

**The Artist and the Folk: Politics, Identity and Humor in the Work of Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector**

by

Alexandra Hoffman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Comparative Literature)  
in The University of Michigan  
2012

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Anita Norich, Chair  
Professor Sandra Gunning  
Associate Professor Mikhail Krutikov  
Associate Professor Christi Merrill  
Associate Professor Joshua Miller

## **Acknowledgements**

I am delighted that the writing process was only occasionally a lonely affair, since I've had the privilege of having a generous committee, a great range of inspiring instructors and fellow graduate students, and intelligent students. The burden of producing an original piece of scholarship was made less daunting through collaboration with these wonderful people. In many ways this text is a web I weaved out of the combination of our thoughts, expressions, arguments and conversations.

I thank Professor Sandra Gunning for her encouragement, her commitment to interdisciplinarity, and her practical guidance; she never made me doubt that what I'm doing is important. I thank Professor Mikhail Krutikov for his seemingly boundless references, broad vision, for introducing me to the oral history project in Ukraine, and for his laughter. I thank Professor Christi Merrill for challenging as well as reassuring me in reading and writing theory, for being interested in humor, and for being creative in not only the academic sphere. I thank Professor Joshua Miller for his kind and engaged reading, his comparative work, and his supportive advice. Professor Anita Norich has been a reliable and encouraging mentor from the start; I thank her for her careful reading and challenging comments, and for making Ann Arbor feel more like home. I look to both Anita and Sandra as models of women academics in their meticulous scholarship, caring instruction, and genuine characters; I want to be just like them when I finally grow up.

Professor Thomas Loebel of York University bears some of the blame for this project, since it was conceived in his Undergraduate seminar on the Harlem Renaissance. Tom's brilliant and ethical approach to reading and writing continues to be an inspiration. Vera Szabo has been a wonderful teacher and a loyal friend. I cannot thank her enough for opening up the world of Yiddish to me in ways much more profound than needed for my research. It is a great honor to be following in her footsteps. Teaching Yiddish has been rewarding in many ways, and I thank my students for their earnestness and commitment.

The support and solidarity of other graduate students has been invaluable. I thank Oren Segal for helping me to bring masochism back into the dissertation through introducing me to Deleuze's theorization of it. I thank Sara Feldman for her companionship and for organizing a dissertation working group, as well as for introducing me to local politics. I thank Benjamin Pollak for his friendship and his generous and brilliant editing of my writing; our conversations through the years have enriched my scholarship profoundly and provided comfort and entertainment.

Orian Zakai has been such a consistent presence in my life this past year that it is difficult to think what not to thank her for. Our community organizing project encouraged me to think about the ways in which a humanities education may make a real difference. For your love, care, reassurance, steadfastness, brilliance and wisdom, I am forever grateful, my sister. I am grateful to James McLenathen for his friendship and for making music accessible to me. I thank Anthony Hinkelman for helping with revisions. I thank Anton Khramov for being there, for believing in me and for supporting me in the most difficult times. And I thank my mother for making me want to make her happy.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation analyzes the complex relationship between the author and the folk in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector. In investigating politics, identity and humor within this relationship, I place much weight on the concept of laughter through tears, a mode of representation where oppressive reality is refracted through humor. Laughter through tears as a mode of representation is a particular political and psychological strategy which models a way towards pleasure within a reality that is all too painful. The aesthetic it engenders is a masochistic one, where the release of laughter comes not from the pain of reality, but rather from the control one has over its representation. The dissertation also seeks to extend the conversation between Russian Jewish and African American literary scholarship. These two identity-based fields continually ask questions about otherness and identity, about diaspora and belonging, about dialect and its representation, about movement, migration, upward mobility, political efficacy, assimilation, self-loathing, communal responsibility. Through bringing some of these questions together I hope to elucidate the various strategies that minority artists use in approaching the folk that is both their subject and their audience.

Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector in Russia and Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes in America posit themselves as a new generation, and so the texts I analyze do not stand alone. They always need a parent, a serious or satirical counterpart, and the generational positioning of the authors reveals not only a conscious attempt at

canonization, but also the dependence of a humorist on solemn representation as a backdrop to his/her own art. The new generation writers' work reveals that even the serious claims are never safe. Their humor explicitly disturbs the equation of reality and realistic representation; it creates unease and tension, as opposed to catharsis.

Following the introduction which provides some of the theoretical background for the dissertation, the first two chapters provide the literary context of the two renaissances, focusing on two periodical publications - *Fire!!* in Harlem and *Yidishe folks-bibliotek* in Kiev – which marked an attempt by a young generation of writers to separate themselves from the previous generation and to reconfigure their own relationship to the “folk.” The third chapter pauses on national and diasporic identifications within the humorous descriptions of train-travel by Sholem Aleichem, Mordkhe Spector, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. In the fourth chapter I continue to follow these authors and analyze ironic relations to the divine, questioning the comfortable intersections between messianic, teleological thought and the rhetoric of political and social liberation.

## Chapter I

### Introduction: When Hegel is Funny

The depth which Spirit brings forth from within . . . and the ignorance of this consciousness about what it really is saying, are the same conjunction of the high and the low which, in the living being, Nature naively expresses when it combines the organ of its highest fulfillment, the organ of generation, with the organ of urination.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.<sup>1</sup>

Laughter of language, laughter of sociality itself. Laughter of castration that moves us to name in a process that exceeds naming.

Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 182.

For the contemporary critic does not recognize that great spiritual depth is needed to light up a picture of ignoble life and transform it into a gem of creative art. For the contemporary critic does not admit that the laughter of lofty delight is worthy to stand beside exalted lyrical emotion.

Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation analyzes the complex relationship between the author and the folk in the work of Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector. In investigating politics, identity and humor within this relationship, I place much weight on the

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<sup>1</sup> Zupančič, Alenka. "(Essential) Appendix: The Phallus." In *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. London/Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 183. It seems so funny in many ways to call the penis "the organ of generation", for it is, of course, the womb.

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*. Tr. Constance Garnett. New York: Modern Library, 1936. 188.

concept of laughter through tears. Laughter through tears is a mode of representation where oppressive reality—both the systematic socioeconomic oppression that characterizes “society” and also the ways in which oppressive presence of the real frustrates attempts to imagine and create within or outside oppressive environments, including the linguistic one – is refracted through humor, fostering what I call a masochistic aesthetic. “He Laughs who laughs last” is but one expression that unites laughter with power struggle and domination. From a psychoanalytical perspective, power relations in their most basic form are articulated through gender. To this is added, though not as a replacement, the Marxist perspective, where power relations originate in the struggle over the means of production. As the joke, in its personal and interpersonal path rolls over and forward, from place to place, person to person, it reveals as much about the teller as about the listener, who is the potential laugher. Humor may reveal the rehearsed arbitrariness of difference in its simplistic, binaristic manifestation which fastens difference to inequality. Laughter – the scowl, the scream, the disturbed and disturbing breath, the shaking, the bursting out of body-discipline and decorum – should be seen as a technology of privilege and domination. There is, however, an allotted space for this outburst within otherwise scripted life of development, progress, and reproduction. Laughter reveals the arbitrariness of hierarchical power relations even as it depends on their deep-seatedness and ubiquity. Laughter through tears is not only a mode of writing – where the writer intends to be humorous about oppressive reality – but also a reading mode where the reader is required to know about, if not experience, the oppressive reality which is being refracted, if not overcome, through humor.

The dissertation is comparing the relationship between the author and the folk by turning to two modern literary moments, the “Harlem Renaissance” (inter-war United States)



alongside the “Classical Yiddish” literary renaissance (Czarist Russia of Alexander III and Nicholas II). Questions of temporality in minority literatures are often concerned with belatedness and renaissance conceptions. Belatedness in relation to modernism and modernity haunt these renaissances and their study.<sup>3</sup> I problematize the concept of renaissances, to the extent that they follow a patriarchal teleology, marginalizing daughters and mothers alike. I further question any notion of a global unified modernism, and would prefer to embrace a *geomodernism*.<sup>4</sup> Simon Gikandi in his “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism” (2005) cites Michael North I discuss in the second chapter, and extends the project to suggest that “modernism was easy to institutionalize because it was also the product of a fundamental contradiction: it invoked the other and made it part of its schemata but also allowed for the differentiation of difference, so that some of its more radical forms could be exiled from its form through the ritual of canonization” (33). There is no monolithic modernism into which these two modernisms need to fit. As I will show, there is contestation, and an intended, pointed contestation not only in relation to global and false generic modernism, but also internally. The problematic nature of a renaissance teleology was not lost on writers at the time. “When [Hurston] speaks of this movement [the Negro Renaissance] it is only briefly, in connection with Dr. Charles Johnson's publication of her first stories in the Negro magazine, *Opportunity*. Even here she qualifies the concept by referring to it as the 'so-called Negro Renaissance’” (Barton 110).

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<sup>3</sup> For “belatedness” as a kind of liberating constraint, see Mark Caplan’s *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms*. Caplan writes, for example “where a canonical literary Modernism develops in metropolitan culture at a moment of anxiety over a dying or lost tradition, in peripheral cultures this phenomenon anticipates the metropolitan canon because the tradition refuses to submit to a regime of forgetting necessary for the ‘business’ of modernization to proceed” (13).

<sup>4</sup> As in the *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*. Ed. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005. In *geomodernism*, Gaea the earth becomes a central feminine presence.

The question of political efficacy and psychological benefits of humorous representations of oppression is central in my research. In what way can humorous representation of oppression be said to be “good for the people,” considering the alternatives of solemn, serious claims for equality? Who did the new generation think they were, literally and idiomatically? What rhetorical and social means did these writers use to conceive their own identity as minority artists? What allowed them to stand atop the “racial mountain” in Hughes’s terms<sup>5</sup>, and what role did they intend to play as the creators of literature? By looking at the production and reception of the texts, and not only at the biographies of their authors, I hope to go beyond “minor literature,” as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari. I use the term minority literature as opposed to minor literature to recognize that literature, culture, and politics are inextricably intertwined, and also to remove the emphasis from “major” literature and language.<sup>6</sup> As any one term that is meant to refer to a group of people that is heterogeneously constituted but similarly oppressed, “minority literature” is dangerously close to homogenizing and thus reiterating difference as hierarchy. I do not mean to say that terminology is somehow unimportant, but rather that I have attempted to question, qualify and revise the terms I use throughout this project. I use the term minority in conjunction with terms like diaspora, ethnicity, race, community, nationalism, internationalism, culture, art, gender and class. Minority literature is made by writers and readers (publishers, critics, and the elusive reading masses), and the identity of readers and writers both is at stake in conceptions of minority literature. How did the contemporary readers conceive of these

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<sup>5</sup> Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

<sup>6</sup> In this way my project differs greatly from Mark Caplan’s project which compares Yiddish and African diasporic literatures, which “proposes to affirm the paradoxical *centrality* of peripheral literatures to a theory of global modernisms” (2, emphasis in original).

artists as the creators of literature,<sup>7</sup> as creators of models for “psychic survival,” in Ruth Wisse’s terms<sup>8</sup>? The contours of the interpretive communities that made the humoristic texts possible are important, and so is the expansion of the interpretive communities, scholarly or otherwise, that maintain the significance of these texts today.

The texts I address do not stand alone; they always need a parent, a serious counterpart. The generational positioning of the authors reveals not only a conscious attempt at canonization, but also the dependence of a humorist on serious representation as backdrop to his or her own art. The new generation writers show that even earnest claims are never safe in an environment which perpetuates inequality. The humor in their works explicitly disturbs the equation of reality and realistic representation; it creates unease, and so provides the tension of a masochistic aesthetics, making the reader question: is the joker poking fun at her/himself? Is the enlightened audience being mocked by being made to laugh at a stereotype? Is the minority reader made to laugh at her/himself?

To elucidate these questions, I turn to a sketch of a masochistic aesthetic that characterizes the laughter through tears mode of representation. It is a pleasant surprise that Leopold Sacher-Masoch, whose name is lent to the modern concept of masochism, and Sholem Aleichem, the great Yiddish humorist who inspired such an amount of humor research that he is more present in this dissertation than the other authors, both reference Nikolai Gogol in their work. In particular, they are fascinated by Gogol’s concept of “laughter through tears” as being inherent in the comic writer’s craft.<sup>9</sup> The connection

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7 This is an elusive subject, due to the limitation of possible sources – letters, editorials – as well as the fact that not everyone who reads, writes.

8 “Ironic Balance for Psychic Survival,” the chapter dedicated to Sholem Aleichem’s work in her *The Schlemiel as the Modern Hero* (41-57).

9 Sholem Aleichem was fascinated by Gogol’s idea of laughter through tears, from the seventh chapter of *Dead Souls*, Part I (1842), which he free-translated into Yiddish and held among his

between humor and masochism is surprising but not accidental; the exploration and a reevaluation of the connections between the two are central to my project. The conceptualization of masochism as proposed by Gilles Deleuze is particularly useful to me because he makes an unequivocal separation between the masochist and the sadist figures.<sup>10</sup> There is no sado-masochistic relation, and the Deleuzian masochist is rather an independent

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personal papers: "... און לאנג נאך, אפאנים, איז מיר באשערט מיט יענעם ווונדערלאכן פה צו גיין האנט ביי האנט מיט ... מיינע מאדנע פארשינדלאך, און צו באטראכטן דאס גרויסע טומליקע לעבן דורך אן אפענעם געלעכטער און דורך פארשטעלטע, פארפארגענע טרערן" (Berkovich 189). In Russian: "И долго еще определено мне чудной властью идти об руку с моими странными героями, озирать всю громадно несущуюся жизнь, озирать ее сквозь видный миру смех и незримые, неведомые ему слезы!" [Constance Garnett's translation: "And for a long time yet, I am fated to go hand in hand with my strange heroes, to observe the grandiosely-galloping life in its totality, to observe it through laughter that is visible to the world and through the tears that are invisible to it!"]. Sholem Aleichem's epitaph (quoted in full in, for example, *Sholem aleykhem* [Vilnius: Di naye yidishe folkshul, 1924], 2) though much lengthier, echoes Gogol's as well. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch is fascinated by this same concept in his *Venus in Furs* (1870): "Gogol, the Russian Moliere, says – where? Well, somewhere – 'the real comic muse is the one under whose laughing mask tears roll down.' A wonderful saying" (63). The celebrated pre-Harlem Renaissance poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar, in the collection *Majors and Minors*, expresses a similar sentiment in "We Wear the Mask": "Why should the world be over-wise. / In counting all our tears and sighs? / Nay, let them only see us, while / We wear the mask" (21).

<sup>10</sup> In "The Law, Humor and Irony," Deleuze moves from the ancient to the modern conceptions of the law. In the ancient conception:

"In their essence, irony and humor shape the thought about the law. They are activated and receive their meaning in relation to the law. Irony is a game of thought, which allows itself to base the law on the good, which is infinitely more supreme; humor is a game of the thought, which allows itself to give [the law] validity through the better [the best possible], which is infinitely more just" (Deleuze 47).

Deleuze then presents Sade and Masoch as pursuing projects of contestation and subversion of the law: "The humorist is the logician of the consequences in the same way that the sadistic ironic is the logician of principles" (Deleuze 52).

Sade, then, proposes "a deviation from the law towards a more supreme principle, but this principle is not the good which forms its basis; to the contrary, it is the idea of evil, supreme being which overthrows the good in its wickedness" (Deleuze 50). And so, sadism is ironic, calling for continual anarchistic rebellion. The masochist, for Deleuze, is not the opposite of the sadist because he obeys the law. Rather, the masochist "simply attacks the law from a different direction" (Deleuze 51). Unlike sadistic irony, which rises up from the law to a higher principle, masochistic humor descends below the law to its results, i.e. it reduces the law to punishment (Deleuze 51). "Masochistic humor is this: the same law which forbids me to realize desire with the threat of punishment, is, from now on, the law which punishes me before hand, and thus orders me to satisfy my desire" (51) – paradoxical, yes, so once you have the punishment means you were bad, otherwise the law doesn't work, and so you turn it all around to say – I've been punished, now I can sit. Relying on Reik, Deleuze states: "The masochist has to be punished before he feels pleasure. It is a mistake to confuse temporal sequence with logical causality: the suffering is not the reason for pleasure, but a necessary prerequisite to the coming of pleasure" (Deleuze 51).

hermaphrodite figure that embodies the relation of two subjects (who become subjects – punished and executioner – only through this relation). At Deleuze’s suggestion, I read Sacher-Masoch, his *Venus in Furs* (first published in 1870) in particular,<sup>11</sup> a text whose echo reverberates through both renaissances, accentuating the troublesome mix of writing, desire, power and pleasure in humoristic texts. Laughter through tears is characterized by the enactment of the relation between binary opposites, bringing suffering (crying) and pleasure (laughter) into one, a one that isn't a synthesis. There is no formula for pain-pleasure, only a disturbing tension that motivates both reading and writing practices that demand laughing at adversity and demand knowledge of that adversity, for the humor to work. Laughter through tears is also about the detour of the satisfaction of desire by ritualizing it: laughter comes only after the description of painful oppressive reality. The release of laughter comes not from the pain of reality, but rather from the control one has over its representation, over its framing and telling.

The two minority renaissances have been studied separately up to now, by scholars of Jewish and African American literature. I would like to try and show the intention of my comparison. Why should a conversation exist between Russian Jewish and African American literary scholarship? It seems that such a conversation must exist between two identity-based fields that continually ask questions about otherness and identity, about diaspora and belonging, about dialect and its representation, about movement, migration, upward mobility, political efficacy, assimilation, self-loathing, and communal responsibility. Through bringing some of these questions together I hope to elucidate the various strategies that minority artists

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<sup>11</sup> Sacher-Masoch also wrote a few idylls with philosemitic elements, that were translated and published in *Voskhod*, a Russian-language Jewish periodical edited by A.E. Landau to which Semyon Dubnow was a regular contributor.

use in approaching the folk that is both their subject and their audience. These are not the only identity-based fields that ask these questions, and I seek not only to “apply” these questions to different sets of material – Jewish and African American literature – but also and thereby to engender different theoretical constructs, as they emerge in conversation with extant scholarship in these fields. The concept of the folk itself is informed in both cases by different contexts – territorial literature in the United States and *narodnichestvo* in the Russian Empire – even while there are points of convergence, in the German concept of the *volk*, for example, and the investment in collecting, preserving and reframing folklore. Comparison in this dissertation is a reading practice that opens up venues of interpretation through examining parallels and divergences and thereby learns more about each literary movement. Reading is political, and the comparison of the literatures of oppressed minorities is also a call for solidarity.

There have been studies juxtaposing Jewish American and African American experiences, and there have been some studies that compared the Harlem Renaissance to other literary renaissances.<sup>12</sup> One of these, Tracy Mishkin’s *The Harlem and Irish Renaissances*, is particularly interesting because the introduction includes a short section, “The Jews: A Model for Black-Irish Comparisons” (3-9). “The Jews” here serve as a symbol of a particular minority group’s ability to negotiate its politics and culture through a parallel

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<sup>12</sup> eg. Eric J. Sundquist, *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); George Bornstein, *The Colors of Zion: Blacks, Jews, and Irish from 1845 to 1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Marc Caplan, *How Strange the Change: Language, Temporality, and Narrative Form in Peripheral Modernisms* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), and Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010). One such intersection comes by way of Russian literature; Dale Peterson’s *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* is quite impressive for its sustained historiography of this transatlantic dialogue. The dialogue between Yiddish classical literature and Russian literature is fairly well documented. The connections between Yiddish, Russian and African American literature, however, have not been documented.

with another oppressed minority; there is a clear political value to comparison as it is practiced within the literatures I study: comparison may lead to solidarity which then bolsters each group's demands for justice and human rights. What is missing, in Mishkin's and other studies of the sort, is the analysis of Yiddish-language literature. I look beyond the symbolic positions, or perhaps below and before them, to consider each historical literary moment in its own complexity and multifacetedness. Importantly "Jews" and "Blacks" have played for one another the symbolic roles which Mishkin attributes to Jews within the Black-Irish comparison. Damrosch in *World Literature*, cites one such example: Art Spiegelman's inspiration for using mice and cats to represent the oppressed and the oppressors came from his attempt to represent race relations in Harlem, and only later did he turn to represent Jews and their oppressors in this way (203-204).

The communist revolution in Russia is a focal point for minority artists. In the 1920s, as the immigration policy in the United States was becoming more and more xenophobic, some African American and Yiddish writers searched for solace in the USSR. Hughes traveled there, and his visit inspired Russian and Yiddish translations; his autobiography *Not Without Laughter* was translated as *Smekh skvoz' slezy* [Laughter through tears], trans. V. Stanevich (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1932). He and other African American artists were attracted by the Soviet promise of a type of internationalist identity and collectivity, a project that was seen (in the African American periodical, *Messenger*, for example) to be successful in eradicating antisemitic racism. The vision of ideal society should not be about eradicating difference, even when it is about eradicating inequality. The humorist writers I am interested in continue to insist on difference and particularity, at times creating utopian representations of a separate society (for example in *Their Eyes Were*

*Watching God* and Sholem Aleichem's *Kasrilevke*). The comparison of the two renaissance movements proves to be productive for the consideration of minority canon formation, diasporic longing and belonging, artistic self-construction and varied (and at times conflicting) identity-based political positions. The comparison means the juxtaposition of the two, with an eye to parallels and divergences, as well as intersections. I pursue both material/historical and symbolic/rhetorical points of comparison and contrast: minority literary canonization efforts, the background of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination, diasporic longings for an ancestral homeland, and conservation of folklore. In this inter-minority studies project focusing on humor, I hope to avoid potential pitfalls and their repercussions: the comparison of wounds, which is never productive and indeed debilitating to conversation. The conversation I would like to foster is multidirectional, as opposed to competitive, to borrow Michael Rothberg's adjectives for collective memory (2009).

Laughter through tears as a mode of representation is a particular political and psychological strategy; it is an aesthetic that models a way towards pleasure within a reality that is all too painful. Painful reality is necessarily contextual. The humoristic authors I explore belong to a minority group that is the ultimate other within the national space they inhabit (most starkly represented by the geographical delineations of the Pale in Russia and the Black Belt in the United States).<sup>13</sup> In the United States, the Harlem Renaissance period is the post-war moment, a period of (yet another) disappointment following the participation of African American soldiers in the war, the differently-configured race-relations in France (i.e. no Jim Crow), the victory of communism in Russia in 1917, the second Pan-African

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<sup>13</sup> The national conceptions of both the United States and of Czarist Russia perhaps are not purely "nations," but rather empire-nations.



Congress in 1919, the Immigration Act in 1924.<sup>14</sup> In Russia, this is the period after the 1881-82 pogroms, when the reformist tendencies of the 60s and 70s are regressing, and when the position even of the wealthy enlightened Jewish families is endangered, even while the “Jewish question” is becoming more and more prevalent in Russian society and letters.<sup>15</sup> Both the Jewish diaspora in Russia, and the African diaspora in United States, are at this time articulating a “back to the homeland” (Land of Israel, Africa) kind of nationalism: *Khibat tsiyon* [Love of Zion] and Garveyism.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, there is a different ethnic-national identification, the identification with the rural, provincial folk. Periodicals, for example, hail from the big city (New York and Kiev), but their contributors often lay claim to a more rural origin (the Southern towns in the United States and small towns of the Pale of Settlement),

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<sup>14</sup> In February of 1919, the 369th Infantry – an African American troupe – returned home, to New York City, and one could witness 1,300 African American military men marching along Fifth Ave and into Harlem (Brown 163). For the influence of the war on African American letters see, for example, Claude McKay’s “If we must die” (1919) and *Home to Harlem* (1928); Charles S. Johnson (editor of *Opportunity*) was a veteran.

<sup>15</sup> See, on the influence of this political atmosphere on Russian Jewish literature, Semyon Dubnow, “Iz sovremennogo khaosa” [From contemporary chaos], in *Voskhod* 1888, No. 11/12, 27-46. See also Kelner, 118-22, 185. Kelner points out the differences in response of the non-Jewish Russian intelligentsia to the early 1880s pogroms as opposed to those some 20 years later; in the Kishinev pogroms of 1903, the intelligentsia exhibited “decisive and surprisingly active” dismay (Kelner 327).

<sup>16</sup> Sholem Aleichem mentions his involvement with *khovevey tsiyon* to Dubnow in his letters dated 20 April 1890, 27 July 1890, and 5 August 1890. Ravnitsky cites Sholem Aleichem’s hesitation about having a particular politics associated with his art: “I am not an assimilationist nor a Palestinian, I am a Hebrew and love the Jewish man, because I am a human and I love human beings. Any idea, however holy it may be, when it falls into our hands, human hands, we begin to massage it and limit it, until it necessarily wears a form that is stupid and ridiculous; therefore, one can mock and ridicule both the assimilationist and the Palestinian” (114). The Zionist Organization was founded later, at the first Zionist Congress in 1897. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) led the Universal Negro Improvement Association and advocated a “Back to Africa” vision of an African empire with Liberia or Ethiopia as its center. In New York, *The Negro World* was his organ. Garvey was brutally condemned in the *Messenger*, and more ambivalently condemned in *The Crisis*. Thurman’s admiration for Marcus Garvey in *Aunt Hagar’s Children* in many ways comes from his dislike for the assimilationist bourgeois (in *Collected* 241-45, 272-80). Besides Garveyism, there was also the Pan African Congress, meeting first in 1900, second in 1919, third in 1921, and fourth in 1923. Du Bois played a central role in these conventions. In the June 1926 issue of the *Messenger*, George S. Schuyler satirized Du Bois by quoting him as saying “I emphatically deny that I am the only member of the Pan-African Congress” (175).

and it is that rural origin that continues to be constructed by these writers as a symbol of the authentic folk. This burden of authenticity, importantly, has at times the effect of reinscribing economic inequality, as determined by geographic privilege, by the unequal juxtaposition of urban and rural.

While performing in the limbo of legal and social equality, the minority artist is marketed – by him/herself or others – as being able to depict the oppressed reality with which s/he is intimately familiar, and indeed, in order to validate the authenticity of representation, there is the expectation that the artist will step off the stage right back into that oppressive reality. At the same time, the very act of being on the stage separates the minority artist from that reality, the artist as representative of a minority presents the folk as self, perhaps translates the folk-collective into self.<sup>17</sup> Performativity theory is most useful here, where representations also serve as the roles one is given and also takes up, and are the way in which one negotiates reality, through identification and othering. Performing as a “minority artist”, there seems to be an additional strain, an additional heaviness to meaning and action.

One of the ways to imagine the minority artist on stage is through an image from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, written in 1952, and so generally considered to be a generation following the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>18</sup> Ellison uses binaristic images provocatively throughout the novel, culminating in the image of a Sambo doll<sup>19</sup> with two faces that grin in all directions (433, 446). The discovery of the doll’s mechanism, a previously invisible thread which can be pulled by anyone, allows the protagonist to begin theorizing a course of action. The discovery is devastating, since it opens up an abyss of meaninglessness: how can

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17 See Christi Merrill, “Are we the ‘folk’ in this lok?: Usefulness of the plural in translating a *lok-katha*,” in *Translation: Poetics and Practice*, ed. Anisur Rahman, New Delhi: Creative Books, 2002, 67-79.

18 Wright and Ellison generally are representatives of the end of the renaissance.

19 The Sambo is a colonial figure, having origins in British-dominated India.

a twice-smiling Sambo doll mean anything at all, being contingent on so many meaning-makers? Within the story or in the realm of composition: the entertainer, the crowd, the protagonist; and also outside the story or in the realm of reading: the author, the reader, the critic; this is a bit crude, surely, since the within/without distinction is not quite clear-cut. Paradoxically, it is from this devastating epiphany of the Sambo doll and the consequent dispersion of meaning, or maybe no meaning at all, that the protagonist begins to theorize independently, gaining agency in secluded, underground existence, where his subversion is a parasitic use of electricity, listening to jazz, and no more. Always at the sidelines, then, in minority humorous writing in particular, is the suspicion that there is no meaning in fact, since the proliferation, mixture and dispersion of meaning is simply overwhelming. I would like to acknowledge the distress, as well as the delight, in multiplicity of meanings; the proliferation of meaning can be paralyzing, irresponsible, unbearable in its dispersed lightness.

In the dissertation as a whole, I focus on Hughes and Hurston in the United States and Sholem Aleichem and Spector in Russia, and each pair is looked at within their particular literary contexts, which involved other authors, both humoristic and not. Each pair of authors had an intimate and stormy relationship, both personal and artistic, and they even collaborated on some literary projects. Sholem Aleichem and Hughes seem to be consistently “the faces” of their respective movements, while Hurston and Spector are less so; and, while Hurston has been “rediscovered” in the seventies and is now a fairly consistent part of the canon, Spector is yet to be written into the canon in any serious way. The self-identification of these writers as a new generation, youthful and naughty, precisely solidified the tradition

of Yiddish and African American literatures; that is, “tradition” becomes important precisely at the point when one is imagining a stepping into modernity, precisely when one is rejecting it. I do not view the establishment of a literary tradition to be a wholly restrictive phenomenon, even though more often than not, it participates in the socioeconomic hierarchization and subjugation. In the two chapters following this introduction I attempt to show the contested and conflicted nature of traditionalization through modernization, and how these contestations and conflicts end up reaffirming a patriarchal power structure. That is, the establishment of a literary tradition, even when it is defined by voices less heard in mainstream national canons, does not guarantee the absence of other kinds of silencing.

It is a particular problem, for Harlem Renaissance and Classical Yiddish humorist writers, who espouse to both be “uplifters” and humorists. How can they uplift the folk, which is, at the same time, the object of their ridicule? The new generation of African American and Yiddish Russian writers inherit a humoristic tradition where the caricature – dehumanizing, stereotypical representation – of the minority subject is dominant. They join the older generation<sup>20</sup> in the project of racial uplift in a particular way, emphasizing their own, often personal and even selfish/narcissistic, search for identity as minority writers. In the United States, the dialogue with the writers of “the lost generation” is a telling one. It is their belonging to the project of racial/ethnic uplift, however self-serving or self-centered the identification with the mass/pop/folk culture may be, that separates the authors I explore from their non-minority counterparts. They do not abandon the comical, caricature-like, stereotypical representation of their folk subjects; it is their humor that makes them “folksy.” They do, however, develop something different from the sentimental humor that is seen to be

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<sup>20</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke in America, Mendele Moykher Sforim and Semyon Dubnow in Russia. As the second and third chapter explore in detail, the generational politics did not always have anything to do with age; rather, they had much to do with class, patronage and independence.

politically inefficient and dangerous.<sup>21</sup> It is precisely because they write with the awareness of caricaturing humoristic art, whether satirical or sentimental, that their humor needs to be seen in a different light.

The laughter through tears mode of representation may be seen as a consoling one, since it is not satirical, since it does not lash out at the particular foibles of the minority subject or his subjugating environment; it is meant, rather, to accept, forgive, and celebrate the particular minority subject position. Laughter through tears does not always operate as consolation, however, or at least its consolation does more than simply restating the status quo.<sup>22</sup> Fantasy and artistic creativity are indeed signs of victory and perseverance, but it is not a victory through catharsis which desensitizes the reader in light of painful reality. It is, rather, masochistic humor which subverts the law by allowing temporary guilt-free pleasure, which says, “I have been punished already, now I can laugh.” This liberating and devastating aesthetic, put crudely, is a way of making the best out of a very bad situation. For eloquence, I would like to borrow Baudelaire’s words in his article on visual humor, where he records his impression of an English troupe of pantomimes, saying: “All the gestures, all the cries, all the faces seemed to be saying in so many words: it is the fairy’s will; we are the playthings of Destiny, and it does not worry us in the least. Let us run! Let us leap!” (127).

The concept of “laughter through tears” is useful for the interrogation of the

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21 See in particular Kaminer’s foreword to the first volume of the *Yidische Folks-bibliotek* and Braithwaite in *The New Negro*, 30-31.

22 Adorno writes in his “Is Art Lighthearted?”: “Where art tries of its own accord to be lighthearted and thereby tries to adapt itself to a use which [...] nothing holy can serve any longer, it is reduced to the level of a human need and its truth content is betrayed. Its ordained cheerfulness fits into the way of the world. It encourages people to submit to what is decreed, to comply. This is the form of objective despair. If one takes the distinction seriously enough, it passes judgment on the affirmative character of art. Since then, under the dictates of the culture industry, that affirmative character has become omnipresent, and the joke has become the smirking caricature of advertising pure and simple” (250).

particularly binaristic terms of subjectivity and relation (high-low, folk-minority, male-female, folk-artist, minority-majority, black-white, Jew-gentile); this is a dialectical model surely, a model that does not take into account the inequality of the two terms of the dialectic. My aim is to analyze laughter through tears as a mode of representation that potentially explodes binary oppositions, but does so only through their reiteration (this ironic reiteration is always in danger of not being read ironically - possibilities which are explored carefully in Denise Riley's *The Words of Selves*, Linda Hutcheon's *Irony's Edge*, and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey*).

The attempt to elucidate the concept of laughter through tears within the particular context of Harlem Renaissance and Classical Yiddish literature, I hope, will contribute to the academic discourse on minority humor in general, minority studies in general, humor in general. Of the four humorous writers in this study, only Sholem Aleichem's humor has been consistently studied, and I use this humor-scholarship in constructing a fuller understanding of the use of humor in the work of the other three writers. Indeed, the lack of a comprehensive theory of humor (to be blamed, surely, on the missing second half of Aristotle's *Poetics*!) gives me the opportunity to treat the primary texts (the novels, short stories, editorials, songs, autobiographies) as expounding their own theory of representation, which is based on the ironic reiteration of binary oppositions (laughter and tears). While I evoke Aristotle's lost manuscript in jest, its lack is indicative of the way humor may be written about in a scholarly way. This dissertation does not answer any questions about humor; its existence is an attempt to formulate questions – and therefore ways of thinking – about humorous representation in minority literature. The relationship between humor and the production of new knowledge is a productive tension underlying this project, though I am

more interested in the ways that humor may intrude upon an academic project than intruding into humor with academia. This theoretical base will be useful I hope not only in this project, but also for further studies of minority humor and diasporic humor.

The two opening chapters situate the minority humoristic writers in their own literary-historical milieu, and allow me to introduce issues which are particular to each tradition, while also suggesting a parallel through their thematics. I consider first the Harlem Renaissance and then the Classical Yiddish renaissance in their literary-historiographical contexts, attempting not to take “tradition” for granted. In each case, I will explore the conceptions of the folk, canonization, and intergenerational strife as it relates to the ambitious and monumental blossoming of the careers of the writers on whose work I concentrate throughout: Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston in one case, Sholem Aleichem (né Shalom Rabinovitch) and Mordkhe Spector in the other. Their taking on of the role of editors and publishers of *Fire!!* and *Yidishe Folksbibliotek* [Yiddish/Jewish folk/people’s library] suggests that they wanted to control the framing of their own work for the public, that they were not satisfied with being mere demonstrations of minority talent. These writers, as editors, were addressing multiple audiences, divided along not only racial and ethno-religious lines, but also class lines. Although the two chapters are separated and treat the two literatures independently, there are certainly ways in which conceptions of the folk are circulating at this time. Locke, for example, announces in *The New Negro*, “Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a renascent Judaism – these are no more alive with the spirit of a racial awakening than Harlem; culturally and

spiritually it focuses a people. Negro life is not only founding new centers, but finding a new soul” (629).

The relationship between the folk and a frivolous, humorous aesthetic has not yet been given attention. The generational rhetoric is significant for humorous representation, in that the “new generation” can pose itself as playful, precisely because the non-ironic demand for equality has already been made by their predecessors, “the older generation.” In an attempt to draw out the literary historical context through and around the periodical, I begin by situating *Fire!!*, as the *enfant terrible* of *The New Negro*, within the modernist project of little magazines, but also the particular queer tradition of anthology and the contemporaneous proliferation of African American anthologies. However, the older generation also provided the younger generation with some, however intermittent, financial support, which made the dependence on white patronage less urgent. For the young artists of the movement, it was clear that the Harlem fad would eventually pass, that there is urgency in succeeding in saying something great in those years, for later, they would not be heard. The Harlem Renaissance is a time when “back to Africa” nationalisms were seriously considered, Garveyism being but one such nationalism. It is within this context of historization and canonization that *The New Negro* and *Fire!!* came to light.

In both the Harlem and the Yiddish renaissances, inter-generational strife is patriarchal, between sons and fathers. The new Classical Yiddish literature was operating within the economics of Yiddish literary and cultural production of the time and, similarly to the editors of *Fire!!*, the editors of *Yudishe Folks-bibliotek* and *Hoyzfraynd* also claimed an in-between position for the “folk author,” juggling audiences divided along ethnic as well as class lines. The in-between position of middle class intelligentsia invested in the



representation and address of the folk has been read as having the task of cultural translation; alongside cultural translation there is also multilingual muteness, an expression arrested by the lack of a stable point of origin, the lack of a language that may provide parental protection from the instability of the self. This in-between position of the folk-writer is central to the understanding of the particular ambivalent, ironic humor of that generation. Sholem Aleichem dedicates the novel *Stempenyu*, appended to the first volume of *Folksbibliotek*, to “my beloved grandfather, R. Mendele mokher sformim.” The latter echoes this genealogy and accepts his patriarchal place at the head of the table not only in personal correspondence,<sup>23</sup> but also publicly, when he offers his novel, *Dos Vintsh-fingerl* (serialized in *Folksbibliotek*), as “a gift to the dear Jewish children.” The violent pogroms that swept Russian cities, coupled with the “silent pogroms” (the May Laws of 1882), brought about the pauperization of the Jewish population, and were also foundational to the historical consciousness of the generation of writers that edited the *Yidische Folksbibliotek* in Kiev and *Hoyzfraynd* in Warsaw.

After situating the humoristic writers in the minority and national literary politics specific to them, the fourth chapter on travel is meant to point to other systems of meaning, besides literature, which are involved in the construction of a modern nation. This chapter will make use of texts from both literary traditions in order to pause on national and diasporic identifications. The connection between technology and modernity is played out in a particular way in minority literature, where there is often an equation between socio-economic dispossession and technological disadvantage. At the same time, there is, nestled within the stories themselves, a mourning of the loss of authentic story-telling, the move

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<sup>23</sup> Letters from Mendele to Sholem Aleichem in the Beyt Shalom Aleykhem archive (LM 31).

from oral to written, and from written to mass produced and distributed. Trains in particular are associated with national unity and possibilities of racial/ethnic uplift through urbanization. How can this move be understood within the very different United States and the Russian Czarist contexts? What are the possible meanings that emerge from the descriptions – sometimes autobiographical – of movement to New York from the South? How can this compare to the description of movements to Kiev from the shtetlekh? What other mobilities are represented? Both Sholem Aleichem and Zora Neale Hurston traveled by that same train to give public readings, often re-enacting a return to the provincial homes of their childhood. Hurston, as an ethnographer, also traveled to Haiti, Hughes traveled to Africa and France, Sholem Aleichem to Western Europe and the United States, and so their body of work gives a particular opportunity for discussing the contours of diaspora, even though I focus primarily on intra-national movements.

The minority writer's relationship to the train is an ambivalent one, and therefore usefully interrogated through irony: it is as much a promise of equality and opportunity in a liberal-utopian view, invested in public spaces and integration-as-liberation. It is also a guarantee of discrimination, since the train-space is in fact segregated and recreates – indeed affirms – social inequalities. In turn, though, the segregated space of the train is to a certain degree celebrated as a minority space – problematically and exhilaratingly. The folkloristic aspect of Hughes, Hurston's, Sholem Aleichem's and Spector's art, their inscription of the oral culture of their communities, may be seen as a step towards preservation of difference at the dawn of social equality, which promises to make all equal and threatens to make all same.

The movement of a minority subject is scripted by legal and economic restrictions,

but the writers I discuss suggest an alternate choreography<sup>24</sup> in their interactions with their readers. Within this chapter there are spacio-temporal and thematic movements from Russia to the United States, the Harlem Renaissance to Classical Yiddish Renaissance, from the train as symbol of innovation to its obsolescence, from humorous representation to representation of laughter. Each of the works I discuss has its context, and creates its context as well, and so my argument is, in part, about conceptions of history, and other symbolic, artistic, aesthetic moves that the texts are making. Each author is independently treated, but there is a common thread of liberating constraint, of a diasporic modernist contortion, and so the final section will bring the authors together in order to discuss the implications of movement and time for creativity, and humorous creativity in particular. Here, “making full sense” involves being ready to achieve – within the context of suffering, dispossession, and painful dispersion – laughter (either physiologically or emotionally, as a movement of the soul or the body).

The fifth chapter deals with ironic relation to religion and the divine. The binaries of spiritual, disembodied, earnest religion, and embodied, realistic, popular humor are productive tensions which can lead to the discussion of embodied spirituality and contextualized religious hierarchies within African American and Yiddish modern literatures. To meet modernity’s demand for national difference, unity and self-sufficiency, the modern writers revise biblical narratives and satirize them – through folk-narratives, through juxtaposition of Hebrew and Yiddish – to point to contemporary injustice, highlight religious

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24 I suppose that what I mean by choreography is something similar to “social choreography” as proposed by Andrew Hewitt, who writes: “What is at stake in proposing an analysis of social choreography is a threefold determination of the modern: namely, a redefinition of modernism as an aesthetic program; a rethinking of modernization as a social process of rationalization that would not, as is generally assumed, compartmentalize and trivialize aesthetic experience; and, finally, a rethinking of the relationship of two terms – aesthetic modernity and sociopolitical modernity – that have either been taken to be irremediably at odds or assumed to be reducible to each other” (3).

tradition's value for the science of ethnography, and expand religious vocabulary to include the highly-individualized psychology (and at times pathology) of faith.<sup>25</sup> Humorous literary devices and representations invite joy into a world of suffering and oppression is at times in line with Marx's oft-quoted slogan about religion being the opiate of the masses. However, by continuing to engage with religious themes while also commenting on oppressive reality, the authors enter into a battle with the creator. The decentralization of "Man" in my readings is one of the main ways in which the patriarchal divinity is displaced. The methodology of the fifth chapter is different from the previous ones. If the second and third chapters are independently but parallelly structured, the fourth chapter suggests connection, while this chapter is a bit more bold in its hybridizing. I am flexing both generic constraints – through reading translation, ethnography, poetry, novel, (auto)biography, – as well as national/linguistic divides and periodizations, that are, in the case of African American and Classical Yiddish literatures, already stretched, complicated, since they are "already" diasporic, at times transnational, at times nationalistic. Further, in contrast with the preceding chapters, feminist politics and gender analysis emerge in a more pronounced way.

Humorous representation of oppressive reality can and should be thought of as practicing and encouraging a particular mode of thought, a particular mode of questioning and communication. The requirement of seeing at least two sides to one situation, at times opposing sides, reenacts the painful split of an in-between position of an artist, of an intellectual, who is working at pointing out the injustice from which she herself benefits. The binaristic approach, in dialectics, synthesizes into third, fourth and fifth options, indefinitely.

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25 One of the striking modern images are those of the Black and Jewish Jesus, as ethnic self-determination defined against colonial Christianity, achieved through parody.

I am proposing to put dialectical thinking on its side, as opposed to upside down, or right side up. There is no right side up. Only aside. The ritualization of the binary in the laughter through tears model is a playing up of the binary to go beyond it. Paul Gilroy noted that “[i]t has become commonplace to remark that, however noble, the idea of antiracism does not communicate any positive or affirmative notes. What, after all, are antiracists in favor of? What are we committed to and how does it connect with the necessary moment of negativity that defines our political hopes?” (*Against Race* 52). Laughter through tears as a mode helps me to negotiate the trappings of dialectical thinking effectively, since humor and irony self-interrogate and expose the limitations of any solemn as well as humorous position. The unease evoked by humorous representation of oppression is not prohibitive; rather, through its insistence on pain as well as pleasure, laughter through tears encourages exploration, frustration and delight.

## Chapter II

### Harlem, USA, 1926: Generational Divide and the Uses of the Folk in *Fire!!*

Laughter is thus merely the witness of a process which remains the privileged experience of the 'artist': a sovereignty (of the subject and of meaning, but also of history) this is simultaneously assumed and undermined.

Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 223.

No big society stuff. Just a neat little colony of kindred souls. I'm crazy to build me a house that looks something like an African king's menage. More elaborate of course"

Zora Neale Hurston in a letter to Langston Hughes.<sup>1</sup>

Consonant with less ambitious goals, the mood of these autobiographies is not shaped by pride. It springs from a search for happiness. As old moral ties are discarded new values form around the strange and exotic or the aesthetic.

Barton, *Witnesses to Freedom*, 88.

To analyze the relationship between the artist and the folk, and the central figure of laughter through tears in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, it is first necessary to elucidate what that context may be. This chapter focuses on the varied approaches the

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<sup>1</sup> In *Zora Neale Hurston* 146.

folk that were developing after WWI in African American arts and letters.<sup>2</sup> The folk's needs and contributions are articulated by African American intelligentsia in part through inter-generational strife. The new generation, of which Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are a part, is rebelling against the older generation (Locke, Du Bois) through explicitly sexualized art and caricaturesque art, within the context of post-war struggle for social and legal equality and the rise of psychoanalysis. Periodicals are a good starting point for the exploration of social literary formations in general, and for the incorporation of the discussion of the folk in particular, considering the accessibility of periodicals as opposed to books. In periodicals, as Alan Mintz observes, "readers are more vivid participants, almost as if they themselves had a place at the table [. . .] as the editors all the while are sending messages explicitly addressed to their 'dear readers'" (3).

*Fire!!* (the first and only issue published in 1926) was a publication which explicitly addressed itself to the reading public as new. Although it was not the debuting publication for Hughes and Hurston in the strictest sense,<sup>3</sup> the periodical does represent a debut of these young authors as editors and publishers of their own periodicals. Their taking on of the role of editors and publishers of *Fire!!*, along with Wallace Thurman and other young writers, suggests that they wanted to control the framing of their own work for the public, that they were not satisfied with being mere demonstrations of minority talent, as they were in *The New Negro*. These writers, as editors, were addressing

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<sup>2</sup> In Feb, 1919, the 369th Infantry – an African American troupe – returned home, to New York City, and one could witness 1,300 African American military men marching along Fifth Ave and into Harlem (Brown 163). For the influence of the war on African American letters see, for example, Claude McKay's "If we must die" (1919) and *Home to Harlem* (1928); Charles S. Johnson (*Opportunity*) was a veteran.

<sup>3</sup> Hurston, for example, is discovered by Charles S. Johnson of *Opportunity*, due to her participation in *Stylus*, a Howard University magazine (Alain Locke served as editor), and it is this interest in her work that prompts her to come to New York in Jan. 1925 (*Dust Tracks on the Road* 167-68).

multiple audiences, divided along not only racial lines, but also class lines. *Fire!!* is an important case-study because its editors socialized not only on the page. The living arrangements on 267 W 136<sup>th</sup>, dubbed “The Niggeratti Manor” are significant in the discussion of alternative sexualities, writing practices and economic arrangements. The mass produced and carefully framed periodicals seem to be the best point of entry into the conceptions of the folk, the minority folk in particular. While the role of the representation of the folk as a focal part of African American modernity and as a particular political engagement (along racial, class and gender lines in particular) has been explored in monographs by Nichols and Favor,<sup>4</sup> the relationship between the folk and a particular frivolous, humorous aesthetic was not yet given attention. The generational rhetoric is invaluable for the discussion of humorous representation, in that the “new generation” can pose itself as playful, precisely because the non-ironic demand for equality has already been made by their predecessors, “the older generation.” Du Bois, answering the criticism that the *Crisis* was bitter and depressing, replied that the periodical was not “try[ing] to be funny.”<sup>5</sup>

The editors of *Fire!!* are artists for whom the folk is a canvas, to be mounted and framed, and, most importantly, to be unwoven into its folkloric strings, only to be rewoven into artistic texts.<sup>6</sup> The folk is an inspiration and an end; the folk’s speech is to

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<sup>4</sup> I address the arguments posed by Nicholls and Favor in detail later. In the last decade studies of gender and sexuality of the Harlem Renaissance by Ross and Summers allow for a critique that takes into account the ways in which class and gender are interrelated processes.

<sup>5</sup> November 1910, quoted in Rooks 7.

<sup>6</sup> Writing to Locke in 1925, Zora Neale Hurston comments on Locke’s *New Negro* and uses the imagery of weaving to speak about artistic creativity: “But the business – our business of dream weaving that we call writing is much more interesting just at this moment and I hope the volume goes over with a bang” (in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 56).



be recorded in writing and then given or sold back.<sup>7</sup> It is a canvas to be painted on in a similar sense to the way Michelangelo thought of his marbles: the form is hidden within the natural, raw material, waiting to be revealed by the capable artist. The finished canvas is then returned to the reader: the reading folk and the reading intelligentsia. *Fire!!* announces itself as part of a new generation, a new approach to aesthetics and politics (often radically aesthetic politics); it thereby solidifies the literary tradition of African American literature, and also allows itself to be more playful and experimental, naughty.

The alternative nature of the project, the editors' explicit disappointment with the current state of mass market journalistic production, and the fact that it was short lived and its legacy difficult to determine, makes the recent theorization of "little magazines" useful.<sup>8</sup> What follows is a historical contextualization followed by a collection of close readings pursuing my questions concerning the complicated relation between the artist and the folk, while keeping an eye on the generational thread that grounds these authors in a tradition and allows for innovation. In an attempt to draw out the literary historical context through and around the periodical, I begin by situating *Fire!!* within the modernist project of little magazines and the contemporary creation of various African American anthologies. I pause to discuss the publication of *The New Negro*, situate it within the New Negro discourse in the periodicals *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and *Messenger* in particular, and in order to accentuate the contemporary views of uses and misuses of

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<sup>7</sup> This process of taking raw material to be made in to a product to be sold back is eerily reminiscent of the center-periphery relation in the colonial economy.

<sup>8</sup> While *Fire!!* has been widely pointed to as representing a certain renaissance era, or as biographical turning points for its editors and contributors, it was never explored in detail. Some studies that included a discussion of *Fire!!* are Mary Fair Burks, "A Survey of Black Literary Magazines in the United States: 1859-1940" (diss. Columbia 1975), 208-43; Walter C. Daniel, *Black Journals of the United States* (Wesport/London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 175-78. Carroll's 205 *Word, Image and the New Negro*, dedicates a chapter to the magazine.

humor, which are inevitably mediated through a give-and-take with the folk (as material and as audience). The overview of the *New Negro* anthology is necessary to understanding how Thurman, the main editor of *Fire!!*, conceived of the project. My point here is not only that the “New Negro” is a contested category, but also that there is a generational split within the movement, and that the concerns of the older generation (Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson) differ from those of the younger generation. If the former construct a New Negro as a way to contest the representation of the “Old Negro” (primarily in plantation literature), the latter is contesting the form of that contestation. Following the overview of *Fire!!* itself, I use Harold Cruse’s idea of cooperatives as a way to talk about the “Nigeratti Manor,” with the help of *Infants of the Spring*,<sup>9</sup> a roman à clef that would be participating in the discourse on literary ethics of its time.

### **Periodicals, Anthologies, Little Magazines and the New Negro**

In this section I provide an overview of scholarship on “little magazines” and on African American periodicals of the Harlem Renaissance in order to create an arsenal of critical terms useful for the discussion of *The New Negro* and *Fire!!*. Mark Morrisson, in his *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920*, while exploring English and American modernism’s “complex and fascinating interdependence with the mass market press,” argues that the little magazine project is born out of the “crisis of publicity,” which led to modernist scoff at mass publication and the masses themselves (here “the masses” should be seen as an economic-political force,

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<sup>9</sup> Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* represents this social milieu in a roman à clef, an overwhelmingly satiric genre, allows me to further explore the relationship between humor and identity-based politics.

as opposed to the “folk” that is more of an aesthetic force); at the same time, the modernists were not subscribing to the purely aesthetic, art-as-private-experience stance, and thought of art as having a public function, and so cherished the opportunity of art’s participation in the public sphere (6-7, 13). Morrison names his introduction “Mass Market Publicity – Modernism’s Crisis and Opportunity,” a strange preconscious nod to two of the most important African American periodicals in the 1920s, *Crisis* (founded in 1910) and *Opportunity* (founded in 1924), which are not mentioned in the article or the book. In *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches*, the editors Churchill and McKible also concentrate on English and American modernisms. They include two papers on African American periodicals, but these do not change the general theoretical framework of the volume; the editors define little magazines, with various reservations, as “non-commercial enterprises founded by individuals or small groups intent upon publishing the experimental works or radical opinions of untried, unpopular, or under-represented writers” (6). Essential to this framework, similar to that of Morrison, is that the little magazines “often walked a tightrope between rejecting and reforming mass audiences” (8).

In the African-American literary context, commercial value is inevitable for the literary process in a particular way. Rooks writes that while all three of the major periodicals of the time (*Crisis*, *Opportunity* and *Messenger*), “paralleled early African American newspapers by protesting conditions that negatively impacted African Americans, and by providing a wealth of political commentary, they were also almost wholly dependent on subsidies from the political organizations to which they were

connected to stay afloat financially” (Rooks 8),<sup>10</sup> and Carroll emphasizes the fact that “[t]he status of *Fire!!* as an independent publication, free of the controlling interests of an organization like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) or the NUL (National Urban League), allowed contributors to launch vicious attacks on their elders and to include controversial subject matter” (Carroll 191). Aside from these issues of patronage from interracial political organizations, dependence on white publishers and patrons of the arts was part of the reality of the Harlem Renaissance literary milieu. However, the older generation also provided the younger generation with some, however intermittent, financial support. *The Crisis* did not pay its contributors at all, but the *Messenger* did, and Thurman, when he worked for the *Messenger*, published the poetry and short fiction of McKay, Helene Johnson, Dorothy West, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston<sup>11</sup> and Langston Hughes,<sup>12</sup> promising \$10 per story.<sup>13</sup> *Crisis* and *Opportunity* also held literary contests, with \$35-100 prizes for fiction and poetry.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the explicit stance of non-commercial “art for art’s sake” that *Fire!!* takes, its

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<sup>10</sup> *The Messenger* editors would not put themselves on this list, and Randolph Owen criticizes the Old Crowd centrally because “there is no organization of national prominence which ostensibly is working in the interest of the Negro which is not dominated by the Old Crowd of white people,” and then goes on to name organizations like Du Bois in NAACP (*Crisis*) and Kinckle Jones or George E. Haynes in National Urban League (*Opportunity*): “The organizations are not responsible to Negroes because Negroes do not maintain them” (May-June 1919, 27).

<sup>11</sup> “The Eatonville Anthology,” Sept 1926: 261-62, October 1926: 297, 319, and November 1926: 332.

<sup>12</sup> “Bodies in the Moonlight,” April 1927: 105-6

<sup>13</sup> In letter to Hughes from 1926, *Collected* 105, also Johnson and Johnson 62, and Hughes’s *The Big Sea* 182.

