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## Distinctly American: Performing Humanity in African American Literature from Proto to Post New Negro Renaissance

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DISTINCTLY AMERICAN:  
PERFORMING HUMANITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
FROM PROTO TO POST NEW NEGRO RENAISSANCE

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
At the University of Kentucky

By  
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Lexington, Kentucky

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### DISTINCTLY AMERICAN: PERFORMING HUMANITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE FROM PROTO TO POST NEW NEGRO RENAISSANCE

This project demonstrates how African American literature from the 1910s through the 1940s uses performance in order to stage debates within African American identity and American culture. Drawing on recent literary scholarship, performance studies, and early critical writing on African American art and performance, the project examines scenes of public performance in order to show how these literary scenes create space to investigate social and cultural constructions. The project investigates the ways performances within the texts also critique performances of race, gender, and class. Within these performance scenes, the literary texts also critique the audiences' reactions to the artistic product against the audience's and performer's racial identity. This layering of spectator and performer can only occur because of the space created by the stage. The texts of this project reveal the problematic nature of being both "American" and "African American" cultural productions.

The literature examined in this dissertation includes "scenes of performance," where both an explicit audience and an explicit performer are present. In these scenes, the performer and their performance represent an embodiment of black cultural products. These "cultural products" include public speeches and musical displays in James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), classical and modern dance as seen in Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924), variety show stages in Walter White's *Flight* (1926), and vocal concerts in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946). The project argues that these literary texts engage with historical theater and create scenes with stage performance to show problems with binary racial lines and class distinctions. These texts in turn provide a historical lens for examining black theater, but also demonstrate why this time period would have been receptive to black theater and performance, and the circumstances that permitted its development.

KEYWORDS: performance studies, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Walter White, Ann Petry

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Julie Anne Naviaux

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July 14, 2016

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To artists and critics who believe in cultural art's ability to change minds and reshape our world.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN CULTURE IN NEW NEGRO LITERARY PERFORMANCES

In James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), the unnamed narrator watches a black pianist perform ragtime at a New York club. The narrator describes the black pianist as "master of a good deal of technique" and describes his playing as "music of a kind I had never heard before...The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places" (*AECM* 98-99). The narrator goes on to explain that, "This was rag-time music, then a novelty in New York...It was originated in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano-players" and comments that "several of these improvisations were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered, and published under the names of the arrangers...They sprang into immediate popularity and earned small fortunes, of which the Negro originators got only a few dollars" (*AECM* 99-100). The scene includes a depiction of the musical performance, the narrator's reaction to the performance as an audience member and a claim for artistic value in the art, and social commentary regarding white artists present in the audience who would appropriate the music and go on to perform ragtime music without crediting the original black artist. This scene and others examined in the project include both spectators and performers and occur in scenes that include spaces created by stages.

Broadly speaking, my research applies both historical African American theatrical performances and performance theory to study African American literature of 1910-1940s in order to understand the developing assimilation and appropriation of African American art into American culture and the problems that this assimilation or appropriation creates. By including what I call "scenes of cultural performance," the literature demonstrates possible outcomes for African American artists and their interactions with racially different audiences and how the audience's race and reactions determine the success and roles of the artistic

product. I expand the definition of “performance” beyond the formal theater in order to apply my analysis to studies of receptions and consumptions of all types of black American performance, allowing for a larger and more fluid project. Applying performance studies theory to the literature allows for a larger study of the literature across time periods as a way of showing the evolution of African American culture within America and the growing concerns of its role in mainstream American culture. Within these performance scenes, the texts also critique the audiences’ reactions to the artistic product against the audience’s and performer’s racial identity. Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, African American literature frequently contains scenes involving stages and public performances. Previous critics have written about the history of African American theatre, about historical black performers and performances, and about the dramas and plays written from 1900 through the 1940s, but a lack of scholarship exists on the artistic performances and the theatrical moments in the contemporaneous literature. The texts of this project reveal the problematic nature of being both “American” and “African American” cultural productions.

My project takes a similar critical approach as current performance studies, black studies, and African American literary criticism. Daphne Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent* studies what she calls "performative acts" in African American literature and theater of 1850-1910 to argue how these acts undo and complicate “American” categories. Koretha Mitchell’s *Living with Lynching* analyzes public stagings, receptions, and close readings of lynching plays from 1890-1930 to argue for how the plays reinterpret black America’s presence in the United States and present lynching victims as respectable members of their communities. David Krasner’s *Resistance, Parody, and Double Consciousness* argues for social value in public performances (both theater and public) of the New Negro Renaissance. In a time before television, the theatre and radio were the American public's access to cultural performances, and African American stage performers were the visual public displays of blackness for

American audiences and, therefore, performance theory works well to provide a theoretical backdrop for this project. My research in performance studies began with Richard Schechner as a framework for understanding how artistic performances could be used to study socially acceptable behaviors and representations of the physical body. I expand my use of performance studies to include Harvey Young, E. Patrick Johnson, and Manthai Diawara who study race as a performance and examine how acceptable public behaviors for black people are based on preconceptions and stereotypes of how people should act (and perform) based on social categorizations. Additionally, Diawara and Young's theoretical work was especially useful for connecting concepts of blackness as a public performance to theater spaces where both the theater and public are spaces for audiences/spectators to judge "correct" forms of behavior and cultural artistry. I use Brooks' writing on presentations of black bodies on fictional and historical stages to draw comparisons and connections between my own examinations of historical performers and their fictional counterparts.

This project originated when I observed the repeated use of singing, dancing, live music, speeches and more throughout African American literature, but these performances are most prominent in the first half of the twentieth century. The Harlem Renaissance has long been acknowledged as a time of increased artistic recognition for black artists in mainstream America, and this includes literature as an art form. In addition to the increased artistic production, the literature of the New Negro Renaissance incorporates performative art types and uses performance as a way to critique the performer's feelings and the audience's reactions to the performance. In this project I use two schools of performance studies: 1) basic theory for defining words and explaining the importance of the performance scene, and 2) black performance theory for working through presentations of black bodies on stages and how visual blackness (and whiteness) can influence audience reception *and* audience understanding for the role of the art. The literature examined in this dissertation includes

“scenes of performance” where both an explicit audience and an explicit performer are present. In these scenes the performer and their performance represent an embodiment of African American cultural products. These “cultural products” include public speeches and musical displays in Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), classical and modern dance as seen in Jessie Fauset’s *There is Confusion* (1924), musical show stages in Walter White’s *Flight* (1926), and vocal concerts in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946). The project argues that these literary texts engage with their respective contemporaneous historical theater and include scenes with stage performance to show problems with binary racial lines and class distinctions. These texts in turn provide a historical lens for examining African American theater, demonstrate why this time period would have been receptive to black theater and performance, and the circumstances that permitted its development. The four central texts allow me to examine performance in African American literature from just before the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance, during the Renaissance and through the growing popularity of African American stage performances, and then after the end of the Harlem Renaissance. I use the terms “proto” and “post” to expand this project, and its historical underpinnings, outside of the “Harlem Renaissance proper.” I argue that these performance scenes predict the rising influence of the New Negro Renaissance as Johnson shows, examine the use of cultural performance throughout the Renaissance as Fauset and White detail, and then reflect on the changes and outcomes brought forth after the end of the Renaissance as Petry examines. Additionally, the project studies the texts themselves as literary performances of African American art where the scenes of artistic performance serve as prompts for questioning the roles of African American art within American culture.

When the actors in this literature perform, they are displaying and commenting on cultural performances, both in historical theaters and contemporaneous culture. I use Richard Schechner’s explanation of performance as “aesthetic genres” such as theatre, music, and

dance but also his expanded definition that includes “performative behavior” as a way to examine constructed identities and different selves for diverse situations (521). Schechner claims that, “The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance” (2). For this project I define performance as moments in the texts involving a stage, audience/spectators, and an acknowledged performer. This understanding comes in part from Diawara’s definition of performance where he explains that a performance must include an audience and a tradition, where the spectators understand the actions as a performance. When I describe a moment in the literature as a performance, I use Diawara’s definition that the audience (whether the protagonist or another defined group of people) understand that the actions in the scene are a performance (209). For example, Walter White’s protagonist Mimi in *Flight* observes black dancers in an urban club and describes the experience as “[b]lack and brown and yellow faces flitted by, some carefree, some careworn. Mimi sensed again the essential rhythm, the oneness of these variegated colors and moods. It was all vivid, colorful, of a pattern distinctive and apart, and she warmed to the friendliness of it all...” (186). These scenes are constructed within the literature to include commentary from those watching the performance, thereby defining a separation from the audience/spectator and the performer.

My project relies on performance studies and discussions of theater and performance to define key words such as “theater,” “stage,” “performance,” and “audience.” Some critics limit these terms to mean formal stages and theater performance. My definition of theater is much broader. “Theater” in this project encompasses any audience with a performer set apart physically. This physical separation I call a “stage” which notes a distinction made between a group gazing upon the performer and the performer him/herself. This is distinctly different from “theatre” limited to formal plays. My use of “theater” refers not only to the formal theater of plays but also the physical space where the performance is contained. For example,

Fauset's Joanna in *There is Confusion* performs an impromptu dance for her family and friends when she recreates the African American children's dance. One of the friends compares Joanna's performance to a show she saw at a matinee and tells Joanna: "It was vaudeville, Joanna, and there was an actress who took off different people...but she couldn't hold a candle to you" (50). The space Joanna dances in this scene is a theater, even though it does not occur in a formal theatre. The presence of a performance, a performer, and an audience in the scene creates a "theater space." For my purposes, the scenes I use in the literature must include a space functioning as a stage. Shane Vogel's work on cabarets explains that a performance turns a group of people into an audience when there is a "common point of reference," (42) i.e., the performance. The stage becomes a "common point of reference" where characters watch/witness another character perform.

The scenes selected from these texts imitate their contemporary historical performances and, more importantly, the scenes include both introspection by the performer and his/her contemporaneous audience's reactions to the performances. My project demonstrates how African American literature from 1910 through the 1940s uses artistic performance in order to stage debates within African American identity and American culture. James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan* (1930) specifically notes the transition from the nineteenth to twentieth century as the years of change in black Americans' presence on American stages. He argues for Sam T. Jack as the first successful departure from minstrelsy in 1890 with his development of "The Creole Show" although Johnson does explain: "It had none of the features of plantation days; nevertheless, it was cast in the traditional minstrel pattern" (92). He then notes that "The summer of 1898 marked another great step forward" when Will Marion Cook composed *Clorindy* using Paul Lawrence Dunbar's lyrics (102) explaining, "It was the first demonstration of the possibilities of syncopated Negro music. Cook was the first competent composer to take what was then

known as rag-time and work it out in a musicianly way” (103). This was quickly followed by Cook and Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s show *Jes Lak White Folks* the next summer. Karen Sotiropoulos, like Johnson, argues that the decade of the 1890s meant for black artists, “a path on the popular stage—a forum made lucrative by the rise of commercial culture. Urban industrial America had brought about an unprecedented expansion of nightlife and offered entertainers numerous possibilities—possibilities that black artists were ready to exploit” (1-2). Fraden marks 1915 at the start of change in theater with Anita Bush forming her own company at the Lincoln and Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. From 1900 to 1910 black ownership of independent theaters increased and the first black syndicates formed. Even outside of New York, the Gilpin Players wrote and staged shows in Cleveland and the Pekin Theatre developed in Chicago (Fraden 58).

The significance of early twentieth century stage pieces such as *In Dahomey* (1903)—credited as “the first full-length musical written and played by blacks to be performed at a major Broadway house” (Bordman)—and *Shuffle Along* (1921) created by black Americans show a more in-depth exploration of black characters than earlier theater shows and theater shows on the Great White Way of Broadway. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer explain that *Shuffle Along* was “a smash hit” when the show arrived in New York and it “began the vogue for Negro singing and dancing that lasted throughout the Twenties. Thereafter for a decade colored musicals on Broadway were top box-office attractions” (97). Arna Bontemps explains that in 1921, “*Shuffle Along*, an all-black musical comedy, became a smash on Broadway at about the same time Cullen and Hughes were making their initial bows.” Bontemps calls this “a happier conjunction” than “could scarcely have been imagined” (5). As Hill and Hatch explain, beginning with the team of James Weldon, J. Rosamond Johnson, and Bob Cole, black Americans began writing, composing music, and performing black-authored pieces in formal theater. These first pieces included Dunbar’s *In Dahomey* with Bert

Williams and Bob Walker, whose performances gained positive audience responses and favorable reviews with critics. In 1923 Roland Hayes made his concert debut in the U.S., and “Hayes promptly became a national symbol, if not a legend, the first of his color ever to invade the closed precincts of top-level concert music in this nation” (Bontemps 10). Despite the crescendoing of black American talent on American stages, Christina Ruotolo does note that, “This is not to say that white defenders of ragtime and ‘plantation’ symphonies necessarily supported equal rights and opportunities for black musicians...” However, as Ruotolo continues, “the fact that mainstream America began to consider African American music as a possible basis for a national culture created an important opening for a generation of musicians who could themselves transcribe—and thus publish and market— ‘black’ music” (254). This opening to “transcribe black music” as Ruotolo writes creates the junction of a historical rise of African American culture into mainstage American culture with black critics’ voicing concerns regarding the roles black artists would play as American artists—and how African American cultural heritage would be either preserved or erased. The performance scenes in the literature studied in this project work through these very concerns and provide space in the fictional world to act out iterations of cultural roles and purpose.

Using historical critiques of African American culture, the physical space of the performance scenes in the literature permits critical space to discuss and evaluate African American art’s role in American culture. For example, Fauset’s novel critiques the division of “high” and “low” art through Joanna Marshall’s performance as a ballerina (“high art”) and her use of African American children’s dance (“low art”) in a single performance. Hill, Hatch, and other critics repeatedly note a class system of “formal theatre” related to the upper class and considered “high art” whereas other public performances such as bars, juke joints, and cabarets were considered lower class and “low art” forms. Historical black theater underwent a change from the 1910s and through the 1920s. Regarding The Art Theatre

Movement (or Little Theatre Movement) specifically, Hatch explains that it originated with intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and James Weldon Johnson, and a “general feeling prevailed that the folk plays, by dignifying the people’s struggles, extended a kind of egalitarian democracy to the rural people, and that the simple lives of these oppressed people offered a deep expression of an abiding spirit” (216). Theophilus Lewis, drama critic and writer, “encouraged a Negro theatre that would rival the energy and talent of the Elizabethan” (Hatch 240). The performance scenes in the literature “perform” as sites providing opportunities to question performances of race, gender, and class, not only of the character/performer but of the audience watching the performance and of the audience reading the text—in this way, the literature itself becomes a performance. In an historical stage performance, Heywood Broun witnessed as an audience member and then reviewed a Hayes performance: “I saw a miracle in Town Hall. Half of the people were black and half were white and while the mood of the song held, they were all the same. They shared together the close silence. One emotion wrapped them. And at the end it was a single sob” (Bontemps 10). This historical rendering meets a fictional account when Fauset’s Joanna dances for black and white audiences. Joanna’s dance combines classically trained European dance with informal, “folk” dance of the neighborhood children, while on a formal theatre stage. Like Hayes, Joanna’s performance moves her audience to silence. While both Joanna’s scene and Hayes’ review present these performances as successful because of positive audience responses, I argue and the literature demonstrates that a single successful performance does not overcome racial boundaries and overturn prejudices.

As Hatch notes, a split occurred during the Harlem Renaissance, specifically between New York (Northern Blacks and Caribbean immigrants) and Chicago (Southern migrants).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This divide can clearly be witnessed in W.E.B. DuBois’s “Criteria for Negro Art” published in *The Crisis* (1926) and his 1926 symposium essay “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed.” Other critics and authors published responses supporting or disagreeing with him.

The divide for “What is Art?” during the Renaissance included not only claiming African American art as legitimate American art but claiming how folk and mass African American art also “qualified” as “high art.” This split and attempts to find reconciliation can be found in both White’s *Flight* and Johnson’s *Autobiography*. White’s Mimi feels an emotional connection to both the lower dancing of the club and also the “high” art performance at the theater. Johnson’s unnamed narrator claims the black preacher and black gospel singer as performers who induced overwhelming emotional connections with their audiences. In her study of New Negro Renaissance authors, Christine Gray writes that Alain Locke, W.E.B. DuBois, and others “realized the potential drama held... Through the stage, African Americans would find a means of giving voice to the culture, of preserving the folk culture, of destroying stereotypes, and of speaking to African Americans about their experience on American soil” (xvii). This “change” and overcoming racial prejudices lies in changing white America’s perceptions of black artists—but also in changing black America’s prejudices against African American folk culture. Gray argues that “the stage was the ideal medium for reaching the African American audience; communal and public, it gathered people together by its very nature” (xvii). As this project argues, both the unnamed narrator of *Autobiography* and *Mimi* in *Flight* experience something as black audience members that the white audience cannot understand. Both novels use folk or “low class” art forms and spaces to claim the emotion connections between black performers and their black audiences via shared experiences of racism as Americans.

African American literature prior to the twentieth century may include theater scenes or clubs with black characters but these earlier texts do not examine the performance as a scene itself. It is simply a backdrop in the scene without internal examination of either audience or performer. For example, Paul Lawrence Dunbar’s *Sport of the Gods* (1902) and

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DuBois’s essay and the responses to his symposium can be found in *The New Negro*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett.

Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood* (1903) both involve theater performances. However, in these and other earlier texts the scene neither questions the performer's role as a cultural artist nor the audience's role as a consumer of the art. These texts lack moments of introspection concerning black America's artistic role in mainstream America. *Sport of the Gods* and *Of One Blood's* publications at the very cusp of the twentieth century do begin the use of theater scenes within the novels, but the scenes from the earlier texts do not serve as the climax for moment of transformation for either performer or audience.

Johnson's use of theater scenes in *Autobiography* (1912/1927) ten years later is much more developed and strategic. First published in 1912, Johnson's fictional *Autobiography* highlights the importance of theater and performance and its interconnection with his narrator's evolving racial experiences from the informal performances he gives, to formal theater he watches, and then to his attempts to transcribe and record African American musical performances. The narrator describes his experiences as a black man and comments how his experience as a black audience member functions differently from the experience of the white audience. I use this novel as the starting point for my dissertation and argue how the novel both foresees the development of African American culture into mainstream American culture and also posits concerns for cultural assimilation and appropriation—something reviewers of the novel's 1927 republication also noted that Johnson foresaw. Johnson's concerns relate to white performers' denying black people credit for their art by erasing the visual black performer (and thereby blackness) from the art. This removes race and racial concerns from the art, allowing them to "seamlessly" assimilate into American culture. The performance scenes Johnson uses in his novel reflect historical black performers on the stage. For example, Sotiropoulos explains that Williams and Walker "were at the forefront of this generation of performers who sought to entertain" but they, and other black artists, "also saw the popular stage as an arena where they could push against stereotypes,

something largely impossible—and fairly dangerous—to do on the street” (46-47). Like Williams and Walker working against racial stereotypes in their performances, Johnson’s use of black folk artists works to claim cultural value in African American art separate from traditional American art forms while also tearing down stereotypes of black performers—and by extension stereotypes of black people.

My chapter on Johnson’s novel, “Distinctly American Performance in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*,” re-contextualizes the novel as a key proto-New Negro Renaissance text by examining the novel’s first publication in 1912 in connection with Johnson’s critical essays on African American theater and literary performances. By looking at this novel in conversation with historical black performers such as Bert Williams and Bob Walker, as well as Johnson’s own personal experiences in turn of the century African American theater, I argue that the novel’s unnamed narrator questions the dichotomy of the color-line via his encounters with stage performances throughout the novel. The chapter opens with Johnson’s statement from the “Preface” to *The Book of Negro Poetry* that black Americans are “the creator[s] of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products” and explores Johnson’s argument, via his novel, that African American art and culture are legitimate both as high art as well as American art and culture. The novel’s unnamed narrator demonstrates the power of performance to change the status quo but also the depth of fear in both black and white audiences that this possibility of change can entail. This fear I define as “loneliness” regarding the support or lack thereof of the audience and who has the ability (and the right) to understand the cultural performance. My “theory of loneliness” analyzes W.E.B. DuBois’s “Coming of John” from his *The Souls of Black Folk* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* for comparable textual analyses of loneliness as a symptom of the struggle with what the unnamed narrator calls “double audience,” echoing DuBois’s “double consciousness.” The

double audience creates a schism for black audience members when the white audience's reaction to the performers uncovers the powerlessness of African American culture and art to create substantive change in racial prejudices.

I argue for Johnson's text as the proto- or pre-Harlem Renaissance example of the use of performer and audience space because, when first published in 1912, his novel is one of the first to recognize of the centrality of the theater and the aspect of performance as a way to question and to explore the roles of race and culture in early twentieth century America. While Johnson does make some changes in the 1927 edition—primarily in how the unnamed narrator meets his future wife—the cultural scenes and performances remain the same in both the 1912 and 1927 editions. In the novel Johnson writes that African American art forms “refute the oft-advanced theory that they [black Americans] are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrate that they have originality and artistic conception, and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally” (*AECM* 88). I argue here that what Johnson says about African American art is correct—*it is* the only true American art, as demonstrated in the novel and the novel itself as an artistic performance. This chapter argues that Johnson's 1912 argument for African American art as the fountain of American art is true and that he is the first to claim this. Other critical arguments do not recognize the importance of the novel's earlier publication date and do not recognize Johnson as one of the first to make this claim. Others will make this argument later, such as LeRoi Jones in *Blues People*. The mistake made by current scholarship is the assumption of *Autobiography* as a Harlem Renaissance text and not what it actually is: a Pre- or Proto- Renaissance text. By accepting African American art as authentically and legitimately American, black people are also accepted as much as any respected white American.

The dissertation's other chapters pivot from the chapter on *Autobiography* in arguing that what is understood as American culture is actually African American culture or that

American culture is black culture. My project works not only with a central novel in each chapter but also with the texts' contemporary critical nonfiction essays related to their claims. The chapter on Fauset's novel, "Masking Propaganda as Art in *There is Confusion*," argues that the central character, Joanna, demonstrates masking and unmasking during her stage performance to represent the masking of African American culture as *the* American culture. I argue masking as a trope central to the fractured relationship between African American art and its centrality to American culture. Joanna's successful stage performance destabilizes white audience's (and her critics') perceptions of black femininity and historical female performers. Central to the chapter's argument is Fauset's commentary on the historical stage performer Bert Williams and W.E.B. DuBois's dictum that "all art should be propaganda."<sup>2</sup> These early critics' writings on historical performers and cultural products demonstrate the significance Joanna's performance has as a black woman claiming American art to a white audience. The chapter concludes with an examination of the commodification of black performers and an examination of black audiences (and their reactions) against the larger "American" audience in Joanna's performances.

The chapter on Walter White, "Claiming Black Art and Ancestry in *Flight*," argues that the novel connects the solitary black protagonist, Mimi, with a larger, ongoing black historical memory accessible to black people through exposure to African American culture. This cultural memory is only accessible to black audiences and thus simultaneously excludes white audiences. Through witnessing the performances, Mimi demonstrates the dissonance experienced by black people when required to prove their Americanness even though they are already quintessential American. The incorporation of African American stage performances throughout the novel shows that, by the mid 1920s, black artists were already an inseparable mainstay in American popular culture. The fractured sense of race and self, demonstrated by

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<sup>2</sup> DuBois makes this claim in his 1926 essay "Criteria for Negro Art."

the lightly-complexioned Mimi, comes together in performance scenes that allow the protagonist to come to terms with racial identity. Mimi's connection to African American history and an ancestral past always occurs via witnessing performances. Working from Langston Hughes' argument that black Americans' cultural products have been subsumed into white America,<sup>3</sup> I demonstrate how *Flight* investigates this claim from the unique point of view of Mimi's experience. Where *Autobiography* leaves the unnamed narrator unsatisfied with his choice to live as white but still doing so, *Flight* concludes with Mimi reclaiming her black racial identity and her right to African America's culture and history.

The project concludes with "Performance in the Post-Renaissance of *The Street*" and its protagonist, Lutie, a stage performer whose performances demonstrate the legacy of performative culture present in White's *Flight* and its power to evoke an ancestral past. During the New Negro Renaissance, art was a place for possibility, a claim to a cultural heritage and legacy. In this novel of the post-Renaissance, art is established a means of escape from current life rather than a salvation or a place of change. The performances serve as an escape from the reality of the after-effects of World War II, the Great Depression, and the legacy of Jim Crow laws. The novel's location between the Renaissance and the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements highlights the changing sentiments of black Americans and growing dissent against racial prejudice and class bias—experienced as, in Richard Wright's words, the "white hot iron of exclusion."<sup>4</sup> The exclusion demonstrated within the novel's stage performances draws black audiences and performers together in shared histories and emphasizes the individual's frustration with discrimination. As well, African American art becomes a conduit for the emotions caused by these exclusions and frustrations. Although published several years after the other texts in this project, many critics compare Petry's

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter works with Hughes' claim in his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain."

<sup>4</sup> This quote and Wright's argument used in this chapter are taken from his 1937 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing."

Lutie to earlier historical blues performers of the 1920s and 1930s such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. The novel's publication also fits within an argument for an extension of blues music beyond the Harlem Renaissance proper. Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines the "swing era" as the late 1920s through the 1940s. She claims that "these broader parameters embrace the substantial and significant overlap between Dixieland and swing on the early end, and bebop and swing in the post-World War II era" (17). *The Street* serves as a fruition of Johnson's warnings—where African American art has been subsumed into American culture and has been appropriated by white Americans for economic gain.

Both Johnson's *Autobiography* and Petry's *The Street* examine public performances of black masculinity, and Fauset's *There is Confusion*, White's *Flight*, and Petry's *The Street* each examine public perceptions of black womanhood. However, in the project, I concentrate on *There is Confusion* and *The Street* to study how issues of black femininity are portrayed in stage performance. I use Nadine George-Graves' analysis of black female vaudeville performers, specifically the Whitman sisters, to understand how historical black female performers worked to overcome stereotypes from their contemporary audiences. George-Graves argues that "by destabilizing fictions of race and gender identity while upholding high-class images and challenging audience members, producers, and theater owners to re-evaluate their expectations and accepted norms, these women succeeded in claiming a degree of agency over their bodies and transforming the vaudeville stage into a site of resistance" (11). Fauset uses this "site of resistance" explicitly via Johanna's stage performance as a black dancer. However, her successful stage performance undermines prejudicial perceptions of black female performers when the audience positively responds to her performance—both dancing with the mask and after she unmask—disrupting preconceptions of black female performers. When Lutie takes the stage in Petry's 1946 novel the audience doubts her ability and view her as an object of desire. But when she performs, the audience's gaze changes

from Lutie's physical appearance to an emotional connection with her. The chapters on both Joanna and Lutie contrast these fictional black women to historical counterparts, including Josephine Baker and Bessie Smith, to understand the roles black women played in the century's cultural development as well as how both historical and fictional black women used their cultural performances to confront stereotypes.

Analyzing moments of the stage in these texts captures the intersection of historical black theater with performances of race, gender, class and permits commentary on how these performances are scripted and created. These literary texts demonstrate specific historical relationships, various types of artistic performances, and racial influences of the audiences and the performers. Schechner explains that, "The performance process can be studied not only as a multiphased time-space sequence, but also as the dynamic relationship among four categories of players" which he defines as the sourcers (authors), the producers (directors), the performers, and the partakers (spectators). My central texts demonstrate not only an ongoing legacy of performance culture in African American early twentieth century literature and the literature's connection to historical theater and performance, but the texts also use what Schechner calls the "four categories" of players to question black America's role in the formation of twentieth century American art and culture, as well as to demonstrate the stage as a cultural space to interrogate African American—and American—performances in the twentieth century United States.

## CHAPTER TWO: DISTINCTLY AMERICAN PERFORMANCE IN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN EX-COLORED MAN

“I am coming to believe that nothing can go farther to destroy race prejudice than the recognition of the Negro as a creator and a contributor to American civilization.”  
—James Weldon Johnson letter to Carl Van Vechten, March 6, 1927

“I make here what may appear to be a more startling statement by saying that the Negro has already proved the possession of these powers by being the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products.”  
--James Weldon Johnson, “Preface” to *The Book of Negro Poetry*, 1922

James Weldon Johnson makes his “more startling statement” in the “Preface” to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that black Americans have created the only original American cultural products. However, prior to “Preface,” Johnson demonstrates African American cultural products as original and claims these products as legitimate American culture in his novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, first published in 1912. Although a foregone conclusion in the twenty-first century, Johnson’s claim for legitimizing African American culture was revolutionary in 1912.<sup>5</sup> The novel’s first publication date occurs at the beginning of the New Negro Renaissance, when African American art first takes center stage on the American cultural landscape. Johnson makes this claim at the very beginning of the Renaissance, not in the midst of it when the novel was republished in 1927. As a proto- New Negro Renaissance text, the novel works from the black unnamed narrator’s perspective as both performer and audience, permitting space within the text for a commentary on the support (or lack thereof) of the audience for black art and observations on who has the ability (and the right) to determine the authenticity of cultural products. The novel incorporates examples of African American stage performances to claim black people as original creators

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<sup>5</sup> He makes this same claim again six years later in his essay “Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist” in a 1928 issue of *Harper’s* that, “Indeed, I dare say it is now more or less generally acknowledged that the only things artistic that have sprung from American soil and out of American life, and have been universally recognized as distinctively American products, are the folk creations of the Negro” (Andrews 755). In this 1928 publication, Johnson notes that his claim is now no longer revolutionary and instead is “generally acknowledged.”

in order to examine the color and class divides between black performers and their audiences—both black and white audiences. In this way, the novel itself becomes a performance of black artistic production as American culture, and Johnson persuasively presents black Americans as its original artistic creators. He is one of the first to consistently and repeatedly offer evidence of this. However, Johnson in his essay and the narrator in the novel leave unanswered if space exists—in America and in the novel—to protect African American art from white appropriation while simultaneously creating a legacy of African American art as American culture.

The novel's ending provides an object lesson in the fine line between legacy value and appropriation. In the novel's closing lines, the unnamed narrator reflects to the reader on his decision to pass as white and to relinquish recording Southern black music, explaining, "I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (*AECM*, 1960 211). The yellowing music manuscripts of the narrator's vanished dream represent the birthright of African American culture as the only original American art. The image leaves readers a warning of what could happen if black performers are not embraced as American cultural creators or if their creations are not accepted as original and legitimate American culture. The narrator's choice to identify as white for economic gain and material comforts aligns with concerns of African American culture "identifying" as only American creations. The novel includes many performance scenes involving stages, such as ragtime club music, cakewalk dancing, piano concerts, opera, preaching, and gospel singing. Analyzing these performance scenes makes useful cultural observations and historical claims, specifically as art is often created in performative mediums. For example, Harvey Young in *Theatre & Race* uses theater as a way to examine

race because the theater is the “most consistently popular form of community engagement in human history” and as such it “serves as the ideal medium through which to study the fascination, anxieties, and concerns related to cultural difference and race” (17). In Young’s writing he focuses only on theater whereas I broaden this into performance spaces outside of the theater. In this analysis, the term “theater” includes all stages—both literal and figurative—involving a performance as a public demonstration; specifically, the performance of an artistic creation and an audience witnessing this performance.

The word “performances” as used to describe scenes from the novel works with Richard Schechner’s definition that, “The underlying notion is that any action that is framed, enacted, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance” (2). When the narrator in the novel comments on performances of black artistic creations, he both displays the performance for his readers and creates space within the novel to comment on these cultural performances, both in historical theaters and contemporaneous culture. The physical space of the “theater” involves a stage area separating a performer and audience, permitting the audience to gaze at and view the performer. The theater is situated as the ideal medium to study both performer and audience because of this gazing/viewing space. Public performance serves as a recognizable form of community engagement to readers, both contemporary and contemporaneous, in that readers are familiar with theater spaces. Performances in *Autobiography* include black performers who perform to black, white, and somewhere in-between audiences. The performances demonstrate a legacy of a performative culture and cultural commentary. This concept of cultural memory works with Joseph Roach’s explanation of performance as “restored” behavior or behavior that is “twice-behaved” because it is “repeated, reinstated, or rehearsed.” His definition fits “theatrical performances, sacred and secular rituals, and social displays of many kinds,” (12) which expands

performance from the space of the theatrical stage into larger societal applications.<sup>6</sup> This definition includes performances existing both inside and outside the “theater proper” in Johnson's *Autobiography*, such as the following scene of Singing Johnson and John Brown.

