The “Aesthetic” of the Blues Aesthetic

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Abstract: This study of the "Blues Aesthetic" both supplements and revises the now-dominant socio-aesthetic paradigm by introducing the perspectives of cognitive aesthetics to African-American vernacular literary criticism. New methods of scansion, informed by literary and linguistic prosody, are developed to measure previously neglected or misclassified innovations in verse practice. Chapter 1 argues that the versificational structures of the blues tradition, enriched by African-diasporic technique, cannot be measured adequately by existing systems of English prosody. Chapter 2 identifies figures of speech that developed during plantation slavery and considers their legacy in African-American literary verse. Chapter 3 examines the often-counterintuitive influence of racial caricature on the verse practices of black writers and performance artists in the blues tradition. Chapter 4, which builds on these insights, reassesses the formal practices of blues poets. Chiastic polyrhythms, blues-sonnet hybrids, and experimental uses of 12-bar phrasing are discovered and evaluated. Finally, several now-forgotten or misconstrued advances in vernacular aesthetic theory are recuperated. What emerges from this far-reaching intervention is a more interdisciplinary, stylistically complex, and demographically diverse map of the blues tradition as a category of literary art.

Notes

Italics in quotations appear in the original unless otherwise noted. Parenthetical citations of poems indicate line numbers or, where this is impractical, volume and page number. Compilations are abbreviated alphabetically (e.g., "*CW*" for *Collected Works*) and other titles by the initial word or phrase (e.g., "*Life*" for *The Life of Langston Hughes*). Where this is impractical, the following abbreviations are used:

ATPR	Helen Vendler, "Are These the Poems to Remember?"
BANP	James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*
BANS	James Weldon Johnson, *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*
BP	Amiri Baraka, *Blues People*
BBAP	Harold Bloom, *The Best of the Best American Poetry: 1988-1997*
CPo	Robert Hayden, *Collected Poems*
CPr	Robert Hayden, *Collected Prose*
HRW	Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why*
LHB	Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues*
LH-BC	Harold Bloom, *Langston Hughes* (Bloom's BioCritiques)
LH-CRSG	Harold Bloom, *Langston Hughes* (Comprehensive Research and Study Guide)
LH-MCV	Harold Bloom, *Langston Hughes* (Bloom's Modern Critical Views)
LH-CPA	Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes and the Challenges of Populist Art"
LH-*FCJ*	Arnold Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*."
NPD	Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama*
NC	Sterling Brown, *The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*
REP	Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry*
RPEV	Richard Cureton, *Rhythmic Phrasing in English Verse*

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Introduction

i: What is blues "aesthetic" criticism?

The 10-point definition of blues poetry established by Stephen E. Henderson (*Understanding* 47) and refined by Craig Hansen Werner (*Playing* 149) is too stylistically broad and too ethnically narrow to demarcate the genre's boundaries. Werner himself worries that the field known as blues aesthetic criticism has become a *de facto* racial category: "When in doubt, the unofficial critical truism concerning black writing goes, say it comes from the blues" (*Playing* 149). "There is hardly a black poet who has not used the word 'blues' in the title of at least one poem," reads Eberhard Alsen's dictionary entry on "The Blues" (105). Many of these poems, including "Colored Blues Singer" by Countee Cullen and "Blue" by Carl Phillips, are anthologised in Kevin Young's *Blues Poems*, even though Cullen and Phillips eschew the 12-bar stanza and reject the Hughesian blues tradition. Meanwhile, numerous experimental uses of 12-bar phrasing are excluded from Young's anthology, including Jean Toomer's "November Cotton Flower" and Elizabeth Bishop's "Songs for a Colored Singer." Young's unclear principles of selection, which seem to favour titles and themes over structure and style, attest to what Jeffrey B. Ferguson calls the "generous parameters" of "current blues aesthetic criticism" (700).

Although the "blues aesthetic" is well-established in African-American literary criticism (Baraka, "Blues Aesthetic" 101-109; B. Baker 155-158), the meanings of its constituent terms are contested. The *blues* encompasses several related concepts: a tragicomic feeling rooted in the conditions of second-class citizenship; a 12-bar stanza form; a musical tradition; a social protest movement; a literary genre of North American verse, drama, and prose; a field of literary criticism. As indicated by the title of this study, the word *aesthetic* is particularly troublesome. This is not, as one might expect, because the expansive history of ancient and modern aesthetic theories makes the standard usage impossible to pin down. Rather, the trouble is that blues aesthetic criticism overlaps with two very different paradigms: one that studies aesthetic response primarily as a product of musico-linguistic competence, and one that studies aesthetic response primarily as a product of socio-cultural competence. In the broader field of literary theory, these paradigms are

often called *formalism* and *historicism*; in the narrower field of verse criticism, they are known as *cognitive poetics* and *historical poetics*.[1]

Cognitive poetics is "cognitive" because it investigates, as Yopie Prins puts it, what happens to "your brain on poetry" (19). Its methods are derived from philosophy, cognitive science, linguistics, prosody, gestalt theory, and more generally, any theory that can clarify the relationship between literary art and aesthetic cognition (Tsur, *Toward* 6; Freeman, "Cognitive" 314). Rather than rejecting outdated theories, cognitive poetics prefers to reorient and redeploy them (Stockwell 6). Historical poetics is "historical" because it investigates, in the words of Virginia Jackson, "the history of the interpretation of lyric poetry" (6). Relative to cognitive poetics, historical poetics focuses more on the practices of readers (rather than writers), the synchronic (rather than diachronic) analysis of poetic form and literary history, and the circulation of texts though discursive channels of politics, economics, and popular culture (rather than through a sphere of canonical influence). The methods favoured by historical poetics include literary (but seldom linguistic) prosody, history, sociology, and elements of race, class, and gender theory.

Cognitive poetics focuses on how "poets make poetry"; historical poetics focuses on how "poetry makes poets" (Said 12). From their very different vantage points, Matthew Arnold and Michel Foucault both indicate that the blueprints of literary art can be studied systematically. Yet while Arnold thinks this structure is formally "traced in its bare outlines upon the spectator's mind" (558), Foucault believes that it "cannot be adequately understood in relation to the grammatical features, formal structures, and objects of discourse" (137). Helen Vendler, who shares Arnold's interest in form and cognition, prefers to read poetry "from the inside, not from the outside" (qtd. in Gibbs 234). Prins, who is closer to Foucault, prefers to read "simultaneously from inside out and from outside in" (14). The terminology shared by these metaphors overstates the possibility of consilience; in fact, Vendler and Prins are not studying the same architecture from different angles, but altogether different phenomena. For example, *musico-linguistic hierarchies* organised

[1] Though useful orienting concepts, these terms, as Marjorie Levinson explains in "What Is New Formalism?," are unstable. "[N]ew historicism" has, regrettably, become "a catch-all term for cultural studies; contextual critique; ideology critique; Foucauldian analysis; political, intersection, and special-interest criticism; suspicion hermeneutics; and theory" (559). Levinson nuances her title concept by distinguishing between "activist formalism" and "normative formalism" (559), neither of which anticipates the prosodically driven approach of this study.

in 4-beat units of rhythm and syntax and *socio-cultural hierarchies* organised by race, class, education, and income involve both different kinds and different degrees of pattern recognition.[2]

These paradigms are usually non-competing: both commonly use the word *aesthetic* as an approximate synonym for *stylistic*. Yet they also diverge: cognitivists sometimes use *aesthetic* to mean *good, true, and beautiful* while historicists are likelier to use *aesthetic* and *strategic* interchangeably. A similar tension accompanies much of the nomenclature used by these fields: terms that Prins describes as "essentially contested concepts" about which "there is agreement that something real is at stake but which involve, and indeed require, as a foundational part of their complex structure, ongoing disputation about how they are to be realized" (14). Cognitivism claims to be historical because "technique" is "the way in which the work of art most intimately registers historical experience" (Jarvis, "For a Poetics" 931), while historicism also claims to be cognitive because aesthetic perception "implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement, a cultural code" (Bourdieu xxvi). As an example of this ongoing disputation, Jarvis and Prins have both published influential studies titled "What Is Historical Poetics?" that critique (and claim to encompass) the methods of the other. Although some contributors to poetics are principally invested in cognitive methods (Jarvis, Culler, Hurley, Vendler) and others are principally invested in historical methods (Prins, Jackson, Martin, Cohen), there is, in practice, nothing like a battle line running between two opposite camps. Most contemporary verse critics are, to varying degrees, interdisciplinary.

Nevertheless, spirited debate often ensues when scholars near one end of the bell curve feel that scholars near the other end are missing the point.[3] This back-and-forth discussion has played such a sizeable role in shaping blues aesthetic criticism that an explanatory digression is in order. On what has been called the conservative side of the Anglo-American Culture War, stylistically driven critics caricatured their perceived opponents as a "School of Resentment" against the "Dead White European Males" (Bloom, *Western* 7); or, with patronising alliteration, as a culture of complaint against the "pale patriarchal penis people" (R. Hughes 106). On what has been called

[2] Social hierarchies, though potentially correlated to hierarchies of syntax (Easthope 113) and metre (Manson, "Worrying" 116-117) in indirect ways, are incommensurable with the organisation of verse. What Arnold and his peers understood as the "architectonic" analysis of a poet's "rhyme" and "rhythm" (Quiller-Couch xiii) and the "architectonic analysis" of the "conditions" and "forms" that make authorship possible (Foucault 137) are concerned with different kinds of metaphorical building blocks.

[3] Unlike the traditional battle line analogy, a spectrum maps critical biases along a gradient. This analogy is nevertheless imperfect because methodological affiliation is not zero-sum: one can study form without neglecting history, and vice versa.

the progressive side, sociologically driven critics lampooned their perceived opponents as privileged connoisseurs. In Terry Eagleton's memoir, Eagleton explains that his PhD supervisor went about his two careers (professor and "wine merchant") with the same attitude:

> rolling a little Tennyson on his tongue, shipping in great crates of minor seventeenth century verse, finding George Orwell distinctly unpalatable and D. H. Lawrence rather too heady. He was occasionally a little unsteady on his feet after a prolonged bout of Ovid. (170)[4]

Although the stereotype of a whining social justice activist is now seldom invoked in professional literary criticism, the stereotype of an oenophile pretending to be a scholar is still in use (as will be seen). Those impacted by Euro-American cultural hegemony have often claimed to find the mannerisms of the aesthete—"much nodding of the head and outpouring of sophisticated jargon" (Achebe 622)—to be unbearably pretentious, even among so-called black intellectuals. "As one Howard University philosophy professor said" to Amiri Baraka when he "was an undergraduate, 'It's fantastic how much bad taste the blues contain!'" (Baraka, "Jazz" 15). Like Eagleton's pseudonymous advisor, Baraka's anonymous professor has bigger problems than his palate: he is trying to savour the lyric of the moonshine-drinking classes as if it were the lyric of the wine-drinking classes.

Baraka's once-radical complaint acquired mainstream status during the "Culture" and "Canon" Wars of the nineteen nineties, when scholars increasingly rebuked the biases of traditional canons of classic literature. These biases are suggested, for example, by Harold Bloom's list of canonical Western poets (*American Women* 2) and Helen Vendler's list of major twentieth-century American poets (ATPR). Between them, these lists contain 30 men, three women, and no African-American writers. Bloom and Vendler were occasionally singled out as the primary antagonists of the Canon Wars: the "gatekeepers" of the literary establishment (D. Smith, "Poet Kings"). Bloom, after embracing the gatekeeper analogy with hyperbole (*BBAP* 15), was satirised by Rita Dove ("Screaming Fire") and excoriated by Nikki Giovanni, Alvin Aubert, Calvin Hernton, and Leonard D. Moore (Giovanni, et. al., 111-113). Even African-Americanists who are sympathetic to aesthetic formalism came to see these "gatekeepers" as objects of parody. In a

[4] See Michael D. Hurley's essay, "George Saintsbury's *History of English Prosody*," for a response to Eagleton's satire.

detective farce, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. characterises Vendler as an Ivy League kingpin in a canon-fixing racket (*Loose Canons* 4-5) and Bloom as the murderer of T. S. Eliot (8).

Bloom proceeds as though William Faulkner were the father of great black American prose (*HRW* 263, *Toni* 3) and Hart Crane were the father of great black American poetry (*African-American* 2:2, 2:4; *LH*-BC 2-3; interviews with Lydon and Laffe). In response to these and other controversial views, African-Americanists have suggested that Bloom's "clouded critical lenses" (Awkward 32) and "elite Europhile glasses" (Romano 223) are not worth the trouble of recalibrating. Something closer to a paradigm shift is necessary: to have "any discussion of African American aesthetics," "we must usually filter our discussion through a sociological lens" (L. Thomas, *Don't* 88). To desegregate the canon, it is necessary to collapse the boundary between culture and aesthetics, removing (for example) "the contributions of artists of the Harlem Renaissance" from "the 'Colored Only' side of a long-perpetuated division in *cultural and aesthetic* analysis" (Rubenstein 147, emphasis mine).

The phrasal template *X and aesthetic*, where *X* is a socio-cultural category, now dominates blues aesthetic criticism. This can be explained, in part, by the assumption that "racial (black-white) and aesthetic (popular art-high culture)" boundaries are correlated (Werner, "Blues" 453). And in other, more nuanced ways, the "social and aesthetic" (Dahn 96) and "political and aesthetic" (R. Wallace 69) dimensions of African-American literature overlap. The "and" is inclusive: scholars do not mean, on the one hand, social, and on the other hand, aesthetic, but rather a single "socio-aesthetic" category.[5] This interdisciplinarity has been productive: Jonathan Scott's discussion of "labor and aesthetic beauty" in Hughes's "African American rhythms" adeptly re-examines the relationship between politics, economics, culture, and style (64). Yet Scott himself complains about the abundance of "biographical scholarship on Langston Hughes" relative to the lack of "book-length aesthetic criticism" (2).

According to Robert Elliot Fox, one unfortunate legacy of the Black Arts Movement is the perception that "the 'true' trajectory" of African American literature "is (politically, but not especially aesthetically) a 'revolutionary' one" ("Shaping"). Seth Moglen also objects to this "anti-formalist" position that is "often imagined to be politically progressive because it enables the inclusion of writers who have been marginalized" (1190). It is nevertheless a non sequitur to

[5] This shift toward "socio-aesthetic" blues criticism can be observed in several recent studies; see Brackett 78; Grandt 156; Lowney, *Jazz* 54.

suppose that sociologically-tinted glasses automatically correct for ethnocentric bias. Indeed, they can even compound this bias by magnifying

> the false presumption that left writers or authors from socially marginalized groups were less concerned with formal experimentation in general—and with modernist experiments in particular—than their traditionally canonized peers. (1191)

Vera M. Kutzinski expresses similar concerns: "folk and protest labels subordinate the formal aesthetics of Hughes's poems either to ethnographic or to ideological criteria" (4). She complains that the "courtesy" of "exceedingly close readings" "has not always been extended to Hughes" and "agree[s] with Jeff Westover that Langston Hughes remains 'easily the most critically neglected of all major modern American poets'" (3). Indeed, in the 33 years since the publication of Arnold Rampersad's biography, the rallying cry that Hughes's artistry needs more attention has become something of a cliché. "It is almost as if Hughes's working with the oral tradition precluded for many scholars any close textual study of his written work," which, on inspection, is "intellectually stimulating" and "aesthetically pleasing" (Tracy, *LHB* 2). "It is the intellectuality in Hughes's work that a cursory reading is likely to underestimate" (Vendler, "Unweary").[6] "Under-reading is the curse of Hughes criticism" (Bloom, *LH*-BC 3). "Hughes remains a major intellectual ancestor" and a poet of "considerable creative genius" (Chinitz 3).

These critics agree that Hughes's blues-inspired style is formally complex. Or perhaps they don't. Hughes limits himself to "the expression of the average, everyday, honest and unpretentious person who expresses himself in a simple, heartfelt, and interesting manner" (Tracy, *LHB* 9); he writes in "the simplest possible words" that "the most uneducated person could hear and understand" (Vendler, "Rita" 381); his poems "rarely demand … 'close reading'" (Bloom, *LH*-CRSG, editor's note); they are "not replete with delicately calculated formal devices" (Chinitz 76); Hughes prefers "plain language" that seems "wholly transparent and self-explanatory" (Kutzinski 2). Like Schrödinger's poet, Hughes is both complex and simple, major and minor, canonical and anti-canonical. Mark Whalan is right to suggest that the neglect of Hughes's "major status" "has

[6] Hughes is a bellwether for blues aesthetic criticism and tends to dominate discussions of the genre, and to engage other leading scholars in the field, it is often necessary to do so by way of Hughes. Nevertheless, this is not a single-author study of Hughes, a period study of the Harlem Renaissance, or a study of blues music. By repudiating several firmly entrenched misconceptions about the verse practices of Hughes and his successors, I hope to lay the groundwork for future scholars to move beyond Hughes-centric blues criticism and consider how Gwendolyn Brooks, Sherley Anne Williams, and others have experimented with the 12-bar stanza.

been somewhat redressed in the past fifteen years" (373): "somewhat" because his formal innovations are still being discovered and the terms of his excellence are still being negotiated.

My break from this conventional wisdom is straightforward, but, in the context of the dominant discourse, polemical and far-reaching. I propose that the blues tradition of Hughes and his successors *is* replete with delicately calculated formal devices, many of which remain misclassified or unrecognised. I rely heavily on scansion and close reading to make these devices legible. Like Tracy and (to a lesser extent) Chinitz, I discuss the use of African-American oral and vernacular tropes in literary verse. However, like Vendler and (to a lesser extent) Bloom, the purpose of my close readings is to analyse the aesthetic creativity of literary artists. Without taking on board Vendler's misguided assumptions about the simplicity of the vernacular, I enthusiastically endorse her cognitive poetic methodology as articulated in the introduction to *Poets Thinking*.[7] This sounds, at first, like a retreat into the transhistorical brackets of New Criticism. Yet as I argue in section 2, prosodic and historical calibration are correlated. When one understands both the African-diasporic history and the musico-linguistic structure of vernacular verse forms, many commonly held assumptions about the *prosodic practice* and the *poetic theory* of the vernacular are clearly in need of revision.[8]

ii: What is the African-American "vernacular" tradition and why do its origins matter?

In Toomer's *Cane*, the character Carma is introduced as both ethnically and aesthetically African:

[7] I am also indebted to the perspectives of Jarvis, Hurley, Tsur, Freeman, Raphael Lyne, Line Brandt and Per Aage Brandt, and other contributors to cognitive poetic criticism who are neither well-versed in blues poetry nor well-known among blues specialists.

[8] This imperative is bidirectional. Attempts to study blues prosody with a cursory knowledge of its history (as will be discussed in chapter 1; e.g., Attridge) and attempts to study blues history with a cursory knowledge of its prosody (chapter 3; e.g., Cohen) lead to errors of similar magnitude, though for different reasons.

> She does not sing; her body is a song. She is in the forest, dancing. Torches flare . . juju men, greegree, witch doctors . . torches go out . . . the Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa. (17-18)

Some have interpreted Carma's performance as an ekphrastic idealisation of a real oral tradition. "[Toomer] recognized that 'the Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa,'" wrote Arna Bontemps, applauding the "native richness" of the passage (x). As Bontemps explains in the introduction to *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949), co-written with Hughes, the "spirituals," "blues, and other spontaneous lyrics" evolved "essentially outside the literary traditions of the [English] language" (vii).[9] Gates offers a similar interpretation of Toomer: "If 'the Dixie Pike … has grown from a goat path in Africa,' then the black vernacular tradition stands as its signpost, at that liminal crossroads of culture contact and ensuing difference at which Africa meets Afro-America" (*Signifying* 4). Like Hughes and Bontemps, Gates focuses his discussion on the fact that

> enslaved Africans carried with them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music …, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. (3-4).

Others have interpreted Carma's performance as a symbolic gesture of racial identity. As Houston A. Baker explains, the "folk song is linked to the African past, and a feeling of cultural continuity is established. The atavistic remains of a ceremonial past have the fragrance of earth and the spirituality of song and dance to recommend them" (*Afro-American Poetics* 26). In an essay titled "From a Goat Path in Africa: An Approach to the Poetry of Jay Wright," Isidore Okpewho links these ancestral tropes to "the projection of a proud Pan-African identity" and "the growth of a strong black consciousness" during the Harlem Renaissance (694). Seen from this angle, Toomer's Afrocentric imagery is notable for constructing a fantasy of "an archetypal black woman" (B. Foley 203) and a "myth" of national origins (K. Ford, *Split-Gut* 56).

Although the vernacular theories of Gates and Baker began on seemingly "parallel trajectories," their divergent interpretations of Toomer illustrate a methodological rift that would

[9] A comparable claim by Baraka: "It is absurd to assume, as has been the tendency, among a great many Western anthropologists and sociologists, that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro's mind because he learned English" (*Blues People* 9).

eventually cause them to be “seen as antagonists” (Birns 182).[10] In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates calls Baker his “ideal reader” (x) and agrees that the “the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime” (64) are “repositories of the black vernacular tradition’s rhetorical principles, coded dictionaries of black tropes” (63). By advocating “close reading” (x) as a tool for appreciating how “the vernacular informs and becomes the foundation for formal black literature” (xxii), Gates implies that the vernacular demands a comparable degree (if not quite the same kind) of interpretive virtuosity that Bloom applies to Milton and other canonical Western poets. Baker also believes that that “[a]dequate appreciation” of blues poetry “demands comprehensive attention” (*Blues* 4), yet he envisions “language (the code) ‘speaking’ the subject” (1) and emphasises that “the operative codes of a culture are historically conditioned” (78). Baker “rejected what he saw as Gates’s neo-formalism” (Birns 182), insisting that the blues are defined “not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself” (Baker, *Blues* 4). Though they appear to study the same code from different angles, Gates and Baker are principally interested in different kinds of codes that interact like what Kimberly N. Ruffin calls “sonic and cultural DNA” (63), each providing certain conditions of possibility for the other.

Afrocentric criticism—e.g., the study of African-diasporic narratology and rhetoric by Gates or African-diasporic prosody by Wilson (159) and Tracy (*Hot* 21)—assumes that the Middle Passage is, in some formal categories, of comparable importance to the North Atlantic Crossing. According to this view, African-diasporic tropes, like new letters added to an alphabet, enriched the English language with the capacity to say things differently. Most blues specialists who are sympathetic to Afrocentricm would agree that

(1) aesthetic responses to vernacular prosody are, to a significant degree, a function of musico-linguistic competence (i.e., they are shaped by constraints of prosody and rhetoric);
(2) the spirituals and the blues overlap stylistically with African-diasporic prosody, and with each other, in ways that distinguish them from traditional English-language forms.

The various formulations of this hypothesis do not propose the “direct, *unilinear descent*” of the blues from any single “African musical genre” (Kubik 5), but rather the enduring influence of

[10] Although responses to Gates and Baker are too numerous and varied to summarise here, African-Americanists have, since the nineties, tended to fault these critics for privileging folk forms in discourses of black authenticity, and have advocated a shift toward more synchronic, ethnographic parameters (see Favor 2-6).

orally-transmitted practices that can be observed like “musical melanin, pentatonic cargo imported to America from West Africa” (F. Davis 4).

Anglophonic criticism—e.g., the belief that the heritage of African-American poetry is the “heritage of the English language” (Cullen, *Caroling* xi; Bloom, *Harlem* 2), that Hughes observes the same 4-beat preferences as other English poets (Attridge, “Case” 22-23; Cureton, *RPEV* 129), or that Afrocentric formalism is conceptually flawed (Warren 1; Cohen, *Social* 224)—assumes that the Middle Passage had little real influence on the underlying structures of African-American literature. Contributors to this approach often blame Afrocentrism for obscuring the meta-narratives, institutional systems, and networks of print circulation that made possible the vernacularisation of African-American literature. Seen from this angle, the Afrocentric study of blues poetry is wrong-headed from the outset, more liable to reify socially constructed distinctions than likely to clarify literary history. Conceived as an ethnolect spoken by “everyday” African Americans, the vernacular is largely an imaginary concept. Conceived as a literary dialect, the vernacular idiom of blues poetry is not always independent of nineteenth-century racial caricature.[11] Most contemporary proponents of Anglophonic criticism would agree that

(1) the differences suggested by vernacular prosody are important largely because they have provided a symbolic mechanism for imagining a national literature and a myth of cultural origins;
(2) the conceptual coherence of the spirituals and the blues inheres not in African-diasporic technique but in the historical conditions of their creators.

Proponents of this view point out that “distinct ethnic styles … don’t quite tell us what we think they do” (Crouch 4). In 1966, Charles Keil noted that many apparent cases of African survivals can be explained by convergent evolution: the “percussion virtuosos of contemporary jazz certainly did not learn how to approximate West African polymeter by listening to the simple meter of New Orleans marching bands” (45). In literary verse, African-diasporic tropes have often functioned not as uses but “as citations of rhythm that … foreground the racialized history of rhythm’s circulation” (Glaser, “*Autobiography*” 155). For example, the composer Florence Price’s use of “African-derived” forms including “syncopated” rhythms and the “juba” is not evidence that she inherited these forms directly from West African ancestors (R. Brown xlv). Although John

[11] Although these weak formulations of the Afrocentric vernacular are common fodder for historically driven studies, few scholars, if any, would be willing to defend them.

Coltrane's music appeals to a syncopated, responsorial, improvisational competence, it also appeals to a "myth" of "essential" "African origins" (Whyton 112). Call-and-response patterning, too, has been used strategically to suggest "African diasporic connections at the time of Ghanaian independence" (Monson 334).

Afrocentric criticism is relatively closer to cognitive poetics because it perceives vernacular idioms as "transformations of modes of musical thought … shared with West African cultures and the African diaspora" (Wilson and Weston 69) and therefore part of "a specific African American tropological consciousness" (Sekoni 65). Anglophonic criticism is relatively closer to historical poetics because it perceives vernacular idioms as "trope[s] for the Africanization of Euro-American music" (Feith 66) and therefore part of a "project of African repatriation" (Cohen, *Social* 225). Afrocentric criticism is interested in the possibility of thinking *through* African-diasporic technique; Anglophonic criticism is interested in the phenomenon of thinking *about* African-diasporic technique. Although there is nothing inherently incompatible about these approaches, their priorities are so different that they are sometimes presented as competing theories.

One influential critique of Afrocentrism appears in Kenneth W. Warren's *What Was African American Literature?*:

> the collective enterprise we now know as African American or black literature is of rather recent vintage. In fact, the wine may be newer than generally acknowledged, which is to say that it was neither pressed on the African continent nor bottled during the slave era. Rather, African American literature was a postemancipation phenomenon that gained its coherence as an undertaking in the social world defined by the system of Jim Crow. (1)

Warren takes aim at the connoisseur who savours black writing for its subtle hints of Africanness. (Notably, he does not take issue with any of Gates's claims, and seems content to declare their irrelevance in advance). In *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America*, Michael C. Cohen offers a similar critique:

> If African American poetry, imagined as a transatlantic set of distinct practices and expressive forms, can be said to have an origin, that origin must be located not in Africa but in the welter of mid-century and postbellum popular American poetry. African origins came later. (224).

Cohen, likewise, only responds to a straw man of Afrocentric criticism. The origins of vernacular literature are not "fetish forms of an originary Africanness or folk authenticity" but rather "minstrel tunes, contraband songs, popular ballads, evangelical hymns, and patriotic anthems" (202). The refusal of Warren and Cohen to consider the Afrocentric hypothesis in its strongest form significantly weakens their critique.[12] "If one accepts Warren's terms, it is difficult to challenge his argument. We do not, however, accept those terms," write Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner, noting that shared tropological histories are not the same as "nostalgic assertions of a monolithic racial identity" (1).

Adjudicating this dispute requires sorting through conflicting uses of the same terms. Afrocentric genealogies propose that the blues inherited some of its African-diasporic tropes from the antebellum spirituals. Anglophonic genealogies are likelier to treat "antebellum" "spirituals" as a contradiction in terms, declaring that the theorisation of the genre and its African origins are postbellum phenomena. This is, in part, a philosophical disagreement—when does a spiritual become a spiritual?—yet each narrative rests on falsifiable claims. If the Afrocentric hypothesis is right, the music of plantation slaves will contain unmistakable evidence of African-diasporic practices; if the Anglophonic hypothesis is right, such evidence will have been imagined or exaggerated after the Civil War. One litmus test for assessing the strength of each hypothesis is to compare it to the first-hand accounts of plantation music recorded in the slave narratives.

The narratives of Frederick Douglass (Maryland), Henry Bibb (Kentucky), Solomon Northup (Louisiana), Harriet Jacobs (North Carolina), and John Andrew Jackson (South Carolina) all offer descriptions of plantation music. These accounts are broadly consistent with the Anglophonic narrative: only Jackson's 1862 account mentions a "Spiritual Hymn" (35); only Northup remarks that the "African race is a music-loving one, proverbially" (216); and none of them frame plantation music as an ancestral tradition that springs from African origins. However, all five narrators emphasise that slaves did not assimilate to the music of their captors. Bibb (23) and Northup (219) both record the unmistakably African-diasporic practice of patting "juba" or "juber."[13] The other three describe an oral culture with distinctive rhythmic, tonal, and

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[12] Although their claims appear true in the context of American print culture, Warren and Cohen do not bring the same historical rigour or theoretical sophistication to the study of African-American oral tradition. This is a recurring problem in historical poetics; e.g., Max Cavitch's essay, "Slavery and Its Metrics," does not discuss the metrical structure of plantation music but rather the history of the metrics of slavery as theorised in nineteenth-century American letters and periodicals.

[13] C. J. Smith (36) details the Dahomeyan origins of the *giouba*.

improvisational norms: "negroes compose their songs" by transposing words and rhythmic patterns from their "legitimate position" (J. Jackson 45); "slaves generally compose their own songs" (H. Jacobs 107), "do not trouble their heads much about the measure" (108), and do not recite hymnals but break into "spontaneous prayer" (103); "They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune" (Douglass 13).

Although these narrators did not speculate in print about the African origins of slave music, they did theorise about the aesthetic singularity of its orally-transmitted language. Douglass, a precursor to vernacular-centred criticism, claims that one must "analyze" the spirituals to know their aesthetic "truth" (14). An improvisational performance culture makes it possible for the thoughts of slaves to take shape, spontaneously, through music:

> The thought that came up, came out—if not *in* the word, *in* the sound;—and as frequently *in* the one as *in* the other. (13, emphasis mine).

Douglass, anticipating what Jarvis calls "musical thinking" ("Musical" 57) or "thinking in verse ("Thinking" 99), realises that vernacular idioms are capable of encoding nuances that other English-language registers are not. These nuances are liable to be misinterpreted by incompetent observers:

> Words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon … were full of meaning to themselves. (13)

Cleanth Brooks makes a comparable claim about *The Waste Land*:

> words which will seem to many apparently meaningless babble … contain the oldest and most permanent truth. (165)

Douglass and Brooks use similar language because they are (surprising at it may seem) wrestling with similar problems: the aesthetic qualities of verse are not immediately apparent, and even those who claim to apprehend these qualities often struggle to describe them. Douglass insists that the aesthetic truths of plantation songs cannot be paraphrased in propositional language: "the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do" (13-14). This

is consistent with Roman Jakobson's observation that the "truth values" of literary art "obviously exceed the bounds of poetics and of linguistics in general" (351).

Douglass's analysis points to a conclusion that this study shares: there can be no rigorous aesthetic criticism of vernacular art without a learned competence in vernacular idioms. The "technique" of the spirituals is not an ancillary curiosity which scholars might find interesting to study in addition to the "content" of the spirituals; an understanding of one entails an understanding of the other. While some might find this interpretation to be controversial, it is not, I suggest, incompatible with Cohen's reading of Douglass. Cohen, who is interested in how plantation music "resisted slavery's systems of knowledge making" (*Social* 199), would benefit from considering the role of call-and-response patterning in launching this epistemological insurrection. The mechanisms for transmitting "group identity, collective history, and social meaning" (200) through verse are not independent of verse and do not become legible as soon as one follows the circulation history of verse.

During the postbellum period, empirical observations and racial stereotypes are difficult to disentangle. William Francis Allen's 1867 introduction to *Slave Songs of the United States* expresses the myths and prejudices of his generation: minstrel tunes are "genuine slave songs" (i) and the creators of the "sperichils" are a "half-barbarous people" (ii). As Cohen observes, Allen's compilation of slave songs is in many ways the North American equivalent of collecting English folk ballads: a practice aimed at "stabilizing racial difference" (*Social* 204) and "constructing 'spirituals' as objects of authentic experience" (206), "imaginatively back-projected … into a distant 'African' past and a disappearing black or African folk spirit" (207). On inspection, however, these African origins might be more than imaginary. Allen's discussion of improvisation, stylised bodily movement, calculated asymmetries of time and pitch, and elaborate responsorial phrasing (iv-vi) is consistent the Afrocentric hypothesis. His analysis of the spirituals identifies African-diasporic practices including patting and the ring shout:

> when the 'sperichil' is struck up, [the singers] begin first walking and by-and-by shuffling round, one after the other, in a ring. … [T]he best singers … stand at the side of the room to 'base' the others, singing the body of the song and clapping their hands together or on the knees. (xiv)

Evidence that such practices proliferated throughout the African-American vernacular is generally ignored by Anglophonic criticism. Rather than considering such evidence, Cohen routinely

oversimplifies the views of Afrocentric scholars, most notably in his condescending paraphrase of W. E. B. Du Bois:

> Like ancient African ruins stupendously brought back to life, such songs were "siftings of the centuries" [sic] that still spoke "the articulate message of the slave to the world." (*Social* 201)

It is unclear whether Cohen's erroneous transcription is related to his misreading, but in any event, the "siftings of centuries" (Du Bois, *Souls* 254) are not stupendously reanimated African ruins. Du Bois compares ten iconic spiritual hymns to the "siftings" of gold in a prospector's pan, separated from the dross. Vendler likewise describes canon formation as the sifting of "wheat" from the "chaff" (ATPR); in such analogies, the "consolidation" of classic texts is framed as a "function of intrinsic worth" (Taubman 36).

Du Bois's writings laid the foundations for the concept of an "African-American Canon" unified by its "tropes and themes" (Japtok 495) and a vernacular-oriented field of literary theory that would later develop into blues aesthetic criticism (D. Hubbard 313). Notably, the "measuring" "tape" analogy Du Bois uses to explain the concept of double-consciousness is the English equivalent of the Greek word for *Canon* (see Kelly 32). Traditional, ethnocentric methods must be recalibrated: "there are many delicate differences" between Anglo-American and African-American culture "that our crude social measurements are not yet able to follow minutely" (*Souls* 164). Some African-diasporic tropes must be studied independently of the English language: "the music is far more ancient than the words" (264). Du Bois apologises for being unable to describe these tropes "in technical phrase" (253), yet he understands them as the medium through which "the inner thoughts of slaves" found expression (258).

Douglass and Du Bois, known to many as political agitators, seldom factor into discussions of aesthetic formalism. Du Bois's claim that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists" ("Criteria" 259)—when taken out of context, as it usually is—appears to collapse the boundary between art and propaganda. Yet Du Bois's point is that aesthetic truth is the most effective form of propaganda (and not that aesthetic truth ought to be pursued with propagandistic intent; he clearly does not believe that all propaganda is art). The artist must proceed "not as a scientist seeking truth, but as one upon whom Truth eternally thrusts itself as the highest handmaid of imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding" (259).

Du Bois, a self-professed elitist who catered to the tastes of the "the Talented Tenth" ("Talented" 33) and Hughes, a self-professed populist who catered to the tastes of "the low-down folks" (*CW* 9:32) are typically placed on opposite ends of a spectrum of aesthetic preference (Ferguson 699). In fact, their views on vernacular aesthetics are more similar than different. Both idealise the double-voiced poet who is neither assimilationist nor separatist: although the black artist "does not wish to Africanize America," "[h]e wouldn't bleach his negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world" (Du Bois, *Souls* 4); he must resist "the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes, *CW* 9:32). Although the "innate love of harmony and beauty" "set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing," the "would-be black savant" has been made to feel "ashamed" that he is unable "to satisfy two unreconciled ideals" (Du Bois, *Souls* 5); he is never trained "in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns" (Hughes, *CW* 9:32). Gwendolyn Brooks, too, believed that "poets who happen also to be Negroes are twice tried" (*New Negro* 13) because they are constrained by two different and sometimes incommensurable sets of rules.

Du Bois felt that the basis for an African-American Canon must be found not among the Anglicised literary verse of slave poets Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon but among the musical speech of plantation slaves and their descendants:

> the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (Du Bois, *Souls* 251)

African-American writers who were sceptical of this idea included Countee Cullen, Du Bois's eventual son-in-law, who discouraged black poets from pursing "nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African inheritance" (*Caroling* xi); and George Schuyler, who asserted that "the literature, painting, and sculpture of Aframericans [sic] … is identical in kind with the literature, painting, and sculpture of white Americans" (25). Cullen and Schuyler were both Anglophiles raised and educated in the American Northeast who conceived of the blues as doggerel ballads.

However, those African-American verse theorists who had acquired a taste for jazz or the blues—including James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sterling Brown—recognised the merit of Du Bois's Afrocentric claims and sought to explore their aesthetic implications.

Because of the historical proximity between Pan-Africanism and racial pseudoscience, most contemporary critics maintain a sceptical distance from the theories of the Harlem Renaissance: "At the same time that Locke attributed style to conditions, he also described that style as 'inborn.' Culture had a biological sting" (Corbould 184). If there is merit to Locke's Afrocentrism, he seems, at any rate, to have gotten the mechanism of transmission wrong by participating in the nativist fallacy that blacks "'naturally' generate and respond to different aesthetic rhythms" (Golston 11-12). Yet there is a better explanation. The original passage reads, "a distinctive racial intensity of mood and a particular style of technical performance" are "inborn in the typical or folky type of Negro" (72). Locke—whose credentials include a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford, a PhD in philosophy from Harvard, and a professorship at Howard University—did not think that folk rhythms are inherent in the genes of all black people (least of all himself).

Like Lorenzo Thomas (*Don't* 90-91), I propose that Locke was writing figuratively. The context of his demographic observation suggests that he is using "inborn" to mean something like "learned from birth." Throughout *The Negro and His Music*, Locke mixes metaphors of genetics and stylistics: "the *process of composing* by group improvisation … really has *generations* of experience back of it" (79, emphasis mine). Rather than espousing a simplistic racial essentialism, Locke anticipates Wittgenstein's elegant solution to the problem of essence: framing shared characteristics as "family resemblances" which form "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing" (§66-67). The vernacular network theorised by Locke is a relatively more Afrocentric, formalist-leaning precursor to Baker's blues matrix "of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses"; a "multiplex, enabling *script* in which Afro-American cultural discourse is inscribed" (*Blues* 3, 4).

Brown, also a professor at Howard, shared Locke's enthusiasm for vernacular prosody and sought to canonise the blues and other vernacular forms in his literary anthology, *The Negro Caravan: Writing by American Negroes* (1941). When Brown writes in the introduction that these works "have greatly influenced the thinking" of Americans (v), his point is not that literature fills

people's heads with ideas and ideologies. He seems to mean, rather, that literature makes it possible to have ideas in different kinds of ways. To clarify, provisionally, the proposed relationship between verse and cognition, it is helpful to consider two poems by African Americans: both set on a southern road, both exploring ironies of racial inequality, and both expressed in 5-beat units. First, "The Southern Road" by Dudley Randall:

> There the black river, boundary to hell.
> And here the iron bridge, the ancient car,
> And grim conductor, who with surly yell
> Forbids white soldiers where the black ones are. (70)

It is, in any event, noteworthy that the "grim conductor" resembles Charon at the River Styx. This motif becomes ironic when it is read historically, in the context of W. E. B. Du Bois's essay, "Returning Soldiers," Claude McKay's sonnet "If We Must Die," and the Red Summer of 1919 (see Schneider 7). As the persona prepares to depart for the Second World War, he recalls, with surreal trepidation, the maltreatment of black soldiers during and after the First. Perhaps war is not the great equaliser after all: even at the "boundary to hell," the ferryman still enforces racial segregation. This irony is also felt formally: like McKay, Wheatley, and others, Randall excels at the Eurocentric standards of excellence once thought to evince the superiority of white artists. The persona, who speaks in well-balanced iambic pentameter and paints a subtle hellscape of classical motifs, is painfully aware that this virtuosity has not earned him the privileges of full citizenship.

Although many would consider this interpretation to be interdisciplinary, it does not address the concerns of cognitive poetics. It offers a potentially illuminating reading of what mythological and metrical motifs might "stand for" in a certain frame of reference, yet it ignores the relationship between the organisation of verse materials and heightened aesthetic cognition. According to the standards advocated by this study, a rigorously interdisciplinary reading ought to consider how Randall's polysyndetic rhetoric (And … And …) launches and sustains a periodic sentence. This idiosyncrasy makes possible the convergence of patterns of grammar and syntax, of metrical hierarchy, and of cross-rhyme, all of which receive closure in the word "are." This sudden foregrounding of the stanza's overarching symmetry, at the very moment when the central irony becomes fully legible, creates (to borrow a phrase from Hurley) "the conditions for a kind of knowing that cannot be translated beyond itself" ("How Philosophers" 108). Anyone who thinks

that these conditions are relatively unimportant beyond the ivory tower of theoretical formalism must contend with what happens when they are altered or removed:

> The conductor forbids white soldiers where the black ones are.

Same words, altogether different "meaning." What is lost is not only beauty and symmetry but also the stylised kind of irony that Douglass, Du Bois, and Brown understood as aesthetic truth. The capacity to perceive this truth is correlated to one's acquired competence in the stylistic and cultural codes invoked by the artist.

By selecting "Southern Road" as the title poem of his first collection, Brown foregrounds the most stylistically innovative work in the volume:

> Swing dat hammer—hunh—
> Steady, bo';
> Swing dat hammer—hunh—
> Steady, bo';
> Ain't no rush, bebby,
> Long ways to go. (*CP* 53)

By framing a vernacular dialect in AAB patterns of call and response, separated by a midline caesura, Brown audaciously links West African musical practices to the 12-bar stanza. This is a richly symbolic gesture because similar 6-hemistich, AAB, responsorial structures have been observed in the work songs of plantation slaves (Bryant 206) and the prison songs of twentieth-century African Americans (Oliver 12). Brown suggests not only that white prison guards continue to function as *de facto* slave drivers, but also that African-diasporic practices continue to provide the conditions for intellectual noncompliance.

Whereas the boundaries of Randall's 5-beat units are imposed by hierarchical patterns of beats, the boundaries of Brown's 5-beat units are imposed by the implicit pace of work ("hunh!"). In analysing the metrical properties of this stanza, traditional assumptions about English 5-beat units go in the growing pile of Eurocentric knowledge that needs tweaking or updating. In what are now considered relatively advanced discussions of blues prosody, specialists continue to regard iambic pentameter as an adequate metric for Brown's vernacular experiments (Glaser, "Folk Iambics") and more broadly, for the 12-bar stanza (Chinitz 77). Yet by parsing the underlying

structures of blues poetry as something they are not, stress-metered approximations are an impediment to well-calibrated cognitive poetic criticism.

The poetic theories and practices of Brown and his vernacular-centred contemporaries were not shaped by myths of a Pan-African folk spirit, even if their figures of speech occasionally give this impression. They did believe that plantation slavery and its aftermath created a petri dish of rhythmic innovation—of singing at work, at church, and during festive gatherings—from which the spirituals and the blues emerged.[14] For example, the spiritual "Heav'n, Heav'n" blithely anticipates the "robe" and "shoes" that the persona will receive in the afterlife; yet by describing these basic amenities as if they were luxuries, the lyrics call attention to the sartorial neglect of slaves in an ironic way. Or the secular song "I Got a Gal," which simultaneously parodies the bellicosity of juke joint culture and the racial prejudices of the legal system. Through composed in different locations, periods, and patterns of stress metre, these lyrics remarkably share the same phrasal template, the same polyvocal persona, and the same mode of ironic thinking.[15]

This mode of irony—the "joy and sorrow simultaneously present in the spirituals" and "the exuberant and lyrical tragicomedy of the blues" (West, "Philosophy" 24)—is arguably the most distinctive quality of vernacular verse forms. Douglass describes it as both "the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone," expressing "at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness" (13). As noted by Douglass (15), Jacobs (109), and Du Bois (*Souls* 251), white observers consistently took these ironies at face value. The aesthetic truth of the blues, likewise, has been described as "laughable woe" (Handy, *Father* 122); "ironic laughter mixed with tears" (Hughes, *CW* 9:33); "a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Ellison 264); "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted" (J. Baldwin 141); the "point at which even grief feels absurd" and "laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity" (A. Walker, *In Search* 115). In section 3, I offer a revisionary interpretation of the relationship between this tragicomic irony and the 12-bar stanza.

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[14] If this blues aesthetic sounds a bit "Romantic," it is: especially in terms of literary experimentation with the conventions of orally-transmitted "folk" music. Within the blues tradition, Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew* plus "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" fill the same niches that the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge plus Wordsworth's 1800 preface fill within the Romantic Tradition (see Hale 54-55).

[15] More extensive formal analyses of the texts considered in this section are provided in the main chapters: "Heav'n, Heav'n" (1.2), "Southern Road" (1.5), "I Got a Gal" (2.6), and McKay's sonnet (4.2).

iii: What rules must an "authentic" blues poem follow?

"God only knows what the world has suffered from the white damsels who try to sing the Blues," Hurston complained ("Characteristics" 42), apparently framing the authenticity of the genre in racial terms. However, when one compares the peppy vaudeville style of Marion Harris's "St. Louis Blues" to the mournful style of Bessie Smith's "St. Louis Blues," Hurston's complaint seems less like racial chauvinism. She objected not to cultural appropriation in the abstract but more specifically, to the defacement of aesthetic "truth," which "dies under [classical] training like flowers under hot water" ("Spirituals" 474). The standards of excellence for a well-performed spiritual—including "disharmony," "shifting keys," and "broken time"—are in some ways "the very antithesis of white vocal art" (474). Johnson agreed that there "are few things more ludicrous" than adapting vernacular performance styles to "a European music hall": classically trained musicians "play the notes too correctly" and "do not play what is not written down" (*BANS* 28). Johnson emphasises that this difference, though correlated to race, is not itself a function of race. Rather, it is a function of learned musical and cultural competences: "white singers" "*can* sing" vernacular forms, "if they *feel* them. But," he continues,

> to feel them it is necessary to know the truth about their origin and history, to get in touch with the association of ideas which surround them, and to realize something of what they have meant in the experiences of the people who created them. In a word, the capacity to *feel* these songs while singing them is more important than any amount of mere artistic technique. (29)

Johnson's point is that the "mere" presence of racialised language is insufficient to authenticate vernacular prosody. One does not sprinkle in a little dialect here and syncopation there and *voilà*, produce a genuine blues poem. Vernacular authenticity is an "elusive thing which nobody can define and that you can only tell is there when you feel it" (Johnson, *BANP* xiii).

This line of reasoning has also been applied to African-American jazz. There is "something elusive about jazz that few, if any of the white artists, have been able to capture … [that] for lack

of a better name, I'll call Negro rhythm" (Rogers 220).[16] What is "true" about jazz cannot be put into words ("if you have to ask what it is, you'll never know") and is something that must be felt ("Jazz is a heartbeat—its heartbeat is yours" [Hughes, *CW* 9:370]). "The notator of any jazz solo, or blues, has no chance of capturing what in effect are the most important elements of the music," Baraka agreed: "Not only are the various jazz effects almost impossible to notate, but each note *means something* quite in adjunct to musical notation" ("Jazz" 19). These critics agree that vernacular forms have something different to say and some different way of saying it. Authentic vernacularity inheres neither in the *what* nor the *how*, but in their consubstantiality.

Conceptually, the verse theories of black and white "modernists" were more similar than they appear from a distance. The poet, as conceived by Marianne Moore, combines "on the one hand," "the raw material of poetry in all its rawness"; and "on the other hand," "that which is … genuine" (267). Locke envisions genuine Negro poetry as a relationship between, on the one hand, "a distinctive racial intensity of mood," and on the other hand, "a particular style of technical performance" (*Negro* 72). These two sides of the equation only become genuine, Johnson explains, when they are in "perfect union," both "responding to the baton of some extremely sensitive conductor" (*BANS* 28). Disembodied content is not being poured into fixed form: in Johnson's analogy, both are constrained by the same baton. As Jarvis clarifies, verse is a product of multiple "colliding constraints: the constraint of making sense … and the constraints selected by the poet's metrical art" ("What" 107). Because of a teleological bias "toward freedom and away from the repressive past" (M. Martin 3), constraints are often misconstrued as vestiges of an archaic class system. In fact, constraints provide conditions of possibility: the "net" which, in Robert Frost's analogy, gives beauty and purpose to the game of tennis (Richardson 455) or the "obstacles" which, in Eliot's analogy, make it possible to play the game of poetry (269).

The constraints of blues poetry—i.e., the rules that it must follow to be perceived as genuine—were first articulated in 1927 in Langston Hughes's "Note on Blues." On the one hand, *what* an authentic blues poem can say is limited by the demands of tragicomedy:

> The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh. (*CW* 1:73)

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[16] Whereas historical poetics links Rogers's claim to "one of slavery's most enduring racist caricatures" (Cavitch 96), I am more interested in assessing the musico-linguistic basis for such a claim.

On the other hand, *how* an authentic blues poem can say it is limited by a set of metrical, rhythmic, and rhetorical constraints:

> The *Blues*, unlike the *Spirituals*, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted. (*CW* 1:73)

This is, if not a categorical prescription, at least a normative description of how blues poetry does what it does: its tone is "almost always" tragicomic and its stanza "seldom" deviates from the conventional statement-repeat-response pattern. An authentic blues poem is a competently-written blues poem: it has something bluesy to say (usually, laughing to keep from crying) and a bluesy way of saying it (usually, an AAB template).

The rigorous academic study of literary blues constraints began in the seventies, when Henderson and Sherley Anne Williams introduced "worrying" and other formal terms to literary criticism. During the eighties, David Evans criticised the foot scansion of blues prosody (*Big* 23) and Steven C. Tracy developed a musicologically informed system of scansion for the 12-bar stanza ("To the Tune" 80; *LHB* 147). These developments make it possible to refine the criteria from Hughes's "Note on Blues." In musico-linguistic terms, most authentic blues poems will satisfy or knowingly transgress

(1) A 3-line structure, usually in a statement/repeat/response pattern. The repeat line is usually modified (i.e., *worried*) and each line is usually divided into two half-lines (or *hemistiches*);
(2) Tragicomedy, an irony that is typically introduced in the response line, often in the form of a paradox or non sequitur.

"Young Gal's Blues" by Hughes satisfies both criteria. Each unit is divided into 2-beat and 3-beat hemistiches (bold); the repeat line (A_2) is worried; and the response line (B) introduces subtle humour:

	Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
A_1 (anticipation):	I'm gonna **walk** to de **grave**yard	'Hind ma **friend** Miss **Co**ra **Lee**.
A_2 (anticipation):	Gonna **walk** to de **grave**yard	'Hind ma **dear** friend **Co**ra **Lee**.
B (reversal):	Cause **when** I'm **dead** some	**Bo**dy'll have to **walk** behind **me**.

According to this hypothesis, experienced readers can recognise the rhythms and ironies of "Young Gal's Blues" as being authentically bluesy without having previously encountered its lyrics. Were the first hemistich to conclude with "somebody'll" rather than "some / Body'll," a 3-beat / 2-beat alternation would risk sounding "wrong" to competent readers. Accordingly (I propose), Hughes separates "some" and "Body'll" in observation of the genre's constraints.

To understand why musico-linguistic constraints are important to the study of cognitive poetics, one must realise that they are not merely constraining empty patterns of sound. Chinitz puts it well: "as the audience anticipates the satisfying closure of rhyme and sense in the response line, … this suspense gives the singer opportunities for irony, surprise, humor, understatement, and other effects" (68). In my reading of "Young Gal's Blues," the initial statement creates the expectation that the persona is "blue" for her departed friend; the repeat line strengthens this expectation by emphasising the dearness of the speaker's friendship; the response line is tragicomic because we learn that the persona is pre-emptively "blue" for her departed self. The funeral messing with her emotions is not the one she is attending, which adds ambiguous depth to her character: she seems, at once, to be grieving for Cora Lee and paying social dues so that her own funeral will be well-attended. This psychological depth does not exist independently of the constraints of the 12-bar stanza, which Hughes introduced to literary verse (much like the visual depth of the *Holy Trinity* does not exist independently of the constraints of single-point perspective, which Masaccio introduced to painting).