<sup>14</sup> *Opportunity* May 1925, 142, and Oct. 1925, 291-92). The contest was first sketched in *Opportunity* Aug. 1924: 228, and outlined with more detail in Sept. 1924: 277-78, with reminders in Nov. 1924: 324 and Dec. 1924: 355. The different announcements, penned by Charles Johnson, are similar to Locke’s framing of *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro*, though Locke’s emphasis on self-expression stands in contrast to the overwhelmingly sociological approach of Johnson, who also does not shy away from emphasizing the “vogue” aspect of the interest in Harlem (“curiosity” he calls it in the December issue). The awards were celebrated on May 1 in Fifth Avenue Restaurant (*Opportunity* April 1926, p. 138).

polemics with the older generation can also be understood as a marketing technique, as a way of carving out an economic, as well as a creative, niche (the editors were hoping to be banned in Boston). It is also primarily due to financial difficulties that *Fire!!* was so short-lived. The burst of creativity is dependent upon a particular financial and legal possibility (freedom of movement, censorship).<sup>15</sup> For the young artists of the movement, it was clear that the Harlem fad would eventually pass, that there is urgency in succeeding in saying something great in those years, for later, they would not be heard.<sup>16</sup>

Churchill and McKibbler attempt to complicate the lachrymose accounts of modernization by emphasizing the *conversational* model of little magazines, in addition to the combative one, moving “toward a ‘great party’ model, one that duly recognizes the era’s sense of urgency, mechanization, and conflict but also addresses modernism’s spirit of creativity, conviviality, and playfulness” (13). The authors included in *Fire!!* socialize with other participants in the periodical, through letters and also in actual gatherings, which adds a “private face” to the publications. In an ironic twist on the image of modernist artists turning their backs on the misunderstanding mass audience, this little magazine, grounding itself in a minority literary tradition, continues to engage the masses. For Thurman, Hughes and Hurston, the “masses” is a word interchangeable

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<sup>15</sup> “The explosion of African American newspapers after the Civil War resulted from increases in African American literacy and mobility combined with a need for advocacy in the battle against segregation, disfranchisement, and lynching” (Rooks 6). However, “The first African American magazine to both last more than a decade and claim a subscription base of more than 100,000 was the *Crisis*” (Rooks 7).

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, *Infants of the Spring*: “And yet the more discerning were becoming more and more aware that nothing, or at least very little, was being done to substantiate the current fad, to make it the foundation for something truly epochal. For the time being, the Negro was more in evidence in the high places than ever before in his American career, but unless, or so it seemed to Raymond, he, Paul and others of the group who had climbed aboard the bandwagon actually began to do something worth while, there would be little chance of their being permanently established” (62).

with the folk, at times with the proletariat; it is a word designating not only a source of awe and inspiration, a necessary component of avant-garde, but also the reader, who perhaps does not understand the import of the particular work of art as would a member of the intelligentsia, but would nevertheless have an emotional connection to the material. The folk's "misunderstanding" is a very comfortable locus for the artist's declaration of independence as the "great, misunderstood genius." Further, the younger generation's hesitant and qualified participation in uplift politics suggests that they hesitated to occupy the place of the educator and enlightener of the folk, as the older generation had done. The new artists posit themselves in a vulnerable position in regard to the folk, becoming rather its students, in search of ethno-racial identification.

There have been some recent studies of African American anthologies – a genre quite similar to literary periodicals (as the publication history of the *New Negro* will show): Noliwe M. Rooks focuses on women's press in her 2004 *Ladies Pages: African American Women's Magazines and the Culture that Made Them*; Jeremy Braddock in his 2002 dissertation "The modernist collector and black modernity, 1914-1934" relates Alain Locke's *The New Negro* to other collection projects, Arthur Schomburg's in particular; and Anne Elizabeth Carroll's 2005 *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* is an overview of periodicals and collections with the focus on visual culture.<sup>17</sup> All three studies address a particular aspect

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<sup>17</sup> Rooks concentrates in particular on migration "as a context within which concerns, issues, and narrative strategies from previous eras and geographical areas interacted with and were transformed by the experience of urbanization with its attendant emphasis on consumerism" (2). Each of the nation-wide magazines she recovers addressed "African American women's hypersexuality" and "attempted to educate the migrant population about the requirements and expectations for societal acceptance in an unfamiliar urban area" (5), with the wish "to claim the mantle of ladyhood" (8), as a response to dominant narratives – in slave narratives, abolitionist publications, plantation narratives – that framed African American women as either sexual

of African American modernity, as expressed through periodicals and anthologies.

Contemporary to the publication of *The New Negro* and *Fire!!*, various collections and anthologies (dramatic, poetic, musical) were published with the explicit theme of the folk and the everyday: James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry* of 1922; his *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* of 1925 and his *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons In Verse* of 1927, Locke's *Plays of Negro Life* and Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* in 1927. What are, then, some of the meanings of the folk within the context of the Harlem Renaissance? Two studies of the folk as a Harlem Renaissance concept are important to address: J. Martin Favor's *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance* and David Nicholls's *Conjuring the Folk: Forms of Modernity in African America*. Nicholls opens by citing Langston's Hughes's autobiography *The Big Sea*, where the latter writes "the ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of a Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any" (Nicholls 1). The folk, for Nicholls, may go under the pseudonyms "common element" "ordinary Negroes" and the like. Now, of course, for Hughes and other artists of his generation, the allure of the common element is precisely that it isn't "ordinary" and common at all, but exciting and inspiring.<sup>18</sup>

The similarities between Favor's and Nicholls's projects are numerous, and both cite Houston Baker's Goethe-esque proposition that "a sign ('folk') [...] connotes a pretechnological but nonetheless vital stage of human development toward ideas of

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victims or jezebels (11). Carroll's careful study of the multi-media display of African American identity in Harlem Renaissance periodicals and anthologies paints the New Negro movement as one propelled by representation. Another, more radical, view of the New Negro, that proposed in *The Messenger*, is missing from Carroll's pages. Carroll's focus on representation and Rooks's focus on readership compliment each other well.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

CULTURE” (quoted in Nicholls 5, Favor 15). Both Favor and Nicholls see the concept of the folk as wholly intertwined with the modern conditions of migration and urbanization: “the rural folk [...] are in the process of becoming urban proletariat” (Favor 12). For Nicholls, however, the “folk” is a referent constructed within modern discourse: “[a]s millions of black Americans left agricultural settings to pursue employment in urban centers, the *folk* seemed to be an appropriate term to describe these masses of former sharecroppers and farmhands who were moving across the landscape” (Nicholls 3). As Nicholls engages vernacular theories (such as those of Gates and Baker) and postcolonial visions of modernity, “the folk” becomes more than a trope, but rather “a contested vision of collectivity” (Nicholls 4). He concludes that there is an “inadequacy of master narratives [both in vernacular criticism and the Eurocentric transition narrative] when compared with the varied locations of folk-centered cultural formations” (Nicholls 11). Similarly to Nicholls, Favor is concerned with the damaging work that the concept of the folk can bring about by equating African American identity with its sign, a perception that “has been used in the service of political and cultural oppression” (Favor 6). Favor is concerned with the privileging of the folk as authentic in African American literary studies, a privileging that creates what he terms an “antielitist elitism” (Favor 8).

Both Favor and Nicholls adapt a way that is most common when speaking of African American intellectual middle class: as mediators, as possessing some kind of duality. For Favor, Harlem Renaissance writers “negotiate the folk-bourgeoisie boundary” (14), while Nicholls claims that “many of [the artists and critics of the Harlem Renaissance] attended to the divide between elite culture and popular culture by translating across the divide” (1), by exploring the relation between “metropolitan artistic culture and its popular



referents” (Nicholls 2). This function of translation, the possibility of being dual and therefore a conduit between two cultures, becomes suspicious since it is so often and perhaps too readily attached to the black middle class and the black intelligentsia.<sup>19</sup> The translation is thus embedded in a privileged kind of mobility between class lines, which is at times invisible when geographical movement is the focus.

The concept of the “folk” as a stand-in for authenticity can be a fertile ground for essentialist theorization, which are attended to differently by contemporary scholars. Favor uses Butler’s theory of performativity, while Nicholls uses “multiple modernities” and Hazel Carby, Robin Kelley, and Diana Fuss’s critiques of vernacular criticism to liberate the concept of the folk from its essentialism.<sup>20</sup> The only shared primary text between the two studies is Toomer’s *Cane*, through which Favor discovers but one “liberating” engagement with the folk (20). Nicholl’s project in a similar vein is “to consider the alternative modernities these works entertain, while it will also draw attention to the linguistic and formal innovations these writers used to conjure up their aesthetic visions of the folk” (Nicholls 17). And indeed, in Nicholls’s critical historical and post-colonial reading, Toomer, Hurston, McKay, Henderson and Wright all have their own versions of the folk and of modernity: one glimpses in the work of these writers, respectively, a spectral folk, a resistant laborer, an anti-colonialist farmer, an

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<sup>19</sup> Reed’s reading of Du Bois’s double-consciousness in *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line* is useful here: the diagnosis of being split and divided among two consciousnesses is by no means a glorification of this condition. The hope is to heal from this condition, and in this it would seem that Hughes would agree: the conception of psychological health is not that of duality or plurality, but of wholeness.

<sup>20</sup> I tend to sympathize with such projects of de-essentialization, and at the same time I feel the need to question it; what is at stake with such liberation projects? Is anti-essentialism necessarily “liberating”? Should we see literary criticism as some kind of self-help, helping us to reassert our own post-modern identities? Is making such an anti-essentialist argument necessarily anachronistic?

individualist farmer, and finally a populist collective. The locations of Nicholls's folk are multiple (132), though one important location, Africa, is ignored. The Harlem Renaissance is a time when "back to Africa" nationalisms are seriously considered, Garveyism being but one such nationalism. The authentic folk as a "contested vision of collectivity" is native to two geographical locations in the discourse, although both *The New Negro* and *Fire!!* emphasize the rural folk, which may have something to do with practical reasons of proximity to the rural folk, the familial background of the authors, and perhaps also the political exigency to identify with a folk that is finally within the confines of a national unit. Indeed, in the writings of the "older generation," Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and Du Bois, African American folklore is the only American folklore,<sup>21</sup> at the same time as they were pointing repeatedly to Africa and African diasporic connections. The fact that the rural is privileged, however, should not mean that the African origin of authenticity should be forgotten in this context.

One of the precursors to *The New Negro* anthology is *The Book of American Negro Poetry* of 1922, edited by James Weldon Johnson. In his preface to the anthology, Johnson connects the project to the general trend to anthologize, as he opens with: "There is, perhaps, a better excuse for giving an Anthology of American Negro Poetry to the public than can be offered for many of the anthologies that have recently been issued.

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<sup>21</sup> Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, "Will America be poorer if she replace [...] her coarse and cruel wit with loving jovial good-humor?" (12), and "the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African" (11). James Weldon Johnson in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, writes that the Uncle Remus stories, spirituals, cakewalk and ragtime, are "the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products" (viii). Significantly, the distinct Americanness of cakewalking is brought about by their popularity in Europe, and by the elite: "society in this country and royalty abroad spent time in practicing the intricate steps" (viii). And as for Ragtime, "[e]verywhere it is hailed as 'American music'" (x), although this dubbing also bears the dangers of the new generation forgetting its origins, and for its economics not to include African American composers (x-xiii).

The public, generally speaking, does not know that there are American Negro poets” (vii). The anthology is also directly related to uplift politics, for “[n]o people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior” (vii). It does not seem that he is being ironic in this last statement, but it seems ironic nonetheless, considering the fact that African American literature was not born yesterday, as he himself sketches out a brief history just a few pages later.<sup>22</sup> The statement should be viewed as proscriptive, rather than descriptive, then, even though Johnson himself seems to put much weight on the literary production so as to exclude, in suspiciously naïve vein, the deep-seatedness of restrictive socioeconomic conditions: “[t]he status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of national mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions” (vii). For Johnson, the conception of art as stemming from the folk is explicit: “nothing great or enduring in music has ever sprung full-fledged from the brain of any master; the best he gives the world he gathers from the hearts of the people, and runs it through the alembic of his genius” (xiv).

And yet, the folk are indeed a part of a hierarchy; if ragtime is “smile-provoking, joy-awakening” and “has its place as well as the music which draws from us sighs and tears,” but is also a “lower form[] of art,” then spirituals have “given America not only its only folksongs, but a mass of noble music” (xv). “Folksongs,” then, cannot be “noble.” Johnson’s exclusion of socioeconomic conditions as being relevant is then slightly revised, importantly through a diasporic connection to Europeans of African descent: “why have not the millions of Negroes in the United States with all the emotional and

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<sup>22</sup> The historical sketch is made possible by Schomburg’s bibliography, stretching from Wheatley to Dunbar, and (xxiv-xxxiii), though he sees little to talk about in between the two greats. “I planned to present only verses by contemporary writers; but, perhaps, because this is the first collection of its kind, I realized the absence of a starting point and was led to provide one and to fill in with historical data what I felt to be a gap” (xxxix).

artistic endowment claimed for them produced a Dumas, or a Coleridge-Taylor, or a Pushkin? The question seems difficult, but there is an answer. The Negro in the United States is consuming all of his intellectual energy in this grueling race-struggle” (xx).<sup>23</sup> Johnson’s position seems contradictory, since, even as he is ushering in African American poets, who need this ushering due to racial prejudice, he sees this engagement with racial issues as potentially hindering the progress of African American literature. His configuration imagines difference without marginalization without oppression.<sup>24</sup> Another diasporic connection is made with “Aframerican poets of the Latin languages” (xxxviii): Cuba, Haiti, Brazil and Martinique poets are compared to Dunbar (xxxvi), and it is from among these poets, who are less marginalized in their nation-states, that Johnson believes an internationally-renowned Aframerican poet will rise. It is within this context of diasporic historization and canonization that *The New Negro* and *Fire!!* came to life, the former to continue in a similar way to Johnson, the latter to subvert his approach in some way.

### **The New Negro and the New Generation**

Doing away with “Old Negro” representations was one of the prerogatives of the older generation. Realistic representation in literature holds particular weight in minority

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<sup>23</sup> Johnson’s concern with the restrictions that non white male Christian artists face and yet the demand that these artists create art unburdened by restrictions predates Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

<sup>24</sup> This is one of the theoretical concerns which Favor addresses. He raises the very serious issue of the marketability and attractiveness of “difference,” that becomes overdetermined by conceptions of “second class” (13); the real danger is that the discourse of black authenticity may reify the very terms of the dominant racist discourse against which it does battle, “[b]y relying too heavily on a critique launched from the margins, we risk never being able to dismantle those margins without wholly erasing ourselves; in an effort of self-preservation, marginal we must remain” (Favor 9).

literary activity at this time. An African American writer does not only write to African-American literature that preceded him or her, but also to earlier representations of African Americans in the majority American literatures. Unrealistic representations often meant stereotypical representations,<sup>25</sup> demanding to be corrected by minority authors. W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, two more of the older generation of African American authors, usher in Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and Jessie Fauset in their collaborative article for the *Crisis*. Though it is primarily a review of Jean Toomer's *Cane*, the 1924 article is entitled "The Younger Literary Movement". It is suspicious of Toomer's modernist sophistication, though the review is not damning overall. Du Bois describes authors writing just a few years before as "the fathers" who outlived their purpose: "Dunbar is dead, Chesnutt is silent, and Kelly Miller is mooning after false gods while Brawley and Woodson are writing history rather than literature." Du Bois declare that Fauset's *There is Confusion* and Toomer's *Cane* "will mark an epoch," along with other poets and essayists (Langston Hughes, whose poem "Brothers" is printed on the opposite page of the article, announcing African diasporic allegiances, Countee Cullen,<sup>26</sup> Georgia Johnson,<sup>27</sup> Gwendolyn Bennet,<sup>28</sup> Claude McKay,<sup>29</sup> Walter White<sup>30</sup> and Eric Walrond<sup>31</sup>).

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<sup>25</sup> Alan Dundes dates the first use of the term "stereotype" to 1922, coined by Walter Lippmann in his book *Public Opinion* ("A Study of Ethnic Slurs: The Jew and the Polack in the United States," *Journal of American Folklore* 84 [1971], 186).

<sup>26</sup> Countee Cullen (1903-1946), most famous for his lyric poetry, published his first collection of poetry while still an undergraduate (*Color*, 1925), and went on to graduate school in Harvard; Cullen published in *Crisis* and was an assistant editor of the monthly *Opportunity* and wrote a regular column "The Dark Tower" for that magazine Dec. 1926-Sept. 1928. While he was a homosexual, sharing his homoerotic experiences and failures with Locke (Nugent *Gay Rebel* 23-24, 53-55 and Reimonenq), he was also married twice, once to Yolande, W.E.B. Du Bois's daughter. He to *Fire!!*'s poetry section which was entitled "Flame from the Dark Tower," after his poem "From the Dark Tower."

<sup>27</sup> Georgia Douglas Johnson (1877-1966) was a poet, playwright and short story writer, and an active figure in Washington D.C. (the home turf for Locke, Hughes and Nugent). Nugent mentions visiting her house that operated as a salon (3, 5). Her poetry was printed in various periodicals as well as in *The New Negro*.

One of the gaps which the new generation was expected to fill in the literary market was the explicit – yet careful – treatment of sexuality. Du Bois’ classification of Douglas Johnson among the young literary generation is interesting in that it seems to be a pattern that women authors are being added to the youthful, emerging generation in a way that conceals their previous work.<sup>32</sup> The younger generation is so new that material is being published “even as [Du Bois] writes.” Toomer is said to be “the first of our writers to hurl his pen across the very face of our sex conventionality.” The emphasis, perhaps even the expectation, that younger writers should break sexual decorum is at the same time a way to point out the general conservatism of African American attitudes towards sex.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, this kind of sex education may be too early for the readers Du Bois envisions, who will “shrink and criticize” Toomer’s frankness (161). Du Bois doubts Toomer’s authenticity, since the author is not from the South, but his connection to

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<sup>28</sup> Gwendolyn Bennett (1902-1981) was an educator and poet who, like Hurston, graduated from Columbia. Like Cullen, she was an assistant editor for *Opportunity*, and contributed the society column “The Ebony Flute” for the magazine. She was on the board of editors of *Fire!!*, and contributed the short story “Wedding Day” to the issue (25-28).

<sup>29</sup> Claude McKay (1889-1948), a Jamaican poet, arrived in the United States in 1912. His poem “If we must die” (1919) is often seen as marking the beginning of the Renaissance. He was associated with the Communist Party and spent a year in Russia in the twenties. He was bisexual, and an ease of representation of homoeroticism can be seen in his novel *Home to Harlem*. His poetry appears in *The New Negro*.

<sup>30</sup> Walter Francis White (1893-1955) published *Fire in the Flint* in 1924, an anti-lynching novel, the material for which was collected with the assistance of his blue eyes and blonde hair, which allowed him to pass for a white American. His essay on “The Paradox of Color” was published in *The New Negro*.

<sup>31</sup> Eric Walrond (1898-1966), a West Indian journalist and writer, who arrived in the United States in 1918. He worked for *Negro World*, a Marcus Garvey organ, and later for *Opportunity*.

<sup>32</sup> For an insightful analysis of gender as it relates to Harlem Renaissance politics, please see Carla Kaplan’s “‘The Oldest Human Longing’: The Erotics of Talk in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” in her *The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 99-122.

<sup>33</sup> It is difficult for me not to see Du Bois’s emphasis on the conservatism of African American sexuality as being related to cautious politics in an American environment where the fear of miscegenation and also the particular lynching in the south, which were justified by pointing to African American promiscuity.

European artistic tradition somehow makes up for it: “Toomer does not impress me as one who knows his Georgia but he does know human beings; and, from the background which he has seen slightly and heard of all his life through the lips of others, he paints things that are true, not with Dutch exactness, but rather with an impressionist sweep of color” (162). Du Bois emphasizes the importance of oral tradition by stating that while Toomer does not have much personal experience with the South, he can still write about it because he heard about it all his life; Toomer’s own travels through Georgia in the company of Waldo Frank (a Jewish American writer who also wrote a novel based on their journey the same year as Toomer, entitled *Holiday*) would not have sufficed. Toomer makes his art a puzzle, which is, for Du Bois, a sign of immaturity, since it “unduly irritate[s]” the reader (162).

Du Bois turns to Locke in mid-article, so that the latter may review Fauset’s *There is Confusion*. Significantly, Locke speaks only of the “Negro intelligentsia” as the potential readers of Fauset’s novel. The book will be satisfactory to these readers because it represents a “cross section of the race life higher up the social pyramid and further from the base-line of the peasant and the soil than is usually taken” in representing the “peasant type and his urban analogue, the Negro of the slums” (162) – the phrase “usually taken” is surely a reference to those older generations, who were publishing dialect verse and poetry, under the pressure of white publishers (this is the weight of caricature previously mentioned).<sup>34</sup> The intelligentsia reader is a middle class reader who

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<sup>34</sup> Wintz and Finkelman quote Cullen as “wishfully announc[ing] that ‘the day of dialect as far as Negro poets are concerned is in the decline’” (728). Those that used dialect in their poetry during the Renaissance, Wintz and Finkelman argue, did so through consciously “refreshing” Dunbar’s approach, by using jazz and blues models (728). JamesWeldon Johnson appreciates Dunbar’s dialect poetry, on which his fame rests, but he also emphasizes the fact that these do not “constitute the whole or even the bulk of Dunbar’s work” (xxxiv). Reminiscing on his personal

can support the enterprise of literature. While Fauset is praised for her genealogical approach to the novel, depicting four generations to the extent possible, the text is also somehow “too contemporary [. . .] to be a period novel, a resurrection of the past” (163). If Toomer is a bit too complex, then Fauset, with her historical tinge, is doing it just right, from “the heights of respectability and from at least a plateau of culture” (163). She strides a fine line by escaping the two evils of “either a raw and brutal cross-sectioning or medicated and unpalatable propaganda” (163). After turning to Locke to discuss Fauset’s novel, Du Bois comes back to instruct, in a grandfatherly fashion: “These, then, are the two books of the younger Negro Movement; read them and enjoy them as I have done and spread the glad tidings” (163). Instructive and imperative is the voice of this patriarch.

Grandfatherly as Du Bois may be, the voice of the younger African American literary generation is irreverent in its address of the older generation. Locke, however, arises as a solitary figure that stands as the only example of the old generation that may still be useful for the new. Locke reviewed *Fire!!* for the *Survey Graphic*, but Du Bois never reviewed it, and the fact that Langston Hughes claims that “Dr. Du Bois in the Crisis roasted it” in his *The Big Sea* emphasizes the combatant spirit of the new generation (184).<sup>35</sup> Wallace Thurman’s *Aunt Hagar’s Children*,<sup>36</sup> written two years after

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friendship with Dunbar, Johnson writes “Often he said to me: ‘I’ve got to write dialect poetry; it’s the only way I can get them to listen to me’” (xxxiv).

<sup>35</sup> Perhaps Du Bois did not review *Fire!!* because only a month before the issue came out, he published his famous address to the NAACP, “Criteria of Negro Art,” in *Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290-97 (In Ferguson, 160-169). In a Platonic move, Du Bois demands: “What has Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness – with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? [. . .] That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable” (163). The address is enlightening in its exploration of the tension of canon-formation and the responsibility of the public, the audience (167, 169).



*Fire!!*, though never published at the time,<sup>37</sup> is an example of an orchestrated effort to position the generational divide. Thurman argues for a Nietzschean - egoistic, rather than self-sacrificing - approach to art and racial uplift, and opens with qualifying the book as being “essentially a youthful book, being the record of a young Negro, who belongs to a new generation which is just beginning to speak for itself [. . .] He has no panaceas to offer, no sure-fire theories for the solution of the race problem” (*Collected* 234). Nonetheless, the Negro artist envisioned by Thurman writes about Negro life, sympathizing with “the condition of the peasant Negro in the South,” and so writing itself is a project that is connected with self-discovery: “It would be his religious duty to ferret deeply into himself – deeply into his race, isolating the elements of universality, probing, peering, stripping all in the interests of garnering literary material to be presented truthfully, fearlessly, uncompromisingly” (239-40). In short, the “New Negro” as an author is also a work in progress, writing her/himself through identification with the folk that is also his/her subject.

Thurman calls *Fire!!* an experiment that was

not interested in sociological problems and propaganda. It was purely

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Representations of African American life have been attractive to white and black artists, he asserts, because of the particular freedom of representation that the subject allows; new African American artists are seen as struggling against sex conservatism, religiosity and fear of non-flattering representation because of the prevalence of stereotypical representation (168). Du Bois sets up the importance of truth and goodness for a success in the art work. And then, echoing Hughes’s “freedom” (see Conclusion), he states: “The apostle of Beauty thus becomes the apostle of Truth and Right not by choice but by inner and outer compulsion. Free he is but his freedom is ever bounded by Truth and Justice” (167). He concludes, famously, that “all Art is propaganda and forever must be, despite the wailing of the purists” (167). Locke’s stance is often seen as more liberal towards the new artists than that of Du Bois, espousing “art for art’s sake.”

<sup>36</sup> Hagar is a Biblical character; she was Sara’s slave who, due to Sara’s infertility, bore Ishmael from Abraham. Hagar and her son are exiled from the family at Sara’s instigation, after the latter miraculously gives birth to Isaac to be Abraham’s legitimate heir. Aunt Hagar Williams is the heroine of Langston Hughes’s 1930 novel, *Not Without Laughter*.

<sup>37</sup> It was only published as part of *The Collected Writing* in 2003, 229-288.

artistic in intent and conception. Hoping to introduce a truly Negroid note into American literature, its contributors went to the proletariat rather than to the bourgeoisie for characters and material, had gone to people who still retained some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin (in *Collected* 242).<sup>38</sup>

Of the older generation, wherein fall Locke, Du Bois, Chesnutt, Dunbar and Fauset, only Locke meets with Thurman's approval, and *The New Negro*, while it "treat[s] the Negro as a sociological problem rather than as a human being," is said to contain "an echo of a different tune" (245). Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson are "two Negroes of an older generation who are remarkable because they alone profess to understand and to aid in anyway possible those in revolt. The usual Negro of prominence has no time to waste on young upstarts"<sup>39</sup> (in *Collected* 251). He quickly goes on to qualify his appreciation of Locke, in another instance of the prioritizing of the emotional over the rational, stating that "Dr. Locke does not always understand, but he always sympathizes" (252). It is Locke and Johnson, and only them, whose activities are "preventing the younger Negro from becoming blindly bitter toward the entire older generation of living Negro leaders" (252). For Richard Bruce Nugent, even Locke is not a proper leader in any but the titular

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<sup>38</sup> Arthur was the younger half-brother of Jessie Fauset, active Philadelphia, published in *Black Opals*, *Crisis*, and *Opportunity* (winning a prize); his essay "American Negro Folk Literature" is included in *The New Negro*. He wrote his dissertation on religious cults in Pennsylvania, and then published a book, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (1942) (Lois Brown). Arthur H. Fauset is one of the patrons of *Fire!!*.

<sup>39</sup> "Young upstart" is what Du Bois called Thurman at some point. In a 1925 letter to Locke, Hurston also identifies Locke and Johnson as her two benefactors (in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 56-57). In a letter to Locke dated 11 Oct. 1927, Hurston, realizing that *Fire!!* "has gone to ashes quite, but I still think the idea is good. We need better management that's all," she suggests that Locke is the best now, since "work in Philosophy is less confining" than the editorial and pedagogical work of Du Bois and Johnson, to be the apex of a "triangle Locke-Hughes-Hurston" (in *Zora Neale Hurston* 109-10). This venture never materializes, and the next hope is again Thurman, with *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, to which Hurston does not contribute, though she expresses willingness (in a letter to Hughes dated 22 Nov. 1922, in *Zora Neale Hurston*).

sense (Nugent 5).<sup>40</sup>

The genealogic representation of minority literature establishes the older generation as being stable, and thus a target of destabilization. Authors separated from each other in age by about a generation, and who continue to create coterminously, appear here as forming two sides of an arch of a long tradition. The newly-established tradition also allows for a thrust towards new artistic projects and experimentation. I would like now to turn to the experimental periodical itself. *Fire!!* is posited by its editors as an alternative to former and contemporary African American periodicals. In this section I analyze the packaging of the issue by its editors, highlighting their dissatisfaction with other forums and explicitly marking their project as new, and enriching of the spirit of the folk, and therefore more suitable for a contemporary audience. This separation from the older generation needs to be made through comparison with *The New Negro*, the publication of the older generation.

### **Framing the *New Negro***

The first iteration of *The New Negro* was as a special issue of the *Graphic Survey* in March 1925. *The Survey* was a long-running, Pennsylvania-based social work periodical, edited by Paul Kellogg. Impressed by the talent exhibited at the Civics Club Dinner, called “The Debut of the Younger School of Negro Writers,”<sup>41</sup> Kellogg wished to finance

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<sup>40</sup> Perhaps this is a sign of his grudge towards Locke, who asked Nugent for a drawing to be included in *The New Negro*, and then desired a story to go with it, only to print the story and not the drawing, an experience which Nugent cites as being “very traumatic” (3; he was also “traumatized” by Locke when the “professor of philosophy and a person old enough to be [his] father [lay] on a bed in their shorts and sa[id] ‘Do anything you want’” [23]). Interestingly, Nugent puts Hughes, whom he met in Washington at the head of the group, even though the latter was his age, perhaps because “he had had adventures all over the world” (5).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson and Johnson 53, *Opportunity* May 1924, 143-45.

a special issue of the “New Negro,” and approached Charles Johnson, the editor of the National Urban League’s organ *Opportunity*, one of the two most prominent African American periodicals at the time, along with the *Crisis*<sup>42</sup> and *The Messenger*.<sup>43</sup> The dinner was hosted by Johnson, and Locke was the master of ceremonies and in turn introduced Du Bois as a representative of the old school, and the latter “complied with remarks about the pioneering nature of earlier black literature” (Johnson and Johnson 53, citing *Opportunity* 2, May 1924: 143-44). Charles Johnson chose Alain Locke to be the editor of the *Survey* special issue, to be entitled *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro*, because of his reputation as a spokesman of innovation when it came to African American expression.<sup>44</sup> Locke continuously published in *The Survey* as a critic of African and African diasporic (African-American in particular) art and literature (he was to write a review of *Fire!!* in the Aug. 15-Sept. 15, 1927 issue). Containing essays on the political and historical condition of African Americans, as well as reflections on inter-racial relations in America, *Harlem* was meant, explicitly, to showcase African American talent in visual art, literature, and criticism. Published only a few months after the special issue, *The New Negro* dropped many of the inter-racial relations articles and expanded the

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<sup>42</sup> An organ of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Indeed, Johnson and Johnson cite Du Bois claims that it was *Crisis* that has prompted the suggestion for a special issue (70, citing *Crisis* 31 (Jan 1926), 141. *The Graphic Survey* inspired other special issues in other magazines, such as the October 1926 *Palms*, specially edited by Countee Cullen, and *Carolina Magazine* in May 1927, May 1928 and April 1929 (Johnson and Johnson 73-74). Thurman applied for an interview there (a letter to Du Bois from March 8, 1926, in *Collected* 163)

<sup>43</sup> A Socialist magazine (for which Thurman worked beginning in Dec. 1925, his sway launching the literary phase of the magazine).

<sup>44</sup> Silberman “‘Youse Awful Queer, Chappie’: Reading Black Queer Vernacular in Black Literatures of the Americas, 1903-1967” (2005), 136-147. Hurston, in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*, identifies Johnson’s approaching her, and other “new writers and new material,” “was the root of the so-called Negro Renaissance. It was his work, and only his hush-mouth nature has caused it to be attributed to many others.” Indeed, she emphasizes that *The New Negro* was a collection that would not be possible without Johnson’s editorship for *Stylus* (168).

literary sections (now divided into poetry, fiction, drama, and music), dedicating the volume “to the younger generation.” The literary pieces of the volume, and “the especially cultural recognition they win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships” (15). The minority artist thus has responsibility to the race, to racial uplift. The volume was to not only bear witness to artistic achievement, but also to enrich the soul of the reading folk. It is an anthology proper, containing quite a few previously published pieces.

The first few pages of the special issue of *The Survey Graphic*, Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro, make clear its positionality. Immediately following the General Electric advertisement on the first page, appear statements from the National Urban League (under the auspices of which Johnson’s *Opportunity* is published) and the *Crisis* (the organ of the NAACP edited by Du Bois). The front matter also includes an “Analytic Index to this Issue,” which frames the special issue within the continuity of the *Survey Graphic* as a social work periodical: the index breaks down the articles into such categories as “Child Welfare,” “Family Welfare,” “Town Planning,” “Social Invention in Industry,” etc. Alain Locke then introduces the number with two pieces: “Harlem” and “Enter the New Negro.” The first piece opens with enthusiastic statements, comparing Harlem to the Statue of Liberty, and dubbing it a representation of a “folk-movement” comparable only to those of the extension of the Western frontier or the waves of immigration in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (629). This means that Harlem symbolizes, within American history (and the American contextualization cannot be overemphasized), the most significant innovation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Locke describes

Harlem as a multi-layered space: it is simply an African American space, underneath it is the space of “racy music and racier dancing,” and deeper still is “the Harlem of the newspapers” and political intrigue. Most importantly, however, the movement to Harlem is to be understood in the context of a national awakening: “Europe seething in a dozen centers with emergent nationalities, Palestine full of a renascent Judaism – these are no more alive with the spirit of a racial awakening than Harlem; culturally and spiritually it focuses a people. Negro life is not only founding new centers, but finding a new soul” (629).

The demand for social equality is loud and clear in Locke’s introduction: “a mass movement toward the larger and more democratic chance [. . .] from medieaval America to modern” (630). Harlem’s status as a race capital is drawn from the variety of African diasporic subjects it contains; although brought together because of segregation, it “becomes more and more, as its elements mix and react, the laboratory of a great race-welding” (630). Harlem is, finally, the place of opportunity, a statue of liberty for the African diaspora indeed, a place where a peasant “must and does survive a jump of two generations in social economy and of a century and more in civilization” (630). The opportunity is not only for the rural immigrants, however, but also for the educated New Negro, “who finds himself in their [the masses’s] midst, in a situation concentrating the racial side of his experience and heightening his race-consciousness” (630). The masses here represent an easy locus for identity formation, for self-discovery. In words that will later be used by Richard Wright to announce the end of the Harlem Renaissance

aesthetic,<sup>45</sup> Locke proclaims that “In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following” (630). While the radicalized vocabulary of “rank and file” slips into his vocabulary, its tone is not sustained. For Locke this progress needs to be seen as one that would make the “racial leaders of twenty years ago” proud (630).

In “Enter the New Negro,” Locke points to the rediscovery of spirituals as the beginning of current race consciousness: “Recall how suddenly the Negro spirituals revealed themselves; suppressed for generations under the stereotypes of Wesleyan hymn harmony, secretive, half-ashamed, until the courage of being natural brought them out – and behold, there was folk-music” (631).<sup>46</sup> Imitation in the arts stems from the sense of inferiority, and only through spirituals does one get to tap into the authentic folk. The masses moving to Harlem as well as the New Negro, the intellectual, both “hurdle several generations of experience at a leap” (631). Locke is careful to position the African American community as “radical on race matters, conservative on others” (633), rephrased as “radical in tone, but not in purpose” in *The New Negro* (11). In other words, it is only in the stagnant democracy of America that African American demand for equality can be considered radical. “Harlem [. . .] is the home of the Negro’s ‘Zionism’ [. . .] As with the Jew, persecution is making the Negro international” (633). The mentioning of Jews as a persecuted minority in the context of the 1920s points to a shared socialist vocabulary, although it is again subdued. Locke’s showcasing of persecution is explicitly different from the way the scars of ex-slaves would be displayed in the “sentimental” era Locke claims has passed; it is emphatically rhetorical rather than

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<sup>45</sup> “Blueprint for Negro Writing”, published in March 1937 in the second and last issue of *New Challenge*, 53-65, reprinted in *The Harlem Renaissance: A Brief History with Documents*, 172-77.

<sup>46</sup> See chapter five of this dissertation for Hurston’s quite different interpretation of contemporary spirituals.

corporeal.

Art, for Locke, is both folkish and old, and intellectual and new: on the one hand, one needs to uncover “the gift of [Negro] folk-temperament [. . .] a leaven of humor, sentiment, imagination and tropic nonchalance has gone into the making of the South from a humble, unacknowledged source” (634). And, on the other hand, art is somehow still new, a matter of the new generation: “the present generation will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress” (634).<sup>47</sup> And so it seems that the project of

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<sup>47</sup> In 1920, the A.N. Jenkins publishing company in Washington published a combined volume of the *National Capital Code of Etiquette* by Edward S. Green and *Short Stories for Colored People Both Old and Young* by Rev. Dr. Silas X. Floyd (copyrighted 1905). Both volumes are illustrated with photographs and sketches. *The Code of Etiquette* was an example of the “pull yourself by the bootstraps” mentality, “the teachings of this book will go far towards assuring success both socially and financially” (9). The book then outlines propriety in a variety of areas, including dress, conversation, and letter writing. In the “Balls-Dances-Parties” section, the author expects a howl of protest from many young people” who “want a drum! In fact, they demand it! Just at present, the Jazz Mad crowds crave the volume, syncopation and vibration that nothing else will supply. Even when only three musicians comprise the orchestra, the present strenuous and unnatural dances, abounding in abnormal contortions of the anatomy, such as the ‘Shimmy,’ ‘Bunny Hug,’ Boston Rag,’ etc., etc., really require this awful travesty on music. Just fancy – a combination of Violin, Piano and Drum! Imagination compels us to see Strauss, the Waltz King, turning uneasily in his grave at the idea. The author has seen these spasmodic revolutions of the dancing public come and go for many years, but the custom invariably returns to the dreamy waltz (76-77).

While the book is meant to be about performing a certain way in social situations, it also contains a chapter on “Etiquette in the home,” without which one is but “a polished exterior covering selfishness, hypocrisy and general rottenness at the core” (130). In a way, then, the book strives to create a particular kind of soul, a proper subject internally and externally. This becomes even clearer when seen in combination with the collection of short stories by Floyd (some previously published in *Lippincott’s, Voice of the Negro*), who promises the quality of his book by first explaining that “It is an old saying that ‘evil communications corrupt good manners,’ but evil reading does more than this: fro evil reading corrupts good morals” (6). The book includes many instructive tales, including two on “The Loud Girl” and “The Rowdy Boy.” There is also a piece on “The Bad Boy – Who He Is” in which the Reverend is careful to distinguish between the bad boy – a criminal – and the mischievous boy, who is full of life. Without mischief, the boy may grow up to be a “‘male woman.’ I mean by that, that he grows up to be a man who acts like a woman; and that kind of man is hardly fit for anything” (190); in “The Unseen Charmer” (262-65), a man is infatuated with a young man’s voice, thinking the latter is a woman. In another tale, “The Strenuous Life,” Floyd instructs children to “lean to rough it a little [. . .] Hard words and hard fortune often make us – if we don’t let them break us” (72). In a short piece of historical



uncovering and the project of development are connected through art. If the folk provides inspiration and the comfort of identification for a generation of artists and intellectuals, the latter are expected to repay by contributing to racial uplift.

The special issue of the *Survey Graphic* and *The New Negro* bear multiple similarities. The cover of the *Survey Graphic* special issue shows a portrait of the tenor Roland Hayes, who consistently incorporated spirituals into his recitals, and was the first African American to give a recital at Carnegie Hall a year earlier, in 1924; *The New Negro* opens with a quotation from a spiritual (“O, rise, shine for Thy Light is a’ coming” with annotation) and a dedication to the “younger generation.” The contents of the two publications are similar, but the emphasis in the latter publication is on artistic endeavors of the new generation, divided into Fiction, Poetry, Drama, and Music (57-

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narration on Frederick Douglass (there are other stories which feature different African American important personalities big and small like Benjamin Banneker, Thomas Greene Bethune, Bragg Smith), the meritocratic ideal is perhaps most clear: “Now this man, born so lowly and surrounded by such circumstances, turned out to be in the course of time by hard work and self-application one of the most influential American citizens and one of the greatest orators that this country has ever known” (126) and “What Frederick Douglass made of himself is possible for any American boy with grit” (127). This last idea is clearly rebelled against by Du Bois’s 1926 “Criteria of Negro Art.” Floyd also publishes Douglass’s address to the young people of Atlanta University (270-73), where he emphasizes that “we got freed by laws” but also that “only as we rise in the scale of proficiency do we encounter opposition” (272). There is also a meditative piece, disturbing to a certain extent to my argument on aesthetic education, entitled “The Poetry of Life,” where poetry is a quality of life that a proper subject assumes, for “Without poetry, life is a tread-mill; a veil of tears; a dreary waste. Even religion is only a crucifixion – a death to sin – if we have not the resurrection into the new life of joy” (249). Considering the fact that the book of short stories was copyrighted fifteen years before its publication, this publication is also a testimony to the difficulty of publishing African American literature in America. It is only with a particular social message that the literature may be acceptable. The penultimate story is entitled “The Future of the Negro,” where the Reverend declares “I believe that the less you think about the troubles of the race and the less you talk about them and the more time you spend in hard and honest work, believing in God and trusting him for the future, the better it will be for all concerned” (275).

The two-book volume was advertised in the *Crisis* throughout the early 1920s. In mid-twenties, the *Messenger*, edited by A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen was increasingly showcasing the lives of African American business entrepreneurs, generally men, and also featured a series of pieces under the title “Exalting Negro Womanhood” (for example in April 1924, 114-15). In line with magazine practices of the time, the *Messenger* continually featured women’s portraits on the cover.

227). While in the *Survey Graphic* special issue the newer literary pieces and the more general, critical pieces on African diasporic artistic tradition are grouped together under the section of “The Negro Expresses Himself,” in *The New Negro*, these sections are separated, each having their own introduction: “Negro Youth Speaks” by Locke and “The Negro Digs up His Past” by Arthur A. Schomburg.<sup>48</sup> Further, the special issue dedicates a section to “Black and White – Studies in Race Contacts”; this section is absent from *The New Negro*.<sup>49</sup>

The “Foreword” (ix-xi) and “Negro Youth Speaks” (47-53) in *The New Negro*, is Locke’s reworking of the “Harlem” and “Enter the New Negro” pieces which opened the *Survey Graphic* special issue. Here, however, he is quick to speak of the “folk-spirit,” with the “social change and progress” taking the back seat (ix). *The New Negro* promises to deliver material “of” rather than “about the Negro,” a “self-portraiture” (ix, emphasis in the original). “So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself” (ix). The “Foreword” opens up the discourse of space beyond Harlem, and so the emerging European and Jewish nationalisms are compared to the diasporic “quickeners of the lives of black folk,” rather than to Harlem alone; “we are now presenting the New Negro in a national and even international scope” (x). Similarly to the

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<sup>48</sup> Arthur Schomburg (1874-1938), lawyer and cofounder of the Negro Society for Historical Research; in 1925 he sold his Africana and Aframerican book collection to the New York Public Library, forming the basis of what would become the Schomburg collection in 1932.

<sup>49</sup> The *Messenger* ran an editorial comment on *The Survey Graphic* in April 1925, which praised the interracial cooperation that characterized the special issue: “At least a larger section of serious minded white America is brought to view the Negro problem from the point of view of black and white thinkers. That they should vary in conclusion and presentation is to be expected. It is also to be expected that Negroes will condemn that which they deem as adverse criticism through the adverse criticism be sound. This is true of all races and peoples [. . .] Contrary to a number of Negroes we don’t consider the Harlem issue of Survey Graphic as hostile criticism. Much of it is flattering; some of it is quite indifferent” (156). The *New Negro* was also reviewed by Robert W. Bagnall in *Opportunity* Feb 1926, p. 74. After asserting that the main fault with the book was Locke’s ubiquitous presence, Bagnall finishes the review with announcing the book’s successful portrayal of “the resurgence of a race to a rich and high culture.”

rhetorical move in the “Enter the New Negro” piece of the *Survey Graphic*, Locke is connecting America’s search for a modern national definition with that of the African American: “America seeking a new spiritual expansion and artistic maturity, trying to found an American literature, a national art, and national music implies a Negro-American culture seeking the same satisfaction and objective” (x). This statement is enigmatic; its parallel structure allows for the disturbing “separate but equal” reading. The location of African American culture within America is ambiguous, but it must be seen in the context of American minority politics and African diasporic connections mentioned above. Further, Locke may indeed be cautious on particular points, using his talent as a MC, and yet, the coming of age is clearly not only that of the African American community, but of America writ major: America, in its “cultural adolescence and the approach to maturity” cannot continue to marginalize African American cultural expression as exotic.<sup>50</sup> The addition which African American literature brings to American literature is necessarily, then, an international one, perhaps cosmopolitan, allowing access to a larger world which white America cannot claim for itself. White America may or may not come along; it is African America, with its diasporic connections, which is rising. He does not overstep the line in a way that may be perceived as too radical in Jim Crowe America. If the next move is indeed integration into American literature, as Locke emphasizes, and the times of “race literature” and “race journalism” are a thing to be overcome, then how should one see his own project? Should it be seen as a transitional volume?

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<sup>50</sup> In an interesting parallel of showcasing modernity, Thurman writes on 1929: “And those American Negroes who would not appreciate the spirituals until white critics sang their praises have their counterpart in the American whites who would not appreciate Poe and Whitman until European critics classified them among the immortals” (in *Collected* 243).

### **épater le bourgeois: Framing *Fire!!***

Throughout “The New Negro,” there seems to be a tension between the celebration of “self-expression” and the desire to be “known” and “understood” (in particular 8-11). Perhaps the tension points to the simple truth that reception and expression hold equal weight in the literary game. Locke demands realism; non-realism means stereotypical representation of “Uncle Tom and Sambo.” Locke’s tone is generally exalted, perhaps too optimistic, ushering a new era when these stereotypes no longer matter, can no longer fool their audiences; and yet, it is not clear whether these audiences are indeed ready for “facing the facts” (631). His hopefulness stems, in part, from the existence of “class differentiation” which should make it impossible to treat African Americans “en masse” (631).

The dynamics between Johnson and Locke’s *The New Negro* and *Fire!!: A Quarterly Devoted to the Younger Negro Artists* – edited by a group of young writers: Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce Nugent, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas and John Davis<sup>51</sup> – is that of generational strife. The

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<sup>51</sup> Even though all those young writers were all listed on the board of editors, it seems that Thurman was most involved, both financially (some of the members of the editorial board were failing to come up with their \$50 contributions) and time-wise, and in the final stretch, he had to “correct the whole damn thing [. . .] alone. Zora had a date. Jeanette was in South Norwalk. Bunnie could not be found. Neither could Bruce. Aaron eluded me. Hence I toiled until I am about ready to scream all sorts of *Fire!!* calls [. . .] God damn *Fire!!* and all the editors” (letter to Hughes, quoted in *Collected* 107-8). After the issue was published, Thurman is, in his own words, “growing resentful, and wondering why I should have shouldered the full responsibility of this finance business. I am so tired of people hounding me for money and holding me responsible that I would like to slink off into some far corner and commit hari-kari” (letter to Hughes in *Collected* 111). When he somewhat recovered, he agreed to edit the magazine *Harlem* in 1928, with someone else worrying about the financial end. He elucidates this point in a letter to Alain Locke dated 3 Oct 1928, among others (in *Collected* 166-67). This is not the only difference from *Fire!!*; in the same letter, Thurman describes *Harlem* as “a general magazine, containing verse, fiction, essays, articles on current events and debates on racial and non racial issues. We are not confining

former publication was explicitly championing the creativity of the new artists, instructing them to connect with the folk, and indeed included some of their creations, but also maintained an outdated ideology in terms of the role of the writer as enlightener. Reminiscing in 1940 on the choice of the title, Hughes writes that the group wanted the periodical to

burn up a lot of the old, dead conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing, the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and the *Messenger* – the first two being house organs of inter-racial organizations, and the latter being God knows what (*The Big Sea* 183).

Wallace Thurman would autograph copies “flamingly, Wallace Thurman” (Johnson and Johnson 218, n. 40),<sup>52</sup> which may point to the queer connotations of “flaming,” though Thurman, unlike his roommate Richard Bruce Nugent, was not openly gay (Nugent 50-51). In either case, the choice of title is bold and may even be seen as jarring, considering the violence that it implies. It is also possible to see the title not as a threatening growl, but as a vulnerable cry “Fire!!,” a cry that is meant to notify the surroundings of a tragedy that is occurring already.

If *The New Negro* was innovative for show (being dedicated to the new generation, all the while serving the old),<sup>53</sup> then *Fire!!* seems to be an attempt to fully break away from the old way in that bourgeois aspirations are mocked. The project of

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ourselves to any group either of age or race. I think that is best. *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* are dead. *Opportunity* is dying. Voila here comes *Harlem*, independent, fearless and general, trying to appeal to all” (166).

<sup>52</sup> Thurman also signed a letter to Hughes, right about the time *Fire!!* was being printed, “Flaming, Wallie” (*Collected*, 107).

<sup>53</sup> See also Henry who sees this as a sign of Locke’s in-betweenness in terms of generations (41).

introducing the folk to poetry presents some kind of spiritual connection between the folk and the artist, where the latter both scripts and embodies the former.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the editors of *Fire!!*, the statement is bold and explicit; there is no attempt to cater to the “old” in any way but the ironic. The “Foreword” to *Fire!!*’s first and only issue is puzzling to say the least. I present it here in full:

## *Foreword*

***FIRE . . . flaming, burning, searing, and penetrating far beneath the superficial items of the flesh to boil the sluggish blood.***

***FIRE . . . a cry of conquest in the night, warning those who sleep and revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing.***

***FIRE . . . melting steel and iron bars, poking livid tongues between stone apertures and burning wooden opposition with a cackling chuckle of contempt.***

***FIRE . . . weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned . . . the flesh is sweet and real . . . the soul an inward flush of fire . . . Beauty? . . . flesh on fire -- on fire in the furnace of life blazing . . .***

“Fy-ah,

Fy-ah, Lawd,

Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul!”

The “Foreword” seems to borrow freely from the folk idiom, the folk saying, the folk dialect, signing off with the gospel: “fy-ah, Lawd!,” while giving back poetry: rhythmic

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<sup>54</sup> More on this in the third chapter.

(repetition and multiplicity of verbs: “flaming, burning, searing, and penetrating,” alliteration “cackling chuckle of contempt,” etc.) and sophisticated (“superficial,” “pagan thirst”). But what does it mean? Who is the audience that is meant to understand this? The inherently elitist sophistication of poetry is complicated by its relationship to the sound of real speech. “Fy-ah,” “Lawd,” “ma,” for example, cannot be contained in the standard orthography of “fire,” “Lord,” and “my.”

Michael North’s *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Twentieth-Century Literature* puts white and African American modernisms side by side and places them within the colonial discourse. The difference is one of mirror reversal here: if for white writers it was a sign of rebellion to write in dialect, then for the African American new generation writers it was a sign of rebellion not to write in dialect. James Weldon Johnson, in his preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, when he finally begins to speak about the contemporary poets, notes that the tendency not to use dialect in poetry “will, no doubt, be regretted by the majority of white readers” (xxxix). The poets, he claims, whether consciously or unconsciously, “are trying to break away from, not Negro dialect itself, but the limitations on Negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention” (xl). “When [the Negro] is thought of artistically, it is as a happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking being or as a more or less pathetic figure,” and so dialect “is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos” (xl). “He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor” (l). At some point, Johnson envisions, “the colored poet in the United States may sit down to write in dialect without feeling that his first line will put the general reader in a frame of mind which demands that the poem be humorous or pathetic” (l). On the question of

stereotypical representations, Thurman, in *Aunt Hagar's Children*, scoffs at the old guard's anxiety over Hughes's poetry as expressing "joy and pathos." He shows the limitations of such a (mis)reading in terms of bourgeois assimilationism:

this is just the part of their life which experience has taught them should be kept in the background if they would exist comfortably in these United States. It makes no difference if this element of their life is of incontestable value to the sincere artist. It is also available and of incontestable value to insincere artists and prejudiced white critics" (in *Collected* 244).

While Thurman admits the potential dangers of representation, his priority remains the sincere artist, who is being unjustly collectively punished by the middle class. The sincerity of the artist is unverifiable, since Thurman does not provide his readers with any tools of verification.

The question of audience is more complicated by the page which thanks the patrons of the current issue, and makes "some appeal" for further contributions:

Being a non-commercial product interested only in the arts, it is necessary that we make some appeal for aid from interested friends. For the second issue of *Firz* we would appreciate having fifty people subscribe ten dollars each, and fifty more to subscribe five dollars each.

We make no eloquent or rhetorical plea. *Firz* speaks for itself.

Gratefully,

THE BOARD OF EDITORS

The finances of *Fire!!* fail perhaps because there are no advertisements at all, and even though Thurman was scrambling to solicit some advertisement from publishing houses,



the end result was that everything was done on loan (letter to Hughes, quoted in *Collected* 108-9).<sup>55</sup> There is a certain formality and informality about this “some appeal,” I suppose in the spirit of not being “eloquent” or “rhetorical”; the appeal ends, however, with a strong rhetorical, if not eloquent, flourish, “*Fire* speaks for itself.” At the same time, it is asking for “aid from interested friends.” What friends are those? To what kind of friend would one write a note signed “The Board of Editors”? The bluntness of the appeal, instructing exactly as to the amount of support necessary, is quite bold. This kind of bluntness is an ironic take on the lack of such explicit appeal in *The New Negro*. In fact, Locke is not listed among the patrons of *Fire!!*. The Board of Editors seems to be asking Locke, Johnson, and other established African Americans who supported that volume that was dedicated to the new generation, to put their money where their mouth is, to turn “dedication” to “devotion.”

What is the project that is being financed, then? What does *Fire!!* speak, when it speaks for itself? What can “Fire” mean? The first three stanzas of the foreword are intimidating, destructive, exhilarating; the fire penetrates through skin, to “boil the sluggish blood,” “revitalizing those who linger in the quiet places dozing.” Again, it is not clear whether *Fire!!* is here a necessarily violent wake up call,<sup>56</sup> or whether it is a call for a recognition of what is already there, the burning of bodies and buildings (everything but stone is burned, in the third stanza). In a letter to Hughes (*Collected* 107), Thurman

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<sup>55</sup> It seems that Locke suspected that “Wallace Thurman was not being ethical about the money” (in Hurston’s letter to Locke, dated 15 June 1928, in *Zora Neale Hurston* 120; also 136). Hughes in *The Big Sea*, states that the printing cost almost a thousand dollars, because “it had to be on good paper” and “it had to have beautiful type, worthy of the first Negro art quarterly” (184). Nugent, who was responsible for distribution, being unemployed, pocketed any income from sales, and the financial troubles were exasperated by the fact that, “irony of ironies,” several hundred copies were destroyed in a fire (*The Big Sea* 184).

<sup>56</sup> Thurman described his devotion to the project prior to printing: “Have spent this week on *Fire!!* – and all the rest will be so spent until the *Fire!!* is blazing hot” (in a letter to Hughes, 108-9).

wrote a draft of the foreword, which has some of the same thrust of the one published, but was also quite different, having only three stanzas; the printed version is more concise, more effective. A draft almost identical to the final version was also resent to Hughes (the letter appears in *Collected* 108-109). The interesting difference between the draft in the letter and the way it appeared is in the word “warning” in the second stanza, which is “warming” in the letter. This could be a misspelling, or a printing mistake (either in the issue or in the *Collected*), or Hughes’s final editing touch, but certainly both “warming” and “warning” work well with the rest of the second stanza – the former perhaps connected more closely to the second half of the stanza (“revitalizing”) and the latter to its first half (“cry of conquest”). The potential meaning of fire as warmth is echoed in a personalized Christmas card that Hurston sent to Hughes in December 1926, with wishes expressed “with ardor and fire,” and expressing thanks for having “warmed me tremendously in my dark hour” (*Zora Neale Hurston* 89).

The last stanza seems to speak of beauty and soul and life: “the flesh is sweet and *real*” and beauty is that flesh “in the furnace of/ *life*”; is this a realist, even naturalist aesthetic? The fire is the soul – that is, “the soul is an inward flush of fire,” and the soul is and is not the fire? To the question of “Beauty?,” the only question mark in the “Foreword,” there seems to be an answer that follows: Beauty is “flesh on fire” – an image evoking lynching, a perverse kind of beauty, “strange fruit,” and yet the line continues to “on fire in the furnace of life / blazing.” The furnace of life, then, is a continual kind of violence that is done to bodies, life itself making them burn. Or is it again, the “revitalizing” “cry of conquest” of the second stanza? And then again, perhaps “flesh on fire” is not the answer to what is “Beauty?” at all. Perhaps Beauty, the only

capitalized word in the “Foreword,” is a name (as is suggested by Nugent’s use of it, explored below), and “Beauty?” is a call to this person named so; to save him or her? to point him/her out as the larcenist? And so the ambiguity of the call Fire! is overdetermined: it is dangerous, erotic, soulful, desiring, consuming; in all cases, it refers to some kind of masochistic communion with others through baring one’s own body. The foreword is a primitivist exposé gone wrong through its own self-reflexivity, equivalent to a drop of blood on the lens of a film depicting violence.

