

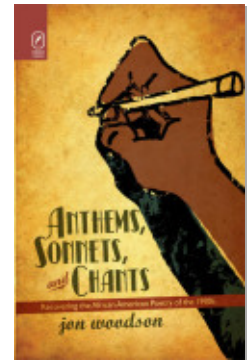


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Existential Crisis

THE SONNET AND SELF-FASHIONING IN THE BLACK POETRY OF THE 1930S

In the society that has come into existence since the Middle Ages, one can always avoid picking up a pen, but one cannot avoid being described, identified, certified, and handled—like a text. Even in reaching out to become one's own "self," one reaches out for a text.

—Illich and Sanders, *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*

Largo: Cry pine!

I pierce you through for turpentine.

To heal the white man's wounds.

—David Cannon, "Black Labor Chant"

THE SONNET AS A MEDIUM FOR BLACK SELF-APPRECIATION

It is highly significant that the first chapter of this study includes a consideration of the jeremiad in the black poetry of the 1930s. An inescapable sociocultural stimulus—the American institutionalization of lynching¹—compelled black poets to assume the jeremiadic posture of anger, repudiation, and despair through which they produced a literature of agency, struggle, and dissent. In the 1930s lynching was, above all, a cultural undertaking directed toward *the self-negation of the black person* through ritualistic acts of terrorist violence and the dissemination of such acts of violence, whether it was a severed and charred human head thrown directly into a crowd of black villagers or the regular and implacable publication in newspapers of photographs of the mutilated bodies

of black persons. So the black jeremiad came about as a counterdiscourse to the culturally empowered discourse of the negation of the black self through a semiotics of terror. To borrow a phrase from Arthur F. Marotti, lynching was a fundamental component that sustained the social order.

What I propose to examine in this chapter is the proposition that what Sterling Brown had categorized as “romantic escapes for the sensitive authors from depressing actualities” (*Negro Poetry and Drama* 126–27) was not a discourse situated in escape, antimodernity, or antirealism or the individualistic self-fashioning that Brown dreamed escapes were. To the contrary, the individualistic self-fashioning that Brown deemed escapes was yet another modernist discourse that has been heretofore unrecognized—a discourse that may be thought of as a type of *individualist self-fashioning* that operated in parallel to the generally acknowledged, valorized, and institutionalized discourse of collectivist *social realist self-fashioning*. Socialist self-fashioning has been made iconically familiar through murals, proletarian fiction, documentary journalism, and documentary photography and film.

Recent academic studies of selfhood, subjectivity, interiority, inwardness, and identity in Western literature have focused on the Renaissance. It is common to encounter such rhetorical-theoretical formulations as *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Greenblatt), *Renaissance Women: Constructions of Femininity in England* (Aughterson), “The Flexibility of the Self in Renaissance Literature” (Greene), *Betraying Our Selves: Forms of Self-Representation in Early Modern English Texts* (Dragstra), and so on. Feminist critics have recognized the blazon tendency in literature that enacts the unmaking of women in literary texts. Discussing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century love poetry, Moira Baker shows that “Philip Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella*, Fulke Greville’s *Caelica*, and Robert Herrick’s *Hesperides* offer a diverse sampling of Renaissance verse, and serve to illustrate a range of rhetorical stratagems for (dis)embodying female power and thus attempting to master it, textually, at least, if not sexually” (7). A related topic is resubjectivization in the neocolonial theory that describes women in Africa and the Caribbean.² Jenny Pinkus shows that another way in which self-fashioning is framed is in terms of the production of selves and the social psychology of selfhood discussed; according to Pinkus, social psychologists discuss selfhood as subject positions and positioning:

Certain social groups are defined by the dominant orthodoxy as “other.” One example is *women*, who within a male hegemonic system are variously defined in terms of whatever men are (which is valued positively) women are not; they are “other.” In this way, the self/other binary intersects with others such as rational/emotional, culture/nature, public/

private and are seen to represent male/female respectively. Within this particular discourse women disappear, become invisible in the binary man/not (wo)man, and women do not have a positive identity but are constructed from a “position” of “lack” and “without male identity,” the “absence of the phallus.” (“Subject Positions and Positioning”)

While the understanding of self-fashioning and, to a lesser extent, embodying/(dis)embodying are topics of considerable interest in certain fields of literary history, there is little to be seen on the self-fashioning of the black person in American culture, a culture in which the institutional abjection of the black person was a central feature. In the example above, while there is a passing mention of several groups that constitute “other[s],” the writer fluidly moves on to a heavily theorized presentation of female otherness and reconstruction without divulging the nature of the several “others” that have been passed over. The Harlem Renaissance has commanded a great deal of critical attention in studies of collective and individual projects of self-fashioning, without the term self-fashioning being applied by scholars. At the same time, the understanding of the movement has undergone a number of shifts as evolving social-aesthetic movements and critical methodologies (black aesthetic, black feminism, multiculturalism, new historicism, cultural studies, and neocolonialism) have affected how we consider the Harlem movement. Along with these shifts in methodology, many versions of self-fashioning have been produced, though the result of most of this work points in the direction of demonstrating the failure of the writers in the Harlem Renaissance movement to advance beyond the conceptual limitations of exotic primitivism and the hegemonies of class, sex, and intraracial color prejudice. In order to categorize those efforts at black self-fashioning in the thirties, I will return to the topic of subject positioning with the idea that the sonnets written by black poets in the thirties constitute a collective sonnet sequence that narrates black self-fashioning in the way that Davie and Harre describe the dynamism of developing social selves: “[Subjects] use the metaphor of an unfolding narrative, in which we may be constituted in one position or another, in one narrative or another within a story, or perhaps stand in multiple positions or negotiate new ones by ‘refusing’ the ones that have been articulated by posing alternatives” (quoted in Pinkus).

The overriding social condition of the black experience in the 1930s was the *white nullification of the black self*:

The Negro’s inferiority was being engraved in every public edifice—railroad stations, court houses, theaters—with signs showing rear entrances for Negroes or kitchens in which Negroes might be served. Moreover, in

every representation of the Negro, he was pictured as a gorilla dressed up like a man. His picture was never carried in the newspapers of the South . . . unless he had committed a crime. In the newspapers the Negro was described as burly or ape-like and even Negroes who looked like whites were represented in cartoons as black with gorilla features. All of this fitted into the stereotype which represented the Negro as subhuman or a beast without any human qualities. (Frazier 122–23)

It is important to contextualize this idea so that it addresses white self-fashioning through the control of the black self-image; the intersubjective dynamic inherent in this process should not be forgotten. Whereas, according to the new historicist narrative, the self-fashioning of the early modern (white) man was accomplished textually through the sonnet sequence and other forms of the lyric (one finds many discussions that are similar to Marotti's "‘Love is Not Love’: Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and the Social Order"), in the 1930s the *textual absenting, canceling, and annihilation of the black self* were effected primarily through technology. It is nearly certain that the wide dissemination of photographs showing lynched black men and women was the most extreme attempt to undermine the black self. The nature of cultural communication changed during the 1930s as American culture became a culture of sight and sound: Doris Pieroth comments that "it is virtually impossible to overstate the importance of the movies in the life of the nation during the 1930s" (94). Other forms of the textual absenting of African Americans proliferated throughout the media folk culture of the thirties (the discourse network³ of the 1930s), as radio, newsreels, movies, and photo-magazines shaped new modes of social interaction and extended and shaped social myths.

Thus, the 1934 box office triumph *Imitation of Life* stereotypically portrayed loyalty between the races (and loyalty especially from the black characters), black selflessness, blacks accepting their place, the commodification of black culture, and unending sacrifice and labor. Similarly, in the 1936 film *Showboat*, a black character effaces herself in the service of a white songstress while engaging in the commodification of black culture. The appearance of African Americans in the films of the thirties as set dressing (menial workers, porters, cooks, and laborers) was a common occurrence, and the roles often called for clownishly incompetent characters. Minstrel-oriented characters and local blackface comedy troupes were abundant on network radio during the first half of the thirties (BW). Thus, in terms of the new forms of culture that rapidly transformed the nature of American consciousness in the thirties, African Americans found themselves faced with an entirely new form of the white cultural gaze: while the new media often replicated preexisting

myths, attitudes, and complexes, the new media disseminated racist content instantaneously, creating a new type of popular culture. In other words, the subjugation of black Americans was reinforced and amplified by technological means.

In response to this complex cultural attack on the black self, black Americans created a countertext in which they attempted the resubjectivization of the black self. This countertext took many forms (and to a large extent was *unconscious*). It may even be proposed that the antiracist, antilynching textuality of the 1930s consisted of a subjectivizing countertext, of which formal poetry constituted but one aspect. My thesis is that this body of poetry was of vital importance in the resubjectivization of African Americans, and that, to paraphrase Pinkus, African Americans used poetry to create new “subject positions” for themselves—subject positions in which they were valued as African Americans.

Psychologist K. R. Gergen states that “Persons of letters—including *poets*, historians, journalists, essayists, philosophers, novelists and the like—are of special interest for the study of the diachronic development of self-understanding. It is such groups in particular that have most effectively pushed forward the dialogue of self-construction” (76; emphasis added). Writing in 1966, Erik Erikson conflated periods of black literary production but nevertheless was able to suggest the role that African American literature had played in the formation of African American self-understanding and self-construction: “In a haunting way they [Du Bois, Baldwin, and Ellison] defend a latently existing but in some ways voiceless identity against the stereotypes which hide it. They are involved in a battle to reconquer for their people, but first of all (as writers must) for themselves . . . [reconquer] a ‘surrendered identity.’ . . . What is latent can become a living actuality, and thus a bridge from past to future” (297). Erikson’s insistence on the latency of African American identity is suggestive. It points to the usefulness of examining black literary production in the 1930s for some indications of the nature of this process of individual and group self-formation. It may be suggested that there was a central role for poets in this activity of black self-construction during the Depression, given the paucity of historians, philosophers, and novelists who work along these lines: Gergen’s insight further supports the centrality of the writings of the black poets whose works were routinely situated adjacent to journalism and essays in such journals as *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*. This chapter will, after some preliminary considerations, examine some of the sonnets written by black poets in the 1930s to uncover an African American narrative of self-formation.

Given the cultural power of racism as it was disseminated by the technological innovations of the discourse network of the 1930s, blacks were

socially, politically, and technologically at a severe disadvantage. Nevertheless, it is important to introduce the idea that formal poetry—such as the work appearing in poetry collections, anthologies, and in journals like *The Crisis* and *Opportunity*—has a relationship to other cultural productions besides the blues and other folk forms, which are already considered central to our understanding of this period of history. Moreover, scholars already recognize the centrality of formal poetry in reshaping modern consciousness under the influence of romanticism and modernism. Thus, we should take seriously African American self-fashioning as a cultural production that offered a forcefully oppositional response to the white nullification of the black self. The difficulty here is that I am speaking of an incremental achievement, as poems changed the minds of individuals over a long period of time. It is impossible to measure this effect, though it is well established that, in similar terms, entire cultures came under the sway of romanticism and modernism. I am proposing that in another set of circumstances, African Americans came under the sway of the poetry of the 1930s, with some important social effects. However, because the poetry of the 1930s has never been adequately surveyed and analyzed, it is simply not known what effect it had on its readers. It is clear which historical events occurred (for example, there was not a socialist revolution in America during the 1930s, nor was there a black American expeditionary force sent to Ethiopia to combat the Fascists). But beyond *mythological* accounts of the period (for instance, totalizations of the New Deal, totalizations of Communist Party culture, or totalizations of documentary culture), it is difficult to determine what shaped the responses of individuals to the cultural environment. The cultural environment of the thirties has been interpreted along restricted ideological lines that have not served very well to illuminate the course of recent social history.

The sonnets of the thirties were exceptional sites for the appearance of the antilynching discourse. Furthermore, these sonnets have not been previously studied. There are many other components of the African American discourse of self-fashioning in the 1930s that deserve attention as components of a hypothetical antiracist countertext. Yet a qualification is in order, since the sonnet contains one of the most revelatory and resounding textualizations of the black self-in-process⁴ (to use Julia Kristeva's particularly apt formulation [*Desire in Language* 140]). The goal, then, is to present a discussion of the sonnet as an important black cultural production in the 1930s.

I hope to show that I am not privileging the sonnet simply because it is a traditionally valorized literary genre. In their discussion of the postcolonial female African subject, Tadjo and Liking state that “once in a position to write, being able to say ‘I’ is by no means straightforward, which is why many of the pioneering texts take the form of a searching for self, or a cre-

ative self-affirmation, and why autobiography is such a significant literary paradigm” (quoted in Syrotinski 141). Similarly, in the 1920s the lyric poem became a malleable mode of textuality through which African Americans pursued a search for selfhood, and the sonnet especially attained ascendancy as it was adopted by some of the leading writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Sterling Brown included nine sonnets in *Southern Road* (1932), a volume that is generally associated with the modernist use of the black vernacular: “[*Southern Road* is] an enthusiastic immersion into and embrace of the Black South, especially its folk life, language, and lore—a relationship from which would come [Brown’s] best-known work” (Tidwell 471). As I will show, it is symptomatic (and ironic) that Sterling Brown himself serves as an example of self-in-process through engagement with the sonnet. Tidwell and Genoways state that

Brown’s quest for a distinctive, engaging poetic voice began, as it did for most writers, with the self. According to archival sources containing his “apprentice” work, the young Brown was thoroughly steeped in late 19th-century Victorian poetry. For example, many of these early experiments clearly show an effort to gain formal mastery of the ballad, villanelle, ballade, hymn, and sonnet. Conceptually, Brown located his vision in an aesthetic that critic David Perkins, in another context, calls “the nineteenth century convention of personal utterance” (*A History of Modern Poetry* 5). By developing themes of unrequited love, anger, self-recrimination, beauty, and self-doubt, he focused much of this early work on feelings, as if the very cultivation of emotion was poetry’s *raison d’être*. These and other Brown poems self-consciously courted “racelessness,” symbolic expression, and the romantic excess that places emotion on a poetic pedestal. Although Brown preserved the best of these early poems in the “Vestiges” section of *Southern Road* and the “Remembrances” section of *No Hiding Place*, other poems reveal much about Brown’s developing proficiency. (471; emphasis added)

For African American writers in the thirties, the sonnet was sufficiently a cultural paradigm that in 1935 one-third of the poems published in *Opportunity* were sonnets. Marcus Christian’s anthology, *Poems from the Deep South* (1937), contained many sonnets, and even Dorothy West’s radical literary journal, *Challenge*, published sonnets by Frank Yerby in 1937. The *Negro Voices* (1938) anthology contained thirteen sonnets. Many of those sonnets address political and social subjects, and they show the influence of Claude McKay. Among the group of the more familiar black poets writing in the 1930s, besides those mentioned above, Melvin Tolson and Georgia

Douglas Johnson published sonnets. Deborah F. Atwater relates that beginning in 1936, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, with a circulation of 200,000, relied on porters in sleeping cars to slip 100,000 papers a week into the South, where the *Courier* was unofficially banned. Once in circulation, each copy was passed from reader to reader, and the number of readers multiplied. Poetry was a regular feature of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and its poems often were sonnets. As late as August 31, 1940, the features page carried, beneath comic strips and alongside astrology and columns about the card game contract bridge, three sonnets in the “*Courier Verse*” column—a love poem and a protest poem (“*To My Son*”) by Lafayette M. Brumby and a love poem by Walter G. Arnold.

In contrast to George Berkelman’s observation about the inappropriateness of the sonnet for black poetry, the sonnet figured commonly as a normative form for poetry published in African American periodicals in the 1930s. Michael Thurston’s discussion of the sonnet illuminates Berkelman’s perception of “the ideology of form”—the sonnet’s supposed “cool” emotional tenor and Berkelman’s consequent notion of the appropriateness of Whitman’s style to the African American emancipatory cause (Hatch 29). Citing Davidson’s work on Zukovsky, Thurston shows that there is a danger that the sonnet’s “ideological saturation” threatens to overwhelm the poet with the form’s traditional associations and critical frames (31). Thurston’s discussion of sonnets by the radical poet Edwin Rolfe is particularly apropos in that Rolfe and Langston Hughes associated with each other during Hughes’s visit to the battlefields of the Spanish civil war in 1937. Subsequently, Hughes wrote and published a few sonnets.

According to Thurston, Rolfe’s appropriation of the sonnet is an example of “a complicated relationship that drew on the form’s contractual expectations and accumulated power to attract and convince readers even as it aimed to dislodge those forms from the social structures that had, over the centuries, empowered them” (*Making Something Happen* 31). Thurston shows that radical poets subverted the sonnet by introducing “unsuitable thematic content” (31). By traducing the *familiarity* of the sonnet as a “culturally sanctioned discourse” (33)—a discourse that was so much a part of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century education (32)—radical poets invested the cultural capital of the sonnet in a political agenda. Finally, radical poets exploited the “multiplicity of traditions” (33) in which the sonnet had been used to take up political themes both covertly and directly—so that the disparity of form and content was “a potential resource for political poets to exploit (even though it presented a potential obstacle to the poet’s immediate political aims)” (31). These comments suggest that the assessment made by George Berkelman underestimated the degree to which, given

the ahistorical identity of the Negro at that time, the subversion of the sonnet usefully contributed to the subversion and reinscription of *American* history as Dodson went about writing “Negro History.”

In *Applied Grammatology* Gregory L. Ulmer comments on the metaphoric nature of abstraction that “every abstract figure hides a sensible figure” (22), leading us to conclude that since the poet writes a *body of poetry*, and since each book contains a *body of text*, the sonnet is also a body. The sonnet, from its Petrarchan beginning, was traditionally associated with the body, and by extension, it was associated with what I am calling the body/self. Moira Baker, discussing the representation of women in early modern sonnet sequences, states in her concluding paragraph that

the female body serves as the battleground on which Sidney contests with other poets to prove his own mastery of language and his control of woman. Nowhere is this as apparent as in his use of the *blazon*, which Nancy Vickers sees as a device of control (“Diana Described” 265–79). For Sidney, the act of praising the woman is an act of self-fashioning as he dismembers her body and divests it of its autonomy. Through his stylized fragmentation and reification of the female body, he asserts his subjectivity as a poet, manipulating and controlling her objectified person. (Baker 9)

Similarly, Gayle Whittier observes while discussing the sonnets in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* that “the inherited Petrarchan word becomes English flesh by declining from lyric freedom to tragic fact through a transaction that *sonnetizes the body*, diminishes the body of the sonnet, and scatters the terms of the *blazon du corps*” (27; my emphasis). When Wordsworth reshaped the sonnet, the possibilities of the form expanded to allow for the contemplation of political, moral, and social themes. With Toussaint L’Overture, the sonnet could address the spectacle of the black revolutionary body/self under the white sublimating gaze. Modern poets used the sonnet to protest, among other things, the First World War (Rupert Brookes) and racial oppression in America (Claude McKay). Yet, the modern sonnet retains the full range of its past developments and associations; thus, Robert Frost was able to produce “The Silken Tent” (1939), a fully modern sonnet that so preserved the forms of the sonnet’s evolution that H. A. Maxson praised it for its flawless rendering of the sensuous presentation of the body of the beloved woman (103–6), the traditional treatment of the beloved and idealized woman in the *blazon au corps*. Similarly, the black poets of the thirties used the sonnet to record their reactions to new social stresses and new means of extending the process of self-fashioning. In order to see the innovations of the poets of

the thirties, it is necessary to briefly examine the sonnet as it was positioned in the twenties.

