allows Keene to imagine decentered subjectivity—identity separated from consciousness, history without linear narrative. Never synthesizing or explaining, Keene’s text instead asks us to read for affinities and echoes, ruptures and breaks.

From the opening lines, the narrator simultaneously draws us into and estranges us from a series of images that flash up and diverge or dissolve, interrupted or diverted to make way for new images. The opening of *Annotations* sounds the note of resemblance and repetition, a thread that runs through the text. The desire for connection and tradition perhaps stems from what the narrator refers to as the impulse toward repetition: “Desire, among other things, derives its force from repetition, or so your general pattern of behavior would lead you to believe” (37). Patterns, repetitions, point to evidence of the desire for recurrences, echoes, tradition. “And so, encased in each attempt to make himself heard,” the narrator suggests, “lies the aim to site his personal development within the broader historical record” (32). Not only does the narrator trace his resemblance—and, by extension, connection—to his family tradition, but he also points to the material evidence of the family’s history. In the section “Language, Knowledge, a Teeming River of Implications,” the narrator reflects,

A small yet insubordinate squadron of impressions had laid siege to his consciousness since infancy. Everything reposed beneath a glaze of dew, which was each morning’s way of announcing its arrival. The slow greening of daylight through

the shutter slats, or evening, when the gangway grew sullen with darkness. Chances are. Shadows appeared to creep across the floor, until you focused to discover them ants. Photographs will substitute for a fully-sketched description. (11-12)

Here, the narrator gestures to an accumulation—an excessive accretion—of visual “impressions,” impressions which, he suggests, exert a particular force on him, determining the shape of his reflections rather than being consciously shaped or manipulated by him. Just as Flusser suggests photographers serve as functionaries of the camera apparatus, Keene’s narrator is caught up in this image apparatus, the photographic poem the screen on which images present themselves and fade or dissolve away. Photographs also threaten to replace memory, and though shapes and figures leap out at him, these shift on further examination (shadows become ants, for example, and each object is covered with a deceptive, watery sheen).

But this claim about the substitutional nature of photographs is itself arresting and slippery, particularly as the text again slides abruptly away from this reflection on photography. Photograph as substitute for description suggests that the visual archive preserves familial and cultural memory, maintaining ties between the present and past, and signaling, too, toward the future. However, such a claim seems to simultaneously register a sense of skepticism or even mourning over the possibility that photographic records might prevent descriptive or creative engagement. As Fred Moten suggests in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, “Memory—bound to the way the photograph holds up what it proposes, stops, keeps—is given pause because what we thought we could look at for the last time and hold holds us, captures us, and doesn’t let us go” (199). Barthes elaborates on this notion by suggesting that the photograph is not only opposed to memory, but “quickly becomes a counter-memory” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 91). Keene’s narrator even goes so far

as to suggest that visual memories inhibit us from perceiving the present.²⁴ In this highly digressive, elliptical, and frequently abrupt style, Keene urges us to grasp both possible readings at once. Thus, photographs become records and vessels of the past as well as obstructions of memory. In other words, photographs record, and therefore preserve memory and maintain connections to the past. However, photography's drive to freeze a past that is fleeting and in flux is also highly problematic and encourages a fixed as opposed to dynamic, contingent relationship to the past and to memory. In this way, photographs can make memory beholden, immobilizing it and preventing notions of the past from mutating or evolving. For Keene, both of these readings of photographic memory must coexist—must be held in tension—so that they resonate with and complicate one another.

As I have discussed in relation to Hurston, part of what draws us to photography is the medium's ethnographic and historical power, the way it flatters fetishistic and collecting impulses. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes reflects that we are attracted to the medium's ethnographic and historical power. Photography, writes Barthes, "immediately yields up those 'details' which constitute the very raw material of ethnological knowledge" and "allows me to accede to an infra-knowledge; it supplies me with a collection of partial objects and can flatter a certain fetishism of mine: for me this 'me' which likes knowledge, which nourishes a kind of amorous preference for it... Photography has the same relation to History that the biographeme has to biography" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 28, 30). In the section suggestively titled "Records, Accounts, Accumulations as Explication," the narrator further complicates this meditation on photographic evidence—on the desire for historical evidence, the kind of desire we see apparent *and* simultaneously undermined in Hurston's and Trethewey's work. At the same time that Keene gestures to the fetishism of historical evidence that photography encourages, he recognizes, like Barthes, that such objects are seductively,

²⁴ "In the interim he flipped through bulletins, which were troves of vital information. Memories, like cataracts, sometimes blind us to the present" (Keene, *Annotations* 17).

dangerously “partial.” For example, after detailing the clothing he and his friends wore as adolescents, the narrator says, “The photographs document the changes in the family’s sense of fashion, but reveal no more than a hint of the unraveling of its internal fabric” (30). This double sense of photography as both evidentiary and incomplete alludes to Barthes’s sense that photography is both “eidetic science” and “only contingency, singularity, risk” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 20). Though the photograph presents itself as complete, transparent evidence (of uncut, unmediated history), it also, by its very frame, alludes to what falls outside of its rectangular space—to what is hidden, inaccessible, fleeting, and to what has already disappeared, unable to be set down, captured, preserved. And we as readers are drawn to what is contingent in the photo—to what exceeds the frame, escapes, and gestures outward, away from the possibility of representation.

Much of Keene’s ambivalence about the role of the photograph in preserving and, paradoxically, distorting or halting memory seems to stem from an anxiety about—and obsession with—perception and representation. At one point, the narrator reflects, “The desire to be seen was an attempt to escape alterity, or in other words, to shift from the margins to the center” (27). Here, visibility seems to offer a refocusing, a way around alterity; visibility seems to promise not just recognition, but *centrality*. However, even this desire is fractured, made paradoxical: “So much of our sense of identity depends on this desire for attention,” the narrator insists, “yet we conversely deem it unseemly to draw great notice to ourselves” (42). Further, as Barthes observes in *Camera Lucida*, being seen and then captured by the camera’s eye is not to be constituted as speaking, moving subject, but to become an immobile object:

For the Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning disassociation of consciousness from identity.... Photography transformed subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object.... In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph (the one I *intend*) represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the

truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. (12-14, emphasis in original)

To become visible photographically is to become dislocated from one's own image, to become both object and specter in the same moment, the same gesture. What is perhaps so spectral in the closing of the camera's shutter is its finality, its ability to capture what is (or, more properly, what was, what has been) a fleeting moment and take it out of time, freezing or halting it. The viewer of the historical photograph "shudders" over the death that will have been (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 96). Particularly in looking at historical portraits, we see the subject of the photograph as already a sort of spectral figure, for, though captured and frozen as a living presence, we foresee in the photograph the death which has already occurred at the time of our encounter with the image.

For Barthes, as well as Trethewey, to experience this spectrality, the prefiguration or future anterior of death—the photograph's relationship to something or someone that *will have been dead* or *will have disappeared* by the time you view it—is to be suffused with melancholy. And for both writers, this melancholic relationship to the image is infused with the absent presence of the mother. Trethewey has stated in interviews, "I think my interest in photographs started after my mother died. I started looking at old photographs of her, trying to see if it was all there in the photographs, what was going to happen to her and to us and our lives. Is it here, or do I, as the poet, put it there?" ("Interview with Natasha Trethewey" 364). She says later in the interview that she is "especially interested in absence. Every photograph represents a moment that is no longer, passed, as well as ways of being that have disappeared. I've always been a little obsessed with the way photographs hold and create an object out of that moment. And I've often thought if you look at a photograph, if you really study the gestures and expressions that the people have in the photograph,

you could see the rest of their lives, everything that's to come" ("Interview with Natasha Trethewey" 364). This melancholy springs from the impossible promise of representation.

Keene is both drawn to and repelled by this spectrality, this dissociative power of the visual archive. Sontag suggests that photographic seeing is "dissociative seeing" (97). Sontag fears that such dissociation dangerously severs photographs—and, by extension, subjects and objects—from their original contexts. But as Fred Moten and other scholars in blackness studies have suggested, blackness is already an experience of separation, dissociation, fugitivity—of being simultaneously frozen in history and without history (as I discussed with relation to Fanon, Césaire, and Glissant in the introduction). In other words, what Sontag fears in photography's dissociative power has already been experienced by the black subject. Photographic thinking, then, enables writers like Keene to explore decentered subjectivity and marginality.

One of the refrains repeated throughout *Annotations* forcefully asserts that this aesthetic project "entails a decentered notion of the 'subject'" (73).²⁵ The text enacts this decentering visually and organizationally, splitting consciousness from identity at the same time that it denies readers a central pivot or focal point. At one point, the narrator suggests, "Love, therefore, assumes the status of cynosure, when in truth it is but one outward manifestation of the internal discourse of returning" (48). Cynosure is foreclosed here, instead repositioned as perpetual returning and circling (movements that echo *Banjo*); what seems at any moment to be the fulcrum may instead be the margin, refrain, or precursor to some other meditation, suggestion, or image. Further forestalling center or pivot, photographic images are not collected and organized here. In fact, the narrator observes in a typically offhanded moment that "Certain sensations are unrenderable in sequential

²⁵ This phrase is repeated, with slight differences, throughout the text. For example, the narrator writes that "Memory, that vast orchard of myriad, variegated moments, appears to undergo an endless replanting.... This entails no notion of the 'subject'" (7).

terms” (25). Instead, Keene seems to enact literarily what Walter Benjamin describes in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and never seen again.... For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Benjamin, “Theses,” 255). It is precisely the shifting, dizzying, ephemeral display of images that makes it possible for something to escape or exceed the photograph. Keene writes,

They too were unable, remember, to categorize to their satisfaction the book of drawings, and went about dismissing them as the products of a ‘troubled’ mind. Snowblink, now blink, see. One’s thoughts are the goads that drive one’s calf-like existence forward, strange diaphanous gods reappearing day and night. Marronage. Seen properly as a field of multiteities, characterized by the presence of so many disjunctions, one might learn to appreciate this experience if only for the intense polysemic pleasure that it offers. Worry later. (57-58)

Conscious of the ways in which organized collections of photographs—the apparatus of the archive, which frames, positions, and classifies—block memory and oversimplify history, the narrator constantly breaks away from their hold, launching outward from the photographs. In the last section of *Annotations*, Keene refers to this “field of multiteities” as a “living, dazzling, eighteen-panel mosaic” (78).²⁶ Images here are unclassifiable, and reflection is fugitive, polysemic—akin to “marronage” in always pushing forward toward freedom. As Barthes argues, “the Photograph is a certain but

²⁶ The fuller excerpt reads, “Always the desire to be loved formed the nucleus, about which other events and moments, positive, negative, or otherwise, whirred like the elementary particles. Some men, women, certain trees, bare certainties. Were these accounts, as was projected for this aesthetic project, selected and set down as carefully as tesseracts, the cumulative effect would approximate that of a living, dazzling, eighteen-panel mosaic” (78).

fugitive testimony” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 93). This is what Fred Moten repeatedly refers to in as the “freedom drive” of radical black art.

The interruptive, circular, shifting aesthetics of Keene’s *Annotations* pushes toward a new way of reading—reading for kaleidoscopic layering, for the “intense polysemic pleasure” afforded by observing this “field of multities.” “Comprehension does not hinge upon an image,” the narrator insists. “The view beyond the patio too was transforming as through a kaleidoscope, changing daily its array of moods and colors into ever more awe-provoking patterns” (38).²⁷ This text, like Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*, “pursue[s] resonance rather than resolution” (*Bedouin Hornbook* 17). Or, as Haryette Mullen suggests, “Negation, deferral, interruption, contradiction, equivocation, qualification, and modulation continually complicate or preclude any categorical statement” (Mullen 160). In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes distinguishes between the experience of reading a “unary” photograph, which privileges harmonious balance and transparent meaning, and what he refers to as the “*punctum*,” in which particular, curious details interrupt the reading and “provoke[e] a tiny shock” (49).²⁸ This means that the *punctum* is both “immediate and incisive” as well as belated; “sometimes, despite its clarity, the *punctum* should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no

²⁷ The text later complicates and almost undoes this assertion: “Our recollective faculties extensively employ this function, dredging doggedly through the muck in search of that vital image” (73). As I have suggested earlier, these two contradictory, paradoxical claims need to be held in productive tension, so that together they enact a sort of shifting, kaleidoscopic vision.

