Depicting African ancestry with Western tropes in the Harlem Renaissance : revisionary rhetorical indirection in the poetry of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett and Countee Cullen

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Depicting African Ancestry with Western Tropes in the Harlem Renaissance:

Revisionary Rhetorical Indirection in the Poetry of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett and Countee Cullen

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

The interwar period, from approximately 1918 to the late 1930s, witnessed a key moment in African American history: the Harlem Renaissance. George Hutchinson posits that the main concern of those involved in this artistic and intellectual movement consisted in "[e]mbracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, [and seeking] to reconceptualize 'the Negro' apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced Black peoples' relationship to their heritage and to each other" (Hutchinson n. pag.). The term "Negro" was "the standard designation throughout the 17th to 19th centuries . . . until the middle years of the 20th cent[ury]" for "dark-skinned . . . peoples originally native to sub-Saharan Africa" and more broadly for people of sub-Saharan "origin or descent" (OED A.1.a).[1] The Harlem Renaissance was part of – or, as Gerald Early suggests, "a kind of peak moment" in – the larger "New Negro Movement" (Early 24). For the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Alain Locke, the "New Negro" is "characterized by self-respect and self-dependence" (Ahlin 150). The thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance invested in the creative arts (as well as the production of intellectual discourse) in order to concretize their desire for racial pride and self-determination.

The Harlem Renaissance is informed by an ambition to break away from the discursive hegemony of the mainstream, or, in Hutchinson's words, of "white stereotypes" about people of sub-Saharan African descent whom "white" culture racializes as "black." According to Whiteness Studies, which "probes the social construction of whiteness as an ideology" (Hart et al. n. pag.), the term "white" generally "refer[s] to light-skinned people of European-descent."[2] However, "whiteness" also "represents a position of power [conceptually

[1] In the 1960s, the Black Power movement "reclaimed [the designation 'black'] as an expression of racial pride." The appellation "black" thus replaced "Negro" as the standard designation, and the earlier term acquired an "offensive" connotation (OED A.1.a).

[2] It is important to note that people with light skin and of European descent do not comprise a monolithic group in regard to the social construction of race. For instance, one can distinguish white Anglo-Saxon Protestants

based on skin color] where the power holder defines social categories and reality – *the master narrator*" (emphasis added; pcc.edu). As an ideology grounded in "European imperialism and epistemologies," the discourse of "whiteness" has historically dominated the narrative which surrounds other-than-European peoples and cultures. The artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance were deeply concerned with extracting themselves, as people of sub-Saharan African descent, from the "white" hermeneutic framework which was predominant in North America, Europe and its colonized territories. As Locke puts it in his seminal essay "The New Negro" (1925), "[l]ittle true . . . or self-understanding" could ever come from the "situation" of being enslaved and of being confined within "the traditional positions from which [the case of African Americans] ha[d] been viewed" (Locke 22). Locke therefore encourages African Americans to explore their own history and to unearth silenced bits of their culture – such as "folk music" (Locke 22) – in order to define themselves independently of mainstream Western stereotypes. In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Langston Hughes expresses this cultural challenge through his own metaphor, as "[a] very high mountain for the would-be racial artist to climb in order to discover himself and his people" (Hughes 1926, 56).

The impulse for Harlem Renaissance thinkers to "discover . . . [their] people" resulted in an interest in their sub-Saharan as well as in their African American ancestral cultures, at both the academic and creative levels. A methodological shift in anthropological studies towards the end of the nineteenth century had already laid the ground for such exploration.[3]

(WASPs) among "white" people. Indeed, WASPs are "the upper class or elite group with [the most] economic and political advantages in American society" (pcc.edu).

[3] As Marion Berghahn explains in her monograph *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (1977), "[the] picture of [Africa as] a barbaric continent inhabited by spiritually, morally and intellectually backward and inferior peoples" was dominant until at least the 1880s (Berghahn 12). Two important changes in the anthropological study of African and African-descended cultures proved influential in the literary output of the Harlem Renaissance. Firstly, "field studies" began to be preferred to that which "most anthropologists of the nineteenth century" had been doing, which was "spen[d] their time at their desks speculating about non-European societies" (Berghahn 15). The second crucial change in anthropological methodology, upon which many Harlem Renaissance literary texts reflect, is the dismissal of "technological progress" as the only cultural parameter against which to "measur[e] the degree of sophistication of other societies" (Berghahn 16).

Some Harlem Renaissance figures, such as Zora Neale Hurston, were keen to use literature in order to communicate the realities uncovered in the process of anthropological research.

However, my mémoire focuses on the alternative ways in which other writers, like Hughes, Countee Cullen and Gwendolyn Bennett, used the abstract notion of African ancestry as a rhetorical tool to express their disdain for the hegemony of Western discourses and culture. For example, they despised the centrality of technology and capitalistic "progress" in the United States. The political Left contributed to this attitude: the Harlem Renaissance came into being in the wake of the Russian Revolution, which, in 1917, saw the replacement of imperial rule by a communist Bolshevik government. Locke acknowledges that African American intellectuals "shifted a little toward the left with the world-trend" (Locke 28). Hutchinson also insists that "left-wing radicalism was not a 'post-renaissance' phenomenon but a significant aspect of the movement" (Hutchinson 2007, 3).[4] The Harlem Renaissance thus challenged not only the racism of Western discourses, but also the capitalist system enabled by the subjugation of enslaved and colonized people.

As a consequence of these overlapping influences, Harlem Renaissance literature is often intersectional. The theory of intersectionality investigates "the differential but interlocking relation of gendered, racialized, sexualized and economic forms of domination" (Hart et al. n. pag.).[5] Aside from economic domination through capitalism, the movement also produced literary texts which explore the intersections between race and gender. Gender bias and misogyny were also prominent among the Harlem elite in the 1920s. Indeed, the Harlem Renaissance was largely led by men; Locke's seminal anthology *The New Negro. An*

[4] Hutchinson does not capitalize the term 'renaissance'; I have, in contrast, chosen to do so in order to emphasize the participation of the writers in question in a movement which has been historically categorized. However, it is noteworthy that the Harlem Renaissance was already referred to as a "renaissance" in its own time. According to Tony Martin, the tag "renaissance" was "borrowed . . . from . . . the literary editor [of Marcus Garvey, a highly influential political activist in the years leading up to the Harlem Renaissance], . . . who credited Garvey in 1922 with ushering in a 'Negro renaissance'" (Martin xv). Martin also traces "[t]he pervasive interest [of the Harlem Renaissance] in Africa" back to Garvey's "influence" (Martin xv).

[5] "Kimberly Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in the late 1980s," though the theory originates in the work of "Black and indigenous feminists and other feminists of color" starting in the 1970s (Hart et al. n. pag.).

Interpretation (1925) is "male-oriented" and, "[f]orty years before the focus on intersections of race and gender by black women . . . in second-wave feminism, black women poets [of the Harlem Renaissance] confronted the need to analyze the real differences as well as the real similarities between black women and white women" (Crawford 126). However, despite the efforts of female authors to participate in the racial self-definition for which Harlem Renaissance thinkers overall strove, many of their works where "overlooked" (Wheeler 744) in their own time. One of the goals of my mémoire is, by discussing the work of Gwendolyn Bennett, both to explore this contemporary tension and to address this historic oversight.

Central to the Harlem Renaissance was the idea that artistic expression was an effective means of asserting that African Africans not only had a culture, but also that they were intellectually equal to light-skinned European-descended United States citizens, and therefore belonged in equal measure to the national and cultural landscape of the U. S. The speaker of Cullen's widely read poem "Heritage" (1925) wonders: "What is Africa to me" (Cullen 1). One could interpret "Africa" as African ancestry, and "me" as an American citizen: in this reading, Cullen's line appears to articulate a key question of the Harlem Renaissance, which asks how African American culture can specifically contribute to American culture at large. In the preface to the second edition of his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1931 [1922]), James Weldon Johnson reflects on the progress achieved during the 1920s in terms of establishing the capacity for African Americans to be artists. "When this book was compiled, only ten years ago, the conception of the Negro as a creator of art was so new . . . that" Johnson thought it necessary to "[devote] forty-eight pages . . . to calling attention to the main contributions which the Negro had already made to [the] common [American] cultural store" (Johnson 3). By the beginning of the 1930s, Johnson remarks, "there has grown a general recognition that the Negro is a contributor to American life not only of material but of artistic, cultural, and spiritual values; that in the making and

shaping of American civilization he is an active force, a giver as well as a receiver, a creator as well as a creature" (Johnson 3). In other words, leaders of the Harlem Renaissance expected African American artists to "become[] . . . conscious contributor[s]" to American culture, and no longer "beneficiar[ies] and ward[s]" but active "collaborator[s] and participant[s] in American civilization" (Locke 31).

Despite the claims by Johnson and Locke about the counter-discursive ambitions of the Harlem Renaissance, a number of writers and critics – before, during, and in the following decades – suspected the writers popular at that time of being secretly obsessed with achieving a mainstream standard. Consequently, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests, the Harlem Renaissance was meant to "fail[] to find its voice" (Gates 224) as a politically and socially revisionary movement. George S. Schuyler, another writer of the Harlem Renaissance, was skeptical about the search for a specifically African American culture and claimed, in his essay "The Negro-Art Hokum" (1926), that the efforts of African American writers like Johnson, Locke and Hughes to apply "a slight dash of racialistic seasoning" to their work merely served "to satisfy the craving of an inferiority complex engendered by the colorphobia of the mob" (Schuyler 53). In the 1940s and 50s, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison accused Hurston, whose work was often concerned with depicting Southern African American cultures, of "[creating] 'black-minstrel' characters [in order] to humor a patronizing white audience" (Cobb-Moore 26). The Harlem Renaissance and the broader African American artistic and literary scene were not monolithic, and Hughes's confidence that "[i]f white people are pleased we [African American artists] are glad," and that "[i]f they are not, it doesn't matter," was not widely believed (Hughes 59).

The allegations, like that of Wright and Ellison, that some Harlem Renaissance artists were interested in pleasing a "white audience" were especially serious considering the context of increasing racial violence of the 1920s. There had been growing lynching culture in the

United States since the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation which freed all enslaved African Americans in 1863. Lynching refers to an "extralegal" or "illegal execution, usually of a person accused of a crime or some type of deviant behavior" (OED v. 1, Tolnay and Beck n. pag.). W. Jason Miller indicates that "[i]n 1919, eighty-three African Americans were reported to have been lynched" (Miller 5). The participation of African Americans in World War I did not earn them the gratitude of mainstream U. S. society, which made the need for racial self-determination and self-respect expressed by Harlem Renaissance writers even more pressing. David A. Davis tells of Wilbur Little, an African American soldier who had served in World War I and was lynched shortly after his return for "def[ying] [the] warning [of a group of white men] not to wear the [military] uniform in public" (Davis 477). Moreover, the African American "Great Migration," during which thousands of African Americans left the Southern U. S. to escape racism and poverty, ironically worsened racism in the North. Indeed, Hutchinson describes the 1920s as a period characterized by a "spread" of "[a]ntimiscegenation laws" as well as the "intensification of racism . . . because the migration [of African Americans northwards] had provoked white Northerners to institute or firm up policies of racial segregation" (Hutchinson 1995, 10). Since systemic racial injustice and violence endured beyond the 1930s, several critics concluded that the failure of the Harlem Renaissance to effect significant social change in the lives of African Americans (Hutchinson 1995, 22) was due to the concern of some artists with the standards of Western canonical literature.[6]

Indeed, the literary output of the Harlem Renaissance conveys a frequent use of Western discursive tropes, which made some critics instinctively question the effectiveness of a movement which sought discursive independence from whiteness. Gates deplores a "turn

[6] This being said, it seems fitting to join Hutchinson in wondering "how to respond to a critique for which the standard of success of an artistic movement is its effectiveness in ending centuries of oppression" (Hutchinson 1995, 23).

away from the vernacular African American tradition" (Hutchinson 1995, 23) in favor of traditional European literary forms. A key Western literary influence – central to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance – was the Romantic movement.[7] Indeed, the Romanticist principle which "[connects] art and truth" (Honey xxxviii) resonates with the discursive ambition of Harlem Renaissance leaders, and with the belief in the political function of art. In his essay "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), W. E. B. Du Bois posits that, as beauty and truth are ontologically intertwined, art which strives to create beauty should also be art which tells the truth, for example by exposing societal injustice – in other words, art should be political. Du Bois wonders,

> What has . . . Beauty to do with the world? What has Beauty to do with Truth and Goodness – with the facts of the world and the right actions of men? I am but an humble disciple of art and cannot presume to say. I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks *with* Beauty and *for* Beauty to set the world right (Du Bois 62).

To Du Bois, "Beauty" is both the means – the artistic form *with* which he works – and the end of his work, to denounce the racism of mainstream society and create discourse which counters it. In brief, while the leading voices of the Harlem Renaissance aimed to re-appropriate the discourse about African Americans, they also sometimes found Western literary forms pertinent to this endeavor. Some writers, like Cullen[8] and

[7] For example, John Keats "was Cullen's principal influence" (Early 118). Moreover, in her introduction to her poetry anthology, *Shadowed Dreams. Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006 [1989]), Maureen Honey claims that some concepts of Romanticism were highly relevant for African American writers at the time of the Harlem Renaissance. Indeed, she states that "[n]ineteenth-century Romantics were . . . compelling as models because they shared . . . [the] alienation from modern society" of this generation of African American writers (Honey xxxviii).

[8] In 1924, Cullen made the oft-quoted claim that "if [he was] going to be a poet at all, [he was] going to be POET and not NEGRO POET" (Cullen qtd. in Smethurst 112). Hughes interpreted this statement as Cullen's confession that he actually wants to be "white" (Hughes, "The Negro Artist" 55). Cullen reckoned that there was no use in defining a specifically African American poetics. On the contrary, such a project would result in racial essentialism: "the attempt to corral the outbursts of the ebony muse into some definite mold to which all poetry by Negroes will conform seems altogether futile" (Cullen qtd. in Smethurst 112). Instead, Cullen was interested in embracing "the heritage of the English language" (Cullen qtd. in Smethurst 112).

Schuyler,[9] even claimed the Western tradition as part of the automatic and rightful heritage of African Americans.

The broad charge of formal "assimilationism" directed against the artistic output of the Harlem Renaissance often specifically targeted the representation of African ancestry. Hutchinson summarizes this opinion as follows: "[i]f the renaissance failed . . ., it did so because white influence steered it in the direction of the '*primitive* and *exotic*'" (emphasis added; Hutchinson 1995, 16). As an artistic denotation, primitivism dates back to the nineteenth century; the "myth of the primitive" was important to the Romantics (Thomas n. pag.). Primitivism designates artistic forms which attempt to "imitat[e]" the art of "the 'primitives'," that is "most non-Western peoples . . . such as . . . African and Oceanic [tribes]" (Thomas n. pag.). In the 1920s, primitivism was a trend which rested on little more than "superficial visual influences"; more concerningly, the "imagery" borrowed from the cultures at hand were not referenced, and "much non-Western art" was considered "anonym[ous] and interchangeabl[e]" (Thomas n. pag.). Primitivist depictions of sub-Saharan Africa include, for instance, pre-urban or pre-industrial settings, pagan characters, and proximity to nature. Therefore, Harlem Renaissance literary writings which employ primitivist imagery in their depiction of sub-Saharan Africa might create the impression that their authors were unable to work independently of the Western perspective.

Admittedly, Anglo-American patrons were often involved, if not financially instrumental in artistic production during the Harlem Renaissance, which could, upon first consideration, raise the alarm that African American artists have adapted their work to the mindset of their benefactors. For example, Hughes, who recurrently uses primitivist imagery in his poetry of the 1920s, benefited from "full financial support" from his patron Charlotte

[9] More specifically, Schuyler does not consider "race" as a possible organizing principle for artistic specificity. He believes that the environment in which an artist operates, with all its economic, political and geographic particularities, informs the work which they produce – not skin color. By this logic, there would be no reason for African American artists to make less use of Western traditional forms than European-descended artists.

Mason between 1928 and 1930 (Kellner 177). Mason was a "vast[ly] wealth[y]" widow and, "[b]y the twenties," had grown interested in

> the primitive and, therefore, innocent elements in Afro-American arts and letters. From her regal penthouse on Park Avenue the old dowager ruled over a stable of protégés that included both Hughes and Hurston as well as . . . Alain Locke . . . Mason invested more than $75,000 in young black artists, but she broke off the alliances when her charges proved disloyal by abandoning what she considered the purity in their work: its primitivism. Because she believed in the cult of primitivism and disliked social protest, the breaks were frequent (Kellner 237).

Thus, the living conditions and material needs of Harlem Renaissance writers could influence the formal dimension of their work.

However, academic research on the movement has overestimated the reliance of African American artists on the wealth of Anglo-American benefactors. Indeed, Hutchinson argues against the idea that "the Depression [which started in 1929 and lasted throughout the 1930s] killed the 'Negro renaissance' because patronizing whites suddenly lost all interest in the 'vogue.'" (Hutchinson 1995, 22-23). On the contrary, it seems that the "cultural legacy" of the movement reached a climax in "the late 1930s" via the creation of "institutional[] . . . programs" supporting African American artistic projects (Hutchinson 1995, 22). Thus, it would be an oversimplification to reduce an African American writer's use of primitivist rhetorical forms to the whims of their Anglo-American patron.

When not accused of internalizing Western racism (Schuyler 53, 54) or attempting to please and assimilate into the Western elite, writers who employed primitivist or more broadly Western tropes in their depiction of African ancestry were sometimes also deemed naïve. However, to interpret the use of Western (and admittedly racist and Euro-centric) rhetoric as a lack of knowledge and a failure to challenge white supremacy is to ignore the specifically American racial context in which Harlem Renaissance writers operate. In fact, Early deplores such a readerly attitude. "Some readers," he complains,

> have criticized "Heritage" for not offering more realistic images of Africa, decrying Cullen's ignorance but that is *one* of the levels on which the poem, the narrator is lying. *These images of Africa are lies; certainly Cullen knew that*. But

> is the poem also lying when it suggests that Africa means nothing to the narrator? Or is the poem lying when it suggests that Africa means anything to the narrator? Or is this very interiorized *speech-act*, speech-event poem nothing more than the system of lies that *the impotent black intellectual* uses to heal his own sickness of alienation and despair? (emphasis added; Early 59-60)

Indeed, it is safe to assume that Cullen, along with other writers whose poetry conveys primitivist stereotypes did not literally believe that his poetic depictions of Africa matched lived experience on the continent – much as his 1924 claim about not wanting to be a "NEGRO POET" (Cullen qtd. in Smethurst 112) did not mean that he literally longed for whiteness. Importantly, the writerly tendency to repeat Western traditions occurred at the formal level rather than at the level of content. As Early suggests, the stereotypical representation of Africa in Cullen's poem "Heritage" does not necessarily mean that Cullen has internalized Western views of the continent which the international community agrees to call "Africa," and is now blindly duplicating such racist ideas in his poetry. The more pertinent and interesting critical response is to interpret the occurrence of unrealistic Western tropes in the literary imagining of Africa, assuming that such practices may in fact attempt to say something about the speaker's experience of African Americanness. Thus, in this mémoire, I follow Early's invitation to analyze *how* a given Western discursive trope functions in a text as opposed to condemning it. Furthermore, my approach is based on my disagreement with Hughes's assumption that the use of Euro-centric formal tools, *per se*, undermines the anti-racist function of a writer's work. In other words, I view Western discursive tropes as rhetorical tools employed by given texts, which do not imitate but revise the effect which these same tropes had in their original Western discursive contexts.

Most of the poems which I analyze in depth in this mémoire were written by three Harlem Renaissance writers: Langston Hughes – "Proem" (1922), "Danse Africaine" (1926); Gwendolyn Bennett – "Heritage" (1922), "Fantasy" (1927); and Countee Cullen – "Black Magdalens" (1925). Since the three authors were born between 1902 and 1903, they all belong to the younger generation of the Harlem Renaissance, as opposed to the likes of Du

Bois, Johnson, and Locke, who grew up in the nineteenth century and shaped the genesis of the movement – and from whom the younger writers sought to become autonomous. All three authors were friends or collaborators, with other artists of their generation of the Harlem Renaissance, on the short-lived but, according to Farah Jasmine Griffen, "incendiary" periodical *FIRE!!*, which "is one of the legendary tales" of the movement (Griffen 46). Notwithstanding that they sometimes disagreed on what should be the nature of African American poetics, these three poets had similar purposes as African American artists.

The poems selected for analysis not only engage with primitivism, but also with several other Western discursive branches that have shaped the ways in which mainstream society views sub-Saharan Africa. Western discourses on sub-Saharan African ancestry include biblical ethics, the legal discourse on race since the late seventeenth century, Enlightenment philosophy, nineteenth-century scientific racism – the belief that race and specific "racial qualities" are inherent and "passed through blood relations" (Young n. pag.) – gender bias and Orientalism. Edward W. Said "defines orientalism as European prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and culture" (Hart et al. n. pag.). More specifically, Said theorizes Orientalism as the tradition of discourse through which, "since antiquity," "European[s]" have "almost . . . invent[ed]" the "Orient" (Said 1). Thus, I will not be referring to Western discourse in the singular, as Western discourse is a diverse and historically accumulative hegemony. In other words, I use Said's conceptualization of discourse – in his case, Orientalism – as "a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment" (Said 6).[10]

A promising framework through which to analyze the specific function of Western discursive tropes in Harlem Renaissance poetry is through the lens of Gates's theory of the "Signifying Monkey." Gates outlines his framework in the eponymous monograph *The*

[10] "A body of doctrines and practices which have been considerably exploited during many generations." (Translation my own.)

Signifying Monkey. A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism (1989), which "attempts to identify a theory of criticism that is inscribed within the black vernacular tradition and that in turn informs the shape of the Afro-American literary tradition" (Gates xix). Gates's theorization of the "Signifying Monkey" relies on several concepts from both structuralist and poststructuralist theory and is especially indebted to the semiotic terminology of Ferdinand de Saussure. These frameworks are applied by Gates to further develop a view of African American artistic originality that was already theorized during the Harlem Renaissance by Hurston (Gates 117-118). Moreover, the figure of the "Signifying Monkey" itself predates any African American culture.

Indeed, the "Signifying Monkey" stems from the mythological topos of Esu-Elegbara, a "trickster figure" which "can [be] trace[d] . . . ultimately to the Fon and Yoruba cultures of Benin and Nigeria" and "seems to have survived the bumpy passage to the New World ["through the mnemonic devices peculiar to oral literature"]" (Gates 4-5).[11] Esu-Elegbara is the god of hermeneutics:[12] his principal role is to "interpret[] the will of the gods to man" (Gates 6). Thus, "linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, . . . text with interpretation . . . He connects the grammar of divination with its rhetorical structures" (Gates 6). Considering the function of Esu-Elegbara as a meaning-maker, Gates's theory is thematically relevant in a discussion about the ambition of Harlem Renaissance writers to re-create meaning about African ancestry. The Signifying Monkey of the African American tradition is not a divine figure like Esu-Elegbara, but he, too, is a trickster of mediation. Much as Esu-Elegbara "endlessly displaces [and defers] meaning," the myths of the Signifying Monkey are grounded in "the open-endedness of figurative language"

[11] Esu Elegbara is often represented as accompanied by a monkey. However, Gates explains, "only the Monkey survived" the deportation of enslaved Yoruba or Yoruba-descended people all the way to the United States (Gates 42). This being said, the "Signifying Monkey" found in the African American vernacular tradition retains the functions of Esu Elegbara as a trickster figure.

[12] Gates emphasizes that Esu-Elegbara's closest equivalent in Western mythologies is Hermes, who "lent his name readily to *hermeneutics*" (Gates 8).

(Gates 42). Thus, he "dwells at the margins of discourse, . . . ever embodying the ambiguities of language" (Gates 52), for example in order to anger and tease his rival, the Lion.[13]

The traditional vernacular African American concept of "signifying" is a "satiric form" which "subsumes many tropes . . . and has many tones, often ironic" (Peters n. pag.). Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)" thus provides a basis for interpreting the use of Western literary and discursive tropes by Harlem Renaissance writers as ironic. As such, one may conceive of a "displacement" of the meaning of a given trope "from antecedent text to revised text" (Gates 53, xxi). In brief, to "Signify" is to "[repeat], with a signal difference": that is, to repeat but simultaneously revise (Gates 51). As Gates explains the etymology of the word "signifying" as a traditional African American vernacular verbal practice, he proposes that members of the African American vernacular community "witt[ily] . . . emptied [a] signifier . . . of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts" (Gates 46). In other words, they kept the form but adapted its content to their own reality and creativity.[14] I argue that the Harlem Renaissance literary texts which employ Western literary tropes carry out a similar process.

By "antecedent text," Gates means the (Western) text which originated a trope, whereas the "revised text" refers to that which uses said trope ironically: that is, it creates a semantic gap between the function of the trope in the antecedent and its effect in its new textual context. It is useful to specify that a literary antecedent is not necessarily a single text.

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[13] According to Gates, the African American "Signifying Monkey" poems "seem to have had their origins in slavery" (Gates 51). He describes the basic narrative of these tales as follows: "The action represented in Monkey tales turns upon the action of three stock characters – the Monkey, the Lion, and the Elephant – who are bound together in a trinary relationship. The Monkey – a trickster figure, like Esu, who is full of guile, who tells lies, and who is a rhetorical genius, is intent on demystifying *the Lion's self-imposed status as King of the Jungle*. The Monkey, clearly, is no match for the Lion's physical prowess; the Elephant is, however. The Monkey's task, then, is to *trick* the Lion into tangling with the Elephant . . . This the Monkey does with *a rhetorical trick, a trick of mediation*. Indeed, the Monkey is a term of (anti)mediation, as are all trickster figures" (emphasis added; Gates 56).

[14] Gates grounds his theory of "Signifyin(g)" into the very nature of African American creativity, as defined by Hurston: "if we look at it squarely, [African Americans are] very original being[s] . . . everything that [they] touch[] is reinterpreted for [their] own use" (Hurston 86). Thus, repetition with a revision is not blind imitation but an essentially African American form of originality.

According to Gates, a text inscribed in what he characterizes as the African American literary tradition can "Signify" upon an individual antecedent text as well as well as upon "a broader mode of spoken discourse itself" like "white racism" (Gates 92, 94). Thus, the Harlem Renaissance poems which I analyze in my mémoire "Signify" upon – that is, repeat and revise tropes which stem from – not only individual texts, like the Bible, but also from what can be identified as Western discourses.

While the antecedent Western racism with which the selected poems engage is diverse and stretches across several centuries, its various discursive components convey a thematic continuity: they use the colors "white" and "black" – or the associated notions of light and darkness – in order to designate African ancestry and connote it as inferior to (Western) European ancestry in various regards, depending on the discourse. According to Berghahn, the pejorative symbolism of the black-white dichotomy can be traced back to biblical discourse, which she usefully analyzes in *Images of Africa in Black American Literature*. This demeaning semiotic strategy is then secularized by legal, philosophical and scientific discourses. The field of Whiteness Studies provides a helpful account of the institutional discourse which instated the constructed "black" and "white" races as social categories. In *Birth of a White Nation. The Invention of White People and Its Relevance Today* (2021) Jacqueline Battalora claims that the adoption, in late-seventeenth century North American colonial laws, of the term "white" to refer to English settlers effectively created the social status of "whiteness" aimed at maintaining African-descended people in the inferior position of free laborers. Sylvie Laurent makes a similar statement in *Pauvre Petit Blanc. Le Mythe de la Dépossession Raciale* (2020), and, importantly, highlights that the construction of "whiteness" as superior was further solidified through the discourse of the Independence period. According to Laurent, Independence discourse equated "whiteness" (the constructed racial status) with citizenship and its according basic rights, and therefore encouraged an

identification of the latter with a form of capital which "white" citizens have earned, which further support the premise that they form a superior human race.