Nevertheless, as demonstrated throughout the Pulitzer Prize-nominated first volume of Rampersad's *The Life of Langston Hughes* (1986), the perceived authenticity of blues poetry is too complex to be explained entirely in musico-linguistic terms. Even if one regards Hughes, Hurston, and Brown as discriminating vernacular connoisseurs, it seems implausible that irony and phrasing were their only criteria for authenticating the genre. Moreover, the majority of their readers lacked this specialised competence. Carl Van Vechten—who insinuates that "negroes" do not understand "irony" ("Uncle Tom's Mansion" 224) in the same article in which he completely misreads the

irony of their vernacular art—"knew almost nothing" about the blues (Rampersad, *Life* 1:111). And he is the *most* blues-educated of Hughes's prominent white readers, a group that also includes Vachel Lindsay, Charlotte Osgood Mason, and Ezra Pound. What these readers found to be authentic about Hughes's verse usually had less to do with irony and phrasing than folk-, race-, and geography-based fantasies.

Since the eighties, blues specialists have continued to explore our understanding of musico-linguistic constraints. Barbara A. Baker has suggested a relationship between the "call-and-response patterns of blues music" and the "tragic-comic catharsis of the blues" (94). Chinitz tentatively links "blues imagery, formulae, and rhythms" (68) to the "compensatory expression of conflicting feelings" (69)—which is precisely what I am interested in—yet this far-reaching discussion begins and ends in less than a page. These scholars are generally more interested in contributing original insights to literary history than to verse criticism, as evident in the stated objectives of Chinitz's research:

> Hughes's interventions into the shifting definition of "authentic blackness," his work toward a socially effective discourse of racial protest, his engagement with liberal politics, … and the imprint of all these matters in texts ranging from his poetry and fiction to his non-fiction prose and even his Congressional testimony. (3-4)

There are many causes for this paradigm shift toward literary history (and away from verse criticism): the belief that Tracy's research is already as "traditional and formalistic" as it needs to be (Cunningham 119); that the concept of authentic bluesiness is inseparable from discourses of racial essence and national identity; and that the practice of admiring the rarefied cognition of the master blues poet is, to put it mildly, a bit anachronistic.

Although blues aesthetic criticism has drifted toward historical poetics, it has not become less "formalist": the discussion of the formal strategies of blues poets has expanded in recent years. This discussion is too interdisciplinary and too contentious to have produced an orthodox set of findings, yet it is characterised by certain biases. Its contributors seldom practice scansion, and when they do, it is usually stress-metered; they tend to frame the formal mechanism for authentic "bluesiness" as a deliberate lack of refinement; they discuss the authenticity of blues poetry primarily in racial terms; they usually perceive the genre's formal evolution as a function of socio-

cultural constraints. Most would, with various reservations and qualifications, agree that an authentic blues poem contains

(1) symbolic tropes, which commonly include the AAB stanza, eye-dialect, or call-and-response patterning;
(2) the use of "rough" or "loose" iambic pentameter and (less commonly) slant rhyme to suggest a folksy, unpretentious, proletarian manner.

Many prefer to study blues poetry from this angle because, despite making some compromises in terms of prosodic sophistication, it appears to explain both the formal and cultural strategies of blues poets. For example, this hypothesis also convincingly explains the authenticity of "Young Gal's Blues." Its dialect (bold) and AAB structure are immediately recognisable and its 5-beat lines, which do not systematically alternate stronger (/) and weaker positions (x), seem casual and unpretentious:

x x x / x x / x x x / x /x /
I'm gonna walk to **de** graveyard **'Hind ma** friend Miss Cora Lee.

x x / x x / x x x / x / x /
Gonna walk to **de** graveyard **'Hind ma** dear Friend Cora Lee.

x / x / x / x x / x x /
Cause when I'm dead some **Body'll** have to walk behind me.[17]

What strikes Chinitz as particularly artful is the funereal motif that bookends the enjambment ("some / Body'll"): "today's participant" is "tomorrow's corpse" (71). The blues idiom is a "strategy for camouflaging [Hughes's] art" (75): clever-but-casual wordplay insulates him from the aspersions of pretentiousness faced by Melvin Tolson, Robert Hayden, and others self-consciously erudite black modernists. The limitation of the socio-cultural hypothesis is its tendency to focus on what the 12-bar stanza stands for (e.g., as a metacommunicative signifier of race, class, and ideology) rather than how it is used (e.g., as a mode of tragicomic thinking). This is precisely the trade-off anticipated by Herbert Tucker: as interpretation expands "from the consideration of a whole poem to that of a whole culture," this "quantitative shift in focus" risks "a qualitative change in attentiveness" (533). Rather than receiving one hundred percent of a

[17] For scansional purposes, Hughes's 6-line stanza has been rewritten as a 3-line stanza.

critic's attention, the stylistic experimentation of blues poets now receives a fraction of that attention, and even then, usually as a means to a hermeneutic end.

As Jed Rasula shrewdly observes, the poems of the Harlem Renaissance "presumably had the impact they did because the audience lived and breathed a world of constraints, both vile (racism) and welcome (blues, hymns, and vernacular traditions like the dozens)" (662). Rasula's "constraints" are, respectively, socio-cultural (things that cannot be said because they violate racial norms) and musico-linguistic (things that cannot be said because they violate stylistic norms). As demonstrated by "Young Gal's Blues," both hypotheses have clear explanatory value, although their relative importance remains a point of contention. Moreover, aesthetic responses to the poem are not perceived as separate socio-cultural and musico-linguistic feelings, but as an overall judgment of authenticity or correctness. Kutzinski's solution is to "use the term 'socio-aesthetics' to signal the impossibility of separating politics from aesthetics when analyzing the poetry" of Hughes and his contemporaries (116). As explained by one of Kutzinski's reviewers, the objective is to understand "Hughes's political and aesthetic decisions" while paying "particular attention to the constraints" that influenced these decisions (Farebrother 392).

However, as discussed in sections 1 and 2, this socio-aesthetic reduction might be a conceptual step backwards: verse is not shaped by a single set of socio-aesthetic constraints. True, as Jonathan Culler acknowledges, even biologically-determined rhythmic preferences are "mediated by culture" (171). Then again, mediation "is nothing at all, by itself": "there can be no mediation without something to mediate" (Jarvis, *Adorno* 183). This "something" is seldom the focus of blues aesthetic criticism. To give a sense of the priorities of the field, Rampersad's biography of Hughes (which usually discusses form as an indicator of class distinction and offers no insights into the 12-bar stanza) is a seminal text, while *The Blues Lyric Formula* by Michael Taft (which comprehensively identifies and evaluates the phrasal templates of the 12-bar stanza) is scarcely cited. In a healthy field of criticism, these priorities would be balanced.

I do agree that, under normal circumstances, the visual foregrounding of poetic form (e.g., through conventions of segmentation) makes its musico-linguistic function impossible to isolate from its socio-cultural function. Once aware of a form's connotations, readers can no more un-perceive them than choose not to see the American flag as a national symbol. However, experimental poets sometimes impose constraints in a clandestine manner: "backgrounding" them, so to speak, by embedding them in other forms, obscuring their conventional boundaries, or

otherwise concealing their identity. I am thinking, for instance, of the sonnet that blends almost imperceptibly into the blank verse of *Romeo and Juliet* (1.5.91-104) or the double-sonnet that blends almost imperceptibly into the blank verse of *The Waste Land* (3.235-262). Whether or not one registers the symbolism of these sonnets, the *volta* continues to do poetic work. Even readers who claim not to care about poetic form can feel the irony when Romeo daringly escalates his flirtation in line 99, or the anticlimax when Eliot's narrator disinterestedly abandons the sex scene in line 243 and again in line 258.

As discussed in section i, the received wisdom maintains that blues poets didn't mess around with esotericism. True, scholars commonly laud blues poetry as subtle, complex, and experimental, yet the bar for these virtues is set relatively low. (Clearly, they don't mean *as complex*, *as subtle*, or *as experimental* as Shakespeare and Eliot). Their approach to the 12-bar stanza assumes that what you see is approximately what you get. While conceding that the techniques of blues poetry are not particularly elaborate, they give other reasons for appreciating the genre. This concession is unnecessary. In fact, Hughes and his successors experimented with call-and-response patterning and 12-bar phrasing in the same kinds of ways that Shakespeare and Eliot experimented with blank verse and the sonnet. To be clear, I am not referring to formally *irregular* blues poems, many of which are mentioned by Patterson or anthologised by Young, but to highly sophisticated and *clandestine* moments of formal synthesis that cannot be spotted from a distance.

This study proposes to reinvigorate, complicate, and expand the critical discussion of blues prosody: not with a radical new set of theoretical claims, but with better-calibrated methods of scansion and close reading. Chapter 1 discusses how African-diasporic practices enriched English-language prosody with metrical constraints and rhythmic preferences that shaped the 12-bar stanza. Chapter 2 considers how plantation slaves developed stylised practices of double entendre, polyvocal persona, iconography, tragicomic irony, and interior monologue. Chapter 3 assesses the counterintuitive legacy of racial caricature: on imagined constructions of authentic blackness, on the persistent confusion of vernacular prosody with satires of itself, and on the repertoire of counter-satire and creative iconoclasm that black artists developed to subvert racial hierarchies. Building upon these insights, chapter 4 introduces several original discoveries: elaborate chiastic poems, blues sonnets, and even chiastic blues sonnets that previous studies have overlooked or misidentified.

Although blues aesthetic criticism is robust and full of insight, the dominant voices often proceed as if prosodic correctness could be approximated or ignored. These critics are commonly, and I say this without hyperbole, wrong about the stylistic origins, the metrical structures, the rhythmic preferences, and the intertextual relationships manifested in blues poems. These details are not less important than dates and places: form, style, and technique are essential to any discussion of literary "aesthetics." Being wrong about these (so-called) formalist questions hamstrings our critical efforts in ways that are too numerous and subtle to predict in advance. Blues aesthetic criticism can no more choose to be uninterested in (rigorous) prosody than evolutionary science can choose to be uninterested in (precise) taxonomy. The new methods of scansion introduced in this study are meant to illustrate two things: firstly, the virtuosity of blues poets; and secondly, the conditions for heightened aesthetic experience. I hope that specialists in cognitive poetics, historical poetics, literary prosody, and African-American literary criticism will benefit from these methods, which shed considerable new light on the origins, the structure, and the experimental virtuosity of blues poetry.

Chapter 1: Form

1.1: Harmony

During the period now known as the Harlem Renaissance, academic criticism usually filtered discussions of cultural preference through the lens of race. This tendency was, in part, a continuation of the Western legacy of racial pseudoscience which viewed cultural norms as evidence of genetic difference. Others used race as a metonym for cultural preference without holding such essentialist beliefs. "Asymmetry," according to the ethnomusicologist Zora Neale Hurston, "is a definite feature of Negro art":

> It is present in the literature, both prose and verse. … It is this lack of symmetry which makes Negro dancing so difficult for white dancers to learn. The abrupt and unexpected changes. The frequent change of key and time are evidences of this quality in music. ("Characteristics" 35)

Others linked this preference to geographic origin rather than skin colour. What Hurston described as the "negro" preference for "asymmetry," Ernest Borneman described as the "African" preference for "circumlocution" and "obliquity":

> While the whole European tradition strives for regularity—of pitch, of time, of timbre and of vibrato—the African tradition strives precisely for the negation of these elements. In language, the African tradition aims at circumlocution rather than at exact definition. … In music, the same tendency towards obliquity and ellipsis is noticeable: no note is attacked straight; the voice or instrument always approaches it from above or below, [and] plays around the implied pitch … The timing and accentuation, finally, are not *stated*, but *implied* or *suggested*. (qtd. in Baraka, *BP* 31).

What these critics agree upon is that artistic traditions of European origin and artistic traditions of Sub-Saharan African origin tend to approach relationships of mathematical symmetry in systematically different ways. Given the difficulty of explaining this distinction, it is helpful to consider a visual example. In the construction of *mbari* shrines, the highest form of sacred Igbo art, one finds a relative thematic harmony (rather than a strict mathematical symmetry) among the parts. No circle lies precisely at the centre of a parallelogram; no straight line drawn through any

shape or figure produces two identical halves; a square pillar on one side is echoed by a round pillar on the other:

Figure 1: Detail of front side of *mbari* to Ala by the artist, Ezem, in Inyeogugu, Nigeria, 1960.

Source: Cole, "Mbari."

The ornamentation of *mbari* shrines is "based on squares, rectangles, rhombuses and triangles; on five and six-pointed stars, or on scroll and spiral motifs, always modified in such a way as to keep the design in a scale appropriate to the size of the carved surface" (Dmochowski 31). While many would describe this kind of symmetry as "imprecise," it is not a symmetry that could be improved

by bringing the parts into a more rigorous mathematical conformity. Without these calculated asymmetries, the sense of vibrancy which animates the earth goddess Ala would be diminished, and the ritual and aesthetic significance of the earthen materials would be diminished.

The sacred architecture of Classical Europe adopted a markedly different approach to symmetry. Ancient Greek architects viewed the imprecise recurrences of the natural world not as qualities to be amplified, but as flaws to be eliminated. Geometric symmetry came to be foregrounded as the fundamental organising principle of visual harmony, a principle that is repeated at every level of construction. The pillars of a Greek temple demonstrate two kinds of strict symmetry, radial (distance from a common midpoint) and bilateral (left-to-right). These pillars are coordinated with other geometric shapes to form larger patterns of symmetry, creating a sense of balance and coherence when viewed from any angle:

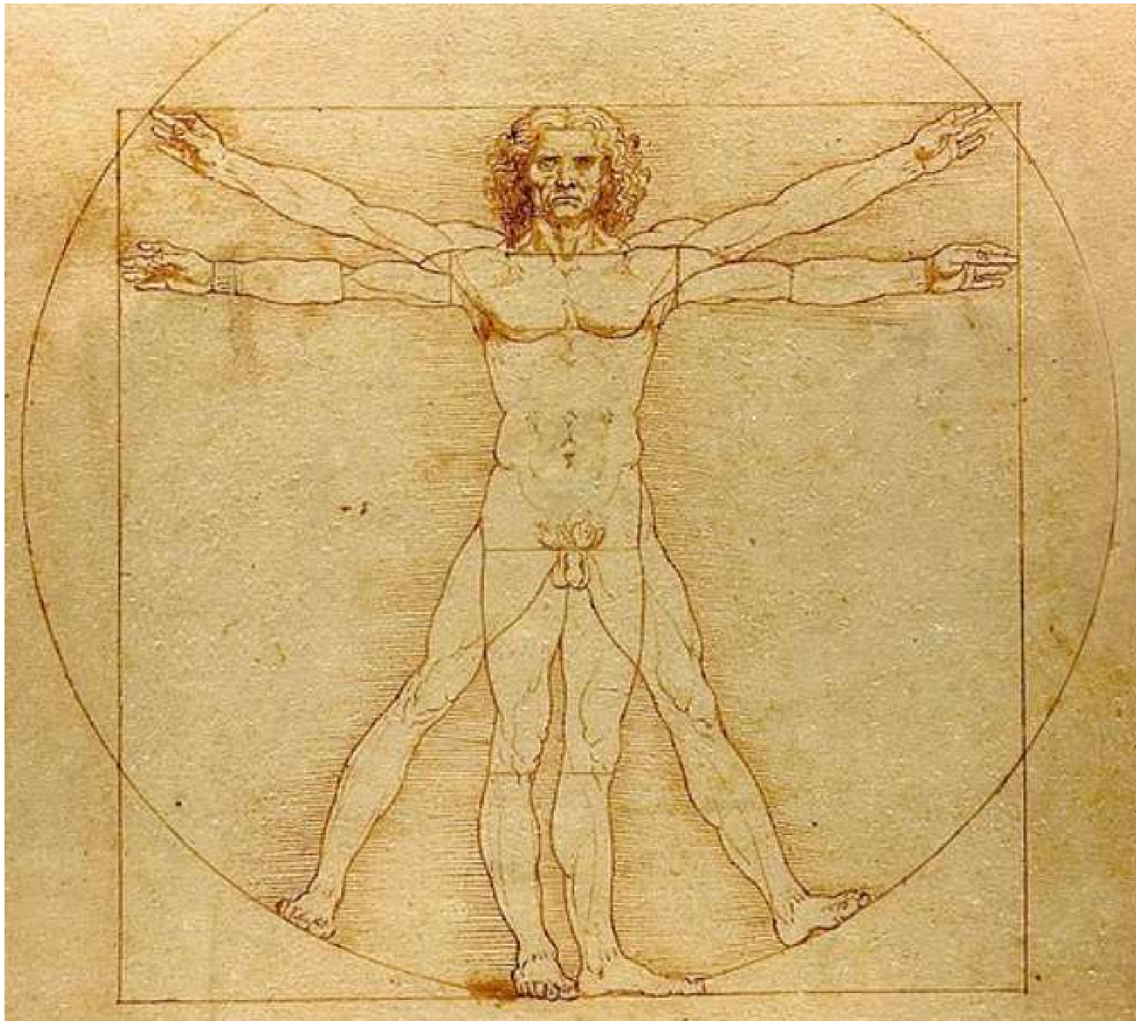
Figure 2: Illustration, Temple of Zeus, Olympia (468-460 B.C.)

Source: Waddell, *Greek and Roman Architecture* 24.

Whereas strict radial and bilateral symmetry would diminish the sense of harmony in *mbari* architecture, these same relationships amplify the sense of harmony in classical European

architecture. The association of "harmonious classical balance" with "absolute symmetry" has continued to shape the evolution of European art, most notably during the Italian Renaissance (Watkin 274). When Leonardo da Vinci represented the proportions of the human body, he emphasised relationships of radial and bilateral symmetry:

Figure 3: Vitruvian Man, drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1487



Source: *Leonardo Da Vinci: Paintings, Drawings, Quotes, Biography*. Web. 25 June 2018. <https://www.leonardodavinci.net/the-vitruvian-man.jsp>.

Cultural norms of harmony are also evident in the dynamic relationships of the performing arts, like the rhythmic and kinesthetic patterns of dance. In the ritual and symbolic dances of Sub-

Saharan Africa (Figure 4), postures are often crouched and unbalanced from left-to-right, suggesting a harmony with the potential energies of the natural world (e.g., of a hunter or a large animal). In the European art form of ballet (Figure 5), postures are comparatively straight, and limbs are extended to suggest a harmony with the ideal proportions of the human body:

Figure 4: Masked dancer (warrior)

Figure 5: Masked dancer (Death)

Source, fig. 4: Welsh-Asante, cover design.

Source, fig. 5: Carolina Ballet, *Masque*.

In each case, the harmony suggested by the posture is amplified by the dancer's costume. In figure 4, the line of symmetry is curved to the left of centre, throwing the proportions of the mask into symbolic relationships. In figure 5, the line of symmetry bisects the dancer's costume so each half

mirrors the other. These different senses of harmony persisted among the descendants of Europeans and the descendants of Africans living in the United States. On festive occasions in the antebellum South, it was not uncommon to see black Americans performing dances of African origin, like the pattin' juba, and white Americans performing dances of European origin, like the waltz. The respective postures of the pattin' juba and the waltz retain many elements of the symmetries suggested in figures 4 and 5.

If one's frame of reference for precision does not involve geometric relationships of symmetry, neither the forms of European origin nor the forms of African origin can be described as more balanced or precise than the alternative. In each instance, what determines the sense of harmony and beauty is not the straightness or crookedness of the parts, but their overall coherence. This suggests a fundamental challenge in applying Western theories to African art: our descriptive terms and basic assumptions invariably lack the capacity to address important nuances. This problem extends also to the interpretation of symbolism. As Alain Locke wrote in 1924, "African images," when evaluated by the terms of Western art, are generally "dismissed as crude attempts at realistic representation"; when the conventions are adequately understood, "the African representation of form, previously regarded as ridiculously crude, suddenly appear[s] cunningly sophisticated" (*Works* 100).

Not all aesthetic categories are culturally relative. The human capacity to perceive and organise patterns of sound and rhythm is biologically determined, which explains why certain musical scales (e.g., the pentatonic scale) and metrical structures (e.g., the 4 X 4 stanza) have evolved repeatedly and independently throughout human history (Powell 121-122). This might seem to suggest that categories like musical harmony, grounded in naturally-occurring frequencies, are objective and impervious to cultural prejudice. However, throughout the oral traditions of Sub-Saharan Africa and the African diaspora, group singing often achieves a sense of overall coherence by deliberately *avoiding* strict mathematical symmetry among note values. Hurston describes this technique as "jagged harmony" ("Spirituals" 474).

Rhythmic competence, too, has a physiological basis. In a study titled *The Poem's Heartbeat*, Alfred Corn observes that the first thing an infant hears "is the heartbeat of the mother—a heartbeat perceived in a regularly recurring sequence" (xix). Richard Cureton observes that "tactical beating"—the central pulse in a line of poetry, usually with four beats per grouping—occurs near the rate of the heartbeat, 40-140 beats per minute" ("Meter" 122), and suggests that

the "ultimate sources of our rhythmic competence … might be intimately related to the propagation and evolution of all living things" ("Telling" 42). In other words, cardiovascular beating and metrical beating might be linked by a shared biological impulse toward repeated muscular activity.

This is not to say English rhythms naturally observe the metronomic regularity of a steady heartbeat; as Kirstie Blair points out, the heartbeat is also "organic and variable" (18). Blair gives the example of Byron, who "stresses the variations in the heartbeat in a moment of passion" (42). Within the field of stress metrics, however, critics have preferred to emphasise the underlying norm from which poets depart during these moments of passion. Derek Attridge describes rhythm as "a regularly repeated pulse of energy, an experience which has a muscular as well as a mental dimension" (*REP* 77). This tendency to organise recurring rhythmic units in hierarchical patterns of 2, 4, 8, and 16—a preference that lies "at the heart of English versification"—can be observed whenever a group reads a poem in unison:

> speakers of English can turn irregular-looking sets of lines … ([which] vary in length from four to eight syllables) into regular metrical verse, and do so without thinking twice. What is more, if a group of English speakers are asked to read lines of this kind of meter together, they will use exactly the *same* procedures to achieve rhythmic regularity in pronunciation—even if they have never seen the lines before.[18] (*Poetic* 44)

Others have downplayed any relationship between the muscular activity of the heart and the metrical activity of a poem. Stephen Cushman finds the idea that "accents recur regularly in a line because heartbeats recur regularly in the chest" to be a "physiological fallacy" (80); Alan Holder likewise dismisses this "dubious staple of prosodic criticism … that might be called 'the cardiac connection'" (126). Despite different perspectives on the source (or sources) of rhythmic competence, prosodists generally agree that this competence is a matter of regular recurrence. In Golston's words, "everyone knows that 'heartbeats recur regularly in the chest'" (11).

Jonathan Culler offers an important verdict on this debate: "What is crucial is not whether poetic rhythm derives from bodily rhythms, but rather the bodily, experiential dimension of rhythm itself"; rhythm is "not so much a matter of interpretation as a direct experience, the result of rhythmic competence, though mediated by culture" (171). If, as Culler suggests, rhythm is culturally mediated, then what sounds natural in one musical idiom might sound unnatural in

[18] The benefits and limitations of Attridge's group-reading test are discussed in 1.3.

another. Although Lerdahl and Jackendoff argue that many grouping preferences are "not peculiar to classical Western tonal music, but … universal" (96), their study considers no examples of Sub-Saharan African origin. It is these rhythms, inherited through the African diaspora, that specialists in vernacular expression generally acknowledge as the source of what sounds "natural" in the blues. Locke wrote that the "obvious connecting link between all styles and varieties of Negro music is of course, the element of rhythm" (*Negro* 139).

In contrast to the European emphasis on melody, West African music places greater relative emphasis on complex rhythms and polyrhythms. West African rhythms have also been likened to a heartbeat, yet this comparison highlights both the systole-diastole movement and the separate movement of "'syncope,' meaning a skipped heart beat":

> syncopation is an acknowledgement of the metronomic heart beat and the significant space surrounding it, displacing rhythmic accents from strong to weak beats. Richard Alan Waterman noted the importance of the metronome sense to African music—the need to have an absolute sense of where the beat is, so that polyrhythm, polymeter, and syncopation can be used … in a complex and effectively coordinated way. (Tracy, *Hot* 21)

Throughout his poetry, prose, oratory, and drama, Hughes plays upon the cardiovascular connotations of syncopation to emphasise both the symmetries and the asymmetries of rhythm. In a play titled "Mister Jazz," the primary narrator, the personified voice of Jazz, explains that syncopation "must have started" "in the human heart" (*CW* 6:250). Hughes's cardiovascular analogies often converge with images of syncopated African drumbeats. In the poem "Dance Africaine," Hughes clusters strong syllables in groupings of two or three to impede a steady pattern of alternating stress:

```
               /     /     /
And the tom-toms beat,

               /     /     /
And the tom-toms beat,
```

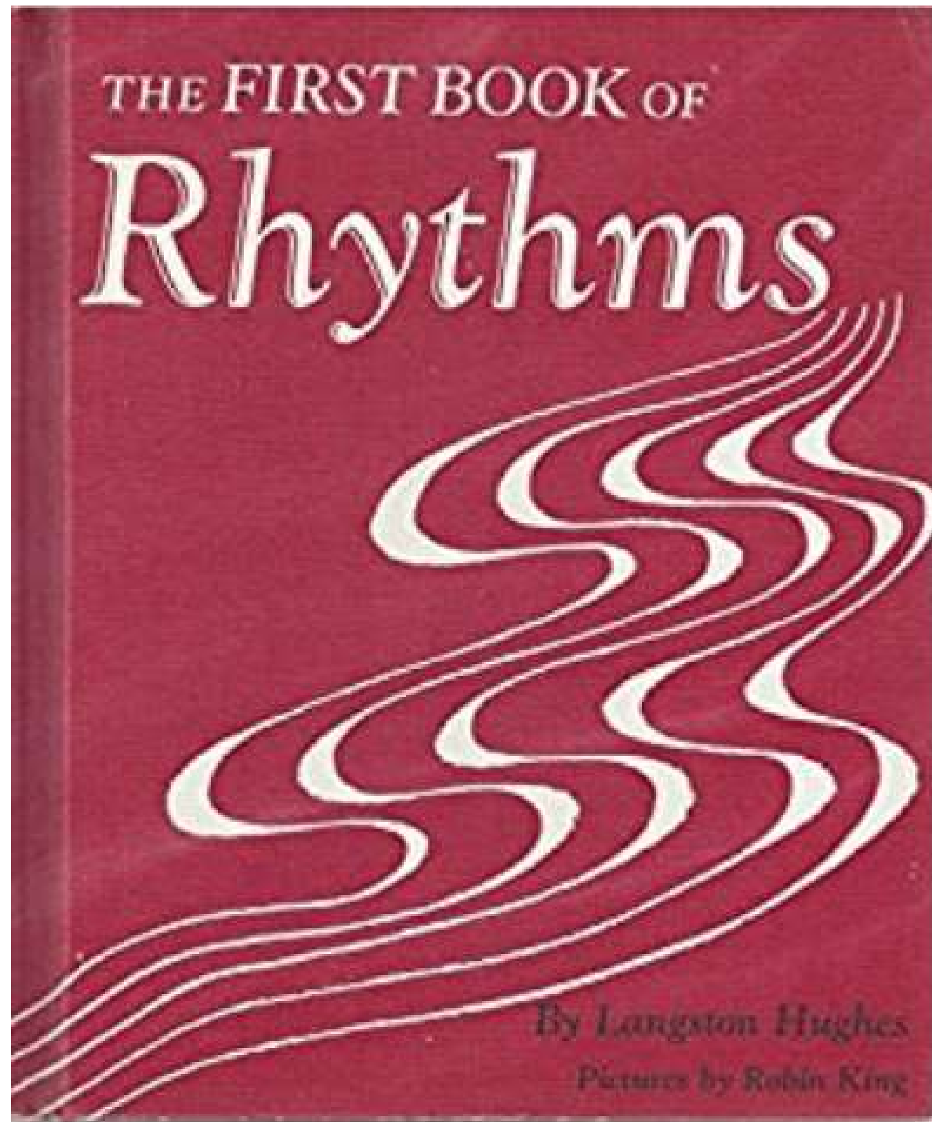
/ / / /
And the low beating of the tom-toms

/ /
Stirs your blood. (*CW* 11:75)

After establishing a regular pattern of recurrence in lines 1-2, Hughes "syncopates" this pattern in lines 3-4—a responsorial technique that occurs pervasively in Hughes's quatrains. The Francophone title situations the poem in the French West Indies, where indigenous elements of West African drumming had been retained. "Dance Africaine" would inspire the Haitian poet Jacques Roumain to write "Quand Bat le Tam-Tam"; Hughes, in turn, translated Roumain's poem into English under the title "When the Tom-Tom Beats." Hughes's translation (see 4.2) centres around a mixed metaphor of pulsing waters and pounding drumbeats, suggesting "the river's capacity to restore continuities with remote African ancestors and cultural practices" (A. Patterson, *Race* 126).

Attridge has described Hughes's placement of strong syllables in weak positions as comparable to the "syncopation" of jazz (Attridge and Staten 78). While this is an apt comparison, it gives a rather narrow view of the syncopation that Hughes considered to be a versatile and all-encompassing quality of jazz rhythms. In Hughes's understanding, syncopation is not merely the stressing of the offbeat in a musical score, but a more sustained idiosyncrasy carried over an otherwise regular structure, moving "in and out and around the beat" (*CW* 11:299). Hughes perceived the regular recurrence suggested by a musical score to be a simplified abstraction of the considerably more complex rhythms and polyrhythms that occur in live performance. In *The First Book of Rhythms*, which Hughes wrote to introduce students to the rhythmic heritage of both conventional and vernacular forms, Hughes returns to the iconography of rivers, oceans, drumbeats, and heartbeats. On the cover image, the five lines of a stave ripple across the page:

Figure 6: Illustration by Robin King



Source: Hughes, *First*, cover art.

The strict symmetry of a musical score blends with the fluid symmetries of a moving stream, indicating Hughes's perception of a tasteful and well-balanced rhythm.

Analogies of fluid are so central to Hughes's thinking on poetic form that he titled his first autobiography *The Big Sea*. Throughout the book, Hughes mixes metaphors of water and blood.

He hears the "heart-breaking blues" "pounding like a pulse-beat, moving like the Mississippi" (*CW* 13:135). The mixed metaphor of a "pulse beat" reappears in Hughes's frequently-quoted discussion of vernacular prosody:

> Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power. (*CW* 13:167)

Hughes is not merely suggesting that the rhythms of poetry echo the rhythms of nature, but also drawing attention to the asymmetrical hierarchies of recurrence that can be found in nature: on one level, the rise and fall of the waves; on a higher level, the diurnal high and low tides; on a higher level still, the monthly neap tide and spring tide. These patterns are not synchronised in symmetrical relationships of 2, 4, 8, and 16. Nature, Hughes suggests, possesses the jazzlike quality of never repeating itself in quite the same way twice. Hughes also highlights the cyclical nature of rhythm: summer does not so much alternate with winter as come full circle every year. Cyclical recurrence, as we will see in chapter 4, is a cornerstone of vernacular prosody and rhetoric.

It would be easy to draw the wrong conclusion from observations that the "African Negro has a horror of the straight line" (Senghor 59), or that African-American artists prefer "to avoid the simple straight line" (Hurston, "Characteristics" 34). There is no stable opposition between the symmetry of European art on the one hand and the asymmetry of African art on the other, nor is there an essential Pan-African preference for crooked lines. What can be said is that African-American vernacular culture has retained a distinctive technical approach toward symmetry in different forms of artistic expression; in section 2, this technique will be identified as "worrying."

1.2: Worrying

Stephen E. Henderson defines worrying as a "device of altering the pitch of a note in a given passage or for other kinds of ornamentation often associated with melismatic singing in the Black tradition," and notes that a "verbal parallel exists in which a word or phrase is broken in

order to allow for affective or didactic comment” (*Understanding* 41). Henderson’s qualification—“melismatic singing *in the Black tradition*”—indicates that he is searching for relative rather than absolute equivalences in musical terminology. For example, blues singers often worry the stability of a single word by stretching its articulation across a sequence of notes (comparable to the classical sense of melisma), yet the stability of this sequence is itself worried through deliberate anticipation, delay, and inexactness of pitch (in contrast to the classical sense of melisma).

Henderson’s definition carries an implicit asterisk: critics hoping to understand him must account for the difficulty of defining worried symmetry through nomenclature that evolved in a musical tradition of absolute symmetry. Nevertheless, many have sought to prove Henderson wrong by holding him accountable to uncompromising dictionary definitions. “‘Melismatic means,’ according to the *O.E.D.*, ‘the art of florid or ornate vocalization. Henderson makes much” (too much, Lewis Turco suggests) “of musical comparisons between Black poetry and Black music” (183). In Turco’s opinion, what Henderson calls worrying is merely a combination of “things such as parallelism, incremental repetition, [and] orthographical schemas” that have long existed “in English poetry of all periods” (183). Rather than catching Henderson in a contradiction, Turco makes a straw man of his argument. If one compares blues prosody to traditional English prosody without recalibrating one’s terminology, it is to be expected that one’s analysis will reveal the similarities but not the differences.

“Repetition in blues is seldom word for word,” explains Sherley Anne Williams: “the definition of worrying the line includes changes in stress and pitch, the addition of exclamatory phrases, changes in word order, repetitions of phrases within the line itself, and the wordless blues cries which punctuate the performance” (“Blues” 546). In the poem “Someone Sweet Angel Child,” Williams simultaneously describes and seeks to emulate Bessie Smith’s tendency to worry the rhythm by “singing / just behind the beat” (10).” Worrying serves an important aesthetic function in call-and-response interaction, altering the initial “phrasing to amplify the poignancy” of the “response” (Gabbin 160). It also serves an important paralinguistic function as “a natural extension of an encoded communicative language” (Marcoux 76). The absence of an orthodox or comprehensive definition of worrying attests to the diverse, eclectic, idiosyncratic, and sometimes contradictory senses of the word that one encounters among blues artists and critics.

Evidence of worrying can be found throughout West African and African-American performance art, especially in their shared

> tendency to create musical events in which rhythmic clash or disagreement of accents is the ideal, and cross-rhythm and metrical ambiguity are the accepted, expected norm. (It is this conceptual approach that accounts the quality of "swing" that Duke Ellington celebrated, which is the result of the "clash" or contrast that occurs either on a rhythmic or metrical level). (Wilson 159)

Whereas the music of most European languages observes "stress-to-beat matching"—the tendency "to associate stressed syllables with strong metrical positions" whenever possible (Dell and Halle 67)—the performance culture of the blues calls for the selective disruption, or "worrying," of the convergence of beats and stresses. During the first half of the twentieth century, several ethnomusicologists found evidence of this preference in their fieldwork. According to Maude Cuney-Hare, vernacular prosody is characterised both by the "great variety and complexity" of metrical patterns and by the rhythmic tendency to "ignore any division of time that follows the natural pulse of a regular metrical beat. Accents are anticipated or are held over beyond their expected time" (133).

As discussed in 1.1, religious architecture tended to favour relationships of strict symmetry in classical Europe, and relationships of worried symmetry in traditional Igbo societies. A similar contrast can be observed in religious music, with hymns of European origin preferring relationships of strict symmetry and spirituals of African-American origin preferring relationships of worried symmetry. The "true spiritual is not regular" (Hurston, "Spirituals" 474): its metre is "something stronger than a beat, and is more or less, not precisely, strict in time"; notes are sung "just a shade off key," and "not susceptible to fixation" (J. Johnson, *BANS* 61). Even when the spirituals have borrowed lines directly from hymnals, the strict accentual-syllabic phrasing (e.g., "I'll safely ride on Jordan's wave") is worried ("I'm a goin' to wade cross Jordan's river") (S. Brown, *NPD* 17).

Hymnals of European origin generally tend toward what Clive Scott calls the "iso-principle": "isochrony, isosyllabicity, isoaccentuality" (68). This tendency can be observed in "A Mighty Fortress," a hymn which maintains a consistent duration between beats, a consistent number of syllables per line, and a consistent accent pattern in each line. The preference is so strong that the pronunciation of some words (e.g., "failing") is altered to maintain a regular

recurrence. Beats are numbered below each line, with silent beats in brackets (Hedge and Wister 51):

A mighty fortress is our God, ***a***
1 2 3 4

a bulwark never failing; ***b***
5 6 7 8

our helper he amid the flood ***a***
9 10 11 12

of mortal ills prevailing. ***b***
13 14 15 16

For still our ancient foe ***c***
17 18 19 [20]

doth seek to work us woe; ***c***
21 22 23 [24]

his craft and power are great, ***d***
25 26 27 [28]

and armed with cruel hate. ***d***
29 30 31 [32]

Metrical boundaries correspond to boundaries of syntax, melody, and rhyme. The symmetry of the rhythm is amplified through strict symmetry at the rhyming positions, using alternate rhyme in the verses (a-b-a-b) and couplets in the refrain (c-c-d-d).

Alternatively, the spiritual "Heav'n, Heav'n," most famously performed by Marian Anderson, suggests a normative relationship of worried symmetry among the parts. Lines vary from 2 to 13 syllables:

I got a robe, || you got a robe, 1 2 3 4	**a***
All God’s children got a robe, 5 6 7 [8]	**a***
When I get to Heaven gonna put on my robe, 9 10 11 12	**a***
Gonna shout all over God’s Heav’n, 13 14 15 [16]	**b***
Heav’n, || Heav’n, 17 [18] 19 [20]	**b***
Everybody talkin’ ’bout Heaven ain’t goin’ there, 21 22 23 24	**x**
Heav’n, || Heav’n, 25 [26] 27 [28]	**b***
Gonna shout all over God’s Heaven. 29 30 31 [32]	**b***

“Heav’n, Heav’n” is representative of the conventions of African-American vernacular hymnody. Boundaries of syntax, melody, and rhyme do not correspond systematically to metrical boundaries. The worried symmetry of the rhythm is amplified through worried symmetry at rhyming positions, using three identity rhymes in each verse (a*-a*-a*-b*) and three identity rhymes in the chorus (b*-x-b*-b*).

In “A Mighty Fortress,” there is a relationship of precise mathematical symmetry among the parts. If one draws a line between the first and second 8-beat groupings of each stanza, the second half precisely mirrors the first in the organisation of beats (numbered) and the organisation of pauses (||):

<table>
<tr><th>1</th><th>2</th><th>3</th><th>4 ||</th><th>5</th><th>6</th><th>7</th><th>8 ||</th></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>10</td><td>11</td><td>12 ||</td><td>13</td><td>14</td><td>15</td><td>16 ||</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><th>17</th><th>18</th><th>19</th><th>[20] ||</th><th>21</th><th>22</th><th>23</th><th>[24] ||</th></tr>
<tr><td>25</td><td>26</td><td>27</td><td>[28] ||</td><td>29</td><td>30</td><td>31</td><td>[32] ||</td></tr>
</table>

Alternatively, "Heav'n, Heav'n" demonstrates a relationship of worried symmetry among the parts. The pauses between positions 2/3 and positions 4/5 are not echoed in the second half of stanza 1, and the beat at position 24 is not echoed in the second half of stanza 2:

<table>
<tr><th>1</th><th>2 ||</th><th>3</th><th>4 ||</th><th>5</th><th>6</th><th>7</th><th>[8] ||</th></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>10</td><td>11</td><td>12</td><td>13</td><td>14</td><td>15</td><td>[16] ||</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><th>17 ||</th><th>[18]</th><th>19 ||</th><th>[20]</th><th>21</th><th>22</th><th>23</th><th>24</th></tr>
<tr><td>25 ||</td><td>[26]</td><td>27 ||</td><td>[28]</td><td>29</td><td>30</td><td>31</td><td>[32] ||</td></tr>
</table>

Rather than converging with metrical boundaries, rhythmic patterns continue across metrical boundaries, like the successive silent beats at positions 16/18/20. (Melodic patterns, while not annotated in this study, behave similarly). Beats 12 and 24 are particularly jarring for taking the place of an anticipated pause. In conjunction with worried patterns of rhyme and melody, the overall effect of the song is striking: "an effect," according to W. C. Handy, "that is impossible for any other singers to match" (*Father* 144). Hughes also found the effect of this spiritual to be unforgettable, and transcribed its lyrics with line breaks at phrasal boundaries rather than metrical boundaries:

> I got a harp!
> You got a harp!
> All God's children got a harp!
> When I get to heaven
> Gonna play on my golden harp—
> Play all over God's heaven!

Heaven! Heaven!
Everybody talk about
Heaven ain't going there!
Play all over God's heaven! (*CW* 11:287)

Hughes perceives the first 16 beats to occupy the space of 6 lines and the last 16 beats to occupy the space of only 4. Hughes repeats the technique of staggering metrical and phrasal boundaries in many of his own poems. For example, "Who but the Lord?" is composed in heteromorphic stanzas of 7 or 8 lines each.

Several critics have suggested that Hughes's prosody is most effective during live performances: the "musical and verbal interplay" in Hughes's readings (Jones, "Listening" 1146) might reveal not only "the specific blues echoes in the work but [also] how he modulated shifts into and out of these rhythms" (C. Bernstein 6). In a 1967 reading of "Who But the Lord?," Hughes's accents (scanned above each line) sometimes diverge from ictic positions (numbered below):

```
  /     /          /
Now, I do not understand
      1          2

      /  /      /    /
Why God don't protect a man
        3           4

       /     /
From police brutality.
      5      6  7  [8]

  /    /      /
Being poor and black,
     9       10

     /  /      /   /
I've no weapon to strike back
       11           12

     /       /
So who but the Lord
    13       14

      /    /
```

Can protect me?[19]
15 [16]

Unusually, there are far more accented syllables (20) than realised beats (14). More unusual still, Hughes denies the anticipated metrical closure at beats 7 and 15, both of which precede major metrical boundaries. One would expect Hughes to promote beat 7 to maintain an insistent rhythm:

From po-**lice** bru-**ta**-li-**TY** [**pause**]

Instead, Hughes worries the line's underlying symmetry by enunciating only two beats:

From po-**lice** bru-**ta**-li-ty

One would also expect Hughes to read the word "protect" in a conventional manner:

So **who** but the **Lord** / can pro-**tect** me? [**pause**]

Instead, Hughes promotes the surrounding offbeats,

So **who** but the **Lord** / can **PRO**-tect **ME**?

Hughes certainly did not go out of his way to maintain the insistence of a rhythm; in fact, he preferred to go out of his way to worry the insistence of a rhythm. This is not to say that metric-rhythmic tension is produced only by Hughes's delivery. In 1969, the actor Ossie Davis, who disapproved of Hughes's lack of vocal expressiveness, recorded his own interpretation of "Who But the Lord." After performing a phonological analysis of Davis's reading, the linguist Kenneth Pike concluded that the function of the verse "paragraph sequence (*as indicated by its phonology*, not by its grammar or by its lexical meanings) is the gradual building up of tension" (Pike and Pike 77).

Hughes took the matter of calculated asymmetry quite seriously, and believed it to be essential to an effective reading of his poems:

> When Alain Locke arranged a poetry reading by Hughes before the Playwriter's Circle in 1927 in Washington, a blues pianist accompanied him, … even though

---

[19] Hughes's reading was digitised by Tim Groeling and Derek Bolin ("Langston Hughes Speaking").

> Hughes felt that the piano was "too polished." He suggested to his Knopf editor that they ought to get "a regular Lenox Avenue blues boy" to accompany him at his reading in New York. (Tracy, *LHB* 112)

Worrying is important not only as a quirky way of jazzing up the rhythm, but also as an essential component of the irony and feeling of a song. "Heav'n, Heav'n" describes basic amenities like a "robe" and "shoes" as if they were luxuries, calling ironic attention to the sartorial neglect of slaves. "Who But the Lord?" creates a similar, but more distinctively blues-like irony by suggesting the futility of prayer. In the climax that occurs at the end of stanza 2, Hughes voices eight accents across five ictic positions:

```
    /   /          /
The Law raised up his stick
    11             12

    /      /    /
And beat the living hell
    13          14

/      /
Out of me!
      15   [16]
```

This is no laughing matter: to beat the living hell out of someone is to do him serious physical injury. Nevertheless, in the recording of Hughes's reading, the audience can be heard laughing at the speaker's nonchalance. This is not cheap laughter inspired by sarcasm or slapstick buffoonery. What is perversely humorous is the inconsistency between the severity of the attack and the almost casual manner in which the speaker recounts it. The audience laughs not because the speaker is assaulted but because the assault barely surprises him. In both "Heav'n, Heav'n" and "Who But the Lord," there is a relationship between the ambiguity of the shifting accent and the ambiguity of the shifting tone.

One reason that worrying has not been adequately explained is that verse critics have not attended to the precise locations of metrical conflict, making no distinction between a skipped beat in line 1 or 2 and a skipped beat in line 3 or 4. When the locations of metrical conflict are accounted for, a more systematic pattern emerges: lines that launch 8- or 16-beat groupings usually observe strict stress-to-beat matching, while lines that conclude 8- or 16-beat groupings are likelier to be

worried. In Hughes's poem "Refugee in America" (*CW* 9:366), line 3 contains precisely one more silent beat than line 1, and line 4 contains precisely one more silent beat than line 2:

There are words like *Liberty*
1 2 3 4

That almost make me cry.
5 6 7 [8]

If you had known what I knew
9 10 11 [12]

You would know why.
13 14 [15] [16]

In lines 1-2, the speaker is "almost" moved to tears. Why "almost"? Because he is implicitly laughing at the irony of being a refugee in his own country. Lines 3-4 are simultaneously parsimonious, articulating five of a possible eight beats, and redundant, repeating the words "known," "knew," and "know." The tragicomic aspect of the blues creates a mode of knowing that exposes "words like *Liberty*" in ways that other registers cannot. In other words, one can only comprehend the hypocrisy of American political discourse by thinking like a blues singer. As the evasiveness of Hughes's rhythm blends into the evasiveness of Hughes's rhetoric, the poem's prosodic and epistemological dimensions converge. In Hughes's words, the vernacular "heritage of rhythm" makes possible an "incongruous humor that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tears" (*CW* 9:33).

1.3: Call-and-Response Patterning

During the years of the Atlantic slave trade, "musical performance" in West African nations often "consisted of repeating a relatively short musical unit again and again, with variation in its repetition" (Southern 14). Musical performance often featured "two groups of rhythm," allowing "both the leader of the reciters and the leader of the tom-toms to give themselves up entirely to their inspiration and to multiply counter-time and syncope" (Senghor 60). The technique

of “responsorial” exchange—also known as “antiphony,” or “call-and-response” patterning—are structured less like an echo and more like an incremental, improvisational dialogue. The relationship between “call” and “response” can be symmetrical or asymmetrical: for example, a time division of “3 + 2” might receive a response of “4 + 3” (Agawu 153).

It would be difficult to overstate the centrality of responsorial exchange to vernacular prosody (Wilson 159, Floyd 37-38). Call-and-response patterning shaped the speech, singing, preaching, dance, and instrumentation of plantation slaves, and “continues to be central to the language used by African Americans to make individual and collective statements about politics and culture” (Gilyard and Banks 6). Many “rhetorical” and “prosodic characteristics” of call-and-response patterning—especially those of African origin—are unique to the African-American vernacular tradition, and liable to “remain undetected” by non-members of the speech community (Foster 295).

The relatively few reliable transcriptions of plantation music that survive generally confirm two details: firstly, that call-and-response patterning was ubiquitous; and secondly, that these patterns were unfamiliar to educated Western observers. “[O]ur musicians would do well to reduce [these songs] to notation,” wrote the poet William Cullen Bryant, inferring that their structures were “probably of African origin” (206). One responsorial corn-shucking song transcribed by Bryant begins by repeating the same line twice, followed by a third line that answers the first two:

> **A_1:** Johnny come down de hollow. || *Oh hollow!*
> **A_2:** Johnny come down de hollow. || *Oh hollow!*
> **B:** De nigger-trader got me. || *Oh hollow!* (206).

Although each line tends toward five beats, the rhythm is nothing like iambic pentameter, which likely explains why Bryant found it unfamiliar. Whereas the boundaries of iambic pentameter are imposed by patterns of syllables (allowing for syntactic continuity from one line to the next), the boundaries of work songs are imposed by the movements of the workers, like shucking corn or swinging a hammer (discouraging syntactic continuity). These repetitive movements, combined with call-and-response patterning, divided each line of verse into strictly-bounded hemistiches. From one hemistich to the next, the organisation and number of beats might vary considerably without interrupting the insistence of the rhythm.

Although the musical insights presented in the slave narratives antedate discourses of modern prosody, and are therefore difficult to interpret, they are consistent with a tradition that valued improvisation and worried symmetry. The most important sources are Frederick Douglass, who confirms that slaves "would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune" (13), and Harriet Jacobs, who writes that "slaves generally compose their own songs" and "do not trouble their heads much about the measure" (107-108). It is unlikely that plantation songs were chanted in strict symmetry. Max Cavitch finds it probable that many work songs functioned as "a rhythmic protest … against the mechanization of time and movement," a phenomenon he describes as "slave dysprosody":

> Poetry—sung, chanted, or spoken—was perhaps the most important, often the only, resource slaves had for the palliation of monotony—the monotony of physical work—through … the assertion of rhythmic complexity and forms of dissonance against the mechanistic regularity of repetitive coerced labor. (100)

"As the nature of labor varied, the music inevitably must have adapted," reasons Ted Gioia (45): "every aspect of cultivation—cutting sugarcane, shucking corn, picking cotton, turning water through rice fields, threshing—had its associated songs" (44), with the pace of work in each case imposing different constraints upon metre and syntax.

The AAB stanza, usually composed of two unequally-balanced hemistiches, persisted in African-American work songs well into the twentieth century, including this prison song recorded by Alan Lomax in 1939:

> **A_1:** Black gal, if I never more || *see youuu*
> **A_2:** Black gal, if I never more || *see you*
> **B:** Oh in them long || *hot summer days* (qtd. in Oliver 12).

As the AAB structure transcribed by Bryant laments being sold to another plantation, away from one's family and friends, so the AAB structure recorded by Lomax laments being impressed into a prison gang, away from one's lover. Both songs express a blues feeling, and their form is a precursor to the six-hemistich AAB structure of the blues (see 1.5).

African-American literary prosody overlaps with musical speech in complex ways. Many stylised registers of vernacular expression resemble a "'talk-singing' style of orature" (ya Salaam 352), with no stable boundary between elevated speech and singing. In the religious services of

slaves, the boundary between speaking (oral poetry) and singing (music) was also loosely-defined, and remains so today in many African-American churches. Some antebellum spirituals likely contained elements of speaking and singing, as they "grew out of the preacher's chanted declamation and the intervening congregational responses" (Lincoln and Mamiya 348).

The AAB structure can also be found in the spirituals. John Andrew Jackson, an escaped slave with an interest in musicology, transcribed a stanza which combines call-and-response patterning with the "Glory, hallelujah" refrain of the camp meeting hymnal:

> **A_1:** I want to go where Moses gone, || *Glory, hallelujah!*
> **A_2:** I want to go where Moses gone, || *Glory, hallelujah!*
> **B:** Sweet milk and honey overflows, || *Glory, hallelujah!* (45)

Unlike the camp meeting hymnals, the spirituals are often repeated with worried symmetry. As Jackson indicates, "lines would be repeated with great energy," with words displaced from their "legitimate position":

> I want to go, hallelu', hallelu',
> Where Moses gone, hallelu', hallelu', hallelu'. (45)

In the blues tradition, this manner of worried repetition in groups of three came to be known as "staggering."

Many spirituals adapt the 4 X 4 structures of European hymnody to the call-and-response patterning of vernacular prosody. Some spirituals alternate 4-beat calls with 3-beat responses, similar to the structure of an English ballad, as evident in Louis Armstrong's recording of "Go Down Moses":

When Moses was in Egypt Land || *let my people go!*
Oppressed so hard they could not stand || *let my people go!*

This structure is often worried in two ways: firstly, by “overlapping” calls and responses (Thompson 81); and secondly, by layering calls and responses “on a number of different architectonic levels” (Wilson 159). Both techniques can be observed in Armstrong’s refrain:

So the Lord said: 1	← anticipation of central 4 X 4 unit
Go down (*Go down*), Moses (*Moses*) 2 3 4 5	← response: beat + offbeat
Way (*way*) down (*down*) in Egypt land 6 7 8 9	← response: single offbeat
Tell old || Pharaoh 10 [11] 12 [13]	← two silent beats
To let my people go 14 15 16 [17]	← overlap: beats 16 + 17
(*let my people go*) 16 17 18	← response**:** 3 beats

The refrain is elaborately organised, with each line contributing in some way to the worrying of the central 4 X 4 structure.

