

5-1-2015

HARLEM IN SHAKESPEARE AND
SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM: THE SONNETS
OF CLAUDE MCKAY, COUNTEE CULLEN,
LANGSTON HUGHES, AND GWENDOLYN
BROOKS

David J. Leitner

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, davidleitner@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/dissertations>

Recommended Citation

Leitner, David J., "HARLEM IN SHAKESPEARE AND SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM: THE SONNETS OF CLAUDE MCKAY, COUNTEE CULLEN, LANGSTON HUGHES, AND GWENDOLYN BROOKS" (2015). *Dissertations*. Paper 1012.

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

HARLEM IN SHAKESPEARE AND *SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM*:
THE SONNETS OF CLAUDE MCKAY, COUNTEE CULLEN, LANGSTON
HUGHES, AND GWENDOLYN BROOKS

by

David Leitner

B.A., University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, 1999

M.A., Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2005

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2015

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

HARLEM IN SHAKESPEARE AND *SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM*:
THE SONNETS OF CLAUDE MCKAY, COUNTÉE CULLEN, LANGSTON
HUGHES, AND GWENDOLYN BROOKS

By

David Leitner

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the field of English

Approved by:

Edward Brunner, Chair

Robert Fox

Mary Ellen Lamb

Novotny Lawrence

Ryan Netzley

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
April 10, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

DAVID LEITNER, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in ENGLISH, presented on April 10, 2015, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: HARLEM IN SHAKESPEARE AND *SHAKESPEARE IN HARLEM*: THE SONNETS OF CLAUDE MCKAY, COUNTÉE CULLEN, LANGSTON HUGHES, AND GWENDOLYN BROOKS

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Edward Brunner

This study responds to the need for an understanding of the relation of form and political critique within the sonnet form, and hopes to demonstrate that the sonnet can be used to effectively articulate the experience of racism, especially the Du Boisian concept of “double-consciousness,” a sense of two-ness born of being both black and American. The fundamental structure of the sonnet (octave, volta, sestet) is dialectical; it “contests the idea it just introduced” (Caplan, *Poetic Form: An Introduction* 75). The sonnet’s self-reflexive structure has been adopted and adapted by poets such as McKay, Cullen, Hughes, and Brooks. The formal and social characteristics of sonnets by African-Americans function synergistically: the way that the octave and the sestet respond to each other in a single poem is also similar to the “call-and-response” movement of African American oral culture. Its tendency to mix two unlike things is like Harlem itself: a compressed space where the street sweeper rubs shoulders with the business tycoon. Perhaps most importantly, the sonnet can be a Trojan horse, a genteel container that conceals a potentially subversive message.

This study is constructed around related lines of questioning: First, why did African American poets, in an era usually associated with free verse, choose to *adopt* a traditional form? Second, how do African American poets *adapt* a European form as a lens into African American experience? Sonnets by African Americans reflect the complexity of a seemingly simple triangulation between the traditional requirements of form, the promise of equality, and the

reality of racism. African American poets infuse “Harlem in Shakespeare,” pouring black consciousness into the European form, and they raise “Shakespeare in Harlem,” elevating the status of African American forms to the highest levels of literary art. At the same time, this study demonstrates the value of a prosody-based approach for examining how small formal details contribute substantially to the reader’s impression of the sonnet. These poets deploy the “rules” of the sonnet ingeniously and unexpectedly.

Additionally, the sonnet is a way to separate from and simultaneously be a part of the dominant culture by writing a critical message in a recognizable form. Black culture can criticize white culture, while at the same time acknowledging the mutual, inescapable relationship that binds blacks and white Americans together. Additionally, the sonnet is a way to separate from and simultaneously be a part of the dominant culture by writing a critical message in a recognizable form. Black culture can criticize white culture, while at the same time acknowledging the mutual, inescapable relationship that binds blacks and white Americans together.

DEDICATION

To my family, without whom nothing else matters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While completing this project, I have accumulated more debts than I will ever be able to repay. Firstly, I would like to thank Professor Edward Brunner for his guidance and for getting me interested in this. Through the many, many revisions of this work, he has been a committed and generous guide. The hours I spent in his office discussing poetry were among the happiest times of my education. He taught me how to listen to and write about poetry. My professional mission is to pass on that ability. Thank you to Professor Robert Fox for showing me the importance of Claude McKay, one of the poets who are a subject of this work. Thank you to Professor Lisa McClure who taught me that learning required a heart and a mind. Thank you Professor Lamb for showing me that scholarship should be a joy and not a job. Thank you to Professor Novotny Lawrence and Professor Ryan Netzley for their suggestions and challenges. Thanks also to the tenacious Indiana Jones of librarians, Scott Ebbing at Lincoln Land Community College. From a young age, my parents Dennis and Sandra Leitner instilled a love of education and a desire to serve. The continued love of Julieta Leitner, my dear mother, has taught me that the important things never die. Thank you to my freshman high school English teacher Mrs. Anna Jackson, whose kind spirit inspired me to become a teacher. Kathy and Howard Hood graciously minded my daughter and allowed me to write in their basement. The friendship and lunches with my colleagues Jason Dockter and Ryan Roberts sustained my body and mind. To the poets who are the subject of this work, I am grateful for their work. I hope I do not disappoint their memories. Finally and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Carrie for her ideas and support. Without her dauntless love and encouragement, this project would not be finished. The longest way round is sometimes the shortest way home.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT	i
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
CHAPTERS	
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1	39
CHAPTER 2	56
CHAPTER 3	96
CHAPTER 4	149
EPILOGUE	180
REFERENCES	187
VITA	210

INTRODUCTION

Overview: Adopt and Adapt

African American poets from the period between the beginning of World War I and the end of World War II found a resonant space for black experience within the seemingly narrow fourteen lines of the sonnet form. This study charts the development of the poetics and tradition of four African American sonneteers from 1917-1949. Some sonnets written after that time will also be considered in order to contrast against that thirty-two-year timeframe. Most artists who work in familiar forms such as the sonnet attempt to defamiliarize and personalize the form by modifying structure, style, or content. The work of these poets can be delineated according to how they make the sonnet new. Claude McKay (1889-1948) wrote formal, militant sonnets of racial protest. Countee Cullen (1903-1946) modeled his work after the English Romantics and wrote formal sonnets of the problems of race and religion. Of all the poets analyzed in this study, Langston Hughes (1902-1969) diverged the most strongly from the standard sonnet form, although he wrote at least three strict sonnets. I will look most closely at his sonnet sequence “Seven Moments of Love,” which fuses the sonnet with blues forms and uses vernacular diction. Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) wrote about the poverty and racism of urban black experience. In her modernist sonnet sequences such as “Gay Chaps at the Bar” from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and “the children of the poor” from *Annie Allen* (1949), Brooks sought to reconcile the elite and vernacular.

This study is constructed around related lines of questioning: First, why did African American poets, in an era usually associated with free verse, choose to *adopt* a traditional form?

Second, how do African American poets *adapt* a European form as a lens into African American experience? Sonnets by African Americans reflect the complexity of a seemingly simple triangulation between the traditional requirements of form, the promise of equality, and the reality of racism. African American poets infuse “Harlem in Shakespeare,” pouring black consciousness into the European form, and they raise “Shakespeare in Harlem,” elevating the status of African American forms to the highest levels of literary art. At the same time, this study demonstrates the value of a prosody-based approach for examining how small formal details contribute substantially to the reader’s impression of the sonnet. These poets deploy the “rules” of the sonnet ingeniously and unexpectedly.

What does the existing literature say about the African American sonnet? While other reviewers of these African American poets noticed sonnets in general, very few have looked at sonnets specifically. James A. Emanuel’s article “Renaissance Sonneteers” in *Black World* (1975) is probably the earliest to discuss African American sonnets in detail. Gary Smith’s article “The Black Protest Sonnet” appeared in *American Poetry* (1984). D. H. Melhem’s 1987 book, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, contains several pages on Brooks’s sonnets. Marcellus Blount, in his article “Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet” in the 1990 book *Engendering Men*, argues that “these sonnets enact the racial and gendered struggles for identity in Afro-American art” (227). In his article “The Unreadable Black Body: ‘Conventional’ Poetic Form in the Harlem Renaissance” (1990), Amittai F. Aviram argues that although free verse is considered “liberating” by many readers, in fact traditional forms have much more practical social result: “the poems that continue to play the most vigorous and active role in the *practice* of democratic movements are in fact traditional in form: the chants of picket-

line marchers, the hypnotic rhymes of street raps, and the vernacular blues and ballad forms” (emphasis in original 79-80). The scholar of African American poetry James Smethurst has a section of a chapter on the history of the African American sonnet in his book *New Red Negro* (1999). Antonella Francini’s “Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry” in the *RSA Journal* (2003) is a good introduction to the history of the form in African American poetry. Karen Jackson Ford analyzed the political and prosodic effects of the sonnet in her article “The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks” in *Twentieth-Century Literature* (2007).

Despite these earlier studies, how and why African American poets have written sonnets has not been adequately addressed, for reasons both aesthetic (or formalist) and political (or historicist). Aesthetic/formalist critics (such as proponents of New Criticism) often considered sonnets to lack “a unique artistic contribution” (Emanuel, “Renaissance Sonneteers” 37) compared to the experimental forms of modernism. But sonnets have also been dismissed for political reasons. Many critics and even poets believed the seemingly rigid sonnet is a symbol of repressive social order. Supporters of the Black Aesthetic believed that black poets writing in “white” forms were reactionary or at least unconscious of their own identity. The noted blues scholar Stephen Henderson implies that the sonnet was not “black enough” for serious consideration:

Surely some structures are more distinctly Black, more recognizably Black, than others. Thus the three-line blues form is more distinctly Black than a sonnet by Claude McKay, for example. The ballad, because it is a form (in the Anglo-American tradition) which was early appropriated by Blacks—on both folk and

formal levels—is also more definitely “Black” than the sonnet. But the blues, an invention of Black people, is “Blacker” than both. (9-10)

Even among modernist poets such as Eliot, Stevens, and Crane, who worked to “make it new,”¹ “the fact that [they] ended up returning to sonnets of sorts suggests their discomfort was less with the form itself than with what it had come to stand for, the peculiar compact sealed by the sonnet’s *fin de siècle* admirers between cultural elevation and formal rigidification” (Howarth 226).

Whereas the formalists assumed that sonnet writers were not concerned enough with form, the political critics claimed they were overly concerned. “[T]he assumption that esthetic [sic] preoccupations or technical restrictions must dominate users of the form” undermines the political practicality of the work (Emanuel, “Renaissance Sonneteers” 96). Both the aesthetic and political approach can easily become extreme: the former excludes all meaning except the text and the latter excludes the text from all meaning. As Stephen Burt phrases it, “Formalist criticism wants to make itself unnecessary; historicist criticism want to make itself indispensable” (357). In other words, formalism believes the text is self-sufficient and speaks for itself, and historicist criticism believes that the text is incomprehensible without historical context, although most critics of literature would categorize themselves somewhere between those two extremes.

Ever since the final two lines of Archibald MacLeish’s poem “Ars Poetica” (1926), “A poem should not mean/ But be” (127), became a modernist dictum, poetry that is burdened with

¹ Even William Carlos Williams, who at one point called the sonnet form “fascistic,” wrote at least one sonnet, “Sonnet in Search of an Author” from *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). He also would write to Marianne Moore in 1936 that he thought Wordsworth’s “sonnets seem to me to be the place at which his genius stops” (Williams, *Selected Letters*, 164).

a strong theme or message has been regarded as heavy-handed. (Coincidentally, MacLeish's poem first appeared in *Poetry* magazine above an Italian sonnet by Grace Hazard Conkling entitled "Guadeloupe.") Meaning became a liability instead of an asset. The argument that traditional poetry cannot be politically effective is usually founded on two assumptions: (1) because poetry is primarily aesthetic it is isolated from practical purposes, and (2) that traditional forms such as the sonnet are inextricably bound up in the history of cultural codes, and therefore cannot effectively critique the dominant culture. The first assumes a mutually exclusive relationship between aesthetics and practice. However, some scholarship has attempted to overturn that assumption. Michael Thurston's *Making Something Happen* (2001) and Mark Van Wienen's *Partisans and Poets* (1997), both based on work begun in Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery* (1989), argue that demonstrating a concern for technical achievement (what Emanuel called "esthetic preoccupations") in a poem can in fact heighten, and not diminish, their effect on the audience. Examining how a poem works on the formal level can illuminate how it causes change on the political level. These poems have "political impact not in spite of but precisely through [their] aesthetic dimension" (Thurston, "Engaging Aesthetics" 25–6). A careful understanding of versification is necessary, therefore, to reveal the full political significance of these works. Indeed, it is a prerequisite: "What might poetry be able to say about such things as race and gender that is distinctive to poetry? The answer must lie in the very thing that distinguishes poetry most immediately from prose: its poetic form" (Aviram, "Unreadable Black Body" 32). Consequently one method of this study is to examine the formal structures of sonnets, from the levels of metrical patterns, lexical, syntactic, and linear arrangements, as well as the way textual materials are organized to make patterns of tension that create meaning.

The second critique argues that formal poetry is inherently reactionary. By writing in traditional forms the poet grants a concession to the dominant culture. However, the crude equation of “meter is oppressive” is easy enough to discount. According to Donald Hall “[m]eter is neither hierarchical nor elitist in itself, and the political analogy corrupts thought” (25). But because of the cultural history of racism, the problem is more complicated when a black writer works in a white form: any “concession” to the dominant culture can be seen as sycophantic. “Negro writing in the past,” Richard Wright would claim in 1937, “has been confined to... prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America” (53). Wright was referring to any artist who relied on the external validation of approval from white audiences, but his idea was easily transferred to matters of form as well as content. Black writers take a risk if they write in forms associated with white culture: they could be seen as socially acceptable, genteel, but ultimately submissive. Langston Hughes identified this desire for approval as the largest barrier to black artists in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926): “But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America -- this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (27).

Dialect: “A jingle in a broken tongue”

The problems encountered by the poets of the Harlem Renaissance are sharply evident in the work of a forerunner, the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906). After William Dean Howells (1837-1920) published a laudatory review of Dunbar’s second book of poetry, *Majors and Minors* (1896), in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Dunbar became an overnight celebrity. Howells

claimed that Dunbar was “the first man of his color to study his race objectively, to analyze it to himself, and then to represent it in art as he had felt it and found it to be” (qtd. in Martin 586). Howells wrote an introduction to Dunbar’s *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) that praised Dunbar’s dialect verse as more authentic than his literary verse:

Yet it appeared to me then, and it appears to me now, that there is a precious difference of temperament between the races which it would be a great pity ever to lose, and that this is best preserved and most charmingly suggested by Mr. Dunbar in those pieces of his where he studies the moods and traits of his race in its own accent of our English. We call such pieces dialect pieces for want of some closer phrase. . . . I do not know how much or little he may have preferred the poems in literary English. Some of these I thought very good, and even more than very good, but not distinctively his contribution to the body of American poetry. What I mean is that several people might have written them; but I do not know any one else at present who could quite have written the dialect pieces. (Howells 2)

As an unintended result of that praise, Dunbar was pigeonholed as a dialect poet: “the Dunbarian split between ‘high’ poetry and vernacular poetry where a mass culture construct of African American vernacular language, which is to one degree or another abstracted from the African American community, becomes an imprisoning medium of African American expression” (Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* 166). The scholar Charles Martin has written that although “Dunbar appreciated the attention he received from Howells . . . he felt that his ability to express himself freely was hampered by Howell’s public call for dialect pieces” (586). Because

of his influence and popularity, even during the “negative and dangerous context” of a racist environment (Nash 216), Dunbar has earned the respect of some contemporary critics. Dunbar himself would regret the reduction of his verse in his poem “The Poet”: “But ah, the world, it turned to praise / A jingle in a broken tongue” (192).

A debate over how African Americans should be represented in literature began with Du Bois’s idea of the “Talented Tenth” and continues up to the present. In his book *The Negro Problem* (1903), Du Bois proposes a racial uplift project in which the Talented Tenth, composed of the black cultural and financial elite from the fields of business, education, art, medicine, and law, would serve as cultural role models for the working class. The Talented Tenth would support the initial cultural efforts of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Du Bois, art should be a propaganda, a tool for racial uplift and most useful if it is earnest, beautiful, and didactic; the Harlem Renaissance writer Wallace Thurman referred to this as “butter side up” racial politics. But this class-bound approach often had the opposite effect, creating hostility and resentment between the Talented Tenth and those they would enlighten. Those who allied themselves against the Talented Tenth accused them of aspiring to a white European standard of culture. Rejecting best-foot-forwardism, the artists of the masses wanted to portray the race as it really was, on its own terms and without seeking white approval.

The paradoxical phenomenon in which a seemingly liberating folk expression becomes a straitjacket after it has been accepted by the mainstream is what I will call the Dunbar Paradox. It recurs in the debates over primitivism in the Harlem Renaissance. It recurs in the debates over blackness in the 1960s. It is happening now with debates over the issues of commercialized African American music such as hip-hop. The Dunbar Paradox affects every black artist from at

least 1886 to the present day. It was recognized as early as 1921 when the critic Charles Eaton Burch published an overview of “Dunbar’s Poetry in Literary English.” Burch recognized that writing for the “New Negro” would be much more effective in literary English: “In examining his verse in literary English, one discovers the Dunbar who is proud of the struggles and aspirations of the ‘New Negro,’ just as truly as his dialect poetry reveals his sympathy with the lowly life of his people” (407). It is precisely because of this double bind many early African American poets found the sonnet so compelling: it is a way to circumvent the problem of dialect. In addition, the doubling of the sonnet when its octave is overlaid with its sestet may be considered a formal analogue to the double-consciousness – that awareness of the conflict of being black and American – of the Dunbar Paradox.

To the degree that African American sonnets are poems of protest, how might a tradition-based formal aesthetic effectively promote social change? Those who would deny that traditional forms have the ability for such promotion believe that the dominant culture is reinforced whenever traditional forms are used. Their underlying assumption is that the reaction to the form is normative: that is, it is the same for different people in different times. However, the sonnet form has no inherent political meaning. Instead, a triangulation of the audience, content, and context primarily determines its political significance. This context can influence political meaning depending on the relationship of the speaker to the audience. An example of a single poem being used in various contexts is Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” (1919) an English sonnet with a sweeping, defiant tone. At the time, this poem defined the boldness of the New Negro. There are no racial signifiers in the poem, which arguably has contributed to the poem’s

popular appeal. According to William J. Maxwell, who edited McKay's *Complete Poems*, both radicals and reactionaries have appropriated the poem:

“If We Must Die,” one of the landmark political poems of the twentieth-century, was immediately embraced for African American community use during the “Red Summer” race riots of 1919 and has been copied, recited, and committed to memory ever since – by radicals of all colors and their enemies in the U.S. Congress, by Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler. (*Complete Poems* xxi)

However, the famous claim that Winston Churchill appropriated “If We Must Die” to rally the British people in World War II is now known to be false (Jenkins 334). Yet the “believability” of this spurious claim has several implications. First, we can easily imagine the apocryphal story of Churchill's appropriation to be true because the poem is free of racial signifiers and therefore “sufficiently abstract” to “be rearticulated to an embattled heroism in any context, racial or nonracial” (Nelson 89). Second, the believability of the claim is effectively a double-blind study of the rhetorical effect of “If We Must Die”; if neither the audience nor the speaker is aware of the poem's author, then it can evoke defiant courage in any group.

Of course, many poets of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Langston Hughes, were wary of assimilation and appropriation. They had seen the effects of white publishers exploiting a demand for “primitivist” literature. And they were repelled by the assimilationist assumptions of the elite Talented Tenth. Early in 1926, Langston Hughes had published his manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in *The Nation*: “We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either” (30). It

has been assumed that Hughes meant that black writers should be “primitive” and “folksy,” but there is little reason that a writer such as McKay or Cullen, who were in fact raised on a diet of Romantic poetry, should not be allowed to write the way they were raised, even if it seems out of step with the everyday black person’s cultural experience. And a defender of Cullen could also argue that the Harlem Renaissance poet (whether Hughes or Cullen) is probably at some level out of step with the masses.

African American poets write sonnets because it is an endlessly flexible form; it is neither exclusively vernacular nor elite. It lends itself to multiple uses, many with particular relevance to African American culture. As noted earlier, it can be used to articulate the experience of racism, especially the Du Boisian concept of “double-consciousness.” The sonnet’s self-reflexive structure can sympathetically represent a speaker who is simultaneously an insider and an outsider. The fundamental structure of the sonnet (octave, volta, sestet) is dialectical; it “contests the idea it just introduced” (Caplan, *Poetic Form* 75). In addition, the formal and social characteristics of sonnets by African-Americans can also function synergistically: the way that the octave and the sestet respond to each other in a single poem is also similar to the “call-and-response” movement of African American oral culture.² Moreover, the sonnet is a way to separate from and simultaneously be a part of the dominant culture by writing a critical message in a recognizable form. The black poet can criticize white culture, while at the same time

² The relation between octave and sestet, it bears mentioning, shifts according to the culture in which it appears. According to the medieval scholar Paul Oppenheimer, the relation of the sestet to the octave may be based on the Pythagorean-Platonic number theories that were widely studied in the Italian Renaissance. The relation of 6:8 and 6:8:12 are ideally “harmonic” proportions, reflect the “fabric of the soul,” and are the means to perfect architecture, music, mathematics, and poetry (189-90).

acknowledging the mutual, inescapable relationship that binds blacks and white Americans together.

The Period

This study examines poems from 1917, when Claude McKay published his prescient sonnet “Invocation,” which commands a primitive muse to “Bring ancient music to my modern heart,” to 1949, when Gwendolyn Brooks publishes her second major sonnet sequence “the children of the poor” in *Annie Allen*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry the following year. 1917 is an ideal beginning time as the reputation of the sonnet had reached a high point. In 1917, T. W. H. Crosland declared, “when great poetry is being produced, great sonnets are being produced” (Crosland 21). At the same time, however, avant-garde modernists considered the sonnet to be a mechanical form: “its formal pattern was complicit with production-line thinking, and its polish with the genteel unreality in which an industrialized culture had wished to preserve its art” (Howarth 225). However, McKay’s controversial sonnets would help spark the Harlem Renaissance. This crucial cultural movement of the 1920s and early 1930s reshaped the landscape of African American artists. These artists drew on their experiences as migrants leaving the rural South and as soldiers in World War I. Although the Harlem Renaissance would end in the mid-thirties, this study considers some sonnets up to the end of World War II, when for a second time black soldiers serve and die for their country but return home to be greeted by continued racism.

The Harlem Renaissance was a time of transition in American history. Race and class divisions were to some degree put on hold in Harlem of the 1920s. A popular joke that circulated

in Harlem indicates the way races and classes mixed during the Harlem Renaissance: ““Good morning Mrs. Astor,’ says a porter at Grand Central Station. ‘How do you know my name, young man?’ ‘Why ma’am,’ the porter explains, ‘I met you last weekend at Carl Van Vechten’s.” (Lewis 184). Van Vechten was the literary patron and impresario of the Harlem Renaissance. His parties were considered “the most exciting gatherings outside of Harlem” (Ferguson 87) and were legendary gathering spots for upper-class whites and blacks of all classes.³ The “New Negro” of the Harlem Renaissance refused to accept the prevailing stereotypes of African-Americans, both the plantation mentality of the South and the ghetto mentality of the North. However, when this rejection of an old identity demanded that a new identity be constructed, the movement produced a variety of conflicting responses. In general, the responses can be categorized along an axis of elite vs. vernacular (or folk) discourse. On the elite side of the spectrum is the Talented Tenth: which included poets such as Countee Cullen who used poetic diction and traditional forms such as the sonnet and rhyme royal. Many of these artists believed that African-Americans were a part of, and not separate from, the dominant culture. They should express themselves freely, but at the same time should uphold the values of respectability and decorum. These artists were most likely to put Harlem in Shakespeare by expressing black consciousness in traditional poetic forms, and therefore prefer formal craftsmanship to cultural critique.

³ White patrons would encourage primitivism in their black artists. Van Vechten may have opened his home to many types of humanity, but he would likely have rejected the sonnet for budding African American poets, because he was “[v]ehemently against black imitation of hackneyed white forms” (Rampersad, *Life II* 109). In this one respect, he shared a trait with William Dean Howells whose dislike of African American use of the sonnet has been remarked earlier in the chapter. Not surprisingly, Charlotte Osgood Mason, Langston Hughes’s patron in the late 1920s, would request Hughes to maintain the elements of “black primitivism” in his work.

On the other side, Langston Hughes is commonly regarded as the poet of folk forms and blues rhythms. Artists like Hughes were more likely to put Shakespeare in Harlem. Years later, Brooks complicates this dichotomy between art and propaganda. She began her career with Harlem in Shakespeare but shifted to Shakespeare in Harlem. Still others, critics such as Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, also do not fit into a category easily. Despite their position as defenders of the Talented Tenth, they initially promoted the primitivism of the New Negro aesthetic. Even among the poets, there is no easy categorization. Both Hughes and McKay believe that African-Americans possessed a distinct culture, and that black artists should value the folk and cultivate African American folk values.

The different but not mutually exclusive movements of Shakespeare in Harlem and Harlem in Shakespeare are complicated by expectations from two sets of values: on the one hand, white publishers wanted to market the New Negro as an exotic primitive, and on the other hand, the pressure of “best-foot-forward” black leaders wanted to portray the New Negro in terms of middle-class respectability. According to Du Bois, the former view caused the latter: “[o]ur worst side has been so shamelessly emphasized that we are denying that we have or ever had a worst side” (Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art” 259). Other Talented Tenth members, such as Countee Cullen, were not trying to “act white” as their detractors supposed, but were instead trying to avoid playing into the hands of exploitative white publishers, something that Hughes would have supported: “For integrationists like Cullen, on the other hand, cultivating the folk or primitive was still acting up to a white audience’s prejudices, whereas the black artist should seek respect as a human being through the continuity of his work with the western cultural

tradition” (Howarth 236). Cullen, as we shall see, was keenly aware of the pitfalls of the Dunbar Paradox.

While the 1920s were a time of great hope for African-Americans, the events of the 1930s were a time of disillusionment. The Great Depression of 1929 disproportionately affected black workers, and the Scottsboro Trial of 1933 convinced many African Americans that racial injustice was endemic and insurmountable. The Depression also had the effect of removing both the demand for and the avenues of publishing for black writers. The devastating Harlem Riot of 1935 effectively ended the Harlem Renaissance, even though some scholars maintain that “the attitudes and themes that were popular in 1925 did not change radically until 1960” (Davis, *From the Dark Tower* 12). It was during the crises of the 1930s that Hughes would write his only strict sonnets, “Ph.D.” (1932), “Pennsylvania Station” (1932), and “Search” (1937). During the same period, he would compose his most controversial poem “Christ in Alabama,” (1931) a thirteen line blues poem he would later republish in fourteen lines. It is ironic that during his most radical period he would also publish poems in genteel forms. According to Hans Ostrom, the compiler of an encyclopedia on Hughes, “Although Hughes published numerous poems of sonnet length and employed techniques related to that form, he rarely published sonnets” (“Ph.D.” 301). It could be argued that Hughes often worked around, if not through, the sonnet form.

In response to the racism of the time, some black intellectuals such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright turned to Communism. Even as he expressed socialist ideals and related to black popular taste, Hughes faced his own kind of paradox: “to reach the black masses, his writing had to be not radical but genteel, not aggressive but uplifting and sentimental” (Rampersad, *Life I* 221). Hughes’s strategy risks being caught in a variant of the Dunbar

Paradox: instead of appealing to the elite, he is appealing to the masses. As we shall see in Chapter 3, Hughes fashions a folk persona that balances vernacular speech with cultural traditions. Working under the assumption that folk/vernacular discourse is more rooted in the actual experience of everyday people, much critical attention has often focused on the folk element of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. As a result, “no portion of Hughes’s literary career has been more commonly dismissed than that of the 1930s” (Smethurst, *The New Red Negro* 93) when he was writing his most political verse. Modernist experimentation marked African American poetry in the 1940s, including Hughes’s *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), which contains the blues/sonnet sequence “Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues”; Brooks’s *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949); and the poetry of Robert E. Hayden and Melvin B. Tolson. Brooks’s modernist attributes are built on the earlier work of Hughes. Although Hughes revises the expectations of the sonnet form for a popular audience, Brooks writes sonnets that can be appreciated by *both* high and low culture audiences. “[I]t is possible to see how Brooks’s ‘high’ neomodernist style in *Annie Allen* (1949), where there is a deliberate attempt by an African American narratorial consciousness to create an “international” modernist documentation of the African American subject, develops directly out of the formal and thematic concerns of the late 1930s and early 1940s transposed into the context of the ‘high’ cold war” (Thurston, *Making Something Happen* 164).

The Sonnet and African American Poetry

William Carlos Williams once wrote, “the sonnet form is thoroughly banal because it is a word in itself whose meaning is definitely fascistic” (qtd. in Howarth 226). Although the sonnet

is associated with order and control, the history of the sonnet has in fact been one of subversion rather than suppression; it “has been a form of revision and rebellion” (Blount 228). For example, the Renaissance scholar Joseph Pequigney argues that in contrast to the courtly love conceits of Petrarchanism, Shakespeare’s canonical sonnet sequence radically revises the orthodox heterosexual desire and creates instead “the grand masterpiece of homoerotic poetry” (1). When they aggressively create a space for social critique, poets such as McKay, Cullen, Hughes, and Brooks are not disrupting but continuing a tradition of the sonnet. It is also important to remember that a poetic form is not a static sign. According to Howarth in his study of the modernist sonnet, “poetic forms may inherit new significances as they move through cultures; they may also mediate between societies or within cultures, and older forms may acquire new possibilities by the arrival of new ones” (227–8). Although one of the oldest literary forms of the postclassical world, the sonnet is far from settled. It is in fact an endlessly flexible vehicle for self-discovery, self-definition, and the expression of racial and gender identity.

Loosely defined as “a fourteen-line poem with a particular rhyme scheme and a particular mode of organizing and amplifying patterns of image and thought,” (Levin xxxvii) a sonnet is usually marked by a turn of thought (called a “volta”) that comes between the first eight (an octave) and the last six (a sestet) lines, so the form of the poem presents an alteration in its line of narrative. The basic sonnet form can cross boundaries of language, history, nation, religion, and race and indeed has been written in every major European language since its appearance in Italy in the thirteenth century. Its meter varies only by a syllable or two according to its operative language: hendecasyllables (eleven syllables) in Italian, alexandrines (twelve syllables in iambic hexameter) in French, and iambic pentameter in English. The two most widely agreed upon

versions of the sonnet written in English are the Italian (divided into octave and sestet: abbaabbacdecde or cdcdcd or a related combination that evades a closing couplet) and the English (abab cdcd efef gg) (C. Scott, "Sonnet" 1167). Despite the common misconception of the form as "fixed," the structure can vary according to rhyme scheme, line length, and the location (or absence) of the volta.

Poets writing in English have historically preferred the Italian form. According to L. T. Weeks, in his 1910 survey of sonnets, two-thirds of the sonnets written in English up to that time were Italian (177). The popularity of the Italian form may be due to the fact that it maintains the "original" asymmetry. According to the poet and critic John Fuller, the "Italian form is the legitimate form, for it alone recognizes that peculiar imbalance of parts which is its salient characteristic" (1). Additionally, the volta is more likely to be clearly present in the Italian sonnet. The English form "does something rather different with the form which is not quite as interesting or as subtle" (Fuller 1). American poets, like their British counterparts, have preferred the Italian form. All of Longfellow's fifteen sonnets are in the Italian form, as are Edna St. Vincent Millay's poems in *Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree* (1923). Emma Lazarus's sonnet "The New Colossus," which appears on the base of the Statue of Liberty, is a variation on the Italian (rhyming abbaabbacdcdd). According to Lewis Sterner, who surveyed over two hundred published American sonnets between 1780-1929, sixty percent were Italian, only eighteen percent were English, and the remainder were irregular or combinations (144).

What is most relevant about Fuller's evaluation of the sonnet form is not his preference for one form over another, but his insistence of the volta as its main criterion. Paul Oppenheimer argues, in *The Birth of the Modern Mind*, that "[m]odern thought and literature begin with the

invention of the sonnet” (3). Oppenheimer also notes that the sonnet was a revolution in terms of being more private than public: the sonnet “is the first lyric form since the fall of the Roman Empire intended not for music or performance but for silent reading. As such, it is the first lyric of self-consciousness, or of the self in conflict” (3). The volta, then, is not only a defining formal characteristic: it represents the turning inward that signals a modern self-consciousness. As a result, it encourages a self-awareness from the writer: “it offers a form attuned to the problem that has obsessed poetry for the last four centuries: how self-consciousness operates, especially when it faces the sharpest and most painful dilemmas” (Caplan, *Poetic Form* 74). Although the sonnet form is “too often assumed to be the sign of aesthetic and political conservatism” (Oppenheimer 63), the sonnet’s double-voiced design gives the form an unusual flexibility that is engineered to face problems.

That double-voiced design is especially useful for evoking that “double consciousness” defined by Du Bois – that concept that attempts to reveal what it means to live in a black body in a society that is defined by racial oppression. According to Du Bois, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* 2–3). Cullen, McKay, and Hughes were all deeply influenced by and had considerable personal interaction with Du Bois, and so it is likely they were familiar with the concept of double consciousness.

The idea of double consciousness, moreover, aligns with the notion of alienation, so keenly felt by modernist writers such as Hemingway and Joyce. As the sociologist Howard McGary explains, double consciousness is a social as well as psychological phenomenon:

[Double consciousness] is also described by contemporary commentators on the African American experience as a kind of alienation. This form of alienation is said to exist when the self is deeply divided because the hostility of the dominant society forces itself to see itself as loathsome, defective or insignificant.

Alienation is not estrangement from one's work, but estrangement from ever becoming a self that is not defined in the hostile terms of the dominant group.

(283)

The sonnet's popularity during the Harlem Renaissance is not surprising, then, for its form relies on a two-part structure that can reflect both the problem of double consciousness and the burden of alienation.

It is a striking fact that the idea of alienation was addressed directly in Claude McKay's Italian sonnet "Invocation," (1917, where it was published alongside the more famous sonnet "Harlem Dancer"), which contained the line "Lift me to thee out of this alien place" (line 12). According to literary historian Kathleen Collins, "Invocation" was "the first substantial poem by a black writer in print since Paul Laurence Dunbar's dialect poems," and McKay was the "first black American to appear in a white avant-garde literary magazine," *Seven Arts* (1105–6). At the same time, despite its appearance in a prestigious forum, the circumstances of its publication serve as an example of the kind of brutalized existence that black intellectuals faced in the years preceding the Harlem Renaissance. Because of his working conditions as a waiter at a popular

women's club, and because these poems were (at that time) strong racial statements, McKay chose to publish his poems under the pseudonym Eli Edwards so as to not jeopardize his employment. The same issue that published McKay contained an anti-war piece by Bertrand Russell, which warned "a great war a hundred years hence might well leave the world in the exclusive possession of negroes" (qtd. in Cooper 84).

Prosody

Prosody (the technical term linguists use to describe the arrangements and patterns that accompany traditional forms like the sonnet) and radicalism are not often considered bedfellows. However, by using the sonnet as a method for racial self-definition, poets such as McKay and Cullen construct an alliance between "traditional" prosody and "radical" themes – an alliance that "has yet to receive the attention it deserves" (Caplan, *Questions of Possibility* 63). Although recent scholarship has enriched an understanding of the political and social contexts of these poems, a close prosodic reading is necessary to meet these poems on their own terms. African American poets use poetic technique to not only create sophisticated works of art and demonstrate competence, but to send a serious message written within a text that might appear innocuous. The sonnet that has embedded within it racial critique is like a letter bomb sent on Tiffany stationery, a radical political message slipped in while the reader is distracted by the art itself, in order that the message "may be more insinuating, and therefore, more overwhelming" (Brooks, "Poets Who Are Negroes" 312).

How does meter, which appears to be abstracted from propositional content, arrive at meaning? Assigning meaning to meter is problematic, even as an awareness of meter is

necessary to explore, as T. S. Eliot once wrote, the “frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail, though meanings still exist” (qtd. in Eliot and North 229). Because of the lack of agreement about the nature of prosody, the problem seems intractable. There is no theory as to how, why, or to what purpose prosody functions, and no agreement about the scansion of English verse (Gross and McDowell 1). Because resolving these problems is beyond the scope of the current study, some working definitions will be necessary. Meter, for example, is organized and repeated rhythmic speech. The prosodist Paul Fussell claims that when the rhythms of normal speech are “heightened, organized, and regulated so that a pattern — which means repetition — emerges” (4), the result is meter. Meter is thus a primary convention of artifice for the “hearing” of a poem, much like line-break is a visual convention.

Meter is constructed on the existence of syllables. Syllables occur when consonants and vowels are voiced. Consonants are formed with the parts of the mouth – tongue, lips, teeth – while vowels are breath adjusted to the shape of the mouth. All sounds are a mix of syllables that are either vowels or consonants. Every word is one or more syllables, and each syllable is a span of time. In addition, English is an inflected language: usually, in a word of more than two syllables, one syllable is stressed more than another. We pronounce “ticket” as “TICK-et” and not “tick-ET.” So words as syllables can be arranged in a more or less regular pattern that is pleasing and orderly – and when interrupted, may be dramatic.