The dichotomy which opposes the signifiers "black" and "white," and the connotations of inferiority and superiority, persisted into the eighteenth century to become an integral feature of Enlightenment philosophy and its depiction of Africa. Heinz Kimmerle (1993) believes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's discussion about Africa is representative of Enlightenment philosophy (Kimmerle 307).[15] For this reason, the text based on Hegel's lectures, *The Philosophy of History* (1837), serves as a fruitful basis for the description of those tropes upon which the poems under analysis in this study "Signify." Similarly, the discourse of scientific racism, which mainly developed throughout the nineteenth century, attempts to prove and therefore justify Enlightenment racism. A clear example of this effort is Arthur de Gobineau's study *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853), in which he claims that race is a fundamental biological feature. The theories of Hegel and Gobineau are abstract and their work is grounded in the earlier tradition of speculative anthropology described by Berghahn, which was dominant in the nineteenth century. Rather than providing an account of the geographical, cultural and ethnic realities of sub-Saharan Africa, they participate in creating a discursive abstraction of Africa as fundamentally inferior to Europe, which allows Western powers to control sub-Saharan Africans and their enslaved descendants.

The creation, via discourse, of an inherently deviant Other exemplifies Said's claim that Western texts about the "Orient" – a term which designates the continent of Asia as well as Northern Africa – imagine, and therefore create and objectify an exotic, "oriental" Other. In this study, I echo Said's use of the Foucauldian definition of discourse as "produc[ing] a self-confirming account of reality" and involving "the operation of power" (Baldick n. pag.;

[15] See Kimmerle 307: "Mit [seinen] blamablen Äusserungen über Afrika steh[t] Hegel . . . indessen nicht allein. Der Gegensatz von Barbarei und Zivilisation und der Gedanke des Fortschritts von der Wildheit zur gesitteten Lebensart sind in der Aufklärungsphilosophie allgemein anzutreffen."

Buchanan n. pag.). However, Said emphasizes, the "Orient" *is* not those regions which lie beyond (Western) Europe. Much as Western descriptions of the "Orient," the Africa imagined by Harlem Renaissance poems which "Signify" upon Western tropes, does not denote the real Africa. Rather, the poems create and perform an alternative imagined Africa with a new set of connotations which compete with the Africa of Western imagination. Indeed, in generating discourse about African ancestry, Harlem Renaissance artists seek power over how the American public views it (and, in turn, recognizes it as part of U. S. culture).

The discursive abstraction of a physically remote reality thus entails the possibility to control it. It is difficult to discuss such discursive objectification without engaging with gender. Misogyny is also a Western discursive antecedent: the othering of women in European literature is an integral part of the biblical literary legacy, much as the use of race to codify otherness and inferiority. It is not coincidental, then, that these two forms of dominance often intersect. In other words, Western representations of other-than-Western women often both racialize *and* sexualize them (Staszak 137, Ali 231).[16] Gender is enmeshed with the racist discourses which the Harlem Renaissance attacked, which is why it is important to read for intersectional critique, and not purely anti-racist critique, in the "Signification" effected by the works analyzed.

Film studies scholar Laura Mulvey conceptualized such a manner of representing women as sexual objects through her seminal theory of the "male gaze," which can also be applied to the textual medium. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Mulvey describes the sexual objectification of female characters by male characters and implied male spectators via the "gaze" of the camera. Importantly, she argues that the sexualization of

[16] See Staszak 137: "Ainsi, les premières danseuses exotiques (en Occident) furent des danseuses (perçues comme) érotiques, et les premières danseuses érotiques prirent le voile de l'exotisme"; and Ali 231: "Comme l'ont montré les pionnières du *Black feminism* . . . la façon de sexuer un corps est aussi une façon de le racialiser."

women in film not only awakes fantasy, but also triggers castration anxiety in the male onlooker. Therefore, in her theorization of the "male gaze," Mulvey actually "Signifies" upon Freud, as she applies one of his oft-quoted concepts to advance feminism: "There is no way in which we can produce an alternative [to the language of patriarchy] out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by *examining patriarchy with the tools it provides*, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one" (emphasis added; Mulvey 7). The Harlem Renaissance poems analyzed in this mémoire, too, initiate a discursive break from Western racism by "examin[ing]" it "with the [discursive] tools it provides." Iris Brey's *Le Regard Féminin. Une Révolution à l'Écran* (2020) supplements Mulvey's work and theorizes a converse, "female" gaze, which foregrounds the sentience of women characters and impedes their visual objectification. Both Mulvey and Brey rework Western representational modes in order to promote the function of women as thinking and sentient subjects. Key female figures of the Harlem Renaissance did just this. In some of their work, the overall aim of the Harlem Renaissance, representing African ancestry outside of Western racialist discourses could not be done without also refuting the demeaning ways in which the same body of doctrines had depicted them as women.

The poems analyzed in my mémoire criticize Western ways of imagining African ancestry through a variety of accumulated discourses, which are part of what Gates refers to as the white "discursive universe," which is informed by "white" constructions of meaning. In fact, he distinguishes starkly "between the black American linguistic circle and the white" (Gates 45). By "white" – or "signification" with a lower-case "s" – he means literal, explicit meaning, whereby the pairing signifier/signified stands in a one-to-one correspondence with the pairing sound-image/concept (Gates 48). In other words, the "white" universe of discourse for Gates is purely direct meaning, void of any rhetorical mediation. Rhetorical language, however, is central to Gates's conception of "black" ways of meaning: that is, through

indirection. Drawing on the conceptual work of Jacques Derrida, Gates explains that, in the "Signifying Monkey Tales" meaning "is not proffered; it is *deferred*, and it is deferred because the relationship between intent and meaning, between the speech act and its comprehension, is *skewed by the figures of rhetoric* or signification of which these poems consist" (emphasis added; Gates 53). This focus on rhetorical language is a fundamental feature of Esu-Elegbara, "[f]or Esu is the Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation" (Gates 6). In other words, to "Signify" is to employ rhetorical language in order to effect a semantic displacement within a signifier away from its former signified in a former universe of discourse.

Due to the focus of "Signifying" on meaning-making and rhetorical language, my study also relies on semiotics, "[t]he systematic study of signs, or, more precisely, of the production of meanings from sign-*systems*" (original italics; Peters n. pag.). In the context of this mémoire, it is fitting to speak specifically of symbols, rather than use the broad denomination of signs. In Charles S. Peirce's theory, symbols are "those [signs] whose relation to their object is wholly conventional" (Matthews n. pag.). By object, Peirce means the extra-linguistic reality to which a sign refers. In other words, symbols are paired with concepts in an arbitrary manner, but with the agreement of all speakers of a language or members of a given discursive universe. For instance, the color black symbolizes "bad" and "evil" in biblical discourse (Berghahn 4) because most instances of the color black in the Bible speak to a pejorative connotation, hence all occurrences of "black" in the universe of discourse constructed by the Bible cohere in associating the signifier "black" with the pejorative notions of "bad" and "evil."

When discussing the reference of a symbol or, in Saussure's term, of a signifier,[17] Peirce distinguishes between denotation and connotation. "One way of putting it would be this," he states: "Every symbol denotes certain objects and connotes certain characters. The symbol represents each of those objects to have each of those characters" (Peirce 1). The denotation – or "object" – designates "the real things which [the symbol] represents"; the connotation – or "ground," to which the symbol refers through its denotation – means "the common characters of those objects" (Peirce 82). Therefore, in my analysis I keep Peirce's distinction between "denotation" and "connotation" rather than using the vaguer term "signified" from Saussure's theory of semiology, considering that the difference between the two former terms by Peirce is central to my argument.

In light of semiotics and of "Signifyin(g)," the function of those poems which use traditional Western tropes to depict African ancestry is discursive – and thus performative – rather than descriptive. That is why the necessary final component of the theoretical framework of this study is J. L. Austin's lectures on performative language – *How to Do Things with Words* (2018 [1955]). According to Austin, to utter a "*performative sentence*" means "not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (original italics; Austin 6); it is not "saying something but doing something," nor is it "a true or false report or something" (Austin 25). Considering Austin's performative-descriptive model, it is possible to identify Gates's "Signifyin(g)" as performative language. Thus, the poems under analysis do not literally describe African ancestry; they do not attempt to provide a "report" on Africa as a set of geographical, ethnolinguistic and cultural realities. Rather, their depiction of Africa is a "speech act," to echo the comment made by Early on Cullen's "Heritage" (Early 60). The poems *do* something: they enact a hermeneutic process which creates meaning by reassigning the

[17] I indeed prefer Ferdinand de Saussure's broader yet equivalent term "signifier" over Peirce's "symbol," for the purpose of direct clarity.

signifiers of Western discursive tropes to new connotations. One can understand the equivalences of the models of Gates and Austin as follows:

Gates: discursive universes	"black"	"white"
Gates: meaning-making	"Signification" Rhetorical language Indirect meaning	"signification" Explicit language Direct meaning
Austin	Performative language *Does* something (by saying something)	Descriptive language *Refers to, describes* something (by saying it)

Thus, I set aside the issue of the "materiality" of Africa, as discussed by Leila Kamali (2016), and of its "epistemological vagueness" in the African American texts at hand (Kamali 7). Instead, I analyze the performativity of the poems: that is, the extent to which they revise – by "Signifyin(g)" upon – antecedent Western texts and discourses.

Through the lens of semiotics and of Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)," it can be argued that, while "Proem," "Heritage," "Black Magdalens," "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" reiterate pejorative Western literary tropes describing African ancestry, they do not perpetrate but refute the ways in which traditional Western discourses have shaped the perception of African ancestry.[18] In order to effect this semantic displacement, the poems employ rhetorical strategies which are typical of "Signifyin(g)," such as reversals of meaning and indirection. The distinction lies in that reversal designates a simple, one-to-one reversal of the respective connotations of the opposed components of a dichotomy, whereas indirection implies that the

[18] One might refer to Hurston's metaphor for African American creativity: "Everyone is familiar with [African Americans'] modification of the whites' musical instruments," in other words with the "use of white-invented musical instruments in a Negro way" (Hurston 86). African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance like Hughes, Bennett and Cullen indeed use Western "instruments" (a possible metaphor illustrating discursive tropes), but produce connotations (in the metaphor, musical sounds) and therefore meanings (or music) which is distinctly questions Western meanings and is grounded in the African American experience. It is not coincidental that the early twentieth century is also the period during which distinctly African American musical genres like blues and jazz reached world-wide recognition.

reversed meaning requires mediation through a third entity, be it an extra-linguistic, historical element or a poetic trope.

At the aesthetic level, reversal is not always applied to the creation of concrete new connotations of the abstraction of African ancestry. In particular, Hughes's poems make use of chiasmus, a trope which literally repeats but reverses a structure, to represent the notion of reversal rather than to reverse concrete Western semantic structures. For instance, the overarching structure of "Proem" is chiastic, which ascribes a fundamental revisionary function to the poem rather than tackles any specific examples of pejorative hermeneutics. In "Danse Africaine," chiasmus is used to effect a play on similar words, thereby symbolizing the trickster-esque power of "Signifyin(g)" rather than offering an example of its semantic function.

In opposition to this symbolic use of reversal, some poems enact a direct reversal of the dichotomies upon which they "Signify" through the use of catachresis. Catachresis, which Gates conceives as "subsumed" in "Signifyin(g)" (Gates 52), characterizes "[a]ny misuse or wrong application of a word" (Colman n. pag.). So, catachresis allows a poetic speaker to switch around the connotations of certain Western racist or misogynistic dichotomies, such that the signifiers of these dichotomies appear to be "wrong[ly]" used: that is, they are no longer applied in the way with which the members of the Western discursive universe are familiar. Cullen's "Black Magdalens" performs such a "misuse" of the biblical signifiers of "Christ" and "Virtue" (Cullen 10-12), whose connotations are exchanged with those of darkness of skin and sex work. Thus, catachresis enables a displacement of meaning using the very semiotic components – signifiers, denotations and connotations – of a given dichotomy, thereby performing a radical discursive reversal.

However, many poetic strategies at work in the poems are not limited to the semantic components readily available within given dichotomies but make use of indirection in order to

create semantic reversal. Indeed, such rhetorical techniques mediate the revisionary meaning of a poem by referring to a reality which is exterior to the semiotic structure of a Western dichotomy, or to the poem itself. For instance, allusion is defined as "[an] *indirect* or passing reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work" (emphasis added; Baldick n. pag.). Allusion is a typical trope of "Signifyin(g)," since indirection is a key argumentative function of "Signification" (Gates 55, 65). The anti-racist meanings of Hughes's "Proem" and "Danse Africaine," and of Bennett's "Fantasy" only fully come to light under consideration of the extra-linguistic realities to which they refer. "Proem" alludes to several historical moments and places which are emblematic of Western colonialism and racism, the knowledge of which is integral to how the poem exposes the violence of colonialism and of the discourse which justifies it. Rather than alluding solely to Western imperialism itself, "Danse Africaine" also indirectly refers to the function of dance in subverting restrictive mainstream Western values and questioning Western authority during slavery, while "Fantasy" evokes concrete West African cultural practices and depicts them as equal to their Western equivalents in terms of complexity.

As allusion is a technique of indirection, it is possible to "Signify" upon a Western literary text or tradition by alluding to it: that is, by inexplicitly reiterating one of its recognizable tropes – but simultaneously adapting it to the purpose of invalidating the discourse from which that text or tradition stems. For example, "Proem" alludes to transcendentalist poetics by repeating the trope of the poetic speaker's expanded individuality used in Walt Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (1855). This technique allows the poem to denote African Americans and colonized people in sub-Saharan Africa as the victims of the ancient and continuing violence of European imperialism. "Proem" also alludes to Lucretius's "The Proem" (first century BC), in particular to its characterization of the goddess Venus as a source of creativity for Romans, thereby reversing the connotations which Western discourses

have ascribed to African ancestry. Another allusion which serves the connotation of African ancestry as elevating is the "Signification" upon Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko* (1668) in Bennett's "Fantasy." Indeed, "Fantasy" also repeats the trope of the Noble Savage used in *Oroonoko*. However, whereas the king and queen Oroonoko and Imoinda are exceptions among people of the same ethnicity, "Fantasy" imagines that queenliness is an inherent characteristic in sub-Sahran African-descended women.

While allusion enables poems to mediate their displaced meaning through concrete, historically locatable events and antecedent Western texts, the abstract notion of liminality also organically performs the indirect poetics of "Signifyin(g)." Gates emphasizes that, as hermeneutic tricksters, both Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey stand for the "open-endedness" of literary interpretation (Gates 52, 21). For example, whereas Esu-Elegbara's function is to interpret the meaning of the Yoruba divine text of Ifa, he does not provide any fixed, finite readings: he is "the god of indeterminacy" and therefore embodies hermeneutic liminality (Gates 21).

Several poems in my primary corpus mediate their revised connotations of Western tropes through liminal settings. More specifically, they construct liminal spatial or temporal loci within which it is possible to reverse the objectification of racialized people and of women by Western discourses. The poems at hand engage with three interrelated liminal spaces. That which most explicitly evokes "Signifyin(g)" is dream, as the "Signifying Monkey" tales themselves can "be thought of as . . . dream narratives," in other words as "chiastic fantasies of reversal of power relationships" (Gates 58, 59). Frantz Fanon's work in anti-colonial theory also supports the view of dreams as a locus of (imagined) reversals: in his final essay *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961), he argues that colonized people can channel their accumulated frustration with their oppression into dreams, in which they can imagine being free of Western oppression. In "Fantasy," the speaker encounters and praises a beautiful and

sophisticated queen. Importantly, this scene is set in the speaker's dream. Dreams often imply night, another liminal locus and key example of how liminality enables reversal in "Fantasy," which takes place in the "Land of Night" (Bennett 1). In *Shadowed Dreams*, Honey characterizes night as "a time when the objectifying eye [is] closed in sleep" (Honey xlvi). Thus, as a liminal space between days night provides freedom from – and the opportunity to reverse – the hegemony of Western discourses. The last central liminal space which enables "Signifyin(g)" combines characteristics of both dreams and night: the performance stage. The rise of jazz and cabaret in the 1920s is strongly rooted in the context of night-life, and the stage constructs an ontology which is separate from and therefore not restricted by the mechanisms of Western discourse and society. "Danse Africaine" imagines the ability of a dancer's performance on stage to strip an implied Western male spectator of his de facto (or even de jure) physical and hermeneutic power over racialized women.

Thus, the respective poetic voices of the poems at hand make use of a variety of rhetorical vehicles through which they are then able to construct a reversal of what Western discourses originally meant when using given tropes to denote African ancestry. However, if they are a character within the poem, the poetic speaker can not only use rhetorical figures of mediation like allusion and liminal poetic space, but also enact the mediation, the meaning displacement, themselves. In "Danse Africaine," the lyrical speaker triangulates the performer-spectator relationship by describing and speculating on the effects of the performance to the "you" addressee. As such, the discursive reversal in which the racialized dancer has agency and the Western man is silenced does not occur directly but is implied through the speech of the lyrical speaker.

Rhetorical indirection through poetic voice acquires an even more explicit trickster function when it enacts the process of semantic reversal at work in a poem: that is, when it shows the transition or performs the tension between embracing Western discourses and

denouncing their destructivity. In poems like “Heritage,” “Sonnet 1,” and “Black Magdalens,” the speaker first espouses a Western cognitive framework, only to gradually but radically switch their meaning at the end of the poem. This technique exemplifies a feature of “Signifyin(g)” outlined by Geneva Smitherman: the “introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected” (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94). The poetic speakers of “Fantasy” and “Danse Africaine” also indirectly and “unexpected[ly]” tease Western discourses by “Signifyin(g)” upon the male gaze. Indeed, while they place figures of African American women in a setting which seems to expose them to exoticization and sexual objectification, they in fact endeavor to hinder the sexualization of these figures, and indeed frustrate the Western male gaze.

The poems selected for analysis in my mémoire exemplify that the reiteration of Western traditional tropes does not undermine the racial political aims of the Harlem Renaissance. The poems do not blindly repeat but “Signify” upon or revise these tropes by playing with rhetorical language. As such, they go hand-in-hand with one of the chief concerns of the movement, which was to invalidate Western racialist hermeneutics. Thus, the purpose of my study is not to disprove the various claims that the Harlem Renaissance failed due to the use of Western literatures and discourses, but to show that this tendency was not naïve but semantically revisionary.

CHAPTER 1: SUBVERTING CONNOTATIONS OF AFRICAN ANCESTRY IN BIBLICAL, ENLIGHTENMENT AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY SCIENTIFIC DISCOURSE

Much of the Harlem Renaissance poetry which discusses African ancestry questions Western cultural, religious, legal and philosophical discourses that largely predate (and attempt to justify) the racial violence of the 1920s, the period during which the poems were written. The "Western discourses" which these poets attack include those doctrines which have shaped Western European thinking about other-than-European ethnicities – the Harlem Renaissance poets being most concerned with the treatment of African ethnicities – including Christianity, Enlightenment, and nineteenth-century scientific discourse about "race." In the semiotic terminology, within such discourses the signifier "black" (along with other signifiers denoting the color black, such as "Negro") denotes people of sub-Saharan descent whilst connoting inherited and eternal inferiority, unworthiness of rights, lack of religiosity and incapacity to create culture.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory of "Signifyin(g)" (1989) builds on semiotic concepts coined by Ferdinand de Saussure (which have equivalents in Peirce's theory), like the distinction between the "signifier" and the "signified" in the creation of meaning. "Signifyin(g)" reveals how poems like Hughes's "Proem," Bennett's "Heritage" and "Sonnet 1," and Cullen's "Black Magdalens" reverse the racist connotations of African ancestry in Western discourses and assert a confident African American racial consciousness in their stead. In order to achieve this "displacement of meanings" (Gates 53), these poems use various techniques to allow for "rhetorical indirection", which Gates characterizes as "a signal aspect of Signifyin(g)" (Gates 65). The main rhetorical tool which enacts indirection in "Proem" is allusion, a key trope of "Signifyin(g)." In "Heritage," "Sonnet 1" and "Black Magdalens," the subversion of the racist semantic patterns of Western discourses exemplifies

how, according to Gates as he cites Roger D. Abrahams, "Signifyin(g)" represents "the language of trickery" (Abrahams qtd. in Gates 54). Indeed, in these poems, although the poetic speaker is initially aligned with the racist semiotics of Western discourses, that positioning is eventually reversed.

1.1 Locating inferiority between sin and backwardness: The pejorative connotations of African ancestry in Western discourses

In *Images of Africa in Black American Literature* (1977), Marion Berghahn sketches an overview of what she refers to as the "'white' image of Africa" (Berghahn v). In this section, she describes how Western (or at least English) discourses have connoted Africa since the Elizabethan period, including before English people settled and practiced slavery in North America. Berghahn explains that, despite "the widespread assumption that racism is a product of slavery" (Berghahn 2), it rather seems that traditional Elizabethan racist semantic patterns – whereby "'white' evokes . . . positive responses, such as 'good', 'beautiful', 'pure', etc., whereas 'black' . . . [connotes] 'bad', 'evil', . . . 'ugliness', 'hell'" (Berghahn 4) – made the enslavement of dark-skinned sub-Saharan Africans appear as morally acceptable, or at least "more suitable" than the enslavement of "whites" (Berghahn 3).[19] Therefore, prior to the beginning of the colonization of North America, there was already a "black-white symbolism" (Berghahn 4) which denoted people's ethnicity and connoted – and therefore established and permitted – unequal attitudes towards them. Pre-colonial English people of Anglo-Saxon descent were already interpretants, in Peirce's terminology, of that symbolism. Peirce defines interpretants as "the minds to which [symbols] appeal, by premising a

[19] However, whether racism predates the institutionalization of slavery is a matter of debate within historical research. According to Jacqueline Battalora, whereas, "[i]n the English language and culture [by the time the English became involved in the Atlantic slave trade], the color black includes such negative meanings as evil, filth, and danger," there is evidence that, in practice, "English and certain Europeans [servants, for instance,] were treated in a similar fashion to Africans within colonial North America and engaged in daily life on equal footing" (Battalora 2021, 4, 5).

proposition or propositions which such a mind is to admit" (Peirce 57).[20] In other words, an interpretant of the symbols "Black" and "Negro" produced by Western discourses is anyone who recognizes such symbols, and is aware that "Black" and "Negro" can connote sin, inhumanity and backwardness – whether they morally agree with such connotations or not. Thus, the universe of discourse within which people as early as the sixteenth century had been operating predisposed them to interpret dark skin negatively and to consider themselves superior to people of sub-Saharan ancestry.

According to Berghahn, such a cultural predisposition for racist thinking is informed by the discourse of Christianity: "[t]he Bible, . . . [which] for many centuries became the main reading in the Occident . . . made a major contribution to the shaping of basic Western thought" (Berghahn 4). The Bible utilizes the colors black and white to symbolize "the great conflict which begins with God's separating of light from darkness" and, by extension, "the struggle between God and Satan, between the spiritual and the 'carnal' sphere, between Good and Evil" (Berghahn 4-5). Moreover, the Bible also explicitly denotes blackness and its set of pejorative connotations as a possible "colour of the skin" (Berghahn 5). For example, when Job is blamed for the calamity which he suffers, and is thereby accused of being sinful, he describes his skin as turning black and animal-like: "I go about blackened, but not by the sun / . . . I have become a brother of jackals, a companion of ostriches. / My skin grows black and peels, and my bones burn with fever" (Job 30.28-30). The tale of Job associates black skin with divine punishment and hell by playing on another denotation of the color black, that of burning; this imagery appears explicitly at the end of verse 30. The quoted passage also prefigures the connotation of Sub-Saharan ancestry as subhuman, as suggested by the metaphor in verse twenty-nine. Indeed, Job compares himself to "jackals" and "ostriches." Both animals typically thrive in semi-arid environments in Africa (awf.org). Not only is Job's

[20] For his part, Gates uses Ferdinand de Saussure's equivalent term, the "linguistic community" (Saussure qtd. in Gates 50), which is designates those people who are familiar with a given discourse.

blackened skin associated with becoming animalistic, it is specifically coded as African bestiality. “From there,” Berghahn argues, “it was but a small step to connect the ‘heathendom’ of Africans with the colour of their skin and then to regard them as creatures of Satan” (Berghahn 5). Biblical symbolic patterns in which the color black denotes skin color and connotes a loss of humanity thus prefigure a discursive dehumanization of sub-Saharan African ancestry in Western thought.

The Bible also provided a religious ground for justifying the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans. As Berghahn suggests, “the myth of Noah’s Curse . . . was . . . used down to the twentieth century to ‘prove’ the God-given inferiority of blacks” (Berghahn 6). Whereas this narrative is initially used only to make sense of “darker complexion” (Berghahn 4), it was extended in order to make slavery logically sustainable. After Ham surprises Noah naked, in a drunken sleep, and attempts to have his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, witness the scene, Noah punishes Ham by cursing Canaan, Ham’s son: “Cursed be Canaan! A servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” (Genesis 9.24). In applications of the myth to the argument supporting the enslavement of sub-Saharan Africans, Canaan’s descendants denote people of sub-Saharan African ancestry. As such, in Biblical discourse, blackness as a signifier of sub-Saharan ethnicity connotes the inherited curse of such peoples to be dominated by individuals of light complexion and Anglo-Saxon or European descent. Moreover, Berghahn emphasizes that “the Puritans of New England were particularly prone to accepting the symbolism of the Bible” and that “[t]his ‘symbolic perception’ [which] pervaded [their] philosophy . . . became the cornerstone of the Americans’ view of themselves and of the rest of the world” (Battalora 5). Throughout the next centuries, the dichotomous symbolic patterns of the Bible evolved into racist discourses which were still active in the early twentieth century.

A crucial step in the entrenchment of color as symbolic within Western racist discourse occurred in the late seventeenth century, when the biblical black-white binary construction embraced by New-England Puritans led to the creation of whiteness as a new discursive category. With the ambition of stifling protests by enslaved people, the authorities of the British colonies of North America (following those of some colonies of the Caribbean) began to restrict civic rights like "engag[ing] in . . . commercial activit[ies], . . . hold[ing] property" or "participat[ing] in the political process" to those people who registered as "white" (Battalora 31). Thus, the law functioned as a discursive vehicle for legitimizing a new, superior social status. "[T]he label 'white'," which did not refer to any "distinct group of people . . . in law within the colonies of North America until 1681," now denoted settlers of English descent – from rich planters to poor workers who were not much better-off than enslaved Africans denoted as "black" – and connoted inherent superiority over said "black" people (Battalora 5).[21] In such a discursive context, any attempts to improve the status of this community – be they on the part or on behalf of African Americans – amounted to jeopardizing the social superiority of people racialized as "white." The loss of the social preeminence conferred upon them by their racial status was viewed by some "white" people as an illegitimate "confiscation,"[22] or as "dispossession"[23] (Laurent 35, 43). Such frustration

[21] Nevertheless, one should keep in mind that the privileges of "whiteness" did not apply to all people who were not of sub-Saharan descent. Later immigrants of, for example, Latin American, Chinese or even Italian descent did not enjoy the economic safety and political power of what White Studies refers to as White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs).

[22] See Laurent 35: "Inspirée des raisonnements de John Locke sur le droit naturel à posséder des biens et sur l'idéal d'une société de citoyens-propriétaires, la version initiale du préambule de la Déclaration d'indépendance de 1776, qui affirmait un droit inaliénable à la propriété, définissait l'homme libre comme celui qui parvenait à l'autosuffisance matérielle et morale en faisant fructifier ce qui lui appartenait: son corps et sa force de travail. Le citoyen américain est censé avoir gagné sa liberté, *mérité son statut*, conquis son confort matériel, et toute remise en cause de ce patrimoine est perçue comme une *confiscation*" (emphasis added).