²⁸ Barthes elaborates, “The Photograph is unary when it emphatically transforms ‘reality’ without doubling it, without making it vacillate (emphasis is a power of cohesion): no duality, no indirection, no disturbance.” “Unary” photographs, which push for transparency and harmony, can produce shock “but no disturbance; the photograph can ‘shout,’ not wound.... [N]o detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading” (41). Interruptions, disturbances, and fissures produce the *punctum*. “Very often the *Punctum* is a ‘detail,’ i.e., a partial object. Hence, to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to give myself up” (43, emphasis in original).

longer in front of me and I think back on it” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 53). Significantly, in order to perceive the delayed effects of the photograph—its explosive, interruptive force—we have to look at it indirectly, averting our gaze or temporarily closing our eyes. And this simultaneous indirection and keen attention to interruptive details—details that flash up and push against abstract meditations—produce a surrealist, estranging effect, in which, in the words of Benjamin, “all intimacies are sacrificed to the illumination of detail” (“A Short History of Photography” 62).

This notion of belated awareness of the *punctum* parallels the way that writers like Badiou approach the event, or the understanding of history as not a progressive, linear motion but a set of interruptions, fragments, and radical shifts, most of which are only recognizable in retrospect. Photographs demand a different conception of history; photographs viewed “testimonially” demonstrate that history “is not continuous, not at all flowing, not a river. Instead, it seems to reveal a world in which time is splintered, fractured, blown apart... The idea of historical time as continuous was countered with a notion of history that imagines time, in a striking image, as an invisible *event*, a decisive moment that requires a new conceptual framework” (Baer 4, emphasis in original). Significantly, to build this theory of photography’s relationship to time, Ulrich Baer draws on photographs of the Holocaust, a historical atrocity only recognizable after the fact as an *event* demanding a “new conceptual framework.” The photographic poetics of Keene tease out this notion that we are arrested in the moment of viewing a photograph, but we can only recognize the way that photograph (or photographs) ruptures our sense of history after the fact.

In these moments of indirection, interruption, and temporary disorientation, Keene’s shifting photographic images cease to become silent. In the *punctum*, the detail that “provokes a tiny shock” in the viewer, “the *object speaks*, it induces us, vaguely to think.... Ultimately, Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatizes, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 38, emphasis in original). Such a reading through indirection is also a

listening act, and necessitates hearing the “kind of subtle beyond” of the *punctum*—both its immediate demands and retrospective insistence—a reading both for quiet, pensive speech and moments of contingency in the photo, details that shout back (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 59).²⁹ Mackey, too, echoes this model of reading, insisting that tonal incompleteness pushes us to hear for a “direction” as opposed to a destination, which “means hearing at the same time beyond [the tone], beyond it in the direction of its will, and going toward the expected next tone. Listening to the music, we are not first *in* one tone, then in the next, and so forth. We are always *between* the tones, *on the way* from tone to tone; our hearing does not remain with the tone, it reaches beyond and through it” (Victor Zuckerkandl; qtd. Mackey, *Discrepant Engagement* 15-16). (Again, this echoes the “undertone” of chapter one.) Keene’s endless qualifications and digressions are insistently musical, jazz-like in their improvisational quality, and force us to dwell in the spaces between images, notes, and meditations. Our expectations for a destination are frustrated. As Keene’s narrator suggests, “Inquiry thereby becomes a ceaseless aspect of living, its complement a vital and vigorous sense of improvisation. Against meaning” (Keene 28). Our expectations for a destination are frustrated, and instead we are attuned for what Keene alludes to as “A sudden musicality of phrase, as when one hears the windowpanes humming” (16). The aural force of the text—the musical moments that burst through Keene’s *Annotations*—erupt in those moments in which the objects of the photograph shout (or whisper?) back uncontrollably. For example, the narrator writes that “Volubility unchecked in an imaginative child is sure prescription for disaster. Although he tried to cloak these comments

²⁹ In “A Brief History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin also echoes this notion that photographs point or allude to a sound that exceeds the frame. He writes that “there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer’s art, something that cannot be silenced...” (58).

in a voiceless whisper, his voice dispersed the silence like a well-cast stone” (18). Musicality here exceeds the body, spilling out and forcing the reader-listener to take note.³⁰

This notion of the object speaking back—sound cutting sight—breaks the subject-object split that photography threatens to perpetuate. Photography tends toward immobilization and embalment, framing and fixing the subject as silent (or silenced) object of the viewer’s gaze. This silencing of the photographic object is perhaps contagious. Barthes insists that the experience of viewing a photograph is highly solitary; the viewer experiences the photograph alone in the literal or hypothetical archive. However, listening for the *sound* of the photograph has the potential to undo this unidirectional subject-object movement. Fred Moten suggests that “The meaning of a photograph is cut and augmented by a sound or noise that surrounds it and pierces its frame” (*In the Break* 205). Keene’s narrator gestures toward this aural force: “The violent tenor of the recollections, perhaps resulting from a delayed effect, far exceeding what everyone had expected. Your tongue, but a bat in its cavern of reassurance, would take flight when you least expected it” (12). Again, the body, the frame, the poem cannot contain the eruptive, interruptive force of the musical note which bursts forth from Keene’s visual meditations, forcing a new way of reading and listening, one aware of contingency and willing to be arrested, one attuned to both immediacy and the “delayed effect.”

This delayed effect, and much of the impetus behind our attunement to the latent meaning of image and sound, largely stems from the *spectrality*—the haunting absences—of Keene’s play with and in the photographic archive. The process of inhabiting the spaces in between tones or in between flashing, ephemeral images necessitates an attentiveness to the absent, to that which has been erased, discarded, closed off. According to Moten, the iconic photograph of Emmett Till

³⁰ Another fascinating example of this excessive, forceful sound particularly stands out: “In the end this disquieting descant left each child more unsure than before. His heart is a grotto bearing witness to others’ kindnesses. A sudden musicality of phrase, as when one hears the windowpanes humming” (16).

“reopens or leaves open the wound” and compels us “to be interested in the complex, dissonant, polyphonic affectivity of the ghost, the agency of the fixed but multiply apparent shade, an improvisation of spectrality, another development of the negative” (*In the Break* 199, 196). This political and aesthetic imperative operates “*By way of sound,*” the sound that is alluded to, but escapes out from, the space of the photograph.³¹ Moten continues, “So this is about the cut music enacts on the image and after the fact of a set of connections between death and the visual, between looking and retribution—as arrest, abduction, abjection” (Moten 197).³² (This “cut” also anticipates the cinematic cutting of chapter three.) In Nathaniel Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*, this gesture toward spectral absence is overtly cast as a sort of phantom limb, a wound around which the band’s music dances, through which they improvise, toward which they reach.³³

In Keene’s *Annotations*, this gesture toward spectrality is more elliptical, indirect, implicit, occurring in fleeting, half-buried phrases. For example, at one point the narrator suggests that “The impact of this pebble of history is barely felt nowadays, particularly by the generation that has

³¹ Moten continues, “Looking at Emmett Till is arrested by overtone reverberations; looking demurs when looking opens onto an unheard sound that the picture cannot secure but discovers and onto all of what it might be said to mean that I can look at this face, this photograph” (198).

³² In fact, Moten takes Barthes to task a bit for what he perceives to be Barthes’s blindness or refusal to acknowledge the sound of the photograph: “But Barthes wasn’t trying to hear the sound of that display, the sound of the photograph’s illumination of facticity that holds an affirmation not of, but out of death” (Moten 109).

³³ Haryette Mullen writes, “With its insistent yet gracefully improvisational reclamation of the fragmented, dispersed, and syncretic elements of the black diaspora aesthetic traditions, Mackey’s novel plumps the ‘ontology of loss’” (155). And she continues, “The writer/composer uses words as music to heal the phantom pain of a social body torn asunder and music as a presence to heal the absence associated with the ‘space we’re all immigrants from,’ as the text puts it... In this manner the writer/composer sets out ‘to reconstruct—with all the comely lost illusion of lore—to reassemble a Way, as though this were ‘his’ (he himself realized the presumption) to do anything with’” (159-160).

benefited most” (8).³⁴ Further, in each recounting of record, of archival act, Keene’s narrator gestures toward that which falls outside of the archive—the repressed, unspeakable, or invisible—that which cannot be expressed by or contained in the photographic collection. According to both Jacques Derrida and Dragan Kujundzic, the archive is always constituted in relation to its outside. In fact, the archive is explicitly contaminated and marked by the very materialities it has excluded. Absences and exclusions leave “suppressed traces,” “markers of alterity” that open the archive up to the future (Kujundzic 168). In order to listen to the possible future-oriented resonances, then, we must be attuned to the material that exceeds or is shut out of the archive, the only evidence of which exists as trace or remainder. In Mackey’s *Bedouin Hornbook*, these traces are alternately figured as ash, dust, and the emanations from the broken bottle of perfume. Such distilled remainders speak to erasure, erosion, and brokenness, and cannot be assimilated into previous ways of seeing and reading.

Ultimately, through his disjunctive, elliptical, continuously shifting and diverging aesthetic project, Keene aims to explore the visual and phonic traces that haunt the apparatus—the fabric—of *Annotations*. What exceeds the citational record?

Consider: images of Vietnam, the assassinations, and Watergate bear that fuzzy, bluish-white glimmer, since nearly all your recollections of that era’s major events are but the residue of each evening’s televised diversions. Despite the activism the uneven terrain of history remains, the challenge, however, no longer to write the unrecorded story. What’s going on. . . . In other words, innocence, no sense, a

³⁴ The narrator echoes this refrain later, lamenting, “Our generation lacks more than a cursory sense of the world that our ancestors faced, which surprises no one cognizant of the contempt in which the nuances of history are currently held” (40).

nuisance. Blind-sight rendered the story that he was beginning unreadable (Keene 31)

Here, Keene reminds us that all of our perceptions and memories of the social world are mediated and rehearsed, framed and selected for us. But, more importantly, they leave a “residue,” visually figured here as a “fuzzy, bluish-white glimmer” cast over the televised images of current and past events (a bluish-white glimmer that perhaps echoes the introduction’s brief treatment of the snowy TVs in Claudia Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*). The remainder here is not resolved or explicated; rather, it continues to haunt the text, vague and unsettled (or unsettling), apparent in the shifting language (“innocence, no sense, a nuisance”), but eventually leaving the story illegible, “unreadable.” Elsewhere, Keene’s narrator alludes to other remainders, suggesting that the characters in the world of the text “were observed to interact in rhythms common to their faith and class, leaving abstract yet indelible *imprints* on the etching-plate of others” (15, emphasis added). Even the last page of the text is contaminated by such traces: “Thus his musings, when written down, gradually melded, gathered shape, solidified like a well-mixed *mâché*, and thus, upon rereading them he realized what he had accomplished was the construction of an actual voice. The final dances of youth, dim incandescence” (78). What initially seems here like a sort of final resolution and unity—a “melded, gathered shape”—is ultimately still coated in a “dim incandescence” reminiscent of the “fuzzy, bluish-white glimmer” pervading the mediated images of current events. And again, this incandescence is not categorized or clarified, but ceaselessly marks the conclusion of *Annotations*. These are the material traces of that which exceeds the archive—the sound that cannot be contained by the body or the camera’s lens, the signification un-translated in the photograph.

