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Shane C. Hunter

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

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JAZZ EPIDEMICS AND DEEP SET DISEASES:
THE DE-PATHOLOGIZATION OF THE BLACK BODY IN THE WORK OF THREE
HARLEM RENAISSANCE WRITERS

by

Shane Hunter

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Shane Hunter, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2016

Advisor: Maureen Honey

This dissertation argues that the Harlem Renaissance was, in part, a response to Victorian-era medical and scientific racism, and that the three writers on which it centers, Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Wallace Thurman (1902-1934), and Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987), participated in subverting these racist discourses. I focus on elements of their creative work that de-pathologize the black body. Specifically, I consider how these writers undermine Victorian-era medical racism that had, by the 1920s, come to inform American racial politics. Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's work from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s is at least partly concerned with undermining medically racist ideology by either re-inscribing the black body as healthy, or by showing medical racism's pernicious effects. While each of these writers' voices is unique, and their lives and careers ultimately followed different trajectories, their work resists the pressures that a burgeoning medical establishment exerted on African Americans to conform to stereotyped norms. Each one highlighted elements from popular and material culture to show that these pressures contributed to pathologizing the black body.

Using a historicist and biocritical approach, I position these writers in opposition to medical discourses that pathologized the black subject. In Chapter One, I contextualize

Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's close personal and professional relationships with each other, and demonstrate that their Harlem Renaissance writing was part of a larger concern within the movement to re-inscribe the black subject as healthy and raise awareness about urban, black public health crises. In Chapter Two, I argue that Hughes's 1920s cabaret poems resist popular medical knowledge that constructed jazz as disabling by re-inscribing the Harlem dance club as healthy. In Chapter Three, I argue that Thurman's short story "Grist in the Mill," and his novel *The Blacker the Berry*, attack racist, sexist, and classist medical traditions about the black body's pathology. In Chapter Four, I examine two Nugent poems, "Shadow," and "Bastard Song," and two short stories, "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" and "Lunatique," to argue that he borrows tropes from the Decadent movement to interrogate Victorian-era sexological constructs of homosexuality, thereby expanding literary and artistic representations of gay men of color.

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CHAPTER ONE

Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent and the De-Pathologization
of the Black Body

This study argues that the Harlem Renaissance was, in part, a response to Victorian-era medical and scientific racism, and that the three writers on which it centers, Langston Hughes (1902-1967), Wallace Thurman (1902-1934), and Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987), participated in subverting these racist scientific discourses. I focus on elements of their creative work that de-pathologize the black body. Specifically, I consider how these writers undermine Victorian-era medical racism that had, by the 1920s, come to inform American racial politics. The work that Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent produced from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s is at least partly concerned with undermining medically racist ideology by either re-inscribing the black body as healthy, or by showing medical racism's pernicious effects. While each of these writers' voices is unique, and their lives and careers ultimately followed different trajectories, their work resists the pressures that a burgeoning medical establishment exerted on African Americans to conform to stereotyped norms. Each of them highlighted elements from popular and material culture to show that these pressures contributed to pathologizing the black body.¹

Although my method in the following chapters largely relies on placing Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's work in biographical and historical context, I discuss how each author's self-presentation of illness and the pathologizing discourses surrounding race and sexuality influences his work. In this regard, I take my cue from A.B. Christa

Schwarz's self-described "biocritical" approach in her 2005 book, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Schwarz's goal is to meet the "need for a more nuanced gay readings of Harlem Renaissance texts that place works in a more historical and biographical context" (Schwarz 3).² Schwarz expands the critical conversation regarding sexuality and race in the Harlem Renaissance by relying, in part, on letters and unpublished manuscripts by and to the male writers in her study. Schwarz uses authors' biographical information to build her case that writers like Hughes and Nugent, for instance, were not only same-sex interested but acutely aware of the contemporary discourse surrounding same-sex desire. Schwarz builds on the work of scholars who examine the Harlem Renaissance in terms of its gay subculture by arguing that ambiguities in literary texts, such as ungendered poetic speakers, can suggest gay themes that, due to the social, legal, and medical discourses that constructed homosexuality as abject, could mostly only be expressed as subtext.³

I adapt Schwarz's biocritical method of using an author's biographical information to contextualize his work by analyzing his self-presentation of his own illnesses (real and imagined) provided by Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent in both their creative work and biographical work. This method provides insight into how these writers understood medical discourse. In addition, I use Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's biographical profiles to argue that these writers were aware of how people of the African diaspora were pathologized by the dominant, white culture, and I connect select creative texts by Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent to medical ideologies that pathologized the black body. Although I discuss some texts that other critics have explored in depth, such as Hughes's cabaret poems, Thurman's best-known novel *The*

Blacker the Berry, and Nugent's well-known short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." I pair these texts with some of their lesser-known works because these texts best illustrate my argument that these writers de-pathologize the black body.

The texts on which I focus include the cabaret poems from Hughes's first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926), and I show how Hughes uses the tropes of the Harlem cabaret to undermine medical and scientific discourses that pathologized the subjects who inhabited these spaces. I argue in part that the leftist political radicalism of Hughes's 1930s poems is present in these earlier poems as well, particularly in his description of vibrant, healthy African American subjects. I then discuss Hughes's 1934 poem "Cubes," a modernist critique of the relationship between colonialism and the cultural discourses, such as capitalism and medical science that enable and reproduce Western power. In his essay on "Cubes," Seth Moglen argues that New Critics marginalized radical interwar poetry because those texts disrupted the notion that Modernism was apolitical (Moglen 1189-91).⁴ By arguing that an unfairly obscure poem like "Cubes" belongs in the Modernist canon, Moglen expands our critical understanding of the relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism. This project likewise draws attention to an obscure text like "Cubes" to argue that the Harlem Renaissance was, in part, a response to medical and scientific discourses that pathologized the black body. I also consider Hughes's description of his ill body in the first volume of his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), where he writes of his own illnesses as a psychosomatic response to his troubled relationship with his father.

I examine Wallace Thurman's little-known short story "Grist in the Mill" (1926) and his iconic first novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) because in each of these texts

Thurman uses a medical or pharmaceutical technology to interrogate how race and gender were pathologized in American culture. In “Grist in the Mill,” Thurman’s protagonist, a racist Southern white planter, receives a blood transfusion from an urban African American man, and subsequently goes insane due to his belief that the transplanted blood will cause him to become black. Similarly, in *The Blacker the Berry*, Thurman satirizes intraracial prejudice within the African American community by depicting the dangerous lengths to which a dark-complexioned woman goes to try to lighten her skin through the use of skin bleaches and arsenic. In both of these texts, Thurman implicates the medicalized, capitalist culture of the United States for promulgating racism. Like his protagonists in these two texts, Thurman’s anxiety over his dark skin color fueled his tendency to neurosis and hypochondria, and I consider the relationship between his experiences, how he wrote about his own life, and his fiction.

Unlike Hughes and Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent was uninterested in pursuing a career as a writer after the mid-1920s, although he did continue to write until shortly before his death in 1987. Despite his meager published output, he is an important Harlem Renaissance figure. I examine four texts by Nugent. Two of these, the poem “Shadow” (1925) and the short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926) are well-known and have been widely anthologized. The other two texts, the poem “Bastard Song” (1930), and the short story “Lunatique” (undated) were first published in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002), an anthology of Nugent’s work edited by his literary executor Thomas Wirth. Nugent’s work remains under examined not only because of the paucity of his output but also because of his work’s gay subject matter. Nugent was influenced by the artists and writers of the *fin de siècle* as well as by nineteenth sexology, which

pathologized homosexuality. In my examination of his work, I show how Nugent uses the tropes of *fin de siècle* decadence to interrogate the sexological discourses that pathologized homosexuality. In addition, I consider Nugent's literary self-presentation of his early intellectual development in his novel *Gentleman Jigger* (c. 1929-1933, published 2008).

I have chosen these particular writers because they share the core theme of interrogating racist medical discourse, but also because Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's lives are similar in a number of intriguing ways. All of them, for instance, had difficult relationships with their parents: their fathers were largely absent from their lives, and their mothers were not a consistent presence. All three were raised by their maternal grandmothers, strong women who were community leaders.⁵ In addition, their lives and careers intersect at crucial points. All three joined the Harlem Renaissance literary scene within a few months of each other, from November 1924 to the summer of 1925.⁶ Hughes, in fact, was responsible for bringing Nugent to Harlem (having met him at a Washington D.D. salon hosted by their mutual friend Georgia Douglas Johnson) and introducing him to Thurman. Hughes and Nugent would remain friends until the former's death in 1967. Thurman and Nugent were virtually inseparable from their first meeting in the summer of 1925 until the spring of 1928, when Nugent (who was a talented dancer in addition to being a writer and illustrator) left New York for two years to tour the United States and Europe in the original production of Dorothy and DuBose Heyward's play *Porgy* (1927).⁷

Furthermore, all three are connected by having lived at a notorious Harlem rooming house, "Niggerati Manor," a name given to the residence by Zora Neale

Hurston. It would prove to be a center of Harlem literary and artistic life for younger, avant-garde African American writers and artists.⁸ It functioned as a space in which the younger writers of the Harlem Renaissance could rebel against the norms of African American bourgeois culture, in their work and in their personal lives. As Granville Ganter notes, this rooming house at 267 W. 136th Street allowed “[its] denizens to take pleasure in what they ostensibly should not” (95).⁹ In addition to the freewheeling, party atmosphere of “Niggerati Manor,” being in such close proximity allowed these three writers to exchange ideas and build, to some extent, a shared literary idiom. Thurman lived there from 1925 to 1928, Hughes throughout the summer of 1925, and Nugent from 1926 to 1928. It was here that these three, along with Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Aaron Douglas, would create and publish the single issue of *FIRE!!*, a little magazine “devoted to the younger Negro artists,” as its cover proclaimed, in November 1926. Even though Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent were part of a larger collaborative effort with *FIRE!!*, they, perhaps more than their collaborators, were committed to the magazine’s rebellious, anti-bourgeois ethos.¹⁰

In addition, Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent are also linked by their apparent homosexuality. Although Hughes’s sexuality remains a mystery and continues to be a source of critical speculation, the general critical consensus is that he should be considered a gay writer. Wallace Thurman denied that he had homosexual inclinations, but his same-sex sexual interest has been fairly well-documented.¹¹ Of the three, only Nugent was open about his sexuality. Nugent’s ownership of his gay identity cannot be solely attributed to a lifetime that lasted well into the modern LGBT-rights era because he was “out” in the 1920s. As he later remarked about Harlem’s sexual mores in the 1920s,

“You just did what you wanted to do. Nobody was in the closet. There was no closet” (qtd. in Wirth, “Introduction” *Gay Rebel* 21).¹² These writers’ rejection of normative heterosexuality connects them and offers an interesting gloss on their resistance to the black body’s pathologization, as well as to that of gay people.

This is not to say that Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent adhered to a specific set of precepts or created an overarching artistic manifesto. Each had a distinct literary vision. For Hughes, it was an interest in African American music and radical leftist politics; for Thurman, it was his own caustic, sardonic personality coupled with blind ambition and outrage at what he perceived to be the wasted potential of the Harlem Renaissance; for Nugent, it was a fascination with *fin de siècle* art and literature and an abiding interest in popular scientific literature. It is their shared radical political and artistic stances, however, that separate them from Countee Cullen and others who worked in traditional poetic forms and were less sympathetic to radical politics.¹³ Moreover, these three writers’ lives and careers extended beyond the brief time they spent living together in Harlem, and their close personal association in the 1920s informed how they represented (and resisted) discourses that pathologized the black body.

The New Negro Movement and Resistance to the Black Body’s Pathologization

The Harlem Renaissance is rightfully associated with art, literature, music and racial uplift, but African American health is a relatively unexplored area of this discourse, and it’s important to recognize the centrality of this issue to the larger movement that frames the three writers’ works I analyze in this dissertation. Although its artists are not usually linked to the medical field, a number of the Renaissance’s participants were connected to the healing professions: Nella Larsen worked as a nurse; Eslanda Goode

Robeson, wife of singer Paul Robeson, was a pathologist; Rudolf Fisher was a radiologist who worked as superintendent of the black-owned International Hospital in Harlem; Claude McKay nearly pursued a medical career as a young man; and Wallace Thurman himself considered studying medicine after barely surviving a bout of influenza during the flu epidemic of 1918-19. Although the opportunities were limited, medicine was one of the few careers available to educated African American men and women of the 1920s. In addition to the (segregated) employment potential in the medical field, many figures associated with the Renaissance were interested in medicine not only because of the prevalence of infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis, within the black community but also because recent medical advances, such as germ theory, undermined the pseudo-scientific racism of the Victorian era. New medical and scientific theories, which had long been used to justify the enslavement and oppression of African people, increasingly showed that people of the diaspora were not genetically inferior to northern Europeans.

The Harlem Renaissance occurred in a context in which people of African descent were believed by the dominant culture to be inherently diseased, and mistaken beliefs about the black body exacerbated systemic inequalities that existed within the health care delivery system. Public health crises in the black community continued longer than necessary, precisely because of the belief that African Americans were prone to illness.¹⁴ African Americans' experiences with white-controlled medical institutions in the 1920s were as difficult as with other white-controlled institutions, and these writers understood that racism. Nancy Krieger and Mary Bassett, in their article "The Health of Black Folk: Disease, Class, and the Ideology of Science," claim that the belief in African Americans' inherent illness can be traced to two different, yet compatible, ideologies: "the patently

racist view that blacks are more susceptible to disease—the genetic model. In contrast, environmental models depict blacks as victims of factors ranging from poor nutrition and germs to lack of education and crowded housing” (161). According to Krieger and Bassett, the environmental model, originally postulated by liberal opponents of the genetic model’s obviously racist assumptions, was in time adopted by conservatives as method to blame poor African American health outcomes on supposedly bad lifestyle choices.

Tanya Hart in *Health in the City: Race, Poverty, and the Negotiation of Women’s Health in New York City*, asserts that this racist assumption about African Americans’ supposed inherent poor health is partly rooted in the antebellum belief that African peoples’ pulmonary systems were less developed than those of whites, and so people of sub-Saharan African descent were ill-suited for the colder climates or northern urban centers such as New York City.¹⁵ According to Hart, the plantation myth held that Africans were immune to tropical diseases such as yellow fever and malaria, and were, therefore, physically and temperamentally suited to the warm, humid climate of the American deep south, and hence, enslavement.

Writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance were determined to present the African American subject as one capable and deserving of full participation in American life, and medical issues were at the heart of this enterprise. Alain Locke, one of the movement’s major architects, claims in the opening essay of his seminal anthology, *The New Negro* (1925), that the New Negro is “vibrant with a new psychology,” which he links to “the new spirit [that] is awake in the masses, and under the very eyes of the professional observer is transforming what has been a perennial problem into the

progressive phases of contemporary Negro life” (3).¹⁶ By invoking “a new psychology,” Locke means to convey that a twentieth-century African American subjectivity would replace internalized racist constructs of black identity. By connecting the emerging science of psychology with the nascent New Negro movement, Locke links it with twentieth century modernity. While W.E.B. Du Bois announced a generation earlier in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that the problem of the twentieth century is “the problem of the color line” (3), Locke’s “new psychology” suggests medical knowledge could contribute to greater cultural inclusion for African Americans.

Creative writers were not the only public figures concerned with giving African Americans a new way of viewing themselves. W.E.B. Du Bois, another major architect of the Harlem Renaissance, first in his work as a sociologist and later as the long-time editor of *The Crisis*, was perhaps the most important figure in the resistance to scientific racism. As Carol Taylor has shown, Du Bois was committed to revealing the logical fallacies and faulty research methods used to construct African Americans as inferior to whites of Northern European descent. According to Taylor, “as Du Bois saw it, scientific racism was a closed system which reached untenable conclusions by weak methodology in the hands of biased researchers” (455).¹⁷ Taylor summarizes various editorials in which Du Bois dismantles scientific racism by demonstrating the researchers’ racist biases. Du Bois’s importance to the effort to refute scientific racism cannot be overstated. Despite their rebellion against his artistic precepts, when Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent undermine scientific racism in their literary work, they are continuing Du Bois’s legacy.

From the beginning of the New Negro movement, there was a drive toward improving African American public health. Booker T. Washington founded Negro Health

Week in 1913, designed to raise awareness about diseases such as tuberculosis and educate African Americans on proper sanitation. During the first two decades of the NAACP's *The Crisis*, the magazine published dozens of articles about African American health, as did *The Messenger* and *Opportunity*. The common theme of these articles is the need for improved urban sanitation, the connection between systemic poverty, racism and the spread of infectious disease, and the need for improved education within the black community on how to avoid spreading communicable disease.

Scientific racism and its attendant ideology of African racial inferiority had long constructed the black body as inherently unhealthy, and especially susceptible to diseases such as syphilis, and, especially, tuberculosis. By the early twentieth-century, the social construction of tuberculosis had undergone a radical shift. Once associated with artistic temperament and feminine beauty, the 1882 discovery of the bacillus bacteria that causes tuberculosis eventually led to the disease being associated with filth and poverty because members of the white medical establishment were quick to blame newly-arrived black populations for the spread of tuberculosis in cities. In the early decades of the 20th century, tuberculosis decimated the African American populations of northern cities, whose resources were already taxed by the influx of migrants from the south seeking an escape from that region's crushing poverty and violent racism. African Americans had had no exposure to the disease until their first encounters with Europeans, and so had no natural immunities to the disease.

The spaces created to deal with the public health crisis of tuberculosis in the black community not only replicated the oppression of blacks by the dominant white culture but furthered it under the guise of healing. The surveillance by (largely white) medical

professionals and supposed incorrigibility of black tuberculosis patients turned the private space of the home and community into public space, wherein inveterate, diseased, black bodies had to be corralled to avoid spreading the bacillus. The ideology underpinning the medical community's handling of this African American health crisis reveals that the social and economic freedom that many African Americans sought by leaving the South during the Great Migration, was, in fact, illusory.

Furthermore, the proposed treatment facilities for black tuberculosis patients frequently reproduced the dominant culture's exploitation of African Americans. In 1913, for instance, Baltimore official C. Hampton Jones argued for two new TB hospitals to be built, "[a] city-supported facility for whites, and a farm and manufacturing colony for blacks, supported partially by public funds and partially through agricultural and light industry goods produced on-site [by the black patients] and sold at market" (qtd. in Roberts 180-1).¹⁸ The implications of this scheme are that blacks—"incorrigible consumptives"—would be re-patriated to a plantation economy. This scheme is only the most obvious example of medicalized space that reproduced racist cultural institutions. Less obviously, promotional material for tuberculosis prevention encourages African-Americans to leave the city: "Bad air, overwork, late hours, intemperance, and other excesses lead to consumption. Fresh air, good food, sunshine and life in the country cure it" (qtd. in Roberts 179)¹⁹. This was the era of the "air cure" for tuberculosis, a regimen that evokes the transparency of the social space it produces. Far from the bucolic arcadia of "fresh air, good food, and sunshine," as the proposed Baltimore work camp demonstrates, black bodies would be highly regulated in a medicalized space controlled by a white medical establishment.

It was in the racist context of the black body's pathologization and the difficulty black doctors and nurse had gaining professional parity that TB clinics and the black hospital movement began. The racialized space of the black TB clinic and hospital speaks to the ideologies that produce it: the rise of the professionalized hospital as the site of healing, and a racist dominant culture that created separate space for African-Americans to find medical care. For many African-Americans, black-run clinics and hospitals did not necessarily represent an achievement. Louis T. Wright, a leading African-American surgeon, in 1935 criticized efforts to combat tuberculosis in Harlem as “aim[ed] at palliation instead of the correction of the real evil, which is poverty and race prejudice.”²⁰ Wright understood that merely reproducing separate and unequal white institutions for black patients would not address the community's issues. In addition, Vanessa Gamble, in her study of the black hospital movement, notes that many African-Americans, mindful of slavery's abuses of the black body, feared TB clinics and black hospitals out of concern they would be made test subjects for medical experiments (59-61).²¹ Urban African Americans in the cities found themselves constructed as already diseased by a white racist medical establishment.

By the early twentieth century, medical authorities blamed African Americans themselves for the high rates of tuberculosis in northern cities. According to medical historian Samuel K. Roberts, medical professionals believed that African Americans were not only inherently prone to the disease but also were “uneducable in disease prevention and sanitation” (27). To combat the spread of tuberculosis, these white medical professionals used surveillance techniques, such as frequent visits to African American homes from doctors, nurses, and public health officials. Surveillance by white authorities

and linguistic constructs used to describe the African American tuberculosis patient such as the “incorrigible consumptive” were designed to regulate the black body, to produce what Foucault termed “docile bodies” (*Discipline* 136).²² This surveillance by white professionals caused some consternation within the black community, which bristled at such condescending treatment by the medical establishment.²³

At the same time, African American medical personnel were systematically denied employment in their white-dominated profession. In his role as editor of *The Crisis* from 1910-1934, Du Bois frequently brought attention to this problem. For instance, in his regular column in the August 1923 issue, Du Bois relates that Dr. Lillian Atkins Moore, a recent graduate from the Woman’s Medical College of Philadelphia, was unable to secure an internship despite graduating with high honors because she was African American. Du Bois relates Dr. Moore’s accomplishments—being elected class secretary, winning several awards, and passing the medical board exam “with a high average and in general [she] made herself a record most unpleasant for the authorities” (“Opinion” 154).²⁴ Du Bois reprints a letter Dr. Moore received from a hospital administrator rejecting her application: ““We are all your good friends and it is a most unpleasant thing to have to tell you that just because you are colored we can’t arrange to take you comfortably into the hospital. I am quite sure that most of the internes who come to us next year will not give us as good work as you are capable of doing”” (qtd. in “Opinion” 154). Significantly, Langston Hughes’s well-known poem “Jazzonia” appears in print for the first time four pages after Du Bois’s editorial. The sensuous vision of a Harlem cabaret as an African American utopia contrasts sharply with the lived reality of - urban people of color.

The African American medical professionals who were able to find employment, unfortunately, frequently echoed their white counterparts' attitudes toward black public health when they blamed their community's high rates of disease on new urban social spaces produced by the Great Migration. One conservative black physician castigated African-Americans for "going to markets," and "buying up, for a trifle, what is hardly fit for human food, and which has been turned over a hundred times already." This comment both reveals and occludes the crushing poverty that forced people to eat poor quality food. The physician then turns his attention to burgeoning jazz clubs, calling them "the very recruiting ground of crime," where "the morals of young men are ruined, their health is often destroyed, and the results are evil in every way" (qtd. in Dreisinger 93).²⁵

In these ways, medical discourse and issues surrounding African American health were always part of the New Negro movement, along with resistance to their racist underpinnings. In addition to Washington's establishment of Negro Health Week in 1913, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* published dozens of articles during the Harlem Renaissance that undermined medical and scientific racism.²⁶ The second issue of *The Crisis* in December 1910, for instance, featured anthropologist Franz Boas, who contributed a piece titled "The Real Race Problem."²⁷ In this article, Boas argued that the physical differences between Africans and Europeans, which underpinned Victorian scientific racism, do not indicate differences in either "intelligence or moral character" (Boas 23).²⁸ Boas acknowledged that physical racial differences exist, but critiqued the racist assumptions that white Europeans were superior to people of African descent: "On the whole, the morphological characteristics of the two races show rather a specialized development in different directions than a higher development in one race as compared

with the other” (24). Boas then pointed out that many African societies had thrived prior to European contact, and he concluded it was the effects of slavery and European colonization that were responsible for African Americans’ social and economic marginalization. Du Bois’s decision to publish an article by Boas, a leading public intellectual, so early in *The Crisis*’s run signals that combating medical and scientific racism was an important editorial goal of the magazine, and, by extension, the Harlem Renaissance, of which Du Bois was a primary creator.

In addition to Du Bois’ *The Crisis, Opportunity*, published by the National Urban League and founded by Charles S. Johnson, also published articles that combated the medical ideology of black pathology. For instance, in the editorial “Health Statistics,” which appeared in August 1932, Elmer A. Carter, the magazine’s editor, argued that assuming African Americans have a “peculiar susceptibility to pulmonary disease” leads to the incorrect belief that tuberculosis is inevitable in the black community (239).²⁹ Carter compared the tuberculosis rates in African American and working-class white neighborhoods and found a comparable rate of infection, from which he concluded that race alone is not a factor in rates of infection. The Boas and Carter articles speak to the connection between the activist, racial uplift ideology of figures such as Du Bois, Johnson, and Carter and the literary work produced by Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent. Hughes published several poems in *The Crisis*, while he, Thurman, and Nugent each contributed to *Opportunity*. Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent did not produce scholarship or write specifically about public health policy, but their creative work was certainly informed by such pieces published in the same journals.

“You just did what you wanted to do”: Pathology, Race, and The Gay Harlem

Renaissance

Hughes's, Thurman's, and Nugent's challenge to scientific and medical racism was informed by New Negro contestation of racist discourses about disease, but they also interrogated the pathologizing medical framework applied to homosexuality. As Siobhan Somerville has shown, the discourses that pathologized the nonwhite and the queer body developed at the same time in the late nineteenth century in ways that “were not only historically coincident but in fact structurally interdependent and perhaps mutually productive” (Somerville 246).³⁰ According to Somerville, Victorian sexologists borrowed the methods of anatomists who studied racial difference in order to taxonomize sexuality and privilege heteronormative sexual expression. In addition, Somerville connects sexology to the racist discourses that studied and pathologized non-heteronormative sexuality to the ideologies that also pathologized biracial subjects: “[T]he beginnings of sexology, then, were related to and perhaps even dependent on a pervasive climate of antimiscegenation sentiment and legislation” (Somerville 258). Somerville suggests that there was a connection between scientific racism, which was used to justify white supremacy, and the emerging science of sexology. The late nineteenth-century sexological construction of healthy sexuality was, as George Chauncey has noted, built on strict adherence to heteronormative monogamy: “sexual relations outside of the heterosexual institution of marriage thus represented not only a degeneration to an earlier, lower state of evolution, but threatened civilization itself” (Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality” 133).³¹

As Chauncey has documented, Harlem and Greenwich Village were the major enclaves of New York City's early twentieth-century gay subculture. Although Greenwich Village, according to Chauncey, was a more famous mecca for gays and lesbians, he asserts that Harlem could be a more liberatory environment: "the Village's most flamboyant homosexuals wore long hair; Harlem's wore long dresses" (Chauncey, *Gay New York* 244).³² The liberatory possibilities that Harlem afforded to gay people was an important element in the development of the Harlem Renaissance, which was, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has noted, "surely as gay as it was black" ("The Black Man's Burden," 233).³³ It should be mentioned that many of the same-sex interested individuals who found refuge in Harlem were whites who, in constructing Harlem as a site in which to explore forbidden sexual desire, reproduced the dominant cultural ideology that constructed African Americans as exotic and primitive. It would be reductionist, therefore, to claim that Harlem was a gay mecca for African Americans in the same way that it was for whites. Most of the businesses patronized by gay customers were for whites only. In addition, African Americans did not benefit economically from Harlem's reputation for gay nightlife because 95% of businesses that catered to a same-sex interested clientele were owned by whites. Consequently, Harlem's African American gay community was only able to take advantage of the neighborhood's liberatory possibilities to a more limited extent than did its white cohort. Gay African Americans were in a double-bind because they had to navigate the legal and medical power structures that criminalized and pathologized homosexuality without the benefit of white privilege. While racial uplift was the primary goal of the Harlem Renaissance, even among its younger practitioners like Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent, these writers were

also committed to documenting the sexual liberation of 1920s Harlem. As Mason Stokes has suggested: “[I]t is tempting to think that Harlem’s may be the queerest avant-garde in history” (60).³⁴ For Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent, Harlem was not only a space in which to experiment sexually, but also a site from which they could interrogate the dominant ideologies that pathologized and marginalized both queer people as well as people of the African diaspora.

Furthermore, New York’s gay scene of the 1920s is, in part, noteworthy for the increased awareness among its members of the medical discourse surrounding homosexuality (Chauncey, *Gay New York* 283). Despite the fact that early twentieth-century sexological discourse pathologized same-sex interested people, many gays and lesbians of the era found this literature empowering because it revealed that homosexual desire is not uncommon. Furthermore, many of the physicians who produced sexological research on homosexuality were not unsympathetic to their subjects and argued for its decriminalization. The publication of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, was, as Jeffrey Weeks has noted, “the eruption into print of the speaking pervert, the individual marked, or marred, by his (or her) sexual impulses” (67). Although Hughes and Thurman were familiar with the scientific and medical literature on homosexuality, it is Richard Bruce Nugent who most heavily uses this discourse in his work, and I spend a considerable amount of time in this study placing his work in conversation with Krafft-Ebing. For Nugent in particular, reading the medical literature on homosexuality became a strategy for undermining homophobia.

Perhaps because of their queer sexual identities, or because Harlem itself was an important site for New York City’s gay subculture in the 1920s, Hughes, Thurman, and

Nugent understood how the white dominant culture used medical discourse to construct African American sexuality as pathological, and all three writers resisted that pathologization. In his seldom-discussed 1931 poem “Cubes,” for example, Hughes’s poetic speaker bitterly relates how an “African from Senegal” is seduced by the French ideals of “Liberty, equality, fraternity,” ideals which he characterizes as the “three old prostitutes of France” (*CP* 176).³⁵ While this metaphor seems misogynistic, Hughes uses it to establish the poem’s central conceit, which is that the Senegalese subject takes “a little more disease” back to the African “women in huts” (*CP* 176). Hughes suggests that while the white, Euroamerican dominant culture equates black sexuality with disease, in reality it is the false allure of European enlightenment ideals that brings disease to Africa. By personifying liberty, equality, and fraternity as prostitutes, figures who seem to offer love but are motivated purely by financial gain, Hughes offers a Marxist statement on European exploitation of Africa and African people while also subverting the ideology of supposed African sexual and racial pathology.³⁶

Wallace Thurman likewise understood how medical discourse was used to pathologize the sexuality of people of color, particularly that of gay black men. Much of the scholarship on Thurman has explored how sexual and racial identity and performance intersect in his fiction. Mason Stokes argues that Thurman spoke about homosexuality “in the language of abnormality rather than identity—of pathology rather than a newly found liberated sexuality” (71). Stephen Knadler, in his discussion of bisexuality in *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), goes further and argues that Thurman disentangled the cultural discourses that pathologized both blackness and homosexuality by “link[ing] racial pride to homophobia” (924). As I will make clear in Chapter Three, Thurman’s work tends to

reproduce rather than critique the pathologizing discourses surrounding homosexuality.

In *The Blacker the Berry*, for instance, Thurman's protagonist Emma Lou's ultimate empowerment and acceptance of her dark complexion occur when she is able to reject her bisexual lover, Alva, whom Thurman inscribes as degenerated and ill. Similarly, in an early scene of his novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932), the protagonist Rusty, describes the decadent persona of his friend Paul Arbian, an aspiring artist based on Richard Bruce Nugent, as "just a symptom of some deep set disease" (Thurman, *Infants* 60).³⁷

Thurman's sardonic equation of Arbian's/Nugent's outrageous persona with disease is consistent, however, with how artists and writers of the 1890s constructed decadent tropes as signs of rebellion against bourgeois norms. I treat decadence in Nugent's work in particular in more detail in Chapter Four, but I will note here that I chose to use part of this quote as this dissertation's title, *Jazz Epidemics and Deep Set Diseases: The De-Pathologization of the Black Body in the Work of Three Harlem Renaissance Writers*, because several writers, in particular Hughes, Thurman, and Nugent, used the tropes of decadence to interrogate bourgeois norms of not only the white, dominant culture but also older members of the Harlem Renaissance such as Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois. Even though Locke and Du Bois themselves identified with the figure of the dandy, for instance, a major trope of decadence, for them the dandy tends to function as a model of bourgeois masculinity within a racist culture that strictly polices the gender performance of men of color. For these younger writers, however, especially Thurman and Nugent, the decadent dandy underscores that very policing by bringing the supposed degenerated nature of the black male body to the forefront, and, in so doing, they critique the bourgeois Du Boisian model of black masculinity.³⁸

Chapter Descriptions

In Chapter Two, “‘A Little More Disease’: Resistance to Medical Racism in Langston Hughes’s Poetry,” I assert that Hughes’s interest in de-pathologizing the black body evolves throughout his career to reflect his changing artistic and political concerns. I open the chapter by establishing that, in the 1920s, the white dominant culture inscribed jazz and cabaret culture as inherently diseased and disabling. Through a close reading of select cabaret poems from Hughes’s first volume, *The Weary Blues*, I argue that Hughes represents this music and the cabaret culture as life-affirming, and, ultimately, healthy. Hughes, in his radical poetry of the 1930s, broadens his focus beyond Harlem. Rather than depict the black body as inherently healthy, Hughes in the 1930s used disease as a metaphor for what people of the African diaspora suffer as a result of Western capitalist exploitation. In an explication of Hughes’s “Cubes,” in particular, I argue that Hughes implicates all of Western culture in this exploitation, including Euroamerican high modernism, by linking Cubism’s cultural appropriation of African iconography with that of the African diaspora. Hughes critiques racist Western ideologies that constructed the African subject as physically—medically—inferior to white Europeans by depicting power structures rooted in capitalism as the cause of African suffering. I conclude this chapter by considering how Hughes’s treatment of illness and the black male body in his post-1930s nonfiction prose work, particularly *The Big Sea* (1940), synthesizes his 1920s project of depicting the black body as inherently healthy with his 1930s critique of Western capitalism.

In Chapter Three, “‘Insane Eyes and Insane Stares’: The Pathologized Black Body in the Fiction of Wallace Thurman,” I argue that in the short story, “Grist in the

Mill” (1925), and the novel, *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Thurman satirizes racist beliefs about the pathology of blackness by representing them as white neurosis. I begin this chapter with an examination of Thurman’s life, which was marked by alcoholism and extended periods of illness and hypochondria, because Thurman’s self-presentation of his real and perceived health problems provides insight into his depiction of racism as an illness. In “Grist in the Mill,” Thurman’s first published work of fiction, an African American man from Chicago living in Louisiana just after World War I donates blood to a wealthy white Southern planter. When the planter learns that his blood donor is black, he irrationally believes that he is turning into a black man, a belief that drives him insane. Thurman, who once aspired to study medicine, uses the then-modern medical practice of blood transfusion to critique beliefs about the black body’s pathology. In *The Blacker the Berry*, Thurman also examines the internalized racism and sexism of Emma Lou Morgan, who thinks of her dark skin as a pathological condition that requires a cure. Throughout the novel, Emma Lou tries to bleach her skin by applying creams and powders, and even by swallowing arsenic. As I point out in this chapter, much of the critical discussion on the novel centers on the extent to which Emma Lou’s racial self-loathing is a projection of Thurman’s own hatred of his dark skin. A strictly biographical reading of the novel, then, would argue that Emma Lou’s foolish and self-hating efforts could be read as one source of Thurman’s alcoholism. I argue, however, that *The Blacker the Berry* is not strictly autobiographical due to the sensitivity with which Thurman handles the cultural pressures placed on women of color and that the novel is an excellent example of Thurman’s resistance to pathologizing of the black body.