The issue contains the first part of a never-to-be-continued novel by Richard Bruce Nugent, “Smoke Lilies and Jade, A Novel” (33-39). In this beginning of a novel Nugent reuses the images of Beauty and fire and “fyah!”, so understanding it is necessary for understanding the “Foreword.” Nugent also contributed two woodcut illustrations (4 and 24).<sup>57</sup> Both drawings may be thought of as primitivist, using geometric designs and showcasing wild, naked femininity.<sup>58</sup> Carroll sees Nugent’s illustrations as a sign of the “importance of the white avant-garde to the creators of *Fire!!* Their sexual nature, of course, is again an echo of that focus in the avant-garde,” and the influence of Aubrey Beardsley, and little magazines *Broom* and *BLAST* of the early 1920s in particular (209). This adaptation of the avant-garde techniques to address issues of racial identity, however, was a way in which “the contributors to *Fire!!* were breaking new ground” (210), and “claim[ed] a place between the two poles of the New Negro movement and the white avant-garde’ (211). Looking back on *Fire!!* in *Aunt Hagar’s Children*, Thurman shows most artists that were involved in the magazine to be reviled; the reason for the

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<sup>57</sup> Thurman originally planned to use only one, since they cost \$60 per drawing, he eventually figured out a way to print them separately and in color, to be pasted in later (as per his two 1926 letters to Hughes, in *Collected* 107-8 and 108-9 and 109-10).

<sup>58</sup> See Farber 17, for primitivism as a masculine form.

dislike of Richard Bruce Nugent, Thurman contends, is the “kinks he insists on putting upon the heads of his fantastic figures. Negroes, you know, do not have kinky hair; or, if they have, they use Madame Walker’s straightening pomade” (*Collected* 243).

“Smoke Lilies and Jade” is written in third-person stream of consciousness with paragraphs that go on for pages. There are no question marks, or commas, only ellipses. There is no capitalization except on account of proper names. The protagonist is Alex, a budding writer, lying and thinking and remembering, smoking a cigarette he bought with his last 5 cents, to satiate his hunger and because “smoke was like imagination” (33-35). Alex has been in New York for 5 years, since he was 14, and he’s not working, but “when his mother said she couldn’t understand him . . . why did he vaguely pity her instead of being ashamed . . . he should be . . .” (34). The mother then brings in the issue of finance, as he goes to Gurdjieff meetings,<sup>59</sup> and talks of Freud, Boccacio, Wilde, Schnitzler, and hangs out with Toomer, Hughes, Cullen, “oh the whole lot of them . . .” (34), “where you get the nerve I don’t know . . . just because you’ve tried to write one or two little poems and stories that no one understands . . . you seem to think the world owes you a living . . .” (34). Whoever this not understanding “no one” may be, it is a no one who could potentially pay for his art. Alex seems to take some pride in precisely his inability to sell his art. He thinks of himself as going “through life known as The Tragic Genius . . . romantic . . . but it was more or less true . . .” (34). These ponderings, illogical, wavering, non-committal, continue and return to the problem of being understood: “a fine feeling that . . . to be misunderstood . . . it made him feel tragic and great . . . but may be it would be nicer to be understood . . . but no . . . no great artist is . .

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<sup>59</sup> George Gurdjieff, born in the Russian Empire, was an important figure in US and international transcendentalism.

. then again neither are fools . . . they were strangely akin these two” (35).<sup>60</sup> There are mixed feelings here about the audience then: on the one hand, the artist separates himself from that audience as a “misunderstood genius,” and yet it is precisely the categorization of genius that is dependent on the audience, the beholder. The best analogy for this solitary genius in relation to his audience is perhaps Nugent’s woodcuts: the audience is the white space, empty and misunderstanding, in contrast to which the great artist can truly shine. The tension between the self and the folk is at the crux of creative expression, where the tension – which could result in a synthesis through dialectics – is actually exasperated into grotesque contrast.

The novel continues to explore intimacy, and we follow Alex to a party, and then on his way back home. On the street he meets a man who addresses him in Spanish, asking for a match to light his cigarette. Alex takes this man, whom he calls “Beauty,” up to his room (36). There is then a transition of scenery to a crowded church on a Sunday morning, presumably, and Alex can’t stop thinking about Beauty, whose kiss keeps coming into his consciousness all the while he is in the church, to the point that the spiritual intermingles with the erotic:

Langston’s spiritual . . . Fy-ah-fy-ah-Lawd . . . fy-ah’s gonna burn ma soul . . . Beauty’s hair was so black and curly . . . they were applauding . . . encore . . . Fy-ah Lawd had been a success . . . Langston bowed . . . Langston had written the words . . . Hall bowed . . . Hall had written the music . . . the young man was singing it again . . . Beauty’s lips had pressed hard . . . cool . . . cool . . . fy-ah Lawd . . . his breath had trembled . . . fy-ah’s gonna burn ma soul” (38).

Alex’s hesitation about erotic connection to Beauty dissolves into a meditation on hell;

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<sup>60</sup> An interesting note on this topic: Hurston in *Dust Tracks* asserts that “If writers were too wise, perhaps no books would be written at all” (212).

sinfulness and pleasure intertwine. “Fyah gonna burn ma soul” connotes temptation and hell, where the soul, forever damned, is burned but not consumed. The fire is both devastating and purifying. Eternal burning, as a reference to the burning bush revealed to biblical Moses, also suggests divine inspiration, the artist’s soul burning with talent, genius. The first section of the novel concludes softly, with the assertion that “one can love two at the same time . . .” (39).

As Nugent plays with the same images from the “Foreword,” images of fire, desire, and the beauty that is so desired, and so cool, until it is hot and accessible, and so “eternal burning” – of hell and of divine inspiration – becomes one of the connotations of FIRE.<sup>61</sup> Not incidentally, the image of hell, as related to the creativity of young African American writers, returns in Thurman’s evaluation of the renaissance, where he identifies two groups within “contemporary Negro novelists, characterized by black America as the respectable and the damned” (in *Collected* 247); he favors, of course, the latter. Thurman also contributed the opening story to the issue, “Cordelia the Crude,” a tale that is smart and surprising. The plot follows Cordelia, who emigrated from the south with her parents, and who becomes “a Harlem theatre chippie,” who is seduced into prostitution by the prudish narrator, who gives her her first two dollars. It is only in the very last line that the reader finds out that the prudish intellectual narrator is Cordelia’s original customer, and so it is only at the very end that the reader’s opinion both of her and of the intellectual narrator is upturned. As Carroll so eloquently observes, the story implies “that the

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<sup>61</sup> In *Dust Tracks*, hell imagery is primary to Hurston’s recollection of revival meetings, and she draws an image of hell that is terrifying and fascinating:

“Hell was described in dramatic fury. Flames of fire leaped up a thousand miles from the furnaces of Hell, and raised blisters on a sinning man’s back before he hardly got started downward. Hell-hounds pursued their ever-dying souls. Everybody under the sound of the preacher’s voice was warned, while yet they were on pleading terms with mercy, to take steps to be sure that they would not be a brand in that eternal burning” (270).

African American elite is leading the masses in the opposite direction than what Du Bois might have asserted, if they have any impact on the lower classes of African Americans at all” (208). There is rather a movement towards the folk which educates the (aspiring) middle class author.

*Fire!!* did not only feature pieces that explicitly dealt with the modernist artist. As opposed to the bohemian Alex in “Smoke Lilies and Jade,” Zora Neale Hurston’s protagonists are situated primarily in the rural south. Hurston contributed two pieces to the issue: the play “Color Struck” and the story “Sweat” both replete with folkloric material in the form of dance, songs, jokes and of course dialect; the length of the pieces makes her the most dominant (or generous) contributor. Thurman displays a concern about this in a letter to Hughes dated 30 Oct. 1926, as he scrambles for materials: “Perhaps I will get another poem or two from someone who is not already represented, and I am searching for another short story. Do you think it would look too Zoraish to run her play and story too?” (*Collected* 109-10). As much as the first issue of *Fire!!* may be Zoraish, Hurston herself does not mention it in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*. Her belonging to the group of the younger generation becomes even more interesting when one considers the fact that she concealed her age. She was born in January 1891, making her only five years younger than Locke, and so she variously shaved off seven or more years off her age (Hurston, *Speak* 5, *Zora Neale Hurston* 37). When *Fire!!* was published in 1926, she was 35, making her more than ten years older than most of the editors of *Fire!!* (Douglas was 28, Bennett, Hughes and Thurman were 24, Davis was 21, and Nugent was 20). Hurston’s gender and her training as an anthropologist (coupled with her interest in folklore for folklore’s sake) make her

exceptional in the predominantly young male artistic circle.

The short story “Sweat” is a prototype for the more enigmatic story contained within Hurston’s later novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; it features the story of the washerwoman Delia Jones, married to an abusive, disloyal Sykes, who calls himself “a snake charmer” (43). The story begins with Sykes entering the house and lowering a whip on Delia’s shoulders, and she is terrified because she thinks it’s a snake, while Sykes is “bent over with laughter at her fright” (40). The scene creates a dissonance; how can Delia not be concerned with the abuse, but rather with the fact that it matches her phobia? Delia begins to shed her “habitual meekness,” primarily through church attendance, and fights against Sykes’s attempts to kick her out of her own house: “Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it” (40), “don’t think Ah’m gointuh be run ‘way from mah house either” (43). Her case is a regular one, and “[t]his case differed from the others only in that she was bolder than the others. Too late for everything except her little home” (41). She is completely alone; the group of older men, sitting at Joe Clarke’s porch, talk about her, talk about him, suggest killing him, and “[a] grunt of approval went around the porch. But the heat was melting their civic virtue” (42). She never acts against Sykes’s lover, but rather watches Sykes die from the snake he himself brought into the house. The story features different styles of dialect; for every speaker, there is a different orthography, it seems (“gointuh” and “gointer,” for example). Johnson, in his preface, writes:

[a]n error that confuses many persons in reading and understanding Negro dialect is the idea that it is uniform. An ignorant Negro of the uplands of Georgia would have almost as much difficulty in understanding an ignorant sea island Negro as an Englishman would have. Not even in the



dialect of any particular section is a given word always pronounced in precisely the same way. Its pronunciation depends upon the preceding and following sounds (xlv).

The use of folklore in literature was a question bound in the ethics of two professions for Hurston, the anthropologist and the writer. In a letter to Countee Cullen dated 11 March 1926, probably as a response to his review of Hughes's *The Weary Blues* in the February issue of *Opportunity* (73-74), she writes:

By the way, [Langston] Hughes ought to stop publishing all those secular folk-songs as his poetry. Now when he got off the “Weary Blues[”] (most of it a song I and most southerners have known all our lives) I said nothing for I knew I'd never be forgiven by certain people for crying down what ‘the white folks had exalted’, but when he gets off another ‘Me and mah honey got two mo’ days tuh do de buck’ I don’t see how I can refrain from speaking. I am at least going to speak to [Carl] Van Vechten (*Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 84, emphasis in the original).

Hazel Carby, questioning Hurston's politics of representation of the folk, which she deems to be essentialist, colonial, and ahistorical, driven by a fixation on childhood memories, argues that “Hurston was concerned to establish authenticity in the representation of popular forms of folk culture and to expose the disregard for the aesthetics of that culture through inappropriate forms of representation [. . .] critics are incorrect to think that Hurston reconciled ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of cultural production [. . .] The people she wanted to represent she defined as a rural folk, and she measured them in their cultural forms against an urban, mass culture” (31). Carby compares Hurston to Hughes, and privileges the latter's representation style since he “shaped his discursive category of the folk in direct response to the social conditions of transformation, including the newly forming urban working class and ‘socially

dispossessed,' whereas Hurston constructed a discourse of nostalgia for a rural community" (32). But besides these discursive differences and variations, Hughes and Hurston were competing friends and colleagues.

There is, in Hurston's criticism of Hughes's plagiarism a kind of possessiveness over this folk material; it is material which Hughes should not be allowed to claim as his own in the urban context. However, only a year later, in a letter dated 17 March 1927, written to Hughes himself, Hurston seems to have a less strict attitude towards authorship; she reports on her findings in the south: "Getting some gorgeous material down here, verse and prose, magnificent. Shall save some juicy bits for you and me" (*Zora Neale Hurston* 93, emphasis in the original), and later in a letter dated 8 March 1928, "I had collected several very good modern stories which I knew were good, but I was wondering if anybody else would see it that way" (112-13). Hurston actually ventured together with Hughes to the south in 1927.<sup>62</sup> In 1928, Hurston frequently writes to Hughes of the reception of his collection *Fine Clothes for the Jew*. When she read it in Loughman, Florida: "they got the point and enjoyed it immensely. So you are really a great poet for you truly represent your people" (113 and 121-23; in the latter letter, Hurston recounts how Hughes's poems re-entered southern folklore). Finally in 22 Nov. 1928 she suggests: "Know what, you ought to make a loafing tour of the South like the blind Homer, singing your songs [. . .] You are the poet of the people and your subjects are crazy about you" (in *Zora Neale Hurston* 131).

The first and only issue of *Fire!!* closes with "Fire Burns," an editorial by

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<sup>62</sup> Both Hughes and Hurston wrote to Van Vechten from the joined journey (Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* 105-6; Hughes and Van Vechten, *Remember me to Harlem*, 58).

Wallace Thurman.<sup>63</sup> This is the closing frame, where Thurman returns to his review, begun in the *Messenger*, of Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*.<sup>64</sup> Thurman problematizes the relationship between representation and the community itself, as well as the responsibility of the artist in racial uplift. Those who would have wanted Van Vechten to represent a more realistic and positive view of the Harlem community, Thurman announces cynically, are misled if they think it would make any social, political difference: a reader who would think that all African Americans in Harlem are as those represented in the book, "lewd hussies and whoremongers" (47), will not be influenced by depictions of middle class African Americans, but rather read the authentic representation as wholly fabricated. He scoffs at those wishing for puritan representation, where "all Negroes appearing in contemporary literature [are] made as ridiculous and as false to type as the older school of pseudo-humorous, sentimental white writers made their Uncle Toms, their Topsy, and their Mammies, or as the Octavius Roy Cohen school now make their more modern 'cullud' folk" (48). Thurman thus points to outside of the artistic sphere for political change, throwing off the baggage with which the older generation loaded artistic creativity. The slogan "art for art's sake" then becomes more than an irresponsible avoidance of the politics of cultural production; art is for art's sake because it is unable to be otherwise.

Although, as mentioned above, Locke saw the exploration of sexuality as one of the tasks of the younger generation, it seems that *Fire!!* went too far for his tastes. In spite of its rallying cry, *Fire!!* made but a slight stir among the older generation, though the contents of *Fire!!* were criticized by the elders for being vulgar, inappropriate,

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<sup>63</sup> There was supposed to be another editorial on "whether there is or is not a Negro art" (in a letter to Hughes, in *Collected* 108-9).

<sup>64</sup> The review, published in September 1926, was entitled "A Stranger at the Gates" (279-80).

unsuitable for the uplift project. Alain Locke, reviewing *Fire!!* for *The Survey* seems to defend the “youth section of the New Negro movement,” that has “marched off in a gay and self-confident maneuver of artistic secession,” in particular for its militancy against Puritanism, he also warns that “The strong sex radicalism of many of the contributions will shock many well-wishers and elate some of our adversaries; but the young Negro evidently repudiates any special moral burden of proof along with any of the other social disabilities that public opinion saddled upon his fathers” (563).<sup>65</sup> Thurman was afraid of losing his job for the *World Tomorrow* because his boss considered him lewd because of *Fire!!* (letter to Hughes, in collected 111). In a call for cautious, if any, modernization of style, Locke suggests that “[b]ack to Whitman would have been a better point of support than a left-wing pivoting on Wilde and Beardsley” (563).<sup>66</sup>

### **The Radical New Negro and Cooperatives**

What is the left-wing pivoting that Locke is so concerned about? Prior and throughout his engagement with *Fire!!*, Thurman worked for *The Messenger*. A slight detour into a different, more radical conception of the New Negro as it was represented in that periodical, and which unfortunately receives no critical attention in discussions of the Harlem Renaissance, is useful to understand Locke’s concern. In a review of *The New*

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<sup>65</sup> For a different reading of the review see Nugent 48-49. It is important to note that Locke’s homosexuality (which was what may now term “closeted”) has been connected to *The New Negro* anthology project. Edward Carpenter’s *Iolaus*, a transnational anthology of male homosexual love, had great influence upon Locke (see for example Harris and Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: Biography of a Philosopher* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008], 158).

<sup>66</sup> See also Harris and Molesworth’s biography of Locke, where they read him as appreciating the racy avant-garde (214-15). And indeed, the review is mild in comparison to some others, such as another review in an African American weekly, that Thurman cites in his *Aunt Hagar’s Children*, which called *Fire!!* “effeminate tommyrot,” worth only of being thrown into the fire (in *Collected* 242).

*Negro*, the April 1926 *Messenger* places the collection as the second contribution “to a class of Negro literature which can be truly termed art. Heretofore, *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois reigned supreme in this field of literature” (Poston 118). The review calls *The New Negro* “an improved edition of the Harlem issue of the *Survey Graphic*” (119). The philosophy of the volume is found lacking, however, primarily because of Locke’s “art for art’s sake” stance. The contributions are then interpreted as contradicting Locke’s editorial thrust by being political, and yet the editorial aesthetic choice compromises the political, and “that virile, insurgent, revolutionary spirit peculiar to the Negro is missing” (119).

In a supplement to their March 1919 issue (the fourth issue published in the shaky early years of the *Messenger*), entitled “The Negro and the New Social Order,” the editors A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen concluded that the New Negro “asks no special privileges, he asks no favors. He only asks that rights and privileges be distributed even as the burdens are distributed” (11). In a revolutionary vein, they continue to envision “a new era in the Negro’s life – an era where light rather than heat, where intelligence rather than emotion, shall determine the solution of his problems – the results of which will be at once fraught with bigness and consequence” (11). The revolutionary view was clearly an internationalist one, as was expanded on by Randolph in the May-June issue that same year. “Throughout the world among all peoples and classes, the clock of social progress is striking the high noon of the Old Crowd,” that is unable to adapt itself and “accept the consequences of the sudden, rapid and violent social changes that are shaking the world” (26). Like Europe, “the Negro” also “must tear down his false leaders” (27), since “the Old Crowd [...] lacks the knowledge of methods for the

attainment of ends which it desires to achieve” (27). The New Negro is defined necessarily as a crowd, a crowd of men to be more precise, and yet it is a crowd of leaders: “As among all other peoples, the New Crowd must be composed of young men who are educated, radical and fearless. [. . .] The New Crowd views with much expectancy the revolutions ushering in a New World. The New Crowd is uncompromising. *Its tactics are not defensive but offensive*”(27, emphasis mine). Alliances would be formed with white radicals, in order “to build a new society – a society of equals, without class, race, caste or religious distinctions” (27).

In a Dec. 1919 editorial, Owen and Randolph write on “The New Philosophy of the Negro” (5). The purpose is to herald the coming of a book by the editors, on Jan. 1, which would provide “some definite knowledge of the New Negro’s point of view on all important questions” (5). Part of Owen and Randolph’s all-encompassing work will be an explanation of “the Negro’s position on violence, laying down a program in connection with force” (5). About nine months later, the editors write another short editorial entitled “The New Negro – What Is He?” (Aug. 1920, 73-74). The article is divided into aims, methods, and relations to current movements. The aims are further developed into political, economic and social. For Owen and Randolph, the social program is one of “education and physical action in self defense” (74). While violence of “self defense” is emphasized several times, the violence against leaders seems to go beyond that: “As to Negro leaders, his object is to destroy them all and build up new ones” (74). In an exuberant and apocalyptic way, the editors point out that “the New Negro arrived upon the scene at the time of all other forward, progressive groups and movements – after the

great world war [...] His presence is inevitable in these times of economic chaos, political upheaval and social distress” (74).

This kind of radical conceptualization of the New Negro would certainly be available to Thurman, Hughes, and Hurston, but I do not wish to suggest that they were on the same bandwagon. At least on two points the new generation strays from the *Messenger*'s ideal: they prioritize aesthetics over politics, and their project in the publication of *Fire!!* was clearly a separatist one, with no interest in interracial solidarity.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, perhaps Carroll's estimation that *Fire!!* was claiming a place in both the New Negro and the white avant-garde circles, cited above, should be turned on its head: *Fire!!* was rather taking itself out of both these circles. Above all, their relationship to the folk was ironic. *Fire!!* included an essay by Arthur Huff Fauset entitled “Intelligentsia” (45-46), a blunt editorial that asserts that “The world owes about as much to the rank and file of this society [the secret Intelligentsia society] as a Negro slave owes to Georgia” (45). In what way did the editors of *Fire!!* then view themselves? The criticism of intelligentsia may be a masochistic self-reflexive and self-flogging move on the part of the editors. The gesture of pointing not only to the separation from the rank and file folk, but also to the abusive relationship, comparable to slavery, which exists between the middle class intelligentsia and the folk, is self-incriminating.

The younger generation provided no ideological solution for this problem.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, I would like to entertain the idea that the bohemian artists did not view themselves as part of the middle class. The living arrangement out of which *Fire!!* was

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<sup>67</sup> One potential contribution was excluded on the grounds of its being written by a white author (Carroll 210, van Notten 152-53)

<sup>68</sup> In this context, Carby's contrasting of Hughes's and Hurston's approach is inappropriate. The tortured relation to the folk that Carby sees in Hurston's work is but a part of this unabashed self-flagellating paradigm.

created is worthy of some attention, because it seems that it is a form of communal living that has revolutionary potential, even if it was not explicitly presented as such by any of the young generation. The artistic commune as a cooperative is a way to look beyond the multiple arresting borders which dictate the relationship of the artist to the folk and to her art. To “look beyond” is again not a liberal notion of multiplicity; it is rather a confrontation with difference and inequality on an intimate and consistent level which allows the sharing of burdens in ways that are generally unavailable in imperial capitalist societies. To investigate the potential of the artistic commune, I will turn to its representation in Thurman’s novel, but first I would like to engage Herold Cruse’s theorization of collectives in his *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (88-89). I see Cruse’s argumentation as engaging a trans-nationalism that isn’t often talked about: a transnationalism that isn’t simply a more politically correct word than “diaspora” or “internationalism,” or “minority” for that matter, but a way to transcend the national through a turn inward, through separatism, through the creation of small communities which can exist hidden from the nation’s patrolling gaze.

Cruse sees the failure of the Harlem Renaissance in the movement’s inability to theorize its own condition. It is a question of riding the tide of a national shift (such as the Great War) towards a cooperative establishment of something completely new, the nature of which cannot be known in advance (this seems to be a reverberation of Lenin’s words: “yesterday was too early, tomorrow will be too late”). He echoes the urgency which is apparent in the *Messenger*, an urgency which was felt in a particular way by the younger generation of the Harlem Renaissance, awaiting the end of the Harlem vogue. For Cruse, since the Renaissance did not leave any institutions behind it, the result is that of



“intellectual retrogression from an age of renaissance to an age of mid-century crisis” (381). While his solution to the problem is the creation of African American cooperatives that will take control of Harlem’s institutions, it seems to me that he doesn’t take seriously enough such attempts during the Harlem Renaissance.

One such attempt was made at 267 W 136<sup>th</sup> St, where Wallace Thurman and (Richard) Bruce Nugent lived together, and which served as a meeting place for young artists – including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglass – and came to be known as The Niggeratti Manor.<sup>69</sup> In the roman à clef *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman points to various faults of the tenant-artists – one lacks motivation while the other lacks talent, one drinks excessively, while the other is arrested for seducing a minor – but the house is eventually disbanded because the landlady no longer believes in the financial security of art and so decides to convert it into a tenement for young women. Another, though much more fanciful, attempt at an artistic cooperation can be found in one of Zora Neale Hurston’s letters to Hughes, cited as an epigraph to this chapter; there, she suggests that they start, on the Dixie Highway, “a Negro art colony. You, and Wallie, and Aaron Douglas and Bruce and me and all our crowd”; “No big society stuff. Just a neat little colony of kindred souls. I’m crazy to build me a house that looks something like an African king’s menage. More elaborate of course” (in *Zora Neale Hurston* 145, 146). In both instances, there is an attempt, whether conscious or unconscious, to make a special case for the artist, to make him or her independent from the middle class.

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<sup>69</sup> Thurman *Collected* 98; Nugent 5, 13-15, 19, 273 n. 7.

**To Conclude: *Infants of the Spring* and the Racial Mountain.**

*Infants of the Spring* does explicitly refuse to provide solutions, its title taken from Laertes's advice to his sister Cordelia in *Hamlet*, "The canker galls the infants of the spring [. . .] Be wary then; best safety lies in fear / Youth to itself rebels, though none else near" (Act I Scene 3, ll. 40-44). Cordelia does not and cannot take his advice too seriously, as his attempt at patriarchal patronage of his female sibling is soon cut short by the entrance of Polonius the father, who proceeds to instruct Laertes with a litany of advice on all matters of conduct. The young generation, in short, has no interest in preaching to its fellows, since they are already overburdened by the constricting advice of their elders. The genre of the roman à clef was itself a genre that is threatening to fiction's autonomy and so its immorality was decried in the contemporaneous *Literary Ethics* by H.M. Paull.<sup>70</sup> The context of the Harlem vogue, however, makes Thurman's project transgressive of more than proper literary form. The novel may be seen as a form of slumming literature, a way into Harlem life which may be consumed without having to even come within the neighborhood's boundaries. Earle Francis Walbridge, who began collecting bibliographies of romans à clef in the early 1920s, mentions Carl van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*, but not Thurman's novel (nor Schuyler's *Black No More* for that matter) in the 1936 edition of the bibliography. These omissions suggest that engaging a mainstream audience was not really at stake here. The roman à clef's audience is a niche market.

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<sup>70</sup> See Latham's introduction to his 2009 study *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef*, 3-20.

Within the novel, Thurman is represented by Ray, and Nugent by Paul,<sup>71</sup> and the name “Nigerratti Manor” was Paul’s idea, to which Ray responds with “quite appropriate, I would say. God knows we’re ratty enough” (40). There is an attempt here by Thurman to emphasize the pompousness of this group through Ray’s shallow, seemingly uncomplicated play on words. Ray’s spontaneous response to the name is a kind of witty and leisurely back-and-forth of the British court, battle of words, very much middle class “literati.” At the same time, by breaking the word in this place, the “literati” is actually broken up, distanced from its bourgeois meaning, while endowing it with the associations of ratty-ness, of “underground” and indecency that characterize Bohemian culture, including its art. Since one of the characters is a compulsive spoonerist (20), “rat” also suggests “art.” In this way the literati is disbanded, and only ratty art remains. This self-ironic assessment of the possibilities of a renaissance is an echo of the Arthur Fauset editorial cited above, and it will bring me to the conclusion of this chapter.

The emphasis on the individual artist’s search for voice and identity is perhaps best expressed in Langston Hughes’s essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” published just five months before *Fire!!*, where he announces, disavowing the importance of approval by either “white” or “colored” critics, “We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves”

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<sup>71</sup> Nugent’s “Smoke Lilies and Jade” appears in the novel as Paul’s tale about “his latest vagabond adventure,” an erotic interracial story (44-46): “Then I became aware of a presence. An ivory body exuding some exotic perfume. Beauty dimmed my eyes (45). The story turns out to be a dream, and provides a very interesting experience for the reader who’s read *Fire!!* prior to reading *Infants*. The experience that is referred to in the narrative seems so real, as if it should precede the story, the anesthetization of experience, the narrativisation of life, and yet the roman a clef comes after, so as to explain, expand, verify the story.

(694).<sup>72</sup> It is precisely this personal, introspective stance that is criticized by Richard Wright about a decade later. Wright's 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing" is often cited as marking the end of the Harlem Renaissance, as it questions the ultimate value of any literary production of the time; for Wright, the failure of African American literature is connected to the failure of not having "continued and deepened this folk tradition," because "the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path" (175). I hope to have shown that, however selfishly motivated their efforts may have been, the editors of *Fire!!* were making a conscious and useful contribution to African American letters, a contribution that was not "escaping," but engaging the folk, even when they did nothing *for* the folk.

The image of the artist as standing on top of the racial mountain is a useful image not only in the African American context, but in the Yiddish one in Czarist Russia as well, which I will address in the next chapter. The image may be seen as representing some duality, for it is certainly ironic: how can a racial artist stand atop the racial mountain? And, at the same time, as per Wright's reading, it is very much an "I-don't-give-a-damn" stance; the artist is standing atop the racial mass that has nothing to do with him. In an even more morbid view, and one that I suspect Thurman et al. would enjoy, the image is that of abuse: the mountain is a racial mass atop of which the artist has climbed by stepping on others' bodies. Self-ironically, it signifies the profound dilemma of a genius, solitary artist, who is able to see the panorama of life from atop the mountain.

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<sup>72</sup> In an interesting twist, Thurman puts similar words in the mouth of a white character in the novel: Stephen says to Ray, as he tries to analyze him: "race to you [. . .] means nothing. You stand on a peak alone, superior, nonchalant, unconcerned. I know all that. You've said it enough. Propagandists you despise. Illusions about Negroes you have none. Your only plea is that they accept themselves and be accepted by others as human beings" (60).

**Chapter III**  
**Czarist Russia, 1888: Generational Divide and the Uses of the Folk in**  
*Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*

My muse which stands over me as I write is, like all the folk of Kasrilevke, a merry soul, poor but merry. She hates tears, and has little use for sad scenes. She says that tears are only what's wet and salty, and that all other tears which the writer pours out on paper are only dry, affected tears and don't mean anything. It's her opinion that it isn't he who conveys pain that suffers but he whom 'it hurts.' And so we shall pass over the heartbreaking and gruesome scenes and go right on with our story, stopping only to estimate the damage that the citizens of Kasrilevke suffered from the fire.

Sholem Aleichem, "Di kasrilevke Nisrofim" [The Kasrilevke burn victims]<sup>1</sup>

The late 1880s mark an important transition in Yiddish literature. In an aesthetic-political move that is similar to the one made by the writers of *Fire!!*, discussed in the previous chapter, the generation of Yiddish writers who came of age in the 1880s saw the failure of assimilation and turned "inward" to explore their own identities as minority subjects, indeed as ultimate others, within the national boundaries of Czarist Russia. They were heirs to the diasporic consciousness and ideologies of ethnic uplift – whether through assimilation or emigration – of their *maskilic* (belonging to the Jewish Enlightenment – *Haskalah* in Hebrew, *Haskole* in Yiddish) predecessors who paved their literary way. In the role of

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. Isidore Goldstick, "After the Disaster," in *Inside Kasrilevke* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 140-43. In Yiddish in "Kasrilevker nisrofim" in *Alt-nay-kasrilevke* (New York: Folks-fond oysgabe, 1919), 26-27. אַז זי זאָגט, אַז פֿריילעכע נשמה, איין אַרעמע, נאָר אַ פֿריילעכע. זי האָט פֿינט טרערן, זי האָלט נישט פֿון טרויעריקע סצענעס. זי זאָגט, אַז טרערן זענען נאָר די, וואָס זענען נאָס און געזאַלצן; די אַלע איבעריקע טרערן, וואָס דער שרייבער גיסט אויף פֿאַפּיר – דאָס זענען, זאָגט זי, / טרוקענע, געמאַכטע טרערן, וואָס האָבן נישט קיין ווערט

editors, this new generation worked to create a minority literary tradition, precisely through rebellion against the older generation.<sup>2</sup> The new generation's taking on the role of editors also allowed for fruitful artistic experimentation and a re-thinking of what was good for the reading folk. If, for the *maskilic* writer, the folk/people was/were to be corrected and mocked into normalcy, the new generation turned to the folk as a source of inspiration for personal and artistic identity, and in turn provided aesthetic education for the folk. This change should certainly be viewed as related to the Russian populist movement, *narodnichestvo*, where the exploration and address of the folk is not only meant to bolster petit-bourgeoisie nationalist claims, but also left-wing politics. No longer satisfied with being mere demonstrations of minority talent, they assumed the roles of editor and publisher, taking control of the public presentation of their own work. The new Classical Yiddish literature was operating within the economic and social context of the time and, like the editors of *Fire!!*, the editors of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* and *Hoyzfraynd* also claimed an in-between position for the "folk author," a writer explicitly drawing from folklore and addressing the masses, juggling audiences<sup>3</sup> divided along ethnic as well as class lines. This often painful in-between position of the folk-writer is central to understanding the particular ambivalent, ironic humor of that generation.

While the idea of the "Volk" has served Romantic Nationalism in legitimizing and spurring national independence movements around central Europe, the relationship to the folk within the confines of the multi-ethnic Russian Empire was quite different. In the European context – as in the American one of the previous chapter – the folk are to be

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*.

<sup>3</sup> Sholem Aleichem made the accounting of the first volume public, publishing the names of the towns and the amount of subscriptions, and the expenses and revenue, in the second volume.

seen as mobs perpetuating racial violence. At the same time, the Russian *narodnichestvo* (populism) movement of the 1860s-1870s looked to the emancipated peasants as both cultural carriers and revolutionary agents. Narodnaya volya [People's Will] were a more radical subset of the movement, which was responsible for the assassination of Alexander II, since his reforms were deemed insufficient. Jews, including the revolutionary Gesia Gelfman, occupied visible positions in the movement and so were directly blamed for the assassination (Gitelman 1-2). The situation of the Jews within the Russian empire had its own particularities, since Jews were confined within the borders of the Pale of Settlement in Czarist Russia. Following the assassination of the Czar in 1881, the reformist tendencies of the 60s and 70s were reversed, even while the "Jewish question" was becoming more and more prevalent in Russian society and letters.<sup>4</sup> The violent pogroms that swept Russian cities, coupled with the May Laws of 1882, also known as with the "silent pogroms," brought about the pauperization (or proletarianization in some discourses) of the Jewish population. This social and economic climate would prove foundational to the historical consciousness of the generation of writers that edited the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* in Kiev and *Hoyzfraynd* in Warsaw.

Sholem Aleichem's *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* [Jewish/Yiddish folk's library]<sup>5</sup> and

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<sup>4</sup> See Gitelman 1-14. See also, on the influence of this political atmosphere on Russian Jewish literature, Semyon Dubnow, "Iz sovremennogo khaosa" [From contemporary chaos], in *Voskhod* 1888, No. 11/12, 27-46. See also Kelner, 118-22, 185. Kelner points out the differences in response of the non-Jewish Russian intelligentsia to the early 1880s pogroms as opposed to those some 20 years later; in the Kishinev pogroms of 1903, the intelligentsia exhibited "decisive and surprisingly active" dismay (Kelner 327).

<sup>5</sup> The title of the periodical may very well be an innovation on the Russian-language serial *Evreyskaya biblioteka: istoriko-literaturnyi sbornik* [Jewish library: a historical-literary collection], published in St. Petersburg beginning in 1871, and then republished beginning in 1881, under the editorship of A.E. Landau. Sholem Aleichem, then, inserted the "folk" into the title, creating a "Jewish folk's library," and not simply a "Jewish library." Lev Osipovich (Yehuda Leyb) Gordon and

Mordkhe Spector's *Hoyzfraynd* [House-friend], unlike *Fire!!*, were annuals of several hundred pages each (though the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* survived for two issues only, 1888-1889). Sholem Aleichem and his correspondents often refer to the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* as a "sbornik" [a collection]. It is not, however, an "anthology"; almost all the material published within the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* is published for the first time, or seriously re-worked (such as Mendele Mokher Sforim's *Vuntsh-fingerl* [translated as *The Wishing Ring* in 2003], for example).<sup>6</sup> In other words, these annuals offer a glimpse of the contemporary literary scene as it was being created where, to cite Alan Mintz once again, "the editors [...] are sending messages explicitly addressed to their 'dear readers'" (3). This act of addressing the reader directly is one of the main focuses of this chapter.<sup>7</sup>

The *Hoyzfraynd* issued five volumes, while the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* was published only twice before Sholem Aleichem's debts led him to flee Kiev altogether. Considering the intimacy between Sholem Aleichem and Spector,<sup>8</sup> the parallel publication of these periodicals recalls the plot of Sholem Aleichem's 1909 short story "Konkurentn" [Competitors] from the *Railroad Stories*. In the story, a husband and wife hustle in a train, competing for the available market to sell their wares to; within the story, the customers feel duped by the couple, but the composition of couple's household is revealed to be

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M. Margulis, later participants in Sholem Aleichem's *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*, were active contributors to the publication.

<sup>6</sup> For the significance of the re-working of the text see Dan Miron's *The Image of the Shtetl* (Syracuse University Press, 2000), in particular 49-80, 93, 105-7, as well as Oyslender 18, n. 2.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of an anthology remains useful. David Stern in his introduction to the three-volume long special topic in *Prooftexts*, "The Anthological Imagination in Jewish Literature," opens up the definition of anthology to include collections and too-briefly mentions the genre's possibility of creating "small libraries" (3). Garrett Stewart's influential book *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* might offer a useful point of comparison here. Similar time period, very different cultural context.

<sup>8</sup> Sholem Aleichem addressed him as his wife ("To my dear spouse") in correspondence, and he was the only colleague to be addressed with the familiar "you" [du].



complicated, composed as it is of two sets of children from previous marriages.<sup>9</sup> While Spector's and Sholem Aleichem's publications shared contributing authors (Yitzkhok Yoyel Linetsky, S.L. Tsitron, Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Moykher Sforim, Yaakov Dinezohn, I.L. Perets, Shimon Frug, I.L. Gordon), *Hoyzfraynd* seems to have had a less lofty standard than the one set up by Sholem Aleichem; it bore the subtitles "a collection of classical literature" and "a historical-literary book," while the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* was subtitled "a book of literature, criticism and scholarship"; the *Hoyzfraynd* did not include reviews or bibliographies, and, unlike Sholem Aleichem's project, Spector's entailed the publication of folk-sayings, including the pioneering systematic collection by Ignatz Bernshteyn.<sup>10</sup>

The two periodical projects had in common the establishment of a literary genealogy against which they defined their own projects as radically different. On the practical economic level, the new generation of writers was introduced into the publishing world by the older generation of more established writers. Sholem Aleichem dedicated the novel *Stempenyu*, appended to the first volume of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*, to "my beloved grandfather, R[eb]/Mr. Mendele Mokher Sforim." Although this grandfathering may be seen as mocking (since there is no father), Mendele himself echoed this genealogy and accepted his patriarchal place at the head of the table, both in his personal correspondence<sup>11</sup> and publicly, as when he offered his novel, *Dos Vuntsh-fingerl* as "a gift to the dear Jewish

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<sup>9</sup> *Voskhod* published a prospectus review of the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* in 1888, written by "the occasional felyetonist," Frug's pseudonym. Frug writes a mocking review, ridiculing the "fashionable then competition of the publishers of literary collections, that multiplied without any special reason, since the contributors were the same authors" (Dubnow 237, footnote).

<sup>10</sup> The proverb collection includes an introduction by Spector dated December 1887, which explains the history of the collection. The history involves a call for submissions from the reading public. Spector ends the introduction with the promise that "as much as we worked and edited the material, this is exactly how the folk say it." Folklore collection continues to be an integral part of Yiddish creativity in the twentieth century as well (with Sh. Ansky and YIVO, for example).

<sup>11</sup> Letters from Mendele to Sholem Aleichem in the Beyt Shalom Aleykhem archive (LM 31).

children” in Sholem Aleichem’s *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*. It was through Sholem Aleichem’s appropriation and promotion of Mendele that the latter began to gain his status in Jewish literature. Mendele was only 23 years older than Sholem Aleichem, but the stretch of a generation allowed Sholem Aleichem to ground himself in a venerable Yiddish literary tradition, while also playing the part of the rebellious grandchild. In a letter to the historian and literary critic Semyon Dubnow dated 2 Sept. 1888, Sholem Aleichem promotes Mendele (Abromovich), saying that “no one of the *zhargon* readers knows him, no one absolutely” (Dubnow 240);<sup>12</sup> in his “Reminiscences on Abromovich,” Dubnow reiterates that it was Sholem Aleichem’s publication of *Dos Vuntsh-fingerl* that first introduced him to Mendele’s writing. The writer and critic Yitskhok Khone Ravnitsky recounts that when Sholem Aleichem visited Odessa in 1888, the title “grandfather” was new, before “everybody knew who the bearer of this name was.” This trip to Odessa also marked the first face-to-face meeting between the Kiever grandson and the Odessan grandfather. When Sholem Aleichem returned to Kiev, he reportedly brought a photograph of Mendele with him, looking at it for inspiration while he worked on the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* (Ravnitsky 120).

As the letter which introduces *Stempenyu* makes clear, Mendele was a serious influence on Sholem Aleichem’s writing, urging the grandson to polish each word (vii, also Ravnitsky 124).<sup>13</sup> He also influenced the make-up of the periodical. In a letter dated 12 August 1888, Mendele refers to Sholem Aleichem’s role as editor of the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* as that of a shepherd, expressing anxiety about publishing his *Vuntsh-fingerl* among

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<sup>12</sup> *Zhargon* is a potentially condescending term that has been widely used to refer to the Yiddish languages. Its connotation of a vernacular is seen by some as preventing its potential to signify literary tradition. The term Yiddish is more politically correct.

<sup>13</sup> Mendele had a nickname for Sholem Aleichem, “akhashteran,” a kind of very speedy camel (Beyt Shalom Aleykhem archive LM 13-31, LM 15-31, 17-31).

works by the common herd of Yiddish writers. Sixteen days later, he repeats his advice that Sholem Aleichem make the journal a destination for good writers, not ignorant fools.<sup>14</sup> Following the publication of the first volume, on 6 July 1889, Mendele wrote that, “aside from my loyalty to your ‘Folks-biblioteke,’ that I want to have make an impression, it should also show what one can do with the Yiddish language for our poor folk, if one is only capable and willing.”<sup>15</sup>

### **What language can the folk speak?**

One of the central tensions which continuously invigorated creativity within East European Jewish literatures has been the language wars between Hebrew and Yiddish.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the two languages – sharing an alphabet but belonging to the Semitic and the Germanic language family respectively – were seen in a binary (as two nostrils,<sup>17</sup> as wife and mistress), where Hebrew was associated more with religious learning and Yiddish with folk wisdom, Hebrew with back-to-Israel Jewish nationalism and Yiddish with diasporic existence, Hebrew with upper-middle class (that could afford the leisure of study) and Yiddish with the toiling masses, Hebrew with masculinity (to the extent that it was associated with religious learning and Zionism) and Yiddish with femininity. For Sholem Aleichem and most Yiddish writers for that matter, the Russian language is added to the mix, as the latter is not only the language in which he brings up his children, but also the language of the urban Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> Beyt Shalom Aleykhem archive LM 9-31, LM 10-31.

<sup>15</sup> Beyt Shalom Aleykhem archive, LM 17-31.

<sup>16</sup> Anita Norich, “Under Whose Sign? Hebraism and Yiddishism as Paradigms of Modern Jewish Literary History,” *PMLA* 125.3 (2010): 774-84; Miron *From Continuity to Contiguity*; Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity*, 496.

middle class and the language in which he has had literary aspirations, as a representative of the parochial Pale for the urban middle class.

Dubnow<sup>18</sup> illustrates the folk author's duality in his "Reminiscences of Sholem Aleichem" when he writes of the author's public readings following his bankruptcy. Needing to "read his work for payment in the houses of the Kiev elite, [Sholem Aleichem] entertained these lords, who appreciated in the writings of the humorist only the funny, at times overdone, element, and didn't notice either the at-times tragic lining of the text or the personal tragedy of the 'joyful' reader" (Dubnow 231).<sup>19</sup> This description of the misunderstood author is more than just a socially-conscious observation. Dubnow is articulating a demand for a particular awareness that is necessary for understanding Sholem Aleichem's ironic humor. The author's identity is part and parcel of the literary work and its readers are expected to be able to read the literary work in light of the author's identity. Sholem Aleichem himself liked to point to his dual persona – Sholem Aleichem/Sholem Rabinovich – as being connected to the tension between his literary and business occupations. In late 1887, prior to his bankruptcy, Sholem Aleichem writes Ravnitsky<sup>20</sup>: "Rabinovich is more Sholem Aleichem than Rabinovich. Solomon Rabinovich is four hours a day in the stock exchange [. . .] but from 5 in the afternoon until 3-4 at night, I am Sholem

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<sup>18</sup> Sholem Aleichem actively sought Dubnow's attention through correspondence, which Dubnow only partially reciprocated. Only in 1890 did they meet, and Dubnow reflects that "Sholem Aleichem was then living out the last days of his bourgeois happiness" (Dubnow 228). In the summer of 1891 Dubnow and Sholem Aleichem were neighbors on their dachas in the environs of Odessa, and they corresponded using a Hassidic Yiddish, following the model of Perl's *Megale tmirin* (Dubnow 230, Ravnitski 133 – the latter calls the language Hebrew, the former Yiddish).

<sup>19</sup> This text is reminiscent of Sholem Aleichem's self-authored epitaph.

<sup>20</sup> Ravnitsky recalls that his correspondence with Sholem Aleichem began in 1886, when Sholem Aleichem responded to Ravnitsky's request for a work to be published in *Der Veker*, a *khovevey tsiyon* (Lovers of Zion) collection. Sholem Aleichem and Ravnitsky would later (1892-93) publish satiric reviews in Hebrew under the collective pseudonym "Eldad and Medad."

Aleichem” (Ravnitsky 115-16). It is the stock exchange Rabinovich who puts Sholem Aleichem’s continuity in jeopardy: while the latter became more and more prolific and recognized, the former lost more and more money (Ravnitski 126-27).

The Jewish language politics of the late nineteenth century were at the heart of Sholem Aleichem’s project, and his position within these politics is ambivalent at best. Sholem Aleichem often presented himself as a champion of Yiddish, defending the vulnerable folk language against the assaults of snobbish intelligentsia.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, he wrote to Dubnow, “I am currently suffering so many persecutions and unjust attacks on me and on *zhargon*, with which, *for some reason*, my name has been connected” (245, emphasis mine, a letter dated 17 August 1889). This enigmatic line qualifies his stance as the champion of Yiddish. Even more surprising, however, is his letter to Y.L. Gordon, where he states that “I never thought that *zhargon* possessed a historical future as a language; but I cannot give up the thought that now, in the hands of good writers, it can bring the masses a great good. That is to say, the question is of a purely practical nature, without any idealistic lining” (dated 9 June 1888). For this reason, Sholem Aleichem is not insulted by

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<sup>21</sup> In a letter dated 2 September 1888, Sholem Aleichem continues to justify himself against Frug’s accusations, insisting that he wasn’t trying to defend himself in front of the public, since “all those who know me and those who do not are convinced that my enterprise is not commercial work, it is good work. I only wanted in front of the readers of *Voskhod*, most of whom see *zhargon* through the eyes of the Occasional Feuilletonist, to present my beloved *zhargon* in a more presentable light, as it (*zhargon*) deserves, which is something that you yourself, it seems, agree with. Unfortunately, not many share our opinion. [. . .] others, looking at us through the yellow pupils of jealousy on this *new* literature, explode from anger” (Dubnow 238). Here he not only inserts himself as a champion of Yiddish, but also recruits Dubnow to the worthy task, and indeed, in a letter dated about 5 months later, Sholem Aleichem urges Dubnow not to forget to “return to our *zhargon*, which considers you to be its *esteemed benefactor* after the fact that for a whole decade, if not more, our emancipated sister *Russian-Jewish* literature absolutely ignored her talented teenager – *zhargon*” (9 Feb. 1889, in Dubnow 243). Interestingly, here Russian Jewish literature is the mother of any possible development in Yiddish literature. See also a letter dated Aug. 17 of the same year, where Sholem Aleichem declares that Dubnow is “the only writer who treats poor *zhargon* in a sympathetic and humane way” (245).

Gordon's doubt that Yiddish language and literature will develop, or needs any encouragement. "But I am insulted," Sholem Aleichem continues in that same letter, "by the fact that I receive from you a letter in Russian, and not in Hebrew."<sup>22</sup> By taking Russian out of the equation, Sholem Aleichem is satisfying Gordon's – and his own – desire for national(ist) Jewish literature. Gordon eventually does write him in Hebrew commenting on the first volume of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*. In this letter, Gordon stands by his doubt of the efficacy of Sholem Aleichem's project, expressing the explicitly "personal" opinion that "it may cause great damage to the great effort that we are making for three generations to recruit our nation to a pure non-Jewish language for worldly purposes, and the holy tongue [Hebrew] for heavenly purposes." Nonetheless, he congratulates Sholem Aleichem on his effort, playfully commending his creation in "the language of our mothers Sara, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah and other righteous women in Heaven" (*Igrot* 310, in a letter dated 3 Feb. 1889).

As Gordon's letter makes clear, the ambivalence towards Yiddish was directly related to contemporary notions about writing and gender. Sholem Aleichem's creation of a patriarchal tradition, with Mendele as the grandfather, can be read as an attempt to dislodge the gendered binary of Yiddish and Hebrew.<sup>23</sup> That is, Yiddish gains its authority only through the expulsion of feminine creativity, even if it may still maintain its feminine

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<sup>22</sup> Beyt Shalom Aleichem MG 1-6.

<sup>23</sup> Seidman, *A Match Made in Heaven*. See also Davitt Bell's *The Problem Of American Realism*, talks about gender and realism, to argue that the realist/naturalist anti-art stance is also a masculine stance, because the profession of a writer is not sufficiently masculine. So, it seems that this may be happening with Sholem Aleichem as well, with his concern for the status of Yiddish and his own status as a writer of Yiddish literature; his insistence on realism (in "A briv tsu a gutn fraynd") and at the same time fantasy and humor, complicate this, however, if only to say that Sholem Aleichem himself may not have been sure what he wants exactly. I thank Benjamin Pollak for this insight.

audience. I.L. Peretz<sup>24</sup> was proclaimed the father of Yiddish literature only at the first anniversary of his death, in 1916.<sup>25</sup> This belated addition to the family tree points to the problematic absence of the father in the original genealogy created by Sholem Aleichem. Perhaps his was an attempt to fashion a genealogy of genius that not only does not need a mother to be born, a la Athena, but which can also dispense with the father. Yankev Dinezon, in his article “Di yudishe shprakhe un ire shrayber” [The Yiddish language and its writers], which opens the first volume of *Hoyzfraynd*, has a similar dual allegiance; he calls Hebrew, in words that suggest the very different ways in which the two Jewish languages were gendered at the time, a “heylike mutershpakhe” [holy mother-tongue] (2). “Language” itself is a grammatically feminine word, and so while the readers and the language are feminized, the writer, the scribbler, the one with the pen, is masculine, hyper-masculine, so as to have admittance to a patriarchal tradition. While Dinezon describes *Tsene-rene*<sup>26</sup> not only as the first important work of Yiddish literature, but also as a work that was specifically read by “our grandmothers, [and] great-grandmothers [. . .] every Saturday just like our mothers, our wives, and some of our daughters” (1), he introduces it as the creation of “a certain prominent Jewish man, Rabbi Yankev the son of Rabbi Yitskhok” (1), thus asserting a masculine, patriarchal legacy for the text. Indeed, beyond reference to the *Tsene-rene*, women are not mentioned at all in the article. Instead, he creates yet another patriarchal

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<sup>24</sup> Yitskhok Leybush Peretz (1851-1915), a very important Yiddish writer and poet, perhaps most influential for modernist Yiddish poetry; the long poem “Monish” was published in the first volume of *Yidische Folks-bibliotek* as his debut in Yiddish literature. Peretz himself went on to initiate a few periodicals of his own. In a further twist on titles (see note 5), Peretz published a periodical in 1891-1895 which he entitled *Di Yidische bibliotek* [The Jewish/Yiddish library], removing Sholem Aleichem’s inserted “folk.”

<sup>25</sup> In Nomberg’s “I.L. Peretz: der futer fun der literarisher mishpokhe,” cited in Frieden 231, n. 1.

<sup>26</sup> A book of translation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, meant for women and for men who are like women (i.e. men who do not know Hebrew).

lineage: beginning with Ayzik Meyer Dik (1807/14-1893), through Yisroel Aksenfeld (1787-1866), Shloyme Ettinger (1803-1856), and Avrom Ber Gottlober (1811-1899), to S.Y. Abromovich (Mendele). The genealogy is completed with a passing mention to Mordkhe Spector and exuberant praise of Sholem Aleichem. While Yiddish literary production is thus made patriarchal, Hebrew is the holy mother-tongue, which would serve Jewish writers well if only the “hamoyn” [masses] understood it. The contemporary educated writer, for Dinezon, must be humble in front of the masses, who are posited as elderly parents, but this humility is connected to the responsibility of the educated to share their intellectual wealth.

Sholem Aleichem entered this gendered “language war” when he began publishing the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* in Kiev. It was also a response to the contemporary *Folks-blatt* [folk’s page], published and edited at the time by Israel Levy. Ravnitsky recalls this situation, casting Levy as an evil king who took over the *Folks-blatt* after Alexander Tsederboym (1816-1893), who preferred to drop the Yiddish journal while continuing to back the Hebrew periodical *HaMelits*. As editor of the *Folks-blatt*, Levy came under criticism for mounting journalistic attacks on Yiddish, as well as for hebraizing the language (for example, writing “*yehudish*” instead of “*yudish*” or “*yidish*”). One time, according to Ravnitski, he sent a telegram to Sholem Aleichem at the Stock Exchange that read simply, “I spit on your hat” (126, n. 2). Levy was a Litvak (Lithuanian, or Northern, Jew) (Ravnitsky 123, 125-126), which signified in a few ways for Sholem Aleichem and Ravnitsky. Litvaks spoke a very different dialect from the one spoken by Ukrainian and Polish Jews (often generalized as “*Galitsianer*” Jews, referring to the Galicia territory, including eastern Poland and western Ukraine); perhaps even more importantly, Litvaks were associated with the *maskilim* (advocates of the Jewish enlightenment) and *misnagdim* (religious opponents of Hassidism in



the eighteenth century). Sholem Aleichem saw Levy as an enemy both of Yiddish and, even more importantly, of Sholem Aleichem's own project as a Yiddish writer, as well as the negative influence that inspired the creation of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* as a polemical response. Writing to Dubnow on 17 July 1889, he refers to Levy as a "psychopath, who took into his dirty hands the only 'folks blat' [people's paper, also the title of the periodical]" (Dubnow 245). Levy "began his hunt against me and *zhargon* (miserable, innocent!). And you should see how the publisher (and de facto editor) of a *zhargon* newspaper screams in each issue 'away with the foul zhargon!' [. . .] And all this – in the *only* organ for the masses!" (quoted in Dubnow 245). This not unjustified fury against Levy also serves the purpose of marketing the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*. At the end of the letter, Sholem Aleichem defends *zhargon* through his publication, since the "responses and sympathy of sincere people endows me with the strength and courage to fight against clear injustice" (qtd. in Dubnow 246).

