A Geography of Resistance

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I hereby declare that, except where indicated by the notes, this thesis contains only my own original work.

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A Geography of Resistance

Literature, community and modernity

in the United States hinterlands

from 1919 to 1939
For My Parents
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Abstract

According to America’s literary modernism, the line between local community and mass society is so faint that the attempt to draw it draws it into question. In the years between the wars, small rural communities were being increasingly socialised by mass media and mass mobility. Following a theory of community advanced by Jean-Luc Nancy, this thesis abandons the mythic view of community as an autonomous ideal destroyed by the geography of mass society. By extension, it cautions against depicting regional modernism as a reaction to a lost order, as an attempt to integrate social fragmentation, or as a lament over community's dissolution in an atomised marketplace. Instead, America’s regional modernism offers a unique poetics of resistance, an aesthetics that controverts any political design for a self-contained community. As it registers the effects of automatic motion and mechanical media in verbal consciousness, modernism undoes the notion that communities were sustained by shared identity, ontological integrity or physical rootedness.

At a time when Americanists are discussing questions of field integrity, the disintegrated picture of communal life this thesis offers may reconfigure the political status of American communities as subjects for intellectual inquiry. Janice Radway recognises that “ethnic, queer, feminist, and working-class identities” urge affiliations with subnational or transnational communities that challenge “the integrity of the very idea of an American whose identity is fully accounted for by residence in the territory of the United States.”

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While identitarian political movements have helpfully corroded the assumptions of consensus and coherence that once contained disciplinary bounds, there is a danger in calcifying and reifying community identities in popular and academic discussions. By linking community to the *ecstasis* of identity, Nancy contests the “understanding of politics as a form or expression of identity.”

In case Nancy overstates the case that ruptured subjectivity universally provides the grounds of communal experience, my thesis moderates theory into a historical focus. Focusing on the interwar era, it suggests that an idea of human essence was disintegrated by industrial media and transportation, but thus affirms that community is experienced once *identification* with a community is no longer possible. While attentive to Susan Stanford Friedman’s imperative—“Always spatialize!”—this project also attempts to satisfy the fourth directive of David Harvey’s disciplinary manifesto: to “integrate geographical sensitivities into [the] general social theories” of historical materialism.

In the belief that global historical purviews have their own shortcomings, this project skims transnational reading rubrics and instead provides a geography committed to the local material of aesthetic struggle.

An introductory section, “landings,” surveys the mass geography of American locales by air and by land. Chapter 1 centres on Gertrude Stein’s 1935 airplane ride over the Midwest, looking into modern literature for the spatial forms that aerial views of the landscape made possible. Stein’s excitement over the land lying flat below the airplane animates her 1936

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4 David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 120.

Geographical History of America, a text that pleads for immanent spatial forms to absolve the need for relating historical violence. When read amongst peer poets and popular geographers, Stein's geography plainly attempts to conceal how the acrobatics and destruction of wartime aviators shocked modernists into the ecstasy of communal feelings. The second chapter enacts a critical literary tour, visiting a number of modernists at specific locations—such as Wallace Stevens in Key West and Willa Cather in Colorado—where mass media and mass transit reshaped rural communities. The tour exposes the pernicious impact of modernism's disintegrative social logic. By disrupting mythic notions of community, the modernism of American settlements devalued the claims of indigenous communities and buried an imperial legacy in its political unconscious.

The next two sections inspect the reorganisations of communal life within a media ecology that hybridised the human and non-human. Section 2, “country sound,” considers a three-way chiasmus between literary form, audio technology and folk tradition in the 1920s. The chapter “Fugitive Radio” focuses on a group of poets in Nashville as it transitioned from “The Athens of the South” to the broadcast hub of the Grand Ole Opry. Resisting the political poles of old and new, The Fugitive Magazine opened an aesthetic space that defied both the nostalgia for a lost community and the destiny of its programmatic simulacrum. The next chapter explores the spectre of mechanically recorded voices in Jean Toomer's Cane and Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. Once they are separated from the body and preserved as tin or vinyl, voices can no longer be deemed to grow organically from within. Even though Toomer and Anderson use agricultural metaphors in a bid to reclaim a spiritual interiority, their modernism depicts communities without organic, self-contained vocal identities. Community without identity paradoxically defines their regional Americas.
Section 3, “writing by movie light” also inspects the topic of hybrid media ecologies by paralleling the history of early cinema with the automated motion of townspeople in *Light in August* and Cather's prairie fiction. When read through the early film theory of Vachel Lindsay, Cather's pioneers appear as animated hieroglyphs. Referencing a set of proto-cinematic technologies, she displays new possibilities for the moving image within the novel. One of William Faulkner's contributions to the modernist novel is the character as automaton; Joe Christmas, in both his motion and memory, exemplifies cinematic mutation in a way that redefines both his maternal and geographic origins as immemorial. The dissertation ends with “departures,” a close reading of Hart Crane's “Voyages,” a sequential poem that evokes the communication between lovers who are submerged in an experience of indeterminacy. Amid a mass media environment that blends advertising image and phonographic noise, the breakdown of their communication finally enacts the possibility of their ecstatic communion.

By rethinking the relations between the technologies of social relations, specific geographic locales, and particular literary histories, this study hopes to re-conceive the territorial coordinates of its field. Each chapter combines the methods of geographic-historical materialism with post-structuralist critical theories in order to completely reassess America's literary modernism. Such an approach elicits summary conclusions about the experience of community during the historical modernisation of the United States, a process that remapped both exterior and interior political boundaries.
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A Geography of Resistance
Towards a poetics of ecstasy, for a sense of community

Something as ordinary as a postmark can seal the saddest fate. At the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s masterpiece *Tender is the Night*, the expatriated American heiress Nicole Warren uses an atlas to track the demise of her former husband and psychiatrist Richard Diver. The unfortunate trajectory of his life is stamped on envelopes and cards addressed from ever smaller and less significant towns in Western New York State.

In the last letter she had from him he told her he was practising in Geneva, New York, and she got the impression that he had settled down with some one to keep house for him. She looked up Geneva in an atlas and found it was in the heart of the Finger Lakes Section and considered a pleasant place. Perhaps, so she liked to think, his career was biding its time, again like Grant’s in Galena; his latest note was post-marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another.6

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If unfamiliarity with “that section of the country” leaves any question as to whether this is a geography of failure, Nicole's condescension about Dick's career “biding its time,” about Geneva being his Galena, reinforces the point that the “Finger Lakes Section,” pleasant as it may be, is a far fall from the French Riviera villa where Dick gave social blessing to America's post-war economic expansion. Familiarity with that section of the country, however, opens a different horizon of interpretation. Because I grew up in a small town between Geneva and Hornell, I was struck, the first time I read this passage, by the bitter thrill of seeing my roots conjured up to spell the collapse of a rich literary construction. At the same time, I had to ask how my own impression of the Finger Lakes (which agreed with Nicole's intuition—a pleasant but pitiable place) coloured my sense of the novel's conclusion. Equally I wondered how Fitzgerald's time as a child in Buffalo might have motivated this flourish of regional place names.7

In terms of Fitzgerald's fiction and biography, to return to Western New York is returning to the land of the dead father. In the novel, the news of Diver's father's death comes in a “cablegram from Buffalo” and is signed by a curate named Holmes an obvious pun on “home” (Tender, 222). Since Western New York was a region “burned over” by the religious revivals of the nineteenth-century, and considering Joseph Smith found Moroni’s golden plates on Hill Cumorah in the Finger Lakes, the choice to make Diver's father a man of the cloth overlays the regional geography with a shroud of metaphysical significance. Dick Diver stages his disappearance in a region accreted thickly with senses of origin, father, homeland, God, presence, and so on. To consider my own relationship with that section of the country would require me to attach pages of equivocations to my interpretations. Anyway, those, in the end, are not exactly the questions that motivated this research project; they are here only in spirit, or in their absences. Not in themselves

are they are present, but in every act of devotion to the particular in a literary reading, or
to the local as a unit of geographic analysis.

To wit: there are five regional place names presented in the novel's epilogue—Buffalo,
Batavia, Lockport, Geneva, and Hornell. Moving between them in that order, Diver
wanders eastward, more or less, and stays close to the major East-West trunk road of New
York State. The site of today's Thruway, this route was first established as a foot trail by
Mohawk and Iroquois peoples trading with the British at Fort Niagara; in the nineteenth-
century the Erie Canal and heavy railways would follow. Hornell, in the remote Southern
Tier, is a fairly wild deviation from this thoroughfare; to get there Diver hooked back
considerably into the hilly south western corner of the state. In electing this location,
Fitzgerald—ever meticulous as tragedian—passed over Hopewell, with its semantic
optimism, a town much closer to Geneva, so that Nicole loses track of her already lost love
in Hornell. The derivation of “Hornell” as a surname (New York's Hornell being named
after George Hornell) is “certainly locational and possibly originates from the village of
Harnhill in the county of Glouchestershire, although this is not proven.” According to the
Name Origin Research database, it is more likely “one of the three thousand and more
surnames of the British Isles that originate from now 'lost' villages,” i.e. those not recorded
in any gazetteers.8

If, as Richard Godden avers it does, “the final chapter [of Tender is the Night] repeats
the pattern of the larger narrative,”9 then this map, with a simulacrum of a village at its
end, must narrate the historical change that splits Diver between metaphors of global
capital’s new liquidity and metaphors of mannered social stability. Godden describes this
historical transition as moving from the imperialist “sphere of accumulation,” with its

typical space as the encrusted Victorian interior, to the late-capitalist “sphere of reproduction,” with its typical space as the Hollywood set. In so far as this historical transformation signals the “demise of a father-centered phallocentrism,”\textsuperscript{10} there is a submerged irony in Diver’s return to the place of fatherly origins.

A Hollywood spectacle, it conceals its own unauthenticity by belying it. The possibility of phallic re-centring in Western New York subtly disrupts itself through the puns Godden uncovers in the final paragraph, the double entendres in “Finger” and “Lockport.”\textsuperscript{11} Since Fitzgerald’s own father was a grocery salesman around Buffalo, Dick's getting “entangled” with a grocery girl in Lockport proxies an incestuous run-in with the father figure, doubling Dick as both the affronting older man and the “Daddy's girl” figure her/himself. Finally, the onomastic disturbances of Hornell, (with its own puns on “horny” and “elle” and “hell”) suggest that any place promising renewed communion with the sexual normativity and social piety of the “good father” is a place that is out-of-the-way, lost or displaced, only to be displaced again through the indefinite (“almost certainly”) and shifting (“in one town or another”) signifiers of the last sentence.

Contributing to its fame, the novel’s closing paragraph employs an eerily casual tone. It plays what Fitzgerald calls, in a letter to H.L. Mencken dated April 1934, the “trick” of the “dying fall.”\textsuperscript{12} Theorising that such a casual address would produce “the lingering after-effects” that the art of fiction must, Fitzgerald defends his narrative technique in a long letter to Ernest Hemingway in June of 1934, in which he boasts he wrote the ending with every intention of leaving the book’s consumer in the “condition of a frustrated woman in

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., xxvi.


\textsuperscript{12} F. Scott Fitzgerald, \textit{A Life in Letters}, ed. Matthew J Bruccoli and Judith Baughman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 256. Fitzgerald called the passage a “piece of burglary” from David Garnett’s \textit{Lady into Fox} (1922). Garnett’s last paragraph: “For a long while his life was despaired of, but at last he rallied, and in the end he recovered his reason and lived to be a great age, for that matter he is still alive.”
bed,” a comment that punctuates Godden’s reading of the novel’s sexual and economic valences. Reflecting only upon the last pages, the reader’s frustrated after-glow must be due in some degree to Nicole’s flippant geographic reconstruction of the major economic shifts that effect Diver’s balancing and toppling act. In an April 1934 letter to Scott, Zelda would respond perceptively: “It is tear-envoking to witness individual belief in individual volition succumbing to the purpose of a changing world.” Unlike Zelda, Nicole reflects with dry eyes and relative insouciance upon the automated purposes of late-capitalist reproduction – those that disintegrated the intentional individual, the charming personality of her lover, and left only a fragmentary trail of post-marks. Aware of the narrative illusion, she is the perfectly canny Hollywood spectator.

Nicole’s map deserves to be at the front of this thesis for two reasons. Firstly, it casually belies the deeper point that one’s entanglement in the “technopolitical dominion” of high capitalist society is, in the final instance, a matter of geography. The second reason is that Dick’s character, according to critical consensus, dramatises a tension between pre-war social bonds and post-war anomie. To fuse these two reasons into one: the tension between pre- and post-war forms of communality culminates and dissolves in a modernist geography of the American hinterlands. In brief, this thesis focuses on the literature of small communities and regional geographies in the interwar United States to comprehensively and freshly examine the relations between communal life and mass society that took place there.

The frustrated after-effects of reading Nicole’s map have lingered long enough in literary history to warrant reassessing the nature of the world into which modernism’s romantic heroes dissolved. That Diver returns to pastoral upstate New York for his

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13 Ibid., 264.
14 Bruccoli, Some Sort of Epic Grandeur, 365.
ultimate diminution implies that village community and the natural bonds to one's hereditary locale only complete the altering effects of mass society. Fitzgerald's conclusion serves here as introduction because it expresses a notion that was widespread among America's regional modernists: that the historical tension of modernisation is not adequately described by the romantic antagonism between the Gemeinschaft, “the older type of village commune or organic society” and the Gesellschaft, “that atomized agglomeration of isolated individuals in the modern market system.”16 Far from being two opposed forms of communality, “community” is the belated production of an industrial society. Perhaps the term “community” simply reifies a microcosmic, marketable and manageable commodity form of mass society itself. In homage to Marx's commodity fetish: through its rhetorical figure “metaphysical subtleties” dance like particles in an hourglass shape; if, in the famous definition, “the definite social relations of men” assume the “fantastic form of a relation between things,” then, in the form that “community” takes as a commodity in the marketplace of ideas, the fantastic forms of mass society resume the appearance of definite day-to-day, face-to-face social relations between people.

For Fitzgerald, as for a number of modernists with “roots” in the U.S. hinterlands, community, in the ultimate instance, is not victim to but rather an example of mass society’s disintegrative effects. This revision of the terms “community” and “society” is so central to my thesis, it is worth quoting its fiercest expositor at length:

*Community has not taken place*, or rather, if it is indeed certain that humanity has known (or still knows, outside of the industrial world) social ties quite different from those familiar to us, community has never taken place along the lines of our projections of it according to these different social forms. It did not take place for the Guayaqui Indians, it did not take place in an age of huts; nor did it take place in the Hegelian “spirit of a people” or in the Christian agape. No

*Gesellschaft* has come along to help the State, industry and capital dissolve a prior *Gemeinschaft*. It would undoubtedly be more accurate to say, bypassing all the twists and turns taken by ethno-logical interpretation and all the mirages of an origin of “bygone days,” that *Gesellschaft*—“society,” the dissociating association of forces, needs and signs—has taken the place of something for which we have no name or concept, something that issued at once from a much more extensive communication than that of a mere social bond (a communication with the gods, the cosmos, animals, the dead, the unknown) and from much more piercing and dispersed segmentation of this same bond, often involving much harsher effects (solitude, rejection, admonition, helplessness) than what we expect from a communitarian minimum in the social bond. *Society* was not built on the ruins of a *community*. It emerged from the disappearance or the conservation of something—tribes or empires—perhaps just as unrelated to what we call “community” as to what we call “society.” So that community, far from being what society has crushed or lost, is what happens to us—question, waiting, event, imperative—in the wake of society.\(^{17}\)

Opening the thesis with “lost generation” icons like Fitzgerald and Hemingway is a reminder that histories of American modernism have classically taken their point of departure as a scene of primal loss. Reliant on occidental military history, such accounts are Euro-centric, gendered, and generationally narrow, and thus they have attracted decade’s worth of scholarly confrontation, but they can be equally interrogated for the ideological mystification inherent in the concept of loss. When Hugh Kenner writes that “all of them” (by whom he means Pound, Eliot, and Lewis) “came to maturity just before the War, and could therefore remember afterward what had been lost,” he typifies the still somewhat acceptable notion that the first World War destroyed something and that the experience of its loss elicited and determined the outbreak of high modernism in the early

\(^{17}\) Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 11.
1920s. As such he expounds a conceit still popularly held, that modernity is a shattered or fragmented social space and modernism its aesthetic reflex. In the introduction to a 2007 volume, *Modernism*, Ástráður Eysteinsson uses the spatial metaphor "rhizomes of modernism emerging, reminding us that we still live in modernity’s shattered space."

Despite the nod to Deleuzian rhizomatics, one suspects this statement has a more tree-like derivation, with roots in his description of T.S. Eliot’s appreciation for the “unity of art”—a "salvation from the shattered order of modern reality”

It is true that this point of view is the product of the lost generation’s self-mythologising, but the same literature contains undercurrents that erode the sense of modernism as a monument memorialising lost social coherence. *Tender is the Night*, for example, apes such a narrative of lost immanence when Rosemary, Dick and Abe North visit the battlefield at Amiens. Dick argues the pervasive thesis of the War's singularity, its status as an end-marker of history. He claims it was preceded by “whole-souled sentimental equipment,” by “religion and years of plenty and tremendous sureties and the exact relation that existed between the classes.” However his breathless aggrandising soon lapses into bald parody and boyish performance. Abe hurls imagined grenades and real taunts: “You’re dead—don’t you know the rules?” He mocks Dick's sentiment that “a century of middle-class love” was “spent” on the battlefield field with his own mawkish war cry: “I have a hundred years of Ohio love behind me and I am going to bomb this trench” (*Tender*, 67-68).

As North marshals, into a colourful parade of mock sentiment, the very idea of the war as culmination and destruction of “whole-souled” “Ohio love,” this signifier of rural

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America appears as no accident. The patriarchal manner (manor) of classical imperialism—with its tremendous accumulation of sure capital, with its exact relations between leisure and labour classes—has a specific, but misleading, geographical location in the American heartland. The point of Abe's rollicking is subtle but not to be missed: perhaps something was destroyed by the war, but the notion that it was an immanent sociality integrated by heart and heartland is laughable. Abe's performance may be complex in its rejection of an ideal communality, but Dick's reaction completes the rejection ever more subtly and irrevocably.

Diver resists the game, saying he “couldn't kid here,” where the verb “kid” (with its barnyard connotation of siring livestock) crystallises the paedophilia/incest complex of the novel. In Rosemary's immature presence he refuses to playfully couple, as the passage subtly refuses to propagate that staged and sentimental brand of history that narrates a lost age of immanence. At the same time, and perhaps for Rosemary's benefit, he reaches his most histrionic, making ham-fisted allusions to Ecclesiastes and calling himself “an old romantic,” to which she responds “I'm romantic too” (Tender, 68). As it surreptitiously and feebly enforces an incest taboo, Dick's pious resistance to “kidding” on a field of “the last love battle” has all the air of a maudlin act. As Rosemary offers (at the point in their affair when Diver realises (internal laughter and all) that he's kidding himself): “Oh we're such actors you and I” (Tender, 118). His reluctance to play the leading man, to act professionally at all, had earlier clarified itself when he refused to sit for a screen test and offered the following reason: “'The strongest guard is placed at the gateway to nothing,' he said. 'Maybe because there the condition of emptiness is too shameful to be divulged’” (Tender, 81).

Reading this comment in light of his guarded posture on the stage at Amiens, one can deduce that “a condition of emptiness” is at the heart of his nostalgia for pre-war “sureties,” and that the myth of an immanent community is a guard baring one from the
sight of a shameful nothing at the core of his historical remembrance. If the myth of pre-war composure does lack substance, the fact could become dangerously visible if he acknowledges the performativity of his sexual and social distance from the sphere of reproduction, that artifice of his personality that conceals his psychic disintegration. Sadly, in Diver we find none of the irony that, according to Paul Fussell, the war triggered in the modernist generation by displaying the vacuity of their heroic hopes.21 The irony is there in Abe. The disjunction between the two characters opens the possibility of reading modernism, not as a response to the erasure of pre-modern forms of community, but as a tense and playful vacillation between an attack upon and an elegy for communal piety.

The fact of Diver’s psychic disintegration brings up a second point in the histories of modernism that this thesis hopes to revise. Classically understood, modernism advanced an aesthetic response to a crisis in subjectivity. These terms can be seen in the critical introduction to Tender is the Night. Godden argues that after bidding “good-bye all my fathers” at his father’s funeral, thus symbolically breaking with the sureties of the nineteenth-century, and after bedding Rosemary, and thus embracing “the delights of the sphere of reproduction,” Dick can “no longer experience selfhood as an entity.”22 The notion of the modern world disintegrating a once integrated subjectivity had early expression in studies like Wylie Sypher’s Loss of the Self in Modern Literature and Art.23 Walter Benjamin connected the atomisation of a mass media society to the waning of community. When he considered the collective silence invoked by the war, and the dissemination of stories through mechanical printing procedures, he offered his thesis that the “birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who ... is himself uncounseled, and

cannot counsel others.”24 This view seems not to have totally absorbed the sense of modernity's disintegrated selfhood. With Benjamin, author and consumer, each mirroring the other in the pursued solitude of reading and writing, turn to the page only to reveal their isolation from the other. But the notion of a disintegrated ego leads to a theory of community that will overcome the early twentieth-century's sense of alienation, and find community itself produced by the loss of self.

For what does the page encrypt? If typeface is a death mask that supplements the presence of an author as it conceals his or her absence,25 then an inscription of literary community lies engraved upon the edifice and within the experience of reading. Mechanically reproduced print—a medium that cheats death, that revives voice and vision in the absence of authorial origin (even after the author's death)—is a place for communing, for maintaining community “at a level equal to death.”26 Readers stay relatively still. Don't we suspend ourselves over the page? As it holds death in both confirmation and negation, the book opens so that we may find what is gone in what remains, lost voices evoked and muted by the silence of print. As Bataille writes, “If it see its fellow-being die, a living being can subsist only outside itself....” So solitary readers of the death masks of books—in their stillness, communing at the level of death—are ecstatic, “driven out of the confines” of their person, to lose themselves “as much as possible in the community of [their] fellow creatures,”27 even as they remain still and apparently alone.

Both preserved and defeated by the substance of language, death (and the subject's awareness of it) prompts communication and thus community. As Ian James explains:

The term communication ... refers to the manner in which Bataille comes to

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26 Georges Bataille, as quoted in Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 15.
27 Bataille quoted in, Ibid., 15–16.
understand the excess of the subject over itself. This excess is precisely what
allows community to occur ... and is marked or affirmed in the sphere of
eroticism ... Within this sphere of communication any self-enclosure of the
subject, or any immanence of the subject to itself, is impossible and the
separation between subject and object is dissolved.28

Responding to death, communication triggers the self’s excess over self, the impossibility
of self-enclosure, of immanence, the impossibility of the individual’s achieving absolute
knowledge of self or systemisation within a total knowledge. As Bataille moves this double
interruption—within the subject and between subject and object—into the erotic sphere, he
characterises the experience of resisting the absolute as a question of ecstasy; so where
American modernists interrupt the myth of absolute community they open a poetics of
ectasy. For example, the pleasant conversations that interpose Stein’s orgasmic Lifting
Belly are the anecdote and interruption to the war of 1916 and 1917 that surrounded its
authorship, as the conversation between Abe and Dick interrupt the nostalgia for more
authentic social bonds that supposedly preceded those conversations. Modernist ecstasy
establishes community not despite the violence of modernity but amid it, and out of the
insufficiency of the self in the face of finitude.

In their attempt to rework the concept of community, Bataille, and Nancy’s other
major interlocutor, Heidegger, rely on a metaphysic of the subject. Bataille thinks of
community as a shared relation to death, but his explanations retain a sense of subject-
object relations. Heidegger’s thought holds singular existence in relation to death, but,
according to James, Heidegger “goes awry” (in Nancy’s opinion) once “he thinks of
community as the assumption of the historical destiny of a people (and thus conceives of
them, in identitarian terms, as a subject.)” So between Heidegger and Bataille, Nancy
intervenes. He theorises community “anew by combining the way Heidegger conceives

28 Ian James, The Fragmentary Demand: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy (Stanford:
Stanford University Press, 2006), 185.
singular existence (Dasein) with the way Bataille thinks communal existence (shared finitude).” The resulting philosophical idiom is Heideggerian without the “community as a historical people” and Bataillian, without “singular existence as a relation of subject and object.”\(^{29}\) As Nancy adopts Bataille's sense of shared finitude, he turns to Bataille's reading of Hegel to discuss what he calls the “clinamen of the individual” and, by extension, the “question of ecstasy,” which opens in the face of immanence and thus separates the self or collective from closing in absolute knowledge.\(^{30}\)

According to Nancy, for community to happen “there has to be a clinamen. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other.” Yet, he complains, “there is no theory, ethics, politics or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisaging this clinamen, this declination or decline of the individual within community.” To invest such a theory into the heart of his thinking on community, he turns to Bataille, whose ecstatic thought supplies the “violent logic of being-separated.”\(^{31}\) Community, finally, is defined in the question of ecstasy, where collective or individual being shifts “outside itself,” so that community achieves an “infinite resistance to everything that would bring it to completion.” Meanwhile, the experience commands literature to inscribe that resistance.\(^{32}\)

Such theories cast new light on mass society's disintegrative effects on the supposedly integrated bourgeois selfhood of the nineteenth-century, since “at the heart of every collectivity and in the heart of every individual” there is always a question of ecstasy that stages a resistance to absolutism, immanence, or completion. Where classic theories of modernism spoke of alienation or isolation, new modernist studies have reformed the tradition of subjective trauma around questions of affect that still take loss as a constitutive

\(^{29}\) Ibid.

\(^{30}\) The term “clinamen” derives from Heraclitus' philosophy of atoms, a term describing the drift between individual atoms, their inclination towards or away from one another.

\(^{31}\) In other words, a clinamen within the individual, Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 34.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 80–81.
category. A prime example is Seth Moglen’s *Mourning Modernity* (2007). Although Moglen rightly links subjective injury to social conflict of late capitalism, Nancy’s theories would rewrite subjective trauma as the taking place of community, not alienation. Where Moglen cleverly schematises American modernists according to their strategies for responding to trauma, this study finds commonality among modernist literature, in that literature, as Nancy puts it, is the “inscription of our infinite resistance” to immanence.

Thus to read American literature is to open the question of ecstasy. In this sense, America’s regional modernism is not a reaction to lost immanence, an attempt to integrate fragmentary experience, or a lament over community’s dissolution into an atomised marketplace. Instead, it offers a unique poetics of resistance, an aesthetics that controverts any political design for a self-contained community. Where modernism acknowledges the incoherency of selfhood, it tacitly nods to modern community. Paterson the place is made out of the fluidity of Paterson the person, his Craytalist likeness to Passaic falls. Where modernism laments the loss of community, it inadvertently resists the immanent upshot of the myth of pre-war social cohesion. Consider Sherwood Anderson’s early fiction, where, as Carl Van Doren puts it, “Village peace and stability have departed; ancient customs break or fade; the leaven of change stirs the lump.” If ancient customs break it is only to smaller pieces; as one will discover, in Jesse Bentley’s attempt at Abrahamic sacrifice the

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34 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 81.
35 Bataille describes the question of ecstasy as an experience of “extreme rupture,” and Nancy elaborates that “ecstasy (community) happens to the singular being.” There is a paradox in this: theorising an event that divides the self from the self, Nancy holds on to his belief in “singularity” and thus reinvokes an integrated monism. Alan Badiou’s description, in his *Ethics*, of the subject as an “infinite multiplicity” could provide a better meeting point between the question (or event) of ecstasy and the ontology of the subject, Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (New York: Verso, 2002). For him, like for Nancy, rupture from or within the absolute is key to political resistance. He writes in *Metapolitics* that all “resistance is rupture with what is. And every rupture begins, for those engaged in it, through a rupture with oneself.” Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (New York: Verso, 2006), 7.
spiritual cohesion of the ancient ethnic band of Jews begets, in Mid-America, only failures at mimicry.

In general the tremendous revolution in town life Anderson narrates is not so much pernicious as not thorough enough, since Anderson’s protagonists, far from seeking out their Walden ponds, consistently depart for more industrial climes. Their dislocation locates the grounds of modern community in an upending of romantic tendencies most greatly achieved in Winesburg, which is why Van Doren finds it to be such an atypical example of the village in revolt. Even though, as in the typical village of revolt, desperate and disused souls lurk about in modern darkness, the imminent departure of Anderson’s alter ego (his ecstatic other) “throws a vaguely golden mist over the village.” His ability to “detach” himself from what he “cherishes” allows Anderson to resist the myth of communal erasure by positing modernism as an active alternation between memorialising and immemorialising impulses, an activity that finally touches alienation itself with nostalgic mist and golden hues.37

To support the literary case studies, the question of ecstasy and the spurious sense of lost community attested to by Nancy’s post-structuralism can be equally grounded in more positivist social sciences, which tend to describe community otherwise, as set of group practices, shared beliefs, or familial or local identities conceded by those involved to be stably held in common. Even though it resists the sociological conception of community, The Geography of Resistance still entertains the premise that the ecstatic poetics of America as a whole are comparable to and visible in the geographic tension between the local particularity of terrain and abstract geodesics of territory. A 1907 paper on historical geography by Martha Krug Genthe argues just that. Genthe was the first woman to be awarded a Ph.D. in Geography from an American university. Her study of the development of townships in the Connecticut Valley recognises the abstract divisibility of entities that

“naturally” belong together as an essential motor of geographic evolution. Citing the Massachusetts state line that divides the northern townships of the valley from their southern sisters, she advances courageously against the early twentieth-century orthodoxy of environmental determinism, stating: the “arbitrary line” of “political boundaries” indicates “just how far man is from being helplessly dependent on his geographical environment.” 

What’s more, Genthe’s research into the evolution of the Connecticut town turns the relationship between mass society and community on its head, as does Nancy’s theory. For colonial towns meagerly supplied with the “most primitive methods of communication” distance was the “inexorable enemy of large political units.” But the locality of political units and their intimacy of communication hardly insulated townships from fractures in local political structures. In fact, in the absence of modernised technologies for public communication and transportation, Connecticut towns encountered the “same process of disintegration” that destroyed “large empires,” and the seeds of small-town America propagating across the landscape were propelled by a principle of segregation as much as by congregation, as physically marginalised persons turned from village centres to settle new and more remote ones, perhaps with the same ecstatic conflict as George Willard, who dreamily goes “out of his town to meet the adventure of life,” as much to confront as to suppress the worry of his “uncertain future.”

This new understanding of literary community—as an event of both internal and external fissure—challenges the classical conceptions of aesthetic modernism as an artistic movement hostile to the supposedly disintegrative forces of modernisation and mass society. Matei Călinescu was once authoritative in his exclamation that modernity as “a

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39 Genthe, “Valley Towns,” 20
stage in the history of Western civilization” and "modernity as an aesthetic concept" have been "irreducibly hostile" since they split "at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century."41 The classical version of this thesis is Adorno's aesthetic theory, which posits modernism [die Moderne] as an aesthetics of negativity. His claim, in Aesthetic Theory, that art becomes social by withdrawing from society, by “congealing into an entity unto itself”42 contributes to any conception of art as resistance. But where Adorno found the usefulness of art in its oppositional stance to society, with Nancy's theory we can find the modernness of art in its basic rejection of the historical opposition between mass society and community, a distinction upon which Adorno's theory implicitly hinges. In exchange for an aesthetics of negativity, Nancy offers literary communism as an aesthetics of ecstasy, where one resists immanence by being ecstatic, being unwhole, being divided from one's self and inclined toward others in the receding face of absolutism.

Because Bataille and Nancy may overstate the case when claiming that fissures in the self have always provided the grounds of communal experience, it is necessary to historicise social theory, and thus focus only on the interwar years, a period when geographic modernity imprinted the hinterland United States. Hence this thesis offers the new concept of “mass geography.” The term refers to a new type of spatial experience ushered in by mass media and mass transit. Mass geography can be understood as the spatial spread of the social media system of the interwar years, and the remediation of space by those technologies of media and communication. As such, it is a component to Paul Giles' call for a deterretorialised American literature. Even as we deterretorialise national and global bound literary studies into locally situated ones, the spatial forms of modernity congregate around what Arjun Appaduri calls a “theory of rupture that takes

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42 Theodor Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (London: Routledge, 1984), 321
media and migration to be its two major, and interconnected, diacritics.”

However, I take these fluctuations of mass geographic force and the ruptures they cause to be constitutive of the literary experience of community embodied in America's regional modernism. As it registers the effects of automatic motion and mechanical media in verbal consciousness, modernism undoes the notion that communities were ever sustained by shared identity, ontological integrity or physical rootedness.

This definition of mass geography has been widely instructed by a lineage of new modernist scholars that consider the effects of geography and media on the literary experience of community. As a thorough investigation of American modernism's mediation, Michael North's *Camera Works* (2005) studies the way the new media presented by invention of the camera challenged the “representational routines” of the older art of fiction. Sara Danius' widens the ambit by considering how a whole host of new technologies—from the automobile to the X-ray—reformed the human sensorium and thus are "constitutive of high-modernist aesthetics." Julian Murphet's *Multimedia Modernism* (2009) follows Frederic Jameson's maxim that histories of modernism cannot be narrativised around a concept of the subject by pushing a technological determinist understanding to its limit. Intentionally omitting the term “culture” from his thinking, Murphet “urges the translation of all cultural concepts into media ones.”

Hence mass geography's distinction from cultural or human geography, it acknowledges the interweaving of media and transit technologies into rural space in ways that problematise


the category of the human and the cultural. What Jameson has called the “suspicious slippage” from geographical characterisations to technologically determined characterisations of modernity will be somewhat reversed by this term, which, by noting the interconnected nature of modernity's two major diacritics, will take mass media as inseparable from its specific enactment at a particular geographic locale.

Adopting the approach of geographic-historical materialism, such a history of American literature responds positively to Susan Stanford Friedman's injunction to “Always Spatialize!” but it moves against the current of transnational modernism. In doing so it aims at satisfying directive four of David Harvey's manifesto for a geographic-historical materialism—to “integrate geographical sensitivities into general social theories emanating from the historical materialist tradition”—where its particular geographic sensitivity is to place, location, and region. To introduce the manner by which it considers theories of history, we may return to Walter Benjamin.

With a perhaps naïve temerity, I earlier approbated Benjamin for construing the isolated individual as in conflict with community. To make up for this I would like to cite his wonderful fourth thesis on the philosophy of history to explain my foray in the geographical history of American literature and media. Drawing from his thesis, the process by which the materials of mass geography enter singular locations (and, by extension, literary modernism) is by itself a process complex enough to consume the literary history contained in these pages. After re-examining American's regional literature, the very idea that Gesellschaft (industrial society) destroyed Gemeinschaft (village life) should seem conspicuous for enjoying such a luxuriant day in the sun of

The local and regional, rather than the national and global, seem to be geographic units of scale far better suited to redress the ideologies that have mystified the relations between industrial society and village life.

Countervailing against the trend of global modernisms is a rich new crop of regional scholarship: Tom Lutz's *Cosmopolitans Vistas*, Leigh Anne Duck's *The Nation's Region* (2006), and Jennifer Rae Greeson's *Our South* (2010) indicate a trait Paul Giles has found in Lutz's work—they emphasise how regional writing was “mediated by an external perspective.” Whether this mediation leads to integrative or exceptionalist conclusions about regional cultures, the approaches are distinctly trans-regionalist. At the same time, recent regional studies have shown a peculiar commitment to Southern states, and to lesser degree, Midwestern ones. Few regional studies have emerged on the intermountain West, the Far West, or the North East. It seems even studies sensitive to more limited geographic scale need revert back to national or global paradigms in order to make their conclusions relevant.

So, despite the advances in geographical studies of American literature, there is still a lack of acute sensitivity to the local and rural aspects of modernism. From Bradbury and MacFarlane's *Modernism: 1890-1930* to Andrew Thatcher's *Moving through Modernity* to the collection *Geographies of Modernism*, which he edited with Peter Brooker; even within Laura Winkiel and Laura Doyle's fresh *Geomodernisms* and the recent MacMillian textbook *Literary Landscapes*; in other words, all efforts, even those in the most advanced wing of new modernist studies, have largely ignored the inherent contradiction that comes with eliding from the narrative of modernism those traces of its material relations to its

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local and rural conditions. Literary Landscapes reflects on the prejudice this way: “Indeed, a strong sense of place, a belief that the individual is linked to a particular area and community by mutually defining bonds, is enough to inspire the suspicion that a writer is not really a card-carrying member of the modernist party.” Cultural geographer Tim Oakes sums up the deeper misunderstanding this way: “community, of course, was seen as something modern society naturally evolved beyond as it progressed toward increased levels of rationality and abstraction.”

The great tendency has been to associate modernism and avant-gardes with cities, due to the notion that cities are less places, in the older sense of organic communities, than they are spaces which pattern the dissolution effects of mass societal forces. Bradbury and Macfarlane’s classical milestone, Modernism, 1890-1930 offers “A Geography of Modernism,” that begins with Macfarlane’s essay “The Cities of Modernism,” and its subsequent chapters visit Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Moscow, New York, Chicago, Paris and London. A section on “The Parishes of Modernism” makes its conspicuous absence felt. It could be objected that some afore mentioned regionalists have forwarded notions of rural modernism, or a cosmopolitan regionalism. A regional scholar stressing modernity is one thing, scholars of modernist geography failing to acknowledge the importance of region and locality is another.

An example is Moving through Modernity (2003), a book dubbed as “the first full-length account of modernism from the perspective of literary geography.” This study

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52 Attie de Lange, et al., Literary Landscapes from Modernism to Postcolonialism (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), xi.
carries the typical association of the modern subject as unbound in space, experiencing fleeting, transitory and contingent locations. For example, "...Howards End cannot be viewed as a nostalgic desire to 'dwell', in the Heiddegerian sense of place. Modernity, with its characteristics of movement, speed and furious restructuring of spaces, cannot be avoided."\(^5^5\) Attentive to the temporal dimension that supposedly makes movement possible, literary geography has treated space and place themselves as “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile,” to reiterate Michel Foucault's complaint about the bias of modern philosophy.\(^5^6\) Though he pays attention to non-urban locales, Franco Moretti repeats Thatcher's bias in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005): “Locations as such did not seem that significant, if compared to the relations that the map had revealed among them.”\(^5^7\) Here he replaces literary geography with what he admits is more of a literary geometry, somewhat compromising his earlier interest in the “place-bound nature of literary forms.”\(^5^8\)

Seeing a text as more of a place to discover than a space to negotiate, I note how any individual location in a novel or poem, such as the battlefield at Amiens, is infinitely different from itself, which ensures that contradiction riles between the apparently inert and unified surface of a place. Such is the fate of any location in a mass geography. When considering community's “nature as area, as formed space” we should consider it “not a territory, but the areality of ecstasy” where the poles of community and ecstasy “make each one the locus of the other.”\(^5^9\) Moretti instructs that literary geography should attend not just to the space within a text but the way texts move through social space and time. Yet


\(^5^9\) Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 20.
the two approaches are sometimes indistinguishable, where considering a text's movement through space illuminates the ruptures in its internal form. As such, books are both “bound places” and dynamic systems of mass geography. Fitzgerald provides the case of a text as a place, one unbound from itself by its transit though the social space of editor's offices, bookshops, and critic's hands.

As is well known, Fitzgerald struggled with *Tender is the Night* until his death and to the consternation of future editors left behind a completely rearranged chronological version of the novel which he claimed was the “author's final version.”⁶⁰ In *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek uses this doubled textual history to exemplify the idea of a “minimal difference, which divides one and the same object from itself.” Žižek concludes that the cause of Fitzgerald’s second guessing is:

> the parallax function at its purest: the gap between the two versions is irreducible, it is the “truth” of both of them, the traumatic core around which they circulate; there is no way to resolve the tension, to find a “proper” solution. What at first looks like a merely formal narrative deadlock (how, in what order, to tell the story) is thus symptomatic of a more a radical deadlock that pertains to the social content itself. Fitzgerald’s narrative failure and his oscillation between the two versions tells us something about social reality itself, about a certain gap that is *stricto sensu* a fundamental social fact.⁶¹

For Žižek, the irreducible gap that divides any object from itself triggered the invention of philosophy. As he writes earlier in the same book: "At its very inception (the Ionian pre-Socratics), philosophy emerged in the interstices of substantial social communities, as the thought of those who were caught in "parallax" position, unable fully to identify with any of

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⁶⁰ Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Composition of Tender Is the Night* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), 103

the positive social identities.” I introduce this argument to suggest that statements about American modernists should follow a similar logic—that they can only be understood by way of their incomplete identification with social communities, especially and namely those identifications “American” and “modernist.” That is to say, an American modernist is anyone who is neither fully American nor fully modernist but issues from the tensile gap between these terms, and from the minimal internal differences—both bound by and opened by their books—that destabilise identity and render the positions of identity politics incoherent terms for description, analysis and historical narration.

At a time when Americanists are discussing questions of field integrity, the disintegrated picture of communal life offered by this thesis hopes to reconfigure the political status of American communities as subjects for intellectual inquiry. Janice Radway recognises that “ethnic, queer, feminist, and working-class identities” urge identifications with subnational or transnational communities and thus “pose a profound challenge to the integrity of the very idea of an American whose identity is fully accounted for by residence in the territory of the United States.” Identitarian political movements have indeed helpfully corroded the nationalist assumptions of consensus and coherence that once contained disciplinary bounds. However, by situating communal experience in the ecstasis of identity, as did Bataille, Nancy mounts “one of our most comprehensive arguments against [the] understanding of politics as a form or expression of identity,” issuing strong caution to anyone who reifies community identity in popular and academic discussions. Attention to the modernisation of the rural United States reveals human essence as already disintegrated by industrial media and transportation, and affirms the

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62 Ibid., 7.
63 Such a schism in the analytical categories of literary studies are responsive to what Zizek calls the “social content” that shakes Fitzgerald's decisiveness. Late in his introduction, Richard Godden says “Fitzgerald's nine-year struggle with the construction of Tender is the Night reflects his fear that story no longer issues from voice, even as action no longer resides in he who acts.” This separation of voice from subjectivity is part of the vocal and visual impacts of an emerging mass geography.
64 Wiegman and Pease, The Futures of American Studies, 59.
notion that community is experienced once identification with a community is no longer possible.

By rethinking the relations between the technologies of social relations, specific geographic locales, and particular literary histories, this study hopes to re-conceive the territorial coordinates of its field. Each chapter combines the methods of geographic-historical materialism with post-structuralist critical theories in order to reassess thoroughly America's literary modernism.

An introductory pair of chapters, on “landings,” surveys the mass geography of American locales by sky and by land. Chapter 1 centres on Gertrude Stein's 1935 airplane ride over the Midwest, looking into modern literature for the spatial forms that aerial views of the landscape made possible. Stein's excitement over the land lying flat below the airplane animates her 1936 Geographical History of America, which pleads for immanent spatial forms to absolve the need for relating historical violence. When read amongst peer poets and popular geographers, Stein's geography plainly attempts to conceal how the acrobatics and destruction of wartime aviators shocked modernists into the ecstasy of communal feelings. Chapter 2 enacts a critical literary tour, visiting a number of modernists at specific locations—such as Wallace Stevens in Key West and Willa Cather in Colorado—where mass media and mass transit reshaped rural communities. The tour exposes the pernicious impact of modernism's disintegrative social logic. By disrupting mythic notions of community, the modernism of American settlements devalued the claims of indigenous communities and buried an imperial legacy in its political unconscious.

The next two pairs of chapters inspect the reorganisations of communal life within a media ecology that hybridised the human and non-human. The first pair, on “country sound,” considers a three-way chiasmus between literary form, audio technology and folk tradition in the 1920s. Chapter 3 focuses on a group of poets in Nashville as it transitioned
from “The Athens of the South” to the broadcast hub of the Grand Ole Opry. Resisting the political poles of old and new, *The Fugitive Magazine* opened an aesthetic space that defied both the nostalgia for a lost community and the destiny of its programmatic simulacrum. Chapter 4 explores the spectre of mechanically recorded voices in Jean Toomer’s *Cane* and Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*. Once they are separated from the body and preserved as tin or vinyl, voices can no longer be deemed to grow organically from within. Even though Toomer and Anderson use agricultural metaphors in a bid to reclaim a spiritual interiority, their modernism depicts communities without organic, self-contained vocal identities. Community without identity paradoxically defines their regional Americas.

Taking up the idea of “writing by movie light,” the next pair of chapters also inspects the topic of hybrid media ecologies by paralleling the history of early cinema with the automated motion of townspeople in *Light in August* and Cather’s prairie fiction. Chapter 5 reads the early film theory of Vachel Lindsay in light of Cather’s pioneers, who can be construed as animated hieroglyphs. Referencing a set of proto-cinematic technologies, she displays new possibilities for the moving image within the novel. Chapter 6 argues that one of William Faulkner's contributions to the modernist novel is the character as automaton; Joe Christmas, in both his motion and memory, exemplifies cinematic mutation in a way that redefines both his immemorial maternal and geographic origins. Following the theme of “departures,” the thesis ends with a solitary 7th chapter, a close reading of Hart Crane’s “Voyages,” which evokes the communication between lovers who are submerged in an experience of indeterminacy. Amid a mass media environment that blends advertising image and phonographic noise, the breakdown of their communication finally enacts the possibility of their ecstatic communion.

Such communion is formed out of meaning's difference from itself, in an ecstasy of fragmentation that refers back to the assembled atlas of Nicole Warren’s imagination.
There, in piecemeal correspondence, Diver's presence to Nicole is but a fading echo. Yet the loss of his substance evokes Nicole's connection to him. As she frequently tells her new husband: "I loved Dick and I'll never forget him" (Tender 337). Read always, as it must be, from the gap between Warren's perspective and my own, the final page of Tender is the Night forces the emotional tone of the entire novel to a point of pure lability, where tragic bitterness folds with sentimental calm. Vanishing in the hinterlands of America, diminishing in the hinterland of memory, Richard's withdrawal elicits Nicole's continuing care, even if it's only amid a pastiche of the plaintive. With his substance lost, the atlas closes; and the ecstasy of community calls forth, caught softly by the turning page.

*Figure 1*
Kansas City Library Plate in Wyndham Lewis' The Wild Body (1928), Courtesy of the Kansas City Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.
Landings
Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward.

Job 5:7

In *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937) Gertrude Stein makes a strange confession: “it always gives me a shock of pleasure the American map and its straight lines...”¹ This wonderful phrase, “a shock of pleasure,” pulls the tone of a potentially mundane admission in competing directions. With the harsh rupture of “-hock” and the soft closure of “plea-”, her response to spatial modernity is one of blissful trauma. Stein’s contradictory emotional relationship with the geography of mass society provides the area of inquiry for the following chapter, which attempts to describe and contextualise that relationship. In Stein's writing of the mid-1930s, the surfaces of maps and landscapes—whether they prompt fear, affection, confusion or elation—are emotional triggers that deploy networks of historical, technological, and formal questions—questions, in the end, of ecstasy.² Her many airplane rides and observations of the world from the sky provided Stein with a hopeful technique for making the fragmentations of geographic modernity cohere comprehensively. As such, her geographical writings of the 1930s voice a desperate demand to find wholeness in both landscape and living, even while they acknowledge, in

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² See my introduction, “Towards a poetics of ecstasy, for a sense of community,” xxiv-xxv.
the final instance, her *ecstatic separation* from this immanent landscape design, this total inhabitation of the human mind, this absolute geography of America.

The mid-1930s mark a break in Stein's formal focus, where the pursuit of cubist portraiture that occupied her from the early 1900s through the 1920s is uprooted by the technological advantages of mass airplane flight, with its capacity to newly display the landscape, to make cartographic vision more real. The airplane provided a heterotopia from which Stein suspended and inverted the power relations between artistic creator and landscape. She found her conviction that cubism beheld the splendour of the twentieth-century both supported and complicated by air travel, as the view from passenger planes provoked multitudes of contradictory sentiments. From cruising altitude she claimed to see:

> all the lines of cubism made at a time when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane. I saw there on the earth the mingling lines of Picasso, coming and going, developing and destroying themselves, I saw the simple solutions of Braque, saw the wandering lines of Masson.

But from the airplane Stein also saw the American map, which offered different compositional forms, a competing modernity, distinct from the wandering, the coming and going of cubist lines. Compare the American map “to any other with the way they go all over nothing neat and clean like the maps of America. Well that is the way the earth looked

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3 In Michel Foucault's most systematic description “heterotopias” are constituted by “a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live,” as Stein used the flight as a simultaneously real and mythic vehicle for contesting the parameters of twentieth-century America. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 12 (2) (Spring, 1986): 24.