The sonnet arrived in Harlem by virtue of several intervening discourses, including the revival and alteration of the sonnet by the British romantics, Rupert Brooke's and Siegfried Sassoon's exemplary protests of the First World War, and McKay's colonial British education. The common critical understanding of the sonnet as the signifier of an elite white discourse (for example, Palatnik labels the sonnet "Shakespeare's discourse") misunderstands how it was used in the 1920s and 1930s. The sonnet was at the time a popular form and was regularly a feature of middlebrow mass-circulation magazines (Thurston, *Making* 32). Edna St. Vincent Millay's volume of sonnets that she published during the nadir of the Great Depression in 1935 was a best seller. It sold an impressive 50,000 copies. While the body is certainly blazoned, reified, and imitated in the sonnets of the Harlem Renaissance, the presentation of embodiment is controversial: the work that resulted from the thirties was layered over the production of the twenties, which led to even more questions, the fundamental question being whether there was a discernible break between the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Depression. The question about the break between the two periods led in turn to further concerns. To what degree was such a break said to exist? How was such a break discerned by the poets? How did the poets who might have followed such a break comment on the poetry produced in the earlier period?

THE SURRENDERED IDENTITIES OF BLUES SUBJECTIVITY

With the above in mind, it remains to be determined what types of bodies existed in the cultural space of the thirties and what type of body the sonnet may thereby textualize. In *The Emotional Self*, Deborah Lupton shows that there are essentially two types of bodies in the modern period, the "Grotesque" Body/Self and the "Civilized" Body/Self. Lupton describes the open, or premodern, body in these terms:

Early European accounts of foreign peoples were rich in the expression of revulsion for their bodily habits and appearance (Greenblatt, 1982: 2). In colonial discourses, the black man was typically represented as highly embodied, particularly sexually, and as infantile and emotional compared to the white man. . . . Bordo (1993: 910) points out how colonial and "scientific" writings on and illustrations of African women often drew attention to their similarity to wild animals, particularly monkeys,

in their supposed over-developed sexuality, reliance on instinctive drives and savagery. (81)

Lupton contributes the following discussion of the civilized body:

By the nineteenth century, the “grotesque” body, the body whose boundaries were not well contained, became viewed as a source of horror and disgust, particularly for members of the bourgeoisie. Disgust for “grotesque” bodies became a potent means by which the bourgeois sought to distinguish themselves from those they considered socially beneath them, who were marked out as “Other”: as dirty, contaminating and repulsive because of their supposed lack of self-control over their bodies and their general deportment, including over their emotions. (83)

Using these observations, it is possible to identify the entire social construction of the black self (or social imposition of black negative identity) with the grotesque body/self and to identify the construction of the white bourgeois subject with the civilized body/self. The folk blues can be said to have written the body/self of the black peasant (what Gussow calls the blues subject), while the sonnet has written the body/self of the white subject—from Petrarch to Dante, Shakespeare, Millay, and Frost. The blues, a performative form of racialized folk poetry, is traditionally spontaneous, improvisational, and momentary. Consequently, it is “illegitimate,” and it bears the sign of the abject subject who uses the blues to further declare his or her own insufficiency. The poetic speaker within the song is self-described as “broken,” “dirty,” “devilish,” “poor,” “alone”—signs that the subject embodies the grotesque body/self. Conversely, the sonnet partakes of the semiotics of the perfect closure of its textual surface; the sonnet’s aesthetic resolution has the power to preserve the body from death. It encloses the subject in its fourteen lines of austere, flawless music. How, then, does the black performance of the sonnet relate to the view of the body as grotesque/idealized? When the black poet writes in the sonnet form to construct the self through *a body* of poetry, what contingencies come into play?

In *Drumvoices* (1976), Eugene Redmond reiterates Brown’s overview of poetry in the 1930s as follows:

Brown separates the poets writing in the thirties into “new realists” and “romantics.” The word “romantic” seems to be analogous to “library” or “literary,” and both are used to speak somewhat disparagingly of poets thus categorized. The “realists” and writers of protest included Welborn Victor Jenkins (*Trumpet in the New Moon*, 1934), Frank Marshall Davis

and [Richard] Wright. Among those concerned with “romantic escapes” were Alpheus Butler (*Make Way for Happiness*, 1932), J. Harvey L. Baxter (*That Which Concerneth Me*, 1934; *Sonnets for the Ethiopians and Other Poems*, 1936), Eve Lynn (*No Alabaster Box*, 1936), Marion Cuthbert (*April Grasses*, 1936) and Mae Cowdery (*We Lift Our Voices*, 1936). The romantics wrote about nature, delicacy, love and quaintness, and their work reflects more book learning than anything else. (DV 223)⁵

Because the discourse of social realist self-fashioning operated as a narrative that repressed, prohibited, and overshadowed other discourses through the control of critical media, it is necessary to retheorize our critical understanding of the poetry of the thirties and to closely examine texts that exist only as names in fleeting accounts of works published in the 1930s.

By embracing social realist self-fashioning, poets hoped to engage *the real* in order to effect social and political changes. Beneath the surface of this assertion, a great deal of myth-making has been carried out. The blues singer and the genre of the folk blues had been co-opted to serve the purpose of sociopolitical revolutionary art. Not only is this project fundamental to Sterling Brown’s poetics but also it is a consistent feature of the leftist discourse of the 1930s. Indeed, the major leftist anthologies and scholarly journals of the period (such as *Negro*, *American Stuff*, and *Folk-Say*) included collections of blues lyrics.⁶ The centrality of the blues in framing leftist discourses on race is further indicated by the general embrace of black folk music and the celebration of such nominally political folksingers as Huddie Ledbetter and Josh White as *bluesmen* within the vibrant leftist culture of the 1930s. In order to elevate the blues to such a level of importance, it had been necessary to treat the folk blues as the authentic expression of the black working class, while at the same time overlooking the unwavering investment in subjectivity of the folk blues. Ideological-aesthetic contradictions are an important feature of social realist self-fashioning: the blues attracted an audience among the black and white intelligentsia *because* it was a powerful expression of subjectivity, while at the same time the intelligentsia rejected the poetry of the published, literary, so-called romantic black poets at face value for indulging in subjectivity. Thus, because the blues was coded as a cultural production of black folk culture, leftist doctrine rendered the subjectivity of the blues singer invisible. On the other hand, because black poets writing bookish poetry were visible only by virtue of their supposed ideological deficiencies, their subjectivity was recognized and was coded as *escape* from the real. This distinction is helpful in framing my questions about the degree to which the blues is celebrated as *inarticulacy*—a description that prevents the emotional and existential expressivity of the blues as subjectivity from speaking

to Marxists. Support for the idea of the invisibility of the subjectivity of the black peasantry is suggested by William Ian Miller's observation that when academics consider the world of people socially unlike them, they fall subject to an "upper-class sense that the richness of one's emotional life varies directly with one's education, refinement, and wealth" (15).

But while it was possible for Sterling Brown and other leftists of the 1930s to construe African American blues as proletarian and politically contestable, this was only made possible by the separation of the cultural production of the black peasantry from that of the black middle class. The view that cultural production may be placed on a continuum was not within the discourse of social realist self-fashioning that so decisively partitions the blues from the sonnet. Yet, these two modes of textuality are but two components of what is in effect the same project. In his revisory cultural study of the blues, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, Adam Gussow shows that blues music is "an assertion of black selfhood and identity in the face of white violence" (5) and that the blues was a "way in which black southern blues people articulated their somebodiness, insisted on their indelible individuality" (4-5). By reading blues as a means to selfhood and identity (a text incorporating self-in-process), Gussow broaches the view of the blues as a textuality invested in affect, that is, centered in developing the singer's emotinal identity. Along these lines, Adamson and Clark state that "what forms the human self, besides certain genetically inherited predispositions, is the nexus of human relationships in which the human individual is intensely engaged from birth (even prebirth) on. This engagement with others, which is the basis of the deeply social nature of human beings, is primarily of an emotional or affective nature" (5). It is possible to gain a further perspective of Brown's rejection of subjectivity, emotion, and interiority by considering Sylvan Tomkins's observation that "the belief in the reality or irreality of affect is a derivative of the socialization process . . . and there has been for the past two thousand years a recurrent polarity of ideology which centers upon the reality or irreality of human affect" (Adamson and Clark 6).

Brown's social realism is, then, a rejection of interiority, and as such it is perhaps a justifiable flight from the harsh realities of the Great Depression. This contradicts the prevailing view that Brown's poetry is "a poetry of motion, vocality, and subjectivity, conceiving agents and actors impinging themselves upon the cultural and psychic landscape" (Sanders xi). Often, subjectivity is invoked by those who do not really advocate a deep, complex, and contradictory experience of subjectivity, namely contemporary poststructuralists⁷ who argue that the self is a social construction or a linguistic-textual formation.⁸ Social realism was not positioned to embrace an

emotionally based narrative of human agency. Slavoj Žižek has commented that the leftist project may be thought of as “the belief that humanity, as a collective subject, can actively intervene and somehow steer social development,” and he opposes that belief to the “the notion of history as fate” (Mead 40). Thus, the collective subject (impersonal, generic, interchangeable) of the social realist project stands in marked contrast to the solitary individual (the bourgeois subject faced with uncertainty and internal division) who enacts what Brown denigrates as a romantic escape through the medium of lyric poetry.

Through the lens of social realism, Sterling Brown theorizes the popularization of the blues as a subset of the social realist/romantic escape dyad, although this is not explicitly established in his discussion. Brown chose to attack certain aspects of technological and popular modernity because they represent the bourgeois separation between individual and collective praxis. He was chiefly offended by the popularization of the Negro folk blues, which threatened to reduce the blues to an exotic means of escape for record buyers and radio audiences. In “The Blues as Folk-Poetry” (1930), Brown set forth one of the most authoritative interpretations of blues music in the 1930s, in effect authoring the master narrative for the reception of black folk art in the 1930s. Brown’s article begins by listing the several ways in which modernity has served to distort, commoditize, and misconstrue the culture of the African American peasant. Because of the popularity of the blues, which had been disseminated by the radio, the phonograph, and troupes of various kinds of traveling performers, Brown laments that “it is becoming more and more difficult to tell which songs are truly folk and which are clever approximations” (*Folk-Say* 325). For Brown, authenticity is a matter of “imagery and attitude” (*Folk-Say* 325). Brown urges us to recognize the complexity of the blues, pointing out that “something of an introduction to folk life might result from the mere reading of blues titles” (*Folk-Say* 325). The “deep knowledge [that] would result from a close study of the songs themselves” (*Folk-Say* 325) indicates that, while “it would be foolhardy to say that everything is here, any more than in more sophisticated lyric poetry” (*Folk-Say* 325), nonetheless, “as documents about humanity they are invaluable” (*Folk-Say* 325–26).

William Stott points out that the phrase “human document” had an important meaning in the thirties; what is unique about a human document is “the glimpse it offers of an inner existence, a private self” (7):

Human documents show man undergoing the perennial and unpreventable in experience, what happens to all men everywhere: death, work, chance, rapture, hurricane, and maddened dogs. . . . Social documentary,

on the other hand, shows man at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place: racial discrimination, police brutality, unemployment, the Depression, the planned environment of the TVA, pollution, terrorism. One might say briefly that a human document deals with natural phenomena, and social documentary with man-made. (20)

Not only does Brown treat the blues as a human document when it is actually a social document but also he suggests that the blues is indelibly limited—that there are significant social aporias, and that the blues may be defined by those nullities with respect to what is contained in more sophisticated poetry. We can get Brown's measure of the social limits of the blues and his disinterest in subjective experience (affect and emotion) when he states that "the diction of most of the Blues is immediately connected, as it should be, with folk life" (*Folk-Say* 325) and that "[c]ottonfield parlance" (*Folk-Say* 326) is in "Makes me feel I'm on my las' go-round" (*Folk-Say* 325). For Brown, the tangible aspects of folk life—here, the *place*—overshadow the intangible aspects of interiority. The singers standing in a cottonfield, and their diction may be shaped by the socioeconomic deprivations of their lives as black agricultural peasants, but the theme of his blues text is not the cottonfield, as Brown would have it, but their own feelings. The blues subjects focus on projecting themselves into that cottonfield (or out of that dreary cottonfield) in order to locate themselves and to establish their identity. Brown constructs and disseminates a sentimental and romantic version of the blues, of folk life, and of the black experience in the South. Though Brown valorizes the peasant and the blues, it is not really possible for him to do so adequately, and often he merely registers the reduced subjectivity of his version of the peasant. He comments, "There is a terseness, an inevitability of the images dealing with suffering. Irony, stoicism, and bitterness are deeply but not lingeringly expressed" (338). In order to present his proletarian, romantic version of the blues, Brown downplays the psychological abyss of the cottonfield in which the peasant stands to sing his song. Brown invokes the peasant's loneliness and rootlessness, but Brown offers no sense of the blues as a phenomenology of the black self—no understanding of the blues as a testimony to the unendurable life that is composed of backbreaking work, social erasure, and the ever-present promise of arbitrary, horrifying torment and brutal annihilation.

In briefly summarizing blues subjectivity, it is important to situate this form of becoming in contrast to the subjectivity that Sterling Brown claimed to have found there. Brown, himself possessing a bourgeois sublimated consciousness, also analytically sublimates the consciousness of the blues

subject. The “terseness” that he finds there indicates the sublimation that he associates with blues subjectivity. He cleans up and resurrects the blues, though the chief characteristic of the blues is its unsublimated, “excremental” subjectivity. Brown and other interpreters of blues subjectivity (Gussow 206) refuse to acknowledge black-on-black violence as a component of black self-fashioning (or self-making). According to Gussow, “inflicting wounds on black bodies and finding in such violent acts a source of fierce expressive pleasure” is essential to blues subjectivity (200). This subjectivity is powerful because it accepts its excremental character-function. Blues subjects do not aspire to sublimation; they accept that they are the very stuff of death and defilement. In blues parlance, blues subjects embrace the “lowdown”; thus, as N. O. Brown has said, “archaic man retains the magic body of infancy” (297). In that realm of bodily fantasy and magic dirt, the blues subject revels in the infantile narcissism that may be heard throughout blues lyrics. The insufferable tension expressed in the blues is generated by the fact that the blues subject, rather than being totally freed by the acceptance of his or her excrementality and the subordination that follows, is still aware of being cast out and is plunged into self-regard and self-hatred, a sort of negative narcissism in which he or she is in love with a reflected image of horror. Thus, the blues subject recognizes on some level that sublimation has not occurred: as N. O. Brown has said (and this brings us around to Sterling Brown’s point of view once more), “The irony is that sublimation activates the morbid animality (anality), and the higher form of life, civilization, reveals that lower form of life, the Yahoo. To rise above the body is to equate the body with excrement” (295). Gussow graphically describes the result of this form of self-in-process: “Blues culture was, among other things, the scene within which an indelible individuality denied by the white South (with its ritual imposition of “boy” and “girl”) could be inscribed with the help of a weapon, or a distinctive wound: Razor-Totin’ Jim, Razor-Cuttin’ Fanny, Peg Leg Howell, Automatic Slim. Gender equality in such dealings was presumed” (204).

While during the 1930s the blues had been rendered intellectually, politically, and aesthetically germane, perhaps even a privileged literary genre within the frameworks of leftist critics, the sonnet was an invisible component of the literary history of the period. As a gauge of the recent reception of this work, we can consider Eugene Redmond’s account of the 1930s, in which he states that “compared to the first three decades of the century, relatively little black poetry was published in book form between 1930 and 1960. In a 1935 article in *Opportunity*, Alain Locke lamented the low quality and quantity of post-Harlem Renaissance poetry: according to Locke, with the exception of Hughes and Cullen, most of the older poets were silent during the thirties” (DV 222). Countee Cullen had excelled at writing sonnets in the 1920s, and

he continued to write them during the 1930s. Langston Hughes was a modernist who had experimented with a blues aesthetic in the 1920s, yet he wrote and published a few sonnets in the thirties. Addressing the developments in African American poetry in the 1930s, Redmond lists Frank Marshall Davis and Sterling Brown as new poets (*DV* 222–23). Davis was a poet of the modernist and experimental manner who eschewed the civilities of the sonnet. Brown published a few love sonnets, but his reputation does not rest on his sonnets. The same may be said about Countee Cullen, Helene Johnson, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, and other Harlem Renaissance poets.

Redmond next identifies a subsequent group of poets who emerged in the 1930s—Robert Hayden, Melvin B. Tolson, Margaret Walker, and Richard Wright, among others (*DV* 223). Of those poets, only Tolson published sonnets in the thirties. Redmond continues his account by listing a second wave of “transitional” poets who supposedly appeared in the 1940s, a number of whom actually began publishing in the 1930s—Owen Dodson (who exclusively published sonnets); Gwendolyn Brooks (who came to write sonnets later but published none in the 1930s); and Pauli Murray (who wrote long, free-verse protest poems). Redmond next discusses Sterling Brown’s review of poets. Of the protest poets whom Brown names “new realists” (Jenkins, Davis, and Wright), none wrote sonnets. A list of six “romantics” follows, many of whom published sonnets during the thirties.

ROMANTIC MODERNISM AND THE DOCUMENTARY TENDENCY

During the 1930s, African American poets created and published a considerable body of poems that, in the collectivist, leftist critical view, they had no mandate to write. This challenge to the centrality of the folk and collective subject suggests the emergence of a counteraesthetic, which gave expression to tendencies that were native to lived experience. This individualistic tendency was at that time repressed by leftist opinion-makers such as Sterling Brown and Richard Wright, who dismissed a considerable volume of the poetic output of African Americans in the 1930s, because it was deemed deficient by virtue of its romanticism. As a first step in reclaiming this poetry, I will review the nature of the romantic discourse. In “The Romance of Realism,” John Koethe states that

the central impulse of romanticism is, I take it, the affirmation of subjectivity. While this affirmation may, in concrete instances, be embodied in or disguised by a championing of individualism, the presentation of the

heroic, the picturesque, or the languorous, or the celebration of nature, the underlying movement of romanticism is a contestatory one, in which subjective consciousness seeks to ward off the annihilating effect of its objective setting, a context which is lifeless and inert. (725–26)

Koethe's argument challenges Sterling Brown's view that romanticism is necessarily a strategy of escape. (The theoretical assessment of the dyad realism/romanticism can be furthered by noting that realism is not itself an unassailable discourse, despite the opinions of Sterling Brown and other social realists. Roland Barthes suggested that literary realism referred first and foremost not to the real world but to a painted representation of the real world. He argued that while nineteenth-century representations of reality in fiction were modeled on painting, those in twentieth-century fiction were modeled on the theater. Twentieth-century fiction included an admixture of atmosphere and setting rather than descriptions of the social or topographical landscape [Robertson 198–99].)

We should also note that the 1930s is often considered to be a period during which the primary form of expression was documentary realism. This new form of realism so dominated the cultural production of the period that few artists were able to resist its influence. In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, William Stott discusses James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as an exemplary and rare exception to the prevailing discourse of documentary realism. There are a number of problems with this view of the thirties, chiefly the tendency to ignore works that do not adhere to the documentary mode: Stott discusses Agee's book not because it is anti-documentary, but because superficially it has the form of a documentary, though it ultimately rejects the realist methodology. Texts that cannot easily accommodate the documentary mode are not given serious attention. Even the lyric poem was taken seriously only when it was aligned with the documentary tendency—as where Brown's poetry recapitulated the language and attitudes of black folk culture. And so this discussion began with Sterling Brown's statement about the blues that “as documents about humanity they are invaluable” (*Folk-Say* 326).