Prosody is the study of the art of writing in verse (Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm* 8). Because meter is made up of rhythm, beats, and off beats, we experience rhythm as profoundly sensory, but to find a meaning in such patterns requires interpretation. Meter, one of the primary signifiers of meaning in a poem, can “mean” in at least two ways. First, meter may mark a certain

discourse as literary: “by distinguishing rhythmic from ordinary statement, [meter] objectifies that statement and impels it towards a significant formality and even ritualism” (Fussell 12). Such marking by an African American author may become not only aesthetic but political. Because black authors have been excluded from the literary canon, the mere act of marking a text produced by blacks as literary has a political meaning. In response to the European and American intellectual tradition of exclusion, “black writers in the United States since the very first Afro-American poet – Phillis Wheatley, who lived in Boston in the late eighteenth century – have sought to establish the ‘capacity of the Negro’ by writing and publishing literature” (Appiah 286).

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, meter creates meaning when its rhythms vary from the regular pattern. By establishing a repeated meter, a writer sets up a system of expectations that can be fulfilled or frustrated. But the rhythm of a poem can diverge sharply from its meter: “meter is a blueprint; rhythm is the inhabited building” (Hobsbaum 7). The result of this variation is a kind of shaping or tension in the propositional meaning of a poem. Belying its reputation as excessively prim and controlling, Paul Fussell asserts that meter is “used less as a mere ordering elements than as an expressive one” (23). The regularity of the meter functions as a kind of backdrop for the variation of individual rhythms. The more regular the baseline meter, the more expressive the rhythm can be if it diverts from the pattern, just as more tension can be created in a ship pulling against a stronger anchor. Tension between meter and rhythm multiplies the possibilities of propositional meanings. Different meanings can be extracted based on how the rhythm draws attention to a point in the poem.

An understanding of rhythm offers opportunity for understanding not only the aesthetics but also the politics of African American poetry. The “meaning” of rhythm is undefined, unlimited, and so it has few limitations in terms of its effect on the reader. Establishing meter allows a poet to create a sanctioned space for a poet’s voice. If this is a minority voice, then any speech is “political” in the sense that the minority voice isn’t heard as if it were entitled to speak, and for it to speak it is required to construct a basis for its speech, a basis upon which it will perhaps be accepted as itself. The meter provides this basis, against which the rhythm can pull the meter apart and create a space for the voice to be accepted as itself, without the need for majority approval. Free verse, in which no ground rules of meter are established, provides no rhythmic conventions to break. The counterpoint between meter and rhythm “perhaps provides a bridge between the views of poetry as an emblem of order and as unsettler of assumptions” (Attridge, “The Language of Poetry” 244). And so if we are looking for how African American poets remake the sonnet as a form of black expression, then prosody should be one of the first objects of analysis.

Poetry and Politics

The claim that poetry can have a political effect might appear to be problematic. The genre itself is so often focused on beauty and indirection that it is apparently unfit for political discourse. W. H. Auden’s famous phrase from “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” (1939), “poetry makes nothing happen,” has convinced poets that good poems are separate from praxis. In other words, poetry should be non-political. And in fact many poets are proud of the fact that their work is not practical, because its “uselessness” puts it above and outside the mundane world of

work and business. The ascent of New Criticism in the 1930s and its dominance in postwar United States enshrined these values. Since the decline of New Criticism, more political models for understanding literature have developed, but problems of applying these methodologies to marginalized groups remain. According to Mark Van Wienen there is “a chasm between critics’ commitment to politicize their readings of literary texts and their willingness to study (and therefore also to encourage the production of) literary texts that are themselves consciously fashioned to political ends” (239). A fair assessment of African American poetry has been hindered by the belief that poetry should remain separate from politics. This study seeks to correct “a continuing reluctance among scholars to engage in scholarship that is genuinely committed to political discussion” (239). Because political poetry is excessively bound to its historical moment, it might be said that political poems can sometimes lack relevance for later readers, but the meanings of these poems can also become richer as history continues to build on past events.

To considering how a scholarly examination of prosody in an African American sonnet may lead to observations with a political cast, Langston Hughes’s “Pennsylvania Station” presents itself as a compelling example. Though Hughes is not associated with either formalism or the sonnet (he wrote only three over a lifetime in which he produced hundreds of poems) he was deeply concerned with the sound and rhythm of his poems, even going so far as to put a kind of stage direction in the preface to his book *Shakespeare in Harlem*: “Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung” (vii). His readings were well-honed performances. Hughes encouraged his poems to be performed with music: “The settings of his poetry and other lyrics to music” was a “form of publication... that Hughes would always crave”

(Rampersad, *Life I* 159). A metrical and rhythmic understanding of Hughes discerns aspects of his poetry that improve our understanding of his poems and enhance his reputation as not only a folk poet but also an accomplished technician. The tensions between the musicality and meaning of metrical poetry are illuminated in Amittai F. Aviram's book on prosody *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*, "[T]he musical or rhythmic is a state of being outside of and prior to the social, verbal, thinking subject, while the latter is a kind of construct that simultaneously represents (in images and in symbols) and represses its musical other, which is also its origin" (197). The seeds of rhythm are perhaps even buried in the evolution of *homo sapiens*. "The pleasure of meter," according to the New Formalist advocate Frederick Turner, "is based on the three-second rhythm of the human processing cycle or neural present, and mediated by the secretion of biologically ancient neurotransmitters" (200).

"Pennsylvania Station" (1932) is an English sonnet that offers itself as a prime example of the way prosody informs a seemingly non-political poem. It is ostensibly about alienated people finding some redemption in a common search "for a dream of God." The title refers to one of the two main railway terminals in New York City, completed in 1910 and regarded as an architectural masterpiece. The main trope of the poem is a comparison of the iconic train station to an ancient cathedral, and so the poem appears to be an inoffensive lyric to a well-known public building. As the most architectural of texts in the way its parts fit together and support the whole, the sonnet as a celebrator of such a building is an apt choice of form. Indeed, the protective, comforting structures of both poem and building enable the reader to expect a redemptive experience. Just as the train station allows the travel and mixing of people and goods, the sonnet anticipates the movement of thought:

The Pennsylvania Station in New York
Is like some vast basilica of old
That towers above the terror of the dark
As bulwark and protection to the soul.
Now people who are hurrying alone
And those who come in crowds from far away
Pass through this great concourse of steel and stone
To trains, or else from trains out into day.
And as in great basilicas of old
The search was ever for a dream of God,
So here the search is still within each soul
Some seed to find to root in earthly sod,
Some seed to find that sprouts a holy tree
To glorify the earth — and you — and me. (*Collected Poems* 159)

The language and prosody work together to give the poem a solemn tone. The diction of the poem suggests religion. Unlike many of Hughes's poems that refer to religion, this one casts religion in a positive light.

One way that Hughes bridges the gap between diverse audiences is through the use of a stable rhythm, quite close to its metrical base. Although verse that is rhythmically metrical is open to derision as excessively genteel, it could just as easily be regarded, with its strong and regular beats, as the most primitive. Rhythm also plays a strong role in popular song lyrics, ballads, improvised, and oral poetry. According to Aviram, this energy is present in poetic forms

ranging from highly refined metrical poems to popular song lyrics, “in sonnets and raps, in ballads ancient and postmodern, in blank verse and the blues” (31). Within it, the primitive heart beats, and a “certain margin of less conventional, less controllable energy persists, not only as pleasure but as power and ecstasy.” By working on an unconscious level, the music of rhythm engages the heart as well as the mind. The tension between the physical vehicle of rhythm and the abstract meaning of words gives the poem energy. The critic Derek Attridge has written that rhythm is not “non-linguistic,” but “presemantic” (“The Language of Poetry” 244). T. S. Eliot referred to a sound quality that works beneath meaning as an “auditory imagination”:

[T]he feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end. (*Use of Poetry* 118–9)

Rhythm, in other words, occupies a zone between meter and meaning, a zone the audience inhabits as it listens.

Like McKay’s “If We Must Die,” there are no racial signifiers in “Pennsylvania Station.” However, a contextual understanding of the composition of the poem and its initial publication offer some keys to the implicit politics of “Pennsylvania Station.” The poem was first published in *Opportunity* (Feb. 1932) under the more abstract but evocative title “Terminal” (Rampersad, “Collected Poems” 641). Agitated by the indifference of the black middle-class to the Scottsboro trial, in an essay published 1932, Hughes would question the intentions of the Talented Tenth, “Dear Negro Leaders, who would starve tomorrow if your salaries and *train fares* and lecture fees were not paid by white folks... whom is it that you lead?” (qtd. in Rampersad, emphasis

added, *The Life I* 230). As this quote suggests, Hughes correlated ideas of social mobility with public transportation. Rampersad also notes that around this time, Hughes visited the “Scottsboro boys” on a tour of the South. While speaking at African American colleges, he was shocked that the black professors and students ignored the ongoing trial and that “the case could not be mentioned” (230).

“Pennsylvania Station” wants to bring diverse groups together in a poem that is as open and clear as a public space. The meter of the poem is nearly unvarying iambic pentameter, which gives a sense of the refinement and dignity of the public building. At the same time, within the stately cadence of the sentences, there exists a relentless movement, which is the subject of the second sentence: “people who are hurrying alone ... to trains, or else from trains” (ln 5, 8). The urgently moving people move within their architectural surroundings on the “concourse,” the only polysyllabic word in line 7, which is derived from the Latin verb phrase meaning “to run together.” It also reminds a New Yorker of the actual concourse, which was architecturally one of the most impressive parts of the building. Where the first four-line sentence introduces a solid “bulwark” of a building, the second four-line sentence observes the masses of people ebbing in and out of the station. The first and second sentences are further paired by a reversal of imagery: the same edifice that protects from “the terrors of the dark” also turns people “out into day.” The same building that unites people also separates them. When the volta occurs after line eight, the poem turns from the physical solidity of train station and explores its metaphorical significance, namely a physical symbol of the perennial search for unity among divided people.

The third sentence returns to the image of a basilica, with line 9 echoing almost exactly line 2. But now Hughes tightens the focus and moves from the public to the individual: the same

activity that occurs under a public roof recurs at the individual level, “within each soul” (11). An end-stopped line at line 10 and 12 relieves some of the pressure from the momentum, giving us a sense of an impending resolution. The final couplet clinches a sense of purpose for the “people who are hurrying alone” (ln 5), by spelling out the “search within each soul” is “[t]o glorify the earth—and you—and me” (ln 14). The people’s activity is positive because it is borne forward with a sense of fundamental interconnectedness: “the earth—and you—and me” (ln 14).

It is possible that this poem, a rare example of Hughes working in a fixed form, is a response to Countee Cullen’s sonnet “From the Dark Tower” (1927). Both poems contain images of “dark” and “towers” and both of their final couplets (a crucial point of the sonnet, where the chimed end-rhymes close the meaning of the poem) focus on “seeds.” But the thematic difference of these poems can be illustrated in how the seeds of inner life are imagined. Cullen’s poem ends passively yet ominously: “So in the dark we hide the heart that bleeds, / And wait, and tend our agonizing seeds.” In contrast, the seeds of Hughes’s poem claim powerful spiritual and human potential, “Some seed to find that sprouts a holy tree/ To glorify the earth — and you — and me.” The unusual choice of placing two caesuras separating the final two feet has the effect of carefully equating the status of “earth” and “you” and “me.” In other words, although it is important “to glorify the earth,” it is just as important to glorify “you” (the reader of *Opportunity* who may or may not be African American) and “me” (black poet). Hughes is calling attention to his own status as a minority *poesis*, a maker of a literary art object. The cultural capital of the sonnet is used to raise the status of the poet. What seems at first to be a simple description of an urban monument becomes, through Hughes’s stately rhythms that carefully distinguish the people from the edifice, rhythms that draw attention to a shift toward a

metaphoric conclusion, and rhythms that affirm that the reader and the poet are equally valuable, an affirmation of movements in public space that integrate travelers as equals. “Pennsylvania Station” is an example of the way sonnets use prosody to communicate on multiple levels that include the political. Such communication conveys political messages without speaking didactically, as in the last line where inviting “you – and me” to act together serves to explain why African American poets could value sonnets, namely, as a way of synthesizing diverse subjects.

Contrasting Figures: McKay and Cullen

The sonnet has always been a powerful linguistic construct, and its power in the hands of African Americans also allows us to appreciate the extent to which prosodic features can be central to poetic communication. With these factors in mind, this study sets forward a chronological view of the sonnet as it was taken up and developed by African Americans in the Harlem Renaissance, beginning in chapter two with a comparison of Claude McKay and Countee Cullen as the first African American writers to repeatedly use the sonnet form. It has been said that this use of the sonnet was a conscious choice made by them to ingratiate themselves to the literary elite. According to one of Cullen’s critics, Alan Shucard, “it would hardly do for a Negro poet seeking acceptance in the Twenties to model himself after such avant-garde poets as Ezra Pound, and the Imagists, and Eliot” (Shucard vi). While it is true that these poets speak in traditional lyric diction and meter that would harness elite cultural authority, their choice can also be said to be based on rhetorical awareness of their audience and purpose. These poets successfully “gained white American recognition for ‘Negro poetry’ at a moment when there

was little encouraging recognition in the United States for anything Negro” (Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* 86). Their strategy, in effect, was to put “Harlem in Shakespeare”: to use forms derived from English tradition as a kind of Trojan horse, to infuse them with social critique and then sneak them under the defenses (which could be conscious or not) of that very society being critiqued. Although some critics claim that any kind of protest “completely obscures [the poet’s] lyricism” (G. Smith, “The Black Protest Sonnet” 3), poetic form in fact enhances the significance of the political themes. The sonnet form can here be used to embed racial protest: “the sonnet as a genre has itself revealed in the productive tensions of the social and cultural context of its construction” (Blount 229).

McKay’s body of work is notable for its themes of strong protest against economic oppression and racial injustice. His writings reflect his defiance of the prejudice he felt as a Jamaican transplanted into Jim Crow America. When he immigrated to the United States, McKay was appalled by the overt dehumanization and hatred in American racism. Yet his poems do not reflect dismissive reactions so much as a kind of emotional alchemy: “the uncanny conversion of white hatred into self-nourishment” (Maxwell, “Introduction” xxx). His voice was a marked contrast to the gradualism and acquiescence found in earlier African American writing. Yet his defiance does not manifest as raw emotion so much as extraordinary restraint. The speaker’s attitude is not one of complaint: he speaks in the voice of an educated and sensitive adult victimized by absurd regulations. In fact, as a young man McKay received an education in European culture, including German poetry and philosophy, Fabian socialism, and English Romantic poetry. Despite his education, he began his literary career in Jamaica writing dialect poems that portray the peasant worker condemned to exploitation, “contrasting Schopenhauerian

pessimism filtered through the elisions of island vernacular” (Maxwell, “Introduction” xiv). McKay’s career shifted through several phases (e.g., Marxism, Catholicism, international bohemianism) and took up various themes (e.g., free love, urban life, nature, revolutionary incitation), but this study will restrict itself to McKay’s ability to stretch the boundaries of the sonnet with special focus on an early poem (which has so far evaded critical inquiry) from *Harlem Shadows* (1922), “The Park in Spring.”

Countee Cullen’s literary education was, like McKay’s, an intellectual one. In the 1920s, Cullen had the most distinguished formal education of any African American poet: a Phi Beta Kappa from New York University, he attended Harvard for his M.A. Whereas McKay was strongly sympathetic to the black masses that he saw discriminated against in the America to which he had migrated from Jamaica, Cullen deliberately avoided folk forms and popular culture. He was profoundly inspired by the Romantics. Yet Cullen was one of the few poets from the Harlem Renaissance to enjoy an audience composed of both white and African American readers. His work was reviewed in the *New York Times* and published in predominantly white periodicals such as *Poetry* and *Palms*, as well the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Certain poems, such as “Yet Do I Marvel,” were extensively reprinted. According to Carl Van Vechten, the closing couplet of that poem was “printed more often (in periodicals in other languages than English, moreover) than any other two lines by any contemporary poet” (Kellner 237). In this study, my emphasis will fall on the entirety of that darkly complex sonnet.

The Innovative Poet: Langston Hughes Finds Shakespeare in Harlem

Langston Hughes, the subject of my third chapter, has always been recognized as a folk poet. Drawing on Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) and Carl Sandburg's *Jazz Fantasies* (1919), his aim has been to include everyday African American experience as part of literature, a project that reached a zenith of sorts when he combined the blues form with the structure of the sonnet. This study examines "Seven Moments of Love: An Un-sonnet Sequence in Blues," his synthesis of blues rhythm and sonnet form from his 1942 volume *Shakespeare in Harlem*. This collection was poorly received by critics, even characterized by an African American reviewer of the time as "loud, lewd, unwholesome and degenerate" (Dodson 27), a charge that "Seven Moments of Love" both invites and refutes.

Of course, the blues and the sonnet could not be less structurally similar. The sonnet is an emblem of high culture, polished, literary, a celebration of order, closure, prosody, and rhyme. The blues revels in chaos, mass culture, vernacular, improvisation, expansiveness, dialect, and performance. Although the unlikely combination might appear to be extreme, it marks a high point in Hughes's attempt to bridge the popular and the literary. Such disarming hybrids are typical of the staggeringly diverse body of work that Hughes produced, most of which resists stable interpretation. As one of the most prolific writers of his time, Hughes filled his forty-year career with twenty plays, sixteen books of poetry, seven anthologies, four volumes of documentary and editorial fiction, three autobiographies, three collections of short stories, and two novels. Because he made a living by his pen, he continually developed as an artist and intellectual throughout his career. Often he would address more than one audience at the same time, in cross-genre works whose resistance to categorization was recognized early on by his reviewers. "[H]e might be acclaimed a new prophet in several fields, and very likely he does not

think of himself as belonging to any of them” (Larkin 84). His most famous early poem is “A Negro Speaks of Rivers,” published in 1921 and dedicated to W. E. B. Du Bois, but written two years earlier when Hughes was 17. It presents “a Negro” as a citizen of the world and a founder of civilization. His work is always, although sometimes peripherally, in conversation with issues of race. From “A Negro Speaks of Rivers” until his last book published in the year of his death, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) Hughes wrote to break down barriers in class and race.

As diverse as he was in his interests and expression, Hughes yet remained accessible to his intended audiences: African American people, the unspecialized reader, and the engaged public. That accessibility has not endeared him to critics. Even though African American literature has become an acceptable subject of study in the academy, two biases of twentieth-century criticism have slowed scholarship on Hughes. One is the scholarly preference for difficult and explicitly complex styles. Second, and closely related, is the modernist “equation of alienated pessimism with the authentic” (Buell viii). At first read, Hughes’s work is often direct, honest, and passionate. However, close reading reveals levels of complexity as well as Hughes’s sensitive awareness of both the African American oral folk tradition and the (not exclusively white) American literary tradition.

Hughes forged a modern understanding of folk forms and the vernacular, not as the “broken tongue” of dialect but as an affirming form of black identity, “a medium of authentic African American self-assertion” (Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left* 166). In his 1926 manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes encourages African American writers to draw upon their own folk traditions and language. Some critics believe that in this essay, Hughes accuses Cullen (without explicitly naming him) of racial self-loathing: “One of the most

promising of the young Negro poets said to me once, ‘I want to be a poet – not a Negro poet,’ meaning, I believe, ‘I want to write like a white poet’; meaning subconsciously, ‘I would like to be a white poet’; meaning behind that, ‘I would like to be white’” (27). Although Hughes exaggerates Cullen’s attitude, his message that black artists should primarily draw on black traditions was an influential affirmation.

Gwendolyn Brooks: The Next Stage

Gwendolyn Brooks, the most prominent post-Harlem-Renaissance African American poet and the subject of my fourth chapter, openly considers the impact of racism and poverty upon the lives of everyday urban black people. She has also drawn successfully on the examples of her predecessors. Like McKay and Cullen, she is a master of traditional poetic forms that attend to formal details, and like Hughes, she is at home in vernacular writings that privilege the spoken voice. Where Cullen found double-consciousness to be an unsolvable dilemma, Brooks saw productive opportunity. “[The black writer] has the American experience and he also has the black experience; so he’s very rich” (Brooks and Stavros 20). Adapting the poetics of “high” modernism to black perspectives, Brooks works to reconcile the conflict between vernacular and elite discourse.

A Street in Bronzeville (1945), Brooks’s first collection of verse, contains blues, ballads, and the sonnet sequence “Gay Chaps at the Bar.” That sequence, which closes the book, describes the conflict black men feel when asked to serve a country that had devalued them during the national crisis of World War II. Based on letters Brooks received from her brother, a United States Army Staff Sergeant in the South Pacific, and other officers and enlisted soldiers,

the sonnets draw on vernacular diction. Individual poems offer distinctive voices: a mother watches her son go to war, a soldier confronts the complexity and chaos of war, and white and black troops thrown together are suddenly face to face with the “paradox of patriotism and prejudice” (Melhem 35). The sonnets are variants of Italian and English sonnet forms, “modernist” in their technical proficiency and complexity: slant rhymes, surprising diction and metaphor, with a strong tension between sound and rhythm.

“Gay Chaps at the Bar” has been celebrated as a major sonnet sequence; my fourth chapter takes up that work but also an overlooked section from Brooks’s second collection, *Annie Allen* (1949), “[T]he children of the poor,” a poem that confronts the problems of being a parent living under urban poverty. Yet for black poet Don L. Lee, that poem and others were “written for whites and unread by blacks” (quoted in Melhem 55). Brooks in fact planned the book “to command a more universal appeal” than *Bronzeville* (Melhem 18). Even so, the presence of urban poverty as well as Brooks’s desire to make heard the voice of the oppressed is particularly evident in the fourth poem of the sequence, “First fight. Then fiddle.” Like McKay’s “If We Must Die,” this poem is not explicitly racialized even as it emerges from a hostile environment.

Brooks’s oblique approach is central to one side of the African American tradition, aligned as it is with “the black tradition of artful ambiguity and indirection” and thus communicating “with a sub-conscious sophistication that is not possible with expression made solely on the conscious level” (Shaw, *Gwendolyn Brooks* 183). Unlike many Black Arts theorists (for whom Lee would be a spokesperson), Brooks understood black experience as inclusive. This study concludes with her as a significant figure. She fully employs the prosodic resources of

poetry. She stands as a test case for the effectiveness of examining poems in close detail. And she is a distinguished observer of the everyday life of African Americans striving to emerge upward in the dramatic years that followed World War II. It would be incorrect to say that she culminates a tradition, because so many poets, including African Americans, carry forward the sonnet into productions that are numerous and impressive. But she demonstrates the vitality of formal writing, and its ability to present political views with grace and with a subtle edge, at an important time for poetry and African American development.

CHAPTER 1

THE SONNET ON THE EDGE OF MODERNISM: ARTHUR DAVISON FICKE,
POETRY MAGAZINE, AND THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

Marjorie Levinson, a prominent New Formalist critic, has identified two ways of thinking about how poets use traditional forms in their work. The first, “activist formalism” (a term Levinson borrows from Susan J. Wolfson), seeks to historicize the form, acknowledging that a sonnet means something different in Harlem of the 1920s and in Florence of the 1300s. Indeed, Elizabethan scholar Hallett Smith notes that in Shakespeare’s time, sonnets were criticized as an illegitimate form, not derived from Greek and Roman models: “a neoclassical reaction which can be traced back to . . . Ben Jonson in Shakespeare’s lifetime” (1745). In contrast, the second, “normative formalism,” seeks to make the form the standard, emphasizing its stability over time (Levinson 559). Many, but not all, of the Harlem Renaissance sonneteers were normative formalists who understood form as a standard of the poetic. For these poets, the sonnet was a stable response not only to the problems of racial relations but also the political, social, and literary changes of the early twentieth century.

To understand the Harlem Renaissance, then, it is helpful to know the status of the sonnet in the early twentieth century. Before turning to that poetry, we can observe Harriet Monroe’s editorial choice of the first poem placed in the October 1912 inaugural issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. While literary modernism is often associated with an increase in experimental forms, an obsession with free verse, and an antipathy to tradition, the beginnings of modernism staged a highly contested rivalry between formalists and anti-formalists. The

question of whether or not the sonnet form would remain viable was at the heart of this controversy. Surprisingly, Monroe did not choose to open with Ezra Pound's free-verse "To Whistler, American" (it would appear on page seven). Pound's poem celebrated the uniquely American, innovative aesthetics of a rebellious painter unencumbered by European traditions — even though the poem was inspired by a "loan exhibit of his paintings at the Tate Gallery" in London (Pound 7). Instead, her choice for the inaugural poet was a Harvard graduate and lawyer named Arthur Davison Ficke (1883–1945). His pair of two strictly rhymed Italian sonnets entitled "Poetry" was printed on page one, effectively acknowledging the centrality of metrical verse at the time, even though within a few years *Poetry* would become the pre-eminent modernist little magazine.

Ficke was one of the most popular and influential poets of his time, although he is little-read today. Along with Edwin Arlington Robinson, he was considered one of the best American sonneteers of the early twentieth century (Mönch 272). Ficke's attitude toward modernism was ambivalent: he was both repelled and fascinated. Today he is primarily remembered for concocting the anti-modernist Spectra Hoax (1916-1919), and his serious work has been largely forgotten. Masquerading under the byline of "Anne Knish," Ficke (along with Witter Bynner, masquerading as "Emanuel Morgan" and with several other writers who played supporting roles) created a satirical literary hoax called "Spectrism." Spectrism parodied the manifestoes and styles of emerging modernist movements, including imagism, Futurism, and Dadaism. Its poetry resembled the fragmented imagist poems that were the most visible examples of modernism in popular culture. Although the purpose of these "fake" poems was satire, the hoaxers turned out poems that were lively and disruptive. Indeed, the two poems by Ficke that survive in the pages

of the Library of America anthology of *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2000), are not his widely read popular poems, but are from his Spectrist work, “Opus 118” and “Opus 131,” (Ficke 421–22). It is possible that Ficke even began to admire his own parodies as real poetry because he would later move away from his traditional aesthetic and become more accepting of free verse and avant-garde poetry in general. Indeed, he would later write an admiring review of Langston Hughes’s controversially explicit *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (Rampersad, “Langston Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew*” 156). The Spectra Hoax had not yet occurred when “Poetry” was published, but Ficke was already developing skill in seeing two sides to poetry which later enabled him to write the unique material in that hoax: poetry that was at once a spoof of free verse and at the same time interesting enough to warrant serious reading.

As a formal poem in a magazine often associated with free verse, Ficke’s poem “Poetry” suggests that modernism can be both experimental and traditional. The poem is a meditation on the active and passive nature of poetry. In its passive sense (corresponding to a normative formalism), it is a retreat, a bastion protecting the land of beauty against the rising flood of philistinism. In its active sense (corresponding to an activist stance), it is a gate, a doorway between the mundane world and the transcendent. The fact that both qualities of poetry are on display within the tight form of Ficke’s sonnets suggests Monroe’s choice of Ficke as the initial face of her new magazine was designed to lay claim to a broad appeal.

The two Italian sonnets that comprise the poem are a response to the question “What is poetry?” (Newcomb 6):

I.

It is a little isle amid bleak seas—

An isolate realm of garden, circled round
By importunity of stress and sound,
Devoid of empery to master these.
At most, the memory of its streams and bees,
Borne to the toiling mariner outward-bound,
Recalls his soul to that delightful ground;
But serves no beacon toward his destinies.

It is a refuge from the stormy days,
Breathing the peace of a remoter world
Where beauty, like the musing dusk of even,
Enfolds the spirit in its silver haze;
While far away, with glittering banners furled,
The west lights fade, and stars come out in heaven.

II.

It is a sea-gate, trembling with the blast
Of powers that from the infinite sea-plain roll,
A whelming tide. Upon the waiting soul
As on a fronting rock, thunders the vast
Groundswell; its spray bursts heavenward, and drives past
In fume and sound articulate of the whole

Of ocean's heart, else voiceless; on the shoal

Silent; upon the headland clear at last.

From darkened sea-coasts without stars or sun,

Like trumpet-voices in a holy war,

Utter the heralds [sic] tidings of the deep.

And where men slumber, weary and undone,

Visions shall come, incredible hopes from far,—

And with high passion shatter the bonds of sleep. (1–2)

Surprisingly, the first poem begins by pointing out the weakness of poetry. The first quatrain of the first sonnet suggests poetry's powerlessness and isolation. Poetry "is a little isle" (1) and an "isolate realm of garden" (2) surrounded by noisy busy-ness which it cannot master. In the second quatrain, the argument shifts to claim that "At most," (4) poetry inspires those who are downtrodden. It does, however, have a dual movement. "[T]he memory of" poetry is "outward bound," "Borne to the toiling mariner," (5-6). At the same time, poetry compels an inward movement that "Recalls his soul," (7). The verb "recalls" also suggests the "memory" of line five, so that this dual movement paradoxically implies a unified effect. Line eight is surprising and not entirely clear. What does it mean that poetry "serves no beacon to [a reader's] destinies"? One interpretation is that poetry, like a lost island, is a metaphorical place, but it is not a destination. But this is a seemingly unexpected line in a magazine that should be making ambitious claims for poetry. Line eight is a continuation of the earlier idea, summed up in line four, that poetry is "Devoid of empery to master these [bleak seas]." In other words, poetry holds

no sway over the outside world. These first eight lines anticipate Auden's dictum from his poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" that "Poetry makes nothing happen."

After the volta of line 8, the argument continues along the same lines, repeating and clarifying the first octave. In contrast to the "stormy days" (9) of non-poetic life, poetry is "a refuge." The world of business and industry tries to puff itself up, but its existence is only temporary. In contrast, the world of poetry endures, in a theme reminiscent of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 107," "thou in this shall find thy monument" (also see sonnet 55, 60, 63, and 81). Poetry is defiantly impractical, from "a remoter world," (10). It is *because of* this impracticality that poetry endures: if it were merely useful as a piece of technology, it would become out of date as soon as a new technology replaced it. Part one ends passively, with "banners furled" (13), and lights fading, although "stars come out in heaven," (14) which signals an imminent change.

Although poetry seems to be passive in part one, it nevertheless has positive effects. It can soothe the reader's soul. Poetry "recalls his soul to that delightful ground" (7), and therefore counters the outward movement in line six. The second quatrain seems to align the purposes of poetry with the idea of "art for art's sake" of the Aesthetic Movement. In this interpretation, the poem is an example of the New Critical idea of a form that stands alone ("remoter" and "isolate"), and outside of the business of the material world. The language and theme of this poem are echoed in an appendix that Monroe wrote for her new magazine: "We hope to offer our subscribers a place of refuge, a green isle in the sea, where Beauty may plant her gardens, and Truth, austere revealer of joy and sorrow, of hidden delights and despairs, may follow her brave quest unafraid" (28). The theme of "Poetry," that great poetry is a world unto itself, is an example of "normative" formalism. In Levinson's terms, the poem argues for "a sharp

demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant – i.e., disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art” (Levinson 559). For Ficke, the enduring sonnet form underscores the enduring truths of poetry. These truths draw readers back again and again. The hidden corner of “Truth” had found its protector, and the austere sonnet would be its vehicle.

This would seem to be Ficke’s understanding of the form. He writes in a letter to the critic L. G. Sterner that “I have used [the sonnet] on occasions when the emotion I wished to express, was fairly simple and well-unified, when, to put it otherwise, sharpness of definition and conciseness of statement seemed to be more desirable than elaborate description of the emotion from several angles. I find nothing constricting in the arbitrary limitations of the sonnet . . . for the simple reason that I never attempt a sonnet unless I am already vaguely aware that the thing I am about to say is, by its inherent nature, suited to the sonnet form, rather than to free verse, the ballad, or some other medium” (qtd. in Mönch 272). But while this poem seeks a “sharpness of definition,” it is not clear that that definition has been achieved.

The overall effect of “Poetry” is characterized by a sense of ambiguities that expand meaning. For example, the meaning of the phrase “[d]evoid of empery to master” is ambiguous because we are not sure who lacks power: poetry or the world outside of it? Ficke implies that both lack power to control each other. Poetry is a “refuge” from the difficulties of the world, but at the same time it “serves [as] no beacon” for human ambition. It can inspire enthusiasm, but not a specific goal.

The final lines of part one may be a reference to Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, lines 7-8, "It is the star to every wand'ring bark,/ Whose worth's unknown, although his heighth be taken." In other words, poetry is simultaneously accessible and mysterious. The poem contains two paradoxes, both of them occurring at or before the turns of the poem, that exemplify the theme. Looking ahead for a moment to the second sonnet, there is a paradoxical statement in lines 6-7: "In fume and sound articulate of the whole/ Of ocean's heart, else voiceless." What does it mean that poetry is both articulate and voiceless? In the first sonnet, poetry "Recalls his soul to that delightful ground/ But serves no beacon toward his destinies" (7-8). As a pair, the two sonnets contrast the serenity of poetry with a defiant argument of art for its own sake. Poetry is described as a "ground" and a garden with streams and bees, but also as "stars" and "silver haze." The phrase "stress and sound" seems to apply to the non-poetic world, but poetry itself is also made up of stress and sound, the physical utterances that the listener translates into meaning. Like the human with a body and a mind, poetry has both concrete and abstract qualities.

The second sonnet of "Poetry" underscores the ultimate purpose of the nascent magazine and emphasizes the more active aspects of poetry as an art form. The diction is more aggressive and militant: a wave "thunders" (4), sea-spray "bursts" and "drives" (5), "heralds ... trumpet voices in a holy war" (10-11). The final line of the poem is dramatic both metrically and semantically. Paraphrased, the line means "The passion of poetry will wake us up from the dream of everyday life." I scan the line as "and WITH high PASSion SHATTer the BONDS of SLEEP." In the second foot, the first syllable of "passion" is "promoted": it gets a very strong beat because although we would expect a stress on "high," "passion" wants an even stronger one due to the iambic structure, and the stress which is on "high" requires a greater stress on

“passion.” This final line of the poem deploys a consonance of sibilants, “passion shatter,” which further heightens the drama and activity of the line. Poetry, whatever its neglect, would stage a defiant return. As Harriet Monroe put it in the terminal essay of the journal: “Poetry alone, of all the fine arts, has been left to shift for herself in a world unaware of its immediate and desperate need of her, a world whose great deeds, whose triumphs over matter, over the wilderness, over racial enmities and distances, require her ever-living voice to give them glory and glamour” (Monroe 26).

Although the poem is highly metrical, Ficke varies the meter in ways that prevent a monotonous rhythm. Most of the poem is iambic pentameter, but nearly half of the lines are 11-syllables (lines 2, 5, 8, 11, 13, and 14 of part one; lines 2, 5, 6, 13, and 14 of part two). Most often, the rhythm of the poem is in the background as a steady beat, with occasional substitutions, while the line-break establishes a pace that allows the reader to move slowly and quietly in sonnet one or rapidly and intensely in sonnet two. Although every other rhyme in the poem is masculine, ending on a stressed syllable, the feminine rhyme at the end of part one, of “even” (11) and “heaven” (14), resists finality and prepares us for the transition.

There are striking similarities between the last two lines of each sonnet. The words “far” and “come” are contained in the last two lines of each sonnet, which has the effect of reinforcing the theme of poetry’s remoteness from everyday life. But this remoteness is shown in slightly different ways in each section. In the first sonnet, the non-poetic world is “far” and passive (with banners “furled” or “rolled up”). In contrast, the poetic world in the second sonnet is far away but sends “incredible hopes.” Additionally, the last lines of both sonnets contain rhythmic elements, namely a spondee in the first and a promotion in the second sonnet, at the second foot

which slow and quiet the line to a stately pace and conveys a serious and profound tone that matches the “deep truths” of poetry that is Ficke’s theme. Poetry for Ficke is a site that welcomes both calm consideration and passionate engagement.

There is a notable difference in line endings between the two sections. The first section feels slow and measured, and the second one is quick and energetic. The stately march of the first section is primarily the result of regularly end-stopped lines and a relative lack of caesura. Twelve of the lines are terminated with a range of punctuation: periods, an em-dash, commas, and semi-colons. The effect of this is to give the poem a serene and dignified pace, well suited to the quiet tone of the first sonnet. In contrast, the second sonnet contains more enjambment: six of the eight lines in the octave are enjambed, and the entire octave is a single sentence. These enjambed lines, building on each other in connected clauses, stoke the slowly building boil of the octave, increasing the pace and intensity of the poem until “its spray bursts heavenward” in line 5. The spondees in that line further support the explosive effect. The octave of the second poem also contains significant caesurae. Six of the eight lines have caesurae and lines five, seven and eight contain two. Line 5 has an especially successful example of an initial caesura that serves to unbalance the lines, mimicking the rolling waves of the tide.

The overall effect of both sonnets together is a display of tightly controlled poetic technique. By formalist (especially New Critical) standards, this is an effective use of the sonnet: Ficke demonstrates paradox, compression, balance, and unity. An ordered and decorous form counterpoints the intensity of the images. The sonnet is a form with a defined beginning, middle, and end. It is structured in rhyme and rhythm. And so it would seem to be a wise choice for the poet who wishes to demonstrate technical skill in a compact and compelling way. As suggested

by Gabriel Rossetti's definition of a sonnet as a "moment's monument," a paradox contained within a unity is one of the hallmarks of the sonnet (134). Similarly, we can see this technique used by Shakespeare in his sonnets. Although they are formally unified, the scholar Helen Vendler points out that "most of [Shakespeare's] sonnets are self-contradicting" (xiv). As Shakespeare put it in *As You Like It*: "the truest poetry is the most feigning" (3.3.16-17). Ficke has consciously designed the pair of sonnets to work together in accordance with principles of unity and symmetry. Both of them are Italian sonnets rhyming abbaabba cdecde. This Italian form, in which the octave contains only two rhymed sounds, is known to be more difficult to do well in English, which lacks the numerous rhymes that enrich Italian. Ficke further establishes his control over the form by contrasting the different parts of the sonnet. For example, the sestet of part one ends on a sleepy note, "The west lights fade, and stars come out in heaven," while part two, wakes the reader up, "And with high passion shatter the bonds of sleep."