#### THE CRITICAL VALUATION OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

In mid-narrative, the unnamed narrator travels to the Southern United States to record Southern black music. In his travels, he encounters a “Big Meeting,” and the novel spends over *thirteen hundred* words describing John Brown’s preaching performance and “Singing Johnson’s” hymn singing style. While watching the performances, the narrator comments:

I sat often with the tears rolling down my cheeks and my heart melted within me. Any musical person who has never heard a Negro congregation under the spell of religious fervor sing these old songs, has missed one of the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience. Anyone who can listen to Negroes sing, “Nobody knows de trouble I see, Nobody knows but Jesus,” without shedding tears, must indeed have a heart of stone. (*AECM*, 1960 181)

By including both the lengthy description of the performances *and* the narrator’s reaction to and commentary on them, the text places attention and value on African American creative art. The section highlights the main elements of the artwork including audience participation in the preaching, the training required to perform the hymns, how hymns and preaching work in tandem as a single performance, and the musical stylization of hymns. The section demonstrates the value of the art via the narrator’s explanation of his emotional reaction to the performance and his claim that anyone who does not react to and understand the power of the emotion caused by the performance “must indeed have a heart of stone.”

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<sup>6</sup> Roach’s analysis is taken from the “Introduction to Cultural Studies” in *Critical Theory and Performance*. His explanation builds on concepts from Richard Schechner and Dwight Conquergood.

The text places importance—by its lengthy inclusion—on African American artistic production because, as Johnson writes in his “Preface”, “The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced...No people that has produced great literature and art has ever been looked upon by the world as distinctly inferior...” (“Preface”). By demonstrating the production’s greatness, the text—via performances such as these—demonstrates black America’s claim to cultural greatness. The scene of cultural performance is important both for demonstrating that black Americans are capable of artistic creation and, as well, that black Americans have culture independent and separate from “white America.” Johnson continues in his essay, “And nothing will do more to change that mental attitude and raise his status than a demonstration of intellectual parity by the Negro through the production of literature and art.” The novel exemplifies Johnson’s argument through its demonstration of artistic production by black performers. Because, as Johnson’s essay continues, “Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing this immemorial stereotype faster than he has ever done through any other method he has been able to use.” Johnson’s “Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist” claims that “The common idea is that the Negro reached America intellectually, culturally, and morally empty, and that he is here to be filled...In a word, the stereotype is that the Negro is nothing more than a beggar at the gate of the nation, waiting to be thrown the crumbs of civilization” (Andrews 350). Not only does the demonstration of artistic talent in the novel crush stereotypes of black people’s intellectual aptitude, but the demonstration destroys the belief that black people are without culture. As Johnson writes, a black artist is not only a contributor to America’s artistic creation but also “He is impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature...” (“Race Prejudice” 350). What *Autobiography* demonstrates in the scene with John Brown and Singing Johnson are artistic and cultural products created without the intervention, influence,

or presence of white America. Therefore, these performances show culture created by black Americans as distinctly different from mainstream America and culture created independently from white America.

In this same scene, the narrator also comments on the depth of fear and possibility of change that witnessing such a performance can entail. Performers can be admired, as Richard Bauman claims, “for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide,” and simultaneously feared because “of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo” (45). This performance scene accomplishes both. The unnamed narrator states that no one can witness these performances without experiencing “thrilling emotion” thereby claiming power in the performances and making an emotional connection with the audience. The narrator also claims that anyone not affected by the performance must have a heart of stone—highlighting appeal for these performances across racial divides and subverting stereotypes that African American art is inferior to American (or white European) art. This idea of stereotyped inferiority is supported in E. Patrick Johnson’s analysis of Dwight Conquergood’s concepts regarding performance theory. Johnson explains that people “enact” and “transact” cultural value every day through valuing their own and other people’s social performances and the premises of these values (17-18). In the cultural performance transactions, E. Patrick Johnson theorizes that subordinate groups, such as black people, cannot have “the privilege of explicitness, the luxury of transparency, the presumptive norm of clear and direct communication” with the same level of freedom privileged to and taken for granted by white people (34). Internalizing this privileged versus subordinate dichotomy into the premise of cultural value creates a status of inferiority for the subordinate group’s culture. Accordingly, a statement alone that African American art produces the ability to show “the Negro as a creator and contributor to American civilization” as Johnson writes in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, would be ineffective because American

citizens determine cultural value by their own experiences—and the experiences of subordinate groups of people are undervalued. Therefore, Johnson employs the stage performances of Singing Johnson and John Brown to redefine what constitutes valuable culture via his claim that anyone who does not shed a tear must have a heart of stone.

This scene also pinpoints a specific moment in the American history of theater and stage development coinciding with deeply entrenched racial stereotypes. The novel's historical significance in 1912 is supported by Miriam Thaggert's argument for valuing Johnson's claim for African American literature and art in order to "gain national acceptance and respect" but also "for active remembering of what would become a crucial period, for such art memorializes that period in objects of lasting importance and reshapes historically entrenched ideas about blackness" (178). The novel's earlier 1912 publication and use of examples of black artistic productions preserves these historical productions and memorializes how the productions shaped the American cultural landscape. Just prior to the "Big Meeting" scene, the narrator comments on American stereotypes of the Negro as he travels in the South: "His character has been established as a happy-go-lucky, laughing, shuffling, banjo-picking being, and the reading public has not yet been prevailed upon to take him seriously. His efforts to elevate himself socially are looked upon as a sort of absurd caricature of 'white civilization'" (*AECM*, 1960 168). The emotionally involved and highly developed performances of Singing Johnson and the preacher work against these stereotypes. The text's examples fall directly in line with what early critics such as Johnson and more recent critics such as Britt Rusert argue that, in the 1800s and into the turn of the twentieth century, "Mass entertainments regularly played upon the drama of appearance" and public shows were "staging grounds for exhibiting human difference" thereby "making the supposedly deep and essential differences of African American bodies hypervisible on the antebellum stage" (292). The novel uses this hypervisibility of the stage to work against the

very stereotypes previously reinforced by stage productions. As well as demonstrating value in the art, the text works to reclaim the performance space. John Brown and Singing Johnson, on stage in front of an audience, depict a respectable art form *and* a respectable presentation of black bodies on that stage. The scene, by reclaiming the space of the stage, dispels and undermines entrenched negative depictions of black bodies.

Immediately before this performance scene, the narrator comments on white audiences' stereotypes and their limitations placed on black performers. He tells the reader:

A novel dealing with coloured people who lived in respectable homes and amidst a fair degree of culture and who naturally acted 'just like white folks' would be taken in a comic-opera sense... No matter how well he may portray the deeper passions, the public is loath to give him up in his old character; they even conspire to make him a failure in serious work, in order to force him back into comedy. (*AECM*, 1960 168)

The text acknowledges contemporaneous racial stereotypes of black Americans and works to dispel these and the limitations on black artists through inclusions of black artists. And the novel achieves some success in its attempts, as a review in the *Cleveland Gazette* of the 1912 edition demonstrates: "This book is of further interest because it reveals the thoughts and feelings of a negro as he is brought into relation with the white race. In a word, he puts himself so effectually in the negro's place that we see the negro as he actually is, rather than as somebody imagines he is" (Goldsby 283).<sup>7</sup> From the viewpoint of white readers, this scene "reveals the thoughts and feelings" of the black narrator and also places the white reader "in the place" of the black narrator so that the white reader understands the experience of black performances from the viewpoint of "the negro's place." Additionally, as the review points out, the scene shows two black artists as they "really are" rather than as people the white reader "imagines them to be."

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<sup>7</sup> "Review of 1912 Edition," June 15, 1912, *Cleveland Gazette*, from *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (2015) edited by Jacqueline Goldsby. Special thanks to Goldsby for her edited collection of the novel's first and second editions, Johnson's related writings on the novel and subject, letters to and from Johnson, reviews of both the 1912 and 1927 editions, and notable scholarly articles on the novel.

Additionally, the scene of Singing Johnson and the preacher complicates issues of race. Related to the “one drop rule,” contemporary popular understandings believed in the ability to absolutely determine a white person from a black person. This is explicitly part of the novel in the unnamed narrator’s experience as a light complexioned black man. Even the title of the novel itself, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, focuses on issues of race and of the narrator becoming an ex-black man. A review of the 1912 publication of *Autobiography* claims that “The publisher’s assertion that the mistreatment of the negroes by white persons in American...is based upon ignorance of the fact that it is not by complexion alone that race is ascertainable. Only ignorance can see any possibility of a mixture of Anglo-Saxon to distinguish between a North American mixed blood and a white person” (Goldsby 289).<sup>8</sup> The reviewer assumes clear distinction between the races, and that it is obviously possible to distinguish black from white—only “ignorant” people believe racial “mixing” as a possibility. However, the Singing Johnson scene overturns stereotypes of black performers at the turn of the century. As Aldon Nielsen argues, “the nameless narrator’s critique of literary stereotype has also revealed a type of discursive passing that white writing has unknowingly perpetrated upon itself” because, if the pervasiveness of stereotyping of black people is true, “then it must be the case that our literature is a national literature, a cultural product of our national life, to the extent that it is a white construction of blackness” (177). And because of this the novel is “at least in part, a cognitive mapping of a world in which ‘white’ does not ‘know’ the truth of its own blackness” (178). Claiming African American art as American culture and claiming visual presentations of black bodies on an American stage leads to claiming black people as Americans and therefore indistinguishable in their Americanness.

Prejudices regarding African American culture existed within the black community as well as the larger American community. Located between the explanation of white

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<sup>8</sup> Review of the 1912 Edition, July 27, 1912 from the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.

stereotyping and the novel's depiction the "Big Meeting," the narrator comments that, "Both these types are now looked upon generally with condescension or contempt by the progressive element among the coloured people; but it should never be forgotten that it was they who led the race from paganism and kept it steadfast to Christianity through all the long, dark years of slavery" (*AECM* 1960, 175). Directly after the performance the narrator repeats this claim that the black community does not appreciate its own culture and offers reasons why: "This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro" (*AECM* 1960, 181). Because of the historical proximity to slavery, Johnson's 1912 readers would have associated art and culture with European and white values. What the narrator posits here is supported by multiple scholarly critics, including LeRoi Jones' argument regarding publications at the turn of the twentieth century. Jones and the novel comment on the black community being "too close" to the legacy of slavery. Jones calls this a "kind of hideous attitude in a Negro" and explains it "could only stem from an acceptance of the idea of the superiority of the white man, or at least the proposition that the Negro, somehow, must completely lose himself within the culture and social order of the master." Jones dubs this "another aspect of the slave mentality" (59). The narrator comments explicitly on the historical connection of African American culture to slavery, giving not just artistic value to the performance, but also historical and cultural—claiming that performers such as Brown and Johnson created a cultural legacy going back for generations. The generations of legacy, the novel claims, gives cultural weight to the art because of its long and unbroken lineage.

Critics have praised Johnson's novel specifically for its depictions of black Americans and his work against stereotypical depictions of African American art.<sup>9</sup> Coinciding with this artistic development, many of the novel's contemporaries, such as W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, and Johnson himself, commented on African American theater's developing presence at this same time.<sup>10</sup> W.E.B. DuBois' "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre"<sup>11</sup> explains that the Negro has long been involved in the theater, but his predominantly white audience required him to perform to an "alien" group. And, as DuBois claims, "Only recently has he begun tentatively to emerge as an ordinary human being with everyday reactions" (447). The turning point that DuBois writes of begins with the New Negro Renaissance, and the 1912 publication of this novel sits at the cusp of the Renaissance's beginning. Johnson's own experiences working in theater ideally situated him to comment on the significance black art's developing presence on the American cultural scene. Johnson's experiences with historical theater are covered in Eric Sundquist's work on the historical theater projects of Johnson, his brother Rosamond, and Bob Cole, who "belonged to the generation of musicians whose work for the black stage significantly transcended the crudest coon song stereotypes of the day" (14). (Johnson himself commented that he originally published the novel anonymously so that the story could have more "truth" in the story, as so many of the narrator's experiences follow Johnson's own biography.) *Autobiography's* unnamed narrator serves as an example character meeting scenes of resistance via his participation in and witnessing of stage performances throughout the novel. Rather than rely on white cultural standards of value, the narrator argues that black people should create their own standards to value culture. The narrator demonstrates this when he

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert Fleming's 1971 article "Irony as a Key" and Howard Faulkner's 1985 "JWJ Portrait of the Artist."

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Stepto's article on *Autobiography* and his comparison of the novel to the contemporary Negro cabaret.

<sup>11</sup> This essay, originally published in *The Crisis* (June 1926), can be found in James Hatch and Leo Hamalian's *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*.

claims: “I was a more or less sophisticated and non-religious man of the world, but the torrent of the preacher’s words, moving with the rhythm and glowing with the eloquence of primitive poetry, swept me along, and I, too, felt like joining in the shouts of ‘Amen! Hallelujah!’” (*AECM*, 1960 177). Johnson explains in “Race Prejudice” that this attempt to critically value African American art was one approach to addressing the race problem: “Today a newer approach is being tried, an approach which discards most of the older methods. It requires a minimum of pleas, or propaganda, or philanthropy” and “It depends more upon what the Negro himself does than upon what someone does for him. It is the approach along the line of intellectual and artistic achievement by Negroes, and may be called the art approach to the Negro problem” (Andrews 344). By situating the performance scene within a black community event, the novel establishes artistic valuation with the space of the black community and not with outsider white spectators.

As well, if this art, with roots in slavery, is a quintessentially American cultural product, as Johnson and the novel demonstrate, then the former “slave music” has value *as* American culture. Alain Locke’s “The Negro’s Contribution to American Culture” supports this in his writing that what is “Negro” quickly passes into what is “American” and what is now “American” was historically “English or Anglo-Saxon.” Locke writes that this logic “destroys completely the ‘nation within a nation’ analogy which has been so overworked a parallel, and makes Negro literature and art a vital, integral part of American cultural expression.” (242). While this makes defining African American art difficult, it also shows value in these “slave songs” through demonstrating their value as part of American culture. Locke does find fault with Johnson’s definition of African American art, which he claims Johnson categorizes solely according to race, however, in his writing Locke does support Johnson’s connections of black art to American culture. This points to both an uninterrupted legacy of black culture existing as far back as slavery and also a cultural value lying not just

with the inventor of the art but with the producer—with the person performing the art. This valuation argument follows Sundquist’s analysis of Singing Johnson’s “ancestral memory and racial history.” Sundquist points out that he is not the creator of these songs but serves as “an emblem of the spirituals’ creators, who may have been strong individual personalities but were nonetheless immersed in the communal act of creation” and the absence of a creator “is a sign of both historical community and the precious survival of cultural forms throughout the duress of slavery” (38). While the preacher and singer are not necessarily creators of the songs or sermons, as Sundquist points out, their presence throughout slavery, Reconstruction, and Post Reconstruction shows a legacy of cultural memory. The performance legacy of gospel music and preaching becomes the means by which black artistic creations demonstrate a historical presence.

#### AUTHENTICITY & APPROPRIATION OF CULTURAL PRODUCT

Throughout the novel, the narrator questions the dichotomy of the color-line in his own performances and as an audience member for both black and white audiences. One moment of questioning occurs in the novel’s depiction of a cakewalk dance, which is almost as in-depth as the description of the “Big Meeting.” In the novel the narrator explains that “This was the cakewalk in its original form, and it is what the coloured performers on the theatrical stage developed into the prancing movements now known all over the world” (*AECM*, 1960 86-87). Although a fictional account Johnson based his description in the novel from historical performances such as Williams and Walker who, as he describes in *Black Manhattan*, “made the cake-walk not only popular, but fashionable” (104-106). The text immediately follows the cakewalk description with Johnson’s now well-known line: “It is my opinion that the coloured people of this country have done four things which refute the oft-advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrate that they have

originality and artistic conception, and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally” (*AECM*, 1960 87). This commentary continues extolling the centrality of African American art, both as American art and even beyond the country’s borders. As many critics and historians have previously demonstrated, turn of the century United States had little respect for black artists and performers. One early reviewer of the novel states “I do not think that in 1912 there were any great number of persons who considered Negro music any more seriously than as one of the art used by a clown to entertain the people he must entertain” (313).<sup>12</sup> But Johnson notes in “Race Prejudice” a historical change was occurring in public acceptance of black performers: “There is a coming to light and notice of efforts that have been going on for a long while, and a public appreciation of their results” (344). The narrator’s claims for African American art supports experiences readers would have witnessed historically regarding these artistic productions. In fact, Errol Hill and James Hatch’s archival work on African American theater unearthed over one hundred black shows from the decade of 1900. Performances from this decade were, “popular spectacle, dance, and music—black vaudeville whose history affords us almost no scripts” (211). The novel reflects its contemporaneous types of artistic performances to make its claims authentic. The demonstration of the art and the explanation of its importance places value in black art. This, in turn, leads to questioning the validity of audience discrimination of black performers.

The novel strikes down discriminatory depictions of black performers in the United States and presents African American art as successfully performed in Europe. Mid-narrative the narrator travels to Europe and plays ragtime for a German audience. One German musician follows the narrator’s ragtime and converts it into classical music: “He seated himself at the piano, and, taking the theme of my rag-time, played it through first in straight

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<sup>12</sup> Alfred L. S. Wood, from “Agates and Migs,” Sept 21, 1927, *Springfield Union* (*AECM* 2015).

chords; then varied and developed it through every known musical form. I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into rag-time, a comparatively easy task, and this man had taken rag-time and made it classic” (*AECM*, 1960 142). If ragtime music can be converted into classical music, then ragtime becomes a legitimate musical genre and not a bastardization of classical music. This scene claims ragtime as an authentic art form no longer limited to the lower or less important arts. By extension African American art becomes legitimate culture instead of a lower form of American culture. And this is how *Autobiography* differs from earlier texts—through claiming black cultural history via the art’s depiction within African American literature.

The scene also legitimizes African American art to audiences by describing the art’s connection to European culture in a way that the audience (including readers) have been trained to value culture. The novel plays to a cross-racial reading audience, one that viewed European cultural as high art and therefore valuable. Part of *Autobiography*’s significance is its attempt to “walk the color-line” for both white and black audiences, specifically by using ragtime, an art form that large numbers of readership would know. A rising push for change with the “Negro problem” was arising in the American consciousness, and it coincided with growing theatrical performance space for black Americans. Noelle Morrisette’s study of the Johnson brothers’ theater work acknowledges that, “While it may seem unlikely that Johnson pursued civil rights through the musical comedies he subsequently authored with his brother,” his experience in the artistic world, “made him a unique leader for the cause while affording him the opportunity to shape a new, modern self” (6). In *Autobiography* Johnson crafted a fictional novel using his very real experiences. The scenes of performance in the novel deal directly with historical race problems because, as Morrisette writes, “Accustomed to blackface stereotypes of the minstrel and vaudeville stage, American audiences did not usually align musical theater with dignity” and she credits Johnson as breaking this “mold of

expectations” through his use in the novel of a variety of black artists (6). Johnson’s own experience with theater “enabled him to develop a new discourse on race in tandem with a new theory of literary composition afforded by his exposure to musical composition” (6). Johnson himself states that, “A startling truth is that America would not be precisely the America it is except for the silent power the Negro has exerted upon it” (Andrews 738). Johnson terms “silent power” to mean the legitimacy of cultural value in black performers and performances. *Autobiography* demonstrates this claim when the narrator visits a New York club. He witnesses as an audience member a black pianist’s performance:

[T]he stout man at the piano began to run his fingers up and down the keyboard. This he did in a manner which indicated that he was master of a good deal of technique. Then he began to play; and such playing! I stopped talking to listen. It was music of a kind I had never heard before... The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect. (*AECM*, 1960 98-99)

The earlier performance scenes of Singing Johnson, the preacher, and the German composer work to claim originality and authenticity of black American culture. This scene adds an additional claim—the black performer creates original art never previously experienced. The music is an intricate and highly developed art form, demonstrating that the creator is highly skilled.

This concept of originality and skill is especially significant, revealed through the novel’s devotion of considerable space explaining the cultural background and historical legacy of ragtime music. This explanation is quoted in length to demonstrate the depth of historical underpinnings connected to the scene:

This was rag-time music, then a novelty in New York, and just growing to be a rage, which has not yet subsided. It was originated in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano-players who knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe, but were guided by natural musical instinct and talent. It made its way to Chicago, where it was popular some time before it reached New York... This was the beginning of the rag-time song. Several of these improvisations were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered, and published under the names of the arrangers... They sprang into immediate popularity

and earned small fortunes, of which the Negro originators got only a few dollars. But I have learned that since that time a number of coloured men, of not only musical talent, but training, are writing out their own melodies and words and reaping the reward of their work. I have learned also that they have a large number of white imitators and adulterators. (*AECM*, 1960 99-100)

The relationship of these two sections—the black pianist and the narrator’s commentary on ragtime—is twofold. First, the scene actually *shows* the black performer enacting the performance and therefore his skill, forcing the reader to become a witness to the art’s creation as well as its physical demonstration by the black artist. Thaggert explains that the physical black body and the visual of a black body are “inevitably intertwined” because “blackness readily connotes bodiliness” whereas “whiteness assumes the values of rationality and intellect” (7). By placing the physical body of a black musician on stage, the novel reclaims the space previously occupied by metaphorical negative assumptions of black bodies and places a successful black artist in that space. The black performer’s creation of ragtime reclaims that art form from white appropriation and profiting of black art.<sup>13</sup> The novel’s inclusion of the ragtime scene demonstrates black culture producers authentically creating the art, thereby laying claim to that creation.

Johnson addresses white appropriation in “The Poor White Musician.” In the essay he responds to a *Globe* article that questions why people prefer black ragtime music over white musicians. Johnson writes, “[Black musicians] may not have spent ‘as many fortunes or as many years of painstaking study’ as the white musicians, but what has that to do with natural musical ability? Nothing. It only goes to show that white men need to spend fortunes and years of study in order to play music as well, or almost as well, as Negroes do naturally” (Andrews 618). While he does not use the term “white appropriation,” Johnson’s response directly points to the authenticity of black artists’ work because they do not have to study

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<sup>13</sup> Previous critics have written on white appropriation of black art forms. For example, Sundquist writes of ragtime specifically where “black ragtime composers frequently saw their work appropriated, or stolen outright, by white artists and publishers” (20).

music to play it but do so naturally. In contrast, white musicians must spend “fortunes” and “years of painstaking study” to master a similar quality of art. Or, as Wallace Thurman writes more succinctly, “For as the overfed child gags when forced to swallow an extra spoonful of half-sour milk, so will the gullible American public gag when too much of this fervid fetish known as negro art is shoveled into its gaping minds and mouths, and the Afro-American artist will find himself as unchampioned and as unimpressive” (315).<sup>14</sup> Both these statements claim an innate authenticity in black artistic performance and contrast it with learned white appropriation of these art forms.

The novel’s inclusion of the scene demonstrates black America’s creation of this art form predating white America’s use of this musical style in the 1920s. Placing the critical conversation on the 1912 publication date shows yet again how the novel predicts American appropriation of African American performance. Reading the text as a novel published in 1912, rather than when it was republished in 1927, uncovers how the scenes foresee the popularity of ragtime in the 1920s and white artists’ adoption of the form. In 1926, fourteen years after the novel’s first publication, Johnson reminds the American public of the origins of this music: “before the Negro succeeded fully in establishing his title as creator of his secular music the form was taken away from him and made national instead of racial. It has been developed into the distinct musical idiom by which America expresses itself popularly, and by which it is known universally” (“Preface,” Andrews 736). When the novel was republished, Alice Dunbar Nelson and other reviewers of the 1927 edition note these very predictions the novel presents. In a letter written to Johnson in 1925, Carl Van Vechten comments on Johnson’s vision for the future of African American culture, and he writes specifically regarding this scene. The letter states, “I was particularly interested to discover that you were apparently the first to sense the musical possibilities of ragtime and to predict

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<sup>14</sup> Wallace Thurman review of *The Autobiography*, Sept 24, 1927, *The Independent* (Goldsby 2015).

for it a future as an art-form” (Goldsby 237). Dunbar Nelson’s article specifically shows how *Autobiography* was able to predict changes to the artistic world brought on by the New Negro Renaissance:

Fifteen years ago, when the book appeared, there was no Harlem, as we know it now...The child of mysterious parentage, such as the author describes himself in the earlier chapters, was common enough in the South of thirty or forty years ago, but fortunately no more...Jazz was unknown, but Lottie Collins had glorified rag-time, and the big Negro shows of the time were making it classic. Cabarets were ‘Clubs’ and vice was gilded, not painted. Life was a bubble and froth in the cup of pleasure, but its bubbles were perhaps caused by real champagne, and not by bootleg substitutes. (325)<sup>15</sup>

Dunbar Nelson’s review echoes the words of Johnson’s novel. She goes on to comment on Johnson’s scene regarding the Southern black music’s future as cultural heritage and Dunbar Nelson claims that Johnson made, “A bold prophecy, but that day has come, and more than that, for this slave music is the biggest thing in the modern musical world” (326). Dunbar Nelson’s statements reflect the same connection to slavery’s legacy as the novel but, as with Johnson and Jones, she writes positively that “slave music” has become so successful in the musical world. By resituating the critical conversation on *Autobiography* to its first publication, the novel becomes a “proto” Renaissance text and one that highlights the changing world of American culture. At the same time it “reclaims” African American culture as separate from mainstream America and authentically created by black artists.

The “reclaim” is significant because, at the time of the first publication, African American art had not yet become a fixture of the mainstage of American culture. Even so the novel stresses the importance of the narrator witnessing the live performances by black artists. While staying in New York the narrator and his friends go to the “Club” one night after gambling. Here, for the first time, the narrator (and the novel’s readers) gain insight into the complexities ragtime music: “I took a seat at once by the side of the piano-player, and was soon lost to everything except the novel charm of the music. I watched the performer

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<sup>15</sup> Alice Dunbar Nelson, “Our Book Shelf,” Nov 1927, *Opportunity* (Goldsby 2015).

with the idea of catching the trick, and during one of his intermissions I took his place at the piano and made an attempt to imitate him, but even my quick ear and ready fingers were unequal to the task on first trial” (*AECM*, 1960 112). This commentary reminds readers, yet again, that black artists are the creators of ragtime music; it is also the first time the narrator admits to being unequal to the performer. The narrator is a classically trained pianist; his admission that he is “unequal” to the black artists signifies the complicated nature of the music despite its apparent simplicity. More importantly, the performance occurs in a space permitted to black artists. Robert Stepto terms the club a “symbolic space” and calls it “an Afro-American ritual ground where responses to oppressing social structures are made and in some measure sustained by ‘tribal’ bonds” (366). While calling the club a “tribal space” does have problematic connotations, Stepto’s argument highlights the space of the club as important. In a world that largely barred black musicians, and even more often barred black audiences, the club permits an actual physical space for black performers to perform ragtime music and for a black audience to witness it.

The scene explicitly describes white appropriation of ragtime when the narrator explains that “There was also another set of white people who came frequently; it was made up of variety performers and others who delineated ‘darky characters’; they came to get their imitations first-hand from the Negro entertainers they saw there” (*AECM*, 1960 107). In this scene the “white imitators” must come to the source (the black Club) to learn how to mimic the artist. Here the novel uncovers the truth; that white America is in love with black art. This inverts assumptions in early twentieth century America that African American art is inferior to white art. Instead, it is superior, and not only is the black art form superior, but white artists must enter black artists’ performance spaces to learn the art form.

Johnson uses his personal experiences writing ragtime to argue in “Preface” that, “Now, the colored composers, even in this particular field, are greatly outnumbered by the

white...But there is a great hope for the development of this music...there will yet come great Negro composers who will take this music and voice through it not only the soul of their race, but the soul of America..." The novel makes use of the genre of autobiography to show possibilities for African American art and artists in America and the narrator's experiences are based in historical truth.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Morgan supports this claim in his argument that the personal decisions of the narrator place events in front of readers and force the readers to "question their previous presuppositions about blackness in light of what they have learned about African Americans from the narrator" (224). The use of the first person unnamed narrator "blurs" fact and fiction, presenting what the narrator relates and commentaries he provides to become first-hand experience, rather than a fictional tale. As Gayle Wald explains, the novel involves "the manipulation of conventions of literary realism to fool readers, to assure them of the essential trustworthiness of autobiography even as the text itself undermines such notions of trustworthiness" (149). And Morgan argues that, "these examples explicitly counter the existing pastoral codes that had constructed black identity" (226). In addition to the use of the autobiographical form to "fool audiences," inclusion of the white appropriation of ragtime in the novel also serves to critique white use of black art. Historically, white performers donned blackface and appropriated black artistic performance. In the novel the narrator's viewpoint forces readers—specifically here white readers—to understand perspective of the black performer and audience. This "forced consciousness" of white readers into black perspective is what Morgan calls "a white-face performance" of the novel that "inverts the operational logic of the minstrelsy tradition Johnson had been forced

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<sup>16</sup> Some critics have analyzed Johnson's use of autobiography as a technique to work into the tradition of previous black authors. For an example see Donald Goellnicht's "Passing as Autobiography" where he claims that, "Johnson seems to have attempted to gain credibility and a market for his text by trading on the importance of autobiography in early African American writing" (18) because, "black autobiography had been immensely successful, gaining support for the abolition cause in particular and sympathy for the plight of African Americans in general" (19). The novel's structure, based on an already successful model, permitted ease of access for readers.

to use during his song-writing days” (224). As Zora Neale Hurston writes, “Speaking of the use of Negro material by white performers, it is astonishing that so many are trying it, and I have never seen one yet entirely realistic...Every one seems to think that the Negro is easily imitated when nothing is further from the truth” (1060).<sup>17</sup> For black artists and those “in the know” on “authentic” ragtime, white impersonation of ragtime artists is evident in its failure to master the art form. The novel’s club scene stages this claim through the originality and proficiency of the black artist, as well as the narrator’s witnessing white performers in the audience who will leave to the club and mimic the art form.

#### LONELINESS AS A BLACK MEMBER IN A WHITE AUDIENCE

*Autobiography* deals in part with perspectives of white readership, but it largely concerns black audiences and their responses to African American art. Specifically, the novel stages scenes from the perspective of the narrator as a black audience member who feels disconnected from the white audience that surrounds him. In the first he witnesses his friend, Shiny, give an oration. The narrator comments that Shiny, the black man on stage, must feel a separation from the largely white crowd. He imagines Shiny experiences what the narrator defines as “loneliness.” The narrator reflects to his readers:

What were his thoughts when he stepped forward and looked into that crowd of faces, all white with the exception of a score or so that were lost to view? I do not know, but I fancy he felt his loneliness. I think there must have rushed over him a feeling akin to that of a gladiator tossed into the arena and bade to fight for his life. I think that solitary little black figure standing there felt that for the particular time and place he bore the weight and responsibility of his race; that for him to fail meant general defeat; but he won, and nobly. (*AECM*, 1960 44)

This projected loneliness and image of a solitary black figure invokes Shiny as a representation of blackness for all audiences. He holds the “weight and responsibility of his race.” The narrator acknowledges the loneliness that Shiny as a black performer must feel in

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<sup>17</sup> From Hurston’s 1934 “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” republished in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*.

front of a sea of white audience members and the narrator, as a fellow black performer, understands Shiny's position in a way that the white audience cannot. Young's analysis of black theatre performances helps explain this scene from the perspective of a white audience viewing a black performer. Young writes, "To conjure a racial label and project it across another person in an effort to categorize that person is an exercise of power. It is a demonstration of the capacity to control and manipulate others: to divide them, to sort them, to mark them, and, even, to name them" (11). Using Young's analysis the narrator's commentary on Shiny as a black man separate from the white audience places the expectation of power with the larger masses, the white audience. This scene acknowledges difficulties faced by black performers, most significantly in the audience's composition as overwhelmingly white. As *the* representation of blackness, Shiny would need to portray the white audience's expectations of blackness. The narrator acknowledges this by comparing Shiny to a gladiator, a performer who must battle for his audience's approval.