4 Gertrude Stein, *Picasso: The Complete Writings* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 88. Stein originally wrote *Picasso* (1938) in French, as a public lecture. Alice Toklas translated it for publication in English. The bombast of this particular quotation is contested by painters and poets who had gone up in airplanes before Stein did in 1934. Consider Elsie Driggs’ painting *Aeroplane* (1928), based on preparatory sketches completed while sitting next to a pilot on a 1928 flight from Detroit to Cleveland. See Julie Wosk, *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 170–171. Similarly, Muriel Rukeyser enrolled in flight school to prepare for her poem “Theory of Flight.”
to me as we flew to Chicago.” Unlike the lines of cubism, these lines are the “strange” “ruled lines on paper,” (in other words, guides for lineated orthography not perspectival composition)\(^5\) and she confesses that she “never can stop having pleasure in the way ruled lines separate one state from another.”\(^6\) Like the shapes the states make on maps, the American landscape viewed from the plane presents the “neat” and “clean” modernity of the writer’s page, an alternative to the maps and minds of Europe that “go all over” in the process of “developing and destroying themselves.”\(^7\)

The distinction between straight, ruled lines on map paper and the wandering, coming and going lines of cubist paintings finds an analogy in the field of geography – in the distinction between absolute and relative location. A map with straight lines for its political borders suggests its status as both an instrument and a product of an astral coordinate system used to determine an “absolute location.” Gauged by celestial patterns not topographical ones, absolute location is coordinated and expressed by longitude and latitude, whereas relative location is conveyed by measuring a location’s distance and position in relation to one or more terrestrial features.\(^8\) Indeed Stein’s *Geographical History of America* (1936) may have accommodated the paradox that “America's modernity is linked to its oldest feature: the natural landscape,”\(^9\) but in her limitless pleasure for America’s ruled lines, Stein literally and figuratively passes over the

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5 The distinction being that analytic cubism maintained perspective while synthetic cubism tended to suppress it.
landscape’s organic terrestrial features. She “overlooks” hydrological boundaries (the Mississippi River, most notably, marks the border of ten states) in order to stress the places where America was patterned by “an arbitrary system of ... design, anchored, as it were, upon the stars, the geodetic system of latitudes rather than a terrestrial set of landmarks.”

Yet neither system, terrestrial or astral, was alone in shaping America. For instance, since it is “a westward latitudinal projection from the northern end of Currituck Inlet,” the ruled line separating Virginia from the Carolinas combines both those styles of land allocation used by sea-faring colonialists, who depended upon both interior waterways (Currituck Inlet) and celestial navigation (latitudinal projection) to organise empires. Guided by constellations and landmarks, the lines dividing first colonies and then states structured a tension between the universal and particular. By consequence, they were drawn “without exact concordance with the actual societies that developed from the many” urban nuclei along the coast, and as human populations migrated from shore to hinterland, “spatial frameworks of local administration” developed in order to “reflect some special characteristics of each society within its larger political bounds.” With her enthusiasm for it astral patterning, Stein endangers America’s framework of locality, and her emotional affinity for but eventual disruption of the absolute plays out in the drama of her inimitable style, which must be located both geographically and historically.

Her cubist writing begins the speech act again and again. This illocution has a double sense. Asking and answering, but also placing and displacing, her illocution wavers between locality and illocality. Such vacillation reflects America’s hybrid territoriality, with its tension between absolute and relative landscape designs. Following Stein’s enthusiasm, the pervasion of absolute demarcations amid natural ones elevates America’s geography

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over Europe's. Flying over Europe was “not so wonderful as America, no one can be grateful enough that there were quarter sections when they first made the country, it makes a regular division.”\textsuperscript{12} The co-existence on the landscape of analytical cubism's wandering lines and the regular divisions of the United States appears to Stein, from the vantage of the airplane, as a moving element in her country's historical geography:

I know so well the relation of the simple center and a continuous design to the land as one looks down on it, a wandering line as one looks down on it, a quarter section as one looks down on it, the shadow of each tree on the snow and the woods on each side and the land higher up between it...\textsuperscript{13}

Here the thrice repeated refrain “as one looks down on it” attempts to keep the airline passenger, a central viewer (“one”), in relation to “it,” the particular thing being viewed (land, line, section, quarter), however even as the “it” becomes more particular (down to “each tree”) it becomes increasingly illocalised. Each repetition of “it” pushes the novelty of the phase to the point where the “it’s” referent is lost. A singular pronoun, it cannot, in the end, refer to “woods.” The issue resists logic and location but embraces affect (most urgent when most localised, in “the shadow of each tree”), where the appearance of a relational, discontinuous and organic landscape design is to Stein far less pleasing than the regular, the ruled, the absolute—even if absolutism provokes impossible questions about language's local referentiality: what thing on the landscape is “it”?

This formal preference for the absolute emerges from Stein’s writing in part because of cubism’s historical situation, most notably its place in the history of warfare. In Picasso (1938), Stein describes the “great war” as if it is a mass-market publisher, bringing the

\textsuperscript{12} Gertrude Stein, \textit{Everybody's Autobiography}, 198.

\textsuperscript{13} Gertrude Stein, \textit{The Geographical History of America, or, The relation of human nature to the human mind} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 77. Originally published 1936. Subsequent references appear in text as GHA.
artist’s intuitive understanding of the twentieth-century to a general audience. Giving early articulation to a now hackneyed conceit, Stein sees World War I as a massive cubist exposition:

Really the composition of this war, 1914-1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the centre surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.14

Notice the compositional similarity between “all previous wars” and the ruled landscape of America: both are absolute Cartesian forms. Figures of immanence, they are continuous designs that maintain a relation to a single, simple centre. With their irreducible distinction between centre point and marginal circumference, they prevent any one locality (corner) from being as “important as another.”

Yet elsewhere Stein vacillates, contradicting herself. In one sense the airplane is a technology for viewing an absolute geography of ruled lines, a landscape designed to make the one immanent in many (a rewriting of e pluribus unum). Yet flying also maps the lines of cubism, those that, despite “having neither beginning or end,” destroy themselves and prefer no one corner to another. Like the cubist war and the masterpieces of modernism, airplane scenery “has no beginning and middle and end” (GHA, 210), thus the land from the airplane connects every piece to every other piece, absolutely, while cubism, by contrast, connects shapes while maintaining disconnection and incompletion: “after all one must know more than one sees and one does not see a cube in its entirety.”15 Here cubism seems symptomatic of disjointed terrestrial experience even though Stein saw

14 Stein, Picasso, 37-38.
15 Jamie Hilder, “‘After all one must know more than one sees and one does not see a cube in its entirety’: Gertrude Stein and Picasso and Cubism,” Critical Survey, 17, no. 3 (2005): 68-84. Accessed January 15 2012. doi:10.3167/00115705780996506
aerial landscapes as cubist, too; so to navigate the impasse one must know more than this, must fly up and look down, must know geography with an absolute mind.

The problem is that absolute geography and cubist composition seem at times antagonistic, at times cooperative. Marks of an absolute geography, “the straight lines on the map of the United States can make wandering a mission and an everything.” Difficult (“a mission”) yet indispensable (“an everything”), “Wandering around a country has something to do with the geographical history of that country and the way one piece is not separated from any other one,” a definition of the geographical absolute (GHA, 84-85). If, in Everybody's Autobiography, the phrases “mingling lines” and “wandering lines” appear as shorthand for the cubist marks that develop and destroy themselves, wandering reappears in Geographical History as a regenerative, absolutist activity that places all pieces of a landscape in connection with one another, even though cubism, province of the wandering self-effacing line, cannot totally produce visible entireties. Facing a nearly impassable contradiction, Stein sets off to refine her geographical absolutism through the philosophical distinction between human nature and the human mind, which provides the central concern of Geographical History, with its alternate title – The Relation of Human Nature to the Human Mind.

Geographical History is full of sentiment that darkly colours Stein's relationship with cartographic vision. Even while it acknowledges the impossibility of seeing the world as a coherent whole, Stein's theorising pleads desperately for what might be called an absolute geography, the need, as she puts it, to know the earth “all in one plane,” to know it with the human mind. The word plane puns on the very technology that Stein believed would make such spatial forms available. Her first experiences of flight urged her excitement about the human mind because in the airplane, she found a technique for reshaping the modern world into one whole landscape. Here again, her affective response to aerial landscapes folds her negative emotions towards war into the political unconscious.
“Anytime after a war any one is nervous,” she writes (GHA, 85). So an absolute geography is needed to calm the nerves, to ensure that the historical event of war stayed buried: “no matter how many have been killed from up there it is not anything that is a memory” (GHA, 54). Taking to the plane and seeing the land in its wholeness made possible a technique of writing that, she believed, would guarantee the extinction of historical conflict. With the transnational aerial perspective offered by flight, Europe “is too small to wage war since anybody now can see it all” (GHA, 64). Modernist writing could ensure the popular thesis that war had culminated and spent itself in the ferocity of World War I.

Stein defines the aerial perspective of the masterpiece, capable of collecting a country into a kind of wholeness and flatness, as that of the “human mind,” which transcends a “human nature” associated with dwelling on the earth. By “human nature,” Stein refers to the part of human living concerned with historical events, personal and cultural memory, subjective identity, celebrity, audience, mortality, and the everyday. The human mind stands disassociated from all such concerns and qualities, having “nothing to do with identity or audience or history or events” (GHA, 150). The aeroplane is a vehicle of the “human mind;” in “an aeroplane human nature is nothing” (GHA, 56). Playing on the distinction between air and earth, Elliott Vanskike glosses Stein’s separation of mind and nature: “The difference between writing from human nature and writing from the human mind is precisely the difference between seeing the landscape unveiled in sequence as you

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16 Kant makes a major distinction between human mind and human nature, but nearer to Stein’s writing is the philosophy of Schopenhauer, who thinks very comprehensively about the difference between mind and nature.
travel on a train and taking in the whole of the landscape as you look out the window of a plane.”


Figure 2
Arthur Dove, Fields of Grain as seen from Train, 1931
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

Figure 3
Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Aeroplane: Synchrony in Yellow-Orange, 1920
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York

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Even here Stein's distinctions beguile themselves in seeming contradiction, as in a characteristic chapter from *Geographical History*, anaphoric, repetitive, compact and frugally punctuated:

The human mind is. The human mind has no relation to human nature at all. The question has been asked is it the relation of human nature to the human mind or is it the relation of the human mind to human nature. The answer is there is no relation between the human mind and human nature there is a relation between human nature and the human mind. (*GHA*, 60)

The human mind is. An absolute entity, the human mind is the human mind. Human nature, on the other hand, is diffuse, presumed to be “our” human nature, maybe even “a” or “some” human nature, but it never enjoys the definiteness of the human mind. Nature exists in relation to the human mind: “there is a relation between human nature and the human mind.” However, “there is no relation between the human mind and human nature.” Phrasal order matters. The primacy and independence of the “human mind” obtains in the syntax.

Human nature depends on the human mind, but not vice versa. Nature realises itself relationally to the mind; but, by contrast, not only does the human mind not require a relation to nature in order to exist, it exists because is has “no relation” to human nature, war, memory, event, killing, identity. The human mind is an escape from fear, is like “not being in danger but being killed” (*GHA*, 56), a total forgetting of the everyday, an extreme and absolute detachment from the grounds of history, and in satisfying these criteria, it becomes the source of the modernist masterpiece. In its geographical schema, Stein's vision is of land that exists in relation to air, and air that exists through denying its relation
to land.\textsuperscript{18} America's landscape is for her a contradiction, where buildings “come out of the ground,” even as its absolute shape is groundless: “air is everywhere, everywhere in America, there is no sky, there is air and that makes religion and wandering and architecture.”\textsuperscript{19}

Separating the ground from an abstract aerial landscape, \textit{The Geographical History of America} doubles as an aesthetic treatise. In it, America's spatial diffusion and divisive history present a challenge that, by taking to the sky, modernist aesthetics attempt to master but fail to overcome. When borne by the flights of the human mind, Stein's vision comes closest to a post-historical absolutism, but such attempts only defer the experience of landing in the world of cubist fragmentation, with the visual disjointedness produced by trains, cars, and carriages. Since the aesthetic theory is exemplified by geography, it makes sense to situate this process of creative attempt and frustration alongside the field of professional geography. But, in a more complete contextualisation, a consideration of popular geography also enriches a reading of Stein's geography. The aviation history interests of \textit{National Geographic}, in particular, make manifest the snags and contradictions within Stein's essay on America's absolute spatial form.

Jessica Berman has pioneered this general approach to Stein by reading her historical geographies as part of the wider academic discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Berman, the point of juxtaposing Stein's geographies with contemporaneous “landmarks of cultural geography” is to “understand her long-term project to describe Americans and their geographical history as part of this broad cultural concern with situating the changing American people in direct relation to their

\textsuperscript{18} Stein's divesting earth and air of any organic connection may lead on from her psychological research at Johns Hopkins, where she studied the “neurone doctrine” with Lewellys Barker. What I'm suggesting is that for Stein, the neurological elements of the mind, linguistic elements of the sentence, and physical elements of geography are all interrelated not by “organic connection” but by sheer contact and contiguity, see Steven Meyer, \textit{Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science}, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 79.

\textsuperscript{19} Stein, \textit{Everybody's Autobiography}, 208.
landscape.” In Berman’s opinion, Stein “adopts” Ellen Churchill Semple’s famous thesis that “human diffusion and differentiation” are geographically conditioned, but supplants the “linear trajectories” “implied by” the Semple School with a “nonteleological, wandering history,” and with a literary style that maps the “ever-shifting recursive location of being.”

To complicate Berman’s general project of juxtaposition, Stein's most explicit foray into the field of geographical sciences seems to deny both the terms “culture” and “relation” any pertinence to its own spatial manifold. Stein's Geographical History is hard to read profitably in the exact terms of early twentieth-century academic geography. Well before Stein's major geographical work, Carl Sauer had rejected Semple's model of environmental determinism and offered the model of cultural interaction between humans and landscapes that initiated cultural geography as such. In 1925 he famously wrote: “culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape is the result.”

In Sauer's morphological approach, the “natural area” no longer simply conditions human differentiation – a point of fact that Martha Genthe anticipated in 1907. Humans and nature combine in a dynamic of mutual mediation. Though Stein exhibits a medial understanding of landscape, hers is not a cultural geography, as such, because it insists on reading the American landscape from a detached vantage, one that radically seeks to obviate the role of a human agent in historical geography. Her opening to Geographical

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20 Jessica Schiff Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 166. We need be suspect, clearly, about “direct relations” in Stein’s geographies.


22 See Michael Conzen, *A Scholar’s Guide to Geographical Writing on the American and Canadian Past* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). For Conzen, a watershed in historical geography occurs with Albert Brigham’s *Geographic Influences in American History* and Ellen Semple’s *American History and its Geographic Conditions*. The two keywords to draw from these titles are “influences” and “conditions,” which both display a disproportionate amount of attention on environment as a determinant factor in the patterns of human behaviour, settlement, migration, etc. In reviewing these books Fredrick Turner, eminent historian and diviner of the “frontier thesis”, attacked the tendency to give exclusive attention to environmental conditions of historical development at the expense of understanding social and ethnographic patterns. He argued that a complete historical geography must grasp both of these forces equally and simultaneously.

History immediately enforces the point that “In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is” (GHA, 45). As a figure of the mind, historical geography persists in the absence of any human body.

Depending centrally on the trope of flight and aerial perception, Stein’s geographical essay elevates a third term over the interwar contest between environmental determinism and Sauer’s cultural morphology. Stein seeks an absolute view of the American landscape that renders the questions of historical process and environmental differentiation merely ancillary to a synthetic modernist masterpiece. Thus, reading her landscapes as human or cultural ones perverts her geographical and historical assays. Nor, to drive a wedge between her and Semple, is there the will for anything “relational,” direct or otherwise, within her proffered geographic mentality. As she inscribes historical and locational recursion, the cumulative effect of her literary style is to flatten language into an alternate plane—one that exists totally apart from the relational and discursive processes of human history on land, and instead takes absolutely to the sky, a being of the air. This impulse, I maintain, can be best contextualised not by academic geography but by popular geographic fancy.

The popular geography of interwar America fostered an acute fascination with aerial vision. In the decades after the Wright brother’s triumph on Kill Devil Hill, North Carolina, the popularity of aviation and aviators seemed limitless. Consider the celebrity of the now-obscure inventor of aerobatic aviation. “An aeroplane in the hands of Lincoln Beachey is poetry,” claimed Orville Wright.24 Foreshadowing his fatal crash into San Francisco Bay, Carl Sandburg’s “To Beachey” describes the pilot as “the cool, calm shadow at the wheel,” the “man-bird / ready with death-laughter.”25 It is estimated that some seventeen million Americans (one out of every five) saw Beachey laugh down death in “loop-the-loops” in the

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last year of his life alone. In *National Geographic* in the teens and twenties, the public not only learnt about the heroics and current state of aviation, but also, in lavish spreads of aerial photography, could see the world as Beachey and other heroes of flight saw it.

From Alexander Graham Bell’s “Aerial Locomotion” in 1907 to “America from the Air” in 1924, *National Geographic* devoted hundreds of pages to appeasing the nation’s appetite for aerial vision. But these aerial photographs seem curiously detached from the standard rhetoric of aviation. Next to the soaring verbal appraisals of flyers and machine technology, photos of town and country from 8,000 feet look stoic, static and map-like. Like Sandburg’s poem, the articles portray flight as a game, laughter provoking, but one haunted always by the spectre of death. In a 1918 special issue on military aviation, a number of *National Geographic* contributors continue the ceremonious opening opinion of “air ace” Jacques de Sieyes: “Aviation is a game, a game of adventure,” by which one can achieve “honor in life or ... glory in death.” This playful yet dire rhetoric only crescendos as the magazine beats the field-drum for World War I.

Even though for Stein, the ability for “anyone” in a plane to see “all” of a country meant it “cannot wage war,” one reads *National Geographic* in this decade only to discover that popular aerial fascination was inseparable from the profane history of warfare. In the 1918 special issue on military aviation, in the article “America’s Part in the Allies’ Mastery of the Air,” Major Joseph Tulsane, Chief of the French Aviation Mission to America, describes the summer of 1917 as “marked” by “spirited” battles for the “supremacy of the air.” This rhetoric of mastery and supremacy was common even in the pre-war development of machine flight. As a missionary to the dormant U.S. Army, Tulsane lauds

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America’s “determination to intervene,” to “blind the army of the enemy.”

Figure 4
Page 8 of *National Geographic* (January 1918)
Courtesy of the HathiTrust Digital Library
THE FRENCH VILLAGE OF VARENNES FROM A HEIGHT OF 7,800 FEET

The airplane from which this beautiful bird's-eye photograph was made was flying above the clouds, which veil a portion of the town, only a few miles from Verdun. The observer's record (at the top of the picture) shows that it was made at 10:45 on the morning of May 24, 1917, at an elevation of 2,400 meters.
NOT A NOSE DIVE BUT A LOOP-THE-LOOP OVER NEWPORT NEWS, VIRGINIA

The biplane is being operated by an instructor of U.S. Army fliers. This remarkable photograph was made from an airplane soaring hundreds of feet above the black fiel in the foreground.
Seeing but taciturn, the photos from airborne cameras mirror Stein's aerial perspective by remaining mechanically aloof from military carnage, detached from the grand rhetoric of war. Ascending towards an absolute geography, Stein's effort is to disentangle the experience of aviation from the memory of war. Intervening in European military history, she offers the historical geography of America (earth as seen from sky, a world of air) as a sight to blind Europe to its military past, to displace the role of armies as indices of historical process and transformation. The plane passing over ruled lines changes how history is written. It unwrites the violence of Europe with the peace of an America heedless of the dead:

Please play and pay all respect to the dead, but not in America not where a country is so big that it is divided one part from the other by ruled lines and it has to be flat, it has to be flat, or there is no hope of it not paying respect to the dead. \((GHA, 87)\)

Where America is mapped by imperial cartography, the country is ruled by projections of latitude, marks of an abstract, astral, and absolute system of coordinating locations and boundaries. Stein's map-like perspective of the earth from the air (and the flat, tilted picture plane it produces) is crucial for the subservience of human nature to the human mind, for the transcendence over the quotidian, historical and terrestrial by the modernist artwork, which must meet the need not simply to forget but to forget forgetting itself, to obliterate the fact that there ever was a need or a thing to forget.

Consider the general premise of Stein's thesis from another angle. The aesthetics of airplane vision overcome the spatial differentiation and disorder that one experiences on the ground. Martin Jay implies that “exaltation of the aerial perspective of the flyer” might be understood as a reprieve from the spatial disorder of not just trench warfare but other
“visually disorienting” technologies of the 20th century such as the camera and cinema.30 Though Jay warns that it is “very hazardous” to generalise about how the World War I might have “stimulated” “effects on visual experience,” we can generalise that Stein’s argument of the non-relation of the human mind to human nature mandates a relation without reciprocity. As human nature relates to the human mind but not conversely, so the land relates to the air but not the air to the land. Here Stein specifically disavows certain technological advances in wartime communication.

Within the historical development of military aviation, commanders and pilots negotiated a two-sided semantic system, with communications passing between ethereal and terrestrial domains, linking the two. This fact of semantic reciprocity between air and earth may be one that Stein wishes to deny, but it has implications for the semantic texture of her own aerial modernism. Her stylistic repetition is analogous to a breakthrough in wartime radio communications. In 1912 Edwin Armstrong discovered the principle of “regeneration” within the circuits of “audions,” radio receivers patented by Lee De Forest in 1907. Armstrong realised that electrical current could be repeated and repeated and repeated across the same circuit, building the strength of the signal, enabling audions to transmit as well as receive. The strengthening of the signal through repetition is called “regeneration.”31

Stein saw her style was immediately comparable to the cinema, which produces the illusion of motion in the small differences between repeated images. At the same time, her sense that the repetitive phrases of her texts were always drawn from talking and listening

31 Sarah Wilson argues that the radio presented “a powerful formal model for Stein's late writing,” in Debra Rae Cohen, et al. eds., Broadcasting Modernism, 107. The sense of Stein imitating a model is misleading, since Stein’s early experiments with language exhibited the same energetic principles within linguistics that coeval engineers discovered in electrics. Edwin Armstrong demonstrated the regenerative circuit the year Tender Buttons was written. For more on early broadcast technologies see David Billington, Power, Speed, and Form: Engineers and the Making of the Twentieth Century. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 129-154.
urges a comparison with radio transmissions. Stein amplifies the energy of a phrase through linguistic regeneration, as an audion does by electrical regeneration. Witness a phrase regenerating its intensity through the circuits of this sentence: “What was what was what it was what is what is is / what is what which is what is it.” Here the two pronouns “what” and “it”, one declarative one interrogative, cycle around and around the verb “to be.” According to Stein’s lectures, what one hears in repetition is not what is repeated but a novelty affected by slight changes in word order, alterations in what she calls “emphasis.” In this instance the appearance of “which” late in the sentence underscores this principle. This is the ecstatic moment in Steinian grammar, where the presence of a word that was previously unaccounted for suddenly interrupts the closed circuit of syntax. The phenomenon of regenerating novelty by way of repetition is even more legible in long passages of The Making of Americans (1925), a novel written and rewritten over the better part of a decade that repeats, for dozens of pages at a time, the terms and ideas of a single sentence, while emphasising each iteration’s novelty.

After improving the audion, Armstrong would join the U.S. Signal Corps and take his skills to France to improve the radio technologies being used in warplanes. In the National Geographic of January 1918, Captain André de Berroeta of the French aviation service discusses the complicated ways, direct and indirect, that airplanes had come to wage war, outlining three distinct branches of military aviation: reconnaissance, combat, bombardment. As bombardiers, flyers tossed explosives by hand over the edge of the cockpit and down upon “hostile assemblage, camp or columns.” But, as midwives to battery and destruction, they first served not as dog-fighters or as bombardiers, but as

32 Gertrude Stein, “Christian Bérard,” first published in English with French translation in Dix Potraits, (Paris: Editions de la Montaine, 1930), then in English in Portraits and Prayers (New York: Random House, 1934). See Ulla E Dydo and William Rice, Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises: 1923-1934, (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2003). Dydo rightly argues that Stein designed her text to be appreciated for how it looks on the page as much as how it reads, a point displayed nicely by the above quoted line from Bérard’s portrait. However, in a fascinating discussion on PoemTalk (September, 8 2008) Bob Perelman reveals the new power the line takes if read aloud with every third word emphasised.

scouts. Revolving as the disembodied eyes of ground forces, pilots were highly effective at observing, yet distinctively ineffective in relaying information and coordinating artillery fire. Planes would have to land to relay the whereabouts of “hostile objectives,” making the pilot blind to the success or failure of the barrage. If the plane could remain in the air during the battery and relay the outcome of an attack, ground forces could commence to “adjusting battery fire by aerial observation,” or spotting. Aviators tried the “dropping of signal lights,” then acrobatic performances where the gestures of the machine would “announce the results of the shots.” Finally, however, an unprecedented system was devised when the French installed radiotelegraphy machines in airplanes. Berroeta almost proudly notes in the “chagrin of enemies, who were subjected to an accurate and murderous fire from our batteries...”

Berroeta’s article speaks to the communicative loop between land-based and airborne entities. Given the pains the “conquerors of the sky” took to coordinate their aerial perspective with the terrestrial “arts” of war, it is curious to come upon the care (or carelessness) with which the aestheticians of modernism like Stein disassociated aerial perspective from terrestrial reality. To follow F.T. Marinetti: “the changing perspectives of flight constitute an absolutely new reality, one that has nothing in common with the traditional reality of terrestrial perspective.” In Geographical History of America, Stein translates Marinetti’s terms of absolutely new reality and traditional reality into the terms human mind” and “human nature,” respectively. Here Stein and Marinetti fly in the face of popular flight rhetoric, aligning themselves in their wilfully obscurant attitude toward


35 Wohl, A Passion for Wings, Chapter 1.

aviation’s military applications.

Both Laurence Goldstein and Robert Wohl indicate that the aerial bombardments of World War I and the airplane’s potential for combat were anticipated by the both the fiction of H.G. Wells and the “the fulminations of Futurism,” wherein Marinetti compared the plane to a blade. Yet, even as the fin-de-siècle literary imagination trembled before the destructive capacities of flying machines, the military applications of airplanes were just as powerfully denied. As “late as March 1913, Ferdinand Foch, future Allied commander-in-chief, is reported to have said that ’aviation is fine as a sport … But, as an instrument of war, it is useless.’” A belief that made Foch look foolish – Stein transmutes it into a utopian and futuristic figure of writing. This despite the fact that since the onset of World War I at least the combat purposes of aeroplanes were quickly realised, and even incorporated those electronic media that were shaping and shaped by modernist form.

Certainly, numerous poems can exemplify the fact of artists anticipating and acknowledging the military applications of flight, even as others denied or suppressed the historical affiliation between aviation and war. A curious example appears in a mystical poem “The Tree of Laughing Bells” by Vachel Lindsay, which offers itself as an intertext with Stein's Geography because in Lindsay's poem the advent of flight (despite it playing an outwardly more bellicose role) also carries the potential to blot out the legacy of terrestrial violence. Perhaps Stein's suppression of war history from the vantage of the airplane extended from the popular thesis that World War I was the war to end all wars, but probably even more so from her nervous acknowledgement that “no war is ever ended.” Written before the war, during his art school years, Lindsay's poem imagines a situation where the advent of flight (even within the profane history of military aggression) has the power to retroactively cancel all the wars that came before aerial combat.

37 Ibid., 8–9.
38 Wohl, A Passion for Wings, 294n5.
39 Stein, Picasso. 29.
Subtitled “a poem for aviators,” “The Tree of Laughing Bells” narrates a young man’s encounter with an “Indian Maiden” who sews wings of wildflower buds onto his back and coaxes him into flight with a “burning song of suns untold.” The “Indian girl” sits in a “grassy wood” where, it turns out, she remains for the duration of the poem’s heroic flight. Just like the women who build America's air army by sewing what National Geographic calls “Wings of Victory,” Lindsay’s maiden manufactures (in the strict sense of the word, by hand) the possibility of aerial conquest and encourages its realisation. She tells of a “star of laughing bells” off to the mythic west—“There's a sky within the west / There's a sky beyond the skies”—in a place she calls “Chaos-land” (CP 214). With this term, Lindsay uses the “Indian Maiden” to re-inscribe the myth of the American land as a space more akin to air—open, unowned, and expansive—unconstructed by humans or history, a chaos-land. Only in her earthy indigeneity can she authorise her paradoxical lack of authority over (and failed mastery of) American land.

Here Lindsay endorses westward progress by invoking the cultural authority of a Native American who does not stop at disclaiming responsibility for the land, but goes on to promise a self-presence to all that is contingent on the pioneer-poet flying West to absorb an Edenic fruit that she, with her proximity to the ground and earthly knowledge, is sure exists. (Strangely she is powerless, evidently, to access it herself.) In the rhetoric of wonder, she promotes the restorative power of the dream-tree's produce, “the bell will quench our memory / Our hope, / Our borrowed sorrow” (CP 214). The fruit will restore peace by obliterating memory. Again, her authority is based in her proximity to the ground, in her botanical knowledge of otherworldly plants, and her stationary position among the wildflowers in the “grassy wood.” This locational fixity on earth assures the white male's mastery of air. Like Stein, she deems flight to be a technology for collectively

40 Vachel Lindsay, Collected Poems (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 213. Cited in text as CP from hereon.
41 Hiram Bingham, “Building America’s Air Army,” National Geographic Magazine 33 (January 1918), 49.
leaving the bloodstained grounds of history faint and far below, but, in opposition to Stein’s view, Lindsay’s poem acknowledges the material and earthly origins of aviation.

Although the objective of attaining the laughing bells is to assuage the wounds of racial and cultural memory, the tree itself sprouts from the violence that inflicted those wounds – it “grew from a bleeding seed.” This suggests, however, that the “blood-red” bell of the tree is an outgrowth of an older violence, an organic one linked to germination and botanical growth – violence with lifespan. The tree also retains and confirms the esoteric knowledge already offered by the “Indian” girl. The seed that grew the tree “was the heart of a fairy, dead” (CP 214). Wings, the medium for reaching the tree, and the tree itself suggest a culture of handicraft instead of industrial manufacturing, and organic violence—blood-spill—over, say, the impersonal incineration of modern bombardment.

Yet Lindsay's poetics of aviation bear many marks of modernity and machine flight. First there is the incredible velocity of the journey: “A thousand times ten thousand times / More swift than the sun's swift light” (CP 214). Moving faster than the speed of light, would vision be available to the human eye? The images of the poem maybe technically impossible for the human eye to behold but they remain available to the imagination. Yet not only do images come to the flyer, they come copiously. Just like America's aviation industry, the tree executes “quantity production,”42 where “A thousand bells from a thousand boughs / Each moment bloomed and fell.” As velocity increases, time contracts. Yet magically it is not the experience of travel but the fruits of the journey that condense time into a singular now. Once the poet's speaker has the bells, he relates: “I had no thirst for yesterday, / No thought for to-morrow.” Militaristic rhetoric applies to this unique temporality as well, as the Indian maiden encourages the aviator to play the part of the bombardier: “Go, make a moment's raid” (CP, 216). Modernity's violence is evanescent, not a protracted pain but a flashing raid executed at high speeds, the violence of the present

42 Bingham, “Building America’s Air Army,” 51.
curing the incessant throb of the past.

“The wings of morning” that the maiden sews are, to be sure, an ambiguous creation. In a literal reading, morning implies the dawn of a new age, where light-speed exploration and conquest allows for the transcendence of past pain into a wholeness, the peaceful co-presence of the oppressed and the oppressors. Yet the means for achieving these feats obtain in the older roots of invasive violence and imperial opposition. In this sense, the wings pun on “mourning,” recapitulating, in an age of modern airpower, the terrestrial exploration and conquest that initiated historical trauma. In returning to the maiden her lost object, the poet-aviator reanimates the geographic process that inflicted primal loss, making it the grounds for communion rather than struggle.

Despite the mixed rhetoric of struggle and accomplishment that accompanied the construction of America's air army, the wings that women sewed in the factories of the early twentieth-century were not, to National Geographic, ambiguous symbols. Hiram Bingham's article on the building of America's air army is illustrated with four photographs of women making “the wings of victory,” as the caption puts it. In photo after photo, National Geographic exhibits the industrial transmutation of the organic into the heavier-than-air machine. Just like the woman of Lindsay's “mossy wood,” female labour power converts plants into that which flies man on to heroic feats. Thus both Lindsay's poem and Bingham's article make patent that America's achievement in the air is inextricable from its efforts on the ground. In Lindsay's poem the Native American manufactures, by hand, a technology that manumits the aviator from imperial guilt.

According to Goldstein, in America the airplane had “absorbed into its complex symbolic meaning the native myth of manifest destiny.”\(^\text{43}\) Stein and Lindsay share the conceit that the poetics of flight quench or flatten any need to commemorate the violence

\(^{43}\) Goldstein, The Flying Machine and Modern Literature, 4
WOMEN AT WORK ON THE WINGS OF VICTORY

The planes of a flying machine are covered with a special quality of Irish linen, which is stitched tightly over the framework by women seated on opposite sides of the plane and using three-inch needles. The British Government has promised that linen in sufficient quantities will be supplied to the United States as rapidly as needed to complete our airplane-building program (see page 35).

Figure 7
Page 49 of National Geographic (January 1918)
Courtesy of the HathiTrust Digital Library
of terrestrial conquest. For Lindsay, the primacy of the soil and its connection to the Indian woman are central to a historical correction that will blot out trauma, but for both him and Stein the erasure of violence cannot be achieved without the providence of ascent, without leaving the ground.

In their poetic incarnations, planes here continue the role played by the “handiwork” of early American geographers; they continue a process that “refus[ed] to recognise any indigenous order upon the land, [so that] invaders and colonizers created a tabula rasa upon which they could impose any kind of designs their minds could conceive.”44 Though Stein explicitly refers to Europe waging war, the human mind's wandering design over the American landscape implicitly advanced the ethos of manifest destiny in the machine age. Meanwhile, it de-legitimises local structures of landed dwelling, autochthonous or otherwise, rendering them, as Lindsay explicitly does, a “chaos-land,” a domain that one would prefer to leave for the air. In this sense, Stein’s Geographical History does exceedingly well “in denying the destructive power of history,”45 denying it even as it multiplies it through a compulsion to verbally begin both history and history's denial again and again. Stein's disavowal is also explicit. For her the destructive power of history is obscured by becoming airborne and achieving the vantage of great elevation. However, air itself, in the popular geography of flight, becomes a figurative field of death, where leaving the ground does not leave the historical destruction of life behind.

Late in National Geographic of January 1918 comes a story that personalises, in a sour and implicitly critical way, the terms of France's missionary plea for American air force. The article cobbles together the epistolary testimony of S. Walcott, a young American aviator. An early letter to his father relates a sleepless night during his senior year at Princeton spent reading Carroll Winslow’s With the French Flying Corps. Walcott

44 Meinig, The Shaping of America, 1:240.
was a classmate of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who depicts the waking collegiate revelry of war as a wave that “rolled swiftly up the beach and washed the sands where Princeton played.” Although Fitzgerald's protagonist, Amory Blaine, enlists in the infantry, his initial disposition is towards aviation, which seems to fellow students “the romantic side of the war.”

A year ahead of the U.S. Army's official entrance to aerial combat, Walcott left college and enrolled in flight school before moving to France for combat training. There he met the fate a young Faulkner would be embittered not to; he got in a dogfight. On the first day of 1918 an International Red Cross cable reported that “S. Walcott was brought down during the afternoon of December 12 near Saint Souplet, and that he was killed by the fall.”

To fall from the sky is to fall on a metaphorical “field” of battle. In his poem “Flyer's Fall,” Wallace Stevens perpetuates rhetoric common to National Geographic, that of the pilot as a reaper. Cutting two ways, the reaper symbol implies that the pilot reaps glory in the traditional sense, as a dead soldier fallen on the field; but also, as Sandburg's shadowy imagery suggests, they themselves personify death, wearing the grim vestments of the reaper. This popular image of pilot as grim reaper and this conceit that the sky was battle-field—where death was sown, honour harvested—could not be further from Stein's mind.

Her Geographic History issues a breathless plea that we distinguish the violence done in the air from that done on the ground:

no matter how many have been killed from up there it is not anything that is a memory, because if you are killed you do not remember no you do not, it is only on land where it is dangerous but where you were not killed that you remember. (GHA 54-55)

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46 F. Scott Fitzgerald, This Side of Paradise (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), 147; 150.
In the air it is possible to be killed and relieved of memory; not so on the land. Stein takes land to be a place where persistent memory prevents a total death, denies the absolute freedom from self-identity. What “makes the Geographical history of America different from the geographical history of Europe is that when anybody is dead they are dead.” The nervousness of war and “tears of loss” are, according to Stein, overcome by a vision that unites death and excitement.

Stein’s thesis of no relation seconds Marinetti’s thesis of an “an absolutely new reality” of the air, but her absolute novelty teases and denies memory, achieving an almost mystical, totalised death. Stein’s *Geographic History* grounds her plea not in a temporal distinction between old and new (like Marinetti’s) but, consistently enough, in affectivity, in the felt quality of the human mind that moves it beyond knowledge. She makes plain that “nervousness” is “always there after a big war;” but she assures us “nervous has nothing to do with the human mind.” Instead the human mind produces “excitement” (*GHA*, 62). The issue of nervousness versus excitement, or at least how Stein describes it, brings us to consider the genre of the flight poem in relation to the older poetic tradition of taking to the heights, the prospect poem.

Indeed, a history of poetic genre offers the grounds for testing her belief in the non-relation of aerial absolutism and terrestrial location, if, that is, the aviation poem emerges from an ancient tradition of locational, land-based poetry. Discussing “topopoeisis” as the “imaginative making of place,” James Cocola surveys the age-old custom of poets taking to high ground:

As David Fairer later described them, English prospect poems ... were not merely poems written about elevations and locales; they were ... concerned with "landscape economies” and "geo-historical continuities and disruptions," distilling within "the small individual landscape" a test of "the state's capacity to harness into an effective economy those potentially competing forces: freedom
and obedience, change and continuity, individual and social good, the arts of war and the arts of peace.” 48 

If national culture “harnesses” competing forces into what Sacvan Bercovitch calls “symbolic oppositions,” 49 then such prospect poems are small interventions in this process, an elevated “oversight” whereby the calculus of locally administrated society is tested. The big flat landscapes Stein saw from a plane similarly test “the state's capacity to harness into an effective economy ... the arts of war and the arts of peace.” The aircraft in ascent provides her, finally, with a heterotopia that suspends the pressures of war and peace, instead evoking an affective place of communication, where identity is evacuated of itself, where personal history is overcome, where the shape of the plane takes on the area of community, where, in her excitement, ecstasy and community graph the locus of the other. 

Yet Stein resists this historicising (if not the theorising) as she embraces, as strongly as Marinetti did, the idea that aerial vision amounts to an entirely new reality: succinctly put, “When there was a sea the world was round but now that there is air the world is flat” (GHA, 124). Flat land seen from the air by the human mind bears no formal relation to economics on the ground where a “piece is only a little way and it must finish even if the world is round” (GHA, 70). This world of disparate pieces is opposed to the world of air, where everything is one flat piece. To accomplish both a modernist masterpiece and an absolute geography of America, to transcend human nature completely, the prospect poem is inadequate because it preserves the discontinuity and particularity of terrestrial location. Rudely confronting any critical claim that her aerial poetics is a continuation of topographical poetry, or the prospect poem particularly, Stein asserts:

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When you climb on the land high human nature knows because by remembering it has been a dangerous thing to go higher and higher on the land which is where human nature was but now in an aeroplane human nature is nothing. (GHA, 56)

The distinction between climbing on land and climbing in air is clear; the demarcation cuts across the affectivity of the subject in ascent. In contrast to the danger experienced by the climber of mountains, the climber of skies experiences an excitement about death. “Why in an aeroplane is one not afraid of being high. / Because human nature has nothing to do with it” (GHA 55). In accordance with the military and popular rhetoric about flyers, the murderous fall from the sky is neither nerve-inducing nor disgraceful, but a transcendental achievement, a transcendence of memory into a pure death; it reaps the reward of a total obliteration where “remembering is nothing ... not anything that is a memory.”

With a mind towards Stein's resistance to connecting the airborne to the earthbound, we might briefly estimate the relationship between prospect poetry and aerial poetics in some other of America's modernisms. Katahdin and Monadnock were among the peaks that America's nineteenth-century writers climbed for aesthetic and national perspective. However, in the twentieth-century, in the context of aerial perspective, it is worth considering just one mount, Kill Devil Hill, as do Hart Crane and Muriel Rukeyser, for whom the hill's ascension inverts the perspective of classic prospect poetry, where poets tilt their heads backwards, gazing up at economies of aerospace, as Crane puts it, the scribbled “cantos of unvanquished space,” laced with the “thin squeaks of radio static.”

In some ways, Crane's vision of the machine age rhymes with Stein's. She sees the historical transition from an age of sea travel to one of air travel as a transformation from a round world to a flat one. Discussing *The Bridge*, wherein Columbus navigates the

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50 Hart Crane, *Complete Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1984), 87; 85. From hereon cited in text as “Crane.”
“turning rondure whole,”51 Alan Trachtenberg seconds Stein’s thesis that the world is no longer round, describing the world of Crane’s “Cape Hatteras” as one where “sea voyages are now down, the rondure accomplished.”52 On Crane’s flattened sphere of water, “the dorsal change / of energy” enacted by the modern age belies “a labyrinth submersed / Where each sees only his dim past reversed.”53 Mirroring Stein’s idea of human nature, this lower labyrinth of modern energy offers incomplete and diminished visions. Parting ways with Stein, Crane explicitly writes of flight’s naval applications, and lifts it on the soaring rhetoric of an ode:

Regard the moving turrets! From grey decks
See scouting griffons rise through gaseous crepe
Hung low . . . until a conch of thunder answers
Cloud-belfries, banging, while searchlights, like fencers,
Slit the sky’s pancreas of foaming anthracite
Toward thee, O Corsair of the typhoon,--pilot, hear!

Raising proud praise to the pilot, it continues

Thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance
To reckon—as they silly eyes partake
What alcohol of space . . . !     (Crane, 88)

How far we are now from the popular rhetoric of military aviation! As Paul Mariani has said of this passage, it is “a Miltonic rhetoric employed to treat the facts of modern air combat,” part of an elevated style Crane prefers when describing “the most sublime

51 Ibid., 66. The Epigraph to “Cape Hatteras” comes from Whitman: “The seas all crossed, / weathered the capes, the voyage done...”
53 Crane, Complete Poems, 85.
undertakings of humankind, man drunk on power in the 'alcohol of space,'”\textsuperscript{54} a phrase that might not appear in National Geographic, whereas “Thou sowest doom,” as well as those favoured by Stevens and Sandburg—reaping “the deepnesses of space” or “the shadow at the wheel”—more closely conform to its editorial style.

But as we move through the “fiery kennel” of Crane's war ode we equally pass from his “theorems sharp as hail” to Muriel Rukeyser's “Theory of Flight,” which dissolves the sheer cutting shapes of the plane into the softness of night, fabric and vegetal matter. By linking “Cape Hatteras” to “Theory of Flight,” we can connect Crane's rhetoric to the popular rhetoric of National Geographic and the prospect poet's vantage of landscape economies. From its opening “Theory of Flight” engages with the popular rhetoric of flight as acted out metaphorically upon a field. Though pilots reaped glory from a field of honour, National Geographic contributors rarely characterise flight as field-labour. Instead they bring in the harvest through play, acting out a deathly game. In Rukeyser's vision, air and earth cooperate in a deathly serious exploration of “mastery,” “power,” and “mortality.”\textsuperscript{55}

“Theory of Flight” appeared in 1935, a year before Stein's Geographical History. Though Stein, in the most abstract way, connects airplanes with the writing of her day, Rukeyser explicitly invokes planes as instruments of inscription: “Cut with your certain wings; engrave space now” (CPMR, 22). As it was for Marinetti, flight is a blade, here put to stone to inscribe an earthly surface, where “flight's escape” makes “strict contact” with a writing tablet. In “Theory of Flight,” the union of air and earth (those elements that Stein roundly rejects as of “no relation”) is ubiquitous. The poem preserves topographical perspective and cuts it, line by line, as a material trace on the space of the page:

\textsuperscript{54} Paul L. Mariani, The Broken Tower: a Life of Hart Crane (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 334.

We know sky overhead, earth to be stepped
black under the toes, rubble between our fingers,
horizons are familiar; we have been taught colors.
Rehearse these; sky, earth, and their meeting-place,
confound them in a blur of distance, swallow
the blueness of guessed-at places, merge them now.
Sky being meeting of sky and no-sky
including our sources the earth water air
fire to weld them: unity in knowing
all space in one unpunctuated flowing

Flight, thus, is meeting of flight and no-flight.
We bear the seeds of our return forever,
the flowers of our leaving, fruit of flight,
perfect for present, fertile in its roots
in past in future in motility. (CPMR, 23)

This variously diverges and converges with Stein's aerial writing. Rukeyser's writing is equally designed to achieve a “unity in knowing,” to render “all space,” in what sounds like a Steinian sentence, “one unpunctuated flowing.” Yet she adamantly commands that “sky, include earth now.” Thus flight becomes an “intolerable contradiction,” a meeting of flight and no-flight that takes place where sky and no-sky merge. Contrarily, Stein's attempt at an absolute geography insists on a division of the strata of earth and air, which also disrupts the popular rhetoric of air as a field of battle where harvests of honour are sown. When Rukeyser asks that air “be stable to our / feet,” providing the stony ground for an “iron stance,” she structurally supports the rhetoric that led, as she put it, “stiff bland soldiers predestined to their death.”

However, in keeping with the rhetoric of aerial mastery, what takes place in the fields of the sky is not field-labour. Instead the air is half playing field, half killing-field. To delimit the sky as a playground Rukeyser makes flying a matter of leaping. Like “little
painful children,” flyers are “the flamboyant leapers toward death.” Heidegger writes that
the leap creates the ground beneath the leaper's feet. So too Rukeyser realises the idea that
flight creates the earth. “Flying, a long vole of descent / renders us land again.” This is
implicit in Stein's view of the flat land lying below the plane, but explicitly she wishes to
deny any relative or dialectical interaction between nature on the ground and the airborne
mind. By making the mind groundless, she denies the earthly historicity of flight and war.
By contrast, Rukeyser's final hope is to dampen the shocks of history by transplanting the
“stalk of time” and those earthly labourers—miners and reapers—into the “savannah of the
sky,” a “sky / emergent with earth” where the “buds of annihilation” are shed (CPMR, 47).
By a similar logic, Crane's own paean to Kitty Hawk enacts the synthesis of the oceanic and
aerial forms that Stein rejects.

In order to carry off his modern epic of metamorphisms, from Columbus to the
Brooklyn Bridge, Crane enacts a metamorphosis of the “Cutty Sark” into the “Kitty Hawk,”
and further, the fallen combat pilot into the risen “Panis Angelicus” held out by Walt
Whitman's hand. Through the figure of the fallen aviator, Crane's poem allows the poet to
forge a communal bond with a ghostly realm. The plane crash registers not only an
experience of finitude but also the larger tension within America's project of material
invention. The awareness of subjective finitude instilled by the crash so too awakens a
sensus communis that allows him, trans-subjectively, to touch the hand of the dead poet.
Importantly, from that hand springs the piece of bread, a product of sowing and reaping, of
terrestrial labour. So, continuing the earthly rhetoric of aerial mastery, the air becomes the
earth, the fallen flyer transfigured into the descending angelic presence of Whitman (who
in Leaves of Grass bequeaths himself to the dirt that can be found under one's bootsoles)
characterised by Crane as the ideal companion (its etymology in bread breaking), the host
an earthly bounty.\textsuperscript{56}

Crane's “Kitty Hawk” and Rukeyser's “Theory of Flight” offer a new species of prospect poem, where poets ascend landmass in order to look up, thereby measuring airspace economies and observing human relations that, though they soar above them, include the ground beneath their feet. To reverse this perspective, consider the simile William Carlos Williams chooses in 1931, when he described Stein's writing as like “the United States viewed from an airplane,”\textsuperscript{57} repeating the perspective of prospect poetry and a central image of \textit{Geographical History}. However well this text fits Williams' description, it is not the one he had in mind, as his commentary precedes it by five years. In fact it may respond to his commentary, correcting the notion that her modernism “views” the land the way prospect poems might:

Why the writing of today has to do with the way any land can lay when it is there particularly flat land. That is what makes land connected with the human mind only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind and so America is connected with the human mind, I can say I say so but what I do is to write it so. (\textit{GHA}, 79)

In contrast to Williams' mention of land “viewed” from above, Stein writes not of the way land looks but the “way it lies,” its lying flat making it “connected with the human mind” and therefore to the writing of the day's masterpieces. An absolute geography of the American landscape is not wrought of its visual immediacy alone, but depends on its mediation in an act of story-telling, or a \textit{relating}, which is paradoxical, given her theory of no relation. Nevertheless, to give the land the agency to look or not to look, but definitely to lie, is to lay forth the land as not merely a visual category but a slyly verbal one too.

\textsuperscript{56} Mariani, \textit{The Broken Tower}, 335–356.

\textsuperscript{57} Williams' essay “Ai” as quoted in Bruce A. Goebel, “If Nobody Had to Die': The Problem of Mortality in Gertrude Stein's \textit{The Geographical History of America},” \textit{Philological Quarterly} 70 (1991).
The airplane and the verbal act of relating therefore cooperate in constructing an ever-incomplete geography of the absolute. Both work to reconstruct the land-based pieces of experience into the literary masterpiece where land lies flat beneath the mastered sky. Yet the pun on “lying” deconstructs the very act of reconstruction, as the land, with equal agency over the aerial observer, falls prey to the verbal seduction of storytelling, of narrativising, even of counterfeiting. The pun on “lie” evacuates the word of dependability, suggesting truth’s remove from the act of telling. Its being seduced into language allows the airplane to “connect” to the human mind and its modernist masterpiece, even while it opens the ecstatic tears where literary community interrupts absolutism.

The masterpieces of today’s writing “always flatten it out, flatten human nature out so that there is no beginning and middle and ending” Stein writes (GHA, 186). Masterpieces occupy human minds where “there is no time and there is no identity” (GHA, 175). This definition of the literary masterpiece and its qualities bear some relation to Stein’s professed masterpiece, the epic saga of family relations and identities related in The Making of Americans. Since this novel achieves, to Stein’s mind, a continuous temporal design, a total spatial form, it is worth considering the intellectual genealogy of her affective reaction to the absolute as a pattern for living.