[23] According to Sylvie Laurent in her study *Pauvre Petit Blanc. Le Mythe de la Dépossession Raciale* (2020), the privileged status of "whiteness" created by late seventeenth-century legislation was considered an intrinsic civic capital from which "white" workers feared dispossession (Laurent 43). Dispossession is a key concept in the discourse of white supremacy. Laurent cites Wilmot Robertson's popular racist manifesto *The Dispossessed Majority* (1972). To be "dispossessed" means to lose one's dignity and autonomy at the expense of the increasing rights of ethnic minorities (Laurent 34). While Emancipation did not provide formerly enslaved people quite the civil rights secured by "whiteness" (Laurent 36), the abolition of slavery in the U. S. still

fueled racial violence, for example in the form of lynchings. W. Jason Miller notably indicates that "lynching was primarily a postbellum phenomenon" (Miller 4): that is, it mostly occurred after the Civil War. Thus, racial lynchings function as an extralegal attempt to continue to enact the racist legal discourse which Emancipation weakened.

While biblical discourse, along with the legal discourse which began in the late seventeenth century, played a central role in constructing the bulk of Western discourses upon which Harlem Renaissance poets "Signify," a major part of the semantic displacement at work in the poems relates to Enlightenment thinking about sub-Saharan African ancestry – of which Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Philosophy of History* (1837) is representative (Kimmerle 307). The reason that Hegel's work in particular is relevant to the study of semantic subversion in Harlem Renaissance poetry lies in that his specific approach to the study of history in part coincides with one of the chief concerns of the movement. According to Hegel, "the history of the world . . . presents us with a rational process" (Hegel 9), the purpose of which is "self-consciousness," or intellectual freedom:

> In the process before us [that is, the study of world history], the essential nature of freedom . . . is to be displayed as coming to a consciousness of itself (for it is in its very nature, self-consciousness) and thereby realizing its existence. . . . This result it is, at which the process of the World's History has been continually aiming. (Hegel 19)

Thus, to study the "Philosophy of History" means to undergo a "*thoughtful*" (original emphasis) rational development whereby one becomes self-conscious, therefore "human" and free (Hegel 8). For many Harlem Renaissance thinkers, African Americans' achievement of "human[ity]" – that is fully-fledged citizenship, with all the corresponding rights – and freedom also closely depended on the realization of their own "Spirit" (Hegel 10), the elaboration and assertion of their own cultural and artistic identity. In terms which seem to repeat but revise Hegel's definition of the philosophy of history, Locke invites African

"dispossessed" "white" workers from a chief distinction which had symbolically elevated them above "black" people: the liberty to dispose of one's body and labor.

Americans to achieve a "spiritual emancipation" (Locke 22) by considering their own ancestral culture and crafting a specifically African American self-consciousness for themselves.

In *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel places sub-Saharan Africa – or "Africa proper," or that part of Africa "which lies south of the desert of Sahara" (Hegel 91) – at the earliest stage of the intellectual evolution with which he compares History: Africa is the "Undeveloped Spirit" (Hegel 99). Indeed, for Hegel, "The Negro. . . exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state . . . there is nothing harmonious with humanity in this type of character" (Hegel 93). According to Hegel, the signifier "Negro," which he systematically uses to denote sub-Saharan Africans, connotes an absolute lack of rationality. This connotation has several implications: Hegel thinks of sub-Saharan Africans as immature, unreligious and incapable of creating culture. He describes sub-Saharan Africa as "the Gold-land . . . of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night" (Hegel 91). As in the Bible verse in which Job laments his burnt, blackened skin, Hegel denotes sub-Saharan African ethnicity not only via the signifiers "dark" and "Negro," but also through other denotations of it, here "Night." He believes the consciousness of sub-Saharan African people to be dormant and not to show any sign of imminent awakening or indeed enlightenment.

In Hegel's view, a lack of reason and self-consciousness entails a lack of religiosity: "Religion begins with the *consciousness* that there is something higher than man" (emphasis added; Hegel 93). Hegel thinks sub-Saharan Africans incapable of the humility required of Christians towards God (Hegel 93-94). Such a state of spiritual and rational dormancy, Hegel argues, renders sub-Saharan Africans "capable of no development or culture, and as we see them at this day, such have they always been." To Hegel, sub-Saharan Africans are "no historical part of the world" (Hegel 98, 99). In effectively subverting the Enlightenment

discourse which Hegel's philosophy exemplifies, the poems at hand express the hope of some Harlem Renaissance artists to earn African Americans their deserved place within American culture and history.

Fifteen years after the publication of *The Philosophy of History*, Arthur de Gobineau released a scientific essay in which he attempts to demonstrate the racist allegations exemplified by Hegel. Gobineau seeks to establish that racial differences are not only biologically real but also immutable, thereby supporting the biblical interpretation according to which sub-Saharan Africans inherited Canaan's curse. In *The Inequality of the Human Races* (1853), Gobineau argues that "[t]he existing races constitute separate branches of one or many primitive stocks," and that the races have "permanen[t] . . . racial qualities [which are] quite sufficient to generate the radical unlikeness and inequality that exists between" them (Gobineau 133). To Gobineau, these racial differences are so fundamental that they can be considered "natural laws" (Gobineau 133). Thus, the scientific racism of the nineteenth century provides legitimacy to both Enlightenment philosophy and biblical discourse. It also secures the success of legal efforts launched in the late seventeenth century to assert the dominance of Western European capitalist interests in colonized territories. The poems selected for this chapter use "Signifyin(g)," that is techniques of rhetorical indirection and reversal, of "[r]epetition with a signal difference" (Gates 51), in order to invalidate these Western discourses and assert the relevance of African Americans as historical and cultural subjects in the same capacity as European-descended U. S. citizens.

1.2 "Signifyin(g)" as a claim to cultural self-assertion in Langston Hughes's "Proem"

Hughes's "Proem" subverts the overarching connotation of the signifiers "Negro" (Hughes 1, 17) and "Black" (2-3, 18-19) in Western discourses as objects, instead of subjects, of discourse, that is of both philosophical and pseudo-scientific observation. The poetic

speaker's declaration of his blackness reads as an act of self-definition, thereby challenging the hermeneutic power which racist Western doctrines have held over people of sub-Saharan descent. The very title of "Proem" gives the poem the tone of an epic and prefigures an elevation of African ancestry to the rank of Classical culture. The term comes from the Latin *proemium* which means "preface" or "introduction" (Greene and Cushman 102). Indeed, a proem is "an introductory passage" to "epic poem[s]" such as "the *Aeneid*, . . . the *Iliad* and . . . the *Odyssey*" (Greene and Cushman 102).

"Proem" consists in the speaker's self-characterization, which he frames by describing himself as "a Negro," that is as "Black." The anaphora "I am" (1, 17) and "I've been" (4, 7, 10, 14) allow the poem to assign new and explicit connotations to the labels "Black" and "Negro." They now connote the condition of being oppressed, as well as the ability to find creative inspiration in such affliction. Indeed, if the same lyrical voice speaks each stanza, then the predicates "a slave," "a worker," "a singer" and "a victim" (4, 7, 10, 14) all characterize the same "Black" identity. Importantly, whilst this self-characterization is explicit, it also functions as an indirect rhetorical tool: by shifting the connotations of a long-standing symbol in Western discourses, "Proem" simultaneously alludes to the initial, "white" connotations these discourses have created. As such, it functions as "double-voice[]" (Gates 50). Indeed, according to Gates,

> The process of semantic appropriation in evidence in . . . Signification . . . has been aptly described by Mikhail Bakhtin as a double-voiced word, that is, a word or utterance, in this context, decolonized for the black's purposes "by inserting a new semantic orientation into a word which already has – and *retains* – its own orientation." (emphasis added; Gates 50)

Thus, "Proem" does not exactly empty the signifiers "Black" and "Negro" of their dehumanizing connotations, so much as it "free[ly] play[s]" with them, and "suspend[s]" them (Gates 49). The words "retain[]" the connotations which the poem thus refutes, but which still appeal to interpretants of Western discourses. Rather than annihilating the

pejorative connotations of blackness, which a single text cannot do on its own, the poem refers to – or, to be more specific, condemns – them indirectly by creating the connotations which the lyrical speaker asserts as true.

In order to span the whole of colonialist violence, the perspective of the poetic voice encompasses the experience of not only one individual, but of all those denoted by the signifiers "Negro" and "Black." Thus, the speaking "I" really claims to be a "we." The trope of an expansive poetic individuality suggests that "Proem," to use Gates's terminology, "Signifies" upon Walt Whitman's expanded poetic individuality in his poem "Song of Myself" (1855), in which the lyrical speaker celebrates a unity traversing the whole nation of the United States, including himself. As I argued in "Langston Hughes as a Whitmanesque Pioneer. A Comparison of Hughes's 'Let America Be America Again' and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in the Context of Hughes's National Critique" (2019), "the lyrical 'I' [in 'Song of Myself'] . . . stands in a passive position when it comes to . . . the completion" of the United States' national ideals of freedom and equality (Bouchelaghem 11). In contrast, the lyrical speaker of Hughes's poem "Let America Be America Again" (1936) is excluded from these rights and "is yet to labor to find America again" (Bouchelaghem 11). In "Proem," too, the speaker limits his proclaimed "Black" individuality to those groups who share the condition of being oppressed – that is, enslaved, forced to work, and murdered – with him.

By referring to both the chattel and wage slavery to which he "ha[s] been" subjected, the speaker includes a critique of Western capitalism[24] within his self-characterization. In doing so, he subverts the function of the legislation which created the social category of

[24] Hughes's poetry, especially from the 1930s onwards, is notoriously intersectional in regard to class. Like several other Harlem Renaissance writers, he was influenced by Russian communism. Michael A. Chaney talks of an "influx of communism in Harlem": "aftershocks of the Russian Revolution reverberated throughout African America, stirring many renowned members of the movement to become [communist] party members as well" (Chaney 48). According to Robert Young, several of Hughes's 1930s poems exemplify a "revolutionary political commitment," including to "Marxist aesthetics" (Young 16). Whereas that commitment is less explicit in the 1920s, poems like "Proem" foreshadow it by engaging with the theme of construction labor.

"whiteness," which has been to hide the potential for class and race to intersect. Although the speaker limits his transcendent individuality to racial "blackness," the signifier "a worker" (7) refers to the overarching economic system of the United States. Indeed, "a worker" has historically denoted individuals of both "Black" and other ethnicities. According to Battalora's account of the legal status of laborers in the North American colonies in *Birth of a Nation. The Invention of Whiteness*, before the "invention" of whiteness in the seventeenth century, the assignment of dehumanizing and sometimes fatal physical work did not follow racial lines. Thus, the life experience of enslaved Africans and indentured English servants could be mutually relatable.

The mention of "the Woolworth building" (9), which refers to a skyscraper "[c]ompleted in 1913," further extends the poem's allusion to the megalomania of the capitalism of the United States. Indeed, the Woolworth building was built for a "millionaire," Frank W. Woolworth. It was "hailed as 'the cathedral of commerce'" and remained "the tallest building in the world until 1930" (nylandmarks.org, n. pag.). By including a general criticism of capitalism into his revision of the signifiers "Black" and "Negro," the speaker emphasizes the truth that the suffering engendered by such an individualist system does not exclusively jeopardize African American lives. Indeed, "Proem" "Signifies" upon the body of legislation which was compiled from 1681 in order to create an illusory ontological boundary between "black" and "white" workers. This strategy highlights how "Proem" revises not only the connotations of blackness, but also its denotation: the "worker" stanza does not exclusively refer to African-descended laborers.

The self-characterization which unfolds throughout the poem is thus highly complex and reverses Hegel's claim that sub-Saharan Africans lack a sufficiently developed intellect to reach self-consciousness. The poem's anaphoric use of the verb "to be" in the first person singular insists that the speaker is fully self-aware. The first and last stanza function as the

topic sentence of the speaker's proclamation, the common denominator of his various identity components. The regular prosody of these stanzas suggests an elevated level of self-knowledge, as it implies measuredness and therefore a careful and extensive reflection upon oneself. Both the second and third line of each stanza comprise three stressed syllables: "Black like the night is black, / Black like the depths of my Africa" (2-3, 18-19). The recurrence of this first, rhythmically regular stanza at the end of the poem amounts to a well-rounded proclamation.

The symbolic spaces in which the speaker has been further emphasize the sense of completion in the speaker's self-characterization, and therefore self-consciousness. The latter is structured as an attempt at a survey of his own identity, the components of which he has, metaphorically, accumulated throughout time and space – that is, the spaces in which the speaker has labored under his oppressors' domination: from ancient Rome to the founding of the U. S. (5-6), "from Africa to Georgia" (11) and from "the Congo" to "Texas" (15-16). The order in which the speaker recounts these movements throughout the poem forms a chiastic arrangement. This overall mirror structure can be summarized as follows:

Stanza 1: Topic sentence
Stanza 2: Europe ➔ United States
Stanza 3: Africa ➔ United States
Stanza 4: Africa ➔ United States
Stanza 5: Europe ➔ United States
Stanza 6: Topic sentence

In the second stanza, the speaker rhetorically transitions from Europe to the United States. He refers to his past as "a slave" (4) working under the orders of two political leaders: first "Cæsar" (5), in reference to the Roman ruler – and, for two years, dictator – then "Washington" (6), which recalls the first president of the independent United States. The third stanza illustrates a rhetorical movement from Africa, via the mention of the "pyramids" (8) of Egypt, to the United States, as suggested by the "Woolworth building" (9). In the fourth stanza, the speaker reiterates such a displacement from "Africa" (11) to the United States,

more specifically "Georgia" (12), the State with the highest African American population at the turn of the twentieth century.[25] Mirroring stanza two, the fifth stanza illustrates a movement from Europe to the United States: "The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo. / They lynch me now in Texas" (15-16). In the case of this stanza, the movement is rather from European oppression than from Europe itself, so Europe's function as a locus of violence is more symbolic in line fifteen than elsewhere. With the addition of the speaker's "topic sentence" as the first and last stanzas, the spatial-historical metaphor which the speaker uses in order to connote "Negro" and "Black" as oppressed forms a fully symmetrical chiasmus, which accentuates the extent of his self-consciousness and, by extension, the self-consciousness of those individuals denoted as "Negro" or "Black." Moreover, since chiasmus consists in mirroring and, therefore, reversing a structure, it is a typical trope of "Signification" and thus reinforces the revisionary work which the poem performs at the semantic level.

By defining his experience of oppression and forced labor within a spatio-temporal continuity through his extended sense of individuality, the speaker of "Proem" subverts Hegel's claim that "Freedom" is nothing but "the self-consciousness" of "the thinking Reason" (Hegel 70), in other words the attainment of an Enlightenment intellectual standard. According to Hegel, "[b]ad as [slavery] may be, [the] lot [of sub-Saharan Africans] in their own land is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists: for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom" (Hegel 96). Therefore, Hegel writes, "slavery is itself a phase of advance" for sub-Saharan Africans (99).

[25] Du Bois's seminal statistical study on the lives of African Americans, which he ran from the University of Atlanta and presented at the 1900 World Fair in Paris, shows Georgia as the U. S. State with the highest number of African American residents. According to Whitney Battle-Baptiste and Britt Rusert, the editors of *W. E. B. Du Bois's Data Portraits. Visualizing Black America* (2018), Georgia provided the opportunity for a typical case study on the lives of African Americans. Graphic portrait number two shows that Georgia has over 750'000 African Americans residents, which is true of no other State than Tennessee. Portrait number eight specifies that amount as 798'747.

In other words, he claims that exposure to Western European society is their only potential for development, and therefore "freedom." However, the speaker of "Proem" characterizes his lack of freedom as the result of recursive, systemic violence perpetrated by Western European powers. For instance, despite the governmental status of the United States as a republic and a democracy, and despite the fact that "Washington" does not "[tell]" the speaker to "brush[] [his] shoes" like "Cæsar [tells him] to keep his door-steps clean," the speaker nevertheless parallels the figure of the American president and that of the Roman dictator (Hughes 5-6). Likewise, the ambiguity of the deictic pronoun "They" in the fifth stanza associates the violence of the Belgian colonization of the Congo with that of the Texas lynchings (15-16). Thus, the speaker makes use of anaphora and chiasmus to show that he – along with those denoted by the labels "Black" and "Negro," whom he claims to represent – possesses the intellectual faculty for self-consciousness, and that to call the latter "freedom" is senseless when considering the violence which he has experienced.

The speaker's portrayal of Western European violence as a force persisting throughout history, and therefore systemic, also "Signifies" upon the biblical interpretation of slavery as the inherited fate of people of sub-Saharan African ancestry. By creating parallels between the slavery which he suffered at the hands of Europeans and that which he faces in the United States, the speaker suggests that Western powers are violent in nature. Much as sub-Saharan Africans are alleged to have inherited Noah's curse from Canaan, "Proem" constructs an inheritance of (colonial) exploitation among Euro-American elites. "Washington," as much as those people who "lynch" the speaker, appear to have inherited the belief that they deserve supremacy both from the legal discourse initiated in the late seventeenth century, and from European and American expansion ideologies like Manifest Destiny and the Doctrine of Discovery. The former posits that expansion throughout the whole of North America is an

inalienable, divine right of Anglo-Saxon Americans.[26] The notion of a God-willed settlement on North American land can be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery, a body of fifteenth-century papal legislation designed to regulate (and justify) Christian domination of land newly apprehended by various European powers, such as the English, French, Portuguese and Spanish kingdoms. In the papal bull *Inter Caetera* (1493), pope Alexander VI asserts that God "conferred upon" him "the authority" to "assign" to a nation jurisdiction over "all islands and mainlands found and to be found" by its own representatives, "forever" (2). The justificatory rhetoric behind the "lynch[ings]" which the poetic speaker "now" suffers thus stems from a centuries-long line of discourse (Hughes 16). By paralleling his transgenerational ego with the enduring self-assignment of power and with the recurring violence of Western political nations, the poetic speaker repeats the trope of the hereditary biblical curse which racist discourses use in order to justify slavery. He claims that Western violence is just as inherent to the construct of "whiteness" as servitude is alleged to be to the fate of sub-Saharan African people.

In spite of the racial violence brought about by the practice of Western ideologies, in "Proem" blackness also connotes a motivation for religiosity, and by extension a capacity for "Black" people world-wide to form a community which is conscious of the ways in which it is marginalized. The poem thereby subverts Hegel's claim that sub-Saharan Africans lack the humility to conceive of anything higher than themselves. At a secular level, the poetic speaker of "Proem" does acknowledge the existence of a higher entity than himself, that is the oppressed, "Black" or "Negro" historical community which he gathers within his individuality, in a "Signification" upon Whitman. He also shows humility towards "[his]

[26] "Manifest Destiny" was coined by journalist John O'Sullivan in 1845. With this phrase, he means that the territory of North America was "allotted [to the United States] by Providence" itself (O'Sullivan qtd. in Stephanson n. pag.). Thus, the doctrine of Manifest Destiny claims that the expansion of the U. S. throughout the North American continent would be a realization or indeed a manifestation of the religious fate of the nation, of God's design.

Africa" (3, 19) as well as an acceptance that he does not, and perhaps cannot, fully understand and control it. In doing so, he "Signifies" upon the light-dark symbolism of Christianity and the Enlightenment. He believes Africa has "depth" and compares it to "the night" (2-3, 18-19), an image which is usually pejorative when used to denote sub-Saharan ancestry and darkness of skin. Hegel used the signifier "Night" to connote the lack of reason which he believed characterizes sub-Saharan Africans. Phillis Wheatley, one of the earliest African American poets,[27] uses the same trope to describe her African ancestry in her poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773): "'Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land, / Taught my *benighted* soul to understand / That there's a God, that there's a *Saviour* too" (emphasis added; Wheatley 1-3). In "Proem," the symbolized concepts of "night" and "depth" refer to the speaker's lack of concrete, lived knowledge about "Africa" as a result of the Atlantic slave trade. Nonetheless, he conveys faith in his belonging to "Africa." In the present context, faith means "the capacity [of the human soul] to spiritually apprehend divine . . . realities beyond the limits of perception or of logical proof" (OED n. 5). The speaker, in an exhibition of just such faith, does not need to obtain or assert any specific, experiential understanding of "[his] Africa" to characterize his ancestry (and therefore himself) with certainty. In asserting his sub-Saharan heritage despite not having experienced life on the continent, the speaker turns what were initially dehumanizing signifiers denoting sub-Saharan Africans into signs of their capacity for religiosity. Moreover, he suggests that it is feasible for those denoted as "Black" people and scattered across the world to realize their mutual, broken links and thereupon function as a politically revisionary diaspora.

[27] Wheatley was born in present-day Senegal (c. 1753). At eight years old, she was brought to Boston on a slave ship and sold to John Wheatley, "a well-to-do and honest Methodist" (Berghahn 35). "[I]n [her master's] very religious house," Wheatley enjoyed "support and encouragement" as she was taught to read and to write. By the time she was fourteen years old, her poetry already conveyed an "evenly balanced rhythm" and a "sophisticated language" (Berghahn 35). She thus represented a key figure for the Harlem Renaissance artists who believed in elevating the status of African Americans through art. Her poetic talent challenged the claims of Enlightenment philosophy which were dominant in the late eighteenth century: her mind *was* capable of producing literature comparable to traditional European standards.

The capacity for belief in a higher, spiritual entity is even more apparent in light of the poem's allusion to Lucretius's "The Proem," which opens Book One of his didactic poem *On the Nature of the Universe* (first century BC). The claim made by Hughes's speaker that he belongs to the lineage of "Africa" echoes the beginning of Lucretius's "The Proem," which starts "with a powerful and moving invocation of . . . Venus," the Roman goddess of love and beauty, "to whom the Romans traced the foundation of their race through her son, Aeneas, and his descendant, Romulus" (Knox and McKneown 73). Lucretius's speaker calls Venus the "mother of the Roman race, delight / Of men and gods" (Lucretius 1). Both the key word "race" and the label "mother" are reminiscent of how some Harlem Renaissance artists considered Africa as a source of ancestry. For example, in her essay "The Gift of Laughter," which was first published in Alain Locke's seminal literary anthology *The New Negro* (1925), Jessie Fauset calls people of sub-Saharan descent – that is people racialized as "black" – "the descendants of Mother Africa" (Fauset 50). Through his allusion to Lucretius's proem, Hughes's speaker "Signifies" both upon biblical discourse and Hegel's Enlightenment discourse. Not only does he assert that members of the sub-Saharan African diaspora can be religious, such religiosity departs from the monotheistic system of Christianity itself. Instead, the speaker's sub-Saharan African ancestry and its associated depth and blackness function as a deity, a source of faith, and no longer connotes inferiority to Western society.

However, Hughes's "Proem" does not limit the power of "Black" people's sub-Saharan African ancestry to the ability to acquire individual and diasporic self-consciousness. The poem's allusion to Lucretius stresses the primordial role which the speaker claims enslaved people have played in building what are known as great civilizations, thereby subverting the biblical parallelization of blackness with downfall, as well as Hegel's assertions that sub-Saharan Africans are incapable of producing any development. In the second and third stanzas, the speaker highlights how, as a worker, he built the architectural

and economic landmarks of large empires or nations like Egypt and the United States: "Under my *hand* the pyramids arose. / I *made* mortar for the Woolworth building" (emphasis added; 8-9). Both these lines are written in the active voice and emphasize manual labor, thus presenting the speaker as an active agent in the building process, even though he was subjected to forced or poorly paid work. The speaker's characterization of himself in such a light, paired with its reference to Lucretius's proem, suggests that workers and enslaved people did not merely participate in developing powerful empires; their labor was crucial to that development. Still addressing Venus, Lucretius's speaker claims:

> Striking sweet love into the breasts of all
> You make each in their hearts' desire *beget*
> After their kind their breed and progeny.
> Since you and only you are nature's guide
> And *nothing to the glorious shores of light*
> *Rises without you,* nor grows sweet and lovely (emphasis added; Lucretius 24-29)

Venus, whom Hughes's "Proem" uses to illustrate the power of the speaker's "Africa" (Hughes 3, 19), inspires "each" among her descendants (Lucretius 25) to produce, to call something into being or to give rise to it, in the figurative sense of the verb "to beget" (OED n. 3). The generative power for which Lucretius's speaker thanks Venus in the opening lines of "The Proem" echoes that performed by Hughes's speaker when, as he claims, he built or indeed gave rise to two architectural monuments known for their great height. Moreover, the assertion that "nothing . . . glorious . . . / Rises" without Venus hints at the assertion of Hughes's "Proem" that the United States would likewise not have been able to rise economically, and therefore politically, had they not benefited from free or close to free labor.

Hughes's active poetic voice asserts the agency of the people whom he denotes as "Negro" and "Black" not only in the economic development of the United States, but also in the nation's cultural development. This is mainly visible in the polysemic use of the verb "to make." In line nine, in which the speaker tells of his participation in building the Woolworth Building, "made" means "[t]o produce (a material thing) by combination of parts . . . to

manufacture; to construct" (OED n. 1a). In line thirteen, in which the speaker discusses his creative activity, "made" means "[t]o compose, write as the author (a book, poem . . .)," or therefore song (OED n. 4a). In doing so, he subverts Hegel's belief that sub-Saharan Africans are unlikely to produce any culture. According to the speaker of "Proem," they not only did have a culture, but were also able to retain and build upon it after they were deported to the Americas and enslaved. He claims:

> I've been a singer:
> All the way from Africa to Georgia
> I carried my sorrow song.
> I made ragtime. (10-13)

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, claiming the existence of a specifically African American culture is a meaningful revisionary act, and not only in so far as it counters Enlightenment racism. Harlem Renaissance thinkers also firmly believed in the potential of artistic form to allow African Americans to be considered as intellectually equal to those American citizens who are racialized as "white." W. E. B. Du Bois famously asserts, in his essay "Criteria of Negro Art" (1926), that "all Art is propaganda and ever must be" (Du Bois 66). In "The New Negro," Alain Locke claims that, whereas artistic prestige cannot, on its own, solve the issues which affect sub-Saharan Africans and their descendants worldwide, it does promise to be impactful in the short term. Indeed:

> Our greatest rehabilitation may possibly come through such channels [as contributing to the future development of Africa], but *for the present*, more *immediate* hope rests in the revaluation by white and black alike of the Negro in terms of his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective. (emphasis added; Locke 31)

The belief in the "immediate" political agency of artistic production explains why it was such an important concern for the Harlem Renaissance, as well as why "Proem" draws particular attention to the speaker's past as a "singer" (10) at the level of form. Indeed, the place of artistic expression is as central to the poem's structure as it is to the Harlem Renaissance, since the speaker discusses his music in the fourth stanza out of six, and the line

"I've been a singer" is tenth out of nineteen. Moreover, this stanza breaks the regular pattern which "Proem" sustains, of three lines; in contrast, it is extended to four. This four-lined stanza illustrates the speaker's actual movement across the Atlantic Ocean: "All the way from Africa to Georgia / I carried my sorrow songs" (11-12). In contrast, the other stanzas only use one line to describe the speaker's experience of European domination or enslavement in Europe or in colonized Africa (with the exception of the Egyptian empire in stanza three). Thus, by drawing particular focus on the fourth stanza, Hughes's speaker asserts the centrality of art in the short-term effort to advance the interests of African Americans. He subverts any claim that sub-Saharan African descendants, that is anyone denoted by the signifiers "Negro" and "Black," cannot make art. They can express themselves creatively and in politically self-conscious ways.