The narrator counters the gladiator image by explaining his response as a black audience member: "the effect upon me of 'Shiny's' speech was double; I not only shared the enthusiasm of his audience, but he imparted to me some of his own enthusiasm. I felt leap within me pride that I was coloured; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honour to the Negro race" (*AECM*, 1960 46). Young calls the identification between two people a "hail" and claims that, "Through [the hail], an individual can be recognized as—and therefore, can be transformed into (in the eyes of others as well as her own)—an insider or outsider, ally or enemy, friend or foe" (12). Young's argument of the "hail" or the recognition supports the narrator's response, which Young explains is "authorized by the community within that individual dwells." (11). The control of the situation, in Young's theory, lies not just in those who label but also those who find like-minded recognition of the hail. In the novel the narrator's recognition of Shiny's loneliness and his identification with

Shiny signal the power of the hail. By recognizing the power of Shiny's performance in its ability to share enthusiasm and racial pride, the performer (Shiny) and his audience (the narrator) transform the performance. The narrator's perspective lends the reader insight into a black man's experience in a largely white audience. In a letter to Sherman, French & Company, Johnson writes "My object in writing the book was not to raise a special plea for the Negro but to present in a sympathetic yet dispassionate manner" (AECM 2015 222). As Young also writes, "Using the theatre as a tool to engage black communities...playwrights among other artists could articulate the experience of blackness. Audiences could gather to see themselves, their stories, their culture, and their lives represented on stage" ("Introduction" 7). Young refers only to theater as in plays, but this same concept of mirroring with performer and audience applies outside of the formal theater as well. When Shiny performs he is a figure set apart physically from the audience—the space of the stage creates a separation between the group gazing upon the performer and the performer himself. Despite the separation, the narrator identifies with Shiny.

Helga Crane from Nella Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand* experiences a similar sense of loneliness represented in Shiny, but her reaction starkly contrasts with the narrator's reaction. While visiting with her white relatives in Denmark, Helga attends a vaudeville show. At the theater she "was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget" (85). The difference between the narrator's positive viewpoint and Helga's negative one lies in the black audience member's understanding of the performance's purpose for the white audience. In *Autobiography* the narrator views Shiny's performance as a demonstration of black artistic accomplishment; Helga views the performance as staging black inferiority. This feeling of inferiority fits Charles Scruggs argument that, to Helga, this

performance in *Quicksand* “reveal[s] something that should be concealed. The spectacle recalls a racialized past that embarrasses her...” (158). For Helga the feeling of loneliness occurs when she acknowledges her difference, due to race, from the rest of the audience. She experiences isolation through her inability to be like the rest of the audience—the white audience. Helga’s experience fits Lazare Mijuskovic’s definition of psychological isolation: “The peculiar characteristic in this type of felt separation is constituted by ‘the rational recognition that men face conditions of existence in their relation to others which they do not know how to change’” (51).<sup>18</sup> While *Quicksand* demonstrates Helga’s racial color-line awareness throughout the novel, the performance scene centers around Helga’s inability to ever cross that divide. The theater space of the theater’s stage permits Helga to view performances of blackness—through the vaudeville actors—and white audience’s reaction to blackness. Mijuskovic explains that “a black man may feel isolated by professional, political, legal, economic, and social barriers. i.e., by *real* obstructions, from participating in certain activities which are simply guaranteed to other white members within a community” (51). To the white audience the vaudeville performance is solely entertainment; in contrast, Helga is unable to participate in the entertainment of the performance because she recognizes shared past (or racial experience) with the performers. Her shared racial identification leads Helga to understand that the audience’s views of the black performers correlates with how those same people view her. Helga identifies with the black performers through her recognition that the song they perform is one she knows from her childhood. With this identification comes the knowledge that she could also be laughed at by the white audience.

The narrator in *Autobiography* faces his own negative moment of racial consciousness. While in Europe he attends a performance of *Faust*. From the audience he recognizes his father with his half-sister, but his own father does not recognize him, which

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<sup>18</sup> In the section of the article referenced here, Mijuskovic cites Rubin Gotesky’s work on psychological isolation.

leads the narrator to feel “Slowly the desolate loneliness of my position” (134) and “I felt that I was suffering” (135). Previously the narrator projected loneliness onto Shiny but here the narrator experiences it personally, despite being surrounded by a crowd of other audience members. He explains to the reader, “Valentine’s love seemed like mockery, and I felt an almost uncontrollable impulse to rise up and scream to the audience: ‘Here, here in your very midst, is a tragedy, a real tragedy!’” (134). The scene’s tragedy is the ever present divide of the color-line where the black narrator cannot claim his white family. By extension the narrator, as a black audience member and black performer, cannot claim his American heritage. Despite the praise the novel builds for African American art and black artists, the novel then demonstrates how the black audience member will never feel as one with the white audience and addresses concerns that black artists will not be fully recognized as American artists. Sundquist explains that “in the America of Jim Crow, to be black was always to wear the distorted mask of blackness before the white world and to be, in legal and political terms, ‘nobody.’ To be black, in relation to the dominant white culture, was to be ‘anonymous’” (9). In this moment the narrator becomes a nobody, even to his own father and sister. Both Helga and the unnamed narrator find themselves struggling for agency in these scenes. This moment watching *Faust* is, for the narrator, what Dwight Conquergood calls “macrostructures of political economy” which E. Patrick Johnson explains as “how macrostructures impinge on micro-textures of subjugated peoples’ experience and how individuals caught within forbidding structures struggle for agency and resist” (8). Internalizing the color-line divide creates a schism for the black audience members where their experience in a predominantly white audience uncovers the powerlessness of black art to create substantive change. Because American (white) audiences are not even aware of the divide, black artists can be erased from white American consciousness without observation. The isolation and racial divide serves as part of the novel’s warning; the clash of African American art with

white audiences will leave the art and performers powerless to change white audience's perceptions regarding race and could even cause the art to be consumed by white American culture.

White audiences become aware of the color-divide only when black audience members are perceived as trespassing as in the case of DuBois's "Of the Coming of John." Many critics have written comparisons of *Autobiography* with DuBois's 1903 *The Souls of black Folk* but have overlooked similarities between the narrator's viewing of *Faust* and Black John's theater experience in the Northern city.<sup>19</sup> During the movie showing Black John examines the white audience members and "wondered why the beautiful gray-haired woman looked so listless, and what the little man could be whispering about. He would not like to be listless and idle, he thought, for he felt with the music the movement of power within him" (158). As does the unnamed narrator, John feels an emotional connection with the artistic performance. Both John and the narrator note the white audience's lack of emotional response to the respective performances. During the movie an usher (named "White" John from the same childhood town as Black John) asks Black John to leave because the theater is segregated. As with the narrator a white figure from Black John's past reappears in the present as a haunting reminder of racial difference and the inequality it creates. The narrator's loneliness and the separation Helga and Black John feel from the white audience connects to a sense of isolation. In all three scenes the black figures are physically and psychologically separated from the white figures. In these instances the white audiences serve as representations for white America. The black audience members within the predominantly white audiences feel location-less, outside of the identification with America, and therefore experience loneliness.

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<sup>19</sup> For example, see Robert Stepto's work on *Autobiography*.

In contrast to these scenes of loneliness, *Autobiography* also includes a scene of a supportive black audience. As a young man the narrator plays the piano at a benefit to raise money after his mother dies. He looks into the audience and sees “the faces of the several hundreds of people who were there solely on account of love or sympathy for me, emotions swelled in my heart which enabled me to play the ‘Pathetique’ as I could never again play it” (51). This scene plays sharply against Shiny’s performance located just a few pages earlier. In this scene the narrator performs for a black audience versus Shiny’s white audience. Not only does the narrator comment on the supportive audience, he explains that these people “were there solely on account of love or sympathy,” thereby removing the visible yet invisible presence of racial color-divides from the audience. At the end of the performance, “When the last tone died away, the few who began to applaud were hushed by the silence of the others; and for once I played without receiving an encore” (51). Where Shiny’s lonely performance is greeted with empty applause, the narrator’s supported performance is greeted with positive silence because of the shared emotion between the performer and the audience. In the scene with Shiny’s performance, the white audience responds positively to the performance, as they also do in *Quicksand* with Helga, but none of the white audience comprehends the depth of emotion experienced by the black audiences and communicated by the black performers. In this scene, the black audience fully connects with the black performer and his artistic performance.

#### AWARENESS AND WHITE AUDIENCES

Toward the beginning of *Autobiography*, the narrator reflects to readers: “It is a difficult thing for a white man to learn what a coloured man really thinks; because...his thoughts are often influenced by considerations so delicate and subtle that it would be impossible for him to confess or explain them to one of the opposite race. This gives to every

coloured man, in proportion to his intellectuality, a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race” (*AECM*, 1960 21-22).

The narrator attempts to explain the severe loneliness and sense of separation experienced by black people within white audiences. The novel echoes DuBois’s concept of double consciousness from *The Souls of Black Folk*, “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings...” (8) The narrator uses “dual personality,” but the sentiment is the same. The novel reiterates the struggle of being both African and American. Unlike DuBois’s explanation, which places the struggle and emphasis on black Americans, the novel posits that the difficulty lies for white Americans. The struggle, in the novel’s logic, is that white Americans cannot truly understand black American perspective due to “considerations” or internalized stereotypes of black Americans.

Using this logic, white audiences are unable to truly understand black American cultural creations. In “The Dilemma of the Negro Author” (1928), Johnson claims the African American author faces a “special problem” that the “plain” (to use his word) American author doesn’t even know about: “the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience; it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often opposite and antagonistic points of view. His audience is always both white America and black America.” Johnson argues that this is a difficulty even in the conception of the artistic process because, “The moment a Negro writer takes up his pen or sits down to his typewriter he is immediately called upon to solve, consciously or unconsciously, this problem of the double audience. To whom shall he address himself, to his own black group or to white America?” (Andrews 745).<sup>20</sup> Johnson’s sentiment reflects the loneliness of the previous section, questioning the anxiety this causes in the black artist: is

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<sup>20</sup> For a more in depth study of Johnson’s concerns with the doubled audience, see George Hutchinson and John Young’s work on the novel.

African American art authentic to the white audience, the black audience, or the creator? The statements question the purpose of black artistic production: to accommodate white expectations, to support the black community, to play into European artistic traditions, or to demonstrate originality? Johnson's essay comments on this by explaining that "He must intentionally or unintentionally choose a black audience or a white audience or a combination of the two; and each of them presents peculiar difficulties" (Andrews 745). Black performers were the originators of the art form that was then appropriated by white performers, as shown in the earlier New York club scene. In a twist white audiences complain that black musicals are too much like white musicals—when it is white performers who mimic black performers. This entanglement and the novel's note of "peculiar difficulties" questions whether black performers should perform authentically or in-authentically for white audiences.

This divided audience that Johnson hypothesizes has real-world evidence. Daphne Brooks works with Williams & Walker's *In Dahomey* and claims that "Rather than re-asserting the domination of (white) spectatorial desire" the musical "waged a unique battle against the circumscription of black corporeality as well as narrativity" (239). Despite the musical's success with white audiences, Brooks notes the appeal to black audiences and how the musical provides interest to white audiences while simultaneously appealing to black community concerns. The narrator's portrayal and commentary on performing "black music" for a white audience in Johnson's novel aligns with Brooks' analysis of Williams and Walker's cakewalk, where she argues for understanding how the dance became, "not merely an expressive act" but became "*constitutive* of African American identity in the early twentieth century" (272). In a similar way the music the narrator plays becomes a representation of black identity—not merely a product produced by a black man, but a defining part of blackness in early twentieth century America. Brooks claims that the cakewalk becomes "a performative practice which, through the dance itself, establishes and

continuously re-assesses DuBois's legendary formulation of an identity constantly in contestation with itself" (272). Both Brooks and *Autobiography* assert that the performance space of the stage permits space in readers' and audiences' minds for social commentary on the duality of American audiences.

When the narrator passes for white at the novel's end, he becomes an ex-black man both racially and in terms of cultural production. Combined with the loneliness experienced with white audiences and the impossibility of performing authentically to please white audiences, the representation of the narrator's passing signifies on black performers who perform only to white audiences. Their whites-only audiences create a strain on artistic authenticity that can lead to artistic passing. The novel posits the danger in black artists becoming too aligned white audience, represented in the agreement the narrator's white millionaire friend and patron requires from him: "He told me that he would give me lots of work, his only stipulation being that I should not play any engagements such as I had just filled for him, except by his instructions" (120). Relying too closely on white audience approval can cause black artists to become caricatures of black artists. In other words, the artistic originality becomes lost in the effort to make it accessible to white audiences, or, as Donald Goellnicht notes, living entirely within European culture "may constitute the ultimate act of cultural and racial mimicry" and that "While the role-playing may have subversive potential, it also has the ability to contain and transform the actor" (26). In this way, the narrator as an artist becomes transformed to meet his white audiences' demands, performing the way they request, in the style they demand, in the medium they want. Goellnicht points to a problem: "The text implicitly asks whether ex-slaves were also forced to re-enslave themselves to the values of white society" (25) through valuing white audience demands on black performances.

The narrator describes the white audience's reaction: "In leaving, the guests were enthusiastic in telling the host that he had furnished them *the most unusual entertainment they had ever enjoyed*. When they had gone, my millionaire friend...said to me with a smile: 'Well, I have given them something *they've never had before*'" (120, emphasis added). The white people's statement about the "unusual entertainment" and the patron's claim that "they'd never seen before" emphasizes the originality of the narrator's artistic production. Furthermore, the statements show the white audience's desire with and preoccupation finding "unusual entertainments" that they have never previously experienced. This desire for something new fits Mijuskovic definition of "extroflexing," which is the mind "anxiously trying to keep itself occupied with various forms of diversion...lest it should be driven back into a confrontation with the nothingness that haunts each individual human psyche" (20). The white characters' search for something new attempts to fill the haunting of boredom. But this boredom (including the patron) differs than the loneliness the narrator comments feeling at *Faust*. In this scene white audience cannot understand the creation of art, not because of loneliness of isolation but of the haunting of nothingness—of never having been cultural creators. Johnson himself wrote that, "The truth is, the pure white race has not originated a single one of the great, fundamental intellectual achievements which has raised man in the scale of civilization" (Andrews 619). Separation and isolation from identification as American caused the narrator's loneliness. The white characters (by virtue of being white) feel not un-American, but instead experience the lack of truly experiencing art and therefore having to face inward, turning and acknowledging feeling nothingness. This serves as the mirror or inverted image of the loneliness the narrator feels at the opera *Faust*.

The novel also critiques the locations where white audiences experience African American art. The narrator performs for the patron's friends at a dinner party hosted by the patron rather than performing for white audiences in a club or another public space. The

scene highlights the juxtaposition between the narrator's performance to the white audience, located in the safety of the white patron's apartment, with the authentic black performers and a black audience, located within a Southern black community and the Club. Siobhan Somerville argues that the narrator (and through him the black artist) becomes a modern symbolic slave to white desires in his performances for the white patron. The narrator describes the white audience as "expecting to find happiness in novelty, each day restlessly exploring and exhausting every resource of this great city that might possibly furnish a new sensation or awaken a fresh emotion, and who were always grateful to anyone who aided them in their quest" (*AECM*, 1960 119). As soon as the narrator switches from classical music and begins playing ragtime "the conversation suddenly stopped. It was a pleasure to me to watch the expression of astonishment and delight that grew on the faces of everybody" (*AECM*, 1960 119). When the narrator plays a version of Mendelssohn's Wedding March, it "raised everybody's spirits to the highest point of gaiety, and the whole company involuntarily and unconsciously did an impromptu cake-walk" (120) thereby combining two art forms that the novel previously claims (and demonstrates) as black artistic creations. The white audience not only shows appreciation for the art, but appropriates it through their connection of rag-time music to the cake-walk and enacting the dance. Additionally, the white audience is comfortable recreating African American culture (the cake-walk) within the safety of an all-white audience. The scene also critiques acceptance of black persons within white spaces. The patron welcomes the narrator because of his identity as a performer. However, he is welcome only as a solitary figure, apart from a black community.

The narrator's blackness limits the spaces in and audiences to whom he is permitted to perform, but, at the same time, his performance gains him entry that would otherwise be denied to him as a black man via his ability to perform African American art. The narrator, after a time touring Europe, comments on the opportunities and tells readers that "By

mastering rag-time I gained several things...I secured a wedge which has opened to me more doors and made me a welcome guest than my playing of Beethoven and Chopin could ever have done" (*AECM*, 1960 115). As a black man performing European music, the narrator would have been in competition with white performers, and measured against classical artistic standards. Instead the narrator performs black artistic productions separate from European tradition. This grants him greater opportunities and "opened more doors." But the doors opened are ones playing for white audiences. Goellnicht explains that the narrator "becomes absorbed into the role of white musician, exploiting black music can be seen by the fact that he later seeks to earn a handsome profit from recording black music in the South, the very thievery he had been critical of white musicians for" (27). The only commercial success for black art in the novel is through white audiences, both performed to and approved by. When the narrator decides to return to the United States to work for racial uplift and record Southern black music, his white patron cannot understand his motivation. The patron finds no value in returning to the U.S. for the narrator because there is no monetary value. Barnhart writes that, "When the patron speaks, he speaks the language of capital; art is attached only to those who can appreciate and pay for its value. The possibility of art functioning as an expression of national or racial ideals is as meaningless to him as the narrator's plan to 'make a Negro' out of himself" (555). Sundquist explains, however, that both the patron and the narrator support the language of capital—that recording the music to disseminate to a wide audience is in the best interest of the art. The novel and Johnson demonstrate an anxiety about "the decay of African-American expressive forms at the hands of those, like himself, who had transfigured them into commercial success" (Sundquist 19). The scene serves as a warning to both audiences and performers: limiting black art to white audience approval may gain monetary and commercial success, but the art can become transformed to meet only white audience expectations.

## LIMITATIONS TO DUPLICATION & REPLICATION

In the novel's closing lines, the unnamed narrator reflects to the reader on his decision to pass as white and to relinquish recording Southern black music, explaining, "I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (*AECM*, 1960 211). The narrator fails to capture the true value of black music and, by attempting to record it, he also gives it form and shape thereby turning it into standardized music. The novel displays the loss that occurs when that music is appropriated and turned into mainstream music by standardizing and forcing it onto written sheet music. Barnhart claims that the narrator cannot record the "truth" of the music much like Johnson writes in *Book of American Negro Poetry*. Barnhart explains that, "What the narrator puts into his notebooks are just those aspects of music ('themes and melodies') that fit into the notation and conceptual scheme of western classical music, while left out are all the elements that contribute to the power and beauty of performances such as Singing Johnson's..." (558-559). The standardized musical scale of European art does not reflect the free-spirited, call-and-response form of Singing Johnson and the improvisation of the ragtime pianist. The narrator's decision to give up recording African American music occurs when he witnesses a lynching. He describes his own reaction to seeing the victim as, "I was fixed to the spot where I stood, powerless to take my eyes from what I did not want to see" (*AECM*, 1960 187). The narrator explains that this is the moment he chose to forsake his black racial identity. As the narrator writes it is his "Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country..." (187-188) and that, in the end, "I finally made up my mind that I would neither disclaim the black race nor claim the white race;...that it was not

necessary for me to go about with a label of inferiority pasted across my forehead” (*AECM* 1960 190). His inability to define a workable role as artist who represents both African American and American is, as Johnson wrote in “Preface,” due to the fact that, “No other group encompasses in its actual history and experiences in this country so wide and varied an emotional sweep as the Negro” (Andrews 741). If recording African American music into a reproducible or replicable form “strangles” its creativity and originality, then the art becomes accessible only in its live state, in the presence of the creator and black artist. If the art is not transferable and cannot be recorded to be reproduced, then the art cannot cross racial lines.

When the unnamed narrator passes for white, Johnson’s novel does something different from other passing novels. M. Giulia Fabi argues that the unnamed narrator “presents passing for white as the result, rather than the *cause*, of cultural alienation and divided racial loyalties,” (374, emphasis original) as though the inability to successfully translate African American art into a reproducible American product results in him leaving the cultural struggle. Cristina Ruotolo claims the ending demonstrates that, “Standing in the way of a truly cross-cultural musical expression, Johnson implies, are obstacles not only of racism but also of an American ‘culture industry’ that reifies racial difference as it depends on the repeatability, marketability, and novelty of its products, separates performer and audience into commodity and consumer, and erases the social history of musical styles and forms” (268). The narrator himself reflects at the novel’s end that, “It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people” (*AECM*, 1960 210). Both the narrator and African American art are unable to fit into a form and structure of America not designed by it. Themes related to blackness and black experience are impossible in an American cultural

space not constructed to include the African American art and artist. In “Steps toward the Negro Theatre,” Locke writes specifically about African American theatre, but his sentiments cover the breadth of African American art: “Our art in this field must not only be rescued from the chance opportunity and the haphazard growth of native talent, the stock must be cultivated beyond the demands and standards of the market-place, or must be safe somewhere from the exploitation and ruthlessness of the commercial” (93). Locke warns of the potential for negative influences on African American art from both “the market-place” (white audiences) and “the commercial.” *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* demonstrates Johnson’s proclamations for African American art: that it has the ability to destroy racial prejudice and also that African American art is both original and distinctly American. The novel also introduces warnings concerning cultural appropriation, the inability of art to cross racial lines, the racial divides of audiences and the inability of African American art to fit into European cultural molds. In the end Johnson’s 1912 novel predicts the very concerns that would arise in the historical New Negro Renaissance artistic landscape.

### CHAPTER THREE: MASKING PROPAGANDA AS ART IN *THERE IS CONFUSION*

“Night after night, when the performance was over, she appeared, splendid, glowing, symbolic before those huge dark masses in some uptown hall...She was indeed for them  
‘Miss America’”

-Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*

“Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”

-W.E.B. DuBois, “Criteria for Negro Art”

When Jessie Fauset’s protagonist Joanna Marshall dances for the District Line Theater in Fauset’s 1924 novel *There is Confusion*, Joanna is allowed to perform the colored and Indian America roles in the theater’s “Dance of Nations,” but not the white America role. Her sister, Sylvia, who assists Joanna as she prepares for the performance, devises a scheme for Joanna to also perform as white America. Sylvia suggests having Joanna wear a mask so that “[Joanna] could then be made as typically American as anyone could wish and no one need know the difference” (232). The mask is important here since it’s only by concealing her blackness that Joanna can be considered “typically American.” Sylvia’s stage note recalls Paul Laurence Dunbar’s famous poem about African American performativity “We Wear the Mask” (1896). Dunbar published “We Wear the Mask” the same year the Supreme Court’s ruling legalized segregation via *Plessy v Ferguson*. The poem, then, presents how such a legal decision becomes internalized and performed by those most vulnerable to it. Just as the Supreme Court ruled “separate but equal,” Dunbar illustrates the separation between the “we” and “the world” in his poem, demonstrating the application of a separation of his “we” of black people and “the world” of the courts (read: white people). As Dunbar’s poem shows, the Court’s “separation” of race is baseless in biology and is more of a performance or social interactive by making race, understood performatively, as the way to separate and thereby categorize Americans. Fauset’s novel echoes this performative separation of white and black.

Rereading Dunbar's masking also addresses performing whiteness during Jim Crow. Using the voice of a collective "we," Dunbar explains that black people don different masks of performance in everyday life as a way of concealing their true personas from "the world" of white people. In this way Joanna represents the masked "we" against "the world" of her audience. Perhaps unwittingly then, Sylvia participates in the requirement of masking, both as a necessity for Joanna to perform for the white audience and as a problem that Joanna must mask her blackness. Fauset performs Dunbar's poem on stage via the tension with Joanna's masking. In response Joanna's performance as a masked white "America" meets with wild success: "On the first night on which the new 'America' was introduced, an inveterate theater-goer in the first row of the orchestra insisted on encoring her. Joanna returned, bowed and bowed, was encored" (232); however, when the audience demands for her to take off the mask during their ovation, the reader wonders: What are the risks for Joanna as a black American woman? Why should black Americans be required to wear the masks in order to be considered "typically American"? And what are the racial risks for the audience, understood as white? Will the audience cheer and accept the now unmasked black dancer?

The narrative answers: "There was a moment's silence, a moment's tenseness." Then Joanna smiles and speaks the lines: "I hardly need to tell you that there is no one in the audience more American than I am. My great-grandfather fought in the Revolution, my uncle fought in the Civil War and my brother is 'over there' now." And immediately following Joanna's lines the narrator writes, "Perhaps it would not have succeeded anywhere else but in New York, and perhaps not even there but in Greenwich Village." The audience accepts Joanna's unmasking and "took up the applause again and Joanna was a star" (232). Not as a masked star but as a black star who could perform America unmasked. What is deeply ironic and what makes this unbelievable is that the same audience, which comprises the public that requires Joanna to wear the mask not only on stage but in segregated race relations off stage,

requires that she now remove it—after she’s danced so beautifully in the white mask. Fauset’s narrative is far too hopeful in this regard as real life African American performers (such as Bert Williams, Aida Overton Walker, and Josephine Baker) were consistently subject to segregation. But even more is that the performance of race, in connection with Dunbar’s poem, is heightened by—not quelled by—everyday racial performance. So when Fauset’s narrator states that Joanna’s unmasking and successful reception of the audience could only occur in a Northern cosmopolitan city, this is a vision of hope not a fact.

In understanding the connection of Joanna’s literal stage performance with the performance of race, I work with Erving Goffman’s definition of performance that “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (8). Goffman further explains that a performer requests that the audience “believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be” (10). Using Goffman’s definition Joanna dances successfully as America because the audience accepts her depiction—she *is* the America that she appears to be. Manthai Diawara defines racial performance as recording “the way in which black people, through a communicative action, engender themselves within the American experience” and that “black agency” involves “the redefinition of the tools of Americanness” (209). Joanna’s performance includes both her dance and also her presentation of her bodily self. In this instance the “performance” includes both a description of the actions as well as the “interaction” with the audience. Through her successful performance Joanna redefines “Americanness”—and American culture—to include black people and African American art.

## JOANNA'S AUDIENCE RESPONSE AND PERFORMANCE POSSIBILITIES

Essential to understanding the importance of Joanna's successful performance in the dance scene is James Weldon Johnson's argument in his "Preface" to *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). Johnson claims that:

A startling truth is that America would not be precisely the America it is except for the silent power the Negro has exerted upon it, both positive and negative...the Negro has already proved the possession of these powers by being the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products. ("Preface")

In this instance Joanna reflects Johnson's major point that the Negro is "the creator of the only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil and been universally acknowledged as distinctive American products." Caroline Joan Picart's work on copyright in dance demonstrates the significance of Johnson's claim and the novel's scene when she explains that "'whiteness' is really about having property (both tangible and intangible)" as well as "being privileged enough to be considered an 'artist' (i.e., one having the 'genius' necessary to create something 'original' as opposed to something merely 'derivative')" (5). In contrast to privileges of whiteness, Brit Rusert analyzes black performers on Antebellum stages and explains that when black performers (which she defines as "musicians, dancers, lecturers, and other performers") entered the stage, "they occupied a space that was routinely used to visually assess the physiological capabilities and limits of blackness" via "both 'legitimate' performances of race science and various nonscientific dissections of black character and anatomy in popular entertainments, particularly on the minstrel stage" (295). Joanna's dance as America in front of a white audience claims privilege to the title of "artist" as well as laying claim to the property that is original art. What "succeeds," to use Fauset's word, in this scene is not simply a black dancer performing in front of a white audience, but a black dancer representing white "America" in a performance titled the "Dance of Nations" where the black dancer becomes the representative figure for all of America, not just the

colored and Indian “version” of the role. In her unmasking she shows to her audience that a black woman could have the intangible property of successfully demonstrating “America” and she also fulfills the audience expectations for that role. Joanna’s dance, as a representation of African American art, enacts Johnson’s argument that African American art is *the* American art. As a black woman masked to play the role America, Joanna becomes African American art masked (and then unmasked) as American art.

Joanna’s performance requires spectators because, without spectators or an audience, the dance is not a performance. Only the audience’s presence and reaction to the dance can determine if Joanna successfully embodies the American role. However, Joanna’s performance and success with her audience is not without problems. As the novel acknowledges, anywhere else the removal of separation between Joanna as a masked black dancer and the artist representing white “America” could not have succeeded or been accepted by the audience when she removes the mask. Joanna’s speech following her unmasking is very important in relation to Johnson’s argument about “Negroes” creating the only things artistic. When she unmask for the audience, she becomes visually black to her white audience. Joanna’s claim that “there is no one in the audience more American than I am” (232) allows her to show her American-ness, not just her visual blackness, after unmasking. Eva Federmayer’s close reading of Joanna’s iteration of her family’s history argues that Joanna must “*relegitimate* herself by black patrilineal patriotism.” She does this after “Realizing that she can no longer present herself as a black woman on account of her skin color,” and therefore “makes her male kin represent her in conformity with the prevailing spirit of war-time patriotism in America” (98, emphasis original). Although she successfully performs America when masked, Joanna’s unmasking requires her to lay claim to American identity through her ancestry. On her own as a black woman, Joanna does not have legitimate claim to the title of America in front of her white audience. Goffman’s

analysis of a performance explains why Joanna as a black artist would work to align herself with her white audience, explaining that “a performer often engenders in his audience the belief that he is related *to them* in a more ideal way than is always the case” (30). In other words, Joanna argues for the audience to see her primarily in likeness with them, as American, and secondarily as black and different from them.

It might seem as if Johnson’s claim and Joanna’s performance reconcile, but the audience’s acknowledgement of this information can only occur via their acceptance of Joanna as a black woman and the artist of the America role. The applause following Joanna’s unmasking does not occur until *after* she claims three generations of male family’s involvement in the United States military. Instead, reading Joanna’s dance during her presentation on stage as representative of African American art and culture, we are forced to recognize this as patriarchal and white nonetheless. This point is crucial for understanding the novel and its comment on a vision of race and gender in America. By erasing Joanna’s visual race via the mask, the white audience (and the world) are able to appropriate Joanna’s dance and African American art as their own art. Understanding Joanna as a presentation or illustration is not new. Leah Ahlin explains that the masking of Joanna “evokes the tradition of blackface-masking in minstrelsy” and also “the whole existence of the black population in American” (119). Jane Kuenz argues that the novel seeks to redefine both what it means to be black and what it means to be American (90), and argues that the stage scene of Joanna’s masking and unmasking can be read as a reversal of a minstrel show. Joanna’s white mask and the removal of it “questions the stability of whiteness as an invisible referent for American national identity at the same time as it positions African Americans at the center of it” (99). Because Kuenz reads the mask as white, her argument bases the mask as a representation of whiteness. Reading this masking not only in relation to minstrelsy but as a racial performance, the mask (that makes Joanna as “typically American as anyone could

wish”) becomes representative of not explicitly white but explicitly American. This is an important distinction since Joanna never claims whiteness but does claim Americanness. And through her claim to an American identity after the removal of her mask, Joanna demonstrates that the “America” role is simultaneously both American and black. Ahlin addresses this concept through the lens of deconstructing white performance rather than from perspective of black performance. She explains that Joanna’s appearance “indicates that whiteness is a mask, to be put on and performed in accordance with the audience's expectations. Thus, it is a construction similar to that of blackness” (120). Joanna’s performance as “America” demonstrates not a substitution of black culture and art for Western (read “white) culture, as previous critics have argued, but America has already claimed black culture and art as American. Joanna’s dance exposes this claim and the audience accepts the claim. The audience visually sees Joanna as black when she unmask and accepts her as an artist and her dance as “successfully American” *after* her unmasking. Therefore, at least visually for the audience, Joanna is black upon her unmasking and yet her art is still successfully American.