In hindsight, it is clear that Levy did not invent the condescending approach he adopted toward Yiddish. It was an intensification of the earlier *maskilic* attitudes towards the corrupted, shameful "*zhargon*," which had been played out since the 1860s by the previous owner of *Folks-blatt*, Tsederboym, although he is not portrayed in as negative a light by Sholem Aleichem. In a letter to Yehuda Leyb Gordon dated 7 April 1888, Sholem Aleichem describes Levy as "meshune vild" [unnaturally savage], much worse than Tsederboym, who was simply "cold."<sup>27</sup> *Kol Mevasser* [*Herald*, both words are Hebrew] was published 1862-1873 in Odessa by Tsederboym, who also founded the *Folks-blatt* in 1881. Tsederboym established Yiddish-language *Kol Mevasser* with the *maskilic* agenda of using Yiddish to

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<sup>27</sup> Beyt Shalom Aleykhem MG 1-6.

reach the masses and eventually wean them off Yiddish, to be replaced with Hebrew or other languages of the land (Russian, English, etc.).<sup>28</sup> On the pages of *Kol Mevasser*, however, some advocated a more liberal approach to Yiddish. In 1864, the journal began publishing Mendele's novel *Dos kleyne menshele* [The little person, translated as *The Parasite* in 1956] and in 1871 Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski's novel *Dos poylishe yingl* [translated as *The Polish Lad* in 1975], both of which – along with Aksenfeld's *Shterntikhl* (1861) – became widely popular to the surprise of their writers and publishers. The latter, in particular, is repeatedly mentioned in the memoirs of Yiddish writers as an early inspiration of creative activity.<sup>29</sup>

However ambivalent Tsederboym's agenda towards the Yiddish language and its speakers may have been, his periodicals *Kol Mevasser* and the *Folks-blatt* were the only platforms for Yiddish literature. In a way, Levy's aggressiveness, when presented in contrast to Tsederboym's by Sholem Aleichem and others, brought about the coming-of-age of a new generation of Yiddish writers, as did some other negative, debilitating circumstances to which the new generation of writers needed to find creative solutions. Nokhum Oyslender's 1926 article "Der yunger sholem-aleykhem un zayn roman 'stempenyu'" [The young Sholem Aleichem and his novel *Stempenyu*] contextualizes Sholem Aleichem's and Spector's development. Oyslender points to Sholem Aleichem's embeddedness in Russian literature, but he also observes that the innovations of Yiddish literature in Russia superseded those of Russian literature, which saw change only in the 1890s, with general impoverishment and the cholera epidemic. Yiddish literature began developing more progressive streams a decade earlier than Russian literature, according to Oyslender, because of the collective trauma of the pogroms of 1881-82, which, after a short period of reflection, brought about a new style

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Miron's *A Traveler Disguised*, 280, n. 41.

<sup>29</sup> See Miron's *A Traveler Disguised*, 5-7.

which placed greater emphasis on personal experience and which revealed a new historical consciousness (11). What emerged was a literature concerned with confusion, crisis, mobility, and displacement (Oyslender 12). While the reportage style, characterized by detailed but arch-less narrative, is a stilted artistic style according to Oyslender, there were other techniques adapted uniquely to this period, like the epistolary genre. The epistolary genre (as used in Sholem Aleichem's *Menakhem-Mendl*, as well as in Spector's "Es geyt nisht khotsh tsu rays zikh!" [It's not working, even if you/they burst!] in *Hoyzfraynd*), as Oyslender demonstrates, was an attempt to give form to the chaotic movement of the period: exile, migration, urbanization (13-14).

Oyslender – and here the Soviet context of his article adds to the import of his words – sees the *Haskalah* as a potential harbinger of socialism. Since the pogroms struck a final blow to the waning Haskole movement, they also dramatically changed the relation of the Jewish intelligentsia to socialism. While some became more radical, most became reactionary bourgeois-nationalists, which meant in Oyslender's scheme of things, an abandonment of what little democratic notions they may have previously had. Sholem Aleichem mentions his involvement with *khovevey tsiyon* [Lovers of Zion, a proto-Zionist movement beginning in the 1880s] to Dubnow in his letters from 1890, and Ravnitsky cites Sholem Aleichem's hesitation about having a particular politics associated with his art:

I am not an assimilationist or a Palestinian, I am a Hebrew and love the Jewish man, because I am a human and I love human beings. Whenever an idea, no matter how holy it is, falls into our hands, human hands, we begin to massage it and limit it, until it necessarily wears a form that is stupid and ridiculous; therefore, one can mock and ridicule both the assimilationist and the Palestinian" (quoted in Oyslender, 114).

Similarly, Spector, in his attempt to appeal to the simple folk, criticizes the surrounding ideologies and politics – the Palestinians (meaning, in this context, Jewish settlers in

Palestine) and the assimilationists (Oyslender 22).

Despite attempts to distance himself from the Jewish political environment, with its largely outdated assimilationist agenda and its newly-emergent “Palestinian” one, Sholem Aleichem did not emerge from the ideological conflicts of the time unscathed. His humor went through a drastic transformation due to the environmental pressures; if he was previously known as a young eclectic writer, most talented at mocking the petit bourgeoisie daily life, with which he was intimately familiar, he now wanted to turn away from mere “*leytsones*” (mockery, buffoonery) which the middle class audience seems to demand.<sup>30</sup> It is the acute awareness of being misunderstood that drove Sholem Aleichem to refine his humoristic craft (Oyslender 30). Sholem Aleichem’s craft was deeply influenced by Mordkhe Spector, who articulated the new aesthetic in the epigraph to his 1886 novella *Yudish!*, dedicated to Sholem Aleichem: “laughing does not mean making fun, laughing means bitter crying sometimes (as said by a simple Jew).”<sup>31</sup> Following the example of Spector, and influenced by Russian populism (*narodnichestvo*), Sholem Aleichem turned to the representation of the folk and of provincial life (Oyslender 16). Folkism involves love for the masses, for the streets of the provincial town. According to Oyslender, Sholem Aleichem strives to study the new types of the poor street, to observe them, and to learn something for himself (17). Sholem Aleichem’s work in the late 80s finally allows for the transformation of the folk from an object to a subject (19), finding within it “buried beauty, hidden forces” (20). Throughout, Oyslender speaks of these authors’ relations to the folk as a feeling or an

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<sup>30</sup> This is already mentioned in one of the opening paragraphs. Add here, or somewhere on the pauperization (or, from some perspectives, proletarianization) of the Jewish population. See also Eli Lederhendler, *Jewish Immigrants and American Capitalism, 1880-1920: From Caste to Class*, the first chapter “Down and Out in Eastern Europe.”

<sup>31</sup> (“לאַכען הייסט ניט חוזק מאַכען, / לאַכען הייסט אַמאָל ביטער געוויינט. / נאַכטעזאָגט פֿון אַ פּראָסטען יודען”) (1). See also Oyslender 21, 29.

instinct rather than a conscious act (19-27). It seems that the instinct is a medium of connection, but that feeling is sometimes the actual content of communication. It is the medium and the message.

### **Nurturing the Folk: Framing the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek***

The framing pieces of the two numbers of the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* demonstrate the ambivalent ideological and aesthetic aspirations of the editors as they relate to the folk and the artist's positionality to it. The four pieces (one at the beginning and one at the end of each volume) echo each other and this echoing allows for an ironic model of criticism, where the different pieces play off each other, complimenting and subverting each other. The first issue of the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* begins with a letter from Dr. Yitskhok Kaminer<sup>32</sup> to the publisher; it parallels the *maskilic* opening of *Hoyzfraynd*. Kaminer was what may be termed a moderate *maskil*, urging respect for the old tradition and rejecting the *maskilic* ideals of assimilation. These ideals were seen as unrealizable dreams following the pogroms, and Kaminer is listed by Oyslender among the many former-socialists-turned-nationalists. Kaminer's letter commends Sholem Aleichem's effort to bring into the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* – along with the great Yiddish writers, Jewish writers who otherwise wrote

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<sup>32</sup> Kaminer (1834-1901) was born close to Zhitomir, and became a moderate *maskil* in Vilnius, who published poetry (untalented pieces, acc. to Ravnitsky, though he still calls Kaminer a “national poet” – characteristically, perhaps, for Ravnitski, politics and aesthetics do not correspond (143, 151-52) and satire pieces in Hebrew periodicals such as *HaAsif*, *HaKarmel*, *HaEmet*, *HaShachar*, *HaKol*, and *Asefat khakhamim*. He became a physician in 1865 and practiced in Kiev. He left Kiev in 1880 due to financial difficulties and persecutions due to his socialist activities. Following the pogroms in southern Russia in 1881-1882, he joined the Jewish commissions through the Pale, and was kicked off because he was outspoken against pogroms and oppression; while he never believed in agriculture as the solution to the Jewish national problem, he became a follower of *khibat tsiyon* in the 1880s and later Herzl (Ravnitsky 143-59, Oded Menda-Levy, “Kaminer, Yitshak” in *The Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 1, p. 855; “Kaminer, Isaak Abramovich,” in *Bolshaya biograficheskaya enciklopedia*, [http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc\\_biography](http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enc_biography)).

primarily in Russian and Hebrew – “they are all here, all our Jewish forces, the best representatives of our literature and they all speak with one tongue, with the same tongue that the whole folk speaks” (I). In his review of “Di nay-zhargonishe literature” [The New-Yiddish Literature], published in the same volume, Ravnitsky also emphasizes the “coming to Yiddish” of authors who are well-known in Russian (like Frug) and Hebrew (like Mendele and Y.L. Gordon), as a sign of Yiddish literature’s renaissance (*Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* 1, 299). Kaminer is delighted at the mere fact that Jewish talent is so visible. He sees such talent as a sign of God’s laughing at the claims of antisemites (III). Jewish intellectuals, in Kaminer’s perspective, are the creators of culture; it is from their efforts that a “holy congregation” is created. Kaminer is also concerned that the publication should follow a particular purpose with regard to the folk; he speaks “as a doctor” to suggest a diet for the folk, a diet that Sholem Aleichem must strictly follow as he prepares his periodical (III).

The language of sickness and healing can be seen as a symptom of the *maskilic* view of Jews as sick or dying. The folk needs warm food, Kaminer says, not cold satire, they need a hearty borscht, not watery foolishness. His recipe for proper folk literature consists of “meat (thoughts), shmalts (feelings), salt (humor), pepper (satire)” (III). He continues to warn that the last two should be used in moderation, as much as the folk love a good joke. It seems that Kaminer is sending a mixed message: on the one hand, he argues that the Jewish folk should no longer be mocked by its writers, that its traditions should be represented in a respectful light (read: however foolish they may seem). At the same time, however, he also urges a continuation of the enlightenment project. The form should only be a vehicle for the liberating knowledge it contains, as he suggests by emphasizing that even if the folk wants salt and pepper, it is the writers’ responsibility not to overdo it and to at least give them meat

(content) to go along with it (III-IV). There is a clear opposition being made between humor and satire, on the one hand, and content on the other, which suggests the difficulty in pointing out precisely the content of humor. It is up to the author to negotiate the duality of earnest aspiration for equality and the popular demand for the anesthetic of humor. As I will touch upon in the fifth chapter, and as I try to demonstrate throughout, humor in spite of pain, laughter through tears, is a strategy that may escape the intentionality of the minority intellectual. It is important to emphasize that humor and satire take up two of the four ingredients in Kaminer's recipe. The two others, fairly abstract "thoughts" and "feelings," head the list and thus provide a hierarchy reminiscent of the Cartesian mind-body binary. And yet, Kaminer uses food imagery, a very material, bodily kind of imagery. The mention of meat, further, should be seen as ironic, since the variety of food he demands would not be accessible to the masses.

The use of food imagery in relation to literary production may also be seen as a poetic program, where literature itself becomes food, and a food, moreover, that can sustain in spite of material shortage. This is a very different manifesto from that of Sholem Aleichem, whose newly found connection to the folk also leads to self-criticism and an ambivalence towards his role as a folk-writer. In 1888 Sholem Aleichem published "Funem veg" [From the road], where the character of a simple Jew criticizes the author's work; he responds to Sholem Aleichem's humanistic defense of literature as benefiting society and the folk: "What folk? Who folk? The hungry folk? The folk is hungry, hungry, hungry! And you're doing them a favor by providing little stories and poems, sayings and proverbs? You give them advice and preach to them? Give them bread! You hear me? Bread give to the hungry folk! A piece of

bread!” (in *Folks-blatt* 1888, no. 43, quoted in Oyslender 18).<sup>33</sup> As opposed to Kaminer’s working metaphor, where bread is completely forgotten, replaced by proper literature, for Sholem Aleichem bread stands in a privileged, incontestable position in relation to meaning-making. Bread cannot be subsumed under metaphor; it is a referent the existence of which points to the shakiness and potential insignificance of all verbal signification, be it earnest or ironic.

The closing piece of the first issue of the *Yidische Folks-bibliotek* is a short piece by Sholem Aleichem on Yiddish orthography. The piece expresses the tension between the desire for order in the language, a thirst for a Yiddish grammar, and the opportunity that the lack of grammar provides for Yiddish writers. Sholem Aleichem goes about setting up some rules for writing in *zhargon*, rules that he continually breaks (he decries the overuse of German and Hebrew in Yiddish, for instance, only to introduce German terms like “shprakhe” [language] and expressions in the holy tongue, like “moneshekh” [one or the other] [474]). He also codifies five simple and enigmatic rules for the Yiddish writer to follow:

1. one must write **yudish** [pronounced “yidish” in Ukrainian, and most Yiddish dialects], just as one speaks.
2. one must write in such a way, that both the Polish reader and the Litvak should understand.
3. every zhargonist should remember that he writes **zhargon**, i.e., more for the folk, for the masses.
4. the spelling of German words must be closer to German.
5. there should be a difference between words that are pronounced the same but have a different meaning. Such as: shteyn (stand and stone), tsen (ten and teeth) [..... – the

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<sup>33</sup> This is especially interesting in the context of left-wing discourses, which were obsessed with metaphors of nourishment. Good (i.e. not bourgeois) art was supposed to be real nourishment for the masses, not the cheap “bread and circus” of mass culture, the carnival, etc, which are seen to be filling but not nourishing. Moyshe Nadir, for instance, refers scornfully to “broyt un tsirk” [bread and circus] in the play “Moshiekh in Amerike” [Messiah in America]. I am very grateful to Benjamin Pollak for this connection.



translation of words is in Russian] etc. (474-475)  
There are some contradictions in the rules, perhaps stemming from the ambiguity of the first rule. What does it mean to write Yiddish as one speaks? If it means to spell it phonetically, then the fourth and fifth rule contradict this statement. What is the difference between “yudish” in the first rule and “zhargon” in the third? That is to say, who speaks in the first rule? And since the Polish speaker and the Litvak (Lithuanian) speaker would speak in different dialects, how can one fulfill both the first and the second rules? These contradictions may point to simple carelessness, but, taken within the context of the piece as a whole, they seem to illustrate an ambiguous attitude towards the possibility of prescribing a literary endeavor.

While Kaminer, in the letter which opened the volume, speaks of the folk as one organic unit, Sholem Aleichem, in the closing piece, is enacting the difficulty of uniting this folk. If Kaminer claims that the volume is written in “one tongue, with the same tongue that the whole folk speaks,” Sholem Aleichem is showing that this tongue is not one by contrasting the Polish and Lithuanian dialects. When he writes of how “one speaks *ba unz*” [“among us” or “as we have it”], he refers specifically to “Jews here in Russia (not Germany)” (474) or “in Poland, in Volin, Ukraine, rather than how one speaks in Lithuania” (475). At the same time, he is convinced that Litvak Jews, and “even German Jews proper” would understand the Yiddish of the volume (475).<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the piece, Sholem Aleichem turns to the learned people, those same

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<sup>34</sup> Lithuanian Jews are associated with the Enlightenment and anti-Hassidic (misnagdic) tendencies, both of which are seen as coming from the west (German Jewry heralded Jewish enlightenment). Dubnow, Sholem Aleichem’s supporter in *Voskhod*, is a Litvak. Y.L. Gordon, in a letter dated 3 Feb. 1889, demands Sholem Aleichem should concern himself with reconciling the “Northern” and the “Southern” dialects, so that this particular authority would not be yet further divided into two (*Igrot yalag* 310).

ones before whom he needs to defend Yiddish, to create a Yiddish grammar for the “folk and its writers” (476). At this point, no unified grammar is available, and “everyone has the right to write as he wishes” (ibid). The turn to the learned ones is surely ironic, since it echoes Kaminer’s presentation of the learned as the builders of a community, and since these learned ones have a linguistic project differing from Sholem Aleichem’s own. What he poses as a problem, the inability to make “forty different articles have one orthography,” can also be seen as a motto of diversity, of a Jewish writer’s identification with the multiple folk, and having responsibility to his particular folk only, through dialect, rather than through any coherent and unified political agenda. In either case, there is an ambivalence towards the possibility and efficacy of ordering language. Perhaps it is the delight in disorder that makes him call himself an “aroyseger” (a publisher), rather than a “redactor” (an editor).

Sholem Aleichem may have avoided naming himself a “redactor,” but that did not stop him from wielding a heavy editorial hand, which caused him some serious frictions with some of the contributors.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, the role of a people’s editor also meant, for Sholem Aleichem, the need to censure material that was too complex.<sup>36</sup> The first section of the volume is entitled “Belletristik” [Belles-lettres], and contains poetry by the famous authors Y.L. Gordon, Y.L. Peretz, E. Tsunzer (translated from Hebrew), Dovid Frishman, and Shimon Frug (translated from Russian and original Yiddish works), among others; short stories by Ben Ami, Yaakov Dinezohn, Y.Y. Linetsky, among others; as well as dramatic works and the first part of Mendele Mokher Sforim’s novel, *Dos vunsh fingerl*. The second section was “Kritik” [Criticism], and was dominated by Ravnitsky.

Ravnitsky, under the pseudonym “Rebe Katsin,” was responsible for most of this

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<sup>35</sup> Linetsky (Dubnow 248, fn.) and Perets in particular.

<sup>36</sup> Tsitron and Frug decry Sholem Aleichem’s demand for transparency (LTs 9-6 and LF 9-44).

section in the two volumes of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*. His review, entitled “Di naye-zhargonishe literatur” [The new *zhargon* literature] in the first volume, gives an overview of Yiddish publications, with special emphasis on serialized collections, thus delineating the market into which the *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* itself was entering. Ravnitsky, unlike Sholem Aleichem, does not display any ambivalence towards the need for an orderly orthography; for him, the lack of consistent spelling was a sign of a lack of seriousness in the approach to Yiddish, and he also condemns the overuse of Russian and Hebrew words in Yiddish writing (299, 323, 329, 340-42). He opens, however, with an explicit recognition of a renaissance in Yiddish literature, an awakening that owes its existence to the Yiddish serial collections (“sbornikes” and “zamlungen” are the words he uses). In his review of Mordkhe Spector’s *Hoyzfraynd*, he emphasizes that, although Spector was not the first to publish a Yiddish collection, he was the first to collect a mixture of articles that did not have a particular end or focus in mind, as his own *Der yudisher veker* had (299-300). Following Kaminer’s food imagery, Ravnitsky compares *Hoyzfraynd* to a feast, with all kinds of “dishes [*maykholim*] that are truly fresh and healthy, that should give strength and juice, so that the audience will be entertained, lick its fingers, as it likes to do” (300). The main problem that Ravnitsky sees with Spector’s collection is that it lacks any discussion of “serious questions.” The folk, Ravnitsky asserts, will read with pleasure and draw some use from serious articles, such as those on education, as long as the writer’s “words come from the heart and are written clearly, without being too complicated [*ibergeshpitst*], or too convoluted [*fardreyt*” (300). Indeed, Ravnitsky is disappointed with the level of criticism exhibited by the contributors to *Hoyzfraynd* (Dinezohn, Mezakh, Emes), who seem to simply give grades to works without explaining their decisions (304-5). His own criticism of the volume involves the argument

that, besides the poetry written by Frug, other poetry is simply “prose in rhymes” (305-9). From the prose selection, Ravnitsky delights primarily in Mendele, whom he calls a “real poet,” more outstanding than the many “romantics” (310-11). The critic is most impressed with the part of *Hoyzfraynd* that contains the collection of proverbs, which bring out the “folk’s genius,” even though he takes issue with the collector’s (Ignatz Bernstein’s) and editor’s (Spector’s) interpretation of the proverbs (321-22). Ravnitsky’s review of *Hoyzfraynd* on the pages of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* provides exposure to the former, but also gives the latter a position of authority in terms of aesthetic judgment.

The opening piece of the second issue of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek* (1889) is Sholem Aleichem’s response to the criticisms of the first volume. It is a mirror image of the Kaminer piece which opened the first issue. This time, Sholem Aleichem the publisher addresses the audience, as opposed to being addressed, and he answers some of the criticisms of the first issue. Sholem Aleichem, in an echo of the closing piece of the previous issue, acknowledges the multiplicity of the folk, apologizing for his inability to please everyone (I). He echoes Kaminer’s expression of collecting “the best powers,” but turns it towards the audience, endowing the folk readers with the power to support their writers: “one must first call together, collect, the public,<sup>37</sup> to collect all the best powers of our folk together” (I). He dismisses those critics who think that the folk cannot handle a “sbornik” and should be given fairy-tales instead (III). He finally states that all the arguments that the first issue inspired are a waste of ink and paper, and that the Yiddish readers have paid their hard-earned money in order to read something new, not to see dirty laundry displayed (III-IV). The self-righteous

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<sup>37</sup> Sholem Aleichem uses the word “oylem” here; I understand it to mean public in the sense of audience, but it is possible that he means to refer rather to the public in the sense of a group of people, and then he may be referring to the Yiddish writers, as well as the audience, who are difficult to bring together because of their variety.

and enraged tone Sholem Aleichem adopts here is similar to the one he uses in relation to Levy. That is to say, the justified rage, the antagonistic spirit, and the promise of battle and drama, is a way of advertising the importance of *Yidishe Folks-bibliotek*. Ravnitsky recounts the commotion the first volume made, describing the response “from many cities and towns, from simple readers and enlightened ones, and also from famous writers” (122).

The 1889 issue closes with a “Letter to a good friend,”<sup>38</sup> an ironic artistic manifesto, in which Sholem Aleichem addresses the criticism of his novel *Stempenyu*, subtitled “the first Yiddish/Jewish novel,” and published as an appendix to the first issue. The letter also prefaces his second novel, *Yosele Solovey*, which directly follows the “letter.” Sholem Aleichem highly valued both *Stempenyu* and *Yosele Solovey*; Ravnitsky recalled how the package which contained the manuscript for *Stempenyu* was insured for 1,000 rubles, which provoked much curiosity at the post office (Ravnitsky 118). In two letters to Dubnow, one dated 2 Sept. 1888, and another dated 11 Jan. 1889, Sholem Aleichem grounds *Stempenyu*’s story in anthropological research he conducted in Berdichev; *Stempenyu* is known to the older generation of the town and its environs, and *Stempenyu*’s descendants still thrive in the town (Dubnow 239 and 242). It isn’t clear whether Sholem Aleichem is being sincere with Dubnow. In his unyielding devotion to Mendele in the letter preceding the novel, he makes the statement that “*Stempenyu* is yours,” and acknowledges that one of Mendele’s characters by the name of *Stempenyu* made him remember all the tales of *Stempenyu* that he had heard as a child. The novel follows a fiddler and Rachel, a young married woman, who become infatuated with each other, and while *Stempenyu* is very ready to pursue the romance, Rachel decides to pursue her married life. If one chooses to read the novel as extolling conservative

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<sup>38</sup> See also Frieden, 151-53.

traditionalism, it is important to note that Sholem Aleichem is describing a world of the past, about a generation removed. In the earlier letter to Dubnow, he writes: “The plot is not very fancy, the process of love is momentary, as is suitable when writing of Jewish life 20 years ago” (Dubnow 239). Incidentally, Mendele did not think highly of *Stempenyu*: “when you describe life, it is a pleasure to read. There is wit, humor. But when you stage love [shplin a libe – lit. “fall in love”], nothing comes of it.”<sup>39</sup>

“Letter to a good friend” is addressed in the familiar form “du” and contains refrains of “bosom friend,” “beloved friend,” and the like. In a baffled tone, Sholem Aleichem answers three concerns that his “friends, the writers” have brought before him: why should this be a Jewish novel, and not simply a novel?; why is the protagonist a lowly *klezmer* [musician]?; and what is the lesson of this novel, how is it educational? Given the letter’s polemical stance, one must ask what “good friend” Sholem Aleichem is addressing. Is he one of the condemners/questioners, or is he simply a sounding board for Sholem Aleichem’s thoughts on Yiddish literature? As an answer to the triple criticism, Sholem Aleichem voices a complaint about the underappreciation of the artist in Jewish culture and also sketches out an aesthetic of the folk writer. He justifies this aesthetic, in his answer to the second charge in particular, by assuming the all-too-familiar role of the educator, the enlightener of the folk: *Yosele Solovey* proceeds from *Stempenyu* and provides a higher example for the folk to emulate; the third Jewish novel, which would later be titled *Blondzhene shtern* will have a yet higher ideal, according to the author’s plan. In a February, 1889 letter to Dubnow, Sholem Aleichem states that *Stempenyu* is his “first attempt to create something wonderful/beautiful [*prekrasnoe*, using the Russian word] in the field of fantasy, on Jewish folk soil/grounding

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<sup>39</sup> In a letter dated 17 Jan. 1889, Beyt Shalom Aleykhem LM 13-31.

[pochva] [. . .] In my following creations, I come back to my usual genre – historical narration [bytopisaniye]” (Dubnow 243).

Describing the writing process of *Yosele Solovey* a year later, Sholem Aleichem delights in the escape to art: “the only escape – is art, into which one can distance one’s self for a while and forget all this literary scum” (2 Feb 1890, in Dubnow 246). Describing “Yosele Solovey,” then under the working title of “Perele,” to Dubnow in a letter dated 18 July 1889, Sholem Aleichem describes it as “lyrical; with all my tendency for happy humor, I don’t have the spirit in me to fool around [yurodstvovat’] with our contemporary social position” (Dubnow 244).<sup>40</sup> It was necessary to begin with Stempenyu because he is folksy, but also has an artistic, poetic spirit which the folk can learn from. His character is meant to encourage the folk: “the folk must know what kinds of power are found in them” (308). In a fascinating take on the empowerment project, one that emphasizes the need for aesthetic education, Sholem Aleichem claims that, before presenting the folk with “high thoughts,” the writer should acquaint it with poetry (307-308). This attitude to poetry is a conflicted one for Sholem Aleichem, it seems, since only a year earlier he had written in *Folks-blatt*: “I don’t want to be a badkhn/jester<sup>41</sup> in *Folks-blatt* [...] I divorced the lyre”<sup>42</sup> (quoted in Oyslender 6). The lyre, a symbol of personal, lofty, emotional poetry, here is conflated with clowning and mundane entertainment.

He furnishes the answer to the second question by stating, “And so it is easy to see,

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<sup>40</sup> Oyslender has an interesting reading of Sholem Aleichem’s inability to joke; he puts the emphasis on internal rather than external factors and claims that the “contemporary social position” refers to the nationalist turn of Jewish intelligentsia, as opposed to the waves of economic and physical persecutions of Jews by the surrounding non-Jewish environment (31).

<sup>41</sup> A badkhn is a type of jester, whose primary role is to serve as a master of ceremonies at a Jewish wedding.

<sup>42</sup> "קיינ' בדיחן אין פֿאָלקסבלאַט' וויל איך ניש זיין / [...] / דער לירע האָב איך געגעבן אַ גט."

that while writing my novels, I have had an idea behind them” (308). These rules that Sholem Aleichem sets for his writing, these realistic and educational goals, seem to break down in the answer to the last question, where he states that “a novel is no article, not a sermon from a preacher to chastise the world” and that “a novel is not made to order” (308-309). What, then, can be understood from his programmatic statement for the elevation of the folk? It seems that there is a repetition here of the sentiment expressed in the closing piece of the previous issue, where the writer claims responsibility to the folk only, a nebulous kind of folk, not delineated by ideals, but rather by personal identification. The characters must be taken from reality (in this case Jewish folk reality), and the artist is a painter who takes elements of this reality only to organize them anew and give them color. The characters must be realistic not only on the outside, but on the inside as well. They cannot be simply “good” or “evil,” as in “days gone-by” (309). To achieve this, the writer must “give himself over to the protagonists and experience everything together with them” (309). There is an ambivalent identification with the folk here, since the relation is contingent upon representation. Sholem Aleichem is drawing his characters from the folk, his claim to being committed to the folk is fulfilled. The writer seemingly approaches the folk through his experiences, except that the writer has fabricated these experiences in the first place.

The framing pieces of the second volume in general have a more bitter tone, perhaps due to his financial troubles (he promises a third volume but must abandon the project for lack of funds), and perhaps due to the responses. In either case, there is a feeling of antagonism toward the world and a greater emphasis on his literary enemies; even the expression of belonging to a folk, the repeated “ba undz” [“among us”] of the first volume is, in the second one, a reference to a community of artists (in the opening piece) or to a



community that doesn't know how to appreciate them (in both pieces); there is discord in the communication between the artist and his audience. Again, though, the only glimmer of hope lies in emotional, rather than intellectual, response. Most artists are buried and suppressed "bay undz" he writes, and "if it happens sometimes that one out of ten thousand comes out, and shows himself with all his fire, nobody understands him among us; **feeling - sure, one feels him, but understanding - no one understands him!**" (307, emphasis in the original). Sholem Aleichem succeeds in walking the tight-rope between being understood and misunderstood. Sholem Aleichem accepts existentially the reality of being "felt," but not "understood." The selfishness of the complaint may be seen as conflicting with his work as the novelist of *Stempenyu*, when one considers Anita Norich's reading of the novel in her "Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem." Striving to find a reading that goes beyond the binaristic approaches which either center on *Stempenyu* (who symbolizes energetic escape from tradition) or *Rokhele* (who symbolizes folk piety), Norich writes, "The hero is not symbolically punished in the end. In effect, he fades away, replaced not by praise of *Rokhele*, but by the broader interest and point of view" (241). Seen in this light (though the novel and the editorial statement may simply be in contradiction), the complaint may not be one of self-pity, but rather an earnestly elitist lament over the folk's deficiency of aesthetic understanding. Oyslender sees great significance in the move to create love stories in Yiddish; for both Spector and Sholem Aleichem, the provincial love story is one of the ways in which the folk are granted their humanity, their subjecthood (20).<sup>43</sup> The folksy characters' subjecthood/humanity is meant, through identification, one supposes, to empower folksy

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<sup>43</sup> Seth Wolitz makes a similar argument about *The Dybbuk* in his "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Lettes," in *The Worlds of S. Ansky* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 164-20, especially 185-89.

readers.

In an 1887 feuilleton entitled “Fun vayte medines” [From faraway lands] Sholem Aleykhem also expresses the concern with being misunderstood, and here the concern is explicitly about the readers’ inability to see the pain involved in his humor and satire. The pain is caused by the fact that “my generation does not understand me and doesn’t see the tears in my eyes, when I cry, and doesn’t feel the pangs which I carry deep-deep in my heart” (quoted in Oyslender 29).<sup>44</sup> The tension here is thus intra-generational as well as intergenerational. The location of pain is slippery here: there is some pain prior to the contact with his readers, his generation, but it is exacerbated by the readers and critics who fail to understand his writing. For Gogol, there is only the hidden individual pain of the author as a tortured artist which causes the tears behind a laughing mask. For Sholem Aleichem, it is the mask itself which is painful; he is not only suffering due to some abstract poetic sensibility but also from the dissatisfying contact with the reader. His approach may be seen as more demanding of the reader.

In Spector’s aforementioned *Yudish!* the concern with connecting to readers on the emotional level is also apparent. The story opens with " וויינען וויל איך, מײן טײער און ליבער לעזער, " "I feel like crying, my dear reader, crying!" (1). The narrator proceeds to explain that he is crying not in self-deprecation; not because the reader might mock the narrator as a “lets” [a clown], and not even because of the Russian editorialist, who claimed to be a Jew but wrote that Yiddish literature is for “cobblers, tailors, water-carriers and old wives.” Rather, the narrator wants to weep

“only for you, really, who feel what you read; for you, and you may be whoever you

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<sup>44</sup> "מײן דור טוט מיך ניט פֿאַרשטיין און זעט ניט די טרערן אויף מײנע אויגן, ווען איך לאָך און פֿילט ניט מײנע שמערצן, וואָס איך טראָג טיף-טיף אין האַרצן."

are – a wealthy man, a pauper, a *misnaged*, a Hassid, a *maskil*, an intellectual, a tailor, a cobbler, a water-carrier; it's all one! If you are a Jew, I want to cry my heart out to you [...] To you, reader, who feel as a Jewish heart should feel, for you who think like a Jew and live in a Jewish way, before you I want now to cry my heart out and to laugh, so that I may feel a little lighter!... lighter!... May god give strength!" (1).<sup>45</sup>

And so the reader's socioeconomic class does not matter; even his or her political and cultural orientation does not matter. It only matters that the reader be a Jew in the contemporary world. Just as in the previous chapter, the homogenization of African American experience is made suspect, here the particularistic utopian unity is surely ironic; the conflicts among Jews are made clear only a few lines later: the Jew "does not hear a single good word from anyone, gets no consolation, and is hated by strangers and his own/friends, ekh! Those closest to him call themselves 'brothers' and cause him more trouble than the strangers!" (1).<sup>46</sup> The perfect Jewish reader is constructed as one who will intimately feel the narrator's weeping. And, in turn, the narrator will only reveal his tears to the one who can feel them. The narrator's emotion is incomplete unless it finds a home within the reader's heart. Here, the practice of reading itself becomes a joint venture between the text and its author, on the one hand, and between the author and the reader, on the other.

## Conclusion

While performing in a limbo of social equality – in the disappointment of regressive liberal politics, the minority artist is marketed – by him/herself or others – as being able to depict the

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<sup>45</sup> טאַקע נאָר פֿאַר דיר, וואָס דו פֿילסט וואָס דו לייענסט; פֿאַר דיר, דו מעגסט זיין ווער דו ביזט – אַ גביר, איין אַרעמאָן, אַ מתנגד, אַ חסיד, אַ משכיל, איין אינטיליגענט, אַ שניידער, אַ שוסטער, אַ וואַסערטרעגער, אַלץ איינס! ביזט דו נאָר אַ יוד וויל [...] פֿאַר דיר, לעזער, וואָס דו פֿילסט ווי אַ יודיש האַרץ דאַרף פֿילן, פֿאַר דיר וואָס דו איך זיך פֿאַר דיר אויסוויינען דענקסט ווי אַ יוד און לעבסט יודיש, פֿאַר דיר וויל איך זיך איצטער גוט אויסוויינען און לאַכן, עס זאָל ווערן אַ ביסעלע גרינגער! ... גרינגער! ... גיב גאָט כחות! ...!"

<sup>46</sup> הערט פֿון קיינעם נישט כאַטש אַ גוט וואָרט, קיין טרייסט, פֿרעמדע האַבן אים פֿיינט און אייגענע, עך! אייגענע וואָס רופֿן " זיך אָן 'ברידער' מאַכן אָן דעם יודן נאָך גרעסערע צרות ווי פֿרעמדע

oppressed reality with which s/he is intimately familiar. Indeed, in order to validate the authenticity of representation, there is the expectation that the artist will step off the stage right back into that oppressive reality. At the same time, the very act of being on the stage separates the minority artist from that reality. The artist, as the representative of a minority, presents the folk as self, perhaps even presenting him or herself as the unifying embodiment of the polyvocal folk collective.<sup>47</sup> It has already become clear that the texts I seek to address do not stand alone; they always need a parent, a serious or satirical counterpart, and so the generational positioning of the authors reveals not only a conscious attempt at canonization,<sup>48</sup> but also the dependence of a humorist on serious representation as backdrop to his/her own art.

The new generation of writers show that even the most serious claims are never safe. The humor in their works explicitly disturbs the equation of reality and realistic representation; it creates unease, and so provides the tension of a masochistic aesthetics: is the joker poking fun at her/himself? Is the minority reader made to laugh at her/himself? The exploration of the unresolved ambivalence of the minority author's relationship to the folk is an attempt to address these questions, where the unresolved and painful duality leads to a masochistic aesthetic, an aesthetic that characterizes the "laughter through tears" mode of representation. Laughter through tears is characterized by the enactment of the relation between binary opposites, as well as the determent of the satisfaction of desire by ritualizing and extending it: laughter comes after the description of painful oppressive reality. The release of laughter comes not from the pain of reality, but rather from the control one has

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<sup>47</sup> Also see Merrill's "Are we the 'folk' in this lok?: Usefulness of the plural in translating a *lok-katha*."

<sup>48</sup> See also Oyslender 7.

over its representation.

## Chapter IV

### Round-Trip: The Liberating Constraints of Diasporic Literature

Thus, while capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e. to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e. to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another

Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

Time and Space died yesterday

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti<sup>2</sup>

### Diaspora in Training: On routes and roots<sup>3</sup>

This chapter examines the railroad both as a symbol and as a mode of transportation, using the different significations of the train to interrogate modern approaches to movement and mobility. In particular, I will focus on laughter, which, I propose, should be understood as one such form of modern movement. Railway construction and expansion and, by extension, trains themselves, are associated with national unity and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Grundrisse*, Notebook V, 22 January 1858 - Beginning of February 1858, (<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1857/grundrisse/ch10.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> "The Futurist Manifesto," 1909.

<sup>3</sup> The root/route binary is commonly evoked in African diasporic studies, African-American studies among them. Nicholls, for example, compares the poetry of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown along this binary in his introduction to *Conjuring the Folk* (11-17).

possibilities of racial and ethnic uplift through urbanization. In the pages that follow, I explore how these associations played out within the very different contexts of the United States in the 1920-30s and Czarist Russia in the 1880s. Although a late nineteenth century journey from the *shtetl* [small Jewish village] to Kiev and back was a very different experience from a twentieth century trip from the American South to New York, this unlikely comparison reveals important similarities in the strategies minority writers have used to negotiate technological modernity, movement, time, and space. The minority writer's relationship to the train is an ambivalent one, and therefore usefully interrogated through irony; for the train is as much a promise of equality and opportunity in a liberal-utopian view, invested in public spaces and integration-as-liberation, as it is a guarantee of discrimination, since the space of the train car was in fact segregated, thereby recreating and affirming social inequalities. To further complicate these dynamics, the segregated space of the train is also to a certain degree celebrated – problematically and exhilaratingly – as a minority space. The movements of a minority subject are circumscribed by legal and economic restrictions, but the writers I discuss suggest an alternate choreography<sup>4</sup> in their interactions with their readers.

This choreography involves ironic literary representation as well as alternative forms of address, such as the artist-driven periodicals discussed in the opening chapters. Another form of address which in turn choreographs minority movement is the public

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<sup>4</sup> In using the term “choreography,” I invoke the concept of “social choreography” as proposed by Andrew Hewitt, who writes: “What is at stake in proposing an analysis of social choreography is a threefold determination of the modern: namely, a redefinition of modernism as an aesthetic program; a rethinking of modernization as a social process of rationalization that would not, as is generally assumed, compartmentalize and trivialize aesthetic experience; and, finally, a rethinking of the relationship of two terms – aesthetic modernity and sociopolitical modernity – that have either been taken to be irremediably at odds or assumed to be reducible to each other” (3).

readings and celebrity-author tours, which follow available diasporic routes. Both Sholem Aleichem and Zora Neale Hurston traveled to give public readings, often re-enacting a return to the provincial homes of their childhood. These “returns” point to a “small” transnational identification. The shtetl and the black Southern town are not super-national spaces, but rather sub-national. These sub-national spaces give us the opportunity of yet again (as in the first two chapters) engaging an understudied form of trans-nationalism: transnationalism as a way to transcend the national through a turn inward, through separatism, through the creation of small communities which can exist hidden from the nation’s patrolling gaze. Hurston also traveled to Haiti; Hughes traveled to Haiti, Africa and France; and Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector traveled to Western Europe and the United States. Their bodies of work and personal movements sketch out the contours of diaspora. While the mobility of the author may be perceived as the privileged counterpart to the immobility of the “common” dwellers of *shtetlekh* and Southern towns, the authors do not address an immobile community; even on the level of the representation of the common folk, the fictional characters are, rather, in constant movement in ways that at times intersect and at others parallel the movements of the modern(izing) author.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> As Marc Caplan once suggested to me in a conversation: As opposed to Peretz’s less modern post-wagon, but more modernist content and style, for Sholem Aleichem, it is the society depicted which is more modern, with the trains, etc., but the style and content are intentionally passe (as Roskies would have it also). James Clifford attempts to disturb the hierarchical binary of - among others - mobility/immobility as it pertains to the relationship of the anthropologist to the field. “Literal travel,” he asserts, “is not a prerequisite of irony, critique, or distance from one’s home culture” (Clifford 4). Further, the critique may cut across the Western/ “native” divide: “Indeed, his conscious choice not to travel – in a context of restlessness driven by Western institutions and seductive symbols of power – may be a form of resistance, not limitation, a particular worldliness rather than a narrow localism” (Clifford 5). But, localism must



What does it mean, and what *can* it mean, to consider African diaspora and Jewish diaspora? Both rooted and routed, having to contend with potential movement, desired or not, having to contend with members of this diaspora, desired or not, that are from elsewhere and going elsewhere. James Clifford, in a chapter on contemporary black Britain and anti-Zionist Judaism, defines diaspora from the margins: “Diasporas are caught up with and defined against (1) the norms of nation-states and (2) indigenous, and especially autochthonous, claims by ‘tribal’ peoples” (Clifford 250). Further, “the term ‘diaspora’ is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement” (Clifford 252). For Clifford – and this relates directly to the kind of humor under discussion here – “diasporic consciousness ‘makes the best of a bad situation’” (Clifford 257). Brent Hayes Edwards, who contrasts diaspora to globalization in his article “Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora,” suggests that “diaspora foregrounds divergence, the ‘friction of distance,’ the irreducibility of the specific conditions that produce transnational movement and transnational ‘sensibilities’” (689). This temporal and spatial distance is also an important theme of this chapter which continues the work, begun in the first two chapters, of staging comparisons between two moments of modern minority literary renaissances in different time periods and on different continents. Though the Classical Yiddish texts were produced earlier than the Harlem Renaissance ones, there is no evidence of direct influence, though some translations would have been available to the English reader prior to and around the

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not, surely, be narrow. As Anita Norich once pointed out to me, “Peretz, the modernist, went almost nowhere.”

1920s.<sup>6</sup> This chapter is not a study of influence but of two parallel modern minority literatures, and so there are spatiotemporal and thematic movements from Russia to America, from the Harlem Renaissance to the Classical Yiddish Renaissance, from the train as symbol of innovation to its obsolescence, and from humorous representation to representation of laughter. Each of the works I discuss has its context, as well as creating its context, and while my argument is not a historical one, it is, in part, about conceptions of history, and other symbolic, artistic, aesthetic moves that the texts are making.<sup>7</sup>

Modernity in general can be seen as a collective body in flux, forming and reforming its internal divisions.<sup>8</sup> From the literary historical perspective, this chapter's

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<sup>6</sup> Spector's *The Three Worthies of Brebendefka: A Story of the Riots in Russia* (New York: Judean Press, 1905); *Yiddish Tales* (The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912) includes Sholem Aleichem on pp. 115-182 and Spector on pp. 83-114; Sholem Aleichem's *Stempenyu*, authorized version (London: Methuen, 1913); Sholem Aleichem's *Jewish Children* (New York: Knopf, 1920, 1922, 1926). In 1899, *The History of Yiddish Literature in the Nineteenth Century* was published by Leo Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), and deals with Spector in one chapter (177-193), while Rabinowitsch (i.e. Sholem Aleichem) and Perez share one (194-215), and an excerpt from *Stempenyu* is translated (300-305).

Interestingly, and requiring further research, is the work of the Slavic literature Harvard professor Leo Wiener who published (among other studies of Slavic, German, and American cultural and literary history) *The history of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century* in 1899, and *Africa and the discovery of America* in 1922.

<sup>7</sup> For "the ongoing entanglement of black and Jewish diaspora visions," see Clifford 268-69. And he continues with a precaution regarding comparison: "Diasporas, and diaspora theorists, cross paths in a mobile space of translations, not equivalences" (Clifford 274).

<sup>8</sup> And has been, in disturbing generalizations, for example by Schivelbusch in his big-story marxist analysis, where the material base, in the hands of the few, gives rise to the ideology: "it did not take long for the industrialization of the means of transport to alter the consciousness of the passengers: they developed a new set of perceptions. The uniform speed of the motion generated by the steam engine no longer seemed unnatural when compared to the motion generated by animal power; rather, the reverse became the case. Mechanical uniformity became the 'natural' state of affairs, compared to which the 'natural' state of affairs, compared to which the 'nature' of draught animals appeared as dangerous and chaotic" (Schivelbusch 14). And, "The regions, joined to each other and to the metropolis by the railways, and the goods that are torn out of their local relation by modern transportation, shared the fate of losing their inherited place, their traditional spatial-temporal presence or, as Walter Benjamin sums it up in one word, their 'aura'" (Schivelbusch 41)

Clifford comes at it from a different perspective (also speaking about a different century):

purpose is twofold: to place the African-American and the Yiddish renaissances within the general transnational context of modern flux, but also to highlight the particularities of a minority transnational identity (my project therefore is in part about preserving boundaries as opposed to lifting them). For African-American and Russian Jewish diasporic communities, the history of movement is part and parcel of communal and individual identity. In what way should “community” be understood? Diasporic identification is not obviously, or even necessarily, scripted as communal. Similarly to the conceptions of the folk in the preceding two chapters, it is one of the axes along which artistic creativity develops. “Community” means different things at different times, in different places, and for different individuals. Thus, while this chapter focuses on a small cohort of individuals who were at the same time producers of culture and constructors of minority discourse, their views, though not necessarily the views of an entire community, have much to teach us about the discourse of diaspora and perhaps even about diaspora(s) in general, contingent though these may be. This chapter, then, is an attempt to think about national and diasporic identifications within the humorous descriptions of train-travel by Sholem Aleichem, Mordkhe Spector, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. The next section will set up the railway as a national-expansionist project in America and Russia; the subsequent sections will treat each author individually, since each text has its own frames of reference, its own points of entry, and its own complicated and tense relationship to humor. Despite these differences, however,

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“In the twentieth century, cultures and identities reckon with both local and transnational powers to an unprecedented degree. Indeed, the currency of culture and identity as performative acts can be traced to their articulation of homelands, safe spaces, where the traffic across borders can be controlled. Such acts of control, maintaining coherent insides and outsides, are always tactical [...] Stasis and purity are asserted – creatively and violently – *against* historical forces of movement and contamination” (Clifford 7).

there is a common thread of liberating constraint, a form of diasporic modernist contortion, and so the final section will bring the authors together in order to discuss the implications of movement, mobility, temporality and time for creativity and, in particular, humorous creativity.

Before turning to the historical contexts and implications of railroad construction in Russia and America, a word on methodology is in order. The writers I continue to read in this chapter belong to the minority group that is seen as the ultimate other within the national space they inhabit (perhaps most starkly represented by the geographical delineations of the Pale of Settlement in Russia and the Black Belt in America).<sup>9</sup> In addition to being constrained within a particular location in their respective national geographies, the two groups were also historically connected to locations outside the nation-state. By “history” I mean here both what might be considered the verifiable facts of “what was,” as well as – and, indeed, primarily – the interest, motivated by the minority group itself, or the majority, in verifying particular facts at a particular time; in this imaginative process, art and literature in particular hold privileged positions. During the time periods with which this chapter deals, both the Jewish diaspora in Russia and the African diaspora in America identified (at least) two geographical loci as homelands and places of origin, attributing to both the power to inscribe/inflict/prescribe the ethnic/racial character in modernity. Both communities are articulating a “back to the homeland” (Land of Israel, Africa) kind of nationalism: *Khibat tsiyon* [Love of Zion]<sup>10</sup> and

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<sup>9</sup> The Pale of Settlement was delineated by Catherine the Great as the western expansion of her empire brought in Jewish residents. The restrictive territory was enclosed until the communist revolution.

<sup>10</sup> A proto-Zionist movement generally characterized by religious, Hebrew-language poetics and the desire not so much to settle in the land of Israel but to be buried there.

Garveyism.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, there is an additional kind of national identification, the identification with the rural, provincial folk. While the centers of publication are in the big cities (New York, Washington, St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Kiev), the contributors often lay claim to a more rural origin (the American South and the small towns of the Pale of Settlement). It is that rural origin that continues to symbolize the authentic folk in the perspective of the writers, with the “ancestral homeland” being evoked more rarely. In the Russian Jewish context, the attempt to foster connections to the “land” (only occasionally identified with “the Promised Land”) was orchestrated in light of national(ist) modern anxieties over non-productive, i.e. mercantile, “Jewish occupations.”

The technology of travel influences the perception and description of movement. With the advent of the train, the distances between “nations” were dramatically reduced, and the metropolis, “the national hearth,” was suddenly within easy reach of rural villages (Schivelbusch 34). The reduction of distances was well received by industrialists and capitalists, but there was also vocal opposition to the train for using power which, all but invisible and incomprehensible to regular folk (i.e. those who were used to seeing the horse pulling their cart), was perceived to be unnatural. In reaction, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch has observed, “the old technology was seen, nostalgically, as having more 'soul'” (13). By the mid-nineteenth century in Europe, trains became sites of reading, expanding the literary market, and bookstores and libraries opened at railway stations

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<sup>11</sup> Clifford, again, provides a pointed articulation of this kind of belonging: “Going 'out' to the field now sometimes means going 'back' [. . .] In the case of a diasporic scholar, the 'return' may be to a place never known personally but to which she or he *ambivalently, powerfully* 'belongs'” (Clifford 80, emphasis mine). On the relation to Africa, which is masculinist: Clare Corbould’s *Becoming African Americans: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919– 1939*, Harvard University Press, 2009, also the review: “Harlem Central” by George Hutchinson in *American Literary History* 23.2: 405–422.

(Schivelbusch 64). Train travel thus has a direct influence on habits of reading and writing on the national level, and has specific implications for diasporic subjects, readers and writers alike.

The writers in this chapter find both despair and delight in their diasporas. Edwards, writing about Hughes, provocatively places diaspora in the future instead of the past in his “Langston Hughes and the Futures of Diaspora,” in order “to ask whether diaspora can be said to involve not only a relation to deprivation and dispossession, but also a particular link to possibility and potential” (690). The art that is the focus of this dissertation is not only diasporic, but also humorous, humor being one of the potential products of diaspora; the diasporic humorous poetics evokes collective movement, travel, and dispersion, but also the at times no less communal internal self-propelled movement of bodies in a spasm of laughter. “The diasporic visual image,” Nicholas Mirzoeff writes, and I take the liberty to extend his observation (back) to literature, “is necessarily intertextual, in that the spectator needs to bring extratextual information to bear on what is seen within the frame in order to make full sense of it” (Mirzoeff 7). And while images other than diasporic would surely also have the prerequisite of extratextuality, with a diasporic image the stakes seem to be higher. The diasporic aesthetic prerequisite of having extratextual information in order to fully “get it” is also an essential part of the ironic aesthetic. Here, “mak[ing] full sense” involves being ready to achieve – within the context of suffering and dispossession – laughter (physiologically or emotionally, as a movement of the body or the soul).

## Railroad and Borders of Empire and Nation

It did not take long for the industrialization of the means of transport to alter the consciousness of the passengers: they developed a new set of perceptions. The uniform speed of the motion generated by the steam engine no longer seemed unnatural when compared to the motion generated by animal power; rather, the reverse became the case. Mechanical uniformity became the 'natural' state of affairs, compared to which the "nature" of draught animals appeared as dangerous and chaotic.

(Schivelbusch 14)

The expansionary and unifying aspirations of the railway in the United States are all apparent in James Walter's *An Overland Trip from New York to San Francisco* (1869), a travelogue published in England only a few years after the American Civil War. The book is concerned with the establishment of a convenient trade connection for the British Empire, because, as Walter observes, "uniting Liverpool so closely with the Pacific, cannot fail to add greatly to our commerce" (Walter 3). It also recognizes the significance of the railway as a decisive white American claim for control of the land: "The war-cry of the red man cannot long be heard against the scream of the locomotive [. . .] It might almost be said that the United States now for the first time enters in and occupy [sic] the continent to which they have hitherto only held the legal right" (Walter 4). The railway is thus inseparable from modern nation-building and transnational empire expansion; the movement it facilitates is meant to mark and legitimate the borders of the state, both geographical (as in the coast-to-coast unification) and social (in its codification of segregation, eventually nation-wide in 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson*).

While the projects of railway construction are associated with national unity, they are also the means of imperial expansion and communication with other nation-states.

The national unification project, unsurprisingly, is also very much invested in differentiating the dispensable other. Technological advancement is inseparable from nation-building within the colonial worldview. The World's Fair tradition, for example, was inaugurated by London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations, also known as The Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, which itself was based on a tradition of European expositions, that were often exhibitions as much of technological as of colonial power.<sup>12</sup> The first railway in Russia, opening in the late 1830s, led southward 15 miles from St. Petersburg to Tsarskoye Selo, and was later expanded even further south. While Sholem Aleichem's and other Yiddish writers' narratives are set primarily south and southwest of the capital in St. Petersburg, it is important to note the commencement in 1891 of construction of the Trans-Siberian line, the last of the Czarist railway construction projects. A little over 285 miles on the Trans-Siberian line from Moscow brings one to Nizhni-Novgorod on the Volga river, a city which hosted an annual fair on grounds constructed specifically for this purpose. The fair as well as its grounds were often referred to as "World's Fair" as it attracted European, American, and Asian merchants.<sup>13</sup> The World's Fairs of all kinds demonstrate the imperial globalizing aspirations reflected in the construction of the railways, with the latter providing access to the former. This globalism allows for and supports the view of culture as commodity, and commodification of culture here means that there is an unmarked center of white

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<sup>12</sup> Schivelbusch treats the exhibition as a symptom of the ferro-vitreous architectural innovation, again in the general/universal terms, as that which divorced light from its natural setting; interestingly, he also relates the Impressionist movement to the experience of the Crystal Palace: "that seems far-fetched, but it does seem justifiable to view Impressionism as a codification of a certain nineteenth-century perception of an evanescence whose most powerful material manifestations are the railroad and ferro-vitreous architecture" (Schivelbusch 49).

<sup>13</sup> See *An illustrated description of the Russian empire* [1855], *Harper's* 38 [1868-69], and *Strange Siberia* [1911].



Europeanness with the periphery blended into some kind of mesh of otherness in the displays of “ethnic villages,” where the Armenian may represent the Jew, where the African American may represent the African, etc.; in other words, where visibility is endowed with the value of classification, collection, and acquisition.<sup>14</sup>

While the train was still something of a novelty as a method of transportation and communication for Yiddish writers in 1880s Russia,<sup>15</sup> by the time of the Harlem Renaissance in America this was no longer the case. As I will show in the pages that follow, the train is represented as a relic of the past by Hurston and Hughes; it is a site of folkloric collection for the former and of ironic immobility for the latter. The train remains, however, a powerful element in the language of music. The ethnographic material Hurston collected – mainly musical and recorded in the 1930s – is derived from railroad workers’ camps, as work on the expansion and maintenance of the railroad in the Southern states was conducted by African American workers. Albert Murray, in his 1976 essay “Playing the Blues” suggests that the train also remains a symbol of the Underground Railroad, and its sounds enter jazz, and other African American musical forms, through this symbolic association (Murray 106-8). Mirzoeff provides a different,

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<sup>14</sup> Seshadri-Crooks writes that “it is the symbolic order of racial difference itself that governs seeing, rather than the reverse” (5). And so, “[r]ace is the regime of visibility that secures our investment in racial identity. We make such an investment because the unconscious signifier Whiteness, which founds the logic of racial difference, promises wholeness” (21).

