

## Race, the American Language, and the Americanist Avant-Garde

### I

The coincidence that *The Waste Land* and *Harlem Shadows* were published in the same year may seem merely to dramatize the differences between the literary movements these works have come to represent. After all, when Eliot and McKay both returned to the United States in the mid-1930s after long absences, transatlantic modernism was an accepted literary fact and Eliot was given a respectful and even distinguished reception, while McKay found the Harlem Renaissance virtually moribund and so few opportunities for himself he soon ended up in a state work camp.<sup>1</sup> The distance between Eliot, delivering his most notoriously narrow-minded opinions on race and culture before an audience at the University of Virginia, and McKay, doing manual labor with a crew of partially detoxified alcoholics, could not be greater. Such differences are so hard to ignore that modernism and the Harlem Renaissance have come to seem not just mutually exclusive but even inimical terms. Yet there was a time when it seemed natural to couple the two, when at least some Harlem writers sought an alliance with their white compatriots in the modernist avant-garde, albeit a modernist avant-garde rather different from the one that Eliot had come to represent.

The month *The Waste Land* was first published, the little magazine *Broom* carried an announcement proclaiming "The Oldest and the Newest Art of America. . . . The *January* number of *Broom* is a challenge to Americans to recognize a national art as profoundly American as BASEBALL / THE CINEMA / THE JAZZ BAND / AND THE DIZZY SKYSCRAPER / while fundamentally in harmony with the Art of the ancient Mayas." Listed as practitioners of this new/old art were Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Malcolm Cowley, Gertrude Stein, and Jean Toomer, among others.<sup>2</sup> When the promised issue arrived, it duly contained works by Williams, Toomer, Cowley, and Hart Crane, all decorated with Mayan masks, statues, and architecture, though there was nothing having to do with baseball. The issue also included Matthew Josephson's dismissive review of *The Waste Land*, the spirit of which seemed to extend to the back cover, which carried a quote from Moore's "England": "America where . . . letters are written / not in Spanish, not in Greek, not in Latin, not in shorthand / but in plain American which cats and dogs can read."<sup>3</sup>

Despite Eliot's youthful enthusiasm for American slang, his work in England seemed to many American writers of the time a linguistic affront, one that Williams was still answering twenty-five years later when he composed *Paterson* as "a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands."<sup>4</sup> By this time Eliot's opinions had also solidified, so that he accused H. L. Mencken of "issuing a kind of linguistic Declaration of Independence, an act of emancipation of American from English."<sup>5</sup> This is, in fact, exactly what the editors of *Broom* were doing at the very moment of *The Waste Land*, for they felt that the success of the literary avant-garde and the linguistic independence of the United States were necessary to one another. Special issues like the one they promised for January 1923 represented the hopes of a wing of the modernist avant-garde also represented, in varying degrees, in little magazines such as *Others*, *Poetry*, *Seven Arts*, *Secession*, the *Little Review*, and *Contact*. This homegrown avant-garde devoted itself to American popular culture, to the multiracial heritage of the Americas, and above all to modern writing in "plain American."<sup>6</sup>

This effort toward an indigenous American cultural renewal coincided with a similar movement in Harlem. As Alain Locke observed in 1928, "It is a curious thing—it is also a fortunate thing—that the movement of Negro art toward racialism has been so similar to that of American art at large in search of its national soul." The fight of the avant-garde "against conventionality, against Puritanism," has found a natural ally in the black movement that has come to accept "the folk music and poetry as an artistic heritage." Because of this convergence of interests, Locke says, "there is every reason for the Negro artist to be more of a modernist than, on the average, he yet is, but with each younger artistic generation the alignment with modernism becomes closer." By modernism Locke apparently meant something like the theater of Eugene O'Neill or the novels of Carl Van Vechten, but he might almost have been quoting Williams when he cited "the equally important movement for re-rooting art in the soil of everyday life and emotion."<sup>7</sup>

Locke realized that this movement toward "plain American" would inevitably bring white modernists like Williams to African-American language and literature for inspiration:

Indeed, contemporary American poets, engaged in spite of all their diversities of outlook and technique in a fundamentally common effort to discover and release the national spirit in poetry, have sensed a kindred aim and motive in Negro poetry, and have turned with deep and unbiassed interest to Negro materials as themes and Negro idioms of speech and emotion as artistic inspiration.<sup>8</sup>

Thus Locke hoped that white modernists and the Harlem movement would meet in a common effort to make a new national art that would free all writers from inhibiting standards and traditions. And, in fact, there was a rumor current in the

early 1920s that *Broom* was going to follow its "All-American number" with a "Negro number." Though this did not come to pass, the mere fact of the rumor suggests how natural was the connection between a commitment to American linguistic independence and an interest in African-American language and literature.<sup>9</sup>

Locke was not by any means the only critic of the time to refer to the younger Harlem writers as modernists or to suggest, as Herbert Gorman did in the *New York Times Book Review*, that American writers both white and black differed from their English contemporaries in being aesthetically modern.<sup>10</sup> And yet by the early 1950s when Frederick Hoffman published what is still considered a standard overview of the new writing of this period, he found it so easy to disentangle the Harlem Renaissance from the other movements of the time that he did not so much as mention a single African-American writer.<sup>11</sup> It is little wonder, then, that Houston Baker, Jr., has found it necessary, in his turn, to disentangle the Harlem Renaissance from critical generalizations about modern literature formed in virtual ignorance of black writing.<sup>12</sup>

The promise that *Broom* made in 1922 was, in short, never fulfilled. Instead of growing from these shallow beginnings, this facile enthusiasm for skyscrapers and the Mayas, into a truly multicultural modernism, the Americanist avant-garde demonstrated instead a persistent inability to understand how race fit into its conception of modern America, or how the language of African America fit into its conception of "plain American." It was in many ways the American language and its fight with everything English that made this branch of the avant-garde what it was, and that powerful and yet curiously undefinable dialect hovered throughout the 1920s as the possible point of contact for all kinds of adventurous American writing. That this contact was not finally made, that Locke's hopes were disappointed, remains one of the most significant facts about American literature of the twentieth century.