Arguing that the novel exemplifies Johnson’s argument through performance may cause some consternation since Fauset was adamant against propaganda. However, as a student of W.E.B. DuBois and editor of his magazine, *The Crisis*, Fauset internalized many of DuBois’ ideas, including his concept of art as propaganda. Joanna’s stage performance functions an example of art as a political/cultural statement. In his “Criteria for Negro Art,” published in the 1926 volume of *The Crisis*, DuBois asks readers if black people “want to be simply Americans” and if his audience is “satisfied with [America’s] present goals.” DuBois explains:

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. (“Criteria”)

DuBois' statement claims legitimacy for African American art, arguing that it is not only entertainment but also a means to social progress—and that, in fact, it *should* be constructed with social progress (or propaganda) in mind. Much of the Northern black leadership of the early twentieth-century were against popular entertainment because of its identification as a lower-art form and therefore lower-class amusement unworthy of middle-class and “respectable” attention. Eric King Watts analyzes contemporaneous black intelligentsia, noting that they “presented as white-like—as a class for which race does not matter” in order to combat “images of the ‘exotic’ folk (composed largely by white artists)” that were “projected as representations of ‘real’ blackness since folk lifestyles were deemed more ‘natural’ and free of social imposition.” Working from this point of view, “racial *difference* signified racial *primitivism*, establishing stereotypes about black promiscuity and violence as ‘universal truths’” (182). Watts also summarizes DuBois' stance on African American art in his analysis of DuBois' “Criteria of Negro Art” speech on June 29th at the Spingarn Medal Award Night, explaining that DuBois “constituted distinct norms of African American culture and expression, affiliating them with the moral capacity of America to reinvent the civic good” and argued that “black culture makes available alternative epistemologies to American social knowledge.” However, Watts notes that DuBois critiqued certain practices in the African American art industry, “exposing them as impediments to genuine public deliberation necessary for the constitution of meaningful civic life.” Watts credits DuBois for “inventing a race” that “authorized black speech and posited it as essential to the capacity for America to realize the universal (pure artistic) ideals of democracy” (187). It's important to note that the novel works against both white and black America's questioning of Joanna's motives. Her brother, Brian, tells her that “While you with your singing and dancing and your wildcat schemes of getting on the stage! Better stick to your own Janna, and build up colored art.” Joanna responds, “Why I am...” with astonishment, “You don't think I want to

forsake—*us*. Not at all. But I want to show *us* to the world. I am colored, of course, but American first. Why shouldn't I speak to all America?" (76, emphasis original). Here Joanna explicitly claims the unification of both African American and American art. In this scene she attempts to overcome the color line (to use DuBois' term) and claim African American art—her dance—as American art. To Joanna they are one in the same. She fulfills Johnson's statement that the original pieces of American art are created by African Americans.

In another scene Vera Staples, a white director at the District Line Theater, explains that she initially witnessed Joanna dance at a school recital, and Joanna is needed for the "Dance of Nations" because "art to my eye is art, and there's no sense in letting a foolish prejudice interfere with it." Staples advocates against the white dancer who, before Joanna, was dancing the America role. The previous (white) dancer "won't darken her face and hasn't a notion, so far as dancing like colored people is concerned, beyond the cake-walk. Well, I told my Board I didn't believe that was either adequate or accurate" (227). Staples, a white woman and member of the board, serves as embodiment of "the critics" of American art. Staples' statement critiques the white dancer's performance of the "Negro" America role. According to Staples, the white dancer, and through her other white Americans who would attempt to fill the "Negro" America role "hasn't a notion" for what African American art and culture truly is. The white Staples explains that she had seen Joanna dance and her way must be the right way "because you [Joanna] were colored" (227). From the utopian viewpoint of the novel, Joanna's visual blackness legitimizes her claim to perform the "Negro" America role on stage—something the white dancer's whiteness does not permit. Daphne Brooks's concept of "Afro-alienation" serves well to explain how this scene works. Brooks explains that DuBois's concept of double-consciousness (for black Americans, always seeing oneself through the eyes of other) led to hypervisibility of racial blackness. Afro-alienation, in reaction to this, offered a "rehearsed way to render racial and gender categories 'strange' and

to thus ‘disturb’ cultural perceptions of identity formation” (5). Instead of relying on “conventional realist methods to convey the humanity and value of black subjectivity,” Brooks claims that this technique “opens up a field where black cultural producers might perform narratives of black culture that resist the narrow constraints of realist representation” (6). Joanna’s donning of the mask for her dance, the performance, permits the white audience/spectators to view Joanna as a “raceless” performer representing *all* of America. This fulfills Staples’ definition that “art is art” and not permitting “foolish prejudice to interfere.” Sharon Jones’s argument for Fauset’s “inclusion of folk, bourgeois, and proletarian aesthetics in her fiction” lies in “an attempt to revamp and redefine the predominant images of African Americans in American fiction...More importantly, it reveals the social, political, and economic politics of literary production of the 1920s and earlier” (22). Yet this omits Joanna’s dance in the “Negro” America role because she performs this role unmasked. And while Joanna, albeit masked, can perform the role of white America, the white dancer—even masked—is unable to authentically perform blackness. Without the necessary racial appearance, Joanna would have no claim to African American culture according to “the critic” represented by the white Staples.

In contrast the “typically American” role—not the Negro role—can be portrayed by anyone. While the scene is not “realistic” in the sense of its possibility for actually occurring in early twentieth century America, the scene does occur “realistically;” it could theoretically happen. The narrative and its inclusions of comments from characters such as Staples regarding the spaces available to Joanna allow for the possibility. Not only is Joanna able to claim the dance of white America, but, by the success of her dance as a masked black woman, it is whiteness (not blackness) that becomes erased and is therefore the artificial construction. As the novel demonstrates, blackness cannot be successfully performed by a white dancer, but America can be performed by a black dancer. When Joanna auditions for the directors,

“Her voice rang out, her slender flaming body turned and twinkled, her lovely graceful limbs flashed and darted and pirouetted. She was everywhere at once” and one of the members of the board cries, “Oh, but that’s great, that’s genius” (229). Several critics have noted the echoes of minstrelsy in Joanna’s performance, and Susan Levison’s analysis of Joanna’s stage scene argues that, “Like the minstrels in blackface, [Joanna] appropriates her culture’s production in order to arrogate power to herself.” By doing this “she inverts the minstrel show’s paradigm of white spectators exploiting black performers and culture for ‘sport and profit’” (834). And yes, she performs as an inverted minstrel by wearing a “whiteface” mask instead of “blackface.” However, Joanna performs *without* claiming whiteness, as evidenced in this audition. She performs without a mask and is proclaimed by the white directors as “genius.” Her mask creates a race-less-ness that can be read as white, but this statement overlooks the fact that Joanna is performing the role of “America,” thereby for the audience representing not a black performer but an “American” performer. The irony is not in the inverted blackface but that Joanna’s performance represents *the* America.

The narrative prepares the reader for this presentation of Joanna (the black performer) as America early in the novel. Before dancing professionally, Joanna first begins performing by singing in her church. During these early performances, “Always in her mind’s eye she was far, far away from the church, in a great hall, in a crowded theater. There would be tier on tier of faces rising, rising above her.” In the line that follows Joanna notes, “And tomorrow there would be the critics...” (74). Joanna’s visualizing of future critics is one of several points in the novel where she comments or makes the reader aware of a larger purpose to her performance. Even as a child singing in the church she understands that stage performance will lead to a greater purpose for her art. Previous critics such as Levison have commented that Joanna’s performances are such that always require an audience “so that the critics will bestow honors upon her” (831). But this scene is perhaps less troubling than

Levison presents. Instead, the performances require an audience because a performance cannot exist without an audience. A performance requires both a performer (or artist) and an audience (or viewer). Joanna's need for spectators (or audience) is related to Joanna's goals as a dancer; the reason she views her art as higher form than others is because of the purpose she gives it. Not art for art's sake, but art for the sake of making a difference. As well, for art to serve as propaganda for "critics" as Joanna calls them, who are needed in the audience to witness the performance. Even early in the novel Joanna performs with an end goal of the performance having meaning outside the context of the present stage. So whether it's Fauset's aim or not, her art is propagandistic in that the art Joanna creates is intended for performance and therefore intended for an audience. To support this argument, I use Watts' explanation that the novel "was criticized for having 'the usual faults of the propaganda story' because it spoke of black middle-class struggles against racism." He notes that, at the time, "One could speak a 'propagandist' and be sanctioned (and potentially silenced) by the literary elite or one could give in." Because of this, "during the Harlem Renaissance, black speech was increasingly delivered through a mode of public expression that either rendered it 'inauthentic' (propagandistic) or bound some speakers to (pure artistic) practices that negated their *voices as black* intellectuals" (182, emphasis original). The presence of the audience thus makes the performance public and open to critics. The purpose of Joanna's performance is propagandist to claim artistic space on the American cultural stage for black artists.

When speaking to her friend, Peter Bye, of her dancing, Joanna states that her dance instructor, Bertully believes "that if there's anything that will break down prejudice it will be equality or perhaps even superiority on the part of colored people in the arts. And I agree with him" (97). DuBois' argument relates to this when he expounds:

Just as soon as true Art emerges; just as soon as the black artist appears, someone touches the race on the shoulder and says, "He did that because he was an American, and not because he was a Negro; he was born here; he was trained here; he is not a

Negro—what is a Negro anyhow? He is just human; it is the kind of thing you ought to expect. (“Criteria”)

By this line of reasoning, Joanna is the embodiment of an American Art that is “born here” and “trained here.” Both Joanna and DuBois argue that artistic presentations reviewed by “unfettered judgments” are the means for making/achieving racial progress. DuBois’ statement that “he is not a Negro...he is just a human” aligns with Joanna’s America performance where she is “just” an American dancer, rather than only a “Negro” dancer with the limitations that entails.

The scene with Peter demonstrates this complicated relationship of being “just an American” while also being a black performer. Joanna notes that the difficulty is not in mastery of the art form because she tells Peter, “The way I figure it is this. If all I needed to get on the stage was the mastery of a difficult step, I’d get there, wouldn’t I? For somehow, sometime, I’d learn how to overcome that difficulty” (99). Instead the complication is, in Joanna’s words, “how to master how to get around prejudice. It *is* an awful nuisance; in some parts of this country it is more than a nuisance, it’s a veritable menace” (98). And directly after this, when learning a Spanish dance, Joanna tells Peter, “I’m going to do a dance representing all the nations, some day” (100) foreshadowing her own performance in “Dance of Nations.” DuBois too writes of the presence of prejudice in artistic performance when he explains that, “We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white Americans wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that America likes to assign to Negroes; but for any thing else there is still small place for us” (“Criteria”). Joanna does not offer a solution outside the confines of approval by mainstream America or white audiences. For both, success occurs when the performance transcends race and becomes not a Negro performing for white audiences, but an American artist performing.

The novel stages Joanna’s goals as a dancer and her art as a higher form of artistic expression than others in the novel due to the purpose she gives it. The reason Joanna views

her art as a higher form of art is because *it is*. As I have already argued, this novel supports Johnson's claims that African American art is the only true American art. Joanna's dance accomplishes two things: 1) her African dance is valued as innovative and receives the best praise, and 2) in this role as a black woman she receives the accolades before unmasking, even though, as Fauset writes, some of the audience "guessed the truth" (232). Joanna's sense of purpose regarding her art contrasts sharply with another character's performance in the novel, her friend Peter's piano playing. While the narrative references his music, the story awards his performances much less weight and value than Joanna's performances, not just in terms of importance of the central character, but in terms of the types of performance itself. Previous critics, such as Federmayer and Levison, mention Peter Bye's connection as a pianist as well, but the narrative marks an important distinction between the two characters, Joanna's dance claims high art; the purpose in the novel of her desire to dance and the dancing itself is to illuminate and create something great. In contrast, Peter's music is simply for entertainment.

The distinct difference in Peter's music is expressed in a letter he writes to Joanna. Peter tells her: "I'm making a lot of money right now—guess how?—with my music, playing for 'grand white folks' at the swell society functions" and Joanna swiftly writes back, "I don't want and won't have a husband who is just an ordinary strumming accompanist" (145). In fact Peter's friend offers him the piano job explaining that the job would be for "white folks" (140). Not only does Peter perform "only" as an accompanist, the text suggests that his music panders to white interests. Nina Miller's argument supports this "lesser value" point about Peter's art, noting that "musicianship in Peter's case being equated with voluntary racial servitude (playing for white parties) and moral degradation (playing in black cabarets)" (214). The novel's judgment against Peter's art form supports other critics' work concerning the black community of the early twentieth century and its judgment of black art. Karen

Sotiropoulos explains that, “Often proponents of racial uplift distanced themselves from public leisure activities deemed ‘too black,’ like ragtime music and dance, in an effort to present the race as respectable to white eyes” (10). The novel foregrounds Joanna’s dance experience and classical training, aligning it with traditional Western and European values of dance. The novel thus makes not only a distinction between the types of performance in a sense of high versus low art, and the audience and purpose of the art are equally important. Peter’s purpose regarding his art is, as he states, to entertain “grand white folks” and “making a lot of money.” Joanna rejects this comparison of Peter’s art to her own. To use DuBois’ words, Joanna “does not give a damn” for any art that does not have an agenda. Joanna notes a problematic situation with Peter Bye’s performance for wealthy white people. Performance becomes a means of cultural uplift. By performing only for white audience’s pleasure, the narrative positions Peter as a sell out and contrasts sharply with Joanna, who notes that mastering the art form is easy but that she also has the greater goal to overcome racial prejudice. Johnson’s “Preface” claims music as one of black America’s four original art forms, yet Fauset shows it as not being respected because of its purpose—in Peter, it is reconstructed simply for white audience enjoyment and lacks the purpose of racial progress. Without a purpose Peter’s music is solely entertainment and not truly original art.

## RECLAIMING THE STAGE FOR BLACK FEMALE DANCERS

When auditioning for professional dance roles and attempting to find a manager, Joanna encounters multiple instances of prejudice and racism. The first manager “kindly” tells Joanna that, “I’m sure of your ability, my dear girl, and you ought to go. You’re young. I can see you could be made into a beauty.” However, “the white American public ain’t ready for you yet, they won’t have you.” After a few minutes’ thought he continues, “I know the day is coming, but not for some time yet” (148), announcing the utopianism of the novel’s

idea. Then the second manager explains he will not include her as a dancer because he “Couldn’t make any money out of you. American doesn’t want to see a colored dancer in the role of a *premiere danseuse*” (148). Picart notes this occurrence in historical ballets, explaining that dance companies gave the reason to exclude black female dancers, “especially those with dark complexions...especially during the 1920's-1930's, no matter how skilled they were because their skin color would ‘break the uniformity’ of the *corps de ballet*” (39). But the manager does not leave it at Joanna’s inability to play the main dance parts. He tells her, “you couldn’t consider being corked up—you’re brown but you’re too light as you are—and doing a break-down?” (148). The scene references two types of racial discrimination: first, the manager rejects Joanna because she is black and “the public ain’t ready.” Second, the manager rejects her because she is not the correct “shade” of blackness. Here Joanna’s talent as a dancer/performer is not questioned (the first manager even tells her, “you ought to go”), but the difficulty of Joanna appearing on a mainstream American stage is regarding her color. And not just that she is black, because the second manager would permit her as a “corked up” character, but because she wants to play the part of the prima ballerina and not the “break down” dances.

Joanna’s staged presentation as a black female dancer references historical black female dancers and the Western world’s appropriation of black folk art into stereotyped primitive casts. Specifically, Joanna’s portrayal directly aligns with early twentieth century presentations of black female dancers as the embodiment of this stereotype. Jayna Brown’s work on black female stage performers during the time period 1890-1945 studies dancers. She explains that, “The ‘native’ dancing girls were key figurations of primitivist rejuvenation in the white American and European imagination, the primitive infusing the modern with its resilience” (190-191). Walter White writes of his own daughter, Jane, who wanted to be in theater. But for Jane, “the disadvantage of skin color was greater even than that faced by

dark-skinned Negroes.” He writes that, “If her skin had been darker” then “she could have secured (assuming that her ability were great enough) so-called Negro roles in the increasing number of Broadway plays in which there were Negro characters.” Unfortunately, her pale skin “caused her to appear un-Negro behind the footlights even with the use of dark makeup. And the stage was not yet ready to permit a Negro actor or actress to portray any except Negro roles” (338). The novel even uses the same language, “America ain’t ready for you yet” from Joanna’s experience and “the stage was not yet ready” from White’s autobiography.

The encroachment of white America into black cultural spaces—such as primitivism—poses a problem for black artists. Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s theoretical work on the female black dancing body explains that, “In general, the black dancing body has been scrutinized by the dominant culture through the lens and theory of difference...differences in the dancing body of an oppressed people were occasionally valued but frequently scrutinized for signs of inferiority.” Consequently, in the world of dance, “dancing bodies were measured against white ideals that ran counter to the aesthetic criteria of ‘inferior’ Africanist cultures, even though the dances performed by white dancing bodies were either solely or partly based on Africanist elements” (*The Black Dancing Body*, 27). If white artists appropriate African American art forms, and white audiences are not ready for black dancers, then what stage space remains for black dancers outside of stereotyped, white-approved spaces? The novel’s performance scene displays a way to claim stage space by demonstrating that black artists are both proficient performers of African American culture *and* successful performers of American culture.

Joanna’s value in her dance ability comes from her abilities as a classical dancer and her innovation on classical dance and incorporation of cultural dance styles. Brown argues that “Dance occupies a specific place in black expressive arts. The utopian primitivism of the

1920s saw dance as the most direct access to the primal original energies of humankind” (230). The novel reconnects the trained dancer, Joanna, with her roots outside of formal training. Joanna is out running errands with her sister, Sylvia, when they come upon groups of children described as, “Italians, Jews, colored Americans, white Americans” who were playing games “according to their peculiar temperament” (47). Joanna joins them and “She outdid them all in the fervor and grace of her acting” (48.) Levison notes that, “Fauset describes the dance with precise detail, recounting the movements and manner of the children with care, as if to suggest that this scene deserves as much attention as any performance of high art” (832). In other words the organic, “found” art of the children carries the same cultural weight as the formal classical dance. The children may have no thought of performing, but it becomes a performance because of Joanna as a spectator. Having the spectator or audience creates the separation of the children from audience, a division in the actors present in the scene between the performers (children) and the audience (Joanna). The dance *becomes* moving because the audience, Joanna, perceives it this way. When she begins dancing with the children, “two white settlement workers stopped and looked at her” (48). Although not a formal stage, both the children and Joanna create a performance space because of their enactment of cultural art and the presence of audience members watching them—both the white workers and Sylvia.

Later, Joanna reenacts the singing and dancing for friends and family, demonstrating all the various parts. One of the friends, Brian Spencer, exclaims, “Can’t you see it all just as plainly? Really, Jan, you ought to go on the stage as an impersonator,” and another friend, Maggie Ellersley, compares Joanna’s performance to one she saw at a matinee and tells her, “It was vaudeville, Joanna, and there was an actress who took off different people and then she did some Irish folk dances, but she couldn’t hold a candle to you. Too bad we’re colored” (50). Early Fauset critics working on *There is Confusion* focused mainly on Fauset’s work as

a feminist text.<sup>21</sup> But critics who fault Fauset for writing “yet another” Victorian-styled novel with a marriage plot overlook the cultural work that the novel performs. Sotiropoulos explains that even though acceptance of women in public spaces was growing at the time, “Perhaps self-possessed white New Women could act out a public sexuality, but black New Women needed to exhibit wholesomeness, grace, and beauty” (105). The scene’s use of language such as “impersonator” and “vaudeville” speak directly to the novel’s contemporaneous historical theater and dance scene. Paula Marie Seniors examines Bob Cole and James Weldon Johnson’s *Gibson Girls*, and she argues that the show’s black female performers, “By performing on stage as cosmopolitan women dressed exquisitely and at the height of fashion” demonstrated, “a dignified image on stage of African American femininity. They communicated that African American women exuded beauty, politesse, and sophisticated fashion sensibilities” in sharp contrast to, “common representations of African American women as the asexual Mammy, the oversexed Jezebel, the wild, childlike, dancing Pickanniny, and the Tragic Mulatto” (161). Seniors explains that the *Gibson Gals*’ performance “worked as a lesson to audience members and specifically to white people about the decorum of African American women, their womanhood, and their moral character.” She also compares the historical *Gibson Gals* to Joanna, arguing:

Just as black writers like Jessie Fauset presented extremely conservative depictions of African American female virtue, fidelity, and chastity in order to make credible arguments for citizenship and marriage rights for African American women, the Whitman Sisters and Cole and Johnson deployed portrayals of black respectability as part of a broader strategy of uplift. (161)

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Cheryl Wall praises Fauset as a prolific writer but faults her for “melodramatic plots” (36). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim that Fauset’s work is an example of “Exploiting the novel of manners to critique American racism” but that “Fauset viewed the New Woman as a white woman, whose feminism the black woman must repudiate in order to reinvent the masculinity of black men” (135). Although these critics worked to add Jessie Fauset’s novel into the African American canon as a representation of black women writers and black female characters of the New Negro Renaissance, discussing the text solely within these constraints misses the larger cultural arguments and social implications that Fauset makes through Joanna.

Sotiropoulos's research on historical black female performers such as Aida Walker explores how they influenced white acceptance of black dancers as high art while also maintaining a sense of propriety. She explains that "pervasive racism left black performers with the problem of presenting a respectable and professional—and modern—black identity in a culture that saw everything black as laughable and primitive, and everything respectable, civilized, and modern as white" (9). Joanna's middle-class sensibilities are exactly what permits her to transgress into the American stage scene.

Joanna is both accepted as a dancer and denied as a black woman space on the stage, until she masks her blackness. Ahlin explains that Joanna, and by extension historical black female dancers, cannot dance as America because "of the political import of a black dancer performing a western, 'high' cultural art form." If Joanna was to dance in such a performance, it would implicate an "equalization between black and white" (119). Without the visual signifier of race, Joanna becomes as American as any white dancer. Joanna as a cultural producer is accepted by the audience—and not only Joanna, but the cultural product she places on stage in the form of her dance. Joanna's masking in combination with her middle-class behaviors makes her indistinguishable from any white American—and, therefore, her dance is as American as any white dancer's performance. As Ahlin notes, Joanna's audience assumes that behind her mask she is a white dancer and therefore "equal" to the role of America. Brooks explains that historical "political activists, stage performers, and writers" used their art "to interrogate the ironies of black identity formation" (3). Joanna's dance is accepted both in its role as "Negro" America, but also the quintessential white "America" as well. To support this Brooks explains, "These cultural innovators managed their alienation by turning the disorienting condition of marginality and subjection into dense performances" (4). Joanna embraces dance as a classical art form but works to reinterpret it as a cultural product of a black performer. Therefore, Joanna the "black cultural

producer,” to use Brooks’ phrase, resists classical ballet and instead liberates black art from primitivism and stereotypes via her dance’s appreciation and success in front of the white audience. Joanna also disorients the clear division between white and black spaces as well as white and black cultural art.

Her disorienting location occurs not just when she dances as America but also through the dance style itself. When Joanna auditions for the “Dance of Nations,” she recreates the scene with the children dancing in the city street. In her audition, “Her voice rang out, her slender flaming body turn and twinkled, her lovely graceful limbs flashed and darted and pirouetted. She was everywhere at once, acting the part of the leader, of individual children, of the whole, singing, stamping circle.” Then the Board “applauded” and one of the board members cries, “Oh, but that’s great, that’s genius” (229). Joanna’s audition reclaims the primitive into the performance space of black dancers because she auditions without the mask. The cultural judges of the board accept this performance as a successful high art form—even calling it “genius.” Mae Henderson’s work on Josephine Baker supports this analysis of Joanna’s dance. Baker’s performance, like Joanna’s, is “a complex ethnic and cultural femininity fused the primitivism associated with African and the modernism associated with 1920s American jazz” (186). Both the historical Baker and the fictional Joanna reclaim the performance space of the primitive from white performers and relocate it in the realm for black artists. Jocelyn Buckner examines the Hyers Sisters and their ability to sing both “traditional European concert music and “black musical traditions, such as spirituals,” identifying them “as versatile performers capable of performing well beyond the narrow stereotypes of minstrelsy” while also “underscore[ing] their identity as African Americans” (311). This paradox of traditional European versus black tradition, when demonstrated by the Hyers Sisters and Joanna, loses its contradiction. Instead, the two groups of black female dancers show how the dichotomy can be one and the same. They do not just

appear the same, but they are the same in terms of claiming the label “high art.” An African American art form such as Joanna’s dance is high art.

At the end of her audition, Joanna suggests that the dance could be even better with “real children...colored children,” and two people run to find the children, coming back “with ten colored children, of every type and shade, black and brown and yellow.” The children do not need to be taught the dance because, “Most of them knew the game already, all of them took to Joanna and threw themselves with radiant, eager good nature into the spirit of what she was trying to display” (229). After the impromptu group performance, one of the board members tells Joanna, “You’re all right, Miss Marshall, if you’re willing, we’ll try you. America’s got some foolish prejudices, but we’ll try her with a sensation, and you’ll be all of that” (230). The concept of using a black female dancer as a representation of Art is not unique to Fauset’s novel, but black female dancers in the 1920s were not universally viewed as respectable artists. Therefore, the additional key requirement for Joanna’s performance to work as an unmasking of African American art as *the* American art is the acceptance of Joanna’s dance as a legitimate cultural art form by the audience. At the turn of the twentieth century, mainstream American culture moved away from or rejected Victorian notions of culture and embraced African American art forms and culture. Joanna’s ballet is white European dance style, but what actually grants her space on the stage is the “primitive” America via the Negro and Indian characters she portrays that the white dancer cannot. Through these characterizations of “America,” the novel comments on America’s historical fascination with the primitive during the 1920s. What Joanna brings to the America role is not just the “primal” through her reenactment of the children’s dance, but she performs culturally, too, via her European training with the French Bertually. Even if social and political leaders such as DuBois may not have valued African American dance styles as high art, Joanna’s dance can be read as a symbol of cultural inspiration.

## THE LIMITATIONS OF JOANNA'S PERFORMANCE

Fauset's obituary for Bert Williams, published in the 1922 *The Crisis*, shows the importance she places on performance as well as commentary on the limitations placed on black performers. Fauset works to substantiate William's contributions to black presence on American stages despite his performances in blackface by explaining how audiences would have permitted no other presentation. She calls Bert Williams a "symbol" because he made people laugh at his sorrows and explains, "I have tried jealously to keep Bert Williams with his struggles, his triumphs, his heartbreaks and his consolations as the symbol of our own struggling race" (13). Fauset incorporates her thoughts regarding Bert Williams into Joanna, and the novel situates Joanna in the same historical world in which Bert Williams performed. Joanna too serves as a symbol from Fauset about the struggles faced by black Americans in the American cultural landscape. Toward the novel's end Joanna laments, "If her gift were only something useful!" (274). Even after breaking the racial barrier and appearing unmasked in the role of America, Joanna reflects that, "of course it did mean something to prove to a skeptical world the artistry of a too little understood people—but she could do that only in New York." Even in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, "she would have to appear in independent theaters. The big theatrical trusts refused her absolutely—one had even said frankly: 'We'll try a colored man in a white company but we won't have any colored women.'" (275). Elsewhere "there was money in the South, but the southern newspapers had started to editorialize against her already" and, in the narrative, Joanna's reputation at this point extended across multiple states, where a Georgia newspaper wrote of her: "A negress...in the role of America. Shameful!" Her manager suggests working in a "highclass vaudeville house" (275). Despite her success as America at the District Line Theater, Joanna cannot replicate this success to other performance roles.

However, in her inverted masked performance, Joanna's white mask demonstrates how black performers are capable of performing successful American cultural performances. In an examination of Bert Williams' blackface performances, Louis Chude-Sokei explains that Williams' use of blackface can be read as a mask where the performance becomes a representation of a character (in this case, the character of the black stereotype) and not a representation of the actual black performer or blackness itself. Chude-Sokei argues, "Bert Williams appropriated from whites the very right to perform and symbolically possess 'the Negro.'" In the novel Joanna appropriates the role of America and the right of the performance space from white America. Williams' historical performances, according to Chude-Sokei, "claimed the right to command the symbolic arena of the Broadway stage, a space of enormous importance and power in the years before cinema and sound recording became dominant sites of cultural and political representation for a nascent American imperial sprawl" (5). Joanna's fictional performances also claims the right to Broadway stage and shows to readers that black performers on American stages is a feasible possibility and makes a convincing demonstration of how black people (and African American art) fulfill all expectations for true artists and cultural performers. The prejudice Williams and other 1920s black stage performers experience are witnessed in Joanna's experiences auditioning for main-stage theaters. The stage was *the* site of cultural performance, as Chude-Sokei writes, and therefore a site of cultural influence and power. Joanna reaches mass audiences and becomes the cultural icon.

After she has success as a dancer on the American stage, Joanna reflects that, "Sometimes she felt like a battle-scarred veteran among all these successful, happy, chattering people, who, no matter how seriously, how deeply they took their success, yet never regarded it with the same degree of wonder, almost of awe with which she regarded hers" (235). The successful, happy, chattering people Joanna references are the other

dancers—all white. And these dancers, unlike Joanna, “had not been compelled to endure her long, heartrending struggle against color” (235). She immediately compares the white dancers to black Americans: “She realized for the first time how completely colored Americans were mere on-lookers at the possibilities of life.” Even though, “She spent a few happy months with these people; they made pleasant and stimulating company for her; she herself suspected that she had made good ‘copy’ for some of them,” Joanna realizes that, “Yet she was not happy” (234). As the token black dancer, Joanna suffers from what Kobena Mercer calls the “burden of representation” in tokenism and explains that the “visibility of a few token black public figures serves to legitimate, and reproduce, the invisibility, and lack of access to public discourse, of the community as a whole” (240). The limitations on Joanna’s success, both in her inability to perform outside of New York and her own isolation as the token black dancer, critiques assumptions that simply because one black dancer has success that problems associated with prejudiced performances and limitations on black art are over. Just as Williams did not actually portray black people through his stereotyped caricatures, Joanna’s performance is not in actuality America. Instead, both are representations.

Ultimately, Joanna’s success is limited. The novel explains that Joanna’s success could only have occurred in this time and space. It will not transfer to a larger cultural shift of public representations of black people in America. Joanna’s own entry to mainstream American stages relies on her masking and embodying caricatures of America to gain entry to the stage. Both Joanna and Williams are limited to the periphery of the American stage. Fauset explains of Williams that, “If the world knew of his great possibilities why had it doomed this stalwart, handsome creature, his beautiful, sensitive hands under the hideousness of the eternal black make-up.” Fauset then expands her reflection to the larger black artistic community, writing “Why should he and we obscure our talents forever under the bushel of

prejudice, jealousy, stupidity—whatever it is that makes the white world say: ‘No genuine colored artist; coons, clowns, end-men, claptrap, but no undisguisedly beautiful presentation of Negro ability’ (14). Fauset uses her character Joanna to explore the possibilities and limitations available to black artists who challenge these stereotypes and who are able to embody the title of “genuine colored artist.” However, the novel also explores the negative side of successful black artists—and white America’s prejudices even while enjoying and supporting the artwork.

After Joanna performs in “Dance of Nations” as the colored American (but before she dons the role of Indian and American), the novel explains that the public is “surprisingly loyal to this new and original plaything, never varied in the expression of its enjoyment of Joanna” (231). Joanna the “colored American” is a sensation:

The newspapers featured her, the “colymists” wrote her up, her face appeared with other members of the cast, but never alone, on the billboards outside the little ramshackle theater. Special writers came to see her, took snapshots of herself and of Sylvia which they never published, and speculated on the amount of white blood which she had in her veins. (231)

Joanna’s audiences love her performance; however, the novel speaks of her fame strictly as the audience enjoys and responds to her. Beth McCoy’s work analyzes the presentation of a middle-class black woman and the performance space of the stage. McCoy argues that, in this scene, “The press does everything it can to suppress the public bodily image of the new black woman star and still be able to ‘enjoy’ her in private” (109). Even though Joanna is the star performer, she is not permitted solo recognition—only recognition within the context of the show and other performers. The pictures taken of Joanna and her sister are not published for public recognition but instead are used for private pleasures about the sisters’ personal identities. While Joanna claims a space, both on the figurative space of American culture and the literal stage of a Northern theater stage, she cannot assimilate into American culture. Although Joanna breaks racial barriers (by performing unmasked, out of caricature, on stage

to white audiences) once her blackness is known she becomes remasked as a caricature of herself—the successful black female dancer. So while the individual black person can break through the color-line, this individual success cannot destroy prejudice. Although she has accomplished all her goals, the performance leaves Joanna unfulfilled.