Although Ficke works within the conventions of the sonnet, he also makes the form his own. Considering that both of these poems are Italian sonnets, which typically warrant a volta, it is surprising that neither of these poems contains a sharp turn after line eight. Instead of a single sonnet that doubles back on itself, Ficke has written two sonnets in which the second speaks back to the first. He does offer more than one perspective on the sonnet (as one might expect in such a dualistic form), but he requires two sonnets to do the job. It is almost as if Ficke is intentionally overlooking the defining turn, and perhaps this is why lines eight and nine are separated by a blank line, else we might miss them. The turns are there, but they primarily signal repetitions or restatements rather than changes in argument. They are gradual rather than acute.

But not all critics long to return to Ficke's deserted island. The self-consciously poetic, general, abstract diction of Ficke's poem would be exactly what the later modernists, such as Eliot, Williams, and Pound, would rebel against. The lines "Where beauty, like the musing dusk of even,/ Enfolds the spirit in its silver haze," (11-12) in sonnet one, would be a particularly egregious example of fuzzyheaded language. Other phrases, such as "isolate realm" (2), seem deliberately archaic. But Ficke has good reasons for his seemingly artificial choices. The word "importunity," meaning "persistent annoyance," in line three is well suited for the comparison of poetry as an island, because the word comes from the name of the Roman god *Portunus*, who protects harbors. Much of the anachronistic diction is derived from Romance languages. The word "empery," an archaic word for "political control" or simply "power" is a similarly Latinate word. But these words are in sharp contrast to the simple, Old English words that describe the isle of poetry, home of the "streams and bees." In the same way, Ficke uses poetic diction (in the second section, the word "whelming" is self-consciously literary). One could argue that this antique diction is appropriate, given the fact the Ficke is creating an old-fashioned atmosphere and emphasizing poetry as something outside of ordinary experience. The masculine connotations of the diction support the masculine characters who haunt the poem: the mariner has "his destinies" (8) in part one and visions come "where men slumber" (12) in part two. If Ficke's purpose was to recast the sonnet form, which might have been considered feminine and delicate, into a more masculine and robust effect, then he could be considered successful. In this sense, he is employing an activist poetics.

There are other "activist" moments, though they are subtle. Ficke's poems are written in a style suggestive of Shakespeare's poetic diction and inverted syntax. For example, it is unclear

whether the soul or poetry itself is being punished by the sea. Sonnet two seems to begin with poetry as the “sea-gate,” but then “Upon the waiting soul/ As on a fronting rock, thunders the vast/ Groundswell.” Although both sonnets emphasize the volta by separating the octave from the sestet with a blank line, the turn in the first is much weaker than the turn in the second. In the first sonnet, the parallelism of both the first and ninth line (“It is a...”) seems to indicate continuity between the two sections and not contrast. In the second, (which also begins with the deictic “It is a...”) the octave describes the immediate and intense power of poetry while the sestet emphasizes its effect on the unconscious reader. While Ficke’s language implies the tradition of Shakespeare, it does so within the Italian sonnet form, suggesting an “activist” formalism. According to Ficke, there is a role for the sonnet in the contemporary world.

Racial Redemption Through Art

Given the complex nature of poetry that Ficke proposes with his two interrelating sonnets, what role could poetry play in the lives of African Americans of the time? Not surprisingly, the conversation about poetry covers territory similar to that Ficke sets forward in both works. As the new conceptions of a self-defined black identity in the 1920s began to take root, African American leaders examined the purpose of art and poetry in African American life. Although the term “New Negro” had appeared as early as the late 1880s, the term gained national currency with the publication of Alain Locke’s anthology of the same title (1925). The New Negro abandoned the old tradition of bemoaning his fate and expecting “neither ... sentimental allowances nor depreciated by current social discounts” (Locke, “Introduction: The New Negro” 8). The New Negro now wanted to stand on his or her own merit as an artist. Many

New Negro leaders were questioning the educational philosophy of Booker T. Washington, prominent at the end of the nineteenth century, who believed that African-Americans should primarily concern themselves with vocational (not liberal) education. But the new leadership was divided between regarding art as propaganda (led by W. E. B. Du Bois) and art as individual expression (advocated by Alain Locke). According to historian Cary D. Wintz, “The ‘New Negro’ was never a simple or comfortable blend of ideologies; it was rather a dynamic ideology filled with internal conflicts and even contradictions whose fundamental questions remains unsolved” (47).

Despite the influence of Locke, the popular imagination did not regard poetry as a practical or political tool. According to historian David Levering Lewis, “Nothing could have seemed to most Afro-Americans more extravagantly impractical as a means of improving racial standing than writing poetry” (90–91). However unlikely it appeared that poetry could be the means of political change, poetry also has some protections that allowed it to work powerfully on the hearts and minds of its audience. Precisely because it is assumed to be powerless, poetry is “a safe or innocuous place in which the reigning assumptions of a given culture can be criticized” (Lentricchia and McLaughlin 69). Like Ficke’s deserted island, poems may be imaginary worlds where nothing matters. So Auden, when he argues that “poetry makes nothing happen,” perhaps has an ulterior motive. He may want his audience to think poetry makes nothing happen that they may let down their guard and allow the poetry to work on their subconscious. T. S. Eliot once wrote that the purpose of poetic “meaning” was “to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog” (151). In a sonnet, a similar

mechanism is in play in which the poet may employ an attractive or graceful form that won't obviously engage the conscious mind of the reader and thus let the poem do its work on another level.

One of the earliest theorists who did envision art as helping attain equality for African Americans was the editor and sociologist Charles S. Johnson (1893-1956), who would become the founder and editor of the National Urban League's prominent journal *Opportunity*. Johnson's plan to achieve racial equality was in sharp contrast to that of Booker T. Washington, who argued for "a grand compromise," an economic transformation through industrial and vocational education, even if it came at the price of segregation. Washington had dismissed higher education for most of the African American students. He mocked those students who studied French grammar but did not have employable skills.⁴ Johnson had come to an opposite conclusion through his training in sociology. The established apprenticeship pathways excluded African Americans from most skilled trades. Johnson believed that because art was persuasive for both the heart and mind, it was, according to the historian David Levering Lewis, the best way "to redeem... the standing of his people" (90). But Johnson's political philosophy has been debated. While Lewis sees him as a pluralist (one who wishes to maintain the independence of minority traditions from the majority culture), Cary D. Wintz sees him as an integrationist (one who wishes to blend minority and majority cultures), and George Hutchinson sees him as

4 This example comes from his bestselling autobiography *Up from Slavery*. Although Washington endured much criticism for his belief that an economic revolution was necessary for a social and political one, his views of the importance of black-owned businesses and economic independence would later be supported (without attribution) by Du Bois as well as the Nation of Islam movement in the 1960s and 70s.

something in between (Williams 621). Although he valued art as a political tool, Johnson also supported the individual artist's right to expression (Williams 621).

Du Bois is often portrayed as a rabid propagandist who believed that all art should be subordinated to political purpose, but this is an oversimplification. In Du Bois's review of Alain Locke's *The New Negro* (1926), he argues that all great art is in essence political. However, he also saw aesthetics and politics not as mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive:

Mr. Locke has been newly seized with the idea that Beauty rather than Propaganda should be the object of Negro literature and art. [I]t is a grave question if ever in this world in any renaissance there can be a search for disembodied beauty which is not really a passionate effort to do something tangible, accompanied and illumined and made holy by the vision of eternal beauty. (Du Bois, "Review of *The New Negro*" 141)

Despite their ostensible differences, Du Bois and Locke had much in common. Both of them believed in the power of art to affect the intellect as well as the emotions. Du Bois sees propaganda and art as two sides of the same coin. For Locke, art and propaganda were mutually exclusive. But Locke's position is also a nuanced one: "My chief objection to propaganda, apart from its besetting sin of monotony and disproportion, is that it perpetuates the position of group inferiority even in crying out against it" (Locke, "Art or Propaganda?" 260).

One disadvantage of Johnson's equality through art hypothesis is that it is vulnerable to charges of racial appeasement: that poems, especially those that do not have overt racial themes, only copy European models and so they seem to be written to reassure a white audience. Supporters of this view are particularly sensitive to the perception that imitating white artifacts

could diminish the stature of black cultural achievement. Such a finding could explain why the number of studies of black sonnets is surprisingly small. Even though black poets have found the form compelling (James Smethurst notes that “[t]he sonnet was a form especially favored by African American writers in the twentieth century until at least the early 1950s” (*New Red Negro* 176), sonnets written by African-Americans have been ignored by scholars and historians of African American culture. One theory as to the cause of this omission is that scholarship on African American writing has intentionally neglected anything that is not derived from a folk-based African American culture:

The focus has been on experiences of African cultural retention or on the struggle for recognition in American society. Arguably, this “ethnocentricity” has historically been a response to being denied literacy and “history,” or a cultural heritage. The aesthetics of writing was from the outset coupled with social and political aims. (Ahlin 147)

James Baldwin succinctly captured the irony of imitation when he wrote, “The American idea of racial progress is measured by how fast I become white” (Baldwin, “On Language, Race, and the Black Writer”). As long as the white sonnet is perceived as the standard, the black sonnet will always be at a disadvantage. But there is no reason that the sharing of forms is inherently in favor of the culture that started it. In fact, cross-cultural borrowings can add a new perspective, making the resulting artwork a bridge that fosters understanding between two groups. Black poets can write sonnets and white musicians can sing the blues.

CHAPTER 2

A BLACK MAN BECOMES A POET, A POET BECOMES A BLACK MAN:

THE SONNETS OF COUNTÉE CULLEN AND CLAUDE MCKAY

An understanding of the sonnet as characterized by Levinson (and anticipated by Ficke) can productively inform a re-reading of the prominent African American sonneteers Claude McKay (1889-1948) and Countee Cullen (1903-1946), whose differences exemplify the “normative” and “activist” approaches to formalism respectively. Yet there are some currently accepted readings of Cullen and McKay that would reverse the categorizing I am about to propose: they would make McKay the activist and Cullen the normative, based on the differences in their background. McKay’s activism began only after leaving rural Jamaica, where he published two books of dialect verse to great acclaim. He was called a “Jamaican Bobby Burns” (Maxwell, “Introduction” xiv). When he immigrated to the United States, McKay was shocked by the dehumanizing effects of American-style racism. A poet first, he became a “black man” under the arbitrary racial categories of American culture, and he turned to the formal sonnet to voice his anger, abandoning the dialect verse that had brought him early acclaim.

Unlike McKay, Cullen avoided dialect verse and achieved success at a young age by writing poetry that skirted his experience as an African American. Cullen achieved national fame as a high school student for his gentle parody poem, “I Have a Rendezvous with Life” (1921). Born in Louisville, Kentucky and raised in Harlem, first by his grandmother and then after the age of fifteen by the Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen of Harlem’s Salem African Methodist Episcopal Church, Cullen experienced racism at an early age (as he would tell in the remarkable

short poem “Incident”) but resolved to become not a black poet but a poet. Though the public hailed Cullen as a great African American poet, Cullen insisted that his poetry not be classified as racial. He infamously claimed that he never intended to write racial poetry, but that this is what he was called to do: “In spite of myself, I find that I am actuated by a strong sense of race consciousness. This grows upon me, I find, as I grow older, and although I struggle against it, it colors my writing, I fear, in spite of everything I can do. There have been many things in my life that have hurt me, and I find that the surest relief from these hurts is in writing” (“Negro Wins Prize in Poetry Contest” E1). Cullen in one sense was unlike McKay. He was a black man who became a poet.

Who Owns the Sonnet?

Because sonnets were among the first and most popular poems written by the earliest poets of the Harlem Renaissance, to ignore them would obscure some of the most significant poems in African American history. These are sonnets not derived from black folk culture, but neither are they derived from American culture. As a foreign form that has been adopted by many languages and nationalities, the sonnet occupies a liminal space that allows a poet to adopt it without making a claim for a particular culture. While each language puts its own stamp on the sonnet as it crosses the border (besides the English and Italian, there is also a French and German sonnet form).

It is true, however, that historically the sonnet offered words of praise in hopes of a reward, as in the Elizabethan tradition of writing sonnets to one’s patron. The Shakespearean scholar Alison Scott sees parallels between the Petrarchan plea to a lover and an economic plea

to a patron (A. Scott, “Hoarding the Treasure” 316). Shakespeare’s sonnets to the Young Man are perhaps the most famous example of the relationship of patron as lover. But the plea for help, which from the powerful position looks like honest humility, from the not powerful position looks like unseemly begging. This historical understanding of the sonnet as a mediator of an unequal power relationship makes the form very problematic for a racial group seeking equality: from their perspective, the relations between speaker and imagined audience are “baked into” the history of the form. The voice of the speaker, then, is already depicted as inferior to any one addressed within the sonnet. In this sense, it is a tool for strivers trying to succeed by passing outside of their community. This may amount to no more than a straw argument: however much the poet may seem to grovel, he or she is the *poet* and the one who makes the praise of the patron possible. The cultural capital of the poet trumps the economic capital of the patron. In the case of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the Young Man is given a less-defined personality, and so, as Scott has also pointed out, the most appealing personality of the sonnets “is the poet himself” (A. Scott, “Hoarding the Treasure” 315). Shakespeare, as Shakespeare, commands center stage.

While the sonnet has been used in the past for praise, it has also a history of effectively expressing values both activist (or subversive) and normative (or establishment). The sonnet is not only one of the oldest literary forms, but is in fact the oldest fixed form in the English language. However, the sonnet’s long history is no burden but an opportunity. The form has shown itself to be infinitely adaptable to new contexts, concerns, and voices. The very tradition of this form is a motivation to create something new. Even Shakespeare’s sonnet, “my mistresses eyes are nothing like the sun” takes up already cliché metaphors used in the tradition of love poetry and only to deny them as a way of praising a woman who, “when she walks, treads on the

ground.” Shakespeare loves a real woman because she is real, and he will describe her as such, even if he has to employ the artificial limitations of the sonnet to do so.

The poets who wrote strict sonnets may have used the sonnet as a kind of upward mobility — as a way of demonstrating technical achievement for a member of a group that had been denied the right to speak as artists. Additionally, the challenge of the sonnet (namely, to extend and not merely copy the tradition) is a claim for the African American to speak as an artist and declare the arrival of fully realized human being. “The sonnet’s role as the gold standard of civilized self-discipline made achieving it, for a late-nineteenth-century African American writer like Paul Lawrence [sic] Dunbar, effectively a claim for public equality” (Howarth 235). The creation of great art was taken to be the sign of a great culture.

Because a poet has to “own” the sonnet form, sonnet writing has been an avenue for developing poets to practice their craft and place themselves in literary history. Since the form of a sonnet helps to shape its content, the exercise of writing a sonnet is ideal for beginning poets to learn how form and content relate. The sonnet works as a kind of instruction manual for reading it. For example, in the English form of three quatrains and a couplet, an experienced reader will know that the first two quatrains will introduce an idea or experience, then there will be a change in attitude or thought (the “turn”), the next quatrain will modify the idea, and the final couplet will give closure. The reader knows to look for a turn after the second or third quatrain, and therefore writers of the sonnets can be as subtle or as obvious as they want, knowing that the reader will not miss the transition. In the 20th century, practitioners of the form include Edna St. Vincent Millay, W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, and Dylan Thomas. The rich history of the form provides opportunity for writers to contextualize and define their own work in how they

respond to what came before. In this sense the sonnet provides a way to “write back” to the form. Literature is a practice that is constantly renewing itself, so any author writing a sonnet is always implicitly reflecting on previous instances of the form. By involving poetry in its own history, the sonnet allows opportunity for a new poet to reference or challenge the poets who precede him or her. The role of the sonnet in the modernist era served as a type of union card; if one could write a good sonnet, then one was closer to being recognized as a competent poet.

But from the perspective of the poets at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, writing sonnets did not seem unsuitable. In the mind of these poets, they *were* being radical by writing the most conservative of forms:

For Countee Cullen, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Claude McKay, it was a political act just to write a sonnet. Their point was to demonstrate that African American experience could easily appear within a prosodic framework that had been developed by Shakespeare, extended by Milton, and employed by Keats. In their polished iambic pentameter lines, dialect certainly had no place. (Brunner 368)

Artistic purposes were inextricably intertwined with political purposes as poets demonstrated that they should have a voice in the cultural conversation. According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie McKay, in their introduction to the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*:

African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition.... In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of

reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write.

(xxvii–xxviii)

For both McKay and Cullen, then, the sonnet was an argument against racial limitations.

According to the critic Gary Smith:

The early poetic training of Cullen and McKay attracted them to what was universal in literature as opposed to the topical. For both poets, race was incidental to art. And since the sonnet had been the cutting stone for most of the great poets writing in the English language, it naturally appealed to [Claude McKay and Countee Cullen] as the most important means of sharpening their skills while reaching a universal audience with their poetry. (G. Smith, “The Black Protest Sonnet” 3)

By writing sonnets, poets gained literary credibility and respectability. This is not the same as white approval, and indeed, if McKay had thought of them that way, he might never have written one.

Contesting the Sonnet Form as Neutral Space: Claude McKay

The sonnet, with its history of crossing barriers of time, language, nation, race, and culture, is a form whose adaptability is difficult for any one culture to claim. On the one hand, then, it is an ideal form for “activist” poets to use without rejecting (or elevating) any particular tradition. The activist view of poetic form assumes that form has meaning only in relation to the things it contains. As the twentieth-century poet Richard Wilbur states, “Forms... survive their

moments of social or other bearing and become mere available instruments of expression” (Wilbur xix). Yet the “normative” view of poetic forms, that such forms inevitably retain conservative values, is still held by other contemporary poets and critics. For these writers, “the most authentic American artists rebel from Old World traditions and start anew” (Caplan, *Questions of Possibility* 11). To have an “American sonnet” is a “contradiction in terms” (11), like a cowboy wearing a powdered wig.

But the term “black poet” was also once a contradiction in terms. Black poets have done much to liberate formalist poetry from stuffy associations. Dialect poems, for instance, were considered in the nineteenth-century to be authentic representations of blackness and today they are considered racist caricatures. The sonnet form was not bound to racial signifiers (“normative”), and so it was a neutral space for black poets to begin to display mastery. At the same time, experimentation with poetic conventions and formulations makes the sonnet form a disruption of culture rather than the main repository of its values. These challenges to sonnet conventions show how “the complex relations among gender, race, and representation are especially visible... in the writings the writings of black men and women in traditional literary forms” (Blount 227). By adopting and adapting traditional literary forms such as the sonnet, black poets complicate the totalizing assumptions of the culture. The invisible forms become visible and then serve as a foil that highlights racial relations.

The clarion call for the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro was not an essay or a play or a speech, but a sonnet – Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” (1919). Although many works contend for the prestige of launching the Harlem Renaissance, “If We Must Die” is the work “most often judged to be the inaugural address of the Harlem Renaissance” (Maxwell,

“Introduction” 63). And much like Ficke’s poem, it is lyrical, emotional, and abstract, though an English and not an Italian sonnet:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
 Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
 While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
 Making their mock at our accurséd lot.
 If we must die, O let us nobly die,
 So that our precious blood may not be shed
 In vain; then even the monsters we defy
 Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
 O, kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
 Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
 And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
 What though before us lies the open grave?
 Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
 Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (McKay, “If We Must Die”)

The poem is a call to stand and defend one’s self-respect in the face of overwhelming odds, so that “even the monsters we defy/ Shall be constrained to honor us though dead” (ln 7-8). “If We Must Die” resounded in both black and white culture to become a turning point in black literary history:

Etched into the consciousness of literate black Americans for generations to come as a model of Afro-American heroism, this poem has become a point of reference

for the entire racial experience and a touchstone of the Afro-American entry into subjectivity. (Blount 234)

Despite its broad appeal, the poem's defiant tone is in fact the result of a very specific context: the Red Summer of 1919. This summer was "Red" both because of the labor conflicts between Communist and capitalists, but also because of the bloody race riots which occurred in major American cities. Racial tensions increased after World War I when white troops returned to find that many black workers had replaced them. A railroad porter at the time, McKay travelled through predominantly white cities and keenly felt the danger of violent racism, "Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous." When describing how the poem came to be, he does not say that he consciously chose the form, but implies that the poem itself chose the form. "It was during those days that the sonnet, "If We Must Die," exploded out of me. And for it the Negro people unanimously hailed me as a poet. Indeed, that one grand outburst is their sole standard of appraising my poetry. *It was the only poem I ever read to the members of my crew.* They were all agitated" (emphasis added, McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 31).

African American protest poetry, it is worth noting, did not start with McKay. An early example is Frances E. W. Harper's (1825-1911) accusatory poem "Bible Defence [sic] of Slavery." But African American protest poetry before "If We Must Die" was often in the voice of a gradualist or a naive speaker of dialect. Although McKay had written folk and dialect forms while he was a young poet in Jamaica, he distanced himself from dialect when he immigrated to America. The rage and defiance in "If We Must Die" is restrained by calm and cool form. Black anger was nothing new, but black *literary* anger, anger dressed in a black tuxedo with a

discreetly concealed automatic pistol, was revolutionary. Alain Locke (1885-1954), the self-described “philosophical mid-wife” (Davis, *From the Dark Tower* 52) of the Harlem Renaissance, in his essay on the black poet Sterling Brown, claims that McKay:

then broke with all the moods conventional in his day in Negro poetry, and presented a Negro who could challenge and hate, who knew resentment, brooded intellectual sarcasm, and felt contemplative irony. In this, so to speak, he pulled the psychological cloak off the Negro and revealed, even to the Negro himself, those facts disguised till then by his shrewd protective mimicry or pressed down under the dramatic mask of living up to what was expected of him. (Locke, “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk Poet” 122)

McKay, as an outsider, could more easily see the ideology that both whites and blacks were living under.

The commentary surrounding McKay’s first non-dialect poems is a good example of the literary elite’s condescending attitude towards black poetry. The noted Cambridge critic I. A. Richards, who wrote the introduction to *Spring in New Hampshire* (1921), notes that even though the poems were written by “a pure-blooded Negro,” they do not violate “barriers” of “good taste.” This introduction was reprinted in the expanded American edition, published in 1922 as *Harlem Shadows*, and a breakthrough volume – the first time in nearly twenty years that a major publisher offered a book by a living black poet:

Spring in New Hampshire is extrinsically as well as intrinsically interesting. It is written by a man who is a pure-blooded Negro...Perhaps the ordinary reader’s first impulse in realizing that the book is by an American Negro is to inquire into

its good taste. Not until we are satisfied that his work does not overstep the barriers which a not quite explicable but deep instinct in us is ever to maintain can we judge it with genuine fairness. Mr. Claude McKay never offends our sensibilities. His love poetry is clear of the hint which would put our racial instinct against him, whether we would or not. (qtd. in McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 88)

The phrase “pure-blooded Negro” is particularly striking and it implies a rich array of meanings. The fact that McKay is “pure-blooded” without “overstepping” racial boundaries, suggests a sexual anxiety about non-whites, and thus it has negative racial connotations. But Arna Bontemps, Harlem Renaissance historian and close friend of Langston Hughes, specifically remembered the phrase. In his memoirs, he remembers the first line of the introduction as, “These poems have a special interest for all the races of man, because they are sung by a pure blooded Negro” (7). Bontemps claims that after reading the poems to his friends, their responses “told me something about black people and poetry that remains true” (7). What that “something” is left unsaid, but it was related to the way that black poetry inspires black readers.

It is interesting to note that Richards claimed to admire these poems as “Negro” poetry. In the 1920’s, I. A. Richards conducted experiments at Cambridge, described in his book *Practical Criticism* (1929). In these experiments, Richards asked students to analyze thirteen poems that had been stripped of context: author, date of composition, or any other historical facts. In other words, students had only the text itself. Richards concluded that the students’ analysis showed they were unable to address the text “objectively,” and that their interpretations were influenced by their own ideology. Richards argues that the so-called incorrect and

subjective interpretations of his students demonstrated that the curriculum should improve how it teaches analytical skill (Richards 224). An alternate conclusion, of course, is that without some background in the poem, readers would be unable to get a handle on interpreting it. Richards's supposedly scientific interpretation demonstrates the truth that he overlooked: any interpretation benefits from a context. If the author does not provide a context, the reader will supply his or her own.

McKay's compiler, the scholar William Maxwell, notes that Richards seems to be unaware of McKay's more inflammatory poetry printed in the Communist party publication *Worker's Dreadnought*: "McKay walled off his professionally eager *Spring* persona from the figure searching for truth, beauty, and revolution at the London Communist newspaper where he earned his keep. Lines written in one voice would not often be spoken by the other" ("Introduction" 308). McKay's work as collected in *Spring* is an example of what Houston Baker would call the "mastery of form," the use of the dominant tradition's accepted literary forms so that a minority voice can be heard. Surprisingly, McKay may have been motivated to write in sonnets *because* he was an accomplished dialect poet (and therefore outside the literary mainstream):

[McKay] became both the first black Jamaican poet acclaimed for writing skillfully and seriously in Jamaican dialect and the first 'African-American' poet commended for investing elevated literary English and the time honored sonnet form with the focused anger of the modern New Negro. (Maxwell, "Introduction" xviii–xix)

Richards acknowledges this when he claims McKay's work as essentially white and therefore unobjectionable. Writing genteel, classically structured sonnets is one way of demonstrating a mastery of form. Unlike his primitivist novels, McKay's poetry offers nothing offensive to the sensibilities of white readers. Indeed, if one removes the names and faces of the poets, it would have been indistinguishable from Ficke, who produced what Levinson calls normative poetry.

Like Ficke, Claude McKay views the sonnet through a predominantly (but not wholly) normative formalist lens. Even as he comments on current events, his poems are meant to stand for all time. He avoids "blackening" or racial signifiers, and de-historicizes the speaker. This is not to say that McKay intentionally made his work appear "white" or even if he used his poetry successfully to appear as other than black. When he sent some of his poems to William Stanley Braithwaite, the eminent African American poet and critic, Braithwaite replied, according to McKay, by saying "that my poems were good, but that, barring two, any reader could tell that the author was a Negro" (*A Long Way from Home* 27). Even as late as the 1960s, critics would ask whether a black poet write well without making us aware of his or her blackness. The poet Louis Simpson wrote, in an October 1963 review of Gwendolyn Brooks's *Selected Poems*, "I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro. On the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important" (qtd. in Fuller 4). What Simpson is trying to claim is that poetry should be relevant, but the unstated assumption of his argument is that African American concerns are not relevant.

McKay's response to Braithwaite was brusque: "Need I say that I did not entertain, not in the least, Mr. Braithwaite's most excellent advice?" (*A Long Way from Home* 28). But while Braithwaite and McKay did not agree on the use of black subject matter, they did very much

agree on certain standards of aesthetics. In 1919, before Cullen had published his first poem and when the Harlem Renaissance was building steam, Braithwaite would praise McKay as one of the more promising young African American poets. In an overview of African American literature, Braithwaite specifically mentions “Harlem Dancer” (which McKay published under the pseudonym Eli Edwards):

Here, indeed, is the genuine gift — a vision that evokes from the confusing details of experience and brings into the picture the image in all its completeness of outline and its gradation of color, and rendered with that precise surety of form possessed by the resourceful artist.... This sonnet differs in both visionary and artistic power from anything so far produced by the poets of the race. The visual quality here possessed is extraordinary; not only does Mr. Edwards evoke his images with a clear and decisive imagination, but he throws at the same time upon the object the rich and warm colors of his emotional sympathies. (404)

Although Braithwaite valued McKay’s decision to write in forms like the sonnet, McKay recorded in his autobiography the dismaying responses he had heard from other respected figures. George Bernard Shaw suggested in 1920, when he granted an audience to the young Claude McKay visiting the London home of the world-famous writer and progressive Socialist, that to be a black poet is a no-win situation. By the end of the evening, Shaw told him “it must be tragic for a sensitive Negro to be a poet. Why didn’t you choose pugilism instead of poetry?” (McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 61–64). The suggestion that boxing is better than poetry for sensitive people would surprise many (both poets and boxers), but Shaw’s comment reveals the limited modes of expression available to African-Americans. In the 1910’s and 20’s, to be a

black poet was to be considered a loser even if you win. If you create a beautiful work, it is likely to fall on deaf ears. To the extent that African American poetry has advanced since 1950, it has been a function of how the writer has overcome the inherent paradox of being a black writer in white America: if a black writer is good, then the work will speak to the black experience; but if it speaks to the black experience, then the work is limiting. McKay would later point out that boxing would in fact *not* be easier than writing poems. Indeed, they shared similar racial obstacles. “[Shaw] no doubt imagined that it would be easier for a black man to win success at boxing than at writing in a white world. But looking at life through an African telescope I could not see such a great difference in the choice. For, according to British rules, no Negro boxer can compete for a championship in the land of cricket, and only Negroes who are British subjects are given a chance to fight. These regulations have nothing to do with the science of boxing or the Negro’s fitness to participate. They are made merely to discourage boxers who are black and of African descent” (McKay, *A Long Way from Home* 70). McKay’s comment points to the fundamental problem of intellectuals commenting on different cultures: they are blinded by their own education and cannot imagine “life through an African telescope.”

McKay does not fall easily into a category: he is a political radical and an aesthetic conservative. Although he is primarily remembered as an iconoclast, a “gallant bomb-thrower of black poetry” (Maxwell, “Introduction” xvi), he never challenged the formal requirements of poetry. His sonnets are remarkably traditional in structure. McKay’s normative approach implies a more substitutive, “Shakespeare in Harlem.” For McKay, the form “becomes black,” not by using dialect but by speaking for and being spoken by black people. Barbara J. Griffin argues that McKay eventually became politically conservative, showing “disdain for integration as a

solution to racial oppression, condemnation of black intellectuals, and hatred of Communists” (Griffin 159).

McKay has been called a poet of rage, unlike any African American poet who preceded him:

Perhaps no greater tension exists in a brief Afro-American text than that between the rage of “If We Must Die” and the sonnet form. McKay used the form again and again to write some of the most hostile verse in Afro-American letters.

(Rampersad, “Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism” 55)

In fact, Cullen wrote in his “Foreword” to *Caroling Dusk* that “Claude McKay is most exercised, rebellious, and vituperative to a degree that clouds his lyricism in many instances, but silhouettes most forcibly his high dudgeon” (xii). While these summaries capture the emotional appeal of McKay’s verse, a more accurate summation, according to Maxwell, is that he sought to “produce a faithful lyric poetry of modern cataclysm” (“Introduction” xxx). This definition takes into account the fact that McKay was able to modulate his tone. Although he was often angry, he could also be subtle and tender when pointing out the faults of society. When evaluating the success of this goal, critics should attend to the technical way that McKay groomed the iambic pentameter line to pull against his violent themes.

That modulation is evident in McKay’s English sonnet, “The Castaways,” a poem about the coming spring, possibly one of the most common themes in literature. It is an early poem, but a better awareness of this poem may undercut McKay’s reputation as a poet of rage. Although little commented upon, this was clearly an important poem to McKay. “The Castaways” was

published in *Cambridge Magazine* in the summer of 1920 and republished *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920) and *Harlem Shadows* (1922).

The poem begins conventionally as exultant praise. Although it appears to be a pastoral poem about nature, the revelation that the subject of the poem is an urban park is jarring. The turn of the poem changes the tone abruptly from enthusiasm for nature to a melancholy awareness of urban poverty:

The vivid grass with visible delight
 Springing triumphant from the pregnant earth,
 The butterflies, and sparrows in brief flight
 Chirping and dancing for the season's birth,
 The dandelions and rare daffodils
 That touch the deep-stirred heart with hands of gold,
 The thrushes sending forth their joyous trills—
 Not these, not these did I at first behold!
 But, seated on the benches daubed with green,
 The castaways of life, a few asleep,
 Some withered women desolate and mean,
 And over all, life's shadows dark and deep.
 Moaning I turned away, for misery

I have the strength to bear but not to see. (McKay, *Complete Poems* 175)

Although the rhyme scheme is that of an English sonnet (ababcdcdefefgg), the turn of the poem after line eight is more characteristic of the Italian form with its distinctive volta after line eight.

By the end of the poem, McKay energizes the poem further by including a second turn (reinforced by the phrase “I turned”) after line twelve, which would be expected in an English sonnet. Is this poem an octave and a sestet (Italian) or three quatrains and a couplet (English)? By the rhyme scheme it is the latter, but by the argument it is the former. The external world that is punningly “Springing triumphant” in the first two quatrains becomes the “withered” and desolate” “castaways of life” in the third quatrain. In the final couplet, the poet turns his attention from the external world to the inner. These comparisons and contrasts demonstrate that McKay is using the English sonnet form for its optimal purpose: “The individuation of its quatrains and couplet, in conjunction with its scheme of alternating rhymes, encourages parallelism and antithesis” (Cousins 127).

The poem as a whole is a meditation on “seeing,” or rather the inability to see. Two important words in the poem are “behold” at the pivotal line 8 and “to see” at the terminal line 14. The verbs are both negated, however. He cannot behold the dazzling spring, because the “shadows of life” have dimmed his vision. Additionally, he cannot look on the great distress of the poor because of his inner sensitivity to the other’s pain. This inability to see is underscored by the fact that despite the speaker’s “vivid” description of the natural world in concrete terms and images (for example the “brief flight” and “joyous trills” of the birds), the “castaways” he cannot bear to look on are rendered abstractly, as “desolate and mean.”

In the first two quatrains, McKay uses a variety of flora and fauna to underscore the abundance of the new season: insects (butterflies, symbols of transformation and transcendence), birds (sparrows), grass and flowers (dandelions and “rare” daffodils”). While the daffodils, along with the “dancing,” are clearly a reference to Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,”

the important point of line five, “The dandelions and rare daffodils” is that the high and low intermingle peacefully. Yet, although the earth is “pregnant,” the castaways are “withered.” The final couplet suggests that the poet has in fact been miserable the whole time. He can accept his own misery, but he refuses to accept someone else’s.

McKay’s diction furthers the contrast between the park the people in it. The natural world of the octave is described using active participles. The grass is “Springing” from the earth, the butterflies and sparrows are “Chirping and dancing.” The “castaways,” however, are only described in generalizations, reflecting the sense of the speaker that their misery is too much “to bear.” Fortunately, they are impassive – “seated” or “asleep.”

Two important parallel phrases embody the theme of the poem: the “hands of gold” (line 6) do not touch the “castaways of life” (line 10). In the octave, the yellow flowers of the dandelion and daffodils touch the speaker’s mind with “hands of gold,” but in the sestet “castaways of life” disturb his internal world. The phrase “hands of gold” is ambiguous. Are these hands that appear golden and therefore valuable? Or are the gold’s hands the hands of abundance and prosperity? The underlying meaning, which has been enriched by the ambiguity, is that the benevolent forces behind nature’s blossoming are not present in the manifestation of the homeless people who populate the part. In the sestet of the poem, there is a parallel phrase with a similar effect, “The castaways of life.” Are they things that have been discarded by life, or are they the things other people have discarded? This phrase is given additional depth by the fact that it is a negative comparison; since a castaway is by definition something that has been abandoned, it can’t be possessed in the sense of “life’s castaways.” The idea of “life” is

suggestive as well. In the octave life is natural and healthy, in the sestet it is man-made and malevolent.

McKay revised the poem between the original version, titled “The Park in Spring,” first published in the September 1918 issue of *Pearson’s Magazine* (McKay, *Complete Poems* 328–9). The phrase “The castaways of life” was originally “Human derelicts.” While the original phrase maintains a sense of something abandoned, “derelicts” has the additional connotation that the homeless people have collapsed into ruin. The connotation of “castaways” is that the people have been acted on by outside forces and are to be pitied, but could still be saved.

A number of allusions put the poem in a dialogue with the European tradition. The “hands of gold” may be a reference to King Midas, who transmutes ordinary objects to gold. The reference gives an ominous edge to the first two quatrains (the greed of King Midas was his undoing— he starved because he could not eat his golden food). In the poem, however, the transformation is from wealth in the first two quatrains to poverty and misery in the last six lines. In addition to the Wordsworth reference already mentioned, the title “The Castaways” may be an allusion to the English poet William Cowper’s (1731-1800) famous poem “Castaways,” which like McKay’s poem is an exercise in surprising uses of form as well as a kind of disciplined melancholy. McKay has used a form associated with love and springtime as a vehicle for awareness of poverty. In a similar case of upsetting the expectations of the form, Cowper has couched the suicidal thoughts of a shipwrecked sailor in traditional hymn meter. According to the critic Phillip Hobsbaum, in his book *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form*, “The reader cannot forget the hymn stanza on which [Cowper’s] surging rhythm is based, yet the rhythm itself has a speed and urgency which would be impossible in a hymn. The language is taut and precise; not

at all the conventional diction seemly in a house of prayer” (Hobsbaum 137). By contrasting the expectations of the form with the language of the speaker, a heightened effect is achieved.

The sonnet form can easily occupy a space between the public and the private. Although there is often a private, individualized voice, the sonnet can also be used as a public declaration. “The Castaways” demonstrates both of these aspects. Of course, the sonnet with a political voice is not new. Wordsworth has a number of examples, including an homage to the black Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture, and Milton’s “On the Late Massacre at Piedmont” also expresses outrage. Although McKay used the traditional rhyme scheme of English sonnet in several poems, he changed the tone and content of the traditional sonnet into an expression of defiance.

Cullen’s Dilemma: Art or Propaganda?

Like McKay, Countee Cullen came of age as a poet at a time when controversy swirled around the problem of African American art – controversies not always clarified by important spokespeople. W. E. B. Du Bois was an early champion of equality through art. He saw great black art as not only a demonstration of cultural equality to whites, but considered all art as a kind of propaganda (Lewis 196). Before 1921, the arguments for equality were based on the history of the race, but as Darwin Turner points out, after 1921 “W. E. B. Du Bois had been working for many years as editor of *The Crisis* to promote literary activity and to foster racial pride through literature” (Turner, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic” 11). Another prominent writer of the period, James Weldon Johnson, wrote in a *Harper’s* editorial in 1928 that the non-artistic roads of equality, “religion, education, politics, industrial, ethical,

economic, sociological,” are too slow, but “through his artistic efforts the New Negro is smashing [barriers of race] faster than he has ever done through any other method” (“Race Prejudice” 244).