## II

In a 1920 essay in the *Dial*, James Oppenheim nominated poetry as "Our First National Art," as long as it used "only our American speech, the resultant of a new environment, mixture of races and new experience." What Oppenheim added could almost have gone without saying, namely, that this new speech "is decidedly different in flavour and construction from English speech."<sup>13</sup> Eliot had advised Matthew Josephson to move to London to "maintain contact with the pure English language," but he and most of his colleagues chose to stay home and remain impure.<sup>14</sup> Even those who went to London did not take instruction quite as mildly as earlier generations of expatriates. Skipwith Cannell's poem "On a London Tennis Court" begins with the following:

The land is new to me,  
And the people, too; and the speech  
Is strange to me  
As words  
Spoken from another star.<sup>15</sup>

Most of the new American poets felt this way, according to Richard Aldington, who noted in 1920 how far removed the Americans were from the "discussion [that] has occurred recently in London on the subject of 'pure English.'"<sup>16</sup>

Actually, the American poets were not just removed from but actively antagonistic to that discussion. As Malcolm Cowley later said, they felt the standardization movement as a positive impediment to the new American literature: "A definite effort was being made to destroy all trace of local idiom or pronunciation and have us speak 'correctly'—that is, in a standardized Amerenglish as colorless as Esperanto."<sup>17</sup> Magazines that favored the new American writing necessarily ran up against the same difficulty, as Baker Brownell said of *Others* in 1918: "Words are fluid and beautiful things which the increasing rationalization of grammar surely is freezing. The 'others' evidently are trying to break through the encrustation and immobility that has gradually grown about the cooling language, and with some success."<sup>18</sup> Thus the motto of *Others*, "The old expressions are with us always, and there are always others," purposely situated the magazine and its contributors outside accepted linguistic territory, associating the new poetry by definition with the violation of old linguistic standards. For other little magazines such as *Broom*, which deployed the *Others* motto in a specifically nationalistic way, those standards were inevitably English.<sup>19</sup>

This might seem a rather late date in America's history as a free country to wave the banner of linguistic independence. But there is evidence to suggest that the long linguistic tug-of-war between England and the United States intensified at this time for the simple reason that the United States was becoming markedly less English. It was at this time, at any rate, that Kipling darkly warned his friend Brander Matthews "that non-Anglo writers were degrading American literature."<sup>20</sup> The trouble, from Matthews's point of view, was that the term "non-Anglo" was distressingly elastic. He had been complaining for years against the English tendency to treat all Americans as "outer barbarians, mere strangers, wickedly tampering with something which belongs to the British exclusively."<sup>21</sup> Now it seemed that even so thoroughly Anglicized an American as Henry James might be deemed a "foreigner," forever incapable of using the English language fully and correctly, as Virginia Woolf claimed quite without conscious malice, in the *New Republic* in 1929.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the Anglophilia of the American academic establishment of the time was meant to ward off such withering condescension, to avoid any guilt by association with the hordes of "non-Anglos" pouring into the United States. At any rate, men like Stuart Sherman, Bliss Perry, Robert Underwood Johnson, and Barrett Wendell carried on the old New England tradition of opposing immigra-

tion on one hand and preaching literary solidarity with England on the other. American literature, according to this line of reasoning, "can only come from pure English racial stock uncontaminated by alien European races—from those 'thoroughbred' Americans who are indistinguishable in taste, manners, and speech from cultivated Englishmen."<sup>23</sup> It is little wonder, then, that the next generation should have made its war with the old a war against England as well, a war that frequently assumed a starkly racial character. As Malcolm Cowley put it, the "revolt against gentility" was also a "conflict of racial strains," with the genteel writers representing "the older immigration" from England and the younger generation representing, sometimes by choice rather than ancestry, the "non-Anglos."<sup>24</sup>

Thus the culture wars of the 1920s were fought in terms that were simultaneously linguistic and racial. In 1922 Harold Stearns dedicated his iconoclastic collection *Civilization in the United States* to the proposition that "whatever else American civilization is, it is not Anglo-Saxon. . . ." <sup>25</sup> A year later H. L. Mencken devoted most of his preface to the third edition of *The American Language* to an attack on the "Anglomaniacs." Both men attacked those Stearns simply called "the standardizers," literary and academic authorities who had robbed America of its true character by holding its language and culture to an English measure.<sup>26</sup> Of course, the standardizers were not about to take this lying down. In 1923 the American Academy of Arts and Letters, armed with a twenty-five-thousand-dollar grant, dedicated itself to the "preservation of our English speech in its purity." "Minor errors in speech," the American Academy was told by no less an authority than Hamlin Garland, "are multiplied by radio into major offenses against society." These the American Academy was determined to eliminate, all the more so in that the newer critics and writers seemed bewilderingly aligned with the very aliens who were undermining America's English speech and heritage.<sup>27</sup>

In short, the debate between the academic establishment and the young writers of the 1920s linked language, literature, and race so closely together that aesthetic experimentation seemed racially alien to certain authorities even if it had nothing overtly to do with race. Thus, at the same time that the American Academy was mounting its campaign against alien influences in the language, the art critic Royal Cortissoz attacked what he called "Ellis Island Art": "The United States is invaded by aliens, thousands of whom constitute so many acute perils to the health of the body politic. Modernism is of precisely the same heterogeneous alien origin and is imperilling the republic of art in the same way." Cortissoz was not so crude as to name names, but the issue of the exact racial or ethnic origin of particular artists was beside the point anyway, because what made the new art perilously alien was its purposeful flouting of the accepted principles of aesthetic order. When Cortissoz says that modernism has been promoted by "types not yet fitted for their first papers in aesthetic naturalization," he commits an elaborate pun, for he simply means that modernism defies what is natural, "what is normal

and sane."<sup>28</sup> In this analysis, art and the body politic reproduce one another so closely that an invasion of one is an invasion of the other, and both depend for their health on order, unity, and homogeneity, so that difference is indistinguishable from disease.

This is precisely the metaphor used by the American Academy against literary modernism, as when Robert Underwood Johnson, reading a stanza from Marianne Moore, exclaimed, "[W]hat is the remedy for this disease?"<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the hysteria assumed a more aggressive and more specifically racist tone. Dreiser's English was, according to Paul Elmer More, "of the mongrel sort to be expected from a miscegenation of the gutter."<sup>30</sup> But the American Academy chose as spearhead of its attack on all novelty in language and literature a youngish academic who could be relied on to take a smoother tone. The purpose of Stuart Sherman's *Americans* of 1922 was simply to deny that name to a rather large group of readers and writers, to a new public that "shows little trace of the once dominant Puritan stock and nothing of the Puritan temper. It is richly and curiously composed of the children of parents who dedicated themselves to accumulation, and toiling inarticulately in shop and field, in forest and mine, never fully mastered the English definite article or the personal pronoun." These immigrant children speak the new slang and, instead of reading the good old New England writers, look into the works of moody European misanthropes or, worse yet, lured by "primitive instinct" and "barbaric impulses," succumb to Sandburg, Masters, Anderson, or Dreiser.<sup>31</sup>