Within this global market of commodified minority cultures, there is something to be said for being able to sell and profit from one’s own culture (See, for example, Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Nokhum Edelshtein’s piece “In vagon” [In the carriage/wagon] in *Folks-blatt* 1884, No. 47, pp. 731-34 and No. 48, pp. 747-780, where the trains are seen as a sign of divine intervention. Everything became smaller, shorter, closer, which was well received by industrialists and capitalists, but not so well by the romantics, who were cautious and uncomfortable of the train not only for being unnatural, but also using power which was invisible, unclear, incomprehensible to regular folk (i.e. one couldn’t see the suffering, exhausted horse, for example). (Schivelbusch pp. 11-13).

more diasporic, reading when he writes about the “wail of the steam engine” as simply one of the sounds that become associated with the yodel from Central Africa<sup>16</sup> that becomes a part of the musical history of the African diaspora, traveling from Central Africa to the Mississippi Delta via the Kongo (7, citing Robert Ferris Thompson). The train is significant not only in written-published texts, but also in visual culture and in music. While literature is the focus of this chapter, these artistic genres are not clearly demarcated; the mingling of visual-auditory-written is perhaps most obvious in poetry as a genre, but more generally, within the social artistic sphere, symbols and images travel from one form to the other, as minority artists that produce and develop the images often work together (eg. The first chapter of *Infants of the Spring* shows singers, painters, poets and novelists living and creating together). And even when no actual collaboration exists, the work becomes associated through the marketing of minority art, as can be seen from the proliferation of “Literature and Culture” periodicals.

Perhaps even more importantly than being a new means of transportation, the train was a new kind of public space – and here the railway car and the station are important – and thus served as a potential threat to earlier social norms, giving rise to legal-administrative literature concerning conduct.<sup>17</sup> In 1887, *HeAsif*, a Warsaw Hebrew periodical, published a summary and translation of government decrees from 1885

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<sup>16</sup> “The yodel is ‘a chest/head, high low snap across an octave [that] is one of the hallmarks of the singing of rainforest pygmies in Central Africa.’ Thompson hears the echo of that yodel in Kongo music and from there in the Mississippi Delta blues, a sound that resonates with the wail of a steam engine: ‘By the 1940s, if your ear were culturally prepared, you could hear a lonesome train whistle in the night and immediately think of black people, on the move. From Memphis to Mobile. Goin’ to Chicago, sorry that I can’t take you’” (Mirzoeff 7).

<sup>17</sup> The regulation of time, Schivelbusch 43-44, started with the trains, 1884: a meeting in Washington to divide the world into timezones, in 1889, USA into four time zones, and legal recognition in 1918. In England 1880 (Greenwich), and 1893 in Germany.

concerning railway passengers. While the article is in Hebrew, quite a few of the terms – such as “passenger,” “gendarmes,” and “train-cars” – are accompanied by Yiddish in parentheses, and for some terms, like “*protokoln*” (protocols), only Yiddish is used, without a Hebrew equivalent (the word “*protokoln*” is Yiddish not only in its root, but also in the plural suffix). The decrees summarized in the article were clearly selective, providing a glimpse into the demographic they addressed; they included the rules pertaining to discounts available to military personnel and yeshiva-students (20, 23), limitations on how many children could ride for free, and discounts for summer travel from Moscow to the “*maayanot harefua (mineral vaser)*” [therapeutic springs (mineral water)] in Kovno. Aside from the various regulations concerning baggage, pricing, and taxation, there is also a detailed description of the rights of the train supervisor/conductor (“*nachalnik*”) to expel someone from the train. The supervisor may, with the help of gendarmes expel a passenger if:

- 1) the rider transgresses the rules that preserve the peace of the other passengers sitting in the same carriage; 2) if another passenger, sitting in the same carriage, demands his removal from the train-car because of his loudness or because of indecent acts [*ma’asim megunim*] which evoke horror in the seers; 3) if the passenger sitting in a train-car with other passengers has a contagious disease, epilepsy, or mental disease and the like, or a disease which provokes disgust, and if a seat in a special compartment is available (22).

The decision to publish this regulation – within the four pages of the article this list appears twice, almost verbatim; the first reference is in relation to the potential rejection of such persons’ baggage – should be read through an ethnic lens; loudness is certainly one of the stereotypical characterizations of the Jews. On the one hand, the decision fits

with the *maskilic* (relating to the *haskallah*, Jewish Enlightenment) project of educating Jewish readers in the norms of proper behavior (where “proper” is usually defined by enlightened European Christian society). On the other hand, the information also serves to empower readers to know their rights in case they are asked to leave a carriage on a supervisor’s antisemitic whim, and perhaps even to know when they may be allowed to request the removal of a belligerent fellow passenger. For while Jewish dwelling was legally restricted to the Pale of Settlement, Jewish movement on trains was not legally restricted. The trains did have three classes, however, and the economic segregation of the passengers often translated into de facto ethnic segregation.<sup>18</sup>

The trains in the United States in the interwar period were segregated according to gender and economic status, as well as race. Sarah Herbert Gordon in her dissertation about “A Society of Passengers: Rail Travel 1865 to 1910” points to the inconsistency of the regulation of train conduct: “From systems of segregation for blacks and women to laws regarding drunkenness and gambling on the train, social issues did not resolve themselves in any consistent way aboard the cars or in the station. In one state the conductor read the Bible aloud to passengers while in another the conductor carried a gun” (Gordon 4); as the dissertation is concerned primarily with women’s history, Gordon paints the train as well as the waiting hall as dangerous territories where there were but

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<sup>18</sup> The analysis of Sholem Aleichem’s short story “Drite klas’ [Third Class] below makes clear, I hope, that I am speaking of representations. That is, the first and second classes were not Jewish, whether there were Jews there or not, while the third class was Jewish, even though all of its passengers may not have necessarily been Jewish. The train and the train station and platform served as inspirations for realist, progressive painters of the nineteenth century. See, for example, Honoré Daumier’s “The Third-Class Carriage,” from ca. 1862–64 (see Fig. 1 and the Met’s website: <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/29.100.129>), and “Disputation about Faith” (1880) by Vasily Perov (see Fig. 2 and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Perov050-A-Disputation-about-the-Faith.jpg>), one of the founders of the *Peredvizhniki* (Itinerants/Wanderers) movement. Significantly, both Daumier and Perov were also producing caricatures.

“few rules to preserve respectability in the course of a journey” (Gordon 94). In antebellum America, the division into first and second class train cars was quite often a segregation into white and black.<sup>19</sup> While during the 12-year reconstruction period segregation rules were loosened, in the 1880s and 1890s “an antebellum social standard was resurrected in a new context” (Gordon 83). The “standard” continued well into the twentieth century, coinciding with the Great Migration of the 1910s and 1920s, the northbound shift in African American population. Its significance for the Harlem Renaissance was immeasurable, perhaps even generating the renaissance, as Alain Locke, among others, would have it in *The New Negro* (discussed in the first chapter).<sup>20</sup>

In a way, all Harlem Renaissance art is overdetermined by the migration. Lucy Ariel Williams’s poem “Northboun’,” winner of the 1926 *Opportunity* prize for poetry and written in dialect,<sup>21</sup> is a conceit that turns the whole world into a polar north-south orientation. The closing stanza is also the speaker’s departure: “Huh! de wurl’ ain’t flat, / An’ de wurl’ ain’t roun’, / Jes’ one long strip / Hangin’ up an’ down. / Since Norf is up, / An’ Souf is down, / An’ Hebben is up, / I’m upward boun’” (202 in Cullen’s *Caroling Dusk*). The poem sets up a hierarchy of up and down, perhaps giving the more liberal North a “thumbs up” and the South “thumbs down.” The poem evokes a “world,” perhaps as a jab at the narrow-minded speaker who may think that the United States is synonymous with the whole world, but also as an only slightly covert reference to a long

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<sup>19</sup> Gordon cites Walter G. Berg’s *Buildings and Structures of American Railroads*, published in 1900: “For a town of several thousand people, and somewhat of a suburban station as well, the requirements in the South are for a building with accommodation for first class passengers (white) and second class passengers (negroes) both under the general supervision of the station agent” (Gordon 16, n. 2).

<sup>20</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson* See also Nicholls 3.

<sup>21</sup> “Dialect poetry” has a loaded history with Dunbar, and in general the Harlem Renaissance was a turn away, with notable exceptions, from this politically problematic stylistic.

history of colonial oppression which implicates not only America.<sup>22</sup> The age of discovery's enlightened discussion of the earth being flat/roun' should remind us of the violence of colonial "discovery," while "Hebben" compliments the enlightened discourse with religious evangelizing. The reference to the constructed Eurocentric map, where "Norf" equals "up" equals "Hebben" equals Europe looking down upon Africa on the other side of the Mediterranean, is a reminder of the enduring practices of eurocentrism that persist within seemingly neutral or even positive and well-wishing educational programs. Slavery (boun') and lynching (strip, hangin') are evoked in a way that paints a pessimistic picture of this world and its circuitous violence; indeed, if it was the Europeans who brought colonial violence to the world, by the time of the poem's publication, European metropolises were actually preferred places for African Americans; in this way, the poem may be bringing the connotations of colonial violence back to enlightened contemporary Europe. The migration is not only a moving up, in short.<sup>23</sup>

As Mirzoeff astutely notes, "[t]his modern diaspora [i.e. the Great Migration] inevitably evoked the forced transatlantic diaspora of slavery that had brought Africans to America, creating different music like the blues, jazz and soul in which the train was both inspiration and subject-matter" (8). The speaker in Williams's poem is bound up. The depiction of a verticality – as opposed to the horizontal movement of the train – needs

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<sup>22</sup> On the creation of "planetary consciousness" within the context of colonialism, see Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, pp. 15-37.

<sup>23</sup> Ellison's *Invisible Man* – a character whom I see as a kind of maturation of the laughter through tears figure – is a case in point with his bunker-like existence in the basement. I thank Anita Norich for this connection.

some attention.<sup>24</sup> To borrow Jean Toomer's conceptualization of a new novel project after *Cane*, “upward heaving” may be “symbolic of the proletariat or world upheaval. And it is likewise to be symbolic of the subconscious penetration of the conscious mind.”<sup>25</sup> This upward movement imagery is Toomer's way of being in tune with changes happening around him as he writes; he is sure that before he finishes the novel “several similar dramas will have been written.” And so the heaving historical, social atmosphere necessarily would find expression in trends in literary production.

While some of the Harlem Renaissance writers hailed from the south, some, like Toomer, came from cities in the north, and quite a few of the personal and professional associations were begun in Washington, D.C., with Alain Locke, chair of the department of philosophy at Howard, serving as the midwife of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston, who studied at Barnard College, was an exception, with most artists studying at established black colleges and universities elsewhere. Indeed, it is Harlem's newness as an African American urban space which attracted some of the younger generation, who

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<sup>24</sup> To use Bakhtin and his discussion of the chronotope, as he is quite often used, out of the historical context (though his historicization should be taken with a grain of salt, since he himself connects Dante to Dostoevsky, Rabelais to Gogol, etc.), verticality may be connected to a particular hierarchy of past-present-future, developed by Dante, and later picked up by Dostoevsky, in both of whose works there is a tension which is “the result of a struggle between living historical time and the extratemporal other-worldly ideal. The vertical, as it were, compresses within itself the horizontal, which powerfully thrusts itself forward” Between the two writers, “There are no attempts to lay open the world as a cross-section of pure simultaneity and coexistence (a rejection of the inability to see the whole of time that is implicit in any historical interpretation)” (158). In folkloric time, though, “There is a greater readiness to build a superstructure for reality (the present) along a vertical axis of upper and lower than to move forward along the horizontal axis of time. Should these vertical structurings turn out as well to be other-worldly, idealistic, eternal, outside time, then this extratemporal and eternal quality is perceived as something simultaneous with a given moment in the present; it is something contemporaneous, and that which already exists is perceived as better than the future” (148). And so, “in no way does it exceed the limits of the real, here-and-now material world, and it does not stitch together rents in that world with anything that is idealistic or other-worldly” (150). Further, while discussing “The Functions of the Rogue, Clown and Fool in the Novel” (158-67).

<sup>25</sup> In a March 1923 letter to the publisher Horace Liveright, Norton's *Cane* 157.

wished to escape the restricting norms of the more established middle class African American centers in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. Further, Harlem's growth was augmented by its proximity to the Port of New York. The movements to and from Harlem went beyond north-south to include transatlantic travel to European capitals and the Caribbean.<sup>26</sup>

The train as a means of public transportation holds particular significance for Jewish and African American diasporas. Within the context of modern nationalism and colonialism, the railway is fitted into a capitalist value system, reproducing wealth by opening up new markets while also reproducing social codes that disadvantage the "others" of the nation.

### **The City Limits: Mordkhe Spector's "Rayze-bilder" (1886)**

What is bitterly ironic [...] is that present-day historians in the second half of the twentieth century – militant and critical of imperialism as they are here – have fallen victim, in another sense, to the very imperialism they appear to denounce. They have no criteria for arts of originality springing out of an age of *limbo* and the history they write is without an inner time (Harris 381).

Sholem Aleichem and Mordkhe Spector began their careers on the pages of *Yudishes folks-blat* [Yiddish/Jewish folk's page], a St. Petersburg-based weekly "Political-Literary" periodical with which both had a conflicted and deteriorating relationship, as discussed in the previous chapter. From 1883-1888, both writers contributed to the periodical fairly regularly, mainly in the form of feuilletons with a particular piece

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<sup>26</sup> As an entry point for Claude McKa and Garvey, for example. See also Edwards' *The Practice of Diaspora*.



extending over a few issues.<sup>27</sup> What is immediately apparent about these feuillets as a group – I will discuss only a few in some detail – is their focus on travel and location: Spector published “In shtub un in gas” [At home and on the street] in 1883, “In veg” [On the road] in 1884-1885, and “Fun petersburg keyn varsha (rayze bilder)” [From St. Petersburg to Warsaw (impressions of a journey)] in 1886, and in June of 1886 he began corresponding with Mendele Mokher Sforim about the possibility of collaborating on publishing a periodical in Odessa or Warsaw. Sholem Aleichem, after primarily contributing poetry in the earlier years of the *Yudishes folks-blatt*, took over with “Bilder fun der barditshever gas” [Scenes from the streets of Berdichev] in 1887, “Bilder fun zitomirer gas” [Scenes from the streets of Zhitomir] and “Funem veg” [From the road] in 1888.

Spector's 1886 description of the train journey from the capital begins on a note of melancholy.<sup>28</sup> In a reversal of the “fargenign” [joy, enjoyment, fun] of entering a big city, he describes departing from the city, observing its liveliness being replaced first by industrial suburbia and then by farmland; the melancholy is especially present for the Jew, who may be seeing it for the last time. Spector writes:

Just five minutes since I departed from St. Petersburg and, already, so much lost for a while, for a time, who knows for how long, seemingly for a month, and perhaps forever; I am a Jew, after all, who knows whether I

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<sup>27</sup> From the *OED*, a feuilleton is “In French newspapers (or others in which the French custom is followed), a portion of one or more pages (at the bottom) marked off from the rest of the page by a rule, and appropriated to light literature, criticism, etc.; an article or work printed in the feuilleton.”

<sup>28</sup> “Fun petersburg keyn varsha (rayze bilder)” [From St. Petersburg to Warsaw (voyage images/impressions)]. I will refer to the four installments (in the *Yudishes folks-blatt*, issues 23 [pp. 347-50], 24 [pp. 363-66], 25 [pp. 379-82], and 30 [pp. 459-62]) as first, second, third, and fourth, even though the third one is entitled “the end” and the fourth one, appearing after a break of five issues, is entitled “III.”

will ever be allowed back in the holy place, in the most beautiful city in all Russia; and even though I feel limited/restricted here, after a few years, you get used to the place, it hurts, but.... (347).<sup>29</sup>

The city limits mark the departure from the city; departing painfully, perhaps never to be seen again, because of the restrictive Pale of Settlement, because of the special difficulties Jews have in acquiring permission to reside in any city (indeed, even in some of the bigger cities within the borders of the Pale). The restrictive geography serves a system of social and physical domination and bureaucracy that inscribes itself on the body<sup>30</sup>: the city limits its Jews. The borders and restrictions which disallow (or threaten with disallowing) a body to enter the capital are also the borders/restrictions which differentiate one body from another, which mark the limits of one's body and of an other's body. It is not only this melancholy awareness of being “the other” which is important for Spector; the practice of describing en-route small towns and their Jewish inhabitants - Spector's ethnographic project - is meant to show not only the dispossession, the misery, and the limitations under which the Jews are forced to live, but also the richness of their cultural and linguistic production. The melancholy musings, then, are interrupted by the “but....” (“nor...”), which marks the transition to “new views and new thoughts” (“naye bilder naye gedankn”), to the “healthy evening air” (“gezunte ovnt-luft”) which is otherwise unavailable to city-dwellers.

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<sup>29</sup> אין גאַנצן פֿינף מינוט אַז איך בין אַרויסגעפֿאַרן פֿון פעטערסבורג און שוין אַזוי פֿיל פֿאַרלוירן אויף לאַנג, אויף אַ " צייט, ווער ווייסט אויף וויפֿל, דאַכט זיך אויף אַ חודש און טאַמער אויף שטענדיק; איך בין דאָך אַ יד, ווער ווייסט צי מע וועט מיך גאָר נאָך אַמאָל אַרבייטלעך אין דעם הייליקן אָרט, אין דער שענסטער שטאָט פֿון גאַנץ רוסלאַנד; כאַטש איך ...פֿיל מיך דאָ באַשרענקט, נאָר מע איז פֿאַרט עטלעכע יאָר געוויינט געוואָרן צו דעם אָרט, עס טוט באַנג, נאָר

<sup>30</sup> Foucault through Butler: “The body is a site where regimes of discourse and power inscribe themselves, a nodal point or nexus for relations of juridical and productive power. And, yet, to speak in this way invariably suggests that there is a body that is in some sense there, pre-given, existentially available to become the site of its own ostensible construction” (601).

And yet Spector does not change the topic, but rather continues to depict an atmosphere of hierarchical differentiation, subverting the liberal view of the train as a carnivalesque space that allows for temporary intermingling and liberation<sup>31</sup>:

And as customary among passengers, without any previous acquaintance, people immediately began to discuss certain things with one another, as if they were old acquaintances, as if they belonged to one class and to one religion, as long as one is not a Jew! . . . Even in the railroad car the Jew is an exception, especially in a railroad car which rolls on the holy earth where a Jew is *not allowed* to live. But the Petersburg passengers didn't notice that I was a Jew" (347, emphasis in the original).<sup>32</sup>

The utopian vision of the new technology as delivering new social equality (often understood as integration), is clearly being satirized here. Indeed, the conjunction of choice within the short opening passage is "nor" [but, only that], and the other oft-repeated expression is "punkt farkert" [exactly the opposite]. Both of these imitate the jerky movement of a train, of turning one's head from one window to the other to watch the changing scenery (a wonderful tribute to human hubris: it is the scenery which moves, with us stable, motionless), but also sets up a vocabulary and mood of oppositions, dualities, and contrasts.

The intimacy among the gentiles on the train contradicts Spector's earlier feuilleton, in which he claims that immediate intimacy and solidarity is possible only among [Yiddish speaking/traditional] Jews, and is being lost in the new generation.<sup>33</sup> In

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<sup>31</sup> Bakhtin and also the Christmas celebrations in the South and the Caribbean.

<sup>32</sup> און ווי דער שטייגער איז צווישן פאסאזשירן, אן שום באקאנטשאפט האט מען גלייך אָנגעהויבן צווישן זיך " איבעררעדן פֿון אַזוינע זאַכן ווי גלייך מען איז אַלטע באַקאַנטע, מע געהערט צו איין קלאַסע, צו איין רעליגיע, אַבי ניט קיין ייד! ... אַפֿילו אין וואַגאָן איז אַ ייד אויך איין אויסנאַמע ובפֿרט נאָך אין וואַגאָן וועלכער האַט זיך געקאַטשעט אויף דער הייליקער ערד וווּ אַ ייד טאָר ניט וווינען. נאָר די פעטערבורגער פּאַסאַזשירן האָבן אין מיר ניט דערקענט אַז איך בין אַ ייד"

<sup>33</sup> "In veg," In *Folks-blatt* 1885, No. 1, p. 6 and no. 2, pp. 19-22.

“From Petersburg to Warsaw,” however, the Jews – traditional and assimilated alike – seem to be less able to sustain the intimacy which the non-Jews have, and their solidarity is shaky at best. In the scene, then, the narrating Jewish traveler is left out of the circle of spontaneous friendship; he notices the other two Jews, huddled in a corner, but does not approach them. Since he is not recognized as a Jew, the narrator is invited to join a conversation with his neighbor, who decides to share his antisemitic observations about the two identifiable Jews in the carriage. Within the antisemitic commentary, the narrator hears an echo of the Jew-baiting periodical “Novoye vremya” [New time], which became more conservative and xenophobic after 1882. In this feuilleton, the creation of “imagined communities” through the spread of print culture, as per Benedict Anderson, can be seen at work. Here, however, the shared periodical provides a bond of affinity among Russian strangers by fostering hatred towards the unfamiliar Jews. “Me darf gor nit kenen yidn, ale veysn vos far a shedlekhe natsiye yudn zenen” [one doesn't have to know Jews, everybody knows how harmful the Jewish nation is] (350), the antisemite proclaims. His comments reiterate the divisions between Christian and Jew, but the train provides him with the opportunity to blame the victim: “Ot di yiden, ot zenen zey do oykh do, zey hobn zikh shoy n aleyn gemakht a bazundere yidishe tsherta in vagon” [These Jews, they are here too, they made for themselves a Jewish Pale in the railway car] (348).<sup>34</sup> The implication here is one of self-confinement, a distorted view of agency; in words that recall more recent accusations about black “self-segregation” in America, Jews are portrayed as the excluded ones who also create their own exclusion.

Once the train enters the Pale of Settlement, a few installments later, *Novoye*

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<sup>34</sup> "אָט די יידן, אָט זענען זיי דאָ אויך דאָ, זיי האָבן זיך שוין אַליין געמאַכט אַ באַזונדערע ייִדישע טשערטאַ אין וואַגאָן"

*Vremya* finally receives a proper retort. The quarrels between the Christian passengers and the Jewish ones are quarrels of two imagined communities, guided by their respective Russian-language publications, the *Novoye Vremya* and *Voskhod* [meaning “sunrise,” a metaphor for the vertical movement of uplift]: “Fun di kristn hob ikh gehert a gantsn laytartikl fun 'novoye vremya', un fun di yuden a peredovaya statya fun 'voskhod' in velkhe er makht a tel fun der 'novoye vremya'. Der krig in vagon hot zikh nit geendikt vi es endikt zikh nit der krig fun dem 'voskhod' mit der 'novoye vremya'”<sup>35</sup> [From the Christians I heard a whole editorial from *Novoye Vremya*, and from the Jews a front-page article<sup>36</sup> that obliterates *Novoye Vremya*. The quarrel within the train-car was as unending as the fight between *Voskhod* and *Novoye Vremya*” (460). This is not an equal fight, however: the Russian paper devotes an editorial to the “Jewish question” while the Jewish periodical responds with a front-page piece. Now, if the *Voskhod* is already adequately responding to Russian antisemitism, what is Spector’s objective here, and why does he use Yiddish to pursue it? Perhaps Spector is raising the question of whether there can be two imagined communities under one language; that is, that the imagined community can potentially contain difference, constant discord, etc.

One of the Jews in the corner, recognizing that the narrator is not an Armenian and that there is talk of Jews, eventually approaches the narrator, and begins talking to him in Yiddish with what are described as recognizably Jewish mannerisms: “Hot er ongehoybn glaykh af yidish redn mit ale yidishe pastemkelekh, makhn mit di hent, mit di

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<sup>35</sup> פֿון די קריסטן האָב איך געהערט אַ גאַנצן לײַטאַרטיקל פֿון 'נאַווויע וורעמיאַ', און פֿון די ייִדן אַ פּערעדאַווויאַ " "סטאַטיאַ פֿון 'וואַסכאָד' אין וועלכע ער מאַכט אַ תּל פֿון דער 'נאַווויע וורעמיאַ'

<sup>36</sup> He is using the Russian expression; the article is in *Voskhod*, which is a Russian-language periodical, so makes some practical sense, but the registers here are both of newspaper jargon as well as train conversation.

pleytsim” [so he immediately began speaking in Yiddish with all the Jewish/Yiddish mannerisms, moving his hands, his shoulders] (349).<sup>37</sup> Yiddish, then, is not only linguistic, but corporeal; the body must be inflected, not only the speech. The narrator wishes the Jew would go away because his presence only fuels his interlocutor’s antisemitism. For the modernized Jewish narrator there is more than a “self-hating” embarrassment here: he does not hide his Jewishness from the antisemite, but his communication with his fellow Jew is prescribed by the antisemitic encounter. The anonymous Jew who approaches him, however, is shown to be free of such restrictions: he wants to talk “glat azoy” (just for fun / just like that, 349), leisurely asking the narrator about news from St. Petersburg, even though he himself just recently departed the city. The capital here is positioned as the central engine of the multilingual Russian Jewish imagined community; it is where all news happens and all newspapers are published.<sup>38</sup> The news becomes important only as soon as the anonymous rider leaves the city, however, since within it there is no time to ask for news, but only to do business. His conversation reveals a highly optimistic worldview – to the point of not fearing to stay in the city without a residency permit – being himself inspired by the success of Jewish magnates (including the railroad magnate Polakov):<sup>39</sup> a Jew, he says, shouldn’t be afraid

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<sup>37</sup> "האַט ער אָנגעהויבן גלייך אויף יידיש רעדן מיט אַלע יידישע פאַסטעמלעך, מאַכן מיט די הענט, מיט די פלייצים" <sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Benjamin Nathans’ *Beyond the Pale*.

<sup>39</sup> Dubnow, “The Conference of Jewish Notables at St. Petersburg,” in *History of the Jews*, vol. 2, trans. Friedlaender, pp. 353-58. The conference, having emigration, to “reliev[e] the congestion of the Jews in the Pale” as its main focus, but also concerning itself with the current pogroms, is described by Dubnow condescendingly, “There was a mixed element of tragedy and timidity in the deliberations of this miniature congress, at which neither the voice of the masses nor that of the intelligentsia were given a full hearing. On the one hand, the conference listened to heartbreaking speeches, picturing the intolerable position of the Jews [. . .] On the other hand, the most influential delegates, particularly those from the capital, were looking about timorously, fearing lest the Government suspect them of a lack of patriotism” (353-54).

of anything, not even St. Petersburg. And indeed, as the overly optimistic rider leaves the train, the antisemite is shown to be powerless: he has since drunk himself into a stupor, remaining pathetically preoccupied with his hatred even while dreaming, murmuring “akh, zhidi, zhidi!” (ach, Jew, Jew, 350).

The second installment of the feuilleton was once again a story within a story, with the second Jew sitting in the corner – whose name, we later find out, is Avreml – looking sick and exhausted while narrating his own story. This world-traveling Jew envies the other Jewish passenger his cheerfulness and innocent hopefulness about the future of the economic changes. Avroml, it turns out, has traveled to America, Palestine and Australia, as well as small and large European cities. He is spurred on in his travels by rising antisemitic violence (he leaves one residence, for instance, when his store is robbed by pogromshchiks), as well as by the Jewish movement to create agricultural colonies in America and Palestine<sup>40</sup>: “nit ikh un nit mayne eltern zenen keynmol nit geven in di gegntn [...] mir hot zikh keyn mol nit gekholemnt ikh zol gor amol farvorfn vern in di ertter, ikh hob shtendik gevoynt in a yidish shtetl in hersoner gubernie (mayn vayb un kinder shtarbn nokh ad hayom dort far hunger)” [Neither I nor my parents have ever been in these areas/environs [. . . .] I never even dreamed that I would one day be cast away in these places. I had always lived in a Jewish small town in the Kherson region (my wife and children are, to this day, still dying of hunger there)] (363-4).<sup>41</sup>

While he characterizes his shtetl profession as a store owner as a “yidishe parnose”

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<sup>40</sup> See Wischnitzer’s *To Dwell In Safety* and Dubnow’s “The Conference of Jewish Notables at St. Petersburg,” for immigration societies.

<sup>41</sup> "ניט איך און ניט מיינע עלטערן זענען קיינמאל ניט געווען אין די געגנטן [...] מיר האָט זיך קיין מאָל ניט געחלומט " איך זאָל גאָר אַמאָל פֿאַרוואַרפֿן ווערן אין די ערטער, איך האָב שטענדיק געווינט אין אַ ייִדיש שטעטל אין הערסאָנער (גובערניע (מיין ווייב און קינדער שטאַרבן נאָך עד היום דאָרט פֿאַר הונגער

[Jewish trade], after the robbery he comes to terms with the fact that both running a store and performing agricultural labor would be “mutshn zikh” [suffering, toiling, slaving], ultimately deciding that he prefers the latter. At work here is a devotion to suffering, with agricultural work taking on a Jewish cast through its association with painful toil. Socially, there is a tension here between diasporic mobility and the desire to strike root through agricultural labor, an economic activity not often associated with Jews who were restricted from owning land, and whose consistent residency was never guaranteed. Just like in Spector’s *Der yidisher muzhik* [1883-1894, also published as *Der yidisher kolonist*]<sup>42</sup>, the feuilleton should be read as a reflection on proto-Zionist thought.<sup>43</sup>

Avroml’s story is one of disappointment, of unsuccessful dealings with the hypocritical and ineffectual philanthropists (he calls them “gute mentshn” [good people] and “voyltetike damen” [benevolent dames<sup>44</sup>]) who invited him for tea but did not eventually have any [actual] work for him, and so maintained the social but not the practical aspect of charity. He could have arrived back in the Pale a few years ago, thus never meeting the narrator, but events delayed his return. Two years prior to the encounter with the narrator, having spent half his estate, he attempts to return home but is unfortunate enough to meet a group of foreign (i.e. Western European) Jews, who convince him to go to Australia. Claiming that the western Jews have done all they could for their Russian brothers, and pointing out that the Russian Jewish magnates are not

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<sup>42</sup> The opening of which is translated in Joachim Neugroschel’s *No Star Too Beautiful: A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (2004), pp. 238-250.

<sup>43</sup> Conceptually, though, one may think of this tension in the sense of Glissant’s and Guattari and Deleuze’s conceptions of the rhizome (multidirectional, multipart, syncretic) and the arborescent (unidirectional, homogenous, binary, systemic), and may be connected to the third class carriage as symbolizing a “third choice” in Sholem Aleichem, discussed later, a choice beyond binary.

<sup>44</sup> While “voyltiker,” with a difference of but two letters, means “sybarite.”



doing much either, these foreign Jews invert the Marxist call for proletarian solidarity, arguing that “ayere gvirim zoln zikh gevezn fareynikn mit unzh” [your wealthy should have united with us] (366).<sup>45</sup>

The word “brider” [brothers], is ironic and slippery in their mouths (as it is reported by the exhausted Jew); it points to a sense of transnational Jewish solidarity, even as it reveals the devastating inequalities and injustices within that imagined community, an inequality that is no less bitter despite the fact that all its members suffer some form of subjugation and oppression. The poor Russian Jews are “brothers” to the wealthier Western European and American Jews, and so the latter help with what they can. The wealthy Russian Jews are “brothers” to their poor compatriots, and here the brotherhood is evoked in order to criticize the insufficiency of the aid coming from the wealthy Russian Jews for immigrant Jews. And finally, “your brothers” [i.e. the poor traveling Jew's brothers] are the poor Russian Jews immigrating to the west and Australia. The responsibility for Avroml's impoverished condition is ultimately laid in his own lap. The wealthy riders tell him he has nothing to lose by trying his luck in Australia: “vos kent ir do onvern? Etlekhe rubl mit etlekhe tog tsayt af dem parakhod?”<sup>46</sup> [What have you got to lose? A few rubles and a few days on the steamer?] (366). This financial gamble is characteristic of the lives being staged on the margins of modernity's plentitude. Indeed, he doesn't have much to lose, as he knows from news of his family's suffering in the shtetl. He will not – we can be quite sure, since he is returning to Russia exhausted and ragged – “win” anything in this gamble.

To add to his burden, the responsibility for all of Jewry is placed on the shoulders

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<sup>45</sup> "איבערע גבירים זאלן זיך געוועזן פֿאַרייניקן מיט אונז"

<sup>46</sup> "וואָס קען איר אָנווערן? עטלעכע רובל מיט עטלעכע טאָג צייט אויף דעם פֿאַראַכאָד"

of this exhausted traveler. He is praised for having “azoy fest bashlosn avek tsu varfn di yidishe shendlekhe parnosos, vos dos gantse yudentum un di 'yidishe frage' laydt zeyer derfun” [so firmly decided to throw away the shameful Jewish occupations, from which all of Jewry and the 'Jewish question' suffer] (379).<sup>47</sup> The philanthropists who praise Avroml, though, also give him the run-around for two full years in Australia, feeding him with empty promises on the rare occasions when they grant him audience. The repetitions within the feuilleton straddle the line between the comic and the tragic.<sup>48</sup> While repetition is a tool of the humorist, in this Jewish traveler’s monologue, the repeated descriptions of his supplications and the philanthropists’ empty reassurances are also devastating, maddening, even traumatizing. The little money he has left from his estate is spent on “trukn broyt ikh zol ale tog hobn koyekh ibertsugeyn di groyse lange gasn, ontsukukn di podiezdun un redn mit di shveytsarn”<sup>49</sup> [dry bread so that I have energy to walk the length of the big long streets, gaze at entrances and speak to the doormen] (280). He has been supporting his family in the shtetl for some time, and keeping up a correspondence with them, but at some point the trauma of his disappointment actually leads to a break in communication. He can no longer write his wife, because she would not understand, indeed wouldn't believe the way he is being handled by prospective employers: “ken zi den farshteyn di groyse layt mit zeyere 'punklekhkeytn' mit zeyer 'frayndlekhkeyt' un 'tsuzogn’” [can she really understand the big people with their 'punctuality' with their

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<sup>47</sup> אזוי פֿעסט באַשלאָסן אַוועק צו וואַרפֿן די ייִדישע שענדלעכע פרנסות, וואָס דאָס גאַנצע יודענטום און די ייִדישע " פֿראַגע' לינדט זייער דערפֿון."

<sup>48</sup> Should the line they straddle actually be classified as a space of madness or insanity? According to Erik, Sholem Aleichem sets out in *Ayznban geshikhtes* to show that “capitalistic competition, having sunk to the very bottom of *meshchanstvo* [‘petty bourgeoisie’], becomes wholly pathological” (8).

<sup>49</sup> טרוקן ברויט איך זאָל אַלע טאָג האָבן כוח איבערצוגיין די גרויסע לאַנגע גאַסן, אָנצוקוקן די פּאָדיעזדן און רעדן מיט " די שווייצערן."

'friendliness' and 'promises'] (380).<sup>50</sup> The cultural differences are too great to be bridged, and the traveler who moves between this does not achieve some cosmopolitan multilingualism, but is rather forced into muteness. The exhausted traveler cannot quite “return” to the old home as he is now, because he looks modern (as a “daytch”),<sup>51</sup> and, as he learns from a former neighbor whom he meets in his travels, the shtetl folk already think that he has married a non-Jewish general's daughter. This well-intentioned townsman feeds him, liquors him up, and offers to buy him good Jewish clothes so that he won't be run out of the shtetl upon his return. When asked by the compatriot whether his name is still Avroml (a diminutive of Avrom, the Yiddish version of Abraham) and whether he is still a Jew, he answers that he never even considered the question of not being a Jew (281). And so, in spite of the break in communication, and in spite of the crumbling stability of the home and family, he is loyal, in an unconscious “organic,” naturalized way, to a communal identity. Although the readers are presented with a community where solidarity is strained, and where identity is malleable rather than stable, Spector presents a potentiality for Jewish continuity even when Jews no longer “look like” Jews. Ensuring continuity involves the satirical chastisement of members of the community who don't contribute as much as they could.

The final installment of the feuilleton comes back to the unnamed first-person narrator, a stand-in for Spector, and his train ride. With Avrem'l's departure from the train, the narrator is able to stretch out on the seat and sleep only to dream of the two Jews he

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<sup>50</sup> "קען זי דען פֿאַרשטיין די גרויסע לייט מיט זייערע 'פונקטלעכקייטן' מיט זייער 'פֿריינדלעכקייט' און 'צוזאָגן'"

<sup>51</sup> This homeless in-betweenness can certainly be related to the figure of *ha-talush* [the uprooted] that has been read into Modern Hebrew literature. See, for example, Yistkhak Bekon's *HaTsair HaBoded BeSiporet Halvrit* [The Lonely Youth in Hebrew Prose] (Tel-Aviv: University of Tel Aviv, 1978).

has met. His dreaming alerts the reader to the fact that the fuellieton is, in part at least, a satire, since the disappointing philanthropists described by Avreml seemed very real and familiar to the dreaming narrator, but they seemed familiar from Russia, not Australia or America, as in Avreml's story.

The silence which allows the narrator to fall asleep is interrupted as soon as the train enters the Pale of Settlement, where the crowdedness and the noise that comes with it forces alertness and forbids dreaming. Once in the Pale, the Jewish passengers become more assertive, repeating the phrase "we are lords just like you, we pay money just like you do" in Yiddish and Ukrainian (459-60). The Jewish environment empowers the Jewish subject, making him or her taller and prouder, Spector suggests. (He develops this theme in other places as well, as in the essay "Unzer sholem-aleykhem.") But here, the narrator's body becomes physically smaller, as the train car fills with jostling passengers. He has to adjust himself to rules of conduct unique to the Pale: "Ikh hob zikh do dermont az ikh bin a yid un gefin zikh itst in der enger tsherta, muz ikh laydn, muz ikh zitsn a bisl englekh [ . . . ] Ikh hob geshvign un gelitn vi eyn erlekher yid shvaygt un laydt fun dem yudishn goles" [I was reminded here that I am a Jew and now find myself in the narrow Pale, and so I must suffer, and so I must sit a little cramped [ . . . ] I kept quiet and suffered the way a good Jew keeps quiet and silently suffers from the Jewish exile] (460).<sup>52</sup> And so with the geographical movement, his understanding of his own body changes; the humor of this metamorphosis holds together Jewish suffering in its physical and spiritual, its individual and communal manifestations. The set up is particularly

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<sup>52</sup> איך האָב זיך דאָ דערמאָנט אַז איך בין אַ ייד און געפֿין זיך איצט אין דער ענגער טשערטאַ, מוז איך ליידן, מוז איך " זיצן אַ ביסל ענגלעך [....] איך האָב געשוויגן און געליטן ווי איין ערלעכער ייד שווייגט און ליידט פֿון דעם ייִדישן גלות"

interesting if one thinks of the narrator as the stand-in for the writer; the narrator's physical shrinking in the cramped space of the train suggests that the writer is no less humbled by the raucous crowd. Spector, like his narrator, is properly silenced, becoming an empty vessel that can serve all the better as the conduit of Jewish life within the Pale.

The contortion of the body on a crowded train can be connected to other articulations of modernist difference. Wilson Harris provides a reading of the Limbo dance, for example, that places painful constraint and liberation in dialogue: "*Limbo* was born, it is said, on the slave ships of the Middle Passage. There was so little space that the slaves contorted themselves into human spiders" (Harris 378). At the same time, "The *limbo* dance therefore implies, I believe, a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes [. . .] And that re-assembly which issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth [. . .] It is a creative phenomenon of the first importance in the imagination of a people violated by economic fates" (381). Other works on minority modern mobility and movement focus on the convulsed, disjointed choreography of minority movers. Anthony W. Lee, in the final two chapters of *Picturing Chinatown* (2001), "Revolutionary Artists" and "The Forbidden City," examines the work of Yun Gee and his Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club, and of Jack Mei Ling in Charlie Low's night club, The Forbidden City. The two artists are unified in their way of walking, as Gee posits "the figure of his convulsed stroller" as a surrogate of himself within the painting "Street Scene with Construction Workers," a surrogate which "traverses a boundary [out of Chinatown] that the painter could rarely cross" (Lee 230, 229). In a similar manner, Ling the dancer "contorted his body in a series of angular postures, with legs flared and with his arms and wrists working in a series of staccato

gestures,” as he performs a flaunting kind of orientalism and a more hidden kind of queerness.

Like these other modern forms of bodily movement and contortion, the jerky movement effected by a train ride in a cramped space has its own particularities for the minority traveler, in this case, the Jewish train rider. Traveling along routes of national and imperial importance, he (gender, here, is not incidental) finds discomfort and relief in the contained space of the train car, and also in the contained space of the Pale.

### **The Train as a Narrative Space in Sholem Aleichem’s *Ayznban geshikhtes* (1902-1911)**

Spector’s representations of Jewish travelers may seem familiar to readers who have encountered Sholem Aleichem’s folksy characters. When he started working for the *Folks-blatt*, however, Sholem Aleichem primarily published what may be termed “high art”: poetry and poetics. When he finally came to depict fleeting encounters with the “simple Jews” who tell him their stories as monologues, his work bears the noticeable, though rarely acknowledged, influence of Spector’s previous work. At the same time, the modernist author who recounts his encounters with the simple folk has a very different presence in the work of Sholem Aleichem and Spector: the latter is very involved, quite often openly insulting and mistrusting his story-telling companions, while the former is most often a very subdued presence. The subdued presence of the interlocutor is often read as a sign of a more complex poetics, to the point of one critic claiming that a bond is created between the reader and the monologists, over the shoulder of the interlocutor-

author.<sup>53</sup>

In the present section I will address one of Sholem Aleichem's later works, the cycle of *Ayznban geshikhtes* [Railroad Stories]. In 1909, the cycle had already been conceived by Sholem Aleichem as a collection. In its framing pieces, "Tsu di lezer" [To the Readers] (1911) and "Drite klas" [Third Class] (1902), Sholem Aleichem, writing in the persona of a traveling salesman allows his voice to be more audible than in the other stories, where he serves as a non-intrusive interlocutor transcribing the tales of others. Both stories, however, use irony to reveal economic concerns. The opening story, announcing the railroad series, introduces the narrator-interlocutor, who claims to have hidden his name from the critics by calling himself a "komi-voyazher" [traveling salesman] – a word which plays on "comic" (in Yiddish, "*komish*") thereby connecting humor and economics. The introduction of the narrator-interlocutor ends with an emphatic, manifesto-like statement, giving a preemptive defense that "ikh bin nit keyn mekhaber, keyn melamed, keyn batlen, - ikh bin a yid a soykher" [I am no author, no teacher, no idler, - I am a merchant Jew] (8). The text is very consciously a product to be sold; the interlocutor is indeed a traveling salesman. This view of the creative process is surely cynical, but it also lends more credibility to the realistically tragic lives of the various character-storytellers. Sholem Aleichem "delivers" a very particular kind of entertainment: he is a humorist and makes his readers laugh. But to deal in laughter is a very particular kind of trade, and the reader may not be getting what he or she has bargained for. The reader is not permitted, for example, to fully empathize with the suffering characters. Since the stories are really structured more like tragedies – with

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<sup>53</sup> See Miron's *A Traveler Disguised*.

humorous descriptions of sad events eventually leading to a yet sadder conclusion – the reader remains in debt for all the times that laughter escaped his or her lips.

“Drite klas,” which closes the *Ayznban geshikhtes*, portrays the first-class compartments as linguistic hell; they are filled, to use Leah Garrett’s words, with “bourgeois silence” (77).<sup>54</sup> The reason for the silence may be, in fact, the sale of books and newspapers at railway stations – a trade driven by the notion that railway travel was boring. Schivelbusch suggests that “the offerings of the English and French railway bookstalls show that the reading public was almost exclusively bourgeois” while the “proletarian traveling public” was talking to each other, because of the crowded nature of their accommodations (66-67). In the first and second classes, “the travelers in the train compartment did not know what to do with each other, and reading became a surrogate for the communication that no longer took place” (67). Ironically, Sholem Aleichem (and indeed the other authors treated in this chapter) would provide reading material for just such a silent reader traveling in first or second class, who, because of his or her socioeconomic advantage, would not be privy to the third class conversations about which he or she reads. The lower class culture is thus being traded, and while the bourgeoisie do not converse, they read, consuming the talk of others through literature.

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<sup>54</sup> There is a parallel to this wonderful formulation in Smith’s analysis of Hurston’s *Dust Tracks*, “In her refusal to ‘clean up’ or to ‘whiten’ her language by erasing all color and adornment from it, she signals both her resistance to the dominant culture’s identity structures and her criticism of the denuded quality of the dominant and neutralized language. Undoing the exclusionary work of standard English that would evacuate color and body from the sentence and the sound, she educates speakers of the neutralized tongue about the cost of the very evacuation of color” (119). Though, one should note regarding the spelling of dialect, there were discussions at the turn of the century about the changing of spelling of American English altogether, of changing the “standard.”



The second class is depicted as a terrifying middle ground, the home of Jews who aim to ‘pass’ as gentiles and, to that end, tell antisemitic jokes.

The third class is represented by Sholem Aleichem as home-like, perhaps too much like home, with constant talking, prying, pushing, sharing of food, and a deluge of free (and often bad) advice. Garrett reads this ironic idealization of the third class as a symbol of Sholem Aleichem’s disenchantment with modernity, which he sees as having destroyed the traditional way of life in the shtetl:

The Jewish community has become a community only in the negative sense of the word. To be sure, in the third-class car you may be entertained, but the narrative suggests that the price is too dear: so many of the stories are fraught with profound suffering that only a sadist, or someone seeking to utilize them in some way, could “enjoy” them. (77)

Sholem Aleichem’s aesthetic, however, involves grappling with the author’s potential position as sadist, and he does not hesitate to share this position with the reader. If he is offering a sadistic type of entertainment, it is to satisfy the implied demand of the modern reading audience for controlled suffering. However, the humor of the work promotes an aesthetic where pain and pleasure are intermixed, offering discomfort rather than catharsis. He is not mourning the loss of some perfect community of the past, as Garrett would have it, but rather, if anything, the very real poverty of the contemporary one. The third class here might be read also as the third choice, as recourse from binary oppositions, an alternative to the two paths of modernity: assimilation or poverty. The constrained space and time of the train ride is pregnant with alternatives; it becomes a space where all potential stories can intersect, serendipitously, where anything is possible.

One of the railway stories, “Der gliklekhster in Kodny” (1909), is illustrative of the particular painful and political aesthetic at work. There seems to be no point in retelling “Der gliklekhster fun Kodny,” for it is its status as story-heard-and-retold-by-a-storyteller which gives it much of its meaning. To retell the story, then, would be to compete with Sholem Aleichem - an impossibility of sorts. The plot is driven not by action but by verbal *interaction* among the folksy character's autobiographical narration, the traveling salesman's interlocution and “later” inscription of the conversation, the author Sholem Aleichem,<sup>55</sup> and the implied reader. As a crude attempt at a retelling, though, this is a story which is related by the storytelling commercial traveler, Sholem Aleichem, who has encountered yet another unusual character, Reb Alter, a “*yidl*” [lit. a “little Jew,” the connotative meaning will be discussed in the third section] on one of his third-class train trips. The man’s son is very ill, most likely consumptive. Reb Alter is glowing with excitement, however; indeed, his happy countenance is the reason that Sholem Aleichem chooses him for a conversation partner. The reason for his happiness appears to be that he is accompanying a physician from Kashevarevke (the doctor himself is riding first class), whom he was able – with great difficulty – to snatch from the doorstep of one of the town's wealthy assimilated Jews. The majority of the story is a recounting of the man’s failing attempts to help his son overcome his illness, among other kinds of hardship and oppression (not being able to go to high school, conscription, poverty). And this, we are told, is the happiest man in Kodny.

The ironic treatment of the man’s hardships is troubling. Denise Riley is one of the few scholars who sees irony not as “an effect of any leisurely distance, but of the

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<sup>55</sup> For the complexity of what is implied within “Sholem Aleichem,” please see Dan Miron's *Sholem Aleykhem: person, persona, presence* (New York: YIVO, 1972).

strongest and most serious engagement with hurt” (162). The questions arise, what constitutes the hurt in “Der gliklekhster in Kodny” and how is the reader meant to engage with this hurt? Both storyteller and reader enter into a kind of pact which distances them from the reality of Reb Alter’s life while allowing them to enjoy his story. The storyteller is (ab)using his power to reveal a story which the dispossessed protagonist has been trying to keep secret. (Reb Alter’s last words to Sholem Aleichem are “please don’t tell anybody whom I’m riding with”) The aesthetic may be best understood as masochistic rather than sadistic (contra Garrett) since reader and storyteller are both complicit in the exchange of guilty pleasure.

Psychoanalytic approaches to humor may be useful in elucidating this economy. In Jerry Aline Flieger’s analysis of Freud’s retelling of the Oedipal myth, the writer functions as “desiring subject-joker,” as the Oedipus-child providing the foundation of the joking triangle.<sup>56</sup> In “Der gliklekhster in Kodny,” the “desiring subject-joker” is split, multiplied, and evasive: it is Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Rabinovitsh, Solomon Naumovitsh Rabinovitsh, komi-voyazher, and many others. As for the butt of the joke, it is the yidl / der gliklekhster. The reader is the hearer of the joke and, following Flieger, a culpable accomplice in the joke, recruited as an ally while the butt of the joke is supposed “to leave the room” (944). The joke lingers with the reader who is left with the pang of having been recruited as an ally – a hurt which can only be relieved through the joke’s perpetuation, through its retelling. The reader is thus coerced to change position from a passive (in Flieger’s terminology father-)figure, who sets the tragedy in motion, to the discomfiting and creative role of the child, who sets the trap for someone else. The joke

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<sup>56</sup> See also Corbeill 4-5, fn. 5.

is a kind of marketing hook in the economy of humorous literature; it assures that the story will remain in circulation through its retellings.

### **Out of the Trains and into the Cars: Hurston's "Color Struck" (1926)**

We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace (Marinetti's "Futurist Manifesto").

In the 1920s, the train in America had been around for almost a hundred years. For Hurston, as well as others – like George Schuyler of *The Messenger*, for example, who published four jokes under the title "Authentic Jim Crow Humor" in July 1926<sup>57</sup> – the train is a wellspring as well as a vessel (and perhaps even a stage) for, ethnographic

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<sup>57</sup> Schuyler is famous (or notorious) for having opposed the marketing of Aframerican art as different from white American art in his 1926 essay "The Negro Art Hokum," and for having satirized race leaders in his 1931 novel *Black No More* as being aligned with KKK, and he is not the only one, of course, who held this view at the time; but, in one of his "Shafts and Daggers" columns for *The Messenger*, he brings this piece of "Authentic Jim Crow Humor: As a relief from the torture of the lamp-blackened jokesmiths masquerading as humorists on what passes as the Negro stage, we herewith append a few samples of the genuine article gathered in the remote fastnesses of the Black Belt:

The following conversation was overheard in Troy, Alabama:

1<sup>st</sup> Ethiop: Whut kinda suhvice cah yo say yo got, boy?

2<sup>nd</sup> Ethiop: A gotta Foahd.

1<sup>st</sup>: Thass *just* whut we want; so 'f anything go wrong, we kin fix it wid a piece o' wood.

On the slow L. & N. Branch between Decatur, Ala., and Lewisburg, Tenn., two sable travelers were discussing the train schedule in the jim crow car:

1<sup>st</sup> Traveler: How many trips does 'is train make a day?

2<sup>nd</sup> Traveler: Boy, 'is heah train is ah tri-daily: hit goes up dis moanin' and tries tuh git back tonight.

Enroute from Orange, Texas, to Lake Charles, La., two corpulent ladies of the Aframerican caste were discussing labor conditions in the former bailiwick:

1<sup>st</sup> Woman: How's eve'ything dow theah in Ochange?

2<sup>nd</sup> Woman: Shuah tight ri' now, sinister. Bettah not stay 'way fum yo' work any day o' yo' house rent shuah ovahcome yo'!" (207).

material.<sup>58</sup> Hurston's 1925 play "Color Struck: A Play in Four Scenes," published in *Fire!!* in 1926, tells the devastatingly tragic story of Emmaline, or Emma, whose psychological complex regarding the darkness of her skin<sup>59</sup> leads her to sabotage her own life, "twenty years ago" and "today." The play opens with a scene set in "The Inside of a 'Jim Crow' railway coach" in a Southern city, around 1900. Even before the curtain goes up, one hears "loud laughter, many people speaking at once, good-natured shrieks, strumming of stringed instruments, etc. The ascending curtain discovers a happy lot of Negroes boarding the train" (7); the crowd gets off just as merrily as they got on: "The crowd has congregated at the two exits, pushing good-naturedly and joking" (9). The group is leaving Jacksonville, headed for a Cake Walk at St. Augustine. As is common with Hurston, the stage directions are spelled in standard English, while the characters' speech is transcribed in dialect. The train car influences both the timing and the movement of those within it. Emmaline and her dancing partner John are quarreling and late to get on and get off the train, causing nervousness in the rest of the group, since the couple are sure to win the cake (which would be shared by all). The train's encroachment upon the individual's sense of time is compensated for by its spaciousness, however: it is large enough to play instruments inside it, to share food in it, and to even practice the dance moves for the cake walk. Like the third class carriage on the Russian railroad, the Jim Crow car is an intimate space where all the passengers not only know each other, but

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<sup>58</sup> See also North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 176-77, for his take on "Color Struck" as Hurston's "self-conscious and even polemical act [. . . T]he play recommends its own sublime indifference to white opinion as a way of redeeming black folk culture from its popularized and vulgarized white versions" (177).

<sup>59</sup> Wallace Thurman also dealt with colorism and its implications, as a type of self-directed racism, within the contemporary African American community in his 1929 novel *The Blacker the Berry*, centered on the protagonist Emma Lou; and both Thurman's and Hurston's evocation of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) cannot be coincidental.

even become friendly with the conductor, who is also from Jacksonville though previously unknown to them (8).

This merriment is squarely placed in the past, while the present reveals a gendered travel route. We find Emma in an alley shack, tending a sick child she conceived out of wedlock, while the recently-widowed John returns to her after having lived in Philadelphia for the past twenty years. Among other possessions, he managed to acquire “a little ‘Rolls-Rough,’ too – gointer teach you to drive it, too” (13).<sup>60</sup> This move from the train to the car encompasses the delights and disappointments of increasing capital: it means the end of Jim Crow only for those who can afford it. Hurston’s tragedy affords some comic relief in the form of verbal comedy, primarily in the sharp, occasionally offensive, dialogue between the characters. Laughter is to be found, then, primarily in the characters themselves; the characters are depicted as laughing, even though the story is quite tragic. While this relates to the painful offense of stereotypical laughing Sambo, the characters also become models of laughter in adversity, where contorted laughter becomes acrobatic, a valuable survival skill.

The African American characters’ laughter should also be taken with a grain of salt in light of Hurston’s claim that this laughter hides more than it reveals. She sees “open-faced laughter” as a subjective resistance to objective anthropology in her introduction to *Mules and Men* (Hurston 2). In this introduction, Hurston is marketing herself as a suitable anthropologist of Eatonsville through establishing herself as a

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<sup>60</sup> What does it mean to call a Rolls Royce (historically the most expensive, prestigious, and elite car) a *Rolls-Rough*? Is it actually a Rolls, or is he being sarcastic? This distinction matters here. Driving such a car could potentially even be dangerous in the Jim Crow south, where it might be seen as “uppity” (see, for instance, Hughes’s story about a lynching in *The Ways of White Folks*, or E. L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*).

mediator between two worlds: that of the predominantly white academia and that of her “native village,” Eatonsville. Hurston opens by representing herself as subservient to academic anthropology: “I was glad when somebody told me, ‘You may go and collect Negro folklore’” (Hurston *Mules and Men*, 1), and closes with a recognition of the patronage of Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason. The “spy-glass of Anthropology” is one that is turned both towards her subject of study and towards her own subjectivity, and so her ironic self-identification with Eatonsville (the first person plural pronoun predominates in the introduction) allows Hurston to simultaneously play the roles of researcher and informant. This ironic identification also allows for a social critique of the place of women of African descent in academia, and also of the very methodology of anthropology. Her credentials as a trained anthropologist are downplayed in relation to her “insider” knowledge and solidarity: “here in Eatonsville I knew everybody was going to help me” (Hurston *Mules and Men* 3). Her insider position is important because of the particular self-representation of African American communities in the south, for, as she explains, “the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive [. . .] We smile and tell him or her [the questioner] something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing” (Hurston *Mules and Men* 2). This ironic identification imbues the introduction with ambiguity, paralleled by the inherent subject-position ambiguity in the genre of auto-ethnography. And so, when she quotes “the Negro” saying that “[t]he white man [. . .] can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind,” it is possible that it is to her *own* writing that she refers (Hurston *Mules and Men* 3). The ironically-inspired ambiguity puts beyond question Hurston’s credentials and insider knowledge, and at the

same time it turns the gaze onto anthropology itself as a science which seeks and fails to read minds.

