Another Person's Skin: Imagining Race in the Works of Crane, Dunbar, Cather and Stevens

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ANOTHER PERSON'S SKIN: IMAGINING RACE IN THE WORKS OF CRANE, DUNBAR, CATHER AND STEVENS

by

Lisa M. DuRose

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
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Western Michigan University
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This study is interested in the motivations behind certain authors' attempts to, in the words of Willa Cather, "enter into another person's skin"—in the desires compelling writers to cross, transgress, or perhaps transcend those barriers that have historically divided people in the world: barriers of color, class, and gender. In particular it seeks to examine the works of four early twentieth century writers who undertake what these days is considered risky: transracial and transethnic crossings. By relying on biographical, cultural, and historical sources, I explore the strategies American writers Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Willa Cather (1873-1947), and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) adopt in their attempt to represent and imagine what they are not. Specifically the study analyzes how each of them constructs the lives of others, those who exist outside the author's racial or social group.

As we near the dawn of the twenty first century, literary critics remain skeptical about the possibility that the imagination can do the work that all four of these writers believe it can do. At the heart of this dissertation, then, is an effort to explore the source of this skepticism by investigating how these authors' representations and impersonations of racial/ethnic others leave many contemporary readers feeling ambivalent,
uncertain, uneasy. This ambiguity is fueled by a series of questions that surface again and again in this critical examination: What function do racial/ethnic outsiders have in the work and what do they offer the writer who uses them? Can any artist legitimately cross lines of color, ethnicity, or class? Can a writer’s personal knowledge and experience living among racial/ethnic outsiders make for a more “successful” crossing? Does a writer’s racial make-up better equip one to understand those who share the writer’s same side of the color/ethnic line? Are movements across the lines of color/ethnicity or class, for all intents and purposes, the same kind of travel no matter which side of the line one begins? And finally, are what we have historically designated as color/ethnic/class lines more accurately represented as a continuum, governed by its own subtle gradations and levels?
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This dissertation stems, in large part, from the influence of two important teachers and thinkers in my life: Shirley Clay Scott who convinced me, in her very Wordsworthian way, that in the realm of the imagination all people can meet; and Katherine Joslin who taught me that art never takes place in isolation, but is shaped by the historical and cultural occasion. This study has been an attempt to reconcile these contradictory philosophies by insisting that since both sides can claim wisdom, I remain happily conflicted. I thank each of them for her intellectual encouragement during these years of study and for sharing her own story with me about her beginning as a reader and a writer; stories, incidentally, like mine, which suggest that as readers we are capable of falling in love with characters and authors who don't necessarily share our same gender, race, class, region, or even sexual orientation. I wish to acknowledge as well the support and guidance from those teachers who sustained my love of literature throughout the years: Mrs. Keyes, Marjorie McCormick, Terry Brown, Laura Zlogar, Richard Beckham, Phil Egan, and Stephanie Gauper. My thanks also to my committee who offered generous and careful readings of this work: Katherine Joslin, Mark Richardson, and Leander Jones. I am grateful as well for a dissertation fellowship I received from Western Michigan University which allowed me to complete this study in a reasonable amount of time. An earlier version of Chapter V was published in The Wallace Stevens Journal and I
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This dissertation is dedicated to four very influential people: to Gramps for his stubborn faith in me; to Dad for teaching me good humor and the beauty of craftsmanship; to Mom who made my first experience with language safe, warm, and full of wonder; and to the memory of my Grandma whose hospitality and strength attended me during by best and most challenging teaching moments.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Human beings are capable of powered flight; we can travel across ourselves and find that self multiple and vast. The artist knows this; at the same time that art is prising away old dead structures that have rusted almost unnoticed into our flesh, art is pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed. The convenient lies fall; the only boundaries are the boundaries of the imagination" (116)
--Jeanette Winterson from Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery

The title of this study comes from a statement Willa Cather made during a 1913 interview when she said of her Swedish, Norwegian, and Bohemian neighbors:

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women at her baking or butter making. I used to ride home in the most unreasonable state of excitement; I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said--as if I had actually got inside another person’s skin” (Willa Cather in Person 10).

Cather’s humble description of her awakening desire to write--the feeling of occupying “another person’s skin” --becomes a metaphor for her creative process, a metaphor many writers, before and after her, will use, in some form or another, to describe what it is that writers do when they tell another person’s story. Eighty-three years later, John Edgar Wideman, will echo Cather in his introduction to The Best American Short Stories of 1996 when he writes,

I seek in fiction some hint that imagination can change the
world, that the world is unfinished but fixable—a hint that we are not always doomed to make copies of copies but possess the power to see differently and the guts and good fortune to render accessible to others some glimmer of what our souls experience. Stories, after all, are a gift. Unless we are willing to imagine what it might feel like inside another skin, we are imprisoned within our own (xx).

Ralph Ellison holds out the same kind of transforming and universal power of art when he says during a 1961 interview: “I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet” (Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison 71). And Jeanette Winterson echoes Ellison’s hope for the imagination as a meeting place for all people in her 1995 book Art Objects when she writes, “the artist knows that art is pushing at the boundaries we thought were fixed. The convenient lies fall; the only boundaries are the boundaries of the imagination” (116). Across such boundaries as color, class, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, and even time, Cather speaks to Wideman who echoes Ellison who anticipates Winterson. In other words (and to be reductive about it), a white conservative Nebraskan woman of the late nineteenth century who wrote about immigrant experience in the Southwest speaks to an African American man and Rhode Scholar of the late 20th century who writes about black experience in settings like Pittsburgh who echoes a Southern-born African American man of the early twentieth century who wrote about racial tension in Harlem, Alabama, and Cincinnati who anticipates a white, British, working-class lesbian of the late twentieth century who writes about such things as religious fanaticism, awakening sexuality, and poverty. Diverse though they may be, they are all brought together under one encompassing faith:
that art and imagination can transform, transport, and connect all individuals who share a love of language. Over the years, artists themselves have kept alive the notion that the imagination is a force which can overcome personal and social biases, a vehicle which allows writers and readers to transcend themselves and join others. Ultimately, these artists claim, the imagination fulfills both the writer's and the reader's desire to escape him/herself. Under the auspices of such faith, writers frequently draw their material from sources outside themselves by relying upon their imaginative powers to "enter into another person's skin."

This study is interested in the motivations behind these imaginative leaps, in the desires compelling certain authors to cross, transgress, or perhaps transcend those barriers that have historically divided people in the world: barriers of color, class, and gender. In particular it seeks to examine the works of four early twentieth century writers whose writing often undertakes what these days is considered risky: transracial and transethnic crossing. By relying on biographical, cultural, and historical sources, this study explores the strategies four American writers--Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906), Willa Cather (1873-1947), and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955)--adopt in their attempt to represent and imagine what they are not. Specifically the study examines how each of these authors conceives the lives of others, those who exist outside the writer's realm of racial or social knowledge. During a time of cultural migrations/immigrations and mounting racial and ethnic tensions, each of these writers aspires to
capture the language and lives of the “new” Americans—European immigrants, African Americans, and rural, working class whites. And regardless of their disparate experiences and artistic interests, their work contains similar tensions: a fascination and repulsion with racial/ethnic difference; an effort to be authentic in their depictions of others tempered by a readiness to fall back upon popular stereotypes; a relentless drive to make their material artistic, and yet profitable; and an idealistic yearning for an apolitical art during a time of social upheaval. These tensions in their work, surely, are complicated by their individual circumstances—the financial security and popularity of both Stevens and Cather, the social and economic disenfranchisement of Dunbar, and perhaps most crucial of all the short writing careers of both Crane and Dunbar who both died early in life. But despite their obvious and even vital distinctions, these four authors’ imaginative maneuvers across cultural barriers, like race and class, tell us much about the consequences of living out a faith in the powers of the creative process during the skeptical age of the twentieth century.

Not everyone, however, is as confident in the powers of the imagination. By the 1960s, for example, the critical verdicts leveled against each of these attempts to “enter into another person’s skin” have been severe. Cather and Stevens have been charged with white racism and criticized for retreating from the most troubling social problems of the twentieth century (racism, economic depression, and to some extent, the World Wars); Dunbar has been called a “sell-out” to his race, a scapegoat, and even a race token; Crane, according to some critics, had “exhausted his
"genius" early on and his premature death was no great loss to American literature.¹

As we near the dawn of the twenty-first century, literary critics remain skeptical about the possibility that the imagination can do the work that all four of these writers believe it can do: that it can, in fact, transcend racial, economic, and cultural boundaries or that an artist equipped with highly imaginative powers can tell us something vital about those outside his/her realm of personal, social, or racial knowledge. Furthermore if such things were possible, it may be dangerous for artists to ignore the political ramifications of their creative acts.

"Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly," writes Toni Morrison. "I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12).

Morrison echoes here a sentiment that for many late twentieth century writers, critics, and readers is a given: politics and literature are, for better or worse, interdependent, symbiotic entities. Nonetheless, in her crucial study, Playing in the Dark, Morrison seems fascinated by examining the creative processes of earlier writers who unflinchingly believed in the universality of literature. And her critical findings, I think, can provide contemporary critics a rich model for meditating upon artists' psychological and imaginative yearnings—for exploring what artists gain politically, socially, aesthetically from their subject matter. It is from

¹ See R.W. Stallman's The Houses that James Built and Other Literary Studies (1961)
Morrison's book that I take my cue and, like the authors I am studying, attempt to cross lines of color in this study of race and ethnicity, what some see as a province more suited to critics of color. I look to the work of African American theorists like Toni Morrison, Kevin Gaines, and bell hooks to aid my own critical maneuvers across what seem, in today's world, impenetrable cultural boundaries. Given the historical and contemporary race situation in America, many scholars and perhaps some writers are suspicious about the nature of racial, ethnic, and even gender crossings, supposing that they can be anything but inauthentic representations, cultural appropriations, or offensive over-reachings. But I worry about the consequences of such skepticism, which at its best would make writers self-conscious and careful in their characterization of racial/ethnic others, but at its worst, more solipsistic, more content to represent only their "own kind." I wonder if such restrictions (or preferences) should ever be critically imposed upon or prompted from the imagination—that chaotic and unruly force behind many great writers. I wonder too if we may better benefit from a paradigm of American literature Morrison offers, a paradigm that invites us to see our literary heritage as a site of cultural and racial exchange produced by the creative products of artists engaging as well as evading the presence of racial others. Indeed, it seems to me, that American writers who have consciously sought out an encounter with others have produced our most disturbing and provocative literature: Moby Dick, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and Life in the Iron Mills are examples.
What draws me to explore the cultural encounters operating in the work of all four writers in this study--Crane, Dunbar, Cather, and Stevens--is exactly these elements of disruption, the ways in which their representations leave many contemporary readers feeling ambivalent, uncertain, uneasy. This discomfort is fueled by a series of questions likely to surface again and again in this critical examination: What function do racial/ethnic outsiders (individuals who exist outside of the writer’s racial, ethnic, or social group) have in the work and what do they offer the writer who uses them? Can any artist legitimately cross lines of color, ethnicity, or class? What does a “legitimate” crossing look like? Can one’s personal knowledge and experience living among racial/ethnic others make for a more “successful” crossing? Does one’s racial make-up equip one to better understand those who share the writer’s same side of the color/ethnic line? Are movements across the lines of color/ethnicity or class in fiction and poetry, for all intents and purposes, the same kind of travel no matter which side of the line one begins? And finally, are what we have historically designated as color/ethnic/class lines more accurately represented as a continuum, governed by its own subtle gradations and levels?

What complicates matters further is trying to find the most accurate terms to describe what these writers are undertaking. I’ve been using the rather generic term racial/ethnic crossing, but at other times it may be more precise to use phrases such as passing, impersonation, masquerade, ventriloquism, even blackface. While I would argue that the latter terms--masquerade, ventriloquism, and blackface--adopt the language of theater
and, with it, imply that race and ethnicity can be performed (and thus a socially constructed category), they nonetheless seem to reinforce the color or gender line, exacerbating the difference between blacks and whites or men and women. Many critics have speculated upon the psychological effects racial masquerading has had upon white performers—contending that, in some cases, such acts blur racial boundaries. As Ralph Ellison notes of the blackface figure:

When the white man steps behind the mask of the trickster his freedom is circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos, but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell... and thus lose the freedom which, in the fluid, "tradionalless," "classless" and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone. ("Change the Joke" 107)

Within this context that Ellison describes, it is important to observe that the white man is still performing; he is playing with his fears of becoming black and putting on a black mask becomes his method to work out these anxieties. However, by keeping the act in the realm of play, the white performer maintains control over the black image and continues to define what it means to be black. Within his own psyche, racial boundaries may be blurring, but on a social and cultural level—since he is undertaking a public act—I would argue that blackface is another technique used to police and enforce racial boundaries. Consequently, I term some of Wallace Stevens' efforts to incorporate black dialect in his depiction of African Americans "blackface" because I think they perform a dual role for him: they allow him to psychologically work out his own anxieties and criticism of white culture within the safest manner possible—in the guise
"blackface"—but don’t require him to relinquish his privileged white status in the culture. In other words, he can have it both ways—acting as a cultural outsider and insider. Likewise I use the term racial masquerade to describe some of Crane’s attempts to playfully declare himself and his bohemian friends “Indians” because he, like Stevens, uses the linguistic technique to shock and critique the white bourgeois. As Susan Gubar explains “white impersonations of blackness functioned paradoxically both as a deeply conservative (even racist) as well as a shockingly radical (sometimes anarchic) mode of cultural production” (12). We can identify these two impulses at times in Stevens and Crane’s representation of racial/ethnic outsiders and occasionally in Cather’s. In addition, since racial masquerade and ventriloquism also imply “imitation,” I will occasionally use these terms when an author’s description of racial and ethnic characters relies heavily upon stereotypes since the aim at hand is not to offer an individual representation, but to make use out of a cultural mythology. In essence the author is using the ethnic or racial type as a vehicle to serve some other psychological or aesthetic purpose.

In contrast, I use the terms crossing and passing to describe Jim Burden’s (the narrator of Cather’s My Antonia) attempt to pass as a Shimerda (his Bohemian neighbors) by forming familial ties with them—first as a young child when he adopts Mr. Shimerda as father-figure and later as an adult when he desires to become one of Antonia’s children. Psychologically and emotionally Jim longs to identify with the Shimerdas even though legally and socially he doesn’t believe such connections are possible. Because his associations with them are not imagined or symbolic
(as some of Stevens' and Crane's alliances are), I would not term Burden's efforts, masquerade. Essentially, he is still searching for a way to define himself and finds, through his connections with the Shimerdas, a possible method for doing so. Conversely, I use the same term to describe how Dunbar's characters—the Hamiltons from The Sport of the Gods—are ostracized by the black community who see their aspirations for middle-class status as an attempt to pass for white.

"Passing," Elaine Ginsberg argues, "is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. Passing is also about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing" (2).

That Burden's attempt to pass bring him the reward of intimacy with the Shimerdas and the Hamiltons' attempt leads to penalty from both the black and white communities demonstrates a fundamental asymmetry in American race relations. As such, I would suggest that racial crossings and passings in fiction and poetry might be the more radical method than racial impersonation to blur the color line since passing exposes the double standard governing racial thought in America and often destabilizes our conception of racial categories. While Jim Burden and the Hamiltons don't literally pass, on a metaphorical level their associations and aspirations expose the absurdity of a social system of classification that insists on an absolute difference between white and other—and not only in terms of skin color and physical characteristics, but in regards to social position as well.
The work of these four authors often reveals the ambiguity and anxiety surrounding racial and ethnic categories in American thought. Each moves in various ways across the color line—at one moment passing, at another masquerading; sometimes reinforcing racial codes, sometimes exploding them. My terminology will likewise move and alter in order more precisely to describe their imaginative negotiations.

Finally, the one overriding question which drives this study is the seemingly simple question of craft: Of whom or what should the author write? Whose point of view should the author take up? Whose mind should the author enter into? There is nothing profound about these considerations. Authors of all kinds have and continue to ask themselves such things. But I will contend in this study that the way these four early twentieth century American writers puzzled over such choices was not the same way a contemporary author would. Part of this difference is culturally and historically based, of course. These days it's impossible to avoid reading a white male author's choice to write about the life of a black woman as merely a matter of craft or style; concerns about sexual and cultural politics would surely surface both in the author's mind and in the mind of his critics. Such acts of transracial crossings, as Susan Gubar observes, carry with them "the blatant racism of minstrelsy" (xvii) which is inevitably tied to white shame, a circumstance that no doubt discourages white authors from making these kinds of creative choices. No contemporary writer about to embark on an imaginative racial/ethnic crossing could ignore the simple literary and historical fact that throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century white people have
largely defined and represented what it means to be a person of color. As I will try to demonstrate, however, the four authors in this study were writing in a cultural and historical context where it was possible to believe that art could transcend racial and ethnic barriers; for white authors, in particular, the act of donning a metaphorical blackface—taking up the language and lives of African Americans—would not necessarily be considered taboo since many of them either did not consider or chose to ignore the racial hierarchy of the white literary establishment. In addition, the four authors in this study are all, to some degree, throw backs to an earlier age; each of them shares a nineteenth century faith in the universal qualities of literature and an aversion to political art. Thus when any of these writers attempt to get inside the body and mind of someone who does not share his/her same racial or ethnic makeup (whether they be an African American musician or an Irish factory worker), he/she is more inclined to view such a maneuver as an aesthetic rather than a political choice. This sets up a problematic dynamic: what happens when a writer who upholds an apolitical ideology engages in a politically charged creative act by representing the life of an ethnic/racial other? What happens when writers truly believe in the transcendence of art? What can the results of these artistic and inadvertently political gestures tell us about the tension between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation?

In the following chapters I explore the consequences and outcomes of each of these writer’s engagement with racial, ethnic, and class boundaries: Chapter II attempts to weave these four authors’ stories and
struggles amid such turn-of-the-twentieth century controversies and trends as the popularity of journalism, the rise of cities, the influx of immigrants, the migration of Southern blacks Northward, and the emergence of socialist and political art. Chapter III examines the writings of Stephen Crane, specifically focusing upon his interest in sites of amusements and their economic use of racial and ethnic others. I argue that behind the amusement-making industry and the narratives Crane tells about the crowds it seduces and sometimes manipulates are classic and ongoing American stories about the ways in which entertainment mongers profit from the racial and social hierarchy—those it makes freaks, minstrels, and dupes out of.

Chapter IV considers the inconsistency of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s work—his moments of brilliance, bitterness, rage, and sentiment—and demonstrates how the unevenness of his writing mirrors his constant movement back and forth across the color line. In his attempt to placate both a white and black audience, I illustrate how Dunbar’s life and work provides us with more than just another example of double-consciousness, but a framework in which to examine the twentieth century’s ongoing obsession with racial/ethnic categories, identities, and politics. I turn to Willa Cather’s work in Chapter V, tracing her efforts to cross ethnic and racial lines via her faith in the capacity of art and youth to reconnect with a past era as well as an altered landscape. Specifically, I demonstrate how Cather’s immersion in European immigrant culture during her childhood not only provided her with an appropriate subject matter for her writing, it also influenced the way she envisioned the
artist’s creative process and obligations. My final chapter looks at Wallace Stevens’ metaphorical use of blackface and his declared alliance with African Americans. I argue that both techniques afforded him a great measure of freedom from the racial status quo, an opportunity to escape the social conventions placed upon an upper-class white American male in the early twentieth century: financial independence, middle class morals, and the Protestant work ethic.
CHAPTER II

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER HALF: CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS ACROSS THE COLOR LINE

"The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"— W.E.B. DuBois from The Souls of Black Folk

When Wallace Stevens arrives in New York city in 1900 to find a job after his graduation from Harvard he is struck by the city’s harshness and ugly commercialism. He writes, “All New York, as I have seen it, is for sale—and I think parts I have seen are the parts that make New York what it is. It is dominated by necessity. Everything has its price—from Vice to Virtue” (Letters 38). It comes as little surprise that his stay in New York was short-lived and after a year of writing what he considered tawdry pieces for the New York Tribune, he leaves to settle “in one of the most exclusive, yet conservatively understated neighborhoods of Hartford” (Richardson 176). What compels Stevens to flee cruel New York, as it turns out, is Stephen Crane—or more precisely stated, Crane’s death. Eight years older than Stevens, Crane was also trying to survive as a serious writer, supplementing his income as a journalist and attempting, like Stevens, to “make something” of himself in a place where art was simply not marketable. When Crane dies in June of 1900, Stevens attends his funeral—a low-brow affair where, Stevens tells us, “there was a sprinkling of men and women who looked literary, but they were a wretched rag, tag, and bob-tail” (Letters 41). Unmindful that these wretched men and
women were likely Crane's Bohemian friends who kept him company during his short career in New York city, Stevens laments such a commonplace service for such an uncommon man. He mourns Crane's premature death because his talents were exhausted writing trite pieces for popular magazines and journals. Crane, Stevens thought, never received the opportunity to write substantial works of art and even his final send-off reflects this injustice.

Certainly he [Crane] deserved something better than this absolutely commonplace, bare, silly service I have just come. As the hearse rattled up the street over the cobbles, in the stifling heat of the sun, with not a single person paying the least attention to it and with only four or five carriages behind it at a distance I realized much that I had doubtingly suspected before—There are few hero-worshipers. Therefore, few heroes. (Letters 41).

Stevens couldn't have guessed that just six years earlier a hero worshiper in Lincoln, Nebraska, was looking to Stephen Crane for literary inspiration and advice. When Willa Cather meets Crane for the first time while she is a junior at Nebraska State University working for the Nebraska State Journal, Crane is already cursing his trade "from the first throb of creative desire in a boy to the finished work of the master" (15). Shabbily dressed in a flannel shirt, "a slovenly apology for a necktie," and a felt hat pulled over his eyes, Crane at twenty-four, according to Cather's description, seemed much like Stevens' version of Crane: bitter, poor, and down on his luck. She explains, "Only a very youthful enthusiasm and a large propensity for hero worship could have found anything impressive in the young man" (12). And yet Cather, who had youthful enthusiasm and a propensity for hero-worship, presses him for insights—this
downtrodden young man stuck in Lincoln, Nebraska, waiting for someone to wire money so he could leave for Mexico. After several days of avoiding Cather’s inquiries, Crane finally begins to talk. Cather sets the scene carefully:

The night was oppressively warm; one of those dry winds that are the curse of that country was blowing up from Kansas. The white, western moonlight threw sharp, blue shadows below us. The streets were silent at that hour, and we could hear the gurgle of the fountain in the Post Office square across the street, and the twang of banjos from the lower verandah of the Hotel Lincoln, where the colored waiters were serenading the guests. The drop lights in the office were dull under their green shades, and the telegraph sounder clicked faintly in the next room. In all his long tirade, Crane never raised his voice; he spoke slowly and monotonously and even calmly, but I have never known so bitter a heart... He gave me to understand that he led a double literary life; writing in the first place the matter that pleased himself, and doing it very slowly; in the second place, any sort of stuff that would sell. (15)

As these two authors consider the perils and labors of their trade—the one worn and bitter, and the other still fresh and somewhat hopeful—another scene is taking place here. While Crane is lamenting the relentless drive to make his material artistic, and yet profitable (the same drive Stevens will also mourn), another labor is occurring: “colored waiters,” Cather tells us, are “serenading the guests” at the Hotel Lincoln. It seems an incidental aside but, I would argue, wholly symbolic in this story of three white writers and their struggles to negotiate the “double life”—living for art, writing for profit.

For while Crane is ranting, Stevens is lamenting, and Cather is anticipating, Paul Laurence Dunbar—a young, gifted black poet—is working at four dollars a week as an elevator operator at the Callahan Building in

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Dayton, Ohio. Writing poetry on the job when there are lapses in elevator traffic, Dunbar is locked out of the field that the other three writers ironically feel trapped in: journalism. The only jobs available to him as young black man in the late nineteenth century are physical labor and domestic service positions. Although the literary critic William Dean Howells is singing Dunbar's praises in 1896, the three other writers in this study are too preoccupied in their own worlds to notice: Stevens is preparing to attend Harvard in the fall of the coming year; Crane is celebrating the enthusiastic reviews of *The Red Badge of Courage* (Howells, incidentally, is writing Crane that same year, saying "I remain true to my first love, 'Maggie.' That is better than all the Black Riders and Red Badges" (*Letters* 102)); and Cather is heading for Pittsburgh to assume editorship of the *Home Monthly*. Even though Dunbar frequently visits New York city where Stevens and Crane are cursing their jobs at the *New York Tribune*, and in 1900, he shares the streets of Washington D. C. with Willa Cather (she returns a year later to Pittsburgh to teach high school English), he goes unnoticed and unmentioned by any of these writers. Like the black waiters twanging on banjos while Crane and Cather converse about the literary profession, Dunbar seems ever in the background, confined to the margins by the literary powers-that-be.

But his absence speaks volumes in this study of transracial and transethnic crossings. If the problem of the twentieth century is, in fact, as W.E.B. DuBois contends, the problem of the color line, then no other author in this study felt it so much as Dunbar. While Crane, Cather, and Stevens are taking imaginative risks to cross such boundaries in their
work, Dunbar is living the color line—doing all he can to negotiate it, soften it, transgress it, and perhaps transcend it. He is looking to white patrons for financial help, to black leaders like Frederick Douglass for political support, and to white readership for marketability. And he will suffer criticism from all three of these groups as well as from literary critics who will harshly judge his work in the decades after his death. Thus Dunbar provides a crucial focal point in this study; it is from Dunbar's side of the color line and the results of his movements, that we may be better prepared to contemplate the outcomes, consequences, and implications of the other three writers' efforts to cross. As Henry Wonham explains:

Significant expression occurs along the color line because that is where American identity is most at issue, there the racial 'Other,' whether black or white, is most insistent and hardest to conceal. . . The task of criticism is to document the 'embarrassing' presence of this 'Other' in cultural places where one least expects to find it, to historicize rather than to deny the cultural exchanges that produce American identity (5).

This study is an effort to make visible those cultural exchanges that have occurred between and among the lives of these four authors—artistically, socially, and politically. All their stories are set during a time of racial, ethnic, and economic transformation in America. And no story is told in isolation.

During an age which saw some of the most significant social, political, and technological changes in America—the largest influx of immigrants, the migration of southern blacks northward, the height of feminism, the rise of social reform, and the persistence of Jim Crow—
Crane, Dunbar, Stevens, or Cather seem completely unwilling to use literature to enter into a politically charged dialogue about these phenomena and movements. Although the settings for Crane's most provocative pieces were the same sites that social reformers performed their missionary work—in the Bowery tenement houses—he never promoted himself as a proponent of reform. He writes in a 1896 letter that even though he has lived on the East side of New York he has "no opinion of missions;" and says that he tried to demonstrate in his story "An Experiment in Misery" that "the root of the Bowery life is a sort of cowardice. Perhaps I mean a lack of ambition or to willingly be knocked flat and accept the licking." (Letters 133). Crane's harsh assessment of urban poverty relates to his no-nonsense view of dogmatic literature. "Preaching," he writes in a 1897 letter, "is fatal to art in literature. I give to readers a slice out of life; and if there is any moral or lesson in it, I do not try to point it out. I let the reader find it for himself" (Letters 158-59).

Stevens expresses a similar distaste of moralizing when he writes, in 1942, during the height of World War II, that poets have no social, political, or moral obligation (Necessary Angel 27). For Stevens, the poet and the politician hold two separate offices. "The poet absorbs the general life: the public life," Stevens writes. "The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is an individual. The politician is general" (Letters 526). Systematic, dogmatic thinking, according to Stevens, is simply not the province of writers—even during moments of political crisis or popular movements. Willa Cather echoes the same cautious sentiment. While numbers of American women are fighting for suffrage in American, Cather is voicing
her distaste for best-selling women writers who, in her estimation, were using the pen to preach. "The mind that can follow a 'mission' is not an artistic one," (Kingdom of Art 406) she writes. She wanted little to do with socially conscious poets like Carl Sandburg or Edgar Lee Masters and could not abide most of the fiction being produced in the twenties. "Willa," her friend and biographer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant would recall, "had no patience with these precursors [Sinclair Lewis and Dos Passos] of the 'novel of protest,' and the sociological fiction of the twenties" (176). Even Paul Laurence Dunbar, the poet who William Dean Howells described in 1896 as "the first man of his color to study his race objectively," wanted to be judged as a writer without regard to his race (Nordloh 171). In an editorial in the first issue of the Dayton Tattler, a black community newspaper, Dunbar cautions, "A great mistake that has been made by editors of the race is that they only discuss one question, the race problem. This no doubt is important but a quarter of a century of discussion of one question has worn it thread-bare" (qtd. in Revell 48).

Despite their various positions within early twentieth century society as well as their diverse tastes and methods--Stevens, the modernist poet, worked as an insurance executive; Cather, the conservative writer of frontier fiction, worked as an editor for McClures; Dunbar, America's foremost black poet, was an elevator operator; and Crane, premier naturalist, once worked as a war correspondent--all of them see literature as an expression of a writer's imagination, that vehicle which allows the artist to transcend even the most rigid of social boundaries. The power of the writer, for Cather, lies in self-abandonment, in his/her ability to
achieve the "bliss of entering the very skin of another human being" (Sergeant 10). In many ways, it is this ideal which enables her to identify with many Eastern European immigrants' dramatic struggle to root themselves in American culture and soil. When she hears them tell their stories she feels as if "they told me so much more than they said--as if I had got inside another person's skin" (Kingdom of Art 449). Crane attempts to explain this same creative process in a 1897 letter to his friend John Northern Hilliard. Crane says of the London reviewers of The Red Badge of Courage:

They all insist that I am a veteran of the civil war, whereas the fact is, as you know, I never smelled even the powder of a sham battle. I know what the psychologists say, that a fellow can't comprehend a condition that he has never experienced, and I argued that many times with the Professor. Of course, I have never been in a battle, but I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field, or else fighting is a hereditary instinct, and I wrote intuitively for the Cranes were a family of fighters in the old days, and in the Revolution every member did his duty. (Letters 158)

Adopting the language of an anthropologist Crane attempts to account for what Cather would simply describe as his "gift of sympathy." For whatever reasons--be it his experience with other forms of battle or remnants from his familial memory--he was able to get inside the head and heart of a civil war soldier. Before he began writing The Red Badge of Courage, Crane had interviewed veterans of the Civil War "only to find that they remembered very little that could be utilized in his imaginative rendering of battle. . . And yet, old soldiers say Crane has painted a most realistic picture the Critic reported in 1896" (Stallman 187).

What accounts for this accuracy? Crane might call it "instinct,"
Cather may describe it as “sympathy,” Stevens may call it “the capable imagination,” Dunbar might attribute it to an “all-absorbing desire.” But whatever the rationale, each writer acknowledges an intangible, mysterious quality to the creative process—a something that allows artists to create an authentic vision of an experience they may not have actually lived. Stevens describes this artistic ability in Emersonian terms. Because he was a writer who shared Emerson’s vision of the poet as an inventor, as someone who "unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene" (236), Stevens also seems to elevate the powers of the artist, viewing his endeavor to capture diverse experience as an attainable ideal, one propelled by his ability to invent, to imagine. According to Stevens, the poet fulfills his obligation to his readers only when he "makes his imagination theirs" (Necessary Angel 29) and even in the fictive depiction of blacks, Stevens appears to view his racial poetry as completely genuine, as a product of that "supreme fiction" made real by the poet and reader’s faith in imaginative powers. Dunbar indulges in a similar act of faith when he decides to record the experiences of southern blacks in his plantation lyrics and stories without ever having visited the South himself, relying exclusively on the stories about the South before the Civil War told to him by former slaves. His white readers, however, will attribute his authentic depictions of Southern blacks more so to his racial make-up than his imagination. Since the white literary establishment shared a monolithic view of black experience, the fact that Dunbar was of a different region and social class than the black slaves in his work seemed inconsequential. Under such a conceptual framework, then, Dunbar’s
talents—his imaginative endeavours—are somewhat minimized. To his white readers, Dunbar is telling his own story; unlike his white contemporaries who are using their imagination to tell another person's story. And yet clearly some of Dunbar's most provocative work is spawn primarily from his imagination.

While all four writers elevate the creative process, each acknowledges the demands of art, the tolls it takes psychologically and sometimes financially. In her first published essay on Carlyle, Cather explains, "Art of every kind is an exacting master, more so even than Jehovah--He says only, 'Thou shalt have not other gods before me.' Art, Science and Letters cry, 'Thou shalt have no other gods at all.' They only accept human sacrifices" (qtd. in Bennett 219). Cather describes the life of the artist as an all-consuming vocation that demands nothing short of an individual's heart and soul. Crane evokes a similar element of a writer's self-sacrifice, when he writes, "It seems a pity that art should be a child of pain, and yet I think it is" (Letters 79). For all these writers, art is achieved with much labor to the individual. But as each of them attempts to depict the lives of racial/ethnic others via an apolitical faith in the powers of art, we shall see too the privileges of the artist. Surely, writers' prerogatives to move imaginatively among the stratified zones of color and class in the early twentieth century are equally as powerful as the sacrifices they are called upon to make to their art. And, as evidenced by the disturbing and ambivalent representations of racial/ethnic others in the literature of the period, we know writers were not the only ones who were sacrificed to the gods of the imagination.
All four authors' fascination with racial and ethnic diversity comes during an influx of movement and migration among all sorts of people: immigrants are arriving from Europe; Southern blacks are migrating north; and more and more rural, working-class men and women are finding economic prosperity in the city. In New York City and Chicago—the nation's two largest cities at the start of the twentieth century—one-half of all male workers were immigrants (Muller 73). In the West—Willa Cather's literary terrain—Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Mexicans immigrants were finding their way toward jobs in agriculture and in industry. And the U.S. economy was booming from their labor and productivity. By the year 1912, for example, immigrants accounted for between 13 percent and 42 percent of all capital accumulation in the United States (Muller 87). Consequently more employers who wanted to increase productivity sought out the labor of immigrants. Thomas Muller notes, "In New England industries, productivity rates in factories dominated by immigrants grew more rapidly than those in similar industries employing few foreign-born workers" (85). More prosperity among immigrants meant more opportunity for self-employment as well. As the number of immigrant communities increased, specific ethnic groups specialized in certain industries. In Chicago and smaller midwestern cities, Greeks set up small candy stores and restaurants. By the end of the nineteenth century, Italians dominated not only New York's construction industry but also its entire fruit business. On the West Coast, Japanese entrepreneurs opened small businesses in ethnic neighborhoods (Muller 87).
Immigrants were not the only ones leaving their homes to find economic prosperity in cities like New York and Chicago. "The emancipation of southern blacks," writes Thomas Muller, "initiated a period of outmigration that lasted for a century" (92). Competition for jobs and places to live, however, lead to ethnic and racial tensions in some cities. In Chicago and Detroit, for example, animosity between immigrants and blacks was beginning to brew in both the workplace and in neighborhoods. Many Southern blacks found entry level employment in industries dominated by immigrants, laboring as meatpackers and steelworkers. They were also beginning to share the same neighborhoods. In fact, Muller argues, "the expansion of the overcrowded black ghetto into Irish-dominated neighborhoods, together with the perception of blacks as strike breakers, supplied the sparks that set off Chicago's bloody 1919 race riots" (93). Certainly part of the tension stemmed from the unfair distribution of wages. For unlike immigrants, blacks in similar occupations did not reap the same economic rewards. In Philadelphia, for example, nearly half of the cities immigrants and white native workers in 1900 held jobs in manufacturing, but three of every four blacks worked as either domestic workers or unskilled laborers (Muller 95). Unfortunately this phenomena occurred throughout the country. In Southern and Northern cities blacks were concentrated in the same low-skill, low-wages categories. Racism and lack of an education made no region of the U.S. a conducive place for black prosperity.

The four authors in this study took note of the rise of northern cities and the hope of many new Americans—Southern blacks, rural,
working class young men and women, and European immigrants—to find employment there. Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*, Cather’s *Song of the Lark*, and Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* can all be read as city narratives. Each features main characters from one of these new categories of Americans struggling to harness the energy of the city, but at the same time, resisting its destructive fever. In Dunbar’s and Crane’s novels, in particular, the city is portrayed as a seductress, tempting young men and women to lose their virtues. Dunbar writes in *The Sport of the Gods*, of the fate of the visitor of New York: "After it is all over, after he has got beyond the stranger's enthusiasm for the metropolis, the real fever of love for the place will begin to take hold upon him. The subtle, insidious wine of New York will begin to intoxicate him" (507). Indeed Dunbar’s Joe and Kitty Hamilton, an African American brother and sister who migrate North to New York city after their father is unjustly accused of theft, and Crane’s Maggie Johnson, an Irish factory worker who labors twelve hours a day in a clothing factory and suffers a horrible home life under her abusive and alcoholic parents, all end up in states of physical or mental demise. Although Cather’s Thea Kronberg, the daughter of Swedish/Norwegian immigrants, is more successful in negotiating Chicago, she too witnesses the mass effects of poverty and despair, but, unlike the other three characters, manages to avoid the city’s sites of amusement which many of these authors identify as sources of vice (as will be discussed in chapter one, Crane and Dunbar’s depiction of city life features such sites of pleasure as beer gardens, jazz clubs, and vaudeville theaters). Of note as well is the fact that Thea brings to the city a
marketable skill; her talents in music keep her well fed, relatively well paid, and protected. But this does not mean she remains unaffected by or indifferent to the plight of many of her fellow immigrants in the city. When Thea works with the Hungarian-born pianist Andor Harsanyi in Chicago, for example, she hears his account of growing up in a Pennsylvania mining town. “As a boy Harsanyi lost his eye when he was twelve in a Pennsylvania mining town where explosives happened to be kept too near the frame shanties in which the company packed newly arrived Hungarian families” (182-83). Harsanyi keeps the clipping from a Pittsburgh paper which reports the accident and mentions the loss of his left eye:

That was his first American ‘notice’; and he kept it. He held no grudge against the coal company; he understood that the accident was merely one of the things that are bound to happen in the general scramble of American life, where every one comes to grab and takes his chance (183).

Those American newcomers who held this country to her promises of prosperity and democracy, chanced both prosperity and ruin, destruction as well as renewal. There were no guarantees here, Harsanyi was telling Thea, only opportunities.

While these authors seem willing and anxious to sustain an imaginative encounter with racial and ethnic difference—taking up the story of the Southern black visitor of New York city and the hopes of the daughter of Norwegian immigrants in Chicago—evidence from their personal journals and correspondences suggest that on a personal and social level such was not always the case. Outside the genres of fiction and poetry, Crane, Dunbar, Cather, and Stevens show mixed feelings toward
racial/ethnic outsiders. Frequently their ambiguity toward people outside their racial or social group stems from these writers' own familiarity with regional and cultural traditions practiced by these racial/ethnic others. In their private writings--letters, memoirs, and essays--geared toward specific (and often few) individuals--we see the extent to which each of them absorbs the dominant culture's prejudice and fear of racial, ethnic, and economic difference.

