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Speaking for Americans: Modernist Voices and Political Representation, 1910-1940

Sarah Kerman
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Speaking for Americans: Modernist Voices and Political Representation, 1910-1940

Abstract
In the early twentieth century, a time of massive population shifts from external immigration and internal migration, the question of whose voices would be heard—both politically and aesthetically—became central to American politics and culture, and authors found new and innovative ways of representing those voices on the page. Yet these textual transcriptions of speech and song are typically considered either as nostalgic representations of a folk past, or as exhibits of populations whose language is marked as non-standard. This dissertation argues that vocal production is in fact a progressive and future-oriented force in American modernist texts, and finds a pedagogical potential in formal innovations that often encouraged readers to themselves perform the voices they read on the page. It examines polemically cross-generic texts by Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, Henry Roth, and Muriel Rukeyser in the contexts of modernist experimentation and of leftist attempts to effect social change through literature, and argues that these authors self-consciously strove to reshape the ways in which their readers performed American identity to themselves and others. Adapting the genres of the long novel, the folk anthology, the modernist long poem, and the documentary, they demonstrate both a deeply felt imperative to represent marginalized communities in aesthetically innovative and ethically responsible ways, and a self-conscious awareness of the limits of such representations. Their works thereby both delineate and manipulate American national identity. In contrast to scholarship that finds a divide between aesthetic innovation and politically-engaged didacticism, then, this dissertation suggests that authors negotiated the ability of speech and song to bridge the two.

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SPEAKING FOR AMERICANS:

MODERNIST VOICES AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION, 1910-1940

Sarah Kerman

A DISSERTATION

in

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in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

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Supervisor of Dissertation

_____

Charles Bernstein, Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature

Graduate Group Chairperson

_____

Kevin Platt, Associate Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures

Dissertation Committee

Nancy Bentley, Professor of English
Jean-Michel Rabaté, Vartan Gregorian Professor of the Humanities

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ABSTRACT

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In the early twentieth century, a time of massive population shifts from external immigration and internal migration, the question of whose voices would be heard—both politically and aesthetically—became central to American politics and culture, and authors found new and innovative ways of representing those voices on the page. Yet these textual transcriptions of speech and song are typically considered either as nostalgic representations of a folk past, or as exhibits of populations whose language is marked as non-standard. This dissertation argues that vocal production is in fact a progressive and future-oriented force in American modernist texts, and finds a pedagogical potential in formal innovations that often encouraged readers to themselves perform the voices they read on the page. It examines polemically cross-generic texts by Gertrude Stein, Jean Toomer, Henry Roth, and Muriel Rukeyser in the contexts of modernist experimentation and of leftist attempts to effect social change through literature, and argues that these authors self-consciously strove to reshape the ways in which their readers performed American identity to themselves and others. Adapting the genres of the long novel, the folk anthology, the modernist long poem, and the documentary, they demonstrate both a deeply felt imperative to represent marginalized communities in aesthetically innovative and ethically responsible ways, and a self-conscious awareness of the limits of such

representations. Their works thereby both delineate and manipulate American national identity. In contrast to scholarship that finds a divide between aesthetic innovation and politically-engaged didacticism, then, this dissertation suggests that authors negotiated the ability of speech and song to bridge the two.

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Introduction: Sound Practices

I began this project with a conjunction: the “and” of Gertrude Stein's notorious sentence "I am writing for myself and strangers." Stein uses these words to justify writing her early novel *The Making of Americans*, but, coming as they do in the middle of long, discursive, repetitive paragraphs, it is easy to take only the first half of the sentence under consideration. In other words, to read Stein's experiments with the form of the novel as hermetic or private, a working-through of aesthetic and philosophical issues that then appear more fully conceived in Stein's later work. Stein’s obsession with repetitive speech patterns, in this model, is biographically instrumental but aesthetically and philosophically insignificant.

Taking the "and" of Stein's "myself and strangers" literally, however, not only opens up new possibilities for reading *The Making of Americans*, but provides a paradigm for reading other modernist literature that straddles generic and formal boundaries. For Stein's declaration connects her with other modernists who consciously took it upon themselves to mediate between individuals and American readers, broadly conceived, through experiments with transcribing speech and song. They used formally innovative techniques to call attention to the construction of American national identity out of numerous individual instances of enunciation. By doing so, they not only changed the forms of the novel, the anthology, and the long poem. They also hoped to change their readers, encouraging them to experiment with new rhythms and cadences, and thereby changing American society for the better.

Considering vocal production as a potentially progressive element of modernist literature challenges the conventional association of speech and song with, on the one

hand, nostalgic representations of an oral, pre-literary past, or, on the other, the monologic musings of the lyric poet. The idea that transcribing speech and song into literary forms could offer readers new modes of speech, and new ways to identify themselves as Americans, is both pedagogical (unlike traditional conceptions of the lyric) and future-oriented (unlike the idea of folk nostalgia). Each of the authors I examine revises generic conventions in the service of this novel combination, suggesting a poetics of the novel, a narrative thrust to poetry, or a textual practice of oral folk song performance. My work is therefore polemically cross-generic, for it locates the relationship between individual voices and a social collective in those moments where generic splicing is most apparent.

Each of the works I consider also spans the divide between high modernism—works whose formally innovative techniques transform literary genres or styles, but which do not explicitly speak to a broad public—and leftist modernism—works that aspire to effect social change through literature.[1] Critics have debated the political and aesthetic affiliations of each text, finally characterizing them, respectively, as debatably leftist (Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead"), clearly but undefinedly national (Stein's *The Making of Americans*, Toomer's *Cane*), and hermetically private (Roth's *Call It Sleep*). The difficulty of pinning down these works' political thrust, I argue, is part of what makes their uses of speech and song rhetorically effective: they each require the reader to participate in the rhythms and repetitions of their represented voices as a fundamental interpretive move. They each create communities of readers who are also performers, while encouraging self-awareness of the conventions of those performances. Unlike

[1] Huyssen's "great divide" between high and mass culture, as later theorists have noted, bypasses this latter category.

scholarship that focuses on a single genre of recognizably political or aesthetic affiliation, then, this work concentrates on the processes set in motion by similar tactics in different generic situations. The process of figuring out how to read and interpret a text, in these cases, requires the reader not only to interpret the text's politics, but also to make performance decisions: how the text would sound performed by individuals or communities. These works therefore incorporate the individual reader as part of a collectivity of performers from the start. They aspire to reform the reader's relationship to a national community by encouraging new modes of participation in that community.

The particular confluence of forces that this dissertation triangulates—representations of voice, modernist literary innovation, and political advocacy—has rarely been explored, particularly in the context of the United States between the World Wars.[2] However, I do rely extensively on work that connects each pair of these three terms, and I will sketch out those relationships in this introduction. First, modernist uses of voice, particularly to evoke oral traditions that, according to one critical model, modernist literary culture both mourned and helped to supplant. The texts I examine, however, suggest that modernist authors consciously experimented with ways that representations of voice could move beyond nostalgia and effect both aesthetic and political change. Second, the relationship between politics and modernist aesthetics in the United States between the two World Wars. And third, the politics of representation more generally, in particular the trend toward representing voices of the marginalized or oppressed in genres such as the folk anthology. Finally, the introduction provides an

[2] The one book-length study that examines the intersection of these forces, Staub's *Voices of Persuasion*, focuses on works influenced by the documentary realism of the 1930s. Staub's main concern is the relationship of these representations to narrative authority and the construction of historical truth; in this way, the work is more present-oriented than future-oriented.

overview of each of the following chapters in the context of these issues, outlining the types of political change these writers hoped would follow from innovative practices of literary transcription.

Modernism and sound: printing the past

The modernist imperative to renovate aesthetic forms has an ambivalent relationship to the historical past. Marxist critics such as Lukács and Jameson have argued that modernist innovation formally enacts the impossibility of coming to terms with a coherent historical narrative,[3] and critics of American modernism have theorized a particularly American process of deliberately forgetting history in looking (perhaps naively) toward the future.[4] In many of the central literary and critical texts of modernist studies, representations of voice on the page emerge as markers of an irretrievable historical past that can nonetheless be put to use for rhetorical purposes.[5]

This mode of reading is grounded philosophically on theories of writing as a technology that necessarily comes after speech, situating speech and sound as always implicitly prior to the written word, and impossible to retrieve once recorded. Scholars of the history of writing, including Eric Havelock, Friedrich Kittler, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter Ong, have documented the transition from orality, which preserves and maintains culture in the present, to writing as the purportedly final form of a text. Whether reproducible forms—writing or sound reproduction technology—explicitly preserve oral

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[3] See Lukacs' "Ideology of Modernism" for a forceful elaboration of this point, which is then taken up by Kern and by Jameson in, among other works, *Marxism and Form.*

[4] In their introduction Scandura and Thurston posit that American modernism "throws itself to the future," choosing assimilation and forgetting over mourning and remembrance. Michaels' *Our America* also suggests a deliberate forgetting, insofar as modernist nativism, which renders American-ness genealogical and racial, must forget that only a few decades earlier, one could acquire American-ness through naturalization.

[5] O'Donnell, for example, analyzes voice as "an outside or displaced antecedent" in a number of canonical modernist narratives (13).

tradition, or whether they make no explicit claim to oral language, the spoken always remains implicitly prior to writing. As McLuhan states, "the content of writing is speech" (23). The transition from orality to writing is culturally significant, for these theorists, because writing allows for the transmission of knowledge to become a private pursuit. In contrast, oral language requires close attention because of its transitory nature; learning takes place in oral cultures through "empathetic and participatory" practices of repetition and close listening (Ong 32).

The contrast between the past community of oral literature and the present solitude of writing is part of the critique of Western metaphysics developed by post-structuralist theorists. Jacques Derrida critiques the implicit primacy of the voice relative to writing, while tracing the dependence of Western literature and philosophy on this primacy. In *Of Grammatology* he traces back to Plato the idea that all writing is structured around a lack, a missing speaker or author who produces the written text while necessarily absenting him/her/itself from the text. While this lack, he argues in *Speech and Phenomena*, is what produces the meaning of a written text, it also implies a point of origin to which the reader can never quite return.

The sound that precedes writing need not be spoken language. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Julia Kristeva have used psychoanalytic theories of subject formation to detail the ways in which music and non-semantic vocal production are always anterior to writing. Both suggest that the subject's longing to return "to the originary One, to the undifferentiated, to chaos" is a longing for a pre-linguistic existence. For Lacoue-Labarthe, music "permits the subject to mime" this return, which would be truly possible except in the total erasure of the subject in death (Lacoue-Labarthe 188). For Kristeva,

pre-linguistic existence implies a return to the womb and the maternal presence, which is evoked in the semiotic *chora* of pure non-semantic sound that is foundationally prior to the subject's entry into language. The semiotic is, for her, a potentially liberatory force in its ability to disrupt the authority of written language, but again, can never be fully recovered by readers who have already entered into language. Written representations of the voice, then, are a kind of haunting, a voice from the beyond that has left a trace for the reader to find.[6]

Printed voices, then, suggest both the history of a community and the history of a subject. Theorizations of lyric poetry have been the most ready to investigate the formal methods by which these histories are evoked on the page. J. S. Mill's classic description of lyric poetry as "overheard… feeling confessing itself to itself" suggest that poetry channels emotion onto the page, where it is held in a reservoir of feeling for the reader to experience later on (quoted in Wheeler 35). Lyric poetry, in this tradition, expresses the state of a subjectivity at a moment in time that can then be retraced by rereading. Theorists of the historical roots of poetic forms such as Andrew Welsch and Anthony Easthope have investigated the ways in which this subjectivity is historically formed and conditioned. Welsch outlines the communal speech rhythms of labor and ritual that are the foundation of metrical poetry: lyric, he writes, is an "exercise in abstraction" in which "memory of its past existence and anticipation of its future existence hold up in [the reader's] mind a ghostly, patterned backdrop against which the actual rhythms of the language perform their contrary dance" (194). As we will see in Chapter 1, modernist writers such as Pound attach specific historical and cultural meaning to the rhythms of

[6] For literary voice as haunting in modernist literature, see Rabaté and Scandura and Thurston. Wheeler traces the rhetoric of haunting at 37ff.

classical poetry, and aspire to bring those meanings back into play for fundamentally conservative purposes.

The meaning inherent in an oral past was often both racialized and geographically localized in modernist literature. In the United States in particular, drastic demographic shifts from external and internal migration and the ever-widening spread of the radio and phonograph caused the distinctive cadences of the Old World or the African-American South to evolve in turn.[7] Domestic anthropologists and folklorists often bewailed this shift as the disappearance of local peculiarity, collecting ethnographical data on micro-cultures always seemingly on the point of vanishing. The fragmentation and mechanization of American society and language gave rise to the recourse to speech and sound as markers of tradition and foundational culture.[8] The association of orality with pre-modern folk culture was present both in stereotypes of Africans and African-Americans as predisposed to rhythm, and in attempts by African-Americans themselves to redefine the terms on which their literature was evaluated by white America. Recent modernist scholarship has argued that "high" modernist writers appropriated the vocal peculiarities (dialect, folk song, accent, intonation, rhythm, timbre) of ethnic and immigrant groups, rural populations, and Native Americans to gain cultural capital or to project an aura of literary rebelliousness. These markers of difference, however, also appear in complex examinations of issues of assimilation, acculturation, and linguistic

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[7] For the purposes of this project, a concern with these two developments, rather than strictly chronological or stylistic markers, delineates the boundaries of the American modernism under discussion. Stein's *Making of Americans* (written in France from 1908-1911) is thus relevant for, among other things, its preoccupation with the boundaries of middle-class American culture and speech in shifting urban conditions. For the same reason, despite his careful attention to speech, Faulkner does not play a major role here.

[8] Elliott and Hegeman discuss the specifically modern and modernist nature of this development. See also Berman and Susman, in addition to many of the references in Chapter 2.

difficulty in literature by members of these groups as well.[9]

Listening ahead

While representations of voice, then, appear as cultural and historical markers of a folk past, my analysis asks how speech and song function as future-oriented forces in American modernism. In doing so, it participates in an ongoing conversation about the political thrust of formal innovations that has its roots in increased attention to non-canonical modernist texts, ranging from explicitly didactic proletarian novels to works that cite contemporary discourses of political change. These critiques, which often rely on historically-situated textual analysis, have both called into question the strictness of the high/mass cultural divide, and demonstrated the effectiveness of relating formal analysis of modernist texts to their political impact. My work relates experimental modernist texts to a more politically-engaged literary didacticism, exploring a variety of ways in which fundamentally pedagogical questions influenced aesthetic choices. In this way, it challenges not only the traditional critical model of a divide between high and mass cultural forms, but also revisions of that model that find mass culture in the content, rather than the form, of modernist literature.[10]

Yet work that relates representations of voice and political change is rare in this context, perhaps because there has been so much ground-clearing work to be done expanding the boundaries of the American modernist canon. When it appears, it focuses

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[9] For scholarship on high modernist appropriation, see McGurl, North, and Strychacz. See Schreiber and Kent for ways in which ethnically or racially marked modernists used dialect in this way.

[10] This division stems from Willihnganz's examination of radio and modernist aesthetic forms (125). I have relied on foundational work on form and politics in American modernism by Barnard, Browder, Denning, Foley, Kalaidjian, and Nelson. Recently, Billitteri, Harrington, and Thurston have examined the exchanges between the social and modernist poetry in particular. Moglen makes a similar distinction between past- and future-oriented modernism, which he associates with melancholia and mourning respectively.

on the lyric poem as the genre that straddles past community and future orientation.[11] Sharon Cameron has theorized lyric poetry's unique temporality: "[an] action that is completed and yet survives, a speaker who says 'I' and yet is pluralistic, a succession of moments long past the point at which succession is possible" (210). The lyric's ability to point to both past and future, both collective and individual, is taken up by Juliana Spahr in her analysis of experimental American poetry. The twentieth-century works that Spahr analyzes include both "identificatory moments" and "moments when one realizes the limits of one's knowledge, movements of partial or qualified identification; moments when one realizes and respects unlikeness" (5). I argue that moments that represent vocal production, whether or not they appear in lyric, gesture toward the lyric's capacity to hold individual and collective in a new relationship to each other. My analysis of works that are not explicitly lyric still relies on the poetics that is produced whenever a text encourages us to attend to the sound of its written words. In this I take inspiration from the work of Henri Meschonnic, who locates the potential for "orality" in both speech and writing, neither of which can escape the non-semantic power of rhythm.

More broadly, theories of the representational politics of the voice most often stem from analyses of post-colonial literature, such as Kamau Brathwaite's analysis of types of literary renovation in the Caribbean or Edouard Glissant's notion of "Caribbean discourse" as a disruptive insertion of orality into the aggressively narrative, historical, and written language of colonial oppressors. Like Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "minor literature," they situate non-hegemonic discourse as that which disrupts national language from within through an intrusion of sonority. Perhaps paradoxically, the works I

[11] See Bernstein, *The Politics of Poetic Form*, Stewart, and Cavarero on the “relationality” of voices (9ff).

consider theorize the opposite connection between unfamiliar sound and American nationhood. They aspire to open up national consciousness to include a greater range of voices, and as such, they theorize methods by which sound first disrupts American speech, but then reconstitutes it to encompass the initially disruptive elements. Paul Gilroy's analysis of the transfigurative, utopian potential of black orality on both sides of the Atlantic locates the "special power [of black cultural forms]... from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity" (73). I argue that American modernists, including but not limited to some who adapted black cultural forms, took advantage of the doubleness of oral forms to mediate between underrepresented populations and a bourgeois reading public, in the hope of producing political change.[12]

To fulfill the role of mediator, authors in this period paid close attention to the curious roles they inhabited, ranging from "native informant" through anthropological participant-observer through political advocate, and sometimes all at once. Each of the following chapters focuses on one or more authors who worked within particular discourses of mediation: the familial saga as emblematic of American life, the ethnographic folk anthology, the proletarian novel, and modernist long poetry and radio theater, respectively. Drawing on and adapting generic conventions, these writers possessed strongly-felt and fundamentally optimistic aspirations that formally experimental literature could change modes of interpersonal interaction, and that

[12] My discussion of mediation relies in part on Spivak's analysis of representation as "speaking for" (political representation/*Vertretung*) and representation as "re-presentation" (aesthetic representation/*Darstellung*). One major difficulty that arises for the authors I examine is the impossibility of either fully embracing or fully avoiding the overlap of these two meanings of "representation."

representing voices on the page was the uniquely appropriate way to do so.

The dissertation begins with a work not generally considered as political: Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans* (1911). My first chapter, "'Our History is Complete': Gertrude Stein's Theory of American Repetition," argues that the novel uses its notoriously repetitive prose, rhythmic cadences, and constantly mutating formal structures to outline and enact a theory of national temporality. Too often viewed as purely private or autobiographical, *The Making of Americans* shares with Stein's later work—including her "Lectures on America" and her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*—a concern with interpellating a national audience through formal innovations. In contrast to recent suggestions by Homi Bhabha and others that literary recursion and repetition disrupt the smooth temporality of national history, Stein defines American readers precisely as those who consciously recreate themselves within recursive, repetitive generic and cultural constraints. Stein suggests that, by attending to the deep-seated relationship between literary genres and individual personalities—their rhythmic repetition of behaviors, uses of language, and modes of interaction—we will understand that Americans exist not as a fixed group, but as a constantly re-created population.

Stein's undertaking is paradigmatic of the works I consider: each tries to redefine national identity by manipulating generic tropes. The second chapter, "Authentic Imitation: Modernist Anthologies and the Pedagogy of Folk Culture," examines the modernist debate over how best to awaken both white and black audiences to the centrality of black culture to American life. Contemporary theorists believed that anthologies like James Weldon Johnson's *Books of Negro Spirituals* (1925-6), which enabled readers to sing along with folk music, would immediately evoke a cultural

heritage for black readers, while encouraging cross-cultural identification among white readers. I first examine the new techniques of transcription and arrangement that Johnson, Alain Locke, and others believed would enable readers to imitate folk performance by non-folk readers, thereby promoting social and political justice. I then turn to two particularly radical theorists of the dialectic between ostensibly authentic performance and modern imitation: the ethnographer Alan Lomax, and Jean Toomer, whose work *Cane* (1923) takes anthological form. Both men's work finds the potential for significant political change not in sympathetic performance practice, but rather in the constitutive failure of such imitations. Lomax's precise transcriptions suggest that performers will realize the inadequacy of their own performances and thus the great discrepancy in social and political conditions between themselves and the composers. On the other hand, Toomer's self-composed folk songs suggest that folk music is already a self-conscious art, and that imitation is an originary condition of folk song. Conspicuous imitation, then, could point the modern artist toward a way to reconcile the gulf between folk culture and urban life.

Like *Cane*, Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) comments on the pedagogical imperative that drove Stein and the anthologists discussed in previous chapters. My third chapter, "*Call It Sleep* and the Limits of Typicality," argues that the novel thematizes the difficulty of extrapolating from the particularity of one novel's protagonist to general political or social concerns. Early-twentieth-century proletarian critics and novelists such as Mike Gold had developed a poetics of proletarian fiction similar to that of Lukács and other Marxist critics of the time. They encouraged such attributes as specificity of visual details; small- and large-scale repetition; and, in particular, the "typicality" of the novel's

protagonist and events, which would enable readers to generalize from the novel to their own lives. In contrast, *Call It Sleep*'s fixation with voice, rhythm, and repetition simultaneously promotes and refuses generalizations from its determinedly idiosyncratic protagonist, David Schearl, making the novel a limit case for the idea of novelistic typicality. Ultimately, this dialectic between the particular and the general suggests that political change based on moments of individual recognition will necessarily be skewed, if not impossible.

Chapter Four, “Muriel Rukeyser’s Politics of Quotation,” reads Rukeyser's 1938 poem cycle “The Book of the Dead” next to her unproduced, and previously unexamined, radio adaptation of the cycle’s documentary material. While “The Book of the Dead” is more commonly analyzed in terms of its visual tropes, it barrages the reader with quotations, as Rukeyser excerpts large chunks of material from legal testimony, personal interviews, letters, and literary texts to excoriate a mining company that caused thousands of deaths from silica poisoning. Who, precisely, is speaking often remains ambiguous, as the lyric voice shuttles between various perspectives even within individual poems. The radio adaptation necessarily forecloses this ambiguity, as the formal constraints of the broadcast medium required Rukeyser to assign particular speakers or singers to each line. These choices heighten the poem’s leftist didacticism in ways consistent with documentary realism: the oratorio’s voices model one national community formed out of separate speaking groups. The poem, on the other hand, offers an alternate mode of engagement via its theory of “interest,” a term it uses to imply both the overlap of voices and their alienation from each other. “Interest,” both a thematized term and a formal technique, models the ways in which the distinct voices of workers, poet, and readers are

all implicated in the fate of the American people and landscape. Like Toomer and Roth, Rukeyser calls attention to the limits of these two rhetorical techniques, contrasting the drive toward didacticism with a self-reflexive mode of political critique.

Chapter 1.

“Our history is complete”: Gertrude Stein's Theory of American Repetition

The title of Gertrude Stein's novel *The Making of Americans* suggests a national epic, conceived and executed on a broad scale. In fact, the work is that and more, for it also attempts to theorize the relationship between rhythmic repetition, literary genre, and national history. At least initially, the text, subtitled "Being a History of a Family's Progress," purports to tell the multi-generational tale of two intermarried families, the Herslands and the Dehnings, who emigrate from German-speaking Europe to the United States and successfully aspire to bourgeois lives. It aspires concurrently to demonstrate the possibility of documenting and taxonomizing all of the personality types in existence: “the history of all the kinds that ever can be of men and women” (184). To that end, the sequentially narrated story of individual Herslands and Dehnings is subordinated to first-person musings on typology and on Stein’s own frustration at the patience and perseverance required for such a massive undertaking.

Critical responses to *The Making of Americans* have, with few exceptions, taken Stein's expressions of self-doubt, frustration, and grandiose ambition as expressive outpourings of Stein's own personality. In many of these readings, both Stein and novel's first-person narrator are hermetic figures who must work through personal, philosophical, and aesthetic difficulties on the way to a more maturely "Steinian" technique. Yet the novel clearly reaches out to a broadly national audience, despite its notoriously repetitive prose and literal heft (925 pages and 2.8 pounds in the current paperback edition). Its theory of personality hinges not only on individual instances of rhythmically, even compulsively, repeated behavior, but on the relationship between these individuals and

American national character. Centrally, it hypothesizes that Americans are uniquely suited to the repetition of generic conventions and iterations of large-scale cultural phenomena. Moreover, it offers an theory of the novel in which the novel foregrounds stereotypically poetic uses of language such as rhythm and repetition to represent this American way of life on the page.

Reading *The Making of Americans* as a public, national work reciprocally benefits both discussions of Stein and theories of the novel under modernism. To the extent that the novel engages with historical and cultural arguments about the privileged role of repetition in American culture, we can read it in the context of Stein's later, more explicit theorizations of American life: *The Geographical History of America* (1936), the *Lectures in America* (1934), or the short newspaper articles for the *Herald Tribune* or the *Saturday Evening Post* (1935-6). The novel's national concerns complicate the critical segregation between early, "private" Stein and this later, "public" Stein. Likewise, *The Making of Americans* bridges the gap that separates Stein from the explicitly national and historical poetics of modernists such as Ezra Pound, who polemically argued that poetic and musical rhythms necessarily reproduced latent cultural values. Stein imports this strain of poetics into the novel, staking the large-scale reiteration of rhythms as the paradigmatic American reading practice.

The poetics of *The Making of Americans*, therefore, offers a theory of the novel's representation and formation of national culture that is fundamentally different from the paradigms that rely on the realist novel’s linear temporality. Such theories, notably those of Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha, claim that the novel creates a national reading public by referencing, narrating, and calling into being a shared experience of narrative

history. A novel whose aesthetics are founded on repetition and recursion would, according to these models, disrupt its readers' sense of national cohesion and linear history, and call into question their interpellation as a coherent body of national subjects. Yet *The Making of Americans* theorizes precisely the opposite effect: because the American reading public is constituted through habits of recursion and repetition, the novel should consolidate, rather than disrupt, its readers' sense of themselves as members of a national whole.

This chapter begins by detailing the novel's theory and practice of repetition as constitutive of individual subjects, arguing that, despite the novel's "private" tendencies, its aesthetics make it necessarily addressed to a public beyond the ostensibly hermetic Stein. I then explore the contextual modernist theories of rhythm that link the seemingly intimate bodily experience of repeated sounds to the creation of a national, even communal, public, focusing on Pound's polemics as enacted through his musical text-setting. These theories clarify the relationship between small-scale and large-scale repetition in *The Making of Americans*, which I discuss using Stein's later theories of the paragraph as the crucial building block of the repeating novel. This transformation of the novel as a genre offers a new perspective on the relationship between the novel and national identity. Finally, as a coda, I discuss the performance of American repetition in Stein's later opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, as a way to evaluate how Stein's theories of formative repetition were put into practice.

“Infinitesimally different”: iterations of the individual

The Making of Americans dubs itself a “history of every one,” but this history is neither chronological nor strictly genealogical. Although it begins in a realist style of

sequential narration, it soon detours into an investigation into what factors determine individual personalities. It initially proposes two fundamental categories of personality, dubbed “dependent independent” and “independent dependent,” or “attacking being” and “resisting being,” respectively. This binary is complicated from the start, however, by the fact that fundamental nature can express itself in a variety of ways, potentially confusing any observer who attempts to diagnose a person as one or the other.

Personality types manifest themselves through modes of rhythmically repeated behavior and speech on both a small and a large scale. The story of young Martha Hersland and the umbrella is paradigmatic both of Stein’s repetitive narrative style and of the novel’s theory that personality manifests itself through repetition.

> …[Martha] was a very little one then and she was running and she was in the street and it was a muddy one and she had an umbrella that she was dragging and she was crying. “I will throw the umbrella in the mud,” she was saying, she was very little then, she was just beginning her schooling, “I will throw the umbrella in the mud” she said and no one was near her and she was dragging the umbrella and bitterness possessed her, “I will throw the umbrella in the mud” she was saying and nobody heard her, the others had run ahead to get home and they had left her, “I will throw the umbrella in the mud” and there was desperate anger in her; “I have throwed the umbrella in the mud” burst from her, she had thrown the umbrella in the mud and that was the end of it all in her (388).

The novel stresses that this story tells us nothing about Martha, for to generalize from one particular incident to the “real being” of a person would be misleading. Only a repeated series of such incidents, carefully notated by an observer, could lead to an accurate diagnosis. This story, then, functions as one building-block in the larger descriptive project.

But the episode also allegorizes both Stein's diagnostic process and the accumulation of self-awareness in the development of Martha’s personality. Martha’s

desires and frustrations are opaque. She cannot express her desire for and anger at the other children, so she repeats her declaration as a threat, a promise, or a way to motivate her own disobedience. Her misconjugation of “throwed” in her final speech only emphasizes, with its final “-ed,” the triumph and satisfaction of a completed action. The frustrated repetition followed by cathartic grammatical shift dramatizes the slow accretion of moments of decision and action necessary, according to Stein, for a personality to become evident to an observer over the course of a child’s maturation. From the child’s point of view, however, such shifts function as templates for future action: they hear and repeat stories that they then live out, “like the children they know from reading from hearing people talking about being in children” (389). Children who possess some knowledge of how they are expected to behave or to mature possess a corresponding self-consciousness about those actions. Every story, to them, is allegory or fable of their own maturation and expected behavior. In particular, the story of the umbrella narrates Martha’s actions at the same time that it narrates her expectations of her own actions.

Martha’s story links deeply intimate, felt experience to large-scale processes of subject formation and socialization. Her reiteration of the action that she plans, prepares, is just about to take, depends on a simultaneous self-consciousness and refusal of self-consciousness. When Martha narrates her own behavior, she projects herself into a possible future she knows she has only partial control over. Such self-projection anticipates the future with the insistent cadences of Martha’s “I will,” an incantatory attempt to bring into being a future Martha who has already thrown her umbrella in the mud. Her conscious expression of this future self through language is a necessary part of

her self-development. But once she has completed her action, “the end of it all in her” remains out of reach: she does not cease her efforts to envision her future selves. Stein extends this parable to her theory of personality: everyone narrates their future selves, and such temporal projections, when finally realized, constantly strike us as “astonishing,” “gratifying,” or “terrifying” in their newness (390). Maturity, in Stein's view, does not require us to abandon self-projection and self-performance; on the contrary, many people Stein depicts are both self-aware of the stories they tell themselves about their personalities, and despairing of ever being able to change those stories.

The rhythms that allow Stein to diagnose personality are both verbal self-projections like Martha’s and repeated behavior patterns, habits of interaction, modes of thought, and responses to others. Stein synthesizes these personality structures in concrete imagery that often synaesthetically links repeated sounds to texture and muscular habit.[13] Attacking being, for example, can be “pulpy,” “not dust but dirt,” “slimy, gelatinous, gluey, white opaquy,” “white and vibrant, and clear and heated” (349), while resisting being can be “dark and smooth and murkier and always about the same state of being a thickish fluid” (353). The elder David Hersland exists, as a young man, in a state of “varied vigorous pounding,” which in middle age turns to “a more sodden repeating,” “accented repeating that later would be louder and have less changing in repeating” (246, 248). While "vigorous" and “sodden” certainly pun on the changing nature of Hersland's sexual activities, they also illustrate that repetition is both a far-reaching and a nebulous concept for Stein, for these adjectives describe and suffuse entire personalities in addition to specific motions.

[13] See, relatedly, Ruddick’s argument that the texture of Stein’s language itself, its obvious pleasure in repetition, is an anally rhythmic process of accumulation and release.

This synthetic conception of the relationship between repetition and personality rests on a belief that the unconscious rhythms of habit—behavior patterns that repeat irrespective of the subject's awareness of them—betray something about a person as a whole. In 1898 Stein conducted a series of experiments on “cultivated motor automatism,” in which she taught a set of automatic writing movements to groups of Harvard and Radcliffe students. When students were left to write automatically—that is, while doing other activities that took up their conscious attention—the physical patterns of their writing on the page, Stein felt, encapsulated larger aspects of their personalities. Students from New England, for example, had a "habit of self-repression" and "intense self-consciousness" that distinguished their writing style as well ("Automatism" 299). Conversely, the "rapid and incessant" movement of the stylus reminded her of the "rapid and incessant movement seen in revival meetings, where people under the domination of religious frenzy swing their arms and beat their breasts in rhythmic time" (300-1). While *The Making of Americans* abandons any attempt at scientific precision, it maintains this belief in a close relationship between the assertion of personality and tangible (visible or audible) patterns of language.

Speech is, of course, the privileged act of physically relating sound and movement, and Stein uses the verb "to say" to indicate both literal speech and the communication of a person's "being" via repetition more generally. She writes:

> I began to get enormously interested in hearing how everybody said the same thing over and over again with infinite variations but over and over again until finally if you listened with great intensity you could hear it rise and fall and tell all that that there was inside them, not so much by the actual words they said or the thoughts they had but the movement of their thoughts and words endlessly the same and endlessly different (*Writings* 86).

The very act of reading this passage, and the novel as a whole, is an exercise in “listening with great intensity” to an interlocutor “saying the same thing over and over,” both on the page and in the mind of the reader. Repeating phrases to oneself is sometimes the only way to interpret the long, under-punctuated sentences. And these reader-generated inflections rely entirely on the small changes that Stein both describes and enacts on the level of the sentence.

These shifts in emphasis are also what Stein uses to determine the basis of each individual, making her famous pronouncement that the novel contains “no such thing as repetition” (*How Writing Is Written* 158) seem paradoxical: “There are many very many kinds of men and women, there are many very many kinds of men, there are many very many kinds of women. There are many ways of making kinds of them, this is now a description of all the ways there are of making kinds of women, all the kinds of ways there are of making kinds of men...” (*Making* 333). As slight changes in vocabulary, syntax, or context alter the meaning of a repeated phrase or sentence, the rhythm of a personality, while repeated, is not self-identical simply by means of having temporally preceded itself.[14]

The tension between repetition and mutation provides the novel's narrative momentum, such as it is. For while it begins in an approximation of the realist novel's linear narration, it soon digresses into vague and repetitive descriptions of characters and of people Stein herself may know, but whom the novel refers to only as "this one,” “this other one,” “some one,” or other ambiguous indexical references. Unidentified by name,

[14] Stein’s theory of the history of every one is akin to Deleuze’s theory of the history of philosophy, which, he claims, should reproduce the philosophy it describes, but bears in its very existence a crucial difference from that philosophy. See *Difference and Repetition*, Preface and Introduction.

these figures are loci of personality traits who assert their characteristics through repeated speech patternings, which Stein sets herself the task of diagnosing and labeling. Her theory of personality, then, stems from conversation: “To begin with, I seem always to be doing the talking when I am anywhere but in spite of that I do listen. I always listen. I always have listened. I always have listened to the way everybody has to tell what they have to say. In other words I always have listened in my way of listening until they have told me and told me until I really know it, that is know what they are” (*Writings* 84). Rather than imposing her own personality on her audience, Stein claims to carefully attend to her interlocutors' relentless self-assertion, which she terms “the complete rhythm of a personality” (*Writings* 90). Her commentary emphasizes both the importance of attentive listening and its potential to produce frustration in the listener and reader, for the relationship between the "rhythms" of language and the more general diagnostic labels of personality types is never a simple one-to-one correspondence. Stein expresses her own frustration at the perpetually shifting material with which she must work. “Often, as I was saying, it is very irritating to be listening, irritating when it is puzzling, irritating just to be hearing repeating” (*Making* 308), she complains, yet she doggedly pursues the project of delineating personality types.[15]

When Stein describes this process, it resembles less a mathematician graphing the back-and-forth of a pendulum than another pendulum sympathetically vibrating with the first, or her own reader repeating out loud the words on the page. For Stein, repeating “commences to sound through my ears and eyes and feelings” (*Making* 291), while her

[15] This project lasts, as Ashton in particular notes, only as long as the novel itself; once Stein establishes (for herself) the possibility of categorizing personalities, she turns her attention elsewhere. Stein outlines these developments in “The Gradual Making of *The Making of Americans*” (*Writings* 84ff).

prose encourages us to read it out loud (silently or audibly): the choppy stresses and assonance of “rise and fall and tell,” the Whitmanesque rocking of “endlessly the same and endlessly different.” Sitting through the multiple iterations of each thought, description, and rhetorical gesture requires a perseverance akin to that with which Stein pursues her investigations of particularly inaccessible personalities. While Stein's method of describing everyone incorporates a good deal of tactile description of exactly what weight, texture, clarity, color, and so on comprise a person's being, she emphasizes equally the frustrating, patient process she must undergo to discern the bottom nature of each personality. “I begin again with listening, I feel new shades in repeating, parts of repeating that I was neglecting hearing, seeing, feeling come to have a louder beating. Slowly it comes to a fuller sounding, sometimes many years pass in such a baffling listening, feeling, seeing all the repeating in some one” (305). Repeating leads to the pun on “sounding,” plumbing the depths of a personality by echolocation, as it were. Sianne Ngai describes this process as “agglutinative,” requiring patience and endurance on the reader’s part, as “new shades” of meaning emerge and subside in waves (Ngai 251); implicit in her discussion is the fact that the reader does not simply endure the boredom produced by such repetition, but that the structure of this repetition itself encourages active participation in boring oneself. Not only must we imitate and interpret Stein’s written cadences, but we are forced to experience the frustration she laments.

