

ABORIGINAL ISSUES: INDIANISM AND THE MODERNIST
LITERARY FIELD

By

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*For
Monte and Bea*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACP	The Alice Corbin Henderson papers are housed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.
BCP	The Barrett Clark papers are housed at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
CP	<i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i> of Wallace Stevens, Library of America edition
<i>Letters</i>	<i>Letters of Wallace Stevens</i>
GGTL	<i>Green Grow the Lilacs</i>
ID	<i>The Iron Dish</i>
LRPB	The segment of Lynn Riggs papers housed at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, Yale University.
LRPM	The segment of Lynn Riggs papers housed at The Department of Special Collections and University Archives of the McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.
TCN	<i>The Cherokee Night</i>

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INTRODUCTION

INDIANISM

So that when I say that I am not, have never been, nor offered myself as an authority on things Amerindian, I do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in becoming an Indian.

—Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm*

Egged on by the New York and Chicago intelligentsia, the romantic Chippeway bursts into the drawing room and among murmurs of approval declaims his maple sugar song: “Maple sugar / is the only thing/ that satisfied me”. This approval becomes acclimation. The Chippeway has the last word in subtlety, simplicity, and poeticality.

—T.S. Eliot, “War-Paint and Feathers”

In his October 1919 *The Athenaeum* review of *The Path on the Rainbow*, the first anthology to present Native American songs and ceremonies as poetry, T.S. Eliot describes “Indian” poetry as a trendy cultural juggernaut wreaking havoc on public and poetic decorum.¹ He goes on to explain that “the savage” can serve as inspiration for “the artist” but cannot create art himself.² Of course, the “Chippeway,” as Eliot calls them,

¹ T. S. Eliot, “War-paint and Feathers,” *The Athenaeum* 17 (1919): 78. George William Cronyn and Mary Hunter Austin, *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (Boni and Liveright, 1918). Throughout this dissertation, I use the inherently problematic terms American Indian, Native, Native American, and Indigenous to refer collectively to the descendants of those who lived in what is now the United States before European colonization. White modernist practice was to view American Indian tribes indiscriminately as “Indians,” a culturally cohesive community knowable through ethnographic research and tourist experience. I use the term “Indian” to refer to this imagined Indigeneity, while using specific tribal affiliations when analyzing the literatures of Native peoples.

² Throughout the review, Eliot equates the poet and the anthropologist, suggesting that a more academic treatment would strengthen the collection. But the very point of the collection was to reframe, largely by way of bibliographic codes, anthropological material as poetic. Eliot’s concerns about the accuracy of the translations, while well

were not actually bursting into drawing rooms but entering them by way of periodical culture in the aestheticized trappings of little magazines, providing the impetus for the book-length collection under review.³ *Poetry*'s February 1917 "Aboriginal Issue" had brought "primitive" Chippewa songs into the very space that defined the "new" poetry, as it was then called.⁴ Eliot's first U.S. publication had been in the June 1915 issue of that very magazine, which marked the experimental "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as legitimate, a necessary sanction for a then unknown poet writing in an unconventional style.⁵

The play between the physical space of the periodical and that of the drawing room must influence how we read the review's most racially charged sentence: "The Red Man is here: what are we to do with him...?"⁶ While I suspect that Eliot means for

founded, are most significant in their insistence that Indian poetry remain ethnographic, not artistic.

³ "Chippeway" seems a deliberate mistranscription of Chippewa. Getting the name wrong connotes disrespect and shows Eliot even in the review itself inventing his own version of the Indian.

⁴ My first chapter expands on the authorizing capability of *Poetry* and other little magazines.

⁵ Marjorie Perloff has argued for the radically avant garde quality of early Eliot poetry. "Avant Garde Eliot," in *21st-century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 7-44.

⁶ Eliot, "War-paint," 78. The review shows Eliot at his most conservative, dismissing the very possibility of Indian poetry. But a few months earlier, in a rangy letter to Mary Hutchinson, he offered a subtly different take on "savage" art. Lamenting that matters of personal taste had become public orthodoxy, "that people have merely assimilated the personal taste of others without making it personal," Eliot explains that he is "annoyed" by the popularity of Mozart, Bach, Russian ballet, Flaubert, and "savage and Oriental art in general" precisely because he "like[s] most of these things." T. S. Eliot, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1: 1898-1922*, Rev. Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 378. Whether "savage art" is one of the "things" that Eliot personally values is unclear in the letter. What is explicit is that Eliot resents the popularization of these markers of taste

“here” and “we” to interpolate, however winkingly, his reader as a defender of tradition and culture against trendiness and barbarism, the terms also signify more literally. The “here” is the magazine itself, and others like it, where Eliot’s essays and poetry were first printed. The “we” are the citizens of the “here,” those who occupy the space of periodical culture and so are poets, whose work, however radical, should be understood as art. Ethnographic poems abutting his own threaten to cast Eliot’s experimentation as nonsense or savagery while also problematizing his “poeticizing” of anthropological materials, as he will go on to do in *The Waste Land*. The striking thing about this quintessentially modernist poet’s reaction to “the Indian” is how little that response has to do with primitivism as we usually understand it and how nakedly it relates to the literary field and Eliot’s position in it. He identifies and attacks Indianism, an influential school of modernist poetry that was, and continues to be, obscured by a more dominant narrative of primitivism.

Modernists and Indians

This is a study of US American literary modernism during the 1910s, ‘20s, and ‘30s, a field of restricted production in which authors struggle for symbolic capital in order to gain position. I identify “the Indian,” in all the ambiguity that term implies, as a

and culture, which seem in danger of toppling into meaninglessness. Several scholars have connected the letter and the review, including David Chinitz in *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide*. He argues for Eliot’s appreciation of the primitive and suggests that “the primitive as a fad presents not only a nuisance but a positive obstacle to any consideration of primitive cultural constructs as a serious alternative to modern ones.” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 78-79. Edward Marx sees Eliot as projecting and rejecting the figure of the savage because he fears the savage within. *The Idea of a Colony: Cross-culturalism in Modern Poetry* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 134. I read Eliot’s resistance as more pragmatic.

potential source of such symbolic capital. My focus is on three poets—Alice Corbin, Lynn Riggs, and Wallace Stevens—and their efforts to claim or to problematize the claiming of that symbolic capital. I call this modernist relation to “the Indian” *Indianism* and argue that it provides a different lens through which to view US American literary modernism.⁷

Approaching the intersection of modernist and Native American literatures has proven treacherous for modernist scholars, who have been caught up by impulse and ideology, alternately reproducing and condemning modernist primitivism. A brief discussion of two still-influential works from the 1990s gives a snapshot of the situation. Marianna Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (1990) critiques modernist primitivism on ethical grounds —“Our attitudes shape representations of the primitive, those representations shape us and our children”—leaving little room for

⁷ The word “Indianism” has been in use for almost 400 years. It has meant the “customs or cultures of American Indians,” as well as an “allegiance to those cultures” (*OED*). “Indianismo” refers to romantic 19th-century Spanish American and Brazilian writings about “the Indian.” “Pan-Indianism” describes a tendency in the early 20th-century United States to view Native American tribes as interchangeable. It also refers to the efforts of members of different tribes to band together for political expediency in the same period. Joel Pfister, in his study of individuality and American Indians from about 1879 to 1950, uses the term “Indianism” frequently, including in reference to modernist New Mexico in the 1920s. Although he never explicitly defines it, at times his use of “Indianism” is synonymous with primitivism, a white invention of Indigeneity (153, 164, 221-22). At other times it signals the older definitions of having Indian qualities (45, 125) or advocating for Indians (215). *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). I was unaware of Pfister’s application of the term until I had already developed my own. The key difference in our approaches is specificity. I understand Indianism as a distinctly modernist literary movement akin to Imagism or Futurism. It has defined practices—the transfer of ethnographic poems into little magazines, the lyric assumption of a Native American subjectivity justified by a shared geography or experience—and works differently from, and often in opposition to, primitivism.

aesthetic analysis of the resulting works.⁸ In fact, Torgovnick describes aesthetic analysis of primitivism as a form of complicity with it.⁹ Marjorie Perloff's excoriation of *Gone Primitive* in "Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivisms and Postmodern Pieties" (first presented 1992) attacks the naïveté of Torgovnick's approach. But Perloff's method is equally ideological, defending the autonomy of art against those who would apply to it an (admittedly anachronistic) ethical standard.

I wish I could say my summary of Torgovnick's argument was simplified, but the fact is that the colonialist Joseph Conrad and the racist D. H. Lawrence, the voyeuristic Bronislaw Malinowski, and even the cowardly Margaret Mead who, despite her own lesbian leanings, "stop[ped] short of explicitly writing against homophobia" (GP 238)--all these are found wanting according to the severe Puritan yardstick applied to them in *Gone Primitive*.¹⁰

There is much nuanced aesthetic analysis in Perloff's essay, but it tends to lead to the single, evaluative conclusion that ethical critiques are in bad taste. These works establish the two main contemporary camps for considering modernist primitivism: ethical rejection and aesthetic defense. A third position argues for the shared formal characteristics of modernist and "primitive" art. From the 1910s on, this has been a common approach taken with Native American literature, from Mary Austin's 1918 declaration of the "extraordinary likeness" between Indian and Imagist verse to Kenneth

⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff, "Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivisms and Postmodern Pieties," in *Poetry on & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 40.

Lincoln's 2000 exploration of commonalities between Native and modern poetics in *Sing with the Heart of the Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry*.¹¹

Responding to these practices, Robert Dale Parker distinguishes between traditional songs and ceremonies and work intended for the literary marketplace, arguing that white modernists embrace the former to prevent Indians from participating in the latter.¹² His is a variation on the ethical critique, with the benefit of historical specificity. I find Parker's argument compelling. Today's scholars should not replicate modernist appropriative practices by insisting on the modernist features of traditional cultural artifacts. But—and this is the key element of my intervention in this study—neither should we ignore Indianism, which encompassed white appropriative practices, the entry of traditional Native texts into the literary field, and Native writers navigating that field. As I show, current approaches to modernist primitivism obscure all three of these important components of literary history.

Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production provides a framework for analyzing modernist Indianism, reckoning with that movement in all its fraught complexity. Bourdieu's methodology may seem totalizing, but in substituting its strictures for ethical rejection, aesthetic defense, or the mapping of formal correspondences between the "primitive" and the "modern," we gain a clearer vantage on modernism and the place of Native Americans in it. As Indianism affected the whole field of modernist literary

¹¹ Cronyn and Austin, *Path on the Rainbow*, xvi. Kenneth Lincoln, *Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890-1999* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

¹² Robert Dale Parker, *The Invention of Native American Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 83.

production, studying it prompts surprising discoveries.¹³ There is Alice Corbin, whose Indianism deforms her lyric voice, inadvertently contributing to the development of literary collage. There is the Cherokee poet Lynn Riggs, who, working within Indianism to critique it, simultaneously creates a place for himself in the literary field. And there is Wallace Stevens, whose collection of bloody captivity narratives instructs him on how he might respond to the formal and emotional threats of Indian influence and pathos. Each of these narratives in some sense springs from the intersection of traditional Native American songs with modernist print culture, the immediate origin of Indianism.

What was Indianism?

A form of copyright, “-ismism” was distinctly modernist, a declaration of originality that threw elbows to establish position in a crowded field of would-be innovators.¹⁴ Inaugurated by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “Manifesto del futurismo” in 1909, the -ism suffix denotes both a formal practice and a group affiliation. Isms reflect

¹³ I follow Bourdieu’s conclusion that each position in the field affects every other position. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 234

¹⁴ Alfred Kreyborg seems to have coined the term in an introductory note to the December 1918 *Others*, denying that those who publish there are “members of a group, a school...[c]ollectively or separately they eschew everything that resembles ismsim.” *Others* 5.1 (December 1918): 2. Pierre Bourdieu identifies the importance of such groups for “making one’s mark” as artists attempt to unseat and replace the old (avant) guard. “Making one’s mark, initiating a new epoch, means winning recognition, in both senses, of one’s difference from other producers, especially the most consecrated of them; it means, by the same token, creating a new position, ahead of the positions already occupied, in the vanguard. (Hence the importance in this struggle for survival, of all distinctive markers, such as the names of schools or groups—words which make things, distinctive signs which produce existence.” Pierre Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,” in *The Field of Cultural Production*), 60.

chosen communities and self-conscious formal innovation, indicating the modernist shift to an autonomous conception of art in which representation itself is the subject. In the Anglo-American context, Imagism, which quickly split into Amyism and Vorticism, moves away from Marinetti's open idealization of war and destruction in favor of exploding an archetypical "traditional" poem into aesthetic fragments.

Aligning modernist invocations of the Indian with other -isms helps distinguish the Indianist corpus from the traditional Native American songs and ceremonies Indianists so eagerly appropriated.¹⁵ These artifacts represent a distinct folk tradition akin to English ballads or African American spirituals, works not produced by authors seeking position in a literary field. However, it is my assertion that during the first third of the 20th century, Indianism was the only way "the Indian" could enter the literary field.¹⁶ So when a song or ceremony is printed in a little magazine, usually under the name of a "translator" or "interpreter," that context makes it Indianist. The same goes for the work of a writer who would claim a racially indigenous identity, even if that writer's work does not explicitly engage with Indigeneity.¹⁷ The representation in modernist print culture of any aspect of Native American experience is Indianist, although, as I will explore, the work itself may critique and challenge Indianism. While a writer could arguably approach Indian materials from a primitivist stance, as Eliot advocates, Indianism was a

¹⁵ My use of the word "Indianism" also nods to Orientalism. While my approach differs from Said's, it would be unimaginable without his foundational text. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

¹⁶ The Native American Renaissance marks a decisive change.

¹⁷ I follow Robert Dale Parker in defining Native American poetry as poetry written by someone whom Native Americans consider to be Native American, *Changing Is Not Vanishing: A Collection of American Indian Poetry to 1930* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 42.

defined enough movement and position to structure the use and reception of traditional Native American texts.¹⁸

Indianism was a school. But, unlike the Futurists or Imagists, Indianists did not name themselves as such, because their authority sprang from the status of the Indian as anti-ism and anti-modern, as “authentic” and “natural.” The modernist writers I call Indianists were much more likely to call themselves simply Indians, as the poet Mary Austin does in *The American Rhythm*, published by Harcourt in 1923 and revised in 1930. That work has come to typify the movement and thoroughly explores its most fundamental assumption: that through a shared geography with Indians, by performing traditional Indian activities, or by association with Indians, it is possible to become an Indian. My epigraph, perhaps Indianism’s most-quoted sentence, concludes a passage in which Austin argues that by making baskets and singing medicine songs, she “escape[s] the bounds of the ethnologist” and assumes an Indian consciousness. While Austin does not describe her work as a manifesto, she prefaces her “reexpressions” with a theorization of them that strangely echoes Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

To saturate myself in the poem, in the life that produced it and the environment that cradled that life, so that when the point of crystallization is reached, I myself give forth a poem which bears, I hope, a genetic resemblance to the Amerind song that was my point of contact.¹⁹

Eliot’s alchemical reaction is replaced with the biological one of giving birth, the slant rhyme to “give forth.” The resulting poem has a “genetic resemblance” to the original

¹⁸ Or, said another way, studying Indianism shows that primitivism-as-originality is impossible.

¹⁹ Mary Hunter Austin, *The American Rhythm; Studies and Reexpressions of Amerindian Songs*, by Mary Austin (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), 40-41, 38.

song. Austin's language is that of racial mixing, or being impregnated by and with the Indian, of literally and figuratively reproducing the original.²⁰

Austin does not claim formal innovation. Instead, she describes her poetry as partaking of an essentialized Indianness accessible to her by osmosis, that is, through her connection with the land and Indians. Ironically, Indianism relied on this essentialized understanding of race, in which all Indians were assumed to have a stable, knowable nature, while also allowing that this identity could be put on at will by nonnative poets. Still, the symbolic capital of Indianism was limited, requiring those who would claim it to prevent others from doing so. For Austin and her Indianist peers, geography and contact with racial Indians limited the position to those in the Santa Fe and Taos area, where they jealously guarded their status from potential newcomers.²¹ Austin's emphasis on physical closeness and fidelity to the source also highlights the distinction between Indianism and primitivism.

Indianism undermines primitivism by locating aesthetic value in the Indian materials. Indianists claim that the art is in the songs and ceremonies, which subsequent interpreters attempt to harvest rather than transform.²² Eliot argues for the originality of the implicitly white poet, his ability to turn primitive materials into art. Our critical understanding of primitivism follows Eliot, stressing appropriation and reinvention, not

²⁰ Her description makes metaphorical the actual relationship between another prominent Indianist, Mabel Dodge Lujan, and her Pueblo husband, Tony Lujan, and signals the element of conventional cross-cultural romance in Indianism.

²¹ Flannery Burke, "An Artists' Home: Gender and the Santa Fe Culture Center Controversy," *Journal of the Southwest* 46.2 (July 1, 2004): 351–379.

²² There are resonances here with modernist Orientalism. As my aim is to chip away at the monolith of modernist primitivism, I will not belabor that point except to suggest that perhaps primitivism existed as a wishful construct more than an actual practice.

the influence of the aesthetic products of non Anglo-European peoples on white modernist writers.²³ But Eliot's primitivism also identifies a threatening alternative, those "Chicago and New York intellectuals" and the poetry of "the Chippeway" himself. So, while we may understand aspects of Indianist practice as primitivist, there is a fundamental difference in rhetoric, which is not to say that a writer cannot cynically assume an Indianist stance.

The relative modesty of the Indianist posture, where authority stems from affiliation, however bizarrely construed, also genders it in ways worth considering. Indianism is strongly associated with women (Austin, Corbin, Mabel Dodge Lujan) and, secondarily, with gay men (Riggs, Spud Johnson, Witter Bynner). Yvor Winters practices it when he is very young and then moves away from it. Wallace Stevens is most in dialogue with it as he shifts from a feminized stance of reticence to a masculine one of literary majority. If we accept that positions in the literary field are hierarchical, Indianism seems one of the lower and more accessible rungs, perhaps because of its limited claims of originality. It appeals to artists for whom, perhaps because of their own marginalized status, the goal is entry into the literary field, not to those seeking the highest rungs of prestige.

But why does the Indian, whom the dominant culture was still, in the first third of the twentieth century, attempting to wipe out through assimilation via the Dawes Act and forced boarding school reeducation, have any symbolic capital at all in the literary realm? Like primitivism, Indianism derives its value from the modernist fixation on minority,

²³ Simon Gikandi usefully dissects this shared modernist and critical tendency in "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," *Modernism/modernity* 10.3 (2003): 455–480.

which corresponds to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "loser wins," in which artistic position is achieved by rejecting economic or social markers of prestige. The social and political persecution of the Indian endows him with value in the artistic field where, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain, the writer succeeds by "finding his own point of underdevelopment, his own *patois*, his own third world, his own desert."²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari's formulation of metaphorical minority replicates the logic of modernism itself, where successful writers assert their own victimization and lack of power, as in John Crowe Ransom's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate." There Ransom, a white Southerner, identifies himself as part of "a Southern minority whose voice has ceased to make itself heard," a position he ironically goes on to equate with slavery.²⁵ Similarly, Ezra Pound claims to be the victim of Jewish capitalism and economically powerful women, wishing the "small" magazine (which might in itself be considered a form of fetishized minority) could shelter him from both.²⁶

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18. Not surprisingly, the minor writer is also a masculine one. Chana Kronfeld criticizes Deleuze and Guattari for their "slippage between the concepts of the minor and the modernist." She argues that by treating the minor and the modernist as synonymous, critics encourage the "implicit dehistoricization of both the minor and the modernist," which allows the "erasure" of "indigenous" modernisms. "My goal is to show that theories of minor writing will continue to replicate the exclusionary practices of the major if they dismiss those forms of opposition which resist, quite literally, the idiom of the hegemonic culture: the ultimate refusal to obey the linguistic imperative to write in the language of the major modernisms of European culture" (13-14). Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6, 8, 12, 13-14.

²⁵ Lewis P. Simpson, ed., *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, Library of Southern Civilization (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), xxxviii, 21, 23.

²⁶ "They leave a need for intellectual communication unconditioned by considerations as to whether a given idea or a given trend in art will 'git ads' from the leading corset companies. Or, in the milder zones, whether it happens to agree with... Aunt Hannah."

John Guillory's reading of Eliot illuminates the very real utility of self-minorization, describing Eliot's doctrine of impersonality as a "covert" strategy for "penetrating" a seemingly closed literary system: "The 'continual self-sacrifice,' or 'extinction of personality' is a preliminary stance on the way to a more subversive posture of *ironic* modesty, a posture which both contains and expresses quite a violent revisionist impulse." By glorifying the minor in literature—"the Metaphysical and Dryden over Spenser and Milton"—Eliot reshuffles the canon and creates an Eliot-sized space in a crowded literary field. "[H]is emphasis on craft over inspiration, his conception of wit, of poetry as 'objective correlative,'" construct a formal concept of minority that becomes self-contained and ahistorical. Eliot seamlessly unites this formal ideal with his authorial persona—proper, repressed, traditional—to reap the major benefits of his own elevation of minority.²⁷ Ransom, Pound, and Eliot recast their white maleness as minority, but white poets also associated themselves with racial minorities to achieve minority-by-proxy.

I have argued that Indianism, as a position, locates its aesthetic value in the Indian works themselves, not in the poetic transformation of them. It does not follow that Indianists necessarily believe their own rhetoric or that their poetry accurately reflects its

Ezra Pound, "Small Magazines," *The English Journal* 19.9 (Nov. 1930): 690. His desire to create a little magazine that would publish only men, a "male review," casts maleness as minority precisely by associating it with the little magazine. Robert Scholes, *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 11. Hugh Kenner reinscribes Pound's "minority" when he laments Amy Lowell's "appropriation" of Imagism, but describes the influence of the literatures of other cultures on Pound's writing as "hints." Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1971), 178, 219.

²⁷ John Guillory, "The Ideology of Canon-Formation: T. S. Eliot and Cleanth Brooks," *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (September 1983): 176.

source material. In 1919, nineteen-year-old Yvor Winters was diagnosed with tuberculosis, which forced him to leave the University of Chicago for New Mexico. His physical “exile” literally enacts Deleuze and Guattari’s imperative that the writer find the desert within himself. We can see in Winters’s persona and poetry how perfectly he conforms to and exploits their ideal of metaphorical minority. Winters’s correspondence shows him openly desirous of poetic fame,²⁸ which he pursues by actively affiliating with different isms. In a May 1919 letter to Maurice Lesemann, he writes, “I am enclosing some recent verse...a couple of experiments in futurism... In case you may not be sufficiently educated in Italian futurists, etc. I offer a little explanation....”²⁹ In previous letters, Winters described dabbling in a style he terms “arsenic” and attempting parodies of William Carlos Williams.³⁰ Clearly, the young poet viewed schools of poetry as available for appropriation and use, perhaps because the culture of the little magazine had in a sense “deterritorialized” them and allowed them to travel, even to the hinterlands of the American West. Santa Fe was at the time rapidly accumulating symbolic capital in a manner parallel to Winters, soon to assume its role as a “minor” (major) modernist metropole.

²⁸ As in his February 1922 letter to Glenway Wescott: “Please, my dear, meet all the celebrities, as it is the only way to become one yourself. Remember that I am alone in the foothills, with only the desert & Cerrillos between me & the world, & I am trusting you to tide me over on your fame. Fame is worth at least two hundred dollars a year, & God knows I need it.” *The Selected Letters of Yvor Winters* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 2000) 54).

²⁹ Winters, *The Selected Letters of Yvor Winters*, 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4, 6.

Nine months after his foray into futurism, Winters submitted a set of poems to Harriet Monroe, describing them as “new stunts for me.”³¹ It seems likely that these are the poems that appeared in the December 1920 issue of *Poetry*. As “Song for a Small Boy who Herds Goats” makes explicit—“I toss high my short arms / brown as the sun”—the stunt is Indianism, a school favored by the magazine.³² Accompanying this position taking, Winters’s letters express real admiration for Indian culture and poetics as he understands them.

I am interested...in the almost supreme beauty of certain Indian ‘images.’ Thus “The Butterfly’s Song” In the coming heat / of the day / I stood there. People may say it is not “big,” but it is as big as its form—i.e. the specific density is very high—and the thing is wonderfully sensitive. It eats a hole in one’s brain and stays there.³³

Winters poetry would grow more Indianist in the following years, culminating in his second collection, *The Magpie’s Shadow*, published by the small press Musterbook in 1922. The book consists of short lyrics, which Winters claimed were in the style of Indian poetry.³⁴ And “No being,” the full text of which is: “I, bent. Thin nights receding” is clearly indebted to “The Butterfly’s Song”,³⁵ we could even read it as the completion of the earlier poem. Day has turned to night, standing to bending.

³¹ Ibid., 25.

³² Yvor Winters, “Song for a Small Boy who Herds Goats.” *Poetry* 17.3 (Dec. 1920): 144. Other poems in the group are not overtly Indianist, instead borrowing technique as I explore in my discussion of Winters’s second book, *The Magpie’s Shadow* (1922).

³³ *Letters*, 23.

³⁴ Yvor Winters, *The Early Poems of Yvor Winters, 1920-28* ([Denver:] A. Swallow, 1966), 10.

³⁵ Yvor Winters, “No being,” in *Early Poems*, 48.

It is possible to dismiss Winters's understanding of Indian verse and therefore its subsequent influence on him by noting that "The Butterfly's Song" is a Chippewa lyric which had first appeared in print—as "The Song of Butterfly"—in the second volume of France Densmore's collection of *Chippewa Music*, published in 1913 as the 53rd volume of the *Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology*.³⁶ It was renamed and reprinted in *The Path on the Rainbow*, the book reviewed by Eliot in "War-paint and Feathers." Winters's reference to the title as it appears in *The Path on the Rainbow* indicates he encountered the song there, where its editorial framing and bibliographic presentation coded it as Imagist, a characterization Winters reiterates in the above quotation.³⁷ While the shift from "The Song of Butterfly" to "The Butterfly's Song" may seem to simply make the title more idiomatic, it actually signals a fundamental reimagining. The song was written by the warrior Memen'gwa, which translates as "Butterfly." In *The Path on the Rainbow*, the fact that the poem even had an "author" is lost. The poet becomes a subject, the butterfly, all the better to make the song more imagistic and appropriable.

We could interpret Winters as a primitivist who misunderstands and reinvents the culture he seeks to associate himself with and appropriate. We could argue that the poems in *The Path on the Rainbow* aren't "really" Indian poetry but a print culture fantasy of it (never mind that tribal poetries are quite distinct), and that Winters's subsequent effort to formally emulate these poems is based on bad information and even bad faith. But that argument rests on dangerous, if unstated, assumptions, most notably that the only way to represent Native American poetry in print is ethnographically, surrounded by explanatory

³⁶ Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music - II*, Bulletin 53 of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1913), 179.

³⁷ I explore the bibliographic codes of that volume in my first chapter.

notes. Emphasizing the untranslatability of Indian poems elides a basic truth of print culture: all poems are altered by their mechanical reproduction, where they are necessarily de- and re-contextualized. The representation of Memen'gaw's poem could have been better, but with all that is lost or mistranscribed, some of his song remains, and dismissing that fact consigns Native Poetry to a permanently ethnographic status. This is not to defend Winters's practice but to note that it is a great deal more complicated than primitivism often allows.

There are intriguing parallels between Winters and Witter Bynner, a one-time editor of *McClure's* magazine and a resolved anti-modernist. Now best known as a translator of Chinese poetry,³⁸ in the teens Bynner caused a stir with an elaborate literary hoax in which he and two collaborators published not simply under pseudonyms, but pseudo-identities, "types" meant to parody the style and perceived "identity politics" of *Others*, which dedicated a whole issue to the Spectras in January 1917.³⁹ Like Winters, Bynner took on a style extravagantly (or apparently) not his own. While Winters was attempting to join the literary elite and Bynner was ostensibly lampooning them, both poets began by experimenting with modes of writing they associated (however dismissively) with cultural centrality—futurism and Othersism—both then shifted from appropriating the avant garde establishment to the Native American, suggesting they saw this assumption of minority status as a path to cultural recognition.

³⁸ Indianism often brushes up against modernist interest in the Orient.

³⁹ All information about the Spectras comes from Suzanne Churchill's "The Lying Game: *Others* and the Great Spectra Hoax of 1917" *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 15.1 (2005): 23–41.

Bynner published *Indian Earth*, dedicated to D.H. Lawrence, with Knopf in 1929, though the poems that compose the collection began appearing in 1923 both in little magazines (*The Dial*, *Poetry*) and in mass-circulation journals (*The Ladies' Home Journal*).⁴⁰ Unlike Winters, Bynner does not borrow the stylistic features of “Indian” poetry. Instead, he takes the Pueblo people and their rituals as the subject of his often-narrative verse. The final section of the book, “Pueblo Dances” begins by depicting, in rhymed couplets, a Pueblo ritual: “A sudden savage sound broke through the door. / There fell a thud of dancing on the floor.”⁴¹ But several poems later, in “Eagle Dance,” the narration shifts from the third person to the first, and the rhyme drops out:

They paint us in our houses
To be pure in the plaza:
They know that we eat, sleep, laugh and are men;
But they paint us in our houses,
To be eagles.⁴²

Bynner writes from the “Indian” perspective as an Indian, with an austere and direct style meant to signify as Indigenous. Both Winters and Bynner are literary aspirants who at once resent and aspire to modernist insider/outsider status as embodied by *Others* magazine.⁴³ As their histories show, both are remarkably comfortable with modernist code-switching, shifting from one mode of experimentation to another. This strategy for a time involves Native American culture and poetics, which they use to penetrate the avant garde in a manner akin to Eliot’s “strategic” minority.

⁴⁰ Witter Bynner, *Indian Earth* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1929).

⁴¹ Bynner, “A Dance for Christ,” in *Indian Earth*, 62.

⁴² Bynner, “Eagle Dance,” in *Indian Earth*, 72.

⁴³ Winters even turns the magazine title unto an adjective, “Othersy.” *The Selected Letters*, 40.

Native American writers themselves fared less well in gaining cultural recognition and acceptance. To return again to *The Path on the Rainbow*, it is notable that the book included only one Native American poet writing in her own name, E. Pauline Johnson, a member of the Mohawk tribe. Her very presence in the anthology is destabilizing, as her inclusion in the “Interpretations” section reveals the assumptions of that category: that it will offer a “creative” white take on Native American literature. Johnson could not, of course, appear in the “Translations” section because she wrote in English. As a contemporary Native American writer, she is without place in a book dedicated to Native American poetry. To make matters worse, Johnson was singled out for special ridicule in *The Dial* by Louis Untermeyer, who described her poems as “jingles...neither original nor aboriginal” in his unfavorable review.⁴⁴ More surprising and problematic is the fact that the book’s editor, George Cronyn (another poet seeking position through Indianism), placed inordinate blame for the collection’s poor reception on Johnson’s two poems, which he insisted he included only because of publisher pressure.

It must be confessed that it was against the judgment of the editor and only in deference to the wishes of the publishers, who argued the great popularity of the poet’s works in Canada and elsewhere that inclusion was made. The poems in question show how far the Indian poet strays from her own primitive tribal songs when attempting the White Man’s mode.⁴⁵

Here is the modernist minority paradigm in miniature: a female Native American poet who has the misfortune of also being “popular,” foisted upon the serious male editor who would associate Indigeneity (and himself) with the modernist avant garde. Indianism is revealed as a stance of minority that is threatened by the presence of racial Indians.

⁴⁴ Louis Untermeyer, “The Indian as Poet,” *The Dial* 66.785 (8 Mar. 1919): 241.

⁴⁵ George Cronyn, “Letter,” *The Dial* 67.797 (23 Aug. 1919): 162.

The poems chosen to represent Johnson, “The Lost Lagoon” and “The Song my Paddle Sings,” are not her finest. Taken on their own, lines such as “I hear the call of the singing firs / In the hush of the golden moon” do seem clichéd. But, as Kate Flint has noted, Johnson’s persona revolved around the contrast between a sentimental, “white” aesthetic juxtaposed against a more challenging and political “Native” perspective.⁴⁶ Cronyn selects only the sentimental, whitewashing the fact that the majority of her writing is political, arguing for Native sovereignty and challenging white cultural hegemony. Only poems that confirm the aesthetic superiority of the “White Man’s mode” find their way into the collection. The racism embedded in a work that describes itself as devoted to the literary achievement of Native Americans reveals the stakes of the struggle for the authority of the minor by way of the Indianism. In the publication and reception of *The Path on the Rainbow*, white authors who desire the symbolic capital of “the Indian” transparently resent the actual Indian in their midst and attempt to exclude her from their defense of the cultural value of Native American poetry.

Johnson is denied the modernist accolades of more traditional (and appropriable) Indian verse, “othered” from the otherness of modernist minority. In the cases of Winters and Bynner especially, we can see how “the Indian” is one of a series of position-takings in which the writers engage. Since Bynner becomes an Indianist after instigating the Spectra hoax—which was essentially designed to expose the literary field as something like the reductive version of Bourdieu’s theory of that field (one of competition and position, not pure art)—he perhaps considered his own turn to the Indian an escape from the reductionist logic so often ascribed to Bourdieu. But it was Indianism that ultimately

⁴⁶ Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2009).

garnered him a secure position in the field, suggesting that he won the game of loser wins by forgetting he was playing it.

The Significance of Indianism

Cary Nelson has made a powerful case for the recovery projects that periodical studies enable. In returning to the magazines of modernism themselves, he discovers a vein of radical and socially engaged literature that he argues was suppressed by the New Critical narrative of the movement.⁴⁷ George Bornstein, utilizing the theories of Jerome McGann and D.F. McKenzie among others, has similarly argued for the recovery of the “bibliographic codes” and “sociology of texts” that accompany their historical instantiations.⁴⁸ These projects share a belief in the redemptive potential of repressed histories, suggesting that a return to the source will necessarily complicate modernism in ethically and aesthetically productive ways.

My exploration of Indianism participates in and revises this critical tradition. On one hand, my recovery is decidedly non-redemptive. Like socialist poetry, Indianism threatens a narrative of modernism as autonomous aesthetic innovation, not by demonstrating there were always politically engaged oppositional voices but in illuminating aesthetic modernism as appropriative. My first chapter, “Historicizing Collage: Alice Corbin and the Poetics of Appropriation” offers an alternative history of collage, locating its origin not in the formal breakthroughs of Picasso or Pound but in the

⁴⁷ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁴⁸ George Bornstein, *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

widespread efforts of writers and artists to incorporate ethnographic materials into their work. Corbin's poetry of the mid-teens appropriates Chippewa ("Indian Songs") and African American ("Echoes of Childhood") texts, requiring a formal expansion, or breaking apart, of the lyric "I." While collage is typically understood as a heroic sublimation of dehumanizing modernity, Corbin's practice suggests that it can also be viewed as an expression of colonial ideologies.

But Corbin's work, especially "Indian Songs," reveals that Indianism also accounts for how certain strands of ethnographically represented Native American aesthetics entered the literary mainstream through the Indianists, a recovery of an elided tradition. However imperfect, or in modernist terms, impure, the process, Native American works were influencing American poetry well before such influence has been acknowledged to have occurred. Wallace Stevens's correspondence with Corbin and his particular interest in "Indian Songs" begins to indicate the widespread impact of Indianism, which cannot be relegated to a fringe community. While its effects are most obvious in the practice of New Mexican poets, Indianism also illuminates the work of canonical modernists never associated with Indian poetry.⁴⁹ My final chapter, "Wallace Stevens and the "Damned Indians": The Order of Assimilation," presents a collection of Stevens's Indian poems and suggests that in them he develops a colonizing persona out of fear of formal indigenous influence. This persona culminates in Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Reaching the end of that colonizing logic, Stevens attempts to

⁴⁹ In presenting and analyzing the Stevens/Corbin correspondence, Alan Filreis notes, "it is hardly surprising that Stevens would remain indifferent to her attempts at reproducing American Indian chants and prayers as an aboriginal imagist verse, this not being his sort of experiment." "Voicing the Desert Silence: Stevens' Letters to Alice Corbin Henderson," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12.1 (1988): 3–20.

assimilate the Indian again, through taking on his pathos, a strategy he learned from his collection of Early American captivity narratives.

The centrality of the Indian to Stevens establishes Indianism as a missing piece in historical understandings of canonical modernism. Poems that seem impenetrable or nonsensical suddenly signify when viewed through an Indianist lens. That lens also allows us to focus on Native American writers in the modernist field. Indianism shows these traditions meeting in fraught and conflicted ways. By distancing ourselves from the paradigms of primitivism, we can more fruitfully analyze the work of Lynn Riggs, who in 1923 mortgaged his Cherokee allotment in Oklahoma to move to Santa Fe, the capital of modernist Indianism. There, he both affiliated with and critiqued this dominant mode, producing a challenging body of poetry and plays that must be understood in their relation to Indianism. My second chapter, “A ‘Curiously Irreconcilable Inheritance’: Lynn Riggs and the Possibilities of Queer Allusion,” explores a contemporary alternative to Corbin’s appropriation, not in a return to an impossible authenticity, but through a radical application of allusion.

Allusion is a reference to, not an incorporation of, another work. It depends on the reader for completion, which has caused it to be understood as intrinsically elitist, “a sort of land mine with which a poet peppers his text, keeping trespassers out.”⁵⁰ I examine the other side of its inherent partiality, which connotes openness and relation to reader and to source text, rather than authority over either. By the 1920s, allusion was seen to be passé,

⁵⁰ Kevin J. Dettmar, “The Illusion of Modernist Allusion and the Politics of Postmodern Plagiarism,” in *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 101.

even regressive, the stodgy Victorian to quotation's seeming modernity.⁵¹ Riggs embraced this deliberately anachronistic practice to both conform to and parody the Indianist practices that were the norm in Santa Fe, as is evident in *The Turquoise Trail*, a regionalist anthology of New Mexican poetry that was edited by Alice Corbin and published by Houghton Mifflin in 1928. Analyzing the book—its bibliographic codes, its editorial framing, its contributors, and the works included—provides a surprisingly comprehensive overview of Indianism and New Mexican regionalism. Riggs's poems fit perfectly. Two even have "Santa Fe" in the title. That his poems would follow the dominant style of the anthology that contains them seems almost too obvious to note, but Riggs's affinities are eerily exact and, when read closely, reveal a coded critique of the collection's colonialism. This critique is most overt in his "Santo Domingo Corn Dance," which was not included in *The Turquoise Trail*, perhaps because Marsden Hartley had already submitted a poem about the dance. Riggs's poem seems to confirm him as an Indianist but is actually a parody of that movement. In 1930, Riggs published his first and only collection of poetry, *The Iron Dish*, with Doubleday Duran. From its cover's Grecian urn to its heavy ivory pages, the book declares itself an art object. But its poems work against the ideology of the self-contained artifact, utilizing modernist difficulty to demand a specific reading practice that rejects modernist aestheticization of "the Indian."

While Riggs's poetry works by allusion, his plays, meant for a popular rather than a coterie audience, offer a more direct theorization of intertextuality as cultural contact. My third chapter, "Adaptation in Indian Territory," argues that *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), a play set in Indian Territory yet containing no Indian characters, is a sustained

⁵¹ Elizabeth Gregory, *Quotation and Modern American Poetry: Imaginary Gardens with Real Toads* (Houston, Tex.: Rice University Press, 1996), 3.

examination of racial adaptation or assimilation. Defining itself as an adaptation of the “traditional” folk songs that it incorporates, the play establishes an analogy between racial and literary adaptation. Against the myth of the vanishing Indian, Riggs suggests that the source text haunts the adaptation that attempts to exploit and control it. The play’s later adaptation into *Oklahoma!* provides the ultimate test for Riggs’s radical theory.

Conceived at the same time as *Green Grow the Lilacs* and made up of the fragments of a failed autobiographical novel, *The Cherokee Night* (1932) is an adaptation. But the principle of adaptation thematized in *Green Grow the Lilacs* changes how we must read the supposed racial assimilation and disappearance of this play’s Cherokee characters. Just as the literal whitewashing scene in *Green Grow the Lilacs* must alter how we understand its racial politics, *The Cherokee Night* depicts a search for blood evidence that ironizes its own invocation of blood quantum to define Cherokee identity.

Reading Indianism

At the 2012 Modernist Studies Conference in Las Vegas, there was a panel on “American Indians and Modernism” featuring P. Jane Hafen and Patrice Hollrah. The papers, which focused on Zitkala-Ša and N. Scott Momaday, presented these writers in opposition to modernist culture and criticism. Hollrah argued that elements identified as “modernist” in Momaday’s work should actually be attributed to Pueblo traditions, and Hafen discussed Zitkala-Ša’s political engagement for Native American citizenship, rather than modernist literary culture, as the appropriate context for her work. Hollrah invoked “the three W’s”—Craig Womack, Robert Warrior, and Jace Weaver, authors of

the influential *American Indian Literary Nationalism*—to ground her discussion of Momaday.⁵² While that book is composed of individually authored essays that vary greatly in approach, it has been taken as a manifesto of literary separatism, or “intellectual sovereignty,” which argues that the work of Native authors should be understood through Native traditions by Native scholars.