Sherman's attack on the ethnicity of these writers and their critical champions is utterly frank. In the course of his exposé of the "alien-minded" among the new writers, he names Huneker, Spingarn, Mencken, Hackett, Brooks, Bourne, Frank, and Stearns, and then suavely concludes, "It is not a group, taken as a whole, however it may be connected with the house of Jesse, which should be expected to hear any profound murmuring of ancestral voices or to experience any mysterious inflowing of national experience in meditating on the names of Mark Twain, Whitman, Thoreau, Lincoln, Emerson, Franklin, and Bradford."<sup>32</sup> Jaded perhaps by the old-fashioned anti-Semitism of such attacks, Sherman finds something a little jazzier in the concept of "literary Mohawks," as he calls "the fighting organization of the younger generation," whose "chieftains have advanced whooping to the portals" of the American Academy.<sup>33</sup> Thus he attempts to combine his favorite metaphors of barbarism and ethnic invasion, forgetting perhaps both the historical priority of the Mohawks in North America and the circumstances of the Boston Tea Party.<sup>34</sup>

Against Sherman's *Americans* the avant-garde could offer Waldo Frank's *Our America*, a book considered by much of the American avant-garde as the first shot in their campaign of cultural independence. Frank spoke for a younger generation eager to leave behind a time "when our land in all but the political surface of its life was yet a colony of Britain." He spoke as well for a multiethnic populace whose "tongues were stilled before the clear articulation of New England."

These tongues, he said, were being given voice in the literary renaissances of Chicago and New York, in the hubbub created when immigrants from the East met rebellious malcontents from the Middle West to create artistic circles like that around Alfred Stieglitz. Above all, Frank preached the positive value of the "ethnic chaos from which a new world must be gathered" and which would give Americans the strength to throw off "English culture [which] has been a growing incubus upon us."<sup>35</sup>

Frank was one of the major intellectual forces behind *Seven Arts*, which had begun publication in 1916 with this charge from Romain Rolland: "You must make of your culture a symphony that shall in a true way express your brotherhood of individuals, of races, of cultures banded together. You must make real the dream of an integrated and entire humanity." The journal apparently tried to meet this charge immediately: the first story it published was "Simply Sugar-Pie," a dialect tale about a pregnant black woman in Louisiana.<sup>36</sup> The editors seemed to have more difficulty finding material by black writers, though the very last poems it published before ceasing publication in 1917 were two sonnets by Claude McKay.<sup>37</sup> Members of the *Seven Arts* group also tried to discharge their responsibility in more substantial ways. Randolph Bourne carried on a long campaign for what he called "Trans-National America," a part of which Paul Rosenfeld illustrated in *Port of New York*, a collective portrait of the avant-garde, which concluded with an appendix giving the varying ethnic extractions of the writers and artists discussed.<sup>38</sup>

Bourne believed that racial and cultural differences were vitally important and should be preserved in the new transnational nation of America: "What we emphatically do not want is that these distinctive qualities should be washed out into a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity." On the other hand, Bourne did most emphatically want cultural unity, and he felt very keenly that "[i]n our loose, free country, no constraining national purpose, no tenacious folk-tradition and folk-style hold the people to a line."<sup>39</sup> In fact, he felt that it was the loss of cultural differences that had rendered the United States such a chaos, but he was quite incapable of suggesting how to unchop this tree, putting difference back in so as to achieve a new unity. As Gorham Munson said years later, "He strove to make his concept of transnational America clear but only made it picturesque."<sup>40</sup>

Achieving unity within a polity that also preserved ethnic and racial differences was a difficult task that no one at *Seven Arts* managed to accomplish, even in theory. When forced to choose, Frank for one preferred unity. In fact, before the 1920s were out, he had started to sound uncannily like Stuart Sherman. In "Seriousness and Dada," Frank calls for control and high seriousness in a way that the American Academy itself might have applauded, and as he does so a distressing note of racial fear and prejudice begins to creep into his version of the American language: "Our brew of Nigger-strut, of wailing Jew, of cantankerous Celt, of nostalgic Anglo-Saxon, is a brew of Dada."<sup>41</sup> The heterogeneous mixture of this brew is no longer cause for celebration; "ethnic chaos" becomes

instead a force that has to be controlled lest it result in the wildness and indiscipline of dada. When a slightly younger group of writers began a new journal, *Secession*, Frank contributed a surprisingly mild "Declaration of War," in which there was very little about war or chaos but much about the need for cultural unity, which he accused the dadaists of undermining.<sup>42</sup>

On the surface, nothing seems less threatening to good order than the dadaism of *Broom* and *Secession*, belated, transplanted, and diluted to half strength as it was. Yet it worried Frank because it violated his own most cherished precepts simply by carrying them out to their natural extreme. When Josephson, Munson, and Cowley spoke of a new American culture, they enthusiastically included billboards, machines, and vaudeville, about which Frank was notoriously queasy. When they spoke of the "knockabout vitality, vigor, raciness, authenticity, humor, poetry, and vividness of the American language," they included examples that did not look or sound much like language at all: "alldressdupinher sun daycloes / and there she goes."<sup>43</sup> Though Frank shifted ground slightly where some movies and some vaudeville were concerned, he realized that a full-scale embrace of skyscrapers and machine culture was inconsistent with his organic definition of culture. He also realized that attacks on language per se would sweep away American along with English.

Obviously, Frank had been counting on "ethnic chaos" to resolve itself into a new order, and he was deeply shocked when the new literature included only the chaos. Others recoiled in the same way, and when they did, the reaction brought with it the same distressing note of racial and ethnic discrimination that had crept into Frank's voice. Edmund Wilson, for example, took vaudeville as a metaphor for the contemporary literature of 1926: "polyglot, parvenu, hysterical and often only semi-literate."<sup>44</sup> It seems that for Wilson the equation between the polyglot and the parvenu and semiliterate was as unarguable as it was for, say, Stuart Sherman. This equation reached its natural conclusion in no less a venue than *Broom* itself, in an essay by Emmy Veronica Sanders about a New York crowd: "And all around, from thousands of lips, bastard sounds reach the ear. Hybrid mixtures of a score of tongues. —And these dishonored crippled tongues, this verbal patchwork, this absence of pure speech, offends the ear. It longs for a clean language as the soul and body long for a clean breeze. Melting pot sounds and melting-pot crowds. . . ."<sup>45</sup> Thus the demand for "pure speech" returns in the very journal that had declared itself for the variety and vigor of a hybrid American tongue. Royal Cortissoz himself would hardly have put it any differently.