The reason why we inflict such boredom on ourselves, Stein hopes, is that such slowly mutating repetition offers new possibilities for writing's ability to depict human beings. Stein's own comparison of her work to a succession of cinematic images, in which “each picture is just infinitesimally different from the one before,” suggests a

kinship between her personality dissections and a terrifically slowed down film, in which the difference between successive images is all but indiscernible (*How Writing Is Written* 158). However, the analogy breaks down when we consider the cinema as a unidirectional form: we do not consider successive frames synchronously (at least not when they are being screened). A more accurate analogy would be one stolen from Stein's lecture "Plays," which concludes by discussing a series of photographs in the window of a Paris studio, the inspiration for the character Saint Therese in Stein's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*.[16] As Stein tells it, the series originates in the death of a young girl. When her family brings a photograph of her to the studio, "[l]ittle by little in successive photographs they change it into a nun. These photographs are small and the thing takes four or five changes but at the end it is a nun and this is done for the family when the nun is dead and in memoriam" (*Writings* 82). Both the photographs themselves and the successive changes are small but discrete, and the grieving family then has a complete history of the girl's transformation, visible in its totality. The slow transformation of dead girl into dead nun is uncanny for its precision; it breaks down what seems to be an indivisible transformation—life to death—into impossibly fine stages, while leaving the fundamental subject of the photograph intact. *The Making of Americans* argues that these minute mutations do, in fact, exist, and occur to everyone in the course of daily life, while their "bottom natures" remain intact.

Moreover, this process is identical to the slow changes that occur in historical and cultural forms over time. The novel's opening paragraph, striking for its concreteness and brevity, is a parable adapted from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that relates concrete

[16] The story references the opera, not the novel; however, much of the rest of this chapter could be said to justify the applicability of this story to *The Making of Americans*.

action to genealogical memory.[17] “Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground through his own orchard. ‘Stop!’ cried the groaning old man at last, ‘Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree’” (3). One source of the humor in this passage is its inversion of the modernist myth of “making it new”; while the angry man may believe he is overthrowing his father, he is inadvertently repeating his father's own act of rebellion.[18] Stein takes the dilemma seriously on the level of individual personality, remarking, “It is hard to live down the tempers we are born with.” But the passage also allegorizes its own relationship to literary and philosophical history. It first stakes a claim to literary antecedents including Aristotle and Adam and Eve, the original orchard inhabitants, and then implies that this shared lineage is both a burden and a contextual necessity for texts that follow. The allegory prefigures the slowly mutating repetition to come, both on the level of the phrase and sentence and on the level of the personalities Stein describes. Its anomalous style, with its emphasis on nouns and adjectives in a text which often focuses on verbs, pronouns, and prepositions, suggests that taking it as a generalizable parable about repetition's role in individual and literary history would produce a reading of the novel as a theory of cultural renewal.

Despite this parable, and the novel's emphasis on “American” as a key category of individual and group identification, readings of the novel have focused on its significance for Stein, the "private" author. The categories of "private" and "public" Stein have become well-established labels for particular works and periods. In particular, those

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[17] As Wald remarks, over the course of the novel, “coherence becomes noticeable and marked rather than the (expected) norm” (286).

[18] Watten's extended reading of this episode the paragraphs that follow argues that Stein repudiates the Oedipal narrative in favor of a model of the subject founded in a network of family relations. Insofar as, later in Watten's discussion, the family is the subject's means of entry into a larger social world, I support his impulse to make the novel more “public.”

works written after the success of and widespread publicity surrounding *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* in 1934 are commonly periodized as "late" or "public" Stein, for she began to write and lecture in a more accessible style.[19] Critical discourse about *The Making of Americans*, in contrast, places it firmly in the category of early and thus private Stein because of the perceived self-indulgence of its length, its own stylistic shifts and clear working-through of philosophical and aesthetic problems, and the narrator's emphasis on the importance of her project. The fact that the novel took Stein eight years to write (1903-11) has enhanced the temptation to read it as a *roman à clef* about Stein, her family, and her circle of acquaintances.[20] Others interpret the novel's struggles with philosophical problems of history, identity, and composition only in the context of Stein's own later engagement with these theories,[21] or praise its lyrically repetitive language in terms of nebulously expressive cadences.[22] In each of these cases,

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[19] Dydo, who has written and edited authoritative and broadly-conceived works about and collections by Stein, puts quotation marks around "public" in its first use but then takes the category of "late public works" as a given (4-5).

[20] Stein began work on the novel in 1903, but discarded almost all of the material she wrote before 1908. See Dydo, 17, for a concise outline of the compositional history. Katz reconstructs, from early drafts of the novel, the plot of what would have been a more realist, linear narrative of the histories of the major characters, and relates this plot to Stein's biography. Bridgman argues most straightforwardly for the *roman à clef* interpretation, claiming in fact that the only coherent reading of the novel is as a daybook of Stein's writing and grappling with family members. Some feminist criticism also relies on the framework of Stein's relationship with her father and brother Leo to situate the struggles performed in the novel: see Ruddick, *Reading Gertrude Stein*, and Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein."

[21] See Walker, chapter 3, for a comprehensive overview of the novel from this standpoint. Ashton rigorously works through the novel's theory of repetition in contrast to Stein's later philosophical stances. In contradistinction, Sutherland's assertion that the narrator's subjectivity "approximates being pure undifferentiated subjectivity, or simply the human mind" (55) is surprising, but serves his purpose of asserting the novel's essentially private status as a "self-contained labyrinth" (56).

[22] Van Vechten's assertion that Stein "has really turned language into music, really made its sound more important than its sense" ("How to Read" 42) and Sutherland's "pure undifferentiated subjectivity" (55) make Stein so generalizable as to be meaningless. Gass's close reading of the text, founded on the way Stein uses the "physical resources" of "rhythm, pattern, shape and sound" to "bring prose by its own good methods to the condition of the lyric" (*Fiction* 96, 90) is the one exception that actually analyzes how the novel's lyrically repetitive prose might affect its meaning.

Stein speaks, hermetically, only to Stein.[23] Stein's own pronouncement that "I am writing for myself and strangers" is generally taken either as a depressed statement of the author's inability to find any sympathetic readers at all, or as a refusal to search for such an audience in the first place (*Making* 289).[24]

But the aspect of Stein's prose that makes the novel seem most private and most frustrating is the very thing that makes it the most public, and the most related to Stein's later theorizations of the relationship between the repetitions of genre conventions and what it means to be American. The novel's repetitive force works precisely to demand its audience's involvement in what Susan Stewart calls "the *ongoing process or work* of enunciation" (15; emphasis in original). Stewart likens such repetition to Lacan's invocatory drive, "the propulsion to make one's self heard and seen," in which the speaker speaks with the expectation of being intersubjectively acknowledged through speech in return (63). The rhythms of "summoning and arriving" structure the lyric, whose speaker projectively assumes a reading and listening public who will be receptive to her particular speech (67). *The Making of Americans*, founded on the physical act of repetition, would seem to beg for recognition of and participation in those acts of repetition. Through rhythmic prose, it demands active engagement with the text. As

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[23] Exceptions include Ngai, who argues that the novel's active "strangering" of its readers might result in a politically productive sense of alienation (292 ff), and Wald, who asserts the novel evokes a "longing for comprehensibility" analogous to the self-mythologizing that Americans must do to accommodate a demographically unfixed population (238 ff).Dearborn considers Stein's relationship to immigration and to the English language in the context of the female ethnic tradition in American literature. The 1995 special Stein issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, especially DeKoven's introduction and Ruddick's "Stein and Cultural Criticism," provides a good overview of recent attempts to situate Stein in dialogue with others, in the context of cultural studies or of modernist writing, but rarely addresses *The Making of Americans* directly. Chessman's *The Public Is Invited to Dance*, as its title suggests, argues that Stein's work promotes anti-hierarchical dialogue between reader and text increasingly over the course of Stein's career; *The Making of Americans* does not exemplify the kind of linguistic play that is Chessman's focus, and is not specifically addressed.

[24] The former position includes Bridgman, the latter Ashton, who uses Stein's own discussion of her novel in her later lectures as support for this claim.

Marianne DeKoven writes, it is a “writerly” text, one that provides a “core of meaning” that “evok[es] and support[s] private [to each reader] layers of association” (57). Stein's style not only supports such association, it requires it.[25]

The Making of Americans can thus be evaluated as a "public" rather than a "private" text, making the category of "strangers" an accurate and possible one. These accepted terms of Stein criticism are also those with which Michael Warner delineates the way literary texts can address an audience. Private texts are, in Warner's terms, special, personal, particular or finite, known to initiates, and related to the individual, especially to inwardness, subjective experience, and the incommunicable. The critical view of a Stein who must be decoded by those who know the biographical or psychological forces at work while she was writing corresponds to this take on a private Stein, one who requires "our silent insertion in the self-communion of the speaker," as Warner describes lyric writing. Considering the novel as a public text would require us to ask what makes it, again in Warner's terms, political, official, common, national, acknowledged, and explicit (29-30). Warner's political and national public is not the victim of ideology: public speech is “poetic world making,” in which the speaker constitutes a desired public by addressing members of that public as such. “Strangers are less strange if you can trust them to read as you read,” Warner comments, imagining a cooperatively constituted public that recognizes itself in public speech and agrees to uphold a “trust” of mutual recognition between speaker and audience (115-16).[26]

When Stein addresses herself to “strangers,” she speaks to an audience that agrees

[25] Hence Gass's statement that “it is nevertheless we who run the comb’s teeth through our hair, it is we who grimace in the glass” (Foreword to *Making of Americans* x).

[26] I would support Cope’s assertion that Stein does not hold to any implied compact of intelligibility with her readers, but is nonetheless extremely aware of the types of demands she puts on her readers (17).

to participate in a slow and laborious process of self-construction. She also expects her readers to recognize what constitutes American being: in particular, the way in which individual manifestations of rhythm and repetition determine national character. The following sections will argue that the frustration that the novel both describes and inflicts upon its readers is inextricably bound up in the slow pace of change on a national scale. By linking individual and national rhythms, Stein participates in a broader conversation with modernist writers and musicians about rhythm's contribution to nationality, in which the moments of individual self-assertion are inextricable from a self-aware participation in national identity. The kinship between *The Making of Americans* and contemporary theories of rhythm, particularly those of the far more polemical and overtly political Ezra Pound, suggest that the novel's philosophical project goes far beyond a working-through of personal or even philosophical issues. It opens up a reading of the novel as a theory of the genre's place in a particularly American cultural life that is self-consciously preoccupied with genre as such.

Rhythm and National Consciousness

Many modernist theorizations of poetic rhythm exalted rhythm as a shortcut to cultural and linguistic authenticity.[27] Rhythm could serve as a shortcut to national identity, especially rhythms of non-white or “primitive” cultures, which theorists categorized as more primally connected to the bodies that produced them. Its integral relationship to the listener’s body meant that rhythm, in some social-scientific discourse, could also be used to synchronize bodies to be more productive instruments of labor and

[27] See, for example, Ch. 9 of Albright, on the primitivist fascination with “native” rhythms in African-American music. As compared to European music, American music in general was held to possess more natural, “freer rhythms” (quoted on 153)

to spur workers to greater productivity.[28] So while rhythm was, on the one hand, a link to a premodern, authentic past filled with so-called natural bodily movement, such a connection could be deliberately reproduced by creating or reintroducing appropriate rhythms to modern city-dwellers. Ezra Pound's prolific writings on poetic rhythm, musical notation, and national culture share this preoccupation with rhythm's ability to transmit the historical past to contemporary listeners. In music reviews, pedagogical essays, and poetry, Pound set out his belief that there exists a well-defined, integral, and utterly transparent link between rhythm and the material and social conditions of a given culture. His theses on national language, genre, and temporality contextualize Stein's fascination with rhythmically repetitive behavior, and offer a set of guidelines for thinking about rhythm's potential to consolidate national identity not only in poetry, but in genres including the opera libretto and the novel.

Pound began theorizing rhythm in music reviews he wrote while living in England starting in 1903, and continued doing so well into his pedagogical essays of the 1930's (*ABC of Reading*, *Guide to Kulchur*) and his ongoing project of the *Cantos*. He offers rhythm as integral to the poet in two ways. He first advises the poet who wishes to learn about rhythm to "fill his mind with the finest cadences he can discover, preferably in a foreign language," ignoring vocabulary and, indeed, all semantic meaning, in favor of pure rhythm (*Literary Essays* 5). This study will enable the poet to present "time and time relations… in an interesting manner, by means of longer and shorter, heavier and lighter syllables" (*ABC* 199). Elsewhere, Pound stresses that it is not merely a question of "interest" or of time relations within a given line or stanza: there exists, for each poetic

[28] Golston details the modernist preoccupation with rhythm as a social-scientific and aesthetic tool; see especially 17-39.

intention, one and only one correct rhythm, a rhythm which will express that intention in tandem with syntax, rather than subordinate to it. Pound calls this concept "absolute rhythm," proclaiming it "uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable" for the circular reason of its precise appropriateness to whatever meaning the poet himself intends (*Pound and Music* 471). That is, only after the poet has composed this rhythm is it revealed to have always been the one absolute rhythm. The "law of rhythmic accord" that pairs rhythm with meaning applies similarly to music; Pound posits that "the tempo of every masterpiece is absolute. … it should be possible to show that any given rhythm implies about it a complete musical form" (*Pound and Music* 471).

Conversely, once we hear a musical form and the rhythms it comprises, we can trace the origins of this rhythm back to their cultural foundations; we should thus be able to reproduce cultural qualities or values through reproducing such rhythms. Here is the second crucial importance of rhythm for the poet, who, if he wishes to transmit or exalt the values of, say, the Italian Renaissance (as Pound certainly did), has at his disposal pre-formed, absolute rhythms that bear within them the rhythms of daily life and labor, in war or peace. This excerpt from a 1918 music review encapsulates Pound's views on this integral connection:

> The Kennedy-Frasers in the Hebridean music gave us equally an epitome of a whole racial civilisation. … This music is as full of sea-slash as the Russian is of plain-bleakness and winter-bleakness. It has the wave-pull and wave-sway in place of the foot-beat of the hopak. … It has its rhythmic validity and variety in labour songs, not to be read by the metronome, but which have their diverse beats and pauses determined by the age-lasting rhythm of the craft, cloth-clapping, weaving, spinning, milking, reaping. And in this connection, damn the young gentleman who said, "I don't go in so much for rhythm. I'm temperamental." (*Pound and Music* 141)

Rhythm here functions as an ethnographical sign, synthesizing the repetitive acts of labor

in the Hebridean community, the environment in which they take place, and the ineluctably organic link between labor and environment. The young gentleman who scorns rhythm in favor of his own "temperament" not only embodies the decadence of anyone alienated from bodily labor, but also, in a pun on "temperament" as "tuning," favors the harmonic and static relationship of one musical pitch to another over rhythm, the bearer of communal history.

Pound applied this belief to his own musical compositions, including the opera *Le Testament* (1920-21), whose libretto chiefly consists of the 15th-century French poetry of François Villon. Starting with verse that possessed its own absolute rhythm, Pound felt driven to reproduce those rhythms as accurately as possible; in practice, this determination made his score so rhythmically complex that it had to be simplified for performance purposes for decades after its composition. Only in this way, however, could he accurately "clarify" and "elucidate" the text, "forcing the listener to attend to the words" and "throwing attention on to the detail," as he later expresses his hopes for successful text-setting (*ABC* 158, 152). Such rhythmically precise notation should not, at all costs, be interpreted by conductor or performer; the composer George Antheil's editorial remark to *Le Testament* reads "The editor would be obliged if the singer would not let the least bit of temperament affect in the least the correct singing of this opera, which is written as it sounds! Please do not embarrass us by suddenly developing intelligence" (*Pound and Music* 474). This warning against "temperament," here shorthand for insensitive musical expressivity that bends the written notation to the will of the performer, would seem to demand exceptional accuracy. The singer capable of reading Pound's rhythms would certainly have to possess some degree of "intelligence";

what Antheil cautions against is what might be considered interpretive intelligence, any presumption that the singer might contribute his or her own experience to the score as written. Antheil summarily criticizes opera for encouraging individual artists to privilege their own (self-centered) power of expression, the individual "temperaments" of their personalities, over the composer's need for an unthinking vehicle for precisely written notation.

Le Testament, which cites established musical forms but rhythmically and harmonically complicates them, transmutes the personal history of its characters into communal forms. Each aria features an individual speaker—Villon, the old prostitute Hëaulmière, Villon's mother—or group that shares a common history—the Chorus of Drinkers, the Chorus of Hanged Men. The speech-rhythms of the solo songs carefully follow Villon's lineation, emphasized by percussive accents or silence at the end of each line. Pound carefully notated his desired tone and affect, sometimes bar by bar: "*simple, tragique, implorant, pompeux, presque parli…*" ("simple, tragic, imploring, pompous, almost spoken…") (quoted in Fisher, 32). But the emotion always occurs within a musical structure; affect always emerges in a predetermined form. Villon's mother pleads to the Virgin Mary to intercede for her despite former sins and ignorance, ending each verse with the set phrase "En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir" ("In this faith I would live and die"). Her lines are carefully end-rhymed, with a given sound sometimes recurring three times in four lines, which Pound's percussive underscoring effectively sets off. In its formally distinct, repetitively harmonized presentation, each line resembles a line of a religious litany; the individual plea merges with the formula of liturgical song. Religious community, expressed through, not by, individual singers, is seemingly

transparent, immediately accessible to Pound's audience even at a distance of 400 years.

A mythologized culture that effortlessly leaps through the ages thus subsumes individual character. This belief in the subordination of the individual to the whole entity is echoed in Pound's dictate that particular moments in a composition should defer to the overall purpose of that composition. Pound suggests that the rhythms of modernity must return to the transparent expressivity of Hebridean music by prioritizing their contributions to a larger whole, much as the components of a machine are constructed for their utility: “A rhythm unit is a shape; it exists like the keel-line of a yacht, or the lines of an automobile-engine, for a definite purpose, and should exist with an efficiency as definite as that which we find in yachts and automobiles” (*Pound and Music* 289). Unlike contemporaneous Futurist writers, Pound does not advocate for a music that imitates mechanical rhythms, or uses machines themselves as instruments; instead, music should put the lessons of “movement and energy” and “interior rhythm” to use in expressing what “men feel about… this new content” (*Pound and Music* 260-1). With form and content united, music can ultimately live up to Pound’s goal of unity in both presentation and apprehension. If “the true imagination… holds a piece of music as a watchmaker would mentally grasp a watch,” capable of “grasp[ing] mentally the sixty or the twelve or six hundred bits of a whole,” such unity of apprehension relies on the music already possessing an absolute rhythm, which will have unified the music (and its text, if one exists) in itself (*ABC* 152).

Pound's directive here, to synthesize words and music into a distillation of culture, resembles Stein's writings on her own theatrical language, especially her opera libretti, which aspire to synchronically present a repeated succession of tableaux. While Pound

intended to transmit national culture through a language's unique rhythms, Stein, in her philosophy of "landscape," offers the reader or listener a barely larger interpretive role. In her 1934 lecture “Plays,” she fondly recalls her first exposure to Sarah Bernhardt, who performed for two months in San Francisco when Stein was sixteen and inspired her to consider the relationship between vocal cadences and nationality. Stein's lack of fluency in French meant that she did not feel any pressure to follow the play's narrative structure:

> ...her voice being so varied and it all being so french I could rest in it untroubled. …The manners and customs of the french theatre created a thing in itself and it existed in and for itself as the poetical plays had that I used so much to read, there were so many characters... and you did not have to know them they were so foreign, and the foreign scenery and actuality replaced the poetry and the voices replaced the portraits. It was for me a very simple direct and moving pleasure. (*Writings* 73)

Stein suggests that the compulsion to link sensory impressions (the cadences of Bernhardt's voice and those of the other actors, the scenery) to emotional response is typically mediated by semantic meaning. Comprehension of the language spoken on stage interferes with the goal of drama, which, according to Stein, is to present an emotion directly to its audience. Her lack of French, then, allows her to bypass the denotative meaning of the dramatic text and access an imagined “french-ness” of the sights and sounds around her. What Stein's idea of “french-ness” may be is unclear, but her pleasure in the French cadences resides precisely in that lack of intellectual rigor or clarity. In contrast to Pound, she suggests that the rhythms of French convey only some *idea* of national culture, with the emphasis on the audience's imaginative projection.

Stein's pleasure is all the greater for the fact that she had been grappling with anxiety over her own performance as a maximally receptive audience member. Expressing her frustration with narrative drama, she writes disapprovingly that “the scene

as depicted on the stage is more often than not… in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience" (*Writings* 59). Stein proposes that the form of traditional narrative theatre forestalls the goal of communicating emotion in tandem with the actions on the stage: the audience is too preoccupied with new sense impressions—"clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around"—to "live in the actual present" the drama attempts to express (*Writings* 72, 66). Unlike real life, theatergoers simultaneously experience strong emotions and a barrage of new sensory detail accompanying those emotions; we cannot "get acquainted," as Stein puts it, with the characters and their world before we are expected to become emotionally invested in them (*Writings* 73).[29] This acquaintance with characters, personalities, or modes of behavior, which takes place over successive re-readings of a book or repeated encounters with someone in real life, is impossible in the context of a theatrical production performed to a given audience in one sitting.

Stein solves this problem by proposing a type of drama grounded on the idea of landscape: a static totality, within which there would be movement without narrative progression. The opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which she wrote with the idea of landscape firmly in mind, is loosely set in two religious communities in the Spanish countryside, a useful setting precisely because its static, flat quality allows Stein to dissociate it from any idea of "actual" Spain or Spanish culture. The audience could thus perceive the opera purely synchronously, watching the movement of bodies and hearing the exchange of words without needing simultaneously to remember prior acquaintance

[29] Stein's use of "acquaintance" here owes much to William James, who uses the term to mean the condition of immediate perception of an object as object. "Getting acquainted" could not, therefore, occur concurrently with actions or plot developments (Steiner 29).

with either Spain or the dramatic text. “I think it did almost what I wanted, it made a landscape and the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep in time. I also wanted it to have the movement of nuns very busy and in continuous movement but placid as a landscape has to be” (*Writings* 82). Moving within a static physical space, Stein's nuns constitute part of the landscape themselves, rather than characters per se. They serve primarily as vehicles for the exchange or repetition of phrases, questions, or rhymed words, often typically Steinian in their repetition-with-difference: “To be interested in Saint Therese fortunately. / Saint Ignatius to be interested fortunately / Fortunately to be interested in Saint Therese. / To be interested fortunately in Saint Therese,” for instance (*Four Saints* 33). The slow punctuated mutation of language parallels the process by which a layperson becomes a saint, biographically or photographically: “Saint Therese could be photographed having been dressed like a lady and then they taking out her head changed it to a nun and a nun a saint and a saint so” (*Four Saints* 24). The libretto describes this process, but does not show it; Saint Therese exists at once as saint, nun, and lady. Contributing to this feeling of atemporality are the grammatical permutations, whose lack of direction preclude all feeling of narrative progression. Just as Stein's unfamiliarity with classical French led her to feel unmediated emotion, Stein hopes that defamiliarized English within a static landscape will allow her audience to be fully present in the moment of performance, rather than intellectually engaging with location, plot, or nationality.

Stein's philosophy of landscape would seem to lay itself open to the charge that it embraces Poundian synchronicity while detaching itself even further from existing historical and cultural forces. In other words, Stein seems to separate the idea of national

culture from all material specificity. However, this very love of landscape, present-ness, and slowly mutating repetition is, for Stein, an exclusively American one. Her American exceptionalism, we shall see, leads to a theory of genre that helps, finally, to explain why and how *The Making of Americans*, and its focus on rhythm and repetition, addresses a specifically national reading public.

Generic novelty and repetition

Stein's theory of the American way of life bestows Americans with a distinct form of historical and cultural awareness founded on the bounded nature of American history at the start of the twentieth century. On the opening page of *The Making of Americans*, Stein declares that "a real American" is "one whose tradition it has taken scarcely sixty years to create. We need only realise our parents, remember our grandparents and know ourselves and our history is complete" (3). While this definition partakes of the trope of American novelty as opposed to European stultification—for genealogy here starts anew with immigration to the New World—it also embraces past generations as material to be creatively worked through or "realised" in cultural endeavors like the novel that follows. Because genealogy starts anew with immigration to America, a member of Stein's generation can write her history comprehensively, much as the playwright creates a landscape, able to be perceived in one fell swoop.

Stein's suggestion that the completion of this history is "only" a simple task proves misguided, as the novel more and more expresses Stein's difficulty describing the generations involved. The comparatively few pages that discuss the Dehning and Hersland grandparents also bookend the novel's earliest, most conventionally written, narrative sections. The eldest David Hersland's reluctance to emigrate from Germany to

America, for example, emerges through quoted dialogue, third-person narration, and clearly-marked free indirect discourse, without Stein's first-person interjections that pervade later sections of the novel. Even so, the style and voice of the three different types of narration are quite similar to each other, all recognizably Steinian in their repetition-with-variation (37-39). As the generations approach the present, Stein's writing becomes increasingly tortuous and theoretical; her notoriously long digression (92 pages) on the kinds of human nature appears when she is just about to start the "Martha Hersland" section, the first devoted to the current generation. This problem is one of temporality: how is it possible to describe a person who still exists, whose personality and history continue into the present?

Stein answers this question with the idea of the paragraph, the crucial formal element in writing this history, and the novel's linchpin.[30] In her 1935 lecture on *The Making of Americans*, she explains that the paragraph, rather than the sentence or the word, has become the functional unit of composition of the twentieth century, a shift necessitated by the fact that at the century's beginning, "phrases were no longer full of any meaning" (*Writings* 97). Rather than describing any metaphysical loss of meaning that followed the World War (which in any case would be, in 1935, a back formation to the novel's pre-War composition), Stein here presents a cultural materialist thesis on the contemporaneity of form, albeit one very loosely connected to concrete historical events.

[30] By reading *The Making of Americans* and Stein's theory of the paragraph together, I am making a deliberately anachronistic argument. As Steiner clearly demonstrates, Stein's theory of temporality does shift between these two periods: Stein begins the novel focused on how "identity" is constructed through resemblance and memory, and only after the novel's completion turns to "entity," the moment of perception without recourse to memory, to describe an individual's temporal relationship to the world. However, as Steiner notes, the continuous present, a formal enactment of "entity," first appears in *The Making of Americans*, and I would argue that the paragraph as a "whole thing," with the specifically American implications discussed here, is another such appearance of Stein's later theory of temporality in her earlier literary work.

She hypothesizes that phrases dominated nineteenth-century English (as opposed to American) literature because English writers had to negotiate the flux of the increasingly precarious British empire. The novel figured for empire, whose interdependent parts could not be taken on their own terms, but only as dependent or independent clauses; writers therefore could not use completed sentences or paragraphs as their basic unit of composition. Toward the end of the century, when the drive to empire began to fade concurrently with the drive toward literary self-reflection, English literature declined, allowing American literature, and the paragraph, to come to the fore.

The paragraph is unique, and uniquely American, because, like the American family, it exists in a well-demarcated block. It "register[s] or limit[s] an emotion" (*Writings* 54) in a kind of container, lending form to a nebulous flow of emotion or personality. Its effectiveness stems from its status as a "whole thing," "a given space of time," which concept, to Stein, is particularly American.

> [E]verybody knows who is an American just how many seconds minutes or hours it is going to take to do a whole thing. It is singularly a sense for combination within a conception of the existence of a given space of time that makes the American thing the American thing. … [T]here is this space of time and anybody who is an American feels what is inside this space of time and so well they do what they do within this space of time, and so ultimately it is a thing contained within. … [A] space of time is a natural thing for an American to always have inside them as something in which they are continuously moving. Think of anything, of cowboys, of movies, of detective stories, of anybody who goes anywhere or stays at home and is an American and you will realize that it is something strictly American to conceive a space that is filled with moving, a space of time that is filled always filled with moving. (*Writings* 98)

Essential to Stein's conception of American-ness is that Americans prejudge given quantities of time, first projecting their own actions into the future to make sure the fit is right, as it were, and then acting accordingly, judiciously inside the bounds of the space

of time they have projected. Like Martha Hersland, the American individual both contains this interval of time (it is "always inside," internally modulated) and inhabits it ("as something in which they are") as externally structured by the imperatives of time itself. One inhabits a space of time sequentially, using it as one requires but accepting and embracing the requirements of the form itself.

Although Stein describes this condition of existence as "natural," it is unclear whether the awareness of this space of time predicates or is predicated upon being American. This confusion occurs because Stein identifies the American space of time with generic conventions both produced by American culture and constitutive of it. Movie-goers anticipate a discrete period of time in which they will sit in their seats and attend to "a space that is filled with moving."[31] Movies that firmly declare their genre add to the certainty of what the given space of time will contain, whether the endless frontier or the whodunit. American culture, Stein suggests, repeats established patterns (of length, of generic expectation) over and over again. American habits of attention do not preserve culture or transmit it to future generations; they reenact culture, with variations.[32]

Stein wants the paragraph to serve as one of these American "spaces of time" whose duration is immediately anticipated (that is, while her paragraphs are not all the

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[31] An expectation reminiscent of Poe's quest for the appropriate length of poem to be read in one, and only one sitting (approximately 100 lines, he concludes).

[32] In *The Geographical History of America*, Stein elaborates on the relationship between detective fiction and what she there terms "the human mind," the capacity to experience and read ahistorically. Because of the temporal duality of detective fiction—the plot begins after a murder has already been committed—the "action" of the story is in some sense trivial. Detective fiction is written after history has already happened; while the detective recreates the past, he does so in order to view past events in their totality. Entrenched generic conventions, for the same detective appears again and again in different iterations of the same plot, give rise to the pleasure of utter familiarity in repetition for an audience so comfortable with the generic structure that the history of that structure fades into a monolithic background. The audience is then free to notice the minute variations in that structure as they experience them in the present, without requiring a knowledge of past history, either of the detective himself or of the genre.

same length, the length of each paragraph is clear to the eye). Whatever movement of sentences, rearranging of words, or ambiguity of phrasing may appear within that space, Stein asks that her readers perceive it as a unified object. Likewise, the finite boundaries of American family history—three generations only—allow the present-day American to experience this whole-ness in his or her own genealogy. Family members repeat patterns of behavior, and similar temperaments emerge in parents and children, but such repetition always takes place within the bounds of a graspable lineage that the attentive child can master. The detailed list of kinds of families Stein begins in *Making of Americans* implies that one could ultimately notate all possible permutations of living and deceased relatives. "Sometimes it happens that one cousin is quite a sick one, sometimes it happens that all the uncles are dead by then and only two aunts are still living. Sometimes it happens in a family living that all the aunts and some of the uncles are still living," and so on (713).

Grasping a paragraph or a family as a "whole thing" does not mean that it remains wholly static. Much as movement lies within landscape, within the finitude and the wholeness of each paragraph lie subtle shifts in sentence structure that incrementally change the function of words and sentences. In one moment of equivocation through grammar more obvious than most, Stein writes, "He certainly never did say this thing then, that is he never really certainly said this thing," moving certainty from the action itself (Mr. Dehning certainly never told his daughter that he disapproved of her marriage) to the definiteness of a given statement (he may have *implied* it, but he never *certainly* said it) (667). Likewise, each family, considered as a whole, contains individuals who, through small steps, change their type of repeating, as David Hersland moves from

“varied vigorous pounding” to “more sodden repeating” (246). The novel as a whole thus comprises a series of “spaces of time”—paragraphs and generations—which provide the formal constraints within which people begin over and over again. This constant beginning always involves a great deal of repetition, carrying forward material from past iterations, but this material can be shifted in such a way as to change its nuances or its entire meaning.[33]

While Stein's theory of the paragraph does not uniformly structure *The Making of Americans*, the novel is so repetitive at the sentence level that paragraph breaks come to assume an inevitable significance, as seen in the paragraph below, typical of novel's later sections. The paragraph comes immediately after the proposition that students have different ways of being angry at their teachers.

> One is being one some one is teaching and that one can be certain that that is not at all a good way for that one to be teaching that one that thing. One is being one some one is teaching and the one some one is teaching can be quite completely certain inside that one that the one that is teaching that one is one not knowing anything about that thing. That one the one some one is teaching something can be certain of this thing that the one teaching that one is not teaching that one in the right way of teaching that thing, can be certain of this thing when that one is quite in the beginning of the middle of young living. (766-7)

Schematically, the paragraph states its initial idea, that a student can be “certain” that he is being taught badly, three times, with successive complications. The second sentence suggests that bad teaching can result from ignorance, while the third adds the component of age—a student can be quite young when he figures this out. The paragraph builds from its first sentence in an accumulative, rather than linear, way. This effect stems partly from the necessity of re-encountering the significant phrases (“one some one is teaching,” “the

[33] My analysis supports Wagers’ conclusion, published after this chapter was written, that Stein’s formal innovations enact her conception of American identity as ever-changing and requiring active participation on the part of American readers.

one that is teaching," "that thing") afresh each time they are repeated, for the lack of indicative punctuation requires constant reorientation of the words within each sentence.[34] The repetition, in other words, takes effort on the part of both reader and narrator, for the constant re-formulations suggest that the narrator's self-expression is laborious and not quite finished at the point at which she moves on to the next idea. Like Martha Hersland's decision to throw away her umbrella, the transition to the next paragraph occurs suddenly—with no intervening deliberation, we begin again with definitions: "Some one is one to whom some one is regularly teaching something." The paragraph break is the formal convention that signifies the unity of the variations within the paragraph, and their segregation from what precedes and follows.

These groups of minute repetitions, for Stein, ground the experience of being American; that is, the experience of recognizing one's participation in formal constraints while also locating the changes in those constraints. The old man in the opening parable protests that he did not drag his father beyond a given tree, but three generations of his family have worked in the same orchard, and he recognizes the boundary line he set years earlier. While Stein starts her delineation of Americans with middle-class children of immigrants, she also suggests that recent immigrants, such as the Irish, Italian, Mexican and German women who work for the Hersland family, could become American, specifically through their participation in family structures, one of those formal constraints with variations. Family living produces an intimate knowledge of other people, which in turn helps every American to identify types of repeating in others: "How

[34] In her "Transatlantic Interview" Stein suggestively relates her distaste of punctuation to a desire for strict political equality that could easily be interpreted as American: punctuation, she claims, disrupts "this evenness of everybody having a vote" (*Primer* 17).

it is done the thing some one is doing in family living is a thing that every one in that family living is knowing. How it is done and how it is done again and again the thing that is done again and again, done by some one in some family living is a thing that every one in that family living is knowing" (920).

While the mere proximity of family living implies an intimate knowledge of how each family member repeats, *The Making of Americans* suggests that it is the determination to restrict oneself to such knowledge, without trying to predict the changes that will inevitably occur, that leads to meaningful American living. At the level of plot, characters often make themselves miserable by trying to construct coherent autobiographical narratives along a diachronic axis. The youngest David Hersland's compatriots suffer from a preemptive nostalgia for the days they are currently living: "They were, all of them then going to be sometime wanting to be enjoying some things the way they were enjoying them then. They were all of them in a way living some in this thing in going to be sometime wanting to be enjoying some things in the way they were enjoying them then" (870). Stein dismisses this gaggle of talkers, who expect that they will each be "going to be doing some other thing sometime," but in the meantime enjoy the anticipatory pleasure of their nostalgia to come (876). Julia Dehning bases her misguided decision to marry Alfred Hersland on a projection of the domestic and cultural life she will inhabit after her marriage, and on her "aspiration in being one learning and to be then completely living" (647). The ideal of an "earnest and exciting american [sic]" married life prompts Julia to ignore her father's warnings and enter into her unhappy marriage (658). Stein herself struggles with her frustration at the small steps and patience required to understand others via the constant monotonous repetition of everyday life.

The novel's solution to the problem raised earlier, then—the problem of how Stein can “know” the current generation—involves not only the rhythms and repetition of individual self-assertion, as we saw with Martha Hersland's struggles with the umbrella, but also a certain self-denial, a putting on of blinders, as we approach the present. By accessing personality in discrete blocks, processing events or interactions in pieces, Stein tries to avoid the speculative pitfalls of the future and the panic that sets in when she tries to fully understand too much at once, her reaction to conventional drama. Like Pound, she views rhythm as a means of bypassing diachronic history, but while Pound focuses on the specific properties of language (Hebridean, French) to bring cultural meaning into the present, Stein finds American identity in the making and experiencing of temporally finite forms. At the moment of reading each paragraph, the reader must imagine that it will be repeated *ad infinitum*, the same detective solving a slightly different mystery each time.