Moreover, the fourth stanza grounds artistic creativity as a feature which is particularly developed in "Black" people and therefore African Americans specifically, thus strengthening the overall sense of diasporic continuity developed in "Proem." They are not merely able to produce art; they are especially creative and their art exceptionally popular. The poem's allusion to Lucretius again reinforces the elevating way in which Hughes's speaker characterizes the people denoted by the signifiers "Negro" and "Black." In his invocation of Venus, Lucretius's speaker praises her as a source of creativity associated with the regenerative power of spring:[28]

> *From* you, sweet goddess, you, and at your coming
> The winds and clouds of heaven flee all away;
> For you the earth well skilled puts forth sweet flours;
> . . .
> For soon as spring days show their lovely face,
> And west wind blows *creative, fresh, and free*
> *From winter's grip,* first birds of the air proclaim you (emphasis added; Lucretius 8-15)

[28] According to Greene and Cushman, it is "convention[al]" for proems to "invoke[] the assistance of the Muse [here, Venus; in "Proem," the speaker's African ancestry] to inspire [the speaker's] song" (Greene and Cushman 102).

Lucretius claims that Venus launches spring, that it is brought about by – or stems "[f]rom" – her. The last two lines of the quoted excerpt may easily be read in the context of African Americans' (as well as colonized Africans') quest for freedom. Indeed, the "winter's grip" can be a metaphor for the constraints of Western supremacy, with "winter" relating to typical Northern spaces like the United States and Europe, from which the dominating, "grip[ping]" powers stem.[29] Since Hughes's "Proem" compares the descendants of the speaker's "Africa" with what Lucretius calls "the Roman race" (1), then Venus's superior creative power also applies to sub-Saharan African-descended people as characterized by Hughes's speaker. According to him, the people whom he denotes as "Black" are inherently creative and their domination by racially "white" people both practically and discursively impedes their artistic productivity.

The mention of "ragtime" (13) is also key in describing "Black" Americans' creativity as particularly powerful. Ragtime is a musical genre "evolved amongst African-American musicians in the 1890s" (OED n. 1). In his preface to the first edition of his anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922), which was published the same year as "Proem," James Weldon Johnson explains how ragtime was popular worldwide but quickly became estranged from its African American origins in the public imagination. Indeed, he claims that African American artists – whom the speaker of "Proem" denotes as part of his "Black" identity – contributed to American culture in the form of ragtime. "Ragtime . . . is the one artistic production by which America is known the world over. It has been all-conquering.

[29] In her poem "On Imagination" (1773), Phillis Wheatley makes a similar if more implicit symbolic use of winter and spring in relation to creativity and living in the U. S. as an African poet. Addressing "Imagination" as her source of creative inspiration, Wheatley's speaker claims: "Though *Winter* frowns to *Fancy's* raptur'd eyes / The fields may flourish, and gay scenes arise; / The frozen deeps may break their iron bands" (original italics; Wheatley 23-25). The "iron bands" and "*Winter*" likely function as metonymies respectively evoking slavery and North America. Despite the "pow'r" of imagination, sub-Saharan African descendants are not free to explore their creativity because of their unfree status in North America: "*Winter* austere forbids me to aspire, / And northern tempests damp the rising fire; / They chill the tides of *Fancy's* flowing sea" (original italics; 50-52). Thus, it is unsurprising that Hughes and Arna Bontemps included "On Imagination" in their anthology *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949) but passed on Wheatley's controversial poem "On Being Brought from Africa to America" (1773).

Everywhere it is hailed as 'American music'" (Johnson 11). However, Johnson explains the "credit" for this popular music was "take[n] from" African Americans around 1910 (Johnson 11-12). This process of the denial of the music's true roots namely started when "[s]ome of the[] earliest songs were taken down by white men, the words slightly altered or changed, and published under the names of the arrangers" (Johnson 12-13). Thus, by specifically referring to ragtime as the music which he created after he arrived in the United States, the speaker of "Proem" not only asserts that he possesses artistic abilities, but also restores the artistic credit once denied African American culture. As such, in terms of cultural abilities, the signifiers "Negro" and "Black" connote an exceptionally high creative productivity as well as the ability to produce music of sufficient quality to be considered "national" music in the United States (Johnson 12).

Hughes thus exemplifies the possibility for Harlem Renaissance poets to "Signify" upon, that is to repeat and revise, and in so doing to refute and reverse, the dehumanizing connotations which various instances of Western discourse – such as the Bible, racist legislation and Hegel's philosophy – ascribe to sub-Saharan African ancestry. The main form of rhetorical indirection in "Proem" is allusion, mainly to the Western doctrines and literature "Signified" upon, coupled with various poetic tools such as rhythm and stanzaic form.

1.3 Semantic subversion as a poetic plot twist

In "Heritage," "Sonnet 1" and "Black Magdalens," Bennett and Cullen turn to a more trickster-esque technique of rhetorical reversal, which is equally characteristic of Gates's theory of "Signifyin(g)." In the "Signifying Monkey Tales," the Signifying Monkey "play[s] on language use" in order to challenge the "shaky, self-imposed [royal] status" of the Lion, his antagonist. Similarly, Bennett and Cullen play with the semantic structure of their poems in order to reverse the self-assigned superiority of Western society. Such a rhetorical twist

exemplifies one of the eight characteristics through which Geneva Smitherman defines "Signifyin(g)": the "introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected" (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94). Throughout most of each poem, the lyrical speaker conveys a view of sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora which follows that of Western discourses. However, the poems end in unexpected semantic twists, whereby the speakers completely reverse the Western-like perspective which had hitherto been dominant.

1.3.1 Spoiling beauty and love with talk of death: Bennett's "Heritage" and "Sonnet 1"

Bennett's "Heritage" depicts a beautiful, peaceful and almost soporific image of what biblical and Enlightenment discourses conceptualize as Africa, only to end in a shocking reminder of the suffering of African Americans. Unlike in Hughes's "Proem," the speaker of "Heritage" imagines the space which Hughes's speaker called his "Africa." In the first five (out of a total of six) stanzas, she describes it as delicate and magnificent. She emphasizes the thinness of the nature and the people that she pictures, such as "the slim palm-trees" (Bennett 1), the "little pointed fingers" (3). Moreover, she emphasizes the delicate and artistic appearance of these palm-trees and girls. She anthropomorphizes the trees, imagining them to be "[p]ulling at the clouds" (2), whilst the girls' silhouettes seem "[e]tched against the sky" (5). She mentions a variety of other such scenes reflecting the beauty of the place which she depicts, such as a "sunset" (6), "the Sphinx" (9), flowers and their pleasing fragrance (13, 15), and "the stars" (14). All of these images provide a stark contrast to the "minstrel-smile" of the closing stanza (18).

The poem is regular on various formal levels, and thus suggests that the beautiful but soporific image of sub-Saharan African ancestry constructed at the figurative level will continue, rather than be interrupted in the last stanza. The poem does not have a regular meter, but it is regular in its rhythm in so far as every line is between three and five feet long

– that is, each contains three to five stressed syllables. The anaphora which reflects the speaker's imagination, or her desire to experience what she imagines through the senses, runs throughout the whole poem: "I want to" (1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16). Moreover, every other stanza in the poem – the first, third and fifth – end in three dots (3, 9, 15). Each of these three stanzas also comprises an alliteration of "s", whereby the syllables containing the sound "s" are always stressed. In "I want to see the slim palm-trees" (1), "see" and "slim" are both stressed (they are the second syllable of the iambs in which they belong). In the third stanza, the speaker talks of "the silent sands / Singing . . . / Before the Sphinx-still face" (7-9). The sound "s" begins the stressed syllables of the two iambs in "the silent sands." "Singing" is a trochee, thus the stressed syllable is the one which starts with "s". "Sphinx" is also the stressed syllable of an iamb. It is unclear whether "still face" is best read as a spondee or an iamb, but the word "face," which also includes the sound "s", is stressed in both cases. In the fifth stanza, the speaker pictures herself "[s]ighing to the stars" (14). "Sighing" is again a trochee and, since "starts" is preceded by the definite article, which is rarely stressed, both "s" sounds in line fourteen are stressed. With its regular rhythm, its lingering or nocturnal imagery and its soft sound patterns, "Heritage" hardly prefigures its thematically violent ending.

More importantly than the poem's aesthetically pleasing setting and its established formal regularity, the speaker has or pretends to have internalized a Western perspective of her African ancestry which contrasts with her revisionary voice in the last stanza. For example, the lexicon of stanza four (10-13) is typical of biblical and Enlightenment discourses which do not (attempt to) make sense of other-than-Christian rites and thus deem them irrational. Indeed, she is picturing a group of people performing a ceremony "[a]round a heathen fire" (11). By describing the people whom she is imaginatively watching as "heathen" – and whom she already denotes as "Negro" (4) – the speaker connotes sub-Saharan Africans as non-Christian, as well as "unenlightened" and "primitive" (OED n. 1A1).

The interpretation of dark skin as exterior to the values of Christianity echoes the biblical black-white symbolism described by Berghahn, whereby the color black evokes burnt matter (such as skin, as seen in the myth of Job), and therefore damnation and the devil (see Berghahn 4-5). The speaker's reductive imagination of the ritual fire as "heathen" suggests that she is aligned to a biblical, pejorative perception of sub-Saharan African ancestry.

Moreover, the concept of heathenness connotes a lack of intellectual and cultural advancement which is typical of Hegel's description of sub-Saharan Africa in *The Philosophy of History* and his allegation that sub-Saharan Africans are "wild and untamed" (Hegel 93). Like Hegel, the speaker believes that the "heathen" religious practice which she is picturing is inherently meaningless and therefore irrational. Her description of the heathen "chanting" around the fire echoes Hegel's explanation of what he believes comes closest to religious ceremonies in sub-Saharan Africa: "The Kings have a class of ministers . . . who perform special ceremonies, with all sorts of gesticulations, dances, uproar, and shouting, and in the midst of this confusion commences their incantations" (Hegel 94). "Chanting" means "[t]o recite (words) musically or rhythmically, [especially] as an *incantation* or as part of a ritual" (emphasis added; OED n. 4a). Whereas chanting can connote religious song, several of its other definitions also emphasize its repetitive nature and associate it with "sing-song" (OED 4 b, c). Thus, through the mention of "chanting," the speaker characterizes her imagined ancestors as lacking in cultural complexity – just as Hegel reduces African dances to mere "gesticulations" (Hegel 94) as well as child-like and therefore immature, or living in a "land of childhood," to apply Hegel's terms (Hegel 91).

While the speaker of "Heritage" refrains from such explicit racism as Hegel's, she is still not interested in finding out the sense of the religious practice which she "want[s] to hear" (Bennett 10). Thus, her perspective of sub-Saharan Africa is no more subversive than is Hegel's. At the end of his account of sub-Saharan Africa, Hegel concludes that the continent

altogether is not worth discussing any further. To him, Africa is merely an "introductory element" which needs be "eliminated" in order to begin discussing "the World's History" (Hegel 99). Similarly, Bennett's speaker concludes, without frustration, that the "black race" which she is picturing is "strange" (13). She does not seek or wish to cross the hermeneutic barrier which makes her oblivious to the meanings of her "Heritage" – she merely wants to "hear," to experience, not to understand. Nor does she extract herself from the position of intellectually superior observer which the voices of Western discourses assume. The combined use of the signifiers "Negro," "black," "chanting," "heathen" and "strange" construct a Western-like poetic voice which connotes sub-Saharan Africans pejoratively.

This Western semantic pattern is completely reversed in the last stanza. However, before this late, unexpected twist, that is half-way through the poem, there is already a hint that the speaker's Enlightenment-like voice is not fully consistent. In line nine, she mentions the "Sphinx," which is not located in sub-Saharan Africa, but in Egypt. However, Hegel does not include Egypt into his depiction of the region inhabited by people whom he racializes as "Negro." According to him,

> *Africa* must be divided into three parts: one is that which lies south of the desert of Sahara – Africa proper – the Upland almost entirely unknown to us, with narrow coast-tracts along the sea; the second is that to the north of the desert – European Africa (if we may so call it) – a coastland; the third is the river region of the Nile, the only valley-land of Africa, and which is in connection with Asia. (original italics; Hegel 91)

Following Hegel's mapping, Egypt, including the Sphinx, belongs to "the river region of the Nile," and therefore to "Asia[n]" Africa. In "Heritage," the speaker conflates Hegel's categories, since she locates the Sphinx, a signifier of "Asia[n]" Africa, with a variety of signifiers which denote Hegel's sub-Saharan Africa. Thus, whilst she repeats the Western discursive racism of the Bible and of Enlightenment philosophy, she still revises such discourses in that she infringes, indeed "Signifies" upon Hegel's geographical interpretation of "*Africa*." Such "Signification" via the poetic setting also counters Western discourses in so

far as it grants prestige to the land which the speaker imagines. In fact, by referencing the Sphinx, Bennett's speaker resorts to monumentalism, which is defined as "an expression of the desire to associate black Americans with symbols of wealth, intelligence, stability, and power" (Wilson Moses qtd. in Gruesser 4). John Cullen Gruesser notes that the monuments of "ancient Egypt" register as such elevating symbols (Gruesser 4). Indeed, they reflect the fact that "Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school of learning" (Moses qtd. in Gruesser 4). The mention of the Sphinx thus refutes both Hegel's representative division of Africa and the consistent dehumanizing tendency of Western discourses about sub-Saharan Africa.[30] In fact, the poem's whole setting is not coherent with sub-Saharan Africa. The speaker imagines a desert, which the presence of "sand[]" signals (7). In contrast, Hegel describes "the interior" of sub-Saharan Africa as "a girdle of marsh land with the most luxuriant vegetation" (Hegel 92), which hardly matches the solitary "slim palm-trees" which Bennett's speaker imagines, or the empty landscapes which makes the "girls" stand out "against the sky" (Bennett 1, 4, 5). The construction of setting in "Heritage" allows the poem to prefigure the shift in poetic voice which occurs in the last stanza.

Aside from the subversive but implicit function of its setting, "Heritage" still builds up an aesthetically pleasing but Westernized imaginative account of sub-Saharan Africa at the semantic level. The sixth and last stanza completely twists this perspective with the lyrical speaker suddenly recalling that her musings are really grounded in the suffering of "[her] . . . people" (17). Beyond such a twist in the poem's thematic content, the last stanza also comprises a rhythmic reversal which draws attention to how the suffering of African

[30] In the late eighteenth century, Wheatley already subtly incorporates the notion of Egypt into her depiction of Africa. In her poem "To the University of Cambridge, in New-England," she describes her "native shore" as the "land of errors, and *Egyptian* gloom" (original italics; Wheatley 4). Whereas, at the explicit level, her speaker deems herself lucky for having been "[b]rought" away "from those dark abodes" (Wheatley 6) her reference to the Egyptian empire prefigures the elevating rhetoric which comes to dominate African American writing about Africa in the nineteenth century (Gruesser 1, 4).

Americans was consistently silenced. In the closing line of the poem, the trochee "Hidden" (18) breaks the pattern in which the last line of each stanza starts with an unstressed syllable. Indeed, each stanza contains three lines, and every third line begins either with an iamb or with an anapest: "With little" (3), where the word "With" and the first syllable of "little" form an iamb; "While sunset" (6), where "While" and "sun-" also form an iamb; "Before" (9), another iamb; "Of a strange" (12), forming an anapest; "With tendrils" (15), where "With" and "ten-" also build an iamb. In contrast, the trochaic word "Hidden" (18) breaks the predictable, soporific pattern established until then and thus pulls the poem into the reality of African American suffering.

In addition to the attention which this shift in rhythm draws to the concealment of African American experience, the "minstrel-smile" functions as a synecdoche referring to the mainstream culture of the United States. Minstrelsy is a "humor[ous]" and "popular[]" form of blackface musical theatrical entertainment which "exploit[ed]" and "exaggerated real-life black circumstances and reinforced dangerous stereotypes during the 19th and 20th centuries." Moreover, this "genre shaped the nation's views on race for over a century and reinforced white superiority well after the abolition of slavery" (lib.usf.edu, n. pag.). Minstrelsy thus stands for the ways in which the U. S. mainstream has sought to maintain African Americans in an inferior position by masking their social and cultural reality. In "Heritage," as in Hughes's "Proem," the dynamics of racial politics are metaphorized through art – here the mask of minstrelsy, and the mention of ragtime in "Proem," thus reiterating the key importance which Harlem Renaissance thinkers put on artistic expression as a political vehicle.

"Heritage" therefore "Signifies" upon the pejorative symbolism of dark skin and sub-Saharan Africanness operating in biblical and Enlightenment discourses, in so far as the speaker mimics such a racist voice, only to denounce the "minstrel" mask, the misleading

rhetoric of the U. S. mainstream. Despite this "semantically . . . unexpected" thematic and rhythmic twist, to recall Smitherman's terms (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94), the poem's closing stanza retains much of the regularity which the poem builds up until then. Indeed, it still displays the anaphora "I want to" and the alliteration of "s" present in every second stanza – the words "surging," "sad," "soul" and "smile" all contain a stressed syllable starting with this sound (16-18). By unifying the last, revisionary stanza with the rest of the poem, the speaker suggests that her Westernized "African" fantasy connotes her frustration with the silencing of African American voices, rather than actual condescension towards sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, Bennett's "Heritage" "Signifies" upon racist discourse in that she uses "the language of trickery" (Abrahams qtd. in Gates 54): whereas she begins by pretending that she accepts a repetitive, non-revisionary image of her sub-Saharan African ancestry, her sensorial longing for African experience is instead closely associated with her knowledge of African American pain.

Bennett uses a similar trick of "semantically . . . unexpected" reversal (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94) in another of her poems, "Sonnet 1" (1927). The lyrical speaker of "Sonnet 1" does not discuss sub-Saharan African ancestry itself, but it alludes to the supremacy which Europeans gained through their canonical literature as well as by violence. She uses masculine pronouns such as "He" (Bennett 1, 6, 8), "his" (8, 9, 10, 13) and "him" (9) to describe a male "lover" (2) wearing a "silvern armour" (1). The portrayed warrior alludes to European canonical literature in several regards. Both the title and style of the poem explicitly refer to the sonnet: "Sonnet 1" comprises fourteen lines in iambic meter, most of which have ten syllables (so five iambic feet). The lyrical speaker uses the archaic past participle of the verb "to carve" – "carven" (5) – as well as imposes a slow and full pronunciation of the adverb "beautifully": in order to follow the iambic meter, one has to stress the third syllable

of the adverb. These formal elements evoke a conservative English standard which is at odds with the various contracted forms of the African American Vernacular.

In addition, the speaker's description of the warrior in "Sonnet 1" alludes to medieval European prestige. The material of his armor recalls some of the armor pieces found at the archeological site of Sutton Hoo, England, such as an "early seventh-century helmet . . . which consisted of an iron bowl decorated with applied figural ornaments with silver inlay" (Breiding n. pag.). The mention of "legends long ago" (2) and of "Romance" (8), as well as the speaker's view of the warrior as the allegory of "Love" (9) are possible allusions to the "long . . . captivat[ing] . . . images of knights in shining armor evoking the age of chivalry and the ideals of Camelot" (metmuseum.org). Indeed, "Romance" is polysemic; in addition to referring to feelings and relationships of love, and to languages derived from Latin or "the Roman language," it also alludes to the Old French word *roman*, which "was applied to the popular courtly stories in verse which dealt with . . . the legends about Arthur, Charlemagne and his knights, and stories of classical heroes especially Alexander" (Drabble et al. n. pag.). According to the principles of courtly love, the warrior's worthiness of the speaker's love means that he has or can "fulfil[] every feat of prowess imaginable" (Burnley 148). "English correspondents" of such heroes Arthur's knights include "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" as well as "Sir Orfeo" (Drabble et al. n. pag.). This literary material goes on to inspire Shakespeare, which closes the loop with "Sonnet 1" back to its allusion to the English canonical literary standard. The poem's lyrical speaker is therefore enthralled in a warrior whose appearance connotes the grounds on which Western Europe has built its self-acclaimed cultural prestige, which is much reminiscent of the Lion's self-imposed royalty in the African American "Signifying Monkey" tales. In the poem's frame of reference, European cultural prestige is the result of European colonial violence. Indeed, the lover's armor also stands for the technical advantages which Europeans had over Native populations of the Americas in

colonial warfare. The warrior's "sheath" made of "Tamarack" (5) alludes to this colonial context: the tamarack tree is native to North America.

As in "Heritage," a complete semantic twist occurs at the end of the poem, here in the very last line. The romantic warrior whom the speaker had thought the man in armor to be is revealed as "the mouth of Death" (14). Whereas European literary culture is first characterized as prestigious and awe-inspiring, in the conclusion of the poem it becomes an allegory of destruction. Just as in the conclusion of "Heritage," the "semantically . . . unexpected" (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94) end of "Sonnet 1" unmasks the true, "hidden face" (10) of Western European discourses and their racist semantics. Indeed, the synecdoche "the *mouth* of Death" (emphasis added; Bennett 14) emphasizes the destructivity of what Westerners have said – that is, written – about African Americans and sub-Saharan Africans in general.

1.3.2 Cullen's "Black Magdalens" and the fall of Virtue

As in the two poems by Bennett, in "Black Magdalens" Cullen uses unexpected semantic reversal in order to draw attention to the damage caused by the perpetrators of Western doctrines to other-than-Christian and other-than-Anglo-Saxon people. While Cullen's speaker first employs biblical discourse, towards the end of the poem he completely switches the semantic pattern initially constructed. As in "Sonnet 1," where Bennett's speaker conflates the allegories of "Love" and "Death," the twist which occurs in "Black Magdalens" is semantically radical. It relies on catachresis or the "misuse or wrong application of a word" (Colman n. pag.). At the end of the poem, the speaker of "Black Magdalens" indeed "misuse[s]" and, in fact, exposes the destructive hermeneutics of Christian ethics by reversing its typical signifiers.

Throughout the first two and a half of the four stanzas, the speaker adopts the biblical discursive dichotomy which connotes the signifier "Black" – and the thereby denoted sub-Saharan African ancestry – as heathen, sinful and dirty, and whiteness as virgin and pure. According to the poetic speaker, blackness, as well as sex work, to follow a late extended use of the word "magdalen" (OED n. 2a), connote sin, poverty and shame. The speaker does not even refer explicitly to the eponymous characters as he opens the poem. He shows contempt towards them by using the deictic pronoun "[t]hese" (Cullen 1). He insists that they "have no Christ" (1), which can mean either that Christ has forsaken them or that they lack faith. Both readings suggest an equally pejorative connotation of their condition as "Magdalens." The symbolic pairing of prostitution with both religious (and therefore moral) and socioeconomic destitution is visible in the ambivalent, figurative and literal meanings of "eat" (8). Indeed, the Magdalens' occupation as sex workers, their "body's sale" (7), either renders them unworthy of the metaphorical nourishment of Christ's love, or the revenue from their activity is insufficient for them to sustain healthy nutrition. They are thus deprived, whether spiritually or physically.

In opposition, "[t]he chaste clean ladies" (9) who pass by the "Black Magdalens" are their complete antonyms, and thus they denote the antonym of "Black": whiteness, which biblical discourse, as well as the poem (at least so far), codes as both morally and socially superior to blackness. In particular, the ladies' whiteness connotes virginity and purity: the adjective "clean" is stressed, which results in the appearance of a spondee in a mostly iambic poem ("Black Magdalens" alternates between iambic tetrametric and trimetric lines). The virginity of these "ladies" alludes to Mary and the Immaculate conception, whereas Mary Magdalene, the biblical figure to whom the poem's title alludes, is a "reformed prostitute": that is, a "repentant (female) sinner" (OED n. 2a). By associating the signifier "Black" with Magdalene's sex work and opposing the "Magdalens" to the metaphorically "clean ladies,"

the poem emphasizes the biblical discourse which connotes "Black" as sinful. In addition to this religious consideration, the "ladies" connote high social ranking. Indeed, they wear long "skirts" which they want to preserve from the alleged dirtiness of the "Magdalens." Moreover, they are merely "pass[ing] . . . by" (9) on their way somewhere (or they feign to be), rather than living or working on the street. The ladies' connotation as clean, virginal and well-to-do thus comes into stark contrast with the eponymous "Black Magdalens."

While the speaker describes the "ladies" as antonymic to the women whom the title denotes as "Black," he never mentions the actual antonym of the color black, "white." The ladies' position within the "[fictitious] white race" created by seventeenth-century legal texts (Battalora 52) is merely recognizable via the mention of what the color white typically connotes in biblical discourse: cleanness, virginity and thus moral superiority. In other words, there occurs a reversal of signified and signifier, whereby the connotations of the signifier "white" become signifiers of "white." This designation of the racial concept of whiteness via its connotations rather than the signifier "white" itself conveys the lyrical speaker's "indirect intent" (Claudia Mitchell-Kernan qtd. in Gates 85), which Gates lists among "[t]he most important defining features of Signifyin(g)" (Gates 85). Echoing his point (which was in turn inspired by Bakhtin) about "double-voiced" signifiers (Gates 50), and drawing on Mitchell-Kernan's argument that a "shared [discursive] knowledge" on the part of readers is necessary in order to decipher both "voices" of a "Signifyin(g)" text,[31] Gates explains that "Signifyin(g) . . . depends on the success of the signifier at invoking an *absent* meaning *ambiguously 'present'* in a carefully wrought statement" (emphasis added; Gates 86). While the symbolic use of the signifier "white" in relation to racist connotations is technically "absent" from

[31] In her analysis of a "Signifying Monkey" poem in which "the Monkey dethrones the Lion" (Gates 85), Mitchell-Kernan argues that "[t]here seems to be something of symbolic relevance from the perspective of language . . . The monkey and lion do not speak the same language; the lion is not able to interpret the monkey's use of language, he is an outsider" (Mitchell-Kernan qtd. in Gates 85). Thus, to understand the "message" which a speaker "attempts to transmit . . . indirectly" (ibid.) by "Signifyin(g)" means to "valoriz[e] the figurative," to perceive the "latent" discursive meaning behind the "manifest," dictionary meaning (Gates 86).

"Black Magdalens," such a concept of whiteness is implicitly, indirectly "present." Following the logic of Mitchell-Kernan and Gates, one must interpret the "ladies" rhetorically, as signifiers of the social construct of "whiteness," in order to understand that the poem "Signifies" upon racist discourses.

While the description of the "ladies" who walk past the "Black Magdalens" is an indirect reference to the racist discursive category of "whiteness," in these lines (Bennett 9-10) the speaker still aligns with biblical color symbolism. The radical semantic subversion of that symbolism occurs in the fourth and last stanza. However, similarly to Bennett's "Heritage," the twist begins discretely beforehand, in the second half of the third stanza: "But Magdalens have a ready laugh; / They wrap their wounds in pride" (11-12). At the level of prosody, the succession of the two unstressed syllables "have a" creates an anapest which breaks the poem's regular iambic pattern. This rhythmic breach reflects the unexpected character of the "Magdalens"' attitude vis-à-vis the "white" "ladies." Despite the semantic framework which the speaker establishes until line ten, the "Black Magdalens" are not ashamed of their social condition. Instead, they laugh at the "clean ladies" and seem boastful. At the "manifest" semantic level (Gates 86), it is antithetical for the "Magdalens" to seem proud of their "wounds." In the context thus far established by the poem, these "wounds" can refer to sexually transmitted disease, and the "Magdalens" seem to incite disgust in the "white" women who walk by them. In mocking the "ladies" rather than accepting their self-assumed "white" superiority, the "Black Magdalens" recall the vanity of the speaker's love interest in another poem by Cullen, "A Song of Praise (For One Who Praised His Lady's Being Fair)" (1925). According to the speaker of "A Song of Praise," his "love" (Cullen 1), who is denoted as a "dark," that is an African American woman (or at least a woman with sub-Saharan African heritage) is in no regard inferior to his addressee's own "[fair] lady." Indeed, the speaker's romantic partner sings well (3) and moves graciously (9-12). Nor does

she surrender to any feeling of inferiority, or even humility: "[h]er walk is . . . winged with arrogance" (Cullen, "A Song of Praise" 5, 8).