It is quite remarkable how the American Academy language of chaos, hybridity, mongrelization, and cacophony reduplicates itself in what is supposed to be the very heart of Mohawk territory. The return of this language and the racial fears it represents marks the emergence of a contradiction, a conflict of motives, in the program of the avant-garde itself. Like Frank, the avant-garde in general counted on the American language to preserve difference and to open up new

freedoms, while also building a new unity. How any language, no matter how flexible, might do this without becoming another standard just as limiting as the old academic one was a question they never managed to answer. How they might attack the privilege of the English language without also undermining the privilege of all language, as the dadaists were doing, was a question they seemed afraid even to ask. The Americanist avant-garde advanced racial and linguistic diversity as a wedge in its campaign against English and New English domination, and it was only too glad to play the role of racial outsider in this campaign, but it failed to anticipate how its efforts against the twin authorities of race and language would also thwart its own plans for a new cultural unity.

### III

The cover of Williams's *Kora in Hell*, published in 1920, was a visual expression of the multicultural ideal which had animated *Seven Arts*: it showed "a design using sperms of various breeds, various races let's say," surrounding a single ovum.<sup>46</sup> The fact that only one sperm could actually penetrate the egg suggested competition rather than cooperation, but this only makes the cover a more revealing picture. For in this case even a picture could not succeed where a thousand words had failed, and Williams was no more capable than Frank or Bourne of actually describing how diversity would coexist with unity in the new American literature.

The abstract problem of describing the role of difference within a unity emerged quite concretely whenever these writers tried to describe the exact function of other races within the culture that had been Anglo-Saxon. One of the reasons discussions of American language and culture always ended up as discussions about race is that the truly original American art forms—jazz, vaudeville, the movies—were created by blacks or dominated by black impersonators like Jolson. As V. F. Calverton put it in 1929, the contribution of African Americans "to American art and literature is far more free of white influence than American culture is of English. In fact, they constitute America's chief claim to originality in its cultural history." Logically, then, the new American writers would be black, for, as Calverton says, "In respect of originality . . . the Negro is more important in the growth of an American culture than the white man."<sup>47</sup>

This is not exactly what the white avant-garde had in mind. Though they were often quite happy to predict great things for black writers in the future, for the present these folk materials and cultural creations would remain raw material for white writers to use. A candid description of this relationship in the *New York Times* reveals its vampirish qualities: "[T]hrough negro culture our novelists and playwrights hope to find colorful folklore that our starved literature needs most of all."<sup>48</sup> This metaphor of spiritual, if not bodily, transfusion was rife in the 1920s. According to John Rodker, European discovery of the "natural man" means that

"[n]ew vitality flows in. The artist has tapped a natural spring which we feed ourselves continually."<sup>49</sup>

Alice Corbin Henderson attempted to describe this process as reciprocal but ended by revealing more than she knew: "As the Negro has absorbed us, so we have absorbed him. His songs, of which he borrowed the inspiration from us, now belong to us quite as much as to him; perhaps more, since the Negro is losing his native strain of song as rapidly as the white man is taking it up."<sup>50</sup> Henderson herself was a good example of this rather tricky transfer. As Alice Corbin she had contributed to an early issue of *Seven Arts* a poem entitled "Echoes of a Childhood: A Folk-Medley," which included two dialect poems and this refrain:

Underneath the southern moon  
I was cradled to the tune  
Of the banjo and the fiddle  
And the plaintive negro croon.  
(p. 599)

In the same year, however, she reviewed Fenton Johnson's *Songs of the Soil for Poetry* and recommended that black poets not write in dialect but rather in some "new and individual idiom."<sup>51</sup> The fact that she was herself writing in dialect while recommending that black poets give it up illustrates only too well why "the Negro is losing his native strain of song as rapidly as the white man is taking it up."

The transfusion metaphor suggests that the role of African Americans is simply to make European Americans whole again, drained as they have been by the effort of creating Western civilization. Or, to vary the metaphor somewhat, they provide what Gorham Munson called "anti-bodies" against the machine.<sup>52</sup> The literature of the period is full of such antibodies, which seem to enter the white body not by injection or transfusion but by sexual transmission. In "Sloth," published in *Others* in 1917, Mark Turbyfill brings this trope down to its irreducible minimum:

In the sun  
A date-palm sways,  
And one brown girl  
Struts copiously.  
  
O days  
Pass thus over me.<sup>53</sup>

Other writers gave the theme fuller, less languid exposition. In Stephen Hudson's "Southern Woman," published in the *Little Review* in 1920, the narrator, frustrated by the enticing but rather frigid white woman he has met on a trip to Nashville, follows a black woman back to her shack and pays to watch her undress, while a black chorus sings "Carry me back to ole' Tennessee" under a full moon.<sup>54</sup>

Frank criticized such works because in them "the negro is not a negro at all; he is the healing and resolving norm within the white man's soul," but his own attempts were hardly any better.<sup>55</sup> The hero of his short story "John the Baptist" burbles to his black cleaning lady, "Nigger woman . . . you are all *one!*" "Hope," another story in the same collection, reproduces the same elemental scene as "Southern Woman." A lonely and confused white man wanders until he meets a black woman, whom he follows home in order to watch her undress. Bolder than Hudson's narrator, Frank's also undresses, and soon "she undulous easeful, black like a buried sea" and he, "separate white," join, and the "black dead body," receiving his "impress of life," becomes "song."<sup>56</sup> He has finally lost the beingless and thoughtless state in which he began the story, and she, having received impress of life, kisses his feet. Years later, Frank said that the southern whites he met on his travels with Jean Toomer resented their black neighbors because they had escaped the machine.<sup>57</sup> This story shows how that resentment might be so mingled with envy as almost to disappear.