Stein thus offers an American national narrative that is not strictly narrative at all. By depicting and enacting a temporality founded on finite increments of self-projection, the novel displays characteristics of what Homi Bhabha calls the performative mode of narrative address to a nation. Bhabha offers this category in response to Benedict Anderson’s famous distinction between Benjaminian “homogeneous, empty time,” the time of the realist novel in which an indefinite number of events occur simultaneously, and “Messianic time,” the moment in which linear history becomes meaningless and past and future collapse into the present (Anderson 24). The realist novel’s reliance on homogeneous, empty time means, to Anderson, that it addresses its reading public monolithically and nationalistically. Bhabha calls this mode of address “pedagogical history,” the linear narrative that relies on the process of “historical sedimentation” to

address the “people” as a unified object of analysis and authentification (304). In contrast, the performative mode is “recursive” and “repetitious,” “that continual process by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process” and in which “the scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a national culture” (297). Disrupting the smooth narrative temporality of official national history, the performative reveals and generates the constant loss and recreation of individual identity within a signifying cultural framework. Bhabha argues that the homogeneous, empty time of the novel only ever produces a “partial identification” of its readers with ideal national subjects; the everyday performance of national identity, fragmentary and constantly shifting, is an equally crucial part of a reading public’s identification with a national whole.

The theory of national temporality present in *The Making of Americans* is closer to Bhabha’s model than to Anderson’s. A constitutive feature of Anderson’s national reading public is persistent and deliberate forgetting of events that counter the official narrative of national history (much as descriptions of literary modernism often accuse modernist writers of deliberately forgetting or bypassing history). Stein pointedly turns her back on the idea of memory altogether, instead struggling to present gradually accumulated impressions synchronously. As she summarizes, “I was faced by the trouble that I had acquired all this knowledge gradually but when I had it I had it completely at one time. … And a great deal of *The Making of Americans* was a struggle to do this thing, to make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out” (*Writings* 91). The paragraph model on which the novel is built constantly tests the degree of repetition necessary to construct a model of personality, but acknowledges that

such constructions are always shifting. The receptive reader would develop a cooperative patience with the small steps and setbacks that are an integral part of this process, with the confidence that the framework of the paragraph would provide an assimilable unit of text.

Bhabha's model does not, however, account for the anomalous text that proclaims its correctly nationalized readers to be precisely those whose relationship to the national culture is constantly under negotiation, recursive, and repetitious. Stein directs *The Making of Americans* toward that public, hypothesizing that Americans recognize themselves because of their unique relationship to temporality. The expectation of discrete blocks of time, which goes hand in hand with the expectation of comforting generic frameworks, leads to a confidence in the ultimate results of one's self-negotiation; while smaller or larger changes in oneself might occur within that framework, one always exists within the "whole thing," America. The American readers the novel addresses perform their daily rhythms, even improvisations, within a totality whose national narrative is precisely the narrative of constant self-creation. This theory of the novel complicates Bhabha's distinction between pedagogical and performative modes of national identification: Bhabha's pedagogy is top-down, emanating from self-proclaimedly authoritative discourse. But in Stein's model, the recursive performance of a shifting national culture is itself pedagogical, instructing consumers of cultural products how to inhabit an "American" familiarity with and participatory relationship to genre.

Using Stein

Two brief examples illustrate how Stein's work was received both as authoritative and as susceptible to transformation and modification by her audience. First, *The Making*

of Americans was no commercial success; of its first, very limited print run, only 100 copies were shipped to America, so there was no spread of a confirming sense of self-recognition among its reading public. However, in later decades, after the success of *Four Saints in Three Acts* and the *Autobiography* made her style notorious, Stein became the popular exemplar of an impenetrably "high," yet silly, literary style. Mocking and imitating Stein's repetitive style in a variety of mass cultural contexts, the American reading public, even those who had not read *The Making of Americans*, recognized the potential for linguistic experimentation within established generic frameworks, including news articles, advertisements, and poetic parodies.[35] Supremely attentive to nuances of genre, this public also accepted the idea of shifting language within formal constraints as an appropriate response to such unfamiliar and unsettling prose.

The second and more extended example comes from the composition and performance of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, in particular the response of composer Virgil Thomson to Stein's language. Thomson saw something specifically American about the libretto, despite the opera's nominal setting in the Spanish countryside and nominal theme of Catholic sainthood. Thomson's text-setting practice reveals a deep affection for Stein's American English precisely because of its lack of narrative structure or coherent syntax.[36] He claims that "with meanings jumbled and syntax violated, but with the words themselves all the more shockingly present," he could "spend [his] whole effort on the rhythm of the language, and its specific Anglo-American sound, adding shape, where that

[35] Tischler engagingly outlines the sheer number and popularity of such engagements with Steinian language.

[36] An affection that extended to Stein as well. Stein sketches the beginning of her friendship with Thomson, and his request that Stein write a libretto for him, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 227-229. Thomson's version of the story appears in *Reader*, 209-210. See also Stein's and Thomson's *Collected Letters*.

seemed to be needed, and it usually was, from music's own devices" (*Reader* 212). The words and the American language itself, Thomson argues, demand straightforward pronunciation, repetition of rhythmic motifs to accompany the repetition of Stein's language, and (often) uncomplicated, homophonic orchestral scoring, and that is precisely what he provides. Once he has appreciated the texture of the words, their sounds and homophonic puns, he uses his discretion as composer to "add shape." Thomson follows the principle of "the observance in vocal music of correct, or naturalistic, speech cadences," first grouping words into rhythmic units, and then setting those units as "idiomatic enunciation" would have them (*Music With Words* 26, 20). When dealing with Stein, though, adding shape requires interpretation, placing a stress here and a pause there when her original sentences are uninflected save for end stops. In contrast to *The Making of Americans*, the listener does not have to do this work of pacing and syntactical interpretation.

Neither, for that matter, does the performer herself. Thomson, like Pound, believes that musical interpretation has little place in the context of opera. "The transmission of thoughts or of feelings," he states, "requires that the words be pronounced (or read) as word-groups," and it is the task of the composer—not the musician—task to ensure that those word groups are clearly delineated (*Music With Words* 17). While Thomson specifies that word groups are "not for the composer to follow literally," and "have little to do with expression," this lack of expression isn't a bad thing, for effective text-setting "does produce a verbal discourse, and inevitably some kind of meaning" (21). The conductor provides, the singer executes; while Thomson later specifies that the words should still be sung with emotion and clarity, the composition itself should be, so to

speak, transparent, requiring only that the singer translate exactly what appears on the page. Unlike reading text aloud, the musical score enables the singer to translate straightforwardly, as pitch, dynamic level, tone, and phrasing are all notated, if the composer himself pays enough attention and has "correctly prosodized" the phrase (*Music With Words* 30).

This straightforward translation, Thomson suggests, is particularly American. In composition, Thomson attempts to "bypass wherever possible the congealments of Italian, French, German, and Russian acting styles, all those ways and gestures so brilliantly based on the very prosody and sound of their poetry" (*Music With Words* 51). While he takes care to note, respectfully, that the expressively emotional tone of European opera has a necessary link to the formal aspects of European languages, he resists the belief that opera, by definition, must be the outpouring of individual subjectivity. Working on *Four Saints*, "a text without much overt meaning," he comments, "had forced me to hear the sounds that the American language really makes when sung, and to eliminate all those recourses to European emotions that are automatically brought forth when European musicians get involved with dramatic poetry, with the stage" (*Music With Words* 52-53). European opera, after all, is the genre of melodic excess: soaring lines and melismas (one vowel sound drawn out over a series of notes) subsume the texture of the sung words in "all those songs that sopranos sing as encores," as Stein disparagingly puts it (quoted in Perelman 143). Thomson and Stein, then, both wish to fight against a dramatic tradition that would emphasize character at the expense of the rhythmic or textural properties of language; hence Thomson's conscious determination to write music that emphasized the rhythms and consonants of Stein's

language, rather than using a series of vowels as a mechanism to transmit beautiful sound. But Thomson takes as particularly American the sound of individual words and phrases, rather than the repetition of larger building blocks.

Thomson's writings reveal an unabashed focus on common sense when it comes to adjudicating the "correct," "naturalistic, "real" stresses of this American English. Like Pound and Antheil's aural image of French, Thomson's normative English pronunciation relies on the supposed existence of a neutral, uninflected language, without idiosyncrasy or dialect variations. Thomson intends his text-setting to highlight the correct cadences of English, which is to say the only ones he acknowledges as truly existing; likewise, his music relies on a harmonic idiom instantly identifiable as American, folkily tonal and harmonically predictable. The result is, as Brad Bucknell suggests, the entrance of American culture into a libretto that Stein hopes will allow her audience freedom from the demand that they recognize and participate in any culture in particular. While Thomson's stress on conveying Stein's language accurately would seem to support this goal, the fact that Thomson bolsters the "natural" American quality of the text with recognizably American music does not.[37]

Not only did the determinedly American nature of Thomson's music make cultural specificity inevitable, the first performance conditions of the opera added a potent reminder of the historical specificity of operatic staging: *Four Saints in Three Acts* was the first major opera to feature an all-black cast in racially unspecified roles. According to Carl Van Vechten, a patron of both Stein and Thomson, Thomson made this

[37] Bucknell also makes the parallel argument that, even outside of Thomson's particularly American musical idiom, the harmonic predictability of the score itself lends the "impression of causality," and thus of narrative progression, to the libretto, again something undesirable to Stein (184).

decision one evening at the theater, saying, "They alone possess the dignity and the poise, the lack of self-consciousness that proper interpretation of the opera demands. They have the rich, resonant voices essential to the singing of my music and the clear enunciation required to deliver Gertrude's text" (quoted in *Four Saints* 7). If the drama and flourish of the opera singer related to an outpouring of self-centered subjectivity, then "lack of self-consciousness" was precisely the quality needed for Thomson's purposes, for the stereotypical black performer would thus produce the "natural," *echt* American English Thomson wished to hear, and avoid the connotations of elaborate European operatic culture he hoped to avoid. But the black cast also, as Bucknell points out, injects history into the opera, occurring as it did in a segregated American where black performances were more likely associated with minstrelsy than with high operatic culture.[38] One possible response was Van Vechten's utter denial of this historical weight, which insists on the theatrical mutability of the singers: "the Negroes in their own persons proved to be more Spanish, more like saints, more even like opera singers than any group of white persons could have been possibly" (*Four Saints* 8). But Van Vechten skips quickly past the dilemma of whether the "lack of self-consciousness" that allows the performers to be "like" Spanish people, saints, or opera singers corresponds to a devaluing of the singers as black Americans. Simultaneously marked as American and culturally mutable, both the singers and the characters they play resemble the stock character types in Pound's opera, who serve as universally comprehensible vehicles to convey the stresses and cadences of

[38] For a fuller analysis, and commentary on Stein's initial unease at this entrance of history into her opera, see Bucknell 216 ff. Other culturally situated analyses of the opera's performance conditions include Webb's and Barg's investigations of the opera's relationship to the American minstrel tradition; and more general critiques by Zamsky and Albrinck of the nationalistic uses of operatic form and of Maurice Grosser's staging, respectively. Watson excerpts some of the more blatantly primitivist reviews of the 1934 performance (288).

language.

Thomson's artistic choices clarify one danger of Stein's reliance on rhythm, repetition, and generic familiarity as the building blocks of her readership. The paragraph model of *The Making of Americans* subsumes racial and class markers under Stein's determined focus on individuals and personality types. Stein's insistence that only patterns of behavior should define individuals and national culture is on one level utopian, but it also lacks any serious consideration of structural forces that might mediate between individual psychology and an overarching whole. The chapters to follow offer examples of the formal and ethical challenges faced by those writers who attempted to transcribe the sounds and patterns of specific groups of Americans who, they felt, required attention or advocacy. By mediating between individuals, marginalized groups, and a bourgeois reading public, these writers hoped to change American culture and American genres with incremental acts of imitation and repetition.

Chapter 2.

Authentic Imitation: Modernist Anthologies and the Pedagogy of Folk Culture

Dismembering an anthology is the first revolutionary act committed by the boarding-school students in Peter Weir's film *Dead Poets Society* (1988). On the orders of their literature teacher, the boys rip out the preface to *Five Centuries of Poetry*, a fictionalized textbook edited by the overdeterminedly named J. Evans Pritchard, Ph.D.. A fat, faded hardbound book, the anthology literalizes the weight of the canon and of obedience to authorities literary, parental, and pedagogical. The remainder of the film investigates the aftermath of rejecting this dry and quantitative pedagogy, which is determined to force students into rating poems in such a way as to conform to the anthology's own conclusions about literary merit. The boys rebel against this stodgy, Britishized tradition in stereotypically American ways, including emotionally connecting with Whitman and Thoreau, and dancing to the bowdlerized African rhythms of Vachel Lindsay's "Congo." With this premise, the film quite casually founds its plot and sense of moral urgency on a complex of concerns about anthologies and issues of pedagogy, performance, race and nationality whose genealogy we can trace back to modernist concerns about the moral weight of the anthology.

This chapter investigates the rise of folk song anthologies in the 1920s and 30s, and the deeply felt connections between written transcriptions of music, oral performances of anthologized songs, and the development of politically productive subjects. These connections come to the foreground in the introductions to James Weldon Johnson's companion anthologies *The Books of American Negro Spirituals* (1925-6), two iconic folk collections. Johnson succinctly outlines the two central justifications for his

project. One is the active role of the spirituals in the development of a self-conscious black American art: “This reawakening of the Negro to the value and beauty of the Spirituals was the beginning of an entirely new phase of race consciousness. It marked a change in the attitude of the Negro himself toward his own art material; the turning of his gaze upon his own cultural resources” (v. 1, 49). The other is directed at white Americans, who, he says, have been “awakened” by the spirituals “to the truth that the Negro is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature” (v. 2, 19). The two audiences share a common ignorance, until recently, of the black American cultural heritage—in Johnson's figure of speech, they have been asleep to it, and the valuation of this heritage can begin as soon as their eyes and ears are opened. In other words, aesthetic education merely involves showing his readers what has been there all along; white Americans will then recognize the full humanity of black Americans by acknowledging them as fully capable of creating culture, while black Americans can start putting these “cultural resources” to use.

Johnson’s hopes were common among contemporary anthologists of black folk music, who, as mediators between folk singers and an urban readership, also confronted a number of pressing questions as to *how*, exactly, this “awakening” would occur. Was cultural recognition simply a matter of repeated exposure, or did certain authentic performance conditions have to be met in order for unfamiliar readers or listeners to fully and accurately appreciate the material? And once black Americans recognized the cultural resources at their disposal, how could they integrate and/or sublimate them into new art forms? The folk song anthology occupies a special position in this debate because contemporary intellectual and social theorists saw both of its defining terms—folk song

and anthology—as particularly efficacious forms of conveying cultural and social meaning. While these decades saw a rise in academic and popular interest in the American folk more generally, folk anthologies served as a privileged and representative point of access to folk culture, particularly because of the belief that performing folk songs oneself could relay experience quickly and deeply, in a way that merely hearing or reading them could not.[39] Anthologies like Johnson's that enabled readers to sing along with folk music would immediately evoke pride in their cultural heritage for black readers, while heightening feelings of cross-cultural identification for white readers. This empathy would then, in turn, lead to greater social and political equality.[40]

The major conceptual hurdle for these anthologists was that such performance practice was fundamentally imitative, a quality that had been vilified in the aesthetic realm from two directions. Imitation was an integral part of racist accusations that black American culture produced nothing but poor takeoffs on white forms, and, more generally, that people of African descent were an inherently imitative race. Proponents of black folk music therefore had to defend it from these charges while promoting a more salutary kind of imitation, one that would lead to understanding rather than mockery. To compound this problem, high modernist writers and critics such as Pound and Eliot had inveighed against imitation as the recourse of second-rate hacks who could recognize

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[39] See Filene for an overview of the development of folklore studies in the United States. Paul Anderson specifically examines the relationship between black folk music and the Harlem Renaissance.

[40] The genealogy of this belief can be traced back at least as far as the valorization of black spirituals that had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, which, as Cruz has detailed, relied on the assumption that song—specifically, "actual engagement with, and intimate proximity to, black singing"—would provide insight into black subjectivity and cultural authenticity" (100). Hutchinson explores the way in which 1920s anthologists and auto-ethnographers, notably including Alain Locke, subsume this thesis under the broader pragmatist philosophy that "specific acts of recognition and identification with particular realms of otherness," not only black culture, would further political and social change (42).

genius when they saw it, but not produce it themselves.[41] The anthology's democratic impulse to open up new aesthetic possibilities for all its readers was fundamentally opposed to Eliot's assertion that a cultural heritage should be "obtain[ed] by great labour," rather than easily reproduced in one's own living room. Folk song anthologists had to reclaim imitation as a serious and potentially productive force, both aesthetically and politically, for their work to have value as more than displays of quaint curiosities.

The political goal of such imitation was metonymic: if new performances of folk culture could be taken seriously, so might the politically disadvantaged folk who had created that culture. The idea that the anthology could be used as a pedagogical tool in service of this goal combined established assumptions about the uses of the anthology as a genre with a new insistence on the importance of imitative performance of the anthology's contents. In this chapter, I first consider the rhetoric that arose to explain how, precisely, the imitation of folk performance by non-folk readers would promote social and political justice, and what formal problems anthologists would have to overcome to accomplish this goal. I then turn to two particularly radical theorists of the anthology's power to alter social relations: Alan Lomax, the ethnographer and folk anthologist, and Jean Toomer, whose work *Cane* takes anthological form. Both men's work runs counter to the expectation of contemporary anthologists that modern imitations of folk song would promote cultural and political solidarity through sympathetic performance practice. In fact, it is the constitutive failure of such imitations that, for both Lomax and Toomer, bears the potential to promote significant political change. Finally, I

[41] Pound's *ABC of Reading* ranks writers based on their degree of originality. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" posits a dialectical relationship between the artist and past culture, so that a total assimilation of history would produce art informed by, but far from duplicating, past efforts.

return to *Dead Poets Society* to briefly explore the cinematic legacy of the anthology's politics of imitation.

Folk anthologies and imitation's double bind

The anthology is based on a principle of editorial selection—an established canon or a revisionary political or artistic program.[42] The anthology's pedagogical potential, however, goes beyond awareness-raising or the instillation of a canon; the very form of the anthology encourages the development of non-linear, non-contextual reading practices. Leah Price asserts that "the anthology trained readers to pace themselves through an unmanageable bulk of print by sensing when to skip and where to linger," selecting individual tidbits that might be of value, and skimming over others (4). The anthology can thus simultaneously serve, in David Stern's formulation, as "a medium for the transmission, preservation, and creation of tradition"—national, social, and/or class identity—and as "an agent in the creation, or re-creation, of… culture and community." Because the anthology permits readers to recombine anthologized texts in ways that "can radically alter their original meaning" and "transform[] the past into a new entity through conscious fragmentation, literary montage, and collage," it encourages a sense of discretion and creativity in its readers (Stern 7).[43]

The anthologies of black American culture that proliferated in the 1920s took two

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[42] See, for instance, Golding's description of Pound's *Des Imagistes* and others as "tools of a poetic program, defining a movement, promoting ideas… also contained in critical essays… and thus helping to shift critical thought" (22). Golding also explores some of the ways black American anthologists used the anthology to "preserve black culture's early poetry, trace its generally ignored historical development, and encourage a racial pride" (29).

[43] Stern's comments here are specifically about the Jewish anthology; crucial to Stern's analysis is the Jewish tradition of reworking a set of preexisting interpretations of and commentary on scripture that are repeatedly anthologized. While this set of reading, re-reading, and writing practices is specific to Jewish culture, the form of the anthology more generally encourages reworking of its material, whether or not readers are accustomed to doing so outside of the context of scriptural commentary.

approaches, not mutually exclusive, to promote engagement and identification with their material. The first stemmed from an anthological tradition that blossomed with the rise of ethnography, spearheaded by Franz Boas and his students, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Michael Elliott has detailed the efforts of this school to salvage cultural artifacts from groups who anthropologists believed were quickly losing their cultural specificity in an era of rapid modernization and increasing communication between geographical areas. Such collections of material, what Elliott calls "textualization[s] of group difference," would serve as the bases for future scientific study and interpretation after the groups themselves had lost their differentiating signifiers, as well as offering a respectful mode of cultural appreciation (10). Domestic ethnographers thus sought out folk songs, stories, and rituals from indigenous American cultures, as well as other sub-cultures, such as Appalachian mountain folk and rural black folk. The anthology, in which multiple texts were collected, juxtaposed and published as representative artifacts of a particular culture, was a convenient repository for this material, a "textual museum," as Elliott dubs it (11). The link between such anthologies and ethnographic observation was underscored with the 1915 publication of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, which was no anthology at all, but a series of poetic monologues spoken by the deceased inhabitants of a fictional small town. The great success of Masters' work indicates both the ever-increasing acceptance of the anthology as an ethnographic tool, and the underlying assumption that anthologized material was dead or disappearing, preserved only in textual form.

The folk anthology—museum analogy runs through one sub-genre of black folk anthologies: those that do not include, or include very limited, musical notation, limiting

themselves to reprinting folk lyrics only. These include Thomas Talley's *Negro Folk Rhymes* (1921), Newman White's *American Negro Folk Songs* (1928), and Howard Odum's and Guy Johnson's *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), all of which have a sociological bent. Editorial prefaces and commentary in such volumes typically present the material in the context of historical scholarship (White hopes to shed light on the development of folk song) or of ethnographic interpretation (Odum and Johnson describe their mission as presenting "a series of pictures of the Negro as portrayed through his workaday songs" [xi]). Reproducing folk lyrics as signifiers of cultural conditions, these anthologies contextualize their likely performers and performance occasions, but do not invite their readers to reproduce the songs at home. The earliest such anthology, *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), prefigures the paradoxes of the salvage drive by emphasizing the impossibility of fully capturing in print songs that were disseminated through oral tradition and performance practice. While it might be possible to retain vestiges of this practice for later academic study, the salvage of folk practice would always be incomplete, for its non-textual aspects would never be fully preserved. However, value still remained in presenting the material analytically and respectfully, as coherent and well-developed in its own right. Such respect did not necessarily exclude aesthetic or cultural judgment, or the belief that folk culture was less advanced than modern culture, as Susan Hegeman points out (see esp. 32-51). Rather, it allowed readers to trace the genealogy of black culture instead of locating it in a primitive, ahistorical space outside the forces of modernity or historical change.

Such a project was not only important to professional anthropologists, but also crucial for the growing efforts by educated black Americans to build a sense of an organic

cultural heritage and current aesthetic community. In his writing on black anthologies, Brent Edwards argues that the anthology as a genre "delimits the borders of an expressive mode or field, determining its beginning and end points, its local or global resonance, its communities of participants and audiences" (44). This first genre of folk anthology outlined impermeable borders of ethnographic engagement with folk communities. Starting in the 1920s, however, a second type of anthology made these borders porous—at least in one direction—by encouraging readers to perform folk music themselves.[44] This new emphasis stemmed in part from the belief, outlined above by Johnson, that awareness of black American cultural traditions would politically and spiritually benefit both black and white Americans. In addition, performance would strike back against the charges of imitativeness that had long plagued black folk music, for the emotive power of the songs would convince performers that they had sprung from an authentic expressive impulse, rather than simply mimicking Anglo-American folk songs and hymns. John W. Work's defense of the originality of folk music proclaimed its source in American landscape: "The new world was a wonderland to the immigrants, and especially to the African. All the newness, strangeness and vastness; the mountains, rivers, and bays; the climate and the people; all these were overwhelming. They gave him new experiences which had to be expressed. No wonder he sang!" (292). Anthologists and black auto-ethnographers suggested that performing black folk music was not only a gesture of respect and acknowledgement toward black culture; it might, because of its specific and unique relationship to American geography, strengthen the performer's own patriotic feeling. Such cultural nationalism, they argued, would have been impossible if black

[44] For extensive bibliographies of the large quantities of black anthologies published during this period, see Edwards (44 n. 60) and Kinnamon.

music were not the thus far unacknowledged foundation of American cultural life.[45]

Yet, if imitative performances of black folk music were not respectful and accurate in their practices, they would quickly cross over into minstrelsy.[46] Reversing the charge of derivativeness, black cultural critics had begun to point fingers at those who derided black music as imitative, yet themselves resorted to "poll parrot" imitations of stereotypical black dialect without "sympathetic" and sensitive attention to its nuances (Miller 327). Alain Locke and others castigated the opportunistic young composers who published "tawdry counterfeits" of spirituals and folk songs, observing that "the first flow of Negro creative genius has been unusually subject to commercial control, cheap imitation and easy plagiarism."[47] Thanks to these efforts, by the later 1920s, black folk music had for the most part left behind accusations of imitativeness and was tied ever more closely to specific economic, social, and geographical circumstances (the folklorist B.A. Botkin described the blues, for instance, as the perfectly contemporary expression of "industrial exploitation, migration, and concentration in cities" [42]). These developments put pressure on performance-centered anthologies to promote imitative practices that went beyond appropriative minstrelsy, and that would allow modern readers to develop a sense of the value and cultural weight of folk music.

One strategy to prevent inaccurate or disrespectful performances was to alter the

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[45] Foley dubs this relationship "metonymic nationalism": rural blacks stand in for a generalized peasantry, whose deep-seated connection to the soil makes them integral to rural America, which in turn stands in for the nation as a whole. While this term is central throughout *Specters of 1919*, see especially ch. 5. Anderson traces the intellectual history of folk nationalism from Herder through Du Bois and the Harlem Renaissance (ch. 1).

[46] Lott traces the institutionalization of minstrelsy out of white appropriation and imitation of black performance practice; see especially ch. 2.

[47] The first quotation is from Locke, "The Technical Study of the Spirituals." The second is from Locke, "Toward a Critique of Negro Music." See also the *Opportunity* editorial "Spirituals Old and New" for accusations of exploitation directed toward composers and arrangers.

musical arrangements, the physical layout, and the extra-musical instructions to immerse the reader in the aural world of folk music. Carl Van Vechten's review of Johnson's anthology, for example, notes with pleasure that “certain figures and arpeggios actually suggest the moans and groans, the startled 'Oh yesses!' of a congregation of mourners.” All this mourning could, moreover, be enjoyed decorously and effortlessly, as “the book is bound so that it will open easily on the music rack” (330-1). Non-folk readers could use the written instructions in anthologies to approximate the music's emotive power in their own homes or churches.

Yet Van Vechten’s sanguine view of the potential inherent in written anthologies was rare: most writers recommended supplementary education in the form of attending live performances. Laurence Buermeyer, for example, instructed white readers “to seek out the rhythmic scheme [of black music], and to vibrate in unison with it,” eventually inculcating “habits of attention” through which they would hear the music's idiosyncrasies as distinctive and respectable formal features, rather than primitive holdovers (158).[48] Arthur Huff Fauset made a similar suggestion, noting, “In cold type [the songs] are words, ofttimes—and what crude vehicles are words for suggesting the pulsations, the quiverings, and the trippings of the soul!” Having experienced the “vibrations” firsthand, readers would then be better equipped to navigate the burgeoning anthology industry with expertise.

Even this informed imitation, however, ran into structural problems with the very nature of folk music, which, as Work mentions above, was exalted as a spontaneous expression of emotion. While this meant that the folk could serve as an antidote to a

[48] On the corresponding fear that such sympathetic vibrations could lead white listeners to be corrupted by black popular music such as ragtime, see Biers, 101-103.

modern excess of self-consciousness, it also made the anthologists' project definitionally near impossible, as Ruth Pearson theorized:

> A true folk song corresponds to the little hummed tune or the chanting of the child absorbed in play. To the child his occupation is the serious matter. He is unconcerned, unself-conscious, and has little thought either of the need for expression or its effect on a possible bystander. Yet the need is there. ... Similarly, the folk song mirrors some passing mood, some wish or fancy or bit of fun, some passionate resentment or some hidden dream common to the members of a group which has not yet acquired group consciousness. But about these early utterances, individual or communal, there is often a completeness and a quality of insight which the conscious artist, for all his sophistication, must still struggle to attain. (29)

Despite its contingent quality, the song is "complete" in itself, requiring no additional accompaniment or effort to convey its message; it brings to light and self-evidently interprets any "hidden dreams" that, unbeknownst to the singer, require expression. Modern composers and performers who try to replicate this effect, however, end up with overly "sophisticated" music, too aware of its own technique, embarrassing and superfluous. Yet the modern artist must nonetheless strive to attain such completeness; hence the importance of preserving folk songs as "the direct voice of a past which... has made us who we are" (Pearson 30). Pearson thus positions the folk song as a model of organic artistic practice, while discouraging musicians from modeling their work on folk song in any practical sense. If fully-rounded aesthetic objects could only be the product of fully-rounded folk experience, it was futile to try to produce the same type of completeness out of modern life.

Cheap tickets and second-hand clothes: the anthology's transcription problem

Alain Locke was perhaps the most vehement theorizer of the anthology's potential to synthesize cultural history and inspire new works of art. In his 1925 anthology *The*

New Negro, he self-consciously reflects on the uses of a folk past for current and future black communities. Even more than the anthologies mentioned above, *The New Negro* emphasizes the challenges of transcribing oral folk practices sensitively enough to allow for modern use. Locke values spirituals as "the richest undeveloped musical resources anywhere available," a strikingly utilitarian formulation of folk songs as veins of melody and rhythm for composers to mine (200). These songs, however, are usable only when their formal intricacy and sophistication are acknowledged and appreciated. It is impossible to fully understand their power, he says, without hearing "the actual mechanics of the native singing, with its syllabic quavers, the off-tones and tone glides, the improvised interpolations, and, above all, the subtle rhythmic phrase balance" (206). With this necessary technical knowledge, even a white artist can learn how to arrange and perform spirituals; while he will not be as effective as those who "feel instinctively qualities put there by instinct," he can, by dint of study, participate in a lesser way in a spiritual musical community (207).

The tension between instinctual and learned musical knowledge emerges in Locke's decision to reprint only two songs following this essay on the spirituals. These transcriptions include all the musical apparatus necessary to play or sing the music—lyrics, piano accompaniment, markings indicating dynamics, tempo, and shifts in tone. Outside the context of a performance-centered anthology, however, they appear as exhibits of the formal intricacy of spirituals that make them impossible to fully learn by means of written materials. In other words, while the songs are performable as written, the anthology does not encourage it. In fact, Locke's concluding insistence that we must "insist upon a broader conception and a more serious appreciation of Negro folk song"

actively discourages the kind of experimental imitative performance that folk song anthologies promoted (210).

Locke's anxiety that his readers attend to the formal intricacies of anthologized works extends to literary works as well. To prepare his readers for the literary innovations they are about to encounter, he emphasizes that each has a distinctive "idiom of style," a certain "flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose, verse and music, color and tone of imagery, idiom and timbre of emotion and symbolism" (51). The formalist reading practice he advocates prioritizes the texture and music of language over the thematically or biographically "racial" aspects of the works, which, he posits, are only byproducts of purely expressive artistic impulses.

Of course, in an anthology titled *The New Negro*, it is impossible to fully elide race. Locke's insistence on the formal qualities of the anthologized works is in tension with the anthology's juxtaposition of a diverse array of texts, including excerpts from larger works like Toomer's *Cane*, as exhibits of Negro innovation. The difficulty posed by *The New Negro* is the broader question of how to compile a selection of texts without losing focus on the aesthetic particularities that made them worth compiling in the first place. Such concerns are representative of the critique of anthologies that were raised not only about folk music, but about the anthology as a genre more generally, presenting the folk anthology with a double problem of credibility in a time when imitative performance was derided.

Laura Riding and Robert Graves' "Pamphlet Against Anthologies" (1928) testifies to contemporary anxieties about the sociocultural pitfalls of readerly engagement with anthologies. The work primarily takes aim at those anthologies that present canonized

lyrics for the easy consumption of the general public (such as Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*) and at those readers who view their contents as a grab-bag of cultural capital. When these readers select particular poems as favorites or emotionally connect with one or another text, they are choosing from among predetermined options that have been selected solely on the basis of canonicity and fashion, rather than any sense of taste. Participating in a mass illusion of free choice, Riding and Graves' reader experiences the same "pretence of immediacy and intimacy" that Theodor Adorno discusses with reference to classical music fans (Adorno 299). Both groups participate in a middlebrow culture of easily commercialized hits to which they form attachments or dislikes in the belief that they are exercising free choice. Their selections, however, afford them only a "pretence of individualism" that they can bring out whenever a display of cultural capital is necessary or desirable (297). Riding and Graves offer the example of the poetry reader who dutifully recites poetry only to demonstrate individual facility with memorization, as a schoolboy masters the outward signs of "expression" of a poem without appreciating its meaning (86).

Riding and Graves' anxiety about anthologies can in this way be read as an anxiety about different modes of performance. Rather than demonstrating sensitivity to a poem's linguistic nuances, readers use poetry as a tool to perform their acquisition of cultural capital. Riding and Graves suggest that a more appropriate type of performance would involve a sense of individual investment in the particularities of the literary work, would bring out the specificities of a text, and would be performed within a community whose members each have similar discriminating power. In their brief critique of folk verse anthologies, particularly anthologies of black American folk songs or poetry, they

caution against "the temptation to formalize and sentimentalize them for popular rendering" which can lead to "a confusion of communal and individualistic poetry" (19). In other words, anthologies turn material that previously required collective improvisation and publicly shared emotional expressivity into parlor songs that promote trite projections of individual sentiment.[49] In doing so, they also detach the authenticity of an anthology's source material from concerns about the authenticity of a reader's aesthetic experience. That is, they point out that an authentic folk text need not produce a deeply felt experience, and vice-versa (the thrills Adorno's bourgeois listener feels when a beloved first movement of a symphony comes on the radio are no less thrilling for being generated out of a process of reification).[50]

Such concerns echo the worries of anthologists of black folk culture, who anxiously derided sentimentalized imitations that, they feared, would prime listeners to hear and perform all folk music through a veil of self-projected emotion. An anthologist who wished to avoid sentimentalizing this music would have to transcribe it in such a way as to not only encourage sympathy, but to incorporate an awareness of the losses produced in transcription. The reader's consciousness of the anthology's limitations would prevent over-investment of the performer into the musical material. The task of compiling anthologies that would encourage such performances was the lifelong aspiration of the musicologist and anthologist Alan Lomax.

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[49] See Elliott's introduction for an outline of the relationship between sentimentality and ethnographic appreciation of unfamiliar folk artifacts.

[50] In her analysis of authenticity, Bendix likewise detaches authenticity from folk music and applies it to the listening experience: "the chills running down one's spine during musical performances, for instance, moments that may stir one to tears, laughter, elation" (13). This dissociation removes the burden on the folk anthologist to preserve the pristine authenticity of his or her source material, but risks valorizing any deeply felt response on the part of the listener, whether that response is connected to the specifics of the material or not.

How to holler: The work of Alan Lomax

Alan Lomax started his career as the assistant to his father, John Lomax, a folklorist who had published a collection of *Cowboy Songs and other Frontier Ballads* in 1910. With recording equipment provided by the Library of Congress, John set off with Alan, then eighteen years old, to collect songs for what would become the landmark anthology *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934). This anthology includes transcriptions of songs from such diverse populations as cowboys, convicts, and stevedores, in professional groupings that roughly correspond to racial ones. It was among the first anthologies to focus on black work songs (on the railroad, for instance, or on the chain gang) in addition to spirituals, and among the first integrated anthologies that lumped all of the music under the label "American." (Slightly over a third of the anthology's pages are devoted to specifically black music, including work songs, blues, celebratory songs, and spirituals; the rest includes sections on "white desperadoes," mountain songs, childhood songs, and cowboy songs, among others.)

It also distinguished itself from other anthologies by its refusal to assume either a purely ethnographic or a purely familiarizing stance. While it exhibits its texts and melodies as authentic artifacts of American subcultures, it also provides the minimum music necessary (only melodies, no piano accompaniment) to reproduce them at home. Explaining why they abstain from providing piano accompaniments for their songs, they assert that such anthologists are "worse than thieves…, for when they capture and imprison in cold type a folk song, at the same time they kill it. Its change and growth are not so likely to continue after a fixed model for comparison exists" (xxxv). Such a critique assumes that, given enough time and space, folk songs will continue to

promulgate themselves through local communities.

Folk singers, on the other hand, could benefit politically from the advocacy of the folklorist, who could mediate between them and the wider world.[51] This advocacy, to Lomax, takes multiple forms. At his most jingoistic, he fully subscribes to the belief that increased familiarity with folk tradition will help Americans respect each other and better develop a sense of a unified national culture. Describing the federally-encouraged efforts at American cultural self-recognition during the Roosevelt era, he writes:

> America was being photographed, painted, even muralized. America as a multiple civilization was being recorded, studied and archived like never before. … Culturally, America has a whole 12 years to feel good about itself, to gather its strength, to become conscious of its power and potential. … That self-discovery poured energy right into the bloodstream of the people and helped us lick the fascists" (*Lomax* 93).