In Chapter Four, ““What to Do About the Symptoms?”: Richard Bruce Nugent’s Decadent Interrogation of Medical Discourses of Homosexuality and Race,” I argue that Nugent interrogates the pathologization of homosexuality by appropriating the idiom of decadence. Nugent was part of the Harlem community of writers and artists in the 1920s and 1930s, and was certainly well-versed in the New Negro ideology espoused by W.E.B. Du Bois, but his primary intellectual touchstones were late nineteenth-century European decadents and aesthetes, such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley. In addition, Nugent was also influenced by Victorian-era medical discourse surrounding homosexuality. In his novel of the Harlem Renaissance *Gentleman Jigger*, written in the early 1930s but not published until 2008, narrates his fictional alter-ego’s self-discovery of his same-sex desire by reading Richard von Kraft-Ebbing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and I use this incident to establish Nugent’s intellectual interest in Victorian medical discourses. Nugent’s work interrogates the pathologization of homosexuality and race, often through a lens informed more by Wilde and Beardsley than by New Negro racial uplift, which places his work outside the mainstream of the Harlem Renaissance. Nugent’s work remains obscure; indeed, almost none of it was published until 2003.

I begin the chapter by establishing Nugent’s use of decadent tropes, and I claim that this late-nineteenth century movement’s association with disease is perhaps the reason Nugent was drawn to them. I then examine two of Nugent’s early poems, “Shadow” and “Bastard Song.” I argue that they reveal Nugent’s indebtedness to the fin de siècle decadent movement. I then analyze Nugent’s short story, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” This story, in which a bisexual artist and poet comes to terms with his sexual identity, is written in a modernist style and evokes all the major touchstones of

decadence. Nugent depicts non-normative sexuality as healthy by depicting the transformation of Alex, the story's protagonist, from sickly decadent to vigorous sexual adventurer. I foreground my discussion of this text by explaining the decadent tropes that Nugent employs to code Alex as decadent, and I connect these elements to the medical models of homosexuality, of which he was highly critical. I close this chapter by examining Nugent's late short story, "Lunatique," which is difficult to date with certainty because it remained unpublished until 2003, but appears to have been written in the 1920s. "Lunatique" reflects Nugent's lifelong interest in psychology. The text centers on Angel, the text's teenage protagonist, and his sexual awakening, which is instigated by a homoerotic dream that Nugent renders in overtly Freudian terms. Angel is so disturbed by the dream that he stops speaking and develops an active fantasy life. In addition to Angel's muteness, Nugent describes his protagonist's body in terms consistent with the physical markers of homosexuality that nineteenth-century sexologists believed characterized the pathological, non-heteronormative body. Nugent engages with and ultimately undermines this pathologizing discourse.

Conclusion

During the Harlem Renaissance, nineteenth-century racial and sexual discourses that pathologized the black, as well as the non-heteronormative, body were still dominant ideologies. As more African Americans moved to northern cities as part of the Great Migration, the racist discourses that inscribed their bodies as pathological allowed public health officials to simultaneously ignore the high rates of infectious disease within the black community, while also blaming African Americans themselves. One goal of the Harlem Renaissance's participants, then, was to challenge these discourses. The three

writers I examine in this dissertation, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, and Richard Bruce Nugent, each challenge these racist and homophobic discourses from a unique perspective. Hughes challenges the black body's and jazz music's supposed pathology by depicting the black body as healthy and by interrogating Euroamerican capitalism. Thurman satirizes white racism by depicting it as symptomatic of illness and reveals how racism contributes to some African Americans' internalized racism. Nugent uses the tropes of fin de siècle decadence to interrogate discourses that pathologized homosexuality. All three of these writers were aware of the medical and scientific discourses by which the dominant culture asserted power by inscribing some bodies as abject and unhealthy, and their work resists pathologizing hegemony. In this dissertation, I extend the critical dialogue surrounding these writers by drawing attention to how they resisted these discourses that pathologized the black body.

Notes

¹ My use of the terms pathology and pathologization is not exactly an engagement with the so-called “black pathology” that can be traced to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 U.S. Department of Labor report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, specifically “Chapter Four: The Tangle of Pathology,” pages 29-46. A trained sociologist, Moynihan sought to find the cause(s) of African American economic inequality. Rather than identify systemic racism, including federal and state laws that furthered a white supremacist agenda, Moynihan ultimately blames African Americans themselves, specifically African American women, for the community’s challenges: “the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male, and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (Moynihan 28). The “tangle of pathology” that Moynihan identifies as the ultimate cause of African Americans’ continued inequality ultimately blames—pathologizes—African Americans themselves by presenting their community and culture as fundamentally broken. Psychologist William Ryan would later coin the expression “blaming the victim,” in his book *Blaming the Victim* as a response to Moynihan’s report, and rebuts Moynihan’s report in detail on pages 63-88 of that book. See Ryan, William. *Blaming the Victim*. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1976.

² Schwarz, A.B. Christa . *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003.

³ See, for example, Weeks, Jeffrey. *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities*. New York: Routledge, 1985.

⁴ Moglen, Seth. “Modernism in the Black Diaspora: Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso.” *Callaloo* 25.4 (2002): 1188-1205.

⁵ For information about Hughes’s family background, see volume one of Arnold Rampersad’s biography of Hughes, *The Life of Langston Hughes: I, Too, Sing America*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1988). For information about Thurman’s life, see Eleanore von Notten’s *Wallace Thurman’s Harlem Renaissance* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994). For information about Nugent’s life see, see Thomas Wirth’s introduction to his edition of Nugent’s work, *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 1-61.

⁶ Hughes began publishing poetry in national magazines when his first mature poem, “the Negro Speaks of Rivers,” appeared in *The Crisis* in June 1921. However, Hughes was still living with his mother in Cleveland, Ohio in 1920, having just recently finished high school. After spending time with his father in Mexico, and later working as a sailor, Hughes would move to New York in 1924.

⁷ Thurman also appeared as a member of the *Porgy* ensemble, having answered a cattle call audition with Nugent in the autumn of 1927. Thurman, however, lacked Nugent’s stage presence and theatrical training, and left the show in December 1927. Nugent stayed with *Porgy* for its entire 354 performance New York run (Wirth “Introduction” *Gay Rebel* 15).

⁸ In his book *When Harlem was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin, 1979), David Levering Lewis points out that “Niggerati Manor” was self-mocking, but also points out that Thurman’s residence on W. 136th Street was “the embodiment of outrageous, amoral independence,” a revolutionary space in which the Harlem Renaissance’s younger artists and writers could be “freed from the prim guidance of the leading civil rights organizations” (193).

⁹ Ganter, Granville. “Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman.” *MELUS* 28.2 (2003): 83-104.

¹⁰ Langston Hughes, in his memoir *The Big Sea*, describes the goal of *FIRE!!*: “to burn up a lot of the old, dead, conventional Negro-white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realization of the existence of the younger Negro writers and artists, and provide us with an outlet for publication not available in the limited pages of the small Negro magazines then existing, the *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and the *Messenger*--the first two being the house organs of inter-racial organizations, and the latter being God knows what” (235-6). Hughes goes on to attribute the magazine’s poor reception to Nugent’s short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” which I will discuss in Chapter Four. Later critics would echo Hughes’s claims, while arguing that Nugent’s story best represents the magazine’s aesthetic. In his article “Lighting the Harlem Renaissance *A Fire!!*: Embodying Richard Bruce Nugent’s Bohemian Politic,” for instance, Seth Clark Silberman argues that *FIRE!!* was a proto-queer revolutionary text and that “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” reconstitutes Wildean decadence in an African American cultural milieu. Michael L. Cobb, in his article “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance’s Impolite Queers,” similarly argues that *FIRE!!* represented a sharp break from the bourgeois respectability of racial uplift promoted by W.E.B Du Bois, but argues that Thurman, in his role as the magazine’s editor, was largely responsible for its rebellious tone. Similarly, Stephen P. Knadler, in his article “Sweetback Style: Wallace Thurman and a Queer Harlem Renaissance,” argues that Thurman was the magazine’s guiding force, but claims that it was Thurman, rather than Nugent, who imbued *FIRE!!* with a decadent, Wildean aesthetic. More recently, however, Suzanne Churchill, in her article “Youth Culture in *The Crisis* and *FIRE*,” argues that *FIRE!!* did not represent such a sharp break from the aesthetic of older Harlem Renaissance figures such as Du Bois and Alain Locke because the two had always encouraged literary experimentation.

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of these writers’ sexuality, as well as the historical context of how they labeled or refused to label their sexuality, see A.B. Christa Schwarz’s *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003). Schwarz’s “study is an exploration of Renaissance writers’ gay voices via a bio-critical approach which entails readings of Renaissance works in the context of archival material such as writers’ personal correspondence and unpublished manuscripts” (Schwarz 3). In addition to a chapter in which she places Harlem’s 1920s gay scene in a post-World War I cultural context, Schwarz devotes chapters to Hughes and Nugent, in addition to Countee Cullen (1903-1946) and Claude McKay (1889-1948). For a recent article that examines queerness in Hughes’s work, see Sam See’s “‘Spectacles in Color’: The Primitive Drag of Langston Hughes.” See argues that Hughes’s first volume of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) can be read as a “primitive drag” performance, by which See means that the

unraced and ungendered status of the poems subjects, coupled with Hughes's formal experimentation, make *The Weary Blues* a comment on discourses such as degeneration theory that constructed the black and queer body as pathologized.

Thurman's homosexuality is not nearly as critically contested an issue as Hughes's. While Van Notten acknowledges Thurman's homosexuality in her biography of him, critical interest in Thurman's sexuality begins with Kevin Mumford's article "Homosex Changes: Race, Cultural Geography, and the Emergence of the Gay." Mumford links figures such as Thurman to the complex early twentieth-century urban web in which race and sexuality intersect. Mumford's essay concludes with a brief analysis of Thurman's 1925 arrest for engaging in homosexual activity in a public men's room. Thurman denied, in a 1929 letter to his playwriting partner William Rapp, that he was a homosexual, claiming instead that the encounter was prostitution: "He offered me two dollars. I accepted" (Thurman qtd. in Mumford 410). Subsequent scholars do not believe that Thurman's homosexual activity was limited to this one incident, in part because Nugent spoke about Thurman's sexuality in post-Renaissance interviews. Cobb and Knadler, in the articles that I mentioned earlier, both deal with Thurman's sexuality in terms of how his life intersected with how he presented Harlem's sexual politics in his fiction. Granville Ganter, in his article "Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman," argues that Thurman's work is indebted to late-Victorian decadent artists and writers.

¹² Wirth, Thomas. Introduction. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. Ed. and Introd. Thomas Wirth. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002. 1-61.

¹³ Cullen was the adopted son of Rev. Frederick A. Cullen, founder and pastor of the Salem Methodist Episcopal Church, and as such was part of the Harlem cultural elite. As an adult, he married Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, but the marriage ended after six months because of Cullen's homosexuality.

¹⁴ Krieger, Nancy and Mary Bassett. "The Health of Black Folk: Disease, Class, and Ideology in Science." *The "Racial" Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*. Ed. Sandra Harding. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993. 161-9.

¹⁵ Hart, Tanya. *Health in the City: Race, Poverty, and the Negotiation of Women's Health in New York City, 1915-1930*. New York: NYU Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Locke, Alain. "The New Negro." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. 1925. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

¹⁷ Taylor, Carol. "W.E.B. Du Bois's Challenge to Scientific Racism." *Journal of Black Studies* 11.4 (1981): 449-60.

¹⁸ Roberts, Jr., Samuel Kelton. *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009.

¹⁹ Promotional material for the Maryland Assoc. for the Prevention and Relief of Tuberculosis MAPRT.

²⁰ Wright, Louis T. "Factors Controlling Negro Health." *The Crisis* (Sept. 1935): 265-84.

²¹ Gamble, Vanessa. *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920-1945*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995. African Americans' fears were not unfounded, as the infamous Tuskegee syphilis experiment demonstrates. The experiment, which was based

at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and conducted by the US Public Health Service, was designed to study the long-term effects of untreated syphilis. During the 1932-1972 study, 399 impoverished African American sharecroppers already infected with syphilis were never told they were infected, nor were they treated, even after penicillin was discovered to cure syphilis. Rather, the men were told they were being treated for “bad blood,” a local vernacular term used to refer to a wide range of ailments. After a whistleblower brought the study to the public’s attention, Dr. John Heller, the study’s last director, defended the experiment’s ethics, claiming that the men involved were subjects and clinical material rather than patients.

²² Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. New York: Random House, 1978. Although my method is not exactly Foucauldian, Foucault’s ideas are instructive on this point. Foucault focuses on the body as the “object and target of power” (136). Docility is the term Foucault uses to describe how individuals’ bodies are subject to institutional regulation: “a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (136). The purpose of such regulation is to maintain “order and discipline” (136).

²³In Chapter Two, I examine how Langston Hughes interrogates the white medical establishment’s pathologization and surveillance in such poems as “Mazie Dies Alone on Welfare Island” and “The Consumptive.”

²⁴ Du Bois, W.E.B. “Opinion.” *The Crisis* (August 1923): 154.

²⁵ Dreisinger, Baz. *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2008.

²⁶ See Taylor, Carol. “W.E.B. Du Bois’s Challenge to Scientific Racism.” *Journal of Black Studies* 11.4 (1981): 449-60. Taylor argues that “a direct and authoritative challenge to the scientific racism of this period was urgently necessary, and that leading such a challenge was one of the leading rhetorical contributions of W.E.B. Du Bois” (450). Taylor claims that Du Bois challenged scientific racism in terms of “social Darwinism, the eugenics movement, and psychologists’ measurement of intelligence” (450).

²⁷ As George Hutchinson notes, “Boas and his students led a devastating assault upon ‘scientific’ racism” (62). Hutchinson, George. *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1995.

²⁸ Boas, Franz. “The Real Race Problem.” *The Crisis* 1.2 (August 1923): 22-5. As the “father of modern anthropology,” Boas was a key intellectual figure of the early decades of the twentieth century, and was an important opponent of medical and scientific racism. Boas helped develop the concept of cultural pluralism, the belief that a minority culture can retain its unique character while still assimilating into the dominant culture. Boas is also closely associated with cultural relativism, by which he meant that all people view the world through the lens of their own culture, and one culture cannot objectively be proved to be superior to any other culture. As a professor at Barnard, Boas mentored Zora Neale Hurston. For a discussion of Boas’ influence on the Harlem Renaissance, see George Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1995), pp. 61-77.

²⁹ Carter, Elmer A. “Health Statistics.” *Opportunity* 10.8 (November 1932): 239.

³⁰ Somerville, Siobhan. "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.2 (1994): 243-66.

³¹ Chauncey, George. "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conception of Female Deviance." *Salmagundi* 58-59 (1982-1983): 114-46.

³² Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic, 1994.

³³ Gates, Jr., Henry Louis. "The Black Man's Burden." *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Ed. Michael Warner. Minneapolis and London: U of Minn. P, 1993. 230-8.

³⁴ Stokes, Mason. "Say My Name: Rethinking the Gay Twenties." *Transition* 92 (2002): 56-79.

³⁵ Here, and in Chapter Two, the abbreviation *CP* stands for *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995.

³⁶ Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexological literature frequently claimed a connection between pathologized sexuality and African people. Sam See has pointed out the "identitarian stereotypes of African Americans and queers" in "early twentieth-century sexological science and degeneration theory: namely, that blacks and queers were unnatural and degenerate because they, unlike whites and heterosexuals, exhibited a lack of racial and gender differentiation through racial miscegenation and arrested sexual development" (799-800). While the Senegalese man in "Cubes" is not coded as queer per se, Hughes suggests that his patronization of prostitutes constitutes a queerness, as does his apparent acceptance of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

³⁷ Thurman, Wallace. *Infants of the Spring*. 1932. Foreword Amritjit Singh. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992.

³⁸ A number of critics have examined the influence of texts and artifacts associated with decadence, especially the British decadence of the Aesthetic movement, on the Harlem Renaissance. These analyses tend to focus on the figure of the dandy, in particular how early Renaissance figures adopt the performative aspects of dandyism while rejecting decadence. For instance, Houston A. Baker, Jr. argues that Booker T. Washington used the dandy as a model for his own public persona. Michèle Mendelssohn argues that Du Bois, in his novel *Dark Princess* (1928) uses the figure of the decadent dandy to interrogate white, bourgeois cultural norms. Monica L. Miller argues that Du Bois' dandyism constitutes a proto-black nationalist masculine identity. See Baker Jr., Houston A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. Mendelssohn, Michèle. "Rewriting the Genealogy of Minstrelsy for Modernity: 'Cry and Sing, Walk and Rage, Scream and Dance.'" *African American Review* 48.1-2 (2015): 127-39. Miller, Monica L. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006.

CHAPTER TWO

“A Little More Disease”: Resistance to Medical Racism in Langston Hughes’s Poetry

Much of Langston Hughes’s (1902-1967) best-known poetry is associated with the black vernacular culture that produced the blues and jazz. What is not well-known is that during the Harlem Renaissance African American cultural products such as blues and jazz were thought by many physicians and scientific theorists to be evidence of black racial degeneracy.¹ By extension, all people of sub-Saharan African descent were believed by many scientists to be inherently diseased. This chapter looks at how Hughes writes about illness and disease in the context of the widespread medical and scientific racism of the early twentieth century that constructed the black body as essentially unhealthy. Hughes’s poetry resists the dominant ideology of the pathologized black body by re-inscribing it as healthy through the vernacular idioms of blues and jazz, which Hughes saw as restorative. In addition, as Hughes became more comfortable expressing his political radicalism in the 1930s, his work more openly confronts the various black public health crises facing the African American community.

At the beginning of Hughes’s career in the early 1920s, many medical theorists still believed Africans and people of the African diaspora to be “naturally diseased” (Wailoo 56).² Supposed African racial degeneracy had been used to justify slavery and, in the twentieth century, continued discrimination against African Americans (Savitt 53-7).³ As scientific advancements such as germ theory demonstrated that disease was caused by pathogens rather than racial inferiority, the ideology of medical racism

accounted for this new knowledge by claiming that blacks were inherently susceptible to many infectious diseases. During the Great Migration, many cities struggled to accommodate their new African American residents, and scientific racism was used to explain why so many of these new residents were sick. By the early twentieth century, respected medical experts attributed the high rates of infectious diseases such as tuberculosis among African Americans not to systemic racism, poverty, and unsanitary urban conditions, but to black racial decadence. Thomas J. McKie, a white physician, linked tuberculosis to insanity among African Americans due to “an overworked and overtaxed nervous organization unfitted by nature and otherwise to bear the burden imposed by newly created necessities or environment” (qtd. in Rice and Jones xii).⁴ When unsanitary urban conditions were recognized as contributory to the high rate of tuberculosis within the African American community, such conditions were blamed on blacks’ “indolence and improvidence” (Harris qtd. in Rice and Jones xii). Similarly, syphilis was also a major health crisis, to the extent that it was referred to as the “Negro disease” (Wailoo 57). While some interwar scholars called for education to halt the spread of syphilis, the leading medical theorists of the day insisted that African Americans were an “unmoral people,” ninety-five percent of whom eventually contracted the disease (Rice and Jones xiii). When Hughes begins his career, then, it is in a context in which the dominant white power structure has constructed the black body as inherently diseased and therefore inferior.

Throughout his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes re-inscribes the black body as healthy and vibrant, and he does so by positioning the black body in the very urban spaces that the medical establishment deems especially inimical to the black body’s

health, namely the city, and, within the city, cabarets.⁵ In addition, when Hughes decided to write poetry in the vernacular, he created new possibilities for American poetry. African American cultural products such as the blues were automatically suspect among the dominant culture. According to the dominant ideology of the era, such cultural products were thought by many to be evidence of racial decadence, and the white listener was always at risk of succumbing to that same decadence.⁶ The concerns about jazz and health are not completely unfounded. Historian Jeffrey Sartin links the emergence of new musical forms with the poor health of its artists: “musical innovation is thus often accompanied by diseases of neglect and over indulgence, particularly infectious illnesses” (106).⁷ Sartin documents the prevalence of tuberculosis, syphilis, and chronic viral hepatitis among early jazz musicians, claiming that the musicians’ poor health contributed to the dominant white culture’s simultaneous revulsion against and fascination with jazz, and its performance spaces. Sartin further associates a musical form’s growing cultural acceptance with an improvement in its artist’s health: “risky behavior and associated infectious illnesses tend to decrease as the style matures” (106). When Hughes writes about jazz dancers and musicians, then, his work is situated in a cultural context of suspicion about musicians and dancers based on their (poor) health. The vibrancy of his dancers can be understood in part as an oppositional stance to the fear that doctors, medical journals, national magazines evoked from the public.

Midnight Dancers of the Jazzy Hour: *The Weary Blues* (1926)

In his poetry of the 1920s, Hughes uses the idioms of black music and its performance spaces to give voice to those who had been voiceless and describe experiences which had previously been unnarratable: “At the center of his effort would

be the recognition of a link between poetry and black music, and in particular the music not of Europeanized spirituals, so often lauded, but of the earthy almost ‘unspeakable’ blues” (Rampersad 146).⁸ Critics have traditionally associated Hughes’s relationship with cultural forms such as jazz and blues with his work’s racial uplift concern.⁹ What has not been mentioned in any previous critical consideration of Hughes’s relationship with jazz and blues is that while these musical forms were popular in the 1920s, they were seen by many medical and cultural theorists of the era as promoting sickness in listeners.

Historian Russell L. Johnson points out that contemporary critics use words like “‘pathological,’ ‘infection,’ ‘virus,’ ‘epidemic,’ and ‘cancer’ to describe jazz” (14).¹⁰ According to Johnson, jazz music was constructed by many theorists as not only “disabled” musically due to its unique tonal qualities but also in its rejection of European musical restraint (14-15). Furthermore, jazz had the power to “disable” its listeners (15-16). Finally, jazz dancing was frequently compared to “the movements of people with epilepsy or nervous disorders” (Johnson 18).¹¹ Rather than depict jazz and cabarets in terms of disease, throughout *The Weary Blues* Hughes portrays black music and its performance spaces as healthy and restorative, and not only re-inscribes the black body as healthy, but also resists the dominant ideology that constructs jazz and jazz dancing as inherently diseased.

Hughes codes the black body as healthy by manipulating the tropes of primitivism. One of the central trends in Western art and literature throughout the first half of the twentieth century, primitivism reverses the binaries of racist ideologies like the scientific racism that constructed the black body as diseased. Primitivism privileges the “savage” over the “civilized.” After the horrors of World War I, many artists and writers

thought the West seemed to be suffering from too much “civilization.” For these mostly white, mostly upper and middle class members of the creative class, primitivism functioned as a balm for the decadence of the West. According to Robert A. Coles and Diane Isaacs, primitivism was “a therapeutic alternative to the insidious disease of Western civilization” (3).¹² Since African Americans had a different relationship to the webs of power and technology that produced modernism, primitivism was a way for black writers to claim the African past as their own while still employing the modernist idiom. Langston Hughes’s relationship to primitivism was complicated, and continues to be a source of critical debate.¹³ In Hughes’s first book, however, primitivist tropes signify the healthy black body, while also pointing to a healthy black identity.

Hughes’s tendency to use primitivist tropes to depict the healthy black body while simultaneously constructing an essential racial identity is evident in his early poem “Danse Africaine.” First published in the August 1922 issue of *The Crisis*, “Danse Africaine,” seems, at first glance, to be straightforward primitivism:

The low beating of the tom-toms.

The slow beating of the tom-toms,

Low . . . slow

Slow . . . low—

Stirs your blood.

Dance! (*CP* 28)¹⁴

The repetition in the opening two lines suggests the beating of the tom-toms; similarly, the chiasmic construct “Low . . . slow/ Slow . . . low” evokes rhythmic drumbeat. In the following stanza, the figure that has been enjoined to dance enters the poem.

A night-veiled girl

Whirls softly into a

Circle of light.

Whirls softly . . . slowly, (*CP* 28)

The poem closes with a reiteration of the beating tom-toms that “Stirs your blood” (*CP* 28). The night-veiled girl who dances “like a wisp of smoke around the fire” seems compelled to dance by the beating tom-toms, which “stirs” the blood. According to most critical readings of the poem, the dancing subject seems to have sacrificed agency in a ceremony that evokes an essential racial identity. Jeff Westover asserts that “Hughes makes the drum his instrument for the recuperative work of memory” by which the psychic scars of the African diaspora can be healed (1215).¹⁵ Marisa Parham, in her article comparing Hughes’s and Countee Cullen’s treatment of racial memory and the Middle Passage, claims that the poem “shift[s] the responsibility for remembering more fully onto the body, which now must only respond to a prompt. Overdetermined, the rhythmic beating of the tom-tom moves the post-Passage body in time, moves it in memory” (443).¹⁶ Parham’s and Westover’s readings of “Danse Africaine” as a statement on the post-Middle Passage black body highlight the work Hughes was doing in his early career to re-inscribe the black body as inherently vibrant and healthy. In this poem, the healthy black body is placed in a space that might be either a Harlem nightclub or Africa. In so doing, Hughes uses the primitivist idiom to connect the African past to the Harlem present. Hughes seems to collapse the distinction between the dancing African subject and the dancing Harlem subject.

Such a reading suggests that Hughes perhaps elides the violence and distress of the Middle Passage; however, Hughes's word choices evoke the physical suffering of the voyage. Even though "Danse Africaine" should be understood as a pan-Africanist statement of racial pride, Hughes intriguingly uses the language of physical pain while depicting the black subject as healthy. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, explores the difficulty of finding a language to describe physical pain. In her discussion of medical professionals' attempt to create a vocabulary by which patients can articulate their pain to physicians, Scarry notes that the most common descriptors of physical pain are flickering, burning, beating, throbbing, quivering, and pulsing, and that these words "express, with varying degrees of intensity, a rhythmic on-off sensation" (7).¹⁷ Scarry's insights into the language of pain can offer a way of understanding Hughes's poem. "Danse Africaine," with its rhythmic beating of the tom-toms, its images of fire, and stirred (pulsing) blood, shares the language of physical pain: the "night-veiled girl" who is compelled to dance seems also to act as a body in physical pain. Scarry claims that physical pain is "often represented as an individual's last hold on personal identity before the surrender to an external force or system" (347*n*). In this reading, based on Scarry's theorization, dance with its attendant beating drums can be interpreted as a metaphor for pain as well as its cure.

By using these images, however, Hughes did not intend to evoke the ill body; rather, "Danse Africaine" is emblematic of how Hughes subverted racist medical discourse. According to Sam See, "the poetic performances in *The Weary Blues* co-opt pathologizing taxonomies of blacks and queers in order to debunk them even while retaining the nature-based premises of those discursive stereotypes" (802).¹⁸ By co-opting

the language of physical pain and illness in a poem that celebrates the healthy sensuality of the black body, Hughes undermines the ideology of racial degeneracy. Throughout *The Weary Blues*, Hughes uses the primitivist idiom to depict the black subject as vibrant, and this tendency can be more clearly seen in the cabaret poems.

We can see how Hughes uses primitivism to evoke health and vibrancy within a cabaret setting in “Jazzonia.” In the poem, first published in *The Crisis* in August 1923, the Harlem cabaret is imagined as a nation in itself, evidenced by the “-onia” suffix.¹⁹ One of Hughes’s best-known poems, “Jazzonia” is a celebration of an African/African American essence incarnated in a Harlem cabaret populated by musicians and dancers:

Oh, silver tree!

Oh, shining rivers of the soul!

In a Harlem cabaret

Six long-headed jazzers play.

A dancing girl whose eyes are bold

Lifts high a dress of silken gold.

Oh, singing tree!

Oh, shining rivers of the soul! (Hughes *CP* 34)²⁰

The poem has a musical structure, with the repeated lines “Oh, silver [later, singing] tree!/ Oh, shining rivers of the soul!” bracketing the cabaret scene, much like a musical chorus brackets a verse. The poem’s musical structure is important because it underscores that Hughes’s poetic project is concerned with re-inscribing the black body as healthy by

reclaiming cultural forms, music, that were coded as diseased. Rather than disabling, the cabaret in “Jazzonia” is empowering. The poem’s speaker does not offer a detailed description of the cabaret; instead, the scene is described in imagistic terms. The shining and singing tree and shining river suggest that nature can be remade through jazz. The diasporic nature of the people in the cabaret and the music the musicians play is underscored by the phrase “shining rivers of the soul,” which suggests movement, much like “Danse Africaine,” and Hughes’s well-known poem of African/African-American essence, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” The central figure of “Jazzonia” is the “dancing girl” who boldly lifts her dress. The speaker presents her open display of sexuality without judgment. The next stanza makes the poem’s theme clearer:

Were Eve's eyes
 In the first garden
 Just a bit too bold?
 Was Cleopatra gorgeous
 In a gown of gold?
 Oh, shining tree!
 Oh, silver rivers of the soul!
 In a whirling cabaret
 Six long-headed jazzers play. (*CP* 34)

The poem’s focus broadens in this stanza beyond the Harlem cabaret and into a mythic past. The new possibilities for life represented by the jazzers and the dancing woman are linked to Eve, the mythical first woman. The nature imagery of the opening stanzas is expanded upon here; jazz can remake the world just as Eve did by eating the forbidden

fruit. The female dancer is compared to Cleopatra; like the last Egyptian Pharaoh, the cabaret dancer holds great power. The poem is ambiguous about her future; however, like Eve and Cleopatra, she too may be headed for a fall. She is not, however, a product of a degenerate race. Furthermore, her health is linked to jazz and the cabaret.

Throughout *The Weary Blues*, Harlem nightlife is treated in a celebratory tone; jazz and dancing are depicted as life giving. As the speaker of “Lenox Avenue: Midnight,” first published in *The Weary Blues*, notes,

The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm
Honey. (Hughes *CP* 92)²¹

Far from being unrhythmical and disabling, jazz is equated with life itself. In *The Weary Blues*, the vivid descriptions of cabaret life contrast with the world outside the cabaret, which seems to scarcely even exist. When the world outside the cabaret is alluded to, it is frequently in terms of its uncertainty. Although the poems in *The Weary Blues* do not overtly reflect Hughes’s concern with social issues and Marxist politics, there are hints that the world of the cabaret is a safe space.

In “Harlem Night Club,” first published in *The Weary Blues*, the speaker urges cabaret musicians to

Play, pLAY, PLAY!
Tomorrow . . . who knows?
Dance today! (Hughes *CP* 90)²²

The use of capitalization in this poem is modernist experimentation that suggests either music getting louder, a crowd demanding more music, or both. The unusual capitalization

functions as a visual syncopation that upends the reader's expectations, like musical syncopation. The poem's next three stanzas depict white and black subjects dancing together, and the poem's final stanza echoes its first:

Tomorrow . . . is darkness.

Joy today! (*CP* 90)

The mood of *The Weary Blues* is one of exuberance, of "joy today." The pressures of racism are treated obliquely in the cabaret poems, as in "Harlem Night Club" ("Tomorrow . . . is darkness"). The cabaret is restorative and therapeutic; the world outside, where the dancing subjects will be "tomorrow," is unspeakable, evidenced by the use of ellipses, and can only be described as darkness.

While the world inside the cabaret is coded as restorative and life-giving, the world outside the cabaret is described in terms of illness or physical pain. "Summer Night," which was first published in the December 1925 issue of *The Crisis*, offers a sensitive look at the sense of loss that musicians and bar-hoppers felt after the cabarets closed for the night:

I toss

Without rest in the darkness,

Weary as the tired night,

My soul

Empty as the silence,

Empty with a vague,

Aching emptiness,

Desiring

Needing someone,

Something. (*CP* 59)²³

As in “Danse Africaine,” Hughes uses the language of physical pain (“Aching”) to comment on his poetic subject’s interior state. Unlike “Danse Africaine,” however, the speaker in “Summer Night” is not ultimately represented as healthy and vibrant. In the poem’s last stanza the speaker reveals that he lies awake

Until the new dawn,

Wan and pale,

Descends like a white mist

Into the courtyard. (*CP* 59)

Rather than bringing clarity or rationality, as opposed to the irrationality of the night, dawn in this poem provides no focus. The fog-like description of the new day suggests that whatever the speaker’s unnamed issues may be, the night is the only time he is able to deal with them. The wan and pale dawn suggests a sickliness that contrasts with the healthy exuberance suggested by the “player-piano” and “Victrola” of the previous night. The night, then, despite the sense of loss that results at its end, offers protection from the figuratively diseased day. Just as he adopts and reshapes discourses surrounding the body and health, in this poem Hughes reverses the modernist convention of portraying the night as a time when dangerous subconscious desires come to the surface, usually through dreams.²⁴

Hughes frequently employs the tropes of primitivism to evoke the healthiness of the black dancing subject. In one of Hughes’s most anthologized poems, “To Midnight

Nan at Leroy's," which was first published in *Vanity Fair* in September 1925 and reprinted in *Opportunity* in January 1926, the eponymous Nan is described in terms that perhaps suggest she is under the disabling influence of jazz:

Strut and wiggle,

Shameless gal.

Wouldn't no good fellow

Be your pal.

Hear dat music....

Jungle night.

Hear dat music....

And the moon was white. (CP 57)²⁵

Nan's movements would have appeared to some cultural critics in the 1920s as mimicking the symptoms of "epilepsy or a nervous disorder" (Johnson 18). This poem reveals the potential disadvantage of primitivist imagery. Nan's overt sexuality, which is linked to "jungle music," threatens to code her in ways that advance racist arguments. As John Cooley reminds us, primitivism "can also be a value judgment. It can serve handily for one wishing to either elevate or to denigrate the 'primitive'" depending on one's subject position (14).²⁶ To an observer inclined to judge Nan harshly, her "shameless[ness]" that makes her undesirable to any "good fellow," would mark her as degenerate. Jazz is potentially further coded as degenerate or disabling in the second stanza by the vernacular spelling of the demonstrative adjective "that" ("dat") and the descriptor "Jungle music." The next stanzas, however, reveals more detail about Nan's strutting and wiggling:

Sing your Blues song,
 Pretty baby.
 You want lovin'
 And you don't mean maybe.
Jungle lover....
Night black boy....
Two against the moon
And the moon was joy.
 Strut and wiggle,
 Shameless Nan.
 Wouldn't no good fellow
 Be your man. (CP 57-8)

Nan is not merely a customer in Leroy's, a popular Harlem nightclub in the 1920s, but a singer, and her sensuous movements occur within the context of a performance. Nan's performance of black female sexuality is not unlike Josephine Baker's, who would open in *La Revue Nègre* at Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées shortly after this poem first appeared. David Chinitz's point that Baker "perform[ed] brilliantly the tropes of Western primitivism, [and] thereby convince[ed] European audiences that they were witnessing an authentic display of racial character, rather than their own preconceptions" seems to apply equally to Nan (*Sin* 16).²⁷ "To Midnight Nan at Leroy's," then, engages with the tropes of primitivism without actually presenting those tropes as racially essentialized. Instead, the jazz-infused primitivism is used to code the body as robust and healthy.