John Steadman Rice's discussion of romantic modernism offers a more specific account of the relationship of realism to the romanticism of black poets who wrote in the 1930s:

Romantic Modernism espouses and rests upon a *distinction between formal rationality and emotion, intuition, spirituality, and individual expressive freedom*. This distinction is reflected in the Romantic Modernist view of the appropriate relationship between the individual and society,

which is predicated upon a distinction between a true self and a false self, with the latter understood in terms of the social roles that society imposes upon and demands of the individual. This societal imposition, in turn, is seen as a violation of the self's integrity and the individual's expressive freedom. Indeed, a "feeling of being violated by an inimical society . . . lies at the root of Romantic alienation," an alienation born of the Romantic Modernist's apprehensive "consciousness of the void beneath the conventional structures of reality." . . . This more positive strand of Romanticism is most clearly embodied in the American Transcendentalist movement of the early nineteenth century. . . . The assertion of the individual's will—the projection, as noted above, of that will onto the external world—was, of course, an abiding theme in Transcendentalist essays and poetry. Thoreau, for one, repeatedly stressed precisely this theme. For example, in *Civil Disobedience*, he baldly asserts that "the only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right." Emerson espoused precisely the same point even more succinctly: "The individual is the world." (Rice; Rice's emphasis)

Walt Whitman is the most widely acknowledged influence on the romantic modernism of the African American poetry of the thirties, and I have discussed in the first chapter the centrality of Whitman in Wellborn Victor Jenkins's *Trumpet*. Thus, in looking at the sonnets written by black poets in the thirties, we are also observing the poems' underlying Whitmanian discourse. Looking beyond the sonnet's formal façade, one encounters a core of romantic modernism. What Brown calls the adoption of romanticism by black poets in the 1930s is nothing less than their attempt to reformulate the nature of black subjectivity along the lines of the important features of bourgeois subjectivity in order to provide for an "ideal of the human agent who is able to remake himself by methodical and disciplined action" (Lupton 75). The "annihilating effect of its objective setting" (Koethe 726) presented the prospect of literal annihilation in the form of psychological abuse, which legally and socially denied food, shelter, security, and love to black people, and which was backed up by an unrelenting campaign of violence, terror, and murder.

In opposition to this insufferable Jim Crow culture, African American poets constructed a new mode of being-in-the-world that was complex, life-affirming, and healthy: these qualities were the heritage of the aesthetic, psychological, and philosophical experiments of the romantics, and they were of immediate use to the women and men of the 1930s. Chiefly of use was what Lupton speaks of as a conceptual tension that developed as a late phase of romanticism: "The modern subject . . . was not defined only by rational

control but by this new power of self-expression and engagement with one's own nature and feelings. There was a continuing tension between the privileging of rationality and of free affective expression" (81). The precarious, paradoxical, and demanding nature of the project of modern subjectivity is described by Michelle Weinroth: "Unable to contemplate the outer world coherently, the modern subject lapses into maudlin nostalgia for the restoration of some prelapsarian unity" ("Kant"). This pattern raises a number of questions when applied to African American subjects. We might think that, given the ahistorical nature of their collective negative identity, African Americans would have difficulty invoking such golden ages as were invoked by modernist intellectuals and writers (Pound's Provencal and China, Eliot's and H. D.'s Greece, T. E. Hulme's Egypt, Yeats's Ireland, and Leo Frobenius's and D. H. Lawrence's Atlantis, to give a few examples). Yet this is not true, for E. Franklin Frazier refers to the black bourgeoisie's tendency to "escape into delusion" (188) as a means to "shield itself from the harsh economic and social realities of American life" (188). Frazier commented that "[some] seek an escape from their frustrations by developing, for example, a serious interest in Negro music—which the respectable black bourgeoisie often pretend to despise. In this way these intellectuals achieve some identification with the Negro masses and with the traditions of Negro life" (189–89). It is difficult to see this as anything other than a description of Sterling Brown, since Frazier and Brown were both on the faculty of Howard University, and Brown was famous for his expertise in and advocacy of black folk music. Frazier's comment, then, allows a rather precise deconstruction of Sterling Brown's realist/escapist dyad, disclosing that the realist term of the divide is no less determined by the forces contingent on the modern subject than those consigned to participate in a so-called romantic escape. The appropriation of the discourses of the modern body/self through revolutionary self-fashioning was a complex, contradictory, and poorly understood enterprise that nevertheless provided some African Americans with the means to negotiate the harrowing difficulties that they faced in America during the Great Depression.

THE SONNET PANTEXT: A NARRATIVE OF SELF-FORMATION

In *The Identity of Man*, Jacob Bronowski uses "Provide, Provide," Robert Frost's poem on the Great Depression, to map the aesthetic divide between the profound and the "shallow." Bronowski comes to the conclusion that "a profound poem is not an exercise in resolution, and does not teach us to opt

for one kind of action rather than another. The knowledge that we get from it does not tell us how to act, but how to be. A poem tells us how to be human by identifying ourselves with others, and finding again their dilemmas in ourselves. What we learn from it is self-knowledge” (63). Bronowski’s conclusion that “a poem informs us in a mode of knowledge that is many-valued” (65) is certainly nothing new in light of recent work on indeterminate theorizing. What Bronowski brings to this discussion is the observation that poetry is not a mode of language but a mode of knowledge. This view is regularly discounted, and it needs to be reestablished within the discussion of African American literature, for the concept is of great use. In the 1930s, aesthetic theories were divided between the discourse of social realism and its anti-discourse of romantic escape. They were conceived as two distinct modes of political behavior manifested as *language*. Bronowski reveals that the fallacy of viewing literature in terms of language (politics) and not as knowledge (being) is a common habit that produces a monoglossal conceptualization of literary truth in which literature is only justifiable as a precursor to action, performance, and agency—a requirement that diminishes our humanity. The African American sonnet served as a record of the collective knowledge of the African American consciousness as it “entertained new concepts of individuality and tried to rationalize new feelings of alienation and ostensibly to assign value to its new surrounding” (Sanders 11).

When taken together for the purposes of this study, the sonnets written by African Americans in the 1930s form an extended, multiauthored sonnet sequence. Jason R. Rudy comments that “through Cultural Studies, we can now imagine techniques of formal analysis that bring to literary texts the direct opposite of New Critical decontextualization. . . . Such a coupling of methodologies has the dual benefit of enlivening formal approaches to poetry and grounding work in cultural studies more firmly in textual evidence” (590). We can assemble the sonnets by African American poets of the 1930s into a *pantext* in order to use literary form as “a subtle [though] often neglected vehicle for [describing] broader cultural forces” (Rudy 590). Analogously, Nick Browne has argued that the U.S. television system is best approached through a notion of the “super-text” (Brunsdon “Television Studies”). The collective treatment of folk ballads is common, though the practice of studying works as an “assemblage” appears to be undertheorized. (This chapter borrows the method by which such writers as Paul Oliver [*The Meaning of the Blues*, 1953] and Adam Gussow [*Seems Like Murder Here: Blues and Southern Violence*, 2002] have compiled the individual and disparate lyrics of the blues into narrative discourses—into a *cultural studies approach*.) An African American sonnet pantext for the 1930s would involve arranging sonnets into a sequence or a cycle in the same way that sonnets

by a single author deal with a single theme, situation, character, or narrative. Indeed, it is possible to read such a discursive assemblage as a collective record of the exploration of black modern subjectivity that existed under the unique conditions (the discourse network) of the 1930s. The various modes of individuality appropriated by black poets in the 1930s are indicative of the responses to the discourse network of racism. I aim to study these responses by examining the sonnets published during that decade.

One use of the sonnet pantext is the application of the “collectively-focused and quantitative methods” (Schweik 52) of social philology to interrogate the sonnet for the existential parameters of the crisis of identity.⁹ Elizabeth Alexander writes that “the sonnet is a ‘little room,’ and [Gwendolyn] Brooks reveals the equivalent of painted tableaux in her sonnets. . . . She understands that any space can be sanctified, that space is what we have, and that if, as a poet, she makes space visible, manifest, then she is getting us closer to the inner lives of her poetic characters who tell us so much about black people in a very specific place and time” (6). In contrast to the secure room is the imperiled black body: “Regardless of the artist’s intent, he or she is painting against a history of deformation and annihilation of the black body and is thus challenged with resisting or redirecting the current (though ancient) vogue for a stereotypical black realism” (Alexander 7). Often when the modern sonnet is not a room, it is a body, as seen in the conventions of the blazon. Thus, by determining which words appear most frequently in the sonnet pantext, we can examine the sonnet’s body/room construction of interiority as an indication of existential polarity. By comparing the occurrences of the insecure black body to the occurrences of the secure room, it is possible to measure the existential polarity of the black sonnet pantext of the thirties. This pantext consists of a representative selection of thirty-three sonnets published in journals and collections by black poets in the thirties.

In the pantext, however, *body* is present only once and *room* twice. *Life* is the most frequent noun in the pantext, which suggests the importance of existential parameters (for example, self-reliance, being, truth). The nouns that appear most frequently, in descending order, are *heart*, *land*, *day*, and *man*. While these instances are suggestive, they do not point to the specific body/room question. The body only appears when it is examined metonymically in connection with phrases beginning with *my*, as shown in the selection below. In this way the sonnet pantext of the thirties reveals the existential formula of the ownership of the body:

”He cries, ‘O, God, my very heart is sore” (Toussaint)

”My heart is beating; life has lost its prime” (Auld)

”My tongue has been in cheek too long—and now” (Lilly)

“Weep no more tears my eyes but gently close” (Auld)
 “Reluctantly, my dragging feet I turn” (Christian “Spring in the South”)
 “I extricate from my sore heart this thorn” (Lilly)
 “Sackcloth against my heart for siring you” (Brooks)
 “Today that ancient beam crushes my soul” (Twynham)
 “What was denied my hungry heart at home” (Cullen)

Similarly, the room appears when phrases beginning with *in* are considered:

“In Mamre of the cold, cave-chambered dead” (Brooks)
 “That holds me fettered like a beast in cage!” (Lilly)
 ”And as in great basilicas of old” (Hughes “Pennsylvania”)
 “Slaves lived within the dungeons there in Greece” (Dodson)
 “To kill and plunder? Yet, in iron chains” (Christian “The Slave”)
 “Then in his room where none may hear or see” (Toussaint)
 “Down in death’s secret chamber no one cries” (Auld)
 “In meagre courts and canyoned streets” (Twynham)
 “In flowery nook, henceforth, a hallowed ground” (Townes)
 “Caged in and stifled by the walls of earth” (Toussaint)
 “Heaps not my roses in their vase of gray” (Rauth)
 “My feet are free; my mind is in a pen” (Smalls)

Both selections indicate a high degree of existential crisis. And one further suspects that this is a reinscription of the sonnet itself pointing to the *heart-rending* experiences of black life, given the many emotionally contextualized uses of *heart*. Moreover, the adjectives *black* and *white* appear with relative frequency. It is clear by looking at the instances in which “the room” obtrudes that there is no sanctuary for the black body. Often when the spaces encountered in the sonnets are not unpleasant and confining, they are instead vast and threatening, as in Hughes’s lines, “And back in space to where Time was begun” (“Search”) or “Life rolls in waves he cannot understand” (“Ph.D.”). These examples present a generalized sense of the depersonalizing nature of the American culture that affected the existentially exposed black Americans in the thirties.

I am approaching subject positions as instances of personal identity. Personal identity is the result of four factors: eudaemonism, self-actualization, personal responsibility, and universality (Waterman 29). In describing the development of individuality, Waterman emphasizes the importance of identity crises in this process, noting that “at least three types of information are considered when one is attempting to make identity-related decisions regarding goals, values, and beliefs. These are (a) personal potentials

[eudaemonistic concerns], (b) the presence of models deemed worthy of emulation, and (c) the likely reactions of others to one's choices" (31). In the chart that appears on page 94, I have placed these three considerations along the horizontal axis. These identity-related materials come into play by virtue of the dramas, contests, forces, and stresses of actual life. Erik Erikson attempts to situate the struggle to form an identity within historical actualities,¹⁰ observing that

in discussing identity, as we now see, we cannot separate personal growth and communal change, nor can we separate . . . *the identity crisis* in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other. In fact, the whole interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical, for which identity formation is of prototypical significance, could be conceptualized only as a kind of *psychosocial relativity*. (Erikson, *Identity* 23; emphases added)

It is just such a crisis of identity that informs the sonnets by black poets of the 1930s that I have assembled as the sonnet pantext. (To address, if only superficially, Erikson's notion of the historical development of identity formation, it is generally agreed that certain types, or subject positions, were valorized in the thirties, such as the worker, the rugged individual, the hobo, the superhero, and the gangster-outlaw. What African Americans faced in their own identity crises must in some ways have been played out against the background of these widely recognized identities.)

Moreover, it is the poets themselves who recognized both the existential crisis of the thirties and a discernible break between the Harlem period and the Depression era. I have already given some indication of the poetic reception of this crisis in my discussion of Owen Dodson's historical imagination. Other poets sometimes experienced and expressed the crisis of identity formation more directly, as this sonnet by J. G. St. Clair Drake makes clear:

DEDICATION IN TIME OF CRISIS

The woe and calumny of cruel years
Heart-rending did not crush their spirits down;
And slavery's lash, evoking blood and tears
While still their cross, bore promise of a crown.
The spiteful glance, the scornful Nordic sneers—
The murderous pack that, snarling hemmed them round—

The crispy corpse that swung to fiendish cheers—
All failed to keep our fathers fetter bound.

We must not fail—the sons of men like these!
Nor cringe in terror bound by sickening fears.
The battle-axe with eager hands we seize;
Our day of destiny in glory nears!
Unborn, the future raises urgent pleas
That we fight on till victory appears.

Sonnets written by black American poets in the 1930s are responses to the racist discourse of negative identity. The sonnets thereby present the trajectory of the narrative of self-formation or self-in-process.

I have placed along the vertical axis of the table an extremely abstract rendition of subject positions. Jenny Pinkus observes that “[Davies and Harre] argue that central to acquiring a sense of self and interpreting the world from that perspective is the learning of the categories which include some and not others such as male/female, father/daughter, then participating in various discursive practices that allocate meaning to those categories. The self is then positioned in relation to the storylines that are articulated around those categories (for example as wife not husband, or good wife and not bad wife). Finally, they say one [recognizes] oneself as ‘belonging’ psychologically and emotionally to that position through adopting a commitment entailing a ‘world-view’ commensurate with that membership category” (“Subject Positions”). I am not so much interested in assigning the applicability of the familiar stereotypes to the sonnet pantext as determining the subject positions generated by past conditions in relation to the new types of subject positions under development in relation to the historical contingencies of the thirties.

For the purpose of this discussion, I have selected a representative group of thirty-three sonnets that appeared in *The Crisis, Opportunity*, and various anthologies during the 1930s. This is the collection that I have referred to as the African American sonnet pantext of the thirties. The discussion that follows relates to the chart and to the sonnets on the chart; it is my hope that the graphic presentation of the intersections of subject positions and materials for identity formation will clarify how these concepts may be seen in the sonnets under discussion. The terms used to define the subject positions and materials for identity formation are interchangeable with the other terms in the same cell. The sonnets have been assigned to the cells of the chart according to what possibilities existed in the society of the thirties; where there are blank cells, we may say that there is no corresponding social

TABLE 1. THE SONNET PANTEXT OF THE 1930s: SELECTED SONNETS PRESENTED AS EXAMPLES OF SELF-FASHIONING

MATERIALS FOR IDENTITY FORMATION	1. eudaimonism; true self; self-discovery;	2. role models	3. expectations of others
SUBJECT POSITIONS			
a. super-ego; transcendental; invocational prophetic	“Foregather” “Search” “The Wine of Ecstasy”	“Cross Bearer”	
b. ego; mediational; social; individual	“Desert in Ethiopia” “Interview” “Museum Portrait” “Pennsylvanian Station” “Spring in the South” “Thoughts from a Train Window”	“Hampton Institute: (Gen. Armstrong)” “Henry Alexander Hunt” “To a Fallen Leader” “Vestis Virumque Cano”	“Achievement” “To France” “McDonogh Day” “Muse” “Ode” (Dodson) “Similies” “Sonnet” (Lilly) “Sonnet” (Prendergast) “Sonnet in Black” “St. Charles Ave.” “This Is the Dream America”
c. id; abject; the insubordinate subject; the outcast	“Carnival Torch-Bearer” “The Octaroon” “Song of the Mulatto” “Torches”	“Ex-Slaves” “Ph.D”	“Jesters” “Southern Share -Cropper”

formation. Thus, there is no transcendental subject position for the expectation of others, meaning that in the black sonnet pantext of the 1930s there was no expression in poetry that anyone would assume a visionary context. The authors of sonnets include such well-known poets as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Owen Dodson and a number of lesser-known “magazine poets.” I have divided these thirty-three poems into Waterman’s three categories of information required for self-formation, so that thirteen of the poems relate to personal potential (eudaimonism),¹¹ seven to role models,¹² and thirteen to external expectations (“the likely reaction of others to one’s choices” [Waterman 31]).¹³ The substantial concern with eudaimonism that this breakdown reveals suggests the importance of self-discovery and self-assertion in the process of moving beyond the self-canceling formations of racialized negative identity: “The question here is whether a particular goal, value, or belief will be experienced as expressive of whom one genuinely is” (Waterman 31). Thus, as the poets explore the question of “who one genuinely is,” they are unavoidably engaged with questions concerning the true nature of the African American self.

Of these thirteen eudaimonic sonnets, three assume the transcendental (invocational-prophetic) subject position, six assume the mediational subject position, and four the abject subject position. Individual invocational-prophetic subject positions are not socially acceptable (though support by groups for messianic conceptions is common); thus expressions of individual invocational-prophetic subject positions are rare in the sonnet pantext. Of the total of the thirty-three sonnets under consideration, the majority used the mode of an ego-mediational subjectivity. The minority of the poems adopt abject subject positions. These poems combine the subject position of the blues with the form of the sonnet. The abject subject position embraces the low (the rebellious social mode) as opposed to the high (the invocational-prophetic mode). In the embrace of the low, the discourse is one of *insubordination*,¹⁴ which is described by Georges Bataille as “submission only to what is below” (Hollier 136–37). A third type of sonnet, one that is invested in mediational subjectivity, more often than not uses the first person. The speaker tends to be situated within bourgeois subjectivity, unlike the first-person speakers in poems that use abject subjectivity. It is apparent that an important part of the project of self-formation is a critique of older versions of the self, for the transition is described as a crisis, and nowhere is the crisis more evident than in the pain manifested in the sonnets evocative of abject subjectivity. These sonnets that speak from abject subject positions are often reformulations of material that traditionally belonged to the blues genre, and a number of them make direct reference to blues subjectivity.

SUBJECT POSITIONS: FROM THE SUBLIME TO THE DEGRADED

The subject positions that black poets of the thirties utilized in their sonnets may also be correlated with psychological research on the identity formation of individual subjects. In general terms, the subject positions available to modern identities may be thought of as a hierarchy of possible narrative structures (Harris 153–54). At the top of the hierarchy is the subject position of the sublime, which often takes the form of a transcendental subjectivity; this subjectivity appears in poetry as the disembodied voice of an omniscient narrator (Fand 98). Below this level are the subjectivities of the social, the individual, and the abject: these categories roughly correspond to the three subject positions outlined in Freudian psychoanalysis. Thus, they derive from the superego (the social), the ego (the individual), and the abject (the id). In reading these sonnets collectively and categorically, I will be particularly interested in examining the delineations of the particular types of subjectivities that emerge as subjects-in-process (Kristeva 135). For example, where does the sublime space originate and in what form? How does the individual mediate the contradictions of societal and instinctual forces? To what degree is the black subject-in-process able to resist the racializing discourses of the dominant technological network?