Of course, it never quite disappears but curdles in secret, as other contributions from the same journals can illustrate. Exactly a year before the *Little Review* published "Southern Woman," it published Aldous Huxley's "Happy Families" in an issue that also included prose by William Carlos Williams, an installment of *Ulysses*, and the first part of Pound and Fenollosa's *Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Huxley's story explores the boundary between passion and the pretensions of polite society by giving its male and female protagonists two alter egos each. Aston J. Tyrell is flanked by his two brothers, Sir Jasper, a Wildean aesthete, and Cain, "a Mendelian throw-back to the pure Jamaican type." Miss Topsy Garrick, who really seems quite anxious to get on with Aston, is accompanied by her sisters Henrika, in white muslin, and Belle, who is bosomy, forward, and coarse. The possibilities of the ensuing crowd scene are numerous, but Huxley seems most interested in the shock produced when Cain, with his "black greasy face, . . . pink thick lips, [and] goggling eyeballs of white enamel," steals a kiss from Henrika, who responds with fainting and tears. Cain, who struts up and down clacking a set of bones and saying "nyum nyum," is the traditional minstrel-show version of black sensuality, which becomes negative when the sensuality becomes active and male instead of being passive and female. Huxley tries to deploy this stereotype as if it were a piece of smart comedy, but the hatred and fear at the heart of it keep leering out whenever Cain licks his lips or "runs a thick black finger along Topsy's arm."<sup>58</sup>

The basic assumption, that black and white somehow form one whole human being, a being that feels a sexual longing to repossess its own unity, runs from Hudson's romanticism to Huxley's nasty humor, and it reaches one of its natural conclusions in a story that immediately preceded Huxley's in the *Little Review*. In Ben Hecht's "Rouge," the black alter ego is "a dwarfed and paralytic nigger boy" named Goliath, who lives with and serves a white, middle-aged sculptor. In Goliath the physical distortions that mark Cain reach horrific proportions: he

shuffles along, dragging huge apelike hands across the floor, lolling a gigantic head with rolling eyes and gaping mouth. The aesthete with whom Goliath is paired is a similarly distorted version of Sir Jasper, alone in an unhealthy dream-world populated by his own deformed sculptures. This story also ends with a sexual attack, only this time Goliath kills the sculptor and violates the clay statue of a virgin. Thus the aesthete pays for his own violation of nature, which he teases and provokes with his distorted statues and with his perverse and isolated life.<sup>59</sup>

What possible connection can there be between Sugar-Pie and all her sisters, who bring health and wholeness to a white society exhausted by its own civilization, and the racial nightmare of "Rouge"? In one way this contrast merely marks the emergence of the negative racial stereotype from its romanticized opposite. What seems at one point like fullness and unity emerges more and more as lack: instinct becomes mindlessness, physical presence becomes brutish size, natural submission becomes sullen surrender, deceit, and then death. Goliath may also represent bad conscience revenging itself on the ideal. The scene of white sexual domination that appears in these works was always a travesty of Rolland's "dream of an integrated and entire humanity"; the murder at the end of "Rouge" is its utter inversion.<sup>60</sup>

The murder also exposes an insidious slippage in the very metaphor of an "integrated and entire humanity." If at first African Americans are idealized as whole in themselves, it soon appears that they are so only by virtue of certain qualities that white civilization craves to make itself whole. Since these qualities—physical assurance, instinctive ease, artistic creativity—are but mirror images of other qualities highly prized in most modern societies, they are always just a hair's breadth away from becoming vices—the sloth, animal violence, and brute strength of Goliath. Yet even at their most positive these qualities are nothing more than necessary *parts*, antibodies, antiselves, antidotes to civilization, and thus inevitably and eternally subordinate to the European mind that craves them.

Thus the image of racial and cultural unity cherished by Frank and the others in the Americanist avant-garde is always shadowed by its twin opposite, racial oppression and murder. And the literary propaganda of the period always carries an undertone of fear and mistrust, exemplified by Cain and Goliath, a fear of the very "ethnic chaos" that Frank promoted in *Our America*. Because the avant-garde could not imagine an integrated and yet independent place for African Americans in its new America, oppression and chaos remained the only two alternatives.

#### IV

It had been the promise of the avant-garde from the beginning that its revolution would take place first in language, that it would be the new American idiom that would form the basis for a better culture. But it was just here, in its conception of

language, that the contradictions in the avant-garde's approach to race appeared most acutely. The American dialect, which was supposed to contain the speech of all ethnicities and all races, turned out to be a good deal less capacious and flexible than the avant-garde had hoped.

Even before the First World War, Max Weber had tried to extract this new speech from the silent lips of Chac Mool:

Oh my brother in eternity, Chac-Mool of Chichen Itza,  
Would that I could but hear thine unuttered speech  
In silence and heavenly mood . . .  
Thy stern lips of thy firm mouth have spoken, do speak,  
and will for ever speak.

A bit like Frank's narrator gushing to his black cleaning lady, Weber exclaims to Chac Mool: "Thou knowest more, thou feelest more, thou seest more, thou rememberest more, thou art more."<sup>61</sup> Properly propitiated, Chac Mool is supposed to extend this wholeness and fullness to Weber's art, to give it some of the eternal repose that Weber apparently finds so heavenly. The repetitive phrasing of the free verse and the selectively archaic diction are perhaps the first indications that Chac Mool's "unuttered speech" is appearing by ventriloquism in Weber's own poetry.

Both phrasing and diction seem wildly inappropriate, however, in a volume that Weber entitled *Cubist Poems*. It is hard to see why any of these poems would have been considered "cubist," except insofar as they appeal to African and Meso-American art for inspiration. Yet the effect of that inspiration is curiously inconsistent. The most "cubist" of the poems, "Bampense Kasai," which is a hymn of praise to an African mask, does include a few blocky clumps of adjectives that may have been meant to mimic the abrupt angularity of the mask: "Crudely shaped and moulded, art thou, / In weighty varied solid frightful form. . . ." Yet at the same time Weber's reverence for the mask's hieratic repose expresses itself in the same old-fashioned diction and inverted syntax that characterizes his poem to Chac Mool. In short, an inconsistent attitude toward the art emerges as an aesthetic inconsistency in the poetry: insofar as the art is "frightful," full of "virility brutality and blackness," it inspires syntactical and rhythmic structures that exceed the ordinary bounds of English verse; insofar as this same art seems full of the peace of the eternal it brings out an old-fashioned, pseudobiblical language of reverence.<sup>62</sup>

Almost ten years later, William Carlos Williams also measured his own art against an African artifact. Looking back at the poems published in the last issue of *Contact*, but also by implication at the poems published during the entire brief existence of the magazine, Williams measures them against a "native paddle" brought back from Africa by a cousin: "[S]lightly curved in haft, six feet long, heavy, tapering to the tridentate spear's edge—wild nigger's work. What is poetry? What shall I say? What is their worth, these six poems in this issue judged

absolutely—what? beside the cut of a West Coast nigger's surf paddle. . . ." The paddle becomes a physical measure of aesthetic success, the fineness of its proportions a model of practical engagement with the concrete world of fact. It is, in other words, what Williams called "the thing itself."<sup>63</sup>

By implication, the African paddle stands for everything that Williams had tried to achieve in *Contact*, a magazine dedicated, as its name implies, to an art as much a part of local conditions as that paddle. But *Contact* had another editor as well, one who featured "wild nigger's work" of a different sort. Robert McAlmon's "*Jazz Opera Americano*" uses the black model to rebel vociferously against repression: "[T]om tom, a hunter's horn, with a high yodel and the rattle of a string of missionary teeth . . . and I feinting but never fainted in a swirling vortex of colored rhythms, uneven dissonant and tragic—wild, wild, wildman, why are you shouting wild man? Dance jazzo, swirl me. . . ." <sup>64</sup> This is a far cry from Williams's reverence for the workmanship and care of the African paddle. Both editors romanticize "wild nigger's work," but McAlmon puts all the emphasis on the adjective, Williams on the noun, and the derogatory possessive hovers in the middle as a kind of ambiguous cipher, looking both ways at once.