In “Negro Dancers,” first published in *The Weary Blues*, Hughes engaged with primitivism as performance even more pointedly. The poem opens with a black dancer describing her performance:

“Me an' ma baby's
 Got two mo' ways,
 Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!”
 Da, da,
 Da, da, da!
 Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!” (CP 44)²⁸

The dancer’s exuberance speaks to the excitement of the cabaret. Such is the dancer’s enthusiasm that even language breaks down. The “Da da,/ Da, da, da” could represent the dancer’s vocally keeping rhythm, but even these seeming nonsense syllables speak to Hughes’s vision of the cabaret and its music as restorative. Karl Henzy reads these lines as “pure reality” and “an instance of pure aliveness articulated without resource to “trope or deviation” (920).²⁹ In addition, Henzy reads the dancer’s “Da da” as a possible allusion to the Dada movement, launched by Tristan Tzara and Andre Breton a few years before the poem was written, which criticized “Western rationalism by irrational means” (920). Although Henzy does not connect this point to primitivism, it was an important element of Dadaism and its successor movement, Surrealism. The dancer’s “Da da,/ Da, da, da” connects the vernacular culture of the Harlem cabaret to the high modernism of Parisian cafes. The modernist ethos is not criticized in this poem; indeed, it seems to be as restorative as the cabaret. The dancer’s description of her dancing is in quotation marks

because she is not the speaker of the poem. After the opening stanza, the speaker offers a more objective description of the scene:

Soft light on the tables,
 Music gay,
 Brown-skin steppers
 In a cabaret. (Hughes *CP* 44)

The speaker's voice is detached, almost reportorial, which contrasts with that of the dancer. The objective voice of the speaker signals to the reader that the seeming primitivism of the cabaret scene is performance, and not an essentialized representation of racial identity. The poem ends with the dancer's voice reiterating the description of her dancing:

White folks, laugh!
 White folks, pray!
 'Me an' ma baby's
 Got two mo' ways,
 Two mo' ways to do de
 Charleston!' (*CP* 44)

The poem's speaker is aware that the dancer's performance, however restorative it might be for her, also amuses the cabaret's white patrons. The "white folks" reaction to black dancing, which seems to be a mix of mockery and reverence, speaks to the dominant culture's racism in that the white cabaret patrons seem unable to recognize the skill with which the dancers perform. This poem re-contextualizes the history of black

performances for white consumption from the slave ship dance to the minstrel stage and re-inscribes black performance as life-affirming and restorative.

The dancing female body also seems to be coded as primitive in “Nude Young Dancer,” first published in *The New Negro* (1925).

What jungle tree have you slept under,
 Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?
 What great forest has hung its perfume
 Like a sweet veil about your bower?

What jungle tree have you slept under,
 Dark brown girl of the swaying hips?
 What star-white moon has been your lover?

To what mad faun have you offered your lips? (*CP* 61)³⁰

This poem may seem like straightforward primitivism, but it is, rather, a literary performance in which Hughes manipulates the tropes of primitivism. As Steven Tracy points out, the apparent exoticism of the poems in *The Weary Blues* “resides in the mind of onlookers, not in the minds of the singers, musicians, and prostitutes who might seem to be so picturesque” (219).³¹ In Hughes’s cabaret poems, the gaze that potentially would inscribe the nightlife’s denizens as degenerate and inherently diseased if they were being watched by medical theorists is here used to re-code the black body as vibrant and healthy.

As in “Jazzonia,” the dancing black female in these cabaret poems functions as a utopian figure through which Hughes reclaims the healthy black subject, and African

American dancing. Hughes's "Young Singer," which was first published in *The Crisis* (Aug. 1923), suggests that the jungle imagery should not be read literally:

One who sings "chansons vulgaire"
 In a Harlem cellar
 Where the jazz band plays
 From dark to dawn
 Would not understand
 Should you tell her
 That she is like some nymph
 For some wild faun. (*CP* 35)³²

In "Nude Young Dancer" and "Young Singer," the black female body is sensual, but it is a sensuousness that is entirely performative. The speaker in "Young Singer" is aware of the performative nature of Harlem primitivism, and, like the female singers of "chansons vulgaire," manipulates the tropes of primitivism.

Although Hughes presents the black body as inherently healthy in *The Weary Blues*, he does not present the black body as wholly immune to illness. The only poem in the collection to allude to the ill body is "Sick Room." In the poem, first published in *The Weary Blues*, an ungendered, unraced speaker comments on a scene of a woman dying:

How quiet
 It is in this sick room
 Where on the bed
 A silent woman lies between two lovers—

Life and Death,

And all three covered with a sheet of pain. (*CP* 99).³³

The dying woman's silence is emphasized; not only is she silent but her room is quiet as well. The space of illness and disease contrasts sharply with the urban noise of Harlem in general, and the cabarets in particular. To an extent, "Sick Room" is a nod to the eroticism of the consumptive's death that is common in nineteenth-century literature, with the dying woman as one member of an erotic triangle that includes life and death. Of course, we cannot know for certain that the silent dying woman in "Sick Room" is a tuberculosis patient, but if she is, the eroticism with which Hughes's speaker imbues her death is intriguing because it rewrites the nineteenth century romanticization of tuberculosis with an African American female subject, rather than a white woman. Finally, the dying woman in this spare, imagistic poem acts as a counterpoint to the healthiness of the cabaret dancers that inhabit Hughes's early poetry.

Hughes also presents black vernacular culture as healthy in his artistic manifesto "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926). Written partially in response to his former friend Countee Cullen's review of his first volume of poetry *The Weary Blues* (1926), Hughes contrasts "we younger Negroes who create" from a vantage point of racial pride with a black middle-class poet who "subconsciously" wants to be white" ("Artist" 692).³⁴ In what Sam See terms a "psychoanalytic account" Hughes intimates that middle-class African Americans' privileging of white Euroamerican cultural institutions over vernacular African-American culture is symptomatic of mental illness (See 809). In Hughes's view, the black middle-class perceives the racially aware poet as a medical oddity, a "sideshow freak" ("Artist" 693). In a "wake-up call to black

consciousness,” Hughes posits that the solution to this cultural neurosis is the valuing of vernacular culture (Jerving 660).³⁵ In a reversal of the era’s dominant ideology that constructed working-class African Americans as inherently ill and a burden to society, Hughes positions the “low-down folk” as essentially healthy and representative of the race’s future through the “eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt” (“Artist” 693). In the essay’s final paragraph, Hughes suggests that the black middle-class can be healed by embracing the vernacular culture and letting the “blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near intellectuals” (“Artist” 694).

Hughes claims that black vernacular culture has restorative power, which is acknowledged even by Hughes’s contemporaries who otherwise find jazz to be unseemly. Joel A. Rogers, in his essay “Jazz at Home,” criticizes jazz’s milieu before praising its effect: “The tired longshoreman, the porter, the housemaid, and the poor elevator boy in search of recreation, seeking in jazz the tonic for weary nerves and muscles, are only too apt to find the bootlegger, the gambler and the demi-monde who have come there for victims and to escape the eyes of the police. . . [Y]et . . . jazz has a popular mission to perform. Joy after all, has a physical basis” (223).³⁶ According to Rogers, even though jazz is “primitive,” and “vulgarizes” its listeners, “jazz is rejuvenation, a recharging of the batteries of civilization with primitive new vigor” (224). While Hughes would no doubt bristle at Rogers’s demand that jazz whitewash itself of all unsavoriness, his early poetry does suggest that jazz is a restorative agent for the diaspora.

“Such a strange disease”: *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927)

Hughes’s second book of poems, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, appeared in January 1927, exactly one year after *The Weary Blues*. It contains Hughes’s best-known blues poems, as well as other poems that document the lives of the “low-down folk” that Hughes considered his ideal audience.³⁷ While *The Weary Blues* offers romanticized portraits of Harlem dancers and musicians, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* provides glimpses into the lives of prostitutes, gamblers, bad men, disappointed lovers, alcoholics, recent Southern transplants, low-wage workers, suicidal women, and broken-down prizefighters. Despite the seemingly salacious subject matter, though, Hughes in this book attempts to capture what he believes to be the blues’ essential nature, which is “an expression of the resilience and tragedy of the African-American lower class” (Chinitz “Authenticity” 178).³⁸ The blues are a flexible form, characterized by reversals, double meanings, and indeterminacy. Blues are specifically for the “low-down folk”; blues are the way such folk deal with their problems, whether those problems be physical, emotional, spiritual, or all three.

Disease and illness are major themes of classic blues,³⁹ and figure prominently in Hughes’s conception of the blues: “Blues ain’t nothin’ but a po’ man’s heart disease” (Bontemps and Hughes 385).⁴⁰ The speaker of this line begins this definition of the blues with a negative, “blues ain’t nothin’”, only to declare what blues are: “a po’ man’s heart disease.” “Heart disease” can mean what might more familiarly be called heartbreak or lovesickness, or it could mean literal heart disease, or it could mean *both* heartbreak *and* literal heart disease. Physical pain and psychic pain become conflated, and the pain is occluded by the irony.

While current critics view *Fine Clothes to the Jew* as a step forward for Hughes's poetic development,⁴¹ many of Hughes's contemporaries interpreted the volume as offering the very primitivism that Hughes sought to move away from.⁴² The black press was especially harsh; many of its critics read *Fine Clothes to the Jew* as pandering to white expectations that Harlem be depicted as depraved, decadent, and, in the words of Joel Rogers, "degenerate."⁴³ Rogers was outraged by what he perceived to be the sensational exposure of black, urban, sexual mores; yet, it is intriguing that he uses the word degenerate given that scientific and medical discourses had long described all people of sub-Saharan African descent with that very term.⁴⁴ Rogers characterizes Hughes's book as "piffling trash" that made him "positively sick." Several critics note that Carl Van Vechten was Hughes's mentor, and accuse Hughes of dealing in the same urban primitivism for which Van Vechten was being excoriated in the black press.⁴⁵ Few of his contemporaries realized it, but in *Fine Clothes to the Jew* Hughes opens new possibilities for poetic expression, becoming "the first writer to grapple with the inherent difficulties of blues poetry, and he succeed[s]—not always, but often—in producing poems that manage to capture the quality of genuine blues in performance while remaining effective as poems" (Chinitz 177). Instead of pandering to the demands of the white, book-buying public, Hughes actually creates a poetic idiom that captures "the range of utterance of common black folk" (Rampersad *Life I* 141).⁴⁶

"I hate to die this way": Hughes's Radical Poetry of the 1920s and 1930s

After *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Hughes gradually moved away from a celebration of blackness that characterized much of his early poetry (Evans 254). According to Evans, as Hughes became increasingly radicalized in the late 1920s and into the 1930s,

the poet continued to see jazz and folk culture as restorative, but increasingly rejected the “folk Romanticism and modernist primitivism” of his earlier work and focused more on the sociological concerns of his black subjects (Evans 254). Hughes wrote jazz poetry, blues poetry, and radical proletarian poetry throughout the 1920s. His first two books, however, revealed only his facility for using black cultural forms in poems intended for the consumption of a largely white, middle-class audience. Even before his so-called radical decade of the 1930s, though, Hughes’s poetry eschews mere racial uplift, and instead critiques middle and upper-class hypocrisy. In the 1925 poem “Drama for a Winter Night (Fifth Avenue),” which first appeared in *Worker’s Monthly*, a Communist publication, a sleeping homeless man is forced to leave, in turn, a church, a car, and finally, the street, where he becomes gravely ill due to exposure. The poem’s speakers are the respectable, middle class people who refuse to help the homeless man even after it becomes clear to them that he is dying:

You can’t let a man lie
 In the street like this.
 Find an officer quick.
 Send for an ambulance.
 Maybe he’s sick but
 He can’t die on this corner
 Not here!
 He can’t die here. (*CP* 47)⁴⁷

Feverish and delirious, the man imagines himself standing before God, only to be told that “bums can’t stay . . .” (47). By now a crowd has gathered around the dying man, and

someone, presumably speaking for the community, notices “The man’s raving,/ Get him to the hospital quick./ He’s attracting a crowd./ He can’t die on this corner./ No, no, not here” (47). The community’s concern is not for the homeless man’s health or comfort, but that he is attracting a crowd—he is making a spectacle of himself by publicly enacting illness. The line “the man’s raving” is clearly ironic; it is the community’s lack of compassion that is “raving” madness. The homeless man’s economic plight is a stark contrast to the wealthy entities that reject him—the church and the luxury-car owner—as well as the presumably middle-class people who wish for him to die anywhere but on their street. This is not the night of the midnight dancers in cabarets.

The 1925 “Drama for a Winter Night (Fifth Avenue)” provides evidence that Hughes’s political radicalism did not begin in the 1930s. Unlike the poetry Hughes publishes in magazines devoted to racial uplift such as *The Crisis*, however, “Drama for a Winter Night” critiques wealthy institutions—the church, for instance. As Hughes’s political radicalism came to the fore of his poetic consciousness in the early 1930s following his break with patron Charlotte Mason and a subsequent trip to the Soviet Union (where he witnessed, among other things, a health-care delivery system for which he would later express admiration), his work seems to reflect a decreased interest in black vernacular culture. According to Robert Young, Hughes’s verse of the 1930s exemplifies a “Red” poetics, which is an idiom that incorporates the folk vernacular while simultaneously moving beyond the folk: “His calls for a transracial/transnational worker-based political collectivity [. . .] encodes itself, not just in the content, but also in the formal structure of his poetics. Hughes’s poetic practice generates a theoretical practice, a ‘red’ poetics that challenges received racial ideas and produces new class subjectivities”

(Young 16).⁴⁸ So rather than fully abandon vernacular forms, Hughes explores new subjectivities in his proletarian poetry, and one of those subjectivities is that of the ill, dying, African American.

The middle-class black community of “Drama for a Winter Night” cannot risk being associated with the dying homeless feverish bum because their own good health, and, by extension, human worth is already questionable. Being confronted with disease, visceral coughing, sweating evidence of their cultural construction as unhealthy and degenerate, the black community resists exploring the “new class subjectivities” and instead reproduces the dominant culture’s racist assumptions about the black body.

Hughes’s Marxist politics lent an urgency and specificity to his verse, as did his activism for victims of systemic racism, such as the Scottboro Boys. His poetic treatment of tuberculosis patients illustrate how racial politics, and official responses to the public health crisis, intersect with the poet’s growing radicalism of expression. During the years of the Great Migration, tuberculosis came to be linked with working-class African-Americans’ living conditions because public health officials and medical authorities believed that blacks were not only genetically inferior and prone to the disease, but also, according to medical historian Samuel K. Roberts, “uneducable in disease prevention and sanitation” (Roberts 27)⁴⁹. At the same time, African Americans were believed by many medical personnel to be, according to Keith Wailoo, “natural-born asymptomatic carriers” of tuberculosis. In other words, the thinking went that all people of African origin were analogous to Typhoid Mary, Mary Mallon, c.1907, the Irish cook who carried typhoid but never became sick. The shift in cultural understanding of tuberculosis from a disease of white feminine beauty to one of overcrowded, unsanitary black slums reflects

the mutually reinforcing relationship between the racist dominant culture and medicine's nascent professionalization in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century.

As the medical field developed a professional establishment dominated by white physicians and policy makers, these professionals pathologized not only the black subject but also black domestic and public space. For urban African-Americans during the years of the Great Migration, this meant that they were likely to be subject to home visits from doctors, nurses, and public health officials. Surveillance by medical personnel became one of the "practical and theoretical compromises" enacted to combat the spread of tuberculosis (Roberts 4).

The newly pathologized (consumptive) black body was frequently discussed in terms of criminality, namely as the "incurable consumptive." The "incurable consumptive" refused to take precautions against spreading the disease, was intemperate, and was generally a drain on public resources. There was no alternative paradigm for a black tuberculosis patient: "not all incurables were black, [but] all blacks were incurable" (Roberts 148). Furthermore, as Claudia Maria Calhoun suggests, during the years of the Great Migration, all poor African Americans were automatically suspected (by the white medical establishment) of being tuberculosis carriers (113).⁵⁰ In my analysis of the following two poems, I want to explore how Hughes undermines the stereotype of the incurable consumptive.

Hughes's poem "Mazie Dies Alone in the City Hospital," solicited by Wallace Thurman and originally published in the single 1928 issue of his little magazine *Harlem*, is spoken by a patient who misses the cabaret lifestyle:

I hate to die this way with the quiet

Over everything like a shroud.

I'd rather die where the band's a-playing'

Noisy and loud. (*CP* 126)⁵¹

The poem insists on asserting Mazie's own individuality, beginning with the title in which her name appears, which highlights that she is not a random incorrigible consumptive. The two first-person pronouns in the first quatrain further establish Mazie's subjectivity. As a speaker, Mazie breaks silence that the space of illness and impending death---City Hospital---seek to impose upon her. Like Hughes's wistful speakers discussed earlier, Mazie reflects on the cabaret life not as a current participant but rather from a position of silence and isolation. Unlike those speakers, who remain reticent about their possible bodily ravages, Mazie openly acknowledges her mortality. The poem's second stanza reveals more about Mazie's life before her illness:

I'd rather die in the way I lived,--

Drunk and rowdy and gay!

God! Why did you ever curse me

Makin' me die this way? (*CP* 126)

As an African American woman, Mazie is automatically in danger of being pathologized by the dominant culture. Since her lifestyle strongly suggests that she is not a member of the middle-class, she is even more suspect. Consequently, the "drunk and rowdy and gay" description of her former life marks her as an "incorrigible consumptive." Drunken rowdiness also functions as an answer to the question Mazie asks in the poem's final two lines. As an incorrigible consumptive who dooms herself by absorbing the infectious rhythms of the cabaret life, Mazie ostensibly has only herself to blame, according to the

dominant ideology of poor, black tuberculosis patients. However, the space from which Mazie speaks—City Hospital—and the occasion—her impending death—give her situation pathos that renders her a sympathetic figure. Hughes does not depict the black subject as inherently healthy, as he does in *The Weary Blues*, but instead he imbues her experience with dignity.

Mazie is not specifically coded as a tuberculosis patient, but given the disease's prevalence among Harlem's African American community in the 1920s, it is a fair assumption that she is dying from that disease. Hughes does explicitly represent a poetic subject as having tuberculosis in "The Consumptive," which first appeared in *The Crisis* in 1933.

All day in the sun
 That he loved so
 He sat,
 Feeling life go.
 All night in bed
 Waiting for sleep
 He lay,
 Feeling death creep—
 Creeping like fire.
 Creeping like fire from a slow spark
 Choking his breath
 And burning the dark. (*CP* 157)⁵²

This is not a romanticized portrait of the consumptive-as-artist, yet it is not a portrait of the incorrigible consumptive either. The consumptive presumably is not in a public TB ward like a typical African American urban tuberculosis patient, such as Mazie. The poem's consumptive seems to be docile; unlike Mazie he does not long for the cabarets. In this poem, Hughes subtly interrogates the dominant ideology concerning tuberculosis, namely, that the African American body provides "fertile soil" for the disease's bacterial infection. According to Calhoun, prior to World War I, "the social Darwinist idea that African Americans were inherently susceptible to diseases like tuberculosis prompted predictions that the race as a whole would die out" (107). Calhoun goes on to document the racist assumptions surrounding African Americans and tuberculosis, including the idea that people of African descent do not have natural resistance to the disease because they didn't encounter it until they encountered Europeans. Therefore, the African/African American body acts as "fertile soil" to the bacillus that causes tuberculosis. Of course, a more immediate cause of tuberculosis among the northern African American population of the era was the high rate of urban poverty in neighborhoods like Harlem. Hughes, in this poem, presents the natural world as therapeutic. Unlike the therapeutic space of the cabaret in the poems of *The Weary Blues*, however, the natural world is a site of the tuberculosis patient's dying, described in violent terms, as "choking," and "burning."

The nameless subject of "The Consumptive" is isolated and silenced by disease. As Scarry points out, physical pain destroys language. "The Consumptive" documents not only its eponymous hero's last days, but also his inability to put his experience into language. The silencing effect of tuberculosis as it is represented in this poem is linked to the alienating experiences of racism. The same language that describes the consumptive's

dying could also describe lynching. Although language such as choking, burning, and creeping death suggest that the situation of the poem is tuberculosis, if the title were not so explicit this same language would allow the poem to be read as a comment on lynching. Although not a blues poem, “The Consumptive” is linked to the blues in that language performs multiple functions in both.

Like the midnight dancers in Hughes’s 1920s poems, the poem’s subject does not speak for himself. The consumptive’s ability to spend time out of doors suggests that he has not migrated North, but rather is still in the rural South. “The Consumptive” is more openly propagandistic than “Mazie Dies Alone on Welfare Island.” By speaking for the dying consumptive, Hughes appropriates the diseased body to interrogate the racist construct of the incorrigible consumptive, and by extension questions all racist constructions of the black body. The dying consumptive, then, is emblematic of the effects of the African diaspora; disease functions as metonymy for all the ravages of Euroamerican colonialism.

Hughes more explicitly conflates illness with white colonial oppression in his 1934 poem “Cubes.” First published in the anti-capitalist journal *New Masses*, “Cubes,” is, as Seth Moglen points out, “centrally concerned with this connection between capitalism and empire—with the global system that had, over several centuries, produced the African diaspora” (1189).⁵³ As Moglen points out, “Cubes” has been ignored by Hughes scholars and critics of Modernism.⁵⁴ Moglen suggests that this is partly because the poem disrupts the notion that Modernism is apolitical, a critical shibboleth that arose as Modernist texts became canonized and in turn determined what texts would be canonized. Although Moglen does not mention it, “Cubes” has been largely erased from

Hughes's own canon. After its initial publication, it was not reprinted until it appeared in Hughes *Collected Poems* in 1995. The poem has been critically neglected as well; to my knowledge, Moglen is the only scholar to even mention "Cubes," which is unfortunate because it is one of Hughes's most radical poems. The poem is relevant to my argument because it explicitly links colonial exploitation and the African diaspora to ideologies that constructed the black body as inherently diseased.

In "Cubes," Hughes offers a sardonic reflection on the modernist moment, in much the same way as he would provide a similar reflection on the Harlem Renaissance in *The Big Sea* (1940). Hughes comments not only on European expropriation of African cultural forms but also the literal European expropriation of African bodies. Hughes opens the poem by juxtaposing the cultural malaise underpinning Euroamerican avant-garde modernism with the colonialism enacting the African diaspora:

In the days of the broken cubes of Picasso
 And in the days of the broken songs of the young men
 A little too drunk to sing
 And the young women
 A little too unsure of love to love—
 I met on the boulevards of Paris
 An African from Senegal. (*CP* 175)⁵⁵

European culture is characterized in this opening stanza as "broken," from Picasso's cubes to the songs of the young men. There is a sense that no one really knows how to survive in the modern world—the men are too drunk, the women too unsure of themselves. Through juxtaposition, the speaker suggests that Picasso's modernist

paintings are connected to the social impotence of the young men and women unable to sing and love. In this environment, Hughes's flâneur-speaker meets an African from Senegal. Moglen points out that the linguistic repetitions in the opening stanza ("in the days of," "a little too") give the stanza a "colloquial feeling" (1193). As the stanza continues, the technique "produces a steadily increasing emotional intensity and conceptual sophistication" (Moglen 1193). Moglen argues that "Cubes" is "black vernacular literary cubism" (1193). This an intriguing construct because it weds Hughes's own radical poetic aesthetic with High Modernism. As I discussed earlier, the vernacular musical forms that Hughes uses as a poetic template were themselves thought to be evidence of disease; similarly, the radical lines of Cubist painting suggest brokenness. In this opening stanza, Hughes uses the vernacular form, not to argue that the black body is inherently healthy or resilient against systemic racism, but to suggest that it is white Europeans themselves who are, in fact, ill, since they are unable to fully engage with life. This is a remarkable development in Hughes's use of the vernacular form and the ill black body. As will soon become clear, Hughes will present the black body as diseased, but ill as a result of colonial oppression. Disease is not used as a commentary on the material reality of Harlemites, nor is it a metaphor for the speaker's personal romantic quandary.

The speaker's perceptive powers of observation mark him as separate from—immune, perhaps—the same malaise that plagues white Parisians. As the poem continues, the speaker reflects on why the African from Senegal is in Paris:

God

Knows why the French

Amuse themselves bringing to Paris

Negroes from Senegal. (*CP* 175)

The uncertainty that the speaker expresses about why the French bring “Negroes from Senegal” to Paris actually contains the answer to its own question. The French “bring” Africans to other continents precisely for their own amusement. The Senegalese man is caught in the web of colonial exploitation, and Hughes suggests there is a psychological element to that exploitation since “he has been brought specifically so that the French may ‘amuse’ themselves through him” (Moglen 1194). Colonialism, then, is not merely about economic exploitation, but has a “libidinal” motive (Moglen 1194).

This is a marked change in Hughes’s depiction of libidinal energy. In the cabaret poems of a decade earlier, Hughes presented sexual energy as positive, even healing and restorative, but now the speaker’s attitude toward that libidinal energy is one of weariness. The speakers in the cabaret poems seem not to care that whites enjoy watching them dance, in fact, the performance may well be for the specific amusement of whites; in “Cubes,” the amusement of Parisians becomes evidence of colonial oppression. Hughes subtly connects the poem’s speaker and the Senegalese by having the speaker refer to the Senegalese man as a “Negro,” which was the term of African American self-designation in the 1930s.

As the poem continues, the Senegalese man becomes symbolic of the African diaspora and the devastation the dispersal has wrought on Africa and African peoples, all for the amusement of Europeans.

It's the old game of the boss and the bossed,

boss and the bossed,

amused
 and
 amusing,
 worked and working,
 Behind the cubes of black and white,
 black and white,
 black and white. (*CP* 175)

In this stanza, Hughes connects the exploitation of the Senegalese, and by extension, all people of the diaspora, with European Modernism (“Behind the cubes of black and white”). The stanza opens with three successive pairings that describe the power relationship of colonial exploitation. The first pairing describes the “old game of the boss and the bossed.” As Moglen points out, “some people are not merely defined by the power of another, but are defined by it: they are simply, ‘the bossed’ (1194). The second pairing, “amused and amusing,” reinforces the power dynamic of colonial exploitation, and, as Moglen points out, “suggest[s] that it may well be the activity of the subordinates that defines the status and identity of the dominant one (the ‘amused,’ who has become the object of the verb and of the subordinate’s action)” (1195). The third pairing, “worked and working,” is more ambiguous. In Moglen’s reading, this third pairing describes “two different ways of understanding the complex position of the subordinate, who can be perceived both as the object of exploitation (one who is ‘worked’ by another) and the active agent of productive labor (the one who is ‘working’)” (1195).

Moglen’s brilliant reading of “Cubes” does not consider the poem as a statement on disease as a product of colonial exploitation, or significantly place this poem within

the broader context of Hughes's career, but there are connections to Hughes's earlier poetic practice. First, Hughes tends to define poetic subjects by either occupation or physical condition ("Nude Young Dancer," "The Consumptive"). Second, the repetitions recall the musical idiom that Hughes uses in his jazz and blues poems. In this poem, though, the musical structure is not for the purpose of imagining a pan-African empire as in "Jazzonia"; rather, it is to show that empire can only lead to exploitation.

The next stanza shows how the exploitation of subjects of the diaspora connects to the necrotic culture of the West:

But since it is the old game,
 For fun
 They give him the three old prostitutes of
 France——
 Liberty, Equality, Fraternity——
 And all three of 'em sick
 In spite of the tax to the government
 And the legal houses
 And the doctors
 And the *Marseillaise*. (CP 176)

As Moglen points out, for colonialism to sustain itself, some form of compensation, "libidinal or ideological," must be offered to those who are exploited (1196). The Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are described metaphorically as prostitutes, which, as Moglen correctly points out, was a "common misogynist trope [used] by the 1930s Marxist Left in order to emphasize the cynical use of Enlightenment

ideology to justify imperial exploitation” (1196). The high-minded Enlightenment ideals occlude the exploitation at the root of colonial exploitation. Hughes does not leave the metaphor at the level of misogyny, however, because he depicts the “old prostitutes” themselves as victims of the same colonial oppression as the Senegalese. This victimization takes the form of illness (“And all three of ‘em sick”). Furthermore, it is the very societal mechanisms that are supposed to keep them safe and healthy—taxes, legal houses, doctors, and national pride (the *Marseillaise*)—that have made them sick. Capitalism and colonial oppression, combined with the trappings of Western-style democracy, leave not only the colonized subject ill, but also degrade democratic ideals themselves.

In “Cubes,” illness functions as a trope for racial, gender, and sexual oppression all at once. Disease is the remuneration for African exchanges with Europeans, regardless whether these exchanges are economic or sexual. Pathologizing discourses surrounding the African body that are only alluded to in the early poetry here are dealt with straightforwardly. The disease that Africans are supposedly inherently susceptible to is wholly a product of their encounter with Europeans:

Of course, the young African from Senegal

Carries back from Paris

A little more disease

To spread among the black girls in the palm huts.

He brings them as a gift

disease——

From light to darkness

disease——

From the boss to the bossed

disease——

From the game of black and white

disease

From the city of the broken cubes of Picasso

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Although the speaker does not say so explicitly, the disease that the African carries back to Africa is almost certainly syphilis, which, when Hughes wrote this poem, was still commonly referred to by physicians as the “Negro disease” because African Americans were thought to be especially susceptible to catching it, and because of racist assumptions about black licentiousness (Roberts 27). The spread of syphilis in “Cubes,” however, is purely a result of colonial exploitation and the corruption of democratic ideals. As we saw in the cabaret poems of the 1920s, Hughes frequently links erotic desire with the desire for freedom; in “Cubes,” such desire brings only disease. Of course, it is not only the sexual act that has led the Senegalese to become ill, but his own internalization of the

democratic Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, ideals that he presumably passes on to others once he is back in Africa.

Hughes hints at the primitivizing way sophisticated Europeans see Africans (“the palm huts”), but does not adhere to this view himself, and in fact, makes it clear that such primitivizing only furthers a colonial agenda. Rather than being exuberantly healthy like the dancing black subjects in *The Weary Blues*, the Africans in this poem are going to become diseased. The call and response structure of this stanza and the repetition of the word “disease” reveal the power dynamics between the African, the French, and the women in palm huts. The bitter irony of the “gift” he gives them collapses the distinction between gender exploitation, capitalistic exploitation, and colonial oppression. The final word of the poem, the chevron-shaped “disease,” is densely packed with meaning. As Moglen points out, it is a Cubist rendering (1199). The disease is not only the literal disease that the Senegalese brings back to Africa, it is also the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In addition, the African also takes back to Africa the ideology that the black body itself is inherently susceptible to and naturally carries disease. By spreading syphilis, he will unwittingly further the medical racism that has constructed the black body as abject.

After he returned from a trip to the Soviet Union in 1931, Hughes’s political radicalism became more evident in his poetry, and “Cubes” should be understood as part of that change in focus. For a period of about ten years, Hughes abandoned jazz and blues poetry in favor of proletarian verse. Although many of his strongest supporters did not appreciate this new direction in his poetic development, Hughes was committed to using his public reputation to highlight social injustice.

Hughes's radical poetry of the 1930s is frequently read as a turning away from the vernacular toward a Marxist interpretation of African American abuses at the hands of white culture. While that is an accurate reading of a large amount of Hughes's output from this decade, it elides the awareness of health issues endemic to the black community that Hughes's 1930s work demonstrates. In fact, Hughes's poems of this decade show perhaps a greater awareness of the body's potential to turn upon itself and break down, or at least a greater willingness to portray that body breaking down, which clearly makes poems like "The Consumptive" and "Cubes" very much part of his radical poetic project of this decade because in these texts Hughes confronts some of the most pernicious attitudes about the black body.

Hughes became a theorist of the ill body as a site of alienation in a racist, misogynistic culture. Although critics are beginning to recognize that Hughes's work can be read in context of an analysis of urban space, no scholar has commented on Hughes's own theorizing of medicalized space as inherently alienating and racist.⁵⁶ For Hughes, the ill body in medicalized space has little recourse but silence and isolation, which mirrors the image he offers of himself as a patient (possibly with influenza) in a Mexican hospital who exerts power in a silent, passive aggressive manner by not recovering quickly. In a 1944 installment of his weekly *Chicago Defender* column, Hughes writes,

[T]here are certain places that accentuate human loneliness and how far away everyone is from everyone else. A dentist's waiting room is one such place. Nobody can share anyone else's toothache. [I]n a dentist's waiting room a dozen people sit, each one nursing his own troubles, and mostly silent, anticipating the drill, the clamps, or the pulling of a tooth.

Certainly it is nothing to talk about, and very little talking is done. But sometimes somebody will start talking, and usually on a subject having nothing to do with teeth. (231)⁵⁷

The title of this particular column is “On Human Loneliness”; the roughly five-hundred word piece is an extended meditation on the silencing effect of a series of alienating spaces. Silence and avoidance are presented here as responses to illness and pain. Physical pain is an isolating experience that separates the sufferer from the human community, even those who are likewise suffering: “Not even sympathy does an aching tooth good. And when your turn comes to go into that white room where the chair is, nobody can go with you but yourself” (231). Hughes goes on to describe a doctor’s office as “intently lonely” (231). Rather than depict medical discourse as concerned with the patient’s well-being, Hughes stresses the isolation of physical pain and the whiteness of the doctor’s office.

In contrast to the black subjects of his early poetry, the ill, possibly dying, black subjects of “On Human Loneliness” are described only as silent, reflective, and self-involved: “[M]ore dangerous illnesses, or the fear of them, generate thoughts of that final illness which is death. The men and women who sit silently in a doctor’s office find it hard to think about anyone or anything outside themselves or their own personal problems” (231). Fear is closely allied with this silence, especially when faced with the possibility of a disease with which Hughes’s readers would have been familiar: “The young woman with the cough that has been hanging on now for weeks wonders desperately if the verdict will be tuberculosis” (231). The patients in the doctor’s waiting

room seem to prove Scarry's point that illness and physical pain actively destroy language.

The word silence or its variants appear eight times in a roughly five hundred word column. In addition to the waiting areas of doctor's and dentist's offices, non-medicalized spaces are also conflated with the spaces of racism, most memorably the death house at Kilby prison in Alabama when it housed the Scottsboro Boys. A vocal advocate for the Scottsboro Boys during their incarceration, Hughes characterizes them as isolated even when amidst supporters: "Their cells were filled with silent men. In each cell were two or three, but nobody was saying anything. Only a few men got up and approached the bars to greet the minister who came up to pray with them that Sunday morning. Their loneliness seemed too great for visitors or prayer" (232).

Silence and waiting, then, connect the experiences of illness and racism. Hughes accomplishes two things here: he offers a language to talk about physical pain, and he links it to racism, which the *Defender's* black audience would presumably understand. By connecting the alienating experience of an indifferent health care system to the outright hostility of the legal system in regard to African-Americans, Hughes offers a language with which one can speak about both physical pain and cultural, psychic pain that too often ended up manifested as physical pain. As Virginia Woolf notes in her 1926 essay "On Being Ill," there is no language to discuss physical pain: "literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear" (4).⁵⁸ According to Woolf, literature should address the body's physical suffering: "it is not only a new language that we need . . . but a new hierarchy of passions" (Woolf 6-7). Woolf calls for the creation of a literary

language with which to express the body's physical suffering. Hughes provides that language, one rooted in American racial discourse.

The spaces Hughes identifies in "On Human Loneliness" reflect power dynamics that deny to black subjects the chance to give voice to their frustrations. This is the experience of racism in microcosm, what Paul Gilroy calls a "topos of unsayability."

The question of racial terror always remains in view when these modernisms are discussed because their imaginative proximity to terror is their inaugural experience. . . . Though they were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible, and . . . residual traces of necessarily painful expression still contribute to historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation. . . . The topos of unsayability produced from the slaves' experiences of racial terror . . . can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness (Gilroy 73-4).⁵⁹

Throughout his career, Hughes demonstrates an understanding that "racial terror" engenders silence. Beginning with the jazz poems in the 1920s, and continuing on to his more overtly radical decade of the 1930s, Hughes develops a poetic idiom to give voice to aspects of African American experience that had been "unsayable." By writing about disease as a product of systemic racism and colonialism, particularly in "Cubes," Hughes challenges the "topos of unsayability" surrounding illness as an instrument of racial terror.