Although Crane prided himself on living the life of the bohemian during his first days in New York and immersed himself in the scenes of slum life he was later to depict in Maggie, he seems to have kept a psychological, if not physical distance, from the inhabitants of the Bowery. In 1922, in what strikes contemporary readers as a troubling display of white racism, his friend John Northern Hillard says of Crane's relationship with various working class women:

He took up with many a drab, and was not overly particular as to her age, race, or color. Many a time I heard him say that he would have to go out and get a nigger wench 'to change his luck.' Time and again he would bring a lady from the streets to his room. He had no eye for women of his own class or station. He preferred the other kind. I can understand this. Women of his own class could not have given him what he was always looking for--the real, naked facts of life. And in seeking them, he was tolerant and absolutely unashamed. . . . And he tried no more to hide his relations with the women of the underworld than an animal would. (Letters 324-25).

Undisturbed by Crane's power and manipulation over these women, Hillard, in fact, praises Crane's choice to embrace "the underworld" and argues that such sexual relations fulfilled his individual and artistic sensibility to seek out the "real, naked facts of life." At the
heart of this statement not only lies an unhealthy bit of racism—equating working class women, women of color, and prostitutes with mindless, animalistic tendencies—but an avoidance of Crane’s unquestioned privilege to move within this world that he, as most people of his station, will eventually leave. What Crane seems to be undertaking here is a strategy that allows one to indulge in the passions of “the underworld” and yet still remain a respected member of upper, middle-class white society. As bell hooks (1992) puts it:

To make one’s self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one’s mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other (23)

In essence, these women of the Bowery do provide Crane with “an alternative playground,” a place he can go to in order to, as he claimed “change his luck” and perhaps more importantly, a locale where he can escape from his own identity as the son of a highly conservative Methodist minister and temperance advocate. What Crane is doing here in the 1890s is what many white modernist writers of the twenties do when they attempt to record African American idioms or frequent black jazz clubs. As Aldon Nielsen argues this curiosity about African Americans hardly served to lessen racism as much as it provided these white writers with a vehicle for rebelling against Puritanism and a white bourgeois life style. He writes:

But this renewed attention to Afro-American life and
expression did not serve to expel from our discourse the old myths of the bad other. It served instead to foster among white writers a curious combination of romantic racism with the most egregious elements of antiblack sentiment from the nineteenth century. Writing of this era, George M. Frederikson observes that “the cultural revolt against Puritanism and repression in the 1920s could lead some whites to believe that they were being complementary to blacks when they described them as naturally naive and primitive creatures who characteristically gave free rein to all their passions.” (qtd. in Nielsen 50)

Indeed, as we shall come to see in the writings of both Cather and Stevens, this impulse to “celebrate” black culture as a means to revolt against the white establishment is an effective literary and psychological tool for white writers who wish to criticize white bourgeois culture while refusing to acknowledge their own position within it. In a 1921 interview, for example, Cather criticized Nebraska club women who moved about culture clubs studying Italian art out of textbooks or memorizing a string of facts. According to Cather, these types are fatal to the spirit of art. The nigger boy who plays by ear on his fiddle airs from Traviata without knowing what he is playing, or why he likes it, has more real understanding of Italian art than these esthetic creatures with a head and a larynx, and no organs that they get any use of, who reel you off the life of Leonardo da Vinci (Willa Cather in Person 46-47).

Like Stevens’ poems “Exposition on the Contents of a Cab” and “The Virgin Carrying a Lantern,” Cather uses the African American youth—whom she describes in a tone of admiration that is steeped, nonetheless, in a language of stereotype and insult—to belittle the white bourgeois club women and their misguided attempts to educate themselves. While, according to some critics, Cather seems blinded by racism (Ammons 134)
when she attempts to depict Indians, Asians, Chicanos, or blacks, she is often praised for her portrayal and progressive views toward European immigrants. In a recent article on *The Song of the Lark* and *My Antonia* Ann Mosley argues that Cather's attitude toward ethnic cultures different to her own was unusually progressive for her time (7) and, in many of her novels, Cather promotes "a philosophy of cultural pluralism" (7). Mona Pers, in a book length study of Cather's portrayals of Swedes, maintains that Cather often saw immigrants as more imaginative and cultivated than most native-born Americans and that she wrote about them in order to better inform misguided American readers. Yet when it comes to her own personal space, even Cather betrayed a sense of discomfort and distress when she must share a third-class railway carriage with working class French peasants. She writes:

There were eight women and one wretched infant in our compartment, most of them women of the people and of the soil. Those women of the soil are all very well in pictures by Millet or Bastiers Lepage but they are not the most desirable traveling companions in a little compartment, on a burning August day when the mistral is blowing and the white dust hangs heavy on olive and fig trees. The baby had not much more clothing on than an infant Bacchus, and its mother was so tired and hot and discouraged with life that she threw the infant upon me and my dress suitcase and left it to its own devices. . . O what a thing is a good hotel at the end of a weary journey, a journey full of heat and dust and hungry French fleas and people that are most distasteful than them all. (qtd. in Bennett 149-50)

Cather displays here a number of reactions that will reoccur and frame her own writings: an symbolic or artistic interest in racial/ethnic others, but not a moral or economic concern about them; a linguistic and thematic impulse to associate racial/ethnic others with Nature (notice in the last
sentence, her equation of heat, dust, and fleas with the French peasants); and finally a commitment to establish a powerful and uncompromising distance between herself and them. All three of these patterns can be readily applied to Stevens and to some extent, even to Dunbar. As Aldon Nielsen argues, "There must be something said about the other which somehow differentiates himself from yourself if you are to enslave him, or, after emancipation, if his condition is to be kept different from your own" (4). For all their interest and fascination with racial/ethnic others these four writers are anxious to protect and safeguard their own personal, social, and cultural boundaries from these same individuals who occupy their art. And as demonstrated in Cather's reminiscences in France, no more evident is this caution articulated than in their private journals and letters.

Like many Cather scholars, early critics of Wallace Stevens often praised his depiction of racial/ethnic others. In his 1951 book review of *Auroras of Autumn*, Randall Jarrell reflects on how Stevens' American philosophy is surrounded by racial and ethnic difference. "In *Harmonium*," writes Jarrell, "he still loves America best when he can think of it as a wilderness, naturalness, pure potentiality (he treats with especial sympathy Negroes, Mexican Indians, and anybody else he can consider wild)" (128). Although Jarrell overlooks the fact that the very quality Stevens most admires in these individuals--their primitiveness--is steeped in historically racist assumptions, he is accurate in pointing out that at least on an artistic level, Stevens was interested in racial/ethnic others. But when it came to issues of personal preference, Stevens, like
Cather feels ill at ease with those who did not share his same ethnicity or social class. In his letters to family and friends, Stevens reveals a similar distress after he finds work with the *New York Tribune* and discovers an element of city life he wasn't prepared for: its foreigners. While working along West Street and the wharves, Stevens, as he records in his journal, finds

a ring of foreigners in a park 'shooting craps.' They were having an exciting but good-natured time--making and losing ten-cent fortunes. I struck up Canal Street and saw an Italian family making its living. The husband was bent over an ice-cream freezer on the pavement--it was an invention of his own. It did not make my mouth water. In the doorway was his wife stitching at some piece of cloth. By her side was a little girl playing with a doll--an invention like the ice-cream freezer, but much dirtier (*Souvenirs and Prophecies* 73-74).

Stevens seems, at once, fascinated and somewhat amused by these immigrant families and at the same time a bit repulsed by them as well--a pattern that will reoccur in his poetry about African American characters as well. As an inventor himself (of poetry), he takes an interest in the creativity of the Italian man also desperate (though much more so than the young upper-class Stevens) to eke out a living for himself in this indifferent metropolis. As Joan Richardson speculates, Stevens may have even found the inspiration and material he needed from this scene to craft "The Emperor of Ice Cream"--that poem replete with images of concupiscent cups and working-class culture. And yet on a personal level, he seems none too willing to help the man's business. Nothing about the scene is appetizing to Stevens; everything from the ice-cream freezer to
the little girl's doll strikes him as dirty, unappealing. He seems, in fact, out of his element here.

Even Dunbar who earned the dubious title as the spokesperson of his race is anxious about any suspected affiliations his white public may think he has with working-class blacks. In a 1901 essay "Negro Society," published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, Dunbar is quick to point out to his primarily white readers the difference between Washington D.C.'s sophisticated leading black citizens and its ordinary, run-of-the-mill working-class blacks. He writes about the group of black elite of which he is a member:

... it is hardly to be wondered at that some of us wince a wee bit when we are all thrown into the lump as the peasant or working class. In aims and hopes for our race, it is true, we are all at one, but it must be understood, when we come to consider social life, that the girls who cook in your kitchens and the men who serve in your dining-rooms do not dance in our parlors. (qtd. in Bruce 66)

Dunbar, ever vigilant to keep his life distant from the lives of Southern rural blacks, echoes Booker T. Washington's address to white southerners that in all things social, blacks and whites "can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (937). Although what Dunbar is advocating is a social separation of classes and not races, he suggests in this quote that while he may support political equality for all of his race, class and social boundaries must be maintained. Dunbar's attempt to distance himself from working class blacks is evident early on in his career. In his 1898 essay, "Recession Never," for example, he disparages Southern working class blacks' migration to Northern cities by infantilizing the would-be migrants. He writes:
They have been deceived by the glare and glitter of city streets. They are great, naughty, irresponsible children. Their highest ideal is a search for pleasure, and they think they have found it when they indulge in vice. I pity them because they have come to the city to lose so much and to gain so little. . . . They are losing the soft mellow voices which even slavery could not ruin. (qtd in *The Dunbar Reader* 41)

As a sophisticated Northerner from Ohio, Dunbar clearly does not see himself as a part of this group. In condescending fashion, he paints these rural Southerners with a simplicity and close-to-nature innocence that suggests that they lack the intellectual and moral resources to resist being swallowed by anything more urbane than a plantation field. Although he shares the same racial characteristics as the black migrants, Dunbar, unlike his white contemporaries, may experience, in his act of separation, an internal racism specific to aspiring middle-class blacks. In a February 8, 1898 letter to Paul, Alice strongly advises him during his stay in New York to find a first-class white hotel. She writes,

> Then you will be away from the--well, niggers. You see I care more of your name and reputation than you do. I want you to be dignified, reserved, difficult to access. You cheapen yourself too often by being too friendly with inferior folks (*Letters* 433).

The letters between him and Alice, for example, betray what Kevin Gaines defines as “a racialized black middle-class ideology,” (xx) an unconscious internalized racism that reflected a middle-class anxiety about poor blacks as a threatening source of moral and social disorder.

If each of the four writers seems ambivalent about these new American wage earners, it is because they were sharing the same cities and pursuing the same ambition as these newcomers: sustainable employment. And here they all must come to terms with the
marketability of journalism and popular fiction and the lack of interest shown for what they each aspire: the literary arts. Consequently each of them had to compromise art for profit. Dunbar’s lack of employment options often compelled him to write whatever would bring in an income even if it promoted white stereotypes about blacks. In fact, some of Dunbar’s story contributions to the *New York Journal* made his wife Alice furious. She writes on October 21, 1897:

> Don’t, don’t write any more such truck as you’ve been putting in the Journal. Now this is between us as between husband and wife. To everyone else I champion your taste. . . I argue from all sorts of premises your right to do as you please--but to you darling, I must say--don’t. I know it means more money and speedier union for us, but sometimes money isn’t all. It is not fair to prostitute your art for “filthy lucre,” is it? (*Letters* 216)

Alice’s comparison of Dunbar’s writing to “prostituting” his art is the same explanation later critics would use to dismiss him, contending that he was a sell-out to his race. But when Dunbar attempted to shift gears and write more poems in standard English as opposed to black dialect verse, James Weldon Johnson tells us, Dunbar felt somewhat trapped by his popularity. Johnson writes, “We agreed that the public still demanded dialect poetry, but that as a medium, especially for the Negro poet, it was narrow and limited” (*Dunbar Reader* 268-69). As we shall see later on, such was not the case for white poets like Stevens and many others (including Williams and Eliot) who benefit, in some ways from a racial double-standard and, as Alain Locke observed in 1928, “turned with deep and unbiased interest to Negro materials and Negro themes and Negro idioms of speech and emotion as artistic inspiration” (150).
During the early part of the century, however, all four writers—even Stevens—are, at various levels, worn down by the commercialism attached to writing, each producing pieces they either despise or think cheapen their talent. As Cather writes of her first meeting with Crane, "He gave me to understand that he led a double literary life; writing in the first place the matter that pleased himself, and doing it very slowly; in the second place, any sort of stuff that would sell" (15). This double life which keeps Crane and his contemporaries pulled between materialistic need and artistic integrity is what necessitates that Cather work as a Pittsburgh high school English teacher, Steven as an insurance executive, and Dunbar as an elevator operator and later as a reading room assistant in the Library of Congress. No doubt this tension leads, at least on one level, to much inner turmoil, especially for Crane and Dunbar who never achieved the financial security Stevens and Cather did. In fact, one critic goes so far to argue that Crane died not from tuberculosis, but from "the cause most common among American middle-class males--anxiety about money" (Liebling 18). But even the more privileged Stevens was not immune to such anxieties, particularly early on in his career. As mentioned at this chapter's beginning, Stevens endures the brutal materialism of New York city for less than a year's time. He returns to the quite mainstay of Hartford to begin a profitable, yet peaceful career as an insurance agent.

Cather was no stranger to the push-and-shove commercialism of journalism, but her practicality and perhaps even her gender kept her from the same kind of despair the male authors in this study will face. Like Crane and Stevens, Cather will work as a journalist for a time, first as
editor for *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh and then at *McClures* in New York city. Yet she is able to tolerate the profession for twelve years despite the fact that she continually battled with publishers to print more literature and less of what she considered, trash. As Mildred Bennett explains: "The sort of piece Willa wanted to write was too heavy for the magazine, and she rebelled at the 'trashiness' of what she was compelled to use, but she decided that the idea was to work whether or not one was suited to it" (191). Perhaps of a different temperament than either Crane or Stevens, Cather accepts this somewhat tainted form of employment—occasionally writing pieces, as Dunbar will do, that she is not proud of—out of a "tragic necessity," an obligation of adulthood. Indeed it is this same philosophy of unavoidable suffering and loss that will dominate the lives of her best known characters: Professor St. Peter, Jim Burden, and Lucy Gayheart. For Cather, leading the double life, negotiating the conflicting desire between art and profit, was simply inevitable. Not that she didn’t lament the defeat of an artistic mind by a materialistic world as she poignantly depicted in her story “Paul’s Case.” But the older she grew, the more resistant she seems, at least in her fiction, to self-pity. In her 1932 “Neighbour Rosicky,” for example, Cather decries the perpetual bourgeois impulse to accumulate things. She says, through the thoughts of Doctor Burliegh, of the practical-minded Rosickys:

> They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn’t get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burliegh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn’t enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too (221).
Of course, that Cather records this sentiment while living as an independent writer in Greenwich village may make her philosophy seem a bit insincere, but nowhere in her life or work does she uphold the sort of bourgeois lifestyle that Stevens, Crane, and to some extent, even Dunbar toil after.

Part of this difference may, in fact, relate to gender. Biographers of Crane, Dunbar and Stevens have attributed the source of their psychological distress to worries over money. As the son of a clergyman, Crane felt the occasion sting of poverty when growing up and he, argues A. J. Liebling, was “peculiarly liable” to this desire for financial independence and economic security. Although Stevens came from an upper-class family background, he felt the same push for economic self-sufficiency, especially from his father. At one point during his stay in New York, Stevens is so wrought by the competitive world of journalism that he asks his father for a guaranteed income so that he might pursue another kind of writing career. His father refuses the request. Frank Lentricchia explains it in this way:

The son of Garrett Stevens had begun to understand, but apparently had not yet learned to live with, the primary lesson in American history that was to be his burden as it was the burden of most of young America’s males. (141)

Even the color line didn’t prevent this same anxiety from visiting Dunbar. In fact he faced more severe financial struggles than either Crane or Stevens. Although he had received support from patrons (what Stevens requested from his father, but never received), Dunbar had both a widowed mother and new wife to support. The income he made from his writings, especially at the beginning of his career, was modest and, as
indicated from the letters between him and Alice, money was often tight. For Dunbar, every cent, dollar, or guinea counted. To achieve the middle-class status he longed for, Dunbar needed commercial success to fund his trips to visit Alice, buy a modest house, and be a part of the Washington social circle. In fact, his marriage plans with Alice seem contingent on his ability to earn enough money for a home. In one letter he asks Alice—whose desire for fine quality was as strong or perhaps even stronger than Dunbar's—whether it might be possible for them to "squeeze along with a six room house at first" until he has a chance to earn more than $1500 a year (Letters 201). And a few days later, he asks her again about the six room option, arguing that many of his Washington friends who make more money than he occupy such homes. (Letters 211). While Cather was not immune to financial sacrifices, she probably never felt the same kind of anxiety that Dunbar, Crane, and Stevens experienced in regard to money. In fact, Cather's attitudes toward money always seem tempered by obligation. The first literary earnings she incurred from her job at the Nebraska State Journal, for example, went to cover her own expenses as well as help her father whose farm failed during the early 1890s. Certainly her survival in the world as a single woman depended upon her ability to remain financially independent, but her gender identity wasn't a part of the equation in the way it is for the male authors in this study. She was, by nature, an independent soul, but a generous one at that. "No writer of her time," argues E. K. Brown, "was more successful than Willa Cather in keeping freedom and anonymity. . . Instead of working for charities she gave as if from a bottom-less purse to old friends fallen on hard times, or
institutions in Webster County” (180). Like so much of her life, Cather made her finances a private affair. Unlike Crane or Dunbar, she seemed indifferent to public perception of her wealth or appearance. She never seemed to fear the same kind of judgment that the male authors in this study would suffer if they risked financial ruin.

Certainly anxieties over money affected the way all four writers felt toward the economically and socially disenfranchised: immigrants, African Americans, poor Southern whites. Ironically while all four writers’ personal encounters with racial/ethnic others result in a great deal of distress and condescension in their personal lives, artistically speaking they find these same individuals compelling subjects for their work.

“What happens,” asks Toni Morrison, when writers “trust in their ability to imagine others and their willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for them? . . . What prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—what disables the foray, the purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer’s imagination?” (3-4).

The desires driving this creative process and the consequences resulting from it are as varied as the writers themselves.

For Crane, Stevens, and to some degree Cather, part of this projection is prompted by a rebellion against white bourgeois religion and culture as well as, in both Stevens’ and Cather’s case, a nostalgic yearning for nineteenth century art and craftsmanship. Consequently racial/ethnic others provide a vehicle, a means for these writers to fulfill their own psychological appetites, artistic aspirations, and literary ambitions. By pitting immigrants, blacks, and other non-Anglo characters and voices
against white upper-class values and mores, all three of these writers attempt to align themselves with (in Morrison's terminology "become") the Other. The outcomes of this imaginative transubstantiation are often ambivalent, disturbing, and at times resemble a type of romanticized racism whereby racial/ethnic others are celebrated for the very characteristics that were once used to subjugate them: a closeness with Nature (primitivism), a robust sexuality, and a bodily appetite. As Morrison puts its:

For American writers generally, this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression; permitted opportunities for the exploration of ethics and morality . . . (47-48).

As such, many racial/ethnic others in the fiction and poetry of these writers act as enablers, mirrors for white characters, those individuals with whom the authors have the more vested interest. Even Cather's Antonia Shimerda (a Bohemian immigrant), whose powerful presence preserves the majestic Nebraska prairie and occasionally disturbs the quiet, exclusive town folk, becomes an instrument for measuring Jim Burden's growth and choices. Antonia, the narrator of the introduction explains, "seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (3). For Jim Burden who leaves Nebraska for New York city where he works as lawyer and is unhappily married to pretentious social climber, Antonia represents that vital part of his past which celebrated the fruits of the land and the imagination without regard to material costs. Because she remains connected to the western soil—living as a sort of
Mother Earth, producing numbers of children--Antonia is a stand-in for Cather’s recurring tribute to the glorious past, the beauty of the preindustrial world. Her character is significant certainly. But her significance is largely determined by the use she serves for both Cather and Jim Burden. The same observation could be applied to Victoria Clementina, a middle-class African American women in Stevens’ poem “Exposition on the Contents of a Cab” and Henry Johnson, an African American chauffeur and stable worker in Crane’s The Monster. While Stevens’ poem and Crane’s novella are of separate tones and subject matters (one is about a social outing, the other about a terrible fire that leaves Henry Johnson burned beyond repair) the African American characters in each piece are used to criticize, dissect, or enable the actions and affairs of whites.

For obvious reasons, the motivations fueling Dunbar’s creative process to imagine the lives of racial/ethnic others are not identical to his white contemporaries. No doubt Dunbar’s portrayals of working class Southern blacks often relied upon the same stereotypes employed by Crane, Cather, and Stevens. And to some extent, we can even argue that Dunbar’s simplistic characterizations of rural blacks finds its source in the same desire, like the other three authors, to distance himself from the lives of those who occupied his fiction and poetry. But Dunbar’s motivation is complicated by a number of factors that cannot be applied to his fellow white artists. To begin with, Dunbar’s exhaustive effort to claim an identity for himself outside his racial group—to circumvent, in other words, his culture’s obsession to classify non-Anglos under one
conglomerate race or ethnic category—was a struggle his white contemporaries did not face. Designated as white, and thus without a "race," Crane, Cather, and Stevens could easily, and without social, literary, or political repercussion, try on other racial identities. Dunbar's endeavor to perform the same literary acts did not meet with similar enthusiasm. Despite the fact that Dunbar's knowledge of Southern rural blacks, like Cather's knowledge of European immigrants, is gained through second-hand sources (his mother's oral tales of growing up as a slave in Kentucky), the literary establishment made him the official spokesmen for Southern black culture. When it came to being black, Dunbar's white readers seem to suggest, one's racial characteristic equipped one to intimately know all members of one's race. As an urban Northern black at the turn of the twentieth century living among middle-class whites and attending an all-white school, Dunbar was no more "genetically suited" to write plantation stories than Cather was to write about Bohemian immigrants or Crane to write about Irish immigrants. Like them, Dunbar relied more upon his artistic talents and beliefs in the imaginative process than his personal experience. And yet it was nearly impossible for the young Ohioan to escape the demands of the literary establishment that focused more upon his racial characteristics than his desire for artistic freedom and experimentation. No matter what he seemed to undertake—whether it was a coming of age story of working class white man, a novel about middle-class blacks in Harlem, or a romance between an upper-class woman and a Colorado rancher—Dunbar was simply known as the negro author of plantation lyrics and stories.
Like the other authors of this study, Dunbar's belief in the universal powers of literature compelled him to represent those whom he knew only through second hand knowledge (Southern blacks) as well as those he knew personally (urban middle class whites and blacks). But while his publishers and earlier critics saw nothing insincere or inauthentic in his depiction of rural blacks, he suffered severe criticism for his "inaccurate" portrayal of whites. So much so that when Dunbar attempts to render white experience, his politics as well as his psychological state become suspect. He is accused of not knowing himself, not having a firm grasp of his identity--"a double-conscious brother in the veil"--a player, a sell-out, a confused soul. Thus Dunbar's dilemma--his effort to move from black to white zones of experiences and the criticism leveled at such a maneuver--raises questions about what the political ramifications of imagining others when one is already identified as the Other. His movement exposes the fundamental imbalance and illogical in American race relations: that white writers can masquerade as black, but no black artist should ever consider such a dangerous pose.

When W. E. B. DuBois writes in 1903 that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line"(54) his assessment of America's racial situation, both then and now, seems painfully accurate. He writes,

Now if one notices carefully one will see that between these two worlds, despite much physical contact and daily intermingling, there is almost no community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings of one race can come into direct contact and sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of the other (204-5).
But it is likely that the Eastern educated, middle-class DuBois didn’t experience the same version of the color line that Paul Laurence Dunbar did. Unable to find employment in journalism, despite his obvious talent for writing, and no means to a college education, Dunbar discovered cultural and social barriers between both his upper-class white patrons as well the rural, working class blacks he depicted in some of his best known works. DuBois comes very close to identifying this discrepancy in the color line when he writes says of America’s social order:

And here is a land where, in the higher walks of life, in all the higher striving for the good and noble and true, the color-line comes to separate natural friends and co-workers; while at the bottom of the social group, in the saloon, the gambling-hell, and the brothel, that same line wavers and disappear (207).

In essence, social class (both high and low scales) disturbs the stability of the color line, causing it to waver and disappear at times. Of course, DuBois laments the fact that this blurring occurs on the lower end of the class scale and not the higher end, where he resides and where he thinks the most work toward racial equality could be accomplished.

But Dunbar, it would seem, is already aware in the early 1890s that social class will ultimately determine where one’s racial identity and perspective lie on the color line continuum. And his work, as well as the work of his white contemporaries consistently demonstrates that the very notion of race and ethnicity is complicated by other factors such as region and education. When, for example, in My Antonia Cather describes the heroic Bohemian immigrant, Antonia Shimerda making a life for herself on the prairie she does so with admiration, but when her white characters
encounter other immigrants in the city, Cather's tone is not so praise-worthy. When one of the characters of "Behind the Singer Tower" describes the behavior of the Italian immigrants who labor in unsafe conditions to build the Mont Blanc hotel in New York city, he compares them to primitive creatures: "Haven't you ever noticed how, when a dago is hurt on the railroad and they trundle him into the station on, another dago always runs alongside him, holding his hand and looking the more scared of the two?" (49). Eventually Fred Hallet, the man who speaks these words, does befriend one of the Italian immigrants, who is killed with the rest of the laborers in a terrible accident. But Caesarino, the Italian immigrant, remains a rather simplistic character, primitive in his appetites and desires. Cather's other immigrant characters who find themselves in big cities—including Spanish Johnnie from *The Song of the Lark* among others—experience the same pattern. For Cather, then, immigrants on the prairie were often sacred, larger-than-life figures, but once they decided to live among various other people in the crowded city, they become merely local color and lose interest for her. In the city, Anglo characters take center stage and immigrants become background figures.

Dunbar's Southern, rural, working-class blacks take a similar route: in the country, the black community enjoys a relatively peaceful existence, aside from the occasional church dispute; but once a young man gets city fever and decides to try to make a life for himself in urban America, as is the case in his stories "Jimsella," "Silas Jackson," and "Finding Zach," he's destroyed by city vices: gambling, drinking, and cheap entertainment. But had he remained on the farm, Dunbar may have found more admiring
things to tell us about him. In the same vein when the educated, middle-
class aspiring Cornelius Johnson from "Cornelius Johnson, Office Seeker"
discovers the all-powerful political machine of white racism in the city,
Dunbar treats his psychological state and victimization with much more
care and complexity. The pattern is not nearly so simple as it is in his
stories about Southern, rural, working class blacks.

Even Crane betrays a similar inconsistency in regard to
race/ethnicity and region. His upstate New York resort setting of
Whilomville functions almost as a site of pastoral bliss. Content to tell us
Jimmie’s Trescott’s coming of age amid the backdrop of racial/ethnic
harmony-- where the Swedish farmer, the German barber, and the African
American carriage driver live quite amicably--Crane’s Whilomville seems
more than simply miles, but ideological decades away from New York
city’s Bowery, where Maggie Johnson manages to “blossom in a mud
puddle.” Here in the slums of the tenement, the working class Irish
Johnsons live so brutally that Crane often likens their behavior to
animals.

No doubt, for these three writers, region and class often determine
the way their characters’ ethnicity and race will be portrayed, what
function the characters will serve in the narrative, and how the authors
themselves will view their characters’ presence and purpose in the piece.
Within these various factors of region and class, we can also identify each
authors’ own personal bias and sources of regional/cultural knowledge. If
Cather and Crane, for example, seem to paint the lives of their immigrant
characters with more richness and sympathy in places like Nebraska or
upstate New York it is because these are their own home regions, where reside the sites, people, and experiences that are most familiar to these authors. And if Dunbar appears more willing to sustain a complex characterization of Northern, middle class aspiring blacks like Cornelious Johnson or the narrator of "One Man's Fortune" is it because their experiences and values most closely resemble his own. Contrary to popular suspicions, although Dunbar devoted a good portion of his fiction and poetry to depicting the lives and languages of Southern rural blacks, he did not travel in the deep South until 1898 and by then three books of his poetry, much of them comprised of plantation lyrics, had been published (Revell 75).

Much of these writers' attention to region and race/ethnicity can be attributed to a literary interest at that time in the linguistic and cultural contributions of various racial and ethnic groups who entering diverse American landscapes.

Since they are all writing during the period characterized by William Dean Howells' doctrine of realism, great care is given in their works to the depiction of dialect and cultural traditions. As Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland note, "realism was characteristically democratic and therefore implicitly American, an art of the dramas of ordinary existence and the 'life of small things'" (190). More and more American writers at the turn of the century discovered that ordinary existence was being lived out in various regions of the country. As such, the characters and narrators who people the works of Crane, Dunbar, Cather, and Stevens are richly diverse. Dunbar's characters, for example, include Southern white
plantation owners, Northerner black politicians, ministers, writers, race-track workers, soldiers, journalists, even cowboys. They reside in Ohio, New York, Kentucky, Colorado, and Virginia. "Dunbar's fictive world," write Jay Martin and Gossie Hudson, "is larger than that of any of his contemporaries. Unlike almost all of the writers of his time. . . . Dunbar was really concerned with the relations between regions and thus portrayed several kinds of American life" (64). One of the most overlooked aspects of Dunbar's work is that he recorded white, regional dialect not just black dialect. As Darwin T. Turner astutely points out, Dunbar employs various regional dialects--Midwestern, Southern, Southwestern--in many of his poems including "The Spelling Bee," "The Rivals", "The Cornstalk Fiddle, "Speaking at de Cou't House." According to Turner, Dunbar assumed a similarity of character between blacks and whites and "was as ready to satirize one as the other" (71). Although Cather is best remembered for her portrayal of Nebraskans and other westerners, she wrote about New York businessmen and opera singers, Pittsburgh teachers and students, Virginian slave-owners, French priests, Chicago music teachers, and many others. Crane's characters included a Civil War soldier, a New York factory worker, a Nebraskan hotel owner, a small town New York physician, and a Texas sheriff among others. But with the introduction of these new Americans came the challenge of depicting their diversity in language. Part of the effort to record these speech patterns and idioms for most of these authors involved the desire for accuracy and verisimilitude.
Yet how this accuracy came to be expressed in the works of these authors, like their characterizations in general, reflected both an attraction and aversion to popular stereotypes. Since all of them begin their careers in the 1890s, their effort to record regional and ethnic/racial dialect is framed in many ways by American authors writing during the 1870s, many of whom used dialect for two specific purposes: to amuse and to sentimentalize. "What was important about regionalism," write Bradbury and Ruland,

was not only that it opened up new parts of the nation’s life and geography for literature, but that it also introduced new languages for the rendering of American experience, several drawn from popular comedy: the powerful dialect humor of George W. Harris’s Southern tall tales... and Joel Chandler Harris’s exploitation of Negro plantation stories... (192).

But this posed a significant dilemma for any writer wishing to use dialect in order to offer an authentic and accurate depiction of the individuals who spoke nonstandard English.

At the time of composing *O Pioneers!*, Cather worried over the authenticity of her depiction of these immigrants. In a 1913 interview with the *Philadelphia Record* she states:

I was not sure, however, that my feelings about the Western country and my Scandinavian friends was the truth—I thought perhaps that going among them so young I had a romantic personal feeling about them. I thought that Americans in general must see only the humorous side of the Scandinavian—the side often presented in vaudeville dialect sketches—because nobody had ever tried to write about the Swedish settlers seriously (*Willa Cather in Person* 11).

Cather speaks about the difficulties of marketing *O Pioneers!* to a mainstream white American audience. In an essay entitled "My First
Novels,” Cather recalls how she didn’t expect *O Pioneers!* to capture a large audience because for starters it was about Nebraska (she includes in her discussion the now infamous quote by a New York critic who declared “I simply don’t care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it”) but it was also about Swedish farmers. “At that time, 1912, the Swede had never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches; and the humour was based on two peculiarities: his physical strength and his inability to pronounce the letter ‘j.’” (Willa Cather on Writing 94-95).

Although Norwegian immigrant Ole Rolvaag was writing *Giants of the Earth* in 1927 and Danish immigrant Sophus Keith Winther published *Take All to Nebraska* in 1936, each of them were writing primarily for immigrants themselves. Cather, however, was painting a picture of immigrant life to an almost primarily native-born American readership. Despite the differences in their audiences, however, Cather’s work shared similar themes with contemporary immigrant fiction: combating homesickness, anxieties about assimilation, the controversy over bilingualism, and economic struggle. While some critics suggest that in some of Cather’s depiction of Scandinavians, it is hard to distinguish between Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians, she is nonetheless praised for her accuracy in developing the “immigrant theme” in American literature. James Schroeter, for example, claims that Cather cut through the claptrap to the salient fact of the American experience of her time—the coming of the immigrant, his struggle, assimilation, triumph—and placed the permanent official seal of an accomplished art on that segment of American history (365).
Clearly Cather’s portrayals of Norwegian and Swedish immigrants had enough validity to win her readership in European countries. At the time of their publications, ten of her novels were translated in Swedish; four in Norwegian, six in Danish, and four in Finnish. Mona Pers suggests in her book-length study on Cather’s depiction of Scandinavian immigrants, “On the whole, American and European critics have agreed over the years that Cather’s accomplishment of depicting European immigrants as individuals and not as national stereotypes was all but unique among American writers” (82).

Crane also attempted to replicate the language of a certain geography of America when he wrote *Maggie: Girl of the Streets.* Although he claimed to give readers “a slice out of life,” his depiction of working-class Irish immigrants hardly reads as a character study so much as an allegorical depiction of slum life in New York city. Crane’s device to avoid mentioning characters’ names—choosing, instead, to describe most of the young children as “urchins” and the rest of the characters as animals of prey (tigresses, panthers, hawks, and lions)—reveals, according to Thomas Gullason, that “to Crane, people were more important as types and symbols than as individuals” (4). But earlier reviewers of the novel praised Crane’s accuracy of language in his depiction of these immigrants. One reviewer says of Crane’s use of dialect:

The dialect of the New York slums, which is reproduced in this volume with absolute accuracy, is, we take it, something new in literature. It is certainly as legitimate a subject of literary and artistic treatment as the dialect of the Georgia

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2 See Mona Pers’ *Cather’s Swedes,* pages 96-105, for a discussion of Cather’s impact and reputation in Europe.
negro or Tennessee mountaineer or even more interesting to the average New Yorker. (143-44).

As this reviewer sees it, Crane is certainly incorporating some of the techniques of realism and regionalism. Hamlin Garland praises the book for its precision as well.

His book is the most truthful and un hackneyed study of the slums I have yet read, fragment though it is. It is pictorial, graphic, terrible in its directness. It has no conventional phrases. It gives the dialect of the slums as I have never before seen it written—crisp, direct, terse. It is another locality finding voice (144).

No doubt Crane seems careful in his recording of Irish immigrant dialect, yet his characterizations of Pete and Jimmie, especially, seem to rely heavily upon stereotypes. Their brutality, cynicism with the world, and bravado seem to come directly out of Hutchins Hapgood's *Types From the City Streets*, a pseudo-sociological study of mostly immigrant individuals from New York city. Hapgood's Peter Casey, for example, bears quite a resembles to Crane's Pete. Hapgood describes Casey as "a man and an Irishman, and all men, particularly Irishmen, love power. . . . He desires social position" (71). Like Crane's Pete, Hapgood's Casey is a prize-fighter, a thug, and a saloon-keeper. Jimmie Johnson also shares much in common with Hapgood's description of the cynical Irish tough character.

Because Cather and Crane are primarily fiction writers applying the accuracy of their portrayals to the poetry of Dunbar and Stevens might be rather difficult. Whether the writer's particular genre of choice affects the representation of these new Americans is hard to assess. We may argue, for example, that since fiction writers have more space in which to construct a character, the nature of their genre requires that they offer a
more complex portrayal than poets could provide within the limited space in which they work. But by the same token, the compacted nature of poetry requires that poets chose their words carefully. And, as Aldon Nielsen argues, whether we're speaking of character or symbolism in a poem what becomes essential in any examination is the poem's context—the choice of words, their relationship to one another, and the ways in which they are arranged by the poet. Certainly this same emphasis on context can readily be applied to works of fiction, nonfiction, and drama.

As this study considers how all these authors represent the language and character of racial/ethnic outsiders, it will be important to keep in mind that "authenticity" of experience is often challenging to assess. Consequently I will rely upon historical and cultural studies as central references from which to judge whether an author seems to be reinforcing or subverting certain racial and ethnic stereotypes. Likewise, in order to avoid getting caught up in the debate over authenticity, I will also be emphasizing the role/function these racial/ethnic others perform for the author. In other words, this study will ultimately tell us more about the author's psychological and aesthetic encounters with and treatments of difference than it will about the characters whose skins he/she attempts to occupy.
CHAPTER III

WHEN A CROWD GATHERS: STEPHEN CRANE’S SPECTACLES, FREAKS AND HORRORS

"They all insist that I am a veteran of the civil war, whereas the fact is, as you know, I never smelled even the powder of a sham battle. I know what the psychologists say, that a fellow can’t comprehend a condition that he has never experienced... Of course, I have never been in a battle, but I believe that I got my sense of the rage of conflict on the football field, or else fighting is a hereditary instinct, and I wrote intuitively. . ." --Stephen Crane in a 1897 letter

"I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet"--Ralph Ellison in a 1961 interview

In his 1894 New York Press article "When Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers," Crane offers a harsh assessment of urban spectators and their savage curiosity to see a suffering man. Crane explains in the piece how a man walking along an East-side street with a young boy, suddenly collapses and sinks to the ground. Instantly a crowd gathers, not so much to offer help, but to get a good look at the man who appears to be having a seizure of some sort. Both the boy and the man speak Italian and the boy especially seems taken aback and threatened by the crowd who huddle around the contorted human being. Over this body of an immigrant (an exotic Italian) Crane attempts to capture the process by which the ethnic alien becomes, in the eyes of this American crowd, a spectacle of fascination as well as horror. He describes the mob:
As for the men near the body, they hung back, appearing as if they expected it to spring erect and clutch at them. Their eyes however were held in a spell of fascination. They seemed scarcely to breathe. They were contemplating a depth into which a human being had sunk and the marvel of this mystery of life or death held them chained. Occasionally from the rear, a man came thrusting his way impetuously, satisfied that there was a horror to be seen and apparently insane to get a view of it. (346-47).

Throughout the scene, Crane is careful to identify the visceral reactions of the crowd as they gaze upon the twisted body of the Italian man: first, they approach the body with trepidation, their breaths held; at the same time, their eyes are spellbound and fascinated by the man's body because they fear (wish?) him to be in a state between life and death; and finally, Crane pinpoints the real horror of the moment when he concludes his description with the word "it"; for the crowd seems to have successfully completed its process—they have made the immigrant man an "it," a "thing" of horror in fact. Later in the piece Crane says that "There were men who nearly created a battle in the madness of their desire to see the thing" (347). In the immigrant man's movement from human being to "thing" Crane seems to be making striking parallels between the crowd's desire to objectify the man as grotesque, and yet at the same time worry over his fate. The ambivalent reaction of the crowd may, as Leonard Cassuto points out in his study The Inhuman Race, be due to the fact that human objectification never fully succeeds; that is, a person never actually becomes a thing. Instead, the attempt to objectify a person places him into an ontological netherworld, part human and part thing. . . . It might be more precise to call this 'attempted objectification,' a process in which a person is made to enter into the liminal space between human and thing, a grotesque space where the person's essential humanness is questioned but not
altogether denied (16).