Momaday is a particularly apposite figure to approach from this vantage, as his work from the 1960s has often been held up as the origin of Native American modernism and at times even Native American literature.⁵³ The narrative that Momaday, under the tutelage of Yvor Winters, began producing modernist prose and poetry in the sixties is highly problematic: it elides Native American writers who were modernists forty years earlier; preserves modernism as an institution of white innovation; and casts Native American modernism as an attenuated form of Anglo-American modernism. Distancing Momaday from modernism, Hollrah frees his work from a limiting critical narrative of belatedness and indebtedness.

But as I listened to her well-reasoned talk, I wondered about the critical fictions necessary to write modernism out of the work of Native authors, especially writers, like Riggs, who were actively engaged in modernist literary culture. By naming and beginning to study Indianism as a movement, I am able to approach Riggs without

⁵² Jace Weaver, *American Indian Literary Nationalism* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006).

⁵³ For Momaday as the beginning of Native American individual authorship see Lynn Cline, *Literary Pilgrims: The Santa Fe and Taos Writers' Colonies, 1917-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 9. For Momaday's modernism see Matthias Schubnell, *N. Scott Momaday, the Cultural and Literary Background* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985). For Momaday as an appropriator and subverter of modernism see Louis Owens, *Mixedblood Messages: Literature, Film, Family, Place* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 64-65.

eliding either his modernism or his Indigeneity. The same goes for North American poetry more generally. Ethnographic Native American texts exerted a formal influence from early in the 20th-century. Indianism provides a rubric for acknowledging that influence.

Indianism is all over the magazines and books of the teens and twenties, but we don't talk about it because it is ethically questionable and seemingly lacks aesthetic value, because it deserves to be forgotten. These criteria support a narrative of a meritocratic canon organized by aesthetic worth. Indianism is inherently disruptive to that canon.⁵⁴ To explore it, I work materially, situating Indianist works within their bibliographic contexts. Such bibliographic readings productively supplement more traditional close readings but they can also replicate and reinforce the logic of an autonomous aesthetic artifact, simply extending formalism to bibliographic as well as linguistic features. I resist such containment by turning unapologetically to biographical interpretation. The archives, especially the letters, of the writers I consider reveal how their writing relates to the larger field and how their formal decisions can be read as position takings.

⁵⁴ Edward Marx's *The Idea of a Colony: Cross-Culturalism in Modern Poetry* and Glenn Willmott's *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, the Market, and the Gift* have begun to address the complexities of analyzing the intersection of modernist and Native American aesthetics. But, despite many fine and illuminating readings, each views the subject through an obtrusive, even distorting, theoretical lens: the Jungian shadow and Mauss's gift theory, respectively. Their choices of these highly determinative paradigms suggest a structural resistance of modernist studies to this topic. Since these approaches tend to draw attention to themselves, and the question of their utility, they create the impression of a lack of a more historicized narrative. These valuable works stop short and in doing so serve as Barthian inoculations against the reckoning that comes with taking Indianism seriously. Edward Marx, *The Idea of a Colony: Cross-culturalism in Modern Poetry* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004). Glenn Willmott, *Modernist Goods: Primitivism, the Market, and the Gift* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Pierre Bourdieu offers a way to describe how writers of all races navigate a shared literary field.⁵⁵ That is not to say that the field is colorblind, far from it, but that we can think of writers pursuing individual authorship as part of a system and then analyze how race and culture function in that system. Utilizing this sociological, bibliographic, and biographical approach, I focus on sites of Indianist intertextuality. Poems do the work of affiliation or the resistance to it, and this work has formal markers and formal consequences. How, for instance, does Alice Corbin, a white poet, align herself with the Indian? She becomes a “translator” and “interpreter” of Chippewa songs, which she quotes and presents under a title of her choosing and under her own name, discovering the poems in anthropological journals and re-representing them in the aesthetic space of the little magazine. How does her friend and Santa Fe neighbor Lynn Riggs, a Cherokee poet, question this appropriation? He writes allusive poems that insist on their own partiality, in contrast to the ethnographic closure of quotation or translation. And what about Stevens, off in his office in Connecticut? He parodies Corbin and ignores Riggs, choosing instead to confront the ethnographic tradition of Native literature “as the pioneers did”: by “assimilating” it. The link between these poets and practices is

⁵⁵ While Bourdieu’s field is divided into restricted production (work produced for an audience of producers, i.e. poetry) and large-scale production (work produced for a mass audience, i.e. popular fiction), in Native American poetry there is also the issue of a separate field altogether, that of Indian newspapers and periodicals, which published everything from news to fiction to poetry. This is work produced by Native American writers for a Native American audience, exemplified by Alexander Posey’s *Fus Fixico* letters, which he resisted syndicating to metropole newspapers. Since my focus here is not to advance Bourdieu’s work but to use it to better understand a body of poetry, I will simply note this alternative field. Following Bourdieu, and more problematically, Pascale Casanova, I will focus on the dominant field, not because of its greater aesthetic interest or value, but because it is the location of my historical grounding and literary training.

intertextuality, the meeting of cultures reflected and theorized through a meeting of texts, which exist not platonically but materially.

Coined by Julia Kristeva as a means of interpreting Mikhail Bakhtin, “intertextuality” describes the myriad ways in which texts overlap with each other. In Kristeva’s words, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”⁵⁶ Bourdieu modifies Kristeva by emphasizing the agency of the writer who uses intertextuality as a means to an end.⁵⁷

Retaining what has been gained through the notion of intertextuality, that is, the fact that at each moment the space of works appears as a field of position-takings which can only be understood relationally, as in a system of phonemes, that is, as a system of differential discrepancies, one can form the hypothesis—a heuristic tool confirmed through analysis—of a homology between the space of creative works, the field of position-takings and the space of positions in the field of productions.⁵⁸

Bourdieu frequently critiques the “fetish” of autonomous art, and he is sometimes read as reducing art to a mere marker in the “game” of position-taking in the field of cultural production.⁵⁹ But the formulation quoted above suggests that recognizing how texts function in the field is necessarily formal.

⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

⁵⁷ Bourdieu, “Field of Cultural Production,” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, 33-34.

⁵⁸ Bourdieu, “Principles for a Sociology of Cultural Works,” in *The Field of Cultural Production*, 182.

⁵⁹ Lawrence Rainey exemplifies this kind of Bourdieuan approach to literature when he refuses to be a “humble handmaiden to the aesthetic artifact” by analyzing literary texts themselves in *The Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), 6. Sean Latham encapsulates and complicates the view that approaching modernist literature by way of Bourdieu would reduce formal complexity to simple snobbery. Sean Latham, “A Portrait of the Snob: James Joyce and the Anxieties of Cultural Capital,” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 47.4 (January 1, 2001): 775–778.

Intertextuality also forces us to consider our own critical blind spots and unacknowledged habits of thought. When we think about intertextuality, the obvious paradigms are influence, whereby something with greater symbolic capital acts on something with less, and appropriation, whereby something with less symbolic capital is taken in by something with more. Both “appropriation” and “influence” implicitly posit an imaginary authenticity that is the only alternative to theft or belatedness. Rejecting this foundational authenticity, be it racial or lyric, I understand all poetry as necessarily intertextual, but follow Bourdieu in focusing on deliberate or self-conscious intertextuality, writers knowingly engaging the work of others in their own poetry.

In an effort to acknowledge power dynamics, critics may miss the potential of an intertextual approach, eliding the great variation of intertextuality: identifying something as “appropriative” is only the first step in analyzing it. How does quotation differ from allusion? Who holds the power in an adaptation? What are the politics of literary assimilation? These are some of the questions raised by the writers I discuss as they navigate the contested territory between traditions. If intertextuality is always at play in modernist poetry, that play becomes both subject and repressed object in Indianism. Focusing on a prototypical Indianist modernist, a Native American poet pursuing modernist recognition, and a canonical modernist poet, I explore how Indianism fundamentally affected all of their work. Though we now localize Indianism as an embarrassing blip in literary culture, I suggest that it offers a secret history of modernism.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICIZING COLLAGE: ALICE CORBIN AND THE POETICS OF APPROPRIATION

By most accounts, collage is the single most revolutionary formal innovation in artistic representation to occur in our century.

—Gregory L. Ulmer, “The Object of Post-Criticism”



Fig. 1. Alice Corbin (left) and A. Rossin circa 1926.
[http://sarweb.org/index.php?exhibit_celebrate.](http://sarweb.org/index.php?exhibit_celebrate)

Taken in 1926 at a swimming pool dedication in Santa Fe,¹ this snapshot of modernists playing Indian shows Alice Corbin,² founding associate editor of *Poetry*, decked out in a placemat headdress, Jell-O mold earrings, and an egg separator necklace.³ Her war paint is most likely lipstick. The playful costume has an efficacious colonial logic, converting Indigeneity into white performance, making “Indians” themselves unnecessary, even superfluous.⁴ Yet the image might also be read as liberatory: the women turn mass-produced instruments of domesticity into decoration, absurdity, art. Corbin’s costume is emblematic of her poetic practice, which is an uncomfortable admixture of daring feminism, demeaning racism, and formal innovation enabled and disguised by the two. This poetry suggests an alternative history of collage, which is generally understood to have been “invented” by Picasso and Braque in 1912 and imported to literature by a cadre of poets including Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William

¹ There is far more to be said about the dedication, which took place at El Delirio ranch and culminated in the “sacrifice” of two virgins to the poetic accompaniment of Witter Bynner. Nancy Owen Lewis gives an enticingly brief description in the literature accompanying her exhibit “Celebrate! The Parties of El Delirio.” http://sarweb.org/index.php?exhibit_celebrate.

² Phillip Joseph Deloria’s *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale, 1999) analyzes the cultural work of indigenous masquerade from colonial times to the present, arguing that the modernists represented a shift from playing Indian to solidify national identity (the Boston Tea Party) to the Indian as Other to modernity, with modernist primitivism as a form of cultural and artistic escape, an interpretation this photo supports.

³ Throughout this essay, I refer to the poet as “Alice Corbin,” the name she continued to use for her creative endeavors after marrying William Henderson.

⁴ Rayna Green’s “A Tribe Called Wannebee: Playing Indian in America and Europe” argues that Indian impersonation is always a form of wishful genocide. *Folklore* 99.1 (1988): 30-55. Non-native writers of the nineteen teens and twenties used the term “Indian” to refer collectively and interchangeably to indigenous tribes in the United States. I will use the word to refer to this variety of imagined Indigeneity, and will use specific tribal affiliations when offering my own analysis of the arts of Native peoples.

Carlos Williams in the late teens and early twenties.⁵ In Corbin's work, the editorial procedures of the little magazine meet the racially appropriative poetry of the day, and the result is literary collage.

In a dissertation not devoted to modernist Indianism, this might have been a very different chapter, one that recovered a forgotten innovator who converted editorial strategies and authority into authorial audacity and a collage aesthetic. Corbin could be claimed as a *sage femme*, or mid-wife, to Pound's *Sage Homme*, the title he gives himself in relation to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.⁶ Pound's comparison of his editing of that poem to a "caesarian Operation" fits perfectly with the collage cuts that *The Waste Land* is seen to embody and define, but only if we read beneath the surface of Pound's quite conventional metaphor: that he saved the poem-as-baby from the maternal bathwater.⁷

How did the printed infancies result
From Nuptuals thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
Know diligent Reader

⁵ Marjorie Perloff's account of the "invention of collage" emphasizes its lack of precedent, stating that "art historians seem to be in unusual agreement" that collage began in 1912 with Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* and Braque's *Fruit Dish*. According to Perloff, collage "is, by definition, a visual or spatial concept, but it was soon absorbed into the verbal as well as into the musical realm...it was just a short and perhaps inevitable step to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* [1918], William Carlos Williams's *Kora in Hell* [1920] or T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* [1922], a poem whose collage composition is at least partially the result of the cuts made by Ezra Pound, himself the great master in English of collage form." Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). 46, 72.

⁶ Ezra Pound, Letter to T.S. Eliot. *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: Volume 1: 1898-1922*, Rev. Ed., ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011). 626.

⁷ A thorough discussion of the poem's gender dynamics could fill its own article. Here I focus on the caesarian delivery rather than the mythical conception of the first stanzas.

That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the caesarian Operation.⁸

Hidden within this emblematic-to-the-point-of-parody narrative of the masculine modernist rescuing poetry from the vagina of defeat is the mother, sliced open, bleeding, “never...the same,” as *The Waste Land*’s own depictions of abortion suggest. The “caesarian Operation” vividly circumvents female reproduction with technological intervention, glossing the boldness of collage as necessarily male. Pound’s knife wielding has haunted me as I’ve worked on this, frequently critical, study. What is to be gained by my critical dissection of nearly anonymous Corbin? Despite her wit, intelligence, and editorial savvy, racial appropriation remains the key to her formal innovation.⁹ And the very murkiness of Corbin’s position, her feminism and racism, her editorial practice sliding into authorial strangeness, makes it impossible to write her into another heroic narrative of redemptive collage. She necessitates an account that includes both the material method of collage and its ideological underpinning: the little magazine and its presentation of colonial materials.

Corbin as editor-writer connects the little magazine’s ability to “translate” ethnographic materials into art to its consecration of radical experimentation. As she stretches the form of her poems to better appropriate and assimilate the literature of “primitive” people, this visually fragmented poetry presents literary collage to its future

⁸ Pound, *The Letters of T.S. Eliot: Volume 1*, 626.

⁹ Another story of modernist collage that weakens the dominant narrative of masculinized innovation is that of Marianne Moore, who beginning in her 1909 poem “Councillor to a Bachelor,” first published in *The Lantern* in 1913, utilizes the feminized practice of scrapbooking to a decidedly feminist end. Bartholomew Brinkman has begun to explore how Moore’s scrapbooking anticipates collage practices but is not understood to do so because it is gendered female. “Scrapping Modernism: Marianne Moore and the Making of the Modern Collage Poem,” *Modernism/modernity* 18.1 (2011): 43-66.

inventors. Corbin's sectioned, multi-vocal "Echoes of Childhood," appeared in *The Seven Arts* in 1917 immediately before a translation of Jean de Bosschère by Ezra Pound, suggesting his collage inspiration may have come from the literary as well as the visual arts.

As collage is so thoroughly imbricated with its status as an honorific, it is worthwhile to define its formal practice. Like Corbin's Indian outfit, collage is structured around quotation, emphasizing the creation of a new whole whose origins must nonetheless remain recognizable. Marjorie Perloff argues that it is this "oscillation or doubleness" that "makes collage such a distinctive modernist invention," a sentiment anticipated and echoed in a century of criticism dedicated to the practice.¹⁰ If collage is understood to work by "radical" defamiliarization, its motivation is often posited as reclamation, "a process by means of which we make the public world our own."¹¹ Ellen Levy cites John Ashbery's characterization of Marianne Moore's "kaleidoscopic collage

¹⁰ Perloff represents the dominant understanding of collage's "radical questioning of the existing modes of representation," and she justifies this claim by identifying concrete chronologies and formal qualities, which provide a foundation for suggesting alternative histories. As she herself explains, the critical consensus about collage is relatively (and somewhat ironically) homogenous, aligning theorists from Rosalind Krauss to David Antin to Gregory Ulmer. Marjorie Perloff, "Collage and Poetry," *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*. Ed. Michael Kelly. *Oxford Art Online*. In "The Object of Post-Criticism," Ulmer outlines a still-more-thorough critical genealogy of collage, citing Richard Kostelanetz, Edward Fry, Eddie Wolfram, and Group *Mu*, who all define it as an unprecedented formal innovation that represents a revolutionary shift in 20th-century art. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983): 83-110. These discussions date from the 1980s, but collage has largely escaped the last decade-and-a-half's critical revision of modernism. Perloff's remains the accepted narrative as evidenced by her entry on collage in the current *Oxford Dictionary of Art* and by this confidently factual definition of collage given on the MoMA website: "The first deliberate and innovative use of collage in fine art came in two works by Picasso in the spring of 1912." http://www.moma.org/collection/theme.php?theme_id=10064.

¹¹ Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, 77.

effects” as “a necessary lesson in how to live in our world of ‘media,’ how to deal with the unwanted information that accumulates around us.”¹² The two most enduring facets of critical considerations of collage are this radical newness and its definition as a humanizing or humanist response to, not a symptom of, modernity. Ashbery’s description of the information that “accumulates around us” as “unwanted” is especially telling. Collage becomes a means of heroically reclaiming modernity for art and is thus associated with a redemptive authorial agency and originality set against a hostile reality that it momentarily remakes, a view exemplified by Eliot’s tragioheroic “fragments I have shored against my ruins.”¹³

Collage has been thoroughly historicized, but the very certainty of its definitive origin, its “invention” by Picasso and Braque, suggests a powerful, and profitable, narrative that has overwritten a more complicated story. This account has been qualified by alternative histories from how the dance hall influenced Picasso, how scrapbooking shaped Marianne Moore, and how séances affected F.T. Marinetti.¹⁴ But these

¹² Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 185.

¹³ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*. 1922. *Poets.org*.
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/18993>.

¹⁴ Jeffrey Weiss connects the dance hall to cubism via Picasso in *The Popular Culture of Modern Art: Picasso, Duchamp, and Avant-Gardism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994). Bartholomew Brinkman offers a compelling formal reading of scrapbooks and scrapbooking in “Scrapping Modernism: Marianne Moore and the Making of the Modern Collage Poem,” *Modernism/modernity* 18.1 (2011): 43-66. In 1998, Lawrence Rainey offered his own critique of the origin story of collage as “an oppositional practice...which undermines received assumptions about the foundations of representation” claiming collage “cannot be easily assimilated to a straightforwardly emancipatory project, but that harbor[s] something more conflicted and compulsive” (124). He argues Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” was inspired by the convergence of spiritualist automatic writing and modern technologies such as the telegraph. Like Rainey, I am critical of collage’s origin myth, but I am hesitant to tie to it to another canonical figure or to the shock of the new. Rather,

revisionary accounts have yet to associate collage with modernism's otherwise well-explored colonialist ideologies. Similarly, those who have looked at race, appropriation, and modernist form—including Simon Gikandi on cubism, Michael North on dialect, and Aldon Lynn Nielsen on the “dead metaphors” of racist poetic language—have yet to extend these critiques to collage.¹⁵ I argue that the technique did not trickle down from geniuses, but sprang up across high and low culture, literature and the visual arts, from the pens and brushes of great and minor artists alike, necessitating an overarching cultural explanation. Why did it develop? What needs did it serve? What structures and institutions recognized and profited from it? We must begin to consider the social origins of collage, one of which is colonialism, which fostered a habit of racial appropriation anticipating and enabling the development of collage practice.

Underlying my analysis is the authorizing capability of the little magazines, which defined, through their selection of materials, what kind of experimentation would count as art. In a rapidly changing poetic economy, the editors of these magazines minted the currency. Within this print-culture paradigm, I explore a set of practices broadly defined as translation—ekphrasis, linguistic translation, shifting texts between periodicals—which share a common relation to originality. Their appropriations are not understood as such. When an African American folk song or a Chippewa ritual is transferred from an

I would argue that Marinetti's 1912 espousal of (unnamed) collage aesthetics suggests that the method was connected to overarching ideologies of the time, the most obvious being colonialism. “Taking Dictation: Collage Poetics, Pathology, and Politics,” *Modernism/Modernity* 5.2 (1998): 123-153.

¹⁵ Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/modernity* 10. 3 (2003): 455–480; Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988).

ethnographic journal to a little magazine, it is not simply being “recognized” as art; it is radically redefined by its new context and the name of the translator/discoverer now attached to it. Because the translational appropriations I consider were underwritten by racist social codes—translating Bosschère was not the same as translating the Chippewa song—the translators’ de facto authorship seemed natural and unproblematic. It is this often-elided space that I explore, arguing that hidden there are the formal and ideological precursors to that great representational innovation, collage. A consequence of my argument is that collage does not jump from the visual to the verbal, but arises in both mediums as a result of their earlier experiments with racial appropriation. In the literary realm, the passion for translation of the teens gives way in the twenties to an acknowledged collage aesthetic.¹⁶

This brings us back to Alice Corbin, a minor figure associated with two of modernism’s more embarrassing movements: writing as African and Native Americans in literary black and red face. Now, when Corbin is discussed at all, it is in relation to her

¹⁶ A similar trajectory can also be inferred in the visual arts. To extend Gikandi’s convincing argument about Picasso’s pirating of formal aspects of African art in *Les Femmes d'Alger* (O.J. no. 1), it is not coincidental that Picasso painted women who look as if they are wearing African masks five years before *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), which also incorporates art’s “other,” this time in the form of patterned oil paper and an actual rope. Perhaps in translating African masks into modern painting, Picasso discovered that the powerful effect was not solely in the reproduction of the masks but in the thrill of theft that the incorporation signified. Haunted, or intrigued, by this conquest, he then thematizes it as what we now call collage. In the later painting, the cubist representational style of the masks is still evident in the painted objects—the glass, the segment of fruit—but the borrowing itself is also represented by the incorporation of the image of chair caning and the rope frame. In grafting the mass-produced oil cloth onto his painting, Picasso takes a representation that exists already, although in a denigrated and artistically unrecognized form, and brings it into high art, where it signifies as innovation. While *Still Life with Chair Caning* is cited as Picasso’s first collage, the practice was already in place, though unremarked, in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, where the racialized borrowing is so naturalized as to be largely invisible. I note this progression in Picasso not because he is ordinary but because he is emblematic.

more famous friends—Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg, and Wallace Stevens.¹⁷ But in the 1910s and 1920s, Corbin literally defined the “new poetry,” co-editing an anthology by that name and, as mentioned, serving as the associate editor of *Poetry* magazine.¹⁸ Her career is a modernist time capsule, sealed by a lack of critical attention, allowing us to see that in uniting editorial technique, ethnographic texts, and lyric subjectivity, Corbin simultaneously produced collage poetry. Corbin’s poems depicting non-white subjects, written in African American dialect, and translating Chippewa songs demonstrate her ongoing exploration of the aesthetic possibilities of racial appropriation, suggesting that collage does not only represent modernists pushing back against aesthetic and political repression but also instituting and camouflaging it.

While I focus on Corbin, her editorial career uniquely qualifies her as a representative figure of modernist poetics. At *Poetry*, she corresponded with and courted the major poets of the day, but she also read the unsolicited submissions or, as she called them, “virgin verse.”¹⁹ Foreign correspondent and shadow editor Pound’s frenetically didactic letters may have helped educate the young Corbin, but the “virgin verse” would have forced her to intuit a set of standards by which to judge the new and experimental. By understanding these submissions in sexual terms, Corbin implicitly defines publication as consummation, a consummation that she as editor performs. This virile

¹⁷ The sole scholarly monograph dedicated to Corbin is a collection of her correspondence with Ezra Pound. Since he did not keep her letters, it is really a work devoted to Pound. Ira B. Nadel, ed. *The Letters of Ezra Pound to Alice Corbin Henderson* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson, ed. *The New Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917).

¹⁹ Eunice Tietjens, Letter to Alice Corbin Henderson, August 16, 1917. ACP.

editor recalls and revises Pound's mid-husband, suggesting that while the birth of collage may be associated with the formal breakthroughs of cultural giants, it was conceived in more humble circumstances. Through Corbin, I explore how the institutional structures of modernism enabled a rush of racial appropriations and suggest that the fruit of those appropriations is an art that, somewhat paradoxically, emphasized originality and with it autonomy.

Rejection

Corbin's first book, *The Spinning Woman of the Sky*, came out in 1912, the same year that *Poetry* was founded. "Modernity," a poem in the middle of the collection, diagnoses its moment as fundamentally derivative while anticipating the formal potential of this seeming lack.²⁰ In "Modernity," there is no originality. Everything new is simply a copy of an older form. An apostrophe to modernity itself, the poem decries its "concrete monoliths" as "No newer these than Egypt's pyramids, / Or Asia's discards of imagination," then equates these supposed technical and architectural innovations with art, whose "modern progress" is dismissed as "whimsical."²¹ Until its final stanza, the poem's logic is rhetorical, forensic even, allying modernity with modernism and dismissing them both as dishonest in their supposed innovation. But in its last lines, Corbin shifts from argument to illustration.

In one brief moment of contemporary
Time
Our uncouth efforts;

²⁰Alice Corbin, "Modernity," in *The Spinning Woman of the Sky* (Chicago: R.F. Seymour, 1912), 50.

²¹ As these Eastern examples suggest, for Corbin modernity is spatial as well as temporal, located in the urbanized West.

While Tahitian girls
Weave coral poppies in their cloudy hair,
And to an unknown music, haunting, strange
Cambodgienne dancers of the golden age
Confuse chronology....

Modernity!

The “Tahitian girls” and “Cambodgienne dancers” stray from a linear logic into a more lyrical and descriptive register. These ostensibly older cultures that endure in the modern world and contrast favorably to it support Corbin’s thesis about the illusory nature of progress and originality, but they simultaneously usurp her analysis with their bodily immediacy and their refusal to conform to the poem’s syntactic structure. This sense that the lines, like their subjects, are both *of* her poem and *to* it is confirmed by the fact that the images themselves are borrowed.

The “Tahitian girls” with their “cloudy hair” seem to refer to Paul Gauguin’s *Femmes de Tahiti ou sur la plage* [Tahitian Women on the Beach] (1891) (Fig. 2) or to his reworking of that image as *Quelles nouvelles?* [What’s New?] (1892) (Fig. 3). On one level, these unmarked citations function as a way for Corbin to register her status as an artistic insider and a modern in spite of, or in keeping with, her rejection of modernity. But the paintings both echo and complicate Corbin’s thesis. Over skyscrapers, traffic, and pyramids, she pastes a postcard of Gauguin’s Tahitian girls. The work becomes about this act of citation, proving that innovation is simply citation, or, more exactly, translation: the movement of a concept to a new context that then makes the concept appear new as well. This is a fairly bold gambit, as Corbin includes her own poem in the camp of modern copyists. Its success comes from the borrowed images. But Corbin’s citation of Gauguin suggests that he too is a copyist. The original here is not a traditional work of art

but the women themselves who, according to Corbin, signify despite, not as a result of, Gauguin's (and her own) "uncouth efforts."

The apparent simplicity of the image masks the instability of Corbin's reference. It is unclear which of Gauguin's paintings Corbin cites. Is it the 1891 version in which the woman with the coral poppy in her cloudy hair wears a pink European-style dress, or the painting revised and renamed, with the woman now wearing what seems meant to signify as a "native" wrap?



Fig. 2. Paul Gauguin, *Femmes de Tahiti ou sur la plage*, 1891, Musée d'Orsay. *Wikimedia Commons*.



Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin, *Quelles nouvelles?*, 1892, Galeria Neue Meister. *Lankaart*.

If ekphrasis creates formal interest by carrying the painting into the poem, that effect is doubled as the painting itself flickers between two nearly identical variations whose key difference is between signs of “modernity” and “the primitive.” That Corbin references “girls” rather than a “girl” implies that she alludes to both paintings and, more importantly, the relation between them.²² The answer to the question posed by the title of the later painting, *What’s New?*, is, ironically, the wrap, a traditional costume. The reference enacts a sort of rebus of the poem: what’s new is old. “Modernity” (as Westernization) does not fundamentally change the image; it only covers the woman up in a high-necked pink dress. Of course, chronologically, Gauguin painted the more

²² While there are two “girls” in each painting, only one wears a coral flower. The other flower is white.

“primitive” scene after the one that depicts a mixture of cultures, so it is the return to an illusory wholeness and coherence that here represents “art’s modern progress.”

Corbin might have ended the poem with these uncanny women quite effectively, but she adds another citation, this time to “Cambodgienne dancers,” a series of mixed-media drawings by Auguste Rodin (Fig. 4).²³ Though present in 1906 Paris, where Rodin saw the troupe and then, entranced, followed them south to Marseille, the dancers are simultaneously “of the golden age,” their Eastern origin carrying with it an older temporality. Rodin himself described the dancers as having “a movement all of their own, unknown in the Antique and to us... This unknown, hitherto-unseen movement belongs to the Far East.”²⁴ As with the Tahitian girls, Corbin seems to cite the dancers but actually re-presents a Frenchman’s representation of them, which is in turn already ekphrastic as it depicts their dance. But Rodin, in attempting to capture the “timeless” movements of the Cambodian troupe, simplifies the human body in a manner that anticipates abstract expressionism, troubling the concept of representation, a marked difference from Gauguin’s more realistic, if repetitive, compositions.

²³ For a more in-depth exploration of Rodin and originality, see Rosalind Krauss, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition,” *October* 18 (1981): 47-66.

²⁴ Quoted in <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/collections/drawings/cambodian-dancer-0>.



Fig. 4. Auguste Rodin, *Danseuse Cambodgienne*, 1906, Musée Rodin. *Musée-Rodin.fr*.

In the drawing, markers of race, ethnicity, and gender have been sacrificed to capture the quality of movement of both dancer and artist, as in the broad and messy brush strokes of the skirt that seems to swing and the drawn outlines of other arms. If, for Rodin, the dancers are other to the modern (as the West), his representation of them suggests for Corbin a way out of the trap of a derivative modernity. While Corbin's framing of Gauguin shows him celebrating the "new" that is old, Rodin demonstrates how taking racial others as a subject allows artists to copy in ways that will signify as original and that do, indeed, allow for formal innovation, at least as perceived within the confines of a single artistic tradition, such as French painting.²⁵ In 1912, Corbin seems

²⁵ This appropriation-as-innovation is essentially what Michael North argues about African American dialect and canonical modernism in *The Dialect of Modernism*, a work I will discuss in greater detail. In 1905 Arthur Symons suggested something similar in

surprisingly clear-eyed about the formal possibilities of racial appropriation. Without the lure of originality, an artist can give himself over to ekphrastic copies with great results, as the paintings and the poem's powerful final stanza confirm. Ending her poem with these formally ambivalent portraits, which "confuse chronology," Corbin illustrates the impossibility of originality precisely by allowing her own lyric voice to give way to citation.

The poem redefines its poet as a collector, not a creator, of beauty, with the ambiguity of its final passage making authorial intention itself the uneasy subject. As the reader must hold in her mind both versions of Gauguin's painting, she must consider Corbin's work as a discrete poetic artifact that nonetheless signals its own inadequacy and contingency. Ekphrasis in "Modernity" is an end in itself or an endless hall of mirrors. Mixing the visual with the verbal, Corbin discards a lyric voice in favor of a curatorial one and, in one possible reading, insists that her reader note this shift. In another, she comes across as a more natural poet, the origin of her own striking images. The poem's final italicized exclamation—"Modernity!"—suggests that this uncertainty, which might also be read as play, is the gift, not the curse, of her unoriginal age. As Corbin's work progresses, her questioning of originality and experimentation with appropriation will become more extreme, from this unsignaled ekphrasis, to the use of African American dialect, to her translations of Chippewa songs that she first presents as such but ultimately incorporates into her own collection, *Red Earth*.

As these examples suggest, race is the central component of Corbin's appropriations, and it is possible, necessary even, to follow Michael North, who in *The*

"The Death of Peter Waydelin," in which Waydelin credits his mature style to drawing the Japanese dancer Sada Yacco. *Spiritual Adventures* (London: Archibald, 1905), 163.

Dialect of Modernism, reads her as an archetypical modernist, using racial masquerade to give her work an edgy, daring quality.²⁶ But I would hazard that while racism undoubtedly underwrites Corbin's practice, the label inadvertently forecloses its formal interest. To read Corbin's work as racially appropriative is a necessary first step, but it cannot be the last. We must connect these practices with their formal repercussions. North exposes dialect as a racially conservative tradition masquerading as innovation. I suggest that collage can be viewed in the same light, and it is in this 1912 poem, the same year that collage supposedly "began" in the visual arts, that we begin to see the relation between the two. Corbin's foray into racialized ekphrasis follows the trend of the day, but in citing Gauguin and Rodin it also offers an interpretation of that trend. "Modernity" demonstrates that such racial appropriations affect not only the content of the work of art but its form, as is most evident in Rodin's drawings. Her own poem seems to consist of two voices stuck together, a rhetorical and Victorian beginning supplanted by a modern and imagist conclusion. This fragmentation and its powerful poetic effects comes to the fore even more prominently in "Echoes of Childhood: A Folk-Medley" as Corbin begins to appropriate not only the bodies of racial others, but their voices and subjectivities as well.

Possession

²⁶ Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 140. North makes this argument about canonical modernism as a whole, citing Corbin as one example. While I agree with and am indebted to North, his consideration of Corbin focuses on "Mandy's Religion," which he does not identify as a section of "Echoes of Childhood," suggesting that he too shies away from considering modernist collage in his larger critique of the movement's racism.

The title “Echoes of Childhood: A Folk-Medley” frames the poem that follows with a destabilizing combination of the lyric “I” whose childhood is represented and the editorial eye who has selected the parts of that childhood to represent. The poem’s melding of quotation, omniscient narration, and personal history further exposes the relation between racial appropriation and poetic collage. “Echoes of Childhood” begins by describing “blind” Uncle Jim, who is then quoted as he calls out the standardized steps of the Virginia Reel, a series of commands that he momentarily controls but did not create (Fig. 5).

Echoes of Childhood

A Folk-Medley

By Alice Corbin

UNCLE JIM

Old Uncle Jim was as blind as a mole
But he could fiddle Virginia Reels
Till you felt the sap run out of your heels,
Till you knew the devil had got your soul—

Down the middle and swing yo’ partners,
Up ag’in and salute her low,
Shake yo’ foot an’ keep a-goin’,
Down the middle an’ do-se-do!

Fig. 5. Image of “Echoes of Childhood,” *Seven Arts* (September 1917): 598.

We can read Uncle Jim as bringing the subsequent characters—Delphy, Cross-Eyed Peter, Mandy, Betsy’s Boy, and The Old Negro—to life and marching them around according to a shared set of minstrelsy conventions that themselves incorporate actual African American spirituals and songs. To represent this complex array of embedded quotations, the 1917 poem employs capitalized section titles, standard and non-standard spelling, varying degrees of indentation, and metapoetic asides. Thematically, it is organized around collection and accumulation rather than narrative. But the parenthetical and seemingly autobiographical refrain unifies these fragments by focalizing them through the consciousness of the poetic speaker and her remembered South.

(Underneath the southern moon
I was cradled to the tune
Of the banjo and the fiddle
And the plaintive negro croon.)²⁷

It is this unity or personality that differentiates the poem from what seems its source, “Echoes of the Dance,” published in the Poetry section of *The Scrap Book* in April 1907 (Fig. 6).²⁸

²⁷ Corbin, “Echoes of Childhood,” *The Seven Arts* (September 1917): 599.

²⁸ “Echoes of the Dance,” *The Scrap Book* (April 1907): 286-88.

ECHOES OF THE DANCE.

Some of the Countless Lyrics Inspired by the Most Poetic and Romantic of All Pastimes—In Every Age and Country Dancing Has Had Its Devotees.

THE OLD VIRGINIA REEL.*

(February 22, 1789.)

By Virginia Giltman McNealus.

FAR in the dusty corridors assigned to Father Time,
There are echoes still awaiting to be caught in prose and rime;
There is one that comes a stealing through the quiet nights of June,
'Tis the twanging and the thumping of an old familiar tune.
And I listen to its numbers, and my heart begins to feel
The scraping of the fiddles in the old Virginia Reel.

Fig. 6. Image of “Echoes of the Dance,” *The Scrap Book* (April 1907): 286.

Like “Echoes of Childhood,” which reproduces its structure, “Echoes of the Dance” begins with the Virginia Reel, here depicted as an overtly haunted form, giving voice to a lost South that now exists only as “relics” that “reveal / Faint echoes of the revelry in the old Virginia Reel.” But “Echoes of the Dance” does not stay on the plantation. It moves from the “Virginia Reel” to “The Sailor’s Dance,” “The Country Dance,” “The Stately Minuet,” and “A Dance on the Ranch.” The piece is organized by the simple thematic of the dance, an overarching title given by an editor to a collection of five songs from different authors, or, in the case of “A Dance at the Ranch,” no author at all, but the newspaper where it was last printed, *The Denver Post*.

Corbin takes this miscellaneous structure and applies it to her poetic speaker’s consciousness. While in the earlier “Echoes,” the editor’s presence is, if not effaced, unremarked, Corbin maintains the sense of the poem as a gathering, but pulls the curtain back to reveal how the editor’s subjectivity shapes that collection. The difference between the two poems is the difference between a stack of fabric swatches and those swatches affixed to a canvas and framed. Corbin presents the editor’s process itself as art.

But she and the editors of *The Seven Arts*, where her poem first appeared, minimize this radical redefinition of lyric subjectivity, describing it as “perfectly delightful—genuine folk-stuff.”²⁹ From a 21st century perspective, the poem’s fragmented narration reads as experimental, but the formal markers of literary collage had not yet been established and so were unrecognizable in 1917, even by the editors of a journal that was founded to promote innovation in American literature, describing itself as “a wedge behind which the new forces in our arts may advance.”³⁰ Corbin and her editors understood the poem as successful, authentic-seeming racial appropriation. What we now see is how the poem’s structure evolved to allow this incorporation of folk materials. Because of its form and our current valorization of collage, the poem today reads as destabilizing to the very racial and representational hierarchies it then naturalized.

Indeed, Corbin’s poem conceptualizes itself as “medley,” an older form of reassemblage with quite different aims. If collage ostensibly takes the familiar and makes it strange, the medley, which dates from the 17th century, fragments songs in order to join their best-known parts together, sacrificing overarching meaning for the comforts of serial familiarity. Like *The Waste Land*, which it anticipates by five years, Corbin’s work voices multiple classes, races, and genders, representing these shifts through visual fragmentation and varied typography, spacing, and indentation. In the poem, Corbin continues the process she began in “Modernity,” defining her own authorship as one of collection, mixing original work with the selection and presentation of minstrel stock characters and songs that could be understood as ready-mades. The formal complexity of

²⁹ James Oppenheim, Letter to Alice Corbin, June 6, 1917. ACP.

³⁰ “A Preface to the December Number,” *The Seven Arts* (December 1916): 95.

“Echoes of Childhood” results from its status as racial appropriation. Corbin strings together a series of racial clichés so absolute that she does not even need to present them in their entirety. The resulting piece replicates both the varied quality of a minstrel show and the partial juxtapositions of collage aesthetics. What separates the two is not form but function or perceived function, our sense that minstrelsy is conservative and reactionary while collage is radical and avant-garde.³¹

These structural parallels are most evident in the “Delphy” section in which a mammy figure need only be metonymically identified by her “wide and deep” breast, just as a snippet of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” can stand in for the song.

Delphy’s breast was wide and deep,
A shelf to lay a child asleep,
 Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low,
Rocking like a lifted boat
On lazy tropic seas afloat,
 Swing low, sweet chariot, swing long.³²

Corbin uses pieces of the song and pieces of Delphy in identical ways—they are excerpted not to critique hegemonic representational structures but to harness their conventional powers. And yet, the poem seems haunted by the symbolic violence this excerpting represents. The section’s second and final stanza continues to mix framing narration with lines from “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” but the voice shifts from neutral to personal, explaining that Delphy took the place of the speaker’s dead mother.

Delphy, when my mother died,
Taught me wisdom, curbed my pride,
 Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low,
And when she laid her body down,
It shone, a jewel, in His crown,

³¹ Here again, my argument aligns with and extends North’s.

³² Corbin, “Echoes of Childhood,” *Seven Arts* (September 1917): 598.

Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low.³³

By mixing the vulnerability of personal revelation with the generic quality of Delphy's stock characterization, Corbin creates a collage clash between the intimate and the mass-produced. The last "Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low," seems to be spoken by the white speaker to both quote and mourn Delphy, suggesting that her devotion authorizes her to occupy the dead woman's subject position. Corbin's efforts to claim these folk songs and the bodies that sing them necessitate a merging of editorial and lyric voices. The intrusion of the personal, which she seems to have intended to make the poem seem more authentic, requires a destabilizing revision of its form.

The presentation of such cultural relics as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" framed by autobiography fulfills collage's defining decontextualization, a strategy associated with the disruption of narrative and representation. But Corbin's work reveals how collage may be a colonial "speaking for the Negro," grounded in the conquest of other cultures and the subsequent representation of those materials. That we now consistently read collage, at least as it was practiced in the teens and twenties, as innovative and counterhegemonic suggests just how effective such colonization was. When Corbin becomes an advocate and translator of "Indian" poetry, the line that would distinguish artistic creation from medley-making, astute curation, or collage is even more difficult to discern.

Appropriation

³³ Ibid., 599.

As “Echoes of Childhood” cites her experiences in the South as authorization for a dialect fantasia, Corbin’s relocation to Santa Fe in 1916 provided a new store of cultural references to explore and exploit. She remade herself as a regional poet of the Southwest, incorporating what she considered Indian and Spanish influences into her work. She was not alone. In Taos and Santa Fe, a genre of poetry developed in which white poets wrote in red face, not only about the Pueblo and Navajo communities they encountered, often through tourist spectacle, but in the voices of Indian speakers and, in Corbin’s case, the re-presented words of Chippewa songs. With its obvious similarities to white use of African American dialect, this Southwestern modernism, which I call Indianism, is now often understood through rubrics of primitivism and projection.³⁴

Much as “Echoes of Childhood” juxtaposes several varieties of black stereotypes into an unstable whole, “Indian Songs” is a long poem composed of several short, individually titled sections. The key difference between the two, both of which are characterized by their citationality, is their source material and that material’s relation to the poems’ minority subjects. While “Echoes of Childhood” quotes existent African American folk songs as well as participating in the pseudo-citational tradition of writing in African American dialect, “Indian Songs” is composed exclusively of actual Chippewa songs, some supplemented and revised by Corbin, some not. Corbin uses her curation to take ownership of the Chippewa material as placement and selection further displace composition, demonstrating how the same features of modernist little magazines that made them conducive to racially appropriative art authorized the development of a

³⁴ See, for example, Tisa Wenger, “Modernists, Pueblo Indians, and the Politics of Primitivism” in *Race, Religion, Region: Landscapes of Encounter in the American West*. Ed. by Fay Botham and Sara Patterson (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2006), 101-114.

collage poetics. The aesthetic space that ropes poetry off, allowing it to signify as poetry even without traditional forms, can also authorize ethnic poetry as poetry; hang something in an art museum and it becomes art. By presenting such racially appropriative poetry, the little magazines do collage before collage, a suggestive anticipation of the avant garde work to follow.