I close with Hughes's literary performance of his personal experience with illness. In *The Big Sea* (1940), the first volume of his autobiography, Hughes recounts becoming extremely ill during an unhappy summer spent with his domineering father in Mexico in 1919. Driven to despair by the elder Hughes's relentless hectoring that he become an engineer, Langston at first considers suicide, but decides against it because "I might miss something" (*Sea* 47).⁶⁰ The young Hughes attempts to sublimate his unhappiness by throwing himself into his father's bookkeeping, per the latter's wishes. The redirection does not work, and Hughes writes, "he must have noticed my silence and my gloomy face" (*Sea* 47). Silence figures strongly in Hughes's depiction of his troubled relationship with his father, and, indeed, silence is a prominent trope in Hughes's work, particularly in regard to the body and its health. Hughes soon began to develop psychomatic symptoms: "[S]uddenly my stomach began to turn over and over. And I could not swallow another mouthful. Waves of heat engulfed me. My eyes burned. My body shook" (*Sea* 48). The nausea and fever manifest Hughes's anger toward his father: "I wanted nothing more than anything on earth to hit my father, but instead I got up from the table and went back to bed" (*Sea* 48). His silent walking away from the dinner table reflects the repressed way Hughes deals with his anger and the resulting bodily pathologies that plague him, in this case a suspected stomach infection that lands him in a hospital: "When I learned that it was costing my father twenty dollars a day to keep me there, I made no effort to get better. It pleased me immensely to have him spending twenty dollars a day" (*Sea* 49). In this account, illness becomes a way of striking back at a stronger oppressive force. Sickness and hospitalization become an act of rebellion whereby the young Hughes can exert some power over his tightfisted father. James Hughes wanted his son to become a

mining engineer, a career option at which Langston bristled. Illness afforded the confrontation-averse Hughes a sense of control over his destiny. This sense of power is reflected in his strategic silence. When asked by his Mexican doctors what has made him sick, Hughes declines to answer: “I never told them . . . that I was sick because I hated my father” (*Sea* 49).⁶¹

Hughes’s version of his later relationship with Charlotte Mason, the wealthy white patron who insisted that her protégés call her Godmother, echoes his account of the summer with his father. While not hostile like Hughes’s father, Mason’s own beliefs would prove to be just as constricting. Mason demanded that the writers she patronized “emphasize in their work what she identified as folk culture or primitivism, and they were to eschew subjects she judged as didactic or smacking of social reform” (Kellner 47).⁶² Hughes characterizes Mason’s mentorship style as strongly informed by colonial paternalism: “She felt that there was mystery and mysticism and spontaneous harmony in their [African-Americans’] souls, but that many of them had let the white world pollute and contaminate that mystery and harmony, and make of it something cheap and ugly, commercial and, as she said, ‘white.’” (*Sea* 316). Like Hughes’s father, Mason places unbearable professional demands on Hughes. Unlike Hughes’s father, Mason believes African-Americans’ future lay in reclaiming an African past, whether they wanted to or not: “[S]he wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive . . . I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem” (*Sea* 325). Mason pressures Hughes to write primitivist poetry even as “he chooses to locate himself within an American, urban geography” (Warren 404).⁶³ As their

relationship deteriorates, Hughes feels the same apprehension that he experienced during the summer with his father. The final break with Mason was so emotionally traumatic that ten years later in his autobiography he could not fully narrate the episode, “because when I think about it, even now, something happens in the pit of my stomach that makes me ill” (*Sea* 325). This event was so painful that he could not distance himself from it, and he again experiences physical distress. As he recalls the scene, Mason’s drawing-room “suddenly became like a trap closing in, faster and faster, the room darker and darker, until the light went out with a sudden crash in the dark” (*Sea* 325). A space in which Hughes had previously felt comfortable was now a site of danger that could only induce anxiety. Images of darkness closing recurred in Hughes’s poetry as tropes for a variety of emotional conditions, from physical illness to the effects of racism to the attendant anxiety surrounding non-normative sexual desire. The emotional stress of this encounter has a visceral effect on Hughes’s body: “Physically, my stomach began to turn over and over—and then over again” (*Sea* 326). In the next sentence he states, “I fought against bewilderment and anger, fought hard, and didn’t say anything” (*Sea* 326). Again, Hughes responds to trauma with silence. He is literally at a loss for words.

In the next section of *The Big Sea*, titled “Diagnosis,” Hughes relates how his health further declined after the break with Mason, and describes his quixotic attempt to find solace in attention from doctors. With his stomach roiling, Hughes visits several doctors in the days after being dismissed by Mason, and we see him unable or unwilling to articulate the root cause of his maladies: “I couldn’t, for the life of me, tell the doctor about Park Avenue,” “I couldn’t open my mouth about it,” “I knew what was the matter but couldn’t say it” (*Sea* 328). He ironically returns to Park Avenue to see a prominent

white specialist who “bark[s]” a diagnosis without asking the patient about his symptoms or allowing him to respond. Hughes ruefully notes, “That was all. I was ushered out. [T]he nurse collected ten dollars” (*Sea* 330). The silencing Hughes experiences in the white doctor’s office echoes the silence of his final meeting with Mason, when he does not speak, but, like the speaker in his youthful hero Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask,” Hughes wears the mask that “grins and lies.”

In the first volume of his biography of Hughes, Arnold Rampersad follows Hughes’s description of these episodes, claiming that in the case with Mason, “[T]his violent illness, in which he lost control of his body and developed symptoms of anemia, would not be the last of his life to be mainly psychosomatic” (34). According to Rampersad, “these episodes were only intense versions of his chronic unwillingness to vent anger. He could not explode; he found it hard even to seethe openly, which was extraordinary in someone with so hyperactive a social conscience” (34). Rampersad links Hughes’s inability to confront people close to him who caused him emotional pain to his sexuality: “while Hughes’s anger ran deep, his fundamental urge, lodged close to his sexual instinct in its intimacy, was in fact toward passivity [until he reached] physical collapse” (34). Juda Bennett also reads Hughes’s tendency toward flight as emblematic of the closet: “These autobiographies show Hughes in constant movement, running from love, sex, and women. These escapes may have given him a sense of being unmarked as a homosexual, for his flight from women could be understood in the context of his other identities: bohemian, poet, sailor” (685).⁶⁴

In Hughes’s autobiography, the ill body reflects inner turmoil. In both instances, his response was flight, itself a stressful series of motions that undermines the distressed

body's need for rest. Hughes's tendency to self-diagnose ("I knew it was stress") suggests a resistance to being medicalized while at the same time he appropriates medical language to explain his symptoms of illness. Hughes acknowledges his body's sickness, even performs the role of patient by seeking out medical attention, and at the same time resists the label of "ill" by maintaining that his physical suffering is psychosomatic. In a sense, this is an empowering move; Hughes's claim that his physical symptoms are a result of emotional stress places responsibility and blame for his body's suffering on his own agency, a rhetorical move that occludes and compounds his body's physical suffering.⁶⁵ The psychoanalytic language Hughes uses to connect his physical illness with external stressors is an attempt to combat bodily fragility and emotional vulnerability by remaking illness into metaphor via the then-popular Freudian idiom. In these two episodes, illness functions as a way of resisting power—the capitalist ethos espoused by his father and the primitivist ethos promoted by Charlotte Mason. Hughes, at least in his literary performance of illness, then asserts his own responsibility for his illness by narrating it as Freudian drama.

As I noted earlier, Hughes's final rejection of primitivism occurs around the same time as his break from Mason. By the early 1930s, Hughes is ready to devote himself more fully to radical poetry, which required a different idiom than the primitivism of *The Weary Blues*, or the vernacular blues voice of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. The primitivist idiom is well-suited to describing a hyper-healthy black utopia, but is not well-suited for the expression of the material reality of black life, and it is even less suited to an overt political agenda. Hughes's poetic evolution can be seen in his treatment of disease and illness.

By 1940, Hughes's literary self-fashioning is that of an urban sophisticate, one who explains his symptoms of physical illness in Freudian terms. Even though he would always empathize and sympathize with the "low-down folk," by this time he was no longer one of the low-down folk himself. Hughes's own narration of his difficult relationship with his father and his break from Mason underscores his own literary and personal development. Hughes's visceral physical reaction to each incident is like a blues song, in that it is a physical reaction to emotional pain that is difficult to explain. Even Hughes, despite his literary artistry, is unable to avoid vague language. Once, he might have agreed that "blues ain't nothin' but a po' man's heart disease" (Bontemps and Hughes 385). By this point, he has also moved beyond, and would soon disavow, the Marxist poetry of the early 1930s (Chinitz "Rejuvenation" 69).

In conclusion, throughout the first two decades of his career, Hughes writes against the prevailing notion that the black body is inherently diseased, and he does so by celebrating the elements of black culture that were thought to be emblematic of that pathology—music. In the cabaret poems of the 1920s, the black body is celebrated as inherently healthy, while the outside world holds only uncertainty and possible illness. The cabaret itself, on the other hand, is a therapeutic site. Even while he was writing the cabaret poems, however, Hughes was also giving poetic expression to the harsh material reality of urban African Americans in poems that were, at the time, not as popular as the cabaret poems, nor are they as popular or widely anthologized now. This is perhaps understandable; "Jazzonia" and "Danse Africaine" are more sensually charged poems than "The Consumptive," or "Mazie Dies Alone in City Hospital." If we ignore the range of Hughes's oeuvre, however, we can miss the full implications of even those better

known poems. We need to read “The Consumptive” and read Mazie’s dying wish to “die in the way that I lived” to understand that Hughes does not merely document Harlem nightlife in the 1920s; rather, he provides a broad view of the black experience in the first half of the twentieth century.

Notes

¹ For an overview of the intersection between theories of racial degeneracy, scientific racism, and the United States' medical establishment in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Savitt, Todd L. *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America*. Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 2007. For an examination of how medical folklore continued to inform the treatment white medical personnel provided to African Americans long after such folklore had been discredited, see Hoberman, John M. *Black and Blue: The Origins and Consequences of Medical Racism*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 2012. For a discussion of how scientific racism and eugenics influenced the Harlem Renaissance, especially W.E.B. Du Bois, see English, Daylanne K. *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina Press, 2004. The major primary source expounding scientific and medical racism in the United States is Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*. New York: Scribner's, 1920.

² Wailoo, Keith. *Dying in the City of the Blues: Sickle Cell Anemia and the Politics of Race and Health*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2001.

³ Savitt, Todd Lee. *Race and Medicine in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America*. Kent State UP, 2007.

⁴ Rice, Mitchell F. and Woodrow Jones, Jr, eds. *Health of Black Americans from Post Reconstruction to Integration, 1871-1960: An Annotated Bibliography of Contemporary Sources*. Bibliographies and Indexes in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 26. New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

⁵ In the post-World War I era, jazz and its milieu were frequently coded as degenerate and linked with poor health. According to one 1920s New York physician, "Jazz music causes drunkenness. . . by sending a continuous whirl of impressionable stimulations to the brain," according to Dr. Elliott Rawlings, a New York physician (qtd. in Dreisinger 93). "Reason and reflection are lost, and the actions of the persons are directed by the stronger animal passions" (qtd. in Dreisinger 93). Similarly, the Health Commissioner of Milwaukee stated that jazz aroused "the nervous system until a veritable hysterical frenzy is reached." Similarly, jazz was also seen as symptomatic of moral decay. An unsigned 1921 article in *Ladies Home Journal* linked jazz music and the "crowd psychology" of "Negro dances" that produces an "unwholesome excitement" in its listeners and went so far as to assert that on account of jazz, "the statistics of illegitimacy in this country show a great increase in recent years" (qtd. in Dreisinger 93).

⁶ See Russell L. Johnson's "'Disease is Unrhythmical': Jazz, Health, and Disability in 1920s America" for an excellent analysis of this ideology.

⁷ Sartin, Jeffrey. "Contagious Rhythm: Infectious Diseases of 20th Century Musicians." *Clinical Medicine and Research* 8.2 (2010): 106-13.

⁸ Rampersad, Arnold. "Langston Hughes's Fine Clothes to the Jew." *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 9.1 (1986): 144-58.

⁹ In her review of *The Weary Blues* for *The Crisis*, Jessie Redmon Fauset praised Hughes's blues and jazz poems, for their "universal subject[s] served Negro-style," even though, as she notes in the same review, she was "no great lover of dialect" (qtd. in *Contemporary Reviews* 61). Hughes's use of vernacular speech is now considered by critics one of the hallmark features of his work. Erskine Peters, in his article "Rhythmic Manipulation and Instrument Simulation in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*," asserts that "Hughes uses black music . . . as aesthetic, social and political referent because, to a great extent, black music is black history" (34). More recently, critics have linked Hughes's blues and jazz poems to non-normative sexuality; for instance, See, Sam. "'Spectacles in Color': The Primitive Drag of Langston Hughes," and Shane Vogel's *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, and Performance*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.

¹⁰ Johnson, Russell L. "'Disease is Unrhythmical': Jazz, Health, and Disability in 1920s America." *Health and History* 13.2 (2011): 13-42.

¹¹ Johnson positions jazz's rise in the 1920s with the Great Migration and technological advancement such as radio and phonographs. Jazz was controversial to its opponents because its syncopation, polyrhythmic nature, and musical complexity made it unsettling and suggested, musically, brokenness and discord (17-19).

¹² Coles, Robert A. and Diane Isaacs. "Primitivism as a Therapeutic Pursuit: Notes Toward a Reassessment of Harlem Renaissance Literature." Singh, Shiver, and Brodwin 3-12.

¹³ Nathan Huggins claims that Hughes "never used 'primitive' or African characteristics to explain American Negroes" (Huggins 164). Similarly, Kathy J. Ogren argues that "he did not try to develop a 'primitive' vision of modern life" (Ogren 128). Other critics acknowledge the importance of primitivism in Hughes's early work, but claim that he repudiated primitivist imagery. Donald C. Dickinson asserts that "In 1930 [Hughes] renounced the whole body of primitivism (Dickinson 30). David Levering Lewis also acknowledges that Hughes's early work is strongly influenced by primitivism, but he downplays primitivist imagery in Hughes's later work. Hughes himself, in *The Big Sea*, denies that he seriously used primitivist imagery, and suggests that he recognized primitivism as a fad throughout the Harlem Renaissance (228, 325). More recent critics tend to see primitivist strands throughout Hughes's oeuvre, and interpret his own denials about his use of primitivist tropes as an attempt to protect himself from accusations of being a Carl Van Vechten imitator. David Chinitz, for instance, claims that Hughes was sensitive to critics' assertion that he was influenced by Van Vechten, but argues that Hughes nonetheless viewed jazz and primitivism as "an attractive and necessary corrective to prevailing American values" ("Rejuvenation" 64).

¹⁴ Hughes, Langston. "Danse Africaine." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 28.

¹⁵ Westover, Jeff. "Africa/America: Fragmentation and Diaspora in the work of Langston Hughes." *Callaloo* 25.4 (2002): 1207-23.

¹⁶ Parham, Marisa. "Hughes, Cullen, and the In-Sites of Loss." *ELH* 74.2 (2007): 429-47.

¹⁷ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.

¹⁸ See, Sam. “‘Spectacles in Color’: The Primitive Drag of Langston Hughes.” *PMLA* 124.3 (2009): 798-816. For a good overview of debate about Hughes’s sexuality, see A.B. Christa Schwartz’s *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003. 68-87.

¹⁹ “Jazzonia,” as an empire of jazz contrasts sharply and intriguingly with the cover of the August 1923 issue of *The Crisis*, which visually narrates the recent history of a real African empire. The illustration, titled “Ethiopia,” is one of Albert A. Smith’s earliest contributions to the magazine. In front of a Doric-columned temple inscribed with ETHIOPIA, there are placed, from left to right, a kneeling figure in shackles, another kneeling man seen from the back, a woman dressed in traditional Ethiopian clothing who is holding a young child, and, on the far right, is a young man in academic regalia, complete with a mortarboard and tassel. Rhonda Reymond reads the image as “a commentary on contemporary politics in Ethiopia. Reading from left to right, the viewer is presented with slavery, perhaps what is about to pass into history and, in the center a female in contemporary clothing representing the present and to the right, the emblem of the future inaugurated by Ras Tafari’s [later crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I] reforms in education, the graduate” (222).

²⁰ Hughes, Langston, “Jazzonia.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 34.

²¹ Hughes, Langston. “Lenox Avenue: Midnight.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 92.

²² Hughes, Langston. “Harlem Night Club.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 90.

²³ Hughes, Langston. “Summer Night.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. 59.

²⁴ Critics have noticed the speaker’s anxiety and his unwillingness to face the dawn. Nicholas Evans claims that while the white mist of dawn in the poem’s last stanza is a metaphor for the speaker’s shrouded—closeted—sexuality, “the poem evokes a code that can certainly be interpreted by a knowing minority, yet it occludes that very code with its disappearing ‘I’ and overall ambiguity, inspiring doubt about the code’s very presence” (228). Shane Vogel argues that Hughes’s Harlem poetry documents a “queer time consciousness” that resists scholarly efforts to parse out the full range of its nuance: “Hughes poetically inscribes a queer time consciousness that is impossible to archive under the official regimes of documentation and verification. The queer time and space of the afterhours club, in other words, is archived in the line of the poem, if not at the library at Yale” (Vogel 400).

²⁵ Hughes, Langston. “To Midnight Nan at Leroy’s.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 57-8.

²⁶ Cooley, John. “White Writers and the Harlem Renaissance.” Singh, Shiver, and Brodwin 13-22.

²⁷ Chinitz, David. *Which Sin to Bear: Authenticity and Compromise in Langston Hughes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013.

²⁸ Hughes, Langston. “Negro Dancers.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 44.

²⁹ Henzy, Karl. “Langston Hughes’s Poetry and the Metaphysics of Simplicity.” *Callaloo*

34.3 (2011): 915-27.

³⁰ Hughes, Langston. "Nude Young Dancer." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. Vintage Classics, 1995. 61.

³¹ Tracy, Steven C. *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Historical Guides to American Authors. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

³² Hughes, Langston. "Young Singer." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 35.

³³ Hughes, Langston. "Sick Room." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 99.

³⁴ Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." *The Nation* 122 (June 23 1926): 692-4. Arnold Rampersad identifies this middle-class poet as Countee Cullen. *The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I*, p. 130.

³⁵ Jerving, Ryan. "Early Jazz Literature (and why you didn't know)." *American Literary History* 16.4 (2004): 648-74.

³⁶ Rogers, Joel A. "Jazz at Home." *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Alain Locke. 1925. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. 216-24.

³⁷ Onwuchekwa Jemie, in his introduction to Hughes's work, defines blues poetry as "one that, regardless of form, utilizes the themes, motifs, language, and imagery common to blues literature" (44). Jemie classifies much of Hughes's work, including his prose, as blues poetry.

³⁸ Chinitz, David. "Rejuvenation Through Joy: Langston Hughes, Primitivism, and Jazz." *American Literary History* 9.1 (1997): 60-78.

³⁹ Daphne Duval Harrison lists disease and affliction in the subject index of her book *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. New Brunswick (NJ): Rutgers UP, 1990.

⁴⁰ Bontemps, Arna and Langston Hughes. *The Book of Negro Folklore*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1958.

⁴¹ Onwuchekwa Jemie, David Chinitz, and Nicholas Evans argue this position. Arnold Rampersad, in the first volume of his biography of Hughes, defends *Fine Clothes to the Jew* as Hughes's "most brilliant book of poems, and one of the more astonishing books of verse ever published in the United States—comparable in the black world to *Leaves of Grass* in the white" (*Life I* 141).

⁴² Novelist Julia Peterkin, in a positive contemporary review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* in *Poetry* magazine, writes that Hughes "interprets the emotions of primitive types of American Negroes" (44-45). Peterkin reads the book's musicality in purely primitivist terms: "Stark, fierce, tragic bits of life fall into simple words which keep up an insistent rhythmic beating, beating" (45). After briefly summarizing the multiplicity of voices in the book's poems, Peterkin notes that "the beat of the tom-toms runs through them all" (45). There is no mention of tom-toms in any of the poems in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. While Peterkin interpreted the book's supposed primitivism positively, as David Chinitz notes, black critics judged what they perceived as the book's primitivism much more harshly than they did *The Weary Blues*, a book that "might arguably have merited the charge" ("Rejuvenation" 66).

⁴³ Rogers, of course, was a well-known African American social critic of the era and a contributor, along with Hughes, to Alain Locke's influential anthology *The New Negro* (1925). The headline for Rogers's review summarizes his opinion of *Fine Clothes to the*

Jew and highlights his own status as a cultural critic: “Langston Hughes’ Book of Poems ‘Trash’: Noted Race Critic Attacks Pandering to White Man’s Twisted Notion of What Race Author’s Would Write.” *Pittsburg Courier* 12 February 1927. Section 2, page 4.

⁴⁴ For a contemporary source on racial degeneracy, see Sadler, William Samuel. *Race Decadence; an Examination of the Causes of Racial Degeneracy in the United States*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1922.

⁴⁵ White author Carl Van Vechten’s controversial novel *Nigger Heaven* was published Alfred A. Knopf in 1926. An enormous bestseller among white, middle-class readers, Van Vechten’s novel was widely denounced in the black press for its incendiary title as well as its perceived celebration of Harlem debauchery. For many African American critics in 1927, Hughes was guilty by association of the same crimes as Van Vechten. Van Vechten remains a problematic figure within Harlem Renaissance Studies for multiple reasons. His own fiction does seem to revel in Harlem debauchery but at the same time adheres to fairly standard Du Boisian racial uplift rhetoric. Van Vechten also did much to promote and mentor African American writers such as Hughes and Nella Larsen. While Van Vechten was no doubt well-intentioned, there is an element of paternalism to his engagement with the Renaissance. Bruce Kellner’s “Carl Van Vechten’s Black Renaissance,” was the first article-length study of Van Vechten’s role in the Harlem Renaissance. Emily Bernard’s *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2012 is to my knowledge the only book-length scholarly study of Van Vechten’s role in the Harlem Renaissance.

⁴⁶ Rampersad, Arnold. *The Life of Langston Hughes*. 2 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 1988.

⁴⁷ Hughes, Langston. “Drama for a Winter Night (Fifth Avenue).” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 47.

⁴⁸ Young, Robert. “Langston Hughes’s ‘Red’ Poetics.” *The Langston Hughes Review* 18 (2004): 16-22.

⁴⁹ Samuel K. Roberts. *Infectious Fear: Politics, Disease, and the Health Effects of Segregation*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2009.

⁵⁰ Calhoun, Claudia Marie. “Tuberculosis, Race, and the Delivery of Health Care in Harlem 1922-1939.” *Radical History Review* 80 (2001): 101-19.

⁵¹ Hughes, Langston. “Mazie Dies Alone in City Hospital.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 126.

⁵² Hughes, Langston. “The Consumptive.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 157.

⁵³ Moglen, Seth. “Modernism in the Black Diaspora: Langston Hughes and the Broken Cubes of Picasso.” *Callaloo* 25.4 (2002): 1188-1205.

⁵⁴ Moglen’s essay remains, to my knowledge, the only published critical exploration of “Cubes” to date.

⁵⁵ Hughes, Langston. “Cubes.” *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Ed. Arnold Rampersad. New York: Vintage Classics, 1995. 175-6.

⁵⁶ The Spring 2004 issue of *The Langston Hughes Review* is devoted to Hughes’s treatment of place. James de Jongh has also examined Hughes’s treatment of place in his

article “The Poet Speaks of Places: A Close Reading of Langston Hughes’s Literary Use of Place.”

⁵⁷ Hughes, Langston. “On Human Loneliness.” 1944. *Langston Hughes and the Chicago Defender: Essays on Race, Politics, and Culture, 1942-1962*. Ed. Christopher C. De Santis. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995. 230-3.

⁵⁸ Woolf, Virginia. *On Being Ill*. 1926. Ashfield, MA: Paris, 2002.

⁵⁹ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.

⁶⁰ Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. 1940. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993.

⁶¹ This could have been a more serious illness than Hughes suggests. Although neither Hughes nor his biographers link the Mexico trip to the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, it is intriguing to juxtapose the two. Cleveland, Ohio, where Hughes was living with his mother, just before he and his father left for Mexico, was hit especially hard by influenza, yet Hughes does not mention the pandemic or its effects on either himself or the city. One wonders if it is possible that James Hughes took his son to Mexico to prevent the latter from being infected in a future possible outbreak of the virus. Although the pandemic had ended by the summer of 1919, no one could have known that for certain at the time since the pandemic had struck in waves throughout the spring and fall of 1918 and the winter of 1919. Furthermore, situating the Mexico trip in the context of the influenza pandemic makes James Hughes seem all the more unsympathetic due to his indifference to his son’s illness and hospitalization. It is a curious silence on Hughes’s part, although not unusual.

⁶² Kellner, Bruce. “‘Refined Racism’: White Patronage in the Harlem Renaissance.” *The Harlem Renaissance Re-Examined*. Ed. Victor Kramer. New York: AMS Press, 1987. 43-56.

⁶³ Warren, Kenneth W. “Appeals for (Mis)Recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora.” *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*. Eds. Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993. 392-406.

⁶⁴ Bennett, Juda. “Multiple Passings and the Double Death of Langston Hughes.” *Biography* 23.4 (2000): 670-689.

⁶⁵ Susan Sontag resists the notion of psychosomatic illness, averring that such a diagnosis places responsibility for the illness on the patient. According to Sontag, psychosomatic illness is the medical establishment’s version of blaming the victim. See Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978. Print.

CHAPTER THREE

Insane Eyes and Insane Stares: The Pathologized Black Body
in the Fiction of Wallace Thurman

Wallace Thurman (1902-1934) is not a writer whose work is associated with the body or medical issues. Rather, critics who examine *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Thurman's first novel, tend to do so in terms of what that novel's indictment of intraracial color prejudice reveals about Thurman's own supposed self-loathing, or else they consider the ways in which his satirical novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932) critiques the loftier goals of the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Thurman understood the discourses of scientific racism, and he was acutely aware that the knowledge created by power structures such as the nascent medical profession could be used to reinforce existing racial and gender hierarchies. At the same time, he understood that the application of medical knowledge has the power to heal the body's physical distress. Like his contemporary and friend Langston Hughes, Thurman's writing is, in part, a reaction to the ideologies of medical and scientific racism that were still prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s, but unlike Hughes, Thurman's response is to satirize those ideologies by showing their harmful effect on his characters' lives. Thurman tends to satirize the era's medical racism by examining the unfortunate consequences of widely held cultural beliefs about the black body. In the texts I will look at in this chapter, Thurman's early short story "Grist in the Mill" (1925), and his first novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), I argue that Thurman's attack on racist medical traditions about the black body's pathology is tied to gender and class ideologies in addition to racial ideologies. In "Grist in the Mill," Thurman uses the then nascent

medical technology of blood transfusion to satirize the pathology of white paranoia about race mixing. In *The Blacker the Berry*, Thurman examines intraracial prejudice within the black community by demonstrating its negative consequences on the emotional and physical health of an African American woman.

Thurman's short life is marked by illness to the extent that virtually all of his major life milestones are touched by infirmity. Born in Salt Lake City in 1902, Thurman's father abandoned his wife and young son three months after Thurman's birth. Thurman's mother subsequently married and divorced a succession of men. According to his "Autobiographical Statement," Thurman began school at the age of six in Boise, Idaho, but became ill, left school, and lived like a "pampered invalid" for two years, during which time he and his mother returned to Salt Lake City (Thurman "Statement" 91).² Thurman eventually finished grammar school in Omaha, Nebraska. After his freshman year of high school in Omaha, "persistent heart attacks made a lower altitude necessary" so Thurman moved to Pasadena, California in 1918. While in Pasadena, he became ill with influenza during the global influenza pandemic of 1918-19, before moving back to Salt Lake City and graduating from high school there in 1920. In the fall of 1920, Thurman entered the University of Utah to study medicine, but left after his first semester without taking any pre-med classes. In his "Autobiographical Statement," Thurman claimed that as a sickly child he wrote stories, but lost interest in writing as his health returned. Thurman became interested in writing again as an adult, and enrolled at the University of Southern California as a journalism student in 1922, but he dropped out after one semester.

Although Thurman ultimately opted not to study medicine, choosing instead to study journalism, that he began college as a medical student is telling. According to his biographer Eleanore van Notten, it remains unclear why Thurman felt motivated to study medicine. According to van Notten, Thurman “may have been influenced by the popular belief, especially among the black middle class, that some of the indignities associated with race could be overcome by joining the ranks of professional men. The visible social status associated with a career in medicine perhaps played a role in Thurman’s choice” (85).³ A number of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Nella Larsen and Rudolph Fisher, were themselves active in the medical field; it was, as van Notten suggests, one of the few professions in which men and women of color could find employment, however limited their career options may have been by the era’s racism.⁴ This thinking among African Americans of the era can be seen in Thurman’s fiction. In *The Blacker the Berry*, the protagonist Emma Lou, while a student at USC and longing to meet other African American students, tries to meet people at the pharmacy school because “she had been told that there were more Negro students enrolled in the School of Pharmacy than in any other department of the university” (*Berry* 47).⁵ Thurman offers a characteristically sardonic attitude toward the shift away from a medical to a literary career in his second novel *Infants of the Spring* (1932). As the narrator Ray, Thurman’s alter ego, explains: “A few years ago it was the thing for all Negroes who could get an education to be professional men, doctors, lawyers, dentists, et cetera. Now, they are all trying to be artists” (*Infants* 216).⁶ Van Notten argues that Thurman ultimately was unsuited for a career in medicine, due, at least in part, to his being neurotic and a hypochondriac (84, 86). Whether Thurman could have succeeded in medicine is a moot

point, but I mention Thurman's personal interest in pursuing a medical career because, as my analysis of Thurman's work will show, Thurman tends to approach his characters as though he is a physician offering a diagnosis. Thurman's characters are, like their creator, neurotic, but their neurosis tends to be grounded in their internalization of folk beliefs about the black body's pathology rather than racism from the medical and scientific communities.⁷ Whatever Thurman's motives were for considering a medical career, the texts I will examine reveal him to have had something of a physician's sensibility, albeit a mordant one, as his characters attempt to heal their psychic and sometimes physical wounds.

Thurman moved to New York City in September 1925, and quickly established himself as a fixture among the Harlem literary community. By the spring of 1926 he began publishing short stories and essays, while subsequently working as an editor at a number of different publications. In the next eight years, he published numerous short stories and essays, three novels, two screenplays, and saw two of his plays produced on Broadway. He became the only African American to be employed as an editor by a major New York publishing firm, when he was hired by the Macaulay Publishing Co. in 1932. Thurman's brief career ended in 1934 when he died of acute tuberculosis at City Hospital on Welfare Island, New York.

During the years of the Harlem Renaissance, many of Thurman's friends noted the irony of his heavy drinking, hypochondria, and the care he took to avoid getting sick. The writer and critic Theophilus Lewis, with whom Thurman boarded for long periods of time during the Harlem Renaissance years, intimated that Thurman was a hypochondriac with "a propensity for making business for doctors and drugstores" (van Notten 85).

According to Lewis, ‘the total volume of prescriptions which have sloshed over his [Thurman’s] tonsils would be sufficient to float a battle ship and two destroyers’ (qtd. in van Notten 85).

Thurman’s final illness, however, is not a product of his imagination. In 1934, Thurman becomes ill with tuberculosis and spends the last six months of his life in the TB ward of City Hospital in New York. In 1932, Thurman had visited the ward as part of his research for his final novel, *The Interne* (1932), written in collaboration with Abraham Furman, and designed to be an exposé of the deplorable conditions in City Hospital. In a letter to Langston Hughes dated September 1934, about three months before his death, Thurman commented on his condition with grim humor: “whodathought when I was in Carmel [CA] that I would soon end up in the tuberculosis ward of the very hospital I damned and god-damned when I wrote *The Interne*. Ironic, I calls it. Or is nature finally avenging art” (*Writings* 131). In the same letter, Thurman documents his daily regimen of physical exams and medication: “Hypodermic needles of various lengths stuck in various parts of your anatomy upon the slightest provocation. I’m not only bored but full of holes and pains. Literally. I feel like a cross between a guinea pig and a pincushion. And I always thought tuberculosis was a romantic disease” (*Writings* 131). Thurman’s final letters reveal that the mordant humor of his authorial voice remained with him to the end: “there is always a spark in Thurman’s letters—even at this point in his life” (Singh *Writings* 99). The postscript of his last letter to Hughes, dated a month before his death, reads like an epitaph: “Thurman is distinctly a has been—so many people have already buried him. Woe betide ‘em when I am resurrected” (*Writings* 132).

I have opened with this look at Thurman's life because there is a gap between the commonly held critical assumptions about Thurman's life that his personal problems were due mainly to his self-loathing regarding his dark skin, and the reality that he was in poor health from a young age and his health problems were exacerbated by alcoholism. To suggest that Thurman's personal failings were due to internalized racism, as some critics have, is to elide the real role that illness played in Thurman's life, while at the same time suggesting that black skin has a pathologizing effect on the black subject. In Thurman's fiction, particularly the two texts I examine in this chapter, blackness does seem to have a pathologizing effect, but it is a mistake to read this as an autobiographical statement. As will become clear, when Thurman's characters wrestle with their own (real or imagined) blackness the conflict arises from their internalization of racist assumptions. Thurman, however, does not share those assumptions; rather, he is the clinician describing an illness. Racism functions as a cultural pathology, and Thurman's objective is to examine that pathology. It is not, in Thurman's fiction, the black body that is inherently ill; rather, it is an American culture dominated by white racism that is sick.

Thurman's Early Fiction: "Grist in the Mill"

Thurman's career as a fiction writer began with the publication of his first short story "Grist in the Mill," which was published in *The Messenger* in June 1926. Other than Thurman biographer Eleanore van Notten's perceptive commentary, this story has received no critical attention, which is unfortunate because it demonstrates that even at the beginning of his career, Thurman is able to dramatize racism's pathologizing effect on individuals. The story is a "sardonic treatment of race in the tradition of Kate Chopin and Charles W. Chesnut" (Singh *Writings* 290). Eleanore van Notten sees the influence

of H.L. Mencken in the story: “Both Mencken and Thurman spoke largely in terms of a fictitious image of rural America which epitomized for them stupidity and provincialism, particularly on the part of the white Southerner. Because Mencken’s ridicule was specifically directed towards the South, Thurman too selected this region” (van Notten 113). The text’s two central characters, an urban northern black man and a lazy, gentleman planter, do seem like stock characters. Thurman satirizes the deeply held racist attitudes of Southern whites by depicting them to be evidence of mental illness, even madness, and he does so by using nascent medical technology as a narrative device.