In fact, the real horror of the scene may relate to the liminality of the new immigrant himself. In this crowd of "Americans," he speaks no English, seems to have no kin (besides the equally alienated young boy), and is in need of dire help. Vulnerable, alone, and othered, he becomes a source of anxiety because no one knows where he belongs. Thus his anonymity combined with his ethnicity make him an available spectacle for the mob who, in the words of Cassuto, question the immigrant man's "essential humaness." Crane emphasizes the theatrical aspect of the pervading scene when an ambulance takes the man away, and he says of the crowd:

Their eyes expressed discontent at this curtain which had been rung down in the midst of the drama. And this impenetrable fabric suddenly intervening between a suffering creature and their curiosity, seemed to appear to them as an injustice (349).

They feel indignant, in other words, that the show is over, that their source of entertainment has disappeared.

Five years later, in his 1899 novel The Monster, Crane will examine in greater detail the same crowd mentality and its method of racial objectification and horror making—but this time the process will take place over the body of an African American man. When Henry Johnson's face is burned off in a fire while he was successfully rescuing the son of the town's doctor, he inadvertently becomes a source of great terror for the small town of Whilomville. Although he isn't an anonymous figure like the Italian man (Johnson, a black stable hand, is well-known in the town as a kind of dandy), he nonetheless undergoes the same process of becoming a "thing." Even though Henry's disfigured face causes a great
deal of distress in the community, the real horror for Whilomville is that Henry Johnson *lives* and, whether the town approves of it or not, he will become absorbed into its fabric. Because the accident leaves him "faceless" it also in some ways leaves him raceless. He is no longer racially identifiable and, like the immigrant man, he occupies a liminal space. Essentially his presence, vulnerable though it may seem, acts as a sort of threat. He has disturbed the social order of Whilomville which up to now has been a site of clearly designated racial boundaries. No one save Doctor Trescott, the father of the rescued boy, will have anything to do with Henry. When he roams the black section of town, he's called a "devil"; in the white section of town he's an aberration, a "monster," and a "thing." Even after the Trescotts take him in, Henry Johnson becomes a play toy for little Jimmie Trescott who creates his own freak show for his friends by making use out of the disfigured black man. "Jimmie," the narrator explains, "seemed to reap all the joys of the owner and exhibitor of one of the world's marvels, while his audience remained at a distance--awed and entranced, fearful and envious" (234-35). In between a thing and a human, Henry Johnson becomes another available spectacle, a means of entertainment (created out of the ingredients of fascination and horror) for Jimmie Trescott and his audience.

The connection between the Italian man and Henry Johnson is startling; for each of these narratives demonstrates not only Crane's fascination with amusements and spectacles and the interest they hold for crowds, but how this interest intersects with racial and ethnic objectification. Whether he's describing the Easterner's reaction to the
fight between the drunken Swede and son of the hotel owner in “The Blue Hotel,” tourists on a beach surveying the distressed boat filled with men in “The Open Boat,” the residents of Rum Alley passively watching Jimmie Johnson pound upon the bloody face of another child in Maggie, or the working class crowd in the vaudeville theater observing an older woman sing a negro melody with her chorus imitating “a plantation darkey under the influence,” Crane is intrigued by one seemingly innate human impulse: how people make “sport” or amusement out of watching other individuals’ distress or pain. Given the cultural and racial climate of the early twentieth century, it is not so surprising that many of Crane’s characters who become objectified for entertainment sake are ethnic immigrants or African Americans. As Bill Brown points out, there is a long history in such amusement making. The Monster, he argues, may have

something to do, perhaps, with the literary monsters of the era (such as Dracula, Hyde, and Dr. Moreau’s hybridities), but far more to do with the African-American prodigies and curiosities that were a staple of the American amusement industry, displayed in circuses, at amusement parks and coastal resorts, and foremost in the dime museums that lined both sides of New York’s Bowery, where Crane slummed in his early days as a writer, gathering material for his Bowery sketches and novels (203-204).

By examining the stories Crane offers about these “new Americans” in his two novellas, Maggie: A Girl of the Streets and The Monster, I will attempt, in this first chapter, to draw a connection between racial/ethnic objectification and Crane’s interest in spectatorship and sites of amusements. I argue that behind the amusement making industry and the narratives Crane tells about the crowds it seduces and sometimes
manipulates are classic and ongoing American stories about the ways in which entertainment mongers profit from the racial and social hierarchy--those it makes freaks, minstrels, and dupes out of. As such, I contend that Crane’s harsh assessment of these sites of pleasure reveals his unconscious allegiance to his father’s Puritan bourgeois values as well as his ongoing anxiety to escape such ties by identifying with racial and ethnic outsiders—a psychological and creative process which make for troubling and problematic representations of race, ethnicity, and social class.

Spectacles of one sort or another abound in Crane’s work. Crowds of working-class immigrants gather in Maggie to watch bar fights; neighbors convene to witness Maggie Johnson’s disgrace and exile from the tenements; women look out from apartment windows and laborers on the deck of “a passive tugboat” (1) quietly view young boys beat one another bloody at Devil’s Row. For amusements that require a fee, crowds in Maggie take pleasure in watching an array of spectacles (chorus girls, jugglers, blackface comedians) on the vaudeville stage. When he begins to court Maggie, Pete takes her to all sorts of crowd pleasing amusements: the dime museum, Coney Island, and seedy beer gardens. Whether in large public spaces or smaller arenas, the atmosphere in Maggie is controlled by an overwhelming force of voyeurism. Someone is always watching another’s pain, contempt, violence, or seduction of a third party. The residents of the tenement house where Maggie lives hover for any piece of gossip they may gather on the girl’s conduct, they take sport in predicting her defilement, and they mock and anger Jimmie about his sister’s loose morals. The way in which they prey upon Maggie’s
vulnerability subtly foreshadows the behavior of the men at the end of the novel who look over Maggie, now a prostitute, as expendable merchandise. In one instance, she functions as a spectacle of ridicule in the other as a spectacle of lust. But in either case, Maggie possesses no agency; the most sympathetic character in the novel, Maggie's best qualities—her loyalty, trust, and hopefulness—are used against her.

The two characters in the novel who, by their own design, take advantage of crowd attention—Maggie's mother and Pete—end up in far better places than Maggie. In Maggie's mind Pete seems to step off the stage of the Bowery theater; his boasting, his talent for breaking up bar fights, and his manner of dress and style make him appear like a knight and warrior to a young girl of the tenements. At the beginning of his "courtship," Pete thrives on both her and Jimmie's attention, telling stories of his prowess and his career as a bartender. In the Johnson home of grimy walls and broken furniture, Pete, in Maggie's eyes, looks aristocratic, dignified like a "supreme warrior" (19). Even in the midst of his brutal talk about fights at the bar, Maggie thinks him a knight, someone to rescue her from her horrible life. Through the presence of Pete, Maggie finally recognizes the wretchedness of her world:

Turning, Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home. A clock, in a splintered and battered oblong box of varnished wood, she suddenly regarded as an abomination. She noted that it ticked raspingly. The almost vanished flowers in the carpet-pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous. (20)

Embarrassed by her home, her drunkard mother, and the dreary work at the cuff factory, Maggie grasps instinctively to Pete and his world

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"of many hues and many melodies" (21). In fact, Pete takes so much pride in how he appears that when Maggie turns to him for help after she is thrown out of her home because he has "ruined" her, he is embarrassed by her presence and worries about his reputation. Crane tells us that Pete stood behind his bar, "immaculate in white jacket and apron" with "his hair plastered over his brow with infinite correctness" (49). An image of virtue and integrity, Pete panics when Maggie enters: "His countenance reddened with the anger of a man whose respectability is being threatened" (50). It seems that Pete really is starting to belief himself a hero of those Bowery melodramas he and Maggie attend. He starts to see his bartender job as the beginning of his rise from rags to riches and he knows that this is only possible if he embraces a bourgeois morality which would discourage any connection to a tenement house girl whose reputation is soiled. As such, the very sight of Maggie must be done away with.

Maggie's mother, another figure who works crowds for her own benefit, exiles Maggie for the same false allegiance to bourgeois values. Mrs. Johnson's drunken antics—her breaking of furniture, violent fights with both her husband and her son Jimmie, as well as her frequent visits to jail—are not lost on her neighbors who look upon her woes with curious eyes. According to the narrator's description, Mary Johnson's very appearance makes her seem a freakish spectacle. As she collapses in a drunken stupor following a fight with her husband, Crane tells us that:

Her yellow brows shaded eye-lids that had grown blue. Her tangled hair tossed in waves over her forehead. Her mouth was set in the same lines of vindictive hatred that it had, perhaps, borne during the fight. Her bare, red arms were thrown out above her head in positions of exhaustion,
something, mayhap, like those of a sated villain. (12)

No wonder that when Jimmie looks over this site of horror (called his mother), he is fearful “lest she should open her eyes, and the dread within him was so strong, that he could not forbear to stare, but hung as if fascinated over the woman’s grim face” (12). Like the reaction of the tenement neighbors, Jimmie can’t seem to look away from his mother’s grotesque body. He is fearful, yet spell-bound. Once Maggie becomes morally tainted, Mrs. Johnson seems to gain even more attention; for suddenly she is transformed by the tenement spectators from an object of contempt and horror to one of pity. During Maggie’s scene of humiliation, Crane tells us, “Maggie’s mother paced to and fro, addressing the doorfull of eyes, expounding like a glib showman at a museum” (48). As she moves from being an object to an agent of spectacle, Maggie’s mother can recreate her identity: she becomes the wounded mother of a misguided child. And once Maggie is dead and the neighbors gather to mourn, Maggie’s mother, over the body of her daughter, becomes a martyr to the very moral system that she had earlier despised. Like Pete, Mary Johnson clings to the false claims of respectability and uses Maggie’s tainted body as a means to displace all the ills and anxieties of her own poverty and despair. And that all these transformations and performances take place in front of a crowd of spectators only adds to the passivity that surrounds the entire novel. Crane describes the residents of the tenement houses as listless and indifferent. Despite scenes of great violence in streets or in homes, no one comes to anyone else’s aid. Even when Jimmie enlists the help of his friend in order to pounce upon Pete for the
wrong inflicted on Maggie, Jimmie feels no obligation to aid his ally when
the police capture him. Jimmie justifies his behavior by saying—what
becomes the novel’s anthem to passivity—“ah, what deh hell?”

If acts of voyeurism/spectatorship create an overwhelming need on
the part of certain characters to keep up appearances in Maggie, the
situation is even more accentuated in Crane’s 1899 novella The Monster.
Set in Whilomville, an upstate New York town which resembles the place
of Crane’s own up-bringing, The Monster contains none of the sites of
glitter and amusement that Maggie does. Nonetheless, crowds do gather
in front of the post-office, on street corners, in parks, and at the local barber
shop to catch all sorts of events. But of all the spectacles in town, it is the
appearance of Henry Johnson who causes the most notice. Crane describes
him as “a very handsome negro... known to be a light, a weight, and an
eminence in the suburb of the town” (192). Johnson, who becomes an
object to gaze upon, speaks with an air of importance (193) and “dressed
himself with much care” (194). When he walks down main street in his
lavender trousers and his straw hat with its bright silk band, Henry simply
appears “a quiet, well-bred gentleman of position, wealth, and other
necessary achievements out for an evening stroll, and he had never
washed a wagon in his life” (194). The fact is that Henry does wash
wagons for the town’s doctor, Dr. Trescott; but it is the way Henry carries
himself, in this novel where maintaining appearances and “keeping up
faces” catalyzes the main conflicts and actions, that largely determines his
importance. In a town composed of diverse groups—German barbers, Irish
farmers, and African American factory workers—Henry Johnson is a site to
see: an aspiring middle-class black man. The young men gathered outside
the town theater call to him, "Hello Henry! Going to walk for a cake to­
night?" And after he passes, they say among themselves: "Ain't he
smooth? ""Why, you've got that cake right in your pocket, Henry!"
"Throw your chest out a little more" (195). As Henry moves beyond the
group, the narrator tells us that he "was not ruffled in any way by these
quiet admonitions and compliments" (195). Although Crane does not
identify the race of these young men, it seems likely (given their attitude
toward Henry) that they are not themselves black. That Crane terms their
taunting of Henry "admonitions" and "compliments" seems to pinpoint
what many critics have identified as an ambivalent response on the part of
white people to a black presence, a reaction that Toni Morrison
characterizes as "disdain and envy" (47) and Eric Lott describes as "the
dialectical flickering of racial insult and racial envy" (18). As Johnson
walks further, he meets with a similar response from the men at
Reifsynder's barber shop. When one of the customers who emerges from
the barber shop gets a look at Henry walking down the street, he bolts back
into the shop. "'Wow!' he cried to the parliament; 'you ought to see the
coon that's coming!'" (195). The racist announcement turns the heads of

3 Crane may be referring here to the dance fad called the Cakewalk.
According to Nathan Huggins, the dance, which was the finale of Sam T.
Jack's Creole Show (1899) became something of a craze during the decade
of the 1890s. "All Negro shows featured the dance; towns and cities
throughout the country had Cakewalk contests. . . .The traditional
explanation of the origins of the dance tell of slaves prancing before the
'big house' on Christmas or similar holidays to win the prize—a cake.
There is doubtless some truth to this--such dances probably did occur on
large plantations—but the dance of the 1890s is related only in name and
idea" (273).
the other customers and even the German barber can't help but notice Henry. "'Ain't he a taisy?' said Reifsynder, marveling" (196). In fact, Reifsynder is so taken in by the figure of Henry that he insists it wasn't Johnson who walked past, but a Pullman-car porter. As the men debate the identity of the well-dressed black man, Henry, "with a face beaming with happiness turned away from the scene of his victories" (196).

No doubt Crane is employing elements of racial stereotype in his characterization of Henry, who appears as a classic "dandy" character. As Bill Brown notes, "The Monster produces in the figure of Henry Johnson. . . a stock character from 'negro minstrelsy'. . . This stock character is the urbanized and effeminized black dandy traditionally named 'Zip Coon.'" (214). Yet Johnson seems to feel content and somewhat superior with his position in the town, despite the fact that many of the white town folk wish to make him a spectacle of amusement. Just what makes the crowd attempt such a process may reveal another layer of white anxiety about the economic and social rise of blacks in the culture. As Eric Lott notes, in minstrelsy's early days, the urban black dandy was "an ideological fiction" through which racial and class conflicts were lived:

Before the depression of the 1840s helped mute and redirect class resentment, white male workers targeted both employers and black workers, reformers (often wealthy or evangelical whites) and their 'fashionable' black associates—the historical referents of minstrelsy's oft-remarked capacity to ridicule upward in class as well as downward in racial directions. (111-112).

In the case of The Monster, the town's working class whites express, through their ridicule of Henry, an anxiety that reflects this dual relationship between class and racial structures. Their laughter here may
function as a harmless means to displace the hostility Henry's class aspirations stir for many white folks in Whilomville who would like to maintain the racial and social status quo. At the same time, like the white audience who attended minstrel shows and the white performers who donned blackface, the residents of Whilomville can't seem to repress their interest in Henry. Eric Lott explains: "Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed--minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation" (6). In this minstrel-like environment that Crane creates, it is interesting to note that Henry's physical appearance is noticed by other men. "Ain't he a taisy?" (196) says the German barber of Henry, a line which may reveal a fascination and fear of black male sexuality.4

As we shall see later, Dr. Trescott will likewise begin to occupy one of these minstrelsy roles--the white patron--when he protects and cares for Henry. Their alliance will ultimately lead to one of the novel's main tensions: the community's awareness that neither Trescott nor Johnson know their place in the town's social order. Trescott not only refuses to let his black stable worker die, but he brings Henry into the very home where Mrs. Trescott entertains Whilomville's elite ladies. Once Trescott invites Henry inside his dwelling, he has violated the social and racial codes of the town and will face the consequences of banishment.

By contrast, at the beginning of the novel, Henry's appearance and attire merely function as an unconscious threat. If it seems like he's acting

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4 For further discussion of minstrel performers and minstrel audiences see Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* pages 24-29 and 49-55.
too “white” or he’s pretending to be what he’s not, the townsfolk seem much more forgiving because they endow him with this comic persona.

In minstrel plays, the black dandy begins to consider himself better than the rest of his race and thus becomes an object of ridicule. Crane exemplifies this notion when he describes how at the same time many of the white residents mock Henry, some of the black residents of Whilomville feel somewhat awkward around him. When Pete Washington, Henry’s friend, encounters the well-dressed Henry out on the streets of Whilomville, the narrator explains, that the meeting between the two men is likely to be affected by Henry’s attire:

In the morning, when in his working clothes, he had met a friend—“Hello, Pete!” “Hello, Henry!” Now, in his effulgence, he encountered this same friend. His bow was not at all haughty. If it expressed anything, it expressed consummate generosity—“Good-evenin’, Misteh Washington.” Pete, who was very dirty, being at work in a potato-patch, responded in a mixture of abasement and appreciation—“Good evenin’, Misteh Johnsing.” (194)

Henry’s manner stirs a mixture of reactions within Pete who feels at once degraded and grateful. No longer on an equal footing with Pete, Henry’s appearance and aspirations disturb the earlier scene of racial solidarity between the two men. Pete doesn’t know whether to feel honored by Henry’s presence or ashamed by his own sense of inadequacy, a confusion that may demonstrate the parasitic relationship between crumbling

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5 See Eric Lott’s Love and Theft pages 131-135 for a discussion of the black dandy figure and how animosity toward him was fueled by both racial and class hatred. See Nathan Huggins’ Harlem Renaissance pages 263-274 for an analysis of how the black dandy stereotype and what he calls “American Negro humor” relied upon travesty—the disparity between the act and his costume.
solidarity and internalized racism. But whether Henry functions as an object of amusement for the white men of the town or an object of embarrassment for some of the black men, at this point in the narrative Henry merely exists as unconscious threat to the residents of Whilomville. Once the Trescott home catches on fire—one of the larger sites of spectacles within the novel—and Henry's "handsome" and carefully kept up face becomes disfigured in the blaze, the menace he poses to the town's social fiber becomes painfully obvious.

In a novel where the act of looking and maintaining appearances dominates most of the action, Henry's disfigurement—his literal loss of face—reeks not only of gothic irony, but of racial confusion. After the tragedy of the fire, the residents of Whilomville take care of the afflicted family, vigilantly waiting to hear of the conditions of Dr. Trescott, Jimmie Trescott, and Henry Johnson. Although the first two seem likely to live, all of the town is convinced that Henry Johnson "could not live. His body was frightfully seared, but more than that, he now had no face. His face had simply been burned away" (211). The residents are so committed to this version of events, that even the morning paper announces the death of Johnson: "There was also an editorial built from all the best words in the vocabulary of the staff. The town halted in its accustomed road of thought, and turned a reverent attention to the memory of this hostler" (211). Eulogized for his generosity and mourned over, "the name of Henry Johnson became suddenly the title of a saint to the little boys" who compose pejorative couplet: "Nigger, nigger, never die. Black face and shiny eye." (211) Despite their effort to somehow contain Henry's life in
the past, via their written and spoken methods of eulogizing, the residents of Whilomville can not prevent what will become an ensuing social horror: Henry Johnson's living presence. And it is his movement from a spectacle of amusement and object of pity to spectacle of horror and fear that disturbs the social and racial harmony of the town.

Once the accident occurs and Johnson's status changes, Crane's novel reads like an American small town version of *Frankenstein*. Dr. Trescott, who feels an obligation to Henry because of his heroic rescue of Jimmie, keeps vigil at Johnson's bedside and nurses him back to health. Despite his good intentions, however, the doctor's efforts are criticized and reproached. When Trescott refuses to be persuaded by the town's esteemed judge to let Henry die, the judge places all responsibility of wrong-doing on Trescott's shoulders, saying to the doctor in a line that could have come from Mary Shelley, "He will be your creation, you understand. He is purely your creation. Nature has very evidently given him up. He is dead. You are restoring him to life. You are making him, and he will be a monster, and with no mind" (213). Of course, what the judge overlooks is that Dr. Trescott merely nurses Henry back to health, he doesn't restore him with new life. Henry survived the fire on his own. Nonetheless it is convenient for the townsfolk to place responsibility upon Trescott for the horror of Henry's existence and more importantly, to de-humanize Henry, classifying him as a "Thing," a "monster." By making Henry into a grotesque—a process that, according to Leonard Cassuto, "occurs when an image cannot be easily classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one" (6)—the
townspeople unveil their own anxieties around race and racial categories. No one, in fact, knows what to call Henry; he is no longer a comic figure whose pretentiousness certain whites can ridicule or whose aspirations certain blacks can admire. And he is no longer Dr. Trescott’s loyal black stable man. His facelessness makes him racially and socially unidentifiable. Certainly Crane himself participates in this process by turning Henry into a sort of monster figure who has a laugh that sounds like a rattle of pebbles, haunts children’s birthday parties, and sends his former fiancee shuddering and wailing down the street at first sight of him. Semantically, Henry is transformed into an “it,” “a dreadful thing,” and a “monster.”

Ultimately, the “monstering” of Henry, however, turns back upon the town itself. When Henry’s haunting is blamed for all sorts of havoc—the broken leg of an old woman, the fits of young children, and the disturbance of social events—a riot ensues. In a particularly brutal scene, a crowd begins to chase Henry, firing rocks at him. Although he suffers no injury from the riot, which bears an eerie resemblance to a lynching, the police official explains to Dr. Trescott that the crowd’s behavior was relatively harmless, especially considering the fact that there is nothing left within Henry to harm. As the official explains:

> Guess there isn’t much of him to hurt anymore, is there? Guess he’s been hurt up to the limit. No. They never touched him. Of course nobody really wanted to hit him, but you know how a crowd gets. (230)

The official’s account of the incident not only demonstrates the process of objectification and dehumanizing, but how this process is generated by collective brutality. In this way, the riot reveals more about the anxiety of
the white townspeople than of the black subject they wish to eradicate or, at the least, exile. For as Leonard Cassuto argues, "The process of racial objectification thus reverberates back to the white subjects, calling their humanity into question in a different way, and thereby making them grotesque also" (6). In this case, the way the white subjects of Whilomville treat Henry, who almost appears like a lynching victim in this scene, speaks for a type of callousness that we commonly call "inhuman" and "monstrous." In essence, then, the real "monster" of the story may not be the disfigured Henry Johnson at all, but the collective "monster" of Whilomville--those quiet-minded citizens who enact a sort of terror that no one in the town would be capable of individually. "You know how a crowd gets," says the town official--an explanation that Crane, it seems to me, is always taking up with fascination, especially in his stories about racial and ethnic outsiders.

In fact, by the latter part of the novel, Crane will examine the ways in which Whilomville's fascination and terror of Henry's monster status begins to translate into marketability for some of its residents. Alexander Williams, an old friend of Henry, is one of the first characters in the novel who sees the disfigured man as a means for profit. Dr. Trescott calls upon Alec and his wife to care for Henry, promising to pay the family five dollars a week for their labor. It's likely Williams agrees to this arrangement before he sees Henry. At sight of the man, Williams gasps and yells; Trescott, in condescending fashion, becomes infuriated by him and retorts, "You old black chump! You old black--shut up! Shut up! Do you hear?" (216). Trescott's reaction and Crane's depiction of Williams
tends to rely here on stereotypical notions of blacks as emotional and mindless creatures who need to be kept in line by good, rational whites. After Trescott’s scolding, the narrator tells us, that Williams “obeyed instantly,” a line which reaffirms the social and racial hierarchy of Whilomville. Even Trescott, the caring, gentle doctor recognizes the benefits of his position; he knows, perhaps unconsciously, that he can order Williams to do as he says because he has the money and power to do so. Despite his terror, Williams takes Henry home. His motivation, however, may not seem as compassionate as one might expect. By the next chapter Williams approaches Judge Hagentorpe, Trescott’s friend, to request a dollar raise to compensate for his care of Henry. Complaining that the sight of Henry frightens his children, makes him lose his appetite, and scares away his wife’s lady callers (an event which will foreshadow the novel’s end), Williams persuades the judge to give him six dollars a week. Throughout the scene, however, Crane continues to rely upon stereotypical depictions of blacks when he rather explicitly indicates that the judge’s reservations about Williams stem from the black man’s laziness and lack of scruples. Even though the arguments Williams presents for his compensation are perfectly valid, Crane conveys a suspicion about the sincerity of his motives. By the beginning of the next chapter we will see the validity of the suspicion. After he receives a raise in his salary and once out of the view of judge, Williams begins to congratulate himself. The narrator explains:

An elation had evidently penetrated to his vitals, and caused him to dilate as if he had been filled with gas. He snapped his fingers in the air, and whistled fragments of triumphant music. At times, in his progress towards his shanty, he
indulged in a shuffling movement that was really a dance.

(223)

As he does in his depiction of Henry Johnson, Crane seems to be drawing Williams’ character upon another figure from the minstrel tradition. “The theatrical darky was childlike,” writes Nathan Huggins, “. . . Lazy, he was slow of movement, or when he displayed quickness of wit it was generally in flight from work or ghosts. Nevertheless, he was unrestrained in enthusiasm for music--for athletic and rhythmical dance” (251). Williams’ joyful outburst after he is granted the raise in salary suggests that, as the judge suspected, he is lazy. And like the white creation of the black minstrel character, what compels Williams to undertake his “scheme,” is a combination of his aversion for work as well as ghosts--his fear of Henry, after all, is treated, by both Trescott and the judge, as pure superstition. In Williams’ character, then, Crane seems to bring together the very stereotypes of blacks which were employed by white performers who used blackface to entertainment white audiences.

Yet for all his reliance upon minstrel character types, Crane seems intent to turn the spotlight back upon the white audience who gain pleasure and comfort from such black type-casting. And so in The Monster the actions and dilemma of William only seem to underscore a more insidious form of profiteering and ostracism, this time within the white community of Whilomville. After Williams fails to take good care of Henry and Dr. Trescott has no choice but to bring the disfigured man home, the same pattern surfaces: Henry once again becomes an object of entertainment--in this case, for Trescott’s son, Jimmie--at the same time he becomes a vehicle for the family’s banishment from the white
community. Although Jimmie is at first afraid of “the monster who lived in the room over the carriage house,” his fear gradually “dwindled under the influence of a weird fascination” (234). Under the spell of fascination Jimmie, the son of an esteemed white man, attempts to undertake what Williams could never have dreamed of: exhibiting Henry as “one of the world’s marvels” (234) to entertain and frighten his little friends. The children thus begin to make a game of it—daring one another to touch the monster. When Dr. Trescott comes upon the scene, he is horrified. As Bill Brown explains:

The moral figure in the Monster, Dr. Trescott, alarmed by such proprietorship, quickly arrests “the joys of the owner and exhibitor.” His stern inquiry leaves his son explaining that “We was playin.’” “Playing at what?” the father asks. “Just playin’,” the son responds. As Tom Sawyer tortures Jim in the act of just playin’ in the adventure novel, here Jimmie Trescott tortures Henry in the act of just playin’ in postbellum American entertainments—the freak show, the dime museum—that helped to bring the thrills of adventure to the streets. (208).

Jimmie’s “innocent” act of play—the pride he takes in his ownership of Henry—evokes another image of American history as well: slave auctioning. Like the mob scene earlier that evoked images of lynching, Crane once again seems to be using Jimmie’s amusement-making to reveal that disturbing symbiosis between white fear and white fascination around a black presence.

By the novel’s end, then, Dr. Trescott fully realizes the horror of the “monster” that has now intruded upon his own home—not Henry, of course, but the social monster of Whilomville, where everyone, including his good friends, have turned against him and not even his son can escape
the insidious monster. No longer welcomed as a physician, Trescott is blamed for young Sadie Winter’s psychological terror of Henry and he is ostracized by the town elite who are furious with him because he refuses their financial help to send Henry to a "place somewhere off up the valley" (245). By the novel’s last scene, Trescott is left comforting his wife who, like Williams’ spouse, can no longer attract lady callers for tea parties. As Mrs. Trescott sits weeping over fifteen empty tea cups--placed out for her guests--Crane leaves us, in this tale about minstrels and monsters, horror and amusement, with an image of domestic and social crisis.

It is no coincidence that Crane’s novellas about spectacles and amusements take place amid the historical backdrop of the 1890s—a time, incidentally, when the nation itself is undergoing an identity crisis and when American entertainment is being packaged for working class people of various racial and ethnic origins across the country. Both The Monster and Maggie rely upon the reader’s familiarity with popular amusements like minstrel shows and Bowery melodramas. Although he uses different settings—the small town of Whilomville and the crowded Lower Eastside of New York city—Crane illustrates the boom of the entertainment industry and its efforts to attract these new American wage earners. In this final section of the chapter, I will locate Crane’s interest in amusements and spectacles within a larger historical context, analyze his critique of such forms of entertainment and their manipulation of working class audiences, and demonstrate that Crane’s reproach of these sites of pleasure reveals his unconscious leanings toward his father’s Methodist values as
well as his ongoing anxiety to escape such ties by identifying with racial
and ethnic outsiders.

Maggie attends the Bowery theater with a crowd composed of Irish,
Italian, and Chinese laborers. "The nationalities of the Bowery," Crane
writes in Maggie, "beamed upon the stage from all directions" (22). That
sites of Bowery amusement should be the focus of Crane's work during
this period hardly seem accidental considering the fact that "the men who
founded vaudeville in America sought to make money satisfying the
needs of the working class for inexpensive and popular entertainment"
(Stein xi). Although vaudeville was often looked upon as a inferior
version of uptown theater--a viewpoint Crane seems to hold in Maggie: A
Girl of the Streets--vaudeville flourished nearly thirty years, from the late
1890s to the late 1920s. In 1911 alone, an estimated 700,000 persons
attended some forty 'low price' theaters each week in New York city.
These theater-goings comprised 16% of the total population and
contributed over $315,000 to the vaudeville industry (McLean 46). While
there were different versions of vaudeville playing throughout the city,
depending upon what part of town one was from, some historians make a
distinction between vaudeville and the variety show. Variety, claims
Charles Stein, operated in ordinary beer halls and appealed to the working
class; vaudeville took place in plush theaters where no liquor was served
and targeted middle and upper classes of American society (3). The shows
often contained eight acts which could include an opening animal act, a
comic or comedy skit, a juggler, a magician, one or two acrobats, a
pantomimist, a dancing couple, a singer, and a one-act play (Stein xiii).
Within the fiction of this period, however, most authors do not seem to differentiate between vaudeville and variety, many of them describing such entertainment under the generic term vaudeville.

Minstrel shows, which became integrated in vaudeville productions, began as early as the 1830s and were also primarily targeted for working class audiences. As Eric Lott explains:

Working people hit hard by economic disaster in the 1840s were to turn even more urgently to the new minstrel shows. Because the economic slump came amid the enormous shocks that northeaster capitalist consolidation was dealing to the apprentices system of labor, it fostered a profound sense of unease of among the popular classes. Their response was a much muted sense of class resistance, an attempt to shore up ‘white’ class identities by targeting new enemies such as immigrants, blacks, and tipplers. (137)

It’s obvious in Maggie where the majority of tenement residents are Irish immigrants that ethnic and racial tensions frequently surface. At one point in the novella Jimmie is arrested for assaulting a Chinese man and Pete frequently gets in scrapes with Italian immigrants. By the 1890s entertainment mongers profited from these ethnic and racial tensions by incorporating ethnic stereotypes and blackface techniques into their shows. As Bill Brown argues:

The minstrel show, however derisive, carnivalized race to provide its working-class white audience with the chance to invest in black male sexuality, and to achieve a class bond that transcended the barrier of race—these ‘interracial’ dynamics all facilitated by the absence of the actual black man. And in the postbellum period, as minstrel shows included the blackface performance of ethnic stereotypes (Irish, German, Chinese), one form of ethnicity channeled the content of another. In contrast, then, the ‘African’ freak—in which form and content converge to embody uncivilized, bestial humanity—appears as a scapegoat on which to project
all otherness, and against which to fantasize white interethnic 'American' solidarity. . . It enabled an immigrant population not just to constitute itself as American by identifying against the nation's internalized, perpetual other, but also to indulge in the illusions of power perpetuated by the amusement/knowledge system. (216)

At its worst, this form of entertainment capitalized upon a racism that enabled poor, newly arrived immigrants to project their outsider status upon, as Brown aptly puts it, "the perpetual other" of American culture: blacks. The entertainment industry invested in and profited from the class and racial conflicts. With minstrel shows in particular, Lott explains,

Theatrical displays of 'blackness' seemingly guaranteed the atmosphere of license so central to working-class entertainment in this period. And blackface provided a convenient mask through which to voice class resentments of all kinds—resentments directed as readily toward black people as toward upper-class enemies (68).

At the height of their popularity, minstrel shows and vaudeville theater certainly stirred much controversy among social reformers, journalists, and novelists—many of whom were intent upon improving living conditions for the working class—but no one criticized the shows' perpetuation of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Instead, they worried about the virtue of these new Americans who, many argued, were being manipulated and abused by a greedy and heartless industry. Jane Addams thought such forms of entertainment constituted another means to exploit the already exploited working class. "We see thousands of girls walking up and down the streets on a pleasant evening with no chance to catch a sight of pleasure even through a lighted window, save as these lurid places provide it," she writes in 1909.
Apparently the modern city sees in these girls only two possibilities, both of them commercial: first, a chance to utilize by day their new and tender labor power in its factories and shops, and then another chance in the evening to extract from them their petty wages by pandering to their love of pleasure (7-8).

Addams' argument that this was another way for wealthy business owners to collect more money from the working poor doesn't seem too far off the mark. According to Gerd Hurm, many New York theaters were controlled by a few strong businessmen by the 1890s. "The Lower East side was exploited at work, at home, and in amusement halls. The working class was flooded with middle-class aspirations which could not be fulfilled under these conditions" (114). In addition to the exploitation argument, some saw vaudeville entertainment as debase, as a lower and soiled form of art. Addams certainly sees this as the case when she writes,

We are informed by high authority that there is nothing in the environment to which youth so keenly responds as to music, and yet the streets, vaudeville shows, the five-cent theaters are full of the most blatant and vulgar songs. The trivial and obscene words, the meaningless and flippant airs run through the heads of hundreds of young people for hours at a time while they are engaged in monotonous factory work (18-19).

This idea, though, that vaudeville was simply an inferior version of uptown theater sold to the working class as a means of exploitation was not shared by everyone in the period. Leading novelist and editor William Dean Howells, for example, expressed none of the skepticism that Addams voiced or that Crane seems to represent in his novels. In a 1903 article in Harpers, Howells declares, "I am an inveterate vaudeville-goer, for the simple reason that I find better acting in the vaudeville, and better drama,
on the whole, than you ever get, or you generally get, on your legitimate
stage” (qtd. in Stein 70). While Howells may not have attended the same
version of the vaudeville show that Maggie experienced, his reaction does
not seem to be verified by Crane’s representation.

As a young New York reporter Crane observed and indulged in
these sites of amusements, but nowhere in his fiction is such activity
represented as harmless or fun. In fact, at least two of his characters who
become intoxicated by such sites and past times meet with tragic ends. The
Swede’s drinking and gambling in “The Blue Hotel” certainly contributes
to making him into a boastful fool who self-fulfills his fear of being
murdered in the West. And Maggie Johnson’s fascination and faith in
vaudeville melodrama allows her to construct an unattainable future
with Pete by using the principles she sees on stage, a process which
ultimately leaves her socially vulnerable and contributes to her demise as
a prostitute. Consider the way Crane describes vaudeville’s seduction of
Maggie. For the girl from the cold, gray world of the tenement houses, the
theater seems alighted by waves upon waves of color and brilliance. The
scene unfolds and an orchestra begins to play popular waltzes, a battalion
of waiters carries trays of beer, and a chorus of yellow-silk-haired women
and bald headed men begin to sing. Crane describes how the seductive
atmosphere affects Maggie:

The orchestra plunged into dance music and the laces of the
dancer fluttered and flew in the glare of gas jets. She
divulged the fact that she was attired in some half dozen
skirts. It was patent that any one of them would have proved
adequate for the purpose for which skirts are intended. And
occasional man bent forward, intent upon the pink stockings.
Maggie wondered at the splendor of the costumes and lost

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herself in calculations of the cost of the silks and laces. (23) Maggie isn't overwhelmed by the romance of vaudeville, but in the glittering expense of it all. It is the bourgeois semblance of wealth and glamour that strikes Maggie the most, hers a typical reaction among the vast crowd, that Crane tells us, is "composed of people who showed that all day they strove with their hands" (22). In this audience of working class laborers, Crane doesn't allow Maggie to fall as violently for the glitter, interweaving the romantic descriptions of the show, as he does, with the underlying bawdiness of the scene: that this is a place where men do more than gaze upon the pink stockings of showgirls. Crane comments ironically on the cheap imitation of entertainment thrust upon the working class crowd:

The dancer's smile of stereotyped enthusiasm was turned for ten minutes upon the faces of her audience. In the finale she fell into some of those grotesque attitudes which were at the time popular among the dancers in the theaters up-town, giving to the Bowery public the phantasies of the aristocratic theatergoing public at reduced rates. (23)

The fakery of the atmosphere, designed to lure working class crowds into the illusion that they too could achieve the bourgeois life-style can be read as Crane's major criticism of popular entertainment: that it blinds and misleads the lower class into believing that they can rise from their position in society.

Watching the Bowery melodramas, Maggie's eyes are transfixed on the stage where "the brain-clutching heroine was rescued from the palatial home of her guardian, who is cruelly after her bonds, by the hero with beautiful sentiments" (27). In other productions Maggie attends, heroes
rise from poverty in the first act to wealth and triumph in the final one.
And throughout all these stories, with their promises of romance and riches, with their promotion of bourgeois ethics and ideals, the young girl from the tenements is mesmerized: "Maggie lost herself in sympathy with the wanderers swooning in snow storms beneath happy-hued church windows. And a choir within singing 'Joy to the World.' To Maggie and the rest of the audience this was transcendental realism" (27). Indeed, this is the place of transcendence for working people like Maggie, the only place in the city where they can witness, an illusion though it may be, some image of the pastoral ideal: snow storms and country churches. But Crane will not allow the magic of the scene to sweep Maggie or his readers completely. Indeed, at the end of these nights of melodrama, Maggie is haunted by the one simple question: Is this bourgeois and glamorous city life possible or morally fulfilling for a young working class girl? The narrator's final comment at the end of chapter eight seems to suggest otherwise:

Maggie always departed from raised spirits from the showing places of the melodrama. She rejoiced at the way in which the poor and virtuous eventually surmounted the wealthy and wicked. The theater made her think. She wondered if the culture and refinement she [the character in the melodrama] had could be acquired by a girl who lived in a tenement house and worked in a shirt factory. (28)

Ironically, the notion that the virtuous will become wealthy or that young women from the slums will be rescued by heroes like Pete does not at all hold true for Maggie. Convinced that Pete will somehow aid her in her rise out of the tenements, Maggie offers Pete what he desires most—her body—only to discover that she has been 'ruined' by a man who carries no
obligations to her, and abandoned by a family that tragically wants to maintain the upstanding middle class morality which it never had to begin with. "As a Bowery woman, she is victimized both by her male surroundings and the false promises of middle-class culture" (Hurm 118). It is a biting sarcasm, indeed, that the girl who can blossom out of the ugly and brutal conditions of slum living, the one who remains essentially human when those around her turn to beasts, is not done in by the reality of her horrible life but by the illusion of bourgeois morality. Convinced that she is only upholding the standards of moral decency, Maggie's mother, acting for the first time out of an ethical imperative (confused as it is), kicks the girl out of her home and inevitably forces her into life as a prostitute, one of the few occupations offered to a woman adrift, sent out on her own to negotiate the system of supply and demand. Writes Donald Pizer,

Maggie is thus destroyed not so much by the physical reality of slum life as by a middle class morality imposed on the slums by the missions and the melodrama, a morality which allows its users both to judge and to divorce themselves from responsibility from those they judge (191).