While at Harvard, Stein would have encountered, in a psychology course reader prepared by William James, a chapter called “The Stream of Consciousness.” If Stein’s absolute geography of America responds archly to the relative location of reality on the ground, James’s chapter is, according to Lisa Ruddick, “a reply to associationist psychology.” Associationists argued that thoughts and sensations were discrete events, linked in a chain, just as land-based motion links discrete sensations and perceptions. For James it “is artificial to think of consciousness as atomized.” Instead he believed in an “indistinct, mingling body of associations and connections that occupies us between one
halting place and the next and suffuses even our cleanest perceptions.” Of consciousness, he wrote, it "is nothing jointed; it flows." Continuing the liquid metaphor, Ruddick explains that our every “thought casts ripples before and after” it, infusing thoughts past and thoughts to come.

Relating James's teachings to Stein's style is the next logical step for Ruddick:

If Stein seems to let her focus wander, it is because she has no thought of moving forward in clean strides as if life fell jointly. She strains against habits of attention that select and divide—as outmoded literary habits that parcel experience into “a beginning and a middle and an end.”

This last quoted phrase is from the *Geographical History*, galvanising the point that her early interests in the wandering relations that illocate language become integrated by the 1930s into her enthusiasm for geographic shape. The figure of the land lying flat and whole below the plane strains against the geographical and historical habits of selection and division necessary for relational location of being.

A recursive epic of terrestrial location and relation, *The Making of Americans* catches its characters in “a continuous present” derived from James' idea that our present thought pervades those thoughts that precede and succeed it. As we observe her characters again and again in the wandering lines of portrait and landscape, Stein stridently commits herself to what James would call a "working hypothesis," where Stein's given hypothesis is that human immanence can be scientifically grasped through the literary experiment of comprehensive characterology, that people might cohere as "a whole one," pervaded by

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61 Which is “a beginning again and again and again and again…” Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” in *What Are Masterpieces* (New York: Pitman, 1970), 37. Stein recognises that one hears difference in her repetitions, saying of her style: “it was all so nearly alike it must be different,” 33.
themselves, even though, resisting immanence and completion, they "go to pieces again inside me." The experiment is inconclusive: "Every one was a whole in me and now a little every one is in fragments inside me . . . Perhaps not any one really is a whole one" (MA 519). The premise that humans are bound by an essence or pervaded by a unified substance cannot be proven.

By the time of her geographic philosophy Stein found a way to deal with these problematic results. The tension between wholeness and fragmentation, between jointed associations and the fluid all-pervasiveness of thought, is relegated to human nature, which, by providence of the airplane, is superseded by the human mind. *The Making of Americans*, on the other hand, is a prolonged attempt to reach the absolutism of the human mind through ceaseless and repetitious observations of human nature(s). One example will suffice, the Hersland children's adjustment to a relatively new regional experience after the family's move from Connecticut to Gossols in the far west.

There is no such place as Gossols in California or anywhere in the far west, though it is commonly assumed that this section of the book evokes the love of country living that Stein developed in her childhood in Oakland. The name “Gossols” is drawn from the Spanish town Gosole, where Picasso and Fernande Olivier were vacationing when Stein was composing sections of her novel. The description of Gossols' regional geography coincides with Stein's first indication of the character typology she is undertaking. She hopes to explain that there “are many kinds of men and there are millions made of each kind of them” and “many kinds of families of them living in the little houses near the Hersland family then” each one different “from all the others of them in their way of living, in their ways of earning a living” (MA, 136; 108). Slowly, the difference of Mr. Hersland from his regional environs becomes apparent to the families living near them then:

Slowly they came to know more about him in his country living, they first learned to know more about him as a man with a country house feeling in him, then it came to be for them that they knew him as a city man with a little country living in him, later in his later living they came to know in him city being with their half city feeling and this was for them the end of his living, the end of his being among them. (MA, 140-141)

Each of the Herslands embodies different mixtures of city, country, and country house life. Mrs. Hersland never has the “feeling of real country living ... with her it was always country house city living.” Her three children, however, to different degrees, have mixed in them “the three ways of feeling, rich city country house being country being and city being” (MA, 131). The lack of punctuation enforces the children’s hybridised identities, their regional modernism. They are undifferentiated composites, partly urban interlopers in nature, partly real natural country people, and partly rural interlopers in an urban environment.

The children develop their rural authenticity through a mixture of country labour and play, as in this passage exemplifying Stein's Georgic modernism:

They all three had it in them to have something of such country feeling. They got it in many ways, in hay-making, hay cutting, helping the men working, eating bread and vegetables, fruit as they were picking it, they got it from milking, and butter and cheese making, they got it from seasons and the things they did to help things growing, they got it in every way around them, they got it in helping ploughing, in helping cut grass, in making hay into bales for winter storing, they got it from playing Indians and having the darkness come around them, they got it from eating grass and leaves and having the taste in their mouths to bring back such things to them in their later living, they got it in every kind of a way then. (MA, 132-133)

Rusticity is achieved through daily effort, industrious and frivolous, but already the stuff of
nostalgia, with the taste of grass and leaves awaiting the call of remembrance. This “real country living feeling,” fed by the close engagement with soil and earth, stores itself in the “bottom in them the kind of being in them that makes them” (MA, 136). The “bottom in them” is a skein woven of daily habit, competing ways of living, memory and family identity, not as fixed but in a mingling body of regional, geographic forces.

Stein ends her relation of the Herslands’ move from Bridgepoint to Gossols with an epic approximation of what makes up the “bottom nature” of humans. As a migrant, Mr. Hersland’s importance in Gossols did not come from his bottom nature as a man whose way of living was a country way of living. In accordance with Semple’s thesis of geographic determinism, his three children, by eating grass, by playing Indians until the darkness envelops them, and by working the fields, do in fact determine themselves as natural country people, members of the Gossols community in a way that David and Fanny Hersland cannot be. This is Stein’s impressive apprenticeship on the topic of human nature. Her geography is not deterministic insofar as we accept that her later geographic project is to abandon human nature, local embodiment, and personal history by leaving the authorship of a masterpiece to the human mind.

Thus does Stein’s rhetoric of aerial mastery differentiate itself from popular modes of aviation history as well as from Lindsay, Crane and Rukeyser, who fold the popular modes into the high poetic traditions of ode, elegy and public critique, the latter still unmistakably in the tradition of topographical poetry, rising into the domain of aerial poetics to savour the role flight plays in a terrestrial economy of violence and memory. Stein remains above this through her insistence on non-relations. The aesthetics of flight in Stein’s work are more absolute and sui generis, even though they present a sombre and more matter-of-fact version of the futurist affirmation of machines. But Stein’s individuality also sets her aerial geography apart from the spatial poetics and professional geography of modernism, especially her affinity to the visual arts of painting, photography and cinema.
Even though she claims to see cubism from the sky “when not any painter had ever gone up in an airplane,” as early as 1920, American synchromist Stanton MacDonald Wright connected cubist landscapes to the flyer's perspective in his famous Aeroplane: Synchromy in Yellow-Orange, the title evoking the burnt hues of California, as well as the synthetic possibilities of aerial vision that Stein embraces in her geographic philosophy. The cubist aerial photographs of photo-secessionist Alvin Landon Coburn appeared in Camera Work where Stein's cubist lines still form portraits. Julian Murphet has recently singled out Stein's cubist experiments in Camera Work for moving the portrait genre outside the visual. To complete the consideration of ut pictura poesis that began this chapter: Stein's syncretic style and synthetic philosophy of an absolute mental geography exemplify spatial form in modern literature, as described by Joseph Frank.

We could easily add Stein to the list of modern “writers who intend the reader to apprehend their work spatially, in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence.”63 Stein's vision is of an America “all in one plane” where “one piece of it is not separated from any other one” (GHA 84-85), a vision absolutely without reliance on the sequential and/or (dis)jointed experiences of living on earth. Frank Kermode's critiquing of spatial form alleges a general association between modernism and Fascism. Though Stein's aerial ideal betrays an affiliation with Marinetti's rhapsody to aerial reality, and her geographic writings coincide with her support for the Vichy government, nevertheless we should not assume that spatial form is something static,64 which Stein's aerial observations are surely not; the landscape from the plane is one of wandering lines, of cubist dynamism. The larger matter is whether this absolute spatial form is possible, whether it transcends human nature with its earth-bound and relational matrix of audience, habit, history, and

According to William Gass, the problem of personal identity that occupies *The Making of Americans* is “triumphantly overcome in *The Geographical History*.” For Bruce Goebel, by contrast, human nature may be what one attempts, impossibly, to overcome in modernist writing, but that nature, as Stein finally accepts, resides as the residue in (but never the origin of) a masterpiece. Deciding the success of Stein's absolutist geography becomes easier when one considers the spatial effects of language in terms like Frank's. According to Yi-Fu Tuan’s ethnographic geography, language is “suited to telling stories and poor at depicting the simultaneous order.” However, for Frank and others, modernism puts language towards just that purpose. The language of Stein's modernist relating attempts a relation without relation, a spatial absolute, a formal whole to be perceived all from one point, all in one plane.

Philologically speaking this should not be a hopeless endeavour. “Absolute” derives from classical Latin. It refers to that which cannot be disintegrated or broken down. “To relate,” meanwhile, means “to bring forth, to place before.” The terms absolute and relative are not strict antonyms, though are often used that way. There should be nothing oxymoronic about “relating” the “absolute,” insofar as it means bringing forth a complete and indissoluble entity. How, though, can a complete and indissoluble being make itself present in language, a structure of differential signification? If recursivity, in presenting the always-novel sound, is part of Stein's attempt to present the absolute, it is also the ecstatic question that unworks absolutism. In the variations within her recursive style, her syntax becomes as differential as it is repetitive, as dissolute as it is a wholesome transcendence of dissolution.

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66 Bruce A. Goebel, “If nobody had to die,” 249.
Whereas the absolute is indissoluble, community, for Nancy, is by its very nature dissolute, deconstructed, ecstatic. Any absolute form of community, or one attached to a notion of a divine immanence (those supposed predecessors of modern society) is oxymoronic and impossible. For Nancy, communitarian projects that prize themes of individualism or communism “are bound together in their denial of ecstasy,” and therefore extinguish community. Stein’s vision of a whole American landscape, her goal of a characterological immanence are ways to render war impossible, but would also end the experience of being with others in the world. Marking the end of communal feeling, Stein seeks to supplant the traditions of topographical poetry with death from above. Refusing to commemorate death, the geographical history of America outlines a space of total extinction where “when anybody is dead they are dead” (GHA 62). The aerial perspective of the human mind does away with memory, with all memory of killing, and thus opens a space for the literary masterpiece, an act of total annihilation, a complete death-work.

Thus, Stein’s final notion of masterpiece is one that extinguishes the literary experience of community, through denying ecstasy, however, in her grammar, ecstasy is again and again evoked, personal emotion excited, and, as the masterpiece is unworked, the ability to being with others in human nature persists. Even in its most dramatic and novel attempt to escape communal life, into the abstraction of an absolute human mind, Stein’s modernism comes back to earth among a geography of ghosts, traces of identity in a quest to escape themselves. The human mind lands her back in her origin, her community, her nature, this “American” self.

68 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 6.
Figure 8
AutoTrails Map, by Rand McNally & Co. Chicago, circa 1921.
For Stein, the splendour of the twentieth-century was in seeing “the earth as no one has ever seen it,” and the automobile hardly sufficed. Marking a point of exhaustion and perfection within the technologies of ground transport, cars were the “end of progress on the earth” but, as such, they merely accelerated the out-of-date, offering the same views that could be achieved “from a carriage, a train, a wagon, or in walking.”\(^1\) Inherently hostile to Stein’s idea of masterpiece, such earth-bound motilities and modes of vision partake of human nature, a fragmented life, the relative locations of mass geography. In search of a modernist poetics of community, the following chapter surveys the grounds Stein depreciated, aligning the geography of American modernism with the discontinuities of terrestrial transportation, local exploration, and the mediating vision of the tourist’s eye. In a series of stops and starts, this critical sojourn alights at locations that exhibit the literary modernism of small towns and “out-of-the-way” places. As a scrap-book or collage of local literary histories, the chapter mirrors its subject matter: the itinerant modernist in the hinterlands, who, in search of an authentic community, only realises the inauthenticity of such a notion, who notes the rips in every fabrication of autonomous and organic local

\(^1\) Stein, Picasso, 88–91.
political structure. In those places, the modernists of America’s regionalisms follow a
disintegrative poetics of community that upsets claims to indigeneity, rootedness, and total
social harmony.

The subdivided landscape of America’s mass geography troubles the attempt to see
the nation as a harmonious whole organised from diverse racial and ethnic sources. In the
pluralist discourse of the 1920s, a privileged metaphor for this hopeful vision of unity came
from classical music. America was, in the words of Waldo Frank, “the symphonic nation.”²
Horace Kallen forwarded an even more strident philosophy of cultural pluralism,
challenging notions of the “melting pot” and the “symphony” by calling America “a chorus
of many voices each singing a rather different tune.” Yet he too sought out harmony,
looking for “an orchestration of mankind.”³ John Kun notes that despite Kallen’s openness
to “discord and dissonance,” he remained “fastened to the very ideas of cultural monism
and racial uniformity” he sought to refute.⁴ Away from the cities, with their own
cacophonous discourse, a wider mass geography was reshaping the borders between
regional America’s pluralist enclaves in ways that tested the symphonic logic of e pluribus
unum.

It could be assumed that the technologies of mass society further justified Kallen’s
buried attachment to a cultural monism. Integrated road-networks opened the interior of
the country to new waves of visitors, who could visually identify with the diverse
landscapes and peoples scattered across the continent, blend their voices and faces with
theirs, associate with the whole of America, in all its difference. America’s regional
diversity was by no means belittled by the ethnic and racial diversity of its urban centres,

² Waldo Frank, The Re-Discovery of America (London: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1929), Chapter XVIII,
“The Symphonic Nation.”
³ Horace Kallen, Culture and Democracy in the United States (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction
⁴ Josh Kun, “Against Easy Listening, or, How to Hear America Singing” in Audiotopia: Music, Race, and
America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 41-45.
where mixtures of immigrants led debates about pluralism and assimilation, and in the interwar years new transport possibilities acquainted urban and rural diversities with one another more dramatically. Adding to the spatial contractions of modern transportation were modern media. Broadcast radio stations bewitched listeners with what Adorno called the “illusion of closeness,” which preserved the false unity of the “radio voice,” where the vocal speaker is confused with the technical apparatus of the radio’s “speaker.” According to Adorno’s analysis of symphonies played over the radio, the technical apparatus produced “softened sounds,” squashing the aura of classical symphonies until they lost the power to shape a community meaningfully, as Paul Bekker argued they did.5

One imagines that the modernist distortions to symphonic community would only have been amplified by the instillation of “motorolas,” the first car radios, in the years when Adorno decried the “atomised listening” habits of America from his post at the Princeton Radio Research Project. He bemoans music listeners of the mechanised era (“dial-twirlers”) whose flippant joy in steering the radio dial takes over for the “enjoyment of technical devices like the motor car.”6 Both sonically flat and spastically inattentive, the radio accompanied the car in corroding classical community as conceived by Adorno. But I will argue that the dial-twirlers and idle motorists of American modernism achieved community in the very corrosion of community so classically conceived. In the spasmodic lurches between stations (petrol or radio), between places and faces, between here and there, America’s localised rural modernisms resolutely resist symphonics and opt for community in cacophony, thereby defining the aura of modernist community as the unique

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5 Theodor Adorno, Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory (Frankfurt am Maim: Suhrkamp, 2006) Adorno only partially accepted Bekker’s theory that symphonies had the “power to build a community,” and radio even further detracted from that power: “First of all, the softened sound can no longer carry the illusion of being directed to a vast community which, in our discussion of Bekker’s thesis, we regarded as so essential for the effect of a symphony.” Adorno, Current of Music, 91. See Paul Bekker, Die Sinfonie von Beethoven bis Mahler (Berlin 1918), as translated and quoted by Adorno in Currents of Music, 87.

6 Ibid, 161.
phenomenon of difference within a nation, however unified it might be.  

A wilful exercise in dial twirling, this chapter must, therefore, jump around. So a whirring motor of modern poetry guides us on the following itinerary: to the slopes of Mount Rainier; the glebe of a New England village; a sandy stretch of Key West; the “pinewiney silence” of Mississippi roads; suburban streets in Chicago and Northern New Jersey; the banks of the Arkansas River; a rose garden in Colorado; a colony of writers in Taos; finally finishing atop the sea-swept bluffs of the Pacific coastline. Mapping these places means abandoning Stein’s pleasure in the cartography of straight lines and instead indulging in the shocks and jumps of a disparate terrestrial geography. To adopt some phrases Frank Lentricchia uses in describing the world according to William James, these American locales sound out “a cacophony of stories,” a “geography of practices adjacent placed,” where, I argue, a poetics of ecstasy dissolves any absolute idea of community into, quoting James, “the form of an infinitely numerous lot of eaches.”

Take, as a first “each,” a poem by Marianne Moore first published in a June 1922 issue of The Dial. “People’s Surroundings” forcefully transitions from an absolute geography to a geography of aesthetic resistance because, even though it evinces a pleasure with America’s straight lines that parallels Stein’s, it dissolves that formation in its litany of disparate settings. Moore concedes that “there is something attractive about a mind that moves in a straight line,” though the poem jerks that mind through discontinuous locales, from the “dried bone of arrangement” in parlour interiors to the “great distances as one finds in Utah or / in Texas” to the landmark of Bluebeard’s Tower in tropical St. Thomas, “where there is no dust, and life is like a lemon-leaf.” Compared to that island utopia and

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7 I hope this play on Benjamin’s famous definition of the aura is obvious enough. He is the major interlocutor of Adorno’s radio theory.  
9 Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1988), 110.  
10 Marianne Moore and Robin G. Schulze, Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924
the ossified East Coast, with its “indestructible necropolis” of “bad furniture,” there is, for Moore, as there was for Stein, a comfort in the apparent openness, emptiness and solidity of the American interior. In those places, Moore relates, “people do not have to be told / that a good brake is as important as a good motor.” Along Moore’s “straight line,” which is that of the roadway, not the state-line, an opportunity emerges to read American modernists like Moore amid a rapidly expanding network of mass geography, amid a tangle of highways that altered the twentieth-century sense of community.

Making inroads towards this topic, John Slatin has analysed “People's Surroundings” in terms of a “search for community.” He is particularly attentive to Moore's relationship with a community of peer poets, carefully uncovering “private” allusions to Pound, Eliot, Williams and Stevens. For example, “dried bone” is a phrase taken from a letter by William Carlos Williams, and Slantin suggests that by its inclusion Moore may at least partially agree with Williams’ objections to Pound’s (“bone-dry”) academicism. Where she says the country folk of America can smell what's coming “like trout,” Slatin detects a reference to Eliot, since she called his mind “facile” and “troutlike” in its passage through “a multiplicity of foreign objects.” In this accretion of voices one immediately confronts a cacophony of American poets who sing different tunes. With Williams as the closest thing to its speaker, the down-to-earth (troutlike) sensibility of rural Americans counteracts Pound's pretensions and Eliot's facile motility. Moore fetishises the natural prowess and heightened sensitivity of country folk as part of her own bid to move seamlessly, swiftly and assuredly through a multiplicity of people’s surroundings. As such, her discussions with poetic luminaries like Pound and Eliot are submerged, at the oblique level of allegory, beneath a curiosity with place typical of a tourist.

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12 Ibid., 128-131.
To read “People's Surroundings” as an explicit travelogue is to encounter the mixture of distance and casual fascination that defines a tourist of ambiguous origins. As she approaches regional topography and formal influence, there is a confidence and casualness supported by the commercial comforts of the poet's surroundings, a new comfort with being away from one's origins, out of town, on the road. Moore's comment about the dependability of a good brake smacks, for example, of advertising copy. The security of mind as it sweeps across geographical distance and through literary references is supported by the historical emergence of a mass-commercial landscape where, for example, motorists could “depend on the widely available goods and services of the roadside while making trips.”13 Making a trip through other poems, filling hers with mementos from Pound and Eliot, Moore brandishes isolated allusions like a tourist does souvenirs. Yet, the security of a mind wandering through geographic and poetic reference points is undercut if one construes community as a sought-after ideal. Here, the encounter with difference and distance does not demand the poet seek resolution in a symphonic whole. Instead, for Moore, mass geography both demands and allows the ability to shift quickly between locations without disrupting them. Her flicks of the dial provoke questions rather than offer summations about the structure of community.

To ask “People's Surroundings” what it says about communal experience elicits more questions than answers. After a stanza appraising rural Americans as endowed with “the explicit sensory apparatus” of common sense, Moore moves on to mention civic mosquito exterminations in Texas before stating: “these are questions more than answers.”14 This line, however, does not appear in the earlier presentations of the poem, in The Dial (1922)

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and Observations (1924). It was added before the poem’s appearance in the 1935 edition of her Selected Poems. So Moore’s seemingly sure-footed affirmations about rural Americans (she calls them “cool sirs” with extra senses) appear to Moore a decade later as affirmations of her own uncertainty. If, in their dependability, rural people become reified as those goods and services available by their roadsides, once those reassuring people (who already know the good of goods, the good of breaks and motors) become as reassuring as those goods themselves, then what commonality exists between them and the mind that travels swiftly and straight between there and the exotic locales of other poet’s minds, of the world’s wider climes? Since the poem eventually questions how to commune with people—poetic theoreticians or salt-of-the-earth stereotypes—who appear primarily as services within a mass geography or a literary landscape, and only secondarily, if at all, as organic essences with whom one identifies, then the poem equally interrogates the conventional meaning of the word “community.”

Figure 9 Shell Motor Road Guide: Colorado (Chicago: H. M. Gousha Company for W. W. Gates, 1928), Image Courtesy of Osher Map Library at the University of Southern Maine.
Slatin’s term “search for community” implies that community is something that can be located, found or founded. The logic of search derives from the idea that community may be lost, so the poet seeks the experience of finding/founding a communal order or reconvening with others in organic communality. Slatin claims that Moore's feeling of isolation in Brooklyn initiates her search for community, and that she remains committed to the idea that “community depends” upon “integrity” “for its survival.” However, if community's dependence on integrity is exchanged for an idea of aesthetic resistance, where the poem questions dependence, where it questions the possibility of integrating various surroundings, where its dependence on capitalist goods can not be reconciled with its dependence on people, then the poem may espouse an alternative view of community, where community obtains in its own dis-integration. The larger point is that community is not something lost, an object of one's search, but the insistent interruption within the search that keeps community on a constantly receding horizon, realised only by its incompletion, in the mysterious remainders of the search itself. In this sense, community is Moore's question, it seems, rather than her goal.

As Slatin notes, Moore's seemingly most integrated depictions of community, such as her portrait of a New England village in “The Steeple-Jack,” are in fact products of her peregrination, of her “visits up and down the Eastern seaboard” and, in fact, “The Steeple-Jack,” seeks to represent Brooklyn, and not its direct New England reference, as, what Slatin calls, “the idyllic and quintessentially American community.” There is a tension, then, between the apparent integrity of the village ideal, and the dislocated process of the poem's formal construction, its mediation through the verbal souvenirs of travel, all of which, in the end, create a discontinuity between the presentation of the community as a village one visits, and the actual place Moore wants to represent as such, the major centre

\footnote{15} Slatin, *The Savage's Romance*, 11.  
\footnote{16} Ibid., 12.
of American urbanism where she tenuously resided. So even her most located depictions of community are founded in the experiences of mobility and uncertain origins that are embodied by the traveller.

“The Octopus” has received ample attention for its connection to Moore’s tourism because, upon a trip to Mount Rainier National Park, she jotted down her notes for the poem in a National Park Service *Rules and Regulations* brochure. For this reason Jennifer Ladino has explored the way the poem collages elements of National Park Service rhetoric to mount a “particular critique regarding nature, American tourism, scientific knowledge and language itself.”17 The intertextuality between the park manual and the poetry is a reminder of the more general point that Bart Brinkman recently makes about Moore’s collage technique: that it is primarily verbal, and that collage poetry should not be seen as a shadow of the visual or derivative of collage within the visual arts.18 Brinkman notes that Moore’s scrapbooks, which literally cut and paste text together, antedate Picasso’s experiments with collage aesthetics. As objects of mass geography, such collage techniques implicate the spasmodically mechanised society that Adorno blamed for the wane of symphonic communalism; but Moore’s shifts in place, ruptures in locality and discordant juxtapositions equally elicit the ecstasy of community as a literary experience.

Like “The Octopus,” “The Steeple-Jack” collages verbal styles: that of a field guide blended with an advert to pioneers, where seaside flora “are favored by the fog” but the “climate / is not right for the banyan, frangipani, or / jack-fruit trees;” then the intimacy of the town’s “simple people” (“moon-vines traced on fishing-twine / at the back door”); or the casual conversation of a tour guide (“You can see a twenty-five / pound lobster; and fish nets set / to dry”); and of course the commentary of an erudite visitor, personified by

the “college student ... on the hillside / with his not-native books,” who speculates that “Dürer would have seen a reason for living / in a town like this.”¹⁹ Unlike the nineteenth-century trompe l’œil of John F. Peto, for example, whose paintings look like scraps of paper on the wall but are continuous surfaces of paint, Moore’s verbal collages call attention to their discontinuity.

“People’s Surrounding’s” “The Octopus” and “The Steeple-Jack” bare their stylistic and geographic juxtapositions in order to reject formal integrity, to realise formally the confusion between “crasis,” a merger of distinct styles, and “ecstasis,” the instability in rhetorical identity that makes such distinction impossible. Considering that Bataillian ecstasis, a being’s separation from itself, is fundamental for community, Robert Pinksy is validated in finding, amid “The Steeple-Jack,” a “double quality” that separates Moore’s “communal speech” from itself. At once idiomatic and idiosyncratic, her communal speech is full of “plain, morally stringent provincial sufficiency and calm” but is troubled by an “ironic undertow,” where the appearance of this local placidity offers “nothing that can be used outside” of that locale.²⁰ Locality welcomes and reassures even though, as a unique “crasis” of linguistic identities, it remains idiosyncratic and alienating. Communal speech in America’s regional modernisms is a double speak, where the affected calm of the mass-geographical navigator carries the reassurance of locality but ruptures into questions of integrity, where integrated village ideals split along the seams of collage composition that, like this chapter, paste scraps of difference into a disintegrated picture of life.

Where one communes by becoming non-native to one’s self and one’s surroundings, the tourist is the ideal community member. The tension between integrity as the seal of community and the ecstatic questions that irrupt within that seal are typical of a mass

geography, where wandering without origin and adopting the speech of others is part of artistic practice. Yet mass geography may simply update an older tension in the patterns of American settlement. Meinig writes that although the “concept of community remained unusually strong” in America, “versions of the communal farm-village were never the dominant form.” This divergence between concept and spatial pattern is enlightening. Though the American landscape is one of human dispersal and differentiation, the mystifications of Puritan colonisation diffused across it too, so that mobility between locality is a practice that attempts, ideologically, to retain the formative sense of locality as a “Christian, utopian, closed, corporate” community. Yet even in New England, where settlement patterns best exemplify Puritan ideals, many towns were “loose aggregations” more than “rigidly theocratic communities.” So due to its adaptability as an idea rather than its edification in geographical actuality, the sense of a community as something complete and whole survived the transition from Puritan colonisation to Yankee \emph{imperium}, where “the concept of a community as a morally conscious, industrious people working together to create a better society remained a powerful ideal.”

\footnote{Meinig, \emph{The Shaping of America}, 1:104-5.}

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure10.png}
  \caption{William Lyon’s 1806 redrawing of Wadsworth’s 1748 Map of Wethersfield Connecticut, the first town settled in the Connecticut Colony.}
  \justify
  Two rows of smaller house lots converge on a meetinghouse green, but at canted alignments, revealing that two groups of settlers are behind Wethersfield, and as such, the town’s ecstatic geography, its difference from itself.
\end{figure}
We can twirl the dial of our attention to find this “powerful ideal” travelling with Wallace Stevens on a business trip from Hartford, by train down to Florida, where he rented a car with colleagues and drove to Key West. The ideas of order he clashes with the spatial organisations of Moore’s poetics. Recall her description of St. Thomas, “where there is no dust, and life is like a lemon leaf.” As Robin Schulze observes, “Moore's tropical seascape occupies the same latitude and repeats the tropes of 'Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,’” an early draft of “An Idea of Order at Key West” that she encountered while composing “People's Surroundings.”

Therefore, the mind moving industriously in straight lines provides an attractive alternative to Stevens’ somnolent holiday ease, where the mind “roamed as a moth roams.” Following a racist climatological determinism, (where a snowman “must have a mind of winter”), the mind of Stevens' tropics is a deaf and dumb one. It “Disturbed not even the most idle ear.” It “drowsed along the bony shores, / Shut to the blather that the water made.”

Stevens’ poem pleads ignorance as to whether the dumbly roaming moth is a figure of the directionless mind on holiday, or a “monstered” mind seduced by the sinking sun of socialism, a light that is “red as red,” as red as the flag atop the café. In either case, the tourist mind and the socialist mind are equally stupid, drowsily meandering through a “stupid afternoon.” In Moore’s poem, which challenges Stevens’, the mind is not a closed one floating through a stupid afternoon but one charged by a mass geography of office furniture, direct flights, advertising copy; one that piles multiple locations into one poetic landscape, collapsing distance, moving swiftly and directly between potential human

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24 Stevens, “The Snow Man” Collected Poems, 9. Originally Published in Poetry (October 1921) and then collected in Harmonium.

surroundings. But the closure of Stevens' mind belies its own rupture, its own problematic difference from itself, its own involvement with imperial legacy, where shores sleep between events of invasion and violence.

Stevens was not ignorant of the political history of Key West. Almost certainly the first European eyes to spy the Florida Keys were Spanish, among the earliest recorded those of Juan Ponce de Leon, who in Easter 1513 sailed from Hispanola for unfound northern islands, who named the flowering coast he saw there “La Florida,” and who, on May 15, entered the Gulf around the outermost Key, naming them The Martyrs for their likeness to suffering men. What suffering he saw there Ponce de Leon found for himself, 200 kilometres north of Key West near today’s Charlotte Bay, in a mortal wound from a Calusa’s poison arrow.26 A generation later Hernando de Soto chose the same stretch of coast as landing point in an epic conquest that brought him overland to the Mississippi, and to his final end, but not before he claimed, with word and banner, a continent for a Spanish throne.27 At lost locations these acts passed 400 years before Wallace Stevens chose for his holiday home Key West: to his mind, an old-fashioned, primitive locale, a town as natural bowery too impoverished to be ordered by gardeners.

It is, he wrote his wife in 1934, “in reality, a place without rich people, a village, sleepy, colonial in aspect, individual.”28 Stevens’ description raises a village-island in the stream of history, a sleeping barrier against the currents of progress, a preserve of wildflowers. However, as European locality, the island had passed from Spanish to British, British to Spanish and then to American hands, when Commodore Perry planted there the explosive flower of a starry banner. The town’s colonial aspect, therefore, looks at a

panorama of imperial repossesssion; the same letter back to Hartford that describes a village among irises offers reminders of such a legacy: US warships, a waiting Navy, “disturbed conditions” in Cuba.²⁹

The Keys, an Anglo-Iberian borderland: where worlds grate against each other, as Gloria Anzaldúa has it, they bleed, they scab, they haemorrhage again; their lifeblood merges into new form.³⁰ How much of this regenerative violence can be read along the boundary of Key West described by Stevens' “Idea of Order”? The classic answer, drawn from Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler, would be “not much.” Along their interpretative horizon, the boundary between sound and song, between the inhuman cry “of the veritable ocean” and “the single artificer of the world,” separates two orders of magnitude “exquisitely fitted and yet subtly uneasy with each other.” The divide, however, is not through political geography but romantic idealism, the two “Wordsworthian orders of mind and world.”³¹ Thoroughly favoured is the order of Mind: a world “sang and, singing, made,” over and beyond the “empty sleeves” of the sea. Yet, in ways that differ from Stein’s demarcation of mind and world, this boundary is not a total divide but rather a location of genesis:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
As we beheld her striding there alone,
Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.³²

²⁹ Ibid., 268.
Solipsist, dislocated, romantic in sublimity, the poem at the same time supports the claims of James Cocola, made in his dissertation on “the imaginative making of place,” Stevens “poetics of disemplacement retains more than a passing interest in questions of emplacement.” Reducing the importance of place, Stevens allows that, for the singer, the “ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea” is “merely the place” by which the she walks. *Merely the place* – “Idea of Order” does not flesh out the local colour of Key West the way Stevens did in letters to his wife. However, a closer look at the last two stanzas brings out the importance of locality to his idealism.

Witness his rhetorical proposition interrogating a personal pronoun: “Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know.” In five line breaks the interrogative voice has shifted to the declarative, offering a final image of order in the light an American town can structure. The name, “Ramon Fernandez,” refers to no one, if we listen to Stevens, just a combination of two “everyday Spanish names.” However Ramon Fernandez was a Mexican-born French critic whose engagement with French politics in the nineteen-thirties Stevens followed in several transatlantic journals. Around the time Stevens wrote “The Idea of Order,” Fernandez openly endorsed communism, rejecting fascism out of what he called a “professional fondness for theorising.” At Harvard, Stevens had been awash in William James’ rage against theorising. Accordingly, Stevens’ transcendental light of order is relocated, pragmatically, at the point of its actual consequence, in an American settlement that masters, portions, fixes, arranges, deepens and enchants the nature of night.

Sacvan Bercovitch has shown how Emerson forged American transcendentalism in relation to a developing European socialism. Here Stevens echoes and updates the relationship; when the singing ends and the two walkers turn towards town, Stevens finds

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33 Cocola, “Topopoiesis,” 64.
the ideals of “pale Ramon,” including his social ideals, reformed by a spirit not so much in or of Key West, but that, like light, springs from Key West as it makes Key West, a reciprocity of belief and fact at work on a geography in continuing revolution, ordering America's sacred space idealistically. To Stevens' credit he embeds pragmatic American ideology in romantic forms; the poem paints poetic history as it engages, as Stevens says the poet must do, in current “questions of political and social order.” The local instantiation of belief embodied by the light of the village cannot be sublated by the order of the mind, nor can it be fused into a theory of community that is the antithetical by-product of sociological theories of the masses.

More remarkable, as an inversion of Emerson's radicalism, Stevens finds not a common goal between American individualism and European socialism, but locates common origins in transatlantic textuality: the “maker's rage to order words” “of ourselves and our origins, in ghostlier demarcations.” Perhaps Stevens knew the etymology of “demarcation” lay in the “line of demarcation” drawn by the Pope of 1493 between the Spanish and Portuguese realms. That verbal order ushered peace to a peninsula wracked by centuries of expelling Moors, but redirected havoc at a flowering peninsula a world away. Perhaps the realisation came to Stevens at Key West, of himself at a border between Spanish sea, with its “noise” of a language not one's own and American song, with its transcendental order that is at the same time the renunciation of order. Perhaps Stevens recognised this littoral and literal borderland as a region made from the ripped scabs of peace, and maybe also the realisation of a cosmopolitan promise came to him, of both Iberian and American civilisations as ones made, ex verbo, self-creating as they self-describe: words “of ourselves and of our origins, in ghostlier demarcations, keener

38 Stevens acknowledges that the poet must necessarily deal with such questions, but indicates the different nature of “order” that concerns the poems collected in Ideas of Order. His statement appears on the dust jacket of the 1936 edition, see Longenbach, Wallace Stevens, 151.
Seeing in Stevens the complexity of a border poet deviates from J. Hillis Miller's recent discussion of Stevens' sense of an indigenous community “generated by language.” In Stevens' Key West, multiple languages and the echo of an alternative discourse of possession overlap. Although Stevens' disintegrative community is still “created out of language” it is not “a particular language that belongs to that place.” Language remains as Miller sees it, a creative force, but an incidental and alien one, interrupting other codes for binding people to place. As such Stevens' pragmatic reordering of Key West simultaneously disorders the value systems of its prior Spanish and native occupants, displacing communal indigeneity, but simultaneously opening the possibility of communing with them. His universalising “ourselves,” “our origins,” enforces a being-in-common that takes root in rootlessness, thus acknowledging the fragmentations (demarcations) of the communicative event rather than its natural potential to bind people to a place or make them bound to one another. Like other modernists in America's hinterlands, he interrupts the myth of a cohesive social order that predates American capitalism, disavowing a primitive communism, just as others, like William Faulkner for example, would fantasise primitive communist society as that which has always already vanished. And so the tremulousness of Stevens' ideal community leads us further westward to the distortions of Faulkner's small towns.

When, after months' of journeying from their landing spot in Florida, de Soto's company entered the Mississippi valley, they found there a flourishing civilisation built amid ceremonial and burial mounds. When French explorers followed a hundred years later, those indigenous cultures were gone, their tremendous pre-historical plantations deserted.39 Indigenous Mississippians had been prepared for mythological awe, since,

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historically, the vanished Indian was readily accepted as a fact of America's promise. For instance, consider Faulkner's small town heterotopology, where American space is both really and mythically contested, as in his description of “the Old Frenchman's place,” a tremendous pre-Civil War plantation in ruins:

He had quite possibly been a foreigner, though not necessarily French, since to the people that had come after him and had almost obliterated all trace of his sojourn, anyone speaking the tongue with a foreign flavour ... would have been a Frenchman regardless of what nationality he might affirm ... But now nobody knew what he had actually been, not even Will Varner, who was sixty years old ... Because he was gone now, the foreigner, the Frenchman, with his family and his slaves and his magnificence.40

This passage blends a levity for the “obliterating” (amnesic) progress of American settlement with a trope from the post-millennial imagination, that of the mysteriously vanished former occupant. The spoils of New England's spiritual imperium, this is a compelling and artful example of the sacred-secular vision that Jonathan Edwards disseminated among regional congregations, that which Bercovitch calls the “union of eschatology and self-interest under the canopy of American progress.”41 The Snopeses personify self-interest, and Faulkner draws the spectre of eschatology from historical localities, from Acadia, from Roanoke (vanished in or at the hands of natives maybe), from the empty mounds of the Mississipians themselves. Writing about their pre-Columbian society in a 1954 issue of Holiday, Faulkner matches eschatology with Biblical prosody: “In the beginning the predecessors crept with their simple artifacts and built the mounds and

41 Bercovitch, The Rites of Assent, 156.
vanished, bequeathing only the mounds..."  

Built on such absence, the boundless indefinite area of Frenchman's Bend distorts the elite geography emanating in straight lines from Jefferson. As a place only indicative of what has vanished, the post-indigenous settlement cannot be contained by astral design of America's nationalist and imperialist imprint, cannot be related in the absolute coordinates of its latitudinal demarcations. Though they are not of national space, such places paradoxically mark the presence of an absence, locating energies that run counter to the absolutism of America's geographic order. For instance, Varner's crossroads, the hamlet at Frenchman's Bend, sits at a junction that is cockeyed within the rectilinear survey the U.S. used to map the western frontier, in the style of the Roman war camp, by parallels. Even as Faulkner bends this imperial geography—with its microcosm in the imprint of Jefferson's street grid—around his story of Snopeses and their slanting North West path to prosperity, he mocks a sense of lost order and vanished other that sustained America's violent ideological designs for terrestrial progress.

The white landowners of Jacksonian America formed a consensus that Indians were by God's will bound for extinction, a component belief of manifest destiny. Controversy only lay in whether their ends were to come naturally from God or should be expedited by human means, most pointedly by the U.S. Cavalry.  

So a recombinant process of apocalypse and progress has precedent in U.S. ideology, and Faulkner only adjusts the

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43 I first encountered this characterisation of Jacksonian American in Bercovitch's *Rites of Assent*, but perhaps this view of consensus can be contested. In support of Bercovitch though, Scott Martin explores how John Augustus Stone's popular 1829 Indian drama *Metamora, or the last of the Wampanoags* (played by America's first native-born theatre star, Edwin Forrest) affirmed the nationalism of Jackson's Indian Removal Act, which incidentally extirpated the Chickasaw and Choctaw from today's Lafayette County, Mississippi, which Faulkner famously called his "postage stamp of native soil." Martin states that despite the slim margins of approval the House and Senate granted the bill, the "overwhelming majority of white Americans shared the conviction of Native American inferiority and eventual extinction in face of 'civilised' society." Scott C. Martin, "Interpreting Metamora: Nationalism, Theater, and Jacksonian Indian Policy" in *Journal of the Early Republic* 19, no. 1 (April 1, 1999), 87.
materials of that ideological concretion. Specifically, with Frenchman’s Bend, Faulkner melds the collapse of Southern plantocracy with that violent ideal of nineteenth-century transcontinental thrust—the previous keepers of the land (Indians or French) who have been selected for extinction. As Faulkner melds the vacuous grounds of Southern mythology with America’s dominant Puritan errand, he parallels a process of infrastructure that literally “concreted” American ideology, condensing it and concealing it, paving it and paving over it.

Both private and federal roadwork projects of the early twentieth-century implemented a mass transit geography that paved over sites of vanished mythology—naturally absent Indians and pioneering European ancestors equally. For example, in Ohio, the Lincoln Highway, which was the first finished coast-to-coast automobile route in America, partly followed an “ancient Indian trail known as the Ridge Road,” and once out west took to the Mormon Trail.44 Yet modernists like Stevens and Faulkner unwork the mythic claims of indigenous dwelling, native entitlement and organic community. To make a metaphor out of the interwoven Interstates on the U.S. map, where the trolling net of mass society might have ensnared the mythologised social bonds of pre-modern community, instead those nets came back empty of any immanent social designs, since the ideal of a primitive communism or village society was simultaneously challenged and displaced by the disintegrative poetics of modernist mobility.

Within the Federal Highway Administration there is a legend that Franklin Delano Roosevelt demonstrated his desire for the Federal Interstate by drawing a giant grid over a U.S. map, three lines to denote highways running East-West, three perpendicular lines denoting highways running North and South.45 This updates the legendary map Thomas

Jefferson drew during a Continental Congress, where he added fanciful Latinate names to what were then only dreamt-of districts in the trans-Mississippi West. Even his primal sketch demarcates those districts by meridians of latitude, a legacy imprinted on the landscape after the Land Ordinance of 1785, a survey system that emphasised the township as the basic political unit, but, through its giant rectilinear segmentations, reformed the land as a Cartesian space at odds with organic inhabitation and topographic contingency. Yet, locking the organic village ideal within the surveyor's grid was a method for hybridising Enlightenment rationalism and Puritan theology, thus combining those competing forces in a symbolic opposition designed to retain ecstatic difference within the homogeneity of American space. America's maps, too, struggle with the divergence of locality as they attempt to structure a symphony-like unity.

The illusion of order maintained by disorder, the disorder concealed as order, the discordant voices perverting the symphony – this is distinctive of the mass geography encroaching on America's hinterlands, where forces of modernisation were standardised but often left regions unevenly developed. Here is Richard Weingroff on the federal government's early regional roadwork:

In 1912, the Nation's highways were just emerging from the "Dark Ages" of road building in the second half of the 19th Century. Railroads dominated interstate transportation of people and goods. Roads were primarily of local interest. Outside cities, "market roads" were maintained, for better or worse, by counties or townships. Many States were prohibited by their constitution from paying for "internal improvements," such as road projects. The Federal-aid highway program would not begin until 1916 and, because of structural problems and the advent of World War I in 1917, would not accomplish much until 1921. The country had approximately 2,199,600 miles of rural roads and only 190,476 miles (8.66 percent of the total) had improved surfaces of gravel, stone, sand-

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46 This point is made in William David Barillas, The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006), 56.
clay, brick, shells, oiled earth, bituminous or, as a U.S. Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) bulletin put it, "etc." Many people thought of interstate roads as "peacock alleys" intended for the enjoyment of wealthy travelers who had time to spend weeks riding around the country in their automobiles.

The fact that rural people maintained the roads running by their homes supports Moore’s association of Texans with the roadside services becoming standard in a mass geography. Commoditised for their mechanical use-value, those people were doubly commoditised by artists eyeing them for the exchange-value of literary representation, whereby images of country people became intellectual property to be disseminated by print media. Country people's resentment over leisure class “peacocks” presses equally against the social barriers enforced by managerial class poets like William Carlos Williams, out of town on a drive, or even driving to work, along “the road to the contagious hospital,” for instance, where the winter trees of New Jersey “enter the new world naked,” where the car “quickens” the landscape, even though, in terrestrial diffusion, its objects are defined “one by one.”

These descriptors of course come from an important poem that William Carlos Williams included in *Spring and All* (1923), one of two collections published in as many years (the other being 1921’s *Sour Grapes*) that exemplify a poetics of auto-mobility. Consider, from *Sour Grapes*, “Romance Moderne,” set in the back seat of a car as it drives through a rainy countryside. “Tracks of rain and light,” run over the “blunt barrier” of the windshield. “Trees vanish—reappear—vanish.” From behind the driver the poet fantasises about a violent act of destruction, a profitless exchange of play, of make-believe, that would force him into ecstasy. His fantasy moves him in and out himself, back and forth from childhood past to adulthood present: “Back into self, tentacles withdrawn. /

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48 Ibid., 148, when the poem first appeared in a 1919 issue of *Others*, this last line was preceded by: "Huge sliding surfaces clatter by," which furthers the sense that driving is a noisy, cinematic experience. Poem first collected in *Sour Grapes: a book of poems* (Boston: Four Seas, 1921).
Feel about in warm self-flesh.” Here is the ecstatic fantasy in full, a deathly game of the imagination:

Lean forward. Punch the steerman behind the ear. Twirl the wheel! Over the edge! Screams! Crash! The end. I sit above my head—a little removed—or a thin wash of rain on the roadway—I am never afraid when he is driving,—interposes new direction, rides us sidewise, unforseen into the ditch! All threads cut! Death! Black. The end. The very end—

Wavering from the well-known compassion Williams expresses for his wife in “This is Just to Say,” “Romance Moderne” alludes to Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” by having the automobile traveller imagine the death of his wife. Inspired by ignition engines, love here is a “fire in the blood,” an expression of a consumer’s superficial desire: “I married you because I liked your nose. / I wanted you!” Their automobile tour passes through mountainous regions indifferent to death, “indifferent to / light withdrawing its tattered shreds.” Passion is expressed in the calamity of accident: “Will you love me always? / --A car turned over and two crushed bodies / under it.--Always! Always!”

In the final stanza, the ecstatic ruptures within the self and the calamitous breakdown of the lovers are clearly set against an economic context, the wealthy driver’s “peacock alley” disparaged by the rural working class:

Myriads of counter processions
crossing and recrossing, regaining
the advantage, buying here, selling there
--You are sold cheap everywhere in town!--

An automobile crossing the country recreates, in large, all the money crossing the counter along the way, until the potential of a person's equivalence to a cheap commodity cements the traveller's dissatisfaction with their social bonds, cements one lover's final death wish for the other: “—I wish that you were lying there dead / and I sitting here beside you.—”

The transit undergone in “Romance Moderne” remains cloistered by a mountainous landscape and the pressing green of nature, an intimate enclosure for marital deceit and dissatisfaction expressed in the poem. As such it focuses on local exchanges, the exchange of one's wife for another woman, the myriad exchanges of dollars along the roadsides of America, but the poem does not suggest the span of the interstate. Hart Crane, however, does write about road openly spanning the continent. His poem “Van Winkle,” shifts the mythological dreamer from Washington Irving’s story into a mass geography, where Rip is told to hang onto a “nickel for car-charge.” Attentive to the materials (macadam) with which roads are paved, Crane describes the roads bridging the continent:

Macadam, gun-grey as the tunny's belt,
Leaps from Far Rockaway to Golden Gate:
(Crane, 70)

As the “gun-grey” of the roadway updates the grey of Rip's gun, the word “tunny belt” (a strap used to carry a weapon) also means seat belt in the early twentieth-century idiom, so that both road and car are accoutrements on Van Winkle's mythical sleeping body. As the road “leaps” from Far Rockaway, it also opens to Walt Whitman, who Crane often remembered walking further East on Long Island, on a “lone patrol” of the beach near
Paumanok. In “Cape Hatteras” Crane equally suggests that Whitman be considered as a foundational figure and icon of America's mass geography, calling him the “Saunterer on free ways still ahead!” Crane sees Whitman as retaining the clear potential to organise the frenzy of modernity:

Not this our empire yet, but labyrinth
Wherein your eyes, like the Great Navigator's without ship,
Gleam from the great stones of each prison crypt
Of canyoned traffic . . . Confronting the Exchange,
Surviving in a world of stocks,—they also range
Across the hills where second timbers strays
Back over Connecticut farms, abandoned pastures,—
Sea eyes and tidal, undenyng, bright with myth!
(Crane, 86)

Whitman’s eyes are capable of balancing America’s pastoral design, bridging the gap between country and city, since they “gleam” like stones overlooking the “canyoned traffic” and stock exchange of lower Manhattan but also “range” along the open roads, taking in the stray timber and empty pastures of the countryside, the tidal flux of the coast. Moving easily, like Moore, between disparate locales, Whitman does not stop at confronting the commercial exchange of mass society, but, in Crane’s view, actually becomes a highway exchange itself, enabling a mass transit geography, the smooth motive force of future “free ways,” which transition the “labyrinth” of modernisation into the “empire” of the interstate, leaping from Rockaway to Golden Gate.