In "Black Magdalens," laughing in the midst of destitution also alludes to the centrality of laughter in the reflection on the specificity of African American artistic contributions at work during the Harlem Renaissance. As Fauset explains in "The Gift of Laughter," through the racist caricatural humor of minstrelsy (including in African American troupes like the "Georgia Minstrels"), African Americans in the performance industry were seen as "the 'funny man' of America . . . a living comic supplement" (Fauset 45). However, Fauset recounts, African American performers like George Walker and Bert Williams then "introduced with the element of folk comedy some element of reality" (46). By the 1920s, the "laughter" which has become a typical code of African American performance arts "has . . . its overtones of pain" (48), as does the laughter of the wounded "Black Magdalens," whose pain is both physical and socio-economic in nature. To Fauset, this particularly African American form of humor is a "gift" associated with "superabundant vitality" and "joyousness." Although "it has its rise . . . in the very woes which beset" African Americans, Fauset believes "[i]t is [their] emotional salvation" (49). So, the laughter of the "Black Magdalens" at the "white" "ladies" is not only noteworthy because it shows their refusal of psychological submission to the racist discourses developed by Western mainstream society. Their laughter also connotes the political priorities of Harlem Renaissance writers in the 1920s, as well as the way in which these artists consider their painful "Black" identity as the very source of their specifically African American creativity. In that respect, the poem "Black Magdalens" agrees with the speaker of Hughes's "Proem," who compares his idea of "Africa" with Venus's gift of the power to "beget" in Lucretius's "The Proem" (Lucretius 25).

The radical twist of the speaker's racist biblical discourse takes full effect in the fourth stanza of "Black Magdalens":

They are full ill since Christ forsook
The cross to mount a throne.
And Virtue still is stooping down
To cast the first hard stone. (Cullen, "Black Magdalens" 10-13)

"Christ" (13) can be seen as a denotation of whiteness, since he represents a moral ideal within the discourse which connotes the color white positively and the color black pejoratively with respect to the biblical ethos. Correspondingly, according to Anna Swartwood House, European representations of Jesus Christ have historically tended to "portray[] [him] as a white, European man," although "no one knows exactly what Jesus looked like" (House n. pag.). Cullen's "Black Magdalens" therefore alludes to an iconography that connotes the construct of whiteness as virtue. The poem's speaker uses catachresis in order to critique the racist ramifications of the ethical system of Christianity: "Christ" now connotes despotism and no longer martyrdom, love or humility. This change is made clear by the antithetical symbols of the "cross" and the "throne" (14). The switch from the definite article "[t]he" to the indefinite article "a" signals the loss of the uniqueness which characterizes Christ. In "Black Magdalens," Cullen's "Christ" is an opportunistic monarch of which there have been many. Alongside "Christ," in a further catachresis, the allegory of "Virtue" (15), another common biblical connotation of whiteness, no longer occupies the moral high ground; instead, it is merciless. This shift is made more striking by the contrast between the upward movement of Christ "mount[ing]" his "throne" (14) and the downward motion of "Virtue" "stooping down" (15). Through catachresis, "Black Magdalens" thus typically exemplifies the revisionary process of repeating and revising of "Signifyin(g)," since it reiterates the connotations which biblical discourse ascribes to people of sub-Saharan African ancestry, only to invert the respective signifiers and connotations of the Christian ethos.

The last stanza makes explicit the ambiguous treatment of the wounds of the "Black Magdalens" in line twelve: "They wrap their wounds in pride" (12). The speaker's biblical

symbolism connotes these "Black" sex workers as sinful. Following such rhetoric, the image of their wounds would merely symbolize the exterior manifestation of their alleged inner, moral corruption. That is why the ability of the "Magdalens" to heal themselves by being proud initially disturbs the coherence of the speaker's speech. The closing stanza clarifies or brings to completion that semantic shift: the speaker explains that the "Magdalens" "fare full ill" because of the despotism of "Christ" and the cruelty and ruthlessness of "Virtue." The wounds do not stem from the life conditions of the "Magdalens" themselves, but from the political as well as discursive domination of Judeo-Christian society.

Bennett's poems "Heritage" and "Sonnet 1" and Cullen's "Black Magdalens" display a key feature of "Signifyin(g)," which Smitherman describes as the "introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected" (Smitherman qtd. in Gates 94). They do so by dramatizing a radical reversal of a semantic pattern which resembles that of racist Western discourses, which the poems' speakers build up (almost) until the last stanza. Bennett uses this technique of indirect subversion in order to critique both biblical symbolism and Enlightenment philosophy, exemplified by Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* ("Heritage"). She also "Signifies" upon the discourse of canonical culture, whereby Western settlers and colonizers crown themselves as inherently superior to other-than-European cultures and people ("Sonnet 1"). For his part, Cullen approaches the Christian facet of Western racist discourses more specifically.[32] He switches the connotations of the binary construction which associates whiteness with goodness and blackness with evil in such a way as to show that the conditions which inform the lives of people racialized as "Black" result from the violence of the perpetrators of this racist white-black dichotomy.

[32] Gerald Early notes that "all of [Cullen's major poetry] is Christian or could only have been produced by a Christian consciousness" (Early 57). Cullen famously described himself as struggling with "reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination" (Cullen qtd. in Early 57). However, he smoothly combines his knowledge of Christianity with racial (and often clearly anti-racist) themes, which are also present in "most of" his "major poetry" (Early 57).

Hughes, Bennett and Cullen each use rhetorical indirection to repeat but reject, first and foremost, the hermeneutic domination of sub-Saharan Africa by Western imagination. Defining the art and culture of African Americans and their past as well as potential contribution to the U. S. as a political power and a body of culture, in place of the connotations which Western discourses created, was of central concern to the writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Contributing to this reflection, the poems analyzed in this chapter are grounded in figures of indirection and "double-voice[]" (Gates 50). Using the same set of signifiers – "Black," "Negro" and "night," for instance – they refer to Western discourses while simultaneously creating new, antiracist connotations. Rather than attempting to erase the Western voice which has used these signifiers to racist ends, the poems discredit it by emulating and juxtaposing it with what they present as the voice of fully-fledged African American subjects.

CHAPTER 2: INTERSECTIONAL REVISION AND THE REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

The Harlem Renaissance – both during its development and through its critical treatment in academia – was dominated by men. When she first published her anthology of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry, *Shadowed Dreams. Women's Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance* (2006 [1989]), Maureen Honey deplored the fact that, as of 1989, "little information existed on women poets from the Harlem Renaissance despite their central role in creating that artistic movement" (xxi). In mainstream U. S. discourses (as well as in Western discourses more broadly), African American women were assigned particularly stigmatizing connotations, which the revisionary anti-racist poetry of male Harlem Renaissance poets – such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen – at times did not address. This discursive gap was not left unfilled, however. Poems written by African American women or representing an African American woman, such as Gwendolyn Bennett's "Fantasy" (1927) and Hughes's "Danse Africaine" (1922), offer an intersectional critique of the Western discursive representations of African-descended people, and of women in particular: that is, a critique which accounts for the overlapping of gendered and racial forms of oppression.

"Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" repeat but critically revise – or "Signify" upon, according to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s theory – both the racism and misogyny of mainstream Western and U. S. discourses. Rather than or beyond representing African American women as objects of a sexualizing, oppressive gaze, these two poems imagine them as beautiful, dignified and powerful. Both poems construct liminal spaces as loci in which African American figures can subvert the power dynamics of racist misogynistic discourses. Bennett's "Fantasy" uses allusion in order to "Signify" upon the representation of African ancestry both in Western discourses and in some poems by other Harlem Renaissance writers, like Hughes's

"Nude Young Dancer" (1926), "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'" (1926), and "Danse Africaine," to name a few.[33] In doing so, "Fantasy" counters the view of African American women's bodies as providers of care or sexual pleasure, and instead centers the potential for mutual admiration and empowerment among women who are racialized as "Black." While "Danse Africaine" appears to direct a potentially oppressive gaze upon the represented dancer, this poem simultaneously conveys typical tropes of "Signifyin(g)" or indirection more broadly. Such tropes include various forms of reversal through allusion and chiasmus. As such, the poem attributes agency to the figure of the dancer, and not merely the function of an object of visual pleasure.

2.1 Outlining the gap: The misogynistic contexts of the Harlem Renaissance women's poetry

While Bennett's "Fantasy" repeats or alludes to tropes which were commonly used in Western discourses to describe African ancestry or Africa itself, the effect of the poem's revision of these tropes tackle both racist ideology and gender bias. Some racist tropes are also "Signified" upon by male poets of the Harlem Renaissance like Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps. "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon the work of these poets, too. Indeed, while some poems by Bennett's male colleagues strive to subvert the racist use of given signifiers, they fall short of including the interests of African American women in particular into their revisionary work. In fact, women poets like Bennett faced and sought to (poetically) counteract a broader context of male domination if not outright misogyny, which informed not only the Harlem Renaissance, but also the "New Negro" movement at large. Most essays reflecting upon these two movements generalize the experience of African Americans using

[33] While many African American texts "Signify" specifically upon Western "antecedent" texts or discourses, to use Gates's terminology, transracial intertextual critique is not a mandatory feature of "Signification." Indeed, Gates borrows Ralph Ellison's claim that (African American literary texts) always already "Signify" upon texts written in the same period, regardless of the author's racial status. Ellison sees intertextual criticism as inherent to literature: "all the novels of a given historical moment form an argument over the nature of reality and are, to an extent, criticisms each of the other" (Ellison qtd. in Gates 106).

the singular, masculine pronoun "he" (for example, see Johnson 1931 [1922], Fauset 1925, Locke 1925, Schuyler 1926 and Hughes 1926). Thus, the figure of the "archetyp[al]" African American cultural citizen (Crawford 126), which leading Harlem Renaissance intellectuals from both the older and younger generation tried to describe, is masculine in essence.

The masculine and potentially misogynistic energy of the "New Negro" is noticeable when considering Gerald Early's account of its origin moment. In his introduction to *My Soul's High Song. The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance* (1991), Early places the initiating event of "the larger New Negro Movement that made the [Harlem] Renaissance ideologically possible" in "exactly . . . 1908," when the African American boxer Jack Johnson became "the first black heavyweight boxing champion, . . . the most significant title in sports in the United States" (Early 24-25).[34] Early believes Johnson to be "an early archetype of the New Negro" (Early 25) in so far as he "refus[es] to accept his place" (Early 27) as inferior to Anglo-Americans and other members of the socially constructed "white" race. While the figure of Jack Johnson seems emblematic of the self-assertion which characterizes the "New Negro" and, by extension, the Harlem Renaissance, tracing this revisionary movement back to Johnson means associating it with stereotypical masculinity. The "idea of the New Negro" enshrined in Johnson's celebrity is specifically that of a man, who "assert[s] . . . his manhood" (Early 26). In Early's description, the champion prizefighter appears to express his racial assertion against "white" people violently and possessively: "There were blacks who had beaten white men in the ring but none who did it with such glee and disdain. There were black men who had had sexual relations with white women before . . . but none had so flaunted their . . . sexual prowess as did Johnson" (Early 25). According to Early, therefore, the "New Negro" movement echoes how Johnson "forced the nation to submit to . . . his dominance" (Early 27), and thus seems grounded in a project of

[34] Early indicates that African American "pugilists," that is prizefighters or boxers, in general "play a central role in a major phase in the development of twentieth-century American and African-American culture" (Early 26).

intimidation and reversed objectification.[35] Bennett, like her many fellow women poets of the Harlem Renaissance, had to develop complex rhetorical strategies – including "Signifyin(g)" – not only to counter racism, but also to defy and create space for their own voices within the hypermasculine atmosphere in which they operated.

The embrace of masculinity in the figure of the "New Negro" – or, more specifically, this movement's tendency to equate racial self-assertion with masculinity – may partly result from the influence of one of its contemporary movements, the "New Woman." Emily Bernard describes the figure of the "New Woman" as a woman who "thumb[s] her nose at gender conventions by questioning traditional marriage, sometimes wearing men's clothes, and smoking. She behave[s] as if she [is] the author of her own destiny" (Bernard xv). The "New Woman" also shares with many Harlem Renaissance writers (who, by extension, are also part of the "New Negro" movement) the refusal to comply with the mainstream social order. Bernard explains that the "New Woman" "ha[s] a distinctive style that [is] a rejection of [dominant] modes of dress and behavior" (Bernard xv). It seems as though the "New Negro" retains the masculine code of the rebellion of its fellow revisionary movement while failing to represent women's interests.

The so-called masculine or indeed imposing and self-assertive character of the "New Negro" led to a concrete bias whereby African American male writers appropriated the discourse of – that is, spoke for – African American women. Kirschke shows how *The Crisis*, a key vehicle for Harlem Renaissance thinkers, "paid tribute to motherhood" in a way which "reinforce[d] the woman's position as the family's main caregiver" (Kirschke 40). Some male

[35] It is necessary to concede that Early's account of the significance of Jack Johnson outlines a positive change for African Americans in the mainstream U. S. discourse on race. Although Johnson exemplifies "the famous black badman of blues songs and folktales," once he becomes a celebrity, he functions as "a national icon, no longer the local terrorist of some black community" (Early 27). In other words, his rendition of the "badman" is a signifier of a new "political and cultural meaning" rather than "simpl[e] psychopath[y]" (Early 27). Still, these newly created meanings do not accommodate any inclusive forms of masculinity, let alone the specific experience of African American women.

authors tended to adopt a louder voice within the movement, and occasionally "appropriate[e]" that of women writers. Margo Nathalie Crawford notes how, "[i]n his preface to one of Georgia Douglas Johnson's volumes of poetry, *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1298)," Alain Locke "claims the right to define the black woman's agenda" (Crawford 128-129). Conversely, in both "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine," African American women appropriate the whole space – both literal and discursive.

In relation to the publication of poetry, men canonize their work far earlier and more often than women. Indeed, several male poets published their poetry in collections from a young age. For example, by the age of twenty-five, Hughes had published two poetry collections and Countee Cullen three. In contrast, women's poems tended to remain "scattered" (Honey xxxiii) across magazine issues[36] and other mediums of publication which had released their poems individually. As Honey explains, "women published relatively few collections, bringing together in a single volume the scattered pieces dispersed among several journals and anthologies" (Honey xxxiii). As a consequence, women poets of the Harlem Renaissance benefited from little visibility as authors in their own right – not only during the Harlem Renaissance itself, but also in the ensuing academic criticism. Indeed, the lack of collections dedicated to the poetic production of specific women authors (until the publication of such volumes as Honey's *Shadowed Dreams*, that is) made it difficult to study any "literary patterns" present in their work (Honey xxxiii). Thus, there was little opportunity to discover and coherently analyze the revisionary rhetoric of these poets. Such unambitious approaches to women's poetry of the Harlem Renaissance led "[l]ater critics . . . to see women's verse as

[36] Magazine publications were instrumental in disseminating the political thought and creativity of Harlem Renaissance writers. Many poems produced in the 1920s were first published in the *Crisis* magazine, which was founded by W. E. B. Du Bois and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and *Opportunity* the magazine of the National Urban League. Such magazines, as the Harlem Renaissance itself, were concerned with encouraging African Americans to produce literature, for example by organizing literary writing contests. Kirschke points out that, "soon" after its creation, "*The Crisis* . . . became one of the most influential journals that dealt with social and political thought in America; it was read and discussed well beyond the limited confines of NAACP membership" (Kirschke 35).

conventional and . . . out of step with the militant, rebellious race consciousness of the period" (Honey xxxiiii). The second section of the present chapter argues that, on the contrary, Bennett's "Fantasy" is invested with racial assertion. Locke had correctly understood that women poets of the Harlem Renaissance "explored gender [as well as race] without developing an explicit protest" (Crawford 129). However, whereas some critics have interpreted the lack of such "an explicit protest" as a sign of "'raceless' literature," this chapter argues that poems like "Fantasy" "Signify." Exemplifying Gates's theory, they revise racist and misogynistic discourses by employing tools of rhetorical reversal and indirection rather than delivering explicit meanings.

In addition to navigating the unequal gender dynamics of their professional milieu, female writers of the Harlem Renaissance confronted the discursive stigmatization of African American women in the 1920s. Common negative connotations ascribed to African American women as signifiers were both hypersexuality and lack of sexuality. For example, Crawford notes "the peculiar simultaneous defeminization of some black women and oversexualization of others" (Crawford 138). Defeminizing signifiers in mainstream U. S. discourse, such as "Aunt Jemima" – especially in minstrel shows in the nineteenth century, and later in food advertisement[37] – typically connoted "caretak[ing]" (as opposed to providing sexual pleasure). The main figure used to create such a meaning was that of the "mammy." Lena Ahlin explains that "the mammy is typically a very black, obese domestic who is more loyal to the white family she works for than to her own biological family" (Ahlin 149). According to Honey, "the plantation mammy" was completely "[d]ivorced from sexuality" and therefore considered "safe . . . for the white female imagination." Indeed, "she wanted to take care of

[37] "Aunt Jemima" is the symbol of a pancake mix brand created in the late nineteenth century and is grounded on the racist and sexist signifier of the "mammy." As Maurice M. Manring writes, "the idea of Aunt Jemima as a salesmammy" came from "the minstrel stage" (Manring 20, 21). The "advertising campaign" for Aunt Jemima "work[ed] so well" that the "nineteenth-century mammy still decorates the front of . . . box[es] of ready-mix batter in the 1990s, . . . a time that supposedly has relieved itself of . . . many racist and sexist stereotypes in advertising" (Manring 19).

her employer (mystifying the exploitative relationship between them) and posed no sexual competition" (Honey l). Beyond desexualization, the "mammy" seems to "place[]" African American women "outside the very category of 'women'" (Crawford 131). In an essay published in Locke's pivotal anthology *The New Negro* (1925), Elise McDougald describes "Aunt Jemima" – a popular iteration of the "mammy" – as "grotesque . . . without grace or loveliness. She is most often used to provoke the mirthless laugh of ridicule; or to portray feminine viciousness or vulgarity" (McDougald qtd. in Crawford 131). Bennett's "Fantasy" reassigns femininity to its constructed figure of the African American woman. It does not merely grant her the sexual attractiveness lacking in the "mammy," but it assigns to her a dignified beauty which can ignite mutual admiration among women racialized as "black."[38]

Claiming sexual attractiveness in order to counter the symbolic damage of the "mammy" would have oversimplified the matrix of stigma in which women writers of the Harlem Renaissance were located. Along with defeminization, another damaging but frequent trope in the mainstream discourse of the 1920s U. S. was the oversexualization of African American women's bodies. Ahlin indicates that there were "widespread stereotypes of the promiscuity of the African American woman," which were even "used to legitimize sexual slavery" (Ahlin 156). The artistic context of the Harlem Renaissance, especially modernist primitivism and its interest in "an instinctive, untrammeled state of mind" (Thomas n. pag.), contributed to a view of African American women's bodies as igniting "primal impulse[s]" and therefore as "oversexualiz[ed]" (Thomas n. pag., Crawford 135). DoVeanna S. Fulton

[38] Admittedly, considering "Fantasy" from the vantage point of Fat Studies (which investigates the meaning of fatness and body weight in society), the poem does not, in fact, "Signify" upon the pejorative symbol of the "mammy." Aside from her racial profile and her role as a care-giver, one of the chief signifiers of the "mammy" is her fatness (see Ahlin 149). With this in mind, "Fantasy" does not retain the signifier "fat" in order to invest it with new connotations. On the contrary, it creates counter-signifiers which connote thinness and lightness. The "peacock" which "saunter[s]" in the queen's garden is "slim-necked" (Bennett 5). Moreover, the queen herself is coded as light in that she wears "hyacinth shoes" (9). The idea of footwear made of flowers suggests delicate feet undamaged by the assumed heaviness and hard work of the "plantation mammy." Thus, while "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon other racist and/or misogynistic tropes which critique and reject the symbol the "mammy," it does not "Signify" upon the "mammy" herself.

claims that “Black women’s lack of morality was a foregone conclusion for many whites at the turn of the century” (Fulton 12). She cites “a writer for the magazine *The Independent*” who found the idea of “a virtuous Negro woman [inconceivable]” (Fulton qtd. in Fulton 12). The African American middle-class, exemplified by Booker T. Washington’s Tuskeegee Institute, Alabama (the first institution of higher learning open to African Americans), internalized these stereotypes and consequently upheld what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls a “politics of respectability,” which embraced “[mainstream] middle-class values of education, material progress, and moral certainty” (Fulton 12). Both “Fantasy” and “Danse Africaine” revise the hypersexualization of African American women, even as they reuse tropes of primitivism and thus remain critical of mainstream American moral values.

“Black” female bodies are at a particular risk of hypersexualization in the context of performance. Literary examples can be found in Hughes’s poems “Nude Young Dancer” and “To a Black Dancer in ‘The Little Savoy’.” Both poems adopt what has become known as a “male gaze” upon their respective addressees, the “[d]ancer[s].” From the context of film studies, Laura Mulvey defines the male gaze as a “neat[] combin[ation]” of “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film” (Mulvey 12). The male gaze is sexual in essence: it “projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Mulvey 11). Although the present discussion analyzes poetry rather than film, the concept of the male gaze is still relevant. Both “Nude Young Dancer” and “To a Black Dancer” address dance performers, whom the respective speakers observe and describe, and generally envisage as objects of sexual pleasure. Both dancer figures are thus “simultaneously looked at and displayed.” Both poems exemplify one way of “cod[ing]” the representation of a woman “for . . . erotic impact” described by Mulvey: they “stylize[] and fragment[] [these women’s bodies] by close-ups”

(Mulvey 14). Indeed, the speakers' diction in the poems isolates body parts which are traditionally sexualized, either at the end of a line or as the only word in a single line, such as the "hips" ("Nude Young Dancer" 6), "lips" ("Nude Young Dancer" 8, "To a Black Dancer" 3), and "breasts" ("To a Black Dancer" 5). Iris Brey, another scholar of film studies, who theorized a counterpart to Mulvey's male gaze, the "female gaze" – "le regard féminin" – also highlights that focusing closely on oft-sexualized body parts, such as the breasts, can make the represented woman appear as vulnerable to (and thus objectified by) the gazing, male subject (Brey 16). "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" both "Signify" upon the hypersexualizing, objectifying discourse which "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer" illustrate.[39]

An intersectional approach to Harlem Renaissance poetry must consider the speakers who gaze at their addressees in "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer" not only as male, but also as Western, and therefore – according to the Western cognitive framework – holding power over racialized women. The description of the dancers in these two poems exemplifies the ideology which Edward Said coined as Orientalism. Amongst other hermeneutical falsehoods in European discourses on the "Orient," Orientalism refers to how "Western artists and intellectuals often romanticized and misrepresented Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, *exoticizing* and *eroticizing* the East" (emphasis added; Hart et al. n. pag.). While the notion of Africa as a continent is distinct from what the West has constructed as the "Orient" or the "East," the speakers of the two poems at hand indeed both "exoticiz[e] and

[39] Admittedly, "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'" may be interpreted as critiquing the (racist) male gaze. Indeed, the poetic speakers perhaps do not speak in the first degree but emulate a fetishizing discourse which is at odds with African American women's dignity. Alternatively, it is possible to view the sexualization of the poems' addressees as part of the emphasis which Hughes puts on freedom. Bernard explains that, "[l]ike other younger [African American] artists, Langston Hughes asserted his freedom through bold representations of sexuality, a sore spot for those bent on correcting stereotypes of black people as hypersexual" (Bernard 2018, xvii). Clearly, however, not all members of the Harlem Renaissance's younger generation of artists agreed with Hughes's position regarding the representation of sexuality in African Americans (Bennett was born in 1902, the same year as Hughes). Thus, this latter interpretation does not invalidate a reading of the two "Dancer" poems as practicing the male gaze.

eroticiz[e]" their addressees. The title of "To a Black Dancer" explicitly racializes her, while the speaker of "Nude Young Dancer" engages in a mixed-race fetish: "What star-light moon has been your mother?" (7). Therefore, it is possible to consider the speakers as Western men, or men racialized as "white," whose dominance over their addressee comprises the indissociable strategies of exoticization and eroticization. Zahra Ali and Jean-François Staszak contend that a gazing (male) entity cannot exoticize a dancer without eroticizing her, and vice-versa – in other words, sexualization entails racialization (see Staszak 137, Ali 231).[40] Moreover, Said suggests that the ability of a Western man to describe a woman as "typically Oriental" not only conveys his twofold dominance over her but also exemplifies how the West has discursively dominated the "Orient" (Said 6). Thus, the simultaneously exoticizing and sexually objectifying depictions of the addressees of Hughes's "Dancer" poems directly allude to the discursive blend of hypersexualization and racism which African American women face, and which both "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" work to subvert via various "Signifyin(g)" tropes.

2.2 From primitive freedom to queenly sophistication: The depiction of African American women in Bennett's "Fantasy"

When Bennett's "Fantasy" repeats Western racist discursive tropes, it always revises them so as to provide an intersectional critique of the discourses which created said tropes. Its subversive treatment of signifiers with racially pejorative connotations consistently integrates, along with its anti-racist effort, a challenge to the hypersexualization of African American women by an orientalist male gaze, as well as to their defeminization through signifiers like the "mammy." The racist tropes upon which "Fantasy" effects an intersectional

[40] See Staszak 137: "Ainsi, les premières danseuses exotiques (en Occident) furent des danseuses (perçues comme) érotiques, et les premières danseuses érotiques prirent le voile de l'exotisme"; and Ali 231: "Comme l'ont montré les pionnières du Black feminism . . ., la façon de sexuer un corps est aussi une façon de le racialiser."

"Signification" include the concept of night (as a possible denotation of the color black), which Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel connotes as the alleged intellectual backwardness of sub-Saharan Africans in *The Philosophy of History* (1837). However, Honey shows how night can be a useful trope to create both anti-racist and anti-misogynistic meanings: "night offers respite from the daily struggle to survive, for in a dark world, blackness cannot be used as a marker of difference" (Honey xlv). Moreover, night is a fitting "space in which to savor the freedom from confining roles" – roles such as the defeminized caretaker on the one hand, or the sexual pleaser on the other hand – "as it [is] a time when the objectifying eye [is] closed in sleep and the freedom to be at one with the soul [can] be safely enjoyed" (Honey xlvi). "Fantasy" "rescu[es]" (Honey xliv) night from its racist Enlightenment connotation and turns it into an ideal liminal space – "the Land of Night" (Bennett 1) in which to stage its speaker's admiration of the "dusk-eyed queen" (2).

A similar process occurs with the notion of dream – the speaker of "Fantasy" visits the "Land of Night" "in [her] dreams" (1). According to John Cullen Gruesser, European texts describing Africa "frequently depict[] [it] as a dream or a nightmare and often a dream that becomes a nightmare" (Gruesser 16). Gruesser quotes from Winston Churchill's travel autobiography *My African Journey* (1909), in which Churchill describes Africa as a "curious garden of sunshine and night-shade" (Churchill qtd. in Gruesser 16). In other words, he views Africa as "a seeming paradise that is actually meretriciously poisonous" (Gruesser 16). However, the liminal and thus unstable nature of dream can also connote revisionary ideas in African American and anti-colonial literature and theory. In fact, dream is relevant to the very function of "Signifyin(g)": since the Yoruba deity Esu-Elegbara "rules over . . . [the] process of interpretation" (Gates 24), over the bridge between truth and understanding, he is fundamentally liminal. Likewise, the indirection which is so central to "Signification" can be

seen as a form of hermeneutic liminality, and rhetorical language as a way of playing in the space between signifier and signified.