In an essay titled “Worrying the Lines: Versification in Sterling Brown’s *Southern Road*,” Michael Manson quite rightly argues that blues poets “worry the line between black and white, country and city, folk and modern, oral and written” (112). However, Manson’s essay has a serious methodological flaw: its only sources for scanning verse structure are Derek Attridge’s *The Rhythms of English Poetry* and Antony Easthope’s *Poetry as Discourse*, two studies from the early eighties that specialise exclusively in traditional English prosody. Manson thus offers an excellent discussion of what blues prosody shares with traditional English prosody (e.g., metrical hierarchy), and no discussion at all of what makes blues prosody distinct (e.g., worrying—which is rather ironic, given the title of Manson’s essay).

As Manson explains, “English is a stress-timed language that prefers to *alternate* strong stresses with weak stresses” (115). Alternating metres are often grouped in hierarchies, with a

second beat slightly weaker than the first, a second 2-beat unit slightly weaker than the first, a second 4-beat unit slightly weaker than the first, and so on.[20] Richard Cureton's system of dot scansion is helpful in visualising these hierarchies ("Meter" 119):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
.								← 1 per line
.				.				← 2 per line
.		.		.		.		← 4 per line
.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	← 8 per line

The insistence of 4-beat lines is further increased when they are organised in 4-line stanzas: the "4 X 4 formation creates a hierarchy" by "alternating primary beats with secondary beats, creating ever-larger rhythmic units until it produces a complete rhythmic whole of sixteen nested beats" (Manson, "Worrying"116). Because "much poetry in the black vernacular relies on the 4 X 4 formation," Manson argues that this creates "a black analogue to feudal discourse" (115); "a *communal intersubjectivity* that feels itself to be a product of various social forces" (113). This is consistent with the conventional wisdom which treats call-and-response patterning as a category of "common meter" (Yasin 116), the metre of the English ballad.

The addition of a fifth beat to each line weakens the insistence of the 4 X 4 structure. Whereas 4-beat lines are organised in symmetrical hierarchies (1-2-4), 5-beat lines are organised in asymmetrical hierarchies (1-2-5):

1	2	3	4	5	
.					← 1 per line
.		.			← 2 per line
.	.	.	.	.	← 5 per line

Manson associates 5-beat metres in the vernacular tradition with "an *individuated subjectivity* that feels itself to be independent of social forces" (113). His distinction is a valuable one, and it

[20] "weaker": a term which, for lack of a better one, is here used to indicate relative prominence within a structure (*not* phonological stress).

perhaps explains why the communally-performed spirituals tend toward 4-beat lines, while the individually-performed blues tend toward 5-beat lines.

In practice, however, call-and-response patterning behaves less like a traditional 4 X 4 stanza and more like a "rhythm of segments," with each unit having "a rhythm of its own" (Hurston, "Characteristics" 35). Because the spirituals can be segmented in many ways, there is no normative template for responses: the "various parts break in at any old time" (Hurston, "Spirituals" 474), following "their own whims, beginning when they please and leaving off when they please" (W. Allen, et. al., vi).[21] This renders the spirituals relatively less insistent than comparable 4-beat structures from traditional English prosody, as observed in the refrain of "Go Down Moses."

"[U]nlike the *Spirituals*," as Hughes explains, the blues "have a strict poetic pattern: one line repeated and a third line that to rhyme with the first two" (*CW* 1:73). Because the 5-beat lines of the vernacular tradition are usually segmented in only one way, by a midline caesura, they are less variable in their structure. Many work songs develop an insistent pulse through a "3 + 2" division, while the 12-bar blues stanza develops an insistent pulse through a "2 + 3" division. This renders the blues relatively more insistent than comparable 5-beat structures from traditional English prosody, and likely explains why Yusef Komunyakaa perceives a "syncopated insistence" in Hughes's blues rhythms ("Langston" 1140).

During the classic blues era, black vocalists and white vocalists usually articulated the 5-beat units of the blues in different ways. "God only knows what the world has suffered from the white damsels who try to sing the Blues," Hurston complained. "Every one seems to think that the Negro is easily imitated when nothing is further from the truth"; "I have never seen one [imitation] yet [that is] entirely realistic. They often have all the elements of the song, dance, or expression, but they are misplaced or distorted by the accent falling on the wrong element" ("Characteristics" 42). This indicates that white vocalists favoured patterns of alternating stress (below, left) while members of the African-American vernacular community favoured a more responsorial organisation (below, right):

[21] In addition to its prosodic dimension, Hurston's concept of segmented rhythms can also be applied to narratology: "like the polyrhythms of African and African-American music, the separate voices in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* fuse with one another, but each quickly breaks free and pursues its different individual beat" (Callahan 125).

	Alternating Stress Model	**Alternating Phrases Model**[22]
4 X 4 structure	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 *relatively more insistent*	1 (2) 3 (4) 5 6 (7 8) *relatively less insistent*
5-beat structure	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 *relatively less insistent*	(1 2) || (3 4 5) (6 7) || (8 9 10) *relatively more insistent*

Because Manson only attends to the kinds of patterns listed in the left-hand column, his analysis suggests various false equivalences between metrically distinct structures. He equates call-and-response pattering with dipodic verse (116, 118), the tendency to alternate primary and secondary stresses. Hughes's poem "Song for a Dark Girl" (*CW* 1:106-107), which is responsorial but not dipodic, confirms that these structures are not identical. Hughes places response elements in parentheses:

Way Down **South** in **Di**-xie ***PAUSE***
(**Break** the **heart** of **me**) ***PAUSE***
They **hung** my **black** young **lo**-ver
To a **cross** roads **tree**.

This is a song *for* a dark girl, not a song *by* a dark girl, because it contains multiple voices organised in patterns of call-and-response.

Alternatively, "The Ballad of the Landlord" by Hughes is dipodic but not responsorial:

Landlord, landlord,
B b B b

My roof has sprung a leak.
B b B [b]

Don't you 'member I told you about it
B b B b

[22] Responsorial 4 X 4 structures can exchange calls and responses in many ways; this example is based on the patterns observed in "Go Down Moses."

```
Way last week? (CW 2:89)
  B    b    B    [b]
```

The only way to maintain a regular dipodic rhythm throughout line 3, which contains consecutive quadruple-offbeats between beats, is to chant the poem quickly like a nursery rhyme. (As discussed in 1.2, Hughes generally prefers to articulate moments of metrical nonconformity). Hughes's technique here can be described as "deepening" and "thinning" (Cureton, "Meter" 141-143). Lines 2 and 3 complicate the rhythm by adding hierarchical levels of beating (deepening), while line 4 returns to the pattern established by line 1 (thinning):

```
Landlord, Landlord,
  .
  .             .                               ← 2 tactical beats
  .     .       .    .

My roof has sprung a leak
      .
      .                     .                   ← 2 tactical beats
      .          .          .       .           ← 2 subtactical beats
  .   .     .    .     .    .    .   .   .

Don't you 'member I told you about it
  .
  .                        .
  .             .          .             .      ← 4 tactical beats
  .      .      .    .     .      .      .   .
  .   .  .   .  .  . .  .  .   .  .   .  .  .  .

Way last week
  .
  .          .                                  ← 2 tactical beats
  .    .     .    .
```

In both "Song for a Dark Girl" and "The Ballad of the Landlord," the first and second halves of each stanza are structurally asymmetrical, consistent with Hughes's tendency to worry the second half of quatrains. Each is a good example of what Hurston called "segmented" rhythm.

Rather than revising his notational system to meet the demands of Brown's prosody, Manson revises Brown's prosody to meet the demands of his notational system. Adhering to

"Attridge's definition of a meter as regulating the number of beats," Manson writes that a "line of iambic pentameter can have no more or no less than five beats" (120). In his scansion of Brown's "To A Certain Lady, in Her Garden," Manson imposes upon line 1 an implausible sequence of five beats (119):

> / · · / · / / · · / ·
> Lady, my Lady, come out from the garden

It is difficult to imagine that a competent reader would articulate (or that a native listener would perceive) successive beats on the phrase "come out." Readers might just as well parse the line as 4-beat triple meter: "**La**-dy, my **La**-dy, come **out** from the **gar**-den." Manson's scansion of line 2 is also problematic (119):

> / · · / · / · / · /
> Clay-fingered, dirty-smocked, and in my time

Again, it is difficult to imagine a competent reader articulating (or a native listener perceiving) the word "fingered" as a double-offbeat.

Manson's claim that "either *clay* or *fin-* must be demoted" (120) is grounded not in his experience of Brown's poem but in his interpretation of Attridge's demotion rules. Moreover, Manson gets this interpretation wrong: according to Attridge, a stressed syllable may realise an offbeat only "after a line-boundary and before a stressed syllable" (*REP* 359), suggesting that "Clay," not "fin-," must be demoted. However, this "phenomenon of indeterminate stress between contiguous syllables"—known as a "hovering" or "jammed" stress (Hurley, "Pragmatics" 70)—does not require the demotion of either syllable. George Wright has criticised beat prosody for subscribing "to dogmas (again, as the generative metrists and other prosodists do) about which kinds of words or syllables in metrical lines *must* receive stress" (155). Manson gives an unrepresentative sense of the rhythmic experience of reading a poem, which does not involve retrospectively weighing which syllables ought to be given an accent.

Call-and-response patterning can also be used in unmetred verse. In the poem "Leadbelly v. Lomax at the Modern Language Association Conference, 1934," Tyehimba Jess juxtaposes the voices of the blues singer Huddie Ledbetter (Lead Belly) and the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (whose recorded the prison song quoted earlier in this section). Read top-to-bottom, the poem

develops as two separate and internally-coherent accounts of the same subject. Read left-to-right, many lines converge in humorous ways, and critique simplistic notions of racial authenticity (*Leadbelly* 88):

a costume.	an outfit.
dark overalls,	new blue jeans,
handkerchief,	clean head wrap,
and ugly-ass shitkickers,	some simple, old, sturdy shoes
clutched like gifts in his outstretched hands	are a proper field hand's uniform,
chase the stink of mule dirt back	down-on-the-farm—familiar:
into my head. now he wants me	dressing down—it raises gods
to wrap my music in a brown bag of coon	dark enough to capture the authentic blues,
to give them *what folks 'spect to see*	bringing southland to a crowd that
says i need the genuine look of farm boy	says they want to hear how it sounds for a black
to sow blues' dirty fingers between their ears	to scrape heaven's dusty starlight out of hell.

This poem parodies the stereotype of a down-home blues idiom. The italicised words in dialect (*what white folks 'spect to see*) are implicitly self-referential, calling attention to their own ironic lack of authenticity. Nevertheless, the modernised vernacular idiom spoken by Leadbelly's persona ("ugly-ass shitkickers") and poem's call-and-response patterning suggest there is a kind of blues authenticity grounded in cultural competence rather than race. To distinguish truth from caricature, one must read (quite literally) between the lines.

1.4: Dolnik Verse

In 1.3, we saw that alternating metres are often organised in 4 X 4 groupings. Attridge attributes this phenomenon to a "fundamental doubling principle": a pulse is doubled to become a hemistich (2 beats); a line (4 beats); a couplet (8 beats); a stanza (16 beats) (*REP* 126; see also

Cureton, *RPEV* 128). Within 4 X 4 stanzas, variation in the number of offbeat syllables between beats is directly correlated to the strength of a metre. Patterns composed primarily of single-offbeats between beats—known as "duple" metre in beat prosody and "iambic" metre in foot prosody—produce a steady relative alternation of weaker syllables (w) and stronger syllables (S): e.g., w-S-w-S-w-S. Patterns composed primarily of double-offbeats between beats—known as "triple" metre in beat prosody and "anapaestic" metre in foot prosody—produce a stronger alternation: e.g., ww-S-ww-S-ww-S.

Some metres are composed of single- and double-offbeats: e.g., w-S-ww-S-w-S-ww-S. This structure, described as "dol'nik" metre by Russian theorists and anglicised as "dolnik" metre by English theorists, tends to be the strongest or most "insistent" 4 X 4 grouping.[23] Attridge identifies Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" as an example of dolnik verse. His scansion calls attention to the silent beats at the ends of lines 1, 2, and 4, and the offbeat positions that vary from 0-2 syllables ("Beat" 40):

Break, break, break,
B 0 **B** 0 **B** 0 B

At the foot of thy crags, O Sea!
2 **B** 2 **B** 1 **B** 0 B

But the tender grace of a day that is dead
2 **B** 1 **B** 2 **B** 2 **B**

Will never come back to me.
1 **B** 2 **B** 1 **B** 0 B

The effect of offbeat variation "is not, as one might expect, a feeling of irregularity and metrical tension but, on the contrary, a heightened experience of rhythmicality, as the individual syllables are shortened or lengthened in order to keep the metrical pulse consistent" (Attridge, "Auden" 126-127). Dolnik verse maintains a steady alternation even "through *considerable* conflicting input" (Cureton, *RPEV* 129): the more readers must vary their pronunciation to maintain the regularity of a metre, the stronger the metre becomes. This, at least, is the orthodox understanding among contemporary verse theorists.

---

[23] For a distinction between dolnik metre and iambic tetrameter, see Tarlinskaja, "Beyond" 494.

"Song for a Dark Girl" by Hughes and "To a Dark Girl" by Gwendolyn Bennett—two poems linked by their titles, their publication date (1927), and their worried 4 X 4 structures—both challenge this orthodoxy. In 1.3, we saw how Hughes worries the underlying 4-beat metre with call-and-response patterning. In Bennett's poem, the first two lines contain eight beats, like a conventional dolnik stanza, yet the fifth beat is shifted to the beginning of line 2. The last two lines contain six and five beats:

I love you for your brownness,
1 2 3

And the rounded darkness of your breast,
4 5 6 7 8

I love you for the breaking sadness in your voice
9 10 11 12 13 14

And shadows where your wayward eyelids rest. (1-4)
15 16 17 18 19

After the self-referential phrase "breaking sadness" in line 3, the poem's tenuous insistence is broken altogether by a line with six ictic positions. Bennett amplifies this effect by placing conventionally weak syllables in conventionally strong positions: positions 2, 4, 7, 10, and 13 are all occupied by prepositions or conjunctions. Unusually, elements of grammatical parallelism are not metrically parallel: "And" takes a beat in line 2, but not in line 4.

This technique is repeated in stanza 2. In lines 1-2, the word "of" occupies offbeat positions; in the grammatically parallel clauses in lines 3-4, the word "of" occupies beat positions:

Something **of** old forgotten queens
1 2 3 4

Lurks in the lithe abandon **of** your walk,
5 6 7 8

And something **of** the shackled slave
9 10 11 12

Sobs in the rhythm **of** your talk. (5-8)
13 14 15 16

A swelling uncertainty accompanies the poet's search for words to describe this "something" "of old," "of your walk," "of the shackled slave," "of your talk." With each iteration, the preposition acquires marginally greater emphasis, underscoring the difficulty of describing the rhythmic competence of African-Americans. The speaker suggests that the summit and the nadir of Pan-African history can be perceived in the "walk" and the "talk" (i.e., the movements and speech) of the dark girl, a tragicomic blend of swaggering queens and weeping slaves. Locke would later echo Bennett's sentiments, suggesting that the "distinctive racial intensity of mood" and "peculiar style of technical performance" are not limited to vernacular music, and "can be detected even in a stevedore's swing, preacher's sway, or a bootblack's flick; and heard equally in an amen-corner quaver, a blues cadence or a chromatic cascade of Negro laughter" (*Negro* 72).

If Hughes and Bennett were to read Attridge's claim that "variety in the offbeats" "increases the insistence of the rhythm rather than weakening it" ("Auden" 126), they would likely argue that this principle does not apply in the same way to vernacular prosody. Attridge, however, means to show that this principle *does* apply to vernacular prosody. In an influential essay titled "The Case for the English Dolnik: How Not to Introduce Prosody," Attridge scans "Song for a Dark Girl" as an example of dolnik verse (22-23):

```
  /   x     /    x    / x
Way down South in Dixie                 1
  B          B         B      [B]

    /     x   /     x    /
 (Break the heart of me)                2
    B         B         B    [B]

  x    /      x    /      /       / x
They hung my black young lover          3
      B          B             B      [B]

  x x    /     /        /
 To a cross roads tree.                 4
        B    B       B      [B]

  /   x     /    x    / x
Way down South in Dixie                 5
  B          B         B       [B]

     /        / x    /   x   /
```

(Bruised body high in air) 6
B B B [B]

/ x / / / x
I asked the white Lord Jesus [sic][24] 7
B B B [B]

/ x x / x /
What was the use of prayer. 8
B B B [B]

/ x / x / x
Way down South in Dixie 9
B B B [B]

/ x / x /
(Break the heart of me) 10
B B B [B]

/ x x / x / x
Love is a naked shadow 11
B B B [B]

x x / x / x /
On a gnarled and naked tree. 12
B B B [B]

"Song for a Dark Girl" contains seven instances of worrying that are eliminated by Attridge's scansion. In three phrases, consecutive strong syllables interrupt a pattern of alternating stress ("**black young lo**-ver"; "**Bruised bo**-dy"; "**white Lord Je**-sus"); Attridge's model requires these strong syllables to be at least partially demoted. There is an enjambed ending between the third and fourth line of each stanza; Attridge's scansion requires readers to pause for the space of a full beat, in the middle of each enjambment. Line 4 contains only two realised beats; Attridge's model suggests promoting the word "roads" to the status of a full beat. In some lines, Attridge's promotion and demotion rules manufacture a rhythm so laborious, it is difficult to imagine anyone chanting the poem in such a manner; e.g., "they **hung** my **black** young **lo**-ver [**pause**] / to a **cross** || **roads** || **tree** [**pause**]." Rather than recalibrating his theory to suit the demands of Hughes's poem, Attridge recalibrates Hughes's poem to suit the demands of his own theory.

[24] Presumably, Attridge means to place an "x" over the pronoun "I."

Attridge realises that his scansion seems unsatisfying, but suggests that there is no better alternative. In a later publication, he indicates that line 4 might be read in either of two ways: (1) "To a **cross roads tree**"; (2) "**To** a **cross** roads **tree**" (Attridge and Staten 84). This is a false dilemma: there is no reason to assume that line 4 *must* receive three beats, except that Attridge's dolnik model requires every line to receive at least three beats. Attridge spends nearly a page justifying his other controversial promotions, demotions, and unrealised pauses, on the grounds that "it makes rhythmic sense" for these lines "to conform to the general pattern" ("Case" 20). This is a textbook example of how not to introduce blues prosody: as Hurston insisted, "the dissonances are important and not to be ironed out" ("Spirituals" 474).

Attridge suggests that the insistence of "Song for a Dark Girl" can be confirmed through a choral reading test. As he explains in a separate publication, English speakers tend to settle into unison when reading an insistent poem:

> ask a group of native speakers to read the poem in question in chorus, without a leader, and note how quickly everyone settles into an agreed rhythm, and whether or not there is unanimity in the reading. (*Moving* 149)

Attridge's test, however, is susceptible to confirmation bias. This study argues that choral reading produces an "agreed rhythm" only in the sense that it pressures readers toward a metrical consensus, imposing a metronome on a poem's otherwise idiosyncratic rhythms. It is likely that many readers would deliver a less insistent reading on their own, if not conditioned to anticipate the simplest pattern of alternating stress. Attridge admits that he would teach Hughes's poem by reading "it aloud, exaggerating the regular rhythm, [and] indicating the beats (including the unsounded, virtual beats) with my hand" ("Case" 19). Attridge's use of the word "exaggerating" is more appropriate than he perhaps realises: the strong insistence he perceives in this poem is largely the result of his own pedagogy.

The Eurocentric bias of Attridge's analysis extends beyond prosody. He is admirably perceptive of Hughes's allusions to Christian iconography, noticing the implicit comparison between Hughes's speaker and the Virgin Mary (both of whom lament the hanging of a young man to a tree), as well as Hughes's wordplay between "cross roads" and Christ's "cross" ("Case" 20). Attridge does not, however, explain the ironic significance of these images in the context of a lynching poem. Hughes implies that Christians in the American South have persecuted blacks in

the same way their Saviour was once persecuted, and he challenges the prevailing notion that this Saviour was white.

Attridge gives a similarly Eurocentric account of the poem's heritage, associating "Song for a Dark Girl" "with an ancient ballad form" (23). He means to emphasise the timelessness and universality of dolnik metre; nevertheless, this comment encourages misleading conclusions about Hughes's form. The historical antecedents to "Song for a Dark Girl" are not English ballads, but rather two American musical traditions of the nineteenth-century: African-American spirituals, composed in call-and-response patterning, and minstrel ballads, composed in crude 4 X 4 caricatures of plantation music (see 3.3, 3.5). Hughes's refrain alludes to the minstrel ballad "Dixie," originally performed in blackface, in which the speaker pines for the (theoretical) comforts of slavery "away down south in Dixie" (W. Hubbard 124); the song was eventually adopted as the de facto anthem of the Confederacy. Hughes's adaptation of "Dixie" to a black female speaker is crucial to understanding the poem's central irony, which parodies the notion that any African-American could feel nostalgia for a racial caste system. The problem is not that Attridge ought to have read more closely, but rather that his close reading ought to have situated the poem in the appropriate cultural and historical context.

Though the poem is explicitly framed by race ("Song for a *Dark* Girl"), Attridge suggests that Hughes's "use of the term 'dark'" should not constrain our reading: "for me it resonates beyond the matter of skin color to connotations of dark fate, dark times, dark prospects" (Attridge and Staten 86). This is, in one sense, a truly excellent insight: the "dark girl" in the poem does indeed have "dark fate, dark times, dark prospects" (i.e., she has the bluest of the blues). However, the darkness of her skin is not independent of, but rather the very cause of, the darkness of her prospects. This is not a universal human tragedy expressed through a universal English rhythm, but a distinctly African-American tragedy expressed through a distinctly African-American rhythm.

There are two places where Attridge allows rhythm and metre to diverge in his scansion: the offbeat stresses in the parallel phrases at the beginning of Stanza 1 ("**black young lo**-ver") and Stanza 2 ("**white Lord Je**-sus"). These lines are parallel in many ways: grammatically, thematically, and prosodically. The shared metrical tension of these phrases is also, ingeniously, a racial tension. Attridge recognises this fact, yet still calls for the demotion of "young" and "Lord" in his close reading of the passage ("Case" 21). Whatever linguistic preferences English speakers

might choose to apply in other circumstances, it is not at all clear that this instance of metrical tension ought to be dissipated through promotion and demotion rules.

Cureton has also scanned “Harlem Sweeties” by Hughes as an example of dolnik verse (*RPEV* 131):

Brown sugar lassie,
. ← prominence launching 8-beat unit
.
.
. . ← tactical pulse (2 per line)
. . . . ← sub-tactical pulse (4 per line)
. . . .

Caramel treat,
.
. .
. . . .
. . . .

Honey-gold baby
. ← prominence launching 4-beat unit
.
. .
. . . .
. . . .

Sweet enough to eat.
. ← prominence launching 2-beat unit
. .
. . . .
. . . .

Unfortunately, Cureton ignores the worried stanzas which occur later in the poem. How does one scan a 3-beat unit like “**Li**-cor-ice, **clove**, **cin**-na-mon” (*CW* 2:31)—surely, we are not meant to demote “clove”? Elsewhere in “Harlem Sweeties,” Hughes’s rhythm approaches dipodic verse: “De-**LI**-cious, **fine SUG**-ar **hill**” (2:31). Although it is unclear how Cureton would scan these metrically nonconforming lines, it is clear that “Harlem Sweeties”—when read beyond its first (and most regular) stanza—is not a conventional example of dolnik verse.

The dolnik models of Attridge and Cureton were developed to account for structures that vary between 0- and 2-syllable offbeat positions. Hughes’s use of the 4 X 4 structure, which

commonly includes 3- and even 4-syllable offbeat positions, is not merely a loose rendering of this dolnik structure. Hughes's prosody is designed, often with meticulous care, to resist the insistent symmetry of the dolnik. His poems invite readers to participate in the conventions of orality and to improvise personalised and individuating rhythms where no metrically conforming options are possible.

1.5: The 12-Bar Stanza

"Techniques are universal within a language," Turco argues. "The rhythms and rhymes" of the blues "are the same" as those found in Robert Browning's poem, "A Toccata of Galuppi's": "The only thing missing from the Browning poem is the formal repetition" (186). Turco's reductionist view cannot explain why blues rhythms often have more in common with Francophone oral cultures in the Caribbean than with traditional English poetry. Du Bois, recognising that vernacular prosody had retained elements of West African prosody, gives the example of an African song that survived the middle passage:

Example 1: Du Bois's Notation of an African Song

Do ba - na co - ba, ge - ne me, ge - ne me!

Do ba - na co - ba, ge - ne me, ge - ne me!

Ben d' nu - li, nu - li, nu - li, nu - li, ben d' le.

Source: Du Bois, *Souls* 254.

According to Du Bois, the influence of this “African music” “may be seen … in the strange chant which heralds ‘The Coming of John’”:

> You may bury me in the East,
> You may bury me in the West,
> But I’ll hear the trumpet sound in that morning. (*Souls* 254-255)

Du Bois insists that these songs are “of undoubted Negro origin” (255), presumably calling attention to their shared AAB structure: an A-line repeated with minor variation followed by a B-line which answers the first two. Musicologist Eileen Southern, the first African-American woman to hold a tenured position at Harvard, came to the same conclusion: “the blues is distinctive for its three-line stanza, which perhaps is a throwback to African origins” (335). The AAB stanza likely arose from a performance culture of call-and-response patterning: a second hemistich answers the first, an instrumental response answers each line, and a B-line answers the A-lines. Unlike the symmetrically balanced hierarchies of the 4 X 4 structure, the 12-bar structure is composed of worried symmetry at every level. Within each line, the balance shifts toward the “response” element (beats 3-5); within each stanza, the balance shifts toward “call” element (the A-units):

(**A_1** **A_2**) (B)
/ \ / \ / \
(1-2) || (**3-4-5**) (1-2) || (**3-4-5**) (1-2) || (**3-4-5**)

As discussed in 1.3, similar AAB templates were commonly found in responsorial spirituals, work songs, and prison songs. In Brown’s 1932 collection *Southern Road*, the title poem, “Southern Road,” is patterned after one of these prison songs (*CP* 52-53):

> White man tells me—hunh—
> Damn yo’ soul; } A_1
> White man tells me—hunh—
> Damn yo’ soul; } A_2
> Got no need, bebby,
> To be tole. } B
>
> Chain gang nevah—hunh—
> Let me go; } A_1

Chain gang nevah—hunh—
Let me go; } A_2
Po' los' boy, bebby,
Evahmo' … } B

The speaker belongs to a chain gang, a system of forced labour which served as a de facto extension of slavery. He is likelier to have been arrested for a trivial offense like vagrancy than for a violent crime, ironically giving the moral high ground to the prisoner rather than the prison guards. The speaker suggests that there is "no need" for his overseers to tell him to go to hell because he is already there.

Brown, also an ethnomusicologist, is known for attempting to reproduce regional variations in dialect and prosodic nuances of orality in his literary verse, a technique Lynn Washington calls "audio-scribal transcription" (57). In "Southern Road," the third beat of each unit—"**hunh**" in the A-lines, "**beb**-by" in the B-lines—corresponds to the fall of a hammer, creating a systematic pattern of metrical recurrence that is not grounded in the alternation of strong and weak syllables. This explains in part why orthodox systems of stress metre struggle to describe blues prosody. If scanned using foot prosody, Brown's metre might be described as trochaic (stronger-weaker):

/ x / x / / x /
Chain gang | nevah— | hunh— | let me | go
S w S w S [w] S w S [w]

This scansion is not without value: it tells us that stressed syllables exceed unstressed syllables, 5 to 3, creating a distinctively jarring rhythm which echoes the sound of a hammer. However, the concept of "trochaic" metre misleadingly suggests that there is a normative alternation between strong and weak positions, as if the poem's underlying metre preferred a weak syllable after every strong one. This cannot be the case, because the third and fourth stresses in each line are not separated by a weak syllable. In other words, the rhythm prefers systematically *not* to alternate strong and weak syllables in this position.

One remedy to this problem is to ignore the number of unstressed syllables (as Attridge often does), and to focus only on the systematic patterns of beats:

/ / / / /
Po' los' boy, bebby, Evahmo' …
B B B B B

This eliminates the suggestion that there ought to be a weak syllable between strong syllables. However, Attridge’s model is calibrated to the English preference for isochrony. Because the word “los’” coincides with an offbeat, Attridge’s model suggests that it should be demoted; and because the final syllable of “Evahmo’” coincides with a beat, Attridge’s model suggests that it should be promoted. Beat prosody is thus similar to foot prosody in assuming a steady stronger/weaker alternation: “**Po’** los’ **boy**, [pause] **beb**-by, **Ev**-ah-**mo’**.”

Cureton’s scansion is more perceptive of hierarchical patterns:

```
Chain gang nevah—hunh—let me go
  .                                  ← 1 per line
  .               .                  ← 2 per line
  .         .     .     .     .      ← 5 per line
  .    .    . .   .  .  .   . . .
```

Because Cureton’s model (the best of the three) does not represent rhythm as a flat sequence of beats, it is sensitive to the distinctive (2)/(3) pulse of the blues. Because Cureton’s model does not account for the grouping preferences of call-and-response patterning, it is unclear how, or whether, he would differentiate between blues metre and structures of similar length like iambic pentameter.

When the study of blues prosody was in its infancy, several ethnomusicologists suggested an approximate comparison to the structure of iambic pentameter. In 1969, Harry Oster described the 12-bar stanza as “roughly analogous to the heroic couplet of the eighteenth century, if we disregard the repetition of a line” (70)—which is a helpful analogy, if one lacks more specific critical tools. Over time, this approximation has been so frequently rehearsed that handbooks on prosody and studies of the blues often equate blues metre and iambic pentameter without qualification:

> “The basic structure of the blues is a stanza of three iambic pentameter lines” (Hudson 28).
>
> “[T]he usual blues line is iambic pentameter” (R. Patterson 191).
>
> The “traditional blues text is a rhymed couplet in iambic pentameter” (Tyler 71).

The first to popularise the concept of blues pentameter was Leonard Bernstein in a 1955 episode titled "The World of Jazz." Bernstein quotes the first line of Billie Holiday's "Fine and Mellow," deliberately exaggerating the alternating metre: "this blues couplet is in iambic pentameter: 'My **man** don't **love** me, **treats** me **aw**-ful **mean**.'" Several poets—most notably, Elizabeth Bishop (*One Art* 445, 478) and James Merrill (11)—have identified the first line of W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues" as a line of iambic pentameter: "I **hate** to **see** the **eve**-nin' **sun** go **down**." Some specialists in African-American literature have echoed these claims: the "St. Louis Blues" "fits its metrical pattern so seamlessly that the natural cadences and inflections of speech are in no way deformed" (Harrison 2); it is one of C. S. Giscombe's "favorite iambic pentameter lines" (286); it is written in "rhymed couplets … obeying strict iambic pentameter" (Moses 625).

In fact, neither Handy's "St. Louis Blues" nor Holiday's "Fine and Mellow" is organised systematically around the alternation of strong and weak positions, but rather around a worried (2)/(3) pulse divided by a midline caesura:

He wears high-draped pants, || Stripes are really yellow ("Fine and Mellow")
(1 2) (3 4 5)

The tendency to confuse blues metre with iambic pentameter confirms Nietzsche's maxim that "we hear strange music badly," and involuntarily relate unfamiliar patterns to those "with which we are more familiar" (69). Because critics "learn to use patterns they hear, read, and study," "the iambic pentameter line" has dominated criticism of African-American versification, when models based in "West African … call and response" would have greater relevance (Lauter 71). "Coincidentally," "the alternating rhythmic scheme of iambic pentameter can be easily likened to the twelve-bar structure adopted by the blues" (L. Washington 57)—coincidentally, that is, because the two forms are organised in very different ways.

Because foot scansion is "virtually meaningless" when applied to vernacular prosody (Evans, *Big* 23), blues specialists have sought to develop alternative methods. Tracy's model is the most sensitive to nuances of audio-scribal transcription (*LHB* 147); however, this model was not designed for the convenience of literary critics, and would be cumbersome to reproduce here, especially because there are no chord changes in literary verse. David Chinitz has suggested a workable adaptation of Tracy's model that can be used for close reading; however, Chinitz's model—which assumes that the "metrical framework" of the blues "presses the lyrics *toward*

iambic pentameter" (230)—encounters the same problems as foot prosody. This study uses the following model to account for the normative (2)/(3) pulse as separated by a midline caesura:

A_1: (1 2) || (3 4 5)
A_2: (1 2) || (3 4 5)
B: (1 2) || (3 4 5)

Although these constraints explain the structure of most traditional blues stanzas, blues poets often improvise upon them to create more elaborate structures. For example, the form of "Blues at Dawn," a poem in Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, has long puzzled critics:

> **A_1:** I don't dare remember in the morning.
> **A_2:** Don't dare remember in the morning.
> **B_1:** If I recall the day before,
> **B_2:** I wouldn't get up no more—
> **A_3:** So I don't dare remember in the morning. (*CW* 3:67)

The worried A-line ("I don't" … "Don't" … "So I don't") identifies this as a variation upon the AAA stanza of the country blues. According to Gayl Jones and George E. Kent, "Blues at Dawn" "adheres to the stricter form of its [blues] genre" (G. Jones 26). Robert Hokanson also sees this as "the traditional blues stanza form" (119). Tony Bolden correctly points out that the poem certainly is *not* a conventional 12-bar stanza, but acknowledges that it "bears close resemblance" to "the traditional three-line aab stanzaic pattern" (109). Meta DuEwa Jones describes the poem as "one of the variants of the classic blues stanza" (*Muse* 59), a conclusion also suggested by Attridge:

> we hear the strains of a blues melody as we read, and the repetition can be said to work 'musically' to restate the opening theme and at the same time to postpone, and hence increase anticipation of, the climax that comes in the third and fourth lines—which in a more typical blues would be the end of the stanza. (*Moving* 46)

Attridge's comments indicate that "Blues at Dawn" is composed of variant AABA stanzas (which, if performed musically, would be sung over 16 rather than 12 bars).

None of these explanations are satisfactory. It is important to keep in mind that *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes's most ambitious experiment in prosody, seeks to adapt bebop-inspired polyrhythms to literary verse. As Hughes explains in the preface,

> this poem on contemporary Harlem, like be-bop, is marked by conflicting changes, sudden nuances, sharp and impudent interjections, broken rhythms, and passages sometimes in the manner of a jam session, sometimes the popular song, punctuated by the riffs, runs, breaks, and disc-tortions of the music of a community in transition. (*CW* 3:21)

One way that Hughes approximates polyrhythm is to merge the blues-based AAA stanza with the 4 X 4 structure of the spiritual hymns. In the spiritual "When the Chariot Comes" (Barton 44), each A-line occupies four beats (three realised, one silent): "Oh, **who** will drive the **cha**-riot when she **comes**?" [**pause**]; the two B-lines comprise the remaining four beats: "Oh, **who** will drive the **cha**-riot" (X2). "Blues at Dawn" also lends itself to this scansion:

A_1: I don't dare remember in the morning.
B B B [B]

A_2: Don't dare remember in the morning.
B B B [B]

B_1: If I recall the day before,
B B

B_2: I wouldn't get up no more—
B B

A_3: So I don't dare remember in the morning.
B B B [B]

The first line might be parsed in blues metre "(**I** don't **dare**) || (re-**mem-**ber **in** the **mor-**ning)," or as a spiritual hymn "(**I** don't dare re-**mem**-ber in the **morn**-ing) [**pause**]." This metrical ambiguity hovers between both structures without committing to either. Readers commit to one rhythm before encountering conflicting information that requires them to revise their initial judgment, a prosodic effect similar to what linguists call a Garden Path Sentence (Dynel 18).

Though he does not identify the structure of "Blues at Dawn," Tracy—in his analysis of the poem—makes the important point that audiences must have some "knowledge of the blues" to appreciate Hughes's prosody:

> A knowledge of the various structures and rhythms does not guarantee that *all* stanzas can be definitely identified as one type of blues stanza or another, but it does help the reader to at least begin to understand what Hughes was trying to do.

> What he did, stanzaically, rhythmically, and typographically, he often did very well. (*LHB* 181-182).

Some argue that blues poetry “summons” “the audience’s aural memory of vernacular traditions” (Marcoux 188), evoking the rhythms of musical speech even in their phonological absence. The possibility of “transforming such distinctly black aesthetic practices as improvisation and polyrhythm from jazz music to poetic text” largely explains the popularity of musically-derived forms in African-American poetry (Anderson III 54). Notably, Attridge denies the possibility of literary polyrhythm: “what we are aware of in reading a metrical line” is not “two voices in a polyphonic composition,” but rather a single “onward movement” (*REP* 17-18).[25] Then again, one can sense rhythms without being “aware” of them: many remained unaware of the polyrhythmic tendencies of jazz until Aaron Copland’s formal description of the technique in 1927 (“Jazz” 87). Indeed, several critics have claimed to perceive polyrhythmic effects in Hughes’s poems (Wall iii; Saber 142; L. Thomas, “It Is” 190).

During the Black Arts Movement, African-American writers experimented with visually irregular adaptations of the 12-bar stanza. Yusef Rahman’s “Transcendental Blues,” included in Baraka and Larry Neal’s 1968 anthology *Black Fire*, returns periodically to the AAB motif:

> **A_1:** A no-nosed bluefool in darkness cannot smell light
> **A_2:** A no-tongued bluefool in disorder cannot taste order
> **B:** A blind bluefool in heat of hate cannot see love. (369)

The A-lines recommend perspicacity in the chaos of creative iconoclasm, while the B-line recommends love in the chaos of social protest. This stanza worries the line between platitude and paradox, as the speaker struggles to resist the oppression that surrounds him and the hatred that rises within him. By the end of the poem, the conventional syntax and phrasal templates of the blues reflect this struggle, becoming so heavily worried that they appear fragmented:

> **A_1:** White maggots will not military your
>   babies down dead
>   again
> **A_2:** White maggots will not mercenary
>   Your fertile Nile to ache with

---

[25] Attridge’s comments are in response to Hopkins, who used the word “counterpoint” to describe “two rhythms” “in some manner running at once” (3).

pus
again
B: My spears shall rain
I-can't give-them-anything-but-drops
-of hate (373)

In a 1975 essay titled "Saturation: Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry," Henderson quotes Peter Berek's description of "Transcendental Blues" as "scatological energy" which "never achieves precision and control" (5), and Jack Richardson's description of the poem as "randomly loose," "unconsidered bombast" which "is haphazard and full of imagistic *non-sequiturs*" (6). "Despite the implicit chauvinism in these reviews," writes Henderson, "polemic is certainly not sufficient to answer them. The question which they raise is structural and should be answered, if possible, in structural terms" (7). Henderson does not offer a close reading of Rahman's structure, yet such a reading indeed confirms that "Transcendental Blues" is not nearly as loose and imprecise as its detractors would have it. Rahman might rather be admired for his dexterity in weaving AAB motifs through patterns of chiasmus and call-and-response, while communicating the nuances in feeling that accompanied the revolutionary milieu of the Civil Rights Movement.

Etheridge Knight has written in both conventional AAB stanzas, like the autobiographical "A Poem for Myself (or Blues for a Mississippi Black Boy)," and in visually worried AAB stanzas, like the salacious "Con / Tin / U / Way / Shun Blues":

Well, I know a girl named Wanda
Yeah, and she flat backs all night long } A_1
Yeah, she be staring at the ceiling
While the truckers hump and moan } A_2
so drunk from gin
that she's gotta put it in } B

Despite considerable variation in textual presentation, one common element in most literary blues stanzas is the 6-hemistich structure, which—as will become clear in chapters 2 and 4—is tremendously effective at communicating irony and paradox.

1.6: The Weary Blues

Although "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is Hughes's signature poem, "The Weary Blues" has received greater critical acclaim. Scholars are intrigued by the poem's evasive, ambiguous structure. There are patterns of rhyme, alliteration, rhythm, and refrain, yet these patterns do not follow any systematic organising principles familiar to Anglo-American verse theory (*CW* 1:23):

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
    I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light 5
    He did a lazy sway …
    He did a lazy sway …
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody. 10
    O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
    Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul. 15
    O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
    "Ain't got nobody in all this world,
      Ain't got nobody but ma self. 20
      I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
      And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
    "I got the Weary Blues 25
      And I can't be satisfied.
      Got the Weary Blues
      And can't be satisfied—
      I ain't happy no mo'
      And I wish that I had died." 30
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. 35

Formal analyses of "The Weary Blues" generally agree on one thing: the poem is spoken in two parts, by two different voices. One part is spoken by the primary narrator, who is assumed to be a member of the audience; another part is spoken, and implicitly sung, by the blues performer. (Notably, critics do not agree on which lines belong to which speaker). Jahan Ramazani suggests that the performer's blues stanzas are framed by the narrator's pentameter couplets:

> Analogous with the frame device of an elegy like "Lycidas," Hughes's literary framing of the "folk" blues means, in effect, "Thus sang the uncouth swain[.]" … [T]he frame device isolates the singer's rhythm and rhyme from the poet's. The African-American blues stanzas, repeating an initial line or half-line, are set off aurally from the poet's European rhyming pentameter couplets. Visually, the regularity and shortness of the blues lines distinguish them from the poet's longer pentameter lines, interspliced with irregular part-lines. (145)

Rowan Ricardo Phillips agrees:

> Hughes starts the poem with a rhymed couplet in iambic pentameter, reminiscent of the heroic couplet most strongly identified with Alexander Pope and John Dryden. … From that moment on, until the final five lines of the poem, "The Weary Blues" is an intertexture of two types of poetry. (96)

If, as Ramazani and Phillips suggest, the rhymed lines are heroic couplets, then these lines ought to divide into five feet with the "iamb" (weaker / stronger) as the dominant foot:

> Dro-ning | a drow- | sy syn- | co-pa- | ted tune,
> S w w S w S w S w S
>
> Rock-ing | back and | forth to | a mel- | low croon
> S w S w S w w S w S

This is, at best, an imprecise approximation. If iambs were the normative foot, how does one explain the three consecutive trochees at the beginning of line 2? If pentameter were the norm, how does one explain the 4- and 6-beat lines?

> The **stars** went **out** and **so** did the **moon**
>
> I **heard** that **Ne**-gro **sing**, that **old** pi-**a**-no **moan**

Judging from comments made by Hao Huang (16-17) and Ben Glaser ("Folk" 431), foot prosody might parse these lines (unhelpfully) as either 3-foot, 4-foot, or 5-foot units. This suggests that foot prosody has been applied to "The Weary Blues" not because it is especially well-suited to describing the poem's formal structure, but rather by default; for lack of a better option; despite its inability to describe what makes the poem unique.

Of the aforementioned interpretations, only those by Ramazani and Huang acknowledge (in passing) Hughes's use of call-and-response patterning. This neglect of vernacular prosody has left the figure of the lyric persona relatively unexplored: which lines belong to the narrator? Which belong to the musician? Is it always possible to distinguish the two? Are there any other voices in the poem? It is possible to address these questions by attending to the systematic alternation of rhymed couplets ("calls") and units beginning with indented lines ("responses"). The first two responsorial sections establish a rich sonic texture and suggest an ambiguous relationship between the primary narrator and the blues player:

Call (1)	**Response (1)**
Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,	I heard a Negro play.
Call (2)	**Response (2)**
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light	He did a lazy sway . . . He did a lazy sway . . . To the tune o' those Weary Blues.

Sonic imagery is accompanied by alliteration ("droning a drowsy"); visual imagery, by consonance ("pale dull pallor of an old gas light"); kinesthetic imagery, by assonance ("lazy sway / … lazy sway"). Although these opening lines contain the greatest density of sound, there is a sustained assonance rhyme that runs throughout the poem, between the end-rhymes of the "call" ("tune / croon," "stool / fool," "toon / moon") and the repetition of "bl*ue*s" in the response ("Sweet Blues!" / "O Blues!" / "Weary Blues"). This bluesy sound is not independent of the poem's rhythm. Although the rhyming couplets tend toward 4-beat lines, no single couplet can be read as an insistent sequence of 8 beats. In the first line, the word "**syn**-co-pa-ted" introduces a triple-offbeat into an otherwise-insistent rhythm: an effect comparable to the syncopation it describes.

One puzzling detail is that the first and the second call-and-response elements describe different subjects:

(1) Droning a drowsy syncopated tune … *I* heard a negro play.

(2) Down on Lenox Avenue the other night … *He* did a lazy sway.

Grammatically, sentence 1 suggests that the narrator, not the blues player, is droning a syncopated tune. (Contextually, one would assume otherwise). Sentence 2 indicates that the blues player is the one swaying. This is not the contradiction it might seem to be, and the implication is rather intuitive: the speaker has gotten caught up in the music. He is droning along with the syncopated tune. It is, of course, possible that Hughes simply began the poem with a dangling modifier. Then again, like several other poems in *The Weary Blues* (see 4.1), "The Weary Blues" appears to experiment with a decentred subject position as multiple voices share the narratorial "I."

Readers are next introduced to an unanticipated scandal:

Call (3)	**Response (3)**
With his ebony hands on each ivory key He made that poor piano moan with melody.	O Blues!

The pianist's "ebony" fingers pound the "ivory" piano keys in a more-than-musical way, making it "moan with melody." The response—"O Blues!"—is spoken by the piano in a burst of melodic gratification. Hughes here playfully represents the blues as a kind of musical miscegenation: an African-American bluesman pleasing a European instrument.

The fourth "call" presents a more detailed image of the performer onstage:

Call (4)	**Response (4)**
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.	Sweet Blues! Coming from a black man's soul. O Blues!

Hughes's unpretentious imagery creates the conditions necessary for what he understood as the blues experience: the dereliction of the jazz club, with its "rickety" stools, complements the "raggy" tune of the performer.

The next two response elements belong to the performer:

Call (5)	**Response (5)**
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—	"Ain't got nobody in all this world, Ain't got nobody but ma self. I's gwine to quit ma frownin' And put ma troubles on the shelf."

Call (6)	**Response (6)**
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor. He played a few chords then he sang some more—	"I got the Weary Blues And I can't be satisfied. Got the Weary Blues And can't be satisfied— I ain't happy no mo' And I wish that I had died."

The motif of musical miscegenation continues in calls 5 and 6: the singer's "deep," penetrating voice makes the piano "moan"; "Thump, thump, thump" goes the rhythm.

In responses 5 and 6, the singer's lyrics are composed entirely of stock phrases from the country blues tradition. They are not improvised spontaneously from the singer's imagination, but recombined from a shared repertoire of images, following the semantic pathways of communal authorship. The first stanza performed by the musician (response 5) appears to be an eight-bar blues stanza (Tracy 222). "Ain't got nobody but ma self," the speaker complains—perhaps true in a romantic sense, but also an ironic gesture feigning the audience's absence. The speaker then resolves to quit complaining about his blues: "I's gwine to quit ma frownin' / And put ma troubles on the shelf." This, too, is ironic: he has just gotten started, and will continue playing late into the night. The second stanza performed by the musician (response 6) is a 12-bar blues stanza, the first ever adapted to literary verse.

Call 7 receives no response, suggesting that much of the audience has left and the speaker is playing to an emptying or empty club:

Call (7)	**Response (7)**
And far into the night he crooned that tune. The stars went out and so did the moon.	*No Response*

Literally speaking, it is the "old gas light" from line 5 that "went out"—yet Hughes's transposition of sentence elements attributes this action to the "stars" and the "moon," as if the heavens were a macrocosm for the jazz club on Lenox Avenue. In the final, triple-rhymed call, the speaker's head is figured as a microcosm for the jazz club, where the music never stops playing:[26]

Call (8)	**Response (8)**
The singer stopped playing and went to bed While the Weary Blues echoed through his head. He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.	*No Response*

How does the narrator know that the blues player has gone to bed and slept like a rock? Perhaps the two went home together: a consummation of the sexual tension that builds throughout the poem. Hughes sometimes ends his blues-themed poems with images of consummation, which—whether subtle ("Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret") or salacious ("Ma Man")—represent the blues player engaging in sexual activity. It is possible to think of the speaker of "The Weary Blues" as one who has been seduced by the blues. However, this does not quite explain how the narrator knows what is echoing inside the bluesman's head, suggesting that the narratorial "I" has become a kind of omniscient figure. Catherine Morley also remarks upon the ambiguity of the subject position:

> The hypnotic power of the blues musician lulls the observer into self-forgetfulness, evident in the absorption of the initial subjective "I," locked within its measured lines, into the colloquial "I's" and "I got' of the musician in the middle section of the poem, culminating with the indeterminate "he" in the final line. (201)

This is not to suggest that there is a single correct interpretation of the polyvocal subject position (no more than there is a single determinate interpretation of the subject position in Picasso's paintings). The important conclusion here is that no simple demarcation line can be drawn between the voices of the narrator, the performer, the audience, and the musical instruments, and no stable

[26] In 4.3, we will see how Hughes uses the same trope—the heavens as a macrocosm, the psychological experience of Lenox Avenue as a microcosm—in the poem "Lenox Avenue: Midnight."

antithesis between the “formal” prosody of the narrator and the vernacular prosody of the blues player (which, as will be seen in 4.3, also blend together).

Chapter 2: Figurative Language

2.1: Speaking Double

Both "lexically and syntactically," writes Helen Vendler, Hughes limited himself

> to language that the most uneducated person could hear and understand. … [M]oved by the syncopated rhythm of boogie-woogie and by the unembarrassed explicitness of the blues, he recreated in the simplest possible words the street scenes he saw around him. ("Rita" 381)

Harold Bloom agrees that "[i]t is difficult to write well about Langston Hughes":

> Popular verse … has to risk a kind of literal simplicity in order to reach and move its audience. Since all poetry depends on metaphor, and Hughes's images tend to be few and traditional, the expositor is left with little to employ as commentary. (*Bloom's* vii)

Nathan Irvin Huggins argues that Hughes did not want to be read critically, and "expected his poems to be taken on the simple and unpretentious level on which they were written" (227). Even David Chinitz, an admirer of Hughes, concedes that "his blues poems are not replete with delicately calculated formal devices" (76). The general consensus is that Hughes sacrificed the possibilities of complex figurative language to write in the more accessible and democratic style of the blues.

This consensus assumes that the blues were taken at face value by their original audiences. However, as James Cone argued in 1972, there is much evidence to suggest that "the literalists were in the minority and not the majority as is often supposed" (*Spirituals* 135). In a 1973 interview with Gwendolyn Brooks, George Kent remarked that "the simplicity" of the blues is a "very difficult thing to define. Ordinarily, I think people look at blues lyrics as representing a very good level of simplicity, where there are certain conventions of metaphor in blues lyrics," which "may be confusing" outside the "blues community" (Brooks 70). As Brooks herself explained in the foreword to *New Negro Poets U.S.A.*, many African-American poets

> wish that they could solve the negro question once and for all, and go on from such success to the composition of textured sonnets or buoyant villanelles about the

> transience of a raindrop, or the gold-stuff of the sun. They are likely to find significances in those subjects not instantly obvious to their fairer fellows. The raindrop may seem to them to represent racial tears—and those might seem, indeed, other than transient. The golden sun might remind them that they are burning. (13)

"All negroes … was born with the blues," claimed Leadbelly, even if "they don't know what it is" (Ledbetter 64). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. offers a similar observation in academic language, acknowledging "the difficulty of rendering the implications of a concept that is so shared in one's culture as to have long ago become second-nature to its users" (*Signifying* 70). Most Americans, Gates suggests, "*do not speak the same language*" as those acculturated to the African-American vernacular tradition (72).