Much of Crane's representation of city amusements and spectacles, then, points to an overwhelming suspicion of the "imported" entertainment fed to the working class laborer by the upper-class profiteer. Not content with controlling the working man or woman exclusively in the factory, those who hold the purse strings in the day also hold them at night; for these factory owners are the same overseers of the entertainment industry as well. Crane's novel suggests an almost Marxist suspicion of vaudeville theaters, minstrels shows, and Bowery melodrama which purvey moral
attitudes for its working class audience that "have no relation to life but which rather satisfy emotional needs or social appearance" (Pizer 190).

Such a harsh assessment might seem surprising coming from a young man like Stephen Crane who was no stranger to scandal or acts of indulgence. Biographers over the years have documented Crane’s notoriety: his court defense of Dora Clark, a well known prostitute; his frequent visits to houses of prostitution; his common law marriage with Amy Leslie.6 As Keith Gandal explains:

Son of a minister who preached against cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, theatre, baseball, and profanity, Crane tried all of these things. He also tried the slums, another morally suspect phenomena in the late nineteenth century--and he was criticized for doing so. Crane settles in lower New York out of curiosity to be sure, but also out of a desire to escape the stifling confines of a middle-class society; he is not only a resident slummer, but a social exile. (127)

Clearly this social exile finds in the slums, a chance to imagine and live the sort of life he couldn’t possibly experience as a preacher’s son. “If most writers tend to write about their experience, however, disguised, Crane did the reverse,” Christopher Benfey argues, “he tried to live what he had already written” (5). Near completion of Maggie, Crane moves into the Art Students’ League Building on 23rd Street, at the heart of the Bohemian subculture of New York city and directly in the middle of the slums. Here he comes in contact with all sorts of people: Irish, Italians, Russians, Chinese, Mexicans, Jews, and African Americans. They find

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their way in many of his sketches and reports as well.\(^7\) He experienced first-hand the kinds of racial, ethnic, and economic tension brewing throughout the city. In one of his New York sketches, "The Duel That Was Not Fought" (1894), Crane details, in a somewhat comic tone, the racial tensions between an Irish man and a Cuban man at bar in the lower east side. Although Crane depicts both men’s threats as empty bravado, it’s clear that he views the Cuban man in a much more stereotypical vein. He describes his face as being radiant with "a savage joy" (357) and his expression as "animal-like" (357). As he does in *Maggie*, Crane doesn’t appear to either condone or condemn the potential for violence here; such racial tensions become absorbed in the very atmosphere of the city streets.

Beyond the artistic and journalistic interest he took in these newly arrived Americans, Crane also seems to engage in an imaginative strategy—which we will see Wallace Stevens likewise attempt to do—when he begins to see himself as one of the socially and economically disenfranchised. One of his early biographers, R. W. Stallman, describes an incident which may reveal Crane’s effort to metaphorically "become"—to use Toni Morrison’s words—a racial/ethnic outsider. When he was living on East 23rd Street Crane, according to Stallman, nicknamed himself and his artist friends "Indians" because—like Uncas (a Native American tribe near Crane’s native Sullivan County)—they wore ragged

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\(^7\) Besides "When a Man Falls" (1894) and "The Duel" (1894), Crane writes about immigrants in "Coney Island’s Failing Days" (1894), "The Fire" (1894), and "Opiums Varied Dreams" (1896). For his depiction of Mexicans see his *Western Sketches*, in particular, and his essay "The Mexican Lower Classes" (1895) which is highly problematic. For his depiction of Irish immigrants, see his *Irish Sketches* (1897).
garments and begged or borrowed their food, drink, and bed. So too, did Crane himself. He declared in 1893 that he would sell his future for $23. He, too, was a veritable “poor Indian” (40). But it wasn’t only poverty that allowed Crane to declare this imagined alliance with a tribe of Native Americans whose lifestyle, one wonders, may be part Sullivan County myth and part Crane’s boyish romanticism. Stallman’s biography of Crane also records a publication party thrown for Maggie during which

Stephen thrummed a guitar while the ‘Indians’ chanted to the rhythmic pounding of a war dance until the abused landlady protested that she rented rooms to gentlemen, not animals. ‘The animals apologize and will return to their cages at once,’ Stephen yelled down to her (70).

Part an act of play and part an act of rebellion, Crane’s racial masquerade hardly seems like a serious effort to imagine the struggles of a racially and socially oppressed group. It’s troubling, for example, how easily he equates Native Americans with animalism and savagery. This is not to suggest that Crane isn’t sympathetic to the poverty, despair, and violence affecting the slum residents around him. As Keith Gandal puts it, “What might be called his minority ethic—his preference for living among people of a lower social class—is partly a sympathy and an identification with the oppressed and their rebellion” (129) But Crane’s preference for living among the economically disenfranchised eventually ends—he moves back to Ashbury Park to live with his brother—and thus his temporary effort to identify with such oppressed groups needs further commentary.

For the strategy that Crane is undertaking here will appear again and again in this study. Wallace Stevens will sign some of his poems “Sambo” and declare his poetry to be “like decorations in a nigger
cemetery;” Willa Cather will cause a stir in her parent’s home when she declares to one of her father’s uptight guests, “I’se a dang’ous nigger, I is” (Bennett 21); and Paul Laurence Dunbar will remark, “My position is most unfortunate. I am a black white man.” (Life and Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar 81). All these incidents, what Susan Gubar would term “racechanges,” may be a social and literary phenomena that artists of the twentieth century can’t seem to avoid. If the problem of the twentieth century is, as DuBois declared, “the problem of the color line,” then the artists of this era have engaged the problem in a number of different and imaginative ways: they have attempted to cross it, transgress it, blur it, and reinforce it. But no one, it seems, has avoided it. “Racechanges,” argues Gubar, “are inevitable (266). Thus when Crane calls himself and his friends “Indians,” he is enacting a type of racial masquerade which embodies all sorts of cultural, political, and even artistic ramifications. As Gubar puts it: “racechanges,” when practiced by white elite “expresses the racial privilege of a group of intellectuals convinced of their right to take a holiday from whiteness so as to thumb their noses at even the highest authorities” (35). In large part, Crane’s excursion in the slum, even though he certainly experiences hardship and poverty there, is a type of holiday. He has what many of his slum brothers and sisters don’t: economic and literary connections, bourgeois individuals who open their homes and wallets to finance his success. 8 In fact, Crane spent the last year of his life trying to recover from financial and health problems at

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8 Crane borrowed money from a number of people, including Hamlin Garland, Amy Leslie (former actress and drama critic of the Chicago Daily News), S.S. McClure (who advanced Crane over a thousand dollars for his work), and James Pinker (Crane’s literary agent).
Brede Place, a fourteenth century manor housed owned by Clara Frewen, aunt of Sir Winston Churchill. At Brede Place, Crane and his wife Cora seemed to engage in all the pleasures of the bourgeois: spending large of amounts of money on clothes and attempting to break off ties to his Bohemian friends. According to Stallman, "Cora did her best at Brede Place to fend off the 'Indians'—Crane's word for unwanted visitors--but they continued to slip past her defenses" (Letters 200). Thomas Beer explains this paradox in his biography of Crane:

To some of his English friends Brede seemed a Bohemian stronghold while roaming Americans thought Stephen Crane in severe evening dress surrounded by formal gowns and black coats a most unhallowed spectacle, the Bohemian turned snob (378).

Certainly, the excursion into the slum is attractive because it allows the one who dons the mask—of the economically and socially disenfranchised—to safely criticize the uptight, white bourgeois, a class which preaches, for its male members at least, economic independence and social restraint. As Nathan Huggins explains:

What would be more likely and more natural for men who were tied up in the knots of an achievement ethnic--depending almost wholly on self-sacrifice and self-restraint--than to create a persona which would be completely self-indulgent and irresponsible? White men put on black masks and become another self, one which was loose of limb, innocent of obligation to anything outside itself, indifferent to success (for whom success was impossible was impossible by racial definition), and thus a creature totally devoid of tension and deep anxiety. (253)

What this dynamic depends upon, of course, is a white-created and shared mythology of black experience combined with an intense desire to escape and rebel against white middle-class existence. Crane, as evidenced by his
stereotypical depiction of blacks and immigrants, clearly embodied both of these impulses. And yet it seems that when money became tight—and for Crane, this occurred frequently—he needed to reestablish ties to his middle class supporters and friends.

Crane’s pattern here bears a similarity to Willa Cather’s. For like Cather, Crane spends part of his youth forming surrogate ties with racial and ethnic outsiders—the slum residents, his group of “Indians”—but when it’s time for him to take stock in his literary ambitions he must return to his own tribe: the white bourgeois. As we shall see later, Cather will spend her childhood and adolescence among European immigrants, but when she begins her life work she will move to Greenwich village and live primarily among the white and middle-class. Leslie Fiedler explains what I see as both Crane and Cather’s movements in this way: “Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhood as imaginary Indians, our adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle down to being what we really are: white once more” (134). For Crane, “being white once more,” meant returning to the kind of middle-class mind set he so heavily criticized in Maggie and even in The Monster. There is something stifling about Whilomville’s obsession with appearance. Crane knew and understood the suffocating presence of middle class norms. As Keith Gandal explains,

in Maggie, the middle-class taboo against pre-marital sex has disastrous consequences. In fact, as we have seen, Crane develops an ethics that is founded on a suspicion and distaste for social norms in general and a valorization of rebellion and resistance (270).
But there's one aspect of Bowery living that Crane seems to treat with a Puritan, middle-class suspicion: its sites of amusement and entertainment. What accounts for this inconsistency?

To understand Crane's criticism of New York's popular sites of amusement we need to turn to *Popular Amusements*, a book published in 1869 by a Methodist preacher named Jonathan Townley Crane, Stephen's father. This tract which literally dams popular attractions and sentimental novels might seem, on the surface, to have little in common with Stephen Crane's writings, but when we read the tract beside *Maggie* and some of Crane's New York sketches it becomes evident that Crane did absorb some of his Methodist father's conservative points of view toward amusements. Crane may have lived the life of a wayward son, indulging in the sins that his parents preached against, but his skepticism of popular entertainment seems to stem in large part from his clergyman father. The Reverend J. T. Crane said of theater, for example, that it "thrives by the vice and crime of the community. It is a buzzard that lives on carrion. To succeed it must be content to be the hunting-ground where infamy shall snare its victims, and lead them 'as an ox to the slaughter'" (50). And later he says: "A successful theater must be on good terms with the grogshop and the brothel" (51).

While Stephen Crane isn't nearly as damning in his portrayals of vaudeville theater and city amusements as his father, his writings do share at least two things in common with the reverend's: he does, in his representation of Maggie, demonstrate how vaudeville creates a setting for victimizing certain innocent types ("an ox to the slaughter"); and he
clearly shows, in his depiction of Nell, the parasitic connection between vaudeville and prostitution. Despite the brutality which surrounds her, Maggie Johnson is somewhat naive and Crane exemplifies this most clearly in her unawareness to the type of shows that Pete is introducing her. Indeed, once Maggie is “ruined,” Pete’s choices of popular entertainment move to lower-class locales. On their second outing to a beer hall, a ballad singer in a dress of “flaming scarlet” stirs the applause of men in the audience by vanishing from the stage and reappearing each time attired in less and less gown (38). By their third trip to the show, the waiters are soiled, the orchestra is composed of men “who looked as if they had just happened in,” and a bouncer stands at the door (42). The glittering versions of middle-class existence are gradually becoming more and more dirtied in Crane’s representation of vaudeville; and Maggie seems happily unaware that she is watching a strip show among a crowd of drunken men and women, prostitutes and johns. Crane writes,

Three weeks had passed since the girl had left home. The spaniel-like dependence had been magnified and showed its direct effect in the peculiar off-handedness of Pete’s ways toward her. She followed Pete’s eyes with hers, anticipating with smiles gracious looks from him. (43)

By the time Nell, an upscale prostitute, enters the scene and takes hold of Pete’s attention, Maggie still seems unaware of what is happening. Maggie takes note of Nell’s wardrobe, her spotless linen collar and cuffs and tan gloves and she feels awkward because she doesn’t seem to be able to enter the conversation, but she isn’t privy to the fact that Nell is a prostitute whose services Pete has sought in the past. Even when Pete is finally persuaded to ditch Maggie, the young Johnson girl still doesn’t completely
get it: "Maggie was dazed. She could dimly perceive that something stupendous had happened. She wondered why Pete saw fit to remonstrate with the woman, pleading for forgiveness with his eyes" (46). Abandoned by Pete, Maggie continues to stare at the doors in hopes of his return; she appears like one of Reverend Crane’s “ox lead to the slaughter.” Although Stephen Crane doesn’t advocate that religion would have saved Maggie from such victimization—when Maggie is prostitute, one of the first individuals to dismiss her cry for help is a preacher—no where does the novel suggest any benefits to theater-going besides manipulation of the working poor. Even in his New York sketch “Coney Island’s Failing Days,” Stephen Crane worries over mass entertainment’s seduction of the lower classes. He remarks that “humanity needs only to be provided for ten minutes with a few whirligigs and things of that sort, and it can forget at least four centuries of misery” (324). The implication here, that popular amusement is simply a form of escapism, relates directly to Crane’s views of entertainment for the working class. In attempting to find some swatch of color outside of their gray existence, the working class flock to these sites of fantasy, where they are fed rags to riches stories and compelled into believing that they too can rise.

It’s important to note as well that Crane is presenting these portraits of the economic, racial, and ethnic outsider—their brutality as well as their victimization—to a middle-class, white readership. As much as he attempts to avoid ties to the middle-class, his works are being consumed by them. And whether he is conscious of it or not, the racial and ethnic outsiders of his writings are also being consumed by this white readership.
Crane, after all, is publishing many of his writings in such literary and popular journals as *Scribner's, McClure's, and Collier's Weekly*. Thus when the middle class reader enters the Bowery's landscape of poverty and amusements and Whilomville's scenes of provincialism and horror, they too become spectators. Consequently Crane's reliance on stereotypes of Irish toughs in *Maggie* and black minstrel characters in *The Monster* only adds to the overall atmosphere of voyeurism. As one critic observes, Crane suggests "that what the middle class and the poor have in common—their humanity—is not a moral concern or even a moral language, but a fierce love of spectacle" (Gandal 177).

And where is Crane in all this spectacle-making? He seems, in fact, to be wavering back and forth: critical, on the one side, of middle class morality, and yet clinging at the same time to the financial benefits that it incurs; intrigued, on the other side, by the humanity and fierceness of the poor and yet doing all he can to escape such poverty. All of this wavering leads to a crisis of sorts—both Crane's individual identity crisis and, I would suggest, a national identity crisis. If Crane shows an inconsistency in his depiction of working class immigrants and blacks, it may be that he himself is unsure about these new American wage-earners.

Certainly, Crane is aware that these new Americans are entering larger theaters than vaudeville—they're entering a theater of American commerce and exchange, especially in the city where they're finding jobs

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9 Crane's "The Open Boat" first appeared in *Scribner's* in June 1897; "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" was first published in *McClure's* in February, 1898; and "The Blue Hotel" was first published in *Collier's Weekly* in November 1898. He also garnered the respect of such authors and critics as William Dean Howells and Joseph Conrad.
and, in some cases, paying good money to be entertained. As Thomas Muller points out, the presence of immigrant laborers within a particular city often contributed to a booming economy:

New immigrants gravitated to states with high income, and surprisingly these states, after accepting poor immigrants, not only maintained their relatively prosperous position but in many cases improved it. New York State, which absorbed more immigrants than any other, increased its per capita income 3.7 times between 1880 and 1920 (75).

No doubt the owners of vaudeville and dime theaters wanted to get the most out of these new wage earners, but at the same time, there's a fear that these masses of newcomers are beginning to take over.

All four of the authors in this study—Crane, Dunbar, Stevens, and Cather—must contend with these new arrivals and each expresses a fear of associating with them: Dunbar is advised by his wife to avoid the working class blacks of the Tenderloin; Stevens feels squeamish around the Italian immigrants who peddle their wares on Canal Street; Cather can't wait to escape the dirty French peasant women who share her train during a European excursion. Crane was no exception to this tendency. He may have temporarily lived in the slums, but he was not of the slums. He never blossomed out of a mud puddle like Maggie. He shares much more in common with Jimmie Trescott, growing up in the provincial setting of upstate New York. When Crane arrives in New York city, he encounters the new faces of the American city and is struck with a curiosity to record and capture their lives. But as we have seen, these racial and ethnic outsiders provided him with more than literary subject matter; they offered him a means to work out his own anxiety with white bourgeois
culture. Crane’s sometimes troubling, sometimes sympathetic depictions of working class immigrants and blacks arise perhaps from this personal anxiety.

But Crane’s story, his struggle to come to terms with his own identity via racial and ethnic others, takes place during a time when the very notions of race and ethnicity are being debated and fought over. It is no coincidence, then, that the patterns we have seen emerging in Crane’s engagement with the cultural boundaries of color and class will occur in the other three writers of this study who attempt similar cross-overs. For all of them are writing at the turn of the twentieth century when America, perhaps more so than any other time of its history, is a culture in crisis with its own identity. As Nathan Huggins explains:

The cultural doubt of provincialism, the fluidity and impermanence of status in a democracy, the phantom of identity where institutions and order were always in flux, the anxiety of an achievement ethic, the possible terror in some views of change itself, these have been the traumas of American life. . . In these contexts, identity has been a desperate issue for white and black Americans. (301).

Crane reminds us in both Maggie and The Monster that these traumas of American life and identity take place in both rural and urban settings, upon stages of provincialism as well as poverty. And that always, someone is watching.
CHAPTER IV

'THE NOVELTY OF A BLACK FACE': DUNBAR'S PRECARIOUS CROSSING OF THE COLOR LINE

"But indeed this publicity is disturbing me. It upsets me and makes me nervous. I feel like a man walking a slack rope above thousands of spectators, who knows himself an amateur and is every moment expecting to fall"—Paul Laurence Dunbar in a 1892 letter to Dr. James Newton Matthews

"For writers, and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us."—Adrienne Rich in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971)

While Stephen Crane was creating narratives out of America’s obsession with spectacles, Paul Laurence Dunbar was feeling uncomfortably like a kind of freakish novelty himself. Dubbed the "Negro poet laureate," Dunbar emerged during the turn of the century as rare find for the white-dominated publishing business: a man of African descent who could write beautiful poetry and prose. Dunbar’s break in 1892 onto the literary scene came rapidly and, as indicated by his circus metaphor of the tight-rope walker, with much personal anguish.

Although the persistence of the color line permitted the author of Anglo Saxon descent to be an observer of racial spectacles and the writer of African descent to be an object of racial spectacle, we know that Crane and
Dunbar did share artistic and thematic concerns that managed to cross such cultural boundaries. While there is no record that the two ever met, Dunbar was also drawn to the fever of New York city. Just a year after Stephen Crane ends his hiatus living in New York, Dunbar visits the Tenderloin district, a mere twenty blocks from Crane’s former residence. In 1896 the young black Ohioan encounters the same big city temptations and pleasures that Crane did: he attends vaudeville theater, frequents nightclubs, and stays at the Marshall hotel, which, according to James Weldon Johnson, “became famous as the headquarters of Negro talent” (159). Here, Johnson tells us, actors, composers, writers, and vaudevillians congregated, Dunbar among them. Like Crane, Dunbar’s impressions of New York city night life will carry over into his short stories and in his most well known novel *The Sport of the Gods*. In these works Dunbar details the corruptibility of New York city living and, in a similar vein as Crane’s, offers a brutal indictment of sites of pleasure, including clubs and the vaudeville theater. Moreover the victims of this big city corruption in Dunbar’s fiction are, like Crane’s, working class people.

But the parallels between Crane’s story and Dunbar’s story end here. Although they both share an anxiety of the city and a paternalistic viewpoint of the poor, Dunbar experienced another side of New York life and struggled with another set of social and economic challenges that Crane could only imagine. For at the same time Dunbar was chronicling the demise of Kitty Hamilton--an innocent Southern young lady who turns into a vaudevillian show girl when she migrates, along with the rest

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10 Dunbar stays on West 53rd Street in the center of life for black residents of the Tenderloin; Crane lives on West 33rd St.
of her family, to New York city in *The Sport of the Gods*—he, like Kitty, was also trying to capitalize on vaudeville's exploitation of the minstrel tradition. Between 1898 and 1902 Dunbar was writing show songs such as "Der'll be Wahm Coons a-Prancin'" and "The Hottest Coon in Dixie" for vaudeville musical comedies including *Clorindy, In Dahomey,* and *Jes Lak White F'oks.* And while he was proclaiming in a letter to a friend, "Unless we live lives of protest, and few of us are willing to do that, we are as guilty as the lynchers of the South—we are tarred with the same stick" (Letter to Brand Whitlock, December 26, 1900), he was also declaring in an essay about the fate of blacks in New York's Tenderloin that "The gist of the whole trouble lies in the flocking of ignorant and irresponsible Negroes to the great city" (*Paul Laurence Dunbar Reader* 42). Such blatant contradictions—involving racial protest while upholding racial stereotypes—seemed to characterize Dunbar's life and work; contradictions, it seems to me, rooted in W. E. B. DuBois' notion of double consciousness. Every time he received money from white patrons or praise from white literary critics like William Dean Howells, Dunbar was compelled, out of literary and economic necessity, to see himself, in DuBois words, "through the eyes of others," with the white world "look[ing] on in amused contempt and pity" (45). No wonder that such a volatile situation—trying to please the white literary establishment while maintaining his own sense of artistic integrity—created contrary impulses within Dunbar. Perhaps the poet Michael Harper described Dunbar's irreconcilable struggle best when he called him "a Minstrel and a Mask." In a poem dedicated to the
memory of Dunbar, Harper address the poet's paradoxical tendencies through a lens of compassion and clarity:

Minstrel and Mask:

a landscape of speech and body

burned in a verbal space,

the match cinder unstandard:

*double-consciousness brother in the veil--*

*double-consciousness brother in the veil--*

*double-consciousness brother in the veil--*

Harper's poem invites a sympathetic and complex reading of a very troubling figure. Part writer of racial protest fiction, part poet of nostalgic plantation lyrics, a man who vehemently called for the education of all young blacks, but still looked upon the African American servants who worked at his public recitations and carried his suitcases with contempt and disdain, Dunbar, since the 1920s, has been a puzzle to readers and critics who, through the years, have reconstructed his image—from racial sell-out to radical protester to ambitious money-grabber. 11 He has been claimed, rejected, and vilified.

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11 Robert Bone and Lawrence R. Rodges, among others, argue that Dunbar "pandered" to white tastes; Bone, in particular, asserts that most of Dunbar's stories are "minstrel travesties" and that Dunbar "collaborated in the defamation of his own people" (*Down Home* 42-43). Conversely, Darwin T. Turner, Ralph Story, and Jay Martin, among others, maintain that Dunbar—especially through his prose—often engaged in racial protest, aligned himself with his black community, offered his readers a black point of view.
It's not unexpected, then, that one of the difficulties any critic of Dunbar faces is locating a consistency of themes, forms, and even politics in his work. Dunbar's fiction and poetry moves from the highly sentimental in his first novel *The Uncalled* to the painfully ironic in his poem "We wear the Mask" to the brutally satirical in his novel *The Sport of the Gods*; it borders, at times, on the genteel as in his two novels *The Love of Landry* and *The Fanatics*, which read almost as novels of manners, and then quickly turns back to the rural and commonplace as in his collection of short stories called *The Folks from Dixie*. It is informed as much by the genteel lyrics of James Whitcomb Riley as it is by African folk traditions and the blues. This hodge-podge of form and style, I will argue, is largely a result of Dunbar's constant movement back and forth across the color line.

In this chapter, I want to examine how the unevenness of Dunbar's work—his moments of brilliance, bitterness, rage, and sentiment—mirrors the very struggles of his life, living within what DuBois refers to as the Veil, that border which kept him always within (or perhaps with out) the sight of opportunity. Specifically, I will argue, based upon Dunbar's letters and fiction that he adhered to the belief that region and class rather than racial makeup are what ultimately define us. Motivated by a deep ambition to be middle class and genteel, by an affection for his mother's stories of plantation life in Kentucky, and by a belief in the transcendence of art, Dunbar wrote lyrics and fiction that he knew would sell to a largely white readership, that would still show-case the folk traditions of his
family and racial roots, and—at times—that would examine the human heart in all its contradictions and struggles.

In many ways, Dunbar was a writer of his times; and like many artists of the early twentieth century, he took great interest in the local color trend in fiction, worried over the rise of industrial cities, witnessed the huge migration and immigration of all kinds of individuals—Europeans, Southern blacks, young women from the country—to the urban North; and, like Stephen Crane, Willa Cather, and Wallace Stevens, he found in their lives and language a source for his art. What places Dunbar's portrayal of these contemporary issues and anxieties under so much more scrutiny than those of his white contemporaries is the very thing he feared would become an obsession on the part of his audience: his race. As early as 1892 Dunbar was agonizing over his sudden popularity among publishers who requested his picture along with his work. He writes Dr. James Matthews: "I hope there is something worthy in my writings and not merely the novelty of a black face associated with the power to rhyme that has attracted attention" (qtd. in The Dunbar Reader 412). His fears were realized when his second collection of poems, The Lyrics of Lowly Life, drew notice from America's foremost man of letters, William Dean Howells, who praised Dunbar because he:

was the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the African American life aesthetically and express it lyrically. It seemed to me that this had come to its most modern consciousness in him, and that his brilliant and unique achievement was to have studied the American African American objectively, and to have represented him as he found him to be, with humor, with sympathy, and yet
with what the reader must instinctively feel to be entire truthfulness (xvi-xvii).

Howells’ promotion of Dunbar as the representative poet of his race became the first in a long line of critical assessments that would place the young writer’s talent under an all-encompassing racial lens.12

As such the demands put upon him from various audiences throughout the years have been many: whites during his time period looked to him for an “authentic” portrayal of the “Negro;” well-known and influential blacks like W. E. B. DuBois, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington saw him as model of black learning and respectability; white publishers insisted that he write popular, marketable material about blacks; and contemporary critics and scholars want him to be an activist, an artist working for the political and social betterment of his race. Despite their various motivations, all these audiences--both past and present--want what Dunbar could supply in neither his life nor his writings: a unified and uniform representation of African American identity. During one moment of despair and exasperation with the public and its demands, Dunbar confesses in a letter to his wife Alice:

I am only a mediocre wretch. I knew and all I asked was to be allowed to work quietly, making a living and no noise, but here I must be pulled out into the glare of public gaze and stand where I never intended to stand on a level with criticism of men whose advantages and antecedents have been much greater than mine. (January 12, 1898; Letters 362)

12 See Robert Bone’s comments of Dunbar in both The Negro Novel in America and Down Home; as well as Jay Martin’s essay “Paul Laurence Dunbar: Biography through Letters,” James Emmanuel’s “Racial Fire in the Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,” and Addison Gayle’s “Literature as Catharsis: The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar”
Forced by financial and literary necessity to stand upon stages and perform roles he never intended, it is no wonder critics and writers call him a "chameleon," one who dons the "mask" and plays the "minstrel;" for Dunbar himself troubles such notions as racial pride, community, and identity. "No other Negro writer," Richard Wright lamented in 1959, "demanded more of himself than Dunbar did, and that he achieved so much, that he managed to wring a little unity out of the blatant contradiction that was his life is truly remarkable" (122). Perhaps in his attempt to placate all these audiences, Dunbar's life and work provides us not merely with another example of double-consciousness or, in Wright's terms, "tragic conflict," but a framework in which to examine the twentieth century's ongoing obsession with racial/ethnic categories, identities, and politics.

Dunbar's writing career, like Crane's was short--beginning in 1892 and ending with his death in 1906--a mere fourteen years. But perhaps more so than any period in American history, it was a particularly difficult time to be an African American writer ambitious enough to capture the diversity of American experience. For this was an era when the very idea of race was being debated, constructed, and politicized among all sorts of individuals: scientists, anthropologists, religious leaders, and politicians. Social Darwinists like Herbet Spencer, G. Stanley Hall, and John R. Commons were employing evolutionary theories to purport a racist agenda. In his book Races and Immigrants in America (1907), Commons argued that Northern Europeans were genetically superior to all races; "the Negro," he claimed, "was generally acknowledged to be lacking in
'the mechanical idea.' He also insisted that such discrepancies in racial makeup were unalterable and unaffected by social environment. "Race differences" Commons maintained, "are established in the very blood and physical constitution," (136) an observation which allowed him to suggest that only "ambitious races" could be industrialized. Social Darwinism also proved useful to clergymen who integrated its main principles to create a racially justified theology. In his blatantly racist tract Our Country (1885) Josiah Strong declared the Anglo Saxon race "more rigorous, more spiritual, more Christian than that of any other" (qtd. in Gossett 187). African Americans fared no better in legal realms. In 1896 the Supreme Court invoked the natural law of racial differences in its Plessy v. Ferguson decision which upheld the principle of "separate but equal" in public accommodations. Even though Homer Plessy, the plaintiff, for all intents and purposes, was a white man, his white counselor Albion Tourgee filed a brief stating that Plessy had one-eighth African blood (Bardolph 150-152). While the "one drop of Negro blood" rule might strike present day readers as absurd, many states upheld legal definitions of race well into the late 1950s. In Arkansas, Georgia, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, a "Negro" was defined as "any person who has in his or her veins any Negro blood whatever" (qtd. in The Negro in Twentieth Century America 4-7). In Florida and Mississippi the one-eighth definition applied; in Kentucky it was declared that "a child having one-sixteenth Negro blood may not attend a school for white children" (qtd. in The Negro in Twentieth Century America 5). With the sanction of law, science, and religion white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan
could mobilize even the most mainstream and middling of white men. In her study of an Athens, Georgia Klan, Nancy MacLean notes that the vast majority of men in the Klan were lower white-collar employees: merchants, farm workers, public workers, salespeople, and insurance agents (54-56). Convinced that it was their natural, legal, and moral right to uphold democracy and protect white women from the sexual aggression of black men and the seduction of Jewish men (MacLean 146), Klansmen enacted a most benign and calm reign of terror. Between 1893 and 1904, more than one hundred blacks on the average were lynched each year (Gaines 25); and between 1882 and 1934, lynch mobs murdered more than five thousand people, the vast majority of them Southern black men. In Georgia alone 549 people were lynched; yet between 1885 and 1922 the state prosecuted only one person for the crime (MacLean 34). Legally unprotected, genetically weaker, intellectually, emotionally, and morally stunted—these were the characteristics imposed by the highest authorities upon blacks.

This is not to suggest that the majority of Americans accepted such viewpoints or that the black community itself left such notions uncontested. Many influential blacks were mobilizing to fight for political and intellectual change. In 1899 the Afro-American Council, founded by a group of dissent black leaders including Ida B. Wells and T. Thomas Fortune were convening in Chicago to protest lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement and to encourage black migration and economic boycotts as mass protests against these abuses (Gaines 30). In 1903 W. E. B DuBois in his *The Souls of Black Folk* made an impassioned plea
holding the nation accountable for insuring its African American citizens their right to vote and obtain a higher education. And by 1908 the NAACP was beginning to form after mob violence erupted in August of that year in Springfield, Illinois, between black and white industrial workers (Gaines 214). It appeared, indeed, that change was at hand, but Dunbar was still somehow on the cusp of it all. He would never live to see the formation of the NAACP.

An eighteen year-old Ohioan who had a talent for writing poetry and powerful hopes of attending college, Dunbar entered this highly charged debate over race with limited resources to affect the political change that DuBois and others were attempting. Personally, financially, and artistically, Dunbar would feel the repercussions of the culture’s fixation with race. Despite his scholastic achievements, his race would keep him from college as well as from a career in journalism. And even when his artistic break came and he managed to capture the attention of Howells, Dunbar’s race still remained a matter of obsession. This anxiety would work itself out in various ways within Dunbar’s life and work. At times his fiction and poetry seemed to reinforce the racist ideas of Social Darwinists and their concept of blacks as mentally and emotionally inferior creatures. On the other hand, his writing will also echo DuBois’ call for higher education and Well’s protests against racist abuses. He provides his reader with little comfort or consistency and yet despite such flaws, his creative process as well as his fictional representations of race and social class make for a fascinating study; for within Dunbar’s wavering across the color line lies the rich ambiguity of his portrayal of African
American experience, set as it is against a backdrop of racial confusion, fear, and animosity.

To be sure, Dunbar’s portrayal of rural black Southerners in such pieces as “The Strength of Gideon,” “Viney’s Free Papers,” and “The Wisdom of Silence,” all stories about former slaves who either refuse their freedom or become corrupted by the prospect of freedom, is painfully problematic for contemporary readers. Lawrence Rodgers expresses it succinctly:

How does one pay homage to the genius of Paul Laurence Dunbar—appreciate his unrivaled popularity, recognize the high esteem he was accorded by his fellow writers, and credit him for his pioneering and crucial role in helping to construct the African-American literary tradition—yet still come to terms with the fact that no small part of his career focused on idealizing and romanticizing the same antebellum southern plantation that had enslaved his parents? (42)

To contemplate the first question—a contemporary reader’s interpretation of Dunbar—one, however, may have to get at the dilemma’s source: Dunbar himself. Perhaps the more interesting question in this regard is this: Why did Dunbar feel himself drawn to writing those oral stories of plantation life that his mother as well as many other former slaves in his life told? What aided his desire to conceive the lives of former slaves, separated from his by generation as well as by region?

Like Cather’s devotion to record the oral stories of her Scandinavian and Norwegian neighbors because they afforded her an opportunity to feel “as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person’s skin” (Willa Cather in Person 10), Dunbar may have felt that same kind of artistic excitement when he heard
the stories of former slaves. But Dunbar wanted to enter other skins as well. He never confined himself to plantation stories; he also wrote about an array of other individuals: Northerner black politicians, ministers, writers, race-track workers, soldiers, journalists, even cowboys. As so conversely, what motivated him to imagine the lives of white Americans, of various ethnicities and regions, separated from his by race and sometimes economic and social status?

What yearning, what longing aided his imaginative leap across lines of color, class, and region? In her 1914 essay "The Poet and His Song," Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson offers one explanation for her husband’s desires: "a poet is a poet because he understands; because he is born with a divine kinship will all things, and he is a poet in direct ration to his power of sympathy" (129). Nelson is espousing here a philosophy which would honor the artist’s imagination above all circumstances.

Reared in a time of national economic boom which saw the presence of a small, but significant rising black middle class, Dunbar also clearly envisioned an artistic as well as economic opportunity for himself by writing. And having published his work from alongside such "scientifically" racist propaganda as Frederick L. Hoffman’s Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro (1896), which concluded that the high incident of tuberculosis, syphilis, and other diseases among blacks would lead to their extinction as a race, and Thomas Dixon Jr.’s The Clansman (1905), which proclaimed a violent hatred for blacks, Dunbar painfully understood the volatile racial climate of the early twentieth century and his highly charged place within it. As Thomas Gossett points out:
American thought of the period 1880-1920 generally lacks any perception of the Negro as a human being with potential for improvement. Most of the people who wrote about Negroes were firmly in the grip of the idea that intelligence and temperament are racially determined and unalterable.

Indeed all three of these factors—artistic aspirations, commercial instincts, and white racism—shaped Dunbar's creative process and products in unpredictable, paradoxical, and disturbing ways.

In his first novel, *The Uncalled*, Dunbar offers a coming of age story centered on the character of Freddie Brent, a young boy suddenly left orphaned, as the book opens, by the death of his mother. Reluctantly, and purely out of spiritual duty, the Puritanical middle-aged woman, Miss Hester Prime, decides to raise young Freddie. The main conflict of the novel stems from Prime's desire to make a minister out of Freddie, the abandoned son of the town drunk. Although he tries rigorously to live out the demands of Hester Prime—even going so far as to become a minister—Freddie finally comes to realize that he is "uncalled," that his spiritual and moral life must reside outside church authority. On its surface, the characters would seem to have little in common with Dunbar's life save for the fact that he sets the action of the narrative in Dexter, Ohio, which bears a distinctive resemblance to Dunbar's hometown of Dayton, Ohio. But as many commentators have pointed out, the parallels between Dunbar and Freddie Brent are quite recognizable and the novel's themes of awakening and self-definition were certainly in the forefront of Dunbar's thoughts during the time he was composing the novel. Some critics, for example, read Hester Prime as a stand-in for Dunbar's strong, yet overbearing mother, Matilda, who also wanted her...
son to become a minister. Like Freddie, Dunbar was also fatherless and left in the sole care of his mother. Evidence suggests that Matilda remained a constant support and powerful presence in her son's life even after he married Alice Ruth Moore, a New Orleans poet and fiction writer. Such a reading may be a bit simplistic, however, because it overlooks the fact that Hester is often referred to as Freddie's care-taker and even more importantly, patron. At one point in the novel, after Freddie quits his position as pastor, Dunbar explains Hester's grief:

Frederick Brent's career had really been her dream. She had scarcely admitted, even to herself, how deeply his success affected her own happiness. She cared for him in much the same way that a sculptor loves his statue. Her attitude was that of one who says, "Look upon this work; is it not fair? I made it myself." (192)

Hester's relationship to Freddie, in fact, seems more Pygmalion-like than motherly.

That she looks upon him as a protégé, her own creation, who will bring her praise may reflect the tensions Dunbar had not with his mother, but with his patrons--those who invested in his career, but not always his well-being. We know, for example, that during the writing of The

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14 It may do well to mention here Nathaniel Hawthorne's influence upon Dunbar. Although there has been no extensive discussion of Dunbar's admiration of Hawthorne, one sees evidence of Hawthorne's presence throughout Dunbar's fiction. In The Uncalled, for example, Hester Prime seems to bear too close a similarity to Hester Prynne to be overlooked. And in The Sport of the Gods Dunbar reenacts a scene from The Scarlet Letter when he has Maurice Oakley holding his chest in pain, trying to conceal his secret sin--the letter he keeps in his coat pocket, which would exonerate Barry Hamilton.
Uncalled Dunbar had severed ties with his European manager, Edith Pond, who Eugene Metcalf tells us "disclaimed responsibility for him and left for a tour of the continent" (Letters 143). In a May 4, 1897 letter Dunbar tells Alice about the incident:

There are some details about her that I can better tell you when we are married. I don't know whether she has returned to America or not, she will do all she can to hurt me there. But as the children say, "I ain't skeart o' her." (Letters 142)

Although Dunbar doesn't specify the circumstances of the parting, that he compares Pond to a somewhat vindictive figure and himself to a child mustering up the courage to fight back indicates the sort of tenuous and conditional relationship that Dunbar likely had with many of his mostly white patrons.

