

EPHEMERAL ARRANGEMENTS:  
MATERIALITY, QUEERNESS, AND COALITION IN U. S. MODERNIST POETRY

by

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## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation searches for a body of queer modernist poetry while at the same time attempting to rework the definition of “queer.” In chapter I, I use a reconceptualization of queerness not as an abstract, theoretical rendering of the breakdown of identity categories but in its fundamental, historical sense: a political coalition made up of individuals with different subjective sexual identities who are similarly marginalized in decidedly sexual terms. Thus, this project seeks to locate texts that demonstrate moments of empathy, intersection, and cooperation between LGBT speakers, characters, or editors and people with different sexualities, races, or abilities. In this project, I avoid traditional, well-known texts of modernism in favor of recovering forgotten work by non-heterosexual authors who have been at one time or another marginalized in the canon and in society at large—Amy Lowell, Langston Hughes, and Hart Crane. In order to rediscover this overlooked work by formerly forgotten poets, the project utilizes archival research and a material methodology in which I analyze poems not just in the abstract but in their original, ephemeral locations and venues: archival manuscripts, little magazines, and book-length collections. In chapter II, I uncover an experimental editorial method that Lowell pioneered in her *Some Imagist Poets* anthologies in which, rather than selecting and editing the

selection as a traditional editor, she offered equal space to each contributor to choose and arrange their own suite of poetry. In chapter III, I analyze Hughes' "A House in Taos" in both its first publication in a Mexico-based literary journal then in one of his own understudied collections, arguing that the poem represents an interracial, bisexual triad. In the chapter on Crane, I analyze several versions of a poem about a young man with a cognitive disability with whom Crane was acquainted while vacationing in Cuba, showing that, when the poem is set outside of the U. S. border, the speaker evinces a deep empathy for the marginalized young man.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Modernism, Recovery, and Marginalization

Cary Nelson, an early advocate of literary recovery and canon expansion, points out in his 1989 book *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* that, despite an incredibly rich variety of authors, styles, and texts in the period, the conservative decades that followed the period we call modernism cemented a very narrow selection of representative texts:

By the 1950s a limited canon of authors and texts was already in place. . . . Academic critics had come to concentrate on close readings of a limited number of texts by ‘major’ authors. . . . And the professorate, largely white and male and rarely challenged from within its own ranks, found it easy to reinforce the culture’s existing racism and sexism by ignoring poetry by minorities and women. (35)

For Nelson, “the history of canonization is pervasively racist, sexist, and anti-intellectual,” “reinforces a romantic ideology of timeless individual achievement and a disdain for lived experience,” and “polices our notions of literariness and the social functions of poetry” (37). In his book, then, Nelson works to recover both forgotten work by marginalized minorities and political radicals and also to uncover the forces that excluded them from the canon. Nelson was not alone as an early adopter of canon expansion: texts like Houston A. Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987) and George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) sought to include the literatures of African American authors in the modernist canon, while work such as Bonnie Kime Scott’s anthology *The Gender of Modernism* (1990) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the*

*Twentieth Century* (1990) worked to uncover and break down a patriarchal system of literary value in which women writers were purposefully excluded from the canon.

By now, canon expansion has become less an exception in modernist studies than a rule. For example, in their introduction to a 2008 article in *PMLA* detailing the changes in “New Modernist Studies,” Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz praise new trends in literary studies of the period, arguing that contemporary modernist studies might be best described by one word: “expansion” (737). Mao and Walkowitz call for us to move beyond recovery work limited to a bounded number of years and acceptable literary sources, praising new modernist studies as expanding in “temporal, spatial, and vertical directions” (737). For Mao and Walkowitz, we must move past conventional beginning and end dates, in and out of national landscapes, and across the formerly discernible categories of high and low art (737-38). Rather than a narrow set of authors, tropes, and years, modernist studies is ever widening.

Indeed, today a scholar of modernism must be well versed not just in a traditional canon but in historical contexts surrounding race, gender, nationality, and sexuality and needs to be familiar with literature that represents these various social categories and forces. Recovery work such as this is an ongoing project, and each new author, text, or source that enhances our field of study in any way is a triumph of contemporary scholarship. Thus, a body of literature once characterized by exclusivity and narrowness is now defined as the complete opposite. Modernism today is not a single object of study but a multiplicity of interactions with modernity. According to Peter Nicholls, in his landmark 1995 book *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (1995), instead of a single canonical lineage of modernism, there were multiple fields of modernism operating at the same

time. In this sense, understanding modernism is less a definitional argument than a foundational methodology that each critic must discover. In a sense, rather than asking “what is modernism?,” we new modernist scholars must ask ourselves: “Which modernism is my focus?”

In answer to this question, I conceived this project as an examination of “queer modernism”; in this sense, my intent is to better understand sexuality in and through poetry by gathering together chapters on authors with varying non-normative sexual identities. But we should not limit recovery work to simply adding new—old—names to the canon. To be sure, expanding the list of source material and authors provides a richer selection of source material and also ameliorates past injustices done to those who were excluded from the canon because of race, gender, sexuality, or any other marginalized status within society. But if we ignore the processes by which these authors and their works had been elided from literary history, then recovery of individual texts and authors may not actually enrich our understandings of the social landscape of the period itself nor the prejudices embedded in our century-long body of scholarship. For, in Nelson’s words, “no texts are merely erased from our memory in a neutral and nonideological fashion. There are no innocent, undetermined lapses of cultural memory” (52). Though we can easily add new authors to an anthology, it is more difficult to unlearn the critical traditions which repressed those writers initially. Thus, when we recover forgotten work we also have the opportunity to uncover the mechanisms which have enforced these disappearances and better understand the systems of literary value that sanctioned these racist, sexist, or homophobic exclusions.

In this sense, then, I would like to suggest an alternate terminology to use here; instead of thinking of work as forgotten—a word which conveys little agency—I would prefer to define these works as “marginalized.” And, rather than working to recover new authors—though, I would argue that it is always an admirable pursuit—in this project, I focus on confirmed or potentially non-heterosexual writers who are, in varying degrees, part of a canonical narrative of literary modernism today only because they have at one time or another benefitted from recovery scholarship: Amy Lowell, Langston Hughes, and Hart Crane. For years, Lowell was considered nothing more than a footnote in the history the poetic school of Imagism, Hughes was systematically divided from modernism as an unsophisticated member of the Harlem Renaissance, and Crane was consistently derided as a failed poet and example of misguided poetic influence. These three authors represent interesting case studies in that they have been valued in dramatically different ways in the history of modernist criticism; to put it another way, their stock shifted considerably during their lifetimes, in the decades that followed, and into the present.

Furthermore, though we can find each of these poets in contemporary anthologies, these poets are known, generally, only for very specific portions of their career. Of course, any prolific poet is represented by a fraction of their work—poems which are considered representative or of the highest quality. But in the respective oeuvres of each poet, there are a great number of texts which are finely constructed, successful poems but that, for some reason, most literary critics and historians have entirely disregarded or forgotten. Thus, my project here is to examine not the well-known, often-anthologized parts of their works, but the obscure, unstudied portions of their corpus. My question is

simple: what might the marginal status of these poems tell us about the cultural and critical values that have obscured such works? Such an examination would enrich our experience of reading and the sources that we draw from in criticism, but it would also explain to us why some literary texts are considered marginal while others are seen as representative. And as we understand the values that marginalize literary works, we can also better understand how the process of marginalization works in society, both then and now.

In addition to a very narrow selection of representative work, scholarly work on Lowell, Hughes, and Crane all share a similarly biographical focus that, I would argue, is characteristic of much criticism of explicitly or potentially LGBT poets or queer texts. Indeed, there is often an overemphasis on biography that can sometimes overtake the criticism and eclipse the poetry itself. This biographical distraction works in two ways. First, the history of criticism that forms the basis for contemporary scholarship was often explicitly or implicitly homophobic in its treatment of each of these authors. But, even today, work under the critical lens of sexuality studies or queer theory can become too focused on reading particular poems as merely symptomatic of the author's biography, in taking them out of the closet, and can create a body of criticism and selection of representative works that focuses on sexuality to the exclusion of other contexts or themes. Of course, this is a necessary step in recovering work by authors who may have been excluded from the canon because of their alternative sexualities; to put it another way, the biographical impulse is necessary as a first step in bringing the author back into critical parlance, but can eventually obscure other aspects of their work.

While this may seem a straightforward or intuitive claim, the critical legacies of Lowell, Hughes, and Crane each show sometimes strikingly different expressions and consequences of this biographical overdetermination. For instance, the very uncertainty of whether or not Hughes may have had sexual or romantic same-sex relationships—he was a very private man—has created an intense debate which has, at times, distracted critics from the poems themselves, or, when scholars have analyzed his poetry with an eye to sexuality, it can easily feel like a mere search for biographical evidence of Hughes’ sexual identity.<sup>1</sup> Lowell and Crane, on the other hand, suffer a different kind of biographical overemphasis. Before her recovery as one of the premier lesbian poets in American literature, Lowell—though quite famous in her day as a poet and literary statesman—was known primarily for wresting the school of Imagism from Ezra Pound.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the dramatic events of Crane’s sensational suicide (he jumped overboard from an ocean liner) often subtly overtake readings of his poetry as a motif of eroticized self-destruction. This, I would argue, is a consequence of a decades-long critical tradition of reading Crane as morally and psychologically flawed which conflates his sexuality and

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<sup>1</sup> While rumors and uncertainty surrounded Hughes in his life, it was not until later in the twentieth century that it began to figure in academic studies of his work. Arnold Rampersad’s 1986 two-volume biography of Hughes argued that, despite decades of uncertainty about Hughes’ sexuality, the poet was not gay but rather asexual. Rampersad’s comments touched off a controversy in which some critics accused Rampersad of homophobia, causing him to qualify his remarks in his afterword to the second edition of the biography and admit that Hughes may have been gay. Though this controversy began in biographical studies of Hughes, it has come to be a central issue in queer studies of his work.

<sup>2</sup> Rooted, most likely, in mentions of Lowell in Pound’s own letters, the tradition of casting Lowell as the thief of Imagism continues most noticeably in contemporary Pound criticism, well-exemplified in Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*. Stephen Watson—in *Strange Bedfellows*—and Carl Rollyson—in *Amy Lowell among Her Contemporaries*—trace this conflict between Lowell and Pound to a single dinner party in London in 1914. In effect, Lowell’s enormously successful and important career—she sold out lectures halls for poetry readings, sold copies of her books by the thousands, graced the cover of *Time*, and won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry—was slowly condensed into a single night’s story.



his suicide.<sup>3</sup> Thus, each of the following chapters begins with a discussion of the different ways that criticism has somehow moved away from the literary and into the sphere of the biographical and how this process limits the scope of our each author's study.

### Queer Theory and Modernism

In many ways, the period of modernism is intuitively exemplary of queerness. In an introduction to a queer issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, Heather Love argues that queer fits so easily with modernism because it resonates with “the prominence of exile and alienation in even dominant modernism” and because “the classic period of aesthetic modernism coincides with the emergence of modern sexual identities” (745). The modernist period is a particularly rich source for socio-cultural studies of alternative sexualities simply because, on one level, of its temporal location. We are all familiar with the narrative of *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, in which Michel Foucault argues that at the end of the nineteenth century the burgeoning fields of social science first defined homosexuality as a type of psychology; previously, the “sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43). In his estimation, though psychologists categorized such identities as pathological, they also inadvertently legitimized these alternative sexualities as inescapable subjectivities. Born at the end of the nineteenth century, people in the modernist period with alternative sexual identities came of age in a difficult position. For Christopher Nealon, writers of the period often demonstrate a “struggle to escape the medical-psychological ‘inversion’ model of

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<sup>3</sup> Extending back to criticism by Yvor Winters and Allen Tate in the thirties and forties respectively, scholarship that implicitly conflates Crane's poetic failure with his psychological failure continues into the present with William Logan's recent controversial review of the *Library of America* edition of Crane's major work. Even queer theoretical interventions echo this conflation of Crane's sexual identity and tragic death; for instance, Tim Dean finds in Crane's poetry “the metaphysical death of the self” (105).

homosexuality that was dominant in the United States in the first half of the century and a drive toward ‘people-hood’ that previews the contemporary ‘ethnic’ notion of US gay and lesbian collectivity” (2). In this sense, the period represents a vital stage in the development of not just gay and lesbian identity but all forms of sexuality.

Whether or not we rely on particular historical hypothesis of the pathologization of sexuality, the first decades of the twentieth century represent vital stages in the redefinition of alternative sexual identities from isolated transgressions to contemporary political and cultural communities. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, George Chauncey takes issue with the idea that before Stonewall homosexual people were isolated and invisible; rather, he focuses on urban culture where people with unorthodox sexualities gathered and created a subculture that is the basis for the “ethnicity model” of queer identity as we know it today. Intrinsic to Chauncey’s argument is that “hetero-homosexual binarism, the sexual regime now hegemonic in American culture, is a stunningly recent creation” (13). In this sense, Chauncey uncovers a surprising spectrum of sexual behavior and community identities that troubles tidy sexual identity category constructions. Similarly, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner detail the importance of public spaces in “Sex in Public”: “what brings us together is sexual culture, there are very few places in the world that have assembled much of a queer population without a base in sex commerce. . . . Respectable gays like to think that they owe nothing to the sexual subculture they think of as sleazy. But their success, their way of living, their political rights, and their very identities would never have been possible but for the existence of the public sexual culture they now despise” (563). Thus, for Berlant and Warner, our contemporary idea of

an abstract “gay community” has its roots in particular city neighborhoods where covert sexual encounters occurred. From this narrow location, a collective notion of sexual identity gradually extended beyond the urban center to the rest of the culture in the succeeding decades.

However, though the modernist period offers an interesting glimpse at the history of physical intimacy in the United States and the development of current identity structures, a critical understanding of “queer” encompasses more than just the historical development of non-normative sexual identities. As Love notes, it is more than just the historical location of the period that makes it so amenable to queer theory: “what makes *queer* and *modernism* such a good fit is that the indeterminacy of *queer* seems to match the indeterminacy, expansiveness, and drift of the literary—particularly the experimental, oblique version most closely associated with modernist textual production” (author’s emphasis 745). Like the ever-expanding field of modernism, “queer,” though a familiar term in academia, is a sometimes vexingly nebulous term. Indeed, both terms are difficult to define, but in such a way that working out a definition can actually define one’s approach to each field of study. Originally a reappropriated pejorative used by gay and lesbian political activists, “queer” entered academic discourse in 1991. Teresa De Lauretis’ wrote the foundational essay “Queer Theory,” in which she defines queer against

the terms ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ to designate distinct kinds of life-styles, sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications, and discourses[.] . . . In a sense, the term ‘Queer Theory’ was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them—or at the very least problematize them. (v)

In essence, queer is a naming device that includes or coopts various non-heterosexual identity categories with the explicit political and philosophical goal of transcending those restrictive categories. In this sense, queerness is about radically transgressing or even completely deconstructing normative identity categories.

Since de Lauretis' foundational remarks, the rubric of queer theory has expanded well beyond just gay and lesbian identities to include a broad spectrum of alternative genders and sexualities. Indeed, just a few years after the initiation of queer theory, it seemed that almost anything could be queer, if one looked at it in the right—transgressive—way. In the 2005 essay, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and Esteban Muñoz praise the openness of the term: “[t]hat queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field’s key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the ‘subjectless’ critique of queer studies disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent” (3). Thus, queerness today is less about non-normative identity than it is the breakdown and transcendence of any stable category of being. While for some theorists this opens up exhilarating possibilities, others have criticized the growing abstractness of the term. For example, David Halperin ambivalently defines queer as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative” (62). On one level, Halperin acknowledges the political agenda of a broadly encompassing position, but, on another, an “identity without essence” is inherently empty, a blank signifier. And Halperin is definitely not alone in his

ambivalence. In *Homos*, Leo Bersani bemoans the “degayification” inherent in queer theory and argues that academic understandings of queerness have become so distanced from their roots in sexuality that queer theory has become in effect meaningless. While many scholars still happily work in the field of queer theory, it is often an embattled territory: “Lo these many years later,” laments Warner, a continued proponent of queer studies, “straight and gay people alike continue to deride queer theory as the ultimate joke of a debased and fraudulent academy” (“Queer and Then?” B6). Indeed, in what is perhaps the most striking example of the tormented position of queer theory, just a few years after her foundational essay, de Lauretis completely reversed her opinion and lambasted queerness as a term that had “very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry” (“Habit Changes” 297).

Of course, it is that “subjectless” position that so irritates critics of queer theory, for—and I would argue that this is the central conceptual conflict of queer theory—what use are identity politics which acknowledge no identity as their subject? The difficulty then becomes the fact that theorists have variously posited queerness as intimately involved with two seemingly conflicted concepts: in one sense, queer is a collective movement comprised of people with different but similarly marginalized non-normative sexual identities, and, on the other hand, queer is a radical resistance to the very coherence of those categorical descriptions of identity. Mostly, these two approaches operate as polar opposites. For example, in applying queer theory to literary studies, the first approach simply expands the perimeters of gay and lesbian literature to include more forms of sexual difference. In the second, “queer” is often deployed not as a descriptor but as a verb and critics seek to “queer” dominant literary forms or genres by interpreting

radical or subversive subtext that disrupts or blurs normative categories of coherence. In the first, the only practical use is merely descriptive—a grouping of authors or texts—and, in the second, we can easily reach a point where the academic practice of “queering” a literary or cultural form can become a catch all that merely describes any unexpected or experimental turn in a text.

In particular, in the field of literary modernism, queering literary forms can also present a problem—because, as we have noted, the dominant account of modernism is already one that fully endorses formal experimentation and prizes the destruction of traditional. One need look no further than the quintessential modernist texts *The Waste Land* or *Ulysses* to see the way modernist authors distorted—or even completely deconstructed—normative literary structures while pushing the bounds of propriety. Similarly, urban culture in the “Jazz Age” as we think of it today teemed with social and sexual experimentation: bars and cabarets full of sexually adventurous progressives, Harlem drag balls alive with alternative sexuality, and a literary culture full of writers encompassing all kinds of sexual difference. In this sense, is there really any reason to look for a queer modernism?

While such a question might be particularly worrisome in terms of modernism, we might also think more broadly and wonder if we can, at all, find a use for such an immanently conflicted model as queer theory. I propose, however, that instead of choosing one side or the other, we choose both. In a sense, we ought to return to the foundational definition of queer theory: a philosophical concept that aims to transcend hierarchically organized identity categories through collective work between people who are differently marginalized in terms of sexuality or gender. As Cathy Cohen explains:

queer theory stands in direct contrast to the normalizing tendencies of hegemonic sexuality rooted in ideas of static, stable sexual identities and behaviors. In queer theorizing, the sexual subject is understood to be constructed and contained by multiple practices of categorization and regulation that systematically marginalize and oppress those subjects thereby defined as deviant and ‘other.’ And, at its best, queer theory focuses on and makes central not only the socially constructed nature of sexuality and sexual categories, but also the varying degrees and multiple sites of power distributed within all categories of sexuality, including the normative category of heterosexuality. (23)

We ought to think, as Cohen does, of marginalization as central to queer theory, of the constructedness of those categories, and of the uneven distribution of power as central to the pursuit of queer theory. For Cohen, a queerness grounded in sexual marginality can include not just gay and lesbian identities but also black heterosexuals categorized as sexually non-normative, and this coalitional model can work in politically productive ways. For example, she makes a nuanced and compelling argument for a reimagining of queerness across the binary divisions between black and white and gay and straight so that LGBT individuals and single black mothers—also sexually marginalized, but in different ways—might work together for political aims. Similarly, Shane Phelan argues for queerness as a coalition of different identities:

Simple versions of identity politics, in which we know who and what we are and we know by people's identifications whether they are trustworthy, are inadequate. The contingency and multiplicity of agendas furthers this indeterminacy. Because lesbians, gays, and queers differ in their political aims among themselves as well as between groups, the ground for common action cannot be “identity” but must be shared commitments; it must be sympathy and affinity rather than identity. Sympathy and affinity need not be total to be real and effective. They do, however, require a self-consciousness about one’s actions and allegiances that is often taken for granted in identity politics. (713)

Of course, the difficulty in this conceptualization is that there are still uneven distributions of power across marginalized groups. Indeed, this is a problem that has

haunted queer theory generally. In fact, Cohen begins her article by noting recent racial discrimination within a queer activist group. Similarly, after attending a queer conference dominated by white men, Judith Halberstam wonders “Is queer studies white? Is queer activism white? Is race somehow not an important rubric for queer studies?” (219).

Since then, queer theorists have worked harder to represent not just the interests of the most privileged members of the collective—gay white men—and integrate analyses other forms of intersecting oppression. This is important, too, in a study of queer modernism, for the literary history of the period has often categorically separated marginal groups from high modernism; for instance, only relatively recently have we begun to consider the Harlem Renaissance part of modernism proper. We might also note that the most recent edition of Scott’s *The Gender of Modernism*, a collection of writing by modernist women, is now titled *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections* (2007) and focuses not just on contributions to literature by women, but of all kinds of authors across races, sex, and other social locations. In the chapters that follow, I will explore the relationship between intersectional understandings of identity in the period with a queer theory that foregrounds emotional connectivity. To this end, I have selected individual poems or groups of poems that feature non-normative sexuality in such a way that offers epiphanic moments of empathy with others who are marginalized in sexual terms—either in the texts themselves, in their arrangements, or in the larger texts in which they are included.

#### Ephemera and Archive

Indeed, it is relatively straightforward to recover work reflecting non-normative sexual identity or desire in poetry of the period, but it is not so easy to find queerness as I



have defined it as a coalition of individuals who are differently sexually marginalized. One problem in locating queer content in any period is that, as Jose Esteban Muñoz notes,

Queerness is often transmitted covertly. This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack. Instead of being clearly available as visible evidence, queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere—while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility. (“Ephemera” 6)

Muñoz, then, defines “queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality. . . . Since queerness has not been let to stand, unassailed, in the mass public sphere, it has often existed and circulated as a shared structure of feeling that encompasses same-sex desire and other minoritarian sexualities” (“Ephemera” 6, 11).

Queerness is an interior sexuality grounded in unpoliced modes of sociality which opens up subversive possibilities, but, because of the historical marginalization of such people, these acts are purposefully fleeting or temporary. In the rest of his article, Muñoz meditates on the difficulties of creating an archive of contemporary queer acts and performances. But if it is difficult to create a stable catalog of queerness in our present moment, how could we do so in a period some one hundred years ago?

What we do have are archives of printed literature housed in our libraries and increasingly available publicly online, and these academic archives can function in much the same way as secret city spaces where sexual subcultures developed. Berlant and Warner hint at the importance of transitory print media in forming sexual subcultures when they argue that “heteronormative culture . . . leaves queer culture especially

dependent on ephemeral elaborations in urban space and print culture” (562). City spaces and print media both function as spaces that can create communities of queer people. During the development toward today’s queer communities, different forms of print media served as locations where writers could present language of same-sex desire, eroticism, or love in public. In this sense, magazine and book publication of poems with non-traditional sexual themes functions in the same way as queer neighborhoods do. Publications in different forums allowed writers and readers access to a community of like-minded individuals. Unlike city neighborhoods, however, print’s public spaces could exceed narrow city limits to function across the geographic landscape of the United States. Thus, just as Benedict Anderson argues that systems of print capitalism were integral to creating “imagined communities” of national identity, distributions of these same media strengthened and expanded sexual subcultures within a broader national identity.

### Material Methodology

And because queerness depends so on ephemeral spaces, this study must use a critical methodology that works to recover those textual locations, in a very material way. We cannot, I would argue, merely pick up the most recent copy of *the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* or even the collected works of individual authors to find a queer modernism—though each of these books is integrally important to academic study. If the object of our study is a coalitional model of queerness, enacted among marginalized identities in ephemeral spaces, then we must look at literature that has been similarly marginalized and forgotten. We must uncover both the individual texts and their print spaces. In this sense, my project relies, in terms of methodology, on contemporary

criticism in material studies. In his 2001 book *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*, George Bornstein, relying on the work of Jerome McGann and other advocates of textual criticism, advocates a scholarship based on not just the “linguistic code” of literary texts—the actual language that comprises the text—but also attends to the implications of the “bibliographic code” of the work—the material aspects of the text as it appears on the page in a particular instantiation and changes with different manuscript or print locations, a methodology that works against dominant understandings of modernism as made up of canonical texts that exist as stable and singular in an abstract and ahistorical form (3, 7). Bornstein goes on to give examples of particular poems that—even with no changes in the content or form of the work—can have dramatically different readings in different print locations. Bornstein further complicates this by tracing the alternate versions of poems by compulsive or long-term reviser like Marianne Moore. Indeed, there are scores of authors working during the period who went through extended revision processes; Hannah Sullivan argues that with the introduction of technical innovations like the typewriter and cheaper typesetting processes, the modernist period is the one in which the concept of revision became central to the writing process (5). In terms of print venue, we must also note the overwhelming importance of little magazine studies in contemporary modernist criticism by scholars like Mark Morrisson, Sean Latham, Suzanne Churchill, and Peter Brooker to name just a few.

Indeed, a material methodology brings together all the disparate factors in this study. First of all, a primary focus on the material instantiations of texts allows us to escape the pitfall of an overly biographical reading. As I have suggested above, and as the chapters that follow will demonstrate in depth, biography has often dominated

readings of these poets for decades, and this is a difficult tradition to unlearn. But, at the same time, we cannot completely ignore the importance of authors' lives nor socio-historical contexts in shaping the poetry. If we focus as much as possible on the manuscript and publication details of the texts themselves, we can account for biographical details of the writers and for legal and social contexts that immediately affect the creation and meaning of these texts without becoming overwhelmed by the central controversies, narratives, or events that have at times dominated criticism of each of these authors. In addition, a material methodology can also recover not just individual texts in an author's corpus, but the actual ephemeral spaces in which these marginalized poems circulated. Focusing variously on archival manuscript *variora*, little magazine contributions, modernist anthology arrangements, and all but forgotten book collections, we can, in a very real way, recover these poems in their queerest potential: as moments of empathy or even coalition between differently marginalized identities in public but ephemeral spaces.

Using such a material methodology, in the chapters that follow I will uncover marginalized arrangements and collections by Lowell, Hughes, and Crane that foreground sexual marginality and offer specific examples of collective work or moments of empathy with others who are also marginalized in terms of sexuality. The first chapter will begin with a discussion of Lowell's role as an editor of a successful series of Imagist anthologies. Her editorial process was explicitly coalitional in that she did not take the title of editor and allowed each contributor to select their own texts. This decentralized editing technique would not end with Lowell, however. Louis Untermeyer—a friend, younger poet, and popular anthologist—would use the same editorial method in a

“miscellany” series of American poetry anthologies that included Lowell’s work. In Lowell’s selection for the 1922 edition of the series, Lowell contributes a selection of poems that foreground American history in “Lilacs,” the failure of religion in modernity in “Swans,” the spiritual rejuvenation of modernity through non-normative love in “In Excelsis,” and closes with a playful description of the gendered power dynamics of modern poetry—in effect gesturing out to the other contributors to the volume—in her closing poem “La Ronde du Diable.” The second chapter focuses on Hughes’ 1926 poem “A House in Taos,” which, I will argue, details a complex, multiracial, pansexual triad. In discussing the publication history of this poem from its original publication, in the little magazine *Palms* in an arrangement with other poems detailing failed or even violent relationships, to its later inclusion in Hughes’ self-styled “lyric” collection *Fields of Wonder* (1947), I will argue that Hughes’ representation of this queer relationship is dependent on an aesthetic breakdown of identity category distinctions of gender, sexuality, and race. In the third chapter, I will trace the various versions and publications of Hart Crane’s poem “The Idiot,” set on a Caribbean island, in which a homoerotically inclined speaker encounters a man with a cognitive disability who is also marginalized because of his sexuality. In the versions of the text, the speaker’s tone shifts from contempt to empathy as the collections that include the poem move in and out of the US national border. These chapters—focusing on vastly different poets, styles, and contexts—are, in a sense, case studies for thinking about queerness as located in ephemeral moments where transcending repressive identity categories suddenly becomes possible but through the fullest experience of non-normative sexual identity and the marginalization that attends it.

## CHAPTER II

### “AT THE MERCY OF EDITORIAL SELECTION”:

#### AMY LOWELL, LOUIS UNTERMAYER, AND THE MODERNIST MISCELLANY

Though today we know Amy Lowell primarily as a secondary figure in modernism, she was, at the height of her career, a literary celebrity and central authority in the field of poetry. In 1914, she published her breakthrough collection *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds*, and embarked on a successful series of lectures and poetry readings. The following year, she edited the first of three popular anthologies of Imagist poetry—according to many accounts, the premier poetic movement of modernism. The financial success of both her own collections—her books regularly went through several printings with prestigious publishing houses—and the *Some Imagist Poets* series was due not only to the innovative use of free-verse “new poetry” but also to Lowell’s tireless promotion of “vers libre” in her speaking engagements. In these presentations, sometimes stacked against several proponents of conventional forms, she would recite her own poetry and make stunning pronouncements about the desolation of traditional verse forms and the cultural renovation that free verse promised—and all with a theatricality that singularly absorbed her audience. According to a biographer, she often ended her lectures by rousing the crowd out of a stunned silence with what would become a catchphrase: “Well?—Clap or hiss, I don’t care which; but do something!” (qtd. in Bradshaw 52). Lowell critic Melissa Bradshaw notes that at the height of her popularity, Lowell had “a devoted following of fans who mobbed train stations in search of her autograph, often necessitating police escorts, and who packed auditoriums to standing-room-only capacity in order to hear her speak” (*Diva* 51).

Thus, in a relatively short period of time, Lowell had become one of the most famous poets of the day, so much so that a 1916 article in the *New York Times* introduces her as “America’s chief advocate and practitioner of the new poetry” (Kilmer).<sup>4</sup> Before her death in 1925, Lowell published numerous successful books of poetry and criticism, contributed regularly to such institutions as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, and *The Little Review*—as well as numerous other major journals of the period—and was even featured on the cover of *Time* magazine for her work on her biography of British Romantic poet John Keats. Following her death, her first of three posthumous collection, *What’s O’Clock*, won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and sold thousands of copies—making it her most financially successful volume.

Lowell’s personal life was just as fascinating as her professional success. Born into a wealthy and powerful family in Brookline, Massachusetts—her brother was at one time president of Harvard University—Lowell lived until her death in her stately family home, in her childhood bedroom in fact. A prolific poet who utilized an unconventional work schedule, she usually stayed up all night and slept all day; in the late afternoon, after she woke, she would sometimes entertain visitors—often young poets seeking advice—in her third floor bedroom, “the Sky Parlour,” from her luxurious bed made of sixteen pillows, shielded from the afternoon sun streaming through the windows by several parasols arranged about her. Short and fat, she smoked cigars and made cocky declarations like “I made myself a poet, but the Lord made me a business man” (qtd. in Bradshaw 49). But perhaps most scandalous of all, though not explicit public knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Joyce Kilmer—a journalist and sometime poet known for the immensely popular poem “Trees”—also complained Untermeyer of Lowell’s tyrannical approach to interviews: she demanded particular questions on “new poetry” and also forced Kilmer to allow her final approval on his manuscript of the article (Bradshaw 54).

during her lifetime, was that she was a lesbian who lived in a “Boston marriage” with retired stage actress Ada Dwyer Russell.

And yet despite Lowell’s absorbing public persona and famous literary work, in contemporary scholarship, Lowell is all but forgotten and is known primarily as a frivolous socialite who wrested the quintessential modern poetry movement—Imagism—from Ezra Pound and, in these accounts, diluted his foundational values for the school into her own brand of “Amy-gism.” Sensational retellings of the battle for Imagism abound, from Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*, Stephen Watson’s *Strange Bedfellows: the First American Avant-garde*, and Timothy Materer’s “Make It Sell! Ezra Pound Advertises Modernism,” to name just a few. As I unpack the underlying assumptions that these critics use in repeating this literary gossip, I will also point to recent critical work by Melissa Bradshaw, Carl Rollyson, and Jayne Marek who seek to recast Lowell’s role in Imagism in a more positive light, and conclude this biographical discussion by citing essays from the period—by Harriet Monroe and Louis Untermeyer—who seem to suggest that the Imagist takeover might not have been so fraught as we often imagine it today.

There is, however, a grain of truth to these tales of Lowell’s “Amygism” revolution: Lowell and Pound did often evince a mutual dislike, and Lowell did marshal the other poets in the group to continue Imagism without Pound, rebrand Pound’s French “Imagisme” to the anglicized “Imagism,” and publish three successive volumes of the *Some Imagist Poets* anthology series without Pound’s input or contribution. But the dramatized retellings of Imagism’s takeover often serve to cast the events as rooted entirely in a personality conflict between two power-hungry poets. Such an



understanding, however, obscures the fundamental philosophical differences between Pound's and Lowell's approaches to literature, which become clear when comparing the editorial methods that each used. In their respective Imagist anthologies, Pound chose, edited, and arranged all of the poems in his collection and published the book through a small press in London—the Poetry Bookshop—while Lowell pioneered a new editorial method in which she gathered the core poets of the group, allowed them each equal space to select and arrange their own work, and exactly divided the sales of the volumes between the contributors and opted for a large commercial publishing house in the United States—Houghton Mifflin. These differences may seem merely a matter of circumstance or preference, but the implications of their varying tactics actually elaborate some foundational debates within literary culture of the period: Pound desired to put himself at the top of an editorial hierarchy and sought a narrow audience of elite literati, while Lowell imagined a broader, popular audience for Imagism. In truth, it was no simple personality conflict between the two, but a battle over the central question of what the intended audience of modern poetry ought to be: a small sliver of literary elite or a broader, more socioeconomically diverse cross-section of society.

In the past few years, however, modernist scholarship has returned to the question of audience that provoked such discord between Pound and Lowell and has, in effect, troubled that tidy binary between high and low culture; indeed, the blurring the boundaries between modernist art and popular culture has become a central focus in contemporary modernist scholarship. As Andreas Huyssen brought to light in his landmark *After the Great Divide* (1986), for decades modernist scholars had privileged a conceptual separation between so-called “high” and “low” art, thereby marginalizing

once important figures who were too widely popular. But, according to Huyssen, it is an artificial division, and, in truth, the lofty category of high modernism actually utilized popular consumer culture in various and important ways. Recent critical work following Huyssen has sought to uncover the role of mass market techniques of promotion and advertising to enrich our understanding of modernism. For instance, in his *Institutions of Modernism*, Lawrence Rainey details the negotiations and planning surrounding Pound's process of securing the publication of T. S. Eliot's quintessential modernist poem *The Waste Land*. Alternately, in his *The Public Face of Modernism*, Mark Morrisson highlights the instrumental role of little magazines in the period, a genre which utilized techniques developed by the booming advertising industry and often explicitly courted popular culture.