Set in Southern Louisiana in the mid-1920s, it is in this text, more than anything else he published, that Thurman directly explores the intersection of competing ideologies of white racial purity and medical discourse. Using parallel narratives, Thurman shows traditional, racist, cultural institutions colliding with modern cultural forces such as a professionalized medical field and newly migratory blacks. The story’s two major characters are Zacharia Davis, an African-American man from Illinois who has fled to Mexico to avoid being drafted into World War I and who is trying to earn enough money to return to Chicago, and Colonel Charles Summers “the second,” a “relic” of the Old South, complete with the unearned military title (Thurman “Grist” *Writings* 294).⁸ Zacharia is emblematic of a confident man of color, but not one who adheres to New Negro ideology. According to van Notten, “Here, behind the mask, is one of Thurman’s favourite characters, the urban self-reliant black who lives by his wits and who feels no racial affiliation with his kinsmen” (van Notten 113). Van Notten goes on to link Zacharia with Thurman himself: “Here, too, is Thurman himself, devoted to the Menckenite axiom that life in all its ramifications can only be tolerated if one looks upon

it as a source of constant merriment” (van Notten 113). “Grist in the Mill” is a complex statement on race that does not conform to either New Negro ideology or the more mainstream literary depictions of the South. Combining hallucinatory lyricism with sharp satire, in “Grist in the Mill,” Thurman positions medical technologies and scientific advancement as antidotes to primitivist racist ideology.

After suffering sunstroke, Colonel Summers needs a blood transfusion. When his doctors ask the Colonel’s wife to recommend a suitable donor, she seems uninterested in aiding his treatment, finally replying, “‘I am no physician,’ and ‘blood transfusion, why not?’” before closing the door on the doctors, thereby closing the door on any input into the Colonel’s care (“Grist” 295). Thurman’s story is not to be read as realism; he does not explain how sunstroke could necessitate a blood transfusion, but the story does contain realistic elements related to the era’s burgeoning medical advancements and how these advancements were perceived in light of existing cultural anxieties about the body. In the mid-1920s, blood transfusions were still rare in the United States, and rarer still in poor, rural areas.⁹ It is conceivable that the spouse of a wealthy planter in rural Louisiana would have been unfamiliar with the process; moreover, a proper Southern lady such as Mrs. Summers would have been expected to not discuss base matters such as bodily fluids. Thurman satirically notes of Mrs. Summers that “her only base of recognition of the world at all was that she was a direct descendant of an old southern family” (295). In “Grist in the Mill,” two power structures collide: the older, landed aristocracy and an emerging medical establishment.

Mrs. Summers’ inability to involve herself with her husband’s medical emergency “placed” her husband’s doctors “in an embarrassing dilemma, for there was no

professional blood donor available, and no volunteers forthcoming either” (296). During the 1920s, blood transfusions were quite painful and time-consuming for the donor as well as the recipient. There was also considerable mistrust about the procedure because it was unfamiliar. In addition, blood banks were still several years away from being a reality, which exacerbated the difficulty that medical personnel faced when finding suitable blood for transfusion. As Thurman suggests, blood donation was a somewhat lucrative way for lower and working-class people to earn money. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, these semi-professional blood donors were frequently African American (in the North), but by the 1920s general cultural anxiety among many whites about blood mixing, including the fear that many African Americans carried syphilis and could be passed on through their donated blood made it unlikely that blood donated by African Americans would be transfused to white patients (Lederer 36-40).¹⁰ In the South, where anxieties over race mixing were especially acute, what was an unlikely scenario in the North was an outright prohibition. For example, in both Arkansas and Georgia interracial blood transfusions were illegal until the 1960s due to fears about miscegenation (Nale 108).

Cultural attitudes toward the body and anxieties about blood mixing become the target of Thurman’s satire. The hospital’s doctors and administrators, Thurman tells us, remember the times when Colonel Summers has refused to donate money to the hospital and decide to “play a scurvy trick on him” by using Zacharia’s blood without telling the Colonel the donor’s identity (295). In actuality, of course, such a scenario actually occurring in 1920s Louisiana is unthinkable given the era’s racial climate, but Thurman is writing satirical fiction and can therefore remain unconcerned with strict realism. The

trick that Thurman's doctors play on Colonel Summers signals the burgeoning medical profession's power, even in a stronghold of traditional morés. While they may not be entirely sympathetic figures, indeed, the doctors are not developed characters in the story at all, there is a sense that the hospital will survive whatever scandal may arise from transfusing the blood of a black man into a wealthy white planter. Thurman critiques still commonly held popular beliefs about differences in the blood of people of different races by having the blood transfusion cure Colonel Summers' condition. Even though Thurman does not narrate the transfusion itself, the procedure links Colonel Summers and Zacharia. For blood to be transfused successfully at this time did require that the donor and the receiver be connected by tubing that took blood from the donor and sent it directly to the receiver. Presumably, Colonel Summers would have been unconscious and Zacharia would have been awake, which would have put Colonel Summers in a passive position because he would not have been aware of what was taking place. It can further be presumed that Zacharia would have been compensated by the hospital, which then would have passed the expense along to the Colonel without telling him the donor's identity.

This is a bold move on Thurman's part. Colonel Summers's anxieties seem at least partly to be libidinally driven. The libidinal implications become clearer when one considers that in the 1920s, there were no blood banks at which blood could be stored to be used at a later time. Rather, all blood transfusions would have done by a procedure known as "direct transfusion," performed by "physically uniting the exposed blood vessels of donors and recipients" (Lederer x). Both donor and recipient would have been in close proximity to each other while the procedure was performed, and both would have

been under the same risk of infection or other complication; they were, in a sense, equal partners in this procedure of blood mixing. Blood, or race, mixing traditionally referred to either heteronormative sexuality that could result in black men fathering children by white women, and the related, mostly unfounded white paranoia about the “black rapist.” Thurman satirizes these white racist anxieties by making the two figures involved in race mixing men; in effect, he queers the racial discourse surrounding race mixing using medical technology. In this text, an emerging medical technology becomes the means by which outdated ideologies about the body are discarded. Colonel Summers represents those outdated ideas. His blood transfusion is all too successful; not only does it save his life but also, Thurman suggests, there is something healing and restorative in the death of assumptions about blood.

Shortly after the successful transfusion, Zacharia is arrested during a raid at an illegal gambling establishment deep in the Louisiana bayou. During the raid, a white sheriff’s deputy is stabbed to death, a crime for which Zacharia is prosecuted because the other black men who were arrested in the raid are protected by their white employers. Zacharia is slow to realize the extent of the predicament he now faces, but once he understands that he is going to be hanged, he reacts by becoming physically ill: “His bronze colored face grew wan and sickly. His beady eyes became more and more screwed up until it seemed as if they would completely retreat into the protective folds of their wrinkled sockets” (298). Zacharia’s imprisonment transforms him from the confident man he is during his first appearances in the story to one driven to physical illness by confinement. His impending execution also causes Zacharia’s mental state to collapse: “Even the firm lower lip, his one sign of forceful character, drooped, and

mutely asked for pity” (298). Here Thurman shows that Southern racial injustice can have a debilitating effect on the body’s physical condition. The sense of disempowerment caused by his confinement has emasculated Zacharia; the drooping lower lip that “mutely asked for pity” conforms to a stereotypical image of the subservient Southern black male.

Zacharia’s mental state suffers as well:

The date of his departure [to the state penitentiary, where he will be executed] drew near, and Zacharia became pitifully panic stricken. The four walls of his lousy cell seemed to be gyrating mirrors sordidly reflecting his certain doom. The bars running diagonally across the cell door and standing upright in the cell window all seemed to assume the personality of ballet dancers attired in hemp, and forming twirling circular figures, lunging at him with menacing loops. Everything choked him, his food—the air—even thought. Incipient nausea tortured him. (298-9).

Zacharia’s reaction to his impending execution—panic attacks, hallucinations, nausea—is a series of physiological responses that speak to the stress under which his body and mind has been placed. The physical and emotional trauma that his body undergoes echoes the racial trauma that is being enacted on his body; Zacharia will soon be literally choked when he is hanged for the deputy’s death. While earlier in the story, medical technology could be employed to save the life of Colonel Summers, Thurman makes it clear that there are still limits to modernity’s reach because Zacharia’s physical ailments will not be cured since his physical and emotional illness is the result of a still firmly entrenched racist culture. Zacharia’s hallucination that the bars of his cell are

ballet dancers speaks to his urban, sophisticated background. At the same time, this passage vividly depicts the physical suffering that results from enforced confinement.¹¹

Before he is hanged for the death of the deputy, Zacharia sends for Colonel Summers. For their own amusement and curiosity as to what a condemned black man could want with a “stuck up” white man, the guards pass along Zacharia’s message to the Colonel, who visits the condemned man (Thurman “Grist” *Writings* 299). Zacharia reveals to Colonel Summers that he donated the blood that saved the Colonel’s life.

After revealing to Colonel Summers that it was he who saved his life, Zacharia disappears from the story, although he is apparently hanged for the policeman’s death. According to van Notten, Thurman borrows from Mencken a “technique of ridicule rather than the traditional black strategy of preaching, pleading, and protest” (113). Thurman’s shift to Colonel Summers’ point of view is deliberate: “Indeed, Thurman shifts from Zach Davis to the Colonel at the very point in the story where indignation about Davis’ lot might distract from the satirical intent of the tale” (van Notten 114). Whatever Thurman’s narrative motive, this shift from Zacharia to Colonel Summers mirrors the transfusion procedure; in effect, the narrative arc of the story follows Zacharia’s blood from Zacharia’s body to Colonel Summers’.

Thurman does not offer a motive for Zacharia’s telling Colonel Summers, but it should be noted that during this time white blood donors were frequently celebrated, and could even become local celebrities if the person whose life they saved was noteworthy (Lederer 36). Perhaps Zacharia thinks the Colonel will intercede on his behalf; instead, the revelation that the blood of a man of color saved his life causes the Colonel to become violently ill to the extent that he becomes bedridden. According to van Notten,

“the deficiencies of the rural South, which Thurman probably had learned to appreciate through Mencken’s polemics against the region, are illustrated by Colonel Summers’ mental and physical disintegration” (van Notten 114). In a sense, Zacharia and Colonel Summers trade places during their jailhouse meeting: Colonel Summers, who has been a figurative prisoner of his own racism, literally imprisons himself in his bedroom as his fear that he is becoming black causes him to panic. He checks his reflection in a mirror: “Eagerly, insanely, he peered into it, and what he saw there evidently pleased him, for the drawn features relaxed a trifle, and only the eyes, the weak, pitiful eyes, remained intensely animate as they peered and peered into the mirror. Then his strength gave out” (300). Colonel Summers’ physical condition now mirrors Zacharia’s earlier condition. Colonel Summers, who was once confident and secure in his identity, has had his assumptions about his own body and racial identity upended by his inability to reconcile the healing property of the blood that saved his life with his own racist assumptions about race. Colonel Summers experiences panic, fear, but unlike Zacharia, paranoia. Zacharia is correct to believe himself in danger due to the racism of the culture in which he finds himself; Colonel Summers, on the other hand, believes himself to be transforming into a black man. Perhaps Zacharia achieves a Pyrrhic victory; by telling the Colonel that it was his blood that saved his life, Zacharia forces Colonel Summers to confront his own racist fears. The irony is that it is the blood transfusion that both gives Zacharia a life beyond his jail cell as his genetic material integrates with that of Colonel Summers and temporarily saves Colonel Summers’ life before his own psychic wounds drive him mad to the point of death.

Like Zacharia, Colonel Summers hallucinates, but his images, in contrast to the sophisticated images of ballet dancers that haunt Zacharia, are decidedly primitivist: “. . . for the tree tops, glistening wet and swaying with the wind, assumed the shapes of savage men, rhythmically moving to the tune of a tom-tom, rhythmically tossing to the intermittent thud of the reverberating thunder” (300). In the previous chapter, I argued that Langston Hughes uses primitivist imagery as a signifier of the black body’s inherent health; in contrast, Thurman uses primitivist imagery here to signify a white man’s racist delusions when confronted with evidence that race is an inherently unstable construct. With no realistic knowledge of black people’s lives, Colonel Summers’ feverish mind constructs blackness in exaggerated, primitivist terms. It is not “savage men” outside his window that terrorize Colonel Summers; it is his own savage beliefs about race.

As his fever rages, Colonel Summers imagines that he sees Zacharia hanging from a tree outside his bedroom window:

His insane eyes set in a bearded skull conjured up strange figures when the lightning flashed. Each tree assumed a definite personality. That broken limb dangling from the tree just beyond the fence was Zacharia, and as it gyrated wildly in the night, it seemed to whisper to the wind, ‘He is my brother, my brother, my brother,’ while the wind broadcasted the whisper through the night. And then that tallest tree so close to the house was himself, a black reproduction of himself with savage sap surging through its veins. It too reveled in the wildness of the night; it too exulted in being pelted by the wind-driven rain drops and in responding to the rough rhythm of the thunder god’s tom-tom. (301)

This is a remarkable passage. Even though Colonel Summers's "insane eyes" continue to see the world in racist terms (the broken limb that represents Zacharia "gyrated wildly," "savage sap"), he is beginning to acknowledge his connection to Zacharia. That the two trees that symbolize Zacharia and Colonel Summers are outside the Colonel's bedroom is telling in that it suggests the intimate bond the two men share, as does the voice of the wind that whispers that the two men are brothers. In addition, the image of the tree that the Colonel imagines to be Zacharia has a broken limb, which suggests Zacharia's own fate as a lynched black man. The image the Colonel sees of himself—"a black reproduction with savage sap surging through its veins"—recalls the Colonel's panicked self-examination of his reflection in a mirror, and the savage sap refers to the transfused blood the Colonel has received from Zacharia. That he now sees himself as a "reproduction" suggests that his new subjectivity is the result of his union with Zacharia—the mixing of their blood—but also suggests that he now sees himself as unreal and inauthentic. The story ends with Colonel Summers' dying in a feverish haze, convinced that he has literally, physically become black. Presumably, the unnamed person who enters his room in the story's last line screams because she has found the Colonel dead on the floor; however, it is just as possible that the Colonel has actually "turned black." The text is silent on this part, an ambiguous irony. The Colonel's own racism, fear, and ignorance are what kill him.

"Grist in the Mill" signifies on white fears of racial transformation, but does so in a way that would have been inconceivable before the advent of modern medicine and viable blood transfusions. By satirizing Southern attitudes toward the mixing of blood, Thurman reveals those attitudes to be wholly irrational. Colonel Summers is a ridiculous

character not because he actually does transform into a “nigaw” or even because he is driven to madness and death due to his racist ideology (301). Instead, Thurman intimates that it is the psychological and spiritual sickness of American racism that leads Summers to almost will himself to die rather than simply acknowledge that he has gotten a blood transfusion from a man of color. In a way, it is understandable why Thurman eschews the easy sentimentality of lamenting the unfortunate end that his black character comes to; Thurman, like a doctor determined to find the root cause of an illness rather than merely treat a symptom, explores the pathology of white, male, upper class, southern racism.

The medical establishment in this story is a harbinger of modernity; it is the interns, along with Zacharia, who bring about Colonel Summers’s madness. The hospital interns understand all too well the southern morés that demand the segregation of whites and blacks, and no doubt understand that race mixing—generally understood to refer to sexual intercourse between whites and blacks—is taboo. The “trick” that the interns play by transfusing Zacharia’s blood into Colonel Summers’ body speaks to a white-dominated, racist society’s fears about race mixing.

In the nineteenth century, scientific racism was used to justify Southern slavery. Since people of African descent were constructed as genetically inferior to white, Northern Europeans, keeping Africans enslaved was not a moral issue, according to the era’s ideology.¹² By the twentieth century, much of the thinking that underscored scientific racism had been discredited, but there was still a widespread popular belief that miscegenation produced inherently ill people. Historian R.B. Kershner, in his examination of degeneration in British and American culture, points out that Victorian anthropologists believed that “not only did the mixing of the ‘natural races’ dilute the

qualities of the superior race, it could also produce a ‘mongrel race’ devoid of the best qualities of either” (430).¹³ Kershner goes on to demonstrate that this belief maintained popular currency long after it had been scientifically disproven. Furthermore, as John Nale has demonstrated, Victorian anxieties about blood lines functioned as a metaphor for larger concerns. Citing the work of Arthur de Gobineau (1816-1882), the French theorist who coined the term “Aryan race,” Nale argues that for Gobineau blood “is the common bond that unifies a civilization” (106).¹⁴ According to Gobineau, miscegenation was not a threat to an individual’s physical health; rather, race mixing threatened to degrade the essence of an entire culture: “blood, so long as it is pure, is manifested in the social bond or spirit of a people” (Nale 119). Colonel Summers’s insanity is a reflection of white racist fears about the loss of racial purity and, by extension, cultural hegemony, which would result from miscegenation.

Since the ideology that blood is synonymous with cultural (im)purity underpins anti-miscegenation ideology, “Grist in the Mill,” then, is an attack on white supremacist beliefs that race mixing would lead to cultural degeneration; these attitudes were still widely prevalent when Thurman published “Grist in the Mill,” even though they had been discredited by biologists. Thurman satirizes not only white, racist, Southern attitudes about the body, but also the discredited beliefs about the negative outcomes that the dominant culture associated with race mixing. Colonel Summers’s new subjectivity, that of a man carrying black blood, makes him, in his own mind if not in actuality, black. This new subject position, which drives the Colonel mad, is in essence the offspring of his transfusion from Zacharia.

***The Blacker the Berry* (1929)**

Thurman shows how internalized racism can damage the psyche of a member of the African American community in his first novel *The Blacker the Berry* (1929). The story of Emma Lou Morgan, a dark-skinned woman originally from Boise, Idaho, who moves to Harlem after failing to graduate from the University of Southern California, Thurman hoped the novel's unflinching critique of intraracial color prejudice within the black community would ignite controversy. In "Notes on a Stepchild," a brief essay in which he describes his writing life, Thurman, referring to himself in the third person, writes:

True, he had made no mention of the difficulties Negroes experience in a white world. On the contrary, he had concerned himself only with Negroes among their own kind, trying to interpret some of the internal phenomena of Negro life in America. His book was interesting to read only because had had lain bare conditions scarcely hinted at before, conditions to which Negroes chose to remain blind and about which white people remain in ignorance. But in doing this he realized that he had fixed the blame for these conditions on race prejudice. (*Writings* 239).¹⁵

Thurman explains his purpose by using medical language; the African American community has a "condition," its own color prejudice that privileges lighter skin over dark, to which it is "blind." Unfortunately for Thurman, rather than expressing shock or outrage at the novel's themes, most contemporary critics found *The Blacker the Berry* to be merely badly written. An unsigned review for the *New York Times Book Review* described the novel as a "merely competent, somewhat amorphous story," in which the

author “reports where he should be dramatizing the world” (“Harlem Negroes” 6).¹⁶ Eunice Hunton Carter, writing for *Opportunity*, was unhappy with the “immaturity and gaucherie of the work” (Carter 162).¹⁷ Not all critics were entirely displeased; W.E.B. Du Bois praised the novel for tackling the subject of intraracial prejudice, but ultimately found the novel flawed due to the lack of positive development for Emma Lou: “[T]here seems to be no real development in Emma’s character; her sex life never becomes nasty and commercial, and yet nothing seems to develop in her beyond sex” (Du Bois 249).¹⁸ Du Bois went on to argue that the novel would have succeeded had Thurman placed a stronger emphasis on racial uplift. The lack of racial uplift suggests to him that Thurman holds a “self-despising” racial outlook, and that he seems to “deride blackness” (Du Bois 250). I argue that Thurman, rather than “deride blackness,” attempts in this novel to reveal the psychological pressure that intraracial prejudice exerts on the black, female, middle-class subject, and that Harlem functions in the novel as a site of healing.

Most critical readings of *The Blacker the Berry* have focused at least to some extent on the biographical similarities between the novel’s protagonist, Emma Lou, and Thurman. These critics take their cue from Langston Hughes, who in his autobiography *The Big Sea* pointedly identifies Thurman as dark skinned: “he was a strangely brilliant black boy” and goes on to suggest that Thurman’s bitterness was the result of the prejudice he experienced because of his dark skin tone (Hughes 234).¹⁹ Richard Bruce Nugent, who was one of Thurman’s closest friends at the time the novel was published, even asked Thurman why “he had made himself into a woman in the novel” (Van Notten 224). Dorothy West, another close friend of Thurman’s, also believes that Thurman makes his protagonist female to occlude the biographical similarities between himself

and Emma Lou (West 79).²⁰ More recently, Thadious M. Davis has looked at *The Blacker the Berry* in the context of “the sociocultural reasons for an emphasis on the representations of the female or the feminine in African American literature” in the years before Richard Wright’s “masculinization of African American fiction” in the late 1930s (Davis 98).²¹ Davis asserts that the similarities between Emma Lou and Thurman himself represent a “textual strategy” in which an African American male writer “respond[s] to racial separation and oppression by assuming a female face” (Davis 114).

There are biographical similarities between Thurman and Emma Lou, but it is a mistake to read the novel as strictly autobiographical; Thurman, could have, after all, made his protagonist male. Thurman was an ambitious writer, and sought for himself a place in the larger context of American literature. Granville Ganter notes that like Dreiser’s title character in *Sister Carrie*, Emma Lou is a young woman adrift in the large city; in fact, Ganter argues that Thurman “seems to have wanted to write a black *Sister Carrie*” (Ganter 88).²² Daniel Walker persuasively argues that through Emma Lou Thurman interrogates gender by exploring how intraracial prejudice and patriarchy intersect; the novel is, therefore “an indictment of Negro society and a specific analysis of the unique position, or lack, thereof, of the dark skinned Black woman within that society” (Walker 155).²³ As Singh points out, Thurman sought to become a public intellectual; to that end, *The Blacker the Berry* is perhaps Thurman’s most complex fictional interrogation of the black community’s attitudes toward race, class, and gender. Daniel Scott III claims that “caught between the era’s demand for the exotic and the race’s desire to present edifying themes, it is an extraordinary novel that dwells on the border between Van Vechten and Du Bois, between fiction and memoir, between a

radical interrogation of race and a surprising assertion of sexuality” (Scott 327).²⁴ Scott argues that what most critics read as the novel’s failings should in fact be read as “tropes that question racial, class, gender, and erotic identities” (Scott 327). Using Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, Scott argues that the novel should be re-evaluated based on Thurman’s “portrayals of Harlem’s moral and sexual ambiguity, in his questioning of parameters by which most Americans conceptualize and/or discuss race and its relationship to gender, class, and sexuality” (Scott 329). In a reading that extends Scott’s analysis of Thurman’s fictionalized Harlem, Martha E. Cook argues that *The Blacker the Berry* is structurally organized by its protagonist’s “geographical flights” as “she seeks a community that will accept and support her” (Cook 152).²⁵ Recent critical approaches like those adopted by Scott and Cook raise intriguing points about Thurman’s interest in how race, class, and gender intersect. In the following discussion, I argue that Thurman’s protagonist, Emma Lou, uses toxic chemicals in a misguided attempt to lighten her skin because she has internalized pathologizing discourses about the black female body. Furthermore, Thurman uses decidedly medical terminology and imagery to interrogate the unique pressures black middle-class ideology exerts on black women.

Like *Sister Carrie*, *The Blacker the Berry* opens with a section that takes the reader inside its protagonist’s mind as she is preparing to leave an unhappy home: “More acutely than ever before Emma Lou began to feel that her luscious black complexion was something of a liability, and that her marked color variation from other people in her environment was a decided curse” (Thurman *Berry* 21). In medicine, an acute condition is one with a rapid onset; by opening the novel with a description of Emma Lou’s perception of her dark skin as a “curse” and a “liability,” Thurman begins to suggest that

Emma Lou's growing awareness of how her skin tone is different from her family's is symptomatic of a cultural neurosis that plagues Emma Lou.²⁶ Emma Lou ruminates on the genetic reasons for her dark skin tone: "Biologically, it wasn't necessary either; her mother was quite fair, so was her mother's mother, and her mother's brother, and her mother's brother's son; but then, none of them had had a black man for a father" (21). Emma Lou is quite aware that her skin tone is not a literal curse, but rather is the result of her parents' genes, yet is unable to use that knowledge to build a healthy sense of self-worth.

The narrator makes it clear that Emma Lou's family is the cause of her damaged sense of self-worth: "It was an acquired family characteristic, this moaning and grieving over the color of skin" (21). Emma Lou's family tries to lighten her skin: "Everything possible had been done to alleviate the unhappy condition, every suggested agent had been employed, but her skin, despite bleaching, scourging, and powderings, had remained black—fast black—as nature had planned and effected" (21). Emma Lou's dark skin is an "unhappy condition," like a chronic medical condition, and the remedies to which her family subjects her, while not uncommon at the time, have a decidedly curative intent. For Emma Lou's light-skinned middle-class family, her dark skin is a medical situation, and by treating it as such, the family unwittingly advances a white supremacist agenda.²⁷ Emma Lou's family hates her dark skin, and manifests that hatred by forcing Emma Lou to undergo "bleaching" and "powderings." That there are available products such as bleaches, skin creams, and powders advertised with the promise to lighten the skin reveals that Emma Lou is not unique, nor is her story anecdotal; rather, Emma Lou is one customer of a large industry that supports itself by convincing people of color that their

skin color is an adverse medical condition. The “remedies” that Emma Lou’s mother and grandmother use to lighten Emma Lou’s skin represent the nexus of the pharmaceutical industry and commodity capitalism.²⁸ Pharmaceutical products such as skin creams and bleaches have long been marketed to people of African descent with the promise that greater economic opportunity and social acceptance will be available to them—if they buy the skin lightening merchandise. Emma Lou’s family has accepted the pharmaceutical-capitalist myth that lightening one’s skin is a panacea for the effects of institutionalized racism. As the novel continues, Thurman makes it clear that Emma Lou’s family’s attitude to Emma Lou’s skin tone is consistent with that of the larger African American community.

In addition, the “scourging” that forms part of the ritual of “bleaching, scourging, and powderings” is an interesting word choice. Here used as a transitive verb, scourging usually refers to the “infliction of blows with a whip” (*Oxford English Dictionary* Def. 1a).²⁹ Thurman’s intention is clearly satirical; it speaks to the level of desperation in Emma Lou’s family that the word the narrator chooses to describe their attempted excoriation is synonymous with flogging. Scourge is also a noun that means devastation from war or pestilence; for instance, a plague can be described as a scourge. Thurman highlights how irrational Emma Lou’s middle-class family really is since Emma Lou’s skin tone is, for them, a source of devastation and ruin. Thurman shows that Emma Lou’s middle-class family has so internalized the wider cultural racism that their responses are irrational, counterproductive, psychologically damaging to Emma Lou, and, ultimately, pointless.

The products that Emma Lou's family uses to lighten her skin have traditionally been marketed to women, evidence that the social, cultural, and economic pressures that face African Americans have been more strongly applied to women of color. Emma Lou's family is aware of the greater difficulty Emma Lou will face as a dark-skinned woman: "[S]he should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy could get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment" (22). Presumably, if Emma Lou had been born male her family would not insist on lightening her skin, which suggests that Thurman chose to make his protagonist female in order to highlight the unique pressure that women of color face in a systemically racist society. Emma Lou understands all too well that gender expectations are as much a part of the dilemma as racism: "There was no place in the world for a girl as black as she anyways. Her grandmother had assured her that she would never find a husband worth a dime, and her mother had said again and again, 'Oh, if you had only been a boy!' until Emma Lou had often wondered why it was that people were not able to effect a change of sex or at least a change of complexion" (33). Emma Lou understands the solution to her problem does not involve changing location, which is what she eventually does, but is a medical procedure that could change either her sex or her complexion. W.E.B. Du Bois famously declared that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,"³⁰ but for Emma Lou the problem is both a color line and gender line.

After she moves away from Boise to attend college, Emma Lou hopes to meet "the right sort of people" who will accept her; however, the class consciousness and internalized racism that her family has inculcated make it impossible for her to form

meaningful bonds with other people (46). Thurman suggests that because Emma Lou has thoroughly internalized her family's and community's racism she is unable to emotionally connect with other people of color: "It was the custom always of those with whom she came into most frequent contact to ridicule or revile any black person or object. A black cat was a harbinger of bad luck, black crepe was the insignia of mourning, and black people were either evil niggers with *poisonous* blue gums or else typical vaudeville darkies" (24 emphasis added). In addition to the negative associations that blackness carries for Emma Lou's community, black skin is coded specifically as "poisonous," as if being of African descent were toxic. The pharmaceutical treatments that Emma Lou's family foists on her are an attempt to ameliorate the toxicity of black skin. As one of Emma Lou's mother's friends suggests, "'Try some lye, Jane, it may eat it out. She can't look any worse'" (32). The irony of Emma Lou's situation is that the supposed cures, such as lye, are themselves toxic.

When Emma Lou meets Hazel Mason, another dark-skinned woman at USC, she is revolted by Hazel's uncouth manner and loud clothes, which she sees as evidence of Hazel's "primitive heritage" (44). For Emma Lou, Hazel represents her fears that other black students will perceive her as "primitive." Emma Lou has so assimilated the racist assumptions about class and skin color that she is unable to see Hazel's good qualities, even though she does acknowledge that Hazel's "good nature is infectious," an idiomatic medical expression that speaks to the extent to which Emma Lou fears being associated with Hazel (45). For the middle-class Emma Lou, Hazel's working-class background is a contagion, which threatens to damage her own reputation. She eventually cuts off contact with Hazel after the latter begins "playing the darky for the amused white students . . . the

very tone and quality of her voice designated her as a minstrel type” (55). Emma Lou wishes Hazel “would be less vaudevillian” (56). As I noted earlier, Emma Lou’s perception of blackness conflates minstrel stereotypes with toxicity (“poisonous gums”). Hazel, because her own skin is dark and because she does not conform to the normative behavior of black, middle-class womanhood figuratively becomes, for Emma Lou, toxic herself, and is further evidence that Emma Lou’s classism and internalized racism are closely related. Furthermore, Emma Lou’s equation of blackness with “poisonous gums” becomes ironic when one remembers that she uses real harmful chemicals in a misguided attempt to lighten her skin.

As the days pass and Emma Lou has yet to meet any students of color besides Hazel, she seeks a pharmaceutical solution to her loneliness, but does not attempt to bleach or powder her skin. Instead, she wanders around the School of Pharmacy because “she had been told that there were more Negro students enrolled in the School of Pharmacy than in any other department of the university” (47). As Emma Lou walks past a group of African American students, the novel’s point of view shifts for the first time; the third-person narrator leaves Emma Lou’s consciousness and relates the students’ conversation.

When the pharmacy students observe Emma Lou walk past them, they privately refer to her as “some new ‘pick’” and “‘hottentot’” (48). The students’ comments about Emma Lou’s skin tone provide the first evidence that the color prejudice she experiences from her family also occurs in the wider black community. It is telling that the pharmacy students discuss Emma Lou in racist terms; unlike in “Grist in the Mill” where medical professionals represent modernity, here the pharmacy students represent outdated, yet

still prevalent, ways of thinking about the black, particularly female body. The pharmacy students refer to Emma Lou as a “pick,” short for pickaninny, and “hottentot,” both terms that are fraught with meaning as racist signifiers of colonialism and the various ways in which the black (female) body has been pathologized. In this scene, the pharmacy students refer to Emma Lou with language that constructs the black female as a medical and scientific curiosity, in an exchange that echoes the surveillance under which black women’s bodies have been observed and pathologized in various imperial situations.³¹

Thurman’s use of the word hottentot calls to mind Sara Baartman (1790-1815), a Khoisan woman who was held in slavery and exhibited in London and Paris as the “Hottentot Venus” in the early nineteenth century. As Sander L. Gilman points out, Sara Baartman, the “Hottentot Venus,” was “the central image of the black female” and came to “dominate all medical description of black women during the nineteenth century” (“Black Bodies, White Bodies” 216).³² Nineteenth-century naturalists pathologized Baartman’s body (and, by extension, the bodies of all women of color) by linking her primary and secondary sex characteristics to her supposed lasciviousness: “In the nineteenth century, the black female was widely perceived as possessing not only a ‘primitive’ sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament-‘primitive’ genitalia” (Gilman “Black Bodies, White Bodies” 213). Gilman goes on to assert that the sexuality of women of color has traditionally been pathologized based not only on sex characteristics but also on skin color (231). When the pharmacy students deride Emma Lou’s skin color, they reproduce a pernicious medical myth about the sexuality of women of color by participating in a discourse that pathologizes African American women’s bodies. This scene, then, is perhaps Thurman’s harshest attack on the intraracial prejudice

of the black community because of the pharmacy students' class position. Furthermore, Thurman's satire here is clearly targeted at the New Negro movement because as educated members of the black middle class, the pharmacy students are the prototypical Talented Tenth.

While at USC, Emma Lou adheres to the New Negro ideology of the bourgeois Talented Tenth. For her, "the people who really mattered" are "the business men, the doctors, the lawyers, the dentists, the more moneyed Pullman porters, hotel waiters, bank janitors, and majordomos" (60). The pharmacy students Emma Lou tried to befriend could easily be added to this list. Emma's Lou's classism is inextricably bound to her low sense of self-worth as a dark-skinned woman, which she conceptualizes as a disability: "A wife of dark complexion was considered a handicap unless she was particularly charming, wealthy, or beautiful" (60). Emma Lou has internalized her mother's and grandmother's hand-wringing over her dark skin to the point that now Emma Lou is anxious about whether she will be able to maintain her middle-class status: "In fact, all of the Negro leaders and members of the Negro upper class, were either light-skinned themselves or had light-skinned wives" (60). As Catherine Rottenberg points out, "the 'or' in this sentence indicates that very black men could and did become leaders and professionals and that their own skin color did not necessarily hinder their success" (Rottenberg 63).³³ Thurman is acutely interested in the cultural and psychological pressures faced by dark-skinned middle-class women; this passage indicates that such pressure is extremely anxiety inducing. Thurman explicitly links this anxiety to the New Negro ideology of the Talented Tenth, and reveals the stress under which a dark-skinned middle-class woman like Emma Lou would have found herself: "The college youths on

whom the future of the race depended practiced this precept [of marrying light-skinned women] religiously” (60). Emma Lou’s self-loathing, then, can be read as neither a projection of Thurman’s hatred of his own dark skin, nor a critique merely of intraracial prejudice within the black community. Rather, Thurman calls into question the elitism of the New Negro movement by pointing out the perception among the Talented Tenth that a healthy future of the race depended on educated men marrying lighter-skinned women. While *The Blacker the Berry* is not as sharply satirical as much of his other fiction, Thurman suggests that the black middle class, represented by Emma Lou’s mother, grandmother, and the pharmacy students at USC, is unhealthy in its preoccupation with light skin. If Emma Lou’s dark skin is disabling or a “handicap,” it is not only because of the dominant culture’s racism but also, and perhaps even more crucially because of, color prejudice and patriarchy within the middle-class black community. *The Blacker the Berry* is, then, about Emma Lou’s quest to become enabled, to construct an identity that does not assume her dark skin is a handicap. Ironically, it is when Emma Lou moves to Harlem, the mecca of the New Negro, that she is able to eventually reject the elitist elements of middle-class New Negro ideology.

In an extension of readings offered by critics like Scott who argues that the Harlem of Thurman’s fiction is liberating, Catherine Rottenberg argues that Harlem, for Emma Lou, while ultimately emancipatory, is not solely liberating because: “‘the city’ cannot be understood as a site of emancipation from dominant cultural norms or constraints, since normative schemes are what bring subjects into being and help constitute subjects’ desires, aspirations, and identifications. In other words, there is no ‘escape’ from regulatory ideals” (Rottenberg 67). Harlem, despite its possibilities, is still

a product of racist, patriarchal, classist dominant culture. In addition, the black middle class of *The Blacker the Berry* has internalized much of the racism of the dominant culture, and reproduces its patriarchy and classism, which leads Emma Lou to revert to using harmful chemicals to lighten her skin.