To listen to the contingency of the photograph—to allow ourselves to be arrested by the event—is an ethical act; the process of inhabiting the spaces in between flashing, ephemeral images and listening for what shouts back from within the frame necessitates an attentiveness to the absent,

to that which has been erased, discarded, closed off. We are compelled “to be interested in the complex, dissonant, polyphonic affectivity of the ghost... an improvisation of spectrality” (Moten, *In the Break* 196). The narrator of *Annotations* suggests that “Listening implies a desire to surrender” (61). Keene here resists Barthes’s emphasis on the solitude of the process of reading photography and, by extension, the cultural and familial archive more broadly. Barthes writes, “The reading of public photographs is always, at bottom, a private reading... Each photograph is read as the private appearance of its referent: the age of Photography corresponds precisely to the explosion of the private into the public, or rather into the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 97-98). Part of Barthes’s melancholic view of photographs, then, stems not only from their spectral nature, but from his solitary relationship to them. In Keene’s *Annotations*, however, when photographic object shouts back—when sound spills out of the frame of the photograph—the process of reading photography becomes social, collective, shared, as the vision and projects of the Dark Room Collective testify. Keene’s insistence on phonic excess implies a joint project, a project of collective listening. For Moten and for Keene, “really listening” implies not only a destabilization of readerly practices, but an attentiveness to Others, a collective awareness of erasures, absences, and traces which speak to archival gaps and excesses.³⁵ This process requires a sort of “surrender,” a giving up of typical expectations and a giving over to the voice that shouts or sings or moans from within or outside of the frame of the photograph. We look, also, for the “fuzzy, bluish-white glimmer” pervading the mediated images of current events, or the “glaze of dew”—the material trace of that which exceeds the archive—the sound that cannot be contained by

³⁵ Moten continues: “really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn’t alternate with but *is* seeing; it’s the sense that it excludes; it’s the ensemble of senses” (67, emphasis in original).

the body or the camera's lens, the signification un-translated in the photograph.³⁶ These traces, this "dim incandescence," point to other histories, other archives.

³⁶ In Mackey's *Bedouin Hornbook*, these traces are alternately figured as ash, dust, and the emanations from the broken bottle of perfume. Such distilled remainders speak to erasure, erosion, and brokenness, and cannot be assimilated into previous ways of seeing and reading.

Chapter 3: Cinema's Cut

Cutting against Presence

A film operates through what it withdraws from the visible. The image is first cut from the visible. Movement is held up, suspended, inverted, arrested. Cutting is more essential than presence – not only through the effect of editing, but already, from the start, both by framing and by the controlled purge of the visible. — Alain Badiou, “The False Movements of Cinema”

“Cutting is more essential than presence.” What might this mean for cultural criticism? Or, what would criticism look like if it depended on cutting and splicing rather than “presence?” This is a question that CLR James takes up, often implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, in his work. This question is also central to Maya Deren’s work in Haiti, particularly to her evolving sense of avant-garde cinema and her own role as cinematographer.

In contrast to static, nostalgic, nativist cultural studies in 1950s America, James and Deren enact cinematic criticism—criticism that performs a kind of cinematic cutting. Trinidadian-born intellectual C.L.R. James gestures toward a non-vanguardist, panoramic vision of history. Inspired by techniques of flashback and crosscutting in early 20th-century film—techniques that force the audience to remain constantly aware of the camera’s mediation, an awareness that disallows mastery of the landscape—James’s panoramic vision forges fleeting connections across landscapes and historical periods in order to reveal fundamental, unresolved political and cultural tensions. The filmic panoramas to which James is drawn suggest temporal and spatial simultaneity and multiplicity;

rather than placing events, places, and people on the same horizon, these filmic panoramas allow times and places to erupt into other moments and locations in a way that prevents totalizing narratives. This fragmentary, disorienting reading of history denaturalizes narratives of (American) mastery and exceptionalism and resists sweeping, rigid, fixed views of culture and politics.

Through her work as both a writer and filmmaker, Maya Deren extends James's panoramic project. In fact, she is able, even more than James, to think through the apparatus of the camera, a kind of thinking that infects her writing about Haiti. Like Zora Neale Hurston in *Tell My Horse*, Maya Deren initially takes an evidentiary approach to material objects and film in *Divine Horsemen*. However, while Hurston clings to the need for media's referentiality throughout *Tell My Horse* (even when this is, perhaps, somewhat tongue-in-cheek), Deren's relationship to the accoutrements of her venture shifts dramatically after her encounter with Haiti. Taking on an intention of their own, Deren's objects—the apparatus of her film career and ethnographic venture—refuse to be assimilated into her Haitian project. Instead, she finds that her encounter with Vodoun⁴⁹ transforms her from a manipulator to a recorder, from a “suturer” and mediator to, perhaps, an object herself, a screen or vessel (while James as amateur film critic remains a suturing figure and connector). Deren's time in Haiti changes her writing and aesthetic sensibility; Deren as ethnographer reaches the limits of her ability to control the apparatus. No longer can the subject behind the apparatus smooth out disjuncture to produce an aesthetic of unity. Instead, Deren as artist merges with her fellow Vodoun initiates, and what emerges is an *ephemeral aesthetic* reminiscent of *Banjo's*, one that, at the brink of achieving collective anonymity, dissolves again into individuated bodies. The constant shifting between collective and individual, fragments and wholes, objects and subjects extends James's project to the artist and his/her relationship to history and storytelling.

⁴⁹ I follow Deren's spelling here (Vodoun), while I have followed Hurston's spelling (voodoo) in the previous chapter.

If chapter one suggests that improvisational aesthetics reframe how we think about narrative and radical politics, and chapter two argues that photographic poetics open up the possibility for new ways of thinking about historiography and the visual archive, chapter three argues for panoramic criticism as an alternative to static, nativist cultural studies. As with the work of Claude McKay and John Keene, Deren's and James's engagement with other media encourages interruptive reading and opens up space for radical histories, radical politics. Cinematic social and political analysis establishes a new relationship between author and work or text: James and Deren become suturers and mediators, shifting the way we think about authorial control.

This chapter builds on the previous one, showing that nativist cultural studies is dependent on the sort of fixed, ahistorical views of the past discussed in chapter two. James in particular reveals that his contemporaries' critical views of popular culture and mid-century politics are often dependent on a limited, nostalgic view of history as well as geography. Both James and Deren embody Edward Said's call for outsider intellectualism—for criticism that, because of its location outside of national culture, "is skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings" (*World, Text, Critic* 26). Such secular criticism—criticism rooted in the world—is oppositional or agonistic, distrustful of totalities and rigid hierarchies (29).

Both James and Deren reveal and push up against the limits of cultural and political critique, and both open their projects up to the possibility of failure because of the unwieldy scope of their work. Deren in particular reaches the limits of her ability to control the apparatus of her project; she chooses an aesthetic of contagious vulnerability—constant, precarious, ephemeral conversions between subjects and objects—over permanent, fixed history or nativist cultural studies. For James and Deren, such radical new criticism is also highly destabilizing and unwieldy. James's American period—the period most defined by this engagement with cinema—is also defined most by an unfinished manuscript (*American Civilization*, published posthumously from unfinished drafts), while

Deren's Haiti film was never finished. James's American period, like Deren's Haitian work, has been called a failure by critics. But viewing James and Deren's unfinished work as failure fundamentally misreads the restless itinerancy of their labor. Condemning their work as a failure because of its openness reveals that scholars remain overly committed to a notion of our labor as culminating in a complete, finished object rather than as an open, shifting, always unfinished process.

C.L.R. James's Dialectical Cultural Studies

In October 1938, the Trinidadian-born intellectual C.L.R. James traveled to the United States for a public lecture tour at the urging of Trotsky. Shortly after arriving, he spoke to an audience of *Partisan Review* contributors and editors—the New York Intellectuals—who had recently separated definitively from the Communist Party. By all accounts, James electrified his audience. According to Scott McLemee, one audience member “suggested that James might be the best speaker the Trotskyists (who had their share of good orators) had yet produced,” while another decided that James was like “a great actor, delivering a famous oration” (xii).

Though James had planned on a brief stint in the US, he did not leave until 1953, when he was imprisoned on Ellis Island for overstaying his visa. James was drawn to America because he recognized the productive potential of American individualism—“the freedom, the energy, the heroic quality of the individual pursuing his daily vocation” (*American Civilization* 46). He writes in glowing terms of the bold restlessness of American political and popular culture. *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways*, the book James finished in prison, ends with a plea for US citizenship. “I wish to be a citizen of the United States.... I esteem citizenship as a privilege. But I also esteem myself as a person fit and proper to be a citizen and a citizen who would be of value to his fellow-citizens” (166). His critiques of American politics and culture are intimately connected to his vision of himself as a contributor to and citizen of the US.

For all of his spellbinding rhetoric and commitment to the US, however, James appears on the margins of the New York Intellectuals' work (an oversight repeated/doubled/intensified in scholarship on the New York Intellectuals), often merely referenced in passing or cited in footnotes. While this can perhaps be partially explained by his public invisibility after 1940—the year that his visa expired and he began to release his publications under pseudonyms⁵⁰—it is also a testament to how James's work and legacy were antithetical to that of most leftist, progressive American intellectuals in the 1940s and 50s.

James, along with his collective, the Johnson Forest Tendency, stands apart from most of the New York intellectuals in his interest in the politics of the everyday and his commitment to uniting Marxist theory with what Manuel Yang refers to as “concrete-class experience at the point of production” (7).⁵¹ James's dedication to working alongside the working class is foundational to his radical politics, and the Johnson Forest Tendency consistently attempts to resist the tendency toward vanguardism that regularly crops up in Trotskyist and leftist circles. This is why, for instance, though his lecture tour included a debate with Bertrand Russell in Chicago, it ended at a black church in Los Angeles.⁵² Andrew Ross writes in “Civilization in One Country? The American James” that James saw himself as the “intellectual fellow traveler” of the 1940s factory laborer (75). In fact, he wrote in a letter to Constance Webb, his future (second) wife, “I have sat for hours in

⁵⁰ James most commonly used the pseudonym J.R. Johnson, and most of his lectures and publications after 1940 were limited to Trotskyist venues. The Trotskyist group that James and Raya Dunayevskaya founded was referred to as the Johnson-Forest Tendency.

⁵¹ Yang also notes that “what made the [Johnson Forest Tendency's] stellar intellectual perspective and energy was their emphasis on the ‘direct democracy’ of the actually existing working class, as they concretely struggled day-to-day through the micropolitics of slow-downs, absenteeism, strikes and other myriad forms of reducing or refusing alienated work under the tyranny of liberal capitalist or Communist bureaucratic labor-discipline” (7).

⁵² Apparently, the audience of James's debate with Russell voted James the winner (McLemee xiii).

America, listening to people, all sorts of poor working people, telling me about themselves. It is indispensable for any understanding of anything. It must go side by side with the books” (qtd. Worcester 183).⁵³ Further, his status as outsider—a key precondition to his radical politics—resists the nativism so often found among other American intellectuals of the post-war era.⁵⁴ Unlike most of the New York Intellectuals and other US leftists, C.L.R James’s separation from the Workers’ Party and the Socialist Workers Party did not lead him to embrace American exceptionalism or adopt the “end-of-ideology accommodation with the Cold War state” (Ross 75).

In fact, James explicitly sees himself as directly opposed to most American intellectuals. Where they are too cooperative with government bureaucracy, James espouses antagonism; where they resort to generalities, James proposes theoretical and historical specificity; and, most significantly, while the New York intellectuals envision the “culture industry” as a homogenizing “filter,” James turns to the cinematic panorama. In contrast to the temporally limited and nativist ideologies of many leftist American intellectuals, James offers a dialectical vision of popular culture that is inextricably linked to what I call his panoramic vision of culture and politics, a vision that seeks to defamiliarize mid-20th-century America. In contrast to the nostalgic politics and dismissive readings of popular culture that dominate liberal, mid-century American commentary, James offers a non-vanguardist view of politics and culture based on non-mastery. Antagonistic rather than purely cooperative, his panoramic vision forges fleeting connections across landscapes and historical

⁵³ Worcester goes on to claim that James “came to see himself as a latter-day Alexis de Tocqueville, mingling with the populace in an effort to comprehend the historical origins and long-range prospects of American democracy” (183).

⁵⁴ His distance from American culture gives him particular insight. For instance, he writes in *Beyond a Boundary* that it is not until he leaves Trinidad for England that he is able to perceive the full political import of Trinidadian cricket. James’s vision of the outsider-critic bears some resemblance to Said’s argument in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* that critiques of national cultures are best levied from a position of exile.

periods in order to reveal fundamental, unresolved political and cultural tensions. This temporal and spatial “splicing” displaces American exceptionalism and denaturalizes narratives of (American) mastery.

During his visit to the United States, James leveled several devastating critiques against his American intellectual contemporaries:

American intellectuals have nothing to say that is new. They will make no special contribution to the future of American society, they formulate no new doctrine, reactionary, progressive, or otherwise.... The American intellectuals *follow*. Since Woodrow Wilson enunciated the doctrines of intellectual cooperation, America neither among its ruling classes nor its intellectuals has had anything to say. (*American Civilization* 225, original emphasis)

Such sweeping criticisms of intellectuals in the US—particularly their inability to craft novel theories or futures—are woven throughout James’s posthumously published text *American Civilization* as well as in much of his other work on American culture and politics. James perceives that leftists “follow” and cooperate with government bureaucracy; they align themselves too closely with the state.