Helping America to "know itself better," and to know itself as a unity made up of multiple but equally valuable folk traditions, would result in a cultural pride that could be used to fight outside national borders and decrease oppression within (*Lomax* 65). This type of self-knowledge was, in part, fact-finding on Lomax's part, after which he took on the task of enlightening readers, via editorial remarks and the song texts themselves, to the social, cultural, and economic conditions that had produced a recognizably American culture.

Yet simply exposing an urban audience to folk culture would not suffice, no matter what the folk singers themselves thought would result from simply singing into a recorder. Convicts aspired to the success of Lead Belly, who (at least in John and Alan

[51] This model of folklorist as advocate is far from anomalous, and continues to inform the field of folklore studies. See, for instance, Proschan, "On Advocacy and Advocates," and the special issue of *The Journal of Folklore Research* on advocacy in which it appears. See also Tedlock for the problems of mediation and transcription that arise between ethnographer, oral performer, and audience.

Lomax's version of the story) recorded a song for Louisiana Governor O.K. Allen that was instrumental in persuading the governor to let him out of jail (*Lomax* 52)[52]. But more often, Lomax portrays his singers' hopes that their songs will result in direct action as "pathetic beyond tears," as he describes one convict's idea that "when they hear that up there in the White House, them big men sho goin' do something for this po' nigger" (*Lomax* 65). His silence in the face of these singers' questions, hopes, or requests shows his lack of faith in the power of music alone; interviewing men in prison, he has no answer to questions like "Do you think my beatin' de bucket like dat'll he'p me git outa here?" or "Will de big boys up in Washington hear dis song? … Maybe my singing he'p me git outa here—I jes' nachly don' like dis place" (*Lomax* 28-29). Instead of replying directly to the convicts (replies which could not but be negative, despite John and Alan's decision to promote Lead Belly and to advocate for his release), Lomax redirects the rhetorical force of those questions to his readers.[53]

The role of the anthologist as professional transcriber, sympathetic ear, and mediator becomes most apparent when Lomax discusses recording technology. Lomax persuades people to record songs on the promise of hearing themselves played back on the phonograph: "after [the first singer] and his fellows had heard his voice, his mistakes, perhaps, coming back to him out of the loud-speaker, there was no longer any difficulty in getting what we wanted" (*Lomax* 22). Recording implies distribution, publicity, a part of the self that has been externalized and can now travel beyond its physical source; it also allows the singer to recognize his own voice. For a slightly later generation familiar

[52] Filene cites prison records that show that Lead Belly was, in fact, paroled for good behavior (58).
[53] In this case, readers of the *Southwest Review*, where Lomax publicized his early collecting efforts (*Lomax* 2).

with jukeboxes, Lomax describes the phonograph as being “an important symbol of democracy, one way for them to assert racial solidarity. They put their money on the records they liked, and the rest went unplayed” (*Land* 38). Turning their voices into objects that they could then evaluate, was, for Lomax, one of the ways in which disenfranchised Americans could come to recognize their own cultural and individual value. “It is always a dramatic moment for any one when his own voice comes back to him undistorted from the black mouth of a loud-speaker. He seems to feel the intense and absorbing pleasure that a child experiences when he first recognizes himself in a mirror” (*Lomax* 65). Such recognition allows the singer to gain self-awareness as a soloist, one individual whose voice has been selected and recorded, rather than a member of a work crew or one voice among many at a party or dance. And the mouth of the gramophone is, of course, a “black mouth,” a visual, as well as aural, representation of the singer.

While the self-recognition of folk performers was a form of self-assertion and self-recognition, both Lomax and the singers themselves recognized that additional advocacy would be needed to translate folk culture into political action. During the Depression, Lomax interviews a poor farmer who, he says,

> spoke into the recorder horn as though it was a telephone. “Now, Mr. President, you just don't know how bad they're treating us folks down here. I'm singing to you and I'm talking to you so I hope you will come down here and do something for us poor folks here in Texas.” ... I realized right then that the folklorist's job was to link the people who were voiceless and had no way to tell their story, with the big mainstream of world culture (*Lomax* 92-93).

Many of Lomax’s singers and interviewees have little or no experience with the phonograph, with the result that they misunderstand the level of access to higher-ups the technology permits them. Their belief in more or less direct communication via the

phonograph leads to a double need for the folklorist—first and more immediately, to translate the technology of "world culture" to the technologically deprived; then, to serve himself as a conduit between the rural and "mainstream" worlds. Dubbing folk singers "voiceless" despite their oral performances implies that a voice counts as such only if it is heard by the right people—in this case, people who would not know to pay attention to these voices without the folklorist's mediating influence. While the implication that Lomax will serve as a neutral telephone line with little static or interference again positions his work as one of merely exposing the folk to a larger public, his savvy knowledge of mainstream culture enables him to target this exposure at his preferred audience. The advocate, in this model, is a marketer.[54]

Lomax attempted to make this marketing politically productive by encouraging an alternative form of imitative yet unsentimental performance on the part of the anthology's readers. An early attempt at such pedagogy appears in the brief preface to the chapter on chain-gang songs. Rather ambitiously, it directs us, "Get the 'wham!—wham!—wham!' of the big splay feet, the axes, the hoes, firmly and heavily in mind. Open your mouth and shout the songs. They are not gentle or sedate or subtle. They are the work-songs of driven, despairing men, who sing about their troubles to be rid of them" (57). While the first sentence of this directive assumes previous experience with field work, the detailed instructions evince some skepticism that any performance replicated from the song book would ever approximate the style of a chain gang worker. Remarkable about this passage is its implicit recognition of the embarrassment its readers would feel trying to imitate someone troubled, driven and despairing in their own living rooms. This embarrassment

[54] Filene's work on the Lomaxes' marketing of Lead Belly's career thoroughly documents this tendency (ch. 2).

might produce a gentle, sedate, subtle performance, domesticating the shout into a more unassuming form; with the encouragement to "open your mouth and shout," the Lomaxes both give their readers permission to imitate a completely unfamiliar genre, and acknowledge that this imitation will inevitably fail, foreclosing the possibility of singing the chain-gang songs with anything like accurate expressivity.

If the likelihood of failure is present in these anthologies from the beginning, it does not prevent them from earnestly encouraging readers to imitate folk forms as best they can, as the Lomaxes detail in the introduction to *Folk Song: U.S.A.* (1947):

> Sing your way through this book. … Join your sin-ridden forefather as he bellows and thrashes all over the camp-meeting ground. Stomp and yell the lines of hell-for-leather breakdown tunes. Raise up your head and howl with the cowboy over the lonesomeness and wonder of the Big West. Rock your own child to sleep with a tune that has lulled babies in log cabins and shanties. Only then will you feel how close these songs lie to your own and your country's marrow. Only then will you feel the surging life and the violent passions that lie hidden at times beneath the surface of these poker-faced songs. Only then will you feel the invigorating strength of this powerful folk art, the quality that sets it apart from popular song with its surface emotion and its cloying sweetness. (vii)

The Lomaxes' imperatives stem from a distinction between songs whose emotive power lies on their surface—popular songs whose tunefulness has a built-in "sweetness," such that the singer need only hear a few notes to identify the emotion being expressed—and songs whose "poker-faced" surface signifies that they have something to hide. To access the kernel of emotion found in folk songs, singers must take the risky and potentially embarrassing step of trying to imitate the physical actions that prompt those emotions, bellowing, thrashing, stomping, and rocking.

The anthologist's duty, then, would be to find a means of transcription that would preserve both the stylistic details of folk songs and the context of their performance.

While the latter half of this task might be accomplished by editorial comments and stories about the circumstances in which the songs were recorded, the first half proved more technically challenging. The problem was taken up with dedication by Ruth Crawford Seeger, who initially wrote her treatise *The Music of American Folk Song* as an appendix to the Lomaxes' follow-up to *American Ballads, Our Singing Country* (1940). Crawford Seeger, transcribing from the Lomaxes' sound recordings, meticulously attempts to walk a middle path between accuracy and ease of use, neither forcing the music into the rhythmic simplicity of a hymn tune, for example, nor transcribing individual performers' every deviation from rhythmic or melodic norms. In her attempt to establish a "bridge," as she calls it, between rural and urban singers, she sees her challenge as discouraging urban readers from importing classical style into folk music (13). She devotes full chapters to explaining the written techniques she has developed to make this possible—simplifying metrical irregularities without eliminating them, clarifying tempo markings—but she notes that the reader must still extrapolate from the page to interpret the music vocally. "There will," she warns, "be a tendency to fill in the notations with unconscious approximations of fine-art singing," which can most efficiently be subdued by repeated listening to recordings, through which the reader might lessen his or her prejudice in favor of classical style and improve his or her ability to recreate folk style from written transcriptions (12-13). Starting from the assumption that urban readers require intensive tutelage to learn or re-learn how to sing folk songs, Crawford Seeger also assumes that her careful work will be mirrored by readers who will undertake a program of self-instruction. Only through such imitation will readers become able to perform, adapt, and change that music in idiosyncratic and appropriate, rather than a homogenizing and radio-

driven, ways (30). Alan Lomax echoes this sentiment in the article "Music in Your Own Back Yard," written for the magazine of the Girl Scouts in 1940: if the Scouts' activities around the campfire are analogous to those of cowboys, farmers, and mountaineers, the Scouts must reclaim the music of their "own grandmothers" in order to reconnect with the "pattern of pioneer life" which the Scouting tradition wishes to maintain (*Writings* 48-49). Neither Lomax and Crawford Seeger, however, take the call to genealogy literally—all Americans, it seems, share a common set of useful grandmothers, repositories of everyone's folk heritage.

Yet at the same time Lomax expects more privileged folk performers to be conscious of the disparity between themselves and those who still live in the oppressive, disenfranchised, or strenuous conditions that generated the folk songs in the first place. The central problem of imitation that arose with regard to the chain-gang songs recurs when he narrates his attempt to replicate a camp holler, the individual cry of frustration, pain, and self-assertion that black prison camp workers used to call out to each other while working. After trying, over the course of several years, to holler persuasively, always failing, Lomax finally hollers on his first day in the army, after he has been working KP duty for hours. "Submerged in feelings of anguish and despair… tormented by fatigue, overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness in the face of the implacable power of the military, I at last could feel and sing the blues" well enough to make his black sergeant remark, "Hey, man, you sound like you from down home" (*Land* 274). Lomax here imagines validation of his holler's authenticity coming only after he has experienced himself the powerlessness of someone caught up in an oppressive and unrelenting system, although he is careful to qualify his own experience by comparing it to the "far

more painful" lives of black prisoners. His dogged insistence that only by replicating physical actions can the musicologist fully understand the folk impulse leads him so far as to fantasize about "committing some crime so that I, too, could experience what [prisoners] were experiencing and thus write about them with some real understanding" (*Land* 287).

This parable, read one way, would signify the impossibility of maintaining a folk tradition outside of the originary social conditions of such music. Lomax, though, stresses the importance of the first part of the camp holler story, in which he recognizes both his own inability to perform such music and the underlying cause of that inability—the disparity in social and political power between him and the singers he has recorded. If the transcription and editorial apparatus of folk songs can make urban Americans aware of the originary causes and need for such songs, it does so through heightening their awareness of their own lack of ability to authentically perform the notes in front of them. Attempting these new forms of performance could result in illuminating existing American power relations, even while the performances themselves were never authentic. This pedagogy requires readers not only to overcome their embarrassment and take folk transcriptions as literal instructions for shouting and slurring, but also to critically distance themselves from their own failure to accurately imitate those forms. Expecting readers to take his instructions at face value, however, assumes that the image of a mythical folk past will not trump responsible performance practice. Such mystification, Lomax hopes, will founder on the singer's self-conscious realization of the discrepancies between their performance and a performance fully informed by oppression and poverty.

The genre of the anthology, Lomax suggests, is particularly able to generate this

productive failure; far from simply acting as a relay between the folk and the modern reader, the anthology provides a surplus of material, such that it gestures toward an entire realm of experience that its readers can never completely replicate. In this way, the anthology spurs readers toward the unattainable achievement of the social and cultural totality called an authentic folk experience. This forward-looking politics is akin to Paul Gilroy's description of the "counterculture of modernity" that black musical forms offer by providing visions of future societies that "realise the social and political promise" of the past and bring about "qualitatively new… social relations… constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come" (36-37). The utopian nature of this promise inheres, in part, in modes of performance that Lomax and Crawford Seeger carefully, but always incompletely, transcribe: "words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by… screams" (Gilroy 37). Inadequate transcriptions point to the gap between reality and utopia, the missing connection that would bind folk performers to their inexperienced readers.

Gilroy's description, however, also points to the danger inherent to folk anthologies, located in the scream that emerges out of physical, social, or emotional violence, and can never be fully represented on the page. Folk anthologies gain rhetorical and cultural authority by claiming to represent a totality; their length, heft, and very titles—*American Ballads and Folk Songs*, *Our Singing Country*, *Folk Song: U.S.A.*—proclaim that they span the breadth of American folk experience. This implicit claim to cultural and national unity implies that even controversial material dealing with structural violence and in justice will be swept up in a narrative of national fellow-feeling. In fact, the sweeping publicness of the anthology could pose a literal danger to some performers:

Lomax recounts an interview with three established bluesmen, in which they had talked "frankly, sagaciously, and with open resentment about the inequities of the Southern system of racial segregation and exploitation." After hearing this "expose" played back to them, however, the men asked Lomax to destroy his recordings for fear of retribution, finally settling for anonymity was the interview ever to go public (*Land* 473). The anthology's structure, conglomerating folk music under a national banner of communal production, conceals the individual instances of violence that would betray too explicitly the nation's distance from the social change the anthology can barely gesture toward.

Coining the folk song: *Cane*

Anthologists of black folk music attempted to reproduce the immediacy of folk song on the page, while acknowledging the impossibility of full transcription. Alan Lomax points optimistically to one way in which this impossibility could be politically mobilizing, as white reader-performers would feel productive embarrassment at their own inability to perform folk music. In this view, as in Pearson's theorization of the "unself-conscious" folk singer, authentic folk composers simply "shout" out their outpourings of emotion; in contrast, white readers, because of their distance from folk life, are too self-conscious to accurately imitate folk performance. Against this reliance on the authenticity of folk life, Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) offers an alternate response to the anthologist's dilemma: *Cane* suggests that folk music is already a self-conscious art, and that imitation is an originary condition of folk song. Conspicuous imitation, then, could point the modern artist toward a way of reconciling the gulf between folk culture and urban life.

Critics have long evaluated *Cane* on the basis of Toomer's perceived, and well-documented, desire to synthesize folk and modern culture into a forward-looking

aesthetic vision.[55] Its generic indeterminacy often features in these evaluations: *Cane* is indeed an uncategorizable compilation of poems and prose sketches, many of which themselves contain excerpts of poems and songs, and contains little explicit editorial intervention.[56] It therefore forces readers who seek a unified interpretation to work for it. Yet this impulse toward unity does not stem from Toomer's vision alone, for the work bears both a formal and a literary-historical similarity to the folk anthologies that were proliferating in the early 1920s and that used overarching rubrics to categorize their material. In this case, however, Toomer produced both the content and the form of a folk anthology by himself, editing and arranging the folk songs he coined. *Cane* is, therefore, itself an example of the imitative production of folk culture that contemporary anthologies propounded.

Toomer's own rhetoric elides his authorial and editorial functions. Using the language of the anthologist, he wrote to Waldo Frank, "The Negro of the folk-song has all but passed away: the Negro of the emotional church is fading. A hundred years from now these Negroes, if they exist at all will live in art [*sic*]. … America needs these elements. They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time."[57] Rather than collect existing folk songs, Toomer "holds them" by assimilating their forms and composing entirely new ones, which appear as interpolations in *Cane*'s prose sections. In

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[55] McKay is perhaps most representative of this view; she interprets *Cane* as "a portrayal of the union of the past with the present, of the black folk culture with its modern counterpart, of those who stayed with those who left" (171). See also Sollors on Toomer's "search[] for aesthetic wholeness" (21). Kodat neatly summarizes the long critical history of this view when she contrasts the interpretation of *Cane* as "a pinnacle of achieved wholeness" with the position that the work's "fragmented formal properties [are] aesthetic embodiments of Toomer's riven self" (2-3).

[56] The only paratextual apparatus is the work's division into three sections, separated by pages each bearing a segment of an arc. "Kabnis," the third and final section, bears a dedication "to Waldo Frank" on this page as well.

[57] Letter from Toomer to Waldo Frank, n.d [late 1922 or early 1923], in *Cane*, 151.

a 1922 letter, Toomer explicitly justifies anthologizing these songs and sketches into one volume: “It was up to them ['we of the darker skins'] to show the equal and distinctive beauties in blacks and to be true to their own individual natures. … The concentrated volume will do a good deal more than isolated pieces possibly could.”[58] *Cane* would thus appear to have the same motivation as folk anthologies: to display black culture with such overwhelming gravity that readers would cease to be “ashamed of the past made permanent by the spirituals.”[59]

But the black culture Toomer chooses to anthologize is his own imitation of folk culture. As Nicholls and Baker have pointed out, these ostensible folk songs are not folk at all, but “lyric poems about folk songs” that aspire to folk songs' powerful aesthetic effect (Nicholls 24, Baker 101). It is difficult to tell, at times, that these poems are not themselves, in fact, transcribed from folk songs; their meter, language and tone seem to mark them as authentic. This semblance of authenticity is one component of what J. Martin Favor has described as *Cane*'s performance of blackness, which suggests that the South, the locus of the folk, is “performable and invocable at will” rather than “a primary, immediate, and always-lived marker of identity” (63). While many of *Cane*'s narrators and protagonists, in Favor's words, “become... content with an (in)authenticity with regard to folk culture,” *Cane* goes one step further: it not only holds up imitation as an appropriate response to folk song, but locates that imitative, inauthentic performance in the South as well.[60] In other words, the “alienation of modern life” that critics such as

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[58] Letter to John McClure, July 22, 1922. Jean Toomer Papers, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, 7:22. Quoted in Kerman and Eldridge, 88.

[59] Toomer's phrasing in his 1922 play *Natalie Mann*, act II sc. 2. Quoted in Kerman and Eldridge, 84.

[60] Terris likewise finds that Toomer “insists that the concept [of the black folk spirit] is inevitably invented,

Baker and Griffin localize in *Cane*'s second, urban, section, is already present in rural Georgia (Baker 37, quoted in Griffin 68).

Cane's first section is full of folk songs, which frame the vignettes of the South or punctuate them with periodic refrains. These songs are easily read as emblematic of the quickly disappearing Southern culture that *Cane*'s narrator both longs for and exalts, particularly in the stand-alone lyric poems such as "Song of the Son." Here, the estranged descendant of the South returns in time "to catch thy plaintive soul, leaving, soon gone," which the folk "pour" into the night in the form of song (14). This intimate, unmediated relationship between song and soul likewise appears in "Georgia Dusk," in which ceremonially festive men produce "folk-songs from soul sounds" (15). The speaker of these poems appreciates folk songs as unthinkingly produced, natural outpourings of the soul. Like many of *Cane*'s narrators, he is often taken as an autobiographical stand-in for Toomer. Biographically, this connection makes some sense: Toomer grew up in Washington, D.C., and had an epiphanic experience of folk culture when he briefly lived in Georgia. However, assuming a strict continuity between Toomer the appreciator, Toomer the composer, and Toomer the arranger of folk forms, all of whom appear as narratorial presences in *Cane*, misses the way in which the juxtapositions of song and story highlight the self-conscious nature of folk performance even in the purportedly authentic South.

The troubled relationship between folk communities and folk forms arises in the work's opening vignette, "Karintha." It contains two different folk songs, one of which

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that its artificiality must be constantly acknowledged and confronted" (6). I would go further in saying that *Cane* depicts the black folk themselves as conscious of the artificiality of "the black folk spirit" as such.

models the stereotypical genesis of folk music out of a communal response to a dramatic event. As a sawdust pile slowly burns, "some one [makes] a song":

> Smoke is on the hills. Rise up.
> Smoke is on the hills, O rise
> And take my soul to Jesus. (4)

A specific event thus becomes a generalized prayer, recognizable to others as a spiritual, in a move common to the black anthological tradition: the song as universal expression of historical particularities.[61] Yet the other folk song suggests a more complex relationship than song:universal::history:particular. "Karintha" begins with a verse that returns as a refrain twice more in the short piece:

> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
> O cant you see it, O cant you see it,
> Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
> … When the sun goes down. (3)

Several components of the text suggest that it is a musical verse: the repetition of the descriptive first and third lines, punctuated by the repeated address in the second line, and capped by the shorter fourth line, which leaves textual space, marked by ellipses, for an imagined rhythm section to fill in. The referent of the second line's "it" is unclear for this reason: it could refer to Karintha's skin itself, asking us to visualize a woman with a beautifully shaded complexion. Or, as a musical gesture, it could ask us whether we understand the first line's analogy between skin and dusk. In fact, this comparison is a difficult one to conceptualize: "dusk on the eastern horizon" is far from a familiar visual referent. The second line at once calls our attention to the fact that we can't really "see" this comparison, and reassures us that it doesn't matter, that simply by listening to the

[61] Du Bois also models this relationship in *Souls of Black Folk*. He prefaces each essay with an excerpt from a spiritual or "sorrow song," offering fragments of familiar tunes that have an unspecified, but presumably emotionally resonant, relation to the quite vividly specific incidents he then describes.

folk cadences of the refrain, we are part of Karintha's world. This relationship between vivid, but unfamiliar, imagery, and an overgeneralized sense of welcome recurs throughout *Cane*, suggesting that it is both too easy and impossible for readers of folk forms to access the folk community.

Karintha's narrative is a curious combination of mythology and biography. Karintha grows up perpetually desired by men even before she is old enough to know what that would mean; she "carries beauty, perfect as dusk when the sun goes down." Now the appositive analogy is applied not to her skin, but to her beauty or to herself, as an epithet that distances her from those around her. She carries this perfect beauty like a perpetual pregnancy; in fact, the narrator's repeated emphasis on this "carrying" far outweighs his attention to Karintha's literal pregnancy, which ends when she has a child in the woods and abandons it on a sawdust pile. Likewise, community members overlook her own childhood cruelties ("she stoned the cows, and beat her dog, and fought the other children") in the face of this beauty. As the archetype of the rural woman who has "ripened too soon," Karintha has "always" been desirable and will always remain so, despite evidence to the contrary. As Monica Michlin has described, "the voice creates the immediacy and rural harmony that it knows is a fiction" (101).

The narrator's use of folk song in "Karintha" dramatizes this tension between violent events that occur in a rural community and their sublimation into timeless folk experience. He repeats the verse refrain twice more, in the middle and at the end of the vignette, concluding with a separate, one-line stanza like a final musical cadence: "Goes down..." (4). The recurring musical form seems to plant the story firmly in the realm of

folklore, an archetypical tale being performed to the accompaniment of a lyrical song.[62] In oscillating back and forth between biography and lyric, however, Toomer suggests that the tropes of folk song can carry weight back into the events they seem to generalize; in other words, Karintha's life cannot help but proceed in the terms the folk song has determined for her. Karintha's beauty is extreme enough to prompt poetry, which then both describes and prescribes her behavior: her wildness, energy, and mischief as a child are ignored in favor of her "ripening." Likewise, *Cane* thus suggests from the beginning that aesthetic mediation of folk experience is not a one-way transmission, from folk culture to urban readers. Folk songs mediate and aestheticize a community's own self-perception from the start.

This pattern of self-conscious folk performance recurs throughout the first section of *Cane*. The poem "Cotton Song" at first reads like a transcription of a spiritual work song, with the speaker exhorting his "brother" to roll cotton bales, in resonant rhyme:

> God's body's got a soul,
> Bodies like to roll the soul,
> Cant blame God if we dont roll,
> Come, brother, roll, roll! (11)

The verse surpasses expectations of the assonance of such a work song: it's unclear what "rolling the soul" signifies, if anything, beyond filler material, which dramatizes the pleasure of repetition while envisioning the body getting pleasure from rolling cotton. The narrator might be the leader of a group of workers, softening the labor of a long day with resonant vowels. The song continues in the spiritual vein, until, in the midst of the next verse, another speaker or speakers suddenly interrupt:

[62] As Ford points out, Toomer's 1922 play "Natalie Mann" contains precisely such a scene of performance, in which a character reads aloud a short piece highly resembling "Karintha" while the other characters on stage "hum an adaptation of a Negro spiritual" (38).

Cotton bales are the fleecy way
Weary sinner's bare feet trod,
Softly, softly to the throne of God,
“We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!

Nassur; nassur,
Hump.
Eoho, eoho, roll away!
We aint agwine t wait until th Judgment Day!”

This voice sings in a more heavily accented dialect, and its lines are shorter and punctuated with spaces for physical labor. The poet, who describes the sinner's feet “softly” walking across bales of cotton, interrupts himself, ventriloquizing a loud, exclamatory refrain that suggests the call and response pattern that, as Barbara E. Bowen has noted, enacts “the drama of finding authority through communal voice” (195). Coming as it does as a response to the narrator, the interruption suggests a dialogic relationship between the narrator’s less colloquial phrasing and the dialect of the communal voice. The narrator does not only imitate the folk, in other words; rather, the folk perform in response to the narrator’s prompting. This call and response pattern, like the refrain in “Karintha,” aestheticizes the structural violence inherent in folk music, reminding us of the fraught relationship between folk songs and the demands of plantation overseers that slaves audibly perform satisfaction and happiness. Toomer's interruption at once suggests the presence of an authentic folk (more authentic than the poem's first speaker, at least), and the ability of that folk to self-consciously manipulate expectations that they will perform on demand—after all, the refrain responds to that demand with the promise of imminent earthly revolution.

Other moments in the first section suggest that folk singers use song to distract from an omnipresent violence they are all too aware of. The women in “Blood-Burning

Moon," for example, use songs as "cotton-wads to stop their ears" against their awareness of imminent disaster, and the story culminates with Louisa deciding to sing as an invitation to the other townspeople to "come out and join her" as Tom Burwell gets burned by a mob (31, 36). The folk choruses of "Carma" ironically downplay the tale's "crudest melodrama" with the understated refrain, "Come along" (13). While some of the narrators in *Cane*'s second section idealize these performances, the interpolations of the folk songs into their performance contexts suggest that the folk use them to express an imagined condition of peace and simplicity that folk life never actually achieves. *Cane*'s own imitative performance, then, is closer to the original than Toomer's narrators believe.

This conceptual difficulty is thematized most clearly in "Kabnis," *Cane*'s third section, whose eponymous protagonist travels to Georgia from the North. Kabnis cannot seem to accept that folk songs need not flow easily from authentic folk feeling; he tries to "shap[e] words to fit [his] soul," but despairs at his inability to communicate in the voice of the South (111). But folk songs pervade the story, torturing Kabnis with their proximity, "so close... that [he] cannot reach them" (87). Rather than accepting that the omnipresence of these songs means that he, too, can imitate them, Kabnis strives, and fails, to seek a deeper meaning behind them. As Farah Griffin has pointed out, he is unable to appreciate the tradition of black rhetorical forms as powerful in themselves (153). This incapacity is emblematic of those who insist in linking the folk tradition with unthinking intimacy rather than composition within established generic frameworks.

Acknowledging that imitation already exists in folk song, *Cane*'s second section suggests, gives the black artist a more productive link to history than trying to immediately or accurately grope backwards for an already-distant folk soul. This section,

set in Washington, D.C., provides several models for creating new art out of existing forms. Some of these narrators still long for the unmediated experience of folk music. The spiritual "Deep River," in particular, serves as the paradigm of a lost folk community in the vignettes "Rhobert" and "Avey," whose narrator imagines hearing the Howard Glee Club perform the spiritual, and himself transmuting it into the art of the future. Emblematic of this longing is the poem "Harvest Song," whose speaker, like that of "Song of the Son," tries to bridge the gulf between modernity and folk culture through song; this time, his dry throat is incapable of making a sound.

Yet although the move to the city carries with it the impossibility of attaining a lost folk-life, it also opens up the possibility of professional performance: the imitative performance that already existed in rural Georgia now situated within a capitalist framework. In "Theater," the professional dancer Dorris and her colleagues dance spontaneously to jazz, performing in a way that is "crude, individualized, and yet. . monotonous," much like the choral responses in the first section, to which the narrator later compares her dance (52, ellipses in original). The vignette contrasts Dorris' performance with John's imagined vision of their future bourgeois life together, private and intimate, a vision that ultimately forecloses any possibility of a real relationship with Dorris. The structured context of "pool rooms and restaurants and near-beer saloons," in other words, is necessary for the performance of "jazz songs and love," both of which founder on John's expectations that he and Dorris could produce a more emotionally authentic relationship outside of that context (52).

The contrast between performing straight from the soul, as it were, and performing in a self-consciously imitative way is thematized in "Box Seat" and "Bona

and Paul." Dan Moore, the protagonist of "Box Seat," tries and fails to whistle in imitation of the beautiful chestnut trees and houses around him, which the narrator exhorts to "teach… a withered people… to dream" (58). However, Dan's heartfelt and passionate dream of overthrowing black bourgeois convention with his love, Muriel, ends only in a frustrated outburst of violence against a stranger. In contrast, a successful performance occurs when, at the theater that Dan and Muriel attend, a dwarf serenades Muriel "with a high-pitched, sentimental voice" (68). While Muriel is disgusted, Dan's view of the dwarf suggests that this kind of performance, however derivative of music-hall conventions, can still reveal something about the humanity of the performer. He imagines the dwarf's eyes saying, "Do not be afraid of me. … I too was made in His image" (68). The originary act of creation, in other words, was imitative. Perhaps, the story suggests, imitative performance not only can communicate fellow-feeling, but is the only kind of performance that exists.

The moment when such performance most closely coincides with the narrative perspective is "Bona and Paul." Paul, passing as white, constantly finds himself the object of other people's gaze, the center of a "ring of silly gaping faces" that wonder how to racially identify him (73). Paul feels ambivalent about both his white friends and the Southern folk: while he imagines scenes of folk performance, they take place in the face of threatened violence—"A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter" (73). He gains "fullness, and strength and peace" only with his growing consciousness that he performs a role of abstract "difference" from those around him (77). Acknowledging his place as a performer allows him to provoke a confrontation at the end of the vignette, when a cloakroom girl and the doorman stare at him and Bona

with “slightly superior” and “knowing” eyes as they leave the Crimson Gardens, propelled by sexual attraction (79). Rather than fold under their gaze, Paul confronts the doorman. Paul's blunt “Youre wrong [*sic*]” refers not to his attraction to Bona, but to the feelings of embarrassment the doorman imputes to him (80). Paul accepts the fact that he is playing the conventional role, for the doorman, of sexually excited customer, and this acceptance allows him to refer to his desire rather than letting it go unspoken.

Cane suggests that the process of compiling and imitating folk forms can benefit black writers, but only if they avoid falling into the fallacy of heartfelt immediacy. By anthologizing a wide variety of responses to folk song, Toomer offers more or less productive ways of grappling with a black cultural heritage. The forms he imitates are themselves self-conscious performances, but this inauthenticity does not preclude a mood of deep longing, as earnest and unashamed as Paul, for an authenticity that the text periodically acknowledges does not exist. While Lomax locates the folk anthology’s political force in its constitutive failure to completely replicate the conditions of authentic performance, Toomer goes further, pointing out that authenticity was always self-consciously performative in the first place. Both the idea of the folk and the genre of the anthology remain necessarily incomplete in their gestures toward totality—but this incompleteness can serve, for Toomer, as the basis of a new art that welcomes imitation as valid in its own right.[63] Pointing to the self-conscious nature of folk song also allows Toomer, unlike Lomax, to thematize the conditions of structural violence to which the songs were often a response, without reducing the songs to instinctive reactions to these

[63] Lamothe characterizes the New Negro engagement with anthropology as one that “resists questions of truth and illusion, authenticity and falsity” altogether, as I contend Toomer (although not New Negro anthologists in general) does here (3).

conditions.

The work of both Toomer and Lomax offers an alternate perspective on the political implications of black folk forms than do the writings of anthologists such as Johnson, who hoped that increasing readers' awareness of these forms would in itself lead to political change. In contrast, Lomax and Toomer dwell on the discrepancy between these aspirations and the reality of inaccurate or ineffective performances. Self-conscious attention to this discrepancy might spur performers toward productively destabilizing performances; at the very least, it would deter them from seeking political change in the nostalgic search for an imagined authentic past.

Adolescent imitation

Black folk anthologists explored the anthology's potential for political activism in an attempt to reposition imitation as a self-conscious philosophical and literary practice. The legacy of their efforts emerges in *Dead Poets Society*, which puts imitation to use on multiple levels, ultimately suggesting that it is an adolescent practice which should be grown out of. Returning briefly to the film will show a few of the ways in which imitative performance is either encouraged or suppressed in the classroom, the most explicitly pedagogical of the spaces in this chapter.

After Mr. Keating's students tear out the didactic introduction to their anthology *Five Centuries of Literature*, they imitate Keating himself and revive his former secret club, the Dead Poets Society. Their group meetings involve reading canonical poetry, and a few original compositions, out loud with earnestness and verve. Taking this sensual pleasure in literature, the film implies, promotes "free thinking," in Keating's words, and therefore transgresses school policy as much as the after-hours trek out to the cave in the

woods where the group meets.[64] The anthology's lack of historical or literary context allows the students to identify with the lyric voices they declaim, appropriating the poems for their own emotional purposes. Canonized poetry here expresses adolescent tumult more articulately than the adolescents themselves do: one lovesick boy is inspired by poetry to pursue his dream girl, but woos her with the most trite of his own compositions. Likewise, at the film's conclusion, the Dead Poets Society leads the rest of Keating's class in a tribute to their teacher, standing on their desks and addressing him in Whitman's words: "O Captain! My Captain!" The film lingers on their furrowed brows, teary eyes, and strong chins, which, in combination with the poetry, substitute for original verbal declarations of loyalty.

The film implies, however, that such imitation belongs in the space of adolescence, and that finding a more authentic, self-expressive language will ultimately trump the performance of others' words. The first indication of this comes with their appropriation of African imagery to signify rebellion, self-expression, and escape. One student, Stephen Meeks, begins reciting an excerpt from Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo," itself a white poet's exoticized reenactment of African ceremony. While the poem itself is quite long, the film shows only a refrain whose first-person revelation underscores the individual nature of the boys' respective aesthetic epiphanies. Meeks chants:

> THEN I had religion, THEN I had a vision.
> I could not turn from their revel in derision.
> THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK,
> CUTTING THROUGH THE FOREST WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.

While Lindsay instructs the reader that the latter couplet should be read "More deliberate. Solemnly chanted," Meeks, if anything, picks up the tempo of his rapping as he reads.

[64] All quotations are from the original film script by Tom Schulman.

Before he finishes, other boys join in, repeating that last couplet over and over. One twangs a mouth-harp, another bangs on a trash-can lid, and they all dance in a circle around the cave and then out into the forest, shouting the lines over and over. Unable even to continue to the next line of the poem, the boys are captivated by the rhythm of the Congo, and they abandon all attempt at an organized meeting in favor of a wild jubilee. While, in their poetic context, the rhythms of the Congo appear as blunt signifiers of tribal Africa, and in a literary-historical context were immediately critiqued as voyeuristic projections of white fantasy onto the African heart of darkness, for the Dead Poets Society, the hypnotic rhythms are simply an invitation to exist in the here and now. They do not claim any anthropological stance toward the Congo, or see any obligation to have one; the poem is a purely utilitarian way to find one's own voice. At this moment, the poetic appropriation that anthologies enable is pushed to an extreme: without any attention to linguistic specificity, the boys take on the trappings of rebellion, much as the fact that they meet in “the old Indian cave” signifies merely a savage past. This approach to the anthology results in performances identically generated from the familiar space of adolescent exploration and self-indulgence.

The one student who takes imitation the most seriously is actually expelled from the school for his challenges to the school’s authoritarian power structure. Charlie Dalton earns both skepticism and admiration by playing the saxophone to accompany his own, quasi-Beat, poetry, seducing girls with Shakespeare and Byron, and, in the aftermath of the “Congo” meeting, painting inscrutable hieroglyphs in red lipstick on his cheeks and declaring that his name is now Nuwanda. At first, he seems to be using the liberatory urges of dead poets in the service of his own libido, slipping an editorial into the school

paper demanding that girls be admitted to Welton, and justifying it on the grounds of political action: “Are we just playing around out here, or do we mean what we say? For all we do is come together and read a bunch of poems to each other. What the hell are we doing?” Throughout the film, there is a disjunction between his earnest desire for action and his schoolboy antics: staging a prank phone call in assembly, for example, earns a reprimand from Keating, who warns him that he'll “miss some golden opportunities” if he gets expelled. Finally, he is the only Society member who refuses to renounce Keating in the face of administrative pressure, earning an expulsion the film portrays as honorable but foolhardy.