Moreover, "[t]he [very] Signfying Monkey poems" on which Gates bases his theory are oneiric in that they imagine power subversion (between the Monkey and the Lion). This function of the dream trope echoes how Frantz Fanon uses it in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961). In his essay, Fanon reverses (or indeed "Signifies upon") the racism of the dream trope in order to highlight the restriction which colonized people (as well as African Americans, it can be argued) experience in their waking life: "Pendant la colonization, le colonisé n'arrête pas de se libérer entre neuf heures du soir et six heures du matin" (Fanon 53).[41] "Fantasy" also departs from the racist connotation of Western travel discourse by creating, in accordance with night, a oneiric space in which the poetic speaker can witness a dignified African American female figure.

Less overtly dehumanizing than Hegel's and Churchill's use of the signifiers "dream" and "night," yet still pejorative, is the trope of the "Noble Savage" and its "subgenre, the 'Noble Negro'" (Gates 133). According to Dabydeen and Sivagurunathan, the term "Noble Savage" refers to an "uncorrupted man of nature as opposed to the degenerate man of civilization" (n. pag.). Thus, it enabled "[w]riters disillusioned with the consequences of [technological] progress" to "idealize[]" the Native peoples of colonized territories (Dabydeen and Sivagurunathan n. pag.). The "Noble Negro" starts to manifest when "[t]he depiction of the black man as noble savage [is] . . . made for humanitarian and anti-slavery purposes" (Dabydeen and Sivagurunathan n. pag.).[42] In texts which employ this more specific trope, "Africa is depicted as idyllic and Africans as peace-loving, joyous people before the invasion

[41] "During colonization, the colonized continuously frees themself from nine in the evening to six in the morning." (Translation my own.)

[42] As Marion Berghahn elaborates, the "argument [of the "Noble Savage"] was employed primarily by the opponents of slavery who, with their emotional stories of encounters with Noble Savages, tried to generate feelings of sympathy in their readers and thus to convince them of the injustice of slavery." She considers Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) to have "unleashed a flood of [such] writings" (Berghahn 7-8).

of the colonizers" (Dabydeen and Sivagurunathan n. pag.). Aphra Behn's novel *Oroonoko* (1688) foregrounds the "Noble Savage" trope in its eponymous protagonist, who is literally noble: his grandfather was the king of Koromantyn.[43] Gates argues that Behn's use of the "Noble Savage" is racially denigrating, in so far as

> the representation of the Noble Savage is that he or she is rendered noble through a series of contrasts with his or her black countrymen. Oronooko [sic?] bears aquiline features, has managed through some miraculous process to straighten his kinky hair, and speaks French fluently, among other languages. Oronooko, in other words, looks like a . . . European king. (Gates 133)[44]

While Bennett's "Fantasy" mobilizes the potentially racist trope of the "Noble Savage," it does so not to isolate the "queen" from the collective imagination of sub-Saharan African appearance but instead, her nobility participates in a rhetorical strategy by which the poem works to elevate African American women above the simultaneously desexualizing and oversexualizing signifiers which denote them in U. S. discourses. The queen stands *for* African American women, not in contrast to them.

In "Fantasy," such a noble, presumably African American female figure as the queen of "the Land of Night" (1) is only accessible by travel – "I sailed" (1) – to an oneiric, therefore a liminal, space. The periphrasis "the Land of Night" and the image of travel by sea suggest that, in her "dreams" (1), the poetic speaker journeys to sub-Saharan Africa. The centrality of this imagined sea travel is sustained by the rhythmic pattern of the poem, which alternates iambic and anapestic feet, thus mimicking the irregular movements of a boat

[43] Koromantyn was "[a] fort and trading post" in which, starting "just before 1630," the English, in "agreement with Fanti chiefs," "held slaves . . . [coming] from the Fanti, Ashanti and interior tribes" of present-day Ghana (Todd 83).

[44] While, to some extent, *Oroonoko* "Signifies" upon biblical black-white color symbolism, this reversal solely applies to the protagonists Oroonoko and Imoinda and thus still characterizes sub-Saharan Africans more broadly as inferior. Behn's narrative voice equates the "perfect ebony or polished jet" of the skin of Oroonoko and Imoinda – "this fair Queen of Night" – with numerous "virtues" (Behn 15, 16, 16). However, she uses a third color, "that brown, rusty black" (Behn 15), to denote sub-Saharan Africans in general. Oroonoko's appearance signals his superior status, so much so that "he [strikes] an awe and reverence, even in those that kn[o]w not his" royal status (Behn 13). The narrator also singles Oroonoko out through her choice of demonstrative articles. She routinely refers to Oroonoko as "*this* great man" or "*[t]his* great . . . character" (emphasis added; Behn 5, 9, 14, 15), as opposed to "most of *that* nation" (emphasis added; Behn 15).

crossing waves, and thus of traveling large amounts of space. Considering Paul Gilroy's analytical framework of the "black Atlantic,"[45] the image of sailing corroborates the sense that the speaker's (dreamed) maritime travel has revisionary implications. The ship "in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean" is a central image – or rather chronotope[46] – in Gilroy's theory (Gilroy 4). For example, Gilroy observes an intimate connection between sailing and key radical sub-Saharan African-descended men born in slavery. For instance, Frederick Douglass, the influential nineteenth-century Abolitionist leader, "escaped from bondage disguised as a sailor" and, what is more, "learnt of freedom in the [Northern U. S.] from Irish sailors while working as a ship's caulker in Baltimore" (Gilroy 13). Some Harlem Renaissance figures like Langston Hughes also have a history of "involvement . . . with ships and sailors" in regard to their travels to Africa. Gilroy emphasizes that the transatlantic journeys of later "[n]otable black American travellers," including Bennett herself, "had important consequences for their understanding of racial identities" (Gilroy 17-18). Therefore, in the context of "Fantasy," the chronotope of the ship – implied by the poem's rhythmic pattern and reference to sailing – emphasizes the revisionary significance of the speaker's dream. The speaker's travel to the "Land of Night" (Bennett 1) prefigures how the "queen" can challenge the simultaneously racist and sexist stereotypes which may have informed the speaker's self-image as an African American woman.

By combining an oneiric setting with the symbolically loaded image of maritime travel, "Fantasy" alludes to the significance of utopia in African American writing. Given that

[45] With the concept of the "black Atlantic," Gilroy proposes "to rethink modernity via . . . [the movement of] the African diaspora into the western hemisphere" (Gilroy 17). The "black Atlantic" analyzes how the various transatlantic journeys of sub-Saharan African people and their descendants – from the victims of the Atlantic slave trade to the travels of nineteenth and twentieth-century revisionary and radical thinkers – can foster an approach to cultural studies which refutes, or at least complicates, what Gilroy calls "ethnic absolutisms" (Gilroy 3).

[46] Gilroy borrows Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the technical term "chronotope" as "[a] unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented" (Bakhtin qtd. in Gilroy 225). In Gilroy's own terms regarding the "black Atlantic," a chronotope is an "organizing symbol" for a given analytical framework (Gilroy 4).

the term utopia can mean "a fantasy, a dream" (*OED* n. 4), the title of the poem itself hints at a utopic reading. In his monograph *Black Utopia. The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019), Alex Zamalin argues that "Black American reflections on the idea of utopia contain some of the most powerful political ideas in the American tradition" (Zamalin 1). He contends that utopian writing is informed by the "hope" for a "transformative" society which belies "the stuff of daydreams of everyday life" (Zamalin 5). Thus, the establishment of the dream trope from the opening line of "Fantasy" signals the revisionary purpose of the poem. According to Zamalin, "[u]topia is like religion" in that "it conjures powerful, irrepressible, sometimes ecstatic feelings" – such as the feeling "of reconciliation with strife" (Zamalin 6). The poem dramatizes the speaker's wonder at the sight of the queen and of the garden in which her throne – her "amethyst chair" (Bennett 8) – sits. If not ecstatic *per se*, the speaker takes a delighted tone as she introduces the scene: "The loveliest things were seen…" (4). The queen, who is also the addressee of the poem, represents an ideal; the liminal space to which the speaker sails is utopic, indeed "a state of existence in which everything" – at least the representation of African American womanhood – "is perfect" (*OED* n. 2a).

In its association of dream with utopia and imagined travel, "Fantasy" prefigures Fanon's comment on the liberating function of dreams for colonized people. In her essay *Se Défendre. Une Philosophie de la Violence* (2017), Elsa Dorlin argues that colonization, in order to sustain itself, seeks to annihilate – or at least immobilize – the bodies of the colonized (Dorlin 6, 8).[47] Governing the Native peoples of a colonized territory – and in the context of this study, maintaining African Americans in a perpetual state of both political and socio-economic inferiority – means restraining their bodies on the scale of the muscle; that is, the

[47] In the original, French version of the essay, Dorlin speaks of "réduire à néant" (Dorlin 6), which I translate as annihilating the body, as well as "l'anéantissement même du corps," the very annihilation of the body (Dorlin 8).

kinetic body, the nervous impulse (Dorlin 17).[48] To Fanon, although colonized bodies are immobilized, colonized people do not internalize or truly accept their inferior status and therefore experience constant tension,[49] a tension which accumulates for as long as their bodies' movements are inhibited by the colonial system (Fanon 54).[50] Their cumulated kinetic tension required outlets, such as what Fanon calls dreams of action: "Je rêve que je saute, que je nage, que je cours, . . . que je franchis le fleuve d'une enjambée" (Fanon 53).[51] The fact that the lyrical speaker from "Fantasy" freely travels across the sea in her dream suggests that the poem uses the dream trope to create the specific effect of escaping Western racist supremacy, like Fanon claims colonized people do when in their own dreams. Thus, while the dream is misleading and nightmarish in Western texts like Churchill's *My African Journey*, it is a central trope of revision in "Signifying Monkey" tales as well as in anti-colonial discourse. The repetition of this trope in "Fantasy" allows the speaker to break free and move away from racist and sexist images of herself as an African American woman. Her dream and its associated imagery suggest a prior "impulse to protect [herself] from a hurtful reality" – which represents "an acknowledgement that the forces arrayed against a black woman's dignity and development of her powers are formidable" (Honey xlvi).

"Fantasy" constructs a space which is safe from Western violence, but the description of the queen is also free of the objectifying male gaze dramatized in Hughes's "Nude Young Dancer" and in "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'." Admittedly, the lyrical "I" is looking at the queen whom she addresses, thus the queen is, technically, the object of her gaze. However, the poem reverses key features of the male gaze as defined by Mulvey and

[48] See Dorlin 17: "[C]e gouvernement des corps intervient à l'échelle du muscle. L'objet de cet art de gouverner est l'influx nerveux, la contraction musculaire, la tension du corps kinésique, la décharge des fluides hormonaux."
[49] Fanon speaks of an "état de tension permanente" (Fanon 54).
[50] See Fanon 54: "[Le colonisé] est dominé, mais non domestique. Il est infériorisé, mais non convaincu de son infériorité."
[51] "I dream that I jump, that I swim, that I run, . . . that I cross a river in one step." (Translation my own.)

complemented by Brey. For instance, Mulvey theorizes the male gaze as creating "an illusion of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey 11). In other words, the gaze would have to be voyeuristic; it would have to "observ[e] others as sexual objects without themselves being observed" (Chandler and Munday n. pag.), and without the objectified person being aware that she is observed (Brey 29). It is not entirely clear whether or not the queen sees the speaker. While the latter directly addresses the queen by way of the pronouns "you" and "your" (Bennett 2, 7, 8, 9), she is "[standing] behind a bush" (12) and the queen does not interact with her, regardless of whether she sees her or not. However, the speaker draws the queen's attention to herself more explicitly in the closing line of the poem, when she "whistle[s] a song to the dark-haired queen…" (13). She makes her presence known by expressing her awe of the queen.

Moreover, "Fantasy" rules out any notion that its gazing subject, the speaker, sexualizes the addressee. In fact, it "Signifies" upon Hughes's "Dancer" poems in regard to the depiction of her body. Brey recalls that a typical feature of the male gaze is that it fragments and stylizes a woman's body in order to sustain voyeuristic, fetishist pleasure (Brey 26). Departing from Hughes's hypersexualized representation of African American women dancers in his two poems, "Fantasy" isolates specific body parts in the description of the queen, however not those which are traditionally used to reduce a woman to an provider of sexual pleasure. The speaker emphasizes the queen's eyes – she is "the dusk-eyed queen" (Bennett 2), her hair – "you were strange with your purple hair" (7), and her feet, which wear "hyacinth shoes" (9). The fragmentation of individual body parts serves to pause on the queen's beauty, sophistication and delicacy. At this sight, the speaker does not merely whistle to validate the queen's attractiveness. Instead, she "whistle[s] [her] a song" in order to express her speechless admiration.

By highlighting the queen's beauty and nobility, "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon the myth of the "Noble Savage," and also upon Behn's *Oroonoko*, which configures nobility (along with European-like facial features and hair texture) as an inherent trait which sets Oronooko above the rest of sub-Saharan African people (Gates 133). In "Fantasy," the "Noble Negro" is now a woman who finds herself in the same liminal, revisionary locus as her admirer. This is an important departure from Behn's text, which favors a system of kingships over the "matrilineal, polygamous societies" encountered at Behn's time in West Africa (Todd xxiv). While the queen of the "Land of Night" (Bennett 1) recalls Behn's other protagonist Imoinda, who is referred to as a "Queen of Night" (Todd 16), Bennett's poetic queen is not superior to the African American female speaker. While awe-inspiring, Bennett's queen is anonymous, merely part of a setting which symbolizes intersectional revision. She is nobody in particular; she functions as an inherent archetype for African American women, the product of imagining a self-image which is not informed by the racist-misogynistic discourses of waking life.

As such, "Fantasy" suggests that nobility is an intrinsic though forgotten characteristic of sub-Saharan African womanhood. This depiction represents yet another departure from *Oroonoko*, in which class supersedes race (Todd xxvi). In the novel, stemming from the noble class means a sub-Saharan African is not destined for slavery. Indeed, "[w]here for the colonists the crucial difference was between Christian and infidel, for Behn and other dramatists rank overtopped race and religion" (Todd xxvi). In "Fantasy," the case is rather that class, race and gender coalesce into a single category, and nobility is a standard trait for any woman who is racialized as "black." Another poem by Bennett, titled "To a Dark Girl" (1922), also imagines royal rank as inherent in sub-Saharan African-descended women: "Something of old forgotten queens / Lurks in the lithe abandon of your walk" (Bennett, "To a Dark Girl" 5-6). Far from merely complimenting her addressee's beauty – "I love you for your brownness / And the rounded darkness of your breast" (1-2), the speaker in "To a Dark

Girl" attempts to convince her of her inner, metaphorical nobility. In this regard, the speaker evokes a motherly figure, or that of a fellow African American woman more broadly. She advises the addressed, presumably younger "Dark Girl" to be confident, that is to "[k]eep all [she] ha[s] of queenliness, / Forgetting that [she] once [was] slave, / And let [her] full lips laugh at Fate!" (10-12). In line twelve, Bennett employs the trope of laughter often used in Harlem Renaissance writing to refer to the creative and powerful resilience of African Americans in the face of U. S. racism.[52] Both "Fantasy" and "To a Dark Girl" "Signify" upon and completely reverse the masculinization of power at work in *Oroonoko,* while attributing inherent beauty and a potential for assertiveness to sub-Saharan African womanhood.

Thus, "Fantasy" exemplifies the investment by women writers of the Harlem Renaissance in appropriating the hermeneutics of African American womanhood, with a particular focus on feminine beauty. While the image of royalty confers upon the addressee of the poem a sense of general good looks, "Fantasy" also uses "Signification" in order to compliment a specific feature of African American feminine experience, that is hairstyling. Indeed, the poem repeats a typical Enlightenment trope when the speaker confesses to finding the queen "*strange* with [her] purple hair" (emphasis added; 7). Bennett already "Signifies" upon the function of strangeness as a connotation of sub-Saharan Africanness in her earlier poem "Heritage" (1923). According to Hegel, symptoms of the alleged strangeness of sub-Saharan peoples include, for instance, occasional "sudden[]" flare-ups of "[w]ildness" or "rage" when "their passions ferment, and then they are quite beside themselves" (Hegel 98). Hegel's general claim that sub-Saharan Africans are strange rests on his belief that "nothing harmonious with humanity [is] to be found in" them, and thus one cannot make logical sense of their behaviors and habits (Hegel 93). "Fantasy" revises Hegel in so far as, for the speaker, the queen's "strange" hairstyle signifies cultural advancement, not inferiority.

[52] See the discussion on Jessie Fauset's essay "The Gift of Laughter" (1925) in relation to Countee Cullen's poem "Black Magdalens" (1925) in Chapter 1.

The color purple in the queen's "strange" hair recalls the social function of hairstyles in sub-Saharan African-descended cultures. Emma Dabiri explains that "[h]air is a material used to express oneself but also to comment upon, reflect or indeed contest society." She specifies that, while this may, to some extent, be true of most cultures, "hair [still] occupies a position of greater significance in African and African diaspora cultures" (Dabiri 30). Importantly, in some West African cultures "hairstyling could [traditionally] operate as a means of organizing people into different social categories" (Dabiri 30). For example, in the Yoruba tradition hairstyling could indicate one's "membership of a royal lineage" (Dabiri 47). "Fantasy" can be understood as doing just that by marking the queen's hair as purple, thereby echoing Western European color symbolism. In an article investigating the ancient "codification" of the color purple through law, that is "what purple symbolized *about whom* and *to whom*" (original italics; Elliott 175), Charlene Elliott mentions that, in antiquity, purple was "a communicator of prestige" (Elliott 176). The "color 'trademarking' . . . over purple in the Roman world" was "complex and highly developed," but it amounted to the following:

> [P]urple's 'rise to royalty' was both acknowledged and affirmed through the application of sumptuary laws to the practices of purple wearing. Simply put, the Roman court employed legal mechanisms in the efforts to connect the color purple, in all its forms, with imperial power. (Elliott 176)

Thus, "Fantasy" transposes the signifier "purple" into the "visual form of language in oral [West African] societies" of which "[h]airstyles were an integral part," and which Western philosophy disdained (Dabiri 31). The poem "Signifies" upon a long-standing Western form of social meaning-making in order to counter the very racist stereotypes of Western discourses.

The treatment of purple in "Fantasy" agrees with the royal symbolism of purple in other Harlem Renaissance poems, such as Cullen's "Black Majesty," but also "Signifies" upon them. The speaker of "Black Majesty" praises figures like Henri Christophe, Jean-Jacques Dessalines and François Dominique Toussaint-L'Ouverture, key agents in the Haitian

Revolution,[53] as "kings": "These men were kings, albeit they were black . . . / These men were black, I say, but they were crowned / And purple-clad, however brief their time" (Cullen 1, 5-6). "Black Majesty" also codes purple as a signifier for nobility, thereby reversing the view of sub-Saharan African ancestry as inferior. However, "Black Majesty" does not depart from the use of clothing as a key vehicle for such symbolism in the Western tradition – unlike "Fantasy," which syncretizes a Western (and racist, given the black-white dichotomy) system of color codification with a sub-Saharan African semiotic medium.

The purple of the queen's hair alludes to another fundamental feature of "black" hairstyling in sub-Saharan African cultures, that is the centrality of experimenting with artifice. Indeed, Dabiri notes that "[w]ithin a traditional West African aesthetic, the idea of artifice was often highly valued" (Dabiri 92).[54] Purple is an "'unnatural' hair colour[]," which, according to Dabiri, exemplifies the tendency towards artifice (Dabiri 144). Bennett is not the only woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance to reference African American women's artificial (or artistic) hairstyling practices in her poetry. In a poem called "A Brown Aesthete Speaks" (1928), Mae V. Cowdery discusses cross-racial capillary experiments and, according to Crawford, "insists" that such instances as "[t]he black woman who straightens [i.e., experiments with] her hair" exemplifies "a focus on new ways of seeing" (Crawford 128). Moreover, Dabiri notes that the relaxing of hair in African American women is merely a sign that "the centrality of artifice remains" in their aesthetic practices, and that this aspect of West African cultures has "survived the ravages of colonization" (Dabiri 144).[55] For its part,

[53] The Haitian Revolution denotes the events by which the enslaved people of Haiti fought for and, by 1804, achieved both liberation and independence.

[54] In fact, Dabiri specifies that "hair was rarely, if ever, left out in anything resembling a natural Afro" (Dabiri 92). Indeed, the Afro is not so much an inherent norm in "African aesthetics" as it is "a symbol of diasporic resistance" (Dabiri 32), an embrace of the hair texture which Western colonizers, slavers and settlers have considered as resembling the wool of cattle.

[55] In fact, as the narrative voice in *Oroonoko* describes the European-like physical appearance of the protagonist and admires, among other features, his hair, she not only praises it for its proximity to racial whiteness in contrast to "the rest of the Negroes," but also because of the intricate artifice which Oroonoko's straightened hair implies: "His hair came down to his shoulders by the aids of *art,* which was, by pulling it out with a quill and keeping it combed, of which he took *particular care*" (emphasis added; Behn 15). While the narrator interprets

"Fantasy" does not participate in the debate over African American women's attempts at Euro-centric hairstyles. The "unnatural" character of the queen's purple hair simply alludes to the cultural advancement of capillary aesthetics in the African diaspora and in African cultures. As the very antonym of nature, the importance of artifice in such a central dimension of some sub-Saharan African cultures invalidates Hegel's claim about their proximity to nature and incapacity of development.

In drawing attention to the queen's hair, "Fantasy" alludes to the complexity and advancement of the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora, however "strange" to the unaccustomed onlooker. The poem "Signifies" upon Enlightenment rhetoric by displacing the semantic content of the signifier "strange," thereby highlighting the fact that "European colonialists were essentially blind to many cultural practices they encountered in Africa" (Dabiri 31). The reality denoted by "strange," that is sub-Saharan Africa, escapes Western reason because it is culturally advanced, not because it lacks rational organization. Moreover, it is noteworthy that hair is a key element of the poem's revisionary work, as the so-called "[w]ooliness" of sub-Saharan African hair has "historically carried sinister associations of inferiority and polygenism" (Miller 187). Indeed, Thomas R. Miller recalls that hair that allegedly resembled "wool" served as an argument in favor of trafficking West African individuals in the Atlantic slave trade, as well as of scientific racism in the nineteenth century, which claimed "the Negro" belonged to a separate species (Miller 187). Thus, "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon Western assumptions of sub-Saharan African inferiority and therefore strangeness by highlighting a key regard in which some sub-Saharan African cultures are at least equally as sophisticated as the West.

The racist Enlightenment trope of strangeness revised in the description of the queen's hair and accoutrement performs a similar function as that which Crawford identifies in

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the result of Oroonoko's haircare as an elevation from his fellow racial counterparts, in praising the artificial aesthetic process in which he engages, she implicitly applauds a typical native practice.

Cowdery's "A Brown Aesthete Speaks," which is to "refuse[] to think too critically about the very fantasy of beauty" (Crawford 129). "Fantasy" does not consider the fantasy of beauty – enhanced via such processes as hairstyling – a trivial aspect of the lived experience of (African American) women. While the speaker's puzzled, humbled admiration at the queen's appearance, too, "honors the simplicity and naturalness of the desire for beauty" (Crawford 129), the queen's specific beauty practices are far from simple in the sense of "[u]nsophisticated" (*OED* A.I). Indeed, the poem associates experimental aesthetics (like the queen's artificial hair) with beauty and nobility, and more importantly with a specifically African way of connecting with one's inherent beauty. In this sense, the queen of "the land of dreams and night" (Bennett 11) compensates for both the low social status and unattractiveness of the "plantation mammy" (Honey l) and the low morals of the stereotype of the African American promiscuous woman. Thus, "Fantasy" repeats various Western discursive tropes – from dream and night, through the "Noble Savage," to the strange – in order to create a new signifier for African American womanhood, a signifier which reasserts African American women's rightful identification with a category from which mainstream discourses have excluded them.

The sophistication of the queen's appearance, which the poetic setting mirrors, exemplifies how "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon primitivism and the trope of sub-Saharan Africans' proximity to nature. As mentioned in Chapter One, in his description of "Africa proper" in *The Philosophy of History*, Hegel describes "the interior" of the continent, south of the Sahara Desert, as characterized by "the most luxuriant vegetation" (Hegel 92). Anticipating Churchill's rendition of sub-Saharan Africa in *My African Journey,* Hegel adds that it is "the especial home of ravenous beasts, snakes of all kinds – a border tract whose atmosphere is poisonous to Europeans" (Hegel 92). In its rejection of Hegel's claim that sub-Saharan Africa lacks any form of development or internal organization, "Fantasy" also

"Signifies" upon the attempt by Hughes and Arna Bontemps to "Signify" upon Hegel and upon the U. S. megalomaniac myth of progress. In some of their poems, Hughes and Bontemps repeat but celebrate the image of wild jungle, a typical primitivist trope which is absent from the natural landscape of "Fantasy." In Hughes's "Nude Young Dancer," the poetic speaker asks the addressed woman dancer: "What jungle tree have you slept under, / Midnight dancer of the jazzy hour?" (Hughes 1-2).

Like Bennett in "Fantasy," Hughes and Bontemps construct sub-Saharan Africa as an abstract, idealized, utopic locus. They set up a dichotomy which opposes this perfect space to the industrialized West – but especially the U. S. In that way, they echo "the romantic image" of colonized territories adopted by Behn in *Oroonoko*, as well as by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Todd explains that *Paradise Lost* exemplifies the Golden Age myth, by "call[ing] God 'the sov'reign Planter' and contrast[ing] a pastoral world associated with Adam and Eve with a greedy commercialization promoted by Satan, the profit-driven 'great adventurer'" (Todd xxii). Thus, rather than designating undeveloped self-consciousness, the trope of nature could also be used as what Honey refers to as an "Edenesque alternative to the corrupted, artificial environment created by 'progress'" (Honey xxxix).

However, in opposition to the praise of experimental finesse in "Fantasy," the utopic sub-Saharan African loci in the poems of Hughes and Bontemps use the primitivist tropes of wild, undomesticated nature as their main semiotic tool to illustrate freedom. Poems like Hughes's "Our Land – Poem for a Decorative Panel" (1926), "Lament for Dark Peoples" (1926), "Poem – For the Portrait of an African Boy after the Manner of Gauguin" (1926), and "Afraid" (1926), and Bontemps's "The Return" (1927) construct such ideal, luxuriant, vibrant, pre-industrial loci, which they associate with sub-Saharan Africa. To these ideal settings, these poems oppose the hostile, grim industrialized world through which they denote "civilization" in the Western philosophical sense. Echoing a technique which Hughes uses in

"Proem" (1922), the speakers of his poems stand for African Americans as well as the Native peoples of colonized territories. Nature – "trees" ("Our Land" 9) but especially the jungle[56] – is characteristic of the ideal ancestral land. In opposition, the constructions built in the industrialized world – such as "skyscrapers" ("Afraid" 1) and "[grey] birds," that is airplanes[57] ("Our Land" 13) – are frightening and depressing. Both Hughes and Bontemps "Signify" upon the concept of reason and, following Hegel's logic, the ability of reason to foster freedom (through self-consciousness), and civilizational development (Hegel 9, 19).[58] In "The Return," "civilization" or industrial development becomes a signifier for imprisonment: as he begins to dream his ancestors' jungled land, he notes: "Our walls recede" (Bontemps 13), and by "walls" he could mean both the walls of his bedroom and the metaphorical walls which restrict his freedom as an African American citizen. In "Lament," the speaker also associates megalomaniacally organized technical progress with imprisonment: civilization is a "cage[]" to him (Hughes 9). To this he adds the notion of the "circus," that is a disorderly, frenetic "display" (*OED* n. 2c) of progress and power. [59] In "Afraid" and in "Poem," industrial development signifies hostility and reminds the speakers of their solitude in the face of racial injustice. In a continuation of the nature-industrialization dichotomy, Hughes and Bontemps "Signify" upon, that is repeat and revise the trope of color

[56] The poetic speaker of "Lament for Dark Peoples," who is constructed on the same principle of expansive individuality as the speaker of Hughes's "Proem" (see 1.2), deplores how slave traders "took [him, who stands for the sub-Saharan African ancestors of African Americans] away from the jungles" ("Lament for Dark Peoples" 6). The speaker of "Poem – For the Portrait" expresses his awareness of his sub-Saharan ancestry by claiming "the tom-toms of the jungles beat in [his] blood" and "the wild hot moons of the jungles shine in [his] soul" ("Poem – For the Portrait" 2, 3). In "The Return," the land of the speaker's ancestors is recognizable by its "jungle tapestries." When he dreams of this land, he feels that "[d]arkness brings the jungle to [his] room" ("The Return" 30, 9).