The autoethnographic persona of *Mules and Men* is similar to – though much more condensed than – that which Sidonie Smith reads in Hurston's *Dust Tracks*: “Culturally provisional and individually improvisational, Hurston's autobiographical 'I' engages in a jazzed-up performance of diasporan subjectivity [. . . T]he autobiography contributes to the mystification of Hurston” (105).<sup>61</sup> The combination of the diasporan and the non-committal (“provisional,” “improvisational”). the “Jazzed-up form” with “diasporan subjectivity” content, mark the autobiography as subversive of the “I.” Is “diasporan subjectivity” a question of form or of content, and where does one look for it? Is it in the choice of language, in sociological reality, in the content – which becomes the fact of travel and exile, of forced movement, and of an artist seeking exile and home for her expression. Smith's analysis of identity politics in Hurston becomes problematic when she writes that “Hurston does not position herself as the victimized black subject since she does not locate the origins of her subjectivity in the history of oppression or the violent psychology of race relations in America. In this way, she eludes being assigned any provided subjectivity and foils any attempt on the part of the white reader to fix her as a 'representative' of her race” (Smith 110). But what about her non-white readers? What can one assume their expectations to be? Smith may well be placing too much emphasis on the white reader for her interpretation, even if Hurston's writing was commissioned by a white publisher (as, indeed, nearly all writing of the period was). The address is not, cannot be, to the white reader only; not only were there African American

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<sup>61</sup> See Bakhtin on chronotope and biography and autobiography (using Ancient Greek, Roman and Hellenistic examples): 111-146.



readers, but the readership was institutionalized through literary criticism, response, education, and activism.<sup>62</sup> The question that creeps up is, if one allows that the reader is white, how does the text construct this whiteness? Quoting from *Dust Tracks*, “if you have received no clear-cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me” (237, qtd in Smith 109), Smith comments “most ironically, Hurston situates her (white) reader 'in the same place' that she occupies, thus blurring the grounds upon which racial differentiation can proceed” (109). Is the irony, then, lost when the reader is not white? Hurston’s irony transgresses racial boundaries, much as her approach to anthropology broke down boundaries to introduce autoethnography, though not precisely through multiplicity per se, but through a certain reaffirmation of binaries, a reaffirmation that inflates and then bursts them.

Even within the title of her autobiography - *Dust Tracks on a Road*, not *the Road* - a profoundly momentary, explosive, theory emerges. The subject of the autobiography, the life of the individual, the celebrity, the artist, the person herself, is fleeting not only because the dust tracks may become indistinguishable from others on the road, overwhelmed by other footprints, irrecoverably trod into oblivion, but also that their direction is altogether unmarked, existing as it does on *a* road, an anonymous, indefinite road among many others. At the same time, this is a highly individualized, perhaps even narcissistic, kind of approach: not only does each life have its own footprints, but also its own road, however unnamed and untraceable.

Hurston's travels are beautifully captured by Rebecca Chalmers Barton, who, in her 1948 *Witnesses for Freedom: Negro Americans in Autobiography*, describes them as

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<sup>62</sup> *Forgotten Readers* (2002).

being influenced by Hurston's childhood in an all African-American community. Barton writes about Hurston's folklore collection:

“As she appreciates the primitive Negro types in the phosphate mines, on the railroads, in the forests of Polk County, Florida, as she captures the rhythm and melody of Negro dance and music in Nassau and the Bahamas, as she studies Negro culture in Jamaica and Haiti, she is extending further and further the original zest for living she felt in her all-Negro community. Her anthropological training equips her with a technique of approach and understanding which fulfills her deep-rooted spontaneities” (Barton 107).

Is there the assumption of a homogenous community here, an assumption of the sense of freedom and ease of moving in a community in which one doesn't stand out, when one is in the majority, and in this case not only a majority but an exclusive majority? In what ways does the “zest for living” come from homogeneity, especially since it is clear from the autobiography itself that Hurston does not attribute much to it.

In fact, Hurston attributes the most formative influences on her development to her teenage experiences on the road with a multiethnic, multi-class, theater troupe. (The title of the section covering these years, “Back Stage and the Railroad,” coincides nicely with the theme of this chapter.) Development thus is located in movement and mobility rather than origin, the route rather than root. More directly than any other section, it deals with humor, with the humor being intricately connected to the formation of boundaries between insiders and outsiders within the little society of artists on the go. She remembers being the butt of jokes within the troupe because she was the only young African American woman there. The teasing was also a part of the violent intimacy and generosity of the group; she was paid for being amusing with food (105): “They teased me all the time just to hear me talk. But there was no malice in it. If I got mad and spoke

my piece, they liked it even better. I was stuffed with ice cream sodas and coca-cola” (Hurston 105). For Hurston, the troupe life, the communal life of artists, is educational in particular ways; a haven of sorts, a utopia: while traveling, she continued reading, though in a diminished way, using the limited and selective library of a “Harvard man” in the troupe (Hurston 116). But her education with the troupe was more than in high culture:

“More than that, I saw thirty-odd people made of all classes and races living a communal life. There were little touches of professional jealousy and a catty crack now and then, but let sickness or trouble touch any member and the whole cast rallied around to help out. It was a marvelous thing to see. There were a few there from good families and well-to-do homes who slept in shabby hotels and made meals on sandwiches without a murmur. From what they said and did, you would think they were as poor as the rest” (117-18).

A moment later, though, the utopia turns into something else: “With all branches of Anglo-Saxon, Irish, three Jews and one Negro together in a huddle, and all friendly, there were a lot of racial gags. Everybody was so sure that nobody hesitated to pull them. It was all taken in good part. Naturally, all of the Negro gags were pulled on me. There were enough of the others to divide things up” (Hurston 117-8). This may be read as a conservative distrust of a diverse community. While Hurston is putting on a brave face, with “it was all taken in good part,” there is also something that may be read as a criticism of the lack of political correctness. One may think of the little girl, who is in the center of the narrative of Zora Neale Hurston’s life, who gets more gags than all the others.

To experience this bullying among friends, however, was invaluable, as Hurston describes it:

The whole experience on that job gave me an approach to racial understanding. [.

. . .] Furthermore, it discouraged any sensitiveness on my part, so that I am still not conscious of my race no matter where I may go. I found out too that you are bound to be jostled in the 'crowded street of life.' That in itself need not be dangerous unless you have the open razors of personal vanity in your pants pocket. The passer-by don't hurt you, but if you go around like that, they make you hurt yourself (Hurston 118).

In spite of the echo of Nietzsche's "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," Hurston's own creativity is restricted to the backstage and the railway. The pronouncement that she's "still not conscious of my race no matter where I go" cannot be taken at face value, since for the past few pages she spoke of being frequently reminded of her racial difference through taunting. How does this reminder make her less conscious of racial difference? If it did indeed have that effect, perhaps it was precisely because every member of the troupe was taunted in some way. When everyone is different, the burden of difference is lightened, because not burdened by the self, not burdened by "personal vanity," perhaps. Since humor functions as glue (creating bonds) and also as oil or shmalts (lubricating social interaction), Hurston, in the tale of her life, becomes the creative center of the comradely taunting. Earlier on, she recalls organizing a communal notice board. She writes, "The result stayed strictly mine less than a week because members of the cast began to call me aside and tell me things to put in about others. It got to be so general that everybody was writing it. It was just my handwriting, mostly. Then it got beyond that. Most of the cast ceased to wait for me. They would take a pencil to the board and set down their own items. Answers to the wisecracks would appear promptly, and often cause uproarious laughter" (Hurston 107). Her youth, her gender, her class and her race all make her a safe intermediary, since she could be safely targeted with blame

when the joking became inappropriate (ibid).

Humor has an important social function in other parts of the narrative as well. During a break in touring, the young Hurston stayed with her employer's family. In Miss M--'s house, as well, the jokes were both painful and delightful. The family was Irish, and she took a particular liking to the elder brother Johnnie, a convicted murderer as the reader later finds out, because “[h]e could tell such funny Irish jokes that I liked to be around him” (Hurston 110). (Self-directed) jokes, in other words, both separate and bring together. Laughter as taunting is painful but, at the same time, a kind of propeller into a poetic exile, a psychic independence. Humor thus influences the movement along the twists and turns of a dust-tracked road.

### **Hughes: Futurist Diaspora in “Railroad Avenue” (1926)**

Langston Hughes’s “Railroad Avenue,” like Hurston’s “Color Struck,” was published in *Fire!!* in 1926. Here the train is completely stationary; it is not only a relic of the past, it is completely flat, since even its pastness, its memory, is denied. I quote it in full:

Dusk dark  
On Railroad Avenue.  
Lights in the fish joints,  
Lights in the pool rooms.  
A box car some train  
Has forgotten  
In the middle of the block.  
A player piano,  
A victrola.  
942  
Was the number.  
A boy  
Lounging on the corner.  
A passing girl  
With purple powdered skin.

Laughter  
Suddenly  
Like a taut drum.  
Laughter  
Suddenly  
Neither truth nor lie.  
Laughter  
Hardening the dusk dark evening.  
Laughter  
Shaking the lights in the fish joints,  
Rolling white balls in the pool rooms,  
And leaving untouched the box car  
Some train has forgotten  
(p. 21).

The train car is literally a relic of the past, completely immobile in comparison to the “shaking” “rolling” laughter; indeed, the laughter takes over the actions that would otherwise be associated with the train. Here it is the movement of laughing, a shaken up breathing, the injection and ejection of air, the convulsing body, the shaking gait. The dynamic being set up once again, as in Spector’s feuillets, draws on the binary of insider/outsider, of tense opposition; the oppositions here, however, are not clear cut. Indeed, it is neither clear who is laughing nor where the laughter is directed. The sudden laughter may be coming from the boy laughing at the passing girl, perhaps laughing precisely because she is passing. Perhaps her purple powder may be an insufficient way to “pass,” or she may be ridiculous for trying to pass altogether. Perhaps it is the speaker of the poem who is laughing, surprising himself. And it may, of course, be simply the laughter of drunken merrymaking, of spirits.

The number 942 most likely refers to the Seaboard Airline Railway, a Georgian line “through the heart of the south.”<sup>63</sup> Hughes’s relationship to the South is complicated;

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<sup>63</sup> See [railga.com/sal](http://railga.com/sal), and also *Life* magazine Jan. 1, 1943; this is an internal Southern railway that doesn’t go to New York, but does go to Hurston’s hometown Jacksonville (from 1899), and from 1904 Atlanta to Birmingham.

he is from Kansas, but arrives in New York by way of Washington D. C., where he was one of Alain Locke's young male protégés.<sup>64</sup> His poem "The South" was published in a June, 1922 issue of *Crisis*, whose editor, Jessie Fauset, was instrumental in supporting Hughes's literary career.<sup>65</sup> The ambivalent poem opens with "The lazy, laughing South, / With blood on its mouth," and continues to anthropomorphize, mystify and eroticize the region in the persona of a femme fatale. It ends with the speaker finally leaving the South, as a scorned lover leaves a cruel mistress:

Beautiful, like a woman,  
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,  
Passionate, cruel,  
Honey-lipped, syphilitic —  
That is the South.  
And I, who am black, would love her  
But she spits in my face;  
And I, who am black,  
Would give her many rare gifts  
But she turns her back upon me.  
So now I seek the North —  
The cold-faced North,  
For she, they say,  
Is a kinder mistress,  
And in her house my children  
May escape the spell of the South.

The speaker, it seems, is able to impregnate the South and the North to bear his children, who may escape the South's spell; the speaker himself will never will escape it, however, even when in the North. What can be seductive about the South? Importantly, its seduction serves as a way of mediating what might otherwise be an obvious preference for the North. There is something else that is seductive, though, which is always lacking

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<sup>64</sup> In Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, Locke is a mother hen with chicks surrounding her. In the first chapter I mention Bruce Nugent's distaste for Locke's sexual advances, and it seems that Hughes was also rejecting these advances in a (strategically) tactful way.

<sup>65</sup> *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP, was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910.

in Hughes's writing in ways that are difficult to ignore because of the presence of Hurston: the South is – however dispersed, localized, wounded, and continually threatened – a well-spring of African American folklore.

His poem “My People” was printed side by side with “The South” in the June, 1922 issue of the *Crisis*.<sup>66</sup>

Dream-singers,  
Story tellers,  
Dancers,  
Loud laughers in the hands of Fate—  
    My people.  
Dish washers  
Elevator boys,<sup>67</sup>  
Ladies' maids,  
Crap-shooters,  
Cooks,  
Waiters,  
Jazzers,  
Nurses of babies,  
Loaders of ships,  
Porters,  
Hairdressers,  
Comedians in vaudeville  
And band-men in circuses —  
Dream-singers all,  
Story-tellers all.  
Dancers —  
God! What dancers!  
Singers —  
God! What singers!  
Singers and Dancers  
Dancers and laughers  
Laughers?  
Yes, laughers...laughers...laughers —  
Loud-mouthed laughers in the hands

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<sup>66</sup> There is also something about the way the two poems are set up on the *Crisis* page, “TWO POEMS / Langston Hughes” which indicates that he is a rising star, a hot commodity.

<sup>67</sup> Along with “Railroad Avenue,” Hughes published “Elevator Boy”: “Maybe no luck for a long time. / Only the elevators / Goin’ up an’ down, / Up an’ down, / Or somebody else’s shoes / To shine, / Or greasy pots in a dirty kitchen. / I been runnin’ this / Elevator too long. / Guess I’ll quit now” (20).



## Of Fate.<sup>68</sup>

Presented here are a multiplicity of occupations: nurses, comedians, dish-washers, and so on; only three are explicitly gendered: “elevator-boys,” “ladies’ maids” and “band-men,” and “Dancers” and “Singers” are singled out, perhaps because these were commonly viewed as “positive” stereotypical professions.<sup>69</sup> The medley of professional designations includes designations that are not necessarily related to any trade: what are “dream-singers” and “story-tellers,” and what is their hourly wage? How do they fit into a capitalist economy? And in what sense is laughter an occupation? By including the story-tellers, dream-singers and laughers among the trades, the whole list becomes strange, defamiliarizing the other occupations, the band-men, comedians, dish-washers, elevator-boys. The implication most important for my purposes here is that laughter, like other types of work, takes effort and skill, perhaps even talent (as with the body in contortion in Hurston mentioned above). The laughter only comes towards the end, however, and it is questioned and then defensively repeated (“Yes, laughers...laughers...laughers”), and yet it does not get the last word, it does not liberate its practitioners from “the hands of Fate.” Laughter is a conscious position one inhabits while remaining a part of a subservient class, if one reads “Fate” (naturalistically, as an injection of deterministic logic into the poem) as a euphemism for the low-paying, unappreciated and anonymous occupations to which African Americans were too often consigned. Laughter is then a psychological

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<sup>68</sup> See also Mike Chasar’s 2008 article “The Sounds of Black Laughter and the Harlem Renaissance: Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes,” who uses a few lines from the poem as an epigraph. Chasar calls this poem “Laughers,” as it was renamed when collected five years after the Crisis publication in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927).

<sup>69</sup> Hughes, in *Poets of the Revolution* (Motown Records, 1970, also featuring the poet Margaret Danner), remembers how he was named the class poet, since his African heritage was thought (by his classmates and teacher) to give him natural talent for rhythm.

survival strategy. Fate, however, may *also* be read romantically as related to the mysterious dream-singers and story-tellers, and laughter, thus, may be read as transformative, perhaps even transcendent. The artistic form liberates the individual from a passive, assigned class and racial identification, a stereotypical *laughee* position, to active *laughers*. A change in perspective is a change in reality.<sup>70</sup>

While in “The South” and “My People” the context is exclusively American, Hughes also evokes Africa and the middle passage in his poetry. In a yet earlier poem published in the *Crisis* in January 1922, entitled “The Negro,” Hughes draws out a diasporic understanding of history which blends past and present, Africa and America. The four middle stanzas have a parallel structure, each beginning in the present perfect tense: “I’ve been a slave/worker/singer/victim,” followed by a simple past elaboration which begins in Africa and ends in America: “Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean. / I brushed the boots of Washington,” “Under my hand the pyramids arose. / I made mortar for the Woolworth Building,” “All the way from Africa to Georgia / I carried my sorrow songs. / I made ragtime.” While the simple past tense suggests a history left behind, the fifth stanza switches to the simple present: “The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo. / They lynch me now in Texas.” The poem is framed with the lines, again in the present: “I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black, / Black like the depths of my Africa.” Similar to his famous “Negro Speak of Rivers” poem of 1919,<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Ellison’s “Change the joke and slip the yoke.”

<sup>71</sup> That is how he places the composition of the poem, though it was published two years later in the *Crisis*. See also Clare Corbould’s *Becoming African Americans*, 158-160, who sees the poem as expressing the poet’s romantic, ahistorical relation to Africa until 1940: “Africa remained in black Americans’ bodies” (159), a relation which he publicly sustained in spite of revealing personal correspondence which denies it for a decade leading to the 1940 publication of his autobiography *The Big Sea*.

the speaker connects his voice to a history, but also bends this history, makes it more flexible and fluid, in order, in the end, to possess it, and expand the meanings of Africa (contra Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*) and of the night.

The number 942 in "Railroad Avenue" also points one in the direction of futurism. Umberto Boccioni's "States of Mind I: The Farewells" (1911) comes to mind (Fig. 3). The colorful lines of the painting are all movements of light and locomotive smoke, and only the number 6943 is strangely immobile and horizontal.<sup>72</sup> There are no clearly discernible people here: the dragon-like train invades the station, breathing fire and smoke, and outlines of huddled figures emerge, seemingly hugging to say their farewells. The train seems to cut through the hugging crowd, or perhaps it is participating in the collective embrace; the organic and inorganic bodies are intermingling to form a billowing dance. The perpendicularly-oriented telegraph poles and the rows of houses remind us of stable, commodified time, of wage workers commuting, of migrations and leave-taking, perhaps forever.

This intertextual comparison is encouraged by Hughes's poem "America," published in the June 1925 issue of *Opportunity*, which seems to be influenced by the Futurist manifesto, as it repeats thrice "Out of yesterday," and continues to juxtapose past and present in "The poverty and pain of the old, old world, / The building and struggle of this new one." There is, then, a futuristic look forward, but the poem is also reminiscent of "The Negro" discussed above, with its fluidity between past and present; Hughes's primitivism and diasporism celebrate a mythic, premodern past. The starkest difference with the manifesto is perhaps the particularity of American racism and all that comes out

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<sup>72</sup> See appendix Fig 3.

of it: injustice, forgiveness, resentment. Notably -- though it is very characteristic for the Harlem Renaissance writers -- there is a parallel being drawn between the Jewish condition in Europe and the African American one in the USA: the poem begins with the lines “Little dark baby, / Little Jew baby,” and goes on to parallel two “yesterdays”: “The chains of slavery” and “The ghettos of Europe.” The oppression being left behind is not of the older generation artists staring down from museum walls, as it is for Marinetti in his manifesto, but rather that of the systematic oppression of a racialized minority.<sup>73</sup>

What is the role of laughter in “Railroad Avenue,” then? The sudden, “neither truth nor lie” of laughter interrupts and bursts the bubble of the mundane “rolling white balls in the pool rooms” and “hardening the dusk dark evening,” as if laughter were the power which conjures the night scene of popular entertainment, creating the chronotope of urban leisure. Commodified time, which is divided into hours and minutes for the sake of the railroad (for it is time that runs for trains, as opposed to trains running on time), points at a contradiction in capitalist symbolism: time is money, not pages or words or lines, not even punch lines. Hours and minutes can be sold, but immediacy cannot be accumulated, cannot be saved up or quantified. The successful joke that provokes laughter is contextual, contemporary, and contingent.

### **Capture the Rapture: on time**

Both the Yiddish and the Harlem Renaissance writers provide counter-narratives while

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas Holt analyzes the July 1910 boxing match between Jack Johnson vs. “the White Hope” as revealing a duality of representation, both as a minstrel character and as a machine, urban, future, etc. (79-80). Also Nadine’s *The Queer Composition of America’s Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), which is actually more of a straight reading of this, of white men wanting to be masculine/exotic, and yet constrained/repressed by modernity.

simultaneously participating in mainstream modernist artistic projects.<sup>74</sup> For the Harlem Renaissance writers, it is the futurist train or the abandoned, immobile train, with no identifiable figures within it, while the visual milieu of the Classical Yiddish writers is the realist and impressionist trains, the insides of which reflect social conscience and liberal utopianism. Within the realist and impressionist contexts, there are portraits, which should be seen as attempts to elevate the subject, to make humans out of subjugated people, and to praise the liberal, and occasionally Marxist, sense of individual integrity. In the futurist context, since there is no one on the train, it is not about elevating a person anymore, not about proving humanity and defending subjecthood; indeed, perhaps it is no longer about the individual at all. Boccioni's painting testifies to a sense of exhilaration at the sight of flashing lights, a dazzled movement forward.

The minority artistic movements are a variation on these visual traditions, however. I open this discussion with Jean Toomer, one of the most celebrated Harlem Renaissance modernists. Toomer conceived of *Cane* (1923), a work that Du Bois and Locke enlisted as the harbinger of the New Negro movement (as discussed in the first chapter), as a swansong of the South and the Negro as a creative source.<sup>75</sup> In a late 1922-early 1923 letter to Waldo Frank<sup>76</sup> he writes:

Dont [sic] let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of the folk-song has all  
but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred

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<sup>74</sup> Simon Gikandi in his "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism" (2005) cites Michael North I discussed in the second chapter, and extends the project to suggest that "modernism was easy to institutionalize because it was also the product of a fundamental contradiction: it invoked the other and made it part of its schemata but also allowed for the differentiation of difference, so that some of its more radical forms could be exiled from its form through the ritual of canonization" (33).

<sup>75</sup> Norton *Cane* 156, in a letter to Waldo Frank, probably from September 1923.

<sup>76</sup> Waldo Frank was a Jewish American writer who accompanied him to the South, promoted *Cane* to Horace Liveright and produced a book of his own based on their travels, *Holiday* (1923).

years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art. And I believe that a vague sense of this fact is the driving force behind the movements directed towards them today. (Likewise the Indian.) America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time. \* \* \* The supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become part of it, or get sloughed off (under). Negroes have no culture to resist it with (and if they had, their position would be identical to the Indians), hence industrialism the more readily transforms them. (Norton *Cane*, 151).

Toomer conceived of his writing as, in part, a search for and expression of a changing, flowing, artistic self; a self which he never identified as Black. His psychological searchings were part and parcel of his artistic stirrings; writing was a way inward, toward the self. The letter reveals a certain compromise between the inward and outward directionality of art and of the artist. The tone of the letter is already nostalgic for the disappearance of local color within a monotone technological modernity. It is also about fleeting temporality in more general terms. As in Williams's "Northboun'," modernization is not a non-violent affair. Otherness here serves as a kind of target on one's back, and progress forward requires that traditions and their bearers be "sloughed off (under)." Often used to refer to reptile shedding, "sloughed off" references skin without naming it. Since the inter-species verb is one of shedding away, not hacking away, it further suggests the lack of a scar, a denial of lasting memory, except, perhaps, "in art." The movement, importantly, is vertical ("under"), not horizontal, just as in "Northboun'." The verticality suggests synchronicity, momentary and fleeting, and the artist, then, needs to hurry in order to capture the now.

In Hurston's *Dust Tracks* as well, one observes momentary happiness – folding on itself, necessarily – happiness without (and beyond) satisfaction; perhaps “rapture,” with its etymology of forced movement, of abduction (an etymology which it shares with “rape”), is the right word for it). As Barton notes (not without judgment, it seems):

She explains that she, too, longs for universal justice, but that it is impossible to do much about it when everybody is bound to disagree on ways and means of reaching it. 'It is such a complicated thing, for justice, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.' Free of many routine moral obligations, Zora Hurston busies herself with unwrapping the happiness contained in each moment [. . .] It is a safe guess that few people were bored in her presence. (Barton 114)

Beauty is found in complexity, and also serves as a way to understand justice, a justice that is as contested and as multiple as conceptions of beauty. A multiplicity of viewpoints is best observable in immediacy, synchronicity. The aesthetics and the ethics here are potentially devastating: if justice is not blind, but is rather “in the eye of the beholder,” how can it ever be achieved? Devastatingly and beautifully complex, there are no easy answers: the “beholder” – the reader, the audience – must take on the responsibility for beauty as well as for justice. There is, then, an ethics of taste. Momentary rapture leads to a potentially troubling ethics, where mourning and melancholy are not only useless, but detrimental. To quote Barton again:

So concerned is she with living in the present that she refuses to be sentimental about the past. 'While I have a handkerchief over my eyes crying over the landing of the first slaves in 1619, I might miss something swell that is going on in 1942.' Her contemporary troubles are of a different nature from those of nineteenth-century slaves, so there is no point in forcing an artificial connection. 'For me to pretend that I am Old Black Joe<sup>77</sup> and waste my time on his problems, would be

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<sup>77</sup> Citing an antebellum S.C. Foster song.

just as ridiculous as for the government of Winston Churchill to bill the Duke of Normandy the first of every month (Barton 111).

The ethics of the moment are double here. First, representations of the past need to be acknowledged as removed and disconnected: historical knowledge comes together with an objectivity which refuses to see continuity within the present if it means dwelling on the past and comparing wounds. Within this irreverent stance, there is, therefore, an acknowledgement of the debt to the dead; every piece of knowledge is a potential abuse of their memory. Second, the now requires all efforts: nothing “swell” is going on in world politics in 1942.

Migration is driven by the push and pull of political advantage and upheaval (pogroms, lynching), as well as by economic necessity and demand. Hurston's travels and migrations from her late teens were determined by her ability to find work as a domestic, and later as a writer and graduate student at Columbia. Sholem Aleichem's movements were guided by his ability to find work as a tutor, and then, also, as a writer. The migration of the artist is determined by the ebb and flow of the demand for skilled (artistic) labor, but within this materialist framework, there is something additional: the romantic notion of homelessness, being an exile among one's peers, seeking a home among the company of like-minded and creative individuals; it is a search for development and inspiration, in addition to low rent.<sup>78</sup> Collecting folklore through travel or correspondence, the train is not the only technology significant for these writers.

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<sup>78</sup> One of Hurston's letters to Hughes, which serves as an epigraph to the second chapter, suggests that they start, on the Dixie Highway, “a Negro art colony. You, and Wallie, and Aaron Douglas and Bruce and me and all our crowd”; “No big society stuff. Just a neat little colony of kindred souls. I'm crazy to build me a house that looks something like an African king's menage. More elaborate of course” (in *Zora Neale Hurston* 145, 146).



Photography was another such technology, and to account for its relationship to the themes of movement and immediacy, I will turn once again to “Der gliklekhster in Kodny,” where irony is contingent upon the camera. This discussion will also serve as the conclusion to the chapter, since in it, identity and technology, subjectivity and objectivity, ironically play out one against the other.

“Der gliklekhster in Kodny” begins with the storyteller reflecting on the luxury of traveling in third class. This luxury is contrasted with the sight of an overworked man on a cart abusing his horse. Both the man and the horse are referred to as “gots bashefenish” [God’s creature], but the storyteller’s fellow passengers on the train are called “mentshn” [humans, people]. There is a hierarchy of living things, then. The story ends with the author’s disappointment with himself for not having a camera to photograph the protagonist, poking fun at the technologically-advanced human who expands his dominion over other creatures.

א שאָד, וואָס איך בין נישט קיין פֿאָטאָגראַף, און פֿיר נישט מיט זיך קיין אַפּאַראַט, עס  
וואָלט געווען אַ יושר אַראָפּצוכאַפּן פֿונעם ייִדל אַ פֿאַרטרעט. לאָז די וועלט זען, וואָס הייסט  
אַ גליקלעכער מענטש. דער גליקלעכסטער מענטש אין קאָדני<sup>79</sup>

[A shame, that I’m no photographer, and don’t carry a camera along with me. It would have been right to snap a portrait of the little Jew. Let the world see the meaning of a fortunate person. The most fortunate person in Kodny]

There may be a variety of ways in which a man can look happy, and in this case, Reb Alter’s face shines and his eyes protrude, with the shiny face serving as a link between beauty and happiness, aesthetics and well-being. The phrase “es volt geven a yoysher” [it would have been just] evokes Sholem Aleichem’s much earlier article, “A por verter

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<sup>79</sup> “Der gliklekhster in kodny,” *Ale verk fun Sholem-Aleykhem: Ayznban geshikhtes* (New York: Sholem-aleykhem folks-fond oysgabe, 1923), 38.

vegn undzer balmelokhe” [A few words about our tradesman].<sup>80</sup> The article closes with a critique of the contemporary “aristocracy,” chastising maskilic writers for their inability to truly help or enlighten the masses due to their ignorance concerning the plight of the poor workers: “s’volt geven a yoysher az undzere yidishe shrayber, vos af zeyer mazl iz oysgefaln tsu zayn lerer farn folk, zoln zikh nemen tsu der shayle” [it would have been just, should our Yiddish writers, who are fortunate to be teachers of the folk, take up this question].<sup>81</sup> As argued by Nokhum Oyslender, Sholem Aleichem’s aesthetic raises the folk from objects to subjects by recognizing the hidden creative power within them: from “yidelekh” he makes “mentshn.”

The storyteller’s verbal longing for the materiality of the camera is a delight in failure. Deleuze and Guattari write of the attempt to make language thing-like when they write about Kafka: “there is no longer a designation of something by means of a proper name, nor an assignation of metaphors by means of a figurative sense. But like images, the thing no longer forms anything but a sequence of intensive states” (Deleuze and Guattari 87). Sholem Aleichem speaks of Yiddish as “a popular, incredibly simple, and, at the same time, an image-filled language” (quoted in Serebryanyi 281). He often recreates the verbal tics of his characters, and this ironic repetition is emphasized by the story’s framing device. Taking the joking status of the story into account, we can see that the story is meant to be told and retold. “Repetition is never an inert affair, despite its mechanical fidelity. Say it, read it, echo it often enough and at short enough intervals, and

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<sup>80</sup> Sholem Aleichem, ‘A por verter vegn undzer balmelokhe’, *Yidishe folks-bibliotek* 2, section 3, pp. 103-111.

<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Nokhum Oyslender, ‘Der yunger Sholem-Aleykhem un zayn roman “Stempenyu” (materyaln tsu der kharakteristik fun Sholem-Aleykhems kinstlerisher antviklung)’, *Shriftn* 1 (1928), p. 25.

the word suffers a mutation, its thingness abruptly catapulted forward” (Riley 158). The storytelling mode points consciously at this repetition, and at the failure of representation. The story’s end is the story’s disappointment, and a breaking down of the storyteller: all that he had told us is meaningless in comparison with a photograph of his protagonist.

The humor is used ironically to position a traditional, local, minority storyteller within an increasingly technological modernity; the storyteller does not fail to catch the train. The humor and irony of the *Ayznban geshikhtes* depend, in part, on the interaction between the storyteller, other Jews, and technology; and it is significant that the story end with the stripping of the storyteller’s technological privilege. First excusing his words as banal, Roland Barthes nevertheless speaks of the subjectivity of the photographer as witness: “the photographer bears witness essentially to his own subjectivity, the way in which he establishes himself as a subject faced with an object” (Barthes 356). “Der gliklekhster in Kodny” began with the storyteller’s reflection over his own technological privilege and the differences between the status of a passenger in a train, and that of “God’s creatures” in a cart, a reflection that serves to elevate the storyteller and his fellow passengers above “God’s creatures” toiling outside the train. At the end of the story, the technological hierarchy is reversed, since the outside is now the fortunate one, while the storyteller and the other passengers are somehow trapped within the train, rather than liberated by it. The storyteller fails doubly and ironically, for he cannot convince the reader that the story has failed to meet the standards of a photograph. After all, the reader has read to the end.

## Appendix

Fig. 1. Honoré Daumier, “The Third-Class Carriage,” ca. 1862–64, and the Met, New York:



Fig. 2. Vassily Perov, “Spor o vere (stsena v vagone)” [A disputation about the faith (a scene in a railcar)], 1880, at Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow:



Fig. 3. Umberto Boccioni's "States of Mind I: The Farewells" (1911), at MoMA, New York:



## **Chapter V**

### **Irreverent Piety: Ironic Relations to the Divine**

The people who make up the sanctified groups, while admiring the white brother in many ways think him ridiculous in church. They feel that the white man is too cut and dried and business-like to be of much use in a service. There is a well-distributed folk-tale depicting a white man praying in church that never fails to bring roars of laughter when it is told. The writer first found the story in Polk county but later found it all over the south.

Hurston, "The Sanctified Church," 107.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter re-examines ironic relationships to the divine within the Harlem Renaissance and Classical Yiddish literatures from a comparative perspective. Piety, often conflated with superstition when it comes to the folk, plays an important role in the construction of an artistic minority identity. The tension between the author and the folk – between folklore collection and artistic endeavor, between enlightening and patronizing, between uplifting and appropriating – is as central as it was in the previous chapters. The “divine” here then is primarily referring to textual and narrative religious identity and organization, revisions of Biblical narrative and the representations of piety, as they show the relationship between religion, politics, and literature.

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<sup>1</sup> Hurston, Zora Neale, *The Sanctified Church*. (Marlowe & Co., Berkeley, CA, 1981).

The methodology of this chapter is quite different from the previous ones. If the first two chapters are independently structured while suggesting a parallel, the third chapter suggests connection, while this chapter is a bit bolder in its hybridizing. I pursue the interconnections among the actors within the various spheres, flexing both the generic constraints – through reading translation, ethnography, poetry, novel, (auto)biography, etc. – as well as national and linguistic divides and periodizations, that are, in the case of African American and Classical Yiddish literatures, already stretched, complicated, since they are “already” diasporic, at times transnational, at times nationalistic. Further, in contrast with the preceding chapters, feminist politics and gender analysis emerge in a more pronounced way.

Religious piety means different things in the two contexts. In the East European context, Jewish piety is a point of argument between Hasidim (religious reformers that put emphasis on belief as opposed to study) and Misnagdim (religious opponents of Hassidism in the eighteenth century), which may be very roughly divided along the lines of ecstatic devotion and faith and rational learning and law, and the two religious movements operate within different social hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> By emphasizing the realia of religious learning, Modern Yiddish writers often extend social critique, since they show clearly the ways in which religious officials participate in, and give further credence and power to, oppressive economic systems. The terms of the critique of traditional religious institutions vary greatly, and one of the variations may be characterized as maskilic and post-maskilic attitudes. A juxtaposition between “Di Takse” [The tax], one of Mendele’s

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<sup>2</sup> If for Misnagdim untutored devotion is looked down upon, and the working masses are therefore generally unable to be truly pious, for Hassidim, even though unlearned acts of devotion are welcomed, the Rebe/Tsadik as a charismatic leader becomes a de facto tyrant.

early plays (1869) and Sholem Aleichem's "Der gliklekhster in kodny" [the most fortunate one in Kodny] (1909), is one example of this variation; in Mendele's burning satire, religious officials unite with the Russian authorities in oppressing the struggling lower classes,<sup>3</sup> whereas in Sholem Aleichem's monologue, the religious advisor is shown to suffer at the hands of an assimilating Jewish elite.<sup>4</sup>

In the African American context, devotional authenticity is also a locus of tensions, but here the tension is between Christian scriptures and teachings – where those who suffer receive the best reward in afterlife and therefore have the benefit of moral superiority in current life – and African traditions, which are focused on communal ritual.<sup>5</sup> The carriers of these African traditions were torn away from their homelands by the same forces who introduced the Christian religion. The African religious traditions, in the context of slavery, are hybridized with Christianity. By the 1920s, the ancient rituals are revived and studied on the continent and in the diaspora through the lens of ethnographic research. This ethnographic lens, importantly, is part and parcel of the colonizing gaze which exoticizes non-Western and non-monotheistic religious practice as shamanistic, pagan, barbaric, and also liberating, pre-modern, primitive. In this way, writers such as Du Bois and Johnson see the Southern and rural communities as also bearing the traditions more authentically; the evocation of authenticity in relation to the struggling masses is at times a way of securing economic inequality, using in fact the

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<sup>3</sup> As in Spector as well, see below.

<sup>4</sup> Other examples abound: For example, Avrom Rayzn's "Der nign" in *Der Hoyzfraynd* vol. III, 1909 (pp. 95-96), which unites the melody of a young man's studying to his physical hunger, or again in *Hoyzfraynd* V (157-158), I.D. Rizberg's "far vos lernt men mit kinder tanakh," which speaks of pseudo-pious Jews who don't recognize the necessity and the holiness of the Hebrew Bible, even when non-Jews do recognize it.

<sup>5</sup> James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* of 1925.



Christian gospel ethic of “the poor shall inherit the earth.”<sup>6</sup> Hurston, analyzing “The Sanctified Church” based on religious folklore she collected during a 1936 expedition to Florida, also makes claims for the authenticity of the spirituals sung in southern churches, as compared to their rendition in concert halls:

In fact, the Negro has not been christianized as extensively as is generally believed. The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name. [. . .] They [the spirituals] are twisted in concert from their barbaric rhythms into Gregorian chants and apocryphal appendages to Bach and Brahms. But go into the church and see the priest before the altar chanting his barbaric thunder-poem before the altar with the audience behaving something like a Greek chorus (104).

Hurston's ethnographic analysis, further, explicitly connects this “barbaric” mode of worship to class stratification. The practice of “shouting,” for example, which she deems to be “nothing more than a continuation of the African 'Possession' by the gods,” is “still prevalent in most Negro protestant churches and is universal in the Sanctified churches. They protest against the more highbrow churches' efforts to stop it” (105). “Highbrow” is inextricable from both wealth and whiteness: “The Sanctified Church is a protest against the high-brow tendency in Negro Protestant congregations as the Negroes gain more education and wealth” (104), and is “putting back into Negro religion those elements

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<sup>6</sup> As a parallel pair of satire vs. compassion, which shows the range and general trajectory from enlightenment uplift and modernist sensibility, one may cite Dunbar's 1902 *Sport of the Gods*, where religious bankruptcy when satirized points to the necessity of a new kind of objective morality and Hurston's high modernist 1937 *Their Eyes*, where no morality code is moral, and ethics are always contingent. Appiah, Kwame Anthony. “The Trouble with Culture.” In *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.

which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity as soon as the Negro came in contact with it, but which are being rooted out as the American Negro approaches white concepts. The people who make up the sanctified groups, while admiring the white brother in many ways think him ridiculous in church” (106-7). The tensions around authentic piety are thus implicated in discourses of racial and socioeconomic divisions and are further complicated by the solidification in the early twentieth century of Socialism through the creation of the Soviet Union, which opened the door to international(ist) atheist identity politics. The section on Hughes brings out the ironic depiction of religion in his socialist writing.

The binaries of spiritual, disembodied, earnest religion, and embodied, realistic, popular humor are productive tensions which can lead to the discussion of embodied spirituality and contextualized religious hierarchies within African American and Yiddish modern literatures. Adorno’s “Is Art Lighthearted?”, Baudelaire’s “On Laughter,” and Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, all seek to separate the comic from the religious, marking the latter as constraining and authoritarian and the former as liberating and popular. Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, further, reminds us that Greek comedy was meant to appease the gods, not humans (77-78); the comic scenes in the *Odyssey*, for example, were meant to “make the fierce elemental god [Poseidon] laugh, so that while he laughs his wrath will disappear” (77). Through reading selections from Spector (“Der Baal shem-tov” [1894]), Sholem Aleichem (*Tevye der milkhiker* [1894]), Zora Neale Hurston (“The First One” [1927] and *Moses Man of the Mountain* [1939]) and Hughes (“Home” [1934], reportage, and some revolutionary poetry written between 1925 and 1946) the modern humorous critique of religion is complicated, since within East

European Jewish and African American articulations of religious community and politics, the congregation is understood overwhelmingly in ethnic and racial terms. To meet modernity's demand for national difference, unity and self-sufficiency, the modern writers revise biblical narratives and satirize them – through folk-narratives, through juxtaposition of Hebrew and Yiddish, etc. – to point to contemporary injustice, highlight religious tradition's value for the science of ethnography, and expand religious vocabulary to include the highly-individualized psychology (and at times pathology) of faith.

This chapter examines the ways in which humor is utilized by the writers to speak of religion. In their texts, African American and Yiddish writers use Biblical and other religious texts in an ironic and humoristic way to protest the socioeconomic reality in which they find themselves. Through humor analysis, I question the potentially comfortable intersections between messianic and teleological thought and the rhetoric of political and social liberation as, for example, in Zionism which saw the land of Israel as ancestral and future homeland, or Du Bois's citation of the biblical Exodus story in *The Souls of Black Folk*, with emphasis on patriarchal leadership<sup>7</sup>. The use of messianic religious rhetoric for racial/ethnic uplift – is mirrored in personal relations to the divine, whereby the current social injustice is somehow transcended through personal connection – of anger as well as trust – with the divine father figure. Humorous literary devices and representations, inviting joy into a world of suffering and oppression is at times in line

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<sup>7</sup> “Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites” (7). On “book learning”: “Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan” (8). Also see Reed, Adolph L., Jr.. *W. E. B. Du Bois and American Political Thought: Fabianism and the Color Line*. Cary, NC, USA: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1997.

with Marx's oft-quoted slogan about religion being the opiate of the masses. However, by continuing to engage with religious themes while also commenting on oppressive reality, the authors enter into a battle with the creator. The decentralization of "Man" in my readings is one of the main ways in which the patriarchal divinity is displaced.

### **Hurston's Revisions of Biblical Narrative**

This section is a reading of Hurston's "The First One" (1927) and *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) which focuses on the revision of biblical originary myths as a parody and feminist subversion of patriarchal master narratives, as well as the positing of joy and humor as a particular strategy within oppressive and at times desperate circumstances. Feminist revision equipped with strategic joy subverts perhaps more than biblical narrative, going beyond it to challenge the patriarchal unitary creator. In the myth of the curse of Ham – which has been repeatedly retold to justify economic inequality based on race – history and fate intertwine.<sup>8</sup> Hurston's play "The First One," published in *Ebony and Topaz: A Collectanea* (1927), is a retelling in which the reverberations of contemporary oppression within the ancient narrative make it a biting satire on modern capitalist racist and sexist power structures. "The First One" joins the texts discussed in the previous chapter (*Dust Tracks* and "Colorstruck") in placing laughing figures in a privileged position. The parody of the biblical narrative, including the humorous

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<sup>8</sup> The Curse of Ham myth's historical development has been explored, from a Religious Studies perspective, by D.M. Goldenberg in his *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (2005). Also interesting is Benjamin Isaac's *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (2004) which - although not dealing with this myth since it is written from a Classics perspective, approaching a different corpus of documents – troubles the generally accepted view that the conflation of race and slavery is a strictly modern phenomenon. A similar effort from the Medievalist perspective is the special issue of *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies on Race and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages* (2001).

incongruous ending, not only comments on oppression contemporary to the publication of the play, but also destabilizes the status of Biblical patriarchal master narratives in general.

The play is set three years after the Flood, close to Mount Ararat, where Noah's family set a temporary camp. Shem and Japheth and their wives, "are all middle-aged and clad in dingy garments," whereas Ham is youthful, "son of [Noah's] old age" (53). The wives have speaking roles in the narrative, but only as "Mrs. Noah," "Mrs. Japheth," and "Mrs. Shem"; only Ham's wife has a personal name: she is Eve, and so she becomes the first one, marking rebirth after the flood, a rebirth that is not utopian or abstract but is rather nestled within a human history of oppression and struggle, and is a repetition of the Christian "Fall of Man," only here Eve is unequivocally innocent.

Hurston inserts a narrative of trauma into the biblical narrative, and thereby adds a sociological aspect to the religious myth,<sup>9</sup> which gives new relevance to the ancient story, but also elevates the author to the status of original creator, or at least enthrones her as a divine interpreter, revealer of ancient realia.<sup>10</sup> Noah's family gathers for sacrifice of thanks on the anniversary of their survival. Mrs. Noah "feelingly" remembers the water, Noah is encouraging drinking for forgetfulness "let us have the juice of the grape to make us forget. Where once was death in this Valley there is now life abundant of beast and herbs. (He waves towards the scenery.) Jehovah meets us here. Dance! Be glad! Bring wine! Ham smite thy harp of ram's thews and sing!" (54), and Mrs. Ham ("wide-eyed") remembers the dead, including her mother, while Mrs. Shem ("eating vigorously") is in denial of Jehovah's injustice: "She would not repent. Thou art as thy mother was – a

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<sup>9</sup> Not unlike Jewish Medieval "pshat" (simple, contextual) Biblical interpreters, such as Rashi.

<sup>10</sup> See also McDowell xii.

seeker after beauty of raiment and laughter. God is just. She would not repent” (54). Mrs. Shem’s weak justification of god’s cruelty – if Eve was like her mother, then she would die as well – coupled with her ravenous eating, reveals a hungry hanging on to life, which requires self-preservation through pathological denial and greed. It is she who plots to incriminate Noah in the eyes of his father; for, if “Eve” is exonerated in this tale, Mrs. Shem carries the burden of feminine/women’s guilt: Shem later “strikes his wife” and says “It was thou, covetous woman, that has brought this upon us” (56).

The wives’ jealousy is for Ham’s vineyards, which supply the wine for the occasion. Noah repeatedly screams “pour”: “Pour again, Eve, and Ham sing on and dance and drink – drown out the waters of the flood if you can [. . .] Drink wine, forget water – it means death, death! And bodies floating, face up!” (55). As Noah falls into a drunken stupor in his tent, the family “snatch tid-bits from each other” (55). And he continues to call: “Eve, wine, quickly! I’m sinking down in the WATER! Come drown the WATER with wine” (55). Ham follows her into his father’s tent, with the intent of cheering up his father with a song (“I go to pull our father out of the water, or to drown with him in it” (55)).<sup>11</sup> Eve comes in first, Noah the Father calls her, but the disturbance/punishment begins only when Ham follows her.

Seeing his father’s shriveled nakedness, Ham bursts into drunken laughter and becomes a healing scapegoat for the rest of the family, as their collective pain is first imprinted on his body and then ejected from the community. Noah, still drunk, unknowingly curses his beloved son, “His skin shall be black! Black as the nights, when the waters brooded over the Earth!” (55). The curse allows the family to mourn

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<sup>11</sup> This seems related to Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, where she claims that in Freudian conception of sexuality, the taboo on homosexuality precedes the incest taboo.

collectively and to direct their anger at a tangible target, at Noah (“Thou art no lord of the Earth, but a drunkard,” Mrs. Noah tells him (56)). Even Mrs. Shem is purged of her greed and feels sorry for Ham: “Black! He could not mean *black*. It is enough that he should lose his vineyards” (56), and asks for the curse to be upon her instead.

Ham’s laughter is equally tragic and victorious, since it initiates his and his family’s expulsion from a community of misery. The juxtaposition of water and wine, and Noah’s demand for wine to drown his memories of the flood expands the play’s allusion to include the New Testament’s Marriage at Cana, where Jesus performs his first miracle at the request of his mother.<sup>12</sup> The revision here involves the replacement of Jesus with Ham and Eve, equating Jesus’s status as the son of god with a cursed fate and also creates a black Jesus who is also an androgynous/hermaphroditic figure, containing the husband and the wife. Mirthful wine stands in a structural opposition to the disastrous water of the flood, though this opposition is problematized by the turn of the narrative: the trauma of the flood is only further exasperated by drunken, unaware decisions. Noah’s drunkenness is here contrasted to Ham’s: while the former continues to mourn as he had before drinking, the latter continues to laugh. Laughter here and elsewhere is therefore a conscious choice, a strategy, and a labor; it takes effort to turn trauma into laughter. This recurs in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, discussed below, as well.

As the family prays in unison for Jehovah to ignore Noah’s curse, Ham is heard laughing drunkenly from behind the altar, only to rise from behind it and “they see that he is black. They shrink back terrified. He is laughing happily” (57). As Ham approaches each member of the family, they quickly forget their guilt as their fear grows; Noah tells

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<sup>12</sup> There is here an intermingling of the New Testament with the Old, just like in *Moses, Man of the Mountain* the Pharaoh calls Moses “King of the Hebrews” (141).

him to go away, “lest by lingering the curse of thy blackness come upon all my seed forever” (57), but it is Eve who leads him away, “Come away Ham, beloved, come with me, where thou canst never see these faces again, where never thy soft eyes can harden by looking too oft upon the fruit of their error, where never thy happy voice can learn to weep. Come with me to where the sun shines forever, to the end of the Earth, beloved the sunlight of my years” (57). They then walk away to a prelapsarian space, leaving the rest of the family in their misery, “Oh, remain with your flocks and fields and vineyards, to covet, to sweat, to die and know no peace. I go to the sun” (57). The scene that Ham, Eve and their son leave behind is that of “All are ghastly calm”; only Mrs. Noah, keeps repeating, sobbingly, “We belong to Thee, O Jehovah / We belong to Thee” (57). Her impotent crying echoes, it seems to me, Mrs. Shem’s weak consolation through self-delusion.

The untreated trauma, exasperated by intoxication and further injustice, shows a doomed world; doomed not in spite of the flood that was supposed to purify human sin and begin a world anew, but because of it. Ham’s eventual walking away from his parents and siblings with his wife Eve and their son is liberating then because of its break away from the Biblical patriarchal narrative as a whole; it offers an escape from a tradition which concerns itself with father-to-son inheritance and women’s sin. The incongruous ending, with Eve and Ham leaving their family joyfully as opposed to begging to stay, or at least mourning their exile, turns the tables on the sociopolitical level: even though Hurston’s politics are often difficult to pin down, the joyful departure from a western tradition through revision seems to be consistent with Hurston’s lack of



excitement about integration as the guaranteed solution to centuries of oppression.<sup>13</sup> That is, integration cannot and must not mean that the white western perspective dominates among all. The power dynamic needs to be restructured on the epistemological level. But also on the symbolic level, Hurston is modeling the possibility of rewriting master-narratives in a way that empowers writing from the margins, from a position that is disempowered by “white capitalist patriarchy,” to use bell hooks’s words.

Hurston has entered the contemporary canon of American and African American literature through the work of African American women writers and critics; the first reader of Hurston’s work *I Love Myself When I am Laughing... And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive* was published by the Feminist Press in 1979, and was a collaborative project of “the intrepid and sharp Mary Helen Washington, the brave and brilliant Barbara Smith, the thoughtful and insistent Gloria Hull,” and others, as Alice Walker writes in her dedication to the volume. Hurston’s revision of Western monotheistic grand narratives in particular can be seen as related to the efforts of later generations of feminists, also searching for a pre-patriarchal past in their struggle with contemporary gender inequalities, a past without a paternal god with his male-leader-messengers, a past that is therefore often imagined as a pre-monotheistic past.<sup>14</sup> *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, published at the very limit of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1930s, revises another myth of origin as not only a story of the origin of an independent

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<sup>13</sup> “Characteristics of Negro Expression” and *Dust Tracks on the Road*.

<sup>14</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky: *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. Also French feminist theory about multiplicity, decentralization, interconnectedness and dependence of the feminine as contrasted to the phallic one-ness, uniformity and hierarchy of the masculine. For the feminine “ethics of caring,” and Hurston as a precursor to Alice Walker’s and Audre Lorde’s depictions of African American Spirituality, see Annette Joy Van Dyke’s 1987 dissertation “Feminist Curing Ceremonies: The Goddess In Contemporary Spiritual Traditions (Pueblo Indian; Afro-American; Celtic).”

ethno-religious, monotheistic group, but also the origin of patriarchal domination. Moses's life as a leader begins at the house of his father-in-law, Jethro.<sup>15</sup> This household composition is directly related to his inability to keep his wealth, as he is being continually robbed by former workers turned rebels. Here Moses breaks his own promise to distance himself from violence and fighting, and becomes Jethro's champion, stealing back his flock from the robbers. Through this violent retaliation, the power relations within the household are unsettled, or rather settled as male-dominated: when Jethro's wife notices that some of the flock they brought home was never theirs, Jethro tells her to be quiet and cook breakfast (96). The beginning of his leadership, then, is tied to the subjugation of women. Zipporah's relationship to politics, however, remains delightfully humorous: "I don't part my lips when he prowls all over Asia and Africa from one nation to another fooling with bugs and worms. All I ever asked for myself was to be Queen and he won't do it" (123).

Moses's bigotry is even more apparent when he is first introduced to Miriam the Prophetess, Aaron's sister, in Egypt (134-35). He is dismayed at a woman's appearance at a conference organized for a meeting with Israelite elders, but Aaron answers Moses's bigotry, "She can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick, just the same as you can do"; when Moses relegates her to speaking to women only, Aaron persists, "she can handle the women, all right. In fact she can handle anybody. We ought to call a meeting of all the people right away and let her speak before everybody for you" (135). Aaron's speaking for his sister, even though he is offering to give over to her his own role of speaking for Moses, is still suspect: here and later on in the narrative, he slips between "we" and "she"

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<sup>15</sup> Both Hurston's Jethro and Sholem Aleichem's Tevye, dealt with below, may be ironic echoes of Job.

for example (212-13), and we don't actually hear Miriam speak for a while, only hearing reports through Joshua the son of Nun about her displeasure with the young man staying at her house (149, 162), or other indirect report (181). She leads a chorus of women in song celebrating the submersion of Pharaoh's army in the sea, playing the cymbal, but she doesn't sing herself, "Oh, Miriam played the cymbal over the Red Sea" (194).

Miriam's first direct speech is to complain to Moses about not moving on after the battle with the Amalekites and to complain about Joshua's position (212-13). As her influence has waned while Moses's influence grew, her grumpiness is dismissed (213), and her influence was reduced further with the arrival of the refined Zipporah, who pours insults on Miriam's appearance and belittles her pain with saying "She has that terrible look of never having been nuded by a man" (217), an insult later repeated by Moses, "The trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain't got no ma to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed" (245). The conflict between Miriam and Zipporah is filled with fine examples of testifyin', each woman showing her verbal prowess to put down the other, and it is only through the conflict between the two women that we catch a glimpse of Miriam's inner thoughts,

She, Miriam, had had so little in her life and now this place she had won by hard work and chance was being taken from her by the looks of a Prince's daughter who hadn't done anything but deck herself to come here and bewitch the eyes of foolish women! Miriam boiled with anger and a sense of injustice (219).

In ways that have not been explicit in the various relationships among men in the narrative, we observe Miriam become aware of her difference, “she looked down at her rough clothing and work-twisted feet and hands and she became aware of class” (221).

This class consciousness is particularly worth noting in the context of the 1930s, when Hurston’s fiction loses popularity due to the credo of social documentation that reigned in African American letters, championed by Locke, Wright, and Ellison. But, as Deborah McDowell so aptly puts it in her 1991 introduction to the novel, “That in *Moses* Hurston casts her own social concerns in the terms of antiquity and eschews the urban realism that Wright perfected doesn’t mean that she shows no concern for contemporary social issues and how they might be addressed in fiction. She simply offers no easy pieties and tidy solutions” (xi-x). It is Hurston’s refusal to follow the party line of the 30s, in fact, which makes her less popular/marketable than Langston Hughes, whose artistic approach transformed with the times in a more accepted way. My reading is in agreement with McDowell’s, and differs primarily in my attempt to de-center Moses through focusing on women characters in the novel.