But, automobiles are not just transportation machines, exchanging one place for another. For Crane they activate the poetic sense of “being transported,” as one is transported by another's voice, or from voice to voice in idly turning the radio dial. At the same time automobiles are luxury commodities that proliferate the mass exchange of more
trivial commodities, including those of poetic and cinematic fantasy. As such the automobile is the end of progress, fantasising the exhaustion of capital's potential to reproduce itself. In order to relieve the exploitation of surplus labour value and the excesses of late capitalist society, they serve, for Williams, as death traps, the escape path from one's entrapment in a dreary local situation. Like recording technologies that trap the dead in simulated afterlife, that contain their vocal and imagistic presence even in their absence, automobiles are a media for lubricating both capitalist flows and mythic fluctuations of human bodies and body-effects in a mass geography. As noted by Jon Chatlos, the landscapes seen from Williams’ automobile poems cut together fragmented images (“Trees vanish—reappear—vanish”), and thus simulate the visual grammar of cinema.49 Even more literally, automobiles outside of Williams’ poetry are complicated media machines. With the installation of the radio antenna, which compliments the addition of soundtrack to cinema in the early 1930s, cars became multimedia systems that receive the complex messages of radio modernity even as they emit messages of their own, with horns and indicators, instruments of communication amid a mass geography.

The development of automotive technologies and the medium of the interstate highway system attempted to circumnavigate that tension between communal centres and sprawl society that registers in America's mass geographical imprint. The highway itself becomes a system for totalising disparate localities into a cohesive and integrated network. As Keller Easterling explains, “while early highway designers saw the road as a means of accessing a diverse set of regional landscapes by car, it was eventually designed as a hermetic system that created its own channel of surrounding traffic-engineered landscape contours”:

Rather than becoming differentiated at its intersections, the system replicated itself, generating products and morphologies of its own structure ... Although initial speculations about the highway considered terminals and exchange points to be of the highest importance, eventually, with interchanges such as the cloverleaf, the chief intent was not interchange, but elimination of change and the creation of a smooth, homogeneous experience.\(^{50}\)

In this sense, the structure of the highway system completes, more than the village does, the Puritan sense of a closed and corporate community, free of interchange or interruption, attempting a theological immanence. Such immanent designs are well imprinted by interstate highways, but are eventually interrupted by the cessation of travel. When one alights at a locality, the smoothness of social exchange simulated for drivers and passengers (a smoothness suppressing uneven development, the human commodity, and the danger of a crash) is rudely exposed as such, as a simulation of cinematic escape, after which the particularities of America’s diffusions and disintegrations come rushing back in. In fact the homogeneity of the Federal Interstate, which spans great distances without change, only increases the shock of local particularity when one exits the system in a vastly different place.

As such, the nascent national highway system of the interwar years attempts partly to overcome the difference and diffusion of mass geography but inadvertently accentuates it. By doing so, it complements a mass media ecology where cinema and radio crossed great distances in order to simulate travel, to bring the experience of motion and exoticism to a viewer or listener fixed in place, in a local theatre or living-room armchair. The modern forces of mass society—highways, cinemas, radio wave transmissions—created a newly hybridised sense of place, collapsing together the local and the far-flung. Take for example Carl Sandburg’s wonderful poem “Slabs of Sunburnt West,” which remediates

\(^{50}\) Keller Easterling, Organization Space (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 76-77.
generic Western tropes and spaces, framing them with the suburban structures of Elmhurst, Illinois, where he resided at the time of the poem's publication. The poem opens with a common metaphor for cinematic vision, the train, as it moves along the Santa Fe Trail, into the “blanket of night.” Interrupting the sing-ability of a trail song, the rhythm moves disjointedly:

> Panels, skies, gates, listen to-night while we send up our
> prayers on the Santa Fe trail.\(^5\)

The energy of the train morphs, through the form of Cowboy Song, into a horseback pace, where a rider describes seeing the landscape framed between “two ears of a blurry jackass.” The western motif of the trail and rider may rest on a blurry image, but the rider relates startlingly crisp visions with a voice calm and assured:

> I see doors open over doorsills
> And always another door and door sill.
> Cheat my eyes, fill me with the float
> Of your dream, you auburn, gold, and purple.

The viewer of western hues consensually embraces the fable of economic opportunity, welcoming the “cheat” of “the dream” through his door. As if speaking directly from Elmhurst all of a sudden, and suspending the vision of the Santa Fe Trail, this stanza interrupts the cowboy song:

> The other side of the five doors
> and doorsills put in my house--

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how many hinges, panels, doorknobs, 
how many locks and lintels, 
put on the doors and doorsills 
winding and wild between 
the first and the last doorsill of all?

The cowboy’s singing ends up responding to this question of the local (“my house”) and its relationship to the universal (“the first and last doorsill of all”), but with more questions that stridently separate the local from the immanent: “How can I touch with my fingers a fingerless god?” Questions of perception take on metaphors of domestic structure, where perception is available through the five doors or five windows of the senses: “I sit looking through five windows, listening, tasting, / smelling, touching.” The filmic reproduction of Western landscapes is finally embedded in the suburban space of a house, where the poem/film’s finale is “scribbled on the panels / of the cold grey open desert,” where the word “panels” connects back to the hinges and door knobs that interiorise the home, shut out the world of the wandering cowboy, where the cold grey open desert, surreally, becomes the closing door of the house, securing the poet in the “blanket” of a “Good night.”

The exploration of American hinterlands, by motor tour and cinematic imagination, parallels literary modernism's pursuit of linguistic discovery. In A Story Teller’s Story Sherwood Anderson talks of his first experience reading Stein, of how she “separated [words] from sense,” and thus gave him the sense of exploring, explaining that Tender Buttons was “a sort of Lewis and Clark expedition for me.”52 Since we have already paralleled Stein’s linguistic experiments with breakthroughs in radio engineering, it suffices to say that the “expedition” of listening to Stein might be that of a radio listener, who closes frontiers by the modern convenience of dial-twisting. Still though, early nineteenth-century pioneers paved the way for the literal pavement that enabled

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automobile tours of America and the particularity of its regional modernisms. Following Indian trails and Spanish routes across the Western plains, William Becknell, opened a trail from Missouri, a frontier State reeling in the Panic of 1821, to the promise of Santa Fe, almost a thousand miles west. Popular trail lyrics—

I've crossed the River Jordan
And I'm bound for Santa Fe.

—exemplify a secular/sacred geography: the Mississippi becomes the Jordan; Santa Fe, Canaan. Westward profit is revised as spiritual finale; the monument at the Trail's head reads: “From Franklin, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico/ From Civilisation to Sundown.” Despite the plaque, the pioneer effort was not an attempt to reach millennial splendour, metaphorical sundown, or the eschatological edge of the continent, but to connect the East Coast to the Spanish Camino that tied Santa Fe to Mexico City, and thus to establish a major artery of transnational trade and traffic, to open the mass geography of the Americas.

Through Oklahoma the Santa Fe Trail followed old Native American and pioneer trails along the Arkansas River, which, by the turn of the century marked the Southern border of the Osage Nation’s land. By this time, the tension between concentration and diffusion that defined America’s mass geography had already infiltrated Native American communities there. Referring to John Joseph Mathew's 1934 novel Sundown, Carol Hunter explains: “In contrast to the full-bloods (who lived in villages), in Sundown, the mixed-bloods (who lived in homesteads scattered throughout the territory) gathered daily in town ... to gossip over the latest development in tribal politics.” As in a small-town

imagined by Faulkner, communal gatherings in town produce gossip, cause fissures in social order that become the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Although mestizo gossip recreates the immediacy of the communitarian village, it also marks a new split in the tribal polity (between village full-bloods and home-steading half-bloods) so the immediacy of town gossip lapses into something like radio’s “illusion of closeness,” where live listening immediately implicates what is far away and unheard. As Indian agencies produced the new social configurations of mass geography among the Osage and mestizo modernists of the west, white modernists such as Willa Cather disrupt mythic immanence by suggesting that pioneer communities displaced not the presence but the absence of the Indian.

Cather’s 1924 novel *A Lost Lady* personifies a mountain of masculinity in Captain Forrester, who came West as a boy working at driving a supply train through a “sea of grass six hundred miles” wide. Forrester roughly hewed a house on a hill overlooking meadow and marsh and stream, early dwelling by the Colorado’s Sweet Water. One night among an assembly of dinner guests, abiding the feminine call to recount conquest, he tells the story of how he “found this lovely spot, 'way back in Indian times.” It went: Once as a young man driving supplies across the prairie, he lost the trail in a washout, and rode south to where he “found an Indian encampment” on the hill where his house now stood. Taken with the spot, he “cut down a young willow tree and drove the stake into the ground.” For years he dreamt of returning, plotting out where he would plant groves of trees and orchards. When he did finally return he found his willow stake “had rooted and grown into a tree,” and he “planted three more to mark the corners” where his house would stand.55

Mystically, Forrester attributes his achievement to his socially privileged capacity to dream in a particular way, “to think and plan for day by day.” Roused by memory, he tells

his company: “a thing dreamed of in the way I mean, is already an accomplished fact.”

Though a prose-writer and local colourist, Cather here asserts American ideology in a similar way to Stevens, that is, as universal spirit beyond yet at work towards local facts. Forrester quietly symbolises the “naturalism” of America’s transcontinental poetics. The Indian encampment vanishes without a word; their departure is as natural as God’s providence. Sweet Water becomes a local point in geographic design conceived ideologically, a dream made fact, a reciprocity of belief and local action within a poetic geography.

When the novel's young protagonist, Neil, first enters the Forrester home he sits in the Captain's chair and notices some old engravings on the wall. The titles read: “The House of the Last Poet in Pompeii” and “Shakespeare Reading before Queen Elizabeth.” From Italy, to England, to Colorado, the Captain's Sweet Water home takes a place in the geography of medieval theologians who theorised that humanity had its origins in the east and was marching westward to the end of time. Isn't Forrester's the house of the last poet of the Old West, himself the poet in Emerson's sense, who alone can “possess” because he sees the “landscape”? As the Sweet Water “traced artless loops and curves through the broad meadows” of his plot, the artless is something achieved. Forrester refuses to drain the bottom land; he had chosen that place because “it looked beautiful to him.” A visionary who grows roses in a Colorado winter, whose willow stakes root and grow skyward, Forrester more than gardens; he dreams the American landscape into a fact of paradise, even if that fact, as Cather charts in the Captain’s crumbling, is contingent on history. Still, after his vision is obliterated, he would have been more than colonist or settler, rather a poet, a maker. The ritual continues, with the vanishing American needed for an always-

57 Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police, 116.
emergent America. In her novels, Cather engraves a host of the nation's fading makers, poets who possess treasure where others only live in the desert of the country's empty dreams.

In a letter addressed to a desert village, years after the Santa Fe Trail had put Taos on the map, Wallace Stevens entreated Witter Bynner to leave the artist colony there and help put Key West on the map. This task was left to one transcendent singer “striding there alone,” and Bynner stayed in his desert colony, adding his voice to the cacophony of a motorised America. The Santa Fe Trail was one of four major transcontinental autoroutes in operation by 1940. As it integrated the old Spanish trail into the mass transit geography of the United States, this particular route reinforced the point that America was not settled in a purely East to West fashion, thus dispelling Cather's implications, in Forrester's prints, of *translatio imperii*. The French had colonised Sandburg’s Illinois before Americans pioneered Ohio and Indiana territory. The most important economic terminus of Bucknell's trade route through Colorado was not the West Coast but Mexico City. So, at a major junction between the Mississippi and Spain's imperial centre, Bynner eschewed Key West and found muses of his own in Taos.

In Sylvia Rodríguez's important study of the early twentieth-century community of artists gathered there, she displays how the New Mexican art colony was a mechanism that symbolically transformed social, racial and local iniquities into mysterious, awesome images for a transcontinental market. The poems collected in Bynner's *Indian Earth* (1929) provide compelling examples of this process. “In Mescala” describes two “old sages” with “Asian faces” and “Indian hats” playing on drum and pipe a “jolly requiem” for deceased Spanish priests. The Anglo, if not absent from the picture all-together, is at least

59 Easterling, *Organization Space*, 86.
only as intrusive as an ethnographer, a detached observer. Paying locals to be servants, as the poets and artists did, never explicitly qualified as a subject for poetry. In a town that was old and broken, but framed, like Key West, by hyacinths, lantanas and zinnias, the mestizos freely celebrate the ruin and sublimation of Spanish blood. In “A Beautiful Mexican” Bynner moves even closer to symbolising extinction in Mexican skin: “her copper brow,” he muses, “Is itself the sunset.” He describes the woman passing with a “dusk of light” and “leaving a sudden darkness.”61 The beauty of the image mystifies the millennial westward process that was both incited and inhibited by the reach of mass geography. Along this tourist trajectory, locations are conquered, goods exchanged, locals objectified for commodity exchange. Hence, Dean MacCannell, in his famous study, The Tourist: a new theory of the leisure class, describes tourism as fundamentally counter-revolutionary. Where modernism is tourism, it is a reactionary aesthetic.

But modernism, split by mass geographic tension, contains contradictions that make it more complicated than that. In an exemplary essay, “The Aesthetic of Regionalism,” John Crowe Ransom's reaction to Northern industrialism causes him to misunderstand Native Americans of the South West. After describing a pueblo seen from a train crossing New Mexico, he approvingly relates the story of an economically distressed tribe that refused government relief in order to preserve native sovereignty and homogeneity. By eschewing money, a “symbol of aesthetic torpor and helplessness of the moderns,”62 the superiority of the Indians asserted itself. From a passing train, Ransom measures their regional aesthetic, which he takes to be more physical, abstract, and experiential than white modernity. Grounded in locality, Indian culture experiences but does not need to theorise that experience, whereas white culture experiences less and theorises more, according to Ransom.

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Though Ransom intends it as a compliment, the mistaken assumption that native peoples led simple, natural lives, free from theoretical systemisation serves as his own mythological premise more than a knowledgeable description of the pueblo locality. In an unintended irony, this paean to locality is a forced relocation, where the Pueblo scene supports an argument about white Southern resistance to mass society. The attempt at respecting locality dislocates itself, bursting into the generality of theory: "As community slowly adapts its life to the geography of the region," it gives way to the "genius of human 'culture.'"\textsuperscript{63} Within intellectual history, the same theory has undergone many re-locations. The notion of “uncontaminated” regions birthing genius derives most notably from German Romanticism, with Herder's theories of a Volk united by a purified language and local customs. Yet for Ransom, as for Marx, economic patterns undergird aesthetic ones.

The point here is that Ransom’s tourism unintentionally lapses back and forth into its political opposite, making it neither purely radical nor reactionary. As Jean Toomer explained, mass geography (or “the highway problem,” as he metonymically dubbed it) is “interwoven with the general conditions of modern living” in more complex ways than one would suspect, and even more so in a country, as he puts it, “of extremes, a juxtaposition of intense opposites.”\textsuperscript{64} It is not so simple as the impulse towards communal centralisation being revolutionary or counter-revolutionary, or the impulse towards social diffusion being revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. Both impulses are contradicted by themselves, become aligned at political cross-purposes. So the very locating and dislocating tensions that obtain in the highway system and radio voice denature the homogeneity of mass society and open the ecstatic demarcations of localised literary community.

Within mass geography, figures of social diversity—Native, Hispanic, French, Anglo—come to represent contradictory things. The Navajo, for Toomer, appears as both the “fat

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{64} Jean Toomer, \textit{A Jean Toomer Reader: Selected Unpublished Writings} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 218.
and greasy” capitalist, in town “to sell things,” and the mystic “robed in white” whose singing in the Taos night incited cosmic transformations, where “existence, focused for a time in a group of singing men, expands to the mountain and the close stars.”

Perhaps the contradictions become most extreme at the end of the world, that end of progress, that culmination of spiritual and imperial geography in the West. “Along the Pacific coast I feel lack of purpose most,” he wrote. What purpose can there be at the point of millennial accomplishment? Yet, there was “something quite new there” for Toomer, as there was for Robinson Jeffers and the other writers who found their Taos on the West coast, in a writer’s colony at Carmel.

Named for the Carmelite monks from Palestine who accompanied the first Spanish explorers of the bay, Carmel is (like Key West and Taos) yet another Spanish-Anglo palimpsest. Captured by the Americans in 1846, occupation was underwritten in the founding of an Art Colony there in the early twentieth-century, a hundred miles south of San Francisco, which, having been shaken and burned in 1906, presented the modern version of the apocalyptic collapse of community.

As opposed to a restored village ideal, Carmel was, for Robinson Jeffers, merely the inhuman oceanic end of a continent, merely the sea, and in the Anglo-Norman etymology “mere” means both a boundary and body of water. With its Palestinian namesake, occupied Carmel makes for an ironic place from which to decry American imperialism, the appropriate place to celebrate Canaanite completion, if the spatial forms of mass geography allowed for such completion. Jeffers tempers the ironic locale at the western end of progress, by the rhetorical touches of the American Jeremiad. Blending lament and promise, resignation and hope, Jeffers, at

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65 Ibid., 239; 249. These comments are dated to the early 1940s and 1935, respectively.
66 Ibid., 218.
continent's end, localises the ends of a nation's historical rhetoric, and the poetics of its revolutionary renewal:

While this America settles in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire,
And protest, only a bubble in the molten mass, pops and sighs out, and the mass hardens,
I sadly smiling remember that the flower fades to make fruit, the fruit rots to make earth.
Out of the mother; and through the spring exultances, ripeness and decadence; and home to the mother.
You making haste haste on decay: not blameworthy; life is good, be it stubbornly long or suddenly
A mortal splendor: meteors are not needed less than mountains:
shine, perishing republic.68

For William James, a state of emergency occasioned belief, and here the decadent apocalypse of the republic triggers a belief in its rebirth, in a symbolic opposition that will convert America's decadent perishing into the shining realisation of terrestrial and spiritual progress. As poets spatially formed the end of progress on the earth, their world from the car window—this mass geography—suggests an emergency to which localised modernisms respond with linguistic novelty. As Lentricchia suggests:

If it is the case that the triggering emergency (or the occasion for belief), the actual work of belief, and the consequences (or future) of belief are always bound to local contexts, then it is also the case that all efforts to escape temporal and geographic locality are expressions of a passion that is the traditional theoretical impulse par excellence.69

69 Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police. 107.
Finding the spatial modernity of rural America to be not a standardised mass but a dynamic process of fissure and conglomeration, this chapter has mapped Nancy's theory of the ecstatic question into an array of localised instantiations. In the various commercial exchanges and hyrbidsations of America's diverse modernities (Osage, French, Anglo, Spanish, meztizo, pioneer, tourist, and so on) this route of reading confirms the belief that “multiple modernisms and their different trajectories remain tied in complex mediated ways.”

Within an interwar mass geography, the impulse towards closing, composing, and completing America's alternative modernities into a seamless whole consistently ruptures itself, as the adjacent practices of collage, juxtaposition and montage expose the capitalist construction of community, the inevitability of community's deconstruction, and the ecstatic separations within the integrity of a nation.

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70 Andreas Huyssen, “Geographies of modernism in a globalizing world,” in Geographies of Modernism, 7.
That Country Sound
Halfway through the twentieth-century, Martin Heidegger delivered a lecture to the Bayerischen Akademie der Shönen Kunste, presenting them with a simple description of mass geography:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel. He now receives instant information, by radio, of events which he formerly learned about only years later, if at all. The germination and growth of plants, which remained hidden throughout the seasons, is now exhibited publicly, in a minute, on film. Distant sites of the most ancient cultures are shown on film as if they stood this very moment amidst today's street traffic.¹

In the decade before Heidegger's lecture, the American geographer Walter Kollmorgen began publishing “thumb-nail” observations on “a series of cultural-agricultural islands [he] visited in the South” in the late 1930s.² In the face of Heidegger's historical understanding of mass geography—where the spatial manipulations of media elicit a temporal contraction, a collapse of the old and far into the new and near—geographers of

depression-era America turned to rural climes in order to create regional preserves, where the South especially satisfied the popular post-war desire for a mythological structure to invoke what Michael Conzen calls “the folk memory of a self-sufficient past.”

This chapter points to a specific point of resistance in what can be called the hybrid media ecology of regional America, where the folk memory of a self-sufficient past and the shifting spatial/temporal conflations of mass geography are inseparable phenomena, where mass society and community ideals are coterminous, not agonistic. Symbols of isolated, culturally autonomous community and their association with folk tradition are produced just as much by standardised academic discourses (geography, sociology, literary history) and a standardised media industry (radio, audio recording, cinema) yet are interrupted by the irony, play and ecstasy of modernist poetry, which inflects its location with a heterotopian language that distorts the set of historical relations it happens to reflect.

On the Cumberland Plateau of central Tennessee, the small city of Nashville hosted such a poetic experiment when a small journal called The Fugitive ran off a local press from 1922 to 1925. In the years between the wars, Nashville was transitioning from a city that saw itself as “The Athens of the South” to a major nexus of commercial broadcast culture. The classical subject matter, both erudite and popular, of Fugitive poetry holds an uneasy rapport with Nashville’s long-standing association as an “Athenic city,” and, by proxy, the larger myth of the South as a community of ancient ideals. As the poets of Nashville project their poetic pageantry to a passing age, to by-gone Southern grandeur, the famous irony of (arguably) their foremost member, John Crowe Ransom, maintains a

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4 Foucault describes heterotopias as places with the “curious property” of relating to all other sites “in such a way as to to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect.” Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.
playful dissimulation towards the old and dead. In general, the Fugitive literary community does not mourn, nor does it evoke nostalgia for the demise of “Southern community.” Rather it playfully undermines the classical plinths that supported that regional myth, and by extension, the classical foundations of the nation. Subtly, the writers’ games celebrate the potential for poetry to upset the modern myth that community is something lost.

Playing, as they do, with a Southern legacy and its classical idealisations, one might also wonder how the Fugitives comport themselves toward the emerging modernity of the interwar South. Thus this chapter describes the contemporaneous development of a popular Nashville radio station, WSM-AM, well known for hosting the Grand Ole Opry. With its proximity to Appalachia, Nashville’s broadcast modernity takes part in a larger, already hybridised, media ecology, where folk-songs, blues musicians, and the blues poetry of Sterling A. Brown also bear upon the Fugitive's aesthetic games. So, to bridge the gap between the playful disruptions of the Old and the unavoidable confrontation with the New, this chapter explores the way regional modernism (distinct from the high modernism of Ezra Pound, for example) resists the mythic ideals of Southern community and copes with the commercial media system that was organising around broadcast technology to produce the new genre of “Country Music.”

To work towards this goal, let us triangulate three apparently unrelated events of the interwar years. First, in the early 1920s Ezra Pound begins writing an opera based on *Le Testament* by François Villon. By the early 30s, at the behest of the British Broadcasting Company he will revise it as an opera-for-radio. Although, according to Daniel Tiffany, Pound was generally suspicious of technical media (he called the radio a “devil box”), he surrendered to (even, at times, embraced) new media in part due to their “supernatural aspect,” and, in the case of radio, for its political capacity to unify “the 'subconscious
energies’ of an entire population.” The appeal of the technology’s supernatural aspect may explain why, for his BBC radio-scripts, Pound relied heavily on his knowledge of Noh theatre, which unifies a contemporaneous world with a world of ancestral spirits. So, in Pound’s use of radio, two elements interplay: there is an attempt to revivify the ghost, to make an older age new, and, secondly, an attempt to politically program a community of listeners. This second facet would become more apparent in the infamous wartime radio broadcasts that propaegandised the Social Credit theories of Major C.H. Douglas and Fascism of Mussolini. The BBC scripts arguably incorporate more of the first impulse.

Our second event of the 1920s is the professional radio host George “The Judge” Hay’s first broadcast from Tennessee. His employers were the National Life and Accident Insurance Company, their studio housed at their Nashville headquarters, their broadcast antenna mounted to the neo-classical hulk of an American office building. The call-letters of the station—WSM—stood for “We Shield Millions.” Acronym as advertisement, this encodes the historical entanglement of a modern commercial system with media technologies that would not only infiltrate literary form, but also recoup on the old, earthy traditions of regional America. With his first WSM broadcast in 1925, the “hillbilly music” of Appalachia met the electromagnetic spectrum; an antenna fixed to a Greco-American shell marked the “spiritual center of country music culture;” and Nashville, Tennessee took an irreversible step from its past as the “Athens of the South” to its future as “Music City, U.S.A.”

5 Daniel Tiffany, Radio Corpse: Imagism and the Cryptaesthetic of Ezra Pound (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 225. In this regard Pound is similar to Marianne Moore, who wrote him a letter on November 9, 1931 explaining she hadn’t heard the broadcast of his Villion opera because, “My mother and I are anti-radio.”

6 “Old” and “age” are etymological siblings. The English word “old” derives from Scandinavian and Danish words for “an age.” The word halde denotes, in fact, something like a period. The phrase “make it new,” what we sometimes take as the catch-all maxim of the modernist period, could then denote the effort to make older ages present, to place antiquity “amidst today’s street traffic,” in other words, to effect the same spatial/temporal consequences that Heidegger attributes to media modernisation.

In an aesthetic space between these two broadcast events, a group of poets from Tennessee started a magazine to publish their poetry. The journal evolved over its short yet respectable lifespan as a small, self-funded modernist magazine, but according to lore, it was, at its outset, an incredibly fun undertaking. John Stewart relates that while compiling the poems for *The Fugitive*'s first issue, the “whole episode had a carnival air about it” and “editing the magazine was more of a game than a chore.”

To further the spirit of amusement, the contributing poets adopted ridiculous *nom-de-plumes*. John Crowe Ransom appeared as Roger Prim, Allen Tate as Henry Feathertop, Sidney Mttron Hirsch as L. Oafer, Donald Davidson as Robin Gallivant, and Merrill Moore as Dendric. A condition of the game was anonymity, affected to displace hereditary title, to disown the past.

On either side of Fugitive play, I have tagged the touchstones of Pound’s radio operas and country music culture to show how Fugitive poetry shifts the relational positions of high modernism and mass media. To my mind, the Fugitives are poets of “the in-between.” They move in-between high modernism and mass media; they move in between the old and new; essentially, they move in between the political pressures of the inter-war years. In defining community, those political pressures organise around ostensibly nostalgic and programmatic poles. Either community is something lost, a village ideal worn down and replaced by the alienation of mass society, or modernity must be adopted as a program for enhancing social life, for defining the destiny of community. So in its Nashville context, the Fugitive runs the gamut between an emergent system of commercialism and the old ideal of an Athenian community, dodging an association with either. Where the poetry celebrates, it does not eulogise a lost folk community or a former ancient ideal of social life; nor can it celebrate the demise of such an order; modernisation fails to enthral their poetry, as it would the Futurists. Instead they celebrate the death of

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the myth of community itself. Theirs is a province neither in decline nor in ascendance but
a playful resistance of both worldviews.

After his walking tour of Provence in 1912, Pound wrote of a deserted province
where he passed over the roads of his twelfth century troubadour idols only to conclude,
“That age is gone.”9 Unlike anything from the pages of The Fugitive, “Provincia Deserta” is
festooned with proper nouns, place names and names of poets, each one leading the motif
of ubi sunt away from the ever-receding nostalgia of a five hundred year old sunrise. In
Nashville, the question as to where the classical ideals have gone fails to apply, because
those classical ideals were always superimposed imperfectly, like ancient sites replicated
amid the street traffic of geographic modernity. In “The School,” a meditation on returning
to Tennessee after undertaking the Litterae Humaniores at Oxford, Ransom could not be
more explicit in his heterotopian suspiciousness about this superimposition, as he
separates the grandiose and ancient from his current geographic local. Remembering
“proud Athens shining / Upon her hill, that slanted to her sea” he wonders:

   Equipped with Grecian thoughts, how could I live
   Among my father's folk? My father's house
   Was narrow and his fields were nauseous.
   I kicked his clods for being common dirt,
   Worthy a world which never could be Greek;10

Where for Pound the historical landscape of Southern France was transitory, diminishing
into a desert of memory, for Ransom, the proud history of Greece was grafted into an
American desert where it would not root. But this poem by a young Ransom is atypically
earnest, and his mature poetry would question the South’s geographic mythology with a

   Directions, 1990), 136. Originally Published 1926.
staunch irony, with sophisticated but subtle formal experiments.

Fields unworthy of Greecan compare reappear in a later poem called “Antique Harveesters,” its first sestet a fruitful contrast to Pound’s metrical panache. Contributing an important insight in modernist scansion, Donald Davie once realised that “the verse-lines,” as opposed to the accented-syllables, are the “true units” of Pound's metrical effect. His lines are “broken in the center much more forcibly” than a caesura breaks “traditional accentual-syllabic meters.”

Midline rhythmic disruptions also define Ransom's agrarian landscape poem, where the poet calls country folk to a place marked by rare onomastic guides: *(Scene: Of the Mississippi the bank sinister, / and of the Ohio the bank sinister.)*

The sestet follows:

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Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold,
And it is harvest; what shall this land produce?
A meager hill of kernels, a runnel of juice;
Declension looks from our land, it is old.
Therefore let us assemble, dry, grey, spare,
And mild as yellow air.
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Note how the punctuation metrically imbalances the lines:

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Tawny are the leaves turned but they still hold,
And it is harvest;/what shall this land produce?
A meager hill of kernels,/a runnel of juice;
Declension looks from our land,/it is old.
Therefore let us assemble,/dry, grey, spare,
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And mild as yellow air.\textsuperscript{12}

In the Poundian line, division preserves a rough metrical parity, as Davie presents: “I have no life / save when the swords clash.” The break separates the spondee of “no life” from the trochee “save when,” accounting for what Davie calls the “emphatically falling rhythm” at midline. Ransom’s lines provide less regularity. “Declension looks from this land,” for example, and “it is old” are two independent clauses spliced by a comma. Though the parts of speech are grammatically autonomous, they have a clear metrical imbalance that only intensifies through the course of the stanza.

Consider the first three lines, where each of their parts has an approximate metrical parity. The second line is unquestionably the product of a Greek ear. The semi-colon at the mid-line break marks beautifully, softly, the colon of Aeolic prosody. To scan “what shall this land produce” delights one with a perfect Sapphic choriamb. By line four, however, Ransom’s neoclassical order is splitting; his aesthetic of distance fraying into the “yellow air.” “Declension looks from this land” holds the greater number of beats, clearly, over “it is old;” even as the pun on “declension” suggests (paradoxically) that the ancient languages of noun declension lose their hold over American land because it too is becoming ancient. As the call for assembly resounds, the classical balance of meter is toppled. The spare assembly literally hangs in the air, as the last line of the stanza holds half the beats of the lines preceding it. As the poem’s speaker calls for a gathering, a concentration of people, the poetic form disintegrates into metrical fragments of its established order, as if the classic prosody is incapable of containing the impulse towards America’s agrarian communalism.

Through the dismissive tone of “The School” and the formal breakdown of “Antique Harveters,” Ransom’s Fugitive stance is critically distant, non-committal to the nostalgia for an old South shining like Athens, suspicious of classical form’s compatibility with American geography. However, as to what figure of the world will replace it, the Fugitives remain open, uncommitted, waiting through the drought landscape of the postbellum South. As such, their poetry creates a space that suspends the pressures of the old and new to revel in a temporary amusement, a play of the intellect. Through poetic play, flights of fancy, and literary games, the Fugitives escape the interwar imperative that one see the world in terms of a lost past or the pressing future of mass media’s modernity.

As Roger Caillois argues in his classic study of play and games, any act of make-believe is “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality, or a free unreality, against real life.” The playful pseudonyms of the Fugitive poets ratify a second reality that escapes the political pressures of inter-war Nashville. In a society still stained by the residues of slavery, and still concerned with a racially motivated paternalism, their anonymous publications rashly flouted the standards of heredity and cultural heritage. In essence, they played the bastard, and as Merrill Moore remembered, a “village could not have been thrown in to more titillation over a birth of a child whose paternity was in doubt, than the Vanderbilt campus witnessed when the poems appeared in The Fugitive...”

To introduce the festive subversion that defines the literary community of the Fugitives, one might consider the esoteric eccentric Sidney Hirsch, who conceived of the magazine, provided its name, and who greatly influenced the young gathering of intelligentsia. Hirsch was famous in his time as the author of The Fire Regained, a spectacular play telling the story of a shepherd who, at the behest of a goddess, undertakes a quest to rescue an Athenian maiden. This simple plot premise soon ruptures before a

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14 Merrill Moore, The Fugitive: Clippings and Comment (Boston: [s.n.], 1939) 10-11.
stream of occult fascination, linguistic oddity and bizarre reversals of fortune that reveals Hirsch “indulging to the utmost his love of the remote and mysterious.”\textsuperscript{15} The staged centrepiece of Nashville’s 1913 May Festival, \textit{The Fire Regained} moved an epic pageant of material and personal against the backdrop of Nashville’s full-size Parthenon replica. Show advertisements beckoned visitors from the countryside with wild promises: “The Flight of a Thousand Doves, the Revel of the Wood Nymphs ... the Orgy of the Flaming Torches.”\textsuperscript{16} With over six hundred participants, a team of professional charioteers, and Pegasus as a stallion with giant papier mâché wings, the spectacle did not disappoint, dazzling crowds collected from a region that had long drawn comparisons between itself and the halcyon civilisation of Grecian states.

To continue the image of the rural spectacle, in the penultimate issue of the “The Fugitive,” which appeared in June 1925, Laura Riding published “The Circus.” The poem describes a group of lost festival performers, who suicidally dismember themselves in a world where “careful dissonance” has replaced the simple music of the “old days.”

\begin{quote}
The trained men tumble hereditarily.  
The ring master has lost his way  
Back to the music, the band being  
Not the same choir simple  
Of primate tunes, as in the old days,  
But a careful dissonance  
Drowning elaborately the lost theme.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

In an exhilarating simulation of acrobatics, Riding’s wonderful enjambment dizzies its

\textsuperscript{15} Stewart, \textit{The Burden of Time}, 8.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 7.  
syntax. The ringmaster, for example, has “lost his way,” but lost his way “Back to the music.” If losing one's way seems a final thought, the line breaks, to the preposition “back,” where the syntax is still swinging. Space twists into the paradox of losing one's way back to somewhere. The line “Back to the music, the band being,” derives a curious strength because the phrase following the caesura is appositive to the one preceding it. Music is defined as the band in the act of being; music emits from being the band. However, this ontological stability is again disrupted when the line tumbles into the “band being / not.” No longer “the same choir simple” of “old days,” the group has become “a careful dissonance” elaborately drowning “the lost theme.” At first the master and band seem joined in an odd reunion, but that impression is once more corrected by syntax that incessantly re-modifies itself. And then, the trapeze-like swing of playful phraseology lands, in a full stop, upon the surety that contemporary dissonance has drowned a “lost theme” (perhaps the lost theme of Athenian community).

In a reflexive flip, the following stanzas critique the “serene tricks of the trapeze.” “Who will be dazzled by all this?” Riding seems to ask of her poetic style. She refers to the “dozing audience” that might awake, clapping and blinking at its “own dreams” only to go home “teased.” (Was the first stanza not a trapeze tease?) With the departure of the audience, the “concentration is complete.” In the “outer silence” of the circus rings—where “private ignorance” preserves “universality”—only two figures remain: the tiger and “the poor poet.” The poet renounces his place in the “accurate frenzy,” perceives a “clenched philosophy” in the “lean jaws” of the animal, and

    Throws himself bit by bit,
    In rhythmic meat
    To the starved yellow beast.
Like the dissipation of agrarian order into Ransom’s “yellow air,” this piece-meal, “yellow beast” of a suicide, the poet’s adieu to a world of “careful dissonance” and “accurate frenzy,” repeats the fugitive gesture to the extreme, where the fugitive flees into the decomposing comfort of animalistic disorder. As such, the Fugitive must destroy itself in order to be one, must welcome the truly fugitive question of death’s ecstasy.

As they countenance this death logic, the teased and blinking audience of Riding’s poem reminds one of Wyndham Lewis's short story “The Cornac and his Wife,” with its thrilling observations of circus goers in rural France:

> They enter the tent with a mild awe, in a suggestive trance. When a joke is made that requires a burst of merriment, or when a turn is finished, they all begin moving themselves, as though they had just woken up, changing their attitude, shaking off the magnetic sleep.¹⁸

Distinct from the walking pace of Pound’s “Provincia Deserta,” Riding’s dizzying line cuts provoke a “suggestive trance” where both poetic subjects (the circus performers) and the poem’s readers (the circus watchers) are automatons, hazy and entranced in the way Lewis describes. Lewis continues to remark on the audience's decision over whether to respond to circus tricks with a “mournful and respectful, a dead silence” or to reflect the violence of the circus—which is that of “the Wild West film, chaplinesque in its violence”—with the violence of laughter. “Violence is of the essence of laughter” he writes, “it is merely the inversion or failure of force. To put it in another way, it is the grin upon the Deathshead” (WB, 167-171).

> “Reminiscent of war,” laughter, as a function of horseplay, “hoists the primitive with its own explosive,” writes Lewis (WB, 160). When an artwork embodies a kind of mock-

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violence, mocking the shocks of America’s straight lines, or the shocks of circus movement, it attains Caillois’ free unreality, opening a new space for the artwork to unwork itself, to attain all the frivolity of violent laugh-inducing play. Caillois defines a game as an activity where property is exchanged but no goods are produced, which differs fundamentally from art making or working. Where art and work produce a “good,” a game is an occasion of “pure waste,” (just as is war a pure waste, it might be added). In this sense, the formation of the Fugitive community, although it outwardly produced the good of a magazine, obtains in the private exchange of intellectual property, satisfying the desire for fun. Only after the war, and Ransom’s return from the army in Europe, did the group elect to convert their frivolous discussions into the “joyous” labour of making a magazine. Emerging from a process that converted labour into play, their poems are aesthetic spaces that invert interwar political pressures into the pure waste of poetic leisure.

Such inversion is carried out on the formal level of Riding’s wordplay. Caillois argues that the circus is a form of play with that same attribute that Benjamin and others identify as the function of modern language, that of mimicry. Caillois calls the second attribute of the circus ilinx, which describes those games with vertigo as their goal, where the objective is to surrender “to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock, which destroys reality with a sovereign brusqueness.” His examples of ilinx players are the dervish and the circus acrobat. By extension, Riding’s poem subjects language’s capacity to produce mimetic correspondence and similarity to the vertiginous effects of her brusque style and its interruptions of reality. The productivity principle of art’s mimetic function is spun back on itself, laying the grounds for her playful modernism, which wastes away language's productive capacity by harnessing the entertainments of a rural geography into a spinning

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19 Caillois, Man, Play and Games, 5.
21 Caillois, Man, Play and Games, 23.
self-negating syntax.

Caillois describes how the circus revives *ilinx* in the modern world, and, in an amazing point of similarity with Riding, he focuses on two performers to demonstrate this, the lion tamer and the acrobat. Through them, the circus becomes the austere side of the country fair, where the reality of rural labour is suspended by the death-defying act. At the circus, he states, “the decisive sanction of death is necessarily present for the lion tamer just as for the acrobat.”22 A poem outrunning its end through the *ilinx* of vertiginous line breaks, “The Circus” succumbs to the “decisive sanction of death” when it feeds its lion-tamer to the lion, drowns its bandleader in the dissonance of modernity. And here Riding is a microcosm of the whole magazine. Through its pages the poets look back at the *dead* silence of the reader with a wry smile, using their intellectual detachment to engrave irony upon the South’s poetic tradition like a “*grin* upon the Deathshead.”

The Fugitive response to the “decisive sanction of death” opens, as a game of coy dissimulation, as early as the second issue of *The Fugitive*, with Ransom’s “Necrological.” There the magazine crescendos into a necrological festivity, indebted, if indirectly, to Hirsch’s fancy for the bacchanal. Hirsch, in fact, would contribute a poem called “*Nebrismus*” to Volume One, Issue Four of *The Fugitive*, where he defines “nebrismus,” from Webster’s, as the “custom of tearing fawns to pieces and of dancing draped in fawn-skins, which formed a part of the orgiastic worship of Dionysus.”23 Both poems indicate that the ecstasy of death and the image of the corpse beckoned the interests of influential Fugitive group members. In a more staid essay of 1933, Ransom wrote that the "preoccupation with the deadness of the body is broken by participation in [communal] pageantry," where the “ecstasy of grief” is absorbed by the rituals of a “religious society.”24

22 Ibid., 136.
24 John Crowe Ransom, “Forms and Citizens” in *Selected Essays* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University
The pages of The Fugitive set the stage for communal pageantry that runs a paradoxical course. Especially in the relationship between Ransom and Allen Tate the shared necrological festivity is measurable within personal contemplation, where, when faced with human finitude, the ego bends like a wry smile towards an audience, but the personal and knowing ironic touches mould prosodic forms designated for public occasion.

Tate saw “Necrological” as a turning point in Fugitive style and the beginning of Ransom's mature phase.25 A set of steady rhymed quatrains signed by the alias Roger Prim, “Necrological” announces Ransom's penchant for a regular form tempered by the disruptions of irony. Inspired by the death of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, whose body, on the battlefield of Nancy, was eaten by wild animals, the poem follows a philosophically reflective friar who walks across a battlefield littered with corpses. As such, the poem offers a brazen and direct contemplation of human finitude. “The dead men wore no raiment against the air,” and the white bareness of their bodies reminds the friar of “meads of asphodel.”26 One is also reminded of the second section of Eliot's “Ash- Wednesday,” where white leopards dismember a body beneath a juniper-tree. Eliot's scene is one of immanence, where God addresses the bones beneath the tree and they answer: “I who am here dissembled / Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love / To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.”27 No divine voice enters the ear of Ransom's friar as he overlooks the moribund landscape.

In “Ash-Wednesday,” the virginal lover of the deceased withdraws in “a white gown, to contemplation.” Similarly, in “Necrological” the friar seeks contemplative solitude, and so traverses a plain, above which the unanswered “kites of Heaven” solicit the dead with their “sweet cries,” until he mounts a summit from where to inspect the bedraggled scene.

Press, 1984),
From this elevation he considers the “meads of asphodel,” which are an ironic respite from the gore, in that they allude to the flora Homer locates in Hades. No immanent order comes from above. The ironic birds of heaven scavenge, animalistic reminders of the wildly devoured flesh on the ground. This playful tension between the above and the below follows a fracture in the tradition of prosody. In Ransom, the quietude of personal reflection is related in ornamental language suggestive of an ode. The Fugitive penchant for irony and paradox enacts a playful exchange where both topographical and rhetorical senses of high and low enmesh.

Irony has its strange ways of exchanging with its opposite. To commemorate Ransom’s eightieth birthday, Robert Penn Warren noted that “irony—the index of distance, the mark of uninvolvement—mak[es] the tenderness, the involvement, possible.”28 As such, the friar’s contemplation of the death and ravaging he has not endured pushes him to ecstasis, where he communes with a death that is not his own:

Then he sat upon a hill and hung his head
Riddling, riddling and lost in vast surmise
So still that he likened himself unto those dead
Whom the kites of Heaven solicited with sweet cries.29

The philosophical processes of life—elevation on a hill, still contemplation, riddle and vast surmise—affect a likeness to cessation of life, the object of the poet's contemplation. The vantage point of topographical poetry, which allows the friar to gauge the arts of war and peace, moves him out of himself, into poetic ecstasy and closer to the victims of deathly indifference. As such, the poem's stillness and inwardness, paradoxically, makes its involvement with the poetic experience of others possible.

28 Quoted in Quinlan, John Crowe Ransom’s Secular Faith, 29.
Quickly following “Necrological,” in the next issue of *The Fugitive*, Allen Tate more ostentatiously alludes to classics than would Ransom’s asphodels, for instance, in lines 1-4 of his “Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi”:

The stage is about to be swept of bodies.
You have no more chance than an infusorian
Lodged in a hollow molar of an eohippus
Come, now, no prattle of remergence with οντως ον.\(^30\)

Tate would later claim to use the term ode ironically, because, for example, the “scene of [“Ode to the Confederate Dead”] is not a public celebration,” but of private contemplation, depicting “a lone man by a gate.”\(^31\) His “Horatian Epode” stages the same sort of irony, where, from line one the scene is a lonely one, the stage cleared of bodies, and in the last stanza the poem's subject, a solitary reader, emerges as he considers John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* in a contemporary setting where “the street-cars are still running.” A casualty of modern ennui, the effects of Jacobean drama (the poet describes “the pity of beholding skulls”) fade in “the warm water of a yawn.” To disrupt the stultification of learned language, Tate invokes esoteric terms mockingly. This teasing of tradition—where he teases out classical language and prosody in order to taunt it—puts “The Fugitive” *ethos* in an ironic and slighting angle towards not just its literary heritage but towards the political demands of community felt by interwar Nashville.

In this regard Ransom actually theorised the poetic moment as one that suspends the historical pressures that encompass it. In his 1930 essay, “Poetry: A Note on Ontology” he describes the “aesthetic moment” as “a curious moment of suspension; between the Platonism in us, which is militant, always sciencing and devouring, and a starved inhibited

\(^30\) Tate, “Horatian Epode to the Duchess of Malfi,” in *The Fugitive*, Vol. 1 no. 3 (1922): 76.
\(^31\) Allen Tate, *Collected Essays* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1959), 257.
aspiration towards innocence.” 32 Louis D. Rubin Jr. wisely construes “Platonism,” in this context, to mean the same as “industrialism” in Ransom’s economic writings. 33 Yet his aesthetics resist another political pressure: the “starved and inhibited aspiration towards innocence,” which has its own economic shorthand: agrarianism. Thus his aesthetics have the potential to suspend a regional pressure to which he would politically succumb in the agrarian manifesto, I’ll Take My Stand (1930).

There Ransom does offer a direct defence of slavery and the old South, crediting the "peculiar institution" of slavery for granting the plantation regions their "spiritual continuity." While such statements do have the potential to up-end my attempt at coaxing out the playful political indeterminancy of Fugitive poetry, it remains essential that we resist conflating the Fugitives with the Agrarians, for there are obvious dangers in reading The Fugitive in the light of the agrarianism of the 1930s. 34 Attention to that political platform ushers in the tendency to place the Fugitives in and of a Southern Athens, to corral them as an essentially backward-looking and obstinate lot. While it is true that the coterie’s four principal members—Davidson, Ransom, Tate and Robert Penn Warren—went on to join a choir of Old South eulogists in I’ll Take My Stand, literary critics have notably over-emphasised the 1930s defence of agrarianism while inspecting the literary magazine, making it a companion piece to the journal. Such an omnibus history can cloud over the pointed ambivalence the poets felt toward their home region just after World War I. In those years, as Fugitives, these Southerners slyly subverted the political pretensions of their locality.

Politics can be the dream of a more ample geography, and the South chose, as a vestment to cover its own landscape, an imaginary Southern Greece. As the Fugitives

32 Ransom, Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom, 85.
mingle classical allusions with images of death and boredom, they mark the historical decline of the Old South’s classicist myths even as they deflect them. Even so, when contextualising *The Fugitive’s* literary community in 1920s Nashville, few commentators have failed to cite the city’s old nickname. When her study of the Fugitive Group appeared in 1959, Louise Cowan explained at the outset that the writers received “a fond admiration [from] a town that considered itself ‘the Athens of the South,’ though a Southern respect for privacy insured their being let alone and virtually unobserved.”35 Following her lead, Rubin observes on page one of *The Wary Fugitives* that even though their city hadn’t much in the way of literary culture, the people of Nashville liked to call their town “the Athens of the South,” because it had “several universities and colleges, and ... a replica of the Parthenon in a public park.”36 Rubin elides the fact, however, that the replica Parthenon did not so much cause the city motto than it did reflect “a long-standing identification of the Old South with ancient Greece, a civilization built on slavery.”37

As Caroline Winterer acknowledges: “A number of factors made ancient Greece a congenial exemplar for the South. Its warm climate, its latitude, and its small scattered independent city-states evoked in many minds the rural, sparsely populated South.”38 The parallels of physical geography start to bend, however, as they cross the boundaries into political geography. Athens appealed to Southern politicians, more so than Sparta for example, because of its democratic political system, its free-market economy, and the individual liberty of its citizens.39 Yet all the acrobatics of the geographic imagination land upon the basic conceit that it was “Greek Slave labor [that] supported a landed, cultivated

leisure class of statesmen”\textsuperscript{40} and that antebellum “advocates of slavery viewed Athens as an ideal society, in which the labor of slaves made political equality among the citizens possible.”\textsuperscript{41}

Even though Athens legitimated a caste system of abject cruelty and iniquity, the Athenian city speciously stood (within the mass geography of the postbellum south) for the kind of “immanent unity” that according to Nancy serves the myth of the “lost community.” When it comes to the ideal of the “the Athenian city,” Nancy writes, it is “always a matter of a lost age in which community was woven of tight, harmonious infrangible bonds and in which above all it played back to itself, through its institutions, its rituals, and its symbols, the representation ... of its own immanent unity, intimacy, and autonomy.”\textsuperscript{42} As such the “peculiar institution” supports the immanent unity of village life that Rubin idealises in “An Image of the South,” collected among his essays in \textit{The Lasting South} (1957). Here he argues that the “very nature of the small town” defuses class conflict, as residents come to know and “enjoy” each other when they are mixed “day after day, at work and at play.”\textsuperscript{43} In response, Michael Kreyling notes that Rubin's village ideal attempts to deny “the Marxist paradigm of society as locked in class conflict and mortgaged to capitalists forces.”\textsuperscript{44} Regional modernism, with Fugitive poetry as an example, retracts the racist denials of “Southern community,” and inscribes an aesthetics of resistance where community takes place between the myth of lost community and the forces of mass society.