Notice as well how easily Dunbar, especially in his letters to Alice, can move into black dialect, how adroit he can be in inhabiting socially diverse realms; one day giving recitations at high society functions and the next working as an elevator operator for $4.00 a week, Dunbar always understood the precariousness of his position. On a mere whim of his manager, he could be abandoned in England and forced to rely on the generosity of other temporary and well-intentioned patrons. To make matters worse, as Dunbar later explains in a letter to Alice, Pond, after hearing that Dunbar had recited at a gathering, demanded her commission and when that never came, tried to get an injunction to keep Paul from reading without her sanction (Cunningham 162). It seems completely probable that Dunbar projects this kind of vulnerability and frustration with "well-meaning" supporters onto Freddie's struggles to define himself
on his own terms against individuals like Hester. Likewise part of Freddie's difficulties stems from the obsessive interest on the part of Dexter townspeople to remind the young man of his genetic make-up, another similarity he may bear with Dunbar. Because Freddie is the son of a shiftless mother and alcoholic father, one of the primary tensions of the novel is whether he can overcome his genetic inheritance.

In the genre of urban naturalism, the novel's tone is often deterministic and Freddie's development is a constant source of curiosity on the part of the provincial gossips who maintain little hope that "old Tom Brent's boy" will turn out good. So strong is the tension between social environment and genetics in the novel that it is not until Freddie is able to find his father and make peace with him that he can have full control over his identity. Certainly the freedom to define one's self was constantly in Dunbar's mind. From the moment he came upon the literary scene, one of the first items mentioned about Dunbar was that he "was of pure African blood," an unusual trait for a black American. Thus Dunbar's "racial purity" was a matter of great curiosity and importance—for both his supporters as well as his critics, one group using it to argue against evolutionary race theories which designated the Anglo Saxon as the superior race, and the other, parading Dunbar as some "freak of nature" ("the novelty of a black face") who defied the odds of racial hierarchy. Understandably, Dunbar projects upon Freddie the very desire he longed for: the ability to name one's self, to identify one's self beyond the "scientific" and legal constraints of genetics and race.
Ironically enough, his decision came under great criticism in both early and later reviews of the novel. One earlier reviewer, for example, advised Dunbar to "write about Negroes," and suggested that in *The Uncalled* all "the charming tender sympathy of *Folks from Dixie* [Dunbar's first collection of stories about blacks in the rural South] is missing." The reviewer asserted that Dunbar was "an outsider" who viewed his action "as a stage manager" (qtd. in Williams 174). Later critics were also harsh in their criticism. Vernon Loggins in his *The Negro Author in America* argued that Dunbar should never exclude black characters from his novel. "All of the bubbling spontaneity which he showed in his tales on blacks is replaced. . .by cheap conventional storytelling" (316). In his 1958 study Robert Bone accused Dunbar of "resort[ing] to the subterfuge of employing white characters, rather than attempting a serious literary portrait of the Negro" (39). And Addison Gayle explains: "That Dunbar, a black man, could masquerade as a white youth, struck his audience as insincere" (144).

With the possible exception of Frank Yerby, no Afro-American novelist has been more confused concerning his identity or worth as a black writer than was Dunbar. And none succeeded so well in using the novel form as a vehicle for vicarious identification with symbols drawn from an alien world (Gayle 140-41).

All of these reviewers, though they are of completely different ideological bents, seem to demand of Dunbar the very same thing: racial authenticity, full and complete recognition of himself and his creations as "Negro" "Afro-American," and "black." What Dunbar seems to offer in the novel, however, is more like racial ambiguity.
In fact, Dunbar may be playing around with the very notion of "whiteness" and "blackness" in *The Uncalled*. Both Robert Fansworth and Kenny J. Williams have noted that Dunbar’s novel is racially ambiguous. Writes Fansworth, “the novel constantly tempts one to think the characters are only superficially white. Intrinsically they seem black” (114). Williams maintains that Dunbar may have intended to avoid racial and ethnic labels so as to relate the story to "the dominant American social structure" (175). Dunbar never verifies the racial or ethnic background of any of his characters; what he provides us with, instead, is regional knowledge about them. We know that the characters speak Midwestern dialect, that they live a few hours from Cincinnati by train, are often fanatical about religion, gossip about their neighbors, practice hypocrisy occasionally, and suffer too often from a provincial mind-set. Dunbar does not seem to purposely avoid a discussion of race—at least on the literal level; it simply doesn’t factor into his study of the Dexter community. As Kenny Williams argues,

Dunbar was not . . . intent upon renouncing his race; neither was he attempting to ignore those problems which he saw daily. Rather, he was operating within the framework of his own belief that the literary artist who happened to be Negro was not to be bound by limitations of purely racial subjects (179).

Dunbar’s fiction and poetry—even his so called plantation lyrics and stories—often question such assumption of racial “purity.”

While Dunbar never spoke explicitly about issues like racial identity, racial confusion, and racial crossing, we do know from a couple of his statements as well as from his fiction that these ideas surfaced
occasionally. Forced to travel, out of economic and literary necessity, between black and white worlds, Dunbar at times felt racially alienated from both groups. As Michael Flushe puts it: "Because Dunbar could not fit between the categories of black and white, he described himself as a black white man" (Cunningham 160). It is usually to this statement that critics point as an example of Dunbar's "schizophrenic" personality, his double-consciousness, his negation of identity.15 But if we turn to his correspondence, it seems obvious that Dunbar understood the social and political ramification of racial crossings, that he was neither confused nor manipulated by it. For Dunbar felt keenly the literary racial double standard and understood the conditional support of whites. Lawrence Rodgers puts it nicely:

> After all, what subjects could be more important for Dunbar to explore personally in his fiction than the potential dangers of black success achieved through white patronage, the consequences of being betrayed by those seemingly appreciative and benevolent white patrons, and the black population's response to that betrayal? (50)

By the time he was writing his last novel *The Sport of the Gods* --the novel whose theme, as Rodgers points out, considers the dangers of black success through white patronage--Dunbar had already experienced the ambitious motivation of his manager, had fought with publishers for decent rates on his work, and had been criticized in reviews for his portrayal of black characters and dialect. And unlike many other writers who were not called upon to be the representative artist of their race, Dunbar was compelled to take careful notice of these criticisms.

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15 See Addison Gayle's essay "Literature as Catharsis: The Novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar" for a discussion of this argument.
His very reputation, the image he wanted to construct for himself and for others, was contingent upon his ability to write marketable pieces. Thus he agonized over rumors regarding his alleged drinking habit and unhappy marriage. His courtship and relationship with Alice, during which time they were dubbed the new Barrett and Browning, made both of them obsessive about keeping up appearances. In many letters Dunbar, although he admits to indulging his two greatest weaknesses--sex and alcohol--is anxious to protect his good name both for Alice's sake as well as for literary and financial reasons. 16 When they decide to secretly marry without the consent of Alice's parents and without a formal wedding announcement, for example, Paul regrets their haste and tells Alice in a letter, "We have greatly endangered our social position. Let us do all we can to obviate that danger. The very friends who know of this matter think as I do--nay, urge upon me very strongly the necessity of immediate announcement" (Letters 498). Even after they marry and settle in Washington D.C., the need to keep up appearances consumes a great deal of their thought. In a January 1, 1898 letter to Paul, Alice writes:

Do not run too much counter to Washington society, please. It will make it hard for me when I come, and I want that our home shall have the highest possible position, the respect and admiration of all the powers that be. We owe it to ourselves to create and maintain an unquestioned, looked-up to social position (Letters 325).

16 Great measure is taken, for example, when Dunbar commits a rather gruesome misdeed while intoxicated. When Alice visits him during a reading in Philadelphia, Dunbar, according to Eugene Metcalf, "became inebriated and, in a drunken state, had intercourse with Alice and injured her internally" (Letters 243). Despite her disappointment with Paul, Alice went out of her way to convince the doctor who treated her that Paul was her husband, not her fiancee.
Of course, the appearance of social prestige and respectability did not, at least in Dunbar’s case, reflect financial security. Dunbar understood the harsh reality regarding his precarious circumstances, always one dollar from poverty and always graceful at posing, making it look otherwise. In a January 5, 1898, letter Paul tells Alice that he is broke because his house contractor has swindled him out of money and publishers are fighting over the rights to publish *The Uncalled* (*Letters* 343-44). And when Alice’s purse is stolen while she is working at the Rose White Mission in New York city, she has to beg Paul for carfare enough to last for two weeks (*Letters* 415). Like many blacks who strove for bourgeois status at the turn of the twentieth century, Dunbar was often on the verge of financial ruin. According to Kevin Gaines, less privileged African-Americans placed their trust in social status as a means to achieve all the rights and freedoms accorded to middle class white Americans. But material and economic comforts did not necessarily result from these aspirations. He explains:

> . . . although marital status, the possession of a home or education, or the wish to acquire these, are considered markers of middle-class status, the material condition of many blacks with these aspirations was often indistinguishable from that of impoverished people of any color. (16)

Such seems to be the case for Dunbar whose letters reveal a persistent anxiety about money and a frustrations with some of his white patrons. As early as 1897 on his tour of England, Dunbar was already telling his wife-to-be of his financial problems. If he wasn’t being hounded by his manager, Miss Pond, for money from his recitals, he was, as he puts it to Alice, “positively robbed” of seventeen guineas “by an unprincipled
scoundrel” (Letters 160). The scoundrel to whom Dunbar refers is Henry Downing, a young black man living in London whom Dunbar had previously known in Dayton. For Dunbar, every cent, dollar, or guinea counted.

To achieve the middle-class status he longed for, Dunbar needed commercial success to fund his trips to visit Alice, buy a modest house, and be a part of the Washington social circle. In fact, his marriage plans with Alice seem contingent on his ability to earn enough money for a home. In one letter he asks Alice—whose desire for fine quality was as strong or perhaps even stronger than Dunbar’s—whether it might be possible for them to “squeeze along with a six room house at first” until he has a chance to earn more than $1500 a year (Letters 201). And a few days later, he asks her again about the six room option, arguing that many of his Washington friends who make more money than he occupy such homes. (Letters 211). At times, it appears that material success is Dunbar’s sole motivating factor. He continues to write pieces he knows will disappoint Alice, but defends his actions to her on the sole grounds that he is making money: “If you look at today’s Journal [New York] you will see and disprove of the first of my Tenderloin stories, but go on disapproving dear, I am getting money” (Letters 195-96). So strong were his commercial instincts that in a September 26, 1897, letter to Alice he writes of his troubles composing after witnessing a beautiful sunset: “I looked on and tried to make poetry. But all I could think of was you. Of course you are a poem, but I cannot sell you and millions wouldn’t buy you if I could” (Letters 195). His equation of poetry with profit may strike one as
disingenuous—even to the point of making Dunbar appear ready and willing to sell anything, including himself, that people would buy. We know too that Dunbar wasn't above writing whatever would bring in an income even if it promoted white stereotypes about blacks. In fact, some of Dunbar's story contributions to the *New York Journal* made Alice furious. She writes on October 21, 1897:

> Don't, don't write any more such truck as you've been putting in the Journal. Now this is between us as between husband and wife. To everyone else I champion your taste... I argue from all sorts of premises your right to do as you please—but to you darling, I must say—don't. I know it means more money and speedier union for us, but sometimes money isn't all. It is not fair to prostitute your art for "filthy lucre," is it? *(Letters 216)*

Alice's comparison of Dunbar's writing to "prostituting" his art is the same explanation later critics would use to dismiss him, contending that he was a sell-out to his race. But Alice wasn't completely indifferent toward the drive for money either. After her marriage to Dunbar, she urges him in a 1898 letter to make sure that he receives the money owed to him by Will Marion Cook, the composer who adopted Dunbar's lyrics into the hugely successful musical, *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*. She tells him, "Now, in my opinion, money has been made on that cake walk, and since your name is used so muchly, your plain duty is to find out where do you come in" *(Letters 602)*.

But for all their talk and worry over finances, there is a sense of money weariness on the part of both Alice and Paul, a deep longing to get to a place free of such concerns. In an April 6, 1898 letter to Paul Alice poignantly writes, "This money business makes me tired. Lets [sic] go away
somewhere where there isn't anybody or any houses where people don't have to wear clothes or eat dainty things or be bothered" (Letters 578)
Here one detects, perhaps, that impossible desire voiced by many American characters, both real and created, to get beyond--that is, outside the social restrictions which deny the funds, opportunities, and protections that would allow individuals the elusive option to live openly and freely. It is in this frame-work that one must consider the financial struggles of Dunbar. To see him only as a ferocious money-grabber is to overlook the tenuousness of both his literary and social position, the exhaustion of always having to rely upon the favors of others. Like the Hamiltons in The Sport of the Gods, Dunbar experienced what it is like to move within two worlds, one populated by false white paternalism and the other by black disenfranchisement and despair, only to inhabit a perpetual and uneasy "in between."

Indeed it is this state of "inbetweeness" which greatly shapes and fuels Dunbar's literary themes and concerns, and, I argue, accounts for the unevenness of his large volume of work. No doubt characters who are forced to live within such uneasy circumstances, always dependent upon the good will of others--and we can include here everyone from Freddie Brent and the Hamiltons to the slaves characters in his substantial collection of plantation stories--occupy much of Dunbar's fiction and imagination. Regionally and racially displaced individuals, in particular, inhabit important positions in every genre he attempted--from his newspaper essays to his plantation lyrics.
Perhaps no single work better demonstrates the sort of inherent contradictions within Dunbar's own state of literary unease than the 1901 novel *The Fanatics*. As he does in *The Uncalled* and the *Love of Landry*, Dunbar ostensibly focuses on the lives and concerns of white characters. An historical novel set in Ohio in the years right before and during the Civil War, *The Fanatics* explores the attitudes of whites, both Northern and Southern, toward the war and its emancipation of the slaves. Often in the sentimental vein that informs some of his plantation lyrics as well as his fiction (*The Love of Landry* especially), the novel is saturated with lovers' quarrels, discussions of family honor, and heroism in the face of battle. While Dunbar steers away from the vivid realism and destructive naturalism he will attempt in *The Sport of the Gods*, he does probe the role region plays in shaping people's identity and traditions. He sets *The Fanatics*, like many of his pieces, in his home state of Ohio; but in this particular case, the Ohioan pre-Civil War setting becomes hugely significant. Because it borders on slave states and is inhabited by its fair share of Southerners, the Ohio town of Dorbury is politically and emotionally torn by the war. Conflicts abound: a daughter is abandoned by her father (a Union sympathizer) because of her love for a Confederate soldier; an old Southerner is forced by the pressure of public opinion to return to the South, but his son has been brought up in the North and feels no loyalty to the Southern cause; and the entire town is violently divided when a group of free slaves attempts to settle in Dorbury. While the larger section of the narrative favors conventional plotting and characters and its conflicts are predictably resolved (families reunite,
transgressions are forgiven, and the town itself seems a haven of peace), the two chapters which fall directly in the center of the novel and feature the difficulties faced by the displaced free slaves are the most dramatic and most telling portion of the book. As he will do in *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar demonstrates the ostracizing these newly freed slaves endure at the hands of both the black and white communities of Dorbury. By the same token, Dunbar not only reveals the racial hierarchy in place between freed slaves and newly freed slaves, but suggests as well his own ambivalence toward Southern, rural, working class blacks, their migration North, and their methods of survival.

In fact, the ways in which these former slaves cope with their volatile state of living in Dorbury seem to echo Dunbar's own psychological anxieties and literary concerns; for the novel contains, in some form or another, nearly all of Dunbar's recurring topics: his paradoxical treatment of slavery—a combination of nostalgia and cruelty—which shows up in many of his poems and short stories: his criticism (and perhaps self-indictment) of what he dubbed the "Negro aristocracy" who strive to distance themselves from working class blacks, a theme found in *The Sport of the Gods* as well as in the lyrics he wrote for the musical comedy, *In Dahomey*; his expose' of the political and social machine at work in religious organizations and government agencies that surfaces in such stories as "Mr. Cornelius Johnson, Office-Seeker" and "The Scapegoat"; and finally, his exploration of the racial violence that ensues when white brutality meets black desperation, echoed in such stories as "At Shaft 11" and "One Man's Fortune." Like many of his
depictions of slaves, Dunbar combines a contradictory mix of tone and message in *The Fanatics*: part admiration, part disgust, part stereotype, and part sympathy. When they first enter the town, the emancipated slaves pose no real threat to the social order because of their smallness in number as well as their willingness to work as cooks or valets to Union officers. This state, however, quickly expires when more migrants move to Ohio as a place of refuge. In a cool, detached tone, the narrator explains: "But for the most part, they hung on, worrying and embarrassing the soldiers with their importunities, sickening and dying from fatigue and exposure, and conducting themselves altogether like the great, helpless, irresponsible children that they were" (156).

Such a description, embedded as it is in stereotypes of blacks as children makes one wonder whose voice Dunbar may be adopting here: the white townspeople's? the Union officers'? the black community of Dorbury's? Evidence from both his prose pieces as well as his letters suggests that voice may be partly Dunbar's own. In his 1898 essay, "Recession Never," for example, Dunbar disparages the migration of Southern blacks to the Northern cities and employs the same method of infantilizing the would-be migrants as he does in *The Fanatics*. He writes:

> They have been deceived by the glare and glitter of city streets. They are great, naughty, irresponsible children. Their highest ideal is a search for pleasure, and they think they have found it when they indulge in vice. I pity them because they have come to the city to lose so much and to gain so little. . . .They are losing the soft mellow voices which even slavery could not ruin (qtd in *The Dunbar Reader* 41)

As a sophisticated Northerner from Ohio, Dunbar clearly does not see himself as a part of this group who, he seems to imply, fai red much in the
South. His stereotyping here may reveal that to Dunbar region rather than race ultimately defines us.

Indeed Dunbar's depiction of the innocence of these Southern blacks coupled with the vice and glitter of the rising city sounds similar to his contemporaries, naturalist authors such as Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane, who offer comparable versions of city life. In his 1900 novel *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser describes the city as a "human tempter" seducing young rural women who lack "a counselor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations" (2) into their ears. Likewise in *Maggie: Girl of the Streets* (1893) Crane links the city's seduction of working class crowds to its sites of amusement. To Maggie Johnson and the rest of the working class audience attending vaudeville theater, Crane tells us, "this was transcendental realism. Joy always within, and they, like the actor, inevitably without. Viewing it, they hugged themselves in ecstatic pity of their imagined or real condition" (27). The city and its forms of entertainment confuse the very perception of the crowd who, as Dreiser would put it, lack someone to "whisper cautious interpretations" into their ears; indeed they can't seem to distinguish between the real and the imagined.

In *The Sport of the Gods* (1902) Dunbar demonstrates this same process of manipulation in his characterization of Kitty Hamilton, a young innocent black woman from the rural South who is able to resist the fever of New York city until she attends her first vaudeville show. At the theater all of Kit's rationality and clear-sightedness fails; she cannot look
away from the dazzling atmosphere of wonder. Once the orchestra starts, Kit becomes lost in a daze:

Finally, the music struck up one of the numerous negro marches. It was accompanied by the rhythmic patting of feet from all parts of the house. Then the curtain went up on a scene of beauty. It purported to be a grove to which a party of picnickers, the ladies and gentlemen of the chorus, had come for a holiday, and they were telling the audience all about it in crescendos... They were dressed in costumes that were not primarily intended for picnic going. But they could sing, and they did sing, with their voices, their bodies, their souls ...

Kitty was enchanted. The airily dressed women seemed to her like creatures from fairy-land. It is strange how the glare of footlights succeeds in deceiving so many people who are able to see through other delusions. The cheap dresses on the street had not fooled Kitty for an instant, but take the same cheese-cloth, put a little starch into it, and put it on the stage, and she could see only chiffon. (516-17)

The inviting romantic scene, with its display of pastoral bliss and material wealth, draws Kit in completely; her perception is clouded by the very footlights. She is so taken in by the show that she declares, "How I'd like to be an actress and be up there!" (517). After the magical night at the theater, Kit begins to dream about finding success in show biz. Eventually Kit does get her dream: She becomes a showgirl, but not without great costs to her spiritual and physical health. In the end, she succumbs to the fever of New York, inoculating herself from any obligations to her previous life. She lets her mother marry a horse race gambler and when her brother is arrested for murdering his girlfriend, Kitty can only wonder what the act will do to her reputation. Dunbar leaves us with a final picture of Kitty's transformation: "Miss Kitty Hamilton had to be very careful about her nerves and her health. She had experiences, and her
voice was not as good as it used to be, and her beauty had to be aided by cosmetics" (569). Kitty’s surrender to the city has left her a superficial creature holding on to mass produced fantasies. Dunbar’s critique of city living seems particularly harsh and his depiction of Kitty quite problematic. Like Dreiser’s characterization of Carrie Meeber and Crane’s portrayal of Maggie Johnson, Dunbar’s somewhat condescending tone and naturalistic style make him appear as distant from the lives of Southern rural blacks like Kitty Hamilton and the former slaves in *The Fanatics* as Dreiser and Crane are from the struggles of their main characters. Moreover within these characterizations, of course, is that notion that both types of individuals—rural blacks from the South and young white women from the country—are easily fooled and corrupted by the sophisticated and cunning city because they lack the intellectual as well as financial resources to resist her temptations.17

Yet for all his references to the simplicity of rural Southern blacks, Dunbar occasionally reveals his admiration for them. In *The Fanatics* Dunbar praises the former slaves’ determination to journey Northward and compares their character to the “stuff that made the early Puritans” (161). In addition, he treats their effort to find a place of refuge within Dorbury’s black community with compassion and advocacy. Like he does in *The Uncalled* and in his short stories, “Trial Sermons on Bull-Skin,”

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17 See his stories “The Intervention of Peter” and “Mt. Pigmam’s Christmas Possum” as well as his lyrics “The Deserted Plantation,” “Accountability,” and “The Old Cabin” for more examples of Dunbar’s simplistic and nostalgic depiction of Southern blacks. See his stories “Jimsella,” “Silas Jackson,” and “Finding Zach” for further tales about the corrupting influence of Northern cities upon honest and innocent Southern young black men.
"A Matter of Doctrine," and "Old Abe's Conversion," Dunbar exposes the hypocrisy and provincial mind set of the Christian body of Dorbury who would exclude the newly freed slaves on the grounds that the distance between them and the black aristocracy is insurmountable. Dunbar writes, "These outcast families seeking God, had stepped upon the purple robes of these black aristocrats, and they were as one for defiance" (162).

Eventually, when a band of the most violent white ruffians unite to attack the newly arrived blacks, the divisions between the freed blacks and the former slaves dissolve. Together the black community of Dorbury silently gathers out of mutual protection. Dunbar explains:

Not a word was spoken among them. It was not time for talk. But they huddled together in the half-lit room and only their hard, labored breathing broke the silence. To the freemen, it meant the maintenance of all that they had won by quiet industry. To the contrabands, it meant the life or death of all their hopes of manhood. Now all artificial lines were broken down, and all of them were brother by the tie of necessity. (173)

Dunbar, however, appears unwilling to sustain this mood of racial solidarity and complicates his portrayal of the black community by injecting this situation with two problematic elements: He makes their only white friend and supporter a Southerner who refers to everyone as "boys," a gesture, the narrator explains, that made them grin "broadly and hopefully at the familiar conduct and manner of address of the South which they knew and loved" (171); and he indicates that their methods of revolution are largely primitive, and not rational. When a mob of drunken whites begins their attack upon the black community, a "wild-eyed" (176) black youngster confronts the white leader, stabbing him in the
heart. The act, however, was not committed out of principle or ideology, "but because the white man made his mother cry the day before" (176). Thus Dunbar concludes this highly explosive chapter not with a nod toward the potency of race-consciousness or political revolt, but a reverberation of the simplistic depiction of Southern blacks he offered earlier.

Within this wavering—Dunbar’s desire to honor his mother’s stories of plantation survival while at the same time embracing the possibilities that the coming century offered to a young black man of his talents—lies the rich ambiguity of his portrayal of African American experience, set as it is against a backdrop where the very idea of race was being debated, constructed, and politicized. On the one hand, Dunbar labored to draw a clear distinction between himself and the black folks he often portrayed in his work. The letters between him and Alice, for example, betray what Kevin Gaines defines as "a racialized black middle-class ideology," (xx) an unconscious internalized racism that reflected a middle-class anxiety about poor blacks as a threatening source of moral and social disorder. In a February 8, 1898 letter to Paul, Alice strongly advises him during his stay in New York to find a first-class white hotel. She writes,

Then you will be away from the—well, niggers. You see I care more of your name and reputation than you do. I want you to be dignified, reserved, difficult to access. You cheapen yourself too often by being too friendly with inferior folks (Letters 433).

And Paul explains in another letter regarding his reputation, and specifically of accusations about his romantic associations with white
women, "If I go out, there is talk. If I stay in, they say I am out somewhere with a white woman; so I shall just let them talk. It is just for this reason that I am so much with Miss Rebekah Baldwin. . . . She isn’t a nigger and she hates them as much as I do” (291) Likewise, in a 1901 essay “Negro Society,” published in the Saturday Evening Post, Dunbar is quick to point out the difference between Washington D.C. ’s sophisticated leading black citizens and its ordinary, run-of-the-mill working class blacks. He writes about the group of black elite of which he is a member:

. . .it is hardly to be wondered at that some of us wince a wee bit when we are all thrown into the lump as the peasant or working class. In aims and hopes for our race, it is true, we are all at one, but it must be understood, when we come to consider social life, that the girls who cook in your kitchens and the men who serve in your dining-rooms do not dance in our parlors. (qtd. in Bruce 66)

Because his essay is directly addressed to white middle class readers, Dunbar’s desire to intellectually define himself against the black masses reflects more than simply internalized racism, but a concerted effort, on perhaps the part of many aspiring middle-class blacks, to urge the-powers-that-be to recognize the very existence of a black middle class.

No doubt Dunbar’s representation of Southern working class blacks relies heavily upon stereotypes, but this is not to suggest that he couldn’t incorporate racial protest within a Southern setting.¹⁸ Consider his 1904

¹⁸ It’s important to note here as well that Dunbar relied heavily upon stereotypes of Southern whites too. The genteel Southerners who occupy his fiction in such stories as “The Lynching of Jube Benson,” “The Colonel’s Awakening,” and “Cahoots” often serve as stand-ins for a kind of Southern ideology. Maurice Oakley and Colonel Saunders in The Sport of the Gods, for example, represent a kind of Southern paternalism and honor which places a white man’s reputation well and above a black man’s freedom. As such they function more as symbols and ideas than as
story, “The Lynching of Jube Benson”—perhaps his most racially charged work—in which Dunbar exposes the false and systematic construction of race and racism. The story opens with a group of white genteel Southerners gathering in a library and in between puffs on their cigars entertaining the notion of what it would be like to observe an actual lynching. Dunbar sets the scene of political and social luxury nicely, including in his group of three an ambitious young reporter, a Virginia gentleman (and owner of the library), and a physician whose hair “was freely sprinkled with gray,” but who could have hardly been past thirty. While the others express a desire to see a real lynching, it is Dr. Melville who says he would “avoid” such an affair as he had once “took a prominent part” in a lynching. The men “drew their chairs eagerly up to the doctor’s,” (224) and thus begins the inner frame story narrated by Melville. He tells of his early days of practicing medicine in the town of Bradford, “a small and primitive place” where he treated white and black patients. Eventually the doctor takes notice of Annie, “a beautiful young girl of seventeen” and the daughter of Hiram Daly, “one of the more prosperous of the townsfolk” (225). Annie’s most faithful servant is Jube Benson whom Melville describes as “a fellow whom everybody trusted; an apparently steady-going, grinning sort,” who was “completely under Miss Annie’s thumb, would fetch and carry for her like a faithful dog” (226).

individual characters. Interestingly enough, white Northerners in Dunbar’s fiction such as Walter Stewart from The Fanatics and Skaggs from The Sport of the Gods seem more fully fleshed out as individuals. This inconsistency may reveal, after all, that Dunbar, as a Northerner, was much more adept and comfortable writing about individuals who shared his same locale. His characterizations may, in fact, have more to do with region than with race.
Melville's description of Jube as the happy, faithful plantation "darky" underscores Dunbar's subtle, biting critique of these Southern gentlemen and their false, but well-guarded assumptions about race. Jube demonstrates his faithfulness again and again in the story—aiding the doctor in his courtship of Annie, even nursing Melville during a three-month illness. But even Jube's reputation for generosity and fidelity is not enough to prevent Melville and the rest of the town from turning upon him after Annie is found bruised and bleeding. In true melodramatic fashion Annie, opens her eyes and with her last breath murmurs, "That black--" (232). Jube, nowhere to be seen, is immediately accused of the crime and Melville and the rest of townsfolk search the woods "for this human tiger." Such a metaphor, however, would be better suited for the good doctor and his clan. Melville explains: "My throat throbbed dryly, but water nor whiskey would not have quenched my thirst. The thought has come to me since that now I could interpret the panther's desire for blood and sympathize with it, but then I thought nothing" (234). Only after the incident is Melville ready to accept the full brutality of his action, the blood-lust compelling his search for Jube. When the party finally finds Jube, he expresses shock and deep sorrow about Annie's murder, and begins to explain that he was visiting "his gal Lucy." Melville pounces upon him—and here Dunbar offers his most stirring depiction of learned racism—screaming at Jube:

"You lie!" I said, and my hands were busy helping others bind him upon a horse. Why did I do it? I don't know. A false education, I reckon, one false from the beginning. I saw his black face glooming there in the half light, and I could only think of him as a monster. It's tradition. At first I was
told that the black man would catch me, and when I got over that, they taught me that the devil was black, and when I had recovered from the sickness of that belief, here was Jube and his fellows with faces of menacing blackness. There was only one conclusion: This black man stood for all the powers of evil, the result of whose machination had been gathering in my mind from childhood up. (236)

That Dunbar places these words in a white, Southern professional’s mouth in some ways disturbs the narrative’s structure and ideology and reveals white anxieties about racially motivated brutality. Dunbar’s juxtaposition of theme and setting is profound: Melville has been telling his gentlemen cohorts a story of blood lust and violence in the most civilized of settings (a library). It may have been possible for them to avoid being implicated, at some level, by Melville’s story—set as it is in a “primitive town” of mostly common folk. But at this point in the narrative, the voyeurism of his listeners is suddenly jostled. For Melville is one of them and as he comes face to face with his socialization, his training in brutality and violence, so must they. Melville’s and his gang’s objectification of Jube as a human tiger thus turns back upon them. For as Leonard Cassuto argues, “The process of racial objectification thus reverberates back to the white subjects, calling their humanity into question in a different way, and thereby making them grotesque also” (6).

In this case, the way the white subjects of this “primitive town” treat their lynching victim in this scene, speaks for a type of callousness that we commonly call “inhuman” and “monstrous.”

Conditioned by his culture and his traditions (both racial and regional) to associate blackness with hostility and evil, Melville vengefully participates in Jube’s hanging. He tells his listeners: “No one was masked.
We knew each other. Not even the culprit’s face was covered, and the last I remember of him as he went into the air was a look of sad reproach that will remain with me until I meet him face to face again” (237-38). Their excessive self-confidence which enables them to conduct the violence upon Jube unmasked parallels real-life accounts of Ku Klux Klan lynchings. In her study of a Athens Georgia Klan, Nancy MacLean includes photos from Klan archives which show its members posing with the corpse of their victim. In one photograph from a 1920 lynching in Marietta, Georgia, a group of men gather around a black man hanging from a wooden pole. In an act of gross indifference, they have placed a sign under him which reads “Please do not wake.” Dunbar demonstrates this same level of callousness in his more overtly political poem about lynching, “The Haunted Oak.” Here he indicts the most powerful and supposedly most genteel of the townsmen and reveals the psychological interplay between racial masquerade and racial violence. The poem’s speaker is the voice of the oak itself which mourns the death of a guiltless man hung on its branches by the town’s elite gentlemen:

Oh, the judge, he wore a mask of
black,

And the doctor one of white,

And the minister, with his oldest
son,

Was curiously bedight. (219 CP)

Here as in “The Lynching of Jube Benson,” the veil of Southern white paternalism—the real mask of the poem—is literally torn down: with
calm self-righteousness, the townspeople identify themselves as combatants of justice against the crime of blackness, and with that action, expose themselves as perpetrators of heinous cruelty. Anxieties about whiteness and its association with hostility and evil are fully fleshed out in the last scene of the story when Jube's brother Ben rushes upon them, too late to save Jube, with the true murderer: Tom Skinner, "the worst white ruffian in the town" whose face "was blackened to imitate a Negro's" (239).

Here Dunbar plays out the full consequences of blackfacing: off the minstrel stage, it becomes more than just a performance of white fantasies and anxieties—more than just a chance for whites to indulge their own sense of 'difference' and transgress the social order—but a ferocious display of white bestiality. With subtle brilliance, Dunbar allows Melville to satiate his listeners' appetite for a lynching while exposing their passive participation in the violence of white racism, a dish which ultimately leaves them repulsed.

In his 1902 novel *The Sport of the Gods* Dunbar also unveils the pretense of rural Southern gentility as well as the hypocrisy of urban Northern liberalism, exposing each of them as racist terrains. And like "The Lynching of Jube Benson" Dunbar complicates the narrative's satire by incorporating such issues as racial crossing and racial identity. As Lawrence Rodgers masterfully points out in his essay on *The Sport of the Gods*, the story of the Hamilton family's banishment from the plantation of the South to the urban North demonstrates the consequences of "acting white," and reveals the dangers involved in one Southern black family's
attempt to be middle-class. Falsely accused and convicted of stealing money from Charles Oakley, a wealthy white Southerner who runs a plantation style household, Barry Hamilton, Oakley’s loyal black worker, is thrown in prison and the rest of his family is forced to migrate to New York city. As he does in “The Lynching of Jube Benson” and in “The Ingrate,” Dunbar demonstrates the futility of blacks’ loyalty to whites. Despite Barry’s years of fidelity to Oakley, he is immediately suspected of stealing money from Oakley when it turns out that Barry had deposited over eight hundred dollars, his life savings, in a bank account on the same day as the theft. With this event, according to Rodgers, Dunbar subverts what some of his critics accuse him of doing in many of his short stories: constructing an image of plantation harmony. As Rodgers puts it:

In Berry’s conviction, Dunbar dramatizes a truth of racial distinction that was brought to national literary consciousness in the wake of Plessy through Mark Twain’s flawed reading of southern racial hypocrisies, Pudd’nhead Wilson. . . While Barry, unlike Tom, has not “passed” as white, he has committed the equally serious offense of disrespecting the rigidly enforced social implications of the separate but equal barrier—“acting” white, modulating his behavior, as Houston Baker notes, “based on an ideal of frugal, convivial Christian respectability that he assumes is the moving force of the southern white world.” (49)

The ramifications of the Hamilton’s aspiration to be middle class, and thus to be white, are equally felt in both the white and black communities of the South. “The Tribe of Benjamin,” of which Barry was the treasurer, feel certain of his guilt and seem perplexed that after running an audit on his accounts everything was legitimate. The A. M. E. church, where the Hamiltons were active members, also “hastened to disavow sympathy with him, and to purge itself of contamination by turning him out” (492).
Dunbar offers some explanation for this disturbing behavior—loyalty to whites could often be stronger than to “one of their own kind” and many feared for their own position in the community—but perhaps the most damning reason is the Hamiltons’ ambition, their unflinching belief in the promise of social mobility. Such an aspiration stirs much dissent among his enemies who rationalize Berry’s demise in their own terms:

“Tell me, tell me,” said one, “you needn’t tell me dat a bird kin fly so high dat he don’ have to come down some time. An’ w’en he do light, honey, my Lawd, how he flop!”

“Mistah Rich Niggah,” said another. “He wanted to dress his wife an’ chillen lak white folks, did he? Well he foun’ out, he foun’ out. By de time de jedge git thoo wid him he w on’t be hol’in his haid so high” (493)

The Hamilton’s practice of American consumerism is what ultimately alienates them from the black community who look upon such actions as a direct violation of racial solidarity. To aspire to be wealthy is to aspire to be white. For the Hamilton’s black neighbors, there can be no space for a black middle class and nor for those who wish themselves as such. And they carry this policy out to the full. After Barry is imprisoned and his son Joe tries to find work as a barber, he meets only with scorn and resentment. Accustomed to cutting the hair of whites, Joe eventually disdains to find employment among black barber shops—“this was something of a condescension,” Dunbar explains, “for Berry Hamilton’s son” (500)—but is shamefully turned away by each of the proprietors. In cruel fashion, Joe’s internalized racism returns to haunt him. “He had never yet shaved a black chin or put shears to what he termed ‘naps,’ and he was proud of it,” (500) Dunbar tells us. And when Joe is begging for

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employment, the proprietor echoes the young Hamilton’s words, arguing that he is unqualified and too proud to work at his shop. Forced to flee to New York, the Hamilton’s strong Southern traditions and morals become infected by the fever of urban seduction and corruption. Joe ends up in prison after killing his girlfriend, Kitty (the daughter) becomes a self-absorbed showgirl, and Fannie, out of desperation for money, marries a race-track gambler.

What makes the Hamilton’s effort to cross lines of class and possibly color so significant to Dunbar’s satire on racial, economic, and regional hierarchy is that he refuses to tell it in isolation. He presents, instead, a deceptively parallel movement across lines of class and color by introducing Mr. Skaggs, a somewhat disreputable journalist, into the novel. Although he is white, Skaggs frequents the Banner Club, “an institution,” the narrator ironically tells us, “for the lower education of African American youth” (523). The club apparently strikes the curiosity of those “who wanted to see something of the other side of life.” (524). Skaggs is among those wanting to see how the other half lives—a tendency, as I indicated in the last chapter on Crane, that we will see time and again among white writers of this period. For Skaggs, according to the narrator is not alone. Dunbar writes: “Among those, white visitors were not infrequent—those who were young enough to be fascinated by the bizarre and those who were old enough to know it was all in the game” (524). Although he attempts to pose as just another member of the club, telling Joe on their first meeting, “there ain’t an once of prejudice in my body,” (525) it’s obvious to all the regulars that Skaggs is slumming. Even the
naive Joe catches on quickly, noticing that "Skaggsy struck one as being aggressively unprejudiced" (525). With brutal satire, Dunbar has Skaggs explain why he chooses to visit the Banner Club, what fascination the racial Other holds for him:

I get more inspiration than I could get at any of the greater clubs in New York... I like coloured people anyway. It's natural. You see my father had a big plantation and owned lots of slaves,—no offence, of course, but it was the custom of that time—I've played with little darkies ever since I could remember (525)

That Skaggs finds an aesthetic or, at least, careerist interest in blacks is certainly probable. But his story about growing up on a plantation, the narrator explains, is entirely erroneous. "It was the same old story that the white who associates with negroes from volition usually tells to explain his taste" (525).