After Joanna's superior success as America (black, Indian, and "just America") on the stage, Joanna begins to "[see] life as a ghastly skeleton and herself feverishly trying to cover up its bare bones with the garish trappings of her art, her lessons, her practice, her press clips" (233). But the limitations the white audience places on her success, and the lack of personal achievement Joanna herself feels, contrasts with the experiences of her black audiences. For them Joanna's performance offers a space of relief from constraints of the world, if not a solution. When black men return from The War, Joanna appears on the stage and, "Night after night, when the performance was over, she appeared, splendid, glowing, symbolic before those huge dark masses in some uptown hall...She was indeed for them 'Miss America,' making them forget to-night the ingratitude which their country would meet them tomorrow" (269). The narrative's comment regarding the African American servicemen occurs only briefly and does not provide an in-depth explanation. Brooks, analyzing Aida Overton Walker's performances, writes that her "emotionally fulfilling stage performance" provided to Walker's black audiences "a source of cathartic 'pleasure' for African Americans facing the traumas of migration and resettlement, relentless economic hardships, and the Southern horrors of mob terror" (283). This echoes the sentiments of Joanna's black servicemen who "forget to-night" for the duration of Joanna's performance the "ingratitude" America gives to black servicemen. The scene offers readers an inside glimpse into the differences between white and black audiences situated as it is between Joanna's successful performances of America for white audiences and her disillusionment from the limitations of that performance.

The contrasting experience of the black audience to the white recalls DuBois's concept of "the veil" from his *The Souls of Black Folk*. DuBois describes his dawning racial consciousness as "a certain suddenness that I was different from the others...shut out from their world by a vast veil" and also calls the divide between white Americans and African Americans the "Veil of Race." The novel's demonstration of difference between the two audiences "lifts the veil" and permits readers—especially white readers—to glimpse behind the veil. Related to this lifting of the veil, Gottschild explains that, "African Americans disguised themselves, were hardly ever allowed to be themselves, masked their blackness, wore their blackness as a disguise" (*African American Vaudeville*, 4) in a way similar to how Joanna is a "good copy" for the theater audiences and board members yet "she herself was not happy." Joanna's reaction to her (limited) success and Gottschild's statement call to mind Langston Hughes' poem "The Jester,"<sup>22</sup> which opens, "In one hand / I hold tragedy / And in the other / Comedy." Both Hughes' poem and Joanna's performances remind the reader that the power of masking lies in the power of the performer to successfully fulfill audience expectations of the character. Joanna succeeds in her ability to win audience approval via her claiming the role of America—both Negro and white. Even after performing, when Joanna experiences a lack of fulfillment in the role, her audience (and the reader) remains unaware of this lack until Joanna voices it. This echoes again Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask": "let them only see us, while / We wear the mask." All three pieces express how (white) audiences are othered from the performer and lack awareness of this masking.

The masking signals a separation between the black performer and the white audience—including the reader. Therefore, the black performer understands that she must always perceive herself as separate from the American reader or audience and understand this separation as mainstream America's coding as white. James Edward Smethurst's writing on

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<sup>22</sup> From his collection "The Weary Blues" and also published in *The Opportunity*.

Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask" calls this the "inescapable connection of the metaphor to the masking practices of minstrelsy and the vaudeville stage (and the traditional doubled opposites of the comic and tragic masks of the European state)." Smethurst also notes the masking trope's resemblance to DuBois' "the veil," which "prevents or inhibits genuine African American self-reflection and self-consciousness, while provoking endless introspection about the nature of the self and identity" (33). Despite her breakthrough performance and demonstration of a black cultural performance as a distinctly American product, in the end Joanna cannot tear down the black-white veil between the performer and her audience. The white audience's inability to overcome prejudice also causes them to miss value in cultural art and to miss experiencing the catharsis that the black servicemen experience. Smethurst explains using Dunbar's poem that the veil "allows Dunbar to indirectly assert his superiority of understanding to white readers—it signifies on them, so to speak" (34). In the same vein, Joanna's performance for the black servicemen points to what white audiences miss about her performance—an inability to truly accept her as America and thereby accept African American art as true American art. Sotiropoulos' work on historical black performers explains a difference between white audience responses and black audience responses to the blackface performances. Her research demonstrates that theater critics identified the distinctions in audience responses where "white critics were particularly attentive to moments when black audiences in the balcony laughed but whites remained silent. These moments made all too clear that black performers had told jokes that went literally and figuratively over the heads of their white audiences" (6). In a way similar to the critics, the novel highlights the differences of experiences for white and black audiences.

Near the novel's end Joanna passes a girl while walking down the street. The girl is dressed much like Joanna's costumes in her America role. She describes the girl as a "dark colored girl wearing Russian boots and a hat with three feathers sticking up straight, Indian

fashion” while the rest of the people on the street “stared, pointed, laughed and enjoyed itself” (274). Joanna thinks to herself, “This, this was fame—to be shared with any girl who chose to stick feathers, Indian fashion, in her hat. An empty thing—different, so different from what she had expected it to be” (274). Joanna comes face-to-face with a reflection of herself in her America costume and realizes that she has been consumed by American culture into a caricature of herself. Joanna’s realization extends to an understanding that, while people have applauded her performance, they have also “laughed and enjoyed themselves” in the same way people on the street “stare and point” at the dark colored girl. Levison argues that, “Whatever power Joanna may have gained as a performer has been transferred to the spectators; they speak of her as if she cannot hear them, as if she does not exist as an individual but as an entity to be regarded onstage and therefore freely critiqued” (830). Where earlier in the novel Joanna’s performance and its successful acceptance by white audiences reads as utopian, the novel ends by showing how even the successful demonstration of African American art as *the* true American art will suffer shortcomings. Regarding historical performers Fauset writes in “The Gift of Laughter” (1925) that the African Americans are surrounded by “the pressure of white opinion” that leads to “his true character is almost submerged.” She claims that, “For years the Caucasian in America has persisted in dragging to the limelight merely one aspect of Negro characteristics, by which the whole race has been glimpsed” (515). The novel’s demonstration of Joanna as successfully dancing the role of America and claiming the title of American culture works to dismantle white control of the limelight and to show instead how the black performer can successfully fill American cultural roles. However, by having only the token Joanna in the limelight, the novel simultaneously shows the limitations of single-representations of black performers on American stages and the inability of the single performer’s presence to overcome entrenched stereotypes.

Fauset calls for recognition of Bert William's work in the same way that DuBois calls for propaganda art to claim true equality and recognition of the Negro performer. Fauset ends her piece on Williams, "we hope that his death and the stream of appreciation which it evoked—alas too tardily—will teach this silly, suffering old world to lay aside its prejudices, its traditions, its petty reserves and to bestow honor where it is due—when it is due. Thus at length shall we all be free" (15). Fauset uses Joanna's stage performance to problematize the clear distinction made by her critics and her audience that she is "only" a black dancer. But Joanna's cultural representation draws a fine line between civilized and primitive, and it is not without risks. Kuenz calls it a "perilous endeavor" that: "the black folk culture on which New Negro artists will base their work and finally their claim to full recognition by white America" can be "easily appropriated and redefined by a hegemonic mass culture over which they have little control" (90). At the end, the novel recognizes how even after fruitful artistic performance African American performers and art are still limited in changing American consciousness.

In conclusion, Joanna is a fulfillment of Johnson's call for representation of African American art revealed—via the representation of her performance as America and her unmasking on stage—as the true American art. Joanna's dance fulfills W.E.B. DuBois's call in his "Criteria for Negro Art" for all Art to be propaganda and to lead toward appreciation for black artists and art not because it is extraordinary for a black artist to create it, but simply because it is high art. Joanna's dance also successfully demonstrates Johnson's claim that all American art is, unmasked, actually African American art. However, the novel shows that while isolated American audiences may accept Joanna in the role of America and by extension African American art as the true American art, this success is limited.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CLAIMING BLACK ART AND ANCESTRY IN *FLIGHT*

“[*Flight*] attempted to tell the story of an attractive New Orleans Creole girl who...decided to cross the color line and live as white, but who eventually decided that the benefits thus secured were not worth the price she had to pay.”

–Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White*

“This is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible.”

–Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”

Walter White’s essay “The Negro and the American Stage” boldly claims, “Of all the racial groups in American life, there is none whose history and experience on American soil is packed so tight with the stuff of which drama is made as that of the Negro” (249). He incorporates this drama into his second novel, *Flight: A Novel (Voices of the South)*, published in 1926 during the midpoint of the New Negro Renaissance. However, White’s novel goes further than simply demonstrating the drama of American Negro life. Through his incorporation of African American stage performances throughout the novel, White draws the conclusion that, by the mid 1920s, black artists were already an inseparable mainstay in American popular culture. White’s novel connects the solitary black protagonist, Mimi Daquin, to a larger, ongoing black historical memory accessible only to black people through their interaction with African American culture. Witnessing the performances, Mimi explores the cultural legacy accessible to African Americans. In her decision to pass and live as white, the lightly-complexioned Mimi also explores the social values of white America. Her experience demonstrates the shortcomings of being white and also the superiority available to black Americans through cultural memory. The fractured sense of past and present Mimi experiences comes together in performance scenes that allow her to come to terms with racial identity. Mimi’s connection to African American history and ancestral past always occurs via witnessing performances. The chapter argues that the novel shows this cultural memory is only accessible to black audiences and thus simultaneously excludes white audiences.

Working from Langston Hughes' argument in the epigraph above that black Americans' cultural products have been devalued by white America, I demonstrate how *Flight* works to revalue black American culture. The novel accomplishes this via uncovering the class and racial biases of American value systems based in European definitions of "high art" that also lead to social and political corruption through overreliance on capitalism. The new cultural values that the novel proposes reclaim African American art from contemporary stereotypes of primitivism and find a deeper, more meaningful life existing within the black community for the protagonist over her seemingly more privileged white life.

Unlike other passing novels, *Flight* concludes with Mimi reclaiming her black racial identity and her right to black America's culture and history. Edward Waldron makes the statement in his 1978 book that, "To date, most of what has been written concerning the Harlem Renaissance has neglected Walter White almost entirely, and most of what has been written about White has focused on his later years of leadership in the NAACP" (x). Over thirty-five years after Waldron's statement, White's work as a novelist, essayist, and editor of Harlem Renaissance literature remains under-studied and excluded from Renaissance canonicity. This project reexamines White's novel and his nonfiction writings to argue for his significance as part of the literary scene of the Renaissance. The novel speaks directly to social concerns of the New Negro Renaissance regarding African American art's place on the American cultural landscape, class biases regarding socially acceptable behavior and artistic behavior within the black community, and breaking down (white) American racist perceptions of blackness as inferior to whiteness.

## NEW ORLEANS HERITAGE AND CULTURAL MEMORY

Most chapters *Flight* begin with a reference to performance and art, such as Chapter 10, which opens: "It was not long before Mimi knew in greater detail the reasons for Mrs.

Hunter's apprehension. Like a great orchestra beginning *pianissimo* upon a symphony, the tongues started clacking in soft and cryptic whisperings” (120). A character's actions are connected to cultural creators, performers, or audiences, such as Mimi's observations of her stepmother, Mrs. Daquin, after Jean's death: “To Mimi she seemed to have donned the atmosphere of the sorely tried and heavily bereaved with full attention to the effectiveness of details, wearing the role as an accomplished actress would” (137). Therefore, reading performance as integral to the text is not a stretch but a clear centrality in the novel. Art and performance are a crucial part of the novel, expressed throughout the story as a means to convey characters' emotions, describe scenes or locations, and to pull the varied locations and scenes of the novel together.

The novel opens in New Orleans and introduces the reader to New Orleans black American culture. Recent scholarship acknowledges the production of black American culture in New Orleans,<sup>23</sup> but Walter White demonstrates it as early as the 1920s through Mimi's familial history in New Orleans and her repeated references to singing, music, and the emotional connection this imports to the audience. Mimi's emotions experienced in New Orleans are each mirrored by a black American artistic performance. For example, when Mimi's new stepmother suggests changes in their older lifestyle to a new, bourgeois middle-class lifestyle, Mimi feels sadness at losing the past and observes her father, Jean, sharing this loss. In the midst of this feeling of sadness, she notices a blues singer outside the window:

The voice died away in the distance, but the poignant, nostalgic longing of the unseen singer remained. Jean and Mimi, used to the Creole dilution of the Negro songs, sat straining their ears to catch every note of this barbaric, melancholy wail as it died in

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Bettye J. Gardner and Niani Kilkenny explain that, “New Orleans, home to a musically sophisticated African American community and a vibrant black Creole culture, had access to rural Mississippi blues traditions via rail yards and waterfronts.” This “vibrant Creole culture” is prevalent in the novel and “these elements combined to make New Orleans a fertile breeding ground for a new music call Jazz.” Artists for this music include Charles Bolden, Jelly Roll Morton, and The Red Hot Peppers. Recordings from 1926 and 1927, at the same time as the novel's publication are, “generally thought to be the best recordings from that era of New Orleans Jazz” (89).

the distance, a strange thrill filling them. The swiftly moving tragedy of the song, dying off abruptly as though the singer was too full for further words, stirred them both to the exclusion of all else. (17)

Later that day Mimi and Jean wander a New Orleans cemetery to avoid the changes Mrs. Daquin suggests. They overhear a funeral march, “Chant for the Dead,” and the music once again mirrors their mood. Jean says to Mimi, “that’s how I feel to-day...Leaving New Orleans, the old houses, the old friends--it makes me feel as though it were I in that coffin...” (36). The repeated presence of the singing and music work to connect Mimi and Jean to their past. Houston Baker calls this connection to the past “nostalgia” and explains that it “does not here mean arrested development, a distraught sentimentality ever pining for ‘ole, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago.” Instead, he uses the word to suggest “*heimweh* or homesickness. Nostalgia is a purposive construction of a past filled with golden virtues, golden men and sterling events” (3). Unlike the new Mrs. Daquin, whose family originates from outside New Orleans, Mimi and her father’s family have for generations existed as a part of the city, and they are “used to” this artistic expression—feeling a sense of nostalgia for the past. This ancestral connection to the area also gives Mimi and her father a connection to the culture, as evidenced by their emotional connection with the music. They share, with the music, an ability to emotionally connect their own emotional experiences to the emotion expressed in the music. This connection becomes central to Mimi’s ability to reclaim her racial identity and her racial heritage at the novel’s conclusion.

After the Daquin family leaves New Orleans and moves to Atlanta, the novel distinguishes between two types of black American artistic production: that influenced by white culture and that unadulterated by outside influences. Mimi describes New Orleans art as “music which had a distinctive Negro note but which had been influenced to a definite extent by French songs that made it a sort of Africanized French.” She contrasts it with her experiences in Atlanta where she “felt much more vividly the rhythmic surge and sweep of

the Negro music untouched by other influences--the ecstatic pouring forth of melodies that often were not melodies but a wild and intoxicating thing that made little chills run up and down her spine and filled her eyes with tears” (91). The novel notes the difference between hybrid cultural products and “pure” or “undiluted” products. Whereas the earlier African American music matched or was able to support her emotions, this “untouched” music is capable of influencing her emotions independently of how she felt prior to hearing the music. While attending a theater production and listening to the “untouched” music, “She began to see and understand the deep spirituality which lay back of this people of hers, to comprehend the gifts which had enabled them to withstand oppression which would long since have crushed a weaker race” (91). Here she notes the strength of black people as a race, and the novel credits that strength with the production of cultural products, which she calls “gifts.” This scene notes both the presence of African American art outside of New Orleans and that Mimi still has a connection with the music. Even though she is not from Atlanta and has no direct heritage or ancestors in the area, she is still able to emotionally connect with the music. And not just connect—she is able to distinguish the influences within the music.

Mimi’s transcendental experiences with music occur not only in a formal theater but also in impromptu performances by black Americans she encounters. On the same page as the theater performance, the novel relates Mimi witnessing a chain gang singing and states, “The day when a convict gang began to repair the street in front of their home was one Mimi never forgot” because “She awoke hearing a wild, plaintive, poignantly simple melody so strange she thought herself yet asleep...A crowd of Negro convicts, clad in the broad-striped and ill-fitting garb of rough material, huge balls of iron attached to their ankles by heavy chains, were tearing up the street with synchronized strokes of their pickaxes” (91). After describing the black convicts, Mimi notes one singer in particular: “A stalwart negro with a ringing barytone led them in the song which had awakened Mimi. On and on he sang, verse

after verse of a wildly sweet and simple song, joined in the chorus by the others” (92). The music’s ability to transfer Mimi emotionally outside of her own experience relates to the aesthetics of the music. After including the lyrics, the narrative explains:

Mimi’s heart beat faster and faster as she watched and listened. She sensed that the song carried the toilers far above their miserable lot. For them the toil and sweat, the luring guards who shouted staccato commands or flung crisp oaths when one of the convicts slackened or appeared to slacken in his labour, did not exist. (93)

Mimi witnesses the art being performed by these unknown artists, thereby acknowledging the art created by black Americans both in formal settings such as the theater performance prior and in impromptu public performances such as this example. Simultaneously, the scene values black American art distinctly and apart from values of Western art. Early collections of black folk art focused on the aesthetic over the historical because, as Eugene Metcalf explains, “early folk art promoters knew little about the circumstances in which the art they collected was produced...most of the artists were unknown.” Furthermore, this valuing of aesthetics “sprang from a bias inherited from the study of high art, which placed art in an ennobled realm above history and beyond mundane human occupations.” By valuing aesthetics over history, “Masterpieces transcended culture and were to be viewed in terms of aesthetics alone” (278). W. Fitzhugh Brundage makes a related point when he explains that, “As the sanctity of high culture eroded during the 1920s, black cultural arbiters called for a new black aesthetics to take its place.” However, “serious disagreements arose over the manner and degree to which black artists were obligated to engage with and represent the experiences of African Americans. This debate about the politics of art framed the significance that black intellectuals assigned to the popular culture of their age” (11). The scene in the novel reconnects the aesthetic—the beauty and emotional influence—with the physical artistic creators and thereby discredits an assumption that Western art forms are the only true “high art.” Instead, the scenes create a way to value art outside of Western tradition

and also show how these art forms are beautiful and artistic independently of Western (or white) support.

Langston Hughes calls this valuing of the aesthetic “*Negritude*” in his essay “Black Writers” and asks early twentieth century readers: “What is the function and significance of African Negro art in the life of the people and for the people?” He claims that “*Negritude*” “has its roots deep in the beauty of the black people—in what the younger writers and musicians in America call ‘soul.’” He then defines “soul” as: “[A] synthesis of the essence of Negro folk art redistilled...expressed in contemporary ways so definitely and emotionally colored with the old, that it gives a distinctly ‘Negro’ flavor...” (*Collected Works* 477). Both Hughes’ definition and White’s novel embrace black culture free of Western (and white) influences and claim the freed culture as the more aesthetically pleasing. Hughes’ embracing of African American culture can be seen in his poem “Weary Blues,” where he writes that an old black man, “With his ebony hands on each ivory key / He made that poor piano moan with melody. / O Blues!” and the narrator explains that the music originates in “a black man’s soul.” Then the narrator, in the following stanza, explains the effect the music has: “The singer stopped playing and went to bed / While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.” These lines demonstrate Hughes’ concept of the soul and the relationship of both audience and performer within the poem. They also show the ability of African American art to emotionally influence the audience—in this case, the narrator/poet.

Jean-Philippe Marcoux’s writing on Hughes’ creative work is useful to understand how Hughes’ writing exemplifies the historical value of art through its aesthetic value. He explains that, in Hughes’ art “music and text intersect and inform one another, thereby perpetuating the passing of (hi)stories of the black experience through its liberalized representation” (41). In other words, the art itself provides or constructs the history. Because of this, Hughes’ theory of “soul” becomes a “repository of cultural memory” and “unifies the

collective black consciousness...” (41) According to Marcoux, Hughes’ “soul” distinguishes the experience of black Americans from that of white Americans because of the “prejudiced environment” and African American art becomes the “pathway to freedom” and “the penultimate theme of black literature” (41). Marcoux explains the relationship between the performer and audience in Hughes’s “The Weary Blues,” calling it “the dialectics of experiential performativity.” The exchange between audience and performer occurs where “The listener/poet’s creativity derives directly from his interconnectedness with the performer’s ritual...” (54). Furthermore, “both poem and song speak the same language: they enact a cathartic ritual of transcendence whose loci are a shared history, a shared language and a shared refusal to capitulate under the weight of oppression.” In this poem both the listener/audience/poet (Hughes or the narrator) and the black performer “show abilities to ‘converse’ without literal word but through a coded musical language that underscore the resilience African Americans affirm through art” (55). As with the novel’s demonstration of performances witnessed by black audiences via Mimi, Hughes’ poem includes a black performer, performance, and black audience. As evidence that White was very familiar with Hughes’ work and the influence of music and performance in the work, White reviewed Hughes’ *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), writing, “It will be interesting to watch these changes as they are developed by Mr. Hughes and others who may follow him in the growth of either a more universal medium of expression or a broadening of the scope of the moods themselves” (Waldron 135). The absence of Western valuation of the art form becomes central to understanding White’s novel where a young black woman has a child out of wedlock, chooses to pass for white, then chooses—and the key here is that she chooses—to return to her identity as a black American.

White’s own writings support this argument for a conscious focus on black American art and its use for racial progress. In a professional letter aimed at procuring funds for black

artists, he writes that, “It is our idea that these students in acquiring these things would also be most serviceable to their people in acquainting foreign intellectual circles with the more representative types and the finer elements of the American Negro, and would therefore be effective agents in combating the further spread of racial prejudice and misunderstanding” (Waldron 117).<sup>24</sup> White also wrote a memorandum in 1927 to gain funds for black artists, echoing his mentor James Weldon Johnson, “I am convinced that there is no single factor of greater importance in solving this thing we call the race problem than the work of Negro artists, or in bringing new respect and a new arrangement of values and opinions concerning the Negro than the work of Negro artists” (Waldron 118). Therefore, Mimi’s acknowledging the artistic value of both the formal theater performer and the informal street performer places the authority for judging art with the audience for the art. It removes the power of “high art” from Western (white/historical) values and places it with the local (black/aesthetic) observers. By claiming African American art as a valuable cultural form, White’s novel thereby claims black Americans (the art’s creators) as valuable contributors to American culture and, therefore, black Americans as integral citizens of the United States.

## CULTURE AND CONSEQUENCES OF RACISM

When first published, the greatest criticisms regarding White’s novel were that white reviewers felt it did not “accurately” portray black Americans. A reviewer for *Survey* wrote that the novel was “more sophisticated, better designed, more artful in craftsmanship, but in white, not Negro craftsmanship...It contains no elemental emotion, no broad sunlit Rabelaisian humor, no folklore, no rhapsody of style or naive splendor of language” (Waldron 98). Another review by Emma B. Holden in *The New Republic* claims: “Mr. White

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<sup>24</sup> In the letter, dated May 20, 1924, White writes to the American Fund for Public service on behalf of the Negro Foreign Fellowship. Whites’ letters used in this chapter are from Edward Waldron’s *Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance*. Waldron’s book contains both critical work on White and also archival work in the NAACP records.

seems to feel that he can handle his people from the same angle that one would use in treating a group of whites, and yet create a special interest by assuring us from time to time that they are colored, and by introducing the dramatic episode of Negro persecution.” However, Holden feels that, “He fails, inevitably...It is neither a very consistent nor a very stirring story” (Waldron 98) because the novel does not conform to white expectations for black people’s behavior. These reviewers missed the messages and the central goal of White’s novel—to portray developed, educated African American characters—characters who did not fit stereotypes of the time. Paula Marie Seniors notes a similar contemporary reaction to Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson’s *The Shoo Fly Regiment* (1907) in that part of the musical’s financial failure “lay in the certainty that whites rejected the production” and that “the racism of white audiences prevented them from appreciating the presence of black soldiers on stage and made them uncomfortable” (90). Seniors continues, “audience members found it difficult to wrap their minds around the new portrayals of African Americans and, in some cases, they missed the messages of black emancipation through education and war that were embedded in the show” (91). On the other hand, “It appears that black audiences enjoyed the production and remained cognizant of the messages that Cole and Johnson relayed” (91). Reviewers’ responses to the novel reflect similar responses early reviewers had regarding the larger body of New Negro Renaissance art. In both, white audiences respond negatively to depictions of black Americans that do not fit their anticipated roles and characters for black people. The reviewers respond negatively to the characters themselves, deeming them unbelievable, and not the author’s writing or development of those characters.

Multiple critics have faulted some writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Walter White, for their sentimental stories and romantic characters. White’s work goes beyond sentimentality to show readers examples of upper-class black people while also dealing with difficult and censored topics. Waldron explains that, “One very important

contribution of the Renaissance writers was the creation of *real* black characters... While the new characters were in some ways almost as stereotyped as the predecessors, they were not demeaning portraits of the subhuman variety often found in the earlier literature” (32). He highlights a distinct difference between white and black writers. Unlike white writers, black authors such as White include “an examination of the interiors of these characters... In these works from the Harlem Renaissance, we see characters live complete lives, not just flashes of their dancing and drinking the night away” (32). White wrote in his 1931 essay “Negro Literature” that “The rigid wall between white and black which the former sought to erect... did help create certain stereotypes of the Negro which clung persistently to the American mind until very recent years (“The New Negro” 351). His essay, published a mere five years after his novel, shows that he was clearly aware of stereotypes in literature created and enforced by white readers. In addition to depicting African American art as culturally valuable, a second purpose of White’s novel was to perform racial uplift, to show to white readers characters who were both educated and African American, who did not conform to expectations. Claire Corbould’s historical work on depictions of black Americans in public spaces supports this type of racial uplift performed by the novel. She explains that “From the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s through to 1930 or so, many black American activists aimed to prove that racial inferiority was unfounded and that America’s black citizens were the equal of white Americans.” The literature was “a strategy of ‘uplift,’ whereby the leaders of the race would prove they were equal to whites” (4). White writes in his autobiography that he was reviewing another author’s new novel and recounts a conversation with James Weldon Johnson and H.L. Mencken: “I said that [T.S.] Stribling’s depiction of Negro servants was not too bad, but that he fell down badly in his portrayal of what educated Negroes feel and think.” Mencken and Johnson encouraged him to write his own novel and White claims, “I had never even thought of attempting to write fiction. Mencken, Jim, and I

talked over the notion as they both tried to convince me that the variety of experiences which my appearance made possible by permitting me to talk with white people as a white man and with my own people as a Negro gave me a unique vantage point” (*A Man Called White* 65). Charles Cooney quotes White as saying about *Flight*, “Colored people know everything in my book—they live and suffer the same things every day of their lives. It is not the colored reader at whom I am shooting but the white man and woman...” (232). For White to “take on” or “write against” stereotyped depictions of African Americans was also to critique, by extension, white influence on and consumption of black art.

Contemporaneous white readers, however, did not believe in White’s educated, well-spoken black characters. White relates his experience with one publisher, George H. Doran, who told him, “Your novel has great drama and power... But there are some changes we want you to make. Your Negro characters—uh, uh—are not what readers expect. I’m sure you will be willing to make the necessary changes” (67). White goes on to write:

We talked for an hour or more, and it became increasingly clear that someone had convinced Mr. Doran that even though there were Negro college graduates who talked correct English instead of dialect, the number of such Negroes was too small to justify their being written of as educated and normal human beings. I learned some time later that Mr. Doran had submitted my novel to Irvin S. Cobb, the Kentucky humorist, who had been so shocked by its outspokenness that he had advised against its publication, fearing that it would cause race riots in the South. (*A Man Called White*, 67)

White did not make the changes and the scenes that “would cause race riots in the South” remain in the novel. In one such scene, Mimi attends a “honky-tonky” dance with her boyfriend, Carl. She watches the “dusky couple” dancing “in a fascinatingly free, peculiar rhythm.” White’s novel notes similar moments of cultural appropriation by white America as James Weldon Johnson notes in his *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Amanda Page is one of several other critics who also compare White’s fiction with his mentor’s writing. Page explains that both men “saw the value in black literature as a means to promote racial equality” (107). In this scene the narrator remarks that: “Many years afterwards when [Mimi]

saw blonde chorus girls on Broadway swaying their shoulders and bodies as these two were doing, she remembered always where she had first seen it done” (97). Mimi’s thoughts directly echo Johnson’s unnamed narrator who, while watching the black pianist play ragtime in the New York club, reflects to himself that, “There was also another set of white people who came frequently; it was made up of variety performers and others who delineated ‘darky characters’; they came to get their imitations first-hand from the Negro entertainers they saw there” (*AECM*, 1960 107). *Flight*, like *Autobiography*, uses the scene of black American cultural performance to show how the art originated with black artists and to comment on how it was later appropriated for economic gain by white artists.

This scene further emphasizes the aesthetic and natural development of black American art over Western historical and formal development when the narrative, in addition to describing the dancers, also describes the musicians: “the orchestra was doing its share with the same joy as the dancers, as though it too had paid its way in for the pleasure of playing,” which the narrative immediately follows with, “Carl explained that practically none of its members had ever taken a music lesson, none of them knew anything about the theory of music” (97). The scene continues with Mimi’s reactions and reflections of the performance: “Mimi had never known that anything like this existed before. Over it all there was a primitive note, a freedom from inhibitions that gave grace and ecstasy to the dancers and the musicians. It exhilarated one and made him forget the stuffiness and dimness of the hall and the sometimes fetid shells which arose as the dance went on” (97). This is the first mention of “primitive” (although it is hinted at earlier in the novel) and it is presented as a separation from “respectable.” David Krasner explains that “acting primitive” was “a catchphrase of the era.” He also notes white America’s “Co-opting the vogue of primitivism” and “fell in line with the ‘realness’ whites associated with primitive societies” (109). The novel introduces the word “primitive” on the same page the narrative comments that the

honky-tonky dance moves performed by white people was witnessed many years before when danced by black people. The novel's re-appropriation of the "primitive" or folk-art into the black community contrasts sharply with the scene that follows in the novel.

Two of Atlanta's "respectable" middle-class black women witness Mimi at the dance alone with a young man and rumors about Mimi's "respectability" spread quickly. One woman accuses Mimi of "Playing off respectable and going in such places—" and declares, "That girl's headed straight for trouble—carrying on like that!" (98) When her stepmother confronts her for attending the dance, Mimi asks why anything is wrong with attending and Mrs. Daquin responds, "Wrong with it? Mimi, haven't you any sense of decency at all? Even if you didn't do anything but what you said, think of what the neighbors will say!" (106-107). Eric King Watts explains that the "black intelligentsia" was "presented as white-like—as a class for which race does not matter." By contrast, "images of the 'exotic' folk (composed largely by white artists) were projected a representation of 'real' blackness since folk lifestyles were deemed more 'natural' and free of social imposition." (182). When Mimi questions her stepmother's and the other "respectable" women's condemnation of the honky-tonk and African American cultural spaces as places "inappropriate" for "respectable" black people, the novel calls into question all of black America's historical valuation of appropriate places, behavior, and spaces.

Judgments about Mimi's behavior occur not only in the novel itself, but also in historical reviews when the novel was first published. A reviewer found significant fault with Mimi, explaining that, "Mimi does not love enough to keep one from having sympathy with the society that condemns her. There is no centuries of home life back of the American Negro, and what the past two generations have laboriously striven to build up, should not be torn down..." (99). As Watts explains, artists and writers, such as White, "who dared to paint images of dignified racial difference" received the label "propagandists" because they

“undermined or indicted (racist) conventional wisdom promoted by ‘pure art’” (182). Waldron comments that “White was clearly violating some of the ‘rules’ of the rear guard...while he did not perfect his heroine, he did make her earthy enough to offend some of the more staid members of the NAACP” (99). Directly after demonstrating the originality of the art at the dance and the talent of the orchestra, the scene situates the honky-tonk dance as a place of ill-repute and a place for “respectable” women to avoid. The contrast serves multiple critiques to readers. First, it offers contrasting views of African Americans—rather than a single, undisturbed image. Second, it claims folk art as “pure art” when created by black artists, reclaiming the cultural artist as black instead of white. Third, it critiques the 1920s black community who has internalized white middle-class values and their negative judgments of African American art.