However, according to the \textit{Encyclopaedia of Southern Culture}, modern literature’s function (like Kollmorgen’s cultural islands) was essentially preservationist in nature:

\textsuperscript{40} Winterer, \textit{The Culture of Classicism}, 74.
\textsuperscript{41} Richard, \textit{The Golden Age of the Classics in America}, 182.
\textsuperscript{42} Nancy, \textit{The Inoperative Community}, 9.
\textsuperscript{43} Louis Rubin, \textit{The Lasting South: Fourteen Southerners Look at Their Home}. (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1957), 4.
\textsuperscript{44} Michael Kreyling, \textit{Inventing Southern Literature} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 47.
Modern Southern literature preserves the image of small-town community life. Literary critics have linked the declining sense of community to the 20th Century Southern Renaissance. Louis D. Rubin Jr., wrote that southern community of the late 19th and early 20th century “had been self-sufficient, an entity in itself, with a mostly homogeneous population, relatively orderly and fixed in its daily patterns” ... White writers of the post-World War I South, members of the generation that witnessed the breakup of cohesive community life, were unable to find “spiritual sustenance and order within community life itself.”45

Obviously it is absurd to describe a society with an entrenched racial caste system as a “mostly homogeneous population” living a “cohesive community life.” So the relationship between modern Southern literature and “a declining sense of community” needs the kind of critical rethinking that Kreyling instigated.

Such an effort should chip away at the basic conceits of Fugitive scholarship. As literary historians have placed the Fugitive community within the rhetorical and narrative topos of ante-bellum slave-society, this coded phrase, “the Athens of the South,” erupts from the cultural narrative as a kind of ideologeme, Bakhtin’s term for the utterance that captures its socio-historical and immediately spatial context.46 In addition to conveying local pride for Nashville’s educational institutions, the Nashville-as-Athens metaphor secretly crystallises the historical struggle between a propertied class and a class of property—between slave-owners and chattel, planters and plantation hands, landowners and tenant labour-power.47 Fredric Jameson has adapted Bakhtin’s terminology, insisting on its inherent, dual potential to appear as a concept in relation to a larger belief system, or

45 Encyclopedia of Southern Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1102
47 Of course the excluded middle term is the white yeoman farmer and mercantile middle class of the cities.
as an element in the narrative of class opposition. Therefore the Nashville-as-Athens ideologeme lives its amphibious life between two senses of belonging. In the first, belonging fits as a concept within the South's larger belief system. Here the idea is of belonging together, communally, through a being-in-common, at a certain level of caste. In a type of citizenship made possible by the caste-based slave-owning society, the master, for example, gains membership to a community of civically privileged partisans. In the second, narrative sense, the ideologeme invokes the social history of conflict condensed and repressed by the Athenic ideal. Where one human belongs to another as private property, privacy itself becomes a contested domain.

In the South, slavery was privatised throughout a rural but basically bourgeois society. The master's civic belonging sprang from his designation as a property owner. Thus, Nashville's classicist geography never obeyed the civic and Grecian design of public visibility. As an architectural guide to a National Geographic Society traveller explained, when

considering Greek structures it should not be forgotten that the *inlook* is a beautiful as the *outlook* ... “this,” he continued, waxing warm, “is in marked contrast to that later manifestation of genius we call Gothic. Though there may be exquisite views from the pinnacles yet, how rare is it that your Gothic structure has such a setting as to bring out its true beauty, when seen from a far.”

Greek geography (as described by *National Geographic*) contrasts with the civic geography of Nashville, where “inlook” is neglected. In Tennessee's capital, the Parthenon replica sits nested in the sylvan enclave of Centennial Park, where no line of sight connects it to the Parthenon inspired State Capitol Building, amid a city grid crammed with other

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neo-classical structures. One of those, an insurance building, faced by six fluted Ionic columns, held WSM-AM’s legendary broadcast studio. Through the broadcast range of the Cumberland plateau, private plantation homes fronted by columned porches spread away from each other, down to the tidewater along the Old South’s riverine geography, up the slopes to the Appalachian hinterlands.

Such a deviation from Athenian publicity could explain the tendency among the Fugitives for ironic odes. In both “Necrological” and Tate’s “Epode” the heightened rhetoric that in classical prosody was reserved for public occasion transmits profoundly personal contemplation. The poets greet the southern penchant for concealed public stature with a similar paradox of form and content, but a self-consciously ironic one. The distance enacted in this dissimulation is integral to what Ransom calls his “aesthetic code,” where one approaches material with the indirection of artistic form that suspends the pressures of industrialism and agrarianism, of Platonic self-assurance and innocent aspiration, of progressivism and conservatism. In resisting alliance with the new or the old, their playfulness defuses the tension between the corresponding spatial constructions of private property and civic publicity.

As the Fugitives communal games played out, a mass media modernism developed in 1920s Nashville that saw widespread reconfigurations of privacy and publicity. Roland Barthes argued that the “age of photography” marked “the irruption of the private into the public, or rather, the creation of a new social value, which is the publicity of the private: the private is consumed as such, publicly.” Fittingly, the mass geography of the suburban South simulates a new kind of “inlook” just as Greecian ideals lose their hold. Building on the intersection of architecture and mass media, Beatrice Colomina sees the same phenomenon as Barthes in the picture window of the suburban home, where “the outside world” is “an image to be consumed” and the “image of the interior” is displayed to the

outside world. She clarifies: this “shouldn't be confused with exposing one's privacy.” Instead, persons become arbiters and mediators of their “own representation,” in the same way that one “meticulously construct[s] [one's] family history with snapshots.”

Where in Athens public monuments and temples were designed with “inlook,” the bourgeois neighbourhoods of Nashville present a machine age inlook kept under personal control, where private entities mediate the publicity of their interior domains. Consider post-war Nashville, its homes and country clubs, private spaces from whence the Fugitives mediated their self-representation. Look, for instance, into the family home of Rose and Frank Smith, sister and brother-in-law to Fugitive instigator, Sidney Hirsch. There is the author of the grand pageant, *The Fire Regained*, reclined on a chaise lounge. With a painted portrait (of himself) hung above him, he espouses his thesis that the truly poetic temperament comes with injury. There in the calm, with relatives and friendly company, he held court with “grave formality,” with the Fugitives arranged in a ring of chairs around the patterned movement of a Persian rug. In this setting the group partook in the philosophical disputations and poem readings that would result in the publication of a magazine—the private, according modernity's logic, made public.

In this sense the magazine playfully constructs a representation of the poet's private meeting space and so enters the wider media ecology of modernity. As the dialectic of public and private domains defines the historical transformation from a civic Athens to bourgeois Nashville, so too those terms define those spheres reformed by mass media. Orson Welles would call personal intimacy “one of radio’s richest possessions.” In *Phantasmic Radio* Allen Weiss describes the mass media's intimacy as its “privacy paradox”:

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a universally public transmission is heard in the most private of circumstances; the thematic specificity of each individual broadcast, its imaginary scenario, is heard within an infinitely diverse set of nonspecific situations, different for each listener.\textsuperscript{53}

A voice in the room, the radio announcer has the power of personal address, having an intimate word to the masses. Sarah Wilson explains that as early as John Dewey's 1927 study, \textit{The Public and its Problems}, radio has been understood to offer an uncanny simulation of the "face-to-face communities" that were supposedly weakened and left nearly dismantled by mass society. She examines how the popular 1930s radio show \textit{America's Town Meeting of the Air} instilled public debate with radio's oft-treasured intimacy and immediacy.\textsuperscript{54}

Fugitive poetry offers a comparable effect. Merrill Moore's sonnet "The Noise that Time Makes," appeared in the fourth volume of the magazine and speaks of time personified, urging us to hear its eternal noise through a series of personal calls. In a series of addresses to the second person, the poem instructs "you" how to hear "the noise that Time makes." In a telephone with no one speaking on the other end, you can hear it passing; in a "small cockle shell," you hear it "brushing the eternal grass." An association with earth and heaven supports time's universality. Building on the common link between telephony and the firmament, the sound heard over the phone line is "Time's own/Garments brushing against a windy cloud."\textsuperscript{55} As time brushes both earth and air, its universal passing is a private experience, captured in moments of small personal intimacy.

Moore's poem indicates that the Fugitives deserve scrutiny for how they register the social effects of mechanical media, including radio broadcast, which are equally

\textsuperscript{55} Merrill Moore, “The Noise that Time Makes,” in \textit{The Fugitive Vol. 4 No. 4} (December 1925): 112.
responsible for re-drawing the unstable boundaries of regional and American modernism. Yet the classic trajectory of literary historiography has been to shift the poets out of the machine age and into the imagined Athens of the Old South, a spasm seeming all the more irregular when one encounters, in the Editor’s Foreword to the magazine’s first issue, an oblique explanation of the magazine’s title: “The Fugitive flees from nothing faster than the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South.”56 At the same time, Ransom was equally reluctant to endorse high-modernism, an aesthetic with its own propensity, especially in Ulysses and the Cantos, to overlay a contemporary milieu with ancient geographies adopted from Eastern climes.

To stage a comparison with the mass geography surrounding the Fugitives, let us approach Pound’s program for revising historical geography by examining his unstable place in the sphere of radio broadcast. In a letter sent to Homer Pound at the end of 1924, Pound explains to his father how a reader will make sense of the cacophony of historical voices that pervade The Cantos: “Simplest parallel I can give is radio, where you tell who is talking by the noise they make.”57 On the other hand, the ideogrammatic method and the doctrine of Imagism indicate that Pound’s program marks, in the words of Daniel Tiffany “a specific historical instance of what Martin Jay calls ‘the scopic regimes of modernity.’”58 Tiffany has indicated that Pound’s enthusiasm for the Image estranged him from his early fascination with “scenes of loss,” with “mournful ‘spirits’” and their “resistance to visibility.”59 In a fascinating juxtaposition, however, he suggests that Imagist writing, which transfers an image into a non-visual (verbal) medium, “appears” like radio waves on the electromagnetic spectrum, as a form of invisible light. Pound himself recognised a “basic correspondence between radiophonic practice and the ideogrammatic technique of

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56 “Editor’s Foreword,” The Fugitive Vol. 1. No. 1 (April 1922):
58 Tiffany, Radio Corpse, 20.
59 Ibid., 26.
The Cantos: 'I anticipated the damn thing [radio] in the first third of Cantos.'  

The flippant hubris of this claim, however, is contradicted by historical circumstance. Margaret Fisher's study of Pound and radio informs us that “The first documented American radio broadcast” was conducted on December 24, 1906. Considering Marconi’s telegraphic transmissions were famous before the turn of the century, the wireless imagination predates Pound’s own ideogrammatic experiments by almost two decades. Nevertheless, it was during the early stages of Pound’s own verbal experiments that he conceived of an opera based on Villon, one that, in 1931 he would adapt for BBC radio. Fisher informs us that “The opera Le Testament began to take shape the same year as Canto IV,” but Villon’s bawd and debauch estranged it from the Cantos’ project of cultural renewal. Fisher comments, “whores for hire did not fit with Pound’s vision for his epic—the building of an earthly paradise, in which coition would once again be sacred.” Fisher also describes how Pound’s Villon opera compares to early drafts of Cantos in their mutual reliance on Noh, with its spectral intrusions of the past into the present. The “Ur-Cantos,” which Pound originally submitted to Monroe at Poetry, included marginal commentary about how the poems were similar to Zeami’s Takasago, Pound’s most adored example of Noh. However, those comments where expunged, and the ancient legacy of Noh haunts the conception of the Cantos as a ghostly trace in literary history. The erasure of Noh related annotations on paper is undone by the non-visual medium of the radio play, where ghosts play key figures within Pound’s public broadcasting design.

In Noh, each short play is enacted by “personae . . . beyond life,” each is predicated on the intrusion of gods, ghosts or nature spirits into cultural memory. On one hand, Pound’s radio operas dramatise the lives of Medieval ghosts, Villon and Cavalcanti, whose

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60 Ibid., 236.
61 Fisher, Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas, 41.
62 Ibid, 33
63 Ibid., 9.
spirits intrude on Pound's own literary contemporaneity. On the other, he subjects his historical heroes, in each of their opera's concluding scenes, to the appearance of personae beyond life. In the same vein, Tiffany argues that Pound's infamous Rome Radio speeches allowed him to transmit himself to phantasms that took both personal and mass-public form. At the “other end of the line” of Pound's radio speeches, claims Tiffany, “is Gaudier's crypt, haunted not only by the ravenous ghost of the young sculptor, but by the spectre of mass death rising from the battlefields of World War I.” Here Pound mobilises the spiritual visitation motif of classic Japanese drama into a mass geography that is both located and dislocated through the privacy paradox of radio, a spatial disturbance that implies unique realignments of past and present, old and new.

Responding to the mass cultural battlefield, Pound's Noh helps to define the *Cantos'* distinct temporal arrangements. As Peter Nicholls explains, the bifurcated temporality of Noh drama does not indicate a past and present in simple juxtaposition, but in a recursive process of revision. When the gods or ancestral spirits arrive late in the plays, it marks “the irruption of the past in the present making the point of greatest intensity that in which time flows back on itself and two moments are, as it were, superimposed or grafted together.” The past is “completed only in the present.” Fisher's gloss on the way Noh shaped the *Cantos* offers an alternative to Nicholls: “Pound’s spirits and gods are spatially deployed ... They do not exist back in time, but about in space...” These rival explanations—temporal recursion or synchronic spatial deployment—seem less antagonistic in a mass geography, where, as Heidegger has it, “distant sites” of ancient culture recur in the contemporary flux of media modernity. The sense in which the anachronistic can be “spatially deployed” around the now reminds one of an absolute

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66 Ibid., 178.
spatial form, where the absence of the past becomes immanent in the present. But where comparisons to ancient sites, like Athens, are obviously insufficient and ideological, as they are in the South, then the landscape becomes a kind of ecstatic topography, where the intrusion of the past does not renew the landscape, but signals its difference from itself.

So unlike Pound, the Fugitives cannot programmatically design a cultural renewal based on enclosing the past within a poetics of immanence. Their poetry takes playful form to create a space that suspends the colliding temporal poles of “old” and “new” and any politics that urges one to align productively with those poles. Pound more programmatically invests in the political pressures of the interwar years. He rehabilitates ghosts both private and classical to achieve, in the eyes of Tiffany, a personal catharsis and progress, and to affect a wider cultural “risorgimento.” To further these goals he took to the bully pulpit of radio, despite what he saw as the pernicious aesthetic effects of mass media. The Fugitives, by contrast, inhabit a resistant enclave of mass geography, uncommitted to renewal, classical idealising, or a programmatic use of new media. Despite their journal’s name, this resistance is not a totally escapist one. Theirs is a dual impulse that stakes its own political notion of literary community. If the poets are, after all, drawing away from the Athenic vision of the South, they equally draw away from Music City U.S.A., the spiritual and historical centre of Country music culture.

J.M. Mancini has advanced the claim that “early American country music ... represents an important aspect ... of American modernism.” She discusses a preservationist atmosphere that developed in the early twentieth-century, arguing that musicologists recorded folk music to “stave off the disappearance of 'traditional' culture threatened by radio, commercial recording, and the market.”68 In modernising Tennessee, Appalachian folk traditions are transmitted to a mass-market as the new commodity form

of country music, which makes Nashville's radio modernism, as the centre of country music culture, a hybrid media ecology, where, amid a burgeoning system of mass commerce, hundreds of years of folk tradition become grafted to modern forms of mass media.

Curtis Ellison has described the economic substrate of radio production in the nascent years of the medium. Remember that National Life and Accident Insurance Company owned the station on which the Grand Ole Opry was broadcast. Hay's on-air claims to authentic folk antiquity, his ruse of looking backward, helped to build musician popularity and thus the future of the insurance business. Ellison states, “musician popularity and insurance sales went hand in hand.”

Like many companies extending personal life insurance to a mass market, Nashville's National Life adopted the sales apparatus of the monthly premium, attracting a new market in the working and middle classes. “Media images of rustic musical performance” were parcel to that apparatus. As they enhanced fans' desires to associate with those images, advertising avenues opened for a number of related concerns, where corporates promotions of "personal security, health, and consumption" (for example insurance, laxatives, tobacco, food, soft drinks) found "a lucrative advertising medium" in country music.

Adding to cooperative agreement of advertisement and commercial interest, Nashville's WSM-AM station integrates industrial society with the rural rusticity and image of community it promoted. Yet more deeply at stake in the broadcast arena was media's capacity to represent reality, to be authentic to its geographic locale, true to its roots. This played out in a contest over the “old.” For example, WSM's hillbilly “barn-dance” program was, in the early days, immediately preceded by a New York production of classical music and grand opera. In 1927, Walter Damrosch, presenter of NBC's “Musical...

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69 Ellison, Country Music Culture, 10.
70 Ibid., 9–11. Hays had previously hosted the National Barn Dance, broadcast from Chicago’s the Sears and Roebucks owned station, its call letters WLS (World's Largest Store).
Appreciation Hour” broke the “rule” that there is “no place in the classics for realism” by including “a composition by a young composer from Iowa who sent us his latest number which depicts the on-rush of a locomotive.”71 Taking to the airwaves moments later, Hay adroitly retorted: “From here on out for the next three hours we will present nothing but realism. It will be down to earth for the earthy.” Whereas NBC’s program had “taken” music from the “Grand Opera,” he promises to “present ‘The Grand Ole Opry.’”72 The insertion of the “Ole” suggests that Americana may be older than Europe's musical history, perhaps conceding the point that American folk largely originated in the British Isles. At the same time, the modification of “Opera” to “Opry” ensures folksiness; the program's pretensions to seniority over the classics will not interfere with its down-to-earth rootedness.

In that three-hour segment he responded musically as well as rhetorically to the classical orchestra's rendition of locomotive realism. As the Opry's rare musician of colour, DeFord Bailey produces the sound of a train in his rendition of “Pan-American Blues,” a harmonica piece that syncopates, by human breath, the huffing and puffing of a locomotive engine, punctuating it with blasts of tinny treble, mimetic of a train whistle.73 Akin to the European avant-garde, the performance provides an example of what the Futurists would call “imitative harmony,” where Marinetti's dictum was to “listen to motors and to reproduce their conversations.”74 Guillaume Apollinaire would debunk the whole project, claiming that “auditive reality” will always reign superior to the Futurist attempt to reproduce the “whirring of an airplane.”75 For better or worse, Bailey's “Pan-American Blues” can be considered such a reproduction, acoustically registering the “realism” of

73 Ibid.
74 Marinetti as quoted by Timoth C. Campbell. “Marinetti, Marconista” in Broadcasting Modernism, 55.
75 Kahn and Whitehead, Wireless Imagination, 9.
mechanical machines by the rustic means of the mouth harp.

Bailey's performance provides an example of how early American country music contributed, as Mancini argues it does, to American modernity and modernism. Considering the fact that Hay orchestrated his performance in an effort to control “reality” better than could the old music of Europe, it would be an error to accept the Grand Ole Opry as a *backward looking* program, a few hours of “old-time music” on Saturday nights. After all, contemporary tastes dictated content as much as any dogged veneration for the past. For instance, the fiddle music of Uncle Jimmy Thompson provoked a torrent of immediate and approving phone calls and telegrams. Within the modern economic context of Nashville, the Opry synchronises the invention of “old-time” country music and the modernity of commercial radio, reaching a mass of listeners that were construed by the agents of radio as a mass of potential consumers.

In the same years that DeFord Bailey stepped to Judge Hay's microphone, in the years when the Fugitives still called Nashville home, a young black academic named Sterling A. Brown lectured at Fisk University. Boldly addressing the mythological geography of the south, his poem “Memphis Blues” notes that the American map is dotted with simulacra, where place names refer to lost, legendary and ancient sites:

Nineveh, Tyre
Babylon,
Not much lef'
Of either one.
All dese cities
Ashes and rust,
De win' sing sperrichals
Through deir dus'....
Was another Memphis
Mongst de olden days,
Done been destroyed
In many ways...
Dis here Memphis
It may go
Floods may drown it;
Tornado blow;
Mississippi wash it
Down to sea—-
Like de other Memphis in
History.76

Altering the eschatological fantasy of modernism's literary tourism, Brown brings the end-of-days-scenario down home, couching it in the rhythms of blues performance. Blues is the ultimate genre of lost origin, eschewing any authoritative account of its beginnings, as many folk traditions do, and cultivating an ironic legend of precision, “the cross-roads,” because no precise voice or place can be pinned down as the ultimate source of blues music. This displacement—which is still assiduously regional, running roughly up and down the Mississippi—doubles the displacement of the African geography superimposed on the U.S., where people and place names are grafted into alien soil, and then made to stand for regional authenticity (down to earth for the earthy, as Hays announces). Yet, the insidiousness and insipidity of comparing Nashville to Athens is deepened as Brown acknowledges the fact that the American Memphis could follow the fate of the Egyptian Memphis into oblivion, becoming the site of total loss that the blues always echoes but can never surely locate. This dissonance between American locales and their ancient namesakes, and the troubling potential that the future could realise America’s mythic designs in cataclysmic ways, makes American places always different from themselves, ecstatic, locations where life upon new shores is a kind of death, or a life equal to death.

As the communal pageantry of the Fugitive movement and Brown’s eschatological folk vision respond to the finitude of being, the decisive sanction of death is to circle: to circle chairs, to form a band, to circulate words in communication. The sanction touches equally upon Afro-American folk music. In the early 1920s, a black Nashville musician, H.B.P. Johnson, informed the historian of Afro-American folk music Dorothy Scarbarough that game songs and the music of play-parties are an aspect of “Negro folk music never touched on.” Fisk Professor Matthew Work likewise complained of having difficulty finding the “children’s game-songs” he wished to include in “a pageant which shall represent something of the history of our race.”

A central form in children’s singing games is the ring, that same shape the Fugitives made in Nashville’s suburban interiors.

According to Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes, the editors of *Step it Down*, an anthology of children’s games songs, “the notion of a ring has always had a quality of magic; during play, it is literally a ‘charmed circle.’” For example, the song “Green, Green, the Crab Apple Tree” creates one such charmed circle. Like the best known of all Anglo musical ring games, “Ring around the Rosie,” “Green, Green, the Crab Apple Tree” draws a circle around death. To play, the children join hands and, singing, circle counterclockwise. In call-and-response, the song itself passes between chorus and a lead-voice that does nothing but interject the name of one player into the lyrics. Here’s how it goes:

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Green, green, the crab apple tree
where the grass grows so deep
Miss
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After the chorus sing the word “Miss” the lead-voice inserts the name of one of the players, and this is repeated to the effect of, for example: Miss *Daisy* Miss *Daisy*. The chorus

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Your true lover is dead
He wrote you a letter
To turn back your head

At the word “turn,” the player whom the lead voice has named must turn 180 degrees, rejoining the circle by hand but facing outward. The game continues until all the players have paradoxically “confronted” death by looking away, by turning their heads away from the centre of the circle, breaking the inwardness of the community. Like the death-focused dissimulation of the Fugitives, these forms of play cycle around a deathly origin and institute a kind of unproductive exchange, since, in Bataille’s view, the transformation from life to death is the ultimate expenditure, the excess of life’s economy. If play is by nature unproductive, games which symbolically exchange death are doubly so, but communicating in face of finitude—the call and response, the letter from the deceased—creates the clinamen within the circle, the inclination to turn the ring inside out, to make its edges ecstatic, to prevent it formally from ossifying absolutely.

If becoming aware of death’s sanction triggers the playful exchange of literary community, the unreality of the poet’s meeting space, and the magazine it issues, convenes an unproductive exchange of temporal terms. By contrast, the modernism of mainstream radio and the high modernism of Pound are programmatic cultural strands, attempting to produce something from the spatial and temporal collapse that characterises Heidegger’s vision of mass geography. On the Grand Ole Opry, classicism was thought bested through an asserted seniority and simulated folk authenticity. Pound sought to oppose the standardising (in his mind inferior) impulses of the culture industry by ideogrammatically

79 Ibid., 69.
inscribing classical history within an aesthetic modernism that reformed the relationship between past and present, making for a temporal immanence where, “We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence” and “All ages are contemporaneous.”80

As Margaret Fisher claims, such a perspective “calls into question our notion of a poet looking back in time to classical Greek, Roman, and Chinese civilisations, the Middle Ages (including Japan), the Renaissance, so forth.”81 It should not require much more exposition to assert that the hybrid media ecology of American’s hinterlands equally calls into question the idea that one looks “back in time” on traditional folk forms. Essentially hybrid in its design, country music modernism absorbs folk tradition as a contemporaneous facet of mass society. Resisting this aspect of a mass geography, with its spatial and temporal logic of collapse, The Fugitive offers an alternative modernist aesthetic of suspension.

However, stressing the playfulness of Fugitive poetry could prove dangerous if it were to undercut the relevance of labour concerns in the agrarian geography of central Tennessee. For their part, the poets described the assembly of the magazine as a “joyous labor,” where the nature of their literary company was roughly egalitarian. As if emerging from the charmed circle of children’s play, they described themselves as “a band of anointed spirits” whose community was indifferent to race, colour or “conditions of servitude.”82 Free from dictatorship or resentment, they arranged material through the long-standing meetings of their collaborative circle, voting poems into print and taking turns with editorial front matter. They placed copies in local stores and sent them by mail to friendly bookstores and individual friends, requesting a dollar for an annual subscription. The only thing the poets outsourced was the printing. Cowan writes that

80 Fisher, Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas, 15. Pound’s claim that “We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence” comes from Guide to Kulchur (1938), and that “All ages are contemporaneous” comes from The Spirit of Romance, his first major critical work, written in 1910.
81 Ibid., 15.
82 The Fugitive Group, The Fugitive Vol. No. 2 (1922): 34.
"because the money for the enterprise was coming out of their own pockets, the young poets took their manuscripts to the most inexpensive printer they could find, a Negro who operated a small press in an upstairs shop."83 Whether the black printer’s labour was joyous or not is silenced by the violence of history. The joint appearance of the words “inexpensive” and “Negro” is neither accidental nor trivial, since the surplus value of black labour power was abjectly exploited in the postbellum South, as it was during slavery.

The transformation from a paternalistic slavocracy to an uneven bourgeois modernity rendered both former master and former slave as subjects of mass society’s imperium. According to Alexandre Kojève, “The slave without a Master, this Master without a Slave, is what Hegel calls the Bourgeois, the private property-owner.”84 Taking the Roman Empire as example, Hegel maintains that the freeing of slaves is carried out “in relation to private property,” where “they become property-owner, Bourgeois, like their ex-masters.”85 But here, as elsewhere, the South imperfectly corresponds to its classical precedents. Not only were Southern planters already constituted as Hegel’s bourgeois (private-property owners), but also, postbellum economic reconstruction hardly extended property rights en masse to emancipated black workers.

In the New South’s scheme of sharecropping and tenancy, the situation for black agricultural labourers was, in fact, doubly iniquitous. Still separated from the civic privilege of the master caste, and without slave owners to large labour teams, former slaves were imprisoned on unproductive lots. The association of African-Americans with no-account land highlights a major transformation in the economic geography of the South. In the plantation South, the value of land and labour-power held a direct relationship. As the census of 1860 suggests, Southern farmland of the highest market value tended to contain

83 Cowan, Fugitive Group, 39.
85 Ibid.
the highest concentrations of enslaved labour power. In addition to concentrations in the long-settled Tidewater and Piedmont regions, the 1870 demographic map shows Americans of colour settled in high percentages along the rich agricultural frontiers of the Blue Grass and Nashville Basins, along the arm of the Missouri, as well as the Brazos River in Eastern Texas, and in the alluvial valley of the lower Mississippi. Big slave populations coincide with high land values. In Wharton County Texas, for example, an excrescence of 92% “colored” population correlates with land-values in the highest bracket of the 1860 census, shown by comparing Figures 5 and 6 (over).
Figure 11. Value of farms per acre of land, 1860.
Figure 12. Percentage of slaves in total population, 1860.
Maps by Mary Lee Eggert,
One should not assume, however, that an abundance of slaves was the condition for high real-estate prices. Rather it was the reverse. As Gavin Wright displays in his revelatory book on the economic geography of slavery, “Slaveholding planters were more ‘laborlords’ than ‘landlords.’”\(^{86}\) The economic and physical exchange of slave labour could be executed across vast geographical distances, and slaves were moved with perfunctory ease from over-farmed plots to newly purchased virgin lands. Wright quotes an 1841 letter of a Florida planter describing his establishment of a second plantation in Texas:

> last winter I commenced a settlement on the river Brazus [sic] in Texas where I have thirty slaves at work exclusive of those mortgaged to the Bank. I purchase there 2,000 acres of land for sixteen thousand dollars agreeing to place that number of slaves on the farm and their productive labour to be applied to the extinguishment of the debt.\(^{87}\)

Regardless the of alarming use of human beings as capital for a fiscal lever, this quote establishes the practice of moving slaves to land that is already valuable, if not in its money form, then in its agricultural potential, in this case the high expected yield of cotton, a crop that had distinguished itself in the East for its ability quickly to sap nutrients from soil. Slaves were mobilised not to add to the real-estate value of land, but to metabolise its latent agricultural value, up to the point of rendering land worthless to farming. The mobility of slave labour, meanwhile, is the primary feature, according to Wright, by which they are defined as private property. As such African-Americans added surplus labour-value to an agricultural economy that attempted to synchronise both human and natural exploitation to yield the highest profits.

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\(^{87}\) Ibid., 69.
The 1920 census reveals that across the South as a whole African-Americans remained concentrated according to the agricultural designs of their labour-lords, along the Mississipi and Brazos Rivers for example. In Davidson County, Tennessee (which incorporates Nashville), the population changed from majority “colored” to majority white, between 1860 and 1920 censuses. Nashville's longing for an Athenian ideal suggests a desire to reinstate a regime of capricious labour-lording, where a master class extracts and accumulates the surplus value that only free black labour-power can create. However, as both a labour-lord and private property owner, the American planter is a hybrid construction that collects the financial advantages of slave owning plus the moral advantages the Christian world, like a “citizen of the City,” “a peaceful Roman Bourgeois.”

But in the mass geography of the U.S., Hegel's contrast between the master slave dialectic of the Greek City and the “bourgeois World” of the “Roman Empire” does not perfectly apply. There, the private property and personal privacy of the bourgeois subject is aligned along the residual demarcations of a racially fractured slave society.

Mystifying all these particularities, the Fugitives refused allegiance to any heredity or caste:

without raising the question of whether the blood in the veins of its editors runs red, they are at any rate not advertising it as blue; indeed, as to pedigree, they cheerfully invite the most unfavourable inference from the circumstances of their anonymity.

With such rhetoric of resistance, the Fugitives diverged from Pound’s sympathy toward the classics as materials for cultural renewal. For them, the past was only ever halfway present and inadequate for renewal. To be sure, there would be no columned porticos along the

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88 Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, 63
Cumberland River if there had not been Hellenic Greece, just as there would be no America without Africa. African labour and leisure time has instilled so much value into the geography of the nation that one cannot be American without always already being African-American.

Nevertheless, racial exclusion is real, as Sterling Brown did not, as he maybe should have, join the Fugitive’s circle in the West End of Nashville. The racism of social separation perfidiously conceals literary community’s dependence on what it excludes. Nashville’s circus ring of white, predominately male, poets is inextricably interlinked with the folk image of black children singing. The labour-power of Americans of colour supported the poet's literary playtime, as the anonymous toil of “inexpensive Negro printers” converted the unreal waste of play into the good of a magazine that would redirect the course of English studies in the twentieth-century. Moving in-between private and public spheres, moving in-between the spheres of old (culture) and new (media), moving, finally, in-between the lines of black and white, the Fugitive aesthetic of resistance is unthinkable were it not for the clinamen between the lost origins of Africa (Memphis) and the white wash of American myth (Nashville as Athens). In the end, their poetic play ensues in the space of a hyphen that both connects and divides spheres of identity, a poetics of the gap, that same ecstatic displacement, slippage and loss that irrupts halfway through the term African-American.
Figure 13.
In Ransom's barren agrarian landscape even the Edenic apple tree, a figure of Judeo-Christian immanence, stands for a confrontation with lifelessness:

speaking of being beside the apple tree,

But I have listened, there is no one breathing here,

And all of the wars have dwindled since Troy fell.¹

By contrast, the town of Winesburg, Ohio exists in an imaginary landscape where people live and grow like the fruits of agricultural labour. From seeds they germinate, then they rot, or are picked for commerce. At the same time the very “nature” of these characters' environment experiences a disturbing change, as both organism and environs are increasingly shaped by the inorganic, the autonomous, the living machine. This chapter continues the geographic conceit of the last one, defining regional modernism amid a hybrid media ecology, where regional folk traditions become grafted to the life force of an

¹ This version of “Blackberry Winter” was revised for the 1945 edition of Ransom’s Selected Poems, reprinted in Ransom, Selected Poems (New York: Ecco Press, 1978, 54. Like the changes he made to “Necrological,” the alterations to “Blackberry Winter” reveal his later preference for the prosaic, since the line “speaking of being beside the apple tree” replaces “The trumpet’s convolve in the warrior’s chambered ear.” Ransom, “Blackberry Winter,” The Fugitive, Vol. 2 No. 8 (1923): 107.
emergent system of industrial media. Here, however, it goes on to argue that the autonomy of this media system confers an inorganic autonomy back onto the “organic community” of the regional folk landscape.

Two major texts will illustrate this argument, both cycles of short stories, one by Jean Toomer, one by Sherwood Anderson, both written and published in the years during and just after World War I. These two curious collections envision the mass geography surrounding American small-towns as they experience the political demands of those transitionary years. In both books, the modernist re-structuring of small-town life enlists agricultural spaces in such a way that the agrarian modes accompany, enforce, and redouble the inorganic nature of that literary voice that invokes them. From the German to English to American traditions of romantic philosophy, the role of pure and organic human speech parallels an interest in folk identity, even into the years when transport technologies made the folksy hinterlands more accessible, and the ontology of folk speech and song was reformed by automated recording and transmission technologies.  

A classic definition of folk community takes root in Johann Gottfried Herder's attention to the role that folk culture and purified language might play in developing a national German identity. In American romanticism, Ralph Waldo Emerson pitted America's promise against industrialism, hoping the nation would lift the “iron lids” from its eyes and fill the world with “something better than the exertions of mechanical skill.”

In the 1910s and 20s the “Young American” critics Van Wyck Brooks, Randolph Bourne and Waldo Frank attempted to integrate folk and high culture toward the goal of cultural

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2 The discrepancy between the romantic discourse of vocal spirit and automated speech technologies opened as early as 1780 when at a competition sponsored by the Saint Petersberg Academy of Science inventors presented “the first automata that, by stimulating and filtering certain frequency bands, could simulate the very sounds that Romanticism was simultaneously celebrating as the language of the soul,” Friedrich A Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 25.


4 Ralph Waldo Emerson and Kenneth Sacks, Emerson: Political Writings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.
At the same time, Heidegger would turn Herder's concept of a coherent folk culture towards a futuristic and programmatic definition of community, arguing for the role it played in the shared destiny of a specific people. However, Heidegger's conception of language is a unique one. As he understands it, people are not the users of language, but instead, they are needed and used by that which exceeds their mortal finitude. Folding such a notion back into the American landscape, the modernist forms of Toomer's *Cane* and Anderson's *Winesburg* arrange “nature” into an autonomous environment that uses humans more than it is used by them. The seed of this belief sprouts from the author's re-conception of the organicity of speech, written and oral, and their renewed participation with the heritage of literary voice in a mass media era.

The American author's confrontation with an autonomous media environment sparks the realisation that their voice is more alien than not, especially when it can be separated from the human, preserved in recording, disseminated with its own autonomous after-life. Humans are possessed by the power of language rather than possessors of language, to follow Heidegger. My argument stems from the insight that the philosophical effects of the mediated voice confer a similar power of autonomy onto the “passive” and “organic” agricultural environment that surrounds the regionalist writer. When the voice is no longer something that grows simply and organically from within, the organicism of life growing outside the human organism is similarly called into question.

This claim can be illustrated by the *Winesburg* piece “Paper Pills,” which tells the

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6 In reversing the classic conception of language advanced by Aristotle and Augustine, Heidegger claims to have discovered the “advantage by which we advance to an exceptional realm, the realm in which we dwell as the mortals, those who are needed and used for the speaking of language,” (italics mine). Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 134.

7 As Juan Suárez writes in his exceptional book on modernism and the noise of modernity, in the age of the gramophone the voice became “disembodied and, therefore, dis-organ-ised.” Juan Antonio Suárez, *Pop Modernism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 126 I’m arguing not only that the voice was dissociated from bodily organs that produce it, but that the ontology of those organs shifted in the machine age, so that the distinction between mechanism and organ is untenable, as is the distinction between organic community and industrial society.
story of Doctor Reefy, in whom, we are told, are “the seeds of something very fine.” Pips and all, Doctor Reefy personifies the fruit and vegetal matter of rural Ohio, and his life is literally “fleshed” out, ripened and chosen by a narrator who advertises that Reefy’s story is “delicious, like the twisted little apples that grow in the orchards of Winesburg.” In “Paper Pills” the narrator makes geographical divisions according to their likeness to three different stages in the maturation of fruit, and for simplicity’s sake let’s call them apples. There are the round perfect ones that will be “eaten in apartments filled with books, magazines, furniture, and people”—the ideal, inaccessible city apples. There are the “gnarled twisted apples” left by the pickers on the frosted ground of Winesburg's winter orchards—the grotesque fruits of regional modernism. Thirdly, there is the transitory apple of the human body, the edible, sexualised body, the apple of the reproductive organ. We find this third type exemplified by the “young dark girl” whom Doctor Reefy courts and marries.

In her previous romance with the son of the town jeweller, she had begun to fear that her courtier's protestations of chastity, especially his frequent speeches on virginity, concealed the seeds of a voracious lust:

> At times it seemed to her that as he talked he was holding her body in his hands. She imagined him turning it slowly about in the white hands and staring at it. At night she dreamed that he had bitten into her body and that his jaws were dripping. (*Ohio*, 19)

In this passage, the girl's interpretation of personal speech deviates wildly from the speaker's intent. The jeweller's son vocalises sentiments of virginity, whereupon a serious distortion takes place. Between transmission and reception, his words pass a fear into the

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imagination of the dark girl, who presumes he has anything but her virginity in mind. Not only does personal identity lack all correspondence to vocalised intentions, it is distinctly corrupted by them.

Critics have long noted the curious aberrations in speech that occur almost so much as to define *Winesburg*. In an article from as long ago as 1968 Glen Love reminded us “it hardly needs repeating that the plight of the characters in *Winesburg* can be traced to their inability to communicate with one another.” Underlining the “significance of stillness” in *Winesburg*, Love set out to link Anderson's attitudes towards “silence, words, and talk” to “the onset of urban, machine civilization.” Following in Love's wake, Thomas Yingling has discussed Anderson's awareness of “how print culture was changing the habits of thought” in Mid-American towns, relating that process to Walter Benjamin’s commentary about the end of storytelling. For Yingling the “impossibility of communication“ suffered by Winesburg’s citizens is symptomatic of what Benjamin diagnosed as the demise of orally transmitted wisdom. More recently, Mark Whalan has connected *Winesburg’s* vocal omissions to Pierre Macherey's thesis that literature gestures “toward ideological formations that can never be spoken directly,” thereby arguing that critics must make the gaps of literature speak in order to reveal “the formulations of that ideology.” Doing his part, Whalan targets the gender politics of the story cycle and Anderson's fraught relationship with homosexuality and masculinity.

In “Paper Pills,” the onset of urbanism is suggested by an absence—by the disappearance of the town’s choice fruit. In modernising Mid-America, the “few gnarled apples that the pickers have rejected” betoken not the effects of urban incursion but the

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symbols of an alternative to urban industrialisation, the alternative modernism of the regional grotesque. Yet this attachment to crude local fruit is a damning one, with the fate of Reefy's dark nameless lover providing a curious caution: “she was like one who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments. In the fall ... she married Doctor Reefy and in the following spring she died,” bearing him no offspring (Ohio, 21).

Dr. Reefy and his lover's penchant for the town's gnarled fruit allegorise the author's selecting modernist characters of disturbed identity. In fact it dramatises Anderson's general picture of a small-town modernism, seeing how he wrote in his memoir that “the short story ... is an idea grasped whole as one would pick an apple in an orchard.”12 Similarly, Anderson relates how in Winesburg, one “runs from tree to tree over the frosted ground picking the gnarled twisted apples and filling his pockets with them. Only the few know the sweetness of the twisted apples.” Stories are apples while apples become characters and characters apples. Winesburg's gnarled fruits “look like the knuckles of Doctor Reefy's hands,” notices the narrator. Like the minor marvels of Anderson's micro fiction, “Into a little round place at the side of the apple has been gathered all of its sweetness.”13 So Anderson's theory of the modernist short-story utilises the apple orchard and its marred fruits as an ideal figure, but more specifically, in this orchard of the imagination, as people attain the characteristics of plants or parts of plants, they become outwardly corrupted but inwardly promising. This discrepancy between interior and exterior, between gnarled outsides and provocative insides, elicits those distorted voices that are unable to properly mediate between the seen and unseen, thus deepening Anderson’s dialectic of the said and the silent.

13 Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio, 19.
For let it be remembered that the whole sad and curious affair of Reefy and his tragic love grows from his lover's earlier distrust of amorous talk, so consequently the critical work on communication in Anderson, his “rhetoric of silence,” speaks to the fruit orchard of “Paper Pills.” During the tall dark girl's pubescent courtship we find not just a gap or silence, but a very specific sort of verbal distortion, where the oral transmission of language directly reverses intentionality. Despite what the boy says, the girl must personify fruit and its fertility metaphors. The purpose of his words would be to make her inorganic, a thing outside the realm of sexual reproduction. However, his words fail to this effect, as his voice does not carry forth naturally from a stable point of human origin and attach itself to fixed objects in the world. Thus, where it sought to reassure it does nothing but disturb the ontology of the self, both his and hers.

While Yingling suggests that the people of Winesburg “‘find themselves’ ... despite the impossibility of communication,”14 “Paper Pills” indicates that the town's residents consistently find something very curious in place of themselves—a spirit or voice not their own—and, as I plan to demonstrate, these curious alterations are distinctive of American communities as they encounter the specific social disturbances of audio and print media. In the hinterlands, modernism recognises that the inability to achieve spiritual completion or a self-enclosed identity signals not the demise of a folk spirit or culture, but that such grounds for immanence have not existed. The modernist experience with the spirit that is not mine or voice not my own interrupts the myth of communal immanence, instead evidencing the idea of community recognised by Jean-Luc Nancy, where the disruption of absolutism and disappearance of “organic identity” is what constitutes communality.

The intrusion of multimedia into the American hinterland demands a multi-generic understanding of print modernism. Reading Anderson's collected small-town journalism, *Hello Towns!* (1929) along side the story-cycle *Winesburg* redefines the latter as a kind of

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14 Yingling, “*Winesburg, Ohio* and the End of Collective Experience,” 116.
experimental journalism, and locates a model for the modernist short-story amid a mass geography of popular print styles. If Anderson's take on the story was that of picking “a whole apple,” then organising these fruits of his labour for a newspaper audience highlights their distribution in an uneven geography, where they could either be consumed distantly as the stuff of European cosmopolitanism, or day by day in a local small-town paper. But how does the cyclical form of the story-cycle and Anderson's notion of “whole” fruit interact with the modernist symbol in “Paper Pills”—the apple, bitten, broken, or in decay? If the apple is a gift of knowledge and communication passed between people, what does the gnarled, wretched nature of Anderson's fruit “say” about the ideological formations of modernising small-towns? What happens to the journalistic voice—one that reports, that testifies, that stands witness—once it enters an ecosystem filled with vocally capable automatons like phonographs?

All told, automated communication technologies interrupt the myth of organic community. Jean Toomer demonstrates this phenomenon in his artful account of the American small-town. Most students of Cane, Toomer's modernist impression of rural Georgia, will be familiar with this reflection on the modernising geography that inspired the work:

The setting was crude in a way, but strangely rich and beautiful ... There was a valley, the valley of “Cane,” with smoke-wreaths during the day and mist at night. A family of back-country Negroes had only recently moved into a shack not too far away. They sang. And this was the first time I'd ever heard the folk-songs and spirituals ... I learned that the Negroes of the town objected to them. They called them “shouting.” They had victrolas and player-pianos. So I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out. With Negroes also the trend was towards the small town and then towards the city—and industry and commerce and machines. The folk-spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert. That spirit was so beautiful. Its death was so
tragic ... And this was the feeling I put into Cane. Cane was a swan-song. It was a song of an end.\textsuperscript{15}

In The Wayward and the Seeking, Toomer relates how he found the “seed” of himself in the folk songs of Southern black peasantry. In a letter he wrote to Waldo Frank in late April 1922 he characterised the songs he heard in Sparta as “spontaneous and native utterances.”\textsuperscript{16} Later that year he wrote a letter to The Liberator that mimicked the language of Anderson's orchard rhetoric, explaining how a "deep part of my nature" "sprang suddenly into life and responded" to "folk songs ... from the lips of Negro peasants."\textsuperscript{17} In his study of the call-and-response structure of Cane, John Callahan writes, "Toomer's voice became whole" because he "breathes the spirit of the ancestral black South into his fiction," because for at least during his Southern sojourn, he is able to "identify with the ancestral past of slavery."\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, Charles Scruggs and Lee VanDemarr have summarised Cane as a celebration of the “spiritual cohesiveness” of black rural life.\textsuperscript{19} The critical terms “wholeness” and “cohesiveness” complement the mythic view of folk communities, those that German romanticism constructed as a Volk, a people gathered around a shared regional identity.

However, Cane also formally acknowledges the limits of defining community in such a way. Its explorations of song, voice, and religious speech collaborate to interrupt this myth, because Cane emerges from a media ecology that was already mutating those oral traditions that supposedly cemented the communitarian bond, where pretensions to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[16] Jean Toomer, Brother Mine: The Correspondence of Jean Toomer and Waldo Frank (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 38.
\end{footnotes}
organic and spiritual cohesion are ridiculed by the mechanical laughter of mass geography. Toomer acknowledges as much when he writes that Cane “was born in an agony of internal tightness, conflict and chaos.” As he identifies with an ancestral spirit, the seed and sprouting of this identity is equally an internal agony, suggesting the physical splitting and separating of the organism as it grows in flawed pursuit of wholeness and cohesion. The “seed” of himself that Toomer finds in spirituals equally causes the coming apart of the subject in the singular conditions of Sparta, the becoming-ecstatic of the individual growing outside of itself.

A figure of inherent potential, the seed is a token of ecstasy that returns to the agrarian motif of Anderson's writings, which Toomer digested in a Georgia cabin with the smell of soil coming up through the floorboards and “Negro women” singing “old folk melodies” at sundown. Included among what Toomer called the “elements” of his “growing” were Anderson's stories, with their characters constantly harbouring “seeds,” or things inside of themselves “striving to grow.” The point here is not just that Toomer stages a relationship with rural geography by becoming fictional, by planting himself alongside the residents of Anderson's fictional town. More simply, the regional encounter with mass geography, or what Toomer calls “the modern desert,” provokes germinal metaphors from both authors, where the curious somethings internalised by characters and authors actually advance the remediation of rural America by the contrivances of mass society.

Both “Paper Pills” and Toomer's remembrance of rural Georgia make mention of furniture. In the 1920s records and record players were the products of furniture stores and salesman, so those victorlas and player-pianos that Toomer saw or heard in the small-

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20 This is from an unfinished fragment of writing, probably a letter to Waldo Frank, as quoted in Scruggs, Toomer and The Terrors of American History, 10.
town homes of African-American Georgia take part in what J.M. Mancini has called “the integration of disparate rural areas, including isolated regions, into a nationally consolidated consumer economy.” Her argument goes that American modernity was made as much in the “hollers of Appalachia and the bayous of French Louisiana” as in the clubs of Harlem or Lower East Side cafes. “Rural Americans” she finds “did not just lash back at modernity but coped with it in many of the same ways as urbanites did: through the pursuit of pleasure, through hybridity, and through consumption.” The swan song of Cane provides a wonderful instance of coping through hybridity, exemplifying a hybrid ecology of folk and new media. It exists between both, inscribing itself into both while reducible to neither. It is not a folk-song, and in fact it thoroughly reverses some important features of Afro-American spirituals. Neither, however, is it sympathetic or reducible to the phonographic voice.

As Mancini’s article demonstrates, small-town moderns are sceptical about, even as they pursue, the automated musical furniture peddled by the mass-commercial system of early twentieth-century America. Cane discloses a similar division in its attitude towards mass geography. Toomer stays consistently involved with the agrarian tropes of seed, growth, and transformation, but, acceding to the “supreme fact of a mechanical civilization,” they do not forestall the incursions of mechanical reproduction. Neither is Toomer wholly nostalgic for a folk-spirit. Tragic acceptance must be differentiated from nostalgia for the lost object. To defy nostalgia and inscribe the experience of modernist literary community, Toomer’s literary voice makes an audio composite of the sung spiritual and the mechanically recorded voice. As it does so, it reforms the heritage of the biblical voice, with its ties, especially in Afro-American culture, to the forces of mimicry and the

magic of social change.