It is the institution of the modernist little magazine and the authority that institution grants Corbin that actually “translates” the varied songs into a single poem. Both anthropological and literary conventions forbid granting the Chippewa songs the status of poetry until they are discovered and re-presented by a white cultural authority. The songs that make up “Indian Songs” were first transcribed by ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore in her second volume on *Chippewa Music* published in 1913 by the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology in its *Bulletin* 53.³⁵ There they are nestled in a 341-page ethnographic study that sets out to answer “First, What do the Chippewa sing; Second, How do they sing; and, Third, Why do they sing?” If these questions border on the existential, Densmore addresses them scientifically, filling the volume with charts, documentary photographs, and musical transcriptions of the songs accompanied by highly technical notes and commentary, all on cramped pages bound by the somber green covers that mark the Bureau’s *Bulletins* and communicate their serious and academic nature. In this scholarly context, the songs are framed as anthropological findings. Rather than texts that might be seen in relation to other literary practices of the day, they are constructed as relics to be preserved in the *Bulletin*, the print culture equivalent of a natural history museum. As such, they become eminently appropriable.

³⁵ Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music II*.

Carl Sandburg gives a window into this enticing availability in a brief editorial on “Red Indian songs” in the 1917 “Aboriginal Issue” of *Poetry*.³⁶ There he praises Densmore’s translations, lamenting that “in the literary world this work has, however, escaped analysis” precisely because of its publication in an anthropological journal and its highly technical presentation there. However, Sandburg playfully inserts the poems into the literary field, continuing, “[s]uspicion arises definitely that the Red Man and his children committed direct plagiarisms on the modern imagists and vorticists.”³⁷ In the same issue, Corbin, who as editor discovered and championed Sandburg, offers her own interpretations of several of Densmore’s transcriptions along with an original poem, “In the Desert,” which contains the memorable and characteristic lines, “*Not yet! / Not yet, O dark lover!*”³⁸ While the seven small poems are presented under the title “Indian Songs,” it is not until 26 pages later in an “Editorial Comment” that Corbin explains that these are Chippewa songs based on Densmore’s transcriptions and that she worked by expanding on the “Indian key-note” while trying to “keep strictly within the spirit” of the songs, which were composed in a language she did not speak by a community she could not locate on a map.³⁹

³⁶ Carl Sandburg, “II,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917): 254-55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁸ Corbin, “In the Desert,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917): 232.

³⁹ Corbin, “Editorial Comment,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917): 254-55. Like many of her peers, Corbin saw all Indian tribes as essentially the same. Thus, in a letter to her publisher, Ralph Seymour, she wrote of a group of poems, including “Indian Songs,” “I am not putting in anything but New Mexican poems, as I think the book gains from a unified impression.” The Chippewa are from the Great Lakes region. Alice Corbin. Letter to Ralph Seymour. 1 October 1920. ACP.

An analysis of “Dancing Song of the Bi’jikiwûck’,” which Corbin renames “Buffalo Dance,” illustrates what discovering the “Indian key-note” involved. Corbin’s poem is composed of short lines that at once replicate the structure of Densmore’s transcription and make it visually recognizable as part of the new poetry (Fig. 7). But Corbin does something more, incorporating Densmore’s anthropological gloss of the poem’s cultural context—Chippewa warriors would imitate buffalo before battle—into the poem itself. Corbin here mixes Chippewa words with an outsider’s understanding of Chippewa culture in order to create a poem that would be compelling to a non-Indian reader.

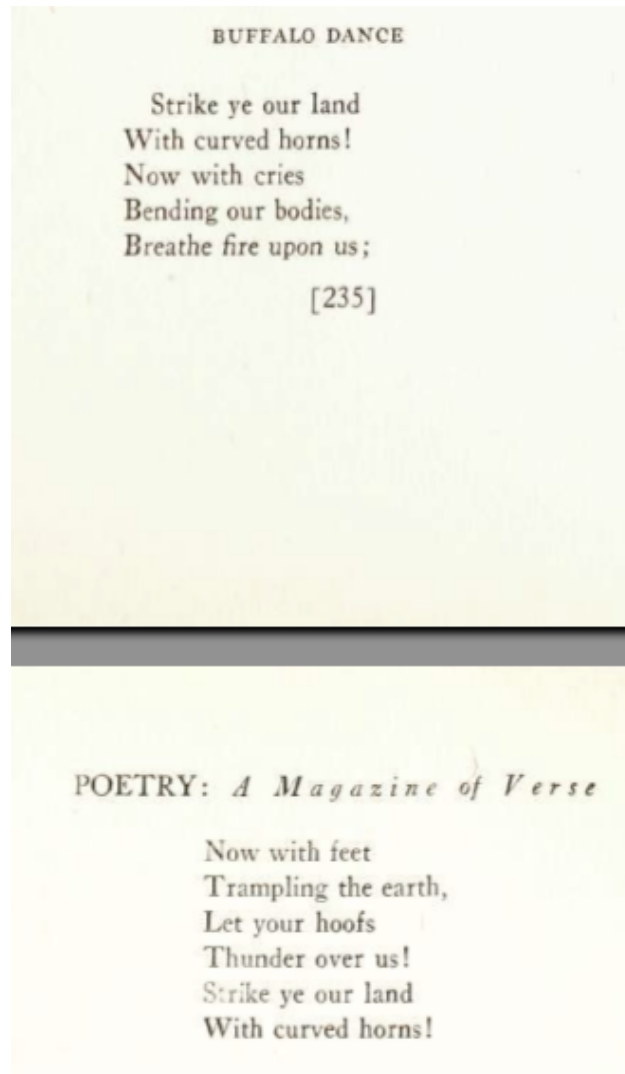


Fig. 7. Image of Alice Corbin, “Indian Songs” *Poetry* (February 1917): 235-36.

Compare this to Densmore’s transcription (Fig. 8), which preserves a sense of its own mediation by placing Chippewa words underneath musical notations with English glosses at that bottom of the page.

No. 23. Dancing Song of the Bi'jikiwēk' (Catalogue No. 382)

Sung by MAIS'GANS ("LITTLE WOLF")

VOICE ♩ = 96

Recorded without drum

The musical score is written in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a time signature of 3/4. It consists of six staves of music. The lyrics are written below the notes, with syllables separated by hyphens. The lyrics are:
 Bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e bi - ti - go - cka - mok
 gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e
 bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e
 we - wa - gi - wi - ni bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e
 bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e we - wa - gi - wi -
 ni bi - ti - go - cka - mok gi - ta - ki - mi - nan e

WORDS

- bi'tigo'ckamok'..... strike ye
- gi'takimnan'..... our land
- wewa'giwini'..... with curved horns

Analysis.—The descending interval of the fourth is especially prominent in this melody (see analysis of No. 22). The first five measures comprise the rhythmic unit, which is well adapted to the expression of the words. This rhythm, combined with the peculiar melodic outline, causes the song to produce an effect of rugged strength.

Fig. 8. Image of Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Music II* (1913): 102.

Densmore's reader is aware of how mediated her experience of the song is as she must literally pull together an English translation—"Strike ye our land/ Strike ye our land/ Strike ye our land with curved horns"—as she moves between the Chippewa words and the smaller, and so seemingly provisional, English. For better or worse, the *Bulletin* locates the song within a culture that the reader would register as highly foreign while, as

Bartholomew Brinkman has explored, the layout of *Poetry*, especially its framing white space, would have encouraged readers to think of the poem as a discreet aesthetic object.⁴⁰ In the *Bulletin*, the reader would not assume she could fully access the poem, but in *Poetry* she is authorized to do just that. This autonomy grants the reader imaginative access to the poem, an access enabled by Corbin, who has freed it from the dense type of ethnography and brought it into the uncluttered pages of the literary field. In addition to presenting the poem exclusively in English, Corbin lessens the tension-building repetition of “strike ye our land” that gives the introduction of “curved horns” its power, opting instead to Orientalize the buffalo as a giant fire-breathing dragon with hooves. In this way, Corbin further grants her version artistic autonomy by denying it to the song, which she dramatically edits through her citation of the orientalist conventions of the day.

Corbin obliquely acknowledges her sources—the Chippewa and, more immediately, Densmore—but stresses her own ability to discover and express the “Indian key-note,” a further blending of the editorial and poetic. The lack of specificity of the word “Indian” in the title and the appearance of Corbin’s name directly under the last song (Fig. 9) contribute to a sense of her ownership of the material, which might be understood, like “In the Desert,” to be her own work on an Indian theme.

⁴⁰ Bartholomew Brinkman, in “Making Modern Poetry: Format, Genre and the Invention of Imagism(e),” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.2 (2009): 20, explores how *Poetry*’s format makes it especially conducive to the aestheticization of the poem and to Imagism specifically.

Now I go, do not weep, woman—
Woman, do not weep ;
Earth is our mother and our tent the sky.
Though I go from you to die,
We shall both lie down
At the foot of the hill, and sleep.

Alice Corbin

Fig. 9. Image of Alice Corbin, “Indian Songs” *Poetry* (February 1917): 238.

After their presentation in *Poetry*, the songs’ grouping under an overarching title perhaps does the most to influence their reception and to alter their meaning. While they do come from a single tribe, they treat unrelated events from war to courtship to death. Yet the title unites them as sections in a single poem, and this new grouping cedes their authority to their editor who has become their author. Each song previously stood alone, but their collection by Corbin reduces them to fragments. And indeed, the only way to understand them as a whole is through the figure of Corbin. The poem contains no trace of autobiography, no wistful mention of the family plantation. Its deceptively bland title seems to withhold any ordering principle beyond mere collection, making the editorial eye its implicit subject. The title seemingly says very little, but it actually speaks volumes, addressing Sandburg’s lament about the difficulty in treating the songs as literary even though they were already available in English. Here Corbin translates them in a way that Densmore could not, by bringing them into *Poetry* where they are framed as art. But she is not content to simply transfer the songs; she also assumes authorship of them. Rather than credit the Chippewa people with the songs, or even Densmore who translated them, Corbin lists them as her own, because she made them poems.

In 1918, “Indian Songs” appeared again in George Cronyn’s *The Path on the Rainbow*, published by Boni and Liveright, a firm associated with several modernist masterpieces, including four years later, *The Waste Land*. “[T]he first authoritative volume of aboriginal verse”⁴¹ according to its introduction by Mary Austin, the anthology is divided into two parts: Translations and Interpretations. Corbin’s versions of the songs are found in the Interpretations section, with Densmore’s more literal translations appearing 200 pages earlier. As a translation, “Song of the Buffalo” (Fig. 10) is lineated in stair step lines, and the repetition of “strike ye our land” is again eliminated.

SONG OF THE BUFFALO
Strike ye
our land
with curved horns

Fig. 10. Image of *The Path on the Rainbow*, 21.

As in Corbin’s version, the changes domesticate the poem by aligning it visually and rhetorically with Imagism. These alterations to the poem are effaced by calling it a translation, an editorial maneuver that grants the symbolic capital of imagism to Native American poetics and, more relevantly, its editorial advocates. Cronyn’s discomfort with and ultimate public rejection of E. Pauline Johnson, the sole Native American poet included in the Interpretations section of *The Path on the Rainbow*, demonstrates the central paradox of Indianism: it had no place for Indians who wrote as themselves, only for poetry that required translation and mediation. Because these poems are assumed not to have “an author,” their editor can take on that role. For Cronyn, who was

⁴¹ George Cronyn, ed., *The Path on the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), xv.

simultaneously pursuing a career as a poet, becoming an editor of American Indian poetry allowed him to benefit from that poetry's symbolic capital much more directly than he would if he were editing work associated with named authors.

The Interpretations section serves a seemingly contradictory function. There, poets translate their perceptions of ethnographic Indigeneity into artistic Indigeneity, implying that Native American culture must be mediated through white aesthetics in order to signify as art. In *The Path on the Rainbow*, Corbin's "Indian Songs" are no longer grouped under that title, a change that mitigates Corbin's poetic authority. Now each section must stand on its own as a work of poetry ostensibly written by Corbin. But the presence of the more literal translations 200 pages earlier would make the extent, or lack thereof, of Corbin's "interpretations" evident to the collection's readers. Despite the cultural authority the collection implicitly grants her, this doubling undermines Corbin's status as author, separating her discovery and re-presentation of the songs from the aesthetic work she has done on them.

Since "interpreter" emphasizes what Corbin brings to the material, she is in an awkward position. Her awareness of this quandary, which goes to the heart of her aesthetics, is evident in her suppression of "Fear," one of the "Indian Songs" that had appeared in *Poetry*.

The odor of death
In the front of my body,
The odor of death
Before me—

Is there any one
Who would weep for me?
My wife

Would weep for me.⁴²

Other than its title and two small changes of diction in the first stanza, “Fear” contains no original material by Corbin; it is simply two of Densmore’s translations sutured together. Both of the poems that make up “Fear,” “Death Song of Namebines” and “Death Song,” appear as “Translations” earlier in the collection (Fig. 11).

DEATH SONG OF NAMEBINES
The odor of death
I discern the odor of death
in the front of my body.

DEATH SONG
Is there anyone who
would weep for me?
My wife
would weep for me.

Fig. 11. Image of *The Path on the Rainbow*, 22-23.

It seems reasonable to assume that Corbin omitted “Fear” because it too openly expressed the curatorial nature of her authorship, making distinct the very line she was troubling. And indeed, “Fear” resurfaces in the comfortably authorial environs of Corbin’s 1920 collection *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico*. This geographical displacement of the Chippewa from the Great Lakes to New Mexico reflects Corbin’s compositional strategy of lifting the two death songs from their anthropological contexts, a move that had, in

⁴² Corbin, “Indian Songs” *Poetry* (February 1917): 237.

turn, removed them from their ceremonial context in Chippewa culture, placing them in the realm of literary production. Corbin's main intervention is imbuing them with her artistic intentionality and authority, an authority granted by the institution of the little magazine, an institution that had not yet been recognized as such. Because it was new, and an alternative to popular, mass-circulation magazines, the little magazine could not appear as a monolith, and yet it quickly developed great authority because it determined the validity of newness. Corbin's role as editor gave her immense power, an authority the very nomenclature of the "little" magazine disavowed, making it all the more effective because unstated.

The reinstatement of "Fear" in *Red Earth* is an affirmation of the significance of this intentionality. By putting the songs together and circulating them in a single-author collection, Corbin affirms that she has done artistic work on them. And their overall meaning did change significantly. Taken on its own, the first stanza, "Death Song of Namebines," offers no reprieve for the dying speaker. But with "Death Song" appended to it, not only is there a wife who would weep for the dead warrior, but the introduction of the conditional in the second song—"would weep"—turns the earlier poem into a thought exercise rather than a ritual that acknowledges the inevitability of death. The title, "Fear," Corbin's lone compositional, as opposed to organizational, addition to the poem supports the reading that death is made hypothetical, a threat rather than a certainty. This huge shift in the meaning of the poems reveals Corbin recognizing and exploiting the expressive possibilities of her appropriations as collage.

In *Red Earth*, as in *Poetry*, "Fear" is included in "Indian Songs," but as in *Poetry*, it is unclear if these songs are meant to be understood as translations, interpretations, or

original work. The collection does have a Notes section, which Corbin dismissed as “stupid,” and explicitly told her publisher that she did not want the poems to directly reference, perhaps because it weakened their autonomy.⁴³ In the Notes, Corbin acknowledges that the songs are from the “literal translations of Miss Frances Densmore.” She does not, however, indicate that in the case of “Fear” the poems *are* Densmore’s literal translations.⁴⁴ Contemporary reviews of *Red Earth* reveal great discrepancies as to how readers understood the provenance and status of the poems. Some believed the entire collection to be translations;⁴⁵ others claimed all poems were original,⁴⁶ others complained about this very uncertainty.⁴⁷ The book itself destabilizes these categories as they interpenetrate each other within its covers. Whether or not Corbin intended to present the “Indian Songs” as her own, this was clearly the understanding of some readers. With these songs, Corbin demonstrates that, to a certain degree, the question of literal authorship is inconsequential. By associating her name with the songs in little magazines, anthologies, and finally her own collection, Corbin takes ownership of them, and their lingering alterity only adds to their cachet. Corbin’s request to be represented in the second edition of *The New Poetry* anthology by “Indian Songs” reveals

⁴³ Alice Corbin, Letter to Ralph Seymour. October 16, 1920. ACP.

⁴⁴ To emphasize Corbin’s appropriation of Densmore puts the critic in an ironic position because, of course, the larger appropriation here is of the Chippewa songs themselves, which are stripped of their function, their context, and their voice to become objects of scientific inquiry or aesthetic contemplation.

⁴⁵ *Current Opinion*, 21 April 1920. Clipping. ACP.

⁴⁶ *El Palacio*, 22 January 1920. Clipping. ACP.

⁴⁷ Babette Deutsch, *New York City Evening Post*, 21 February 1921. Clipping. ACP.

how completely her understanding of authorship and editorship had merged.⁴⁸ Ultimately, her co-editor Harriet Monroe chose other poems, but the request indicates that Corbin understood her selection and re-presentation of the “Indian Songs” as a form of authorship even if that authorship did not yet have the authorization of a defined collage aesthetics. Whatever Corbin’s artistic claims to the “Indian Songs” her legal claims were quite clear. The poems were hers. After they appeared in *Poetry*, various anthologizers wrote to her with requests to reprint that she accepted.⁴⁹

Revision

Corbin’s relationship with Harriet Monroe and *Poetry* came to an ugly end as the women struggled for control of and credit for the second edition of *The New Poetry*, which was released in 1923. Corbin’s tuberculosis had returned during the process of completing the first edition, precipitating her move to New Mexico and leaving Monroe to handle the bulk of the administrative labor of finishing the manuscript and obtaining permissions for over 300 poems by 102 poets. Although they are listed as co-editors, Monroe received two-thirds of the royalties, a split they agreed was fair since Corbin had selected most of the poems and shaped the editorial direction of the book. When Macmillan requested a second edition, both editors responded enthusiastically. The royalties they received for the anthology had been significant, far outstripping what either earned for her own poetry or through their editorship of *Poetry*. The anthology allowed them to cash in on their symbolic capital; updating it was an effort to maintain its position

⁴⁸ Alice Corbin Letter to Harriet Monroe, 1920. ACP.

⁴⁹ Louis Chalif, Letter to Alice Corbin, June 8, 1923. ACP.

as the dominant and best-selling modernist anthology. But Monroe effectively cut Corbin out of the editorial process, disregarding her suggestions and negotiating with the publisher behind her back, then decreeing that because their unequal distribution of “prestige, responsibility, and labor,” Corbin would receive only 25 percent of the royalties.⁵⁰ The irony of Monroe asserting the literary value of her superior “prestige” seems to have been lost on Corbin, who hired a lawyer and tried to stop publication of the book. Monroe relented, but both parties considered themselves grievously wronged, and Corbin resigned her—by this point largely ceremonial—post at *Poetry*.

This divorce from Monroe and *Poetry* stripped Corbin of the editorial apparatus that had been crucial to her development as a poet. The authority of her editorship had authorized her to serve as a translator of art that did not signify as modern poetry—paintings, minstrelsy, and Chippewa song—into art that did. It was not simply that her position at *Poetry* earned her the goodwill, or compliance, of other editors who published her work, or that as an editor she was exposed to new movements before they entered the mainstream of modernist practice. Most significant was her editorial authority, her right to select among the most ambitious poets of her generation, to offer suggestions about their work, to champion and dismiss. This authority perhaps felt creative, and she extended it into her own poetic practice. In this chapter, I have outlined how Corbin wrote a collage poetics that nonetheless insisted on its status as authorship. When the invisible underpinning of that authority, her place at *Poetry*, was removed, she faced a professional and artistic crisis. As Corbin began to rebuild her cultural authority as the doyenne of a New Mexican arts community, she capitalized on her circumstances by

⁵⁰ Harriet Monroe, Letter to Alice Corbin, 26 October 1921. ACP.

utilizing the strategies, both literary and extra-literary, of the “new poetry” to garner notice and respect for the regional poetry of New Mexico. Without the benefit of the shrinking monolith of *Poetry*, Corbin made a counterintuitive move, downplaying the extent and interest of her role as editor in order to obscure the artificiality of her newly formed institution, Indianism, which needed to seem natural in order to possess and endow symbolic capital.

The Turquoise Trail: An Anthology of New Mexico Poetry was edited by Corbin and published in Boston by Houghton Mifflin in 1928. In her dedication, Corbin equates “the covers of the book” to “the low-roofed adobe houses within whose walls most of the poems have, at one time or another, been shared in their manuscript form,”⁵¹ suggesting that the book is an expression of an already-formed community, not Corbin’s ordering hand. Corbin extends the “naturalness” of the collection’s organization to the composition of the poems themselves, which spring from the generative union of the authors’ talent and the surprisingly fecund “soil” of the New Mexican desert. While she identifies three primary “influences” on today’s New Mexican Poetry—the Indian, the Spaniard, and the Cowboy—she insists that

any influence of this sort is largely accidental, or incidental to creative expression. No lyric poet sets out to celebrate more than himself. But the subliminal influences of soil and atmosphere inevitably affect the expression of any poetry or artist who, consciously or unconsciously, is submerged in a new environment—particularly when that environment is as strange as it is new, as liberating as it is primal. Something of this sort has been happening to poets in New Mexico during the past decade, and this collection is merely a record of that happening.⁵²

⁵¹ Alice Corbin Henderson, *The Turquoise Trail: An Anthology of New Mexico Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928), Np.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xl.

Corbin's assertion that New Mexico, through its "soil," acts as a chemical agent on the poets allows her to conclude that their poetry must be understood as original, even if it may seem derivative. The status of the book that contains this gloss as "merely a record" further effaces the editorial work of the collection, again in the service of authorizing the poems as organic, non-derivative, original, the very concepts she denied 15 years earlier in "Modernity." In fact, *The Turquoise Trail* represents a total reversal of the thesis of "Modernity," a reversal so exact that it reveals the same logic. While "Modernity" argued that the apparently new is just the old (or/as foreign) repackaged, in her framing of *The Turquoise Trail*, Corbin argues that while these new poems may look like copies of older works, the resemblance is not due to influence but a shared environment.

By placing cowboy poems alongside Spanglish ones alongside those written in the voices of Pueblo and Navajo Indians, Corbin effectively downplays the very idea of influence through a multiplicity of sources. Despite her claims of organic composition, the anthology utilizes collage to authorize itself and the individual poems, taking multiple originals and mixing them up until the new construction becomes the dominant. This move represents a conscious effort to reframe the New Mexican scene as artistically relevant, against many of the poems themselves, which seem to have no such aspirations. While the collection does include work by D. H. Lawrence, Carl Sandburg, and other established modernists who had passed through New Mexico, the bulk of its local contributors write a different, more traditional, style of poetry. One such example is Stanley Vestal, the first Rhodes Scholar from Oklahoma, who meditates in "Kit Carson's Last Smoke":

'I'd ruther die on my pins' Kit said,
'With the bull meat under my belt,

Than to die in my bed by inches
Like a beaver trapped for his pelt.⁵³

If poems like Vestal's are to register as art rather than doggerel, it is because of their context and framing in the collection. It is Corbin's role as editor, despite her attempts to disguise it, that proves the most creative and artistically relevant, especially in its dialogue with her own work, which relies on the same strategies of placement and curation to achieve its effects.

The title of the book comes from the trade route between Spanish conquistadors and Pueblo Indians, a poetically named place of commercial contact and exchange. After summarizing this history Corbin abruptly concludes "Hence the significance of both the title and the sub-title of this book..."⁵⁴ The ellipses say a great deal. Paired with the vague "hence," they suggest that the connection is something Corbin does not want to state directly, perhaps because it too openly acknowledges the collection's similarity to older commercial modes of conquest and exploitation. The design of the book itself, which would constitute a significant form of its marketing, further yokes it to this ambivalent origin. Its turquoise color declares that it represents the treasure, coming naturally from the earth, not the trade that made it available. *The Turquoise Trail* also resembles a Western novel in that the subtitle is not included on the cover and Corbin's name is writ large, indicating authorship more than the more modest gathering she herself describes. Inside the book, Corbin diminishes her editorship to give to the poems artistic legitimacy, but on the cover "Alice Corbin Henderson" helps associate the work with the

⁵³ Stanley Vestal, "Kit Carson's Last Smoke," in Corbin, *Turquoise Trail*, 147.

⁵⁴ Corbin, *Turquoise Trial*, viii.

“new poetry” and *The New Poetry*, because they are curated and author-ized by the same person.⁵⁵

While the book is edited by “Alice Corbin Henderson,” it contains poems by “Alice Corbin,” the first of which, “El Rito de Santa Fe,” seems, like the collection itself, to be in dialogue with her own “Modernity.” If “Modernity” represents Corbin’s attempt to write a modern poem that both rejects and enacts the derivativeness of modern art, “El Rito de Santa Fe” (The Rite of Santa Fe) revises this position slightly but significantly, locating the art in the act of borrowing. It begins by observing: “This valley is not ours, nor these mountains / Nor the names we give them” echoing the disavowals of the earlier work.⁵⁶ This familiar invocation of an irretrievably lost indigenous past enables the poem’s final passage in which dead Indians live on in white poets who offer up their remains—“white bones / Washed clean and bare by the sun”—for aesthetic contemplation.

Let us build a monument to Time
That knows all, sees all, and contains all,
To whom these bones in the valley are even as we are:
Even Time’s monument would crumble
Before the face of Time,

⁵⁵ Corbin wrote under the name “Corbin” and edited under the name “Corbin Henderson.” Even in this volume with “Corbin Henderson” on the cover, the table of contents lists the author of the poems as “Corbin.” The continued use of her maiden name reveals the poet’s investment in titles and framing. Any writing attached to “Alice Corbin” must be understood as poetry because the persona existed exclusively in the pages of modernist little magazines. This distinction between the editor and the poet is significant, as Corbin will lay claim to the work of others through the simple act of citing it under her pen name. That this name is not a dramatically distinct nom de plume does not make it any less effective as an authorial persona. Her superficially insignificant decision to publish and edit under different names reveals a preoccupation with the power of framing that is a key element of Corbin’s increasingly audacious appropriations.

⁵⁶ Corbin, “El Rito Santa Fe,” in *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico* (Chicago: R.F. Seymour, 1920), 13.

And be as these white bones
Washed clean and bare by the sun...⁵⁷

Corbin's repetition of the word "time" makes it cyclical rather than linear, allowing contemporary poets to move through time as they do through the tourist space of the nation, picking up fragments to bring to the center, to frame and to name as their own.⁵⁸ In this poem, Corbin tacitly acknowledges the violence of her racial appropriations, which are figured as dismemberment. But she defends this sacrificial "rite" by arguing for its aesthetic value. The beautiful bones that the poem presents to its reader cannot come from the source culture, which is figured as dead, but only from the modern artist who sees their value and beauty. Corbin's valorization of the collector represents what I have argued is the encoded origin of collage, its symbolic violence giving way to a formal schematization of that violence.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ This circular representation of time is itself an appropriation of a perceived "Indian" belief.

CHAPTER II

A “CURIOUSLY IRRECONCILABLE INHERITANCE”: LYNN RIGGS AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF QUEER ALLUSION

An absorbed race has its curiously irreconcilable inheritance. It seems to me the best grade of absorbed Indian might be an intellectual Hamlet, buffeted, harassed, victimized, split, baffled—with somewhere in him great fire and some granite. And a residual lump of stranger things than the white race may fathom.

—Lynn Riggs, Letter to Barrett Clark

Something crowding in,
Tender ah, and stony,
Has begun again
Asking alimony.

—Lynn Riggs, “Hamlet Not the Only”



Fig. 12. Lynn Riggs with miniature set.
<http://www.statesymbolsusa.org/Oklahoma/TheaterLynnRiggs.html>

Poet—Santa Fe

Perhaps more than any other poet, Lynn Riggs occupies the contested intersection of Modernist and American Indian poetry, mortgaging his Cherokee allotment in Oklahoma to finance his move to arts colony Santa Fe in 1923. There he joined a loosely affiliated group of writers developing a regional style that relied, in part, on a unique form of quotation, mining ethnographic journals for transcriptions of American Indian songs, which they placed in little magazines and later their own collections.¹ These print culture translations at once participate in and disrupt a long tradition of whites in the US writing for, as, and about Indians, from Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" (1855) to Hart Crane's "Powhatan's Daughter" section of *The Bridge* (1930).² The re-presentation of ethnographic materials authorized a historically unique phenomenon that I call Indianism, as translation became interpretation became original "Indian" work by white poets. The white poet Mary Austin infamously glossed her own Indian compositions, explaining, "when I say that I am not, have never been, nor offered myself as an authority of things Amerindian, I do not wish to have it understood that I may not, at times, have succeeded in being an Indian."³

¹ This practice is the focus of Chapter One. For a typical example, see Alice Corbin's "Indian Songs" in the February 1917 issue of *Poetry*, 9.5 (February 1917): 234, and later her own collection, *Red Earth* (1920).

² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Hiawatha* (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1983).

Hart Crane, *The Bridge; a Poem* (New York: H. Liveright, 1930).

³ Mary Hunter Austin, *The American Rhythm; Studies and Reexpressions of Amerindian Songs, by Mary Austin* (Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), 41.

The belief that a non-Native writer could assume an “Indian” style was not, as one might expect, based on the formal influence of ethnographic texts. Quite the opposite, it rested on a powerful conception of poetic originality paired with a determinative understanding of geography.⁴ In Alice Corbin’s words, “No lyric poet sets out to celebrate more than himself. But the subliminal influences of soil and atmosphere inevitably affect the expression of any poet or artist who, consciously or unconsciously, is submerged in a new environment—particularly when that environment is as strange as it is new, as liberating as it is primal.”⁵ Here Corbin articulates the widely held belief that the mind of the poet is acted upon by his or her physical surroundings so that apparently derivative work must be understood as original; white poets do not copy Indians but share their space and therefore their subjectivity.

Riggs had come to Santa Fe, the epicenter of Indianism, at the urging of Witter Bynner, who was concerned that a culture of conservatism in Oklahoma was contributing to Riggs’s deepening depression. The older poet suggested that 24-year-old Riggs leave the University of Oklahoma in Norman to seek treatment for tuberculosis at the Sunmount Sanitarium, where Corbin, Yvor Winters, and Bynner himself were or had been patients.⁶ Beyond his immediate concern for Riggs’s mental health, Bynner hoped the move would allow him to make the social and artistic connections necessary for a successful literary career. At the University of Oklahoma, Riggs edited the literary

⁴ I see the concepts of “racially authentic” and “lyrically original” poetry as cognates. Both endorse the possibility of a poetry free of the contamination of intertextuality.

⁵ Alice Corbin Henderson, ed., *The Turquoise Trail; an Anthology of New Mexico Poetry*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1928), xi.

⁶ The role of convalescence and the identity of the convalescent represent another level of performance and authenticity in Santa Fe.

magazine and newspaper and appeared in mass circulation magazines such as H.L. Mencken's *Smart Set* and *The Overland Monthly*.⁷ These publications validated him as a poet within the University of Oklahoma community, but their broader relevance and authority had been supplanted by experimental little magazines and the very different sort of poetry that they cultivated. Aware of this divide between elite and popular taste, Bynner, a resolutely, often grumpily, traditional poet, parodied the avant garde by inventing his own school of modern poetry, the Spectras, and assuming the alternative print culture identity of Emanuel Morgan, a louche aesthete. As Morgan, Bynner gained access to journals that were not interested in the more conventional verse he wrote under his own name. The Spectras' success, which included a special issue of *Others* magazine, proved, at least to Bynner, the paramount importance of image and authorial persona to the new poetry.⁸ By getting Riggs out of Oklahoma and the popular press and into the modernist hotbed of Santa Fe, Bynner gave him the connections necessary to redefine himself and his work.⁹

Riggs's relocation corresponds to rapid changes in his poetic style and print culture identity. Before 1923, most of his poems have varying length iambic lines

⁷ *The Smart Set*, founded in 1900, functioned as an avant garde magazine in the 1910s, but by 1920 had shifted to a more conservative, establishment position.

⁸ Suzanne W. (Suzanne Wintch) Churchill, "The Lying Game: Others and the Great Spectra Hoax of 1917," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 15.1 (2005): 23–41.

⁹ In the 1923, Oklahoma had only been a state for 15 years and, like Santa Fe, was a place where Indians and whites were in frequent, if fraught, contact. While Santa Fe capitalized on its heterogeneous identity, Oklahoma arguably attempted to white wash it, an effort exemplified by and thematized in *Oklahoma!*, which was based on Riggs's play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. I discuss *Oklahoma!* in depth in Chapter Three but here note that Riggs left what had been "Indian Territory" to a place that signified as Indian Territory.

arranged in quatrains with an abcb rhyme scheme. The poem, "Puritans," which appeared in *The Smart Set* in 1922 is typical.¹⁰

In the forest lurking,
Schemed the known foes,
But there were savage enemies
Other than those:

In their heads prowling
And prying at will,
Little eager questionings
Would not be still,

Whispered to their senses,
"Come—what's a crime?
What's a body good for
Now or any time?"

And they could never be happy;
They were meshed in an iron mesh
By the fear of God and damnation
And the feel of flesh.¹¹

The poem's subtle entanglement of sexuality and Indigeneity, its coded language, its deliberately archaic tone all endure in Riggs's mature style, but in the context of *The Smart Set*, the poem signifies as poetry through its rhymed quatrains, which domesticate or mask its more challenging and transgressive features. In the 144 pages of that August 1922 issue there are twelve poems, eight of which are similarly structured in rhymed quatrains. As a young and unestablished poet, Riggs had gained entry to the periodical by assuming its dominant style. This strategy is a form of allusion, where the source text is the periodical itself.

¹⁰ Other Riggs poems that fit the pattern include "Wanderer's Song," *The Smart Set*, 68.2 (June 1922): 29, "Though the Brightness Beckon," *ibid*: 58, and "The Jester," *ibid*: 126.

¹¹Lynn Riggs, "Puritans," *The Smart Set*, 68.4 (August 1922): 2. Because Riggs's poems are out-of-print and largely unknown, I will quote those discussed at length in their entirety.

A year later, in August of 1923, "Rhythm of Rain," appeared in *Poetry*.¹²

RHYTHYM OF RAIN

I

Out of the barrenness of earth,
and the meager rain---
Mile upon mile of exultant
Fields of grain.

Out of the dimness of morning—
Sudden and stark,
A hot sun dispelling
The hushed dark.

Out of the bleakness of living,
Out of unforgivable wrongs,
Out of the thin, dun soil of my soul—
These songs!

II

Only the rhythm of rain
Can ease my sorrow, end my pain.

He was a willful lad,
Laughter the burden he had;

Songs unsung haunted his mouth,
Velvet as soft airs from the languid south;

He was sprung from the dawn,
Flame-crested. He is gone!

Only the lashing silver whips
Of the rain can still my lips...

The poem begins with the familiar rhymed quatrains, which conclude on a triumphant note of poetic transubstantiation, "Out of the thin, dun soil of my soul-- / these songs!". But the poem does not end there. A second section follows, in which rhymed couplets replace the quatrains. The couplets interrogate the assured optimism of the first section,

¹² Lynn Riggs, "Rhythm of Rain," *Poetry*, August (1923): 252-253.

supplanting a unified first-person speaker with a fractured voice that alternates between the first and third person, undoing the powerful lyric subjectivity that the first section celebrated to narrate the disappearance of that traditional poet, “He was sprung from the dawn, / Flame-crested. He is gone!” and to arrive at a more ambivalent, modernist voice, “Only the lashing, silver whips / Of the rain can still my lips...” The replacement of the exclamation mark with an ellipsis signals Riggs’s inauguration into modernist print culture as he shifts from a poetic community defined by popular recognition of traditional forms to an elite taste for fragmentation, uncertainty, and experimentation.¹³ Both “The Puritans” and “The Rhythm of Rain” allude to the journals that contain them. These allusions are not superficial; they shape the poems’ structures and voices, demonstrating the interdependence of the work of art and its market. Riggs made his living as a playwright, and his poems might be understood to work like characters in a drama, characters defined by those who surround them and the spaces that they occupy. While a piece fitting the magazine that presents it is a rather obvious feature of print culture, Riggs’s poems do not always simply “fit,” they also speak back to the institutions that they simultaneously align themselves with. In Santa Fe, Riggs forms close relations with the editors of *Poetry*, *Palms*, and *Laughing Horse* and develops a poetic style in dialogue with the schools and conventions of modernism rather than the more stable poetry of the popular press.

Riggs’s persona changed with his poetry. At the University of Oklahoma, he dated women and was briefly engaged to a “beauty queen with raven hair and violet

¹³ Or, from the field of large-scale to restricted production.

eyes.”¹⁴ In Santa Fe, he began to live openly as gay. In some sense, Riggs’ story is familiar, the poet leaving the provinces for an artistic center where he sheds dated habits, sexual and metric. But Riggs was aware from the start that Santa Fe’s racial masquerade and appropriation went hand in hand with its liberality and its art. It was Corbin, after all, who served as his ambassador to *Poetry*. Writers played cowboy, Indian, and Mexican, sometimes simultaneously, embracing the performative nature of identity, which extended to sexuality and to their writing.¹⁵ The freedom of a woman to have multiple partners (Mabel Dodge Lujan) or a man to live with other men (Spud Johnson) is counter intuitively tied to the conservative logic of settler colonialism.¹⁶ It is the pyrrhic exceptionality of the frontier, where a carnivalesque freedom is allowed, even encouraged, as U.S. society achieves a critical mass that will soon suppress these very practices.¹⁷ As Riggs changes his style to conform to modernist norms, his work is simultaneously, if more subtly, shaped by a concurrent desire to critique this very culture,

¹⁴ Phyllis Braunlich, *Haunted by Home: The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs*, 1st ed (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 6. Braunlich’s desire to cast Riggs’s as essentially heterosexual is one of the many troubling aspects of her nonetheless useful biography of him.

¹⁵ I follow Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism* in my understanding of racial masquerade as a performance that feels radical but is actually conservative. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Scott Lauria Morgensen, “Settler Homonationalism: Theorizing Settler Colonialism Within Queer Modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16.1 (2010): 105–131.

¹⁷ The unconventional artists of Santa Fe were appalled that other, less avant garde communities would follow them to New Mexico. Of course, their presence marked the first of such colonizations. F. Burke, “An Artists’ Home: Gender and the Santa Fe Culture Center Controversy,” *Journal of the Southwest* (2004): 351.

which he values but also thinks racist, provincial, and bourgeois.¹⁸ Allusion enables Riggs to meld affinity and critique while also developing a theory of time and poetic relation.

Skull and Bones : Allusion and Quotation

I concluded my consideration of Alice Corbin with a discussion of “El Rito de Santa Fe,” which appeared in her 1928 anthology of New Mexican poetry, *The Turquoise Trail*. Ostensibly honoring Santa Fe’s Indigenous cultures, the poem’s “rito” or “ritual” is a sacrificial one, reducing those cultures to “white bones / Washed clean and bare by the sun,” allowing Corbin and the rest of the New Mexican literary community to become their inheritors and surrogates.¹⁹ An evolutionary logic underwrites Corbin’s poetry and practice, which locates the Indigenous cultures of Santa Fe and its surroundings in the past, making them available for an appropriation of voice that parallels that of land. Her quotation of Chippewa songs in “Indian Songs” is here represented metaphorically as the discovery, presentation, and aestheticization of Indian bones. Since *The Turquoise Trail* represents colonial thinking at its most magical, with newly arrived poets staking their claim to “New Mexico,” a code word for Indian, Mexican, and cowboy subjectivities and

¹⁸ Riggs burlesqued Santa Fe in his lost play, *El Pasatiempo* or *The Primitives*. His notes describe Anglos flocking to New Mexico “to become primitive” in naïve and offensive ways, costuming themselves “outrageously” as penitents and Pueblos. As I will discuss, his play *Russet Mantle* may also be read as a sly critique of Santa Fe artists by depicting them as their self-declared enemies, bourgeois newcomers.

¹⁹ Rayna Green explains that apparent identification with “Indians” is often a form of wishful genocide, speaking for and as them performs their extinction, which would allow the appropriators to play Indian without challenge or complication. Rayna Green, “The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe,” *Folklore* 99.1 (January 1, 1988): 30–55.

forms,²⁰ the inclusion of a Cherokee poet would seem to undermine the anthology's overarching project of substitution. But, despite current critical consensus to the contrary, Riggs did not at the time publically identify himself as Cherokee, and his poems that appear in *The Turquoise Trail*—"Spring Morning—Santa Fe," "A Letter," "The High Words," and "Morning Walk—Santa Fe"—seem to confirm Corbin's faith in the power of New Mexican regionalism and geographical determinism. As the "Santa Fe" appended to two of the titles suggests, the poems are self-consciously regional and characterized by a Williamsian commitment to things, in this case a litany of Santa Fe-chic signifiers, which they catalogue but generally refuse to analyze overtly. In "Spring Morning-Santa Fe," the speaker simply describes what surrounds him as the hours of the morning tick by.