Hughes also criticizes this internalizing by the black community when he writes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” that, “this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible” (32).<sup>25</sup> When the black women of Atlanta judge the black dance hall and African American art as “unrespectable,” they demonstrate an internalizing of white judgment regarding appropriate public spaces and definitions of true art. The black women of Atlanta are not portrayed as pitying or laughable, but rather as fundamentally flawed by basing their values of culture and behavior on standards of white America. As Hughes claims, “the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all the virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money.” And Hughes writes that it is difficult for a black person “to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is never taught to see that beauty. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he

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<sup>25</sup> Hughes’ essay is in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: Essays on Art, Race, Politics, and the World*. The essay was originally published in *The Nation* on June 23, 1926—the same year White’s novel was published.

does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns” (“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” 32). When Mimi’s stepmother and the other black women are unable to see the beauty in the black performance, they judge only according to Western standards of artistic value. Hughes contrasts the black middle-class’s inability to appreciate African American cultural work with the “common people” who are not “afraid” of African American art and beauty: “They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations” (33). By embracing white America’s standards of appropriate behavior and spaces—and by extension what is considered artistic—the black women of Atlanta in the novel are therefore unable to see the beauty in their own people’s creations.

Part of the novel’s work, through the performance scenes, is to illustrate the fundamental concept that being white is NOT “better than” being black. Thus far, I have argued this claim through African American cultural demonstrations and the ability of black art to reach emotionally to the audience. But the novel and Walter White go further. White explains in his autobiography that when people found out he was “actually black” and identified as a Negro they asked, overcoming their surprise, why he would choose to be black when he could easily pass for white. People were startled by his claim: “I am not white. There is nothing within my mind and heart which tempts me to think that I am” and he elaborates:

There is magic in a white skin; there is tragedy, loneliness, exile, in a black skin. Why then do I insist that I am a Negro, when nothing compels me to do so but myself?... Whites can see no reason for a black man wanting to be black; there is only reason for a black man wanting to be white. That is the way whites think; that is the way their values are set up. It is the startling removal of the blackness that upsets people. (3-4)

And because White does not fit white people’s stereotypes of black people, “[white people] are aware that these things are *not* part of me. They think there must be some mistake” (4 emphasis original). Instead of valuing whiteness and the stereotyped “magic” in white skin,

White's novel argues for value that blackness offers and whiteness does not. The reason so many people believe that whiteness is superior, White explains, is that, "No matter how low a white man fell, he could always hold fast to the smug conviction that he was superior to two-thirds of the world's population, for those two-thirds were not white" (11). White and the novel challenge the assumption that whiteness is better because of opportunities available, and they instead show positives offered by blackness. The novel passes judgment on the very concept of racial division and whiteness as a superior identity. Hughes calls for black artists "to change through the force of his art that old whispering, 'I want to be white,' hidden in the aspirations of his people, to 'Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful!" ("The Negro Artist" 35). White's personal claim and Hughes' call to black artists contain the same message: that African American art should be claimed as valuable by black audiences and should be a source of pride for the black community rather than attempting to fit into expectations and values decided by white America. In Amiri Baraka's words, "Art is one particular aspect of culture, *a* culture. Art expresses the values of its creator—the values being whatever you think is good and what you think is bad, what you think is beautiful and what you think is ugly." Because of this, "European art suggests European life. It is a manifestation of European values" (23, emphasis original). If European art manifests European values, then it consequently ignores or removes values that do not fit, such as African American art. By both valuing African American art and rejecting white American middle-class standards, White, Hughes, and *Flight* offer an alternative value system for art—and behavior—not based in white American expectations.

When Mimi moves North to live with her aunt, the narrative connects the fictional world of the novel with historical Harlem and its African American culture. Mimi arrives in Harlem and describes the setting as "more familiar to her, yet strange, and her bewilderment was decreased but little. For here was a new lift, teeming, exotic, individual. Hurrying along

the streets, coming out of restaurants, standing in doorways and on street corners were groups of Negroes, well dressed, jubilant, cheerful” (185). Even though she has never been to Harlem before, it seems familiar; not just to her personally, but black people she observes seem interconnected: “Black and brown and yellow faces flitted by, some carefree, some careworn. Mimi sensed again the essential rhythm, the oneness of these variegated colors and moods. It was all vivid, colorful, of a pattern distinctive and apart, and she warmed to the friendliness of it all...” (186). Mimi’s introduction to Harlem also serves to introduce the reader to the novel’s idea that black people are part of a collective. This theme plays repeatedly in the second half of the novel during Mimi’s time in the North.

The scene continues, adopting the metaphor of a play, with Mimi as a spectator with insider understanding: “The colorful scenes fascinated her, made her want to stay there and watch the comedies, the tragedies, the shifting panoramas of life as it flowed, now swiftly, now slowly” (187). When she asks about African American cultural history in Harlem, Mimi’s aunt tells her “of the Maceo and Marshall’s and other rendezvous of Negro and white musicians and writers and bohemians.” Mimi asks “many questions about Williams and Walker, Aida Overton, Jim Europe, Buddy Gilmore who served as model for trap drummers in all the orchestras, Ernest Hogan, Cole and Johnson, and many others of the stars of the stage” (193). Her aunt tells Mimi about “the brilliant Sunday nights when they used to dine to the music of a Negro orchestra at Marshall’s” and describes the music as “the members of which played and sang and danced and established the vogue out of which sprang the modern cabaret” (193). Written from the aunt’s perspective and as a memory, where these events already occurred, her aunt passes her own experiences as an audience for African American performers on to Mimi, the next generation of black audience. In this same way the novel records the names of famous black artists and names them for future generations—cementing their positions in the African American cultural canon. This also creates a physical space and

sense of belonging for black Americans, demonstrating that they—by their elders’ stories—have existed in this space and that they belong here. Corbould’s argument supports this when she explains that, “Black public culture was suffused with debate about identity, representation, history, and discussion about where black Americans belonged.” This was exacerbated by “simply living in a nation where they were told constantly they were not wanted, black Americans were forced just as often to negotiate questions about who they were and where they belonged” (215). The novel creates a specific space where black Americans not only belong at that time but where they have a history and legacy of belonging.

On the novel’s following pages, Mimi, as the younger generation, creates her own memories of Harlem’s culture, thereby continuing the generational move from her aunt to herself. She experiences as a black audience witnessing African American art and cultural production. When Mimi attends a dance, “She had heard of Ford Dabney, had been told of the way in which his orchestra could play. But she had never dreamed that any human beings could entice from inanimate objects such intoxicating, inspiriting music” (198). The narrative repeats the scene of her aunt’s memories, including historical performers in the fictional story, telling American history from the perspective of the black audience (Mimi) and including African American cultural events that demonstrate the originality and beauty of the cultural creations. As well, the scene provides a physical demonstration of African American art’s power to bring together the black community. The narrative explains that when the music began, “Mimi sat and watched the kaleidoscopic scene, brilliant, colorful, fascinating.” She describes the dancers as, “Like one body the crowd on the huge, densely packed floor swayed and moved with an easy grace, laughing, carefree, exuberant. There was a natural spontaneity to the movement, a rhythmic unity that gave Mimi the impression that the dancers had been rehearsed with great pains by an expert *maitre de dance*. They moved with

graceful animation, with a decorous but fascinating abandon” (201). Baker uses the term “critical memory,” which he defines as “the very faculty of revolution.” He goes on to explain that, “The essence of critical memory’s work is the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into a relationship significant instants of time past” (3), and that it “focuses the historical continuities of black-majority efforts, strategies and resources for leadership and liberation. Furthermore, it demonstrates the ever-renewing promise inherent in the contiguity between majority and “leadership’ remembrance” (31). The scene performs a critical memory, joining the concept of Mimi’s aunt passing on of historical memories with Mimi’s own creation of cultural memories. In this way, experiencing African American culture becomes a community event, or a community memory, that joins all individuals into a single interconnected group.

Shortly after this experience Mimi chooses to live as a white woman to have access to better job opportunities to help raise her son. Her experience of community as a black woman at the black dance club sharply contrasts with a mirror-image experience she has as a white woman at a white dance club. The novel points to the white dance club as the key moment of expression for her unhappiness living as white: “her discontent was born one night at a gay party after the theatre at one of the very smart and very expensive night clubs.” Pausing from dancing, Mimi sits to watch the white dancers: “Grimly they went about the task of acquiring pleasure, their faces set in hard, nervous lines as they executed or attempted to execute quick, jerky, ungraceful and intricate new steps. They are working at leisure and happiness just as though it were a trade, she concluded.” She tells her white husband, Jimmie, that the white people dance “as though they were saying: ‘This night is costing me a couple of hundred dollars and I *will* get two hundred dollars’ worth of fun out of it!’” (267). Mimi comments on the lack of pleasure derived from dancing and cultural enjoyment, and the narrative remarks that Jimmie is “puzzled” at Mimi’s comment, as though he cannot understand her

perspective.

This scene contrasts markedly with the earlier scene Mimi witnesses at a club with black dancers. In that scene she describes the black dancers as “fascinatingly free.” The same type of club with white dancers shows a different experience in the world of white people:

After that night she watched the faces in the street, in the theatre, wherever she happened to be. There was always that strained, unhappy expression on the countenances of these people who, like scurrying insects, rushed madly here and there, each as though upon his efforts depended the future of civilization and life and everything else. Like cogs in a machine... (267)

Waldron comments that when Mimi begins passing, she “becomes terribly conscious of the distinctions between the two lifestyles, the white and the black. There is a quality to the latter which is completely missing in the former” (89). The scene of the strained dancing, and attempt to embrace art through dance, becomes representative in the novel of white people’s outlook on their lives, where “these people” represent white people and “the machine” represents Modern life. This is one of several times in the novel where the white/Western world is described as machine-like, calling to mind Karl Marx. Joseph R. Roach’s analysis on cultural studies and performance explains a “Marxist idea” that culture “is the occasion and the instrument of struggle between contending groups with differing amounts of power or, at least, with different kinds of power” (10). The metaphor of the white machine-like dancers connects the earlier part of the novel prior to Mimi’s passing for white with the end of the novel when she begins questioning her choice to live in the white world. Mimi first experiences the difference between white and black worlds at the dance clubs, and she makes the comparison as a white woman and a member of the white world. However, she first heard the Western world and its values described as “machinelike” by her father, Jean.

#### AGAINST WESTERN WHITE WORLD’S ROMANCE OF PRIMITIVISM

The theme of white America’s preoccupation with industry and progress runs

throughout the story and reaches a crescendo at the novel's end. However, toward the novel's beginning Jean Daquin laments to Mimi, "The whole world's gone mad over power and wealth. The strongest man wins, not the most decent or the most intelligent or the best." In contrast to power and wealth, Jean places on art and culture: "All the old virtues of comradeship and art and literature and philosophy, in short, all the refinements of life," and explains that these "are being swallowed up in this monster, the Machine." The "Machine" is terrible because, "we are creating that which is slowly but surely making us mere automatons, dancing like marionettes when the machine pulls the strings and bids us prance." He continues, "I know you're thinking I sound like a masculine Cassandra—but some day, perhaps long after I'm gone, maybe you'll think back to this day, and agree with me" (54). Cassandra, the mythic Greek oracle, serves as a warning figure. Jean's dichotomy of the Machine (symbolizing Modernity and the Western world) versus art (symbolizing humanity) forewarns of a potential loss if the world chooses Modernity over humanity. White's scene echoes other authors of the 1920s as well as Modernism's preoccupation with Africa and black people as representations of a "simpler" and more "primitive" way of life. Many scholars have studied Modernist America and white authors' appropriation of primitivism. Waldron links primitivism to the Harlem Renaissance's cultural scene specifically where a "newly awakened interest within the white community in the 'primitive Negro' and the array of night spots that catered, exclusively for the most part, to a white clientele" who "gathered to watch professional entertainers represent themselves as 'typical' Harlemites." (26). Not only does the novel support claims for the beauty of folk art and black American artists, this statement and Mimi's experience claim that black people are able to access critical shared memories through exposure to art created (or performed) by black Americans. Metcalf explains that, "Art represents and sanctifies what is valued in a society; the ability to create and appreciate art implies heightened sensibility and confers social status and prestige."

People or groups without art are “lacking in the qualities that dignify human experience and social interaction” and are therefore “‘uncultured,’ ‘primitive,’ unable to participate in refined society.” Because of the weight of art as a definition of refinement and civilized nature, “Definitions of art are therefore highly political. They are major battlegrounds on which the struggle for human and social recognition is waged. A people can ill afford to let others control the definitions by which their arts are classified and evaluated” (271). And if black Americans create art, can they really be primitive? If art represents civilization, then does valuing the Machine over art therefore demonstrate a lack of civilization?

Earlier, the novel argued for African American culture as valuable art because of its aesthetic beauty. With valuable art, black Americans are therefore civilized. However, the novel goes even further here and suggests that white people are actually less civilized than black people because white America values the Machine over art. White presents drama and performance as the quintessential art form for discussing concepts of civilization in modern America. In his 1932 essay “The Negro on the American Stage” White explains, “It was inevitable that this growing consciousness should find expression on the stage, seeking always as it does for legitimate exploitation of new themes and fresh thrills. This delving into the drama of Negro life was concurrent with and greatly aided by the rapidly developing preoccupation of American dramatists with the American scene and creation of a native American drama” (251). Connections between White’s novel, his essay, and historical drama merit analysis. The historical prevalence of black artists on American stages during the Harlem Renaissance presents the stage as a uniquely situated art form for examining the place of black American art on the American cultural stage. The use of stages in *Flight* and other literature presents a space within the text to critique American appropriation of black American art *and* the use of stereotypes of black Americans for artistic purposes. Metcalf writes that before World War I “white writers had already suggested that black Americans

might possess a gift of primitivism and simplicity that preserved them from the technological sterility of American society.” However, after the war ended “black American primitivism...was discovered and celebrated by whites from all over the world...Blacks not only are discovering and defining themselves and their culture, but for perhaps the first time, they also were supported and encouraged in this endeavor by white America” (276). And as Metcalf notes this occurred at the same time as growing racial divides and Jim Crow laws. Black American art, or folk art, offered a new avenue for high art and “served to connect the artists of the twenties and thirties with a long tradition apparently unique to America, giving them not only historical and cultural roots but also a reply to critics of American modern art who claimed that it was only another version of decadent European civilization” (278). However, the novel stages Mimi’s life as a white woman as distinctly separate—and unrelated—to her experiences in the black community. In other words, Mimi’s contrasting racial experiences uncover a truth: that white America lacks the ancestral connection and “primitive” connection to African American art that invalidates white people’s claim to the art as their own culture.

During Mimi’s time living as white, she marries a white American, Jimmie. In a scene between Mimi’s husband and a young white professor, Henry Meekins, the two men have a discussion about black people with Mimi as their audience. The novel uses this scene to allow racial conversation between two white people as though providing an inside look at racial issues, since Mimi is black as well as white. Daphne Brooks’ analysis of Pauline Hopkins’ novel *Of One Blood* and the issues passing presents are relevant to this scene. At a time of predominately segregated audiences, Brooks explains that a passing character who enters the theater audience “creates a sphere for considering the profound impact” that performers “may have had on black subjects who were questing for spiritual and philosophical consolation” (303). In a similar way, Mimi’s identity as both black and white

American provides her (and the novel's audience) a unique insider perspective as both black and white audience. Mimi is passing and visibly white, so "we" means "white" and "they" means "all non-whites." Additionally, as Page explains, White's novel "complicates the dynamics of the African American passing narrative that often includes an element of 'race betrayal,'" because Mimi chooses first to live as a white person but then to return to the black community. Page notes that Mimi is not condemned for passing, as is the case in other "tragic mulatta" novels, and "White does not treat Mimi's act of passing as a betrayal of the race; instead, the race has betrayed her by conforming to the hypocritical middle-class standards of morality" (107). This scene is worth describing at length since it works through a connection of modern, twentieth century America with the value of art and culture. Meekins responds to Jimmie's derogatory statements regarding black people by saying, "Granted that we teach them sanitation, build them roads and railway lines...But do we teach them, or better, prove to them that our religion is better than theirs?" Mimi self-identifies as a black American, but her visual whiteness allows her to both be a part of the insider audience—someone Jimmie sees as a fellow white American—while simultaneously an outside observer—someone who understands herself as different and identifies with the group Jimmie critiques.

Meekins says that, "We've made it possible to spread faster and more easily bigotry and hatred and intolerance and give more power to the mob, whether represented by the crowd that beats up a crowd of Jews or Germans or Russians or Negroes or whether it's represented by nations fighting each other for spoils in some part of the world. And we call ourselves free men, boast of it" (271). Jimmie responds, "But you forget our art, our literature, all the other things we've created beside the machine you hate so..." and Meekins counters, "Our art? Our literature? As if other civilizations didn't have art and literature, ethics and philosophies of life and codes of conduct many of them much better than anything we, busy as we are with material things, have created" (271). The scene uses two successful,

educated white men—one upper middleclass businessman and one college professor—to debate the potential shortcomings of white America. Page explains that the novel uses Henry Meekins, a white professor, to explain the failings of white America in order to lay “the groundwork for White’s final challenge to the white hierarchy: the presentation of a viable alternative philosophy to the Western (white) way of life” (110). The narrative uses this scene to call into question the imperative that “white is right” and that perhaps there are flaws in white logic that claims the Western world and white America as the best the world has to offer. As Meekins explains, white America has spread bigotry and war and, because of the preoccupation with power and material things, white America’s value in terms of art and culture is decreased. If the value of a society is based in its art and culture, then by this logic white America is falling behind.

In the scene that follows this one, Mimi speaks with a visiting businessman from China, Mr. Chuan. Mr. Chuan, like the black American characters, is also non-white in the novel and therefore “othered” from Western ideals. When Mimi speaks with him, she explains that the previous night she was speaking with Professor Meekins “and he was telling us you of the East are beginning to look on Western civilization with considerable less enchantment than you used to.” Mr. Chuan looks at Mimi “fleetingly but sharply and with acute inquiry. Mimi met his eyes frankly and he seemed satisfied with what he saw in him” (280). Then he responds, “There is a change...But it isn’t against what you call your ‘Western civilization’ nor is it primarily against white people as white people—it’s a healthy movement of people who for centuries have been asleep—it’s a rising, given form by the late war, of peoples who have been exploited” (281). He continues:

As long as we produced only men of letter, men of knowledge, and artists, you treated us as barbarians. Now that we have learned to kill, you call us civilized?... The great nation or people civilization is not that one which has the greatest brute strength but the one which can serve mankind best. The machine has been created—and it in turn is mastering its creators. I have been in your country many times and I feel that only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization—they yet can laugh and they

yet can enjoy the benefits of the machine without being crushed by it... (282)

Although Mr. Chuan is not American, the sentiments he expresses regarding white America parallel Mimi's own experiences as a black American. Mr. Chuan's comments regarding the Machine speak directly to her father's use of the same word. Both men—one Asian, one black American but both apart from mainstream (white) America—question white America's direction. Both support and define an alternative way of life that does not laud mechanization of the Western world as the preferred direction. Page's essay works significantly with this section of the novel and claims that "Critiquing white materialism while praising black warmth also becomes a means of challenging the dominant discourse of competing racial civilizations, a discourse that places African Americans on the bottom of the racial hierarchy" (109). Mr. Chuan, as a non-American and non-Westerner, provides an outsider perspective on America's values and unequivocally finds white America lacking. The scene disrupts social thought of white Americans at the top and black Americans at the bottom. Instead, those civilizations that develop according to Western standards actually lose part of their civilization. James Edward Smethurst notes that for white people "the trip to Harlem, Black Bottom, the Hill, or the South Side was one where visitors expected to encounter skilled and stylish musicians and, sometimes, dancers and waiters as well as the staging of more 'primitive' forms of exoticism and eroticism. Then the visitors were able to go home." (14) But as he notes, for the black performers, this space was often home: "In fact, one could think of the creation of these black territories as part of the root of an intensified sense of dualism encountered in the work of early twentieth-century black artists and intellectuals as it was possible to be in the new and to a large extent officially designated black homeland and still find that one had to go outside to be inside" (14). In her conversation with Mr. Chuan, Mimi as a black woman shares more of a similar perception of her own country than she does with other non-black Americans.

Immediately following her conversation with Mr. Chuan Mimi feels “Her discontent was taking form” (283) and she thinks to herself, “I don’t know what I can do about it all, I’m sure, but there’s emptiness, emptiness, everywhere—” (283). Prior to the two conversations between Jimmie and Meekin and then Mimi and Mr. Chuan, Mimi does little to question her choice to live as white. However, when faced with lack of value for art and culture in the Western world, following her contrasting of black and white dance clubs, Mimi starts to wonder if she has made the smarter choice—to live as white instead of black. Mimi does not regret living as white, or feel that she has forsaken her own identity to do so. Page explains that, “Because Mimi has reasons to pass, rooted in the narrow-mindedness of her middle-class black community (rather than a desire to be part of a white community), she does not battle the guilt of having betrayed her race by taking on a white identity.” Page’s argument supports the use of the passing theme to compare “the respective values of black and white culture to decide whether to continue living as one race or another” (108). What the novel and Mimi question, rather, is whether life as a white American is truly better or preferable than living as a black American. Between her conversation with Mr. Chuan and the novel’s climaxing performance scenes that follow, Mimi asks herself “Why was I given this restless spirit, this ceaseless inability to be content with what life has brought me?” (285). The self-reflection’s timing is significant. Mimi feels “restless” during the period she lives as white. The sensation of restlessness “grows” the longer she continues living as white, and it comes to a crescendo when she returns to experiencing African American art through attending theater performances.

#### CULTURE AND MEMORY FOR BLACK AMERICANS ONLY

Mimi accompanies her white friend, Bert, to the cabaret while Jimmie is out of town. The novel describes this theater as, “The vogue of Negro shows on Broadway, ‘Shuffle

Along, 'Runnin' Wild' and others, the popularity of Miller and Lyles and of Florence Mills" (291) and references the actual historical shows. Mimi tells Bert, "I want to see a Negro cabaret in Harlem. I've hinted to Jimmie but he had never offered to take me. Though he seems to know a lot about them himself—" (291). By including the Harlem theater in the novel, the narrative both acknowledges the stereotyped reputation of the cabaret and reclaims the space from that stereotype. Shane Vogel's work on the Harlem cabaret supports both the novel's historical presentation of the scene and also Mimi's experience. By presenting an "actual" scene of a Harlem cabaret, the novel works to "redefine the meaning of blackness and racial identity in American popular consciousness and to forcefully assert the role of African Americans in the shaping of American culture." The scene "counter[s] images and representations of black inferiority with more 'truthful' representations and evidence of serious black cultural accomplishment" (3). As with the club honky-tonk in Atlanta, Mimi—here as the respectable middle-class white woman—attends the performance and concentrates not on the negatives or inferiority of the space but instead on the strength of the African American art performed in the space. The scene in the cabaret contrasts with the earlier white theater and compares similarly to the black dancers at the Harlem club. The narrative explains that, "The music had a strange effect upon [Mimi]. Analysed, it was all wrong when judged by conventional musical standards. Taken as a whole, it formed a weird and oddly exciting cacophony of chords and exotic rhythms" (293). The music, "all wrong," reflects back to Mimi's earlier experiences with the orchestra and black dancers who had no formal training, as well as the music she heard in New Orleans that was "untouched" by white influences. Christine Gray points out that during this time period folk art for white writers "supplied an exotic foreign quality, one that fit in with the stereotypes of the 'exotic primitive'" (xiv). She notes that musicals especially perpetuated this conception as "the most popular form of entertainment," placing African American performers "in a world that was

controlled not only by white theater owners but by the tastes of a white audience. By continuing the stereotypes of the minstrel tradition, musicals promoted the very images that educators were working to extinguish” (xvi). Again, the novel demonstrates art lacking training and Western tradition but that has an “untouched” and “all wrong” sound that is still “oddly exciting.” Mimi reacts to the “all wrong music” and “its freedom from rules, its complete disregard of set forms. It refused to be tied down, its creators wove harmonies out of thin air and transferred to their notes the ecstasy of a wild, unharnessed, free thing” (294). The music’s freedom echoes the freedom Mimi witnessed in the black dancers and, once again, shows how differently the contained and Machine world of white people appears to Mimi.

Mimi reflects to herself at the beginning of the Harlem cabaret scene, “It came to her suddenly why the impulse to go to Harlem had sprung to her mind. It was the statement Wu Hseh-Chuan had made—only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization...”

(291) After leaving the cabaret Mimi reflects on her experiences:

[S]he felt within her a renewing of her old eagerness towards life. Here was something real that the unknowing and unseeing had called “native humor” and “Negro comedy.” But, somewhat vaguely, she felt the thing went deeper than that. She speculated as to the lasting value of machines and all that they brought...She loved the comforts of her home...But she wondered if the somber, cynical companions she met in her home and in other places were worth the price she was paying for these luxuries. (295)

Mimi’s two reflections bookend the cabaret itself, and her reflections share how she experiences music by black artists that creates a feeling of shared intimacy between Mimi, the audience, and the musician, the performer. This section works with Vogel’s definition of “intimacy,” which “threatens (promises?) to undo the routines and routes, the familiar patterns and rote narratives, that organize psychic and social lives” (42). The space of a performance, involving both viewer (audience) and participant (performer) creates a focused space or event to direct attention and to have a “shared experience” and “common point of

reference,” even if, as Vogel explains “the meaning of that shared experience may vary widely from spectator to spectator” (42). The shared moment Mimi experiences begins overturning her internalized concept that passing as white and living in the white world offers her better advantages than her life in the black community. Mimi experiences the shared history of her background in New Orleans with her witnessing/watching black performers in Harlem. This scene serves, through Mimi, to link black folk culture of the South to Northern stages and public spaces. As well, Mimi’s reflection on the experience compares her New Orleans and Harlem experiences in the black community with her experiences in the white community. Against the black communities, the white one seems “somber” and “cynical.” Hughes, in his essay “That Sad, Happy Music Called Jazz,” explains that, “Jazz is such happy music because it was born out of such great sadness. Its rhythms of joy grew from the heartbeats of sorrow, for it was born of bondage...the music itself, for all its gaiety, remembered Africa, the ships of the Middle Passage, whips, chains, blood hounds, the slave markets, the lifetimes of work, past to come, without pay and without freedom” (216). Where the novel presents the white world as “cynical,” despite its wealth and benefits, the black community has “freedom from rules” and “happy music” in spite of its “heartbeats of sorrow” and “lifetimes of work.”

Following her experience at the cabaret, Mimi attends a performance at Carnegie Hall with her husband. As a member of the largely white audience, Mimi watches: “Out of a door on one side of the platform came a short dark figure followed by a taller one whose skin was brown.” The performers begin with traditional Western classical pieces, “songs by Bach and Schubert, by Brahms and Franck, by Quilter and Jensen.” Then the black singer, “whose skin was brown,” sang “the sounds of his own people.” And the novel describes the audience’s reaction: “Not a sound disturbed the spell he had woven, the auditors dared hardly breathe. ‘Nobody Knows de Trouble I see,’ he sang, a strange wistful sadness pervading the music”

(296-297). The music creates a visual transformative effect when the novel describes the music:

As from a fountain of bronze, tiny jets of gold and silver sound were flung in a pellucid stream high above the heads of the silent throng. It broke against the ceiling, the iridescent bubbles bursting in radiant glory, dissolving into myriad little drops of sound, each perfect and complete in itself. Down they were wafted in gentle benediction upon the heads of the listeners. Soothing, comforting, they brought peace and rest and happiness. Before them fled all worries, all cares, all lines of sex and class and race melting the heterogeneous throng into a perfect unity. (297)

Within the moment of the performance, the African American art creates a sense of transcendence where “all lines of sex and class and race” melt for Mimi as a black audience member. Mimi’s own reaction to the music “opened before her eyes mystic rooms, some of them long closed, some of them never opened for her before,” (297) which brings to life Mimi’s historical memory and echoes Hughes’ analysis of jazz music, which finds beauty in the sorrow of the past. Richard Schechner uses the term “restored behavior,” which he explains as “the main characteristic of performance because it is behavior that can be ‘stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed.’ The process of rehearsal is the essential element of restored behavior, but it is not the only one... Performance means: never for the first time” (517). Success for the black performer’s performance exists because of its ability to connect Mimi both to her personal memory (of previous theater and street performers) and also “opening” her to her shared cultural history with the performer. This cultural history begins through sharing experiences with her aunt and her aunt’s past. It comes to fulfillment in Mimi’s own experiences witnessing the black performer and his African American performance.

While listening to the songs of “his own people,” Mimi sees “Ghostly figures moved shadowily across the rooms—figures with eyes sad with the tragedies of a thousand years, eyes bright with the faith which is born of strength in trial... The transformation did not startle nor alarm her—instead, held fast in the spell woven by the black singer, the re-creation of life

in the figures before her seemed the most natural thing in the world” (297). The scene operates outside the physical space of a realistic theater and instead enters, for the first time in the novel, on a spiritual or unrealistic plane. Koritha Mitchell explains a concept such as this as: “Fully appreciating black expressive culture becomes impossible if readers assume that white oppression was so powerful that there could be no psychic or discursive space for anything other than resisting or protesting” (8). As Karen Sotiropoulos explains, “While white audiences enjoyed hearing black laughter from the gallery, they usually considered it to be little more than part of the show...For the most part, African American patrons’ applause authenticated African American stage performances for white audience members” (195). Mimi’s experience of the transformation under the performer’s spell presents an experience outside of the white world of Mimi’s experience and creates an alternative world of experiences. The scene protests assumptions of superiority in white experience and view of the world by presenting a world separate from the values and experiences of whiteness. As well, the scene reorients the stage performance with a black performer from the supposed white audience to an actual black audience in purpose.

White’s essay elaborates on this idea when he writes, “It is impossible to estimate fully and accurately the influence this genuinely Negro theater has had... few forces which have directed Negro life have done more to debunk the Negro in his own estimation and to keep him free from the smugness and overweening self-esteem which afflicted and still does afflict white America” (“The Negro and the American Stage” 249). White’s essay serves two purposes. First, it takes down the supposition of the superiority of white America—which White calls “smug” while also praising black America for not suffering from this affliction. Second, it calls attention to the Negro stage’s centrality in accomplishing this. In a letter to Mordecai Johnson, White reflects on this idea of an alternative experience when he writes, “I am now at work on a novel dealing with white and colored characters but from as different an

angle from 'Fire in the Flint' as may well be imagined." His letter refers to his writing that would become *Flight* and explains, "It will be considerably less dramatic or melodramatic than 'Fire in the Flint' but I think it will go very much deeper beneath the surface particularly in the spiritual foundation in which we as a race have our root so firmly fixed..." (Waldron 82).

Still during the black man's performance of "his own people," Mimi's mind's eye moves from the physical space of the theater into a racial memory shared by all African Americans:

A vast impenetrable tangle of huge trees appeared, their pithy hulk in ebon beauty to prodigious heights. As she gazed, half afraid of the wild stillness, the trees became less and less blackly solid, shading off into every lighter greys. Then the trees were white, then there were none at all... In their stead an immense clearing in which moved at first slowly, then with increasing speed, a ring of graceful, rounded, lithe women and stalwart, magnificently muscled men, all with skins of midnight blackness. To music of barbaric sweetness and rhythm they danced with sinuous grace and abandon... (297-298)

Following this the scene in Mimi's mind is disrupted by invaders. As the invaders in Mimi's mind seized black men, women, and children, the black man on stage sings, "Sometimes I'm up / Sometimes I'm down / Oh, yes, Lord; / Sometimes I'm almost to the ground..." (298).