The film suggests that Charlie is a mischief-maker who uses poetry as an excuse for acting out, and that the other Dead Poets make a tragic but necessary sacrifice of poetry at the film’s end. Abandoning Keating in practice, they declare their solidarity without risking their own membership in the school community or their prospects for college admission. Only one student achieves the valorized goal of using performance as a means to “what’s really, really inside of me,” and he ultimately commits suicide. He and the other Dead Poets, the film suggests, are ahead of their time in their desire for active learning and emotional engagement with their material. But this material must also be abandoned at the proper time, adolescent turmoil giving way to mature self-sacrifice.

The dichotomy that the film sets up between imitative performance and authentic self-discovery both draws on and obscures the work of anthologists to blur the boundaries between the two. It also suggests that imitation is primarily an adolescent poetic practice, rebellious and fleeting, rather than a potential force for political change.[65] The film’s

[65] See Bernstein’s “Unrepresentative Verse” for more on adolescent poetics.

nostalgia for performative poetics looks back to a moment in childhood rather than an era. But it reinforces the belief that anthologies can promote or inhibit a sense of moral agency in their readers as well. If we take this promise seriously, the film begins to look like a belated attempt to discredit the imitations and reinterpretations of folk music that occurred in the 1930s and again in the 1960s and 70s, in the service of a politically conservative ideology that would categorize those performances negatively, as adolescent. It also suggests that the power of such imitations is fundamentally real, and that the type of self-discovery that imitation promotes could be not only the revelation of an authentic self, but an increasing knowledge of the relationship between the self and the systems of political and social injustice that surround it.

Chapter 3. *Call It Sleep* and the Limits of Typicality

Henry Roth's novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) might be aptly subtitled *The Making of Americans.* That statement is itself controversial: most critical responses to the novel would be more likely to dub it *The Making of One American*, focusing on the exceptional sensitivity and idiosyncrasy of its protagonist, the young boy David Schearl. Or, if they were to generalize from David to broader socio-cultural populations, they might offer *The Making of a Jewish-American* or even *The Making of a Modernist.* This chapter offers a reading of the novel that foregrounds this problem of categorization, arguing that the novel itself thematizes the difficulty of extrapolating from the particularity of one novel's protagonist to general political or social concerns. *Call It Sleep* considers the aesthetic and political consequences of an affinity for patterns and typicality, and does so through a fixation with voice, rhythm, and repetition. In this way, it is a commentary on the very pedagogical imperative that drove anthologists to reprint folk songs and that invited Stein to drill generic repetition into her American readers' skulls: the drive to use innovative formal techniques to interpellate a new, and newly self-aware, political and cultural population.

Call It Sleep oscillates between the particular and the general. It is focalized almost completely through David, who grows from six to eight years old over the course of the novel; his associative and highly idiosyncratic thought processes structure the novel as overarching thematic and linguistic material. David constructs a system of magical associations between household objects and locations, family members, local street life, and Jewish and Christian texts and icons. His inner monologues—his physically unvoiced speech—are some of the novel's most powerful passages, alternately

repeating comforting phrases and images, providing a rhythmic underpinning to his daily life, and insistently relating his symbolically important items to the people and places around him.

Against David's status as a uniquely creative individual stands the suggestion that he is nonetheless representative of a class of Americans. The novel both describes the sights and reproduces the sounds and dialects of the ghettos of New York's Lower East Side, situating David as a second-generation immigrant who must navigate between the Yiddish of his parents' generation and the English of the street. One strand of critical responses to the novel emphasizes David's Jewishness, focusing on the novel's representations of Jewish liturgy, song and culture to argue that David represents a generation of second-generation Jewish immigrants struggling with questions of assimilation and adaptation in a melting-pot society. Another focuses on the innovative formal techniques the novel uses to depict David's experience—its close focalization, heavy use of free indirect discourse, and stream-of-consciousness passages. These readings, which invoke the modernist genealogy of Joyce, Eliot, and O'Neill, suggest that David represents the modernist writer, driven to reproduce and reshape the world around him through aesthetic experimentation. Finally, critics such as Werner Sollors and Thomas Ferraro have promoted the category of “ethnic modernism,” arguing for critical reevaluation of the first- or second-generation immigrant writers who used modernist techniques to present subjects more often associated with sociological realism (Sollors 128). Along with those who characterize David as a proto-modernist, they valorize this synthesis of sociology and aesthetic experimentation for its avoidance of ethnic stereotypes and its characteristically modern examinations of linguistic and ontological

uncertainty.[66]

While the novel's use of now-familiar topical and aesthetic reference points makes it tempting to view it, and David, as typical of one or more generic, aesthetic, or historical moments, it also suggests that generalizing from David's individual experience to larger societal structures is quite risky. David himself, convinced in the universal truth of the mythology he creates, near-fatally electrocutes himself trying to produce holy light from electric streetcar tracks. This event, the novel's climax, is the last in a long chain of episodes in which David repeatedly tries, and fails, to extend his associative conglomeration of symbols to physically affect the world around him. The novel thus dramatizes the dangers of extrapolating from individual experience to generalized interpretation, calling into question the process of typification that, as we saw, Stein viewed as structuring and ultimately beneficial to American life.

All of this recent work on *Call It Sleep* takes upon itself the task of somehow solving the novel's problem with typicality, either by offering a categorization of the novel, or by arguing that the novel, precisely as unique as David, transcends or problematizes these categories.[67] There was, however, a body of criticism

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[66] See Fiedler, Kazin, and Wisse for some examinations of *Call It Sleep*'s Jewishness. Wirth-Nesher's afterword to *Call It Sleep* offers a theory of David's gradual assimilation. Roth discusses his own Judaism in interviews with Bronsen and Freedman; see also Lyons 30-32 for a biographical overview. For analyses of *Call It Sleep* that situate it specifically within the modernist tradition, see especially McHale on the lineage of Joyce, O'Neill and Eliot, Lawrence on the novel's success in combining modernism's "myth of uniqueness" with "social and material reality" (109), and Schoening on the novel's politicized modernism that sees "the celebration of the irreducibly alienated subject" as an extension of class politics (64).

[67] In her introduction to *New Essays on Call It Sleep*, Wirth-Nesher states that the novel challenges "the very notion of typicality" (10). Most of these essays, however, use the categories of Jew, immigrant, and/or modernist either to describe David or Roth, or to explain how the novel transcends *specific* categories, rather than the "notion of typicality" in general. Along the same lines, Lawrence, in that collection, initially asks how the novel can "craft a myth of uniqueness, a weighty, idiosyncratic interiority... without surrendering social and material reality," but unfortunately does not engage that question further (109).

contemporaneous with the novel that was precisely committed to linger on the dialectic between the particular and the general, and on the difficulties of extrapolating from one to another. These were theories of proletarian literature, which abounded in the early 1930s, the years of *Call It Sleep*'s composition and publication. Communist and fellow-traveler writers and critics sought to develop a poetics of proletarian fiction: that is, the formal attributes that would help novels bring about political change. Specifically, they sought out and encouraged novels whose protagonists demonstrated both individuality and—what became a key term—typicality, embodying paradigmatic struggles or experiences that readers could then relate to their own lives. They were particularly concerned to promote those novels that subsumed any dogma or didacticism in detailed and accurate portrayals of characters and locations, and thus avoided losing their readers' interest. *Call It Sleep*'s dialectic between the particular and the general places it squarely in the midst of this debate over what formal techniques novels should use to change readers' lives. Simultaneously promoting and refusing generalizations, *Call It Sleep* is a limit case for the idea of novelistic typicality, suggesting that political change based on moments of individual recognition will necessarily be skewed, if not downright impossible.

In arguing for the relevance of theories of proletarian literature to *Call It Sleep*, I am deliberately favoring history over biography. Roth himself stated numerous times that his own awakening to radical politics came only after he had finished the novel, which he wrote out of autobiographical compulsion: “My own feeling was that what I had written was far too private for me to have given much thought to specific social problems. My personal involvement had absorbed my entire consciousness, leaving no room to focus on anything else” (Bronsen 269). Yet, as we will shortly see, the novel was immediately

evaluated by the standards of proletarian literature, including accuracy to lived experience, visual detail, and structural repetition; critics again referenced these criteria when it was republished in 1964. Although Roth did not set out to write a proletarian novel, *Call It Sleep* nonetheless responds to contemporary concerns about the practice and challenges of novelistic typicality.

This chapter begins by outlining these concerns, detailing the poetics of proletarian literature, and examining the early debate over whether and how *Call It Sleep* fell into that category. It then analyzes how the novel grapples with the idea of generalization through repeated sound, song, and chant, and through the curious slippage between the third-person narrator and David's own represented thoughts. Finally, it explores the political implications of a novel that destabilizes the entire idea of literary politics by insisting that novelistic typicality is destined to fail at political change. A novel that wishes to instill leftist political goals in its readers, Roth suggests, must commit itself to the impossibility of doing so.

Theories and Practices of Proletarian Literature

Call It Sleep is structured around a series of events in the life of David Schearl from the ages of six to eight, many of which can be seen both as typical rites of passage for a young immigrant boy and as deeply personally significant to David in unusual ways. In the novel's prologue, he arrives in New York with his mother, Genya, at the age of two, after their journey from Austria to join his father Albert, who has been living in America for some time. Roth contrasts the conventional depiction of the bustling Ellis Island scene with “something quite untypical” about the Schearls—namely, Albert's fury that Genya failed to recognize him in the crowded immigration hall. This anomalousness,

as Leslie Fiedler observes, pervades David's life, even though the novel's main plot events are not at all unusual in themselves: David is coerced into “playing bad” with an older neighbor girl; gets lost on the outskirts of his neighborhood; develops and suppresses a fear of the dark coal cellar in his basement; starts cheder, or Hebrew school; and cultivates the friendship of Leo, a charismatic Polish-Catholic boy. Fiedler emphasizes that, while these events might suggest “the usual pitfalls of the ghetto book,” the novel is saved by “the sensibility of this sensitive, poetic... Jewish child” (*Jew in American Novel* 38). David interprets his experiences as part of a coherent system of associations that turn immigrant clichés into personal mythology. On the one hand sit death, sex, sin, the dark, his father's volatile temper; on the other, light, purification, and holiness, represented in particular by Leo's rosary and by one passage from the Biblical book of Isaiah. After David introduces his cousin Esther to Leo so that they can “play bad,” his own mythology requires that he expiate his sense of shame by finding the purifying electric light he once saw explode from between the streetcar rails, precipitating the novel's final crisis. He thus shares with adult proletarian protagonists the compulsion to interpret the world around him as a coherent system of quasi-independent forces—but where the Communist sees capitalism's invisible hand, David cobbles together his own mystical network.

When *Call It Sleep* was first published, critics hotly debated whether and how David was, in fact, representative of the proletarian experience. The initial “Brief Review” in the Communist *New Masses* magazine was one brief, anonymous paragraph. “Another first novel about the Jewish East Side,” it begins flatly, lamenting, in a much-quoted line, “It is a pity that so many young writers drawn from the proletariat can make

no better use of their working-class experience than as material for introspective and febrile novels." The reviewer denigrates *Call It Sleep* by lumping it together with an entire undesirable category of novels, characterized by location, age of protagonist, authorial identity, and strong focalization.

Over the next few issues a controversy erupted, as readers and critics objected to this review, for the most part, not on grounds of the novel's superior quality, but with the riposte that the categorizations the reviewer uses are more politically useful than he supposes. David Greenhood's letter to the editor the following week chided the reviewer for dismissing valuable categories of novels: "Just what is the difference between [the review's first sentence] and saying: 'Another first novel about the lower classes?'" Both Edwin Seaver and Kenneth Burke defended the novel's introspection and limited treatment of politics, Seaver on the grounds that David's experience provides "an emotional and human propulsion" to Communism, since "such a childhood can mature into a revolutionary manhood." Burke compared childhood to the state of any individual before he is exposed to the "new meanings" of Communism. "Insofar as children *are* pre-political savages, living in a world of symbolism and magic, I question whether any realistic philosophy could properly condemn a writer for reviving such a picture of childhood." Each response was concerned with the novel's fidelity to the young immigrant experience—as Burke puts it, its realism—and with the novel's place in the large quantity of immigrant and/or proletarian fiction written in the 1930s. In other words, they defended both the categorization of the novel's protagonist as a proto-revolutionary, and the categorization of the novel itself as a window into immigrant experience. Crucial to the novel's value, for these contemporary critics, was not its

originality, but its typicality: David Schearl could be anyone in the process of becoming an American political subject.[68]

How such typicality could promote revolutionary sentiment without falling into stultified propaganda was a question that theorists of proletarian literature had been asking since the very idea of proletarian literature came into being with Marx and Engels.[69] While debate raged in the 1930s about what, precisely, constituted proletarian literature—the identity of the author or audience, the subject matter, and the explicitness of the work's political leanings were among the criteria discussed—Communist and fellow-traveler theorists of the novel agreed that authors should avoid bluntly propagandistic writing suffused with editorializing on the state of the working class. Instead, they encouraged writing that would "show, not tell," as the precept goes: instead of narrative commentary, novels should accurately and minutely describe events and situations involving individuals struggling within overarching systems of capitalism (Foley 277). Theorists of the realist novel such as Mike Gold, who edited and wrote for *New Masses* throughout the 1930s and frequently published editorial notes dealing with the topic, pinpointed specific formal and thematic qualities that authors of proletarian fiction should seek out; in particular, they encouraged writers to draw from concrete experience. Of the nine requirements for proletarian literature Gold lists in "Proletarian Realism" (1930), five urge straightforward and detailed fidelity to life, including a lack of "straining or melodrama or other effects" (*Anthology* 208); an editorial in *Partisan*

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[68] In later decades, a few other critics hailed *Call It Sleep* as a proletarian novel. Rideout includes it in his study of *The Radical Novel in the United States*, although he notes that it contains only "an implied criticism of capitalist society" (188). Ledbetter, in 1966, reiterates the argument of Burke, Seaver and others that "it is through the representative nature" of David's experiences that "the plight and the hope of the proletariat are conveyed" (125).

[69] See Foley 148 on Marx's and Engels' calls for a non-didactic realism.

Review declared that "literature... does not lend itself to the conceptual form that the social-political content of the class struggle takes most easily. Hence the translation of this content into images of *physical life* determines... the extent of the writer's achievement."[70] These images, full of sensory detail, might typically include minute descriptions of work processes or labor conditions as well as descriptions of radical organizing or a protagonist's gradual awakening to revolutionary consciousness.[71] Gold's own autobiographical novel, *Jews Without Money* (1930), "was an exhaustive catalog of the genre's motifs, incidents, and characters," including the sights, sounds, and smells of street life, Jewish song and theater, and descriptions of newly-arrived "greenhorn" relations, local pimps, prostitutes, and bums, and other boys on the block (Denning 232).

These motifs, Gold argued, hold constant in "a hundred other ghettoes scattered over all the world," so that a novel that accurately described his own lived experience would enable his readers to recognize their own material struggles in the text (*Jews Without Money* 10). Other proletarian theorists subscribed to this justification for realist detail: the introduction to *Proletarian Literature in the United States* (1935) asserted, "The best art deals with specific experience which arouses specific emotion in specific people at a specific moment in a specific locale, in such a way that other people who have had similar experiences in other places and times recognize it as their own" (quoted in Foley 139). This act of recognition would make readers aware that their own problems were structural rather than individual, encouraging them to look to revolutionary politics

[70] William Phillips and Walter Rahv, quoted in Klein (136).

[71] The metonymic association between sensory detail, especially visual description, and a broader phenomenology of the world is characteristic of realist literature in general, as Peter Brooks has described (16, 210). Proletarian novels would, theorists hoped, make use of this metonymic convention to suggest that the individual experiences of their protagonists were representative of everyday life.

to better their socioeconomic situation. In contrast to the sympathetic recognition posited by theorists of the anthology, which would allow readers to recognize others as human while appreciating fundamental differences in their respective social and political positions, proletarian literature would produce the recognition of unavoidable similarities among any group of workers under industrial capitalism.

Out of this goal stemmed the valorization of the literary type—the idea that a character or situation could be idiosyncratic and individual while at the same time embodying paradigmatic struggles or experiences that the reader could extrapolate to his or her own life. Summarizing the concept in 1948, Lukács describes typicality as constituting "the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being, as a member of a community" (*Studies* 8). Without the type to mediate between the world of the novel and the world of its readers, a novel would remain confined to the world of private, and thus bourgeois, experience, lacking any revolutionary potential.[72] In American criticism, typicality often had to do with subject matter: Gold criticized a novel by Jack Conroy for lacking typicality because Conroy wrote primarily about Midwestern migrants instead of the urban ethnic poor (Denning 215). But formal features could also effectively convey typicality: Gold argues that proletarian literature should merge "individual tremors, lyricism, emotions, eccentricities... into a large objective pattern," hinting that both thematic patterning and smaller-scale poetic effects could contribute to these novels' political effect (*Anthology*

[72] As Mizruchi details, the idea of typicality had always been a constitutive feature of realist fiction, defining "an immediately identifiable public persona" while reserving "some residual aspects of personality" for the individual (199). American theorists of proletarian literature adopted the term specifically hoping that contemporary reading practices would make the leap from classifying social types to recognizing the socio-economic forces those types embodied. See also Davis for a history of nineteenth-century literary negotiations between typicality and particularity.

192).

Barbara Foley examines the implications of this suggestion in her analysis of the formal qualities of proletarian literature, arguing that, on the macro level, large-scale "thematic patterning of characters and events" suggests to the reader that "the social forces shaping characters and events correspond with the forces producing change in the world of its readers" (278). This greater structural unity also takes place, she asserts, on a smaller formal level, through redundant "patterns of repetition and stress" that are "crucial to the process of narrative persuasion" (267-8). Novels that encourage generalization from individual experience, in other words, do so by encouraging the reader to undertake interpretive work: he or she must link together not only repeated motifs and themes, but also repeated sounds and stresses, to systematize novelistic experience into political reality.

Call It Sleep shares with explicitly proletarian novels a dedication to large- and small-scale patterning and repetition and plenty of visual detail. In the leftist debate over the novel's affiliation, all sides praised its accuracy and fidelity to detail, asserting that the novel would, at the very least, give readers a window into the life of a boy growing up in an immigrant ghetto.[73] The question remained open, however, whether and how much David's experience represented a revolutionary consciousness, or whether he was simply too "febrile and introspective," as the anonymous critic put it, to constitute a properly typical proletarian subject. To stake out a position on one side of the argument or another, many critics, then and since, have turned to a biographical identification of David with Roth himself, who, like David, grew up a second-generation immigrant in the ghettos of

[73] For other reviews that praised the novel's fidelity to detail, along with a more detailed rundown of the *New Masses* debate, see Lyons 15-19 and Materassi 34-35.

New York. This biographical criticism is both importantly emblematic of a strain of proletarian literary criticism, and symptomatic of the novel's tendency to elide the perspectives of its protagonist and its narrator.

Roth's life encapsulates a paradox in proletarian literary theory: the author must be both honest about his own experiences, translating them faithfully onto the page, and ingenious enough to make those experiences rhetorically effective. On the one hand, workers themselves, rather than professional writers, seemed most likely to focus on conveying experience as directly as possible, rather than worrying about style or adherence to party line. The "cult of authenticity" that pervaded 1930s criticism assumed the language of workers had not already been culturally conditioned, and that workers needed simply to channel life onto the page.[74] Gold's hyperbolic evocation of a "wild youth of about twenty-two" evokes similar descriptions of folk singers producing authentic noise:

> [He is] the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self confidence but writes because he must—and because he has a real talent.
>
> He is a Red but has few theories. It is all instinct with him. His writing is no conscious straining after proletarian art, but the natural flower of his environment. He writes that way because it is the only way for him. (*Anthology* 188-89)

The unthinking worker, in this view, filters experience and sentiment onto the page, avoiding "straining" because there are no theories that shape his expectations for what art appropriately is. The nature of the author shapes the nature of the prose: honest.

[74] Foley applies this phrase to theories of proletarian literature (144), but see ch. 2 of this dissertation for a discussion of the cult of authenticity that sprung up more generally around folk singers and black and immigrant writers.

Yet the representative effect of proletarian literature could not solely be produced by honesty, since honesty had no purchase if the reader could not recognize the experience in his or her own life. The problem with the view of the proletarian author as naïve channel, then, was that it was not obvious that he could produce typicality totally by accident. As Edward Dahlberg observed in *New Masses*, simply reporting sights, sounds, or events ignores the benefit of the "insights, nuances, graduated perceptions" that "a literary vocabulary" can produce (224). Proletarian authors, then, had to partake both of proletarian labor and of the craft of the writer without being too dogmatically attached to either. The incoherence of John Dos Passos' description of Mike Gold as the paradigmatic proletarian author is symptomatic of this double bind:

> I think he was also lucky to have worked on a real garbage dump, instead of on the garbage dumps of dead ideas the colleges are, to have started life as a worker instead of as an unclassed bourgeois. A writer is after all only a machine for absorbing and arranging certain sequences of words out of the lives of the people round him.… American society is a sausage machine forever turning lively proletarians into bleached and helpless suburban business men. Mike Gold has the luck to get the nourishment for his writing from the meat before it has been fed into the hopper (117).

On the one hand, the writer unthinkingly channels experience, excreting it in the form of words: this is the view of the writer as an authentic font of experience who does not need to think about the form or style of the words he produces. On the other hand, the writer constantly runs the risk of himself being taken up and reprocessed by the giant sausage processing plant of American bourgeois culture; his proximity to that "hopper" places him in danger of losing his direct access to "real life." And on yet a third hand, the writer—Gold, in this case—must take advantage of those others who are being turned into meat as we speak, feeding himself off of the pleasures and misfortunes of their lives.

He cannot, therefore, be totally unthinking, for he must calibrate his own machinery to "arrange" his words.[75]

Two parallel expectations thus dominated theories of proletarian literature in the 1930s. First, literature's task was to mediate between individual experience and generalized social forces by using typical protagonists and situations. Second, authors themselves would embody this mediation by their affiliation with both the proletariat and a professional class of writers. Early justifications of *Call It Sleep* as a proletarian novel thus relied both on David's typicality and on the biographical facts of Roth's own conversion to revolutionary politics. For Roth had been awakened to Communism after writing *Call It Sleep*; he now aspired to write more explicitly leftist fiction.[76] David thus represented the artist as a pre-revolutionary child, on the inevitable road to political consciousness by means of increasingly powerful observations of the world around him. David, in other words, in his attention to detail and preoccupation with patterns and repetition, shared characteristics both with Roth and with the ideal of the proletarian novel itself. This equivalence among David's typicality, Roth's life, and the novel's accuracy extended not only to the physical details of ghetto life, but to the phenomenological experience of growing up among those details.

As the following sections will explore, however, *Call It Sleep* both explicitly encourages generalizations from David's experience and thematizes the problems with viewing David as a type. While the interplay between the novel's disparate voices—

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[75] Dos Passos himself would turn away from the idea of the proletarian author in part because of this paradox, moving to a view of "The Writer as Technician" (a 1935 essay) whose business was to observe and record reality, rather than to gain experience with proletarian labor himself. See Hanley for more on proletarian literature's double bind between authenticity and a bourgeois literary market and formal techniques.

[76] See Lyons 19-21 for the details of Roth's political awakening.

David's internal monologue, the dialects and songs of the street and of religion, and the third-person narrator who seems to translate David's experiences into adult language—indicates an easy slippage between personal and shared experience, the novel also cautions us against doing so. The novel abounds with repetition, but its repetition speaks to David's private obsessions rather than societal structures; and although it contains descriptive passages appropriate to any realist novel, the expectation that we can generalize from these descriptions fails under scrutiny.

Repetition and representativeness: David's typicality

The repetition that structured proletarian literature in both large and small ways would, proletarian theorists believed, reinforce the novels' claims to representativeness, and encourage readers to identify the particular travails of their protagonists with their own lives. Certainly, the obsessively repetitive symbolism that pervades *Call It Sleep* has contributed to critical evaluations of the novel that extrapolate from David's individual experience to socially representative categories of Jew, immigrant, and modernist. David's idiosyncratic collection of significant objects and events thematically dominates the novel, and this symbolism recurs frequently: the novel's four main sections are named after the four most dominant symbols, the cellar, the picture, the coal, and the rail. Yet, as we shall see, the novel also questions the entire enterprise of generalization because David's experience is so intensely particular. In this way, it stands in contrast to the paradigmatic proletarian novel, Gold's *Jews Without Money*, which will periodically recur as a touchstone in the following discussion, both for its agglomeration of proletarian tropes and Gold's prolific theorizations of proletarian literature. While the rhetorical effects of the two novels are very different, their formal strategies often overlap, so that if

Jews Without Money can illuminate *Call It Sleep*'s kinship to proletarian fiction, *Call It Sleep*, in turn, comments on the efficacy of *Jews Without Money*'s form and conventions.

Call It Sleep has two crucial formal elements that will underpin this discussion of particularity and generalization. The first, and most obvious, is the novel's use of dialect, which underscores David's membership in a number of linguistic and cultural communities. Roth translates Yiddish, the language that David uses within his family and that is generally used among David's parents' generation of Jews, almost word for word, so that expressions that would sound ordinary in Yiddish take on a literary cast in English: “Shudder when I speak to you,” Albert orders (77). Only once, at the novel's first line of dialogue, does Roth remind us that Yiddish is the language in question; from then on, we recognize Yiddish through the dramatic cadences it assumes for non-native speakers. English, the language David uses with other boys his age on the street and with non-Jewish adults, is transcribed with heavy accents: “Id's” substitutes for “it's,” “mine fodder” for “my father,” and “kentcha” for “can't you” (21). Both languages encourage reading slowly, the one because of its poetry, the other because of the effort required to decipher its accent; at the same time, the occasional cascades of English are all the more dramatic for being transcribed as, fundamentally, sound effects, like the boy Yussie's description of catching a rat in a trap: “An nen my fodder takes it out and he put it in nuh bag and trew it out f'om the winner. Boof! he fell inna guttah. Ooh wotta rat he wuz. My mudder wuz runnin' aroun', an aroun' an after, my fodder kept on spittin' in nuh sink. Kcha!” (49). Only the context enables us to read “winner” as “window,” and the slow process of sounding out the English gives even more zest to the comically dramatic exclamations “Boof!,” “Kcha!,” and especially the under-punctuated “Ooh wotta rat he

wuz."[77] Spoken language here operates at a dramatic remove from ordinary language, making David's self-imposed task of interpreting the world around him seem necessary, and naturalizing the literary language of the narrator in contrast. The novel's two other spoken languages, Polish and Hebrew, are even more mysterious—the Polish that Genya and her sister Bertha speak to keep secrets from David never appears in the novel, while the Hebrew that David recites uncomprehendingly in cheder is printed phonetically and translated sporadically, in bits and pieces. Like David, non-Hebrew speakers must piece together the meaning of the Hebrew texts through the memory of Bible stories and contextual hints that David's rabbi lets slip, with the ongoing potential for uncorrected misinterpretation.

David's immersion in a number of linguistic communities in succession, and the heightened way in which Roth transcribes or translates of each of them, has led critics to situate *Call It Sleep* in the context of American ethnic fiction, representative of the wave of novels such as *Jews Without Money* and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* in which immigrant children came to terms with their ghetto upbringings.[78] Yet the critical consensus has agreed with Fiedler that the novel does not fall into the clichés of more sociological portrayals of the ghetto that, in the first few decades of the century, often

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[77] Harris argues that the novelist Abraham Cahan's use of this system of translation treats accented English as a joke: it leaves no room for "individual psychology," which is "glossed and mocked, rather than explored for its representative status" (138). While Yussie's speech seems intentionally funny, *Call It Sleep* treats the children's interactions and games with total seriousness.

[78] For discussions of the novel's heteroglossia, and of David's participation in different linguistic communities, see Wirth-Nesher's afterword to *Call It Sleep* and Buelens' Bakhtinian evaluation of the novel. Sherman analyzes the novel as part of the lineage of immigrant fiction that "demonstrates the existence" of immigrant culture "and a tongue capable of expressing it" (87). Klein elaborates the relationship between this genre of immigrant fiction and typification, arguing that ghetto authors "tended… to suppress individualities of attitude for the sake, precisely, of typicality" (34).

played to type.[79] This conclusion stems, in large part, from the novel's second dominant formal feature, its strict focalization through David's consciousness.

David's interpretations are structurally connected and given special significance by this focalization, which makes what would be typical experiences accessible to readers only through the prism of David's often idiosyncratic perspective. The narrative usually fluctuates between free indirect discourse, in which the narrator uses relatively literary language to relay David's observations, and David's inner monologue quoted directly.[80] These quoted monologues (to use Dorrit Cohn's terminology), vivid stream-of-consciousness passages, often occur at moments of great stress, when David's thoughts become particularly fragmented and attuned to his moment-to-moment physical movements or reactions.[81] When David, fleeing a feared punishment, follows a chain of telephone poles out of his neighborhood and gets lost, his thoughts are initially set off from the narration with dashes, as in the following: "—Next one.... Race him! … Hello Mr. High Wood. … Good-bye, Mr. High Wood. I can go faster. … Hello, Second Mr. High Wood. ..." (93, ellipses in original). The paragraph immediately following, while implicitly still quoted monologue, is no longer clearly punctuated as such: "They dropped behind him. Three. … Four. … Five. . . . Six. . . . drew near, floated by in silence like tall masts. Seven. . . . Eight. . . . Nine. . . . Ten. . . . He stopped counting them." David's

[79] See Harris for descriptions of the turn-of-the-century immigrant tales that "often recreat[ed] stereotypes prevalent in mainstream culture rather than representing ethnic characters' own subjectivity" (128).

[80] Diamant categorizes these narrative stances into the "experiencing self," David's phenomenological registering of his experience, roughly corresponding to quoted inner monologue; the "narrating self," which decodes and "order[s] the impressions of the experiencing self," roughly corresponding to free indirect discourse. There is a third type of narration, what Diamant calls the "authorial universe," the brief passages where an omniscient third-person narrator abandons David's perspective entirely (338). These comprise the prologue and three of the book's 56 chapters; the vast majority of the novel is focalized through David.

[81] See Cohn 13-14 for a brief discussion of quoted monologue as "a character's mental discourse" (14).

walking speed and the successive arrival at and departure from each successive telephone pole presumably determine the length of the elliptical pauses, attuned to his bodily rhythms. But the very personal rhythmic activity of David's walk is juxtaposed with a simile that compares the poles with tall masts and their passing with the silent movement of ships. The simile slips in between episodes of counting, camouflaged by the surrounding language; quoted monologue suddenly shifts to free indirect discourse in a conspicuously more literary style. While these monologues oscillate between the two types of narration, they are confined to David's perspective, lending him narrative authority and underscoring the uniqueness of his point of view.

The specificity of David's subjective musings is often reinforced by slippage into the realm of aural abstraction, tied closely to David's bodily rhythms. While David's greetings to the telephone poles correspond to his visual experience, as he gets more and more lost, he stops addressing either them or himself, as his inner monologue turns into inner chant. It is no longer set off from the rest of the text via punctuation; the pulsating rhythm of David's walk takes over. His growing hunger means that his fantasy begins with food:

> Sour cream with eggs. Sour cream with what else? Borscht... Strawberries... Radishes... Bananas... Borscht, strawberries, radishes, bananas. Borscht, strawberries, apples and strudel. No. They didn't eat with sour cream. Sour. Cream. Sour. Cream. Like it, like it, like it. I—like—it. I like cake but I don't like herring. I like cake, but I don't like what? I like cake, but I don't like, like, like, herring. I don't don't—How far was it still? (95, ellipses in original)

While the words David chants all have meaning to him, even to the extent of expressing his preference for cake over herring, they span a wide range of the spectrum between, at one imagined extreme, pure nonsense syllables, and, at the other, language that carries no

extra-semantic weight or sound whatsoever. Each repetition of “borscht” loses some of its meaning as “beet soup,” and becomes more of a linguistic placeholder whose rhythm spurs on David’s walk. Punctuation, too, assumes a non-semantic function, aligning the chant to David’s steps rather than clarifying grammatical structure, until the final interrupting question at the end. At the same time that these rhythms bear deep significance to David, on the level of both his physical movement and his personal preferences, the cadences of his mental speech blur its particularity. They also, through this rhythmic pulse, invite the reader into David's experience, suggesting some commonality on the level of, if nothing else, a shared cadence of walking.

David’s quoted monologues are often dominated by similar oscillations between semantic and non-semantic uses of language, suggesting that the rhythms of his thoughts might afford us access to some kind of generalizable experience. Walking along the street, trying to figure out what is disturbing him, he thinks, perhaps, it is the problem of what the Chinese laundry man’s name is: “Maybe his name? Mr—Mr. What. Yes. Maybe. No—But—Approaching the laundry, he gazed up at the low sign, the dull black letters against the dull red. C-h-Chuh-Ch-ar-ley. Charley, American name. … L-i-ng. Ling. Ling-a-ling.” David first sounds out the phonemes of “Charley Ling,” pauses over their Americanness, and arrives at the abstract sound of a bell ringing. On the same walk, he shifts between levels of reference in the opposite direction, starting with the overheard cries of a parrot and a canary—“Awk! awk!” and “Eee-tee-tee-tweet!”—first comparing them to “a smooth and a rusty pulley,” then wondering about interpretation and meaning: “He wondered if they understood each other. Maybe it was like Yiddish and English, or Yiddish and Polish” (174). Sounds, to David, are not simply an ever-present background

noise, but a demand for interpretation and reinterpretation; his subsequent associations often suggest common themes of Americanness and assimilation, as well as David's struggle with the polyglot nature of his existence.[82]

David's associative tendencies stem, in part, from a paranoid belief in the mutability and fundamental arbitrariness of language. He takes this lesson from his father, whose speech David interprets only as threat, no matter what the supposed content. Confronting David after he kicks his friend Yussie, Albert commands him, "Speak!... Tell me did you do this? … Answer me!" David, cowering, cannot take these words literally, as a request for explanation, but understands them as an inevitable accusation: "Answer me, his words rang out. Answer me, but they meant, Despair! Who could answer his father? In that dread summons the judgment was already sealed" (83). The fact that David's cringing attitude then makes this interpretation a self-fulfilling prophecy—Albert beats him with a coat hanger—only reinforces David's belief that the semantic meaning of his father's speech is trivial. Words have hidden meaning to those who pronounce them, and the listener must flounder to interpret the private meaning the other wishes to convey. David's first lesson in interpretation is that language carries meaning solely based on its extra-semantic content—tone, speaker, intention, situational context—and is thus infinitely malleable. This lesson is reinforced when Yussie's older sister Annie convinces David to agree to "play bad" without knowing it, by using allusions and hints. Ashamed and scared, he later looks back on his agreement with chagrin: "Everything changed. Even words. Words, you said. Wanna, you said. I wanna.

[82] See Adams for a discussion of how David "constitutes his world through listening"; as that quote implies, Adams considers David as the recipient, rather than the producer, of his neighborhood's soundscape (51).

Yea. I wanna. What? You know what. They were something else, something horrible" (102). Rather than deciding to push for more specifics in the future, David leaps in the opposite direction, determined to confront and master the "game" that Annie and his father have taught him. In other words, if they can twist words to produce feelings of fear, shame, and guilt, then David too can turn language into an incantation.

Proletarian fiction, too, often confronts the question of language-learning as a series of embarrassments that progress toward mastery, whether a protagonist is a first- or second-generation immigrant or simply engrossed in learning the technical language of a trade. In a similar moment of linguistic confusion over the language of sexuality, Gold's protagonist (named Mikey after himself) is teased by Kid Louie, a local gang leader who orders him to repeat the code word "Barlow" to the rest of the gang. When he does, he learns from their "exuberant comments" that it signifies that Kid Louie has brought a girl up to the gang headquarters; "ashamed" of his newfound knowledge, Mikey refuses payment and runs away (27). Mikey's education in the mysteries of street language parallels his formal education, during which he learns a simple patriotic rhyme that produces instant applause, cheers, and even the gift of a pretzel from his father's friends.

David's determination to master the seemingly arbitrary languages around him, then, puts him in a lineage of immigrant protagonists. Perhaps the most vivid support for the critical categorization of David as "ethnic modernist" lies in moments when he adapts rhythmic language, song, or chant for his own purposes. Afraid of a funeral procession he has just seen outside his building, David instructs himself to "make a noise… What? Noise. Any." But the noise he beings with, the formless vowels "Aaaaah! Ooooh!," isn't enough to dispel his fear. He sings instead "My country 'tis of thee" as he charges

upstairs, reaching his apartment by “Land where our fodders died!” (62). David has, one presumes, learned the song in the ritual of his school day, where it is an abstract pledge of loyalty to a country where, of course, none of David’s forefathers have actually died. The very meaninglessness of the song to David, however, only increases its efficacy as pure form, waiting to be filled with whatever content is dictated by the context (in school, patriotism; in the apartment building, the comfort of imagined communities of school and nation). The immigrant makes aesthetic and practical use of American material; the young modernist subject demonstrates the mutability of language and his creative attempts to come to terms with the shifting language of the world around him.