The water in the acequia came down
At the stroke of nine; and watery clouds were lifting
Their velvet shadows from the little town;
Gold fired the pavement where the leaves were shifting.²¹

The poem is structured around close observation conveyed in metaphoric language. Adjectives like "watery" and "velvet" offer glimpses of the speaker's subjectivity, but our access is limited to noting the care with which the poem attacks its task of depicting picturesque Santa Fe. If the poems wear the same armor that many of Williams's do, they also share his vulnerability, establishing that every utterance, even the most casual

²⁰ The cowboy's inclusion in this group of excluded "others" hints at the centrality of class as well as race in authorizing such appropriations. A "lower" class fits into the progressive evolutionary perspective, as inherently incapable of art and therefore as available for appropriation as a "lower" race. T.S. Eliot makes this racial argument in "War-paint and Feathers," *The Athenaeum* 17 (1919): 78 and demonstrates it through classed quotation in *The Waste Land* as in lines 152-165.

²¹ Lynn Riggs, "Morning Walk—Santa Fe," in Corbin, *The Turquoise Trail*, 113.

or apparently objective, is an act of self-portraiture. This implicit Freudianism is most fully realized in “A Letter.”²²

I don't know why I should be writing to you,
I don't know why I should be writing to anyone;
Nella has brought me yellow calendulas,
In my neighbor's garden is sun.

In my neighbor's garden chickens, like snow,
Drift in the alfalfa; bees are humming;
A pink dress, a blue wagon play in the road;
Guitars are strumming.

Guitars are saying the same things
They said last night—in a different key.
What they have said I know, so their strumming
Means nothing to me.

Nothing to me is the pale pride of Lucinda
Washing her hair—nothing to anyone:
Here, in a black bowl, are calendulas,
In my neighbor's garden, sun.

Like “Morning Walk-Santa Fe,” the poem seems devoted to recording a series of pretty images. But it opens by flirting with a tense intimacy—“I don't know why I should be writing to you”—that is quickly generalized—“I don't know why I should be writing to anyone”—and then dismissed as rhetorical because what are words and people beside the truth of yellow calendulas? The lure of registering the external world offers an alternative to the uncertainties of the relationship that motivates the letter. But in representing this evasion in the poem itself, Riggs recasts the seemingly objective as defensive and therefore revealing.

The next stanza veers away from the personal, describing a scene through the impressionistically objective way it registers upon the senses, rather than how the mind

²² Lynn Riggs, “A Letter,” in Corbin, *Turquoise Trail*, 114.

interprets and contextualizes it. Chickens “drift” “like snow,” bees “hum,” in the distance “a pink dress, a blue wagon play in the road.” But the immediacy of the language is mitigated by its allusive quality. It is impossible to read the stanza without recalling Williams’s “Red Wheelbarrow,” which had originally appeared without a title in *Spring and All*.²³ The poems share white chickens, with Riggs substituting a blue wagon for the red wheelbarrow. More significantly, the allusion emphasizes the psychological significance of observation, which is framed by Williams’s “So much depends” and by Riggs’s “I don’t know why.” Williams functions as an embedded key, revealing the stakes of Riggs’s speaker’s guarded intimacy.

The final stanza affirms this link between emotion and observation—“Nothing to me is the pale pride of Lucinda”—only to again generalize the sentiment: “nothing to anyone.” It ends with another reference to the calendulas, this time describing their presentation in a black bowl. Riggs’s choice to call marigolds calendulas makes the flower difficult to identify and so to visualize, transmuting the ordinariness of a common plant into something exotic and esoteric. In a poem seemingly dedicated to precise visual description, the equally precise vocabulary disables that transparency and draws attention to the word itself. “Calendula” is a Latin diminutive, meaning little clock or little calendar, perhaps a pun for “little time,” placing the poem in allusive relation to the *carpe diem* genre exemplified by Robert Herrick’s “To the Virgins, To Make Much of Time,” which advises the addressee to

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;

²³ William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* (New York: New Directions, 2011), 74. The first edition of *Spring and All* circulated very narrowly, but I think it is quite possible that a copy was passed around the close-knit Santa Fe poetic community.

And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.²⁴

In Herrick's poem, flowers stand in for sex, which is described euphemistically, "gather ye rosebuds," while also embodying death, which is referenced directly, "tomorrow will be dying." Riggs's poem does not discuss sex or death directly, instead burying them in etymology and intertexts. The black bowl that holds the yellow flowers translates Herrick's bawdy argument into a stark and abstract symbolism, especially as the flowers cannot be precisely identified, so float—like the girl Riggs describes as simply "a pink dress,"—shapelessly in the black bowl. Death surrounds sex, conveying a coded despair in the sunny superficiality of local color.

The poem hides the *carpe diem* beneath its regionalism, but does not align itself fully with either. Rather than trumpet Riggs's Southwestern authenticity or seduce the "you" of the letters (although it may have accomplished both goals), the poem alludes to these genres only to carve out a space for itself in its difference from them. The flora of Santa Fe, and the sex it implies, cannot stave off the despair and death that is the poem's dénouement. If this reading seems depressing, Riggs's poetic strategy is more hopeful. The return of the *carpe diem*, a Renaissance form, suggests that death is not as absolute as we generally assume, a sentiment to which poem nods as its final line shifts from the black bowl to the sun.

"The Letter" itself becomes the object of allusion in Riggs's 1936 play, *Russet Mantle*. In the play, John Galt, an idealistic poet grifter, delivers the following speech while trying to ingratiate himself with the Kincaids, a rich Santa Fe family.

²⁴ Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175882>.

JOHN. Oh. [*Then as he remembers the bet he overlooked, following with his eyes the direction off right in which KAY is pointing.*] Ohhh!! [*He goes toward the right as he speaks.*] There are dozens of the most beautiful white chickens drifting in the alfalfa! Isn't that a sight? Like snow. If I settle in Santa Fe—which I mean to—I'll pass by here often just to look, if you don't mind.²⁵

Here, John praises the beauty of the Kincaids' chickens in the same metaphoric language, the same metaphors even, as the young poet Riggs uses to write a Santa Fe poem for an audience of wealthy, Anglo newcomers. The later work's allusion to the earlier poem alters both, connecting the character's subjectivity to the poet and giving textual support to an autobiographical reading of the play. More significantly, it parses a certain mode of seemingly impersonal poetic observation as self-conscious performance designed to appeal to a bourgeois audience looking for beautiful self-contained art, rather than the kind of art that the play ultimately represents, one of class critique. Riggs uses allusion to recast the poem, his most popular, as a deliberate manipulation of the Santa Fe poetry scene. Just as the poems that appeared in *The Smart Set* look like other poems in *The Smart Set*, Riggs wrote to an audience but not always in the way they may have liked or understood. "The Puritans" seems a straightforward critique of repressed sexuality, which places the reader comfortably above those who are "meshed in an iron mesh." But, as I will show, allusions between Riggs's poems make clear that the "iron mesh" does not refer simply to a Puritan distrust of sexuality but to heterosexuality generally, a view even the sophisticated audience of *The Smart Set* would have been unlikely to endorse.

The four poems included in *The Turquoise Trail* are all explicitly set in the morning or the bright "blue air" of midday. On the surface, they fit the optimistic nature of the collection, celebrating Santa Fe and the possibilities of New Mexican regionalism.

²⁵ Lynn Riggs, *Russet Mantle, and The Cherokee Night: Two Plays* (New York: Samuel French, 1936), 42.

But they also strain against and undercut the categories the anthology requires them to occupy. A broader sampling of Riggs’s poetry of the same period would fit even less harmoniously into Corbin’s regionalist melting pot. While these poems do not appear in the anthology, they nonetheless allude to it, especially “Skulls Like These,” which seems in uneasy dialogue with Corbin’s “Rito de Santa Fe.” In the dominant figures of these poems—bones and skulls—the key difference between her quotation and his allusion becomes evident.

“Skulls Like These” appears in Riggs’s first and only book of poetry, *The Iron Dish*, and critiques the implicit politics of its own bibliographic and literary framing, the single author collection as the apex or nadir of the poem-as-isolated-artifact.²⁶ The poem posits a culturally self-conscious indigenous subjectivity that refutes, and so makes visible, the naturalized aesthetics that would supplant it.

Skulls like these

Skulls like these
Inhabiting
Gardens given over
To spring
Can never flower
Again, or be
In their death
Sap for a tree.

Wide browed
But uncelestial,
They must keep
Their bestial
And undisintegrate
Identity
In a garden
Eternally.

²⁶ Lynn Riggs, *The Iron Dish* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1930), 33.

Like Corbin's bones, Riggs's skulls provide the occasion for and organize the poem. But her "Rito" attempts to "build a monument to time," celebrating a linear progression that requires one civilization to pass away and be replaced by another. The bones are beautiful because they are long dead and so evoke no sense of remorse or responsibility, only aesthetic pleasure and possibility. "Clean and bare" like a good imagist poem, they are disembodied, decontextualized, and defamiliarized. While in "War-Paint and Feathers," T.S. Eliot argues that Indian poetry is a fad "egged on by the New York and Chicago *intelligentsia*" and that its appeal is not the poetry itself but its "savage" creators,²⁷ Corbin's practice suggests that Eliot is missing the most crucial part of this history of reception. Perhaps the poetry so appeals to whites not because it was written by Indians but because it has been taken from them. The book Eliot reviews, *The Path on the Rainbow*, is ostensibly a celebration of Indian poetry, but, as Robert Dale Parker argues of such anthro-poetics more generally, its aestheticizing is also a colonization and there is no way to differentiate the two processes, which are ideologically inseparable.²⁸ Such poetic *quotations* of Indian verse, which operate according to a logic of defamiliarization, taking the song from its culture and putting it into the new context of a magazine or book, always involve symbolic violence made even more destructive by its effacement. In paying homage to the Indians, white writers take possession of their poems to preserve and present them. The implicit message is the same as that of salvage archeology, that the living culture can now be destroyed. Or, to follow Rayna Green's logic, it must be destroyed.

²⁷ T. S. Eliot, "War-paint and Feathers," *The Athenaeum* 17 (1919): 78.

²⁸ Robert Dale Parker, *The Invention of Native American Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 83.

In Santa Fe, social and poetic racial masquerade were often accompanied by a political commitment to the local Pueblo population and to Indian rights generally.²⁹ To understand Riggs it is essential to understand how much Corbin and her cohort idealized and valued the idea of Native Americans, while noting how those feelings interacted with and authorized artistic practices that were symbolically and literally destructive to Native Americans. Riggs's poem does just that. His skulls, in their specificity, insist on the subjectivity they once held and that Corbin's generic bones elide. "Undisintegrate," the skulls resist absorption by the "flowering" garden that surrounds them, refusing to participate in its economy of aestheticized procreation. Corbin's poem is enabled by the disappearance of "those who have lain her long years" because now she can speak for them. Riggs's skulls deny such successions in their refusal to decay "or be / in their death / sap for a tree." The skulls will not be quoted and aestheticized, so stand as reproofs to the garden that would contain them. As the garden has its naturalistic conventions, Riggs's poem begins with a familiar set of symbols—the skull and the garden, death and life—that it quickly sets about revising, as the skulls present-progressive "inhabiting" reveals them to be animate and intentional.

In the first stanza the skulls are not racialized but do signify as queer in their refusal either to procreate or die.³⁰ The first line of the second stanza, "Wide browed," brings ethnicity, via phrenology, into the skull's "undisintegrate / Identity." We learn

²⁹ Tisa Wenger, "Land, Culture, and Sovereignty in the Pueblo Dance Controversy," *Journal of the Southwest* 46. 2 (2004): 381.

³⁰ Here I accept Lee Edelman's conception of the queer as opposed to heteronormative narratives of futurity, narratives that are often mobilized to suppress people in the present. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

that as the skulls are other to the garden, they are also other to the reader, defined by their difference from a perceived norm—their wide brows. The shared characteristic suggests race, as does “uncelestial,” signifying in the context of the preceding line as “not Asiatic” and in the lines that follow as “not heavenly.” The play between the two meanings defines the skulls through their refusal to settle into knowability. They remain constant in their ambivalence, even as they “must keep” themselves imprisoned in the garden that has grown up around them, possibly paralleling the situation of the Pueblos in Santa Fe, the more general condition of Native American tribes in relation to the United States, or the fragments of “Indian” poetry that find themselves in modernist poems, magazines, and books. The skulls reveal the garden’s artifice, signaling the constructed nature of its naturalistic conventions.

If “Skulls Like These” seems to argue with Corbin’s “Rito,” it also speaks to *Hamlet* and the prince’s graveyard speech upon discovering the skull he holds belonged to the court jester, Yorick. But the poem does not quote *Hamlet*, which would formally invoke just the sort of succession it argues against. By contemplating skulls, the poem echoes without reproducing Hamlet’s contemplation of Yorick, in the process granting Hamlet’s wish in that scene. For Hamlet, more horrible than the deaths of Alexander and Caesar is the knowledge that their remains become “loam,” that they disappear.³¹ Riggs fulfills Hamlet’s unstated fantasy, which is not immortality but stasis, a death that isn’t decay and so necessarily carries the past into the present. The poem does this on several levels. Literally, the skulls remain. Figuratively, they embody the mode of allusion that

³¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 424, 5.1.200.

Riggs is theorizing: haunting, embodied, disruptive. Finally, the poem itself is allusive, forcefully enacting its own argument in its relation to *Hamlet*.

In the figure of the skulls, the poem brings together the Indian and queer. They are everything the garden wants to appropriate or forget. But they refuse to follow the law of the garden and so make themselves its center, much as Wallace Stevens's jar "made the slovenly wilderness / surround that hill."³² While the man-made jar turns nature "no longer wild," Riggs' skulls insist on a wild truth that the very existence of the garden must suppress. The poem's overt hostility to them, as evidenced by its description of them as "bestial," mirrors that of the garden and connects the poem to the settler community that would embrace its particular aesthetic. The garden's separation from nature parallels that of the modernist poem, both of which are threatened by an "other" that would question their aestheticization. "Skulls Like These," spare and modern, makes visible its supposed isolation, which it then surrenders.

Hamlet Not the Only

If "Skulls Like These" denies the separation between past and present, living and dead, we can flesh out Riggs's use of allusion by continuing to trace his most frequent intertext, *Hamlet*. In a March 20, 1929 letter to his agent, Barrett Clark, Riggs describes his idea for a new play, *The Cherokee Night*, conceptualizing Indigeneity through the figure of the Danish prince.³³

³² Wallace Stevens, "Anecdote of the Jar," in *Harmonium* (New York, A. A. Knopf, 1923), 112.

³³ Braunlich, *Haunted by Home*, 80.

An absorbed race has its curiously irreconcilable inheritance. It seems to me the best grade of absorbed Indian might be an intellectual Hamlet, buffeted, harassed, victimized, split, baffled—with somewhere in him great fire and some granite. And a residual lump of stranger things than the white race may fathom.

Since its inclusion in Phyllis Braunlich's *Haunted by Home: The Life and Letters of Lynn Riggs*, the Hamlet passage has been cited in nearly every critical consideration of Riggs and has become the Rosetta stone for deciphering his position on "the Indian." But scholars have not commented on a passage that comes later in the same letter. Writing about his application to have his Guggenheim fellowship renewed, Riggs observes, "[b]y the time this reaches you, the Guggenheim awards will be out, and I shall be—or not be—on the list."³⁴ By echoing Hamlet, Riggs aligns himself with the "absorbed Indians" he describes, an affinity he never publically acknowledged.³⁵ In an undated gloss of *The Cherokee Night* that was clearly written after the play's completion, Riggs returns to and revises his comparison of Hamlet and "the descendants of the Cherokee," but suggests that the metaphor breaks down because of Hamlet's superior ability to navigate the complexities of his situation: "If the Cherokee had a mind and an education as happy as Hamlet's he might see his way through his emotional miasma. But he has not. And his night is usually black with storm, and unlighted by lamp or star."³⁶ Riggs's characterization of Hamlet's success initially seems a repression of the play's conclusion,

³⁴ Lynn Riggs, letter to Barrett Clark, March 1929. BCP.

³⁵ My understanding that Riggs did not publically identify himself as Cherokee is at odd with most current considerations of him. I base my conclusion on Riggs's interviews, author notes, the public biography he provided his agent, Barrett Clark. Nowhere in these materials does Riggs identify himself as Cherokee. This is not to say he did not think of himself as Cherokee, and in letters to friends he alluded to his ethnicity openly, if ironically.

³⁶ Riggs, "The Cherokee Night," undated. LRPM.

the violent death of every main character except Horatio. But Riggs positions Hamlet's "happiness" relative to the assimilated Indian, thereby establishing the extent of the tragedy of their, and his own, situation. In alluding to *Hamlet* without acknowledging its tragic end, Riggs hints at a more radical politics than he can overtly express, a violent stage clearing as the only resolution to a history of irreconcilable betrayal. Hamlet also provides the model of using playwriting for political critique.

Hamlet's play within a play suggests a way of understanding the potentials and limits of allusion.³⁷ Hamlet chooses *The Murder of Gonzago* because it resonates with Claudius's murder of his brother, Hamlet's father, and Hamlet hopes that, in seeing the play, Claudius will be affected by the allusion and definitively reveal his guilt. As in "Skulls Like These," allusion offers a way of reversing the power dynamics between past and present, not through nostalgia, but an active haunting that has the potential to change the future. Allusion grants Hamlet plausible deniability; he speaks under cover, using the illusive distance between art and politics to his advantage, a strategy Riggs seems to employ in his political romantic comedy, *Russet Mantle*. Its title comes from the lines in *Hamlet* that are spoken by Horatio to Marcellus at the end of the act in which the guards see the ghost of King Hamlet and debate whether it is real. The next act opens with Claudius giving his speech about "mirth in funeral" and "dirge in marriage," as he uses poetic language to reconcile the irreconcilable and so relativize his betrayal. The shift from the ghost's silence to Claudius's verbiage makes words themselves suspect, and

³⁷ Blake M. Hausman has explored the connection between Hamlet's play-within-a-play and Sherman Alexie's "Indian trap doors" in "Alexie's Nutshell: Mousetraps and Interpenetrations of The Business of Fancydancing and Hamlet," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 22.1 (2010): 76–112. He also mentions Riggs, citing the oft-quoted "irreconcilable inheritance" letter.

Riggs's reference to the play, the dawn that separates night and day, the realms of the ghost and the living, locates his play at this ambivalent moment.

That *Russet Mantle* takes *Hamlet* rather than one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies as its intertext positions the audience to understand Riggs's own play as a mousetrap, an allusion to an allusion to an allusion. Hamlet wants to "catch the conscience of the King," and Riggs places his audience, which is implicitly white and metropolitan, in Claudius's position. The play begins as a light comedy, with witty bickering between a middle-aged husband and wife, a dizzy Southern belle, her sexually adventurous daughter (who, Riggs imagined, could be played by Katherine Hepburn), and the arrival of a young drifter who disturbs the dynamics of the household. It ends with the marriage of the daughter and the drifter, a classic romantic comedy resolution with nothing in common with the tragedy that gives the play its title. But the play's bed plots and banter have an intermittent audience, the Pueblo Indian Salvador, who plays no part in the plot, only walking into the house occasionally and asking for cigarettes. By the racial conventions of the day, it would be reasonable to assume that Salvador was there for comic relief, and no reviews that I have found even mention him. He is as invisible to the audience as he is to the play's characters, who dismiss him as "no one at all."³⁸ The relation to *Hamlet* so clearly established by the play's conspicuously allusive title but left unsatisfied by its primary plot offers another way to read Salvador, as King Hamlet, haunting the castle that has been built on his displacement. In *Russet Mantle*, Riggs plays with the conventions of genre, turning the stock figure of the Indian into a serious, if subtle, political statement about U.S. Indian policy. If Salvador is King Hamlet, then that

³⁸ Lynn Riggs, *Russet Mantle, and The Cherokee Night*, 80.

must make the protagonist, John Galt, Prince Hamlet, establishing a fraternal bond between the boy from the Midwest and the seemingly autochthonous Indian. As already discussed, intertextuality between “A Letter” and *Russet Mantle* establishes an autobiographical connection between Riggs and John. With the further structural relation between Salvador and John established through *Hamlet*, we can connect Riggs to Hamlet, another veiled declaration of Riggs’s status as an ambivalently absorbed Indian. These connections are the closest Riggs comes to a public reckoning with his heritage and reveal the link between his understanding of his own Indigeneity and his literary work, particularly his reliance on and faith in allusion. Hamlet is racked by the loyalty he feels to a dead father who has been murdered by his uncle who has now assumed the role of father, either feigning or falling into madness as a response to the impossibility of his position. Claudius perfectly encapsulates the relation Riggs posits between the absorbed Indian and U.S. culture—it killed his father and now calls itself father. If Hamlet will play along, he survives, but by questioning and obsessing over the injustice he brings tragedy on himself and everyone else. In *Russet Mantle*, Riggs alludes to the parallels between Claudius and the U.S., but doing so in such a subtle way that the audience is unlikely to perceive the critique. This might be understood as a lack of nerve, but it also can be ascribed to Riggs’s ambivalent relation to modernist difficulty, his tendency to turn to complex and layered forms, even as he questioned the politics of modernism more broadly.

For Riggs, the allusive potential of *Hamlet* reaches its culmination or anti-climax in the late poem “Hamlet Not the Only,” probably written in the early 1950s, unpublished during Riggs’s lifetime, and printed as “Hamlet Not the Only One” in Phyllis Braunlich’s

This Book, This Hill, These People in 1982.³⁹ The poem, with its tortured, often ungrammatical syntax and archaic language resists interpretation in much the same way as Hamlet's mad speech, forcing the poem's reader to occupy the role of Hamlet's interrogators and false friends. Here, the "lump of stranger stuff" that Riggs used to describe his Indian heritage is refigured as an invasive foreign mass.

Something crowding in,
Tender ah, and stony,
Has begun again
Asking alimony.

I believe this change in Riggs's portrayal of Indigeneity, from inherent to invading, reflects his evolving relationship with periodical culture and his imagined reader. Riggs's inability to find a publisher for the collection is presaged in and reflected by the poem itself. Denied circulation, Riggs's allusions can no longer function and the poem registers this breakdown by veering into incomprehensibility.

Anxious for the fee—
Blackmail, to be just.
I must pay to be
What I will, and must—

Single-minded if
That is in the cell,
So imperative
(It is possible.),

who would fardels bear.
Hamlet not the only
One to battle air,
Danish made, and lonely.

In the stanzas above, which conclude the poem, the speaker constantly revises and corrects himself: "Anxious for the fee-- / blackmail, to be just." In the penultimate stanza,

³⁹ Lynn Riggs, *This Book, This Hill, These People: Poems*. (Tulsa: Lynn Chase Pub. Co., 1982).

this revision breaks down into an internal dialogue of telegraphic language that is impossible for the reader to decipher. The sentence that contains the stanza is, without line breaks, “I must pay to be what I will, and must—single-minded if that is in the cell, so imperative (It is possible.), who would fardels bear.” Assuming there is not an error in Braunlich’s transcription, the rhyme, which recalls Riggs’s earliest forays into periodical culture, is the only structure that remains. The speaker recovers in the final stanza by recasting the poem as performance. In invoking *Hamlet*, the syntax becomes comprehensible again. But whereas in Riggs’s earlier engagement with the play, the prince is seen as an aspirational figure facing real foes, now he is paranoid, “not the only / one to battle air.” Riggs interpretation of him has changed. Hamlet has become mad, rather than a performer of madness. The distinction is one of audience. If Hamlet acts mad in front of other characters, he is cunning, but if he is alone, he is crazy. Because the poem did not circulate, it is closed; without audience, its allusions are necessarily incomplete and therefore incomprehensible.

The strange afterlife of the poem and the collection that was to have its name is almost too perfect, or tragic, a coda for Riggs’s career-long engagement with *Hamlet*. Renamed and reorganized by his biographer and chief critic Phyllis Braunlich, the book is released as *This Book, This Hill, These People*, to mark the diamond Jubilee of the state of Oklahoma. If Riggs’s early poems push back against the myths of progress and Manifest Destiny that led to the conversion of Indian Territory into the state of Oklahoma, his last collection is framed by its presentation as a celebration of those very values. Not only are the poems divided into folksy sections such as “Love Scenes and

Final Curtains” and “Battle Themes”; they are also illustrated with religious and heterosexually romantic cowboy pictures (see Figures 13 and 14).⁴⁰



Fig. 13. *This Book, This Hill, These People*, 54.

⁴⁰ I would eventually like to edit a volume that contains both *The Iron Dish*, which is now out-of-print, and *Hamlet Not the Only*, a draft of which can be found in Paul Green’s papers at the University of North Carolina.



Fig. 14. *This Book, This Hill, These People*, 19.

Illicit Intertexts: Self Allusion, Sameness, Desire

Riggs's prolonged engagement with *Hamlet* gives way to an even more radical application of allusion if we move from his intertextuality with Shakespeare to intertextuality within Shakespeare, specifically within his sonnets. Anyone who has taught the sonnets knows that, with the possible exception of 20, they are remarkably easy to naturalize—to take as brotherly or to make the addressee female—when taken individually. What allows the early sonnets to signify as something more sexually ambivalent is the way they build upon each other as the speaker moves from begging the subject to procreate, to saying he will preserve him in words (though they are a pale substitute for procreation), to saying that words and procreation complement each other well, to saying that his own words are superior to and more enduring than procreation, to frankly acknowledging same sex desire. Taken individually, the poems signify differently

than they do holistically, which is, of course, the nature of poetic language more generally. A queer reading of the sonnets then depends on making connections, both between poems and to their author—taboos, or apparent taboos, of the New Criticism, a mode of analysis that was coming to prominence as Riggs assembled his collection.⁴¹ The pervasiveness of the new critical ideology, this myth of the pure poem, is evident in *Palms*, a journal based out of Guadalajara and edited by Idella Purnell, to which Riggs was a frequent contributor. Early in the journal’s run, Purnell began to present poems anonymously with the explanation “the poem’s the thing,” as if divorcing the poem from its author proved that the author was meaningless for poetic interpretation and reception.⁴² Although Riggs participated in this experiment, his poems require the reader to think not of each poem as having an atomized, fictional poetic speaker, but of all poems being the work of a single consciousness. It is the same unifying principle that Shakespeare utilizes with his much discussed punning on “Will,”⁴³ inviting biographical readings and playing on the tension between public poetry and private desires. Riggs adopts this strategy in *The Iron Dish*, unifying the poems through a shared vocabulary in which words assume meanings that, once identified, allow them to signify in disruptive new ways.

⁴¹ “New Criticism can still be considered a movement, beginning after World War I with the critical work of modern poets and critics, especially T.S. Eliot, Richards, and somewhat later Ransom, culminating some 30 years later in the work of explicitly academic critics, such as Wellek, Wimsatt, and Brooks.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 692.

⁴² Idella Purnell Stone, *Palms*. Ed. Elmer Nicholas (Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico: Palms, 1923).

⁴³ Stephen Booth, *An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969).

Riggs establishes the rules for such a reading in “Charger,” the collection’s first poem.⁴⁴ A Shakespearean sonnet, the poem’s form is its own variety of allusion, connecting Riggs’s practice to Shakespeare’s and making the double or tripleness of language its subject.⁴⁵

Charger

And now the little chargers split the street—
Black and dappled, iron rusty, gray—
Rolling their velvet eyes toward spurring feet,
Beating the cobbles to a creamy spray.
All in their dazzling mail the riders sit
Secure and roweled, exquisites on leather.
Their hands are leaning from the silver bit,
Their lips are speaking of the chiseled weather.

Who will unlock the stable in the alley
Where gaunt limbs flex, and sandy eyes are peering
Past the bright cavalcade; who loose the sally
Of whip on flank? Those nimble feet uprearing
Claw at the boards; the brittle bit is banging.
By one red bolt the stable door is hanging.

The first stanza defines chargers as military horses and seems set in a medieval, or perhaps Shakespearean past, with chain-mailed riders and silver bits. It is a scene of privilege and apparent imperturbability. As the “secure” riders talk about “the chiseled weather,” the reader can almost hear their lock-jawed intonation. But the turn between the octave and the sestet, reinforced by a line break of white space, is extreme. The second stanza shifts from a descriptive to interrogative tone, asking who will release the other, less majestic horses from their stable in the alley. The meaning of charger now

⁴⁴ Riggs, “Charger,” in *ID*, 3.

⁴⁵ While the rhyme scheme is Shakespearean, the turn between the octave and sestet is Petrarchan.

shifts to “accuser,” in this case the one who will disrupt the display of pomp, circumstance, and stability that is, intriguingly, also linked to sexuality—the chargers are “beating cobbles to a creamy spray.” The line’s suggestiveness reveals that these figures are allowed a public sexuality, which only reinforces their power and authority, as differentiated from the desires of the alley, of the dark, whose very existence is seen to threaten this monopoly of legitimacy, which requires that the other horses stay hidden. The answer to the question that begins the stanza—“Who will unlock the stable in the alley?”—is the poet himself, who, in the fictional, quasi-historical world of the poem does just that, revealing the alternative to the stately privileged figures, showing that other possibilities exist, and noting that those other possibilities have been suppressed, locked up, so that the first meaning of charger will seem inevitable.

Writing about horses, Riggs says something significant about power and sexuality and also, crucially, about language. The poem hinges on the first meaning of the word giving way to the second, suggesting that the same word can hold inside it two radically different, antithetical, even hostile, meanings. Riggs here writes against the apparent stability of identity, suggesting that subject positions are determined by power relations, by narrative control which is always delusional, collusive, and potentially damaging. “Charger” celebrates disruption, with the beautiful procession interrupted by the “gaunt” “sandy eyed” horses of the alley storming into the light, by charger becoming charger. Notably, this action transpires in the corral of a sonnet. The form, with its regular meter and rhyme scheme, might seem a surprising place for a celebration of chaos, especially considering that by 1930 free verse was a well-established option. But perhaps the poem’s formal anachronism is part of its rebellion, as free verse, once codified as new,

had become convention and the wild otherness that the American poetic avant garde flaunted, and that Riggs experienced in New Mexico, had also become codified and hierarchical. This avant garde relied on both allying itself with and appropriating the identities of other ethnic (Hispanic and Indian) and socioeconomic (cowboys) groups who were then disenfranchised from artistic participation, doomed to be aped and represented by “real poets.”⁴⁶

In choosing the sonnet form, Riggs rebels against the convention that calls itself revolution.⁴⁷ And he finds, in the past, a form that can express the tensions between the social and the individual, a form that allows difference to express itself against a set pattern. His turn to the sonnet also suggests a disruption of temporality as it brings past practice into the present, showing that it is perhaps not so past after all. The first stanza, which describes the conventional scene, consists of five lines in iambic pentameter and three lines that break the pattern so that the apparent tranquility of the lines is undermined by their irregularity, the naturalness of the horsemen revealed to be constructed and sloppily so. None of the sextet lines are pentameter but all break that pattern in the same way, with eleven syllables. The stable in the alley represents a space of abundance—the extra syllable—and order, though not one that conforms to the set pattern.

Additionally, the sonnet form reveals the gaunt horses to be part of the pattern, not other to it, a status the procession would deny them. Even as the poem functions as an

⁴⁶ Riggs often embedded folk songs in his plays and favorably reviewed a collection of cowboy songs. He was committed to the artistic validity of all folk genres, which some critics have read as a further betrayal of his Indigenous identity.

⁴⁷ Mutlu Konuk Blasing makes a similar argument about James Merrill’s formalism in “Rethinking Models of Literary Change: The Case of James Merrill,” *American Literary History* 2.2 (1990): 299–317.

accusation, it also is a reclamation. A third meaning of charger is “dish,” which connects the poem individually to the collection that contains it. This connection is essential, as it establishes the centrality of allusion and interconnection to the book, the physical form of which ropes the poems off into a highly aestheticized space. Against such isolation, the poems establish an intricate intertextuality that is hinted at by the work’s title, which comes from the second poem in the collection, “Song of an Unholy Oracle.”⁴⁸

Be that placated
Monastic one—
Chill fingered, gated
From the sun!

Shrubs may be tended
With the shrunk wrist,
Oaks grow splendid
Unsun-kissed.

Furrows long fattened
May turn from sleep
Sprouting, flattened
Worms shorten and creep,

Feverish earth—
Field, thicket, plain—
Come to birth
Without pain.

In the beginning,
This was your wish:
To feed unsinning
At the iron dish.

Be that lone diner
On the grubby root---
You who want no finer
Disastrous fruit!

⁴⁸ Riggs, “Song of an Unholy Oracle,” in *ID*, 4.

The gate in the first stanza recalls the gated horses of “Charger,” locked in darkness, which is here associated with a forced celibacy. The poem then lists the ways in which living in darkness still allows for growth, even “splendid” growth, or at least the speaker used to “wish,” in the haunting if opaque lines “in the beginning / this was your wish / to feed unsinning / at the iron dish.” This stanza is very difficult to interpret, largely because “the iron dish” is so mysterious.

Within the poem, the stanzas seem to operate aphoristically rather than cumulatively, as the title, “Song of the Unholy Oracle” suggests. In their isolation, they are evocative but deny the satisfaction of a stable meaning. Their sphinxlike qualities invite the reader to treat them as riddles. To solve them it is necessary to reject “straight” interpretation for circular understanding. The reader must break that isolation, connecting them to each other, the rest of the collection, and even Riggs’s previously published works. The “iron dish” echoes Riggs’s early poem “The Puritans,” already discussed in this chapter.

And they could never be happy;
They were meshed in an iron mesh
By the fear of God and damnation
And the feel of flesh.⁴⁹

It also recalls the “iron rusty gray” eyes of the privileged “Charger” horses. Through triangulating the poems, it is possible to see that in Riggs’s coded vocabulary iron is associated with heteronormativity, which he equates with being locked in irons. While open about his sexuality in Santa Fe and later New York and Hollywood, Riggs was publically closeted. Just as he uses allusions to the figure of Hamlet to voice a radical objection to U.S. settler colonialism, here he uses allusions to his own work to imbue

⁴⁹ Riggs, “Puritans,” *The Smart Set*, 68.4 (August 1922): 2.

words with alternative definitions that are hidden but discoverable with a certain kind of queer reading.

Such reading results in an identification of Indigeneity with homosexuality, as already discussed in “Skulls Like These.” In Riggs’s Santa Fe circle, “root” was used as a metaphor for Indigenous peoples, who were seen to be connected to the earth and older ways of life, with the implication being that their time had passed, enabling the new settlers to flower. The metaphor was perhaps more revealing than they realized. The root must remain for the plant to live; it is just hidden from sight. Because of its physical properties, the word also lends itself to sexual metaphors. As “Skulls Like These” seemed to speak back to “El Rito de Santa Fe,” “Song of an Unholy Oracle” seems in dialogue with another poem that appeared in *The Turquoise Trail*, “The Living Root” by Riggs’s friend, the editor of *Laughing Horse*, Willard “Spud” Johnson.⁵⁰

To find between me and the wall
That held the alley’s deepest shade
An Indian standing, still and tall,
So near me that I felt afraid.

He was a part of silence and of night,
And when I tried I could not see
His eyes flash any glint of light.
...I passed him as I would a tree.

As Riggs implies in “Charger,” the hidden and marginal space of the alley makes it a natural metonym for that of the homosexual in society, a place of public/private assignations and anonymity. The same qualities, Johnson suggests, make it a suitable environment for the Indian, where the implicitly white speaker encounters him, and feels “afraid.” But the threat of violence is displaced into a more existential fear of the Indian’s

⁵⁰ Willard Johnson, “The Living Root,” in Corbin, *Turquoise Trail*, 59-60.

silence and, significantly, his darkness, which make him nearly invisible. Unable to incorporate the figure into a system of meaning, to see in his eyes “any glint of light,” which here seems to mean humanity, the speaker treats him as a natural—though inanimate—object, the tree. In Johnson, the equation of homosexuality and Indigeneity reinforces the speaker’s decision to ignore the figure in the alley while, in “The Impenitent,” Riggs insists on making his reader contemplate and come to terms with “the root.”⁵¹

The Impenitent

They, the impenitent, discordant
Of voice, with their high scorn,
Fail in the land of willows, fail
In the broad wood, in the country of corn.

In the groaning hill, the desert that is stricken
And barren of fruit,
Or in crawling sand under water,
Let them strike root.

The first stanza establishes that “The Impenitent” with brash voices and “high scorn” fail in the light agricultural spaces of the nation, “in the country of corn.” Like the skulls, they do not fit into spaces defined by agriculture and procreation. The second stanza shifts to landscapes “stricken and barren of fruit”—the “groaning hill”, “the desert” and, intriguingly, the “water.” These are places of rugged beauty that register as significant aesthetically but are not agriculturally productive. They offer the satisfaction of the sublime and counter it to the mundane, the comfortable deciduous forests and fields where they “fail.” Fail is decisively value-laden and sets up the last line “let them strike root” ambiguously—the reader is unsure whether this striking of root is a punishment or a

⁵¹ Riggs, “The Impenitent,” in *ID*, 50.

form of redemption. The rhyme between root and fruit both equates the two and puts them in contrast to each other. The impenitent take the lands that are unsuitable for cultivation, and there finds “root” perhaps meaning subsistence, but of an unexpected sort. If we read root as connoting both Indigeneity and queerness, the two offer an alternative to the normative success of the first stanza.

Riggs often writes in the imperative, which defines the poems’ relationship with their implied readers according to lines of power, thoroughly imbricating the personal, political, and aesthetic. As “Charger” establishes the stakes and the method of the collection, “The Fountain,” its final poem, asks the reader to “brood” (another double word, meaning think and reproduce) on what she has read, which may mean to look for patterns beyond the bright surface of so many of the more public poems.⁵²

The Fountain

Brood, brood on this:

The fountain leaps,
The moon is there,
A rain of mist
Grays in the air.

And in the pool
The slow drops fall—
No one seeing
This at all,

No one moving,
Black on white,
Fountain leaping
At the night.

Brood, brood on this
Against the day
When the fountain

⁵² Riggs, “The Fountain,” in *The Iron Dish*, 63.

Will not play.

The reader is told to brood on a fountain sending out spray that no one sees. But the reader sees. The speaker has just given the scene to the reader to see, so the poem seems to be an implicit denial of the reader's subjectivity, forcing the reader to contemplate what it means to be "no one," to have no voice and yet to witness the end of something beautiful if incomprehensible. Riggs here asks the reader to occupy his own subject position, but he does so in a way that is almost antithetical to the traditional lyric. Rather than presenting an "I" with whom the reader will identify, "The Fountain" is a poem without pronouns of any kind. "No one seeing / this at all" requires the poet to construct a poem that takes the place of human witnesses, perhaps because people do not want to see. The poem gives us another way of understanding Riggs's difficulty and opacity. Faced with an audience, a country, that has "vanished" both Indians and homosexuals, that refuses to see them at all, he cannot write plainly and directly. He must approach his audience obliquely and with cunning. He must lure them with textual games, and once they have entered the mousetrap, allow it to spring.

In his sonnets, Shakespeare writes about the immortality of writing, an immortality that he extends to the beloved. Riggs reaches out or back to Shakespeare, pulling the poet into the present, offering another kind of immortality that Riggs then extends to the un-beloved, the alley dwellers, the forgotten. If poets such as Corbin and Austin use quotation to appropriate Indian lyrics and identities based on a colonial logic of succession, Riggs parodies these practices through his seeming participation in them and uses the anachronistic practice of allusion to insist on the persistence of the

seemingly past into the supposedly present, denying the evolutionary logic that underwrote both the approbation of Native lands and Native cultures.

I conclude by analyzing Riggs's single poem acknowledged to address Indigeneity directly. While his play *The Cherokee Night* has received abundant critical consideration, "Santo Domingo Corn Dance" has not. This inattention is characteristic of the more general neglect of Riggs's poetry, but it is curious considering recent efforts to position Riggs in a Native American canon. The poem may represent a problem for scholars recovering Riggs as a Native American poet, as it seems closely aligned to the exoticizing Indianism of Riggs's Santa Fe contemporaries, suggesting his Cherokee background was no impediment to putting on modernist red face.⁵³ But there are problems with this interpretation, problems that bring to light the ideologies of modernist literary and bibliographic codes and the interpretative methods they spawned. Read as a discreet aesthetic artifact, the poem might be understood as Indianist, a tradition that helped establish the very idea of an isolated artifact by isolating the artifact, taking songs from the cramped type of slick-sheeted ethnographic journals into the wide margins of little magazines and single-author collections. But the poem's allusions work counter to such formal isolationism and function as a telling counterpoint to Corbin's already discussed quotations.

⁵³ I have not located any extended readings of the poem. Jace Weaver simply describes it as "[t]he one piece with a Native theme...in which he describes being moved to tears by the power of the ceremonial." *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 97. This reading takes the poem at face value, an interpretation that I suggest Riggs's destabilizing allusions work against.

“Santo Domingo Corn Dance” first appears in print in *The Nation* on April 14, 1926 (Fig. 15). It is in this ephemeral iteration that the poem interrogates both modernist codes of reading and the appropriation those codes enabled.