This is not to suggest that African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is fundamentally different from Standard American English (SAE): some researchers have found "no significant difference between the speech of blacks and whites of the same geographical origin and economic and educational status" (Spears 170). Gates's point is that certain stylised registers of vernacular expression are constrained by conventions not found in other English-language registers. "Formally speaking," writes Kalamu ya Salaam, "SAE is literally a foreign language," with a "lexicon and grammar" unable to "communicate the essentials of our experiences precisely" (352). Because a "'native tongue' is not imposed, but rather developed" (352), ya Salaam argues that the musical speech of the vernacular tradition coevolved with African-American culture to serve many functions of a native language.

The most well-documented figure of speech to develop during North American slavery is a kind of practical doublespeak: the communication of necessary but forbidden information in a manner not understood by white listeners. Plantation slaves generally faced harsh punishment if their speech was deemed seditious. Lyrics that satirised one's master or encouraged running away had to be sung in coded language: "many of the spirituals and work songs … had one meaning for white listeners and quite another meaning for the slaves" (Shulman 245). This practice was especially common in churches, where "laws banning the worship of blacks unless authorized whites were present" led slaves "to sing songs with double meanings" (Cone, *Spirituals* 135).

Religious doublespeak often incorporated Biblical narratives of liberation, most notably the Exodus myth. Moses's deliverance of the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage was generally presented as an allegory of spiritual liberation, and many slaves indeed looked forward to freedom

in the afterlife. Given the striking parallels to North American slavery, many also interpreted the allegory as foreshadowing their own emancipation, yet kept up the charade while their overseers were present. In Paul Laurence Dunbar's "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," the speaker, a slave preacher, allows his congregation to understand that their liberation is imminent: "de Lawd will sen' some Moses / Fu' to set his chilun free." During one digression, the preacher's images of military conquest give some indication of how this liberation might occur:

> A' de lan' shall hyeah his thundah,
> Lak a blas' f'om Gab'el's ho'n,
> Fu' de Lawd of hosts is mighty
> When he girds his ahmor on.
> But fu' feah some one mistakes me,
> I will pause right hyeah to say,
> Dat I'm still a-preachin' ancient,
> I ain't talkin' bout to-day. (*CP* 14)

The preacher claims only to paraphrase "ancient" events, lest the congregation "mis"-interpret his militant language as a call to arms. He remains anxious throughout the sermon, once imploring the congregation not to "run an' tell yo' mastahs / Dat I's preachin' discontent," and later reminding them that he is only "talkin' bout ouah freedom / In a Bibleistic way" (*CP* 14).

The preacher's sermon is encoded with two simultaneous meanings: one for a white audience (salvation), another for a black audience (emancipation). Ingeniously, Dunbar's poem also is also encoded with double meaning. As explained by Meredith McGill,

> Dunbar's dialect verse draws uncomfortably close to the minstrel and plantation traditions, inviting readers to mistake poems full of subtle ironies for racist nostalgia. … "An Ante-bellum Sermon" comes perilously close to voicing a sharp-edged critique of the persistence of inequality in the postwar United States … but the poem draws up short in a way that can be read either as buffoonery or as a protest against the still deferred promise of equality. (130)

Those accustomed to the conventions of minstrel shows and plantation novels might find amusement in the preacher's bathetic juxtaposition of high martial rhetoric and broken English, as well as the comical transparency of his Biblical analogy—which would seem to confirm that slaves are incapable of linguistic subterfuge. Nevertheless, in laughing at the simplicity of the preacher's

coded implication (without fully understanding Dunbar's), readers in a sense re-enact the overconfidence of plantation owners.

Like his preacher, Dunbar himself engages in a kind of literary doublespeak, indulging casual readers with a superficial mockery of black mannerisms while leaving the poem open to a more subversive interpretation. If one takes the sermon as a phonetic transcription of African-American Vernacular English (rather than comic dialect), it reads less as a parody than as a psychological exploration of an anxious black insurrectionist. This is not a subject Dunbar would have written about openly during the nineteenth century, yet it is a subject some of his more attentive readers have inferred from the poem. In a 1935 article in *The Crisis*, Samuel Stevens links "An Ante-bellum Sermon" to the slave uprising led by Nat Turner that killed more than fifty white Americans in Southampton County, Virginia (276).

In Hughes's poetry, coded language appears not merely as a convention of, but as the very definition of the blues: laughing to keep from crying. The blues are not to be taken at face value: they say one thing, and mean one or more entirely different things. Hughes invokes the motif of laughing to keep from crying in "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," an almost lackadaisically cheerful poem that, on closer inspection, reads more like a riddle:

> Play it,
> Jazz band!
> You know that tune
> That laughs and cries at the same time.
> You know it.
>
>   May I?
>   Mais oui.
>   Mein Gott!
>   Parece una rumba.
> Play it, jazz band!
> You've got seven languages to speak in
> And then some,
> Even if you do come from Georgia.
>   Can I go home wid yuh, sweetie?
>   Sure. (*CW* 1:106)

David Yaffe offers a thoughtful reading of this poem:

> [Hughes] saw jazz not, as Ellison did, as an aesthetic outgrowth of Eliot's poetics, but as a retort to them. In "To a Negro Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret," for example, Eliot's famous clangor of three languages … is tweaked when Hughes directs the expatriate musicians to play their multilingual "thing." (123)

Hughes's polyglot lines, like those of *The Waste Land*, present an interpretive puzzle. "May I [have this dance]?" asks an unidentified speaker; "Mais oui" (Why yes), another replies in French. There are subtle hints that this conversation takes place between a black man and a white woman. "Mein Gott!" (My God), a German exclaims: presumably at the skill of the dancers, though perhaps at the spectacle of an interracial couple. "Parece una rumba" (Looks like a rumba), a Spanish-speaker observes. After a spontaneous interjection from the band leader, the dialogue continues: "Can I go home wid yuh, sweetie?" asks an African-American man; "Sure," is the response. Whether these lines are spoken by the same couple that begins to dance, or by a different couple, there is a strong implication of interracial sex.

Although readers cannot be sure which characters in the poem "come from Georgia," the band leader's allusion to the Deep South evokes a society where interracial marriage (miscegenation) was illegal, and the "ever-present threat of lynching proscribed consensual liaisons between black men and white women" (Hodes 179). The poem's setting in Paris is thus significant. "For the African American community that emerged in Paris during the wars," as Tyler Stovall aptly puts it, "the possibility of engaging more or less openly in interracial sex showed expatriates that they weren't in Kansas anymore" (21). However openly these sexual encounters occurred, Hughes writes about them in a clandestine manner, like the preacher of Dunbar's poem. Whereas Hughes's white readers might easily overlook the poem's implicit sexual politics (as several generations of literary critics have done), attentive African-American readers might just as easily perceive the implication in the couplet: Paris is a place where black men can safely and successfully court white women. Notably, the lines "Mais oui" and "Sure"—the only lines in the poem that can be clearly attributed to women—both offer consent.

This is not the writing of a poet limited by literal simplicity. Throughout the poem, jazz becomes a language of flirtation through which dancers communicate sexual interest in rhythmic and kinaesthetic signifiers. Jazz becomes a universal cipher, rendering explicit world languages and musical styles as though disassembling the Tower of Babel. The improvisational texture of jazz encourages homophonic wordplay: "May I?" / "Mais oui"—which becomes mutually and

felicitously intelligible. The quality of being multilingual belongs not only to the audience, but also to the musical idioms of jazz and the blues: as the band leader reminds his players, "[y]ou've got seven languages to speak in / And then some."

2.2: Lyric Persona

The use of the dramatic monologue in the blues tradition has received considerable interest, both from specialists in African-American literature (D. Martin 97, Melhem 23) and from specialists in poetic form. According to Glennis Byron, the dramatic monologue has been used to amplify the "non-canonical" and "overtly politicised voices of such black American poets as Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks" (119). Michael Hurley and Michael O'Neill, quoting from Byron, also consider Hughes and Brooks among "the comparatively 'minor' poets who employed the genre 'primarily as an instrument of social critique'" (181). Such comments assume firstly, that Hughes and Brooks appropriated the form of the dramatic monologue from the English tradition; secondly, that they did so for political purposes; and thirdly, that they did so outside the auspices of canonical discourse.

Hughes acknowledged that his poems are written "in the form of a kind of dramatic monologue" (qtd. in Tracy, *LHB* 183). One wonders what is being qualified with all this hedging ("in the form of a kind of…"): what prevents Hughes from identifying his poems *as* dramatic monologues? One likely explanation is that the African-American vernacular tradition had its own well-established conventions for representing the dramatic speaker. In the blues tradition, the "dramatic *persona* who speaks in the first person" is usually understood to be semi-autobiographical (Evans, *Big* 27). Because "poet (singer) and audience share the same reality," the audience "assumes 'we' even though the blues singer sings 'I'" (S. Williams, "Blues" 543); "the 'I' of the blues singer always suggests the 'we' of the community" (Manson, "Sterling" 23).

The implicit polyvocality of the vernacular persona requires literary critics to revise many of their basic assumptions about the identity and function of an author and the process of imaginative composition. Among plantation slaves, authorship was usually a communal activity.

Paul Harvey describes how the ring shout, an American adaptation of a West African style of singing, took shape through a process of communal and responsorial improvisation:

> In slave cabins or in other secluded settings, slave worshippers formed a circle and began singing. Often this was in secret, with a pot turned upside down at the door to "catch" the sound, a tradition probably derived from African folklore. A leader sat in the middle and called out the main lines. The rest sang out the chorus and refrain in call-and-response form. … Participants called out new verses, including local names and locations. Slaves reworked stock phrases, producing songs that were communally authored and constantly modified throughout the years. (89)

The spirituals are not exclusively (or even primarily) religious songs. William Andrews describes the slave rhetoric of the period as "more psycholiterary than spiritual" (7). Most spirituals are not expressions of devotion, but explorations of individual and communal emotions like sorrow, hope, longing, or indignation. The spirituals were not always performed in ecclesiastical settings. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes one performance of "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" as an expression of communal solidarity:

> When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfill its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept. (*Souls* 255)

Having been denied their promised land (the proverbial forty acres and a mule), the African-Americans—like the Biblical Hebrews with whom they identified—are sent into exile. They sing of their sorrows; the soldier weeps. Because Du Bois's account reads like a parable, it would be easy to assume that the spiritual it describes is a simple, sentimental expression of sorrow. The opening stanza also supports this impression:

> Nobody knows the trouble that I've seen,
> Nobody knows my sorrow.[27] (Cooke, "Nobody")

These lines, which contain no similes or metaphors, might appear to be strictly literal. However, as J. L. Austin would remind us, "the occasion of an utterance matters seriously": "the words used

[27] An 1867 version of this spiritual was published under the title "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Had" (W. Allen, et. al., 55). Though transcribed in duple metre, it was likely performed as a "multimetric song" by plantation slaves (Southern 196).

are to some extent to be 'explained' by the 'context' in which they are designed" (100). When analysing these lyrics, it is important to account for what Austin calls their "perlocutionary" value (101), attending not only to what they "say" but also to what they "do." The purpose of these lines is not to express a belief that the speaker's sorrows are unknown or unknowable, but to introduce a theme for elaboration and invite responses.

As Gates argues, the rhetorical structures of the vernacular tradition are "not engaged in the game of information-giving" (*Signifying* 52). The phrase "[n]obody knows my sorrows" is not true in a literal sense: the leader certainly knows her own sorrows, and so does the rest of the community. The polyvocal persona presumes overlapping and interacting voices, all of whom have experienced the sorrows of slavery. The second stanza clarifies that "Jesus" knows their sorrows. Hurston clarifies that communally-authored forms behave less like "songs" than "unceasing variations around a theme" ("Spirituals" 473). Lines that begin as literal complaints may be revised and invested with new, double- or even triple-meanings, even if these meanings were unintended by the original singer:

> These songs, even the printed ones, do not remain long in their original form. Every congregation that takes it up alters it considerably. For instance, *The Dying Bed Maker*, which is easily the most popular of the recent compositions, has been changed to *He's a Mind Regulator* by a Baptist church in New Orleans. (473)

Hurston suggests that the spirituals retain many conventions of oral poetry, even after being committed to writing. She also illustrates the importance of improvisation and revision as mechanisms for producing complex figures of speech. The original author of "Bed Maker" (Christ's literal occupation of carpentry) almost certainly did not intend for this phrase to evolve into "Mind Regulator" (a more abstract representation of Christ's occupation). Notably, this image is not the product of one individual's poetic introspection, but rather the result of several successive, imaginative, communal modifications.

Because African-American parishioners participated actively in composing spirituals (rather than passively reciting them), the subject position did not belong in any simple sense to the leader ("I") or the congregation ("we"), and came to occupy a liminal space between singular and plural. The clause "[n]obody knows my sorrows," ostensibly an individual's complaint of isolation, is modified through performance into an affirmation of membership within the

community: the singers are together in their sorrows. This referential ambiguity is not incidental, and is amplified in the final stanza:

> If you get there before I do,
> Oh, oh yes Lord,
> Don't forget to tell all my friends I'm comin' too. (Cooke, "Nobody")

Is "you" meant to be singular (addressing a close friend) or plural (addressing the congregation)?—or, as indicated grammatically, does it refer to the "Lord" (an intimate prayer)? There is not a wrong answer to this question, for the same spiritual might hold different meaning to different singers and congregations. The "conditions of slavery cast the spiritual into uniquely polyvocal forms" (Marini 110): not only in the technical sense of musical polyphony, but also in the semiotic sense of pluralising, decentring, and troping the lyric persona.

2.3: Irony

"The dividing line between the blues and some kinds of spirituals cannot always be sharply drawn," writes Eileen Southern, noting that some bluesmen hustled at train stations while others visited churches (333). Though sung by an individual, the blues retained many conventions of communal authorship, including the incremental modification of stock phrases. If a bluesman's "conceit had merit," wrote Abbe Niles in 1926, "it would be gladly adopted by his hearers," and "pass around as a vehicle for the old expressions, common property of the race" (31). "Despite the fact that these expressions are used over and over again by blacks in everyday conversations," Sherley Anne Williams explains that "they escape being clichés because their meanings are deeply rooted in a constantly renewed and thus living reality" ("Blues" 550). In most celebrated blues songs, stock phrases behave less like literal complaints than indicators of irony.

The sentiment in many blues songs can be described as cosmic irony: the sense that the persona has been cruelly manipulated by Fate. Blues singers are connoisseurs, capable of detaching themselves psychologically from their undesirable circumstances for long enough to gain an aesthetic appreciation of Fate's sense of humour. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the title of

Hurston's blues-themed novel, indicates a sense of wonder at an unpredictable, inscrutable, and potentially sadistic deity. Hurston described this irony as "cosmic loneliness" ("Inside" 42). The internal logic of the blues suggests that "life is not about good vs. evil, but about good and evil eaten off the same plate" (ya Salaam 357). The lyric personae of the blues are often near the brink (of committing adultery, suicide, murder), with a sense that one more natural or emotional disaster might send them over the edge. If taken literally, most blues appear tragic; however, the tone is better described as "tragicomic" (Gilyard 77), or the "humorous acceptance of the inevitable" (White 387).

In 1.2, we saw how the spiritual "Heav'n, Heav'n" calls ironic attention to the neglect of slaves by suggesting their lack of shoes. Hughes suggests a similar irony in the poem "Bad Morning," in which the speaker is wearing a mismatched pair of shoes, and likely cannot afford a new pair:

Here I sit
With my shoes mismated.
Lawdy-mercy!
I's frustrated! (*CW* 2:204)

Whereas the spirituals respond to the neglect of slaves with qualified optimism, "Bad Morning" responds to conditions of socioeconomic inequality with comedic cynicism. This blues vignette invokes the Lord's name with a sense of humour that lies halfway between prayer and profane interjection. The speaker makes much ado over something serious, as if it were something trivial. Although the poem reads like a light sketch in doggerel verse, the speaker's eye dialect—"Lawdy" (Lord have), "I's" (I'm), "mismated" (mismatched)—suggests a more serious theme of being without a mate. Perhaps the speaker feels as "mismated" as his shoe: is this a comedic malapropism, or a cannily transferred epithet?

The earliest blues songs had no authoritative version, and functioned, like the spirituals, as variations upon a theme. Niles explains that "*Weary Blues*, *Worried Blues* and the like were merely generic terms." He illustrates this point through a hypothetical exchange: "the white man saying, 'What's that terrible thing you're singing?' and the answer: 'Oh, dat's just de weary blues'" (42). Blues songs commonly begin by introducing the theme in the first hemistich of the A-line, followed by another stock phrase in the second hemistich:

Got the weary blues, || can't be satisfied. (Hurt, "Got the Blues")

The elision of pronouns renders the first line ambiguous: "[Who] got the weary blues, || [Who] can't be satisfied[?]." The expectation, of course, is that the speaker has the blues. In the final stanza, however, the persona says, "*You* got the blues, || and I still ain't satisfied"—the joke being that the performer's blues are contagious.

Henry Thomas's "Texas Worried Blues" follows the same lyric formula, introducing the theme in the first hemistich of the A-line, followed by another stock phrase in the second:

I got the worried blues, || Lord, I'm feeling bad. (X3)

In the second stanza, the speaker complains that he is alone:

I've got no one, tell my troubles to. (X3)

While this is perhaps true of the speaker's romantic life, these lines also contain a rather pointed irony: they are sung to an audience that has come specifically to listen to the bluesman's problems. With increasing hyperbole, the next five stanzas amplify this ironic motif of being unwanted:

> You can box me up and send me to my ma (X3)
> If my ma don't want me, send me to my pa (X3)
> If my pa don't want me, send me to my girl (X3)
> If my girl don't want me, cast me in the sea (X3)
> So the fish and the whales, make a fuss all over me (X3)

The use of a recurring phrasal template ("If A don't want me, send me to B") encourages the build-up of anticipation across stanzas 4-6. Stanza 7 breaks this phrasal template: if nobody wants the singer, they can throw him in the ocean, where he will be quite popular among marine scavengers. This amusing reversal of expectations also carries more sobering implication: if the speaker drowns, his troubles will be over. The motif of drowning to escape one's blues is so common, Hughes even had a name for it: "the desperate going-to-the-river Blues" (*CW* 9:213).

These versions of "The Weary Blues" by Hurt, whose referential ambiguity conflates his own blues with those of the audience, and Thomas, who feigns the audience's absence, both exploit the predictability of the first line to introduce an unexpected reversal later in the song. As we saw in 1.6, the 12-bar stanza contained in Hughes's version of "The Weary Blues" follows the same lyric formula:

> I got the weary blues, || I can't be satisfied.

Tracy, observing this similarity, speculates that Hughes might have heard Thomas perform in Kansas (*LHB* 106). Wherever Hughes heard these lyrics first, he was not hearing an unsophisticated folk form, but a form with well-developed conventions of irony.

Thomas's lyrics demonstrate that the AAA stanza is well-suited to ironies of expectation and reversal or anticipation and release: it is effective at amplifying, or contradicting, the previous stanza. Like the AAA stanza, the AAB stanza also evolved specific templates, or formulae, for developing irony across successive stanzas. One such template introduces the persona's troubles in the A-line (cosmic irony) followed by a shocking amplification or reversal in the B-line (situational irony). As seen in Bessie Smith's "Eavesdropper's Blues," the movement from A to B

is characterised by insult added to injury. Each A-line introduces some new gossip by the eavesdroppers, while each B-line amplifies the outrage:

> They said I had a man I give my money to, (X2)
> And if I was broke he would turn my eyes all blue.
>
> They talked about my pa[28] who was blind in one eye, (X2)
> They said he was a sinner and was too mean to cry.
>
> I never knock nobody, wonder why they picked on me, (X2)
> There's goin' to be a funeral if they don't let me be.

The symmetry of these stanzas is easy to overlook. In the first B-line, the lover threatens to add injury to the gossipers' insult. In the second B-line, the gossipers add insult to the lover's injury. In the final B-line, the speaker threatens to add injury to the gossipers' insult. Each B-line introduces a new play on words: (1) the speaker anticipates having the "blues," literally, in the form of a black eye; (2) her lover is said to be "blind" in one eye because he is "too mean to cry"; (3) the lyric persona who "never knock nobody" is going to knock somebody off (i.e., murder them) "if they don't let me be." This is not disembodied lyrical virtuosity: the value of these lines *as poetry* arises from their uncanny effectiveness at representing the social dynamics in increasingly crowded African-American communities. When Robert Hayden sought to depict urban decay in the black community, he turned not to the forms of high modernism but rather to the phrasal templates of Bessie Smith (see 4.5).

"Negroes are no lovers of irony," wrote Carl Van Vechten: "They do not, for the most part, even comprehend it and are likely to read literalness where it is not intended" ("Uncle" 224). Van Vechten's qualification, "for the most part," excludes the literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance, but assumes that working-class African-Americans have no sense of complex irony. Vendler, likewise, treats Hughes as the literary exception to the proletarian rule:

> [one] characteristic of the Hughes poem (at its normative best) is irony. … Du Bois's famous "double consciousness" of the "souls of black folk" does not necessarily produce irony, though it may produce the doubleness—watching oneself as if one were another—that can become a root of writerly irony. But the sort of humorous irony found everywhere in Hughes depends on the conscious

[28] "Pa": in the blues, "papa" and "daddy" are generally slang for a male lover.

> diminution of self, which is precisely the sort of diminution that the role of tragic victim cannot tolerate. ("Unweary" 39)

Vendler confuses the tragicomic irony of the blues with a simpler irony that is merely tragic. She hears the cry of the blues, but not the laughter. As we have seen in this section, the blues are full of self-conscious irony: from Thomas's gesture that no one wants him (which evolves into a disturbingly amusing jest at suicide) to Smith's gesture that no one likes her (which evolves into a disturbingly amusing jest at murder).

After the American Civil War, free blacks in cosmopolitan cities like New Orleans and Atlanta found themselves oppressed by new race codes, while former slaves found themselves in economic competition with working-class whites. If these slaves had fared little better than animals during slavery, many fared worse after emancipation. Country blues singers often expressed this irony indirectly by describing themselves as inferior to animals. "Got No Mo' Home Than a Dawg," begins one anonymous blues song quoted by Niles (40). "If I was a mule I'd / Git me a wagon to haul," writes Hughes in another (*CW* 1:75). This motif also appears in the chain-gang song "I Ain't Free," wherein the black speaking voice expresses jealousy at the luxuries of rabbits, squirrels, roosters, and hens. The folklorist B. A. Botkin, who transcribed the lyrics to "I Ain't Free" in 1927, noted the song's "ironical or satirical blend of pathos and humor" (39). This is precisely the "humorous," "conscious diminution of self" which Vendler assumes to be absent from the vernacular tradition ("Unweary" 39). Hughes's contribution, therefore, is not to invent a manner of irony, but to adapt this irony to a literary context and sharpen its execution.

Hughes's use of the 12-bar stanza is characteristically parsimoniousness, seldom including language that might distract from the central irony of a stanza. Kevin Young, a contemporary blues poet, has amplified this technique by condensing the blues stanza to a couplet. Young's "Black Cat Blues" contains no language that does not contribute to the trope of cosmic irony around which the poem is organised:

> I showed up for jury duty—
> turns out the one on trial was me.
>
> Paid me for my time & still
> I couldn't make bail.
>
> Judge that showed up

was my ex-wife.

Now that was some
hard time.

She sentenced me
to remarry.

I chose firing squad instead.
Wouldn’t you know it—

Plenty of volunteers
to take the first shot

But no one wanted to spring
for the bullets.

Governor commuted my sentence to life
in a cell more comfortable

Than this here skin
I been living in. (*Dear* 53)

Although “Black Cat Blues” bears no superficial resemblance to the 12-bar stanza, Young’s manner of structuring cosmic irony is distinctively blues-like: line 2 of each stanza plays upon line 1, and each successive stanza plays upon the previous stanza. However, the form, the imagery, and the figure of the lyric persona have been updated to reflect twenty-first century developments within the African-American community. In 4.6, we will see how Young worries this 2-line blues stanza by combining it with elements of a hip-hop aesthetic.

2.4: Iconography

Much of the iconography used in Western poetry originated the Biblical Judeo-Christian and the classical Greco-Roman traditions; as discussed in 1.4, Derek Attridge recognises the figure of the Madonna and Child in Hughes’s “Song for a Dark Girl.” Some of the iconography used in African-American literature, such as the trickster archetype, originated in the narrative traditions

of West Africa. In addition to these European and African sources of images and archetypes, the blues tradition developed its own iconography in the aftermath of the Civil War. Blues iconography centres not around gods and goddesses, but around rivers and railroads, common means of transportation (and methods of suicide) that acquired mythical status, and an almost spiritual significance, in the lyrics of the blues tradition.

Fittingly, the written history of the blues tradition begins at a railroad station in 1903. As W. C. Handy tells the story,

> one night at Tutwiler, as I nodded in the railroad station, … [a] lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plunking a guitar beside me[.] … The effect was unforgettable[:] …
>
> Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog.
>
> The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself with the weirdest music I had ever heard. … When the singer paused, I leaned over and asked him what the words meant. He rolled his eyes, showing a trace of mild amusement. Perhaps I should have known, but he didn't mind explaining. At Moorhead the eastbound and the westbound met and crossed the north and southbound trains four times a day. (*Father* 74)

The first blues Handy overheard were not only sung at a railroad station, but are also about railroad travel. Perhaps the most important liberty offered by emancipation was the freedom to escape undesirable circumstances and pursue better ones elsewhere. Themes of escape are ubiquitous in the early blues: "As in so much Negro folklore the railroad becomes the favoured symbol of escape. Down at the depot the board read, 'Hard times here, there's better up the road'" (S. Brown, "Blues" 289).

The performance culture of the blues coevolved alongside this relatively newfound freedom of movement. African-American musicians travelled on steamboats throughout the Mississippi Delta, where a distinctive delta blues style developed; and on railroads throughout the South and Midwest, where regional inflections of the country blues developed simultaneously. Many African-Americans relocated to major urban centres like Kansas City and St. Louis, while others adopted itinerant lifestyles and travelled from place to place. These changes profoundly influenced the domestic conditions of young African-Americans, are reflected in the blues—especially in the archetype of the travelling bluesman (or woman).

The traveling musician is as much a folkloric figure as a historical one. Like most lyric personae in the vernacular tradition, this archetype straddles the boundary between autobiography and fiction. Whether fleeing oppression or fleeing one's intolerable lover, traveling musicians were escape artists; and whether pursuing opportunity or pursuing sexual conquest, they were adventurers too. In one stock phrase, the singer might threaten to leave his lover; in the next, he might threaten to find another (or others). Such stock phrases, which Howard Odum associates the "boast of" "the wandering negro" (269), were part of a stylised braggadocio. In one song by Furry Lewis, the speaker tells his lover,

> I'm going I'm going, || your crying won't make me stay (X2)
> For the more you cry, || further you drive me away.

If these lines are attributed to a traveling musician, they are no idle threat: the blues singer is liable to pick up and leave at any moment. When attributed to the tippling wanderer in Lewis's rendition, the narrative voice becomes complex, unreliable, and humorous:

> If the river was whiskey || I'd stay drunk all the time (X2)
> So a woman like you || could not worry my mind.

"Some of these mornings," the persona concludes, as though trying to convince himself, he will get around to leaving that woman. In a comparable moment of indecision, Charlie Patton equivocates, "Sometimes I think I'll quit you, then again I won't" ("Moon Going Down"). The "some of these mornings" motif is appropriated from the spirituals, where it foreshadowed one's escape from slavery (either by fleeing to Heaven, or fleeing to the North). Blues artists began appropriating this motif to foreshadow a departure from their domestic situation. The aforementioned examples by Lewis and Patton suggest an unreliable narrator who considers leaving his lover but is ambivalent about doing so.[29]

The traveling musician often boasted of having multiple lovers: one in every city, or perhaps one of every shade (e.g., black, mulatto, quadroon). This "three lovers blues" motif played upon the subtle racial dynamics, stereotypes, and resentments within the African-American community: for example, a yellow-skinned lover was sometimes represented as an unscrupulous individual with pretensions of superiority. In Blind Willie McTell's "Three Women Blues," the

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[29] See Botkin 40 for another variation of this motif.

speaker "Got three womens || Yellow, brown and black." However, the speaker's prolific exploits become something of a mixed blessing, giving way to loneliness when he has no serious companion to spend the night with:

> These blues at midnight || They don't leave me till day (X2)
> I didn't have none of my three women || To drive these blues away.

The "three women blues" motif also made its way into literary verse. In Sterling Brown's "Odyssey of Big Boy," as in McTell's version, the boast of the persona catches up with him:

> Had two fair browns in Arkansaw
> And three in Tennessee,
> Had Creole gal in New Orleans,
> Sho Gawd did two time me—
> Lawd two time, fo'time me— (*CP* 21)

This motif also appears in the lyrics of the classic blues era, with the gender reversed. Bessie Smith's "Mama's Got the Blues" is composed entirely of stock phrases, including the "three lovers" motif. These stock phrases are organised and modified in a deliberate manner, and build toward an especially memorable reversal of expectations:

Stanza	**Motif(s)**
Some people say that the weary blues ain't bad (X2) But it's the worst old feeling that I've ever had	Weary Blues
Woke up this morning, with the jinx around my bed (X2) I didn't have no daddy to hold my aching head	Early Morning Blues Lonely Bed Blues
Brown skin's deceitful, but a yellow man is worse (X2) I'm gonna get myself a black man and play safety first	Yellow Papa Blues Three Lovers Blues

Smith parodies conventional wisdom by framing multiracial polyamory as a matter of prudence rather than promiscuity. Unable to decide between her first two lovers, the lyric persona—in the form of a proverb—decides that the responsible thing to do is to take a third. Smith also parodies the stereotype of the frail woman pining for her unfaithful lover: the song, which begins as a complaint, turns sharply toward a radical declaration of sexual freedom. In the stanzas that follow, Smith boasts of her (at least) twenty-one lovers throughout the American South and Midwest, and

concludes with the innuendo, "If you don't like my peaches, please let my orchard be." These ironies characterise the lyric persona as one who flouts openly the social and legal restrictions of her era, including Prohibition. Why does her "aching head" need holding?—presumably, because she is terribly hungover on bootlegged alcohol.

Like blues singers, blues poets often modify communal archetypes in a semi-autobiographical manner. Hughes's lyric personae tend to betray (often unwittingly) their own vulnerability. In the poem "Gypsy Man," a female speaker invokes the archetype of the traveller and the motif of the yellow papa, yet the effect is strikingly different from that achieved in Smith's rendition:

> Ma man's a gypsy
> Cause he never does come home.
> Ma man's a gypsy,—
> Never does come home.
> I'm gonna be a gypsy woman
> Fer I can't stay here alone. (*CW* 1:78)

Rather than parting ways with her no-good lover, the speaker unexpectedly parts ways with her home instead. "Once I was in Memphis," she recalls in stanza 2, with a touch of nostalgia. Or so it seems. "But I had to leave," she says, "cause / Nobody there was good to me." The first two stanzas characterise the speaker as constitutionally soft: a hard-luck woman whose pattern of behaviour is liable to repeat itself unwittingly. The third stanza narrates another romantic failure:

> I met a yellow papa,
> He took my last thin dime.
> Met a yellow papa,
> He took my last thin dime.
> I give it to him cause I loved him
> But I'll have more sense next time. (*CW* 1:78)

The speaker, who claims to have learned her lesson, stumbles into a dramatic irony in the B-line: given a chance, she will make the same mistake again. Although the poet (Hughes) and the lyric persona (gypsy woman) are separated by gender, they are united by dissatisfaction with their romantic lives.

Instrumentally, blues musicians often emulated the sound of whistles, which might signify either a departing train or a departing steamboat (N. Cohen 409). "Trains, steamboats, [and] steam

whistles," three of the commonest blues motifs (Handy, *Father* 74), could also symbolise a more tragic form of escape. In Big Bill Broonzy's "Trouble in Mind," rivers are linked to suicide:

> I'm goin down, down to the river
> Yes, I'm gonna take, take my rockin' chair
> Now if the blues, blues overtake me,
> I'm gonna rock on away from here.

As are railroads:

> I'm gonna lay, lay my head
> Yes, on some Sou-, Southern railroad iron,
> I'm gonna let that two, two-nineteen[30]
> Pacify my mind.

Wherever the speaker goes, he will still be poor and black. He fantasises about railroads and rivers to escape the South: not temporarily via train or steamboat but permanently via suicide. However, when one considers that suicidal gestures in the blues are often playfully ambiguous, the speaker's thinking reads less like maudlin histrionics than ironic introspection.

Broonzy is not the author of "Trouble in Mind," a song that originated among plantation slaves, and was first published in 1867 under the title "I'm A-Trouble in de Mind" (W. Allen, et.al., 80-81). The suicide-by-train motif appears in a 1922 transcription by Johnson:

> I'm go'n lay mah haid on de railroad line,
> Let de B. & O. come and pacify mah min'. (*BANP* [22] xiii)

Johnson notes that these lines are "one of the many versions of the famous 'Blues'" (xiii). Other versions are transcribed by Hughes (*CW* 13:167) and Niles (32):

> Gwine lay my head || right on de railroad track, (X2)
> If de train come 'long, || I'm gwine to snatch it back.

Hughes also transcribes the rocking chair motif in both 8-bar form (*CW* 9:212-213) and 12-bar form (qtd. in Tracy, *LHB* 105). The motif had long been associated with suicide-by-drowning, as in Bessie Smith's "Rocking Chair Blues":

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[30] "two-nineteen": the 2:19 train.

I'm going to the river || carryin' a brand new rocking chair (X2)
I'm gonna ask Mister Tadpole || to move all his stuff from here

The lyric persona is a woman who has been wronged by an easy-riding, blues-playing minister who makes her alternately "laugh" and "cry" (i.e., he gives her the blues). "I won't be back || until you change your ways," she insists, repeating the B-line twice to underscore her seriousness. Immediately following this threat, the speaker introduces the rocking chair motif, which her blues-playing lover will recognise as a figure of speech. But what kind of figure: is it a suicide threat? Or perhaps a sexual innuendo, "encoded in the black slang term *eagle-rockin*"? (R. Washington 100).[31] Whether the speaker intends to drown her sorrows literally in the Mississippi, or figuratively in someone else's bed, her lover has been informed that he risks never seeing her again.

Drowning is the most common suicide motif in Hughes's poetry. In "Lament over Love," the speaker heads to the river with thoughts of suicide ("I ain't goin there to swim"), only to reverse this implication anticlimactically in the B-line:

I'm goin' down to de river
An' I ain't goin' there to swim.
Goin' down to de river,
Ain't goin' there to swim.
Ma true love's left me, an'
I'm goin' there to think about him. (*CW* 1:109)

The two reversals in this stanza reflect the speaker's internal conflict as she debates whether to go through with it.

In a poem titled "Suicide," Hughes's female speaker debates the archetypal murder-suicide dilemma: "Shall I carve ma self or / That man that done me wrong?" In the end, the suicide-by-drowning motif appeals to the speaker as a more dignified (and permanent) solution:

'Llieve I'll jump in de river
Eighty-nine feet deep.
'Lieve I'll jump in de river
Eighty-nine feet deep.

[31] The explicitness of "rocking" is clearer still in Hughes's twelve-bar poem "Ma Man," which Rampersad considers "among the most sexually teasing in American poetry" (*Life* 1:144).

> Cause de river's quiet
> An' a po', po' gal can sleep. (*CW* 1:77)

The image of "sleep" that concludes the poem is not only a conventional metaphor for death, but also a play on words. Why does the speaker prefer the river to, say, a railroad? "Cause de river's quiet." The implication is that a noisier method of suicide might keep her "awake." If the speaker must die, she will pass quietly, and with a sense of humour.

Handy was a great admirer of Hughes's psychological sketches in the 8- and 12-bar forms, and wrote that Hughes had managed to say in four lines "what it would have taken Shakespeare two acts and three scenes to say" (qtd. in Tracy, "To the Tune" 79). This is less a disparagement of Shakespeare than a celebration of Hughes's remarkable economy of language. In fact, economy of language is something that Hughes and Shakespeare have in common. Like Hamlet ("To be, or not to be" [3.1.55]), the speaker of Hughes's "Suicide" ponders one of life's unfathomable dilemmas through a sequence of understated monosyllables ("An' a po', po' gal can sleep").

One of Hughes's subtlest allusions to (classical and vernacular) iconography occurs in a vignette titled "Suicide's Note":

> The calm,
> Cool face of the river
> Asked me for a kiss. (*CW* 1:53)

The speaker's romantic and ultimately fatal encounter with his reflection alludes to the myth of Narcissus, while the motif of drowning is taken from the blues. These allusions are further complicated by the ambiguity of the title. If taken as a "Suicide Note," the poem reads like epistolary fiction: a perversely witty message written by someone who intends to drown himself. If taken as "*Suicide's* Note," as indicated by the title, the poem reads like a parable. The personified image of "Suicide," perhaps a black Narcissus, is driven to suicide not by self-love but self-loathing.

In Rampersad's view, "Suicide's Note" "exemplifies" Hughes's poetry of "isolation, despair, suicide, and the like—conventional themes for a young, romantic poet" (LH-*FCJ* 144-145). Vendler appreciates the poem as a juxtaposition of individual isolation and illusory companionship: "Even the loneliest moment of all … is represented as a moment of reciprocity" ("Unweary" 38). Both critics might be selling Hughes rather short. However one chooses to

identify the lyric persona, the figure who commits suicide is not the figure who commits the “Note” to writing: Hughes, apparently, had mastered the art of committing suicide vicariously.

2.5: Voice

The birthplace of the blues is usually linked to the Mississippi Delta, the terminus of the largest river system in North America. The boundaries of the delta, as drawn by David L. Cohn, extend from “the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis [Tennessee]” to “Catfish Row in Vicksburg [Mississippi]” (12). Cohn’s remark suggests that the delta region—which covers parts of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee—is as much a cultural as a geographic entity. Richard Mizelle, Jr. explains the prevailing view that

> the Mississippi Delta is distinctively more southern than any other part of the South[.] ... [S]ociologist Rupert Vance described the race relations between blacks and whites and the region’s political and economic culture as still reminiscent of slavery. “Nowhere but in the Mississippi Delta,” he wrote in 1935, “are antebellum conditions so nearly preserved.” (3)

One way in which geography and culture interacted involves the levee system, which protected wealthier white communities in the South from annual flooding, while leaving unprotected the poorer areas inhabited primarily by African-Americans (Mizelle 4). The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, “probably the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States,” created more than a million refugees, less than ten percent of whom were white (Evans, “Bessie” 97). “[U]ntold numbers perished”:

> The roughly two hundred deaths quoted by the American Red Cross is, without question, a vast underrepresentation that reflected sensibilities of race. African American dead bodies were not considered important, so most were not included in the official death toll. (Mizelle 8-9)

In the months that followed, more than a dozen notable blues singers recorded songs about the flood (Evans, “Bessie” 97-98). The song most commonly linked to the disaster, Smith’s “Back-

Water Blues," was coincidentally recorded two months prior to the great flood, yet "arrived in stores at the perfect time to capitalize" on the catastrophe that had "affected millions of black Americans" (99).

Stylistically, "Back-Water Blues" is one of Smith's most unusual songs. In one line, the normative five pulses are distributed across 18 syllables:

There's been enough trouble || to make a poor girl wonder where she want to go
1 2 3 4 5

The unusual inflection of Smith's melodic and rhythmic lines delays the first beat until it clashes with the second: "There's been e-**nough trou**-ble." The effect is an eerie sense of despair. Other lines are unusually short, with the normative five pulses distributed across as few as six syllables:

Mmmm || I can't move no more
1 2 3 4 5

In this line, despair is mixed with weariness. The lyric persona, who has only recently been rescued by boat from her inundated house, is now an exhausted refugee.

Other lines abandon the normative (2) || (3) pulse:

Then trouble takin' place || in the lowlands at night
1 2 [3] 4 5

Brown echoes this line, changing it slightly, in the poem "Ma Rainey" (where, curiously, he suggests that "Back-Water Blues" was performed by Rainey, perhaps as a cover of Smith):

/ / / /
(Trouble taken place) || (in de lowlands at night) (*CP* 63)
1 2 [3] 4 5

In his audio recording of the poem through Smithsonian Folkways, Brown also articulates only 4 beats, as scanned above. Brown's attentiveness to Smith's (or perhaps Rainey's) rhythmic phrasing indicates an investment in recreating the conditions of oral performance. Near the end of Brown's poem, one of the audience members is quoted as saying, "She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway" (*CP* 63). Some transformative quality about the speaker's voice evades description: her lyrics, if

articulated with a different sense of feeling, would mean something different. For example, if the word "trouble" is not sung (or in the case of Brown's poem, spoken) in a knowing way, it loses the power of ironic understatement.

The cultural impact of "Back-Water Blues" by Smith, the most internationally-acclaimed African-American recording artist of the nineteen twenties, might be compared to the impact of the Grammy Award-winning single "Formation" by Beyoncé, which addresses the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In both songs, the voice of the performer animates the lyrics in a way that amplifies implicit social critiques, including questions about infrastructure in low-income areas and the adequate nature of government responses to natural disasters.

Brown is one of many African-American writers to develop a literary voice that aspires toward the qualities of speech. The implicit orality of blues poetry behaves less like a signifier (e.g., what Vendler calls an "identity marker" of blackness ["Rita" 382]), and more like a register of expression (e.g., what Gates calls a "speakerly text" [*Signifying* 22]). In the poem "Po' Boy Blues" by Hughes, each of the four stanzas uses verbal gestures in a suggestive way. The speaker begins,

> When I was home de
> Sunshine seemed like gold.
> When I was home de
> Sunshine seemed like gold.
> Since I come up North de
> Whole damn world's turned cold. (*CW* 1:78-79)

The speaker's profanity—"de / Whole *damn* world's turned cold"—is double-voiced, suggesting superficially a casual disapproval of the North, and more implicitly, a mixture of homesickness and dread. The word "cold" is also spoken with a double voice, suggesting that the climate *and* the culture of the North are inhospitable. He misses the warmth of the sun, and the warmth of the African-American community. These lines only make sense if one imagines that the speaker is laughing to keep from crying; any other reading renders him simplistic.

In stanza 2, the interior monologue continues:

> I was a good boy,
> Never done no wrong.
> Yes, I was a good boy,
> Never done no wrong,

> But this world is weary
> An’ de road is hard an’ long. (*CW* 1:79)

The use of the past tense is suggestive: “I *was* a good boy” (is he no longer a boy, or no longer good?). This is followed by a non-sequitur: “Never done no wrong, / But this world is weary” (has his weariness caused him to do something wrong?). The speaker seems to have a guilty conscience, as he contemplates the possibility of compromising his morals to feed and clothe himself in this inhospitable environment. “Out of the oppressiveness of the laws grows the necessity of breaking the law,” wrote Botkin in 1927 (41), noting the prevalence of implicitly unlawful activity in the African-American music and folklore of the period.

In stanza 3, the persona recalls a tragicomic romance:

> I fell in love with
> A gal I thought was kind.
> Fell in love with
> A gal I thought was kind.
> She made me lose ma money
> An’ almost lose ma mind. (*CW* 1:79)

Here again, the speaker’s misfortunes are double-voiced. His hard luck story concludes with a cliché (“made me lose ma money / An’ almost lose ma mind”): how serious could it be? Contained in this cliché, however, are two crucial details about the speaker’s state of mind. He has spent all his money on the no-good woman (hence the title “Po’ Boy Blues”). Given these circumstances, the speaker’s claim in the last line—that he has begun to question his own sanity—must be taken seriously.

The A-line in the final stanza of “Po’ Boy Blues” resembles the A-line in the final stanza of “Back-Water Blues” because it is unusually short, and because it repeats a motif related to the speaker’s weariness:

> Weary, weary,
> Weary early in de morn.
> Weary, weary,
> Early, early in de morn.
> I’s so weary
> I wish I’d never been born. (*CW* 1:79)

Geoff Ward feels that this stanza could only succeed in a musical context: "Pieces like 'Po' Boy Blues' (1926) were important for their incorporation of a blues aesthetic," "but their lines limp by comparison with recordings by John Hurt, Willie McTell or any other effective musician of that period and form" (170). He argues that the most effective blues poems are "those that explore … ironies of freedom and containment by the use of double meaning, while [the] least effective pieces are those that attempt to resolve ambiguity by a simple affirmation in the Langston Hughes tradition" (170). Ward suggests that while "affirmative gestures of recognition" can be effective in blues music, "simply as a trigger to automatic reaction" (171), these gestures lose their effectiveness in literary verse. Bloom, too, writes that Hughes's emulation of "[f]olk traditions ranging from blues to spirituals to jazz songs to work chants" "retains some freshness and yet has palpable limitations": "his poems on the whole do not compare adequately to the best instances of those cultural models" (*LH*-MCV 1).

True, lines which succeed as musical speech usually fail to achieve a comparable aesthetic response if written as poetry. However, if one reads "Po' Boy Blues" as a speakerly text—with carefully-placed indicators of tone, intensity, and feeling—the voice of the persona renders his intentions unclear: is he fleeing the South as a refugee? Is he planning to sustain himself by turning to a life of crime? How seriously is he contemplating suicide at the end of the poem? In a 1925 letter to Van Vechten, Hughes identifies "Po' Boy Blues" as his most effective psychological sketch: "I sent you some new Blues. I want to dedicate the best one to you, if any of them are ever published,—and … I think the Po' Boy Blues is the best" (*SL* 49). This suggests that Hughes understood the verbal gestures of the persona to behave less like simple signifiers for canned responses, and more like the ambiguous surface of an interior monologue—a technique that will be discussed in 2.6.

2.6: Interior Monologue

The founding contributors to African-American literary theory generally agree that the spirituals favour implication over explication. It "is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake" than to take the spirituals at face value (Douglass 15); they are "persistently mistaken and

misunderstood" by casual listeners. (Du Bois, *Souls* 251). To appreciate the spirituals, one must pay not only close attention, but also the right kind of attention. In 1928, the folklorist Newman I. White wrote that the "logic" of the African-American oral poet

> is different from the white man's. From the white man's point of view this difference may be expressed as the predominance of *feeling* over *meaning*. … So it seems to the white man, but not necessarily to the Negro, who goes by the general feel of the song (words and music merged) and not by the precise rules of English. Thus it makes little difference to the singer of the spirituals whether all God's chillum got shoes or all 'at's got chillum got shoes. (27)

White arrives (in a roundabout manner) at the conclusion that the spirituals are governed by a distinctive kind of musico-logic, which regards meaning and feeling as consubstantial, and does not privilege one over the other. As Du Bois puts it, the "real poetry" of the spirituals lies beneath their apparently "unmeaning rhapsody" (257), in unstated interior monologues: "the inner thoughts of slaves and their relations with one another" (258). Listeners must attend to what remains unspoken: "[m]other and child are sung, but seldom father; fugitive and weary wanderer call for pity and affection, but there is little of wooing and wedding; the rocks and the mountains are well known, but home is unknown"; there is a "[s]trange blending of love and helplessness" (259).

As discussed in 1.2, the spiritual "Heav'n, Heav'n"—quoted by White in the paragraph above—calls ironic attention to the neglect of slaves by celebrating the basic necessities they do not have. To make sense of these lyrics, one must understand that the phrasal template "I got X, you got X, / All god's children got X" is a means of suggesting ironies of omission. This template was retained in secular lyrics, like the following song transcribed by Botkin:

> I got a gal, you got a gal,
> All us niggers got a gal.
>
> He fool 'roun', I fool 'roun',
> All us niggers fool 'roun'.
>
> I got a razor, he got a razor,
> All us niggers got a razor.
>
> I 'hind de bars, he 'hind de bars,
> All us niggers, 'hind de bars. (42)

Botkin emphasises that this is not merely a declamation of sex and violence, but rather a "gem, which any poet would be glad to have written, remarkable for its sense of form and plot,—its parallelism and compression, telling a story entirely by suggestion" (42). Stanza 1 establishes a theme (romance); stanza 2 introduces a conflict (infidelity); stanza 3 amplifies this conflict (skirmish); stanza 4 suggests a resolution (imprisonment). This resolution dovetails with a recurring motif in vernacular lyric: the humorous treatment of incarceration, which, for black southerners, often resembled the conditions of slavery. As Botkin explains,

> The constant threat of the chain-gang hanging over his head … has bred in the Southern Negro a haunting dread of persecution, thus humorously viewed by the "bad man":
>
> Went up to 'Lanta,
> Who should I meet?
> Forty-leben blue boats
> Comin' down de street.[32] (41)

The speaker suggests that merely by setting foot in town, he has attracted the attention of dozens of police officers, an outlandishly disproportionate response to the negligible threat he poses.

The vernacular lyrics and the ethnomusicological research considered in this chapter make it clear that a culture of close-listening already existed in the African-American community, long before the advent of New Criticism. Singers communicated complex thoughts and feelings through stylised conventions of figurative language, and audiences were accustomed to listening between the lines. Hughes's poems make similar demands upon their audiences. In a poem titled "Conservatory Student Struggles with Higher Instrumentation," the first stanza develops the voice of a conflicted adolescent (*CW* 2:266):

[32] "'Lanta": Atlanta; "blue boats": squad cars.

> The saxophone
> Has a vulgar tone.
> I wish it would
> Let me alone.

In a superbly attentive close reading, Vendler recognises that the most interesting part of the poem is the unwritten interior monologue of the adolescent speaker. She rewrites the poem with a running parenthetical commentary which suggests the persona's unstated psychological conflict:

> The saxophone (which I wish I were playing now)
> Has a vulgar tone. (at least according to the standards of the conservatory)
> I wish it would (at least while I'm here taking my lesson)
> Let me alone. (*it* is pursuing me, I'm not pursuing it)
>
> The saxophone (let me sternly remind myself)
> Is ordinary. (a euphemism; translation: "lower class")
> More than that, (and even worse)
> It's mercenary! (and the conservatory is "above" such things)
>
> The saxophone's (about which I can't stop thinking)
> An instrument (so why isn't it taught at the conservatory?)
> By which I wish (but my wish doesn't amount to will)
> I'd never been (been what? attracted? degraded?)
> Sent! (ecstasy, aesthetic transport, the "wrong" sort of pleasure) ("Unweary" 40)

Vendler demonstrates that the poem contains two voices, one explicitly stated (the good shoulder angel) and one implied (the shoulder angel persuading him to play the devil's music). In his exterior monologue, the student rehearses what he has learned from the instructors at the conservatory. In his interior monologue, the student gradually yields to the temptation of the saxophone.

Vendler nevertheless offers a curiously colour-blind analysis which suggests that the saxophone's "lower class" connotations are the only issue at stake. The stigma of the saxophone (an iconic instrument among black jazz players) in the conservatory (an institution noted for its Eurocentrism) also foregrounds race relations as a central conflict. This conflict is not independent of aesthetic experience: would the poem be the same if spoken by a white student throwing a tantrum because she is not allowed to play the edgy saxophone, as opposed to a black student who is frustrated because he is discouraged from playing the jazz he identifies with culturally?

Interestingly, the saxophone has acquired multiple stigmas throughout its history. Invented by Adolphe Sax in 1846, the industrially-produced saxophone drew immediate protest from rival instrument makers, expert musicians, and classical conservatories. The saxophone became popular among military marching bands, but not among elite European orchestras, a fact which contributed to its reputation as an unsophisticated instrument. This might explain, in part, why Hughes's speaker describes the saxophone as "vulgar," "ordinary," and "mercenary." In England and the United States, however, the perceived distastefulness of marching band music was also a matter of race. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, English and American armies generally preferred enlisting black soldiers in marching bands to arming them with weapons (Pickering 80). Thousands of black musicians served in the Union Army, and afterwards retained brass instruments as an integral component of urban African-American music (Southern 208-209).

The perceived distastefulness of jazz among elite conservatories and music schools was in many ways a lingering consequence of racial caricature. Instructors and critics often made little or no distinction between jazz and ragtime, which they associated with minstrel music, and regarded as having little more than comedic value (as will be discussed in 3.4). In a 1924 essay titled "Putting Jazz in Its Place," Dean Smith of the Yale Music School is quoted ridiculing the notion that jazz could ever produce a "great American composer":

> What is bound eventually to deaden the inventiveness of the 'great American composer' is the fact that jazz is the exploitation of just one rhythm. This rhythm is the original rag-time of thirty years ago. There have been occasional captivating additions to it in the form of elaborate counterpoints in jarring rhythmic dissonance, but the fundamental 'um-paugh, um-paugh' and the characteristic syncopation persist through the years. (323)

The timing of Smith's prediction is almost poetically inopportune. That same year, two such "great American" composers, Duke Ellington and George Gershwin, were beginning to realise the diverse rhythmic possibilities of jazz.