From her newly found class consciousness, Miriam attempts to organize the women against the hierarchy of Moses’s and Zipporah’s elevated status, “you women better get together and do something or you will find that Ethiopian woman and that Moses will have us all out here in the woods using us for slaves” (343). But instead of attacking Moses, Miriam, having conscripted thousands of women and her brother Aaron, attacks Zipporah, consistently referring to her being dark, and claiming that it is the people who are complaining about her skin color (242-45). It is Moses, however, who extends the punishment; Miriam’s leprosy has shut her up for good (246), and the

traumatic experience made her very life a burden (261-65). It is only after her death that Moses finally recognizes Miriam's power, "He thought how the threads of his life had gotten tangled with the threads of this homely slave woman" (265); his commemoration of her death is only the final step in his suppression of her influence throughout the narrative.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. puts it thus: "What we might think of as Hurston's mythic realism, lush and dense within a lyrical black idiom, seemed politically retrograde to the proponents of a social or critical realism. If Wright, Ellison, Brown, and Hurston were engaged in a battle over ideal fictional modes with which to represent the Negro, clearly Hurston lost the battle. But not the war" (293). The return of Hurston's popularity from the late 1970s on, should give us pause, surely.<sup>16</sup> That is, it may not be too surprising that the stylistics which were popular in the 1920s should also be popular at this time of unbridled capitalism.<sup>17</sup> Hurston's strength is, for Gates and many others, her duality, her ability to hold on to contradiction. Of her language within *Dust Tracks*, Gates writes, "So many events in this text are figured in terms of Hurston's growing awareness and mastery of books and language, language and linguistic rituals as spoken and written both by masters of the Western tradition and by ordinary members of the black community [. . .] she constantly shifts back and forth between her 'literate' narrator's voice and a highly idiomatic black voice found in wonderful passages of free indirect discourse" (296). Hurston's "usage of a *divided* voice, a double voice unreconciled," Gates suggests, is "a verbal analogue of her double experiences as a woman in a male-dominated world and as a black person in a nonblack world, a woman writer's revision of W.E.B. Du Bois's

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<sup>16</sup> See Carby.

<sup>17</sup> See also Reed, for the liberal impotence of academia.

metaphor of ‘double-consciousness’ for the hyphenated African-American” (296-97). This doubleness is meant, he says, to “celebrate the psychological fragmentation both of modernity and of the black American” (298).

It seems that Hurston is not interested in a god’s nature, but only in the way that belief and ritual affect people. Her approach is more ethnographic than theological. The plagues that descended on Egypt are done with Moses’s conscious efforts, using the magic he has learned from his servant Mentu in Egypt and from Jethro in Midian. They are not, that is, miracles of any god. Pharaoh’s prolonged hesitation at letting the Israelites go has to do with his fear of the nobles’ reprisal at losing their slaves (166) and the generations of oppressive governance weighing on the current ruler (173), as opposed to god’s hardening of his heart, as the biblical narrative has it (Exodus 7.3, 8:15, 8:19, 9.12, 10.27, etc.). Moses’s revelations are also not human-centric, importantly. Moses spends most of his training in nature, and the god he inherited from his father-in-law is a god of the mountain.<sup>18</sup> Further, this god of the mountain may be “a bearded lizard who knows all the things that used to be” (287).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> It is supposed that north Mesopotamian writings, rather than Egyptian ones influence the stories of the Biblical Patriarchs. The Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) probably spoke an Aramaic dialect before adopting a Canaanite one. The chief god of the Patriarchs was believed to have been Shaddai, and other deities were also worshipped. The importance of a mountain divinity is stressed. The personal names of the period reflect the personal relationship with god; god was the *abh* (father) of the clan. The chief divinities might have been arranged in a familial trinity of father (*El*), mother (*Anath* or *Elat*) and son (*Shaddai*). So, YHWH was introduced later by Moses, not by the Patriarchs themselves. The insertion of the name YHWH into patriarchal texts was probably one of the latest steps of composition of the Old Testament. William Foxwell Albright. *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* Second Edition. Garden City: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1957.

<sup>19</sup> Moses’s meeting with a lizard before his death is also the theme of Hurston’s 1934 story “The Fire and the Cloud.”

While the biblical version definitely shows the Pharaoh to be a trickster-figure, in Hurston's story Moses and his allies are full of deception as well.<sup>20</sup> Even the burning bush description in fact seems as if it is Jethro who set it up in order to spur Moses into action (125-28). Laughter is political in the battle between Moses and the Pharaoh. When Ta-Phar tricked Moses into announcing to the people of Goshen that he let them go, but then retreated again, forcing Moses to come to him again, while he is "laughing fit to kill himself" (165-66); he and his priests also laugh to mock Moses's claim that he will bring hail down in this hot land (168). And Moses has the last laugh before the last battle with Pharaoh, before the Red Sea, "First and last, I'm showing him my ugly laugh" (190).

The powerful laughter of the leaders does not come so easily to the suffering people, however. As the message of god's liberation was brought to the elders by Moses, their suffering turned to hope: "blowing in the ashes of their hopelessness to kindle hope" (138). The joy of liberation is limited, however, since the Israelites carry generations of suffering on their shoulders: "Moses noticed that their glad notes broke on wails. Israel was used to wailing now. They had forgotten how to laud" (182). And so here as elsewhere joy takes a particular effort; enjoyment in no way comes natural to a people that has been subjugated for so long, and it is therefore doubly triumphant. The hope that a unifying one god provides, especially as he speaks to Moses only, further makes it difficult for the people to rejoice; it is only with the return to Egyptian religious practice through the building of the golden calf, that the Israelites are said to feel unequivocal joy (232), "Before Apis and Aaron they were clothed in joy and license. Before Moses and Sinai they were naked to their souls" (236). In the final face off between Moses and

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<sup>20</sup> Eg. Exodus 8.32: "But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go."

Aaron, Moses's approach to people's happiness is rational and removed, "I never said I'd make them happy people. I promised to make them great [. . .] Happiness is nothing but everyday living seen through a veil" (272). It is only from the people themselves that happiness may come, not from a leader, however powerful and well-meaning. Hurston's narrative provides hope, however, for, if "Israel had learned to weep" (2) in oppression, it means that laughter, too, can be learned. As in "The First One," joy and laughter within oppressive reality requires a conscious effort.

This warrior-leader Moses is a contradiction to his own words of peace and humility. He is meant to liberate a people, but what he does is convert them to one truth under one leader. Hurston may be suggesting here that the birth of a nation, however liberating, decolonizing, or urgent, is necessarily bloody, and that leadership, however well-meaning, often slips into corruption and violence. To Moses's credit, he does not in fact want a high post in Egypt, even though Pharaoh variously suggests it (eg. 164), and Moses himself is tempted after Pharaoh's death (194-95), and he refuses the crown the Israelites fashioned for him (268). Moses's murder of Aaron in Hurston's version of the story (275-76) is very disturbing, and so is the internal battle following the golden calf episode, which follows the biblical narrative faithfully, is particularly horrific, in its violent purging of paganism (238-39; Exodus 32.27-32.29); the reason for Moses's command, though, is given as a strategic political move: "A divided people, and that would never do, not at this point in their history" (238). And it is finally Moses's death which is the day of thunder meant to mark the Israelites' final liberation (287-88). In this implicit criticism of Moses' tactics, there may be a glimpse of an anarchist politics, as the alternative to unidirectional, homogenous, political organization.



The novel is rich with references to African American religious practice. The Pharaoh calls Moses's talents "hoodoo" (142), for example, and the hope inspired by the Pharaoh's eventual succumbing to Moses's demands is expressed by the ancient Israelites with lines from a spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty I'm free at last!" (180). These references are dispersed among all characters, including the narrator;<sup>21</sup> this is not, then, an attempt to use the Israelite Exodus story as an allegory to African American slavery and liberation, or not only that,<sup>22</sup> but also a way to make ubiquitous (and "normal") that which has been and continues to be exoticized and belittled in American letters. Perhaps beyond normalizing, these references along with her use of transcribed dialect, are elevating, serving as a competition to any translation of the bible. Hurston very explicitly comes to revise "the common concept of Moses in the Christian world," through Asian and Near Eastern legends, as well as African ones (xxiii). Her narrative which incorporates African and African diasporic tales of Moses as a serpent

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Louis Untermeyer's 1939 review, where he says, "Equally disappointing [as Moses's under-characterization] and even more disastrous to the illusion are the compromises which the author had made in idiom. Her book deals largely with magic and to maintain that mood the spell must be complete. Here it is wrecked on inconsistency. Much of the descriptive matter is straightforwardly 'correct' – some of it is poetic in the traditional 'white' manner – but her conversations are (usually) in broad dialect" (27). Now even if this was true, one should consider Gates's delight in the duality of her voice. But, I don't think Untermeyer is correct in his assessment. *Moses* is one of Hurston's texts, along with the Eatonville Anthology, where the transcribed vernacular visibly slips into the omnipotent narrator's speech.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Deborah G. Plant's 2007 *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit* (125) and Blyden Jackson introduction to the 1984 edition of the novel (152), who read it as such an allegory, and also McDowell's more complicated reading which suggests that "In writing this political allegory analogizing Hebrew oppression in biblical antiquity, black oppression in the contemporary United States, and Jewish oppression in Nazi German, Hurston probably remembered the fact that the U.S. government made aggressive efforts during World War I to stifle any publications that did not lend their full support to the war effort" (xvii). And also the biographer's Valerie Boyd's assessment: "As allegory, Moses is many, many things: Written in the Negro idiom that Hurston has mastered by 1939, it is a story of black America and its continuous yearning to be free. At the same time, it is a satire on the whole notion of race and racial purity, and it is a deeply philosophical exploration of the very nature of freedom and self-empowerment" (329).

god is itself irreverent, even sinful, since it gives form to god and suggests that a corporeal god can be worshipped. One of Hurston's contemporary reviewers, writing for *The New York Times* Book Review (Nov. 19, 1939), would disagree with me, though in a blatantly racist vein: "Moses seems almost to be greater than God. But this is not irreverence, for it is undoubtedly due to the fact that it was easier for a primitive mind to endow a human being with mystical powers than to grasp a purely rational concept of deity" (Percy Hutchison in *Critical Perspectives Past and Present* 28); even worse, he says of that novel that "It is warm with friendly personality and pulsating with homely and profound eloquence and religious fervor" (29).

The American literature scholar Deborah McDowell puts women at the center of Hurston's alternative politics, "Hurston says much about the relations between nationalism and masculinity and how, for both, the presence of the feminine is a problem" (xiii). I again am confronted with the potential and problem of directionless politics, as all ironic texts produce; these are politics that are on the one hand all embracing and on the other arresting of action, since irony necessitates a duality (at least a duality) of meaning, while a course of action, after all, needs a direction. A possible way out of this paralysis may be a kind of pragmatic politics, driven by ethics of the moment. Moses's own plan is that which places community-building before legal liberation. As the elders and Aaron are impatient with leading the people out, liberating them from the yoke of Egypt, Moses does not want to depend on Egyptian decrees, and rather has the priority of converting all Israelites to the belief in "I am who I am", in the god of the mountain (138). "If Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go peaceably it won't be six months before they will be back here ready to serve him again. If I'm to make a nation of

you, you've got to be cut loose forever" (147). There is here the refusal to take the bone thrown by the Egyptian government, a desire to be liberated on one's own terms: "I don't want his [the Pharaoh's] consent, really. It would spoil everything I planned. I mean to whip his head to the ground and then lead out with a high hand" (148). Importantly, also, Moses in Hurston's story never recovers his heritage as a Hebrew and whether or not Jochebed's baby-son was rescued by the Egyptian Princess is unclear, since it is presented as Miriam's fabrication (26-35); the Israelites' repeated mistrust of him relates to his heritage as an outsider, where his difference is marked by class and ethnicity, inextricably connected; when a pair of Israelites discuss Moses's ability to speak their dialect, they also note "Moses forgets too and goes back to talking his proper talk when he gets excited" (204). McDowell reminds us that Hurston's novel and the English translation of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* were published the same year, and that both texts "ventured boldly to call Moses' racial origins into question" (xiii). While scientific racism has been criticized by African American writers at least from the late nineteenth century, Hurston's critique gains additional significance in 1939, the year of Freud's death, the year Hitler invaded Poland, and so the opening chapters of the novel, which detail the increasing oppression of the Hebrews must be read in this light as well.<sup>23</sup>

Hurston's work is diverse in genre and theme, but most importantly here, her political attitudes are often difficult to pin down, even within one work. This is not unique to Hurston, of course. There is a way in which literary critics imbue the creative texts they read with a political bend of one form or another, bolstering a type of solidarity

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<sup>23</sup> The connection between Freud's and Hurston's work was not lost on Hurston's contemporaries, as is evidenced by Louis Untermeyer's piece for the *Saturday Review* from November 11, 1939 (in *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, 26-27). See also Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses*.

between author and critic which intertwines aesthetics and politics. Deleuze in his *Pourparleurs* provides an effective simile for this reading process: “I imagined myself as one who comes at the author from behind and makes him with child that is his own and, at the same time, is monstrous. It is very important that he should be his, since it is important that the author should indeed say all that I make him say. But it is also unavoidable that the child should be monstrous since it had to go through different kinds of retreats from the center, slides, explosions and secret emissions that brought me pleasure” (quoted in Azulai 54). My own approach to the text is similar to Deleuze’s, but necessarily different due to the different pronouns that dominate my reading and writing.

While acknowledging that this may be a combative argumentation move, I nonetheless take as my starting point Peter Powers’s “Gods of Physical Violence, Stopping at Nothing: Masculinity, Religion, and Art in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston” published in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* (2002). I do not mean to present Powers’s argument as a “strawperson,” but rather to dramatize my feminist politics through disagreement, through the exposure of the continuing misogynist stances of some scholars. Powers attempts to fill the perceived gap in the analysis of gender in Hurston’s work and claims that there are models of masculinity that are presented as attractive in her work, and ties her project to the new masculinity of “self-conscious manhood,” in Du Bois’s words, that is associated with the Harlem Renaissance and modernism in general. Powers’s reading relies heavily on Hurston’s dissatisfaction with Christian girls’ literature she read as a child.<sup>24</sup> Although one first wades through disturbing justifications of violence against women, where the violence is justified

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gloria Cronin, “Going to the Far Horizon: Zora Neale Hurston and Christianity,” *Literature and Belief* 15 (1995): 48-71.

because the woman doesn't answer an expectation, and a reinscribing of gender binaries – equating femininity with passivity and masculinity with action – most interesting is the article's conclusion where Powers suggests that the attractive masculine figures in Hurston's work “are men made in the image of Zora Neale Hurston herself” (243). And, speaking on voodoo and African American folk religions in particular, he suggests that Hurston's presentation of them “is not that it is feminocentric and only partially that it is egalitarian. Rather, for Hurston, the spiritualism of such men and women delivers the goods” (235). The argument is largely dependent on the equation of masculinity with action and embodiment – “virile embodiment” in his words (237) – and femininity with passivity and internal spirituality, which is but one binaristic approach to justify the subjugation of women. As with stereotypes of other groups, stereotypes of women are diverse to suit the context: at times they are too spiritual, at others they are too materialistic; at times frigid, at times too passionate,<sup>25</sup> at times ‘madonna,’ at times ‘whore,’ in Freud's articulation.

Whereas Powers claims that in Hurston's work women are expected to have the “willingness to cross the gender divide” (242), in their taking action (and he even conscripts Janie's shooting of Teacake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an example of this supposed “gender crossing”), I would argue that Hurston is saying something much more simple: women can do anything men can do, and sometimes more. Powers himself cites the ambiguous description of Big Sweet from a male perspective in *Mules and Men*: “uh whole woman and half uh man”; the description is both a put down and a compliment, depending on how one does the math: Big Sweet=1 woman=1/2 man; or, as

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<sup>25</sup> See for example Lowe, *Jump at the Sun*, where he brings some examples of stereotypes of African Americans that cut both ways.

I read it: Big Sweet=1 woman+1/2 man=1 and 1/2 human. Indeed, while gender politics permeate her work, Hurston does not define women against definitions of men or masculinity, but on their own terms, as human beings. In this her approach is well suited to the famous phrase coined by Cheri Kramarae and Paula Treichler, “feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”<sup>26</sup>

### **Langston Hughes’s Socialist Aesthetics**

*Now, Mr. Hughes, would you tell this committee frankly as to whether or not there was ever a period of time in your life when you believed in the Soviet form of government?*<sup>27</sup>

While in Hurston I focused on satiric revision as a way to promote a feminist politics, Hughes's social realism seems to be more man-centered. Hughes's modernist aesthetics, related to Futurism in the previous chapter, unite socialist politics with revolutionary form. Religious and economic oppression are equated, and while he uses satire as a way to highlight hypocrisy, it seems that irony itself escapes his intention so as to both criticize religion and see its redemptive value when criticizing capitalism. In the poem “God to a Hungry Child,” for example, irony is used to criticize capitalism in a particular way, where socioeconomic inequality is revealed as socially constructed (and therefore changeable), but also point directly at the creator as the initiator of oppression. Following the Communist revolution in Russia, the rhetorical connection between the oppression of

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<sup>26</sup> *A Feminist Dictionary* (Chicago: University of Ill. Pres, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> State Department Information Program- Information Centers Hearing Before The Permanent Subcommittee On Investigations Of The Committee On Government Operations, United States Senate, 83d Congress, 1st Session, March 24, 25, and 26, 1953 ([http://www.archive.org/stream/statedepartmenti01unit/statedepartmenti01unit\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/statedepartmenti01unit/statedepartmenti01unit_djvu.txt)).

Russian serfs and African Americans (often evoked prior to the revolution) turns towards the parallelism between Russian Jewish and African American oppression. A central figure in the communist transatlantic exchange is Alexander Pushkin, the Romantic Russian poet of African descent, who has helped the development of the Russian language not only through the introduction of West European forms and vocabulary, but also through the incorporation of Russian folklore. This latter was presented in the post-revolutionary era as indicative of his anti-serfdom politics. Hughes's visit to Moscow in the 1930s was accompanied by translation into Russian as well as Yiddish. The short story "Home" brings about, in particular in the character of the mother, a call for humanistic ethics, religious or not.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. wrote that "[p]art of Hurston's received heritage [. . .] was the idea that racism had reduced black people to mere ciphers, to beings who only react to an omnipresent racial oppression, whose culture is 'deprived' where different, and whose psyches are in the main 'pathological.' Albert Murray, the writer and social critic, calls this 'the Social Science Fiction Monster.' Socialists, separatists, and civil rights advocates alike have been devoured by this beast" (293). While literary criticism of the 1990s has been often concentrating on staying away from 'the Social Science Fiction Monster,' emphasizing stylistic achievement as opposed to radical politics, it is important to note that this was not always the case. Faith Berry's introduction to the posthumously published collection *Good Morning Revolution: Uncollected Social Protest Writings by Langston Hughes* (1973), for example, documents the ways that the McCarthy era has been characterized by publishers' refusal to publish radical texts, and also Hughes's self-censoring both in anthologies and in public readings (xi-xiv). In the 1930s, however,

Hughes was fitting very well with the American arts and letters, and Berry writes that “Hughes’s most outspoken prose and poetry is from the 1930s. This was a period when many American writers and critics, concerned about the economic depression in America and the rise of Fascism in Europe and disillusioned by the values of capitalist society as a whole, were moving toward the left,” while adding that Hughes’s radical writing was further driven by his travels to Russia, China and Spain (xii). If the humor of Hurston’s texts analyzed above is certainly satirical, Hughes’s texts on religion analyzed below have a much more explicit target; very concrete politics seem to be expressed.

The poem “Good Morning Revolution” is preceded in this collection by “Letter to the Academy” (3), written in Moscow in 1933, that questions the authority of the “gentlemen who have got to be classics” (what is now commonly called “dead white men”). The ageism of the piece is reminiscent of the Futurist Manifesto (and I have drawn some of the connections between Futurism and Hughes’s poetry in the previous chapter). The gentlemen who are “now old / with beards (or dead in their graves)” are challenged by “the young by the hundreds of thousands,” and the challenge is inextricably connected to the creative competition of young artists carving out a space for themselves in an art-world that is already too full of well-established artists and critics “who write better / than we do.” The poem is modernist in its experimentation with form and it is also imbued with irony: the poem is called a letter, but reads as a direct invocation (“will kindly / come forward”), the closing line evokes a “we” while the second stanza fronts an “I,” sentences run across lines and even stanzas, stanzas are of unequal length, etc. The poem’s shape is the opposite of a letter with paragraphs: all lines



are indented but the opening ones. Thus the modernist form is fairly explicitly matched to a revolutionary socialist message.

One of the aspects of Hughes's socialist message is atheism and even anti-theism. The "Letter" draws parallels between religious restriction and socioeconomic oppression. The old gentlemen who "wrote lovely / books about the defeat of the flesh and the triumph of the spirit," are mocked through the exposure of their hypocrisy: those same books about the defeat of the flesh are being "sold in the hundreds of thousands." The Marxist Revolution is the synthesis "where the flesh triumphs (as / well as the spirit)," where "bodies and souls [are] unchained." Hegelian dialectics are properly put upside down: flesh precedes the spirit and bodies precede souls. The most explicitly drawn parallel between religious restriction and socioeconomic oppressive rigidity appears in the last four lines of the third stanza; the Revolution is "without My Lord saying a commoner shall never / marry my daughter or the Rabbi crying cursed be the / mating of Jews and Gentiles or Kipling writing never / the twain shall meet." The refusal to mingle (through marriage, mating, meeting) as it comes from the top down (the Rabbi, Kipling, and "My Lord" – here certainly feudal, but the theological meaning of the address reverberates) is understood as necessarily creating a hierarchy.<sup>28</sup> In the revolutionary utopia, there is no difference between authoritative economic systems, restrictive religions, and colonialist expansion. The stanza is a diagram, perhaps, of dialectical thinking, where the revolution will be the synthesis and thus necessitates the

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<sup>28</sup> The ties between difference and hierarchy are also played out in Hurston's "What White Publishers Won't Print," but there she seems to emphasize "sameness" as a strategy, as a necessary evil, considering that the majority of Americans are taught to hate those who are different. Hughes also is not quite saying "sameness," but intermingling. Importantly, the issue here is the connection among humans and the recognition that oppression is a human problem, no matter what minority it may be effecting.

intermingling of struggling opposites. Hughes seems to be trying to give proper form to his revolutionary aspirations, and finding the social realist approach – that has become official in Stalin's USSR – sufficient for the task.

Hughes's poetry from almost a decade before the visit to the USSR also focuses on the hypocrisy of professedly spiritual folk: “To Certain ‘Brothers’” and “God to Hungry Child,” both published in *The Workers Monthly* in 1925 and both using irony and incongruity so as to satirize religious well-meaning criminality. The first poem is moved by heavy-handed and sarcastic irony, with the opening lines being “You sicken me with lies, / With truthful lies”; the title itself, with the word “Brothers” in quotation marks is an explicit wink and nod to the reader that the brothers to be addressed are not very brotherly. The first few lines speak of “pious faces” and “wide, outstretched / mock-welcome, Christian hands” and the last few lines speak of “dirt and ugliness,” “rotting hearts,” “your soul’s waste lands.” The poem’s two parts are divided by the line “while underneath,” and the poem is thus a diagram of irony: that which appears is not what is underneath the surface. The explicit unfolding of irony ends up destroying it: just as its structure is revealed, the message ceases to be dual and continually revolving on itself and self-renewing; there is no doubt as to Hughes’s message of direct protest against criminal charity.

“God to Hungry Child” is less unequivocal, it seems, as god narrates as if he was a businessperson. “I didn’t make this world for you,” he says, “You didn’t invest in my corporation” (36). The incongruity here comes from what the reader knows of the New Testament, where Jesus says “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6.20). The irony of the poem then motivates a variety of interpretations.

Perhaps most clearly, the very wealthy here have divine power, and the image is that of a fundamental corruption: they have usurped god's power, and therefore pushed him out of his rightful place. They might as well be god, but they are godless, since the message is very different from the Biblical one. Judeo-Christian god's temporal infinity, his "I am what I am," here turns into "the rich / And the will-be-rich / And the have-always-been-rich" (36). The incongruity allows for further multiplicities of signification. It may be read as a critique of American Puritan morality, where god's approval is made manifest in a person's financial success, but the incongruity of Biblical god's message and that contained in the poem, coupled with the eternal "rich" trinity, allows for a more humorous, even optimistic, reading. The reader's response to "I made the world for the rich" should be "that's not what it says in the creation story," and if the world was not created for the rich, it is not essentially unjust, and may be healed. This message of possible change within the contours of faith, also seems to be the message of a later poem, "A Christian Country" (1931), where a wino god is invited to "get up and fight / like a man" (36). "Goodbye, Christ," which has a similar equivocal message concerning capitalist godlessness on the one hand and the parallel between religious authority and capitalism on the other.

While the post WWI connection between Russian and African American social struggle is better known, the connection precedes the Soviet revolution. The parallels between "Russian serfdom and American slavery had been noted in the black press as early as the 1820s" (Lounsbery 257). Following the revolution, the parallel most often drawn is that between the oppression of Russian Jews under the Czar and the Jim Crow oppression of people of color in the U.S. The figure of Alexander Pushkin, Russian

national Romantic poet of African descent is central in this transnational exchange both pre and post Revolution. In 1920, Lenin raised an agenda item at the Second Comintern Congress under the title “the Negro question” (Ahern 81). The Soviet government began to actively agitate for the coming of African Americans into the country. “In 1925, the first five African-Americans enrolled in the Far East University, created to educate international representatives of oppressed nations worldwide [. . . .] The Soviet government also extended invitations to prominent African-American intellectuals, cultural figures and artists as it became clear that their greatest support in the spreading of communist ideology within the U.S. was to be found among black intellectuals” (Ahern 81). In this group’s literature, which included W.E.B. DuBois, Claude McKay, Paul Robeson and Langston Hughes, “Pushkin’s African heritage [...] becomes a tacit statement of heritage, solidarity and promise” (Ahern 81).

Hughes, who visited the Soviet Union in 1932 noted the fact that Pushkin’s mulatto heritage was played up in the press while he was there, and “Hughes is less eager to throw himself into the arms of the Soviet experiment and recognizes that this foray into Russia has value for both the visitor and the host” (Ahern 84). Paul Robeson also did not simply accept the official Soviet propaganda. “Invited by the Soviet Writers Union to participate in a celebration of the centennial of the Jewish writer Sholem Aleichem’s birthdate [. . . .] The event was planned as a gesture of goodwill toward Soviet Jews; however, the authorities failed to anticipate the innocent frankness of Paul Robeson’s remarks. To the audience’s delight and the officials’ chagrin, he began by saying that Jews and Negroes share a common fate.” He also “mentioned the Jewish actor Schlomo

Mikhoels, a victim of Stalin's purges whose name was still considered taboo" (Blakely 154; also Mihailovic).

The 2006 scholarly anthology *Under the Sky of My Africa: Pushkin and Blackness* includes an essay on "The Pushkin of *Opportunity* in the Harlem Renaissance" by Olga O. Hasty, who contends that "it was not Pushkin's verse, but the fact of Pushkin himself that was of greatest relevance to the movement" (226). Hasty later modifies herself and says that black American intelligencia of the Harlem Renaissance identified with the plight of Russian intelligencia under Stalin (235; see also Lounsbery 259 and Ahern 85). African American critics did not underplay Pushkin's Russian identity, however; on the contrary, "the fact that a writer of African descent had played a crucial role in establishing a Russian literary tradition provided an example of the fruitful assimilation of African roots into national identity" (Hasty 234; also Lounsbery 258). An October 1925 issue *Opportunity*<sup>29</sup> published a Pushkin poem, translated by Edna Wrothley Underwood, who also translated *Arap Petra Velikogo* [translated usually as Negro of Peter the Great], and wrote a biographical sketch of Pushkin a year earlier. *Opportunity* also held literary competitions, supported by Casper Holstein, who sponsored, among others, the Alexander Pushkin Poetry Prize (Hasty 237).

The connection with Pushkin continues after the Soviet revolution as well. Another essay contained in *Under the Sky of My Africa*, "'Bound by Blood to the Race': Pushkin in African American Context" by Lounsbery, emphasizes writing of the American, primarily African American press, in the latter half of the nineteenth century

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<sup>29</sup> *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* was published January 1923-winter 1949, as "the official organ of the National Urban League, an interracial organization devoted to improving the condition of urban African Americans" (Hasty 235).

and the first half of the twentieth century. Paralleling the Soviet commemorations of Pushkin's death in 1937, "the 136th Street Library in Harlem exhibited works by and about Pushkin, as well as mementos recently acquired by Langston Hughes in the Soviet Union. That same month at the Harlem People's Bookshop, Pushkin's centennial was marked in conjunction with Frederick Douglass's birthday" (Lounsbury 249). Lounsbury brings two examples of nonabolitionist American texts, both reprints of British 1850s publications; in both, Pushkin's "fiery passions" and "savagery" are attributed to his Russian, rather than his African, heritage. Lounsbury demonstrates that "[a]rticles in the black press, again drawing on an axiom of Russian and Soviet criticism, argued that Pushkin's nanny, Arina Rodionovna, opened the young poet to a culture more authentic, more truly 'national' than that of the deracinated upper classes" (Lounsbury 260). And indeed, besides harking back to Blakely's discussion of the meaning of "black" in Russian, this approach is incredibly similar to the Soviet 1956 teachers' aid, which states that "Luckily, besides French-educators, in childhood there were Russian people in [Pushkin's] surroundings [. . .] and especially close to the child a notable simple Russian woman, mistress of folk speech, guardian of inexhaustible reserves of folk tales and songs, nanny Arina Rodionovna" (Kalaushin 5). "In American terms, the figure of Pushkin's nanny becomes, one might say, structurally black: as Rogers makes explicit, she is in effect a 'mammy.'" (Lounsbury 261).

Hughes documented his 1932 Moscow visit in a series of articles for the *Chicago Defender* in the summer of 1946. The time lag in publication is curious, but is no doubt connected to the post-war moment, spurred by the Soviet-American alliance during the war and the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis, for as early as the second

installment of the travelogue, he describes the condition of the Jews in Czarist as opposed to Soviet times: “Gone – in less than fifteen years – was the Jewish problem!” (83). This is in tandem with American communist publications, but Hughes’s description has the tinge of irony, in its inconsistencies and the refrain of “I asked”/“they told me”, and “less than fifteen/thirty years.”

Hughes’s visit to Moscow was accompanied not only by translations into Russian,<sup>30</sup> but also into Yiddish. In 1937, the Soviet publishing house Der Emes [“The Truth,” i.e. “Pravda”] published a brochure translation of a short story entitled *In Der Heym* [At home – translation of “Home,” originally published in 1934 in the cycle *The Ways of White Folks*<sup>31</sup>]. The translation, executed by Robert Magidoff, a Russian-born American, was part of a series *Masn-bibliotek* [Library of the masses], which seemed to otherwise include only original Yiddish texts by Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, and Bergelson.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Langston Hughes, *Smekh skvoz’ slezy* [Laughter through tears; an authorized translation of *Not Without Laughter*], trans. V. Stanevich (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1932); Langston Hughes, *Skottsboro: odnoaktnaia p’esa* [Scottsboro: a play in one act], trans. A. Grevs and A. Meier (Moscow: Izd-vo TsK MOPR SSSR, 1932); *Zdravstvui, revoliutsiia!: sbornik stikhov* [Hello, revolution!: a collection of poems], trans. Iulian Anisimov (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1933); Langston Hughes, “A Ballad about Lenin,” trans. YUlian Anisimov, *Internatsional’naya literatura* 1: 27; as well as general African American poetry anthologies: *Afrika v Amerike: antologiiia poezii amerikanskikh negrov* [Africa in America: an anthology of poetry by American Negroes], trans. Iulian Anisimov, ed. S. Dinamov, intro. Loren Miller (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1933); and one collection published in the US: *Negry poiut* [Negroes sing], trans. by Robert Magidoff, ed. B Borisov, Zakhar Gisenkin, and Ian Kaminskii (New York: Soiuz russkikh revoliutsionnykh rabotnikov iskusstva im. Maksima Gor’kogo (1934), Magidoff’s collection *Neger-dikhtung in Amerike* [Negro poetry in America] was also published in Moscow’s Der Emes in 1936.

<sup>31</sup> *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, Vol. 15: *The Short Stories*, pp. 37-45.

<sup>32</sup> Magidoff is also responsible for a translation into Russian, published in the US: *Negry poiut* [Negroes sing], ed. B Borisov, Zakhar Gisenkin, and Ian Kaminskii (New York: Soiuz russkikh revoliutsionnykh rabotnikov iskusstva im. Maksima Gor’kogo (1934), Magidoff’s collection *Neger-dikhtung in Amerike* [Negro poetry in America] was also published in Moscow’s *Der Emes* [The Truth] in 1936.

The story tells of a young violinist who travels with a jazz orchestra in Western and Central Europe and eventually returns home to his mother in the southern United States, where he is murdered by a lynch mob. His awareness of his own color, of his embodied circumscribed identity, is reflected in the gazes of whites both in Europe and in the United States. Through the eyes of the young musician the ills of a decadent capitalist world is shown in a way that suited well the Soviet publishers: in the concert hall there is gold and champagne, while on the streets there is poverty, and therefore homelessness, hunger and prostitution (3-6). The sadness at that which he observes in Vienna, Prague, Berlin, Paris, and New York manifests itself in a persistent cough, and the illness turns him back to his Southern home, to his mother; “Rotten everywhere,” Roy thought. “I want to go home” [“s’iz umetum tsefoylt, - hot roy a trakht geton, - kh’vil aheym” (7)]. Although Roy has a premonition about his own death beginning with the cough, he dies not from his own illness but from the illness of the society which he is unfortunate enough to call his home. The duality of observed and observing is sustained throughout the story, and is expressed as he plays in his home-town church, “The colored folks said, ‘Boy, you sure can play!’ Roy was shaking a little and his eyes burned and he wanted terribly to cough. Pain shot across his shoulders. But he smiled his concert-jazz-band smile that the gold spending ladies of the European night clubs had liked so much” (16).

The sojourn in the industrial metropolises has made his gestures unsuitable for the South: his shaking hands with white people gets him into trouble as soon as he exits the train. He is greeted by a gang of white loafers, which includes his “old playmate,” who doesn’t shake his hand long and further diminishes Roy by calling him “boy.” Here, “boy” is translated as “bokherl” in Yiddish thus losing the implication of a slur; in the



very beginning of the story, it says “when the boy came back,” where “boy” signifies both the white gaze but also always his relationship to his mother, the Yiddish reads “when he came back.” The reaction to the abusive greeting is corporeal: “His skin burned. For the first time in half a dozen years he felt his color. He was home”; the translation has “צום ערשטן מאָל פֿאַר די לעצטע עטלעכע יאָר האָט ער דערפֿילט אַז ער באַלאַנגט צו אַ צום ערשטן מאָל פֿאַר די לעצטע עטלעכע יאָר האָט ער דערפֿילט אַז ער איז געווען אין דער היים” [for the first time in the last few years he felt that he belongs to the colored race. He was home] (9).<sup>33</sup> From the philosophical remove of Europe (where Roy’s consciousness brought the reader an insight into the socioeconomic environment), the narrator is brought to the emotive and the intimate. The translation blurs the Southern town with the shtetl: “the old home town” becomes “alt heymish shtetl,” his violin becomes a “fidl,” and his mother reads as a Jewish mother when she unites nourishment with love: “גאַטעניו! ביסט דאָך אַזוי שיין אָנגעטאָן, מײן זיסער, אָבער אַזוי אויסגעדאַרט” (10) [in the original: “Lawd! . . . You’s got some might nice clothes, honey, but you looks right thin. . .”]. The murderous white mob at the end of the story receives a transliterated English: “yes, sir!” (24), their final words cannot be said in Yiddish.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Here again, the slur in English, “Nigger” becomes something different: “shvartshoytiker” [lit. black-skinned].

<sup>34</sup> Only a year before the Soviet translation, an American Yiddish translation was published in Chicago, *Dos gezang fun neger-folk: iberdikhtungen* (1936), a 44-page-long publication, copyrighted to Zishe Bagish, in Bucharest, and edited by M. Ceshinsky; it consists of two parts: Part I contains translations of Hughes’s poetry (at his permission, it is claimed). It also contains a very condensed biography, emphasizing Hughes’s various jobs and his travels around the world; the selection of poetry itself seems to focus on race relations and night-life, both in a very non-radical vein, it seems. Part II, entitled simply folks-lider [Folk poetry], begins with a poem about John Henry, providing a short biography for him as a legendary hero, inspiring many stories of his freeing his people from slavery. There is something interesting in the parallel structure of the two sections, beginning as they do with biographies, one of the poet, one of the folk-hero.

It is the mother, also, who unites social justice and religion under the umbrella of ethics and morality, when she refuses the approaches of a white woman to have Roy play in her home:

ניין, ביסט ניט פֿון די, וואָס גייען אַרום שפּילן איבער די הייזער. כ'האַב איר געהייסן זאָגן דער ווייסער פֿרוי, אַז דו וועסט געב אַ קאָנצערט אין קירך, וווּ יעדערער קאָן קומען פֿאַדינען אַ מיצווע – באַצאָלן פֿין און צוואַנציק סענט פֿאַר גאַץ לוי און הערן ווי דו שפּילסט [. . .]. דאָ אין האַפּקינסוויל וועסטו שפּילן פֿאַר גאַט, האָסט איבער גאַנץ אייראָפּע דינער געשפּילט פֿאַרן טייוול יעדע נאַכט. . . אַ, גאַט מינער! כ'דאַרף דאָך אַרויסנעמען דאָס וועש פֿון וואָסער! און ביין דו וועסט זיך איבן, וועל איך דיער אַזוי אויסבאַקן אַ ראָזשינקעס־באַבקע (10).

The original reads

I told Sister, no indeedy, you don't go around playin' at nobody's house. Told her to tell that white woman de Deacon's Board's arrangin' a concert at de church fo' you where everybody can come and pay twenty-five cents to de glory of God and hear you play [. . .] You gwine play fo' de Lawd here in Hopkinsville. You been playin' fo' de devil every night all over Europy. . . . Jesus have mercy! Lemme go and get ma washin' out! And while you's practicin', I'm gonna make you a pumpkin pie this afternoon.

When Roy is invited to play at a white school, Ma continues in a similar vein: "First time I ever knowed 'em to have a Negro in there [at de school] for anything but cleanin' up, and I been in Hopkinsville a long time. Go and play for 'em, son, to de glory of God!"

(18 in translation). The main direction of the mother's speech, her fussiness, her controlling of Roy's playing, her religiosity, are all conveyed; and she is named "ma" in the Yiddish text as well. I want to point out two changes in the translation. The first one is that of the type of cake: "pumpkin pie" becomes "rozhinkes babke" [Raisin babka/cake] in Yiddish. The pumpkin pie, weighed down with nationalistic-colonial significance, does not travel well. The second change is the insertion of "fardinen a mitsve" [having the opportunity to fulfill a commandment] in the second sentence, so that the Yiddish text has the funny incongruity of fulfilling a "mitsve," a word from the Biblical Hebrew-Aramaic meaning "commandment," inside a church. Even though Roy's mother clearly means a religious good deed, the incongruity brings out the second meaning of "mitsve," simply meaning a good deed – an ethics without a Biblical imperative. The humor of this incongruity may come in place of the humorous, folksy way of the mother's speech, since neither Roy nor the white loafers speak in a marked dialect as she does, and the translation usually only maintains her exclamations and the endearments.

Sister Sarah Williams's, Roy's mother's, expectations of the church event were not answered, however. The front rows were sold not for 25 cents, but for 50, and were taken up by whites, while the back rows were taken up by blacks, "Methodist and Baptist both came, forgetting churchly rivalry" [say di metodistn say di baptistn zaynen gekumen, fargesndik vegn zeyere kirkh-krigerayen (12)]. The church, then, is not immune to the restrictions of Jim Crow; it fails to restore justice. But Roy is dreaming as he plays, "Hello, Mr. Brahms on a violin from Vienna at a colored church in Hopkinsville, Missouri. The slender brown-skin hands of a sick young man making you

"אלא, מיסטער בראַמס, [sing for an audience of poor white folks and even poorer Negroes"] וואָס קומט אָן אויף אַ ווינער פֿידל אין דער נעגער־קירך אין האַפּקינסוויל, מיזורי. די דינע, ברוינע פֿינגער פֿון אַ קראַנקן יונגערמאַן צווינגען אייך צו זינגען פֿאַר אַן אוילעם פֿון אַרעמע וויסע לייט און נאָך אַרעמערע [12-13]. And as Roy dreams of playing on a huge stage, but cannot quite escape the reality of the moment:

a thousand people look up at me like they do at Roland Hayes singing the Crusifixion. Jesus, I dreamed like that before I got sick and had come home. And here I am giving my first concert in America for my mother and the Deacons of Shiloh Church and the quarters and fifty cent pieces they've collected from Brahms and me for the glory of God. This ain't Carnegie Hall. I've only just come home.... But they're looking at me. They're all looking at me. The white folks in the front rows and the Negroes in the back. Like one pair of eyes looking at me.<sup>35</sup>

While the artist himself is tuning in and out of reality, his performance is transformative and corrective: only in the context of his performance do Black and White eyes look on "like one pair of eyes." The colors intermingle to the music, "with black hands and brown limbs and white breasts and a golden face with lips like a violin bowed for singing. . . . Steady, Roy! It's hot in this crowded church, and you're sick as hell... This, the dream and the dreamer, wandering in the desert from Hopkinsville to Vienna in love with a streetwalker named Music...."

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<sup>35</sup> די מענטשן קוקן אויף מיר, ווי זיי קוקן אויף ראָלאַנד הייזן, ווען ער זינגט "ביים ציילעם." יאָ, כ'האַב געטרוימט וועגן דעם איידער איך בין קראַנק געוואָרן און געמוזט זיך אומקערן אַהיים. און אָט גיב איך מיין ערשטן קאַנצערט אין אַמעריקע פֿאַר מיין מוטער און פֿאַר דער קירך און פֿאַר אַ האַלב און פֿערטל־דאָלעריקע, וואָס מע האָט אַרײַנגעטראָגן אַהער צוליב מיר און צוליב בראַמסן און גאַטס זכות. דאָס איז ניט קאַרנעגיאַל. . . . דאָ בין איך ערשט געקומען היים. . . . אָבער זיי קוקן אויף מיר, זיי קוקן אַלע אויף מיר. די וויסע אין די פֿאַדערשטע רײען און די שוואַרצע אין די הינטערשטע. זיי קוקן אויף מיר, ווי איין פֿאַר אויגן" (13).

As he plays “The Meditation,” the dreamer is coming out from that church, imagining an escape from that church back to Vienna, back to before he was sick, back to his mother whose attention is taken up with god. “Listen, you bitch, I want you to be beautiful as the moon in the night on the edge of the Missouri hills. The Meditation from Thaïs... You remember, Ma (even to hear me play, you’ve got your seat in the amen corner tonight like on Sunday mornings when you come to talk to God.” The mother is the locus of conflicting determinations: she is a pious woman who somehow was able to get him a violin, who didn’t have enough to pay for classes, which seems to explain his particular attention to the impoverished sex workers in Europe and everywhere. The artist’s fantasy of the nun/whore, played out on the mother’s suspiciously pious body, is paralleled by the story of Thaïs, a whore turned into a nun, and her guide’s, Athanaël’s eternal frustration for not being able to have her. Thaïs the Byzantine Egyptian, a polytheist, converted to Christianity, as African diaspora is converted. What is she doing, his mother, but blindly, naively even, following this forced religion, and what is he if not giving up himself fully to modernist sensibilities, allowing art to be supreme, more than religion, more than the hymns she wants for him, and then, and but, the art supreme, the aesthetics supreme, and he too is a lamb sacrificed, his hanged body becoming a violin for the wind to play with by the end of the narrative. Religion is stifling, perhaps, but modernist aesthetics are just as deadly. There is no transcendence either way – his talent killed by depression and urban cough, her approach simply impotent.

His music, though, makes him heroic somehow: as he walks through the streets, he doesn’t notice the racist remarks about his look and his clothes, only thinking of music and his biography as an artist, he and his violin, who was his mistress (22). Is this muse,

this dedication somehow in replacement of religious devotion? The left-over of religious devotions finds a new vessel in art; the continual lack of fulfillment, the distraught individual is wrapped up in Oedipal trauma. His last walk is tragic and not surprising, we are warned ahead of time that this is his last walk, and we are told that “everything might have been all right, folks might only have laughed or commented and cussed, had not a rather faded woman in a cheap coat and a red hat, a white woman, stepping out of the drug store just as Roy passed, bowed pleasantly to him, ‘Good evening’” (23). She was no Thaïs (“You sure don’t look like Thaïs, you scrawny white woman in a cheap coat and red hat” [15]). The premonition of death has always been with him. He knew. We know. The two speak about Sarasate and about Heifetz’s recording. And then: fist to the face, and he becomes “a Negro talking to a white woman – insulting a White Woman – attacking a WHITE woman-RAPING A WHITE WOMAN” (24). The guarding of boundaries here is most clearly revealed as violent and oppressive. What do dream or reality matter when one’s truth means nothing, when a lie is truth when supported by a mob.

As the blows land, “He knew he would never get home to his mother now” (25). Now Roy’s premonitions become real, he really knows. In this recreation of *Via Dolorosa*, Black Jesus, the sacrificial lamb, turns to his mother, rather than to a divine father. The return to the mother is the same and different from the return home, it is an *unheimlich*, uncanny return, to use Freud’s terms. The mother, with her folk-wise tongue, with her humanistic ethics that are blindly optimistic is the strength to which he turns.

## **Mordkhe Spector's Unholy Besht**

I have mentioned in the second chapter Spector's periodical project, *Hoyzfraynd: A historish-literarishes bukh* [House-friend: A historical-literary book], which is unapologetically ethnographic at times. In this section I analyze Spector's contribution to the fourth issue of the periodical, in which he begins a biography of the Baal Shem-Tov, "Besht" for short, the founder of Hassidism. Spector's sources for the biography are not all holy books, and not even all books. He plays on light and dark, to suggest the contrast between Enlightenment and desperate socioeconomic situations. The story is imbued with the love of nature and artistic soulfulness and so has affinities with romanticism. The holy figures are presented as tricksters, and the relationship to religious practice and theological aspiration is presented in a positive light only when related to creativity and story telling. Joy is at times presented as dangerously lulling (anaesthetic, drug, opiate, etc.), potentially. Conjuring is practiced by the mother, a woman who is also literate, which presents a view of folk religion not as an alternative but rather additional. As in Hughes, tax-collectors and rabbis are in cahoots, and while there is criticism of kheyders, Hassidism is presented as a kind of revolution, in particular as it espouses "lo lefakhed klal" [not to fear at all].<sup>36</sup>

Well suited to the title of the periodical is the title of the biography: "Der Baal-shem-tov: A historisher roman fun 18-tn yor hundert" [The Baal Shem-Tov: A historical novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century]. My reading will be guided by the strands already touched upon in the previous sections: the conflation of religious liberation (as well as reform) and

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<sup>36</sup> The whole entire world is a very narrow bridge, and the most important thing is not to fear at all כלל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד, והעיקר - לא לפחד כלל. The saying is from a different Hassidic patriarch, though: from Nakhman from Bratslav.

social justice, as in Hughes's "Home"; the fronting of woman's story-telling and feminine revision as in Hurston. The preface to the story (107-8) is very characteristic of his work as a whole; how very straightforward he is, what ease he has with approaching the readers as they are where they are: " ווייל מײן ווערק איז געשריבן אין דעם פראַסטן יודישן לשון " וואָס גרויס און קליין קענען ליינען און פאַרשטיין און פּדי די לעזער זאָלן זיך חו"ש ניט טועה זיין אין דעם "צוועק פֿון דעם ווערק, שרייב איך די דאָזיקע הקדמה [Since my work is written in the simple Yiddish/Jewish tongue that big and small can read and understand and in order that the readers should not god-forbid be mistaken about the aim of the work, I write this introduction] (107). Because, since a few years ago, when he decided to write such a historical novel, people wrote to him, and came to him to complain, doubting his motives, that he means to make fun [vertlen zikh] of the books, the holy books [sforim not bikher]. Not only does he receive many letters, but he also has a couple of Hasidim come to him to complain: "וואָס מײן איך און וואָס וויל איך פֿון דעם בעל שם" [What do I mean and what do I want from Baal Shem] (107). There is, in Spector's introductory statement, a remainder of maskilic mockery of Hassidism, its equation with illiteracy – some write letters and the Hassidim come to talk. At the same time, he also puts quotation marks around "הייליקע "ספֿרים" [holy books], which he indeed used as a primary source for his novel (more on his sources below). Further, he appreciates Baal Shem-Tov all the more because of the "פֿינצטערער צײַט" [dark times] in which he lived (107).

It is difficult to imagine a Jewish world without the influence of Hassidism, but Spector is presenting it certainly as a revolution, led by young men who decided to study by themselves from forbidden books in which it is written that god has created a world to enjoy, "to pray in a few words, but with the whole heart so that one could feel with every



organ that one prays to the creator, whom every one should praise for everything” (125).<sup>37</sup> And good deeds and helping the needy are part of joy, enjoyment, and the books require an emotional understanding, and so one has “to possess such a heart that can feel, love a lot, a heart that cares and is touched by everything” (126).<sup>38</sup> It is only this heart that can feel the folk: “the folk’s suffering and joy is expressed, reflected in this heart. Such a heart is happy when the folk is doing well, and it cries when the folk suffers or is not doing well” (127).<sup>39</sup>

The play on light and darkness, literacy and orality, and the potential readers<sup>40</sup> suspicion that his purpose is to mock Hassidism are all reminiscent of maskilic literature but it turns it on its head: here, the Baal Shem Tov is “a bright star with a lot of love and warmth to all people and to all of god’s creatures in general and to the Jews – his unfortunate brothers, especially. I do not intend, god-forbid, to mock, but, quite the opposite, to show how little we know [how] to appreciate such a great person as the Baal Shem-Tov, may his memory be blessed” (107).<sup>41</sup> And so the founder of Hassidism is here not only the bringer of light, but also of warmth and love, and, perhaps most importantly, the bringer of a humanist perspective in line with Enlightenment principles, including the

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<sup>37</sup> דאוונען אין עטלעכע ווערטער נאָר מיט דעם גאַנצן האַרצן אַז מען זאָל פֿילן מיט אַלע אַבריים אַז מען דאווענט פֿאַר דער באַשעפֿער וועלכן יעדער דאַרף פֿאַר אַלעס לויבן

<sup>38</sup> פֿאַרמאַגן אַזאַ האַרץ וואָס זאָל קענען אַ סך פֿילן, ליבן, אַ האַרץ וואָס יעדע זאָך זאָל אַרן און אָנרירן

<sup>39</sup> דעם פֿאַלקס ליידען און פֿריידן דרוקט זיך אָפּ, שפּיגעלט זיך אָפּ אין דעם דאָזיקן האַרצן. אַזאַ האַרץ פֿרייט זיך ווען דאָס פֿאַלק איז גוט, און עס וויינט ווען דאָס פֿאַלק ליידעט אָדער עס איז אים שלעכט

<sup>40</sup> To the question of audience: the publication of a periodical or a book has a wider cultural significance – it seems – than the actual reading of it. That is, one does not have to be able to read to know of their existence, to hear the rumors of the periodical’s slant, etc. Much of reading, in short, happens in oral communication between readers and non-readers.

<sup>41</sup> אַ ליכטיקער שטערן מיט פֿיל ליבע און וואַרעמקייט צו אַלע מענטשן און צו אַלע גאָטס באַשעפֿענישן בכלל און צו די ייִדן – זיינע אומגליקלעכע ברידער, בֿפֿרט. ניט חו"ש זיך ווערטלען בין איד דאָ געקומען נאָר פֿאַרקערט צו ווייזן ווי ווייניק מיר ווייסן צו שעצען דעם גרויסן מענטשן ווי דער בעל שם טוב ז"ל

often overlooked aspect of humanism which pushes beyond human-centricism to affect a shift in perspective.<sup>42</sup>

In the turning of Besht's story into a historical novel Spector does a few things which are methodologically interesting: 1. the emphasis on time, although, as is clear from the quotation below, this time is not completely linear, nonetheless, there is the emphasis on "his [i.e. Besht's] time," the "18<sup>th</sup> century." 2. Spector is explicit about the scope of his source-materials: researching the different books in different languages (not all of them are holy, certainly), and the sociological: he grew up with it, the stories which surrounded him in his childhood, and here chronology becomes confused, and the Baal Shem Tov is a ghost of sorts that is still inhabiting Medzihbozsh (108)]. 3. the refusal to call the Baal Shem Tov holy, except from the perspective of a child; 4. the interestingly all-human universalistic approach, where Baal Shem Tov's influence extends not only beyond the Jewish sphere, but beyond the human sphere altogether. 5. The project is creative: it is a novel, and imagination is here given the task of traveling backwards in time: "imagination that transports to that time in which the heroes of the novel lived" (108).<sup>43</sup>

The story of Besht is ushered in through the figure of a girl-child, whose behavior (mental and social) is determined by superstition and socioeconomic inequality, both coming from above, from sources beyond her control (her mother, the Russian government). The story begins with Khanele, startled at the loss of her cow and all her shepherdess-friends, having strayed away from the flock in search of beautiful flowers.

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<sup>42</sup> While the turn to nature can also reflect conservative politics, it may also suggest an embrace of trans-species solidarity.

<sup>43</sup> די פֿאַנטאַזיע וואָס טראָגט אַריבער אין יענער צײַט אין וועלכע די העלדן פֿון דעם ראָמאַן האָבן געלעבט

Her mother, she remembers, has warned her not to lose the cow, for a Jewish cow straying into the poretz/lord's land would be either held for ransom or butchered, and its owner is at times, depending on the lord's character, punished with public flogging. This fear, stemming from the socioeconomic oppression of Podolyan [Ukrainian] Jews is exasperated by her fear of the forests' inhabitants, both human and magical: "one fear brings on the other: she immediately remembered all the scary tales of the robbers who will also come out of the forest and attack her, and all the scary tales of demons and spirits that she ever heard at home and from men and women" (112).<sup>44</sup> Mystical folklore here is not being mocked as superstition. Rather, Spector emphasizes the power of narrative: stories, and not only legal restrictions, have very real effect on the girl's psyche and actions.

Khanele is the leading force in this beginning of a narrative about a male leader. The girl not only serves as a representative of East European Jewry, but she is also imbued with the narrative strategies to weave a new story out of many strands (third person limited): the background of Biblical textuality, conjuring (usually by women) and story-telling of the Jewish community, the legal restrictions which she relays in her mother's words, and finally the direct experience of encounter with the young Baal Shem Tov and nature. So, again, nature, and the joy of living – connect humor to the joy of living - which is like a medicine, like a narcotic, "an opiate of the masses", which makes one joyful, anesthetized, without a reason; that is, one can say – as Spector says later on – that the world is actually dark, and so the joy is unjustified. However, this joy is also a

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<sup>44</sup> "איין שרעק ברענגט די צווייטע: באַלד האָט זי זיך דערמאָנט אין די אַלע שרעקלעכע מעשיות פֿון די גולנים אַז זיי וועלן באַלד אויך אַרויס פֿון וואַלד און אַנפֿאַלן אויף איר, און אַלע שרעקלעכע מעשיות פֿון שדים און רוחות וואָס זי האָט זיך נאָר אָנגעהערט אין דער היים פֿון אַלע ייִדן און וויבער."

medicine that is a useful technological advancement, an improvement of life, however temporary, so as to allow for room to breathe, move, re-vision one's steps. And so Khanele is encouraged by the singing voice, and is then able to scream out and find a guide home.

The optimism of devotional joy is potentially a lulling opiate. The encounter between the girl Khanele and the boy Yisroel (Baal Shem Tov as a child) begins with the echoing of a prayer, a familiar heart-wrenching yet sweet melody: "and all this flowed and entered Khanele's heart so sweetly, it was so good, that she forgot her unfortunate situation for a few minutes" (113).<sup>45</sup> The melody, both sad and happy, serves as a lulling agent of sorts, as it is comforting to the point of forgetfulness. But through forgetful hope, Khanele receives the strength to run and scream, praying to god to send angels and messengers to rescue her, and it is this screaming which makes the young Baal Shem Tov run to her rescue. This encounter of the young heroine with the young hero of the novel emphasizes the communicative aspect of art: a voice crying out, leading to fantasy, leading to running together, finally leading to encounter.