Fearing the triumph of a “massive centralized bureaucratic state” in the US, James writes that “Many liberal intellectuals will make peace with and join such a state of the most authoritarian type” (*American Civilization* 255); they will, he says elsewhere, follow the power (*American Civilization* 230).

Now, looking back on James’s prediction, it appears to have been fairly prophetic, given the movement of several of the New York Intellectuals toward neoconservative policy.

For James, his peers’ lack of political imagination seems to be connected to their myopic perceptions of popular culture. And James’s insistence on non-vanguardist political activism and frequent contact with average and working class Americans is inseparable from his immersion in popular culture. James is highly critical of the Adornoan critiques of mass audiences that were

particularly popular in post-World War II America. He writes in *American Civilization*, “To believe that the great masses of the people are merely passive recipients of what the purveyors of popular art give to them is in reality to see people as dumb slaves” (122). This reads almost like a direct rebuttal to the likes of Dwight Macdonald,⁵⁵ who in his essay, “Masscult & Midcult,” not only sharply separates high from low culture, but goes so far as to argue that “Masscult is a parody of High Culture” (206). Macdonald’s sweeping denigration of popular culture hinges on an understanding of the “masses” as undifferentiated, powerless, abstracted, and cut off from one another.⁵⁶ His uncritical understanding of popular culture is exemplified by the rather bizarre list of examples he uses to illustrate the way in which elements of popular culture have replaced community as the sole link between new “mass” men: “a football game, a bargain sale, a lynching; in the cases of the masses, it can be a political party, a television program, a system of industrial production” (206-207). This list in its apparent uncritical, random juxtapositions (a form of racialized terrorism alongside popular athletic entertainment?) serves as a kind of antihero to James’s creative, but historically specific, thoughtful splicing and cutting. Macdonald suggests that the greatest threat of popular culture is its refusal to discriminate; it “dissolve[s] all cultural distinctions. It mixes, scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture” in a process that “destroys all values, since value-judgments require discrimination” (209). Macdonald’s views of popular culture not only parallel Horkheimer and Adorno’s insistence on homogenization,

⁵⁵ While some critics write this as MacDonald, I’ve chosen to follow the capitalization of Neil Jumonville in *The New York Intellectuals Reader*.

⁵⁶ Macdonald continues in this vein: “A mass society, like a crowd, is inchoate and uncreative. Its atoms cohere not according to individual liking or traditions or even interests but in a purely mechanical way, as iron filings of different shapes and sizes are pulled toward a magnet working on the one quality they have in common. Its morality sinks to the level of the most primitive members... and its taste to that of the least sensitive and the most ignorant” (207).

but also their language of infection and containment: “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness” (Horkheimer and Adorno 94).

The understanding of popular culture that Dwight Macdonald espouses is representative of a large body of mid-century leftist writing on popular culture. What such writing reveals is not only a totalizing view of popular culture and a theoretically vague definition of “the masses,” but, more importantly, a sort of transfixed relationship to the past and the future and a dislocation from the present. Frequently, these dismissals of popular culture are laced with profound nostalgia for the past and an inability to imagine progressive possibilities for the future. Macdonald mournfully writes, “The past cultures I admire—Periclean Greece, the city-states of the Italian Renaissance, Elizabethan England, are examples—have mostly been produced by communities, and remarkably small ones at that” (207). Ultimately, his narrative of Masscult reads as a backward-looking lament; the narrative of popular culture is reducible to the modern destruction of communities, and the only revolutionary possibility lies in traditional high culture.

In direct contrast to Macdonald, James’s writings about the past are careful to avoid the easy nostalgia of his contemporaries: “To believe that this Athenian multitude was better ‘educated’ or more ‘intelligent’ than the modern film audience is to use words without any discoverable sense. The *society* was different and we shall have to see why and in what way” (James, *American Civilization* 150). Sweeping criticisms of mass audiences are dangerously ahistorical. This is why he is not wary of the increased production and availability of art. In James’s view, the historical constant is that the relationship between the public and great art is dialectic and specific to its local context.

James illustrates this dialectical motion beautifully when he briefly takes up the example of jazz. In its infancy, “jazz was essentially music for *the new dancing*.... [A] sensitive leader *caught the rhythm for the evening from the dancers*. And when he had caught it, he told his band to hold it. The crowd of dancers therefor expressed their particular feeling for that evening and transferred it to the

musicians” (*American Civilization* 137). This nuanced, dialectical reading of jazz (which should evoke chapter two’s emphasis on the call-and-response nature of improvisation) is directly at odds with Norman Podhoretz’s sweeping dismissal of the musical genre as “primitive vitality and spontaneity” (309).⁵⁷ Moreover, James’s understanding of dialectical rhythm—something he saw as inherent to jazz but also characteristic of the dynamics of popular culture more broadly—refutes Horkheimer and Adorno’s insistence that under the tyranny of the culture industry, spontaneity is erased (96) and “Even the aesthetic manifestations of political opposites proclaim the same inflexible rhythm” (94).

James seems to be most drawn to popular cinema as the exemplar of the dialectical nature of popular culture. He writes in a letter to Constance Webb:

During the last two years, illness and other difficulties have caused me to spend a certain amount of time at the pictures.... The movies, even the most absurd Hollywood movies, are an expression of life, and being made for people who pay their money, they express what the people *need*—that is what the people miss in their own lives.... Like all art, but more than most, the movies are not merely a reflection, but an extension of the actual, but an extension along the lines which people feel are lacking and *possible* in the actual. That my dear, is the complete secret of Hegelian dialectic. The two, the actual and the potential, are always inseparably linked; one is always giving way to the other. (*Special Delivery* 72-73, original emphasis)

⁵⁷ James takes Richard Weaver to task for a strikingly similar reading of jazz: “[Weaver] shows every sign of hostility to Negroes. Throughout his book, as he propagandizes for a return to hierarch, he employs the words ‘discrimination’ and ‘measure,’ not specifically against the Negroes but as a means of enforcing superiority rather than equality. He attacks jazz, linking it with Negroes’ ‘spontaneity,’ with ‘formally repudiating restraint by intellect and by expressing contempt and hostility towards our traditional society... Jazz sounds often as if in a rage to divest itself of anything that suggests structure or confinement’” (*American Civilization* 242, ellipsis in James’s text).

Far from seeing audiences of popular culture as a vast, undifferentiated, indiscriminating vessel to be filled up by the purveyors of “Masscult,” James understands that the relationship between cinema and life, as well as producers and consumers, is dialectical. “James’s view from beginning to end was that great art, though never merely a reflection of the social, always gives aesthetic form to social movement” (Nielsen 149).

Despite his patent enthusiasm in his letter to Webb, James’s fascination with cinema is far from an uncritical, romanticized celebration of the liberatory potential of popular culture (a critique frequently leveled at cultural studies more broadly). Isolated quotations from *American Civilization* do encourage such romanticized readings (the same dynamic occurs if we cherry-pick quotes from *Banjo*): “in modern popular art, film, radio, television, comic strip, we are headed for some such artistic comprehensive integration of modern life, that the spiritual, intellectual, ideological life of modern peoples will express itself in the closest and most rapid, most complex, absolutely free relation to the actual life of the citizens tomorrow. In fact it cannot be escaped” (*American Civilization* 150). James is sometimes given to sweeping, poetic proclamations such as this. But it is crucial to note that while James clings to what is perhaps a utopian vision of the future possibilities of popular culture, he also perceives its present limitations. James reflects (in what can only be a tongue-in-cheek style aimed at the likes of the New York intellectuals) that “the great masses are for the most part only statistics, voters, wage-earners, unionists, white-collar workers, etc. But in the modern world as soon as they had the choice of what they should choose as ‘entertainment,’ they have expressed themselves in negative and concealed form, but clearly enough within the limitations allowed to them” (*American Civilization* 148). This is what Neil Larsen refers to as James’s theory of the “radical *negativity* of popular culture” (98). This is not to be confused with the idea of popular

culture as corrosive or threatening.⁵⁸ Rather, James describes the negative power of mass audiences; he identifies the relationship between producers and consumers of popular culture as a state of “armed neutrality” or, in Ross’s terms, “collective bargaining.” Producers do not always give the public what it wants, but are “scrupulous, rather, in *not* giving the people what it does *not* want” (Larsen 101). In other words, the transgressive potential of popular culture is not located in its “positive content.” In making promises that it can’t keep—namely promises of individuality and personality—popular culture “clears a space that it itself cannot occupy” (Larsen 99). Essentially what this means is that while popular culture is not in itself revolutionary or liberatory, it provides a forum for catharsis and displacement, and in so doing, it reveals the gaps between past and present, cinematic and actual, thereby opening the door, if only momentarily, for revolutionary potential.

Building Toward a Panoramic Vision

James attempts to build a critical method, an apparatus, for understanding popular culture as a crucial site for revealing social and temporal gaps and seams. In fact, James’s interest in film infects the way he thinks about political and historical scholarship, and, during his visit to the US, he begins to re-envision cultural criticism through the language of contemporary film. In “Popular Art and the Cultural Tradition,” C.L.R. James makes what initially sounds like a bizarrely unsubstantiated, sweeping claim: “Our world of the twentieth century is *panoramic*,” he writes (*James Reader* 247, original emphasis).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ In *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989), Andrew Ross charts the New York intellectuals’ coding of popular culture in the language of contagion and containment. This is the sort of corrosive or threatening view that I am talking about here.

⁵⁹ It is unclear if the allusions here to Benjamin’s reflections on 19th century Parisian panoramas are conscious or not, but the resemblance is certainly striking: “The panoramas, which declare a revolution in the relation of art to

Contemporary society gives man a sense, on a scale hitherto unknown, of connections, of cause and effect, of the conditions from which an event arises, of other events occurring simultaneously. His world is one of constantly increasing multiplicity of relations between himself, immense mechanical constructions and social organizations of world-wide scope. It is representation of this that demanded the techniques of *flashback*, *cross-cutting* and a camera of extreme mobility (*The C.L.R. James Reader* 247).

At first, this appears to be just the sort of language of mastery of which James is usually so critical; “connections” and “cause and effect” appear to echo the narratives of development espoused by so many of the New York Intellectuals as they look back on their early Trotskyist days. However, it quickly becomes clear that James’s panoramic vision is one of simultaneity and multiplicity. The techniques of flashback and crosscutting, and the camera’s increasing ability to capture and achieve movement, become indicative of James’s vision of criticism rooted in *non-mastery*. Panoramic vision for James does not connote a totalitarian way of seeing, but a fragmentary, ephemeral line of sight that opens up the possibility for new forms of critique and new ways of thinking.

Most scholarship traces the panorama to late 18th and 19th century painting.⁶⁰ Nineteenth-century literary and cultural studies associates the panorama with Romanticism and imperial aims of

technology, are at the same time an expression of a new feeling about life” (Benjamin 150). In his own work, James frequently makes similar rhetorical gestures to new artistic forms and popular sensations.

⁶⁰ On June 17th, 1787, Robert Barker patented the panoramic painting (Oettermann 5). The word “panorama,” a neologism, was originally used only to designate the circular, 360-degree form of landscape painting (Oettermann 6), though the application of the word quickly spread to other forms and media that aimed toward presenting an audience with an overview. “With the passage of time, and the disappearance of the actual form of large circular paintings, the sense of the world as an overview of a natural landscape came to be seen increasingly as the primary or original meaning

mastering landscapes and peoples.⁶¹ In his essay “The Panoramic Ecstasy: On World Exhibitions and the Disintegration of Experience,” Lieven de Cauter equates the panoptic with the panoramic—with a gaze based on possession, capitalist expansion and modes of production, and “the organization of space in modernity” (de Cauter 3).⁶² Panoramic paintings are linked to surveying in all its forms—encyclopedias, museums, novel cycles, and Kantian philosophy.⁶³ So at the same time that the panorama seems to offer more expansive lines of sight, it is most often bent toward mastery, toward flattening philosophy, people, culture, nature, and politics on one temporal and spatial plane. This view has even bled into film studies; Angela Miller associates the panorama with “The image of a mechanically controlled narrative with a definable beginning, middle, and end [that] from which all other uses in the metaphorical sense were derived – including the specific art form” (Oettermann 7).