The successes of Gershwin, along with Paul Whiteman and other white jazz players and composers, did much to increase the respectability of symphonic jazz. Alternatively, "black" jazz continued to carry a stigma. Maud Cuney-Hare, an accomplished pianist and music theorist, distinguishes between "Negro" jazz, "synonymous with comedy and buffoonery, rhythmic oddities, and random lines"; and "Intellectual" jazz, "as expressed by trained and cultivated"

musicians (131). Cuney-Hare uses the identifiers “black” and “jazz” interchangeably and indiscriminately to describe African-American poets like “[James Weldon] Johnson, Hughes, and Cullen” (321), even though Hughes is the only poet from this group to write jazz poetry. Cuney-Hare was not what one might call a racist—indeed, she was one of the most forward-thinking students at the New England Conservatory of Music, and was even briefly engaged to Du Bois (Banfield 97)—yet she betrays many of the cultural prejudices of her era, writing that African-American music “prevented an acquirement of taste for good poetry. The verses lacked literary value—the words were vulgar, the sentiment execrable” (134).

When reading “Conservatory Student Struggles with Higher Instrumentation,” it is important to keep in mind that the stigma of jazz in classical conservatories had less to do with its “low class” connotations than its “negro” connotations. Even among saxophone players, a racial double-standard existed. As Baraka explains,

> an alto saxophonist like Paul Desmond, who is white, produces a sound on his instrument that can almost be called legitimate, or classical, and the finest Negro alto saxophonist, Charlie Parker, produced a sound on the same instrument that was called by some “raucous and uncultivated.” But Parker’s sound was *meant* to be both those adjectives. … Parker also would literally imitate the human voice with his cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs, while Desmond always insists he is playing an instrument, that it is an artefact separate from himself. (*BP* 30)

Baraka suggests that Parker’s supposedly “uncultivated” sound is in fact meticulously cultivated. The “vulgar tone” of the saxophone in Hughes’s poem is not merely a reference to the sound of an industrially-produced instrument, but more specifically, an allusion to the rhythmic and melodic preferences of African-American jazz.

This is less a prescriptive issue (*should* the aesthetics of the saxophone be isolated from race?) than a descriptive issue (*can* the aesthetics of the saxophone be isolated from race?). In the words of Michael Eric Dyson,

> The question of what to do with ragtime, and then blues, jazz, and gospel, was never simply a matter of taste, or should I say, that taste was never merely a matter of musical preference extracted from the prevailing racial context. … [A] saxophone … facilitated the process of improvisation that was strictly forbidden in classical music, which had to be read note for note off a sheet. (*Michael* 379-380)

In Hughes's poem, the speaker's interior monologue appears both more complex, and more interesting, when one accounts for the racial connotations of the saxophone. The title, "Conservatory Student Struggles with Higher Instrumentation," is the kind of feedback one might expect to find on a report card. From the instructor's perspective, a black student struggles to learn the higher instruments (his capability as at stake). From the student's perspective, the struggle is *not* to learn the allegedly lower instruments (his taste is at stake). Hughes's play on "Struggles" might allude to the misconception that black saxophonists played erratically because they lacked discipline. A further play on words occurs between "Higher Instrumentation" and "Higher Education," calling into question the hierarchies of institutional aesthetic values. This twofold wordplay frames the student's monologue as a struggle to persuade himself that the European orchestra is, in fact, superior to the jazz band, when his experience tells him otherwise.

Another figure of speech that Vendler puzzles over, and twice returns to, is the word "Sent" in the last line. She offers a parenthetical paraphrase ("ecstasy, aesthetic transport, the 'wrong' sort of pleasure") and a puzzling interpretation ("Whatever 'sends' you as a writer is the language you have to write with") ("Unweary" 40), neither of which clarifies what the word means in the context of the poem. Importantly, the speaker does not regret having been *sent* a saxophone (e.g., as a gift), but rather regrets having been *sent by* the saxophone (e.g., as a kind of anointed or chosen one). The word "Sent" functions as an implied metaphor, identifying the speaker as a vernacular messiah. Jazz calls to the student, who feels compelled to respond in an almost spiritual sense, despite the standards of the conservatory that are stifling his creativity.

Regarding Eurocentric standards, Vendler treats Hughes's poem as if it were written in a traditional metre of European origin: Hughes's "tetrameter is … cut into dimeters" ("Unweary" 39). This suggests that the poem's normative pulse tends toward two beats per line rather than one—"The **sax**-o-**phone** / Is **or**-din-**ar**-y. / **More** than **that**, / It's **mer**-ce-**na**-ry"—even though such an alternation can only be achieved through the mechanical promotion of secondary stresses. The monosyllabic last line of the poem certainly is not written in "dimeter"; and the interesting point here is not that Hughes breaks the iambic pattern, but that the iambic pattern was never normative in the first place. Like the speaker of the poem, readers struggle between the metrically conforming preferences of a classical idiom and the metrically nonconforming preferences of jazz.

As we have seen throughout the first two chapters, academic discourse has tended to conceive of the blues idiom as a register of folk expression, and the blues form as a simple pattern of loosely-constrained repetition. Whitney Balliett endorses this view:

> The most astonishing thing about the blues … is their ingenuity and simplicity. … Blues lyrics usually don't scan, have faulty, strained rhymes, are repetitive and ungrammatical, and abound in non sequiturs. Yet they sometimes come close to the concision of rhythms, words, and imagery of genuine poetry. (69)

This study has argued that the blues idiom is better understood as a register of oral poetry, and that the blues form is better understood as the organisation of narrative and lyric units in highly-constrained and optimally-suggestive patterns. The ostensibly "ungrammatical" "non sequiturs" are more stylised than Balliet realises, and are indicative of a distinctive narrato-logic and socio-logic. According to Botkin, the typical bluesman is "as much the philosopher as the poet" (42). While this is a rather romanticised way of putting it, Botkin hits upon the important truth that the blues do function in some ways as a philosophical tradition. Chapter 3 will discuss how this tradition has been caricatured for most of American history and continues to be poorly understood in the field of aesthetic criticism.

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Chapter 3: History

3.1: Reason

"As one Howard University philosophy professor said to me when I was an undergraduate, 'It's fantastic how much bad taste the blues contain!'" recalls Amiri Baraka ("Jazz" 15). The distastefulness of the blues is "fantastic" because it offends the cultivated palate not in one or two respects, but in almost every aspect of its form. "But it is just this 'bad taste,'" Baraka insists, "that has kept the best of Negro music from slipping sterilely into the echo chambers of middle-brow American culture":

> We take for granted the social and cultural milieu and philosophy that produced Mozart. As Western people, the socio-cultural thinking of eighteenth-century Europe comes to us as a legacy that is a continuous and organic part of the twentieth-century West. The socio-cultural philosophy of the Negro in America (as a continuous historical phenomenon) is no less specific and no less important for any intelligent critical speculation about the music that came out of it. And again, this is not a plea for narrow sociological analysis of jazz, but rather that this music cannot be completely understood (in critical terms) without some attention to the attitudes which produced it. It is the philosophy of Negro music that is most important. (18-19)

The association of "*bad* taste" with "the *best* of Negro music" flouts the assumption that there exists a single standard of excellence. Baraka does not deny that Western music is, by reputation, more cultivated and refined, yet he suggests that the music of the African-American vernacular tradition is the product of comparable cultivation and refinement. Baraka does not deny that these traditions have interacted; indeed, he often points out that the vernacular tradition has influenced mainstream American art and culture. His point is that the "fantastic" abyss between Western classical and African-American vernacular standards of "taste" indicates that the latter is not merely a bastardised version of the former.

Baraka suggests that the foundations of these parallel intellectual traditions were laid during the eighteenth century. The first—composed mainly of the philosophy, literature, and music theory of Europe—has been continuously passed down in the written discourses of the West. The second—composed primarily of the stories, sermons, and music of plantation slaves—has been continuously passed down in the orature of African-Americans. Baraka leaves us to understand

that the association of one tradition with "high" art and the other tradition with "low" art has more to do with the power dynamics of slavery than with any essential difference in quality.

That the eighteenth century coincided with the height of the Atlantic Slave Trade remains one of the great ironies of Western history. The rhetoric of life, liberty, property, justice, and equality appears altogether irreconcilable with a practice like human slavery, until one considers the narrow and exclusionary definition of human rationality that developed during this period. Many scientists, philosophers, and political leaders associated with the Enlightenment came to view Reason, the sovereign ruler of mankind, as the domain of white Europeans, the sovereign rulers of the lesser races. Carolus (Carl) Linnaeus, the developer of the modern system of taxonomy, "transformed superficial morphological differences into a substantive basis for subdividing the human species into four distinct races" (Franklin 279). Linnaeus identified "*Homo Europaeus*" as superior in physical beauty, intellectual development, and character:

> European. White, Sanguine, Brawny. Hair abundantly flowing. Eyes blue. Gentle, acute, inventive. Covered with close vestments. Governed by customs. (qtd. in Franklin 279)

Linnaeus placed "*Homo Afer*" at the bottom of this natural hierarchy, emphasising their physical unattractiveness, primitive intellect, and lack of character:

> African. Black, Phlegmatic, Relaxed. Hair black, frizzled. Skin silky. Nose flat. Lips tumid. Women's bosom a matter of modesty. Breasts give milk abundantly. Crafty, indolent. Negligent. Anoints himself with grease. Governed by caprice. (qtd. in Franklin 280)

European philosophers of the period understood human rationality to include the intellectual traditions of Europe but not those of Sub-Saharan Africa. Hume, Hegel, and Kant all "came to conclude that blacks were incapable of intelligence": "Kant claims that 'so fundamental is the difference between [the black and white] races of man, … it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in color" (Steffen 183).

"[R]eason," wrote the philosopher John Locke in the *Second Treatise of Government*, "teaches all mankind … that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (*PW* 263-264). In *The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina*, the same John Locke—a major investor in the slave trade—wrote that "[e]very freeman of Carolina

shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what opinion or religion soever" (*PW* 230). This clause prevented slaves from gaining their freedom by converting to Christianity; indeed, many argued that dark-skinned Africans are the descendants of Ham and possess "no rights that Christians need observe" (Mecklin 116). Napoleon Bonaparte and Thomas Jefferson, two champions of liberty whom the historian Michael Broers describes as the "most intellectually gifted leaders in the western world at the dawn of the nineteenth century" (387), first cooperated during an unsuccessful effort to re-enslave the islanders of Saint-Domingue in present-day Haiti. Like Linnaeus, Jefferson classifies "blacks" as "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (239). He argues that "their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life" (235), but "fixed in nature" (230), and therefore "a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people" (240).

One of the first to reassess the rationality of the African mind and the immortality of the African soul was Phyllis Wheatley, born in Senegambia circa 1753 and taken as a slave to Boston in 1861. In the poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Wheatley presents her argument in heroic couplets:

> Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
> "Their colour is a diabolic die."
> Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,
> May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train. (5-8)

Wheatley's balanced pauses and elegant coincidences of sound attest to her proficiency in the Augustan style of Alexander Pope. She reminds readers that she has been "refin'd," both spiritually and intellectually. Wheatley's poem inspired a response from Jupiter Hammon, a slave-poet from New York:

> Come you, Phillis, now aspire,
> And seek the living God,
> So step by step thou mayst go higher,
> Till perfect in the word. (33-36)

This hymnal stanza concludes by amplifying Wheatley's conceit, emphasising her mastery over "the word," both the written word of English and the eternal Word of God. Hammon's language of measured increments ("step by step") alludes to the measures of poetic metres (feet) and musical

scales (steps). This theme of incremental progress held a threefold relevance to Wheatley's life, emphasising her laboured ascendancy to gain literary taste, physical emancipation, and spiritual salvation.

One might think that Wheatley's excellence would have discredited theories of African intellectual inferiority. George Washington wrote to Wheatley personally, praising her "elegant lines" as "striking proof of [her] poetical Talents" and literary "genius" (qtd. in Carretta 156). Jefferson, however, was unwilling to acknowledge the abilities of a black woman, excoriating Wheatley's verse as "below the dignity of criticism." "Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but no poetry," he insists: "[t]he heroes of the *Dunciad* are to [Wheatley], as Hercules to the author of that poem" (234). Jefferson suggests that the difference in quality between Pope and Wheatley is proportional to the difference in potential between the white intellect and the black intellect. Ignatius Sancho, a celebrated Afro-British composer, receives a similar assessment: "though we admit him to the first place among those of his own colour," "we are compelled to enrol him at the bottom of the column" of artists (235).

Jefferson clarifies that superiority in the endowments of mind and body is not a matter of memory and strength, but of taste and beauty. He defines physical "beauty" as a function of chromatic nuance, with "the fine [European] mixtures of red and white" "preferable to that eternal [African] monotony" (230). It is implied that as black skin lacks nuanced colouration, so the black intellect lacks shades of nuanced thinking. Jefferson might not have believed his own argument. If his long-term relationship with the slave Sally Hemings is any indication of his taste in women, Jefferson found non-white features to be considerably more attractive than he acknowledged publicly.

Moreover, it would have been difficult for Jefferson to sneer at Wheatley's intellect in earnest. Jefferson may have mastered Ancient Greek and Latin; yet remarkably, so had Wheatley. What these comments do confirm is that Jefferson considered aesthetic concerns to be of great moral and political importance. "Functional beauty," in Jefferson's opinion, is "determined by the use of the rational faculty" (Hafertepe 217). Jefferson believed that "reflective beings are capable of discerning a path to virtue through aesthetic experience" (Quinby 338); if black Africans and their descendants possessed such a capability, there could be no justification for treating them as property.

"African peoples," according to Alain Locke, "had the serious disadvantage of an environment in which the results of civilization do not accumulatively survive" (*Works* 102). Whereas Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Practical Reason* attested to the analytical capabilities of Western philosophy, the oral traditions and cosmological views of West African societies were seen as primitive and irrational. Baraka suggests that the greatest challenge faced by slaves in the New World might have been spiritual and philosophical alienation:

> What a weird and unbelievably cruel destiny for those people who were first brought here. Not just the mere fact of being sold into slavery—that in itself was common practice among the tribes of West Africa … But to be brought to a country, a culture, a society, that was, … in terms of purely philosophical correlatives, the complete antithesis of one's own version of man's life on earth—that is the cruellest aspect of this particular enslavement. (*BP* 1)

Baraka suggests that music played an important role in developing and preserving knowledge, wisdom, and creativity. "The Slave's Critique of Practical Reason," a poem by Rita Dove, reimagines the process by which slaves adapted the English language to the oral traditions of their ancestors. The poem, spoken (and implicitly sung) by an intellectually gifted plantation slave, begins with a pun on the word "reason":

> Ain't got a reason
> to run away—
> leastways, not one
> would save my life. (*CP* 37)

The perversely humorous implication is that the speaker's only "reason" (i.e., motivation) to run away would be to kill himself. Dove traces the origin of the suicide blues to the ironic thoughts of slaves, suggesting a continuous line of thinking from native West Africans to contemporary African-Americans.

"Another irony here" is that "Kant's writing was famously dry and prolix, whereas the slave is witty and succinct, with a drawling turn of the line to the word 'leastways' that undermines the initial statement" (Righelato 20). The speaker thinks not in the propositional logic of a Western philosopher but in the imaginative metaphors of an oral poet. Dove here illustrates Hurston's point that "the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics" ("Characteristics" 32), which is not to say that orature is more primitive than literature but that it

structures the expression of truth in different ways. The speaker resembles Kant in his tendency to form theoretical conjectures: “I scoop speculation” (rather than cotton) “into a hopsack” (*CP* 37). Unlike Kantian philosophy, the speaker’s thinking is unwritten and improvised:

> [I] keep dipping and
> thinking up tunes
> that fly off quick
> as they hit
> the air.[33] (*CP* 38)

As memories are repeated in new contexts, images of past and present blend together and recollections become intertwined with immediate sensory experience. The speaker describes himself as

> a stony mote
> circling the mindless
> blue, dropping rows
> of little clouds,
> no-good reasons
> for sale. (*CP* 38)

These cryptic images give the details of two separate events, one from the speaker’s past and one from his present. He recalls crossing the Atlantic Ocean (“circling the mindless / blue”), aboard a ship with human cargo (“no-good reasons / for sale”). This memory blends into the speaker’s immediate experience of working on a plantation: he imagines himself as a black body (“stony mote”) silhouetted against a blue sky (“circling the mindless / blue”), filling a satchel with cotton (“clouds”) to be sold for profit (“no-good reasons / for sale”). The penultimate line echoes the title and line 1 by punning on the word “reason.” The speaker struggles to make sense of the “reason”—the necessity, and the justification—behind all this commerce in human bodies and mass-produced cotton.

The fact that the speaker is picking cotton likely places his arrival after the invention of the cotton gin in 1794. His recollection of a slave ship likely dates his transatlantic journey before the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. This window, contemporaneous with the latter period of Kant’s

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[33] The speaker’s gender is unclear; because of the implied comparison to Kant, this study defers to the masculine pronoun.

career, further emphasises the juxtaposition implied by the title. Dove here anticipates a more recent trend in the criticism of Pan-African expression, which seeks to re-evaluate the relevance of Western aesthetic theories to oral culture. In a 2017 collection of essays titled *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, several contributors argue that notions of "'pure' judgments of beauty" and "the purposeless nature of art"

> have neglected the ways in which one's location and embeddedness in a particular culture and social milieu affect one's aesthetic judgments, the role that such social location might play in aesthetics, and questions of whether and how social experience might itself be immanent in aesthetic experience. (Born, et. al., 2)

These comments clarify the purpose of Dove's poem: to identify the improvised slave music of eighteenth-century America, in addition to the aesthetic theories of eighteenth-century Europe, as the philosophical foundations of African-American literature.

The most remarkable feature of "The Slave's Critique of Practical Reason" is the speaker's exploratory language, cobbling together unconventional semantic pathways through the English he has acquired. If analysed without historical and socio-cultural context, the speaker's ambitious language might seem instead like the simple down-home dialect of a minstrel. In one unfavourable review, Vendler dismisses the language of Dove's "Critique" as "[d]ialect" "uneasily mixed with lyricism" (*Soul* 159). In another unfavourable review, she suggests an inherent incompatibility between vernacular expression on the one hand and complex figurative language on the other: "the slave speaks in a 'folksy' language that nonetheless unconvincingly drops into—or rises toward—complex vocabulary and metaphor" (383).

Vendler's complaint is not that Dove is misusing the conventions of the vernacular, but that she is using the vernacular at all. This is the same essay in which Vendler criticises the style of Hughes as too "simple" ("Rita" 381) and the style of Gwendolyn Brooks as too "judgmental" and full of "prudishness" (384). Dove's slave poems are characterised as "unsuccessful historical excursions in a lyric time-machine" (383), full of immature nostalgia for an irrecoverable past. In Vendler's opinion, Dove is at her "best" when she avoids "the fraught subject of blackness" altogether (384). Within the past decade, several critics have remarked upon Vendler's tendency to treat racial themes and aesthetic value as mutually exclusive. Ankhi Mukherjee wonders "what exactly is Professor Vendler insinuating when she refers to Dove's canvas of 'mostly short poems of rather restricted vocabulary' for her target audience 'who would be put off by a complex text,'

especially after she has unambiguously accused Dove of pandering to black culture?" (12). Ailish Hopper accuses Vendler of catering to an implicit racial hierarchy:

> White poetry: known worldwide as valuable, stylish, artistically ambitious; black poetry: of unproven value, concerned with content over craft, filled with angry outbursts (185).

If one were to replace "white" with "modernist" and "black" with "vernacular," Hopper's dichotomy would give a more accurate reflection of Vendler's bias. Vendler is a great admirer of the black poet Robert Hayden, who has also written extensively about themes from African-American history. Hayden's poems, like the sonnet "Frederick Douglass" or the brief epic narrative "Middle Passage," are written in a style that Vendler's aesthetic criticism is better prepared to appreciate.

Proponents of "New" and "Aesthetic" criticism have long doubted the relevance of Baraka's socio-historical analysis. Vendler wonders which African-American candidates for an expanded Western Canon "will have staying power, and which will seep back into the archives of sociology?" (ATPR). The word "seep" suggests an objective process of osmosis that separates the high and aesthetic from the low and merely sociological. According to Bloom, if one does "not know the color or background" of African-American characters, the "intense sociological pathos … vanishes, and we are left … with an inadequate rhetoric" (*Richard* 2). True; yet if one isolates Matisse's paintings from their backgrounds, one is left with a series of inadequate lines. Race in literature, like colour in painting, affects our understanding. The phrase "let freedom ring" does not mean the same thing issuing from the pen of Reverend Samuel Francis Smith as it means issuing from the microphone of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. (Branham 625, 642).

One purpose of this chapter is to revise the aesthetic criticism of Bloom and Vendler by suggesting that socio-cultural referents comprise an important dimension of aesthetic experience. This critique proceeds indirectly, and some of its implications will be realised through the close readings presented in chapter 4 (which would not "mean" the same thing without this context) and the analysis presented in the conclusion. This chapter draws upon the research of various contributors to the field of historical poetics who have done important work in demystifying the racially-correlated aesthetic hierarchies of American literature. Nevertheless, this historical scholarship is often guilty of rather glaring category mistakes: in some cases, vernacular expression has been confused with caricatures of itself. (Presumably, literary critics would make

these mistakes less often if they had been taught the difference between call-and-response patterning and ballad stanzas). One central theme that unifies the broad scope of this chapter is that the aesthetic and historical dimensions of African-American literature cannot be isolated and studied separately.

3.2: Juba

Although this connotation has largely faded from memory, the image of African drumbeats once conjured fears of armed insurrection. In 1739, a group of Congolese slaves in South Carolina used the sound of drums to coordinate an uprising that killed 25 whites—and this was only the most notable of the slave rebellions that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century. In response, "The Negro Act of 1740" prohibited "beating drums, blowing horns or the like which might on occasion be used to arouse slaves to insurrectionary activity" (qtd. in Knowles 39).

The proscription of drumming threatened to eradicate the percussive musical traditions of West Africa in the American colonies. Despite this obstacle, plantation slaves kept alive the polyrhythms of their ancestors by using their hands to strike different parts of their bodies while they danced. This technique was called "patting," and the movements originated in a Dahomeyan dance known as "giouba" (C. J. Smith 36): hence, the phenomenon came to be known as the "pattin' juba" or "juber." The dance was performed throughout the American South and the Caribbean, and even influenced the street culture of New York, where it was combined with elements of Irish jigs and other popular dances.

William Henry Lane, a champion African-American dancer from New York during the eighteen forties, acquired international acclaim under the stage name "Master Juba." In 1842, Charles Dickens witnessed a performance by Master Juba, described in his *American Notes for General Circulation*:

> Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; snapping his fingers, rolling his eyes, turning in his knees, presenting the backs of his legs in front, spinning about on his toes and heels like nothing but the man's fingers on the tambourine; dancing

> with two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs. (218)

The frenzied rhythm of this passage builds in a "brilliant mimetic escalation" (Lott 120), as if synchronised to the dancer's movements. However, Dickens is not only imitating Master Juba, but also emulating the racial caricature of plantation novelists like his acquaintance John Pendleton Kennedy and minstrel performers like T. D. Rice. Dickens's style echoes public enthusiasm for the grotesque, as if Master Juba were a freakish spectacle on display in P. T. Barnum's American Museum, which had opened in New York the previous year.

Dickens's *American Notes* was a mixed blessing for Master Juba, who was received in England with considerable fanfare, yet treated more like a circus animal than an artist. In *The Puppet Show* (Aug. 1848), Juba is characterised as a contortionist:

> Out of compliment to Dickens, this extraordinary nigger is called "Boz's Juba," in consequence, we believe, of the popular writer having said a good word for him in his *American Notes*: … Juba's talent consists in … jumping backwards in a less graceful manner than we should have conceived possible; and in shaking his thighs like a man afflicted with palsy. … [H]e sometimes moves about the stage on his knees, as if he was praying to be endowed with intelligence.[34] (243-244)

In another review from *The Mirror and United Kingdom Magazine*, Juba is not even granted the status of a primate. The critic's mock-admiration confuses the dancer with a prized ungulate specimen:

> Such mobility of muscles, such flexibility of joints, such boundings, such slidings, such gyrations, such toes and heelings, such backwardings and forwardings, such posturings, such firmness of foot, such elasticity of tendon, such mutation of movement, such vigor, such variety, such natural grace, such powers of endurance, such potency of pastern, were never combined in one nigger. (243)

This gratuitously anaphoric sequence, which begins with a mimetic gesture toward the dancer's rhythms, soon settles into the galloping cadence of a racehorse. The thinly-veiled implication is that Juba's movements are the product of animal husbandry, to be appreciated in much the same way that one admires the pedigree of a champion thoroughbred.

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[34] Anonymous reviews are identified by title in the list of works cited and cross-referenced to the secondary source in which they appear. The most extensive collection of press reviews of Master Juba is found in the endnotes of Stephen Johnson, "Gender."

Such accounts reinforced the perception that the value of black singers and dancers is carnivalesque rather than aesthetic. "In all the rougher and less refined departments of his art," read the *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, "Juba is a perfect master" (243). One critic from the *Illustrated London News* wondered how any human being could "tie his legs into such knots, and fling them about so recklessly" (qtd. in Floyd 55). Because he had been marketed for his novelty rather than his artistry, Juba found it necessary to resort to degrading skits, including cross-dressing like the blackface character Miss Lucy Long. "'Master Juba,' the immortalized of Boz [Dickens]," arrived at Manchester's Free Trade Hall wearing "a most bewitching bonnet and veil, a *very* pink dress, beflounced to the waist, lace-fringed trousers of the most spotless purity, and red leather boots—the ensemble completed by the green parasol and white pocket handkerchief" (qtd. in S. Johnson 238). As Stephen Johnson explains,

> Juba's cross-dressed performance might have been entirely demeaning; that is, however skilled the dancer under the skirt, the contextual disparagement of women in the minstrel show would have become attached (literally) to the authenticity of his color, the sexual energy clearly evident in his dance diminished as he is feminized. If true, he can be seen as an unfortunate precursor to Topsy.[35] (236)

When larger numbers of African-Americans began to participate in minstrel shows during the postbellum period, they encountered an audience that had been trained to appreciate them not as artists or "as entertainers but as representatives of the plantation Negro put on exhibit—like animals in a zoo" (Toll 206). Black writers encountered the same stigma: Paul Laurence Dunbar, the most notable African-American poet of the nineteenth century, was expected to write in broken English despite his skill in traditional forms. According to Hughes, the "quaint charm and humor of Dunbar's dialect verse brought to him, in his day, largely the same kind of encouragement one would give a sideshow freak (A colored man writing poetry! How odd!) or a clown (How amusing!)." (*CW* 9:34).

Dunbar's representation of plantation music was torn between two standards of authenticity: vernacular conventions like call-and-response patterning on the one hand, minstrel conventions like comic dialect on the other. Both appear in Dunbar's account of the pattin' juba in the short story "Supper by Proxy":

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[35] Topsy, a character from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* later adapted to the minstrel stage, will be discussed in 3.4 and 3.5.

> From one cabin to another could be heard the sound of "Juba, Juba!" and the loud patting of hands and the shuffling of feet. Now and again as some voice could be heard rising above the rest, improvising a verse of the songs, as:
>
> "Mas' done gone to Philamundelphy, Juba, Juba.
> Lef' us bacon, lef' us co'n braid, Juba, Juba.["] ("Supper" 72-73).

Superficially, Dunbar's narrative observes the nostalgia of plantation literature. The dialect of slaves is marked with comedic malapropisms ("Philamundelphy"), while the generous master has left them bacon and cornbread. However, those familiar with plantation music might recognise in Dunbar's lyrics an irony of omission: slave renditions of the pattin' juba were likelier to protest the inadequacy of their diet. Hughes makes this critique explicit in his transcription of plantation music:

> We raise de wheat—dey give us de corn.
> We bake de bread—dey give us de crust.
> We sift de meal—dey give us de husk.
> We peel de meat—dey give us de skin. (Hughes, *CW* 6:444).

Hughes credited "the juba dance" for preserving the percussive polyrhythms of West Africa, and considered it to be an important precursor to modern jazz: "Where there were no drums, in the slave quarters of the cities, or on remote plantations, hands took over" (*CW* 6:247).

Drums appear frequently in Hughes's poetry and prose, including the following passage from "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work" (*CW* 9:35). This language of militant insurrection has led critics to focus on the "revolutionary" dimension of Hughes's manifesto:

> Hughes made the revolutionary argument that black culture was a source equal to American and Western European art traditions. A similar call to black artists to represent black subject matter emerged in the 1960s in … the Black Arts Movement, … the self-described artistic arm of the Black Power Movement. (Mahon 90)

True, Hughes taps into a revolutionary zeal that would manifest itself decades later in civil strife. This interpretation is nevertheless anachronistic, looking forward (from Hughes's perspective) to

the mid-twentieth century rather than backward to the mid-eighteenth. Hughes's point is that the tragicomic rhythms of the blues aesthetic, *rather than* the drumbeats of war, are responsible for liberating black Americans. The unconquerable thing about African-American vernacular culture is not its military prowess but its oral tradition.

3.3: Jim Crow

As we have seen, restrictions on unsupervised worship (2.1) and drumming (3.2) did surprisingly little to restrict the development of the African-American vernacular tradition. What prevented this tradition from receiving critical acclaim was not "racism" or "oppression" in the abstract, but a more specific belief that the singing and dancing of black Americans lacked skill, taste, and sophistication. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of racial caricature in creating this perception. During the eighteen thirties, actors, illustrators, and novelists began depicting African-Americans—who "almost never [appear] as central characters" "in early American fiction" (J. Gardner 83)—in caricatured forms which exaggerate their physical, intellectual, and musical unfitness. This suggests that racial satire set the precedent for representing and interpreting African-American vernacular expression. Although these practices are no longer explicit in our critical discourse, their legacy continues to affect our judgment in complex ways.

Blackface theatre, in which white actors blackened their faces with burnt cork and lampooned the mannerisms of plantation slaves, was the most popular form of racial caricature. Jim Crow, the most successful minstrel character of the period, was made famous by the actor T. D. Rice and the illustrator Edward Williams Clay. Several accounts suggest that Rice modelled the eccentric movements and comic dialect of Jim Crow in imitation of a physically handicapped slave:

> Rice found an old cripple of a nigger, doing odd jobs around a livery stable in Louisville, and made him his own. By the closest mimicry he put "Jim Crow" on the stage, dressed in tatters as he dressed, shaking his palsied legs as he did and singing his very words:

Wheel about, turn about, Do jis' so.
An' ebery time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow. (Sherlock 64)

Such accounts exaggerate the authenticity of Jim Crow; in fact, Rice's rhythms bore little resemblance to vernacular prosody. "Jump Jim Crow" can be classified as a doggerel ballad, with the customary 4 beats per line, and 1-3 syllables between beats:

Wheel about, turn about, Do jis' so.
(0) B 2 B 2 B 1 B

An' ebery time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow.
(1) B 3 B 3 B 1 B

These lines infantilise plantation slaves with the rhythms of a nursery rhyme and a dialect of broken English, characterised by the elision ("jis'") or transposition ("ebery") of consonants. As W. T. Lhamon remarks, Rice's success arose largely from his ability "to translate lumpen blackness into the grammar of European-derived roles" (41).

It is also significant that Rice chose to caricature a handicapped rather than an able-bodied slave. Following the influential writings of Enlightenment scholars like J. J. Winckelmann, the classical figure of the European male came to be perceived as the ideal standard for human proportion (West, *Prophesy* 53-54), as represented in illustrations like Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (fig. 3). According to Jefferson, white bodies are endowed with "a more elegant symmetry of form" (230) than black bodies. As imitations of plantation music exaggerated asymmetries of rhythm, so illustrations of plantation slaves exaggerated asymmetries of physical proportion. This is best seen in Clay's (in)famous depiction of Jim Crow as the kinesthetic and sartorial degradation of the white male body:

Figure 7: Lithograph from Edward Williams Clay, *Mr. T. Rice as The Original Jim Crow*, c. 1831.

Source: Beinecke Digital Collections. Web. 25 June 2018.
<https://brbl-media.library.yale.edu/images/1041990_quarter.jpg>.

Jim Crow is crooked at every joint and his costume is derelict and misaligned in every respect. This is not the posture and costume of a slave dancing the pattin' juba, but the posture and costume of a blackface actor dancing an Irish jig.

Plantation literature—which developed concurrently with, and frequently alluded to, the theatrical and pictorial conventions of blackface minstrelsy—immediately adopted the "Jim Crow" type as a supposedly authentic representation of the slave musician. In John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), slaves perform bastardised versions of European songs and dances rather than their own vernacular songs and dances. Black dancers perform "the odd contortions of a jig" (160), while Carey, a black musician, is described as a "minstrel" singing "a doggerel ballad" (101-102). Like a West African griot, Carey is an oral poet and singer-storyteller who is respected by the other slaves: he "is considered as a seer amongst the negroes on the estate, and is always heard with reverence" (101). Unlike a griot, however, Carey is represented as undignified and grotesque:

> "Give us 'Sugar in a Gourd' or 'Jim Crow,'" cried Ralph, referring to two popular dances well known in this region, and for the execution of which Carey has some reputation … We encouraged him, and the minstrel struck up another kind of rattling air which went at a jangling gallop on his banjoe, accompanied by an improvisation[.] … It will not do to give his words, which … would convey but a bald impression of the serio-comic effect the whole exhibition had upon us. (102-103)

These theatrical, pictorial, and literary caricatures all represent African-Americans as if they had no culture of their own. Their language, rhythm, dancing, and fashion are not distinct from, but rather degraded versions of, the language, rhythm, dancing, and fashion of white English and Americans.

By collapsing separate musical idioms into a single category, racial caricature enabled cross-cultural comparisons of absolute quality. It is difficult to compare a well-performed English hymnal to a well-performed African-American spiritual: each may be tasteful when judged by its own standards, and the contest will be decided by the skill of the performers. Alternatively, it is easy to compare a well-performed English ballad to a *poorly*-performed English ballad: by definition, the poorly-performed ballad is distasteful, and the skill of the performer becomes irrelevant. This conditioned audiences to perceive improvisation, worried symmetry, and strained articulation as a lack of posture, a lack of discipline, and a lack of pitch. Because blackface

minstrelsy depicted cultivated skills as if they were deficiencies of taste, the virtues of one tradition came to be understood as the vices of another.

The alleged authenticity of minstrelsy began as an ironic gesture, with the masked figure insisting that he was "the real Jim Crow" (D. Jacobs 219). Nevertheless, when minstrels like E. P. Christy claimed that they were "the first to catch our native airs as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south" (qtd. in Buckley 463), many spectators who had never set foot on a plantation took these words at face value. "[Rice] is decidedly the best personator of negro character who has appeared in any drama," declared the *Spirit of the Times* (qtd. in Lott 218). Charles Reginald Sherlock considered Jim Crow to be "the only real Negro of his day," and praised Rice's "fidelity to nature" as one of the "most genuine things that have been done upon the stage in the guise of Negro portraiture" (64-65). Those who pointed out the obvious inauthenticity of Jim Crow were themselves satirised. James Kennard Jr., with tongue in cheek, wrote that "[h]umorous and burlesque songs are generally chosen for theatrical exhibition" (333) so that "base counterfeits" "pass current with most people as genuine negro songs" (336). Ironically, Kennard's facetious commentary is unwittingly accurate. For most of the nineteenth century, and much of the twentieth, the "authenticity" of African-American music was measured against a standard set by a cartoon.

One literary consequence of minstrelsy was to normalise hyperbole as the default rhetoric for describing African-American singing and dancing. In nineteenth-century prose fiction, African-American dancers were represented as if their movements exceeded both the conventions of decorum and the descriptive capabilities of the writer. Such rhetoric also influenced the travel narratives of British writers. Dickens's description of Master Juba concludes with a reference to Jim Crow:

> having danced his partner off her feet, and himself too, he finishes by leaping gloriously on the bar-counter, and calling for something to drink, with the chuckle of a million of counterfeit Jim Crows, in one inimitable sound! (218)

In her account of plantation music, Fanny Kemble writes,

> I have seen Jim Crow—the veritable James: all the contortions, and springs, and flings, and kicks, and capers you have been beguiled into accepting as indicative of him are spurious, faint, feeble, impotent—in a word, pale northern reproductions of that ineffable black conception. It is impossible for words to describe the things

> these people did with their bodies, and, above all, with their faces, the whites of their eyes, and the whites of their teeth, and certain outlines which either naturally and by the grace of heaven, or by the practice of some peculiar artistic dexterity, they bring into prominent and most ludicrous display. The languishing elegance of some—the painstaking laboriousness of others—above all, the feats of a certain enthusiastic banjo-player, who seemed to me to thump his instrument with every part of his body at once. (82)

Dickens and Kemble both complain that Rice's Jim Crow is inauthentic: not because it is excessively caricatured (as we think of it today), but because it is insufficiently caricatured. These passages represent African-American dancing as a genre already saturated with excess, and thus impossible to exaggerate. Kemble and Dickens were both abolitionist sympathisers, and neither fits the image of the stereotypical nineteenth-century racist. Their participation in the discourse of blackface minstrelsy bespeaks the universality of racial caricature during the mid-nineteenth century. As we will see in 3.4, even the most devoted abolitionists did not seriously question the natural inferiority of African-Americans and the aesthetic inferiority of their music.

3.4: Topsy and Eva

Topsy, a slave in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, has no knowledge of her biological parents. She claims that she "[n]ever was born" because she "never had no father nor mother, nor nothin'" (2:37). Topsy is described as if she were an animal: "a fresh-caught specimen" (2:34), with "woolly hair which was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction" (2:32). When Topsy's master addresses her like a dog, she responds with a comedic lack of coordination:

> the thing struck up, in a clear shrill voice, an odd negro melody, to which she kept time with her hands and feet, spinning round, clapping her hands, knocking her knees together, in a wild, fantastic sort of time, and producing in her throat all those odd guttural sounds which distinguish the native music of her race. (2:33)

Topsy's movements, clapping hands while keeping time with her feet, suggest that she is performing the pattin' juba. Her antics, however—spinning round, knocking knees, and shouting wildly in broken English—make it clear that Stowe's conception of authenticity is derived "from the minstrel stage" (Kaufman 19) rather than first-hand knowledge of plantation music. Like most northerners, Stowe did not differentiate between the comic dialect of minstrelsy and the musical registers of plantation slaves, collapsing the ironic distance between parodies of African-Americans and African-Americans themselves.

Though they disagreed on the matter of slavery, abolitionists like Stowe and anti-abolitionists like Reverend Baynard Hall used the same set of literary conventions to describe plantation dances. In the anti-Tom novel *Frank Freeman's Barber Shop*, Hall's account of the pattin' juba is only marginally more exaggerated than Stowe's account of Topsy:

> [The dance] includes all sorts of single, double, compound, complex, implex, riggle and twist, forward and stop-short, back-again and go-a-head dances; in which floors are heeled into hollows—thick soles kicked against ebony shins—legs are here, arms there, heads down and feet up; while corn-stalk fiddles are scraped into agony, and calabashes emerge into banjos; and all and everything is a joyous uproar of jolly and unmeaning laughter—wild refrain—silly song—absurd brag—jack-daw gabble—mill-clatter raillery—day and night—and night and day—all society seems resolved into chaos—the darkness only being visible![36] (103)

Hall's contortionist rhetoric ("single, double, compound, complex, implex, … legs are here, arms there, heads down and feet up") strikingly echoes that of Dickens ("Single shuffle, double shuffle, cut and cross-cut; … two left legs, two right legs, two wooden legs, two wire legs, two spring legs—all sorts of legs and no legs"). This echo, whether intentional or inadvertent, attests to the ubiquity of conventions depicting African-American performers as "both visually and rhythmically" misaligned (C. Smith 180). The posture of Hall's dancers ("heads down and feet up") also parallels the posture of Topsy (who prefers to "hang head downward" [2:48]).

Topsy's inverted posture associates her with the minstrel tradition, as does her name, which is perhaps taken from the lyrics of a Jim Crow song:

> The house was topsy turvy, all turned upside down,
> And de niggers had de dance ten foot under groun. (Rice 33)

[36] "darkness visible": an image of Hell in *Paradise Lost* (1.63), here suggesting the "epic" chaos of black dancers.

One crucial difference between Topsy and Jim Crow is the presence of Topsy's companion character Eva. The two young girls are opposites in every respect: Eva, the well-bred daughter of Augustine St. Clare; Topsy, the motherless and fatherless slave of Augustine St. Clare. Eva represents the (white) ideal of moral and aesthetic virtue; Topsy, who has no positively-definable virtues of her own, represents the (black) absence of Eva's virtues.

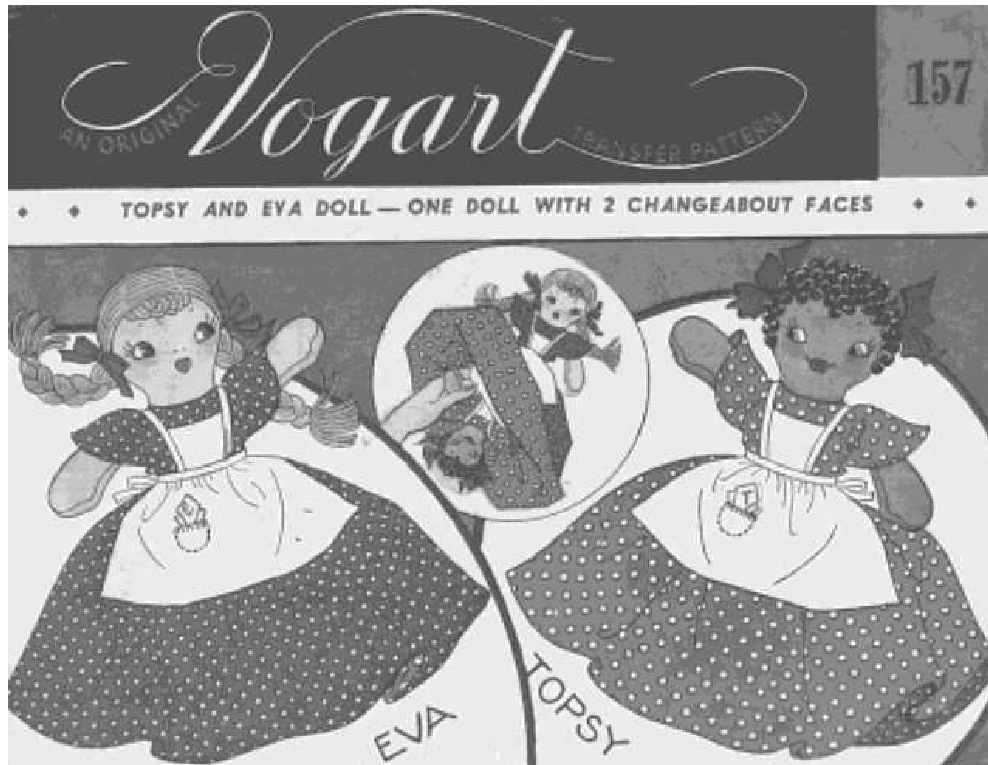
Topsy is a paradigmatic example of what scholars have described as "the Western construction of blackness as absence" (Dubey 30); a blackness that is "constructed around ironic, low-other characters" (R. Allen 169). Whereas Jim Crow is a solitary buffoon, Topsy's categorical subordination to Eva inscribes her into the simplest of structures, a binary hierarchy of white superiority and black inferiority. As explained by Ferdinand de Saussure, a semiotic unit is

> not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be "exchanged" for a given concept, i.e. that it has this or that signification: one must also compare it with similar values, with other words that stand in opposition to it. Its content is really fixed only by the concurrence of everything that exists outside it. Being part of a system, it is endowed not only with a signification but also and especially with a value, and this is something quite different. (115)

Eva's value is described in direct opposition to Topsy's disvalue: "The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!" (2:43). Topsy becomes a signifier of aesthetic inferiority whose only hope of improvement is to become more like Eva. In addition to providing "comic relief" (Tillet 81), Topsy's minstrel qualities also serve an important allegorical function. Stowe suggests that slavery has reduced Topsy to a degraded condition, then demonstrates her potential to be reformed through love, education, and religion.

Topsy and Eva became a commercial sensation, most famously through the "Topsy-Turvy" or "Topsy and Eva" doll, a children's toy with black and white faces separated by a reversible dress. Images of Topsy and Eva, like the transfer pattern in Figure 8, usually show Eva facing up:

Figure 8: Sewing pattern from Vogart, *Topsy and Eva Doll*, 1941



Source: R. Bernstein 82.

Constant visual and literary reminders of this aesthetic hierarchy had a profound effect on the psychological development of black children: the "binary opposition" "between the white Eva and the black Topsy structured representations of white and black girls into the twentieth century" (O'Loughlin 586). Young African-Americans were left to infer that taste and beauty were qualities that must be acquired by assimilating to the language and culture of the dominant class:

> Like white children, black children were taught that the speech of their fathers was not proper English speech. They were encouraged to leave behind their dialects and regional and ethnic idioms. … Nor were the special rhythms of their speech suitable for poetry when Keats and Shelley were the models. In time, they could learn to accept the spirituals, with their decorum and simple majesty, but … surely not the profane blues. Culture was something distant and alien—generally English—to be studied, and … fitted on like a suit of clothes. (Huggins 63)

To become "cultured," African-Americans with aspirations of social mobility often felt compelled to abandon their own vernacular culture. This process of acculturation usually involved modifying

their speech and their appearance: as will be discussed in 4.6, blues poets sometimes compared stylistic assimilation to skin-bleaching and hair-straightening.

The developmental psychology of acculturation is a major theme in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The protagonist Pecola Breedlove fantasises about having white skin and (especially) blue eyes, an unattainable ideal that ultimately drives her insane. The narrator Claudia is more resistant to the structured hierarchy of white supremacy. One Christmas, Claudia receives "a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" (13)—an image that refers directly to the title of the novel, and indirectly to the ideal of feminine beauty established by Stowe's Eva. "Psychologically, the Shirley Temple doll still shares a dress with Topsy," Jim O'Loughlin explains: "The doll's beauty and grace implicitly is contrasted with the ugliness and awkwardness that Claudia is made to feel about herself" (589). Initially, however, Claudia finds no aesthetic "pleasure" in this piece of plastic, but "quite the opposite": she is repulsed by the "hard unyielding limbs" (13) of this "most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion" (14).

Claudia's experience is representative of the process of socialisation by which African-American girls learned their place in the hierarchy of the dominant class. Her response to this experience, however, sets her apart. Claudia's resistance to conventional signifiers of "white" beauty identifies her as a kind of visionary, unusually perceptive for her age and circumstance. As the narrator explains,

> I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (14)

Claudia perceives that the doll's "blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned" features are meant to indicate beauty, yet also finds nothing inherently beautiful about these cheap commercial wares. (Ironically, the doll's skin is "pink," demystifying the structure of "white" supremacy before the narrator has fully internalised it). Claudia sets out to understand the relationship between the doll's apparently arbitrary features (signifiers) and its universally-apprehended beauty (signified):

> "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-

> up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry "Mama," but which sounded to me like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July. Remove the cold and stupid eyeball, it would bleat still, "Ahhhhhh," take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back against the brass bed rail, it would bleat still. The gauze back would split, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. (14)

Claudia's destructive behaviour is represented as a philosophical investigation, attempting to infer "the *Thing* that made [white girls] beautiful, and not us" (58). There is perhaps an element of sadism in Claudia's destruction of this image of whiteness, yet her primary motivation is an almost etymological curiosity in taking apart the sign of white beauty. Several critics have noted that the child's investigative iconoclasm doubles as a poststructuralist wordplay, "literally deconstructing" "the source of alleged white physical superiority" (Searls 187) and finding nothing at its centre but a "mere metal roundness" (Morrison 14). However, as Claudia grows older, she finds it increasingly difficult to resist external pressures and internal shame. She learns to idolise Shirley Temple: "fraudulent love," an "adjustment without improvement" in taste (16). While recounting the passage, the narrator's tone is ambivalent: proud, perhaps, to have recognised the arbitrariness of the ideal of whiteness, yet also painfully aware that few are immune to the pressures of socialisation.

3.5: Topsy and African-American Music

Released in March, 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became an immediate bestseller in England and the United States. Within months, theatrical adaptations followed on both sides of the Atlantic. "Lampooning Topsy one minute and lamenting Tom's fate the next" (Lott 225-226), Tom shows in the American Northeast blurred the boundary between the theatre and the minstrel stage. Abolitionist Tom shows were banned south of the Mason-Dixon Line and replaced by theatrical rebuttals in which escaped slaves voluntarily return to the purported comforts of plantation life

(Watson 64-65). In Europe, "colonial versions of Topsy" rendered her "a figure of English and European colonial subjecthood" (J. Brown 65). "Countless adaptations in books, plays, minstrel shows, and later in movies and comic strips became confused in the public mind with the book itself" (Bloom, *Harriet* 16), to the extent that comedic renditions of Tom and Topsy were more widely recognised than their literary antecedents.

In C.W. Taylor's 1852 adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the first to appear in New York, actors shared the stage with Rice, the creator of Jim Crow. Rice went on to play Uncle Tom in H. E. Stevens's 1854 adaptation, to considerable acclaim: a fact which gives some sense of the seriousness with which Stowe's black characters were received. Nevertheless, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* became increasingly associated with blackface theatre,

> Topsy, not Tom, emerged as the focal point. Taking cues from Stowe's Topsy, the blackface minstrel version exaggerated Topsy's "black" features, rendered her a completely comical and impish figure, and cemented her status as the most famous 'pickaninny' in American culture. Unfortunately, the iconic image of … Topsy as impish, unruly, and wicked, justified both pro-slavery and pro-segregation debates about the alleged inferiority of African Americans. (Tillet 56)

The most successful Tom show in England and the United States, produced by George L. Aiken, also depicted the novel's African-American characters in blackface. When Stowe attended one of Aiken's productions, the performance of Caroline Howard as Topsy was reportedly the highlight of her experience: "I never saw such delight upon a human face as she displayed when she first comprehended the full power of Mrs. Howard's *Topsy*," recalled Francis H. Underwood of the *Atlantic Monthly* (qtd. in Robbins 74).

"I'se So Wicked," written by George Howard in the style of a Jim Crow song and performed by Caroline Howard, came to be known as Topsy's signature song:

Black folk can't do naught, they say,
(0) B 1 B 1 B 1 B (0)

I guess I'll teach some how to play,
(1) B 1 B 1 B 1 B (0)

And dance about dis time ob day,—
(1) B 1 B 1 B 1 B (0)

Ching a ring, a bang goes de breakdown.

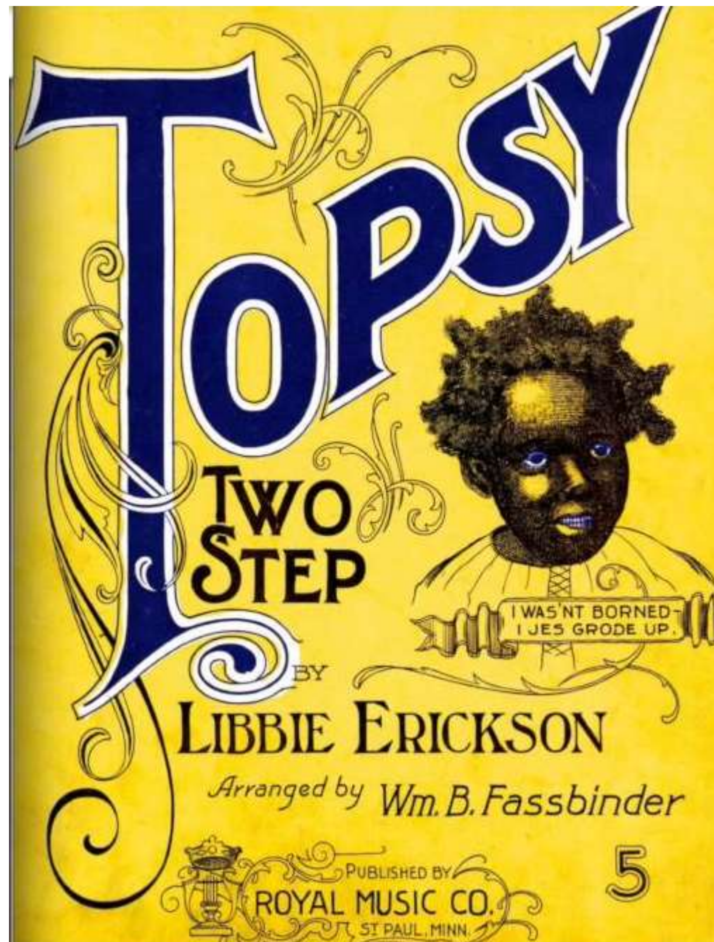
(0) B 1 B 1 B 2 B (1)

In response to the claim that "[b]lack folk can't do naught," Topsy reminds the audience that she is an expert in playing and dancing about. The value of African-American performers, in other words, was perceived to be exclusively comedic: customers paid to laugh at Topsy's frivolous behaviour, not to appreciate her artistry. Some directors replaced Stowe's narrative of redemption with burlesque plot devices, including "the novelty of two Topsys" ("one Topsy," the critic complained, was already "quite enough" [Bolton 367]).