When Emma Lou speaks to the head of an employment agency about becoming a secretary to an African American businessman, for instance, she is advised to go to Teachers' College and take a job in the school system because “lots of our Negro businessmen have a definite type of girl in mind and will not hire any other” (*Berry* 94). The “definite type of girl” is one who is lighter skinned than Emma Lou. As she continues to struggle to gain an economic foothold in Harlem, Emma Lou again attempts to bleach her skin by swallowing arsenic wafers, “which were guaranteed to increase the pallor of one’s skin” (121). The mordant humor of this line underscores the extreme lengths to which Emma Lou will go in that she is willing to literally poison herself. The alienating effect Harlem has on Emma Lou mirrors the difficulty she had fitting in with the black middle class in Boise and Los Angeles; her mother’s and grandmother’s prophecies about the cultural pressures placed on dark-skinned women seem to come to pass. Since Emma Lou takes the arsenic wafers during a time in which she is virtually unemployed and unable to meet other members of the black middle class, it seems that her use of these agents is related to her tenuous economic and social position as an unmarried woman. Emma Lou’s reasoning seems to be that if her skin were lighter, her situation would improve; she would find meaningful work and meet “the people who really mattered” (60). Tellingly, the wafers do not lighten Emma Lou’s complexion; they worsen it: “the only effects were an increase in blackheads, irritating rashes, and a

burning skin” (123-4). Emma Lou’s swallowing of arsenic wafers is an act of racial violence against her own black skin.³⁴

Thurman’s language remains detached and clinical throughout the novel; the narrative voice tells the reader about Emma Lou’s behavior without judging her. The text treats Emma Lou’s sexuality quite openly, and that openness is intriguing when one considers that black middle-class female sexuality was, at the time of the novel’s publication, still subject to pathologizing narratives. In her introduction to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), Deborah McDowell notes that “black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence,” and she goes on to assert that “this pattern is clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women’s libidinousness” (McDowell xii).³⁵ These myths began in the eighteenth century with the (pseudo)scientific construct of the pathologized black female body. As a black middle class emerged in the late nineteenth century, “U.S. black women reformers began to develop strategies to counter negative stereotypes of their sexuality and their use as a justification for the rape, lynching, and other abuses of black women by whites” (Hammonds 132).³⁶ Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham claims that by the early twentieth century the chief strategy was a “politics of silence” about black female sexuality (Higginbotham 262).³⁷ The “politics of silence” sought to counter the stereotype of the sexually licentious black woman by promoting proper Victorian morality through silence about sex. By presenting Emma Lou as unapologetically sexually active, Thurman risks presenting her as a pathologically libidinous black woman, but I argue Emma Lou uses her sexuality the same way she uses toxic substances to lighten her skin—as a means by which to solidify her position in the black middle class.

Emma Lou's first sexual encounter occurs in Boise while she is on a vacation from USC. She is "depressed and discouraged" because she has been unable to ingratiate herself with the black middle class of Los Angeles (61). At a church picnic, "the crowning social event of the summer season among the colored citizens of Boise," she meets Weldon Taylor, significantly, a medical student (61). Emma Lou is immediately attracted to his "tall, slender body, the deep burnish of his bronze-colored skin, and his mass of curly black hair" (62). She wishes, however, that "his skin had been colored light brown instead of dark brown. It was better if she was to marry that she did not get a dark skin mate. Her children must not suffer as she had and would suffer" (62-3). Emma Lou loses her virginity to Weldon the afternoon of the picnic, and while her middle-class background would suggest that she feel ashamed of her sexuality, that is not the case: "[N]ot for one moment did Emma Lou consider the loss of her virtue, not once did any of her mother's and grandmother's warning and solicitations revive themselves and cause her conscience to plague her" (64). This frank depiction of black, female, middle-class sexuality is rare for a novel of the period; Emma Lou resists having her sexuality policed by the "politics of silence."³⁸ Instead, she views her new relationship with Weldon as life-affirming because she naively believes Weldon will marry her and thus solidify her middle-class position. Looked at another way, however, sex with Weldon replaces the bleaches and skin creams as a palliative to what Emma Lou perceives as the "handicap" of her dark skin. This strategy is likewise doomed. When Weldon leaves her and his medical studies to become a Pullman porter, Emma Lou blames her skin color. The narrator makes clear, however, that, "not once did she consider that he was acting toward her as he would have acted toward any girl under similar circumstances, whether her face

had been white, yellow, brown, or black. Emma Lou did not understand that Weldon was just a selfish normal man and not a color-prejudiced one” (69).

Emma Lou’s sexual expression is relevant to this discussion because she resists the pathologizing discourse surrounding black, female, middle-class sexuality; this does not mean, however, that Emma Lou’s sexuality is entirely healthy. Rather, her sexual expression serves as further evidence of the damaging psychological effects of her internalized racism. Shortly after she arrives in Harlem, Emma Lou goes to a cabaret and meets Alva, and is immediately drawn to him because he is light-skinned and “he looked like a college person. He dressed well. His skin was such a warm and different color” (124). She again seeks to gain a sense of self through her relationship with a man whom she believes can provide a middle-class life. Alva, on the contrary, is a “sweetback,” a “sheik dandy,” a figure in which the discursive categories of masculinity collapse (Knadler 899-901). A sweetback is, as Knadler argues, “an ambiguously gendered and sexualized hustler” who crosses the borders between Harlem’s simultaneous “gay permissiveness and virulent homophobia” (900). Alva is a bisexual alcoholic who uses Emma Lou for his own economic gain because ““the only thing a black woman is good for is to make money for a brown-skin papa”” (134). In contrast to Emma Lou’s earlier sexual motivation, Alva does not seek entry into the middle class, but rather wants only to fund a lifestyle that includes frequenting cabarets and rent parties. Thurman does not celebrate the cabaret world, as does Langston Hughes. On the contrary, in *The Blacker the Berry*, the cabaret lifestyle is a marker of illness. As Michael L. Cobb notes, in Thurman’s work characters who indulge in alcohol or sex to excess “serve as the marker of responsibility for the condition of pathology” (Cobb 341). Thurman links the excess of

Alva's sweetback identity and sexual fluidity with physical and emotional illness: "He [Alva] was in a serious condition, his stomach lining was practically eaten away and his entire body wrecked from physical excess" (204).

Alva eventually marries a woman named Geraldine, while drunk, and fathers a son with her. Their child, Alva Jr., is born severely disabled; Alva refers to him as a "tainted ball of suet" (192). The child's disability is a reflection of Alva's and Geraldine's profligate lifestyle; Geraldine soon abandons their disabled son leaving him with Alva because she believes that "had she mated with someone else, she might have given birth to a normal child" (192). Like the dark-skinned Emma Lou, Alva's disabled son inspires revulsion in his parents, and like Emma Lou's mother, Geraldine regrets her choice of mate. Similarly too, Alva's son is abandoned by one parent and neglected by the other. In addition, the boy's physical disabilities—his limbs are deformed and he is described as an "idiot"—undermine Emma Lou's belief that she would have been better off had she been born male.

Left alone with his son, Alva's health soon declines sharply: "Alva was drinking more and more. He was also becoming less interested in looking well. He didn't bother with his clothes as much as before, his almond-shaped eyes became more narrow, and the gray parchment conquered the yellow in his skin and gave him a death-like pallor" (193). Alva's loss of interest in his outward appearance mirrors the internal ravages that alcohol takes on his body, and, ironically he achieves the "death-like" skin tone that Emma Lou seeks for herself.

Emma Lou returns to Alva when he is "wan, dissipated, and bloated" with "the face of a corpse" (206). She becomes his and Alva Jr.'s caretaker:

Twice a week she took him [Alva Jr.] to the clinic where he had violet ray sun baths and oil massages. His little body had begun to fill out and simultaneously it seemed as if his head was decreasing in size. There was only feature which remained unchanged; his abnormally large eyes still retained their insane stare. They appeared frozen and terrified as if their owner was gazing upon some horrible yet fascinating object or occurrence. (208)

The image of the disabled black male body in this passage echoes Colonel Summers's madness in Thurman's earlier "Grist in the Mill." The "insane stare" that "gaz[es] upon some horrible yet fascinating object or occurrence" recalls Summers's hallucinations of seeing Zacharia's dead body hanging from the tree outside his bedroom window. In "Grist in the Mill," Thurman's focus was on the psychological pathology of racism manifested in a medical setting. In *The Blacker the Berry* the black male body as responsive medical subject contrasts sharply with Emma Lou's neurosis about her skin color. While Emma Lou uses questionable pharmaceutical products in a misguided attempt to lighten her skin, she encourages apparently valid medical therapies for her lover's son. While critics such as Bell and Bone see Emma Lou's newfound sense of self-worth at the text's end as evidence of Thurman's lack of skill as a novelist, I assert that Emma Lou's confidence begins with her role as caretaker precisely because the positive results of Alva Jr.'s treatment are readily apparent, unlike her skin bleaching.

To overlook the figure of Alva's son is to ignore an intriguing facet of Thurman's interest in how the pathologized black body could reinforce the interests of power, or be a force for undermining those interests. As with his handling of Emma Lou's sexual

expression, Thurman takes a risk by introducing Alva Jr. because of stereotypes about the inherent unhealthiness of African Americans, particularly those not part of the middle class. Thurman's purpose in introducing a poor African American child who is clearly developmentally and physically disabled is to show Emma Lou's rejection of her middle-class background and New Negro ideology. Furthermore, by living with a working-class, alcoholic, bisexual African American man, Emma Lou discards the middle-class, heterosexual principles with which she constructed her identity for much of the novel. In addition, by caring for Alva's disabled son, Emma Lou reconstructs her own racist ideas about the black body as a pathology, and recognizes that she will only find personal fulfillment once she accepts her body as it is, particularly her dark skin.

In *The Blacker the Berry*, Thurman charts Emma Lou's movement toward personal growth by showing the harmful psychological effects of internalized racism and intraracial color prejudice. Thurman does this primarily in medicalized language through his description of the folk remedies Emma Lou uses to lighten her skin, which serve as evidence of the extreme neurosis such intraracial color prejudice inculcates in one dark-skinned woman. While *The Blacker the Berry* is Emma Lou's story, it is, in a broader sense, a narrative about the pathological effects of racism on the middle-class African American community. In "Grist in the Mill," Thurman satirizes racist white assumptions about the black body's inherent abjectness by using an interracial blood transfusion as the central narrative element. In doing so, Thurman undermines the medical and scientific racism, still prevalent in the 1920s, which constructed the black body—and black blood—as intrinsically diseased. It is Colonel Summers who is driven insane by his paranoia about transforming into an African American man. In contrast, Thurman depicts

the black male body as pathological in the figure of Alva Jr., but the text makes it clear that the child's problems are caused by systemic poverty, and unhealthy and neglectful parents, rather than his race. Thurman ultimately shows that it is a society that labels its citizens as pathological simply because of their skin color that is pathologically ill, not those who are victimized by its racist view of disease.

Notes

¹ In *The Negro Novel in America*, Robert Bone reads *The Blacker the Berry* as evidence of Thurman's self-hatred: "No one who has read *The Blacker the Berry* will doubt that the source of this self-hatred was his dark complexion" (93). In his influential study *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), Nathan Huggins criticizes Bone's unsympathetic reading of Thurman's work, but claims that the latter's goal in *Infants of the Spring* is "to bury the Renaissance once and for all" (Huggins 241). More recent Thurman scholars, especially Singh and Van Notten, have taken a more nuanced view of Thurman's oeuvre.

² Thurman, Wallace. *Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel Scott III. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003.

³ Van Notten, Eleanore. *Wallace Thurman's Harlem Renaissance*. Atlanta: Rodopi, 1994.

⁴ See Vanessa Gamble's *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 for a discussion of the black hospital movement, an attempt within the African American community to establish medical cultural institutions staffed by black doctors and nurses. In an era in which African Americans could not rely on a white medical establishment to serve their needs and medical professionals of color could not always find employment within white-dominated hospitals and medical practices, the black hospital served a necessary function within the African American community.

⁵ Thurman, Wallace. *The Blacker the Berry*. 1929. Intro. Shirlee Taylor Haizlip. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

⁶ Thurman, Wallace. *Infants of the Spring*. 1932. Foreword Amritjit Singh. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992.

⁷ An intriguing exception to this tendency occurs in *Infants of the Spring*. After the novel's protagonist Ray collapses in a Harlem street, he dreams that he is "on an ocean. Calm billows cradled him, transferred him gently to the shore, venting plangent roars of self-approval. Mist kissed his lips and cooled his fervid head and cheeks" (*Infants* 208). Ray is awakened from this reverie by "an unfamiliar male voice" asking "'How's the coon?'" to which a woman replies "'He's coming out of it. Must be an epileptic'" (*Infants* 208). Ray had been taken to Bellevue Hospital, and the voices he hears are a doctor and a nurse discussing him using racist language rather than professional medical terminology. In this instance, the disciplining force of racism and medical authority intersect.

⁸ Thurman, Wallace. "Grist in the Mill." *Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel Scott III. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. 294-301.

⁹ For a discussion of the history of blood transfusion in the United States, see Lederer, chapter 2.

¹⁰ Lederer, Susan E. *Flesh and Blood: Organ Transplantation and Blood Transfusion in Twentieth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

¹¹ Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert have written about the claustrophobic sense of enclosure in novels written by women, and Thurman evokes that same sense of

claustrophobia here. See Susan Gubar and Sandra N. Gilbert. *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1979.

¹² Nineteenth century American proponents of scientific racism argued that people of African descent were biologically inferior to white Europeans. Zoologist, geologist, and Harvard professor Louis Agassiz argues in “The Diversity of the Origin of the Human Races” (1850) that Europeans are superior to Africans. Surgeon Josiah Nott, in “Geographical Distribution of Animals, and the Races of Men” (1854), similarly argues that people of color are biologically inferior to whites, but Nott goes further by claiming that the different races are ideally suited only for the particular geographic region in which they originated: “black skin would seem to be the best suited to hot climates . . . for this reason we may suppose that a special creation of black races took place in Africa” (Nott 463). Nott further contends that removing people from their ideal geographic location causes “degradation analogous to the operation of disease” (Nott 463). Louisiana physician Samuel A. Cartwright, in “Slavery in the Light of Ethnology” (1857), argues that Africans are suited to servile positions because “The innate love to act as body servant or lacquey is too strongly developed in the negro race to be concealed. It admirably qualifies them for waiters and house servants, as their strong muscles, hardy frames, and the positive pleasure that labor in a hot sun confers on them, abundantly qualify them for agricultural employment in a hot climate” (471). Agassiz, Nott, and Cartwright all argued that white, EuroAmerican subjugation of Africans and African Americans was rooted in biological difference, which, though repellent and now thoroughly discredited, was widely accepted in the antebellum United States.

¹³ Kershner, R.B. “Degeneration: The Explanatory Nightmare.” *The Georgia Review* 40.2 (1986): 416-44.

¹⁴ Nale, John. “Arthur de Gobineau on Blood and Race.” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 2.1 (2014): 106-24.

¹⁵ Thurman, Wallace. “Notes on a Stepchild.” *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman: A Harlem Renaissance Reader*. Ed. Amritjit Singh and Daniel Scott III. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. 235-41.

¹⁶ “Harlem Negroes.” Review of *The Blacker the Berry*. *New York Times Book Review*. March 17, 1929: 6.

¹⁷ Carter, Eunice Hunton. Review of *The Blacker the Berry*. *Opportunity* 7.5 (1929): 162-3.

¹⁸ Thurman, Wallace. “Review of *The Blacker the Berry*, by Wallace Thurman.” *The Crisis* 36.7 (July 1929): 249-50.

¹⁹ Van Notten disputes the theory that Thurman’s dark skin tone was a source of his lifelong bitterness, noting instead that Thurman’s sickliness and alcoholism. As an adult, Thurman was rejected by Salt Lake City’s black elite (he frequently visited that city even after he moved to New York City), and Van Notten notes that Thurman himself never claimed the rejection was due to his skin color but rather to his “offensive propaganda against the race,” by which he meant *The Blacker the Berry* (71).

²⁰ West, Dorothy. “The Elephants Dance.” *Black World* (November 1970): 77-85.

²¹ Davis, Thadious. “A Female Face: Or, Masking the Masculine in African American Fiction Before Richard Wright” *Teaching African American Literature: Theory*

and Practice. Ed. Maryemma Graham, Sharon Pineault-Burke, and Marianna White David. New York: Routledge, 1998. 98-131.

²² Ganter, Granville. "Decadence, Sexuality, and the Bohemian Vision of Wallace Thurman." *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 28.2 (2003): 83-104.

²³ Walker, Daniel E. "Exploding the Canon: A Re-examination of Wallace Thurman's Assault on the Harlem Renaissance." *Western Journal of Black Studies* 22.3 (1998): 153-8.

²⁴ Scott III, Daniel M. "Harlem Shadows: Re-evaluating Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*." *MELUS* 29: 3/4 (2004): 323-39.

²⁵ Cook, Martha E. "The Search for Self in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*: Color, Class, and Community." *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Art, and Letters*. Ed. Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2010. 140-152.

²⁶ Brian Roberts, in his reading of the topographies of *The Blacker the Berry*, reads the first sentence in the context of Thurman's Utah background. Emma Lou's perception of her skin as a "marked" and a "curse" "takes a particular (i.e. Utah Mormon) Rocky Mountain State heritage as a template for imagining the racial mythos within which other black denizens of the Rocky Mountain states operate" (Roberts 97).

²⁷ As bell hooks points out, hating blackness is a clear manifestation of white supremacy (9). See hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 1992.

²⁸ Historians and cultural critics have been slow to fully explore the implications of skin lightening techniques, the pharmaceutical industry, and people of African descent. For an early discussion of the link between Western medicine and the pathologization of blackness see Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove, 1967. For a discussion of how the "scientific gaze" helped produce the racist knowledge that would construct colonized people as genetically inferior to Western Europeans, see Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York/London: Routledge, 1995. For an example of the "scientific gaze" and the pathologization of the bodies of women of color, see Havelock Ellis's *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Volume 4: Sexual Selection in Man*. 1905. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis, 1920. Ellis claims that there is an objective hierarchy of beauty, with Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom. Consequently, according to Ellis, men of the "primitive" races admire women of the "more civilized races," which in turn leads "primitive" women to use face powder in a neurotic attempt to gain "their" men's attention (Ellis 158).

²⁹ "Scourging." Def. 1a. *Oxford English Dictionary*. N.d. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

³⁰ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003. 3.

³¹ For a discussion of Baartman and the black female body's subjection to the medical and scientific gaze, see Gilman, Sander. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204-42. Gilman claims that the nineteenth-century iconographic representation of African women intersected with the medical discourse that pathologized their bodies. Gilman argues that nineteenth-century images of

African women's bodies accentuated their secondary sex characteristics, primarily the buttocks, and constructed those characteristics as both evidence of black women's supposed lasciviousness and symptomatic of racial degeneracy.

³² Gilman, Sander L. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 204-42.

³³ Rottenberg, Catherine. "Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* and the Question of the Emancipatory City." *Mosaic: an interdisciplinary journal for the study of literature*. 46.4 (2013): 59-74.

³⁴ This self-perpetuated violence is ironic because it happens in the racially and culturally diverse space of Harlem, but Emma Lou experiences many of Harlem's liberating possibilities as well—especially sexual possibilities—but she has difficulty moving beyond the psychological damage that has been inflicted upon her because of her dark skin.

³⁵ McDowell, Deborah. Introduction. *Quicksand and Passing*. Nella Larsen. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986. ix- xxxv.

³⁶ Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Politics of Black Female Sexuality." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6.2, 3 (1994): 126-45.

³⁷ Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17.2 (1992): 251-74.

³⁸ For discussions of how black female sexuality was depicted by female middle-class writers during the Harlem Renaissance, see Deborah McDowell's introduction to Nella Larsen's *Quicksand and Passing*, Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, and Gloria Hull's *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Woman Writers of the Harlem Renaissance*. For a discussion of how Victorian ideals influenced black, female, middle-class sexuality, see Evelyn Hammonds' article "Black (W)holes and the Politics of Black Female Sexuality," and Ann DuCille's article "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies."

CHAPTER FOUR

“What To Do about the Symptoms”: Richard Bruce Nugent’s Decadent
Interrogation of Medical Discourses of Homosexuality and Race

Paul Arbian, a would-be decadent artist and aesthete, and a central character in Wallace Thurman’s *roman à clef* of the Harlem Renaissance, *Infants of the Spring* (1932) was based on Thurman’s friend and one-time housemate, Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987). Paul cultivates an outrageous persona that Ray, the novel’s protagonist and Thurman’s fictional alter ego, describes in terms that link Paul’s excesses to anxiety about his race: “He [Paul] sits around helpless, possessed of great talent, doing nothing, wishing he were white, courting the bizarre, anxious to be exploited in the public prints as a notorious character. Being a Negro, he feels that his chances for excessive notoriety à la Wilde are slim” (Thurman *Infants* 59). For Thurman, Paul’s decadence, characterized as self-indulgent indolence and ambivalence about race, becomes emblematic of the failures of the Harlem Renaissance in the novel because it represents the wasted potential of many of the Renaissance’s participants. Although Thurman was gay himself, Ray goes on to describe Paul’s Wildean decadence as pathological: “Thus the exaggerated poses and extreme mannerisms. Since he can’t be white, he will be a most unusual Negro. It’s just a symptom of some deep set disease” (Thurman *Infants* 60). Nugent was acutely aware of late nineteenth-century medical and scientific discourses that pathologized both race and homosexuality, and he used the tropes of the *fin de siècle* Decadent movement to resist ideologies that pathologize gays, namely early sexology and degeneration theory. Elisa F. Glick claims that Wilde’s dandyism provided a performative mode of personal

expression for Nugent, and, to a lesser extent, Thurman, in a way that reveals the connection between race and sexuality: “the complexities and contradictions of dandyism as symbol and oppositional act make legible not simply the bifurcation of race and sexuality but rather their interrelation” (415).¹ This chapter will explore a more positive interpretation of Nugent’s exaggerated flamboyance so unflatteringly presented in Thurman’s portrait. By borrowing tropes from the Decadent movement, I argue, Nugent interrogated the Victorian-era sexological constructions of homosexuality to expand the possibilities for literary and artistic representations of gay men of color.

Decadence is an artistic and literary movement that began in France in the mid-nineteenth century and spread throughout continental Europe by the 1890s. As an aesthetic practice, decadence is characterized by a preoccupation with decay and morbidity, a rejection of vitality, an embrace of indolence, and a privileging of artifice over nature (Bernheimer 5).² Like Wallace Thurman, in his fictionalization of Nugent, critics usually associate Nugent’s interest in decadence with an Oscar Wilde-like “art for art’s sake” aestheticism, by which they usually mean dandyism. Thomas Wirth, for example, in his introduction to the 2002 edition of Nugent’s selected work, connects Nugent’s dandyism to his aesthetic practice: “[A]s a gay writer, Nugent began squarely in what might be characterized as the tradition of perfumed decadence” (Wirth “Introduction” *Gay Rebel* 41).³ Glick argues that the dandy “enables him [Nugent] to offer a critique of authenticity and primitivism, while simultaneously mobilizing a radical recombination of primitivist and decadent aesthetics that disrupts the commodity relation to African-American culture” (Glick 415). I extend Glick’s reading of Nugent’s interest in Decadence by arguing that Nugent’s resistance to “authenticity and primitivism”

entails an active celebration of Decadent tropes: artifice, a rejection of the “natural,” altered states of consciousness brought about by drug use, a privileging of sexual deviance, namely homosexuality, a lack of health and vitality, and a preoccupation with morbidity. As Thurman intimates in *Infants of the Spring*, decadence for Nugent represents a method by which to challenge the dominant culture’s construction of African Americans and gays as inherently ill by ironically adopting an oppositional stance that privileges illness.

The Decadent movement’s practitioners deliberately linked their work to disease and decay. Poet Arthur Symons, in “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” his manifesto of the Decadent movement first published in the November 1893 issue of *Harper’s Magazine*, claims that decadence “is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease” (Symons 859).⁴ This memorable phrase encapsulates the seemingly incompatible elements that decadent writers and artists sought to synthesize: modernity, beauty, and decay. For Symons, embracing a decadent aesthetic meant embracing the movement’s pathology: “[H]ealthy we cannot call it, and healthy it does not wish to be considered” (Symons 859). Symons goes on to position decadence as a response to late nineteenth-century culture:

[Decadence] is but another form of the *maladie fin de siecle*. For its very disease of form, this literature is certainly typical of a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct. It reflects all the moods, all the manners, of a sophisticated society; its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature. (Symons 859)

The disease of decadence, then, is a reflection of the disease of late nineteenth century bourgeois Western culture. If the Decadent movement can be accused of privileging languid self-absorption, it is only the same self-absorption that plagues the rest of Europe. For Symons, a culture that itself was artificial and excessive demanded an artistic aesthetic that reflected that culture's morbid excess. The decadent artist, in Symon's estimation, would agree with William Blake that "the road to excess leads to the palace of wisdom." The decadent figure's languidity reflects bourgeois culture's languidity. The true decadent recognizes that the artificial, morbid, and languid are "natural" in a culture that has rejected the natural.

Nugent's decadent modernism embodies this ethos. For Nugent, homosexuality was entirely natural, so rejecting what the normative codes of a culture that pathologized and criminalized same-sex sexual expression was entirely natural. White heteronormativity has been privileged as "natural," so when Nugent uses decadent tropes in his work, he chooses an aesthetic that problematizes the "natural" by privileging the artificial. Decadence for Nugent, then, is a way to resist discourses that construct the black and gay subject as inherently, naturally diseased.

Nugent's embrace of decadent tropes set him apart from other Harlem Renaissance figures. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman claimed that "decadent is no name for our movement. Coin another word" (Thurman, *Collected Writing* 113).⁵ As Matthew N. Hannah has argued, however, decadence gave Thurman and Nugent an idiom by which to express the "dynamically queer sexualities operative in Harlem" (Hannah 163).⁶ Decadence was, as I will demonstrate, part of a medical discourse that reflected nineteenth century anxieties about the future of civilization. To

many physicians and cultural critics, decadence signaled literal, cultural disease. Nugent had a firm grasp of the discourses that coded decadent subjects as diseased, and he employs decadent tropes to subvert the discourses that constructed gay and biracial people as diseased.

Degeneration Theory

The medical discourse that is seminal to Nugent's intellectual and artistic development is part of a larger EuroAmerican cultural dialogue about degeneration theory, a dialogue of which Nugent seems to have been aware.⁷ Degeneration is the now thoroughly discredited theory that complex organisms can degrade over time and become simpler sub-species. Based on a misunderstanding, and misapplication, of Darwinian evolutionary theory coupled with cultural anxiety about changing social mores and increasing poverty, degeneration theory posited that entire cultures can degrade over time due to the influence of "inferior" races and abject figure such as homosexuals. Although degeneration theory has its roots in early nineteenth-century scientific racism that constructed some races, particularly so-called primitive races, as genetically inferior to the northern European body, by the close of the century, degeneration theory was used to explain the perceived decline of the West.

Degeneration theory began to appear in mid-nineteenth century medical and criminological studies to explain pathological and criminal behavior in multiple generations of a family, and became more widespread as the century continued due to widespread misunderstanding of evolutionary theory.⁸ By the 1890s, degeneration theory became commonplace in cultural analysis as a model of the supposed decline of the British Empire specifically and European culture in general, aided by the German

publication of Max Nordau's *Entartung* (1892), translated as *Degeneration* (1895).⁹ *Degeneration* is a work of literary criticism, in which Nordau, a physician as well as a cultural critic, attacks the decadence of the *fin de siècle*, arguing that the rejection of traditional mores is evidence of cultural decline that can be traced to medical degeneration: "We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria" (Nordau 537). According to Nordau, degeneration is a cultural disease that is a result of modernity, specifically the growth of large cities, industrialization, and changing social roles. Daniel Pick points out that for Nordau, modernity is a fatiguing experience because "modern society was witnessing a terrible crisis born out of the growing division between the human body and social conditions" (Pick 24).¹⁰ While Nordau drew heavily from scientists such as Lombroso (to whom he dedicated *Degeneration*) and Darwin, Nordau was never taken seriously by scientists. Freud, for instance, was decidedly unimpressed with Nordau (Pick 25). Nordau's work, however, influenced artists and writers, especially those associated with the Decadent movement, who simultaneously mocked him and used his theories to develop tropes for characterizing the varieties of human experience that had been made possible by modernity.

This reaction by artists was provoked by Nordau's attacks on nearly every notable British and Continental European writer (as well as composers such as Richard Wagner) of the second half of the nineteenth century.¹¹ The degenerate subject, according to Nordau, is a deformed imitation of itself. He points as evidence to Decadent novels like Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), in which the

degenerate subject transforms into a monstrous version of itself. Literary critic Kelly Hurley, in *The Gothic Body*, calls the monstrously transformed body of Victorian gothic literature abhuman, and characterizes the abhuman body as one that is only vestigially human: “the abhuman subject is a not quite human subject” (Hurley 7).¹² According to Hurley, *fin de siècle* novelists working in the Gothic mode were influenced by scientific theories such as evolution, as well as such pseudo-scientific ideologies such as degeneration theory, and medical specialties like sexology. Sexology, in particular, sought to reinforce cultural norms by codifying behavior that did not adhere to the norms as abject. By bringing to light the variety of human sexual behavior, however, Victorian sexology, “which sought to fix the meaning of human identity, was capable of fracturing it beyond recognition” precisely because it revealed the diversity of human sexual behavior (Hurley 9).

According to Hurley, sexual contagion is a chief symptom of degeneration in the view of theorists like Nordau, one that in turns weakens an entire people: “this disease [degeneration] wrought moral effects by inducing in the human organism a morbid deviation from the original type whose offspring were congenitally prone....to sinful behaviours. Symptoms became increasingly confused with causes” (Hurley 71). Hurley claims that by the 1890s, degeneration theory, which was supposed to merely describe trends that were already occurring, came to be seen as the cause of further cultural degeneration, especially after Oscar Wilde’s criminal trials and conviction for gross indecency in 1895. As Wilde’s name became code for homosexual, his work became synonymous with the degenerated, urban homosexual and, by extension, moral and sexual contagion.

By openly linking his own aesthetic to the disgraced Wilde, Nugent reclaims the ethos of the Aesthetic movement and re-inscribes it to include a healthy, integrated sense of self free of late Victorian-era pathologizing ideology. Nugent exhibited an interest in medical and scientific knowledge from an early age, and his work reveals a general knowledge of degeneration theory and the discourses that pathologized homosexuality. Born to bohemian, well-read parents in Washington D.C., Nugent would later credit the books in his father's library for providing an intellectual foundation that would shape his personal and artistic development. As he relayed in an interview with Thomas Wirth:

My father had a very esoteric library. There was *everything* in his library, and I read everything. From the time I was five, I was reading everything [O]ne of those books . . . told you all of the cures for things . . . and about babies being born . . . and there were beautiful, wonderful pictures in it [that] told you all about diseases with wonderful names like 'syphilis' and 'gonorrhoea. . . .' (Introduction *Gay Rebel* 7-8)

The "wonderful names" of venereal diseases reflects both the young Nugent's naiveté and the adult Nugent's decadent, camp sensibility. Nugent was an intellectually curious child with access to a wide range of texts; as his comments to Wirth reveal, medical knowledge was, from an early age, one of his major interests. According to Wirth, the medical and scientific texts in Nugent's father's library would continue to influence Nugent for the rest of his life.¹³ This chapter will look specifically at how late nineteenth and early twentieth-century medical and scientific knowledge about homosexuality and race influenced Nugent's work across multiple genres.

Nugent's description of his youthful interest in medicine and science belies the connection that medical authorities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries made between morality and disease, and Nugent's career occurred during a period in which African Americans and gays were pathologized in multiple ways. Many physicians considered African Americans to be inherently susceptible to, or carriers of, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis, which in turn prevented public policies from being enacted that could have alleviated the ravages of these diseases. In addition, degeneration theory, which I discuss in more detail below, held that some peoples, including those of African descent, are intrinsically genetically inferior to people of northern European descent. Likewise, medical professionals constructed gays and lesbians as the aberrant products of a degenerate society.

Nugent's mother's family were the socially prominent Bruces of Washington D.C., and, through his maternal grandmother Bruce, Nugent met several people who would become important figures of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Alain Locke. Poet Angelina Weld Grimke was his high school English teacher, and from a young age Nugent was a frequent guest at the salons held by Georgia Douglas Johnson, another family friend.¹⁴ It was at one of these salons that he met Langston Hughes in the spring of 1925. Hughes and Nugent immediately became close friends (and would remain so for the rest of Hughes's life). When Hughes returned to Harlem later that summer, Nugent went with him. When Locke solicited from Nugent a contribution to *The New Negro* (1925), he submitted a drawing, since lost, of an "African girl standing in a hut" (Nugent qtd. in Wirth, Introduction 3). Locke elected not to use Nugent's drawing, and instead asked him to write a narrative based on the image. The resulting story, "Sahdji," was

included in *The New Negro*, and it became one of Nugent's first publications. Nugent, however, was incensed that Locke chose an illustration by Aaron Douglas to accompany "Sahdji": "[I] didn't draw again for a year. Because I couldn't draw, if Locke did that. . . . It was just very traumatic" (Nugent qtd. in Wirth, Introduction 3). Nugent's response is telling. Rather than try to build on the success of publishing a short story in an important anthology, Nugent's reaction was one of displeasure that his drawing was not used, rather than gratitude that his story was accepted. Nugent considered himself an artist rather than a writer, and he interpreted Locke's rejection of his drawing as a rejection of his aesthetic, which was strongly informed by the decadent tradition of the *fin de siècle* and his discovery of New York's gay subculture.

Nugent's poem "Shadow," which became his first publication, as either an artist or writer, in the October 1925 issue of *Opportunity*, illustrates his creative blending of decadent and New Negro tropes. Written on a piece of scrap paper that was mistaken for rubbish and discarded before being rescued from a wastebasket by Langston Hughes, "Shadow" would eventually be widely republished in African-American newspapers and anthologies, including Countee Cullen's *Caroling Dusk* (1927).¹⁵ "Shadow," as Nugent later explained in an interview with Thomas Wirth, "caused a bit of a sensation" because it was widely considered to be a comment on race (*Gay Rebel* 268). It is clear why "Shadow" was read solely as a race poem:

Silhouette

On the face of the moon

Am I.

A dark shadow in the light.