Spring Book Section

Poems From Desert Indians
By FRANCES DENSMORE

The words of Indian songs are the poetry of the race. We hear only the sound of Indian singing, but the Indians hear and enjoy the delicacy and imagery of the words. A particularly poetic tribe is the Papago, living in southern Arizona. The poems here presented are the words of songs recorded in that tribe, and are used by permission of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution. A portion of the songs are connected with a ceremony intended to bring rain.

1

Here I am sitting and with my power I bring the south wind toward me,
After the wind I draw the clouds,
And after the clouds I draw the rain that makes the wild flowers grow on our home ground and look so beautiful.

2

By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,
From there the wind comes and blows over the world,
By the sandy water I breathe in the odor of the sea,
From there the clouds come and rain falls over the world.

3

The cottonwood leaves are falling and flying in the air,
On top of the remaining mountain they are flying around
And falling as though they were wet.

4

Under us the world spreads wide,
From there the corn comes up,
On the leaves the water moves in little drops.
Under us the mountain stands wide,
On that the squash comes up
And the water spreads over the vines.

5

A poor man takes the songs in his hand and drops them
near the place where the sun sets,
See, little girl, run to them and take them in your hand
And place them under the sunset.

6

Crazy woman, crazy woman, trying to sing to mescal leaves,
How can she sing to them and make the wind come?
Young children trying to sing to *bahwi* flowers,
How can they sing to *bahwi* flowers and bring rain?

Santo Domingo Corn Dance
By LYNN RIGGS

THE CHORUS

“Bring rain—
As we bring now
Our gift of dance and song
To You, who dance not, nor sing,
Bring rain!”

THE DANCERS

Bodies
Reddened, and gourds,
Rain girdles, ornaments,
The skins of foxes—what should please
You more?

PORTENT

But look!
Where the line whips
Like rain in corn, like clouds
Wind-beaten, or like the frown upon
His brow!

SONG OF THE BODIES

“I am
Naked before
You, High One—Look! Hear me!
As I stamp this ground worn smooth
By feet.

“Not as
A supplicant
I shake the doors of earth.
Let the green corn spring to meet
My tread.”

THE CLOUDS

Just now
Across the line
Of these red men there swept
Like wings of thunder at the sun—
Shadows!

THE KOSHARI

As if
Their feet were struck
With scorn, their hands with pride
Koshari glide, halt, grimace, grin,
And turn.

THE CHILD DANCER

“But that
I am a child
I should not notice
The branch of spruce tied on his arm
In my eyes.”

THE ORCHARD

Beyond
The baking roofs
A barren mountain points
Still higher, though its feet are white
With bloom.

RAIN

One drum
Note more, one voice,
One slant of bodies—
And my tears will fall like rain
Upon this ground.

Fig. 15. *The Nation*, April 14, 1926.

The page containing the poem has the heading “Spring Book Section,” in 30 point type, darkly underlined. Beneath this heading, the page is divided into two columns, which read as subordinate to the overarching title. Scanning the page from left to right, the

reader will encounter “Poems From Desert Indians” in 18 point type. This title substitutes ethnographic classification for more literary framing. We are told that these are Indian poems that, by implication, lack a single author and are instead understood to be communal. This lack of authorship also locates the poems firmly, if amorphously, in the past. As T.S. Eliot explains in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” the poet is an individual in whose mind alchemical reactions make poetry, so the very act of communal composition disqualifies the work from signifying as art, placing it instead in the realm of ethnography. But the “by line” confuses things. What is the relation between this supposed author, Frances Densmore, and the work that follows?

The lengthy italicized explanation that separates Densmore’s name from the poems attempts to resolve the question of authorship but only complicates it further, explaining “the poems presented here are the words of songs recorded in that tribe and are used by permission of the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution.” The equation of songs and poems glosses over the different cultural and aesthetic work of the pieces, translating “song” to “poem” as easily and transparently (and therefore problematically) as the poems are shifted from Papago to English, a change not acknowledged in the paragraph which seems to imply that the song/poems are simply a transcription, not a translation, of the proceedings. The sentence adds another author to the poems, the Bureau of American Ethnology, which in funding their recording gains ownership of them as though they were physical artifacts. The songs’ presentation further subordinates them to Densmore’s authorship. Consecutively numbered but not titled, they are converted into a single poem about the Papago Indians rather than a series of poems by Papago writers.

I have been unable to establish whether Riggs submitted his poem knowing that it would be placed with Densmore's, or if they were simply grouped by their common theme. I suspect the former, as "Santo Domingo Corn Dance" seems to allude to "Poems from Desert Indians" and its editorial framing. Riggs's poem begins, "Bring rain," echoing the ethnographic gloss of the Papago poems, which are "connected with a ceremony intended to bring rain." Positioned as it is, in the same column as "Poems from Desert Indians," "Santo Domingo Corn Dance" might initially seem its continuation. Riggs plays with this potential misreading, titling his poem with the same type of ethnographic description as Densmore. And, like the first section of "Poems From Desert Indians," Riggs begins by speaking in the first person, highlighting the strangeness of presenting what is clearly a lyric subjectivity in an ethnographic frame. The unacknowledged dehumanization that must accompany ethnographic presentation becomes Riggs's subject as he slyly alludes both to Densmore and to broader cultural shorthand for Indian subjectivity.

Densmore's ostensible authorship loosens the meaning of that concept and allows Riggs to play with the uncertainty as to whether his poem is ethnographic quotation or original literary formulation. The reader, already identified in the italicized section as non-Native—"We hear only the sound of Indian singing, but the Indians hear..."—will likely recognize the short declaratives and homely offerings that begin the poem as signifiers of Indigeneity.

Bring rain—
As we bring now
Our gift of dance and song
To You, who dance not, nor sing,
Bring rain!

The “You” here seems to refer to the higher power who controls the rain, but can also be understood more literally as the reader, with the rain being the capital, both symbolic and economic, that comes to appropriators of Native culture. The second stanza continues along these lines, using language that breathlessly confirms the reader’s exotic expectations, now playing up the unacknowledged sexual desire that underwrites ethnographic interest.

Bodies
Reddened, and gourds,
Rain girdles, ornaments,
The skins of foxes—what should please
You more?

The dance is here reduced to its most lurid elements, taunting the reader, what should please you more? Later, the speaker goes further.

“I am
Naked before
You, High One—Look! Hear me!
As I stamp this ground worn smooth
By feet.

This artful nakedness highlights the doubleness of Riggs’s language. “Santo Domingo Corn Dance” depicts perhaps the most popular tourist spectacle of the Southwest. It was also the frequent subject of modernist poets from Marsden Hartley to D.H. Lawrence, epitomizing the economic and aesthetic commodification of indigenous authenticity. By choosing it as the subject of his single published Indian poem and presenting that poem alongside Densmore’s ethnographic appropriation of authorship, Riggs signals the performativity of his Indigeneity. While the poem seems an attempt to harness the ritual’s authenticity, the “ground worn smooth / By feet” might refer to this once meaningful ceremony worn down by the metric feet that have beaten the life out of it in its repeated

representation. The reader's ethnographic expectations are subverted as Riggs's apparent foray into playing Indian is exposed as a more complex masquerade—presenting the white reader's expectations and desires in a way that satisfies them too completely, revealing the psychology of the reader far more than that of the depicted Indian. Riggs's Indianism is ethnographic, but its object is the audience of the corn dance, not the dance itself. In the contributor notes of that issue, Riggs shares that he “lived for two years in New Mexico” rather than mention his Cherokee background, confirming that he is acting as an ethnographer of Indianism, not Indians.⁵⁴

In this chapter, I have suggested that allusion is a literary version of the kind of encounters that Riggs thematizes in “Charger.” These are confusing, open, non-hierarchical connections that betray a too-close relation between literary works. If quotation may be understood as part of modernism's obsession with purity because it can be neatly contained,⁵⁵ allusion works against such certainty and closure. That Riggs's allusions are often to his own work echoes the very taboo of homosexuality itself: the threat of sameness and desire. Appropriately, Riggs's allusions are not a stable force or referent, as the practice pushes against such certainty to suggest hidden, even contradictory, connections, meanings, and possibilities. The next chapter will build on Riggs's interest in the subversive potential of intertextuality to explore his most famous, and most analyzed, plays, *Green Grow the Lilacs* and *The Cherokee Night*.

⁵⁴ Riggs, “Contributors to This Issue,” *Nation* 122.3171 (April 14, 1926): 401.

⁵⁵ Joseph R. Slaughter, “‘It's Good to Be Primitive': African Allusion and the Modernist Fetish of Authenticity,” in *Modernism and Copyright* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 275.

CHAPTER III

ADAPTATION IN INDIAN TERRITORY

O liquid and free and tender!
O wild and loose to my soul—O wondrous singer!
You only I hear—yet the star holds me, (but will soon depart,)
Yet the lilac with mastering odor holds me
—Walt Whitman, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”

It’s a lie, Big Boy! I wouldn’t hurt a fly! I go to church. I’m a good girl—I’m happy as hell. I love everybody. You’ll see. You’ll find out. When I was born, they wondered why I looked so sweet. Now they know why. I am sweet, that’s the trouble with me. I can’t help it. I was born that way—
—Lynn Riggs, *The Cherokee Night*

My last chapter focused on Lynn Riggs’s poetry and its place within modernist literary culture, arguing that he worked within Indianism to critique it by espousing allusion, which could be parodic, affiliative, or a mixture of the two. In this chapter, I turn to Riggs’s plays, which were intended for a markedly different audience than his verse. The poems were addressed to a coterie culture that could confer symbolic but not economic capital. The plays were bids for Broadway success and its accompanying financial rewards. It is in the plays that Riggs most fully develops a politicized intertextuality through the figure of adaptation, which, more than allusion or quotation, has a direct cultural analogy in assimilation. Doing this work in a genre associated with a popular audience, Riggs makes a more pointed political argument, one decisively opposed to the norms of the time.

Revisiting *Oklahoma!*

We all remember, or almost do, *Oklahoma!*, the unprecedentedly popular musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein.¹ Melding romance and nation building, its protagonists Curly and Laurey court and marry as “the Territory” marches toward statehood, which is portrayed as a similarly natural and inevitable consummation.² Set in a homogenized past and West where the closest thing to racial tension is the feud between farmers and cowboys, it is easy to miss that “the territory” of *Oklahoma!* isn’t the Oklahoma territory. The musical takes place to the east, in the countryside surrounding Claremore, Indian Territory, in the heart of the Cherokee Nation (Fig.16).

¹ Oscar Hammerstein II, *Oklahoma!: The Complete Book and Lyrics of the Broadway Musical* (1943) (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2010).

² While not addressing *Oklahoma!* specifically, Mark Rifkin has explored this intertwining of heteronormativity and settler colonialism, arguing that the two enforce and constitute each other. “More than justifying particular legislative enactments, heteronormative employment works to deny the possibility of registering indigenous residential and kinship formation as political, positioning the adoption of legally recognized, monogamous, companionate marriage and heterogendered bourgeois domesticity as the self-evident basis of American political identity.” Mark Rifkin. *When Did Indians Become Straight?: Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 31.

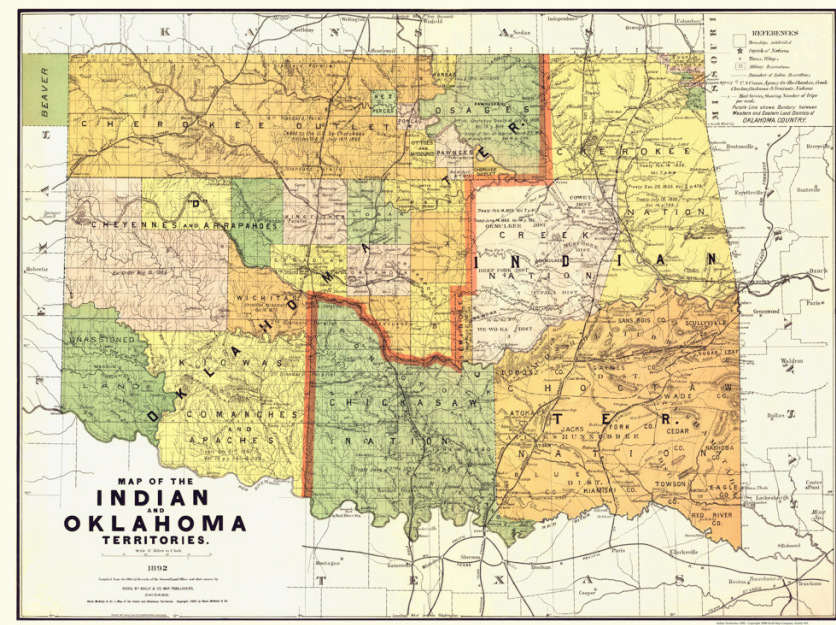


Figure 16. 1892 Map with a red line dividing Oklahoma and Indian Territory.

This incongruous detail, which threatens to compromise the musical’s universalizing whiteness, is a vestige of its source, Lynn Riggs’s 1931 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, which “is laid in Indian Territory in 1900.”³ The endurance of “Indian Territory” in *Oklahoma!* points to the musical’s status as an adaptation and the necessary instability of that genre. While *Oklahoma!* has received abundant critical attention, including comparative readings with *Green Grow the Lilacs*, these considerations share unexamined assumptions about the nature of adaptation, presuming that Rodgers and Hammerstein could retain, cut, and augment as they saw fit in order to craft a celebration of American expansion for an audience nervous about the country’s involvement in World War II. Meanwhile, faced with a deep corpus of plays and poems, most of which

³ Lynn Riggs. *Green Grow the Lilacs, a Play* (New York; Los Angeles; London: S. French, Ltd., 1931), np.

have received little or no critical attention, Riggs scholars have largely ignored or dismissed *Oklahoma!*, although the adaptation was his main source of income for the last ten years of his life and is responsible for much of his posthumous fame.

The reader who comes to *Green Grow the Lilacs* by way of *Oklahoma!* will find much that is familiar, or perhaps uncanny, as the shadows of the play are quite a bit darker than those of the musical. Still, their plots, young love on the range, are the same. They share most of the same characters: the villainous hired hand, Jeeter/Jud; steely Aunt Eller; dizzy Ado Annie; and the peddler, who is Syrian in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Persian in *Oklahoma!*, and was played “Jewish” in both. The paratexts surrounding both works—playbills, printed editions, posters—frame them as quaint and nostalgic. In all this consistency, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s most significant revision seems to have been replacing the traditional folk songs of *Green Grow the Lilacs* with original show tunes. But that particular change signals something deeper about the works and their relations to tradition, identity, and originality. The structural parallels between literary adaptation and colonization, between folk songs becoming show tunes, and between Indian Territory becoming Oklahoma, are thematized within the works themselves, making them a remarkable site for analyzing processes that are often perceived as totalizing and absolute. My analysis begins with the conviction that *Green Grow the Lilacs* is distinct from yet persists in the normative celebration that is *Oklahoma!* and that this persistence is anticipated by Riggs’s theorization of adaptation within his own play.⁴

From the title on, Riggs’s original defines itself as an adaptation of the folk songs that it incorporates and presents. These songs are linked to a traditional culture threatened

⁴ Throughout the first half of this chapter, I will refer to *Green Grow the Lilacs* as “the play” and *Oklahoma!* as “the musical.”

by its impending assimilation into the United States and bureaucratic modernity. That the culture the play represents is that of white settlers, not the Cherokee, is only the first of Riggs's evocative substitutions. In 1931, at the time of the play's production, Indian Territory had been gone for 24 years, assimilated into the state of Oklahoma. But the play, set in 1900, seven years before statehood, suggests that this absorption cannot be complete. In Riggs's version of adaptation, the present does not revise the past so much as the past overtakes the present. If the adaptor seems to tame and claim the source text, Riggs demonstrates that these containments are never total and often draw attention to exactly what they attempt to elide.

“To change the green lilacs to the red, white and blue”

Green Grow the Lilacs begins with a disembodied voice, singing:

As I walked out one bright sunny morning,
I saw a cowboy way out on the plain.
His hat was throwed back and his spurs was a-jinglin,
And as I passed by him, he was singing this refrain:

Ta whoop ti ayae ay, git along, you little dogies! (*GGTL*, 3-4)

As the song progresses, the audience catches a glimpse of the singer, but only “part” of him, as he passes a set window. Finally, voice and body resolve into Curly, “a tall, waggish, curly-headed young cowboy in a checked shirt and a ten gallon hat” (*GGTL*, 4). This folksy beginning presents a familiar West symbolized by the cowboy and his cattle song, but its typicality is both underwritten and destabilized by its extravagant citationality. First, there is Curly, or at least his voice. He sings a traditional song that has its own fictional speaker, whose dialect—“throwed,” “a-jinglin”—suggests he is a cowboy as well. This speaker encounters a singing cowboy who he then quotes. The

cowboy's song is also quotational, consisting of generic cattle calls that are themselves quotations of some imagined Indian language. Curly, the handsome young cowboy, is identifiable as such by his traditional garb, which now seems yet another form of quotation, especially since it is first presented in pieces.

In this opening scene, Riggs begins a subtle recasting of Western archetypes as figures bound to convention, rather than bold individuality and self-expression. This redefinition of settlers as a traditional, even primitive, culture is most fully developed through the characters' relation to the eleven folk songs that punctuate the play.⁵ Subtitled "A Folk-Play," *Green Grow the Lilacs* takes its title from one of these songs, indicating the play's status as an adaptation, a claim that the preface to the printed edition makes explicit.

The intent has been solely to recapture in a kind of nostalgic glow (but in dramatic monologue more than in song) the great range of mood which characterized the old folk songs and ballads I used to hear in my Oklahoma childhood...." (*GGTL*, vii.)⁶

The play not only anthologizes, thus preserving, these songs, but frames itself as a dramatic version of them, even suggesting *An Old Song* as an alternate subtitle (*GGTL*, vii).

⁵ Additionally, in production actual cowboys were brought in from the rodeo, which had been at Madison Square Gardens, to sing outside the curtain during scene changes.

⁶ Riggs affirms this intention in his letters "You remember that in the early days of writing the play last year, I told you what I wanted to do-? I wanted the play, like the old songs of its era, to reproduce the reality of a gone age in Middle-West America—it's quaintness, its absurdity, its melodrama, its rude vigor and vulgarity, its touching sweetness." Letter to Barrett Clark, July 18, 1929. BCP.

Still, Riggs named the play after a particular song, and a close examination of it grants a fuller sense of his notion of adaptation, which is far more challenging than the preface lets on.

The title song is first heard early in the play when Laurey tells Curly that she plans to go to Old Man Peck's party with Jeeter. "Ever heard that song, Aunt Eller?" Curly asks Laurey's guardian, as though there is only one song that would fit the occasion, and they both know what he will say next. Curly's introduction clearly establishes the song as quotation rather than an extemporaneous expression.⁷ Unlike his subsequent incarnation in *Oklahoma!*, this Curly cannot spontaneously burst into original song. The stage directions describe how the song, which Curly feels compelled to sing, affects him. He "begins to sing, half satirically. But by the time he has reached the first chorus, the song with its absurd yet plaintive charm has absorbed him" (*GGTL*, 22). The word "absorbed" is significant, as Riggs uses it in his letters to describe the Cherokee, which he characterizes as a tragic race, "absorbed" by a foreign culture.⁸

While Riggs's epistolary use of the term "absorbed" casts Cherokee tradition as opposed to yet incapable of resisting modernity, the play reverses the relation between tradition and innovation, giving the power to the past. The old song absorbs Curly, determining his emotions and state of mind. He cannot keep the song at arm's length by singing it satirically, even as the lyrics themselves are patently, even aggressively, illogical in their salving of heartbreak with patriotism.

Green grow the lilacs, all sparkling with dew,

⁷ *Oklahoma!* substitutes original numbers in the voices of the characters. These show tunes recast the story as a celebration of Western myths, rather than a critique of them.

⁸ I discuss these letters in Chapter 2.

I'm lonely, my darling, since parting with you.
And by the next meeting I hope to prove true
To change the green lilacs to the red, white and blue. (*GGTL*, 22-23)

Curly is possessed by the song to such a degree that he “sings the rest of its sentimental periods, his head back, his eyes focused beyond the room, beyond himself—upon the young man having his sad say, the young man who’ll go into the army, by God, and put an end to his distemper, his unrequited fervor” (*GGTL*, 22-23). The stage directions acknowledge and in their tone enact the song’s sentimentality. But this sentiment, rather than reducing the song’s affect, increases it, as Curly becomes the character who will solve his romantic problems by, as the play’s glossary repeats the stage directions in explaining, “join[ing] the army.”⁹ In the “real” world of the play, this solution is not available to Curly, as he lives in a region defined precisely by its lack of an army, its status as non-nation, a liminal other to the U.S., again recalling the contemporary position of Native American tribes. Nevertheless, the song comforts Curly, allowing him to narrativize his disappointment in grand terms. That he is just asking a girl to a box social imbues the moment with a hint of the mock epic, gently minimizing the scope of the characters and their problems. The gap between the stakes of the song and its singer assures the audience that we are in a safe space and can relax into the play’s declared nostalgia.

I initially read Curly’s absorption by “Green Grow the Lilacs” as analogous to the impending absorption of Indian Territory by “the red, white and blue,” a “primitive” culture subsumed by a more powerful, modernizing one, which would be consistent with

⁹ The very presence of a glossary warrants further exploration, as it suggests, once again, the ethnographic nature of the text. “To change the green lilacs to the red, white and blue--means, ‘I’m going to join the army.’” *GGTL*, 165.

Riggs's characterization of the Cherokee. But the play works against this binary of total cultural assimilation. The scene complicates the more conventional view, presented in the preface, of adaptation as the present recalling and rewriting an idealized past, by describing the old songs as perversely powerful and capable of changing the characters who sing them. While Riggs explained the play's incorporation of folk songs as an attempt to preserve these endangered relics,¹⁰ the play's portrayal of the songs suggests that they are fully capable of defending themselves.

"Green Grow the Lilacs," with its aabb rhyme scheme, is a traditional ballad embedded in the verisimilitudinous world of the play. The otherness of the song, its difference from the spoken language that surrounds it, is key. The song represents a different reality in both its formal structure and its patriotic logic. But this otherness, despite Curly's attempt to condescend to it, is a source of power, bluntly moving in its old-fashioned rhythm and rhyme. Like a ghost, "Green Grow the Lilacs" takes possession of Curly, briefly turning him into its protagonist. Curly fights the song with his "satirical" modern attitude, but its formalism is more powerful. This scene distills the relation between Riggs's play and the older songs that it quotes. The play does not absorb the songs in its adaptation of them, but depicts what it means to be absorbed by them and the cultural authority they represent.

Riggs's depiction of quotation seems antithetical to modernist quotation of Native American lyrics, as in Alice Corbin's use of Chippewa songs in her own "Indian Songs," discussed in Chapter One. In that scenario, Corbin has access to literary culture, and she

¹⁰ Lynn Riggs letter to Henry Moe, December 28, 1928. LRPB.

appropriates the culture and symbolic capital of the Chippewa by becoming the preserver and interpreter of their songs, their de facto author. The key difference between the quotation of folk materials in “Indian Songs” and *Green Grow the Lilacs*, both of which frame themselves as representations of a dying culture, is the presentation of these songs. Corbin works to claim the songs as their discoverer, and the songs themselves become commodities, signifiers of primitive authenticity. There is no sense that the songs might be dangerous, might challenge the colonialism inherent to their presentation. They are decorative, docile, war trophies of a victorious colonizer.

Riggs’s songs resist this domestication. They interrupt the play, and rather than allowing the characters to feel superior to their dated simplicity, and so move confidently into the future, they *act* on them, pulling them back into the past. In the Indian Territory of 1900, the song controls the singer. And while Curly may choose to sing the song because it applies, at least partially, to his situation, once he has begun to sing it the power is all with the old song. Corbin quotes songs from a tradition not her own, while Curly sings the songs of his own culture, songs that come to him naturally and ineluctably. Because Corbin is not in the songs’ tradition, not under their thrall, she can apparently exploit them, while the song exploits Curly, making him its minion. Still, as I will explore, the theory of adaptation developed in *Green Grow the Lilacs* must alter our understanding of Corbin’s work and the work of her contemporaries, raising the possibility that their adaptation-as-assimilation may not be as total as it would seem. *Green Grow the Lilacs* represents the seeming vulnerability of the folk tradition, its lack of sophistication, its “primitive” nature but, as the story develops, these quaint songs and their quaint culture come to have a terrifying force.

The song “Green Grow the Lilacs” describes a man whose “sweetheart” has left him for “another.” It details love looks not returned and love letters sent back. The refrain, quoted above, appears after each stanza. The song fits into the play’s narrative because Curly sings it at a moment when it seems Laurey prefers Jeeter, but at that point in the story she and Curly have no relationship to end. The song’s only partial applicability signals its dominance over both the characters and the adaptation. They incorporate the song, even though its message does not fully align with their own. The song’s dominance is reinforced by its recurrence in the play. Curly sings it to Laurey after escaping from jail (where he awaits trial for Jeeter’s murder) so that they can consummate their marriage. The “red, white and blue” are the last words the audience hears.

Since it is the “red, white and blue” that has wrongly incarcerated Curly, it is difficult not to read this ending as ironic, with the song’s patriotism running counter to the play’s critique of U.S. imperialism. Such a reading would conform to a conventional understanding of adaptation, where the later text (the play) subsumes and manipulates the earlier one (the song). But Riggs suggests other possibilities. Like the play that contains it, the song is not simply adapted, but is about adaptation, the “green lilac” “chang[ing]” to “red, white and blue.” And this embedded formulation, repeated throughout the play and concluding it, insists on an interpretation that goes beyond the superficially political. The line seems to describe ideology overtaking nature, the “green lilac” turning “red, white, and blue,” which also corresponds to a literal reading shifting to a metaphorical one. But these interpretations, which would fit the adaptation-as-assimilation-as-disappearance thesis, gloss over the incongruity at the heart of the line, the song’s title,

and the title of the play. The blossoms we think of when we say “lilac” are not green but light purple.

Even before their “natural” state becomes a metaphorical one, corresponding to their interpolation by the U.S., the lilacs are altered, their defining purple color replaced with green.¹¹ The artificiality of “the natural” green displacing the more evocative purple corresponds to the relation between the play’s plot and its queer subtext, which calls into question the “naturalness” of Laurey and Curly’s relationship. By titling the play *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Riggs thus suggests a text organized around significant but unremarked substitutions. This impression is only strengthened by the compositional history of the song. “Green Grows the Laurel” is an old English folk song and the subject of a 1952 case study by Tristram P. Coffin.¹² His essay traces the song’s evolving variations and substitutions, noting lilacs had sometimes replaced laurel. Coffin cites Riggs’s play as his earliest example of this replacement. In the play’s own acknowledgments, Riggs credits several of the songs’ arrangements to other sources, but does not mention “Green Grow the Lilacs.”¹³ Coffin explains that in earlier versions of the song, the color and plant imagery make literal and metaphoric sense, as the green laurel, signifying virginity, is replaced by the “origin blue,” or thyme, signifying fertility. In Riggs’ version lilacs replace laurel and “red, white, and blue” replaces “origin blue.” Coffin continues that the

¹¹ We could read the “green lilacs” as having not yet bloomed, which would correspond to an association with virginity. However, this botanically motivated explanation still leaves the linguistic contradiction, “green grows the purple.”

¹² Tristram P. Coffin, “A Tentative Study of a Typical Folk Lyric: ‘Green Grows the Laurel’,” in *The Journal of American Folklore* 65.258 (October 1, 1952): 341–351.

¹³ “The songs in *Green Grow the Lilacs* are old and traditional. The specific acknowledgments concerning the arrangements used are... The other songs are from the original script of the play.” *GGTL*, np.

“red, white and blue” substitution was common across the U.S., but notes that laurel was rarely substituted, perhaps because it is part of the title and song’s first line.

I believe that Riggs changed “Laurel” to “Lilac,” adapting the title of the song in a way that draws attention to itself as adaptation, substitution, and allusion. By replacing the virginal Laurel with the phallic Lilac, Riggs makes the song less, not more, like the play—“Laurel” even sounds like “Laurey” who is obnoxiously virginal—again signaling the song’s rhetorical dominance. Riggs also, I think, alludes to Walt Whitman’s “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” one of the poet’s Lincoln elegies.¹⁴ In that poem, the speaker smelled lilacs when he learned of the president’s assassination and from that moment forward, the blooming of lilacs, a harbinger of spring, pulls him back to “death.” The allusion gestures at once to the inescapability of past trauma and the formal complexity required to represent it. But it also works more biographically, yoking the song and the play to America’s great gay grandfather. The overwriting of the lilac’s color with green might correspond to the normalizing of the play’s homosexual subtexts, and the antagonism between Curly and Jud, ostensibly “over” Laurey, corresponds perfectly with the kinds of triangulations Eve Sedgwick has dubbed homosocial.¹⁵ Just as the play about white settlers may be read as an analogy for the plight of Native Americans, its romantic plot gestures to the homosexual desires it denies, as when Curly angrily calls Jeeter a “bullet-colored growly man” (*GGTL*, 19). Here again, color seems a red herring, a way to mitigate the suggestiveness of the shape of the lilacs and the bullet, to hide these

¹⁴ Walt Whitman. “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d.” <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174748>.

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

phalluses in plain sight.¹⁶ I do not think it is necessary to do a more extended reading of the queer undercurrents of *Green Grow the Lilacs*, especially since Craig Womack has already suggested that Riggs is an “Oklahomo,” a queer “code talker.”¹⁷ But the proliferation of substitutions in the play does warrant further exploration.

When Riggs wrote *Green Grow the Lilacs*, cultural adaptations by Native Americans were cited as proof of their vanishing status. Meanwhile, literary adaptations of Native literatures by non-Native writers contributed to the exclusion of Native American authors from the literary marketplace.¹⁸ Both literary and cultural adaptation located Native cultures in the past, making a continued existence in modernity impossible by definition. *Green Grow the Lilacs* seems to be a play about white people where the “Indian question” has been largely bracketed. And yet, Riggs’s depiction of white settlers casts them as a primitive culture at odds with the United States, which is described as a “furrin country” (*GGTL*, 161). Might he be using typical white Western figures—the cowboy, the virginal farm girl, the steely matriarch—to represent indigenous subjectivities and situations? Literary adaptation allows Riggs to approach issues of racial adaptation or assimilation by analogy while also flipping the script and depicting white settlers through an ethnographic lens, portraying them as traditional and primitive. Even

¹⁶ Jace Weaver uses the same description as evidence that Jeeter is white against readings by Andrea Most that he is dark and represents an ethnic “other.” Both focus on what color exactly a bullet is, while I suspect the real interest is in the shape it shares with the lilac. Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 100. Andrea Most, “‘We Know We Belong to the Land’: The Theatricality of Assimilation in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*,” *PMLA* 113.1 (January 1998): 82.

¹⁷ Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 271-300.

¹⁸ As Robert Dale Parker has explored in *The Invention of Native American Literature*.

their speech is often registered in a thick dialect: “‘F I’d jist a-kep’ my head! Now whut am I gonna do!” (*GGTL*, 106). Perhaps of the most formal significance is the settlers’ racial isolation from the cultural diversity that historically surrounded them in Indian Territory. This “purity” is an ethnographic trope of the period, in which Native American cultures were depicted as though they had never been in contact with Euro-American culture or as if contact were necessarily a form of contamination. As a gay man and a Cherokee, Riggs possessed a mixed and potentially marginalizing identity. But he could hide his homosexuality and Indigeneity under a façade of heterosexual whiteness. *Green Grow the Lilacs* might be read as a metaphor for this mask, an apparent celebration of straight white romance that simultaneously explores a gay, Indian identity.¹⁹

“You know about shivorees, honey”

I have argued that *Green Grow the Lilacs* establishes adaptation as a process by which the source pulls those who would repurpose it back into its own logic. The power of the old ways is literalized in the play’s terrifying shivoree scene. The shivoree, which the glossary explains is “a corruption of the French *charivari*, a wedding celebration” (*GGTL*, 166), reveals the stakes of adaptation, as tradition violently asserts itself against the will of the play’s protagonists. The subjugation of Curly and Laurey to the primitive ritual strips away any vestige of the play’s supposed nostalgia, revealing a past characterized by strategic brutality. The scene begins innocently enough, with Curly and Laurey sneaking home following their wedding, hoping to avoid the shivoree, which seems at this point to be more of an inconvenience than a threat. But as the couple leaves

¹⁹ I differ from Womack’s portrayal of Riggs’s “codedness” by stressing its rhetorical interest rather than understanding it as closeted and tragic.

the stage, “[t]here pop into sight on top of, and from behind the [hay] stacks, dozens of men” (*GGTL*, 120). The mob follows the pair, watching them through their bedroom window, and eventually dragging them back to the hay field. There, Curly and Laurey are forced to climb on top of a hay stack and seem to be ordered to consummate their marriage in front of the crowd.

CURLY (*deeply troubled*)

Laurey, honey. (*She looks at him, in dumb misery.*) I’d give my eye-sight, honey---! Try to stand it---I done all I could. I cain’t he’p it--- [*He takes her in his arms, the men break out in derisive and lascivious guffaws...*]
(*GGTL*, 127)

All the while, the anonymous men yell increasingly disturbing cat calls, culminating in cannibalistic cries that equate the shivoree to human sacrifice, “Bite them shoulders!” and “Eat ‘er alive!” (*GGTL*, 128).

The shivoree puts trauma in the middle of the “Old Song” that the play claims to represent, as Curly and Laurey are caught up in a tradition they literally cannot evade. Until this point, the play has taken place in a past that has seemed quaint and harmless, with Jeeter’s unacceptable sexuality and violence opposed to the wholesome courtship of Curly and Laurey. But the shivoree turns “the folk” into a mob and their “tradition” into sacrificial ritual. This is another view of the settler society—an all male crowd, largely anonymous, identified as 1st Man, 10th Man, etc., with a right to regulate the community’s sexuality, which is tied to its economy. Lest the viewer interpret the shivoree as anomalous, Riggs makes it clear that its logic is capitalist, founded in the very values that would seem to drive the society to “evolve.” As the men contemplate the consummation, they describe their envy of Curly by equating Laurey’s body to real estate.

10th MAN

Wish’t I uz in his shoes. Godamighty!

3rd MAN
 He shore got him sump'n there!
 1st MAN
 Couple of sections!
 2nd Man
 Grazin' and timber and plowed land!
 4th MAN
 Money!
 6th MAN
 Scads of it in the bank, and more comin'!
 5th MAN
 And God! She's a purty un, too! (*GGTL*, 122).

Unlike serial killer Jeeter, the shivoree does not represent a threat to the values of the territory but is their culmination and logical conclusion. Members of The Theatre Guild, who produced *Green Grow the Lilacs*, objected to the scene, but Riggs fought for its inclusion on documentary as well as artistic grounds, gathering press clippings that testified to the reality of the practice.²⁰ Regardless of its historical accuracy, which I suspect Riggs invoked for the purely pragmatic purpose of retaining the scene, the shivoree is as crucial to the story as it is destructive of it, forcing the audience to revise all that we thought we knew about this wholesome settler community.

As the shivoree moves toward its logic of consummation, a tragic resolution intervenes. Jeeter sets the haystack on fire, tries to stab Curly, then falls on his own knife, with Curly sent to jail to await trial for the crime.²¹ This violence is enabled by the acceptable chaos of the shivoree, which no one is allowed to question, "You know the way ever'body feels about shivoreein'. You got to take it right" (*GGTL*, 133). Once we can tie Jeeter's earlier crimes against women to the same logic that drives the crowd, he

²⁰ Letter to Barrett Clark, July 29, 1929. BCP.

²¹ This scene might represent the criminalization of male homosexuality as sodomy; it does represent the "consummation" through penetration of Jeeter and Curly's relationship.

becomes a distillation of, not a counterpoint to, social norms. Laurey's white gown even visually echoes that worn by the woman Jeeter murdered and threw in a feed trough (*GGTL*, 69 and 124).²²

The final twist of the play's political critique comes when the same structures that turn a blind eye to these acts of systemized violence persecute and prosecute Curly, the victim of that violence, imprisoning him to stand trial for murder. The law, instead of representing protection for individuals, is here portrayed as an arbitrary power that must be submitted to, just as the couple must submit to the mob. The play does not resolve the apparent injustice of the law, but lets it hang over the characters, an uncertainty that is "fixed" in *Oklahoma!*, where Curly is almost instantly acquitted and allowed to go off on his honeymoon. In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the law, like the mob, works to prevent that "natural" consummation. It is only by escaping from prison that Curly can become "really" married to Laurey. When Curly breaks out of jail, Riggs put the values of Indian Territory and the U.S. into seeming confrontation, with Aunt Eller arguing that the U.S., a "furrin" power, has no right to hold Curly. By the play's conclusion, Riggs has successfully estranged its audience from naturalizing U.S. settler colonialism by presenting a colonized nation that looks exactly like the U.S., then introducing the actual U.S., which is cast as a threat to this society that we had previously identified as American. And yet, the U.S. posse sent to apprehend Curly is made up of the same men who composed the shivoree mob and is led by its one named participant, Cord Elam, who is also a federal marshal. The apparent opposition between "Indian territory" and the "U.S." resolves in these figures of authority and arbitrary power.

²² I discuss the murder in the next section.

Until the shivoree, the settlers have occupied the rhetorical space of Native Americans threatened by impending statehood. Viewing whites through an ethnographic lens, Riggs is able to depict the problem of cultural assimilation as distinct from race, tying it instead to the beloved figure of the cowboy. But to end the play with this logic of substitution intact would reinforce the very social structures he critiques. Instead, in the shivoree, Riggs exposes the violence that underpins settler society. This violence does not undo the charm of earlier acts, but it does recast that charm as ominous and willfully naïve. In the days after the shivoree, Laurey cannot eat or sleep and repeats how traumatized she was, not by Jeeter's death or Curly's imprisonment, but what the men did to her.

LAUREY (*strangely, a new element coming into her concern*) No, not over with, not forgot. You didn't see. Other things. Things you cain't git outa yer mind. [*she shudders*].

AUNT ELLER

What is it, honey?

LAUREY

Over and over! The way them men done. The things they said. Oh—why'd it have to be that-a-way? (*GGTL*, 143-44)

These scenes of a present haunted by a past violation are the opposite of nostalgia, which is the present recalling an idealized version of the past. Just as in the world of the play the shivoree represents the frightening force of tradition, in the structure of the play it prevents a rosy adaptation, insisting on registering the trauma of the frontier and the blunt force of “the source,” which is ineluctable violence.

In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the shivoree reveals the thrall of the past and recasts adaptation as an expression, not a suppression, of that thrall. Just as the song “Green Grow the Lilacs” overtook Curly, so the sunny play is derailed from within by a powerful and primitive ritual. *Oklahoma!* goes to great pains to deny the past its power, celebrating

rather than resisting the march to statehood and with it modernity. Songs such as “Kansas City” shift from backward-looking folk songs to forward-looking show tunes, the rhyme scheme now domesticating the hard edges of modernization, turning it into a wonder that brings comfort and entertainment, not displacement and dehumanization.

Ev’eythin’s up to date in Kansas City.
They’ve gone about as fur as they c’n go!
...
Ev’eythin’s like a dream in Kansas City.
It’s better than a magic-lantern show!
Y’c’n turn the radiator on whenever you want some heat.
With ev’ry kind o’ comfort ev’ry house is all complete.²³

Rodgers and Hammerstein make clear that Oklahoma is on its way to Kansas City and the inevitable progress it represents, which enables the musical’s perfect nostalgia. The present of *Oklahoma!* is, within its own time, the past. Its rustic charms can be celebrated with no threat to the trains, plains, and automobiles that will soon make their way to Middle America. If the shivoree and its aftermath are the culmination of Riggs’s theorization of adaptation as the endurance of a threatening past, we can see how the adaptation of the shivoree in *Oklahoma!* attempts to mute these troubling resonances, reinforcing the teleological logic of the marriage plot. Rodgers and Hammerstein turn the shivoree into a benign wedding celebration whose peace the villainous outsider, Jud, disrupts. The overtones of rape and sacrifice are gone. The shivoree survives in name only, an exotic bit of dialect reflecting benign rural customs.

ADO ANNIE What you goin’ to do, Paw? Give Laurey and Curly and [sic] shivoree? I wisht you wouldn’t.
CARNES Aw, it’s a good old custum. Never hurt anybody. You women jist keep outa the way. Vamoose!²⁴

²³ *Oklahoma!*, 23.

²⁴ *Oklahoma!*, 120.

Oklahoma! recasts settler society as wholly good by defanging the shivoree and opposing it to, rather than associating it with, Jud's brutal misogyny. But this rewriting inadvertently maintains Riggs's characterization of the settlers as necessarily violent, even bloodthirsty. That was, after all, how they won the West. In *Oklahoma!* the settlers are portrayed as good, peaceful people, but the unsettling ease with which they move from Jud's death to Curly's exoneration to an ebullient rendition of "Oh What a Beautiful Morning!" is perhaps even more disturbing than the openly malevolent chaos presented by Riggs.²⁵ While the shivoree is reduced to a mention, there remains a sense that the characters' belief in their own simplicity and goodness is itself a form of violence. The optimism of "Oh What a Beautiful Morning," which declares "I got a beautiful feelin' / Ev'rythin's goin' my way",²⁶ celebrates the bright future made possible by the well-timed death of a troubling outsider. The musical itself even draws our attention to the lack of ceremony surrounding Jud's death. In its first half, Curly had suggested that Jud hang himself and sang a song that focused on how Jud would be mourned, arguing that this recuperation of Jud's character would more than justify its cost.