The subject position that expresses the sublime or the infinite through a narrator with an exalted consciousness—the invocational-prophetic mode (Culler 166)—is present in a minority of the sonnets written by African American poets during the 1930s. The relation of this subject position to a narrative of transcendence may be thought of as an imaginative “lunge into the realm of infinitude” (Weinroth) by the speakers. In poetry, this is often accomplished without the narrative materials that are available in works of realistic fiction. A sonnet written in this mode succeeds when the poet assumes a visionary consciousness and encapsulates a transitory vignette—a *tableau vivant* viewed from on high. By leaping over the overwhelming social and material contingencies of the lower levels through transcendental subjectivity, the poet achieves the beneficial and therapeutic advantages of detachment, objectivity, and relief from the disruptions of emotional trauma, intellectual conflict, and indeterminism. Any number of subject positions are derived from the sublime, the chief one being that of the superman. The superman is the subject of Melvin Tolson’s mystical-esoteric sonnet “The Wine of Ecstasy.” Other poets’ sonnets provide far more conventional and approachable conceptions of the sublime; their romantic, liberal, and aesthetic formulations fall within the limits of “ordinary” reality. Given the unique qualities of Tolson’s sonnet, a detailed

examination of it is justified.

In 1938 Melvin B. Tolson published “The Wine of Ecstasy” in the “important” anthology (Redmond 372) *Negro Voices*, edited by Washington, D.C. poet Beatrice M. Murphy. “The Wine of Ecstasy” has escaped attention by Tolson’s critics, even by Joy Flasch, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on Tolson’s poetry under his direct tutelage. Flasch’s dissertation was published as the first book-length study of Tolson’s work. The absence of any mention of “The Wine of Ecstasy” by Flasch suggests that Tolson, after publishing the sonnet, concealed its existence where possible. The errant sonnet does not appear in bibliographies of Tolson’s publications. The significance of the suppression of this particular poem is that thematically it establishes a concern with religious mysticism,¹⁵ a concern distant from his more characteristic and recognized interest in meticulously delineating the oppression of proletarians and racial minorities. Tolson’s critics routinely associate him with Marxism and the black arts movement,¹⁶ and while there has been mention of Tolson as a Marxist-Christian, this view has never been comprehensively explored. But even if we allow for a measure of Marxist-Christian religiosity on Tolson’s part, there is a vast distance between the social activism of the Marxist-Christian position and the otherworldly mysticism described in “The Wine of Ecstasy.” Prior to composing “The Wine of Ecstasy,” Tolson had worked for several years on “A Gallery of Harlem Portraits,” a Marxist epic of the Great Depression era (with pronounced echoes of *The Spoon River Anthology*) that he was never able to publish. Subsequently, Tolson sufficiently veiled his revolutionary politics and became a nationally recognized literary figure. His ascendancy was based on the prize-winning and widely anthologized “Dark Symphony” (1939),¹⁷ a historically based protest poem in the manner of Carl Sandburg that concludes with a utopian crescendo reminiscent of the fervor of Margaret Walker’s “For My People,” though lacking her poem’s turbulent and ruthless overthrow of the present political order.

But now to Tolson’s sonnet. On close examination, “The Wine of Ecstasy” initially seems to be a resoundingly eccentric and ambiguous performance. A distinct departure from the sociopolitics of “Dark Symphony.” Tolson’s title presents one of the most widely disseminated formulas belonging to the Kabbalah, the coded permutations of language that make up the literary component of the system of Jewish mysticism. Philip S. Berg states that “the primary purpose of the Kabbalist is to obtain a direct mystical experience of reality” (*The Zohar* iv). Tolson’s poem thus claims that he has succeeded in this visionary quest. In *The Holy Kabbalah: A Study of the Secret Tradition in Israel*, A. E. Waite’s early and widely disseminated study of the occult and secret tradition in Judaism, Waite writes that

there is a . . . *wine* reserved for the righteous from the creation of the world, and it is said to signify Hidden and Immemorial Mysteries which will be revealed in the age to come. . . . Isaac Myser sought to increase the significance by an indication that the word “wine” refers Kabbalistically to “the mysterious vitality and spiritual energy of created things,” an opinion based on its investigation by *Notarikon*, for Wine = 70 = SOD, or secret. (169; emphasis added)

Waite played a vital role in the dissemination of esotericism into modernist literature,¹⁸ and there are many indications that Tolson was familiar with his writings. It is likely that the above passage served as a source for the Kabbalistic lore in Tolson’s sonnet. *Notarikon* is one of three methods of Kabbalistic exegesis whereby the Torah is treated as though it is written in a divine code.¹⁹ The meaning of the coded level may be determined through a system of manipulations based on the equivalence of the Hebrew alphabet with the Hebrew numerals. Three techniques serve the process of the literal or practical Kabbalah: *gematria* (the conversion of Hebrew words into numbers, and then into other words of the same numbers); *notarikon* (a “shorthand” method of making new words by combining initial or final letters from several existing words); and *temura* (the transposition of letters by definite schemes). Waite, who disparages the practical Kabbalah, (9 n.2) inaccurately points out that the numerical equivalence of *wine* and *secret* is determined through *notarikon*. The device that makes this equivalence is *gematria*.

We also note that the formula as Waite presents it is not symmetrical, for he omits the Hebrew word for wine (*yayin*, 10 + 10 + 50 = 70). It would have been both more explicit and more accurate for Waite to have presented this Kabbalistic formula as *yayin* (wine) = 70 *sod* (secret). In Tolson’s treatment of Waite’s formula, he inserts the word *wine* prominently in his title, and he then constructs his poem—as shall be shown below—so that it reproduces the word *sod* through poetic wordplay, though the word’s appearance is adeptly concealed. Any reader with basic familiarity with the lore of the Kabbalah would recognize that Tolson has established a key in his title, and such a reader would try to determine whether there are additional hidden meanings within the body of the poem. The text of Tolson’s sonnet is as follows:

THE WINE OF ECSTASY

One night I drank the wine of ecstasy,
 Drank till my soul throbbbed with a verve sublime.

The incident became a memory
 Set, like a jewel, in the ring of time.
 I had not lived until that moment came:
 I was a plodding thing of servile breed;
 Today, tomorrow, naught can be the same,
 And people marvel at my change of creed.

Now I can see how men have given all
 An interlude of ecstasy to win,
 Have left behind the virtues that appall,
 Have scorned the status quo, the censor's din.
 The opium of custom drugs the clod;
 The wine of ecstasy makes man a god!
 (Tolson 153)

It is immediately apparent that Tolson's efforts have produced a mediocre and unconvincing sonnet. While "The Wine of Ecstasy" is inescapably reminiscent of Claude McKay's celebrated sonnets, the impression is that Tolson's performance tends toward a parody rather than an imitation of McKay's work. Like The Curator of Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson may be said "to dangle Socratic bait" (line 2784). It is well known that McKay's sonnets were grounded in "the sheer musical beauty of Keats's language, the luscious sensuousness of Keats's words" (Keegan). While Tolson has incorporated McKay's vocabulary into his sonnet, none of McKay's finesse is reflected in Tolson's heaving, end-stopped lines or in his indistinct imagery, and the degree to which Tolson's poem employs inversions and archaisms suggests that "The Wine of Ecstasy" is purposely flawed. Of McKay's sonnets, Tolson's "The Wine of Ecstasy" most closely resembles "I Know My Soul," from the 1922 volume, *Harlem Shadows*.

I KNOW MY SOUL

I plucked my soul out of its secret place,
 And held it to the mirror of my eye,
 To see it like a star against the sky,
 A twitching body quivering in space,
 A spark of passion shining on my face.
 And I explored it to determine why
 This awful key to my infinity
 Conspires to rob me of sweet joy and grace.
 And if the sign may not be fully read,

If I can comprehend but not control,
 I need not gloom my days with futile dread,
 Because I see a part and not the whole.
 Contemplating the strange, I'm comforted
 By this narcotic thought: I know my soul.
 (McKay 46)

The soul is the subject of both sonnets. Tolson's experience of his soul's rapture—"a jewel in the ring of time"—is comparable to McKay's soul as "a twitching body quivering in space." In McKay's final line, there is a "narcotic thought" that Tolson echoes in his penultimate line as the "opium of custom [that] drugs," suggesting that Tolson's speaker can dispense with depressants and instead transcend habit and opinion by directly experiencing divinity. But what is perhaps the most interesting feature of these poems is that McKay's sonnet gives prominent position to the important word *secret* in its opening line. This word is, of course, absent from Tolson's poem; however, the motivation for the poem is to manifest the word *secret* as it appears in the Kabbalistic formula given above, *wine* = 70 = *secret*. Since Tolson's sonnet reproduces *wine* but not *secret*, it seems that Tolson writes this poem in order to complete the equation *wine* = *secret* by the surreptitious presentation of *sod*, the Hebrew word for *secret*. The word *secret* is reintroduced into Tolson's manipulations by McKay's intertext, where in the first line the soul is plucked "out of its *secret* place" (emphasis added).

Tolson's disappearance of McKay's "secret" is not his poem's only instance of intertextual wordplay. Tolson's use of *jewel* (jew-el) clearly points to his interest in Jewish mysticism. And the playful effect of his intertextual recapitulation of McKay's poem is heightened by Tolson's parody of McKay's allusion to the Marxist dictum that religion is the opium of the masses.²⁰ McKay says, "By this narcotic thought: I know my soul," to which Tolson ripostes, "The opium of custom drugs the clod." While Tolson sides with Marx by rejecting religion, Tolson does so here because he privileges the direct experience of transcendent unity over the indirect experiences of belief, faith, and hope. The pointedness and specificity of Tolson's attack on Claude McKay is further emphasized once we realize that to read Tolson as a one-dimensional poet is to severely underestimate him. Tolson provides the reader with a salient landmark for navigating his intricate sonnet by phonetically sounding out his detractor's name, Claude McKay, as "clod mak a" in lines 13 and 14: "The opium of custom drugs the *clod*; / The wine of ecstasy *mak*[es man] a god!" (This playful device is hardly unique, and as I will show below, Langston Hughes treats W. E. B. Du Bois similarly in one of his sonnets.) The use of sound to confirm the double meaning of a text was called by Tolson "sight, sound, and sense" and is discussed below in more detail.

Further examination of “The Wine of Ecstasy” shows that Tolson reformulated McKay’s “secret” as the Hebrew word *sod*, which is aurally present throughout the poem. Tolson’s sonnet employs the English sonnet’s traditional pattern of rhymes; yet by means of a space between the eighth and ninth lines, he separates his poem into two stanzas and reminds us of the octave and sestet of an Italian sonnet. Though Italian sonnets are at times printed as two stanzas of seven lines, McKay’s “I Know My Soul” has no such division. Tolson further emphasized this resemblance to an Italian sonnet by introducing a turn (a change in the argument that resolves the poem) in the ninth line, as in McKay’s Italian sonnet: “And if the sign may not be fully read” (line 9). Anyone experienced in reading formal poetry will quickly conclude that by intermixing elements of the English and Italian sonnets, Tolson has produced a bungled synthesis in which the two forms of the sonnet are in conflict. Here again, Tolson follows McKay’s lead, for McKay experimented with the synthesis of the sonnet forms, as Nilay Gandhi observes about McKay’s “The Lynching”:

Its form is a striking variation on the Italian sonnet. Much of the Italian sonnet’s aesthetic appeal is its ability to go slowly, cruise the reader through a description and then a calm conclusion, in contrast to the quick *abab* rhymes and epiphany of the final couplet (*gg*) in a Shakespearean (or the variant Spenserian) sonnet. Accordingly, the octave in this poem follows the traditional Italian form, rhyming *abbacddc*. The concluding sestet breaks form, rhyming *effegg*. The embedded third quatrain makes the poem mimic a Shakespearean sonnet (three quatrains and a couplet). Because of this formal duality, it might be difficult to call “The Lynching” Italian or Shakespearean; the key is the poetic pace—the reflective tone is more indicative of an Italian sonnet and so the poem can be primarily characterized as such. It largely follows the Italian rhyme scheme but has Shakespearean organization. (Gandhi)

For Gandhi, McKay’s sonnet makes its point by means of the formal experiment: “Lynching becomes not only accepted but natural. This is why McKay breaks the Italian form. The added quatrain and lengthened pauses have us pensively consider the descriptions. The couplet is a way of saying nothing that preceded it makes sense” (Gandhi). In contrast, Tolson’s combination of the two major forms of the sonnet is not justifiable as a poetic expression of cosmic consciousness. However, like McKay, Tolson has also usefully exploited the formal synthesis.

In “The Wine of Ecstasy” the use of the concluding couplet contradicts the octave-sestet development of the sonnet so that there is a pronounced cessation at the end of the twelfth line, “Have scorned the status quo, the

ensor's din." The abruptness with which the concluding couplet follows is emphatic, and the lines add little more to the poem than unconvincing declarative bombast and the thudding reverberation of *clod* and *god*. Yet in this emphatic conjunction is to be found the entire point of Tolson's intentionally halting exercise: in concluding with the "od" of *sod*, Tolson has presented the reader with the word *sod* through an indirect combination of sounds. The components *s* and *-od* of *sod* are not contingent in the concluding heroic couplet, but the rhyme of *clod* and *god* as end rhymes emphasizes the importance of the *-od* sound. The poem begins with *s* sounds—as in *ecstasy*, *soul*, *sublime*, *incident*, and *set*; thus, *s* sounds predominate throughout the first four lines. Beginning in the fifth line, there are a number of *o*'s. The sixth line contains *plodding*—a rhyme for *clod* and *god*. Moreover, the fifth line signals the replication of the letter *d* as a final letter in *breed*, *creed*, *behind*, *scorned*, *clod*, and *god*. Finally, there is a parallel pattern in the concluding couplet that suggests that the close approach of "drugs the clod" to the disclosure of *sod* [drugs the *clod*] is echoed in the final line by "makes man a god" [makes man a *god*]. To summarize, the elemental components of the word *sod* occur in "The Wine of Ecstasy" ten times—in lines 1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, and 14. An interrupted presentation of *sod*—where other letters come between the *s-o-d*—occurs twice in lines 12 and 13, with the letters presented in the proper order to spell *sod* all four times; the letters also follow the proper order in the fourteenth line. In this manner Tolson presents the word *sod* as sight. *Sod* is sounded three times in Tolson's sonnet in the sense that when the poem is read aloud, the word *sod* is heard among the other sounds the poem delivers.

If McKay's poem is used as an experimental control—a poem in which the poet has no interest in the word *sod*—the letters that compose *sod* occur only four times (lines 4, 9, 11, and 13) and only once in the proper order, a marked contrast to the ten occurrences in the proper order in Tolson's poem. It is also clear that the *od* sound is present only once, in the fourth line of McKay's poem ("body . . . space"), and not in such a way that it may be combined to produce *sod*, since it is in partially reversed order, and the *s* occurs only as *sp*. Thus, Tolson's sonnet functions at the level of the practical Kabbalah more so than at the level of formal poetry. While the poem suffers as a sonnet, it succeeds as a Kabbalistic cipher. At the same time, the features that degrade Tolson's performance formally are those features of the poem that serve as aids to its Kabbalistic level, for the formal disruptions call attention to the patterns that reveal the code.

The source from which the theory behind Tolson's sonnet originates is the *Book of Splendor*, also known as *The Zohar*. Section 68 states that "'Wine makes glad the heart of man' (Psalms 104:15).²¹ This is the wine of the Torah,

for the numerical value of the letters of the word *yayin* [wine] (10 + 10 + 50) is the same as the letters of *sod* [secret] (60 + 6 + 4)” (Berg 34). In Jewish mysticism, the man who is transformed by the mystical “wine” of the Torah is the zaddik, the enlightened saint. Thus, the burden of Tolson’s sonnet is his claim to have attained mystical enlightenment (*Yechidah*, union with the Absolute) and to have become a zaddik. The poem confirms that he has become a zaddik through another cipher. Six lines of the poem contain a number of occurrences of the letters *l* and *v*, the predominant example being in the second line—“Drank till my soul throbbd with a verve sublime”—which contains four *l*s and two *v*s. This effect of superabundance is echoed by the eleventh line with its three *l*s and two *v*s. The *l* and *v* cipher also occurs in lines 5 (“lived”), 6 (“servile”), 8 (“marvel”), 9 (“given all”), and 11 (“Have left behind the virtues that appall”). In all, there are ten occurrences of the *l* and *v* cipher in Tolson’s sonnet. *L* and *v* are the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *vau*, and since the Hebrew numbers and letters are interchangeable, the number 36 is written as *lv*.

The number 36 is, in a sense, the most important number in the lore of the Kabbalah. The lore surrounding the number 36 goes back four thousand years to Sumerian civilization, in which groups of thirty-six judges heard matters of law. Throughout the body of his published poetry, Tolson repeatedly alludes to the so-called inner circle of humanity, or, as they are called in occultism, “those who know.” Allusions to the phrase “those who know” were worked into “The Man from Halicarnassus” and *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*. In *Harlem Gallery* Tolson writes, “Who knows, without no, / the archimedean pit and pith of a man?” (lines 55–56). In *Kabbalah Zev* Halevi explained that “those who know” was a traditional name for Kabbalists in ancient times (29). This usage is further supported by the fact that in two of his poems, “The Man from Halicarnassus” and *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson uses variant forms of the word, *qabala* and *cabala*,²² respectively. “Those who know” are called the zaddikim in the Hasidic tradition, a tradition that he refers to directly in *Harlem Gallery*: “Hideho’s joy was Hasidic” (line 3372). The traditions surrounding the zaddikim were borrowed by Tolson who applied them to himself. The following discussion of the zaddikim is very helpful in explaining how Tolson viewed himself and the activity of writing poetry:

We also have the concept of thirty-six *tzadikim* whose existence sustains the world from one generation to another. In this age-old tradition, it is not a body of people who are in touch with one another; each one is alone and for the most part does not have any idea about himself or the others. They simply do not know who they are or what they’re doing.

The important thing is that, from the point of view of divine justice, the world cannot continue to exist except if there be a certain number of persons who justify its existence. As an archetype, we have the story of Abraham and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The question is: Why should any place that is full of wickedness be allowed to perpetuate itself? And the answer is that a minimal number of righteous persons can compensate for the evil of the many and check the course of retribution. Thus if there were not a certain number of *Tzadikim* who justify the continued existence of the world, the world would be destroyed like Sodom, like the world at the time of the Flood. Therefore there is the tradition of the thirty-six persons whose existence on earth in every generation, whether they know it or not, keeps the world from being annihilated. (Steinsaltz 100)

Tolson's assertion that he was a zaddik was his indirect way of indicating that he was involved in the Gurdjieff movement, an important component in American intellectual life beginning in 1924.²³ While accounts of the Harlem Renaissance submit that Jean Toomer lectured on Gurdjieff's system to Harlem writers in 1925 and 1926, the lectures were actually conducted by A. R. Orage and C. Daly King, figures far more advanced in the Gurdjieff work than Toomer. As a graduate student at Columbia University from 1931 to 1932 and the author of the thesis "The Harlem Group of Negro Writers" (1940), Tolson encountered a large number of Gurdjieff's followers. He also encountered an American version of the phonetic Kabbalah, a form of esoteric writing employed by the psychologist and mystery writer and Gurdjieff group leader, C. Daly King. Tolson referred to King's method as "[the] three S's of Parnassus" (Flasch 48)—"sight, sound, and sense," implying that he had invented it. King first presented the phonetic Kabbalah in *Beyond Behaviorism* (1927)—a Gurdjieffian treatise on "conscious evolution" that masqueraded as Buddhist thought. Tolson intended his spurious sonnet to be a purposeful mistake, a parallel to C. Daly King's naming his detective novels "obelists"—*Obelists at Sea* (1933) and *Obelists Fly High* (1935). Tolson writes always in the mode of Gurdjieff's *legominisms*—coded texts that use deliberate imprecision ("lawful inexactitudes") to force the reader to follow a pattern, only to interrupt the pattern with something that is both obviously wrong and contains some wisdom or insight. This technique alerts readers that they will be forced *to look beneath the surface of what is written*. Here is Gurdjieff's description of "lawful inexactitudes" from *Beelzebub's Tales*:

In all of the productions which we shall intentionally create on the basis of this Law [of Sevenfoldness], for the purpose of transmitting to remote generations, we shall intentionally introduce certain *lawful inexactitudes*,

and to these lawful inexactitudes we shall place, by means available to us, the contents of some true knowledge or other which is already in the possession of men of the present time.