As he has been doing throughout the novel, here Dunbar not only critiques the plantation mythology of racial harmony, he also offers a psychological reason for romanticized racism. The fact that Dunbar chooses to make Skaggs a journalist for a "yellow" newspaper may reveal a distrust he had not only for muckraking, but for whites who go slumming and thus befriend and socialize with blacks for purposes of their art, their career, or both. Although Dunbar's career precedes the rise of modernism, even during his time he witnessed a renewed interest in blacks on the part of white writers. He certainly was familiar with the works of Harris, Page, and Riley—all of whom tried to replicate Southern rural black dialect—but in this passage Dunbar seems to be anticipating modern white writers' fascination with Northern urban black dialect as

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well, of whom we can include here William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. As Aldon Lynne Nielson puts it:

The evidence offered by the writings of white poets during the era of high modernism demonstrates that they, like most white intellectuals of the time, through writing more and more often of the nonwhite, were frequently guilty of a type of aesthetic slumming. Many seemed to feel as did Carl Van Vechten that “the squalor of Negro life, the vice of Negro life, offer a wealth of novel, exotic, picturesque material to the artist.” (52)

Dunbar seems purposefully critiquing such white artists in his portrayal of Skaggs who serves a dubiously useful function in the novel. True to his inclination, Skaggs gets the lead he’s been waiting for when a drunk Joe confesses that his father never stole any money from Oakley. On this thin lead, Skaggs approaches his editor who agrees to send Skaggs to the South to do some investigating. And here Skaggs, astute poser that he is, manages to convince the community of Southern white gentlemen that he is one of them. He infiltrates their circle, wins their trust, and before long has them telling him all about Barry Hamilton’s arrest.

As he does in “The Lynching of Jube Benson,” Dunbar exposes the systematic and false pretense of Southern white paternalism by recording private conversations among the closest and most intimate friends. In fact, Dunbar makes this section of the narrative feel like eavesdropping, where the reader, like Skaggs, is positioned as an outsider posing as an insider. In this atmosphere of assumed comfort, these Southern gentlemen reveal just how intertwined Southern honor and sanctioned racism are. The most vocal and respected of the men—Colonel Saunders—explains that he doesn’t believe Barry Hamilton is guilty based upon his
observation of Oakley's changed behavior. According to the Colonel, the sociable Maurice Oakley, in the course of one day, became "a recluse, shunning visitors and dreading society" (572). No one knows what brought about the attack, the Colonel explains, but when the doctor was called to examine Oakley, the man "kept clutching his hand over his heart" (573). The Colonel speculates that Oakley, in true Hester Prynne fashion, is guarding a secret that has something to do with Barry Hamilton's arrest. He surmises that Oakley discovered the missing money and, out of pride, refuses to tell the truth and confess that he was wrong. It is the so-called missing money that he clutches near his heart. When Skaggs expresses his surprise that no one has brought the real solution, the real "matter to light," (573) he receives a lesson on the Southern code of honor whereby a white man's reputation takes precedence over a black man's freedom. The Colonel tells him, "as for bringing it to light, no one would think of doing that. It would be sure to hurt Oakley's feelings, and he is one of our best families" (574). Although Skaggs eventually discovers the real source of Oakley's guilt--the letter containing his brother Frank's confession to the crime--and Berry's "crime" is pardoned by the state, Dunbar provides no happy resolution for the Hamiltons. Upon his release Barry learns that his son is in prison, his daughter is a chorus girl, and his wife is remarried. Skaggs, oblivious to Barry's tragic circumstance, comments naively, "This is a very happy occasion, Mr. Hamilton" (580). Feeling pleased that his newspaper had done its proper work, "it demanded the right to crow to its heart's satisfaction," (580) Skaggs indulges in a little self-righteousness. Barry essentially becomes Skaggs'
showpiece, a trophy to his open-minded white liberalism. As the narrator sarcastically explains, Skaggs works for the *New York Universe* and "The *Universe* had always claimed to be the friend of all poor and oppressed humanity, and every once in a while it did something to substantiate its claim, where-upon it stood off and said to the public, 'Look you what we have done, and behold how great we are, the friend of the people'!" (578).

Within these two variant outcomes in crossing lines of color and class—the Hamilton's attempt versus Skaggs' attempt—Dunbar exposes the fundamental asymmetry of the American racial situation. The Hamilton's perceived move from black to white, via the promise of social mobility, results in ostracizing by both black and white communities. Their crossing is viewed as suspect, a misleading campaign to be what they are not. In attempting to "act white," the Hamiltons, in the eyes of their critics—both black and white—may be trying to metaphorically pass. And as Samira Kawash has pointed out, passing from black to white unleashes all kinds of social chaos because it exposes one of America's silent and revered falsehoods: "Apparent whiteness is no guarantee of true whiteness" (135). Indeed the very stability of racial knowledge, the main foundation for racial hierarchy, is challenged. "Between the 'perception' of whiteness and the 'knowledge' of blackness," writes Kawash, "an abyss open up, an abyss that threatens not only confusion but the very orders of being" (125). While the Hamiltons do not literally pass as white, their very striving after a middle class white existence does upset their small Southern community and they are severely punished. Skaggs, on the other hand, is free to define himself—even as black if he so desires—and
will face no negative consequences for his association. In fact, his reputation and his career are rewarded because of his slumming. He may be undertaking a strategy more akin to blackfacing, which unlike passing, typically serves to reinforce the social order and racial categories. Like the array of modern white writers who frequented Harlem nightclubs during the twenties and were fascinated by black dialect, Skaggs can pose as a participant and admirer of black culture, but still enjoy the legal and social protection that his white skin accords. As Eric Lott points out in his study of blackface minstrelsy:

The very form of blackface acts—an investiture in black bodies—seems a manifestation of the particular desire to try on the accents of 'blackness' and demonstrates the permeability of the color line . . . it was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made a black face minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure. (6)

Certainly Skaggs is anxious to prove himself a friend to the black community, but in his metaphorical adoption of "blackness," I would argue, contra to Lott, that Skaggs (and we can include a number of modernist white writers here) doesn't expose the color line's permeability, but rather its impenetrability—especially during an era in American history when racial and ethnic categories were being defined and sometimes rigidly policed. No doubt blackfacing satiated whites' fascination with black culture and may have even provided an outlet for what Lott terms white panic and anxiety, but unlike passing, racial boundaries are clearly defined. The exaggerated layer of blackness applied to white skin sought to continually remind observers that what they were
viewing was simply a fiction—that beneath the mask an authentic white face was always lurking.

Throughout his career, Dunbar clearly recognized the double standard imposed on racial performance and representation: racial masquerade is the province of whites only. As his friend James Weldon Johnson would later say, “it is deemed quite seemly for a white person to represent a Negro on the stage, but a violation of some inner code for a Negro to represent a white person.” Dunbar often suffered from accusations of undertaking, through his portrayal of and identification with white characters, to metaphorically pass as white. Thus his crossing of the color line, his movement from black to white zones of experiences and the criticism leveled at such a maneuver raise questions about the political ramifications of imagining/becoming other when one is already identified as the other. As we have and shall see, when Crane represents working class Irish immigrants, or Wallace Stevens shows an interest in black dialect, or Willa Cather painstakingly tries to record the language and stories of her immigrant neighbors, these artists are acknowledged for their sensitivity and curiosity—in the same way, Dunbar portrays Skaggs’ reception when he is able to obtain Barry Hamilton’s release. But when Dunbar attempts to render white experience, his politics as well as his psychological state become suspect. He is accused of not knowing himself, not having a firm grasp of his identity—“a double-conscious brother in the veil”—a player, a sell-out, a confused soul. Crane, Cather, and Stevens are free to define themselves in ways that Dunbar cannot.
According to the white literary establishment of the early twentieth century, then, the option to experiment with various personae, to try on different racial/ethnic identities—what, it can be argued, all the authors of this study have endeavored to do—is largely a maneuver permitted to white artists of the twentieth century, but not black artists. Designated as white, and thus without a "race," Crane, Cather, and Stevens could easily, and without social, literary, or political repercussion, try on other racial identities. But the white reading public and publishing companies' message to Dunbar was clear: his artistic duty and role was as the representative spokesman of his own race, not the poet or writer of universal (what they would define as white) experience.

What this literary double standard ignores, however, is the fluidity of racial identities and the complexity of racial crossings. As Susan Gubar explains:

What the history of race change teaches is that race and color are not immutable categories but classifications with permeable boundaries. Or, to put it another way, neither black nor white fill-in-the-blank—artistic productions, experiences, groups of people—can be understood as unitary, entire, monolithic, coherent (247).

Because he was forced to live between competing provinces—white and black, poverty and prestige, patronage and abandonment—Dunbar's life and work often resist clear categorization. Thus his attempts to enact the sorts of "race changes," of which Gubar speaks, disturb a much beloved falsehood among white America: the artificiality of racial categories—a revelation that has caused unease and ambivalence among many of his readers over the years. Whether Dunbar intended to cause such a stir
among readers and critics of his day and ours is probably unlikely. He claimed that publicity made him "feel like a man walking a slack rope above thousands of spectators, who knows himself an amateur and is every moment expecting to fall." Such an uncomfortable position for any young author to be in, certainly. But perhaps even more so for a young black author whose writing painfully exposes the on-going tension between his drive for individual and literary freedom and the white literary establishment's desire for marketable black poetry and fiction. As Dickson D. Bruce argues,

For Dunbar, all issues of identity and social relations were intimately tied to questions of human freedom and authenticity. He saw freedom as something that, even under the best of circumstances, was hard to find. The peculiarities of American race relations only made the task more difficult. . . . freedom involved not simply an ability to choose one’s place in the social order but, more, a finding of a self that was not constrained by the artificial demands of any social order (85).

This urge toward authenticity and artistic freedom, especially in regards to race, consumed many writers of the early twentieth century. Dunbar's struggles to create a larger space from which to draw his material and subject matter—to transcend the lines of color that imposed a false system of racial authenticity and hierarchy—tells us much about the social forces at play in the early twentieth century which would make his effort, in the eyes of many past and present critics, appear so disingenuous, and yet the same undertaking by his white contemporaries, seem so generous.
CHAPTER V

RECOVERING (M)OTHERS: THE SEARCH FOR HOME IN CATHER’S RACIAL AND ETHNIC CROSSINGS

“I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women... I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person’s skin” — Willa Cather in a 1913 interview

“I seek in fiction some hint that imagination can change the world, that the world is unfinished but fixable—a hint that we are not always doomed to make copies of copies but possess the power to see differently and the guts and good fortune to render accessible to others some glimmer of what our souls experience. Stories, after all, are a gift. Unless we are willing to imagine what it might feel like inside another skin, we are imprisoned within our own.”

—John Edgar Wideman in his introduction to The Best American Short Stories 1996

Born just one year after Paul Laurence Dunbar, in 1873, Willa Cather's life and writing career couldn’t have seemed more unlike his than if they lived a century apart. When Dunbar was working as an elevator operator in Dayton, Ohio in 1891, Cather was attending the University of Nebraska, the first in her family to go to college. When he was struggling to promote his first collection of poetry and giving recitations for very small wages, she was working as an editor of Home Monthly and, later that year, at The Pittsburgh Leader.

But to look at their publication history may tell us another story. When Dunbar published his first collection of poetry in 1892 at his own
expense, Cather had only two small essays to her name, both submitted by her professors to *The Nebraska State Journal*. And by the time he had died of tuberculosis in 1906, Dunbar had published seven collections of poetry, three collections of short stories, and four novels. In that same year, Cather took a job at *McClure's* magazine, but had only to her literary credit, a collection of poems entitled *April Twilights*—which, like many of Dunbar's poems in standard English, betrayed a nineteenth century style and diction—and *The Troll Garden*, her first collection of short stories that included "Paul's Case" and "A Wagner Matinee." Had she died at the same age Dunbar did—34—there would be scarcely anything to say about Willa Cather, besides perhaps a passing reference to her contribution of "Paul's Case." But she was blessed with a long life and had ample opportunities to flourish during an age when it was possible for an unmarried, fiercely independent woman to make a rich and rewarding career and life for herself. She enjoyed a long apprenticeship, not publishing her first novel until 1912 when she was forty and, as a result of the accumulated income from her ten years as an editor and teacher, was able to devote the rest of her life solely to her art. Although Cather herself would never acknowledge that part of her success owed something to the efforts of early feminists, she, unlike Dunbar, benefited from good historical timing. While the color line continued to segregate and isolate many black artists from literary honors and economic security, the gender line was, ever so gradually, beginning to wear. More and more women writers of the early twentieth century were beginning to transgress the age-old provision that women couldn't write serious literature. Cather, even
though she would have agreed partially with such claims about women writers, was among those female artists who were pioneering literary terrain which, up to now, had been the sole possession of men.\(^{19}\)

Despite the discrepancies in their lives and careers, however, Dunbar and Cather share vital commonalities that manage to cross color, class, and gender lines: both gather their primary artistic materials during their youth; both find these sources in oral traditions—in the stories told to them by older individuals (for Dunbar, it is the narratives of former slaves like his mother and for Cather, it is the tales from her Bohemian and Scandinavian neighbors); and both root these oral traditions in the soils of home—a term that represents for the two of them, a particular place as well as an imagined, untapped region that they can only travel to via their artistic powers. Such an artistic framework, forging narratives out of past traditions within regions close to home, can lead, at times, to a form of nostalgia that some critics and readers spurn. And certainly both Dunbar and Cather have suffered from accusations that their work is painfully sentimental—Dunbar, in particular, is disparaged for his plantation tales which seem to romanticize slavery; and Cather’s last novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), which centers around a Virginian slave mistress, is criticized for the same tendency.

Yet to understand the creative process of each author’s endeavor to gather his/her material from old sources is to examine the complexity and tension between cultural exchange and cultural appropriation. While Dunbar may have profited from the plantation tales and used the stories

\(^{19}\) For Cather’s views of women writers see Sharon O’Brien’s *The Emerging Voice* pages 177-189.
of former slaves (including his mother) to advance his own career, he nonetheless saw his life and struggle intertwined with theirs. His lyrics and stories of slave life represent this complexity: they are as much about nostalgia as they are about exploitation, suffering, and racial solidarity.\textsuperscript{20} The same is true of Cather who saw her effort to record the oral narratives of her European immigrant neighbors as a chance to get "inside another person's skin," to fully experience what it meant to be an exile in a strange land. In many ways, Cather's \textit{Sapphira and the Slave Girl}-(1940)-which relies heavily on the oral stories of the slave women—is an attempt at such a "racechange"—an opportunity for Cather to get out of the very skin, as John Edgar Wideman puts it, that "imprisons" her. But, like some of Dunbar's plantation stories, it is a troubling and problematic novel because it tells us more about Cather's own longings than it does about her "slave girl's" (Nancy's) physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her white mistress. Cather's personal desires—for origin, for home, and for mother—begin to appropriate the narrative; and in order to fulfill this yearning, she calls upon the labor and assistance of racial and ethnic outsiders.

To fully understand Cather's strategy of racial movement in \textit{Sapphira and the Slave Girl}, however, one needs to start much earlier in Cather's career. Indeed most of her fiction is peopled by main characters who often undertake the journey home, the journey back to some kind of

\textsuperscript{20} In her introduction to Dunbar's collected poems, Joanne Braxton points out that in Dunbar's poem "The Deserted Plantation"—which is often accused of sentimentalism—the antebellum black folk are "imagined on their own time and in an Afrocentric environment where they can enjoy each other's company and where they are self-identified rather than focused on the master or the degree of their oppression" (xxvii).
Motherland; and inevitably these rites of passages involve groups who have historically been cut off from their places of origin: European Immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans. Not only do Cather's characters create and forge an alliance with racial/ethnic outsiders—dead as well as living—in order to recover their own forgotten roots, they also turn to these figures in order to lament the passing of another time, a lost age. In this chapter, I want to trace Cather's efforts to cross ethnic and racial lines via her faith in the capacity of art and youth to reconnect with a past era as well as an altered landscape. Specifically, I wish to demonstrate how Cather's immersion in European immigrant culture during her childhood not only provided her with a subject matter for her writing, it also influenced the way she envisioned the artist's creative process and obligations. By analyzing three of Cather's novels as told or seen through the eyes of young people who happen to be white and, in two of the cases, orphans—*My Antonia, The Professor's House,* and the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—I will illustrate how European immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans function as substitute parents and nurturers for white youth as well as symbols for a pre-materialist world.

Racial/ethnic outsiders often represent, for Cather, the symbols of a preindustrial world still untouched by what she referred to as "the hard molds of American provincialism" (*Nebraska* 623). Like Wallace Stevens, Cather will use individuals outside of Anglo-American culture to critique what she calls "the ugly crest of materialism" (*Nebraska* 624) that has settled over industrial America during the twentieth century. But
Cather’s frustration with the system and her reliance upon these individuals manifests itself in very different ways. As I will argue in the final chapter, Stevens’ critique of American capitalism via the safe guise of blackface stems from his own personal frustration with being expelled from the bosom of bourgeois life into the adult male world of economic self-reliance. What motivates Cather’s criticism seems much more culturally-based. Cather sees the rise in capitalism as movement away from craftsmanship and artistry toward “showy extravagance” (“Nebraska” 625).  

She laments in a 1923 essay, that in the early twentieth century we are seeing a “coming generation which tries to cheat its aesthetic sense by buying things instead of making anything” (“Nebraska” 624). Her hope for rectifying the situation also lies in the imaginative powers of youth. She predicts that the children and grandchildren of the current generation “will go back to the old sources of culture and wisdom—not as a duty, but with burning desire” (“Nebraska” 625). One could almost make the claim that nearly all of Cather’s young characters—from Thea Kronborg to Jim Burden to Tom Outland—seek out “old sources of culture and wisdom.” And their burning desires are almost consistently fulfilled by forming emotional ties to racial/ethnic outsiders.

21 It should be added here that both Stevens and Cather shared an anxiety about capitalism’s affects on the arts. They knew that the growing public demand for more popular forms of writing (such as journalism) had limited the career prospects of many emerging writers of fiction and poetry. Both, in fact, leave careers as journalists. See Joan Richardson’s biography The Early Years page 128 for a discussion of Stevens’ departure from the New York Tribune.
For Cather, the source of the imaginative life that informs one’s art is simply “cremated youth” (Willa Cather in Person 36). “A child’s attitude toward everything is an artist’s attitude,” (460) says Thea Kronborg, Cather’s heroine in The Song of the Lark. A brief review of Cather’s novels—especially her early ones—demonstrates just how frequently and seriously she emphasized this connection between artist and child, creation and youth. In O Pioneers! (1913) Song of the Lark (1915), My Antonia (1918), A Lost Lady (1923), and even to some extent Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) Cather either employs a youthful point of view or a youthful consciousness to capture the life and language of her characters. Many of these young people—like Jim Burden and Tom Outland—are orphans who are either forced or compelled to leave their homeland; and feeling perhaps something akin to how their creator felt when she moved at the age of eight from Virginia to Nebraska (“for the first week or two on the homestead,” Cather writes, “I had that kind of contraction of the stomach that comes from homesickness”) they construct for themselves adoptive families composed of European immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans. But, as I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, Cather is much more willing to sustain this connection between white characters and older racial/ethnic outsiders when her white characters are younger. Strong ties between adults who do not share the same racial category are much more scarce in her fiction. Her philosophical and artistic position may relate to Leslie Fiedler’s observations in Waiting for the End. He argues, “Born theoretically white, we are permitted to pass our childhoods as imaginary Indians, our
adolescence as imaginary Negroes, and only then are expected to settle
down to being what we really are: white once more “ (134). This “settling
down” impulse often occurs among Cather’s white characters when they
reach maturity. Jim Burden leaves Antonia Shimerda behind to marry a
woman of his own race and social class. Tom Outland gives up his dream
of being an imaginary Indian and goes off to die in a real war. Cather
herself leaves Nebraska and her immigrant friends behind to pursue a
writing career in bigger cities: Pittsburgh and New York.

In both Cather’s life and her art, youth is a time of freedom and
even experimentation. Many biographers over the years have noted
Cather’s adventures as a youth experimenting with her own persona—
cross-dressing, cutting her hair short, calling herself William Cather. They
have offered various explanations for it: youthful rebellion, a budding
desire for invention, signs of her awakening lesbianism. I would suggest
that it is a combination of all three of these factors. Yet it’s interesting to
note that by the time she graduated from the University of Nebraska, she
changed her name back to Willa, had let her hair grow, and was wearing
silk dresses. She would never cross-dress in the same manner again. 22
Once she reached adulthood, she seemed to accept certain social forces and
codes: the acquisition of a career, a desire for economic security, an
obligation to associate with the white bourgeois, and the appearance of
heterosexuality. We will see the same pattern with her young, white

22 See Sharon O’Brien’s Willa Cather The Emerging Voice pages 96-97 and
110-111 for such explanations as well as Stephanie Vaughn’s introduction
to My Antonia ix-x in which she argues that Cather abandoned her male
impersonations once she began to see herself as a writer.
characters who leave behind their old ties with racial and ethnic outsiders as they begin to find success in the white world.

In youth, however, Cather's own connections with European immigrants were vital and strong. She maintained that her homesickness was understood and eased by her Scandinavian and Bohemian neighbors, older women, themselves exiled from home, who were fond of telling the young Willa stories about the old country. In a 1913 interview Cather indicated just how influential these oral narratives were to her emergence as a writer:

I have never found any intellectual excitement any more intense than I used to feel when I spent a morning with one of those old women... I always felt as if they told me so much more than they said—as if I had actually got inside another person's skin (Willa Cather in Person 10).

"Getting inside another person's skin," occupying more than a person's position or point of view, but daring via the very powerful methods of language and imagination, to, in Toni Morrison's words, "become"—this, for Cather, is the artist's greatest gift. Unlike Stevens' notion that the artist fulfills his function to his readers when he "makes his imagination theirs," when he sees "his imagination become the light in the mind of others" (Necessary Angel 29), Cather envisions an altogether less condescending and penetrating process. She writes in an essay on "The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett":

It is a common fallacy that a writer, if he is talented enough, can achieve this poignant quality by improving upon his subject-matter, using his 'imagination' upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose. The truth is that by such a process (which is not imagination at all!) he can at best produce only a
brilliant sham, which, like a badly built and pretentious house, looks poor and shabby in a few years. If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; it is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again. (Willa Cather on Writing 50-51)

Cather’s description of the imaginative process here—a combination of reverence for subject matter and self-erasure of personality—is, aptly enough, tied to an understanding of “the land and people” of a writer’s heart, those individuals, we are told, who will fulfill the artists’ desire to be born again. Fueled by this philosophy of creative power, Cather sometimes gracefully, sometimes intrusively enters into the lives of her racial and ethnic characters who provide, for many of her young white protagonists, parental nourishment and sustenance.

Even Cather’s artistic journey—from struggling writer to accomplished artist—is rooted in her relationship with European immigrants. In her first novel Alexander’s Bridge (1912), a story about a successful Boston bridge engineer caught between his obligation to his career and his wife and his love for an Irish actress, Cather seems uncomfortably out of her element. She says in a 1921 that she had been trying, in the novel, to imitate the style of Henry James. “I had been trying to sing a song that did not lie in my voice” (Willa Cather in Person 37).

What she eventually discovered was that her voice was rooted in the soil, in the Nebraska prairie of her childhood. Cather says,

I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil, and I did not find them. And so I wrote O
Cather's novel about Norwegians, Swedes, and Bohemians making a life for themselves on the Nebraska Divide came directly from her memories of the land and her affection for the people who lived there. In a gift copy of *O Pioneers* addressed to a Nebraska friend, Cather wrote:

This was the first time I walked off on my own feet—everything before was half real and half an imitation of writers whom I had admired. In this one I hit home pasture and found that I was Yance Sorgeson and not Henry James. (Bennett, "Catherton," 283).

Yance Sorgeson, it should be noted, was a Norwegian bachelor Cather and her father would often visit. Apparently he led "a frugal settler's life on his vast estate, Norway Farm." Cather is said to have remembered him for his "staunch integrity and faithful adherence to Old Country traditions" (Pers 12). Cather's identification with Yance Sorgeson may strike contemporary critics, cautious about acts of cultural appropriations, as somewhat contrived and perhaps even comical, but her affection for immigrant characters is genuine. Cather here relates her connection to a real person, someone whom she knew and felt affectionate toward. Even when she became more successful, she still maintained written communication with her old Bohemian and Scandinavian friends. Mildred Bennett reports that at one time Cather even sent Annie Pavelka, the prototype for Antonia Shimerda, a check for fifty dollars; and she continued to send money to the family during the bitter drought years of the depression (51).

It may strike contemporary readers as a bit narrow minded, but Cather's interest in and depiction of immigrant characters, led one early
reviewer to criticize her for not significantly representing what the reviewer termed “native Americans” (*Willa Cather in Person* 12).

Despite such criticism, Cather continued to rely upon her rich experiences with European immigrants, but she did so with a great deal of care as well. At the time of composing *O Pioneers!*, for example, she worried over the authenticity of her depiction of these immigrants. In a 1913 interview with the *Philadelphia Record* she states:

I was not sure, however, that my feelings about the Western country and my Scandinavian friends was the truth—I thought perhaps that going among them so young I had a romantic personal feeling about them. I thought that Americans in general must see only the humorous side of the Scandinavian—the side often presented in vaudeville dialect sketches—because nobody had ever tried to write about the Swedish settlers seriously (*Willa Cather in Person* 11).23

Cather’s anxiety about romanticizing ethnic others is something which seems entirely absent from the worries of either Stephen Crane or Wallace Stevens. This difference may relate to individual temperament as much as to artistic philosophy. Of the three, Cather is perhaps considered the regional author, the one who took more care in trying to authentically describe a particular group of people in a particular region of

23 Cather speaks about the difficulties of marketing *O Pioneers!* to a mainstream white American audience. In an essay entitled “My First Novels,” Cather recalls how she didn’t expect *O Pioneers!* to capture a large audience because for starters it was about Nebraska (she includes in her discussion the now infamous quote by a New York critic who declared “I simply don’t care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it”) but it was also about Swedish farmers. “At that time, 1912, the Swede had never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches; and the humour was based on two peculiarities: his physical strength and his inability to pronounce the letter ‘j.’” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 94-95).
the country. When she went to write down her stories of the prairie, she also had in mind specific models as characters, real people she had known from early childhood on—unlike Crane who lived among poor New York city immigrants for less than a year's time. If she demanded more authenticity and care in her depictions it was, perhaps, because she actually had a human standard by which to judge her creations. Conversely, neither Crane nor Stevens seemed interested in specific questions of characterizations (whether their depictions were authentic or not may have never been a concern of theirs); individuals often function, in both their works, as symbols or as fleshed out ideas. Take for example, Crane’s *Maggie* which hardly reads as a character study so much as an allegorical depiction of a certain geography: slum life in New York city. Crane’s device to avoid mentioning characters’ names—choosing, instead, to describe most of the young children as “urchins” and the rest of the characters as animals of prey (tigresses, panthers, hawks, and lions)—reveals, according to Thomas Gullason, that “to Crane, people were more important as types and symbols than as individuals” (4).

For Cather matters of characterization were important. She seems—at least in her portrayal of European immigrants—to recognize that there is a border of understanding that may divide her perception of their lives from the immigrants’ actual experiences. In a 1899 review of English writer Richard Whiteing’s best-selling novel *No. 5 John Street*, a narrative of a man who crosses class lines, voluntarily living and working among London’s poorest citizens, we can already see Cather’s emerging ethical stance about depicting others. She praises Whiteing for not presenting his
characters as sociological subjects, but as "real folk of the real world, of the most real of worlds," depicting them with "a convincing actualness of speech and manner and the blessed warmth of blood in them" (World and the Parish 712). Cather says of Whiteing that he does not "handle" these people at all, but "He thinks of them, feels for them, knows them, lives with them" (World and the Parish 712). In the same piece she criticizes Richard Harding Davis' account of the Cuban war because he affects a "certain supercilious air of a man who stood off afar and watched the battle and suffered because his linen was not clean" (World and the Parish 713). Clearly Cather finds such artistic distance from one's subject matter intolerable. In fact, she advises near the end of the piece: "Nobody yet ever knew anything thoroughly through study, much less are they able to adequately impart that knowledge by a purely intellectual process. To know anything about any class of people, one must ascertain how and what they feel, and to do that one must not only observe but feel himself. . ." (World and the Parish 713). Here Cather acknowledges that the creative act is fully realized only when a writer combines intellect with feeling and with living. "An author must live," writes Cather, "live deeply and richly and generously, live not only his own life, but all lives" (World and the Parish 131).

Whether Cather has successfully been able in her fiction, to capture "all lives" is a hotly debated topic for many contemporary critics and readers. Her portrayals of Czech and Scandinavian cultures have been called "true to life," her allusions "informed, not merely exotic" (Murphy 85). In a recent article on The Song of the Lark and My Antonia Ann
Mosley argues that “Cather’s attitude toward ethnic cultures different to her own was unusually progressive for her time” (7) and, in many of her novels, Cather promotes a philosophy of “cultural pluralism” (7). Mona Pers, in a book length study of Cather’s portrayals of Swedes, maintains that Cather often saw immigrants as more imaginative and cultivated than most native-born Americans and that she wrote about them in order to better inform misguided American readers. Pers explains:

Her frustration at their [native-born Americans]lack of regard for immigrants was the origin of the lifelong crusade against American chauvinism that she started to pursue as a student with her critical reviews in Lincoln papers, and continued in Pittsburgh and New York (20).

Most of these critics will point to Cather’s autobiographical writings and statements on such political issues as cultural assimilation and English only legislation. In 1924 interview with The New York Times Book Review, Cather was quite vocal about what she saw as a social reform effort to white-wash European immigrants:

When I was a child, all our neighbors were foreigners. Nobody paid any attention to them outside the attention they wanted. We let the alone. Work was assigned them, and they made good houseworkers and splendid craftsmen. They furnished their house as they had in the countries from which they came. Beauty was there and charm. Nobody investigated them; nobody regarded them as laboratory specimens. . . . A ‘foreigner’ was a person foreign to our manners or custom of living, not possible prey for reform. (Willa Cather in Person 72)

The last thing Cather wanted to do to anyone was make him/her more American. Among the items she named as having “helped retard art” were: “standardization, indiscriminate Americanism, false conventions of thought and expression, aversion to taking pains, and superficial culture”
(Willa Cather in Person 149). In a 1923 essay on “Nebraska” Cather laments the cultural changes in her hometown because of the movement toward assimilation. She remembers walking the streets of Wilber, Nebraska and being able “to go for a whole day without hearing a word of English spoken.” Here “there was pleasant little theater where the boys and girls were trained to give the masterpieces of Czech drama in the Czech language” (622). But the current trend toward Americanization, Cather argues, has done away with all this. She says bitterly of Nebraska legislators who want to establish English only laws: “Our lawmakers have a rooted conviction that a boy can be a better American if he speaks only one language than if he speaks two” (622). Such statements, many contemporary critics conclude, demonstrate that Cather was committed to detailing the full humanity of her European immigrant characters.

But during the past five years Cather’s record has come under severe attack. While her depiction of Czechs, Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians is praised, some critics have argued that her portrayals of Mexicans, Italians, Asians, Jews, Native Americans, and African Americans are not nearly as enlightened.24 “When it comes to Americans of other races such as Indians, Asians, Chicanos, or blacks,” writes

Elizabeth Ammons, "her [Cather's] racism blinds her" (134). In her effort to represent the lives of European immigrants in *My Antonia*, Cather, Mike Fischer argues, she overlooked the significant losses Native Americans suffered during the settlement of Nebraska lands (41). Many critics point to her portrayal of the black pianist, Blind d'Arnault, in *My Antonia* in order to illustrate how "African heritage for Cather frequently signifies some preternatural artistic (musical) talent" and how she "employs a diction of racial difference to simultaneously praise his [Blind d'Arnault's] talent while stressing his irrevocable, and implicitly denigrating, otherness" (Carlin 151). All these efforts on the part of contemporary scholars to argue for or against Cather's "enlightenment" do raise significant and useful questions about Cather's political and cultural positioning and her methods of representation.

I wish, however, to examine Cather's engagement with race and ethnicity—specifically her strategies to identify with non-Anglos and nonwhites—not so much to evaluate her failings or score her successes, but to explore what the inclusion of these nonwhite figures does to and for her work, what it provides for the writer herself and what it may, in fact, offer her mostly white readers. I want to use the rest of this chapter to analyze three of Cather's novels—*My Antonia*, *The Professor's House*, and the epilogue of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—in order to demonstrate how nonwhite figures function, in these works, as substitute parents and nurturers and as symbols for a pre-materialist world. "To read *My Antonia*," writes Stephanie Vaughn in her introduction to the book, is to slip through the garden gate of a fairy tale and return to the lost world of childhood—not only to the adventures of
Jim Burden's and Antonia Shimerda's childhood but to the mythology of an American national childhood, a collective dream of life liberated on the frontier (vii).

Cather's novel which recalls the childhood and maturation of Jim Burden--from his journey at ten, after his mother and father die, leaving Virginia to live with his grandparents in Nebraska to his Harvard schooling and his work as a lawyer in New York--is intimately interwoven not only with the landscape of Nebraska but in the fabric of his relationship with Antonia, the young Bohemian girl who, the narrator of the introduction explains, "seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood" (3). As many critics have pointed out, Jim Burden's cross-country trek and his first experiences in Nebraska closely parallel Cather's own story--her family's move from Back Creek, Virginia to Red Cloud, Nebraska, her memory of driving into the country and feeling as "if we had come to the end of everything," experiencing a "kind of erasure of personality," (Willa Cather in Person 10) her overwhelming homesickness, and her friendships with immigrant women on the prairie. Although Cather was never an orphan like Jim Burden, the way she describes her childhood loss of Virginia, her feeling, at the time, of being "jerked away from" all those things in which a "child's life is bound...the woods and the hills and meadows around it," (Willa Cather in Person 10) does suggest an emotional uprooting, a severing of the ties if not between mother and child, then at least between motherland and child. Once she arrives in Nebraska, she takes comfort in her friendships with her immigrant neighbors in the same way Jim
Burden finds himself sustained by the ties he forms with Antonia and her father.

Mr. Shimerda may, in fact, occupy as powerfully a space of Jim's imagination and affection as Antonia does. When the Burdens visit the Shimerdas for the first time, it is the father of the family who sparks Jim's attention. Jim describes Mrs. Shimerda and the brothers, Ambrosch and Marek, with a mixture of disdain and xenophobia--making note of the way the mother smells the loaves of bread Grandmother Burden brings, describing how Ambrosch "fairly snapped at the food," (24) and emphasizing Marek's strangeness, the "uncouth" noises he makes and his delight in displaying his webbed hands and crowing like a rooster. But Mr. Shimerda stands apart from the rest. Jim remarks on the Bohemian man's manners--he takes Grandmother Burden's hand and bends over it. He notes too how well dressed Mr. Shimerda is; he wears a knitted gray vest and a silk scarf held together by coral pin (26). What Jim Burden admires about Mr. Shimerda--his manners, cultivation, his love for music--is, of course, linked not so much to his ethnicity as his social class. Later in the book when Antonia tells Jim that her father was "very different from my mother;" we hear for the first time that Antonia's mother was a poor girl (a "hired" girl) working in the Shimerda household who became pregnant by one of the sons of the family, Antonia's father. "He did not have to marry my mother," Antonia tells Jim, "and his brothers quarreled with him because he did" (187). Clearly Jim and Antonia admire her father for the choice, but Cather nonetheless, feels compelled to tell us the story of Mr. Shimerda's origins to let us
know that he is indeed of another class than his wife. And the differences between Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda are continually emphasized in the book. When the Shimerdas’ stock of provisions freeze up and the Burdens arrive to help, Mrs. Shimerda fails to greet them and instead looks “accusingly at everyone” (62) pointing at the rags on her feet and the rotting potatoes in the food barrels—demanding that the Burdens fix everything. Mr. Shimerda, on the other hand, makes Mrs. Burden sit down and, feeling more embarrassed than anything else, explains to her “that they were not beggars in the old country” (64). It’s also apparent that when Mr. Shimerda dies, the sense of quiet dignity about the Shimerdas dies as well. Mrs. Shimerda’s greediness and materialism, which ignite the family to move to America in the first place and indirectly cause her husband’s death, now drive the philosophy of the family. Ambrosch, his mother’s son, hires Antonia out to neighboring farmers, makes her do grueling labor, and quarrels with the Mrs. Harling (who Antonia will work for in Black Hawk) about giving the girl an allowance for clothes. What Jim, and I think Cather, emphasize so poignantly in these descriptions of the family is the void left by Mr. Shimerda.

Mr. Shimerda’s absence shapes Jim’s and Antonia’s memories of childhood and becomes a part of “the incommunicable past” (289) they possess together. Jim’s memory of Mr. Shimerda seems to take precedence over even his memory of his parents. When he arrives in Nebraska, Jim describes the feeling of having left the world behind; that he had somehow arrived “outside man’s jurisdiction” (12). And viewing nothing familiar under this “dome of heaven,” he states:
I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind (12).

These two sentences are the only reference Jim makes to his parents and Cather uses it to reiterate just how truly disconnected and severed Jim’s ties to anything, be it parent or place, are.

Although he does find safety and comfort living with his grandparents, Mr. Shimerda also serves as a father-figure. When Mr. Shimerda meets Jim, he touches the boy’s shoulder and, Jim tells us, “looked searchingly down into my face for several seconds. I became somewhat embarrassed, for I was used to being taken for granted by my elders” (27). Jim stirs a certain reverence and concern on the part of Mr. Shimerda. When Jim admires Shimerda’s gun from Bohemia, the old man gives the boy “his far-away look” (38) and, what seems very much like an act of inheritance, promises when Jim is “a big boy” to give him the gun. In the novel’s memorable Christmas scene—when Mr. Shimerda visits the Burdens and Jim notices how peaceful and secure the old man seemed in their home—Jim recalls the way Shimerda blesses him (making the sign of the cross over his head) and with his eyes, foresees the young boy’s future. “When his deep-seeing eyes rested on me, I felt as if he were looking far ahead into the future for me, down the road I would have to travel” (73). Shimerda appears here, in Jim’s description and memory, almost as a spiritual father, an all-knowing force which blesses and protects. No wonder that when Shimerda kills himself, it is Jim, not Antonia or any of his other children, who senses the man’s spirit and
presence. Alone in his grandparents' house, the young Virginian who he has left his parents' spirits behind, now finds himself surrounded by the soul of a man who has become a source of fatherly love and concern.

As I looked with satisfaction about our comfortable sitting-room, it flashed upon me that if Mr. Shimerda's soul were lingering about in this world at all, it would be here in our house, which had been more to his liking than any other in the neighborhood. (83).