Indeed the historical differentiation between Lowell's popular audience and Pound's elite readership may perhaps be a bit overstated, for—though Lowell did indeed intend a broad popular audience—Pound too sought a similar notoriety, as critics like Rainey and Materer demonstrate in his use of marketing and promotion. Indeed, his publication of manifestoes in *Poetry* evidence a very careful navigation of literary culture as a market. Further, while the Poetry Bookshop was indeed a small press, it had fantastic success a few years before Pound's *Des Imagistes* with Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* series, which went through numerous editions and printings and sold thousands of copies. In reality, it was not so much that Pound and Lowell envisioned a different scope of audience or textual dissemination but that they disagreed primarily in who could control that audience: Lowell envisioned a coalition of poet peers while Pound wanted to be the single arbiter of culture. Lowell intended to expand the reception of modern poetry to

include a broader and more mainstream audience. Publishing for the narrow audience of high modernist poetry—publishing in avant-garde little magazines like *The Little Review* and *Others*—as well as the wider distribution of popular literary culture—respectable but heavily distributed magazines like *Vanity Fair* and *The Century*—and even the vast circulation of daily newspapers—*The New York Post*—Lowell is certainly difficult to classify with certainty in either “highbrow” art or “lowbrow” entertainment.

By the thirties, however, influential thinkers like Q. D. Leavis worried not so much about the cultural schism between high and low, but about the rise of an aspirational “middlebrow” readership. It may be helpful, then, to think of Lowell as “middlebrow,” a term that came to prominence, not accidentally, at the height of modernism. In their introduction to the anthology *Middlebrow Moderns: Popular American Women Writers of the 1920s*, editors Lisa Botshon and Meredith Goldsmith define the middlebrow as “[n]ot quite ‘vulgar’ and real enough to be deemed low culture, nor sophisticated or experimental enough for high culture” (3). Mellissa Sullivan and Sophie Blanch, in an introduction to a special issue on the middlebrow in *Modernist Cultures*, outline the three major criticisms of middlebrow taste: that “their allegedly second-rate entertaining tastes usurped the power of the highbrow, that their miscegenation of highbrow and lowbrow cultures lacked substance or distinction, and that they succumbed to aesthetic ideals deemed necessary for sales or popularity by publishers or agents. These accusations often focused upon the reified borders between modernism and the middlebrow” (2-3). In a 1949 article in *Harper’s*—so popular that it was reprinted in *Life* magazine with humorous charts—Russell Lynes playfully discusses the categories and the anxieties that attend them. Lynes maps the brows explicitly onto

class divisions: “the highbrows are the elite, the middlebrows are the bourgeoisie, and the lowbrows are the *hoi polloi*” (author’s emphasis 147). For Lynes, always pondering high art and philosophy, the highbrow devotes all of his daily life to culture and “has worked hard, read widely, traveled far, and listened attentively in order to satisfy his curiosity and establish his squatter’s rights in this little corner of intellectualism” (147-48). To Lynes, “the highbrow is primarily a critic and not an artist” who often finds it a personal duty to study and disseminate art—both canonized high art and the authentic folk arts of the lowbrow—for instance jazz music. In this way, highbrow intellectuals often court the lowbrow artistic producers. The middlebrow, however, is fixed in the middle and relatively despised by both.

Joan Shelley Rubin notes that the rise of the middlebrow coincides with cultural aspirations of the middle class, seen in such forms as the formation of the instantiations of the Book-of-the-Month clubs, “great books” discussion groups, expanded college programs in the humanities to match rising university matriculation, as well as the increasing popularity of community education and lectures series—both in lecture halls and in radio programs; poetry, too, saw an upsurge in visibility demonstrated on one level by the success of Harriet Monroe’s journal *Poetry* in 1912. Perhaps even more illustrative of the middlebrow’s growing sway in matters of verse is the rising popularity of poetry anthologies in the period. Lowell’s and Pound’s Imagist anthologies were just a few in a market saturated with such books. Thus, following this examination of Lowell’s *Some Imagist Poets* series, I will discuss the role of the anthology more generally in the modernist period. For, though recent years have done much to recover the value of the similarly ephemeral little magazines of modernism, critics have given the myriad

anthologies of the period much less attention. In this discussion, I will examine the role of this much overlooked genre in modernist literature, and seek to represent the function of anthologies in the period as intricately involved not only in the construction of the modernist canon but as intrinsically involved in debates about the audience and popularity of literature.

In the pages that follow, I will first discuss the gradual erasure of Lowell from the canon as rooted in dramatic retellings of one particularly notorious dinner party in the summer of 1912, often described as the seed of her schism with Pound. Then, I will turn to her editing of the *Some Imagist Poets* series to underscore the meaning and implications of her pioneering method of coalitional editing. Rather than limiting this chapter entirely to the well-worn critical landscape of Imagism, however, I will trace the lineage of Lowell's editorial method from *Some Imagist Poets* into the next decade and into another editor's hands. From 1920 to 1927, Louis Untermeyer—a close friend and collaborator with Lowell during her lifetime—published a series of four anthologies with the same “editor-less” principle, the *American Poetry* series of anthologies he called “miscellanies.” Untermeyer's series followed Lowell's collective approach in allowing a select group of poets to curate their own arrangements for the occasional anthologies. Untermeyer invited Lowell to participate, and her poetry is included in the three volumes published before her death. Thus, in examining Lowell's contributions to this series, we can—in addition to understanding Lowell's roles as an editor—also discover how her writing functions within the editorial method that she pioneered.

I make this perhaps unconventional change in focus from the famed Imagist anthologies to Untermeyer's lesser-known volume because *American Poetry 1922, A*

*Miscellany* much more clearly demonstrates the possibilities for radical content that the coalitional model of editing can encourage. The Imagist volumes work to secure the careers of a group of young poets and the movement in which they loosely associated, while the *Miscellany* series brings together poets at very established points in their respective careers who, given the freedom that popularity can endow, offered much more socially and politically progressive poetic arrangements. The 1922 edition was actually the second volume, but it serves as a fascinating example of the political possibilities that coalitional editing offers.

In particular, I will focus on the second book in the series, *American Poetry 1922: A Miscellany*, both because it offers a fine showing by many of the contributors—for example, it is the first book publication of Robert Frost’s “Fire and Ice” and “Design,” as well as Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “What my lips have kissed, and where, and why”—and because it serves as a counterpoint to the publication of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, the landmark event of canonical modernism. In Lowell’s contribution to the 1922 edition, I will demonstrate the way Lowell frames the major concern of the volume: to represent American culture in the period via a collection of self-chosen work by authors from sometimes vastly different perspectives who find national identity in their own particular life experiences. Lowell’s contribution weaves evocations of New England history, a traumatic break with Christian tradition, and the spiritually restorative possibilities of fully sexualized non-normative love. Finally, her selection culminates with an insightful glimpse into the gendered networks of modern poetry figured as a child’s game in her closing poem, which gestures to the subsequent contributions in the volume and to the machinations of literary culture of the period. Then I will briefly connect the socially and

politically progressive content of Lowell's sequence to some of the other contributions—in regards to sexuality, focusing on H. D.'s gender-bending lyrics and Edna St. Vincent Millay's sexually liberated sonnets, and, in regards to American nationalism, looking at Carl Sandburg's criticism of civic patriotism and Vachel Lindsay's vision of the United States through immigrant minority populations. Thus, though we generally think of middlebrow anthologies as conservative, sometimes such a collection, seeking a wide and socioeconomically diverse audience, can also be intrinsically subversive in reimagining what it is to be American. In the end, this chapter will show the way the coalitional editing strategy Lowell pioneered and Untermeyer continued can create a space of collectivity in which alternative sexuality and progressive politics can work in concert to create a new vision of American nationalism.

### Hi-Jacking Imagism

Before we can examine Lowell's contribution to modernist editing in *Some Imagist Poets* and its later lineage in Untermeyer's miscellany series, we must first reexamine the critical narrative that casts Lowell as merely mediocre poet and thief of Imagism, for this narrative is one that lessens Lowell's contributions in the period and obscures the misogynist and homophobic causes of Lowell's fading into obscurity after her death. Ultimately, the narrative of the hi-jacking of Imagism comes down to one single evening in history: a dinner party on July 17, 1914, in which Pound supposedly humiliated Lowell, an event which would spur Lowell's scornful theft of the movement. This sensational retelling, however, is actually quite apocryphal. In the survey of scholarship below, I will demonstrate the considerably different renditions of this tale, in

order to show how the canonical retelling of the events of the dinner party serve only to diminish Lowell's importance in Imagism and in literature of the period in general.

Scholars of literary modernism routinely cite the early twentieth-century school of Imagism as the premier movement in the establishment of modernist poetry as we know it. So too does it serve as a beginning point for a study of Lowell's career. Imagism was instrumental in developing the poetic aesthetics and literary culture of modernism by advocating a decidedly avant-garde form and progressive content that broke with traditional poetics. Stylistically, Imagist poetry eschewed traditional poetic forms and meter, used as spare a language as possible, and avoided a first-person speaker or other mediating structures. More than just a call to formal experimentation, Imagism is also important to a study of the way publication networks and systems of promotion became central to the modernist mission, for it existed largely as a coterie of writers who spread their work to the public via specific magazines and limited book-length anthologies. In addition to the "catchy name" of "Les Imagistes," which profited from the cultural cachet of its French spelling, Materer argues that the success of imagism also stemmed from the deliberate mystery of the core principle of the "'Doctrine of the Image,' which the imagists had not 'committed to writing' and which 'did not concern the public' . . . Whether this obscurity was calculated to intrigue, or whether it was just a product of Pound's natural ability to mystify, these product descriptions were brilliantly successful" (18). Pound had come up with the eye-catching name, written one of the quintessential manifestoes—"A Few Don'ts by an Imagist"—publicized the movement and its writers in various magazines of the period—in particular *Poetry* and *The Egoist*, and edited *Des*



*Imagistes*, the book-length anthology of Imagist verse first published in the magazine *The Glebe* and then as a stand-alone book.

Lowell first discovered the principles of the movement in the manifestoes published in the newly established *Poetry* magazine. Fascinated, she traveled to London to visit Pound and the other Imagists twice. Pound rewarded her by including one of her poems in his anthology of the movement *Des Imagistes*. But then something happened. Following the disappointing sales of *Des Imagistes* Pound was separated from the other Imagists. He went on to form the school of Vorticism and publish *Blast!* while the others would publish three additional Imagist anthologies without Pound. Somehow, it would seem that Lowell, a late comer to the movement, had become the new leader of the group. By many scholarly accounts—for example, those of Kenner, Watson, and Materer—Lowell, though a prodigious and popular author in the teens and twenties, was a lesser poet who must have imperiously elbowed her way into Pound’s movement and wrested it away from him in order to edit and publish three successive and more financially successful volumes. In essence, she stole the brand.

And it is true, Lowell did distribute these additional books, and they were much more successful; but the dominant narrative of this process is unkind to her than it ought to be. This narrative is probably rooted in Pound’s letters during the period. In a letter from 1915, Pound tells Harriet Monroe—editor of *Poetry* magazine—that Lowell “comes over here, gets kudos out of association. She returns and wants to weaken the whole use of the term imagist by making it mean *any* writing of vers libre” (48). Further, he notes that Lowell’s intent “to turn Imagism into a democratic beer-garden” would have “undone what little good I had managed to do by setting up a critical standard” (48).

Though the “beer garden” quote finds its way into many writings on the schism between Lowell and Pound, it is most often presented as simply a sharp little aphorism—for which Pound was well known—rather than a concise statement of the central editorial and aesthetic conflict between the two figures. Rather, sensational retellings of the events surrounding Lowell’s Imagist high-jacking abound. Pound’s side of the story became the dominant one, and critic Hugh Kenner repeats it with flair in *The Pound Era*, in which Lowell is a foolish aristocrat who capriciously decided she was a poet. According to Kenner, following the Imagist issue of *Poetry*, Lowell travelled

twice from Massachusetts to the Imagist headquarters in London crossing like a big blue wave or like Daisy Miller, in 1913 to join the movement and in 1914 (with maroon-clad chauffeur and matching auto) to appropriate it since she had not been properly accepted. Democracy in the arts was her credo, with herself as chief democrat. The Aldingtons, Richard and H. D. were soon at her feet. . . . It had been a model campaign. She had ended his reign, and neatly separated him, she thought, from everyone who mattered. (292)

Kenner’s overall tone in the book is parodic, and he presents most figures with an air of mocking derision, but in this section Lowell faces the brunt of it, and she is reduced to a foppish caricature. Furthermore, he is sure to include Witter Bynner’s insulting name for the overweight Lowell—the “hippopoetess”—for no reason whatsoever, at least, that is, for no academic reason.

Kenner’s glib narrative would be often repeated in contemporary criticism. For instance, in the 1996 essay “Make It Sell! Ezra Pound Advertises Modernism,” Timothy Materer claims that Lowell, whom he categorizes unreservedly as a “mediocre” poet, “used her wealth and literary connections to publish further imagist anthologies and take over leadership of the movement” from Pound, who could not match her economic superiority. Further, “Pound dropped the term imagism and dubbed Lowell’s movement

‘Amygism,’ rudely dismissing her as a ‘hippopoetess.’ He of course refused to contribute to Lowell’s proposed second ‘imagiste’ anthology” (19). We might note the use of “Amygism,” another of Pound’s most-cited comments about Lowell, and one of the most repeated facts of Lowell’s literary career. Like “hippo-poetess,” the term is used ubiquitously—for example, both titles figure prominently in Lowell’s Wikipedia page—but “Amygism” does illuminate the central issue in the falling out between the two figures, while the repetition of the fat joke is simply unnecessary, even if used to remonstrate Pound’s impoliteness. For, though acknowledging the rudeness of the epithet, he still keeps it in the discourse. Finally, for Materer, it seems a foregone conclusion that Pound would not contribute to the new volume.

While brief descriptions of the struggle for Imagism often unfavorably portray Lowell, longer, more novelistic, interpretations of the event present her ambivalently at best. For instance, Steven Watson delves deeper into the struggle of imagism focusing on the “dinner wars” of 1913 and 1914. In this period Lowell visited London twice, as Kenner noted, meeting with Pound and the other Imagists through a series of dinner parties. The most dramatic of these meetings was a July 1914 dinner Lowell hosted at a posh restaurant attended by Lowell and her partner Ada Dwyer Russell, Pound and his wife Dorothy, H. D. and Richard Aldington, Ford Maddox Hueffer and his wife Elsie, F. S. Flint, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, John Gould Fletcher, John Cournos, and Allen Upward. According to Watson, Upward, giving a brief speech, read from Lowell’s only poem included in *Des Imagistes*: “In a Garden,” in which a nude woman bathing in a garden by moonlight is the first-person speaker. Upward took the opportunity to turn the reading into a joke at Lowell’s expense, in which he imagined Lowell as the bather, alluding

insultingly to her weight. Following this, “Pound stole out to an adjoining room and returned with a large tin bathtub on his head. He deposited it before Amy Lowell, brushed his disheveled auburn hair from his forehead, and made a formal announcement: Les Imagist would be succeeded by a new school of poetry, Les Nagistes, with this tub as its symbol. Perhaps Lowell, its inaugurating poet, should demonstrate her whiteness by bathing in it. During the laughter Lowell sat stiffly” (203). Lowell left the dinner humiliated, vowing to wrest Imagism from her newly foresworn enemy. Of course, the tale makes narrative sense in providing Lowell the motivation to steal the movement from Pound, if only to spite him.

Watson’s account is by no means the only narrative of this moment; in fact, Lowell biographer Carl Rollyson devotes an entire chapter to various narratives of this dinner in his book *Amy Lowell among Her Contemporaries*, examining the numerous retellings of the story and focusing on the differences between them—from the miniscule to the fundamental. Indeed, in some narratives all the other attendees sit in uncomfortable silence during Pound’s tub joke, in others Pound wears a pan on his head and makes jokes unrelated to Lowell, and in still others this scene does not occur at all. In the end, Rollyson can only conclude that “The truth is that no account of the July 17, 1914 dinner is entirely satisfactory” (36). Unfortunately, we will never get to the absolute truth of what happened at the dinner, but we can uncover what this sensational story obscures.

Often lost in this tale of the schism between Pound and Lowell is the fact that several other authors were involved—H. D., Richard Aldington, F. S. Flint, D. H. Lawrence, and John Gould Fletcher all agreed to Lowell’s proposal to publish another volume of the Imagist anthology. Pound was the lone holdout. Further, in many of these

narratives, Pound is an embattled victim and Lowell a wealthy seducer, and, while it is true that Lowell was rich, anyone familiar with history of the period knows that Pound was far too aggressive to be a merely passive victim. Indeed, if the other Imagist poets were seduced by Lowell, it was in part because they were weary of Pound's tyranny. Watson notes of that summer: "Pound's position within this group was as embattled as his health (his hacking cough prompted some to speculate that tuberculosis was attacking his brain), for Pound's always-volatile alliances were especially conflict ridden that summer. He was quarreling with Ford and Fletcher, and H. D. and Aldington felt betrayed by the Vorticist alliance" (202). Even Kenner notes that Lowell offered the others "freedom from the decisions of a tiresome man who supposed that impersonal standards were accessible to his judgment" (292). Jayne Marek, in an article meant to recast Lowell's role in the Imagism a bit more positively, argues that when Lowell suggested another edition of the anthology in her 1914 visit to London, all the poets, save Pound, agreed, and, even as the project progressed despite Pound's attempts at subversion, "Lowell made sure to invite Pound to contribute, despite the other imagists' growing impatience with Pound's autocratic manner" (156). Carl Rollyson also argues that the other poets preferred Lowell's manner to Pound's, particularly Aldington and Lawrence, for whom "her encouragement was such a relief from the dictatorial, prescriptive Pound" (17).

Despite this profusion of stories, perhaps there is another alternative: maybe the relationship between Pound and Lowell was not actually so intensely conflicted. In his preface to *Modern American Poetry* in 1921, in a section devoted to "The Imagists," Untermeyer summarizes the events with no dramatization: "Ezra Pound was the first to

gather the insurgents into a definite group. During the winter of 1913, he collected a number of poems illustrating the Imagist point of view and had them printed in a volume: *Des Imagistes* (1914). A little later Pound withdrew from the clan. The rather odd assortment of writers began to disintegrate and Lowell, then in England, brought the best of the younger members together in three yearly anthologies (*Some Imagist Poets*)” (xxxvii-xxxviii). In Untermeyer’s instructional tone, the events seem entirely banal. According to Untermeyer, nothing happened, really. But perhaps the truth lies somewhere in the middle. In an elegiac essay on Lowell, Harriet Monroe describes the history of Imagism in a way that both acknowledges and downplays the conflict between Lowell and Pound: “It was during the early summer of 1913 that she went to England, met Ezra Pound and the other imagists, and dined and wined and motored them with a lavishness unheard of among poets. The acquaintance led to pleasant friendships with Fletcher, H. D. and Aldington, and to a pleasant enmity with Ezra Pound—for two such dominant personalities could not get on in the same boat” (211). Monroe seems to be going against current common knowledge that the two hated each other intensely; rather, they have for one another a “pleasant enmity.” Of course, we could imagine that Monroe is simply being diplomatic in her retelling, but the lack of sensationalism is rather compelling. And we must note that if anyone would know the reality of this relationship it would be her—she corresponded with both of them frequently. Furthermore, for both Pound and Lowell, having a foil that one could always vilify could have been relatively productive for both of their careers in contemporary literature. As Bradford argues: “Lowell and Pound’s infamous clash of wills provides each of them with an easily demarcated Other against whom they define themselves” (68). In any case, more

important in literary history—but certainly less sensational—are the ideological roots of their antagonism perhaps best demonstrated by the vastly different methods they each employed in editing their respective Imagist anthologies.

### Highbrow Anthologies

An anthology is, at its simplest, a collection of works by different authors in one book. But, of course, the implications of editing any such volume extend well beyond this brief definition. For those of us who teach from contemporary academic anthologies, we surely recognize the complex relationship between these books and hierarchical notions of canonicity. In his essay “American Poetry Anthologies,” Alan Golding notes that the initial impulse behind anthologies—dating back to their nascence—is preservation. That is, editors collect and arrange literary pieces into an anthology for posterity so that they simply will not be lost to time. While Golding is working from a contemporary academic perspective, poets and editors working in the modernist period were similarly aware of the role of the anthology in relation to conservation. For example, in 1928, poets Robert Graves and Laura Riding, writing as literary critics, discuss the function of editorial collections in *A Pamphlet against Anthologies*. According to Graves and Riding, the “true anthology” can be one of only two types: “First, a strictly non-professional, non-purposive collection, such as the poet’s or amateur’s scrapbook,” and, “[s]econd, the rescue anthology” that sought to collect work for posterity (24). The “rescue anthology” came about in “the days before cheap books [and] were printed was justified as a secure portfolio for short poems that might otherwise have been lost” (11). Thus, for Graves and Riding, the true anthology is one without any kind of professional intent but is motivated

by a noble drive to save poems that would otherwise be lost to personal or collective memory.

But in choosing the texts to save, editors must also decide what texts are worth saving. Thus, each anthology is—even a completely personal “non-professional, non-purposive” one—in its own way, an assertion of a canon, and volumes in discourse with each other often deploy competing claims. Indeed, in each successive generation tastes and styles change so that the canon represented in each anthology changes as well, for, as Golding notes in his survey of the changing canon of English literature seen through popular anthologies from different periods, “Evidently excellence *is* historical, *not* transhistorical” (author’s emphasis 283). According to Golding, however, the inherent goal of poetry anthologies changed in the twentieth century: “Whereas nineteenth-century anthologies tended to reflect and even celebrate popular taste, the modernist anthologies grammatically deviated from it” (296). For Golding, “Most modern anthologists were revisionists. Pound, Lowell, Kreymsbourg, Monroe, Aiken: all used their anthologies to propose a canon written in defiance of inherited poetic norms” (296). Jeremy Braddock calls such modernist collections that aim not to suggest a canonical narrative based on popularity but to reshape the narrative of literary value “interventionist” anthologies. Today, the anthologies that we acknowledge were important in the period—for instance, the Imagist anthologies—generally fall at least loosely into the interventionist category for their explicit challenges to contemporary modes and mores.

Thus, such “interventionist” anthologies constituted, for Aaron Jaffe, a system of “promotional networking” in which movements, groups, or individuals used the genre in order to assert their own estimations of literary value. According to Jaffe, the “formal



qualities of these anthologies embedded individual authors in propaganda about new literary brand names, schools, movements, generations, and periods” (138). Similarly, Braddock argues that anthologies—as part of a modernist system of collection in both visual and literary arts—worked to “determine the constituents of the movement, group or field, in gestures that were by turns restrictive (because of the constitutive selectivity and exclusions of a given collection) and synthetic and enabling (where the collection’s disparate pieces represent a new, hitherto unimagined form of sociability and set of affiliations)” (3). Anthologies worked by a process of aggregation but also through exclusion in order to create a canon for either a specific movement or a discrete temporal period.

In a review of one interventionist anthology, *Modern American Poets* edited by poet Conrad Aiken, Virgil Geddes discusses the book and the form in general. He begins with a discussion of what such anthologies are meant to do in the culture:

The very word ‘anthology’ suggests finality. The number of collections of poems of the last decade already issued seems to indicate very definite opinions among critics as to who and what is important, and more or less permanent, in the huge accumulation of our poetry. Usually there are the looked-for poets, together with their famous poems. Sometimes the selection of poems differs, yet often only enough to give the impression that the last anthology is simply a working-over of previous ones with changes made wherever the editor has differed from his contemporaries in matters of preference and taste. A general unanimity of opinion on most poems, however, seems to predominate over digressions of taste, and the contents bear familiar titles. Yet the absence of some familiars and the presence of new poets have sufficient conspicuousness in most cases to challenge discussion. (53)

As Geddes points out, the anthology, on a conceptual level, is typically thought of as a way to assert notions of cultural ascendancy among authors in a given period and to curate the high points of each of those writer’s works. But, according to Geddes, the sheer number of these books published in the period would seem to run counter to the

task of narrowing that canon-building implies. For Geddes, these anthologies are less about asserting a central group of authors, than in excising particular authors from an already-established canon. In this way, a reader like Geddes approaches a collection not for who is included, but for who is ignored—and why. Similarly, Jaffe notes: “although the new anthologies were particularly good at finding some literary figures, they were even better at losing others” (138).

Through this process of exclusion and relational promotion, modernist anthologies were often also reflective of the overall taste—perhaps even “genius”—of the editor. Braddock notes that “[t]he aesthetic dimensions of the modernist collection also indicated a belief in the virtue of maintaining a connection to the idiosyncratic subjectivity of the collector who had assembled them” (3). In this sense, the modernist anthology is seeks just as much to establish the cultural authority of the editor himself as it does to envision a canon. While Braddock argues that “the privately assembled, but publicly exhibited, art collection and the interventionist literary anthology” edited by individual editors and collectors is at the heart of modernism, Jaffe is more critical of the underlying effects of the exclusive tendencies modernist anthologies: “the formal logic of new poetry anthologies helped institute a modernist logic of literary networking by placing the representative (male) modernist (that is, the singular artist, the solitary genius) *among* groups of putative subordinates” (138). Specifically, Jaffe wonders “why did so many anthologized women get lost in this mode of presentation that lies at the very core of the lionization narratives of a number of their male counterparts?” (139). While the practices of institutionalized misogyny that wrote women authors and editors out of the canon are too numerous to detail here, we can focus for a moment on one particular

example in which an anthology series was edited in turn by both a man and a woman: the Imagist anthologies.

### Editing the Imagist Anthologies

As we have seen above, the dramatized story of Lowell's Imagist coup following a slight by Pound actually does nothing to instruct contemporary readers on the significance of poetry in the period, nor does it demonstrate the workings of promotional systems that drove anthology culture. In fact, the narrative obscures the actual editorial conflict between Pound and Lowell: Pound wanted absolute control over the movement, while Lowell aimed to give each poet equal authority. However, I would argue that these differences—between democratic and hierarchical versions of literary culture—represent a foundational conflict in modernism. Fortunately, we can still recover the underlying theoretical differences between Pound and Lowell—and their implications—if we return to their respective anthologies themselves to find the conceptual root of their conflict.

In compiling the first edition, Pound selected the contributors, chose from their poems, and even revised some of the texts to reflect his ideas of what an Imagist poem ought to do. Pound's work here corresponds to our perception of him as an impresario, taste-maker, and engine driving the whole culture of modernism. In terms of contributors, Pound's volume includes the central group of imagists—H. D., Richard Aldington, John Gould Fletcher, and F. S. Flint—as well as several other authors who might seem unexpected today—William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, and Ford Maddox Hueffer, to name a few—totaling eleven contributors. The volume does not include a preface, introduction, or manifesto, but ends with a “Documents” section of a few seemingly unrelated pieces of verse.

Lowell's anthology, on the other hand, does include a preface and is organized in a completely different manner. The unsigned preface—written by Aldington with edits by Lowell—outlines a detailed, six-point explanation of the poetic theory behind Imagism. In addition, it highlights the collective nature of the volume while softening the exclusivity of the group: “We wish it to be clearly understood that we do not represent an exclusive artistic sect; we publish our work together because of mutual artistic sympathy, and we propose to bring out our cooperative volume each year for a short term of years, until we have made a place for ourselves and our principles such as we desire” (iix). In this sense, the authors claim that this is not actually an “artistic sect” or movement, but a collective of authors. To further differentiate this volume from the earlier, the preface reads:

In this new book we have followed a slightly different arrangement to that of the former anthology. Instead of an arbitrary selection by an editor, each poet has been permitted to represent himself by the work he considers his best, the only stipulation being that it should not yet have appeared in book form. A sort of informal committee — consisting of more than half the authors here represented — have arranged the book and decided what should be printed and what omitted, but, as a general rule, the poets have been allowed absolute freedom in this direction, limitations of space only being imposed upon them. Also, to avoid any appearance of precedence, they have been put in alphabetical order” (v-vi).

Unlike Pound, who chose the authors, poems, and arrangement in the volume, *Some Imagist Poets* is driven by individual selection and contribution and comes across as a collaboration.

Generally, critics have favored Pound's anthology and almost completely ignored Lowell's later volume. Of course, the primary reason for this would be simply because *Des Imagistes* was the first anthology, and, in that sense, it was a landmark in the literary scene as the first anthology for a modernist movement. But critics also tend to praise

Pound's anthology while deriding Lowell's in terms of overall quality. For instance, John Nichols argues that the lack of prefatory material and confusing "Documents" section in Pound's *Des Imagistes* was an intentionally experimental model of organization. For Nichols, *Des Imagistes* "abjure[s] explicit explanatory material such as prefaces and introductions" in order to better express "the complexities of readers' encounters with modernist poetry's stylistic innovations and startling subject matter; moreover, the collections increasingly encourage readers to develop and adjust their strategies of reading to keep up with current literary experimentation" (173, 174). In essence, Nichols argues that Pound seeks to invent—to use the language of the essay's title—a new "architecture of reading," a new modernist and exploratory way to interact with the text. By contrast, he finds that "Lowell's anthology offered readers a poetic movement already explicitly organized for them," while Pound's book gave "only implicit guidance through the careful selection and thematic arrangement of poems" (178). Nichols is certain, then, that Lowell's approach is much less modernist and innovative than Pound's treatment. That is, Nichols equates innovation with difficulty. But of course we know now that even traditional forms can be modernist—take for instance the sonnet form, with a rich history full of many shockingly modern images in the period. And, indeed, *Des Imagistes* is disconcerting and might leave even scholars of modernist poetry slightly puzzled. However, in arguing that Pound is inventing a new way of reading, Nichols works very hard to make the claim cohere while the much more straightforward hypothesis is that Pound might simply not be as good at editing an anthology as he was at promoting the movement in magazines. Further, if we are looking for a truly innovative editorial

process, would not Lowell's unheard-of collective approach be much more radical than Pound's traditional editorial role?

Lowell was meticulously devoted to representing her anthologies as collective labors. In fact, though I have been referring to Lowell as the editor of the volume, she herself adamantly denied such a title. Following a notice of the book in *Poetry* that cited her as the editor, Lowell wrote a letter to the journal—published in the April 1915 issue—stating: “I am not the editor of that volume. There is no editor, as is carefully stated in the preface. Each poet was the arbiter of his own verses, and the poets have been put alphabetically in order that no possible sort of preference might be suggested. My only function has been to see the volume through the press, as being the one of the group nearest the publishers” (52). In part, this assertion is to assuage the now tense relationship between Lowell and Pound—to politely assert that she did not steal the movement from Pound. But more than that, this is the editorial principle of her volumes. More than just collectivizing the editorial work, she also divided the proceeds equally among all the contributors, and her concession of the title downplays the amount of work that she put into the volume.

And her work paid off; as Braddock, Jaffe, Materer, and Nichols mention in passing, Lowell's volumes—each of them—were more successful than *Des Imagistes*. Braddock notes: “As is well known, three subsequent anthologies compiled and promoted by the commercially savvy Amy Lowell brought imagism a financial success” heretofore unseen (20). But is this so well known? While we have read numerous accounts of Pound's genius for marketing and promoting new forms of poetry, there are slim accounts of Lowell's similar successes. In exact terms, *Des Imagistes* sold only a few

hundred copies while the 1915 issue of *Some Imagist Poets* sold over two thousand and went through four printings (Fletcher 190-91). Indeed, Lowell was such an accomplished promoter that an ireful T. S. Eliot once referred to her as “the demon saleswoman of poetry” (qtd. in “Let Us Shout It” xv). While Eliot most likely meant to deride her as a shameless self-promoter, this intended pejorative is, today, a badge of honor in a field where the use of marketing and promotion are more increasingly valued. Further, we might note that, in a little-noted moment of wheeling and dealing, when approaching the publisher Houghton Mifflin to take on the *Some Imagist Poets* brand, Lowell also guided the publishing house to start a “New Poetry Series,” for which friend and fellow Imagist poet John Gould Fletcher’s *Irradiations* would be the first issue (Marek 156-57 also Damon 279, Gould 159). Bear in mind, Lowell had Fletcher’s manuscript on hand for just such an opportunity, hardly the actions of an unscrupulously mercenary self-promoter. Indeed, the commercial success of these books brought consistent dividends to the poet contributors even into the twenties—as D. H. Lawrence wrote in thank you note to Lowell: “Those Imagiste books seem to blossom into gold like a monthly rose” (qtd. in Moore 91).

And while Lowell’s success may have irritated Pound, it was her radical democratization of the movement that infuriated him the most. Pound wanted “the name ‘Imagisme’ to retain some sort of meaning. It stands, or I should like it to stand for hard light, clear edges, I cannot trust any democratized committee to maintain that standard” (qtd. in Bradshaw 68). But the popular success was in fact the central criticism of “Amygism” according to Pound. Further, he notes that Lowell’s intent “to turn Imagism into a democratic beer-garden” would have “undone what little good I had managed to do

by setting up a critical standard” (48). Writing to Lowell in 1917, Pound notes more bluntly that “There is no democracy in the arts” (122). Thus, the salacious stories of Lowell, Pound, and the “dinner wars” in reality only serve, first, to conceal the immense popularity and success of Lowell—who could hardly fit into a patriarchal canon—and, second, to obscure the blurry border between elitist high culture and popular low entertainment in the modernist period.