In any case, for the interpretation itself, or, as may be said, for the “key” to those inexactitudes in that great Law, we shall further make in our productions something like a Legominism, and we shall secure its transmission from generation to generation through initiates of a special kind, whom we shall call initiates of art. (Gurdjieff, “Art” 51–52; emphases added)

C. Daly King used the phonetic cabala to write his obelisk series of detective novels, and many of Gurdjieff’s students adopted this technique. Here is Tolson’s presentation of the rules for reading the “sight, sound, and sense” code, which he uses in his epic, *Harlem Gallery*: “contrives the triple-rhyming oblong leaf / of the metaphor-maker of Naishapur; / fashions the undulant mold / of the cyma reversa” (lines 4035–63). In this passage Tolson indicates that his hidden words may appear reversed, may be present only as sound, or may appear through intermittent, complex patterns. Using C. Daly King’s system of phonetic repetition, Tolson has created yet another hidden level in his sonnet in which he has inserted the name of his teacher, *Daly King*. Other names that appear are [Jean] *Toomer* in lines 7 and 13; *A. R. Orage* in line 12; *P. D. Ouspensky* in lines 13 and 14; and *Gurdjieff* in lines 13 and 11 (*drugs* read in reverse combined with *left*).

Our view of Tolson’s early poems has to be revised, for even his unpublished manuscript of the early 1930s, *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, was freighted with esoteric content. Since he could not comfortably insert it in the plainspoken, proletarian poems of the *Portraits*, he concocted improbable names and turned the table of contents into a cabalistic text.²⁴ Thus, the sonnet “The Wine of Ecstasy,” rather than being an early esoteric exercise, comes after Tolson had written a considerable body of coded poetry. Tolson positions himself as a zaddik primarily because by claiming enlightenment he could place himself in the highest rank of individuality, beyond all social, cultural, intellectual, and biological limitations: “Those who attain enlightenment become liberated, released from the attachment to suffering and limitation of any kind. They are absolutely free, and extraordinarily awakened” (Ullman xv).

The textual strategy for erecting this subject position has involved surmounting an inferior subject position so that here Tolson surpasses Claude McKay’s romantic genius as a self-originating subject (Strathausen 141): McKay’s subject is trapped in paradox and unable to observe the totality of the world. Tolson indicates through the esoteric coding of his sonnet that he has surpassed the limits of his former self; simultaneously, he uses parody

to indicate that he has outgrown the limitations of subjective literature. Finally, it must be noted that Tolson's mysticism did not lead him into an inner-directed style of life. Rather, Tolson's predilection for extroversion and engagement was acknowledged in a recent film, *The Great Debaters* (2008), which portrayed Tolson as a radical involved in the clandestine unionizing of Texas farm workers in the early 1930s. His colleague Wallace Thurman commented in his novel *Infants of the Spring*, in shockingly frank terms, on the connection between the esoteric doctrine of the superman that Tolson expressed in his sonnet "The Wine of Ecstasy" and Tolson's radical political activities: "It is mass movements that bring forth individuals. I don't care about stray darkies getting lynched, but I do care about people who will fight for a principle. And if out of a wholesale allegiance to Communism the Negro could develop just a half dozen men who were really and truly outstanding the result would be worth the effort" (*Infants* 218–19).

LANGSTON HUGHES'S HANDBOOK ON EUDAIMONISM

Langston Hughes published three sonnets in the 1930s: "Pennsylvania Station" (1932), "Ph. D." (1932), and "Search" (1937). Hughes worked out an existential and ontological credo across the span of his three-sonnet sequence; in combination, the sequence expounds a modern treatment of becoming or self-fashioning. Thus, Hughes's three sonnets compose a sequence that is a handbook on eudaemonism. Hughes's sonnets reveal a derivation not so much from the romantic modernism of Walt Whitman as from Ralph Waldo Emerson, for the sonnets are couched in an expressly Emersonian vocabulary. For Emerson, *range* is a key word, appearing in nearly all of his essays.²⁵ The word *range* figures in "Search" ("To seek the sun that ranges far beyond" [line 2]) and in "Ph.D." ("And quite beyond his Ph.D.'s small range" [line 14]). Similarly, the word *search* appears in both "Search" and "Pennsylvania Station" (where it has two appearances).

Emerson's individualism was situated in the idea of searching. For Emerson, searching was a generative activity throughout his years as a writer.²⁶ Rather than being informed solely by collective discourses, Hughes's poetry was also influenced by romantic modernism, and his sonnets are expressions of Emerson's liberating individualism. While this finding seems on the surface out of place (especially given Hughes's association with the Communist Party in the 1930s), in truth Hughes was a complex, experimental, and eclectic personality. Added to this is the cultural centrality of Emerson in the 1930s. Bliss Perry, in the Vanexem Lectures at Princeton in 1931, noted that "more books have been written about Emerson in the

last five years than in any five years since his death” (11), and he detected a rising interest in Emerson (136). In the 1930s Emersonian individualism was most powerfully reformulated and advanced by John Dewey in *Individualism Old and New* (1930), which developed a view of individualism in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 that framed what he saw as the increasing corporatization of social life fostered by neoliberal economic policies: “The tremendous disruption occasioned by the Great Depression left many Americans asking ‘what happened?’ The incredible insecurity and impoverishment that subsequently followed made the revaluation of rugged individualism not only a welcome philosophical exercise, but an urgent one” (Willet “Individualism”).

In the table of subject positions and materials for identity formation, Hughes’s “Pennsylvania Station” sonnet intersects eudaemonistic materials for identity formation and the mediational subject position.

PENNSYLVANIA STATION

The Pennsylvania Station in New York
 Is like some vast basilica of old
 That towers above the terror of the dark
 As bulwark and protection to the soul.
 Now people who are hurrying alone
 And those who come in crowds from far away
 Pass through this great concourse of steel and stone
 To trains, or else from trains out into day.
 And as in great basilicas of old
 The search was ever for a dream of God,
 So here the search is still within each soul
 Some seed to find to root in earthly sod,
 Some seed to find that sprouts a holy tree
 To glorify the earth—and you—and me.

“Pennsylvania Station” locates the speaker within a specific modern artifact, though this is done somewhat distantly, as the speaker foregoes presenting the self as a lyric “I,” preferring to remain behind the scenes until the concluding “me.” The sonnet is particularly interesting in that it begins by comparing the train station, completed in 1910, to “some vast basilica of old,” so that one at first suspects that the burden of the poem will be to present the terminal of a modern transportation system through a realistic description. Conventional wisdom suggests that vast public spaces threaten individuality—that individuals, in effect, become dehumanized by overwhelming structures. This is

not the case in Hughes's poem. On the contrary, the poem quickly dispenses with the material world. The train station's secular origin—it was in fact designed in imitation of a Roman bath—becomes spiritual through reference to sacred architecture. Simultaneously, the station transitions backward into history. This twofold action reveals that Hughes's omniscient, disembodied narrator is relegated neither to the historical present nor to materiality, for the transcendent trajectory of the poem locates the speaker within the "soul" (line 4). The lofty *public interior* of the train station, whose marble-sheathed main waiting room was 150 feet high, becomes a part of each individual who enters the public space, transforming it into a *private interior*. Not only is the subject position of the narrator outside of historical time but also the narrator is capable of projecting each traveler into a direct experience of his or her own interior vastness. The speaker is powerful enough to transform a collective public space into a site of transcendence, an interior psychological event: "so here the search is still within each soul" (line 11).

"Pennsylvania Station" is a hymn to the subject-in-process. The individual searches for "some seed" (line 13) that will bring into the world a new quotient of being, "To glorify the earth—and you—and me" (line 14). Thus, the train station becomes an emblem of the sublime, and even though the modern subject is dangerously close to losing his or her soul in the rushing crowd that the poem describes, the train station inadvertently conducts modern subjects into the experience of the ineffable and the mythical. The speaker uses the growth of a "holy tree" (line 13) to symbolize the attainment of individualism. Certainly, the elevation of the train station to a house of worship and subsequently to a place of mystical experience occurs within the psyche of the speaker. The speaker, though, assumes a Whitmanian posture that allows him to extend his private sublimation of the train station to all who pass through, though it is not realistic to assume that anyone who passes through the station attains the speaker's level of perception. Rather, we have access to this experience through the magical space of the sonnet itself, thanks to the way that sonnets have operated traditionally as portals of access to intellectual immortality: "The subject of the image, once chosen, is abstracted from the world of nature and yoked to a conceptual scheme. Its natural properties are wholly subordinated to its place in the allegory, and are never regained. When . . . Guillaume de Lorris . . . makes his rose the *sanctum sanctorum* of courtly love, it gives up its being as a natural flower and becomes . . . the life-less and undying symbol of an idea" (Lever 4).

Like de Lorris, Hughes uses the conventions of the sonnet to portray subjectivity in a manner that disguises the sublimated fantasy that is the essence of the poem; thus, the discourse of monumentality that the poem presents on a number of levels must be rejected:

Architecture represents this silent, homologous, gravitational mass that absorbs every meaningful production. The monument and the pyramid are where they are to cover up a place, to fill a void: the one left by death. Death must not appear, it must not take place. Death comes with time as the unknown bourne of the future. It is the other of everything known; it threatens the meaning of discourses. Death is hence irreducibly heterogeneous to homologies; it is not assimilable. The death wish, whose action Freud recognized whenever a return to the inanimate could be noted, whenever difference was denied, wears the elusive face of this expanding homology that causes the place of the Other to be imported into the Same. One plays dead so that death will not come. So nothing will happen and time will not take place. (Hollier 36)

Thus, “Pennsylvania Station” narrates the sublimation of excremental man. The fantasy encapsulated in the poem is that the dead monument of the train station transcends death: by the act of being engulfed within the monument, the subject is protected by the monumental and immortal body which is then further sublimated by the monumental body of the sonnet.

“Pennsylvania Station” is particularly interesting in that it helps us to see that the mechanism of sublimation equates the monumentality of the train station with the monumentality of the sonnet, a feature that might have otherwise remained outside of the reader’s consciousness. The poem also acknowledges the sublimating character of the process, for it names “the terror of the dark” (line 3) against which the subject requires protection. Thus, the poem presents a fantasy in which the building-as-body engulfs the basilica and endows the subject with monumentality; it is through the magic textuality of the sonnet that the subject is able to attain monumentality. Of course, as Bataille, Laing, and Brown tirelessly argued, the monument/sonnet has only the capacity to preserve the dead/abstract form of the tomb/poem. Discussing Bataille’s view of architecture, Hollier observes that “one of the labyrinth’s most subtle (treacherous) detours leads one to believe it is possible to get out, even making one desire to do so. Sublimation is a false exit that is an integral part of its economy” (73).

THE BLACK PEASANT

It should not be surprising that the African American poetry of the 1930s often utilizes the subject position of the black peasant. In Marcus Christian’s sonnet “Carnival Torch-Bearer” (*Opportunity*, Feb. 1938: 45), this familiar figure is placed at the intersection of eudaemonism and abjection.

CARNIVAL TORCH-BEARER

In nondescript clothes and run-down, broken shoes,
 His small, dark face unnaturally lean,
 He walks the brightly lighted avenues
 With smoking, flaming torch of kerosene.
 He lights the way for one more King tonight,
 Just as his dark forbears have always done
 From Caesar to some lesser ones in might—
 Tomorrow night will be a different one.
 What are a thousand years but one tomorrow?
 What are five hundred years but one long night?
 None sees his face, pinched hard by want and sorrow,
 Although he carries in his hands a light.
 Lighting a dream, he dreams another dream
 Of dives on Poydras Street where bright lights gleam.

One of the most accomplished and perceptive black poets working in the 1930s, Marcus Christian wrote highly original sonnets that are situated in an intellectual version of bourgeois subjectivity. Though his poems suggest an investment in a transcendental-romantic modernism reminiscent of Hughes's sonnets, Christian's poems are anti-Marxist contemplations of historical determinism. Christian addressed a number of sonnets to the theme of the "man farthest down," the figure that Adam Gussow calls "the blues subject"—the slave, the agricultural peasant, or the urban proletarian. Marcus Christian was a social realist with a determination to voice his political concerns in sophisticated, complex, and challenging poems. Whereas Sterling Brown presents his black folk subjects through dialect and in forms that approximate those of folksongs, Christian experimented with social realist aesthetics in order to frame the black peasant in a broader context, at times reaching for a Spenglerian temporal vastness and at other times reaching for a cosmic grasp of causality.²⁷ Though he often wrote in the sonnet form, Christian employed a diction that confirms the influence of modernist aesthetics, and his writing shows few remnants of the romantic or the archaic.

Christian's peasant comes under the gaze of a Spenglerian narrator in a manner reminiscent of Owen Dodson's prophetic treatment of the Harlem underclass in his sonnet cycle, "Negro History," with the difference that in Christian's poem the peasant has not yet escaped from working the southern land. Except for the decisive shift in rhetorical register effected by *nondescript*, the poem's opening line echoes the familiar posture of the blues subject, who candidly refers to what would have been obvious to his immediate

audience, the fact that he was “broken-down,” “a broke man” (Paul Oliver 57), “broken and hungry” (Oliver 44) with “shoes [that] ain’t got no bottom, feets standin’ on the ground” (Oliver 57). The blues subject willingly comes under the gaze of his onlookers because he can look forward to gaining their sympathy; perhaps they have suffered similar indignities. Not so in the case of the carnival torchbearer: Christian’s narrator allows the torchbearer neither to address the audience directly nor to come voluntarily before his onlookers. The omniscient speaker seizes upon the carnival torchbearer and subjects him to an objective historical analysis. The effect is metonymic; the man himself becomes nondescript. Though the sonnet supplies realistic details of a traditional Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans, the language points to its function as a conveyer of semiotic multiplicity: “His small, dark face unnaturally lean” (line 2) inescapably alludes to Caesar’s iconic description of Cassius in act 1, scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look; / He thinks too much: such men are dangerous.” The contrast between the nameless torchbearer and the named Cassius cannot be more indicative. Yet the poem enforces this reading by mentioning Caesar in the seventh line, where the secularized and degenerate celebration of the beginning of Lent in carnival is semantically elevated by the historicizing discourse of the narrator in the second quatrain:

He lights the way for one more King tonight,
 Just as his dark forbears have always done
 From Caesar to some lesser ones in might—
 Tomorrow night will be a different one.
 (“Carnival Torch Bearer” lines 5–8)

Christian’s reference to Cassius and Caesar raises the issue of revolutionary violence (if we assume that Christian grounded his poem in Marxism): “Rene Girard observes that *Julius Caesar* is Shakespeare’s deconstruction of the mythology of revolution. The modern world, still gripped by dreams of regenerative violence, has yet, Girard contends, to catch up with Shakespeare” (Leithart). For Christian’s narrator, Shakespeare’s Cassius does not so much indicate a condemnation of revolution as an incitement to revolt. The peasant torchbearer refuses to take up the revolutionary role. Down through the ages, the oppressed classes’ political inaction has made it possible for kings to rule. The narrator’s chief distinction is that he is able to see the peasant, for, despite the illumination provided by the torchbearer himself, he remains otherwise *historically* invisible. The word *light* is used in the poem five times, and the torch appears in the title and in line four, so the narrator is inexorably connected to this pervading light. In contrast, the peasant wears

a darkness on his face (line 2). This darkness surrounds him in the form of historical ages that mark his political and social irrelevance and impotence: “What are a thousand years but one tomorrow? / What are five hundred years but one long night? (lines 9–10).

At this point, it is apparent that the handling of time has itself become a subject within the poem, and (as I have said in connection with Owen Dodson’s “Negro History”) *time* as a metaphysical abstraction is not a Marxist concern. It was the philosopher of history Oswald Spengler who addressed the form of time within historical dynamism:

Spengler was convinced . . . that the dynamics of decadence could be fairly well predicted, provided that exact historical data were available. Just as the biology of human beings generates a well-defined life span, resulting ultimately in biological death, so does each culture possess its own aging “data,” normally lasting no longer than a thousand years—a period, separating its spring from its eventual historical antithesis, the winter, or civilization. The estimate of a thousand years before the decline of culture sets in, corresponds to Spengler’s certitude that, after that period, each society has to face self-destruction. For example, after the fall of Rome, the rebirth of European culture started anew in the ninth century with the Carolingian dynasty. After the painful process of growth, self-assertiveness, and maturation, one thousand years later, in the twentieth century, cultural life in Europe is coming to its definite historical close. (Sunić 51)

The centrality of time in Christian’s sonnet is not the only theme that points to Christian’s interest in Spengler’s philosophy of history; in *The Decline of the West*, one of Spengler’s cultural-historical stages is *Caesarism*:

By the term “Caesarism” I mean that kind of government which, irrespective of any constitutional formulation that it may have, is in its inward self a return to thorough formlessness. It does not matter that Augustus in Rome, and Huang Ti in China, Amasis in Egypt and Alp Arslan in Baghdad disguised their position under antique forms. The spirit of these forms was dead, and so all institutions, however carefully maintained, were thenceforth destitute of all meaning and weight. Real importance centered in the wholly personal power exercised by the Caesar. (vol. 2 431)

Spengler’s Caesarism also incorporated the peasant in rather specific terms, so it is possible not only to evaluate Christian’s use of time and his use of

Caesar, but also to relate the sharecropper, around whom time and the political order revolve, to the scene that Christian depicts in his sonnet about carnival. Spengler states: “With the formed state having finished its course, high history also lays itself down weary to sleep. Man becomes a plant again adhering to the soil, dumb and enduring. The timeless village and the ‘eternal’ peasant reappear, begetting children and burying seed in Mother Earth. . . . Men live from hand to mouth, with petty thrifts and petty fortunes and endure” (vol. 2 435). The expansion of these themes in Christian’s poems points away from Marxism and toward Christian’s alignment of the Great Depression with Spengler’s prediction of the collapse of Western civilization: “Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again” (vol. 1 31).

Christian does not present the black peasant as a subject-in-process. There is no corresponding progressive historical frame in which the peasant operates: Oswald Spengler describes no matrix on which the peasant can attain bourgeois subjectivity. The peasant is subjugated to the decline of his civilization. Thus, in the final line of the poem Christian shows the torch-bearer retreating into a dive (“a disreputable or run-down bar or nightclub” [AHD]). Spengler’s *Decline* outlines “a new kind of primitivism” as the historical stage that corresponds to the peasant’s descent into the *dive*. *Dive* can be “a nearly vertical descent at an accelerated speed through water or space” (AHD). It is also possible to metaphorically dive (descend) through time. The figure in Christian’s sonnet retreats into the primitive future, where he will seek the end of both selfhood and the process of becoming.