Jim reasons that it was home-sickness that finally killed Mr. Shimerda and says “if he could have lived with us, this terrible thing would have never happened” (83). What he craved really, Jim argues, was a home. That Shimerda could have found it among the Burdens and not within the cave with the rest of his family suggests how insignificant a role biology plays in Jim's notion of family. As Ann Fisher-Wirth points out, "Orphanhood releases Jim into this pattern of surrogacy in which one's true kin are defined not biologically, but emotionally or spiritually” (50).25

In fact, it is through his memory of Mr. Shimerda that Jim will recall, out of his desire for origin, a lost homeland. It is no accident that Mr. Shimerda reminds Jim of home. On first sight of Mr. Shimerda, Jim

25 One sees this kind of surrogacy again and again in Cather's work. Even young people whose parents are still alive receive nurturance and support from individuals outside the family. The Song of the Lark's Thea Krongborg, for example, is able to pursue her music career because of her friendships with Dr. Archie, Ray Kennedy, and Professor Wunsch. Her mother and father have no plans for her to leave Moonstone and seem naively unaware of their daughter's gifts. In "Old Mrs. Harris" Vickie Templeton is given the support she needs to attend school because of the generosity of her neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Rosen who also recognize the talent that her family overlooks. In A Lost Lady Niel Hebert "clung" to his maternal uncle, Judge Pommeroy who offers the young boy support, guidance, and a place to stay—even though Niel's father is still alive.
notices the man's bushy hair and how it "made him look like the old portraits I remembered in Virginia" (25). The feeling of familiarity Shimerda stirs in the boy is, I think, a recognition of their shared circumstance as exiles from an old world (be it old Virginia or old Bohemian) of cultivation and custom. Mr. Shimerda becomes for the Virginia boy, a symbol of a lost age where manners, good will, and integrity were placed above mere accumulation of things. In this way Mr. Shimerda will fulfill for Jim, and I think Cather, a similar function to Stevens' Victoria Clementina: he will become a means to critique bourgeois middle class American values.

When the Burdens move to Black Hawk and Jim observes for the first time the narrow-minded and materialistic tendencies of its town folk, he recalls again the dignity of Mr. Shimerda. "There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction of Antonia's father" (160). Part of Jim's disgust with Black Hawk is its treatment and viewpoint of Shimerda's daughter, Antonia, and the other hired girls, immigrants from various European countries. Jim may be expressing the contempt Cather held for convention-ridden Anglo Saxons and their fear of immigrants. In her essay on "Nebraska" Cather remembers the xenophobia she witnessed while growing up:

American neighbors were seldom open-minded enough to understand the Europeans, or to profit by their older traditions. Our settlers from New England, cautious and convinced of their own superiority, kept themselves isolated as much as possible from foreign influences. The incomers from the South—from Missouri, Kentucky, the two Virginias—were provincial and utterly without curiosity... A New
England settler might have noticed that his chore-boy [a Swede] had a kind of intelligence, but he would have distrusted and stonily disregarded it. If the daughter of a shiftless West Virginia mountaineer married the nephew of a professor at the University of Upsala, the native family felt disgraced by such an alliance. (622)

Here Cather displays the same frustration and anxiety with native-born Americans and their drive for an almost in-breed homogeneity. This sentiment echoes Jim’s description of Black Hawk. “I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid,” Jim says. “If I told my classmates that Lena Lingrad’s grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn’t speak English” (160).

What Jim possesses, of course, is an awareness of historical ties, of past lineages. The townspeople cannot see in the immigrant girls what he sees: a previous life before the prairie. To Black Hawk residents, these young woman are simply others; they are seen “almost as a race apart” from the daughters of well-to-do families. As such they function for many of the townspeople, and perhaps even for Jim, as a repository for sexuality and passion. The immigrant girls have a “vigor” and energy, Jim tells us, that contrasts with the “listless and dull” (159) American girls with whom he goes to school. At dances, all the Black Hawk men want to dance with Lena, Tiny, and Antonia. “The country girls were considered a menace to the social order” (161). But as Jim goes on to explain, “Anxious mothers need have felt no alarm. They mistook the mettle of their sons. The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth” (161). This description may, in fact, reflect Jim’s overriding critique of Black Hawk: its guarded materialism, its repressive concern with
respectability. Perhaps the two characters he detests most in Black Hawk are the “autocratic and imperial” (128) Mr. Harling and, of course, the “merciless moneylender” Wick Cutter, two rather successful businessmen.

It’s interesting to note, however, that for all of Jim’s critique of Black Hawk men who avoid marrying immigrant women, he takes a similar route. Although he tells Antonia, “I’d have liked to have you for a sweetheart, or a wife,” (251) he marries (according to the 1918 introduction) Genevieve Whitney, “the only daughter of a distinguished man” (2). In fact, the narrator of the introduction tells us, Jim’s career as a young lawyer “was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage” (2). Cather’s choice here to make sure that Jim marries within his own ethnicity and slightly up from his class could be interpreted as a particularly safe decision, an arrangement which would likely not offend her more conservative white readers. By avoiding an ethnically mixed marriage in the book, one could argue, Cather makes sure that there is no threat to the status quo. In *My Antonia*, one of Cather’s most popular novels, Norwegians marry Norwegians (the Harlings), Italians marry Italians (the Vannis), Bohemians marry Bohemians (the Cuzaks). Although people marry outside of their ethnicity in some of Cather’s other works, in this particular novel social niches are fortified.26

26 Results of marriages across ethnic lines are relatively varied in Cather’s stories. In “Neighbour Rosicky,” for example, Anton Rosicky’s oldest son, who is Bohemian, marries an American girl. Although the mixed marriage is of some concern to Rosicky because of the couple’s financial situation—he fears the young American woman may want more material comfort than Rudolph can afford—his anxiety has little to do with the young woman’s ethnicity. In *O Pioneers!* (1913), however, Oscar Bergson’s American wife is described as “being ashamed of marrying a foreigner”
Like Stevens' use of African Americans and Crane's employment of Irish immigrants in *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, Cather's treatment of Mr. Shimerda and the young immigrant women to critique the pious respectability of Black Hawk could be read as Cather's attempt to transgress bourgeois white America without acknowledging her own position within it. Cather herself takes a path similar to Jim's. She too moves East to start a career, returning to Nebraska periodically but never making a permanent home there. Her artistic and economic ties are all maintained in Eastern cities where she lives, for the most part, a white middle-class existence. One could argue, for example, that when she has Jim criticize the repressed and civilized Black Hawk bourgeois, Cather indicts her own culture (middle and upper class whites), but still benefits by the arrangement. For these are the very same individuals who buy her books and support her writing career. We can also glean from some of her writings that Cather, like Stevens, was not above employing racial and ethnic outsiders to satirize and mock high toned old Christian women, taking Stevens' same troubling dichotomy to contrast African primitivism.

(99). Her husband is Norwegian. In *The Song of the Lark* the half Norwegian-half Swedish Thea Kronberg marries the German Fred Ottenburg without thought to their different ethnicities.

27 I don't mean to suggest here that Cather was only read by those in the upper class. Her appeal was much broader than that. Cather remained one of America's best-loved writers. According to Joan Acocella, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) was the most widely read novel in the United States following the year of its publication. *Lucy Gayheart* was also a best-seller. Universities gave her doctorate degrees. *Time* put her on its cover (63). But she did find a large readership among the genteel. She was especially popular among Catholics who championed her in many of their religious magazines (Acocella 63).
with Victorian prudishness. But something more is at work here in Cather’s decision to have both Jim and Antonia marry within their own ethnic group and I think it reflects less about her attitude toward racial/ethnic outsiders than it does her philosophy on youth and life.

In some ways, Jim’s movement toward adulthood reveals a growing allegiance to a social order which precludes any legal bonds—specifically marriage—to the immigrant girls with whom he grows up. Neither Lena Lingrad nor Antonia are possible candidates for marriage. Although Lena expresses a certain attraction for Jim, she has no desire to marry anyone. Consequently Cather makes Lena’s flirtations with Jim while he is away at school appear more like a distraction for the young man than the beginnings of a long lasting romance. Antonia too sees Jim’s path as profoundly different than her own. Earlier in the novel when Jim berates Antonia for emulating her brother Ambrosch, she tries to explain to the young man the significant gap in their social realms and future opportunities. “Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us” (113). Her prediction holds true of course. Hers is a difficult life; after she becomes pregnant by a man who abandons her and the child, she

28 In a 1921 interview, for example, Cather criticized Nebraska club women who moved about culture clubs studying Italian art out of textbooks or memorizing a string of facts. According to Cather, these types are “fatal to the spirit of art. The nigger boy who plays by ear on his fiddle airs from Traviata without knowing what he is playing, or why he likes it, has more real understanding of Italian art than these esthetic creatures with a head and a larynx, and no organs that they get any use of, who reel you off the life of Leonardo da Vinci.” Like Stevens, Cather uses the African American youth—whom she describes in a tone of admiration that is steeped, nonetheless, in a language of stereotype and insult—to belittle the white bourgeois club women and their misguided attempts to educate themselves.
is forced to return home and labor in the fields raising her daughter alone. It’s not until her marriage to Cuzak and all the children produced from it, that she finds some semblance of happiness. Jim, on the other hand, moves smoothly from the University of Nebraska to law school at Harvard to a job as a lawyer in New York. Indeed part of Jim’s maturation process comes with a recognition that all, in fact, is not equal among him and his immigrant playmate. He is given the opportunity for education—the very thing Mr. Shimerda wanted for Antonia, but which never came to fruition—and the social mobility that comes with such a prospect. This is not to suggest that the only person in the novel who finds economic success is Jim. Tiny Soderball and Lena Lingrad become prosperous businesswomen. But there is a recognition on Cather’s part I think, that Jim is not of their set, that he must eventually abide the social order which advises Harvard lawyers to marry daughters of distinguished men.

Thus Jim’s ties to Antonia must reside in the emotional, not the legal realm. His final option, then, is not to make her a wife (a condition that must be acknowledged by the larger social world), but a surrogate mother (a state that need only be recognized by him). When Jim returns to revivify his old friendship with Antonia, he seems to become a boy again.

Sleeping in the hay with Leo and Ambrosch, eating Antonia’s kolaches, Jim seems to regain his own childhood and to become another of Antonia’s children—a magically timeless boy who will play alongside the children whose names echo names form the novel’s beginning: Ambrosch, Nina, Yulka (Fisher-Wirth 42).
Jim makes plans to take the oldest Cuzak boys hunting and on trips to the Bad Lands. "There were enough Cuzaks to play with for a long while yet," says Jim. "Even after the boys grew up, there would always be Cuzak himself!" (287-88). The idyllic conclusion here in which Jim can somehow recover his lost youth and innocence through Antonia's children really emphasizes the connection Cather continually draws between youth and sympathy. Only when the human being is in the process of maturation—in the midst of forming and experimenting with various identities—can he/she create a strongly felt and powerfully imagined alliance with others, those outside the individual's particular class, ethnic, or even gender niche. Jim's imaginative passing for one of Antonia's children demonstrates perhaps Cather's own youthful endeavor to "get into another person's skin." As Elaine Ginsberg points out in the introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*...

... passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress (16).

But only in childhood, Cather's narratives seem to suggest, can this social experiment be undertaken. The transition to adulthood for Jim Burden and many of Cather's young characters entails an acceptance of certain uncompromising social circumstances: the drive for economic success and survival as well as the need for human relationships, what Cather called "the tragic necessity of life" (*Not Under Forty* 136). Thus Jim's decision to marry within his own ethnicity is born out of the very tragic
necessity that Cather laments, buts nonetheless acknowledges as one of the consequences of the social order.

"He had escaped all that," Godfrey St. Peter says of the young Tom Outland at the end of The Professor's House. "He had made something new in the world and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others" (261). What Tom Outland escapes via his early death is precisely the societal codes that Jim Burden must embrace. St. Peter envies Outland the freedom that comes with youth, the opportunity to live adventurously, to explore and experiment with all of life's materials. Tom Outland, like Jim Burden, is an orphan who has at his disposal Cather's three most cherished possessions: land, youth, and imagination. And as Jim Burden writes himself into a family of European immigrants so Tom Outland will construct his own heritage by claiming a lineage with the Native American cliff dwellers on the Blue Mesa.

Over the course of his young life, Tom finds himself forming connections to many kinds of families--from the O'Briens who raise him, to the St. Peters, to the family he creates with Rodney Blake and old Henry on the Mesa. Tom claims to be "kind of a stray" (185). Cather tells us that his parents were "mover people" and both died when they were crossing southern Kansas in a prairie schooner (115). He was raised and informally adopted by locomotive engineer and his wife, but little else is mentioned of these adoptive parents except to remark upon their kindness. When Tom arrives at the St. Peter residence he becomes a kind of adoptive son, dropping in on the family two or three times a week to play cards and tell stories to Kathleen and Rosamond about his adventures on the Blue
Mesa. Had he survived World War I we know, of course, that his integration into the family would have been complete when he married Rosamond. But surprisingly, Tom's most vocal allegiance to a family, albeit a dead one, is the lost Indian tribe in the Blue Mesa.

Outland sees the cliff dwellers in much the same way as Jim Burden sees Mr. Shimerda: as a symbol of civilization and art, a remnant to a preindustrial world. Thus Outland and Roddy are cautious about making their discovery of the cliff city known because, Tom tells us, "we were reluctant to expose those silent and beautiful places to vulgar curiosity" (205). What underlines this vulgar curiosity both here and throughout the novel is the impulse toward materialism and commercialism. When Rosamond wants to offer St. Peter Tom's money, St. Peter vehemently refuses, putting it in nearly the same terms as Tom uses:

...there can be no question of money between me and Tom Outland. I can't explain just how I feel about it, but it would somehow damage my recollection of him, would make that episode in my life commonplace like everything else...my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue. (62)

Translating his friendship with Tom "into the vulgar tongue"—the capitalistic language of supply and demand—is for St. Peter what selling Mother Eve is for Tom: sacrilege. Tom's cliff dwellers serve as important touchstones to a novel that is almost unrelenting in its critique of commercialism. No other force is to blame for so much in the narrative: St. Peter indicts it for "undermining and vulgarizing education," making a "trade school out of the university" (140); it creates strife among
Rosamond and Kathleen; it keeps "the hundred of little black-coated men pouring out of white buildings" (236) in Washington D.C; and it induces St. Peter to move out of his old house in the first place.

Indeed when the final and complete stroke of materialism is delivered by Roddy's decision to sell the cliff city relics to a German buyer, Tom feels more than simply betrayed, he feels sold himself. He tells Roddy, "They [the relics] belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from" (242). It is precisely because of his status as an orphan that Tom can claim a heritage with the cliff dwellers and that he can describe Roddy's selling of the relics as an act of treason, first against the state and then more importantly, against his family. Even the terms Tom employs to frame Roddy's action reiterate the intimate connection he wants to create between himself and the Native Americans. "I'm not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago"(243), he says. And later: "I'd as soon have sold my own grandmother as Mother Eve [the name they give to a dried human body they discover]--I'd have sold any living woman first" (244). In a novel composed of main characters who adore and cherish nonliving things and people (St. Peter's headless female sewing dummies, Tom Outland, even the "Kansas Boy" of St. Peter's youth) Tom's statement may not appear as shocking (and perhaps misogynist) as it could (that the only good woman is a dead woman).

Yet his insistence on claiming the Indian cliff dwellers as his ancestors and his devotion to preserve the home he discovers on the Blue
Mesa may strike an uncomfortable chord with contemporary readers, who could dismiss such a claim as white romanticization or criticize Tom for trying to appropriate Native American heritage. As Walter Benn Michaels argues:

Her [Cather’s] cliff dweller embody absolutely the myth of the Indians as a “vanishing race” and Tom’s claimed descent from them is not only false but on her and his own terms impossible; since the cliff dwellers were “utterly exterminated,” no one is descended from them. (Italics Michaels 221)

As such Tom’s alliance with these racial/ethnic others is a relatively safe one. Their extinction forbids them, as well as their living (but soon to be dead) spokesman--Tom Outland--from launching any real threat to the social order. In fact, Tom quickly learns just how indifferent those in the upper echelon of the United States government feel about his beloved cliff dwellers when he visits Washington D.C. Passed from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, Tom discovers that those in the government “don’t care much about dead and gone Indians” (235). When Tom meets with the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he tells the young man that “his [the Commissioner’s] business was with living Indians,” (226) a group with whom Tom, interestingly enough, wants nothing to do. Such a choice on Cather’s part have led some critics to declare that “in The Professor’s House, the only good Indians are the dead ones” (Benn Michaels 235). The same may be said as well as about St. Peter’s Spanish explorers who, like the cliff dwellers, represent a lost age of glory and civilization, but the implication—that it’s politically more sound to profess allegiance to a dead racial/ethnic minority than a living one—makes Cather’s ethnic/racial
crossing seem less bold here than in *My Antonia*. In addition *The Professor's House* does seem to reiterate the same edict Cather expresses in her earlier novel: only the young can remain idyllic about their possibilities within the social world. Even the quixotic Tom Outland has to come to this realization, although he dies too young to experience it fully. He leaves the burden of social realities to Godfrey St. Peter who comes to the painful understanding that when youth dies, and so it must, one has to learn “to live without delight” (282).

Both *The Professor's House* (1923) and *My Antonia* (1918) fall somewhat in the middle of Cather's career; *My Antonia* is her fourth novel and *The Professor's House* is her sixth. But we know from reading the rest of her novels that Cather never abandoned her endeavor to capture the life and language of minority populations. Appropriately enough, when Cather, at the age of sixty four, begins her final novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) in 1937 we see the culmination of this artistic effort: She decides to represent, also through a youthful lens, the lives of African Americans. And yet out of all of Cather's attempts to cross ethnic/racial lines, perhaps no work is more troubling than *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. In fact, the novel's stereotypical representation of African Americans as well as its nostalgic depiction of slavery have, until the last five years, caused many critics to shy away from an in-depth discussion of the text.29 What ultimately makes the novel disquieting for

29 As Elizabeth Ammons points out Cather fills the novel with stereotypes of blacks ranging from fat cooks to shuffling, docile servants, referring casually to the "emotional darkies" and the "foolish, dreamy, nigger side" of Nancy's nature. "In addition to these images and descriptions", argues Ammons, "is the mind-boggling fact that no slave
contemporary readers is Cather's decision to write herself into the story's epilogue as the child persona, a decision rooted, I think, in the yearning for home/origin (the same longing that Jim Burden and Tom Outland have) and in the desire for emotional connection with racial/ethnic others.

Set in 1856 in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia— Cather's birthplace—the novel tells the story of a young slave woman's (Nancy Till) flight from an abusive white mistress (Sapphira Colbert) who falsely suspects Nancy of having sexual relations with the slave master (Henry Colbert). Nancy's escape, however, doesn't seem to have anything to do with a yearning for freedom from the institution of slavery. She flees in order to avoid the lecherous advances of Martin Colbert, a nephew Sapphira has asked to visit for the purpose of raping Nancy. Before Sapphira's malicious plan comes to fruition, the Colbert's daughter, Rachel, intervenes and manages, with help from her reluctant father, to effect Nancy's escape North. In the epilogue, which occurs twenty five years after Nancy's escape, we learn that Sapphira is dead and we witness (through the eyes of a five-year old persona) Nancy's reunion with her mother Till (Sapphira's most devoted servant).

A first person narrator enters the last two chapters of the novel, which until then has been in the third person omniscient point of view, to tell us about the specific day of reunion: a windy day in March where she lies in her mother's bedroom with a cold. The young narrator is waiting with "Aunt Till," whom she describes as "a spare, neat little old

*Sapphira and the Slave Girl* hates slavery" (135) For more of her discussion, see *Conflicting Stories* pages 134-35.
darky, (280)" for Nancy's return. In fact, she tells us, "the actual scene of
the meeting [between Till and her daughter] had been arranged for my
benefit" (282). When she cries because she is not allowed to go downstairs
to witness Nancy's arrival, Aunt Till reassures the young narrator, telling
her "Nancy'll come up and you'll see her as soon as I do" (282). Nancy's
visit is particularly pleasurable for the child who sits with Nancy and Till,
sewing patchwork "while the pound cake was baking in an slow oven"
(287), listening to the women talk about old times. During these
exchanges, the narrator learns from Aunt Till, what has happened over
the past twenty five years, filling in the gap for the reader as well. We hear
about the effects of the Civil War on the Colberts, the aftermath of
Colbert's freeing of his slaves [which includes a very disturbing story about
one slave who "hadn't been able to stand his freedom" (290). He
accidentally kills another black man and is hanged for the crime], and
Sapphira's change of heart and her reconciliation with her daughter. The
narrator, whom Cather identifies as herself in the story's footnote, relishes
the rich oral tales of these women.30 One gets the sense that Cather may
have experienced the same feeling from these oral narratives as did she
from hearing the immigrant women's stories of the old country --as if she
"had actually got inside another person's skin" (Willa Cather in Person

30 According to Sharon O'Brien, Cather asserts in a letter to Dorothy
Canfield that the meeting between Nancy and Old Till had been one of the
most moving events of her childhood (Will Cather to Dorothy Canfield,
October 14, 1940, Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt.).
Cather also told Viola Roseboro' that the "Epilogue" was literally true
(Willa Cather to Violo Roseboro,' November 9, 1940, Barrett-Cather
Collection, University of Virginia Library, Charlottesville, Va.). See The
Emerging Voice pages 44-45 for further discussion.

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10). As Elizabeth Ammons points out *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* is important because Cather “attempts to go back to the original story of her life as an artist” and because she also “intends this story to pay tribute to the heroic women, black and white, who empowered her as a writer” (134). But the tribute gets taken over by the intrusion of the child narrator and the writer’s empowerment comes at the expense of her black characters.

Hence the pertinent question: What goes awry for Cather in this particular crossing? What makes readers/critics—past and present—call the novel “disturbing,” “flawed in its vision,” “racist”? For starters, Cather’s decision to have a young white child tell a fugitive slave woman’s story. “But most disturbing of all is Cather’s appropriation of Nancy’s story, “writes Elizabeth Ammons. “Appearing to celebrate black and white women’s shared struggle, and particularly the heroism of a black woman, the novel in fact steals the black woman’s story to give it to white women” (Ammons 135). Similar arguments have been made about Cather’s decision to have Jim Burden tell Antonia’s Shimerda’s story, giving Jim the power to construct Antonia’s life in whatever way that pleases him.31 Here Cather’s choice to place this story, ostensibly about the suffering of slaves, in the mouth of a white child seems an even greater act of unregulated power. That she has Nancy and Till’s reunion literally staged for the child’s benefit reveals, as Toni Morrison points out, just how

31 See Katrina Irving’s “Displacing Homosexuality: The Use of Ethnicity in Willa Cather’s *My Antonia* (1990) and Helen Wussow’s “Language, Gender and Ethnicity in Three Fictions by Willa Cather” (1995) for such arguments.
“wholly available and serviceable” (25) the lives of these black characters are to both the narrator as well as the author. “Only with Africanist characters is such a project thinkable: delayed gratification for the pleasure of a (white) child” (Morrison 27). Of course, what is lost in this staging of the reunion is the agency of Nancy and Till. “At the center of the book,” writes Elizabeth Ammons, “is not Nancy Till as an agent in her own drama but Sapphira, Rachel, and vicariously Willa Cather as Nancy’s manipulators” (135).

Perhaps what most impedes Cather’s progress across the color line is the difficulty she had fulfilling her artistic project to give herself “absolutely to his [her] material,” to possess that “gift of sympathy” which allows the writer to “fade away into the land and people of his [her] heart,” to “die of love only to be born again” (Willa Cather on Writing 51). It is clear from the descriptions in the epilogue that the young child feels intimately connected to “Aunt” Till in the way that Jim Burden feels about Mr. Shimerda and Antonia. Till nurtures and soothes the child like a mother. But this very young narrator who, we gather, is given free reign of the household does not yet possess “the gift of sympathy”—the very quality that allows Jim Burden to see the nobility in Mr. Shimerda and the immigrant girls the other residents of Black Hawk overlook. She understands only her own needs (wanting to see the reunion first hand) and places them before Till’s. As such, the narrative has much more to do with the young girl’s (and I would add here Cather’s) desires than it does about the lives of former slaves.
What do Till and Nancy's presence in *Sapphira and the Slave*, then, do for and to the work? How do they serve the narrator as well as the author? Morrison offers one possibility:

Just as Sapphira has employed these surrogate, serviceable black bodies for her own purposes of power without risk, so the author employs them in behalf of her own desire for a safe participation in loss, in love, in chaos, in justice (italics Morrison 28).

As to why Cather may have felt compelled to indulge in this scene of loss and reunion, many critics point to her relationship with her mother.32

While it seems nearly impossible to speculate upon all the nuances of Cather's complex relationship with her mother, we do know that she did undertake a reunion of some sort: she decided, by setting the novel in Virginia, to return home, to her Mother state. "My end is my beginning," Cather wrote in a letter to a friend about *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (qtd. in Skaggs 166). And in a real sense, Cather here, more than in any other novel, attempts to reconcile the pervasive pattern of loss that shapes nearly all her work by finally bringing--via the symbolic depiction of Nancy--the fugitives and exiles home. That this journey and reconciliation relies upon the labor and suffering of African Americans reveals a painful and unrecognized conflict of interest on Cather's part.

32 Sharon O'Brien reads the reunion of Nancy and Till as a "powerful image of mother-daughter unity" that reflects Cather's final reconciliation with her mother. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, O'Brien argues, Cather acknowledges the contribution of her mother to her creative art. See *The Emerging Voice* pages 45-46.

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If, as I've tried to show in *My Antonia* and *The Professor's House*, Cather's young characters create an alliance with racial/ethnic outsiders for two specific purposes: to recover their own forgotten roots (to take the journey home) and to lament the passing of another time, a lost age, then Cather is caught in a dilemma here. For in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* there is an antithetical relationship between these two aims: The events of this particular lost age, namely slavery, are largely to blame for severing these African characters from their places of origin. Thus what many critics have located as one of the more disturbing aspects of the novel—the way it seems to long after the very customs and hierarchies of the antebellum American South—counterbalances whatever attempts Cather makes to sympathetically and fully portray her African American characters.33

“All fiction,” writes Stephanie Vaughn in her introduction to *My Antonia*, “is created out of desire, and therefore a good deal of American writing has been built out of nostalgia and regret, out of men and women wishing themselves back and forth across some boundary” (xxii-xxiii). Willa Cather spent a great deal of time, in both her life and in her art, wishing and moving across boundaries—boundaries of gender, ethnicity, even time. Indeed her remarkable talent for capturing “the language of the

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33 E. K. Brown (1953), Hermione Lee (1989) and Naomi Morgenstern (1996) all note Cather’s nostalgic tone in the novel—especially her descriptions of the institution of slavery. Even the most sympathetic white characters express doubt about the abolition of slavery. Henry Colbert says at one point, “There are different ways of being good to folks... Sometimes keeping people in their place is being good to them” (268). And when he does free his slaves, Cather feels compelled to tell us about a slave who “hadn’t been able to stand his freedom” (290)
American soil” (Richardson *The Later Years* 178) lies in her capacity to imagine herself across these various boundaries. “The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self,” writes Toni Morrison, “to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power” (15). In her depictions of racial/ethnic outsiders Cather tests her power to imagine, to invent. Sometimes she finds the fictional terrain more difficult than she supposed—as perhaps is the case in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. But like many writers before and after her, Cather saw stories as gifts—opportunities to “render accessible to others some glimmer of what our souls experience” (Wideman xx). The gifts Cather presents us with, the glimpses of life inside the heart and mind of such a diversity of Americans, communicate more than perhaps she expected or even desired. For somewhere in her endeavor to push the limits of gender and racial boundaries, to “get inside another person’s skin,” Cather regretfully leaves behind the very individuals fueling her artistic journey. Their work done, Cather “fades away into the land and people of [her] heart, [she] dies of love only to be born again” (*Willa Cather on Writing* 51). But a birth, at last, always dependent upon the labor of others.
RACIAL DOMAIN AND THE CAPABLE IMAGINATION
OF WALLACE STEVENS

"What is his[the poet's] function? Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the mind of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives" (29).

--Wallace Stevens from The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination

"...what happens when writers work in a highly and historically racialized society? For them, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming"(4).

--Toni Morrison from Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

In December 1940 Wallace Stevens, honoring a friend’s request “to be kept abreast of the current goods” in America while he was away from the country, sent the traveling American a copy of Willa Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl along with the statement, “We have nothing better than she” (Letters 381). Stevens’ admiration of Cather’s work comes as little surprise; both shared an Emersonian faith in the powers of the artist; both thought, and even celebrated, art as a process of escape; and finally, both detested writing that had an overtly social or political dogma attached to it. Yet interestingly enough, Stevens sends Cather’s book to his friend because, according to Joan Richardson, he sees her...
as someone equally involved as he with the language of the American soil and with the differences the dialects of the language bespoke. Only by making the American public sensitive to the views of minority populations could change come about (The Later Years 178).

Whether Stevens displayed a “public sensitivity” to the views of minorities or wished to affect social change through his art are highly debatable arguments. Of the four authors of this study, Wallace Stevens—the youngest and perhaps most successful—offers the most troubling and problematic depictions of racial/ethnic outsiders. This owes something, in part, to Stevens’ social and literary position. He is, of the four, the most difficult to analyze, sympathize with it, or to love. We can’t locate his sometimes racist depictions of African Americans in the same site of double consciousness as we can do with Dunbar who battled against racism as well as poverty. We can’t compare his aesthetic efforts to go “slumming” with Crane’s, who did more than just imagine the lives of the poor; he lived among them. And we can’t analyze his mythologizing of African culture in the same terms as Cather, who glorified the powers of the artist to achieve some sort of solidarity among all people. A prosperous insurance executive who wrote the kind of poetry that prestigious journals clamored after and academics marveled at, Stevens seemed to epitomize the very powers that be: upper-class, old money, Anglo-Saxon, Harvard man. How is it possible, then, for someone like Stevens, even with the assistance of his capable imagination, to cross or transgress such impenetrable boundaries as color, class, or gender; he, who shared nothing in common with the working class Italian peddler or the
Irish factory worker, or the Southern black musician, save the streets of New York city in 1900?

Like his contemporaries, Crane, Dunbar, and Cather, Wallace Stevens was a witness to the turbulent politics and raging prejudices of the twentieth century. While he insisted that poets should carry no social, political, or moral obligation (NA 27), he is an artist embedded in the racial climate of his times, an atmosphere that infiltrates some of his most memorable poems—from "Prelude to Objects" to "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" to "The Greenest Continent." These poetic depictions have led some critics to conclude that Stevens, like his fellow modern poets, shares "the vocabulary of racial images" (Nielsen 54), a language typically identifying nonwhites as exotic, primitive, and sexualized.34 The evidence is quite convincing: Of the more than twenty Stevens poems that contain nonwhite characters, record black dialect, or recount African

34 Although African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer employed similar strategies, they usually served another purpose: to ironize, to appropriate the image on their own terms. Cullen's "A Song of Praise" for example describes a black woman's beauty in a racial vocabulary: "Her walk is like the replica / Of some barbaric dance / Wherin the soul of Africa / Is winged with arrogance." Yet her loveliness is not obscured by this reference, only enhanced. For if we view the woman only through this racial description, the poet tells us, we will be deprived of her complete radiance. In the last stanza he addresses his white readership:
You-proud-and-to-be-pitied one,
Gaze on her and despair;
Then seal your lips until the sun
Discovers one as fair.
See Hughes' "Negro" and "Young Negro Girl" for other examples.

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American experience, most construct and employ African American identity in a fixed and categorical manner.\textsuperscript{35}

But simply to say that Stevens' poetry of racial difference is a product of white racism is too sweeping; for it leaves nearly everything else unanswered: In what ways does Stevens' construction of black identity work to criticize, celebrate, or merely maintain the status quo? How does the inclusion of black characters in the poems benefit Stevens himself? What are the consequences of believing in an imaginative process that could remain untouched by politics? Certainly Stevens' encoding of race does more than invite further exploration. It requires it.

In this chapter, I will explore how Stevens' poetry of racial difference grows out of a particular, complex dynamic, that is generated by the conflict between Stevens' belief that the imagination can transcend cultural assumptions and the reality of early twentieth century racism that made it nearly impossible for even the most ambitious white mind to comprehend black American life. "A possible poet," writes Stevens, "must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of reality" (NA

\textsuperscript{35} The poems which seem to characterize African Americans as rather primitive and often associate them with the forces of death and decay include "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (which describes a "negro undertaker / Killing the time between corpses/ Fishing for crayfish"), "The Jack - Rabbit," "Two at Norfolk," (which begins with the imperative, "Mow the grass in the cemetery, darkies") "Mud Master," and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." In poems such as "Contrary Theses (II)" (with its oddly placed line, "The negroes were playing football in the park") and "Primorida" (where in the eighth section, "The black mother of eleven children / Hangs her quilt under the pine-trees"), Stevens seems to be using nonwhites as local color. See Aldon Lynn Nielsen's \textit{Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century} (1988) page 62 for a further discussion of this pattern in Stevens' poetry.
And what during the mid-twentieth century could be one of the more pressing forces of reality to contend with than the struggle for racial equality, a struggle that Stevens had in fact to witness and somehow process? How Stevens negotiated this specific pressure of reality—the ways in which he unconsciously resisted it, boldly confronted it, or silently evaded it—shapes nearly every image he crafts of African Americans. Because of this psychological and poetic struggle, Stevens' poems of racial identity reveal what can happen when gifted, complex, and self-insistently apolitical artists work in "a highly and historically racialized society" (Morrison 4). Stevens' poetic undertaking demonstrates how even the most prized and individual imagination "sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision" (Morrison xi).

In a disturbing, almost maddening way, Stevens' representation of the African Americans, though steeped in historically racist language and imagery, is often aesthetically powerful, and his characters so gorgeously rendered and compelling that it becomes too difficult to dismiss the poetry as simply a product of racial prejudice. As such, Stevens' construction of African American identity poses a problem for contemporary readers sensitive to the perpetration of literary racism; for to admire a Stevens poem like "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" for its unorthodox treatment of bourgeois white women is also, in some ways, to tolerate its stereotypical construction of African American women. It is difficult and perhaps even dangerous to separate the aesthetic beauty of a poem from its highly racist ideology. "Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly," writes Morrison. "I think of this erasure
as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). Indeed Stevens' fabrication of the black presence provides an unmitigated space for exploration; it invites a meditation on the writer himself--on the fears, desires, and curiosities that reside in his imaginative process.

Stevens' attitude toward people of color--a mixture of fascination and sympathy, vulgarity and aversion--is useful in understanding his depiction of black characters. Interestingly enough, no modern white poet, with perhaps the exception of Williams, was as vocal in his declarations of alignment with African Americans as Wallace Stevens. But his expressed alliance was often a troubling blend of support and stereotype. During his career Stevens made a number of statements indicative of the problematic sentiments he held for people of color. His letter to Ronald Latimer on Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia in which he declares his support for the Ethiopians, but does so only by employing the derogatory term "coons" is perhaps the best example of this strategy. He writes, "While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors" (L 295). While in Johnson City, Tennessee, Stevens describes in a letter to his wife the movements of troop trains carrying black soldiers. Although at one point he notes that these soldiers are viewed as

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"absurd animals" by the southern whites in the station, Stevens writes, "I want to cry & yell & jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white" (L 223). Perhaps more as a shock device than a political statement, Stevens occasionally signed his poems "Sambo" and declared his poetry to be "like decorations in a nigger cemetery." Stevens' remarks in his letters do reveal a struggle to come to terms with racial inequalities of his generation. That the poet, however, expresses his views within a racist paradigm (describing Ethiopians as "coons" and using racial epitaphs like "Sambo" and "nigger") suggests the difficulties even the apolitical Stevens had in overcoming the racial politics of his time; and it expresses a troubling symbiosis between sympathetic intentions and racist ideologies.

What happens, asks Toni Morrison, when writers like Stevens (those in positions of privilege because of their race, gender, or class)

trust in their ability to imagine others and their willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for them?... What prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from--what disables the foray, the purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination? (3-4).

What is it, in other words, to identify with the other, to take on the characteristics, to inhabit the positions of those who are not privileged in the culture? For Stevens especially, declaring an alliance with African Americans--fictive though it might have been--is both dangerous and liberating, both a way to symbolize black culture without legitimizing its presence and a way to transgress bourgeois white America without acknowledging his own position within it. While Stevens may have
maintained that his poetry is "like decorations in a nigger cemetery," when it came time to publish those decorations, he resumed his position of privilege as a white American male. "To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require," writes bell hooks,

that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other (23).

Although Stevens can admire the boldness and beauty of Victoria Clementina in "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" and the insight of the negress in "The Virgin Carrying the Lantern," by embedding the descriptions of these characters in stereotypes, he allows himself a space for distance, an avenue away from these figures of alliance.

While a few Stevens scholars have noted the poet's declarations of identification with African Americans, many—especially contemporary critics—have avoided the subject of race altogether.37 And of those who

37 Helen Vendler, in her astute and insightful reading of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" in On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (1969), points out that most of the poem's stanzas (except for i and iv) depend upon rhetorical figures for their form. "Often the figure is antithesis, for instance, as in the dominating contrasts of summer and winter, rich and poor, the mechanical and the human, the social and the private" (72). Yet the subject of racial experience and identity seems politely avoided. Nowhere in this list of antithesis is there any mention of the contrast which frames the entire poem: black and white. And the title's significance is primarily discussed in terms of its relationship to Stevens' simile that his poems "are like decorations in a nigger cemetery." Such also seems to be the case in David Jarraway's explication of the poem which he simply states is "strangely titled" (61), but offers no further
have discussed Stevens' proclaimed racial allegiance, none have considered in their examinations what Stevens gained from such positioning. In his 1951 book review of *Auroras of Autumn*, Randall Jarrell reflects on how Stevens' American philosophy is surrounded by racial and ethnic difference. "In *Harmonium*," writes Jarrell, "he still loves America best when he can think of it as a wilderness, naturalness, pure potentiality (he treats with especial sympathy Negroes, Mexican Indians, and anybody else he can consider wild)" (128). Ardyth Bradley in his 1961 explication of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" suggests quite astutely:

The title is perfectly relevant, saying that imaginative creations, including poems, including this one are like decorations in a cemetery, are dogged assertions of the meaningfulness of life. . . . Stevens locates this affirmation of meaning in the midst of a poverty-stricken world of death, in a nigger cemetery, because the affirmation comes not from a systematic metaphysics but from a primitive instinct for finding meaning in life, an instinct corresponding to what Santayana calls our 'animal faith.' For Stevens, as for William Carlos Williams and Faulkner, the American Negro is a symbol of vitality. It is a particularly simple, primitive strength--the *niggerness*--of Negroes living in an austere world without the buttressing of wealth and European culture, that Stevens is using to demonstrate vitality. (italics Bradley) (114)

Peter Brazeau, in his 1977 biography of Stevens, recounts the origin of the poem's title. Stevens had been visiting Key West with his friend Judge Arthur Powell when, during a walk, they came upon fence.

"I explained," the Judge recalled,

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explanation of the strangeness. See his *Wallace Stevens and the Question of Belief: Metaphysician in the Dark* (1993).
that I thought it [the fence] enclosed a graveyard, as some of the rubbish looked 'like decorations in a nigger cemetery.' He was interested when I explained the custom of negroes to decorate graves with broken pieces of glass, old pots, broken pieces of furniture, dolls heads, and what not. The poem ["Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"] itself is an olio, and the title fitting (100-101).