It was in this ambiguous way that blackness entered and affected the language of the avant-garde. The works produced by that influence range from the conventional dialect of Alice Corbin's "Mandy's Religion" and "The Old Negro Alone" to things like "*Jazz Opera Americano*" or Charles Galway's "La Rumba Cubano," which finally dithered into pure noise:

I am colossal elephant buttocks  
That have learned to sway stupidly  
And writhe the old Bowery plantation negroes Voodoo  
Bum— bum— bum— bum  
Madness . . .

Galway is apparently trying to construct a challenging poetic out of the very metaphors that Cortisoz and Johnson had applied to modernism: "Out of desert and jungle I become infection / Slippery sinister green of tropic heat that lures / To vileness . . . Pestilence loud trumpeted accurate and frantic."<sup>65</sup> But even in this absurd performance, with its juvenile desire to shock, there is equivocation. Galway wants his loud trumpeting to be "accurate" as well as frantic. It is hard to see any way in which this frenzy might be accurate, especially since Galway gives up on description altogether and resorts to pure noise: "bum— bum— bum." The word *accurate* seems to suggest that, despite its frenzy, there is something about the rumba that is incisive and sure, something that might even meet Williams's desire for solid workmanship or Weber's for eternal form.

In one sense such differences simply represent the use of quite different if equally familiar stereotypes: the racial other as natural and basic versus the racial other as perverse and mysterious. In another sense these aesthetic differences are perfectly natural variations within the movement. As Josephson said, "Revolt

against traditional style takes many shapes; one writer employs violent thought-dissociations; another ripe colloquialisms, and the terminology of our popular magazines, newspapers, advertisements; others, again, employ the most shocking opposition in word-relationships, distort syntax, and punctuation and typography."<sup>66</sup> But the peculiarity of many of these works is that they try to deploy both stereotypes and to revolt against tradition in all these ways at once.

In "The Widow's Jazz," published in 1931, Mina Loy sums up a whole decade of such confused white attempts to understand, absorb, emulate, or dismiss black language and culture. The poem begins with a line that captures the whole genre to which "Hope" and "Southern Woman" belong: "The white flesh quakes to the negro soul." Beyond mere description, the poem also linguistically enacts the effect of this earthquake by slipping into dialect: "White man quit his actin' wise / colored folk hab de moon in dere eyes." Though this is the only line of actual dialect in the poem, it clearly functions as a linguistic model for the style of the whole, the modernist tangle of interjected phrases, contradictory syntax, mixed metaphors, and choppy rhythmic refrains that is apparently supposed to represent what happens when wisdom catches the moon in its eyes. The "impish musics" of black performers, the "dissonance" of black music and language, what Loy finally calls "this cajoling jazz . . . with its tropic breath," inspire the writer with a modernist style.<sup>67</sup>

Jazz is for Loy "a synthesis / of racial caress," an aural version of the black-white congress that occurs in stories like "Hope." From this congress, in Loy's version, is born a language, the very language, in fact, that the Americanist avant-garde had been talking about. Yet this language is presented in two quite different ways. Toward the end of the poem the language becomes almost biblical in its reverence for itself:

The seraph and the ass  
in this unerring esperanto  
of the earth  
converse  
of everlit delight. . . .<sup>68</sup>

A universal language of the earth, joining opposites and contraries in unerring communication: this sounds like the loftiest ambitions of the avant-garde for the American language. The notion of Esperanto neatly combines an international character with a notion of universality and simplicity: this language is to be both various and basic. But elsewhere in the poem the same language is an "uninterpretable wail."<sup>69</sup> How could Esperanto be uninterpretable? How could the universal language break down in incomprehension? The fact is that Loy seems to favor *this* situation just as much as she favors the other, for this kind of language provides the poem its most arresting lines: "An electric clown / crashes the furtive cargoes of the floor." This is hardly the language of conversation, not even the conversation of seraph and ass.



Instead of providing an “unerring esperanto,” the meeting of black and white produces a contradiction that works at several levels at once. Loy’s own attitude toward jazz is inconsistent, for she celebrates both its availability and its mystery. The style she evolves from jazz has the same attributes: her poem is a curious composite of direct appeal and cryptic word painting:

Husband  
 how secretly you cuckold me with death  
 while this cajoling jazz  
 blows with its tropic breath<sup>70</sup>

Her attitude toward the poem is similarly divided, for she clearly wants on one level to communicate and to further communication, while on another level romanticizing the aloofly incomprehensible.

In one poem Loy nearly touches the two extremes reached by white modernists under the influence of the “racial caress.” These extremes were not, finally, just the two distant ends of a continuum but radically incompatible alternatives, since one of these was to confirm the sanctity of language as the ultimate guarantor of American cultural unity, while the other undermined and attacked all language, even if it was solidly American. The ultimate threat of the “uninterpretable wail,” of McAlmon’s juvenile hooting, of Galway’s “bum— bum— bum,” was that they exceeded language altogether and in so doing imperiled the whole cultural project of the avant-garde. That project depended just as much as the American Academy did on the notion that language is the surest representation of a people to itself. The avant-garde wanted that language to be more flexible and inclusive, but it did not dispute the essential notion, derived from Romance philology, that identified a culture with its language. Stretching narrow notions of the English language, Galway, McAlmon, and Loy stretch language itself until it snaps. Without any unity or harmony of its own, without any meaning, this language could hardly perform its traditional function as symbol of cultural or political unity.