To begin at the beginning, “Karintha” achieves two desirable effects. Firstly, one immediately confronts the issue that Toomer's valley of death symbolism starkly superimposes itself upon Anderson's orchard symbolism. Secondly we uncover the formal blueprint to Cane's first two sections, which combine lyrical prose (often employed towards an expressionistic portraiture), the rhythms of folk song lyrics, which often precede or interrupt the prose, and free verse that emulates Imagism more than folk tradition. Since “Portrait in Georgia” and “Face” stand out as examples of this last mode, it is tempting to generalise that Toomer used it to strip down the high poetic tradition of blazon to its bare and fragmentary elements. For example:

Hair—braided chestnut,  
coiled like a lycher's rope,  
Eyes—fagots,²⁴

As it elides the prepositions of simile in favour of the hyphen, the style nods to Dickinson, while the elements of the portrait—hair, eyes, lips, breath—repeat those of Shakespeare's famous 130th sonnet. “Face” begins similarly with

Hair—  
silver gray,  
like the streams of stars,  
(Cane, 12)

Toomer's free verse is in the business of disintegrating bodies, recording sketchy and illustrative effects around the face and mouth. However “Face” and “Portrait of Georgia”

²⁴ Jean Toomer, Cane (New York: Liveright, 1975), 27. Future citations show in text as Cane.
are also depictions of the cane plant itself, the crop that Georgia’s black folks personify. The burning of the cane field, the boiling and cooking of syrup, homologises, therefore, the organic decomposition of the body, especially the destruction of the sexualised black body, which, in “Blood Burning Moon,” is lynched and torched in order to simultaneously neuter the black male and sustain the whiteness of the white female.

Where black libidinal energies are focused on working a dark and denuded agrarian landscape, Toomer’s poetic forms become more outwardly traditional, as in the iambics and regular rhymes of “Black Reapers” and the work-song “November Cotton Flower,” two pieces that appear between “Karintha” and “Becky.” As such Cane vacillates between wide-shots of masculine field labour and the close ups of the cane plant in “Face” and “Portrait” that disguise themselves as sensual depictions of femininity. As they become plantlike, rural Americans fragment into decomposing free verse, only to be reconstituted, in the recognisable sonnet structure, once they have returned to the field for the agricultural labour of managing those plants. Yet both the free verse portraits and iambic landscapes only vaguely recapitulate the spirituals and folk-songs that awoke in Toomer the “seed” of Cane. That germinal content is more obviously integrated by the prose portraits of the first section, and of course by “Cotton Song,” “Song of the Son” and “Evening Song.”

As an exemplary prose portrait, “Karintha” is surrounded by the sung voice of the blues:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,} \\
\text{O cant you see it, O cant you see it,} \\
\text{Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,} \\
\text{... When the sun goes down.}
\end{align*}
\]

(Cane, 1)

As a centred block of text, these spiritual lyrics frame the story as both epigraph and
conclusion. Here the dusk does not announce the closing of day and the end of labour so much as the coming of night and the beginning of violence and treachery. At night the fruits of the day's labours are consummated, as the townsmen sexually consume Karintha. She is not associated with the poignancy of the sunset, but (in a turn towards Africa) the opposite eastern darker horizon, where light is first lost to dark, where the productivity of diurnal effort makes way for the reproductive demands of nocturnal desire. Thus the spiritual is turned from the transcendent celebration of the sunset towards a foreshadowing of the sexual drives that will interrupt the town's tenuous social balance.

Folk lyrics twice more intersperse Toomer's portrait of Karintha, who is, not incidentally, likened to a fruit. The men of Sparta, the narrator judges, seek “to ripen a growing thing too soon,” and their sexual interest advances Karintha's procreative burden. Yet the metaphor of plant life delays and obscures her sexual advancement, since even after the local preacher catches her in the act she seems still “as innocently lovely as a November cotton flower.” His delusion foreshadows a line in the poem “November Cotton Flower” which praises an unseasonably late bloom as the face of love “without a trace of fear” (Cane 4). The irony is that Karintha's lovemaking is laced with fear, shrouded in night, omitted from narration. The menace of the men's eagerness precedes not a sex scene but a tragic birth scene, where she burns her own child in the smouldering “pyramidal sawdust pile” of a nearby sawmill. The quiet tragedy, written in a silent indirectness, in a chilling ellipsis, elicits the singing of a spiritual:

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

(Cane, 2)

Smoke releases the spirit from a burning body in this example of a “sorrow song,” the
“weird old songs” where W.E.B. Du Bois claimed, “the soul of the black slave spoke.”

Du Bois hears “an ominous silence” in Negro spirituals when it comes to the topic of “deep successful love,” but Zora Neale Hurston, Toomer's contemporary, would quibble with Du Bois's reduction of African-American spirituals to sorrow songs. As an ethnographer, she documented myriad topics for folk-songs, a spectrum covering unpredictable points, from "a peeve at gossip to Death and Judgment." Toomer's folk landscapes, complete with “supper-getting-ready songs,” support her argument for tonal and topical diversity. Still, the song and story inspired by Karintha's infanticide (or, potentially, disposal of still birth) certainly omits a “deep successful love,” whereas the love of Janie and Tea Cake, in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, is too deep to survive a superficial society made savage and “gossip-peved” by racism. Nevertheless, the main point of Karintha's tragedy remains – she is the mishandled produce of an agrarian society, where “the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon.”

In this deceptively simple statement, a woman's spirit is still found to be living, but not autonomously. It ripens not by its own design but it is a thing that can be ripened. The living body of a community member is approached as if it were the produce of the agrarian economy surrounding it. The excessive desires of Sempter's workmen perniciously affect Karintha's soul, which is thereafter open to manipulation, potentially even the regulation and rationalisation of a mass geography. According to Gramsci, who wrote “Americanism and Fordism” the same decade Toomer wrote Cane, “the sexual instinct” must be “suitably regulated” and rationalised in order for there to come into being “the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work.”

The modern commercial system of rural America, by extension, sought to control human voice, spirit and sexuality

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simultaneously. This series of modernist concussions is inscribed well by the literary community of regional America, where writers encountered a supposedly direct mediation between interior and exterior, between soul and society, in the sung spiritual. In the interwar mass geography, however, the “organic” intermediary of human voice competes amid a group of technologies with the power to mechanically record and reproduce speech and song.

In an essay on this phenomenon, Angela Frattarola addresses the “similarities between the art of phonographic recording and the modernist novel.” Present in both, she claims, is “a drive to present reality without a sense of mediation; an attention drawn to the subjectivity of hearing; an aesthetics of fragmentation; an association with the repetitious workings of the mind; and, lastly, a subversion of the authority of a sound's source that opens new possibilities in referencing.” In regards to the last point, where the phonograph undermines the authority of a vocal source, Fredrich Kittler has succinctly said that ever since the invention of the phonograph, there “has been writing without a subject. It is no longer necessary to assign an author to every trace, not even God.” The novelty of Frattarola's article is that it brings the tenets of media theory so pointedly to bear on the modernist novel.

As such, Cane, displays the interrelatedness of her schematic explanation, especially in the tangled effects of fragmentation and repetition. Recall that the image of the November cotton flower appears in a labour sonnet and the fragmented lyrical prose of “Karintha.” Also, the descriptive imagery surrounding Karintha's labour and childbirth recurs in later sections of Cane. Her child, we are told, “fell out of her womb onto a bed of pine-needles ... smooth and sweet” and that the pine-needles “are elastic to the feet of rabbits.” The same textual, that is to say, non-visual images resound in a piece of

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29 Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 44.
fragmentary free verse called “Nullo” where

A spray of pine-needles
Dipped in western horizon gold,
Fell onto a path.

(Cane, 18)

The reduction of hypotactic prose to paratactic poetry, what Frattarola calls an “aesthetics of fragmentation,” combines here with the “repetitious workings of the mind,” where the association of forest stillness repeats in story and poem, in the comforting vegetal matter of pine-needles. In each itineration, the pines are a place of human ignorance, watched over by the passage of the sun, but the decline of Karintha’s purity and beauty, “perfect as dusk when the sun goes down” is reversed by “Nullo” by the more luminescent “western horizon gold.” The repetition of image is enhanced by the reappearance of the rabbit among the pine-needles, where in “Nullo,” animal life remains oblivious to the disintegration of the plant, announced by the spray of needles:

Rabbits knew not of their falling
Nor did the forest catch aflame

(Cane, 18)

When rabbits and pine-needles previous co-mingled, the image preceded an odd ellipsis, and, ultimately, the terrible sawmill fire that burns Karintha’s birth. The forest in “Nullo,” however, does not “catch aflame,” so that Cane disturbs the very expectations its repetitions encourage.

Holding together these fragments from “Nullo” and “Karintha” reveals not only the mind’s repetitious workings but the distortions and disruptions available to a modernist
mind whose capacity it is to think phonographically. The interplay between Cane’s imagistic echoes brings to mind two particular techniques of phonographic inscription: variable speed and variable direction, effects produced by manipulating the time axis of the rotating medium of early sound recording.³⁰ In 1880, three years after Thomas Edison first demonstrated phonographic writing, a philosopher and poet named Jean-Marie Guyau wrote a short essay exhibiting his fascination with the device and proposing a “psychophysical” analogy between the phonograph and the brain. He claims that an analogy between the phonograph and our brain exists in that the speed of the vibrations impressed on the apparatus can noticeably change the character of the reproduced sounds or recalled images ... If you turn the handle faster, a song will rise from the deepest most indistinct notes to the highest most piercing. Does not a similar effect occur in the brain when we focus our attention on a blurred image, increasing its clarity step by step and thereby moving it up the scale?³¹

The fragmentary snatches of “Karintha” recurring later in Cane mimic the time manipulation potentiated by the phonograph. Parataxis quickens playback, and Toomer repeats prosaic images in lyrical fragment to move them faster through time and the reader's consciousness. In their repetition and isolation (shorn as they are of surrounding prose) they demand a more focused attention. Curiously, Toomer enacts this effect around the image of needles, acknowledging the structure of phonographic inscription with which his pen must compete. Dropping the needle of his pen and cranking the cylinder of our minds more quickly, the lyrical, elongated images of Karintha’s prose story fragment and sharpen within the poetry, in order to “focus our attention on a blurred image, increasing

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³⁰ Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 34.
³¹ Ibid., 32.
its clarity step by step and thereby moving it up the scale.”

Early gramophones allowed users not only to vary the speed of playback, but to completely reverse the direction of the time axis. Edison’s first phonographic machine was hardly more than a cylinder turned against a needle. Yet the rotation of the cylinder could be reversed, so the potential for phonetic reversal is as old as the phonograph. As Fredrich Kittler notes, “the Columbia Phonograph Company recognized in 1890, the phonograph can be used as machine for composing music simply by allowing consumers to play their favourite songs backwards: 'A musician could get one popular melody every day by experimenting in that way.'” When Toomer repeats images to reverse effects, a November bloom as truth rather than corruption, the drop of the needle at a “golden” hour rather than at “dusk,” he is doing more, however, than producing an aesthetics of reversibility he learned from the Victrolas filing up the homes of American small towns.

Julian Murphet’s *Multimedia Modernism* argues that modernism occurs when literature’s ontological primacy over other aural and visual media becomes less secure, so that, after the second industrial revolution, literature began to borrow the “vestments of materiality from other media.” This insight withdraws studies of literature and mass media from the discourse of similarity, comparison, and analogy in order to focus on the material and ontological status of literature in a mass media age. In the chiasmus between *Cane* and a media ecology of both oral and mechanical constitution, Toomer’s modernism produces its own new media effects, ones that can pervert, controvert, and disturb the exogenous developments in the new media landscape. This impulse explains Toomer and Anderson’s recourse to constant endogenous metaphor, as they search for the inherent potential of literary form to produce modern media effects. For Toomer it is the

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“immediate” vocalisation of spiritual song that fertilised his attempt to grow a new media voice for and from the tradition of literature.

A scholar of Afro-American folk-songs, John Lovell, attests that the spiritual was "preeminent in message bearing, in setting the record straight, in appeals to highest courts of human values, in advocacy and declaration of change, and in the African-inspired tradition of poetry as magic."35 Thus, technologies of industrial society do not so much destroy the superstitions and magical thinking of the pre-modern as they absorb them. In that sense, audio recording and reproduction continue the magical tradition of African American spirituals by automating the processes of social change. Yet, as they bear messages and set records straight, the mechanical reproduction of voice alters what it means to be human. As Derrida argued, the so-called human sees itself write and hears itself speak, whereas mechanical media “dissolve such feedback loops.”36 Equally, those technologies dissolve the supposed bond between human voice, spirit and community that Romanticism idealised.

Like Anderson's, Toomer's engagement with the dissolution of spiritual bonds takes vegetal life as an exploratory motif. In his book on the political magic of singing, Lovell catalogues images of flora and fauna that traditionally appear in African-American folk songs. He writes that the folk poet's “references to nature are not casual; they are full of wonder, awe and delight”37 and, as such, are politically motivated towards social transcendence. Hence, in Lovell's catalogue, he pays special attention to the prized position that standing trees, mountains, and the high sun take in African-American folk singing. By contrast, Cane depicts the detritus of trees, trees in conflagration, valleys in shrouds, and the marginality of the sun, which appears at the edges of his landscapes, rising or setting

36 Kittler, Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 23.
37 Lovell, Black Song, 263.
but hardly ever at its apex.

Toomer contradicts the folk community for whom his swansong sings and actually aligns himself with the popular geography of Georgia as addressed to a national audience. According to a National Geographic article of 1926, the Georgia of the early 1920s awoke to "discover her prestige departing":

Her pine forests were rapidly vanishing; failure to rotate her crops had caused much of her rich tobacco lands to "burn out"; the devastating and irresistible boll-weevil army ... threatened even greater financial debacle than the army which marched from Lookout Mountain to the sea in 1864...38

In accord with popular geography, Cane's soot-strewn, dusky and pine-depleted landscapes demonstrate the departing prestige of Georgia, diverging from the traditional folk motifs catalogued by Lovell.

Those motifs, especially the imagery of tree and sun, congregate around the funeral procession in “Becky,” where the sun, far from a transcendent beacon, is “listless and heavy.” “Even the pines were stale, sticky, like the smell of food that makes you sick” (Cane, 6). Ghastly trees failingly approximate what, in “Song of the Son,” Toomer calls “an everlasting song, a singing tree,” one that carols softly “souls of slavery” (Cane, 12). Hazed by smoke tendrils from the “leaning chimney” of Becky's cabin, the pines “whisper to Jesus.” As a ghost train passes the funeral procession and shakes the home of the departed Becky, the “pines shout to Jesus.” In the morose wake of Becky's death, the trees whisper and shout, but fail to find the middle range of soulful carolling. The whispering shouting pines are vegetal records that inscribe and play back frequencies quite other than the sung

38 Ralph Graves, “Marching Through Georgia Sixty Years After: Multifold Industries and Diversified Agriculture Are Restoring the Prosperity of America's Largest State East of the Mississippi,” National Geographic Magazine, (September 1926), 259.
human voice.

Vibrating in dissonance, the soundscape of “Becky” produces hypnotising, dehumanising, and desacralising effects. From the wagon that has recently departed her funeral, the narrator of “Becky” and Barlo are drawn to her cabin, like automatons. “Barlo and I were pulled out of our seats. Dragged to the door” as the sound of the collapsing chimney brought them running. “Its thud was like a hollow report, ages having passed since it went off” (Cane, 6). To Toomer’s consciousness, exposed as it to the phonograph, sound is no longer attached to its source. Like anonymous news-writers, noises “report” well after cause and origin disband. Pulling and dragging listeners with originless sound, automatic playback technologies divest humans of autonomy. So fated, Barlo mumbles something and throws his Bible on a pile of bricks that marks the place of Becky’s spirit, if anything does. There, the “Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound” (Cane, 7).

Figure 14.


Terra Foundation for the Arts

(Note how both natural and religious symbols (pine-trees and steeples) are represented as a jumble of angles, reminiscent of stock market graphs.)
If the sung spiritual was a major vehicle whereby biblical knowledge entered Afro-American culture, it too is bound to the spiritual poet’s sense of magical power. Adaptively allegorical, biblical stories fuelled the folk-singer’s sense of revolutionary poetics, where the “folk community of spiritual believed in poetry as maker and reflector of change so powerful as to constitute magic.”39 But in Toomer’s vision, The Holy Bible no longer joins an inventory of political and aesthetic weapons. Endowed with “leaves,” like a tree, impotent as the pines, stale and sticky, it makes only an “aimless rustle.”

In “Carma,” the “aimless rustle” of the Bible leaves mutates into the “cane leaves swaying” and sounding “rusty with talk” (Cane, 10). A mechanically printed tome flutters like the leaves of Sempter's organic world and this hybridity, as opposed to biblical and folk tradition, announces the continuing possibility of a poetics of resistance. Since, according to Toomer’s hybrid modernism, vegetal matter can rust (like the wheels of the printing press or the cylinder of a gramophone), plant organs take on the autonomy of modernity’s undead media life forms. As they do so, they confer an ontology of the inorganic back into the (rusty) talking voice, where the plant comes to signify the mechanisation of man’s spirit.

Because of our interest in the relationship between an internal, human spirit (mythically constitutive of a folk community) and an “organic” environment that surrounds the singer and poet, we may here invoke a theory of magic and mimicry associated with that same relationship. It originates, moreover, from the surrealist literary community that congregated, in the interwar years, around George Bataille, whose theories of community have supported my argument throughout. In “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” Bataille’s collaborator Roger Caillois exhibits the amazing propensity of primitive life (moths, insects, crabs, etc.) to imitate their environments. This, he claims, should be seen as nothing else than a primitive form of magic. More complexly, that

39 Lovell, Black Song, 196.
magical mimicry, he argues, takes place in the human consciousness, as ideas in one's mind mimic others.\footnote{One thinks here of Abbot Thayer's work on “concealing coloration” and his turn-of-the-century photographs which reversed the trend of nineteenth-century animal photography by striving to make animals less distinct from their environments. See Matthew Brower, Developing Animals: Wildlife and Early American Photography (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 136.}

The danger confronting any organism so endowed with this magic comes in its potential to mimic too completely, to lose its identity in a surrealist slippage through and into space. The boundaries between an organism and its environment may become so indistinct as to amount to insanity. The clear separation between inner and outer, upon which a stable identity depends, becomes extinct. The commonality Caillois finds between schizophrenia and primitive camouflage pervades the mass geography of modernism. Again, Toomer and Anderson's preference for an endogenous sense of literary creation are implicated, as they attempt to resist the loss of themselves to exogenous media forms. But the resistance is incomplete, allowing for the schizoid moments of lost identity that constitute community as the inscription of ecstasy.

In their adaptation to the media ecology of this new geography, characters and authors experience, to use Caillois' description of psychasthenia, a “depersonalisation by [their] assimilation to space.”\footnote{Roger Caillois, The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).} The imagery of the internal growth of the organism and the organisation of literary form are couched in metaphors of seed, gestation, plant-life, but these processes, because of the mechanisation of landscape and mediascape, are no longer “organic,” as such. In ecstasy, the organism and the literary organ lose themselves and their autonomy in this inorganic milieu. To borrow biological terms urged by Toomer and Anderson's metaphors, the ontogeny of a given text recapitulates its presence among other species of media, a phylogeny increasingly grafted to mechanical modes of production.

To support this conclusion, we have, perhaps, paid scandalously too much attention to the first section of Cane. The recurrence of smoke and valleys, dusk and lament is not
surprising if one considers *Cane’s* multiple and overlapping sense of design. According to Toomer, *Cane*’s organisation expressed what he called “the spiritual entity behind the work,” which completes a life cycle within the text that starts with the awakening motif of “Bona and Paul,” “plunges into 'Kabnis,' emerges in 'Karintha,' etc. swings upward into 'Theater,' and 'Box Seat,' and ends (pauses) in 'Harvest Song.'”42 In describing the early poems, those that mark the upward swing of the spiritual cycle, Robert Jones and Margery Latimer chime with the critics of cohesion, calling them “celebrations of ancestral consciousness” that yet lament the disappearance of “Afro-American culture.” The “advent of dusk,” they claims, brings “a heightened sense of the black man's union with the spiritual world,”43 where Georgian geography is melded to Africa's, where songs turn toward the trans-Atlantic horizon, where a town lane leads back to a goat path in Africa. But the geographic collapse of Georgia into Africa only briefly staves off the completion of the spiritual cycle that ends with the dark harvest of mass geography’s strangely hybrid fruit.

At the origin of the soul’s harvest is Paul's racial epiphany, which “awakens” *Cane’s* “spiritual entity.” Newly self-conscious, Paul realises that some people see the darkness of his skin as not attractive but as different, which triggers “something long empty inside” him to become a place of growth, where the stares of others “were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness.”44 This decidedly organic awakening is ironic, however, in that it closes him to any reproductive opportunity with Bona. The troubled sprouts of Paul's identity find salvation, however, in biblical undertones, the “aimless rustling” of the Bible encapsulating Paul's experience in some husk of hope.

One religious parallel that presses against the trajectory of “Bona and Paul” is that

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44 Toomer, *Cane*, 74
of the annunciation. Here Paul is a typological union of Mary and Jesus, as the providence of speech impregnates him with a new racial consciousness even despite his sexual innocence. Thus he is born anew as a son of African ancestry, even as he is biologically orphaned. Much like Mary’s conception, the birth of Paul’s spirit is instigated by the lack, even the denial, of physical coupling. Love is promised, but speech alone is a grain that brings forth no fruit, as he says to Bona’s profession of love: “Love is a dry grain in my mouth unless it is wet with kisses.” Thereupon, at the moment Bona refuses to kiss him, as they stand together in the “slim shadow of the tree trunk,” Paul’s birth to himself, as a man of colour, is delivered. All the glances and judgments of others are crystallised in her rejection of him, in the cold culmination of his own being “Colored; cold. Wrong somewhere” (Cane, 74).

The biblical subtext of Bona and Paul extends into the final flourish of Paul’s coloured solidarity with the black doorman of the Crimson Gardens. To this man, Paul breathlessly admits that he “came into the Gardens, into life in the Gardens, with one whom I did not know. That I danced with her, and did not know her. That I felt passion, contempt and passion for her whom I did not know” (Cane, 78). His strenuous insistence that he came into life despite the absence of conjugal knowledge reminds one of the verbal annunciation brought by a divine spirit. His asexual awakening echoes the gospel of Matthew 1:24-25: “Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.” So in his spiritual birth, Bona seems impregnated through the failure to enact physical conjugation, likening him to Mary. At the same time, it is he who is born to himself, making Christ his antetype. Mother, father, and son are united in the authorship of Paul, in the spiritual entity who authors the figure

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of an awakening, a coming into a world without production or reproduction, as the moment is also one where, metaphorically, a grain fails to be wetted by sexual action.

Rounding out Cane’s nonlinear chronology, “Harvest Song” marks the endpoint of Cane’s spiritual design even though it immediately precedes “Bona and Paul” (the spiritual awakening of the formal cycle). Sung from the point of view of a “reaper,” the song presents a strong instance of Toomer fusing together the symbols of grain and voice into a literary, spiritual, and agrarian conceit. Hungry and dry-throated, the reaper cracks a grain between his teeth. “It has no taste to it.” “And should [he] call, a cracked grain like the oats ... eoho—” (Cane, 69). The reaping singer fears the use of his voice will prove as fruitless and dry as the grain is tasteless. This marks the complete disintegration of call-and-response community. Directly preceding Paul’s awakening story, “Harvest Song” compactly prefaces the paradoxical sense of birth through disunion. The singer admits:

I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have been in the fields all day

I fear I could not taste it. I fear knowledge of my hunger.

(Cane, 69).

The hopelessness of the agrarian scene subtly interrogates The Bible’s magical role in the formation of in Afro-American identity. “Harvest Song” and “Bona and Paul” participate in a conceit (the word as grain) that derives from strong biblical precedence. For example, in the Parable of the Sowers, which is related in the Synoptic Gospels, Mark relates (in 2:24-25) how Jesus and his disciples travelled through the agricultural communities near the sea of Galilee, unlawfully gleaning corn on the Sabbath to assuage the hunger they have developed in carrying the news of Christ. In Chapter 4 of Mark, Jesus
cryptically addresses his listeners with a parable about a sower who indiscriminately casts his seeds. Some are choked by inhospitable climes, some land in fecund places and bear fruit.

Later, when alone with his disciples, Jesus is asked to explain the parable. Mark then provides his own hermeneutic apparatus, one that can be useful in approaching the biblical and spiritual propagation of Cane’s metaphorical field, as well as Wineburg’s. “The sower,” Jesus explains to his small and committed community, “soweth the word.” The visual and vocal impotence of the singer of “Harvest Song” cannot be separated from his hunger at harvest, from the meagreness of his reaping. Why would he call out to others when there are no more nourishing voices to collect, when grains have no taste? Here the lack of identity between sound and seed counteracts the biblical insistence that speaking and planting are the same act. One clearly does not reap what one sows. One's call is not returned.

Another famous unity of voice and grain comes from the Gospel of John, when Jesus evokes the voice of the Lord for the stray Greeks visiting an early Christian worship:

Verily, verily I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

To prove potency of word as germ, Jesus calls upon the voice of the Lord to glorify his name. “Then came a voice from heaven, saying...” The heavenly voice of angel or Father is again associated with a seed, a divine immanence in the landscape, which Cane, to its modernist credit, disinters.

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46 Carroll and Prickett, The Bible, 48.
47 Ibid., 134.
The dramatic form of “Kabnis” largely represents direct speech acts, and so is all the more alarming and damning for the fact that, according to Toomer, “Kabnis” marks the deepest point of dormancy for the spiritual entity behind or within the text. The Maeterlinck-like stillness of the characters sitting in the cellar of Halsey's workshop, especially that of the speechless Father John, reinforces the point that the spirit finds itself in even greater remission the more imperative the question of speaking out loud becomes. *Cane* is therefore still deeply enmeshed in the biblical hermeneutics of parable and the folk implement of the voice intoning the spiritual, but it explores the faltering limits of those cultural antecedents. The potential for speech to effect political change in a community is compromised within a mass geography of the agrarian south, where an auditory media system reformed the religious ontology of both the word and voice as an organic catalyst for growth. For Toomer, that ontology was no longer consistent with the folk spiritualism of this regional African-American culture and its drives for political emancipation.

Though the topic of folk singing plays less of a role in Sherwood Anderson's vision of the modernising American community, he offers a short journalistic anecdote on that subject, which he published in the daily paper of Marion, Virginia, where for a time he owned and edited local print media. As an “impressionistic sketch,” what Taylor and Modlin call the “signature genre” of his journalistic writing, 48 “The Singing Print Shop,” tells of Warren Johnson, a “colored man and teamster” who, on a clear bright day when he “had got the manure all unloaded,” came into the print shop and sang a song for the staff. “Now you must have Jesus round your home,” went the lyrics. “The presses were running and Warren came in and sang ... to the tune of the presses.” To the whirring of the presses went they lyrics:

Little Children, your body lies molded in the clay,
Little Children, your body lies molded in the clay.
Get your heart right with God,
Cause you won't stay here always,
You must have Jesus round your home.49

Anderson relates this anecdote a bit flippantly, ignoring Warren's admonition that one ought have Jesus round the home. Instead he highlights the fact that Warren's singing complements the found sound, the mechanical instrumentation of the press, naming the piece “The Singing Print Shop” to underscore the lived autonomy of mass geography's mechanical forces. The juxtaposition of the spiritual song and the printing press, and this hybrid creation of “the singing print shop,” indicates Anderson's awareness that the origin of inscription has been displaced by autonomous technologies for reproducing print. Small towns no longer require the authority of God (“Jesus round the home”); not once newspapers and magazines pervade those houses as if they were city apples, the fruit of mass geography, produce of mechanical inscription, a “writing without a subject.”

This trait of America's mass geography explains Anderson's qualms with reporting experience in the mechanical age. As a mechanical distribution of reproduced voices confronts him with a challenge to the ontology of authorial source, his critical writings suggest that the human voice no longer underwrites authority and truth. As the mechanical forces of mass geography transfer into a rural landscape, Anderson's organic, endogenous metaphors of story-writing equally luxuriate in that literary form's propensity to disrupt truth. As told by his “Book of Grotesques,” the regional modernist relishes stories relating people's quixotic attempt to grasp the truth. So both in Anderson's short stories and his journalistic writing, the human voice (as a conveyor of testimony) becomes of increasingly suspect authority, and moreover, an incomplete source of identity.

“Among the Drifters,” a piece collected in Hello Towns!, displays how starkly and frankly Anderson, as a story's editor, casts a shadow of doubt over human speech. The story is about “workmen” he met in Chicago and the way they “talk and lie.” An exemplary encounter with a suspicious urban transient occurs one night when a “tall countrified fellow” named Jake interrupted Anderson, who had been contemplating the railroad from his boarding house window, gazing out at the “lanterns in the darkness and the headlights of the engines.” Jake was shifty: “There was something queer about his eyes,” Anderson remembers, and he made “queer movements with his fingers, opening and closing his fists” (Hello, 216-217).

Jake tells Sherwood the story of how his “shot-gun marriage” met a violent end. Anderson prefaces the story, which he relates in great detail, by stating: 'Whether it was true or not, I do not know.” Stories emerging amid the den of lying workmen are impossible to verify. “Whether or not this one [Jake] was a liar I never found out. As I have said, we were all itinerant workers ... He may just have been a liar or he may have been an itinerant workman, drifting about with that [violence] on his mind” (Hello, 222–223). Placing himself among the workmen, who lack both origin and the authority to validate experience, Anderson reduces his own credibility by proxy, so that the identity of a person as “true” or as “liar” is made doubly uncertain by the verbal transience of telling and retelling. Irrupting in paradox, however, and cutting against this illocalising trend of language, is the discrete locational detail of both Jake and Anderson's storytelling.

The first queer spat of concrete description comes when Jake describes himself as a farmer. Amid a georgic scene, the “leaves had fallen off the trees in the wood,” Jake told Sherwood, giving a “sickly smile” as he told that “simple fact.” From the trees the leaves had fallen and “there were wet ones clinging to his shoes.” “He mentioned also that during the previous summer there had been tall flowering weeds growing beside the lane in the shadow of the woods.” This irruption of plant life and organic trimming recapitulates
Anderson’s modernism in *Winesburg*, but here those tropes are mouthed amid a trust-less testimonial in a Chicago flophouse. Anderson therefore voices a question that any reader of *Winesburg* might ask, remarking that Jake “seemed to be telling me these details, wanting to get at something yet hesitating. Was he fending me off what he wanted to tell or was he just working me up?” (*Hello* 218).

Eliciting the same questions, the narrator of *Winesburg, Ohio*, who seems always to be hesitating before something, uses organic particularity to draw the sexual geometry of the town. “The town lies in the midst of open fields, but beyond the fields are pleasant patches of woodlands. In the wooded places are many little cloistered nooks, quiet places where lovers go to sit on Sunday afternoons” (*Ohio* 88). These concentric circles relegate the richest libidinal repositories to the woodland nooks, and such is the design of the tale told by Jake, who rescues his ill-fated lover, Elise Hardy, from an emotionally disturbing night in town, only to bring her to the woods and penetrate her as she “resisted a little, not much.” As he relates the trip from town to woods, with its promise of consummation, Jake “described the pattern of the moonlight on the path in the wood” just as he “described how the wet dead leaves clung to his shoes on another evening.” Jake's attachment to organic matter, to the foot-clinging mould of the forest, parallels his sexual fecundity, since in the ovulating woodland moonlight he impregnates Elise. The pregnancy prompts Elise's brother to convert rape into marriage at the end of his shot-gun, but, being badly matched, Jake murders his wife because, he claims, she “had such a scrawny neck” (*Hello* 221).

Though Anderson cannot verify the authenticity of the man's tale, he notes the role details play in manipulating a listener's perspective on the truth of events. Jake's details make him an exemplary liar, who redefines the very categories of lie and truth along the undecidable, ecstatic boundaries of mass geography. Unlike Toomer's inscription of literary community (where recorded musical voices modify literary voice), Anderson's questions about the natural boundaries of personal voice and sexual bodies stem from his
place among workers, farmers, and craftspeople who are deracinated (like harvested plants) and drifting (like fallen leaves) through the mass geography of early twentieth-century America.\textsuperscript{50} Here, transience disrupts the ontology of literary voice, as opposed to the “permanency” of the phonographic recording. So in general, mass geography interrogates authorial speech from two sides, as autonomous vocal technologies replace the spirit and magic of “natural Man” who meanwhile, like the daily paper, succumbs to unprecedented ephemerality and disposability, as well as distributability.

As Anderson’s under-drawn miniature of Warren Johnson attests, he and Toomer compare in their attitudes toward the place of rural African-American vocalists in this mass geography of the American countryside. Anderson’s correspondence with Toomer displays an ecstatic split over the issue of racial relations in the United States. A man of two minds, he declined to advance the cause of the Negro Arts movement, suggesting that artists quit thinking of Negro art and just call it art. As such he opted out of Toomer’s plan for a magazine that would “function organically for” the “budding Negro consciousness,” maintaining that art was more important than the social identity of the artist. Yet elsewhere, to Toomer’s chagrin, Anderson pigeonholed him as an artist of colour: “He limits me to Negro,” Toomer complained to Waldo Frank. Despite the faltering friendship between Toomer and Anderson, stumbling as it did over racial grounds, Toomer did praise the artistic and emotional “richness” of Anderson’s depiction of black Americans.\textsuperscript{51}

In \textit{Hello Towns!}, the collection of his newspaper editorials that includes both “Among the Drifters” and “The Singing Print Shop,” he frequently comments on what he calls the “unconscious giving of himself to the song by the singer” that he had “heard from the lips of so-called ignorant negro workers” in “lonely places in the far south.” Repeating Toomer’s conceit of finding seed and soul in black American singing, Anderson hears

\begin{footnotes}
\item[50] Cf. Whalan, \textit{Race, Manhood, and Modernism in America}, especially chapters 1 & 2.
\end{footnotes}
spirits as proof that the “negro race has something the white race has lost.” Muting the fact that spirituals resound with the loss of home and identity in Africa, Anderson makes loss the substrate of art: “In the arts you have to lose all before you begin to gain anything. The arts are like religion in that” (Hello 146-147). The perverse implication is that slavery is an artful experience, offering artistic and spiritual authenticity, but, as implication, it remains subcutaneous, with Anderson’s impressionistic journalism, like his fiction, falling short of blatant exposition.

A sketchy conglomeration of details, the impressionism of storytelling and newspaper reporting hinges on the cryptic and even unfinished comments. In his short article on Afro-American folk singing he achieves his inimitable effect, paradoxically, through the standard rhetorical technique of aposiopesis. Comparing the black singers’ performance in Marion to the more authentic ones he heard in his travels, he trails off: “They are good, surely. But when you have heard negro singing, as I have, in lonely places in the far south—” Aposiopesis, however, does not obscure his point, as it defines the singular impressionism rather than public expression of his journalistic voice. The point remains that Southern singing becomes more authentic the closer one tracks it to the brutal experiences Anderson takes as constitutive of the “negro race.”

Like Nancy in theorising community, Anderson finds the sorrowful source of loss at the wellspring of community, just as Du Bois equated Afro-American folk community with the “sorrow song.” Anderson’s contemporary Paul Robeson conceded, in a 1929 interview with the Toronto Daily Star, that the African “flair” for song was a “faculty [that] was born in sorrow.”52 The formal effects of aposiopesis mimic that loss whereby, as Anderson has it, the artist gains his or her art. For the loss of syntax, the writer’s losing their train of thought, is the only artful response to the way in which spirituals espouse the redemption that can be found in loss. Making its point by its disappearance, as an unfinished sentence

loses itself to gain its artfulness, it meanwhile stages the experience of waiting that keeps both singer and listener, writer and reader on the line, open to one another in the communal resistance to closure.

In the modernist experiments of *Winesburg*, Anderson's sentences—paired back as they are to the simplest constructions, sometimes even raw and unfinished—condense in microcosm the larger creations of his stories and reports. He picks details with constraint, producing sketchy impressions, evocative curiosities that gain from what is left unsaid. Let us be reminded that Anderson identifies this principle as a religious one. By holding Anderson's modernist story cycle to the mirror of his journalistic impressionism, one sights both people and words propagating according to the organic metaphors of planting and growing, that fusion of a religious and agrarian conceit wrought by the literary ancestry of the Christian gospels.

However, the sections of *Winesburg* that most explicitly engage with biblical sources allegorise Old Testament stories rather than the testimony of Christ's disciples. A most noteworthy instance is “Godliness,” a two-part story that is picked up and completed by “Surrender” and “Terror.” “Godliness (Part One)” introduces Jesse Bentley, a “coarse and brutal” “overlord”, who “had proclaimed himself the only true servant of God in all the valley of Wine Creek” (*Ohio*, 55). Distinct from the magical mimicry and “instinctive” musical “flair” of the African-American spiritual, Jesse Bentley's religious energy derives from a distinct intellectual and allegorical brand of mimicry, that of Puritan typology. He sees the valley of Wine Creek as refiguring the Valley of Elah, and anoints himself its King Saul. His idealisation of the men “of old times, who like him had owned flocks and land,” arouses his suspicion that the farmlands around Wine Creek could produce another man, “like Goliath the Philistine of Gath,” who “could defeat [Jesse] and take [his] possessions” (*Ohio* 50). As a preventive measure, he asks the Lord for a son; after all, Saul had been given David. He is, unsurprisingly, delivered a girl, Louise, in the first of two ironic
disruptions to Jesse's typological scheme.

In “Terror,” the fourth instalment of the Bentley saga, Anderson completes his interrogation of typological geography by inverting Jesse into the Goliath he originally feared. Even though Jesse's prayers have been answered by agricultural abundance, he craves the unmediated word of the lord, so he absconds to some “lonely place in the woods” where he is certain an offering of burnt flesh will make God “appear to him and give him a message.” Jessie's desired vocal message contradicts Anderson's religious attitude toward silent “lonely places,” isolated geographies like those of the deep South where Afro-folk singing provoked his aposiopetic speechlessness, his artful loss of language. Nonetheless, Jesse collects his grandson, David, and the two drive their phaeton silently together through the countryside, to a remote “opening among the trees,” where, “still silent,” Jesse builds his sacrificial fire. Deciding to wipe the blood of the sacrificial lamb on David's head, he approaches the boy with the knife still brandished. Overcome by terror, David loads his slingshot and fells the violent giant of old times with a speechless stone (Ohio, 73–74).

Under the false assumption that he has “killed the man of God,” David flees Winesburg forever. However, Jesse awakes with an indefatigable faith, reading the disappearance of his grandson as the sign from the Lord he so desired. God's message obtains in the absence of filial presence, so that when “David's name” appears on the lips of Winesburg's residents, Jesse looks “vaguely to the sky,” stating that God's messenger took the boy because he (Jesse) was “too greedy for glory.” Besides that he “would have no more to say in the matter” (Ohio, 75–76). Again the withdrawal of speech demarcates both religious and artistic experience as that which cannot be articulated, that which exchanges the impulse to name and describe for a contemplative vacancy.

In this sense Anderson partially sympathises with Jesse's terrible pretensions to godliness because those religious attitudes are inseparable agonists to what, in
“Godliness,” he calls the “revolution” of industrialism and the “vast change” it registers in America’s hinterlands. Mass geography, “shrilly” announced by “millions of new voices” from overseas, penetrates the city into the country, as inter-urban trains thread “in and out of towns, past farmhouses.” Newspapers and magazines have been “pumped” into the minds of farmers until they are “overflowing with the words of other men.” This media flow, the narrator laments, has washed away an “old brutal ignorance that had in it also a kind of beautiful childlike innocence.” The revolution of mass geography erodes not only the storied men of the Bible but also the typological imagination of those who attempted to plant a “childlike innocence” in the new world. David therefore topples America's simulacral dream of a renewed covenant, resisting the terror of immanence in a panic of fight and flight that sentences him to the open-ended migrations of mass geography.

The saga of the Bentleys and “The Strength of God,” the satirical sketch of Winesburg's reverend, call for a deeper investigation into the religious life of Anderson's modernist small-town. In contrast to Toomer's Sempter, the spiritual design of Winesburg is held together by a perseverating pervert of a pastor, and the epic contest of a modernist son and an elder Goliath, which casts religion as an oppressive monolith, permeated and outmoded by those permissive energies of modern sexuality that rationally reorder the townscape. In Toomer's southern portrait, the Bible provided an ill-equipped resource for traditions of mimicry and magic struggling to reinstitute political change in a newly mechanised ecology of human voices. This urges a comparison with Winesburg, where the concern about “natural” speech within mass geography appears, in “Godliness” for instance, as the question of whether vocal divinity will sow, propagate and yield the fruit of modernity. In Toomer, auditory media technologies render the voice sourceless and without subjectivity, as Kittler described the gramophone's impact. Anderson similarly takes the measure of the human voice, but his literary speech is sourceless and unverifiable.

53 Ibid., 48.
because of the increased mobility and disposable material of mass geography, where, even among small-towns, identity is unanchored and testimony untrustworthy.

Though its typology differs from *Cane*, *Winesburg* inhabits similar territory by uniting plant metaphor with questions of modern speech and writing. The town's plant metaphors grow from its news reporter, George Willard, whose mother realises (after their “communion” at their home’s back window, where a “picture of village life” presented itself) that the boy is no “dull clod,” that inside him “there is a secret something that is striving to grow” (*Ohio*, 24-26). Such secret internal growth is the kind that the growing George will persist in observing, especially under the influence of his teacher Kate Swift who advises: “You must not become a mere peddler of words. The thing to learn is to know what people are thinking about, not what they say” (*Ohio*, 161). The philosophical force of *Winesburg, Ohio* germinates from this phenomenon, articulating the unarticulated within the formal features of silence, loneliness, aposiopesis, and impressionism. The ability to counteract the inauthenticity of other people's speech with the knowledge of their thoughts secretes a sexual fertility and organic promise, separating the “dull clods” from the “striving,” germinating townspeople who escape the town's boundaries.

Because talking generally precedes coition, voice and speech further the mouth's function as the gateway to sexual interaction. In Winesburg, such speech acts and sex acts often stay unrepresented, except as absences, in ellipses, where the sexual is registered by what surrounds it, the cloistered nooks, the woods, the natural shapes of geography that wordlessly ensconce lovers. “Nobody Knows” tells of George’s early romantic escapades. After courting Louise Trunnion across a “potato patch,” he eventually spirits her to the outskirts of town to take part in something about which, to George’s ecstasy, “nobody knows.” To access the sexually reproductive geography of Winesburg, they cross a stream, pass “vacant lots,” file down a narrow path and sit on a pile of boards beside a berry field. Setting the precedent of clandestine love being surrounded by vegetal fecundity, this story
establishes a spatial pattern that the story-cycle goes on to disrupt.

The orchards, berry fields, and “cloistered nooks” of woods that fortify the romantic success of lovers only torment other townspeople as places of exclusion, relegating them, like the tall dark girl in “Paper Pills” to an unproductive wretchedness, trapping them within the bound of the town. In “Adventure” the young newspaper man Ned Currie makes love to Alice Hindman in a “place where a long meadow ran down to the bank of Wine Creek,” but promptly thereafter he leaves for the city and forgets Alice, who remains, without child or lover, pining for their love every time she sees “the moon shining on the grass as it had shone that night on the meadow” (Ohio, 86-87). Yet the broken and forgotten Alice undergoes a process of growth, just not a reproductive one. In fact she constantly worries about “growing” this way or that way. Her “desire” grows “vague.” On a rainy night, she runs naked with mad desire through “the little grass plot” in front of her house, only to collapse, tremble, and crawl through the grass, physically distorted by the fact that she must live and die alone in Winesburg.

The sad fates of Alice and the other lonely atomised characters of Winesburg society challenge the notion that Anderson’s collection renews a lost sense of community in a figure of coherence or immanence. In Different Dispatches David Humphries notes that both Yingling and Irving Howe express “contradictory assumptions” about the nature of community before, during and after modernisation. Howe admits that the bonds of communality supposedly obliterated by modern alienation may be naught but the “claim of American mythos.” However, he earnestly characterises George Willard as a “priest” who will renew “forgotten communal rites.” Howe and Yingling therefore stage the same mystifying literary history that Callahan, Scruggs and VanDemarr apply to Cane, splitting themselves (ecstatically) between claims of spiritual cohesion and the tacit understanding

that modernism disintegrates such immanence, exposing self-coherent models of community to be mythic, as such.

As a genre, the story-cycle elicits some confusion over the integrity of literary and social forms. The point is dramatised by Waldo Frank's modernist short-story cycle, *City Block*, an under-examined link between *Winesburg* and *Cane*. Written in 1922 (several years after the Winesburg tales began appearing in *New Masses*) Frank's work, according to Scruggs and VanDemarr, “subjects” *Winesburg* to a “compression and fusion” that is “based on Frank's understanding of Jules Romains's *unanimise*.” They claim his attempt is to “produce a new social spirit, 'the harmonics of a Unit,' a communal relationship that would manifest itself beyond the individual's awareness.” Scruggs and VanDemarr describe the “technique of *Winesburg*” as satisfying this new social spirit, as later stories complete “the meanings of earlier ones, linking them by patterns of imagery, doubled characters, recurring themes, and a broken or intermittent narrative.”

However, the later stories complicate as much as complete the earlier ones, and the broken or intermittent technique implies that community is based in narrative and social disintegration, thus contesting Frank's vision of a unified and harmonious national culture. As such, Anderson and Toomer's towns mark the ragged edges of Frank's Americanism, where literary community inscribes the “infinite resistance” to complete narrative and cultural cohesion.

Moreover, the concepts of organic unity, cyclical completion, and interruptive modernity have their physical, geographical manifestation in the areal patterns of the rural United States. D.W. Meinig has comprehensively elaborated on the “*American system of regional development*,” which, as early as 1785, when Jefferson spearheaded the first federal land ordnance, established a “township and range” system of surveying. The centrepiece of this system was the town, dictated as a six square mile area from which

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outlying plots would be measured – rectangular patches awaiting individual settlement. However, in its application, the system did not always control actual patterns of settlement, which often escaped the dictates of governmental policy. But the general system has left its imprint on America's regional geography and it offers a paradox that can be extended to narrative form, where uniformity obtains in intermittent narration, the cessation and resumption of story and voice. As the township and range system ensured conformity not despite but through a processes of division and dispersion, so to the regional story-cycle completes itself in its incompleteness, achieves its definitive formal effects by its disintegrative tendencies.

Amid a mass geography, divided and dispersed settlement patterns speak to the commercial subtext of communal experience. In a series of books on American town-planning, John Reps demonstrates that despite the number of exceptional designs proposed for American settlements, most have developed, in Meinig's paraphrase, as “simple grids of linear streets framing rectangular lots.” As the segmented grid brought “[r]egularity, simplicity and conformity” at all scales of American locales, from village to metropolis, the “primary purpose” of the design was “not to found communities but to sell lots.”57 Obeying the reproductive logic of late capital, the short story cycle recapitulates the economic design that divided land into saleable commodities. As such, narrative form mimes the financial logic of land management: one person per story, one person per plot. Devoid of natural voice, shot through with the effects of mechanical media, humans, in the short story cycle, become so deeply associated with vegetal life that they are finally exchangeable with land – not in the romantic sense, where their identities spring organically from a regional homeland, but in a commercial sense, where characters and

communities demarcate the distribution of commodities in a mass geography.

Figure 15.
Panoramic Map of Urbana, Illinois, by Chicago Lithography, 1869,
Courtesy of Library of Congress

The pastoral elements of the agricultural landscape hardly balance this standardised division and production of human space. Winesburg may be a town allotted among berry and potato patches; Sempter may smell of soil and woodsmoke and pine; moreover, Anderson and Toomer's townsfolk may be “germinal” in Pound's sense, as those who
harbour their thoughts just “as the thought of the tree is in the seed,” but, the poeticism of such organic immanence is always acknowledged as such, a poeticism that does not overcome mass geography so much as grow from it, where the idea of “organic community” depends on the capitalist modernity that supposedly displaced it. Hence, a picture of village life that unveils the corruption of human intention and identity is the only image of community available to the regional modernists, who compile their stories between a series of narrative gaps, and inscribe a series of narrative gaps (silence, ellipsis, aposiopesis) within their stories. The story-cycle’s outer tension between division and wholeness expresses the inner tension of the modernist storyteller, who can no longer naturally mediate the irreducible distinction between the interiority of thought and the exteriority of verbal articulation. So, as bodies of work, Cane and Winesburg, Ohio are like the body of Toomer's character Fern, which “was tortured with something it could not let out” (Cane 25).

In the final instance, the “something striving to grow” in George, this “something” that Fern's body could not let out, is the same something that Toomer and Anderson's fiction are equally incapable of locating and emitting, since the human voice, in the phonographic age, undergoes what Žižek calls an “uncanny autonomization,” and is no longer “attached to an object” or a person. In the mass geography surrounding Toomer and Anderson, there are no more canny voices that are naturally attached to objects and humans – only the free floating “spectral voice” that haunts the modern desert of Georgia, the inauthentic and sourceless speech that disrupts the ideal of the Midwestern village. Yet this landscape of automatization, as it resounds with inorganic communication, “founds” a

58 Fisher, Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas, 11. Quoted from Pound, Spirit of Romance, (New York: New Directions), 92. Pound thought germinal people, who he contrasted to the “phantaskitkon,” were best represented in the media of dramas, music and radio.

community based on continuous and incessant interruption, a community that can never be sure of its identity, as it fails to confirm the authority or naturalness of its own self-articulations.

According to Kittler, media technologies modify humanity, interrupting the feedback loop whereby “humans” hear themselves talk or see themselves write. However, according to Slavoj Žižek humans have always been so disintegrated from their senses, as voice and sight mutually indicate the inadequacy of the other sense perception. As such, the voice “points toward a gap in the field of the visible,” where “ultimately, we hear things because we cannot see everything.” To see, by extension, is to peer into the inaudible, into a gap within the vocal, so one sees an “image that renders present the failure of the voice.”60 In the spatial patterning of America’s rural landscape, divided by property lines; in the organisational breaks of the short story sequence; in the jagged end of aposiopesis or in the ellipsis as it trails off; among all this formal evidence (which points to gaps in the auditory field) readers literally see the failure of voice, observe the silence of a character/narrator’s unarticulated thought. Both muting and activating the voice of its author, a line of text visualises silence, presents an image of personal interiority that need not be aurally externalised, and as such, the modernist inscription of community draws a new picture of the American small-town, shaped, as they were, to resist the expression of their own teleological designs, to identify only with the fleeting, sourceless, and always-already lost “nature” of their self-identities.