A silhouette am I
 On the face of the moon
 Lacking color
 Or vivid brightness
 But defined all the clearer
 Because
 I am dark,
 Black on the face of the moon.
 A shadow am I
 Growing in the light,
 Not understood as is the day,
 But more easily seen
 Because
 I am a shadow in the light. (*Gay Rebel* 269)

The poem's play between white and black, and its images of isolation, suggest racial alienation. A.B. Christa Schwarz, in her study of gay writers of the Harlem Renaissance, only writes about "Shadow" that "race is of central importance" in the poem (Schwarz 125).¹⁶ According to Christopher Vitale, the poem's form suggests a secrecy and isolation that can be linked to the speaker's subjectivity: "'Shadow' manage[s] to pass, to be invisible, to proceed unseen, to speak as little as possible, with its short clipped lines and sparse metaphorical condensations" (Vitale 157).¹⁷ Indeed, the poem's sparseness evokes the very invisibility and alienation to which the text gives voice. At the same time, it seems to be a positive, plaintive expression of racial pride consistent with the rhetoric

that Nugent's early mentor Alain Locke advocated.¹⁸ In "Shadow," however, Nugent does not emulate Locke's version of racial uplift; rather, he appropriates W.E.B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness to describe the alienation of being a gay black man in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Nugent certainly understood racial uplift ideology, and was capable of using the Du Boisian tropes of racial uplift and the veil to express his own subjectivity as a gay man of color. The poem's central image, for instance, the shadow, evokes the veil, a seminal trope of African American literature and culture, that Du Bois uses to great effect in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). In the book's famous opening line, Du Bois describes American racism as always present, yet occluded: "Between me and the world there is ever an unasked question" (Du Bois, *Souls* 7).¹⁹ The unasked question is, of course, "How does it feel to be a problem" (Du Bois, *Souls* 8). Du Bois's reflection on the unasked question is revealing:

[A]nd yet, being a problem is a strange experience,--peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. . . I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. (*Souls* 8)

The language Du Bois uses to describe race as a cultural construct—strange, peculiar—speak to the difficulty of putting into words experiences for which there was no existing theoretical language.²⁰ The difficulty in identifying the specifics of racism is underscored by the metaphor of the shadow, which Du Bois links to the lived experience of the black

subject's encounter with racism. After a white classmate rejects his gesture of friendship, the young Du Bois realizes the alienating effect of racism:

Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. (*Souls* 8)

Du Bois goes on to introduce the concept of double-consciousness, which he explicitly connects to the metaphor of the veil:

the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body. (*Souls* 9)

For Du Bois, the veil meant not only the dominant white culture's inability and unwillingness to accept African Americans as co-equals, but also African Americans' inability to see the reality of their own subjectivity other than that which was projected on them by the dominant (white) culture.

The term double consciousness was originally a medical term in the nineteenth century used to describe a condition also referred to as “alternating selves,” which is now called dissociative identity disorder (Dickson 303).²¹ Du Bois does not pathologize African Americans; he instead uses the terms as a descriptor for the alienating effect of racism. At the same time, double consciousness is a survival strategy, a “gift,” albeit a bittersweet one, that gives the African American subject a “second sight” into the true nature of American culture (Du Bois, *Souls* 9). As Mary E. Wood has noted, Du Bois avoids even the suggestion that African Americans are mentally ill because of the contemporary widespread belief among medical professionals and the general public in African/African American degeneracy (Wood 195).²² This was a necessary intellectual move for Du Bois to make because, according to Wood, “any suggestion that the injustice, violence, and racism experienced by African Americans after the failures of Reconstruction might lead to mental illness ran the risk of playing into stereotypes that blacks were prone to mental illness and better off under slavery” (Wood 195). Du Bois carefully avoids using pathologizing language that would undermine his purpose of racial uplift, yet by appropriating a medical term to describe life behind the veil, he essentially diagnoses the African American subject’s psychic conflict of being forced to view oneself from the perspective of the dominant culture, while simultaneously maintaining a sense of self.

Nugent’s poem, “Shadow,” seeks to capture the nuance of Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness. The poem’s speaker hints at the psychic wounds inherent in life behind the veil, “Lacking color or vivid brightness,” but also highlights the self-affirmation that comes with recognizing his subject position, “Growing in the light.”

Nugent, like Du Bois, avoids using pathologizing language to describe racial oppression. On a textual level, then, Nugent's poem seems to be a lyrical expression of Du Boisian double consciousness, hence, a "race poem."

As intriguing as the Du Boisian allusions of "Shadow" are, Nugent did not pursue the language of racial uplift in his future work, essentially consigning this experiment in New Negro literary expression back to the waste basket. Nugent's mature literary and artistic output would instead reflect his interest in exploring urban gay identity through a lens mainly influenced by the *fin de siècle* decadent movement. Although the poem seems clearly to be about racial alienation, for instance, Nugent himself claimed years later that "Shadow" "was about a different kind of loneliness. You see, I am a homosexual" (Nugent, *Gay Rebel* 268). Nugent's later coming out provides a way of understanding his work's treatment of race and sexuality. By metaphorizing his sexual identity as a "shadow" existence, Nugent's poetic speaker draws attention to his non-normative, queer subjectivity using pointedly Du Boisian language. Rather than privileging his queerness over his blackness, Nugent links his queerness and his blackness together. In his study of Nugent's use of cinematic language, David A. Gerstner argues that Nugent's concept of sexuality and race privileges fluid subjectivity that resists strict conformity to racial or sexual identity categories. Writing about "Shadow," Gerstner notes that "[N]ugent's declaration [that he is a homosexual], therefore, directs our sights toward his aesthetically shadowy landscape, where mixed races and sexualities are discovered through movement and light" (Gerstner 70).²³ The fluidity of movement and the indeterminacy of light and shadows represents Nugent's commitment to hybridity and his rejection of fixed, stable identity categories. "Shadow"

is not fully a “race poem,” nor is it solely a paean to same-sex sexual desire; rather, it is a mixture of both.

“Shadow” is also a Decadent poem that employs tropes of illness and decay. I noted earlier that shadows and silhouettes are tropes of the New Negro movement, but they are also tropes of the Decadent movement. For instance, shadows figure prominently in Decadent literature. As a stylized representation of the human form, the silhouette symbolized death and decay. Arthur Symons’s second book of poems was titled *Silhouettes*, and illustrator Aubrey Beardsley frequently used silhouettes in his work. Nugent, then, in a Decadent move, privileges the seemingly negative. The speaker is “Lacking color,” which suggests a sickly countenance.

Although Nugent privileges outsider status, he resists constructing the outsider position as fixed and stable, preferring indeterminacy instead. “Shadow” subtly plays with the concepts of light and dark to show these concepts’ inherent instability. A shadow can only exist if there is light bright enough to cast one. In “Shadow,” the poem’s speaker is not in the privileged position of being “in the light,” or the dominant culture. The privileged, “light” position in “Shadow,” though, is itself not really one of power because the “light” against which the speaker is a “shadow” comes from the moon, not the sun. The moon, which gives no light of its own but only reflects the light of the sun, is only visible at night, when the world is already in shadow. In “Shadow,” the source of light is dependent on the dark of night. Without the darkness, the moon would not be visible, and without the light from the moon’s reflection, the speaker’s shadow would not be visible.

In this way, Nugent interrogates the binaries of light and dark, and by extension, white and black, as well as straight and gay. In a binary opposition, one signifier in the

binary dominates the other, and the resulting power imbalance forms a “violent hierarchy” in Hogue’s terms, in which “one of the two terms governs the other” (Hogue 48).²⁴ Nugent points out the power imbalance between light and dark, the two objects of his binary opposition, but also suggests how the light/dark binary deconstructs itself by making the privileged item in the binary, the moon, closely related to the marginalized item in the pair, the shadow. By referring to himself as the shadow, which in Du Boisian terms is synonymous with the Veil, Nugent’s speaker suggests that healing the psychic wounds of double consciousness is possible by privileging one’s outsider status while recognizing the effects of oppressive power structures. Nugent uses the language of racial uplift to create an idiom to express proto-gay pride. Given this brief analysis of “Shadow,” it should be apparent why it attracted so much attention within the New Negro movement upon its initial publication. By subtly extending Du Boisian racial uplift rhetoric, however, Nugent claims the shadow as an empowering symbol of racial—and sexual—difference.

Nugent would also employ the language of Du Boisian double consciousness in his poem “Bastard Song,” written around 1930 but first published in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (2002). “Bastard Song” is dedicated to “H.F.”—most likely Hank Fisher, Nugent’s lover at the time he wrote the poem.²⁵ In “Bastard Song,” Nugent makes explicit the racial and sexual conflicts that he handles obliquely in “Shadow.” As Schwarz points out, “the title of ‘Bastard Song’ hints at the mixed racial background of the speaker, who addresses an ungendered ‘pale white’ person” (Schwarz 125). As he did in “Shadow,” Nugent interrogates racial and sexual binaries using night/day, black/white imagery in the opening stanzas:

Since I am neither truly one, nor really true the other,
 Can you not see that I must be the third—the first two’s brother?
 For it is true I am not black and just as true not white,
 But when the day gives sudden way, dusk stands ‘tween it and night.

(Nugent, *Gay Rebel* 89)

These first two lines of the opening stanza introduce the reader to the speaker’s conflict using the language of alienation and alternative subjectivity. When the speaker asks, “Can you not see that I must be the third—the first two’s brother?,” Schwarz maintains that he is referring to his “intermediary status” that could be read as a statement about either biracial, or gay, identity (Schwarz 125). The “third sex” (or “intermediate sex”) model was a late nineteenth and early twentieth century model of homosexuality, with which Nugent was almost certainly familiar, in which gay and lesbian identity was placed outside the male-female binary.²⁶

The poem’s racial theme becomes clearer in the second couplet of the opening stanza, and the speaker’s metaphorical self-identification with dusk clearly marks him as biracial. Dusk is an indeterminate, liminal time that is neither fully day nor night. By connecting his biracial speaker to dusk, Nugent rejects the idea that racial categories are stable. Considering that nineteenth century scientists believed there to be a link between miscegenation and degeneration, Nugent risks marking his poem’s speaker as a diseased, pathologized subject. Nugent avoids this by letting his speaker defend his indeterminate subject position:

And dusk is just as true a thing as either night or day
 And if the dusk smells faint of musk, turn not its scent away—

Night perfumes dusk's pallor—day etiolates the night:

My love for you is love for you though neither black nor white. (*Gay Rebel* 90)

In this second stanza, Nugent uses decadent language (“dusk smells faint of musk,” “Night perfumes dusk’s pallor”) to critique degeneration theory’s condemnation of homosexuality and race mixing. The decadent tropes of perfume and musk, which Max Nordau found morbid and evidence of disease, Nugent uses as a lover’s plea (“turn not its scent away”) with an ironic touch that undermines normative ideologies (“day etiolates the night”). The speaker asserts his biraciality (“dusk”), and draws a parallel between his mixed race identity and his desire for the same-sex lover to whom he speaks by declaring that his love, like his race, is “neither black nor white.” When the speaker claims that biracial subjectivity is as “true a thing as either night or day,” he rejects pathologizing discourses that constructed the mixed race subject as degenerated. In the final stanza, Nugent’s speaker confronts his lover about the latter’s apparent refusal to reject the normative discourses surrounding race and sexuality.

Yes, it's love I offer you and hope that you will keep.

This love you see is true, from me;--but not—it is to weep,

For you—pale white—cannot trust love from whom you've loved too long

And yet deride with untaught pride—my love is far too strong

So what thing can I offer you? What gift is there to give?

Not even dreams, or so it seems—for you refuse to live.

So this I offer now to you is weak with right and wrong—

Half dark, half light, half black, half white—a truly Bastard Song (*Gay Rebel* 89-90).

Scientific Constructions of Homosexuality

Nugent focuses on sexual difference in his writing and artwork, but he does so from a racialized subject position in which he explores the interstices of sexual identity and race. Nugent was aware of the ways in which medical and scientific discourses about race and sexuality normalize the oppression of African Americans and gays, and it is this awareness that I want to focus on in the remainder of this chapter.

Although legal and religious institutions were certainly instrumental in creating the homosexual as an abject being, the burgeoning medical establishment lent scientific credence to pathologizing discourses at a time when, due to evolutionary theory and eugenics, biological sciences were in the ascent. As Michel Foucault points out in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, homosexuality in the nineteenth century ceased to be thought of merely discrete acts one committed, and instead became an identity:

[the homosexual] emerged a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (43)²⁷

Homosexuality was constructed as a pathology within “a technology of health and medicine” (Foucault 44). By the end of the nineteenth century, physicians who performed sexological research codified heteronormative sexual practices as healthy, and virtually all other sexual practices became pathologized.

One text that would greatly influence Nugent was Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. First published in 1886 and later revised through twelve editions, Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* was among the first scientific texts devoted to sex. In a series of 127 case studies, Krafft-Ebing described practices such as sadism, masochism, and homosexuality (“sexual inversion”) using highly coded technical jargon in order to make the text inaccessible to lay readers. Krafft-Ebing intended for this text to serve as a diagnostic aid to medical professionals. Instead, due to the dearth of published information on sex, *Psychopathia Sexualis* became widely dispersed among the lay public, and a foundation for popular concepts of homosexuality as a disease. Krafft-Ebing pathologizes homosexuality by presenting it as equivalent to “sexual manias” such as lustmurder, necrophilia, pederasty, coprophilia, fetishism, bestiality, transvestism, transsexuality, and sadomasochism, as well as violent crimes like sexual assault, and mental illnesses like neurasthenia. Krafft-Ebing collapses any distinction between these widely varying practices, desires, and psychological conditions “into a space of related knowledge” (Seitler 84).²⁸ Krafft-Ebing’s purpose, however, was not to offer a criminal profile of those who engage in homosexual behavior; rather, according to Chauncey, the “medical model of homosexuality” he helped to create replaced the religious ideology that constructed homosexuality as a sin (Chauncey, “From Sexual Inversion” 114).²⁹

To the extent that Nugent's characters are conflicted about their homosexual desires, it is because they are told they are sick by the defenders of psychiatric models of sexuality. In his posthumously published novel *Gentleman Jigger* (2008), Nugent's fictional alter ego Stuartt reads *Psychopathia Sexualis* to find a language with which to construct a sexual sense of self. After his father's death, Stuartt, age thirteen, responsibly manages his family's household until he discovers Krafft-Ebing:

Stuartt secured a job as errand boy, and Palma [Stuartt's mother] was taken to the hospital with pneumonia and pleurisy. Out of his ten dollars a week and tips, Stuartt fed his brothers, paid the rent, and still had time to discover Krafft-Ebing and the regrettable similarity between the symptoms manifested in one-hundred-and-twenty-seven cases and himself before Palma decided to relieve the tension and bad nourishment by getting well and going to work again. (*Jigger* 10-11).³⁰

This passage speaks to the influence that the intellectual trends I have just outlined had on Nugent's aesthetic. As in his own life, coming of age for Nugent's fictional alter ego involves intellectual engagement with the nineteenth-century sexological discourse surrounding homosexuality. The campy understatement of the "regrettable similarity" between Stuartt's sexual desire and the diseased, pathologized subjects in *Psychopathia Sexualis* hints at the unapologetic queer sexuality that Stuartt will eventually adopt. In addition, homosexuality was part of the matrix of pathologies that, according to degeneration theory, were inherited. Therefore, Stuartt's father's death and his mother's illness suggest that Nugent is using the tropes of degeneration to code his character as

homosexual, not to pathologize Stuartt, but rather to reveal the limits of pathologizing discourses of sexuality.³¹

Stuartt's seeming industriousness could have presaged a degenerated decline into neurasthenia. Stuartt's initial reaction to recognizing his own sexual desire in his reading of Krafft-Ebing is uncertainty: "Stuartt did not know what to do about the symptoms" (*Gentleman Jigger* 11). Stuartt at first views his sexual desire as symptoms attending an illness, but he soon decides, like Oscar Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that "the only way to overcome a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde 19).³² In this passage, Wilde recodes dominant cultural attitudes as pathological, and constructs the degenerate subject's "monstrous" nature as a byproduct of a rigid, disempowering soul. Like many of Krafft-Ebing's nineteenth-century readers, Stuartt rejects the pathological models of homosexuality, and chooses a mode of existence heavily associated with decadence: "He would become an artist" (*Jigger* 11). Stuartt's decision to devote himself to art is based on a desire to act on his sexual desire and live an unconventional life: "All artists were strange, or at least they were expected to be" (*Jigger* 11). For Stuartt, then, an art-for-art's-sake existence becomes a way to live unconventionally while still seemingly conforming to the normative strictures imposed by the dominant culture; artists "were expected to be" unconventional. Rather than deny who he is, Stuartt adopts an outsider stance, and as the novel progresses, Stuartt remains untroubled by his early reading of Krafft-Ebing.

Although Stuartt experiences no guilt about his sexual identity, Palma, Stuartt's mother, believes Stuartt's newfound identity to be a "contagion" (*Jigger* 11). It is not clear from the text if Palma objects to Stuartt's sexual identity or his choice to become an artist. As cultural historian George Rousseau has shown, however, homosexuality was popularly referred to as a contagion in the nineteenth century. Homosexuality, according to Rousseau, was a disease that threatened the fabric of society because its supposed carriers had the power to infect others: "In the realms of sexual orientation the primary route for acquisition among the *not-yet-infected* was social contagion: the notion that when—what we call—gay and straight people interact the gay person is somehow an active aggressor, the straight person a passive victim" (Rousseau 47).³³ When Stuartt's mother perceives her son's sexual identity to be a contagion, then, Nugent employs language that recalls the nineteenth-century tropes used to pathologize and demonize gays and lesbians. Nugent's conflation of sexual "perversion," artistic temperament, and criminality is entirely consistent with Max Nordau's version of degeneration theory, which as I have already noted, greatly influenced Nugent.

"One can love": Decadence in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade"

"Smoke, Lilies and Jade" first appeared in the Wallace Thurman-edited single issue of *FIRE!!* in 1926. A collaborative effort "devoted to the younger Negro artists," according to the magazine's sole issue's cover announced, *FIRE!!* was intended to cause controversy. To that end, Thurman and Nugent decided to include a piece with a gay theme; they flipped a coin to determine who would write it, and Nugent won the toss. He published "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" under the name Richard Bruce, eliminating his last name to avoid drawing attention to his mother's family.³⁴ While other texts in *FIRE!!*

explored controversial topics, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” was intended all along as the piece that would elicit the strongest reaction and get it “banned in Boston” (Smith 214).³⁵ *FIRE!!* was not banned anywhere, and, while the responses were mixed, African American critics were generally sympathetic to the magazine’s goal of providing a creative outlet for young African American artists, however much they may have disapproved of Nugent’s contribution.³⁶

For Nugent’s Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, the decadence of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” was decidedly queer. Alain Locke, in his review of *FIRE!!*, criticized “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” for “effete echoes of its contemporary decadence,” and suggests that Walt Whitman “would have been a better point of support than a left-wing pivoting on Wilde and Beardsley” (Locke 563).³⁷ Langston Hughes, in the first volume of his autobiography *The Big Sea*, described “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” as a “green and purple story . . . in the Oscar Wilde tradition” (Hughes 237).³⁸ Interestingly, neither Hughes nor Locke openly state that Nugent’s theme is homosexuality, yet both clearly seek to convey as much to readers. When Locke suggested that Whitman’s “manly love” is a healthier alternative than Wildean decadence, he “rejects flamboyant homoeroticism and Victorian sentimentalism,” and asks instead for a decidedly rugged, American gay identity (Pochmara 105).³⁹ Tellingly, neither Locke nor Hughes criticize Nugent for writing gay-themed fiction. Poet Countee Cullen (a *Fire!!* contributor), for instance, acknowledges the journal’s editors’ goals in his regular *Opportunity* column, “The Dark Tower”: “There seems to have been a wish to shock in this first issue, and though shock-proof ourselves, we imagine that the wish will be well realized among the readers of *Fire*” (Cullen 25).⁴⁰ Cullen goes on to note about Nugent’s story that “ample extenuation

for what some may call a reprehensible story can be found in the beautifully worded, *Smoke, Lilies, and Jade*, by Richard Bruce” (25). Cullen offers a mild defense of Nugent’s story by claiming that “some may call” it “reprehensible.” Indeed, as I noted earlier, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” was supposed to get *Fire!!* banned. Cullen’s review speaks to the decadent tension Nugent creates in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade”; the text deals with the morbid, “reprehensible” subject matter of homosexual desire using a lyrical style that occludes the story’s decadent markers, especially the markers that link decadence and homosexuality to disease.

Although there is no question that Nugent was strongly influenced by the Decadent artists and writers of the *fin de siècle*, exactly how that movement informs his work remains critically underexplored.⁴¹ For instance, transformation as a trope pervades Nugent’s work, but while *fin de siècle* writers still construct transformation in monstrous terms, Nugent adapts the trope of transformation to show his protagonists’ growing self-acceptance of a queer identity. While Decadent writers depicted the degenerated subject’s transformation as monstrous (Dorian Gray, Dr. Jekyll), Nugent emphasizes transformation’s positive potential by counter-intuitively adopting as one of the central tropes of his work one of the major symptoms of degeneration: neurasthenia.

Neurasthenia was a poorly defined medical condition and a fairly common diagnosis from the late nineteenth century through the early decades of the twentieth century. According to American neurologist George M. Beard, who first described it in 1869, neurasthenia, or nervous exhaustion, constituted “a distinct morbid condition” characterized by “want of strength in the nerve,” which leads to a variety of symptoms: “dyspepsia, headaches, paralysis, insomnia, anaesthesia, neuralgia, rheumatic gout,

spermatorrhea in the male and menstrual irregularities in the female,” that manifest as “general malaise and weakness” (218). Beard believed neurasthenia to be “caused by a combination of hereditary factors and a variety of circumstantial pressures, such as bereavement, business and family worries, sexual excesses, and drug abuse” (Jackson 25). Beard linked neurasthenia to “civilized, intellectual communities” and claimed its existence indicated the “progress and refinement” of the modern age (Jackson 217). Beard linked neurasthenia specifically to the United States and the growth of northeastern American cities, and even referred to it as the “American Disease.” Neurasthenia, then, is a psychological condition (“weak nerves”) that physically manifests differently based on gender and can be caused by a wide range of personal or professional stressors. Beard alternately linked neurasthenia with the supposed languid nature of the artistic temperament and the ambitious nature of capitalistic pursuit of wealth (Jackson 219). Neurasthenia was closely associated with degeneration. Nordau, for instance, identified neurasthenia, or “nervous exhaustion,” as a symptom of degeneration. Beard’s own language suggests that he in turn was influenced by degeneration theory; in the medical literature of the late nineteenth century, the physical changes of the neurasthenic subject evoke the same changes the degenerated subject undergoes (Jackson 46). Neurasthenia, then, can be understood as a symptom of degeneration but also as a metonym of degeneration theory.

Neurasthenic discourse is located within a network of anxieties about industrial capitalism, urbanization, race, and *fin de siècle* cultural anxieties about Western civilization’s supposed decay. Medical professionals such as Beard generally assumed African Americans were immune to neurasthenia since the condition was linked with

exhaustion from capitalist pursuit and artistic feeling, and the era's racism constructed people of color as unburdened with either capitalist pursuit or artistic feeling. Brad Campbell has argued that the medical discourse surrounding neurasthenia was, in fact, instrumental in constructing "American" identity as white, male, and middle-class: Nugent engages with and subverts the discourse surrounding neurasthenia by broadening its application to include the biracial subject. In addition, Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* is replete with references to degeneration theory and neurasthenia, and its construction of homosexuality as a pathology that can be evidenced by the presence of neurasthenia place it within the discourse of degeneration (Pick 8; Beachy 818). Nugent, then, as a close reader of Krafft-Ebing's work, would have been familiar with degeneration theory.

In his short story "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Nugent examines the intersection of discourses about same-sex desire, neurasthenia, and race. In Nugent's text, the biracial, bisexual subject represents possibility for overcoming nervous exhaustion, and, by extension, pathologizing constructs of race and same-sex desire. Nugent does this by undermining conventional readers' expectations on multiple fronts from the subject matter to style.

"Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is written in a stream-of-consciousness style punctuated only with ellipses rather than standard end punctuation. The ellipses tie the text's elements together, and serve as signposts that the protagonist Alex's thoughts are shifting focus. Much of the criticism about "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" focuses on the story's unconventional use of ellipses, which is a stylistic quirk Nugent employs in much of his 1920s era prose. Joseph Allan Boone reads the ellipses as "Freudian self-censorship"

(224).⁴² Michael L. Cobb takes issue with Boone's analysis, claiming that "very little is left unsaid, very little repressed" (Cobb 334).⁴³ Cobb further maintains that ellipses constitute literary "roughness": "the ellipses indicate the opposite of [Alain] Locke's smooth racial veneer, and offer up, instead, the choppy incompleteness of sentence fragments strewn together by a thematic or interracial queerness" (Cobb 345). Cobb reads the ellipses as "unrestrained queer expression, of the dramatic entrance of a Bohemian and culturally inappropriate sexuality that risks the coherency of either Harlem or a solid sentence" (Cobb 345). Seth Silberman goes further, arguing that "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is an outright attack on the goals of the Renaissance itself," and that the ellipses represent a disruption of normative expectations by confronting Du Boisian bourgeois ethos with modernist experimentation (Silberman 258).⁴⁴ Despite their disparate views, these critics agree that Nugent's formal experimentation is consistent with the text's larger goal of undermining the bourgeois racial uplift ideology of the New Negro movement.

In "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Nugent reveals how the intellectual trends of degeneration theory, sexological pathologization of same-sex desire, and neurasthenia intersect. He extends the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance goal of de-pathologizing the black body by showing a young man of color's transformation from degenerate neurasthenic to a more self-aware, self-accepting, sexually hybrid subjectivity. Nugent's radicalism here is that he presents a biracial subject as mentally ill, but it is a mental illness that was presumed to only affect whites. If Nugent had asserted in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" that African Americans can be as mentally ill as whites, this story would be radical enough, but Nugent moves beyond simply presenting Alex as neurasthenic by

offering a cure, a panacea to neurasthenia. Nugent diagnoses African American neurasthenia and cures it.

“Smoke, Lilies and Jade” opens with its protagonist Alex in a state of languid contemplation: “*He wanted to do something . . . to write or draw . . . or something . . . but it was so comfortable just to lie there on the bed . . . his shoes off . . . and think . . . think of everything . . . short disconnected thoughts . . . to wonder . . . to remember . . . to think and smoke . . . why wasn’t he worried that he had no money . . .*” (“Smoke, Lilies and Jade” *Gay Rebel* 75 emphasis original).⁴⁵ Elisa Glick reads Alex as a Decadent dandy who “exemplif[ies] the black dandy’s refusal to be a commodity to be bought and sold in the form of a fetishized black body or in the form of wage labor” (Glick 420). Glick claims that “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” presents the black dandy as a critique of normative African American masculinity within the context of a capitalist culture. While Nugent does use the dandy to undermine gender expectations about male industriousness, he does so using the *fin de siècle* post-Wilde interpretation of the dandy as homosexual, and therefore diseased.

Nugent’s protagonist exhibits classic signs of neurasthenia. He is fatigued, unable to take meaningful action, unable to form sustained thoughts, and, while he realizes he should be concerned about his dire financial straits, he can instead only wonder why he is not worried about being impoverished. The italics of the opening line evoke the urgency of Alex’s desire to take action, even though the vagueness of the word “something” underscores his lack of direction. Like Stuartt in *Gentleman Jigger*, Alex wants to devote himself to art, but is too psychologically paralyzed to write or draw. Nugent’s fractured sentences echo Alex’s fractured psyche. In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing links

neurasthenia and artistic sentiment with homosexuality, to the extent that in dozens of the case histories he presents, the patient is both neurasthenic and homosexual.⁴⁶ Early in the text, Nugent, no doubt based on his understanding of Krafft-Ebing, constructs the homosexual as neurasthenic. According to Max Nordau, the degenerated, neurasthenic subject is so obsessed with the minutiae of his or her own thoughts that she is uninvolved with the world (37-39).⁴⁷ Alex's tendency to perceive his life in aesthetic terms connects him to the "art-for-art's-sake" mentality of the fin de siècle that Nordau constructs as evidence of Western decay.

Alex turns his poverty and unwillingness to engage with the world into an aesthetic performance, which marks him as a Decadent aesthete. For example: Alex's indolence created a dire financial situation: "he *had* had five cents . . . but he had been hungry . . . he was hungry and still . . . all he wanted to do was . . . lay there comfortably smoking . . . think . . . wishing he were writing . . ." (*Gay Rebel* 75). Elisa Glick, in her examination of how Nugent and Wallace Thurman turned the minstrel figure of the black dandy into a sophisticated commentary on modernity, claims that "even hunger does not drive the true dandy to wage labor, since his aestheticization of reality allows him seemingly to transcend such mundane concerns" (422). Despite his worsening finances, Alex is unable or unwilling to work because, like Stuartt in *Gentleman Jigger* and Nugent himself, Alex is an artist. Alex connects his unemployment with his artistic temperament:

he wondered why he couldn't find work...a job...when he had first come to New York he had...and he had only been fourteen then...was it because he was nineteen now that he felt so idle...and contented...or because he was an artist...but was he an artist...was one an artist until one became

known...of course he was an artist... (*Gay Rebel* 75)

Alex's insistence that he is an artist, even though he does not seem to actually produce art, allows him to romanticize his poverty and the psychologically fraught, probably neurasthenic mindset that has produced his abject social and economic position.

Nugent takes a risk by creating an African American protagonist who is not industrious or hard working because of the blackface minstrel tradition that constructed men of color as lazy. In fact, the effete, black dandy who affected intellectual sophistication was a long-running trope of the minstrel stage.⁴⁸ Alex is not a minstrel stereotype; rather, his neurasthenia and his idleness suggest he is a degenerated subject.

Throughout the story, Alex's intellectual associations are a blend of European Decadent writers and medical authorities. Alex is "content to lay and smoke and meet friends at night . . . to argue and read Wilde . . . Freud . . . [Arthur] Schnitzler" (*Gay Rebel* 77). In addition, Alex's inability to focus and his extreme self-absorption, both of which were qualities associated with degeneration, also code him as decadent (Goldfarb 369).⁴⁹ Alex's decadence is further underscored by his tendency to transform every moment into a highly aestheticized, artistic performance. For instance, Alex smokes cigarettes in "an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green," (*Gay Rebel* 76, 77). In fact, the "blue smoke from an ivory holder" that Alex constantly takes mental note of helps tie the disparate elements together (*Gay Rebel* 77). According to Michael L. Cobb, "the phrase, 'blue smoke from an ivory holder' tends to be a metaphor for Alex's aesthetic desires, iterating the joy he has having thoughts and expressing them through the imaginative smoke of a decadent literary tradition" (346). Alex seems to live for the physical pleasure of smoking, a flamboyant aestheticizing of life that further connects

him to the Decadent movement. By coding Alex as Decadent, Nugent signals to his readers that Alex is homosexual at a time when Oscar Wilde's name was still code for homosexual. Rather than being influenced by the rhetoric of racial uplift that Nugent's contemporary Talented Tenth readers might have expected of a protagonist with his intellect, Alex's cultural touchstones mark him as a pathologized subject because of decadence's association with disease and cultural decay. Decadence in turn functions as code for homosexuality, which was, in the 1920s and for several decades thereafter, considered a disease.

As in *Gentleman Jigger*, the death of the protagonist's father becomes the inciting event for emotional and sexual transformation. Alex' disconnected thoughts soon drift toward memories of his father's death:

when they had taken his father from the vault three weeks later...he had grown beautiful...his nose had become perfect and clear...his hair had turned jet black and glossy and silky...and his skin was a transparent green...like the sea only not so deep...and where it was drawn over the cheek bones a pale beautiful red appeared...like a blush...why hadn't his father looked like that always...but no...to have sung would have broken the wondrous repose of his lips and maybe that was his beauty...maybe it was wrong to think thoughts like these...but they were nice and pleasant and comfortable... (*Gay Rebel* 77)

In his psychoanalytical reading of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," Joseph Allan Boone argues that the death of Alex's father represents a reversal of the classic Oedipal narrative and claims that "this symbolic and psychological killing off of the father free[s] both Alex's

psyche and the narrative to proceed along nonoedipal erotic trajectories” (225).

According to Boone, Alex’s identification, rather than competition, with his dead father is an early indication of his rejection of heteronormative sexuality (226). Although Boone declines to further explore Alex’s response to his father’s death, and no other critic who has written about “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” has discussed it, Alex’s thoughts about his father’s death warrant discussion because Nugent uses Alex’s father’s death to further code Alex as a Decadent aesthete.

Alex’s reaction to his father’s decomposing body has erotic elements. Death has made his father “beautiful,” for example. The image of green skin highlighting red cheekbones is grotesque, even monstrous, yet to Alex it seems that his father’s corpse lies in “wondrous repose,” a description that conflates the sacred with the profane. Alex’s attitude is one of awe, to the point that he is tempted to literally sing the praises of his dead father’s beauty. Alex considers, but rejects, the possibility that these thoughts are immoral: “maybe it was wrong to think thoughts like these . . . but they were nice and pleasant and comfortable. . .” (*Gay Rebel* 77). That Alex takes comfort in the memory of his father’s decomposing body codes Alex as a *fin de siècle* aesthete because he constructs his father’s dead body as spectacle.⁵⁰ Nugent similarly employs morbid, gothic imagery to foreground Alex’s rejection of heteronormativity. *Fin de siècle* figures like Wilde and Beardsley appropriated Nordau’s analysis of degenerate Western art, and deliberately highlighted the gothic and the morbid, to represent non-normative subjectivity. Alex’s sensuous, decadent response to his father’s corpse is underscored once he mentally returns to his Harlem room and his thoughts turn to “smoking a cigarette through an ivory holder inlaid with red jade and green . . .” (*Gay Rebel* 77).

Alex's morbid preoccupation with death, and his aestheticizing of lived reality, codes him as decadent.

If "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" ended at this point, it would merely be a character sketch of a pathological, decadent aesthete. Rather than pathologize his protagonist, however, Nugent uses the discourse of Victorian sexology to reveal the inadequacy of constructs of homosexual desire. Nugent's protagonist begins to accept his own identity by engaging directly with gay Harlem when he leaves his Harlem room to take a nighttime walk. Like the decadent nineteenth-century *flâneur*, Alex constructs the experience of walking in the city as an aesthetic exercise: "the street was long and narrow . . . so long and narrow . . . and blue . . . in the distance it reached the stars . . . and if he walked long enough . . . far enough . . . he could reach the stars too . . . the narrow blue was empty . . . quiet . . . Alex walked music" (*Gay Rebel* 81). Alex imagine the darkness of night in clearly decadent terms. He had earlier likened the "dusky blue" of the evening to being "hung like a curtain in an immense arched doorway . . . fastened with silver tacks" (*Gay Rebel* 78). The text's stream-of-consciousness technique, with its intersecting associations, links Alex's internal world with the geography of the modern urban center. As Boone points out, "the text of Alex's mental world resembles a vast thoroughfare, a space crossed by myriad, conflicting impressions, sensations, and desires. And to the extent that Alex's mental world forms a crossroads, it evokes both the story's primary setting (the streets) and its primary action (walking)" (224).

The same-sex connections in Harlem were not confined to speakeasies, drag balls, and buffet flats, but were part of the street life of early twentieth-century New York.⁵¹ When Alex enters the street, he awakens to the modern, queer possibilities of 1920s

Harlem. On the walk, Alex meets a white man, Adrian, for whom he instantly feels an erotic connection: “Alex liked the sound of the approaching man’s footsteps . . . he walked music also . . . he knew the beauty of the narrow blue . . . Alex knew that by the way their echoes mingled . . .” (*Gay Rebel* 81). Adrian asks Alex for a match, and soon after “they walked in silence . . . the castanets of their heels clicking accompaniment” back to Alex’s apartment (*Gay Rebel* 81). Alex constructs his relationship with Adrian in aesthetic, decadent terms, evidenced not only by his impression of their meeting but also by the fact that he soon rechristens Adrian as Beauty.