Cullen’s views were formed in this turbulent period. He is often quoted as not wanting to be a “black poet” but then he was criticized for using black themes even though he claimed to desire a general appeal:

If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET. That is what has hindered the development of artists among us. Their one note has been the concern with their race. That is all very well, none of us can get away from it. I cannot at times. You will see it in my verse. The consciousness of this is too poignant at times. I cannot escape it. But what I mean is this: I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda. That is not what a poet is concerned with. Of course, when the emotion rising out of the fact that I am a negro is strong, I express it. But that is another matter. (Sperry 9)

In his contribution to the well-known colloquium in *The Crisis*, Cullen claims that he is not against the use of “high” or “low” material as such. Instead, he is against the over-generalization of the material: the use of high material that does not acknowledge its flaws, or likewise of low material that does not acknowledge its beauties.

The danger to the young Negro writer is not that he will find his aspiration in the Negro slums; I dare say there are as fine characters and as bright dream material there as in the best strata of Negro society, and that is as it should be. Let the young Negro writer, like any artist, find his treasure where his heart lies. If the

unfortunate and less favored find an affinity in him, let him surrender himself; only let him not pander to the popular trend of seeing no cleanliness in their squalor, no nobleness in their meanness and no commonsense in their ignorance.

(Cullen, "Negro in Art" 200)

In the mid-twenties, Cullen was immensely popular with both white and black audiences.

Houston Baker notes that he "was called by contemporaries the poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance" (*Afro-American Poetics* 52). However, later scholarship has not turned favorably toward Cullen's work. The scholar Darryl Pinckney finds that Cullen is psychologically crippled by double-consciousness and never able to fully inhabit the formal poetry that he created: "The sadness of [Cullen's] career lies in his inability to claim as his own the tradition he admired ... handling] it back, like a poor relation careful to show his patient *good manners*" (emphasis added Pinckney 18). Paradoxically, these critics are offended by Cullen's "good manners," because they assume that any self-respecting black poet should write more angrily or less formally.

Cullen disclaimed propagandistic poetry early in his career: "I shall not write of negro subjects for the purpose of propaganda" (qtd. in Cullen, *The Collected Writings* 23). Yet Cullen wrote primarily about African American subjects, which has led many critics to note the "Cullen paradox": while he wanted to evade racial labels, his best work expressed racial protest. As Du Bois noted in 1946, "That Countee Cullen was born with the Twentieth Century as a black boy to live in Harlem was a priceless experience...." Yet Du Bois also cautioned that "Cullen's career was not finished. It did not culminate" (qtd. in Lomax 221).

Later critics see this as not only a lost opportunity but also a contemptible character flaw; by evading race consciousness, Cullen unwittingly fell into overly self-conscious poetry. "With

his rejection of race,” Michael L. Lomax decides, “Cullen concentrated on the essentially fatuous literary artificialities which were, according to him, the poet’s true concern” (220). Alan Shucard reinforces this idea of elitism: “Perhaps it is because he did not want to be a protesting writer of black poetry that Cullen’s voice sometimes sounds effete” (16). And his ultimate conclusion is that Cullen is overrated: “a literary evaluation of Cullen’s poetry shows it to be seriously flawed” (102).

But what I am calling Cullen’s paradox is not limited to Cullen. It is arguably the most difficult question faced by an African American artist. As the African American critic Gerald Early writes:

[H]ow to express one’s blackness without being trapped by it or merely seeing it as a convenient pose[?] This is the black writer’s inviolate anxiety: to be free to be yourself and to be free to be anything but yourself. It must always be kept in mind that Cullen was a great poet. To paraphrase T. S. Eliot’s sentence on Keats and Shelley, Cullen would not have been as great as he was but for the limitations which prevented him from being greater than he was. That sums up the paradoxical weight of his blackness as well as anything and comes close enough to explicating the last two lines of “Yet Do I Marvel” [“Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:/ To make a poet black, and bid him sing!”]. (Early, *The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen* 23)

Early’s reformulation of double-consciousness as not a burden, but a double-freedom is instructive: the problem of double-consciousness could be seen as the reason these poems are effective. Several other critics have noted, in accord with Early, that Cullen’s resistance to the

label “negro poet” is not a rejection of race, but “a desperate attempt to mitigate the consequences of being seen as ‘THE New Negro,’” (Powers 666).

Despite Cullen’s conservative aesthetic values, he did not write to please white audiences. Cullen “vehemently defended the artist’s right to choose his own materials” (D. T. Turner, “Introduction” vi). For Cullen, it was the popular and not the elite artists who were inauthentic. Cullen even felt that “Hughes and others were being misled by white critics encouraging a vernacular approach” (Hutchinson 188). There is very little evidence that Cullen was ashamed of his blackness and much more evidence which argues that Cullen “was a downright racial nationalist and chauvinist,” especially when it came to the subject of black female beauty⁵ (Cullen, *The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen* 51). When we evaluate the claims authors make about their own work, we should not always trust the teller, but trust the tale. Far from being a rank conformist, Cullen rebelled against the pressure to conform to propagandistic poetry. In doing so, he may have perhaps overstated his position.

It may be better to understand Cullen’s plea was for artistic rather than political autonomy. In this Cullen has much in common with Hughes’s ideal poet, “the one who is not afraid to be himself,” in Hughes’s manifesto of African American poetics, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (28). The essay argues that ordinary black experience should be portrayed

5 Jeremy Braddock finds extensive similarities between Cullen’s “Song of Praise” and Shakespeare’s sonnets. “Although ‘A Song of Praise’ clearly employs conceits and subjects lifted directly from the dark lady sonnets (pride, pity, the sun, a dark lover, and so on), the poem is not a sonnet, but instead consists of five stanzas written in ballad form. Like a sonnet, however, ‘A Song of Praise’ contains seventy iambic feet, thereby maintaining a connection to Shakespeare, while insisting on an imposed difference. Indeed, the poem combines traditions of song and sonnet, capitalizing on the historical tension between sung and discursive modes of address (the present poem, like a song, does not contain a turn)” (Braddock 1256).

realistically. Claude McKay makes a similar argument in his essay “A Negro Writer to His Critics” (1932). Whether this is a political statement or not depends on whom the reader is.

It is also worthy to note that it is hardly the case that Cullen wrote poetry only about beauty, truth, and death. In 1936, Alain Locke pointed out that Cullen’s humorous epigram, “For a Certain Lady I Know,” is “socialistic”:

She even thinks that up in Heaven,
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black Cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores. (“Propaganda – or Poetry?” 264)

To call Cullen’s poetics “activist” is to return the sense of surprise that the contrast of black content in a European form must have evoked. For example, Cullen’s poem “Incident” is a sing-song child’s ballad in three stanzas:

Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
 From May until December;
 Of all the things that happened there
 That's all that I remember.

This poem related the experience of a sudden awareness of a racial hierarchy and one's place in it. Hughes wrote that "'Incident' captures with great power the meaning of *nigger* for most black Americans" (emphasis in original Hughes, *The Big Sea* 269). Cullen draws attention to the shock and the injustice of the "incident" on the innocent child. The contrast of the innocent joy of the child with the permanent awareness of being labeled and dehumanized is sharpened. The form itself sharpens this contrast: a nursery-rhyme-like ballad that serves as a vehicle for a racial experience. A reader from the twenties would have a different awareness of the form compared to readers of today. Readers of today tend to hear free verse as "natural" and rhymed quatrains as artificial. The ballad form, which may feel "sing-song" today, could then distract the reader from the emotion of the poem. For a reader of the twenties, however, it is more likely that "the harsh dilemmas of American life take on sharper focus in [Cullen's] rhymed stanzas than... those poets of rebellion who believe that the disregard of poetic tradition is equivalent to excellence" (Perry xii).

Although he would not have claimed the label of "political poet," we can see Cullen as highly political because of our own historical perspective. In the 1920s, a poem such as "Incident" might not be seen as political but lyrical: the speaker is telling his own private revelation. Contemporary readers hear a political edge even in these private songs: "Critics of the 1970s and '80s have shown repeatedly how subjects formerly thought not to be political are in

fact importantly so, partly because the range of social change that can be envisaged has expanded” (von Hallberg 961).

Cullen’s work is complex and resists categorization. He was a formalist poet who wrote two highly influential sonnets, “Yet Do I Marvel” (1925) and “From the Dark Tower” (1927), among many other sonnets that, like all his poems, are notable for precise diction, wit, and fluent rhythmic effect. Cullen valued skilled performance — highly polished artifice and artistry — above technical experiment or ethnic authenticity, yet even as he evaded racial claims upon the artist, he wrote very little non-racial poetry. Cullen hoped to be judged simply as a poet, not as a member of a particular ethnic group, but this did not mean that he turned his back on writing poems of protest on behalf of black Americans.

Cullen’s early success and his Romantic themes of beauty and death earned him the epithets “Black Keats” (S. Jones 202) and more strangely “Black Pan” (qtd. in Early, “Introduction” 4). Additionally, Cullen was inspired by the same forms used by “English romantics such as Keats and Shelley as role models for his poems in terms of structure, rhyme and metre” (S. Jones 202). It was an affinity that Cullen did not reject. His poems dedicated to Keats include the sonnet “To Endymion,” “To John Keats, Poet,” and “For John Keats, Apostle of Beauty.” As homages to the beauty of Keats’s verse long after his death, these poems take as their subject the Keatsian idea of eternal beauty. Like Keats, Cullen tried to make the sonnet new. Like Keats, he was a self-conscious writer, steadily developing his abilities and shaping his legacy as a poet. They also share similar struggles and successes while young. Both poets lost their parents at an early age. Both were prodigies who published influential works in their early twenties. Both suffered from depression, and both were burdened by prejudice (Cullen for his

race and Keats for his social class). Both of them saw beauty as a personal redemption, not as a political or social tool. According to the scholar David Goldweber, “Neither Cullen nor Keats had a complete or unqualified faith in illusions and lies, but both poets very often saw these things as our best hope in keeping ourselves, and others, from being crushed by the sorrows of mortal life” (47).

Goldweber’s description is perhaps overly melancholy, since by 1942 Cullen believed that there was a good measure of racial equality in the literary world. In an interview with James Baldwin (who was a senior at DeWitt Clinton High School at the time), Cullen responded to Baldwin’s question: “Have you found... that there is much prejudice against the Negro in the literary world?”:

Mr. Cullen shook his head. ‘No,’ he said, ‘in this field one gets pretty much what one deserves.... If you’re really something, nothing can hold you back. In the artistic field, society recognizes the Negro as an equal and, in some cases, as a superior member. When one considers the social and political plights of the Negro today, that is, indeed, an encouraging sign.’ (Cullen, *The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen* 605)

The sonnet “Yet Do I Marvel” (1925) is Cullen’s best-known and perhaps most anthologized poem (Fetrow 103). The poem was written early in Cullen’s career, and it was probably one of his favorites. Two volumes bookend Cullen’s career: *Color* (1925) and *On These I Stand* (1947). “Yet Do I Marvel” is placed first in both collections. The poem was first published in Mark Van Doren’s *Century Magazine* in November, 1924, possibly as a result of Cullen’s introduction to Mark’s father Carl Van Doren at the seminal Civic Club party in March,

1924 arranged by Charles S. Johnson. Cullen has been accused of being “the black writer of the Renaissance who best appealed to white readers, mainly because he was the one who best appropriated the literary convention of Europe and white America” (Bamikunle 47). But in fact this poem is an typical example of the Trojan horse strategy: Cullen was able to place a racially-conscious poem in *The Century*, which was at one time a “bastion of cultural conservatism” and from there to attack the very center of “Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony” (Hutchinson 113):

I doubt not that God is good, well-meaning, kind,
 And did he stoop to quibble could tell me why
 The little buried mole continues blind,
 Why flesh that mirrors Him must some day die,
 Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
 Is baited with the fickle fruit, declare
 If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
 To struggle up a never-ending stair.
 Inscrutable His ways are and immune
 To catechism by a mind too strewn
 With petty cares to slightly understand
 What awful brain compels His awful hand.
 Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
 To make a poet black, and bid him sing! (Cullen, *The Collected Writings* 79)

The poem plays with expectations on many levels. It begins with a pious tone that any Victorian reader would recognize: “I doubt not that God is good, well-meaning, kind.” But it ends as an

ironic crisis of faith. Structurally and formally, “Yet Do I Marvel” builds toward a resolution, but it then frustrates that resolution. Because of the reversal at the end of the poem, this poem reads very differently the second time through. The coolly pious first line is undermined by the impassioned questioning of the following lines. Although James Emanuel finds that Cullen “probably was sincere in his octave” (“Renaissance Sonneteers” 44) because Cullen was reared by a minister, it appears more likely that Cullen was gently satirizing submissive Christian attitudes by framing existential questions as a “quibble.” In addition his satirical tone is evident by describing Tantalus’s temptations as “fickle fruit” and God’s will as “merely brute caprice.” Houston Baker calls this quatrain “devastating in its restrained cynicism” (Baker, *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams* 33). In an initial reading, the speaker appears to be a believer in the octave but turns to disbelief in the sestet. This game of setting the table and then yanking out the tablecloth is not an aberration, however, but is in the tradition of the best Elizabethan sonnets, whose final couplets “unsettle the very closure they seemingly establish” (Dubrow 129). It is ironic that the speaker seems able to believe that Sisyphus and Tantalus are explainable, and yet he marvels at “this curious thing” of a black poet. The movement from moles in the first quatrain to mythic references undercuts the reverent attitude. It is as if the speaker is saying: “I could believe in myths, but I can’t believe that black poets are not meant to sing.”

The first quatrain evokes God and addresses the problem of suffering in a Christian worldview. The range of images extends from the humblest animals, “the little buried mole” (ln 3), to ordinary humans “flesh that mirrors Him,” to mythical figures, to ordinary humans in the couplet. More important than the images themselves is the contrast between the two. The “little buried mole” seems to be far less important than the question of mortality, but the mole and

death are also linked because both involve being underground. Cullen's poem "For a Philosopher" also draws on the image of a mole and connects it with death.

The second quatrain moves from the animal and human into the mythic, imagining the kings Tantalus and Sisyphus. These mythological choices are unusual given the Christian opening of the poem, but Cullen is making an ironic connection—the presence of mythical characters in a Christian worldview. The comparison of black poets to mythic kings is a theme that Cullen will return to in "Black Majesty." Cullen claimed that his "chief problem has been that of reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination" (*Caroling Dusk* 179). But the focus of the second quatrain is two mythical characters that are symbolic of the contrast between the reality (Sisyphus) and the dream (Tantalus) of equality in America. The king Tantalus, a son of Zeus who is forced to remain standing in water with fruit and water always just out of reach, and the king Sisyphus, a son of Aeolus condemned to the eternal task of rolling a rock up a hill, only to have it roll back down again are two characters who seem incongruous in a Christian-themed poem. One key is that "it is characteristic of Cullen's poetic technique to reverse the symbolic content of his to Greek (and sometimes Christian) mythology, thereby doubling their semantic content" (Dorsey 77). Cullen presents Tantalus and Sisyphus as tragic characters with spectacular punishments, yet they also seem like characters with basic human emotions of temptation and frustration. Dorsey believes that Cullen "wishes to question every aspect of God's justice, not merely those which scandalise us all" (70). Catherine Copeland notes that Cullen compares both "opposite extremes" (moles and mythic kings) and "comparables" (both kings being equal in social status) (261).

Gerald Early comments on the way race intersects with this conflict between pagan nature and Christian nurture. He relates the issue of paganism to race, and identifies the way that Christian values are potentially in conflict with racial struggle. Cullen's:

poetry is the product of a black Christian who cannot reconcile two things. First, he cannot reconcile his blackness, which he refers to as his paganism, and his Christianity. However, this fact has little to do exclusively with a race consciousness and a great deal to do with an overbearing and overburdened Christian one. What Cullen finds attractive as a writer is the basic ambiguity that exists in the meaning of his being a black Christian. That ambiguity is there, to borrow an idea from Clifford Geertz, because being a black Christian has both religious and political significance, a kind of uneasy meshing of the sacred and secular. To be a black Christian is to be caught always between ideology and theology, to be unsure whether one's major concern is eschatology or a power struggle. (Early, "Introduction" 58)

For other examples of Cullen's Christian/Pagan paradox, see "Heritage," "The Black Christ," "The Shroud of Color," "The Litany of the Dark People," and "Pagan Prayer."

Cullen intentionally chose to vary from the accepted ababcdcd efefgg form of the English sonnet. Cullen appears to do this in order that the meaning of his final couplet, by following two earlier couplets, appears all the more sudden, even as the sound pattern is similar. The sestet also begins in a similarly God-fearing mode, invoking the dogma of Christianity with the "catechism." There is a mild turn after line seven, as the speaker seems to partially explain the issue of the first part: he does not doubt that God is good, because His ways are obscure.

However, this does not quite resolve the problem: how do we know God is good if we cannot know God?

The final line begins with the infinitive “To make,” which parallels the beginning of line eight, “To struggle.” These lines are also similar in their iambic meter, which gives a sense of slow, noble dignity. Although the poem is predominantly iambic pentameter, significant variations the end of the octave and the end of the sestet give the poem a sense of moving from chaos to order. For example, the last line of the octave is easy to scan because of its polysyllabic line. This poem is an example of how polysyllabic lines, which are easier to scan because a polysyllabic word in English has agreed upon stress patterns, can be interwoven with monosyllabics.

The concluding couplet of “Yet Do I Marvel” contains “the two most poignant lines in American literature,” according to the prominent Harlem Renaissance writer James Weldon Johnson (*The Book of American Negro Poetry* 267). This understanding of sadness and regret in the poem, while intended to be laudatory, has also led Cullen to be categorized as a sorrowful or complaining poet, especially given the fact that this poem may be the Cullen poem most likely to be read by contemporary students. As the critic Eugenia Collier has written, “I do not marvel, Countee Cullen, that God should bid the black poet sing. For who could sing so well, and who else has such as song?” (87). The withholding of racial significance until the end of the poem is part of this poem’s power. As early as 1925, a year after the poem was published, a white editor, John Macy, addressing the second Civic Club dinner, said Cullen “was wrong to marvel that God would ‘make a poet black, and bid him sing’” (qtd. in Hutchinson 218). Langston Hughes “had

always disliked these lines,” presumably because of the speaker’s ambivalent attitude to blackness, although he acknowledged their lyricism (Rampersad, *Life II* 6).

However, many of these interpretations are based on the assumption, which is not certain, that the speaker is Cullen himself or is even African American. Fetrow asserts the common understanding of the poem is the result of a radical misunderstanding: “A reconsideration of the poem’s structure and logic reveals that Cullen actually expresses the resolution of a paradox, rather than bemoaning his fate” (103). The previous examples of paradox in the three quatrains, he argues, are actually not “real” but only “apparent” paradoxes: the mole does not need his sight, and Tantalus and Sisyphus are justly condemned (Fetrow 104). Although Fetrow keenly analyzes the analogies of the poem – mole, mole, humankind, Tantalus, and Sisyphus, and finds the way they are similar to the final couplet – he does not figure out the pattern between all of these allusions. In each case, the analogies go from positive to negative: the mole becomes blind, the human dies, Tantalus and Sisyphus, formerly kings, are tortured. The obvious problems of blindness and death in the first quatrain, and of frustrated desire (Tantalus) and fruitless labor (Sisyphus) in the second quatrain do not seem to match. The blind mole from line three also parallels the impenetrability of “His ways” to humans. To make a poet black is not a bad thing by itself, but only in the context of this poem.

The “blackness” of the poem is saved for the last line. Given the glaze of familiarity that has obscured the surprise of the final couplet, this fact is difficult to see. Although this poem may be categorized as a “protest sonnet,” by delaying the racial signifier until the end, Cullen attempts to make this less a poem about race than about injustice and suffering, and race is just an instance. According to Carl Van Vechten, the closing couplet of “Yet Do I Marvel” was

“printed more often (in periodicals in other languages than English, moreover) than any other two lines by any contemporary poet” (qtd. in Kellner 237). In their evaluation of the final couplet, most critics agree with the editors of the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, “These lines capture the essence of Cullen’s highest achievement and paradoxically the confluence of his most troubling dilemmas. It was his blackness that was at once his perceived handicap and his greatest asset” (Gabbin, “Poetry” 587). Note that the musical quality of the poem is itself a response to the paradox of the poem: how can a black poet sing? By doing it. The experience of reading the poem confirms the poem. Cullen is demonstrating that he can in fact “make language sing” (Perry 19) — and the critics who chastise him for resenting his own blackness are unaware of the irony.

The final couplet reverses the direction of poem but still maintains continuity. Yet note the message here: I have been created by God, and commanded to sing! The implication is that the reader should not question the God-created black poet, just as he or she does not judge the other facts of God’s creation. Fred Fetrow, a professor of African American literature at the United States Naval Academy, comes to a similar conclusion: that “Rather than evidence of his failure, the sonnet can be better and more accurately understood as an illustration of achievement” (105). Thus the seemingly strange array of allusions makes sense as a system of “precedents,” “Cullen acknowledges, even emphasizes, the difficulty for a black poet in answering that divine call to sing: but through the strategic presentation of precedent, he also claims that the black poet can still articulate his blackness and express his unique racial identity while singing his humanity” (105).

The form of “Yet Do I Marvel” is a variation on the English sonnet. The third quatrain, which would typically rhyme “efef,” is instead a pair of couplets, “eeff.” Cullen has made the form his own, by using the most distinguishing characteristic of the English sonnet, the epigrammatic terminal couplet, in an unexpected way. Most critically, the sestet is rhymed eeffgg— three couplets. Why couplets instead of a more typical cdecde rhyme scheme? Cullen’s purpose in keeping the chimed, repeated sounds of rhyme was to develop a sense of doubling. Catherine Copeland analyzes the linguistic couplings and finds that the “pronounced” coupling results in a “unifying effect” which is, according to the linguist Samuel R. Levin, “among other things, every poet’s task” (qtd. in Copeland). And this unity contrasts with the emotional content of the poem: “the better to signify his complete frustration portrayed in the final line” (Copeland 261). The strong sense of unity is the result of Cullen’s thematic and structural ordering. Cullen coordinates the syntax of the poem with the main parts of the sonnet: the octave is a single sentence and the sestet is two. The three sentences diminish in size and complexity (from 8 lines to 4 to 2, and from compound-complex, complex, to simple), but increase in importance and intensity (Copeland 259). This sense of unity also implies not a tone of self-pitying, which Cullen has been accused of, but of health self-assurance and self-knowledge.

Cullen is adept at selective omissions. There is a key ambiguity in the couplet as well as the title: what do the “Yet” and “Marvel” signify in “Yet Do I Marvel”? As a title by itself it is not interesting, but when it is repeated at the penultimate line, it grows in significance. There are two senses of the phrase. Firstly, it could mean “even now do I marvel” or “yet again do I marvel,” meaning that after my knowledge of all these other marvelous events, I am still amazed. This signals a continuity, or increase, or repetition of the previous allusions. Secondly, it could

mean “nevertheless do I marvel,” signaling a reversal of poet’s attitude previously admiring attitude toward Greek mythology. The word “marvel” is intentionally unspecific as well. It means “to be astonished,” but in what way is the speaker astonished: in fear, anger, disgust, or something else?

As noted earlier, all of this formal work supports the other ways Cullen defies, doubles, and reverses expectations. In an article on Cullen’s use of literary allusions, David Dorsey finds that Cullen uses allusions ironically:

[I]t is characteristic of Cullen's poetic technique to reverse the symbolic content of his to Greek (and sometimes Christian) mythology, thereby doubling their semantic content, that is, their significance in his own contexts. It would be outside the scope of this paper to argue, but it is inevitable to suggest that this practice is intimately related to the severely paradoxical, aporetic and ironical content of his poetic genius. (77)

Unlike McKay, many of Countee Cullen’s poems deal with blackness. However Cullen’s poem “Yet Do I Marvel” is disciplined in a similar way to Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die.” “Yet Do I Marvel” as a poem is clearly racial in content, but it does not reveal that fact until the final line. It suggests the “Trojan horse” strategy in which a genteel exterior hides a provocative interior. This delay makes the poem seem more surprising, more aesthetic, and less propagandistic. Perhaps this is one reason the sonnet form was used by Cullen, who was so often a racial poet despite his intentions. According to one of his biographers, “[s]ome of Cullen’s best expressions of race consciousness appear in his sonnets” (Reimherr 66). This poem is an

example of that “best expression” in the way the final couplet succinctly expresses the dilemma of double-consciousness.

The diction of “Yet Do I Marvel” is deceptively simple. Countee Cullen’s penchant for archaic diction, what Houston Baker called “Countee Cullen’s ‘albeit’s’ and ‘listeth’s’” [sic] (*A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams* 15) is largely absent from this poem. Cullen’s diction tends toward ambiguity: he often has two seemingly legitimate but divergent meanings in a single line that result from a turn on a word. Scholar Fred Fetrow believes that “[t]he couplet (and the poem) turns on the connotation of the term ‘sing,’” with the result that “Cullen acknowledges, even emphasizes, the difficulty for a black poet in answering that divine call to sing: but... he also claims that the black poet can still articulate his blackness and express his unique racial identity while singing his humanity” (105). Although Fetrow might be faulted for finding evidence of a “unique racial identity” in a poem that does not mention race until the last line, this final line is powerfully deployed. The medial caesura in the line comes right at the point between the two parts of the paradox.

One of the most significant words in “Yet Do I Marvel” is the adjective “awful,” which is repeated in line 12, “What awful brain compels His awful hand.” It is one of only two words repeated in the poem, and although Cullen uses it in a single line, he adjusts the meaning slightly from one instance to the next. The word is intentionally ambiguous. Although the surface meaning, that God’s hand is “awful” in the sense of “shockingly bad,” seems to support the theme of unjust suffering, at the same time “awful” has positive connotations. It is an archaic form of “awe-inspiring” or “awesome.” The phrase emphasizes the separation between the will of God (which is by definition good) from the results of God’s will (which are the conditions of

our world). The other significantly repeated word is the verb “make” (5 and 14). The poem considers God as a kind of “maker” or *poesis*, but unlike the poet, who presumably understands the results of his or her own work, God is on a superior level. This also invokes the superior position accorded whites and Du Bois’s and Locke’s Talented Tenth, both of which claimed to have the interests of the masses in mind. Although God can “make a poet black,” he cannot “Make plain the reason.” The word order of this phrase is significant as well. “To make a poet black” is more artificial from the ordinary “to make a black poet,” but it puts the poet first. What seems to be artificial word order not only keeps the line iambic, but in fact reinforces the themes of the poem: “a poet” by itself, is unraced. He or she is born a poet and “made” black. The word “bid” is also interesting. The speaker doesn’t *want* to sing, but is *compelled* to sing.

When compared to Langston Hughes, McKay and Cullen seem writers from different times and places. Arnold Rampersad wryly notes, “the definition of New Negroism that would include *both* Langston Hughes and Countée Cullen [sic] would have to be elastic” (emphasis in original, “Introduction” xxi). Langston Hughes uses a more inclusive approach to dialect than Cullen or Hughes. However, all of these poets respond to the subjects and language that were originally addressed by Dunbar: “As different as the works of Hughes and Cullen appear in many respects, then, both address the questions of political and cultural citizenship and filiations posed by turn of the century writers, particularly Dunbar, adopting and adapting in their different ways” (Smethurst, “Lyric Stars” 197). These Harlem Renaissance writers who were published in white magazines but also read aloud in black churches complicate the issue of audience, but none more intricately than Hughes, as we shall see in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3
 LANGSTON HUGHES AND THE UN-SONNET:
 BLUE SHAKESPEARE

“And Simple Truth Miscalled Simplicity”⁶

Although Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is commonly known as a folk poet who used blues forms to depict everyday black life, I want to show that under certain conditions he is better described as an experimental poet who combines popular, free verse, and traditional forms to formally underscore a message of racial unity. These conditions are themselves complicated by critics’ fallacious assumption that easy-to-understand poetry is not worthy of serious study. Hughes’s own ambivalent relations to primitivism, and his choice to write to both an educated and uneducated audience also make him a challenge to critics. But I plan to demonstrate that Hughes excels at formal technique and sensitivity to audience. Altogether, this is a new constellation of approaches that gives us a sense of how we might better understand the technical achievement of Langston Hughes.

Hughes often referred to himself as a “folk poet” (Gabbin, “Poetry” 558); however, there seems to be no fixed definition of the term “folk poet.” According to James Weldon Johnson, in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), African American folk material is exemplified by folk tales (especially the Uncle Remus stories compiled by Joel Chandler Harris) and spirituals. These works “constitute the greatest body of folklore that America has produced, and the ‘spirituals’ the greatest body of folksongs” (J. W. Johnson, “Preface” 427). But to say

⁶ Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 66,” line 11

that a folk poet is defined by the use of folk material for a folk audience is a circular definition. What is “folk” about “folk poetry”? One answer to this question is that folk poetry is often identified with oral poetry. Indeed, the entry for folk poetry in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics* reads, “see Oral Poetry,” which is defined as “poetry composed and transmitted mainly but not exclusively by those who cannot read or write” (Lord n. pag.). Both American (e.g. Washington Irving) and European authors (e.g. Robert Burns and W. B. Yeats) have used folk poetry or folk tales as a foundation for written literature (Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* 1). A folk poet, then, is trained by and performs within an oral tradition. The critic Peter Howarth asserts that Hughes employs a “folk poetics” as “a challenge to the bourgeois poetics of his rival, the formalist Countee Cullen” (Howarth 235). In this sense, a folk poet is defined in opposition to a “genteel poet” who presumably speaks for the educated middle and upper classes and those who aspire to join their ranks. But even this definition is a problem, since it appears that genteel audiences read and enjoy folk poetry and vice versa. Hughes himself, at least in the early 1920’s, admired Cullen’s work (Miller 30).

Being a folk poet can mean writing in dialect or vernacular, and these poems are particularly difficult to evaluate from a technical standpoint: dialect “would be cheered by some as ironic or authentic and vilified by others as playing with the fire of negative stereotypes, of debased representations” (Fossett 429). Choosing a sonnet, by contrast, was a way of demonstrating mastery of an art and separating the poet from the “natural” effusions of dialect verse and ballad. Critics have avoided discussing dialect poems because they evade, intentionally or not, traditional aesthetic criteria. Dialect crosses the boundary between formalism (how something is said) and historicism (the context in which something is said). Dialect is

particularly defined by time and region. What sounds like authentic vernacular in 1920 is not considered authentic in 1960, and what is authentic in Chicago does not sound right in New York. Vernacular speech changes rapidly.

The “folk poet” label has been an asset and a liability for Hughes. During his life, both black and white critics assaulted his poetry as unsophisticated and oversimplified. Some critics believe that Hughes intentionally oversimplified his work to appeal to the “low-down folks.” For example, Hughes’s good friend and fellow poet J. Saunders Redding (1906-1988), in his review of Hughes’s *One Way Ticket* (1949), suggests that Hughes has outgrown the limitations of a folk audience, “While Hughes’s rejection of his own growth shows an admirable loyalty to his self-commitment as the poet of the ‘simple, Negro common folk’ — the peasant, the laborer, the city slum-dweller —, it does a disservice to his art” (Redding 31). This view has not faded with time. Fifty years later, some critics continue to believe that Hughes sacrificed depth for breadth. For example, the critic James Kelley believes that Hughes never lived up to his potential, “Hughes had imaginative powers larger than he could place in his work, because his sense of responsibility to his audience partly inhibited him” (Kelley n. pag.). In a 2009 overview of early twentieth-century African American poets, Harold Bloom claims that Hughes’s dedication to his audience prevented his literary development in relation to his peers. “Though a number of African American poets have developed their art more fully [than Hughes] (Robert Hayden, Jay Wright, and Thylas Moss among them), Hughes wrote a populist poetry (like Carl Sandburg’s) to serve the needs of a wider audience.” In addition to the obstacles of what he perceived as the limitations of Hughes’s audience, Bloom believes that Hughes’s lack of formal technique obstructs the best elements of his poetry, “Something authentic and powerful almost always

struggles to break through *into adequate form* in Hughes's poetry" (Bloom, *African American Poets: Vol. 1* 5).

And although Hughes was popular at various points in his long career, his literary reputation paid a price. A bias that continues to influence American critics is T.S. Eliot's 1921 pronouncement that "poets in our civilization . . . must be *difficult*" (emphasis in the original 289). "Difficult" poetry in this sense means "hard to understand," full of obscure allusions and disconnected images. Contemporary poetic criticism is dominated by "a preference for intricate, difficult, quirkily individual styles over the lucid and the popular" (Buell viii). And it is not only white critics that hold this view. James Baldwin sees Hughes as a perpetually underachieving prodigy. Baldwin opens his famous review of Hughes's *Selected Poems* (1959) with the statement, "Every time I read Langston Hughes I am amazed all over again by his genuine gifts and depressed that he has done so little with them. [T]his book contains a great deal which a more disciplined poet would have thrown into the waste-basket" ("Sermons and Blues" 6). Baldwin's indirect accusation, that Hughes is lazy and weak-willed, demonstrates how deeply the preference for hard poetry is held: if you do not write this way, then not only are you not a good person, but you should not be writing at all.

Hughes's classification as a folk poet created an opportunity for critics to accuse him of lacking technique. He was either derivative and "remained too close to the folk form to achieve much beyond weak imitation," or "too simple and lacking in intellectual sophistication and rigor" (Andrews, Foster, and Harris 588). Arnold Rampersad, Hughes's Boswell, notes that the staff at Knopf, Hughes's own publishing house, considered his work childish. As one editor recalled:

When Wallace Stevens visited the office, people were in awe of him. We treated him like a lord. Hardly anybody cared about Hughes. As far as I am concerned, he wrote baby poetry, poor stuff. If we had to go out to lunch with him, say to a French restaurant in mid-town, it was kind of embarrassing. (Rampersad, *Life II* 120)

In Hughes's own time, each book he published "invoked a litany of faults" from reviewers. According to the critic Karen Jackson Ford, some contemporary reviews claimed "the poems are superficial, infantile, silly, small, unpoetic, common, jejune, iterative, and, of course, simple" (Ford, "Do Right to Write Right" 437).

Hughes's association with simplicity also led some critics to label him as a primitivist, but Hughes's relationship to primitivism is highly ambivalent. "Primitivism," according to the art historian Jürgen Heinrich, "marks the borrowing of forms and artistic expressions from other cultures as a means of renewal of and rebellion against 'exhausted' values of mainstream Western civilization" (Heinrich 992). Primitivism is related to the interest in folk literature, because romanticization of the pre-literate, pre-industrial "folk" is one of the hallmarks of primitivism. From his early career until at least the 1940s, Hughes was marketed as hybrid artist/primitive. His first book, *The Weary Blues*, contains several poems that could be identified as primitivist. For example, "To Midnight Nan at Leroy's" is a poem influenced by primitivism: "Jungle lover... / Night black boy... / Two against the moon / And the moon was joy." (lines 13-16). Like other Harlem Renaissance authors, Hughes was accused of exploiting the fad of primitivism for his own purposes. Hughes was strongly influenced by Carl Van Vechten, whose primitivist novel *Nigger Heaven* caused a negative reaction from black and white critics.

Interestingly, although Hughes deplored the indiscriminate use of black culture in white productions (a message he stated in poems such as “Note on Commercial Theatre”) he helped the white Van Vechten to write the seemingly exploitative *Nigger Heaven*. Because of copyright restrictions, some blues lyrics that Van Vechten had included in the novel had to be removed. In a late-night editing session, Hughes rewrote the blues lyrics in the novel. From the perspective of a primitivist writer like Van Vechten, Hughes has a double advantage: he is both a Negro, meaning that he has access to a primitivism that Van Vechten does not, and sophisticated, meaning that he has the tools to express this primitivism to civilized whites. In a December 9, 1925 letter from Carl Van Vechten to H. L. Mencken, Van Vechten wrote that Hughes was the “first sophisticated Negro to turn back to the crude and primitive for his inspiration” (qtd. in Lewis 180).

But primitivism is a label that can be confining. Especially disconcerting to Hughes was the primitivist tag that seemed to be automatically and reductively associated with black writing. Hughes certainly chafed against the primitivist label that his patron Charlotte Osgood Mason placed on him.⁷ In 1928, one of her letters to Hughes refers to him as “a golden star in the firmament of Primitive Peoples” (Rampersad, *Life I* 159). A paradox emerged, however, when those who supported primitivism seemed to rely on the same racial stereotypes that writers such as Hughes were eager to dispel, and the “primitivist impulse in the Harlem Renaissance actually

7 Charlotte Osgood Mason was Hughes’s patron between 1927 and 1930. She “had specific ideas about black folk and black art: “...she subscribed to his [her deceased husband, Dr. Rufus Osgood Mason’s] beliefs that the most magnificent manifestations of the spiritual were found in “primitive” “child races” (qtd. in Story 285). There is a special connection between her and Penn Station: on his way back to Lincoln University, Osgood’s chauffeur would take Hughes to the train station, much to the admiration of his fellow students (Rampersad, *Life I* 157). Perhaps this is why the place had significance for Hughes— it was a gateway between the limits of race and class.

hindered the very development of cultural development it sought to encourage” (Heinrich 993). “Primitive” is a name that the powerful give to the powerless. The bourgeois values of Negro intellectuals like Countee Cullen, who objected to bohemian innovations such as jazz poetry, irritated Hughes. Hughes admired Claude McKay’s primitivist novel *Home to Harlem*, writing that it was “it was the finest thing ‘we’ve’ done yet” (Rampersad, *Life I* 160). Hughes’s respect for McKay was reciprocated. In 1932, McKay wrote to the bohemian heiress Nancy Cunard, “Of the Negro writers today I think Langston Hughes is the real thing” (McKay, “Claude McKay to Nancy Cunard” 106).