They'd shore sing loud though when the signin' started—sing like their hearts ud
break! (He starts to sing very earnestly and solemnly, improvising the sort of
thing he thinks might be sung:)
Pore Jud is daid,
Pore Jud Fry is daid!
All gether 'round his cawfin now and cry.
He had a heard of gold
And he wasn't very old—

²⁵ Others, including Most, have noted the dizzying speed of Curly's acquittal. She compares Jud's death to a lynching, suggesting he occupies the role of African American in the musical, 84.

²⁶ *Oklahoma!*, 11.

Oh, why did sich a feller have to die?²⁷

The song contrasts to the actuality of Jud's body being carried out and instantly forgotten. While *Oklahoma!* is at pains to represent a state wholly and wholesomely white, the fate of Jud must recall that of those other unacceptables, the Indians, whose death is cause for celebration rather than mourning and whose demise allowed the society to "move forward."

White Dreams

Green Grow the Lilacs has been accused of whitewashing Indian Territory, a charge Jace Weaver counters by suggesting many of the characters, including the hero Curly, are actually Indians.²⁸ While the text supports this provocative interpretation, especially according to a model of radical marronage,²⁹ in which only an Indian audience would understand the signs, I do read it as exclusively white and insistently so. This "pure" whiteness not only reproduces an ethnographic trope of the period of depicting Native American tribes as if they had never had contact with Euro-American culture, but it is when these white characters talk about non-white people that the politics of adaptation are most evident, as in the scene of literal whitewashing that also corresponds to an intriguing substitution in *Oklahoma!*. Near intermission, the narrative of *Oklahoma!*

²⁷ *Oklahoma!*, 62.

²⁸ Jace Weaver. "Ethnic Cleansing, Homestyle." *Wicazo Sa Review* 10.1 (April 1, 1994): 32.

²⁹ I take the term from Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, where it refers to a work that those outside a community will perceive as deformed but members of the community will recognize as a coded and directed to them. Baker derives the term from the poem "La verbe 'marronner'" by Aimé Césaire. Houston A. Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

is interrupted by a “dream ballet” in which Laurey’s dancing double must choose between the dancing doubles of Curly and Jud (Jeeter). The scene marks a departure from the innovative realism of *Oklahoma!*, where songs do not break the fourth wall by shifting into overt performance, as proto-musicals had typically, instead functioning as part of the story, justified by and advancing it.³⁰ The dream ballet literally brings in the dancing girls, the dirty postcards from Jud’s room come to life. The move is at once commercially savvy, giving the audience the sensationalist sexuality that family-friendly primary narrative denies, while also signifying as “artistic,” especially as it was choreographed by Agnes de Mille, thus increasing the production’s symbolic capital.

The dance spectacle is introduced by having a vexed Laurey drink “The Elixir of Egypt,” a potion she had earlier purchased from the Persian peddler who sells it as “a secret formula, [that] belonged to the Pharoah’s daughter.”³¹

Read what it says on the label: “Take a deep breath and you see everything clear.” That’s what Pharoah’s daughter used to do. When she had a hard problem to decide, like what prince she ought to marry, or what dress to wear to a party, or whether she ought to cut off somebody’s head---she’d take a whiff of this.³²

³⁰ The formal significance of *Oklahoma!* in the development of the musical has been much remarked, as has the place of the dream ballet within it. Bruce Kirle, in his study of the politics of *Oklahoma!* credits not only Rodgers and Hammerstein but the musical’s producer, Theresa Helburn, with the innovation, tracing it to her interest in “producing an American folk version of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a further refinement of the kind of integration of book and score that had begun with *Show Boat* in 1927.” Bruce Kirle, “Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of ‘Oklahoma!’ in American Consciousness,” *Theatre Journal* 55. 2 (May 1, 2003): 257.

³¹ *Oklahoma!*, 37.

³² *Oklahoma!*, 37.

This orientalist framing allows a brief interruption of the musical's narrative progress, granting us access to Laurey's mind as she works through her problem, loving Curly but worrying about the violent jealousy of Jud.

After the girls dance off, "Laurey" and "Jud" are again alone. "Curly" enters, and the long-awaited conflict with "Jud" is now unavoidable. "Curly," his hand holding an imaginary pistol, fires at "Jud" again and again, but "Jud" keeps slowly advancing on him, immune to bullets.

As these emotions are expressed physically through dance, the substitution falls away and the "real" Laurey reaches a decision: "He is killing 'Curly.' 'Laurey' runs up to him and begs him to release her lover. It is clear by her pantomime that she will give herself to JUD to save CURLY." The dream ballet supplements the plot, explaining Laurey's otherwise confusing decision to keep Jud's threats a secret from Curly. But the dance can also be read against the grain of the musical's aggressively healthy and normative surface as a screen for Laurey's desire for Jud, or Laurey's very ability to desire at all. Here she is "forced" to give herself to him (not his substitute) to save Curly, allowing her to maintain her virtue by sacrificing it.

The romantic confusion of the dream ballet never finds its way into the waking world of *Oklahoma!*, where Laurey marries Curly and Jud conveniently dies. The dream itself can be blamed on the exotic foreign potion, which provides an alibi for Laurey's and the musical's expression of sexuality. In *Green Grow the Lilacs* the elixir serves a more quotidian purpose. While it too is of Egyptian origin, "Smells like the Queen of Egypt!", and promises to miraculously solve romantic problems by working as "Reg'ler love drops" (*GGTL*, 51), the bottle contains not a mystical hallucinogen but whitening powder, which Laurey smears across Ado Annie's face. Aunt Eller accompanies the

make-over with yet another traditional song, this one about the deceptive lengths that men and women go to to find love. When the song ends,

(She [Aunt Eller] gets up from her chair to see what LAUREY is doing.) Let's see whut you're a-doin' to her. (She turns ADO ANNIE about in her chair, and bursts into a loud guffaw, ADO ANNIE's face is plastered with white.) Mercy! She's plum whitewashed you! Look like a nigger angel turned all white and shinin'. Whur's yer wings at, Angel? (*GGTL*, 53)

In *Oklahoma!*, Ado Annie is reimagined as pretty and flirtatious, but in *Green Grow* she is homely and awkward, with her surname Carnes suggesting the possibility of Hispanic ethnicity. By covering Ado Annie with whiteness, Laurey means to make her more attractive, but the adaptation fails, and she only makes her ridiculous. (Or perhaps this is Laurey's intent all along, her "goodness" in *Green Grow the Lilacs* is up for debate.) The scene appears designed to make the audience laugh at the sight gag of Ado Annie's face paired with Aunt Eller's racist speech about a "Nigger angel." Those who have defended Rodgers and Hammerstein against charges of racism in *Oklahoma!* have noted that they stripped the play of Riggs's "casual" use of "nigger," arguing that any lingering racism came from Riggs, not his adapters.³³

While "nigger" may be being used for a laugh here, the scene seems to problematize rather than endorse this mean-spirited racism, perhaps even indicting the audience for its amusement. The description of white-faced Annie as a "nigger angel" while bizarre and gratuitous, insistently casts her transformation in racial, not merely cosmetic terms, even if Laurey explains she's simply hiding Annie's "freckles." The

³³ Robert Hapgood sums up this position in a letter to *PMLA*: "Rodgers and Hammerstein are of course accountable for what they chose to include from their source, but in weighing their intentions it is worth distinguishing what they borrowed, invented, and omitted... Also gone from the musical are the play's casual references to 'nigger.'" *PMLA* 113.3 (1998): 453.

scene could be understood as a reading of adaptation generally, suggesting the racial politics that may motivate apparently neutral formal practices. The slur also reminds the viewer that the characters live in a racially diverse world, even if the play seems not to depict it. The whitewashing punctures the sense of white universality and, in depicting minstrelsy in reverse, associates Laurey with the symbolic violence of that practice. The adaptation of face whitening to dream serum in *Oklahoma!* itself provides a potent gloss of the function of white privilege and reveals that Rodgers and Hammerstein on some level understood and attempted to contain the play's racial critique.

This sense of whiteness as both cure and dream also seems to be an undercurrent of *Green Grow the Lilac's* other use of the word "nigger," which is also its most direct consideration of adaptation. This scene too revolves around Laurey, here fantasizing about a world away from the hard labor and limited possibilities of farm life on the frontier: "Wish't I livrd in the White House, and had diamonds on my shoes, and a little nigger boy to fan me—when it was hot" (*GGTL*, 33). Once again "white" and "nigger" are contrasted, but this time it is the White House, which is depicted as a place of white power where de facto slavery endures. Laurey continues

Er I wish't I lived in Virginia or Californie. In Californie, they's oranges growin', and snow fallin' at the same time. I seen a pitcher of it. In the Verdigree bottom the other day, a man found thirty-three arrow heads—thirty-three—whur they'd been a Indian battle--- (*GGTL*, 33)

As is often the case with Riggs's dialogue, Laurey is associative to the point of seeming almost incoherent. Her listing of other possible lives ends unexpectedly back in Indian Territory, with the discovery of 33 arrow heads.³⁴ As if to highlight the illogic of this

³⁴ Riggs repeats the Verdigree location later in the play in case the reader had any doubt about its location in Indian Territory. *GGTL*, 130.

turn, Aunt Eller asks, “Whut’s that got to do with the White House and livin’ in Californie?” Laurey does not answer. But perhaps she is haunted by the absent presence of these displaced Indians, perhaps her restless unhappiness is not simply the hysteria of a repressed sexuality, set to be cured once she finally marries Curly, but a deeper and unresolvable unease about her colonial position, one that she tries to overcome by fantasizing about overt racial subjugation, the fanning boy, but that remains buried, threatening to surface in her consciousness as the arrows did in the ground.

As she attempted to assimilate Ado Annie into white heteronormative sexuality, Laurey here tries another adaptation, incorporating the arrowheads into the story that she wants to tell about her life. But they cannot be assimilated, and her storytelling stops with them. In this scene we seem to see the limits of adaptation, which correspond to those I identified with quotation in my first chapter. But the key to the moment, and to Riggs’s theorizations of adaptation more generally, is that this thinking naturally aligns itself with the perspective of the adapter, who wishes to control and harvest the source text’s meaning. But what if the real story of adaptation is not the adapter at all, but the adapted? The arrowheads survive into Laurey’s storytelling, but she is not able to claim them. They are not used to show that Laurey now occupies the place of the dead Indians, that her connection to the land is the same as theirs, that she speaks for them. Rather, they haunt her and prevent her from narrating herself into the United States and the uncontested racial privilege she imagines there. They stop her fantasies dead in their tracks and pull her back to Indian Territory.

A key aspect of the whitewashing scene is its simultaneity with Curly’s confrontation of Jeeter in the smokehouse. The stage directions note that the scenes,

while presented sequentially, occur at the same time, and the architecture of the scenes themselves also establishes their concurrence. As Laurey literally whitewashes Ado Annie, Jeeter, sitting in filth and darkness, figuratively whitewashes himself, attributing his violent past to another “feller.” Whiteness appears here too, attached to the body of the dead girl, which becomes “sump’n white.”

I knowed a feller onct killed a girl. . . One night her paw and maw couldn’t sleep fer the dog a-barkin’ so. Next mornin’ the old man went down to feed the stock like he always did, and when he come to the horse troft, he seen sump’n white a-layin’s there. It was his daughter, in her nightgown, layin’ there in the water all covered with blood, dead. They never did fin out who done it. (*GGTL*, 69-70)

Riggs insists that we note the simultaneity of the scenes, even though he could have simply placed them, as Rodgers and Hammerstein do, in chronological order. Gunfire interrupts the Laurey/Ado Annie scene, which sends the girls running to the smokehouse. The play then moves backwards in time to Curly’s arrival at the smokehouse, which we know will conclude in gunfire. The scenes are linked by the violence of the shots, which connect Laurey’s erasing of Annie’s race with Jeeter’s murder of the farm girl. While the surface narrative of the play puts Laurey and Jeeter at odds, its structure unites them, as do their attempts at adaptation. The failures of these adaptations, which can also be read as the victories of their sources, is signaled by Laurey marrying Curly and so remaining trapped in Indian Territory and Jeeter repeating the violence he attempts, through narrative, to relegate to the past and to someone else.

One way to look at *Green Grow the Lilacs* is to put it in the same camp as *Oklahoma!*, representing a landscape of whiteness without racial diversity, counter to the reality of Indian Territory. But while the whiteness in *Oklahoma!* strives for universality and autochthony, “we know we belong to the land and the land we belong to is grand,”

that of *Green Grow the Lilacs* is overtly partial, gesturing to what is absent or suppressed. Riggs takes the “folk,” the whites of Oklahoma, who he consistently describes as “primitive” as the object of his ethnographic gaze. This ethnographic treatment of whiteness corresponds to, or is the negative of, Riggs’s modernist treatment of Cherokees in the overtly experimental *The Cherokee Night*, another, even stranger, adaptation.

Adaptation as Indian Territory

The Cherokee Night (1932) is apparently a play about the tragedy of assimilation, bookended with scenes that speak directly to the “Indian question.”³⁵ It begins in 1915 with six young “mixed blood” Cherokees—Viney, Audeal, Bee, Hutch, Art, and Gar—picnicking at night on the Claremore mound, where the Cherokees massacred an Osage village in 1817 (Fig. 17).



³⁵ Lynn Riggs, *Russet Mantle, and The Cherokee Night: Two Plays* (New York: Samuel . French, 1936).

Figure 17. Postcard from Lynn Riggs to Barrett Clark with a section of the play's epigraph, "Night has come to our People," scrawled across the back.

They are frightened by an "old Indian—kinda crazy" (*TCN*, 143) out robbing graves, who tells them "You're no use to anybody. You're lost. You might as well be dead" (*TCN*, 146) and tries to force them to touch the arrowheads he's gathered in order to mystically reconnect them with their Cherokee heritage.³⁶ The scene ends with the old man yelling apocalyptically that the Cherokee war party will return—"I hear 'em now. The whisper of rawhide! The whing of tomahawks! The groans of the dyin'!"—allowing us to read that return into the characters' actions in the scenes that follow (*TCN*, 152). And indeed, the next scene depicts Art, twelve years later, accused of murdering his wife with a hatchet.

The play's middle scenes are largely self-contained. Though they feature the characters from the picnic, they are arranged achronologically and their relation to each other is formal and thematic, not narrative. They depict the investigation of Art's wife's death, a domestic dispute between Viney and her sister Sarah, the male characters as children searching for the blood of a murdered black man, Gar's capture and torture by a group of white cultists called "the Tribe," and a romance between Hutch and an Osage woman. They do not contribute to a single story, but are instead united by the question of what unites them.³⁷ The final scene returns to a direct consideration of race and

³⁶ The scene's title, "Sixty-seven Arrowheads," also recall the 33 arrowheads that disrupt Laurey's reverie in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The action of both plays takes place over this submerged Indigeneity.

³⁷ Riggs also binds the scenes structurally, as when the sound of a horn from Scene Six intrudes on the dramatic conclusion of Scene Five, seeming to rush that story off the stage.

assimilation. It is 1895. The father of two picnicking characters from the first scene flees from a posse, taking an old man, Gray-Wolf, and his grandson hostage. The posse leader declares, “This is God’s country out here—and God’s a white man” (*TCN*, 260) and kills the outlaw, Spench. Despite Spench’s violence toward him, Grey-Wolf, a “full-blood” claims him as “our dead” and concludes the play with a ritual of mourning full of stock Indian signifiers.

A far-away look is in Gray-Wolf’s eyes, a quality of magnificent dignity and despair as if he mourned for his own life, for the life of his son, for his grandson, for Spench, for the women, for a whole race gone down into darkness. The lights fade slowly. The fire flickers. Claremore Mound glitters in the night. A few stars are in the sky. (*TCN*, 262)

The quotation above comes from the stage directions, but the language far exceeds the utilitarian or descriptive, glossing what the audience sees in a way that emphasizes its over-the-top and stereotypical symbolism with lines like “a whole race gone down into darkness.” Here the performed and written plays seem to conflict, the irony of the stage descriptions imperceptible in their enactment. Riggs winks at the play’s reader, who can see what the theatrical audience cannot.³⁸ In *Green Grow the Lilacs*, the stage directions and glossary are similarly extensive, indicating Riggs’s ongoing exploitation of marginal spaces, spaces generally seen to function non-rhetorically, in order to explore subversive potentials.³⁹ Riggs’s cultural critique urges his reader to assume more rigorous and complex reading practices, looking beneath the surface story for clues to other meanings

³⁸ Riggs’s relation to Broadway and theatre in general was ambivalent, and he often expressed that he wrote for the page, not the stage.

³⁹ Riggs most fully explores the marginal and its possibilities in his poetry, itself a relatively marginal genre, see my discussion of “Charger” in Chapter Two.

and possibilities, which might translate to a more critical engagement with the narratives of political and social life.

The Cherokee Night has been described as “distort[ing] native cultures and perpetuat[ing] racist stereotypes, demonstrating how authors of minority ancestry, with no real connection to their culture, may inadvertently reinforce the views of the dominant society.”⁴⁰ But, as in so much of Riggs’s work, he joins a tradition, in this case the genre of the vanishing Indian, only to transform and critique it. This subversive intent is especially crucial when considering a play that deals directly with Indian themes, themes which I have argued shape and inform the entire Riggs corpus. How does this play so directly “about” cultural adaptation fit into, expand, or undercut Riggs’s theorization of adaptation in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, in which he suggests the possibilities for cultural resistance in apparent assimilation? To answer this question, we must consider *The Cherokee Night* as a self-contained work *and* as an adaptation.

Scenes in *Green Grow the Lilacs*, such as those involving the whitening powder and the shivoree, put Rodgers and Hammerstein at great pains to revise and domesticate Riggs’s destabilizing content which they inadvertently carry forward as a threatening trace. Riggs anticipates this trajectory in *Green Grow the Lilac*’s own theory of adaptation, which can be meaningfully applied to *The Cherokee Night*. Conceived at the same time as *Green Grow the Lilacs*, while on a Guggenheim fellowship in France in 1929, Riggs wrote, or more accurately, adapted, the bulk of *The Cherokee Night* from fragments of a failed autobiographical novel, *The Boy with Typhoid Fever* (which he had already previously adapted into a series of one-act plays), during the staging of *Green*

⁴⁰ Julie Little Thunder, “Mixedbloods and Bloodlust in Cherokee Night.” *The Midwest Quarterly* 43.4 (2002): 355.

Grow the Lilacs in 1931. *The Cherokee Night*'s status as undeclared adaptation about cultural adaptation concentrates and applies this theory by yoking it to personal experience. The source text here is Riggs's own life as an "absorbed" Cherokee.

In *The Cherokee Night*, the autobiographical source material, which Riggs had been unable to amalgamate into a novel, fractures the traditional structure of a well-made play until the play can only be understood as a broken thing that the reader must put back together. The novel's failure becomes the play's formal innovation. As discussed, the scenes shift backward and forward in time and are self-contained rather than cumulative. By implicitly characterizing the source text, his life as a Cherokee, as beyond traditional (or conventional) representation, Riggs creates an alternative to the seeming inevitability of modernist primitivism. Such primitivism has been elegantly described by Michael Denning as an "enclosure of the global cultural commons, of the symbolic resources of song and story,"⁴¹ a practice Joseph Roach accuses Riggs of for his harvesting of folk materials in *Green Grow the Lilacs*.⁴² Relying on economic models, these Marxian theorizations describe the transformation of folk materials into commodities that are then owned and controlled by their appropriators.

In this scheme "primitive" texts, which span racial divides to include folk materials of all cultures, are depicted as passive and vulnerable, unable to fight off the capitalists at the door. Such progressive critiques ironically replicate the structure of modernist Indianists toward Native Americans, locating both people and their culture

⁴¹ Michael Denning, "'So-Called Cultural Histories': Cultural Studies and History in the Age of One World," in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies* (Temple University Press, 2011), 141.

⁴² Joseph Roach, "World Bank Drama," in *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 171.

frozen in the past. To draw a metaphor from another folk archive, the story of Snow White in her glass coffin captures this assumed relation between source and adapter as well as Riggs's radical reinterpretation of it.⁴³ Apparently dead, Snow White is still prized for her decorative beauty, and it is as decoration that her prince initially intends to use her, ordering his servants to carry her coffin down the mountain to be displayed in his castle. It is not a kiss, but the accident of a dropped coffin that awakens her. Riggs writes the folk tradition awakening, disrupting its decorative appropriation. By portraying his Cherokee characters as living and flawed, rather than noble and dead, by depicting them in a play characterized by modernist experimentation rather than Indianist pageantry, Riggs ceases to parody Indianism and instead breaks its glass coffin.

The Grimms' version of Snow White ends strangely.⁴⁴ The evil queen finds herself unable to stay away from Snow White's wedding but, once there, "terrorized, she could only stand there without moving." The shock of seeing the thing she thought she'd killed alive and thriving paralyzes her. "Then they put a pair of iron shoes into burning coals. They were brought forth with tongs and placed before her. She was forced to step into the red-hot shoes and dance until she fell down dead."⁴⁵ The story captures the threat to capitalist modernity of a genuinely living folk tradition, a theme that I argue Riggs develops beneath the play's apparent, or perceived, primitivism. As Riggs uses allusion to directly counter quotation and appropriation of Native cultures by white "experts," he

⁴³ The gendered nature of the metaphor is intentional.

⁴⁴ Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen: Ausgabe Letzter Hand Mit Einem Anhang Sämtlicher Nicht in Allen Auflagen Veröffentlichter Märchen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997).

⁴⁵ Translated by D.L. Ashliman, <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimm053.html>.

uses adaptation to show how these cultures can survive political and cultural imperialism, resistant to and troubling the dominant culture and its arts.

Riggs structures the play to illicit critical thinking in his viewers. Perhaps the complication of a linear narrative itself represents a critique of the evolutionary logic of the colonizer. This wariness of narrative also surfaces in Riggs's unease as a correspondent and his apparent inability or unwillingness to write a standard professional autobiography, even at the insistent bequest of his agent and publisher.⁴⁶ The failed autobiographical novel, an attempt to adapt his experiences into a "major" form, returns as a play about the minor Cherokee, which makes a certain sense as Riggs's race was an aspect of himself that was both defining and undefined. Riggs held onto his ethnicity *as* uncertainty, perhaps because in Santa Fe he was surrounded by white writers who thought of Indigeneity as just the opposite, a totally assimilable position.

Despite frequent scholarly attempts to assign Riggs a culturally Indigenous background,⁴⁷ he seems to have grown up with exclusively white affiliations, his closest

⁴⁶ Riggs's archive contains few of his own letters, which writers with an eye to posterity usually keep, and the letters of others frequently mention how they know he hates to write letters. Barrett Clark, his agent, had to bully him into writing the biography, which in the end was largely fictitious.

⁴⁷ Riggs has been claimed by Native Studies scholars as a Native writer. So as not to replicate a blood quantum definition of Indigeneity, these scholars posit his cultural, rather than a racial connection to Cherokee culture. While I believe that Riggs's ethnicity and his relation to it are central to his work, I do not follow critics such as Daniel Justice in "imagining" how Riggs might have grown up Cherokee: "It's easy to imagine the studious and imaginative young Riggs sitting around with his friend in Claremore... listening to the old stories about *Uk'ten'*, the dangerous but powerful antlered snake of Cherokee story lore, or of the Long Man, the Mississippi. Did he know the ceremonial power of lightning-struck wood? Did he respect *Awí Usdi*, the Little Deer who inflicted rheumatism upon hunters?... Riggs's separation and feelings of exile can't be necessarily conflated with an ignorance of the old ways; *The Cherokee Night* clearly demonstrates his familiarity with some elements of traditional Cherokee life." Daniel Heath Justice,

connection to Cherokee culture severed when his mother died of Typhoid Fever when he was two. His father quickly remarried, but his stepmother, who was also Cherokee, was distant and abusive and seems not to have shared much of anything with Riggs, let alone a cultural inheritance. I suspect that under these circumstances, Riggs's Cherokee ethnicity became a metonym for his lost mother and, as the mother was irrevocably gone, the accessibility of a Native identity seemed equally impossible, a counterhistory of what might have been if his mother had lived. Riggs's relation to his race seems unique in a period still characterized by the "one drop" rule.⁴⁸ He had the privileges of whiteness but knew that he had other, unexplored filiations.⁴⁹ This version of passing shares a structure with his homosexuality, which was present yet invisible, and necessarily disavowed in Oklahoma.⁵⁰ Riggs's Cherokee blood entitled him to an allotment of land, which his father farmed. But he was insulated from the Cherokee culture that surrounded him by his

Our Fire Survives the Storm: a Cherokee Literary History (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 105

⁴⁸ Native American blood quantum operates differently than African American blood quantum, perhaps because the settler colonial government benefited from the disappearance of Indians (and their land claims) so Indian blood was seen to be diluted by a sea of white. While white blood was "tainted" by even a drop of black, thus creating an ever-growing racialized underclass.

⁴⁹ The most famous "mixed race" member of Riggs's community was Will Rodgers, whose career and success give a sense of how mixed race Indians of the first half of the 20th century often, as was also the case for Jews and Hispanics, "became white."

⁵⁰ Craig Womack set the stage for my understanding of Riggs in his treatise on Native American literary sovereignty, *Red on Red*, which makes the essential connection between race and sexuality in Riggs's work. But while Womack positions Riggs as responding to the generalized historical milieu of the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, his focus on the closet simplifies Riggs's complex poetics into compulsive revelation. I would suggest that there is more at stake for Riggs than revealing his ethnicity and sexuality, that he offers a way of looking, a theory, that destabilizes the powerful individuality that is presumed to characterize the modernist poetic voice. Womack, *Red on Red*, 273.

extended white settler family, a situation perhaps depicted in *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In place of that Cherokee knowledge, which his characters so often and fruitlessly seek, Riggs grew up with a different alternative to capitalist modernity: poor white farm life. While not coded as racially other, the values of working and living off the land were directly opposed to the bureaucratization and accumulation of capital that modernity represented to Riggs. His indigeneity was largely imagined, but differs from that of the Indianists in ways that are worth contemplating. While they perceive “the Indian” as a subjectivity they can fully inhabit, Riggs is different precisely because he refuses such easy identification, proposing a more ethical separation, a sense of difference that is respectful rather than demeaning.⁵¹

The Cherokee Night replaces the autobiographical lens of the material’s origin with a seemingly ethnographic one, for the simple fact that it depicts Cherokee people and identifies them by their blood quantum. The familiarity of the ethnographic trope domesticates the play’s formal experimentation and serves as a screen for its anti-capitalism. Take, for example, Scene Three, “Liniment,” in which mixed blood sisters Viney and Sarah are reunited after more than a decade of separation. Sarah, the good, poor sister, embodies Cherokee values, while rich Viney has rejected her Cherokee background to identify as white. Sarah tells her sister:

The way to be is to be humble, and remember the life that’s in you. Our Maw told us once the way we was meant to live. “Remember it,” she said. “Remember it and your days’ll be food and drink. They’ll be a river in the desert, they’ll be waving grass and deer feeding.” (*TCN*, 184)

⁵¹ *The Cherokee Night* was published with *Russet Mantle* by Samuel French in 1936. The pairing of these works is quite evocative, as *Russet Mantle* parodies Santa Fe Whites who could claim an understanding of the Indian, and *The Cherokee Night* seems to offer just such an understanding.

Since Sarah is too poor even to buy liniment for her debilitating arthritis, it seems clear that her Cherokee goodness has made her ill-adapted for the modern world. But the “vanishing Indian” story smuggles an astringent class critique as the two sisters also represent an ethical encounter between rich and poor. Riggs is a storyteller wary of narrative and its totalizing deceptions. Close reading reveals the happy marriage plot of *Green Grow the Lilacs* to be anything but. Similarly, *The Cherokee Night* is made up of moments that ask to be read against their grain, strung together in a “story” that rejects the very category.

For instance, the ending of *The Cherokee Night* seemingly confirms that the Cherokee are a doomed but honorable people. After the challenging achronology of the play, which serves to undercut a teleological model of development or evolution, the audience is left with a beating drum and a brave old brave. “Santo Domingo Corn Dance” gives us a way to read this moment. As discussed in Chapter 2, Riggs trots out the most common conceptions of Indians only to bring up the problems with these conceptions. But parody is not a sufficient mode for understanding the complexities and ironies of *The Cherokee Night*. And here it seems useful to consider Riggs’s only other overtly “Indian” poem, the unpublished “Undergraduate Student,” which itself seems an adaptation of “Santo Domingo Corn Dance.”

“Undergraduate ~~Student~~”
 An Indian, he said, had sired his sire
 In Oklahoma in the early days;
 But now he sits before an open fire
 Indoors, with legs unused to ~~older~~ (^open) ways,
 Unused to tapping on the fertile earth
 For corn to yield and rain to wash the sky,
 (^His eyes have now) ~~Now~~ and then ~~in his eyes~~ a look of birth
 Which later (^prejudice can not) ~~practice cannot all~~ deny
~~And holds his way~~ (^And so he walks) among imported people

With dignity uneven on his toes,
~~Because he thinks the presence of a steeple~~
(^Because he fears the topple of a steeple)
~~Improves his Indians dancing in their rows~~
(^Is not so good a dancer as he (^one) chose)
(^Is not the dancing worshipper he chose)
~~Yet~~ (^So) in the night in dreams he makes a throaty,
Blanketed outcry like a trapped coyote.⁵²

While the published poem parodies those who think they can take on an Indian subjectivity, “Undergraduate Student” seeks to do just that, and as the draft of the poem demonstrates, falls apart under the effort to internalize and personalize the imagery of the corn dance, only regaining its footing in the last line’s expression of unconscious agony.

In order to depict the Cherokee in *The Cherokee Night*, Riggs did secondary research through a white friend in Oklahoma, writing to Hugh M. Bland for “funny Indian names.”⁵³ Performing such research, Riggs seems to act as an ethnographer, or worse, exploiter. “Undergraduate Student” reveals the pathos of these efforts. The very fact of its suppression by Riggs shows him working privately through the meaning of an Indian heritage, a meaning he does not assume even exists. Riggs directed the first performances of *The Cherokee Night* in Iowa City in 1932 and corresponded with Sawyer Faulk about a subsequent production in Syracuse. When Faulk wrote to him, asking what to use for the “Cherokee music” called for in the stage directions, Riggs replied that he

⁵² Draft found among undated correspondence between Riggs and Albert Bein. LRPB, Box 1, Folder 4.

⁵³ Riggs did not save his side of the correspondence. On December 21, 1931, Bland sent him “a partial roll of the Cherokees by blood together with a few suggestions from my own acquaintances.” Then, on January 28, 1932, he wrote, “When it comes to funny Indian names, I am a gushing fountain,” probably in response to Riggs’s characterization. LRPB, Box 1, Folder 4.

had simply substituted Pueblo drums.⁵⁴ The poem similarly attempts to access Indigeneity through Pueblo rites and symbols, in tension with “Santo Domingo Corn Dance” which lambasts just such pretensions. Since “Undergraduate Student” is undated, it is tempting to read “Santo Domingo Corn Dance” as the later poem, with Riggs ironizing his own effort to access indigenous subjectivity through tourist spectacle. Perhaps Riggs was uncomfortable with how he fell in with the Indianists, embarrassed by his own desire to represent that much-represented ceremony. The earnestness of “Undergraduate Student” is a betrayal of the very ideas it attempts to explore. The stricken line “improves the Indians dancing in their rows,” which accompanies “the presence of a steeple,” suggests Riggs attempting to bring together “white” and Pueblo cultures, but instead replacing this meeting with a more abstract and general description of a “dancing worshipper” and “the topple of a steeple.” “Undergraduate Student” shows Riggs working through the aesthetic possibilities of cultural meeting and mixing, possibilities which the poem’s consignment to the archive suggests Riggs rejects in favor of a more radical stance of not knowing.

Crimes and Misdirection

Riggs establishes the racial stakes of *The Cherokee Night* in its first scene, tying the characters’ torment to their blood quantum and a violent, half-remembered past embodied in the Claremore mound, which also appears in every scene, knitting their disparate narratives together through an ordinary massacre. This is a sleight of hand. By the final scene, the characters’ angst is revealed to spring not from Indian bloodlust or

⁵⁴ LRBP, Box 2, Folder 37.

tragic hybridity, but capitalist alienation. Riggs plays on the exoticism of his subject throughout, offering a surface narrative punctuated by hypnotic, racialized brutality only to indict capitalist modernity, as is especially clear in the “White Turkey” scene, in which a full-blood Osage woman sells her allotment, which her father farmed, to live in luxury, buying markers of modernity epitomized by her Studebaker. Despite her apparent greed, the play is sympathetic to her, portraying her as unhappy, caught up in a cycle of acquisitions not because she is stupid or lazy, but because she has lost touch with the land, which Riggs portrays as stabilizing for Native and non-Native alike, as in the prayer that Sarah recites in “Liniment.”

“The man’ll plow the ground, Maw said.
“And he’ll plant and cultivate.
The woman’ll have her garden and her house.
...
The night’ll come.
Children’ll be born.
The gods of the earth things—the gods of the stone and the tree and all natural
Things
Will live by their side.
And the God of the Christians, too,
Will keep them from sin.” (TCN, 185)

Just as I have argued that *Green Grow the Lilacs*, a play apparently devoid of Indians, is about them, *The Cherokee Night*, a play that flaunts its characters’ Indigeneity, has little to do with Indigeneity. While this stance may seem instrumentalizing to Native peoples, Riggs simultaneously critiques the audience’s tendency to think of Indigeneity as something they understand, as a narrative they can follow. Throughout the play, we are presented with racial mysteries, and each time we are shown how inadequate race is as a paradigm for understanding. In this way, Riggs’s teaches his audience to question what they actually know about race and the capitalist structure that benefits from racism.

Scene 4, “The Place Where the Nigger Was Found,” has been read as a homoerotic primitivising of African Americans.⁵⁵ It is 1906, the year before statehood. Garth, Art, and Hutch are children, “ten or twelve years old” (*TCN*, 191). They have gone to the woods to find the scene of a murder they learned about in snatches of overheard conversation. Their innocent prurience recalls Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, as does the racialized nature of their intrigue, a search for where “One nigger beat the other’n’s head in” (*TCN*, 193). In a parody of Indian trackers, they try to recreate the murder by the evidence left at the scene: a torn playing card, a tin cup still wet with whisky. But their investigation soon turns to reenactment.

‘F I seen a nigger, I’d hack him!
‘F I seen a nigger, I’d hack him!
‘F I seen a nigger, I’d hack him!
‘F I seen a nigger, I’d hack him! Hack him! (*TCN*, 200)

In their response to essentialized blackness, they begin to act as stereotypical, movie Indians, “slapping rapidly their own open mouths” (*TCN*, 200). Finally, in the midst of this frenzy, Art “drops his club, goes on his knees, feverishly tearing the leaves apart with his hands. He leans forward, then back quickly, rises, his hands out in front of him, turned down. He turns them over. The palms are streaked with blood” (*TCN*, 201). He has solved the mystery, identifying the location of the murder. But its discovery provokes no satisfaction, only horror.

The scene is insistently about race. The boys objectify the dead man, referring to him only as “the nigger” which is also the term they use to refer to his murderer. Their racism makes the story of the murder itself difficult to follow. It is unclear who is the victim, who the perpetrator, as the word is the same for both.

⁵⁵ Justice, *Our Fire Survives the Storm*, 105. Womack, *Red on Red*, 289.

HUTCH. All of a sudden this nigger riz up—
ART. Whut nigger?
HUTCH. The dead nigger! (*TCN*, 199)

But it would be a mistake to take this racism at face value as though it were an ethical position endorsed by Riggs. The blood the boys seek corresponds to the dominant understanding of what Indigeneity means: blood, or more exactly, blood quantum, as the play's first scene so vividly depicts, describing the character's appearance and giving their percentage. When the boys find the blood, it authenticates the crime and their own version of it. The blood confirms the story they already knew was true because the characters are "niggers." But we, the viewers, know that such authentication is impossible and illusory. This desired resolution, the blood, breaks the scene apart, destroying the story the boys want to tell, or their ability to tell stories at all. They flee the scene, the fantasy over. Once they are gone, "a giant NEGRO, naked to the waist, lifts himself into the sun from behind the thick underbrush" (*TCN*, 201). As the stage directions make clear, he might be both "the murderer undismayed by his crime, and the very emanation of the dead man himself" (*TCN*, 201). The floating signifier of the multiple "niggers" is embodied in this figure, who, as if in response to the mystery surrounding him, "yawns," ending the scene.

Riggs acknowledges that racialized violence has a certain appealing force, as it provides a familiar narrative, but it is a narrative that cannot survive analysis. The scene depicts the boys rehearsing the story they already know, a story of blackness and brutality. The viewer too is invited to use race as a proxy for characterization, to understand the characters through their blood quantum. The boys spend the scene exoticizing African Americans in the most offensive and violent way possible. Might this

be a way for Riggs to mirror his audience's own conception of Indians back at them as they "solve" the play, using his trademark racial substitution developed so meaningfully in *Green Grow the Lilacs*? The exoticization of the black characters is possible because there are no actual people present, only their traces, just as Indian masquerade relies on an absence of Indians. The end of the scene disturbs this easy exoticizing as the murderer or murdered man emerges from the dirt. The replacement of a story of murder with a body that might be the murderer or his victim raises the issue of how real bodies fit into racist narration, suggesting these narratives rely on turning people into symbols akin to the card or cup.

This interest in crime and the ambivalence of evidence is also developed in Scene 2, "The Hatchet," in which the prostitute Bee serves as a literal native informant, tricking Art into confessing his crimes as the sheriff listens through an intercom that is hidden in plain sight. Here too, there is a mystery to be solved. Did Art murder his wife? He has been beaten by deputies but holds to the story that she jumped into the shallows of the Verdigrée River, cut her head, and drowned. Bee works Art into a frenzy during which he confesses, explaining that it was not for money, as everyone suspects, but for hate. This revelation is anti-climactic. A mystery explained becomes simply a crime. As the murder loses its narrative interest, our attention is insistently drawn to the social structures and technologies that enable this confession. The Sheriff pays Bee to help entrap Art,⁵⁶ linking her work as a prostitute to this pursuit of justice. Art talks to Bee because they share a history, and he thinks they are alone in the county jail's cells. As the scene progresses, Art notices that the sheriff has a hung a picture of his dead wife in his cell,

⁵⁶ The double meaning of his name is also evocative.

hoping to play on Art's superstitions. Art laughs at this ruse—"Whutta they think I am, anyway? God, what a bunch of lousy hicks—a school kid wouldn't be took in by it" (*TCN*, 168)—but he is trapped by something else on the wall, the intercom that he does not recognize as such. Because he does not see what is right in front of him, he condemns himself to be hanged. The scene vividly plays up the madness in Art's Indian blood.

She grinned at me. I hit her and hit her, her grinnin's at me like a fool! Hit her seven or eight times, her clawin' to git away! Killed her, thowed her overboard! The blood came on the water like oil! Not fer money, though don't you think that! I wouldn't do that. I hated her, that's why, hated her, hated everybody--! (*TCN*, 167)

But, once again, it also warns us about the danger of missing or misinterpreting signs that are right before our eyes. The sensationalistic violence of the plot invites bad reading, which it then exposes and condemns.

The final mystery that I would like to discuss is the abduction and apparent murder of Gar in Scene 5, "The High Mountain." From the first moments of the play, Gar is depicted as the most conflicted character because he is equal parts Cherokee and white. He embodies the trope of the tragic mulatto, or in this case half breed. Gar attempts to resolve his tortured hybridity by going to Tahlequah, the Cherokee capital, but there he finds only "old men." Desperate for answers and meaning, he scales a cliff to arrive at the compound of a white cult called "The Tribe," where he is quickly captured. While most of the cult wants to kill Gar, their charismatic leader, Jonas, tries to convert him and groom him as a successor. Gar refuses, and they chain him to a post where previous intruders had been executed. The scene ends ominously with Gar begging for his life as The Tribe sings hymns.

Each scene in the play embeds a date in its opening stage directions and the play's program also included this information so that audience members could follow its temporal leaps. We are told this scene takes place on "a summer day in 1913." The opening scene, which also features Gar, takes place in 1915. So, despite appearances to the contrary, we know that Gar will escape the cult, and this traumatic scene retrospectively explains his strange behavior in Scene 1. Since Gar is the play's most "Indian" character, the scene could be read allegorically: you think the Indian is doomed, but he is not. It can also be read as a burlesque of the Santa Fe literary community and their obsession with indigenous authenticity. The white cultists call themselves "The Tribe" implying they can do Indigeneity better than the Cherokee community that is literally situated below them. Until Gar stumbles into their midst, most of the act is dedicated to an account of their worship, which consists of members of the church standing up and offering poetic observations.

A WOMAN [With a rapt, ecstatic look, as if praying, jumping to her feet.]
I went out this mornin' when the bees was about—The bees was singin's where
they flew about the flowers.

PEOPLE.
Hear us, O Lord!

A MAN [Jumping up.]
The cows knowed thy presence—
The calves leaped up for joy.