The narrative perspective switches between Mimi's "flashbacks" and her current experiences in the theater. The "flashbacks" are not to Mimi's own personal experiences, but to black America's historical memories. Genevieve Fabre explains these flashback moments as, "The problem of ties with Africa pervades the black American's quest for identity." She compares the two images as "a mythic land belonging to a distant past, revived only by nostalgia of collective memory, with which solidarity must be established" and "the actual relation of black Americans to Africa," which she explains "is more symbol than fact" (2). Mimi's flashbacks are symbolic. They argue for a symbiotic relationship between Mimi, the modern black person, and her African ancestors. Even though Mimi herself has not had these experiences, the scene uses the performance and African American art (the black man's

performance) to argue for a legacy of interconnectedness between the modern generation of African Americans with the atrocities of the past. Theater and performances serve as reminders of the past and remind black people of this past. Fabre’s work supports this point when she explains, that theater is “both the manifestation and the formulation of culture” and, therefore, can help to understand black American identity. Theater “is also the best forum to express the social roles around which images of the new identity will form (roles meted out authoritatively, accepted or rejected, held consciously, or unconsciously, inverted, subverted, or imagined)” (2). Richard Bauman argues for the importance of performance spaces when he writes that, “The consideration of the power inherent in performance to transform social structures opens the way to a range of additional considerations concerning the role of the performer in society” (45). Scenes of artistic performance, such as this one with Mimi at the theater watching a black American performer, demonstrates both the art itself (as theater is understood as an art form) while simultaneously also re-enacting historical moments as part of the performance. Manthai Diawara explains that performance “records the way in which black people, through a communicative action, engender themselves within the American experience” because it “presumes an existing tradition and an individual or group of people who interpret that tradition in front of an audience in such a way that the individual or group of people invent themselves for that audience” (209). For example, in this scene the African American artist sings the song “No One Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen,” a black spiritual from the 1800s.<sup>26</sup> The song functions as a historical timeline for African Americans, linking its original beginnings as a slave song to its current publications in the 1920s. As the song itself connects African American’s slave history to the contemporaneous day, it also links Mimi, the black audience, to the rest of the black community and historical memory.

This theme of interconnected experiences shared by black Americans—brought

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<sup>26</sup> Project Gutenberg’s website on “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” gives a brief history of the song, including original lyrics.

together through shared history, remembered and shared through exposure to art and culture—is supported by J.A. Rogers’ 1925 essay “Jazz at Home” where he claims that jazz, as an example of an African American original art form, is “one part American and three parts American Negro” (492). Because of its inherent origins in African American culture, “there still remains something elusive about jazz that few, if any of the white artists, have been able to capture. The Negro is admittedly its best expositor. That elusive something, for lack of a better name...I’ll call Negro rhythm...” (494). White’s novel introduces that “elusiveness” through the “rhythm” Mimi finds in the black community but not in the white. Both Rogers’ essay and White’s novel describe the connections running between black people as a shared “rhythm.” The rhythm develops when Mimi attends her first Harlem cabaret and becomes fully expressed in her first formal theater performance involving black performers. This use of performance to convey a shared history also appears in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923). The story “Theater” demonstrates art’s ability to transport the audience and performer into a shared past. As Dorris dances, she forgets the formal dance routine and instead dances freely, much like the black dancers in the club that Mimi observes. The narrative describes Dorris’ dance as, “Glorious songs are the muscles of her limbs. / And her singing is of canebrake loves and mangrove feastings” (55). When Dorris releases the formal portion of her dance and freely performs with the orchestra, the walls close in on Dorris and John and “John’s heart beats tensely...And then, the shaft of light goes out the window high above him. John’s mind sweeps up to follow it. Mind pulls him upward into a dream” and John is transported into a Southern canefield and a separate world (55). Just as the music of the African American artist transports Mimi out of the theater and into a flashback of cultural memory, the dancing transports John into a flashback of cultural memory of the South.

As she continues listening to the singer, Mimi’s flashback takes her farther back into

cultural and historical memory, past American history and this time on a slave ship where, “Black figures bent low while near them stood with watchful eye and ready whip an overseer” (299). The scenes flashing in Mimi’s mind echoes Hughes’ words that black American art was born of “heartbeats of sorrow,” which the novel depicts as:

A world of motion and of labour was caught up and held immobile in the tenuous, reluctant notes. Over them hovered that overtone of hope too great for extinction by whatever hardship or sorrow which might come to the singers. It was the personification of faith, a faith strong and immovable, a faith unshakable, a faith which made a people great. Against that faith, Mimi felt, contumely, brutality, oppression, scorn could do naught but dash and break life angry waves against huge granite cliffs. (299)

Mimi’s sentiments echo White’s essay when she thinks, “Whatever other faults they might possess, her own people had not been deadened and dehumanized by bitter hatred of their fellow men. The venom born of oppression practiced upon others weaker than themselves had not entered their souls” (299). Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney use the term “collective memories” that they explain, “are actively produced through repeated acts of remembrance using both a variety of media and a variety of genres” (112). The performances Mimi witnesses work as “cultural narratives” and they “contribute in a very specific manner to the ongoing production and reproduction of cultural memory, as well as to our reflection *on* that memory” (113, emphasis original). The novel’s scenes of Mimi’s experiences with collective memories “makes remembrance observable” and creates “cultural knowledge about how memory works for individuals and groups. Seen in this light, literature might be called a ‘mimesis’ of memory...it stands in dialogue with other memory-observing discourses such as philosophy and psychology” (113). The cultural histories (or collective memories) that Mimi experiences are not joyful ones. Instead the memories are ones of pain, and White writes the memories keep black people from experiencing the smugness and self-satisfaction evident in white experience. The novel *Flight* and Toomer’s *Cane*, by including such scenes demonstrating this transference of collective memory, makes the phenomenon of collective

memory observable. The literature also records the memories and the experience of transference, creating a written historical legacy of the occurrence.

On the novel's final page, "Tears crept unnoticed to Mimi's eyes and made little cascades down her cheeks. A line of verse sprang to her mind with poignant appropriateness: 'The music yearning like a God in pain.' She knew she had found the answer to the riddle which had puzzled her" (300). The black performers at the end of the novel can be defined as "griots," which Marcoux defines "in the historical African context" as "conveyors of their peoples' history, and they employ storytelling and the oral tradition in order to sensitize their audiences to the necessity of claiming one's ancestry. For those reasons, griots are poet-historians and genealogists..." (23). To continue, "In the U.S. African Americans perceive griots in terms of cultural identification; that is, griots enable the transmission of stories that continues to construct Black American History through authenticating performances of blackness" (13). The transference of cultural memories through the performance is deemed successful when the novel ends with Mimi exclaiming to herself, "Free! Free! Free!" as "another book in her life was being closed with the shutting of the door" (300). Mimi judges that her life will have more value living within the black community rather than as a white American because of access to African American artistic culture and the collective memories accessible through exposure to this art. White's critique of modern America and a claim for preference to be a black American over being a white American in the 1920s was revolutionary, and many critics found fault with his novel. Frank Horne's review in the 1926 July issue of *Opportunity* claims:

The climax meant to be so intense and sweeping, strikes a hollow, blatant note...She leaves a white world, with all its advantages of body and spirit...to go back to 'her people.' How then to be received?—how to adjust to a lower, cramped scale of life that had become so full?—how to compensate of the intense freedom of 'being white?' Truly, has Mimi been left in the lurch. (Waldron 101)

But reviews such as Horne's miss the novel's point entirely—that valuing art and culture

over “advantages of body and spirit” offers a preferable way of life. The novel and specifically the performance scenes at the end re-inscribe the value system in American, claiming that black experience can, and does, supersede white experience.

Possibly prompted by White and Charles Johnson, Nella Larsen wrote a review of the novel which appeared in *Opportunity* and responds directly to Horne’s review:

[Frank Horne] fails to realize that this is the heart of the tale. A lost race. Yes. But I suspect that [Mr. Horne] refers to the black race, while Mr. White obviously means that it is the white race which is lost, doomed to destruction by its own mechanical gods...Surely, the thesis of ‘Flight’ is, ‘What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’...Mimi Daquin came to realize that, for her, there were no advantages of the spirit in the white world... (Waldron 104)

White’s novel works to claim American rights for black people via their participation in and claim to American culture, building on his mentor James Weldon Johnson’s belief that cultural value would lead to political and social value. Ernest Gruening also offers a favorable review of the novel, even comparing it to James Weldon Johnson’s earlier novel:

Besides hurling an additional brickbat at modern Western civilization from a new angle, ‘Flight’ invades the intriguing realm treated in book form but once before and then as a special and unique case in ‘The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,’ that of colored Americans who ‘go white.’...Throughout Mr. White’s latest book one glimpses the ground stirring among American Negroes” (Waldron 100).

In addition to this, White’s novel creates an alternative value system for American artistic culture, where the audience judges the value of art based on its aesthetics and emotional response. The novel manages to subvert dominant views of black primitivism in the era of Modernism—claiming the value of folk (primitive) art while simultaneously claiming it as the artistic property of African Americans. The novel faults white America for its valuing power and wealth over art and humanity, claiming that black Americans have a shared cultural history and memory available only to African Americans and accessible through the art that belongs to them. In the end White’s novel challenges both art and world value systems and also claims black identity as a preferable way of life.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: PERFORMANCE IN THE POST-RENAISSANCE OF *THE STREET*

*"I find it difficult to subscribe to the idea that art exists for art's sake. It seems to me that all truly great art is propaganda... The novel, like all other forms of art, will always reflect the political, economic, and social structure of the period in which it was created..."*

-Ann Petry, "The Novel as Social Criticism"

*"Barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, Negro writers have been made to feel a sense of difference. So deep has this white-hot iron of exclusion been burnt into their hearts that thousands have all but lost the desire to become identified with American civilization."*

-Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing"

African American literature of the first half of the twentieth century includes scenes of cultural performance to comment on the growing black American presence and involvement on the American cultural stage. This chapter works to re-examine Ann Petry's 1946 *The Street* and its use of performance scenes to critique American inclusion (and exclusion) of black cultural products. The protagonist, Lutie, is a blues singer whose performances demonstrate a legacy of performative culture and its power to evoke an ancestral past. *The Street's* location between the Renaissance and the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements highlights the changing sentiments of black Americans and growing dissent of racial prejudice and class bias experienced as, in Richard Wright's words, the "white hot iron of exclusion" from theater, publishing houses, and more broadly American art and culture (106). This exclusion demonstrated within stage performances draws black audiences and performers together in shared histories and emphasizes the individual's frustration with discrimination, and the African American art becomes a conduit for the emotions caused by these exclusions and frustrations.

This exclusion comes in conflict with African American culture as a performative culture that is, in Wright's words, "folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life." The folklore includes blues, spirituals, and folktales passed orally through generations and "all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed"

(99). African American culture, using this logic, becomes a location of shared experiences and a way to pass on generational history. Earlier academic critics of Petry's work side-lined her as a female-authored version of the Richard Wright school of Naturalism.<sup>27</sup> In fact Petry was compared to Wright as early as 1946, when Ben Burns wrote a review explaining that, "Richard Wright's *Bigger* Thomas will have to move over this week to make room for Lutie Johnson" (Ervin 5). However, more recent critics have encouraged a re-examination of Petry's work.

Elisabeth Petry, Ann Petry's daughter, reveals in her recent publication of her mother's letters and diaries that Ann Petry was much more politically minded and culturally involved than previous critics have acknowledged. Ann Petry's "The Novel as Social Criticism" explains that, "Being a product of the twentieth century...I find it difficult to subscribe to the idea that art exists for art's sake. It seems to me that all truly great art is propaganda..." (99). This chapter focuses on the stage scenes and artistic musical performances in the novel to place Petry's writing in *The Street* in conversation with earlier texts of the New Negro Renaissance. The novel itself is a piece of the culture—cultural literature. It also serves to comment on the changing presence and role of African American culture/literature on the American landscape in the post-Renaissance. From celebrating African American art as a vital part of American culture but also the only original American culture, the critical conversation moves to an assumption that this is already known and to looking at the culture as a haunting reminder and presence ingrained into peoples' lives. *The*

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<sup>27</sup> Critics such as Vernin Lattin, Richard Yarborough, and Bernard Bell analyzed *The Street* against its contemporary texts *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *Native Son* as another example of a Naturalist text, but one written by a female author containing a female protagonist. Later critics, such as Marjorie Pryse and Calvin C. Herton began analyzing Petry's black female characters in *The Street* as contrasts to Lutie, addressing failures of Lutie's and black women's motherhood. More recent critics—including Nellie McKay, Kimberly Drake, and Heather Hicks—place Petry back in conversation with Wright, Himes, and Ellison claiming that Petry's use of a female protagonist allows a demonstration of different understandings of women's experiences and their meaning. These essays and reviews of the *The Street* used in this chapter are from Hazel Arnett Ervin's *The Critical Response to Ann Petry*.

*Street* specifically links these historical periods and reflects on what happened to African American culture after it entered the main stage of the American landscape. Wright's 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing," asks, "Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, molding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?" (99). He claims that earlier African American writing, "has been addressed in the main to a small white audience rather than to a Negro one" (99). Lawrence P. Jackson explains that Wright's concerns "to develop a literary style that competed on the stage of world opinion and a literature of ideas—were ambitions widely shared by his fellow black writers" (9). And Petry herself wrote that:

The novel, like all other forms of art, will always reflect the political, economic, and social structure of the period in which it was created... The moment the novelist begins to show how society affected the lives of his characters, how they were formed and shaped by the sprawling inchoate world in which they lived, he is writing a novel of social criticism whether he calls it that or not. ("Social Criticism" 32)

Petry views art as a form of social awareness and a tool to inspire change. Petry's use of the word "propaganda" loudly echoes W.E.B. DuBois's call in "Criteria for Negro Art" that, "[A]ll Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists... I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda." Elisabeth Petry summarizes her mother's experiences at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute where she was sent by her parents to study housekeeping. This experience "placed her firmly on the side of family members who agreed with the W. E. B. Du Bois model that black people should receive the same kind of education as whites" and strongly against "those in the family who supported Booker T. Washington's notions of manual labor as the road to advancement for blacks" (38). Therefore, connecting Petry's novel to earlier critics makes sense. Her novel serves as an example of the fruition and failings of social critics such as James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Walter White who argued for valuation of African American culture as high art, for

acknowledgement of African American art as the *true* American art, and the warning of cultural appropriation and commodification.

#### FULFILLMENT OF JAMES WELDON JOHNSON'S WARNING

The closing lines of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the unnamed narrator reflects to the reader on his decision to pass as white and to relinquish recording Southern black music, explaining, "I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (211). The yellowing music manuscripts of the narrator's vanished dream represent the birthright of African American culture as the only original American art. The image leaves readers a warning of what could happen if black performers are not embraced as American cultural creators or if their creations are not accepted as original and legitimate American culture. Thirty-five years after Johnson first published his novel, Petry's novel unveils how Johnson's fears have come to fulfillment.<sup>28</sup> The unnamed narrator reflects at the novel's end, "I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter..." (*AECM*, 1960 210). Both the narrator and African American art are unable to fit into a form and structure of an America not designed for it, a form based on European—and white—values. Literature of the New Negro Renaissance attempted to create a new system of cultural value, as demonstrated in White's *Flight*. Rena Fraden's work on the black Federal Theater argues that, "Through the organized attempts to establish African American artistic movements in the twenties and thirties, critics believed they were proving the greatness of the race that would have to be acknowledged by anyone who appreciated the

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<sup>28</sup> In an interview Petry names Frederick Douglas and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* as black authors she read when she was young (Wilson 74), showing that she was both familiar with and influenced by Johnson's work.

greatness of art.” She calls this, “no small ambition” since, “these critics meant through their criticism to effect fundamental political and cultural differences that would reshape the dynamics of white and black America” (51). Fauset’s *There is Confusion* serves as an example of a critic attempting to “reshape the dynamics.” *The Street*, written and set in the early 1940s, serves as a reflection of those earlier critics and critiques whether or not they “proved the greatness of the race” via cultural performances.

Petry’s novel includes two main performers: Boots Smith, a black man, piano player, and lead band member; and Lutie Johnson, a black woman who dreams that becoming a lead singer in Boots’s band will gain her economic independence. Both performers engage in musical art but do so solely for economic gain. Lutie dreams of raising her son, Bub, and herself out of the grasp of poverty and day-to-day substance living. She believes that performing as a nightclub singer will save them from this existence. When Boots asks if she would like a singing job with his band, “She was holding the beer glass so tightly that she could feel the impression of the glass on her fingers....She couldn’t seem to stop the excitement that bubbled up in her...” Singing with the band, “would mean she and Bub could leave 116<sup>th</sup> Street...There wouldn’t be any more worry about rent and gas bills and she could be home when Bub came from school” (151). This focus on the ability of cultural performance to provide economic gain rather than demonstrating artistic value shows a commodification of African American art since Johnson first voiced his concerns over thirty-five years earlier. Johanna X. K. Garvey’s analysis of the novel supports this, explaining that “Lutie’s experiences illustrate how Black music has been commodified, its power diminished, some would argue, in its merging with the dominant culture” and that Lutie “participates in the belief that music makes money” (135). Lutie’s belief in the possibilities of economic gain through her cultural performance stem partially from the novel’s connection of race and class.

Frustrations of racial discrimination and class hostility present time and time again in the novel. Directly after her focus on the economic gain she would get from performing as a singer, a police officer pulls over Lutie while she is riding in Boots's car on the way home. When the police officer first approaches the car, Lutie notes, "a slight stiffening of his face" which means that "he had seen they were colored" (165). At first, "The cop's mouth twisted into an ugly line" but then Boots pays the police officer with his name recognition and cash. Lutie thinks to herself, "Even with cops money makes a difference... Money could make a white cop almost smile when he caught a black man speeding" (166). Lutie recognizes the police officer's racial bias and understands that all Americans are complicit in this bias. This stilted white world-view of black Americans depends, as Lutie thinks "on where you sat" because, "If you looked at them from inside the framework of a fat weekly salary, and you thought of colored people as naturally criminal, then you didn't really see what any Negro looked like. You couldn't because the Negro was never an individual. He was a threat, or an animal, or a curse, or a blight, or a joke" (199). Lutie connects negative treatment of black people with their status as lower class, and believes that a "fat weekly salary" would make her an "individual" and would make people like the police officer "almost smile." The promise of a music career signifies to Lutie the opportunity to both escape from the street but to also become an "individual" in the eyes of whites.

The novel makes a clear distinction between racial discrimination and class bias through Lutie's experiences as a nanny and housekeeper. While working for the white Chandler family, Lutie questions to herself why the white family and their friends make assumptions that she is sexually available for their husbands—and the women believe Lutie attempts to entice the men—solely because of her identity as a young black woman. Ann Petry's diaries explain that women such as Mrs. Chandler and her friends are based on women her mother worked for, and Elisabeth Petry explains that Ann "overheard the

personal conversations when they came to have prescriptions filled by her father and her aunt” (52). Lutie claims that the women’s conversations *about* her while *in her presence* “made her feel that she was looking through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden” where “She could see, she could hear, she spoke the language of the people in the garden.” However, “she couldn’t get past the wall...there was this wall in between which prevented them from mingling on an equal footing. The people on the other side of the wall knew less about her than she knew about them” (41). She notes that this is not class only—that the Chandler’s gardener didn’t “move behind the wall” in some “classification.” This racial classification and the consequences of separation repeat throughout the novel. The separation between races is, in part, due to what DuBois in *The Souls of Black Folk* terms “the veil” and the novel calls “the wall.” Earlier novels such as Fauset’s *There is Confusion* celebrate the possibilities of claiming African American art as high art and its potential to overcome racial bias to show black Americans as equal to white Americans. But Lutie’s “wall” complicates her belief in the ability of economic power to make her an individual in the eyes of white people. In other words, valuing art according to its economic potential questions the art’s ability to tear down the wall between black and white Americans.

Like Lutie, Boots also uses African American cultural performance for economic gain. After meeting Lutie Boots reflects on his life before his position with the band. He would play the piano at a club and, “He would get a meal for playing in the joint and the hard-faced white man who owned it would toss a couple dollars at him when he left.” Boots explains that, “He wanted to throw it back” but that “he had to live, and so he took it...” However, “He got so he hated the sight of the drunks and dopesters who frequented the places where he played” because “They never heard the music that came from the piano, for they were past caring about anything or listening to anything.” Most important in Boots’s reflection is: “But he had to eat, so he went on playing” (266). Like Lutie, Boots plays music

for economic gain. Unlike earlier protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Walter White's Mimi from *Flight*, Boots does not relish the cultural experiences of the lower class clubs and he does not find inspiration in the music. Garvey explains that, "By the 1940s, the Great Migration and the era of the blues lie in the past; the music has become commercialized" and that, "Though evincing traces of a creative and nurturing blues aesthetic tied to earlier years, Boots compromises himself in order to survive and succeed in the city's world of entertainment and capital" (129). Where Mimi in the 1920s transgressed black middle class social norms to visit clubs with black performers and relished in the African American culture of the music, Boots as a black performer in the 1940s sells his African American culture and for very little profit. *The Street* highlights this transformation from the Harlem Renaissance. Where Renaissance cultural critics argued for value in black American folk art and its artistic spaces, *The Street* reflects on those same spaces twenty years later and questions if change has actually occurred. Additionally, the novel offers Boots as an example of the black performer from those clubs and how, even after the Harlem Renaissance brought African American art onto mainstream American stages, white audiences continued to undervalue that art.

Even when Boots does become an economically successful musician, he does so only under the control of a white man—Junto, who owns the clubs where Boots's band plays. On his own as a black performer, Boots could only perform at lower level establishments described by Boots as "dives and honkey-tonks and whorehouses, at rent parties and reefer parties" (266). To escape from poverty, Boots sells his art to the white man—literally and figuratively. Boots initially started working for Junto because, "It had been a pleasure" (273) since "There hadn't been any of that you're-black-and-I'm-white business involved" (274). Instead, Boots built the orchestra and "Junto had been pleased and revealed his pleasure by paying him a salary that had now grown to the point where he could afford to buy anything in

the world he wanted” (274). Like Lutie, Boots’s commercializing his art echoes James Weldon Johnson, allowing his career to follow, as Garvey argues, “an upward trajectory, largely due to his connections with Junto...he has climbed the proverbial ladder, with Junto’s assistance.” Because of this assistance, “The White man controls him, having made him and able to break him” (130). Heather Hicks also highlights the negative side of Junto’s association with Boots’s cultural art. Hicks explains that African American culture is commodified through “Petry’s depiction of Junto as a means of speculating that a thoroughly systematic structure of power, driven primarily in this case by economic forces, might generate a culture that so dismantles human subjectivity itself that racial categories become inconsequential...” (29). In this argument, the lack of “I’m black and you’re white” that Boots views as a positive change from his earlier experiences becomes inconsequential. Whether playing for the white man in a “dive” or playing for a white man in a nice theater, the cultural product is still created solely for economic gain and is under the control of the white man in both situations. So not only has African American culture in the post-Renaissance lost its value as a means of social uplift, but it has also been lost to white America through, as Boots demonstrates, indulging the desires of white audiences. Once again, *The Street* hints at a reminder of Johnson’s *Autobiography*. Like the narrator must play only when commanded by his white patron, Boots plays where, when, and how Junto demands.

Boots even shows the lack of control he has over his own art. He explains that Junto the white man controls both Lutie’s future career and Boots’s current career. Boots works for Junto and, “Junto could break him all right. It would be easy. There weren’t many places a colored band could play and Junto could fix it so he couldn’t find a spot from here to the coast.” Boots notes that this very thing occurred to other bands, whom Junto had “sewed up,” and all Junto had to do “was refuse to send an outfit to places stupid enough to hire Boots’s

band. Junto could put a squeeze on a place so easy it wasn't funny" (265). In this reading, "Junto dwells in a gray zone of economic imperative, where race is neutralized by an optics of dollars and cents." Despite Junto's "ostensible color-blindness," his actions "remain contextualized by the rigid hierarchy that the system of white power holds in place" (Hicks 29). William Scott also argues for reading of Junto's presence as harmful, explaining that, "Although Petry might be read as lauding such color-blindness, her emphasis on his treating each person 'the same' suggests that it is only another (idealistic) strategy for exerting authority over those who work for him" (109). Where Boots and Lutie (and their performances) represent the commodification of African American art, Junto represents the appropriation of that art—in this novel, the black characters don't even own their own artistic productions. Junto, the white man, controls all the economic avenues in the novel, from the music to the bar itself. Boots notes that, "All those people guzzling drinks at the bar" and "The ones standing outside on the street" and those "walking back and forth" were all "dumb, blind, deal to Junto's existence." Yet Boots explains that, "[Junto] had them coming and going. If they wanted to sleep, they paid him; if they wanted to drink, they paid him; if they wanted to dance, they paid him, and never knew it" (275). Although Boots is the face of the performance via his role as band leader and the visual presentation of the black American band on the stage, he does not control the art. And Boots is acutely aware of his lost control. Marjorie Pryse explains that the name "Junto" is a direct allusion to "the first significant men's club in American colonial history, the name [Ben] Franklin gave his secret group of friends." This club, Pryse explains, "Formed ostensibly for moral and intellectual improvement, Franklin's Junto actually served its members as a central sphere of social and political influence" (118). As a symbol of white America's cultural clubs and social power, Junto of the novel stands for white control of both performance space and economic control of African American art.

## SUCCESS IS NOT WHITE AUDIENCE APPROVAL

The novel firmly demonstrates the loss of economic control over African American art but also argues for a re-examination of the purpose of African American art after the Renaissance. LeRoi Jones notes that, “Between the thirties and the end of World War II, there was perhaps as radical a change in the psychological perspective of the Negro American toward America as there was between the Emancipation and 1930” (179). Renaissance protagonists such as Fauset’s Joanna Marshall “successfully” performed African American art as American art when white audiences could not distinguish the masked black woman Joanna from a white dancer in *There is Confusion*. Both black and white dancers were demonstrated as equally American. In contrast, *The Street* criticizes white audiences and locates “successful” black performance experiences only with those performed for black audiences. Jones’s work supports this analysis when he explains that the generation of black Americans after the Renaissance “also began to understand the *worth* of the country, the society, which it was supposed to call its own.” His statement is insightful because, as he elaborates, “To understand that you are black in a society where black is an extreme liability is one thing” but that this post-Renaissance generation understood “that it is the society that is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, and not yourself” resulting in isolation for that generation from its own society (185). Jones’s concept of isolation builds on DuBois’s concept of 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” and the feeling of “two-ness,” “two warring ideals in one dark body” (“Souls of Black Folk”). David Krasner relates the concept of double consciousness to black stage performers explaining: “Becoming an object in the eyes of whites, and therefore becoming the dehumanized, central attention of their gaze, creates a double consciousness in

the performer's sense of self" (71). However, Jones' isolation takes a step further than DuBois' double consciousness. Not only does Jones acknowledge the "two-ness," present in the post-Renaissance but it is *society* that is lacking, not black Americans. And, working with Krasner's argument, this concept of cultural and social isolation can be witnessed via stage performances.

This isolation of the black artist from his white/American society appears in Boots's reflections on his performances with white audiences. While relating his reliance and economic indebtedness to Junto, Boots also explains an earlier period in his life when he had vowed to give up performing. In his words, "More frequently than he cared to remember some drunken white couple would sway toward the piano, mumbling, 'Get the nigger to sing,' or, 'Get the nigger to dance'" (266). Unlike earlier novels, which lauded white audience appreciation for and valuing of black artists as successes, this scene instead shows the white audience—or white society—as a negative aspect of the performance. Garvey notes that the white audience's reactions to Boots's performance resemble minstrelsy in that "White folks drunkenly urging him to dance and sing, and in all the recollections, Whites possess power" (131) and explains that Boots's performances are limited in their ability to enact social changes because "he does not have a vision beyond his determination to avoid military service, seduce women, and maintain his lucrative career" (131). Boots's focus on the economic advantages of his art also leads to a degrading of the cultural value of the art. As Garvey argues, "Boots may draw an audience, but as his thoughts show, he performs most often for Whites and is indebted to Junto, rather than acting as shaman for his own group or expressing communal experience and concerns" (131). Boots's experience demonstrates the detrimental effects on black artists when performing for white audience approval. As Boots himself explains, "he would despise himself for not lunging at them, but the fact that the paltry pay he would get at the end of the night's work was his only means of assuaging his

constant hunger held him rigid on the piano bench” (266). Because he performs only for economic benefit, and only for white audiences, his performances lack cultural value and the ability to enact change.

In contrast, Lutie’s first public performance singing occurs spontaneously at the local bar, The Junto, which Lutie explains she and other people go “because they couldn’t bear to spend an evening alone in some small dark room; because they couldn’t bear to look what they could see of the future smack in the face while listening to radios or trying to read an evening paper” (145). Although Lutie later dreams of cultural performance as a means of lifting herself out of the street, her first performance lacks this calculation and motivation. When the juke-box begins playing “Swing It, Sister,” Lutie hums “not really aware that she was humming or why, knowing only that she felt free here where there was so much space” (146). In this initial humming, closely followed by her first moment singing, Lutie notes people who, like herself, come to the bar “to replace the haunting silences of rented rooms and little apartments” and describes the bar as “warm,” “soft,” and “sweet” (147). In this scene containing the first of Lutie’s performances, people surround her who are “here for the same reason that she was,” because “they couldn’t bear to spend an evening alone in some small dark room” (145). Unlike Boots’s aggressive and angry white audience who cause him to feel isolated as a performer, Lutie comes from within the audience. She is a part of and one of them. Scott explains that *The Street* shows “an economy of objectifying ideals” but that it “simultaneously reveals sites where the temporal construction of these ideals is interrupted, and at times totally dismantled, by the very materiality of the embodied people such an economy seeks to contain” (92). Lutie’s recognition of her connection to the other people in the bar joins her with her audience prior to her beginning her performance. This marks her performance as distinctly different from Boots’s performance.

The audience notes this distinction. When Lutie moves from humming to singing, she follows the juke-box playing the song “Darlin.” Jurgen Grandt’s work explains that the songs are historical pieces. “Swing It, Sister” was “a hit for the tremendously popular singing group and scat pioneers the Mills Brothers back in the 1930s” (32). And “Darlin’” is “a sentimental ballad composed by Lucky Milliner and Frances Kraft Reckling.” Grandt explains that the song was “recorded on May 26, 1944, six months prior to Lutie’s arrival on 116th Street” (33). Like previous African American literature, this novel uses historical songs and performers to locate the story within its contemporaneous time period. Using actual songs popular at the same time as the novel’s setting permits reading Lutie and the people of the club as fictional representations of actual situations. Therefore, when the audience reacts to Lutie’s performance, their reactions embody how 1940s black audiences would have reacted. The novel uses popular contemporaneous songs to bring the scene to life for readers, who would have known the songs and heard them in jukeboxes in local bars. When Lutie sings her audience physically reacts to her performance:

The men and women crowded at the bar stopped drinking to look at her. Her voice had a thin thread of sadness running through it that made the song important, that made it tell a story that wasn’t in the words—a story of despair, of loneliness, of frustration. It was a story that all of them knew by heart and had always known because they had learned it soon after they were born and would go on adding to it until the day they died. (148)

In this moment the art that Lutie creates exists outside of her and becomes a shared part of the community’s experience. In her work on blues music, Nghana tamu Lewis explains that, “The voice of the individual blues singer transcends the speaker at once to express and represent the ‘experiences’ of self and audience” and that the “blues text is never static and in fact always represents the site of a dynamic network of evolving, multi-dimensional experiences and communicative acts and reactions, calls and responses” (600-601). The narrator does not relate the exact words that Lutie sings. Instead, the scene focuses on the audience’s reaction to Lutie’s singing, rather than on the song itself. The emphasis of this

moment becomes not the music itself—the recorded song of the jukebox—but what the performer is able to bring forth from the song and what her audience experiences through the performance.