One of the contributors to the January 1923 issue of *Broom* that promised so much was the Baroness Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, who produced what may have been meant as a Mayan poem written in a kind of “Me Tarzan, You Jane” dialect: “Where youth? / No find her.”<sup>71</sup> The baroness also caused a long-running controversy in the *Little Review* with works that ended like this:

Vé—O—voorrr—!  
 Vrmbbbjjj—sh—  
 Sh—sh— —  
 Ooh!!  
 Vrmbbbjjj—sh—sh—  
 Sh—sh—  
 Vmmm.<sup>72</sup>

Maxwell Bodenheim defended this poem as the work of “a conscious savage,” and the paradox of his term says a good deal about the mixed motives of the avant-garde and the ultimate contradiction inherent in the language of the baroness’s two contributions.<sup>73</sup> On one hand, savagery was to be a refuge from consciousness, and its language the language of earth itself; on the other hand, savagery was the avant-garde’s conscious disruption of the natural order, especially the natural order of language. Though this contradiction worked itself out in many works by the Americanist avant-garde, Bodenheim himself offered the best illustration of the direction the contradiction would take when forced to resolve itself.

Bodenheim had published two poems on racial themes in the first days of *Others*, and by the mid-1920s he constituted one of the few real links between the white modernist avant-garde and Harlem. His poem “Lynched Negro,” from the *Little Review*, was reprinted in *Opportunity*, and he served as judge for one of the annual literary contests that magazine sponsored.<sup>74</sup> Though he wrote a number of jazz poems, Bodenheim tended to make greater use in fiction of the Harlem slang he had learned: *Naked on Roller Skates* includes a glossary for the uninitiated.<sup>75</sup> But his most interesting use of these materials occurs in *Ninth Avenue*, a novel that Countee Cullen called “well worth reading,” despite the fact that he appears in it himself in a rather unflattering light.<sup>76</sup>

*Ninth Avenue* is in part a roman à clef, a takeoff on the Harlem fad, an elaborate send-up of the way white aesthetes like “Paul Vanderin” fawned over young black poets like “Christopher Culbert.” Into this structure Bodenheim inserts another, somewhat more serious if equally symbolic, about the growing love between Blanche Palmer and another young writer, Eric Starling. Blanche, as we can tell merely from her name, is white and also quite unlettered, Eric an accomplished writer who only seems white. There is a recognition scene that does not seem to be a takeoff, though it duplicates almost to the letter the scene in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* when the protagonist is forced to confess his race. Despite her rather limited background, Blanche decides to marry Eric, throwing off every prejudice except one. With a vision of Eric in her mind urging her on, Blanche settles down “with a little grammar she had purchased” to rid her speech of the crudities of *Ninth Avenue* and become a writer.<sup>77</sup>

One of the reasons the scene rings so hollow is that Blanche already speaks perfect American: “‘Oh, for Gawd’s sake, what a dump,’ she said. ‘How’m I going to sit down with gue and coffee all over the chairs?’”<sup>78</sup> Why she should have to abandon this language to join a literary circle made up of thinly disguised members of the Greenwich Village avant-garde—“Max Oppendorf” is in part James Oppenheim—is very hard to say. In fact, it seems an exact reversal of the situation in Loy’s poem in that the result of communion between the races is nothing other than standard English. Yet this is precisely why Bodenheim’s novel is so revealing, because the meeting between the races depends on a mutual reverence for language, a reverence too strong to allow for any trifling. When they first meet Blanche says, “You’ve got to help me with my grammar—that’s the big,

weak sister with me," to which Eric replies, "You can bet I will."<sup>79</sup> A romance begun over grammar lessons may not sound very promising, but it proves strong enough to defy every convention—except the one with which it begins.

In one sense the marriage of Blanche and Eric is a fulfillment, albeit a fictional one, of the multiracial program of the avant-garde. But somehow the American language gets lost in the process. The irony is perfectly revealing, however, because Eric and Blanche can meet only in a language utterly stripped of particular characteristics, a language that allows them to live together because it robs them of their own cultures and backgrounds. In other words, the only way that Bodenheim could imagine a multiracial unity was in terms of a language so conventional it was indistinguishable from the standard. Thus his own language in *Ninth Avenue* is utterly inoffensive and unimaginative. Though the novel is as enlightened in its social attitudes as any of the period, its linguistic conservatism reveals quite well what would happen to the Americanist avant-garde whenever it was finally forced to reconcile its competing desires for diversity and unity: it would cease to be an avant-garde at all.

## V

The same issue of *Opportunity* that included Cullen's notice of *Ninth Avenue* also included the second part of a story that must have seemed a virtual mirror image of Bodenheim's novel. Claude McKay's "High Ball" is also about grammar, racial impersonation, and mixed marriage, but it turns out far less happily than its counterpart. In fact, it may well be a fictional rendition of McKay's own difficulties with "Color Scheme," his first attempted novel, which he burned after Knopf rejected it. "Color Scheme" was unsuccessful with white publishers and the black sponsors to whom McKay entrusted it because of its language, because in it McKay tried to move back into dialect, or at least into "the everyday language of the streets."<sup>80</sup> "High Ball" seems to be about the pitfalls that await a black artist who attempts to use this language.

"High Ball" tells the story of Nation Roe, a blues singer who is taken up and lionized by the white press. The black press welcomes his fame but also criticizes him, embarrassed by the "bad grammar and false rhymes" of his songs: "The Negro journals said that Nation was among the few living men of the race who served as an example and incentive to all Afro-Americans. But those very journals also said that Nation's bad grammar and false rhymes were not interpretative of the modern spirit of the Negro." Here McKay wickedly captures the tone of critics like Locke and Johnson, who said in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* that dialect is no longer "capable of giving the fullest interpretation of Negro character and psychology."<sup>81</sup> Whether McKay is mocking his old friend and long-suffering supporter is uncertain, but when Nation reforms his grammar he also loses his

audience: "At last Nation's manager put his foot down on all academic improvements."<sup>82</sup>

In the process Nation almost loses his distinctive style, but he finds it again, oddly enough, in the company of George Lieberman, "a successful black-face actor." With Lieberman and his colleagues, Nation finds "the finest accents of his voice," a voice that now acquires "a wider range and greater power." McKay goes out of his way to purge this situation of its ironies, which would have been all the more obvious when the story was originally published, the very month Al Jolson, to much publicity, signed the contract to make *The Jazz Singer*.<sup>83</sup> George, his wife, and his blackface cronies are made out to be touchstones of honesty and goodwill. In fact, they might have saved Nation from his worst mistake, which is to marry Myra Peck simply because he wants "a brilliant-talking wife like one of the white actresses."<sup>84</sup>

Thus McKay describes from the point of view of the black artist a situation that seems the very dream of the Americanist avant-garde: black and white artists in league together on behalf of ordinary American language, facing down standardization and convention on all sides. In fact, McKay's story, in which black and white make a compact over bad grammar, seems much truer to the avant-garde vision than Bodenheim's story, in which the compact requires that both sides acquire good grammar. But George finally cannot save Nation from the "brilliant-talking Myra" because he cannot find a way honestly to express his reasons for disliking her. George and Nation share a language only onstage; offstage they are tongue-tied and clumsy: "Yet sometimes in a burning wave of resentment he felt that his white friends made cruel blunders that bit into his flesh like this, because they had never suffered so deeply."<sup>85</sup> When Myra finally reveals the crude racism beneath her brilliant talk it seems a judgment on them all: on Nation's own linguistic snobbism, on George's linguistic slumming, on "brilliant talk" itself, which is just a shell over the most insidious form of discrimination.