Oettermann goes on to link panoramas to a particularly modern, bourgeois ideology.

⁶¹ Exemplary of this trend in the field is the title of Denise Blake Oleksijczuk’s 2011 study of the panorama: *The First Panoramas: Visions of British Imperialism*.

⁶² De Cauter writes, “In the panorama the capitalist need for spatial expansion was, as it were, transferred to perception: the ‘all-encompassing view’ becomes an aesthetic experience of the first order. The viewer of a panorama takes enjoyment from a distant reality that can be possessed, that is always on the verge of being annexed or colonized” (3). Lieven de Cauter provides quite a useful description of the origin and development of panoramic painting in the 19th century: “A panorama was a painting, in the form of a cylinder, of a town or a historical scene with a real foreground, which was looked on by the viewer from the centre. Because there is no frame limiting the picture, the new invention had, according to the earliest descriptions, to evoke a complete illusion of reality, an optical illusion in its most perfect form. The panoramas were made with almost scientific accuracy... As the panopticon stood for the principle of total controllability, likewise the panorama represented the ideal visibility in a painting. Both are ‘vision machines’ in the sense of Foucault: they shape the perception and a display of space. They are in fact ‘super-vision machines’: the panopticon for surveillance, the panorama for survey” (3).

⁶³ Lieven de Cauter points out that the language and metaphors Kant uses to describe his vision of history bear striking resemblances to the 19th-century panorama. “Kant tried to invent a philosophical ‘vision machine’, and with this he wanted to be able to represent history as progress, as a plan of nature” (de Cauter 5).

encouraged a view of history as a series of unfolding scenes fluidly connected with one another, giving to audiences the illusion of mastery over random, distant, or otherwise incomprehensible events” (46). She argues that the panoramic scene “naturaliz[es] and legitimiz[es] the power of the nation-state” (Miller 59).

However, this is not the panoramic vision of James. Influenced by his immersion in popular American cinema, James has in mind the landscape panorama of mid-century film. I want to suggest that James’s panoramic vision necessitates—or, perhaps more accurately, helps produce—an audience that is always conscious of the camera mediating the view, disallowing the audience’s mastery of the landscape. Panoramic shots from mid-century films don’t allow the viewer to “master” or “flatten” the space; rather, such shots make the viewer aware of the mediation of the camera, the apparatus between viewer and landscape. This panoramic vision is fragmentary and, frequently, dislocating or alienating. Such panoramas connect scenes in a film in order to enact temporal and spatial simultaneity and multiplicity; rather than placing events, places, and people on the same horizon, filmic panoramas allow times and places to erupt into other times and places in a way that prevents totalizing narratives. Benjamin hints at this when he suggests that the panoramas of Paris in the 19th century brought the country into the urban space (150). Such cinematic panoramas use the rural to estrange the urban, providing a sense of Romantic past-ness at the same time that they displace the past.

James’s panoramic aesthetic—his use of cinematic language that emphasizes splicing, multiplicity, and simultaneity, as well as his insistence on the dialectical relationship between reality and culture and producers and consumers—presents a marked contrast to the visual imagery used by Macdonald and Horkheimer and Adorno to describe the culture industry. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno compare the culture industry to a filter through which “the whole world is passed” (99). This filter has a flattening, homogenizing effect and produces a

sensation of “seamless extension” between the real world outside the theater and the screen; “life is to be made indistinguishable from the sound film” (99). This visual image is highly similar to the rather bizarre analogy Dwight Macdonald draws between Masscult and the “homogenization process that distributes globules of cream evenly throughout the milk instead of allowing them to float separately on top” (209).⁶⁴ If the panorama is an image that does not allow for totalizing views of time and space, then the filter is its opposite. Not only does the filter deny the audience’s ability to distinguish between the outside world and the cinematic screen, but, perhaps even more than the original 19th century circular panoramas, it levels historical periods and distinct spaces.

James frequently practices an imaginative “splicing” in his writing. For example, during one of his many digressions in *American Civilization*, James launches into an imaginative reading of Aristophanes in mid-20th-century America. After pointing out that Aristophanes wrote for popular audiences (another retort to Macdonald’s ahistorical view of mass culture), James writes,

If Aristophanes came back today and were given a free hand... he would naturally consider it his business to write for the films to which 95 million people go every week... It would have it in slapstick, a great deal of plain indecency, but precisely because of the present situation of democracy, the film would contain the most unbridled blows at American democracy, calling things by their names and naming names as well... He would be bitter beyond belief. He would do all this, however, from the standpoint of a lover of his country... (157-158).

James’s imaginative reading enacts his panoramic sensibility. This is not only a version of a past time bursting into the present, but it also performs a tonal panorama; “slapstick” and “indecency” are spliced together with “bitter” criticisms of the current political state. And this highly ironic tone,

⁶⁴ Macdonald goes on to say, “The interesting difference is that whereas the cream is still in the homogenized milk, somehow it disappears from homogenized culture” (209).

performed through the culture industry, becomes, in James's mind, the most prescient form of social critique.

James's turn toward cinema as a way of arguing for defamiliarizing American cultural spaces in some ways prefigures Deleuze's books on cinema. In his introduction to *The Brain Is the Screen: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema*, Gregory Flaxman writes that Deleuze's books on film "fundamentally contend that, beyond all other arts, the cinema opens the possibility for deterritorializing the cogito, the rigid 'image of thought' that in one form or another has dominated Western philosophy. The cinema provokes us to see, to feel, to sense, and finally to think *differently*" (2-3, original emphasis). Film's play with time and space provides both James and Deleuze with new ways of thinking about simultaneity and multiplicity. Not only did Deleuze, like James, receive initially skeptical reviews from other critics because of the sprawling reach of his work, but both writers look to the cinema for the language to capture new ways of thinking. As Alain Badiou suggests, "Cinema transforms philosophy. In other words, cinema transforms the very notion of idea. Cinema basically consists in creating new ideas about what an idea is. To put it another way, cinema is a philosophical situation" (*Cinema* 202).

James's panoramic vision and "unsettling" aesthetic—his constant temporal and spatial splicing, panning, and crosscutting—are not confined to his writings on cinema, but are evident throughout his work. He continuously juxtaposes examples from high and low culture and splices historical periods and genres. *The Black Jacobins* connects the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804 to African independence movements in 1930s while looking forward to—or attempting to write into existence—independence for the West Indies as a whole. The first chapter of his semi-autobiographical *Beyond a Boundary*, titled "The Window," establishes James's literal panoramic view as foundational to his emerging awareness of the intersections of politics, sports, and art. When he was a child, he would sit at the window and watch cricket matches. The windowsill also allowed him

to access the books on top of the wardrobe. He writes that “this watching from the window shaped one of [his] strongest early impressions of personality in society” (3). Here, we can see the window as, like the camera, a mediator; James’s view through the window juxtaposes the Victorian literature on his shelf at home to the bodies of Trinidadian cricketers in the yard next to his house.⁶⁵

James’s unique style endeared him to audiences, who often expressed awe over his ability to weave together many different kinds of information. For example, Scott McLemee writes of James’s 1938 speech on “The Twilight of the British Empire” that James talked “for three hours without notes [and] quoted statistics and historical facts from memory, weaving in allusions to news from the day’s newspaper” (McLemee xii). Contemporary audience members also admitted to being entranced by his ability to tie passages from Marx and Trotsky to quotes from Shakespeare. Constance Webb writes of his speech to a black church in Los Angeles, “Here was an international movement: he linked our activities on the West Coast with those of people in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa” (qtd. McLemee xiii). Such an approach has had the effect, as Aldon Nielsen points out, of decentering cultural studies in the same way that James’s work on race pushed Trotskyites toward new interpretations of Marxism.⁶⁶

James’s panoramic sensibility is perhaps best exemplified in *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways: The Story of Herman Melville and the World We Live in*. This is a hybrid, generically unstable text—part literary criticism, politics, cultural studies, and bid for citizenship. Significantly, this is not a nativist or exceptionalist American text in the traditional sense. James finished the book from the prison on

⁶⁵ James similarly refers to Picasso’s “Negro Sculpture before a Window” as “at an intersection between the classical motifs of ancient Greece (themselves connected in intriguing ways to Africa) and the aesthetic forms that had become canonical instances of the modern” (Nielsen 170).

⁶⁶ Critics such as Donald Pease and Aldon Nielsen argue that James unsettles and decenters American studies, and cultural studies more generally.

Ellis Island, an explicitly liminal space that, despite its location within the borders of America, points to spaces beyond the nation-state. (This space also serves as a site of cultural production antithetical to the spaces of the New York intellectuals.) Temporally, the text is panoramic; James looks backward at Herman Melville in order to diagnose present American politics and predict future possibilities. And the text spatially juxtaposes—or pans between—the *Pequod* and the prison on Ellis Island, labeling both spaces microcosms of American society in a way that unsettles narratives of American political and intellectual traditions. Though *Mariners* is a plea for citizenship, it is an appeal based on a *defamiliarizing* vision of the space of America. In the last chapter, when James asks for US citizenship, he places his hope for revolutionary potential in the aliens of Ellis Island, foreigners from disparate countries who might be able to form a sort of “world federation” and “redescribe a possible model of American studies as... a site where becoming American would become indistinguishable from becoming ‘mariners, renegades and castaways’” (Pease, “Introduction” xxx).

Radically, James’s method of critique hinges on *non-mastery*. Deleuze turns to film largely because “the specificity of cinematographic images invariably eludes the rigid determinations of any overarching schematism. The result is a philosophy whose rigor is always local, reflecting the emergence of rules immanent to each given ‘zone of indetermination’” (Flaxman 9). Again, James aligns himself with a sort of Deleuzian project in an effort to counteract the ideological bent of the majority of leftist intellectuals, a bent toward generalities and rigid “schematization” that leaves them susceptible to totalizing thinking (*American Civilization* 251). Manuel Yang writes that “The Achilles’ heel of the New York intellectuals’ project – a fatal defect not particularly unique to them to be sure but shared by many intellectual, political, cultural, and religious traditions – was...to mistake conceptual mastery for mastery over social and historical reality” (8). In contrast, James is acutely aware of his own intellectual and material limits. Rather than celebrating American exceptionalism or

mastery, James proposes a panoramic vision that denaturalizes our understandings of time and place and resists rigid, totalizing views of culture and politics.

The destabilizing jump cuts and panning movement of James's criticism perform the kind of cutting that Foucault calls for in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Foucault, following Nietzsche, claims that while most modes of historical study lead toward excessive reverence for either the past (nostalgia) or the present (teleology), "effective history" "introduces discontinuity into our very being"; it destabilizes us and causes us to reexamine our underlying assumptions, the taken-for-granted realm (*Foucault Reader* 88). Knowledge should continually contribute to this "cutting," this destabilizing and discontinuous process, rather than to an increasingly sedimented, rigid accumulation of facts and assumptions. Of course, such methods for destabilizing our thinking must be continually adapted as each becomes too familiar, taken for granted. The jump cuts of Godard were initially upsetting, but such aesthetic forms have been familiar, necessitating new methods and forms of estrangement and defamiliarization. As Philip Brian Harper suggests in *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*, as audiences become more adept at "decoding" abstract art, particular forms of abstraction become too familiarized, too easily read as or decoded for signs of the representational. In other words, unfamiliar modes of abstraction more readily disorient us, while familiar forms of abstract and experimental art may not disorient or displace us. This is largely why it's particularly important to read James's apparatus as a provisional process rather than a finished product—but we will return to this at the end of the chapter.