60 Ibid., 93.
Writing by Movie Light
If, as Žižek argues, we see what we cannot hear, if sight points to a “gap within the field” of the audible, then a suitable demonstration of this phenomenon should appear in the medium of the silent film. To adapt a literary modernism from the silent screen, regional authors (in their writings on cinema and on the American landscape) discovered both a sound comparison and a cinematic precursor in the ideograms of ancient languages, including Egyptian hieroglyphs. For them, the mute icon of the cinema screen exhumed what C.S. Peirce would call the “non-logical” icons of primitive writing,¹ and, as such, regional modernists were able to interpret the “rhemes,” or conditions of possibility,² within the cinematic sign, specifically uncovering the phonetic potential of the silent image, its potential to be read aloud, by comparing those screened images to the phonetic icons inscribed on the immemorial walls, tombs and temples of Egypt.

A cinematic and archaeological ambiance floods the first pages of Willa Cather’s My Ántonia (1918), as Jim Burden and an old friend travel westward into the memory of their Nebraska youths:

² Peirce, Collected Papers, 2:144.
While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over everything.³

Wipe the dust from Burden’s memory and the metaphors of the human mind meet the concrete details of material inscription, just as Rukeyser’s theory of flight merged earth and air into a new surface, upon which the airplane engraved its likeness to stone-cut hieroglyphs. One of the first such details appearing in Burden’s memoir is that of the “worldly man” who conducted passengers amid the bucolic “flashes” of the country train, a man who was “more inscribed than an Egyptian obelisk,” whose cosmopolitanism was symbolised even by “his cuff-buttons,” which were “engraved with hieroglyphics” (*Every 714*).

In *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915), Vachel Lindsay refers to Egyptian hieroglyphics as “a moving-picture alphabet.”⁴ Using a contemporary dictionary to argue that the letter C derives from an isomorphic Egyptian hieroglyph that signified throne, he “fancifully” suggests:

> There are sometimes three thrones in this small town of Springfield (Illinois) in an evening. When you see it flashed on the screen, you know instantly you are dealing with royalty and its implications. The last one I saw that made any particular impression was when Mary Pickford acted in Such a Little Queen. I only wished then that she had a more convincing throne.

William Routt has already discussed the way in which Lindsay’s film theory applies a

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Peircian semiotics to the film image, but Routt overly schematises the relationship, seeing Peirce’s triad of icon, index, and symbol as directly mapped onto Lindsay’s triadic division between photoplays of Action, Intimacy and Splendour. However, Lindsay’s experience at the Springfield theatre, his interpretation of “Such a Little Queen,” indicates a more complicated accretion of signs within the cinematic image. Here Mary Pickford, despite her royal dress, is iconic, referring only to who she is, the ingénue Mary Pickford herself. The “hieroglyphic” throne, however, emerges in a way Peirce would not have expected. Whereas Peirce discussed Egyptian hieroglyphs as “non-logical” icons, Lindsay sees them as symbolic, where the flash of the throne on the screen, or the pictographic inscription of the throne in Egyptian writing, symbolises royalty and its implications. When Lindsay claims that photographs portray “elementary or conventional things” (what in Peircian semiotics would be the delomic or argumentative nature of a sign) but also a more abstract meaning (or “interpretant”), he prepares the stage for Cather to interpret the silent film image rhemically, uncovering, as she does, its potential for highly emotive qualities.  

Just as they are in Springfield’s theatre, the hieroglyphs Burden encounters on his cross-country train ride are definitively symbolic – of worldliness. By the late nineteenth-century, the inscribed obelisk Cleopatra’s Needle was installed in Central Park outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where Cather lived for much of her life, and where both Jim Burden and the un-named narrator of My Ántonia’s introduction reside. In Paris the Luxor Obelisk had enjoyed its prominence in the Place de La Concorde since the early nineteenth-century, so Cather probably passed it during her stays there. Even as the “worldly” and “inscribed” train conductor escorts Burden towards the “big Western dreams” of Wyoming and Montana, he moves back and forth, as a hieroglyphic man, through a mass geography that is transatlantic as well as transcontinental, and as such he is the first to make Burden aware of the Bohemian girl Ántonia whose family has come, as

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5 Lindsay, Art of Moving Picture, 115-117.
he puts it, “from across the water” (*Novels* 715).

A signifier that encompasses more than just cosmopolitanism, “Egypt” provides the setting for Cather’s early short story “A Tale of the White Pyramid.” Told by a high priest in Memphis, who, after witnessing a romantic devotion between men, promises to keep his lips “sealed,” the story represses the homosexual “sin” of King Kufu and a young northern shepherd by burying it beneath a silence as heavy as a stone. The city of Memphis presides over the scene “as silent as the judgement hall of Osiris.” Such seriousness quells the crowd. As masses of royal subjects and slaves witness a ceremonial burial, “the words of men died upon their lips.” When the final “polished stone” is hoisted up to crown the pyramid, “every voice was hushed.” When the stone breaks free from the rope pulley, “the builders spoke no words,” and the slaves, “not daring to breath,” watch from frozen postures as the young shepherd, whom the king showed “great favor,” leaps to heroic action. Using his own body to “break the shock” of the falling object, he himself is stilled by injury, falling “motionless” upon the stone. 6

The silent images of the story “speak” to the violent repression of same-sex desire by verbally omitting it, concealing it within the body to dampen its “shocking” impact. Elsewhere in her fiction and non-fiction Cather references Egyptian inscription to double the violence of sexual repression with the violence of slavery. *A Lost Lady* (1922) describes this touch of the Foresters’ interior decorating: a small sculpture of “an Arab or Egyptian slave girl, holding in her hands a large flat shell from the California coast” where Marian Forester placed letters to be posted, including those that arranged her extramarital affairs. Wendy Perriman notes that the “actual prototype sculpture in the Red Cloud Museum,” depicts an African-American girl, which suggests that Cather’s alteration of geographic

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detail tinges Marian's infidelity with an uncertain exoticism ("Arab or Egyptian"). In an 1899 review of Richard Whiteing's No. 5 John Street, Cather again refers to ancient Egyptian slavery when she compares Whiteing's "satisfactory" handling of the "metropolitan poor" with the "stiff-necked" sociological studies of Princeton political economist Walter Wyncoff, whose book on the turn-of-the-century working class Cather finds "as instructive and alive" as those "old Egyptian sculptures" that depict slave labour.

Implying that old stone pictographs are as dynamic and educational as current sociological methods, this last reference contains the overtones Cather reserved for cinematic projection, a medium to which she attributed at first only pedagogical value, affording it little of the emotive power she found in other arts, especially theatre and music. Harshly reviewing a production of Anthony and Cleopatra she saw in Lincoln, Nebraska, Cather mocks the lowbrow stage techniques that "treated" the audience to "stereopticon views" of the Egyptian setting. All that was missing was a "lecture," she quips. Since the stereopticon, or "magic lantern," was a proto-cinematic technology commonly used for education and entertainment, Cather reveals a common bias toward the projected image when she describes silent motion pictures as both pedagogic and lowbrow, something "instructive," or a mere "entertainment" – the ideal "diversion" of "tired businessmen."

Through this sprinkling of references, Cather advances a basic association between Egypt and slavery that a Christian education would instil, but she combines the Egypt/slavery conflation with a second association, that of visual modernity. Cather balances this prejudice with a call for solidarity with the abjectly outcast, the enslaved, the

downtrodden worker. Her lionisation of the young gay shepherd presents an example. Not only does he labour heroically to preserve the Pyramid's royal edifice, but, like Jesus, he is from a land lying to the north of Egypt, a shepherd, perhaps an interloping Israelite, and so by geography and trade he is doubly ostracised, since in Genesis 46:34 it states: “every shepherd is an abomination unto Egyptians.” Cather consistently characterises Egypt as a slave society hostile to brotherly love, individual effort and the pastoral ideal, and in so doing she encodes a contemporary discussion of the impoverished “metropolitan” masses profiled by Wyncoff's books. Her thesis that every writer has to know what it means to be Egyptian as much as they “know how it feels to be a thirsty Bowery boy” furthers her association between Egypt, the “vagrant” masses of modernity, and the popular visual forms that instructed and entertained them. This assumed solidarity between the writer of modern literature and the defiled consumer of mass society obtains in the figure of the Egyptian engraving, a silent cipher which encrypts the violent experience of American modernity within an ancient African precedent for mass societal bondage.

Using the figure of the hieroglyph to encompass a mass geography, Cather has Burden traverse the region of his youth with a worldly figure who therefore miniaturises the grandeur and violence of an ancient civilisation across the water. Yet the violence of slavery, which approximates the technopolitical dominion of mass society and its commodity forms, does not undercut Cather’s insistence on the restorative power of labouring close to the land. In a classic article on My Ántonia as an American Georgic, Curtis Dahl reveals how the novel interprets Virgil according to an early twentieth-century theory of regionalism, as Burden's Latin instructor at the University in Lincoln translates patria as “not a nation or even a province but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born” (Novels 876). Furthermore, Cather distils from the Georgics the

11 Carroll and Prickett, The Bible, 60.
12 Cather, The Kingdom of Art, 145.
melancholy attitude (like Pound's towards a “Provincia Deserta”) that grandeur is transitory, that we cannot recover “the golden days of youth.” Yet, in an optimistic misreading of Virgil, she translates the message of his *Georgics* in order to support her thesis that, as Dahl puts it, “all poetry must necessarily grow out of the lives of people close to the land,” what he calls a nineteenth-century theory “rather than a Roman one.”

Cather's turn-of-the-century regionalism thus acknowledges the processes of geographical superimposition and poetic translation in modernity, maintaining the coherence of American community according to the exigency of displacement and loss, but, in a way that diverges from Nancy's theory, assumes that labour and literature are intertwined forces in the creation of communities on the Midwestern prairie. Using the Egyptian glyph as a recurrent meme for the labouring masses, Cather suggests the communalism provided by group labour is potentiated, in America's interwar mass geography, by the figure of the labourer and even in the popular media forms of the stereopticon and moving picture, which, although they did not yet fully achieve the poetic effect of conjuring emotion, provided ideal distractions for those bound to a society of mass labour.

In Cather's theory of art, for an artistic form to be fully poetic it must affect the emotions, and to that effect silent cinema did not, for her, qualify. Whereas sociological and cinematic writing may be instructive, they are stiff-necked and computational when compared to theatre and music. Although Cather does not “lament the advent” of what she calls the “screen drama,” she compares cinema unfavourably to the “old-fashioned” “barnstorming” theatre companies “which used to tour about in country towns and 'cities of the second class.'” A movie, and especially, she recognises, the movies of Charlie Chaplin, might “appeal to what is called the artistic sense,” but as to appealing “to the

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emotions, the deep feelings, never!” She watches audiences, and especially the faces of children, during the “picture shows in the little towns” only to observe “curiosity” and “mild excitement,” but never “that breathless rapt attention and deep feeling” that her gay shepherd of the pyramid and “the old barnstorming companies” of the country road “were able to command.”

As the movies “put an end” to the opera houses of “little Nebraska towns,” Cather describes a transition from what she sees as the emotional efficacy of music and “real people speaking” to a mass geographic proliferation of silent images on page and screen. By contrast, Vachel Lindsay, with his enthusiasm unchecked, touted American civilisation as growing “more hieroglyphic everyday.” With advertisements everywhere and “acres of photographs in the Sunday” papers, the United States was so hieroglyphic as to be “far nearer to Egypt than to England.”

Lindsay dictated that the superlative companions to his own poems, or “hieroglyphic sermons” as he called them, would be Egyptian grammar manuals and “Swedenborg’s theory of Egyptian Hieroglyphics.” Juan Suárez notes that Emmanuel Swedenborg, who was a massively influential transcendental philosopher of the nineteenth-century, “saw the physical world as a ciphered inventory of spiritual realities.”

As such, Lindsay’s “inscriptional” inventory of America’s villages, where “Hieroglyphic marchers” parade by in the form of “Rich inscriptions,” advance what Suárez describes as Lindsay’s project to combine obscurity with readability, visual modernity with ancient notation, the material of mass-society with “past mythologies.” Though Lindsay and Cather both favour the mythic signs “Egypt” and “hieroglyphic” as codenames for America’s mass geography, Lindsay affirms the flux of a mass society that Cather only

16 Lindsay, “Adventures While Preaching Hieroglyphic Sermons,” in *Collected Poems*, xxiv.
17 Suárez, *Pop Modernism* 37.
18 Lindsay, *Collected Poems*, 204.
tentatively embraces. Yet, by the 1920s at least, Cather's novels do begin to support Lindsay's observation that in modern American art and literature the verbal and visual can be fused into one art, “as of old in Egypt.”

In explaining the formal innovations of her later novels, Cather used competing metaphors borrowed from different artistic media. For example, she claimed *The Professor's House* (1925) combined “two experiments in form,” one literary, “that of inserting the Nouvelle into the Roman” and one musical, a “vague” experiment “akin to the arrangement followed in sonatas in which the academic sonata form was handled somewhat freely.” These two models, which she cites in a 1938 letter, complement a third, visual form that also demonstrates the novel's inventiveness, its execution of contrasts. In a 1931 interview article appearing in *Good Housekeeping*, Cather relates that her “conception” for the form of *The Professor's House* was also influenced by “those Dutch pictures” that employ “trick lighting” and a “double scene.” She recalled one Dutch picture depicting a “dull, grayed interior” with a window, through which there appeared “a sunlit wharf with fishing boats” even “more alluring for the very grayness of medium surrounding” it. In the novel's experiment, “the glittering idea” of Tom Outland's New Mexican adventure erupts as the novel's middle section, contrasting the first and second parts, which revolve around the “shadowy crypt” of Professor St. Peter's home office.

At the same time, as Richard Giannone argues, *The Professor's House* does indeed follow “the characteristic development of a sonata,” with its alternation between “statement, ... fantasia, and restatement.” But crucially, in the metaphor of the Dutch picture window, the novel's silent musical fantasy emerges by way of what is visible, in particular the visual impressions Cather gathered on her 1915 trip to Mesa Verde. By that

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22 Cather, *Willa Cather in Person*, 125.
year the park offered “automobile access, telephone lines, hot meals, comfortable accommodations,” a host of comforts the National Parks System and the nature tourism industry were extending to the mobile masses of which Cather and Marianne Moore were a part. If Cather's presentation of a sonata form is somewhat “vague” and freely handled, then the essay she wrote for the *Denver Times*, which exemplifies what Anne Raine has called her “ethnographic tourism,” includes visions of “sharp contours, brutal contrasts, glorious color and blinding light.”

In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland's personal narrative appears in “glittering” colour between the statement and restatement of Professor St. Peter's dulled, fading interiority. Therefore, the musical reading of the novel (and its auditory experiment) lies submerged as a sonic potential behind a primarily visual exposition. As such, the very form of the novel weds the pictographic and the musical, exemplifying Lindsay's idea of hieroglyphic form, an embodiment of something simultaneously voiced and drawn.

That the novel's sonata form emerges imagistically does not detract from its role in the novel’s artfulness, in fact, as a vague absence covered by light, it more boldly satisfies Cather's modernist manifesto for the “unfurnished novel,” where a reader is struck by the “inexplicable presence of the thing not named.” Due to the synesthesia of the ideogram, which, like the alphabetical sign, melds the auditory and visible into a visual index for spoken thought, the silent reader of *The Professor's House* does not hear the sonata form but sees it, as the “glittering idea” of Outland's archeological adventure fills a gap within the field of the auditory. Thus one encounters the third aspect of Peirce's semiology, the way in which the cinematic novel of modernism, as exemplified by Cather, indexes things or forms that are not named themselves, the way her modernism indexes what is heard.

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26 Cather, *Cather on Writing*, 43. Her aesthetics bares considerable similarity to what Peirce describes as taking place in the rhemic interpretant, where the sign indicates a quality not expressly denoted in the argumentative or delmoic interpretant.
and unheard by way of what is seen and unseen.

In his book on poetic obscurity and the hermetic communities it creates, Daniel Tiffany claims that obscurity in poetry is “hieroglyphic,” in that it provides an index of the meaning it withholds in code. Obscurity is a way of “making things disappear,” whereby the signified vanishes behind the materiality of letters that make that disappearance “legible,” that stand as “an index of [that] disappearance.” Though there is nothing patently obscure or hermetic about Cather's prose, her process of stripping language back to its “emotional aura” makes the signifiers of her writing an index of things not named, of meanings (often social and sexual meanings) which are withheld by a tacit code. By the same indexical logic, Tom Outland realises that the indigenous artifacts he uncovers amid the dust of Cliff City are valuable not because the Smithsonian might sanction them as such, but because they stand in for the “feeling of being on the mesa,” (his elation joining Stein’s) in a “world above the world” (*House*, 217). In this sense, souvenirs index rather than symbolise emotional memory. Drawing from visual modernity, Cather's indexical signs, which are the signature of her modernism, produce emotional interpretants, rather than those “instructive” or “educational” interpretants produced by popular (photographic) media. Expanding the impact of hieroglyphic modernity to the emotional realm, her crepuscular hieroglyph of the mesa (“like one great ink-black rock against a sky on fire”) enters Tom’s mind as clearly “as a picture ... like a magic-lantern slide” that allows him to feel an affinity with the “strong and aspiring people” who built it, with their “feeling for design” (*House*, 171; 182). In these pages she absorbs the semiotics of silent film into her emotive modernism, blending visual technologies (like the magic-lantern) with the fantasy structure of a sonata. By doing so she expands the capacity of new media, allowing

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28 Cather, *Cather on Writing*, 43.
29 I have chosen to use the verb “to index” in place of “to indicate” to emphasise the indexical nature of the sign in Cather’s writing.
them to reanimate the lost voices they index; and thus they become emotional triggers, which here trigger Tom’s sensation of communion with what is lost.

Between “The Tale of the White Pyramid” (1892) and The Professor’s House (1925), Cather may have softened mechanical media into her modernism, but her attitude towards “Egypt” as a pejorative index of visual culture hardly changed. Whereas the mute Egyptians of her short story preside over the suppression of the gay shepherd, so too Egypt becomes the hobgoblin of Tom’s revelations on the mesa. Washington fails to value the Pueblo artifacts as national treasures because, as Tom spits, museums “don’t care about our things. They want something that came from Crete or Egypt” (House, 102). Both the Indian Commission and the Smithsonian dampen the enthusiasm of Henry Atkins, the English cook who accompanies Tom to Cliff City hoping to fulfill his youthful “ambition to go to Egypt and see the tombs of the Pharaohs” (House 183). As the nation’s empire was always as transatlantic as it was transcontinental, the geographical superimpositions it made (Memphis, Tennessee; Athens Georgia) concealed the archeological importance and even the presence of America’s pre-conquest civilizations behind a cartographic fantasy.

But images of visual technologies fare better than the topic of Egypt in Cather’s fiction, as they begin to indicate the potential of music or living speech to ally themselves with the silent image, thereby elevating silent images to an artistic and emotional equality with theatrical performance. In O Pioneers! (1913), when the harsh impermanence of the unsettled prairie is compounded by the oncoming death of one of its frontiersman, the views of the stereopticon flood the scene’s mortal silence with an optimistic colour. Wagon-bound on the road home, Alexandra contemplates the imminent death of her father with an “anguished perplexity.” Riding beside her, under a “leaden sky,” Carl feels tongue-tied, speechless before the fact of death, until he remembers he has a certain visual technology, a “magic lantern,” which here serves as his mouth's prosthesis, speaking to and comforting the dying and bereaved even while he cannot. To interrupt Alexandra’s
depression, he suggests bringing “his magic lantern over some evening.” Immediately shifting the sour tone of circumstance, Alexandra lets out an enthusiastic “Oh Carl!” Carl happens to be carrying the item “back there in the straw” and informs her that it makes “fine big pictures” of German hunting scenes, Daniel Defoe novels, and “funny pictures about cannibals.” Carl intends to “paint some slides for it on glass, out of the Hans Andersen book,” and Alexandra seems “actually cheered.”

As Cather appropriates this image of a machine technology that in turn appropriates literary images, her stereopticon views are emotionally earnest, unlike those she lampooned in her supercilious reaction to the set design of *Anthony and Cleopatra.* Here, in this reversion of Christ's birth narrative, the magic lantern is a gift of wisdom, placed in the regional straw of Nebraska and carted toward an old dying pioneer. The mere mention of this proto-cinematic apparatus indicates Cather's filmic consciousness, which ends the chapter by fading to a point of light on a dark screen: “The rattle of her wagon was lost in the howling of the wind, but her lantern, held firmly between her feet, made a moving point of light along the highway, going deeper and deeper into the dark country” (*Early 146*). As the dialogue ends, sound (rattle) is suppressed by sonic force (howling wind). In the deafness of noise, the pinpoint of isolated light moves deeper and deeper into darkness. Cather’s description mimics an early film technique called an “iris out,” where the image on the screen shrinks to a point of light, retreating behind a contracting field of black. Contracting around this lantern moving in the night, the initial chapter of *O Pioneers!* emerges as a filmic primer, a film-reel shuddering like a wagon wheel, closing in filmic fashion and thus opening the cycle of the novel and the larger cycle of Cather's prairie trilogy by way of a cinematic transition.

Clearly such silent film images in Cather's fiction are not icons of mass geography, nor do they symbolise it; instead, just as Derrida claims that the word indexes the living

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*Cather, O Pioneers! In Early Novels and Stories, 145-146. Originally Published 1913.*

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logos, her silent fictive images form an index of the emotional vitality that Cather more strongly locates outside of silent media, in those arts, like opera and theatre, that make use of living speech. Outside her fiction Cather is skeptical about the emotive potential of movies because, as “pictures of plots,” they are “unaccompanied” even by a phonographic voice, “the voice from the machine,” which is anyway “much worse than no voice.” For her, only Chaplin came close to exciting emotion, as his image provides the best prosthetic to overcome the eye's deafness to living speech. So then, the hieroglyphic image of Cather's rural modernism can never directly present its aural and oral potential, can never “sound itself out” but, since the opera and theatre are displaced by popular visual media, her hieroglyphs do index the absence of older media—the opera, the play—that directly impacted emotions.

Cather's prairie fiction is laden with visual icons, such as the outline of the plow, “black against sun,” in *My Ántonia*. Heroic in size, this Lindsay-like “picture writing” presents what William Barillas has called Cather's “hieroglyph of the pastoral ideal.” Such hieroglyphs condense and encode the sexual and social repression that riles within what the narrator of *O Pioneers!* calls the “new consciousness of a country.” Aesthetically, the country landscape is an inexplicable presence, indexing the unnamed things of Cather's modernist method, where, for example, the unencumbered clarity of the desert in “Tom Outland’s Story” serves as an icon for an unfurnished literary style. Writing on *My Ántonia*, Blanch Geflant has observed that Jim's exploration of the burrows in the prairie-dog town complements his sexual maturation as he symbolically plumbs his unconscious, where his impulsive desires for Antonia and Lena Lingard lie buried. However, Cather's landscapes encode not only sexual repression, but, like in her early Egyptian story, the violence of slavery, extirpation and extinction.

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31 Cather, *Cather on Writing*, 187.
Witness Jim Burden walking with his grandmother, when he “felt motion in the landscape...as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping...” (Early, 723). As Burden remembers this moving picture of prairie grass, the prairie grass remembers the motion of an extinct animal it once sustained. Just as Cather’s stories index absences in visual code, Jim Burden’s story, like Stein’s absolute geography, seeks to recall what is lost by forgetting it. Where Cather writes of a “great circle” “faintly marked in the grass” “where the Indians used to ride” she gestures, according to Blythe Tellefsen, to the “forgotten” history of indigenous peoples being removed from supposedly “empty” lands. So too, Burden’s “repulsive” description of the musical “negro prodigy” Samson D’Arnault attempts to remove the blot of slavery from the Midwest, placing his birth in the “Far South” where the “spirit” of slavery still “persisted” (Early, 830). But his performance in Black Hawk’s small town opera house reminds Tellefsen of the “violence that permeates” Cather’s Midwest, as the violence endemic to their national history marks what is “‘incommunicable’ about Ántonia and Jim’s past.”

Written large, Cather's hieroglyphic imagery encodes the repressed violence of America’s mass geography, which is compounded by the emotional and aesthetic inadequacy of popular narrative forms like cinema and the magic lantern. In her novels, music and living speech, equally suppressed by both printed text and silent film, “silently voice” (a modernist paradox) the emotional trauma of American history. That trauma cannot be directly mediated by the novel, which instead indexes emotional trauma, using pastoral imagery as a hieroglyph to mark, as William Barillas says, the “place and the tragedy of displacement.” As such, the formative communal ground of Cather’s geography is the graveyard—those of Buffalos, Indians, Slaves, and European settlers—as

34 Barillas, Midwestern Pastoral, 74.
much as it is the prairie homeland, where, according to Cather, “The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman” (Early, 170). Satisfying oneself with this romantic reading of Cather means neglecting the “emotional aura” of slavery, racial genocide, and sexual oppression – things felt but not named by her muted visual style.

As the unsaid, unheard, yet hieroglyphically seen content of a violent history emerges as the wretched underside of Cather’s grassland earth, the optimal hieroglyph with which to index the unspoken artfulness of her work is the burial site, the grave. Barillas suggests that the gravesite of the Bohemian immigrant Mr. Shimerda should be considered just as central to My Ántonia as the “picture written” pastoral hieroglyph of the plow on the sky. If death equals labour as the constitutive act of community, if the burial site provides the grounds for Cather’s experience of literary community as much as the farm, then she follows Bataille and Nancy’s insight that shared finitude binds life together as much as the regionalist romanticism that she elsewhere professes. But the grounds for this claim rest with Mr. Shimerda, whose suicide in Nebraska, far from his “home” in Europe, signals to a traumatic core within the migratory experiences of modernity, one that cannot be consolidated by an absolute landscape:

The grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island; and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence—the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the home-coming wagons rattled after sunset. (Early, 789)

In the spirit of Anderson’s aposiopesis, final sentence of Jim’s description cannot be carried out. Interrupted by a dash, it is “sentenced” to “speak” through the faltering of
speech. The stammering syntax correlates to a rupture within America's mass geography, where soft, merciful roads confront and disrupt the “surveyed section-lines” of the nation's absolute space. In accordance with Bohemian tradition, Shirmerda, a suicide whose body won’t be accepted by the nearby cemeteries, should be buried at a crossroads. Since his son Ambrosch knows that “section-roads” will follow property lines, he decides to bury his father at the corner of their property, which will become a crossroad “once roads and fences follow [Thomas] Jefferson's rectangular survey” of the American landscape.35 Resisting the absolute design of America, the “propitiatory intent” of the grave's placement incompletely reserves the grounds of the new world according to the spiritual designs of the old one.

As the roads bend around his burial mound, they void Ambrosch's attempt at propitiation. Although the American roads, as Burden's grandfather foretells, do not come together over Shimerda's head, neither, due to his presence, can they satisfy the quadrilateral intent of the nation-state. As such the burial customs of the old world interrupt the Enlightenment design of the new world, as Shirmerda's grave, like Frenchman's Bend, Mississippi, bends the straight and rectangular geographic order defined by Jefferson (as both president and Faulkner's county seat). Shirmerda's gravesite hieroglyph marks the ecstatic irruption within the coherency of the terms old and new, where both the designs of spiritualism and rationalism lose a bit of themselves to the other. Barillas interprets this hieroglyph as Cather's bid to add circularity to the rigid grid of the American mindset. In this lonely spot of Cather's country, the roads passing Shimerda's grave do re-inscribe the old natural roads that ran about like “wild things,” just as those cubist lines of Europe developed and destroyed themselves, thus complicating Stein's pleasure in the absolutely straight lines of U.S. boundaries.

Since community is shaped by memento mori, the death of Shimerda in Black Hawk

35 Ibid.
inclines the town’s residents towards each other. Jim recalls that in the days after his passing “everyone talked more than usual.” Neighbors came calling, eager for interaction. For the first time, the postmaster inquired into personal matters. Through the countryside, the question of where to bury the old man opened a debate about absolutism. When she hears the news that the Norwegian graveyard would not “extend its hospitality” to a Bohemian suicide-case, Jim’s grandmother cites the need for a more “liberal-minded” “American graveyard,” one that would resist the “clannish” autonomy of sub-national and exclusively denominational communities. However, the progressivism of the “American” project falters in the second suicide scene of the book. Remember that just before the wandering tramp casually waves to Tony and throws himself into a wheat thresher, he inquires as to where he can get a beer. When Tony tells him he might try the Norwegians, he exclaims: “so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was Americy” (Early, 826).

The doubled signifier American/Americy splits the national symbol between worldliness and folksiness, between themes of inclusion and exclusion, mercy and judgment, between immanence and the resistance to immanence. In his final words over the deceased Bohemian, Jim’s grandfather notes the same ecstatic double nature of the Lord, whose “judgment seat” is also his “mercy seat.” As Christian immanence and American integrity divide, the contradictions beneath mass geography's apparent unity become legible in the way country roads inscribe the earth, in the tension between the judiciously straight “surveyed lines” and the “clemency” of the “wild” old roads that bend before human finitude. The road inscribed across the prairie is Cather's best hieroglyph for the suppressive forgetting that accompanies the selectivity of memory, a figure for how the absolute mind of modernism attempts to displace a violent history that remains inexplicably felt beneath the contours of language and land. As such the presence of roads in Cather's fiction always indicates the extirpation of those who made way for them and the exploitation, deracination, and obliteration of those who made them, and thereby her
Midwestern towns and highways stand as memorials to what can not be memorialized, suggesting but never confronting the essential violence, distortion and loss—distressing as it is—that lies at the flat “heart” of the “American” community.
Figure 16.
Cover of First Edition (1932),
Photo courtesy of Manhattan Rare Books.
In *Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather describes an ephemeral and unfinished map of Moonstone, Colorado. Sometimes, the town's schoolchildren were required to:

make relief maps of Moonstone in sand. Had they used colored sands, as the Navajo medicine men do in sand mosaics, they could have easily indicated the social classifications of Moonstone, since these conformed to certain topographical boundaries and every child understood them perfectly.¹

Though, conceivably, they could achieve the fullness of Navajo mosaics, the children's maps are colorless by comparison. Pure topography, they index latent social content that they cannot manifest. Ironically, the “American” children's capacity to represent their community relies on the aesthetic practice of those they have displaced, since Diné tah, the traditional homeland of the Navajo, extended to Sís Naajini (or Blanca Peak) in South West Colorado, but today that state officially contains no Navajo Nation territory.² So like the roadway inscriptions of Cather's hieroglyphic pastoralism, these lines in the Colorado sand allude to a violent experience of loss within the historical unconscious of America's mass geography, with its cinematic semiotics and local cartography, and thus they draw

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¹ Cather, *Early Novels*, 320.  
the contours of social facts they fail to represent.

The road on the countryside, the contour on the map: both are inscriptive forms that unsettle their own relationship with the social classifications defined by origins, hometowns, homelands and homes. Once a traveler reaches the end of the road and arrives “home” or at a home they expect—upon crossing the threshold—to enter an interior, their interior. What if, however, their motion was such an incontrovertible force (like the movement of Cather’s grassland, where the “whole country seemed, somehow, to be running”) that when they opened the door and stepped through they found only another road stretching before them? Disrupting the border between interior and exterior, Reverend Hightower’s house provides Light in August with a “kind of gateway and natural entrance point into the world” of the novel, just as the wagon road across the Nebraska divide does for O Pioneers! However, the geography of Light in August and Jefferson, Mississippi cannot be domesticated by the presence of Hightower’s house. The traveler, outlaw, or weary reader enters to find neither origin nor haven. Instead they find another road, one that moves according to Faulkner’s modernism, expanding in time and contracting in space, a road bending to the somnolent flux of the Deep South’s cinematic mutation.

Arguing that the novel absorbs the semiotic play of the silent film image, the previous chapter prefaces an approach to reading cinema and literature adapted from David Trotter’s Cinema and Modernism, which points in a promising direction for Faulkner and film studies. What Trotter nominates as “argument by analogy” has dominated as the popular method for comparing Faulkner’s fiction to the substance, grammar and philosophy of film. This line of argument follows the presupposition that writing might be “structured like a film,” and therefore maintains that the techniques of

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3 Cather, My Ántonia, in Early Novels, 722.
4 Wendy Fay Goldberg, “Faulkner’s Haunted House: The Figure of the Recluse in Light in August and Absalom, Absalom!” Ph.D. Diss., Yale University, 1996, 11.
narrative cinema (such as montage, iris-outs, close-ups, deep focus, and parallel editing) transfer, both by influence and analogy, into the linguistic constructions of modernist literature. Trotter suggests, however, not that we abandon but that we supplement such an approach with the understanding of modernism and cinema as paralleled in history. According to this idea, Faulkner’s narratives would not adopt, repudiate, or even necessarily remediate the technologies of film, Instead, his modernism would be registered in its confrontation with a tear in the ontology of the arts, wrought by the appearance of that very technology that split cinema and modernism into their parallel courses: film as a raw medium for recording. Trotter returns to André Bazin to summarise this novelty of the camera, where for the first time the only force intervening between an original object and its reproduction is “the instrumentality of a nonliving agent.” Cinema and modernism are not merely analogous, but are two narrative forms conditioned by the advent of an automated reproduction process, and they therefore share a preoccupation with their own capacities and incapacities in relation to that technology.

In Faulkner studies, one steps out from this model of parallels and onto a precarious edge. A mild danger lurks in the chance that one might exhume that damned analogy the author birthed himself: the metaphor of “two rooms,” one where he worked on “cheap” ideas “to make money” and the other where he worked in his “own medium.”

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askance over the “divide” between mass media and literary art, this chapter asserts that Faulkner’s “own medium” harbours both reservations and attestations regarding its ability to countenance the autonomy of filmic reproduction, especially film's ability to record rather than represent locomotion. To establish such a preoccupation in Faulkner's literary modernism, I will offer, in some detail, a phenomenological analysis of memory and movement in *Light in August*, paying special attention to how the potential of film, the photographic medium of cinema, is remediated by the consciousness of an orthographic, written imagination. At the same time, I want to stay attentive to the parallel history of cinema, by considering how Faulkner would have experienced the development of that narrative art. Towards those goals, this chapter moves between a close reading of *Light in August* and a more general project, that of placing Faulkner in the audience of popular American cinema.

Cinema, the projected motion effects of any visual recording technology, is something by degrees distinct, however, from the material upon which or in which those motions are captured. During the years of Faulkner’s cinematic experiences that material was of course film. The medium of the movies, historically, has been the photograph on film, the writing (graphing) of light (photo) on a substance such as silver nitrate. As opposed to the orthography of Faulkner's literary production, obviously “[p]hotographs are not hand-made.” Bazin had argued that in making the intermediary of human touch obsolete the photograph satisfies “once and for all and in its very essence our obsession with realism.” It presents us with things in themselves, as they are. But surely, as the case has been made, a photograph of a house is not itself a house. One may hold up a photo of a

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9 Compounds such as silver nitrate and silver halide automatically darken when exposed to light; silver compounds were also used in early cinema screens to make them more reflective, hence the epithet: “silver screen.”
horse, and say “this is a horse,” but to be rigorously ontological such a proposition is patently absurd: a photograph is not a horse. Stanley Cavell avers that, instead of satisfying a reality hunger, the photograph satisfies our wish to “escape subjectivity”; or perhaps, more precisely, the photo repositions subjectivity at a remove, by presenting us with something to which we ourselves cannot be present. Succinctly, “photography maintains the presence of the world by accepting our absence from it.” To Cavell, painting and photography are not in competition but go about two radically different projects of effecting subjectivity. If in modernist paintings Michael Fried has found “objects of presentness” that connect us with reality “by permitting us presentness to ourselves,” photography, according to Cavell’s view, “overcame subjectivity” by “automatism; by removing the human agent from the task of reproduction.”

Such automatism “enters” literary language in various ways. Long before the invention of visual recording technologies, mechanised printing processes allowed for the automatic production and dissemination of written documents. For Frederic Jameson the automation of language is a geographic process distinctly contingent on a capitalist mode of production’s division and distribution of written symbols: language is automatised, once it “organizes itself into relatively self-sufficient bodies of words which can then be grasped by groups and individuals widely divided from each other in space and time, and by social class or by culture.” As these “relatively self-sufficient bodies of words” experience their own new- or afterlife, what formerly appeared as mutations in form and genre might be

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12 Early on Siegfried Kracauer articulated an ontology of photography that would challenge Bazin’s notion of realism. What “appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her, and where person and portrayal to converge, the person would cease to exist.” Kracauer, “Photography,” in The Mass Ornament, 56-7.

13 Here Cavell is summarising Michael Fried’s definition of modernist painting as distinct from minimalist painting. Fried’s seminal essay, “Art and Objecthood,” appeared in a 1967 issue of Artforum, and was reprinted in the eponymous collection Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).


spoken of as mutations in automatisms. In this situation, the task of the modern artist, as posited by Cavell, is to create “not a new instance of his art” (in Faulkner's case not simply to write a new novel), but to create “a new medium in it. One might think of this as the task of establishing a new automatism.”\textsuperscript{16}

The motif of mechanised life abounds in Faulkner's early novels. In \textit{The Sound and the Fury}, Quentin's ever-fixed embodiment in and of the machinery of time, the watch, the clock. In \textit{As I lay Dying} Dewey Dell collapses on her dead mother's body, yet still fans it, unthinkingly automated by grief and habit with Cash outside the window frame, automatic and ever-on as a mill, his plane going “chuck, chuck, chuck” on his mother's casket.\textsuperscript{17} However, in \textit{Light in August}, automatism is so thoroughly inserted into character that it reaches the point where character itself is rendered as an automatism. That is, character is a new medium within the instance of the novel. Joe Christmas is a fantastically intricate case. His character and his motions through the space of Jefferson are cinematic in that they respond (as would popular narrative cinema) to the instrumentality of a non-living agent.

When it comes to the self's ecstatic escape from itself (the service, according to Cavell, provided by photography), Joe Christmas is an exemplary fugitive from self, fatedly so to the ends of tragedy. Over and over again, his racial identity is evacuated when it approaches self-presence, as he more surely becomes a figure of pure difference from his environment. Although on the surface Joe's problem seems to be his particular and violent subjugation within a racist society, once we understand Joe's characterisation as an automatism in the way Cavell offers the term, then Joe's racial, sexual and social traumatisation becomes inseparable from an ontological problem confronting artistic

\textsuperscript{16} Cavell, \textit{The World Viewed}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{17} For a consideration of phonographic recording and history in \textit{As I Lay Dying} see John Matthews, “Faulkner and the Reproduction of History,” in \textit{Faulkner and History}, (Salamanca: University of Salamanca Press, 1983), 63-76.
images, the method of their reproduction, and their accretion into the illusion of motion. The point is not to translate social problems into formal ones, but to recognise the instability of the two categories, where issues of racial prejudice and inequality remain insoluble unless one confronts the aesthetic questions of Faulkner's novelistic automatisation.

An iconic instance of Joe as automaton emerges when Faulkner develops a simile around photography, where the photographic process of development inscribes Christmas's racial identity as a relational process or reaction, where “he watched his body grow white out of the darkness like a kodak print emerging from the liquid.” Metaphors of liquidity, of blood (race), sexual conjugation and organic decomposition mingle around Christmas's body in this scene: as he seemed to watch it “turning slow and lascivious in a whispering of gutter filth like a drowned corpse in a thick still black pool of more than water.” Poised outside Joanna’s window, “cursing her with slow and calculated obscenity” he “touched himself ... up his abdomen and chest inside his undergarment”, disrobing slowly until he stands naked in the dusty reeds. An automobile passes by, driving a woman’s shrill cry through the night, and the headlights cast upon his body trigger the racial and photochemical reaction of his whiteness. With his white body exposed amid stereotypes of black sexuality, he yells out “White bastards!”

Even as Christmas’s skin reacts automatically to its exposure to light, his racial association is equally automatised by the intrusion of an automobiling white audience. Although there is no the space here to adequately explore it relationship between filmic grammar and automobility has received attention, cf. Jon Chatlos, “Automobility and Lyric Poetry: The Mobile Gaze in William Carlos Williams’ ‘The Right of Way’,” Journal of Modern Literature 30, no. 1 (2006): 140–154.

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18 The language of triggering, and 'lighting up” is not accidentally that of war; we will return to the corollaries of film technologies and war in both Paul Virilio's excellent scholarship on the subject and Faulkner’s obvious investment in popular war films.


similar fashion. Along the way he passes people, white and black, on their way to the picture show. Reminiscent of black and white studio light expressionism, “heavy shadows” slide “like scraps of black velvet across his white shirt.” “[S]urrounded by the summer smell and summer voices of invisible negroes,” his agitation increases: “It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female. He began to run, glaring, his teeth glaring...” (87-88). The liquidity of Christmas’s racial affiliation—his attempts to cut “primogenitive” darkness with razor, teeth, and glare—emerges through the automatic positive-to-negative inversion of his social environment. Social relations are thus reformed as a process of writing, or, in a particular nod to photography, the process of developing an imprint of light that has already been automatically written. Like a darkroom attendant, Christmas “watches” his racial identity react, automatically, to stimuli, and at the moment Christmas is presented to “what he is,” white and/or black, he rejects that presentness.

Joe’s movement through Jefferson’s partitioned racial geography can be read as a kind of automatised writing, explaining what Peter Lurie has identified as the town’s “cinematic fascination” with Joe’s body.21 Lurie involves the cinematic still in his analysis of Faulkner's famous and frequent uses of tableaux,22 where the moving images of Faulkner’s narration are frozen into isolated photograms. The converse relationship between stillness and motion is equally evident in Faulkner's visual freeze-frames. In the case of the Kodak reference in Light in August, the image of Joe's bodily reaction is not the cinematic still, but rather an instance of cinema (motion) within the still, the echo or afterlife of a mutative, developing process that resists completion, that disrupts any object of self-presence, be it a photograph, a category of subjectivity, or a community. The

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simile—racial constitution like the constitution of photographic image—exposes race as a social, and even aesthetic technology of mass geography. It exposes the automatic photochemical reaction within the still, the process that conditions cinema's basic semiotic unit, the photogram. Only apparently frozen by lights, Joe is a mercurial question of ecstasy, always shifting, always in resistance to the coming presence of the self. Character here has become a union of authorial/human agency and the agency of a non-living agent, the automatic instrument of its own recording.

1907 was the year in which narrative films first prevailed in number over scientific recordings. Although most of Faulkner's film-watching years came after 1907, he frequently engages (as the Kodak simile reveals) with what Trotter calls the “fact of film as medium before film as art.”23 The first explicit aesthetic reference to motion pictures in Light in August occurs, again as a simile, midway through Chapter 9. After bludgeoning his adoptive father Simon McEarchen at a country-dance, Christmas is fleeing what one assumes might be patricide on a stolen horse. In their faltering flight, horse and rider had, to quote, “a strange, dreamy effect like a moving picture in slow motion as it galloped steady and flagging up the street...” (158). The effect immediately conjures up a host of proto-cinematic experiments with human and animal locomotion, those of Eadweard Muybridge most famously, who, with multiple cameras in 1872, recorded, in successive freeze-frames, a horse in full gallop. The instrumentality of nonliving agents settled a bet about whether a galloping horse soared for a moment, without foothold, over the ground. However, Faulkner's description refers to and anticipates the potential of a more obscure cinematic technology.

Slow-motion cinematography was invented in 1904 by an Austrian priest and

23 As Trotter notes, this data refers to the American film industry and is recapitulated from Charles Muser, 'Moving towards Fictional Narratives: Story films become the dominant product, 1903-1904', in Lee Grieveson and Peter Kramer (eds), The Silent Film Reader (London: Routledge, 2004), 87-102.
physicist August Musger. In the 1920s, after the Ernemann company marketed an expensive camera designed from Musger's lapsed patents, the technique made a cinematic debut in the Weimar avant-garde, most notably in the work of photographer turned filmmaker Arthur Fanck, a contemporary of and influence on Leni Reifensthal. If nothing else, there is the suggestive anomaly that despite his bellicose posturing towards Germany at the time, Faulkner is contemporary to the Weimar film avant-garde in his understanding (apparently conceived independently) of slow-motion film recording as artistically potent. In popular American cinema, slow-motion techniques did not emerge until the late 1960s and 1970s, and then, almost invariably amid depictions of violence. So it is a remarkable antecedent of American cinema, by some fourty years in fact, that Joe's stick beats the moving picture horse with the “same spent and terrific slowness” as the slow-motion moving picture (158).

Argument by analogy might draw out the slow-motion aesthetics of Faulkner's writing, and there is no dearth of evidence to support such a project. A tempting one sits with Lena Grove along the road to Jefferson, in the “hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon.” As she watches a wagon mount the hill towards her, with a sound slow and terrific, it seems to hang forever in the middle distance, “so infinitesimal is its progress,” ... “in its slow palpable aura of somnolence” (8). The temporal distortion of Faulkner's style—its intrepid sentences, piled adjectives, oxymoronic diction in relation to movement—does not indicate an elongation of temporal duration but a conflation of time,
and so the analogy with cinematic slow-motion is emphatic. Despite the common understanding, the slow-motion effect is not achieved by slowing down a projection. If the projection speed were slowed down to twelve frames per second, for example, the action would look rushed and sporadic, like a choppy stop-motion animation. Slow-motion cinematography does not slow down the played image but rather records more images, more frames per second. When more photograms run within the same fixed duration, time becomes more compact, endures less. In the same paradoxical way, when Faulkner conjures indolence, heat, and fatigue, he does so through an accretion of lexical components.

Analogy is tempting, but Faulkner's modernism also deserves an intersection with cinema history. Consider the slow-motion image in relation to the novel's chronology. Even though, in the story's linear time, the slow-motion departure of Christmas precedes the arrival of Lena and in utero child by some fifteen years, the image of Christmas fleeing his family violence is a doubling, a reverberation, of Lena fleeing hers. Here the novel seems to remember its own images, even those yet to arrive. To read the novel is to daydream about its self-patterning, as it collects both the having-already-been and the having-yet-to-be into the extant. This challenges what Heidegger would call the “common understanding of time” as an “irreversible sequence of nows,”28 and it suggests a challenge to the common understanding of the film-medium, as a sequence of frames, at twenty-four per second. Crucially, Faulkner's reworking of the common understanding of time cannot be separated from his modernist reworking of media, specifically his narrativisation of the moving and photographic image. If Faulkner's modernism is read in parallel with cinema's own attempts at narrativising media technology, Faulkner, again, anticipates, even influences, styles yet to find manifestation on the screen.

Gilles Deleuze associates the early film era (1895-1945) with what he calls “the movement-image.” American genre films were typical in their use of the movement-image, in which all the parts of the cinematic grammar relate rationally to a whole. Take for example D.W. Griffith's short melodramatic Western, *The Last Drop of Water*. In the climactic scene a wagon-train of Westward pioneers are set-upon in the desert by a band of murderous Natives. To make matters worse, the water rations have run all but dry. The wagons have been circled; things begin to look dire. By this point Griffith has already composed the space for his signature parallel editing. The circled wagons mark the boundary between a threatened interior and a hostile exterior. The dramatic action consists in men braving the Indian barrage in search for water. The camera cuts back to the women, desperately thirsty, huddled together. On the next cut the shot is once again with the men, crawling in a desert beneath a hail of bullets, seeking water. The passage of time is subordinated, as each elemental shot rationally relates to one “simple” action: men getting water to save women. Here characters react to their definite environs in immediate and rational ways.

A very different species of image is typical of the modernist European cinema of the post-War era, which Deleuze would call “the time-image.” Here the rational connections between character and space corrode. Time is no longer subordinated to action or movement. In the time-image, as David Rodowick writes, “chronology is pulverised.” We have established that Joe's reactions to his environs are not only irrational (a stark example: his murder of a woman who many times tried to help him), but also highly mediated, highly automatised by visual media.

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Figure 17.
Stills from *Last Drop of Water*, DVD, directed by D.W. Griffith
(1911; New York: Kino on Video, 2002).
Next to Faulkner's other high modernist novels, *Light in August* may appear more conventionally plotted, but it triggers the re-experience of Lena's slow-motion transit in the chronologically anterior event of Joe's. Therein, chronology is pulverised. All along, character-in-action is alienated from space by the mediation effects of mass geography. Deleuze describes the time-image as uniting “image, thought and camera in a single ‘automatic subjectivity’”. The cumulative modernist effects of *Light in August* derive from the unity of image, thought and character within an “automatic subjectivity” that unhinges action and movement from an intentional consciousness. When Deleuze explains the social and psychic conditions for the emergence of the time-image, he coins the phrase: “disturbances of memory and the failures of recognition,” which extends easily to Joe Christmas.

Steven Kern has expounded technology's impact on the phenomena of the human imagination. The speed of modernity alters memory, as the acceleration of being in the present transforms the “memories of years past” to “something slow.” Kern provides the example of the car outmoding the horse. Riding a horse would never feel slow if it were not for the faster technologies of car and plane. Yet, it bears considering: what might be the impact on linguistic duration, not, as was examined above, of film as film-speed, but of film as narratively formed, as cinema? Faulkner's relationship with film is legible in syntax that asserts itself against the abstract capacity of film's grammar and logic, but also – his automatism within the genre of the novel is significant for its immersion in the popular culture of moving pictures, constituted already in the teens and twenties by a rich ecosystem of genres.