However, David does not generally grapple with the conditions of his existence through the use of abstract form and rhythm—instead, he takes comfort in its escapist possibilities. Afraid both of his current existence and of not existing at all, he seeks sensory anchors that will allow him to fantasize undisturbed. As he descends the tenement stairs, the sound of his feet on the treads gives him comfort that he is “actually there and not dreaming,” but dreaming is precisely what he longs to be doing, as long as he can control his own fantasies (20). When he arrives on the street, playing with “the rhythmic, accurate teeth” of a watch cog, he uses the chanting of neighborhood girls to imagine his own origins:

> Waltuh, Waltuh, Wiuhlflowuh,
> Growin’ up so high;
> So we are all young ladies,
> An’ we are ready to die. (23)

Walter Wildflower, David imagines, is a little boy whom he had met as a baby in Austria: “He had seen him standing on a hill, far away. Filled with a warm, nostalgic

mournfulness, he shut his eyes. Fragments of forgotten rivers floated under the lids, dusty roads, fathomless curve of trees, a branch in a window under flawless light" (23). While David has no direct memory of Austria, the song enables him to create memories of "a world somewhere, somewhere else," a world that contrasts with his present life of city streets and dark stairways.

The comfort David takes from the song is the comfort both of possible alternatives to his everyday existence, and of not having to commit to those alternatives. The reverie is sparked by the evocation of a particular place and time in which David's alter ego could exist, but its effect on David is a state of utter selflessness: "He seemed to rise and fall on waves somewhere without him. Within him a voice spoke with no words but with the shift of slow flame…" (23, ellipses original). The pleasure of imagined nostalgia for his own unremembered babyhood manifests itself as a Freudian death drive, the desire to return to a state of unconsciousness, a place without desire or choices, surrounded by comforting maternal rhythm. This dialectic between, on the one hand, David's self-mythologizing—his reveling in possible worlds—and his desire to completely suspend his sense of self, on the other, structures the novel's use of rhythm as both a typifying and a negating force.

This use of abstract repetition is itself also overdeterminedly Jewish, by virtue both of Judaism's thematic presence in the novel and of the stereotypical associations between Jews and non-semantic sound. As Sander Gilman details:

> The image of the 'Jew who sounds Jewish' represents the Jew as possessing all languages or no language of his or her own; of having a hidden language which mirrors the perverse or peculiar nature of the Jew; of being unable to truly command the national language of the world in which he/she lives, or indeed, even of possessing a language of true revelation, such as Hebrew. (12)

The fear that Jews would undermine the stability of national languages by their simultaneous power over and submission to linguistic rhythms, and by their uncontrolled dissemination of non-semantic sound, came to modernist literature by way of anti-Semites like Richard Wagner, who theorized that Jewish sound and song was contentless, such that the listener was forced to linger "on its repulsive *how*, rather than on any meaning of its intrinsic *what*" (quoted in McGee 512). David's self-negation via chant is therefore strongly marked as Jewish even before he engages directly with Jewish ritual song and texts.

At first the novel seems to confirm this suspicion of Jews as preoccupied with the form, rather than the content, of rhythmic language. When Genya lights the Sabbath candles and begins to pray, David, in a moment of intense communion with his mother, immerses himself in the rhythms of worship without attending to its specificities. David's awareness trails off into a nebulous glow:

> The flame crept tipsily up the wick, steadied, mellowed the steadfast brass below, glowed on each knot of the crisp golden braid of the bread on the napkin. Twilight vanished, the kitchen gleamed. Day that had begun in labor and disquiet, blossomed now in candlelight and sabbath.
>
> With a little, deprecating laugh, his mother stood before the candles, and bowing her head before them, murmured through the hands she spread before her face the ancient prayer for the Sabbath …
>
> The hushed hour, the hour of tawny beatitude … (71, ellipses in original)

David's mental easing is concretized in the flame—first tipsy, then steadying on the wick, mesmerizing him with both sound and sight. The description of the room, focalized through David but given symbolic weight by the more literary tone of free indirect discourse, suggests an inevitable link between Judaic ritual language, rhythm, and David's sense of contentment. The chapter ends, trailing off into unthinking comfort; yet

the beginning of the next chapter picks up immediately with his mother preparing for his father's return home by lighting the gas lamp, which “condense[s] the candle flames to irrelevant kernels of yellow” (71). Judaism here seems to be strongly and nostalgically allied with the past, and David's attachment to Jewish ritual would thus make him a throwback, a mystic struggling in a secular world.[83]

Yet the novel mistrusts the implicit association of Jewish chant and ritual to a mystical rejection of the self and an embrace of the unthinking past. While rhythm maintains its connection to the sacred, it is not clear that this relationship is inevitable or infallible, as when David's Aunt Bertha deliberately uses a parody of a religious litany to annoy Albert: “As usual, whenever his father's wrath was kindling, Aunt Bertha never seemed to realize it. And now as before, she launched out unheeding upon a sea of extravagant vision. And almost intoned. 'We'll have a white bath-tub! Hot water! A white bath-tub! Let it be the smoothest in the land! Let it be the slipperiest in the land! Like snot let it be slippery!—'”(186). Bertha's invocation is a rare moment of out and out humor, which knowingly (despite Bertha's assumed ignorance of her provocative needling) parodies the anti-Semitic fear that religious cadences could be filled with any content, especially content betraying a longing for material advancement, as Bertha does.

In itself, this distrust of religious cadences in favor of concrete aspiration would make the novel more proletarian than not—if religion is the opiate of the masses, then Bertha's focus on material lack would seem to be a step forward. One of the more poignant figures in *Jews Without Money* is the old clothes peddler whose “lamentations”

[83] Readings of the novel that center on its Judaism agree that the novel shares the problem of assimilation of Jewish traditions to modern American life, often complicated by Oedipal drama, with other Jewish fiction. See Fiedler's characterization that “there is surely no more Jewish book among American novels” (“Neglected” 104) and Kazin's introduction to *Call It Sleep*.

haunt Gold through the years: “I cash clothes, I cash clothes, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” (56). While Gold is sympathetic toward his old religion, throughout the novel, religious Jews come in for their share of criticism for hypocrisy, sham holiness, and taking advantage of the power they have over young cheder students like Mikey. Poverty trumps Judaism as the novel's structuring condition: when Gold learns about Communism at the novel's end, after all, he addresses the workers' revolution as “the true Messiah” (309).

David's judgment about the definition, use, and significance of sacred rhythm, however, makes it impossible to categorize him as either old-fashioned Jew or assimilatedly progressive proletarian. While he does associate Jewish chant with mystical peace, a lack of self-consciousness, and the alternative worlds of his imagination, he does so in a decidedly personal, and declaredly private, way. His belief in the magical power of the Hebrew language—a power that nonetheless speaks only to him—manifests soon after he starts attending cheder, where he has learned to pronounce, though not to translate, Hebrew:

> Spring had come and with the milder weather, a sense of wary contentment, a curious pause in himself as though he were waiting for some sign, some seal that would forever relieve him of watchfulness and forever insure his well-being. Sometimes he thought he had already beheld the sign—he went to cheder; he often went to the synagogue on Saturdays; he could utter God's syllables glibly. But he wasn't quite sure. Perhaps the sign would be revealed when he finally learned to translate Hebrew. At any rate, ever since he had begun attending cheder, life had leveled out miraculously, and this he attributed to his increasing nearness to God. (221)

David here occupies a suspended position between self-awareness and self-negation: while he analyzes his life closely, and recognizes his own contentment, he sees himself as an instrument of someone else's hermeneutic code, which he must decipher and master to

make any sense of his own future. God, acting through the Hebrew words David pronounces, forces David to undergo a trial of his own interpretive capacity: can he recognize a sign when he sees one? As the authority over language and over David's destiny, God might arbitrarily change that sign, or the means or moment of its revelation, hence David's wariness. The passage continues by elucidating the work that David must do to gain control over the language of God and his father:

> He never thought about his father's job any longer. There was no more of that old dread of waiting for the cycle [of employment, outbursts of rage, and firing] to fulfill itself. There no longer seemed to be any cycle. … All one had to do was to imagine that it wasn't there, just as the cellar in one's house could be conjured away if there were a bright yard between the hallway and the cellar-stairs. One needed only a bright yard. At times David almost believed he had found that brightness. (221)

David takes responsibility for finding a divine hermeneutic code that will allow him to explain away the mysterious actions, statements, and innuendos of those around him. This task itself produces its own cycle, as Naomi Diamant points out, for David's interpretive drive encompasses, processes, and spits out everything around him as his imagination "reorganizes reality into its own, almost hermetic pattern of symbol and meaning, exerting its own pull on reality. … Objects such as Albert's whip first become symbols, and then, under the crystallizing pressure of the imagination, are materialized back into physical objects of central importance" (347-8).

Nowhere does this cycle, and David's drive for submission to and control over the magical force he attributes to sacred language, appear more clearly than in his encounter with a passage from the book of Isaiah in cheder. Still ignorant of the meaning of the Hebrew text he recites, he overhears his instructor teach another student the meaning of this passage, in which an angel purifies Isaiah by holding a fiery coal to his lips.

Fascinated by the story, David associates the coal with his fear of dark cellars, turning an already significant location into a place with magical potential, and develops a chain of metonymic associations that justify a continued obsession with the story. First he wonders what Isaiah could have said to make his mouth so in need of purification, and, deciding it must have been "dirty words," can't avoid listing them to himself: "Shit, pee, fuckenbestit—Stop! You're sayin' it yourself. It's a sin again!" (231). The mere knowledge of dirty language, not to mention the "playing bad" in which he has been complicit, makes David himself in need of purification, and he decides that the flash of electrical light he has seen coming from streetcar tracks must be same purifying light. This association takes place not as a conscious structuring of a mythology, but through repeated sound and chant, as David sits in the cheder yard and gives himself over to free association. The sound of someone chopping food nearby lulls him into a condition in which "words flowed out of him of their own accord":

> In the dark, chop, chop. In the river, showed him, showed. In the dark, in the river was there. Came out if He wanted, was there. …
>
> – Could break it in his hands if He wanted. Could hold it in His hands if He wanted. Could break it, could hold it, could break it, could hold it, could break it, could hold it, was there.
>
> —In the dark, in the hallways, was there. In the dark, in the cellars was there. Where cellars is locked, where cellars is coal, where cellars is coal, is
>
> Coal! (254-55)

As David's chant gains momentum, it unifies the sounds of everyday life, the fearsome aspects of David's existence, and the religious mythology he has learned in cheder. These connections allow David to create an interpretive framework for his experience as if by magic—simply by thinking it so. To put a seal on this magical conflation of levels, David climbs through the window of the deserted cheder and recites Isaiah to himself, although

he cannot understand the words. Roth here quotes an entire paragraph of Hebrew, forcing the reader, like David, to sound out phonetically words that no one except Hebrew speakers can understand. What the language signifies for David, however, is beyond meaning: “All his senses dissolved into the sound. The lines, unknown, dimly surmised, thundered in his heart with limitless meaning, rolled out and flooded the last shores of his being. Unmoored in space, he saw one walking on impalpable pavements that rose with the rising trees. Or were they trees or telegraph-poles, each crossed and leafy…” (255).

David’s physical pleasure in the recitation turns him into a feedback generator, producing the sound that then “dissolves” all particulars of his sensory existence. Because he can project his own mythological meanings “limitlessly” onto the Isaiah story, and onto the unfamiliar Hebrew words he recites, he ascribes limitless power to the text, power enough to subsume him in a swell of generalized emotion. This transcendent experience, however, takes the form of another powerfully rhythmic experience that David has already had: walking down the street watching the rise and fall of telegraph poles. He can imagine sublimity only in a form particularized to his own experience; his rhythmic transports speak to him alone.

When the story of Isaiah recurs, it is again significant to David on the basis of his private symbolism. Reb Pankower, the cheder instructor, instructs David, his prize pupil, to recite it to a visiting rabbi. He reads powerfully: “Not as a drone this time, like syllables pulled from a drab and tedious reel, but again as it was at first, a chant, a hymn, as though a soaring presence behind the words pulsed and stressed a meaning. A cadence like a flock of pigeons, vast, heaven-filling, swept and wheeled, glittered, darkened, kindled again, like wind over prairies” (367). The narration here slips back and forth

between different levels of analogy: while it describes the recitation straightforwardly as a chant and, in David's fervency, a hymn, it also compares the reading to a diverse set of material objects. The "drab and tedious reel" of syllables anachronistically evokes a cassette tape, but has no clear material referent; it suggests a string of words imaginatively strung together in sequence much as David metonymically links words that bear personal symbolism. The flock of pigeons again reminds us of an experience particular to David, for, earlier in the novel, he observes the birds "wheeling" over the water of the East River, where they "hung like a poised and never-raveling smoke" and "glittered like rippling water in the sun" (296). David's memory connects these two moments to the extent of using the same verbs, which themselves are strung across the page like chanted syllables. Moreover, he compares the pigeons to "wind over prairies," an image that he knows only from Genya's descriptions of Austrian meadows. While wind, like flocks of pigeons, can come and go, fluctuating in its movements, the links between wind, pigeons, and scripture are tenuous, holding up only because they belong to David's private chain of associations. The chance encounters and references of his daily life not only become incantatory phrases, but also structure the novel's use of figurative language, using pigeons and prairies to stand in for more poetically conventional tropes.

And David's reading, much like Roth's narration, is convincing: at least, both rabbis are startled by the conviction with which he reads words that are incomprehensible to him. Reb Pankower comments, "If I didn't know him, I'd think he understood!" (367). While the rabbis take David's fascination with the scripture and emotive talent to be scholarly aptitude and a commitment to the Jewish faith, David believes in the magical power of the language he recites to shape his own existence, taking a belief in the

arbitrariness of language to extremes. When Reb Schulim praises him conventionally, exclaiming, “Blessed is your mother, my son!,” this chance mention of Genya sets David to weeping for shame at his perceived betrayal of his cousin Esther. Enthralled by the power of storytelling and recitation, David experiences a “compulsion greater than he could withstand” to lie to the rabbis, telling them that his real mother is dead, and that his father is a church organist in Austria. This lie, which brings on the novel's climactic events, seems inevitable, because David feels the power of these linguistic associations so strongly.

We recognize, and David himself knows, that these associations are not easily verbalized or communicated to other people in the novel. Genya’s joking comment on David’s silent receptivity illustrates one constitutive limit of his magical thinking. “I really believe… that you think of nothing. Now honest, isn’t that so? Aren’t you just a pair of eyes and ears! You see, you hear, you remember, but when will you know?” (173). David’s interpretive drive stops short of knowledge, or of anything that can be transparently verbalized or communicated to others or to himself. It is by definition unable to be articulated in words other than itself, as David produces a bedrock of belief from his private experiences.

Yet the process of reading *Call It Sleep* is most definitely not one of confusion in the face of impenetrable or opaque symbolism. The deeply personal nature of David's associative thinking is precisely the feature that makes his mythology most accessible to us, since the novel so strictly confines itself to David's point of view. To the extent that David himself relates personally significant aspects of his daily life to each other in a network of symbolism, the novel is sympathetic to his project, structuring its narrative

and overarching structure around his mythology as well. *Call It Sleep* thus shares with the proletarian novel a fixation with repetitive structures, reinforced by the small-scale rhythms that give those repetitions rhetorical force. It situates David as a typical immigrant, modernist, and Jewish subject, not only categorizing him, but doing so in a way that encourages identification on the part of readers. Yet its constant slippage between interpretive categories and levels of narration pushes the bounds of this typicality, taking patterning to extremes. Oscillating between the intensely personal and the totalizingly general, the novel first persuades us of David's typicality through rhythm and repetition, then overextends that typicality to a ludicrous degree. It suggests that the central aspiration of theorists of proletarian fiction—that readers would extrapolate socially valid interpretations from individually-generated responses to literature—will result either in self-fixated solipsism or in overly general and therefore meaningless categorizations.

Looking at details

Proletarian literature was able to make a powerful case for readerly extrapolation both through insistent repetition and through narratorial reinforcement of the idea that the details selected for emphasis were so representative as to be trivial. In other words, the poor living and working conditions portrayed in proletarian novels were so ubiquitous that they produced a surplus of details: any individual image could be altered or replaced without an effect on the novel's polemics. The opening paragraphs of *Jews Without Money* are simultaneously vivid—note the overabundance of active verbs—and, Gold implies, relevant to ghettos around the world:

> I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy.

> It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces.
>
> Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks.
>
> People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried.
>
> A parrot cursed. Ragged kids played under truck-horses. Fat housewives fought from stoop to stoop. A beggar sang.
>
> At the livery stable coach drivers lounged on a bench. They hee-hawed with laughter, they guzzled cans of beer.
>
> Pimps, gamblers and red-nosed bums; peanut politicians, pugilists in sweaters; tinhorn sports and tall longshoremen in overalls. An endless pageant of East Side life passed through the wicker doors of Jake Wolf's saloon. (13-14)

The novelistic practice of observing and categorizing urban passers-by has a venerable realist lineage in America, and Gold's descriptions certainly provide easy labels for each exhibit in the "pageant" in which Mikey lives.[84] But Gold emphasizes the universality of these categories: they are timeless, as the repeated "always" and "never" suggest, and each type of individual repeats the same actions. The simple subject-verb sentence construction lends a rhythmic cadence to each paragraph, implying that the actors are interchangeable with each other—parrots, babies, and beggars come and go, each producing noise, each contributing to the miserable crowding of the ghetto but not individually responsible for it. Undergirding this impression is Gold's assertion that his own memory remains accurate and vivid—at the end of this opening section, he insists that "I can hear it now"—and that it accords with historical reality ("the notorious Bowery") (14). Gold's unrelentingly blunt statements both reinforce the plausibility of his memory and establish translatable categories of people and living conditions.

Call It Sleep is a limit case for proletarian fiction in its presentation of such visual

[84] Poe's obsessively detailing narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" and Howells' middle-class shock at the ethnic crowds on a subway train in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, for example, share a focused isolation of details from the confusion of urban life.

and aural details as well as in its use of repetition, for it includes both an overabundance of precise detail and an insistence on the subjective quality of the conclusions able to be drawn from such observations. Early in the novel, it at first seems as though the narrator channels David's observations with precisely the kind of attention required to promote extrapolations from his experience. When David first walks into his neighbors' front room, the mass of detail situates us in a recognizable ethnic and historical milieu that, we may infer, is characteristic of the immigrant ghetto experience. Hanging on the wall are "two pairs of yellowed portraits, two busts of wrinkled women with unnatural masses of black hair, and two busts of old men who wore ringlets under their skull caps and beards on their chins. With an expression of bleak hostility in their flat faces, they looked down at David." These ancestors, prototypically Jewish in their traditional hairstyles and wigs, emblematize the discomfort of importing traditions to a new land. Moreover, along with the "dark and portly furniture" that crowds the room and "a swollen purple plush chair, embroidered with agitated parrots of various hues," they suggest the relative prosperity some immigrant families had to sacrifice when they moved to America, and the unfamiliarity of David's generation with such standards of living (48). The description thus suggests that David represents the Jewish immigrant experience; its emphasis on the detail of furnishings, in particular, places the narrator in the high realist tradition of sociological or historical observation.[85]

Yet the slippage between observation and personal mythology we encountered in David's repetitive thinking occurs in passages of narrative description as well, making it difficult to know what portions of David's experience might be extrapolated to the level

[85] More than any other scene in the novel, this passage evokes Jameson's "realist-floor plan," the interior milieu whose minute descriptions bear historical and sociological significance.

of social or historical structures. The free indirect discourse switches so smoothly between David's lived experience and narrative interpretation that it is easy to elide David's point of view with that of the narrator, and vice-versa. When David, for instance, gains a sense of comfort and security from his new apartment building's well-lit staircase, his reaction soon slips into estranging metaphor:

> He became very fond of his own floor. There was a frosted skylight over the roofstair housing that diffused a cloudy yellow glow at morning and a soft grey haze at afternoon. After one climbed from the tumult of the street, climbed the lower, shadowier stairs, a little tense, listening to toilets, entering this light was like reaching a haven. There was a mild, relaxing hush about it, a luminous silence, static and embalmed. … These [stairs] that led up to the roof still had a pearliness mingled with their grey. Each slab was still square and clean. No palms of sliding hands had buffed the wrinkled paint from off their banisters. No palms had oiled them tusk-smooth and green as an axe-helve. They were inviolable those stairs, guarding the light and the silence. (144)

The passage's first three sentences are consistent with David's point of view, including his "fondness" for light and his search for safe "havens" in a threatening world. The fourth sentence, however, abandons David's system of evaluating the world (light is positive, shadow negative) for a different point of view in which "silence, static and embalmed" no longer signifies danger and the ominous presence of death in everyday life, as it does to the younger David when he runs up the stairs in his first apartment. Instead, silence and light are paired together, so that embalming conveys peace and the suspension of anxiety. It can only do so, however, from the perspective of a narrator who translates David's sense of peace into terms that would not be intelligible to David's own mythology.

The second half of the passage takes place in suspended animation: while the stairs are "still" pristine, this litotes suggests that repeated usage will, inevitably, soon damage them. The narration implies that this future decay is predictable both by David,

who might extrapolate the damage from the stairs lower down in the building, and by a narrative voice speaking from the future, already having seen the accumulation of dirt and signs of constant use. But only the latter voice could produce such strange comparisons between banisters, tusks, and axe handles; it is hindsight that suggests a contrast between David, our sensitive young observer, and a kind of primitivism of the lower stairs, whose inhabitants occupy a world of hunting and chopping wood, that almost likens the stairs to cave art. When we return at the end of the passage to a state of suspended animation, the stairs “inviolable” and incorruptible, the suggestion that the entire passage is told from the point of view of a future David, looking back through his memories at a moment preserved in time, is strong indeed.

In contrast, Gold's use of descriptive imagery can, at times, be so stilted that the distance between the narrator and any kind of experiencing consciousness seems infinite. On a single page, we get “[the rain] spattered on the tin roofs like a gangster's blood,” “[it smelled] of decay, as if some one had dumped a ton of rotten apples,” and “I heard the hum of sewing machines, surf on a desolate island” (61). These figures are not merely laughable when taken in such close proximity; they produce a noir-like sense of detachment from phenomenological experience and underscore the mood of violence and despair. What they do not attempt to do, however, is mediate between Mikey's experiencing consciousness and Gold's future evaluation and interpretation of that experience: Gold's perspective dominates, including his facility, as a professional writer, with simile and metaphor.

No such evaluative distance exists in *Call It Sleep*: the narrator, who might have emerged as an ironic counterpoint to David's single-minded hermeneutic perspective,

instead reinforces it. When David observes Bertha's suitor, Mr. Sternowitz, he extrapolates personality traits from physical details in the realist tradition—his aesthetic perceptions slide into ethical reliability.

> He was, as Aunt Bertha had said, a little man, very long-nosed, blue-eyed, and sallow. A pale, narrow mustache, the tips of which he kept trying to draw down and bite, followed the margin of thin lips. His ears were overly large, soft-looking and fuzzy almost as red plush. In his small mouth as he spoke, gold teeth gleamed, and his sallow brow that knitted easily into long wrinkles, crept up in quick perspectives into the brownish kinky hair. Above his mustache, his face appeared good-natured, meek yet shrewd, below it, despite the small mouth and receding chin, he gave one the impression of peevish stubbornness. Altogether he looked rather insignificant and even a little absurd. And David scrutinizing him felt increasingly disappointed not so much for himself but for his aunt's sake (180).

Like the description of the stairwell, this passage takes place over a prolonged period of time, as the repeated verbs and adverbs of habitual action indicate (Sternowitz “kept trying,” his brow “knitted easily,” David “scrutinizing... felt increasingly disappointed”). Yet it remains the point of view of David-the-child, as we know from the “quick perspectives” of Sternowitz's forehead, indicative of the foreshortening a child experiences viewing an adult from below. And it is therefore David's evaluative perspective which we trust when he links Sternowitz's physical attributes to his personality traits in an inference made possible only by descriptive metonymy. Chewing on one's mustache might well indicate nervousness, but it is “peevish stubbornness” that David identifies; there is no total identification between physical traits and character. We trust David's judgment of Sternowitz's character precisely because he is so capable of vividly describing Sternowitz's face.

In this way, Roth takes advantage of the conventions of realist fiction to bolster the reliability of David's notation and evaluation of physical detail, while, at the same

time, insisting on the particularity of David's evaluative standards, which remain closely tied to his psychological investments in his parents and his system of mythological interpretation. He contrasts Bertha, for instance, with his mother, pinpointing each way in which Bertha's "complete difference in appearance" from Genya distresses him. She is "distressingly homely," with "rebellious, coarse red hair, that was darker than a carrot and lighter than a violin," teeth whose color, "if one had to decide upon it, *was* green," and a tendency to sweat "more than any woman David had ever seen" (146). While each point of description relates Bertha to standards of beauty that we recognize, it also situates Bertha and Genya on that continuum in such a way to glorify Genya by contrast.[86]

David's attention to visual detail suggests systems not of social relations, but of psychological investment particular to David himself. His encounters with visual art over the course of the novel reinforce the interpretation that his hermetically overdetermined associations leave no room for social extrapolation. Two episodes mark this closed circuit in particular. The first is Bertha and David's visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a trip that puts them in the unfamiliar neighborhood of the Upper East Side. While this foreignness at first puts David on his toes—he is determined not to get lost again—he is so concerned with losing his way that he now fails to register anything else around him. Bertha decides to follow a "knowing"-looking man and woman through the museum to ensure their safe return out of the "stupendous castle," and David makes sure she sticks to this plan, despite her tendency to periodically fall behind at the sight of particularly moving works of art (148). At a sculpture of Romulus and Remus being nursed by a wolf, she exclaims in horror, "Who would believe it—a dog with babies! No! It could not have

[86] Roth himself saw Genya and Bertha as two "polarities" whose characters he based on aspects of his own mother (Bronsen 268).

been!" Bertha's literal-mindedness extends to "an enormous marble figure seated on an equally huge horse": she identifies him as a biblical figure for the reason that "in the old days," heroes must have been "gigantic" (149). Bertha's experience allows her to observe some aesthetic qualities of the statues, and to linger and marvel at them, but she has no means of conceiving the art as otherwise than directly representational. David, in contrast, preoccupied with his duties as navigator, urges her forward, and is soon tired of the endless procession of items. Neither he nor Bertha has a vocabulary of aesthetic appreciation: while Bertha sees art as strictly mimetic, David bypasses the objects as unrelated to his personal goal; there is no middle ground for him between impediment and tool to help him get out of the museum and the neighborhood. The humor of this passage suggests that Bertha and David are simply wrong in their approach to the museum—as much as they attend to visual detail (Bertha to the art, David to navigational markers), the way in which they use personal experience to extrapolate from this detail means that they miss the aesthetic value of the art. While the novel's ridicule is gentle, it is ridicule nonetheless. A little aesthetic education, it suggests, would do Bertha and David good, allowing them to use objective standards to escape the bounds of their personal experience.

David's other experience with art is, likewise, a privately significant one that relates solely to David's place in family relations. Genya brings home a picture of green corn and blue cornflowers that, to her, evokes memories of Austria, in particular the comfort she took from fields of cornflowers after her failed affair with a Catholic organist. David's reaction to the picture is primarily one of longing to know the secret of Genya's attachment, and to recreate his own memories of such fields from a time when he

was too young to remember them. This compound lack of knowledge takes the force of an accusation when Genya reminds him, “You’ve seen them… fields and fields of them, only you’ve forgotten, you were so young” (172). The picture forces David to question the status of his own memories, as he struggles with his inability to remember Austria: “She said he couldn’t remember. So maybe he was trying to remember the real ones instead of the picture ones. But how? If— No. Funny. Getting mixed and mixed and—“ (188). David's confusion about whether and how to think of the cornflowers as representing his own lived experience is settled when he finally overhears his mother's secret, and links the painting firmly to the mystery of her love affair. His first flush of excitement about the realization of the picture’s significance gives way to caution: “Blue corn flowers? Likes them! Corn! That was—! Inside on the wall! Gee! Look at it later! Listen! Listen now!” (203-4). He must indefinitely defer the pleasure of looking at the picture with full knowledge of its associations, for on the heels of this knowledge comes the realization of the danger that prolonged looking could place him in: “Gee! The picture! Not now, though. Look at it later, when nobody’s here… Green and blue it’s— Sh!” (207). Both to David and to his family, the very act of gazing at the picture would signify not an appreciation of its colors or even of David’s own memories, but his participation in a network of family secrets, including Albert's lurking suspicion that David is not his own son.

Artwork, to David, does not have universal aesthetic value: there is no such thing as the Kantian quality of the beautiful, objectively determined and accessible to anyone who views an object. Instead, art carries overdetermined significance as a marker of individual history. These objects appear only through dialogue and David’s inner

monologues; no narrative voice mediates with retrospective aesthetic descriptions or judgments of the objects' value. This judicious absence, coupled with the close identification of David with the narrative voice, calls into question any attempt to locate a narrative voice uninvolved with David's mythological constructions. Instead of gaining reliability from an association with realist description, in other words, the narrator becomes implicated, through David's acts of looking and the narrator's retrospective descriptions, in David's private systems of association. David (and Bertha) are unable to use visual description to generalize on the basis of personal experience, instead remaining within their own systems of interpretation.

The novel implies that the metonymic project of the proletarian realist novel—generalizing from description, especially visual detail, to the reader's own life, to larger social systems—will fail in the lack of any experience making such generalizations. While descriptive accuracy provides insight into the workings of David's psychology, it promotes personal, rather than structural, responses in those whose knowledge of social structures remains unarticulated. The hope that such descriptions would prompt readers of proletarian fiction to realize their place in a network of capitalist social relations, Roth suggests, is misguided—leftism would need to escape from, rather than embrace, personal experience to educate its potential audience.

Everyday Uniqueness

Call It Sleep gestures towards representativeness, but always turns back towards David's unique interpretations of the world around him, implying that generating political force from particular examples will always end in tautological thinking that simply confirms the reader's preexisting perspective. In a final turn, the novel's final few

chapters suggest that what David has experienced as deeply personal associations are, in fact, common to the other children in his neighborhood, making his associations unique only in his ignorance of their everyday nature. This section is the novel's moment of crisis, when David, suffering from guilt after enabling Leo to play bad with Esther, lies to Reb Pankower about his mother's death and his own parentage; as he flees down the street, the novel alternates between his feeling of complete isolation and the sight or sound of other children and adults on the street. David's transgression briefly makes him feel omnipotent, and his elation manifests itself in a torrent of nonsense. His monologue—no longer interior, but vocalized—combines swear words and exclamations with children's chants: "Hey, busted sidewalk, lousy, busted sidewalk, w'y yuh busted? Makes double jumps! Triple jumps! Fawple jumps. Fipple jumps. Yoop! Yoop!... Why yuh busted? Touch a crack, touch a cella', touch a cella', touch a devil" (371). Just as he constructed an alternate version of his conception and birth, David speaks out loud in a language, it seems to him, of his own devising, a language whose incantations give David power over the world. Although David's stream of language contains conventional rhymes and associations, David does not dare maintain this level of anarchic sound, for it makes him fear the amount of power he has over the conditions of his own existence. In a pattern of call and response, he looks into shop windows to test his control over his ability to exist for himself and to the world:

> Only his own face met him, a pale oval, and dark, fear-struck, staring eyes, that slid low along the windows of stores, snapped from glass to glass, mingled with the enemas, ointment-jars, green globes of the drug-store—snapped off—mingled with the baby clothes, button-heaps, underwear of the drygoods store—snapped off—with the cans of paint, steel tools, frying pans, clothes-lines of the hardware store—snapped off. …
>
> —On the windows how I go. Can see and ain't. Can see and ain't. And

> when I ain't, where? In between them if I stopped, where? Ain't nobody. No place. … Carry a looking glass. …. Be nobody and she comes down. Take it! Take looking glass out, Look! Mama! Mama! Here I am! Mama, I was hiding! Here I am! But if Papa came. Zip, take away!" (378-9)

David's fantasy allegorizes the conditions under which he can exist to others: either he "mingles" with the world around him, and is thus tainted with the sin and darkness of ordinary life, and implicated in systems of signification he cannot control; or he is "snapped off," not to exist at all except in his own mind. David desires total control over his communication with others, attempting to escape from the tainted symbols of everyday life by coining his own private language, which he can share only with those, like his mother, whom he invites.

Yet this language, as we have seen, contains conventional symbols, and leaches into the narration, where it is interpretable with a minimum of effort. Moreover, the novel's brief portrayals of other children suggest that David's fantasies of linguistic power, and his experiments with self-assertion and abnegation, are so common as to be banal. As David fearfully prepares to enter his building and face his lies, his terror is absurdly mimicked by a boy on the stoop:

> He held in his hands the torn tissue of a burst red balloon which he sucked and twisted into tiny crimson bubbles. As David, fainting with terror, dragged himself up the stone stairs, the other nipped at a moist, new-made sphere. It popped. He grinned blithely.
>
> 'Yuh see how I ead 'em? One bite!'...
>
> 'Now, I'll make a real big one!' said the boy. 'Watch me!' The stretched red rubber hollowed into a small antre in his mouth, was engulfed, twisted, revealed. 'See dot! In one bite!'
>
> Pop!
>
> Despair. ... (379, ellipses in original)

This unnamed boy concretizes David's self-assumed power of creation and destruction—he forms entire worlds, "new-made spheres" over which he has the ultimate godlike and

monstrous power of life or death. Unlike David, he takes his power lightly, as a game, despotically exercising his right to consume the products of his own making, and thereby confirming his omnipotence. The boy's actions suggest that David is not alone in his fantasies that he can control the world through language, nor in his need to take comfort in material reality: the oral comfort the boy takes in consuming and re-forming the red balloon is akin to David's own rituals of repetitive self-soothing.

Moments that evoke strongly personal associations to David also, the novel implies, have significance to other children as well. After a gust of wind blows a girl's dress above her knees, David hears "a chorus of boys and girls" on the sidewalk chant after her, "Shame! Shame! Everybody knows your name" (223). David is preoccupied with his own response, "the old horror" of unexpected sexuality reminding him of his fear of Annie's sexual advances and his unarticulated conjectures about his mother and Luter. However, the children proclaim that they too are aware of the intimate relationship between sexuality, privacy, and naming—their chant redefines indecent exposure as giving others linguistic power, an association that links language to material effects as much as David's magical thinking does.

The isolation in which David increasingly finds himself over the course of the novel, and his fantasy of his own uniqueness, is thus made increasingly unreliable, as the novel suggests that other children undergo the same disorienting experiences. In the final climactic sequence, during which David nerves himself up to drop a milk dipper into the streetcar tracks to produce a burst of electricity, his single-minded determination stands out from the snippets of dialogue from adults in the surrounding area; his is the isolated consciousness of a modernist artist, or subject. However, immediately before this

sequence, David's predicament is again allegorized by the game of boys playing on a stoop. Instead of isolating David, the game suggests that the cycle of fear and desperation that he feels driven to break up is not unique to him. While one boy, the “wolf,” stands on the stoop, the others prepare to run, chanting a call and response that betrays excitement and fear:

> ‘Wolf, are yuh ready?’
> ‘I'm geddin' ouda bed!’
> ‘Wolf, are yuh ready?’
> ‘I'm goin' t' de sink!’
> ‘Wolf, are yuh ready?
> ‘I'm washin' op mine face—’ (406)

The wolf, tantalizingly, takes as long as possible before finally “co-o-o-o-omin'—down—duh—st-o-o-op!” (408). Drawing out even his final declaration of attack, the wolf, having built up the excitement among the boys to the point where they are “shrieking,” presumably then chases them down the street before catching a new wolf. The crescendoing rhythm of chant, expectation, release, and re-building is itself a cycle like the one David fears, the pattern of tension and release that epitomizes his home life. The routine actions of daily life prefigure an outbreak of arbitrary violence, which then produces the conditions for another cycle, and so on. The patterning on which David has based his hermeneutic code appears not only to David, a privileged interpreter, but to other children trying to make sense of the world as well. In this way, he comes close to Gold's assertion that “boys in Africa and Peru” share the “universal games” of “tag, prisoner's base, duck on a rock,” “kites, tops and marbles” (Gold 38). David's private language, it turns out, is not unique to him, but partakes of shared desires, assumptions and interpretations that he believes he has arrived at individually and in isolation.

This commonality justifies Roth's later objection to critical readings of David as a young artist, ready to produce radically new interpretations of the world. “I didn't see a creative life in store for the boy,” he noted in a 1972 interview with William Freedman. “David's problem, as I saw it, was to reconcile himself to a more ordinary form of existence from now on. I don't know what he'd do after that, perhaps go off and teach elementary school somewhere” (155). Not only has David not created something totally unique, he is suited, in Roth's vision, to revisit the same years he has just experienced over and over, participating in conventional systems of socialization. Roth's interpretation, in fact, strangely justifies biographical identification of David with Roth himself, for his stated difficulty reconciling political aims with novel-writing led him to abandon fiction altogether until the1960s, working as a teacher and farmer for decades (Lyons 22 ff). His insistence that David enters “ordinary existence” gestures obliquely to his own struggles to relate literary and political life.