[57] The image of the bird serves as a signifier for either thriving nature or urban life. In "Our Land," the poetic speaker admires the "tall thick trees / Bowed down with chattering parrots" (Hughes 9-10). In Bontemps's "The Return," the lyrical speaker opposes the "huddling birds" of his ancestors' land to automobiles or "driven birds" (Bontemps 5, 43).

[58] See my discussion of Hegel's claims about the study of history in *Philosophy of History* in Chapter 1.

[59] To the speaker of "Lament," "civilization" is not only a "circus," but also a "cage" which dehumanizes him and prevents him from living the life which he knows ("Lament" 9-10). The speaking "we" in "Afraid" are "afraid" of the world in which they find themselves, symbolized by the "skyscrapers" ("Afraid" 1, 6).

symbolism. Rather than black and white, they oppose warm tones to grey.[60] The symbolic use of the color grey also serves Bontemps's "Signification" upon American dream mythology in "The Return": "Let us go back into the dusk again, / Slow and sad-like following the track / Of blowing leaves and cool white rain / Into the old gray dream, let us go back" Bontemps 38-41). The internal rhyming pair "leaves" – "dream" associates the American dream with the season of fall, that is with dying nature. Conversely, by "Signifyin(g)" upon Enlightenment depictions of pre-industrial Africa, Hughes and Bontemps use the image of unexploited nature as a signifier for their poetic utopia.[61]

In constructing a poetic locus with revisionary connotations, "Fantasy" "Signifies" upon Hughes and Bontemps, in addition to Hegel. The latter two use the "luxuriant vegetation" of which Hegel speaks (Hegel 92) as a signifier for freedom and the possibility to experience and celebrate romantic and communal love.[62] For its part, "Fantasy" centers love and mutual nurture among African-descended women specifically. The setting of "Fantasy," which represents a typical form of domesticated nature, functions so as to connote elaboration

[60] The "land" of the speaking "We" in "Our Land" is lit by a "gorgeous sun." There, "the twilight / Is a soft bandanna handkerchief / Of rose and gold" ("Our Land" 1, 4-6). (In fact, the title of Cullen's second poetry collection is *Copper Sun*.) Alternatively, the moon is either "gold" or "silver" ("The Return" 26, "Lament" 8). In "Poem – For the Portrait," the speaker conflates the grey, hard and cold features of metal (standing as a synecdoche for industrialization) with the manner in which the industrialized world, denoting the U. S., has treated African Americans.

[61] The ideal ancestral worlds constructed in the poems might not exactly register as utopia, if one considers the definition of the term in *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, which "distinguishe[s] [between utopia and] mythological Golden Ages . . . in that [utopias] are the products of human (i. e. political) arrangement for human benefit" (Baldick n. pag.). Because they do not create new signifiers but "Signify" upon already existing, racist ones, the poems by Hughes and Bontemps analyzed here construct ideal but abstract ancestral loci, rather than explicitly describing "a postracist future," for example (Zamalin 8) (although the speaker of "Our Land" uses the conditional tense, and thus describes a hypothetical ideal space). However, while they do not imagine any concrete political mechanism for a better society, the poems still critique the capitalist societal order of their time. This criticism makes the poems utopic in so far as they allude to a "form of ideal . . . communistic . . . human society" (Baldick n. pag.), which makes much sense in light of the influence of the political Left on Harlem Renaissance writers, especially Hughes (see 1.2, footnote 7). This interpretation is further supported by the suggestion of social equality and shared experience via Hughes's use of expanded lyrical individuality and the frequent use of the pronoun "we" in the poems at hand, in contrast to the inherent individualism of capitalist systems.

[62] In "The Return," the speaker conflates the setting in which his "fathers" lived with the love which he shares with his "you" addressee: "And once more, returning out of pain, / The friendly ghost that was your love and mine" ("The Return" 15, 17, 7-8). In "Our Land," the unrestrained enjoyment of love is inherent to an imagined Africa, or the land in which the speaking "we" would be free: "Ah, we should have a land of joy, / Of love and joy and wine and song" ("Our Land" 13-14).

and refinement, thereby reflecting the poem's support for experimenting with aesthetic sophistication in beauty. The "Land of Night" (Bennett 1) to which the lyrical speaker travels and in which she finds the queen is not a jungle but "a garden of lavender hues" (6). Again, as with the mention of the queen's hair detail, the poem valorizes the cultivation of beauty and sophistication over a primitivist depiction of African Americans' ancestry. The color symbolism of "Fantasy" further shows how the poem "Signifies" upon Hughes and Bontemps. Rather than warm hues inspired from the color range of sunsets, in "Fantasy" the setting is dominated by cold colors – but not grey like the industrial world of Bennett's male colleagues. They comprise the "lavender" of the garden, the "purple" of the queen's hair, of the "amethyst" of which her throne (her "chair") is made, and of the hyacinth she has for shoes (8-9). In keeping with these cold tones, the speaker says, "the moon [gives] a bluish light" and the bush behind which she stands is "yellow-green" (12). Thus, beyond signifying the queen's nobility, the color purple is part of a symbolic color pattern which marks a departure from the more stereotypical rendition of African ancestry in the poetry of male Harlem Renaissance poets like Hughes and Bontemps.

In this reversal of stereotypical portrayals, "Fantasy" joins other poems by women writers of the movement in their dismissal of primitivist tropes when creating revisionary and racially proud poetry. For instance, Anne Spencer felt strongly about "writ[ing] of love without hypothecating atavistic jungle tones" such as "the rumble of tom-tom" and the "high spliced palm tree" (Spencer qtd. in Crawford 139). Likewise, "Fauset refused to comply with the demand for 'primitivist' literature" (Ahlin 155). However revisionary Hughes's and Bontemps's poems are in relation to racist Western discourses, however successful their "Signification" upon Hegel, these particular poems do not address the racialized misogyny which African American women faced in the 1920s, an issue which differentiated their (female) experience from the racial discursive violence which their male counterparts also

suffered. As such, "Fantasy" not merely reverses Hegel's racist connotations, but slightly alters his signifier itself (from luxuriant to domesticated nature) and thereby valorizes the cultivation of beauty and sophistication over primitivism.

2.3 Representing and disabling the Western male gaze: Hughes's "Danse Africaine"

As Bennett's "Fantasy" shows, the very trope of a poetic speaker gazing upon an African American woman does not, in and of itself, prevent a poem from performing an intersectional revision, that is, from providing a critique at the levels of both race and gender. At first sight, Hughes's poem "Danse Africaine" appears to describe a woman's dance in a way which exemplifies the male, orientalist gaze. Indeed, the dancer in "Danse Africaine" bears some resemblance to the hypersexualized addressee of Hughes's "Nude Young Dancer." Hughes's speakers associate both dancer figures with the image of the veil, which recalls the orientalist image of the oriental dancer. According to Jean-François Staszak, dance numbers inspired by so-called non-Western elements, which were often considered cheap and explicitly erotic, included veils: "Les voiles suggestifs, la nudité partielle, les gestes plus libres et audacieux mettent sensuellement en scène le corps, en rupture avec les canons de la danse de tradition européenne… et de la pudeur bourgeoise" (Staszak 134).[63] In "Nude Young Dancer," the speaker compares the smell of his addressee (or some aspect of her appearance which, to him, evokes a exotic "great forest") to a "sweet veil" (Hughes, "Nude Young Dancer" 3, 4). In "Danse Africaine," the speaker similarly depicts the dancer as "[a] night-veiled girl" (Hughes, "Danse Africaine" 7). The image of the veil goes hand-in-hand with Hughes's use of hypersexualizing primitivist tropes as a way to proclaim freedom against the restrictiveness of mainstream Western values. The latter often deemed this eroticized dance obscene, which

[63] "The provocative veils, the partial nudity, the freer and more audacious movements stage the body in a sensual manner, breaking away from canonical European dance traditions… as well as bourgeois prudishness." (Translation my own).

resulted in outrage when such dance appropriated highly visible space such as American or world fairs.[64]

Despite conveying characteristics of the male, orientalist gaze, "Danse Africaine" can also be understood as a "Signification" upon the male spectator implicit in male gaze theory (as well as upon broader racist discourses). The poem admittedly puts the dancer in a position in which the addressed spectator can watch her and potentially experience scopophilic pleasure in doing so, thereby repeating the trope of the sub-Saharan African-descended (or, more generally, other-than-European, orientalized) woman as a sexual object. However, even as it lays such foundations, "Danse Africaine" prevents the dancer from being sexualized by enacting the poetic equivalent of breaking the theatrical fourth wall, the "imaginary barrier that separates the performers on stage" or the characters in a film "from the audience" (Chandler and Munday n. pag.). Commenting on the cinematographic work of Chantal Akerman and Sally Potter, Brey posits that, when a female protagonist breaks the fourth wall, for example by addressing the camera directly, she triggers what Bertolt Brecht refers to as distantiation, thereby blocking the seduction and emotional investment at work between the (male or female) spectator and the female character.[65] As a poem, "Danse Africaine" enacts distantiation by way of a third party – the speaker – who directly addresses an implied spectator signaled by the possessive pronoun "your" (Hughes 5, 15). Since the speaker claims that the performance "stirs" the spectator's "blood," it is indeed possible to assume that the addressee is watching the scene. Thus, while the audience addressed as "you" is indeed portrayed as observing the dancer, the superimposed mediation of the speaker who directly

[64] Oriental "belly" dance was indeed considered outrageous in the years leading up to Hughes's generation. Trudy Scott explains that "the Algerian and Egyptian women [who presented] the *danse du ventre* (belly dance) [at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893] became objects of protest by the clergy and the National Association of Dancing Masters." About twenty years earlier, "[d]uring the 1876 American Centenary Exposition in Philadelphia," a Turkish dancing troupe had even been "prevented from performing by the police" (Scott n. pag.).

[65] See Brey 18: "l'adresse directe à la caméra, théorisée par Brecht, déclenche un processus de *distanciation* qui bloque le processus de séduction et d'investissement émotionnel entre les spectateur.trice.s et l'héroïne" (emphasis added).

addresses him distances him from any direct, automatic and unquestioned scopophilic experience.

More specifically, the distantiation at play in "Danse Africaine" concerns only the sexual character which the relation of the addressed spectator to the dancer might have had. While she is not figured as a source of arousal, the dancer still seems to express an ability to hypnotize the addressed "you."[66] In other words, the speaker is held at a distance from his own tendency to objectify her; however, the performance still strongly focuses his mind on itself. For instance, the dancer's spinning movements are prone to captivating a spectator's gaze. The poetic speaker specifies that she dances in continuous circular motions: she "[w]hirls softly into a / Circle of light. Whirls softly… slowly, / Like a wisp of smoke around the fire" (8-11). The rhythmic pattern of the poem, too, reflects the hypnotic effect of the performance which the poetic speaker describes. For example, the girl dances to a drumming sequence which cyclically alternates its rhythm. The poem also employs figures of inversion, again a typical trope of "Signifying." Indeed, it alternates four times between slowness and vivid interruptions created by both its rhythmic pattern and its punctuation. In lines one and two, trochaic inversions initiated by the word "beating" draw attention to the drum beats and force the diction to slow down (1, 2). Following the first two lines, the rhythm slows down even more due to the ellipses and the repetition of long, diphthongal syllables: "Low… slow /

[66] This analysis assumes that the addressed "you" is a Western, or at least a male spectator, and not, for instance, an African American spectator speaking to themself. After all, "Danse Africaine" repeats the very tropes which Hughes uses in other texts in order to "Signify" upon the Western concept of civilizational technological development. One notable example is the "tom-toms" ("Danse Africaine" 1, 2, 14) which recall the opening line of "Poem – For the Portrait of an African Boy after the Manner of Gauguin," in which the lyrical speaker metaphorizes his racial awareness as "the tom-toms of the jungles beat[ing] in [his] blood" (Hughes, "Poem," 1). In his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Hughes figures the "tom-tom" as a symbol of "revolt against weariness in a white world," as well as of "joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile" (Hughes, "The Negro Artist," 58).

However, this author-based intertextual interpretation is not the only viable one. The poem leaves the identity of the addressee unspecified, opening itself to a reading based on "Signification," of which interpretative uncertainty is typical. Moreover, the vulnerability of the dancer to sexual objectification by a Western, male gaze precisely constructs a Western male implied spectator. This uncertainty resembles the process of double-voice active in "Black Magdalens": whereas "whiteness" is absent from the explicit dimension of the poem, it is "ambiguously 'present'" (Gates 86) through the connotations of Western discourse – in "Danse Africaine," through the apparent possibility to eroticize racially othered women (see 1.3.2).

Slow… low –" (3-4). The rhythm picks back up in line six, as indicated by a single short syllable and an exclamation mark – "Dance!" (6). The pace of diction slows down again with the recurrence of ellipsis and the notion of slowness in line ten: "softly… slowly" (10). It increases once more towards the end of the poem, when it switches to sequences of two unstressed, followed by three stressed syllables in lines twelve and thirteen: "And the tom-toms beat, / And the tom-toms beat" (12-13). The rhythm switches to a slow pace one last time with a repetition of the initial trochaic inversion brought by the gerund "beating" (14). As the poem almost ends with the same rhythmic pattern as that with which it begins, it reflects the circular motions of the dance which the speaker describes. Both the movements and rhythms of the girl's dance are circular and thus catchy. Such rhetorical strategies corroborate the speaker's argument that the performance thoroughly engages the spectator.

In addition to increasing the addressed spectator's focus on the sound of the drums, lines three and four – "Low… slow / Slow… low –" – construct both a chiasmus and an antanaclasis. An antanaclasis is "[a] figure of speech that makes a pun . . . by repeating the same word, or *two words sounding alike*, . . . but with differing senses" (emphasis added; Baldick n. pag.). Antanaclasis, as a play on words, exemplifies the type of "rhetorical games" in which a text "engage[s]" when it "Signifies" (Gates 48). Gates associates antanaclasis with "homonymic puns" and the "Signifyin(g)" text's function as a double voice, simultaneously creating revisionary connotations and retaining the original (Western, racist) connotations of signifiers. He argues that "[a]ll homonyms depend on the absent presence of received concepts associated with a signifier" (Gates 48). Since "low" and "slow" are not complete homonyms, and since they do not convey any specific semantic displacement resulting in double voice, they do not fully exemplify Gates's meaning when he talks of antanaclasis. However, the pairing and chiastic reversal of the two adjectives still achieve a trickster function vis-à-vis the addressee. By repeatedly interchanging these simultaneously similar

and dissimilar words (mainly in the first four lines of the poem), the speaker emulates the confusing effect which he believes the performance has on the spectator.

The cyclical "blood-stirring" (5, 10) which the addressed onlooker undergoes could refer to sexual arousal, but this is not the only viable interpretation. The poem also focuses on the dancer's broader ability to awaken feelings in the spectator, such as passion or enthusiasm; in other words, to manipulate him and void him of his control over his own reason. In this emphasis, "Danse Africaine" "Signifies" upon Hegel and Enlightenment philosophy, which both claim that Westerners' ability – and sub-Saharan Africans' alleged lack thereof – to achieve progress is due to their capacity for self-consciousness, which is itself only possible through the reason and the mastery of one's mind. Thus, if the addressee of the poem is interpreted as a Western or male spectator susceptible to sexualizing the dancer – as do the speakers of Hughes's "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'," then "Danse Africaine" dramatizes a reversal of any power which such a spectator might implicitly hold over the female performer. The poem thus echoes how the Monkey manipulates the Lion in the "Signifying Monkey" tales recounted by Gates (Gates 56). While the Western male onlooker technically has power over the dancer – as the lion is physically stronger than the monkey – her performance, reflected by the poetic speaker's rhetorical performance, is able to trick him and thereby strip him of his "self-imposed" superiority over her.

The poem can also be said to exemplify and apply to the intersecting issues of racism and misogyny the Freudian trope of castration anxiety, of which Mulvey speaks when theorizing the male gaze. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Mulvey explains that the visual objectification of women in film ignites a tension in the implied male spectator (as well as in the male characters within the film). As a viewer gazes at a woman, he both becomes aroused and fears potential castration: "She is isolated, glamorous, on display,

sexualized . . . But in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (Mulvey 13).[67] "Danse Africaine" illustrates a metaphorical type of castration, whereby the dancer, along with the drums' music, both captivates the Western male viewer and strips him of his intellectual, hermeneutic power over her. Since she symbolizes that which the Western gaze tends to blur into a single, "unchanging," exotic "abstraction" (Said 8), the dancer also reverses the alleged power conferred by "successive Western cultures" on "written art over oral or musical forms" (Gates 132).

Thus, the poetic speaker of "Danse Africaine" appears to tease his Western male addressee by repeating how the performance manages to "stir [the spectator's] blood," to disempower and therefore trick him. This recalls W. Jason Miller's argument that "signifying" – specifically in the form of "passing" – enables Hughes to fool "white" people in particular. Miller defines "passing" as "denot[ing] a black person passing for white" (Miller 10), which Hughes was capable of doing. According to Miller, "[t]he use of passing can be understood as a specific type of signifying or masking aimed exclusively at a culture recognized internationally for lynching its black citizens" (Miller 12). "Danse Africaine" functions as a form of poetic "passing." While the dancer of "Danse Africaine" does not attempt to "pass[] for white," she still performs a type of passing, or indeed "masking," in so far as she originally appears as a figure who can be objectified by "white" supremacy, only to trick it.

[67] Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) provides a particularly striking example of the simultaneity of seduction and threat in the literary imagination of the Harlem Renaissance. *Passing* tells of the reencounter of two childhood friends, Irene and Clare. Both are of African American descent but have fairly European features and can thus pass as "white," which Clare does by being married to a racist Anglo-American man from whom she has managed to conceal her African ancestry. To Irene, Clare – an epitomic liminal figure – represents both a source of erotic fascination and a threat to the equilibrium of her everyday life as a member of the Harlem African American elite. One could venture that Clare "Signifies" upon, teases Irene in so far as she resists any determinate interpretation of herself (see Gates 35).

The revisionary power which the dancer assumes through her performance is enabled by the poem's setting, a liminal locus in which, as in Bennett's "Fantasy," a release from Western discursive supremacy is possible. The poetic speaker, who appears to mediate the performance to the addressee at the same time as the latter watches it, does not specify where it takes place – whether in a theater or in another space dedicated to the performance industry. The lack of a precise spatial reference – for example to jazz or to cabaret – dissociates the poem from any concrete context in which the dancer might be sexualized (in opposition to "To a Black Dancer," which is set in a night club and refers to joyful alcohol consumption, suggesting the speaker might be inebriated and thus more likely to sexualize her). Nonetheless, the poem hints that the performance is taking place at night or in the dark, and night, as in "Fantasy," functions as a key liminal space enabling intersectional subversion. For instance, the adjective "night-veiled" (7) could, in fact, be polysemic. One interpretation, suggested above, is that the dancer is using one or more (black) veils as props in her performance. However, "night" can also refer to her ethnic background, since sub-Saharan African-descended people are often denoted by a key connotation of night: "black." Alternatively, "night-veiled" possibly means that the constructed space in which she moves before reaching the "[c]ircle of light" is, in contrast, dark.

In so far as it shares the characteristic of darkness with the trope of night, the stage itself represents a liminal space, a space technically outside lived reality, in which African American women dancers can defend themselves against the simultaneously desexualizing and hypersexualizing connotations which racist misogynistic discourses associate with them. On the stage, they can represent themselves in their own terms and have their own agency.[68]

[68] This claim ignores the dimension of production of the performance industry. Under the supervision of producers, directors and/or choreographers who work towards a specific commercial goal, it might not always be the case that women performers have full agency over the representation of their body onstage. This being said, I lay this aspect aside in the present discussion, as the latter is primarily concerned with poetry, and Hughes's "Danse Africaine" does not discuss the ramifications of the performance industry but uses danced performance as a metaphor for "Signifiyin(g)" upon, that is fooling the stakeholders of Western patriarchy.

Ahlin cites the example of Josephine Baker, "[t]he most successful of all African American artists in Europe" in the 1920s (Ahlin 157). In her well-known "*danse sauvage* (the savage dance)" (original italics; Ahlin 157), in which, like Hughes often does, she draws on various primitivist tropes, Baker staged a "persona" which "owed more to French exotic fantasies than to African culture" (Ahlin 157). However, like the dancer of "Danse Africaine," Baker was not a mere "sell-out to white values" (Ahlin 157). As Ahlin argues, Baker "offers a vivid illustration of the stakes involved in primitivist representation, and of the role of Europe in this representation" and plays on a substantial trigger of "anxiety during the first decades of the 20th century": that is, Freud's thesis that the "civilized man repress[es] [his] basic instincts" (Ahlin 157, 158). Honey more broadly supports the idea that performance on stage allowed African American women to counter the desexualizing figure of the "mammy": "To bring their bodies into public view under their own terms was to state that black women were sentient, complex beings deserving sexual pleasure" (Honey 1).[69] As a liminal locus, the stage therefore bears the potential to address the two contradictory stereotypes of African American women at the same time.

However, "Danse Africaine" does not focus so much on providing the woman dancer with sentience as it strives to dissociate her from her body and its proneness to sexual objectification. Rather than reducing her to how she can awaken a spectator's basic bodily instincts (even in the potentially liberating attempt which Hughes makes in poems like "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'"), "Danse Africaine" suggests the opposite: that dancing can result in a transcendental experience. For example, the speaker of "Danse Africaine" associates the practice of dance with disembodiment by comparing the dancer to "a wisp of smoke" (Hughes 11). In a 1929 poem titled "Last Night," Ethel Caution-

[69] This passage exemplifies Iris Brey's theory of the "female gaze," which foregrounds the phenomenological experience of the represented woman, rather than focusing on her potential to provide sexual pleasure: "Il existe un regard féminin, ou *female gaze*, un regard qui nous fait ressentir l'expérience d'un corps féminin" (Brey 9).

Davis, another woman poet of the Harlem Renaissance, uses night as a locus of corporal liberation through dance and uses similar imagery of disembodiment when describing this experience: "Athwart my vibrant body / A chiffon could I flung, / Diaphanous and azure, / With starpoint brilliants hung" (Caution-Davis 5-8). Rather than a veil, the speaking dancer's prop is a piece of "chiffon," a light, transparent fabric (*OED* n. 2). Considering the possible definition of "azure" as "[t]he clear blue colour of the unclouded sky" (*OED* n. 4), the color of the chiffon contributes to the image of the sky – and thus the notion of transcendence – suggested by the simile of the "cloud" of fabric. The "brilliants" which "h[a]ng" on the piece of chiffon, which the speaker compares to stars, solidify this imagery. If one reads the verb "to fling" as intransitive (*OED* v. I), then the chiffon is not merely a prop in her dancing. Rather, she compares herself to a celestial piece of chiffon. In other words, the speaker metaphorically dissolves across the sky. The poem insists that her disembodiment is revisionary: the figurative definition of the adverb "[a]thwart" means "[i]n opposition to the proper or expected course," that is "crosswise, . . . awry" (*OED* 4). Through the image of smoke, the dancer of "Danse Africaine" also acquires a metaphorical diaphanous, cloud-like character in her dancing. However, the revisionary implications of her performance are less explicit than in "Last Night," since they rely on the hypnosis of the Western male spectator through her circular movements, the drumming, and the poetic speaker's mediation.

In addition to countering racist misogynistic stereotypes of hypersexuality and promiscuity, the trope of transcendence also signals the possibility to achieve freedom in a liminal space like a night setting or a stage. As suggested above in relation to Fanon, to be free means to be able to move one's body in space (see Fanon 48, 53). By comparing the dancer to a "wisp of smoke around the fire" (11), the speaker of "Danse Africaine" implies that her dance movements can go unhindered for an indefinite amount of time. Gabriele Brandstetter characterizes "whirling dance as . . . climaxing rotation," indeed a "vertical,"

"elevation movement" (Brandstetter 213-214, 212). As the smoke of a fire rises and diffuses increasingly into the air, the dancer's performance acquires an increasing amount of control over the spectator. That is, her hypnotic power over her spectator (or spectators – it is not specified whether the "you" addressee is alone in watching her) expands without restraint for the duration of her performance.

The capacity, through dance and the resulting disembodiment, to appropriate space which was formerly denied, is also a metaphor for a momentary mental release. In "Delirium of Movement and Trance Dance," a chapter from her monograph *Poetics of Dance. Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes* (2015), Brandstetter claims that "trance," "ecstasy" and "hypnosis" – which all relate to a state of temporarily transcending one's body or bodily consciousness – are "space[s] in which all *norms* are suspended" (emphasis added; Brandstetter 199). In an appropriate liminal space, the poetically constructed dancer can use movement to transcend the limits of her "ego" (Brandstetter 199), that is to break the societal "norms" which repress her as a racialized and gendered subject.[70] In Caution-Davis's "Last Night," the disembodying effect of the speaker's dance (5-8) leads to a sense of liberation visible in the punctuation, in some lexical choices and in an interjection: "And oh! my feet flew madly! / My body whirled and swayed! / My soul danced in its ecstasy, / Untrammeled, unafraid!" (Caution-Davis 9-12). The use of exclamation points and of the notion of

[70] Drawing on the anthropological work of Mary Douglas, Brandstetter distinguishes between "*ritual* forms of communication" and "the 'religious rapture' of *trance*" (original emphasis; Brandstetter 200). While ritual "incarnat[es] . . . controlled action," trance entails a "loss of control" and is "dominated by the informal" (Brandstetter 200, 200, 201). Brandstetter understands "Western-Christian culture" and "modern industrial society" as ritual, that is as a "symbolic[ally] order[ed]," "control-oriented system" (Brandstetter 200). A psychoanalytic reading of the ritual-trance dichotomy resonates with the attractiveness of modernist primitivism, and of the nature-culture/civilization dichotomy, in the early twentieth century. Expressionist dancers conceive of a "collective unconscious" which "ha[s] been buried in the process of civilization" and can allegedly be retrieved "by dissolving the ego into a transpersonal unit" (Brandstetter 199). As such, turn-of-the-century psychologists such as Freiherr von Schrenck-Notzing interpreted the effects of trance dance (on the dancer) as a "liberat[ion] [of] the ego from its socially acquired inhibitions and releasing the free creative 'natural' essence from its cultural form" (Brandstetter 204). In fact, when associated with trance dance, the signifier "primitive" comes to connote the absence of elaboration and virtuosity (Brandstetter 208). "Danse Africaine" departs from the Freudian point of view on trance dance, whereby the (female) dancer loses all self-control and is completely subjected to the male, medical gaze. In "Danse Africaine," the speaker seems playful and manipulative; the performance is deliberate and does not lose but regains control over the Western male watcher.