Even reputable Tom shows contributed to the authentication of the pickaninny stereotype: "More than ever, the gentrification of blackface allowed its audiences to take its representations of slave life for the genuine article," and motivated playwrights "to turn slave children into Topsies" (Meer 55). With growing nostalgia, Americans pined for the "plantation darkey," who "came as close to nature as the [minstrel] profession ever got. He was the shiftless, good-for-nothing nigger whose companion-piece many years later was Topsy"; it was "this style of dancing that most resembled the dancing of the real Negro" (Sherlock 64-65). One English critic declared that "the strange, wild, screaming chant in which [Topsy] sang the song, 'I'se So Wicked,' was … a truthful representation of the original" (qtd. in E. Young 38).

Topsy's frequent association with ragtime made the genre's emphasis on syncopation seem doltish and haphazard. The "generic title 'coon song' was indiscriminately applied to virtually any new ragtime number" (Sundquist 283), many of which bore Topsy's name, including Louise Gustin's "Topsy Turvy Two Step" and Libbie Erickson's "Topsy: Two Step." Sheet music emphasised Topsy's unkempt hair and broken English:

Figure 9: Sheet music from Libbie Erickson, *Topsy: Two Step*, 1931



Source: Morgan and Barlow 20.

Such caricatures reinforced ragtime's place at the bottom of the American musical hierarchy. In a review titled "Ragtime," one writer from *The Musician* (paraphrasing the composer F. W. Root) writes that ragtime "bears the same relation to the great things of the musical world that Mother Goose's melodies do to the masterpieces of the world's literature" (60).

Ragtime's rhythmic deviations from Anglo-American norms came to be associated with moral and sexual deviancy. In *The New York Herald*, Walter Winston Kenilworth wrote that "'rag time' music is symbolic of the primitive orality and the perceptible moral limitations of the Negro type" (qtd. in "Remarks" 96). In the *English Review*, Francis Toye wrote that the African-

American "inability to reproduce a complex rhythm" "denotes a species of music almost invariably associated with particular dances of a lascivious or merely ridiculous kind." (95). "[T]his lengthening of something here and shortening of something else there, must all have some influence on the brain," speculates Toye, who compares ragtime dancers to "raving lunatics only fit for … a straight-jacket" (96). "Jazz disorganizes all regular laws and order," warned Anne Shaw Faulkner; "it stimulates to extreme deeds, to a breaking away from all rules and conventions; it is harmful and dangerous, and its influence is wholly bad" (153).

The legacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within the African-American community runs the gamut from unqualified praise to unqualified condemnation. Dunbar memorialised Stowe as an ally who contributed to the downfall of slavery: "At one stroke she gave / A race to freedom and herself to fame" (*CP* 119). A generation later, the blackface tradition linked to Stowe's caricatures "was to be avoided at all costs—it was a thing of the past" (A. Knight 36). Contributors to Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, the most celebrated critical anthology of the Harlem Renaissance, condemned Topsy as "the paradigmatic icon of racial shame and degradation" (Tillet 82). "Our poets … have shaken themselves free from the minstrel tradition and the fowling-nets of dialect," declared Locke (*New Negro* 48). Other contributors to *The New Negro* were less optimistic. William Stanley Braithwaite perceived in Stowe's caricatures nothing but "artistic loss and setback" (31), while Montgomery Gregory offered an even more scathing review:

> Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* passed into obscurity, 'Topsy' survived. She was blissfully ignorant of any ancestors, but she has given us a fearful progeny. … We cannot say that as yet the public taste has generally recovered from this descent from sentimentalism to grotesque comedy, and from that in turn to farce, mimicry and sheer burlesque. (155)

Hughes, who edited the centennial edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was more ambivalent. He celebrated Stowe's "humorous but human" Topsy while regretting the pickaninny stereotype which "degenerated into a comedy 'wench'" (*CW* 9:491):

Figure 10: Images of Topsy, compiled by Hughes

TOPSY

In the book Topsy is humorous, but human, and was played so by Caroline Fox Howard, wife of the drama's first producer. But gradually, the stage character degenerated into a comedy "wench" typified by New York's Topsy, Queenie Smith, in the Players' Club's 1944 production with Otis Skinner as Uncle Tom.

Source: Hughes, ed. and introd., *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Centennial ed., 1952. Beinecke Digital Collections. Web. 25 June 2018. <https://brbl-zoom.library.yale.edu/viewer/1062992>.

Some African-American women admired Topsy's "defiant and disruptive resilience": "Topsy is inured to pain and proudly so; in her defiance she refuses humiliation" (J. Brown 77). In African-American theatrical and literary adaptations of Topsy, Stowe's caricature was given emotional and psychological depth until she took on the role of a full character, like "Topsy Templeton," Pauline Hopkins's literary protagonist featured in *New Era Magazine* (1916). Hurston ended one letter to Charlotte Osgood Mason with the valediction, "your pickaninny, Zora" (*Zora* 223). While there is some disagreement about what Hurston meant by this gesture, she clearly did not shy away from "the identity of a Topsy" (Chinn 192). "The Harlem Renaissance era" "became a fruitful site for reimagining the figure of Topsy within a subversive corporeal kinaesthetic rubric" (Tillet 82). "According to popular ethnographic science," writes Jayna Brown,

> lesser races were governed by a simpler concept of time. I argue instead that black expressivity was formed in a complex web of time registers. … Whirling, twisting, and refusing to behave, Topsy "rags" the master's time; her movements prove that a body is never fully containable. (59)

The most notable African-American critic of the Harlem Renaissance to encourage this comparison was James Weldon Johnson, who linked Topsy to the blues in 1917:

> Strictly speaking, ["The Memphis Blues"] is not a composition. The name of the composer printed on the copies is Handy, who is a negro musician of Memphis; but "The Memphis Blues" is one of those negro songs which, like Topsy, "jest grew." ("Negro's" 27)

And to ragtime in 1922:

> Ragtime music was originated by colored piano players … [who] did not know any more about the theory of music than they did about the theory of the universe. They were guided by their natural musical instinct and talent, but above all by the Negro's extraordinary sense of rhythm. Any one who is familiar with Ragtime may note that its chief charm is not in melody, but in rhythms. … The earliest ragtime songs, like Topsy, "jes' grew." Some of these earliest songs were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered or changed, and published under the names of the arrangers. (*BANP* [22] x-xi)

Johnson characterises the rhythms of ragtime and the blues as orphans separated from their African ancestors. Because these forms "jes' grew" in relative isolation from the classical notation of

Europe, Johnson seeks to disentangle vernacular standards of excellence from European aesthetic hierarchies. Like the country blues, the earliest vaudeville and classic blues songs also grew like Topsy:

> One particular environment in which the blues "jest grew" was the network of culturally independent African American vaudeville theatres that started cropping up in the South and Midwest just after the turn of the century. By 1910 almost every black community in every city in the South had a little vaudeville theatre. (Abbott and Seroff 59)

Perhaps because the phrase "growed like Topsy" had become a cliché for "unplanned growth" of any kind (Morritt 151), Johnson's analogy had the unintended consequence of fuelling speculation that vernacular prosody is disorderly and "stumbling" (Van Vechten, "Negro" 316). In 1922, the Paul Whiteman Orchestra's rag-inspired "Stumbling" (1922) appealed to this stereotype. In 1923, a review in *Sheet Music News* titled "Origin of 'Blues' Numbers" associated the blues with "Old Darkey Melodies," noting that the genre "really did 'jes' grow,' without apparently having either lyricist or composer" (260).

Between 1925 and 1926, Carl Van Vechten, the most prominent critic in Harlem, published several essays on the blues in *Vanity Fair*. One essay, titled "Uncle Tom's Mansion," hints at the growth in stature (from a lowly cabin to a Broadway mansion) of the genre Van Vechten still regarded as a kind of minstrel music. In "Prescription for the Negro Theatre," he describes black dancers as a band of Topsies: "pickaninny ragamuffins dancing … their exhibition of terpsichorean virtuosity" (95). In "Negro 'Blues' Singers," Van Vechten sensationalises the "wild, rough, Ethiopian voice" of Bessie Smith (a native Tennessean) and transcribes her lyrics in comic dialect: "I'se gwine to staht walkin' cause / I got a wooden pah o' shoes" (317).

In a 1939 essay, Paul Whitman also alludes to Johnson's analogy. As Johnson argues that vernacular poetry "deserves serious attention" (*BANP* [22] xiii), so Whiteman argues that jazz "has won its legitimate claim to serious attention" (34). As Johnson traces the genealogy of jazz and ragtime through Topsy, so Whiteman writes that "Jazz, like poor little overworked Topsy, 'just growed'" (34). However, Whiteman's condescending tone suggests an agenda very different from Johnson's. Whiteman seeks to re-inscribe Topsy at the bottom of America's aesthetic hierarchy—to throw her under the bus, so to speak—so that symphonic jazz can be appreciated in contrast to "black" jazz.

Whiteman's objective is to elevate jazz to its "rightful place in the sphere of higher music" (70). Topsy provides Whiteman with an image of the low-other, against which his "high" (and implicitly white) jazz can be appreciated. Notably, Whiteman makes his case for orchestral jazz not by comparing it to the concert music of Europe (a comparison many cultured readers would object to), but by contrasting it with African-American music (a contrast few cultured readers would find offensive). Whiteman presents his appropriation of jazz as a kind of civilising influence, "lifting popular music to the level of the concert platform" (35-36). Whereas Johnson argues that vernacular prosody is formally distinct from Euro-American prosody and must be appreciated on its own terms, Whiteman suggests that vernacular prosody is a primitive version of universal human preferences and must be refined in terms of the superior idiom. The implication is that jazz, like Topsy, has the potential to become civilised if brought into conformity with Anglo-American standards of decency and excellence.

The aesthetic hierarchy implied by Whiteman's comments is essentially a modernised version of the Jim Crow hierarchy from a century earlier, updated to reflect the latest (pseudo)scientific theories of racial inferiority. Throughout the article, Whiteman keeps high and low jazz in constant opposition by using two antithetical vocabularies: one, to describe orchestral (and implicitly "white") jazz; another, to describe traditional (and implicitly "black") jazz:

> **High Jazz** (*white; symphonic*): "eloquent," "cajoling," "persuasive," "streamlined," "melodious," "timeless."
>
> **Low Jazz** (*black; comedic*): "barbaric," "depraved," "clownish," "haphazard," "savage rhythm," "voodoo rhythms," "tom-tom music of the African jungle."

Further emphasising this contrast, Whiteman includes a cartoon of minstrels depicted in a cacophony of uncoordinated shouting. These minstrels are meant to represent early jazz, from which Whiteman proposes to rescue the genre:

Figure 11: Caricature of black jazz players as minstrels, compiled by Whiteman

No invention of the present day are syncopated tunes, as this minstrel poster of 1867 so clearly indicates.

Source: Whiteman 35.

Whiteman defines skill not in terms of musical ability but in terms of conformity to European standards: "top-notch swingsters must be, first of all, fine musicians, well grounded in musical

theory" (35). Readers are left to infer that jazz players like Louis Armstrong—Whiteman's African-American rival for the title "King of Jazz"[37]—are not "fine musicians," because they learned to play jazz through oral transmission rather than written notation. Hurston was among a number of African-American writers to resist this idea, questioning whether Whiteman's brand of music deserves to be called swing (or even jazz): "Whiteman is giving an imitation of a Negro orchestra making use of white-invented musical instruments in a Negro way" ("Characteristics" 38).

Even contemporary African-American writers have found themselves wrestling with Topsy's complicated legacy. In an essay titled "It Didn't Jes Grew: The Social and Aesthetic Significance of African American Music" (1995), Kalamu ya Salaam critiques caricatured understandings of vernacular expression by emphasising the correlation between social and aesthetic hierarchies. This argument is not merely a dismissal of the Western Canon "as a prolonged cultural conspiracy" against "various minorities" (Bloom, *Western* 50), but rather an acknowledgement that traditional Western conceptions of aesthetic value coevolved with a racial caste system and are often "based on upholding the supremacy of 'White' and/or Euro-centric ideals, or at least on accepting the 'goodness' and 'desirability' of these ideals" (ya Salaam 358).

The objection to Shakespeare, for example, is not that he belongs to a coterie of "Dead White European Males" (Bloom, *Western* 7), but that his stylised interactions among characters presuppose the superiority of signifiers conventionally associated with whiteness. In *Une Tempête*, the Afro-Caribbean poet Aimé Césaire seeks not to politicise but to depoliticise the structured relationship between Prospero and Caliban, and he seeks not to decrease but to increase Caliban's psychological complexity. This explains why ya Salaam conceives of a "blues aesthetic" (357) as *creative* iconoclasm, "literally a guerrilla attack" which outsmarts "the dominant and dominating system" (358): the "bluesy sound" which "exists outside of the specific tones associated with Western musical scales … approximates the social reality, which is one of chaos and struggle rather than order and stability" (357). The blues, in other words, are their own best argument: anyone who understands what is "good," "true," and "beautiful" about blues literature will recognise the inadequacy of aesthetic hierarchies that deny its value.

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[37] For a discussion of the two "kings" of jazz, see Joshua Berrett, *Louis Armstrong and Paul Whiteman: Two Kings of Jazz*.

3.6: The Cakewalk Aesthetic

The first creative iconoclast to challenge race-based aesthetic hierarchies was not an African-American but the English poet William Blake. In “The Little Black Boy,” the speaker suggests that his dark skin is “sunburnt” (*Songs* 9): an association that is either endearingly naïve if taken at face value or remarkably subtle if taken as a conceit. The speaker implies that blackness, like a sunburn, is only superficial and temporary, with no essential relationship to the immortal souls of dark-skinned individuals. It is also suggested that the sunburned individual has been closer to the light of God, inverting the association of whiteness with purity.

In the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake repeatedly uses “innocence” as an ironic frame for the philosophical observations of his young speakers. “The Chimney Sweeper,” spoken by a child who has been sold into forced labour, also invokes images of whiteness and blackness in ways that destabilise conventional oppositions between them. Though written in the rhythm and register of a nursery rhyme, the poem’s intricate figures of speech would take pages to explicate. One example will have to suffice:

> [M]y father sold me while yet my tongue
> Could scarcely cry, “’weep! ’weep! ’weep! ’weep!” (12)

The syntagmatic value of “weep,” as indicated by syntax, is a mispronunciation of “sweep”; the paradigmatic value of “weep,” as indicated by context, is “weeping.” The chimney sweeper, an antecedent to the blues persona, sings merrily to keep from crying.

Blake demonstrates the inadequacy of binary oppositions of age (adult/child), class (high/low), religion (Christian/heathen), and race (black/white) by performing complex operations of language through connotatively simple registers. Relative to “standard” English, the child’s language is either less sophisticated (because misspoken) or more sophisticated (because polysemous). There is no middle ground: the chimney sweeper is either speaking broken English or speaking poetry. Blake’s technique anticipates the ironic frames that later developed independently in the African-American vernacular tradition. Syntagmatic/paradigmatic inversions

are so common in vernacular expression, Gates has coined the term "(un)witting" to describe the intentionality of such wordplay (*Signifying* 46).

One example of (un)witting signification is the cakewalk, a dance developed by plantation slaves which likely originated as a satire of the affected mannerisms of white dancers. According to one second-hand account,

> Us slaves watched white folks' parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we'd do it, too, but we used to mock em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better. (qtd. in B. Baldwin 208)

Another account describes the cake-walk as "a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the 'big house,'" adding that the "masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point" (qtd. in B. Baldwin 208). By the eighteen seventies, the cakewalk had been appropriated by minstrel shows. As Baraka remarks, "I find the idea of white minstrels in blackface satirizing a dance satirizing themselves a remarkable kind of irony—which, I suppose, is the whole point of minstrel shows" (*BP* 86).

Whereas white audiences interpreted the cakewalk as "a sincere, though not completely successful emulation of 'higher' white cultural forms" (B. Baldwin 209), some black dancers came to understand the cakewalk as a satire of a satire of a satire, mocking both the pretentiousness of white dancers and the ignorance of white minstrels. Dunbar—who co-authored *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cake Walk*, the first all-black musical on Broadway—understood well the referential ambiguity of the dance. In a poem titled "We Wear the Mask," Dunbar also explores the referential ambiguity of the blackface mask with which the cakewalk was associated. The poem is spoken in the plural first-person, suggesting a polyvocal persona who speaks both for blackface performers and as a collective African-American consciousness:

> We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties. (*CP* 71)

The phrase "myriad subtleties" is curiously redundant ("subtleties" is already plural) and curiously at odds with the rhyme scheme ("subtleties" is the only slant rhyme). Dunbar appears to have chosen this phrase carefully, as if foreshadowing "myriad" ambiguities to come. The poem's central theme is not only that minstrels smile when they are unhappy, but that the mask conceals a spectrum of human emotions which the audience fails to register. Like a cakewalk dancer, Dunbar takes the opportunity to mock (however covertly) the simplicity of anyone who takes the performance at face value:

> Why should the world be over-wise,
> In counting all our tears and sighs?
> Nay, let them only see us, while
> We wear the mask. (6-9)

Hughes's poem "Minstrel Man," composed of two rhetorical questions in grammatically parallel stanzas, is a deliberate echo of Dunbar's poem:

> Because my mouth
> Is wide with laughter
> And my throat
> Is deep with song,
> You do not think
> I suffer after
> I have held my pain
> So long?
>
> Because my mouth
> Is wide with laughter,
> You do not hear
> My inner cry?
> Because my feet
> Are gay with dancing,
> You do not know
> I die? (*CW* 11:63-64)

As the "laughter" of Hughes's persona masks his "inner cry," readers are implicitly encouraged to take the blues less literally.

In addition to this revision of Dunbar, it is also worth asking how much of Hughes's uncharacteristically hypotactic syntax is an echo of Blake:

> "because I am happy & dance & sing / They think they have done me no injury." (*Songs* 37)

> "Because my mouth / Is wide with laughter / And my throat / Is deep with song, / You do not think / I suffer." ("Minstrel Man" 1-6)

Both speakers complain that their exuberant singing has been misunderstood in a manner that legitimises their oppression. Frederick Douglass, writing several decades after Blake and before Hughes, explains how this kind of misreading was pervasive in both southern and northern states:

> I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. (14)

There are other meaningful points of comparison between Hughes's minstrel and Blake's chimney sweeper. Both are compelled to perform degrading, even dangerous work.[38] Both are easy targets of caricature, as evident in the blackface song-and-dance routines of the chimney sweepers in *Mary Poppins* or the slaves in blackface Tom shows. Whether in the context of the English Industrial Revolution or American slavery and segregation, socially-conscious poets have chastised the dominant classes for interpreting the singing of the oppressed as evidence of happiness. Hughes and Blake both suggest that caricature works not only as negative reinforcement to the lower classes (reminding them that they are inferior), but also as positive reinforcement to the ruling classes (reassuring them that they are not oppressors).

Hughes had read Blake and mentions him favourably in *The First Book of Rhythms* (*CW* 11:267). Like Blake, Hughes is a master of the ironic frame: especially the dramatic irony of a deceptively childlike speaker who appears to know both less and more than the reader. Hughes's "Merry-Go-Round," spoken by a child, begins,

> Where is the Jim Crow section
> On this merry go round,
> Mister, cause I want to ride? (*CW* 9:414)

[38] Chimney sweepers, exposed to carcinogens, and minstrels, subjected to overwork and malnutrition, both faced occupational hazards. Hughes's decision to end "Minstrel Man" with the phrase "I die" might indicate both the speaker's mortification and the premature deaths of performers like Master Juba.

Critical responses to this poem have been almost condescending in their appreciation. Although some "have deplored the fact that … Langston Hughes chose to defend freedom by resorting to such trivial themes," Jean Wagner feels that the poem is redeemed by its "unpretentious" "sincerity" (460). However, it is difficult to read this poem strictly in earnest when confronted by Hughes's twofold irony. Firstly, the radial symmetry of the merry-go-round cannot be segregated by any kind of linear (front-to-back) hierarchy. Anyone who sits in front of the child is also, from another perspective, sitting behind her.[39] Secondly, the child, not the adult, is wise enough to realise the practical inadequacy of racial hierarchies.

Hughes also utilised frames of verbal irony, usually to suggest the opposite of what is written in the poem. Because Hughes is seldom sarcastic, his verbal irony is easy to misread. In "Red Silk Stockings," the speaker encourages a young African-American woman to pursue white sexual partners so that her children will come closer to the ideal of whiteness:

> Put on yo' red silk stockings, gal,
> An' tomorrow's chile'll
> Be a high yaller. (*CW* 1:105)

The speaker implies that prostitution to white men is a greater privilege than marriage to a black one; or, to put it another way, that an illegitimate child of mixed race will rank higher than a legitimate child of unmixed ancestry. These implications demonstrate how America's moral and racial hierarchies are irreconcilably at odds. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes remarks with mixed amusement and annoyance that this "ironic poem" was taken "for literal advice" by many readers (*CW* 13:203).

Whereas Du Bois sought "to subvert" racial hierarchies and remove "the 'minstrel mask' from his entire race, taking back from the black-face theater the characteristic art form of his race, its music" (Herring 3), neither Dunbar nor Hughes considered unmasking to be a possibility. One irony suggested by their minstrel poems is that an African-American minstrel in blackface can remove his mask of burnt cork and still wear the veil of blackness. Where Du Bois saw "a vast veil" between the races (*Souls* 2), Dunbar and Hughes recognised an opportunity for veiled satire. While Du Bois, writing as an academic, was primarily interested in reshaping and redefining

[39] Hughes later explained that he imagined the speaker to be "a little girl, maybe six or seven years old" (*CW* 9:414).

African-American psychology, Dunbar and Hughes, writing as poets, were primarily interested in representing the nuances of this psychology.

This chapter might seem to fall in line with the shift in literary criticism from formalism to historical poetics. However, while this chapter is informed by the formal history of the vernacular oral tradition (as discussed in chapters 1 and 2), historical poetics is interested primarily in print culture: "in poetry circulating in and out of print, in poetry as media, in the translation and global circulation of poetry, in ballads and poetess verse and dialect poetry and popular parodies and other subgenres" (Prins 16). Historical poetics focuses on how slave poetry revises "the assumptions underlying the poetic conventions … inherited" from "Anglo-American poetry" (McGill 117), and on slave poetry in the context of the "theorized" "rhythm" and "prosodic history of the slavery era" (Cavitch 96); but not on the poetic conventions inherited from West Africa, or the orally-transmitted theories of rhythm and prosodic history of plantation slaves and their descendants.

Counterintuitively, historical poetics demonstrates many of the same Eurocentric biases as its antecedents. Like those associated with aesthetic criticism, most self-described historical prosodists regard the blues idiom as a simple folk dialect and deny the relevance of West African prosody to vernacular prosody. Max Cavitch challenges the tendency of specialists in African-American literature to "speak of an 'African' or 'African-American' or 'Pan-African' *sound*":

> To talk about the sophistication and ubiquity of slave rhythm's triumph … is to veer toward one of slavery's most enduring racist caricatures—what the Jamaican-American critic Joel Rogers … referred to as "That elusive something, [that] for lack of a better name, I'll call Negro rhythm." (96).

It is unfair of Cavitch to accuse Rogers of "racist caricature" for describing vernacular prosody as "[t]hat elusive something" in "Negro rhythm," especially given Rogers's qualification ("for lack of a better name"). Although Cavitch's critique is not an empty one, he overstates the degree to which "recent critics including Houston Baker, Eric Sundquist, and Jack Kerkering" are guilty of a totalising and unfounded Afrocentrism (96). Their Afrocentrism is not totalising because they do not deny that the blues are part of an English-language tradition. Their Afrocentrism is not unfounded because—as Mary Louise Kete explains in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, the same volume in which Cavitch's essay is published—"West African

conventions of narrative and lyric verse remained prominent" in nineteenth-century slave poetry, including "call and response" patterning and "signifying" (18).

Recent "historical" studies of vernacular prosody seldom have anything to say about vernacular prosody itself. Although McGill is an excellent close-reader of Dunbar, her definition of dialect poetry as "a literary approximation of African American vernacular [sic]" (129), rather than a parody of the vernacular, gives no sense of the profound differences between blackface minstrelsy and plantation music. "The popularity of Thomas Rice and many other white antebellum minstrel performers helped ensure cultural saturation by the rhythms of the black vernacular," writes Cavitch (101), when in fact Rice's caricatures bear little resemblance to the rhythms they satirise. Michael C. Cohen regards "broken English speech" and "the conventions of black vernacular dialect transcription" as interchangeable ("Paul" 251) and argues that the "emergence of black poetry" can be traced not to African origins, but to "negro ballads" and "blackface theater" (*Social* 224).

Historical prosodists, despite consulting many of the same sources as this study, have drawn radically different conclusions. Ben Glaser points out that the cakewalk originated not in Africa, but as a "takeoff of white plantation dances":

> The cakewalk is proof that a rhythm or prosody taken to be uniquely racial in character—for instance, the syncopated cadences referenced in works as different as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Langston Hughes's "The Weary Blues" (1925)—are best understood as citations of rhythm that in many cases, including Hughes's poem, foreground the racialized history of rhythm's circulation. ("*Autobiography*" 155).

This is not the "proof" that Glaser believes it to be. True, the object of parody originated in Europe rather than Africa, yet one cannot assume that the parody is therefore free of African influence. As Karen Sotiropoulos points out, the "cakewalk had also evolved out of … the ring shout, a style of worship and dance that survived the Middle Passage" (22). Glaser does not analyse the ring shout, or any other form of vernacular origin, because there is "limited space here to explore how poets of the New Negro Renaissance negotiated the history of meter and rhythm" ("*Autobiography*" 148). Given the considerable weight that Glaser places on the opposition between metred Anglo-American prosody on the one hand and "oral folk rhythms" on the other (155), one would think he could find a paragraph or two to discuss the latter term in this opposition.

It is difficult to appreciate the aesthetic dimension of vernacular prosody without accounting for its oral character. McGill, informed primarily by print culture, sees nineteenth-century African-American poetry as “a powerful tool in the antislavery struggle” (117). As discussed in 2.1, McGill perceives the doubleness of Dunbar’s voice as a split between self-parody and implicit social protest. B. A. Botkin, informed primarily by oral performance, characterises vernacular doubleness in more explicitly aesthetic terms: “a dual personality, one for himself and another for the white man, whom he takes delight in beating at his own game” (41).

While both paradigms are valuable, Botkin’s makes it possible to appreciate what one might call the cakewalk aesthetic of vernacular poetry: delight in referential ambiguity, not as a means of social protest or civil rights activism, but as a source of truth and beauty. This value cannot be determined by adding together separate methods of inquiry, the formalist and the historical, into a tidy sum that is calculated after the fact. In chapter 4, we will see how the synergy that many artists and audiences have claimed to find in the blues is best studied by reading forms of history into histories of form, without privileging either term.

Chapter 4: Experimental Prosody

4.1: Rhetoric

Chapter 1 followed several rhythmic concepts—including calculated asymmetry, call-and-response patterning, and polyrhythm—from their African-diasporic origins to their appearance in African-American poetry. Similarly, chapter 2 traced several figures of speech—including veiled irony, iconography, and interior monologue—from the oral tradition of plantation slaves to the literary verse of their descendants. Chapter 3 provided a historical context for these "formal" practices, which developed concurrently with (and continue to be confused with) the tropes of racial caricature including eye dialect, atavistic symbolism, and the "othering" of racial prosody. These chapters have laid the groundwork for the more ambitious project of chapter 4: a reassessment of experimental blues prosody since the Harlem Renaissance. The discussion, though proceeding in an approximately chronological manner, is driven by versificational practice. Because the broad diachronic scope of this chapter cannot offer anything like a comprehensive assessment of the blues idiom, the bar for "experimental" prosody is set extremely high. I am interested primarily in moments of stylistic ambition and aesthetic creativity that offer something qualitatively new to the history of English prosody. Of the 31 tables presented in this section, most introduce new discoveries, while the rest offer more nuanced perspectives on existing scholarship.

I begin with Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, who might be remembered for their remarkable similarities. Both were ambitious young African-American men who enrolled in Ivy League Universities: Hughes, at Columbia in 1921, before withdrawing for personal and financial reasons; Cullen, at Harvard in 1925, where he earned a master's degree. Each was a rising star in the emerging Harlem literary scene; neither was conventionally heterosexual. Their paths often crossed: as pen pals, exchanging ideas about poetry and poetics; as rivals, competing for the 1925 poetry prize in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* (Cullen finished second; Hughes, first); as literary critics, casting mutually unflattering aspersions about each other's work. Cullen fired the first salvo, claiming that the only formal innovation in Hughes's first volume of poems is to write something other than poetry:

> the first section of this book, *The Weary Blues*, will be most admired, even if less from intrinsic poetic worth than because of its dissociation from the traditionally poetic. … I wonder if jazz poems really belong to the dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry. ("poet" 73)

Hughes responded by excoriating African-American poets who pour "racial individuality into the mold of American standardization" (*CW* 9:32), a barely veiled critique of Cullen's Eurocentric prosody. Cullen fired back with a barely veiled critique of Hughes's African-diasporic prosody in *The Weary Blues*:

> Negro poets, dependent as they are on the English language, may have more to gain from the rich background of English and American poetry than from any nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African inheritance. (*Caroling* xi)

These comments enshrined Cullen as Hughes's antithesis: a formalist who emulated William Blake, an elitist like W. E. B. Du Bois, and even briefly (and unhappily) the husband to Du Bois's daughter Yolande. Hughes, meanwhile, is remembered as a racial populist who "did not emulate consciously elitist modernists like Ezra Pound" (A. Schwartz 68-69). One seminal publication characterises Cullen as "formally schooled," "genteel in inclination and taste," and "prissy" (Huggins 207), in contrast to Hughes, a "casual and almost anti-intellectual" poet (227) who "never studied versification in any formal way" (221). Another presents Cullen as a poet's poet, who "practiced sonnets and villanelles, honed his rhymes, and searched mightily for the right word," while Hughes was as a people's poet who "believed in the power of inspiration and improvisation" and found "beauty in the black masses" (Rampersad, *Life* 1:63). Once again, things might have been remembered differently. Cullen's "Heritage" is more nebulously atavistic than anything written by Hughes. Meanwhile, Hughes did, in fact, write sonnets; he did, in fact, emulate the chiastic patterning of Blake and Du Bois; and he did, in fact, correspond with Pound, and emulate him consciously in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.[40]

Although Hughes's enduring popularity dwarfs that of his rival, Cullen's characterisation of *The Weary Blues* has also endured. Most scholars agree that the grounds for appreciating the volume include originality and social impact but not stylistic innovation or technical refinement.

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[40] See Wallace 2010: 89 for a discussion of Hughes's "blues imagism."

The simplicity of Hughes's diction can be observed in the proem, titled "Negro," which begins *The Weary Blues*:

> I am a Negro:
> Black as the night is black,
> Black like the depths of my Africa. (*CW* 1:22)

Because *The Weary Blues* was written during the "heyday of essentialism" (Takayoshi 158), scholars typically interpret Hughes's persona as a crude Pan-African collective consciousness. Assessments of this persona often emphasise how it is "racial" and "single," including the following passage by Chinitz, who emphasises it twice:

> The collective voice is the product of a romantic essentialism, evoking as it does a *single racial mind* or "soul." Although he had employed it with success, Hughes abandoned this voice as he matured. The fiction of a *race* speaking through a *single, universal voice* was not one that he could sustain beyond his youth. (43, emphasis mine)

Chinitz's language ("as it does") frames his interpretation as uncontroversial. It is consistent with Sonia Delgado-Tall's view that the Harlem Renaissance took "group identity, cultural pride, and the right to self-government" to be "the essential preoccupations of all back-to-Africa black proponents" (296) and the preoccupation of a "racial essentialism" that extolled "the spiritual gifts of Black people" (299). Viewed from this angle, the persona of *The Weary Blues* appears to have been shaped by various ideologies including Garveyism, Black Nationalism, African atavism, and racial romanticism (Wagner 394, Rothenberg 119).

There is nevertheless a "formalist" argument for appreciating *The Weary Blues* which suggests that the persona is shaped by something more than a romanticised view of racial essence. As George Hutchinson explains, Hughes "early sensed the affinity between the inclusive 'I' of Whitman and the inclusive 'I' of the spirituals" (415). The African-American spirituals are inclusive because first-person pronouns speak at once for individuals and for the congregation. One iconic spiritual hymn begins, "Deep river, my home is over Jordan" (Billups 11). Such lines were understood to require interpretation: to some slaves, the Jordan represented the Mason-Dixon Line, with emancipation on the other side; to other slaves, the Jordan represented freedom from earthly bondage, with Heaven on the other side. As "Deep River" suggests an affinity with the

Israelites, so "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Hughes (quoted below) suggests an affinity with the populations of the Middle East. And in its last line, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (*CW* 1:36), Hughes's poem seems to evoke simultaneously the collective voice of the spirituals and Whitman's plural selfhood:

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then …. I contradict myself;
> I am large …. I contain multitudes. (55)

Viewed from this angle, the "I" who speaks throughout *The Weary Blues* appears to have been shaped by the techniques of literary verse as well as by those of oral tradition.

These competing interpretations of Hughes's persona, at least in their extreme versions, cannot both be correct. The persona cannot be simultaneously singular and polyvocal, homogenising and pluralising, immature and self-conscious, socially determined and stylistically determined. It cannot, at once, proceed merely from twentieth-century racial ideology and shrewdly from nineteenth-century lyric (of both races). This tension, I suggest, epitomises what is arguably the most important question in twenty-first century verse theory: what does it mean to read historically? Does literary history take shape diachronically through stylised intertextual dialogue or synchronically through print culture? As indicated in one recent discussion of historical poetics, most contributors to this debate agree that "the usefulness of any literary theory ultimately rests on its capacity to illuminate particular literary texts as art" (Adams, et. al., 9). This section therefore addresses the tension between competing notions of historical poetics through close attention to individual texts and contexts. Rather than taking "context" for granted, I seek to reassess the parameters that are useful for textual interpretation. Hughes's persona in *The Weary Blues* offers a unique test case because it has been neglected by cognitive aesthetics.

Although the superficial resemblance is slight, *The Weary Blues* is an almost Blakean experiment in persona, rhetoric, and iconography.[41] Like Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, *The Weary Blues* contains several companion poems spoken by the same or similar personae. The most notable pairings include "Negro" and "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which address themes of racial essence through a Pan-African persona; "The Weary Blues" and "Lenox

[41] Blake and Whitman are the only two poets named in *The First Book of Rhythms* (*CW* 11:267), a book on prosody that Hughes wrote for children. This suggests that Blake's influence on Hughes might have been considerable. As discussed in 3.6, there is a striking similarity between Blake's chimney sweeper poems and Hughes's "Minstrel Man."

Avenue: Midnight," which are set on Lenox Avenue and spoken by an ambiguous persona; and "Mother to Son" and "I, Too," which address themes of racial progress through an allegorical persona. (Because "The Weary Blues" was discussed at length in 1.6, this section focuses on the other five).

Hughes's rhetoric is also comparable to Blake's: for example, "The Tyger" and "Negro" are both written in predominantly isomorphic stanzas that are organised in an ABB:BBA pattern. (The scansion in this chapter uses A, B, and C to designate stanza-level groupings). This chiastic template allowed Hughes to compose quickly, with a clear sense of architectonic design, and he tried to finish every poem in a single sitting:

> No doubt I changed a few words the next day, or maybe crossed out a line or two. But there are seldom many changes in my poems, once they're down. Generally, the first two or three lines come to me from something I'm thinking about, or looking at, or doing, and the rest of the poem (if there is to be a poem) flows from those first few lines, usually right away. (*CW* 13:66).

Interpretations of this passage typically focus on how Hughes "did little rewriting" because he sought to emulate the practices of the "common people," from "the most ordinary person" to "the lowest human being" (Huggins 222). However, this is not what Hughes is saying. The "first two or three lines" (the A-units) are important because they introduce an iconographic motif: a culturally resonant image that *means* more than it *says*. In the B- and C-units, Hughes typically introduces a secondary pattern of parallelism, producing something like a rhetorically driven polyrhythm. These patterns shape our reading experience whether or not we pause to diagram them; then again, they are patterns that reward familiarity. Throughout *The Weary Blues*, Hughes utilises rhetoric to juxtapose different motifs, to thread these motifs through the voices of different speakers, and to place them in suggestive patterns of parallelism and antithesis. Rhetoric is not merely a stylish container for repackaging ideology but a powerful tool nuancing this ideology.

"Negro," the proem to *The Weary Blues*, inserts deceptively simple language and imagery into an elaborate rhetorical template. This template is remarkably effective at developing the poem's central theme: movement through time and space. Movement through time is indicated primarily by patterns of chiasmus (below, left); movement through space is indicated primarily by patterns of parallelism (below, right) (*CW* 1:22):

Table 1: Scansion of Hughes's "Negro"

Time				**Space**
	A	I am a Negro:	**a**	
		Black as the night is black,	$\mathbf{b_1}$	
		Black like the depths of my Africa.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	
Oppression (slavery)	$\mathbf{B_1}$	I've been a slave:	**a**	
Ancient		Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.	$\mathbf{b_1}$	Egypt
Modern		I brushed the boots of Washington.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	American North
Creation (buildings)	$\mathbf{B_2}$	I've been a worker:	**a**	
Ancient		Under my hand the pyramids arose.	$\mathbf{b_1}$	Egypt
Modern		I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	American North
Creation (music)	$\mathbf{B_2}$	I've been a singer:	**a**	
Colonial Past		All the way from Africa to Georgia	$\mathbf{b_1}$	Africa
		I carried my sorrow songs.	$\boldsymbol{b_x}$	
Colonial Present		I made ragtime.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	American South
Oppression (terror)	$\mathbf{B_1}$	I've been a victim:	**a**	
Colonial Past		The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.	$\mathbf{b_1}$	Africa
Colonial Present		They lynch me still in Mississippi.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	American South
	A	I am a Negro:	**a**	
		Black as the night is black,	$\mathbf{b_1}$	
		Black like the depths of my Africa.	$\mathbf{b_2}$	

"Negro" establishes two architectonic patterns which recur throughout the volume. The first is rhetorically driven polyrhythm: the rhythm of single lines is driven forward by parisonic symmetry (abb-abb) while stanza-level groupings double back upon themselves in chiastic symmetry (ABB-BBA). This experimentation with two independently moving rhythmic patterns characterizes Hughes's prosodic experimentation throughout his career. As will be seen later in this section, Hughes compared this polyrhythmic tension to the overtone / undertone dynamic of vernacular musicology (9:33); and, in a play on words, to the overtow / undertow dynamic of an ocean wave (13:167). The second pattern is a polyvocal subject position. In the A-units, the subject "I" functions as a top-down synecdoche: one collective black consciousness (whole) speaking for

diverse African and African-diasporic individuals (parts). In the B-units, the subject "I" functions as a bottom-up synecdoche: individual voices (parts) which comprise a heterogenous pronoun (whole).

Rather than developing separately, these two architectonic patterns are consubstantial. The consciousness that emerges in the A-unit is shaped by the rhetorical patterning of the B-units:

- Stanza 2 (B_1): The ancient-to-modern and Egypt-to-America motifs are introduced. The two personae in the b-lines are both slaves in the service of white generals (Caesar / Washington) who founded empires.

- Stanza 3 (B2): Precisely the same motifs of time and space (Ancient → Modern, Egypt → America) are repeated. The two personae in the b-lines are both workers, proud to have had a hand in building what were, at the time of their construction, the tallest buildings in the world (pyramids / Woolworth Building). The socioeconomic prospects of the "Negro" are on the rise.

- Stanza 4 (B_2): The ancient-to-modern motif narrows (colonial past → colonial present), as does the destination of the transatlantic journey (Africa → American South). The motif of music echoes the motif of building. The persona is proud to have carried African musical practices, like call-and-response patterning, from one continent to another. At this point, the poem's one asymmetrical line ($\boldsymbol{b_x}$, above), "I carried my sorrow songs," suddenly invokes images of slavery and the Middle Passage. A chiastic tension enters the poem as the fate of the "Negro" doubles back toward the theme of stanza 2 (oppression).

- Stanza 5 (B_1): Precisely the same motifs of time and space (colonial past → colonial present, Africa → American South) are repeated from stanza 4. The two personae in the b-lines are both victims, not merely of oppression, but of racial terror. What had been a tone of optimism is now muted by disillusionment with romanticised narratives of the "Negro's" progress.

"Negro" represents Pan-African history as being diverse rather than homogeneous. It explores themes of individual identity, racial identity, cultural history, and aesthetics, all themes which recur throughout *The Weary Blues*. Rhetoric is a tool for Hughes to organise, juxtapose, and combine the many voices of Pan-African history in patterns that converge and diverge suggestively yet remain irreducible to a single moral.

The stylistic heritage of "Negro" is also remarkable. Its opening lines modify a phrasal template that first appeared in Carl Sandburg's "Nigger" (49):

Sandburg, “Nigger”	Hughes, “Negro”
I am the nigger**.**	**I am** a Negro**:**
Singer of songs,	**Black as** the night is black,
Dancer …	**Black like** the depths of my Africa.
Softer than fluff of cotton …	
Harder than dark earth.	

This allusion to Sandburg is consistent with Hughes’s reputation as a stylistically unambitious low modernist. As Harold Bloom would have it, Hughes “actually owed more to the poetry of Carl Sandburg than he did to the greatest African-American contribution to the arts” (*LH*-MCV vii). “Negro” also alludes to “The Song of the Smoke” by Du Bois. Rampersad emphasises how this allusion aligns Hughes with “a radical minority tradition in Afro-American letters” (1986: 44), yet neglects to mention that it also aligns Hughes with a virtuoso tradition of African-American rhetoric. “The Song of the Smoke” is formally unusual, composed of four isomorphic 11-line stanzas. The rhetorical and metrical structure (below, left) and rhyme scheme (below, right) of each stanza are organised in elaborate patterns of chiasmus (1914: 132):

Table 2: Scansion of Du Bois's "The Song of the Smoke," Stanza 4

Grouping (Stress Metre)		**Rhyme**
A (2-beat duple metre):	I am the Smoke King	**a**
	I am black!	**b**
B (4-beat duple metre):	I am cursing ruddy morn,	**c*-d**
	I am hearsing hearts unborn:	**c*-d**
C (4-beat triple metre):	Souls unto me are as stars in a night,	**e**
	I whiten my black men—I blacken my white!	**e-f-f-e**
	What's the hue of a hide to a man in his might?	**e**
B (4-beat duple metre):	Hail! great, gritty, grimy hands—	**g*-h**
	Sweet Christ, pity toiling lands!	**g*-h**
A (2-beat duple metre):	I am the Smoke King	**a**
	I am black.	**b**

* feminine rhyme

Du Bois's form is so fastidiously chiastic that each B-unit precisely mirrors the other: feminine rhyme on the second beat of each line, masculine rhyme on the fourth. The C-unit shifts from duple to triple metre. At the centre of the central unit, the stanza begins to double back on itself by placing signifiers of race in a chiastic echo—whiten/black/blacken/white—as if unravelling the construction of racial identity. Like Hughes, Du Bois recognised blackness as a troublesome category with boundaries that still needed to be worked out: "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line" (*Souls* vii). The racial phenotype of "Negro"—part Sandburg, part Du Bois—offers an ingenious critique of the American law of hypodescent, known colloquially as the "one drop rule." As the racially mixed Hughes identified as "black" and was associated with a minority ethnicity, so Hughes's stylistically mixed persona identifies as "black" and is associated with a minority tradition of literature. Such a critique could not have proceeded from a naïve view of racial essence.

Helen Vendler argues that "poems are not their paraphrases, because the paraphrase does not represent the thinking process as it strives toward ultimate precision" (*Poets* 6). "Negro" is exemplary in this respect. The meaning is not only that "Pan-African history is complex," or that "Europeans have long exploited Africans," or that "the descendants of black Africa have excelled at their crafts." The fact that "Negro" never arrives at a paraphrasable solution to the problem of essence allows it to be more, rather than less, valuable as a source of knowledge. In Jarvis's words,

> Poetics need not subserve hermeneutics. Anyone who is trying to find out and to say what a given poet's verse style is actually like will at some point or other face the urgent inquiry, But how does this help us to offer a reading of the poem? That question feels natural. Yet it assumes as an evident good a quite peculiar and not invariably valuable practice, the writing of readings of poems. ("For a Poetics" 932)

This is not a retreat from rigorousness: as will be seen, understanding what Hughes's "verse style is actually like" offers many salutary and even revelatory insights into his poems. Nevertheless, the assumption that technique is valuable only insofar as it can be distilled into paragraph form misses the bigger picture. Rather than asking, "how does rhetoric help us offer a reading of 'Negro,'" a more interesting question might be, "how does rhetoric help us understand what 'Negro' is doing at the beginning of *The Weary Blues*?" I argue that "Negro" is the keystone which holds all subsequent poems in place. It establishes the constraints that Hughes echoes, reworks, and transgresses throughout the volume.

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers," written by an 18-year-old Hughes as he crossed the Mississippi River on a train, represents the "debut" of his "most favored A-B-A strophic form" (Takayoshi 158). The phrases and clauses that begin the A-units are linked by epistrophe: each concludes with the word "rivers." The clauses that begin the B-units use parallelism to develop the central theme: the sensual experience of rivers as a basis for shared racial heritage. The complements in the B-units are arranged in a chiastic pattern of subordination and coordination, creating a sense of movement through time (*CW* 1:36):

Table 3: Scansion of Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

	Initial Phrase / Clause	**Complement**	
A_1:	I've known **rivers**:		**a_1**
	I've known **rivers**	ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.	**a_2**
	My soul has grown deep like the **rivers**.		**b**
B_1:	**I bathed in** the Euphrates	**when** dawns were young.	**c_1**
	I built my hut **near** the Congo	**and** it lulled me to sleep.	**d_1**
B_2:	**I looked upon** the Nile	**and** raised the pyramids above it.	**d_2**
	I heard the singing of the Mississippi	**when** Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.	**c_2**
A_2:	I've known **rivers**:		**a_1**
	Ancient, dusky **rivers**.		**a_2**
	My soul has grown deep like the **rivers**.		**b**

Like the A-units of "Negro," the A-units of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" contain indistinct, familiarised, iconographic images. These images are so "ancient," "old," and "human" (twice-repeated) that they recall a time before racial distinctions existed:

> Hughes, always evasive, speaks of "knowing" rivers—ancient, dusky, and profound as the black soul—but they are "older than the flow of human blood in human veins." Why does Hughes risk the (only) apparent redundancy of repeating the word "human"? The origin is evidently set before our present condition, of whatever race or mixture we are (Hughes's own ancestry included French, African, and Native American strains). … I hear in the poem a knowing so sophisticated that it becomes esoteric and heretical. (Bloom, *LH*-BC 2-3)

Hughes might find it amusing to see his poetry described as "sophisticated," "esoteric," and "heretical." Nevertheless, Bloom's point—and one that is worth taking seriously—is that the

persona does not sound like Marcus Garvey, or any other ideological Pan-Africanist for that matter. This is not the voice of a homogenising black consciousness but a voice so abstract as to be almost universal.

Like the B-units of "Negro," the B-units of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" shift to a bottom-up synecdoche, with distinct voices speaking through a common pronoun. What these voices share is not a unitary worldview but rather the epistemological capacity to "know" rivers through sensual experience, whether tactile ("I bathed"), kinaesthetic ("I built"), visual ("I looked"), or auditory ("I heard"). This capacity might seem not only essentially "Negro" but also essentially "human," and that is, I think, the point. Whatever else the African diaspora might have taken from the "Negro"—language, power, cultural history—it could not evacuate the most human of experiences. Although some would argue that the early human civilisations on the Euphrates and Nile rivers fall within the purview of Pan-African history, only the speaker of d_1 would be traditionally recognised as a black African. This reference to "The Congo" likely alludes to the eponymous poem by Vachel Lindsay: not to rehearse Lindsay's "voyeuristic fantasies" but to critique them by linking "blackness to a universal human quest" (DuPlessis 95).

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" inherits from Whitman and the spirituals not only an inclusive "I" but also a Bible-based rhetorical parallelism, which typically supersedes patterns of accentual-syllabic symmetry. Whitman celebrated calculated rhythmic variation, emphasising that the ocean does not "break on the beach every so many minutes"; "[h]ow monotonous it would become, how tired the ear would get of it if it were regular!" (qtd. in Asselineau 245). Hughes held similar views:

> Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day—night, day—night, day—forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power. (*CW* 13:167)

Unlike a metronomic beat, the recurrences of the natural world vacillate "in and out and around the beat" (11:299)—like jazz. This explains why Hughes often described jazz as the rhythm of life: the "undertow" which keeps a wave from being predictably symmetrical, or the "undertones" which prevent a musical performance from sounding mechanical. The same theme, in combination with the same play on words, reappears in "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," which juxtaposes "Overtones" and "Undertones" as its chiastic inflection point (1:32):

Table 4: Scansion of Hughes's "Lenox Avenue: Midnight"

$\mathbf{A_1}$	The rhythm of life	$\mathbf{a_1}$
	Is a jazz rhythm,	$\mathbf{a_2}$
	Honey.	$\mathbf{a_3}$
	The gods are laughing at us.	$\mathbf{a_4}$
$\mathbf{B_1}$	The broken heart of love,	$\mathbf{b_1}$
	The weary, weary heart of pain,—	$\mathbf{b_2}$
$\mathbf{C_1}$	Overtones,	$\mathbf{c_1}$
$\mathbf{C_2}$	Undertones,	$\mathbf{c_1}$
$\mathbf{B_2}$	To the rumble of street cars,	$\mathbf{b_1}$
	To the swish of rain.	$\mathbf{b_2}$
$\mathbf{A_2}$	Lenox Avenue,	$\mathbf{a_1}$
	Honey.	$\mathbf{a_2}$
	Midnight,	$\mathbf{a_3}$
	And the gods are laughing at us.	$\mathbf{a_4}$

In section 2, I return to the structure of "Lenox Avenue," which is, I suggest, Hughes's earliest experiment with the vernacular sonnet. At present, I call attention to the coyness of the persona(e), who keep their identity or identities a secret. In one jointly published dialogue, Derek Attridge and Henry Staten have pondered these identities. Attridge begins,

> "Lenox Avenue: Midnight" is clearly a poem about African-American experience, although … the reader is invited to *share* for a few moments the exhaustion and the pain it depicts—this is where the "universality" of the poem is felt. … The poem can thus be read as a protest against the conditions under which this community is forced to live; but this political edge is not prominent—indeed, the reference to "the gods" suggests a kind of fatalism rather than the pointing of a political moral. (82)

Staten goes one step farther:

> I resist the notion that ["Lenox Avenue: Midnight"] is about "African-American experience." It says not that jazz is the rhythm of African-American life but, simply, of life; … there's nothing distinctively African-American about broken hearts, weary pain, or the sounds of street cars and rain. … I want to insist on the fact that

> the poet has *intentionally* not provided the details that would particularize the scene. (84)

In the context of Hughes's prose, these images are certainly racialised. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," published the same year as *The Weary Blues*, Hughes defines "jazz" as "one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; … the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work" (*CW* 9:35). Staten's deracinated interpretation of jazz, weariness, and street cars is a step too far: yet only a small step, for these images are reinvigorated by Hughes's rhetoric. Staten's underlying point—that Hughes's "marks of craftsmanship" would attest to the complexity of the persona, regardless of race (80)—is spot on.