The book's title stems from David's last act of naming, in which he sinks into sleep through fantasies of the crowds who gathered around him after his electrocution. His “strangest triumph, strangest acquiescence” assimilates him into those crowds, arriving at conventional systems of interpretation by means of fantasies of uniqueness.[87] “One might as well call it sleep,” he muses before, literally, sleeping (441). By the novel's closing pages, he demonstrates not a potential for revolutionary awareness, but the kind of social awareness that makes for an utterly conventional political subject: coming to the conclusion that he is one of many, who each have particularized and atomized roles to

[87] Lesser similarly interprets David's attempts at self-creation as “exposing the conventional character of the religious, familial, and social systems most commonly assumed to possess... universal value”— but concludes that this exposure also uncovers “the rhetorical nature of the world” and hence the power of rhetoric to change it (164, 176).

play in the city's life.[88] The commonality he draws from his particular experience is the common belief in independence from pre-given social forms, which he will nonetheless recreate. In this way, *Call It Sleep* is highly skeptical of the power of individual examples and concrete experience to foster political awareness, for repetition and attention to detail produce, for David, either solipsism, a hermetic belief in his own truths, or utter acceptance of convention. There is no room here for the realization that other people share structural commonalities within a capitalist system. Perhaps the way in which *Call It Sleep* is most political is in its insistence that political change can occur only as the result of external intervention—it is not self-generated simply from comparing oneself with others, nor as the result of repeated rhetorical emphasis on those comparisons.

This conclusion, as it happens, is shared by the otherwise prototypically proletarian *Jews Without Money*, whose final pages suddenly shift in tone from the generalizable experiences of the preceding three hundred. Mikey has been working in a factory when he hears a soap-box orator preaching Communism on the street: "I listened to him," he says, and promptly launches into praise of the revolution, with no rhetorical motivation for his conversion. "O workers' Revolution," he apostrophizes, "you brought hope to me, a lonely, suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit. O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle and to live" (309). Gold takes up the revolutionary cause not from experiencing poverty or comparing his lot with those around him; instead, the *deus ex machina* of an educator at once inspires Gold's political career and ends the

[88] This conclusion—that David becomes a democratic subject—is given a positive interpretation by Altenbernd, who sees David as the people's hero, suited to a democracy "whose leaders can emerge from among the most miserable and despised part of its population" (685).

novel. Unlike earlier moments of apostrophe, in which Gold addresses individuals—a teacher, a vacant lot, his mother—and proclaims their representativeness, he here starts from an abstract concept and describes its effects on him personally.

Michael Denning characterizes this type of ending as typical of the genre of "ghetto pastoral," proletarian fiction that portrays a "reality-principle so unrelenting as to mock the conventions of 'realism'" and "situations so grim that only transparent wish fulfillments... could overcome them" (249). Indeed, the greatest similarity between *Call It Sleep* and the explicitly proletarian *Jews Without Money* is their rejection of the conventionally realist expectation that the interpretive work of individuals suffices to establish them as thinking political subjects. Gold's encounter and conversion is a moment of wish fulfillment—the wish being that explicitly didactic moments of instruction would relieve individuals from having to re-derive revolutionary consciousness for themselves out of the raw materials of their experience. Rather than underscoring or criticizing the didactic practice of explicitly proletarian fiction, these novels suggest that effective pedagogy must necessarily be divorced from literary creation. Extrapolating from typicality can only get a reader so far along the road to revolution.

Chapter 4: Muriel Rukeyser's Politics of Quotation

Like *Call It Sleep*, Muriel Rukeyser's long poem "The Book of the Dead" provoked critical dispute over the relationship between its politics and its formal tactics. But while contemporary critics evaluated *Call It Sleep* on the basis of theories of the proletarian novel, they lacked even that framework of genre criticism to deal with "The Book of the Dead," which appeared as part of Rukeyser's second book, *U. S. 1*, in 1938. Thematically, the work is of a piece with poems and songs of proletarian protest: it excoriates a mining company whose neglect of proper safety procedures caused the deaths of hundreds of miners from silica poisoning in the town of Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. However, the poem challenges the idea that proletarian protest lyrics should be clear in their aims, instead promoting leftist politics in the form of a long and challenging sequence of shorter poems. Very little of it resembles a straightforward, strident call to arms.[89] Instead, Rukeyser intersperses chunks of quoted material—legal testimony, personal interviews, letters, literary texts, and short excerpts from the Egyptian mystical text *The Book of the Dead*—with lyric reflections on the West Virginia landscape and the place of the Gauley Bridge tragedy in American life. This mixture of quotation with lyric meditation led to confusion about the grounds for evaluating the poem, for it seemed to deliberately intermingle the conventions of documentary realism, which sought to produce subjective responses through accumulations of details in themselves, and lyric poetry, in which the voice of the poet was assumed to trump or at least organize documentary evidence.

[89] Cary Nelson ascribes the stereotype that political poetry is, or should be "devoted to single unqualified beliefs" to reactionary attempts to "cast proletarian or political poetry out of modernism" (*Revolutionary Memory* 65). Yet, as we will see, Rukeyser was criticized from the left for her indirect tactics as well.

The central problem with "The Book of the Dead," then, is that it has too many voices. Its rhetorical force stems from its deep earnestness, which pervades, with few exceptions, both the documentary quotations and the expressively lyric passages. Presenting a surplus of emotional authenticity distributed among multiple speakers, the poem provokes anxiety over the source of its impassioned political critique—the voices of workers and their families? Rukeyser as arranger and editor of those voices? Or Rukeyser as lyric narrator, who alternately observes and exhorts? The interplay among these disparate voices goes so far, at times, as to produce confusion over who, precisely, is speaking, a problem foundational to critical interpretations of, and disputes over, the poem. For, while the poem clearly uses quotation to raise its political and rhetorical stakes, it is unclear whose struggle we become involved in.

This chapter offers two models for how, formally, quotation produces readerly investment in poetic and political narratives. The first comes through a heretofore unexamined text: Rukeyser's own adaptation of "The Book of the Dead" into an unproduced and unpublished radio script, titled *Gauley Bridge*. The formal constraints of radio required that Rukeyser assign lines of poetry to individual or collective voices. In other words, the adaptation necessarily forecloses some of the poem's ambiguity between lyric and quotation; at times, Rukeyser goes further and radically rewrites the poem's apparent meaning by assigning unexpected speakers to particular lines. These choices heighten the poem's leftist didacticism in ways consistent with contemporary theories of radio's and theatre's potential to educate a mass audience in the speech and affect of collective politics. Using tactics consistent with those of documentary realism, the radio script educates its readers by direct aural representations of the sounds of work, political

activism, and collective optimism for a more equal America.

In contrast to the radio script's direct presentation, which encourages listeners to perceive, absorb, and respond to workers' experience, the poem, I argue, struggles to find a way for both poet and reader to participate in that experience without appropriating it. The framework of "interest," a term that appears in the poem's first stanza, models a mode of interaction in which the poet's curiosity and investment respects the independence of other voices, while sharing language and political goals. The poem uses this term to imply both common investment in the fate of American workers and land, and mutual respect for the independent frames of reference of all parties involved. "Interest" produces both the overlap of voices and their alienation from each other, illustrating the ways in which the voices of workers, poet, and readers can merge but remain distinct. In this way, the poem offers a form of engagement akin less to the radio's documentary realism than to the alienated performance style of Brecht's epic theater, a mode that thematizes the reader's own role as observer and participant, and models the individual's tangled relationship to social and national collective identities.

Speaking From the Dead: *Gauley Bridge*

Rukeyser adapted "The Book of the Dead" for both radio and film, either concurrently with the poem's composition or soon afterward. While there is little available documentation as to the precise timing, the project seems to have been alive prior to the publication of *U. S. 1*, at the very least, and to have continued until 1940, when Rukeyser published her notes for the film treatment, which she titled *Gauley Bridge*, in the journal *Films*.[90] If "the use of truth is its communication," as Rukeyser

[90] The earliest reference to Rukeyser's desire to find mass media outlets for the Gauley Bridge material is a

would later write in her manifesto *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser seems to have had high hopes for the utility of her material. She contacted her agents in 1939 about pitching the radio script, also titled *Gauley Bridge*, to NBC, perhaps for its *Radio Guild*, which regularly presented radio adaptations of staged theater.[91] (She also submitted the film treatment to Paramount and Columbia studios, the latter of which replied that, while the material had "swell possibilities for a documentary film," their films "are strictly commercial and have to do mostly with 'love'" [Ettinger].)

Rukeyser clearly felt that the original poem was well-suited to broadcast, for the "documentary radio oratorio," or "radio narrative," as she called it, consists entirely of excerpts from "The Book of the Dead."[92] Presumably for purposes of length, large blocks of text are eliminated altogether, and many poems appear in radically shortened form, cutting the text by more than half.[93] Small changes in diction and rearrangements of lines

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November 1937 letter from the anthologist and critic Louis Untermeyer, who affectionately ridicules her plans in a paragraph worthy of quotation in its entirety:

But what is this about radio and movies? I had a dream about you last night in which you and Ronald Colman were walking along the Boston Post Road, thumbing your thumbs unsuccessfully at motor trucks, all of which carried illuminated swastikas. Finally one of the trucks stopped, and out came Leo Rosten—accompanied by H*Y*M*A*N K*A*P*L*A*N* —with an immense script, whereupon the Post Road dissolved into a sound stage and Colman turned into Hart Crane. Try this on your psychoanalyst. I tried mine — tried him beyond his patience. Movies and radio, indeed! What, no television!

Colman was a popular leading man at the time; Rosten, a screenwriter, was better known for his stories about the Jewish immigrant Hyman Kaplan, who habitually signs his name with asterisks. Untermeyer had given a very positive review to Crane's *The Bridge* in *The Saturday Review* in 1930, comparing it favorably to *The Waste Land*. It is intriguing to note that Brian Reed's recent scholarship has brought out Crane's attempts to represent aural experience in poetry, although Untermeyer did not focus on that aspect of Crane's work in his criticism (Reed ch. 4).

[91] A 1939 letter from Alan C. Collins, a manager at the Curtis Brown agency, says that "we shall be delighted to act for you with respect to N.B.C. and the radio idea," but that "you have told me practically nothing about it." Another forum for broadcast could have been CBS's *Columbia Workshop*, which was the other major producer of serious radio adaptations, but there is no record of Rukeyser pitching *Gauley Bridge* there. See Fink 214 for details of the (limited) contexts in which such adaptations were broadcast.

[92] The terms appear in the unnumbered "NOTE to GAULEY BRIDGE" and on page 1 of the script, respectively. Further references to the manuscript will appear in the text.

[93] The poem runs 63 pages in its original printing, and 38 in the 2005 *Collected Poems*. The oratorio manuscript is 18 typed pages.

or stanzas are not uncommon, but some of the most striking alterations are those necessary for the adaptation to radio: who Rukeyser assigns to speak particular lines, and whether she sets those lines to music. She asks for a cast of thirteen speaking voices: an announcer, five anonymous readers, and seven assigned characters, including a questioner, a judge, Mrs. Jones, and George Robinson (specified as "Negro"). A female singer, a chorus, and other musicians perform "music including blues, ballad accompaniment, guitar accompaniment, much background music" (1).

Rukeyser's political aims in adapting *Gauley Bridge* emerge in her introductory Note, which instructs producers to play the oratorio "as a Living Newspaper is, with a free, staccato movement, laced with music and sound effects." The Living Newspaper was a live theatrical form that had originated in the Soviet Union; it reenacted current events and social problems as theatrical and musical spectacle, from a leftist perspective. As Laura Browder details, Living Newspapers aspired to motivate audience involvement in political change through education about political and social facts, defamiliarizing styles of narration and montage, and encouraging audience reaction during performances (122-23). Because they were primarily sponsored by the federal government, they also tended to emphasize the patriotic components of political action, rather than promoting Communism per se. The Federal Theatre Project produced dozens of Living Newspapers from 1935 to 1939, when it was disbanded, so in referencing the form, Rukeyser was evoking a familiar reference point for those acquainted with political theater (118ff). In fact, “The Book of the Dead” required little structural change to take the form of a Living Newspaper, since its documentary quotations and interplay of voices were already present. Rukeyser’s idea seems to have been to resurrect her documentary material as

living speech, and to accelerate its often meditative pace, heightening its immediacy. As we shall see, *Gauley Bridge* also stresses the aspects of "The Book of the Dead" that are specifically American, rather than internationalist or revolutionary.

The final component of a Living Newspaper's style—its participatory engagement with a live audience—would be more complicated to produce over the airwaves. Yet the hope that radio plays could produce a collective sense of political engagement had been energetically theorized in the years leading up to *Gauley Bridge*. Radio's potential for political activism was founded on its mass audience and its mode of apprehension, through sound alone. In the 1920s and 30s, listening to radio was a communal activity: a 1923 article in *Scribner's* rhapsodized, "How easy it is to close the eyes and imagine the other listeners in little back rooms, in kitchens, dining-rooms, sitting-rooms, attics… one here, two there, a little company around a table away off yonder, each and all sitting and hearing with the same comfort just where they happen to be" (quoted Heuser 14). The feeling of synchronicity across a wide swath of the nation relied, by definition, on the simultaneity of radio broadcast. It also posited a strong connection between radio's completely aural nature and the "ease" of imagining not only visual images to supplement the broadcast, but also other listeners' reactions, filling in an audience who shared a common response. The first sociological study of the phenomenology of radio listening, published in 1935, posits that listeners experience the "impression of universality": "Each individual must believe that others are thinking as he thinks and are sharing his emotions."[94] This mass appeal simultaneously frightened cultural critics worried about radio's potential for mass advertising and broadcast in the service of profit,

[94] Cantrill and Allport's *Psychology of Radio* (1935), 72. Quoted in Douglas 133.

and appealed to optimistic activist-writers who aspired to promote mass political activism.[95]

Such writers included Archibald MacLeish, whose pioneering experimental radio play *The Fall of the City* was broadcast on CBS' *Columbia Workshop* in 1937. The success of MacLeish's explicitly political, formally adventuresome work inspired a number of other poet-playwrights to experiment with ways of reaching a mass audience. MacLeish and others, as Bruce Lenthall outlines, introduced the widespread use of music and sound effects to communicate details about the world of the play, and played with shifts in time, space, and narrative perspective that fragmented listeners' perceptions of a unified world. While these broadcasts did not reach audiences as large as those designed as commercial entertainment (indeed, they were often broadcast at times when their competitions' programs were overwhelmingly popular, and hence when the network had nothing to lose from risky programming), they brought modernist narrative techniques into American radio, and helped to establish new standards for the use of sound (Lenthall 175ff). Rukeyser had these contemporary radio plays, in addition to Living Newspapers, for a frame of reference when she aspired to reach a mass audience with *Gauley Bridge*.

The strategies that Rukeyser uses in *Gauley Bridge* to promote audience investment range from encouraging audiences to visualize scenes through the use of sound and contextual clues, to unexpectedly mingling spoken and sung text, to briskly pacing the transitions from one scene to the next. The oratorio begins with the opening

[95] See Heuser, especially ch. 4, for differing views on radio's political possibilities in the 1930s. In addition to the works mentioned above, several recent texts elaborate on the relationship between broadcasting, politics, and modernist aesthetics. Hilmes analyzes radio's cultural and political legitimacy in American broadcasting, Avery examines the imperative for public service broadcasting in early BBC radio broadcasts, and Cohen et al. investigate radio's influence on modernist writers.

lines of “The Book of the Dead,” assigned to multiple anonymous speakers:

> 1. These are **the** roads to take
> 2. when you think of your country
> and **following clews** bring down the maps again
> phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend.... (1, my emphases)

The emphasized words, two of the few alterations from the original text, both make the opening more immediately inviting to a listening audience. First, Rukeyser adds a definite article to the first line, which reads as published, “These are roads to take when you think of your country” (73).[96] In contrast to the ambiguously indexical poem (which roads? some roads?), the oratorio opens in scene-setting mode, asking the listener to imagine a set of highways. This invitation is at once reinforced with sound effects that fade in: “auto horns, sounds of engine, traffic noise,” suggesting the simple synecdochic substitution of highway driving (1). These conventionalized sound effects do not demand particular creativity in deducing where the scene is set, but get the audience’s feet wet by offering a familiar moment of imaginative recognition at the outset.

With direct second-person address, the next lines presume a shared nationality and sense of national purpose. The narrator “follows clews,” suggesting that the listener, too, is a detective, detached from the events to follow, but curious about their origin. This phrasing replaces “interested,” a more disengaged word, in the original. While the poem’s use of “interest” will be the focus of my argument later, here I will simply point to its duration: “interest” is a state of being that impels the poet and the reader over the course of the poem, and highlights an internal motivation to investigate. In contrast, “following clews” is a process; it suggests that the listener is about to embark on a one-way journey, and must actively engage with fleeting evidence, broadcast once, without a second

[96] All references to the published text of "The Book of the Dead" are to *Collected Poems* (2005).

chance to retrieve it. “Following clews” emphasizes the act of investigation itself, a more active process of participation from the start, spurred by the external motivation of sequentially presented information.

While the oratorio begins with the suggestion of a whodunit, then, the mystery does not often prove a challenging one. Like contemporary radio plays, *Gauley Bridge* uses speech and sound cues to clearly indicate setting and dramatis personae. The announcer’s introductions are sometimes written out (“Here’s Mearl Blankenship. He worked there. He’ll tell you.”), sometimes just alluded to (“Announcement, introducing Philippa Allen.”), but are generally unambiguous (5, 2). Likewise, moments when sound intrudes into speech often serve as straightforward reminders of the omnipresence of the working class. As the social worker Philippa Allen describes her work in West Virginia, a chorus of speaking voices interpolates facts about the subcontracting of the mining process. Throughout this section, machines intrude into both Allen's and the chorus' descriptions: the script instructs that "during this dialogue, machine noises have been increasing in volume - explosions, drilling, shouts, etc." (2). A few lines later, "traffic, drilling, rushing water, etc." explicitly "drown out" the same voices (3). Rukeyser here blurs the boundary between diegetic and non-diegetic sound: knowing from the announcer that Allen is a social worker, we might assume that the sound is non-diegetic, background noise that symbolizes the mining process without occurring on the same level as the dialogue. Later, as the volume increases, the machines intrude into the descriptions, and the location of the scene is transplanted. Allen's interview is now the background to the world of mechanical work, which has become the foreground.

The aural intrusion of labor into moments of testimony occurs again in "The

Disease: After-Effects." This section excerpts the arguments of a Montana congressman who argued for a workers' rights bill, in part because his own father, a miner, died of silicosis. The script makes two changes that make the workers' cause significantly more present to the congressional audience in the House. In the original text, the congressman first describes his father's work and participation in the labor movement, then reviews some statistics about silicosis. Three stanzas follow, indented to set them apart from the surrounding text, which start in the voice of the congressman (he mentions "my father" twice) and then veer into poetic rhetoric, using recurrent images of the map and the X-ray, and increasingly elevated phrases like "resemblent pictures of one living breath" (103). As the poet gradually takes over from the congressman, the text subordinates his folksy story to the overarching emphasis on "our [collective] meaning." In contrast, this section of the oratorio begins with the announcer, who details the setting and the speaker, and provides us with a summary of the factual information about the father and silicosis statistics. The congressman speaks only the three indented stanzas. This shift means that the politician, rather than the lyric voice, uses the poetic figures we have grown to trust as earnest political truths: the phrases "one living breath / one country marked by error / and one air" are not empty political rhetoric, nor are they a detour from political speech into lyric commentary, but a politician's accurate assessment of the nation as an organic body, whose health depends on the well-being of all. Because of his working-class background, the script infers, the congressman can accurately convey political truths to Capitol Hill.

The second shift that brings workers more immediately into the political process is an added sound effect. In the published text, the section ends with a picture of a sharp disconnect between politics and the working class:

> Bill blocked; investigation blocked.
>
> These galleries produce their generations.
> The Congressmen are restless, stare at the triple tier,
> the flags, the ranks, the walnut foliage wall;
> a row of empty seats, mask over a dead voice.
> But over the country, a million look from work,
> five hundred thousand stand. (104)

These lines critique a self-perpetuating political system in which bored representatives feel no investment in the masses, whose ominous stance of expectation contrasts with the politicians' silent apathy. The congressmen, they imply, are directly culpable in obscuring the "dead voice" of the congressman from Montana, now silent, and his father's voice as well. In the oratorio, these lines are preceded by the "sound of many voices arguing. Then quiet." An anonymous voice continues: "Bill blocked; investigation blocked. / A row of empty seats, mask over a dead voice. / But over the country, a million look from work, / five hundred thousand stand" (15). Here, congressional debate presents a defense against the poem's earlier accusation of "lack of vigor"—at least, the representatives are politically engaged. Gone are the lines describing their wandering eyes and lack of attention. Or, alternately, the arguing voices could be the workers themselves, whose voices intrude even to the floor of the House.

This passage, and the continued integration of collectively spoken or sung lines into the poetic text, gives the collective—the workers—far more authority than the published text does. Not only does the oratorio emphasize their proximity to sites of power, but it also integrates their speech with that of the oratorio's announcer, giving them equal narrative authority. “West Virginia,” the poem’s second section, details a landscape of early exploration and the site of John Brown’s execution. As set in the

oratorio, the text presents an organic connection between the explorers and the surrounding landscape. The following passage should be set, the script directs, to “water-music”:

Cho[rus, sung].	They saw rivers flow west and hoped again….
Solo [sung].	Virginia speeding to another sea.
Ann[ouncer, spoken].	1671—emergent from the east
	followed the forest past blazed trees, pillars of God.
	They left a record to our heritage,
	breaking of records. Hoped now for the sea.
1. [reading, spoken]	Coming where this road comes,
	flat stones spilled water which the still pools fed.
	Kanawha falls, the rapids of the mind….
Solo.	Fast waters spilling west. (1)

The sung lines are precisely "water-music"; they describe the river and falls while themselves mimicking the sounds of water. The singers are thus both observers of the natural landscape and components of it themselves, contributing to its mood and sounds. The voices of the announcer and the first reader share the perspective of the singers, seamlessly transitioning between speech and song. Music bridges the gulf between explorers and landscape that leads, as we will see, to a relationship of domination in the published text, smoothing over that distinction with music. The passage continues:

Cho.	War-born:
	the granite
Ann.	SITE OF THE
Cho.	precursor
Ann.	EXECUTION
Cho.	sabres, apostles
Ann.	OF JOHN BROWN LEADER OF THE
Cho.	War’s brilliant cloudy
Ann.	RAID AT HARPER’S FERRY
(1)	

The text of the monument is here typographically and aurally distinct from the lyric passages, which are set to music throughout. We can imagine the passage being

performed in one of two distinct ways: either the chorus sustains its lines while the announcer speaks over the music, or the script is performed sequentially as written. In the first case, the two voices overlap but exist in self-contained lines, one musical, one spoken; in the second case, the distinction between speech and song, and choral and solo voicing, prompts the listener to connect each of the two threads independently. On the page, the two lines are interrelated. On the air, the passage emerges as foreground and background, with the choral fragments setting off the monument's stark phrasing.

This translation requires a different type of interpretive effort on the part of the listener. In the poem, monument and lyric are on the same plane, calling our attention to the oscillation between lyric description and quotation. Here, the monument comes through in relief, its visual distinctiveness translated into aural prominence so that artifact trumps lyric. Sung lyrics are easily elided, in contrast to the deliberately recited monument. Moreover, the oratorio omits two lines between "War-born" and "the granite…," in addition to lines earlier in the poem, all of which are full of proper names associated with exploration, war, and revolution. In the poem, these lines draw on historical particulars to trace a genealogy that leaves traces in the landscape. In the oratorio, however, historical specificity vanishes, and the identity of the chorus is non-specific as well. No longer are those lines spoken by a lyric speaker who has traveled, like the explorers, to see the West Virginia landscape; now they are choral, sung by a group that could include listeners and workers as well as a lyric commenter. This shift encourages listeners to imagine themselves at the scene, part of the chorus whose individual identities are subsumed under the pressure of one monumental historical event.

The oratorio, like many Living Newspapers, emphasizes the American, rather than

the internationalist, nature of this collective. It ends with much of the text of the concluding poem, "The Book of the Dead," but switches the order of two large sections. While the printed poem concludes by referencing the need for collective action "across the world," the oratorio weights the American experience more heavily, describing pre-colonial and colonial periods of exploration immediately before the concluding stanzas. One anonymous speaker details "how first ships came," "took the land," then:

1. ... Replaced the isolation,
dropped cities where they stood, drew a tidewater
frontier of Europe,
a moment, and another frontier held,
this land was planted homeland that we knew.
Discovery at one hand, and at the other
2. frontiers and forests,
3. fanatic cruel legend at our back and
speeding ahead the red and open west,
All. and this our region,
desire, field, beginning.
3. Name and road,
2. communication to these many men,
1. as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (18)

This conclusion addresses listeners as members of an audience of Americans who feel a sense of ownership and national pride, a desire to improve the nation for others in that same collective audience. Anonymous speakers recite these lines, allowing the audience to imagine themselves as members of an expansive national community. This fellowship is founded on the rhetoric of national fellow-feeling, based on a relationship to the American land and a belief that ordinary Americans can affect the political process, as "The Disease: After-Effects" implies.

As the oratorio valorizes its anonymous American audience, it isolates individual workers' voices as representative exemplars of proletarian virtues. The section titled “The

Disease" consists, in the published text, of a question-and-answer session between an anonymous doctor and an unnamed questioner; their alternating speech is indented, making it clear who is speaking. The one interruption comes when Rukeyser inserts quoted speech that seems to come from an affected miner. Here is the published poem's concluding section, in which the doctor discusses X-rays of an affected miner's chest:

> That indicates the progress in ten months' time.
> And now, this year—short breathing, solid scars
> even over the ribs, thick on both sides.
> Blood vessels shut. Model conglomeration.
>
> What stage?
>
> Third stage. Each time I place my pencil point:
> There and there and there, there, there.
>
> "It is growing worse every day. At night
> I get up to catch my breath. If I remained
> flat on my back I believe I would die."
>
> It gradually chokes off the air cells in the lungs?
> I am trying to say it the best I can.
> That is what happens, isn't it?
> A choking-off in the air cells?
>
> Yes.
> There is difficulty in breathing.
> Yes.
> And a painful cough?
> Yes.
>
> Does silicosis cause death?
>
> Yes, sir. (86-87)

In quick succession, the doctor's clinical exhibition, the miner's description of symptoms, and the questioner's rephrasing demonstrate different types of rhetorical authority: the doctor's to locate and name, the miner's to elicit concern and fear, the questioner's to

summarize and demand information.

In contrast, consider the same passage in the oratorio. Until this point, the chorus, speaking, has taken the lines of the questioner, indicating a collective investment in the questions and answers:

Doctor.	That indicates the progress in ten months' time.
	And now, this year – short breathing, solid scars.
Cho[rus].	What stage?
Doctor.	Third stage. Each time I place my pencil point:
	There and there and there, there, there.
M.B. [Mearl Blankenship]	It is growing worse every day. At night
	I get up to catch my breath. If I remained
	flat on my back I believe I would die.
Doctor.	It gradually chokes of[f] the air cells in the lungs?
	That is what happens, isn't it?
	A choking-off in the air cells?
M.B.	Yes.
Doctor.	There is difficulty in breathing.
M.B.	Yes.
Doctor.	And a painful cough?
M.B.	Yes.
Doctor.	Does silicosis cause death?
M.B.	Yes, sir. (Strongly and impressively.) (7-8)

Mearl Blankenship has appeared earlier in the poem and oratorio as the speaker of a plea for help. His initial appearance is marked by his "quiet, gentle voice" with "noticeable dialect," so listeners would be able to recognize his voice two pages later (5). From his initial position of appeal, however, he now assumes a role of authority, testifying from a position of expertise that stems from firsthand experience of the disease. The doctor asks questions that are not only diagnostic (does he have difficulty breathing, and a cough?) but also require accurate medical knowledge (the cause of the symptoms, and the likely outcome of the disease). As the chorus drops out, the scene changes from a collective interrogation to a dialogue between a concerned professional and a worker whose "strong

and impressive" speech and willingness to testify unflinchingly elevate him to heroic stature. Blankenship has been transformed from an individual in need of help to a representative workers' leader, able to provide pithy and forceful responses.

Similar moments of representativeness occur throughout the oratorio, contributing to its explicit didacticism. The most striking occurs through the very act of assigning a spoken voice to written text, in the section titled "George Robinson: Blues." The published poem, written in an adapted twelve-bar blues meter, presents the point of view of a black miner who was one of the lead organizers of the workers' committee.[97] It culminates with Robinson's observation that mining dust obscures the racial differences among the miners, in a neat formulation of proletarian unity: "As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after the tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white. / The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white" (88). The blues form underscores Robinson's race, while the loose meter and rhyme scheme, and typographical shifts in capitalization and indentation, denaturalize the poem's cadences. Indeed, the blues share the formal tactics of the poem's other sections, including a thematic emphasis on whiteness and dust, and the tendency to repeat short phrases for emphasis. These commonalities reinforce Robinson's conclusion that oppressive labor conditions lead workers—both those from Gauley Bridge and the "black and brown" workers from neighboring Vanetta—to common interests.[98]

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[97] As Dayton and others have noted, Rukeyser mistranscribed or simply changed the name of the worker George Robison.

[98] Many critics have evaluated this section's representativeness. Lowney and Thurston both describe Robinson as a representative type of the black worker, while Kadlec finds the depiction "essentializing" (38). The blues form, as I state earlier, does a lot of work to typify Robinson, but it need not imply that he is thereby cordoned off from the poem's other voices. Rukeyser's adaptation of blues form, and her use of techniques and tropes that recur elsewhere, interrelate Robinson's perspective with the lyric voice, suggesting that Robinson's representativeness does not prevent him from joining in a larger, multi-racial,

Although this section is the only one in musical form, adapting it to the oratorio raises both logistical and political difficulties. The oratorio's version begins with the direction "Blues music. (This next section is sung as a blues, in a rich, deep Negro voice.) (First line of each verse repeated)" (8). This last instruction, to repeat the first lines, makes no sense given the poem's written form, which already repeats, with variations, material from each first line in the subsequent lines. The first stanza exemplifies this difficulty:

> Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand
> around, they let us stand
> around on the sidewalks if we're black or brown.
> Vanetta's over the trestle….. that's our town. (8)

Twelve-bar blues is usually an AAB form: the first line is repeated, followed by a second line that rhymes with the first; this seems to be what the stage direction indicates. But the first line of this stanza does not end with a rhyme; the repetition comes in the middle of the first line. In the poem, this formal eccentricity is an early signal of the deviations from strict blues form, but musical text-setting erases this deviation. Likewise, it is unclear what to do with the complete lack of repetition in the oratorio's third stanza:

> Did you ever bury thirty-five men in a place in back of your house,
> thirty-five tunnel workers the doctors didn't attend,
> died in the tunnel camps, under rocks, everywhere, world without end.

The poem's last four stanzas use assonance and repetition instead of strict end rhymes: back/muck, dust/dust, twinkled/ankles, and white/white. In contrast to the end rhymes of the first three stanzas, these endings indicate both the gradual encroachment of a chronic illness, and the unpolished nature of the poem's speaker. When asked about the weakened end rhymes, Rukeyser noted that "…what I wanted was the suspended ending,

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collectivity.

an ending in which recurrence would do it. It should be read with a southern voice and a man's voice—mine is a northern voice and a woman's voice and it's not right for it. It should be read in George Robinson's voice, or George Robinson's voice as you imagine it" (quoted in Madden 132). Rukeyser here implies that form alone is insufficient to express the miners' oppression and the poem's unpolished speech—we must "imagine" a generic blues voice to compensate for the poet's presumed inauthenticity. But the poem's formal tactics undermine any attempt to consider it as unmediated speech from the working class; it is clearly adapted from Robinson's speech.

The oratorio bypasses this moment of mediation. Instead of forcing us to consider the rough overlaps and disjunctions between Robinson's blues and their adaptation by the lyric speaker/editor, it offers the voice of one particularly prototypical singer. Robinson's voice, stereotypically "rich" and "deep," localizes the blues to a segregated subset of workers. The character "George Robinson" contributes to the oratorio's leftist didacticism, as he becomes the type from whom we extrapolate a population of workers. Hearing the "blues voice," as the script demands, still requires an act of imagination, but one that is so reflexive as to be almost undetectable—taking an individual voice as synecdochic for a collective. This substitution distances us further from Rukeyser's editorial manipulations, which make the poem a shared text, produced by both Robinson and Rukeyser. It encourages listeners to imagine a scene made up of types, populating Gauley Bridge out of their own ideas of what people who sound like George Robinson or Mearl Blankenship should look like.

Ultimately, then, the oratorio's poetics of representation both involves listeners in a national community, and limits the power of the oratorio to reshape political

consciousness beyond existing categories: American citizens, white workers, black workers. While the text strives toward politically progressive ends, the oratorio addresses itself to a social fabric made up of preestablished groups. This segregation is reinforced, in fact, by the oratorio's list of characters, which implies that the named characters do not speak as participants in the choral passages. The oratorio thus uses them as exhibits of workers, without (as far as we can tell from the script) including them in the choral speech that enacts the power of collective action. Its pedagogy thus relies primarily on display and education about poor conditions and injustice, combined with medium-specific means of audience involvement. As contemporary documentary realist texts and radio plays show, this strategy could be quite rhetorically effective in raising awareness about segments of American life previously "hidden" from those geographically or culturally separate.

The limits of this pedagogy, however, are implicit in the limitations of radio as a medium: namely, radio's unidirectionality. In contrast to Living Newspapers (or, for that matter, folk anthologies), the oratorio has limited opportunities for audience interaction or participation that might further increase engagement with the forms of political action it depicts. As such, it exemplifies the concerns of early theorists of radio, who feared that listeners could be bombarded with commercial entertainment and advertisement without actively participating in its creation. While the tactics of MacLeish and other experimental radio playwrights promoted audience engagement in the form of envisioned or imagined re-creation of setting, perspective, and character, radio remained a one-way medium.

Radio's participatory potential was tapped by a very few playwrights, among them

Bertolt Brecht, who in 1932 imagined a kind of two-way radio that would promote collective dialogue and a changed relationship between the listener and the conditions of radio production. This revolutionary radio would know "how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear, how to bring him into a relationship instead of isolating him" (52). It would thereby promote "a kind of resistance by the listener, and... his mobilization and redrafting as a producer" (32). Brecht bases this model on his play *The Flight of the Lindberghs*, which required the listener to possess a script that called for participation at designated points; needless to say, this level of interaction during a radio program did not make its way into common practice. Walter Benjamin's commentary on Brecht's model places it in contrast, in fact, with the more common model of audience participation. Because Brecht's principle of epic theater, both in *The Flight of the Lindberghs* and elsewhere, is "based on interruption," Benjamin argues, it

> has a pedagogic function. … It brings the action to a halt, and hence compels the listener to take an attitude toward the events on the stage and forces the actor to adopt a critical view of his role. … [E]veryone who has followed the development of radio will be aware of the efforts made recently to bring together into coherent groups listeners who are similar to one another in terms of their social stratification, interests, and environment generally. In like fashion, Epic Theater attempts to attract a body of interested people who, independently of criticism and advertising, wish to see realized on stage their most pressing concerns, including their political concerns, in a series of ‘actions’. (585)

Radio, in these terms, reinforces already-homogeneous groups through what we might call niche marketing, encouraging involvement in ways that are addressed to specific populations of listeners. Programming, in other words, further provokes interest already inherent to the audience. Radio's potential for political action would therefore lie in calling attention to the "coherence" of its own listeners as a group, and thematizing the

power of that group to advocate for its own interests, much as *Gauley Bridge* does with its representative politics.[99]

Benjamin likens this audience to that of epic theater, but epic theater's critique of modern capitalism is far from radio's stratified programming. In fact, the type of imitative performance that Brecht describes as central to epic theater's alienation effect is more similar to the textual invitations to perform folk songs we saw in Chapter 2, performances that highlight their difference from their prototypes. "It is important," Brecht writes in "The Street Scene," "that [the demonstrator] should not be too perfect. … He has to avoid presenting himself in such a way that someone calls out 'What a lifelike portrayal of a chauffeur!' … [His] performance is essentially repetitive" (122-123). The actor, like the audience, does not experience this imitation as authentically emotive, but instead recognizes that the speech is "like a quotation," adopted by the actor with all of its "full human and concrete shape," but nonetheless with spectatorial distance that encourages a critical attitude (138).