Hughes also loathed the stereotype of primitivism held by white critics. Although he initially showed some sympathy with primitivism in *The Weary Blues*, Hughes later wanted to avoid that label. Being labeled primitive or folk opens one up to a charge of simplicity or glibness. And it damaged Hughes’s political message of racial harmony: primitivism may be admirable in some contexts, but it can also be used as evidence of racist ideas. By the time he wrote *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes was dissatisfied with the way that his writing was being received by critics. Many critics viewed him as a sincere but simple urban folk poet. Even his own publisher, Knopf, presented him this way when they published *Shakespeare in Harlem* with pictures of dice and a wishbone held in a brown-skinned hand on the cover. Hughes’s inscription of Van Vechten’s copy of *Shakespeare in Harlem* (written on the fingers of the hand holding the dice and wishbone) reads, “The wishbone is broken. The dice have thrown a deuce. The song’s an old familiar tune — What’s the use?” (Bernard 204).

An over-reliance on certain elements of folklore could lead an artist to be painted with a primitivist brush. In a letter to Van Vechten dated October 30, 1941, Hughes complained about

the marketing of *Shakespeare in Harlem*, “And I hope (even beg and entreat via letters to the entire Knopf staff) that nobody will, in publicizing my book or writing the blurb, use the words: childlike[,] primitive[,] unmoral[,] amoral[,] or simple[,] which, aside from being untrue when applied to the American scene, have been quite out-worn in describing Negroes and books by and about Negroes” (Bernard 194). Even though he seemed able to effectively navigate the complex relationship between primitivism and folklore, Hughes was frustrated with the futility of explaining himself to an audience that refused to listen. Perhaps he refused to romanticize African roots because he had actually visited Africa during his time on a merchant marine steamer. Hughes recounts the following loss of innocence on his trip to Africa in the twenties: “[T]here was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked to the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro” (*The Big Sea* 11).

Misunderstandings of Hughes’s poetic theory are perhaps forgivable because Hughes expected his poetry to speak for itself, and therefore “did not articulate, by means of literary criticism, a comprehensive poetics or ‘philosophy of poetry’” (Ostrom, “Poetics” 306). But accusing Hughes of oversimplification or triviality is to fall into a trap that the poet himself set: he deliberately disguises his knowledge and skill to establish an approachable public persona. Langston Hughes’s “theory of composition,” although he was suspicious of theories, was based on a populist impulse: “an aesthetic of simplicity, sanctioned finally by democratic culture but having a discipline and standards just as the baroque” (Rampersad, *Life I* 146). Moreover, Hughes’s reluctance to emphasize his university education was in line with his interest in appearing authentic. Far from being a sign of stunted development, though, this was a

camouflage that other American modernist poets such as Robert Frost and William Carlos

Williams also employed:

Hughes's interest in folk traditions, in working people's lives, and in traditional verse forms can also, at first glance, seem to place him at odds with many Modernists, who tended to focus on bourgeois culture (if only to critique or even satirize it), to reject (or at least to change radically) traditional verse forms and to ignore folk traditions. One obvious exception is William Carlos Williams, whose plain style affinity for everyday American life and spare poetic structures are remarkably similar to those of Hughes, even if his political concerns and frames of reference are not. (Ostrom, "Harlem Suitcase Theatre" 251)

In the 1940's Hughes distributed his poems widely and published prolifically. By 1941, Hughes was "like a threadbare professional wooing a monied clientele, elastically adjusting his standards. Perhaps the best that might be said for such work is that it reflects the peculiar pressures facing him as a democratic black poet seeking, paradoxically, the widest audience. In dividing his poems into groups and sending them in various directions, he showed himself aware of the instability of his audience" (Rampersad, *Life II* 19). The critic Meta DuEwa Jones notes the similarity between Frost's and Hughes's folk persona. "Like Robert Frost, Hughes encouraged this view by representing himself as a 'folk poet' and by implying that he was far less well read than was actually the case" (M. D. Jones 1171). While poets such as Countee Cullen and Claude McKay would display their education by creating overtly literary poems, Hughes's folk persona suggested a distinctly modern attitude. He presented himself as raw and innocent to appeal to diverse audiences, including, but not limited to, academic readers who were

looking for the true primitive, bohemian whites and blacks that were wary of race propaganda, and everyday African Americans uninterested in belles-lettres.

Blues Poetry

“I believe,” Hughes wrote, implicitly contrasting his democratic poetics with the typically “difficult” art of white modernist poets such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, “that poetry should be direct, comprehensible, and the epitome of simplicity” (Rampersad, “Langston Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew*” 145–46). Even Pound, famous for his complex and sometimes baffling poetry, once exclaimed after encountering Hughes, “Thank God; at last I come across a poet I can understand” (qtd. in Tracy, “Introduction: Hughes in Our Time” 5). Simplicity was part of his worldview; Hughes wrote, “where life is simple, truth and reality are one” (*The Big Sea* 311). In other words, Hughes “equates simplicity with truth” (Ford, “Do Right to Write Right” 440). The scholar Karen Jackson Ford argues that Hughes’s poetic philosophy of simplicity is not superficial but profound. It is “a philosophy of composition that resorts to simplicity, not in response to singleness or triviality, but, ironically, in response to almost unspeakable contradiction” (440). This simultaneous simplicity and irony gives Hughes’s poetry an unexpected depth and richness. Although little commented upon, *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942) is “a volume of poetry that typifies Hughes’s aesthetic program” (Ford, “Do Right to Write Right” 438).

In *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes returned to the blues poetry he pioneered twenty years earlier, while remaining committed to his political poetry of the 1930s. It was his first volume of poetry for adults published by a major press since *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) (Smethurst,

New Red Negro 145). In his overview of the contemporary reviews, Rampersad notes, “the responses of black critics were more negative than those of their white counterparts” (“Introduction” to *Collected Works* 4). An excoriating review by Owen Dodson accuses Hughes of pandering to the vulgar masses: in *Shakespeare in Harlem* “we merely hear the laughter: loud, lewd, unwholesome and degenerate. We see and hear a cartoon doing a black-face, white-lip number, trying terribly to please the populace” (27). And in perhaps the most damning criticism of all, Hughes is not only pandering but sounds white: “After hearing some of these poems read aloud a fellow who hadn’t heard of Mr. Hughes said: ‘that Langston Hughes must be a cracker’” (28). Additionally, by 1942 the values of the Harlem Renaissance was considered passé. “[T]he Harlem tradition has been overemphasized,” concedes scholar of black history Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950), in his 1942 review of the book (237). Other reviewers noted that the urban Harlemiter is no longer considered representative of the average African American citizen. Woodson notes that the speakers who inhabit *Shakespeare in Harlem* are “not typical of the majority of the race in the United States” (237). Mary Colum, in her *New York Times* review, agrees that the work “may be only the expression of one type of Negro, the Harlem Negro” (9). Anticipating this criticism, Hughes explicitly states in his preface that the voice of the poems are not solely in Harlem, but “syncopated and variegated in the colors of Harlem, Beale Street, West Dallas, and Chicago’s South Side” (*Shakespeare in Harlem* viii).

Critics have continued to misread Hughes, mistaking the blues for triviality or complaint. *Shakespeare in Harlem* “sidestepped politics in favor of blues and humor” (Rampersad, “Introduction” to *Collected Works* 4), unlike Hughes’s overtly political poems from the 1930s and his highly political volume of poems that would be published the following year, *Jim Crow’s*

Last Stand (1943). Other readers overlooked the humor, however, and most found the material dark and depressing. According to an overview of Hughes's work by the reviewer John H. Parker, the predominant feature of the book is "disillusionment of the Forties" compared to the "reckless abandon" of the Harlem Renaissance (339). However, if during the height of the Harlem Renaissance African Americans were misunderstood when considered to be joyful primitives, the blues are misunderstood as mere melancholy songs. In a reversal of the expected stereotype, reviewer Mary Colum wrote in the *New York Times* that "The Europeans seem to be the only branch of the human race who ever believed much in the joy of life or went in much for the praise of life. The Negro of 'Shakespeare in Harlem' [sic] is immensely sad, even hopeless. As a relief from the forlornness he rushes headlong into some activity— love, dancing, banging a musical instrument, or fighting, gambling" (9). Colum's statement points to another bad habit of reviewers, namely, taking a book of poetry as a representation of an entire race.

Although this generalizing kind of judgment is problematic, it is a problem that Hughes unwittingly encouraged because of his desire to speak for the masses. Sophisticated readers can enjoy a ribald or melancholy poem without assigning those features to either the poet or the poet's race. "Realizing how untrue Octavius Roy Cohen's stories [which portrayed conventional stereotypes regarded as "disgusting" by Hughes (Hughes, "Concerning 'Goodbye, Christ'" 149)] may be," wrote publisher John Farrar in *The Crisis* in 1926, "they have amused me immensely, nor do they mean to me any very great libel on the Negro — any more than an amusing story about the Yankee would seem to me a libel on myself" (278). But in general black audiences are less likely to essentialize the poet. While both black and white readers can enjoy the sensuality and uninhibited celebration of sexuality of the blues, "black audiences were less likely than their

white counterparts to mistake these qualities for the totality of the black experience, or to reify them as the defining characteristics of a diverse and complex black existence” (Ward 12).

Lacking understanding of the irony and play of the blues, some critics become lost in what the folk critic George Kent has called a “fantasia of misinterpretation” (G. Kent 185). This misinterpretation can lead to errors in both meaning and form. Like many things that look simple, writing blues poetry is easy if you don’t know what you’re doing. Hughes has taken on a difficult aesthetic project and few did it before Hughes and few have done it well since. According to Arnold Rampersad, Richard Wright and Elizabeth Bishop were much less successful blues poets than Hughes: “the blues, they learned, is not as a simple as it seems” (“Langston Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew*” 156). The blues song is not merely melancholy. The critics, often white, would claim that blues songs are mired in “futility” and nihilism, but in fact are manifestations of the folk “face-up-to-it spirit, a tone of pathos, outrage, and defiance mingled, not in the rhetoric of formal rationality” (G. Kent 185).

Although Hughes is simple in some ways, there is often a gently ironic tone to his blues poems. Instead of criticizing directly (although he could when he wanted), Hughes “laughs us into an awareness of a serious problem” (Davis, “Langston Hughes: Cool Poet” 37) through the use of light verse, poems that tend to use a relaxed voice, a playful tone, or gentle satire (Abrams and Harpham 146). In Hughes’s work, the seriousness of the subject is highlighted and contrasted with a humorous and light-hearted attitude. Knowing he would be misread, Hughes attempted to contextualize his verse. In his preface to *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes claims that the book should be read as “[a] book of light verse. Afro-Americana in the blues mood....” (vii). Karen Jackson Ford believes that because Hughes identifies the book as “light verse,” “it

has been largely overlooked” (“Do Right to Write Right” 446). The Hughes collaborator and biographer Milton Meltzer believes that Hughes “probably meant ‘light verse’ in the sense that the forms were simple blues, ballads, and reels. For the themes were hardly light — loneliness, hunger, death in Harlem, on the South Side, on Beale Street” (231). This juxtaposition of subject and tone is a contrast typical of the blues, as Hughes insisted in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), when he described the tension that underlies the power of the blues: “the mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh” (*Fine Clothes to the Jew* 7). In an earlier letter to Carl Van Vechten, Hughes placed the blues in its historical context and explained the paradox of the blues, they are “sadder even than the spirituals because their sadness is not softened with tears but hardened with laughter, the absurd, incongruous laughter of a sadness without even a god to appeal to” (Rampersad, *Life I* 111).

In his preface to *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Hughes also places the poems in the oral tradition. “Blues, ballads, and reels to be read aloud, crooned, shouted, recited, and sung. Some with gestures, some not — as you like. None with a far-away voice” (Hughes, *Shakespeare in Harlem* viii). Despite Hughes’s invitation for “a more robust articulation” (Caplan, *Questions of Possibility* 107) than a breathy recitation, or worse, reading silently, few of the reviewers mention Hughes’s invitation to experience the poem aloud. Reading the poems silently reduces the poems’ power. If the poems are misread this way, this may be another reason for critics to overlook the book. The blues historian Steven Tracy understands the preface as a development of Hughes’s poetics towards an oral tradition. “Having presented a series of dramatic monologues in a variety of forms using blues stanzas and rhythms in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Hughes went one step further by explicitly inviting performance and audience participation in this volume; the

invitation had been only implicit in the oral base of the earlier poems” (Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* 4). By forbidding the “far-away voice” Hughes intends for us to take the poems with humor and to relate the speaker to the audience within an everyday situation. This preface also contextualizes the poems as popular pieces. “*Shakespeare in Harlem* represents his first large-scale effort,” according to James Smethurst, to “construct... an oral poetry in which there is a call and response relationship among the poet, the popular voice, and the imagined audience” (*New Red Negro* 146).

Another problem of translating the blues to verse is a loss of connection to the everyday folk who authorize the “authenticity” of the blues. *The Faber Book of Political Verse*, an anthology of political poems since Dante, claims that “the injustice which so disfigures American society is most persuasively criticized by Blues singers—they are the most authentic American political poets and their work challenges the more comfortable written tradition” (emphasis added Paulin 50). Although the introduction of the anthology strongly states the political importance of the blues, there are no blues poems in the book. This inconsistency is probably due to the publisher’s location in England, although some Americans are represented in the collection. It is because the blues lie outside the “comfortable written tradition” that they can be “authentic.” Given the fact the blues identifies itself against classic literature, can blues, if written down, maintain their folk and political credibility, or do they sell out?

Successive critics have noted the problem of translating “the total blues experience” (G. Kent 191) onto the printed page. The blues lyric, printed on the page and isolated from its performance, does not have an impressive effect. At root, this is a problem of translating one genre into another. Additionally, the blues seems ill-suited to conventional literary standards, “to

give artistic expression of permanent value to a form demanding simple diction, repetition, and an elementary rhyme scheme raised problems” (Emanuel, *Langston Hughes* 137–38). But Edward Waldron counters this argument by claiming that “the very qualities Emanuel cites as obstacles to ‘good poetry’ are what give strength and effectiveness to the blues poetry of Langston Hughes, i.e., the simplistic, direct nature of the blues form” (141). Effective blues poetry requires a balance of the raw passion of the blues singer with the calculated technique of the poet.

Hughes’s own stated goal was to create a new form of literature that spoke for the everyday “low-down folks.” In 1929, Hughes wrote in his journal that he wanted “[t]o create a Negro culture in America— a real, solid, sane, racial something growing out of the *folk* life, not copied from another, even though surrounding race” (emphasis added Rampersad, *Life I* 173). Hughes admires the “so-called common element” for their joie de vivre, independence, and authenticity:

[T]hey do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let’s dance! These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. (“The Negro Artist” 28)

According to Arnold Rampersad, “the essence of Hughes’s career had been from the start an interplay between art and social conscience” (Rampersad, *Life II* 6).

Although Hughes relished his reputation as a “poet of the people,” he never felt himself to be one of them. Born James Langston Mercer Hughes, Hughes’s upbringing “had been spent away from consistent, normal involvement with the black masses whose affection and regard he craved” (Rampersad, *Life I* 65). The poet and scholar Melvin B. Tolson (ca. 1898-1966) notes that Hughes came from an “an old aristocratic family” (120). His grandfather Charles Langston was an editor of a black paper, the *Historic Times*, and his great-uncle John Mercer Langston was president of Howard University and elected to Congress in 1890. He once knocked down a white man in a courtroom for insulting the black race, and was later exonerated of any crime for the incident (Rampersad, *Life I* 7). Hughes was raised by his maternal grandmother, who ingrained in him the narrative of her first husband’s martyrdom as a member of the band of men who attacked a federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry with radical Abolitionist John Brown. The effect of Brown’s raid on the public imagination can hardly be overstated. Du Bois’s first book after *The Souls of Black Folk* was a biography of John Brown (1909). And in 1910, an eight-year-old Langston Hughes attended former president Theodore Roosevelt’s speech dedicating the John Brown Memorial Battlefield. His grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson Leary Langston, was given a place of honor on the platform as the last surviving widow of the Harpers Ferry band (Rampersad, *Life I* 13). Days after the event, the shawl that her husband died in, riddled with bullets and stained with blood, was brought to Mary Leary. Not only would she continue to wear it for fifty years, but in this garment she swaddled young Langston (6). Hughes seemed destined to be destined to devote his life for art and justice.

Hughes Experimenting: Hybrid Form and the Sonnet Sequence

Hughes's range of forms and influences, far from being static, grew throughout his long career. Early in his career, Hughes was profoundly influenced by an experimental free verse tradition. Hughes admired the "loose-limbed modern vernacular" of Walt Whitman (Paulin 47). Hughes referred to the "radically democratic modernist" poet Carl Sandburg as "my guiding star" (Rampersad, "Hughes, Langston" 368–69). Additionally, two black poets who worked within dialect as well as literary genres that influenced Hughes were Paul Laurence Dunbar and Claude McKay (Rampersad, "Hughes, Langston" 368–69). Early reviewers noted that Hughes was not easily categorized. "In casting about for a precise category in which to identify the work of Langston Hughes, I find that he might be acclaimed a new prophet in several fields, and very likely he does not think of himself as belonging to any of them" (Larkin 10). Later on, however, Hughes's work continued to adapt and defy expectations. While it is true that he draws on a wide range of folk forms: blues, badman stories, tall tales, and sermons, he also draws on many of the genres of American culture, as is fitting to his democratic poetic persona. He incorporates elements of popular culture: r & b, gospel (such as in the poem "When Sue Wears Red"), black vaudeville, and elements of improvised daily speech: the dozens, "signifying," and street corner and bar stool conversations (Smethurst, "Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement" 1229). Given this range of influences, it seems to be problematic to call Hughes *only* a folk poet.

It might be more accurate to say Hughes is a poet of the masses rather than of the folk. He is neither a product of folk culture nor is he read exclusively by folk audiences. The critic Jean Wagner distinguishes between the audiences of the folk and the masses: the folk are rural

(often in a hospitable location) and share a traditional system of values; the masses are urban (often in a hostile environment) and are transitioning into a new set of values:

The folk have roots, ties to the earth, while the masses whose joys and sorrows, both material and moral, are depicted by Hughes in the sometimes shocking hues of the naturalist palette, and with whom his own origins ensured obvious affinities, for the most part are flotsam, uprooted human beings as yet ill-fitted for the harsh, unfamiliar urban environment to which the barriers of segregation and the economic necessities of the epoch had driven them. (Wagner 394)

The move from “folk” to “masses” reframes the problem of Hughes’s popular poetry. It is not simple for the sake of a wider audience; rather it is fitted to an audience in transition.

Hughes did not attempt to unthinkingly transfer oral forms to the page, as many critics of folk poets suggest, but experimented with forms to represent “low down folks” in a belletristic context. The critic George Kent points out that Hughes was “sensitive to the implications of form,” and that he “seldom takes up a form that could not express the folk or that expresses *forms of response* to existence that are foreign to their sensibility (emphasis in the original G. Kent 191) Although Hughes often works with “distinctly African American literary forms,” he often experiments by blending free verse with popular forms such as the blues and the ballad (Smethurst, “Langston Hughes, the Left” 1229). According to the blues scholar Steven Tracy, Hughes’s “artistic strategy was to attempt to impose a more sophisticated and literary scheme on the material” (“To the Tune” 78).

An example of Hughes’s attention to form is the little-commented-upon lyric poem “Seven Moments of Love: An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues,” first published in the May 1940

issue of *Esquire Magazine*. Rampersad claims that *Esquire* paid Hughes more than \$100 for this poem, which was “the most ever paid for one of his poems” (Rampersad, *Life I* 380). This issue contained a diverse mixture of articles, fiction, and poetry. The articles ranged from the humorous and frivolous (“So You Can’t Smoke a Pipe” by J. E. Keith) to serious political reporting (Diego Rivera’s “Stalin, The Undertaker of the Revolution”). Hughes’s poems were printed in two full pages with drawings by E. Simms Campbell, one of the first and most successful African American artists. Unfortunately, we do not know what Hughes himself thought of the drawings. Hughes’s reaction to these drawings is not mentioned in his autobiography, Rampersad’s biography, or Hughes’s letters to Arna Bontemps or Carl Van Vechten. But it is likely Hughes was at least satisfied with them because he would later petition his publisher Blanche Knopf to hire Campbell to design the book cover for *Shakespeare in Harlem* (Rampersad, *Life II* 9).

Two years later the poem was placed first in his 1942 volume of poetry *Shakespeare in Harlem*. This period marks the beginning of Hughes’s most productive poetic decade (Emanuel, *Langston Hughes* 43), in which Hughes would also publish *Fields of Wonder* (1947) and *One Way Ticket* (1949). While Hughes is best known for his short poems, “Seven Moments of Love” is a long poem of seven sections that range between 13-23 lines each. As the longest and perhaps most ambitious poem of the volume, it deserves some critical scrutiny. Formally, it is a hybrid of the sonnet sequence and blues form. There is a cooperative interaction between the two forms. James Smethurst asserts that “while the subtitle privileges the vernacular or ‘popular’ form over the ‘high’ form, the interplay between the blues and the ‘traditional’ sonnet sequence is far more reciprocal than the subtitle would indicate” (*New Red Negro* 146).

What is the formal result of a sonnet/blues hybrid? By synthesizing the sonnet and blues form, Hughes is transforming two traditional forms into something new. It also calls attention to the difference between Hughes and other more formal poets. The subtitle, “An Un-Sonnet Sequence in Blues,” invites ambiguity by simultaneously denying and affirming its own form. Hughes is assuming some knowledge of the sonnet sequence from the audience. According to the prosodist Derek Attridge, “when a poem is written against a particular tradition, it is still relying on some prior identification with that tradition” (*Poetic Rhythm* 15). Negating the name of the form is a highly suggestive strategy. The denial allows Hughes to evade the accusation of formal ignorance (“That’s not a ‘real’ sonnet!”). At the same time it appeals to the historical sonnet sequence tradition. According to Smethurst “the invocation of the sonnet tradition is used to claim genuinely ‘literary’ status for the poems, and by extension the African American popular lyric associated with the blues, and the African American speaking subject” (*New Red Negro* 146).

This observation points to a difference between how Hughes and how McKay and Cullen use the sonnet. Like McKay and Cullen, Hughes is putting the “Harlem in Shakespeare” by making a racial argument in a literary form. However, the speaker in a McKay or Cullen poem could be any English or American poet of the last 200 years. In contrast, Hughes creates a “Shakespeare in Harlem,” metonymically substituting “the African American speaking subject” for the constructed white one. “[T]he blues content of the blues-sonnet hybrid transforms the bourgeois-lesser aristocratic social context of the sonnet sequence in English since Wyatt and Spenser into a specifically, and ‘authentically,’ African American working class one” (Smethurst, *New Red Negro* 146).

What is an “un-sonnet”? “Seven Moments” is an “un-sonnet” in the sense that it plays off of the conventions of the sonnet form and rejects the order and decorum that is characteristic of the form. The sections within “Seven Moments” of poems can be thought of as a progression on both the form and the content of a conventional sonnet. Hughes’s decision to play with line length, rhythm, diction, and stanza length is related to the improvisatory jazz precept that “the accepted conventions of the specific genre... [are] at work even if they are being deliberately violated” (Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* 225). This sense of play, even as a tragic story is being told, is an important stance of the blues and of Hughes in general. It provides a model of resilience for those who might relate to the problems of the poem. “Seven Moments” is a poem that is not about the idealized world of aesthetics, but the messy world of physical relationships. Hughes’s poems might be best differentiated from Cullen’s in their differing aspirations. Although Cullen’s poetry seeks to invoke a higher plane of existence, Hughes’s seeks to find beauty in everyday life. On a more literal level, an “un-sonnet” is a form that invokes but does not conform to the sonnet structure. It is a form that is messy, dirty, and still in contact with the real world. “Messy imperfection is the price... for remaining in touch with the real world as well as the world of art” (Bayley 272). By calling his poem an “un-sonnet,” Hughes elevates the experience of ordinary life to the level of high culture while remaining distinct from it.

Hughes intentionally crosses the boundaries of literary genres. In contrast to McKay and Cullen, he appears to control form more than being controlled by form. “He is seldom at the mercy of forms that immediately evoke experiences whose essentials are not those of the black experience, a dilemma that sometimes catches up with Claude McKay as we hear him crowded by the romantic tradition and the sudden notes of Byron or Shelley” (G. Kent 203). For Hughes,

the folk and literary traditions were “not mutually exclusive” (Tracy, “Langston Hughes and Afro-American Vernacular Music” 89). Combining literary and folk forms is not without precedent. The tradition of vernacular sonnets goes back to Dante, who along with Petrarch developed the form in fourteenth-century Italy. Dante collected his sonnets and canzoni in *La Vita Nuova (The New Life)*, which was written in Italian and not Latin. Using Italian for literary writing was so unusual that he felt obliged to explain himself in *De Vulgari Eloquentia (On Eloquence in the Vernacular)*, asserting the power and value of the vernacular as equal to that of the classical languages. Although it has become a standard of “high” literature, the sonnet began as a “vulgar” form, and *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is the first reference to the source of the sonnet form as the folk canzone (Wilkins 470). George Kent believes that Hughes is at his best “when he attempts to capture the blues spirit and varied forms of response to existence in a poem that uses non-blues devices” (202).

The sonnet sequence, according to the literary historian Michael Spiller is unique in that it is “the only literary genre (apart from an author’s publication of his or her own letters) to balance the wholeness of each of its parts with the wholeness of the entire collection” (141). The fact that Spiller does not include African American poets in his book *The Sonnet Sequence: A Study of Its Strategies* (1997) is a sign of the neglect these poets have suffered. The sequence appeared soon after the invention of the sonnet itself, with Giacomo da Lentino and his friends exchanging and responding to each other’s ideas in sonnet form (15). For Hughes to write a sonnet sequence is an unexpected choice. The critic and poet Yusef Komunyakaa actually defines Hughes *against* the sonnet, “Where 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” (Komunyakaa 1140). Unlike many sequences which seem to announce their own importance, Hughes’s sequence is unassuming: it does not commemorate a great moment in history; it is not self-aggrandizing. The date and time of the poems sections suggest improvisation and immediacy. The poems are subject to the pressures of the immediate moment and cannot be polished or refined.

What then, is the unity of “Seven Moments of Love”? Individually the sonnets are lyrics, but as a sequence they take on the quality of a narrative. A jilted lover, Jack, mourns his lost love, Cassie, who is asked to return in the final section. The speaker of the poems, Jack, begins with a traditional blues trope of anger and melancholy for lost love. Note that some critics have seen this as a “murderous rage” (Ostrom, “Seven Moments of Love” 350), but they fail to see the irony in the first section. In subsequent sections Jack’s anger changes to loneliness, and finally to a letter of forgiveness to Cassie, the beloved. The seven sections are “Twilight Reverie,” “Supper Time,” “Bed Time,” “Daybreak,” “Sunday,” “Payday,” and “Letter.” The final and climactic section is built up in several ways. The speaker has received a letter (which we don’t see), and the section is in the form of a responding letter to his beloved, forgiving her (with mock sternness) and asking her to return. The poem moves from an alienated interior monologue to the social contact of a letter, suggesting how the social connection can reverse or interrupt the painful reality.

By announcing the number of sections in the title, Hughes makes the number seven itself significant. Seven is one half of the fourteen-line length of the sonnet (the most well-known rule of sonneteering). Hughes pre-determines the number of poems the reader will be faced with, which might be a relief to the non-specialized reader of poetry that is typical of *Esquire’s*

audience. The sections themselves have a rhythm to them. All the sections, except for the last one, “Letter,” are defined by repeated events: times of day or days of the week. Thus the title “Seven Moments” has a double meaning, they are exact, objective points in time as well as the brief, subjective moment of lyric awareness. The times of day are roughly analogous to the seven *Horae Canonicae* (official set of daily prayers, see *Psalms* 119:164 “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws.”) prescribed by the Catholic Church and the subject of a famous Auden poem by the same name: *Prime* at 6:00 a.m., *Terce* at 9:00 a.m., *Sext* at noon, *None* at 3:00 p.m., *Vespers* between 4 and 6 p.m., *Compline* 9:00 pm, and *Lauds* in the early morning hours.

Several differences between the first sections and the last helps to charge the last section with the suddenness that the speaker feels on receiving a letter from his beloved. In this way Hughes lulls us into the rhythm of life only to be shocked by a new event. Hughes defers naming the speaker or the beloved until the last section. By beginning with an anonymous speaker, Hughes allows the reader to identify with the voice. Naming the speaker and the beloved at the end relieves the reader of this identification and satisfies the expectation of resolution.

The sonnet sequence is “the formal analogue of variety in unity” (Spiller 46), and therefore it seems ideal for a radically democratic poet such as Hughes to represent diversity within a unity. By respecting both diversity and unity simultaneously, it can underscore a political message that values the larger society while respecting the identity of smaller racial groups. Although “Narrative is an uncommon kind of linkage, since its demands tend to obliterate the internal wholeness of single sonnets,” (Spiller 141) Hughes succeeds in uniting these sonnets by repetition: the delusions and desperation of the speaker, the atmosphere of the

blues, the form of the poems themselves as “un-sonnets,” and the address of the second-person singular “you.” Interestingly, the reference for this “you” is constantly changing: from Cassie, to an intrusive alarm clock, to a pair of mice. A formal element of unity exists in the sequence, namely the way the forms of the blues and sonnet are drawn together. Indeed, the blending of forms can be seen as a variation on blues technique of “bending” blue notes.

“Seven Moments of Love,” is both an un-sonnet sequence and blues song. Although the poem represents “one of his more ambitious blues poetry experiments” (Waldron 143), it has been largely ignored. Notable exceptions include a short discussion in Edward E. Waldron’s “The Blues Poetry of Langston Hughes” (143) and Karen Jackson Ford’s “Do Right to Write Right” (448-49), and a longer treatment in James Smethurst’s *New Red Negro* (146-150). The unexpected pairing of blues and sonnet has resisted scholarly consensus or even analysis.

Prosodists may avoid the poem because popular forms such as the blues are not effectively analyzed using prosody. Blues scholars ignore the poem presumably because the blues elements are obscure: it does not follow the three-line blues verse form and it has very little repetition.

Despite the fact that this poem is an innovative application of the blues form, Stephen Tracy does not mention the poem in his book *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (1988). Additionally, an “un-sonnet” is not representative of Hughes’s other blues work.

But the poem is a turning point in Hughes’s career in several ways. It seems likely that the poem is prelude to Hughes’s later work. In its improvised form, “Seven Moments” is very similar to the work that is arguably Hughes’s masterpiece, *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951). Indeed, the scholar of African American poetry James Smethurst believes that “Seven Moments” “establishes the basic framework for the collection in which ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ forms African

American forms of expressive culture are simultaneously paired with and set against ‘high’ literary forms” (*New Red Negro* 146). Although “Seven Moments of Love” is not a “real” sonnet sequence, it is about real life.

Recognizing the way that Hughes blends the blues and sonnet form may help resolve some of the critical debate that has surrounded Hughes’s technical ability. This recognition may show that Hughes does not merely copy the blues in an ineffective way. For instance, Harold Bloom’s judgment that Hughes’s poems are literary copies of actual blues songs, and thus “do not compare adequately to the best instances of [his] cultural models” (*Langston Hughes: Modern Critical Views* 1). However, to claim Hughes is attempting to replicate the experience of the musical blues on the printed page is a mischaracterization of Hughes’s intentions. Hughes is attempting a crossover appeal to diverse audiences. He is not content to only speak to the “masses” but experiments with form in ways that appeal to a literary audience. Indeed, a combination of the blues and the sonnet is the ultimate literary/folk experiment. By combining the belletristic sonnet, “the basic unit of European poetic currency” (C. Scott, “The Limits of the Sonnet” 248), with the blues, a sign of blackness, Hughes creates a uniquely American form. But what does “the blues” mean?

Like “primitivism” and “the folk,” the “blues” is an elastic term that is used in a variety of contexts. As a concept, the blues has musical, poetic, psychological, social, and philosophic associations. Although the blues could refer, “in the 1920s and ‘30s, to almost any kind of song,” according to musical historian Luc Sante, the term can be defined technically: “the true blues songs are those that hew to the twelve bar structure” (Sante 479). However, the blues can be defined expansively. Houston A. Baker, in his theoretical exegesis of the blues, *Blues, Ideology,*

and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory, argues that the blues represents a form of black consciousness, a “multiplex enabling script in which African American cultural discourse is inscribed” (Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 4). In his poem “Slim Greer,” Sterling Brown (1901-1989) uses the blues as a sign of authentic blackness that even a crass “cracker” could recognize:

An' he started a-tinkling'
 Some mo'nful blues,
 An' a-pattin' the time
 With No. Fourteen shoes.

The cracker listened
 An' then he spat
 An' said, “No white man
 Could play like that...” (Brown 137)

The origins of the blues are lost in the sands of time, but the rise of the blues coincided with the rise of African American disenfranchisement after the period of Reconstruction. The origin of the word “blues” is disputed. It may be from “the blue devils,” a nineteenth-century term for melancholy, drunkenness, or delirium tremens. Clarence Major, a compiler of dialect terms and definitions, suggests that “the blues” is rooted in blackness itself, “in the concept of blue-black skin, or black skin that seems to reflect blue light or has a blue cast to it” (qtd. in Ostrom, “The Blues” 50). One of the earliest written encounters with the blues is mentioned by W. C. Handy (1873-1958), an African American cornetist and bandleader. He claimed that in

1903, in a train station in Tutwiler, Mississippi, he saw a guitarist “fretting his guitar with a knife to produce an eerie, sliding wail, and singing about ‘goin’ where the Southern cross the Dog.’” In other words, the singer was going to Moorhead, Mississippi, where two railroad lines, the Southern Railway and the Yazoo (or Yellow Dog), intersect. Although Handy knew field songs and other folk music from the South, this music was completely new to him. Handy called it the “the weirdest music I had ever heard” (Sante 478). However, he must have also seen its appeal, because he would later publish “St. Louis Blues” (1914) as sheet music. By the time the first blues audio recording, Mamie Smith’s “Crazy Blues” (1920), was released, the blues had already become firmly entrenched in the culture, especially in the South.

Surprisingly, there are strong similarities between the blues and the sonnet form. The five beat line of the blues lyric is similar to the iambic pentameter of the sonnet. This similarity reflects the roots that both of these forms have in an oral as well as written tradition. According to the formalist critic David Caplan, “A ten-syllable line cannot help but allude to iambic pentameter, the language’s most famous meter and the one most often linked to speech” (*Questions of Possibility* 130). There is a similarity in the way the last line tends to be an elegant and concise response to the preceding lines and in the ways that the end-rhymes clinch things together. “In the classic [blues] form, the first line makes a statement which is repeated with a variation in the second. The third line provides an ironic contrast or extension. Thus all kinds of combinations are possible, [including] call and response patterns between the voice and the accompanying instrument (guitar, harmonica) or band” (Henderson 142). In terms of proportions, the sonnet and the blues share a top-heavy asymmetry of form: eight lines followed by six lines in the case of the Italian sonnet; and two lines followed by one line in the blues. And

although the blues is well known to be a folk form, the courtly sonnet may have also begun with the folk. The scholar Ernest Wilkins concludes that the origins of the sonnet's octave lie in the *strambotto*, an eight-line stanza rhyming abababab, of Sicilian folk-song (95). Since Dante, the sonnet has become a belletristic standard, but it began as a vernacular form. One of the earliest treatises on the sonnet is Antonio da Tempo's *De Ritimicis Vulgaribus* (On Vernacular Verse), written between 1329 and 1332 (Spiller 160). Both the sonnet and the blues carry expectations of experimentation. Excessive derivation from earlier artists is frowned upon, and sonneteers and blues musicians are expected to demonstrate their competence by putting their own stamp on the form. Finally, the most obvious similarity is the shared theme of the distresses and despair of thwarted love, the departed lover of the blues and the disdainful mistress of Petrarchan conceit.

Hughes contributes to the existing body of sonnets by replacing the standard, non-racialized speaker of the sonnet with, if not a blues singer, then an Everyman character from the blues. And although we should be wary of extrapolating one poem to be a touchstone for a group of people, the significance of the blues singer holds a similar position in literature to the speaker of a sonnet:

Blues — always the blues and its singers — stand as modal norms for the public person of Afro-American culture — whether that figure is a preacher, politician, or poet. For the blues' awesome genealogy makes them the signally legitimate expressive form of Afro-American culture. (Baker, *Afro-American Poetics*)

The substitution of the speaker is an important characteristic that separates Hughes from previous African American sonneteers. Earlier writers such as McKay and Cullen express African American themes through a speaker that is not distinguishable from a European. Their

goal, in fact, was to write poetry that was “as good as” the best English examples. Du Bois expresses this when he says “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (*The Souls of Black Folk* 88). The effect is a metaphorical comparison: “Black folks are like white folks” (that is, “Harlem in Shakespeare”). But Hughes is doing something different. Instead of a metaphorically comparing, he is metonymically substituting black subjectivity for the white speaker, effectively replacing the position (and not the content or meaning) of the poet (that is, “Shakespeare in Harlem”). Hughes is not trying to be “like” Shakespeare but to speak from Shakespeare’s position. James Smethurst has made a similar claim about the character Jess B. Simple from Hughes’s “Simple” stories:

Hughes is adamant about avoiding political and artistic marginalization in the Simple stories, as in much of his work, both in terms of the African American community and American society generally. *Instead, Hughes is determined to place, or replace, the African American speaker, and his or her voice, at the center of some of our society’s primary defining stories.* (emphasis added, “Adventures of a Social Poet” 53)

It may be true that that this makes Hughes seem more bound to his time period and therefore less inclusive, but this is Hughes’s intent, especially since “timelessness” has been used as an unwitting synonym for “white.” “Any criticism of Hughes must thus also face the instances and the degree to which he varied from the traditional stance of the Western artist. Much of his work is very little reflective of a concern to be universal and timeless. Instead, the topicality of numerous pieces reflects Hughes’s satisfaction in giving the issues of the community an immediate and striking voice” (G. Kent 193).