Next, I consider two poems that address the theme of social climbing through the voice of a single historical figure; although, as will be shown, each voice has an allegorical dimension. The first, "Mother to Son," is spoken *to* a young African-American male; the second, "I, Too," is spoken *by* a young African-American male. In both poems, rhetoric and cognition are inextricable. Rather than doubling back at a clearly defined midpoint, each poem breaks off suddenly (a technique known as *aposiopesis*) before ending where it started. In "Mother to Son," chiasmus (left) is relatively weak while parallelism (right) is relatively strong (*CW* 1:60):

Table 5: Scansion of Hughes's "Mother to Son"

A_1:	Well, son, I'll tell you:	
	Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.	
B_1:	It's had **tacks** in it,	**b_1**
	And splinters,	**b_2**
	And boards torn up,	**b_3**
	And places with no carpet on the floor—	**b_4**
	Bare.	
C:	But all the time	
	I'se been **a-climbin'** on,	**c_1**
	And reachin' landin's,	**c_2**
	And turnin' corners,	**c_3**
	And sometimes **goin'** in the dark	**c_4**
	Where there ain't been no light.	

B_2:	So boy, **don’t you turn back**.	**b_1**
	Don’t you set down on the steps	**b_2**
	’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.	
	Don’t you fall now—	**b_3**
A_2:	For **I’se still goin’**, honey,	**a_1**
	I’se still climbin’,	**a_2**
	And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.	

Previous attempts to describe the form of the poem have tended to focus on its accentual-syllabic organisation. M. H. Abrams notes that lines 2 and 6 are “metrically parallel” in the sense that “both fall into fairly regular *iambic pentameter*” (107):

> Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.
>
> And places with no carpet on the floor—

Hughes links these lines not only by visual and metrical parallelism, but also by slant rhyme (stair/floor). There is a sense of closure at the end of line 6. It therefore comes as a surprise to find a true rhyme at the beginning of line 7. Because this is the poem’s only monosyllabic line, the effect is particularly striking: it seems as though the mother’s spartan accommodation, hardscrabble life, and unadorned language all converge upon the word “Bare.”

Notwithstanding such isolated effects, foot prosody is unlikely to provide much useful information about structure or content. The rhythm and the thinking of the persona are constrained not by patterns of alternating stress but by patterns of rhetoric. Like the poems in sections 2 and 3, “Mother to Son” uses the A-unit to introduce a central conceit. In this case, it is introduced by omission: the speaker spends the next three stanzas discussing how her life has *not* been a crystal stair. In the B- and C-units, once again, Hughes’s rhetoric goes to work drawing out the implications of the conceit:

- **Stanza 2 (B_1)**: The mother traverses an obstacle course that carries both socioeconomic significance, indicating the dilapidation of her tenement, and allegorical significance, indicating the pitfalls of the Jim Crow caste system: (b_1) It’s had tacks … (b_2) And splinters … (b_3) And boards … (b_4) And places with no carpet …

- **Stanza 3 (C)**: The ascent up the staircase demands all the mother's intellectual labour. She strives rhetorically for the next participle while striving allegorically for the next landing: (c_1) I's been a-climbin' … (c_2) And reachin' landin's … (c_3) And turnin' corners … (c_4) And sometimes goin' in the dark …

- **Stanza 4 (B_2)**: The reason for the mother's sense of urgency becomes apparent. Her son, discouraged by the conditions of racial segregation and the low ceiling on his social and economic mobility, is struggling to find motivation. She implores him not to give up on life: (c_1) don't you turn back … (c_2) Don't you set down … (c_3) Don't you fall now—

This is a deeply moving moment because it reveals the mother's affection and concern for her son. Yet it is also potentially chilling because the rhythm breaks off one step short of the final landing (there is no c_4). The son's future is very much in doubt; the mother is genuinely concerned that he might fall. Hughes does not invoke the figure of a struggling young African American casually. As discussed in chapter 2, a recurring theme in his poetry is that the conditions of racial segregation have pushed black Americans to their psychological breaking points, up to (and sometimes past) the point of suicide.

One wishes for an uplifting conclusion to "Mother to Son": an indication that everything will be okay if the son perseveres just a little longer. Yet the poem ends where it began:

> Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (A_1)
>
> And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (A_2)

The mother is determined not to be Sisyphus: she wants her interminable climb to mean something. Hughes further develops the allegorical dimension of this voice in *The Negro Mother* (*CW* 5:561), a narrative poem implicitly spoken by all African-American mothers who have sacrificed for their children. Although its conventional, sentimental stanzas are less formally innovative than the stanzas of "Mother to Son," *The Negro Mother* also concludes by doubling back to the opening lines. Moreover, it undertakes the remarkable project of narrating an oral, black, matrilineal history as a counternarrative to the dominant written, white, patrilineal history.

Perhaps because the persona of "I, Too" is more embedded in its historical moment than other speakers in *The Weary Blues*, its thematic development is relatively unconstrained by the volume's dominant patterns of rhetoric. There are only faint traces of chiasmus and parallelism,

with the persona's adverbial distinctions (below, boldface) primarily responsible for the sense of forward movement (1:61):

Table 6: Scansion of Hughes's "I, Too"

A1: I, **too**, sing America.

B1: I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

C: Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

B2: **Besides**,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

A2: I, **too**, am America.

The deliberately parsimonious title, "I, Too," could be spoken by any number of voices and finished in different of ways. Hughes plays upon this ambiguity by developing what Eric Griffiths calls a "mute polyphony through which we see rather than hear alternatively possible voicings, and are led by such vision to reflect on the inter-resonances of these voicings" (63).

If you interpreted the persona as a historical voice belonging to a black servant in a white household, you would be right. The servant—a "brother," or young black male in the non-familial sense—is sent to the kitchen when company arrives. Rather than allowing the indignities of segregation to compromise his self-esteem, the speaker decides that the joke is on his employer

for leaving him alone in the kitchen, with all the food: "I laugh, / And eat well, / And grow strong." This is the same laughter and the same strength in the face of segregation as appear in "Strong Men" by Sterling Brown:

> *Today they shout prohibition at you*
> *"Thou shalt not this"*
> *"Thou shalt not that"*
> *"Reserved for whites only"*
> *You laugh.*
>
> *One thing they cannot prohibit—*
> The strong men … coming on
> The strong men gittin' stronger. (*Southern* 53)

There can be no doubt that the personae of Hughes and Brown carry the imprint of their historical circumstances. Yet the psychological depth of these personae cannot be understood entirely in historical terms.

If you interpreted the persona as an allegorical voice belonging to a child, you would also be right. This voice is strongest in the B- and C-units, where the speaker is carefree and still maturing: "I laugh," / "And eat well," / "And grow strong." With the spirited indignation of one who has been sent to eat at the children's table, he imagines the day when he will be old enough to join the adults: "Nobody'll dare / Say to me, 'Eat in the kitchen,' / Then. // Besides, / They'll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed." This allegorical voice attests to the infantilisation of African-American workers. What makes this voice so compelling is that the developmental hierarchy of age has been replaced by an arbitrary of hierarchy of race: the speaker is not "the *younger* brother" but "the *darker* brother."

If you interpreted the persona as an autobiographical voice belonging to Hughes, you would, once again, be right. This voice is strongest in the title and the A-units, both of which respond to Whitman's poem, "I Hear America Singing." Hughes critiques Whitman's portrait of America, which appears to exclude the voices of non-white Americans, by suggesting that "I, Too [Am America]" and "I, Too [Am Singing]." Conscious of his youthfulness yet full of ambition, Hughes anticipates that he will someday be welcome at the table of major American poets. During his lifetime, few literary critics offered Hughes a seat at the adult's table. As recently as the nineteen nineties, "the idea of Langston Hughes being included in a discussion of major writers

would probably have been dismissed as a piece of affirmative-action silliness" (Rampersad LH-CPA 199). Notably, Hughes does not demand the desegregation of the canon as recompense for the oppression of his ancestors. He expects to be appreciated for the aesthetic merits of his work: not merely because he is black, but because "They'll see how beautiful I am."

4.2: The Blues Sonnet

"Of course," says Maya Angelou, weighing in on the Oxfordian controversy with tongue in cheek, "William Shakespeare was a black woman" (28). Angelou supports this claim with an inside joke, shared with the poets and scholars in her audience who happen to be familiar with the formal histories of the sonnet and the blues. She quotes the first eight lines of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29" (63), which manifests both the octave/sestet organisation of the Italian sonnet (below, left) and the quatrain/couplet organisation of the English sonnet (below, right). The beginning of the *volta* (reversal) is in bold:

Table 7: Stanzaic Scansion of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 29"

Italian Structure		**English Structure**
Octave (8 lines)	When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes, I all alone beweep my outcast state, And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, And look upon myself and curse my fate,	Quatrain 1 (4 lines)
	Wishing me like to one more rich in hope, Featured like him, like him with friends possessed, Desiring this man's art, and that man's scope, With what I most enjoy contented least.	Quatrain 2
Sestet (6 lines)	**Yet** in these thoughts myself almost despising, Haply I think on thee, and then my state, (Like to the lark at break of day arising From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;	Quatrain 3
	For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings That then I scorn to change my state with kings.	Couplet (2 lines)

Throughout the octave, the speaker's tone is *tragicomic*: lamenting, with a knowing sense of cosmic irony, the universe's cruel sense of humour. "[T]hat is a condition of a black woman," says Angelou (28), presumably alluding to the singers of the Classic Blues Era including Gertrude "Ma" Rainey and Bessie Smith. The normative tone of the 12-bar blues stanza is also tragicomic, as explained by Langston Hughes: "The mood of the *Blues* is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh" (*CW* 1:73). Other contributors to blues literature describe its tone as "laughable woe" (Handy 119); "near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Ellison 264); "the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted" (Baldwin 141); the "point at which even grief feels absurd" and "laughter gushes up to retrieve sanity" (Walker 115).

Angelou is one of several African-American poets to suggest an affinity between the basic situations of the sonnet (despair) and the 12-bar stanza (second-class citizenship). Yet by quoting only the octave of "Sonnet 29," Angelou implies that the redemptive *volta* of the sestet is disallowed in advance by the conditions of twentieth-century blackness and womanhood. Unlike

the white, male speaker of the Shakespearean sonnet, the lyric persona of the classic blues does not share the privilege of retreating from public disgrace to the comforts of romantic life.

Although Countee Cullen doubted whether vernacular forms "really belong to the dignified company, that select and austere circle of high literary expression which we call poetry" ("Poet" 73), his most anthologised sonnet ("Yet Do I Marvel") registers a racial tragicomedy that is only a half-step removed from the tone of the blues. After insisting, throughout the first dozen lines, that God's inscrutable ways are just, the speaker mentions one exception in the couplet: to combine the sublime impulse of a poet with the vulgar connotations of blackness seems almost premeditatedly sadistic.[42] Cullen's versificational skill is evident in the rhythm of the couplet (*Caroling* 182), which is usually described as *iambic pentameter*:

Table 8: Foot Scansion of Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel"

Yet do | I **mar**- | vel **at** | this **cur**- | ious **thing**: 13
trochee iamb iamb iamb anapest

To **make** | a **po**- | et **black**, | and **bid** | him **sing**! 14
iamb iamb iamb iamb iamb

To review a concept discussed in chapter 1: an *iambic foot* is composed of a relatively weaker syllable (e.g., "-vel") followed by a relatively stronger syllable (e.g., "at"), even if neither is conventionally accented. *Pentameter* indicates 5 metrical groupings per line. Thus, *iambic pentameter* describes a 5-foot unit that is predominantly iambic. *Trochaic* (stronger/weaker) inversions of the first foot are common: "Sonnet 29" also begins with one. Although foot prosody can be a useful explanatory convention (as Timothy Steele argues in *All The Fun's In How You Say A Thing: An Explanation Of Meter & Versification*), some find it cumbersome and imperfectly calibrated to the preferences of English speakers (Attridge, *Rhythms* 9-18; Cureton, *Rhythmic* 88-92). Regardless of how one classifies the metre of the traditional sonnet, *binary alternation* is the norm that poets satisfy, transgress, and reinvent.

[42] As far as I can tell, neither Cullen nor his contemporary Claude McKay ever emulated the techniques of the blues. Yet like McKay, Cullen wrote about the blues in "Colored Blues Singer," composed in ballad stanzas. They eschewed the 12-bar stanza, presumably, because they associated vernacularity with the stigma of blackface minstrelsy, "coon songs," and the dialect verse of Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Claude McKay's "The Negro Dancers" (1919), set in a Harlem blues club, contains the earliest thematic treatment of the blues in sonnet form. The poem's pattern of indentation parallels its schemes of cross-rhyme (quatrains 1-3) and pair rhyme (couplet), along with its *caudated* structure (8 + 4 + 2 = 14).[43] As shown in Table 3, this produces three points of convergence between metrical hierarchies (ending in "1") and rhyme schemes. In other words, McKay's orthography guides the reader's eye toward moments of closure (bold) that are also felt rhythmically and phonologically:

Table 9: Scansion of converging rhyme schemes and metrical hierarchies in McKay's "The Negro Dancers"

	Rhyme Scheme	**Metrical Hierarchy**
Lit with cheap colored lights a basement den,	a	8
With rows of chairs and tables on each side,	b	7
And, all about, young, dark-skinned women and men	a	6
Drinking and smoking, merry, vacant-eyed.	b	5
A Negro band, that scarcely seems awake,	c	4
Drones out half-heartedly a lazy tune,	d	3
While quick and willing boys their orders take	c	2
And hurry to and from the near sa**loon**.	**d**	**1**
Then suddenly a happy, lilting note	e	4
Is struck, the walk and hop and trot begin,	f	3
Under the smoke upon foul air afloat;	e	2
Around the room the laughing puppets **spin**	**f**	**1**
To sound of fiddle, drum and clarinet,	g	2
Dancing, their world of shadows to **forget**.	**g**	**1**

McKay returns to this setting, in precisely the same form, in "The Harlem Dancer" (1922), which develops themes of prostitution and the mingling of homosexual and heterosexual gazes. These sonnets influenced Hughes, as will be seen later in this section.

Whereas the 14-line sonnet allows *enjambment* (syntactic continuity) across line-endings, the 3-line blues stanza does not. Moreover, each line is typically divided by a "blues caesura" (R.

[43] For an authoritative discussion of metrical hierarchy and caudation, see Richard D. Cureton's "Meter and Metrical Reading in Temporal Poetics," especially pages 117-123 and 133-138.

Patterson 191), which corresponds, approximately, to the end of bars 1, 5, and 9 (see Tracy, "To the Tune" 80; *Langston* 147). So despite the misconception that blues prosody is loosely organised, each stanza is highly constrained by boundaries of metre and syntax. Blues singers navigated these boundaries with an elaborate repertoire of phrasal templates, which were adapted to literary verse by several African-American poets. The best way to scan the 12-bar stanza is to measure both phrasing (columns) and accentual stress (bold) (Handy 3):

Table 10: Scansion of "Boweavil Blues"

	Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
Statement:	**Boll Wee**vil,	**where** you **been** so **long**?
Repeat:	**Boll Wee**vil,	**where** you **been** so **long**?
Response:	You **stole** my **cot**ton,	**now** you **want** my **corn**.

These lyrics are *comedic* because they scold the gluttony of a personified insect. They are *tragic* because, in the blues tradition, the boll weevil came to symbolise "the South's long history of rural poverty, racism, and environmental blight" (Giesen ix).

Jean Toomer's "November Cotton Flower," a pastoral poem included in *Cane* (1923), is the earliest attempt to synchronise the sonnet and the 12-bar stanza. Toomer inserts the iconography (boll weevil), structure (midline caesura), and rhythm (2-beat / 3-beat phrases) into the pentameter framework of the sonnet:

Table 11: Polyform scansion of Toomer's "November Cotton Flower"

As blues:

Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
Boll-weevil's **com**ing,	**and** the **win**ter's **cold**

As a sonnet:

Boll-wee- | vil's **com**- | ing, **and** | the **win**- | ter's **cold**.
trochee *iamb* *iamb* *iamb* *iamb*

Although Hughes is now recognised as the founding contributor to blues poetry and the inventor of the blues sonnet (see Müller 253-254), his experiments were, in fact, part of a broader experimental trend during the Harlem Renaissance. Compare the first 6 lines of McKay's "The Negro Dancers":

Lit with **cheap colored lights** in a basement den,
With rows of chairs and tables on each side,
And, all about, young, dark-skinned women and men
Drinking and smoking, merry, vacant-eyed.
A **Negro** band, that **scarcely seems awake**,
Drones out half-heartedly a **lazy tune**.

To the first 6 lines of Hughes's "The Weary Blues":

Table 12: Structural scansion of Hughes's "The Weary Blues"

	Phrasing	Syllables
Droning a **drowsy** syncopated **tune**,	A	10
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,	A	10
I heard a **Negro** play.	B	6
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night	A	11
By the **pale dull pallor of an old gas light**	A	11
He did a **lazy** sway …	B	6

Hughes's opening line ("Drowning a drowsy syncopated tune") alludes to McKay ("Drones out half-heartedly a lazy tune"). Unambiguously, Hughes's first blues poem has one foot in the sonnet tradition.[44]

So does its companion poem, "Lenox Avenue: Midnight." Long classified as free verse (Vogel 120), the poem is, as demonstrated in section 1, a highly organised 14-liner. Like the caudated structure found in both of McKay's blues sonnets (8:4:2), "Lenox Avenue" narrows (4:2:1), then echoes this structure in reverse:

[44] The other foot is, perhaps, already treading toward the 12-bar stanza. As Catherine Morley speculates (inconclusively, but plausibly), the poem contains a recurring structural motif that can be parsed as an "AAB blues rhythm" with a truncated B-unit (201).

Table 13: Polyform scansion of Hughes's "Lenox Avenue: Midnight"

Vernacular Structure (chiastic)			**Sonnet Structure** (caudated)
	A_1	The rhythm of life Is a jazz rhythm, Honey. The gods are laughing at us.	Quatrain
	B_1	The broken heart of love, The weary, weary heart of pain,—	Sestet
	C_1	Overtones,	
	C_2	Undertones,	
	B_2	To the rumble of street cars, To the swish of rain.	
	A_2	Lenox Avenue, Honey. Midnight, And the gods are laughing at us.	Quatrain

Anyone who tries to resolve the poem's structure by scanning metrical feet has gotten off on the wrong foot. Hughes shows that it is possible to write sonnets without abandoning the phrasal templates of the vernacular tradition.

Hughes's "tom-tom of joy and laughter" (*CW* 9:35) also influenced the Francophone vernacular sonnets of the Caribbean. The tom-tom held a twofold significance for the poet Jacques Roumain, both symbolising the beating of African blood in his heart and mimicking the beating of West African polyrhythms on the drums of his native Haiti. Roumain's sonnet "Quand Bat le tam-tam" (1931) ponders its complex transatlantic heritage, imagining itself as an interracial hybrid of European form and language with African-diasporic prosody. Hughes translates Roumain's sonnet to English under the title "When the Tom-Tom Beats." Notably, Hughes organises the poem's conclusion around phrase-initial anaphora and phrase-terminal epistrophe (bold) rather than stress metre (qtd. in A. Patterson 126-127):

> **Your soul** is this image in the whispering water where
> **your fathers** bent their dark faces
> Its hidden movements **blend you** with the waves
> And the white that **made you** a mulatto is this bit
> of foam cast up, like spit, upon the shore.

Robert Hayden—who claimed to have "read all" of Hughes's books, and "attempted to write … pretty much in his style" ("Poet" 136)—also organises the sonnet "Frederick Douglass" around anaphora rather than iambic pentameter:

> **When** it is finally ours, this freedom, this liberty, this beautiful
> and terrible thing, needful to man as air,
> usable as earth; **when** it belongs at last to all,
> **when** it is truly instinct, brain matter, diastole, systole,
> reflex action; **when** it is finally won; **when** it is more
> than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians. (62)

Although it has not been possible to offer a comprehensive discussion of the blues sonnet, this section has established the form as a significant experimental development of the interwar period. To summarise the concepts introduced in section 1:

(1) The sonnet is an *accentual-syllabic* form (constraining both the number of syllables and the pattern of accentual stress) with a *volta* (reversal) in or after line 9. Its 14-line structure is achieved via *caudation* (extending, by half, the length of the preceding metrical hierarchy), usually in coordination with patterns of rhyme and syntax.

(2) The 12-bar stanza alternates 2-beat and 3-beat *hemistiches* (half-lines) around a midline *caesura* (pause). It typically *worries* (repeats with variation) the original statement, followed by a tragicomic reversal in the rhyming *response* line.

(3) Although their origins are separated by boundaries of race, class, geography, and gender, the sonnet and the blues offer enticing possibilities of formal and thematic synthesis. African-American poets began to explore these possibilities during the Harlem Renaissance. Interestingly, the earliest blues poems were written in, or in response to, the sonnet form.

These concepts have revisionary implications for the study of the African-American vernacular sonnet. The genre has recently seen renewed scholarly interest: most notably, from Timo Müller, author of "The Vernacular Sonnet and the Resurgence of Afro-Modernism in the 1940s" (2015) and *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018). Müller compares his methods to the

"historical poetics … of scholars such as Simon Jarvis" and "Yopie Prins" (*African-American* 10). It is unclear what Müller means by this: is he suggesting that Prins and Jarvis share a single set of methodological assumptions? (They do not). Or is he suggesting that his study will make an interdisciplinary effort to accommodate the methods of both Prins and Jarvis? (It does not: his study skews toward Prins's historicism and away from Jarvis's cognitivism).[45] At stake, here, is a set of divergent assumptions about the aesthetic functions of verse.

As discussed throughout the introduction, historical poetics tends to interpret what poetic form *stands for* rather than how it is *used*.[46] This has biased the study of the blues in combination with the sonnet, two forms which, from a distance, appear to be separated by a stable cultural antagonism. Most literary critics have looked no closer, believing that all they need to know about the sonnet and the blues can be inferred without the trouble of close reading. For example, Cullen's habit of sonnet-writing is said to be "emblematic" of his differences from Hughes (van Notten 145; see also Peppis 45, Howarth 235). In his seminal biography of Hughes, Rampersad invokes this ready-made contrast:

> Hughes believed in the power of inspiration and improvisation; Cullen practiced sonnets and villanelles, honed his rhymes, and searched mightily for the exact word. (63)

For this to make sense in versificational terms, it must be the case that Hughes did not write sonnets, hone his rhymes, or search mightily for the right word.[47] Hughes did all these things, putting some poems through more than a dozen drafts (Jones 1146). So Rampersad's claim only makes sense as a judgement of cultural connotation, and not as a judgement of poetic practice.

Yusef Komunyakaa returns to this antithesis:

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[45] What Müller (*African-American* 10) and Prins (13) call "historical poetics" tends to subordinate *poetics* to *history*; and what Müller (*African-American* 10) and Anthony Reed (8) call "situated formalism" tends to subordinate *form* to *situation*. While I typically agree with these scholars in principle, I find that their discussion of prosodic practice is miscalibrated to the extent that it neglects or approximates versificational nuance.

[46] See Meredith Martin's *The Rise and Fall of Meter* for an influential discussion of what iambic pentameter "means" and "stands for" (4). In the context of African-American aesthetics, Reed also interprets iambic pentameter as a metonymic standard against which colonial literature is to be measured (61). Whereas these authors conceive of metre as a social construct, this study approaches metre as a set of linguistically and biologically determined preferences; accordingly, my fundamental assumptions about how to interpret poetic language often diverge from the established norms of the field.

[47] Many Hughes scholars do believe these things to be the case. Anecdotally: at *Remembering Langston Hughes: His Art, Life, and Legacy Fifty Years Later* (2017), a conference at Princeton University that gathered the leading specialists in Hughes criticism, one talking point that arose during the first panel discussion is that Hughes is not the kind of poet to write sonnets.

> Whereas Countee Cullen and Claude McKay embraced the archaism of the Keatsian ode and the Elizabethan sonnet, respectively, Hughes grafted on to his modernist vision traditional blues. ("Langston" 1140)

As does Yasser K. R. Aman, in a chapter titled, "Race Relations as Expressed through the Ballad, the Sonnet, and the Blues":

> Cullen used the sonnet and Hughes the blues. … For Cullen the ballad, as well as the sonnet, may have functioned as a mask under which he hid his blackness. … Hughes finds the blues an effective tool through which his race can penetrate the veil. (1)

These are valuable insights, within historical parameters, yet they are unreliable as prosodic claims. One cannot cite the mere fact that Cullen wrote sonnets and Hughes wrote blues as illustrative of their differences. Hughes (and Toomer and Hayden and Brown and Brooks and dozens of lesser-known blues poets) also wrote sonnets. The *sonnet-versus-blues* binary cannot be taken for granted: it doesn't mean what most critics think it means.

Yet it is so firmly established, scholars who claim to problematise it end up rehearsing it. For example, critics who point out that Hughes combines the sonnet and the blues in *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) all indicate that Hughes utilises the blues to *simplify*, rather than *complicate*, the structure of the sonnet. Their narrative rests on two claims: (1) Hughes's "Seven Moments of Love; An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues" is "in Blues" thematically but not structurally, and is unconstrained by the traditional AAB pattern; and (2) what is most blues-like about the sequence, therefore, is its dialect, folksiness, authenticity, and formal simplicity. According to Karen Jackson Ford, "Seven Moments of Love" takes

> the thematics of simplicity to the structural level. … [It] resist[s] complication and elaboration. If we can find ways to read these atomic lyrics, we will have begun to achieve fluency in Hughes's poetry of simplicity. ("Do" 452)

James Smethurst tells a similar story:

> The blues content of the blues-sonnet hybrid transforms the bourgeois-lesser aristocratic social context of the sonnet … into a specifically, and "authentically," African-American working-class one. … [I]t is obvious that the poems of the

> sequence are neither blues nor sonnets in any typical sense. … [T]he poems of the "Seven Moments of Love" sequence are obviously not formally blues after the manner of the *aab* stanza blues poems. (*New* 147-148)

In Müller's words:

> [Hughes] replaces the traditional rhyme schemes of the sonnet with … the structural simplicity of common blues stanzas. … Hughes also incorporates traditional types of epistrophe and inflects them with the black vernacular and the themes … of both the blues and the sonnet traditions, neither of which enters his sequence in its pure form. ("Vernacular" 256-257)

This orthodox narrative appears so self-evident (Smethurst uses the word "obvious" several times in his discussion), none of these critics supplement their analysis with rigorous scansion.

Yet if one scans "Seven Moments of Love," the received wisdom about its structure is clearly incorrect. What Hughes has done, ingeniously, is to synchronise the reversal of the blues (in the response line) with the reversal of the sonnet (in the *volta* that begins the sestet):

Table 14: Polyform Scansion of Hughes's "Seven Moments of Love; An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues"

From "Un-Sonnet 1" (CW 2:24):

12-bar constraints		Sonnet constraints
statement (1):	**Gonna go get my pistol**, I said forty-four—	Octave (line 5)
statement (2):	Make you walk like a ghost if you bother me any more.	Octave (line 6)
repeat* (1):	**Gonna go get my pistol**, I mean thirty-two,	Octave (line 7)
repeat* (2):	And shoot all kinds o' shells into you.	Octave (line 8)
response (1):	**Yal, here I set thinking**—a bitter old thought	Sestet (line 9)
response (2):	About two kinds o' pistols that I ain't got.	Sestet (line 10)

From "Un-Sonnet 3" (*CW* 2:25):

12-bar constraints		Sonnet constraints
statement (1):	**Or if I wasn't so drowsy** I'd look up Joe	Octave (line 5)
statement (2):	And start a skin game with some chumps I know.	Octave (line 6)
repeat* (1):	**Or if it wasn't so late** I might take a walk	Octave (line 7)
repeat* (2):	And find somebody to kid and talk.	Octave (line 8)
response (1):	**But since I got** to get up at day,	Sestet (line 9)
response (2):	I might as well put it on in the hay.	Sestet (line 10)

The embedded AAB pattern does not, in this case, "stand for" anything: verse patterns cannot function as symbols if no one recognises them. So the primary aesthetic function of the AAB template (here, as in Hughes's more traditional 12-bar stanzas) is to supply the semiotic conditions for tragicomic irony. Whether threatening an antagonist with weapons he is too poor to own (un-sonnet 1) or lamenting the absence of friends he is too weary to accompany (un-sonnet 3), the persona is at least two steps away from ameliorating his blues. In each case, cosmic irony is felt *through* the response unit.

It is worth pausing to discuss the implications of the scansion in Table 14. Hughes can be seen to magnify the aesthetic possibilities afforded by the sonnet and the 12-bar stanza by aligning their metrical boundaries (and hence, their moments of closure and reversal). What is authentically bluesy about these poems—the sense that the speaker is laughing to keep from crying—is not (as

others have claimed) primarily a product of dialect and simplicity. Rather, it is a function of coordinated patterns of rhyme, metre, and syntax. In the synthesis of *volta* and *response*, both poems converge upon the trope of surplus emptiness: having even more of the blues than is necessary to be blue. If one kept the dialect but deleted the response unit, the irony would disappear. So one cannot adequately assess the aesthetic function of verse while giving cursory attention to prosody. Müller, for example, makes four prosodic claims about "Seven Moments of Love":

(1) It is derived in part from the "syllabic meter" of the sonnet (260). (In fact, the sonnet is accentual-syllabic).

(2) It is derived in part from the "the loose accentual four-beat" blues (260). (In fact, the blues are neither a "loose," an "accentual," nor a "four-beat" form).

(3) It uses the "freer rhythm of the blues" to loosen up "the conventional rigidity of the sonnet form" (260). (In fact, the structural relationship between these forms is nuanced).

(4) The vernacularisation of the sonnet is concurrent with the resurgence of Afro-Modernism in the 1940s (253-254). (In fact, as demonstrated in section 1, this was an interwar development).

Prior to this dissertation, scholars simply haven't given adequate attention to the technique of the African-American sonnet: which is assumed, even by formalist-leaning critics (see Westover, "African" 234), to have grown out of the political sonnets of the Romantics. However, poetic form is neither ahistorical nor apolitical. Proceeding with a cursory or misguided understanding of this form can have unanticipated consequences in other evaluative categories. Tellingly, Müller is wrong about (3) and (4) because he is wrong about (1) and (2). I return to this line of reasoning in the conclusion, which emphasises the correlation between historical and prosodic correctness.

Since the mid-twentieth century, the number of vernacular sonnets that have been written far exceeds the scope of this section. I therefore focus on three poems that allude, thematically and structurally, to the blues sonnet tradition: *The Dream Songs* by John Berryman, "The Blue Terrance" by Terrance Hayes, and "Graveyard Blues" by Natasha Trethewey. Because these poems do not belong to any single period or movement, the ensuing discussion interprets their intertextual dialogue with the form, style, and technique of their historical antecedents.

Critics have long recognised "the idiom, rhythm, and experience of a jazz-man" in Berryman's work (Meredith 28). But *mentioning* something isn't the same as *identifying* it. In contrast to the specific attention given to the techniques of Berryman's Anglo-American prosod*y* (Attridge, *Poetic* 171; Denman 90-91), his blues prosody is often discussed in general terms. Kevin Young claims to hear echoes of Hughes in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*: "Could this be the same *Dream Deferred* that Langston Hughes wrote of? Certainly it is the same postwar America" ("Responsible" 162). Noting that each dream song is written in "three sestets" (161), Young classifies their structure as "a sonnet plus some—a devil's sonnet, say (the three sixes stanzas too obvious to be ignored)" ("On Form").[48] It is unclear what, precisely, Young means by this. He seems to suggest that there are, broadly speaking, several conceptual links between Berryman's stanzas and the blues and sonnet traditions. (This is true). He might also mean that Berryman's 6-line stanzas bear structural and functional affinities to both the sestet of the sonnet and the 6-line units of Hughes's blues poems. (This is plausible).[49]

Or he might be calling attention to the uncanny similarity between the sestet motif in "The Weary Blues" (see Table 12) and the same motif in *The Dream Songs*. The resemblance is especially strong in Berryman's explicitly blues-themed poems, like "Dream Song 68," which alludes to Bessie Smith and Charlie Patton. The first stanza is scanned in Table 15:

Table 15: Structural scansion of Berryman's "Dream Song 68"

	Phrasing	Syllables
I heard, could be, a Hey there from the wing,	A	10
and I went on: Miss Bessie soundin good	A	10
that one, that night of all,	B	6
I feelin fair myself, taxes & things	A	10
seem to be back in line, like everybody should	A	12
and nobody in the snow on call	B	9

[48] During the Classic Blues Era, the blues were known (especially among African-American churchgoers) as the devil's music.
[49] According to Vendler, the "isometric form" of *The Dream Songs* evinces "Berryman's debt to the meditative Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet sequences" (36). According to Maria Johnston, Berryman's "six-line stanza" resembles "blues poetry, particularly that of Langston Hughes" (206).

While it is not obvious that this is, in fact, a blues sonnet, there are similarities. The persona is tragicomic: amusing yet pitiable. It can be inferred that he doesn't pay his taxes or show up to work on time. "Dream Song 40" also parallels the structure of "The Weary Blues" while developing one of Hughes's favourite motifs, the suicide blues.

Terrance Hayes's volume *Wind in a Box* (2006) is peppered with allusions to Hughes's work. At one point, the narrator complains that he can no longer read books without being reminded of *The Weary Blues*: whenever he encounters images of water, "I pencil L.H. [Langston Hughes] in the margin" (71). The narrator writes a one-line short poem titled "The Blue Langston," which reconstitutes (and perhaps parodies) iconography from *The Weary Blues* in a chiastic pattern:

O **Blood** of the **River songs**, O **songs** of the **River** of **Blood**. (72)

This is preceded by a longer companion poem titled "The Blue Terrance," which "brings together in a bravura way European and African American technique" (Burt 269). This "technique" is worth a closer look. Onomatopoeia from "The Weary Blues" ("Thump, thump, thump") reappears in "The Blue Terrance" ("Thump. Thump. / Thump"): in each case, with salacious connotations. And this is only one of many sonic echoes: both poems share a fabric of phonological coincidences that are, on inspection, less innocent than they appear.

In the opening sestet of "The Weary Blues" (see Table 12), sensory experience is linked to patterns of sound: sonic imagery, to alliteration ("*dr*owning a *dr*owsy"); visual imagery, to consonance ("pa*l*e du*ll* pa*ll*or of an o*l*d gas *l*ight"); kinesthetic imagery, to assonance ("l*a*zy sw*ay* / … l*a*zy sw*ay*"). There is, moreover, a sustained assonance rhyme across the poem's end-rhymes ("t*u*ne / cr*oo*n," "st*oo*l / f*oo*l," "t*oo*n / m*oo*n") and responsorial interjections ("Sweet Bl*ue*s!" / "O Bl*ue*s!" / "Weary Bl*ue*s"). These interjections carry erotic undertones. The narrator describes the musician's "ebony" hands pounding the "ivory" keys in a more-than-musical way, making the piano "moan with melody." ("Oh Blues!" exclaims the personified piano).

In "The Blue Terrance," written in terza rima, rhyming positions compound the significance of the words that occupy them. In stanza 1, the *a*-rhymes (losses/crosses) are linked to operations of arithmetic in an elementary school math class. The image of subtracting "losses," or minus-signs on a chalkboard, foreshadows the "loss" of the speaker's virginity. The word "crosses," or plus-signs on a chalkboard, foreshadows Christ's crucifixion. The *c*-rhymes (buck-

/funk/Thump) are linked by assonance to their surrounding images (thumb/humping). The speaker claims to remember "what the world was like before / I heard the tide humping the shore smooth": yet even before the Fall, the rhythm of the waves is already eroticised.

As "The Blue Terrance" reaches sexual maturity, temptation takes the form of a serpent: "a garter belt wrung / like a snake around a thigh." Positions *g* and *h* abandon the rhyme scheme, yet even these are linked sonically to the surrounding lines: "shadows" anticipates "wedding"; "night" echoes "thigh" (suggestively). Each 3-line unit mimics the structure of the 12-bar stanza, yet without performing its distinctive operations (statement/repeat/response). By the end of the fourteenth line, the poem has become something else—a Shelleyan sonnet:

Table 16: Scansion of Hayes's "The Blue Terrance" as a Shelleyan sonnet

If you subtract the minor losses,	**a**
you can return to your childhood too:	**b**
the blackboard chalked with crosses,	**a**
the math teacher's toe ring. You	**b**
can be the black boy not even the buck-	**c**
toothed girls took a liking to:	**b**
the match box, these bones in their funk	**c**
machine, this thumb worn smooth	**d**
as the belly of a shovel. Thump. Thump.	**c**
Thump. Everything I hold takes root.	**c**
I remember what the world was like before	**e**
I heard the tide humping the shore smooth,	**d**
and the lyrics asking: How long has your door	**e**
been closed? I remember a garter belt wrung	**f**
like a snake around a thigh in the shadows	**g**
of a wedding gown before it was flung	**f**
out into the bluest part of the night.	**h**

From this tangle of sounds and images, one central theme emerges: the speaker cannot access his memories of childhood independently of the language used to recall them. Although the poem does not allude explicitly to *Paradise Lost*, it wrestles with similar issues: the inability to conceive of one's Prelapsarian condition through language uncorrupted by sin. The speaker's memory and linguistic competence are put together from the building blocks of a fallen language.[50]

The 3-3-3-3-2 organisation of Hayes's poem is mirrored in Natasha Trethewey's "Graveyard Blues," where the structural echo of the 12-bar stanza is much stronger. In each stanza, the repeat line is worried:

[50] I invoke this concept with an awareness of its limitations; "on inspection," the descriptive categories of verse are "nothing like as sturdy as the 'building blocks' metaphor implies" (Hurley and O'Neill 16).

Table 17: Scansion of 12-bar phrasing in Trethewey's "Graveyard Blues"

statement:	It rained the whole time we were laying her down;
repeat:	Rained from church to grave when we put her down.
response:	The suck of mud at our feet was a hollow sound.
statement:	When the preacher called out I held up my hand;
repeat:	When he called for a witness I raised my hand—
response:	*Death stops the body's work, the soul's a journeyman.*
statement:	The sun came out when I turned to walk away,
repeat:	Glared down on me as I turned and walked away—
response:	My back to my mother, leaving her where she lay.
statement:	The road going home was pocked with holes,
repeat:	That home-going road's always full of holes;
response:	Though we slow down, time's wheel still rolls.
statement:	I wander now among names of the dead:
response:	My mother's name, stone pillow for my head.

There is a redemptive *volta* ("The sun came out")—and then there isn't ("Glared down on me"). Trethewey's elegy is comparable to Smith's "Back-Water Blues," which, as discussed in 2.5, is set during the catastrophic flooding of the Cumberland River in 1926. In the presence of death, both lyrics invoke the tragedy of the blues without the comedy. The first line of "Graveyard Blues" seems to allude, in structure and iconography, to "Back-Water Blues":

Table 18: Comparison of Smith's "Back-Water Blues" to Trethewey's "Graveyard Blues"

Smith:

Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
When it **rained** five **days**	and the **skies** turned **dark** as **night**

Trethewey:

Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
It **rained** the **whole** time	**we** were **lay**ing her **down**

What bears emphasising here is that lines of influence cannot be established without specialised methods of scansion. To say that poets use "blues rhythms" or "blues techniques" (a surprisingly common critical practice) is about as helpful as saying that poems are the product of "dates and places." Smith's highly specific influence on African-American poets, and especially African-American women, is considered in section 3.

4.3. Phrasing

As discussed in the introduction (iii), Hughes's "Note on Blues" specifies two normative constraints for the 12-bar stanza: on the one hand, tone (tragicomedy); and on the other hand, technique (a worried 3-line, 6-hemistich, 12-bar pattern of statement/repeat/response). However, as Hughes clarifies elsewhere, the *what* and the *how* of blues poetry are not exactly on different "hands." In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he writes that the "rhythm" of the blues "*becomes* ironic laughter mixed with tears" (9:33, emphasis mine). Rather than occurring independently, tragicomedy occurs through rhythm: the blues are "the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" (9:35).

Although Hughes valued the 12-bar stanza primarily as a mechanism for tragicomedy, others have valued its capacity to eschew the conventions of formal logic. In the words of Harryette Mullen: "bluish music" "obeys its own logic" (*Muse* 32).[51] Blues songs commonly begin with the phrasal template "A, A, because B": proposing to explain "why" the persona has the blues, yet in a way that leaves the question unsettled and encourages elaboration. For example, the first stanza of the "St. Louis Blues":

Table 19: Scansion of Handy's "St. Louis Blues"[52]

	Hemistich 1 (2 beats)	Hemistich 2 (3 beats)
statement:	I **hate** to **see**	the **eve**nin' **sun** go **down**,
repeat*:	Yes, I **hate** to **see**	the **eve**nin' **sun** go **down**,
response:	**Cause** my **ba**by,	**he** done **left** this **town**.

This *effect/effect/cause* structure doesn't add up in propositional terms: because the persona's partner has left town, she therefore hates to see the sunset. To make sense of this stanza, the audience must take an imaginative leap.

One can leap in many directions. The imagery tends toward the pathetic fallacy, as sunshine surrenders to the "blues" of evening. The iconography, as Adam Gussow has shown (8-10), alludes to racial terrorism. In his autobiography, Handy explains that he "had passed through towns with signs saying, 'Nigger don't let the *sun go down* on you here" (86, emphasis mine). In stanza 2 of the "St. Louis Blues," the persona resolves to pack her things and make her "getaway." Handy's autobiography, likewise, narrates his narrow escape from lynching by hiding in a "get-away" compartment on a train (46). The conventions of the blues suggest that this is a song about heartbreak. Also in his autobiography, Handy recalls that the lyrics were inspired by the despair of a jilted woman:

[51] Thomas Gardner's discussion of "thinking lyrically" through Harryette Mullen's "rhyming, resonating, four-line blocks of memory" (151) anticipates the approach of this dissertation. Yet rather than focusing on the familiar 4 X 4 structure of traditional English prosody, I apply cognitive aesthetic methods to the unique parameters of the 12-bar stanza.

[52] As performed by Smith in the short film, the "St. Louis Blues" (1929).

> She had tried to take the edge off her grief by heavy drinking, but it hadn't worked. Stumbling along the poorly lighted street, she muttered as she walked, "Ma man's got a heart like a rock cast in de sea." The expression interested me, and I stopped another woman to inquire what she meant. She replied, "Lawd, man, it's hard and gone so far from her she can't reach it." (122)

This figure of speech reappears in the 1929 film of the "St. Louis Blues," directed by Handy. The "man" mentioned in Handy's autobiography, played by the dancer Jimmy Mordecai, slaps his lover to the floor, kicks her, laughs, and says, "woman, I'll be gone before the *evenin' sun goes down*." He leaves with a younger woman, who wears cosmetics and styled hair.[53] The deserted lover, played by Bessie Smith in her only cinematic appearance, rises from the floor and sings, "My man got a heart like a rock cast in the sea" (X4). She then performs the "St. Louis Blues," as originally written by Handy.[54] In this context, it is implied that Smith finds the sunset unbearable because it reminds her that her partner is with someone else.

A formidable composer, professor, and (according to Hughes [*CW* 9:370]) a founding contributor to jazz poetry, Handy presumably invested considerable thought in these ostensibly straightforward lyrics. However, it is a different kind of thought, or thinking, than one finds in Handy's autobiography. It is like what Simon Jarvis calls "compressed semantic thinking": "the sphere of the prosodic intelligence, is a para-intentional sphere, in which the most interesting and powerful effects are always those just at the edge of the poet's superveningly explicit intelligence" ("What" 113). One wonders whether Handy "meant" for all these "meanings"—the pathetic fallacy, the iconography of racial terrorism, the drunken rambling of a lovesick woman, the implication of domestic violence, and the insinuation of racial inauthenticity—to inhabit the lyrics of a popular song. Yet there they are, filling the interpretable space between cause (departed lover) and effect (hating the sunset). Not everyone will resolve this ambiguity in the same way, which is to say that the responses of "competent" and "casual" listeners diverge.

As discussed in the introduction (ii), the relative importance of *form* and *culture* in determining competent responses to the blues has long been debated, especially during the eighties. I agree with Houston A. Baker, Jr. that the blues comprise a "mediational site where familiar antinomies are resolved (or dissolved) in the office of adequate cultural understanding" (6). Yet it

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[53] In stanza 3 of the "St. Louis Blues," the persona resents the "powder" and "store-bought hair" of the sophisticated city woman, who, it is implied, has artificially lightened her skin.

[54] In her iconic 1925 recording with Louis Armstrong, Smith sings a different version of the first stanza.

does not make sense to think of blues prosody as pure cultural mediation. Rhetorical structures are not arbitrary graphemes with culturally determined significance (see Pinker 3, Lyne 3): they are highly adapted to performing specialised tasks. So Baker underestimates the importance of rhetoric in cognitive aesthetic experience. True, he acknowledges that things like "onomatopoeia" and "cultural mimesis"—as conveyed through "sound" and "instrumental rhythms"—echo the circumstances of working-class African Americans including railroad travel and manual labour (8).[55] Yet as Margaret Freeman explains, "mimesis" and "[o]nomatopoeia" provide only the "crudest" and "narrow[est]" conditions for poetic iconicity ("Poetic" 428-429). The heavy lifting of aesthetic experience is done by syntax, metaphor, and other tropes that heighten the relative organisation of verse materials.

Even granting that Baker offers a sound assessment of blues singers (pun intended), his theory appears to disallow the possibility that the blues have value beyond the sonic texture of musical performance. This study is interested in the question, *what makes the blues valuable as literary art?* Answers to this question typically fall into one of three categories. One line of reasoning proposes is that the blues have little or no value as literary art. According to Paul Oliver,

> Blues is for singing. It is not a form of folk song that stands up particularly well when written down. … Blues can be analyzed on the printed page, but they do not exist there: blues are essentially performed—they exist in the singing and the playing. (8; see also Ward 170).

Neither the printed page nor the spoken voice can change chords, and therefore, these media cannot engage the memory and perception of readers and listeners in the same way as a vocalist. So Oliver is right that blues-based literary verse can't do the same things that blues music can do. But what if it isn't trying to?

Another possibility is that blues poetry succeeds by appealing to the "aural memory" of the competent listener (Marcoux 188), who supplies the figure of sound even in its phonological absence. This is, implicitly, the position of Steven C. Tracy, whose scansion of the 12-bar stanza in Hughes's "The Weary Blues" marks the chord changes from F to C to G, as if Tracy is "hearing" the poem while reading it ("To the Tune" 81). Yet it is telling that Hughes's "Note on Blues" offers

[55] Baker echoes Foucault, who argues that the underlying principles of literary art "cannot be adequately understood in relation to the grammatical features, formal structures, and objects of discourse" (137).

no specifications of voice, tone, or accentual stress: he apparently believed that the tragicomic essence of the blues is a product, specifically, of its rhetorical structure. Williams, too, acknowledges that blues poetry is "a verbal—as distinct from musical—genre" ("Blues" 542).

A third explanation suggests that blues poetry doesn't need sound and might even be better off without it. Henry Tompkins Kirby-Smith puts it well: "poetry is forever separating itself from its origins in music … as when Dante or Langston Hughes composed [vernacular] poems as if they could be sung to music, but which are in fact offered as verbal art" (2). According to this view, blues poetry is not an aesthetically weakened version of blues music: it is something altogether different. The unique structure of the 12-bar stanza has a capacity for multiple ironic reversals in rapid succession, as evident in Pearl Dickson's "Little Rock Blues" (bold font):

Table 20: Scansion of Dickson's "Little Rock Blues"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	I started to heaven,	**but** I changed my mind.
repeat:	I started to heaven,	**but** I changed my mind.
response:	**But** I'm going to Little Rock,	where I can have a better time.

The first line "can be construed as 'I started to embrace religion,' while on the other hand, it can mean 'I started to commit suicide and thereby access heaven.' Read either way, the narrator makes it clear that a trip to Little Rock is preferred to either piety or suicide" (Reed 57-58). These nuances are only evident to competent interpreters (which supports Baker's hypothesis), yet they can also be interpreted independently of sound (which suggests that the rhetorical structure of the 12-bar stanza is transferrable to literary art). This section will consider some of the most ambitious attempts to amplify the phrasing of the 12-bar stanza in verse and prose. Interestingly, the form of these experiments is not independent of gender.

The archetypal blues*man* at the crossroads is misleading in that the dominant voices of the Classic Blues Era belonged to women: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, "Mother" of the blues, and Smith, her protégé, "Empress" of the blues. These voices were dominant not only in their unprecedented commercial success but also in their attitudes. Smith's persona in the "St. Louis Blues" is uncharacteristic. As Angela Y. Davis explains, "blues women did not acquiesce to the idea … that

men take the road and women resort to tears. The women who sang the blues did not typically affirm female resignation and powerlessness, nor did they accept the relegation of women to private and interior spaces" (20).

In "Empty Bed Blues," Smith mourns for her departed lover and performs domestic tasks like replacing a coffee grinder. Yet while invoking the figure of the slighted female, Smith flouts the stereotype through self-conscious innuendo:

Table 21: Scansion of Smith's "Empty Bed Blues"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	Bought me a **cof**fee **grind**er	got the **best** one **I** could **find**
repeat:	Bought me a **cof**fee **grin**der	got the **best** one **I** could **find**
response:	Oh he could **grind** my **cof**fee,	cause he **had** a **brand** new **grind**

With the double entendre falling on the first musical stress—"Bought me a **COFF**ee **grind**er"; "Oh he could **GRIND** my **coff**ee"—Smith winks at her audience by exaggerating metrical prominences. In addition to these local effects, the metre of the 12-bar stanza came to function as an immediately recognizable convention. Women who participated in this convention invoked the stage presence of the classic blues queens: sometimes bellicose, often sexually uninhibited, and almost always independent with a humorous edge.

Interestingly, the first African-American woman to satisfy this convention in literary art did so in prose rather than verse. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist, Janie, confides in her friend Pheoby Watson, that she plans to leave town with her new lover, Tea Cake (139). As she does so, her speech adopts the pattern of a 12-bar stanza without the repeat line (see Cataliotti 78, Jimoh 113). One can imagine these lines being sung across 8 bars of music:

Table 22: Scansion of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	**Some** of dese **mor**nin's	**and** it **won't** be **long**,
response:	you **go**intuh **wake** up	**call**in' me and **Ah'll** be **gone**.

My scansion minimises metrico-rhythmic tension; however, as Hurston explains in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934), vernacular performance culture often preferred to maximise this tension. The rhetorical parallelism of the second hemistiches ("… and it wont be long" / "… and Ah'll be gone") suggests that the response line might be unbalanced or syncopated. Either way, this represents, to my knowledge, the earliest use of 12-bar phrasing embedded in prose. (Three years later, Hughes followed suit in his autobiography, as will be seen). The "Some of dese mornin's" motif echoes a stock phrase in African-American vernacular culture that suggests departure: in the spirituals, death or escape from slavery; in the blues, leaving town with a new lover. The allusion reinforces Janie's refusal to be tied down by marriage.

Muriel Rukeyser—a Jewish-American journalist, social activist, and creative writer who herself experimented with the 12-bar stanza—admired Smith as a seminal blues poet of comparable stature to Hughes and Sterling Brown. In *The Life of Poetry* (1949), Rukeyser regrets the marginalisation of the classic blues queens within "the doorless walls of an ambivalent society" (112). This echoes the theme of Gwendolyn Brooks's "Queen of the Blues" (1945), where the persona, Mame, is an aging blues singer trapped in the repressive 4 X 4 dimensions of the ballad stanza. The poem narrates Mame's relegation to demeaning work at a sleazy blues club. Adding insult to injury, Mame, like the persona of the "St. Louis Blues," has lost her lover to a woman with lighter skin. At this moment, she begins to speak through the 12-bar stanza:

Table 23: Scansion of Brooks's "Queen of the Blues"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	I **loved** my **dad**dy.	But **what** did my **dad**dy **do**?
repeat:	I **loved** my **dad**dy.	But **what** did my **dad**dy **do**?
response:	Found him a **brown**-skin **chick**en	What's **gon**na be **black** and **blue**.

Mitigating tragedy with comedy, Mame resolves to beat the "brown-skin chicken" "black" (i.e., *as black as my skin*) and "blue" (i.e., *as blue as I feel*). One can make the same play on words in the ballad stanza, but it doesn't come out the same way:

I loved my daddy.
But what did he do?
Ran off with brown girl
who's gonna be black and blue.