In this sense, it was Lowell’s facility with promoting the later imagist volumes that for the most part contributed to their success. More than simply seducing the other Imagists away from Pound, she had to find a publisher, organize manuscripts, maintain communication with the other poets, make crucial decisions about the brand, divide up and distribute the proceeds, and promote the volumes. Pound’s volume was published by Harold Monroe’s Poetry Bookshop in England—which had previously published the enormously successful *Georgian Poetry* series—and Charles and Albert Boni in the United States (at the time operating as part of the popular Greenwich Village Bookshop, Albert Boni would later join forces years later with Horace Liveright to form Boni and Liveright, the quintessential modernist publishing house). Lowell, on the other hand, secured the much larger publisher and distributor Houghton Mifflin.<sup>5</sup> This larger publishing house was better able to distribute and promote the volumes of the group, which certainly contributed to their success. Meanwhile, Lowell gave lectures and interviews on the state of modern poetry—asserting the irrelevance of conventional verse forms and advocated vers libre broadly and Imagism in particular. Though Lowell’s

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<sup>5</sup> She settled on Houghton Mifflin after failing to secure Macmillan, the press that had issued her popular 1914 volume of poetry, because, in part, of their reticence to work with a movement that had been associated with Ezra Pound, since he had previously threatened to sue the company for advertising Lowell, in notices of her *Sword Blades and Poppy Seeds*, as “the foremost member of the ‘Imagistes’” (Marek 156).



anthologies certainly carried the highbrow cultural significance of the Imagist school, her tactics often employed promotional techniques of popular culture. In addition, her aim to create a vast readership for new poetry made her what we might think of as a middlebrow modernist.

### Middlebrow Anthologies

While anthologies have been an important part of our literary history for centuries, advancements in printing and cheaper costs in paper allowed the books to flourish in the modernist period in heretofore unseen numbers. Indeed, though we acknowledge the importance of a handful of anthologies from the period, for example the Imagist volumes, modernist scholars have, for the most part, forgotten the ubiquity of the genre. And, in truth, only a small percentage of anthologies in the period were highbrow interventionist anthologies like *Des Imagistes*. In some ways, the genre was particularly suited for a middlebrow audience: aspirational readers who desired to be familiar with the high art of modern poetry but did not have the time to scour little magazines and single-author volumes in ever-increasing numbers. And the most successful anthologies—for example, Untermeyer's *Modern American* and *Modern British* poetry series and Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson's *The New Poetry*—did focus on this market. They also cornered the burgeoning market for literature textbooks. And though they might be less esteemed today, middlebrow anthologies were instrumental in establishing the careers of many poets and editors. Perhaps the best example is W. S. Braithwaite's immensely popular *Anthology of Magazine Verse and Yearbook of American Poetry*, published annually from 1913 through the 1920s. The mission of these volumes was to curate the best poetry published in little magazines of the period and to save readers time in

surveying the vast expanses of new poetry in a literary field glutted with poetry journals. This was not the only role of the anthology, however. Each edition also contained an index of bibliographic information on all poems published in magazines each year and provided a list of magazines accepting contributions of poetry. Perhaps this led to the anthology's early success; it served as a tool for aspiring authors to find entry points into the field of literature in the period. At the height of the series' popularity, Braithwaite wielded immense power in culture; Kenny J. Williams calls him a "king-maker" (qtd. in Hutchinson (351). George Hutchinson also notes that Carl Sandburg and Alice Corbin Henderson even plotted to mutiny against his authority by deliberately excluding their work from his volumes (351). In this sense, Braithwaite's now-forgotten volumes were actually as important—if not more—than Pound's *Des Imagistes*. Why then have we forgotten them? These middlebrow books have fallen into obscurity for much the same reason that Lowell's career faded: they were popular, sold well, and were intended for a wide audience. In this section, I will briefly outline the importance of these forgotten books—focusing in particular on textbooks that became popular to general readers—and synthesize the critical discourses that divested them of their value because of their financial success and broad readership.

In addition to their monetary success, middlebrow anthologies actually have a continued impact on literature as an academic discipline, for editors like Untermeyer and Monroe specifically designed and organized their anthologies for use in secondary and postsecondary education. According to Braddock, "the more expressly canon-defining modernist anthologies," for which he uses Untermeyer's *Modern Poetry* series, "augur the Norton and Longman institutions" (16). Thus, though it might seem antagonistic to

our ideals of the period as radical and experimental, it was actually in the modernist period that the today's anthology textbooks—the Norton, Longman, or Bedford—were born. Importantly, anthology editors like Untermeyer, Monroe, and Margeurite Wilkinson ushered in the academic anthology that dominates university studies today, and it was these volumes that were the most popular during the period. Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson's editions of *The New Poetry: An Anthology* began with a preface explaining what "the new poetry" was, what it included, and why it was poetry. Perhaps an even better example would be Margeurite Wilkinson's *New Voices in Contemporary Poetry* which was not structured around a canon but divided into chapters that focused on a feature of contemporary poetry. For instance, the 1919 volume includes chapters on "The Pattern of the Poem," "Organic Rhythm," and "Images and Symbols," to name a few. Each chapter would begin with an essay on each of these aspects and then concluded with an arrangement of several poems representative of this feature. In this sense, the increasing complexity and self-consciousness of literary styles and movements in the modernist period, requiring clear explanations for the fast-changing field, easily prefigured some of the more didactic uses of the anthology today.

While Monroe and Henderson and Wilkinson were certainly significant forces in crafting the educational anthology, Untermeyer was in many ways the premier figure in the field. Untermeyer's 1919 *Modern American Poetry* was the first textbook for the now-venerable educational publisher Harcourt (Morris 5). Indeed, Graves and Riding offer Untermeyer as an exemplar figure: "the chief modern American anthologist" (54). While phrased as praise, the compliment is actually a criticism of Untermeyer's editing of anthologies as presenting popular consensus—for being essentially a stock trader in

literary currency. Similarly, contemporary critic Daniel Göske argues that these modern poetry anthologies were special for two reasons of historical and national categorization: “Untermeyer’s project covered the period from, roughly, 1870 to the present. More importantly, he opted for two separate, unilateral anthologies of *Modern American* and *Modern British Poetry* in English along national lines. Untermeyer’s strategy was taken up by many American publishers of one-volume anthologies in the twenties” (155). Indeed, this essentially credits Untermeyer with creating the modern educational literary anthology. And the volumes do look quite a bit similar to today’s *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*; for instance, the second edition of *Modern American Poetry* (1921) has prefatory comments on periods and movements, authors organized in order of age, and biographical headnotes to each author—all features of the contemporary *Norton*.

These anthologies were successful not just in academia; as Craig Abbott points out, though these anthologies “had been prepared with schools and colleges also in mind,” they “enjoyed great popularity with the general public” (212). But, as I noted above in regards to anxieties over the growing middlebrow readership, popularity was a double-edged sword, and these successful, educational anthologies were often suspect for many literati. For example, in a 1921 *Poetry* magazine evaluation of one of Untermeyer’s *Modern Poetry* editions, in a combined review with no less than eight other anthologies, Monroe worries that Untermeyer’s anthology might seek an audience “too eager for pre-digested food, too eager to lean upon the opinions of editors and publishers. Perhaps this is inevitable—in these crowded days no one can read everything, even in one specialty. But the public should choose its anthologies carefully, avoiding those whose motives are frankly commercial” (“Recent Anthologies” 107). Indeed, the fact that Monroe must

review nine anthologies at once suggests that modernist literary culture was glutted with the books. Monroe notes: “The above list is [only] a slight indication of the present rush of anthologies; and incidentally it is proof of a public for modern poetry” (“Recent Anthologies” 106-107). On one level, the sheer numerousness of anthologies suggests the growing audience of poetry, but it also suggests the complicated relationship of the “high” art of poetry with the “low” concerns of book sales.

Graves and Riding take up the economics of anthologies too, but in an even more dramatic fashion. Worst, for the two, are the books they critically refer to as the “trade anthology” which “treats poetry as a commodity destined for instructional, narcotic, patriotic, religious, humorous and other household uses” (26). The trade anthology is a popular book created by and proliferated through mass culture. Graves and Riding outline the ideal editor of an editor of such a volume as eminently business-minded:

The ideal anthologist is a priest of Poetry to the people, ready to give them any acceptable god. He must be free from prejudice of his own but have a steady intuition of the sort of poems that other people will like from year to year. He must, in fact, to be free from prejudice, actually dis-like poetry. He must be merely a barometer of fashion: if to-day he compiles so authoritative an anthology of ancient or contemporary or mixed verse, he must be ready to recast it tomorrow. He will have to be an expert in literary booms. He will have to know, for instance, the exact upward popularity-curve of Donne, Marvell, Shelton, Blake, Clare and others and the exact downward curve of Burns, Byron, Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne, as revealed by an exhaustive historical chart of previous booms and depressions in poets. (51)

Thus, the preeminent anthologist is not particularly literary, but is devoted to poems and poets as one would be interested in investment futures. In this sense, the editor of the modern trade anthology is not looking for the best poetry but the texts which have the most promise of popular appeal and monetary success.

Thus, we have two tidy categories into which we could seemingly divide all modernist anthologies: a highbrow, interventionist volume—often devoted to a particular movement or group—which asserts which texts and authors are worth reading, versus a middlebrow educational survey of the field of contemporary poetry complete with an introduction that poses an already established canon for the period. The former sells hardly at all but wields great cultural capital, and the latter is quite lucrative yet is easily forgotten. In either case, critics generally think of anthologies as perhaps more representative of the critical genius of the editor of the volume—one central figure at the top of the literary hierarchy, be it Pound or Untermeyer—than accurately objective on the subject of literature of the period. While examples like Pound’s *Des Imagistes* or Untermeyer’s *Modern American Poetry* might fit rather easily into highbrow and middlebrow categories respectively, the orderly demarcation between the two is not always so clear. For instance, Untermeyer’s later “miscellany” anthology series *American Poetry* is published by a large-scale, middlebrow educational press, Harcourt, but utilizes Lowell’s experimental, coalitional editorial process.

*American Poetry 1922: A Miscellany*

The year after Untermeyer began publishing his educational trade anthology—the *Modern American Poetry* series, which was followed by *Modern British Poetry*—he started another, altogether different anthology. With a similar title, *American Poetry 1920: A Miscellany* was part of a series too, and Untermeyer intended to publish the volume biennially throughout the decade. Aside from its serial nature, the *Miscellany* is in almost every other way directly opposed to *Modern Poetry* in terms of editorial intent. For one, though he later acknowledges editing the volumes in his autobiography, he does

not admit to this anywhere in the volumes themselves—much as Lowell denied the label of editor in *Some Imagist Poets*. In the unsigned preface he writes: “each contributor has been his own editor. As such, he has chosen his own selections and determined the order in which they are to be printed” (v). Thus, like Lowell’s Imagist volumes, each section offers an arrangement of poems that the author deemed representative of the past two years of poetry. According to Braddock, the editorial strategy “figure[s] the anthology not as a *collection*, but rather as a *group exhibition*” (38). But while the miscellany borrows Lowell’s process of editing, the volume is otherwise not very much like Lowell’s Imagist collections: the book represents no single movement or style and contains both free-verse and conventional-form poems by very different authors—Lowell, Robert Frost, Vachel Lindsay, Sara Teasdale, and H. D. to name a few.

The miscellany lies somewhere between the highbrow aspirations of the Imagist volumes and the market concerns of Untermeyer’s educational, trade anthologies, making it a particularly middlebrow text. Yet, though we might imagine that a volume intended for broad consumption across different classes might be blandly apolitical, the volume is actually intrinsically subversive in its representation of sexuality and gender and its outright criticism of American politics. It might seem a bit surprising that this book offers such controversial poetry, for it was published not by an independent press, but by Harcourt Brace & Company, a successful publisher of popular literature—for instance, the house printed Pulitzer-Prize-winning novelist Sinclair Lewis’ *Babbitt*, a contemporary bestseller—as well as nonfiction and educational textbooks—the company also began Untermeyer’s influential *Modern Poetry* series. To put it rather simply, *American Poetry 1922* was meant for a relatively mainstream, middlebrow audience. Braddock calls the

volume a “reprisal anthology” that in its “desire to reassert the broad view of a national poetry . . . attempted to neutralize the interventionist mode of the anthology and to recapture the form for official culture” (38). Though the volume is interested in discussing American culture, the editorial strategy allows for intensely subversive content that endorses lesbianism as a spiritual resource, criticizes war memorials, condemns misogyny in poetry, and presents sexual liberation as an acceptable choice for women. In this sense, the editorial style that Lowell created in *Some Imagist Poets* here attains its fully subversive edge.

Indeed, Untermeyer is obviously borrowing from the editorial style that Lowell pioneered in the previous decade. In his 1939 autobiography—almost fifteen years after Lowell’s death, when her fame was in decline—he admits Lowell’s influence but downplays her contribution and claims quite another source for his conception of the series: “In 1920 some six of us American poets decided to start a biennial *Miscellany of American Poetry*. . . . Amy, having accomplished something similar with the Imagist group, volunteered to collaborate in the venture, and, though the actual editing fell on my shoulders, she almost succeeded in managing us” (120, 121). Despite his nod to Lowell, Untermeyer feels more comfortable citing a much different editorial forefather: “The plan was frankly imitative; it undertook to do for American readers what the collections of *Georgian Poetry* had done for the English public. The dissimilarities of temperament, range, and choice of subject were manifest. But the outstanding difference was this: *Georgian Poetry* had an editor, and the poems it contained reflected that editor’s highly personal taste” (120). Indeed, the prefaces to the volumes do position themselves against *Georgian Poets*, but the *Miscellany* seems to have very little in common with the British



series which was comprised entirely of conventional verse forms and only male authors. The only feature that these books do have in common is in their loose national character. Further, he almost certainly aspired to the immense financial and cultural success of Marsh's series. 1922 *Miscellany* represents American culture of the moment in a kind of snapshot, with each disparate contributor's voice representing a particular perspective, and many of the component selections are explicitly critical of normative social structures and institutions. In this sense, the coalitional editing process that Lowell pioneered in *Some Imagist Poets* reaches its pinnacle in *American Poetry, 1922*, where the radically democratic editorial style meets a socioeconomically diverse audience who might be more interested in social justice than the narrow elite of a truly highbrow audience.

#### Lowell in the *Miscellany*

Perhaps the most strikingly subversive suite is Amy Lowell's selection. Since Lowell was the eldest contributor to the volume, she begins the collection and, in fact, offers an arrangement that best expresses the collective ideal of the book. It begins with genealogical heritage of America in "Lilacs"; proceeds into a description of modernist rupture with history and religion in "The Swans"; moves into spiritual rejuvenation via a fully sexualized same-sex relationship in "Twenty-Four Hokku on a Modern Theme," "Prime," and "Vespers"; culminates in the ecstatic and idolatrous love of "In Excelsis"; and closes with a poem detailing the repressively gendered systems of poetic self-promotion in "La Ronde du Diable." The arrangement sets the tone for the whole book and, particularly in "La Ronde du Diable," gestures to the collective nature of the volume and the relational systems that govern modern poetry.

Given the title of the book, it is perhaps no surprise that the first poem in the collection—and the first poem in Lowell’s section—deals with Americanness. Lowell’s quintessential national poem “Lilacs” begins with a series of short lines—only one to three words in length. The first line is a single word: “Lilacs” (1). This line, immediately following and repeating the capitalized title at the top of the page, begins a tendency to repetition or reiteration throughout the poem; indeed, the first five lines of the poem—“Lilacs, / False blue, / White, / Purple, / Color of lilac,”—are repeated three times throughout the poem. The flowers of lilac bushes, of course, are the central images of the poem, but they are also the second-person subject of poem, or, to put it another way, the speaker is directly addressing the flowers themselves. These flowers are important to the speaker not just in terms of aesthetic appreciation, but also because they represent American people, in the sense that lilacs are not indigenous to North America but have been transplanted to the continent and have thrived. The speaker tells the flowers: “You have forgotten your Eastern origin, / The veiled women with eyes like panthers, / The swollen, aggressive turbans of jeweled pashas” (58-60). While the lines clearly offer an exoticized image of the Orient, the “Eastern origin” of the flowers connects to the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Puritan settlers who settled the land and thrived alongside the lilacs: “Paradoxical New England clerks, / Writing inventories in ledgers, reading the “Song of Solomon at night” (37-38). In a sense, both the religion of the Puritans and the genetics of the lilacs have their roots in Asia but have become intrinsically associated with New England.

One might argue that the “Americanness” expressed in the poem is a very specific one that elides all other histories besides the dominant category of white New

Englanders; though this is certainly true, we must recall the overall structure of the *Miscellany* is one that elaborates a broad cultural context through individual collaboration. That is, while Lowell's intent with the poem is to represent the American spirit, she is doing it in a deeply personal way. Jane Marcus finds that the poem "is about being transplanted to American soil and *taking*. It is about hybridity . . . [T]he poem invokes both a lesbian and a New England spinster's presence—'Lilacs' claims the right and the duty of the hybrid ( [. . .] here specifically Asian) to speak to America of itself, to sing of it with one's own voice" (187-88). Though we must always be cautious of reading too much biography into poetry, Marcus' reading is compelling. For Lowell is not representing the spirit of America as one universally defined solely by whiteness but, rather, is tracing her own biographical lineage. Lowell herself is descended from some of the oldest Puritan settlers in the colonies. In this way, she is presenting Americanness as defined not by a single culture, but by particular lived experiences of individual lives. In this way, vastly different narratives take place side by side—here, Lowell's puritanical heritage alongside the transplantation of the Asian flower.

Lowell also connects the style of the poem to a past literary tradition; the list of lilacs that begins the poem reoccurs throughout the poem and recalls the poetry of Walt Whitman. This example of exact repetition is used alongside the use of reiteration, slightly changing lines to shift or progress meaning, for instance: "You are everywhere, / You were everywhere" (21-22), or "Because my roots are in it, / Because my leaves are of it, / Because my flowers are for it, / Because it is my country," (103-06). This repetition with slight variation, the free-verse form of the poem, periodic long lines with relatively few enjambments, extensive lists of inhabitants of New England all allude to

Whitman, the so-called “father” of American poetry. This is reinforced by the final lines of the poem: “Lilac in me because I am New England, . . . / And I speak to it of itself / And sing of it with my own voice / Since it is mine” (102, 107-09). Using the thematics of Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” Lowell is attempting to sing the American spirit but instead of Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, she uses the blossoms of the lilac as her overarching poetic symbol. Thus, the poem borrows from a keystone American text and revises it to reflect a different point of view.

The following poem transitions from what it is to be American to what it means to be modern; in “Twenty-Four Hokku on a Modern Theme” Lowell offers a series of first-person haiku set in the modern US. The first-person speaker is, like Lowell, a poet: “In the ghostly dawn / I write new words for your ears— / Even now you sleep” (15-17). In this section, we see not only the first-person speaker but the second-person object of the poem, often addressed by the speaker but not described specifically—that is, not ascribed any gender, at least not explicitly: “A cloud of lilies, / Or else you walk before me. / Who could see clearly?” (66-68). In this section the beloved is figured as cluster of flowers. In this sense, we might think of the flower, traditionally a feminine symbol, as representing a female beloved: “Watching the iris, / The faint and fragile petals— / How am I worthy?” (39-41). The devotional tone of this section offers a glimpse into a quiet moment of affection. But more than just a sensual eroticism, the physical intimacy expressed in these lines indicates the modern theme at the heart of this poem is a woman poet writing domestic love lyrics to her female beloved.

Though “Lilacs” roots the American spirit in religious migration of the Puritans, “Swans,” the third poem in the sequence, effectively severs the bond with Christianity.

Set in and around a cathedral, the poem narrates the riotous iconoclasm of the Reformation. The poem begins serenely, however: "The swans float and float / Along the moat / Around the Bishop's garden," (1-3). These swans seem almost unchanging, eternal objects in this space, but time passes constantly here; above the garden, an elaborately constructed clock chimes the hours: "Two slim men of white bronze / Beat each with a hammer on the end of a rod / The hours of God. . . . Prime, Tierce, None" (9-10, 52). The bronze men do not toll the hours as we know them but the canonical hours of the Church, which organize society around specific daily liturgies. The unstoppable march of time leads to the moment when the people revolt against the systematic organization of the Church, as suddenly a torch-wielding mob appears: "Swarms of men with a thirst for room" (45). These men seek to annex the cathedral grounds, revolting against the ornate excess of the Church and its artifice. The swarm of men rob the cathedral, destroy relics, and even unearth the body of a former bishop in order to "break the mitre off of his head," and "toss for his ring" (63, 65). The marauders have no use for the elaborate bronze men nor the religious hours they toll: "Who wants to hear? No one. / We will melt them, and mold them, / And make them a stem / For a banner gorged with blood" (53-56). In the poem, the egalitarian impulses of the revolutionaries vanish beneath their seemingly unquenchable desire for violence. But the old order does not fare much better; the living bishop is entirely unaware of the danger: "Only the Bishop walks serene, / Pleased with his church, pleased with his house. / Pleased with the sound of the hammered bell. . . . He is old, and kind, and deaf, and blind" (75-76). Well-meaning but entirely self-satisfied, the ineffectual bishop feeds his swans with no realization of the imminent danger to himself and his cathedral. The speaker is clearly sympathetic to the

plight of the aged bishop and, it would seem, regrets the fall of the Church. But at the same time, the archaic language of the hours—prime, tierce, none—is so far from modernity that the words are almost impossible to understand. In addition, the overly ostentatious cathedral grounds do certainly imply an unfair distribution of wealth. In this sense, it is not so much the actual defeat of religion that the speaker laments but the loss of a source of spirituality that is not tied up with greedy expansionism.

Historically, canonical narratives of modernism offer spiritual stagnation as inescapable and romantic or sexual relationships impossible. Lowell, however, counters both of these. “In Excelsis,” the sixth poem in sequence, ultimately finds this spiritual resource refigured not in religion but in a fully sexualized non-normative love. The poem teems with images of Christian symbols and tones of ecstatic devotion. Indeed, this poem is less a love lyric than a devotional. For an example, look no further than the title, which alludes to the latin “Gloria in excelsis deo,” translated as “Glory to God in the highest.” Ironically, the title is key to understanding that the poem is not, in fact, about God, since God is elided from the title. The first stanza reads: “You—you— / Your shadow is sunlight on a plate of silver; / Your footsteps, the seeding-place of lilies; / Your hands moving, a chime of bells across a windless air” (1-4). The first-person speaker here is unidentified by gender as well, and we can again assume the same gender as Lowell herself. In this poem, however, the beloved is not presented in the third person but rather the second. In this sense, one level of mediation is taken away in this poem. The free-verse lines of the poem, mostly ending on terminal punctuation, coupled a poetics of intense repetition of “you” and “your” give the poem an almost frantic sense of emotional outpour—like a rapturous prayer. The metaphors for the beloved hold vaguely religious

connotations; for instance, silver is often known for supernatural purity in folklore, lilies are often associated with Christ, and, as is clear from previous poems in the sequence, the chiming of bells comes primarily from church bells tolling hours. Faderman argues that Lowell “manages, in the best Jacobean tradition, to combine metaphors of religious worship with metaphors of Eros, but unlike those early poets, in her poems Eros is central” (71). But these metaphors are not so straightforward; each of these lines creates a paradoxical metaphor. The beloved’s shadow—the blocking of light—is figured as sunshine on a silver plate—which would amplify the light into a glare. Thus, her shadow is brighter than sunlight. Similarly, the movement of her hands is like the tolling of bells in still air. That is, the typically soundless movement of hands rings like a loud, unobstructed sound.

But just as quickly as this paradoxical metaphor is presented, the speaker launches into a second and third metaphor for the way her beloved’s hands move in the following stanza. Indeed, it would seem that the image of bells chiming is not perfect, and the speaker tries again to describe her beloved’s hands: “The movement of your hands is the long, golden running of light from a rising sun; / It is the hopping of birds upon a garden-path” (5-6). First, it is as a beam of light from the dawning sun, then the quick movements of wild birds in a garden. Both images are lovely, but do not seem to literally describe the movement of hands. In this sense, the speaker wants to convey the idea of beauty in daily life; that is, these metaphors consist of objects and events of intense aesthetic experience that occur in the everyday life that they share. Further, the way the speaker gives numerous metaphors for the same object in quick succession indicates that one of these images alone would not be sufficient to describe the hands of her beloved.

Or, to put it another way, the concept of metaphor itself is unable to convey the reality of the beloved's movements and the intensity of the speaker's emotional response to them.

In the stanza that follows, the poem continues to describe the features of the beloved in strange yet striking metaphors. The speaker goes on to describe the quickness of her thoughts, fancies, and words. In this way, the poem reflects the blason tradition of poetry, cataloguing the features of the beloved in verse. But this poem lacks the orderliness of a blason; rather than moving in a spatial or thematic direction—from her feet to her head or from her body to her soul—the speaker of “In Excelsis” seems almost random in the features of the beloved on which she chooses to focus. Indeed, the progression of metaphors is scattershot and frantic, as though trying to convey everything that the speaker notices in quick succession.

After this initial series of metaphors, the poetic structure shifts a bit as the “I” first enters the lines. The speaker calls out: “I drink your lips, / I eat the whiteness of your hands and feet” (11-12). In one sense, eating and drinking the beloved works as another Christian allusion to the symbolic consumption of the Christ's body and blood in communion. But drinking the beloved's lips evokes an image of passionate kissing not the chaste devotion of a sacrament. The lines that follow, then, become even more eroticized: “My mouth is open, / As a new jar I am empty and open. / Like white water are you who fill the cup of my mouth” (13-15). The desirous want of her kissing mouth is figured as an empty jar waiting to be filled. But the speaker also describes her mouth as a cup needing to be filled—here another biblical allusion to the woman at the well, to whom Jesus offered a cup running over with the living water of divine love. But in “In Excelsis,” this cup is not a metaphor; it is the very mouth of the speaker moving against



the body of her lover, longing to be filled with the essence of her beloved. In this sense, the most heavily eroticized section of the poem also contains the most specific Christian allusion in the text. According to Faderman, in the poem the beloved “is the Eucharist, Christ, and the beloved of the Songs of Solomon, but she is especially the beautiful woman the speaker longs to devour sexually as well as to worship” (71). Lowell thus uses the Christian tradition to break down its own characteristic binary divide between flesh and soul so that she can sing a hymn of embodied spirituality—an ecstatic experience.

As this stanza closes, the close physical intimacy is exploded apart by figures of impossible distance. According to the speaker, the beloved is “far and sweet as the high clouds” (17). The speaker reaches out to her beloved, but she seems always just out of reach: “I dare reach to you, / I dare touch the rim of your brightness” (18-19). Just as the initial images of the movement of her beloved’s hands suggested a ceaseless and impossible search after just the right metaphor and the seemingly eternal thirst of the speaker’s passionate mouth in the second stanza, in this section there is an endless reaching out, if only to touch the outer expanses of her beloved. Tacit in the language is that the speaker will never actually gain the absolute intimacy that she seeks. The speaker endlessly reaches out for whatever intimacy she can have, calling out to her beloved: “I cry and shout, / For my throat is keen as a sword / Sharpened on a hone of ivory. / My throat sings the joy of my eyes” (20-23). But this impossible effort is not without its productive result: her desire to sing of the joy of “the rushing gladness” of love creates this poem (24). Indeed, only through successive insufficient images and religious symbols of the highest love imaginable can she convey some measure of the emotional experience of this love.

Indeed, the speaker seems almost shocked at her good fortune in finding this love: “How has the rainbow fallen upon my heart? / How have I snared the seas to lie in my fingers / And caught the sky to be a cover for my head” (25-27). But this is not just about her good fortune in finding a lover. This emotional experience changes the way she perceives and experiences the world, and makes the physical environment seem intimately related to her emotional life. Even more surprising than finding this love is to find it returned: “How have you come to dwell with me, / Compassing me with the four circles of your mystic lightness, / So that I say ‘Glory! Glory!’ and bow before you / As to a shrine” (28-31). Here the speaker makes explicit the domestic nature of their love— simply that they dwell together. In this way, the love she experiences makes all aspects of her daily life mystical and spiritually fulfilling. And here, too, the love becomes the entirely idolatrous. Yet while she is acutely aware of her blessings, in terms of the sustenance provided the physical world around her, these forces of nature are not things for which she can be merely grateful: “Do I think the air a condescension, / The earth a politeness, / Heaven a boon deserving thanks?” (33-35). Is there any way to thank the absolute necessities in our existence for their assistance? The speaker thinks not: “So you—air—earth—heaven— / I do not thank you, / I take you, / I live” (36-39). Just as she cannot thank the air for allowing her to breathe, she cannot thank her beloved for providing her with the life that she needs in order to survive. After noting the impossibility of closing this poem with a mere “thank you,” the poem ends with the lines: “And those things which I say in consequence / Are rubies mortised in a gate of stone” (40-41). In a sense, everything that the speaker says, and every word that comprises this

poem, is inconsequential. Ultimately, though, there are spots of brilliance in a larger, more quotidian structure.

In these three poems, we can see the overall argument of Lowell's grouping, and, in terms of arrangement of the component poems, it is one that proceeds in linear order: we, as modern Americans, come from a religion from which we have been irrevocably severed, and we long for a spiritual rejuvenation; according to Lowell, however, we can achieve a new kind of ecstatic spirituality through a deeply personal experience of love—both physical and emotional. This assertion is in itself revolutionary but is made even more so by the fact that “In Excelsis” is so explicitly sacrilegious in its representation of an idolatrous romantic relationship between two women. While the rupture from a past based on religious value is traumatic, it allows a new freedom for people, even those with non-normative sexualities, to find spiritual—and sexual—satisfaction in lived experience in a corporeal world.

The final poem in the sequence, “La Ronde du Diable,” departs dramatically from the romantic and sexual intensity of “In Excelsis” in favor of a wry description of the economy of modern poetry depicted as a children's game. The poem is divided into three stanzas, and the title of the poem as well as the first line of each stanza alludes to a children's folksong and game—“Here We Go ‘Round the Mulberry Bush”—where children dance in a circle while singing a song. Here the children dancing are “Little poet people” dancing around an ivy bush, a laurel tree, and a barberry bush in each of the three stanzas (3). In the first stanza, the poets surrounding the ivy bush snatch leaves. While there are more than enough leaves to go around, the poets are still “Trying to prevent one another from snatching ivy” and desire the others' leaves rather than the free ones: “But I

want your leaf, Brother, and you mine, / Therefore, of course, we push” (7-8). In the end, their struggle turns to childish fisticuffs.

The second stanza repeats and clarifies the enviousness of the “little poet people,” this time focusing on a group similarly vying against one another around a laurel tree. The speaker asks: “Do we want laurels for ourselves most, / Or most that no one else shall have any?” (10-11). Noting the speaker’s reference to the poets as “Sisters,” Cheryl Walker focuses on the fact that the poets in this second stanza, unlike those in the first stanza, are specifically women (18). For Walker, this is a statement of the particularly difficult position of women in the field of poetry: “The poem raises the question of whether a male tradition of poetic glory, epitomized by the laurels, is really appropriate to women . . . or whether it divides women from one another” (37). That is, women poets, as the minority working in the field, instead of supporting each other fight for what they see as limited possible success. In the stanza, the speaker notes: “We cannot stop to plait them into crowns / Or notice whether they become us. / We scarcely see the laurel-tree, / The crowd about us is all we see” (13-16). In the end, “We’ve none of us very much chance at a leaf” (19). Thus, in both the first and second stanza, the poets become so distracted by one another that they forget the actual object of their conflict: poetry. But, more than this, the actions of the boys and the girls in their respective stanzas is a comment on the way the literary scene somehow creates negatively stereotypically gendered behavior. That is, all the male poets resort to pushing and shoving and become violent bullies while the female poets are concerned more with how the laurels suit them and become vain attention-seekers. That is to say, in each of these situations, the result of

this struggle for dominance in the field is a reduction to tired notions of gendered personality flaws.

The speaker, however, is able to escape this in the third and final stanza, in which the central figure changes to a barberry bush. In this, the berries are the potential objects of the poets' striving, but "It's a bitter, blood-red fruit at best, / Which puckers the mouth and burns the heart" (21-22). What is this "aching meat" that tastes like "a mouthful of sorrow" (28, 30)? According to the speaker, "That's poetry" (29). Poetry itself is the harvest here, in the form of the bitter fruit of life's experience. Yet, unlike the objects distracting the poets in the first two stanzas, these berries are not so popular. Though there is an "Abundance of berries for all who will eat," "only one or two / Want the berries enough to strive / For more than he has, more than she" (27, 22-24). The speaker asserts that she is one of the only poets who is actually interested in poetry. Further, she encourages the struggling others to continue fighting: "The world is old and our century / Must be well along, and we've no time to waste . . . [L]eave the barberries be / For poor lost lunatics like me" (31-32, 34-35). In a sense, the childish and gendered machinations of most of the writers leaves more space for those with a genuine interest in the craft of poetry, who are, not inconsequentially, able to work together across gendered lines to create a volume like the *Miscellany*. In this way, rather than ending her section with a poem that closes her arrangement, making it an autonomous and internalized reading, the poem gestures out—away from her own personal perspective in this section and toward the suites of the other poets.

But though the closing of this poem and this opening section seeks to defuse a gender divide in modern poetry, Lowell's language still maintains gender categories.

That is, she still refers to the characters as brothers and sisters. In this sense, though she calls attention to the ways that the disparate contributors have worked together despite different approaches, gender is still emphatically present. Perhaps because Lowell knew that her suite would begin the collection, her selection embodies several themes that are crucial to the volume: individuality as key to understanding America as multiplicitous in “Lilacs”; the sense of the historical moment of 1922 as disconnected from the values and religion of the previous generation in “Swans”; the possibility for spiritual rejuvenation that new forms of relationships—here grounded in her experience of same-sex love—offer in “In Excelsis”; and the machinations of the networks and economy of modern poetry in “La Ronde du Diable.” The other selections in the book reflect these key themes in varying ways. For instance, Carl Sandburg’s “And so Today” presents a critical view of American nationalism as seen in the pageantry of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown soldier, while Vachel Lindsay’s “I Know All this when Gipsy Fiddles Cry” focuses on an expression of American history retold through marginal ethnic groups. Similarly, Sandburg’s “California City Landscape” presents a vision of America as seen in the environs of Los Angeles, where a descendant of Irish immigrants, Japanese families, and a rich director of prurient Hollywood films all live in close proximity.