Another layer of irony, which is only available if one considers the original magazine of publication, *Esquire*, is that by describing a blues badman who is not really a bad man, he is aware of the irony of a blues poem in a predominately white magazine. The speaker may not know what a sonnet is, but he does know the blues. Readers know sonnets, but don't know the blues. At the same time, the white readers of *Esquire* may not want to be sonneteers, a term that suggests effeminacy and old-fashionedness. Like Cullen and McKay, Hughes published his formally strict, deracialized sonnets in black magazines: "Ph.D." (Feb. 1932), and "Penn Station" (Aug. 1932) in *Opportunity*. Are Hughes's "blackest" sonnets published in white magazines? If so, it would support the idea that sonnets and the blues have special relevance as cultural forms. But they may romanticize themselves as a sensitive, yet masculine, blues singer, just as the speaker romanticizes himself as a blues badman. The rich layering of sonneteer/ bluesman/ badman is another technical achievement of Hughes.

This layering, which is subtle but not intentionally hidden, is one of the differences that separate Hughes's use of the sonnet from McKay and Cullen. McKay and Cullen mastered forms such as sonnets and ballads and then blackened them with racially tinged themes. This "denigration of form" (Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* 85) is the movement of "Harlem in Shakespeare," metaphorical comparison ("I am like you, white reader" or "I am like Shakespeare"), and a kind of masking where the reader is uncertain whether the mask is real or not, although most academically trained readers of poetry will always assume a distinction between persona and poet. In Hughes, the mask is a clear fiction: Hughes is not the speaker, and the blues singer is not the badman. But this displacement is humorous and not alienating. Like the "low down" folks Hughes admires, who "do not particularly care whether they are like white

folks or anybody else” (Hughes, “The Negro Artist” 28), the speaker is completely at home in black culture, even though he feels despair at his love situation.

The poem as published in *Esquire* does not have the same effect as the version published in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. Whereas the early reviewers noted the depressing tone of *Shakespeare in Harlem*, and how the Harlem dwelling persona is not an effective speaker, modern readers of the poem encounter it as a familiar, approachable persona:

Hughes does not recast the folk voice of “Seven Moments of Love” in an overly oppositional form that would supposedly stand outside and against mass commercial versions of the blues and the “genteel” “high” culture form of the love sonnet. Instead, Hughes chooses to adopt a construct of the folk voice that was much more consonant with mass-culture representations of the speaking folk subject and with “high”-culture representations of the middle-class (or middle-status-obsessed) subject with a unobtainable [sic] upper-class love object.

(Smethurst, *New Red Negro* 147)

The two texts are virtually identical, with the notable exception of the dialect “ole” in *Esquire* is replaced with “old” in *Shakespeare in Harlem*. There are a remarkable number of instances of the word, it occurs three times in the first stanza (lines 9, 11, and 14 of “Twilight Reverie”) and once in the last (line 19 of “Letter”), in addition to line 8 of “Daybreak.” An additional exception is typographical: words which are italicized in *Shakespeare in Harlem* are printed in capitals in the *Esquire* version. Two features combine to make the poems feel more unified than separate in *Esquire*. The staggered arrangement of the sonnets and images in *Esquire*, filling two facing pages, has a unifying effect. Each poem is carefully placed in relation

to its corresponding picture. Additionally, the sections are numbered in *Esquire* with Roman numerals, while in *Shakespeare in Harlem* sections numbers are Arabic. Because of this difference, the poems in *Esquire* appear to be more integrated, and the poems in *Shakespeare in Harlem* appear to be more of a disconnected list.

The drawings in conjunction with the poem unify the poem into a consistent narrative and emphasize the emotional swings of the speaker. However, the drawings also simplify the poems in a way that reduce the possibilities of irony and humor. A second result is the leveling of racial differences. The working-class black speaker of the poem seems to have the same problems as the college-educated man who reads *Esquire* (for example, debt, work, and social obligations). Race is de-emphasized by portraying the black speaker in silhouette. Whereas Hughes intends the poems of *Shakespeare in Harlem* to be light and amusing, the drawings in *Esquire* make the poem more dramatic. The drawings portray the speaker in different moods that correspond to the poem: sitting, standing with hands in pockets, sitting up in bed, getting out of bed, walking, lounging, and finally a picture of the man's face as he is writing a letter. The poems and drawings are arranged in two columns, beginning with the first poem on the left and a corresponding picture on the right. The poems and drawing positions alternate in subsequent rows. Overall the drawings limit interpretation to the poems to be more literal. This is somewhat surprising given the apparently ironic attitude of some other *Esquire* articles.

“You” occurs thirty-three times, more than “and” (twenty-nine) or “the” (twenty-eight). “Your” occurs an additional six times. These deictic pronouns, typical of a lyric poem, suggest a specific time and place of the speaker, but at the same time they are ambiguous enough for a reader to identify with. “You” refers to, at various points, the departed lover, a pair of mice, and

an alarm clock, and “you” appears in each section. Nearly the entire poem takes place seemingly in the speaker’s head. At no time does Hughes break with this address and acknowledge that he is writing a poem. To do so would have compromised the everyday, working-class personality of the speaker. Although the “you” dominates the poem, the person being addressed is never actually present. Gradually, the addressee becomes more significant, and by the last section the speaker has received a letter from her and her voice appears (although mediated through him), “What do you mean, why didn’t I write?” The last section, “Letter,” has a reversal in form which symbolizes the return of the beloved: the speaker’s loneliness is broken because he has heard from the beloved and is responding to her.

The first section of the poem is “Twilight Reverie.” This title references the diction of popular songs of the time, for example the “melody that haunts my reverie,” is a line from the jazz standard “Stardust,” and Duke Ellington has a composition entitled “Blues Reverie.” Considering Hughes’s intention to situate his poems in a dramatic context, the title seems unexpected. Although the rest of the poem is written in everyday language, “Twilight Reverie” implies the tranquil contemplation one might expect from the sophisticated speaker of traditional lyric poem. But because the speaker is aware of his imagining an exaggerated act of violence, the “reverie” is ironic. The speaker’s passive state is not pleasant, but the frustrated result of his own impotence. The final line of the poem echoes the “twilight” of the title, and is an allusion to the first line of “St. Louis Blues,” “I hate’s to see dat ev’nin’ sun go down.”

Here I set with a bitter old thought,
 Something in my mind better I forgot.
 Setting here thinking feeling sad.

I keep feeling like this I'm gonna start acting bad.
 Gonna go get my pistol, I said forty-four—
 Make you walk like a ghost if you bother me any more.
 Gonna go get my pistol, I mean thirty-two,
 And shoot all kinds o' shells into you.
 Yal, here I set thinking — a bitter old thought
 About two kinds o' pistols that I ain't got.
 If just had a Owl Head, old Owl Head would do,
 Cause I'd take that Owl Head and fire on you.
 But I ain't got no Owl Head and you done left town
 And here I set thinking with a bitter old frown.
 It's dark on this stoop, Lawd! The sun's gone down! (Hughes, *The Collected
 Poems of Langston Hughes* 217–18)

In the initial octave of the fifteen-line sonnet, the speaker imagines violent revenge upon his absent lover. The speaker of the poem alternates between descriptions of his real internal state and imagined external action. His inability to resolve these two states invokes the sense of comic tragedy that is the distinctive marker of the blues. The first four lines introduce us to an emotional and cognitive dissonance of “thinking” and “feeling.” The present progressive tense of the verbs emphasizes that his state is both current and continuous. In line four, the transition of “feeling” to “acting” sets up the tension of the poem, namely, the question of how is the speaker going to act.

Lines five through eight describe his future act in an attitude of comic overstatement or hyperbole, which is also one of the techniques of the blues. Two other features derived from the blues, namely the list of weapons and the extreme violence of the bad blues man are used ironically. The list of weapons is ordered in terms of the weapons' power. Each successive weapon is less powerful and prestigious than the former. The rhetorical effect of this is comic, and the listener begins to understand that the speaker might not be the stereotypical bad man of the blues. By setting up the fantasy of violence against the reality of it, he is critiquing the standard features of the blues.

After line eight Hughes engages one of the standard structural features of the sonnet, namely a change in attitude, or turn. The line after the *volta* begins with the lines "Yal, here I set thinking — a bitter old thought/ About two kinds o' pistols that I ain't got." This phrase is not ironic, exactly, but we understand that this is a man who, although he might be really angry, is not going to do anything violent. He is completely authentic, even when he is lying to himself. The use of the second person indicates that the speaker is imagining an audience. In lines nine through twelve, the speaker repeats the internal state of bitterness and external state of sitting from the first line, but this time with an awareness of his own inability to act. Not only does he not have one of the legendary weapons of the bad blues man, he does not have an "Owl Head," a slang term for a kind of cheaply made and widely available gun which would have been common in urban areas of the time. The repetition of the everyday object in relation to the more celebrated object reinforces the divide between his fantasy and reality.

The final tercet contains a humorous, yet painful, recognition of the speaker's actual state. The speaker has no gun, his lover is gone, and even the daylight is gone. Several levels of

contrast enhance the humor of the situation. The sudden darkness is in ironic contrast to his enlightenment. The phrase “here I set” is repeated again, giving the audience the sense of a frustrating motionlessness. The tercet ultimately embodies Hughes complex use of the sonnet and blues form: he not only demonstrates his mastery of their formal features, but he plays the features against each other to make them relevant to a popular audience while validating their experience to the level of high literary culture. Hughes expands the seemingly competing forms, but maintains credibility by setting up and then frustrating the audience’s expectations. The reader of sonnets would expect the poem to end at line 14, but Hughes adds a line to stretch the form. By establishing a series of couplets in the first 12 lines, the blues audience expects a final couplet to conclude the poem. Hughes instead truncates the expected sixteenth line, and rhymes the last line with the previous couplet, contributing a sense of frustration to the suddenness of the speaker’s recognition.

The drawing for the first stanza in the series “Twilight Reverie” is a close-up of disembodied hands intensely gripping a man’s knees. It is apparently meant to reflect the strong anger felt in the poem. The effect, however, is to simplify the possible readings of the poem, precluding an ironic interpretation. The seriousness of the drawing reduces the possibility of humor in this stanza. For example, the repeated invocations of successively smaller caliber handguns, which might ironically comment on the ineptness of the speaker, instead becomes a description of a man desperately grabbing whatever weapon he can find.

“Twilight Reverie” contains a remarkable six-line section that simultaneously combines the defining feature of the blues lyric (the aab line structure) and the sonnet (the volta after the eighth line). By putting these markers in the first stanza, Hughes is making a critical decision that

will color the reader's expectations for the remaining lines. Even though the subsequent poems will be highly variable in the way that they follow or avoid the blues and sonnet forms, the fact that Hughes has put these two balls in the air allows him to play these forms off of each other for the rest of the poem. Not all the un-sonnets have an obvious volta like the first one.

The second section, the fourteen-line "Supper Time," is written in couplets. The speaker describes the lack of domestic items of his house, "the kettle is dry" (ln 1), the "bread box" is empty (2), there is "no wood" for a fire (4). The speaker notices the monotonous rhythms of an empty house, footsteps (10), water dripping (5), and heartbeats (6). These physical details, along with the end-stopped lines (all but line 11) and frequent caesurae which slow the pace of the poem, suggest the emotional emptiness and physical isolation of the speaker. The second quatrain contains an explicit connection between the outer and inner state of the speaker. "Look at that water dripping in the sink/ Listen at my heartbeats trying to think" (5-6). The associated image in *Esquire* shows the speaker standing awkwardly, hands in pockets, facing different directions as if he is unsure of what to do. Structurally, it is more sonnet than blues; the turn of the poem occurs after line ten. It continues the sense of sour grapes from the first section, "Stay away if you want to, and see if I care!" (11). The images of the trunk and the attitude of despair, along with the sharp second turn after line 12, are derived from the blues. This second turn demonstrates how Hughes allows external economic reality to intrude on a lyric poem.

A typical poet would end the poem after the couplet at lines 11-12, "If I had a fire I'd make me some tea/ And set down and drink it, myself and me." As closing lines, these seem structurally and semantically ideal for closure (one of the hallmarks of the sonnet). Structurally, the lines have a chiasmic internal coherence (me —> tea/ tea—> me). As the only enjambed

couplet in the poem, it draws attention to itself as significant. Semantically, by echoing the empty kettle from the first line, they neatly bring the poem around to where it started, suggesting the speaker's emotional denial. However, Hughes does not end the poem there but adds another couplet containing a reference to the WPA, (Works Project Administration, a branch of the New Deal Depression-era jobs program), "Lawd! I got to find me a woman for the WPA —/ Cause if I don't they'll cut down my pay." Why the WPA? According to James Smethurst, this is part of a larger system of signifiers that WPA point to: "the marks of the Depression—the WPA, mass unemployment, urban hunger" (*New Red Negro* 155).

The suddenness of the intrusion is set up by the consistency of the previous 12 lines. The first octave is united by its perfectly rhymed couplets (dry/fly, good/wood, sink/think, floor/more). Additionally, Hughes unites octave by moving from the speaker's "looking" ("look" appears 4 times) in the first quatrain, to "listening" ("listen" appears twice) in the second. Allowing this intrusion of everyday life is normal for Hughes, but would be unimaginable for an internally directed poet like Countee Cullen. This "anticlusal" technique is typically associated with jazz:

While other queer poets of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, often adapted the sonnet - a form with strong clausal structures - to respond to black aesthetic and historical concerns-Hughes was primarily drawn to the anticlusal impulses of modern, avant-garde, and jazz poetry, forms which the structural resources of closure are minimal. (Vogel 129)

By integrating it into the sonnet form (while demonstrating a respect and understanding for the sonnet tradition), Hughes proves his attention to form without a heavy-handed display.

Although the complaint about the WPA in this second section by the speaker may be real, it is also colored with the irony of the first section, “Twilight Reverie.” Is the speaker too proud to admit that he is lonely, and so transforms his personal loss onto an economic one? By layering this irony, Hughes is able to make a political statement about the hardships of urban black life without a polemic attitude.

The un-sonnet sequence, indeed the entire book, treats love as a social rather than merely a private problem. Abandoned lovers are exposed to hunger and cold, to diminished wages and status. Details like the dry kettle, the empty breadbox, and the lack of firewood function simultaneously as metaphors for the speaker’s isolation and as factual examples of the hardships he will face living on only one income (Ford, “Do Right to Write Right” 448–49). As a struggling writer, Hughes was aware of the “senseless policies of the bureaucracy” (Chinitz 188). Why would the speaker’s pay be diminished? WPA payments appeared to be structured in terms of the members of the household, and since only one worker per family could be employed by the WPA (to spread opportunity to as many families as possible). For a married worker, the loss of a spouse is not only an emotional hardship but also an economic one. The loss is “unexplainable” either in terms of poetry or in terms of filling out a form.

The reference to the WPA may seem obscure, but by 1933, several Harlem Renaissance writers had found work with the WPA. The Works Progress Administration (WPA), started in 1935 as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, relieved high unemployment caused by the Great Depression. It employed workers not only for public construction projects but also for cultural programs. The cultural wing of the WPA was Federal Project Number One, which was the parent organization for the Federal Arts Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal

Music Project, the Historical Records Survey, and most importantly for this study, the Federal Writer's Project (FWP). These programs brought art to poor and rural parts of the country and preserved much of the folk culture of the time. Additionally, it sustained many white and black artists who would later become famous. There is some disagreement about whether or not Hughes worked for the WPA. The historian Valarie [sic] Moses claims he did (Moses 1278), although she does not cite her source. However, in an article written in the 1960's Hughes denies having been employed by the WPA:

I was never able to enroll in the Federal Writers Project because I had had two small volumes of poems published and a novel, so the government presumed I was well off — not realizing that a writer cannot eat poems, even when handsomely bound by Alfred A. Knopf. All my relatives were registered in the WPA except me, so they looked down on me as if I did not want to work. Disillusioned and having no regular source of income, Federal or otherwise, I ceased looking for work, WPA or otherwise. I have not had a job since. On the Federal Project, Wright and Ellison worked at writing for the government and got paid. But I just wrote. (Hughes, "Harlem and Its Negritude" 12)

Although the WPA is viewed as invaluable today, at the time it was criticized by radicals for censorship, and by conservatives for political "boondoggling" (Moses 1278). The WPA was investigated by the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities in the late thirties and was ended in 1942 by presidential proclamation. Hughes himself would indirectly criticize the WPA when he recalled "the dull relief W.P.A. kind of worried existence" of the mid-thirties

(Rampersad, *Life I* 341). Hughes's poem "Out of Work," published in *Shakespeare in Harlem* and "Madam's Past History" in *One Way Ticket* also mention the WPA:

I couldn't find no job

So I went to de WPA

Couldn't find no job

So I went to de WPA

WPA man told me:

You got to live here a year and a day. (In 7-12 *Collected Poems* 217)

These six-lines exemplify two things. First, the way that Hughes would break up the three-line blues stanza into a form more suitable to written poetry. Second, it demonstrates the blues technique of starkly revealing the arbitrary, bureaucratic rules, "You got to live here a year and a day," that made everyday life a struggle.

The fifteen-line third section, "Bed Time," begins by cataloging all of the disreputable things the speaker could do now that he is a single man. He begins by pointing out a radio which is not "good," and therefore cannot play music, in the same way that his relationship with his beloved is broken.

If this radio was good I'd get KDQ

And see what Count Basie's playing new.

If I had some money I'd stroll down the street

And jive some old broad I might meet.

Or if I wasn't so drowsy I'd look up Joe

And start a skin game with some chumps I know.

Or if it wasn't so late I might take a walk

And find somebody to kid and talk. (ln 1-8)

This octave is written in couplets, organized grammatically. Lines one and three of the first quatrain begin with “If,” (which appears five times) and lines five and seven of the second quatrain begin with “And if.” “And” appears five times in the first eight lines, at the beginning of lines two, four, six, and eight. The repetition of “if” and “and” implies the limitless possibilities open to the speaker, while at the same time suggesting the internal reluctance of the speaker to do any of these things. The irony of the possibilities (we should see that the speaker is fooling himself) is heightened by the repetition of the modal verb “might” in lines four, seven, and ten. Despite its tone, something like a barstool conversation, the poem has remarkable density with a high proportion of significant monosyllabic words; for example, “the” only appears twice.

Although most of the poem is written in couplets, “Bed Time” (like the first section, “Twilight Reverie”) contains a tercet at a crucial point in the poem. In the second half of “Bed Time,” Hughes is setting up the expectation of couplets, but then frustrating that expectation. The move from couplets to a tercet (lines 9-11) signals the turn of the poem from continued emotional denial to realization. In fact, several lines suggest themselves as *voltas*. It could be after line 11, when the realization of the speaker’s denial occurs, or after line 12, with the introduction of a question.

But since I got to get up at day,

I might as well put it on the hay.

I can sleep *so* good with you away!

House is *so* quiet!... Listen at them mice.

Do I see a couple? Or did I count twice?

Dog-gone little mouses! I wish I was you!

A human gets lonesome if there ain't two. (In 9-15, emphasis in original)

The caesurae in lines 12-14 support a sense of the speaker's slow realization as he moves from the highly active world outside the home into the stillness and the quietness of the interior of his house— and by extension, his mind. The monosyllables and shorter line lengths of the tercet in lines 9-11 slow the pace of the speaker's voice. The emphasis on “so” in lines connects the different ideas — showing a shift in awareness from his own thought to his environment.

This section combines two allusions, to the dialect poetry of Robert Burns and the blues of Count Basie, that support Hughes's project to unify high literature, popular culture and folk poetry. In his explication of this poem, James Smethurst argues that the “Basie orchestra can be seen as a sort of totem for Hughes's poetry in the 1940s”:

The appeal of this music, which was popular, modern, urban, and yet retained a well-known continuity with the “folk” past of the blues, as an artistic model for Hughes is obvious. This musical model was simultaneously popular, avant-garde, traditional without being curatorial, serious, and humorous, encouraging the adaptation, alteration, and intermingling of “high” and “folk” culture. (*New Red Negro* 149)

The words “see” and “count” are repeated in lines 2 and 14. In an interesting shift of allusions, line 2 refers to Count Basie's blues, and line 14 refers to Robert Burns's poem in Scots

dialect, “To a Mouse” (1785).⁸ Hughes’s “Do I see a couple? Or did I count twice?” relates to “But Mousie, thou art no thy lane,” (“But little Mouse, you are not alone,” ln 37), and his line “Dog-gone little mouses! I wish I was you!” relates to Burns’s “Still thou are blest, compared wi’ me!” (ln 43). Hughes has put an urban twist on this allusion— his home has “city mice” compared to the “country mouse” that Burns discovers in his field. This entire section is a restatement of the Burns’s theme, that “The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men/ Gang aft agley.”

As a whole, the work avoids racial signifiers. Other than the vernacular diction that indicates an African American speaker, the only direct mention of race is in the last five lines of the fourth sonnet “Daybreak.” This section, positioned in the middle of the sequence, although only thirteen lines, is the most sonnet-like, and follows closely on the sonnet’s self-reflexive structure. The initial octave is two arguments grouped into two quatrains. The first four lines describe the speaker’s exaggerated anger at being awakened by an alarm clock. The speaker personifies the clock, “Gonna hit you in the face and let you fall.” Smethurst notes that the alarm clock in the section “Daybreak” is an allusion to Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) (*New Red Negro* 149). Although the first quatrain is rhymed in couplets, the fifth line is unrhymed. This frustrated expectation suggests the interruption of sleep, while the missing rhyme suggests the missing partner who he wishes were there. The second quatrain describes the loneliness that the clock reminds him of, “You ain’t got to wake up *no body* but me” [emphasis in original]. This attention to the body, the speaker’s “big old down-home frame,” (ln 8) is resolved in the turn after line 8:

⁸ Burns may have been a subject of the cultural conversation of the time, because John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, which took its title from a line Burns’s poem, had been published in 1937.

Say! You know I believe I'll change my name,

Change my color, change my ways,

And be a white man the rest of my days!

I wonder if white folks ever feel bad,

Getting up in the morning lonesome and sad? (ln 91-93)

The speaker's attitude toward race is light-hearted. The fantastical idea to "change my color" is listed casually along with things that are actually changeable. This is an effective and subtle message of racial similarity. Hughes is suggesting that racial differences are just as arbitrary as the names we are given. Unlike earlier African American writing that aspires to a seemingly non-racial appeal, the speaker only ironically wishes he were white to escape his loneliness.

In the fifteen-line fifth section, the speaker deepens his self-deception. Hughes begins by addressing another facet of ordinary life, attending church. By doing so, he increases the relatability of the sequence as a whole. The speaker ironically claims to want the beloved there to tell her that he is happy she is not there, seemingly because she would require him to attend church.

All day Sunday didn't even dress up.

Here by myself, I do as I please.

Don't have to go to church.

Don't have to go nowhere.

I wish I could tell you how much I *don't* care

How far you go, nor how long you stay —

Cause I'm sure enjoying myself today! (ln 1-7)

The desperation of line 7 is amplified by the long enjambed lines 5-6 that follow the first four end-stopped lines. Lines 5-6, however, are enjambed so that the indirect object of line 5 is not revealed until line 6. This again opens up a sense of possibility (what is it he doesn't care about?), which is revealed in line 6 in a negative way: he doesn't *know* where she is or how long she will stay away. Lines 4-9 are in couplets, but at line 10, the volta of the sonnet when the speaker realizes his own loneliness ("But this house is mighty quiet!") is accented by being unrhymed. The irony deepens in the last lines when he claims to "do as I please," but is unable to "get up a poker game" because "the boys is all married! Pshaw!/ Ain't that too bad?"

In the sixth section, "Pay Day" the speaker imagines his economic freedom now that he is not responsible for providing for a dependent spouse:

This whole pay check's just for me.

Don't have to share it a-tall.

Don't have to hear nobody say,

"This week I need it all." (ln 1-4)

Also unusual in this section is fact that the beloved speaks — the Petrarchan ideal beloved being absent and silent. David Schalkwyk, who has analyzed the performance of love in sonnets, notes that "Much recent feminist criticism of the Petrarchan sonnet tradition has remarked on the degree to which the addressee of the sonnet, despite her traditional idealization, bordering at times on idolatry, is in fact reduced to a silent, passive, and... disembodied object" (385). This sequence, however, is anti-Petrarchan. Over the course of the poem, the presence of the woman gradually becomes stronger. James Smethurst notes that the poem is peppered with

“iconic markers of modern urban African American life” (*New Red Negro* 149) including “the installment plan”:

I'm gonna tell the furniture man to come
 And take back all them things we had
 That's been keeping my nose to the grindstone.
 I never did like the installment plan (ln 11-14)

The installment plan, a means of purchasing consumer goods on credit, seems to be a curious thing to put in a poem. It also appears in DuBose Heyward's novella *Porgy* (1925), and it signifies a similar idea: that in trying to appear middle-class by purchasing household appliances (such as the broken radio in “Pay Day”), automobiles, or furniture, poor people put themselves under even more economic pressure and made true economic freedom less likely. However, the illustration for this section de-emphasizes this political reading. It shows the speaker walking home from work (named “Construction Company”), happily holding his paycheck.

The final sonnet resolves the problem of the poem just as it finally names the characters: Jack and Cassie. The poem is shaped in the form of a letter, with a salutation and close, making the resolution sudden and definitive. The speaker has heard from the beloved, “Dear Cassie: Yes, I got your letter,” and he beckons her to return. The *volta* after line 14, “I can't get along with you, I can't get along without—/ So let's just forget what this fuss was about.” (ln 14-15) mentions the “fuss” but never specifically defines what that fuss is. The omission serves to make Jack and Cassie's problems more relatable: readers can supply the lack with their own problems. Another reference to the alarm clock, this time associated with natural rhythms instead of occupational ones (assuming that the speaker had to wake up for work in the earlier section):

“And wake me up gentle when the dawn appears/ Cause that old alarm clock sho hurts my ears” (In 18-19). Cassie’s gentle love is contrasted with the demands of urban working life. The iambic heft of this line contributes to its sense of authentic feeling, which would probably be missing in a sonnet that used conventional Petrarchan tropes. “In the view of most modern readers, the Petrarchan code that shapes the sequences — suffering lover, scornful beloved, oxymoronic passions, obsessive complaint — registers their distance from actual emotional experience” (Marshall 57). By alluding to, but not relying upon, Petrarchan and Shakespearean structural and poetic characteristics, Hughes disrupts our expectations heightens the experience without romanticizing the speaker.

What is the significance of Hughes’s sonnet sequence? A bluesified “un-sonnet” essentially validates the “popular” aspect of popular culture in that it demonstrates the ability of the “people” to evade both the restrictive confines of a “standard” cultural arbiter and the more alluring web of mass commercial culture. By combining disparate elements of American culture, Hughes shows he is not merely a facile “folk poet,” but a prototype for the black modernist poet. According to Steven Tracy, “What we have in Hughes is the New Negro Modernist, heir to the varied strands of Romanticism, Realism, American humor, local color regionalism, and dialect poetry that converged in his work to provide a staff on which Hughes could compose his syncopated musical score” (“Langston Hughes and Afro-American Vernacular Music” 89). Hughes’s political radicalism and his commitment to the black vernacular carried him — not outside this artistic movement — but rather, into the development of a distinctive populist and revolutionary version of modernism, which has been called “popular neomodernism.” Hughes

conceived of this as a combination of “popular African American expressive culture, popular “literary” poetry, and “high” modernism” (Smethurst, *New Red Negro* 144).

What is Jack and Cassie’s life like after her return? Does their relationship continue to suffer under the pressure of poverty and middle-class ambition? Hughes’s sensitivity to form may help to answer these questions. What looks at first like an uneasy fusion of the blues/sonnet hybrid in fact suggests strain in the relationship. At the same time, the subtle and effective of the forms suggests that in the end, the reunited relationship will be successful. Although there are few mentions of race in the poem, the blues/sonnet hybrid non-polemically suggests that Hughes, like the Harlem Renaissance historian George Hutchinson, sees “‘white’ and ‘black’ American culture as intimately intertwined, mutually constitutive” (Hutchinson 3).

Hughes’s experiments with the sonnet sequence have perhaps been influential, and there have been many more sonnet sequences published by African American poets since 1942. Before Hughes published “Seven Moments of Love,” sonnet sequences by African American poets were rare. William Stanley Braithwaite (1878–1962) published a sonnet sequence in *The House of Falling Leaves* (1908). Following Hughes, however, sequences by African American poets have flourished. Claude McKay wrote his unpublished “Cycle” sequence (c. 1943). Brooks closes her book *A Street in Bronzeville* with the sonnet sequence “Gay Chaps at the Bar.” The late twentieth-century has seen a revival of the form. Rita Dove’s *Mother Love* (1995) is the narrative of a mother-daughter relationship cast as the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone; it includes single sonnets, a sonnet sequence, as well as a crown of sonnets, a sequence in which each sonnet’s last line is repeated in the first line of the succeeding sonnet. Marilyn Nelson’s *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005) is also a crown of sonnets. Natasha Trethewey’s Pulitzer Prize-

winning book, *Native Guard* (2006), includes a crown of sonnets. Allison Joseph has published a book-length series of sonnets about her father in her book *My Father's Kites* (2010). Two recent books appear to owe much to Hughes's commitment to popular culture. The subject of A. Van Jordan's sequence, "The Homesteader," from *The Cineaste* (2013), is the career of black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and his struggles to work and live during an eruption of lynching in the post-World War I time period. The latter poem may also be indebted to Claude McKay's poem, "If We Must Die," a militant response to lynching in the "Red Summer" of 1919. Unlike Hughes, however, many of these newer poems follow the sonnet "rules" closely. Given that Hughes is writing an un-sonnet sequence, the reach of his influence has perhaps been limited.

"Seven Moments of Love," however, is a milestone in the fusion of high and low literary forms. Hughes does not thoughtlessly combine the blues and sonnet forms, but leverages the blues's directness and ironic tone to answer the question of how to blend formalism with oral folk tradition:

But how was he to effect a link between his learned standards of formal poetry and songs created by the artist among the masses? This question masquerades as one simply of technique; however, it concerns not only the realities of political power — the social powerlessness of blacks translated into the declassification of their art — but the ability of the individual to attain a sufficiently deep identification with his people and their modes of utterance so that, on an individual initiative, he is able to affect a dignified fusion of learned poetic values with those of the despised masses. (Rampersad, "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*" 146)

Hughes publicly opposed “the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization,” (“The Negro Artist” 27). And as we would expect, Hughes worked in not only recognizably black forms such as the blues, but also forms such as ballads and free verse. Like McKay and Cullen, Hughes worked with the legacy that had been passed down by Paul Laurence Dunbar. McKay and Cullen learned to avoid dialect poems because of the gilded cage that had caught Dunbar, although they continued his attempts at conventional literary forms. But a full and accurate appraisal of Hughes’s body of work would include his work in standard forms.

CHAPTER 4

GWENDOLYN BROOKS: HYBRID FORMALITY

Instead of being restrictive, a formalist reading allows poetry to communicate more than the plain meaning of the words. In Brooks's case, she uses form to resist easy classification of African American poetry. Many of Brooks's formal poems combine elements of both popular and elite discourse by combining the vernacular innovation of Langston Hughes with the attention to formal structure of McKay and Cullen. Hughes was an active mentor to Brooks. Karen Jackson Ford points out that Brooks read Cullen's anthology of African American poets, *Caroling Dusk* (1927), in her local library ("The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks" 354). Like Hughes, Brooks would often merge high and low culture, but whereas Hughes preferred to foreground the low culture, Brooks foregrounded high culture (with low culture in the background).

Some critics of traditional poetics have found formal poems by black poets to be a futile endeavor. For example, even his admirers dismissed the formal poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar. The formal poems of Countee Cullen (who wrote nearly all his poems in rhyme or meter) were enough to place him in the second or third rank of historical poets, according to the critic David Littlejohn. In 1966, Littlejohn wrote this backhanded compliment of Cullen: "As the earlier Negro versemakers were bad nineteenth-century poets, Cullen was a fairly good one" (Littlejohn 55–6). This was deemed to be "a more succinct judgment of Cullen's accomplishments and limitations than anyone else who has assayed his work briefly and without bias" twenty years

later by the critic Alan Shucard (113–4). To these critics, the formal poems of Cullen appear to be exercises that recycle long-standing perspectives that traditionally sideline black writers.

Other critics believe that African American literature, because of its roots in folklore and oral traditions, should never be viewed through a formalist lens. Formalism might overlook or downplay the most important aspects of the literature. According to the critic Norman Harris, formalist analysis of African American literature is excessively narrow because the formalist critique, as a commentary on pattern and sound, does not consider social and contextual elements of the poem. It does not consider the “purpose of literary criticism within the context of the spiritual (aesthetic) needs of black people” (44). However, this study has set out to counter that anxiety with several examples from the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. These examples effectively promoted an African American perspective while they embraced formal structures, including the “Shakespearean” sonnet.

Nevertheless, many black poets have sought to distance themselves from the associations of formalism even as they work within them. As we have seen in earlier chapters, black poets feared they would risk losing much of their expressive voice if they tied themselves to a formalist practice that was associated with European art. The roots of English poetry are strongly associated with its formal features: rhyme schemes, line breaks at appropriately dramatic points, and a commitment to the five-beat iambic meter. In fact, Shakespeare’s sonnets used these features so effectively that scholars gave his name to his favorite variant of the form. Due to this association, there have been fears expressed in the African American community, perhaps best exemplified by the stance of Langston Hughes, who tailored the sonnet to fit African American speech. Langston Hughes’s willingness to compromise the sonnet for the sake of African

American speech is an example of “Shakespeare in Harlem,” in contrast to Cullen’s “Harlem in Shakespeare,” who adjusts African American vernacular to fit into the sonnet’s iambs.

The formal features of prosody, though they are historically associated with European poetry, are in fact designed primarily to record a speaker’s voice. In an era before recording instruments other than the printed page existed, they were like a musical score for spoken word performance. Rhyme is used to emphasize the importance of words at the end of a line; the break operates to establish a pace that can speed up or slow down the material as it moves across lines, while the iambic rhythm with its irregular five beats opposes itself to a four-beat “sing-song” the better to follow the contours of a speaking voice. At least in theory, all of these elements can be adopted by anyone as a means of leaving a record of how a poet wants his or her work to be heard, though of course the listener is always being invited to find meanings that may be more or less implicit in the text. However, a closer and careful examination reveals that black poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks use formal verse techniques even in forms with such considerable lineages as the sonnet sequence to make a strong case for African Americans at a pivotal point where their history and the national history intersect during World War II.

This chapter addresses the objections aimed at black poets who write formal poems such as sonnet sequences. Most such objections stem from the idea that a focus on form will restrict the imaginative power of the poet. For a black poet who is already operating under social restrictions, this seems unbearable. The misapprehension of these objecting critics is understandable, because the term *formalism* itself is problematic. Obviously it is based on the term “form,” which is so difficult to define that it is often defined in the negative as “everything that is not content.” According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, formalism is “the

cultivation of artistic techniques at the expense of subject matter” (Baldick 101). This difficulty has led to the term having disparaging connotations of insignificance or rhetorical fluff. More specifically, as the literary critic and black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers has noted, the word *formalism* itself suggests an insidious hegemony: “formalism, by name, by implication, embodies yet another instance of Anglo-American adventurism whose dress conceals at least exclusive aims, at most, ‘genocidal’ cultural ones, infinitely more subtle than the arms race because it decides, through intellectual and symbolic sovereignty, precisely what categorical imperatives we will obey” (83). But there are ways of understanding formalism beyond “exclusion.” Margaret Levinson’s, positive definition of formalism, as a “demand for scrupulous attention to the formal means that establish the conditions of possibility for experience—textual, aesthetic, and every other kind” (562), opens up the potential for additional meanings, ironies, and priorities.

Because many critics assume that black poets should be more focused on vernacular poetry, the study of Brooks’s formal aspects has been largely ignored. David Caplan asserts that “many studies of ‘traditional’ prosody fail to mention Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, or any other African American masters; more shockingly, some ‘general’ studies of the ballad in English unselfconsciously examine only white poets’ work” (*Questions of Possibility* 107). But the problem is not only one of unequal appreciation for black and white artists. As artists, these poets are using form to make the poem say more than “what it says.” Without a more complete analysis of these works, we cannot acknowledge the complex ways in which form can be used ironically, for example when Brooks questions the vernacular in a strict sonnet (or when McKay questions white privilege). An example of an ironic use of form, pointed out by the Gwendolyn

Brooks scholar Ann Folwell Stanford, are the lines from Brooks's dramatic monologue "Negro Hero," the poem placed first in *A Street in Bronzeville*. According to Stanford, the childlike, repetitious rhythm of these lines underscores the absurd logic of the white speaker: "the lilting quality illustrates how ingrained and traditional such an attitude is, how thoughtlessly, reverberatingly present it is" (Stanford 201):

Indeed, I'd rather be dead;
 Indeed, I'd rather be shot in the head
 Or ridden to waste on the back of a flood
 Than saved by the drop of a black man's blood. (Brooks, *Blacks* 49)

Here, the ballad and its anapestic feet present a narrative that displays ease of transmission, a "natural" expression that gallops forward.