When the conventional 2-beat / 3-beat pulse and the suspense of the repeat line are replaced by the insistent, singsong metre of the ballad, the irony is weakened. So Brooks does not begin, on the one hand, with a 12-bar stanza (as an arbitrary container) and on the other hand, with Mame's distinctive personality (which could just as easily manifest itself in some other form). Rather, the 12-bar stanza plays an immanent role in generating Mame's personality and character.

Like Hurston, Maya Angelou experiments with the blues in a suggestive way. And like Hurston, Angelou does so by embedding it in prose. In the opening scene of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), a young Angelou performs a song that is, as noted by Cherron A. Barnwell (136), a 12-bar stanza. Each phrase of the initial statement carries a double meaning. Hemistich 1 calls attention to her anxiety (she has stage fright), while hemistich 2 advertises her irrepressible urge to run offstage (she has forgotten to use the restroom). Distracted, she begins to sing the repeat line again, before cramming the entire response into the second hemistich:

Table 24: Scansion of Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	What you **look**ing at **me** for?	**I** didn't **come** to **stay** …
repeat:	What you **look**ing at **me** for?	**I** didn't **come** to **stay** …
response:	What you **look**ing at **me** for …	Ijustcometotellyouit'sEasterDay

It is nearly a good save, but the recovery is late. Metrical stresses remain undifferentiated ("jamming the words together") and the sound of the other children laughing only exacerbates the need to relieve herself ("giggles hung in the air like melting clouds that were waiting to rain on me") (3-5). Angelou drives home the tragicomic irony of the 12-bar stanza not by getting its prosody right, but by getting it wrong.

In the poem "Someone Sweet Angel Child," Sherley Anne Williams admires Bessie Smith's talent for "singing / just behind the beat" (567)—a technique that is impossible to reproduce in literary verse. So Williams emulates Brooks's solution: retaining the dialect, metrical stresses, and phrasal templates of the 12-bar stanza while heightening its phonological texture and visual organisation on the printed page. For example, "Any Woman's Blues":

Table 25: Scansion of Williams's "Any Woman's Blues"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	**Soft** lamp **shin**in	and **me** a**lone** in the **night**.
repeat*:	**Soft** lamp is **shin**in	and **me** a**lone** in the **night**.
response:	Can't **take** no one be**side** me	need **mo'n** jest some **man** to set me **right**.

Whereas Smith's bed in "Empty Bed Blues" does not stay empty for long, Williams has no sense of urgency to procure a new coffee grinder. Like her precursor, Williams disregards conventional gender roles; yet in a voice that is distinctively her own, she declares that men are not the solution to her problem.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that 12-bar phrasing “stands for” racial protest or black feminism or self-affirmation or any single concept. It is capable of standing for these things, but that does not explain its popularity among black poets of the twentieth century. As Brooks put it, “[e]very Negro poet has ‘something to say,’” but “no real artist is going to be content with offering raw materials” (“Poets” 312). The value of the 12-bar stanza is its capacity to “say” things about (for example) identity politics that cannot be said in prose. My argument, therefore, is that blues prosody appears to play a nuanced role in facilitating an intertextual dialogue among Smith, Brooks, and Williams. Although the mechanisms of this dialogue are still being worked out, the logical implication of Brooks’s statement is that one cannot interpret the aesthetic “content” of blues poetry in the same way that one interprets the letters, essays, and speeches of blues poets.

On the one hand, as Charles Keil observed in 1966, African-American artists often use rhythmic patterns as indicators of “in-group solidarity” (43). This perhaps explains why the 12-bar phrasing considered in this section (tables 22-25) has thus far emulated the 2-beat / 3-beat pulse of musical performance. Each is visually foregrounded: either printed as verse (Brooks, Williams) or differentiated from the surrounding prose by quotation marks (Hurston, Angelou). On the other hand, as I have emphasised throughout this study, accentual stress is not the only systematic measure of the 12-bar stanza: the 6-hemistich structure is also a kind of metrical organisation. This section concludes by considering several specimens that are not visually foregrounded; that abandon the 5-beat metre of the traditional 12-bar stanza; and that otherwise conceal their formal identity. So in addition to being experimental, irregular, and non-traditional, they are also surreptitious, clandestine, or undifferentiated from their surroundings. Each represents an original discovery of this study.

While Hughes is increasingly recognised as a “major” American poet (Whalan 373), some are more impressed by his prose (see Atmore 287-288). Harold Bloom, at best a lukewarm admirer of Hughes’s prosody, points to the iconic description of Wallace Thurman in *The Big Sea* (1940) as an example of Hughes at his best: the passage contains “a mode of irony almost his own” (*LH*-MCV 3). Perhaps Hughes doesn’t need the 12-bar stanza to achieve his signature tragicomedy. Then again, when one scans the structure of the passage, perhaps he does. Thurman is described as “a strange kind of fellow”

Table 26: Scansion of Hughes's *The Big Sea*

	Hemistich 1 (anticipation)	Hemistich 2 (reversal)
statement:	**who liked** to drink gin,	**but** didn't like to drink gin;
repeat:	**who liked** being a Negro,	**but** felt it a great handicap;
response:	**who adored** bohemianism,	**but** thought it wrong to be a bohemian.

Coincidence, right? Except the next sentence is constrained in the same way:

	Hemistich 1 (anticipation)	Hemistich 2 (reversal)
statement:	**He liked** to waste a lot of time,	**but** he always felt guilty wasting time.
repeat:	**He loathed** crowds,	**yet** he hated to be alone.
response:	**He** almost always **felt bad**,	**yet** he didn't write poetry.

Perhaps Bloom *is* an admirer of Hughes's prosody without realising it. The rhythm of alternating phrases falls within the purview of literary prosody, with its distinct 6-hemistich structure creating the conditions for tragicomic irony. Hughes exploits the form's potential for rapid reversals, both at the level of the line and the level of the stanza. In both sentences, the second clause or predicate of each unit reverses the logic of the first. The effect is strongest in the final clause, which reverses, at once, the logic of the penultimate clause *and* the phrasal template used in the previous five iterations.[56] Hughes could easily offset these lines from the rest of the text to call attention to their craftsmanship. As he does, for example, three sentences later, differentiating an 8-bar blues stanza and foregrounding the relationship between cognition and tragicomedy:

> You don't know,
> You don't know my mind—
> When you see me laughin',
> I'm laughin' to keep from cryin'. (*CW* 13:185)[57]

[56] This is the same general trope of anticipation and reversal analysed in 2.3, for example, in Henry Thomas's "Texas Worried Blues."

[57] This relationship is foregrounded not only through visual segmentation, but also by the placement of the rhyming positions: "my mind" / "laughin' to keep from cryin'."

Yet Hughes allows his 12-bar phrasing to blend almost imperceptibly into his prose, as if he preferred that no one notice.

Two years later, Hughes was back at it, imposing the constraints of the 12-bar stanza in obscure places no one would think to look for them. As discussed in 4.2 (Table 14), "Seven Moments of Love; An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues" synchronises the octave/sestet structure of the sonnet with the statement/repeat/response structure of the blues. In addition to concealing his phrasing, Hughes deflects attention away from the experiment on several occasions. He lies—both to the public ("Langston Hughes Speaking") and to other poets (Hayden, *CPr* 136)—about never having written sonnets. However, Hayden, who claimed to have "read all" of Hughes's books and learned to write "pretty much in his style" (136), knew better than to believe him. As Hayden drifted toward high modernism, he came to find Hughes's lexical choices distasteful. Nevertheless, he continued to admire, and emulate, Hughes's "[b]lues and jazz … motifs and verse patterns" (*CPr* 46-47)—as will be seen later in this section.

During the free jazz era of the late sixties and early seventies, many African-American poets abandoned the formal constraints of the 12-bar stanza for the apparent formlessness of *avant-garde* jazz. Sonia Sanchez's "A/Coltrane/Poem," anthologised in Stephen E. Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1973), epitomises the conventions of the Coltrane poem: radical orthography and indentation, the personification of a saxophonist's screech, and the disillusionment with the agendas of previous generations of black poets. "The End of an Ethnic Dream" by Jay Wright—advertised in the November 20, 1969 edition of *The Wellesley News* as the work of "a young black social-consciousness poet" ("Jay Wright" 3)—satisfies each of these conventions. Or it seems so from a distance.

Wright's semi-autobiographical persona, a musician-turned-intellectual, complains that his mind hurts, rather than his fingers: "Cigarettes in my mouth / to puncture blisters in my brain" (a). Unused musical instruments collect dust in the background: "My bass, a fine piece of furniture" (b). The dreams of King (assassinated 1968) and Hughes (died 1967) feel suddenly anachronistic: "Now, / it's the end / of an ethnic dream" (c). The poem proceeds with no discernible symmetry, until one unit unexpectedly repeats itself. Wright then concludes by echoing, in reverse, the lines quoted in this paragraph: (c), (b), (a). The symmetry of the conclusion is only visible when one

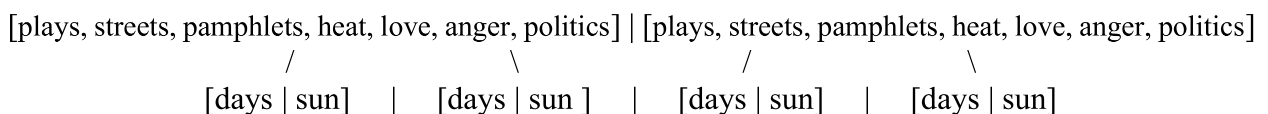
scans it phrasal organisation. The worrying of the repeat line is in italics; the anaphora and epistrophe of the second hemistiches is in bold:

Table 27: Scansion of Wright's "The End of an Ethnic Dream"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	Here, there are coffee shops, bars, natural tonsorial parlors,	plays, streets, pamphlets, **days**, **sun**, heat, love, anger, politics, **days**, and **sun**.
repeat*:	Here, ***we shoot off every day to new horizons***, coffee shops, bars, natural tonsorial parlors,	plays, streets, pamphlets, **days**, **sun**, heat, love, anger, politics, **days**, and **sun**.
response:	It is the end of an ethnic dream.	**My bass** a fine piece of furniture. **My brain** blistered.

The "play-on-syntax" in the A-units is best observed through a branching diagram. Ingeniously, diurnal pairings (the persona's daily tedium) revolve within larger syntactic units (e.g., the persona's weekly tedium):

Table 28: Branching Diagram of Wright's "The End of an Ethnic Dream"



Phrasal units of soul-destroying monotony are nested one inside the other. The insipidness of the persona's routine is strongest at the end of the repeat line, where "days" and "sun" bring simultaneous closure to repetitive groupings of two and four. The worried segment of the repeat line—"we shoot off every day to new horizons"—is bitterly ironic (the new horizons are precisely the same as the old ones). After lionising, satirically, the glamorous lifestyle of a writer, the stanza shifts to the self-deprecating humour of the response line. This is Wright's erudite appropriation of tragicomic irony: the persona has a terrible case of the intellectual blues. It is unclear how much,

or what kind of irony to read into the speaker's tone. If this is an elegy for Hughes's "dream deferred," it resuscitates Hughes's favourite phrasal template.

In 1970, Michael S. Harper published a Coltrane poem that behaves like a responsorial Russian doll. Moving from largest to smallest: volume (*Dear John, Dear Coltrane*), title poem ("Dear John, Dear Coltrane"), epigraph (*a love supreme, a love supreme*). The title poem also contains an italicised stanza in call-and-response pattering. Scholars have offered different explanations for this motif, especially as it pertains to consciousness. From a cognitivist perspective, Harper's experimental syntax liberates readers from the constraints of propositional language: it "disintegrates expectations and dislocates accepted relations, semantic as well as epistemological," replacing formal logic with "call-and-response logic" (Benston 181, 183). Others suspect that this Coltranian mode of cognition is largely a "myth," associated with "essential" "African origins" (Whyton 112). Viewed from a historical perspective, Harper's "call-and-response framework" looks more like a "symbol" of (though not a medium for) "black consciousness"; "an exemplar of" (though not a mode of) "improvisatory greatness and blackness" (Martin 66).

These are different kinds of claims—the former pertaining to poetic *iconicity*; the latter, to a cultural *icon*—and are not mutually incompatible. Each can be evaluated more clearly when the stanza's structure is diagrammed. Twelve total phrases are divided into three units. The first establishes the theme, the second repeats this theme with minor variation, and the third answers this theme with the poem's epigraph:

Table 29: Scansion of Harper's "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"

	1 (Call)	2 (Response)
statement:	*Why you so black?* *why you so funky?*	*cause I am* *cause I am*
repeat*:	*why you so black?* *why you so sweet?*	*cause I am* *cause I am*
response:	*why you so black?* *a love supreme,*	*cause I am* *a love supreme:* (74)

Anyone who tries to explain what is innovative about this stanza in terms of stress metre (e.g., by marking 4 feet per line) has gotten off on the wrong foot. As Harper explains of his experimentation during the sixties, "I was writing in 'phrasing' when all my Iowa classmates were writing in rhyme and meter" ("Michael" 272). What is new and innovative about Harper's work has less to do with beats and offbeats than with the enigmatic open-endedness of the twelve phrases (one per bar of music), which appear to "speak" for Coltrane's saxophone.

At the conclusion of Coltrane's interlude, the persona asks, "what does it all mean?" (74), a question that pertains thematically to racial terrorism and hermeneutically to the interpretation of musical phrasing. Because the poetic syntax is derived from instrumentational syntax, the poem could easily come out sounding like nonsense verse, yet Harper's does not. It exchanges meaningful patterns of call-and-response within an AAB grouping to explore paradoxes of racial identity. One need not cherish essentialist notions of a Pan-African collective consciousness to acknowledge that Harper's Coltrane poem "thinks" differently: both from prose, and from other poems in the genre. In an interview with Heather Treseler, Harper cautions against paraphrasing the aesthetic content of his verse: "the act of composition" cannot "be distilled into a slogan, or an easy thesis" (108). Summarising the meaning of Harper's poem is like offering a synopsis of Coltrane's virtuosity.

Viewed from a distance, Robert Hayden's "Homage to the Empress of the Blues" appears not to participate in the conventions of the 12-bar stanza. It contains the kind of obscurantist language that Hughes found unpalatable. The poem's images—including a man "in a candystripe silk shirt, / gracile and dangerous as a jaguar," and "torn hurdygurdy lithographs of dollfaced heaven" (*CPo* 32)—evince the speaker's erudition. Images are sufficiently precise to constrain potential interpretations yet sufficiently vague to occlude their referents. The central action of stanza 1 occurs "somewhere"; the action of stanza 2, "somewhere" else. On inspection, "Homage" is less like a tribute poem and more like *The Waste Land* of the blues tradition: a condensed mini-epic full of recondite allusions. In some ways, "Homage" is like an inkblot, muddling visual content into an interpretable sequence. In other ways it is kaleidoscopic, fragmenting scenes from the African-American community into a jumble of overlapping narratives. The poem reminds Ann DuCille of the rollicking, Roaring Twenties:

> Jazz. Blues. Boogie-woogie, black bottom, shimmy, shake, and mess around. Black bodies moving by the millions from southern shacks to northern slums, moving to the beat of the New Negro in a new world. Freud. Sex. Speakeasies and bootlegged gin. Marcus Garvey. Victory in Europe. Breadlines. Unemployment. Race riots and mob violence. Rent parties and literary salons. Detroit. Chicago. *Home to Harlem*. *Nigger Heaven*. The "authentic," "real colored thing." Josephine Baker. Ma Rainey. Bessie Smith. "Love Oh Love Oh Careless Aggravating Love." (66)

This word association epitomises the suggestiveness of Hayden's imagery. However, these images are not working in isolation: their tantalising open-endedness is amplified by Hayden's syntax. Although the "structure of the poem is cause and effect—because this happened, this happened"—"the causes are not clearly correlative to the resultant fact" (Phillips 100-101). The

> syntactical frame ("Because…") keeps us aware of the larger sentence that unfolds through each four-plus-two line stanza. This elaborate syntax of logical certainty also highlights the apparent illogic of the statements. How could the existence of the man in the "candystripe silk shirt" and the white policemen's "fists of snow" on the door cause Bessie Smith's resplendent appearance on stage? (Hartman 166)

Phillips and Hartman do not say whether there is anything bluesy about the poem's structure. (Indeed, they seem to think it is not blues-like). Although some have suggested that the narrative / refrain sequence of "Homage" has the "general form of a blues song" (Fetrow 56), the consensus is that "Hayden does not employ the [AAB] blues stanza" in the poem (Rashid 204).

In fact, when one scans Hayden's rhetoric (rather than stress metre), the AAB structure is unmistakable (*CPo* 32):

Table 30: Scansion of Hayden's "Homage to the Empress of the Blues"

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	**Because there was a man** somewhere in a candystripe silk shirt,	gracile and dangerous as a jaguar
repeat:	and **because a woman** moaned for him	Faithless Love / Twotiming Love Oh Love Oh Careless Aggravating Love,
response:	**She came out on the stage** in yards of pearls, emerging like	a favorite scenic view, flashed her golden smile and sang.

Stanza 2 is constrained in the same manner:

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	**Because** grey laths began somewhere to show from underneath	torn hurdygurdy lithographs of dollfaced heaven;
repeat:	**and because** there were those who feared alarming fists of snow	on the door and those who feared the riot-squad of statistics,
response:	**She came out on the stage** in ostrich feathers, beaded satin,	and shone that smile on us and sang.

The "dangerous" man in the "candystripe silk shirt" perhaps alludes to the dangerous man with a silk shirt and striped necktie in Handy's film:

Figure 12: Scene from *St. Louis Blues*: Smith (centre) catches her boyfriend (Jimmy Mordecai, right) with a new girlfriend (Isabel Washington Powell, left)

Source: Albertson 194.

Other interpretations have been suggested: most of them compelling, and inconclusive. Rather than trying to make sense of the poem, I am more interested in evaluating its engines of sense-making. I propose that Hayden's purpose is to rearrange the effect/effect/cause structure of the "St. Louis Blues" into a pattern of cause/cause/effect. He inverts the 12-bar stanza, turns its phrasal templates inside-out, holds them up for analysis, and foregrounds their almost Baroque structure of internal contradictions. To a highly trained ear, Hayden suggests, the 12-bar stanza is an elaborate non sequitur.

The speaking voice in "Homage" emulates the workings of memory as it strives to fill in the gaps between cause and effect with half-recollected fragments. These memories belong to Hayden, who recalls his experience of a Bessie Smith concert at the Koppin Theater in Chicago.

Yet they also belong to the predominantly black audience at the theatre (and, via synecdoche, to the African-American community), a voice which identifies itself, in the last line, as "us." Their shared experiences—of heartbreak and domestic violence (stanza 1), and of urban decay and police brutality (stanza 2)—along with the shared interpretive conventions of the blues, allow them to "know" what Smith is singing about. This knowledge is contingent on the structure and conventions of the blues stanza. The aesthetic function of Hayden's 12-bar phrasing is not to stand for anything, but rather (in Hayden's words), to say "what cannot be said or at least not said so effectively in any other form" (*CPr* 12).

Komunyakaa, another admirer of Hughes's "simultaneous laughter and crying" ("Langston" 1140-1141), peppers his verse with allusions to vernacular phrasing. "Blues Chant Hoodoo Revival," constrained by an apparent pattern of call-and-response, invokes the 8-bar form:

> my story is
> inside a wino's bottle
> the cup blood leaps into
> eight-to-the-bar. (*Neon* 82)

Similarly, "No-Good Blues" invokes the 12-bar form. The entire first stanza is worth quoting:

> I try to hide in Proust,
> Mallarme, & Camus,
> but the no-good blues
> come looking for me. Yeah,
> come sliding in like good love
> on a tongue of grease & sham,
> built up from the ground.
> I used to think a super-8 gearbox
> did the job, that a five-hundred-dollar suit
> would keep me out of Robert Johnson's
> shoes. I rhyme Baudelaire
> with Apollinaire, hurting
> to get beyond crossroads & goofer
> dust, *outrunning a twelve-bar*
> *pulsebeat*. But I pick up
> a hitchhiker outside Jackson.
> Tasseled boots & skin-tight
> jeans. You know the rest. (644, emphasis mine)

"No-Good Blues" reads like a mock epic with a semi-autobiographical folk hero. A would-be assimilationist, the persona disguises himself with identity markers of whiteness: "a super-8 gearbox," "a five-hundred-dollar suit"; "Baudelaire / Apollinaire." The hero's tragic flaw (in this, and all successive stanzas) is that he can't stop stumbling into the most blues-like sexual encounters. He fails in "outrunning a twelve-bar pulsebeat" and steps unwittingly into the "shoes" of "Robert Johnson," the bluesman at the crossroads who boasts of a new conquest in every city.

The "twelve-bar / pulsebeat" is surreptitiously echoed in the structure of the poem. The six stanzas, which look like free verse from a distance, are isomorphic: each contains 18 lines and begins with a recurring phrasal template.[58] When one isolates the blues motif at the beginning of stanzas 1-3, a familiar pattern emerges:

[58] Komunyakaa's "Blue Dementia" also uses a recurring template in groupings of three.

Table 31: Scansion of Komunyakaa's "No-Good Blues"

Stanzas 1-3:

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	I try to hide in Proust, Mallarme, & Camus,	but the no-good blues come looking for me.
repeat:	I spend winter days with Monet, seduced by his light.	But the no-good blues come looking for me.
response:	At the Napoleon House Beethoven's Fifth draws shadows from the walls,	& the no-good blues come looking for me.

Stanzas 4-6:

	Hemistich 1	Hemistich 2
statement:	Working swing shift at McGraw-Edison, I shoot screws into cooler cabinets as if I were born to do it.	But the no-good blues come looking for me.
repeat:	My hands are white with chalk at The Emporium in Colorado Springs,	but the no-good blues come looking for me.
response:	I'm cornered at Birdland like a two-headed man hexing himself.	But the no-good blues come looking for me.

In the first three stanzas, the persona's burgeoning classicism finds outlets in European literature (Proust, Mallarme, Camus), painting (Monet), and music (Beethoven), yet keeps getting side-tracked by those no-good blues (a leitmotif for unplanned sexual liaisons). In stanzas 4-6, images are taken from Komunyakaa's personal life: assembling coolers "at McGraw-Edison," where he worked in 1971; playing pool "in Colorado Springs," where he worked in 1973; and attending a show "at Birdland," a jazz club in Manhattan. His story has become synchronised to the internal logic of the 12-bar stanza.

This is not the logic of loose iambic pentameter: a misconception which, as discussed throughout this study (especially in 1.5), has caused generations of critics to mischaracterise the

structure and complexity of blues poetry. Even the most cautious invocations of this analogy leave something to be desired. For example, Charles O. Hartman writes,

> The most typical blues stanza is three lines, each of about five beats. The second line usually repeats the first. All three lines rhyme. (Therefore any heroic couplet *can* be sung as a blues, appropriately or not.) (278)

Hartman's point is that the 5-beat line is the standard from which others deviate. This is sometimes true. Whether visually irregular (Brooks, Williams) or embedded in prose (Hurston, Angelou), the 12-bar specimens considered at the beginning of this section either satisfy or transgress a 5-beat norm. Yet as Hurston points out, it is a category mistake to treat the blues as a stress-metered form because its underlying structure is best described as a "rhythm of segments" ("Characteristics" 35).

When 12-bar phrasing abandons the 5-beat norm but retains the 6-hemistich organisation, Hartman's definition becomes irrelevant. The specimens considered in the second half of this section (tables 26-31) neither satisfy nor transgress patterns of accentual stress; their underlying structure can only be measured systematically in terms of phrasal segmentation. This is not a trivial concern: as observed in the discussion of Hayden's "Homage," Hartman and several others misidentify the poem's structure because they conceive of the 12-bar stanza in terms of accentual stress. I propose that phrasing, rather than stress metre, provides a more reliable standard: firstly, because it explains the organisation of both conventional and experimental specimens; and secondly, because it is correlated to the heightened aesthetic cognition of poets and readers. The question of why prosody matters—and especially, why it ought to matter to historians—is discussed in the conclusion.

Conclusion: "The Weary Blues" and Hughes's Legacy of Virtuosity

This study began by suggesting that blues poetry overlaps with two different approaches to "aesthetic" criticism, which have been described as "historicism" and "aesthetic formalism" (Jay 211-212).[59] Some view these approaches as complementary, studying the same thing from different angles, like "two sides to the same coin" (212). Prins, too, uses this analogy to suggest that she has already accommodated the concerns of cognitivism: "cognition," or "thinking-through-making," and "recognition," or "thinking-through-reading," are "two sides of the same coin that pay and repay close attention to poems" (15). This is a good analogy because Jarvis focuses on how poets make *verse*, Prins focuses on how readers create *lyric*, and both are (generally speaking) correct on their own terms. Yet these are different kinds of creation, and different kinds of cognition, that defy straightforward comparison. Are we to understand from Prins's analogy that, say, Van Vechten's fetish for exotic blackness is the flipside of Hughes's rhetorical experimentation?

Prins appears to imply that Jarvis's cognitive poetic criticism is so interested in "heads," it forgets about tails. There is something plausible about this suggestion, yet it takes the form of a false dilemma: Jarvis's concept of thinking in verse is already a two-sided coin. On one side, "virtuosically fantasized significances of art-verse prosody"; on the other, "answeringly virtuosic performances of fantasy from their readers" ("What" 112). This is the same two-sided coin described by Eliot: on one side, the "conscious virtuosity" of the poet; on the other, "a virtuosity of interpretation on the part of the audience" (269). The binary at stake is not cognition/recognition but virtuosity and everything else. Perhaps what Eliot and Jarvis are being held accountable for, in a roundabout way, is the arbitration of taste: neither seems particularly interested in verse unless it is refined or idiosyncratic. The question is not whether to study writers or readers, but whether to focus on virtuosity (Vendler, Jarvis) or national discourse (Prins, Martin).

To give a sense of how this discussion impacts blues aesthetic criticism, I conclude with two divergent interpretations. The first is historically driven, the second is stylistically driven, and

[59] Jay proposes that "new" historicism offers a way forward—and a way backward (212). Although the terms of the discussion have shifted over the past three decades, most of his underlying concerns are still relevant.

each tells a different story about the founding documents of the blues tradition.[60] These three texts were published by Hughes between 1926 and 1927: *The Weary Blues*, which introduces the 12-bar stanza to literary verse; "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which defends the literary value of vernacular art; and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, which defines the constraints of the 12-bar stanza and explores the form's literary potential. These are products of a singular era, bearing the imprint of socioeconomics (Jim Crow, the Roaring Twenties), cultural politics (Black Nationalist and New Negro Movements), and racial periodicals (*The Crisis*, *Opportunity*). They are also products of a singular poet, bearing the imprints of rhythms (antiphony, worrying), rhetoric (chiasmus, 12-bar phrasing), ironies (anticlimax, tragicomedy), and iconography (blood, rivers). Depending on which idiosyncrasies one pays attention to, the "aesthetic" contents, functions, and legacies of these documents look extremely different: especially concerning the questions of whether Hughes was a virtuoso, and for what reasons.

In the decade following Hughes's death, there were attempts to frame his legacy in versificational terms: by Theodore R. Hudson, who marked Hughes's 12-bar stanzas for their patterns of stress metre (24-45); and by Sherley Anne Williams, who took a better-calibrated approach ("Blues" 542-554) that Tracy later developed into a system of scansion. Yet many found it hard to believe that Hughes's prosodic craft is worthy of close study. As Hughes acknowledges in his autobiography,

> there are seldom many changes in my poems, once they're down. Generally, the first two or three lines come to me from something I'm thinking about, or looking at, or doing, and the rest of the poem (if there is to be a poem) flows from those first few lines, usually right away. (*CW* 13:66).

Interpretations of this passage long focused on how Hughes "did little rewriting" because he sought to emulate the practices of the "common people," from "the most ordinary person" to "the lowest human being" (Huggins 222); he "did not emulate consciously elitist modernists like Ezra Pound" (A. Schwartz 68-69). Recently, critics have challenged these assumptions—Hughes did, in fact, revise meticulously (M. Jones, "Listening" 1146), and emulated his pen-pal Pound in *Montage of*

[60] I focus primarily on the contributions of Rampersad, Hughes's definitive biographer, and Chinitz, who converges with Rampersad on questions of style. Despite a comprehensive familiarity with Hughes's verse and an exemplary understanding of his style, these critics (who echo, authoritatively, the norms of the field) are likelier to cut corners in discussions of prosody than in discussions of history.

a Dream Deferred (R. Wallace 89)—yet Hughes hasn't quite lived down his reputation as a casual versifier.

Rampersad appears to agree with Huggins's assessment that Hughes "never studied versification in any formal way" (221). Reading between the lines, one gets the sense that Rampersad appreciates Hughes primarily as a poet of connotation. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" succeeds because its "diction" "is simple and unaffected either by dialect or rhetorical excess; its eloquence is like that of the best of the black spirituals" (40). In "Mother to Son," "Hughes boldly reclaimed the use of dialect" by allowing the mother "to speak nobly" (43). The proem, "Negro," is "[l]ess successful," but still notable for its "radical" use of the word "black," an allusion to "The Song of the Smoke" by Du Bois (44).[61] Stylistically, the poem is an echo of Sandburg, without the sensationalism (44; see also Chinitz 43). If Hughes was doing anything experimental with his rhetoric, syntax, or iconography (Rampersad and Chinitz seem to think he was not), these experiments never factor into the discussion. It is implied that what is radically new about Hughes's art is best observed in the symbolic and mimetic effects of his verse.

While this interpretation of *The Weary Blues* does not ignore Hughes's prosody, it tends to interpret metre as "standing for" something. For example, the structure of the title poem is usually interpreted as having a stress-metered *frame* (representing a European "formal" tradition) which encompasses folk *specimens* (representing an African-American "vernacular" tradition):

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more— } **Frame**

"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied— } **Specimen**
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

[61] As I argued in chapter 4, the most striking similarity between these poems is not the radical connotations of their language but their unconventionally chiastic structures.

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon. (*CW* 1:23) **Frame**

Critical discussions tend to regard the frame as relatively more organised and the specimens as relatively less organised: "formal poetry" frames "the lowly blues" (Rampersad, *Life* 1:66); "formal poetry" frames "oral tradition" (Bloom, *African-American* 1:5); "highly structured, rhymed stanzas" frame "blues rhythms" (Kelley 94); "European rhyming pentameter couplets" frame "the 'folk' blues" of "the uncouth swain" (Ramazani 145). However, when it comes to explaining what makes frame and specimen different, critics cannot seem to tell the apart:

- The frame has been classified as a heroic couplet (Ramazani 145, R. Phillips 96), or at least a "loosely conventional" version of it (Rampersad, *Life* 1:65);

- The 12-bar stanza has been classified as "rough iambic pentameter, … a cousin to the AB heroic couplet" (Chinitz 77; see also Tyler 71, Moses 625).

These definitions, which are supposed to classify very different things, accidentally converge: frame and specimen are both portrayed as "loose" or "rough" heroic couplets. Given sufficiently vague parameters, one metre begins to sound like another. Glaser comes nearest the mark by suggesting the metrical ambiguity of the frame: "Hughes's 'Weary Blues' can largely be scanned either as four-beat accentual verse or loose iambic pentameter" ("Folk" 431). Yet Glaser might still be accused of begging the question: both options are regularly alternating syllabic or accentual-syllabic metres (against which, Hughes's worried preferences will always appear "loose").

Quibbling over "looseness," a throwaway word, seems like pettifoggery. Yet prosodic correctness is not a throwaway issue. If Hughes's aesthetic innovation is to simplify traditional constraints, he is something like a populist or an iconoclast. His cardinal prosodic achievement is symbolic: declaring the tastes of "the black masses" (Rampersad 9, Chinitz 67, Hayman 85, Marcoux 28) to have literary value. Alternatively, if Hughes's aesthetic innovation is to introduce new constraints to literary verse, which present formidable challenges of their own, he is more like an experimentalist and a virtuoso. The distinction matters. Although the looseness of Hughes's rhythms, and of blues prosody in general, is pervasively invoked, critics are noncommittal about

whether it represents an increase or a decrease in complexity. (The safe money is on *decrease*: Hughes's "blues poems are not replete with delicately calculated formal devices" [Chinitz 76]). Or rather, they seem to commit to both positions at once without having thought the matter through in versificational terms.

Rampersad acknowledges that the "technical virtuosity" of "The Weary Blues" "is seen only when one measures [its lines] against the cadences of urban black speech, … with its glissandos, arpeggios, and sudden, unconventional stops" (*Life* 1:65). So why does Rampersad not "measure" them? The relationship between glissandos and arpeggios (modifications of tonality) and Hughes's verse (which has no chord progression) is not self-evident. Perhaps he is writing metaphorically. Chinitz, too, comments on the poem's "elaborate technique" (44), yet this is more a judgement of connotation (elaborate-because-formal) than an assessment of style. Such claims are too vague to verify, refine, or falsify. It is unclear (a) by what standards Hughes's verse is virtuosic, and (b) whether his alleged virtuosity is meant to be taken literally (as a metrical claim), figuratively (as a general impression), or some combination of the two.

Nevertheless, if one is primarily interested in connotation, general prosodic claims might seem appropriate. Perhaps what matters about "The Weary Blues" is not the nuance of Hughes's technique but the manner in which the frame, like filigree, stretches round the specimens, utilising the conventions of European art to aestheticise the language of the folk. Regardless of Hughes's methods, the important thing is that he quickly outgrew them. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes urges black poets to experiment with vernacular prosody. (The fact that this essay is classified as a "manifesto" [Rampersad, *Life* 1:142] defending the art of the "proletariat" [Chinitz 26] illustrates the kind of aesthetic criticism it typically receives). Likewise, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*

> falls deliberately within the range of authentic blues emotion and blues culture. Gone are the … poems in which the experience of the common black folk is framed by conventional poetic language[.] … Here are few poems are beyond range of utterance of common black folk, except in so far as any formal poetry by definition belongs to a more privileged world. (Rampersad, *Life* 1:141)

Abandoning formal poetry allows Hughes to explore "his own racial and class authenticity" (Chinitz 28). The question of whether this new poetry has its own "formal" terms is of secondary

importance.[62] Yet focusing so heavily on connotation reduces the aesthetic function of verse to metacommunicative gestures. Form is presumed to operate like what Jarvis calls a "rough badge or uniform, very rapidly legible to friend or foe, who, as it were, already knows all about you even before you have begun to open your mouth" ("Why" 19). For example, James Smethurst writes that the "authenticity" of Hughes's verse is "guaranteed by the form, the rhythmic stresses, the rhyme scheme, and the tropes of the blues itself, a musical genre associated with African Americans" ("Lyric" 121). Itemising categories is not the same as analysing verse, yet many seem to think it is. Tropes are interpreted as standing for something (usually, something related to *blackness*). Hughes is admired for organising these tropes like decorative and symbolic accoutrements, as if his talent lay in the capacity for daring yet tasteful arrangements.

Fine Clothes to the Jew certainly invites this sartorial analogy. By placing lyric utterances in the context of a pawn shop, the title characterises its vernacular personae as vulgarly dressed and in need of money to pay the rent (or buy gin, as the case may be). Hughes's style is appropriate because it, too, is tattered and impolite: "He would rather have his blues poems under- than overdressed" (Chinitz 75). If one assumes that metre and diction are worn on top of a poem's central themes, the Harlem Renaissance begins to look like a fashion show. Traditionalists preferred the starched and ironed 5-beat fabric of the sonnet. McKay wore sonnets defiantly; Toomer wore them with a keen sense of nostalgia. Cullen looked elegant in sonnets, albeit pompous and a bit prissy. Anti-assimilationists preferred the loose-fitting, rag-tag 5-beat fabric of the blues. Although Brown's wardrobe contained a formidable sonnet sequence, his most daring work was done in the hardscrabble dialect of the country blues. Hughes, meanwhile, was at his handsomest (and most authentic) in the chic urban blues, yet he wore all kinds.

By the forties, a daringly new Afro-modernist aesthetic was pushing pentameter to its limits. Hughes, Brooks, and Hayden started wearing sonnets ironically, breaking up the form's intolerable stiffness with blues motifs. Or so the story goes. However, one cannot mix and match sonnets and 12-bar stanzas like blazers and button-up shirts. Constraints must be synchronised before one form can be embedded in another. Contrary to the prevailing view that a blues sonnet is a loosened-up sonnet, African-American poets have combined the forms in highly organised

[62] Chinitz, as discussed in the introduction, offers an impressive yet abbreviated synopsis of blues prosody, simplifying Tracy's model to bring it more in line with foot prosody.

ways: by synchronising metre and syntax (Toomer and Trethewey), anticipation and reversal (Hughes), or 3-line units (Hayes and Trethewey).[63]

This raises the crucial question of whether historical calibration and prosodic calibration are independent or correlated. If independent, historically driven critics are potentially justified in making general prosodic claims. Given that most of their readers do not specialise in cognitive poetics, approximations of Hughes's prosody might seem not only acceptable but indeed preferable if they help to get the point across. The problem with this approach is that it encourages confirmation bias. Regarding prosody as a tool for getting from point A to point B in a historical narrative disincentivises precision. (Imagine a verse critic saying, "eighteen twenties, nineteen twenties, what does it matter if *The Weary Blues* contains chiastic phrasing?"). Alternatively, if historical and prosodic calibration are correlated, category mistakes of style matter a great deal. If historical research does not begin with a thorough understanding of the verse it proposes to study, it can only give general answers to the following questions: what kinds of verse did Hughes write? What kinds of innovations did he make? What kinds of influence did he have on other poets? (Point being: prosodic correctness is more than a matter of degree). These are historical questions, yet they cannot be answered only in historical terms.

To put this another way, historical poetics might not even get the history part right. Perhaps it gets the history wrong to the extent it gets the prosody wrong. While Hughes criticism registers, often minutely, the circumstances in which his verse participates, it regards prosody as something that can be approximated for explanatory purposes. This has caused the historical narrative to drive (and sometimes, bend or fabricate) the prosodic narrative. After reading the conventional wisdom about Hughes, one could be forgiven for assuming that he withdrew into a chrysalis in 1926 as a formal, immature, romantic poet, and emerged in 1927 as an authentically socialist folk poet. Yet throughout his career, Hughes's verse style demonstrates a relatively stable preference for

(1) phrasal templates, with occasional stress metre;
(2) vernacular iconography, with occasional Judeo-Christian iconography;
(3) worried symmetry, especially when closure is expected;
(4) veiled irony, especially tragicomedy.

[63] Antonella Francini also touches briefly on the vernacular sonnet, with similar assumptions of looseness and tendencies to itemise categories. Nevertheless, Francini's attentiveness to the sonnet's cognitive function is exemplary: "Brooks calibrates assonances, alliterations, slant-rhymes, accents, enjambments and punctuation in order to create language in motion" and generate "the thought process of the speaker" (48).

These are the recurring preferences that determine how Hughes's verse is organised. They are largely unchanged from *The Weary Blues* to *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, suggesting that the synchronic parameters of historical poetics might have mistaken refinement for discontinuity. When one allows Hughes's technique to drive the narrative, everything looks a bit different—as discussed at length in 4.1. For example, when Hughes writes that his composition process is to allow "the rest of the poem" to flow "from those first few lines" (*CW* 13:66), he is describing the volume's stanza-level organisation (and not, as has been supposed, his distaste for revision).

As mentioned in 1.6, the structure of "The Weary Blues" is best explained not as a frame/specimen dynamic separating two clearly distinct speakers, but as a call/response dynamic blending multiple voices and instruments. The poem is also notable for the two years that Hughes spent fussing over the ending:

> The singer stopped playing and went to bed
> While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
> He slept like a rock or a man that's dead. (*CW* 1:23).

Although one can only speculate about why Hughes found these lines so difficult to finish, something important has been left unsaid: perhaps the tragicomic irony of "The Weary Blues" that had been echoing in Hughes's head since childhood. In its companion poem, "Lenox Avenue: Midnight," one hears an explicit verbal echo ("weary, weary" [*CW* 1:32]) and an implicit structural echo (macrocosmic heavens / microcosmic blues clubs). Thematically, "The Weary Blues" makes sense as a genre, containing an eponymous volume, containing an eponymous poem, containing an eponymous song. This design was not drawn up in advance; yet even before Van Vechten suggested the title (see Rampersad, *Life* 1:110), Hughes's verse in the mid-twenties had already begun to strive for a tragicomic ideal.

In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes suggests that this ideal can only be felt through the rhythms of the vernacular tradition: "the tom-tom of revolt against *weariness* in a white world, … the tom-tom of *joy and laughter*, and *pain swallowed in a smile*" (*CW* 9:35, emphasis mine). Hughes attempts "to catch" this "veiled weariness" in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, as he explained to Dewey Jones of the *Chicago Defender*.[64] On inspection, Hughes's second volume

[64] Whereas Rampersad (140) and Chinitz (28) discuss this interview in the context of Hughes's shift to proletarian verse, I am interested in what it suggests about the intensification of Hughes's focus on tragicomedy. If one acknowledges that "[t]ragicomedy unifies the literary art of Hughes's entire *oeuvre*" (R. Miller 100), or at least the

follows the same design principle as the first. The stanza structure of the proem that begins *The Weary Blues* (ABB:BBA) is echoed in the six-part structure of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*:

A: "Blues" (8 poems in 12-bar stanzas; isomorphic)

B: "Railroad Avenue" (13 poems, heteromorphic)

B: "Glory! Hallelujah!" (9 poems; heteromorphic)

B: "Beale Street Love" (10 poems; heteromorphic)

B: "From the Georgia Roads" (8 poems; heteromorphic)

A: "And Blues" (9 poems in 12-bar stanzas; isomorphic)

Several poems in the B-sections are constrained in a similar manner. Most notably, "Sinner":

A: Have mercy, Lord!

B:	Po' an' black	**b_1 & b_2**
	An' humble an' lonesome	**& b_3 & b_4**
	An' a sinner in yo' sight.	**& b_5 …**

A: Have mercy, Lord! (*CW* 1:96)

This poem follows the same design principle as "Mother to Son." The B-unit—a suggestive, polysyndetic sequence—establishes the persona as a victim of economic hardship ("Po'"), racial discrimination ("black"), self-doubt ("humble"), and isolation ("lonesome"). This sequence is unbalanced with a terminal prepositional phrase ("in yo' sight"), a minor deviation from the underlying script which nonetheless explains the meaning of the title. As if it weren't bad enough being a second-class citizen in the eyes of society, the persona is also a "Sinner" in the sight of God. This interior monologue is framed by the A-units: an initially formulaic refrain with an ironic sting in its tail. By the second iteration, to keep from crying (at the prospect of damnation), the persona is laughing (at the audacity of adding eternal insult to earthly injury). The refrain—"Have

greater part of it, Hughes's refinement of this trope during the second half of the twenties seems less like a footnote than a headline.

Mercy, Lord!"—straddles the boundary between sacred prayer and profane interjection; between the mournful optimism of the spirituals and the tragic laughter of the blues.

What is most different about *Fine Clothes to the Jew* can be found in the A-sections that bookend the volume: Hughes's experimentation with the 12-bar stanza. With this form, Hughes inherits nuanced conventions of worrying, templates of anticipation and reversal, and an abundant repertoire of stock phrases, iconographic images, and cultural archetypes that "mean" more than they "say" in stylised combinations. Many of these tropes had coevolved with African-American vernacular culture for more than a century and were highly adapted to performing specific tasks. I agree with John Foley that "oral tradition never was the other we accused it of being; it never was the primitive, preliminary technology of communication we thought it to be. Rather, … oral tradition stands out as the single most dominant communicative technology of our species" (1). Hughes valued orality not (or at least not primarily) because of its symbolic opposition to European literature but because it was uniquely adapted for expressing the kind of irony that he valued most.

The first A-section begins with a single 12-bar stanza, titled, "Hey!":

	1	2
A$_1$:	Sun's a settin',	This is what I'm gonna sing.
A$_2$:	Sun's a settin',	This is what I'm gonna sing.
B:	I feel de blues a comin',	Wonder what de blues'll bring?

The second A-section concludes with a single 12-bar stanza, titled, answeringly, "Hey! Hey!":[65]

	1 (anticipation)	2 (reversal)
A$_1$ (anticipation):	Sun's a risin',	This is gonna be ma song.
A$_2$ (anticipation):	Sun's a risin',	This is gonna be ma song.
B (reversal):	I could be blue but	I been blue all night long.

Unlike the triplet in "The Weary Blues"—which seems unsure of its own purpose, except to provide a conclusion—the last three lines of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* know exactly what they are doing. On a macro-level, they punctuate the volume's chiastic organisation with thematic and structural symmetry. On a micro-level, they generate suggestive irony by deferring the anticipated

[65] On Hughes's *Smithsonian Folkways* recording, these poems are listed under the title "Night and Morn."

closure. The first clause, like the archetypal "Woke up this mornin'," foreshadows the blues, while the second clause foreshadows a narrative. Conventional setup, unconventional punchline. The speaker unexpectedly changes tenses: first, to the conditional (what happened to the blues?), then to the preterit (what happened to the song?). These successive, anticlimactic reversals make for a good joke: one imagines Hughes dropping the microphone (as if saying, "I'm tired of writing blues poems"). What makes this stanza tragicomic is the uncertainty of what the persona has been through ("blue all night") and whether the conditions of segregation make it possible to just forget about the blues. The blues are the joke that often kills itself with implications: "laughable woe" that is nonetheless "too real to provoke much laughter" (Handy, *Father* 122). Handy admired Hughes as a master, not of connotation, but of implied narratives, able to say in one stanza "what it would have taken Shakespeare two acts and three scenes to say" (qtd. in Tracy, "To the Tune" 79).

Hughes's aesthetic achievements are not only those of a fashion *icon* (who crosses boundaries by mixing and matching different metres) but also those of an innovator in poetic *iconicity* ("the means by which poetry creates the semblance of felt life … within a semiotic framework" [Freeman, "Poetic" 423]). His verse does not engage our memory and perception in the same way as a static object: he is more than "a totemic figure" of "authentic" vernacularity (M. Jones, "Listening" 1145). If, as Bolden suggests, the 12-bar stanza is "a window on the people's psyches" (3), then one of the central tasks of blues aesthetic criticism is to assess the optical qualities that make this singular perspective possible.

Despite Hughes's meteoric ascendancy in recent years, we continue to overlook his most impressive "aesthetic" accomplishment: experimental prosody. This seems like hyperbole, considering the ostensible rise in formalist Hughes studies, yet even the best of these seldom practice well-calibrated scansion.[66] They say all the right things about Hughes being a virtuoso, though not always for the right reasons. Claims of Hughes's virtuosity are Janus-faced, and most of his admirers are on record, at some point, saying that he doesn't *really* demand close reading. Not, at any rate, what Frank Kermode calls the "rabbinical minuteness of comment and

[66] Jeff Westover stands out as one of Hughes's sincerest admirers and most attentive close readers. Yet what does he mean by suggesting that the "structure" of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" echoes "the performance of an African griot" ("Africa" 1221)? He seems to suggest that these forms are linked by orality: a tantalising possibility, yet also a problematic one. Perhaps Westover means to speculate. When critics do not explain their prosodic insights (e.g., through scansion), it is impossible to understand or evaluate their claims systematically.

speculation" afforded to texts in "the modernist canon" (89). This is where I differ from the rest of the field. I think that Eliot and Hughes were comparably experimental in their respective idioms, and a central difference between them is that Hughes's most stylistically ambitious work has gone largely unnoticed prior to this study.

Largely, but not entirely. Although literary critics have been slow to recognise what Hughes was up to, African-American poets have tended to be his most reliable and fastidious readers. Hughes's experiments were followed by a proliferation of 12-bar stanzas, some traditional (Brown, Wright), some visually fragmented (Brooks, Williams), some heavily distorted (Rahman, Knight), and most of them tragicomic. White poets noticed, too (Auden, Rukeyser, Bishop), and reinterpreted the conventions of the 12-bar stanza in abstract ways, while still playing within the rules of Hughes's "Note on Blues." African-American modernists and "high" modernists took note (Hayden, Harper, Wright, Komunyakaa), performing their own clandestine experiments in 12-bar phrasing. Despite its ostensible interest in readers, historical poetics has neglected *these* readerly practices—the virtuosic ones—perhaps because they are perceived as being, in Warren's words, "merely formal" (66). Yet form does not only become interesting once a grand narrative is attached to it.

The fact that it has taken this conclusion so long to get to Hughes's readers illustrates two challenges of blues aesthetic criticism. Firstly, to discuss the genre's origins and respond to critical orthodoxies, it is often necessary to divert one's discussion through Hughes and his work before addressing anyone or anything else. This study has sought to complicate the field's Hughes-first and Hughes-centric biases by focusing also on the blues of his successors, yet these discussions have been largely preliminary in nature. There is much experimental blues prosody that has yet to circulate through academic criticism, and that which is recognised by scholars continues to be misclassified. Secondly, it is often assumed that the historical value of Hughes's work is best recuperated relative to the tastes of his contemporaries (e.g., Cullen, Lindsay, Van Vechten, Mason) rather than the tastes of our contemporaries (e.g., Komunyakaa, Young, Mullen, Hayes). This produces a kind of criticism that is highly calibrated to historically contingent social norms (e.g., shifting definitions of authentic blackness) yet uncalibrated to musico-linguistic constraints (e.g., comparatively stable measures of virtuosic bluesiness). To suppose that social norms are more "aesthetic" than musico-linguistic constraints is deeply flawed.

By focusing on the social distinctions implied by verse, historical poetics can link prosody to Foucault, Bourdieu, and other theoretically sophisticated thinkers. Yet this doesn't make the "poetics" of historical poetics more sophisticated than the "poetics" of cognitive poetics. Quite the opposite. In order to make blues prosody digestible to "theory," sophisticated versificational concepts have been repackaged in simplistic ways. To be clear, I think critical theory and prosody ought to work together. Yet the subordination of prosody to critical theory prevents this from happening. When reading the dominant voices in African-American literary criticism, one sometimes gets the sense that prosody is either recondite (the kind of thing that kept George Saintsbury entertained) or abecedarian (the kind of task a schoolteacher might assign to students, who then mark, in a binary manner, strong, weak, strong, weak). These, and other misconceptions, have long provided alibis for not taking prosody seriously. Many seem to think that by mentioning "formal repetition" or "African-American rhythms" or "vernacular idioms," they have paid their debt to formalism and are free to get on with the higher-level evaluative stuff.

Yet cognitive aesthetics is not a niche or esoteric discipline, and its concepts are foundational to any well-calibrated blues "aesthetic" criticism. The recalibration I am proposing does not involve the retroactive application of twenty-first century verse theories to oral poetry. Rather, as I have argued, seminal African-American writers in the nineteenth century, including Douglass and Du Bois, and the twentieth, including Johnson and Hurston, were already making theoretically sophisticated claims about the aesthetic singularity of vernacular prosody. These claims, though imbricated with discourses of racial authenticity and class politics, cannot be understood in ethnographic or sociological terms. (It is, in other words, impossible to understand "what" these critics are talking about without specialized knowledge of vernacular poetics).

The relationship between poetic language and cognition lies at the heart of "aesthetic" questions about blues poetry. These include its origins (where do its techniques come from?), purpose (what is it trying to "do"?), innovation (what is new about it?), meaning (how are its ideas put together?), legacy (has its structure been emulated or modified?), and historical importance (what unique conditions for aesthetic experience has it provided?). If one acknowledges that critics have neglected these questions, or answered them in unhelpful ways, the urgency of recalibrating blues prosody becomes inescapable. The findings of this study are not, therefore, valuable only on their own terms. Studying the aesthetics of poetry independently of prosody is like studying the

aesthetics of painting independently of perspective, or the aesthetics of dance independently of motion.

Some readers might remain sceptical of my contention that call-and-response patterning, chiasmus, the phrasal templates of the 12-bar stanza, and the worrying of rhythmic symmetry create singular conditions for the conscious experience of verse. Yet any specialist in blues poetry who accepts this argument must, as a logical consequence, accommodate the concerns of cognitive aesthetics. If the objective is to understand blues poetry as literary art, critics must stop scanning it with the same miscalibrated systems (and labelling all innovation, no matter how highly organized, as "loose"). When analysing experimental prosody, it is often necessary to modify conventional methods of scansion or invent new ones. This prosody, which cannot be spoken for by "history," must speak for itself. The stories it has to tell are, as Du Bois puts it, arguably the most compelling "expression of human experience born this side the seas" (*Souls* 251).

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