Of course, though Sandburg and Lindsay offer versions of American spirit grounded in racial and ethnic diversity, we must not overstate the diversity of the contributors to the volume, for all of them were white. Though the volume wants for racial diversity, the women authors who contribute to the volume do show a diverse spectrum of perspectives: Lowell, a lesbian; H. D., who identified as bisexual; and Edna St. Vincent Millay, a progressive heterosexual. And since Lowell’s closing poem “La

Ronde du Diable” introduces the subsequent contributors by emphasizing the genderedness of the networks of modern poetry, the volume highlights the feminist subtext of the other poetry in the volume. For instance, H. D.’s contribution includes the poem “Heliadora,” which details two male poets conversing all night to find the best poetic descriptor for the titular woman, who, in the process, becomes all but forgotten. She also contributes her long sequence “Toward the Piraeus,” again set in the classical era, which features a female speaker addressing a regal man: “Of men—of *men* made you a god, / and me, claimed me, set me apart / and the song in my breast, yours, yours forever— / if I escape your evil heart” (“I” 11-14). H. D. further emphasizes the rigidity of gender constructs in the fourth section of “Toward the Piraeus,” which begins “If I had been a boy” (1). Incidentally, Gilbert and Gubar argue that this sequence reflects H.D.’s experience of working closely with—and at times being shadowed by—Pound (180). In addition to H.D.’s performance of literary misogyny, Edna St. Vincent Millay ends the volume with a sequence of sonnets that very much antagonize conventions of heteronormative love poetry. Included in the arrangement is one of her best-known poems, “What lips my lips have kissed and where and why,” in which a female speaker ponders her rich sexual history later in life. Her nostalgia is suggestive of a substantial sexual liberation: “And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain, / For unremembered lads that not again / Will turn to me at midnight with a cry” (6-8). Though the poem is essentially dealing with romantic regret later in life when she can no longer remember all her past partners, she does not regret the number of her sexual exploits. Rather, she only regrets that her love life has slowed down. In another sonnet, a married speaker hides her contempt at her husband who, having found her reading, comments: “What a big book for

such a little head!” She immediately changes the subject to her hat and purse but resolves in the sestet of the sonnet: “I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly; / You will not catch me reading any more; / I shall be called a wife to pattern by; / And some day when you knock and push the door, / Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy, / I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me” (9-14). Indeed the most shocking feature of this volume of middlebrow poetry is the way it allows for a collective argument against normative relationships—for Sandburg, in terms of the individual relationship to the state, for H.D., in terms of the male poet’s relationship to the female object, and for Millay and Lowell, in different ways, in terms of women’s sexual agency apart from heteronormative relationships.

#### Conclusion: The Power of the Editor

In the field of the “editor-less” anthology, Lowell offers a fascinating example—both as the progenitor of the form and, no less successfully, as a contributor. In uncovering her work in the *Some Imagist Poets* series, we can see her collectivizing impulse in editing the premier movement of modernism and how this fundamentally conflicts with the editorial philosophy aimed at an elite and narrow readership. Thus, the different approaches Pound and Lowell took in editing the Imagist anthologies suggest more than just a simple personality conflict and highlight the tension in modernism between conceptualizations of literature as hierarchically organized and selected by an elite few versus a radically democratic collective project of self-selection. Lowell’s financial success in the *Some Imagist Poets* series and the series’—and her own—eventual erasure from the canon also underscore a complex anxiety about poetry’s function within a capitalist, consumer culture.



Further, in Lowell's contribution to the 1922 *Miscellany*, we can see that she was aware that her selection ought to be grounded in her own experience of life—one that was distinctly non-normative at the time—and, at the same time, she was equally aware that her arrangement did not exist in isolation. Thus, her selection represents the validity of a fully sexualized same-sex love as a spiritual source in modernity and also gestures out to discuss the politics of the literary market, which is, unmistakably, gendered. In her playful "Ronde du Diable," Lowell makes clear the intrigues and collusions of infantilized brothers and sisters in verse. This poem, as the final text in the first sequence, suggests that we think of the subsequent contributions as subject to the kind of struggles she outlines in the poem. In this sense, the rest of the poems ought to be thought of as about poetry and about the social forces that poets must navigate. And yet, the collective ideals that Lowell demonstrated in *Some Imagist Poets* and Untermeyer picked up in his miscellany series were eventually rendered naïve and written out of the history of modernism.

We might wonder why Lowell, who was surely one of the literary elite in the period—and also of a privileged class with a conservative political outlook—would be so concerned with a democratizing editorial method and the possibilities that the style enabled. Perhaps we can find the answer to this question in a review that she wrote for another anthology series, the 1919 edition of *Georgian Poetry*. She writes:

It is horrible to reflect on the power of an editor. Poets, at the mercy of editorial selection, may well tremble, reflecting on the fate of the Dutch painter, Vermeer, who vanished for nearly three hundred years from the knowledge of men because a contemporary writer, with whom he was so ill-advised as to quarrel, omitted him from a list of painters which was destined to become the text-book of future generations. (428)

Lowell is keenly aware of the cultural authority that editors wield as well as the personal politics which contribute to editorial power. Reading her words today, the statement is also rather poignantly prescient of her own dismissal from the canon as merely an antagonist of Pound. Did Lowell have an inkling that she might be someday forgotten? We will probably never know, but we can see that she expresses a complex truth about the power of relationships in historical narratives of the arts.

### CHAPTER III

“WAITING FOR NOTHINGNESS”:

TRANSNATIONAL REGIONALISM AND QUEER NIHILISM IN LANGSTON

HUGHES’ “A HOUSE IN TAOS”

I could tell you,  
If I wanted to,  
What makes me  
What I am.

But I don't  
Really want to—  
And you don't  
Give a damn.

The above epigraph—the complete text of Langston Hughes’ 1957 poem “Impasse”—demonstrates one of the most frustrating components of Hughes scholarship: because of his privacy, basic facts about who Hughes was are sometimes unclear. This may seem counterintuitive, considering Hughes himself authored two autobiographies. But, as premier biographer Arnold Rampersad notes, the “smiling poise” of Hughes’ narrative voice in his autobiographies “appears to give nothing away of a personal nature” (379, 377). In this sense, Hughes’ autobiographies are curiously controlled in what they divulge, and his biographies—even Rampersad’s well-researched, two-volume tome—often offer questions instead of definitive answers. And probably the most unclear fact of Hughes life is the seemingly foundational element of his sexual identity. As Shane Vogel begins a chapter on Hughes: “Rumor has it Langston Hughes was gay” (104). Indeed, from Hughes’ early career to present criticism, his sexuality has been a subject of tense debate. In his younger days, Harlem Renaissance figures like Alain Locke and Countee Cullen gossiped about Hughes’ sexuality. What could cause these rumors?

Hughes certainly never publicly admitted to any same-sex relationship or desire but was—despite a few relatively short relationships with women—a lifelong bachelor. And yet, though he did not admit any sexual activity with men in his autobiographies, he did give one of the only accounts of a Harlem drag ball in his first autobiography *The Big Sea*.

But, despite Hughes' mysterious sexuality, homosexuality was not entirely absent from his literary work. In his later career the poem "Cafe 3 AM" (1951) and the short story "Blessed Assurance" (1963) deal explicitly with homosexuality in detailing, in the former, a police raid on a gay bar, and, in the latter, an intolerant father's expression of anger at his effeminate son's supposed sexuality. However, there is something unsatisfying about the temporal location of these texts, for Hughes' best-known and most-studied work is that of his early career, in the 1920s' Harlem Renaissance. In a moment of candor, Vogel admits that "most of us who do queer Harlem Renaissance studies secretly wish Hughes had written 'Café: 3 a.m.' for *The Weary Blues*, rather than for his 1951 collection, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*" (119). Indeed, what if—instead of writing of a drag ball years later in his 1940s' autobiography or of gay bars in his 1950s' work—Hughes had included this subject in his landmark first collection in his canonized Harlem Renaissance writing?

As "Impasse" might suggest, he was generally evasive or inscrutable on some fundamental topics, including sexuality, even with intimate friends. According to Rampersad:

For the greater part of his life, Hughes made almost a fetish of the secrecy about his sexual interests, so that from the start of his adulthood even close friends of liberated sexuality, such as Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Carl Van Vechten,

and Bruce Nugent, vouched privately not for the nature or relative strength of his sexuality but for its maddening elusiveness. . . . The truth about his sexuality will probably never be discovered. If Hughes indeed had homosexual lovers, what may be asserted incontrovertibly is that he did so with almost fanatical discretion. (Rampersad 2:336)

Ultimately, Rampersad—and some of Hughes’ friends and acquaintances in the period—interpret Hughes’ silence in regards to sexuality as an inherent lack of interest: “Hughes was yet a sexual blank; his libido, under stimulation or pressure, seemed to vanish into a void” (289). According to Rampersad, “As for the fashionable tendency to assert, without convincing evidence, that Hughes was a homosexual, I will say at this point only that such a conclusion seems unfounded, and that the evidence suggests a more complicated sexual nature” (439). In a word, Rampersad believes that Hughes was asexual. But Rampersad’s comments in his well-researched biography would not end the debate; in fact, they would cause a controversy in Hughes scholarship.

Many critics charged Rampersad with homophobia in denying the possibility that Hughes could have been gay. And indeed, some of Rampersad’s critical moves do sound a bit judgmental toward homosexual readings of Hughes’ life and work; for instance, he argues the poem “To F. S.,” which Hughes dedicated to a still-unidentified man, could only be read as a “tender expression of grief” but is “sometimes taken insensitively as proof of his homosexual feeling” (62). In 1997, critic Charles Nero lambasted Rampersad for his refusal to acknowledge that Hughes may have been gay and claims outright that Rampersad’s findings are motivated by homophobia, arguing that “Rampersad’s efforts to remove the homosexual label from Hughes may very well reflect an armchair black nationalist desire to place the poet securely in the American canon as an exemplar of ‘poetic maturity’” (195). But perhaps the best-known work which opposes Rampersad’s

view is not a work of criticism but of film: Isaac Julien's 1989 *Looking for Langston*, a black and white art film that takes biographical license to posit a hypothetical romantic and sexual liaison between Hughes and another man. The subject matter of the film, despite the relative quality and notoriety of the movie, did not agree with the executor of Hughes' estate, George Bass, who refused Julien's request to use Hughes' poetry in the film.

Nero muses that, following the failure of *Looking for Langston* to secure the Hughes estate's support, "Rampersad was the first biographer granted access to the voluminous papers of Hughes, and one cannot help but wonder whether keeping the homosexual label off Hughes might have an unspoken condition for access to the poet's papers" (195). In his afterword to the second, revised edition to the biography, Rampersad defends himself from these accusations:

I wrestled with this question and came up with the tentative conclusion that Hughes probably had been asexual. This may well have been weak reasoning on my part. Perhaps it was owing to homophobia [. . .]. Perhaps it was owing to naivete, or to both homophobia and naivete. However, 'asexual' was a word that came up spontaneously several times in talking to people who had known Hughes very well, and asexuality seems the best explanation of his condition as I was able to discover it. (435)

In the end, the debate was not resolved, nor will it ever be it seems. And, years later, many scholars who write on Hughes in terms of sexuality must begin with a discussion of this biographical debate—just as Vogel or this very chapter does.

For Vogel, the way out of the morass of endless debate over Hughes' sexual identity is to create a theoretical model for queering Hughes' Harlem Renaissance collections. Thus, though Vogel bemoans the absence of explicit homosexual content in *The Weary Blues*, he crafts a queer reading of the Harlem cabarets that appear throughout

Hughes' work from the twenties. Vogel argues that "in the sometimes prohibited, sometimes tolerated time and space of afterhours . . . the queer rhythms and ethics of Harlem nightlife developed" (110). For Vogel "[c]losing time always reaches beyond itself: rather than marking the termination of social possibilities, it makes a transformation of time and space that operates in the interstices of the law. . . . [A]fterhours marks a time of subjective possibility that could include but always exceeds the closures of 'sexual identity' as such" (112-13). While Vogel offers a compelling theoretical reading that is grounded in legal discourse of the period, his reading comes from the basic assumption that there is no actual non-heterosexual content—in terms of sexual activity or identity—in Hughes' poetry from the twenties.

Similarly, focusing on Hughes' second collection, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Martin Joseph Ponce argues that Hughes' use of blues poems in the form of dramatic monologues from male and female speakers is inherently queer, both in terms of "literary form and cultural politics" (507). Moreover, "the ambiguity and mobility of the 'I' emerging in those poems point toward Hughes's fluid, gender-crossing positionality" that makes the volume so queer to Ponce. Critics are not used to reading Hughes' blues poetry in such a way because acknowledging the self-conscious deployment of female speakers who "address or mourn an absent, often male lover" forces them to admit that Hughes is interested in writing to a male lover. However, though Ponce successfully teases out the implications of these poems written to men, the texts themselves always assert a heterosexual sexuality either by identifying the female speaker in the title or within the body of the poem. In fact, there is no poem about love or sex in the collection that does not in some way indicate the gender of the speaker and cement the content of the poem

into a heterosexual pairing.

To return to the question of Hughes' sexuality, there could also be another hypothesis: what if Hughes' ambiguity on the subject of sexuality was not as a screen but the truth itself? Perhaps Hughes was neither gay nor straight. Perhaps Hughes might identify today as bi- or pansexual, or perhaps he simply would not classify his sexuality along the lines of the gender of the object choice. Indeed, the assumption of homo- or heterosexuality as the only options is an intrinsic problem of a binary logic of sexuality, in which only heterosexuality and homosexuality are possible, and both are lifetime choices. Volumes of discourse on sex and identity have tried—and still do—to force the vast array of individual sexual experience into one of two discrete categories. In the first sentence of her 1990 book *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed, fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” (1). In regards to Hughes, Shane Vogel notes that “as literary scholars continue to pursue the question of Hughes's sexual identity and his relationship to the history of US sexual subcultures, queer readings of his work and his biography—with a few significant exceptions—continue to approach him within a hermeneutics of sexual object choice, concerned with uncovering his ‘gay voice’ and reasserting his contribution to a US gay and lesbian history” (106).

But perhaps Hughes fit neither into gay nor straight, and that is the reason his sexuality is so difficult to parse. In *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, A. B. Christa Schwarz argues that “[c]onsidering that he was—perhaps on a sexual level—involved with women and at least on one occasion with a man, the possibility that he did not



perceive himself to be included in any category such as homo- or heterosexuality seems given” (70). Even so, it seems the temptation to categorize Hughes according to this binary is too much for Schwarz, who later in the chapter argues that, “in his poetry, Hughes produces a multiplicity of meanings, works with an ambiguity of terms, and employs textual strategies, thereby opening up spaces for gay readings” (72). Thus, after arguing that perhaps Hughes’ sexual identity lies outside of a homo/hetero binary, Schwarz reinscribes the problematic binary by seeking only a “gay reading.”

In this chapter, I will explore this question—what it means to disidentify with given sexual identity categories and what the implications for this may be in terms of other identity categories like race. From women of color feminist theory, we know that different modes of oppression do not operate separately but intersect and interlock in a way that a single form of oppression—for instance race—cannot be disentangled from another—for example sexuality—so if Hughes had a non-binary sexual identity perhaps this also at times destabilized his sense of racial identification. The reason, then, that critics have been frustrated in every attempt to find explicitly queer content in Hughes’ canonical work would be because his canonical work celebrates his black identity in a way that imagining the blurring of binary categories like sexuality forecloses.

Thus, rather searching for a gay poem in Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance work, we ought to look for a poem that troubles the very categories of sexuality and race. Fortunately, there is such a poem; in this analysis, I will focus on Hughes’ 1926 poem “A House in Taos.” Though Hughes wrote and published the poem in 1926 in the little magazine *Palms*—winning for it the 1926 Bynner and Zuno Poetry Prize—he would not include it in any of his collections from the 1920s. In fact, he would not publish the poem

in any of his own collections until his little-known 1947 collection *Fields of Wonder*—the only book that Hughes himself labelled a “lyric collection.” To my mind, “A House in Taos” is Hughes’ most queer poem: focused on a relationship between three characters with “red, white, and yellow skins” and culminating in an eroticized dance in the desert wind, “A House in Taos” gives a poetic portrait of an interracial, bisexual triad. It is interesting to note that, despite intense debates over Hughes’ sexuality, no critics have yet examined the poem beyond its significance in Hughes’ biography.

Most mentions of “A House in Taos” use it biographically—from Hughes’ own *The Big Sea* to Rampersad’s two-volume work—and discuss it only in reference to the fact that it won Hughes a poetry contest and that it caused a minor gossip among literati who believed the poem alluded to wealthy patron of the arts Mabel Dodge Lujan’s New Mexico artists’ colony and her somewhat scandalous flirtation with Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer, all while she was married to Tony Lujan, a Native American man.<sup>6</sup> One reason, I would argue, that this poem has not been discussed in terms of sexuality in Hughes’ criticism is because it does not fit into the conventional debate over Hughes’ sexual identity grounded in a binary distinction between gay and straight—for the focus of the poem, strictly speaking, is neither of those. “A House in Taos” has also been ignored in queer studies of Hughes’ work, because, as a stylistically modernist poem, the text does not quite fit into Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance body of work. As Karen Jackson Ford notes, the poem “is classically modernist in both its fragmented form and its decadent sensibility” (437).

In this chapter, I will examine the poem in two different publication venues in

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<sup>6</sup> I have chosen to use the spelling Lujan, though Lujan herself often spelled her last name “Luhan” so that people unfamiliar with Spanish could pronounce it properly.

order to understand the implications of this queer text in different contexts: first, in the Mexico-based, Southwestern-focused English-language journal *Palms*, and, second, in Hughes' little-studied lyric collection *Fields of Wonder*. In each publication, the poem is the first in a sequence. In the 1926 *Palms*, it is published with three additional poems: "Beale Street Love," "Walls," and "Dressed Up." In fact, the editor of the issue presents the arrangement as a group poem under the title "A House in Taos," interestingly blurring the boundaries between the individual poems. In its first publication in the Mexico-based English-language journal *Palms*, the poem works as a kind of regionalist yet transnational text that responds critically to social forces that destroy traditional couples; further, "A House in Taos," representing the most unconventional but only successful relationship in the group, shows the way economic privilege and distance from the cultural metropole can allow a queer relationship.

Like most of his book-length collections, Hughes divided the 1947 *Fields of Wonder* into titled sections comprised of poems on similar subjects. "A House in Taos" is the first of eleven poems in the "Mortal Storm" segment, and in this context, the poem takes on a drastically different reading. The volume, which Rampersad describes as "nihilistic" for its overwhelming focus on death and nonbeing, highlights the conceptual breakdown of meaningful categories—including both race and sexuality—in order to contemplate nothingness. Intrinsic to this discussion is an understanding of what Hughes means by "lyric," for he held off on including this 1920s poem until he arranged a specifically "lyric" volume in the 1940s. I will argue that, to Hughes, the lyric is a form in which structure and content work together to collapse boundaries between binary categories. The outcome of this lyric form in "A House in Taos," in very different

ways in *Palms* and *Fields of Wonder*, is a collapsing of the boundaries of race, gender, and sex, which, in the end, equates to a kind of queer nihilism.

#### Hughes, Greenwich Village, and Taos

“A House in Taos” does not fit into Hughes’ body of work very well at all. At forty-two lines, it is longer than the average poem in Hughes’ oeuvre. In addition, the New Mexico setting of the poem is geographically and conceptually distant from the Harlem setting that Hughes generally favored throughout his career. Also, there is not a trace of blues or jazz undertones in the poem, and, perhaps most out of character for Hughes, there is no direct reference to African American politics of the period. It is no wonder, then, that Hughes could not find a place for the 1926 poem in any of his collections until 1947. Although it may seem a bit odd that Hughes did not opt to include it in any of his collections during the period of modernism, in terms of aesthetics, it is a quite modernist poem. Rampersad also notes that it was Hughes’ most “modern” poem to that date, “according to the prevailing definition of modernism” (121). Indeed, it seems, like many poems of the period, to allude to the preeminent modernist poem *The Waste Land*. For instance, the poem is set in “a barren garden” about the house in the desert—much like the infertile landscape of *The Waste Land*. In addition, the first three stanzas of “A House in Taos” begin with the phrase “Thunder of the Rain God,” similar to the closing section of *The Waste Land*, in which the voice of the thunder calls out three times. The poem does not simply retell Eliot’s poem, however; “A House in Taos” is a reaction to *The Waste Land*.

But “A House in Taos” is not a marginal poem. In fact, the poem won Hughes the Bynner and Zuno poetry prizes from *Palms* magazine in the November 1926 issue.

Countee Cullen also included “A House in Taos” in his anthology *Caroling Dusk* in 1927. Hughes finally included the poem in his post-war collection *Fields of Wonder* and also included it in his first edition of *The Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* in 1959. Thus, despite its peculiarity in Hughes’ oeuvre, “A House in Taos” has held a privileged place in Hughes’ body of work. Indeed, Ford includes the text in a group of poems that “invariably comprise his anthology repertoire despite the fact that none of them typifies his writing” (436). And yet, despite its popularity in anthologies, scholars have almost never analyzed the poem beyond its biographical implications. In fact, this poem is contradictorily only remembered as a very particular biographical debate about two completely different figures in modernism—Toomer and Lujan. In this sense, this central biographical issue has kept the poem in parlance in academic studies throughout the years but has also reduced its significance to only that particular debate. Before we can analyze the poem in *Palms* and *Fields of Wonder*, though, we must understand the historical context of Taos, New Mexico at the time as well as the biographical debate through which scholars generally read the poem. In this discussion, I will also outline the importance of interracial romantic and sexual relationships and mixed-race individuals in the narrative of Lujan and Toomer, in the text of “A House in Taos,” and as a figure in Hughes’ writings at the time.

In *The Big Sea*, Hughes give the details of his inspiration for “A House in Taos”: at a party in a Greenwich Village apartment, a conversation with various bohemian literati—whom Hughes describes with condescending simplicity as “exotic and jittery”—turned to the merits of an artistic community in Taos, New Mexico. The Southwestern town had been center for visual arts since 1896 when two young painters—Bert Geer

Phillips and Ernest L. Blumenschein—visited the area and eventually founded the Taos Society of Artists.<sup>7</sup> In 1919, the small community of artists was joined by a wealthy New York divorcee, Mabel Dodge, who had previously established successful salons in Greenwich Village and Florence, Italy that were visited by the likes of Gertrude Stein, Georgia O’Keefe, Alfred Stieglitz, Emma Goldman, and Max Eastman. On moving to Taos, Dodge commissioned a house in a *mélange* of modernist and Southwestern architecture adjoining Pueblo tribal land, married local Native American Antonio Lujan to become Mabel Dodge Lujan, and continued her salon at her home, hosting D. H. Lawrence, Witter Bynner, and many other contemporary artists and writers (Burke 13, 5). The Southwestern location, so infused with Native American culture, was valuable to contemporary culture, because, as Flannery Burke argues, modernism “nurtured theories that celebrated so-called primitive people for their simplicity, their closeness to nature, their spirituality, and their spontaneity. Modernists saw in ‘primitives’ and their artistic practices what they believed were the solutions to the problems of modernity” (8).

Perhaps it was the intrinsic racialization of this primitivism, or perhaps just the pretentiousness of well-to-do art snobs congregating in fine modernist houses, that caught Hughes’ attention. In any case, though he dismissed the affectations of such intellectuals in *The Big Sea*, the mental image of that house in Taos stuck with Hughes: “I was walking home from work one night when this poem came to me. . . . It was a strange poem for me to be writing in a period when I was writing mostly blues and spirituals. I do not know why it came to me in just that way, but I made hardly a change in it after I put it down” (260-61). So out-of-character was its style and spontaneous its conception, that

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<sup>7</sup> For a more detailed account and illustrations of the visual art of the Colony, see White’s *The Taos Society of Artists* and Schimmel’s *Bert Geer Phillips and the Taos Art Colony*.

Hughes implies that the poem was perhaps mystically implanted in his psyche. After its publication in *Palms*, “amusing things began to happen. I did not know anybody in Taos, nor had I ever been there, but the Greenwich Villagers all seemed to know people there and even houses that the poem fitted, and I received a number of gossipy and amusing letters about it from folks I had never met” (261-62). The one letter in particular he mentions is from Mabel Dodge Lujan who was certain the poem was about her and her house, a claim which Hughes unilaterally denies.

In addition to the poetic setting’s similarity to Lujan’s desert house, those “gossipy” letter writers suggested the “red, white, and yellow skins” of the poem’s central three characters reflects the complex real-life relationship between the white Lujan, her Native American husband, and her supposed lover: biracial Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer. While rumors of an affair between Lujan and Toomer were mostly unsubstantiated, they did have roots in some actual events. Lujan first met Toomer in 1925 when he spoke at spiritual leader George Gurdjieff’s center in France. Lujan was immediately smitten with the handsome and charismatic Toomer and sent him many overtly passionate love letters and even loaned him thousands of dollars to establish a spiritual center in Taos. Despite Toomer’s lack of romantic interest, Lujan’s almost-obsessive pursuit of Toomer nearly destroyed her marriage (Burke 99-102). Though Faith Berry argues that any connection between Hughes’ poem and Lujan’s affairs must be “pure speculation,” she points out that surely “Hughes had also heard gossip about an affair between Mabel and the mulatto Jean Toomer” (80). Both Berry and Rampersad suggest that these rumors could have originated either from Witter Bynner or Carl Van Vechten, each of whom was acquainted with Lujan. Hughes explicitly denies

that “A House in Taos” is based on Lujan in particular, insisting that “At that time, I had never heard Mrs. Lujan’s name, nor did I know she had married an Indian, or that Jean Toomer had been a guest in her home. The red, yellow and white of my poem came from the Indian corn colors of the desert” (262). Here, Hughes is attempting to smooth over a minor controversy that the poem may have initiated. Perhaps in his autobiography, Hughes is attempting to contain some of the seeming gossipiness of the poem’s suggested content. In any case, the above narrative demonstrates the way that this poem—though a prominent one in Hughes anthologies—is almost entirely subsumed by a minor biographical debate.

Immediately following his assurance that “A House in Taos” did not allude to Toomer and the Lujans, Hughes discusses another poem he wrote that same year: “Mulatto.” In his autobiography he seems particularly proud of the poem and notes that he had never worked harder writing any other poem to that date (263). He would include the complex, free-verse, multi-voice poem in his second collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. He writes: “I had been intrigued with the problem of those so-called ‘Negroes’ of immediate white-and-black blood, whether they were light enough to pass for white or not” (262-63). For Hughes, though the issue “of mixed blood in America is, to be sure, a minor problem,” it is inarguably “a very dramatic one—one parent in the pale of the black ghetto and the other able to take advantage of all the opportunities of American democracy” (263). Hughes, however, frames the issue in his autobiography in primarily political terms and is careful to clarify that he means those of “immediate” descent—whose parents were of different races—and undercuts the black identity of such people by using the adjectival “so-called” and by putting “Negroes” in quotation marks. In this



way, Hughes—while claiming that the “yellow” skin in “A House in Taos” does not suggest a biracial skin tone—shows his poetic and philosophical interest in what it means to be mixed race. But in the context of his discussion of “A House in Taos,” Hughes makes a telling move in switching immediately from his assurance that the “yellow skin” in “A House in Taos” is not descriptive of race to a discussion of the next poem that he wrote, which focuses on the plight of “little yellow bastard boys” (36).

And, considering that there were scores of “tragic mulatto” narratives in culture at the time, it is clear that Hughes was not the only author concerned with the plight of mixed-race individuals. According to contemporary critic Walter Benn Michaels, the period of modernism coincided with sociological movements of cultural pluralism which solidified race as central to individual identification. For Michaels, in this climate of multicultural categorization “miscegenation, the breaking down of difference, becomes the privileged sex crime” (78). Richard Dyer explains that “If races are conceptualized as pure (with concomitant qualities of character, including the capacity to hold sway over other races), then miscegenation threatens that purity” (25). For race is not just “about bodies, it is also always about the reproduction of those bodies [. . .]. This is implicit in the notions of genealogy (the chain of sexual reproduction leading back to the origins of the race), degeneration (the bad chain of such reproduction) and genetics (the way we now understand the passing on of characteristics through reproduction)” (25). However, this policing of whiteness through reproduction “is a badge of superiority, yet it also creates an instability for whites at the hidden heart of the notion of race” (30). For, simply, sex and reproduction are biological processes that show that all sovereign bodies can have permeable boundaries.

But Hughes' reticence in his autobiography to fully name mixed race individuals as "Negroes" also recalls another existential personal problem that Hughes faces earlier in his autobiography. Early in the book, Hughes details his experiences travelling the world as a sailor. The young Hughes is perhaps most excited to visit Africa and experience the continent of his ancestors, but, upon arrival, "there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people," he admits, "The Africans looked at me and would not believe that I was a Negro" (11). This is because of, simply, his skin color. In a surprising turn of phrase, Hughes writes: "You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word 'Negro' is used to mean anyone who has *any* Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means *all* Negro, therefore *black*. I am brown" (11). He then summarizes, briefly, some of his own white ancestry. Though Hughes only mentions his experience in Africa briefly, it is a powerful example of his own experience of marginalization, even from the culture he had so often thought of as his ancestral source.

Hughes' different racial recognition in Africa is also proof of the radical instability of racial categories themselves; indeed, though race is one of the most deeply held facets of personal identity, it is also a cultural construct depending on naturalized local or national norms for coherency. According to queer race theorist Ian Barnard, "Race is as much constructed and unstable as sexuality is," and, as such, is just as subject to the same radical destabilization of identity categories that queer theory offers (206). Indeed, as examples of the instability of racial categories, Barnard notes difficulties of ethnic identification for people of mixed-race descent and the curious way that an individual can change race by merely crossing a national boundary. For Barnard, "race

and sexuality are not two separate axes of identity that cross and overlay in particular subject positions, but rather, ways to circumscribe systems of meaning and understanding that formatively and inherently define each other” (200).

Similarly, in *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Siobhan Somerville argues that “it was not merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies” (3). That is, instead of arguing that repressive systems of race and sexuality are separate discourses that operate in parallel ways and sometimes overlapped, she argues that they both function as part of the same system of binary division grounded in nineteenth-century scientific theories that held that racial and sexual categories were readable on bodies—that deviance was, in a sense, written into bodies.

An important theme in her work to “queer” the black/white, homo-/hetero binary, is the concept of racial indeterminacy as seen in the motifs of the “tragic mulatto” and narratives of passing and how texts that use these tropes also often demonstrate examples of both homosexual and heterosexual desire. For example, Somerville focuses one chapter on the racial and sexual ambiguity of the narrator of James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*. Somerville details unstable boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual desire in the text, arguing that, within this text, the “‘hybrid’ racialized subject, symbolically both black and white, . . . is also gendered ‘between’ male and female, like the bodies of inverters who were subjected to the taxonomizing gaze of the sexologists” (114). I do not mean, however, to argue that

marginalization in terms of race and sexuality are synonymous—race and sexuality are both aspects of identity that are at once interrelated and distinct—nor do I mean to conflate issues of race and sexuality in Hughes’ work in general. But, in its eroticized depiction of the relationship between three people of different races—in which the first-person speaker is of mixed race—“A House in Taos” offers an aesthetic space in which boundaries of race and sexuality are transgressed simultaneously.

### Regionalism, Race, and *Palms*

The first publication of “A House in Taos” was in a 1920s little magazine with an interestingly transnational but Southwestern emphasis. The poem first appeared in the November 1926 issue of the poetry magazine *Palms*, the creation of young Idella Purnell, who, at the age of twenty-two, began publishing the magazine in 1923. Born to white American expatriate parents in Guadalajara, Mexico, Purnell founded the *Palms* in that same city. She did not, however, spend her entire life in Mexico. In her adolescence, she lived and studied in California, and it was in 1919 that she took a poetry class at the University of California at Berkeley from the established poet Witter Bynner. Purnell was one of Bynner’s favorite students, and their friendship would become instrumental in her establishment of *Palms*, particularly in assuming the title of associate editor of the magazine—sharing it at one time with his friend, famous poet Vachel Lindsay<sup>8</sup> and in moving his annual undergraduate poetry contest from the Poetry Society of America to the auspices of *Palms* when the magazine was only two years old (Potter 47-48).

Purnell recognized that beginning a literary magazine at the height of modernism

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<sup>8</sup> We might also note that Vachel Lindsay had been credited with “discovering” Hughes, after Hughes had shared with Lindsay some of his poetry while Lindsay dined at a restaurant where Hughes worked as a busboy.

might be a foolish prospect, for there were, indeed, hundreds of magazines beginning and ending throughout the twenties. In her first issue, Purnell anticipates naysayers who would wonder “Why, there are too many now. What will be *different* about it? Besides, surely you realized that you are too far away from the United States” (24). But Purnell thought her magazine had a privileged perspective; for though Purnell foregrounded Guadalajara as headquarters of the journal, it was devoted to literature of the United States: “Standing on the bank,” she explains, figuring the scene of contemporary poetry as a river, “one is better able to see the current’s direction, and to understand its manifestations. So our PALMS will hold proud heads up from Mexico, to watch the current in the United States, and to bloom in imported fruit” (24). We might think of Purnell’s positioning of the magazine—though focused on literature of the United States—as deliberately transnational in its presentation. For, in his *Transnational Poetics*, Jahan Ramazani argues that simply dividing poetry into categories of the author’s nation of origin is an incomplete vision of the field of literature. For Ramazani, “Globe-traversing influences, energies, and resistances, far from being minor deviations from nation-based fundamentals, have arguably styled and shaped poetry in English, from the modernist era to the present” (23). According to Ramazani, we can expand our understandings of modern poetry by attending to the forces of literary transnationalism that “may suggest a different disciplinary model of ‘citizenship’: instead of replicating the centripetal vortex of the nation-state . . . , cross-cultural writing and reading can, if taken seriously in criticism and the classroom, evoke non-coercive and nonativistic forms of transnational imaginative belonging” (31). And, indeed, Purnell’s magazine explicitly places itself at the periphery of the artistic culture that is the subject of the magazine.

At the same time as it pronounces its transnational flavor, *Palms* also seems to take a US regionalist position. Purnell's brief biographies of the poets in the end matter is sure to make clear when the author is from a Western or Southwestern state, for example:

Helen Hoyt was associate editor of *Poetry* in 1918 and 1919. She has published in many magazines. Her best known poems are in Harriet Monroe's *New Poetry*. She went to California in December, 1919, and there married in 1921.

Jack Lyman was born on a ranch in Napa Valley, California, and spent his boyhood there. He was instructor at the University of California, and at present is studying at Harvard. In 1921 he married Helen Hoyt. (31-32)

Hoyt was well known at the time, as Purnell points out, for working with Chicago-based editor Harriet Monroe both at *Poetry* and in her successful series of anthologies. But Purnell, in framing the biography of the two, is much more interested in emphasizing their ties to California than to the traditional urban cultural centers. In this way, though not explicitly stated, *Palms* might be read as kind of regional magazine, which, though it included work by urbanites to the East, was geared more toward work by Western or Southwestern authors.