The assumptions that critics have of black poets, that they are (or should be) much more concerned with issues of content rather than issues of form, also extend to the critics' assumption of the limits of the audience for black poetry. They believe that the masses, who may hear a poem at a reading or from a church pulpit, do not have the education nor the interest to appreciate poetic forms. This argument, however, is something of a straw man. Great writers have often written for a diverse audience, from the illiterate to the ruling class. One of the most common ways to do this is to combine traditional forms with new language. Dante wrote sonnets and other forms in Italian instead of Latin. Wordsworth, in his *Observations Prefixed to Lyrical Ballads* (1800), explicitly claimed to write "by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men" (Wordsworth). Unlike Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, who were cautious about mixing genres, Brooks is unafraid to write formal verse in dialect.

Although Brooks comes from an African American tradition, she finds continuity in the Anglo- and African American tradition of democratizing poetry:

Brooks (as much as Frost, Bishop, Bogan, Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell, and Hart Crane before them), “Americanized” traditional English prosody, married it successfully to American speech, expression, locutions, while relishing and employing all its liberating disciplines with legerdemain, indeed, adding baroque syntactical flourishes, never devoid of irony, to the music of meter (as African American clergy had done from the pulpit in Miltonic cadences for two centuries). (Hacker 34)

Each of these poets is taking a political position. They are looking for a wider appeal for poetry. Brooks is making poetry more flexible. The Black Arts poets did not believe in the politically agnostic nature of forms. This is not quite the same, however, as stating that poetic forms are political by their nature. Instead, the views of Black Arts poets should be understood in the context of the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960’s. Black Arts poets such as Don L. Lee (who later became Haki R. Madhubuti) claimed that black poets should reject “white” forms. Even when the Black Arts movement radicalized Brooks, she never completely rejected her previous verse. Instead, in her later free verse she deconstructed and reassembled the traditional forms that influenced her early career. “She broke apart familiar Anglo-American stanzaic forms, but she continued to use the pieces, and in among them she placed the syncopations of Black English” (Burt and Mikics 311).

Brooks and the Vernacular(s) of African American Life

Brooks gently satirizes the hipster's inauthentic use of vernacular in a poem from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), "the soft man." (For the poems in this chapter, I am following the lower-case titles as printed in Gwendolyn Brooks's *Blacks* [1987].) Brooks often put her titles in lower case to suggest how the vernacular can be elevated to the status of a title. This poem begins with a harsh tone and maintains that tone until the turn after line eight. The speaker begins by referring to the subject of the poem, "the soft man," as "Disgusting" and ends the octet with "garbage cans":

Disgusting, isn't it, dealing out the damns
 To every comer? Hits the heart like pain.
 And calling women (Marys) chicks and broads,
 Men hep, and cats, or corny to the jive.
 Being seen Everywhere (keeping Alive),
 Rhumboogie (and the joint is jumpin', Joe),
 Brass Rail, Keyhole, De Lisa, Cabin Inn.
 And all the other garbage cans.

But grin.
 Because there is a clean unanxious place
 To which you creep on Sundays. And you cool
 In lovely sadness.

No one giggles where

You bathe your sweet vulgarity in prayer. (Brooks, *Blacks* 25)

The speaker's attitude toward the jazz venues allow us an opportunity to compare Brooks's use of black music to that of Cullen and Hughes. The octet is full of references to popular and influential jazz clubs, such as the Rhumboogie Café (1942-1945 at 343 East 55th Street, Chicago) which was co-owned by Joe Louis (hence the reference to "Joe" in line six). "De Lisa" (1934-1958 at 5521 S. State Street) was famous enough that its closing was mentioned in *Jet* magazine in 1958. Fletcher Henderson and Red Saunders were among the many famous jazz musicians that played regularly at these venues. Cullen would have disapproved of these as subjects for poetry. Hughes would have endorsed them as sites of African American culture. Brooks strikes a median. She is able to find the poetry of the jazz club, even if it is satiric, and although she refers to nightclubs as "garbage cans," "the soft man" is eventually able to find "a clean unanxious" place by the end of the poem.

The speaker's attitude toward vernacular can be summed up in the paradox of the final line, "sweet vulgarity." "Vulgarity" has two definitions: 1) the strongest meaning is a negative one of coarseness, rudeness, obscenity; but 2) due to its Latin root (from *vulgus*, 'common people') it also has a positive connotation of democracy and authenticity. The "soft man," who lives in fear of being "corny to the jive" (in other words, not cool), is imprisoned by his own hipster code. In this poem, and this phrase in particular, Brooks addresses what I have called the Dunbar paradox: that the use of vernacular in poetry begins as an assertion that ordinariness can be poetic, but concludes as a straitjacket of racist expectations. Smethurst claims that this is primarily an effect of mass-culture appropriation:

Brooks raises the problem of the Dunbarian split between ‘high’ poetry and vernacular poetry where a mass culture construct of African American vernacular language, which is to one degree or another abstracted from the African American community, becomes an imprisoning medium of African American expression.

(New Red Negro 166)

Here the split of the sonnet parallels the split of the racial problem of sinning during the week and being holy on the weekend. The turn after line eight is shift in tone from harsh criticism (“garbage cans”) to gentle irony (“a clean unanxious place”). Brooks communicates the irony of the “Sunday Christian” who lives immorally during the week (in the octet) and goes to church on Sunday (in the concluding sestet). The title is now shown to refer to a man who lacks integrity. He is soft because he cannot maintain the facade of either hipness or piousness. The man is soft because he is trying so diligently, but failing, to be a “hard man” as depicted in the blues stereotype. Like Hughes, who also gently mocked the blues bad man in his poem “Seven Moments of Love,” Brooks suggests the impossibility of this figure in real life. But unlike Hughes, the “the soft man” suggests a place of refuge. Smethurst points out the importance of place in “the soft man,” contrasting the popular ideas of jazz clubs with the “lovely sadness” (line 12) of the sanctuary, “there is a place outside of popular culture... where the African American subject can be his or her authentic self, a church” (*New Red Negro 166*).

How does the semi-sonnet’s prosody amplify what Brooks is trying to say? Brooks combines elements of traditional prosody and elements of free verse in “the soft man.” She modulates the pace of the poem by putting five longer sentences and longer lines (which are read faster) in the octet and four short sentences in the sestet. In addition, three of the lines in the

sestet are extremely short, signaling a change to a more gentle irony than the octet would suggest. But there are also remnants of traditional prosody. Three lines are pure iambic pentameter (2, 3, and 11). These lines provide a contrast to the free-verse lines, suggesting the differences in the state of mind of “The soft man” as he moves from nightclub to church.

A more traditional but still unusual sonnet by Brooks, “The rites for Cousin Vit” is a gently ironic poem that uses sonnet form as an ironic container, much like the casket that cannot contain the spirit of Cousin Vit. The form is a variation of an envelope sonnet, rhyming abba d d c e f g g e f. The three couplets (lines 2 and 3, 6 and 7, 11 and 12) are “enveloped” by the other rhymes. The theme of this poem, that those who are “Too vital” are not overcome by death, is suggested by the way these couplets struggle against their enveloping lines.

Carried her unprotesting out the door.
 Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her,
 That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her,
 The lid's contrition nor the bolts before.
 Oh oh. Too much. Too much. Even now, surmise,
 She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,
 Back to the bars she knew and the repose
 In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes.
 Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge.
 Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss,
 Slops the bad wine across her shantung, talks
 Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks

In parks or alleys, comes haply on the verge

Of happiness, haply hysterics. Is. (*Blacks*, 125)

By closing with a verb – the simplest of verbs in its present tense – she cements in place Vit’s living presence.

The poem is primarily a celebration of Cousin Vit’s unconventional life, although it contains a note of vampiric edge in the line “[e]ven now she does the snake-hips with a hiss” (ln 10). At the beginning of the poem Cousin Vit is “unprotesting” and seemingly compliant, but by the end has achieved a dynamic but ambivalent state of “happiness” and “hysterics.” The form is a modified Italian sonnet rhyming *abbacddcefggef*. Like most sonnets, the meter is primarily iambic pentameter with some substitutions. The poem is apparently free of racial meaning. The primary tension results from the Vit’s affection for earthly pleasure and the church funeral ceremony. The Christian “rites” are implicitly contrasted with Vit’s “rights” as a human.

By truncating the subject of the sentence, the first line, “Carried her unprotesting out the door,” suggests both the suddenness of death and the stark transition of walking out of a church into the sunshine. This effect is reinforced rhythmically by the trochaic substitution in the first foot. The second line, with eleven syllables and perhaps an extra stress, pushes against the boundaries of the line like Vit pushes the boundaries of acceptable behavior. The “stuff and satin aiming to enfold her” is a subtle criticism of the emptiness and materialism of traditional rituals. At the same time, this is an ironic resistance to the seemingly overwhelming power of death. In the fourth line, the lid feels “contrition” because it is responsible for separating Vit from her lively existence.

The fifth line contains four caesurae, signaling a drastic change: breaking free of restrictions, a linguistic inability to comprehend the meaning of Vit's life (?), "Oh oh. Too much. Too much." The smoothness and repeated "s" and "r" sounds of the next sentence, "Even now, surmise/ She rises in the sunshine," contrast strongly with the fragmented sentences of line five. Vit returns "Back to the bars she knew and the repose/ In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes" (ln 7-8). The oddly phrased ideas in line 8 protect the "love-rooms" and "things in people's eyes" from excessive vagueness. Instead they seem stand for concrete human experience. The turn after line 8 signals the change from remembering the past to experiencing the present. Line 9 answers the question, "Why is death unable to tame her?" Because she is "Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge." The fragmented syntax implies the primitive desire to cling to life.

Another sonnet by Brooks, "a lovely love," published in *The Bean Eaters* (1960), is a love poem that is similar to the love poetry out of which the sonnet form first emerged. Unlike most sonnets, however, it is a love poem that expresses the difficulties of an early stage of a relationship in a hostile environment. Despite the difficult surroundings, love persists (although whether it thrives or not remains ambiguous). In the octave, Brooks describes this love in highly aggressive images: "a splintery box" (line 5) and "scraped with a kiss" (line 6). This theme is supported by a contrast between the "strict atmosphere" of the sonnet form and the "Definitionless" relationship (line 14). It is in the sestet that Brooks implicitly contrasts her poem with the sonnet love tradition. This is a love poem that is "Not like that Other one," that is, the traditional Petrarchan sonnet. The critic George Kent refers to this as "the self-validating quality of love without conventional stagings" (G. E. Kent 35). At the same time, Brooks invokes Christian imagery and relates it to this love relationship. Is this a comparison or a contrast?

Brooks devises a hybrid form that promotes the notion that the sonnet can both compare and contrast. The octave is Italian, rhyming abba ddc in envelope quatrains and nearly perfect rhymes. The sestet, however, is in the English form (efefgg), an alternating quatrain with a final couplet. The poem contains a strong turn after line 8, changing from a seamy description of an alleyway relationship to a comparison between the lovers's "birthright" and the Nativity. By synthesizing the two forms into something new, Brooks is invoking the history of the sonnet while making her own claim as a poet (a "maker") who creates her own tradition. By openly violating the sonnet form, she also suggests the disruptive nature of the relationship: it is new and therefore a violation of the status quo, and it is unsanctioned by the people who surround them:

Let it be alleys. Let it be a hall
 Whose janitor javelins epithet and thought
 To cheapen hyacinth darkness that we sought
 And played we found, rot, make the petals fall.
 Let it be stairways, and a splintery box
 Where you have thrown me, scraped me with your kiss,
 Have honed me, have released me after this
 Cavern kindness, smiled away our shocks.
 That is the birthright of our lovely love
 In swaddling clothes. Not like that Other one.
 Not lit by any fondling star above.
 Not found by any wise men, either. Run.

People are coming. They must not catch us here

Definitionless in this strict atmosphere. (Brooks, *Blacks* 363)

Brooks even layers Christian and Petrarchan allusions in order to show the complexity and ambivalence of the relationship. D. H. Melhem points to the similarities of the lovers and the Nativity: “there is no proper place for [the lovers], just as there was no proper place for Mary and Joseph” (Melhem 124). In contrast, Joanne Gabbin finds that there is a difference between the love and the Christian allusion, “In alluding to the Nativity, the poet effectively suggests the lowly beginnings of this love that, unlike the “Other one,” must be concealed” (262). But even “the Other one” had to be concealed in the sense that the Nativity is also a scene of fugitives: the infant Jesus being hidden from the “Massacre of the Innocents” ordered by King Herod. The comparison is not simple, like so many elements of Brooks’s poetry. These comparisons suggest the complex way that this love is simultaneously celebrated and concealed.

Graceful diction elevates the sordid subject, while at the same time more mundane diction ironizes the speaker. Other unusual word combinations include “hyacinth darkness” (the hyacinth is favored for its intense colors and heady fragrance). The Greek myth of Hyacinth is relevant to the theme of the poem. The flowers having grown from the blood of a youth of this name accidentally killed by Apollo, the myth touches on the fear of easily killing the love as well as the violence of the interaction. The janitor is ironically and humorously picked up again in the sestet: the lovers are “Not found by any wise men, either.” This line is also a nod towards vernacular (in phrasing if not in diction).

Brooks achieves a remarkable compactness and efficiency in this work. There are no wasted words (“the” only appears twice) and the most common word is “Not,” which appears

four times (in lines 10, 11, 12, and 13). The repetition of “Not” is followed by a one-word sentence: “Run.” This sentence is given extra resonance by the unusually placed terminal caesura that precedes it, and it functions as a second turn that leads into the couplet.

The attitude of the speaker is one of the most interesting aspects of the poem. This is not a protest poem even though it suggests the poverty of the lover’s situation. It is intensely realistic while at the same time beautiful in its use of language (Baker, “The Achievement” 23). The poem is nearly free from racial signifiers or dialect. By a skillful use of poetic and specific diction, Brooks succeeds in conveying a sense of the problems of poverty without a hint of condescension. Harry Shaw believes the language of the poem redeems the problems of its environment, and like alchemy turns lead into gold, “Their love makes sacred the otherwise negative qualities of the world around them.” The repetition of “Let it be” in line 1 (twice) and again in line 5 suggests the acceptance of the speaker, who “exploits” the “the ghetto environment in which the love must flourish” (156).

The final line of the poem, where one would expect a Shakespearean sonnet to clinch the meaning, Brooks instead opens opportunities for ambiguities: the lovers are “definitionless.” What is the meaning of the last line, “Definitionless in this strict atmosphere”? On the level of content, it means that although limitations are all around us (economic and social), we will surpass those limitations. The sound of this phrase is intriguing: the open vowels and final sibilance of “definitionless” (the final “ess” wants to decrescendo like a narrowing tail) is contrasted with the consonants of “strict atmosphere.” Brooks’s struggle between the rigid expectations of form and the openness of poetic content is visible. She is unafraid to mix forms

and therefore be “definitionless.” D. H. Melhem points out that the word literally means without limits (124). To be definitionless is to contain infinite possibilities.

An even stronger example of ambivalence in Brooks is the fourth poem of the sequence, “the children of the poor” from *Annie Allen* (1949), untitled, but often referred to by its first line, “First Fight. Then Fiddle,” and which may be Brooks’s *ars poetica*. Brooks is one of the few poets who deal with the subject of children, adolescence, and youth. There are biographical explanations for this. Claude McKay married and had a daughter, but his wife returned to Jamaica before the daughter was born, and McKay never saw her. Countee Cullen married twice without having children. Langston Hughes did not marry or have children. Brooks had two children, and so she was more likely have a perspective that involves raising them. In “First fight. Then fiddle,” Brooks gives advice that is presented as if she were speaking to a child without being condescending.

First fight. Then fiddle. Ply the slipping string
 With feathery sorcery; muzzle the note
 With hurting love; the music that they wrote
 Bewitch, bewilder. Qualify to sing
 Threadwise. Devise no salt, no hempen thing
 For the dear instrument to bear. Devote
 The bow to silks and honey. Be remote
 A while from malice and from murdering.
 But first to arms, to armor. Carry hate
 In front of you and harmony behind.

Be deaf to music and to beauty blind.

Win war. Rise bloody, maybe not too late

For having first to civilize a space

Wherein to play your violin with grace. (Brooks, *Blacks* 118)

Like “lovely love,” “First fight” is a half-Italian and half-English hybrid. Its rhyme-scheme is abbaabbacddcee: three “kissing” or envelope quatrains followed by a couplet. This movement, by the way, seems to be a modern sensibility. Whereas a nineteenth-century sonnet may see form as a clarifying mechanism, moving from uncertainty to certainty, Brooks’s more modern sensibility acknowledges the problems of any lens: each way you look at a thing might be new but it might also be biased. Brooks places stabilizing rhymed couplets all through the poem, from octet to sestet, to emphasize the solidity of her advice. It is nearly all in the imperative voice. She wants this set of insights to be heard and to be taken to heart.

The theme of the poem is that life interferes with art, and that the artist must “civilize a space” to work before creativity can flourish. The subject of the conflict of life and art is similar to the “Poetry” sonnets of Arthur Davison Ficke. However, where Ficke’s poem describes the peace of an artistic utopia, Brooks’s poem is dripping with images of violence juxtaposed with the sweetness of music: fight/fiddle, “muzzle the note,” “carry hate” and “harmony,” “Rise bloody.” While the first line seems very sure of itself and the correct order of when to fight and when to fiddle, the critic Clarke Owens notes that as the poem progresses, uncertainty increases, “becoming more and more difficult to discern which does, in fact, come first: the image of murder or the image of music” (240). There are in fact two reversals in the poem. At the end of the octave, in lines 6 through 8, the speaker seems to say the opposite of line one. After the volta

of the poem at line 8, which is an end-stopped line, the speaker reverses again so that the claim is the same as the beginning of the poem.

The meter of the poem is remarkably regular iambic pentameter with a few key substitutions. Two of the lines begin with an alliterated spondee followed by a caesura: “First fight” in line one and “Win war” in line twelve. These are key positions in the poem since the first begins and the second ends the series of quatrains. The lines that follow the caesurae are iambic, giving a sense of the peace that follows the violence required. But there are few wasted, especially in the middle of the poem. The word “the” does not appear after line 7. The most significant repeated word is “first,” which appears in lines 1, 9, and 13.

Brooks balances activist and normative formalism in her sonnets. Like Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, she practiced traditional prosody in surprising ways. Like Langston Hughes, she explored how vernacular can make poetry accessible but also serious. And for most critics, Brooks’s middle way has avoided the problems of the extremes. She “was able to sustain these two often contradictory purposes without creating polemical verse or writing in an art for art’s sake mode” (G. Smith, “Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘Children of the Poor,’ Metaphysical Poetry and the Inconditions of Love” 165). The theme that runs throughout African American sonnets is that the sonnet is often a leveler of race or status. The sonnet form gives shape to the formless emotions and powerless desire that every human being must face, regardless of background.

Before we turn to the sonnet sequence by Brooks counted among a major work of poetry in the twentieth century, “*Gay Chaps at the Bar*,” it will be helpful to compare the differences between the lone sonnet and the sonnet sequence. As mentioned previously, the sonnet sequence, according to the literary historian Michael Spiller, “is the only literary genre (apart from an author’s publication of his or her own letters) to balance the wholeness of each of its parts with the wholeness of the entire collection” (141). When compared to a sonnet by itself, the sonnet sequence has the potential to radically expand the range of the form in two ways. First, the sequence can open up a third space, a middle ground within the form itself which is so often bifurcated into an octave/sestet structure. If there is a limitation to the sonnet by itself, it is that as a form, the sonnet discourages a middle between the beginning and the end: it is a beginning that pivots directly into an ending. John Keats noted the suddenness of the sonnet’s turn in his “*Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke*” (1817), “Who read for me the sonnet swelling loudly/ Up to its climax and then dying proudly” (lines 60-61). But the sequence introduces the potential for a middle. Second, the sequence can strongly resist the urge to fix the meaning of the poem in the final lines. In both the Italian and the English form, the sonnet often urges a poet to clinch the theme of the poem at the end, often leading to an overly didactic tone. Each variant of the sonnet has its own way of doing this. The Italian often divides its content into a problem-focused octave and a resolution-focused sestet. The English concludes with a couplet that resolves or repeats the ideas developed in the first three quatrains. The sonneteer is often driven to make a final statement of theme by the form itself.

Anti-formalists may criticize the sonnet’s tendency to produce an excessively facile argument. Like the modern sit-com or detective drama that is always resolved within the

confines of the one-hour format, the English sonnet features a concluding couplet or resolving sestet that infallibly and neatly resolves the poem. And these critics are correct in terms of the propensity to fix meaning. But what if the poet wanted to avoid this overbearing final statement? A example of this, although one in which the form is used effectively, is Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," which is so certain of its own message of defiance that the poem has been picked up by various groups as a rallying cry (Maxwell, *Complete Poems* xxi).

One solution is to open up the fixed form of the sonnet to the more open form of the sonnet sequence. Indeed, this solution was realized from the beginning of the sonnet's development. As soon as poets were writing sonnets, they began writing sequences, such as Guittone D'Arezzo's thirteenth-century sonnets. Even at the time it was conceived, the sonnet hovered somewhere between high art and popular performance. "[Guittone] helped transform the vernacular poem from something composed for performance by singers to a text of writers and correspondents.... his experimentation with expanded forms reveal his involvement in literature not simply as a vehicle for his formal talents but as a committed redefinition of the relationship of literature to its public" (Clayton-Emmerson 284). The "redefinition" changes the relationship from a one-way street from poet to audience to a greater sense of dialectic between poet and audience. The sonnet sequence opens up spaces for the audience to fill in their own response to the story the poet creates.

Unlike Hughes's "Un-Sonnet Sequence," which is primarily narrative, Brooks's "Gay Chaps at the Bar" appears to be a "lyric sequence" according to the categories expounded by Michael Spiller in his book *The Sonnet Sequence* (1997), "where nothing connects the sonnets beyond the presence of a speaking or meditating /I/" (17). This speaker, however, "tends to

become part of what he or she is speaking about, providing an intricate dance of subject and object about each other” (77). Brooks places her sequence so that it completes her first volume of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945). Each of the twelve poems in the sequence is a variation of a traditional sonnet type (for the sake of convenience, I’ve numbered them): six are combinations of a Shakespearean and Petrarchan rhyme schemes (nos. 2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12), one is Petrarchan (no. 7), one varies the Petrarchan (no. 1), three are Shakespearean (nos. 3, 4, 5), and one varies the Shakespearean (no. 9). By using combinations of the form, Brooks prevents predictable patterns that might seem trite or sentimental. At the same time, the careful crafting of the traditional form elevates the status of her subject, the black servicemen of World War II who were denied equal opportunities to serve in combat.

Gwendolyn Brooks was attracted to the sonnet form, as she was to many traditional forms as a young poet, but she also resisted overly simple conclusions in her individual poems. Because of the more flexible form of the sequence, it is understandable why it holds a prominent place in Brooks’s work. As a volume, *A Street in Bronzeville* describes the everyday lives of seemingly unremarkable people from the perspective of one of their own. According to an analysis of Brooks from the scholar Kate Rushin, “Brook’s explorations of the lives of ‘the folk’ have nothing in common with the condescending, mainstream representations of African American working class life” (20). As we shall see, Brooks was able to write so as to extend the dignity of a subject others might deride.

A full understanding of the relationship between Brooks’s aesthetics and her politics has been lacking. The tension of this relationship defines Brooks’s career, “an anxiety about form, a persistent question about the appropriateness of art in political and social struggle, and,

consequently, a suspicion of elaborate artifice. And yet this anxiety and suspicion continually run up against her equally tenacious confidence in (and inclination toward) a highly wrought and self-conscious style” (Ford, “Satin-Legs Brooks” 348). We can see this explored by Brooks as a problem in one of the sonnets from “Gay Chaps.” Although “Still Do I Keep My Look, My Identity...” is not one of the sonnets that has received much attention, it exemplifies the problem of using crafted artifice to express concrete reality:

Each body has its art, its precious prescribed
 Pose, that even in passion’s droll contortions, waltzes,
 Or push of pain -- or when a grief has stabbed,
 Or hatred hacked -- is its, and nothing else's.
 Each body has its pose. No other stock
 That is irrevocable, perpetual
 And its to keep. In castle or in shack.
 With rags or robes. Through good, nothing, or ill.
 And even in death a body, like no other
 On any hill or plain or crawling cot
 Or gentle for the lilyless hasty pall
 (Having twisted, gagged, and then sweet-ceased to bother),
 Shows the old personal art, the look. Shows what
 It showed at baseball. What it showed in school. (*Blacks* 65)

The poem affirms an enduring identity for its subject, but it does not define this identity as transcendent but in curiously materialistic terms. The speaker ironically finds this identity within

an anonymous casualty of the war. The tension between the concrete diction and the abstract subject, a body that is strangely absent from the poem, intensifies the irony. The “body,” which in Western Christian doctrine is temporary and therefore less important, is affirmed to be the location of the permanent self. As the title suggests, this poem stoically meditates on the physicality of identity: namely, that our bodies are literally and figuratively the embodiment of our unique selves. The speaker of the poem is indeterminate, as is the “body” itself. Racial and gender signifiers are notable for their absence. Although the title contains three first-person pronouns, the “body” of the poem is entirely in the third person. As a whole, the poem moves from a sense of the body’s identity in the activity of adult life to a recovery of innocence in death. In keeping with this intricacy, Brooks interlaces the slant rhymes of the sestet (efgefg), anticipating an unorthodox resolution.

The first quatrain affirms the uniqueness of a body in terms of its physical reaction to dynamic emotions. “Each body has its art, its precious prescribed/ Pose” (lines 1-2) introduces the ironic idea of the body as a construction of artifice. At the same time the “art” is fully owned and unique, the “Pose” is “its, and nothing else’s” (line 4). The alliteration of lines two and three highlights the singularity of the individual, as does the line break after the adjectives that isolates and emphasizes the “Pose.” Although the first line is a nearly regular iambic pentameter, the long second line expands to six beats as passions contort it. The physical verbs impress the concreteness of emotions upon the reader, “when a grief has stabbed,/ Or hatred hacked” (lines 3-4).

The second quatrain reinforces the materiality of the self in terms of time and space. “Each body has its pose” is repeated from the first quatrain, but this body has “[n]o other stock/

That is irrevocable, perpetual/ And its to keep” (lines 5-7). Although these lines deny an eternal soul, they unexpectedly affirm the permanence of the body’s “pose.” The Anglo-Saxon “stock” contrasts strongly with the Latinate “irrevocable, perpetual” and supports the sense of concreteness. The chiasmic pairing of, “[i]n castle or in shack./ With rags or robes,” (lines 7-8) economically suggests the vast variety of ways a body can be clothed or housed. A range of capitalized prepositional phrases, “In castle,” “With rags,” “Through good” further emphasizes the wide scope of human experience.

In the final sestet, the speaker turns from the body in life to the body in death. Brooks preserves the strong volta after line 8, a turn both in content and syntax. The telegraphic sentences at the end of the second quatrain contrast with the long sentence, covering five lines, which begins the sestet. Whereas the short sentences imagine a single body living through a number of changes, the long sentence of the sestet suggests a number of bodies in death. The body “Shows the old personal art, the look,” which gives some agency to the corpse. The adjective “personal” is ironic given the utterly depersonalized body that runs through the poem. The repetition of “show” supports the continuity of the “pose” from life to death, and, the final two sentences (“Shows what/ It showed at baseball. What it showed at school.”) brings it back to life again. Until the last line, the diction of the poem obscures any sense of specific time or place, although it does impart a dignified tone, “droll... waltzes,” “castle or shack,” “lilyless... pall.” But the unexpected “baseball” and “school” at the end evokes nostalgia for childhood.

“Still Do I Keep My Look” exemplifies the contradiction of the African American soldier being a great American without having the respect of the country he or she protects. This idea has been a common trope within African American literature, and the sonnet has long been a

vehicle for this particular paradox: from Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Robert Gould Shaw" to Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*. For Brooks, this paradox matters most not for great historical individuals but for the ordinary black servicemen of World War II who were denied equal opportunities to serve in combat. Even if they did fight, they were often overlooked. This contradiction haunts the poem at the level of its diction: "prescribed" (which has a medical, abstract, Latinate connotation) is rhymed with "stabbed" (which has a criminal, concrete, Anglo-Saxon connotation). The juxtaposition of these two words from unlike registers emphasizes the impossible mix that Brooks finds intolerable.

These sonnets are not limited just to Brooks's sense of how unfairly the black soldiers are regarded. They are also poems of anguish that express what any individual feels when a loved one enters a world of violence from which they may not return. The fourth sonnet in "Gay Chaps at the Bar," entitled "Looking," is different from all the others in the sequence in that it is a response from a civilian to the soldiers. In this sense, it cuts in the opposite direction from the other sections, which are nearly all from the points of view of soldiers. The theme of this poem is that words are not enough. It is true, also, that a gaze or presence is also not enough, but it is better than empty words. The speaker takes the invisible (the act of looking, a presence) and makes it into a "body." The octave is concerned with words and the sestet with the body). The chasm between words and body in the poem is crossed in a single poem. The emphasis on sound and the Anglo-Saxon couplet grabs the eye and ear like the words that try to grab and save the bodies of the soldiers.

You have no word for soldiers to enjoy

The feel of, as an apple, and to chew

With masculine satisfaction. Not “good-by!”
 “Come back!” or “careful!” Look, and let him go.
 “Good-by!” is brutal, and “come back!” the raw
 Insistence of an idle desperation
 Since could he favor he would favor now.
 He will be “careful!” if he has permission.
 Looking is better. At the dissolution
 Grab greatly with the eye, crush in a steel
 Of study---Even that is vain. Expression,
 The touch or look or word, will little avail,
 The brawniest will not beat back the storm
 Nor the heaviest haul your little boy from harm. (Brooks *Blacks*, 67)

Civilians must helplessly watch their loved ones leave for a foreign, dangerous place, and they are caught in an insoluble dilemma: what can one say in this situation, at the point of their leaving? The poem begins with the inability of words, especially words of parting, to properly express one’s feelings. “You have no word for soldiers to enjoy/ The feel of.” Nothing one says will comfort either the soldier or the one being left. The turn of this sonnet is after line eight: “Looking is better.” And the gaze turns into a palpable force, “Grab greatly with the eye, crush in a steel/ Of study,” but “Even that is in vain.” There is no way to protect a loved one going to war, and in a similar way, no way to protect one in life.

This poem shares a thematic concern of “gazing” or “looking” with other sonnets in the sequence, namely the ninth (“God works in a mysterious way”), and the tenth (“love note / I:

surely”). In the former, the eye is conceived as the shifting attention of a world in transition: “many an eye that all its age had drawn its/ Beam from a Book endures the impudence/ Of modern glare.” The beam is the gaze itself and a reference to the Biblical “mote and beam” analogy from Luke. In “love note I”: “Your gaze, surely, ungauzed as I could want,” is an ambivalent reference to both the potential for serious injury and an unbiased or realistic outlook.

An even more significant gaze occurs in the seventh sonnet of “Gay Chaps,” “the white troops had their orders but the Negroes looked like men.” In this case, however, the gaze is not returned, since the poem is about the problem of sorting out soldier’s corpses. Whereas the gaze is “ungauzed” (meaning “undisguised” or “intense”) in “love note I,” it is “hooded” in “white troops.” However, the “type of hooded gaze” the white officers “devised” does not obscure the humanity of the bodies of the black men they gaze upon.

They had supposed their formula was fixed.
 They had obeyed instructions to devise
 A type of cold, a type of hooded gaze.
 But when the Negroes came they were perplexed.
 These Negroes looked like men. Besides, it taxed
 Time and the temper to remember those
 Congenital iniquities that cause
 Disfavor of the darkness. Such as boxed
 Their feelings properly, complete to tags-
 A box for dark men and a box for Other-
 Would often find the contents had been scrambled.

Or even switched. Who really gave two figs?

Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled.

And there was nothing startling in the weather. (*Blacks* 70)

The form of the poem is a virtual commentary on the situation described: the irony of applying the concepts of racial integration and segregation when confronted with death, which recognizes no racial difference. The poem is a variation on the Italian sonnet form, rhyming abbaaccadecded. The poem powerfully turns on the confusion of the white troops. Even those who “boxed/ Their feelings properly... Would often find the contents had been scrambled” (8-11). But “the contents” could refer to feelings or to the corpses;” neither of them could be sorted out easily. The octave describes the problems of life, namely the “[c]ongenital iniquities” (9) of socially-embedded racism. The sestet turns to their appearance in the state of perfect equality, death. In an unexpected reversal of terms, the line “A box for dark men and a box for Other” (10) applies “Other” to the white soldiers, but also to the pointlessness of sorting out the dead, “Who really gave two figs?” (12). D. H. Melhem claims it is a “regular” Italian form (46), but this it could just as easily be classified irregular due to the off-rhymes. Melhem does not explain his reasoning, but he probably labels the rhymes of the octave as abbaabba, which would mean “devise”/“gaze” would rhyme with “those”/“pause.” Typically, in the Italian form the octave is fixed while the sestet is flexible. In the case of the sestet, the rhyme-scheme is heavily disguised by off-rhymes. For instance, the “a” rhymes are “fixed,” “perplexed,” “taxed,” and “boxed.” A reader would only recognize this as an Italian sonnet if he or she knew to look for it. Even if the reader does recognize it, Brooks asks the reader to think about those rhymes. Just like the reader is asked to decide if this is or is not an Italian sonnet, the white soldiers must decide how to

categorize bodies. Thus the reader inhabits the same experience as the white troops. In a subtle repetition of the word “men,” Brooks shows the sudden realization of the white troops: in line five, “These Negroes looked like men,” but by line ten the “Negroes” are referred to as “dark men.” The sonnet ends in anticlimax: “there was nothing startling in the weather.” In a sense this understated line seems out of place in an “impassioned” sonnet (Melhem 64). But in fact the sonnet works as an unfolding of the awareness that black soldiers are dying for the same cause as white soldiers.

The first line of the poem, “They had supposed their formula was fixed,” implicitly announces its intent to play with expectations in both meaning and form. The word “fixed” itself strongly suggests the closed form of the Italian sonnet. In line eleven of the sestet, however, “the contents had been scrambled.” the verb “had” references the first two lines but with a difference: the word “scrambled” opposes the word “fixed.” Additionally, the rhyme scheme of the sestet is “scrambled” or irregular compared to the octave. The poem charts a movement from a kind of false certainty (the beliefs of the white troops being challenged) to a true uncertainty (the realization that these categories are meaningless). Diction moves from the scientific register of “congenital iniquities” (line 7) to the colloquial “Who really gave two figs?” (12). “Congenital” seems out of place until one considers it as a disease that is present from birth, like the ideology of racism itself. The concrete language of the question, “Who really gave two figs?” deflates the abstract “congenital iniquities.”

The subject of “white troops,” the separate burial of white and black soldiers, may be an allusion to a much earlier Italian sonnet, “Robert Gould Shaw,” by Paul Laurence Dunbar

published in 1903.⁹ Robert Gould Shaw was a Civil War colonel who left Harvard College to command the black 54th Massachusetts Regiment. Shaw, along with nearly all of his men, was killed in a suicidal attack on Fort Wagner, near Charleston, in July 1863. The Confederate soldiers intended to insult Shaw by burying him alongside African American men, similar to the “scrambled” contents in Brooks’s poem, but instead he became a national hero. Dunbar’s sonnet, which one would expect to praise the colonel, surprisingly argues that Shaw should have stayed at Harvard instead of fighting, and that his sacrifice was futile, “Since thou and those who with thee died for right/ Have died, the Present teaches, but in vain!” (lines 13-14). Dunbar’s apostrophe to Shaw, however, may be ironic. Dunbar is frustrated by the racism that remained in the culture even after Shaw’s martyrdom, and he projects that frustration onto Shaw himself.

No African American poet embraced the possibilities within prosody as fully as Gwendolyn Brooks as a young woman writing during this critical time in African American history. In a study of modern sonnets, scholar Peter Howarth points out that “Gwendolyn Brooks was the first to make the sonnet *sound* like it was written by an African American poet” (236). Brooks not only managed the sonnet-form but also developed a sonnet sequence, “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” that economically presented black concerns within the context of wartime. At the same time, Brooks easily moved into other types of verse that employed other formal material and even loosened form when she deemed that to be appropriate.

Brooks takes the values of the Harlem Renaissance and, more than a decade after that movement had ended, extends them in various new directions. An examination of Brooks, especially in light of earlier sonnets by poets such as Claude McKay, shows how Brooks makes

⁹ Additionally, Shaw was the subject of an 1893 Italian sonnet by the African American poet Henrietta Cordelia Ray.

use of the opportunities of the sonnet sequence to express a range of perspectives. The first line of the first poem of the “Gay Chaps at the Bar” is “We knew just how to order,” which invokes Claude McKay’s “masculine bravado,” according to Marcellus Blount (235). Indeed, the theme of “white troops” is similar to Claude McKay’s English sonnet “If We Must Die”: that in the face of examples of courage, the white troops must “honor us though dead.” But unlike the explicit message of “If We Must Die,” however, the message in “white troops” is implicit. The sequence is studded with moments which speak with a African American masculine voice and yet undercuts the stereotypes of both race and masculinity. When she does take on these personae, she uses the language of everyday people, which is always a mix of levels of diction: the language of work and the language of home. And she situates that distinctive voice in a complex political position in a development that her forerunners in the Harlem Renaissance had pioneered.