Maya Deren: Film Form / The Artist as Object

Curious, subterranean—or even, dare I say, panoramic—threads connect the work of Maya Deren and C.L.R. James. Encountering these thinkers necessitates confronting the tensions between practice and theory, systematicity and organicity (to borrow Annette Michelson's terminology),

spontaneism and dialectical thought that subtend their work and frustrate their critics.⁶⁷ In many ways Deren extends and intensifies James's cinematic thinking; an aesthetic of cutting and suturing is central to her films and theory, and this aesthetic frames and pervades her anthropological work on Haiti. While James responds to the static, nativist cultural studies of the New York Intellectuals, Maya Deren combats the homogenizing filter of Hollywood films, on the one hand, and the masculinism of the avant-garde on the other.⁶⁸

While James uses filmic panoramas to disrupt nativist historical and cultural studies, Deren explicitly articulates a unique, cinematic form of thought. "The form proper of film is, for me, accomplished only when the elements, whatever their original context, are related according to the special character of the instrument of film itself—the camera and the editing—*so that the reality which emerges is a new one*—one which only film can achieve and which could not be accomplished by the exercise [sic] of any other instrument" (*Anagram* 39-40, my emphasis). Like Sergei Eisenstein, she warns against importing literary, musical, or other visual art structures and forms to film. Such importation blinds critics to the new reality emerging from the film or, for the artist, actually prevents her from allowing this new reality to emerge. Cinema creates a unique manipulation of both time and space by not recreating "an original chronology. It can place together, in immediate temporal sequence, events actually distant, and achieve, through such relationship a peculiar filmic reality" (42). Importantly, though, this is not done merely through "established filmic techniques as

⁶⁷ In Michelson's excellent essay, "Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*," she suggests that both Deren and Sergei Eisenstein are filmmakers who are compelled to theorize, too; both figures are motivated by a productive, fruitful tension between "systematicity" and "organicity."

⁶⁸ In "Poetics and Savage Thought: About *Anagram*," Annette Michelson traces male critics' derisive reactions to Deren, who, as the only female and the only independent filmmaker on the panel, was "doubly marginalized" during a 1953 symposium on "Poetry and the Film." Her co-panelists included Dylan Thomas, Arthur Miller, Willard Maas, Parker Tyler, and Amos Vogel.

flash-backs, parallel actions, etc” (42). These techniques—the sort of techniques becoming familiar to audiences watching the Hollywood films James is interested in—establish “the camera as a witness of action, not as a creator of it” (42). Deren’s films frequently use cutting and splicing to achieve a continuous sense of movement and to make either time or space discontinuous, thereby defamiliarizing both for viewers.⁶⁹ Such techniques are unique to experimental films. Hollywood films, Deren insists, simply import literary techniques to cinema. It is in abstract and avant-garde films that new realities emerge.

At the same time that Deren’s theory of film insists on creating new spatial and temporal realities through uniquely filmic techniques, she also highlights the fragility and ephemerality of subjects and objects. Through cutting and splicing, subjects and objects merge, disoriented and reoriented. In a 1946 essay, “Magic Is New,” she writes: “Using cinematic techniques to achieve dislocations of inanimate objects, unexpected simultaneities etcetera, [a] film establishes a reality which, although based somewhat on dramatic logic, can exist only on film” (*Essential Deren* 204). Space becomes fluid, or, in Deren’s language, “active” and “fluent” (*Essential Deren* 205). This

⁶⁹ Deren gives two examples of this abstraction of both time and space. She films a motion, like a head turning, at fast speed, then slows it down to create a sense of two tempos simultaneously. “Thus one creates a movement in one tempo which has the qualities of a movement of another tempo, and it is the dynamics of the relationship between these qualities which creates a certain special effectiveness, a reality which can only be achieved through the temporal manipulation of natural elements by the camera as an art instrument. In this sense, such a shot is a new element which is created by the camera for a function in the larger whole of the entire film” (*Anagram* 48). This is a crucial difference between film and dance or theater, which also rely on movement. Here, the camera is able to estrange movement to create a new reality. She also describes filming waves with the camera upside down so that the movement appears to be happening in reverse. While this sort of manipulation happens while filming, she also manipulates scenes through editing, for example, filming a male dancer raising his leg in a forest, stopping the movement when his leg is at waist-level, and continuing this movement inside a house. When she edits the film, the scenes are “spliced to follow one another without interruption [which] holds together spatial areas which are not, in reality, so related” (50-51).

technical approach orients and frames Deren's cultural criticism; her aesthetic of suturing is directly tied to her comparativist cultural and ethnographic work and her stance against critical hyper-specialization and creative atomization.

Deren's aesthetic of suturing therefor extends James's panoramic vision: not only is the reader's/viewer's frame of reference estranged, but objects and subjects are increasingly defamiliarized, transfigured. The filmic objects increasingly exert control over the film in similar ways to James's jazz audience, but when Deren turns her cinematic perspective to Haiti, this control is intensified to such a degree that the filmmaker herself risks becoming object, too. In other words, while James is interested in the dialectical relationship between audiences and artists, Deren is interested in an even more collaborative project. She crafts an ephemeral, shifting vision, one that emphasizes the vulnerability of subjects and artists and the ease with which they become objects.

Particularly when Deren films dance, she suggests that dancer or actor and space become mutually constructing: "cinematographic space—the entire world—becomes itself an active element of the dance rather than an area in which the dance takes place. And the dancer shares, with the camera and cutting, a collaborative responsibility for the movements themselves" (*Essential Deren* 206). The "exploitation" of the basic objects of cinematic production allow the filmmaker to exert control over her audience. Dislocations of objects and continuities of movement are achieved by cutting and splicing; the space captured in the film is "made to dance" by the filmmaker's manipulations (*Essential Deren* 225). In fact, not only are they mutually constructing, but the performers become increasingly indistinguishable as agents-objects. "These shots are held together not by the constant identity of an individual performer, but by the emotional integrity of the movement itself, independent of its performer.... In this sense, the pattern, created by the film instrument, transcends the intentions and the movements of the individual performers, and for this reason I have called it *Ritual*" (*Essential Deren* 225-227). Ritual here, understood through the lens of

anthropology, “depersonalizes” through the use of specific, material accoutrements and choreographed movements; ritual “fuses all individual elements into a transcendent tribal power towards the achievement of some extraordinary grace” (*Essential Deren* 225-227). It is through technical manipulations that the individual intentions of the dancers/actors are transcended or transfigured.⁷⁰ Subjects and objects merge in the cinematic landscape, synthesized (paradoxically) *through disjuncture* by the camera; the apparatus synthesizes and provides the space for the convertibility of objects and subjects into a depersonalized, transcendent aesthetics.

Deren’s cultural criticism is determined by her cinematic vision—infused with cutting and splicing. For example, in section 2B of *An Anagram of Ideas on Art Form and Film* (1946), perhaps her most famous piece of aesthetic theory, she suggests that what distinguishes the human infant from the animal is that it must “learn beyond its instincts, and often in opposition to them, by imitation, observation, experimentation, reflection—in sum, by the complex ‘horizontal’ processes of memory” (11). Deren goes on to define “horizontal memory” as non-linear:

By ‘horizontal’ I mean that the memory of man is not committed to the natural chronology of his experience—whether of an extended period, a single event, or a compulsive reaction. On the contrary, *he has access to all his experience simultaneously*. He can compare the beginning of a process to the end of it, *without accepting it as a homogeneous totality; he can compare similar portions of events widely disparate in time and place*, and so recognize both the constancy of elements and their variable functions in one context or another; and he is able to perceive that a natural, chronological whole is not immutable, but that it is a dynamic relationship of functioning parts. (11, my emphasis)

⁷⁰ This tension between ritual and individual should partially echo the tension between structure and artistic freedom explored in relation to improvisation in chapter one.

Deren's definition of horizontal memory here echoes James's panoramic sensibility: an openness to simultaneity and juxtapositions of different times and experiences. Our ability to access disparate events or memories simultaneously importantly allows (or even necessitates) viewing such events and processes as heterogeneous, fractured, discontinuous. This form of comparativism is at odds with what Deren views as an increasing trend toward hyper-specialization in Western labor and theory. Not only does this hyper-specialization prevent us from questioning the uses and ramifications of our findings, but it prevents comparativist thinking and, she writes, "to arrive at principles requires comparative analysis" (*Anagram* 6).

Deren's interest in comparativism stems, on the one hand, from aesthetic influences as well as her outsider-critic status—Sergei Eisenstein's theory of film montage and her eclectic, iterant background. Maya Deren's work and biography, like James's, cross many lives/lines: socialism, avant-garde cinema, theory, poetry, ethnography, fashion, dance, choreography. Her parents fled the Ukraine during a spate of pogroms. Later, as an artist, she joined other émigrés in Greenwich Village. Like James, Deren devoted a great deal of energy to developing counter-institutions, counter-movements in the US in the 1940s and 50s. She helped inspire the creation of Cinema 16 and helped form the Creative Film Foundation to encourage and develop avant-garde cinema (Nichols 3-5).⁷¹

Until 1947, Deren's aesthetic project was an evolving relationship between poetry, photography, and film; her writings from the early- and mid-1940s constitute an attempt to theorize (and craft) the poetic cinema and cinematic poetry. In 1947, she received a Guggenheim fellowship to film dance in Haiti. She imported her theories of dance and cinema to Haiti in 1947, but her increasing interest in ethnography radically reoriented her aesthetic sensibilities and her theories of

⁷¹ Most scholarship on Deren begins with biography and because such biographical criticism sometimes overshadows Deren's aesthetic and cultural contributions.

authorship and creative control. Such a shift felt like a betrayal to many of her contemporaries, who viewed this choice as an abandonment of avant-garde artistic practices. However, I argue that Deren's ethnographic work isn't a break with her earlier art, but an extension of her earlier work—a deformation and reformation of her metaphysical project, her attempt to envision the aesthetic transcendence of the physical body. She views Haitian mythology as inherently cinematic—it relies on the kinds of abstract filmic techniques that craft new ideas of and relationships between time and space—and this in turn changes the way she thinks about experimental aesthetics.

Deren's encounter with Haiti most radically alters her conception of authorial control and the tension between mastery and non-mastery that James confronts. In the preface to *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, she suggests that her immersion in Haitian Vodoun mythology has transformed her relationship to the filmic apparatus—to the material trappings of her work—and converted her from an artist to a recorder or medium. Deren notes that the same objects which she carefully packed (the objects she lists almost ad-nauseum), particularly the documentary evidence of her trip, lie neglected in her house:⁷²

This disposition of the objects related to my original Haitian project—evidence that this book was written not because I had so intended but in spite of my intentions—is, to me, the most eloquent tribute to the irrefutable reality and impact of Vodoun mythology. I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations. (*Divine Horsemen* 5-6)

⁷² In fact, when Deren died in 1961, her film and audio tapes were still “tucked away in drawers and closets” (Willeken 314).

Just as Zora Neale Hurston points to a photograph as forceful evidence of the existence of zombies in *Tell My Horse*, Deren offers “the disposition of the objects” of her film project as “tribute” to the power of Vodoun. (In fact, I’m struck by the similarity of thought and phrase here, but Deren does not cite Hurston in her references, so we are left to speculate about her knowledge of *Tell My Horse*). Taking on an intention of their own, Deren’s objects—the apparatus of her film career and ethnographic venture—refuse to be assimilated into her Haitian project. Instead, she finds that her encounter with Vodoun transforms her from a manipulator to a recorder, from a “suturer” to an object herself, a screen or vessel. For Deren, the filmic endeavor is initially one of suturing, but this suturing is disrupted by her encounter with Vodoun mythology. When she comes up against the limits of her ability to “master the material in the image of [her] own intention” (*Divine Horsemen* 6), her “amorphous collection of memories” and objects are enabled to “emerge gradually in [their] own terms” (7). As filmmaker, Deren herself never becomes object; she remains the manipulator, the subject directing the apparatus, the final arbiter of disjuncture, splicing, and cutting. However, Deren as ethnographer reaches the limits of her ability to control the apparatus. And as she reaches these limits, she becomes object, at least momentarily, while the subjects she studies and films—the Vodoun initiates—achieve a momentary, anonymous collectivity, only to become individuated subjects in the next instant.

It is Vodoun mythology’s constant reversals and oscillations of/between objects and subjects, collectivities and individuals, the transhistorical and the historically materialist that both epitomize and complicate abstractionist aesthetics. Turning to what she calls “ritualistic form” as a way to think through what is essentially experimental art, Deren suggests that the radical potential of abstract art lies in manipulation, combinations, and re-combinations of filmic objects and techniques “abstracted from the immediate conditions of reality and incorporated into a contrived, created whole... which, by containing its own logic within itself, has no reference to any specific time or

place, and is forever valid for all time and place” (*Anagram* 20). The person or figure in ritualized form is a “depersonalized element in a dramatic whole. The intent of such depersonalization is not the destruction of the individual; on the contrary, it enlarges him beyond the personal dimension and frees him from the specializations and confines of personality. He becomes part of a dynamic whole which, like all such creative relationships, in turn, endows its parts with a measure of its larger meaning” (20). What emerges from the manipulations and splicings of these depersonalized figures is a new reality, a new form or vision of thought.