In contrast to Boots's antagonistic audience, Lutie's shared background and self-identification with her audience permits space in her performance for the audience to self-identify with the performance. Lutie literally comes from the audience itself—she is one of the people in the bar and, prior to singing, acknowledges that the people in the bar are like her and come from the street. Margaret T. Gunderson's analysis of this scene labels this experience a "transcendence" from the shared troubles and that "such periods of feeling free are rare and communicate to a deeply felt need for expression. Only the blues can provide such a sense of shared grief" (106-107). Her analysis focuses on the idea that Lutie's singing of "Darlin," a blues song, emphasizes "the suffering and sorrow the city elicits has been a constant presence in the lives of these people." Lutie's singing a blues song "gives her that feeling of freedom from her troubles, even if it is only temporarily" (107). Lewis notes that "no single form of the medium can represent holistically the experiences of every individual" but that art and blues music specifically "has the ability to 'tap into' the experiences of some people...blues text is never static and in fact always represents the site of a dynamic network of evolving, multi-dimensional experiences and communicative acts and reactions, calls and responses" (601). Just prior to Lutie's performance, the novel "sets the stage" for the blues song by explaining the shared sense of suffering that both Lutie and her audience experience. Lutie's cultural performance of blues music transcends, if only for a moment, the shared despair, loneliness, and frustration. The performance serves as a space for catharsis. Rather than artistic performance as a site to bridge class and racial differences, the performance becomes a site of shared struggle and creates an insular community of people with mutual experiences. Gunderson does note that, "While the transcendence that the blues provide may

not be long-term or have a lasting political or socio-economic impact” it can affect the individual. Gunderson continues, “The blues may not free a culture from oppressive bondage, but they help to provide the strength necessary to survive one day’s battle long enough to take on the next” (28). The art that Lutie performs brings the audience together in their shared history of struggle and, as a Naturalist text, the impossibility of escape. The shared experience transfers between audience members but also between the performer and her audience. Lutie’s singing joins her to the others in the bar because of a mutual history based both in shared racial experiences and class struggles.

Lutie’s cultural performance returns the art (blues music) to the original artist (black Americans). Between the 1920s of the New Negro Renaissance and the 1940s of Petry’s novel, much African American music was recorded, mass produced, and sold to American audiences. W. Fitzhugh Brundage explains that recording made blues music “peculiarly adaptable to a mass-consumer market that bridged previously stark divisions in American audiences” because “recorded musical performances were, in a literal sense, disembodied from the black performers who made them” (25-26). However, Lutie’s singing the blues song from the recording returns the physical black body of the performer into the shared theater space with her audience. As Lutie herself explains regarding the bar, “she felt free here where there was so much space” (146). In the space with people like herself, Lutie—as an artist—has the space (literally) of the bar to perform and the space (symbolically) to perform as a black artist. Harvey Young explains that historical documents of American culture “reveal the absence of the black body within recorded history” (132). Lutie’s performance works to re-claim black art from the recorded public audiences of white Americans and re-situate it within the black community. As Young argues, “Re-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one” but rather that, “To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your

possession” (135). At the same time, “It is to remain aware of its previous ‘claims’ even as you articulate your own. It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future” (135). Where recordings removed the physical black artist from the art, the live stage performance reasserts the visual black body in front of the cultural consumer.

This critique of post-Renaissance culture is directed at both black and white audiences of the novel. As Jackson notes, “The marketing division at Houghton Mifflin seems to have taken on faith that, unlike Wright’s book...Petry’s novel would sell best among, if not exclusively to, blacks” (228); however, as Jackson argues, Petry’s novel actually appeals to both racial audiences because, “Petry successfully yoked two audiences—the black middle class and the white liberals...” (230). Early reviews of the novel support Jackson’s statement. Even as early as the year it was published, *The Street* was compared to Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. One early reviewer wrote that the novel “will dismay and terrify many white audiences in the same manner that *Native Son* did. In some ways its negative aspects will have a disheartening, defeatist reaction that cannot but disarm many and cause them to turn to cynicism.” But black readers who are “like Lutie” will “be incensed, will be moved to a vengeful anger and strike out desperately at the virus of racism that creates characters Lutie.” The “anger” created “is the asset of *The Street* for all its hopelessness. It is a book to move people to action, perhaps wiser, more organized action” (Ervin 6). The novel’s use of performances and the audience’s reactions are significant. The anger the early reviewer feels that the novel taps into can also be found in Wright’s depiction of African American art:

It was, however, in a folklore molded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth...all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed. (“Blueprint” 99)

Wright makes two distinct points relative to Lutie’s and Boots’s performances. First, that African American culture is “molded” through the difficult experiences of racism and prejudice. Both Boots’s personal history with struggle and racism and Lutie’s (and her

audience's) experiences of discrimination share Wright's "inhuman conditions" that lead to the "complete expression" through the cultural art. Second, Lutie's ability to "completely express" those conditions permit her performance to share in the "racial wisdom." Claude McKay argues that, "The spirituals and the blues were not created out of sweet deceit. There is so much sublimated bitterness in them as there is humility, pathos and bewilderment." And, as McKay claims, "if the Negro is a little bitter, the white man should be the last person in the world to accuse him of bitterness. For the feeling of bitterness is a natural part of the black man's birthright as the feeling of superiority is of the white man's" (391). Like Wright and the novel, McKay notes a distinctive shared experience between black Americans that is inextricably connected to the cultural art.

Sterling Brown's "Ma Rainey" speaks to the same community connection in Rainey's singing that Lutie's audience experiences. In the poem the audience calls to the performer: "O Ma Rainey, / Sing yo' song; / Now you's back / Whah you belong, / Git way inside us, / Keep us strong..." The poem's speaker questions Ma Rainey's audience for why they enjoy listening to her, to which the audience member explains, "She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway." In the same way that Lutie's audience shares her experience, Ma Rainey's audience in the moment of the performance calls for Rainey to "make them strong" because she is able to "catch hold of them." As a reviewer for *Opportunity*, Brown witnessed that "white writers getting into print and some of them making reputations out of Negro subject matter." Like Wright, "This fundamental dynamic of American cultural production—black creativity and white commercial success—infuriated [Brown]. It had played out ten years earlier on Broadway and ten years before that with ragtime and Dixieland jazz music" (Jackson 38). Brown himself wrote that, "Negro authors... must be allowed the privilege and the responsibility of being the ultimate portrayers of their own" (38). Brown's critical essay and his poem return African American art to the physical black performer in front of an

audience, and a black audience who shares similar experiences with the performer.

The urban 1940s setting of the novel, according to Gunderson, stages that “All those who live on the street experience the blues because they have in common that cultural environment with which they must interact” (84). In an effort to negotiate “the difficulties associated with life in America,” Krasner argues that, “African Americans began to see their experiences as part of a *larger collective whole*” (emphasis original) and “attempted to make sense of their lives through an appreciation of overlapping events that signified the black experience.” Krasner even notes that “Theatre marked indices of these experiences by way of symbolic references to the black experience” (131). Wright, McKay, Brown, Krasner, Gunderson, and the novel highlight the experience of a “collective whole” or a “racial wisdom” that black Americans share. This sharing of racial wisdom between black people results in an exclusion of white people, demonstrated in the different reactions *The Street’s* two black performers experience. Lutie, with a shared history to her audience, experiences a positive cultural performance. Her performance “was a story that they all knew by heart” and results in a communal joining and sharing. In contrast, Boots’s lack of shared history with his (white) audience leads to his “isolation.” The difference lies not in the performer—both of whom are black Americans—but in the audience. The noted differences between how the racial makeup of the audiences impacts the success of the performance reflects, in part, the novel’s historical situation. Hazel Carby argues that, “The mass migration of blacks to urban areas, especially to the cities of the North, forced these traditional intellectuals [in the North] to question and revise their imaginary vision of ‘the people’” and to “directly confront the actual displaced rural workers who were, in large numbers, becoming a black working class in front of their eyes” (472). Published in the midst of Jim Crow laws and following on the heels of the Great Depression, the novel’s characters and its commentary on cultural performances shows marked difference from literary texts of the New Negro Renaissance,

both in terms of how a successful performance is no longer related to white audience reactions to the art but also in the types of emotions the performance invokes in its audience.

Lutie's performance reminds her audience of "despair, loneliness, of frustration." Everyone begins the novel already knowing suffering. When Lutie sings with the jukebox and brings the music to life, she becomes a "cultural ethnographer" who "seeks to portray the shared experiences of the African-American community realistically and even holistically" (Gunderson 10). Lutie's singing at the bar brings forth the shared suffering of her audience and signifies on the genre of blues music. Blues music developed through the 1920s and into the 1930s, and the novel's readers in the 1940s would have understood that, as Gunderson explains, "the concept of call and response is central to blues music" and, by extension, this call and response in blues music "is also found in the literary experience: the writer calls and the reader responds" (12). Angela Davis' work on historical black female performers helps to explain this. Davis explains Ma Rainey's 1928 song "Hustin' Blues" as "there are also underlying racial implications and political contradictions in this song, which Rainey's black audience would have been able to read" (108). In the same way Lutie's audience would be able to understand meanings behind her performance because, "The African-American community of that era did not need to be informed about the underlying social implications of such seemingly abstract notions. Their collective emotional experience of these themes almost certainly facilitated shared social interpretations" (118). Like Wright and McKay, Petry's novel signals to black readers to, as the early reviewer wrote, "strike out desperately at the virus of racism" via the shared common experiences brought together and voiced in the performance.

However, as a black female performer Lutie faces severe sexism. Davis argues that historical female performers "like Bessie Smith and Ida Cox presented and embodied sexualities associated with working-class black life." But these topics were "seen by some

Renaissance strategists as antithetical to the aims of their cultural movement—their music was designated as ‘low’ culture, in contrast, for example, to endeavors such as sculpture, painting, literature, and classical music” (xiii). Lutie’s own treatment as an unequal performer can be seen when she auditions for Boots’s band. Prior to her performance:

She avoided the eyes of the men in the orchestra because what they were thinking was plain on their faces. The fat pianist grinned. One of the trumpet players winked at the drummer. The others nudged each other and nodded knowingly. One of the saxophonists was raising his instrument in mock salute to Boots. It was quite obvious that they were saying to themselves and to each other, Yeah, Boots has got himself a new chick and this singing business is the old come-on. (221)

Rather than receiving automatic respect as an artist, Lutie must first demonstrate to the other performers that she deserves the performance space. Like the historical Bessie Smith and Ida Cox, Lutie’s singing originates from “low” culture concerns of the working class and “embodied sexualities.” However, Lutie’s performance of these concerns works to claim their centrality to black American life and therefore as authentic topics for African American art. Elisabeth Petry explains that Ann Petry “eventually came to believe that there was no such thing as class strata among black people. We were all subject to a caste system because of the racism in American society” (52). Petry explained this clearly to a reporter who asked her “how she could identify with black people and write about them since she was so obviously not a ‘ghetto black’” (52). Petry responded to this reporter, “The idea that there is a black middle class or a black upper middle class is a creation of white sociologists who refuse to acknowledge the existence of a caste system...based on skin color” (52). Petry’s personal concerns with working class black Americans originated, Farah J. Griffin argues, in her “reporting, writing, and activism focused on issues of housing, segregation, equal opportunity, and the fight against white supremacy at home and abroad...As women’s editor, features writer, and columnist Petry was involved in every aspect of the newspaper” (131). This journalism background shows through in characters in *The Street* and lends weight to claims for social activism in Petry’s novel. Stephanie Leigh Batiste’s explanation of “staged

performances” also works well to support claims for a connection between Petry’s journalism work and the cultural claims of her novel. Batiste explains that, “Staged performances often act as a ritual of nation, national memory, and embodied identification with larger historical and imagined ideas and forces.” Due to this connection, “Performers take on structures of cultural power in their bodies and in the narratives they perform as a means of exploring its dimensions, looking for spaces of manipulation and freedom in a manner far from binary” (7). Lutie’s performance again re-places her visual black body as the performer (and creator) of blues music and African American art.

Furthermore, Lutie’s connection of the performance as a space of mental escape from lower-class life struggles connects African American art to lower-class struggles as themes of that art. While Lutie sings, the music becomes something separate from her voice. It is described as, “[swelling] in back of her and she began to sing, faintly at first and then her voice grew stronger, clearer, for she gradually forgot the men in the orchestra, forgot even that she was there in the Casino and why she was there” (222). To use Batiste’s words, Lutie finds space to manipulate traditional ideas of acceptable “high art” themes and, instead, shows the “cultural power” available to the lower class. Or, as Houston Baker writes, “no object, process, or single element possesses *intrinsic aesthetic value*. The ‘art object’ as well as its value are selective *constructions* of the critic’s tropes and models” (Baker 10). Rather than a cultural product deemed “artistic” because of its form, Baker argues for a product to have value based on a critical understanding of the art. The power of an artistic performance exists not the song itself (and in the lyrics) but in the way that artist performs.

Lutie successfully performs the value of her art to the skilled artists of the orchestra. At the end of Lutie’s audition, “The men in the orchestra stood up. They were bowing to her. It was an exaggerated gesture” and Lutie is “filled with triumph at the sight” because she knew that, “this absurd, preposterous bowing was their way of telling her they were accepting

her on merit as a singer, not because she was Boots's newest girl friend" (222). Lutie's art is deemed successful because it "appeals to tradition." Richard Bauman claims "an appeal to tradition may thus become a key to performance, a way of signaling the assumption of responsibility for the proper doing of a communicative act" (21). Grandt explains this moment of Lutie first performing with Boots's band as "the individual's ability to transcend in music the pain and suffering of history, the straining towards a metaphorical place of freedom" (26). The music becomes so much a part outside of Lutie and outside the song itself that the novel explains that, "Though she sang the words of the song, it was of something entirely different that she was thinking and putting into the music" (222). In reality Lutie cannot escape from her circumstances and the street, the art provides a temporary means of escape. The novel explains that through the song "she was leaving the street with its dark hallways, its mean, shabby rooms" (222). When Lutie performs, Daniel LeClair Hartley argues for a "hidden narrative" that "evokes the blues. He claims that, "Lutie's individual expression becomes representative of group experience, and she moves the group to silence" (85). The novel's demonstration of mutual recognition of race and class between audience and performer comments on the connection the room feels toward communal histories of discrimination. By singing "something entirely different" than just the words of the songs, and by performing in such a way as to connect with and identify with her audiences, Lutie's performances align with blues performance tradition and she successfully "appeals to the tradition" of blues music. Through her alignment with a performance tradition already known to the orchestra members by the 1940s, Lutie successfully performs a credible art form and receives praise for her performance from the other artists.

The same escape that Lutie experiences also occurs for Boots when he plays the piano. He "kept on until he forgot there were such things as Pullmans and rumped sheets and wadded-up blankets to be handled. Forgot there was a world that was full of white voices

saying; ‘Hustle ‘em up, boy’; ‘Step on it, boy’...He forgot about bells that were a shrill command to ‘come a-running, boy’” (273). Young explains that “When popular connotations of blackness are mapped across or internalized within black people, the result is the creation of *the black body*” (emphasis original). Young distinguishes the physical “black body” of the black person from racist assumptions placed on the visual “black body,” and he argues that, “This second body, an abstracted and imagined figure, shadows or doubles the real one. It is the black body and not a particular, flesh-and-blood body that is the target of a radicalizing projection.” When someone yells a racial slur, “The epithet, asserting an adjectival influence that locates within the seen (body) an aspect that is largely imagined, brings together the physical black body and the conceptual black body. It blurs them” (7). Like Lutie, Boots’s performance permits a temporary escape from the label of “black body” and the blurring of the imagined prejudices placed on the individual black person. Therefore, the novel shows how African American art provides an escape from the streets and transcends physical labels associated with racial prejudice. The temporary escape occurs for the audience from their struggles against racism, as Wright argues, but also for the performer.

#### INDIVIDUAL INTERNALIZED EXPRESSION OF PROTEST

Throughout the novel Lutie holds fast to Benjamin Franklin’s concept of the American Dream as a means of pulling herself (and her son) out of life on the street. The moments Lutie fantasizes about the American Dream coincide with, as Ama S. Wattlely describes them, the “physical spaces that are narrow, small, and confining as well as harsh realities such a racism and sexism” in order to “relate to the way in which Lutie is trapped and constricted within her urban environment as she attempts to realize the American Dream” (342). For example, returning home from work and the grocery, Lutie thinks “that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she” (64).

However, Lutie's use of African American culture for economic gain, and her alignment of the American Dream with economic security lead to her failure to achieve the Dream.

This is due in part to Lutie's desire to achieve success without help from the black community. Lutie explicitly states this after auditioning for the orchestra: "And the thought that she had been able to accomplish this alone, without help from anyone..." (230). The thought repeats throughout the novel and reinforces Lutie as a representation of the Post-Renaissance cultural artist separated from the ancestral connection that earlier writers—such as White's *Flight*—worked to demonstrate. As Garvey explains, "Lutie has been acculturated, accepting messages from the dominant culture and concomitantly dismissing the remnant of ancestral memory embodied in granny...Significantly, the ancestral connection often expresses itself through music" (126-127). Lutie's ancestral connection is represented by her connection to her grandmother, Granny, who never appears in the novel but who echoes in Lutie's mind throughout the novel. Granny comes in as early as page 15 when Lutie thinks of "Tales that has been handed down and down and down until, if you tried to trace them back, you'd end up God knows where—probably Africa. And Granny had them all at the tip of her tongue." (15-16). After thinking about Granny Lutie makes a connection of music (representing African American cultural art) to Granny (representing the black American ancestral connection): "She started humming under her breath, not realizing she was doing it. It was an old song that Granny used to sing" (17). Garvey argues that Lutie's reliance on Ben Franklin and the white Western value system results in Lutie "not allow[ing] Granny's qualities enough recognition or respect." Unlike the ancestral connection, the white Western values "ultimately do not possess the subversiveness necessary to combat the hegemonic systems that govern the city" (Garvey 128). As a result, this "will lead to an isolation both extreme and self-destructive" (Garvey 134). While the novel critiques the black community's leadership for undervaluing working class art forms, it also finds fault with

artists who reject the support of the black community. In the same way that Johnson's unnamed narrator symbolizes a warning of white appropriation and commodification of African American art, Lutie symbolizes a warning to artists who reject the support and values of the black community and instead hold up white values as the standard and ideal for art.

The novel contrasts Lutie's individuality with the shared community of the black performers in the orchestra. During intermission, one of the trumpeters, "was experimenting with a tune that had been playing in his head for days" (302). The pianist begins to play with him and "groped for appropriate chords as the man the with trumpet played the tune over softly." Working together, "they produced a faint melody, barely a shred, a tatter of music that drifted through the big ballroom. Conversation and the clink of glasses and roars of laughter almost drowned it out, but it persisted—a slight, ghostly sound running through the room" (303). While the music is faint, it is present. Grandt argues that the orchestra members, "Unencumbered by the commercial demands of the venue and the artistic restrictions of pre-arranged scores," play improvised music "at its purest, spontaneously composing a new song, a new story, in the moment." And for these two performers, "jazz provides the opportunity for artistic self-actualization" (29). This music, unlike the performances that both Lutie and Boots give, does not serve economic gain. It is an informal and spontaneous performance of the music, created for the pleasure and self-expression of the performers.

Lutie overhears this same haunting music by the orchestra members as she speaks with Boots regarding pay for her performance. While the music fills the backdrop of the scene, Lutie relates feeling "trapped" when Boots tells her she won't be paid for her singing. This destroys her idea of escaping the street through the stage, as "She waited for his answer, leaning toward him, straining to hear it and hearing instead the faint, drifting sound of music. It disturbed her because at first she thought it wasn't real, that she was imagining the sound. She turned toward the bandstand and saw that two of the boys were practicing" (304). The

“trapped” experience occurs when she perceives that, despite all of her efforts, the performances will not lead her to economic security and independence. The echo of the music, like the echo of Granny’s voice, demonstrates the difference of Lutie’s desire for independent success with the reliance the orchestra members have on one another and with the community. Lutie’s idea of a Franklin-inspired escape from the street ignores how that same Franklin (read: white) based way of thinking re-traps her on the street. After all, it is Junto (the white man) who both permits Boots’s band to play at the Casino and who orders that Lutie not be paid for singing. The white Junto permits and finances the performance opportunity but also prevents both black performers the freedom they desire. When Lutie realizes that she will not escape from the street, “she tried to remember the tone of his voice and couldn’t. She could only remember the thin, ghostly, haunting music. But he had told her she could earn her living by singing” (304). She remains haunted by the dream of using her music for economic freedom and individual independence.

After Lutie has been made to feel the chains on her performance career and her music’s inability to save her from the street, she experiences the white hot iron that Wright argues:

Barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, Negro writers have been *made* to feel a sense of difference. So deep has this white-hot iron of exclusion been burnt into their hearts that thousands have all but lost the desire to become identified with American civilization. The Negro writers’ acceptance of this enforced isolation and their attempt to justify it is but a defense-reflex of the whole special way of life which has been rammed down their throats. (“Blueprint” 106, emphasis original)

The novel combines the emotion of the music with the physical and emotional sensations Lutie experiences: “The music faded away, returned, was lost again...This was worse than being back where she started because she hadn’t been able to prevent the growth of a bright optimism that had pictured a shining future” (305). Like the writers from Wright’s “Blueprint,” Lutie demonstrates the the desire to identify with American civilization. In her case, the loss of Ben Franklin’s American Dream achievable through cultural art. Not only

has she lost her desire, but she has realized that the path to economic freedom through her music was never available to her; the economic power always belonged to the white Junto and by extension white America.

The haunting music repeats in the attempted rape scene, when Boots tells Lutie to “Just be nice to him as long as he wants” and he will take care of her. The trauma of the assault connects to the trauma of her art’s loss of power. While Boots speaks, Lutie “heard what he said, knew exactly what he meant, and her mind skipped over his words and substituted other words.” In her mind, “She was back in the big shabby ballroom at the Casino, straining to hear a thin thread of music that kept getting lost in the babble of voices, in the clink of glasses, in the bursts of laughter, so that she wasn’t certain the music was real. Sometimes it was there and then again it was drowned out by other sounds” (421). Noel Schraufnagel explains that protest novels from the 1940s like *The Street* “are seldom concerned with the winning of civil rights, for the reason that they deal primarily with individuals who are trying merely to assure themselves as human beings.” Due to the limitations of racism and economic powerlessness, “The only recourse that is open to them is violence” (19). The physical threat Lutie experiences here associates with the economic threat she faced earlier. In both, the black orchestra members’ music runs as a thread throughout both scenes, tying them together. When Boots explains that Junto wants to sleep with her, Lutie “could still hear that floating, drifting tune. It was inside her head and she couldn’t get it out...If she hummed that fragment of melody aloud, she would get rid of it. It was the only way to make it disappear; otherwise it would keep going around and around in her head” (422). Lutie’s desire to hum brings forth memories of the previous scenes of humming: Granny’s older song, and her humming of the juke box song. This critical scene draws together Lutie’s performance and singing experiences with her reminders of Granny.

The decision she makes in the scene evolves from her cultural experiences—both ancestral and her role as an African American artist.

When Lutie kills Boots with the candlestick, “she was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her” (429). Scott explains that, “Lutie’s final act is not to be understood as resistance to her material embodiment itself but as resistance to her radical disembodiment according to the plans of others” (111). Petry herself explained that Lutie’s actions, which she calls “This pattern of violence,” originates from “arguments used to justify slavery still influence American attitudes toward the Negro” (38). Petry notes that “if emotion is aroused by the use of certain words, and the emotion is violent” then “it seems fairly logical that novels which deal with race relations should reflect some of this violence” (“Social Criticism” 38). The physical violence Lutie commits reflects the violence and frustration committee against African American culture, as Carby argues. She claims that, while blues performers were able to exercise power and control over their art and their sexuality, this power was short lived and “the space occupied by these blues singers was opened up by race records but race records did not survive the Depression” (482). Lutie, too, claims performance space in the Post Renaissance of the 1940s, yet the space is limited to small clubs and cannot transition to economic success through her art. Carby acknowledges that some women “broke through the racial boundaries,” but for the most part the blues era performers did not enact overt change for black female performers (482). As for Lutie, her power is limited to her ability to share personal experiences with her audience and to offer brief respite from lower class life through the stage. The anger Lutie vents at Boots represents the inability of African American art to substantially change the lives of lower class black people.

## CONCLUSION FOR POST RENAISSANCE CULTURAL PERFORMANCE

Early in the novel Lutie takes the train home from work as a menial office employee, and she realizes that “she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who started at her on the downtown streets and in the subway.” Downtown makes her feel that she needed to escape “from the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs” (57). She perceives that the other black people on the train with her feel the same way, “that once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals.” Lutie contrasts the downtown world of white America with the Harlem world of black Americans: “Up here they are no longer creatures labeled simply ‘colored’ and therefore all alike...The same people who had made themselves small on the train, even on the platform, suddenly grew so large they could hardly get up the stairs to the street together” (57-58). Like the physical “smallness” Lutie imagines, the novel shows the “smallness” of power African American art had to enact lasting social change on America. The novel places the responsibility for this “smallness” on the point that black artists do not control the economic power over their art and that the art has been appropriated and “mainstreamed” into white America. Bernard Bell argues that, “the rural vision of the city is characterized mainly by sin, crime, and violence. At the same time, however, young Americans, especially blacks, dream of the city as a place of opportunity, wealth, and progress.” He locates “the truth” of Petry’s novel as “actually more complex and paradoxical. So, too, is the socialized ambivalence, the pride and shame of one’s identity, and double-consciousness, the struggle to reconcile one’s dual heritage, of black American character” (106). Bell notes the blame of social problems lies not with the black community, but “white people like Junto and the Chandlers, whose prosperity is based on the economic exploitation of blacks” (110). The novel relocates the possibility of social change through artistic

endeavors within the black community via reconnecting with a legacy of performative culture and by embracing themes germane to the performers and their audiences. This returns the values of African American art and its creation and control to the black community while simultaneously noting the varied voices and stories of that community. Petry reaffirms claims made by earlier writers such as Johnson, Fauset, and White who argue for an authentic folk, independently valued, black authored and controlled artistic culture.

During the New Negro Renaissance art was a place for possibility, a claim to a cultural heritage and legacy. Post Renaissance and post-Depression the music serves as an escape from the reality of the after-effects of World War II and legacy of Jim Crow laws. As Lutie explains, the oppression she feels “wasn’t just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other—jammed and packed and forced into the smallest possible space until they were completely cut off from light and air” (206). This novel’s location between the Renaissance and the Black Arts and Civil Rights movements highlights the changing sentiments of black Americans and growing dissention of racial prejudice and class bias experienced as, in Richard Wright’s words, the “white hot iron of exclusion.” In Jones’ words, “The American Negro is being asked to defend the American system as energetically as the American white man.” He believes that, “There is no doubt that the middle-class Negro is helping and will continue to help in that defense” but believes that “there is perhaps a question mark in the minds of the many poor blacks...and also now in the minds of many young Negro intellectuals. What is it that they are being asked to save?” (236). This exclusion demonstrated within stage performances draws black audiences and performers together in shared histories and emphasizes the individual’s frustration with discrimination. The African American art becomes a conduit for the emotions caused by these exclusions and frustrations.

Earlier twentieth century African American literature detailed the success of black performance with both white and black audiences to claim the cultural significance of African American art on the American cultural landscape. Post-Renaissance texts function very differently, not only in terms of the possibilities for social uplift through performance, but also in terms of a focus on the individual performer's motivations separately from a collective racial experience. Lutie's motivations for singing and Boots's motivations for playing highlight the performance as having value because of the emotion and freedom of expression experienced by the performer. However, this space for freedom that the individual performer experiences chafes against the limitations available to both black people and African American art in the 1940s United States. While the performance art permits a moment of freedom, it cannot lead to the economic freedom through traditional channels controlled by white Americans such as Junto. This is doubly so when the idea of "success" is tied only to economic means.

## CHAPTER SIX: DISTINCTLY AMERICAN CONCLUSIONS

My research has examined the importance and influence of performance in African American literature during the first half of the twentieth century. Drawing from American studies, African American theater history, and black performance studies I have shown how the literature demonstrates the significance of black artistic public performances and how these performances demonstrate the problematic nature of being both American and African American. Using previous critics' work to show the significance of public performances ranging from dance, speech, and music my project connected literary texts from multiple time periods of African American literature and investigated how these texts work within the performative nature of black culture to argue for an ongoing questioning of black America's cultural situating within—and yet apart from—American culture. In this project I have demonstrated how the fictional writings of James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Walter White, and Ann Petry incorporate and reflect on contemporary historical developments of black Americans on American theater stages and contribute to American culture. My chapters analyzed historical black performers such as Bob Walker, Bert Williams, Josephine Baker, the Johnson brothers, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith to connect the historical world of American and black theater to the fictional worlds of the literature. By using references to historical performers as well as realistic fictional depictions of black performers, I have shown how the performance scenes in the texts create a credible reflection on the contemporary world to interrogate audience responses to black performers, spaces and locations permitted to black people as audience and performer, and the ways that America—and white people—both assimilate and appropriate African American art and culture.

Furthermore, I argued that the literature serves as a social and political commentary (and critique) of the role of African American art within the larger American culture and how African American cultural products are both a part of and apart from American culture. In

addition to the fictional works themselves and critical studies on historical black theater, I used social critics contemporary to each of the central novels. By supporting my central work of fiction with an essay from the same time, I substantiated my own readings of the texts and also show how these issues were of great social concern when the texts were published. I spotlighted the stage, specifically, as the central location to study African American culture for two reasons. First, much of artistic production is performative in nature and relies on audience approval or enjoyment of the art for the product to be a “successful” enactment of its representative culture. Second, the physical space created by the theater creates two spaces for critiquing the cultural performance: 1) in terms of the scene within the novel, and 2) in terms of the reader and their cultural understanding. Stages, by their very definition, elevate the person on them above the crowd and create a performer (the person on the stage) and an audience (those gazing at the person on the stage). The dynamic of the two groups of people allows for commentary on how the performer acts and how the audience reacts to the performer.

By extending the historical scope of this project beyond the confines of “Harlem Renaissance,” I was able to study not only the scenes in the texts and their performances but also the texts themselves as cultural representations. The project used *Autobiography* and *The Street* as bookends of the New Negro Renaissance. I argued for a re-evaluation of Johnson’s novel and placed him at the cusp of the Post Reconstruction and the Renaissance. By demonstrating the importance of the novel’s first publication in 1912 over its republication in 1927, my reading of *Autobiography* relocated Johnson’s classification in the African American literary canon and demonstrates him as a much more influential author than previous critics have credited him. I argued for critically revisiting Walter White and his contributions to African American studies, and my chapter shows how his critical and creative works both support current arguments in the cannon but also show new ways of

overthrowing racism and reaffirming the importance of African American cultural contributions via calling into question the very notion that whiteness offers more opportunities and a “better life” than blackness. My chapter on *There is Confusion* revisited the known trope of masking and its associations with W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of the veil and double consciousness; however, my work on the novel questioned that if black artists can successfully perform the role of America (both on the fictional stage and as citizens) then black artists (and black people) are therefore as quintessentially American as white people and deserving of the same rights of citizenship. I ended with *The Street*, published after the end of the New Negro Renaissance. I used this text to explore the changes on the American cultural landscape after the Harlem Renaissance and after African American art had been integrated into American culture. My work connected Petry’s novel to Johnson and investigated how the cultural assimilation and appropriation Johnson warned of came to fruition. My project explored black America’s role in the formation of twentieth century American art and culture, as well as demonstrated the stage as a cultural space to interrogate African American—and American—performances of humanity in the twentieth century United States.

Future research related to this project could develop in two directions. First, my concepts of performance studies and expanded definitions of theater, performance spaces, and performers could be applied to historical black American stage performers. This would add to the current critical discussion of presence and visual representations of black Americans on American stages. Second, arguments made in this project for the roles of African American art within American culture can be applied beyond literature alone and used in broader cultural studies projects. This project studied African American literature from the “proto to post” New Negro Renaissance and the novels’ contemporary critical conversations about art’s role in social and political conversations. The project also worked

with contemporary reviews of the novels. In a similar fashion, future critical discussions could study reviews and public audience responses of non-literary African American art to further expand our critical conversation of African American art's role in twentieth century America.

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- "Snap! The Marlon Riggs Bibliography." *African American Review E-Project* (2012). <http://aar.slu.edu/riggs.html> --with V. Young  
- "Introduction." *Code-Meshing as World English: Pedagogy, Policy, Performance*, Ed. Vershawn Ashanti Young and Aja Y. Martinez. NCTE (2011) --with V. Young and A. Martinez.

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