In *The Psychology of Individualism*, Alan Waterman argues that identity-related decisions are partially made in relation to role models: identity does not develop through carefully looking at oneself, but rather, at least in part, through actually performing an identity role (Cober). These role models can be derived from subject positions that are transcendental, mediational, or abject. I have shown that even though Tolson’s sonnet “The Wine of Ecstasy” was a transcendental poem, he used a coded subtext to name the esoteric teachers who were his role models, thus demonstrating the centrality of role models in Tolson’s identity formation. In the African American sonnet pantext of the 1930s, a number of factors influence how we read sonnets that hold up role models—the most salient factor being that white poets (by publishing in African American publications in the 1930s) have inserted

texts into the African American literary discourse of the thirties at the intersection of mediational subject positions and role models. It is not possible to ascertain whether it would have been known that such writers as Isabel Fiske Conant, Leonard Twynham, Carolyn Hazard, Kathleen Sutton, and others who regularly published in *Crisis* and *Opportunity* were white poets. I suspect Conant and Hazard were sufficiently famous that their race was known to many readers; in other cases, the assumption must have been that the poets were black. Since there are major differences in how the black and white poets of the 1930s treat the central themes, it is important to at least acknowledge that race is a factor.

One example of the imposition of a role model by a white poet is a sonnet published in *Opportunity* in 1937, “Hampton Institute (Remembering General Armstrong)” by Isabel Fiske Conant, a popular poet, social activist, and philanthropist of the twenties and thirties. Conant’s sonnet intervenes in favor of General Samuel C. Armstrong, the founder and president of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute for the education and training of young African American men. Maurice O. Wallace states that “General Armstrong exemplified the very abstract disembodiment and disciplinary individualism that had come to idealistically define the social and political preconditions of (white) American masculinity” (101). Through his influence on Booker T. Washington, Armstrong did influence the development of a particular cast of black masculinity: “It was that—Armstrong’s capacity to domesticate the masculine—which Washington sought to emulate: ‘I have observed that those who have accomplished the greatest results are those who “keep under the body”; are those who never grow excited or lose self-control, but are always calm, self-possessed, patient and polite’ [*Up from Slavery*, 182]” (102). Wallace labels Washington’s masculine subject position a “eunuchistic, if still manfully rugged, ideal” (105). African American sonnets that present mediational role models are relatively rare in the pantext of the 1930s; thus, intervention by white poets was potentially all the more consequential. Only toward the end of the decade were there elegiac sonnets addressed to James Weldon Johnson and Henry Alexander Hunt. The two living figures who inspired sonnets were Marian Anderson and Haile Selassie.²⁸ Anderson’s historic concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 was a turning point in racial relations, so it is not surprising that Anderson became the subject of poems; similarly, the uniqueness of Selassie’s position on the world stage as a black head of state lent him an aura that was in a few cases translated into sonnets.

Henry Alexander Hunt, the subject of an elegiac sonnet by George A. Townes, stood in marked contrast to the repressed, quasi-military subject position that Isabel Fiske Conant ascribed to General Armstrong. Hunt, a

member of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Black Cabinet,"²⁹ had worked his way to national prominence through his commitment to educational efforts among black southern farmers: "In spite of various economic adversities and certain social controls not favorable to black southern farmers during almost a half century before 1938, Hunt had some successes in his attempts to help a large group of 'forgotten' farmers turn their labor into assets for themselves" (Bellamy 464). In attempting to convey something of the force of Hunt's individualism, Bellamy states that

Hunt's personality and his determination must be considered as large factors in any attempt to measure the degree of his success as a leader. His understanding of the "real problems" of the region in which he worked during some of the most fruitful years of his life, his sympathy with rural black people, and his ability to convey to them important practical instruction and information in a convincing way were essential attributes of the man. Hunt was a very able and useful man whose leadership was a major force in helping to change the course of the agricultural story of the South. (479)

Townes wrote a very rough sonnet in tribute to Hunt, but it is a unique social and cultural document. The sonnet is formally inconsistent, with the first quatrain following the Italian pattern of the sonnet and the second quatrain taking up the English pattern. The poem also has an irregular appearance due to indentations that are not systematic. There is a turn at the ninth line as would follow from the Italian pattern, while the rhymes of the sestet follow the English pattern, though without any sense of a turn or recapitulation in the final couplet. While poets often take such liberties in sonnets, Townes's poem exhibits none of the qualities of stylistic innovation that encourage the reader to overlook formal deficiencies. The sonnet also uses a number of archaisms of diction.

HENRY ALEXANDER HUNT

Mid classic shades with genial friends and true.
 Where cheerful, welcome duties brought no moil,
 He planted his life-tree in friendly soil;
 And piercing deep, its fibers lusty grew.
 Then came a summons that he set himself
 Anew, in doubtful, distant, native earth,
 That offered him nor recompense, nor pelf—
 Mere privilege to serve a land in dearth.

This fruit of golden deeds his life-tree bore:
 The humble sheep and lanky lambs he fed;
 Made pastures bloom on arid lands of yore;
 And stony glance and wanton insult led
 To change in rev'rence, ere he lay him down
 In flowery nook, henceforth, a hallowed ground.
 (*Opportunity*, Dec. 1939: 358)

Townes's casual approach to composition may be attributed to the influence of his model, Joaquin Miller's³⁰ hodgepodge of neoromantic postures, "In Classic Shades." Townes borrows from Miller's poem the phrase "in classic shades" and further borrows "I sat me down," though Townes changes the lines to "Mid classic shades" and "he lay him down." Miller's poem is a strange model for "Henry Alexander Hunt," given its jingoist subject and its handling of race. "In Classic Shades" relates an occurrence that takes place in Italy. An American tourist is despondent due to loneliness. In a café he finds that the waiter is a black man of severe countenance, and the speaker is daunted by the waiter's fearsome demeanor to such a degree that he refers to the waiter as Hannibal. "The Carthaginian general Hannibal (247–182 BCE) was one of the greatest military leaders in history. His most famous campaign took place during the second Punic War (218–202), when he caught the Romans off guard by crossing the Alps [into Italy]" (Lendering "Hannibal"). By calling the black waiter "Hannibal," Miller's speaker characterizes the waiter as an African invader of Italy. The speaker is an American, an outsider; he projects his own otherness onto the waiter so as to cast the waiter as the outsider.

Finally, in despair the speaker tells the waiter that he cannot understand the waiter's Italian, whereupon in a sudden reversal the waiter reveals himself to be the stereotypical Negro who knows his place. The waiter fawns over Miller's American tourist:

His black face brightened as I spake;
 He bowed; he wagged his woolly head;
 He showed his shining teeth, and said,
 "Sah, if you please, dose tables heah
 Am consecrate to lager beer;
 And, sah, what will you have to take?"

Relieved to have arrived at a familiar social arrangement in a foreign country, the speaker then orders the waiter—now characterized as "that colored cuss"—to bring him two cocktails, which presumably they partake of

in some type of unequal fellowship: the matter of social equality would not seem to enter into the arrangement, since the waiter's speech reassigns him to a socially inferior position. The waiter, now that it is determined that he is merely an American Negro, is assigned to bringing the drinks, and the socially dominant speaker, having defeated Hannibal, revives the "classic" arrangement by paying for the drinks:

Not that I loved that colored cuss
 Nay! he had awed me all too much
 But I sprang forth, and with a clutch
 I grasped his hand, and holding thus,
 Cried, "Bring my country's drink for two!"

For oh! that speech of Saxon sound
 To me was as a fountain found
 In wastes, and thrilled me through and
 through.

On Rousseau's isle, in Rousseau's shade,
 Two pink and spicy drinks were made,
 In classic shades, on classic ground,
 We stirred two cocktails round and round.

The speaker has taken his revenge on the black waiter, who discomfited a white man by demonstrating his superior abilities to speak Italian and to function adequately outside of the United States. Townes's allusion to this racist poem makes sense only if we consider Henry Alexander Hunt the role model who replaces "Hannibal." There is some ambiguity on this point, since it is originally Miller's waiter who wears the uncompromising stare, while in Townes's sonnet it is the white people who disapprove of the efforts of black people to improve their economic and social status: "And stony glance and wanton insult led / To change in rev'rence." However, when read independently of the Miller intertext, Townes's point is direct and forthright: Henry Alexander Hunt's life was uncompromisingly directed toward the social improvement of black people, and his example is to be followed.

THE ABJECT SUBJECT POSITIONS

"Ph.D.," the third poem in Hughes's three-sonnet sequence, was published in *Opportunity* in 1932. The poem combines eudaemonistic materials for

identity formation and the abject subject position.

PH.D.

He never was a silly little boy
 Who whispered in the class or threw spit balls,
 Or pulled the hair of silly little girls,
 Or disobeyed in any way the laws
 That made the school a place of decent order
 Where books were read and sums were proven true
 And paper maps that showed the land and water
 Were held up as the real wide world to you.
 Always, he kept his eyes upon his books:
 And now he has grown to be a man
 He is surprised that everywhere he looks
 Life rolls in waves he cannot understand,
 And all the human world is vast and strange—
 And quite beyond his Ph.D.'s small range.

The contradictions that Dewey exposed in his study of American individualism are very much a part of Hughes's treatment of the protagonist in this poem: Hughes's application of Emersonian individualism in "Ph.D." is an exercise in the construction of an other, a black scholar with an advanced degree. This poem was modeled after the satirical portraits of individuals in *The Spoon River Anthology* (1915). Edgar Lee Masters's subjects, townspeople—always examples of existential failure—take a regret-filled approach to their lives, so that *never* (with fifty occurrences in the text) is a customary word in the vocabulary of *Spoon River's* characters. Hughes's "Ph.D." is similarly generated from the word *never*, and is comparable to Masters's "Ace' Shaw":

"ACE" SHAW

I never saw any difference
 Between playing cards for money
 And selling real estate,
 Practicing law, banking, or anything else.
 For everything is chance.
 Nevertheless
 Seest thou a man diligent in business?
 He shall stand before Kings!
 (*Spoon River Anthology* 45)

One important distinction between “Ph.D.” and “Ace’ Shaw” is that Masters gives speech to the dead, while Hughes denies autonomous speech to a living character. The anonymity of the doctorate-holding protagonist is, however, illusory, for the poem is a mocking description of Hughes’s Harlem Renaissance adversary, W. E. B. Du Bois, PhD. Du Bois had a reputation for being arrogant, puritanical, condescending, and uncompromising (Kellner, *Harlem Renaissance* 106), and Du Bois disapproved of Hughes, one of the antagonistic and provocative avant gardists of the Harlem Renaissance movement. Hughes had been a devoted follower of Du Bois and had dedicated poems to him as well as echoing the title of *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) in the title of his collection of short stories *The Ways of White Folks* (1928). Du Bois’s unfavorable comments on *Fire!!!* (1926), the literary magazine that presented the work of the younger Harlem writers, sparked a Hughes-Du Bois contretemps. In his autobiography Hughes comments that “Dr. Du Bois in the *Crisis* roasted it” (*The Big Sea*, quoted in *VFHR* 379).

If we assume that Hughes’s race-neutral sonnet is directed at a black PhD, the title of the poem—“Ph.D.”—is itself adequate to identify Du Bois as the subject, for at that time black PhDs were rare. Hughes has not made the subject of his sonnet ambiguous, however. In the first line, the soundplay of *boy* points directly to Du Bois. Moreover, the importance of the sound *boy* is further emphasized by the poem’s failure to supply a complementary end rhyme for *boy*—for the unrhyming *girl* occupies the complementary position in the third line. Additionally, in line with the *boy*/Du Bois rhyme, other sonic elements of Du Bois’s full name (William Edward Burghardt) make prominent appearances in the poem : silly/William, book/Burg, and hair/hardt.

Hughes used his confrontation with Du Bois as a means of conducting his own search for his true self. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) was an important document in the resubjectivization of the American black person. The form of the subject that Du Bois described was a divided and tormented double-consciousness, in which, under the white gaze, the black people had no choice but to see themselves as they were seen: their images were reflected back to them by the discourse network. At the time, Du Bois’s resubjectivization through double-consciousness was relatively effective because it made available a subjectivity that was complex, flexible, and emancipatory. Double-consciousness made the acquisition of self-formatational resources far more life affirming than did blues subjectivity (submission only to what is socially below bourgeois subjectivity: crime, sex, noise, violence, and ecstasy) and Booker T. Washington’s program of accommodation to second-class citizenship (which at least was a form of participation-in-exclusion). The problem with Du Bois’s insistence on double-consciousness

was that it erected and materialized categories where they were not wanted. Du Bois had made a fundamental mistake in naming his psychic apparatus *double-consciousness*, for what Du Bois described by that phrase is Lacan's process of self-identity: "To achieve self-identity, the subject must identify himself with the imaginary other, he must alienate himself—put his identity outside himself, so to speak, into the image of his double" (Žižek 104). In contrast, Emerson saw the subject as "from the start free of the temptation to see the connection between self and other . . . as a mutually implicating puzzle or detective story . . . for him, illuminated moments of power or self-reliance authenticate us, even in our aloneness, with a clarity that shines through our meeting with others" (Mikics 3). Though Hughes does not explicitly mention Du Bois in his sonnet, and though Hughes does not challenge double-consciousness, he provides a scheme that allows us to identify his rejection of Du Bois and thereby allow us to recover Hughes's description of the evolution of black subjectivity. (And by overlaying this reading of "Ph.D." with readings of Hughes's other two sonnets, we can recover a more detailed delineation of the new form of black subjectivity.)

Hughes presents double-consciousness as an absence—a missing part of his childhood self: "He never was a silly little boy." (line 1). Hughes's formula registers Du Bois's double-consciousness as the subjective experience of shame under the gaze of the white Other; because the little boy was ashamed of his racial (bodily) difference, he defended himself against his shame by internalizing the "decent order" (punishment) of the school, thereby deforming his character and predisposing him to serious pursuits. Through these defensive mechanisms (repression and reaction formation), he created a rigidly disciplined world over which he exercised control—he was a successful neurotic. His bodily shame later motivates him to propound a social theory based on a projection of his distorted view of reality, and it is this distorted view of life—the PhD's books, sums, and maps, that Hughes attacks. Again, the sonnet both compresses and exaggerates certain aspects of Hughes's subtext. Hughes does not elaborate much after providing a picture of the PhD's limitations; accordingly, *The Spoon River Anthology*, with its failed townspeople revealing their regrets from the grave, casts the shadow of its influence over Hughes's poem. By presenting this portrait of the PhD/Du Bois, Hughes suggests that the alternative course would have been the refusal of shame (and its resultant double-consciousness) and the embrace of Emersonian individualism in the form of "a dream of individual power set against . . . conformity . . . [a dream of] vitalism, which emphasizes the development of an instinctive or spontaneous moral life rather than one imposed from without" (Mikics 1–2).

Having identified the sonnet "Ph.D." as a satirical treatment of Du Bois,

it is evident that Hughes's enterprise is what I have framed above as the familiar process of self-fashioning that Stephen Greenblatt has described: "Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile. This threatening Other . . . must be discovered or invented in order to be attacked and destroyed" (quoted in Dyche 6). Hughes's disparaging treatment of Du Bois's bourgeois subjectivity is a counterdiscourse in which Hughes advocates the validity of raw, unmediated experience over and above the *textual* approach to reality that Hughes extends to Du Bois: "paper maps that showed the land and water / were held up as the real wide world to you" (lines 7–8). The sonnet form that Hughes has chosen to frame his analysis of Du Bois's "small range" (line 14) is itself a text that provides only a small range; the question arises as to whether the sonnet's presentation is in itself yet another aspect of the ironic treatment that Hughes accords Du Bois in the process of Hughes's romantic self-fashioning at the expense of Du Bois's mode of operating situationally within language. In other words, are the sonnet's textual diminutiveness and formal uniformity to be read as an analogue to Du Bois's allegedly stunted scope?

Hughes opened the door for ambiguity by using romantic materials when constructing his own subject position. He chose not only to work within the form of the English sonnet but also to echo (in the twelfth and thirteenth lines) Shelley's "The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves" (lines 1–2); Hughes wrote, "Life rolls in waves he cannot understand, / And all the human world is vast and strange." Hughes has linked his poem to Shelley's first-hand description of a visit to Mont Blanc; thus, Hughes's speaker formulates his subjectivity out of Shelley's text, while disparaging Du Bois for a similar dependence on texts. Thus, where Hughes might have been expected to situate his speaker within modernist or social realist subjectivity, he has instead resorted to the resources of nineteenth-century British romanticism when critiquing Du Bois.

Hughes's sonnet operates by means of subterfuge. He appears to address himself to the problem of empirical knowledge in the modern era, as though he wishes to show that the type of agency represented by the PhD is the wrong method of self-construction. He has, however, shifted his critique from dissatisfaction with the discourse of scholarly inquiry to his dislike of a particular type of character (the archetypal pedant), and of even a particular person (Du Bois). In doing so he has set up the hierarchical discourse of romantic subjectivity over and against the discourse of Du Bois's sociology, but he has not allowed sociology to emerge into the discourse of the poem. Consciously or not, he endorses popular culture's stereotypical depiction of intellectuals as unimpressive figures. Hughes wins this sham contest by reducing his argument to an *ad hominem* attack. Hughes ridicules the

PhD's way of being-in-the-world because, as Hughes's speaker depicts him, the scholar attempts to deal with the world through repression, reducing experience to inadequate maps. The title of the poem, "Ph.D.," is an abbreviation of *doctor of philosophy*; by abbreviating the name of the degree, Hughes removes *doctor* and *philosophy* from the poem, figuratively reducing the scholar's capacity for transcendence. Hughes leads us to assume that the speaker's character is expansive, realistic, and playful, while the PhD is contractive, axiomatic, and serious.

Alfred Adler defines a character trait as "the appearance of some specific mode of expression on the part of an individual who is attempting to adjust himself to the world in which he lives. Character is a social concept. We can speak of a character trait only when we consider the relationship of an individual to his environment. . . . It is the behavior pattern according to which his striving for significance is elaborated in the terms of his social feeling" (133). In his section of *Understanding Human Nature* on "Pedants and Men of Principle," Adler's description of the pedant matches the character of Hughes's PhD. Adler grounds the motivation for the pedant's character in feelings of insecurity, commenting that "these overconscientious individuals are moved by an unchecked vanity and a boundless desire to rule" (210). Thus, even though Hughes acknowledges the "terrors of the dark" in "Pennsylvania Station," he does not admit the scholar's need for psychological protection through the construction of a defensive type of character. It is striking to recognize that "Ph.D." blames the PhD's character on himself, as though his character resulted from his own decisions rather than as unconscious responses to his social and cultural surroundings: the prosecutorial speaker is quick to inform us that "he never was a silly little boy," as though that was his choice. What is missing from the enunciation, though covertly present in the enounced subtext, is Hughes's treatment of Du Bois as a race man. Du Bois gained his prominence by analyzing race, and this prominence elicits from the sonnet's speaker an Oedipal response: the demotion of the *father* (W. E. B. Du Bois) by the *son* (Hughes) is a "necessary" component of individuation. Hughes's ability to negotiate his own racial crisis was, by Hughes's admission, largely due to Du Bois's literary and personal example. However, once Hughes reached the point in his career where he became a rival, it was necessary that he strike a blow against his predecessor in the process of eventually surpassing him, which he was ultimately able to do, eventually becoming a figure of greater fame. This pattern is visible in Owen Dodson's "Negro History" sonnet sequence that I have discussed in the first chapter. In "Past and Future" and "Post Emancipation," Dodson criticizes the black leaders who have preceded his own self-in-process. In "Harlem" Dodson singles out Langston Hughes for a demotion similar to that which

Hughes applied to Du Bois. Barely discernible in the background of Dodson's less sublimated sequence are his role models, the shadowy "force-men³¹ of the next centuries" (*Decline* vol. 1 37) that rule the imagination from the past.