In this way, *Palms* is part of an increase in regionalist or localist writing and literary networks in the modernist period. Robert L. Dorman argues that this "regionalist chapter" that grew in the interwar period eschewed "the famous *cosmopolitan* artistic and intellectual circles of New York, Chicago, or Boston" and occurred, rather, "in obscurer settings, small provincial cities, college towns, artist colonies, and still remoter locations" (xii). For Dorman, the increased interest in local and regional literature was a response to contemporary debates over American nationalism and cultural pluralism. On one hand, regionalism seeks to find a source for authentic American national identity in response to the threats of increasing immigrant populations, particularly in cities. On the other, "the

regionalist ethic of pluralism became more directly an ideological construct, commenting on the distribution of power among and within the various sections of the nation, and upholding heterogeneity over homogeneity” (xii). For Dorman, regionalist literature participates in a kind of utopian future building, in which power—both political and cultural—would be distributed equitably throughout the geographical expanse of the United States.

But, of course, if *Palms* participated in imagining a utopian US, it did so from an entirely different country; in a word, it was a transnational modernist journal, which complicates its regional focus, for the transnational has historically been posited as antithetical to the regional in US literature. Recent modernist criticism, however, has begun to trouble the conceptual opposition between transnational and localist modernism. Mark Morrisson notes that “While it is common to envision modernism as cosmopolitan and international at its core, many of the impulses of modernism in the US were manifestly nationalist and even regionalist. Indeed, the interplay between literary regionalism and nationalism was especially dynamic during the modernist period” (538). Further, Eric B. White argues that regionalist little magazines that networked internationally show “how localist avant-gardes relied on transatlantic traffic to establish a means with which to represent their ‘homemade worlds’ to their international peers” (15). But beyond the distribution networks and relationships with other magazines, “localist aesthetic involved a creative engagement with the site-specific contingencies of a given locality rather than with creating affirmations of static national or regional identities” (White 12). For White, then, localist literature’s concern with “demographic

fluidities” reflected “an increasingly permeable American identity” that mirrored the ideals of cosmopolitan transnational writing (12).

Thus, *Palms*, as a site of permeable identity, is the perfect place for Hughes’ foray into the deconstruction of sex and gender identity categories; in addition, there was actually a noticeable racial diversity in the contributors to the journal. For example, the magazine was quite significant in the career of noted Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen. For, while Purnell sought a middle-of-the-road aesthetic and praised her external view of the US literary market for the journal’s eventual success, Bynner’s poetry prize—supplemented by a scholarship opportunity from the Mexican government to form the Bynner and Zuno Undergraduate Poetry Prize—definitely helped publicize the magazine. And, certainly, the one-hundred-and-fifty dollar prize was a windfall not just for the journal but for young authors as well. Cullen won the award the first year it was offered in *Palms*, and, following this award and the publication of his first book *Color*, he became the first and only guest editor of *Palms* for the “Negro Poets’ Issue” in October of 1926—a significant editorial precursor to his important collection *Caroling Dusk* (53-54). Cullen included Hughes in the issue, and, in the following issue, Hughes was featured even more prominently as the 1926 winner of the Bynner and Zuno prize. Hughes may not have been too surprised to win, for back in New York City it was Bynner himself who encouraged Hughes to contribute to the contest.

The complex history of *Palms* and Hughes’ relationship to the journal tell us something about the nature of the magazine itself. While *Palms* was not a radical journal—indeed, it was for the most part apolitical—we must not underestimate the significance of Cullen’s work at the magazine. Simply put, though there were scores of



literary magazines appearing in the twenties, not many included the work of both black and white authors, either alongside one another or in different issues. Of course, we must not overestimate this racial inclusivity either, as, following the black issue, Purnell did not ask Cullen to guest edit again, and the journal returned to publishing mostly white authors.

But in the period surrounding Hughes' publication in the journal, we might read this literary space as one grounded in an aesthetic of the Western US, encouraging of fluid national identification, and encouraging of contribution and collaboration among people of different races; thus, *Palms* is certainly an ideal space for the publication of "A House in Taos," Hughes' interracial, Southwestern, modernist lyric. The poem is divided into four sections—titled "Rain," "Sun," "Moon," and "Wind"—and, in addition to the speaker, there are two unnamed characters in the poem, and the poem is narrated alternately with a collective "we" and the repeated phrase "you, she, and I" (3). Each of these sections bears title in italics: To varying degrees, each of these titular figures is personified as a deity. The prize-winning poem is published in an arrangement with three other poems by Hughes: "Beale Street Love," "Walls," and "Dressed Up." While each of these poems is an individual text in Hughes' oeuvre, the editing of the magazine blurs the boundaries between these texts. For instance, though "A House in Taos" seems to be just the first poem in the sequence, the biographical information on poets in the back matter states that the Hughes won the award for "the group, A HOUSE IN TAOS" (63). In the arrangement of the poems themselves, only the title of "A House in Taos" is printed in the largest lettering, while the titles of the later poems are in smaller type, which matches the size of the subsections of "A House in Taos." Further, in the table of contents to the issue,

Hughes' section is simply labelled "A House in Taos," while other entries list titles of poems only if the section contains but one poem by that author, and, if the section contains more than one poem, it is labelled "Two Poems" or "Five Poems." Thus, this arrangement is presented not as a loose set of contributions but as a unified suite under the title "A House in Taos."

The "A House in Taos" group opens the issue. The poem begins: "Thunder of the Rain God: / And we three / Smitten by beauty" (1-3). The first three stanzas begin with the same opening line, and, in each of the stanzas, the following two lines are indented beneath the first. The indent gives the sense that "we three" exist beneath the domain of the rain god and his thunder—mirroring the language of the line. It is not until the third stanza that the "we" opens up to an explanation of the individuals, at least somewhat: "Thunder of the Rain God: / And you, she, and I / Waiting for nothingness" (7-9). The characters, which began as a single unit, have been fractured into individuals. There is the "I" of the speaker the second-person "you," and a third-person "she." Both the "I" and "you" offer no identifying characteristics and certainly none that indicate gender. After breaking up the "we" into individual pronouns, the rhyme scheme of the first two stanzas—the second and third lines—is abandoned. This places a tension on the words that should rhyme "I" and "nothingness." Whether this equates or distances the speaker and nothingness is unclear, but it does place "nothingness" as the goal of these three devotees of the rain god. Though the regularity of rhyme breaks down in this stanza, the final line of the third stanza rhymes with the first of the fourth. Incidentally, in the fourth, stanza structure shifts: "Do you understand the stillness / Of this house / In Taos / Under the thunder of the Rain God?" (10-13). There is an additional line, which is not indented.

Thus, the first and last line create a frame around “this house / in Taos” (11-12).

Unlike the first section, comprised of four separate stanzas, the section that follows, titled “Sun,” is just one six-line stanza. Nor is there any rhyme scheme in this free-verse section. The section begins: “That there should be a barren garden / About this house in Taos / Is not so strange” (14-16). Here the speaker presents the desolation of the desert landscape that surrounds the house. This is no abstract modernist waste land, however; the climate is simply inhospitable for a garden. It sheds light on the ironic relation of humans to nature, though. In the high desert of New Mexico, someone has attempted a garden that, unsurprisingly, cannot flower. The lack of fecundity is immediately compared to the three inhabitants of the house: “But that there should be three barren hearts / In this one house in Taos— / Who carries ugly things to show the sun?” (17-19). Like the garden, the hearts of these three individuals are not producing fruit. To put it another way, their lives are not reproductive. Indeed, these three live together in a house—a living situation that seems contradictory to normative structures of family and kinship structured around a reproductive heterosexual couple. In this way, the question that ends the second section denounces these people as ugly for the barrenness of the hearts and the non-reproductive nature of the relationship they share.

The following section, “Moon,” has the same number of lines as “Sun” but does not end with a question, rather it begins with one. This is in a way determined by the overall structure of the poem; the space between the second and third section of a four-part poem is the center, and in this schema the second half mirrors the first half. The question is simple: “Did you ask for the beaten brass of the moon?” (20). The abrupt accusation of ugliness in the previous line is mirrored here with lovely phrase about a

nature image. However, this quickly turns into a capitalist criticism in the close of the stanza: “We can buy lovely things with money, / You, she, and I, / Yet you seek, / As though you could keep, / This unbought loveliness of moon” (21-25). It would seem that these three live a life of luxury in this desert home and have substantial finances at their disposal. Despite the ability to purchase whatever they desire, they seek the uncommodifiable natural beauty of the moon. But still the lines seem to criticize the second person as approaching even appreciation of the moon as a possession, something to be bought.

The final section, titled “Wind,” is the longest of the four, and, in this unbroken, seventeen-line stanza, the three are most embodied. The section begins: “Touch our bodies, wind. / Our bodies are separate, individual things. Touch our bodies, wind,” (26-28). The repetition of “bodies” and the repeated request to be touched has specifically sexual overtones. Their bodies are simultaneously caressed by the desert wind. The action continues: “But blow quickly / Through the red, white, yellow skins / Of our bodies” (29-31). Though Hughes claims in *The Big Sea* that this line does not reference race, the words describe varying skin colors in such a way that is similar to much of Hughes’ racial terminology. Regardless of the racial connotation of the lines, the image of the simultaneous caress of the wind carries a sexual implication. The wind blows brusquely through a cloth barrier to the skin, to the very flesh of each of the three. All coiled in this embrace, they are caught in a kind of dance “To the terrible snarl, / Not mine, / Not yours, / Not hers, / But all one snarl of souls” (32-36). Their bodies each labor individually in an endeavor that unites their souls into a single, animalistic groan echoed by the wind. But this moment of sexual freedom in the natural landscape is fleeting: “Blow quickly, wind, /

Before we run back / Into the windlessness—” (37-39). The three can only experience this physical connection to nature and each other briefly before they must return to the human structure: “With our bodies— / Into the windlessness / Of our house in Taos” (40-42). In a way, the house represents acceptable human social structures and only through leaving that space can the three share an emotional and physical connection with each other. That is, outside of the house the non-normative nature of this biracial, pansexual, triadic relationship is exposed.

On one level, Rampersad is right: Hughes is critical of this pretentious and infertile triad; however, reading this only as a criticism of privileged artists elides the energy and titillation that the text exudes over this non-normative relationship. Though there is an implicit social criticism of a bored artistic elite here, this does not foreclose the possibility that Hughes is interested in the non-normative sexuality present in the verse. Further, the criticism Hughes offers in the poem does not lie in the relationship these three people share but rather in the life of leisure that they lead inside the house; the problem is that these people do not have to work for the means to sustain their art—as Hughes had to at the time—not that they are caught in a decadent love triangle. In fact, their interracial, pansexual triad is the only redeeming aspect of their lives. Similarly, the predominantly biographical focus of scholarship on the poem erases the speaker’s—and by extension Hughes’—investment in this type of relationship in favor of a discussion of literary “gossip.” In a sense, the obvious sexual content is ignored in favor of a minor footnote in literary history. It is almost strange that, given the substantial debates on Hughes’ sexual identity, one of Hughes’ most sexually transgressive poems is referenced only in relation to the love lives of other literary figures. And if this is Hughes’ Harlem

Renaissance poem that deals most specifically with non-normative sexual identity, then the tropes and ideas expressed in this poem are key to understanding and unraveling these themes in other poems in which non-normative identity frameworks might not be so apparent. That is, using “A House in Taos” as our starting point we might examine the other poems in *Fields of Wonder* for the same motifs of interiority and exteriority in regards to houses and homes.

Three asterisks separate the final section of “A House in Taos” from the poem that follows in the group: “Beale Street Love.” Later included in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, this poem is a dramatic change in both form and content: it is a short, seven-line poem set not in New Mexico, but on the titular Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee, a predominately black neighborhood, which, since W. C. Handy’s popular song “Beale Street Blues,” was associated with blues music (Rampersad 149). Thus, while Taos and Beale Street may seem at first glance quite different, they share one intrinsic similarity: both locales are, to varying degrees, artistic centers even though they may seem to occupy marginal positions in relation to the generally accepted cultural capitals of New York, Boston, or Chicago. Further, since Hughes indicates the setting of each poem only in the title and does not explain the context of each place, a reader would need to have a familiarity with the significance of each location to fully understand the poems. Thus, the ideal reader would know that Beale Street is a blues center and that Taos holds a thriving community of artists and writers; it would be one who, like Hughes, circulates among communities of mostly white high modernists and predominantly black culture of blues and jazz music.

The settings of a well-to-do artists’ commune and a bustling city street seem quite different, and if, as the editor, we consider this arrangement as a single, group-like poem,

it would seem that this text is pulling in different directions—in terms of both geographic space and social reality. Unlike the aesthetic pretense of the triadic relationship in “A House in Taos,” “Beale Street Love” offers a startling glimpse into an abusive relationship:

Love  
is a brown man’s fist  
with hard knuckles . . .  
blackening the eyes,  
crushing the lips.  
Hit me again,  
Says Clorinda. (1-5).

In *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, “Beale Street Love” is the first poem in a section with the same title. Overwhelmingly, the poems that comprise this section offer texts that show dysfunctional, violent, or even murderous relationships. Here in *Palms*, the poem is no different, and though we do not have any other context for this couple, we know that violence characterizes their relationship. Indeed, love itself is defined as physical violence.

One way to think of this is that in a life of systematic oppression, there is no way to act out against the oppressor, so, for the abusive man, frustration is redirected to one with less power: Clorinda. But it is certainly not a sympathetic rendering; the man is completely dehumanized and made into a faceless, nameless conduit for oppressive violence. And though Clorinda is allowed a name, and her words represented, she is not the one speaking. That is, her words, not in quotation marks and followed by “says Clorinda,” are mediated by the poetic speaker. In this sense, she is rendered an object without agency. In “Beale Street Love,” this relationship—or love in general, as the speaker would have it—is merely a circuit of oppression that turns people into faceless

aggressors and trapped victims. Relationships are violent, restrictive, or simply impossible.

While “Beale Street Love” strikes a much different tone from “A House in Taos,” the next poem in the sequence recalls the themes of interiority and exteriority and motifs of wind and rain of the first text. “Walls” begins: “Four walls can hold, / Oh, so much pain: / Four walls that shield / From the wind and rain” (1-4). Here, the role of houses is twofold: it keeps some things in and some things out. Walls shelter from the elements but keep people locked into painful places. The poem concludes: “Four walls can shelter / Oh, so much sorrow / Garnered from yesterday / And held for tomorrow” (5-8). These walls separate us from natural spaces and serve to trap us in artificial lives. And in these ill-fitting, constructed lives, pain and sorrow proliferate.

The final poem in the sequence, “Dressed Up,” which was also later included in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, is a blues form in the strictest sense—in a twelve-bar form and featuring a blues-type speaker. The speaker here, who just had his clothes laundered, “still feels blue” because he is missing his “old gal” (4, 8). In the closing stanza, the speaker laments: “I got new shoes,— / They don’t hurt ma feet, / But I ain’t got no body / To call me sweet” (9-12). Though on first glance this poem is the least bleak of the group, in the end it too suggests an impossibility of intimacy. In a sense, systems of fashion—both purchasing and laundering—do not necessitate happiness, and, though the speaker seems to imagine they would, do not ensure success in relationships. In the end, only alienation is possible.

In the transnational yet regionalist context of *Palms*, and in an editorial layout that troubles the divisions between the component poems, the sequence becomes a powerful



meditation on the pressures and effects of normative relationships on marginal subjects. In the poems that comprise the suite, no normative sexual or romantic relationship is possible—at least in non-destructive way. In this peripheral space of the Southwest, traditional heterosexual couples either simply fall apart or break down into violence. Inside the social structures of normative relationships—playing house—there is nothing but loneliness. The only successful relationship is the queer one in “A House in Taos,” but this is only possible because the economic and cultural privilege that each of the three parties seems to enjoy. In a sense, the only solution to destructive patterns of social affiliation is to have the means to leave the metropole, be economically self-sufficient, and invent new ways of relating to one another.

#### A Book of Lyric Poems

In a strange way, even though “A House in Taos” is set in such a geographically precise location, its participation in a localist yet transnational modernist publication helps us see the way the poem is actually about a kind of displacement. In order to experience the artistic, social, and sexual freedom that the poem evinces, the characters must come from different places to meet at this house in Taos; they must be distant from the urban cultural centers. But *Palms* was only the beginning of the poem’s publication history. Though “A House in Taos” won a significant poetry prize—and was also included in one of the most well-known Harlem Renaissance anthologies, *Caroling Dusk*—Hughes did not include the poem in any of his own book collections until twenty years later in the 1947 collection *Fields of Wonder*, subtitled “A Book of Lyric Poems.” Like the suite of poems Hughes contributed to *Palms*, the theme of displacement is central to *Fields of Wonder*, but this dislocation is less geographical than existential. That

is, in *Fields of Wonder*, the contextual setting is less New Mexico proper than the “nothingness” for which the three characters wait.

Indeed, “nothingness” as a theme is of central importance to *Fields of Wonder*. In terms of style, contemporary critics called the texts that comprise the volume “slight, fragile” and “almost fragmentary” (307), and most note the overall depressed mood of the collection’s seeming obsession with “life’s loneliness and man’s inevitably unhappy destiny. . . . [L]ife is short and cruel, love fickle, and, perhaps, suicide isn’t bad after all” (309). Even today, Rampersad agrees, calling the book “deeply pessimistic, even nihilistic” (131). And these critics do not exaggerate; many of the poems are specifically about meaninglessness, nothingness, and non-being. And it is no accident that this nihilistic volume is also Hughes’ lyric collection, for the aim of Hughes’ lyric poetry is to break down categorical binary constructs—a process that often ends in a meditation on nothingness.

Notwithstanding the obsessively nihilistic tone of much of the volume, the book itself is quite beautiful. At a well-established point in the career of both Hughes and his longtime publisher Knopf, the 1947 collection *Fields of Wonder* is linotype printed on a heavy-weight, cream-colored paper with luxuriously wide margins in a beautiful typeface. An endnote to the volume names the font “*Janson*, a recutting made direct from the type cast from matrices made by Anton Janson some time between 1660 and 1687,” and, after briefly noting Janson’s history, explains that “The book was composed, printed, and bound by H. Wolff, New York” (117). One reviewer from the period calls the short verses so “tenuous and sheer” that they “are even narrow on the page” (307). Thus, the wide margins and excessive white space complement the sparse form of most of the

poems in the book. Indeed, it suggests a kind of implicit relationship between aestheticism and emptiness, which corresponds to the poetic content which correlates lyricism with nothingness.

Yet despite its lavish printing, *Fields of Wonder* is almost completely forgotten today. One reason the volume remains in obscurity is its overall pessimistic tone. For one example of how critics forget or exclude the volume, Janet Neigh—in an article connecting Hughes’ use of radio and broadcast motifs in his 1940s poetry to a transnational perspective on Harlem—writes that Hughes’ “renewed focus on Harlem and the voices of its inhabitants is reflected in his . . . three poetry books written during the 1940s: *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *One Way Ticket* (1949), and his more famous bebop suite of poems that depicts Harlem as “a community in transition,” *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951)” (269). Perhaps Neigh leaves *Fields of Wonder* out of the list because it was not—strictly speaking—entirely written in the forties, comprised as it was from recent poems as well as earlier poems like “A House in Taos.” Certainly, the volume does not fit into Neigh’s argument, but her exclusion of the volume with no explanation or footnote is somewhat unsatisfying. One reason Hughes scholars forget the volume has to do with its reception, for, while there were several positive reviews, some contemporary critics spurned the volume. William Harrison of the *Boston Chronicle* calls the book “merely a chore, an exercise in craftsmanship by a competent worker” (qtd. in *Contemporary Reviews* 302). Perhaps worst, a review from the communist *People’s World* calls the poems “empty lyricisms of a man who is fugitive from his origins and his sources of strength” (qtd. in *Contemporary Reviews* 308). Indeed, the latter criticism is

based in the fact that themes of race are pushed to the background of the volume—literally to the last section of the book “Stars over Harlem.”

Indeed, one key to understanding the negative reactions to the book is apparent on the dustjacket: *Fields of Wonder* is subtitled “a book of lyric poems.” This label was no accident, nor was it ascribed by anyone other than Hughes himself. In a letter to Blanche Knopf about the volume, Hughes calls the collection his “first more or less completely lyric book” (qtd. in Rampersad 2:120). And Hughes decision to use this appellation was not without much consideration. As he did with all of his collections, Hughes shared the manuscript for *Fields of Wonder* with his friend and sometime mentor Carl Van Vechten, who in turn urged Hughes not to include the subtitle: “you haven’t been quite true to your avowed intention of making this book purely lyrical without social or political significance. You’ve never written anything more political than ‘When the Armies Passed,’ ‘Indonesia,’ or ‘Today.’ This may or may not be a mistake; certainly it would be a mistake to announce your intention of writing a ‘purely lyrical book’” (*Remember Me to Harlem* 239). In his response, Hughes initially agrees to remove the subtitle, “so nobody will get confused,” but, in the end, chose to keep the subtitle (*Remember* 240).

Of course, his agreement was only brief, and ultimately Hughes decided to keep the lyrical descriptor while still including “When the Armies Passed” and “Today.” However, in Hughes’ response to Van Vechten it is important to note that he does not explicitly agree with Van Vechten’s assertion that social or political issues should not be expressed in the lyric form but rather agrees that it might “confuse” readers’ understandings of the lyric form. But at the same time, in the sentence immediately following in the letter, Hughes mentions that he plans “to follow this with another book

of mostly Negro poems” (240). On one level, he does not explicitly agree with Van Vechten’s assertion that the lyric form forbids social engagement, but he also seems to implicitly place this collection in opposition to one of his “Negro” volumes. And it is not as though there are no poems in the volume that deal with race, class, or politics. Indeed, the last two sections—“Stars over Harlem” and “Words Like Freedom”—feature many poems that deal heavily with social issues. In particular, “Trumpet Player: 52nd Street,” “Migration,” and “Spirituals” each deal primarily with issues of race. In the collection overall, however, these issues are not foregrounded. Indeed, how then, we might ask, is Hughes defining lyric?

Before we unravel Hughes’ definition, we might try to define lyric poetry in general—an equally difficult proposition. In a sense, contriving a formal definition of the lyric is always confusing, as Hughes suggests in his letter to Van Vechten. The term comes to us from the Greek, where lyric poetry was simply verse performed aloud while accompanied by the lyre. In later Western traditions, lyric poetry is the antithesis of other poetic forms—like dramatic and epic. In this sense, lyric poetry is simply shorter than other forms of poetry. But, in another sense, it is differentiated from these longer forms in its resistance to narrative structure. The lyric features a first-person speaker addressing deeply personal and emotional issues—to cite English poet William Wordsworth, it is “emotion recollected in tranquility.” In this Wordsworthian sense, lyric is about deeply private emotional experiences outside of a historical or social context—lyric poetry is about the human experience, and comes from a universal subject position with no identifiable social, racial, or sexual signifiers.

It is no wonder that Hughes is clearly ambivalent to the lyric; for instance, in the

essay “My Adventures as a Social Poet,” published in *Phylon* in autumn of 1947—a few months after the publication of *Fields of Wonder*—Hughes makes an unambiguous differentiation between lyric poetry and social poetry. He begins the essay by musing that “Poets who write mostly about love, roses and moonlight, sunsets and snow, must lead a very quiet life. Seldom, I imagine, does their poetry get them into difficulties. Beauty and lyricism are really related to another world, to ivory towers, to your head in the clouds, feet floating off the earth” (269). This is not the kind of poetry that Hughes has staked his career on, however: “Unfortunately, having been born poor—and also colored—in Missouri, I was stuck in the mud from the beginning. Try as I might to float off into the clouds, poverty and Jim Crow would grab me by the heels, and right back on earth I would land. A third floor furnished room is the nearest thing I have ever had to an ivory tower” (269-70). Hughes then goes on to detail some of the difficulties his socially conscious poetics brought him—he notes being taken into custody in Cuba and in Japan. He jokes: “I have never known the police of any country to show an interest in lyric poetry as such” (270). More than just trouble with police, Hughes also notes his difficulties with censoring patrons, protesting fundamentalist Christians, and threatening Klansmen. In his concluding paragraph he returns to the question of the conventional tropes of lyricism:

So goes the life of a social poet. I am sure none of these things would ever have happened to me had I limited the subject matter of my poems to roses and moonlight. But, unfortunately, I was born poor—and colored—and almost all the prettiest roses I have seen have been in rich white people's yards—not in mine. That is why I cannot write exclusively about roses and moonlight—for sometimes in the moonlight my brothers see a fiery cross and a circle of Klansmen's hoods. Sometimes in the moonlight a dark body swings from a lynching tree—but for his funeral there are no roses. (277)

It seems strange that he should express such ambivalence about lyricism after just

publishing a lyric volume.

On one level, perhaps Hughes' condemnation of "lyricism" is a response to reviewers of *Fields of Wonder*. As Rampersad notes, "Black reviewers, who in general had never approved of either his blues or his radical verse, liked the 'lyric' style" of *Fields of Wonder* (130). For instance, black poet Owen Dodson, writing for *Poetry*, praises Hughes for moving from "his usual racial genre into wider human areas" (279). Similarly, African American journalist Frank Marshall Davis, writing for the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, notes that "In this volume Mr. Hughes is not preoccupied with what is known as 'the race problem.' He uses a universal approach on behalf of all humanity, so that the reader may see the world through the eyes of a poet who happens to be a Negro instead of as an open propagandist" (316). Perhaps Hughes bristled at the positive reviews of this seemingly socially uncritical volume and sought to reassert the value of his more socially aware poems and volumes.

The contempt that Hughes' essay conveys for lyric poetry might indicate he changed his mind about the form following these reviews of *Fields of Wonder*, but there is also another answer: perhaps Hughes does not think of his own lyric poems as apolitical. That is, perhaps his lyric need not necessarily imply a complete departure from politics, even when social reality seems entirely absent from a work. Indeed, Theodor Adorno sought to contradict this antagonistic relationship between social and lyric poetry in his well-known essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society." In the essay, Adorno argues that the universal, ahistorical value of lyric poetry is usually privileged over historical specificity. In fact, the transcendent quality of the lyric is so often emphasized that Adorno feels it necessary to begin a lecture on lyric poetry and society apologetically. He

admits that many readers will object to any incursion on the most “delicate” and “fragile” literary form by the “bustle and commotion” of the material social world (37). His detractors would claim that any attempt to apply the social logic of industrial modernity would crush the ethereal truth of human existence that the lyric offers. But Adorno argues that this conception of aesthetic universality has its roots in collective experience; this idea

implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and [that] this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. (39-40)

For Adorno, lyric poetry becomes abstracted from the social realm because this reality is in conflict with the value of individual experience. The individual in industrial modernity is formulated around subjective interiority, but at the same time, the logic of capitalism degrades the subject to “something exchangeable, to something that exists merely for something else” (42). Industrial capitalism needs individuals to sustain the system, but it also dehumanizes the individual as only valuable relative to capital. Thus, when one defends the fragility of the lyric from the dangers of the material world, one implicitly argues that poetry exists solely as an escape from economic reality. In this formulation, lyric poetry is a fantasy of escape from the commodification of the individual in capitalist modernity and into an aesthetic realm where existential experience is the only autonomous truth of any value.

Thus, even the most abstract and ahistorical poems have the social sphere in which they were created printed on them in reverse, or, to put it another way, the abstractness and ahistoricity of the poem are necessitated by the social conditions under



which they were created; indeed, if Hughes' had completely escaped from the unfairness of contemporary society, then why are his lyrics still so bleak? Hughes must simply have a different understanding of the lyric form. R. Baxter Miller argues that "For Langston Hughes the lyric illuminates the graphic and timeless" (155). According to Miller, Hughes' lyric form "involves poetic emotion which, expressed in time, insists that time itself or, sequential thought, is an illusion" (156). Thus, in Miller's estimation, Hughes uses the lyric to break apart the passage of time and transcend its confines. In one of the only published articles that focuses on *Fields of Wonder*, Earlene Garber notes in 1971 that when asked to contribute one poem to a *Poet's Choice* anthology in the early sixties, Hughes selected—of all of his work—"Border Line," which begins the eponymously titled second section *Fields of Wonder*.

In *Poet's Choice*, selections all begin with the poets' own explanations of why they chose each poem. Hughes explains that "Border Line" "is one of my favorite poems because it seems to carry within itself a melody which I can hear although I cannot sing a note. Since this poem is like a song, its sound conditioned its saying. *What* it says is therefore so much of a piece with the way it is said that form and content are one, like a circle whose shape is itself and whose self is its shape, and which could be no other way to be what it is" (49). Garber argues that Hughes does this because "the metrical structure helped to determine the logical structure of the poem" which works to demonstrate a "condition of paradox" (137, 139). The poem in its entirety is as follows reads:

I used to wonder  
About living and dying—  
I think the difference lies  
Between tears and crying.

I used to wonder

About here and there—  
I think the distance  
Is nowhere.

The first quatrain of the poem establishes an abcb rhyme that pairs and compares two sets of relationships in order to better understand their binary definitions. The already tense comparison of “living and dying” with “tears and crying” is put under even more stress with the comparison of “here and there” with “nowhere.” In this way, the rhymed structure of the poem enables Hughes’ lyric form to collapse the boundaries of each binary. In Hughes’ lyric, form and content work together to create meaning out of a paradoxical breaking down of categorical understandings of reality. Now perhaps we can reconcile some of the complexities of *Fields of Wonder*: that, in his own words it is Hughes’ only almost completely lyric volume; that the overall tone and form of the poems that comprise it are deeply nihilistic; and that Hughes valued the poetic structure of “Border Lines” as representative of the successful interrelation of form and content in his work. I would argue that, for Hughes, the lyric form he intended was not one that eschewed social reality or that unconsciously reflected it but was in fact a poetic form intrinsically devoted to dissolving the categorical constructions that make up social reality.

But again, we might consider Adorno’s admonishment about the lyric, and think of these poems not as asocial, or as ostensibly ignorant of the social, but inherently imprinted upon by the real world. Repression and avoidance are integral to the collection, in more than just natural imagery. And we must also note that not all reviewers in the period felt that the book ignored race issues; for instance the white poet-critic Dora Hagemeyer, writing for the *Carmel Pine Cone*, argues “Grief, race-grief, drives its dark

thrust; joy enters like star-beams; mere happiness is an earth-song” (317). For Hagemeyer, then, the somber or nihilistic tone of the volume is an expression of grief, or “race-grief.” Indeed, the term “race-grief” can be particularly helpful in analyzing the peculiar volume, for, on one level, “race-grief” conveys a sense of sadness over the plight of marginalized and oppressed African American people, and, on another level, it expresses a kind of sorrow in nihilistically imagining an existence without racial identity. As Rampersad notes, many of the poems in volume—in fact, the ones that he finds the most successful—are “nihilistic” (131). And it certainly is a nihilistic volume.

### *Fields of Wonder*

*Fields of Wonder*, like many of Hughes’ collections, is divided into nine sections of poems grouped according to content. The first section, titled “Heaven,” is comprised of relatively optimistic poems, the second section, titled “Border Line,” begins with the poem of the same title and introduces the reader to Hughes’ nihilistic lyrics. In successive sections, these bleak lyrics gradually take over the volume, culminating in the seventh section “Mortal Storm,” which is headed by “A House in Taos.” After this section, however, the last two sections—“Stars over Harlem” and “Words Like Freedom”—return us to Hughes’ beloved Harlem and offer us the only explicitly political poems in the volume. Hughes was a conscientious organizer of his collections, and I will argue that his arrangement of the volume represents a specific philosophical process: the book begins with a bland acceptance of the world, becomes increasingly troubled by existential turmoil suffered by the breakdown of identity categories, reaches a crescendo in the “Mortal Storm” section—with queer poems like “A House in Taos” and “Strange Hurt” that seek to deconstruct social and sexual identities—and then returns to issues of racial

and social equality. I argue that “Mortal Storm” is a turning point in the volume, one in which the nihilism of the volume reaches a point where it allows for a deeper understanding of social ethics. That is, an intense meditation on the constructedness of the identity categories that we use to create our own individual senses of being does not destroy the desire for social justice, but, rather, exposes the arbitrariness of systematic marginalization and oppression based on artificial categories of identity.

Thus, before we examine “A House in Taos” in the context of “Mortal Storm,” we must get a sense of the larger project of the book, in terms of overall organization. We could begin with a discussion of one of the weakest poems in the volume, also the very first one, entitled “Heaven.” The poem begins: “Heaven is / The place where / Happiness is / Everywhere” (1-4). All animal, vegetable, and mineral life is personified with a seemingly vapid friendliness: “To each stone, / ‘How—do—you—do?’ / Stone answers back, / ‘Well! And you?’” (9-12). As one progresses through the first section, however, the unbridled cheerfulness of the first poem gradually fades into a more somber tone. The second section of the volume begins with Hughes’ strange, boundary-dissolving poem “Border Line” and concludes with an even darker poem, titled “End.” “There are / No clocks on the wall,” the text begins, “And no time / No shadows that move / From dawn to dusk” (1-3, 4-5). The space Hughes’ represents here certainly, as Miller would have it, is one without the passage of time. But what is the implication of this timelessness? Hughes concludes the first stanza: “There is neither light / Nor dark / Outside the door” (7-9). The second stanza is simply one line, and exclamation: “There is no door!” (8). While it does follow Miller’s assertions that Hughes’ lyrics seek to escape from linear

time, “End” is also rather representative of the kind of nihilistic poetics that Rampersad sees in the book.

As the collection moves on, these brief poems about nothingness begin to dominate the volume, interspersed here and there, that is, with some nature poems and some texts naming particular places. Indeed, an assortment of disparate geographic locations appears throughout the book: Carmel, California; Montmartre, in Paris; a cabin in Carolina; a jazz hall on Beale Street;<sup>9</sup> the Shakespearian setting of Verona in Italy, and the house in Taos with which we have already become familiar. While these poems all point to specific geographic places, the randomness of each reference creates a sense of nomadic movement. Critic Monika Kaup, in an article discussing Hughes’ transnational perspective in travelling to Cuba and meeting with and translating the work of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, offers “Border Lines” as an example of Hughes’ commitment in the thirties and forties to a “countryless nomadism” which represents a “transcultural black identity” (106). In this sense, according to Kaup, “instead of building a bridge culture ‘in between’ Africa and America, a home between the lines, Hughes’ speaker asserts the annihilation of the borderlands journey into ‘nowhere’” (106). It is a paradoxical theme: a sense of intense movement in the search after no place—after nothingness.