"mad[ness]" marks the climax in the speaker's momentary experience of both physical and mental freedom through her dance-induced trance.

Both "Danse Africaine" and "Last Night" suggest that their dancing subjects do not reach disembodiment by doing just any dance. Brandstetter's chapter explores how specific "movement patterns" are able to "physically represent" the momentary suspension of consciousness which occurs in states of trance, ecstasy and hypnosis (Brandstetter 199). She defines the artistic and "social-sociological" context of the turn of the century as a

> situation in which the social system is no longer sufficiently stabilized by corresponding symbolic forms, such as rituals and formulas of distancing, while simultaneously still far too caught up in the taboos and constraints of obsolete structures to be able to handle an integration of the informal. (Brandstetter 202)

In other words, what Brandstetter calls "the 'cultural crisis' around 1900" is characterized by "the need for a 'loss of control' in the still 'formally' organized subsystems," that is in a social system which does not provide any framework of rethinking or revision. According to Brandstetter, "*whirling* dances compensated" for this lack (emphasis added; Brandstetter 202). The speaker of "Danse Africaine" specifies or implies, on a total of three occasions, that the dancer performs a whirling dance. He repeats twice that she "[w]hirls" (Hughes 8, 10) and the simile of the "wisp of smoke *around* the fire" further suggests circularity (11). (The speaker of "Last Night," too, "whirl[s]" once she is in "ecstasy" (Caution-Davis 10, 11).) Thus, the very dance which the dancer performs in "Danse Africaine" is based on ways of moving which, starting shortly before Hughes's active years as a writer, were thought capable of suspending the strict societal order in place by inducing a state of trance. In the empowering liminal locus which the stage (including the audience) represents, the dancer's whirling coalesces with the rhythm of the accompanying drums to momentarily suspend the power of the Western male gazer, which itself symbolizes the societal order of the early twentieth century.

Importantly, the disembodying power of whirling acts not only on the dancer, but also on her audience. While the simile of the "wisp of smoke around the fire" (11) in "Danse Africaine" suggests the dancer is transcending, the dance also dissociates the spectator's consciousness from his own body. Brandstetter's discussion of whirling dances among dervishes leads to the conclusion that, although the whirling dance can amount to "a form of prayer," and even to a "loss of self in religious rapture," it is also possible, not only for the dancer themself, but also for "the empathic *onlooker* . . . to take part . . . in a mystical experience of union" (emphasis added; Brandstetter 212, 213, 212). The captivating repetitiveness and circularity in the poem's structure and rhythm, along with the recurrence of the affirmative statement that the dance "Stirs your blood" without any response from the addressee "you", suggests that the performance forces him to "relinquish[] . . . control" (Brandstetter 201) over himself. Commenting on a performance by dancer Mary Wigman, Brandstetter states that, depending on the "degree of intensity" of the "pattern of rotation," a whirling dance can "cast a spell not only over dancers, but also over the audience" (Brandstetter 214). Thus, it is possible to read the action of "Danse Africaine" through Brandstetter's explication of the whirling dance, according to which the dancing subject disembodies into "a 'communion with space'" (Brandstetter 212) and thereby also puts the spectator under a spell.

The interpretation of the dance in "Danse Africaine" as enchanting or bewitching matches the discourse about African American culture developing during the Harlem Renaissance. Zora Neale Hurston, who dedicates a short section to "Dancing" in her influential essay "Criteria of Negro Art" (1934), claims that what she defines as African American dance is "compelling": "the spectator . . . finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. . . . That is the very reason the spectator is held so *rapt*" (emphasis added; Hurston 84). While the whirling dance of "Danse Africaine" is not

specifically coded as African American, the dancer herself is. Thus, the poem suggests that, in convergence with an empowering liminal space, it is the very creativity inherited from sub-Saharan African ancestry that gives the dancer agency against her potential oppressor.

While "Danse Africaine" evokes theoretical dance principles in regard to whirling, the poem also departs from the framework of disembodiment described by Brandstetter – thus, it "Signifies" upon it – so as to inverse the expected power dynamic between the dancer and the spectator. The spectator is rapt and in a trance but does not dissolve into the collective "transpersonal" ego of which Brandstetter speaks (Brandstetter 199); according to the poetic speaker, the performance "[s]tirs" the spectator's "blood" (5, 10), and thus it cannot be said that the spectator's consciousness properly dissociates from his physical body – according to the speaker, the addressee can still have bodily sensations. The use of the second person pronoun "your" further supports the notion that the spectator's mind is still informed by the boundaries of his own ego. A distinct "you" is the opposite of the "I" which signals a speaker whose identity is transcendent in poems such as "Proem" (1922), "Lament for Dark Peoples" and "Let America Be America Again" (1935). In Hughes's later poem "Let America Be America Again," the "you" addressed by the African American poetic speaker "I" – who conceives of his individuality as encompassing all those individuals marginalized and oppressed throughout U. S. history – is explicitly adversarial. As I argue in "Langston Hughes's Poetic Voice as a Whitmanesque Pioneer. A Comparison of Hughes's 'Let America Be America Again' and Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' in the Context of Hughes's National Critique" (2019), the "you" addressee of Hughes's poem represents "an adverse entity." "[Y]ou" "refers . . . to those served by the enslaved, in other words those enjoying basic rights and profiting from the subjugation of African Americans, native Americans, [and] workers" as well as "fallaciously attempts to discredit the speaker by calling him names" (Bouchelaghem 9). Thus, "Danse Africaine" prefigures Hughes's use of pronouns as a poetic

tool to deny the oppressive gaze access to the expanding (self)-consciousness of the African American subject.

While the addressed spectator remains trapped within his own body and ego, he is still under the spell, to borrow Brandstetter's phrasing, of the dancing girl's performance, in so far as he is no longer in control of his own body. His inherent power, as a Western man, to objectify the dancing African American woman is suspended, during which time the power dynamics between her and him are reversed. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey suggests that, "[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey 11). In "Danse Africaine," the (Western) male is passive, as he is addressed by the lyrical "I" and, believing the poetic speaker, rapt by the dancer's performance. The poem does not dramatize any response on the spectator's part; he lacks the discursive ability which permits him to assert his dominance over African Americans, so the speaker's words are final. Here lies a chief concern of the Harlem Renaissance and of the belief of its participants that literature can effect short-term change for African Americans: in "Danse Africaine," the Western male onlooker can no longer speak or produce any damaging discourse on African American women.

The combination of an empowering liminal locus such as a night setting, a dream or an on-stage dance – especially in the form of whirling – enables female African American poetic subjects to "Signify" upon, that is to reverse and fool the Western racist societal order and its representatives. However, Fanon recalls that liminality implies ephemerality and does not constitute a real insurrection, since the colonized can only liberate themselves from their oppressed egos and reach ecstasy in dream. To Fanon, group dances which a colonized tribe carries out at night in a circle are simply an occasion for people to release their accumulated libido and hindered aggression – in Fanon's original terms, "la libido accumulée, l'agressivité

empêchée" (Fanon 58).[71] He claims such dances nurture illusions but are ontologically meaningless. According to Fanon, colonized people (and arguably people who are similarly oppressed, such as African Americans in the U. S.) are bound to discover reality – "Le colonisé découvre le réel"[72] (Fanon 58) – and, once engaged in armed revolt, lose interest in what Fanon reckons are unrealistic fantasies.[73] Brandstetter's insight into the whirling dances of the dervishes reaches a similar conclusion: once the trance has reached its "climax[]," there necessarily comes a "fall" (Brandstetter 213). The lyrical speaker of Caution-Davis's "Last Night" adopts such a pragmatic view of her ecstatic, liberating dance: "Last night I danced on the rim of the moon, / Delirious and gay, / Then slipped into my sober self / Just ere the break of day" (Caution-Davis 13-16). As evidenced by the last stanza of the poem, when the new day begins, the dancing speaker resumes her mournful day-to-day life. The dancing which she narrates is admittedly not insignificant to her. Even in the ensuing day, as she recalls this moment in the past simple tense, her account of it is as animated as if her discourse-time equaled her story-time (which is visible in the exclamatory punctuation, the vocabulary of "mad[ness]" (Caution-Davis 9) and the imagery of transcendence). Still, her memory remains

[71] This being said, Fanon's understanding of dance as a counter-colonial impulse also supports the argument that the performance described in "Danse Africaine" reverts the discursive power of the Western male spectator over African American women, and racialized or colonized people in general. Rather than the vertical elevation induced by whirling dervish dances to which Brandstetter draws attention in "Delirium of Movement and Trance Dance," Fanon reckons that a revisionary practice of dance – in this case, in the specific context of colonization – verges on possession. He describes the nocturnal group dances as seances in which people become possessed by vampires, djinns and Legba: "ce sont des séances de possession-dépossession qui sont organisées: vampirisme, possession par les djinns, par les zombies, par Legba, le Dieu illustre du vaudou" (Fanon 58). Legba, which is the Fon name for Esu-Elegbara (Gates 5), is the very deity from which Gates (indirectly, through the figure of the Signifying Monkey) derives his theory of "Signifyin(g)," the god of interpretation. While the dancer in "Danse Africaine" does not explicitly dance at night or in a tribal communal context, she occupies a liminal space in which she is able to transgress the Western racist (and, for Fanon, colonial) societal order (the stage). Thus, there is a case for interpreting the dancer of "Danse Africaine" as possessed by Legba, the figure whom Gates sees as embodying the discursive trick (the "Signification") which African American texts play on what Gates refers to as "antecedent" texts and discourses.

[72] "The colonized discovers reality." (Translation my own.)

[73] See Fanon 58: "Après des années d'irréalisme, après s'être vautré dans les phantasmes les plus étonnants, le colonisé, sa mitraillette au poing, affronte enfin les seules forces qui lui contestaient son être: celles du colonialisme."

just that, and does not represent a concrete resource which she can use against the system which prevents her from breaking out of her "sober self" (Caution-Davis 15).

Nevertheless, it would be hasty to divorce the revisionary potential of dance completely from the dancing subjects' waking reality. In *Se Défendre. Une Philosophie de la Violence*, Dorlin refutes Fanon's pessimism towards anticolonial fantasies expressed in dance. She provides evidence that, in some cases, dance is a form of – or, at least, a transition to, a preparation for – revolt. Indeed, she suggests that the "violence" channeled in the tension-releasing activities by which colonized people carry out an imagined combat ("le combat imaginé") against the colonial order – such as nightly communal dances – is not "vain[]" but propaedeutic (Dorlin 35). In other words, dance can function not only as an outlet for the accumulated anger experienced by oppressed people, but also as a form of training for actual revolt. Imagining oneself as a powerful, rebellious subject in dancing represents both a psychic self-defense, or "autodéfense psychique," and an anticipatory visualization, or "visualisation anticipatrice," of (armed) insurrection (Dorlin 35).[74] For example, Dorlin cites the reaction of colonial authorities to the practice of dance by enslaved people in the Caribbean islands. Their dance triggered what Dorlin refers to as a white panic – "une panique blanche" (Dorlin 36). Enslaved people on Caribbean islands like present-day Martinique, Haiti and the Dominican Republic commonly performed dances such as the *calenda*, "an ancient African dance" which originated in "the Guinea coast of [the continent]" (Frank n. pag., Latham n. pag.). *Calendas* became prohibited, not only because the authorities deemed their movements obscene, but also because the colonial authorities feared that these

[74] See Dorlin 35: "[I]l se peut que cette nouvelle orientation [of the violence resulting from the tension between the way colonization immobilizes the bodies of the colonized, and the latter's lack of internalization of the inferior status which colonizers impose on them], opérée par la lutte de libération, de la violence vaine en violence historique, totale, soit de fait rendue possible par les exécutoires cites par Fanon. Si l'on fait l'hypothèse que ces simulacres d'un corps fantasmé sont aussi une forme propédeutique de l'affrontement, on peut travailler l'idée selon laquelle le combat imaginé est non seulement une forme d'autodéfense psychique mais aussi une forme d'entraînement corporelle, de visualisation anticipatrice de l'entrée dans la violence défensive."

dances, which were also an occasion for consuming alcohol, could result in revolt (Dorlin 35-36).[75] According to this interpretation, the equivalent of the "climax" of which Brandstetter speaks leads not to a fall back to the established order, but to an insurrection against it. To the European colonizers, a dance move is always already an engagement in combat[76] and, according to Dorlin, they are right to fear it. She explains that, indeed, the *calendas* comprise movements which resemble boxing and other fighting techniques,[77] which recalls the importance of pugilism in the "New Negro" movement. Considering Dorlin's convincing claim that communal nocturnal dances of enslaved people served as training for physical revolt, the agency of the dancer of "Danse Africaine" on the spectator can be read as transcending the ontological barriers which enclose the stage. As such, the dance may be a metaphor or, to use Dorlin's specific lexicon, an anticipatory visualization of the discursive reversal of which African Americans are culturally capable.

As mentioned above, "Danse Africaine" dramatizes not an armed or military but rather a discursive revolt, by which the Western male meaning-maker is stripped of his ability to construct and sexualize a stereotypical figure of the African American woman. Still, reflecting upon the broader context of Harlem Renaissance women's poetry, Cowdery's poem "Longings" (1927) exemplifies how the practice of dance in a context which is liminal – and therefore safe, to echo Honey's point about the trope of night (Honey xlvi) – may be part of a more violent revolutionary process. When she dances, the speaker compares herself to a

[75] See Dorlin 36: "On fait des ordonnances, dans les Îles, pour empêcher les *calendas*, non seulement à cause des postures indécentes et tout à fait lascives dont cette danse est composée, mais encore pour ne pas donner lieu aux trop nombreuses assemblées . . . qui, se trouvant ainsi ramassé[e]s dans la joie, et le plus souvent avec de l'eau-de-vie dans la tête, peuvent faire des révoltes, des soulèvements ou des parties pour aller voler. Cependant, malgré ces ordonnances et toutes les précautions que les maîtres peuvent prendre, il est presque impossible de les empêcher" (Jean-Baptiste Labat qtd. in Dorlin 36). The communal happiness of sub-Saharan African-descended people who rejoice in dance and alcohol recalls the utopian setting constructed in Hughes's poem "Our Land."
[76] See Dorlin 36: "On soupçonne un pas de danse d'être déjà un engagement au combat."
[77] See Dorlin 36: "[Les *calendas*] sont constituées de mouvements pugilistiques, rythmés par des percussions et accompagnés de rituels de magie, qui associent des techniques de lutte, bâton, frappes (poings/pied), balayages et acrobaties, héritiers de savoir-faire martiaux transatlantiques liés au contexte de la traite esclavagiste (notamment de techniques de combat africaines, indigènes et européennes). De ce fait, elles peuvent être interprétées comme de véritables propédeutiques à l'affrontement."

weapon: "To dance – / In the light of moon, / A platinum moon, / *Poised like a slender dagger* / On the velvet darkness of night" (emphasis added; Cowdery 1-5). The speaker develops a gradation through the first line of each stanza, which is always an infinitive verb followed by a dash, such as "To dance –" (Cowdery 1). Dance is the first step of this conceptual path towards self-assertion, not simply an ecstatic experience without relevance to her waking reality.

The rest of the gradation grounds the speaker's understanding of her potential discursive liberation in phenomenological terms which align with Fanon and Dorlin. In her imagination, self-assertion means the refusal to remain physically "petrified" by Western racist and sexist doctrines.[78] The gradation unfolds as follows: "To dream," "To croon," "To plunge," "To stand," "To talk" (Cowdery 6, 11, 18, 23, 28). After dancing, the speaker imagines being able to dream, thereby echoing the trope of disembodiment or liberation from the racial and gendered restrictions which inform many African American women's daily lives. The speaker continues by musing on how the capacity to transcend the boundaries of the Western societal order mentally enables creative expressions of sub-Saharan African ancestry: "To croon – / Weird sweet melodies . . . / With banjos clinking softly / And from out the shadow / Hear the beat of tom-toms / Resonant through the years" (Cowdery 11-12, 14-17).[79] The speaker then phenomenologically outlines the remaining steps: once able to use artistic expression (particularly music) to define her own racialized ancestry, she imagines the possibility "[t]o plunge / . . . In a golden pool," "[t]o stand" and "[t]o talk" (Cowdery 18, 20, 23, 28). The idea of "stand[ing]" echoes the vertical position which she evokes when

[78] See Fanon 48: "Si, en effet, ma vie a le même poids que celle du colon, son regard ne me foudroie plus, ne m'immobilise plus, sa voix ne me pétrifie plus."

[79] In this regard, Cowdery echoes Hughes's rhetorical apparatus for the poetic expression of African ancestry and racial "blackness": the drums or "tom-toms" (see "Danse Africaine" 1, 2, 12, 13, 14; "Poem" 1; "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" 58). Moreover, the stanza in which Cowdery's speaker imagines herself singing lies in the middle of the poem, recalling the centrality of song in Hughes's "Proem" (where the stanza in which the speaker discusses his activity as a singer is also located at the center of the poem). In both "Proem" and "Longings," creative expression is crucial to self-assertion against racist discourses.

imagining herself dancing, thereby strengthening the central position which this act holds in her view of the process of asserting herself. Although the poem only dramatizes the speaker's "Longings," as the title suggests, she can still phenomenologically visualize, in Dorlin's words, the necessary steps to affirm herself. The speaker of "Longings" conceives of dissolving the mental barriers of racism and sexism primarily through dance. She then expects to be able to express herself creatively and, as a result, conceive of her discursive liberation as feasible and closely linked with how she moves her body in space and how its posture can produce assertion. Therefore, Cowdery's poem "Longings" joins "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" in in their "Signification" upon the tropes of night and dance in order to imagine a reversal of power which grants African American women hermeneutic power in the discourse produced about them.

Bennett's "Fantasy" and Hughes's "Danse Africaine" both construct liminal loci in which figures standing for African American women can assert themselves and thereby reverse the tropes used to represent them in Western discourses. The two poems allude to but critically revise – in other words, they "Signify" upon – various "antecedent" texts. Such discursive antecedents are found both in Western discourses – from the "Noble Savage" trope in Behn's *Oroonoko,* to the defeminization of African American women in minstrel shows and advertising in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century U. S., to the sexualization of other-than-European women in orientalist texts. Within African American poetry itself, Bennett "Signifies" upon the use by Hughes and Bontemps of the trope of the primitive. Hughes's "Danse Africaine" "Signifies" upon his own poems, "Nude Young Dancer" and "To a Black Dancer in 'The Little Savoy'" regarding the objectifying gaze on African American women and their exoticization through dance.

The creation of liminal poetic loci of "Signification" upon racist tropes allow "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" to produce an intersectional critique of mainstream

discourses on African American women. The two poems "Signify" upon both racist and misogynistic tropes which are characteristic of the Western discursive depiction of sub-Saharan African ancestry. "Fantasy" constructs a setting which departs from the celebration of the primitive among poets like Hughes and Bontemps, thereby revising racist tropes. Likewise, "Danse Africaine" reverses Hegel's description of sub-Saharan communal dances as mere "gesticulations" (Hegel 94), a term which Fanon identifies as a key lexical item of colonial discourse.[80] An intertextual reading of this poem, drawing on Caution-Davis's "Last Night" and Cowdery's "Longings," shows how "Danse Africaine" alludes to the various metaphysical and revisionary functions (or connotations) which can be ascribed to dance.

At the same time, "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" address a number of gender-specific stereotypes affecting African American women: that is, their simultaneous desexualization and hypersexualization in mainstream U. S. discourses. In "Fantasy," the addressed figure of the queen reclaims, if not an explicit sexuality, at least her femininity via her asserted nobility and her valorizing exemplification of sophisticated aesthetic processes. "Danse Africaine" reverses the figure of the asexual and inferior caretaker by reversing the racialized and gendered power dynamics between dancer and spectator. It also "Signifies" upon the trope of dance: whereas the staging of African American female bodies often contributes to hypersexualizing patterns, the poem hints at the ways in which dance can confer upon the performer the ability to dismantle the discursive power of the Western male gaze. Moreover, both poems prevent the addressed or described woman from being sexualized or objectified at all by "Signifying" upon the trope of the male gaze: while they establish a poetic setting or action prone to objectifying the female figure at hand, they prevent the implied or addressed spectator from experiencing any scopophilic pleasure. Thus,

[80] Fanon includes "gesticulation" to a list of example terms from what he calls the "vocabulaire colonial," terms which have animalized colonized people: "le langage du colon, quand il parle du colonisé, est un language zoologique. On fait allusion . . . aux gesticulations. Le colon, quand il veut bien décrire et trouver le mot juste, se réfère constamment au bestiaire" (Fanon 45).

“Fantasy” and “Danse Africaine” richly exemplify Gates’s theory of “Signifyin(g).” They mock and invalidate the racist and misogynistic discourses of the mainstream West about sub-Saharan Africa by semantically reversing the very tropes of such discourses.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this mémoire has been to explicate a selection of poems, written by authors of the younger generation of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of how they invalidate the meanings which Western discourses have created about sub-Saharan African ancestry. More specifically, these poems repeat but revise – or, in Gates's terminology, they "Signify" upon – pejorative tropes which originate in these very discourses. Along with Gates's theoretical framework of "Signifyin(g)," the semiotic models of Ferdinand de Saussure and especially Charles S. Peirce, as well as J. L. Austin's definition of performative language, have allowed me to argue that the use, in these poems, of racist or misogynistic tropes is performative and revisionary. While they repeat the signifiers of Western pejorative meanings, the poets play with connotations so as to expose the destructivity of Western discourses about Africa. As such, these poems participate in one of the main concerns of the Harlem Renaissance, which was to end the hegemony of Western discourses in defining – and thus controlling – communities of sub-Saharan African descent.

The antecedent Western discourses, to repeat Gates's terminology, upon which the poems at hand "Signify" comprise a variety of doctrines. However, they do share a few common denominators which enables the labeling of this body of discourses as "Western": that is, they all denote Western Europeans, their descendants, their cultures and their societal organizations as the fittest to rule, and those of sub-Saharan Africans as meant to be controlled. Importantly, these discourses illustrate this opposition by inscribing it within a vertical black-white symbolic hierarchy, within which white is high and good, and black low and bad. Biblical discourse, which heavily influenced the collective imaginary of Elizabethan England, connotes the color white as indication of virtue, purity and beauty, whereas the color black, which denotes African ancestry, connotes sin and ugliness (Berghahn 4). This idea

persists into the seventeenth century through the New-England Puritans and is secularized in slave codes, after which the legal discourses of the British colonies of North America begin to connote "white" or European ancestry as worthy, and "black" or African ancestry as unworthy of citizenship and basic rights (see Laurent and Battalora). These ideas are defended throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through the discourses of the Enlightenment and of scientific racism, which both posit that African ancestry means an inherently undeveloped mind or brain, and therefore a form of sub-humanity (see Hegel and Gobineau). These ideas still inform the mainstream U. S. view of African ancestry as a discursive category – "blackness" – by the 1920s, when Hughes, Bennett and Cullen write "Proem," "Heritage," "Sonnet 1," "Black Magdalens," "Fantasy," and "Danse Africaine."

At the time these poems were composed, racial violence had been on a steady increase, an assimilationist African American middle class (to which Cullen himself belonged) had been forming and Anglo-American patrons were common actors in artistic production circles. Thus, it is not fully unreasonable to wonder whether the use of typical Western tropes in the poems selected could be traced back to a calculated surrender to Euro-centric literary conventions, or even to an unconscious internalization of racism. However, I have shown that the use of Western tropes in these poems is not naïve. Noting, though not foregrounding, potential authorial intention (in the case of Hughes), I have argued that in repeating a specific set of tropes (signifiers of specific Western meanings), the poems connote people of sub-Saharan African ancestry not as destined for servility but as oppressed by Western colonialism; not providers of strictly physical labor but integral shapers of American success, both economic and cultural; not undeveloped but culturally sophisticated; not devoid of (self-)consciousness but capable of transcending the limits of their own minds, either to connect with their racial counterparts or to manipulate their oppressors. Moreover, my analysis has emphasized specificities in the experience of women as opposed to men of sub-

Saharan African descent in the Western world. Whereas Western discourses objectify women who are racialized as "black" and connote them as lacking either femininity or virtue, poems like "Black Magdalens," "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" imagine them as proud, dignified, beautiful and powerful.

Central to performing these displacements of meaning is the employment of reversal through indirection. Ultimately, each poem performs a form of inversion, in so far as it discredits Western hermeneutic practices regarding Africa and the sub-Saharan African diaspora. Hughes's poems employ chiasmus, a fundamental figure of reversal, to represent reversal for its own sake, in other words without simultaneously shifting the connotations of any specific Western tropes. In opposition, catachresis inverses the connotations of opposed dichotomic pairs. This technique of reversal allows Cullen's "Black Magdalens" to achieve a radical and playful revision of Western meaning-making.

According to Gates's conceptualization of "Signifyin(g)," the very use of rhetorical figures – such as chiasmus and catachresis – exemplifies the indirect, performative language of "Signification" or what Gates calls "black" discourse as opposed to the direct, descriptive language which Gates believes to be characteristic of "white" hermeneutics. However, indirection can also take the form of a larger rhetorical detour, whereby the reversed Western meaning is mediated through a third poetic entity. The full effect of the semantic reversals achieved relies on the construction of this poetic mediation. "Heritage," "Sonnet 1" and "Black Magdalens" do not directly provide reversed versions of Western tropes – for example via catachresis – but rather stage the event of the discursive reversal, by first pretending to espouse Western racism and misogyny. Similarly, the poetic speakers of "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" make the African American women which they construct appear as vulnerable to a Western male gaze; nevertheless, they frustrate such objectification. This type of discursive indirection puts the reversed meaning in stark contrast to the antecedent Western

discourse, thus strengthening the radical nature of the semantic revision which the poem performs. Rather than simply unveiling the very process of reversal, poems like "Fantasy" and "Danse Africaine" construct poetic liminal loci which enable poetic speakers and poetically constructed figures to overthrow the constraints and objectification of the Western societal order. Spatio-temporal configurations such as dreams, night and the stage are indeed situated in the margins of mainstream experience. In *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Frantz Fanon uses the metaphor of muscular inertia to argue that those liminal spaces are the only ones within which colonized people – and African Americans – can occupy space: that is, be free. In "Danse Africaine," the speaker himself takes on a liminal function. Acting as an intermediary between the dancer and the Western male spectator whom she hypnotizes, the speaker verbally mediates her actions to her spectator, thereby strengthening the irony of the spectator's having been rendered unable to speak. Like liminality, allusion, which most of the poems analyzed employ, is instrumental in the construction of rhetorical reversal. The use of allusion – be it to historical instances of colonial violence or to Western, West African or African-descended traditions – is more radical in its function as rhetorical intermediary. Indeed, interpreting allusions is necessary in order to make clear that a poem performs any semantic reversal – that is, "Signifies" – at all.

As I hope to have shown in my study, close reading of the selected poems rules out the assumption that poets like Hughes, Bennett and Cullen used Western tropes describing African ancestry due to an alleged internalization of the simultaneous denigration and romanticism which characterize Western discourses about Africa. The framework of "Signifyin(g)" developed by Gates makes clear that to focus on "matter," or the use of Western signifiers in Harlem Renaissance poetry, without thorough consideration of "manner" – *how* these poems rhetorically construct meaning based on these signifiers – lays the ground for "serious misreading" of the literary texts at hand (Gates 70). Thus, Hughes,

Bennett and Cullen are not jeopardizing the discursive and hermeneutic aims of the Harlem Renaissance by reiterating antecedent racist and misogynistic discursive tropes. Instead, they indirectly and therefore playfully use such tropes precisely to discredit Western hegemony.

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