The "In yene tsaytn" [In those days] section describes a world which is dark:

"On the street it is dark but in their dwellings and their life is darker still, it hasn't been going well for a long time. Not joyfully did the Jews live in that time, when the Polish landowners oppressed the Jews from all sides, each landowner looked on the Jews who lived on his land as on his own property, i.e., as on his cattle and sheep from which he needs only to shear and milk more

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<sup>45</sup> און דאָס אַללעס איז חנה'לען זיך צו גאַסן און צו גאַנגען אויף דעם האַרץ אַזוי זיס אַזוי גוט אַז זי האָט מינוטען ווייז פֿאַרגעסן איר אומגליקלעכע לאַגע

and more. The landowner did whatever he felt like with the Jew.  
When the Russian peasant was at the time oppressed by the  
landowners, what kind of worth could the miserable lonely orphan  
have – the Jew whom no one accepted, even once in a hundred  
years”

(122-23)<sup>46</sup>

The ubiquitous oppression in the world makes for a dark world which cannot be approached with a consciousness lulled by religion. In Spector’s presentation the Jews are more oppressed than the peasants. It is an unusual hierarchization of oppression, since economically the peasants were in general worse off than the Jewish population, but Spector’s point of view is refreshingly different, and is inspired in part by nationalistic privileging of the land. The darkness of the time makes Jews into sheep lea to the slaughter, silent, obedient, hunched over; the Jew “fell lower and lower in his own esteem and eventually completely forgot that he is a person and felt less like an animal, like sheep” (123).<sup>47</sup> And so he describes a situation where humans are robbed of their humanity, and while one may glimpse here a non-human-centric perspective, it is also very clear that to be an animal is not good. There is also a bit of victim blaming of the Jews, as they receive bad treatment from everyone, and are like sheep, adjusting to the

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<sup>46</sup> "אויף דער גאס איז פֿינצטער נאָך אין זייערע ווייננגען און זייער לעבן איז נאָך פֿינצטערער, עס האָט ביי זיי שוין  
לאַנג ניט געטאַגט. ניט פֿריילעך האָט זיך די ייִדן געלעבט אין דער צייט, ווען די פּוילישע פּריצים האָבן ייִדן געדריקט פֿון  
אַלע זייטן, יעדער פּריץ האָט געקוקט אויף די ייִדן וואָס האָבן געווינט אויף זיין ערד ווי אויף זיין אייגענטום ד.ה. ווי  
אויף זיינע / בהמות און שאָף פֿון וועלכע ער דאַרף נאָך וואָס מער שערן און מעלקן. וואָס דער פּריץ האָט נאָך געוואָלט  
האַט ער געטאַן מיט דעם ייִדן. ווען אַז דער רוסישער פּויער איז דאָן געווען געדריקט פֿון די פּריצים, וואָס פֿאַר אַ ווערט  
האַט שוין געהאַט דער אומגליקלעכער עלענטער יתום – דער ייִד פֿאַר וועלכן עס איז ניט געווען ווער עס זאָל זיך  
אַננעמען, אפֿילו איין מאָל אין הונדערט יאָר"  
<sup>47</sup> נידעריקער אַראָפּגעפֿאַלן ביי זיך און צייטן ווייז גאָר פֿאַרגעסן אַז ער איז אַ מענטש און ווינציקער געפֿילט ווי די  
בהמה, ווי די שאָף"

oppressive environment without crying out in protest: “and the Jew accepted everything and continued to live as it was, sighed and barely contained his wounded soul” (123).<sup>48</sup>

The boy, Baal Shem Tov, is being admired as embodied holiness, but the trickster nature of divinity, as in Hurston, is an important part of Khanele’s perception of him. The boy is healthy looking (a “sosne” – a pine-tree, a common metaphor for the description of large, healthy young men, also the way Aronchik is described by Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye). Khanele sees him as a beautiful angel, remembering the stories about the patriarchs, Abraham and Jacob, who also received visits from god’s angels. And so a young girl is inserted within a patriarchal tradition; and indeed it is her mother who reads to her from the Pentateuch (114). Khanele’s vision of god’s messengers is their trickster-like behavior: how they pretend to take human shape and, repeatedly, how they pretend to be eating (114, 118). Khanele’s imagination thus both points out the trickster-like nature of divinity, and also the power of human imagination in representing the paradoxical encounter with that which cannot be known. And also there is the inextricable connection between food and life on this earth, which reveals the embodied, fragile nature of humanity.

The young Baal Shem Tov, the beautiful little angel, thus emerges out of the stuff of biblical legend and east European folklore about nature and its magical inhabitants. His talk is of god’s manifestation in nature, “di sheyne velt” [the beautiful world]: “from the small worm that can be found here in the grass under our feet to the large eagle that

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<sup>48</sup> און דער י'ד האָט אַלץ אין זיך איינגענומען און ווייטער ווי אַזוי עס איז געלעבט – געזיפּעט און קוים אין זיין צווינדעטן געהאַלטן די נשמה"

flies above all the forests and the highest mountains” (115).<sup>49</sup> This view of creation is pushing against human-centric views, since the hierarchy is between worm versus eagle, not animal versus human. His message is about joy, interwoven with idealization of and devotion to nature. The young angel speaks to Khanele in words she barely understands; he sounds intelligent, but she doesn’t quite get him. He speaks to her not in ways that one speaks to a little girl. We also find out that he speaks to himself, to the birds and the mountains. Is it possible that he is also to a certain extent crazy?

The question of descent becomes a participation in patriarchy within the story. In the section “Ver zaynen zey?” [Who are they?], the question of “who are you?” is a question of “who is your father?”. The boy’s answer is reminiscent of Jesus – the Jewish Jesus – as he says, " מנין טאטע איז אין הימל און מנין שטוב איז זיין גאנצע וועלט, שוין לאנג אַז איך בין " [my father is in heaven/sky and my house is his whole world, I have long been an orphan and have no parents] (118).

Khanele is walked home by Yisroel, but he is never made visible to the mother, who grows afraid that her daughter is possessed. The mother’s “superstition” makes her afraid for her daughter. She invites a shprekhern [conjure woman, one who knows incantations, shprukh, shprakh, always about ways of saying] and begins to conjure herself (120), until the shprekhern comes. Importantly, the superstitious mother is the same one who has read to her daughter from the Pentateuch, and so this is a representation of an orally-transmitted folk-religious practice (in rhymes, known by heart) which is not written down, but is perpetuated through the lips of women primarily (of course until the assumed moment in which Spector writes it down). But, because we

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<sup>49</sup> פֿון דעם קליינעם ווערעמל וואָס געפֿינט זיך דאָ אין גראַז אונטער אונדזערע פֿיס ביז דעם גרויסן אָדלער וואָס פֿליט העכער פֿון די וועלדער און די העכסטע בערג

know that the mother is literate in the holy texts as well, we are presented not so much with an alternative to text-based religion, but rather the existence of both folk-oral and codified-literary holy texts at the same time. And they perform together the *kritshme*, the ritual pronouncement of loyalty to the God of Israel: “And the mother must finish reading the *kritshme* with her, even though the daughter wants to sleep and repeats with closed eyes, barely opening her mouth (lit. “through the teeth”)” (121).<sup>50</sup>

Much like in Hughes, intra-ethnic oppression is in fact perpetuated by the tax collectors and the rabbis (123).<sup>51</sup> And so this is an emphasis on the revolutionary aspect of Hassidism. The traditional Jewish authorities make a skeleton out of the human: “Not a person who is suitable for work, for life” (123).<sup>52</sup> And no one to comfort the suffering Jews, not even a good word, “soft good warm words which the folk seeks as a thirsty person seeks fresh water. A good word, that would comfort him and heal his wounds so that he may have the strength to continue living” (124).<sup>53</sup> Words of comfort, then, would give people the pause and the strength to survive and perhaps also rethink their situation. The upper classes lose their ethnoreligious identity: the members of the religiously-educated upper class are called “inquisitors” (124). Being a rabbi is presented as a business, the class hierarchy illogical and physically harmful (with the murderous teachers [124]). The power of words and story-telling as a catalyst for change place the author in a privileged position, certainly. Traditional religious schools [kheyders] are not

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<sup>50</sup> און די מאַמע מוז אָפלייענען מיט איר קריאת שמע, כאָטש די טאַכטער וויל שלאָפֿן, און חזרט איבער "מיט פֿאַרמאַכטע אויגן צווישן די ציין

<sup>51</sup> Quite the same as it is described in “Der takse” by Mendele.

<sup>52</sup> "נישט שוין קיין מענטש וואָס זאָל טויגן צום אַרבעטן, צום לעבן"

<sup>53</sup> "ווייכע גוטע וואָרעמע ווערטער וועלכע דאָס פֿאָלק האָט געזיכט ווי אַ דאָרישטיקער פֿרישער וואָסער. אַ גוט וואָרט, עס זאָל אים טרייסטן און היילן זיינע ווונדן כדי מען זאָל האָבן קראַפֿטן ווייטער צו לעבן"



only stifling and abusive, but are also fully participating in reproducing socioeconomic inequality.<sup>54</sup>

The moral of the story seems to be that of no fear (“Nisht moyre hobn” in Yiddish and “lo lefakhed klal” in Hebrew) – the lack of fear seems to be the most important strategy. Laughing, singing, joy, make one forget fears even if just for a little while, just as they open us up to a fearless vulnerability.

Not to be afraid, not to cry, to be scared, we should not to be miserable, but rather we should live happily, lively, with the whole heart, and in each moment praise for all that he gives us and does with us. If god would have wanted for us to live in terror, in fear, in misery, in lament, he would have created his world to be so beautiful, with a beautiful sun, with a moon and millions of stars, with green forests and fields, with fragrant flowers, with the million other beautiful things that he created for people and for everything which lives. If god would have wanted people to lament and cry, torment ourselves, he would have created a dark desolate world without a sun, without a moon with stars and without all the beautiful things that are present in his world wherever one may turn to look. . . .”

(116).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Criticism of kheyders: Yisroel’s orphanhood is important, he didn’t receive the love he wanted and needed (128); he was thrown in the kheyder – and criticism of these school-rooms, with the angry teachers, and a child without parental protection is in even more trouble, as a scapegoat (kapore-hindl, lit. “small atonement rooster”) (128).

<sup>55</sup> ניט מורא האָבן, ניט ווייניגען, ניט שרעקן זיך, ניט פֿאַריאַמערן זיך דאָס לעבן דאַרפֿן מיר, נאָר פֿריילעך, לעבעדיק מיט דעם גאַנצן האַרצן דאַרפֿן מיר לעבן און אין יעדע מינוט לויבן פֿאַר אַלעס וואָס ער גיט אונדז און טוט מיט אונדז. ווען גאָט זאָל וועלן מיר זאָלן לעבן אין שרעקעניש, אין מורא, אין יאָמער, אין קלאַג, וואָלט ער זיין וועלט ניט באַשאַפֿן אַזוי שייך, מיט אַ שיינער זון, מיט אַ לבנה און מיליאָנען שטערן מיט גרינע וועלדער און פֿעלדער, מיט שמעקענדיקע בלומען, מיט די אַלע מיליאָנען אַנדערע שיינע זאַכן וואָס ער האָט באַשאַפֿן צום לעבן פֿאַר מענטשן און פֿאַר אַלעס וואָס לעבט.

What are we to make of this statement of faith within the context of a story which describes so much pain and suffering, so much oppression? Surely it is ironic. Similarly to Hughes above we are presented with a vision where faith – in its reformed nature and joy oriented way – may have a liberating effect for the suffering folk. At the same time, the irony reveals the creator’s complacency in the world’s suffering, as much as in the world’s potential beauty.

### **Sholem Aleichem’s Disappointed Tevye**

In reading Sholem Aleichem’s letters to Spector, one may glimpse the relationship between masochism and the imperative to write, expressed through a comparison between the writing practice and elementary religious education. In a letter dated 16 January 1894, he writes: “You should have, just like me, a whip, and a good one. Oy, one needs to break our bones! Oy, one needs to teach us how to write! Oy, we both need a rebe [rabbi or teacher], an editor!!!”<sup>56</sup> (Lis 284). In a much later letter, dated 2 February 1904, Sholem Aleichem criticizes one of Spector’s feuilletons, and finishes: “Now, since you already received what’s coming to you, excuse me, pull up your underwear (takhtonimlekh), kiss the rod and say ‘Oy rebenyu! Rebenyu! It will never happen again!’” (Berkovich 201). In a letter written two days later, dated 4-5 February 1904, Sholem Aleichem goes on and suggests that Spector should slap himself on both cheeks, adding that “you have soft cheeks, the devil take you – the very best to slap!” (Berkovich

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ווען גאָט זאָל וועלן מען זאָל קלאַגן און וויינען, זיך פּייניקן, וואָלט ער באַשאַפֿן אַ פּינסטערע וויסטע וועלט אָן אַ זון, אָן אַ לבנה מיט שטערן און אָן די אַלע שיינע זאַכן וואָס געפֿינט זיך אין זײַן וועלט וווּ מען קוקט זיך נאָר אום. אַצינד, אַז דו האָסט שוין באַקומען דאָס דײַניקע, נעם זשע, זײ מוחל, צײַאַרויף די תּחתונײַמלאַך, טו אַ קוש די רוט " <sup>56</sup> און זאָג: 'אוי רבינו! רבינו! סוועט שוין מער אַזוי ניט זײַן!' – און זײ מיר צוריק דער ספּעקטאָר פֿון די יום־טובֿ־דערצײלונגען, פֿון די עכט־ײִדיש ייִדן און טעכטער און פֿון די חתונות מיט די אַרעמע מאַלצײטן, דאָרט וווּ דו ביסט דו, - וועסטו זײַן מײַנער. אַניט, ליג אין דער ערד (חלילה) און באַק בײַגל.

202). In the last example in particular, writing is necessary for the drafting of the fantasy and also for the delay of gratification, thereby continuing the circulation of desire. Further, religious education and secular creativity are equated here; in which way can one say that an editor is just like a rabbi? What kind of childhood dynamic – since the rebbe is found in the kheyder years – is being evoked once one begins to write, and needs to have one's words cut? Importantly, the exchange is humorous – a rabbi is not an editor, of course, and Spector does not have his pants down to be spanked; it is joke, poking fun. Humor, through incongruity, both comforts (we can be comforted that our editors will not spank us like rebbes do) and thrusts us into a borderless anarchy, an alternate reality (*what if our editors spanked us like rebbes do?*).

The relationship between suffering and resilience in Sholem Aleichem's auto-kuntslerroman *Funem yarid* helps to elucidate this point; Sholem remembers his treasure (a reincarnation of his desire for a childhood friend, with whom he was as David and Jonathan) in the worst moments, when god (or any other illogical, unfathomable power like fate, for Sholem Aleichem, alas, is no sociologist) is most vicious in his punishments, most cruel in his logic; it is through and after these moments that the pleasure may be had. That is, the fantasy, artistic creativity, etc., is indeed a sign of victory and perseverance, but it is not a victory through pity, it is not a distraction from painful reality.

The Tevye story cycle is probably Sholem Aleichem's most famous work. The first story was published in *Hoyzfraynd*, indeed in the same issue as Spector's historical

sketch of the Baal Shem-Tov's life.<sup>57</sup> *Tevye der Milkhiker* [Tevye the Milkman] was later published as a complete work, and has even been treated, however tenuously, as a novel. Tevye's relation with god is certainly patriarchal, and, read against the grain, it is wholly an unhealthy one. God is cruel, just as Tevye is cruel, oscillating between *nekhama ve-tokhakha* [consolation and punishment, pity and justice/law] for his children and highlighting human vulnerability in front of god the (punishing, not protective) father. The patriarchal relation is limiting, even as it is most intimate. The attachment to the cruel father is also conducive to suffering survival. The law of the father controls time: the calendar, human life, death, and aging. Tevye's subversion of the Biblical and Talmudic authority through misquotation is ironic not only because it holds the tense duality of admiring and mocking folkish uneducated wisdom, but also because it plays on the duality of two Jewish languages: Yiddish and Hebrew. Citations from the Hebrew (with occasional Aramaic), original quotations, are at times deconstructed beyond recognition, and serve as soundbytes, bizarre objects threaded into Tevye's artful monologue for embellishment and contrast. While the personification of god in Tevye's monologue often fails (i.e. god remains an unapproachable other), the deification of humans is much more successful, and humor and irony allow for gender bending and queer sexualities. Humor provides comfort and relief (as in Spector), but also more

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<sup>57</sup> Sholem Aleichem first wrote, on Sept. 21 1894, about the birth of Tevye out of a meeting with an actual milk-man on Sholem Aleichem's datcha in Boyarke. Should Spector agree to the *tnoim* (of making 200 copies for Sholem Aleichem), Sholem Aleichem promises to sit down and write the story, and, indeed, on Nov. 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> he sends the story in two shipments to Spector at the Hoyzfraind publishing house (Lis 295-98). This first story is dedicated to Spector, and Sholem Aleichem calls it "a poor gift" and sends instructions to the print-setter (*habokher-hazetser*) about the way the dedication should look like (Lis 298; see also Shmeruk 11-12, 20 and Berkovich 162-65). On 30<sup>th</sup> April, 1907 Sholem Aleichem sends "Shprintse" from New York to the Warsaw publishing house *Unzer Lebn*, edited, yet again, by Spector (Berkovich 216-17).

profoundly struggles with the creator's role in human suffering. In a world where suffering is a given, the road to joy comes only through a confrontation with god the father.

One of Tevye's sources of misquotation is Ecclesiastes, though Tevye attributes the book to King David, as opposed to his son, Solomon, Sholem Aleichem's namesake. "As David the king says, hevel heveylim [vanity of vanities]" (48). The characteristic thing is for Sholem Aleichem's Tevye to be messing this up, and there have been subversive interpretations of this art of mis-quotation<sup>58</sup>; one shouldn't, though, forget that Sholem Aleichem is also, certainly, making fun of Tevye, for those who know the proper citations. Tevye's folksy figure is made to compete with the scriptures. For those who don't know the proper citations, what is the effect? Miseducation, certainly, and also potentially an affirmation of folk-interpretation, where the mistaken Tevye is not mistaken after all, but is right to be misquoting in a way that relates to his own life, to his own situation, making the scriptures live again and also transforming his situation; it is therefore a translational process. The phrase "all is vanity" [ha-koyl hevel] is repeatedly set in the context of physical necessity and survival.<sup>59</sup> This may serve as an excuse for inequality, a way to ignore the fact that some people have no money, have no food, are barely surviving, by saying that material/physical well-being is not important. The dangerous side of carefree joy is the possible suggestion that poor and the indigent should accept their position or even rejoice.

Ecclesiastes helps us put the Tevye stories in the context of Russian literature as

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<sup>58</sup> Eg. Michael Stern's "Tevye's Art of Quotation."

<sup>59</sup> In "A boydem" (47), in "Hayntike kinder", to Tsaytl. (80), and in "Tevye fort keyn erets-yisroel" (170).

well. “Shprintze,” for example, was published in the same year as the notorious *Sanin* by Artsybashev.<sup>60</sup> The novel bears an epigraph taken from Ecclesiastes 7.29 (quoted below). The seventh chapter of Ecclesiastes begins with a discussion of a paradox – perhaps Ecclesiastes as a whole should be seen as dealing with paradoxes, or, better yet: stimulating binaries – that is inherent in the relationship between vexation (ka’as) and revelry (sekhoq).<sup>61</sup> The original text is full of contradictions: “Vexation is better than revelry; for though the face be sad, the heart may be glad./Wise men are drawn to a house of mourning, and fools to a house of merrymaking [. . .] Don’t let your spirit be quickly vexed, for vexation abides in the breasts of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7. 3-4, 9). The contradiction can be read with morbid seriousness or non-morbid humor, humorous surprise. First laughter is foolish, then vexation is foolish; surely they are both foolish. There is no way to be smart in a world where life and knowledge are random. These lines, as the closing one which Artsybashev quotes, are self-ironic, surely: the man who is engaged in reasoning out life goes against god’s creation, as verse 29 reads: “But, see this I did find: God made men plain, but they have engaged in too much reasoning.” The pursuit of “khashbonot rabim” [“too much reasoning” is the opposite of “adam yashar” [lit. “straight man”] which god created.

Since this follows directly a denouncement of women, I am tempted to see here the beginning of queer, not straight, theory. “Now, I find woman more bitter than death; she is all traps, her hands are fetters and her heart is snares. He who is pleasing to God

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<sup>60</sup> *Sanin* is mentioned directly in “Keyver oves,” of the *Ayzenban geshikhtes* cycle (95-96). The 1909 monologue is told by one whose daughter Etke committed suicide. Unlike Shprintse, Etke left a suicide note which speaks of homoerotic desire between herself and Khayke, which brought on the suicide pact (100-101).

<sup>61</sup> I am using the English translation found in *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Second Edition (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

escapes her, and he who is displeasing is caught by her [. . .] And for what I sought further but did not find, I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman” (Ecclesiastes 7.26 and 28). Tevye refers to the latter verse in the first monologue, “Dos groyse gevins,” talking to Golde, awfully pejoratively, abusively: " ניט אומזיסט זאגט שלמה המלך, אז צווישען טויזענט ווייבער האָט ער ניט " געפֿונען איינע אַ רעכטע [Not for nothing does King Solomon say that among 1000 women/wives he couldn't find one right(eous) one] (35). This citation is homoerotic in a slightly hidden way: the original passage speaks of 1000 people, while Tevye is limiting it to the heteronormative women-crowd, a crowd that has not one suitable mate. So, this is homoerotic only for those who know the original passage, and for those who know Tevye's mis-quotation is undercutting his own attempt to establish patriarchal authority. For those who do not know, there is an implication; the story is now not only straightened, but also adds a justification for violence against women as a manifestation of gender inequality.

In the opening of “Hodl,” Tevye proclaims “*odom yesoydoy mi-ofor vesoyfoy le-ofor*, that a man can be weaker than a fly and stronger than steel – I tell you, that’s a description of me!” (95, translated in Halkin, *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories*). This excerpt is fascinating. Tevye’s interpretation of the Hebrew phrase “*odom yesoydoy mi-ofor vesoyfoy le-ofor*” [Man’s origin is in dust and his end is in dust; Halkin translates “Man is nothing but dust” in an endnote] seems to have nothing to do with the text cited (usually there is at least a word of association), aside from the fact that, as Roskies notes, Tevye is able to revise the text to fit his own situation perfectly (*Bridge of Longing*, 160). The original is utterly erased, it ceases to be an allusion, but rather

becomes a sound-byte, a sample reinscribed into an entirely new context. Tevye's twist on the original brings out performativity of power relations in a way that breaks down the binary opposition between strength and weakness, and should be seen in the context of masochistic aesthetics.<sup>62</sup>

Divine control over time and the calendar is ironized within the story; the displacement of divine order allows for a creative rebellion against human finality. In "Shprintse," Tevye is repeatedly quoting the Passover Haggadah, even though the holiday within the story (and the timing of its publication) is Shvues, seven weeks after Pesach, and thus falls in a different season. Although in a letter accompanying "Shprintse" Sholem Aleichem claims that "Tevye has not changed even by a hair, that is, what does it matter? The circumstances have changed, the years have done theirs, but Tevye himself remained the same Tevye, with the same world-view, with the same thoughts and principles, and even with the same language" (Berkovich 217). There is irony, surely, in the letter, since Tevye talks about his hair getting white (eg. 143, 150 and 199). In "Shprintse," it is Sholem Aleichem who hasn't changed even by a hair (143). Tevye is very concerned with his looks: "Take a look at me: *harei ani ke-ben shiv'im* [I am as a seventy year old] b- I am not yet sixty, and see how white Tevye has become" (143). Tevye quotes the Passover Haggada – "for I am almost sixty years old" – and while in the Haggada the concern is with a late attainment of knowledge, Tevye is concerned with his looks, for he is an entertainer. In the context of the 1905-6 pogroms, Tevye has become

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<sup>62</sup> The association of Jewish humor with masochism is not new. Elliott Oring summarizes conceptualizations of Jewish humor, connecting it inextricably to conceptions of Jewish difference, and elucidates three characteristics of the understanding of this humor: transcendence, defense, and pathology. It is within the latter that he classifies the treatment of Jewish humor as masochistic by Martin Grotjahn and Theodor Reik – in *Beyond Laughter* and *Jewish Wit* - respectively (for unclear reasons, Oring equates masochism with self-hatred) (Oring 120).



more popular, like some kind of war-time cabaret: “How does it suit you, Tevye is in fashion” (144). Tevye is an entertainer while Sholem Aleichem is his manager, in a contract whereby Tevye gets to become a thing, a commodity to be sold.

Human life relates to divinity through time, through the calendar: but the same god that makes some days holy, that makes celebrations, is the same one that makes human years so short, makes death, makes time run out. Sholem Aleichem himself is concerned with aging in his personal correspondence. In a letter to Spektor, dated Feb. 17, 1914, he writes: “one grows, you say, older? Not me. I, thank God, grow younger. I hate growing older! Brodsky once admitted that he hates a pauper. I confess that I hate an old person... But you I do not hate, because you are Mordkhe Spector and still have, bless God, a good appetite for food, I wish it should be so for a long time – Amen and Amen. Yours, was and remained” (In Berkovich 252).<sup>63</sup>

The patriarchal god is presented as a punisher, a sadist. The relationship with god is impossible because he is radical difference. If in Tevye’s non-conversations with god, god is silent: “freg kashies baym ribono-shel-olam un entfere mir aleyn” [ask the lord of the universe questions and answer (them) myself] (162). There is a lack of connection here, a radical unbridgeable difference. At the same time, Tevye is on extremely intimate terms with god; god is his companion during his generally lonely days: “אך טי רבונו של עולם, גאָטעניו נאַש!” (143), he addresses him multilingually, using Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew to say “Akh, you, Lord of the Universe, our dear god.” This intimate yet other is the limitation of patriarchal relation, where father is like son, and cannot relate to the

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<sup>63</sup> "מע ווערט, זאָגסטו, עלטער? איך ניט. איך, דאָנקען גאָט, ווער דערווייל יינגער. איך האָב פֿינט ווערן עלטער! בראַדסקי האָט מיר אַמאָל זיך מודה געווען, אַז ער האָט פֿינט אַ קבצן. איך בין זיך מודה, אַז איך האָב פֿיין אַן אַלטן. . . נאָך דיך האָב איך ניט פֿינט, ווייל דו ביסט מרדכי ספּעקטאָר, און האָסט נאָך, ברוך־השם, אַ שיינעם אָפּעטיט צום עסן, הלוואי לאורך ימים – אמן ואמן. דינער געווען און געבליבן" (252).

daughters, and the relation-system we are presented with is wholly male: it is Tevye and god. One of the important disagreements that Deleuze has with Freudian psychoanalysis is the privileged position of the father – read psychiatrist, read subject (Azulai 57). “In the case of sadism, it is the father who is posited above the law, a supreme principle which relates to the mother as to a perfect victim. In the case of the masochist, the law is ascribed to the mother, who expels the father from the symbolic sphere” (Deleuze 52).<sup>64</sup>

When Tevye talks of “tsa’ar gidul banim” [the sorrow of raising sons]<sup>65</sup> in the beginning of “Shprintse,” I expect that, as with other daughters, Shprintse should act out in some way against his will. Shprintse has done nothing of the sort. She was too compliant, in fact. Indeed, by not telling us that she has killed herself right away, Tevye does not get to be a mourning father, or an accepting father; there is a radical lack of closure. He opens with his survival and then goes on to describe his own complicity in what has happened. For he does not wash away the guilt by telling all that has come before her suicide, even if I may see his intention at doing so, he does so failingly (See Miron 102-3). His rhetoric is one of “suspicious feigned simplicity” (Miron 94).<sup>66</sup> Having his tracks covered clumsily, he makes his guilt burn all the brighter. Janet Hadda, in her analysis of suicide in Yiddish literature, elucidates what may be termed Tevye’s active participation in Shprintse’s suicide: “Shprintze’s idea of committing suicide, while certainly not directly suggested to her by her father, is nonetheless made available to her

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<sup>64</sup> Does modernity without Freud become perhaps more palatable, less patriarchal?

<sup>65</sup> In “Hodl,” 111, *kerakhem ov...*, Psalms 103.13; in “Chave”, 131, *a mame iz nit keyn tate*; there, Tevye questions, why does it say that father and not mother; he never asks why it says sons and not daughters.

<sup>66</sup> And thus humor always has a teaching mode: the feigned simplicity/stupidity which is Plato’s irony (Riley).

by Tevye's unusually frequent references to death in general, and to suicide in particular” (44). Tevye's lack of action is equally condemning.

While Tevye makes direct parallel between himself and Job, he does so in the most inappropriate moments, when I feel no pity for him; when Shprintse is talked of as a whore (158-59), when she goes out as a light (157, 161), the reader's sympathy is surely with her who suffers, not with him who sympathizes. By the very end, Tevye reveals the fact that Shprintse has killed herself when I am already dissatisfied with him, with his coldness (coldness of action, whether his proclamations of emotional sympathy are genuine or not). At the same time that he receives his punishment, through denial of pity, so that he may live through the haunting accusation of his drowned daughter's eyes (162), I am denied the extension of pity, denied a catharsis.<sup>67</sup>

But if Tevye is complicit in Shprintse's death, god is fully responsible. As the one judging between life and death, god is necessarily cruel to his followers, “Cast [your burden] on god – depend only on god, he will make it so that you lie deep, nine yards in the earth, and bake bagels, and even say: it's for the best” (150).<sup>68</sup> At certain points of the narrative it seems that god is some kind of a name for the troubles that befall Jews in general and Tevye in particular. God is cruel in death as in life, but is also the guarantor

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<sup>67</sup> Miron feels for Tevye, he “gets” his emotional investment in his daughters, his identification with them in ways that I cannot. This narcissistic emotional investment, that carries no responsibility along with it, an ephemeral, kind of proclamation of pity (*ke-rekhom*) which has no consequences aside from occasionally excusing irresponsible behavior. That is it carries no practical value and no communication; it achieves nothing aside from self-reflexivity and self-affirmation; it fails to connect.

<sup>68</sup> "השלך על ה' – פֵּאַרְלֶאַז דײַך נאַר אויף גאָט, ער וועט שוין מאַכען אַזוי, אַז דו זאָלסט ליגען טיף, נײַן אײלען אין דער  
Halkin translates: “Doesn't it say in the Book of Psalms, *hashleykh al hashem* – trust no one but God? Just leave it to Him: He'll see to it that the worms are eating you like fresh bagels, and you'll thank Him for it too.”

of survival, “But there is a great god in the world, that takes care of his poor miserable people, so that they may suffer a little longer in the world” (144).<sup>69</sup>

One of Tevye’s oft-repeated phrases comes from *Pirke Avot* [Sayings of the Fathers] 4:29: “be’al korkhekho oto khay” [involuntarily you were created]<sup>70</sup>: “Know that for all there is an accounting. Let not your desire tell you that the grave will be an escape for you, for involuntarily you were created, involuntarily you were born, involuntarily you are alive, involuntarily you will die, and involuntarily you are destined to give an accounting before the supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”<sup>71</sup> The psychoanalyst and literary critic Hadda writes of this particular phrase:

Tevye’s use of the line from Sayings of the Fathers, i.e. ‘Against your will you live,’ is particularly significant in the context of Shprintse. Tevye cites this quotation on several occasions (in connection with Khave), and he always translates the original Hebrew as ‘A person doesn’t take his own life.’ In this case, however, the words serve not only as his attempt to cheer and comfort himself but also as a veiled criticism of his daughter and thus an indication of his continued anger at her (Hadda 53).

Historical contextualization should point us to Durkheim’s *Suicide*, where he makes a connection between Enlightenment (as cultural progress) and attitudes towards suicide;

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<sup>69</sup> "ס'איז דאך אַבער דאָ אַ גרויסער גאָט אויף דער וועלט, וואָס גיט אַכטונג אויף זינע אַרעמע לייט נעבעך זיי זאָלן זיך  
"a merciful God up above who looks after us poor country folk and makes sure we keep our noses to the grindstone."

<sup>70</sup> In *Tevye*, the phrase appears in “A Boydem,” p. 63, Hodl, 134, In “Shprintse,” 143, In “Lekh-Lekho,” 204.

<sup>71</sup> Hadda 206-7, n. 23; using the translation of David De Sola Pool in *The Traditional Prayer Book for Sabbath and Festivals* [New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1960]; see also Halkin 290.

the more advanced a society is, the more accepting it is of suicide. Like Freud's, Durkheim's view of religion is pejorative; religion is a leftover of illogical, backward blindness; it has no value for the conscious individual. The damnation of religion seems to me to be cruel, almost a continuation, or perhaps radicalization of the maskilic mocking of traditional spirituality; not seeing the comforting, communal aspects of religious practice. The view of created reality as reflected in the Pirke Avot passage is also potentially very conservative: things are as they are and there is nothing to be done about them, there is no use in changing them.

Through Tevye's obedience, Sholem Aleichem creates a masochistic aesthetic which does and does not conform to the stereotype of the effeminate passive Jew. "Tevye resents [his daughters] immensely, because, as females, they have license to be the way he wishes, but won't allow himself, to be" (Hadda 50). In addition to play with gender roles, there are also fairly explicit homoerotic motifs in "Shprintse." Aronchik is in some way the forbidden fruit, his appearance described in the transgressive (because it suggests not kosher food) Yiddish saying: "blut un milkh" [blood and milk] (146). This is particularly important for the context of the holiday – it is Shvues, a time to eat milk products; and Aronchik, who doesn't know of Rashi (148), comes riding on a holiday. Tevye, as a proper father figure criticizes this behavior (when he invited Aronchik, he told him to walk, "makhn a shpatsir" (147), also a sexual term since it suggests "going out" which comes back later, even more potently, when Aronchik invites Tevye for a shpatsir after sunset [152]), and points to god's punishment, god's will to punish, and

Tevye's submissive and subversive masochistic obedience: "when they will, I say, if god wills it, whip you in the world to come, it won't hurt me any" (149).<sup>72</sup>

Deification of humans as opposed to personification of god (as in Hurston also) is directly related to Tevye's masochistic homoerotic desire. One of Tevye's first fantasies about Aronchik is a violent one: " וועט מן הסתם אָננעמען מײַך פֿאַר'ן קאַלנער בײַד חזקה אחת, און " וועט מיר געבן באותות ובמופתים שתיים – צוויי פעטש הייסט עס, און וועט מײַך אַרויסוואַרגן פּחרס הנשבר [will probably take me by the collar *with one mighty hand* and give me *signs and wonders two* – that is, two slaps, and will choke me *like shattered pottery*] (146). There are three liturgical references in the sentence (indicated with italics in the translation). "Mighty hand" and "signs and wonders" appear in the Passover Haggadah, and the expressions appear in the Hebrew Bible always in relation to Exodus from Egypt.<sup>73</sup> The Passover references, already mentioned above, may also be related, in the case of "Shprintse" in particular, to Sholem Aleichem's investment in Jewish self-defense and in Zionism, since in the year of its publication he also represented America in the Zionist congress. "Like shattered pottery" is from "Unesanneh Tokef" in The Days of Awe liturgy, a poem that speaks of complete prostration.<sup>74</sup> The emphasis is on the young man's strong arm, and he becomes an embodied god.

Tevye is enlisted as Aronshik's teacher, which leads to the eroticism of playing out various inequalities, as well as the framing of religion and devotion as being about ways of saying, being formulaic. Aronshik's mother says that it's better to bring him a

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<sup>72</sup> אָז מע וועט אײַך, זאָג אײַך, אַם ירצה השם, שמינסן אויף יענער וועלט, וועט מיר נישט וויי טאַן

<sup>73</sup> Deuteronomy 4.34, Deuteronomy 6.22, Nehemiah 9.10, Jeremiah 32.20, Psalms 135.9.

<sup>74</sup> "אדם יסודו מעפר, וסופו לעפר / בנפשו יביא לחמו / משול כחרס הנשבר / כחציר יבש וכציץ נובל" [A man's origin is from dust and his destiny is back to dust, at risk of his life he earns his bread; he is likened to a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower].

horsy than a midresh (“ferdl, nit keyn midresh,” 146). Even though Aronchik’s mother originally says that it’s better to bring her son a horsy than a midresh (“ferdl, nit keyn midresh,” 146), Tevye is eventually enlisted to be Aronchik’s advisor and tutor (from Latin guardian, failing the presence of the father, *OED*) and pedagogue (from Greek child-leader, referring to slaves who accompanied children to school). The language of this education is a violent, destructive one, using words like break, rob, chop; these are also all, interestingly, words of cooking, food: "איך האָב אים דערצײלט מעשיות, געבראַקט, געריבען פּסוקים, געהאַקט מדרשים" (147).<sup>75</sup>

The tension between *nekhama* [pity, compassion] and *tokhakha* [justice, reproach], both law/justice and pity, is an organizing tension played out in the Tevye cycle. Suffering is presented as useless, one might as well not live. Suffering is useless; there is too much feeling, which is useless in light of the objective cruel law. There is a tension here between *nekhama* and *tokhakha*, which is also a part of traditional Biblical scholarship, but in Tevye, it seems to me, *nekhama* and *tokhakha* are intertwined to create something else altogether. Now, the humorist perspective is a forcing of a humanist perspective to a large extent: it is radical (in the sense of anti-status quo) not because it ignores life’s darkness; suffering is a given, it is part of creation, and humans have the potential only to act as if it isn’t and in this way, through this performance to subvert creation itself.

Both *nekhama* and *tokhakha* are not for Sholem Aleichem [Shloyme HaMeylekh] and his yidene(s). The humor does not operate as *nekhama*, art is not there to console, but also not to destroy or punish. And so, in *Funem yarid*, Sholem remembers his oytser

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<sup>75</sup> Halkin translates: “told him a story, fed him a parable, slipped him a verse from the Bible, even let him have a midrash or two.”

(treasure, a reincarnation of his desire for a childhood friend, with whom he was as David and Jonathan were) in the worst moments, when god (or any other illogical, unfathomable power like fate; Sholem Aleichem liked to think of things as “bashert” or not – see Berkovich, 165) is most vicious in his punishments, most cruel in his logic; it is in these moments, after these moments that the pleasure may be had. That is, the fantasy, artistic creativity, etc., is indeed a victory, perseverance, but it is not a victory through nekhamah/rekhamim, not through pity, it is not a distraction from painful reality. It is the masochistic humor which subverts the law and thus allows for guilt-free pleasure – I have been punished already, now I can laugh. And so with Aronchik, who becomes Tevye’s best friend after he laughs when getting his rebuke from Tevye. This laughter is subversive in its masochism.<sup>76</sup>

One of Sholem Aleichem’s ironizations of god can be found in his correspondence with Spector. “גאָט לעבט און מיר זענען ניט געשטאָרבן” he writes in a letter dated Sept. 12, 1902 (Lis 398), and in the letter accompanying “Shprintse”: “גאָט איז אַ גאָט” “גאָט איז אַ גאָט, שולעם-עליכם לעבט און טביה איז ניט געשטאָרבן” [god is god, Sholem Aleichem lives, and Tevye did not die]. Both Sholem Aleichem and Tevye are both burdened and free to live. The refrain of “m’lebt” points to bare survival. One simply survives, but also simply lives, without identity, as in the letter Sholem Aleichem pushes the burden of identity onto god: “got iz got, Sholem Aleichem lebt un Tevye iz nit geshtorbn” – Tevye and Sholem Aleichem are free to be non-identities when there is a god, whose name is not to be spoken. This is paradoxical: surely the identity of god is not any way clear, and yet it is

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<sup>76</sup> This parallels the acquaintance of Wanda and Severin in *Venus in Furs* – is this not the same laughter – similar laughter – which unites Severin and Wanda (Sacher-Masoch 72). In Masoch’s text too, there is a deification of the human: “The divinity asks for my name and mentions her own. Her name is Wanda von Donajew. / And she is actually my Venus” (ibid).



profoundly existent, his name endowed with endless power. This father then is obliterated through repetition, god is god [echoing Moses's burning bush revelation, "I am that I am"] and opens up to the living, simply living, not dying. Sholem Aleichem ironizes god's position, replacing, usurping him, and also ironizes Tevye. Sholem Aleichem imposes on Tevye's figure in order to show his own superiority, his own interiority, depth, three-dimensionality so to speak, of the artist.

### **To Conclude: Imitation between representation and solidarity**

An important aspect of transnational Jewishness is the apparent contrast between Soviet and American social position. While in Soviet Russia Jews continue to be a representative "other," though in a very different way than in Czarist times now that ethnic discrimination became illegal, in the United States that role was delegated to African Americans. The relative liberation for the Jews brought about studies such as *Blackface, White Noise*, where Rogin argues that black otherness was used by Jews to secure their whiteness. Before leaving off this chapter, it seems important to pause on some of the specific ways in which inter-ethnic solidarity was practiced.

*The Messenger*, subtitled as the "only radical negro magazine in America" in particular was consistent in drawing the connection between the plight of East European Jews and American people of color. In March 1919, an article on "Immigration and the Jews" was published (3). "Why the Jews?," it questions rhetorically the immigration restrictions placed on East European Jews and continues, "A similar bill was presented in

1915 barring Negroes.”<sup>77</sup> The article finishes with: “Thinking and class conscious Negro citizens must oppose this discrimination against the Jewish people” (3). On July 1919, there was an editorial entitled “Jewish Pogroms,” beginning with “We wish to protest respectfully and otherwise against the pogroms being committed against the Jews in Poland or anywhere else [. . .] These pogroms against Jews are little different from the mob violence and lynching perpetrated upon Negroes” (5). The article again expresses some praise of Jewish radicalism, but is also clear about the stark difference in Jewish status in the US. “They practice less discrimination and segregation against Negroes, even in the South, than any other American whites” (6). And ends with “We call upon our readers, and especially the class conscious Negro workers, to oppose in every way any prejudice against the Jewish people” (6). In September 1919, W.A. Domingo published an article entitled “Did Bolshevism Stop Race Riots in Russia?”, stating explicitly “Perhaps the greatest analogy between Russian and the United States can be found in the former’s treatment of Jews and in the latter’s treatment of Negroes” (26). The article continues to show the ameliorating effects of the Communist revolution, claiming that anti-semitism and pogroms happen only in those parts of the former Russian empire that have not yet been Bolshevised. The same liberation from racial oppression is hoped for in America (27). A year later, in Sept. 1920, an editorial entitled “Jewish Pogroms Passing” (81) expresses the same hope, ending with “Without further discussion we wish to ask this question: *If Bolshevism can stop massacres of Jews in*

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<sup>77</sup> In a way that is misleading for propaganda purposes at best and racist and malicious at worst, they write “Booker Washington and others opposed it, but that was only for effect. The bill had not the slightest chance of passing. Why? Well, the Negro immigrants, on the whole, are ignorant, disorganized, non-radical and easily exploited. Not so with the Jews. They are radical, largely socialistic, and they organize into labor unions with efficiency and quickness which puts our native American whites to shame.”

*Russia – would it be able to stop race riots and lynching of Negroes in the United States?”* (81, emphasis in the original). And into the 20s, the periodical continues to swear loyal allegiance to the Soviet Union. In Dec. 1923, an editorial entitled “Jew Baiting” reads: “The world has gone mad with hate. [...] News dispatches of frightful, nameless scenes and plots of murder and persecution of men and women only because they are Jews [. . .] Be it said to the eternal credit and honor of Soviet Russia that the hydra-headed monster of anti-Semitism was killed by the revolution. May Christian Europe take a lesson in applied humanity from the pagan Bolsheviks.”

There is also ambivalent solidarity with victims of antisemitism in America. In March 1921, there is an article on “Henry Ford and the Jews” (198-99). And then in Jan. 1922, “Ford Stops Attack on Jews” (327-28): “However, let us congratulate Mr. Ford upon his belated but sensible decision to stop Jew-baiting and pogrom-making in America” (328). But In August 1922, there is the “Harvard University and Racial Discrimination” editorial, which begins: “Harvard University is following the trend of American prejudice in excluding or limiting Jewish and Negro students” (459). And it continues: “We have no prejudice against the Jews, but we are glad to see them being excluded along with the Negro. Hitting the Jew is helping the Negro. Why? Negroes have large numbers and small money: Jews have small numbers and large money. Together, the two have large numbers and large money. Not only that – the Jews control the powerful media of dissemination of opinion, - namely, the press, the screen and the stage. The Negro has benefited before from fights made in interest of Jews” (459).

In the May 1923 of *Messenger*, a letter from Abraham Cahan of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, is printed:

All I can do is to wish you success from the bottom of my heart and to ask you to convey my greetings and warmest feelings to the struggling proletariat of your race. We are all united by the same cause, by the same crusade for real liberty and real equality. I, too, happen to be a member of the persecuted race. The triumph of Socialism will do away with all persecution, discrimination, and every form of prejudice and hatred. Fraternally yours” (715).<sup>78</sup>

These proclamations of solidarity are one of the ways in which one should question Rogin’s argument about the transformation of Jewish identity in America. This chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, I hope, suggests that the problematic and varied affinity that east European Jews have articulated with African Americans has also something to do with the taking on of new models of performing difference in a new national context.

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<sup>78</sup> There are also on the same page letters from a variety of Jewish activists, all in solidarity, including Morris Kaufman of the International Fur Workers’ Union, M.K. Mackoff of the Joint Board Dress and Waismakers’ Union, M. Sigman of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union, and B.C. Vladeck of the *Jewish Daily Forward*).

## **Chapter VI**

### **Conclusion: Eat, Drink and Be Merry**

I couldn't find a food which tasted good to me. If I had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart's content, like you and everyone else.

Franz Kafka, "Hunger Artist"

So then, the problem is to control this resurgence of phallic presence; to abolish it at first, to pierce through the paternal wall of the superego and afterwards, to reemerge still uneasy, split apart, asymmetrical, overwhelmed with a desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written.

Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 164-5.

What is the difference between minority and majority humor? The difference exists not so much because there is something essentially different in the humor, in the words, nor in the artist, nor in the community that receives it. In the communications model where there is a dynamic among the sender, a message, and a receiver who is surrounded by a community, all the elements are a bit different. And so perhaps the humor *is* different essentially, for what is essence other than a contingent, contextual moment of meaning-making, meaning acceptance, and meaning change. In other words, laughter through tears, painful humor coming from a minority position, is to be understood both differently and the same as painful humor understood as coming from a majority position. Even while the positions of

minority/majority are not stable, past and continuing subjugation inscribe, etch, carve, scar an identity. The frivolous, humorous representations are a way to make scars beautiful through reframing the scar of hurt as also the scar of healing or, at the very least, survival.

One of the possible directions for further research is to focus more systematically on the returns enacted by Hurston and Sholem Aleichem in their reading tours and folklore collections. These returns point to a “small” transnational identification. The shtetl (small East European town with a large Jewish population) and the Southern town are not supra-national spaces, but rather sub-national. The modern engagement with these spaces reveals a transnationalism that isn’t just another word for diaspora or internationalism. It is a transnationalism as a way to transcend the national through a turn inward, through separatism, through the creation of small communities which can exist hidden from the nation’s patrolling gaze. Part of the project would be the exploration of alternative modern configurations of community within the Yiddish and Harlem renaissances, where aesthetics and politics intertwine inextricably. The alternative communities (such as the one described in Wallace Thurman’s 1932 roman à clef *The Infants of the Spring*) are structured by the tensions between patriarchy and homoerotic desire, and local folklore conservation and transnationalism, to create contingent ethics of the moment.

In this coda I look at food and laughter, so as to tease out some additional implications of minority humor and literary analysis. Food, its acceptance and rejection, have a complicated relationship to meaning making, to making sense of insides and outsides of subjectivity and community. One of the important features in the representation of the third

class train-car in Czarist Russia – and Hurston's Jim-Crow car as well<sup>1</sup> – is the sharing of food among the passengers. Would the sharing of food be possible among the first and second class folk? Is it the romanticization of hungry bellies which bring to some kind of intimacy out of necessity? Or is it simply the style, the silent repressed aesthetic that is the problem with the first two classes? I already gestured to the importance of food imagery to conceptions of minority literature while discussing Kaminer's introduction to the first volume of *Yidische folks-bibliotek* in the third chapter. It is necessary to pause in order to draw out its implications for romanticization of “belly empty” poverty, but also as providing yet another model for writing and interpretation, and for an artist’s route towards the self.

William Faulkner, one of the most famous singers of the South, provides a palatable phrasing of the “belly empty” phenomenon, as it appears in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), nestled in one of the letters written after the American Civil War, a physical object in Quinton’s hands, written on expensive French notepaper from the late eighteenth century, with “the best of stove polish,” which the vanquished Confederate troupe - “an assortment of homogeneous scarecrows” - chanced upon (102-3). The hungry and tattered soldiers, upon finding the stove polish cache, laugh. “How we laughed. Yes, we laughed, because I have learned this at least during these four years: that it really requires an empty stomach to laugh with, that only when you are hungry or frightened do you extract some ultimate essence out of laughing just as the empty stomach extracts the ultimate essence out of alcohol” (103). The white southern man is educated through hunger, and the reward for this education is some kind of authentic, essential laughter. Both the materiality of the letter as a crumbling object – “the best of the old South which is dead” (104) – and the consistent reference to

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to conflate an economic restriction with a racial one, but rather to say that the two segregated spaces are presented by the authors as a safe minority space in which the group’s heterogeneity may be played out.

hunger unites this text with a modernist aesthetic which reveals the materiality of the body as a crumbling object.

How different is Hurston's approach to hunger in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road*, where she writes,

A child in my place ought to realize I was lucky to have a roof over my head and anything to eat at all. And from their point of view, they were right. From mine, my stomach pains were the least of my sufferings. I wanted what they could not conceive of. I could not reveal myself for lack of expression, and then for lack of hope of understanding, even if I could have found the words. I was not comfortable to have around. Strange things must have looked out of my eyes like Lazarus after his resurrection (Hurston 88).<sup>2</sup>

The stomach pangs stemming from lack of food are a given, and certainly not to be sought after; they are but one aspect of the constraints of her expression as an artist. Existence in a world that is saturated with racial and economic injustice is compounded by her artistic searchings which are realized through a rebirth and exile, but also liberation, from one's environment. The liberation she seeks for herself is one which she sees as being available to all meaning makers. Again in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston writes, "Nothing that God ever made is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature,

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<sup>2</sup> Adolph Reed, in "Romancing Jim Crow," problematizes the middle class nostalgia for the segregation era, which he claims has to do with childhood memories. "Memory is a great liar," he writes, "Of course the world seems in retrospect to have been nurturing; as kids, being nurtured was our job description. Or rather, it was for some of us. Although it has attained a nearly universal status in black public discourse, this nostalgic narrative is in crucial ways a class vision" (17). The implication of the nostalgic narrative are not benign: "Leveling the black experience also levels racial oppression and thereby equates the middle-class experience of racism ("I couldn't get a cab" [...]) with the borderline genocidal regime tightening around the inner-city poor" (23).



because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle. So every man's spice-box seasons his own food” (60). There is a letting go here of any aesthetic uniformity; let people interpret for themselves, let them carry their own spice boxes.

Sholem Aleichem suggests a theory of meaning making which also depends on food imagery. On 12 September 1909, he wrote to Noyakh Zabludovski, asking him to collect “roy-material” [raw material] while traveling through the Pale, and send it to Sholem-aleykhem, unedited, so as to help with the production of more Railroad Stories for publication in *Naye Velt*. “Life is rich with facts,” he writes, “a sea of tears, which, going through my prism, cannot but turn into laughter, *delicacies such as I loved...*”<sup>3</sup> Sholem Aleichem is quoting Genesis 27.4, where the elderly and blind Isaac asks Esau to go out and hunt and feed him on his dying bed, so that he may in turn bless the elder son. The story continues with Rebecca and Jacob successfully fooling Isaac into bestowing the blessing on Jacob, the younger twin, instead. He is surely trying to parallel Isaac’s declining health to his own – for he writes from a sanitarium in Switzerland – but the impending trickery of the patriarch is also a model of the value of artistic creativity.<sup>4</sup> For Sholem Aleichem, it is the

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<sup>3</sup> "דאָס לעבן איז רייך מיט פֿאַקטן [...] אַ ים טרערן, וועלכע אַז זיי וועלן דורכגיין דורך מיין פּרייזמע, וועלן זיי שוין במילא " ווערן לאַכנדיק, מטעמים כאַשר אַהבתי" (Lis #597, pp. 510-511).

<sup>4</sup> The line also echoes Mendele's "Masoes benyomin ha-shlishi" [trans. as "The Brief Travels of Benjamin the Third" by Hillel Halkin, 1996, pp. 299-391]: "hakitsa, mendele, khap zikh uf, mendele, un krikh aroys fun untern oyv'n! Gey nem a fule hoyfns gevirts fun binyomins oytser un makh derfun potraves tsu dayne brider, azoy vi zey hobn lib" (New York, Ikuf 1946, vol. 2, p. 163) [Halkin: "Arise, O Mendele! Get thee from thy cozy corner by the hearth, and take thou a pinch of Benjamin's spices, and whip up a dish for the Jewish brothers such as they relish!" (304). Miron and Norich connect this story to Jacob's tricking Esau into exchanging his primogeniture for a pottage of lentils (Genesis 25.34), which "puts Mendele in the position of the younger brother who steals the rights of the first-born, which perfectly parallels his comments on the Yiddish-Hebrew rivalry. It presents him also as the cunning author who plagiarizes from his hero and made out of his travelogues a spicy concoction of his own. However, it also presents him as Jacob, the divinely chosen and the father of all Jewish people, the clever and energetic one, whose life was the embodiment of the principle of movement (from the land of Canaan to the land of the children of the East and back; then again from Canaan to Egypt and back for burial in the cave of Machpelah)" (42). And "Mendele, like Benjamin,

prism, with connotations of a filter, a distance, which must turn misfortune into laughter. It is the prism of an H<sub>2</sub>O cell which transforms light into rainbow, and so it is a drop of water, a tear, which transforms real misfortune into humorous art. It is the prism which erases Sholem Aleichem in order to make him a tool of humor. Whose suffering is taken up here, and whose laughter? It is my sense that rather than choosing either suffering or laughter, the reader is invited to *observe* Sholem Aleichem's genius as he transforms suffering into laughter.

In "Is Art Lighthearted?" Adorno characterizes contemporary comedy as being beyond seriousness and lightheartedness, marking the post-WWII epoch as that in which a "dried up, tearless, weeping takes the place of laughter" (252). This is not the dejection that the authors I examine go to. Even while they often present an opportunity to glimpse the existential horror of humanity, of life, of god, they cannot be represented by the face contorted in voiceless laughter that Adorno so chillingly paints, but rather a face of insecurity, and therefore of possibility.

The theory emerging from the Harlem Renaissance and Classical Yiddish primary texts also models an ironic type of criticism. It is perhaps natural that it should be difficult to speak about humor within academic discourse. The conversation keeps slipping somewhere else, to more serious, or more visible, more relevant, matters. I hope that my project allows for certain slippages and discoveries which are specific to humorous modes of thought. Laughter interrupts serious modes of inquiry in a way that is useful, since it leads to a more rigorous questioning of research methodology and relevance; there is something very productive about a burst of laughter during a lecture; it is disturbing and uneasy, it requires

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like the tiniest blade of grass and the heavenly spheres performs the duty of all living and growing things – movement" (43).

an immediate response which is “here and now,” unplanned, allowing randomness to pierce through the façade of control and assurance.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace L. Chafe in his *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*, brings in the statistic that lectures are the social events where people laugh least, with only official state communication being less conducive to laughter (8).

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