EPILOGUE

DANCING IN CHAINS

This study argues that the sonnet remains a vigorous and flexible form. In the past, the sonnet has been considered an ideal, a “*heile Welt*,” in the words of the poet Rita Dove (xi). As exemplified by Ficke’s pair of sonnets from 1912, this perspective severely reduces the possibilities offered by the form. The sonnet is not merely a goal to aspire to, but a space for cultural conversation, “a mediator of the ever-shifting social relations between the artist and the public” (Howarth 242). The subject “chooses” the form, and the form responds by delineating the subject, and the process is a total dialectic that works back and forth between the thesis of matter and the antithesis of shaping with the end product the synthesis that is a brand new poem. This commingling is the very act of a crossover population in which contraries mingle positively.

While the sonnet is an open space, it also is a defined space. Like a chess knight’s move or an L-shaped room, it is limiting but ripe with the potential to surprise. Three characteristics of the sonnet make it particularly amenable to writers from the Harlem Renaissance. First, its structure of duality and reflexivity is sympathetic to the problem of double consciousness. Second, its tendency to harmoniously mix two unlike things is like Harlem itself: a compressed space where the plebian rubs shoulders with the patrician. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the sonnet can be a Trojan horse, a genteel container that conceals a potentially subversive message. The container and the contained converge, however, when form that deviates from an ideal structure reinforces the subversive message. In this sense, the sonnet *invites* destabilization.

In writing a sonnet, writes the poet Carol E. Miller, “one is constantly bumping up against the Law” (58).

Genres mix in the sonnet in the same way that workers and socialites mixed in Harlem rent parties. Like the sonnet, which is at the center of literary life, Harlem is at the center of urban life. Indeed, the sonnet, like Harlem itself, is not a place one “goes out to” but “goes through”:

In nearly every city in the country the Negro section is a nest of several nests situated somewhere on the borders; it is a section one must “go out to.” In New York it is entirely different. Negro Harlem is situated in the heart of Manhattan and covers one of the most beautiful and healthful sites in the whole city....

Harlem is not a section that one “goes out to,” but a section that one goes through.

(J. W. Johnson, *Black Manhattan* 146)

Harlem Renaissance poets were attracted to the sonnet for the same reason they were attracted to Harlem: it was the center and it was visible.

The Trojan horse aspect of the sonnet is striking for how it can be interpreted in opposite ways. It is admittedly a method of indirection, most useful when the attacking side is not strong enough (or the defending side is too well entrenched) for a direct attack. This was the Black Arts criticism against the use of white forms: it was a sneaky and undignified way to upset the status quo. It can be an explosive appropriation of a form that is associated with revered poets of the dominant culture. Indeed, poets who unthinkingly reject tradition are capitulating to that tradition as much as those who unthinkingly accept it. Many twenty-first century poets are using the sonnet in unexpected ways. The poet Marilyn Nelson has called this “owning the masters”:

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, writes Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*. But why should we dismantle the house? Why toss the baby over the porch railing, with its bassinet full of soapy water? Why don't we instead take possession of, why don't we own, the tradition? Own the masters, all of them.

Wordsworth and Wheatley, Hughes, Auden. As we own the masters and learn to use more and more levels of this language we love, for whose continued evolution we share responsibility, the signifiers become ours. We must not stand like trembling slaves, at the back door of the master's house. We must recognize, as Cornelius Eady does in a poem called "Gratitude," that "I am a brick in a house/that is being built/around your house." (16)

Twenty-first-century black poets are reaping the harvest sown by early African American sonneteers, especially the most complex presentation of the sonnet, the sonnet sequence. Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard* (2006), which won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, centers on a crown of sonnets (in which the last line of one sonnet becomes a variant of the first line of the subsequent sonnet) about one of the first black regiments of the Civil War; *My Father's Kites* (2010) by Allison Joseph contains a long sonnet cycle in iambic pentameter, "What the Eye Beholds," about the process of grieving for her father. A. Van Jordan's long sequence in *The Cineaste* (2013) combines formal elements of screenplays and sonnets.

Joseph's thirty-four sonnets are a mixture of Italian, English, and other variations of the sonnet. The sonnet sequence form also allows Joseph to consider various perspectives on her father's legacy: bitterness and humor, anger and insight. Referring to her receipt of the John Crowe Ransom Prize, he asks "How come they give a little black girl like you / a Jim Crow

Ransom prize?” At the same time, “he unmasked / the whiteness of that place (32). Joseph has said that the form offered a way to write about a painful and intimate subject: “I needed that scaffolding to get through that material. I thought of the sonnet as a life raft for that material. Being as emotional as it was and as close to me as it was, I needed some kind of tool so that I could handle the immediate grief and also the history, the family history” (“Interview” n. pag.). The sonnet as “scaffolding” is indeed one of the more common reasons that poets give for using formal verse: it distracts them from the emotion long enough to let the poem speak for itself. Other contemporary poets echo this idea. According to Marilyn Nelson, in her preface to *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, “[t]he strict form became a kind of insulation, a way of protecting myself from the intense pain of the subject matter, and a way to allow the Muse to determine what the poem would say” (1).

Nelson’s heroic crown of sonnets, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* meets the difficult challenge to write “a poem about lynching for young people,” (1). A heroic crown of sonnets, also known as a sonnet redoublé, is a sequence of interlinked sonnets in which the last one is made up of the fourteen linking lines in order. In the case of *Wreath*, the last sonnet is also an acrostic, spelling “RIP Emmett L. Till.” The commingling of lines in the final poem is a formal analogue of the American ideal of E Pluribus Unum, “one from many,” diversity within unity. Additionally, this rare form reinforces the theme of an interwoven wreath, which is both a memorial and a sign of honor. Each poem is rhymed abbaabbacdecde with occasional off-rhymes. The individual sonnets are rich with a wide range of allusions. The second sonnet’s lines “I remember, like a haunted tree / set off from other trees in the wildwood / by one bare bough,” simultaneously allude to Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “The Haunted Oak” (1900) and Billy Holiday’s song

“Strange Fruit” (1939). The first sonnet, “Rosemary for remembrance,” invokes Ophelia’s speech in Act 4.5 of *Hamlet*, before she was found dead in water just as Emmett Till was. In each sonnet, Nelson carefully attends to the volta. Line eight of the first sonnet is “What should my wreath for Emmett Till denote?” After the turn, the poem considers the symbolic plants, heliotrope for “*Justice*,” mandrake for “*Horror*,” and forget-me-nots, will make up a wreath for Till (1). This focus on form conveys the dignity that the subject demands.

The importance of remembrance and bringing gravity to an overlooked history is a recurring motif of contemporary sonnet sequences. It is nowhere more starkly evident than in the black soldier’s paradox: that the person who is willing to die for his or her country is yet not accepted as a complete human being. In *Native Guard* (2006), former Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey memorializes the Native Guard, an African American Louisiana regiment in the Union Army, in a crown of ten sonnets. The speaker of the poem is unnamed, but identified as a recently freed slave and a member of the Native Guard. Like many contemporary sequences, “Native Guard” explores the subject of memory, “not the lure / of memory – flawed, changeful – that dulls the lash / for the master, sharpens it for the slave” (25). The speaker also considers the intertwined and destiny of white and African American cultural history at a time when the races were sharply segregated. When the speaker takes a journal from a Confederate home, the book is:

near full

with someone else’s words, overlapping now,
crosshatched beneath mine. On every page,
his story intersecting with my own. (26)

The sonnet's flexibility continues to be explored by contemporary poets. A. Van Jordan's book of poems, *The Cineaste* (2013) contains a rhymed sonnet sequence, "The Homesteader," about a film by one of the first African American directors, Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951). Like Hughes remixing the blues into a sonnet sequence, Jordan remixes a screenplay into a sonnet sequence. The sonnets are grouped according to scene headings (or "sluglines"), formal features of a screenplay which tell the reader where and when a scene takes place, such as "FLASHBACK: INT. ATLANTA HOTEL ROOM—1915—DAY" (75) or "INT./EXT.—1919" (83). In the latter poem, a thirteen-year-old factory worker speaker questions the first line of Keats's "Endymion," "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever." Her response, "More a puzzle than 'a joy,' Mr. Keats" (line 13), calls into question the possibility of a "universal" beauty. Jordan has said that a sonnet sequence and a screenplay have similar formal restrictions. Both of them must communicate rich experience in compressed shape:

The sonnet is a very flexible form, and of all the forms I can think of it's probably the one that's extended into the 21st century best. At the same time, there's a certain limitation to it. You don't want to spend the first sestet contextualizing, telling who's speaking. So to get around that, I thought if we used the screenplay format, we could just go there. (qtd. in Falk n. pag.)

In his introduction to *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, William J. Harris condemns the sonnet, conceding only that it was appropriate for its time: "Unlike the Harlem Renaissance poets – such as Claude McKay, who constantly battled the rigid, archaic form of the English sonnet replete with nineteenth-century diction and conventions to express 1920s black American language and life – the Black Arts poet had the flexibility of contemporary forms, forms

committed to orality and polyrhythms” (xxvii). However, this study maintains that groundwork for that flexibility was established earlier, in sonnets written as formal verse in the Harlem Renaissance. Sonnet writing is not an aberration of the African American literary tradition, but an inextricable part of it. In “Renaissance Sonneteers: Their Contributions to the Seventies,” the critic and poet James A. Emanuel warned against “forsaking a single line in our literary heritage” that rises to the standards of usefulness and beauty: “We know that many Black poets have written sonnets, some of which are racial to the core; and it is our critical function to respect and to save their spirit or substance, whenever we can distill the beautiful or the useful” (32). In its formal reflexiveness alone, the sonnet is related to one of the most fundamental characteristics of African American literature. As Henry Louis Gates points out in his study of African American fiction, *The Signifying Monkey*, African American literature is characterized by a self-reflexiveness, a “conscious articulation of language traditions aware of themselves as traditions, complete with a history, patterns of development and revision, and internal patterns of patterning and organizations” (Gates xx–xxi). The sonnet sequence especially allows for multiple voices to converse within a single poem, and its effective use by contemporary American poets confirms its continued usefulness. Most poetry values reflexivity, but the sonnet in particular offers a sharp turn within what Wordsworth called its “scanty plot of ground.” This turn, which is admittedly a limitation, also creates a stage for diverse lyric voices.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H., and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. "Light Verse." *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 2005: 146–148. Print.
- Ahlin, Lena. "The Harlem Renaissance: Depicting the 'New Negro.'" *African American Poets: Volume 1: 1700s-1940s*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New. Vol. 1. Chelsea House Publications, 2009. 147–164. Print. 2 vols.
- Andrews, William L., Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. "Race." *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 274–287. Print.
- Attridge, Derek. *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.
- . "The Language of Poetry: Materiality and Meaning." *Essays in Criticism* 31.3 (1981): 228–245. Print.
- Aviram, Amittai F. *Telling Rhythm: Body and Meaning in Poetry*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994. Print.
- . "The Unreadable Black Body: 'Conventional' Poetic Form in the Harlem Renaissance." *Genders* 7 (1990): 32–46. Print.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. *A Many-Colored Coat of Dreams: The Poetry of Countee Cullen*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1974. Print.

- . *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988. Print.
- . *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. 1st ed. University Of Chicago Press, 1984. Print.
- . *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Print.
- . "The Achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks." *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1989. 21–29. Print.
- Baldick, Chris. "Formalism." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* 2001: 101. Print.
- Baldwin, James. "On Language, Race, and the Black Writer." *The Cross of Redemption*. N.p. Print.
- . "Sermons and Blues." *New York Times Book Review* 29 Mar. 1959: 6. Rpt. in *Hughes : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates & K. A. Appiah. New York: Penguin, 1993. 37–38. Print.
- Bamikunle, Aderemi. "The Harlem Renaissance and White Critical Tradition." *CLA Journal* 29.1 (1985): 33–51. Print.
- Baraka, Imamu Amiri. *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*. Ed. William J. Harris. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000. Print.
- Bayley, John. "Formalist Games and Real Life." *Essays in Criticism* 31.3 (1981): 271–281. Print.
- Bernard, Emily. *Remember Me to Harlem: The Letter of Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, 1925-1964*. New York: Knopf, 2001. Print.

Bloom, Harold. *African American Poets: Volume 1: 1700s-1940s*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Vol. 1.

New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2009. Print. 2 vols.

---, ed. *Langston Hughes: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1989.

Print.

Blount, Marcellus. "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet." *Engendering Men*. Ed.

Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden. New York: Routledge, 1990. 225–238. Print.

Bontemps, Arna. "The Awakening: A Memior." *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered*. Ed.

Arna Bontemps. New York: Dodd, 1972. 1–26. Print.

Braddock, Jeremy. "The Poetics of Conjecture: Countee Cullen's Subversive Exemplarity."

Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters 25.4 (2002):

1250–1271. Print.

Braithwaite, William Stanley. "Some Contemporary Poets of the Negro Race." *The Crisis* 17

(1919): 275–280. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and*

African American Culture 1892–1938, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 401–406. Print.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Blacks*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1987. Print.

---. *Conversations with Gwendolyn Brooks*. Ed. Gloria Wade Gayles. Jackson, MS: University

Press of Mississippi, 2003. Print.

---. "Poets Who Are Negroes." *Phylon* 11 (1950): 312. Print.

Brooks, Gwendolyn, and B. Denise Hawkins. "Conversation." *The Furious Flowering of African*

American Poetry. Ed. Joanne V. Gabbin. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia

Press, 1999. 274–280. Print.

Brooks, Gwendolyn, and George Stavros. "An Interview with Gwendolyn Brooks."

Contemporary Literature 11.1 (1970): 1–20. Print.

Brown, Sterling. "Slim Greer." *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References*. Ed. Stephen E. Henderson. New York: William Morrow, 1973. 136–137. Print.

Brunner, Edward. "Fine Clothes to the Jew." *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*. Ed. David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006. 367–375. Print. Blackwell Companions.

Buell, Lawrence. "Introduction." *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: Selected Poems*. New York: Penguin, 1988. Print.

Burch, Charles Eaton. "Dunbar's Poetry in Literary English." *Southern Workman* 50 (1921): 227–229. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007),. Print.

Burt, Stephen. *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*. Saint Paul: Graywolf, 2009. Print.

Burt, Stephen, and David Mikics. *The Art of the Sonnet*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.

Caplan, David. *Poetic Form: An Introduction*. New York: Longman, 2006. Print.

---. *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.

- Chinitz, David. "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes." *Callaloo* 19.1 (1996): 177–192. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Jan. 2013.
- Clayton-Emmerson, Sandra. *Key Figures in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopedia*. Ed. Richard Kenneth Emmerson. Taylor & Francis, 2006. Print.
- Collier, Eugenia. "I Do Not Marvel, Countee Cullen." *CLA Journal* 11.1 (1967): 73–87. Print.
- Collins, Kathleen. "Seven Arts." Ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* 2004: 1105–6. Print. 2 vols.
- Colum, Mary M. "The New Books of Poetry." *New York Times* 22 May 1942: n. pag. Print.
- Cooper, Wayne F. *Claude McKay: Rebel Sojourner in the Harlem Renaissance*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. Print.
- Copeland, Catherine H. "The Unifying Effect of Coupling in Countee Cullen's 'Yet Do I Marvel.'" *CLA Journal* 18.2 (1974): 258–261. Print.
- Cousins, A. D. "Shakespeare's Sonnets." *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*. Ed. A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 125–144. Print.
- Crosland, T. W. H. *The English Sonnet*. London: Secker, 1917. Print.
- Cullen, Countee, ed. *Caroling Dusk*. New York: Carol-Citadel, 1993. Print.
- . "Foreword." *Caroling Dusk: An Anthology of Verse by Black Poets of the Twenties*. Ed. Countee Cullen. New York: Carol-Citadel, 1993. ix–xiv. Print.
- . *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*. Ed. Gerald Early. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Print.
- . "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed." *The Crisis* 32.4 (1926): 199–200. Print.

- Cummins, James. "Calliope Music: Notes on the Sestina." *After New Formalism*. Ed. Annie Finch. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1999. 135–143. Print.
- Davis, Arthur P. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900 to 1960*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974. Print.
- . "Langston Hughes: Cool Poet." *Langston Hughes: Black Genius: A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Therman B. O'Daniel. Morrow, 1971. 18–38. Print.
- Dodson, Owen. "Review of *Shakespeare in Harlem*." *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates and K. A. Appiah. New York: Penguin, 1993. 27–28. Print.
- Dorsey, David. "Countee Cullen's Use of Greek Mythology." *CLA Journal* 13.1 (1969): 68–77. Print.
- Dove, Rita. *Mother Love: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. Print.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. "Criteria of Negro Art." (1926): . Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 257–260. Print.
- . "Review of *The New Negro*, Edited by Alain Locke." *The Crisis* 31 (1926): 140–141. Rpt. in Wintz, Cary D., ed. *The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996: 142–143. Print.
- . *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Knopf, 1993. Print. Everyman's Library 176.
- . *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. Brent Hayes Edwards. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.

- Dubrow, Heather. *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchanism and Its Counterdiscourses*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995. Print.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "The Poet." *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913. 192. Print.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. *Genders, Races, and Religious Cultures in Modern American Poetry, 1908-1934*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.
- Early, Gerald. "Introduction." *My Soul's High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*. New York: Doubleday, 1991. 3–73. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber and Faber, 1950. Print.
- . *Selected Essays*. 3rd ed. London: Faber and Faber, 1951. Print.
- Eliot, T. S., and Michael North. *T.S. Eliot, The Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2001. Print.
- Emanuel, James A. *Langston Hughes*. New York: Twayne, 1967. Print.
- . "Renaissance Sonneteers." *Black World* 24.11 (1975): 32–45. Print.
- Farrar, John. "The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed." *The Crisis* 31.6 (1926): 278–280. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 190–204. Print.
- Falk, Leah. "This Time, This Place: An Interview with A. Van Jordan." *Fiction Writers Review*. N.p., Sept. 2013. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Ferguson, Blanche E. *Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance*. New York: Dodd, 1966. Print.
- Fetrow, Fred. "Cullen's 'Yet Do I Marvel.'" *The Explicator* 56.2 (1998): 103–105. Print.

- Ficke, Arthur Davison. "Poetry." *Poetry* 1.1 (1912): 1–2. Print.
- Filatova, Lydia. "Langston Hughes: American Writer." *International Literature* 1.1 (1933): 99–107. Print.
- Ford, Karen Jackson. "Do Right to Write Right: Langston Hughes's Aesthetics of Simplicity." *Twentieth Century Literature* 38.4 (1992): 436–456. Print.
- . "The Sonnets of Satin-Legs Brooks." *Contemporary Literature* 48.3 (2007): 345–373. Print.
- Fossett, Judith Jackson. "Lyrics of Lowly Life." *A New Literary History of America*. Ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 2009. 425–429. Print.
- Fuller, John. *The Sonnet*. London: Methuen, 1972. Print.
- Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979. Print.
- Gabbin, Joanne V. "Blooming in the Whirlwind: The Early Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks." *The Furious Flowering of African American Poetry*. Ed. Joanne V. Gabbin. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1999. 252–273. Print.
- . "Poetry." Ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* 1997: 585–592. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1996. Print.
- Goldweber, David E. "Cullen, Keats, and the Privileged Liar." *Papers on Language and Literature* 38.1 (2002): 29–48. Print.

- Griffin, Barbara. "Claude McKay: The Evolution of a Conservative." *CLA Journal* 36.2 (1992): 157–170. Print.
- Gross, Harvey, and Robert McDowell. *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*. 2nd ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. Print.
- Hacker, Marilyn. "'the Rites for Cousin Vit': The Sonnet as a Wild Woman's Blues." *Field* 61 (1999): 30–35. Print.
- Hall, Donald. "Notes on Free Verse and Fashion." *Ohio Review* 28 (1982): 25–30. Print.
- Harris, Norman. "'Who's Zoomin' Who': The New Black Formalism." *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 20.1 (1987): 37–45. Print.
- Hass, Robert et al., eds. *American Poetry: The Twentieth Century, Volume 1: Henry Adams to Dorothy Parker*. Vol. 1. New York: Library of America, 2000. Print. 2 vols. The Library of America 115-116.
- Heinrich, Jürgen. "Primitivism." Ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* 2004: 992–994. Print. 2 vols.
- Henderson, Stephen E. "Blues." Ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F Brogan. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1993: 142–143. Print.
- . "Saturation: A Progress Report on a Theory of Black Poetry." *Black World* 24.8 (1975): 4–17. Print.
- Herron, Carolivia. "Early African American Poetry." *Columbia History of American Poetry* 2010. *Columbia Granger's World of Poetry Online*. Web. 10 May 2010.
- Hobsbaum, Philip. *Metre, Rhythm and Verse Form*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.

- Howarth, Peter. "The Modern Sonnet." *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*. Ed. A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 225–244. Print.
- Howells, William Dean. "Introduction to *Lyrics of Lowly Life*." *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1913. 2-4. Print.
- Hughes, Langston. "Concerning 'Goodbye, Christ.'" *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Writings of Social Protest by Langston Hughes*. Ed. Faith Berry. New York: Citadel Press, 1992. 147–149. Print.
- . *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. New York: Knopf, 1927. Print.
- . *Shakespeare in Harlem*. New York: Knopf, 1942. Print.
- . *The Big Sea*. Reprinted 1963. New York: Hill and Wang, 1940. Print.
- . *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel. New York: Random House, 1995. Print.
- . *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Vol. 2. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001. Print. 16 vols.
- . "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation* 122 (1926): 692–694. Rpt. in Napier, Winston, ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. 27–30. Print.
- . "The Twenties: Harlem and Its Negritude." *African Forum* (1966): 11–20. Rpt. in *The Langston Hughes Review* 4.1 (1985): 29–36. Print.
- Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press-Harvard University Press, 1995. Print.

Jenkins, Lee M. "‘If We Must Die’: Winston Churchill and Claude McKay." *Notes and Queries* 50.3 (2003): 333–337. Print.

Johnson, Helene. "Sonnet to a Negro in Harlem." *Caroling Dusk*. Ed. Countee Cullen. New York: Carol-Citadel, 1993. 217. Print.

Johnson, James Weldon. *Black Manhattan*. New York: Knopf, 1930. Print.

---. "Preface." *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. Ed. James Weldon Johnson. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1922. 9–47. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 426–443. Print.

---. "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist." *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 14 (1928): 769–776. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 343–350. Print.

---. *The Book of American Negro Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, 1931. Print.

Jones, Meta DuEwa. "Listening to What the Ear Demands: Langston Hughes and His Critics." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 25.4 (2002): 1144–1175. Print.

Jones, Sharon Lynette. "The Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance." *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*. Ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins. 1st ed. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 195–206. Print.

Jordan, A. Van. *The Cineaste*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013. Print.

Joseph, Allison. *My Father's Kites: Poems*. Bowling Green, KY: Steel Toe Books, 2010. Print.

- . Unpublished Interview with Alison Joseph by David Leitner. 3 May 2010.
- Kelley, James B. "Bloom on How to Write about Langston Hughes." *Bloom's How to Write about Langston Hughes*. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2009. Web. 3 Nov. 2011.
- Kellner, Bruce. "*Keep A-Inchin" Along': Selected Writings of Carl Van Vechten About Black Art and Letters*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979. Print.
- Kent, George. "Langston Hughes and Afro-American Folk and Cultural Tradition." *Langston Hughes: Black Genius*. Ed. Therman B. O'Daniel. New York: William Morrow, 1971. 183–210. Print.
- Kent, George E. "Aesthetic Values in the Poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks." *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1989. 30–46. Print.
- Komunyakaa, Yusef. "Langston Hughes + Poetry = The Blues." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 25.4 (2002): 1140–1143. Print.
- Larkin, Margaret. "A Poet for the People: A Review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*." *Opportunity* 5.3 (1927): 84–85. Rpt. in *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates & K. A. Appiah. New York: Penguin, 1993. 10–12. Print.
- Lentricchia, Frank, and Thomas McLaughlin, eds. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Levin, Phillis. *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*. New York: Penguin, 2001. Print.
- Levinson, Marjorie. "What Is New Formalism?" *PMLA* 122.2 (2007): 558–569. Print.

- Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was in Vogue*. New York: Knopf, 1981. Print.
- Littlejohn, David. *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes*. New York: Viking Press, 1966. Print.
- Locke, Alain. "Art or Propaganda?" *Harlem* 1 (1928): 12. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 260–61. Print.
- . "Introduction: The New Negro." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Atheneum, 1970. 1–32. Print.
- . "Propaganda--or Poetry?" *Race* 1 (1936): 70–76, 87. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 261–268. Print.
- . "Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk Poet." *Negro: An Anthology*. Ed. Nancy Cunard. London: Wishart and Company, 1934. 88–92. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 119–122. Print.
- Lomax, Michael L. "Countee Cullen: A Key to the Puzzle." *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer. New York: AMS Press, 1987. 213–222. Print.
- Lord, Albert Bates. "Oral Poetry." Ed. T.V.F. Brogan and Lawrence J. Zillman. 23 July 2012. Web.
- MacLeish, Archibald. "Ars Poetica." *Poetry* June 1926: 126–127. Print.
- Marshall, Cynthia. *The Shattering of the Self: Violence, Subjectivity, and the Early Modern Self*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Print.

Martin, Charles D. "Howells, William Dean." Ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman.

Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance 2004: 586–587. Print. 2 vols.

Maxwell, William J. "Introduction: Claude McKay-- Lyric Poetry in the Age of Cataclysm."

Complete Poems. Ed. William J. Maxwell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. xi–xliv. Print.

---. *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism Between the Wars*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. Print.

McGary, Howard. "Alienation and the African American Experience." *African American*

Perspectives and Philosophical Traditions. Ed. John Pittman. Routledge, 1996. 282–296. Print.

McKay, Claude. *A Long Way from Home*. New York: Furman, 1937. Print.

---. Claude McKay to Nancy Cunard, September 18, 1932, from Tangier, Morocco. 18 Sept.

1932. Typed transcription. Rpt. in Wintz, Cary D., ed. *The Critics and the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996:106. Print.

---. *Complete Poems*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Print.

---. "If We Must Die." *Complete Poems*. Ed. William J. Maxwell. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. 177–178. Print.

Melhem, D.H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987. Print.

Meltzer, Milton. *Langston Hughes: A Biography*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968. Print.

- Miller, Carol E. "Toward an Alternative Formalist Tradition-The Other Harlem Renaissance." *After New Formalism*. Ed. Annie Finch. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1999. 48–59. Print.
- Miller, R. Baxter. "Langston Hughes, 1902-1967: A Brief Biography." *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Ed. Steven Tracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 23–62. Print.
- Minot, Walter S. "Millay's 'Ungrafted Tree': The Problem of the Artist as Woman." *The New England Quarterly* 48.2 (1975): 260–269. *CrossRef*. Web. 14 May 2013.
- Mönch, Walter. *Das Sonett: Gestalt Und Geschichte*. Heidelberg: Kerle, 1955. Print.
- Monroe, Harriet. "The Motive of the Magazine." *Poetry* 1.1 (1912): 26–28. Print.
- Moses, Valarie. "Works Progress Administration." Ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* 2004: 1277–1279. Print. 2 vols.
- Nash, William R. "Dialect Poetry." Ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* 1997: 213–216. Print.
- "Negro Wins Prize in Poetry Contest." *New York Times* 2 Dec. 1923: E1. Print.
- Nelson, Cary. *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. Print.
- Nelson, Marilyn. *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. Print.
- . "Owning the Masters." *After New Formalism*. Ed. Annie Finch. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1999. 8–17. Print.
- Newcomb, J. T. "Poetry's Opening Door: Harriet Monroe and American Modernism." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 15.1 (2005): 6–22. Print.

- Oppenheimer, Paul. *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print.
- Orlando, Emily J. “‘Feminine Calibans’ and ‘Dark Madonnas of the Grave’: The Imaging of Black Women in the New Negro Renaissance.” *New Voices on the Harlem Renaissance: Essays on Race, Gender, and Literary Discourse*. Ed. Australia Tarver and Paula C. Barnes. Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006. 59–95. Print.
- Ostrom, Hans. “Modernism and Hughes.” Ed. Hans Ostrom. *Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* 2002: 250–253. Print.
- . “Ph.D.” Ed. Hans Ostrom. *Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* 2002: 301. Print.
- . “Poetics.” Ed. Hans Ostrom. *Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* 2002: 306–308. Print.
- . “Seven Moments of Love.” Ed. Hans Ostrom. *Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* 2002: 350. Print.
- . “The Blues.” Ed. Hans Ostrom. *Langston Hughes Encyclopedia* 2002: 50–53. Print.
- Owens, Clarke W. “Brooks’s ‘First Fight. Then Fiddle.’” *The Explicator* 52.4 (1994): 240–241. Print.
- Parker, John W. “Review: The Growth of a Poet’s Mind.” *The Phylon Quarterly* 19.3 (1958): 339–340. Print.
- Paulin, Tom. “Introduction.” *The Faber Book of Political Verse*. Ed. Tom Paulin. London: Faber and Faber, 1986. 15–52. Print.
- Pequigney, Joseph. *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. Print.

- Perry, Margaret. *A Bio-Bibliography of Countée P. Cullen 1903-1946*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1971. Print.
- Pinckney, Darryl. "The Sweet Singer of Tuckahoe." *The New York Review of Books* 39.5 (1992): 14–18. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. "To Whistler, American." *Poetry* 1.1 (1912): 7. Print.
- Powers, Peter. "'The Singing Man Who Must Be Reckoned With': Private Desire and Public Responsibility in the Poetry of Countée Cullen." *African American Review* 34.4 (2000): 661–678. Print.
- Rampersad, Arnold. "Hughes, Langston." Ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* 1997: 368–370. Print.
- . "Introduction." *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Vol. 2. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001. 1–10. Print. 16 vols.
- . "Introduction." *The New Negro*. Ed. Alain Locke. New York: Simon & Schuster-Touchstone, 1992. ix–xxiii. Print.
- . "Langston Hughes and Approaches to Modernism in the Harlem Renaissance." *The Harlem Renaissance: Revaluations*. Ed. Amritjit Singh, William S. Shiver, and Stanley Brodwin. New York: Garland, 1989. 49–72. Print.
- . "Langston Hughes's *Fine Clothes to the Jew*." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 26 (1986): 144–158. Print.
- . *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume I: 1902-1941: I, Too, Sing America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

- . *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.
- Redding, J. Saunders. "Review of *One Way Ticket*." *The Saturday Review* (1949): Rpt. in *Langston Hughes : Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates & K. A. Appiah. New York: Penguin, 1993. 31. Print.
- Reimherr, Beulah. "Race Consciousness in Countee Cullen's Poetry." *Susquehanna University Studies* 7 (1963): 65–82. Print.
- Richards, I. A. *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgment*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench Trubner, and Company Limited, 1930. Print.
- Roderick, Mary Beth. "When Oscar Micheaux Came to Carbondale, Murphysboro." *The Southern Illinoisian* 27 Feb. 2011. Web. 15 Mar. 2015.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. "The House of Life." *The Penguin Book of the Sonnet: 500 Years of a Classic Tradition in English*. Ed. Phillis Levin. New York: Penguin, 2001. 134–136. Print.
- Rushin, Kate. "'when You Have Forgotten Sunday: The Love Story': Not Just Another Love Poem." *Field* 61 (1999): 18–23. Print.
- Sante, Luc. "The Invention of the Blues." *A New Literary History of America*. Ed. Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors. Cambridge, MA: Belknap-Harvard University Press, 2009. 478–482. Print.
- Schalkwyk, David. "'She Never Told Her Love': Embodiment, Textuality, and Silence in Shakespeare's Sonnets and Plays." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45.4 (1994): 381–407. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Apr. 2013.

- Scott, Alison. "Hoarding the Treasure and Squandering the Truth: Giving and Possessing in Shakespeare's Sonnets to the Young Man." *Studies in Philology* 101.3 (2004): 315–331. Print.
- Scott, Clive. "Sonnet." Ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F Brogan. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 1993: 1167–1170. Print.
- . "The Limits of the Sonnet: Towards a Proper Contemporary Approach." *Revue de littérature comparée* 50 (1976): 237–250. Print.
- Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990. Print.
- Shaw, Harry. *Gwendolyn Brooks*. New York: Twayne, 1980. Print.
- . "Perceptions of Men in the Early Works of Gwendolyn Brooks." *Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940-1960*. Ed. R. Baxter Miller. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1986. 136–159. Print. Tennessee Studies In Literature Volume 30.
- Shucard, Alan Robert. *Countee Cullen*. Boston: Twayne, 1984. Print. Twayne's United States Author's Series.
- Smethurst, James Edward. "'Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat': Langston Hughes, the Left, and the Black Arts Movement." *Callaloo* 25.4 (2002): 1225–1237. JSTOR. Web. 1 Mar. 2013.
- . "Lyric Stars: Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes." *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. George Hutchinson. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 112–125. Rpt. in *African–American Poets: Volume 1: 1700s–*

- 1940s. Ed. Harold Bloom. Vol. 1. 2 vols. Chelsea House Publications, 2009. 185–198. Print.
- . “The Adventures of a Social Poet: Langston Hughes from the Popular Front to Black Power.” *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 49–70. Rpt. in *African–American Poets: Volume 1: 1700s–1940s*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publications, 2009. 49–70. Print.
- . *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930-1946*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.
- Smith, Gary. “Gwendolyn Brooks’s ‘Children of the Poor,’ Metaphysical Poetry and the Inconditions of Love.” *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. University of Illinois Press, 1989. 165–176. Print.
- . “The Black Protest Sonnet.” *American Poetry* 2.1 (1984): 2–12. Print.
- Smith, Hallett. “Sonnets.” *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Harry Levin, and Herschel Baker. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1974. 1745–1748. Print.
- Sperry, Margaret. “Countee P. Cullen, Negro Boy Poet, Tells His Story.” *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* 10 Feb. 1924: 9. Print.
- Spiller, Michael R. G. *The Sonnet Sequence: A Study of Its Strategies*. New York: Twayne, 1997. Print.
- Spillers, Hortense. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. Print.

- Stanford, Ann Folwell. "Dialectics of Desire: War and the Resistive Voice in Gwendolyn Brooks's 'Negro Hero' and 'Gay Chaps at the Bar.'" *African American Review* 26.2 (1992): 197–211. Print.
- Sterner, Lewis G. *The Sonnet in American Literature*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1930. Print.
- Story, Ralph D. "Patronage and the Harlem Renaissance: You Get What You Pay For." *CLA Journal* 32.3 (1989): 284–295. Print.
- Thurston, Michael. "Engaging Aesthetics: American Poetry and Politics, 1925-1950." Dissertation. University of Illinois, 1995. Print.
- . *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001. Print.
- Tolson, Melvin B. "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers." M.A. Thesis. Columbia University, 1940. Print.
- Tracy, Steven C. "Introduction: Hughes in Our Time." *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 3–22. Print.
- . "Langston Hughes and Afro-American Vernacular Music." *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Ed. Steven C. Tracy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. 85–118. Print.
- . *Langston Hughes and the Blues*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Print.
- . "To the Tune of Those Weary Blues: The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes's Blues Poems." *MELUS* 8.3 (1981): 73–98. Print.
- Trethewey, Natasha D. *Native Guard*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print.

- . "Poetry Off the Shelf." Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, Springfield, IL. 2013. Speech and Question and Answer Session.
- Turner, Darwin T. "Introduction." *Color*. New York: Arno, 1969. i–vii. Print.
- . "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Theory of a Black Aesthetic." *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*. Ed. Victor A. Kramer. New York: AMS Press, 1987. 9–30. Print.
- Turner, Frederick. "The Inner Meaning of Poetic Form." *After New Formalism*. Ed. Annie Finch. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1999. 199–203. Print.
- Van Wienen, Mark. *Partisans and Poets: The Political Work of American Poetry in the Great War*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press-Harvard University Press, 1997. Print.
- Vogel, Shane. *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. Print.
- Von Hallberg, Robert. "Politics and Poetry." Ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F Brogan. *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* 23 July 2012: 960–964. Print.
- Wagner, Jean. *Black Poets of the United States: From Paul Laurence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*. Trans. Kenneth Douglas. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973. Print.
- Waldron, Edward W. "The Blues Poetry of Langston Hughes." *Negro American Literature Forum* 5.4 (1971): 140–149. Print.
- "War at Attica: Was There No Other Way?" *Time* 27 Sept. 1971. Web. 2 Sept. 2013.
- Ward, Brian. *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness and Race Relations*. Electronic. London: Routledge, 2003. Print.

- Weeks, L. T. "The Order of Rimes of the English Sonnet." *MLN* 25 (1910): 176–180. Print.
- Wilbur, Richard. "Foreword." *Strong Measures: Contemporary American Poetry in Traditional Forms*. Ed. Philip Dacey and David Jauss. New York: Longman, 1986. xix–xx. Print.
- Wilkins, Ernest H. "The Invention of the Sonnet." *Modern Philology* 13.8 (1915): 463–494. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Jan. 2013.
- Williams, William Carlos. *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1985. Print.
- Williams, Vernon J. "Johnson, Charles Spurgeon." Ed. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman. *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance* 2004: 619–622. Print. 2 vols.
- Wintz, Cary D. *Black Culture and the Harlem Renaissance*. Houston, TX: Rice University Press, 1988. Print.
- Woodson, C. G. "Review of *Shakespeare in Harlem* by Langston Hughes." *The Journal of Negro History* 27.2 (1942): 236–237. Print.
- Wordsworth, William. "Observations Prefixed to Lyrical Ballads." *Classic Writings on Poetry*. Columbia University Press, 2010. Web. 10 May 2010. Columbia Granger's World of Poetry Online.
- Wright, Richard. "Blueprint for Negro Writing." *New Challenge* 2.2 (1937): 53–65. Rpt. in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture 1892–1938*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 268–274. Print.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

David Leitner

davidleitner@gmail.com

University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana

Bachelor of Arts, English and Rhetoric, May 1999

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Master of Arts, English, May 2005

Dissertation Title:

Harlem in Shakespeare and *Shakespeare in Harlem*: the Sonnets of

Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks

Major Professor: Edward Brunner