It is in this sustained meditation on nothingness across boundaries that we reach “A House in Taos,” the first poem in the section “Mortal Storm.” Though it is the seventh in the sequence—seemingly just a midpoint in the text—it occupies an important position, for immediately following “Mortal Storm” are the only sections that offer

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<sup>9</sup> However, this is not the same poem as “Beale Street Love.” *Fields of Wonder*’s “Beale Street” recreates a hazy, almost forgotten memory of a night out drinking and gambling in Memphis.

poems explicitly about race and politics: “Stars over Harlem” and “Words Like Freedom,” respectively. In this sense, then, the section represents a crucial turning point in the text, where Hughes moves away from the nihilistic lyrics of the first sections and into a grounded and politically conscious poetic tone. Biographically, the period represents another important change in Hughes’ life; in 1948, the year following the publication of *Fields of Wonder*, Hughes settled down for good in the top floor of a Harlem row house, where he would remain for the rest of his life (Rampersad 146). Just as *Fields of Wonder* finishes its wandering by returning to Harlem, so did Hughes himself.

Here, “A House in Taos” is almost identical to the version published some twenty years earlier in *Palms*, save for the additions of two line breaks and a comma here and there—revisions that do not seem to change the meaning or formal process of the poem. In *Fields of Wonder*, the triadic relationship between the three focal characters remains the same, but the recurring theme of nothingness in the volume emphasizes the lines “And you, she, and I / Waiting for nothingness” (9-10). In the context of *Palms*, the wait for nothingness implied a kind of soulless pretentiousness of idle intellectuals, but here “nothingness” carries with it the conceptual breakdown of boundaries and categories that we see in poems like “Border Lines” and “End.” Indeed, the nothingness that they wait for in this book is rather the complete erasure of categories of identity—in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality—and this erasure is achieved by the eroticized dance of the three characters in the desert wind, which condenses them all into “one snarl of souls.”

The poem “Strange Hurt”—also included in the “Mortal Storm” section—utilizes

some of the same tropes of interiority and exteriority as “A House in Taos.” Like “A House in Taos,” “Strange Hurt” was first published in the twenties but was not included in any of Hughes’ book collections until *Fields of Wonder*. The poem is comprised of three cinquains with varying line lengths. The first stanza reads:

In times of stormy weather  
She felt queer pain  
That said,  
‘You’ll find rain better  
Than shelter from the rain.’

The unnamed subject of the poem, introduced in line two, has a problem. In certain inopportune moments, she feels a “queer pain.” It is more than just a strange ache, though; it speaks to her. Indeed, at the most inappropriate times, this pain tells her to make decisions completely opposed to socially acceptable behavior. In the second stanza, her bizarre affliction becomes clearer. The stanza reads:

Days filled with fiery sunshine  
Strange hurt she knew  
That made  
Her seek the burning sunlight  
Rather than the shade.

The stanza has the almost the same form as the first, with nearly the same number of syllables per line within the form—with longer beginning and ending lines surrounding a two-word third line that forms the center of the stanza. On this center line, the relationship between the woman and her pain turns. In this stanza, during hot days her pain makes her prefer the glare of the sun and not shady coolness. Also note, in the first stanza the pain spoke to her, telling her she would enjoy the rain. In this stanza, however, that level of mediation disappears. The hurt does not merely suggest or vaguely tempt her, it simply forces her to comply.

In the third and final stanza, the stanzaic form shifts. Though it is still a five-line stanza, the center line is no longer a two-word line showing the relationship between the woman's pain and her consequent actions. Indeed, this relationship is entirely absent in this stanza:

In months of snowy winter  
When cozy houses hold,  
She'd break down doors  
To wander naked  
In the cold.

While in the first two stanzas the pain told her or made her act in strange ways, in this final stanza there is no difference between her ache and her actions. Indeed, she has become this pain. It drives her no longer; it is her. Consequently, in this stanza, her non-normative behavior reaches its most startling extremes. She cannot be kept indoors in a snowstorm, but will break out of any home "To wander naked / In the cold." The final image is a shock—a naked woman walking undisturbed through a snowstorm. On one level, the image is an embodiment of the threat of irrational female sexuality. But this closing must suggest, though does not present, the consequences of this action: death. And yet, as we might consider the ending line the cause of her death, the language of the poem—"In . . . winter . . . When . . . houses hold . . . She'd break down doors"—suggests that this is not an isolated action. It is a behavior, one that she repeats with some regularity.

As in "A House in Taos," houses represent the normative social order, and, in "Strange Hurt," we find a completely naked woman who embodies some kind of basic anomaly that requires her to break out of this normative structure. This image of dissident sexuality, in combination with the "queer pain" of the second line, begs for a reading. Of



course, the use of the word “queer” might seem an emphatic anachronism. And, indeed, in contemporary usage, “queer” is a term that is laden with theoretical and socio-cultural semantic significance not attached to the word in the twenties. In the initial decades of the twentieth century, the word “queer” had relatively broad, and not so deprecatory, connotations. The term meant simply “strange” or “odd.” However, the word was not without a sexual connotation, even in the modernist period. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites the earliest use of the term in print in the sense of homosexuality in 1914, in a *Los Angeles Times* article detailing the “dramatic and hideous” prosecution of a group of “shameless men.” While the article is clearly condemnatory of this group of homosexuals, the word queer is not used as a pejorative but, rather, is used by the men to describe themselves. The use of a banal word as a coded reference to non-normative sexuality seems subversive in its implications for identity politics. In this sense, the word “queer” becomes a linguistic possibility for the coding of sexuality in non-normative sexual subcultures. In spite of this, we cannot make assumptions about the semantic register that the word had for Hughes, or the connotation he meant for this particular poem. However, this “queer” feeling—even if simply meaning “out of the ordinary”—compels her to walk naked out of doors, an action which exposes her sex to the public.

Regardless of the implications of the word “queer,” Sara Ahmed’s work on “queer feelings” is helpful in understanding Hughes’ poem. For Ahmed, proscriptive, social norms impress themselves on the surfaces of everyone’s bodies, and how those bodies are allowed to “fit” together. Most notably, the obligation to compulsory heterosexuality, based on a “fantasy of difference,” relies on the possibility of reproduction and reinforcement of the normative family. This notion of family then becomes conflated with

national character, and as such reproductive heterosexuality reinforces a national, heteronormative culture. Of course, the subject can reject compulsory heterosexuality, but the ideals of heterosexual, family culture still determine even the queerest subject.

Compulsory heterosexuality determines what social spaces a queer subject can enter, and shapes the way that subject lives and loves. In a world that is structured around the ideals of heteronormative coupling, the queer subject will often, necessarily, experience discomfort in many spaces, both public and private. Comfort is how easily a body fits into a certain space or pattern. A normative subject does not experience this discomfort as their bodies, shaped by these normative ideals, fit perfectly within the contours of the social world. When one is comfortable in a space, the normative forces that shape this space seem to disappear. In this same manner, the nameless heroine of Hughes' poem feels "strange hurt" and "queer pain" that makes her leave normative spaces.

"Mortal Storm" ends with another of Hughes' nihilistic poems: "There." The titular "there," is a place

Where death  
Stretches its wide horizons.  
And the sun gallops no more  
Across the sky,  
There where nothing  
Is all (1-6).

This is a place of death, but a particular kind of death. It is a place outside the passage of time; it is a place of nothingness. Though this space seems an oppressive limbo, the empty nothingness allows for a breakdown in the barrier between self and other that becomes inspiring for the speaker:

I,  
Who am nobody,

Will become Infinity,  
Even perhaps.  
Divinity. (7-11)

Embracing the complete emptiness of the space, the speaker is able expand to infinite or perhaps even godlike proportions. With “There,” “Mortal Storm” ends, and is immediately followed by the section “Stars over Harlem,” which is—importantly—the first mention of Harlem in the entire volume. In a sense, the meandering poems of the first seven sections— spaces of abject emptiness, moving through nomadic transnational poems, and through myriad different spaces in California, New Mexico, Carolina, and Paris—have led Hughes back to the central geographic focus of his life’s work. Similarly, *Fields of Wonder* does not end so much as return to its beginning: the final poem in the collection, “Reprise,” repeats, word for word, the first poem in the volume, “Heaven.” On the first page of the book, “Heaven”—in which happiness is everywhere and everything sings—seems naïve, almost embarrassing for a poet of Hughes’ caliber, but in “Reprise,” after reading through pages and pages of bleak lyrics that question the reality of being, the tone of the poem is less bland acceptance of the world than one of weathered hope.

#### Conclusion: Queer Nihilism

Hughes would publish “A House in Taos” in one more book during his lifetime: his 1959 *Selected Poems*. Hughes chose and arranged the contributions for the volume— surveying his entire career and adding a few new poems. Hughes organized his selected poems in much the same way he organized many of his volumes: in sections of poems on similar themes and topics, for instance “Afro-American Fragments,” “Shadow of the Blues,” and “Sea and Land.” Hughes included “A House in Taos” in a section called “Distance Nowhere,” taken from the closing line of “Border Lines,” the poem that heads

the section. The title of the section is apt, for most of the desolate lyrics in this section also appeared in *Fields of Wonder*, with a few pessimistic additions. The title “Distance Nowhere” shows a new degree of spatial progression in “A House in Taos”—in its first publication, the poem was grounded in distant, Southwestern landscapes capped by the palm trees of Guadalajara; in the next, in the vague “fields of wonder” where Hughes struggles with issues of nonbeing; and, finally, to a place of absolute nothingness that is always at an acute proximity in “Distance Nowhere.” In *Palms*, the poem uses the transnational and regionalist perspective to show the ways that racially and sexually transgressive relationships can be productive outside of hegemonic norms. In *Fields of Wonder*, on the other hand, the same relationship, because it demolishes boundaries between binary identity categories of race and sexuality, conveys a deeply nihilistic tone; in blurring the boundaries of given identity categories, the result is an existential crisis.

Thus, the reason that we have found no queer record in Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance poetry is because Hughes’ queer poetics is, in a way, antagonistic to the very identity categories that inspire the black cultural movement. But even this experience of emptiness becomes productive, for, once the poems in *Fields of Wonder* pass through this meditation on nothingness, they re-center on a renewed ethnic identity and political consciousness. It makes sense, then, that this motif of nothingness is one that Hughes returned to again and again—all throughout his career—for it is the negative of his wonderful poetry in celebration of black culture and identity. Perhaps he needed this bleak counterpoint in order to remind himself of the value and richness of individual experiences of culture and identity.

## CHAPTER IV

### “MY TRESPASS VISION”:

#### DISABILITY, SEXUALITY, AND NATIONALITY IN HART CRANE’S VERSIONS OF “THE IDIOT”

American poet Hart Crane’s work is difficult; often fraught with arcane words, strained metaphors, and disjointed syntax, his intellectually challenging poetry sometimes seems inscrutable. Perhaps because of the complexity of his style, scholars have often criticized Crane’s work as simply a failure. Indeed, in order to see how ubiquitous the notion of “failure” is in Crane criticism, one only needs to take a moment to survey the number of titles that include the word, for instance: “Hart Crane’s Poetics of Failure” by Joseph Riddel (1966), *Splendid Failure: Hart Crane and the Making of the Bridge* by Edward Brunner (1985), or “The Success of Failure” by Susan Schultz (1989). But though Crane’s poetry is often admittedly obscure, the narrative of failure sometimes seems less focused on his verse than on his biography, specifically on both his promiscuous homosexuality and his shocking suicide in 1932—while returning from Mexico to the United States aboard an ocean liner, Crane unexpectedly and intentionally jumped overboard. In fact, such esteemed figures as Waldo Frank, Allen Tate, and Yvor Winters have meditated at length on Crane’s death and sex life in essays ostensibly devoted to his poetry—conflating Crane’s sexual identity, unfortunate death, and poetic output into one unified pathology.<sup>10</sup> Even in recent years, an overreliance on biography—sometimes quite homophobic in nature—persists; for example, in a 2007 review of the

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<sup>10</sup> Frank’s “Introduction” to *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane* (1933), Tate’s “Crane: The Poet as Hero” (1952), and Winters’ ““The Significance of *The Bridge* by Hart-Crane, or What Are We to Think of Professor X?” (1947).

*Library of America* volume of Crane's writings, poet-critic William Logan focuses primarily on biography, in particular Crane's "voracious" sexual appetite for "too many sailors" and his sensational suicide (18). Perhaps surprisingly, even with the advent of gay and lesbian literary studies and queer theory, many of the scholars who have sought to recover Crane's work from the failure narrative in terms of sexuality have still maintained a focus on Crane's death. For instance, while Thomas Yingling argues that Crane's negative critical heritage is symptomatic of the normative American canon which sought to "reproduce the 'lesson' of homosexuality's failure," he still finds in Crane's work "surrender to nonbeing" (8-9, 185). Similarly, Tim Dean (1996) and Gordon Tapper (2006) each theorize on Crane's work and find in his poetry a "metaphysical death of the self" and a "self-shattering eroticism," respectively (Dean 105, Tapper 38). And though their readings are often compelling, it is troubling that they each hold that Crane's poetry is often characterized by a different kind of failure—that of self-destruction.

Because of the nature of Crane's life and death, he has, in many ways, become a figure for both the "lost generation" of American modernists and for the fatal repression of sexual minorities in the twentieth century, and, as such, it might seem that we could never acknowledge the importance of Crane's doomed biography and find anything but sexualized trauma and death in his poetry. As Brian Reed argues, Crane's "suicide has undefined but profound 'historical significance' for anyone who wishes to diagnose the fallen condition—whether psychological, social, economic, or theological—of the present age" (4). In a sense, when we talk about Crane's biography, we are not talking about his circumstances in particular but, rather, about modernity's fatal inhospitability to those marginalized others who could not conform to social norms and survive in

modernity. But though we may have gained some critical traction in reducing Crane to a figure for all troubled modernists or self-destructive homosexuals, we may have lost sight of Crane's poetry. To put another way, have we become unable to see any points in Crane's work where his alternative sexuality offered productive insight rather than destructive abstraction? One way to escape dominant critical debates over Crane's supposed failure is to turn not to his most canonical works—his first lyric collection *White Buildings* and the elaborately organized American epic *The Bridge*—but to Crane's most marginal work intended for his last, unfinished collection *Key West: An Island Sheaf*. For while it is almost impossible to enter the discourse on Crane's earlier work without addressing the overwhelming questions of where and how his work fails, Crane scholars to date have almost entirely ignored Crane's latter work. And it is here that we can, as much as possible, approach Crane's poetry anew.

Critics and scholars have generally forgotten *Key West*, because, first of all, it is unfinished. The collection as it we have it today is taken from manuscript material currently archived at Columbia University; the holograph pages that comprise the suite were found in a manila folder among Crane's papers after his death, with type-written pages indicating the title, epigraph, and table of contents of the work along with typescripts of each poem. To complicate matters, however, the folder also contained several poems not listed in the table of contents, and it is unclear if Crane meant to include them or simply happened to put them in the folder as he travelled. Further, some readers and editors—most notably Frank in editing the first volume of Crane's collected work—have argued by editorial arrangement that some poems not included in the folder would have become part of the collection—in particular Crane's last poem "The Broken

Tower.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the collection remains quite unstable in terms of Crane’s actual intent, and it is further troubled by the fact that, per Crane’s handwritten emendations on the manuscripts in the folder, he was still actively revising the individual texts at the time of his death.

In addition to its unfinished status, the collection is also difficult to place in Crane’s broader body of work on both a stylistic and thematic level. While only two critics have discussed the collection as a whole, each has noted the uncharacteristicness of the component texts. Edward Brunner argues that the suite is “untypical” of Crane’s work since “there are no expressions of love, and no poems that end in an ecstasy of celebration; there are no poems of city life and no poems focusing on the machine. Moreover, their language is noteworthy for its clarity and directness” (202). Similarly, Margaret Dickie focuses on the thematic peculiarities of the volume. For Dickie, “the island poems are uniquely static and lifeless. It is surprising that while Crane’s letters from Isle of Pines are full of references to mimosa, oleanders in full bloom, the fecundity of strange fruits and vegetables, he should choose to write poems about the dry groins of the underbrush, the parched air plant, flat slabs of marble, the fruitless palm tree” (179). Indeed, these poems are for the most part focused on plants or objects that cannot reproduce or people who are not productive in socially acceptable ways. In this sense, Dickie finds the cycle “death-ridden” and notes that the poems “express an intense desire for obliteration; but what the poet seeks to obliterate is the sense of otherness that overwhelms him” (158). For her, the collection overall exhibits a kind of destructive theme but not a self-destructive one.

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<sup>11</sup> For the purposes of my argument, I will use Crane’s own table of contents as the definitive organizational statement of the collection.



In fact, though the material instability of the collection and the thematic and stylistic incompatibility with the rest of Crane's oeuvre might give some critics reason to ignore *Key West*, these same issues might also open up fresh possibilities in Crane studies—new capabilities to escape from dominant readings of sex and death as immanent features of Crane's work. For instance, for all its incompleteness, the folder full of works in progress demonstrates an often overlooked fact: Crane was a studious reviser of his works, who sometimes toiled on individual texts and collections for years. In this way, it becomes clear that Crane's poetry is not simply an abstract representation of self-obliteration written down in an ecstatic trance—as much Crane criticism would suggest, as I will explain below—but rather a longtime labor of poetic craft. Further, *Key West* also challenges our perceptions of what the characteristic style and content of Crane's work actually is—for if Crane planned an entire collection with mostly uncomplicated poetic language, often infertile and sexless objects, and focused on death but not self-destruction, we might have to reconsider the dominant narrative that holds that Crane's work is densely obscure, often conflates sex and death, and generally evokes self-destruction.

And yet, though the volume does not contain any poems of darkly erotic urban sexual encounters that have alternately scandalized or titillated Crane scholars throughout the years, marginalized sexual identity is not entirely absent from the volume—in fact, it is central to the arrangement. That is, “The Idiot,” the poem in the very middle of *Key West*, equidistant from the first and last poems, is about a young man with a cognitive disability who is explicitly sexualized and socially marginalized because of his ability.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The term “idiot” has in this period an ambivalent usage, for, though the word is used today primarily as an insult, in the 1920s the word was sometimes a pejorative and at other times was one of the accepted

The subject of the poem—based on Crane’s real-life interactions with a person while on an extended vacation on the Isle of Pines in Cuba in 1926—has a rich publication and manuscript history beyond its intended inclusion in *Key West*. “The Idiot” took shape in various writings that Crane worked on from 1926 through 1932—from the text of a letter to his friend and modernist impresario Waldo Frank, through a scrapped component of Crane’s American epic *The Bridge*, to its publication in a suite of poems in the Paris-based literary magazine *transition* in 1927, and into the last extant manuscripts found in the folder after Crane’s death. With a focus on the material instantiation of these versions, I will highlight the way Crane’s homoerotically inclined speaker identifies with the intellectually disabled man who, like the speaker, is alienated from society. But beyond a simple expression of sympathy between two oppressed men, I will argue that this identification between two people with differently marginalized identities shifts within and outside the border of the US in terms of poetic setting and publication history and, in doing so, will interpret Crane’s understanding of the nature of social marginalization as it relates to the national boundaries of the US.

#### The Morbid Tradition in Crane Criticism

But before we move onto an examination of the various instantiations of “The Idiot,” a mostly forgotten poem, we must first understand the decades-long critical trend that necessitates material recovery work of this kind, and, in particular, how some canonical treatments of Crane’s work have cast both his sexuality and death as integrally related and immanent components of his poetry, which serves to diminish Crane’s agency

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legal and medical terms for someone with an intellectual disability. In its roots in the early modern period, the word had various registers as well and could denote simply “ignorant, uneducated person; a simple or ordinary person” or could describe a person who was intellectually disabled from birth (OED, Digby 2).

in writing consciously. For the purposes of discussing this morbid tradition in Crane scholarship, I divide such academic work into two distinct categories: first, that of criticism by well-known, heterosexual-identified author critics who pathologize and marginalize Crane's sexual identity, and, second, contemporary queer theoretical interventions from theorists who find in Crane's poetics an eroticized performance of self-destruction. Though both groups have vastly different perspectives and intentions in discussing Crane's work in these ways, both often seem to present Crane as an ecstatic or unstable mystic whose poetry was inherently shaped by a conflation of homosexuality and suicidality. In turn, this renders Crane's individual works as merely aspects of internal psychological disorder and forecloses the possibility of understanding his poetry as consciously constructed and engaged with and responding to real-world social issues.

While negative reviews of Crane's work existed during his lifetime—response to *The Bridge* was not particularly laudatory—criticism following his death took a decidedly different tone. In a sense, Crane's suicide was so shocking that it not only overwhelmed biographical studies but subtly invaded scholarly criticism of his work.

Pointing this trend out in a 1981 article, Allen Grossman muses that critics

describe relationships between the catastrophe of Hart Crane's life and the nature of his work, different, I think, in degree and perhaps also in kind from such relationships in other authors. It is agreed, whatever else may be in question in the matter of Crane, that he was, undeniably, a poet of stature; and that the sources both of his unquestionable achievement and of his equally unquestionable aberration (whether the latter be considered as an imperfection of his work, or his stopping of that work in death) are inextricably bound up with the sources of his monumental authenticity as an artist. (841)

Indeed, by the time Grossman writes on Crane, he must remind the reader that Crane was not only a spectacular suicide but also a respected poet in his day. Grossman notes that “Critics of Crane,” historically, “assume relationships of cause and effect between his

philosophic and (I would add) stylistic decisions, and his suicide. . . . But the psychological causes of Crane's suicide could not have been determined by, or healed, in the context of his art" (872). For Grossman, much of the trajectory of Crane's criticism has sought to understand the psychological trauma of Crane's self-destruction, but this is an impossible expectation, for Crane's poems are artistic objects and not psychological symptoms. Indeed, Grossman gets to the heart of the self-destructive lens in Crane scholarship; it is not so much an attempt to universalize Crane as a martyr but, in each instance, a deeply personal attempt to come to terms with the trauma and tragedy of modernity.

Probably the earliest example of critical expression of intimate grief is in the introduction to the first edition of *The Collected Poems of Hart Crane*, published in 1933, which sought to interpret Crane's suicide using the symbolic lexicon of his poetry. Waldo Frank—modernist impresario, editor of the volume, and close friend of Crane—discusses the poet's biography and work at length in the introduction. In the essay, Frank seeks to understand his friend's death in and through his poetry and finds "a synthesis attained by the symbolic use of the Sea" throughout Crane's entire body of work (xvi). Frank describes the trope of "the Sea"—with a capital S—as "objective, huge, hostile, encompassing, [and] maternal" (xvi). Frank's reading of the sea as the central motif of Crane's writing provides a thematic synthesis for each of Crane's disparate collections—from nautical-themed "Voyages" of *White Buildings*, through the New York harbor settings of *The Bridge*, and into the tropical poems of *Key West*. From the prevalence of oceanic imagery, Frank extends his reading beyond motif and into biography, relating both Crane's sexuality and his alcoholism back to the sea:

It was not accidental that Crane's tender friendships were with boys who followed the Sea. And drink was the Sea's coadjutor; for it gave Crane release not, as with most men, from the burden of *separateness* from life, but from the more intolerable burden of *continuity* with life's chaos. The Sea had ebbed, while he stood high above it on his mythic Bridge; now again it was rising. (xix)

Here we find an indirect acknowledgement of Crane's sexuality—in particular his predilection for sailors—and an apology for Crane's drinking problem. In Frank's account, Crane, both as a poet and as an individual, was an outsider. Because of his peculiar sensibilities, Crane was a visionary, always observing the world as though apart from it, yet always confined within it. Particularly sensitive to the overwhelming sensations of existence, Crane was well-suited for poetry but poorly equipped for life. For Frank, Crane should be permitted moral indiscretions of sex and alcohol because of his overwrought, poetic nature: “he let the world pour in; and since his nuclear self was not disciplined to detachment from his nerves and passions, he lived exacerbated in a constant swing between ecstasy and exhaustion. Therefore, he needed the tangent release of excess drink and sexual indulgence” (xiv). Thus, according to Frank, the sea represented for Crane a “retreat into the unity of immersion and of dissolution” that was both a source of life and death (xix). It would seem that all of Crane's behaviors were rooted in his neurotically existential nature.

Frank's work was the first—but certainly not the last—that privileged readings of Crane's last moments as key to understanding his work; in his 1947 book of essays *In Defense of Reason*, Yvor Winters offers his own brand of biographically influenced criticism of Crane's long poem *The Bridge*. Winters claims that Crane's entire moral ideology was based on Walt Whitman's work, which came to him via Ralph Waldo Emerson, who rooted his philosophy in English Romantic ideology. Winters finds this

supposed Whitmanian-Emersonian-Romantic philosophy as inherently dangerous; after an extensive discussion of Emerson's essays with lengthy quotes, he concludes: "The doctrine of Emerson and Whitman, if really put into practice, should lead to suicide: in the first place, if the impulses are indulged systematically and passionately, they can lead only to madness; in the second place, death, according to the doctrine, is not only a release from suffering but is also and inevitably the way to beatitude" ("Significance" 590). The central problem, in Winters' estimation, with Crane's supposed doctrine was that it called for radical commitment to individual experience of pleasure. According to Winters, the impulses that Crane indulged were clear: "He was certainly homosexual . . . , and he became a chronic and extreme alcoholic. I should judge that he cultivated these weaknesses on principle" ("Significance" 589). Here, Crane is a decadent hedonist who chose his sexuality and alcoholism in service to a defective ideology.

In Frank's and Winters' renderings, Crane's poetry is foremost an instrument in understanding his death, but, a few years later, Allen Tate would make an even more marked pathologization of Crane's sexuality with the use of a more psychoanalytic lens. Writing for *The New Republic* in 1952, Tate—another of Crane's friends—would review the first publication of *The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932*, edited by Brom Weber. In the article, Tate feels compelled to comment on Crane's sexuality and suicide, beginning with an emotional admission: "I hope I shall not have to follow this desperate, melancholy life again" (25). For Tate, this is the last time he will try to ponder what might have compelled Crane's death, but, weighing the options of what might have driven the suicide, Tate notes Crane's difficult childhood with warring, divorced parents and his commitment to homosexuality in young adulthood: "He had definitely been

confirmed in his homosexuality and cut off finally from any relationship in which the security necessary to mutual love was possible” (25). For Tate, Crane’s sexuality was a fatal sickness: “The ‘causes’ of homosexuality are no doubt as various as the causes of other neuroses. But the effect on the victim seems to be uniform: they are convinced that they cannot be loved, and they become incapable of loving” (25). In any case, some of the attendant symptoms of Crane’s sexual pathology seem to define his poetry; according to Tate, Crane “had an abnormally acute response to the physical world, an exacerbation of the nerve-ends, along with an incapacity to live within the limitations of the human condition” (25). Again, Crane is cast as neurotic to an almost mystical degree—ecstatically experiencing life in excess but unable to maintain existence in such a manner.

Descriptions of Crane as an ecstatic yet troubled mystic acted to explain both Crane’s inability to survive in the real world as well as his densely obscure poetic style. In perhaps the most illustrative example of this, Winters recounts a conversation he and Crane had in which the poet admitted “that he often did not understand his poems till after they were written” (585). Winters makes much of this, arguing that the reason Crane’s poetry is so difficult, abstract, and ecstatic is because Crane wrote it in a mystical trance, for, according to Winters’ estimation of Crane’s inheritance of Romantic thought, “the poet [. . .] is merely a passive medium” (585). Indeed, the word “medium” is entirely appropriate to Winters’ argument since he explicitly equates the image he has constructed of Crane’s writing process with the occult practice of automatic writing (585). Winters’ reading of Crane’s writing is an assertion of the poet’s pathology—his poems demonstrate only a fractured and unhealthy subconscious that fails to achieve poetic greatness. And yet, given the fact that even Winters admits that Crane’s poetry has some

beautiful moments, he also figures Crane as a kind of “savant” of poetry, completely transparent in his work, who through no conscious direction could create some moments of beauty.

The notion of Crane as an ecstatic mystic or troubled savant created by the above examples forms the backbone of almost all the nearly century-long body of Crane criticism. In Gorham Munson’s words, Crane was a “‘mystic’ on the loose” whose poetry consisted of the “divine madness” of “ecstatic illuminations” (50, 44, 48). Similarly, Frank notes that Crane “lived exacerbated in a constant swing between ecstasy and exhaustion” (xiv). Indeed, “ecstasy” is a term that is almost ubiquitous in Crane scholarship up to the present. In addition to the likes of Frank and Munson, sympathetic contemporary critics like Thomas Yingling, Tim Dean, and Brian Reed all agree on the ecstatic nature of Crane’s style. As Edward Brunner notes, reviewers of Crane’s poetry, historically, cast it as “the product of his conversion to some remote brand of mysticism. The reason, they explained, that his language was so dense, so obscure, was that as a mystic he habitually saw into a dimension separate from that of ordinary experience” (1). In a larger project to emphasize Crane’s placement in a history of the development of gay and lesbian identity, Nealon also argues that “Crane has been accused of believing in a mystical, cyclical idea of history, and this claim has fed on the homophobic accusation that his writing did not achieve a normative ‘maturity’” (30).

Despite the exposure of the morbid focus in much of Crane scholarship by Brunner, Nealon, and Grossman, this biographical treatment would persist even into the twenty-first century. In a series of controversial articles in high-profile literary journals in 2007 and 2008, which academics have yet to address in Crane scholarship, contemporary



poet Logan lambasted Crane's literary reputation in starkly biographical terms. As a reviewer, Logan is well-known and respected but has a reputation as a particularly harsh critic. For instance, in a 1999 review, Robert McDowell describes Logan as "a high-profile, honest reviewer of poetry," who, at the same time, is also known as "the most hated man in American poetry" for his generally negative reviews (801). And Logan revels in this reputation. In fact, not only did he not object to McDowell's "hated" epigraph but rather uses it consistently on his book jackets. In 2007, Writing for *The New York Times Book Review*, Logan evaluated the first *Library of America* edition of Hart Crane's *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*. Since the volume included not only Crane's poetry but a selection of his letters, Logan took the opportunity not just to review Crane's body of work but his life story—much in the same way that Frank, Winters, and Tate before him had felt compelled to do.

Logan begins the review, just as many other essays on Crane begin, with a description of Crane's final moments aboard the *Orizaba*. But throughout the rest of the essay, Crane's troubled life and early death are, for the most part, the focus of Logan's critique. For instance, in regard to Langdon Hammer's editorship of the volume, Logan criticizes Hammer's biographical notes on Crane's life, complaining that "the chronology of Crane's life averts its gaze from his athletic philandering and the exact events leading to his suicide—he had been badly beaten during the night by a sailor he propositioned" (18). While this is true, Crane was beaten after his below-deck overtures to a crewmember, Logan's assumption here seems to be that Crane's non-normative sexuality rightly caused him to be assaulted and was the sole instigator of his suicide. But perhaps most telling in Logan's review is in a small admission of praise—or, rather, a "backdoor

compliment”—that Logan gives at the end of the article: “his best lines are extraordinary, even if there are few major poems, or even very good ones. He failed to write the poetry of the American continent Emerson was calling for before the Civil War: if the ideal seems naïvely nationalistic now, the country was once younger and less cynical. Crane was no innovative genius like Whitman; he was perhaps closer to a peasant poet like John Clare, an outsider too susceptible to praise and other vices of the city” (15). The passage begins with a relatively common statement in Crane criticism: though his entire body of work is a failure, there are some brilliant points—this harkens back to criticism that represented Crane as an untrained savant who only accidentally hit some high notes. But more puzzling is Logan’s comparison of Crane to Clare, for what could an urbanite homosexual son of an industrial tycoon have in common with a mid-nineteenth century, working-class, British poet? Though Logan chalks it up to Crane’s defensiveness about a lack of college, I would argue that the tacit connection is that Clare is just as well-known for his nearly lifelong battle with mental illness as he is for his class location. In this sense, Logan casts Crane as a troubled savant who stumbled upon some excellent lines once in a while, perhaps because of a pathology that made him “susceptible” to “vices of the city” and makes him somehow unfit to write poetry or to be representative of American literary culture.

With the rise of queer studies in the 1990s, theorists sought to recover Crane’s work from the dominant narratives of literary failure through readings focused on Crane’s marginalized sexual identity, but even many of these re-readings still deliberately maintained a heightened focus on his tragic suicide. In his landmark work on the poet, Thomas Yingling notes that Crane’s “work is almost universally deemed short-sighted,

failed, or unreadable, and yet he remains a canonical presence” (8). According to Yingling, Crane’s contradictory placement in American letters is emblematic of the placement of homosexual poets in the American canon in general: “Only within an intensely patriarchal tradition (one where, not long ago, only the figures of white heterosexual, male-identified writers were accorded true value) would there be this insistent need to reproduce the ‘lesson’ of homosexuality’s failure; only within a tradition that needed to defend the manhood of its exemplary figures could this become a naturalized practice” (8-9). Indeed, in terms of sexuality, the subtext of Crane’s poetry is often a sexuality that he cannot explicitly express, and, thus, his oeuvre must always be figured, on a basic level, as inherently a failure in communication.

In this way, the same theoretical interventions that sought to reframe Crane not as a failure but rather a writer impoverished by persistently homophobic biographical criticism, often served to code suicidal impulses into his poetry on a theoretical level—in a sense refiguring Crane’s failure as existential. For instance, Yingling, in discussing Crane’s use of the sublime, claims that “Crane produced a volume of writing that directs its reader to consider it as a body, as the site of contradictory drives and heterogeneous matter” (145). This body strives for an ecstatic transcendence, for “‘moments in eternity’ where the body could be forgotten” (185). Ultimately, this desire comes to paradoxically “signify as well the ‘end’ of desire in a sublimity that is . . . the surrender to nonbeing” (185). This symbolic use of self-destruction is also apparent in Tim Dean’s essay “Hart Crane’s Poetics of Privacy.” According to Dean, Crane’s sexuality was an open secret both in his poetry and his life, easily accessible for anyone who might be interested. Crane creates poems that attempt to circumvent the logic of the closet; in order to do so,

Crane creates a new type of privacy: “Crane’s ontological lyric privacy is founded on an experience that shatters its subject [. . .]. Intensity eliminates inviolate identity” (105). For Dean, Crane only escapes from the constraints of the closet via a lyric performance of the ecstatic disintegration of individuality, in which the “self is consumed . . . by an experiential intensity whose connotations are unmistakably erotic” (97). In an analysis of a poem from *White Buildings*, Dean takes this argument a step further by figuring this ecstatic breakdown of identity in an explicitly sexual manner as “the *petite mort* of orgasm or the metaphysical death of the self” (96). Thus, for Dean, Crane’s poetics consist of an eroticized performance of orgasmic death. While both Dean and Yingling offer substantial contributions to Crane beyond a homophobic marginalization, Crane’s suicide looms large in their analyses and correlates directly to his sexuality.