While it is impossible to extrapolate the acting style in which *Gauley Bridge* would have been performed, there are no textual indications that demand anything other than a realist portrayal of the characters. In fact, Rukeyser's struggles to incorporate quotation into lyric, and vice-versa, in the published version of "The Book of the Dead" reveal a greater commitment to alienated imitation. The poem is not a theatrical text, but its closeness to the radio script suggests that its succession of dialogues, scene changes,

[99] Four years later Rudolf Arnheim's theory of radio would assert the need for distinctive and contrasting radio voices on precisely the ground that the meaning of a radio play should be expressed through "the interplay of vocal types" (39). Rukeyser's decision to make George Robinson's voice distinctively "Negro," then, conforms to expectations of both proletarian art and radio as a genre: both depended on typification to clarify the generic and political roles of their characters.

and framing observations can be productively read not only as an interplay between metaphorical voices, but also, in places, as a proto-script. It is worthwhile, in other words, to ask who is speaking, to whom, and how. In the following section, I will argue that the difficulty in pinpointing the poem's speakers produces an alternative model of reader engagement in shared political goals, based on a philosophy of interest, and suggest some implications of this model for theorizations of the long poem.

The Poetics of Interest

"The Book of the Dead" is made up of twenty short poems, many of which are titled after places or people that figure in the Gauley Bridge tragedy and its aftermath. Its first section, "The Road," portrays the poet's decision to travel to West Virginia in 1936, with the photographer Nancy Naumberg, to investigate the aftermath of the industrial tragedy that had garnered national attention since its exposure by the left-leaning press a few years earlier, ultimately resulting in Congressional hearings.[100] Rukeyser had at her disposal, then, not only her own observations and personal interviews, but also extensive transcripts of the hearings and magazine and newspaper articles. While each section has an ostensible topic (eight are titled with names of people or places), the poems often contain abrupt shifts, not only in who is speaking, but also of setting or time, and they often lack contextual or paratextual markers that would inform the reader of the source or speaker of the new language. Quotation is, however, usually set aside from the surrounding text by a variety of typographical tactics: italics, capitalization, dashes, greater indentation, or quotation marks themselves. For this reason, it is often clear when

[100] See Cherniack and Spangler for investigative histories of the tragedy that include details of working conditions, a breakdown of workers by place of origin and race, and a summary of the testimony given by many of the poem's speakers.

other voices enter and leave the poem, although we cannot always tell whose voices they are.

The second section, "West Virginia," contains two representative instances: first, Rukeyser inserts four lines from the early American document *A Journey from Virginia to Beyond the Appalachian Mountains* (1671); they are set off by italics, and by their archaic syntax and spelling, from the surrounding poetry, which tells of the colonial exploration of West Virginia. Rukeyser does not, however, list *A Journey from Virginia* in her original endnote to "The Book of the Dead," which does (rarely) provide such information; the reference appears only in editorial notes added to later editions.[101] Later in that same section, Rukeyser interpolates the language of a historical marker into an otherwise descriptive passage:

> War-born:
> The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk's tribes,
> last stand, Fort Henry, a revolution won;
> the granite SITE OF THE precursor EXECUTION
> sabres, apostles OF JOHN BROWN LEADER OF THE
> War's brilliant cloudy RAID AT HARPER'S FERRY.
> Floods, heavy wind this spring… (74-75)

Lyric observation, marked by asyndeton, lies in an uneasy relationship to the quoted inscription, whose language is contrastingly matter-of-fact. While the two voices reference elements of the same scene ("granite" could very well serve as the literal ground for the inscription), the inscription is indexical, pointing to the location of one historical event, while the lyric evokes the accumulation of history with foundational American tropes of stone and righteous battle. Lyric provides the descriptive context for the inscription, while also depending on the inscription for its own coherence: meaning is

[101] In this case, the editorial notes to *U.S. 1* in Rukeyser's *Collected Poems* (2005).

produced in each line both by integrating the two types of speech ("the granite site," "apostles of John Brown"), and by reading each separately ("the granite precursor," "sabres, apostles," "War's brilliant cloudy[.] / Floods"). Likewise, the interrupting period at the end of the inscription appears to conclude both the inscription and the lyric component of that line, interrupting the phrase "War's brilliant cloudy floods" and instead completing the phrase as "War's brilliant cloudy raid," implicitly praising John Brown as American hero. In contrast to listening to this passage in the oratorio, which separated lyric and monument with different speakers, the process of reading this passage highlights the interdependence of the voice of the lyric speaker and the written inscription on a block of stone. What appears to be a narrator's lyric speech is also not the narrator's at all, but speech inextricably interdependent with inscriptions written by others. This ambiguity—the fact that the same words can be both lyric and inscription—depends on typography. The written nature of lyric allows for slippage between voices in a way that the oratorio does not choose to highlight.

This passage is paradigmatic of the interplay between lyric and quotation in "The Book of the Dead," including the ambiguity between typographical differentiation of speakers and syntactic continuity of their language. Rukeyser's technique in this poem stands in seeming contrast to her later comment that "the use of truth is its communication," a process that, she implies, requires a person first to possess the truth, and then to transmit it to designated receivers: "the truth of the poem is the truth both of the poet and the reader. It has been given and taken" (*Life of Poetry* 27, 32). This model of artistic communication posits clearly-defined categories of poet, reader, medium and message, much as didactic models of proletarian literature assumed that the truth of

Communist revolution was easily portable from writer to reader through techniques of thick description and typical protagonists. However, "The Book of the Dead" demands a more complex model of poetic communication, in which multiple voices require the reader to construct meaning out of formally intermingling perspectives. Critical reception of the work has tended to elide this complexity, focusing on Rukeyser's use of quoted speech as either appropriation (of the speech of workers and their families) or good prolet-lit doctrine. But the ethical question that such responses raise is still valid: what is the effect of using the words of others in such a way that they become interdependent with Rukeyser's own language?

The critical debate over this question takes as its frame of reference the documentary impulse of the 1930s. As William Stott and Paula Rabinowitz have detailed, documentary conventions had much in common with theories of proletarian literature in its reliance on "empirical evidence," concrete details that would "render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous" (Stott 14). The genre relied on a rhetorical appeal to emotion, rendering its subjects "simplified and ennobled—sentimentalized, in a word" (Stott 57). Like ethnographers such as Alan Lomax, documentarians hoped to produce action both on behalf of the oppressed, and by the oppressed themselves, who would see themselves, in art, "as object and subject simultaneously," thereby coming into revolutionary consciousness.[102]

Rukeyser herself subscribed to the notion that a combination of documentary evidence with the representative type of proletarian literature would inspire others to take political action, as she detailed in a 1938 radio interview:

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[102] Rabinowitz 38, paraphrasing Lukàcs' argument about the relationship of objectification and class consciousness in documentary representation.

> What I have done is use a contemporary statistical method. The large unit is reflected in the lives of the people, so that you get an engineer and his story in terms of his work on the dam. … The engineers were a representative type of what I should call society in the abstract. … The town of Gauley Bridge stands as a pattern for all those places where people are linked even in the middle of their suffering, where people fight against an evil condition so that other people need not go through the same fight... (quoted Dayton 145-6).

Rukeyser here uses familiar terms—“representative type” and “pattern”—as well as the ideas that the engineer's work process would undergird his representation in literature, and that that representation would provide a model for other collective fights against injustice. She also, following Kenneth Burke's controversial exhortations at the 1935 American Writers' Congress, uses the term “people,” rather than “proletariat” or “workers” to refer to those brought together in solidarity to fight injustice. The people, unlike the proletariat, did not exclude those, like Rukeyser, who sympathized with the revolutionary cause without themselves being working-class.

Rukeyser's reliance on tropes and techniques of proletarian literature, her selection of subject matter, and her own biographical position as fellow-traveler rather than worker or open Communist led to evaluations of "The Book of the Dead" that tried to pinpoint exactly what her position on the revolutionary continuum was. The status of the poem's lyric language vis-à-vis the quotations had an integral place in this debate: do the quotations have the status of evidence in a larger polemic that Rukeyser's lyric voice makes, and if so, have they been appropriated for this purpose? Or does the poem respect the integrity of disparate voices as powerful and representative instances of speech against oppression, and if so, does it tilt away from lyric altogether?

At the time of the poem's publication, critics tended to strongly promote one position over the other. Critics who espoused the former position included the editors of

Partisan Review, William Phillips and Philip Rahv, who, in an anonymous analysis of Rukeyser's early publications, notoriously accused her of having been merely a "poster girl" for the revolution, writing "indignant though fashionable poetry" in a time when Marxist rhetoric was "a topic of the day" (471).[103] Others with more favorable views of the poem nonetheless criticized the use of documentary material in poetry altogether, as Willard Maas did, or warned, like William Carlos Williams, that Rukeyser risked "losing herself in her injudicious haste for a 'cause'."[104] The model of lyric poetry that these critics rely on dates back to J.S. Mill's formulation of a poem as an overheard monologue, the expressive musings of a single subjectivity.[105] "The Book of the Dead" puts this assumption under stress in a way that goes beyond even Pound's *Cantos*, a work that Williams uses for comparison in his review of *U.S. 1*. The two works include a similar preponderance of quoted material, and Williams praises Rukeyser for displaying "something of the skill employed by Pound," precisely in that "she knows… how to select and exhibit her material" (141). Pound's poetics of exhibition, as Ming-Qian Ma and Charles Bernstein have described it, is always "supplemented by and, in turn, subordinated to, a poetics of commentary, of telling, of representation," although it never fully succeeds in domesticating its own exhibits (Ma 42). Yet the use of quoted texts that, in Pound, comes across as "evaluative" "appropriation" by a master organizer goes beyond appropriation in "The Book of the Dead" (Bernstein 636). Williams and critics

[103] See Kalaidjian for more on the so-called "Rukeyser Imbroglio," which extended through two more issues of *Partisan Review*, and included responses by Rebecca Pitts and F. O. Matthiessen (161ff). Kalaidjian highlights the completely *ad feminem* nature of the *Partisan Review*'s polemic, but does not point out explicitly that the title of their critique, "Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl," takes its name from Balzac's novel *Splendeurs et Misères des Courtisanes*, sometimes translated as *A Harlot High and Low*.

[104] See Maas' reactionary statement that the poem's material had been "more adequately explored and more tersely recorded by journalists" (102).

[105] See Wheeler 34ff for a comprehensive genealogy of this view.

like him do not seem to consider that Rukeyser's "losing herself" might be one symptom of the poem's aspirations to relate the lyric voice to a political collective. In contrast to the *Cantos* or Williams' own later epic *Paterson*, "The Book of the Dead" consistently uses the pronouns "you" and "we" to suggest both the biographical and the collective nature of its observations, troubling those who wished for a more present and dominating artistic subjectivity.

Those critics who were more sympathetic to the cause of proletarian literature tended to take the opposite position, praising Rukeyser's commitment to detailed and factually accurate portrayals of workers' labor conditions, speech patterns, and interactions. The poem's political force, they felt, stemmed from its direct presentation of the word and testimony both of workers and of those corrupt or opportunistic businessmen and politicians who used the mine, and later the tragedy itself, for financial or political gain. John Malcolm Brinnin took the extreme position that the poem "was not, primarily, literature" at all, since its attempt to objectify the plight of the Gauley Bridge workers was "so successful, in the narrow sense, that all suggestions of the elevation of poetry have been objectified out of existence" (565-66). Most contemporary critics agreed, however, that the interaction between lyric and quotation was problematic. John Wheelwright's generally favorable review in *Partisan Review* claims that "through immediate documentation," the poems "compel instant sense of moral history," while the more "obscure" lyric sections "rise under the accepted canon of culture of a ruling class" (54, 56). The poem's documentary sections give the reader unmediated insight into the voices of the oppressed, thereby "striking you with the abrupt violence of the event itself," as David Wolff's review put it. These critics came down in favor of direct

presentation of the workers' voices—Wolff says that Rukeyser has "made an error in not marking off the documents clearly from the body of the poem"—and hence more authentic transmission of their collective speech. Correspondingly, the lyric speaker—Rukeyser's subjective "I"—should be minimized. In a review of Rukeyser's 1936 collection, *Theory of Flight*, Ruth Lechlitner urges Rukeyser to make the "essential transition from the 'I' sympathiser type to the 'we' collectively working, emotionally unconfused poet" (29).

The critical rediscovery of Rukeyser, particularly of "The Book of the Dead," that has taken place in the past fifteen years has often relied on this continuum to evaluate the significance and rhetorical efficacy of the poem. Criticism that engages, often positively, with the poem's representational politics evaluates the effects of a non-proletarian writer making claims on the speech of the working class. In generally positive terms, critics have described the interplay of lyric and quotation as "reclaiming the [suffering miner's] experience," Rukeyser's speaking "*to* various audiences by speaking *as* them, in language marked somehow as their own," and a maneuver that "keeps our eyes sharply focused on—and pays a referential debt to—the extratextual referents [i.e. the workers] who…demand the payment of an explanation" (Kadlec 30, Thurston 182, Wechsler 236).[106] In each case, Rukeyser is *inside* the text, the poem's lyric speaker, and those she quotes are outside. While this interpretation is not false, and in fact the statements by Rukeyser herself seem to endorse it, the lyric voice struggles, throughout the poem, to incorporate itself into the quoted material, and vice-versa.

My use of the word "voice" here points to an ongoing tension within lyric poetry

[106] See Duncan for an evaluation of the poem's politics that stems from its depiction of the laws of physics, rather than on its use of quotation.

itself. As Lesley Wheeler elucidates, the concept of voice “mediates between poetic communities with varying agendas,” whether to maintain the lyric subject’s authenticity, or to bring new perspectives—the voices of the unheard and unrepresented—to the attention of the poetry-reading public (15). One way to view the critical debate outlined above, in fact, is as a fight between partisans of varying definitions of voice: voice that both produces and signifies “originality, personality, and the illusion of authorial presence”; the voices that perform poetry out loud; and the voices that are quoted and incorporated into the poem for political or polemical ends (3). The juxtaposition of these different meanings of "voice" in "The Book of the Dead" has led critics such as Walter Kalaidjian and John Lowney to foreground Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia in their readings of the poem, suggesting that its juxtaposition of many distinct voices gives rise to a feeling of communal politics (Lowney 66). Both readings persuasively describe the poem's compositional technique as, in Kalaidjian's terms, “representing not just workers but the people at large” using “a polyphony of personal voices and institutional discourses” (170). To add to their analysis, I would argue that "The Book of the Dead" not only sutures these different voices together but puzzles over the extent of their overlap most conducive to political change, self-consciously offering a poetic-political methodology for the use of its readers as well. In doing so, it participates in what Cary Nelson points to as the "collective and choral features" of 1930s political poetry (*Memory* 178). Nelson's resurrection of 1930s discourses of poetry and politics importantly notes that not only was writing poetry a "credible form of revolutionary action," but that *reading* poetry "became a way of positioning one's self in relation to the possibility of basic social change," precisely because it offered "a voice one could

temporarily take up as one's own" (144).

In the reading that follows, I argue that the model of vocal overlap that "The Book of the Dead" offers its readers is based on the poem's opening affect of "interest," a term that permits individual voices to speak in the service of collective social and political goals without being subsumed by them. My emphasis on the term is greatly informed by Jürgen Habermas' elucidation of three types of interest that found any social, political, or philosophical drive toward "the true and good life" (317). Following Kant's thesis that the human desire for freedom—autonomy and responsibility—is founded on a hypothesized "interest of reason," Habermas argues that this interest stems from our necessary relationship to the fundamental tools of human life: social labor, linguistic communication, and identity formation within a community. "Technical interest," or control over objectified natural processes, produces statements of scientific fact only after we have experientially worked to master the natural forces around us. "Practical interest" produces cultural knowledge when we attempt to define, historically or anthropologically, rules of societal engagement; this interest in "the intersubjectivity of possible action-oriented mutual understanding" is the foundation of communally-defined norms and traditions (310). Finally, "emancipatory interest" spurs ideology critique: the drive to "take the historical traces of suppressed dialogue and reconstruct what has been suppressed" (315). "The Book of the Dead" is an extended meditation on how poetic language can and should represent such interests, particularly interests held in common by groups of people who otherwise might not share such mutual understanding. Its ambiguously intermingling voices highlight both the interdependence of Habermas' three interests, and the ability of individual voices to participate in communal pursuit of these

interests without losing their status as autonomous individuals.

The poem's opening section, "The Road," introduces interest as the motivation for the rest of the poem, situating it as the precursor to travel and investigation:

> These are roads to take when you think of your country
> and interested bring down the maps again,
> phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,
>
> reading the papers with morning inquiry. (73)

While we can infer that the speaker herself is taking these actions, the second-person address transforms the relationship between thought and interest into a structurally necessary one: thinking of "your country" leads immediately to "interest," which only then provokes a scientific impulse toward documentary fact-finding. This interest does not stem from factual knowledge, or from sympathetic feelings or benevolent concern for individuals, but the other way around: a personal investment in the definition and composition of "your country" leads to the drive to produce shared knowledge of the conditions and landscape that make up that country. This abstract impulse implies that the motivation for political change is, in part, interest in self-identification, the desire to reclaim one's country as an entity that inspires pride and a sense of recognition. Working toward the well-being of others not only improves the lot of the country as a whole, it also strengthens this sense of possession and identification inherent in the phrase "your country" (later in the poem, the even more proprietary "your own country"). Even more than Lomax, who shares this desire to self-identify with a radically improved America, Rukeyser makes clear that her wanderlust stems from an internal impulse, rather than a need on the people's part.

Reveling in the freedom of her road trip, the speaker uses the rhetoric of free

choice: "your wish" decides which rivers to "follow," and you "select" which mountains to climb (73). But this possession also implies a responsibility toward the history of the landscape and "its meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice": the significance of the landscape both for those who have mastered and exploit its resources, and for those who have lived there for generations (74). Although the residents of Gauley Bridge have not summoned the documentarian-poet for help, her interest in the fate of the country implies an investment in the fate of the people and the land.

While the source of her interest is different from that of the West Virginians', Rukeyser implies that the expected distinction between the detached observer with the white woman's burden, on the one hand, and the people who are intimate with the land, on the other, breaks down in the context of shared political goals. The second and fourth poems, "West Virginia" and "Gauley Bridge," set up this implied opposition but suggest that it is insufficient to describe the extent of their mutual involvement. "West Virginia" portrays early English explorers observing a scene of natural sublimity:

> Kanawha Falls, the rapids of the mind,
> fast waters spilling west.
>
> Found Indian fields, standing low cornstalks left,
> learned three Mohetons planted them; found-land
> farmland, the planted home, discovered! (74)

The explorers first experience disinterested contemplation, the "rapids of the mind"; they, like the poet, follow roads where they will, viewing the "scene of power" both for its aesthetic beauty and for its possible use. The residents of Gauley Bridge, on the other hand, are forced to work in overly intimate proximity to natural forces that should remain at a safe distance; they are decidedly too interested in the landscape around them, in the

sense that their very physical being both relies upon it and, ultimately, is destroyed by it. In contrast to the oratorio, which integrates chorus and solo lines to suggest an natural interdependence on the land, these two poems segregate the explorers, who strive for aesthetic and technical control over the landscape, and the residents, who do not seem to realize such mastery exists. "Gauley Bridge" lingers on the mundane components of rural life (railway, post office, bus station, doctor) before chastising those who would aestheticize the slightly grimy town: "What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here" (78). But of course, the poem has already given us an ekphrasis of the town's landscape, which, if not beautiful, becomes an object of contemplation.

The possible common ground between observer and residents occurs neither through detached aesthetics nor forced use, but through the town's representative status. Gauley Bridge stands in for an America in which both poet and workers are interested: "any town," Rukeyser observes, "looks like this one-street town" (78). For the workers, this interest comes through their engagement with technological means of harnessing the natural environment they inhabit; for the poet and readers, the interest lies in the possibility of critiquing that mode of interaction through defamiliarizing poetic techniques. Both groups, moreover, share an interest in establishing Gauley Bridge as part of an imagined nation, interrelating the economy and society of the town with a larger national whole.

"The Cornfield" elaborates most clearly how Rukeyser represents this model of shared interest through the interplay of lyric and quotation. It comes a little after halfway through the poem, after sections consisting entirely or primarily of quoted speech, and

sections devoted entirely to lyric. Although the preponderance of lines in “The Cornfield” are lyric, with occasional quotations set off by dashes, the poem contains a number of passages whose speaker or audience is ambiguous. Specifically, each of the first four stanzas is addressed to a certain type of audience: “those given to contemplation,” “those who like ritual,” “those given to voyages,” and “those given to keeping their own gardens,” respectively. Each stanza also emphasizes the imperative, foregrounding one or more commands addressed to those audiences. Yet for all the poem’s outward-looking language, the commands are grounded in actions performed and reduplicated, spoken and repeated, by the actors in the poem. It starts with the act of looking, in a documentary description worthy of a Dorothea Lang photograph:

> Error, disease, snow, sudden weather.
> For those given to contemplation: this house,
> wading in snow, its cracks are sealed with clay,
> walls papered with print, newsprint repeating… (92)

Likewise, the description of the single resident: "The long-faced man rises long-handed jams the door / tight against snow, long-boned, he shivers. / Contemplate.” The almost overwhelming unity of this scene is not only a result of the monotonously repeated "longness" that evokes both a longing for warmth and long underwear against the cold. The command to contemplate orders us to fill in the blanks to make a coherent portrait of the man: we know it is cold, and that he lives in poverty, and the familiar tropes of documentary realism allow us to fill in the rest, and then to regard it with thought, rather than action.

But the poem does not stop there: the next stanza commands a performative speech act, the injunction to “Swear by the corn, the found-land corn.” The cornfield is

where one local undertaker buried dead workers “five at a time” in hastily-dug graves, after the power company paid him off to declare, in “sworn papers,” that the men died of pneumonia or tuberculosis, rather than silicosis (93). Swearing by the corn thus places us in complicity both with the undertaker, who has perjured himself by falsely swearing, and with the cause of the buried workers; the “found-land corn,” a symbol of American fertility, has literal roots in criminal acts of obfuscation. Swearing in itself is not enough, not if it keeps us in company with the undertaker, who sits in comfort in a cozy office, “feet on the stove.”

The third stanza, then, gives us instructions on how to walk to the cornfield itself (“turn upstream twenty-five yards. … Over the second hill, through the gate, / watch for the dogs”). Before we reach the cornfield, the poem quickly offers a diversity of voices: the man on the road giving directions, the worker/organizer George Robinson, and an anonymous questioner asking Robinson about the progress of silicosis among the miners. The final question and answer pair, which ends the stanza, links the poet’s physical body, walking uphill to the cornfield, to those of the miners:

> —Do they seem to be living in fear
> or do they wish to die?
> —They are getting to breathe a little faster. (93)

This overlap between poet and worker gestures toward the dramatic reduplication of their voices that occurs in the fourth stanza:

> For those given to keeping their own garden:
> Here is the cornfield, white and wired by thorns,
> old cornstalks, snow, the planted home.
> Stands bare against a line of farther field,
> unmarked except for wood stakes, charred at tip,
> few scratched and named (pencil or nail).
> Washed-off. Under the mounds,

all the anonymous.
Abel America, calling from under the corn,
Earth, uncover my blood!
Did the undertaker know the man was married?
Uncover.
Do they seem to fear death?
Contemplate.
Does Mellon's ghost walk, povertied at last,
walking in furrows of corn, still sowing,
do apparitions come?
Voyage.
Think of your gardens. But here is corn to keep.
Marked pointed sticks to name the crop beneath.
Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe.

—No, sir; they want to go on.
They want to live as long as they can. (93-94)

At first, Rukeyser the tour guide gestures toward the cornfield in a lyric mode, even switching briefly into blank verse for a few lines. This more formal mode lends her description an ominous detachment: while the elevated syntax and meter suggest the distancing tactics of an aestheticizing observer, the figures—"wired by thorns," "the planted home"—have an uncanny relationship to the household gardens of her audience. Protected by thorns from nosy intruders, the cornfield is, nonetheless, "home," the site of domestic cultivation. The poem suggests a familiar complicity with the undertaker's dirty work, with the men buried in the cornfield, like backyard vegetables, casually labeled with garden stakes.

Abel America interrupts the lyric speech at the moment when it slips from blank verse into tersely referential phrases. While Rukeyser gives "all the anonymous" a short line to themselves, suggesting a loss of poetic speech in the face of mass tragedy, Abel America's call to arms is itself strictly metrical, a trumpet call in triple meter that marks a break from description to command. The series of questions and commands that begins at

that moment is remarkably overdetermined, for each line has multiple speakers and addressees. The first two questions are of a piece with the interrogation of George Robinson that occurs in the previous stanza, and the second ("Do they seem to fear death?") is actually repeated verbatim. In the context of Abel America's spectral voice, however, they slip into the realm of philosophy: the poem directs those questions at an audience which must "contemplate," among other things, the enormity of the tragedy. The third question is even more rhetorical, invoking the ghost of the recently deceased Andrew Mellon of Pittsburgh Coal.[107] More than one specter haunts the cornfield: not only the workers, but also the industrialist and the legal questioner whose words echo from earlier stanzas.

In a moment of Gothic return, the boundaries between dead and living, speaker and listener, become permeable. The imperatives are familiar from earlier in the poem: formerly spoken by Rukeyser, they are now shared by Abel America, a representative of the national working class. Both instruct us, from beyond our reach, to reveal the solution to a crime. Yet Rukeyser is also the audience for those commands, for she also voyages, contemplates, uncovers. This mingling of voices evokes political solidarity from beyond the grave, as well as the futility of such solidarity after the fact. The earth, after all, bars the dead from the living; only the marked sticks, scant indicators of the burial locations, bridge the two, and even they fail to name a majority of the men. In this context, the desire of the remaining miners to live "as long as they can" both gestures to the power of poetic speech to memorialize the men and fight for their cause, and alerts us to the

[107] While Mellon was not directly implicated in the Gauley Bridge tragedy, he and his company greatly influenced mining conditions in the region. Mellon died in 1937, while Rukeyser was writing “The Book of the Dead.” For more on Mellon’s massive control over the local coal industry, see Dayton, 91.

insufficiency of the fight for those already dead or dying of silicosis. How, then, do these imperatives help those who are living under the sentence of death?

One answer lies in the overdetermination of those imperatives, spoken by the poet, the dead, and, by implication, George Robinson, a living worker. The reduplication of voices suggests a model of political solidarity in which a diverse array of speakers arrive at the same conclusions from different initial points of interest. The earlier stanzas no longer seem like insufficient steps in the face of tragedy: now, contemplation, ritual, and voyaging are necessary precursors to the urge for political action. These steps, which appear compressed in the very first lines of "The Road," lead Rukeyser now to a shared investment in the goals that the workers, in conversations and committee meetings depicted earlier in the poem, arrive at independently. The poem implies that successive reduplication of these steps by more and more people will produce first solidarity, then change.

This model of repetitively instilled knowledge producing mutual interest and motivating political change recurs in the poem's few refrains. Each refrain both has an individual speaker and evokes choral, collective speech in which the reader can participate. In "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones," Rukeyser portrays an engineer who walks up to the dam, contemplating its structure and remembering the stages of construction. The first refrain occurs midway through the poem:

> Never to be used, he thinks, never to spread its power,
> jinx on the rock, curse on the power-plant,
> hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass
> (O the gay wind the clouds the many men).

This refrain is parenthetical, an address to nature reminiscent of a ballad; it gives Vivian

Jones himself, and his complicity in building and supervising the dam, a fated quality. It also inserts irony into an otherwise straightforward focalization through Jones. While this focalization suggests that he speaks the refrain as he gazes at the landscape, the distanced, chant-like language offers itself as both woefully insufficient to describe the events at Gauley Bridge, and the only way to memorialize the workers, in a litany of repeated nouns.

Similar refrains recur two stanzas later—"O the gay snow the white dropped water, down, / all day the water rushes down its river"—and again in the final stanza:

> And the snow clears and the dam stands in the gay weather,
> O proud O white O water rolling down,
> he turns and stamps this off his mind again
> and on the hour walks again through town. (79)

While the first refrain is parenthetical, an aside suggesting the limitations of Jones' perspective, these refrains mingle with Jones' reflections. The disjunction between the nobility of the scene and its tainted history appears to Jones as well; although he "stamps it off his mind," the closing rhyme suggests that it will return. Shared by Jones and by an anonymous ballad-voice, the refrains offer a form of contemplation that acknowledges the beauty of the scene while mourning the dead. Later in "The Book of the Dead," the organizer Juanita Tinsley mentions the "forgetful ballads" of America (89), but "Vivian Jones" suggests that ballads can also permit distanced memorializing that allows readers to share both in Jones' complicity and in a collective grief.

The poem's other refrain shares this distancing quality. "The Doctors" consists primarily of adapted testimony from expert witnesses and local doctors at Congressional hearings. After two pages of transcripts, set off by a change in indentation and spacing,

are the poem's sole lyric lines:

> The man in the white coat is the man on the hill,
> the man with the clean hands is the man with the drill,
> the man who answers 'yes' lies still. (92)

These lines combine the cadences of a nursery rhyme with aphoristic generality, at the same time as they reference specific characters in the Gauley Bridge story. Rukeyser's polemical commentary—the only innocents, the lines imply, are the workers themselves—becomes a rule to live by—the only way to definitively answer "yes" to the question, "Was it silicosis?" is to die of it. Cautiously reserving judgment, as the doctors do, forestalls action. In contrast, the poem suggests that action first requires its readers to absorb and repeat the truths of the story, forming a body that shares both a collective wisdom and a collective sense of shame at its own dirty hands.

The poem, then, asks the individual to retrace the steps of the poet, repetitively gaining knowledge shared by a larger community, and thereby arriving at common interest. While this pedagogy of repetition was a familiar component of theories of proletarian literature, it challenges theorizations of the long poem that evaluate the genre's political efficacy by way of the dichotomy between the lyric voice and historical, narrative, or quoted language. Michael Bernstein's theory of the American "modern verse epic" characterizes its mode of instruction as a "narrative of its audience's own cultural, historical, or mythic heritage" controlled by a "dominant voice" which "function[s] as a spokesman for values generally acknowledged as significant" (14). Here, the lyric voice shapes historical narrative, taming it for didactic purposes: while other voices interpose themselves, they remain subordinate. Leonard Diepeveen likewise posits a "separate texture" to quotation in the modern quoting poem, although he does not subscribe to

Bernstein's hierarchy of significance (17).

Much criticism of the long poem that complicates the lyric/narrative dichotomy has stemmed from Susan Stanford Friedman's foundational work on contemporary long poems by women. Friedman calls attention to feminist revisions of poetic discourses of history, philosophy, religion and aesthetics, but stresses that "narrative and lyric cannot be accurately said to exist in a fixed binary where lyric is (always) the revolutionary force that transgresses (inherent) narrative tyranny" (23). Instead, she locates the political force of these poems in the "fluid mingling" of symbolic and semiotic discourses (38). Critics such as Peter Baker, Lynn Keller, and Smaro Kamboureli have extended Friedman's analysis to suggest that this mingling is in fact a definitional property of long poetry. While all three insist on the generic flexibility or "lawlessness" of the long poem (Kamboureli's term), Baker's concept of "exteriority" is particularly useful for considering the link between Rukeyser's textual strategies and the political force of her work. Baker argues that long poets experiment with ways to "refuse the insularity of the lyrical 'I' in order to engage thoughtfully and energetically with the minds and experiences of others. ... while inviting the reader to participate in the creation of meaning" (ix, 9). The innovative formal tactics of "The Book of the Dead" suggest that the reader's interest will form part of an intersubjective community of interests that open up new possibilities for collective politics.

In addition, the poem's expansion of the lyric to encompass moments of shared experience contribute to its critique of those who participate in or collude with oppressive institutions. Michael Davidson has observed that the poem's documentary language emphasizes "the materiality of social speech"; that is, the systems of language that create

and uphold the authority of those in power (139). Judicious quoting, editing, and rearrangement of legal and other documents call attention to the constructed nature of this authority and expose an underlying "complicity in malfeasance" (146). I would add that the poem's strategies also expose its readers' own complicity in the structural violence of poor working conditions. But such engagement, the poem proposes, works in both directions: our participation in such intersubjective communication also implies an ability to critique and fight against oppression collectively.

"The Book of the Dead" strives to break down those boundaries between reader and history, between lyric voice and external narrative, that would allow us to pinpoint individual moments of either engagement or complicity. Instead, it develops a theory of constant reduplication and retracing that produces an inevitable drive toward political action. The stakes of this strategy become clear when we consider the final section, also titled "The Book of the Dead," which implies that at last, readers have become a community, and are now prepared to act:

> Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,
> to photograph and to extend the voice,
> to speak this meaning.
>
> Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.
> As we enrich, growing in larger motion,
> this word, this power.
>
> Down coasts of taken countries, mastery,
> discovery at one hand, and at the other
> frontiers and forests,
>
> fanatic cruel legend at our back and
> speeding ahead the red and open west,
> and this our region,
>
> desire, field, beginning. Name and road,

> communication to these many men,
> as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (110-111)

Whether or not the poem's assumption of community seems presumptuous depends on how sympathetically the reader has responded to the preceding text. From an opening that features the poet's individual interest in the fate of her own country, we have arrived, in stark contrast, at the exhortation for all of us to spread the word about her discovery. While the imperative to "carry abroad" maintains a distance between the poet and the audience for her command, the shift from the second person to the first-person plural collapses that distance. The audience shifts from a projected community that the poem exhorts to come into being through action, to assumed fellow-travelers, in the backseat of Rukeyser's car as we "speed ahead." A similar collapse occurs between the imperative "to extend the voice," which positions the reader as a potential triangulator between the voices of Gauley Bridge and those whose interest has not yet been piqued, and the phrase "voices to speak to us directly," which eliminates the need for mediation. This final reciprocity, in which a collective audience moves, speaks, and listens as one, smoothes over the difficulty of the earlier poems, which struggle to achieve that incorporation of many voices into a political collective. The succession of nouns that closes the poem further condenses the process of forming a social body that could recognize itself in "our" nation's past, present and future. Unlike earlier sections, which position such terms as "name and road" as problematic for those who do not control the naming of diseases or the construction of roads, this conclusion offers them as inherently communicable to all readers.

This sudden shift to didactic summary at the poem's end was one factor in critical

accusations of egotism leveled at Rukeyser. Given the poem's attention to the interface between poetic language and quoted material, and its awareness of its audience, such accusations are unjustified. However, the material limitations of the long poem make it difficult to arrive at a collectivity by the poem's end without submitting to such didacticism. The very experiments with documentary form that often encourage readerly engagement also often form a barrier to practical participation in the overlap of voices. Such quotations as stock market quotes and chemical formulas are difficult to translate into voiced speech, discouraging attempts to perform or recreate the poem's interest for oneself. In other words, while the poem theorizes the possibility of a collective of interests, at the end it must simply posit its existence and hope that it has persuaded its readers to do the same.

"The Book of the Dead" and *Gauley Bridge* thus suggest two alternate possibilities for using the same documentary material in politically didactic ways. The determinate voices that speak in *Gauley Bridge* suggest a national community formed out of separate speaking groups, each of which can temporarily involve the listener in its narrative. The oratorio presupposes a listening audience who, for the moment, stands outside of the Gauley Bridge tragedy, and is able to learn and take action from this external listening-in. In contrast, the poem's interplay of voices implies a reader who is already implicated in the systems of economic, social, and linguistic interest that underlie the Gauley Bridge material. By calling attention to the ways in which such interests converge, it hopes, ultimately, to produce a self-consciousness in its readers that will further a collective impulse toward immanent critique, to reshape America from within.

Conclusion: Joining Voices

The authors in this study use representations of voice to negotiate between two impulses. On the one hand, they each take the stakes of the term "American" seriously. Assuming the crucial importance of this term to the nation's political, social, and aesthetic health, they attempt to carve out new meanings and applications through more or less explicit means, from straightforward definitions to represented speech and song to moments of pedagogy and imitation. On the other hand, the more conventionally modernist drive toward formal experimentation that propelled these innovations in transcription and performance had nothing specifically American about it.

Rather than placing these two impulses in competition with each other, these authors, I have shown, situate them dialectically. They hope to complicate the didacticism of top-down definitions of "America" by representing in innovative ways the diversity of voices that make up a nation. Yet their authorial mediations and their self-conscious examinations of the limits of vocal transcription often highlight the points at which the umbrella term "Americans" fails to encompass individual circumstance (as in Locke's anthologies) or becomes so broad as to become descriptive rather than prescriptive (as in Stein's redefinition of "American" as a relationship to genre). At the same time as they pursue new means of representing individual voices on the page, they ask how these very particularities situate individuals within larger communities (as in Roth's investigation into David Schearl's typicality).

Crucially, asking these questions through the medium of vocal transcription opens up the possibility that readers will imitate the voices on the page. By experimenting with vocal production as a potentially progressive element of modernist literature, not only are

these authors responding to changes within an artistic community, but they also aspire to teach and produce new sounds in the context of a broad “American” readership.

Like these authors, I have attempted to mediate between definitions of Americanness and representations of voices from both directions, both investigating the scope of the master term “American” in aesthetic and political discourse, and allowing the voices on the page to dictate, as it were, the conditions of their engagement with that term. If they hoped to broaden and diversify the ways in which marginalized voices spoke in literature and politics, I hope that this work expands the ways in which we speak about speaking and singing: not only as nostalgic evocations of a disappearing past or ethnographic snapshots of the present, but as an aesthetic and ethical tool that could teach readers to perform a different future.

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