McKay's story describes a situation in which the black artist finds himself surrounded on all sides by falsehood: on one side the pretensions of those who would have him become a brilliant talker himself; on the other, the facile enthusiasm of George and his friends, which is finally nothing more than a mask, a role that despite themselves they leave behind in the theater. The real Nation is alone in what seems a hall of mirrors. Just a few months before Locke described with high hopes the way a common interest in "folk music and poetry" would bring the white avant-garde and the Harlem writers together, McKay showed the complex dynamic that kept them apart.

"High Ball" is, in fact, an uncannily accurate allegory of the conflicts facing the Harlem Renaissance. Black artists did in fact seek out alliances with those McKay later castigated as "impersonators," alliances against the restrictions of the African-American and Anglo-American genteel traditions. As Locke said in *The New Negro*, African-American writers "have too long been the victims of the

academy tradition. . . .”<sup>86</sup> Thus he welcomed the new “revolt against Puritanism” even though he realized it would often involve a shallow primitivism.<sup>87</sup> White dialect writers like DuBose Heyward, Julia Peterkin, T. S. Stribling, and Clement Wood became important allies of the Harlem movement and were welcomed as significant modern writers.<sup>88</sup>

*Opportunity* also formally welcomed the new work in “our modern journals” because it promised to break the hold of old stereotypes that had dominated establishment journals like *Harper’s* and the *Atlantic*.<sup>89</sup> The alliance of black and white writers against academic authority thus comes to resemble the one in “High Ball” between *Nation* and the blackface actors, and in the end it falls subject to the same dangers. It may have been simply insensitive of Knopf to advertise Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven* together in *Opportunity* as if they were of equal and similar interest to a black audience, as if “THE NEGRO as author and as subject” were pretty much the same thing.<sup>90</sup> But the Bonis went a good deal farther when they advertised *The New Negro* and R. Emmett Kennedy’s folk song collection *Mellows* together in the *Crisis*. The idea that there might be something appealing to the audience of “new Negroes” in Kennedy’s bayou romanticism was insulting by itself; there was no need to add injury to insult by offering *Mellows* “bound in a special bandanna cloth.”<sup>91</sup>

The younger Harlem writers were willing to accept the white modernists even if they often played a blackface role because any encouragement of African-American folklore and language helped to break down stifling academic traditions of the past.<sup>92</sup> As in “High Ball,” the point of contact was a mutual interest in “bad grammar,” in language, that is to say, that refused to conform to standard English. But in reality, as in “High Ball,” white use of “bad grammar” was often nothing more than a stage convention like blackface or bandanna cloth. There always seemed to come a moment that exposed the basic asymmetry of the situation, the unbalancing fact that George Lieberman and friends were black only onstage and thus could take off the burnt cork and eat in whatever restaurant they chose, while *Nation* was the same, on stage and off, and had to be careful not to go where he would be refused service.

McKay’s story thus exposes the reality behind Locke’s blithe hope that “deep and unbiassed interest [in] Negro materials as themes and Negro idioms of speech” would make for common cause between white modernists and the Harlem writers. For it is hard to say that that interest was always “deep and unbiassed,” and even when it was, as in the fictional case of George Lieberman, personal sincerity counted for very little in the face of social and political inequality. Without any changes in that underlying reality, the avant-garde combination of patronization and masquerade simply created a temporary space of racial cooperation, which *Nation* Roe always had to leave for a real America in which his position had changed, if at all, for the worse.

## Two Strangers in the American Language: William Carlos Williams and Jean Toomer

The December 1922 issue of *Broom* included a brief sketch that already seemed to justify its high hopes for a new art as American as skyscrapers and jazz. Aesthetically Jean Toomer’s “Seventh Street” was as original as anything *Broom* would publish, and its subject matter was immediate, timely, and American: “Seventh Street is a bastard of Prohibition and the War. A crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington.”<sup>1</sup> The same month this appeared, Waldo Frank took a whole book of such sketches to Horace Liveright, who had just published *The Waste Land*.<sup>2</sup> A year and a day after he had agreed to publish that poem, Liveright accepted Toomer’s manuscript, which was entitled *Cane*.<sup>3</sup>

When Toomer returned his signed contract to Liveright, he expressed his gratification at entering “the fold” along with Eliot.<sup>4</sup> However, Toomer’s manuscript had a good deal more in common with a work that was written as a direct challenge to *The Waste Land*, a work that, if it had had any readers, would have seemed the very epitome of *Broom*’s campaign of modern writing in “plain American.” Like *Cane*, Williams’s *Spring and All* was a curious mixture of prose and poetry, of pastoralism and urbanism, of political fears and cultural hopes. The two works depended for their hopes on the same organic metaphor: Williams’s spring shoots come struggling out of the muddy waste of weeds in the same miraculous way that Toomer’s November cotton flower blooms out of season. The very titles of the two works suggest spontaneous growth from the American soil, and yet nothing could be less organic than the organization of *Cane* and *Spring and All*. The two works proved even more difficult to read and resolve than *The Waste Land* itself, so much so that they both languished in obscurity, unread and virtually unknown, for decades.

Originally, these two works, along with the others Williams and Toomer were writing at the time, were intertwined in the ambitions of the Americanist avant-garde. Even before *Broom* had linked their names in its manifesto/advertisement, Toomer and Williams had appeared together in the *Little Review* for autumn 1922. Williams contributed a letter/essay praising the *Little Review* “because it

RACE AND AMERICAN CULTURE

General Editors:

Arnold Rampersad and Shelley Fisher Fishkin

Love and Theft

*Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*

Eric Lott

The Dialect of Modernism

*Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature*

Michael North

THE DIALECT  
OF MODERNISM

*Race, Language, and  
Twentieth-Century Literature*

MICHAEL NORTH

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New York Oxford