The problems with the morbid tradition in Crane scholarship are various: first, it either naturalizes or eroticizes a direct correlation between non-normative sexuality and suicide; second, it makes Crane’s work only destructive and never constructive; and, finally, it reduces Crane’s poetic output to a mere symptom of a suicidal psychosis and, subsequently, eliminates Crane’s agency in writing. That is, if we read Crane’s work only as symptomatic of psychological distress, our reading forecloses the possibility of understanding his poems as studiously crafted aesthetic objects that represent real-world issues. That is, even if Crane’s composition of poetry was spontaneous or mystical, his revision was anything but. For instance, Winters bases his assertion that Crane’s poetry consists of automatic writing on a fundamental misunderstanding of Crane’s writing process, for, assuming Crane was honest in his statement to Winters about not knowing the subject of a poem until after he wrote it—he may have been simply posturing to the

fellow writer—that does not explain the fact that Crane often revised poems for years after the initial writing. In this sense, in fact, Crane actually spent exponentially more time revising his poetry than he did composing it, and, during this length of time, might surely have developed an understanding of his texts.

For example, Crane’s poem “O Carib Isle!” is almost unrecognizable from its first to its final version. For proof of the profundity of Crane’s work in revising this poem, one can simply perform a quick internet search of Crane’s “O Carib Isle!” The most prominent result one might find would probably be from the web site of the Poetry Foundation—publisher of the venerable and long-lived literary magazine *Poetry*. If, after reading the obviously avant-garde, free-verse text, one were to follow the site’s link to a scan of the poem as it appeared in the October 1927 issue of *Poetry*, the reader might be surprised to see a strikingly different poem comprised of quatrains and cinquains of blank verse. The differences in the words, syntax, and structure of the two poems are immense. In a way, the two versions are entirely different poems. If we attend to the sometimes slight and sometimes vast differences between Crane’s versions, we can understand that Crane’s work in revision was not just about systematically progressing toward one authoritative text but was a process of deployment in which the same poetic subject functioned differently in various magazines, books, or collections. The different incarnations of the same poetic subject often show allow for dramatically different interpretations, which, rather than confusing a final version create a spectrum of depth to a subject treated differently in different contexts.

Of course, Crane was not the only heavy reviser in modernism—it is to many a hallmark of the period that differentiates the era from previous literary ages—but his

revision process is hardly, if ever, discussed.<sup>13</sup> And yet one of the most striking absences in Crane scholarship to date is an extended review of Crane's sometimes profound process of revision, in which Crane sometimes worked on a text for years.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, rather than focusing on the actual material texts that survived Crane, scholarship seems more focused on reading failure and death into his poetry—a correlation that is easily used to support claims that Crane was a failure as a poet. In the above morbidly biographical renderings, Crane is a mystic who can hardly cope with the sensations of living in a corporeal world; concerned only with abstract spiritual matters, he longs for release from this earthly world. His poetry, like his psyche, is fractured and on the edge of complete dissolution. And the job of the critic of Crane is to relentlessly focus on his death and read it into his whole corpus—either in a homophobic doctrine in which his death is morally justified and unavoidable or in a queer activist model in which an experience of grief becomes a rallying cry. One way to think of critical responses to Crane's life and work is that critics are more fascinated by a kind of grim aestheticization of the immateriality of Crane's disappearance into the sea—his remains were never recovered—than they are by the material legacy of his work—the delicate sheets of onion-skin typing paper that have survived in archival collections. It is only with a scrupulous focus on the physical reality of Crane's texts—in the manuscripts, magazines, and books that have survived, that we can avoid falling victim to the common critical pitfall of an overly sensational, morbidly biographical criticism.

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, Hannah Sullivan, in *The Work of Revision*.

<sup>14</sup> Brunner is one exception.

### The Isle of Pines, and *The Bridge*

Rather than thinking of Crane as an ecstatic mystic for whom poetry was a spontaneous transcription of an internalized experience of self-destruction, we might undertake a material study of Crane's rich writing process in order to understand his work as intelligently engaged with the social world and often sensitive to the complex realities of marginalized peoples. One of the best examples both of Crane's vastly alternate versions and of the way his personal experience of non-normative sexual identity allowed him a complex understanding of social marginalization in others is "The Idiot." The various versions of "The Idiot" were inspired by an actual person, a young man with a cognitive disability, with whom Crane interacted on the Isle of Pines in Cuba while on an extended working holiday at his family's vacation home—Villa Casas, a former colonial plantation (Mariani 218). During the time of Crane's stay in 1926, the border between the US and Cuba was still relatively indeterminate on the Isle of Pines at the time—the island had been a possession of the US following the Spanish-American War and only in 1925, the year before Crane's visit, did the Hay-Quesada Treaty acknowledge the isle as rightfully a part of Cuba. In terms of the texts themselves, the island setting of the poem shifts in and out of the borders of the US in the poetic arrangements in which Crane included the various instantiations—Crane's 1930 essentially American epic *The Bridge*, a brief suite of Caribbean-inspired verses in the transatlantic literary magazine *transition* entitled "East of Yucatan," and as manuscripts meant for his unfinished book *Key West: An Island Sheaf*. The fluctuating geographical location inherent in each of these arrangements—moving in and out of the periphery of the US border from Florida to

Cuba—emphasizes the importance of national identity in describing this young man as either integrated in or separated from society.

Interestingly, Crane began work on “The Idiot” and the other poems of *Key West* at the same time he was writing his American epic, *The Bridge*. While *The Bridge* seeks to synthesize American nationalism internally, Crane’s island suite—with its blurring of national boundaries—represents the shadow side of that song of national spirit, focusing not on what it was like to be at the center of the US but from the outside—on a distant Caribbean island—or at its very margins—the southernmost point in the nation. Thus, the Caribbean poems express a transnational perspective, and, in the words of Paul Giles, “can probe the significance of cultural jagged edges, structural paradoxes, or other forms of apparent incoherence and illuminate our understanding of where the culture of the United States is positioned within a framework of broader global affairs” (65). In focusing on the jagged edges of “cultural conflict,” Giles finds that “To problematize the geographical integrity of the United States is, inevitably, also to problematize the ‘natural’ affiliation of certain values with a territory that can no longer be regarded as organically complete or self-contained” (64). In these texts, then, the shifting border problematizes dominant notions of ability and sexuality and shows the way that ableist, homophobic, and otherwise repressive doctrines of marginalization are intricately interwoven in ideologies of American nationalism.

Indeed, in Crane’s renderings non-normative sexuality and ability seem inseparably linked, for the young man who becomes the subject of Crane’s poem is ostracized from society because of his mental ability but this marginalization is represented in a specifically sexualized manner. The complex elaboration of the young



man's sexuality is perhaps best evidenced by Crane's first reference to the young man in writing, in a letter to Waldo Frank from August of 1926:

I have made up a kind of friendship with that idiot boy, who is always on the road when I come into town for mail. He has gone so far as to answer my salutations. I was unexpected witness one day of the most astonishing spectacle; not that I was surprised.—A group of screaming children were shrieking about in a circle. I looked toward the house and saw the boy standing mostly hid behind the wooden shutters behind the gratings; his huge limp phallus waved out at them from some opening; the only other part visible was his head, in a most gleeful grin, swaying above the lower division of the blinds.

When I saw him next he was talking to a blue little kite high in afternoon. He is rendingly beautiful at times; I have encountered him in the road, talking again tout seul and examining pebbles and cinders and marble chips through the telescope of a twice-opened tomato can. He is very shy, hilarious,—and undoubtedly idiot. I have been surprised to notice how much the other children like him. (*Letters* 273)

To be sure, the most shocking part of this description is Crane's observation of the young man exposing his genitals to a group of local children who react by screaming resoundingly while the young man smiles gleefully. And yet, though Crane was witness to this inappropriate action, he is hardly repulsed by the young man. In fact, Crane seems to be rather attracted to the young man, for he calls him "rendingly beautiful," a poetic or aesthetic portrayal, but is also sure to note his "huge limp phallus," a distinctly sexual description. But rather than shying away from the uncomfortable sexuality of the young man's exposure, Crane goes on to use this image as a key descriptor for the young man's character. The subsequent texts articulate a sense of sexual abjection, of judgment and praise, repulsion and attraction.

Crane's next attempt to represent the young man occurred not much later than the letter, in his draft of the poem "Lenses," a rejected component of Crane's American epic *The Bridge*. Crane described this multi-part long poem as "a mystical synthesis of 'America'" in which disparate voices throughout the history of the US came together

under the figure of the Brooklyn Bridge (*Letters* 124). Though Crane eventually chose to cancel “Lenses” by crossing out the entire text of the manuscript, the fact that he considered the Cuban-inspired poem for his quintessentially American collection is significant in a discussion of marginality and nationalism. The young man is the central figure of the opening half of “Lenses,” which begins by placing a Caribbean location for the opening stanzas of the poem: “In the focus of the evening there is this island with the buzz of saw mills, the crunch and blast of quarries; furnaces, chisels and ploughs” (1).<sup>15</sup> In the next line of the poem, the young man from the Isle of Pines appears: “And the idiot boy by the road, with carbonated eyes, laughing or extending a phallus through the grating,—talking to a kite high in the afternoon, or in the twilight scanning pebbles among cinders in the road through a twice opened tomato can” (2). The poetic portrait of the young man is quite similar to Crane’s prose description in the letter to Frank and contains the key characteristics of the young man as a poetic emblem: his self-exposure of his genitals, his intense pleasure in flying a kite, and his rapt focus on everyday objects. The poem continues: “And there is work, blood, suet and sweat,—the rigamarole / of wine and mandolins. Midnight; and maybe love . . .” (3-4). The image of the young man suggests the simplicity of island life and love and disappears into unspoken, elliptical possibilities. The young man becomes a figure, then, for the prospect of a productive life of uncomplicated beauty and happiness.

Following these lines Crane gradually shortens the long, prose-like lines that he begins the poem with, and uses primarily to describe the young man, into centered,

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<sup>15</sup> I will cite poems by line number.

symmetrical lines that taper into single words as the poem collapses into closure and shifts suddenly to a new narrative:

And there is, as Mr. Budge explained before his  
chorea took him away — there is the Nine of  
three-times-three, the hopeful plasm,  
the vigilance of the ape, the repe-  
tition of the parrot. Locks on  
doors and lips of agony to  
dance upon. And there is

time for these; time for all these, as cattle and birds  
know, Mr.  
Budge -  
why did  
you  
die  
so  
soon  
?

There is  
this gate of  
wrath.

According to this new character, Mr. Budge, there will always be facts of nature. Or, perhaps more accurately, there will always be naturalized facts. There is a formal tension inherent in the text. The freedom of the paragraph like lines of the opening section give way to a gradual reduction of the lines, which suggests a repressive movement away from the subject of the first stanzas—the island and the young man—to one who is much more practical, from a visionary to pedant. But a pedant who is dead and gone. Indeed, it is almost as though the formal history of the United States, fettered with pedantic old religious men, is too restrictive for the young man. Ultimately, after this shift in subject the poem culminates only in a “gate of wrath” which segues into what would have been the next poem in *The Bridge*: “The Tunnel,” a poem which details a

subway ride figured as a descent into hell. In the initial stanzas of “Lenses,” however, there is a freedom, both formal and thematic. There is opportunity and beauty and love with no restrictions. Ultimately, however, Crane decided not to include “Lenses” in *The Bridge*. Bear in mind, too, that “Lenses” is the only version on this motif that Crane chose to cancel and cut from the intended collection because neither the blissful island setting of the poem nor the idyllic life of sexual freedom fit in his vision of *The Bridge*. Perhaps, this unproblematic vision of life, love, and work is simply not possible within a US context.

#### “East of Yucatan”

Crane was by no means through with the image of the young islander, and, probably immediately after rejecting “Lenses,” Crane set to work on writing a new version of the poem, focused entirely on the young man, set in a vague location outside of the US border, and published in a European literary journal. “El Idiota,” appeared in the ninth issue of the literary review *transition* in December of 1927, as part of a suite of five poems titled “East of Yucatan.” In this brief collection, “El Idiota” is the fourth poem in the sequence, following “Island Quarry,” “Royal Palm,” and “Overheard”<sup>16</sup> and preceding “The Hour!”<sup>17</sup> Visually, these poems are all quite similar. They are closed form, conventional verse poems, each rhymed and metered. This was not Crane's first publication in *transition*. Crane had already contributed four poems on two occasions to the journal, including a prominent publication in the first issue. And Crane had not even sought out the review. The editor, Eugene Jolas, had been so impressed with Crane's

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<sup>16</sup> The later version was titled “Bacardi Spreads the Eagle’s Wing”

<sup>17</sup> The later version was titled “The Hurricane”

work that he solicited the first contribution from the poet, and featured “O Carib Isle!” in issue number one of *transition* still in April of 1927 as the first poem in the poetry section. Upon receiving a copy of the journal after it was printed, Crane was quite “enthusiastic about it” and was pleased to be published alongside such esteemed figures as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and André Gide (*My Friends* 331). Indeed, despite the lack of financial support afforded by the magazine, *transition* would become one of Crane’s favorite forums for publication, and Jolas would publish much of Crane’s later poetry in the journal.

*Transition* was an English-language journal published in Paris by editor Eugene Jolas and, running off and on for over a decade, *transition* was wildly successful compared to comparable journals of the period. In addition to Crane, *transition* published figures like Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and James Joyce—serially publishing *Finnegan’s Wake* for the first time. In terms of its mission, *transition* has a distinctly transnational and avant-garde agenda. In *The Little Magazine: A History and Bibliography* (1946), Frederick John Hoffman, Charles Albert Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich call *transition* “one of the most interesting and challenging of all the little magazines” and argue that the journal intended a systematic overhaul of contemporary literature: “To Anglo-American literature was to be brought the spirit of French modernism; to the Continent, young American rebels were to be introduced. To present a synthesis of German expressionism, of Dadaism, and of surrealism; to revolutionize language, [and] to present a new idiom” were the immediate goals of the review (287, 173). According to Michael North, Jolas, born to bilingual Franco-German parents in the US, “purposely juxtaposed French, German, and English, and drew from the conflict

entirely new, synthetic words” (210). Similarly, Rainer Rumold argues that Jolas’ intent in the journal was to pursue “an idealist vision of a multi-lingual, transnational, universalist poetic language for modernity” (46). Thus, throughout its run, one of the core projects of the journal was a focus on creating a multicultural and transnational aesthetic space.

Though the overall transnational and multilingual project of the journal is perhaps best known by the controversial 1929 “Revolution of the Word” manifesto, which called for literary license to create new words and grammatical structures, the earlier issues in which Crane published showed the same avant-garde aesthetics but with a more distinctly American point of focus. The transnational and multilingual project of the journal is clear from the beginning of the magazine’s run but is emphatic in the same issue in which “East of Yucatan” appeared. In this issue, Jolas clarified the American-centered but internationally focused mission of the magazine, explaining that he hopes “for an esthetic synthetism in which not only Europe and Asia will coalesce into a new flowering, but to which also the two Americas will bring their vision” (191). For Jolas, the only way to do this is to ignore national boundaries: “Art and literature do not represent a geographic condition, but as in the most fruitful historic events, when each nation contributed its share to the whole, they can conquer again the universal supremacy of the spirit” (192). Thus, the geographical location of the suite as somewhere “East of Yucatan” fits nicely with the transnational account of modernism that *transition* extolled, for the arrangement is of Caribbean-themed poems written by an American in an international context.

The suite of poems is comprised of five poems and offers a thematic narrative arc focused on productivity—both reproductive and economic—as it relates to mortality. The

cycle begins with “Island Quarry,” and, in the title alone, the poem makes the island setting clear. The text is comprised of two stanzas in iambs, but, though the metrical regularity would imply the poem is in a traditional verse form, the lines are irregular in length. Some lines are as short as four feet while some are over seven, giving the poem a free-verse appearance. The contradictory formal quality reflects the thematic concern over the imposition of structure on organic life: “Square sheets—,” the poem begins, “they saw the marble only into / Flat slabs there at the marble quarry” (1-2). The stone mined at the quarry is cut into unnatural shapes that allow people to use the resource. This shaping of natural material is mirrored in the site of the quarry, appearing to block a road that the speaker must follow: “At the turning of the road around the roots of the mountain / Where the straight road would seem to ply below the stone” (3-4). Though humans reshape the mineral taken from the quarry, the site itself seems to interrupt the human path. As the speaker muses on the visual appearance of the path as it dead ends in the mountain quarry, the language takes on tense repetition: “It is at times— / In dusk, it is at times” that

At Cuban dusk the eyes  
Walking the straight road toward thunder— . . .  
It is at times as though the eyes burned hard and glad  
And did not take the goat path quivering to the right,  
Wide of the mountain—thence to tears and [sic] sleep—”  
But went on into marble that does not weep” (7-8, 9-15).

We might note that the speaker repeats the phrase “it is at times” in three places, which indicates a thematic tension—something that the speaker cannot reconcile.

This tension lies in the fact that, according to the speaker, in certain moments while walking the road toward the quarry with a looming bank of thunderous clouds behind it—prefiguring the hurricane that arrives in the final poem of the arrangement—

the speaker imagines himself not taking the curving path that he must, that leads only to sorrow and death, but walking straight ahead into the inhuman, unemotional “profile of marble” for rest from the burden of humanity. That is, gazing forward while walking the path, which appears to run straight into the base of the mount, the speaker imagines continuing to walk forward into rocky face of the mountain and into nothingness. The speaker wonders, then, what it would be like to cease to exist. Of course, given our knowledge of Crane’s death and the critical narratives of failure and self-destruction that surround the poet, we could reductively call this a suicidal poem that merely longs for death. But focusing only on what the poem says about death obscures what it says about life. In this poem, the speaker arrives at a crossroad at which he must consider the destination of each route—one of potentially sorrow-filled life of “tears and sleep” as opposed to the complete emptiness of non-being. Bear in mind also the setting of the poem, for it is not so much death that haunts the poem as a life of work—mining the quarry would be some of the most backbreaking labor possible, and, for many, that is the only promise of life: a ceaseless repetition of agony and sleep, even in an island paradise. The point of the poem is not choosing life or death but the realization of mortality in life—the constant intellectual awareness of death or non-being amidst a productive life of day-to-day work.

Thus, the first poem in “East of Yucatan” foregrounds mortality as it relates to economic productivity as the central concern of the poem; the second poem focuses on physical reproduction, or the lack thereof. Following “Island Quarry,” is a tightly composed poem in a conventional form called “Royal Palm.” The poem is dedicated to Crane’s mother, Grace Hart Crane, and the subject of the poem is the tree of the title,



indigenous to the area. A first-person speaker gazes at the tall palm, figured as “the sun’s most gracious anchorite” that must “Climb up as by communings, year on year” (4, 5). Its growth is a kind of religion, a worship of the sun that somehow allows it a form of immortality: “It grazes the horizons, launched above / Mortality” (16-17). What grants the palms immortality, though, is not their worship of the sun, but, rather, their seeming non-participation in reproduction: “Forever fruitless, and beyond that yield / Of sweat the jungle presses with hot love / And tendril till our deathward breath is sealed” (12-14). To the speaker, because it does not yield a crop yet grows steadily, the palm must be immune to the warmth of the island climate, the sweat of a work-filled life, and the heat of sexualized love. For those creatures who must succumb to the biological drive to reproduce, like the speaker, life is a frenzy of desire until death. Ironically, the palm’s “fruitlessness” is what assures it will never die and that it will grow on “As though it soared suchwise through heaven, too” (16). It highlights the basic conflict in the poem between animal, and human, reproduction and the stoic immortality of the palm. Thus, echoing the desire for escape from mortal toil in “Island Quarry,” “Royal Palm” presents an ambiguous conceptual impasse between an imagined immortality of sterility and purity and a mortal life of heat and passion.

After the first two poems in the arrangement focusing on mortality and reproductive futurity, the tone shifts entirely in the next poem titled “Overheard.” As the title suggests, the poem is a snippet of overheard conversation, an anecdote about a laughable island duo, Pablo and Pedro, who foolishly buy an old boat that is completely “thin and blistered, just a rotten shell” (4). After setting out on the ocean, the engine stalls, and, characteristically lacking foresight, the foolish men are without oars and must

sit “like baking Buddhas” until a passing schooner rescues them. Salvaged from the sea, they return to their rightful place working at a local restaurant. The poem is mockingly condescending to the two men and seems satisfied that these men are back in positions of servitude, where they belong. But what is this poem doing in the sequence? The humorous tone of an unsympathetic speaker seems to hardly fit into the logical complexity and ambiguity of “Island Quarry” and “Royal Palm.” More than just island color, “Overheard” has in common with the first two poems a sense of the impossibility of escape from capitalist systems of labor. Pablo and Pedro must not be permitted to escape from their jobs, even for a brief excursion on a boat. Living in a lovely island landscape, they are allowed a vacation. Here we find the paradoxical crux of the arrangement: this island paradise—where Americans go for leisure and escape from their humdrum lives—does nothing but emphasize everything that is inescapable or unproductive for those who live on the island.

Following these three poems, we reach Crane’s poem about the young disabled man: “El Idiota.” The title is in Spanish, grounding the central figure in the Cuban setting in which Crane knew the young man, and the tonal shift from “Overheard” to “El Idiota” is again striking. Perhaps this is why “El Idiota” begins with a sense of departure as the speaker identifies the subject of this new verse: “Sheer away to the other side, for see— / He is coming along under the mimosas” (1-2). This young man is, in the speaker’s words, “daft / With dead lanterns in his head, and it’s likely / Fumbling his sex” (2-4). “Dead lanterns” seems to suggest that this young man is bereft of the spark of intellectual rationality. Further, he is “likely” to be fondling himself in public. In this poem, the young man’s exposure is not a one-time occurrence as the letter described, but is rather a

regular scenario. And yet, despite his dead glare and awkward sexuality, the children are amused by him: “That’s why the children laughed / And screamed so in a circle round his door / The other day—he stretched in ghastly shape. / I hurried by” (4-7). While the children are entertained, the speaker is uncomfortable at seeing the “likely” image of the young man fondling himself while stretching out his “ghastly shape” and rushes past. The next time the speaker sees him, the situation is much different: “But back from the hot shore, / I passed again. And he was lonely, agape” (7-8). Just a short time later, the young man’s behavior is completely different. And, this time, the speaker seems sympathetic to the young man: “With a kite-string in one hand, a tin can / In the other, the peeled end tight to his eye. / That kite aloft—you should have seen him scan / Its course, though he’d clapped midnight to noon sky!” (9-12). Just as in his letter to Frank, the young man is using a tin can with both ends removed as a telescope to observe the kite he is flying.

While he tracks the kite in the sky, the young man is ecstatic, completely lost in the moment, and the speaker in turn becomes fascinated with the young man, seemingly stunned at the intense pleasure that the young man takes in such an everyday act. The scene seems to make quite an impression on the speaker, who, thereafter, often hears the young man singing out an excited song of gratitude: “Since then, across the arroyo’s wall of green, / A Dios gracias, grac—I’ve heard his song / Persist above all reason, and halt serene— / Uncancelled as the stars that sum no wrong” (13-16). At any distant point on the island, the speaker can hear the echo of the man’s song—a simple song echoing a broken “thank you” for the seemingly banal moment of experience. Though the young man’s song does ultimately fade, it remains “uncancelled” like the stars that may not always be visible but are always in existence—eternally true and reliable. Further, the

language of the line relies on an emphatic absence of negativity: the stars are “uncancelled” and sum “no wrong.” In denying these negative terms, the line achieves a positive epiphany; in short, the closing is optimistic. Indeed, in the international context of *transition*, the poem offers new and heretofore unimagined possibilities for productive interactions with others in landscapes beyond the borders of the US.

But following this brief moment of transcendence and positivity, mortality again appears in the next and final poem. In this last poem, “The Hour,” death arrives again in a very different manner from the first poem in the suite. Crane gives “The Hour” an epigraph to hint at the subject of the poem: “September—remember! / October—all over!” It is the closing couplet of a mnemonic rhyme that identifies the hurricane season. And in this poem the storm arrives with a vengeance. Indeed, it has been coming all along and was foreshadowed in the thunder clouds hanging over the “Island Quarry.” In contradistinction to the uneven lines of first poem however, “The Hour” is the most tightly composed of all the verses in terms of metrical form. The poem is laid out in nine stanzas of couplets with alternating rhyme in mostly iambic meter. The conventional nature of the form of the poem is highlighted by the use of archaic language evidenced by the use of “thou” throughout the poem and anachronistic verb forms like “ridest.” The tone of the poem is biblical; it is, for the most part, an ejaculatory expression of awe and prayer for mercy from the devastating power of the hurricane.

Thus, when the storm arrives, it is more than just a tropical storm; it is personified as the God of Christianity: “Lo, Lord, Thou ridest! / Lord, Lord, Thy swift heart” (1-2). Indeed, unlike some of the other poems in the sequence, this is not an intellectual exercise but rather a fiercely embodied poem about terror: “Thy chisel wind / Rescinds

each huddled bone / To quivering whittlings thinned— / Swept, whistling straw!” (5-8). The power of God harnessed through the hurricane is so intense that it can flay a person alive and erode human bones into straw. The hurricane can completely annihilate a physical body. The emotion of the poem reaches a shocked fever pitch in the last stanza: “Thou ridest to the door, Lord! / Thou bidest wall nor floor, Lord!” (16-17). No wall or human structure can keep God out, and in the last line He has just reached the door, bringing carnage and death.

*Key West: An Island Sheaf* and Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy”

Following the publication of “East of Yucatan” in *transition*’s international forum, Crane continued working on *The Bridge*—which would be published in 1930—and on the poems included in the suite as well as numerous other island poems, which he intended to collect into a new volume titled *Key West: An Island Sheaf*. Unfortunately, before he could complete the manuscript—but after resoundingly contemptuous criticism of *The Bridge*—Crane committed suicide in 1932. After Crane’s death, the manuscripts that comprise the tropical collection were found in a manila folder among his papers, complete with type-written pages indicating the title of the collection, epigraph, and table of contents for the book. Because of the incomplete status of the arrangement, *Key West* has consistently baffled editors of Crane’s collected works. The suite was first published in the 1933 edition of *The Collected Poems*, edited by Waldo Frank. In this book, it is clear that the editor seeks, as much as possible, to create an authoritative volume of Crane’s work for the poet’s posterity. *Key West* is grouped with the two collections Crane published during his lifetime—*White Buildings* and *The Bridge*. This section of Crane’s collections is followed by a section titled “Uncollected Works” and, finally, “Early

Works.” In this book, Frank presents *Key West* as a completely unproblematic compilation of Crane’s work, including all the texts in the folder with no footnotes, and even taking it upon himself to add Crane’s last poem “The Broken Tower” to the collection. It would not be until 1966 that Brom Weber would edit a new version of the volume—now *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*. Weber, on the other hand, is much less invested in presenting *Key West* as a completed collection. In fact, Weber moves the arrangement out of the first section of published collections—comprised by *White Buildings* and *The Bridge*—and moves it into a section of posthumously published work, situated after even Crane’s juvenilia.

The most recent edition of *The Complete Poems of Hart Crane*, released in 2000 and edited by Marc Simon, is much more transparent in its presentation of Crane’s work. Like Frank and Weber, Simon gives organizational preference to Crane’s collections but chooses to organize them chronologically. *White Buildings* is the first section of the text, followed by *The Bridge*, and then *Key West*. But while Simon moves *Key West* to the opening section of the book, he makes the material instability of the arrangement quite clear. Divided into two halves, *Key West* begins with a section that reflects the exact organization of Crane’s typescript table of contents. Simon then compiles a second sequence, titled “Key West: Folder Subsection,” containing the six additional poems in the order that they were found in the folder. While this is the best presentation of the volume to date, it still belies some of the critical perplexity of the folder, which actually contains multiple versions of many of the poems. What we can tell from the table of contents, however, is that Crane intended to include all of the poems in “East of Yucatan” in the collection. But *Key West* is hardly a mere expansion of the briefer arrangement, as

we can see in one important change; the major difference between “East of Yucatan” and *Key West* can be seen in the titles: while the earlier suite is set somewhere off the coast of Mexico, the longer collection is placed in but at the very margin of the US border.

Though the geographic location has changed, the themes of mortality and productivity remain, but with an important organizational change demonstrated in the first and last poems in Crane’s table of contents for *Key West*: “O Carib Isle!” and “The Hurricane.” Each of these poems is focused on a realization of mortality in life but in markedly different ways. In “O Carib Isle!,” the speaker, on “white sand / Near the coral beach,” lounges and watches wildlife here and there: “zig-zag fiddle crabs / Side-stilting from the path (that shift, subvert / And anagrammatize your name)” (2-3, 3-5). In this strange moment of leisure in which the speaker begins to confuse or even forget his own name, he realizes that the shells dotting the beach are in fact “nacreous frames of tropic death” (9). In taking the time to appreciate the magnitude of death surrounding him in this beautiful landscape, he somehow receives a new experience of the world around him which allows him a power to rename all the life-forms in the space: “To the white sand I may speak a name, fertile / Albeit in a stranger tongue. Tree names, flower names” (12-13). In this edenic space, the speaker becomes a new Adam, who named all new life into order, and this is possible through a realization of death. As the moment reaches its climax while “The wind that knots itself into one great death— / Coils and withdraws,” the speaker, through the re-creation of Adam’s naming, manages to “gainsay death’s brittle crypt” (15-16, 14). In the closing stanza, the speaker relaxes back into leisure, rejuvenated by his brief conquering of death: “Slagged of the hurricane—I, cast within its flow, / Congeal by afternoons here, satin and vacant. / You have given me the shell,

Satan,—carbonic amulet / Sere of the sun exploded in the sea” (32-35). In these moments of leisure, thoughtless and relaxed, the speaker is empowered by the dark power of Satan, figured as a black amulet paradoxically “sere” or dry like a sun that has exploded in the water—perhaps evaporating all into nothingness. Admittedly, this reading—situated around the realization of mortality, dissolution of identity, and the intellectual fecundity of oblivion—seems to support all those critics who find ecstatic performances of self-destruction inherent in Crane’s poetry.

However, we must remember that this final version of “O Carib Isle!” is part of a collection and has a very special relationship with the final poem in the sequence, “The Hurricane.” Indeed, this final poem is prefigured by the final stanza of the first poem. Here the speaker is “Slagged of the hurricane,” exhausted after the hurricane’s passing. Thus, the poem prefigures the later poem in an oddly cyclical way—it gestures forward to the later poem as though it has already happened. And, fascinatingly, “The Hurricane” is the complete opposite of “O Carib Isle!” in form, style, and content. While the first poem is irregular and free-verse, the final poem is tightly composed in metered couplets of alternating rhyme. Further, the poem itself is essentially a prayer for mercy during a hurricane, sprinkled with archaic words like “thou” and “lo” and conjugating verbs with -est forms; it begins: “Lo, Lord, Thou ridest!” (1). Thus, the poem is completely unlike the first in content—leisurely dedicated to Satan—as well as form. It is, however, just as interested in death but in a different way. Instead of intellectualizing mortality in order to surpass death on a mental level, the speaker of “The Hurricane” screams out in fear of an imminent and highly physical death: “The chisel wind / Rescindeth flesh from bone / To quivering whittlings thinned— / Swept, whistling straw!” (6-9). The speaker boggles at



God's power, displayed in this awesome catastrophe, and at the material reality of the violence of death. Death is unstoppable in the closing couplet: "Thou ridest to the door, Lord! / Thou bidest wall nor floor, Lord!" (17-18). Death, here figured as a God of wrath, can reach through any human-made structure to achieve His end.

In bookending the collection with these two poems, both—I would argue—strong poems in Crane's oeuvre, he is not simply suggesting different moods for suicide, but is placing these two poems as the most dramatic representation of a binary discourse demonstrated through tropes of death and mortality. It is not a simple binary discourse, but embodies some of the most disruptive struggles in the modernist period: progressive versus traditional poetic forms, Christian versus secular ideology, mind- versus body-based identification, and—at its basic level—the past versus the future. In a sense, the collection plays out the traumatic relationship between the tradition and modernity that is at the very heart of modernism. Thus, *Key West* represents a stylistic and thematic spectrum; each poem in the collection represents a stage in the continuum, displayed in its most excessive degrees in the first and last poem. To add a level of complexity, however, the archaic poem is at the end of the collection and the modern poem at the beginning, as though in reverse chronological order. Similarly, the poems within the body of the sequence do not tidily progress from avant-garde to traditional but are juxtaposed within the collection.

Thus, if the choice of the first and last poem represents a conscious and emphatic spectrum, the arrangement of the poems in the body of the collection could be significant as well. And indeed, it is particularly evocative that "The Idiot," the only poem that deals with sexuality and marginality, is directly in the center of the arrangement, equidistant

from the excessive poems at the ends of the collection. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, though discussing a vastly different subject matter—applying Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque to contemporary social structures—offer important insights into the nature of marginality in Western culture. In particular, Stallybrass and White demonstrate the way that the uppermost strata in hierarchical social structures often tend to fetishize the “low-Other” in such a way that

the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primary eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life. The result is a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire in the construction of subjectivity: a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and exiled at the social level. It is for this reason that what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central . . . The low-Other is despised and denied a level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture. (5-6)

In Crane’s organization of *Key West*, we see the same concept but from a different perspective. The arrangement suggests the centrality of the abject other, not viewed from “the top,” but rather through a moment shared between two marginalized others at the center of a cultural conflict figured as spiritual crisis surrounding mortality. This arrangement demonstrates the way that what is “normal” is contingent on what is labeled “abnormal” and also the way this centrality is eroticized.