Alex’s response to Beauty’s sleeping body, after they go to bed together, is to perceive him in aesthetic terms, as if he were a work of art: “his body was all symmetry and music . . . dancer’s legs . . . the contours pleased him . . . his eyes wandered . . . on past the muscular hocks to the firm white thighs . . . the rounded buttocks . . . then the lithe narrow waist” (*Gay Rebel* 82). Unlike his earlier morbid preoccupation with his father’s dead body, Alex’s appreciation of Beauty is positive, life affirming, and normative. According to Matthew Hannah, Nugent “reconfigured hetero-normative literary tropes into explorations of queer, interracial desire; moreover, this reconceptualization questions the boundaries and possibilities of art” (175). Nugent’s goal is not racial uplift, however: “rather than relying on art to idealize normative sexuality’s role in reproducing the race, Nugent celebrated the pleasures of same-sex desire” (Hannah 176). To extend this point, the celebration of interracial same-sex desire is an important element of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade.” Harlem’s gay subculture was integrated to a larger extent than was Greenwich Village’s, which made Harlem subject to increased pressure from a homophobic and racist dominant culture that stigmatized

interracial relationships as much as homosexuality. As Kevin Mumford has observed, by the early twentieth century, sexologists “understood black/white homosexual relations through reference to the ideology of miscegenation” (*Interzones* 76).⁵² By depicting an interracial gay relationship, Nugent critiques the racist and homophobic ideologies that pathologize both the biracial and queer subject.

Nugent ultimately synthesizes the sexually liberatory possibilities of the twentieth-century city with nineteenth-century decadence. Alex remains an aesthete even after he meets Beauty. In the final moments of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” Alex’s thoughts alternate between a woman named Melva, Beauty, and “blue smoke from an ivory holder” (*Gay Rebel* 87). Alex ultimately decides that “one *can* love . . .” (*Gay Rebel* 87). Nugent and the creators of FIRE!! may have been naïve to think that the decadent tropes that shocked the nineteenth-century French and English bourgeoisie would have the same effect on 1920s Harlemites, so in that sense it failed.⁵³ “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” succeeds, however, as a document of Harlem’s interracial gay subculture. In addition, the text reveals Nugent’s knowledge of the limitations that the pathologizing discourses surrounding race and sexuality could exert on individuals.

Nugent’s Post-Harlem Renaissance Fiction: “Lunatique”

Nugent’s lyrical short story “Lunatique,” which remained unpublished until it appeared in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, likewise depicts a queer protagonist who, during the first part of the story, rejects the heteronormative discourse that pathologizes same-sex desire.⁵⁴ Lunatique is the Old French word for lunatic, and derives from the Latin word *lūnāticus* for moonstruck, which is the belief that the moon is responsible for people’s abnormal psychological states, particularly insanity. Nugent’s use of an Old

French word hints at the cultural difference that the story explores. As a premodern psychological term for a nonnormative mental state, the title “Lunatique” functions as a subtle critique of the complicated taxonomies and pathologizing discourses of late nineteenth century degeneration theorists and sexologists. As in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” a young man whose sexuality does not conform to normative patterns eventually finds a measure of acceptance. While “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” shows the gay, male, black urban subject finding self-acceptance, “Lunatique” shows the gay male subject finding social acceptance through an emotionally intimate same-sex relationship.

“Lunatique” functions as an extension of the themes Nugent first explored in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” and relies on many of the same tropes as that story, such as color symbolism, morbid imagery, and an emphasis on the liberatory possibilities of night. Most importantly, Nugent extends his modernist exploration of same-sex sexual desire, although he dispenses with the elliptical, stream-of-consciousness style of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” in favor of a somewhat more conventional narrative technique. In his review of *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, Charles I. Nero notes that “Lunatique” lacks the polish of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” but still “fascinates as a superb example of pre-gay liberation writing” (676).⁵⁵ Other than Nero’s brief comment, “Lunatique” has received no critical attention, which can be explained only in part because of its recent publication. As Nero suggests, “Lunatique” possesses little of the Renaissance’s panache and instead seems to comment on the increased homophobia of the 1930s and 1940s, a period that saw the dissolution of gay subcultures that had thrived in cities like New York from the late nineteenth century until the early 1930s.⁵⁶

As in “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” Nugent engages with tropes of homosexual pathology in “Lunatique” in order to undermine them. The protagonist’s narrative arc moves from degeneration to regeneration just as Alex’s does in “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade.” In this later text, Nugent again answers the question his fictionalized alter ego in *Gentleman Jigger* asked: “what to do about the symptoms?,” and, again, Nugent’s answer to this question entails falling in love with a man who represents the essence of male beauty. Finally, although Nugent again employs the tropes of decadence and degeneration in his depiction of the gay male subject; in “Lunatique,” he undermines pathologizing constructs of homosexuality even more clearly than he did in “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade.”

The story’s protagonist, Angel, is a youth who the narrator describes in the text’s opening paragraph as a “strange boy” and a “delicately built lad” (*Gay Rebel* 248). Angel is further described as having “slim hips [that] perennially smiled mysteriously to unheard excitements” and his “slim legs and waist had acquired an androgynous grace” (248). Nugent codes Angel as feminine, which puts his body at odds with the heteronormative culture in which he lives.⁵⁷ Angel’s community responds to him with pity because they equate his androgynous appearance with disability: “older people in the town all treated him in that kindly manner reserved for harmless dreamers and mentally retarded persons” (*Gay Rebel* 248). Nugent demonstrates here that the pathologization of the gay male body occurs in conjunction with normalizing discourses surrounding the disabled body or mind as well as gender expectations. Angel’s community considers him mentally disabled not because he is cognitively impaired, but because his body does not physically conform to expectations about how a young man’s body should look or

perform. Angel's failure to perform in normatively masculine ways becomes central to the story's conflict.

The inciting event of "Lunatique" is an erotic dream that Angel has at the age of fourteen. The dream sequence, which Wirth claims Nugent wrote in the 1920s, several decades before the rest of the story, reflects Nugent's interest in Sigmund Freud's work on dream analysis.⁵⁸ Angel's dream represents the beginning of his sexual awakening, and the coded language with which Nugent describes Angel's homoerotic desire is consistent with Freud. According to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), "[D]reams employ this symbolism to give a disguised representation to their latent thoughts" (Freud 240).⁵⁹ In the dream, Angel is in a barn "in the corner of which were four men, backs toward him. Four beautifully modeled men—headless. Headless and beautiful. One was red and one was yellow and one was black and one was white, and each body glistened like lacquer" (*Gay Rebel* 248). That the men are headless suggests that they represent a non-rational aspect of Angel's psyche, and the range of colors with which they are depicted suggests that they represent a part of Angel's psyche, the discovery of which will bring him a sense of wholeness and completion. To that end, the men are coded in decadent terms. As I mentioned earlier, red, yellow, and black are associated with the Decadent movement. In addition, the men's headlessness and lacquer finish highlights their artificiality. As the four headless men search for him, Angel hides behind a pile of straw, only to be discovered when one of the men steps on him:

[I]mmediately four pairs of hands grasped him. Tossed him from one to the other. Beat him. Grasped him by the heels and rammed him head foremost into the floor, and his head rolled off and over into a corner,

where it was stopped by a pitchfork. (“Lunatique” *Gay Rebel* 249)

This dream is disturbing, and its violence is underscored by the directness with which Nugent narrates Angel’s symbolic beheading. According to Freud, being beheaded in a dream usually represents castration anxiety (244). According to Freud, “It is quite unmistakable that all weapons and tools are used as symbols for the male organ,” the pitchfork is almost certainly a phallic symbol (244). Castration anxiety, according to Freud, is the child’s fear of being literally and figuratively emasculated by the father in retaliation for the child’s sexual desire for the mother. As Sander L. Gilman notes, castration anxiety “is about losing the penis and being made into something different and less whole” (*Freud, Race, and Gender* 77).⁶⁰ In “Lunatique,” that “something different” is Angel’s homoerotic desire, and the loss of Angel’s dream head symbolizes his fear of losing his penis, which in turn symbolizes his fear of losing his masculinity. Eventually, the four headless dream-men find Angel:

Black hands and yellow, red hands and white—they grasped him. Flung him down into a far corner and followed him. And his body was much misused . . . Then he exploded and floated slowly up, like gas, around the four, held in by the four walls. . . Faster, faster . . . many colors, gyrating colors . . . faster and faster, and he expanded more and floated higher . . . up like gas . . . and he could *feel* himself expand. He would pervade the *whole* barn, keeping a level just above the necks of the de-headed men. . . Pleasure, shock, tingle . . . and he withdrew. (*Gay Rebel* 250)

The sexual connotations of the dream are unmistakable, but the eroticism is fraught with anxiety. Angel’s apparent castration anxiety, evidenced by the dream’s headless men and

his own beheading, coupled with the phallic symbolism of the pitchfork (with its attendant associations with the Devil), speak to the cultural pressure that Angel is under to view his desire as morally wrong. In addition, the sensation of expansion, of “pervad[ing] the whole barn,” that Angel experiences in the dream suggests that he perceives his sexual desire to be outsized and impossible to satisfactorily fulfill. Finally, as in “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” where the sight of the father’s dead body served as a young boy’s erotic touchstone, in “Lunatique,” the spectacle of death again informs the queer protagonist’s sexual development. Unlike “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade,” in which the protagonist clearly rejects bourgeois normativity by adopting a decadent persona, the castration anxiety evident in Angel’s dream suggests that he is experiencing anxiety about the possibility of being ostracized; his symbolic death in his dream represents his fear of social rejection.

As a strategy for dealing with the implications of his dream, Angel withdraws further into his fantasy world by refusing to speak. Since he is unable to actively resist the medical and cultural pressures to behave heteronormatively, the memory of his erotic dream becomes a safe space:

Angel lived in a sensuous and uncharted world, alone but not lonesome or unhappy. He no longer played with the other children. Day by day he lapsed deeper and deeper into the softly spoken Italian old-country idioms and adages of his mother. And into the remembered gentle memories of the equally softly-spoken Spanish aphorisms of his father. The unsaid sound of them all rang in his ears like a far-away melody. (*Gay Rebel* 251)

Angel's separation from the objective reality of his New Jersey adolescence is underscored by his longing for the "far-away melody" of the "old-country idioms" of his Italian mother and Spanish father. Angel's retreat from the world is reminiscent of Alex's similar reclusiveness in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade." Like a decadent aesthete, Angel leads a solitary existence marked by sensuousness and a rejection of bourgeois normativity. Angel, however, is not a decadent aesthete because his persona is not an artistic affectation; rather, Angel's dream occasions a crisis that causes him to withdraw from the world. Nugent repeatedly emphasizes Angel's social isolation: "he talked to *himself* and listened to the unhearable music" (251), "Angel walked on magic" (252), "Angel lived completely alone in his vague, crowded thoughts of nothing" (252). For the sexologists with whom Nugent was familiar, such as Krafft-Ebing, muteness was a marker of any number of pathologies related to degeneration, from homosexuality to neurasthenia to insanity.⁶¹ While Nugent seems to pathologize Angel for much of "Lunatique," Angel's refusal to speak emblemizes his rejection of the patriarchal imperative to use language to dominate. In addition, Angel's strategy of muteness protects him from the social, legal, and medical pressures to perform masculinity even though his refusal to do so risks pathologizing him.

Angel's self-imposed muteness and disconnection from heteronormative masculinity intriguingly makes him an object of erotic fascination for the other boys in his community. Angel's male peers speculate about his sexuality: "no girl would want to try . . . he was too pretty . . . he probably just masturbated. Perhaps that was the way he was . . . they say too much of it will make you crazy" (252). Angel's peers understand him in pathological terms, evidenced by their assumption that he has been driven insane

due to excessive masturbation. Furthermore, Angel's male peers understand that his body codes him as feminine ("he was too pretty"), which means that he is not in sexual competition with them ("no girl would want to try").

Angel's silence, then, while a defense mechanism against homophobic violence, is also a product of patriarchal discipline. As Barbara Johnson argues in *The Feminist Difference*, women's silence in canonical literary texts such as John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is simultaneously idealized and eroticized, while also being strictly enforced. "Muteness," Johnson writes, becomes a "repository of aesthetic value" because women's silence reinforces patriarchal power (Johnson 131).⁶² Similarly, Anna Clark, in "Twilight Moments," identifies the silence imposed on women and men who do not adhere to normative sexual identities as furthering the aims of patriarchy (Clark 151).⁶³ The boys who speculate about Angel's sexuality seem to understand that silence is a feminine marker because they also suggest that "maybe he was a girl" ("Lunatique" *Gay Rebel* 252). That Angel codes as feminine leads the boys to speculate about his sexuality: "Maybe he was a *pato* like they had met down at the ferry terminal, who had been in the toilet looking at everybody when they took a leak, and whom they had chased after they had used him" (*Gay Rebel* 252). The violence with which the four boys treated a gay man echoes Angel's dream, and their homophobia reveals why Angel would choose to remain silent and retreat into a fantasy world.

In addition to his muteness, Angel, like the subjects of Nugent's early-career poetry, is fascinated with the moon. Angel leaves his mother's house each night to gaze at the moon, which he imagines to be his friend and lover. One night, convinced that the moon had "made a god out of—made love to him," Angel stays out all night

(“Lunatique” *Gay Rebel* 257). When Angel returns home the next morning nude and disoriented, his mother calls a doctor. Angel, who does not speak to the doctor, is only partially aware of the diagnosis, which he overhears: “[D]elirious. Fantasies. Nervous breakdown if he’s not careful” (“Lunatique” *Gay Rebel* 258). Angel’s muteness, his obsession with the moon, and his unusual behavior all code him as diseased. In addition, Angel’s peers diagnose him as homosexual and ostracize him. From this point, “Lunatique” concludes quickly; the rest of the story is roughly five hundred words. Although this is probably because “Lunatique” is unfinished, the brevity with which Nugent treats the material has a silencing effect on Angel’s story, and, as Johnson and Clark point out, the silencing of men and women whose sexuality is non-normative furthers the goals of patriarchy.

Angel does not have a nervous breakdown; instead, he recovers and develops a close friendship with Adorio, one of the neighborhood boys who had taunted him. Angel gains acceptance from the boys, and the community in which they live, because of his relationship with Adorio: “he went with Adorio to the block and the guys soon accepted him. They grew to know him some and to like him—even to like some of the things he said sometimes that were so different from anything others said” (*Gay Rebel* 259). The narrator relates that Angel begins speaking again, but does not provide the reader with any of Angel’s dialogue until the end of the story. Angel and Adorio join the army during World War II, and after Adorio is killed in battle, Angel carries his body back to their comrades. In his grief, he seems to revert to his earlier, neurotic state: “. . . The moon is behind a cloud . . .” (*Gay Rebel* 261). Once he returns to his hometown, however, he retains the community’s acceptance that he had gained before the war: “They had read

about the battle. They were all proud and sad; they all knew that Angel was alone . . .”

(*Gay Rebel* 261). Angel’s acceptance in the community is based on military heroism.

Although the community does seem to acknowledge Angel’s and Adorio’s relationship (“they all knew that Angel was alone”), that acceptance is predicated on Angel’s bravery in an apparently famous battle, which suggests that in the post-WWII, pre-Stonewall era gay men had to conform to patriarchal ideals to gain even the slightest acknowledgment of their relationships.

By the time he wrote “Lunatique,” Nugent had essentially withdrawn as a public literary figure, effectively silencing himself, mirroring his protagonist’s self-imposed muteness. In addition, that the lovers in “Lunatique” aren’t allowed to consummate their bond has a silencing effect on the text. In “Lunatique,” Nugent’s protagonist overcomes neurosis by entering a platonic romantic friendship with another man, and gains social acceptance by seemingly conforming to patriarchal ideals. Since the post-WWII era was more homophobic than 1920s Harlem, perhaps “Lunatique” is ultimately best understood as a reflection of the severe pressure placed on gay men by a repressive culture that viewed their sexuality as a mental illness. The text’s silences, then, reproduce the postwar cultural pressure to conform to normative gender roles.

Richard Bruce Nugent’s work reveals his lifelong interest in, and knowledge of, the various ways in which people of color and gay men were pathologized by the dominant white, heteronormative culture. His own performance as a decadent dandy during the Harlem Renaissance scandalized some of that movement’s more conservative figures and symbolized the wasted potential of the Renaissance for Wallace Thurman. For Nugent, though, decadence represented a way to demonstrate his knowledge of the

limits of pathologizing discourses surrounding race and homosexuality. In his early poetry, Nugent used decadent tropes to explore Du Boisian double consciousness in poems that can be read as commentary on both race and sexuality. In his fiction, Nugent uses his understanding of late-Victorian and early twentieth-century sexology and degeneration theory to show the ideology that underpinned the gender and sexual expectations placed on gay men of color, in order to answer the question that his protagonist in *Gentleman Jigger* asks of himself: “what to do about the symptoms?”

Notes

¹ Glick, Elisa F. "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 49.3 (2003): 414-42. Print.

² Bernheimer, Charles. *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor, eds. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2002. Print.

³ Wirth, Thomas. Introduction. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent*. By Richard Bruce Nugent. Durham, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2002. 1-61. *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* is comprised of written and visual texts that Nugent created from the early 1920s through the 1970s. Most of the volume's texts appear in print for the first time in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*. In addition to Nugent's work and Wirth's introduction, the text also includes excerpts from a series of tape recorded interviews that Wirth conducted with Nugent during the last years of the latter's life.

⁴ Symons, Arthur. "The Decadent Movement in Literature." *Harper's Magazine* (November 1893): 856-67.

⁵ This letter is dated 12 July 1928. Thurman, Wallace. *The Collected Writing of Wallace Thurman*. Eds. Amritjit Singh and Daniel Scott, III. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003.

⁶ Hannah, Matthew N. "Desire Made Manifest: The Queer Desire of Wallace Thurman's *Fire!!*" *Journal of Modern Literature* 38.3 (2015): 162-80.

⁷ Thomas Wirth, in our e-mail interview, claimed that Nugent told him that the English translation of Nordau's *Degeneration* was in his father's library. Wirth does not know if Nugent read Nordau, and I am not arguing that he did. It does seem likely that Nugent did read *Degeneration* given that he remembered the book decades later. What I do wish to show is that Nugent's literary treatment of homosexual desire, especially in "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" is influenced by Victorian-era medical discourses, of which degeneration theory, and its attendant discourse of neurasthenia, figure prominently.

⁸ Degeneration theory was first articulated as a pathology by French psychiatrist Benedict Morel in his study *Treatise on Degeneration* (1857). Based on his experience as an attending physician in Normandy, Morel argues that mental degeneration is the result of heredity—bad blood being passed from one generation to the next. Later in the nineteenth century, Italian criminologist and physician Cesare Lombroso developed a theory of anthropological criminology, the basis of which was that criminality is inherited, and could be evidenced by the shape of the skull, the slope of the forehead, and the distance between the eyes, in addition to other physical characteristics. While Lombroso's theories have long since been discredited (by end of his life, even Lombroso was looking at other factors, such as poverty and drug/alcohol addiction, to explain criminal behavior), his work did strongly inform criminology, particularly through the idea of the "born criminal" and the notion that some nationalities and ethnicities are more prone to criminality and deviant behavior than others. See Pick, Daniel. *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, 1848-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

⁹ Nordau, Max. *Degeneration*. 1895. Intro and Trans. George L. Mosse. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1993.

¹⁰ Pick, Daniel. *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–c.1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹¹ Nordau's study is, for the most part, limited to European literature, and Nordau does exhibit a wide range of knowledge of various European languages and literatures. As for American writers, Nordau mentions only Edgar Allan Poe, who he characterizes as , and Walt Whitman, who he describes as "morally insane and incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, between virtue and crime" (231). Nordau characterizes Whitman's admirers as "degenerate and hysterical" (230).

¹² Hurley, Kelly. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin De Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

¹³ Thomas Wirth has, since Nugent's death in 1987, generously provided insight to several scholars seeking to understand nuances of Nugent's life and work. Wirth has been gracious enough to respond to my e-mails, and I include in this chapter, with his permission, information from a series of e-mails from 2012.

¹⁴ Nugent and Georgia Douglas Johnson even collaborated on a play, *Paupaulekejo*, which, according to Wirth, was performed in Washington D.C. in 1926 (Introduction 3).

¹⁵ It was typical of Nugent to write and draw on scrap paper, and then leave his work laying around where it might be discarded. He was, as Zora Neale Hurston's biographer notes, "probably the most Bohemian of all the Renaissance artists" (Hemenway 44).

¹⁶ Schwarz, A.B. Christa. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003.

¹⁷ Vitale, Christopher. "The Untimely Richard Bruce Nugent." Diss. New York University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2007.

¹⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his article "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," has documented how Locke's use of the term New Negro for the 1925 issue of *Survey Graphic* that he guest-edited ("Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro"), which Locke later expanded into the anthology *The New Negro*, was a marked departure from the concept's roots in late nineteenth-century anti-lynching, anti-Jim Crow activism. Locke, writing in *The New Negro*, repeatedly uses the word "feeling" to describe a sense of racial optimism without articulating what exactly he means by feeling: "the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now pervades the awakened centers" (8); "this deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life" (11). Michael Cobb, in his article arguing that Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies and Jade" runs counter to Locke's "well-expressed notion of feeling race" claims that language such as Locke's stands "in sharp contrast to the stale and superficial emotions of sentimentality preceding the 1920s," and that Locke "articulate[s] the feeling of race percolating to the surface in Harlem" (331). The rhetoric of feeling prevalent in middle-class, conservative Harlem Renaissance participants probably explains the poem's contemporary popularity, and why Cullen found the poem worthy of inclusion in *Caroling Dusk*.

¹⁹ Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2003.

²⁰ *The Souls of Black Folk* would, of course, become an important text in creating such language.

- ²¹ Dickson Jr., Bruce D. "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness." *American Literature* 64 (1992): 299-309.
- ²² Wood, Mary E. "'A State of Mind Akin to Madness': Charles W. Chesnutt's Short Fiction and the New Psychiatry." *American Literary Realism* 44.3 (2012): 189-208.
- ²³ Gerstner, David A. *Queer Pollen: White Seduction, Black Male Homosexuality, and the Cinematic*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2011.
- ²⁴ Hogue, W. "Radical Democracy, African American Subjectivity, and John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire." *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the United States* 33.3 (2008): 45-69.
- ²⁵ The dedication "For H.F." appears in the poem's manuscript. Thomas Wirth identifies Hank Fisher, Nugent's partner at the time of the poem's composition, as the dedicatee. See p. 89 of *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*.
- ²⁶ For a discussion of the "third sex" model, see Chauncey's *Gay New York*, pp. 48-9. The "third sex," or "intermediate sex" model originated with the German activist Karl Ulrichs in the 1860s. According to Ulrichs, *Urnings*, or *invert*s, were really women trapped in men's bodies, and so their sexual desire for members of their own sex, was, therefore, entirely normal. Other activists, such as German author Magnus Hirschfeld and British writer and anthologist Edward Carpenter, adopted a similar model. Carpenter's 1917 anthology *Ioläus*, in which he collected various historical and literary writings on male friendship from antiquity to then recent figures such as Walt Whitman, was designed to further the agenda of gay rights activists (Chauncey 284). *Ioläus* was a major touchstone for several gay Harlem Renaissance figures, notably Alain Locke, who recommended the volume to Countee Cullen in 1923 (Chauncey 284; Schwarz 19).
- ²⁷ Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. 1978. New York: Vintage, 1990.
- ²⁸ Seitler, Dana. "Queer Physiognomies; Or, How Many Ways Can We Do the History of Sexuality?" *Criticism* 46.1 (2004): 71-102.
- ²⁹ Chauncey, George. "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conception of Female Deviance." *Salmagundi* 58-59 (1982-1983): 114-46.
- ³⁰ Nugent, Richard Bruce. *Gentleman Jigger: A Novel of the Harlem Renaissance*. Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2008. Thomas Wirth edited *Gentleman Jigger* from manuscripts that were part of Nugent's papers. According to Wirth, Nugent wrote the novel between 1928 and 1933 (Introduction *Gentleman Jigger* xi).
- ³¹ The morbid juxtaposition of death (his father's) and illness (his mother's) with sexuality recalls *fin de siècle* novels such as *Dracula*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and suggests that Stuart is going to be coded as a degenerated subject.
- ³² Wilde, Oscar. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 1891. New York: Bantam, 1982. For a discussion of Wilde's novel in the context of degeneration theory and the work of Max Nordau, see Richard Dellamora. "Productive Decadence: 'The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought': Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde." *New Literary History* 35.4 (2004) 529-546.
- ³³ Rousseau, George. "The Overlap of Discourses of Contagion: Economic, Sexual, and Psychological." *Contagionism and Contagious Diseases: Medicine and Literature 1880-1933*. Ed. Thomas Rütten and Martina King. Berlin, Boston:

DeGruyter, 2013. 41-64.

³⁴ Hughes mention in *The Big Sea* that this was Nugent's reasoning for publishing the story as Richard Bruce. Nugent himself, in an interview with Thomas Wirth in the 1980s, makes the same claim. Since Nugent's mother's family, the Bruces, were the members of the black elite, it seems as though publishing as Richard Bruce would actually draw attention to the Bruce name.

³⁵Smith, Charles Michael. "Bruce Nugent: Bohemian of the Harlem Renaissance." *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Ed. Joseph Beam. Boston: Alyson, 1986. 209-20.

³⁶ It is true that some conservative African American critics were very critical of *FIRE!!*. Benjamin Brawley writing for *The Southern Workman* claimed that "if Uncle Sam ever finds out about it, it will be debarred from the mails" (180). Rean Graves, according to Langston Hughes, labeled *FIRE!!* "effeminate tommyrot," before claiming that that "I have just tossed the first issue of *Fire*—into the fire, and watched the cackling flames leap and snarl as though they were trying to swallow some repulsive dose" (qtd. in Hughes *Big Sea* 237). More recently, Anne Elizabeth Carroll, in her book *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance*, argues that W.E.B. Du Bois, in particular found *FIRE!!* distasteful (195-6).

According to Suzanne Churchill, the extent to which the effort of the Renaissance's younger artists was rejected by an older generation, however has been overstated in the past and is now being examined with more nuance. Churchill, in her article "Youth Culture in The Crisis and *FIRE!!*," persuasively argues that the creators of *FIRE!!* were less concerned with rebelling against Du Bois and Locke than they were with "contribut[ing] to a larger, ongoing project of constructing a vibrant African American youth culture" (67). Several other African American publications of the time were engaged in the same pursuit, including the Du Bois-edited *Crisis*. Churchill argues that Du Bois was sympathetic to the artistic, literary, and political goals of *FIRE!!*'s personnel, but does acknowledge that "he might have drawn the line at Richard Bruce Nugent's bisexual love story" (67).

³⁷"*Fire: A Negro Magazine*." *Survey* 9 (Sept. 1927): 563.

³⁸Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. 1940. New York: Hill and Wang, 1993. Hughes's description of "Smoke, Lilies and Jade," due to its vivid color imagery and use of ellipses, is itself decadent in a way that recalls Nugent's own style.

³⁹ Pochmara, Anna. *The Making of the New Negro: Black Authorship, Masculinity, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam UP, 2011.

⁴⁰ Cullen, Countee. "The Dark Tower." *Opportunity* 5 (January 1927): 25.

⁴¹ Wirth mentions in his 1985 article that Nugent was influenced by Wilde and Beardsley, but does not elaborate further. For an examination of Wilde's influence on other Harlem Renaissance writers, especially Wallace Thurman, see Stephen P. Knadler's "Sweetback Style: Wallace Thurman and a Queer Harlem Renaissance." Elisa F. Glick, in "Harlem's Queer Dandy: African American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness," argues that Wilde's dandyism provided a performative mode of personal expression for Nugent, and, to a lesser extent, Thurman, in a way that reveals the connection between race and sexuality: "the complexities and contradictions of dandyism as symbol and oppositional act make legible not simply the bifurcation of race and sexuality but rather their interrelation" (415). While these critics have informed my own reading of Nugent,

especially Glick's, my own focus differs from these critics in that I argue that Nugent engages with, reshapes, and undermines medical knowledge about race and sexuality through a Wildean, Decadent lens.

⁴² Boone, Joseph Allen. *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.

⁴³ Cobb, Michael L. "Insolent Racing: The Harlem Renaissance's Impolite Queers." *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 328-51.

⁴⁴ Silberman, Seth Clark. "Lighting the Harlem Renaissance AFire!!: Embodying Richard Bruce Nugent's Bohemian Politic." *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*. Ed. Delroy Constantine-Simms. Los Angeles, New York: Alyson Books, 2000. 254-73.

⁴⁵ All quotes from "Smoke, Lilies and Jade are from *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 75-87.

⁴⁶ In the 12th edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the word neurasthenia appears 163 times.

⁴⁷ Nordau, Max. *Degeneration*. 1895. Intro and Trans. George L. Mosse. Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 1993.

⁴⁸ The black dandy is starting to be examined as a cultural figure that exists beyond blackface minstrelsy. Monica L. Miller has analyzed the figure of the Harlem Renaissance black dandy. In her 2006 article "The Black Dandy as Bad Modernist," she argues that Wallace Thurman's mockery of the belief held by many of the Renaissance's figures that political and social change could be enacted through art and literature to be a dandyist literary performance. In her 2009 book *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*, Miller argues that the black dandy's body is a "being beyond circumscribed notions of race, gender, sexuality, class, and national identity, [...] a visible and visual ideal" (18). Miller devotes two chapters to the Harlem Renaissance black dandy. In "W.E.B Du Bois's Different Race Man," Miller argues that Du Bois's black dandy performance, both in his personal life and in his novel *Dark Princess* (1928), was an "anxious," or "feminized" masculinity. In "Passing Fancies: Dandyism, Harlem Modernism, and the Politics of Visuality," Miller examines James Weldon Johnson's personal dandy performance, and argues that his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is a black dandy text that engages with sexual identity in addition to race and class.

⁴⁹ Goldfarb, Russel. "Late Victorian Decadence." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 20.4 (1962): 369-373.

⁵⁰ Alex's eroticization of his dead father's body borders on necrophilia. In terms of Nugent's engagement with, and undermining of, *fin de siècle* medical knowledge surrounding homosexual desire, necrophilia was understood in the late nineteenth century to be the most extreme of erotic impulses. According to Krafft-Ebing, necrophilia is "a horrible kind of sexual indulgence" that is "so monstrous, that the presumption of a psychotic state is, under all circumstances, justified" (501). Krafft-Ebing's assessment combines moral judgment and medical opinion, while also hinting at degeneration theory ("horrible," "monstrous"). Alex's necrophiliac desire seems to mark him as degenerate. Alex's necrophiliac longing for his dead father connects him to the Decadent tradition more than his reading Oscar Wilde or his sensuous enjoyment of cigarettes. Necrophilia His erotic feelings about his father's dead body further demonstrate Alex's decadent,

pathological sexuality, in addition to his neurasthenia, and extreme self-absorption. The early paragraphs of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” depict a protagonist who exhibits a range of fin de siècle degenerate pathologies, in particular neurasthenia and an erotic preoccupation with his dead father. In Victorian sexology, homosexuality occurred in tandem with a range of additional pathologies, so Nugent, in these opening paragraphs, seems to bring his reading of Krafft-Ebing and other psychological texts to his portrayal of Alex. Krafft-Ebing’s method was to present case studies, which were brief character sketches of an individual, and then diagnose the patient’s pathologies. The beginning of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” reads like a case study, albeit a highly stylized one, in the mode of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

According to Lisa Downing, the Decadent “spectacularizing” and “eroticization” of death occurs in the context of “the nineteenth-century cholera plague and bloodshed, the idealization and sexualization of the dead body can be seen as a striving to overcome a fearful reality embodied in the social sphere. It can also be seen as the attempt to achieve the repersonalization of death as a fantasized friend, lover or comforter” (42). Downing, Lisa. Downing, Lisa. *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature*. Oxford: Legenda, 2003.

⁵¹ According to George Chauncey, “although gay street culture was in certain respects an unusual and distinctive phenomenon, it was also part of and shaped by a large street culture that was primarily working class in character and origin. Given the crowded conditions in which most working class people lived, much of their social life took place in streets and parks. The gay presence in the streets was thus masked, in part, by the bustle of street life in working-class neighborhoods” (*Gay New York* 180). Kevin Mumford, building on Chauncey’s work, argues that Harlem’s reputation among white New Yorkers as an area of vice, which he terms an interzone, affected gay black Harlemites’ ability to create spaces of their own because “the more visible and accessible a Harlem club became, the more heterosexual its patrons” (*Interzones* 84).

⁵² Mumford, Kevin. *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.

⁵³ Nugent, in a 1982 interview with James Hatch, claimed that after the publication of “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” “we [he and Wallace Thurman] got ostracized for only a day” (qtd. in Vitale 35). In the same interview, Nugent suggests his and Thurman’s inability to promote themselves as the reason *FIRE!!* did not generate controversy: “to promote flammable material takes a special kind of know-how. Carl [Van Vechten] could have done it” (qtd. in Vitale 35). Seth Clark Silberman argues that “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” did not excite greater controversy because of Nugent’s mother’s family’s high social position in the African American community: “he was seen by his family and by the black high society in Washington D.C. as ‘eccentric’ and rebelling against social norms, not as a faggot.” (264).

⁵⁴ Wirth does not assign a specific date to “Lunatique,” claiming in his editorial note on the story in *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* that “Lunatique” is part of an unfinished novel that Nugent worked on intermittently for several years. See *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance*, p. 248.

⁵⁵ Nero, Charles. “Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance: Selections from the Work of Richard Bruce Nugent” (review). *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12.4 (2003):

672-676.

⁵⁶ George Chauncey, in *Gay New York*, argues that the greater homophobia of the 1930s was a reaction to the Prohibition-fueled excesses of the 1920s, but also “reflected the crisis in gender arrangements precipitated by the Great Depression. As many men lost their jobs, their status as breadwinners, and their sense of mastery over their own futures, the central tenets undergirding their gender status were threatened” (353). According to Chauncey, American cultural anxiety over male unemployment, and an attendant crisis of masculinity, also explains the hypermasculine physiques of men in New Deal public art and attacks on women for “stealing men’s jobs” (354). In this environment, gays and lesbians were seen by the dominant culture as a further threat to gender normativity.

⁵⁷ Krafft-Ebing, in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, claims that sexual pathologies are visually present on the homosexual body, in some instances as an androgynous appearance: “the secondary physical sexual characteristics approach that sex to which the individual, according to his instinct, belongs” (Krafft-Ebing 55).

⁵⁸ According to Thomas Wirth, the dream sequence is from a notebook that Nugent kept in the 1920s (*Gay Rebel* 248).

⁵⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. A.A. Brill. 1900. New York: Macmillan, 1927.

⁶⁰ Gilman, Sander L. *Freud, Race, and Gender*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

⁶¹ Krafft-Ebing, in his *Textbook of Insanity*, links mutism to “melancholia,” “idiocy,” “religious paranoia” (102). Krafft-Ebing also links mutism with a number of other symptoms that should suggest to the clinician that the subject is the product of genetic degeneration: “Has there ever been suicide, drunkenness, or eccentricities or remarkable immorality (crime), arrest of mental development, sudden death with cerebral symptoms, apoplexy, convulsions, deaf-mutism, or malformation in the family, and in what members of it?” (240). In a section titled “Special Pathology and Therapy of Insanity,” Krafft-Ebing identifies mutism as a primary symptom of insanity, and one that makes treatment difficult because it prevents the patient from communicating with her or his physician (306).

⁶² Johnson, Barbara. *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.

⁶³ Clark, Anna. “Twilight Moments.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14.1/2 (2005): 139-60.

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