PEOPLE.
Hear us, O Lord!
A WOMAN. [Jumping up in from and turning back to the others.]
The f'ar burned most of itself when I struck the flint;
The peas is getting' ripe and fat in their pods. (*TCN*, 213)

These prayers look and act like poems, suggesting that we could read *The Tribe* as a parody of the politics and pretensions of the Santa Fe arts colony, a place notoriously

hostile to outsiders. Gar, as an actual Indian, is especially dangerous to the structure of this delusion. Because the play lacks an overarching narrative, these scenes require the viewer or reader to actively interpret them, in the process demonstrating the failure of certain racialized modes of understanding. In place of the romance of the vanishing Indian, we are given a critique of capitalism and the artistic practices it spawned.

First as Tragedy

In the early fifties, Riggs returns again to *The Boy with Typhoid Fever*. But this later work, *The Boy with Tyford Fever*,⁵⁷ a “musical play” in which he also wrote the songs, has an additional source, the phenomenally popular and profitable, *Oklahoma!*, an adaptation of his own *Green Grow the Lilacs*. The play is a sentimental reimagining of his abusive childhood, in which a boy runs away from his cruel stepmother and finds happiness in a transient railroad camp. It seems an effort to capitalize on *Oklahoma!* and Riggs’s association with it, and it is generally far less critical and subversive than his earlier works. But *The Boy with Tyford Fever* does contain one haunting scene that provides the perfect post script to this consideration of Riggs, adaptation, and Indigeneity.

The de facto “mayor” of the camp, Old Timer, tells the young runaway about how it used to be, describing a hunting trip with his father in “old Oklahoma” and of killing two buffalo with one shot.

“You’ve missed ‘em,” Paw said.
But two started caughin’
And fell down dead.

⁵⁷ The play is located in Riggs’s archive at the University of Tulsa. All quotations come from this archival text.

I'd shot through 'em both
And made the dust bile up
On the other side a way.
We left 'em where they lay.

The Old Timer sings this story in the play's present but then goes quiet. "A drop descends. A drop of craggy mountains and far distances." The stage directions continue that "The Dance of the Old Timer" begins. This largely silent and symbolic dance recalls the dream ballet of *Oklahoma!*, which had in turn replaced the racialized whitening powder scene of *Green Grow the Lilacs*. In this late work, Riggs revisits Rodgers and Hammerstein's attempted bowdlerization of one of his most pointed scenes, and adapts that sublimation into a direct representation of race relations between whites and Indians in Indian Territory. In the dance, a white father and son go to hunt buffalo, this time killing six, impossibly, with one shot. They move on, as the stage directions describe, "spurning the bodies as so much refuse." But suddenly "Indians skulk up, surround them." The son fires another, single, shot, this time killing 17 Indians. He echoes his father's words about the buffalo, declaring, "there's plenty of Indians," and leaves them dead on the ground. At this point, the backdrop lifts and we are returned to the world of the railway camp, where an audience that has formed around the old-timer greets his performance with laughter.

From what I can tell, the play was never staged but was adapted again for television as *Some Sweet Day*. All details of that production have been lost. Whatever the status of the play in performance, it seems to me that it is in this attempt to be popular and populist that Riggs is most devastating and effective in his portrayal of white/Indigenous relations. The dance of the Old Timer follows the same script as every Hollywood movie of the time, of Indians as trash, worthless, "refuse" exaggerating these

claims and the audiences' eagerness for them until they become horrible, gratuitous, their ideology escaping its bounds and becoming overt. I suspect that Riggs learned this strategy from *Oklahoma!*'s relation to his own *Green Grow the Lilacs*. Its celebration of the very whiteness that he problematized showed him that perhaps the best way to critique hegemony is to make visible its logic.

Everyone knows *Oklahoma!* like everyone knows U.S. history, inexactly. The musical's most memorable lines are also a translation.

And when we say:
Ee-ee-ow! A yip-i-o-ee-ya!
We're only sayin',
"You're doin' fine, Oklahoma!"
Oklahoma, O.K.!⁵⁸

The indigenous possibilities of "Ee-ee-ow! A yip-i-o-ee-ya!" are contained by the "we're only saying" gloss and the redundancies that follow, "Oklahoma! Oklahoma, O.K." But the repetition of the name is destabilizing, drawing attention to the language as language. The war whoop becomes a state becomes an affirmation, but the name of the state is already a translation, Choctaw for "red man."

⁵⁸ *Oklahoma!*, 119.

CHAPTER IV

WALLACE STEVENS AND THE “DAMNED INDIANS”:
THE ORDER OF ASSIMILATION

The old expressions are with us always and there are always others.
—Motto of *Others*

Trinket pasticcio, flaunting skyey sheets,
With Crispin as the tiptoe cozener?
No, no: veracious page on page, exact.
—Wallace Stevens, “The Comedian as the Letter C”



Fig. 18. Lyonel Feininger, *Volcano*, 1919,
http://www.moma.org/collection/object.php?object_id=72303

Unpacking Stevens's Library

In this final chapter, I turn to Wallace Stevens, a writer seemingly removed—geographically, temperamentally, canonically—from “the Indian” and his erstwhile imitators. Stevens was, famously, an insurance executive in Hartford, Connecticut, a situation that he described as somehow un-American, wondering “in what sense do I live in America if I walk to and fro from the office day after day?”¹ Stevens's avowed placelessness is accompanied by an alternative definition of “living” based on reading and eating. In the same letter, he asserts that he “practically lived in France,” a country he had never visited, because a Mr. Vidal would “procure from an obscure fromagerie in the country some of the cheese with raisins in it of which I read one time.” Other letters confirm that Mr. Vidal was Stevens's European book dealer, reinforcing the deeply literary nature of even the sensual side of Stevens's “living.” Stevens's own life as a suburban businessman had no obvious literary tie to the region or its delicacies and was therefore, in its unmitigated reality, both unreal and un-American. So what, to echo Langston Hughes, was America to him?

The answer, I think, lies in Stevens's library, or the afterlife of it preserved in the Huntington, which suggests that Stevens did indeed “live” in America, but it was not a place that he could write to for cheese. In addition to the art books, philosophy, French novels, and contemporary poetry that we might associate with Stevens's reading practice,

¹ Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 610. For the remainder of this chapter, I will refer to this book as *Letters* and cite it parenthetically in the text. As Frank Lentricchia notes, this walk was also Stevens's time of poetic composition, so it is not simply his corporate lifestyle, or his Connecticut location, but his poetry that may alienate him from America. *Modernist Quartet* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 154.

he also collected what we now call Early American literature, 591 books published before 1860, including the pamphlets of Thomas Paine, the writings of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson, and several captivity narratives. Like our image of Stevens, these captivity narratives may seem dusty, impenetrable, and perhaps bloodless, but they are surprisingly urgent, violent, and, most importantly, punctuated by a disruptive pathos.

Stevens's genteel habits of collecting—exotic tea, *objets d'art*, antique books—contribute to the aesthete persona that he still maintains, casting him as a dandy, a term often used to dismiss his early work, including his first book, *Harmonium*.² His oft-stated interest in books as objects, rather than reading material,³ further obscures his relationship with these stories of whites pulled into the woods and tortured by Native Americans. Rather than write off the captivity narratives as an incidental part of Stevens's library, I see them as an integral element of his engagement with American Indians and their literatures, which this chapter explores. In the first part of his career, dating from his entry into the culture of little magazines in 1914 to the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, Stevens had to navigate a literary field where “Indians” were the rage. This confrontation with “the Indian” and, more often, Indianism, shaped his poetics

² Lentricchia's consideration of Stevens in *Modernist Quartet* remains for me the most compelling and convincing narrative of the relation between the poet's life and work. Lentricchia situates Stevens historically, politically, and, most importantly, economically, describing how he longed to be a fulltime artist but had to work to maintain the middle class status of his childhood, which he was, especially in the early days of attempted journalism, always in danger of losing to downward mobility. This Stevens writes poetry for the same reason that he collects beautiful things, to forget, or repress, his capitalist imbrication and, of course, because of some deep sexual misgivings that Lentricchia only insinuates.

³ “Some months ago I received from Mr. Vidal a copy of Valéry's ETAT DE LA VERTU, beautifully printed by Leon Pichon. And I have had it in my room under my eye ever since, but I have not read a line of it.” *Letters*, 290.

and persona, providing formal opportunities and a corresponding reaction against unwanted influence. Stevens's efforts to "assimilate" the Indian lead him to shift from a dandy to a colonizing persona in his work, and then, once that persona reaches its culmination in "The Comedian as the Letter C," to once again turn to the Indian as a way out of the artistic dead-end of writing the colonizer.

It is deceptively simple to search the Huntington's electronic database for books that were owned by Stevens. There are 1,207 resulting records. But the catalog's implicit authority elides the complicated provenance of the collection, which J.M. Edelstein outlines in his 1974 essay, "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and his Books." Edelstein identifies not only two auctions of Stevens's books at the Parke-Bernet Galleries in 1959, but states that Elsie Stevens had previously sold parts of the library piecemeal to a book dealer who mixed them with his general stock.⁴ While Stevens possessed two bookplates, he rarely used them and only wrote in his books some of the time, often choosing not to mark in the older, more beautiful books. Edelstein notes that only 172 titles in 211 volumes held by Holly Stevens at that time (before the first sale to the Huntington) can be definitively identified as belonging to her father, with the possibility that "half again" that number might have been his as well. This bibliographic history leads Edelstein to conclude, "The reconstruction of Wallace Stevens's library, if it is ever to be undertaken, will not be easy; it may even be impossible. Too much is missing."⁵ But, beginning the next year, in 1975, The Huntington Library attempted to do

⁴ J.M. Edelstein, "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books." *Book Collector* 23 (1974): 55-56.

⁵ *Ibid.*

just that, purchasing part of Stevens's collection from Holly Stevens for \$225,000 and making another large purchase in 1996, but it is unclear from whom or for what amount.⁶

This material history of Stevens's books echoes the history of his reputation. His confirmed major status now requires a suitably extensive and researchable archive to enable the endless considerations that fill books, chapters, essays, and even a journal devoted exclusively to him. That Stevens's reconstructed library may be, in some sense, a fiction is intriguing. My argument relates to a small section of books in the expansive Stevens archive, books about Indians that have, to my knowledge, escaped critical notice. My project of thinking Stevens and "the Indian" together begins with these books, but it seems possible that they did not actually belong to Stevens. It is not as though the Huntington simply bought Stevens's library in its entirety close to the time of his death or in preserved form from his daughter years later. The library had been dissolved, sold off in pieces, but now seems reborn, bigger than ever, in California. Since the function of the archive is often to inject historical fact and certainty into literary analysis, I choose for now to embrace this tentative knowledge as tentative, a reminder of how slippery considerations of influence especially can be.⁷ The history of Stevens I tell sheds new light on the poet, while also augmenting our understanding of the place of Native American literatures in the story of 20th-century American poetry. We don't often see

⁶ Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *Wallace Stevens Journal: A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society* 3.1-ii; iii-iv (January 1, 1979): 15. Robert Moynihan, "Checklist: Second Purchase, Wallace Stevens Collection, Huntington Library," *The Wallace Stevens Journal: A Publication of the Wallace Stevens Society* 20.1 (April 1, 1996): 76-103.

⁷ I plan to visit the Huntington to look at these books and hopefully gain a bit of certainty.

those books on the shelf together, but like Stevens's unnoted collection of captivity narratives, perhaps "the Indian" has been there all along.

"There was a time when the country really made me ill"

In April of 1921, Stevens wrote to his friend and some-time editor, Alice Corbin, about her new book, *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico*. "It raises again the question of what to do about the damned Indians. I suppose the poets will have to do just what the pioneers did, and that is assimilate them."⁸ In this tongue-in-cheek remark Stevens astutely identifies Corbin's colonial intent, dismissing her identification with "the Indian" in favor of reading her formal practice, which literally assimilates Chippewa lyrics into her own authorial identity.⁹ As the letter continues, Stevens more directly critiques Corbin's version of assimilation, though his dissatisfaction is already evident in his initial assertion that her collection "raises" rather than "resolves" the Indian question. Stevens continues, "their Native aesthetic, like the aesthetic of England, France, Peru, and so on, is all something that we have to assimilate, not imitate. This sort of thing is really becoming an ordeal."¹⁰ Here Stevens revises the metaphor of assimilation from one that directly parallels colonial contact—the pioneers and the Indians—to something quite different. His list of assimilated countries includes both Europe and the Americas, suggesting that the concept of assimilation does not involve colonization, but the threat of being colonized, the fear of influence. So "assimilating" the Indian means exactly the

⁸ Alan Filreis, "Voicing the Desert Silence: Stevens' Letters to Alice Corbin Henderson," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12.1 (April 1, 1988): 15.

⁹ For an analysis of Corbin's practice, see Chapter One.

¹⁰ Filreis, "Voicing," 15.

opposite of what it seems, not appropriating, but fighting off, as the pioneers did the Indians. Stevens compares the settlers' dismay with encountering Native Americans rather than an empty continent with "the ordeal"—literally a divine test of innocence—a writer faces in attempting to write new and original poetry in the face of an onslaught of potential influences.

It is clear from the letter, in which the only poem from *Red Earth* that he praises is one of Corbin's translations, that Stevens at least considers himself knowledgeable about Native American poetry: "[t]heir native aesthetic comes out as clean as bone in your song about striking the ground with curved horns, which made an impression on me when I first read it."¹¹ Stevens here seems to refer to the fact that he had seen the song before reading the book, probably in its first appearance in *Poetry*'s February 1917 "Aboriginal Issue."¹² Since that issue was devoted to translations and interpretations (often slipping into each other) of Native American verse, and Stevens seems to have read it, we can assume that he knew at least as much as the average modernist about Native American literatures, certainly enough to decide that "Buffalo Dance" was a good example of the "native aesthetic."¹³

Strike ye our land
With curved horns!
Now with cries
Bending our bodies,
Breath fire upon us;

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Alice Corbin, "Indian Songs," *Poetry* (February 1917): 235-38.

¹³ As I discuss in Chapter One, the issue also contained an essay by Carl Sandburg, a friend of Stevens, lauding the more literal translations of Chippewa songs by ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore. Corbin bases her "Indians Songs" on these translations.

Now with feet
Trampling the earth,
Let your hoofs
Thunder over us!
Strike ye our land
With curved horns!¹⁴

Stevens's awareness of Native verse is an important starting point for my analysis. As is his comparison of these literatures to those of England and France, which suggests that his desire to "assimilate" implies respect, because Native literatures pose a real threat to his poetic autonomy.¹⁵

A recurrent theme in *Harmonium* is "I am what is around me," as the poem "Theory" begins by declaring. In that work, "One is not duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage." And features of a room, "a black vestibule," "a high bed sheltered by curtains" become "portraits" of the person in it. The internal is the external, the "I" vulnerable to and composed of what he or she is exposed to. Analogously, the poet risks becoming what is around him, and in the late 'teens that was Indianism and, less directly, Indian poetry. In his letter to Corbin, Stevens insists he cannot assimilate the Indian by imitation or quotation, which differentiates him not only from Corbin and her cohort but from Eliot and Pound, higher modernists who also utilized anthropological sources. Thus, for Stevens, assimilation and imitation are not only distinct but oppositional. Assimilation is the process by which the imagination asserts itself against the threat of external influence. This definition, obviously, involves a complex mythology of self, organized around the possibility of an imagination that is "pure" and free of influence. In

¹⁴ Corbin, "Indian Songs," 235-36.

¹⁵ This is not to imply that Stevens approached Native literatures without a racist agenda, just that he had some knowledge of some literatures, which he seems to have generalized, and felt he had a sense of the aesthetic, or at least enough of a sense to fear its influence.

identifying these “foreign” threats, Stevens takes for granted his ownership of a natural “American” voice, a tradition that is not assimilated but innate.¹⁶ Therefore, the poet must bring the Indian into his imaginative project, into himself, and overpower him there. This definition of assimilation makes formal influence itself a sign of defeat and artistic failure.

Stevens’s description of Indian encounters as “an ordeal” reveals their stakes as well as the extent of his difference from Corbin and her Indianist peers. As I discuss in my first chapter, ethnographic Indigeneity offered the modernist poet both the symbolic capital of its apparent authenticity and minority and an array of formal practices, most notably short “mysterious” lyrics,¹⁷ which would signal this affiliation and simultaneously signify as modernist experimentation, carrying its own symbolic capital. This prevalent mode of assimilation also had the benefit of excluding Native American writers from the literary field. To be “authentic” they had to reproduce white appropriation of Native American folk materials; efforts to write “the white man’s verse” were ridiculed.¹⁸ As a result of simple racism and the perceived authorless quality of traditional Native American verse, even direct plagiarism was not seen to compromise a

¹⁶ “The truth is that American poetry is at its worst in England and, possibly in Ireland or any other land where English is spoken and whose inhabitants feel that somehow our English is a vulgar imitation.” *Letters*, 597. Stella Halkyard quotes both this letter and the one about Stevens ordering French cheese in “[Foot]Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction: Stevens, Frank Kermode, and the John Rylands University Library,” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 30.1 (April 1, 2006): 104.

¹⁷ Or apparently mysterious. A shared frame of reference often meant that seemingly oblique songs were simply cultural shorthand, as Washington Matthews explains about Navajo gambling songs. “Navajo Gambling Songs,” *American Anthropologist* 2.1 (January 1, 1889): 1–20.

¹⁸ See the case of E. Pauline Johnson outlined in the Introduction.

white author's originality. But the symbolic capital of Indianism was limited, so there were efforts in the field to define who could possess it. For poets such as Corbin, Yvor Winters, and Mary Austin, living in the Southwest entitled them to "expert" status even though their "interpretive" practice could be achieved by anyone with a subscription to the *Bulletin of the Bureau of Ethnology* (today's *Smithsonian Magazine*). Here Stevens questions the basic artistic validity of this Indianist mode.

Stevens suggests that, rather than do the hard work of assimilation, Indianists simply imitate, translating the work of translators, quoting those translations within the framework of their own authorship, or writing in what they perceive as its style. The ambiguity of Stevens's phrasing—"this sort of thing"—suggests he might refer to his own confrontation of Indian materials as one in a list of potential foreign influences (literal and metaphorical) or to the works of poet-imitators who, in their lazy plagiarism, undermine the imagination and poetry generally. In another letter to Corbin, Stevens indicates that Yvor Winters has sent him "his most recent attenuations" these poems, most likely *The Magpie's Shadow*, are themselves translations of/ variations on Navajo verse.¹⁹ That Stevens dismisses the collections as attenuations, or pale imitations, affirms his dismay with Indianist assimilation of the Indian as well asserting once again his awareness of the "originals." For Stevens, the encounter with the Indian is more fraught, not an opportunity, but a threat perhaps made more daunting by frequent contemporary comparisons of experimental and aboriginal poetry. In that "Aboriginal Issue" of *Poetry*

¹⁹ Filreis, "Voicing," 17.

Carl Sandburg joked that the “red man” was copying the Vorticists, but Indianism made the risk of all experimental poetry being understood as derivative all the more real.²⁰

In “The Cuban Doctor,” written, as Alan Filreis points out in his article analyzing and presenting the Stevens/Corbin correspondence, soon after the *Red Earth* letter to Corbin,²¹ Stevens seems to depict the unwanted imperative of the American poet to deal with the Indian, although he disguises this issue by making the subject of his poem a “Cuban Doctor” rather than an American Lawyer. The poem was published in *Poetry* in October, 1921 as part of the SUR MA GUZZLA GRACILE group.²²

I went to Egypt to escape
The Indian, but the Indian struck
Out of his cloud and from his sky.

This was no worm bred in the moon,
Wriggling far down the phantom air,
And on a comfortable sofa dreamed.

The Indian struck and disappeared.
I knew my enemy was near—I
Drowsing in summer’s sleepest horn.

In the first stanza, the poet leaves Cuba to escape the Indian, who nonetheless finds him, apparently because the Indian owns the sky, which suggests a tradition that cannot be avoided. This imaginary ownership of the sky also displaces issues of actual land ownership in the Americas.²³ The second stanza confronts the objection, which would align with modernist primitivism, that the poet has simply invented this Indian, asserting

²⁰ Carl Sandburg, “II,” *Poetry* 9.5 (February 1917): 254-55. I discuss Sandburg more fully in Chapter One.

²¹ Filreis, “Voicing,” 9. He reads the poem in psychoanalytic terms.

²² Wallace Stevens, “The Cuban Doctor,” *Poetry* 19.1 (October 1921): 5.

²³ I read “Indian” here as American Indian.

the reality of the threat and the experience. The third stanza relays the attack: “The Indian struck and disappeared.” But the seemingly clarity of this depiction is complicated by the next two lines “I knew my enemy was near—I / Drowsing in summer’s sleepest horn.” Here the poet seems to suggest just what the second stanza had denied: that it was all a dream. But perhaps this seeming contradiction is meant to make the reader focus on the grammar of the lines and their enjambment. Stevens seldom breaks lines where a pause would disrupt grammatical meaning. But here, rather than break the line after the dash, he breaks it after the “I.” That dash and hanging “I” draw our attention to the line as a unit, with the dash functioning as a sign of equivalence. “I knew the Indian was near,” “I knew the Indian was I.” Directly after the Indian’s attack, Stevens assimilates him, redefining the actual Indian as a persona, an “I.” He does this precisely by dreaming, not inventing the Indian of whole cloth, but allowing himself to be attacked by the danger of the Indian’s influence only to conquer him by the force of his own imagination.

But the ending can also be read another way. At least three times in his letters, Stevens brings up the concept of influence only to modify it as “unconscious” or “not conscious” (*Letters* 287, 290, 813). Much later, he will go so far as to assert that in his early career he did not even read “mannered” peers such as Eliot or Pound for fear of their unconscious influence (*Letters* 813). The threat for Stevens is not that he will knowingly imitate, but that he will do so without being aware of it. The conclusion of the poem might be read as confronting that fear—that sleeping he will be “killed” by the Indian—but it does not resolve it. The Indian is in his unconscious now, and who knows when he will guide Stevens’s pen?

In its first *Poetry* publication group, “The Cuban Doctor” is preceded by “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” which concludes.

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.²⁴

The poem echoes and modifies the earlier “Theory,” first published in the 1917 *Others* anthology, changing “I am what is around me” to “what is around me is what I am,” reclaiming the poet’s imagination from the threat of external influence. Rather than mirror his surroundings, these surroundings only serve to reveal the poet to himself. This formulation recalls another way that Stevens describes influence in his letters: the poet responds to resonances of himself that he sees in the world, so what may seem like influence is actually only an expression of the self.²⁵ Notably, in *Harmonium*, Stevens reverses the order of poems, placing “The Cuban Doctor” after “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (also from the SUR MA publication group) and before “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon.” The “horny feet” that definitively register “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” as funereal recast the “sleepiest horn” that concludes “The Cuban Doctor,” inflecting it with the earlier poem’s pathos, a pathos made the more striking by the apparent playfulness of

²⁴ Wallace Stevens, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” *Poetry* 19.1 (October 1921): 5.

²⁵ “There is no end of gnomes that might influence people—but do not. When you feel the truth of, say, an epigram you feel like making it a rule of conduct. But this one is displaced by that, and thus things go on in their accustomed way. There is one pleasure in the volatile morality: the day you believe in chastity, poverty and obedience, you are charmed to discover what a monk you have always been—the monk is suddenly revealed like a spirit in the wood: the day you turn Ibsenist, you confess that, after all, you were always an Ibsenist, without know it. There is a perfect rout of characters in every man—and every man is like an actor’s trunk, full of strange creatures new + old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things.” *Letters*, 91.

its title and opening lines. The “sleepiest horn” might be a description of death, suggesting again the stakes of the encounter with “the Indian.”

In “The Cuban Doctor,” “Egypt” allows the poet to use an actual place as an invented one, but “the Indian” resists that mode of assimilation, threatening to prevent the poet from living imaginatively at all, stalking him as he tries to “escape.” The poem suggests that Stevens means to assimilate the Indian with imagination, and so requires that the threat of the Indian, the nature of his attack (his formal influence) remain unclear. He simply “struck.” Assimilation is achieved by depicting assimilation; the Indian is represented, but with no voice, no power to represent.²⁶ Stevens here avoids not only the influence of the Indian but of Indianism, managing the threat by representing and so gaining discursive authority over it. In a later, March 1922 letter, Stevens glosses the poem for Corbin.²⁷

The Cuban is a person fostered by interiors: comfortable sofas etc who cannot keep exteriors out. There was a time when the country really made me ill, more or less. And there was a very good friend of mine who stayed indoors from June to September one summer. No joke. Imagine the American sky or an [sic] intense as savage blue as the Indian and so much for that.

Here Stevens shifts between literal and metaphorical significations to explain the poem in terms that are at once abstract and intensely personal. The Cuban, he explains, is “fostered by interiors” precisely because he “cannot keep exteriors out.” Staying inside, literally on “comfortable sofas” corresponds to personal interiority, the imagination, or John Berryman’s “inner resources.” This preference for interiors is a response to the

²⁶ Rachel Blau DuPlessis makes a similar argument about Stevens’s use of African American figures. “‘Darken Your Speech’: Racialized Cultural Work of Modernist Poets,” in *Reading Race in American Poetry: “An Area of Act”* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 43.

²⁷ Filreis, “Voicing,” 16-17.

threat of an invasive exterior. Stevens then segues into speaking directly of himself, “there was a time when the country really made me ill, more or less,” inviting Corbin to read the poem autobiographically, before shifting to discussing a “very good friend,” and then moving on to a more universal consideration of the “American sky” which is “savage” in its intensity and so associated with “the Indian.”

The sentence about the country making him sick seems performatively dandyish, a preference for artificial interiors over open air, extending the logic of the previous sentence. But this moment in which Stevens appears most open and frankly autobiographical is also when he is being totally dishonest: his letters indicate that he walked in the country, often rapturously, from his early youth. This is no dandy’s rejection of the natural for the artificial, although it may cloak itself as such. The admission that the country made him sick seems to refer to nature, but is a code for the influence of “the exterior.” His vulnerability made him almost sick. The word “country” provides several alternative but complementary associations as well. “The country” of the poem is ostensibly Cuba, but this autobiographic gesture suggests it is the United States, and perhaps Stevens here refers to the second nature of the nation and its habitus. There is also the *Hamlet* “country matters” reading, where Stevens expresses a veiled disgust with female reproductive organs and sexuality, playing up the sexual delicacy of the dandy.²⁸ Retreating from the proliferating possibilities of “country,” Stevens deflects the focus from himself to a “friend” (an evasion that seems intended to call attention to itself as such) who stayed inside a whole summer, “no joke.” Here Stevens insists on the

²⁸ I do see this reading supported by Stevens use of “country” in his poems—“that whole country was a melon, pink”—but I am hesitant to suggest that Stevens melds the female and the “savage” into a generic “other.”

literality and veracity of the story he is telling. I am talking about actual interiors and exteriors, no joke. But then, to explain this friend, himself, the Cuban doctor, Stevens ends his discussion of the poem with a ruminative non-sentence that he abruptly abandons with a “so much for that.” The grammar of the first part of this sentence begins reasonably enough, “Imagine the American sky,” but Stevens’s need to explain what he means by “American sky” ends up enacting the effect of that sky, reducing him to describing the “external” in a way that simultaneously dissolves his “internal” control, his ability to construct a narrative, or even a sentence: “an intense as savage blue as the Indian.” The sky, a noun, is equated, or differentiated, from “intense” an adjective, which leads to the synonym adjective, “savage,” which leads back to the noun, “Indian,” where Stevens ends his explanation. The arrival at the Indian, finally equated with the sky, seems almost accidental, or unconscious, but Stevens writes the letter after the poem has not only been written, but published. By placing the Indian at the end of a long autobiographical vignette, Stevens subordinates the significance of the Indian to the self, just as he does in the poem. Surely of particular interest to Corbin, Stevens assures her that the poem isn’t really about “the Indian” at all, that the Indian simply describes the sky, something external, a threat to the poet’s originality, which is the true subject.

“Ohoyaho, Ohoo”

Despite their differences, Stevens had a friendly and respectful correspondence with Alice Corbin, though he wrote less attentively to her than he did her superior at *Poetry*, Harriet Monroe, who was an early champion of his poetry and whose favor he actively curried. His relationship with editor and poet Louis Untermeyer was more

strained. Untermeyer dismisses Stevens's "attenuated preciousity" and the experimentalism of *Others* poets generally in his 1919 *The New Era in American Poetry*.²⁹ The same year in *The Dial*, Untermeyer condemns the Native American poetry of *The Path on the Rainbow* by comparing it to *Others*.³⁰ While Untermeyer came around to Stevens in the twenties, Stevens seems to have held a grudge, passive aggressively demurring when Untermeyer solicited his poems, probably for *Modern American Poetry*, with responses that seem insultingly superfluous.

It doesn't in the least look as though I shall have anything for your annual this year. At the present time all my attention is devoted to reducing, getting the week's washing done (not by me but by one of the ever-flitting laundresses of the town,) etc. (*Letters*, 247).³¹

Stevens's civilly antagonistic relationship with Untermeyer situates the publication of "Earthy Anecdotes" and "Life is Motion" in the July 1919 issue of *Others* as a specific critical/poetic retort to Untermeyer's equation of that magazine with the "primitive." I will position this reading in the longer publication history of the poems to suggest how, even before Untermeyer's insult or his "Indian" correspondence with Alice Corbin, Stevens was already engaged in an alternative assimilation of the "native aesthetic." Published in 1921, "The Cuban Doctor" reveals and recasts the dandy, the dweller of interiors, as his seeming opposite, the colonizer, but one who colonizes through his dandyism, through his literal and metaphorical interiority, which fights the exterior that holds the Indian and his dangerous influence. Reading "Earthy Anecdote" and "Life is

²⁹ Louis Untermeyer, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: H. Holt, 1919). 317.

³⁰ Untermeyer, "The Indian as Poet," *The Dial* (March 8, 1919): 240.

³¹ This was a dormant period for Stevens poetically, so his decision not to contribute to the volume is not in itself significant or notable, but the *way* he responds is.

Motion” through the lens of “The Cuban Doctor,” we see that these poems are also attempts to assimilate through the act of representing assimilation.

In the span of five years, Stevens published three versions of “Earthy Anecdote.” The poem first appeared, with an abstract illustration by Walter Pach (Fig. 19), as “Earthy Anecdotes” in the anarchist educational magazine *The Modern School* in July 1918.³²



Fig. 19. Walter Pach, illustration of “Earthy Anecdote,”
<http://raforum.info/spip.php?article5157>

Upon publication, Stevens wrote to the journal’s editor, Carl Zigrosser, complaining that “Walter Pach’s illustration is just the opposite of my idea. I intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not ordinary chaos” (*Letters*, 209). One year later, in July 1919, the poem reappeared in the final issue of *Others*, as “Earthy Anecdotes” this time

³² Throughout this section, I draw from the fine, detailed archival work of Bart Eeckhout in “Wallace Stevens’ ‘Earthy Anecdote’; or, How Poetry Must Resist Ecocriticism Almost Successfully,” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 7. 2 (June 1, 2009): 173-192. I have been unable to view a copy of *The Modern School*, so I rely on his description of the poem’s title, text, and appearance there.

accompanied by another Stevens poem, “Life is Motion.”³³ Finally, in 1923, “Earthy Anecdote” became the first poem in *Harmonium*.³⁴ In each instance, the poem is supplemented by another text—Pach’s drawing, “Life is Motion,” the whole of *Harmonium*—and asks to be read through and against these other works.

Stevens knew *The Modern School* through his friendship with Pach, and the journal was famous for its art and beautiful presentation. He must have expected that his contribution would be illustrated, which is perhaps why he sent them such a visual poem.

Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,
They went clattering.
Until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the left,
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.

His disappointment with Pach’s failure to represent the poem in a literal fashion, the artist’s refusal to allow the poem to dictate his drawing, tells us a good deal about

³³ Stevens, “Earthy Anecdotes” and “Life is Motion,” *Others* (July 1919): 14.

³⁴ Stevens, *Harmonium* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1923).

Stevens's intended reception of the work, which he also described as without "symbolism" but with "a good deal of theory" (*Letters*, 204). This invocation of "theory" which Stevens leaves deliberately ambiguous—"but explanations spoil things" (*Letters*, 204)—ties "Earthy Anecdote" to the poem "Theory," which declares "I am what is around me." This oblique reference suggests that "Earth Anecdote" may be another in Stevens's series of meditations on originality and influence, even as it would appear to have nothing to do with these things. This sense is strengthened by its conclusion, "Later the firecat / closed its bright eyes and slept," which anticipates the resolution of "The Cuban Doctor." While we are not granted access to the subjectivity of any of the animals, the narrative follows the firecat, not the bucks, who are represented as a mass and from a distance. Helen Vendler reads the poems as demonstrating "how much [Stevens's] art depended on obstructions and the consequent swerves provoked by them,"³⁵ but this interpretation implicitly identifies with the bucks, not the firecat who is actively hunting them. Several critics, beginning with Stevens's biographer Joan Richardson have suggested the possibility of reading the "bucks" as Indian men.³⁶ This reading has generally resulted in the poem becoming a portrait of colonialism, which I think it is, but not directly. The possible parallel between the firecat and the Cuban doctor would also make the bucks correspond to the later poem's "Indian," and as the Cuban Doctor assimilated the Indian, so the firecat attempts to literally assimilate or internalize the bucks by eating them.

³⁵ Helen Vendler, "Wallace Stevens: Hypotheses and Contradictions," *Representations* 81 (January 1, 2003): 103.

³⁶ Eeckhout, "Resist," 180.

If Pach's drawing is a failed supplement, we can read Stevens's decision to republish the poem as "Earthy Anecdotes" the next year alongside "Life is Motion" as an attempt to reframe it in a way that will lead to a "correct" reading. The control Stevens here demands of his poem's potential significations itself suggests a deep distrust of the external. The most obvious commonality between the two poems is their Oklahoma setting.

In Oklahoma,
Bonnie and Josie,
Dressed in Calico,
Danced around a stump.
They cried,
"Ohoyaho,
Ohoo"
Celebrating the marriage
Of flesh and air.

This repetition of Oklahoma, a place Stevens described in a September 1916 letter as "a land of mustangs, Indians etc" (*Letters*, 198), and the obvious play on Indigeneity in "Life is Motion" insist that the reader take the pair as "Indian" poems. Still, they function quite differently. "Life is Motion" depicts Indianism, the white performance of Indigeneity. And "Earthy Anecdotes" seems just such a performance. In "Earthy Anecdote" Stevens registers a distinct scene through visual description, but "Life is Motion" relies on the reader's connotations to give the seemingly objective descriptors meaning. "Bonnie and Josie" are diminutive names that suggest both youth and non-Indigeneity. Their non-Native status is confirmed, or seems to be, by the fact that they are "dressed in Calico" rather than stereotypically Indian attire. Now that we have been presented with the place and the personae, we are given the action. They "dance around a stump," echoing the circular motion of the bucks. The next line, simply "they cried,"

suggests the possibility of some trouble, as in Stevens's poems crying often signals despair rather than declamation.³⁷ But that sense is soon subjugated to what comes next, a foreign quotation given two lines. Here the reader's ability to "solve" the poem through association breaks down as it and the girls become one in this undecipherable utterance. After the quotation we do not go back to a visually represented Oklahoma but to a final gloss, which explains the girls are "celebrating the marriage / of flesh and air."

If Stevens accomplishes a highly coded assimilation of the Indian by way of the firecat in "Earthy Anecdotes," in "Life is Motion" he demonstrates that this assimilation hasn't turned him into a white (female) Indian.³⁸ His power to represent the ceremony that the girls perform establishes just that. The movement of Bonnie and Josie correspond to that of the bucks, which makes sense if we read the girls as Indianist (imitative) white poets. The firecat has disappeared from the poem, becoming the poet himself, telling the story of Bonnie and Josie. From the quotation on, the poem captures and parodies the two most common varieties of Indianism, quotation and platitude. "Life is Motion" presents white girls imitating Indians on the land from which they have most recently displaced them, Oklahoma. The poem does not overtly question the girls' colonial position or their right to the Indian song, but neither does it present "'Ohoyaho, / Ohoo'" as its own or a shared utterance. Stevens might have presented the words without quotation marks; the punctuation strengthens the sense that the cry is other, or exterior, to the poem. Here are Stevens's "pioneers" assimilating the Indian, which they do by singing the Indian's song.

³⁷ As in "Pieces": "Tinsel in February, tinsel in August. / There are things in a man besides his reason. / Come home, wind, he kept crying and crying" (*CP* 306).

³⁸ Indianism was dominated by women. For a fuller discussion of gender and the movement see the Introduction and Chapter One.

But this kind of assimilation seems exactly what Stevens rejects as “attenuation.” It seems problematic therefore to read the poem as an un-ironic celebration of “flesh and air.”

As I have suggested, “Life is Motion” functions as a response to and a parody of Louis Untermeyer’s comparison of Native American poetry to “Others and Kreymborg [the editor of *Others*] naive.” In the poem, Stevens depicts just what Untermeyer accuses the *Others* poets of being, white savages. Here again, Stevens gains discursive authority over a situation not by entering directly into the debate but by representing it from an elevated position, as he did the movement of the bucks that became simply “circular lines.” And that would seem to be the story of Wallace Stevens and American Indian literature, with Stevens not actually engaging the Indian at all. But the *Others* poems share a vocabulary with Corbin’s “Buffalo Dance.” “Cries” and “fire” are repeated, and “hoofs thunder over us” returns as “clatter.” “Earthy Anecdote” even repeats the action of “Buffalo Dance”: animals running. Since Stevens’s described “Buffalo Dance” as his preferred expression of a “native aesthetic” he seems in these poems to actually attempt to grapple with that aesthetic, while at the same time ironizing his relationship with it. But what about the girls’ cry, the most explicitly indigenous element of either poem?

The reference is not the one we have come to expect of Indianism, not the anthropological journal or its attenuations in the little magazines, but an older, stranger genre: the captivity narrative. Stevens substitutes the obvious and accepted intertext of ethnography with his own, uncommon archive. Stevens’s library contains none of the ethnographic journals that we might associate with Indianism. But it does hold the

captivity narratives of Mary Jemison, Peter Williamson, Elizabeth Hanson, “Mrs.” Johnson, and William Lee.³⁹ As his metaphor for poetic contact harkened back to the pioneers, perhaps Stevens looked to these brutal works as a way to preserve his originality as he confronted the Indian, choosing an archive that was distinct to himself and tied to his avocation as collector, itself an expression of individuality through capitalism.⁴⁰

The physical object of the captivity narrative, the old book, may have been to Stevens an aesthetic thing. But the stories inside these books are the opposite of decorative, more in line with the sublime or even the shock of the (not so) new. The poet critic Susan Howe has rendered their compelling horror in *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-Mark*, focusing on Mary Rowlandson’s account, which she identifies as the origin of the genre.⁴¹ Howe’s description of Rowlandson’s narrative captures the method of the narratives themselves, enumerating a numbing litany of violence.

In the first paragraph of the first published narrative written by an Anglo-American woman, ostensibly to serve as a reminder of God’s Providence, guns fire, houses burn, a mother, father, and suckling child are killed by blows to the head. Two children are carried off alive. Two more adults are clubbed to death. Another escapes—another running along is shot. Indians strip him naked then cut his bowels open.⁴²

Stevens collects these stories, perhaps because they tie him to America, as many take place in his native Pennsylvania. They “decolonize” his existence, wetting his well-worn

³⁹ There may be more.

⁴⁰ Lentricchia explores Stevens’s collecting as capitalist ennui.

⁴¹ Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1985), 42.

⁴² Howe, *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 95.

walking path with the blood spilled on it two hundred years before, representing a secret history, a secret archive, another way of looking. Returning to “Life is Motion,” the quotation it contains seems to come from *Deh-he-wa-mis; or, A narrative of the life of Mary Jemison : otherwise called the White woman, who was taken captive by the Indians in MDCCLV; and who continued with them seventy-eight years. Containing an account of the murder of her father and his family; her marriages and sufferings; Indian barbarities, customs and traditions connected with the narrative.*⁴³ It tells the story of Mary Jemison, whose family was kidnapped and killed by Shawnee Indians when she was 13. She is then sold to the Senecas and assimilated into their culture where she chooses to remain even when she is given the opportunity to return to white settlements. Like Bonnie and Josie, Jemison is a white Indian. But her story, in which the scalps of her parents and siblings are cleaned and brushed in front of her, casts a different light on that poem’s Indianist performance. The cry that Bonnie and Josie utter is found and translated in Jemison’s narrative, which melds brutality with more factual, or seemingly factual, information about geography and Indian customs.

In the afternoon we came in sight of Fort Du Quesne, (since Fort Pitt, now Pittsburgh,) where we halted, while the Indians performed some ceremonies in conformity to their customs on such occasions. The fort was then occupied by the French and Indians. It stood at the junction of the Monongahela, (Falling-In-Banks,) and Alleghany rivers, where the Ohio River begins to take its name. The word O-hi-o signifies bloody.⁴⁴

The passage describes the early days of Jemison’s captivity, with the meaning of the river’s name reflecting her sense of her captors and the unfamiliar landscape that

⁴³ James Everett Seaver, *Deh-he-wa-mis, or, A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: Otherwise Called the White Woman, Who Was Taken Captive by the Indians in MDCCLV: And Who Continued with Them Seventy Eight Years: Containing an Account of the Murder of Her Father and His Family* (Batavia, N.Y.: W. Seaver and Son, 1842).