As the placement of “The Idiot” in the center of *Key West* shows its value to the overall collection, so too does Crane’s consistent work on the poem show its importance in this stage of his work. Of the poems from “East of Yucatan,” “El Idiota” is the one that Crane revised the most in the years between the *transition* publication and the final typescript. In the most immediately noticeable change, Crane translates the Spanish title “El Idiota” to the English “The Idiot” as the subject is brought into the landscape of Florida. Formally, the final version of the poem is the same as “El Idiota:” a conventional

verse poem in quatrains with alternating rhymes. The authoritative version of “The Idiot” is based on one of two versions found in the *Key West* folder. Both of these drafts revise the earlier “El Idiota” version, and both typewritten versions include handwritten emendations by Crane. One draft appears to be an earlier, intermediary draft, however, in that it is more heavily emended and some of the changes are integrated into the later draft. This earlier version includes not only corrections on the body of the poem but also handwritten rewrites for particular lines from that poem at the bottom of the sheet. Though this version is not the final draft and was never published, it still provides insight into the development of the poem.

For instance, in one emendation of the earlier draft, Crane writes the word “Boy” into the typewritten title of the poem, making it “The Idiot Boy,” which would have created a direct allusion to William Wordsworth’s 1798 poem with the same name. Wordsworth’s “The Idiot Boy,” part of *The Lyrical Ballads*, focuses on—like Crane’s poem—a young man with a cognitive disability, and this romantic predecessor and some of the criticism surrounding it can help shed light on Crane’s later text. *The Lyrical Ballads*, per Wordsworth’s preface to the volume, uses scenes taken from “low and rustic life” in order to create a poetic voice of “the common language of men” (vii, xviii). “The Idiot Boy,” then, is an ideal character for the volume, for, according to Peter Rushton, the poem participates in a nostalgic fantasy of a “pre-industrial paradise” where “the ‘idiot’ was a familiar social identity; the person was cared for within an accepted framework of familial or communal obligations, or was left relatively independent within certain bounds” (59). Wordsworth’s poem is a nostalgic song of praise to a bygone period in

which community and family bonds formed the backbone of society and no citizens were marginalized because of their abilities.

In this sense, “The Idiot Boy” is a long narrative poem that takes place in an idyllic pastoral setting in the distant past where young disabled Johnny Foy lives with his devoted mother Betty. At the outset of the poem, Betty’s friend and neighbor Susan Gale—who lives alone—has become mortally ill and needs a doctor’s care immediately. Only Betty and Johnny are nearby to help Susan, and Betty decides to keep watch by Susan’s bedside and send Johnny into town on their trusty horse to collect the local doctor. Betty directs Johnny to do just this, but whether or not Johnny understands her admonishments is unclear. In any case, rather than heading directly for the village, Johnny—greatly excited, for he has never ventured out by himself like this before—simply meanders aimlessly through nature all night. But when after a few hours Johnny has not returned, Betty begins to worry for her son and ultimately leaves Susan’s bedside to find him. Fearing that he might have accidentally died, she rushes into town but does not see him. Returning homeward in a panic, she fortuitously runs across Johnny and embraces him with relief. Meanwhile, Susan Gale has fretted about both of them so much that she has somehow worried herself well and is out of bed healthy and in search of them when they return.

In many ways, the climax of Wordsworth’s poem is in Johnny’s experience of nature while lost, but—despite an appeal to the Muses—the speaker of the poem cannot reconstruct Johnny’s magical encounter that night and can only offer various possible imaginings. The poem concludes with Johnny himself describing his adventure after being asked by his mother and Susan what he saw on his journey: ““The cocks did crow

to-who, to-who, / And the sun did shine so cold!' / — Thus answered Johnny in his glory / And that was all his travel's story" (450-53). In a sense, Johnny has taken over the role of speaker in the poem and, more generally, of Wordsworth's ideal of the poet as an ecstatic visionary. According to Albert Wilhelm, in the closing "The speaker's limitations as a storyteller and poet are deliberately placed in contrast with Johnny's remarkable but mysterious insight" (23). In this way, Wordsworth "has given us a tale involving visionary insight," but has accorded all of that poetic vision not to the speaker but to Johnny (22). Similarly, Duncan Wu notes that "The idleness and joy experienced by Johnny as he moves out of the poem and into the night indicate that he is enjoying nothing less than a pantheist apprehension of the natural world. . . . He is, in fact, one of the few visionaries of *Lyrical Ballads* capable of perceiving the unified, idealized reality inherent in nature" (173). Though by no means one of the best-known poems from the collection, "The Idiot Boy" offers, at least according to Wu, one of the best representations of Wordsworth's ideal relationship to nature as spiritually restorative.

Though Crane did not ultimately give his poem the same name as Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy," the similarities and differences between the two poems productively emphasize the way attitudes toward disability had changed since Wordsworth's late-eighteenth-century text. For instance, the period in which Crane knew the young man and wrote these verses about him coincides with a legal debate about restricting the reproductive sexuality of people with cognitive disabilities—from productive member of society to a financial drain on the nation. As the most stunning example of this logic, in 1927, the year that *transition* published "El Idiota," the Supreme Court would uphold the constitutionality of forced sterilization for the "feeble-minded." The issue took shape

decades earlier, however; the first years of the twentieth century saw the first attempts at passing state laws allowing for forced sterilization, and, in 1907, Indiana became the first to pass such legislation. Thirty-one states would pass similar laws in the following years—ending in 1937—and some states would practice it without specific legislation passed. In fact, only eleven states in total would neither pass such laws nor perform sterilization procedures (Largent 71-72). Ultimately, in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927, opponents of the laws would unsuccessfully challenge forced sterilization in the Supreme Court, in the case of a young Virginia woman. In *Buck v. Bell*, Chief Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes describes the plaintiff, Carrie Buck, as “a feeble minded white woman who was committed to the State [. . .]. She is the daughter of a feeble minded mother in the same institution, and the mother of an illegitimate feeble minded child” (205). In finding that it would be appropriate to sterilize the young woman, he explains that “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind. . . . Three generations of imbeciles are enough” (207). The importance of this finding to both the changing attitudes toward disability and the history of eugenics in the US cannot be emphasized enough. Paul A. Lombardo points out that the “case confirmed the theory of hereditary defect, providing legal approval for operating on more than sixty thousand Americans in over thirty states and setting a precedent for more than half a million other surgeries around the world” (x). On one level, the Supreme Court decision reflected a contemporary interest in the science and public policy of eugenics in the early decades of the twentieth century, which reached its high-water mark in the twenties. According to Alexandra Minna Stern, *Buck v. Bell* was

one of the quintessential victories for eugenics in a period in which the movement “achieved its greatest visibility” (16). To put it in Clement Vose’s words: “with the eugenics movement at its height in 1927 the Court was its prisoner” (17).

Not only was eugenics at its height of popularity in the twenties, but the qualifications for what constituted “mental deficiency” were much broader than we might think today. In an essay on the forced sterilization of Buck and other women labeled disabled, Pamela Block argues that “Early twentieth century theories of mental development (and deficiency) in the US were usually linked to social status. Although ‘mental deficiency’ was considered a medical diagnosis, the decision to label an individual ‘mentally deficient’ was closely tied to structures of power, i.e., ideologies of race, class, and sexuality, theories of modernization and racial degeneracy, and cultural perceptions of urbanization, immigration, masculinity and femininity” (240). Indeed, the diagnoses that authorized removing a subject’s reproductive capabilities were based on all kinds of otherness but were various forms of alterity that represented a specifically sexual threat. In fact, in contemporary medicine, Buck would not have been considered mentally disabled (Block 246).

Thus, in one way, Crane’s poem is a modernist retelling of Wordsworth’s, one in which Johnny has come of age in the twentieth century—a period that conflates his non-normative ability with sexual threat. As in Wordsworth’s poem, the “idiot” acts as a kind of lens through which poetic material is channeled unmediated by complex cognitive processes, but in Crane’s modernist version the poetic subject is ostracized from society and bears his sexuality both as an essential characteristic of his identity and as an embodiment of the social threat of his existence. Indeed, Crane’s “Idiot Boy,” though still

rendered childlike in many ways, has grown into a man equipped with adult genitalia. Gone is the devoted mother and supportive community; the young man here is an alienated modern, distanced both from the previous generation and from contemporary, normative family structures.

In his work in changing “El Idiota” to “The Idiot,” Crane revised the title, made changes on all but three lines, and, save the last word, completely rewrites the last line of the poem. Like “El Idiota,” “The Idiot” still begins with a sense of geographical departure. The opening lines reads: “Sheer over to the other side,—for see— / The boy straggling under those mimosas, daft / With squint lanterns in his head, and it’s likely / Fumbling his sex” (1-3). The first line signals a shift to a new location or subject, which works to emphasize an island setting where one may quickly move to another side, and, consequently, to suggest that the poem will express a different perspective. In a sense, the poem will show the reader something from an alternate point of view. And the subject of this shift in perspective is Crane’s young friend, who Crane characterizes with a distinct set of predominant features that we have seen refined throughout the previous versions: his eyes and his genitals. In “Lenses” he is characterized “with carbonated eyes,” in “El Idiota” “With dead lanterns in his head,” and in “The Idiot” “With squint lanterns.” Thus, in each of these versions, the distinctive features of the young man are his eyes and his genitals—his vision and his sexuality. Regarding his eyes, Crane presents the young man's way of looking as dim, a rather unkind metaphor for the cognitively impaired, but despite this, there is also something vaguely attractive about these descriptions of his gaze. The effervescence of “carbonated eyes” strikes a playful tone, while the “lantern” motif emphasizes a tradition of the light of rationality. Of course, in “El Idiota,” this light



is completely extinguished, which is not in any way complimentary. Crane was not content with this word choice and changed it to “squint,” which still emphasizes the dimness of the young man’s insight but also shows a narrower focus of vision.

Of course, the other unmistakable descriptive element is his fondling of his genitals in public. In “Lenses” the young man is “extending a phallus,” while in “El Idiota” “it’s likely [he is] / Fumbling his sex,” and, finally, in “The Idiot” he is “Fumbling his sex.” We might also note that, per the letter to Frank, Crane only witnessed him expose himself once, in the poems this becomes a “likely” sight. On one level, the exposure shows that the young man lacks a sense of propriety shared by most members of society. In a more abstract sense, however, it is not just the young man’s genitals on display but his intrinsic sexuality that cannot he cannot hide. In any case, the reaction by the children seems devilishly condemnatory: “That’s why those children laughed / In such infernal circles round his door / Once when he shouted, stretched in ghastly shape. / I hurried by” (4-6). This also represents a significant revision from “El Idiota,” where the children “laughed, / And screamed so in a circle.” The later version is more menacing in that the children scream at him while surrounding him in “infernal circles” of mocking laughter.

In any case, the speaker feels it necessary to rush past on his way to the beach only to stumble across the young man on his return. It is in this moment that he sees the young man engaged in a somewhat prosaic activity which fascinates the speaker: “One hand dealt out a kite string, a tin can / The other tilted, peeled end clamped to eye. / That kite aloft—you should have watched him scan / its course, though he’d clapped midnight to noon sky!” (9-12). As he espies the kite with a makeshift telescope made from a tin

can, the young man is elated and fascinated by the beauty of the event. And the speaker too seems fascinated by the awed pleasure of the young man's visionary ecstasy, which leaves a lasting impression on the speaker: "And since, through these hot barricades of green, / A Dios gracias, grac—I've heard his song / Above all reason lifting, halt serene—" (13-15). The power of the young man's song of gratitude for this moment is its intelligibility beyond reason; the young man sings "Above all reason lifting" only to "halt serene." The young man's song of thanksgiving reaches a crescendo but does not reach a conclusion; it halts suddenly, fading into an only half-heard "gracias." In a biographical and critical study from 1963, Vincent Quinn argues that the speaker of "The Idiot" identifies with the young man, because he is a figure for the "concept of the poet as visionary" and "of the poet as singer" (54). In this way, the fascination that the speaker evinces is because he is, like Wordsworth's Johnny Foy, a figure for the poet. Quinn goes further in his assertion of sympathy to cite the "ambiguous sexuality" of both the young man and Crane the poet, for which "both are rejected by society" (54). Indeed, while the speaker is not explicitly introduced as possessing a non-normative sexual identity, his nervous fascination with the often physically exposed young man—for which he must shame himself in the ultimate line—implies in the speaker a kind of sexual otherness, a heightened sense of alarm at the young man's exposed sexuality, or even an erotic desire for the young man.

In "The Idiot," both the speaker and the young man are two figures who offer entirely different perspectives on social marginalization focused on sexuality, who share a moment of connection and sympathy. Robert McRuer (2006) explains a similar connection between the theories of normativity in disability and queer studies using

Adrienne Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality," which holds that the supposed naturalness of heterosexuality is dependent on an institutionalized exclusion of alternative sexuality as abject that enforces heterosexuality as the only possible "normal" choice. McRuer applies this concept in the field of disability studies, arguing that "compulsory heterosexuality is intertwined with compulsory able-bodiedness; both systems work to (re)produce the able body and heterosexuality" (31). Like the social enforcement of heterosexuality as an invisible default category, the societal view of the "normal" able body is naturalized only with reference to what is abnormal or disabled. In this sense, "compulsory heterosexuality is contingent on compulsory able-bodiedness, which in a sense produces disability, [and] is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness" (2). Thus, compulsory able-bodiedness and heterosexuality need a visual representation of the abject other in order to function, but the existence of this other always highlights the contingency of dominant category on the abject. In this way, the queer other always has the capability of destabilizing the hegemonic ideal, for, these marginalized others are constant reminders of impossibility of defining what is "normal" on its own terms; by their mere existence, they emphasize the tenuously constructed hierarchy and naturalness of the social order.

More than just a consciousness of inequality, however, this connection between the speaker and the young man, each representing two historically marginalized subjectivities, offers possibilities for resistance. That is, a moment of identification like this could allow for these disparate others to work together for real social change in what we think of today as a coalitional political model. Cathy Cohen, writing about the potential for political coalition between non-heterosexual activists and marginalized

black heterosexuals, defines coalitional politics as “the process of movement building [. . .] rooted not in our shared history or identity but in our shared marginal relationship to dominant power that normalizes, legitimizes, and privileges” (43). And, indeed, people with disabilities or non-normative sexual identities in the 1920s faced extensive institutionalized repression that sometimes took the same shape. For example, the state legislation endorsing forced sterilization, which saw its constitutional mandate in *Buck v. Bell*, included, first in California and then in many other states, “moral degenerates” and “sexual perverts” (qtd. in Ordover 2003, 79). That is, in many legal statutes, people with non-normative bodies and people with non-normative sexualities fell into the same punitive categories.

#### Conclusion: Contradictory Closures and the US National Boundary

Unfortunately, while the moment of sympathy between the speaker and the young man sheds light on the parallel forms of marginalization that each experience, any possibility for resistance is quashed in the close of “The Idiot.” For though the resounding echo of the young man’s gratitude pulses forever through the speaker’s experience of the island, the final line of the poem quickly shifts in tone to express a sense of contempt for the young man himself and for the speaker’s unacceptable fascination with his behavior: “My trespass vision shrinks to face his wrong” (16). Bear in mind, this final line is the one that Crane changed most between “El Idiota” and “The Idiot;” in fact, it is the only line of the poem that Crane entirely rewrites—save the final, rhyming word “wrong.” Remember, in “El Idiota” the poem ends with “Uncancelled as the stars that sum no wrong,” a rather inscrutable line. The earlier version is much more abstract and moves away from the young man and the speaker. The poem ends with the

young man's song "uncancelled," which could either imply that the song continues after the poem has ceased or that the song of thanks that he has sung will never be rendered meaningless. That is, the young man's echoing cry is as quotidian yet beautiful as the stars in the sky, which can neither be right nor wrong but simply are. Yet this lack of negativity is completely inverted in the "The Idiot." In the final version, the terminal line returns to the speaker and the young man. Here, the speaker's vision "shrinks" into ultimate focus—to the harsh truth—finding that the young man is explicitly wrong, or at least possesses the "wrong" of the poem.

Similarly, the speaker's vision of the young man's ecstatic song is a "trespass vision," which is to say that the speaker has seen something he is not supposed to have seen. The forbidden sight is not entirely, as one might expect, the young man exposing himself—indeed this is a "likely" quotidian act—but is rather the moment of visionary bliss in tracking the kite across the sky that the speaker stumbled upon. The young man's pleasure in this simple moment is so intense that it seems it should be private, and, rather than being uplifted by the "serene" song, the speaker is haunted by a sense of shame. Thus, in the end, the speaker cannot meet the eye of the young man, because the young man is a better expression of the artist: his exposure—both of his physical sex and of his existential joy—is unselfconscious and not loaded with shame. To put it another way, because the young man does not experience humiliation at exposing his sexuality, the speaker must project his own shame onto him.

On another level, the "trespass" of the poem is literal, in that it emphasizes the national boundary of the US in the interaction between the two men, for *Key West* and "East of Yucatan" differ in one important way: this binary of marginalization in *Key West*

occurs within an American context while “East of Yucatan”—though by no means an exact geographical placement—is certainly not set in the US. Thus, this is the reason that marginality is central in *Key West* but not in “East of Yucatan”—that is, “The Idiot” does not lie in the center of the suite but prefaces the finale. We might also note that Crane was writing most of the *Key West* and “East of Yucatan” poems at the same time as he was crafting *The Bridge*—his “mystical synthesis” of the US. In a sense, *Key West* is the marginal version, the other, of this national song. Instead of being synthesized in New York City—the urban center of the US—it is set at the very margin of the nation. This is mirrored by the different titles of each of Crane’s poems about the young disabled man: “El Idiota,” outside the boundaries of the US, has a Spanish title, but “The Idiot,” within the national boundary, is in English. Thus, we might think of the earlier version “El Idiota” not as one stage in Crane’s process toward the final draft of “The Idiot,” but as a different poem with a completely different meaning in this dramatically different context.

In keeping with this idea, the final line of each poem is changed entirely, because in these different material and thematic locations, they must close differently. At the end of “El Idiota” the young man’s song is “Uncancelled as the stars that sum no wrong.” In this transnational space, the speaker moves away from blame and from the individual identities of himself and the young man and is finally able to escape a repressed individual subject position through this sympathetic understanding. In *Key West*, however, the speaker must sharply differentiate his subject position from the young man in the end by transferring his blame: “My trespass vision shrinks to face his wrong.” Conditioned by an American context of marginalization and oppression, the speaker can be nothing but ashamed at even a moment of identifying with this marginalized other.

This is the trespass of his gaze: seeing something besides otherness in this man. In the end of “El Idiota” there is an unbounded sense of freedom, while in “The Idiot” that possibility is completely foreclosed. In the unclear national space of “East of Yucatan,” it is perfectly appropriate—even spiritually fulfilling—but, within the US, that possibility is not allowed, for, within these national boundaries, though the speaker and the young man are both abject, they are not necessarily equal.

The reason the speaker cannot maintain an optimistic closing in a US context is the same problem that troubles the possibility of coalitional activism: unequal privilege. In her essay, Cohen gives a word of caution about a coalition between marginalized black heterosexuals and queer-identifying people: “In the same ways that we [must] account for the varying privilege to be gained by a heterosexual identity, we must also pay attention to the privilege that some queers receive from being white, male, and upper class. Only through recognizing the many manifestations of power, across and within categories, can we truly begin to build a movement based on one’s politics and not exclusively on one’s identity” (44). Broadly speaking, one of the biggest problems with organizing a coalition not based on identity politics is that the members of the movement will have to abandon the privileges that their particular places in society might afford to work with other, differently marginalized people equally. To complicate matters even more, we might note Bernice Johnson Reagon’s warning in her foundational essay on coalition politics that, in any coalitional movement for social change, nationalism is at one stage “crucial” but at another “reactionary” (358). That is, for Reagon, an investment in national spirit is a necessary motivator for change, but a monolithic sense of national identity is at the same time too narrow a conceptualization for a culture made of myriad identities. Thus, for

Crane's speaker and the young man, though the apparatuses of the state might similarly marginalize both, the same institutions grant them different levels of privilege within society, and the privileged voice of the speaker is not one to relinquish whatever slight advantage that might be.

Ultimately, Crane's stay at the Isle of Pines was ended by a disastrous 1926 hurricane which left Villa Casas and many other structures on the island in ruins. Crane described the horror of the storm personified as the Christian God of wrath in the final poem of the *Key West* sequence, aptly titled "The Hurricane": "Nought stayeth, nought now bideth / But's smithereened apart! . . . Thou ridest to the door, Lord! / Thou bidest wall nor floor, Lord!" (3-4, 17-18). Whatever comfort or escape Crane found in the leisurely island setting was short-lived and punctuated by the inescapability of mortality. While the hurricane itself seemed a terrifying punishment, the aftermath of the carnage, which Crane detailed in his unpublished poem "Eternity," was just as horrific:

... Bodies were rushed into graves  
Without ceremony, while hammers pattered in town.  
The roads were being cleared, injured brought in  
And treated, it seemed. In due time  
The President sent down a battleship that baked  
Something like two thousand loaves on the way.  
Doctors shot ahead from the deck of planes.  
The fever was checked. I stood a long time in Mack's talking  
New York with the gobs, Guantanamo, Norfolk, -  
Drinking Bacardi and talking USA. (51-60)

Before he even left, he was already gone, already discussing the US—but in a way still curiously inflected with Caribbean life, in which New York, Norfolk, and Guantanamo seem equidistant and part of the same national identity. In the chaos, it is uncertain whether or not the "rendingly beautiful" young man Crane befriended survived. We do



know, however, that though Crane prevailed against this storm, he was not able to survive in the US much longer, and took his life a few years later on another return to the US, this time from Mexico. But though Crane's death was tragic, we must not linger on it too long. For if we become too focused on Crane's suicide, we run the risk of reducing Crane's complex poetry to a transparent representation of Crane's psychological state at the moment of his death, and we might, like so many before us, forget that Crane's poems are not simply symptoms of his pathology but are meticulously constructed aesthetic objects that sometimes took Crane years to craft. In this sense, Crane's works are not isolated, introspective lyrics detailing the psychological and sociological forces that caused their author to self-destruct but can offer astute observations on the marginalization of others—including people with disabilities. Further, in focusing only on final versions of his work, we might never notice that a single, authoritative version might just be one of a diverse group of texts with alternate interpretations in different material contexts, which expose Crane's transnational perspective on the nature of marginalization within and outside the border of the US.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

This project has focused on American modernism—and not just in terms of the shared country of origin of Lowell, Hughes, and Crane. More than just a simple coincidence of birthplace, each of these authors has a very particular commitment to portraying what it means to be an American and to strengthening our national literature. Indeed, these three poets might be placed in a particular subgroup of writers in the period, made up of, in Mark Morrisson’s words, “American modernists who primarily stayed in the United States . . . [and] were preoccupied with American national identity or with regional identities within the United States” (15). Though each of them did travel internationally—sometimes extensively—they are distinct from transatlantic expatriate authors like Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, or T. S. Eliot, who form the backbone of a more transatlantic American modernism. Lowell, Hughes, and Crane, on the other hand, were committed to remaining US citizens and to imagining a modern American nationalism; each does so in a different way, but all three feature a similar attention to national geography. For one, they are all primarily associated with a particular urban center in the US: Lowell is firmly entrenched in Boston high society, Hughes is one of the quintessential poets of Harlem, and Crane lived in and wrote extensively of New York City. Moreover, in each of the preceding chapters, I have also further demonstrated a deeper use of geography: Lowell portrays the cultural history of New England as intrinsic to US culture; Hughes describes the barren yet decadent landscape of Taos, New Mexico; and Crane writes of the island context of Key West. In this way, each author is interested not just in the city they call home, but in the contours of the nation as a whole.

But each author's perspective on US nationalism is not limited entirely to an interior perspective, for, though Lowell, Hughes, and Crane were all absorbed in creating a vision of American nationalism, they were each also influenced by the expatriate or cosmopolitan transnationalism of the period. Indeed, global travel and international exchange of ideas were important to each author's development. Lowell's journey to London to meet the Imagist poets was instrumental in her writing career, Hughes' travels to Africa and Cuba—to name just two destinations—energized both his poetics and politics, and Crane's voyages to Paris and the Caribbean fostered scores of poems. But, of course, we need not think of nationalism and transnationalism as contradicting one another; in an afterword to a special issue of *Modernism/Modernity* devoted to “transnationalisms,” Sonita Sarker notes that “a sense of nationalism is concurrent with supranational linkages. . . . [W]hile modernist authors supersede national boundaries, they believe in the cultural uniqueness of their respective nations” (562). In an increasingly complex world of modern literature—both in terms of culture and politics as well as travel and communication technology—it impossible to be purely national or purely transnational. The two actually complement and enrich each other, and it is this conflicted yet complementary relationship between national identity and cosmopolitan globalism that can shed light on the work of Lowell, Hughes, and Crane.

Perhaps even more contradictory is the fact that, even though Lowell, Hughes, and Crane were each absorbed in creating a vision of American nationalism, they were each in their own way profoundly marginalized from normative culture and literary institutions of the US at the time. And, to be sure, the systems of marginalization that criminalized and repressed free expression of their sexual identities were not outlying or

extraneous social forces but were deeply intertwined in the same US culture that they sought to strengthen. In many ways, in fact, sexual marginalization was central to American national identity in the modernist era. For example, in an article titled “Alarming Decrease in American Babies: Race Suicide Among the Rich is Only One Phase of the Diminishing Birth Rate” in the popular—albeit conservative—magazine *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1922 (the oft-cited “annus mirabilis” of the modernist period), Royal S. Copeland, a medical doctor, argues against birth control in the interest of reproductive bloodlines in the United States:

The native American is becoming extinct. Facts and figures prove it. If New York conditions were to prevail for one hundred years throughout the United States, the ‘native American’ would have black hair, black eyes and be of swarthy complexion. The first families, so called, are being decimated, obliterated, and the progeny of the foreign-born so far exceeds that of native mothers that the wheel of time is bound to stamp their characteristics from the race. Imagine George Washington coming to life a century hence and finding his country peopled by a swarthy host. (37)

Bear in mind, Copeland is not using the phrase “native American” as we use it today but as a figure for the descendants of the earliest European settlers of the United States—white people. His central worry here is that the “right” kind of people are not reproducing enough, while those who should not are reproducing excessively. Copeland was no mere outlier in the culture either; after the publication of this series of articles on race suicide and birth control, Copeland was elected a US Senator for Michigan in 1922, a position that he was reelected for twice—serving until his death in 1938 (“Biographical Directory”). Indeed, Copeland’s essay reflected a contemporary interest in eugenics that—though not without some significant dissent—would be an acceptable scientific and public policy for decades to come, at least until the horrors of holocaust. And even this intuitive date for the end of twentieth century American eugenic philosophy might be

permeable, for, to return to an example from an earlier chapter, the forced sterilization of individuals with cognitive disabilities continued in some states into the 1960s. Similarly, it was only in the 1967 case *Loving v. Virginia* that the Supreme Court would find that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional.

Concerns over who should reproduce and how are certainly not new in modernist studies. In fact, numerous scholars and critics have commented on the relationship between eugenics and modernism. In *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, Daniel Kevles notes that “eugenics involved not only scientific rationalizations of class and race prejudice but a good deal more, including disputes over how men and, especially, women of the modern era were to accommodate to changing standards of sexual and reproductive behavior” (Kevles x). That is, eugenic philosophy and public policy was, in many ways, a response to changes in culture wrought by modernity—just as we define modernism as the cultural response to the pressures of modernity. Kevles then goes on to chart the history of eugenics in the US and Britain from its inception in the late-nineteenth century to its general disavowal following the holocaust and then into its legacy in contemporary culture—just as we conventionally date the period of modernism and its later influences on culture. Similarly, in *Modernism and Eugenics*, Marius Turda notes that in addition to being a “biological theory of human improvement grounded almost exclusively in ideas of race and class . . . eugenics was equally a social and cultural philosophy of identity predicated upon modern concepts of purification and rejuvenation of both the human body and the larger national community” (1). It is in this sense of regenerating a stagnant culture, Turda notes, that “eugenic ideas permeated modernist literary culture” (1). And, indeed, recent literary work has borne out

the connection between literature of the period and eugenics; for example, Donald Childs' 2001 *Modernism and Eugenics: Woolf, Eliot, Yeats, and the Culture of Degeneration* and Daylanne K. English's 2004 *Unnatural Selections Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* both explore the function of eugenic models and subtexts in canonical modernist literature.

Truly, there is not enough space in this conclusion for a list of all the ways sexuality was policed and punished in the US in the modernist period. And this may come as a surprise, for we are used to thinking of modernism as intrinsically progressive—calling the height of the period the “Jazz Age” or the “roaring twenties.” In fact, it was actually a quite conservative period. In his 1995 book *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*, Walter Benn Michaels argues that in the interwar period a new model of “cultural pluralism” came to hold sway in social thought and literary production. For Michaels, the rise of cultural pluralism followed the Progressive Era, which held a “melting pot” assimilationist ideal of American nationalism in the face of increased immigration and racial difference. Cultural pluralism, on the other hand, relocates the focus from racial to cultural identity. While this sounds positive in theory, it actually just provides a new context for racism: “although the move from racial identity to cultural identity appears to replace essentialist criteria of identity (who we are) with performative criteria (what we do), the commitment to pluralism requires in fact that the question of who we are continue to be understood as prior to questions about what we do” (15). For Michaels, cultural pluralism reflects a kind of “nativist modernism” in which a collective “native American” identity is based on constructing a binary opposition between culturally pure and authentic white Americans and impure invaders,

all in terms of ethnic difference read as cultural affect. Michaels demonstrates the reproductive anxieties over racial purity in modernist literature which is so often focused on “keeping the blood uncontaminated” (12). In this sense, the marker for the marginalized American is specifically sexual—a threat of contagion to the dominant category of normative, white culture through reproduction and sexuality.

To put it another way: American national identity is about constructing and reinforcing a binary between the right kind of Americans and the wrong kind, and this boundary is fought under the banner of sexual or reproductive purity. Why, then, were Lowell, Hughes, and Crane—each in different ways non-normative in their sexual identities or lifestyles—so invested in nurturing an America national poetry? To be honest, their writings on American nationalism are certainly not without a relative degree of ambivalence. In “Lilacs,” Lowell, born into a wealthy family descended from Puritan colonists, writes of the importance of New England in the history and culture of the United States. But though her Boston history is long and storied, it is at heart a story of colonization from afar—of a foreign species introduced from distant lands. Though contemporary American culture might seem natural and rooted eternally—like the ubiquitous lilac—it is actually alien to this landscape. Hughes too was determined to show African American culture in poetry, in all its highs and lows. And while Hughes wrote of and lived in Harlem for much of his life, in “A House in Taos” he strays from the city in order to capture the cultural imperialism of well-to-do modernists establishing artists’ colonies in the Southwest. Everything can be bought, and, in Hughes’ Taos, the cultural authenticity of the region is in the sights of these invaders. Crane, on the other hand, spent years working on a kind of epic poem about the spirit of America, centered

on the Brooklyn Bridge. It may come as a surprise, however, that he worked on several important components of *The Bridge* not in the US but in Cuba. And at the same time, he was also writing poems about the blurry national boundaries of his Caribbean life and the empathy and contempt he experiences for a similarly marginalized young man.

One way to understand the ambivalence that registers in each of these chapters is by paring it down to a central tension between cities and provinces. Indeed, one of the key causes and conflicts of modernist culture is increasing urbanization, and each of these chapters has demonstrated anxieties around this process. At various points in this dissertation, I have used the terms “core” and “periphery” to describe this relationship, borrowing from the world-systems theory of history and economics. Obviously, I cannot perfectly remap these global terms onto a single national space, but the implicit criticism of the cultural imperialism of the core and the exploitation of the periphery is helpful for understanding the tension that each of these poets foregrounds. Lowell seeks to renovate the core from within and writes her non-normative sexuality into the core culture of the Boston elite. Hughes and Crane, on the other hand, move their poetic focus outside of the central urban space and into the cultural periphery of the US landscape, where they both find freedom to represent alternative sexualities at a safe distance from the conceptual center of the nation. But each chapter also blurs the boundaries of a particular national identity: for Lowell a grounded American identity is one of colonization, for Hughes it is an exploitation of African and Native American culture, and for Crane the very border is unclear as his poem shifts inside and outside of the border. Each of these is at once an evocation of a particular national identity but also a radical dismantling of it.



Why, then, would each of these poets be so invested in a culture in which they could only occupy a marginal status? I would argue that it is because they are invested in breaking it apart and remaking it in a more equitable vision. For Lowell, Hughes, and Crane, the ethical center of American culture is not in normative, canonical, spaces, but in the periphery—either geographically or conceptually. Only in marginalized spaces can we hope to renew an unbalanced culture. And, thus, it is in marginal and forgotten spaces that we find this work: in dusty books, archived magazines, and fading manuscripts. This alternative history of the US told through moments of intersection and coalition between differently marginalized people is, inherently, ephemeral—it takes place at the fringes, where culture is the least policed.

Thus, it may have seemed at times that each chapter was the history of a failed enterprise. All of these powerful moments of intersection and coalition were forgotten: Lowell's editorial process did not continue after Untermeyer's work, Hughes' exploration of the breakdown of identity categories was written off as apolitical lyricism, and Crane's epiphany that people with alternative sexualities and people with intellectual disabilities are often marginalized in the same way vanished into an archival obscurity. Each of these examples has been in effect written out of the canon. But it is no mistake or coincidence that each of the texts that I have focused on has been forgotten. In truth, there is simply no way that such texts that denaturalize systems of marginalization could be anything but excluded from canonical narratives of literary history. In this sense, we might think of "failure"—at least in the context of repressive, normative culture—as something positive. As Judith Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*:

What kinds of reward can failure offer us? Perhaps most obviously, failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between . . . winners and losers. (3)

And while I agree that we should reconceive our values when considering social structures that deliberately marginalize human beings by constructed categories, I am not sure I want to continue using the word “failure.” Thus, these texts—and indeed any moments—of intersection and cooperation cannot simply be labeled failures, even if they are ultimately forgotten. Indeed, my main quibble with queer theory is its persistent negativity; why must we continue to use the negative words? To my mind, the true power of queer theory is no longer in its radical belligerence but in its capacity to deeply feel empathy for any individuals who are marginalized in terms of sexuality. In truth, the texts which I have analyzed in this dissertation—alternately described as coalition or intersection—share one simple feature: empathy. For, if we persistently remind ourselves of such forgotten moments of empathy in our literary history, perhaps we can bear more scrutiny on the present, and instead of letting moments of possibility fall into obscurity, understand and respond to them in their fullest potential for equitable change.

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