This depersonalization, as well as its precarity, is central to the cinematic quality of Haitian Vodoun mythology. Deren, like Joan Dayan, insists that Haiti is a land of convertibility, a space where fragments are resurrected and subjects converted to objects (and vice versa) in an endless series of reversals. Vodoun as ritual practice emphasizes—and, indeed, stems from—such constant vacillations and reversals, what Dayan refers to as “epistemological conversion” (*Haiti, History and the Gods* 26). Vodoun dramatizes the recuperation of things—objects—previously discarded or tossed aside as waste (note here similarities to the recuperation of waste in *Banjo*). Through possession, when a loa (a Vodoun deity) “mounts” an individual, subjectivity is temporarily evacuated to make room for the deity’s subjectivity. When Deren describes this process, she echoes her earlier writings on ritualistic form, suggesting that this evacuation—this depersonalization—is not erasure or robbery but a temporary, relational submission, a kind of dance between the subject/object and the loa. Such an evacuation does make the subject vulnerable; Deren highlights a few moments when the possessed body is endangered. But this temporary vulnerability, this momentary evacuation, is importantly a reversal of the permanent depersonalization suffered under slavery. Possession, Deren and Dayan suggest, is a kind of performative reversal of enslavement.

Though Deren’s own possession is perhaps the most surreal (and most discussed) section of *Divine Horsemen*, her descriptions of the tension between individual and archetype within the loa are

most revealing of her cinematic thinking. Far from a simple classification of the loa and Vodoun sects, Deren's text traces, through a description of the deification process, a complex, dynamic relationship between mythology, abstraction, identity (individual and collective), and history. Her cinematic vision—especially her cutting and suturing—and her theory of “horizontal memory” collide with mythology here, producing a nonlinear, accretive vision of individuals in history. The depersonalization of figures that Deren strives after in her films and criticism is realized in the “unknown,” “unwitnessed” moment when an ancestral soul becomes a loa. First, the equivalent of an individual's soul—his “gros-bon-ange” or “metaphysical double of the physical being”—is itself a “precious accumulation,” the “repository of a man's history” and character (*Divine Horsemen* 27). After he dies, the man's gros-bon-ange is kept in a sacred vessel by his descendants. During services for the dead—which are importantly, Deren urges, not nostalgic and not aimed at retreating into the past—“the race reincorporates the fruit of previous life-processes into the contemporary moment, and so retains the past as a ground gained, upon and from which it moves forward to the future.... [N]othing of heredity's accumulations should be permitted to leak away, to be lost for ever [sic]” (27-8). So the individual accumulation principle that characterizes the gros-bon-ange is multiplied and further accumulated in the collective. And in time, the ancestral spirit becomes

only the distilled, depersonalized, almost abstract essence of the principle that especially characterized him. Thus, in time, *the person becomes principle*. And yet—what was once so real, so substantial, cannot be permitted to end in such rarefication, to vanish forever into the far reaches of history. This abstraction, to function in reality, must become reality; *the principle must become person*. And so the process of abstraction, as though meeting, finally, the limits of its own extension, curves back toward its origins: those who cannot remember begin to create, building now from the inside outward, as one might be guided by the clues and logic of a skeleton to construct a

figure. In time, the ancestor becomes archetype. (*Divine Horsemen* 28-29, original emphasis)

In Deren's relational aesthetic, anonymous collectivity is combined with historical specificity; the loa become the repositories for familial as well as national history. The deification process works through abstraction (person becoming principle) while maintaining materiality and specificity (the principle must also manifest materially, usually through possession). In other words, the body (and matter more generally) are transcended, only to be, fleetingly, re-inhabited. When a Vodoun initiate is possessed, her body briefly becomes the medium through which the community understands their history as a series of accumulating, contradictory, convertible materialities. Personality here makes way, temporarily, for the loa. Deren, like Joan Dayan, seems acutely aware of the disjunctures—the incoherence—between these continuous transformations of subject and object, material and immaterial, historically specific and transhistorical. “Deification is never simply a spiritualization of matter,” Dayan writes. “Spirit and matter, defilement and exaltation do not dwell unperturbed in harmony” (39). This necessitates an *ephemeral aesthetic*, one that, at the brink of achieving a sort of collective anonymity, dissolves into individuated bodies. In her own possession, Deren describes briefly understanding the world around her as absolute abstraction, “purely form” (261). Yet as she attempts to “remember forever this pristine world, already the forms become modulated into meanings, cease to be forms” (261-2). Abstraction is momentary, tenuous, and quickly becomes overdetermined by “meanings” and context. After practice, after the sacred dance, the object which had been a vessel of divine power becomes, again, an object. Accumulated history, locatable in the Haitian-body-as-vessel, disperses again, to be recalled later in ritual.

It can be quite tempting to view Deren's approach to accumulation as a potentially dangerous, universalizing, non-specific bent. In sharp contrast to C.L.R. James's insistence on historical specificity, even in the face of temporal splicing and cutting, Deren's work verges on the

same kind of ahistorical mist that often seems to creep into Zora Neale Hurston's ethnography. For example, in describing divinities in Vodoun connected to the natural elements, she writes: "They seem to belong to another period of history. Yet, precisely because these divinities are, to a certain extent, vestigial, they give... a sense of historical extension, of the ancient origin of the race. To invoke them is to stretch one's hand back to that time and to gather up all history into a solid, contemporary ground beneath one's feet" (116). Here, historical sensibility is expressed simply as a kind of transhistorical ritual stretching backward through time. Many of the reviewers who responded to *Divine Horsemen* upon its initial publication expressed deep concerns about Deren's tendency to smooth out divergent religious and cultural practices. Erika E. Bourguignon, for example, writes that Deren's method dangerously glosses over or obscures the great diversity in Vodoun practices and theological interpretations. She writes, "While Deren is aware of this diversity, and explicitly refers to it, she nonetheless attempts to construct a system without contradictions" (638).⁷³

But perhaps the views above represent a narrow understanding of specificity. Deren is interested in the *idea of* specificity as well as its fragility, its elusiveness and ephemerality, and the tension between this kind of specificity and abstraction. She doesn't share the view (which today dominates literary criticism) that to acknowledge history ethically is to equate it with material specificity; she is interested in a different kind of history and in what happens when the specific is abstracted. Responses such as Bourguignon's miss the many ways in which Deren attempts to demonstrate an alternative form of accretion, one in which historical specificity occurs

⁷³ She continues, "At times her attempts at establishing coherence and her interpretations of the forces which the vodun deities represent reach levels of metaphysical abstraction which it is hard to follow and which one would be inclined to ascribe to the author rather than to her Haitian peasant informants. It is unfortunate that the distinction between accounting and interpreting is rarely made explicitly, and thus leads to some confusion" (638).

simultaneously with and defers to collective anonymity. On the one hand, the loa are archetypal and *almost* universal and ahistorical, and yet, because each loa is a sort of vessel for the accumulated history of Haiti, each loa archetype retains traces of the individuality of each preceding ancestor-turned-loa: “The entire collective over time...here is comprehended, here becomes intimate and feeds and comforts. Yet up through this same center emerge also the monumental archetypes, the loa as pillars of the moral cosmos, each of them multi-faceted yet homogeneous, each one a marvel of diversity without digression” (Deren 247-248). The individual and the collective, present and past, reside together in the figure of the loa. Each loa is an accretion of fragments, individual personalities, personal and national histories colliding. And accretion does not erase these diverse fragments.

In attempting to convey this new, more fragile, more contradictory sense of accretion or accumulation, Maya Deren constantly oscillates between unifying, universalizing language and a recognition of contingency, diversity, and specificity. Much of the surrealist aesthetic of *Divine Horsemen* flows out of this constant back-and-forth movement. Observing the dancers just before her experience with possession, Deren writes, “Watching, one senses that if these are united, it is not at all because they refer to each other. They are separate, as bodies and as beings; the ground-fixed eyes and the deep crouch accentuate this sense of each of them in-turned, in-listening, moving in common to a shared sound, heard by each of them singly” (*Divine Horsemen* 257). Much of the surreality of this experience, and of Deren’s attempts to capture it, stem precisely from a frequent inability to tell whole from part, individual from group, subject from object. And it is her attention to this inability, as well as her emphasis on ephemerality, which seems to link her to a series of explorations of Haitian history and culture that refuse coherence and gesture toward a more plastic, less rigid sense of the past. As Dayan suggests in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, to tell history through the lens of “folk” Vodoun is to narrate the accretions of contradictory, obscure, often partial

accounts. Historicization that emerges from contact with Haitian Vodoun is replete with disjunctures and gaps as well as excesses and contradictions; such histories bear the trace of Deren's sense of accretion.

Just as Deren isn't interested in pursuing a notion of historical specificity as such, she ultimately doesn't pursue a theory of Vodoun or Haitian dance as a vehicle for political commentary—for reflecting on Haiti's contemporary political and economic position. Her insistence on the tension between anonymous collectivity and individuality and the endless conversion between subjects, objects, and vessels seems to participate in the Haitian tradition of echoing, recuperating, and subverting the colonial splits between subject and object, past and present. And there are moments in *Divine Horsemen* that verge on a contemporary sense of political critique. For example, she suggests that Haitian's relationship to “frailty,” as well as their interest in one loa, Erzulie (who represents luxury and excess), is forged by their sense that “this life is spent in a state of precarious balance on the edge of an abyss of despair” (166). However, such moments quickly give way to abstraction; Deren isn't interested in the contemporary vulnerability of Haitian people so much as vulnerability abstracted—the possibilities presented by an aesthetic and intellectual approach rooted in precarity rather than stability. Deren ultimately refuses permanent, fixed history in favor of this vulnerability, the constant, precarious, ephemeral conversions of subject and object, specific and transhistorical abstract. Such abstraction may frustrate contemporary cultural and literary theorists, who tend to prefer rather narrow ideas of specific, concrete political interventions.

Unfinished Work: Utopianism, Failure, and Contemporary Criticism

One thing that should be obvious by now is that both James and Deren are, occasionally, dilettantes, dabblers in multiple fields and media, experimenters with form and methodology. This serves as easy grounds for dismissing large swaths of their work; it is highly suggestive that both James's

American period and Deren's work in Haiti are frequently dismissed as failures. But neither James nor Deren viewed their experimentation with unfamiliar forms and fields as a liability. Deren writes,

But if my specialized concern for film left me unprepared for the culture as a whole, it created, also, a disinterested receptivity to it. And if at first, and for quite a while, I merely retained an amorphous, formless collection of memories which a professional observer would have systematized as soon as possible, I, having no such commitment, nor professional or intellectual urgency, could permit the culture and the myth to emerge gradually in its own terms and its own form. (7)

Similarly, as A. Douglas points out, James's reading of Hegel (via Lenin) in *Notes on Dialectics* is idiosyncratic, rejecting certain fundamental parts of Hegel while embracing others. James writes, tongue presumably firmly in cheek: "For our purposes it [world-spirit] does not matter a damn. ... To hell with it!" He continues, "I do not *guarantee* these interpretations. The point is once they are down we begin to get somewhere. I am not afraid of mistakes." James plays with Hegel's writing just as he plays with Kantian philosophy: "I am doing injustice to Kant, I am sure, and committing crimes against philosophical terminology" (qtd. A. Douglas 427, original emphasis). James plays with Hegel and Kant, experimenting with interpretations like Deren experiments with forms and techniques, in order to see what possibilities open up. Here we should hear echoes of the pragmatism that runs through McKay's *Banjo*—this sometimes delighted, frequently unsatisfactory attempts at new lines of thought. In other words, their "dilettantism" is intimately connected to James' and Deren's experimentation—their unsettling, disjunctive critical and aesthetic approaches—and to their refusal to produce critical methodologies or apparatuses that would be reducible to utility.

But more often than not, critics balk at the most experimental elements of James' and Deren's work—the elements that are messy, disjunctive, constantly shifting and always unfinished.