As Hughes develops the theme of self-construction across his three-sonnet sequence, he makes individuation a matter of size: the PhD's discourse is obviated because it is "abbreviated," not because it is ideologically unjustifiable. Both "Pennsylvania Station" and "Search" are treatments of the outside reality as internalized infinities, and as such they dismiss the manifold difficulties of modern disorder, complexity, and conflict. Hughes uses the finite/infinite dyad to portray the quest for modern subjectivity, through the finite/infinite dyad, and as Hughes depicts this process, the plunge into limitlessness is not dangerous. However, Hughes does not plunge into the modern sublime so much as retreat into various habits of mind in which the romantic masquerades as the modern. Thus, in Hughes's incomplete grasp of this trope, transcendence is not real.

Hughes's strategy of avoidance is a common response to the demands of modernity. László Moholy-Nagy, the pioneering modernist theorist and suprematist-constructivist photographer, invented modernist positionality by experimenting with point of view—"bird's eye views, worm's eye views, extreme close-ups, asymmetrical compositions, clipped heads and torsos, emphasized shadows" (Makovsky 146). Yet his daughter, Hattula, was distressed that she could not locate her own bourgeois subjectivity within her father's photographs and films of their family. It was not her father's style to establish a panoramic setting for filmed action: Hattula Moholy-Nagy states, "Oh, if only he had shifted the camera . . . and let us see the rest of the room . . . the artwork and furniture in our London living room" (Makovsky 146). By comparison with Hughes's treatment of setting, this example shows us the degree to which Hughes's approach is comfortably and familiarly contextualized according to premodern conventions for narrative and perspective.

Hughes's speaker defines his own subjectivity negatively through the abjection of the scholar rather than leaping beyond the scholar's bourgeois subjectivity: Hughes shows us the furniture. In the folk blues, the speaker conventionally assumes the abject subject position and speaks of his difficult life. Were the PhD allowed to speak for himself, presumably, what Adler calls his "unchecked vanity" (210) would block any such perception of his inadequacies. Hughes satirizes those inadequacies, as though the smallness of the PhD's interiority is sufficient to condemn him. The disguised substitution of the dyad of transcendent idealism/scientific materialism for the dyad of bourgeois/proletarian occurs because the speaker refuses to make it clear that he has situated his discourse in proletarian revolutionary terms so that

he can denigrate the PhD's bourgeois subjectivity. We are shown the PhD from the point of view of a narrator who seems to speak from above, when in truth it speaks from below—in the manner of the proletarian sublime—which is an instance of what Bataille calls *subordination*, submission only to what is below (Hollier 136–37). Of course, Hughes's poetic output in the 1930s was not limited to the three sonnets that he wrote, and in fact during that period not only was he prolific but also he wrote for three widely different audiences—the political left, the black underclass, and a segment of the middle class. (Hughes's middle-class readership encountered his poems in African American periodicals.)

THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS

One of the most explored locations for identity formation in the African American sonnet pantext of the thirties was the intersection of mediational subject positions and the expectations of others. This category may in part account for the tendency toward the creation of a collective identity, and thus it represents the area in which individual, social and cultural efforts of African Americans were being expended in opposition to the Jim Crow culture that so methodically oppressed them through governance, social discrimination, media propaganda, and terrorism. Few possibilities existed for the creation and dissemination of effective role models, so there are few poems in that category. While there were a number of poems that describe bourgeois subjects who struggle to discover themselves, these concerns were perhaps too rarified and abstract for the times: the imposition of leftist anti-individualism throughout the creative writing of the thirties and the general deemphasis of individualism in the culture of the Depression contributed to the tendency for poets to write in advocacy of the expectations of others. Marcus Christian's sonnet "McDonogh Day in New Orleans" was printed in *Opportunity* in June of 1934 and reprinted in the *New York Herald Tribune* on Sunday, June 17, 1934.

MCDONOGH DAY IN NEW ORLEANS

The cotton blouse you wear, your mother said,
 After a day of toil, "I guess I'll buy it";
 For ribbons on your head and blouse she paid
 Two-bits a yard—as if you would deny it!
 And nights, after a day of kitchen toil,
 She stitched your re-made skirt of serge—once blue—

Weary of eye, beneath a lamp of oil:
 McDonogh would be proud of her and you.

Next, came white “creepers” and white stockings, too—
 They almost asked her blood when they were sold;
 Like some dark princess, to the school go you,
 With blue larkspur and yellow marigold;
 But few would know—or even guess this fact:
 How dear comes beauty when a skin is black.

John McDonogh owned enslaved Africans and had educated a handful of his slaves, granted them manumission, and helped them establish a model community at McDonoghville. His intent was to prepare them for a new life in Liberia. In 1842, eighty of his former slaves left New Orleans for Liberia in a ship provided by the American Colonization Society. Upon his death in 1850, McDonogh left half his estate to New Orleans and half to Baltimore for the education of poor children in those cities, no matter their ethnicity. For many years, students from the public school system of New Orleans would gather in Lafayette Park each May to pay homage to John McDonogh. The event was called McDonogh Day. In these segregated ceremonies, white students would be the first to lay their flowers at the McDonogh statue, the first to sing songs, and the first to receive the keys of the city from the mayor. Black students waited in the hot sun while the white students performed their ceremonies. Black students could only begin after the white students had finished (McDonogh Neighborhood Snapshot).

Christian’s moving and perceptive sonnet, reprinted and then anthologized many times, succeeds because of its meticulous blend of the intimate and the distinguished: the sympathetic speaker addresses the schoolgirl from a godlike vantage point and yet is concerned with accounting for every component that contributes to her makeshift appearance. The speaker is that Other who has the highest of expectations, perhaps the superego, and the reader is privy to the pleasure that this remote being feels as it catalogs the fulfillment of those lofty expectations. The speaker’s measured tone, however, belies the social horror of the occasion and installs in the sonnet an extreme tension between the text’s surface (with its fleeting indulgences in balladic lilt, romantic imagery, and restrained lyricism) and the drive of the poet to register a firm though reticent protest. Because Christian is so effective in bringing the reader close to the schoolgirl, the reader enters unaware into his conspiracy. Christian exposes the ritualistic humiliation of the black schoolchildren, yet he keeps secret from them the reality of their position.

One of the most innovative aspects of this sonnet is that the speaker

addresses the schoolgirl without irony on behalf of John McDonogh—“McDonogh would be proud of her and you” (line 8). This device brings the speaker ambiguously close to McDonogh himself so that McDonogh becomes the indirect speaker, the superego, and the uncontradicted benefactor of the schoolchildren who celebrate him sincerely, though they are forced by their social circumstance to do so in a markedly unfair manner. The poet’s refusal to deal with this situation by employing irony places the efforts of the mother and the daughter within a framework of ethical individualism (self-acceptance, self-esteem, a sense of personal identity, and self-actualization) that elevates them above their barbaric surroundings. Ultimately, Christian’s sonnet addresses the theme of shame: racial shame was a fundamental component of black life under the Jim Crow system. In the face of the shame-generating experience of McDonogh Day and through the narrator’s attentive and appreciative recounting of the mother’s preparations for her daughter, the reader is privy to the daughter’s experience of the event. Her unambiguous assumption of personal beauty thus reinforces her self-worth, belonging, and personal identity.

Finally, we see that a second innovation results from the sonnet’s refusal of irony: the sonnet is an antiblazon—a variation on the blazon, which is a type of love poem that praises a woman or a man item by item. Often the blazon partitions the body into metaphors. Gayle Whittier states that “the *blason* . . . removes the woman from the human realm, which is, after all, the Platonic lover’s aim” (33). In the most famous antiblazon, Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130,” the speaker seems to forego conventions for a more realistic depiction of the “dark lady.” Jeremy Braddock states that “the dark lady sonnets are often considered—as a whole, and particularly in certain poems, such as ‘Sonnet 130’—to be working against the blazon tradition inherited from the Italian Renaissance poets. Demonstrating the failure of figurative language to account for an adequate experience of the described subject, anti-blazon poems are seen to refuse or frustrate the metonymic mode of praise, as employed by Petrarch. Yet as in the blazon tradition, the dark lady sonnets repeatedly anatomize their subject” (1257–58). Christian’s antiblazon has reflexively reworked Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 130” just as the mother in Christian’s poem has reworked “the re-made skirt of serge—once blue” (line 6). In “McDonogh Day in New Orleans,” the love-object is a schoolgirl, so the speaker’s gaze does not directly glimpse her body and instead describes her clothes. The clothes that substitute for the parts of the body are not described metaphorically (“cheeks like roses,” “lips like rubies”) but in terms of the labor that was required to produce each item of clothing. Since the traditional blazon originated in the (white) patriarchal sexual discourse as a device of control that dismembers the woman’s body and divests it of its

autonomy (Vickers, quoted in Baker “Uncanny” 4), it is clear that Christian’s sonnet privileges the abjected binaries of the patriarchal discourse); thus, the mother represents action, culture, and reason. Overcoming the negative factors of poverty, exhaustion, and hedonism, the toiling mother finds a way to dress her daughter adequately for McDonogh Day. In re-dressing the daughter through selfless “toil” (lines 2, 5), the mother *labors* to bring into being her daughter’s subjectivity. *Labor* is socially and psychologically transformative. By the end of the catalog, instead of having a portrait of the traditionally idealized and dehumanized woman who is loved from afar, Christian’s sonnet presents an intimate portrait of an ordinary African American schoolgirl, a person who usually would be accorded little social worth but is here treated reverentially as an embodiment of grace and esteem. Christian’s sonnet troubles many waters, for it disorders the motifs of white child/black child, boy/girl, and princess/pickaninny. And as I have shown, Christian deliberately engages these themes through the sonnet tradition and under black and white patriarchal gazes.

The conjunction of abject subject positions and the expectation of others was a highly active category in American culture during the thirties. In keeping with the negative character of what was being directed at black people at this time by texts in this category, black poets published relatively few sonnets in the mode that describes abject subject positions and the expectations of others. At the same time, it is useful to see that black poets found restorative approaches to negative self-fashioning in their works. This formation represents the efforts of the discourse network of the thirties to construct and maintain a culture of American apartheid, which African Americans struggled to eradicate. Thus, the category itself is highly unstable; this instability generated voluntary and involuntary subject positions of the abject type. It is possible to assemble a long list of abject subject positions that were enthusiastically created, embraced, and transmitted through the national discourse network—a panoply of mammies, black fools, coons, jezebels, layabouts, thieves, rapists, and jigaboos that constituted the only visible African Americans in films, on radio broadcasts, and in newspapers and magazines. The instability of these subject positions was a prominent factor, as the example of Louis Armstrong demonstrates:

Armstrong’s film career began in the 30s, made possible by his well-known music of the last decade . . . but the roles he played were stereotyped, demeaning, and unimaginable to modern audiences. . . . On one side, he is the tuxedo-clad virtuoso, on the other a gruesome parody of blackness. . . . Sometimes he appears as a savage, others as a servile “Uncle Tom” type, but what is most disturbing is that every time he is clearly

Louis Armstrong. One of the most respected jazz musicians in history is transformed into a clown in these films, and one of the great puzzles of his life is how he could appear in such obviously degrading, even racist pictures. (Graham)

In her chapter on black modernist film criticism from 1930 to 1940, Anna Everett discusses how upwardly mobile African American responded to these images. According to Everett, Mrs. Carrie Pembroke—a college teacher “familiar with the viewing habits and preferences of black youth” (Everett 211)—wrote a letter in 1937 to respond to a “changing the movies” campaign:

I believe that I speak for the race when I say that we feel personally affronted every time we see the coon hunting, dice-throwing scenes. We feel ashamed and disgusted when we see any stalwart man playing a frightened, cringing role. It is insulting to the race to show only the mammy type of woman. This type of woman is rarely given anything to do except hang clothes on a line in some rich lady’s back yard, or chase small boys away from a dice game. . . . Will the general public ever get an idea of the “Souls of Black Folk” by the roles Negroes play in the movies? . . . We believe the present interpretation is faulty. (Everett 212)

And while it was not possible for African Americans to insert what Pembroke calls the “higher aspirations or sensibilities of the race” (Everett 212) into the mainstream Hollywood films of the era, it was possible to express them in formal poetry of a high caliber.

In general terms it is only possible for people living in modern societies to maintain the integrity of their identities at a minimal level. One of the salient supports for these fragile identities is race; thus, in the case of Louis Armstrong, whatever else he may indicate through his performances, blackness was his primary sign, and as such he marks the limits of whiteness. In the case of the construction of black identities, the starting place is with the rejected subject positions of the abject level—the slave and the coon. There is also a component of black identity that is a reaction to the positive processes, where (through the formulation of negative identity) individuals choose to rebelliously reject preferred or acceptable roles in favor of sociopathological roles, such as bohemians, gangsters, zoot-suiters, hipsters, criminals, and flagrant homosexuals. Abject subject positions serve the processes of identity formation in complex ways. It is not enough to simply reject abject subject positions, and in the case of the slave subject position it was neither desirable nor possible to dispense with that historical component of black reality. In the thirties many sonnets were written about the slaves, and the direct

descendant of the slaves, the figure known as “the man farthest down,”³² received attention as well.

My discussion of Henry Alexander Hunt shows that one of the most dynamic interventions in African American culture in the thirties was the attempt to uplift African American farmers in the South. Thus, under the tutelage of various intervening organizations such as the Share Croppers Union and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the oppressed black farmers of the South overcame some of the limitations of their former roles, claimed agency for themselves, and ultimately were empowered in new ways. For example, Hunt’s efforts had measurable effects: “The agricultural instruction and demonstrations at the school and community outreach programs, in general, were deeply constructive forces. One white observer of Hunt’s work noted that the ‘work is being felt back on the plantations in a way that gives results that can be measured in cold dollars and cents as well as in good citizenship’”(Bellamy 472).

Indeed, the notion of progressive levels of black agency on the part of “the man farthest down” cannot be exaggerated. Something close to a war had broken out across the South as the Communist Party attempted to unionize sharecroppers, both black and white, and these efforts were met with violent resistance.³³ One of Marcus Christian’s most poignant sonnets, “Southern Share-Cropper” (*Opportunity*, July 1937: 217), took up the subject of sharecropping, an economic practice that was rife with social and political implications at the time:

A practice that emerged following the emancipation of African American slaves, sharecropping came to define the method of land lease that would eventually become a new form of slavery. Without land of their own, many blacks were drawn into schemes where they worked a portion of the land owned by whites for a share of the profit from the crops. They would get all the seeds, food, and equipment they needed from the company store, which allowed them to run a tab throughout the year and to settle up once the crops, usually cotton, were gathered. When accounting time came, the black farmer was always a few dollars short of what he owed the landowner, so he invariably began the new year with a deficit. As that deficit grew, he found it impossible to escape from his situation by legal means. The hard, backbreaking work led to stooped, physically destroyed, and mentally blighted black people who could seldom envision escape for themselves or their children; their lives were an endless round of poor diet, fickle weather, and the unbeatable figures at the company store. Those with courage to match their imaginations escaped under cover of darkness to the North, that fabled land of opportunity. (Harris “Sharecropping”)

Marcus B. Christian's English sonnet, "Southern Share-Cropper" (1937), confronts this institution directly and contrives a deft balance of magisterial tone, objective observation, and outraged social protest:

SOUTHERN SHARE-CROPPER

He turns and tosses on his bed of moss;
 The moon wheels high into the Southern sky;
 He cannot sleep—production, gain, and loss
 Harass him, while a question and a cry
 Stir through the dim recesses of his soul
 This slave to one-fourth, one-third, and one-half;
 His sow will litter soon; his mare will foal;
 His woman is with child; his cow, with calf.
 Earth screams at him—beats clenched, insistent hands
 Upon his brains—his labor and his health
 He gives unceasingly to her demands;
 She yields to him, but others grow in wealth
 What nailed his soul upon the wrack of things—
 That he must slave, while idlers live like kings?

Whatever there may have been of Christian's leftist politics has been filtered through a naturalist discourse so that the presentation is reminiscent of Communist short story writer Richard Wright's collection, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1936). (Christian's writings often show the influence of Oswald Spengler, a thinker whose ideas did not coincide with Marxism, though it is possible that Christian had some Marxist leanings.) Like many of Wright's characters, the sharecropper has been reduced to the status of an animal: he has lost the habits of a human being. In the poem, the sharecropper is lying sleeplessly outdoors on the ground. He is subject to natural forces, including the pull of the moon's gravity: "He turns and tosses on his bed of moss; / The moon wheels high into the Southern sky" (lines 1–2). Not only is he exposed to the natural world but also he suffers even more in the interplay of economic forces: "He cannot sleep—production, gain, and loss / Harass him, while a question and a cry / Stir through the dim recesses of his soul / This slave to one-fourth, one-third, and one-half" (lines 3–6). The figure's dehumanization is further emphasized by the comparison of his pregnant wife to farm animals—a pig, a horse, and a cow (lines 7–8). Christian again invokes nature's antagonistic forces: "Earth screams at him—beats clenched, insistent hands / Upon his brains—his labor and his health" (lines 8–10).

The verb *clenched* betrays the subtext of the poem, for *clenched* is a near

rhyme with *lynched*: the narrator invokes the lynching theme as though saying it through gritted teeth. The lynching theme is a structured absence that is barely allowed to come to conscious utterance. The poem is reminiscent of McKay's "Harlem Dancer" in the way in which the remote/intimate subject position of McKay's narrator is infused with double-speaking. We can apply Beth Palatnik's gloss of McKay's poem to Christian's poem: Palatnik observes that "though the speaker wants to distance himself from the rest of the audience, he ends up identifying with them in that respect, both holding back from the objectification of the dancer and participating in it" ("Consumption"). To the extent that the narrator's lyric identity allows the dancer to reflect back to him his participatory identity as they are joined under the white gaze, he must take in the concrete form of his objectification of the black other—that in her embodiment as the black other, she is *always already lynched*. Thus, seeing and being seen have collided with "the chronic shame of being an African American in white America" (Bouson 208), and this collision has produced "the wish to 'disappear as the person' one has shown oneself to be, or 'to be seen as different' than one is" (Wurmser quoted in Bouson 208). Lacking the positive qualities of McKay's dancer, Christian's sharecropper brings little more into view than his shame.

It seems that in "Southern Share-Cropper" Christian resolves his sonnet's argument in the concluding couplet using the ironic resolution of a rhetorical question: "What nailed his soul upon the wrack of things— / That he must slave, while idlers live like kings?" (lines 13–14). On the surface, Christian seems to employ the sonnet form to carry one of the most highly regarded textual formations of the dominant culture into the depiction of the ordinarily invisible black peasant; in a sense, the peasant is framed within the most refined resources of bourgeois subjectivity. As if to emphasize this reading, Christian has resorted to what Sterner calls "sonnet diction" (xix). The thesis of the poem, at least as it is implied by the question asked in the couplet, is that economic injustice will bring about class war.

The word *slave* appears twice in the poem. The interests of the peasant, though, are opposed to those of the "idlers [who] live like kings"—an arrangement that bespeaks a medieval society, not the modern, agrarian South of the 1930s. This provisional reading of the sonnet is undercut by the inescapable sense of what the line does not say, since the peasant is not nailed to a *rack* (a framelike instrument of torture) but to a *wrack* (a wreckage, especially of a ship cast ashore). The unspoken torture of the rack, though, is shown by the torments that the peasant suffers. We do not see his torturers, for they are unrecognizable as the "idlers" that the poem blames for his condition. Wrack/rack, of course, refers to lynching, which was all too common in the black peasant's world. Christian's sharecropper has no agency: the southern

peasant is depicted as a man/animal, powerless to alter his circumstances. The narrator seems content to observe with a remote, objective gaze the destruction of the man farthest down. Apparently, the speaker's distance is justified, since the peasant's condition is presented as a naturally occurring inevitability. In the concluding line of the poem, his oppressors are uncharacteristically identified as "idlers"—a group that is equally lacking in agency—and as such, Christian's handling of class is altogether a departure from leftist discourses of class. As Christian has it, *things* are in control of master and slave, and the narrator can do no more than pose questions that have no answers: any answers must come from beyond the limits of human knowledge.