⁴⁴ Seaver, *Deh-he-wa-mis*, 56

surrounds her. Stevens does not footnote his poem in the manner of Eliot, which would make this private archive and his own vast reading explicit. Instead, he uses the saccharine final lines of “Life is Motion” to signal the disingenuousness of the poem’s seeming celebration. The intertext breaks the code of the to-my-ear un-Stevensian conclusion. The marriage of flesh and air is blood. It seems doubtful that Bonnie and Josie know what they are saying. They have gained their land by “assimilating” the Indian like “pioneers,” driving him off, and now assimilate him in an Indianist sense, by quoting him. But the violence of their original assimilation comes through in their dishonest tribute.⁴⁵ Both “Earthy Anecdote” and “Life is Motion” are soon assimilated into the project of *Harmonium*. In my next section, I argue that in that book Stevens continues to mine his early American archive, taking on the persona of the colonizer.

“What counted was mythology of self”

In the fall of 1922 Wallace Stevens wrote to Harriet Monroe about the process of assembling his first collection.

Gathering together the things for my book has been so depressing that I wonder at *Poetry*’s friendliness. All my earlier things seem like horrid cocoons from which later abortive insects have sprung. The book will amount to nothing, except that it might teach me something... Only, the reading of these outmoded and debilitated poems does make me wish rather desperately to keep on dabbling and to be as obscure as possible until I have perfected an authentic and fluid speech for myself. (*Letters*, 231)

The letter confirms an understanding of Stevens as private, perfectionist, and uncomfortable with the workings of publication and reputation. His declaration in another

⁴⁵ Of course, it was not the Seneca or the Shawnee in Oklahoma. So the language the girls speak is not that of the Indians they have displaced. Stevens’s use of the term like his invocation of “their native aesthetic” suggests a sense that all Indians are the same.

letter from the same period that “having elected to regard poetry as a form of retreat, the judgment of people is neither here nor there” (*Letters*, 230) offers an appealing and enduring formulation of the businessman-poet’s relation to his work and its reception.⁴⁶ But less than a year earlier, in December of 1921, Stevens had written to Monroe in a quite different mood. He was “churning and churning,” writing a poem to “capture” the Poetry Society of South Carolina’s five hundred dollar Blindman prize, admitting, “I am determined to have a fling at least and possibly to go through the damndest doldrums of regret later on” (*Letters*, 224). The naked ambition evident in this Christmas letter suggests a forthright engagement with the politics of prizes and publishing, an impression strengthened by the very fact of Stevens’s frequent (and frequently flattering) correspondence with Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine, as well as the Carolina color of his entry, “From the Journal of Crispin,” which plays to the localist judge, Amy Lowell. Louis Martz and Martha Strom have explored Stevens’s foray into that popular movement, which concludes with his losing the Blindman to Grace Hazard Conkling and, it seems from his letters, drowning his sorrows in illicit prohibition-era liquor, also from South Carolina.⁴⁷ This Stevens is focused on public recognition and its accompanying financial rewards.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ To this day, Stevens’s wealth is invoked to cast him as a “pure” artist because he need not earn a living from his literary work. Such readings disregard the difference between economic and symbolic capital. If Stevens is to participate in the literary field at all he must find a position there.

⁴⁷ Martha Strom, “Wallace Stevens’ Revisions of Crispin’s Journal: A Reaction Against the ‘Local’,” *American Literature* 54.2 (May 1, 1982): 258. Strom also explores “Earthy Anecdote” as localist. Martha Strom, “Wallace Stevens’s Earthy Anecdotes,” *New England Quarterly* 58.3 (September 1, 1985): 421-41.

⁴⁸ Stevens preserved the announcement of the prize, in which he received honorable mention. It remains in his archive.

In the nineteen teens and early twenties, Stevens appeared frequently in little magazines such as *Poetry*, *Others*, *Broom*, and *Secession*, was selected for several anthologies, and won *Poetry*'s Levinson Prize. But between his inclusion in the 1914 "War Number" of *Poetry* and the publication of *Harmonium* almost ten years later, Stevens' poetic success carried the quixotic caveat that he had "published no books." The phrase comes from Amy Lowell's 1922 "A Critical Fable" which dissects the "poses" of various notable poets, concluding of Stevens: "He has published no book and adopts this as pose...His name, though the odds overbalance the evens / Of those who don't know it as yet's Wallace Stevens / But it might be John Doe for all he seems to care -- / A little fine work scattered into the air..."⁴⁹ Monroe also characterizes Stevens as indifferent to his own reputation, albeit without the irony, even using a similar poems-as-dust-in-the-wind analogy: "Mr. Stevens is the most abstemious of poets. It is the unwritten poem in his mind which interests him—the old ones, once they are registered in some magazine, may go fluttering down the wind like dead leaves."⁵⁰In a 1920 letter to Monroe, Stevens reveals an awareness of his otherworldly reputation and, anticipating Lowell, argues that his disregard for the public reception of his work, in this case his play *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, is "truth, not a pose" (*Letters*, 216).

By the time Stevens signed a contract with Knopf in 1922, the promised book would have represented a major reversal of his public persona and a threat to his "cool 'laissez-faire'" -- that's Lowell again-- image regarding the reception and placement of

⁴⁹ Amy Lowell, *Dear Sir (or Dear Madam) Who Happen to Glance at This Title-page Printed You'll See to Enhance Its Aesthetic Attraction, Pray Buy, If You're Able, This Excellent Bargain: A Critical Fable* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1922), 97.

⁵⁰ Harriet Monroe, "Comment: A Cavalier of Beauty," in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988), 27.

his work. After losing the Blindman, Stevens had retreated into the identity of dabbling business man, responding to a request for biographical information from Gilbert Seldes of *The Dial* with a refusal that obscures his multiple publications and casts himself as a poetic outsider. “Do, please, excuse me from the biographical note. I am a lawyer and live in Hartford. But such facts are neither gay nor instructive” (*Letters*, 227). Stevens’ uneasy shift from a creator of ephemeral poems found in little magazines to one of permanent collections is indicative of this larger pattern of authorial reticence, defined not by an indifference to public opinion, but an awareness of and anxiety toward it.⁵¹ He navigates this shift though revising the Crispin poem and making it the center of *Harmonium*, which he imagined calling *The Grand Poem and Primary Minutia*. The figure of Crispin structures not only the poem but the collection.

“The Comedian as the Letter C” follows its protagonist, Crispin, as he endures an epic voyage that transforms him from frivolous (effeminate) dandy to “colonizer” and the father of four daughters, a poetic bildungsroman that corresponds to Stevens’ shift from incidental poet to major author. As its title suggests, “The Comedian as the Letter C” is a poem that flamboyantly resists stable signification. And this difficulty is perhaps its most significant feature. As John Newcomb has explored, the publication of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* in 1922 made that poem and its writer the focus of modernist intellectual attention: its difficulty declared its importance.⁵² (There was also Pound’s behind-the-scenes

⁵¹ Edward Ragg notes this shift from ephemeral to permanent in Stevens as well. *Wallace Stevens and the Aesthetics of Abstraction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 32.

⁵² Newcomb has described how Eliot’s brand of experimentation stole Stevens’ readership, depriving him of those who might embrace his variety of avant garde experimentation. John Timberman Newcomb, *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992): 78-79.

wrangling, which situated the work as major and significant even before its publication, which Lawrence Rainey has established.⁵³) Rather than attempt a comprehensive reading of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” which I suspect Stevens deliberately resists so as to lure those looking for a modernist challenge, I will focus on the fourth section, “The Idea of a Colony,” where the poem turns back on itself and begins revising its opening lines, as though the very idea of a colony had already begun to reorder the work and words of the past. This revision echoes that between “Theory” (1917) and “Tea in the Palaz of Hoons” (1921). In a section titled “The World without Imagination,” the poem begins with a statement about the internal and external.

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
The sovereign ghost. (*CP*, 22)

Here, as in “Theory,” “I am what is around me.” A man is a reflection of the external world. But, with the “Idea of a Colony,”

Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence.
That’s better. (*CP*, 29)

Now, the external environment is a reflection of the man, the colonizer. This alliance between imagination and colonization is especially intriguing. As Crispin thinks about his colony, he begins to see everything clearly, to control, rather than be controlled by, his surroundings.

What was the purpose of his pilgrimage,
Whatever shape it took in Crispin’s mind,
If not, when all is said, to drive away
The shadow of his fellows from the skies,
And, from their stale intelligence released,
To make a new intelligence prevail? (*CP*, 29-30)

⁵³ Lawrence S. Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 77-106.

The colony will allow Crispin to rid himself of influence, “the shadow of his fellows,” and so finally to see in the light of his imagination. More, the colony will cure him of the old, bad, habits of his dandy ways.

The torment of fastidious thought grew slack,
Another, still more bellicose, came on.
He, therefore, wrote his prolegomena,
And, being full of the caprice, inscribed
Commingled souvenirs and prophecies. (*CP*, 30)

The poem at this point seems a meta-discourse on *Harmonium*, and in its discussion of “prolegomena” might refer to the collection’s first poem, “Earthy Anecdote.” Crispin’s possible description of that poem as “commingled souvenirs and prophecies,” of evidence of the past and hints of the future, corresponds to its assimilation of the Indian and Indianism as well as its relation to “The Cuban Doctor” and finally “the Comedian.” A few lines later, in the poem’s only reference to North American Indians, Crispin asks

On what strange froth does the gross Indian dote,
What Eden sapling gum, what honeyed gore,
What pulpy dram distilled of innocence,
That streaking gold should speak in him
Or bask within his images and words? (*CP*, 30)

These lines either ask why the Indian is perceived as magical and full of wisdom, why his words should be taken as poetry “streaking gold,” or asserts that these conclusions are true. Stevens here either echoes Eliot’s concerns in “War-Paint and Feathers”—that there’s nothing special about the Indian—almost exactly, or takes the exactly opposite stance.⁵⁴ Based on his relation with Eliot at the time, I think it is the latter. We know already that Stevens respects what he perceives to be the “native aesthetic.” Here, he seems to pay tribute, as though the confidence of the colonizer allows him to see the

⁵⁴ T. S. Eliot, “War-paint and Feathers,” *The Athenaeum* 17 (1919): 78.

beauty in the soon-to-be colonized. The poem then moves away from Indians, setting out write-what-you-know style rules for art in Crispin's "comprehensive island hemisphere."

The man in Georgia walking among pines
Should be pine-spoken. (*CP*, 31)

The silliness of these pronouncements already suggests the artistic limits of the colonizer persona. The poem then shifts from third person narration to first person plural to contemplate the origin of dreams being "our dependent heirs, the heirs / Of dreamers buried in our sleep" (*CP*, 32), which I read as another reckoning with influence and originality. If dreams have before, especially in "The Cuban Doctor," been associated with the imagination as a contrast to influence, here Stevens finally confronts the risk of "unconscious" influence, the possibility that dreams do not belong to the dreamer at all. The stanza ends with one of Stevens's typically abrupt dismissals, anticipating the last line of the poem, "so may the relation of each man be clipped" (*CP*, 37).

All dreams are vexing. Let them be expunged.
But let the rabbit run, the cock declaim. (*CP*, 32)

What follows is white space and then a strange tercet, without formal precursor in the work.

Trinket pasticcio, flaunting skyey sheets,
With Crispin as the tiptoe cozener?
No, no: veracious page on page, exact. (*CP*, 32)

Stevens's vocabulary here makes it especially difficult to understand the first two lines, while the last is immediately comprehensible. A translation of the stanza suggests that its difficulty is a cover for its dangerously direct expression of ideas.

Trivial pastiche, flaunting lofty pages,
With Crispin as the eager imposter?
No, no: truthful, page on page, exact.

The “skyey sheets” recall the sky of “The Cuban Doctor” that belongs to the Indian, and the “pasticcio,” or collage, what others have made of him. The passage asks if Crispin is colonizing in the way others have, and answers no.

As the ambiguous figure of the Comedian, who is playing the part of the letter C, distances Stevens from Crispin, the poem separates itself from the rest of *Harmonium*. In the original 1923 edition, “The Comedian” interrupts the collection with a title page of its own.⁵⁵ The poem follows “Homunculus et La Belle Etoile,” which ends with “The torments of confusion,” and precedes “From the Misery of Don Joost,” which begins, “I have finished my combat with the sun.”⁵⁶ This framing suggests that “The Comedian” itself is an odyssey (or ordeal), a trial poet and reader must endure to continue with the collection. Both thematically integrated into the text and graphically disruptive to it, “The Comedian” fractures *Harmonium*, especially coming as it does near the beginning of the book, not symmetrically in the center. Colonization in “The Comedian” is depicted as prose overtaking poetry in the same manner as the colonizer overwrites another culture, “Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare / His cloudy drift and planned a colony.”⁵⁷ Following this logic, Crispin and “The Comedian” colonize the older poems of *Harmonium*, imbuing them with new significance while simultaneously stripping away or dismissing their former meaning, including their often-minor resonances.

In the poem’s earlier iteration as “From the Journal of Crispin,” his travels suggest to Crispin the productive metaphor of colonization, in which prose grants him

⁵⁵ Stevens, *Harmonium*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44, 70.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

dominion over his writing as the colonizer conquers lands and people, recalling Stevens's treatment of "the Indian" in "The Cuban Doctor." This colonization reverses the poem's opening celebration of nonsense verse, which defines Crispin as "the Socrates of snails, musician of pears, principium and lex."⁵⁸ Now the "laconic phrase" summarily dismisses these earlier efforts, "Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex, / Rex and principium, exit the whole/ Shebang."⁵⁹ In place of poetic silliness, there will be political efficacy. Crispin's salvation lies in prose, which suggests fictionalization, as demonstrated by the poem's Borgesian conclusion in which Crispin escapes its frame.

As Crispin in his attic shapes the book
That will contain him, he requires this end:
That the book shall discourse of himself alone,
Of what he was, and why, and of his place,
And of its fitful pomp and parentage.
Thereafter he may stalk in other spheres.⁶⁰

While the title "From the Journal of Crispin" provides the reader with a stable point of entry to the poem, and the poem with the stable identity of a series of journal entries, "The Comedian as the Letter C" disrupts the very idea of representation. Instead of a poem about a persona, we are presented with a persona, "The Comedian," playing the role of "the letter C," creating a double persona. In a poem that might be perceived as autobiographical, Stevens shifts the attention from himself to the complexities of representation while at the same time making ever-more-incessant autobiographical gestures. In fact, the poem's most major revision is the addition of the two sections that

⁵⁸ Wallace Stevens, "From the Journal of Crispin," in *Wallace Stevens: a Celebration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

follow “The Idea of a Colony” and depict Crispin marrying and having children, sublimating his poetic impulse into these more worldly pursuits, just as Stevens defines himself as a middle class burgher in his letters. The published poem ends not with Crispin powerfully and triumphantly breaking its fourth wall, as he did in the “Journal,” but seemingly accepting the limits of his own situation.

Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,
Glozing his life with after-shining flicks.
Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
By apparition, plain and common things,
Sequestering the fluster from the year,
Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,
And so distorting, proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly to its end?
So may the relation of each man be clipped. (*CP*, 37)

If “The Comedian” thematically clips Crispin’s wings, it structurally accomplishes just what “The Journal” predicts, dramatically reframing “the book that contains” it, the previously published poems of *Harmonium*. The presence of the character Crispin endows the collection with a fictional structure, which is both self-protective, allowing Stevens to ironize the weaker pieces, and artistically generative, creating another layer of significance for the work and the individual poems, a structure that can contain discrepancies of style and philosophy and that indeed turns those very discrepancies into proofs of its coherence.

“The Comedian” is thus the final supplement of “Earthy Anecdote,” which might be read as sketching the relationship between Stevens, Crispin, the Comedian, and the work that follows. A “circular line / To the right” followed by a “circular line / To the left” makes an “S,” composed of two “C”s. Stevens, Crispin, and the Comedian are there in the movement of the bucks, suggesting another reason why Stevens would choose to

begin his collection with “Earthy Anecdote”: it is a title page of sorts, his triple autograph. In these small gestures, “The Comedian” organizes *Harmonium* into a whole, and notably does so first through its colonization of a poem associated with Stevens’ flirtation with Native American aesthetics. This whole is defined by a display of authorship at once bold and invisible, reflecting Stevens’s persona of aggressive reticence.

The colonizing relation of “The Comedian” to the collection is captured in “Anecdote of the Jar,” which tells of a jar, whose very presence on a hill in Tennessee “made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill” (*CP*, 60). The jar’s “dominion” changes the natural world, recasting its randomness and chaos as meaning. Of course, this remarkable transformation is not a literal one. The jar changes the speaker’s understanding of Tennessee, not the land itself. It is a mental construction that brings order. The prickly, difficult “Comedian” similarly transforms the wilds of Stevens’ self-professed “witherlings” (*Letters*, 232). It establishes Stevens as a “difficult” poet, akin to Eliot, whose work should be understood as serious and worthy of attention. Perhaps “The Comedian” represents an effort to seduce Eliot’s readership, by declaring the obscurity and density of Steven’s own work. The text of “The Comedian” itself sets about conquering the apparently random and remaking chaos as structure. Each of the poem’s six sections—“The World without Imagination,” “Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan,” “Approaching Carolina,” “The Idea of a Colony,” “A Nice Shady Home,” “And Daughters with Curls”—retells the story of Crispin as glimpsed from a different angle, in a different setting. In this way the varying registers of human existence and poetic expression fall onto a continuum defined through an authorial figure or persona.

They are united by the character Crispin, as the structure of the poem binds the various sections, which function both to challenge and to reaffirm its cohesive power. The more the sections seem to fracture a coherent narrative or stable genre, the stronger the hold of “The Comedian.” It is useful here to remember the collection’s title and Stevens’ own insistence on the necessity of “varying the serenade” within a long poem (*Letters*, 230). The parts must strike different notes for the whole to function. The dissimilarities are what allow and create order.

In “From the Journal of Crispin,” we see Stevens attempting to fully enter into the profession of writing by engaging in its politics and prizes, a reversal of the “cool ‘laissez-faire’” persona he had then and largely retains to this day. Assembling *Harmonium*, Stevens uses “The Comedian as the Letter C” to preserve this removed, indifferent identity in the very act of entering the literary marketplace. But we also see how the poem allows this “progress” through its figuration of a colonizer, culminating a trajectory that is evident throughout his early work.

“One has a malady, here, a malady. One feels a malady.”

Stevens’s preoccupation with order is a well-established, consistent aspect of his authorial persona, as well as a link between his personal and literary lives (“System of some sort is inescapable” [*Letters*, 300]). *Harmonium* means “a euphony derived of order” and Stevens’s second book drops the euphony for simply *Ideas of Order*. But what is this order and what does it protect against? The group of poems I have discussed in this chapter—“Earthy Anecdote,” “Life is Motion,” “The Cuban Doctor,” and “The Comedian as the Letter C”—were all written between 1918 and 1923 and all included in

Harmonium. In them, the poet works out a system by which a representational order protects from the threat of Indian influence and perhaps influence in general. The nature of this system becomes more explicit with each poem, from the highly coded “Earthy Anecdote” (1918) with its bucks and firecat to “The Comedian as the Letter C” (1923), in which the order is identified as colonial.

Imagining himself as a colonizer of his earlier work allows Stevens to present the potentially “minor” or “decorative” poems of *Harmonium* under the sign of the difficult and “major” “Comedian,” a defensive expression of poetic mastery. We can read the poems of *Harmonium* as building to “The Comedian,” the last composed and revised to fit the collection specifically. The colonizer thus seems a generative mode for Stevens, except when we consider the period of poetic sterility that followed the publication of *Harmonium*. We can understand this silence as a result of the poor reception of the book, of Steven’s increased responsibilities as father and businessman, and, I will argue, as the inherent limit of an artistic representation of colonial order.

To return to my question of what Stevens’s order is meant to contain and protect him against, the obvious answer is disorder, as he writes in a 1935 letter to Ronald Latimer about the necessity of systems, including literary systems, which soon segues into a note about housekeeping.

I do very much have a dislike of disorder. One of the first things I do when I get home at night is to make people take things off the radiator tops. Holly subscribes to various magazines, collects stamps and carries on correspondence with unknown people about unknown things. She starts to tear the wrappers off at the front door and leaves them on chairs and on the floor and piles up her magazines wherever there is a ledge. Of course, all sorts of people do the same things, even in their thoughts. I confess to a dislike of all that. This is much too large a field to discuss without the help of a little apple-jack... (*Letters*, 300)

In this letter Stevens attests to his personal distaste for disorder, which he links to his personal power. When he gets home and finds things a mess, *he* doesn't tidy them but "make[s] people" do it.⁶¹ He jokes about Holly's "unknown people," but he wants to see no evidence of this correspondence, no evidence of a life independent of his house. The letter grows even stranger as Stevens links Holly's adolescent messiness to a more essential and ominous disorder: "all sorts of people do the same things, even in their thoughts." Here he seems to move from the practical to the moral, disliking the messiness of people's consciousness, or perhaps the very nature of consciousness. Stevens's poetry involves making order from just this chaos, turning association into pattern. The sheer expansiveness of Steven's need for order sends him looking for a drink, and Holly Stevens, the editor of the letters, truncates this one there.

The figure of the colonizer enables Stevens to make peace with his poems and move forward with his book, a necessary fiction. But if, in the literary field, "loser wins," Stevens has written himself into an untenable position. How do you make art from the vantage of the colonizer/oppressor? I do not mean to say that it is impossible for the colonizer or the dominant class to make art. In fact, one of the implications of Bourdieu's theory of the field of cultural production is that cultural authority reinforces political power; but it does not do so knowingly, having, in order to exist, to believe in its own autonomy. In the modernist elevation of minority, which is in many ways exemplified in Indianism, the artistic possibilities of conscious colonization are limited. Stevens, after

⁶¹ In another, lengthy letter to Latimer Stevens remarks: "This is a frightfully long letter but, fortunately, I merely have to dictate it and do not have to write it out" (*Letters*, 292). Such mentions of dictation occur at least ten times in his letters. In these moments, he recognized the labor of his secretary, but usually in which a way that he shows relief for not having to do her work, for not being troubled with it, but still, it occupies him.

“The Comedian,” has reached an impasse. He emerges from this stagnation of colonization through colonization, by once again “assimilating” the Indian, only this time it is not to fight the Indian in order to establish the dominion of the imagination but to put himself in the Indian’s place as colonized, to look at order as something lost rather than ascendant. He learns this from captivity narratives, which provide a model of converting colonizer to victim. And if *Harmonium* is a work of colonialism, *Ideas of Order*, published in 1935, situates itself as postcolonial, as about the impermanence of order and its limits.

The threat to order and to colonialism specifically is, for Stevens, pathos. In his letters Stevens associates “pathos” with women, minorities, and the lower class. He represents it, in this 1901 journal entry, as an attack, almost a seizure.

[T]o illustrate the change that has come over me I may mention that last night I saw from an elevated train a group of girls making flowers in a dirty factory near Bleecker-st. I hardly gave it a thought. Last summer the pathos of it would have bathed me in tears. (*Letters*, 53)⁶²

The context of this observation is not included, but in isolation it still tells a great deal. First, there is the manner in which Stevens addresses his journal as he sets out to explain to himself the change that has come over him, citing evidence with a formal “may I mention,” distancing himself from his subject, himself. Then he cites the image of the girls in a dirty factory making flowers and follows it with “I hardly gave it a thought,” which is clearly untrue, as he is now contemplating it. But here what he seems to mean is that at the time it did not affect him, he did not respond to it emotionally. Only later did

⁶² This comes from a much-edited section of Stevens’ letters with journal entries only included to fill gaps in years, and these entries are often edited to the point of indecipherability. Despite Stevens’s stature and the accompanying hundreds of thousands of dollars that have been devoted to his archive, there are notable holes. The critic must be careful not to read archival gaps for deliberate lacuna. Omissions might be accidents.

he think about it intellectually. The pathos is contained and transformed into intellectual interest based on what it tells him about himself. He neutralizes the threat of the girls by making them mere stimuli for this self-portrait. Here his journal anticipates his poetic assimilations, turning the “you” and the threat of empathy toward it into the “I.”

Pathos returns in a later letter that also contains the only direct mention of American Indians, rather than their literary reputation, which I have found in Stevens’s correspondence. This letter registers his awareness of and anxiety toward their pathos and the unjustness of the white, colonial position.

While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and boa-constrictors. However, ought I, as a matter of reason, to have sympathized with the Indians as against the Colonists in this country? A man would have to be very thick-skinned not to be conscious of the pathos of Ethiopia or China, or one of these days, if we are not careful, of this country. But that Mussolini is right, practically, has certainly a great deal to be said for it. (*Letters*, 295)

In the passage, in which Stevens seems to respond to Latimer’s response to Stevens’s earlier assertion that “The Italians have as much right to take Ethiopia from the coons as the coons had to take it from the Boa-constrictors” (*Letters*, 290), Stevens pretends to repent but only repeats his slur. He compares the situation between Italy and Ethiopia as that between the U.S. and the Indians, but seems to do so in order to suggest not the problematic nature of U.S. colonialism but the unproblematic nature of fascism. If Coons : Indians :: colonists : fascists, can fascists be so bad? The passage concludes with Stevens reaffirming his belief that “Mussolini is right.”

This is Stevens at his ugliest and most overtly racist, but I think in this moment of performative racism lurks another impulse. Stevens writes “ought I to have sympathized,” rather than “ought I to sympathize,” suggesting not a person considering

the past, but someone transporting himself back into it: if I were a colonist, ought I not to have sympathized with the Indians? The “have” suggests that Stevens means that if he had lived in the time of colonization—of course, he did live in the time of colonization, we still do—he wonders how he would have perceived that situation, if he would have sided with the Indians. He knows the answer is no. Stevens refuses the historical privilege of judging the past and insists on a more arduous ethical test: what would he have done at the time? Again, I suspect this perspective comes from his Early American library, which would have made colonial history seem not inevitable but rugged, violent, and in play.

Stevens’s grammar grows even more complex as he observes, “A man would have to be very thick-skinned not to be conscious of the pathos of Ethiopia or China, or one of these days, if we are not careful, of this country.” Here again is “country,” this time explicitly referring to the U.S.. The conditional—“would have to be”—sets up a counterfactual, suggesting that Stevens is not so hardhearted, that he feels the pathos of the colonized, from Ethiopia to China to “this country.” But the term “country” also carries with it all those old significations as something far more personal than a nation. And it is this personal, interior country that is at risk “if we are not careful.” The sentence is broken into several clauses, making their connection difficult to establish. But Stevens does build to a direct parallel. While before he put the issue in the past, he now represents it as a threat to the future, that “if we are not careful,” the narrative of colonization will give way to pathos. The racist slurs and flirtation with fascism make Stevens the aggressor, stopping him from a dangerous empathy, an empathy that structurally parallels that of literary influence. These are external stimuli that make the interior vulnerable. Indeed, in the same letter Stevens denies that other poems influence

him “consciously” and asserts that he barely reads, preferring to buy books but not open them. In another letter, Stevens simply writes the Indians out.

One great difficulty about everything Mexican is the appalling interest in the Indians: the Mayans, and so on. It is just as if every time one picked up a number of the *New Yorker* one found a dozen illustrations of life among the early Dutch settlers. (*Letters*, 543)

Explaining why he had canceled his subscription to *Cuadernos Americanos*, Stevens insists that Mexican culture pays too much attention to its Indigenous past and compares this backward-looking tendency to the *New Yorker* obsessing on “life among the early Dutch settlers.” Here, Stevens chooses not to make the obvious comparison, which would be *The New Yorker* writing about the Iroquois, and so to locate the prehistory of the U.S. in Dutch settlers. The “just as if” comparison suggest Stevens emphasizes its exactitude to more fully efface the Indian from the cultural inheritance of the United States.

Distance seems a force of order and the key to averting a dangerous pathos. As, from an elevated train, Stevens looks down on the factory girls, the train’s physical position reflecting his social one, he enacts that distance with racist language to keep himself from the pathos of the situation, the pathos that could well up within himself and make him fall from his precarious privilege. We must be careful in our patterns of thought. We must be careful in comparing ourselves to Mussolini even though that comparison is apt, “page on page, exact.” We must careful about the artistically deadening position of the colonizer. Stevens anticipates the argument that Susan Howe, echoing Walter Benjamin, will make in *The Birth-Mark* about dominant white male narratives writing others out, but not totally, so there is always threat of the others returning, crowding from the margins into the main text, changing the narrative. The word “pathos” for Stevens seems tied to the things “we” don’t want to see, the threat to a

dominant narrative. The inassimilable emotion they elicit, the feelings, a weakness, threatening to derail. Stevens explains his maturation as the failure of these things to move him, corresponding to Lentricchia's exploration of Stevens shifting from a feminine to a masculinized persona. Stevens's penchant for captivity narratives might be explained by his anxiety over the pathos of others.

Of Stevens's collection of captivity narratives, he seems to have found one especially compelling. There are five copies of *The story of the eventful life, and curious adventures of Peter Williamson: who was carried off from Aberdeen and sold for a slave. Containing the history of the author's surprising adventures in North America. His captivity among the Indians, and the manner of his escape, also the cruel treatment he suffered while among the savages. Their customs, manners, dress, ceremonies, &c. &c. &c. To which are added, A particular description of the Indian tomahawk. Together with the traditionary Indian story of Marraton and Yaratilda* in Stevens's library. Unlike most captivity narratives, the protagonist is male, and the story begins not with his abduction by Indians but by white kidnapers in Aberdeen, Scotland. The first pages of the book tell of the horrible conditions he suffers on the slave ship and how, when the ship wrecks on the coast of Delaware, he and the other cargo of children are left to die, only rescued days later by the captain attempting to recoup part of his investment. Williamson is then sold into indentured servitude in Philadelphia, where he has a kind master who allows him to learn how to read. These first pages resemble a slave narrative, but the genre shifts abruptly after Williamson achieves his freedom and is given a plantation in western Pennsylvania. Then the captivity narrative begins. He is abducted by Indians and bears witness to their numerous atrocities including scalping children alive, feeding a man to

pigs, roasting and eating a man alive (with his brain as “Indian pudding”), and having sex with the body of a woman they have just murdered in front of her husband. Williamson is also tortured graphically and repeatedly.

Why did Stevens acquire five editions of this story, reflecting an obvious choice to seek it out?⁶³ Captivity narratives, and that of Peter Williamson in particular, offer a blueprint, an order, for the containment and assimilation of pathos. In this story, a white man is the victim of both slavery and Indian captivity. Beyond the structure, or in addition to it, there are the frequent horrifying anecdotes that simply shock, giving the work a modern quality that the connoisseur in Steven perhaps valued for his own ability to recognize. Stevens is already playing with pathos and the threat to power (and order) it represents in *Harmonium*. “The Plot Against the Giant” is divided into three sections, each relating a girl’s plan to thwart “the giant.” The first girl will conquer him with the smell of flowers, the second with the sight of beautiful colors, the third with sound.

Oh, la...le pauvre!
I shall run before him,
With a curious puffing.
He will bend his ear then.
I shall whisper
Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.
It will undo him.

She will make herself seem weak, he will bend over to her, she will whisper soft sounds in a world of hard sounds (anticipating Bonnie and Josie), and the pathos will “undo him.” The shift from feminine “la” to “le” with interceding ellipses is striking. She begins to speak “Oh” just as Bonnie and Josie did, uttering sounds, not words, which she then

⁶³ In his effort to avoid the specter of influence Stevens would sometimes claim not to read the books that he owned, but in any case his acquisition of this particular book seems almost compulsive, and I have identified no similar extent of duplication in his library.

converts into “le pauvre,” the poor thing, suggesting she now has the power. She appeals to him by seeming weak, and then speaking weak, and this weakness, this pathos, undoes him. The poem mimics a fairy tale, but the giant, the conqueror, is not battled directly. Instead, he is incapacitated by female wiles and weakness. The factory girls return in the first stanza, with the flowers that “will check him,” confirming that the way to fight a powerful monster is to undermine his confidence, to disrupt his way of thinking about the world. To undo, to unmake, to disorder. Power and order are united against pathos and disorder, which becomes clear in “Banal Sojourn,” as fecundity turns to decay—
“Moisture and heat have swollen the garden into a slum of bloom. / Pardie! Summer is like a fat beast, sleepy in mildew” (*CP*, 49)—and in describing this decay the poetic speaker loses the ability to describe the world. He ends the poem in a confession of panic that he attempts to hold at bay with the impersonal “One”: “One has a malady, here, a malady. One feels a malady.”

In “The Snow Man,” Stevens extrapolates on the vulnerabilities of empathy and pathos.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow...
And not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind (*CP*, 8)

Stevens interrupts this sentence with subordinate clauses so that the reader gets lost in the cold as well. But it might be translated as “you must be the cold to not feel the cold”; you must be the oppressor to not feel the pain of the oppressed. And this is the stance that Stevens develops throughout the collection as he puts on the hat of the colonizer to fight the pathos of this country, often by “assimilating” those that embody it. “The Snow Man”

is followed by “The Ordinary Women,” whose “poverty,” represents just the kind of pathetic threat to the autonomous individual that “The Snow Man” theorizes. This threat of pathos in some sense explains the ugly racism of Stevens's letters, which springs not from an incapacity to see what is wrong or problematic with racism but from seeing it too exactly. He fights the attacks of pathos with linguistic and metaphoric colonialism.

In a 1907 journal entry, Stevens pastes a clipping from *The Nation* describing the “effectiveness of Uncle Tom’s cabin to make whites surrounded by slavery feel sympathy for blacks” (*Letters*, 107). Underneath it Stevens writes “It is because common reality is being exhibited. It is being treated objectively” (*Letters*, 107). This seems a very odd interpretation of that melodramatic book, meant to play on the sympathies of its reader. Stevens’s understanding of the work as objective, rather than manipulative, suggests how vulnerable he is to the pathos of the country. But his decision to clip and explicate the review also reveals a more pragmatic professional interest: this is how a white writer does pathos, by telling the story of black slaves.

This strategy perhaps motivates a key shift between *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*. “The Comedian” reframes the *Harmonium* poems by consummating the colonial logic of Stevens’s early work. But “The Comedian” also anticipates the fall of that order. The rhythm of “Inscrutable hair in an inscrutable world”⁶⁴ predicts the “dirty house in a gutted world” of “A Post Card from the Volcano” (*CP* 150), and “If he dreamed / Their dreams, he did it in a gingerly way”⁶⁵ anticipates that poem’s “will speak our speech and never know.” But “A Postcard from the Volcano” no longer speaks for the colonizer but

⁶⁴ Stevens, *Harmonium*, 47.

⁶⁵ Stevens, *Harmonium*, 61.

for the colonized who, the poem suggests, linger in physical, linguistic, and spiritual relics.⁶⁶

Children picking up our bones
Will never know that these were once
As quick as foxes on the hill

And that in autumn, when the grapes
Made sharp air sharper by their smell
These had a being, breathing frost;

And least will guess that with our bones
We left much more, left what still is
The look of things, left what we felt

At what we saw. The spring clouds blow
Above the shuttered mansion-house,
Beyond our gate and the windy sky

Cries out a literate despair.
We know for long the mansion's look
And what we said of it became

A part of what it is...Children,
Still weaving budded aureoles,
Will speak our speech and never know,

Will say of the mansion that it seems
As if he that lived there left behind
A spirit storming in blank walls,

A dirty house in a gutted world,
A tatter of shadows peaked to white,
Smearred with the gold of the opulent sun.

After the tooth and nail fight for originality and imagination of Stevens's early career, "A Postcard from the Volcano" reveals him developing a different relation to influence and

⁶⁶ "Our bones" recall Riggs's "skulls," which themselves modified Corbin's "white bones." For a discussion of those poems—"Skulls Like These" and "El Rito de Santa Fe"—see the "Skulls and Bones" section of Chapter 2.

intertextuality. The poem is strongly reminiscent of section sixteen of Walt Whitman's "Starting from Paumanok."⁶⁷

On my way a moment I pause;
Here for you! and here for America!
Still the Present I raise aloft—Still the Future of The States I harbinge, glad and
sublime;
And for the Past, I pronounce what the air holds of the red aborigines.

The red aborigines!
Leaving natural breaths, sounds of rain and winds, calls as of birds and animals in
the woods, syllabled to us for names;
Okonee, Koosa, Ottawa, Monongahela, Sauk, Natchez, Chattahoochee, Kaqueta,
Oronoco,
Wabash, Miami, Saginaw, Chippewa, Oshkosh, Walla-Walla;
Leaving such to The States, they melt, they depart, charging the water and the
land with names.

Formally quite distinct, Stevens borrows the haunting heart of the section in which Whitman catalogues what the "red aborigines" have left, the sounds of nature and the names of places, "charging the water and the land with names." He takes from the poem Whitman's pathos, which is the pathos of the supposedly vanished Indians. And he transfers that pathos to the speaker, imagining a future of a different order, imagining his own displacement. The conclusion of "A Postcard from the Volcano," in which the mansion, possibly a symbol of civilization, is "smeared with the gold of the opulent sun," recalls the description of the "gross Indian" in "The Idea of a Colony."

What pulpy dram distilled of innocence
That streaking gold should speak in him
Or bask within his images and words? (*CP*, 30)

Stevens lifts that "streaking gold" and smears it on his own ruins, replacing antagonism with appropriated pathos. In "A Post Card from the Volcano" structure/system/order is all that remains. "We" have been replaced with bones, the mansion with "blank walls." In

⁶⁷ Walt Whitman, *The Works of Walt Whitman* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 24.

the abundance of “The Comedian” this sparseness is emerging, when “the children” would no longer be the poet’s offspring, his “personae,” but his excavators. The relics of “The Comedian”’s colony in *Harmonium* become the stark materials of *Ideas of Order*. This assimilation of the Indian shifts from a relationship of conflict to one of identification or substitution, with Stevens perhaps finding a way forward in poetry by casting off the role of the orderer and oppressor and putting on that of the oppressed.

“The Indian Struck and Disappeared”

Knighted by Harold Bloom as the greatest modernist poet, Wallace Stevens offers the tantalizing possibility of transhistorical readings, of a beautiful world contained and created by his flight from the actual one. I have argued, along with many fine critics, that we must read Stevens in his historical context, specifically in relation to “the Indian” and Indianism. While Indianism was most prevalent in the literary field in the years leading up to Stevens’s publication of *Harmonium* in 1923, his assimilation-by-colonization of the “native aesthetic” corresponds to his life-long unease with his own privilege and position. His efforts to contain the “pathos of this country” result in both performative racism and his own eventual assumption of a post-colonial perspective in his poetry. Stevens’s prolonged engagement with the Indian suggests, once again, that Native American literatures were a significant element of modernist literary culture and that aspects of these literatures shaped the development of modern American poetry not simply as fodder for ethnographic appropriation but as literary influence.

CODA

Wallace Stevens led me to this project. Writing on *Harmonium* my first year of graduate school, I couldn't make sense of "Life is Motion." I knew it was a representation of white girls playing Indian, and I thought that its final lines—"celebrating the marriage / of flesh and air"—were deliberately flat. The choice of aesthetic failure interested me. I also wondered about the target of Stevens's satire. Was it the girls? Indians? Both? It was hard to say.

In tracing the poem's publication history, I realized it was part of a much larger narrative, that of the near-simultaneous appearance of experimental modernist poetry and translations of Native American songs and ceremonies in periodical culture in the 1910s. As I explore in my introduction, the two poetics were frequently compared, often in a way that disparaged one through its likeness to the other. This relation was complicated as white modernists also began to write "Indian" poetry. "Life is Motion" and its companion poem, "Earthy Anecdote," both printed in *Others* in 1919, reveal that Stevens was quite invested in the poetic possibilities of the Indian, while wary of associating himself with Indianist practices.

We seldom talk about Native American literature in relation to modernism, and when we do it is as a form of primitivism—the modernist appropriating the Indian for his own purposes. Since most of us know little about the history of this country's Indigenous population, my surprise that Stevens would be writing about Indians and their imitators is probably typical. Native Americans and their literatures are often forgotten in our literary

histories, a cultural repression of an irredeemable colonial past that continues to shape our present.¹

By redefining the term “Indianism” and exploring the intersection between modernist and Native American literatures, I have attempted to provide a framework for analyzing, rather than suppressing, the Indian in modernist culture. A brief discussion of Indianism, perhaps in relation to Stevens, is enough to contextualize the work of the Cherokee poet Lynn Riggs and to bring his poems into the classroom. “Skulls Like These,” “Charger,” and “Santo Domingo Corn Dance” to name just my three favorites, all possess a rhetorical density that rewards close reading. They also lend themselves to discussions of periodical culture and bibliographic codes. The parodic elements of “Santo Domingo Corn Dance,” which first appeared in *The Nation* below ethnographic transcriptions of Papago songs, are most evident in this original publication.

Even as an adult academic, my own implicit understanding of Indians as marginal to U.S. American history, literature, and culture predisposed me to accept primitivism as an adequate paradigm for understanding modernists and Indians. If the modernists made Indians up, I didn’t really need to know anything about Indians. But the modernists were not simply inventing Indians, they were quoting traditional Indian poetry, imitating it, and, in the case of Riggs, the modernist was an Indian. By teaching Indianism as an element of modernism, we make some small progress in interrupting colonial narratives of Native American disposability.

¹ I see discussions of formal affinities between modernist and “primitive” works as a form of inoculation. By noting similarities we also avoid discussing relation.

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