Reading James is a bit like having the terrain frequently shifting underfoot, a highly unsettling feeling. Literary critics are particularly disturbed by James's writings on literature, which do not resemble traditional literary criticism or theory. Meanwhile, political theorists resent literary critics for turning James into a "mere writer." But again, rather than viewing these frustrations as markers of James's failures as political theorist or literary critic, we ought to recognize signs of genres in the process of being defamiliarized.

For James in particular, this diletantism and play across and in multiple traditions, genres, and fields is intimately connected to charges that he is too optimistic, too utopian; it is his imaginative reading process that occasionally makes him a target for theorists and literary critics. These imaginative readings sometimes produce misreadings, as James himself acknowledges, or predictions that do not pan out. James's prophetic tone and the futurity of much of his writing have drawn the ire of critics from the mid-twentieth century through today. It's important to note here that issues of tone are inextricable from issues of temporality. When James criticizes leftist intellectuals' willingness to align themselves with the state bureaucratic machine, he recognizes that this alignment is tied to a particularly dangerous temporal fixity. James understands that American intellectuals are "no longer capable of imagining a progressive future" (Ross 77) and, simultaneously, are also primarily backward-looking, trapped in nostalgia, "as likely to welcome authoritarian forces that promised to halt the 'decline' of society by restoring a less degenerate past" (Ross 77). In other words, contemporary critical myopia is inextricably linked to ahistorical nostalgia, both of which inhibit the ability to imagine futures.

While James accuses other American intellectuals of becoming trapped in nostalgia, incapable of "imagining a progressive future," James himself has since been targeted for his perceived naïve optimism. In a conversation between Jim Murray and Robert Hill in 1985 (which, as far as I can tell, is still unpublished), both men dismiss CLR James's American period, arguing that

Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways fails as literary criticism, a charge made by several other scholars against James. But what is interesting about Murray's and Hill's conversation is their frustration with both James's sense of authorship as prophetic and with what they read in him as a sort of sloppy optimism (and they turn to *Mariners* as an exemplar of both critical faults). Robert Hill says,

You see, the thing that I found most ridiculous was his *attempt to elevate the writer into the role of prophet*. There Nello [CLR James] *imputes to the writer the role of historical prophet, social prophet*, and before you know it, Nello is standing in for the writer, Melville, and is saying, *I am the voice of the prophet*. Which is why the second part of that book is crucial, when he's on Ellis Island and his attack against the Stalinists. Nello *surreptitiously had assumed for himself the role of prophet*, and I believe that it was not difficult, because under the circumstances of that horrible personal and political crisis of the cold war [sic] - - and Nello wrote at the height of the cold war [sic]: American troops were in Korea. *One could easily lapse into taking on the role of prophet*. Very possible.... It was his cold war book. It's about the cold war. But as a statement and a study of Melville, I just say I wish he hadn't written it (22, original underlining; my italics).

Soon after, Hill continues:

But, see, *the prophetic style is part of what makes Nello such an attractive voice*. *If Nello didn't have Marxism to temper what he has to say, Nello would be a millenarian*.

In the preface to the 1938 edition... the final closing paragraph - - "This book was written within earshot of the boom of Franklin's [sic; Franco's] gun' - - *and there's a prophet, and the closing of the book... is emprophesying* [sic] that somewhere like, to say in reading Abu Reynal (??) [sic; probably Abbé Raynal], would be some African

club who will pick up a stray copy of Trotsky or a stray copy of this, and out of that will come the leader of the African revolution.

There is this prophetic voice with which he speaks, and when he is right, he really hits it on the head, he is extraordinarily powerful. But he doesn't always do that, and there are times when he is very very wrong (23, my italics)

Note here how many times Hill uses the word prophet or prophetic. There's a certain kind of paranoia lurking here, a fear that James has overstepped his bounds, that he won't be taken seriously as a critic. What is at issue seems to be not simply the moments of futurity in CLR James's work, but also his very affect—his style, his approach, and even, perhaps, his personality. His “prophetic style” is part of the speaking skills that impressed and wooed his contemporaries—part of his “attractive voice.” On the other hand, his attempts at prophecy not only frequently fail, but leave him open to the sort of charges that Jim Murray subsequently levels at him; Murray responds to Robert Hill, suggesting that while James “hated” the sectarian politics “where everybody had their analysis of where things are and where they're going... the one that he came up with was ridiculously *optimistic, vague, and idle*. And you're only allowed to make one mistake in this culture. In the put-down culture, you're only allowed to make one mistake” (24, emphasis added).

Setting aside Murray's bizarre allusion to the “put-down culture,” what is most interesting about such criticisms of James is not whether or not they are accurate (because certainly not all of James's predictions panned out), but their alignment of optimism with naïveté, vagueness, and failure. Their sense of James as a prophetic figure is intimately tied to James's conception of the author. *Mariners, Renegades, and Castaways* strikes Jim Murray and Robert Hill as James's greatest failure, both as literary criticism and as theory, precisely because in it James “attempts to elevate the writer into the role of prophet.” Such a view of authorship undermines any serious engagement with either Melville's work or its connections to Ellis Island and the twentieth century. (Such a view is

shared by most literary critics.) This is why, though CLR James repeatedly claims that his American period is his most productive, Murray and Hill are disappointed with his mid-century career and relieved that he did not publish another book-length work, aside from *Mariners*.

There are two problems with Murray's and Hill's criticisms of James's relationship to optimism and prophecy. First, I would argue that they misunderstand his idea of the author. Though throughout *Mariners* James expresses what seems like admiration for Melville's unparalleled genius, such moments might actually underscore the text's, not the author's, positioning between two eras. *Mariners* suggests that *Moby-Dick* hints at the consequences of capitalism and totalitarianism, consequences that Melville himself wasn't yet able to articulate. In other words, whether James himself is aware of it or not, his study of Melville, like his revised edition of *Black Jacobins*, seems to point to a notion that texts enact affects, ideas, and aesthetics about which their authors may not always be aware (just as Hurston may or may not be aware of the moments of fugitivity in *Tell My Horse* that push back against photography's referentiality). In *Mariners*, as much as in *American Civilization*, James celebrates the potential of the United States at the same time that he recognizes the "consuming rage with the social and psychological problems of society" that the American public experiences (*American Civilization* 81). Looking backward at Melville in order to look forward to the future of America, and Western civilization writ large, James interpretively reenacts departures and tensions between an older America and its more modern trajectory at the same time that he balances presentist critique with future-oriented optimism.

More importantly, it seems to me that critics' implicit coupling of optimism, naiveté, and failure reveals more about the state of literary and political criticism than it does about James himself. Critics' confusion about how to read not just James, but theoretical/critical temporality and affect more generally, is evident in the fact that James is accused of spontaneism and, in the next breath, of teleology. Just like readings of *Banjo* reveal a great deal about how we tend to map politics

onto literary texts—how, for example, we attempt to see black radicalism or its opposite in fiction when the fiction itself, in its artistic complexity, resists such utilitarian treatments—such readings of James suggest the impoverishment of certain kinds of contemporary criticism.

Just as James’s panoramic vision necessitates geographic and temporal splicing, his work also shuttles between optimistic and pessimistic, utopian and cynical registers. Lauren Berlant diagnoses cruel optimism as a persistent attachment to fantasies of the “good life” despite evidence of its impossibility, a form of optimism that, to my mind, is dependent on blindness to or blind faith in institutions and an inability to read the structural and global constraints on individuality. But futurity for James—the kind of optimism he locates in the future—isn’t a question of blind faith in people and institutions. Rather, thinking toward the future is an exercise in an imaginative, playful kind of criticism. It is both rigorous and creative, and continuously tempered by a keen understanding of historical and contemporary constraints.

James is not the only public intellectual—and certainly not the only black writer—to be accused of misguided utopianism or naïve optimism. In fact, these accusations appear in waves with each new generation of critics. Tracing the conversation around Trey Ellis’s “New Black Aesthetic” is revealing of this. Published in *Callaloo* in 1989 and re-issued with the second edition of *Platitudes* (1988, 2003), Ellis’s artistic manifesto is striking in its optimistic pronouncements for his generation of black postmodern artists, musicians, and writers. “‘This is an incredible time,’ Trey Ellis writes in the conclusion to his essay. ‘It has been over a year now that I don’t envy any other age. I feel good’” (203). Two responses to Ellis’s essay appeared alongside “The New Black Aesthetic” in the winter 1989 issue of *Callaloo*, and both open by drawing attention to Ellis’s marked enthusiasm. Eric Lott writes that “Optimism and desire burst so infectiously from Trey Ellis’s essay that you want to forget its occasional glibness.... [I]ts attitudes and slogans strive poetically to bustle a reality into being” (244). In other words, Ellis’s work is not just a description of a movement, but a calling-

forth, an enactment. Because of this, both Eric Lott and Tera Hunter conclude their responses with familiar gestures toward the ways in which Ellis's work, though flawed, opens up further conversations about contemporary cultural production and black postmodernism.

However, where James's optimism emerges from rigorous study of the past, what seems to make critics particularly uncomfortable with Ellis's optimism is its reliance on overly simplified narratives of the literary-cultural past. In order to shake off the Black Arts and civil rights movements—in order to fashion a new artistic project—the New Black Aesthetic has to construct a “limited narrative of soul culture or civil rights politics,” a narrative that selectively highlights voices of the previous generation while obscuring the already diverse culture and politics of the 1960s (Paul Taylor 635). In other words, Ellis's claim of newness is dependent on ignoring the pluralism and multiplicity already at work in the generation before.⁷⁴ Ellis's is a flattening, revisionary reading of history, one that echoes the Black Arts Movement's flattening narrative of the Harlem Renaissance, and the Harlem Renaissance narrative of Reconstruction-era writers. Reactions against Trey Ellis's piece, then, conflate optimism and ahistoricism (or, at the very least, weak historicity with historical naivety). To conflate James's optimism with the sort that appears in “The New Black Aesthetic” is to seriously misread James's work. James's panoramic criticism is dependent on historical specificity, and the optimism in the future is frequently undercut by pessimism about the present.

James's optimism emerges from a sense of critical work as *play*, as *tries* or *attempts*, as a process of building, taking down, and continuously rebuilding methodologies and apparatuses that

⁷⁴ Paul Taylor goes on to suggest, “We might take George's baps, b-boys, and the rest as evidence that a new pluralism has emerged, that there are more and more acceptable ways of being black now than ever before. But it is not clear that this pluralism is new, or that it has evolved and diverged from a common root. There have always been many ways of being black, shaped by region, class, occupation, theological commitment, sexual orientation, and more. In fact, the culture industries today have conspired to flatten out local variation and sell monochromatic models of black ness so effectively that there may be fewer ways of being black than before” (635).

better helps us read and re-see historical and cultural narratives. In the same way that we ought not reject James's work because of an occasionally prophetic or optimistic tone, it is crucial that we not reject James and Deren's unfinished labor. Viewing James and Deren's unfinished work as failure fundamentally misreads the restless itinerancy of their labor. In many ways, these writers have quite different political, cultural, and aesthetic investments: Deren remains committed to the metaphysical—to pursuing methods of filming and theorizing that might transcend the physicality of dance—while James is firmly rooted in a black Marxist tradition (though his particular organizational affiliations famously and repeatedly shift). But what each suggests is that the value of their work lies in the *process, the development*, of their critical apparatus, not in the finished product or framework. Each aesthetic and cultural object Deren and James approach—each location, text, and epoch they study—forms, deforms, and reforms their projects. It is suggestive that rather than recognizing this apparatus-building as valuable, literary and cultural theorists frequently accuse both James and Deren of not only failure, but dilettantism and naïveté. We learn more about the state of contemporary criticism than we do about James himself when we attempt to explain why critics simultaneously accuse James of spontaneism and teleological Marxist dialectical thought, or why he is sometimes dismissed for naïve utopianism. In the same way that James cuts back and forth between different eras and spaces, he combines cynical engagement with the present—revealing the limits of present cultural and political criticism—with a vision of the future that constantly verges on utopianism. In other words, his shuttling between pessimism and optimism mirrors the geographic and temporal splicing central to his work. Studying the ways in which James and Deren mobilize and think through cinema's machines therefore reveals various narrow, ghettoized or siloed investments in not only James and Deren, but in cultural studies and literary criticism more generally.

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