There is, though, a definitive intertext supplied by the final line. The phrase "idlers live like kings" plays on the title of Alfred Tennyson's once canonical long poem, *Idylls of the King*. The epic intertext offers a number of possible readings for the poem. Christian brings under consideration Tennyson and the bourgeoisie. Tennyson was a prominent British romantic poet who used legendary narratives for his poems. He also condemned social injustice and attacked the moral degradation that he saw in Victorian society. The educated class of the South often used Tennyson's name to endorse the world of medieval chivalry. Thus, Tennyson's epic may be supposed to supply the answer to the "what?" posed by the narrator. Tennyson's Arthur is a virtuous ruler with a "selfless devotion to large social goals" (VS). Thus, Christian's sonnet uses Tennyson's Arthur to indict the owner class for its inability to live up to its own moral ideals. Through Christian's poem, the Southern landowners' hypocrisy becomes apparent. They condemn themselves with their own words.

In this way Christian's poem "Southern Share-Cropper" covertly indicts the owner class for creating a society that not only converts men into animals but also pretends to belong to the chivalric society that Tennyson's poems depict, despite Tennyson's advocacy of "the rights and moral worth of every individual" (VS). Christian's indirect treatment of Tennyson's poem is conceptually ironic: "Southern Share-Cropper" attacks the South's metadiscourse by stripping away its heroic illusions, all without naming the discourse that is under attack. The material that comes under direct treatment in the poem is the actual substance of the discourse under attack, but it is accessible only through the word play in the poem. However, Christian's sharecropper does come into sharp focus in relation to *The Negro a Beast* (1900), which played a key role in the discourse network of the period:

While public opinion and the personal attitudes of whites concerning the Negroes were being formed by politicians and newspapers, there appeared

in 1900 a book entitled *The Negro a Beast*, published by the American Book and Bible House. The publishers of this book stated in the preface that if this book were “considered in an intelligent and prayerful manner, that it will be to the minds of the American people like unto the voice of God from the clouds appealing to Paul on his way to Damascus.” In order that the American People might be convinced of the scientific nature of the “Biblical truths” presented in this book, the author included pictures of God and an idealized picture of a white man in order to prove that white people were made in the image of God, as stated in the Bible, and a caricature of the Negro showing that he could not have been made in the image of God. This book had a wide circulation, especially among the church-going whites, and helped to fix in their minds, as it was argued in the book, that the Negro was not the son of Ham or even the descendant of Adam and Eve, but “simply a beast without a soul.” (Frazier 122–23)

By associating the sharecropper with animals, the narrator has linked the sharecropper to the South’s racist/eugenicist/biblical discourse of *The Negro a Beast* but not *explicitly* to class war. At the same time, the sonnet has also revealed the mind and soul of the sharecropper—crucial elements that the racist discourse of *The Negro a Beast* denies in its insistence that the sharecropper is not a man but a soulless *thing*, as the penultimate line emphasizes: “What nailed his soul upon the wrack of *things*” (line 13; emphasis added), where the word *things* is a sign of the beast discourse.

Above all, we must account for the source of the narrational voice. As I have shown, the poem is a meticulously executed sonnet with a double subtext, through which the reader is confronted with the discourse of Southern chivalry and the practice of lynching. Christian’s narrator is situated within a mastery of the official culture, and from that site the poem offers a measured, assured critique. The narrator is also intimately acquainted with the sharecropper’s world, even to the point of entering the sharecropper’s tormented psyche to give an account of the effects that the sharecropper suffers in his life of endless misery. While McKay’s Harlem dancer is on display in a cabaret, we find Christian’s peasant isolated in the rural South at night. McKay’s speaker has a reason for his proximity to the dancer (for what the speaker does in consuming entertainment in a nightclub confers and confirms social status). Christian’s speaker has no social pretext for intruding on the sharecropper, and the reader experiences some of the shock provided by Whitman’s poetic access to private spaces in “The Sleepers”—“I stand in the dark with drooping eyes by the worst-suffering and most restless, / I pass my hands soothingly to and fro a few inches from them, / The restless sink in their beds, they fitfully sleep” (“The Sleepers” lines 23–25).

Christian's handling of the protest theme is rhetorically restrained throughout. He refuses to allow his sonnet to become a merely propagandistic exercise: the tension between the objectivity of the social realist gaze and the intimate and psychological details of the sharecropper's hard lot raises the poem to an effective emotional crescendo. The narrator refuses to descend into bathos or to offer the cliché of the pointed accusation. Posing a question at the conclusion is a device that allows a satisfactory reading of the sonnet, even when the reader has not registered the Tennysonian intertext. The subject position of Christian's narrator represents a complex, omniscient individuality, equally transcendent and immanent, who is able to penetrate time and space, but whose psychological insights allow the reader to arrive at the final revelation rather than contaminating the argument with reductive or didactic posturing. Christian's poem humanizes the peasant by supplying the genealogy of his socioeconomic predicament without sentimentalizing the depiction of his experiences. Christian has created a narrator who is complexly single-voiced.

Within the political theory of the Left, the role of the peasant was a matter of great importance, and beginning with Karl Marx, there had been a debate over the question of whether the peasant belonged within a revolutionary class or was, so to speak, outside of history. The debate surfaces in the discourses of the thirties in a number of places. The status of the black peasantry was also questioned in 1933 in Prinkipo, Turkey, during discussions between Trotsky and various members of the American Trotskyist movement (which, at the time of the first discussion, still regarded itself as the Communist League—an opposition group within the Communist Party) about its policy concerning the Negro question in America (Trotsky “On Black Nationalism”). B. A. Botkin referred to Constance Rourke's identification of the folk with the proletariat in a speech at the Second American Writers Conference in 1937 (“Regionalism and Culture” 141). Perhaps the most consequential discussion was the debate between W. E. B. Du Bois and the Communist Party following the publication of Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction* (1935). William Gorman describes the influence of Du Bois's study in this way:

The main theme of *Black Reconstruction*, published in 1935, is not that “the Negro is an average, an ordinary human being.” . . . In the chapter entitled “The General Strike,” Du Bois presents the Negroes' physical movement from the Underground Railroad to the mass enlistment in the Union Army, not as the flight of a broken people, but as a purposeful weakening and paralysis of Southern economy, as the necessary prelude to its fundamental reconstruction. This was part of a larger conception that the Negro in the South was not simply a long-suffering but essentially

a revolutionary laboring class which attempted “prematurely” to remake Southern society in its own image through land seizures and government based upon mass political participation. And if the prosperity of European imperialism was built on the massacre of the Paris Communards, America’s rise as a participant and leader in world plunder was built on the unbridled deceit and terror which broke Black Reconstruction in the South. . . . This bold, new conception startled the bourgeois historical writers, petty-bourgeois radicals and Negro intellectuals. . . . Their attack on *Black Reconstruction* in a more concealed fashion has continued up to this day. (84–85)

In light of this debate, Marcus Christian’s portrayal of the sharecropper seems to conform to the understanding of the black peasant as a weak element of society awaiting deliverance from the more organized component of the revolutionary class.

What Christian has presented through his sonnet “Southern Share-Cropper” is a version of the modern sublime, a metahistorical narrative from which seemingly unassailable and comprehensive assessments of individual and social performance can be delivered. Thus, the subject position of the narrator is defined by the suppression of any semblance of bourgeois subjectivity (possessive individualism, self-position, unity, self-control, and dominion over the future). The narrator is equally wary of the collective-revolutionary point of view that allows for the possibility of an revolution that intervenes in history. The poem avers that it was the bourgeoisie who effectively dehumanized the black peasant and profited from that process.

THE MODERNITY OF THE BLACK SONNET IN THE THIRTIES

H. A. Maxson has posited that Robert Frost’s thirty-seven sonnets are organically composed reinventions of the sonnet: “The uniqueness of each is one reason they fit most definitions of a modernist poem, despite their ‘sonnetness’” (5). There is little to be seen of formal experiment in the African American sonnet pantext of the 1930s, but the poems are no less modernist. Their modernism is situated in their embrace of radical individualism and the recontextualization of the individual within the fabric of a received social heritage, for “the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life” (Simmel). African American self-identity is exactly this self-same radical individualism, for it exists in the face of

the institutional denial of individualism: “American collective identity is not only inclusionary but for a long time in its history was blatantly exclusionary toward certain groups. The case of African Americans is undoubtedly a prime example of the discriminatory and nonegalitarian aspect of American democracy and American collective identity” (Kook 158). The crucial contribution of African American poetry toward the sustenance of life under these hard conditions is difficult to frame, because in general terms there is little grasp of the psychological nature of human life in the materialist, consumerist, bottom-line, any-means-to-an-end, result-oriented, extroverted, competitive, and territorial American culture. Jay Parini addresses these factors directly when he states that “the world of the poet is largely an interior world of the intellect and the emotions—where we mostly live, in fact. And poetry bolsters that interior realm” (xiv).

The convention of the sonnet-as-body—the blazon that praises the various parts of the female anatomy—is by now quite familiar. However, except in the case of Shakespeare’s disturbing antiblazon, there has been no canonical treatment of the black body in the sonnet tradition. Further, the disruptive presence of a black body in the Shakespeare sonnet is the very element that marks the poem as an antiblazon. During the thirties, poets composed an entire body of sonnets that present the African American individual in a kaleidoscope of fragmented attributes—attributes that I have categorized in connection with a theory of individuality, of self-in-process (eudaemonism, role models, and the expectations of others). It is not easy to recognize the modernist and subversive nature of the sonnets that seek to invent new subject positions for African Americans. For African Americans in the thirties, the sonnet pantext constructed a self-fashioning discourse in opposition to the many shame-inducing discourses that the American racist culture directed toward African Americans: eugenics, Jim Crow, the extraction of labor, biblical misreading, and so on. The sonnets oppose these activities with a counterdiscourse in which African Americans are newly endowed with many of the positive qualities that have been denied to them by the fundamentally racist construction of American society. By virtue of this literary discourse, the African American becomes refined, sensitive, reflective, quiet, elegant—in a word, lovable.

One of the most powerful subject positions adopted by the African American writers of sonnets in the thirties was that of the romantic lover. Though well within the framework of psychological normalcy and bourgeois subjectivity, the lover is often powerfully steadfast when others oppose the lover’s choices (Waterman 29). Having succumbed to a dynamic form of agency, the lover is not necessarily aligned with conventional role models but instead uses romantic love to find the true self. While romantic love may gen-

erate knightly and courtly behavior, it may also lead to “misbehaviors” such as elopement, adultery, and miscegenation. The romantic lover’s extreme impulses are aligned with the telic value of eudaemonism; such impulses bolster the ability to sustain directed action despite the obstacles and setbacks inevitably encountered in the pursuit of self-expression (Waterman 16). The crucial nature of the bourgeois erotic formation is evident when it is contrasted to the blues formation of romance, the latter of which may be designated “love from below” or “subordinate romance.” Blues love combines the abject subject position with the expectations of others; thus, a typical lover who is portrayed in a blues song destructively and helplessly says, “I’m got a mind to ramble, a mind fo’ to leave this town, / Got a mind my baby is goin’ to turn me down” (Sterling Brown, “The Blues as Folk Poetry” 330) The love sonnet, as in the example below, combines the mediational subject position with the identity materials of self-discovery. It is the product of a more stable world.

In November of 1937, Mary T. Rauth published “Sonnet” in *The Crisis*:

SONNET

I love you, dear; so well, that should you leave
 Your earthly garment, like a crumpled dress
 Left fallen wearily; though I caress
 Your lips forlornly, praying for reprieve,
 Not yet aware, not ready to believe
 That you were gone; though crowding years should press
 Rudely against me—jostling years, whose stress
 You kept at bay: I could not wholly grieve.
 Death is a thief who steals my gleaming gold,
 My jewels flashing in the firelight’s play,
 Silver and silks and furs, yet on his load
 Heaps not my roses in their vase of gray.
 My crimson roses! Death takes not away
 Our love, whatever else his hands may hold.

Rauth’s Millayan, neo-Petrarchan sonnet presents a series of dyads—soul/body, life/death, crime/security, and private/public. Above all the poem is a celebration of romantic love as a defense of individuality and interiority against the assaults of collective, consensual reality (“crowding years, . . . jostling years” [lines 6, 7]). Because the body is deemed insufficient, unable to defend the personal self from the bruises of reality, it is quickly dispensed with as “a crumpled dress” (line 2). Nevertheless, the poem remains haunted

by the black female body through an antiblazon that simultaneously presents and absents the body through subtextual language play: *eye* (“I,” line 1), *ear* (“dear,” line 1; “earthly,” line 2; “years,” line 6), “lips” (line 4), “hand” (line 14), *arm* (“garment,” line 2), and *rump* (“crumpled,” line 2). So headlong is the progression of emotion and images that it is important to keep in mind that the speaker has not been abandoned by the lover to whom the poem is addressed. The crimes described—murder and theft—are fantasies, merely projected fears. The soul and the absent qualities of the lover are depicted as stolen wealth, while those qualities that could not be removed by death are “crimson roses”—thus, what remains is still subject to a “crime.” Love, the sublime wealth that the speaker embezzles from the predations of time and death, is a paradoxical countercrime that drives the desperate fears of the guilty speaker of the poem. In the final analysis, the sonnet describes the speaker’s struggle to preserve her true self: paradoxically, the speaker ultimately possesses herself by surrendering her lover.

Rauth’s hysterical, diluted, and imitative sonnet takes on a completely new expressive scope in light of the following statement: “In the very year in which the first World War started, an advertised authority on the Negro stated that ‘many animals below man manifest a far greater amount of real affection in their love-making than do negroes [*sic*]’ and that it is very rare that ‘we see two negroes kiss each other’” (Frazier 122–23). (Let us not suppose that by the thirties there had been a sufficient shift in race relations to cancel out the supposed veracity of this account.³⁴) For an African American to assume the subject position of this deathless lover was to assume a radical and modernist identity. Rauth’s speaker is derived from Edna St. Vincent Millay’s *Fatal Interview*,³⁵ for Millay was one of the most influential American poets of the twenties and thirties. Though Millay wrote in traditional forms, she adopted the roles of bohemian and political dissenter. Nina Miller observes that “Countee Cullen, favorite son of the Harlem Renaissance, wrote his undergraduate thesis on Millay and pursued his professional career along distinctly lyrical and traditional lines.” John Timberman Newcomb states that Millay demonstrates “the importance of alternative methods of constituting social identity through discourse, especially those which portray individuals as interdependent parts of an egalitarian collective rather than as masters of a hierarchical subject-object relationship” (“The Woman as Political Poet”). For African American poets and readers, association with a Millayan subject position was a foundational appropriation of autonomy, self-determination, and humanity.

In *Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page*, George Bornstein argues that

the literary text consists not only of words (its linguistic code) but also

of the semantic features of its material instantiations (its bibliographic code). Such bibliographic codes might include cover design, page layout, or spacing, among other factors. They might also include the other contents of the book or periodical in which the work appears, as well as prefaces, notes, or dedications that affect the reception and interpretation of the work. Such material features correspond to Walter Benjamin's concept of the "aura" in his celebrated essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." (6)

Bornstein demonstrates that Yeats's "When You Are Old" "loses its original, courtly, medieval aura but still takes from its material instantiation a context both of love and of Irish nationalism, both of which disappear from contemporary collected editions and from anthologies" (2). According to Bornstein, "the 'aura' locates the work of art in time and space (that is, in history) . . . [and] the 'bibliographic code' as an important constituent of meanings, particularly of historical or political ones" (2). Thus, poems published in African American journals are embedded in a racialized social context and thereby assume a racialized aura that intervenes in the reception of the poem. The race of poets published in *The Crisis* and *Opportunity* was rarely disclosed, and race was only mentioned when the poets were African American.³⁶ At times the contents of the poems revealed the race of the poets, as in the sonnet "To a Negro Friend," in which it is obvious that the poet is white. In the case of the obscure poet Mary T. Rauth, her race is unknown, and there are no racial signifiers in her poem. However, Rauth's "Sonnet" was published along with poems titled "The Color Game," "To the Man Farthest Down," and "To One Sorrowing." Page 348 of the November 1937 number of *The Crisis* also carries advertisements for Merl R. Eppse's *A Guide to the Study of the Negro in American History* and for subscriptions to *The Woman's National Magazine*. In other words, Rauth's poem became a black poem by assuming a black aura, and in addition, the specific bibliographic code of the page on which it appeared further embedded the poem in more specific political and social contexts. Rauth's "Sonnet" was embedded in the politics of literary race in such a way that the universal, lyrical subjectivity that she had constructed applied to a racial objectivity, which it thereupon subjectivized, providing for the African American group identity an emotional resource that had been previously disallowed.

CONCLUSION

My project has been to assemble an account of how poets brought together those qualities that would form a new type of African American individu-

ality, while keeping in mind the decentered nature of the selves that were being formulated. In fact, there is an inherent contradiction at the core of the African American sonnet pantext. On the one hand, the true self—the goal of self-fashioning—is singular, unitary, and not subject to change. On the other hand, the experiential processes of the self-in-process call into question the reality of a static self-identity. The new type of fully developed person never really emerges from the shifting colors, images, sounds, names, and shadows. But there are indications that may be taken as milestones along the route of self-in-process. In the thirties there were few role models available to African Americans. (Even now in the twenty-first century, African American role models are commonly drawn from athletes and vocalists; figures from the fields of law, politics, religion, television, and film have some application; while technology, medicine, science, and business do not really qualify as acceptable role models for the black masses.) In the thirties, the black discourse network was tenuous, the unfolding black culture was fragile, and there were few black figures that commanded all-embracing cultural power. Once Marian Anderson had sung on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, a few poems, including sonnets, were directed toward her³⁷—and here perhaps is the point at which powerful, positive role models came into play. In the thirties, poetry that addressed the self in relation to the requirements of others gained prominence, with many poetic calls for men and women to take on new responsibilities and new roles. Finally, the poets of the thirties were all too aware of the heritage of abjection; the black poetry of the thirties was pervasively haunted by slavery: the concluding couplet of Octave Lilly Jr.'s "Ex-slaves" mournfully observes that "for these old folks there is no freedom save / forgetfulness—fast in some welcome grave."

But the peasant was not so easily dismissed, and for many black poets in the thirties the black peasant was a site of great discursive interest. Owen Dodson's "Negro History" is informed by the positive pole of Spengler's thought. Dodson carries the peasant into the metropolis and bids him to align himself with the Caesarian strong men. By contrast, Marcus Christian's peasant is shown at the moment before he is relegated to the timeless village. Taking an even more objective view of society, Melvin B. Tolson intervened experimentally—hoping like Dr. Frankenstein to create a few superhuman individuals from the raw material of the masses of the black peasantry. These poets tended to reject the Marxist "transindividual conception of selfhood" (Foley) for the potentialities of the self-in-process. It is well known that even Richard Wright, who was accorded Communist Party celebrity because of his peasant origin, was finally unable to accept the erasure of his individuality at the hands of Third Period party discipline (Walker 70; Pells 232). If the ideas and methods of the black poets of the thirties now appear eccentric,

limited, or anachronistic, we should keep in mind that in the thirties many nineteenth-century ideas (including Marxism) were in wide circulation, and esotericism, for example, was adopted by many of the most progressive writers and artists of the period. It was rare that an authentic modernism that broke with the past was broadly or consistently disseminated. Emerson's romantic modernism, Gurdjieff's esotericism, and Spengler's philosophy of history became prolific and regenerative resources out of which the black poets of the thirties were able to resist the discourses that enforced their inferior position in society.