Both Powell's explanation of the poem's title and Bradley's highly charged and racially assumptive description represents much of what is going on in Stevens' poetry of racial difference—a combination of fascination with and stereotyping of the other.

In her 1986 biography on the poet, Joan Richardson describes how the young Stevens, who arrived alone and jobless in New York city in 1900, was struck by the playful tempos and irregular rhythms of a new style of music played by African Americans. Listening to ragtime music, Richardson argues, Stevens felt a kinship with the performers:

Like the black musicians roaming 'free' up from the South, he had moved away from his familiar soil. Just as they reproduced in beats mimicking the quickening pace of city life the deep movements of ring shouts they had sung in their churches back home—movements of songs that proclaimed their faith—he too, changed what he was experiencing of the newborn century into poems that re-created his yearning for his native place and the faith that was lost. (Early Years 113)

As a rootless wanderer left to negotiate the quick and often brutal world of New York, Stevens, suggests Richardson, had much in common with those Southern blacks who migrated North; for both are adventurers who take the new experience of city life, mix it with their old traditions, and create.
and detailed anecdotes of Stevens' alignment with and sympathy for people of color not one considers what Stevens received from such an alliance in his poetry. No critic asks what Stevens gain, artistically, by embracing "the primitive strength" of his African American characters or by experimenting in his poetry with the rhythm of ragtime music. Their tone suggests an admiration for the poet, for what he gives African Americans, namely a sense of legitimacy and a call for recognition of their gifts (all stereo-typically framed, of course). Even though it seems to shape nearly every encounter Stevens has with racial/ethnic others in his poetry, the pertinent question is ignored: What does the inclusion of African Americans do to and for the work? What does it offer the poet who uses them? "Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette," writes Morrison,

American Africanism makes it possible to say and not to say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom (7).

African American characters and images in Stevens' poetry serve as mirrors for white characters ("The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" and "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab") and catalysts of events and ideas impossible to embrace in white skin ("Nudity at the Capital," "Prelude to Objects," and "The Greenest Continent"). If, as Stevens notes in The Necessary Angel, "the poetic process is psychologically an escapist process" (30) but one that ultimately must adhere to some reality, then applying blackface--declaring in his poetry that he is just like African
Americans—afforded him a great measure of freedom from the racial status quo, an opportunity to escape the social conventions placed upon an upper-class white American male in the early twentieth century: financial independence, middle class morals, and the Protestant work ethic. Thus black figures in "Nudity in the Colonies," "Nudity at the Capital," "Prelude to Objects," and "The News and the Weather" are often used in categorical and racist fashion—as symbols of primitive and savage imagination—to criticize or even celebrate white American wealth, religion, and morality by providing a standard with which to judge the larger white culture. Because his identifications and experiences with African American were more often confined to the imaginative realm—they occupied his poems, but not his life—Stevens could project himself into the myth of black life (he could imagine, for example, the state of an Ethiopian soldier fighting Mussolini's army or the position of a black female maidservant) without actually living in it.38 His imaginative

38 A close examination of Stevens' correspondence and various biographies suggests that he had very little contact with African Americans. Although he lived during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, I could find no mention of his views on poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, or Jean Toomer. But perhaps the most damaging and revealing evidence comes from Joan Richardson's biography The Later Years (1986) where she recounts a 1952 meeting of the National Book Award committee, of which Stevens was one of the judges. She writes:

While waiting for Peter Viereck, the last of the judges, delayed by a snowstorm, to arrive, the other five (Winfield Townley Scott, Selden Rodman, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, and William Cole) passed the time looking at photographs of previous meetings of National Book Award judges. Gwendolyn Brooks appeared in one of these. On seeing the photo, Stevens remarked, "Who's the coon?" (The meeting it should be noted, took place after lunch, which for
sympathies (with those who do not share similar advantages) never had to become everyday realities.

No doubt many of Stevens' poems recognize the African American presence as vital and powerful. In the counter-pointed poems, "Nudity at the Capital" and "Nudity in the Colonies," it is the speaker in the first poem, the one who adopts the persona of a black man, who seems the most insightful and knowledgeable: But nakedness, woolen massa, concerns an innermost atom. If that remains concealed, what does the bottom matter? (CP 145) The speaker in blackface astutely theorizes that the truth is much deeper than most think, that nakedness—the kernel of existence—encompasses a much smaller arena than some would think. As Joan Richardson points out, the white man, "massa," then responds to the observation. In "Nudity in the Colonies" he admits the truth: Black man, bright nouveautes leave one, at best, pseudonymous. Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous. (CP 145) While the "black" speaker is praised for his insight, an explanation for this attribute is quickly tendered. The anonymous status of the speaker, the one who applies the blackface and the black idiom, is what grants him the perspective the white man cannot hold: that of the critical outsider. The

the poet had probably begun with two healthy martinis and continued with a fine bottle of wine.) Noticing the reaction of the group to his question, he added, "I know you don't like to hear people call a lady a coon, but who is it?" (388) While Richardson goes on to imply that the incident is partly a result of intoxication and partly Stevens' comedic attempt to be shocking, this passage reveals more than an uncomfortable bit of racism; it demonstrates the poet's ignorance of African American writers. It's 1952 and Stevens, who is more than established in the American life of letters, seems ill informed of the contribution of black artists.
black speaker's anonymity makes him knowable and easily equipped to recognize one of the basic tenets of existence: nakedness. As Michel Benamou notes, "Stevens insists on nudity as essence revealed by existence. . . . The search for centrality and for nakedness is a single movement, the ascensational movement of a human hero" (114). That Stevens chooses to adopt an invented black persona to express this essence of existence is quite revealing; for the poet seems to be suggesting that a black man would be better able to comprehend this simple element of life—nakedness—than a white man would. This depiction appears to reiterate a sort of noble savage ideology in which the intelligence of the black man is grounded in his more primary and nourishing relationship with the natural world. The speaker in "Nudity in the Capital" turns to a black man with a very specific dilemma, one that both the white speaker and poet assume a black man would be well equipped to handle. Moreover, because this description is framed by the process of blackface, the authenticity of the poet's praise and respect of this black figure becomes suspect. How are we to read the construction of black dialect? Is it Stevens' attempt to capture the black idiom? Is it used slightly in jest to poke fun at the white man who misses what is so obviously clear to the black man? Even these two counter-pointed poems—which superficially seem to admire the black presence—are, when examined under a historically racial lens, troubling.

In "Prelude to Objects" Stevens embraces what he terms the "nigger mystics" as ruthless and destructive figures of the imagination. He brings in the vocabulary of racial difference to pit the uncivilized imagination
against the schooled, the mystical against the scientific. The first stanza in part one seems to be a discussion about finding one's self; the word "self" is repeated four times within the first eleven lines. The poem begins:

If he will be heaven after death,

If, while he lives, he hears himself

Sounded in music, if the sun,

Stormer, is the color of a self

As certainly as night is the color

Of a self, if, without sentiment,

He is what he hears and sees and if,

Without pathos, he feels what he hears

And sees, being nothing otherwise,

Having nothing otherwise, he has not

To go to the Louvre to behold himself. (CP 194)

The tone of possibility that surrounds this first stanza, with all the repetition of "if," suggests some kind of searching. The speaker implies that this search should begin in the forms of landscape and art; for the character—the "He" in the poem—may take on a variety of different forms: heaven, music, the sun. He is, in fact, "what he hears and sees" as long as he "feels what he hears and sees." His metamorphosis begins with what he can imagine, what he can feel. In the stanza's last line we are told only where the "he" figure will not behold himself: at the Louvre. To gain a possibility of what he can be, the character needs to look elsewhere. The last part of the second stanza indicates where he may gain such a reflection of himself:
One is always seeing and feeling oneself,
That's not by chance. It comes to this:
That the guerilla I should be booked
And bound. Its nigger mystics should change
Foolscap for wigs. Academies
As of a tragic science should rise. (CP 195)
The way of finding oneself, the speaker suggests, is by recognizing the
"guerilla I" within, that part of us which is hidden and metaphorically
imprisoned ("booked and bound") by internal and external forces. That
the "nigger mystics" of the "guerilla I" serve as catalysts, as mirrors of the
"One" who is seeking, is indicated clearly by the first two lines of the
second stanza: "Granted that each picture is a glass, / That the wall are
mirrors multiplied." "One" needs to find himself in his foils, in those
who, through their difference, enable and validate his presence.
Oppositions frame the poem--One/"guerilla I", mystics/ scientists, and
Foolscaps/scholars' wigs --and all are set in motion by the vocabulary of
racial difference. In part two of the poem, Stevens clearly specifies where
the poet should fall in this midst of polarizations:
  Poet, patting more nonsense foamed
  From the sea, conceive for the courts
  Of these academies, the diviner health
  Disclosed in common forms. Set up
  The rugged black, the image. Design
  The touch. Fix quiet. Take the place
  Of parents, lewdest of ancestors.
We are conceived in your conceits. (CP 195)
The poet sides with the "nigger mystics," "the rugged black," and abandons loyalty to the courts of the academy, opting instead to find his poetry in common forms. He decides to return to the art of his parents, "lewdest of ancestors," and rediscover his primitive, imaginative powers. But the poet's alignment and identification with these black figures cannot come without a racially connotative vocabulary that represents blacks as more common and "rugged" than whites and portrays them as standing outside the court of cultural knowledge: the academy. Such a distinction also raises the issue of audience in the poem. The poet is asked to gather these common forms, these "rugged blacks," for those in the academy. He is to prepare his conception and creation of images for a particular audience, those who are unfamiliar with the "common forms" of art, unaware of the "nigger mystics" in their midst. In addition, it is somewhat disturbing that the pieces of advice given to the poet--about setting up the "rugged black" and taking the place of "parents, the lewdest of ancestors"--are inscribed in the realm of the primitive. Essentially, the poem's racial vocabulary (a vocabulary that cannot escape certain cultural connotations even though Stevens is describing an imaginative transformation) suggests that although black characters are valued, what they are valued for--their lack of sophistication, their investment in the mythical instead of the scientific, and their closer proximity to the earth--are all attributes stereotypically associated with people of color. Although the poet embraces these qualities and chooses to adopt them in his philosophy of
art, it is hard to overlook that such stereotyping works against any attempts Stevens has at truly knowing African American culture.

Ironically enough, Stevens' alliance with those who held the least power in his society--blacks--allows him a certain measure of freedom, a way to transgress white society safely. Putting on blackface as he does in "Nudity at the Capital" and "Prelude to Objects" accomplishes two important tasks for Stevens: it is a vehicle by which he can explore the other in the safest possible manner (on his own terms) and it is a mechanism to critique the white world from which he comes. And what could be one of more forbidden social forces to critique than the bourgeois morality and economics of a society in which, as Frank Lentricchia tells us, "the inescapable question pressed upon him [Stevens] first by family and then by his New York experience is this: How can I turn some part of myself (my 'talent') into a commodity that people will want and 'therefore pay for?'" (146).

In fact, the early Stevens felt much anxiety and perhaps even anger over the economic burden he was forced to carry. When he moved to New York in 1900 at the age of twenty-one Stevens, Lentricchia argues, was "forced to bear witness to the thinness of his middle-class existence" (142). Although he was raised in the bosom of bourgeois life, Stevens' father insisted that the young man carry out the full responsibility of American manhood: economic self-reliance. Encouraged by his father seek a career in journalism and, in the language of supply and demand, "to take an inventory of [his] capacities," (L 19) Stevens did find a position with the New York Tribune. But he thought the writing assignments a
drudgery and his position on the staff tenuous. All this economic anxiety came to a head when Stevens attended the funeral of a fellow journalist who also wrote fiction he admired: Stephen Crane. Stevens found Crane's funeral, peopled mostly with lower class mourners, an "absolutely commonplace, bare, silly service" (L 41). He felt Crane, surrounded by the throngs of the commonplace, was not given his proper due. The budding writer's talent was never appreciated and honored in a culture which valued popular forms of media (like journalism) over more artistic endeavors like novel writing. After this event, Stevens, according to Joan Richardson, had finally become a "native" of the city's brutal reality (Early Years 128) which declared no vacancy for a life devoted solely to arts and letters. Nine months later, not wanting to share in the same fate as Crane, Stevens wrote his father requesting a guaranteed income so he could quit his job at the Tribune and devote all his time to writing. Garret Stevens refused his son's request and Stevens, in the words of Lentricchia, suddenly found himself "expelled from Eden" (144). Unlike the rags to riches pattern of most American tales, however, Stevens' story took another form. His American dream "involve[d] the recapturing of a lost social and economic status that he had never earned but which he nevertheless enjoyed" (Lentricchia 144). Suddenly Stevens came to know the tenuous comfort of middle class existence and the pervading threat of economic descent. That he would find much to criticize about the system which placed him in such an unhappy circumstance certainly seems likely.

For a white American male poet beginning his career during the
turn of the twentieth century, besieged by demands from both his father and his culture to prove his masculinity through an economically productive talent, Stevens may have felt compelled to critique American capitalism in the safest manner possible: in the guise of a blackface. "In minstrelsy," writes Morrison,

a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law. Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist presence to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture (66).

Yet as in minstrelsy, Stevens' metaphorical use of blackface in his poetry is not employed to reveal the social injustice of racism or even to show a sensitivity toward African American struggles. Rather, it provides a means for Stevens to indulge his felt sense of difference—as a poet in a culture obsessed with commodity and production—without actually experiencing the powerlessness of such a position. As Milton Bates notes, Stevens frequently adopted various personas in his poetry. Citing a journal entry in which Stevens claims that "every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new and old" (qtd. in Bates 84), Bates identifies at least three of the on-stage roles Stevens performed: burgher, dandy, and fop. But a distinction needs to be drawn here between Stevens posing as any one of these three characters and Stevens posing in blackface. For, as Bates astutely points out, Stevens was, in fact, a burgher and was often accused of being a dandy; these personas were dramatizations of himself. Obviously, Stevens was not a black man and thus this pose proves more problematic. His poetic maneuvers—drawing
analogies between his circumstances and the trials of more marginalized members of his society—reveal the fear as well as the desire propelling Stevens' imaginative process "to become." Posing as the culturally disenfranchised releases the poser from certain expectations and duties. That is to say, if the culture devalues certain individuals (based on gender, race, class, etc.) then it matters little how well they perform, think, or for that matter, create. With inheritance—acquiring social or financial prestige—comes responsibility, an upholding of standards and norms. Trying on these various identities enables the poet to satisfy the fascination of becoming the outsider (discounted and thus "untouched" by cultural impositions); but what's more, the strategy also quells the poser's fear of ever truly remaining that outsider. Like the newly found solidarity Stevens may have felt with the poor immigrants of New York in 1900, his strategy of blackface is always once removed. As longs as he remains white and employed--two circumstances that were unlikely (impossible in the first case) to change--Stevens can still hope to reclaim that bourgeois Eden of his early existence.

39 In Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, and Wallace Stevens (1988), Frank Lentricchia describes Stevens' newly felt sympathy with the poor during his early years in New York: Suddenly he felt a shocking solidarity with the poor who had hitherto only repulsed him in their filth and poverty (the sight of Italian immigrants had once made it impossible for him to finish a snack of clams on the half shell); he was coming to know a new sort of closeness with those who had hitherto made him feel faintly disgusted when they sat too near him on commuter trains. At the age of twenty-five Stevens came to know the economic difference and the peculiar privilege of middle-class life in America. (144-45)
Perhaps Stevens' strongest critique of the culture that placed him in such a financially tenuous position comes in the poem "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab." Employing his metaphorical strategy of blackface, Stevens uses a black female figure in this poem to critique sexually inhibited Victorian characters like the High Toned Old Christian Woman and Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. In a stereotypical fashion he endows the black female with a primitive and wild sexuality, one which he contrasts with the white women's. But interestingly enough, the representation of the black figure is ambivalent; for in the same moment he uses her as a symbol of sexual power and freedom in order to indict the white women, he also elevates her as this individual force, content and happy with herself. He writes:

Victoria Clementina, negress,  
Took seven white dogs  
To ride in a cab.

Bells of the dogs chinked.  
Harness of the horses shuffled  
Like brazen shells.

Oh-he-he! Fragrant puppets  
By the green lake-pallors,  
She too is flesh,  

And a breech-cloth might wear,  
Netted of topaz and ruby  
And savage blooms;  

Thridding the squawkiest jungle  
In a golden sedan,  
White dogs at bay.

What breech-cloth might you wear,  
Except linen, embroidered
By elderly women? (OP 41)

In contrast to the collective "Fragrant puppets"—sisters of the High-Toned Old Christian Woman—who are destined to wear ordinary linen embroidered by elderly women, the named individual, Victoria Clementina, may be fitted in cloth netted of topaz and ruby, savage blooms. From the first, the speaker seems to embrace Victoria Clementina, this figure of vitality and creativity, who may ride in golden sedans with white dogs at bay. He reminds us that this "negress," often dismissed by those white Victorian-minded ladies, is just as human as they. "Oh-he-!," he taunts the old women, "She too is flesh." While the poet's obvious admiration for the black female figure can be read in some ways as a celebration or an embrace of black culture, both the role Victoria Clementina occupies in the poem as well as Stevens' word choice and conception of character reiterate a certain racist rhetoric, far removed from the language of adoration. The images and words Stevens associates with this powerful black woman—"savage blooms" and "the squawkiest jungle"—are historically racist and demeaning. The poet praises and equates her with those characteristics—primitive, savage, sexually uninhibited—that have been traditionally placed upon nonwestern people as a means to maintain their oppression. Seen in such a lewd manner, African Americans appeared as the other, entirely different and ultimately less human than those in the white western world. Although Stevens admires the wild imagination and savage beauty of Victoria Clementina, he does not allow her to exist outside stereotypical and racist perceptions of African Americans. Even though she is the only named figure in the
poem, the poet uses Victoria Clementina almost exclusively as a point of reference; her presence merely enables him to critique those stuffy Victorian women; her sexuality foils their prudishness, her vibrant imagination, their stifled thoughts. She becomes the Other from which we can define the white women in the poem. By using Victoria Clementina as a mirror, Stevens adopts a recurrent strategy in American literature in regards to portraying black characters: employing them to define the goals and illuminate the qualities of white characters. They become more valuable to the work as foils, rather than highly individualized characters. "For American writers generally," observes Morrison,

this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression; permitted opportunities for the exploration of ethics and morality . . . (47-48).

In "Exposition" Victoria Clementina's presence becomes a way to reflect on the sexuality, morality, arrogance, self-righteousness, and mundanity of high-toned Christian women.

"The Virgin Carrying a Lantern," an earlier Stevens poem, also uses a black woman to comment on the love affair of a white woman.

There are no bears among the roses,
Only a negress who supposes
Things false and wrong

About the lantern of the beauty
Who walks there, as a farewell duty,
Walks long and long.

The pity that her pious egress
Should fill the vigil of a negress
With heat so strong! (CP 71)

Like Victoria Clementina, this "negress" is imaginative, insightful; it is she, the speaker tells us, "who supposes / Things false and wrong," who recognizes that something is amiss with the lantern and the one who is carrying it: the white woman. Although it's never clearly indicated, one could speculate that the beauty's (the white woman's) problem relates to matters of love and sexuality; her egress, though pious, is surrounded with sexual connotations, enabled once again by the presence of a black woman. While readers are invited in some ways to share the perspective of the black woman--viewing the beauty from behind a bush--and though it is the black character's realization and speculation that frames the whole purpose of the poem, the speaker will not allow the "negress" full identity outside of racist thought. From the outset we are told by the speaker that she is "only" a "negress" and that a bear might incite more notice. But the speaker, like the "negress," is an intriguing figure because he/she is the only source we have with which to base our assessment of both the black and white women. Helen Vendler reads the poem's speaker as having a "simpering Victorian voice" who "reprove[s] the negress' suppositions as 'false and wrong,' and express[es] indignation at the negress' 'strong heat'" (Words Chosen 18). Although the speaker shows sympathy with the "negress" in the last stanza, he/she draws upon stereotypical descriptions of black women and espouses racist ideas. Vendler clarifies some of the speaker's notions:

if the negress supposes bears, it is because she is acquainted with bears, while the virgin knows only roses; the negress is in the dark, the virgin bears a lantern; the negress, with her
strong 'heat,' is sexual, the virgin chaste; the negress an impious spy, the virgin a pious vestal. The trouble with the virgin's universe, which would be pleasing if it contained only roses, dutiful virgins, lanterns, and pious farewells, is that it contains the negress, her vigil, her heat, her suppositions. (Words Chosen 19)

But, as Vendler points out, this is a voice and philosophy that Stevens, by employing a satirical tone, is criticizing. Even in this critique, however, Stevens is working under a racial dichotomy; he is pitting white against black. And he is employing the "negress" as an enabler of both white characters— the Victorian speaker as well as the white beauty. In a rudimentary sense African primitivism meets white Victorian morality in this poem and Stevens, as he usually does, appears to side with the African imagination. For it is the "negress" who centers this poem, who watches, who waits, who understands.

As he does with Victoria Clementina, Stevens constructs the "negress" as a "figure of the imagination," someone with insight and clairvoyance. Yet both these women's status as a creative force does not divorce their representations in the poems from certain realistic connotations. Stevens cannot describe an African American—even if she is used as a "figure of the imagination"—in a vocabulary of racist images and leave these characters untouched by his culture's racism. In both poems what is most striking about Stevens' portrayal of these two women is the process of appropriation he employs. If "imagining," as Morrison contends, is more than just looking at the other (more than just depicting images), but actually "becoming" that other (4), then Stevens—especially in these two poems—performs a powerful transubstantiation whereby the "imagined" (these two black women) become the "validated" (the critics of
white morality). As he does with his strategy of blackface in "Nudity at the Capital," Stevens unconsciously employs his whiteness, and all the privileges it confers, as a means to "empower" these black figures; in an almost patronizing fashion, the poet, through his whiteness, grants these characters a space to criticize the dominant white culture.

Despite his biting critique of women like the "high-toned Old Christian woman" and the genteel lady in "Sunday Morning," in reality Stevens had stronger associations with them than any African American. Stevens himself realizes this when he writes in a letter to his wife Elsie:

I sit at home o' nights. But I read very little. I have, in fact, been trying to get together a little collection of verses again . . . Keep all this a great secret. There is something absurd about all this writing of verses; but the truth is, it elates and satisfies me to do it. It is an all-round exercise quite superior to ordinary reading. So that, you see, my habits are positively lady-like. (Letters 180)

Stevens' specification of verse writing as "positively lady-like," notes Lentricchia, suggests the poet's alignment not with working women but those in the leisure class: the high-toned old Christian ladies. As with his declared identification with African Americans, though, his acknowledgment of his "feminine side" is not used to celebrate or legitimize the qualities of women; it is employed only to articulate his felt sense of difference in a society "that masculinized the economic while feminizing the literary" (Lentricchia 168). In this case of associating himself with what was lady-like so to speak, Stevens seeks an encounter not with the racial other, but the sexual other. "His [Stevens'] 'absurd' habit of verse writing," writes Lentricchia, "necessarily forces upon him a feeling at odds with his maleness—the feeling of the sexual other within,
in the mask of poetic culture: the lady poet” (140). In this regard, the two classes of people Stevens appears to pit against each other the most—African Americans and Puritan white women—fulfill a similar double edged role for the poet: they both release him from his obligations as a white male poet (after all his writing habits are "lady-like" and his poetry is only like "decorations on a nigger cemetery") as well as conversely reaffirm his privileged position and reinforce the status quo. He was and would undoubtedly remain Wallace Stevens: white American male insurance executive.

Stevens does attempt, however, to reconcile this dichotomous thinking—this pitting of African imagination and sexuality against white Victorian morality and prudishness—in the poem "The Greenest Continent" from his 1936 collection Owl’s Clover. Possibly inspired by Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, suggests Milton Bates, the poem describes a European invasion of Africa in which European angels try to impose their theology and sense of aesthetic on African bushmen: they attempt to place a statue within the jungles of Africa. Once again Stevens frames the two sides in a stereotypical fashion (civilized Europe meets African primitivism). But as Milton Bates notes, "The angels win the battle but lose the war, since the statue, here symbol for all northern ideas of order, proves meaningless in the jungle" (187). In part four of the poem it becomes obvious that European religion, with its golden icons and ivory statues, has no place in Africa: "No god rules over Africa, no throne, / Single, of burly ivory, inched of gold," the speaker tells us. "Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne: / Death, the herdsmen of elephants," (OP
86) a line that suggests how completely different are the circumstances and environments that surround these two peoples. While Europeans are constructing statues to pay homage to their gods of order and ideas, African bushmen are quite literally battling against the only force that seems to govern their lives: Death. That these angels from Europe should gloriously inflict their religion and ideas upon native Africans, an act that recalls Western missionaries' goal of Christianizing the "savage," strikes the speaker as utterly absurd. In part five he questions the European invaders:

He' quoi! Angels go pricking elephants?
Wings spread and whirling over jaguar-men?
Angels tiptoe upon the snowy cones
Of palmy peaks sighting machine-guns? These
Seraphim of Europe? (OP 87)

The speaker's tone suggests that such an imposition of philosophy is not only useless, but completely ridiculous as well. Forcing one's ideas upon other people, going about "pricking elephants" and tiptoeing upon snow-covered peaks all in the name of Western religion seem comically meaningless. The poem likewise indicates that the gods of the African bushmen are just as legitimate as the god of Europeans and that no one needs to be saved by the forces of Western thought and religion. While it seems as if the differences between the two peoples are vast, the final section of the poem suggests that they are not irreconcilable. Stevens envisions the sort of divinity they might share: Ananke, "the fateful, impassive, changeless presence who ordains the shape of all lesser gods and artifacts" (Bates 187). Ananke, which symbolizes poetry and is indifferent to racial and regional differences, offers hope, suggests that a
merging between black and white is possible. For Ananke is "the common
god" and he looks upon the statue in the jungle and observes the people
that surround it:

He sees the angel in the nigger's mind
And hears the nigger's prayer in motets, belched
From pipes that warm clerestory walls. The voice
in the jungle is a voice in Fontainebleau. (OP 90)

It is probably Stevens' most utopian representation of racial
relations where black and white are bonded by their similarities and peace
and order surround them. But even with this attempt at a harmonious
conclusion, Stevens cannot refrain from using racial epithets or from
characterizing blacks in stereotypical notions. "Stevens could hold such
notions," writes Aldon Lynn Nielsen,

and still consider himself rational because he was ignorant of
Africa's contributions to culture, because he chose to ignore
the means by which the Africans had been rendered
homeless, and because he thought within the structures of
belief which supported such conceptions and shrouded them
in scientificity (65).

As much as he wants these two forces to merge, it does not seem possible
because he operates under a structure of thinking that will not allow it.
With Ananke looking on, the statue can remain in the jungle, but it will
never be completely a part of the jungle; the ivory seems destined to chip,
the gold to tarnish. The European statue seems ill equipped to adapt to the
climate of the jungle, the jungle unlikely to temper its heat.

In Stevens' 1950 poem "The Sick Man" the possibility of some
symbiosis of black and white--what is never completely achieved in "The
Greenest Continent"--finally arrives. The poem centers on a listener who
"waits for the unison of the music" (8) between "the drifting bands / And
dissolving chorals" (8-9) of two distinct groups of musicians: the "bands of
thousands of black men" in the South "playing mouth-organs in the
night" (2-3) and the voices of men in the North, "singing without words,
remote and deep" (5). The listener, the sick man who lies in a bed "alone,"
has a vision and in the last two stanzas imagines:

The words of winter in which these two will come together,
In the ceiling of the distant room, in which he lies,
The listener, listening to the shadows, seeing them,

Choosing out of himself, out of everything within him,
Speech for the quiet, good hail of himself, good hail, good hail,
The peaceful, blissful words, well-tuned, well-sung, well-spoken.

(OP 118)

By possessing a "mind of winter"--the psychological state so espoused in
Stevens' poem "The Snow Man"--the speaker is able to envision a unity
between black and white, North and South, sound and language. And in
this epiphanic moment, the listener moves out of himself and gains what
for him is the most vital and sustaining music: "The peaceful, blissful
words." The listener here almost seems like a poet who finds, in the
opposition between black and white, a language, an art form. But whether
or not he is a visionary, or a poet, or an artist, Stevens tells us only one
detail about this listener: he is a sick man, lying in a bed alone. What are
we to make, then, of his vision of racial and regional harmony? Can we
trust this dazzling revelation or is it merely the result of some feverish
delirium? Are "sick men" the only ones who can imagine a state of racial
unity? The idyllic atmosphere of equality perceived by this listener,
because of who he is and what he suffers from, now seems rather tenuous.
He appears somehow divorced from the outside world because of his
sickness and isolation, solipsistically enjoying the idea of racial harmony but never really entering the song himself.

Perhaps more than anything else, Stevens wished to disturb the quiet thoughts of his readers, to stir them out of the comfortable chairs of their parlors, to wake them from the slumber of Sunday morning service and the complacency of "late / Coffee and oranges" (CP 66). Sometimes in bold and bawdy tone, sometimes in cool and detached cadence, Stevens wrote to rouse and even criticize his most devoted followers: white upper and middle class Americans. Armed with the power of the imagination, that force that would allow him to "become the light in the mind of others" (NA 29), Stevens took this readership to task: he forced them to question the comfort they took in religion in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the fascination they had with bourgeois values in "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," and the passive submission with which they performed the simple and daily routines of life in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock."

But such an aim, noble and demanding as it was, did not come without a price, without its richly disturbing consequences. If Stevens, it can readily be argued, accurately assumed that his readership was composed almost exclusively of whites, what then are we to make of his imaginative construction of black identity? What effect did his assumption of a white readership have on Stevens' depiction of those who were not likely to own, in the 1920's or 1930's, a copy of Harmonium? When did Stevens' awareness of race and when did his conscious and
unconscious allegiance to twentieth-century prejudices disrupt, enrich, or impoverish his imaginative process? As Aldon Nielsen argues:

But on the whole, Stevens's preachments are intended for other ears; he pushes black readers into the role of eavesdropper as he sings: "...I play my guitar, / The negro with laundry passes me by" (Opus 72).

Blackness is at the periphery of Stevens's world and requires the attendance of imaginative missionaries" (63). As evident by the number of poems that concern black characters and presence, Stevens leaves us with an uncomfortable sense of racial ambivalence. In some ways, he finds it difficult and frequently impossible to imagine whiteness without calling upon images of blackness, what Nielsen terms "imaginative missionaries." Black characters in many of his poems--from Victoria Clementina and the black "negress"--not only encounter whiteness but are often used by the poet to comment on these white figures. Thus Stevens' invention of black identity performs a reflexive function; it provides, in Toni Morrison's terms, "an extraordinary mediation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17). Attempting to draw an empathetic alliance with those who were disinherit in his culture--African American men and women--may have provided a vehicle for the poet to work out his fears and desires, especially those anxieties fueled by the pressures of achieving financial success and security. In his own mind, however, Stevens may have perceived his self-declared alignment with blacks during such turbulent times as an artistic aspiration to reflect something beyond himself, something universal about human struggles and ambitions. Because he was a writer who shared Emerson's vision of the poet as an
inventor, as someone who "unlocks our chains and admits us to a new scene" (236), Stevens may have viewed his endeavor to capture African American experience as an attainable ideal, one propelled by his ability to invent, to imagine. If, according to Stevens, the poet fulfills his obligation to his readers only when he "makes his imagination theirs" (NA 29), then he may have viewed his representation of African Americans as completely genuine, as a product of that "supreme fiction" made real by the poet and reader's faith in imaginative powers. Yet in undertaking this task, the poet strives to render more than he knows, and, at last, can only present us with small sketches of black America that appear more invented than authentic, more imagined than real.

Whatever it was that Stevens envisioned as his poetic obligation—whether he hoped as he said, to be "the light in the mind of others," or "to help people live their lives" (NA 29)—his poetic privilege, his endeavor to move imaginatively among the stratified zones of black and white experience in the early twentieth century, was equally as powerful. In his crafting of African American characters, in his act of imagining the other, Stevens did, in fact, become. But this transaction, in the end, proved costly. For Stevens' various poetic acts of "becoming"—his declarations of alignment, his use of blackface, his strategies of enabling whiteness, and his methods of transubstantiation—inevitably diminish and patronize African Americans. Through his seductive depiction of African American experience and struggle as something comprehensible to white sympathies and useful to white artists, Stevens makes African American identity "knowable" and thereby controllable. Regardless of his intentions,
Stevens reinstates the very color line he imaginatively attempts to blur, unwittingly leaving us to contend with the attraction and consolation of false alliances.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

"Some of my favourite books are written by people whom I doubt that I could spend one hour. In print I can live with them forever because the strong line connecting us is love of language."

--Jeanette Winterson

In this study of writers who attempt to cross boundaries, I end finally with a complementary and equally vital crossing: the imaginative travel of readers. For if art and imagination are, as the four writers in this study contend, forces which unite all people, then good art must move the reader, must transport her out of herself. "Good writing," John Edgar Wideman explains, "teases us with the possibility/impossibility of sharing the intimacy and power of someone else's invisible vision" (xix). This intimacy of vision, of course, can create unusual and unexpected marriages. The "love of language" that Winterson characterizes as the holy bond drawing reader to writer makes for odd traveling companions. Indeed the ability to reach a diverse readership is a test of the writer's vision. We might argue that Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, can speak as much to a contemporary twentieth century reader as she could to her rather reluctant eighteenth century reader; or, that today in prison cells, libraries, subways, and even in classrooms we can observe the most varied set of readers discovering Henry David Thoreau, or Malcolm X, or Jane

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Austen. “Literature is not a lecture delivered to a special interest group,” Winterson argues, “it is a force that unites its audience” (106).

But for a long time in this nation’s history, literature was directed toward a special interest group. “Until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author,” writes Toni Morrison, “the readers of virtually all American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination” (xii). The four writers in this study—Crane, Cather, Stevens, and even to some extent Dunbar—wrote for an exclusively white middle-class readership. And like many readers, they wanted to be transported. Sometimes these four authors obliged their readership by transporting them to safe, non-threatening regions. Some of Dunbar’s plantation tales and lyrics as well as Cather’s novel *Sapphira and the Slave Girls* comforted white readers with the memory of a glorious past without the stain of racism. Dunbar’s use of plantation mythology, for example, likely eased his white reader’s guilt because he creates, in some of his lyrics, a harmonious picture of black folk enjoying the protection of white masters. And Crane’s tales of the slum may have inadvertently served the same purpose as his contemporaries—like the social reformer Jacob Riis—who frequently made the poor an object of consumption and spectacle for the white bourgeois.

The same may be said for Stevens’ poems “The Virgin Carrying a Lantern” and “The Greenest Continent” which sexualize and primitivize black identity. Such creative acts may have served to entice a white readership who, in their enjoyment over the black object, may overlook the fact that Stevens is actually critiquing white culture.
Yet there are vital, capable moments in all four of these writers' works when their white readership is disturbed, when racial categories explode, and, for a brief time, the imagination performs its vital service: allowing writers to express more than, other than, what they are; and with their art, giving readers the chance to experience more than, other than, what they are. Middle-class whites who picked up Dunbar's *The Sport of the Gods* or his short story "The Lynching of Jube Benson" expecting another plantation story likely experienced a shock which compelled them to move out of their comfortable notions of black and white equality. In each of these pieces Dunbar subverts the plantation mythology of some of his earlier work—ultimately exposing the myth of southern black/white harmony, unveiling the brutality of white racism, and offering a portrait of both the South and the North as inhabitable regions for the black population. Crane's readership may have experienced the same jolt when they read *The Monster* which also questions white notions of race and disturbs safely guarded assumptions about racial hierarchies. One editor from the *Century*, for example, rejected the story in 1897 saying, "We couldn't publish that thing with half the expectant mothers in America on our subscription list" (qtd. in Stallman 334). It was in *Collier's Weekly* that *The Monster* first appeared and, as evidenced by the harsh reviews it received, Crane did provoke his readership. Perhaps to a lesser extent, Cather and Stevens also ruffled their audiences out of their parlor chairs. Cather risked a certain amount of ridicule in her effort to bring immigrants from Nebraska to the forefront of her fiction; and she did suffer some criticism for her decision. One New York critic said of *O
"Pioneers: "I simply don't care a damn what happens in Nebraska, no matter who writes about it." And for all his mythologizing of black experience, Stevens did invite his readership to envision the possibility of some symbiosis between black and white lives in his 1950 poem "The Sick Man." As the poem’s listener "waits for the unison of the music" (8) between "the drifting bands /And dissolving chorals" (8-9) Stevens himself may be encouraging his white readership to do the same. In the poem "bands of thousands of black men" in the South "playing mouth-organs in the night" (2-3) meet the voices of men in the North, "singing without words, remote and deep" (5). Here, at last, is Stevens’ momentary effort to reconcile the tension and distance that he often creates in his poetry between black and white.

As critics and readers in the late twentieth century become more and more taken with autobiographical and memoir writing and the growing trend among booksellers is toward specialization—promoting books by authors who write for and about individuals who share their same race, social class, or sexual orientation— it remains to be seen how the reputations of these four authors will fair in the future. Cynical of earlier authors’ audacious attempts to occupy "another person’s skin" or to speak for another, many contemporary readers are turning to the subjects of these works themselves for their point of view. Over the last decade, for example, critics and readers have discovered the works of many immigrant, African American, and Native American writers who were contemporaries of Crane, Dunbar, Cather, and Stevens. As such readers who are interested in a first-hand account of immigrant experience in
New York city may turn to Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* or Abraham Cahan’s *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* rather than Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*; if they wish to understand more about American Indian life in the Southwest they may choose Zitkala-Sa’s *American Indian Stories* rather than Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* or *The Professor’s House*; and if readers are really curious about the way African American jazz infused modern poetry they may abandon Wallace Stevens all together for the rhythm of Sonia Sanchez’s poetry.

We need not lament any of these movements and changes in taste as the discovery of an even greater diversity of American writers has meant a richer, more expansive version of American literary history. But I do think we have to lament the driving trend in literature and literary publishing for “authenticity” of experience, eye-witness accounts, and specialization which would have us believe that Crane’s writing can’t speak to Yezierska’s, or that Cather has nothing to say to Zitkala-Sa, or Stevens to Sanchez. For such assumptions not only disregard the capacity of the imagination, but deny that American literature is composed of a dynamic exchange of cultural traditions. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out “segregation is alive and well among literary historians, who persist in affirming that white writers come from white literary ancestors, and black writers from black ones” (142).

The aim of this study was to reveal the intersection of these four writers’ lives as well as their efforts to de-segregate the American literary imagination. The outcomes of their imaginary travels are, as indicated by the previous discussions, varied, mixed, and ambivalent. Yet the risks
they take to occupy “another person’s skin” invites us as readers to be mindful of the privileges, responsibilities, and dangers imposed upon the life of the imagination. It is a tricky terrain this landscape of the imagination; writers who journey there chance not only inaccuracy in their depictions of others, but racism, sexism, and classism as well. And yet to cast its powers completely away may run an even greater risk: committing ourselves to the safe, but unimaginative world of solipsism.


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