In a report on Faulkner and silent film, Jeffery Folks details the film distribution

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31 Ibid.

contracts of Oxford's Lyric theatre, which hosted the town's picture show. From 1910 to 1915, when Faulkner was thirteen to eighteen years old, the local cinema exhibited properties distributed by the oligarchic General Film Company, who served the production companies Edison, Biograph, Vitagraph, Kalem, and American Pathé, among others. With the Edison trust bust of 1915 the hedonism of a young industry faltered, Faulkner became an adult, and Oxford went over to Universal for its distributions. In these years, as his brother Murray could remember, Faulkner was an avid patron of the Lyric, taking in “mostly Westerns.”

A paucity of particular information about the dates and times that Faulkner attended the picture show is matched by a indigestible mass of titles that the General Film Company and Universal Services may or may not have sent to the Lyric. So it remains difficult to confirm what particular films Faulkner saw. A solution to this problem exists with increased inspection of distributor's filmographies, local newspapers, and clues to genre preference provided by accounts like Murray's. By these means scholars can make ever-more educated conclusions about how Faulkner's linguistic constructions and popular American cinema responded to a media environment of felt autonomy. Based on Murray's reminiscences and the popularity of the genre, we could take the Western as a promising point of departure.

West of Everything, Jane Tompkins' intimate account of a genre, provides essential remarks on the role of the town in the Western. For Tompkins, the town marks a central battle site in the “literary gender war” that the Western fights. Meanwhile, town “functions as a surrogate home,” satisfying needs without “imposing the obligations” of a domestic commitment. Yet “town always threatens to entrap the hero in the very things the genre wishes most to avoid: intimacy, mutual dependence, a network of social and emotional

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responsibilities.” In other words: “Town seduces.” Even an exception within the genre like *Hell's Hinges*, the great Thomas Ince production of 1916, does not so much dispense with this relationship as distil it. Betraying the impulses of Victorian sentimentalism central to the Western, a pivotal scene of *Hell's Hinges* has an Eastern woman come to town and reform William Hart’s drunk bad boy character with an intoxicating love at first sight. The towns of Mississippi where Faulkner's characters roam retain rough memories of their times as frontier settlements.

A book about town, *Light in August* names Jefferson 110 times, whereas the appearance of the town’s name is comparably scant in the preceding fiction (ten times in *The Sound and the Fury*, twenty-one in *As I Lay Dying*). Clearly, Lena, the single traveller, heading to a place of masculine disorder, Jefferson, takes, in *Light in August*, the civilising role of feminizing force, normally afforded, in the Western genre, to the Eastern newcomer. Of course she comes from an only deeper South, and her impact on the town is comically fraught; she tames the wrong man with love at first sight, while the one she wants to domesticate stays incorrigible. Yet the town not only accommodates the consequences of her sexuality, but her arrival catalyses Bunch's mission to civilise Brown, which parallels his and Hightower's flawed attempts to save Joe Christmas. These motifs—responsibility triggered by the arrival of a female, a pervasive discord between genders—are typical of the silent Western genre.

As one would expect, similar arrangements exist across a range of documents, even those that stand out for their flexible use of generic codes. Cecil B. DeMille’s 1914 precursor to *Hell's Hinges, The Virginian*, similarly juxtaposes a civilised Eastern femininity and a savage Western masculinity, the former imposing itself on the latter with the intention or unavoidable result of reforming it. The generic gender-role alignments climax in “the

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Talkies” of John Ford, notably The Man who Shot Liberty Valance. In the silent era, the gender conflict was composed through an almost purely visual semantics. The East/West juxtaposition, in its cinematic grammar, lacks the capacity of conjunction. Faulkner’s recourse to simile, X like Y, (skin colour like a Kodak print) is modified by cinema where the expression is X [absence of conjunction] Y. Therefore the viewer’s intellect works out the “meaning” of the juxtaposition by extrapolating a syntagmatic link out of the interval between photograms.

For a good illustration of this principle, consider Eisenstein's invention of “intellectual montage.” Witness a shot of workers entering a factory, then a shot of cattle being corralled. The two images collide to form a simile, workers treated like cattle. In DeMille’s case, working with the automatisms of the Western, the filmic “conjunction” of the cut (which is, to be precise, the disjunction of the interval) separates a shot of two women in a Vermont bedroom—an intimate, domestic space—from a succeeding shot of an unruly group of men in a western saloon—a communal, public space. Responding to the automatised conventions, the viewer reads the latter as a space open to, even inviting, the entrance of the former’s feminine order. Towns in westerns hold the potential to rearm the munitions of sentimentalism and femininity that underlie and provoke the genre's idyllic tropes—the lonesome cowboy's ride, the moral regeneration of the open landscape—and they maintain this feminine potency even more when the settlement seems incurably masculine.

The railway switching point that adolescent Joe Christmas frequents with his father is a man's town. “The air of the place,” the narrator says, “was masculine, transient.” Yet, in the father's words to his son Christmas, “town is no good habit for a man yet to make his way,” a place a boy should “avoid and shun” (131-132). Of course that caution refers not to the masculine town itself, but the feminine domain it harbours: the restaurant-brothel the two visit by chance. After that visit, Joe's “thinking [often] suddenly flowed into a picture,
shaping, shaped” of the “violethaired woman” guarding the counter, and the waitress “not much larger than a child ... within touching distance of the men” (133).

As a stark rejoinder to the cinema's generic narrativisation of gendered motion, the cinema of Joe's thinking, and his memory of motion, have origins in a *topos* both outside and before that genre space of the surrogate home-town. Amid Faulkner's unpunctuated stream of consciousness, Joe's memory "knows remembers believes a corridor" (91). “Corridor” could be the primary architectural term for the rambling orphanage of Joe's memory. The word recurs though *Light in August* and *Absalom, Absalom!* in relation to childhood and even the womb. The etymological root of "corridor" can be traced to the Latin "to run." In strict derivation, it means “a running place.” Yet Joe's childhood is anything but a running-place. In fact, he seems passive to paralysis. Sick on too much toothpaste he lies “motionless” until discovered, wrongly, as peeping Tom.36 When offered a dollar of hush-money by the paranoid dietician, he might have been “carven, a large toy,” ... his whole being “coiled” at the thought of toothpaste stacked “like corded wood” (95). When kidnapped in the night by the janitor Doc Hines, he stays as “still and as lax as while he had been asleep” (104). Before his adoptive parents he remains “motionless,” towards their home he rides “small, shapeless, immobile” (109). So, from his first dwelling, one defined by running space, Joe is ejected as much for the metaphysical conceit of immobility as for the racist fantasy of his identity.

When tracing the psychic architecture of the imagination back to the conditions of childhood space, no phenomenologist is more instructive than Gaston Bachelard, who, with Faulkner, entertains a special relationship with post-romantic French poetry. “Memories are motionless,” writes Bachelard. In his reading of intimate spaces, he argues that the home is the origin of the pure imagination; that without places of enclosure we

36 Already at this stage of his life, Christmas's motionlessness is described in relation to the presence denied to anyone who views the automatism of a chemical reaction: “he seemed to stoop over himself like a chemist in his laboratory, waiting.” Faulkner, *Light in August*, 93.
could not dream. When memory moves us toward our first home, he declares, we “travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all immemorial things are.” Comfort is relived in “memories of protection.”³⁷ Since Joe is stolen by the possessed and fanatical Doc Hines from his orphanage room, ripped from one bed “among forty others since he could remember” (103), his first images of home afford him meagre protection, and the sick strain of homelessness reverberates thorough all his subsequent lodging. This arrangement reverses Bachelard; Joe's daydreaming has been cultivated by spaces of expulsion and transience.

Bachelard's generalisations on memory and motion are instructive though. Clearly, in its early stages, when the novel is focalised by Joe, the “child’s parentage” lies outside of the novel's capacity to remember. The soft coiling-toothpaste of the dietician's office does nurture and call forth Joe's memory, as Bachelard would have it. The womb is an immemorial space, even as, metonymically, in the curtained office corner, it is origin, both of thought, and, later, masculine transience. Approximated by the warm interior of the dietician’s office, the “primogentitive female” is, for Joe, both a fugitive memory he has no hope of capturing and the source of his automated adherence to a fugitive mobility, the same that runs him toward a fate he has no hope of escaping.

So, Joe's incapacity to remember is related to his incapacity to move, not only his inability to motion on his behalf in the face of the dietician's indictments, but also, as an adult, to move in any way that does not expedite his horrible end. Joe's immobility arises from the anxiety of his memory meeting its limitations, as it strives after what, in the literal sense, is before memory, and thus immemorial. This tension between what memory knows and what it cannot know constitutes a deep philosophical problem in the novel, and most of all Joe's problem, which automates the fraught process of his deepening it in trying to outrun it.

However, because of Faulkner's confrontation with the ontology of a photographic image that is automatically reproduced, “automation” replaces “fate” and “destiny” as terms applicable to character. To speak of Joe's tragedy is then something of an exercise in pastiche. Far from the Greek stage, his motion is not an agency contradicted by the gods, and despite the novel's saturation with Calvinism, he is neither an instrument of God nor a being authored by an “invisible world.” The media that automate him are those referenced by simile. He changes like a photograph, he moves like cinema. Faulkner then is in the act of orthographically authoring an automated process of instrumentality, one that separates the consciousness of subjectivity from the objectivity of images of action and motion. As far as Joe is denied self-presence and access to maternal origins, his intentions toward memorialisation are always fraught by their likeness to the ontology of the photographic media that automate him. Remember that for Deleuze the time-image originates in “disturbances of memory and failures of recognition.” A time-image, Joe's motion is a terrifying no-motion, because he is fixed (cursed, one might say) by an originating event beyond his capacity to remember. His is an immemorial motion, cinematic because of both memory's failure and the camera's automatic success.

Before pursuing the abstraction of immemorial cinema, it would be useful, however, to dwell on the connections between cinema and memorial in a more concrete sense, and here the historical study of popular cinema resumes. One year before the Lumiere brothers famously recorded workers leaving a factory, local Ladies Memorial Associations across the American South merged into the United Daughters of the Confederacy. As money recirculated through Southern states, a flood of monuments rose to salute the Confederate dead, most of them erected between 1900 and 1917.\(^ {38} \) Since the heights of Civil War memorialising happens to coincide almost exactly with the emergence of narrative cinema, it should provoke no surprise that the movies offered war memorials of their own. Around

\(^ {38} \) Aiken, *William Faulkner and the Southern Landscape*, 125-127.
1912, The Kalem Company shot *The Confederate Ironclad* on location in St. Petersburg, Florida, but here the reference is not to the bloody edge of Spain’ territory. A historical monument, its release commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of the *CSS Virginia* (“The Merrimack”) in battle.

In the early minutes of the one-reel film, two narrative spaces are deployed: the battlefield and a flimsy domestic hearth. The former space is one of noble struggle, and from the second emanates a seductive deceit that will challenge that nobility. Exemplar of nobility, Lieutenant Yancey, is a dashing young confederate officer, and a sweetheart of one of the local girls, Rose. Trouble ensues when he is asked by a local matron to entertain her niece Elinor, an orphan from the North. The two flirt in the domestic interior of the Aunt’s home. Unsuspecting of the perfidious Elinor, he takes her out to survey the battle scene, and shows where the Rebels are building a state-of-the-art ironclad gunboat. Elinor, it turns out, is a spy, relaying information to Union troops in the area. As Yancey is caught flirting with Elinor in Auntie’s parlour, the Rebs are routed by the Yanks, thanks to information passed on by Elinor, of course.

The film generally cuts between ineffectual masses of male soldiers, and two young women who surreptitiously orchestrate the action and the outcome of the struggle. A contest of female cunning, this real battle of espionage and counter-espionage rationally underpins this memorial to one of the famous naval confrontations of the Civil War. The narrative seems hemmed for a specific audience, the Confederacy's American daughters. In protest and in print, Faulkner described these “unvanquished” women as “old unordered vacant pilings above a tide's flood.” They had, what he calls, “an illusion of motion,” but were really immobile in a moving world, as they looked “irreconcilably backward toward the old lost battles, the old aborted cause.”

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39 From “The Jail,” as quoted by Aiken, *Faulkner and the Southern Landscape*, 126. Aiken is a wonderful source for understanding Faulkner’s place in and use of the post-Civil War landscape.
Joe's movement as an adult is precisely the opposite. As a child, frozen in a running-place he was immobile in a world of adult action. As an adult Joe is a total figure of “running in place.” Consider the motion of his adolescence, which is constant: to and from town, fighting, working, and sneaking out for “lechery.” Just as he was motionless in the corridor of childhood, as a teen his surrounding space proves antithetical to his action. For the layout of the McEachern home has no “corridor.” Instead its darkly squatting bulk folds in a stark interior comprised of attic, rooms, and a “hall.” Hardly Latinate, "hall" derives from the Anglo-Saxon word for concealment. So in a home-life structured around a mother's hiding places and a hall, not a corridor, Joe starts running. And when he runs from the primal scene of violence against his adoptive father there is a final disunion in the metaphysic of motion: "He was running now ... as a man might run far ahead of himself and his knowing in the act of standing stock still" (161). This dialectic of running and stopping, of stasis and motion, moves to the immemorial cinema of *Light in August*. A motion picture horse that is steady and flagging, Lena moving forever and without progress across an urn; Joe running as he stands stock still, motion persists despite its spatial confinement, offering a definition of motion, not as a shift from place to place, but as a transformation. Aristotle's term for this is *alloiosis*, which Heidegger describes as motion registered by a “becoming different in the sense that one quality changes to another.”

Heidegger argues that Henri Bergson misunderstood the Aristotelian concept of time. Bergson's mistake was insisting that it had spatial dimension. Although it is not a shift in place, *alloiosis* is motion, an “away from something toward something.” For example, a change in colour from white to black, from negative film to positive print, a developing kodak is an *away from something toward something*. Bergson's mistake was to claim that Aristotle reduced time to space, when in reality, according to Heidegger,

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alloiosis allowed Aristotle to conceive of the motion of “away from something towards something” while ridding himself completely of “the spatial idea.” Pace Bergson, dimension “does not have have a primary spatial character, but that of stretch.” In what serves as both a remarkable description of slow-motion film recording and Faulkner's syntax, temporal dimension is here “a stretching out that is closed within itself.”41 If one were to consider Joe's stasis in a running place, his mobility in a place that would “keep” him, his manner of movement becomes different not through a shift in location or a spatial extension. In relation to a spatially collapsed “home,” as a difference from his environment, be it any-space-whatsoever, his being comes to itself, by moving out of itself, by a constant change in quality. And a motion picture obeys a similar principle. In the projection booth the film moves from one place to another, across a light source, but on the screen the movement is a “becoming different” as one “quality changes to another,” what Deleuze, in his own corrective to Bergson, would call mutation.42

Whereas in Mosquitoes Faulkner acknowledges the non-spatial dimension of cinematic movement with a sardonic slight—“They are not going anywhere, and they don't do anything. . .kind of like a movie or something,”43—he grows darker as he inserts Christmas into Light In August as the literary automatism of the moving image. Phillip Weinstein recognises the curious qualities of Joe's locomotion as conjuring the “uncanny space” of modernity. In his reading of the novel's pivotal sequence, after Joe has attacked his foster-father, Joe's flight looks like a combination of velocity and incomprehension, where “cameralike” he registers “the incomprehensible data coming at him.”44 Joe's mobility is cinematic in that it outruns his knowing. The more one understands Joe as an

41 Ibid., 242.
42 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2, 138: “And this is what we have been trying to say since the beginning of this study: a cinematographic mutation occurs when aberrations of movement take on their independence; that is, when the moving bodies and movements lose their invariants.”
43 As quoted in Folks, “William Faulkner and the Silent Film,” in The South and Film, 172.
automatism, however, the more it makes sense to pose his problems in Deleuze’s post-phenomenological terms, where the subject is “‘hystericised’ or subsumed through intensities, rhythms, flows and energies.” Weinstein's observations would hold true that Joe's consciousness constitutes merely the bare grounds of intentionality, a figure for “encounters” without “meaning,” in the language of Deleuze. As a figure of differential becoming, he is a pure motion from and within his own bodily and external space, even as he is pinned, in mobility as much as stasis, in one fixed space after another. This process of becoming different can only be recognised as cinematic when one recognises the photogrammatic imprint as the substrate of the cinematic experience.

Garret Stewart makes the point that the film medium has more than just its historical origins in photography. It “owes a more immediate ... debt to the photograph than we can ever (quite) see on-screen.” Movies are, in fact, their “difference from photographs one after another, a difference on the run. This is as obvious as it is invisible.” Within the “psychodynamics of viewing”, where the moving image is dependent on the “after-image of the photographic trace,” the photographic substrate of cinema is suppressed. Viewers are always exposed to the “once having been there” of a medium, that, to invoke Cavell, denies the viewer presence to it. Even at this scale of the individual photogram, the cinematic image can never be reduced to “a simple unity.” Deleuze writes that the image “is the system of the relationships between its elements, that is, a set of relationships of time from which the present only flows.” When this relationship is figured as one of pure change, when invariance is completely lost, Deleuze refers to this as “cinematographic mutation” in which the “aberrations of movement take on their

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46 Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism’s Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1-4
47 As quoted in Rodowick, *Deleuze’s Time Machine*, 8.
independence.” It is essential to comprehend that like Joe’s automated movements, these aberrations are paradoxically legible in the image that does not itself move, the photograph. As such, mutation occurs within the still.

Incidentally, resonantly, Faulkner uses the word “mutation” in one of his most explicit and extended descriptions of Jefferson’s picture show. “Dry September,” a story written the year *Light in August* was published, collides the fascinating flicker of the moving image with the town’s racist fantasising. Peter Lurie has exhibited just how thoroughly populist fantasies of race and theories of film viewing combine and pervade *Light in August.* In “Dry September” lynching and the movies come together in a close collusion of popular entertainment. Faulkner’s diction, however, betrays the fact that a philosophical meditation on cinematic form operates amid what might just be read as the critical portrayal of social battle at the colour line. Here is the description:

They reached the picture show. It was like a miniature fairyland with its lighted lobby and colored lithographs of life caught in its terrible and beautiful mutations. ... And they took their accustomed places where she could see the aisle against the silver glare and the young men and girls coming in two and two against it.

The lights flicked away; the screen glowed silver, and soon life began to unfold, beautiful and passionate and sad, while still the young men and girls entered, scented and sibilant in the half dark, their paired backs in silhouette delicate and sleek, their slim, quick bodies awkward, divinely young, while beyond them the silver dream accumulated, inevitably on and on. She began to laugh. In trying to suppress it, it made more noise than ever...

The terms to stress here are ‘mutations” and “accumulated,” proving that the

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48 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 138.
49 Lurie reads Joe’s movement before the “appraising eyes of other characters” as indicative of African American stereotypes within a larger “popular imagination.” Lurie, *Vision’s Immanence*, 68.
cinematic process, for Faulkner, is not one of linear development but rather Deleuzian mutation. Life is “caught” mutating and accumulating while still in place, either fixed by a frame, or (to stretch programmatic mutation toward Faulkner’s modernist sentence) fixed “between one Cap and one period.”\footnote{Malcolm Cowley, \textit{The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories, 1944-1962} (New York: Penguin, 1978), 14.} Folded in the screen are the accumulated mutations of life. Yet the stills, the lithographs, expose the vitality of the cinema, caught in its “terrible and beautiful mutations.” Again, subjectivity confronts the ontology of the photographic medium. The bright gaiety of cinema's medium is terrible and beautiful in the way it literally separates the subject from the world that it creates and inhabits, the world of racist murder, “[t]he dark world [that] seemed to lie stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 183.}

The cinema viewer who sits immobile but whose consciousness is overrun by images of pure difference resembles Weinstein's description of Joe as a consciousness that outruns action. Add to this Cavell's ontology of film, where cinematic spectatorship and the cinematic spectacle reflect each other, but in a way that removes the viewers from their subjectivity by giving them a world empty of themselves. The reality of the photo creates a way of seeing that does away with human involvement, a “real” world that distorts the self’s relation to it. In the domain of social conflict, the automatisms of photogrammatic media trigger one's distanciation from violence, not so much by concealing it as by concealing us from it, by separating us from ourselves. The automatism of the photographic world, as Cavell has written, allows us to “not so much look at the world as look \textit{out at} it, from behind the self.”\footnote{Cavell, \textit{The World Viewed}, 102.}

It would be correct, therefore, to see cinema palaces like the one Faulkner describes in “Dry September” as monuments to a certain historical way of blinding as well as of
seeing. And so Paul Virilio has described them:

After 1914, while old Europe was being covered in cenotaphs, indestructible mausoleums and other monuments to the glory of its dead millions, the Americans, who had suffered fewer losses, were building their great cinema temples – deconsecrated sanctuaries in which, as Paul Morand put it, the public sensed the end of the world in an ambience of profanation and black masses.

For a culture “forever on the move to see new commodities ... with the cinema, pure visions were for sale.”54 Clearly, the palaces mark, as monuments, the momentary peace of “silver dreams.” Picture shows retail therapy, the dreamer shops peaceably, giggles uncontrollably while outside the displaced subjectivity of that viewer, outside the palace walls, racial and social war persists.

Cinemas, and their featured presentations, erect curiously temporal monuments, offer evanescent respite and the semblance of conflict’s capture, even while that conflict, hundreds of years of race war, endures. So, picture palaces sell visions as memorials, and yet—equally glaucous in their social effects—they go about immemorialising. Mary Favret has brilliantly uncovered a poetic history concerned with burying yet retaining images of war, of transposing images of war into images of winter, the falling of bombs and bodies into the falling of snow, which both stills the world even as it still falls.55 Perhaps, in the age of cinema, light plays a similar role. It is the photograph (“the word of light”) that removes the viewer from the world, contorts her subjective relationship to the object, even as it records, in light, the world of war and social conflict. This world is one in which the subject is always implicated yet absent. The world, as mechanically recorded, is presented to subjects as “real” but without having been made by them. Captured light records and

documents violence even as it removes the human from the “reality” of war.

The discourse of war brings us toward the final figure of Christmas’ automated undoing: Percy Grimm, Jefferson’s parodical yet deathly solider. Remiss at having missed the “great” war that Europe was already memorialising, Grimm deploys a military order within the “peacetime” civic space of the courthouse square. Grimm’s final pursuit of Christmas makes use of several tableaux, and we should now understand this special effect of Faulkner’s syntax as a confrontation with the automatising photogram, the basic semiotic unit of cinema. Pace Vachel Lindsay, who claims, in the first book-length film theory published by an American, that the chase is the most abstract form of the action film,\textsuperscript{56} it has to be remarked, that Light in August’s extended chase sequence, in which the full force of law hounds the accused Christmas, proves less than cinematic in its action. Gone is the sense of Christmas’s mutative motion through a circular yet segregated social space of Jefferson. All the same, as he flees through forest and bog, Joe retains the status of automaton; the fugitive trace he leaves on the landscape is not orthographic, but mechanical.

The novel carefully explains that Christmas eschews the organic contours of the land, that his “direction is straight as a surveyor’s line, disregarding hill and valley and bog” (254). Christmas is here a reminder of the modernisation of Mississippi’s cultural landscape. The South’s “wild” old roads followed the natural topography of ridges, where modern ones cut straight between points, obliterating obstructions, heedless of nature’s contours. In mapping the terrain of his flight with precise modernity, Faulkner makes Christmas and his violent trajectory move according to a set of technologies that rely on standardisation: roads, rail, film, typography, those that increasingly overlay and automatise the organic, orthographic, agrarian past.

Far more direct in how it draws from the popular imagery of cinema is Bunch’s

\textsuperscript{56} Lindsay, Art of the Moving Picture, 9.
parallel pursuit of Brown. There is even this potential allusion to the Lumieres’ famous documentation of the train pulling in to La Ciotat: “The engine is in sight now, almost head on to him beneath the spaced, heavy blasts of black smoke. It has the effect of terrible no-motion. Yet it does move, creeping terrifically up and over the crest of the grade” (331). When Brown jumps on the moving train he seems to “materialize apparently out of the air, in the act of running” (331). These cinematic relationships of motion and stasis are repeated in the militarised space of Joe's death scene. With automatic pistol, Percy Grimm pursues (without volition, like a chess piece moved by a “Player”) the manacled Christmas around the exterior corner of the cabin. “For an instant they glared at one another, the one stopped in the act of crouching from the leap, the other in midstride of running, before Grimm’s momentum carried him past the corner” (347). As if made not of “flesh and blood,” Percy “reacts automatically,” as automatic as the pistol he carries. Beside the ditch “he stopped, motionless in midstride” (347). Such a manoeuvre seems physically impossible, but it is totally compatible with cinematic motion, which can be stopped and suspended, revealing the autonomy of the photograph within its illusion. The automatising effects of visual recording have so inserted themselves into the actions of Faulkner's characters that all belligerency and all sympathy sink into the vacant space of inconsequence left after the separation of conscious intention from movement and action.

So characterisation and, in particular, the spatial manipulation of character locomotion present a powerful literary automatism with which Faulkner confronts the mechanical reproduction of the moving image and acknowledges its relationship to the fixity of its photogrammatic substrate. Ingeniously, Faulkner allows his same novelistic technology to absorb the bound burdens of social conflict and literary influence. A last example can be found in Mrs. Hines' narrative of her husband's murderous ride, which ends in the shooting of Christmas's probable father, where what automates the motion of character is external to character itself and bears the name “devil” or “curse.”
automation of modernity here bridges the cultural legacies of Virginian Cavalierism and New England Puritanism. In the southern context, the curse emerges as ancestral yet immemorial, proclaimed by both the Hines and Burden families but extending past their bloodlines: a “curse God put on a whole race before your grandfather” was ever thought of, Nathaniel tells Joanna. African-Americans are, in his narrative, a “race doomed and cursed to be forever and ever a part of the white race’s doom and curse for its sins,” a curse on “every white child that ever was born and that ever will be born” (190). The inhuman (and religious) automatism of the curse animates both Burden’s abolitionist and Hines’ murderously racist energies. As it does so, it proposes a link between the cinematic automation of movement and the Puritan doctrine of predestination: “[S]he says it was the devil that guided him,” as he chose the only short cut

in the dark, out of a half a dozen of them, that would ever have caught up with them. And yet it wasn't any possible way that he could have known which road they had taken. But he did. He found them like he had known all the time just where they would be, ... [and he] rode right up behind the buggy ... still in the pitch dark and without saying a word and without stopping his horse, and grabbed the man ... with one hand and held the pistol against him with the other and shot him dead and brought the gal back home behind him on the horse. (282)

Here, like Dewey Dell, Cash and Quentin, Christmas and Grimm, the gestures of Eupheus Hines are automatic, controlled by some force not his own. Devil or curse, the automatisation of character removes human agency from the body and its motions. The general arrangement obeys the philosophical principle of the autonomy of the photograph; the curse is present to the subject without the subject being present to it. (“You dont have any idea who your parents were?” (191) Joanna asks Joe.) Ancestrally yet immemorially the curse is carried, which is why those with immemorial, inaccessible parentage, those
like Joe with no known human maker, experience its automation all the more acutely. Nathaniel also describes the curse as a shadow Joanna must raise with her. As Christmas slips into Joanna's house he is called “a shadow returning without sound and without locomotion to the all mother of obscurity and darkness” (173). If Joe becomes a shadow in the dark obscure world of maternalism, he becomes no more “enlightened” or fixed by the line of the patriarch.

The case of Doc Hines represents just the most fanatic example of the powerful Calvinist paternalism exerted through the novel. Joe's story is situated in a network of Protestant passions, those of Nathaniel and Calvin Bundren, Rev. Hightower and his own father, and Simon McEachern. As Cleanth Brooks observes, even though Joe is the “most violent rebel” against this tradition, he fatalistically aligns himself, in his childhood, with the “hard, just, ruthless man” over the “soft kindness of the woman” (128). Yet, as a novelistic innovation, as a hybrid of the human and the automaton, Joe's shadowy locomotion begins to reverberate against the strains of the Puritan legacy exerted on American arts and letters. Not Nathaniel Bundren but Nathaniel Hawthorne represents aptly the power of Faulkner's “steeple-hatted” fathers, a paternal literary lineage perverted yet preserved by Faulkner's rebellious experiments in fiction.

The totally innate depravity of the Calvinist worldview (the “blackness, ten times black” that Melville found on the underside of Hawthorne's manse) provides the dark tones of Light in August, the obscure negative image of Faulkner's cinematic stillness. Brooks calls Christmas a “perversion of Calvinist determinism.” The medium by which Faulkner has Christmas pervert Calvinism is, in the end, the mechanical, automatic medium of the photograph. Faulkner is then as much responding to the age of mechanical

58 Calvin highlighted the statement from John 3:7 that the “innate depravity” of man is total.
reproduction as he is using that age to respond to preceding ones. He melds the effects of reproductive media technologies into the novel in order to update the deterministic orthodoxy of a Puritan intellectual culture that predicated and automated the history of the American novel. Into the literary tradition, the automatism of cinematic mutation folds itself.

Joe's home, as racial mater and material location, is always a variant to him, so his movement becomes the aberration of the time-image. Where the western hero escapes from the “surrogate home” of a township, Joe Christmas flees literal surrogates. What pushes him onto the “thousand savage and lonely streets” (166)? Most deeply, the origin of his wandering is his foster-mother, in the rejection of her surrogate womb. In a crucial passage Joe realises “It was not the hard work which he hated, nor the punishment and injustice ... It was the woman: that soft kindness which he believed himself doomed to be forever victim of ... 'She is trying to make me cry,' he thought, lying cold and rigid in his bed” (128). Joe reacts to something like what Slavoj Žižek has called the maternal superego, whose irrational, emotional demands obstruct bodily relations, those privileged, for example by masculine genres like the Western.

Despite Mrs. McEachern's obviously oppressed gender role, her maternal orders are not so much suspended as concealed, as the mother becomes the immemorial order that the novel's memory seeks without accessing. This repressive process of memory does not contain the illusion of motion, like the therapeutic memorials of the South's unvanquished women. Instead, Faulkner's cinematography is an illusion in motion, moving despite its fixity to a lost and immemorial origin in the Mother, a mother beyond memory. Worse than a social uncertainty, Christmas' indeterminacy is ontological: not who, but what am I? In Doc Hines' rant, “the nigger says, [to Joe] 'You are worse than that [a nigger]. You dont know what you are'” (288). In other words, he is a substance to which his own

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subjectivity cannot be present, a photographic autonomy not just metaphorically, but formally, philosophically and politically.

In their parallel histories, cinema and literature invest in the cultural record of human locomotion as it is captured and altered by mechanical reproduction. Both *Light in August* and war movies have a stake in memorialising vast movements of bodies in history; they have a stake in the distinction between what is remembered and what escapes the memory, even the “memory” of automatic recording devices. Both *Light in August* and Westerns display motion as a deeply gendered phenomenon. In his “own medium,” Faulkner found the capacity to shift these phenomena though the phenomenological register of memory, and expose that, too, as a technology for manipulating motion. This is something that cinema was years from accomplishing as forcefully. Faulkner’s slow-motion syntax and mutative *tableaux* respond powerfully to the automatism of modernity’s new media, and he placed that response, or course, within an orthographic consciousness that absorbed its literary lineage while it offered, to the future, a precursor of and influence on cinematic modernism and its own supersession of the silent era movement-image.

In one last note on silent film, the early Westerns D.W. Griffith made for Biograph, according to Scott Simmon, never really lost “the sense of land as a tourist space.”61 We might, in a final general gesture, connect the tourist images of his Westerns to the cinema of war. In my reading, Griffith's films retain a touristic attitude of appreciation toward the attraction of the West, in that he envisions the desert landscape as one more place to memorialise the genre of melodrama, and the way that drama crystallises into the unconscious lump in the throat of gendered and racial battle-cries. Since America’s

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imperial tourism is, according to Dean MacCannell’s famous study, counter-revolutionary, Griffith's Westerns stage an ironic and counter-revolutionary conflict, a war fought against Native Americans with the objective of replanting the social conflict of “Eastern civility” in an empty American desert.

Judging from his one-reelers, *The Last Drop of Water* (1911) and *The Massacre* (1912), there are no towns, no homes in Griffith's vision of the west. Formulaically, these films begin with a newly and (maybe) happily married couple succumbing to “the lure of the west.” Both shorts end with the failure of man and woman (who are by then alienated from each other anyway) to plant themselves, and to replant their eastern pasture. Griffith’s cinematic spaces are instead wild sites of battle that tear apart man and woman and put them in separate melodramatic spheres: he as inept protector, failing in battle with feminine flourish; she as an encamped refugee, huddled in hard defencelessness. In the climatic battle sequences of each of these short westerns, these two spheres meet in deft montage. The overall experience of Griffith's characters, and so too his viewers, is never more than one of whimsical departure, transit, and definitive devolution. Even more limiting, this devolution is only sensible in regards to the ordered East from which the couple co-originate. With no such sensible origins, without even an imperfect home or garden to appreciate replanting, Joe Christmas is a tourist in no sense. His movement is an aberration, not a moving through space, but a becoming different from presence within space.

But to every “negative,” its “positive”: Lena, a maternal unity with babe ever-fixed in womb or to breast, is allowed the frivolity of tourism. Her comedy moves like a line from Alabama to Tennessee, passing through Joe's locally spiraling tragedy. “My, My. A body does get around” (381). Then there is Faulkner himself. Never quite the hometown boy his lifetime in Oxford suggests, he too had opportunity to be a tourist. He stayed ever in touch

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with his maternal origins, at her fixed Oxford address, in the six months of 1925 that he toured Europe, writing his mother more than a dozen letters. He shared with her the charm of Italian small-towns, the maturation of his beard, the American attitude towards sex, and a crucial literary breakthrough that would become the famous final passage of *Sanctuary*. He addressed these souvenirs to Moms, signed them Billy. The fleeting and transitory memory of tourism is returned to the fixity of its remembered origin. Faulkner's traipse as a modern tourist offered the social experience that his transient modernism flouts, where the literary experience of community in Jefferson contrasts the “communion” of remembering (to write) one's mother. *Light in August* is a modernist memorial to motion without memory, a dark jewel of literature not sent but placed, engraved, indelibly, William Faulkner, whose address cannot be fixed, whose community would cohere except for the accursed share that exceeds it, wastes it, negates it.

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Departures
Chapter Seven

Crane's Voyage:
The indeterminacy of passing away

And wrecks passed without sound of bells,
The calyx of death's bounty giving back
A scattered chapter, livid hieroglyph,
The portent wound in corridors of shells.

“At Melville's Tomb”¹

As opposed to Stein, who approached her absolute vision of America by rising in an airplane and forgetting the fact of death far below on the land, Hart Crane found that the “spiritual gate' to [his] absolute vision”² was in the “calyx” of death that would suck a body down to the “cruel” bottom of the sea. Rejoining the theme of absolute vision that preoccupied Chapter One, the trajectory of this thesis also obeys the gravity of a body in descent, suggesting that authors and their bodies of work are magnetised by the earth

¹ Hart Crane, Complete Poems (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1984), 53.
rather than celestial muses.\(^3\) By relocating the experience of the absolute from the air and airborne to the sea and the abyss, the thematic organisation of this thesis exhibits the potential for American modernisms to be aligned in a way that challenges the cyclical designs that came with modernism's own utopian drive toward immanence. Drawing the sky down to the sea floor, the gravitational field of American modernism therefore pulls American modernists into paths that divide and rupture any design for community's self-enclosure.

Yet a cycle completes itself even in the short stanza from Hart Crane quoted above, as the calyx gives back, redacts its menace, moves toward harmony and balance. Even though the whirlpool at sea sucks a sailor down, the sea offers up shells in which the dull hieroglyph of life can be heard echoing, since, as Crane reminded Harriet Monroe, anyone can hear “the roar” of their own “veins” just “by holding a shell close to one's ear.”\(^4\) Thus the shell's opening closes one inside one's self. The sonic “portent” held in “the corridor” of the shell is, at the same time, an ominous miniaturisation of the ocean's danger, because the “roar” of blood it returns to the listener is the gift of one's own mortality, reconnecting one to the sound of one's body, which is, in the end, “death's bounty,” too. But to sum up the distinction: whereas Stein escaped the material realities of death by turning to the absolutism of air, Crane seeks the absolute in the vicissitudes of the flesh itself, in an obsession with death, decay and the liquid world, both inside and outside the body.

Alfred Hanley, who said that death was the “'spiritual gate' to [Crane's] absolute vision,” also boldly claims that “the major theme of Crane's entire poetic work” is “the sustained pursuit of an Ideal or absolute clothed often with the attributes of divinity.”\(^5\) This chapter advances a materialist reading of Crane's poetry in order to demonstrate how

\(^3\) See Socrates’ discussion of muses, poets and magnetic force in Ion.
\(^4\) Letter accompanying the submission of “At Melville's Tomb” to Poetry, quoted in Hanley, Holy Vision, 156.
\(^5\) Hanley, Holy Vision, 2.
Crane's “pursuit” of the absolute was well equipped yet ultimately obstructed by his immersion in America's mass geography. Amid the community of mass society, the only “true” figure of the absolute is the experience of death, an experience to which literature responds but can only give imperfect representation. Contextualising Crane's poetry amid the turning tide of modernity, Paul Giles has demonstrated that Crane's “syntactical ambiguity” also disrupts the fixity of bodies in space, for instance when it operates according to the wider 1920s discourse on Einstein's theory of relativity, where the “interchangeability of noun and verb, subject and object” speaks to the “perpetually shifting relationship” between things in the world. However, Giles seems to reverse his own intent and align himself with Hanley's more idealistic thesis when he claims that The Bridge “wishes to eliminate any appearance of motion that would render the construction provisional rather than absolute.”

So even the best critical correctives to idealistic readings of Crane lapse into the stance of their opposition, even though Crane explicitly disavowed absolute truths. To wit, he remained sceptical about any dogmatic enthusiasm for relativity theory. In a letter written in March of 1926 he offers Gorham Munson the “platitude that 'truth has no name,'” yet he complains that the “latest one, of course, is 'relativity.'” Acknowledging the contradiction that would come with any absolute rejection of absolutism, Crane uses his statement of “General Aims and Theories” to equivocate his views:

It may not be possible to say there is, strictly speaking, any “absolute” experience. But it seems evident that certain aesthetic experiences ... can be called absolute, inasmuch as it [sic] approximates a formally convincing statement of a conception or apprehension of life that gains our unquestioning assent.

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7 Crane, “General Aims and Theories,” in The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of Their
Though here Crane's description of the aesthetic absolute conforms to ratiocinative demands (“a formally convincing statement”), in his personal correspondence he does enshroud his materialist core with “attributes of the divine,” especially when he rests the “assumption of the god-head” upon the materiality of communicative signs. Thus, Crane's “pursuit” of the ideal does not move him toward some divine realm beyond the material world, nor does he allow for the potential of immanence in this world, but instead he sees the divine and the absolute as core constructions of modern life that can be accessed through poetic language. However, according to him, they will never provide absolute or total experiences.

So as he embraces the suffering of incompleteness, Crane's conception of the divine is not Ideal or otherworldly, but condensed in the materiality of language and social communication. As he writes to a friend, the “true idea of God” may come from the happiness of identifying one's self with “all of life” (immanence), but he is sceptical of its feasibility and recognises the beauty in “pierc[ing] through to the center” of emotional suffering. In a letter to his mother he suggests that suffering delimits “a kind of kingdom” for those initiated by it, “a kingdom that has the widest kind of communion.” In Crane's mind, “divinity” and “communion” are not identical and desirable (though unattainable) figures of unity, rather the absolute connective experience of being with others is equally an expression of one's separation and suffering under “that godless cleft of sky,” as he puts it in the fifth section of “Voyages.”

Suffering, therefore, initiates community, the divine experience of social fragmentation. Community obtains in the suffering of the living, among those who feel the

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9 Ibid., 142.
10 Ibid., 243.
ecstatic logic of being separated from the whole, who observe their own finitude in the dead other. If the experience of death puts an end to suffering, it also puts an end to community, snuffing out the kingdom of those who suffer together, who suffer each other for each other. For this reason, Crane's poetry remains ever on the living side of the spiritual gate of the grave, communicating the suffering of one who stands at the threshold to death but does not cross. Though it may be obsessed with that threshold, the experience of his poetry never crosses, can never cross, and never believes it can cross into the immanent unity of death, and thus never becomes that unified Ideal, which would be the “death-work” or the extinction of community.\(^\text{11}\)

The term “spiritual gates” comes from Crane's poem “Emblems of Conduct,” which appears early on in the first third of his 1926 collection *White Buildings*. In the poem a wanderer sketches an “uneven valley of graves” while a cataclysmic volcanic explosion lures the “living into spiritual gates.” Here “spiritual gates” refer not just to the graves but to ears and mouths, the organs of speaking and listening, just as the deathly calyx of “Melville's Tomb” becomes the horn in which one hears the roaring sea of one’s own bodily life force. Moreover, “Emblems of Conduct” acknowledges its place amid a mass geography that impacts the organs of speech and hearing by discussing the “Dull lips” of “orators” and “radios” that “complete laws to the people.”\(^\text{12}\) So a homology between the grave and the mouth begins in “Emblems of Conduct” and extends to the final third of *White Buildings* where in “Melville's Tomb” the grave, the mouth, the whirlpool, the shell and the ear all mirror each other in a metaphorical structure that demonstrates the interrelation of human finitude and the technologies of communication/perception.\(^\text{13}\) This intricate

\(^{11}\) “‘Community’ means, in some way, the presence of a being-together whose immanence is impossible except as its death-work.” Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 80.

\(^{12}\) Crane, *Complete Poems*, 27.

\(^{13}\) The fact that Crane plagiarised almost every line of this poem from the notebooks of his recently deceased friend Samuel Greenberg does nothing to discredit my point, but rather it furthers the argument that voice and language can not be stably attributed to a stable, living subjectivity, which casts Crane a proto-conceptual artist in that he appropriates the work of others, making it “his” by simple authorial assertion.
mirroring act is galvanised in the last poetic sequence of *White Buildings* entitled “Voyages.”

Outwardly, “Voyages” appear to be a series of erotic death lyrics set at sea that are noteworthy for, among other things, their surrealist mix of idiosyncratic diction and formal tone. Yet a closer inspection reveals how Crane uses his “Voyages” sequence to imagine the port of New York as a kind of regional America, a watery hinterland between life in modernity and loss at sea, where, paradoxically, the poems somehow “mouth” the experience of lovers who lack a singular embodiment, whose experience of literary community remains ecstatically non-subjective and semantically indeterminate. Though many critics tend to place “Voyages” amid an idealistic and romantic tradition, where a singular poetic subjectivity transcends mortal suffering and achieves an affirmative vision of community and poetry, instead the poem resigns itself to the impossibility of such transcendence, resists fetishising the harmonious whole, and signifies the visual and auditory violence with which modernity has redrawn the limits of subjectivity, verbal symbolism, and lovers’ communion.\(^\text{14}\)

The “imaged Word” (or written language) is an ominous portent of such violence from the very outset of “Voyages,” the first poem of which contains this searing hieroglyph:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The sun beats lightning on the waves,} \\
\text{The waves fold thunder on the sand;}^\text{15}
\end{align*}
\]

The beach here personifies a labourer in the drudgery of domestic chores, for instance, beating and folding laundry, but the sun and sea also behave as do lovers, who beat and

\(^{14}\) M. D. Uroff, “The Imagery of Violence in Hart Crane’s Poetry,” *American Literature* 43 (2), May 1971: 200–216. This article exposes the ways in which, across his career, Crane commandeers the motif of violence from the Romantic tradition. For example, with Crane, elements like wind and fire lose any correspondence to nature. Where in Romanticism violence has both destructive and preserving effects, with Crane it becomes a purely destructive reification.

fold the body in a rough play that mirrors that of the children who strive for “conquest” on
the beach, “flaying” each other with sand. This omen of violent rumpus is echoed by the
second poem in “Voyages,” where the sea takes on an even more terrible pall. Personifying
a capricious queen, her “sceptered terror” puns visually on “cept/red Terre,” earth soaked
in red, and the conceit of the sea as a blood-soaked earth continues in references to a
waterborne field of red, the “poinsettia meadows of her tides.” Then the “dark confessions
of her veins” are followed by further images of blood and flesh wounds in “Voyages III,”
with its terms “consanguinity” (“together in blood”), “ribboned water lanes” (where the
decorative “ribbons” carries the ghastly poetic usage of flesh torn to ribbons) and, finally,
the “black swollen gates,” referring to both graves (again) and the signs of domestic
struggle/violent sex.

Though “Voyages” lacks the clear references to America's mass geography and New
York’s harbour that fill out The Bridge, John Unterecker emphasises that the period in
which “Voyages” was composed saw both an agonising love affair and the factionalising of
Crane's literary coterie in New York. As such, the setting, tone and linguistic inventiveness
of “Voyages” is attributable to Crane's place in the same media saturated mass geography
that emerges in The Bridge, plus the particular circumstances of his sex and social life in
the Spring and Summer of 1924. According to Allen Tate, their New York group was united
by their youth, poverty, and ambition, meeting in Village coffee shops, attending parties at
each other's apartments and occasionally retreating to Eugene O'Neill's country home. The
loose group consisted of Malcolm and Peggy Cowley, Sue Jenkins, Kenneth Burke, James
Light, e.e. Cummings, who together discussed a prospective magazine, Aesthete, that when
published in 1925 would attack Crane's other close friends Gorham Munson and Waldo
Frank.16

Amid the troublesome camaraderie, Crane spoke, in a letter from December of 1924,

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about “a need for ‘brokenness,’” the urge to be “excommunicated” from certain “literary circles,” and suggested that a “little more solitude, real solitude, on the part of everyone, would be a good thing.” Even so, as this social turbulence influenced the speed and consistency of what he called the “current of creation,” Crane emerged from the “maelstrom” of these times with a more sharply defined notion of his poetic enterprise.\(^\text{17}\)

Appended to a draft of “Voyages IV” that he mailed to Jean Toomer was the following explanation: “I try to make my poems experiences ... when they are good, they are.” In the same letter Crane presents a unique definition of aesthetic experience and its relationship to absolute divinity: poetry, he writes, is the “limitless and yet forever incomplete” “effort to describe God.”

The second major factor in the background of the “Voyages” sequence is Crane's love affair with Emil Opffer, with whom he lived in a historic, well-kept section of Brooklyn that appeared to like a “moment of communion ... where the edge of the bridge leaps over the edge of the street.” With Emil he resided at 110 Columbia Heights, in a building formerly occupied by Washington Roebling, who, along with his father Augustus, engineered and designed the Brooklyn Bridge, which Crane aggrandised as “the most superb piece of construction in the modern world.”\(^\text{18}\) “To Brooklyn Bridge” addresses the “curveship,” the “harp and altar” of the “lover's cry,”\(^\text{19}\) but “Voyages” addresses, more hermetically yet more directly, the physical love he shared with Emil there in the shadow of the bridge, where, as he put it in a letter to Waldo Frank, he saw the “Word made Flesh,” “where flesh became transformed through intensity of response to counter-response, where sex was beaten out.”\(^\text{20}\) Agonisingly, Crane periodically lost Emil, with whom he charted Brooklyn's narrow lanes hand in hand, to the “ribboned water lanes” of the sea, as

\(^{17}\) Crane, \textit{Letters}, 192–193.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 181–183.
\(^{19}\) Crane, \textit{Complete Poems}, 63.
\(^{20}\) Crane, \textit{Letters}, 181.
Emil voyaged intermittently on eight-week trips to South America, for, as Crane put it, his “bread and butter.”

Amid the violence of personal separation and communal rupture, within sight of what “To Brooklyn Bridge” calls the “flashing scene” of the cinema and the “subway scuttle” of America’s mass geography, Crane’s “Voyages” dissolve the solid presence of a body and a singular subjectivity amid the ecstatic tremors of mass society’s communal deformations. It does so in three distinct ways. Initially, the poem experiments with an advertising form, an anti-romantic gesture that exchanges the spontaneous expression of artistic creativity for the superficiality, impersonality and automation of commercial signification. Secondly, the poem gathers together immersive fields of text, in which the “signature of the incarnate word” is affixed amid a clear but confused modern soundscape. Just as the surf can be heard with clarity despite the impossibility of attributing any aspect of the sound to any one part of the wave, Crane’s poetry voices the singularity of love through a confused chorus of singers and disparate utterances, attributable to no source. Thirdly, as the “monody” of “Melville’s Tomb” spreads into the polyvocal deltas of “Voyages,” the poem’s communicative intentions are bedevilled by absent, mute and mutating interlocutors. Here the stable subjectivity of a dramatic monologue is dislodged through grammatical operations, as the poem asks a reader to trace obscure anaphora through convoluted syntax, as well as make sense of frequent apostrophes to non-human as well as human interlocutors, all of which raise unanswerable questions about the ontology and location of the speaker from whom language emanates.

Throughout Crane’s life, communication technologies ruptured and reshaped themselves, reforming communal life in general, and the rarefied communicative project of advertising played a central part in those fluctuations. Long before Crane’s birth, those channels of promotion designed for a largely illiterate or local marketplace—the town crier and the pictographic shop sign—had become obsolete, outmoded. The geographically
dispersed marketplace of a mass-geographic America facilitated the expansion of print media,\(^{21}\) and by the 1920s—the time of Crane’s reluctant career as a copywriter—advertisers were well adapted to mass media forms. They adopted a paradoxical role, pushing the products of modernity while containing the psychic ruptures that new commercial technologies dealt to personal life. Roland Marchand locates the modernity of advertising in this double-faced negotiation of its own purpose, arguing that advertisements became “modern” once they “transcended or denied their essential economic nature as mass communications and achieved a subjective and a 'personal' tone.”\(^{22}\)

“Voyages” divulges its desire to be modern mass-communication by adopting the vestments of traditional prosody, especially the divine invocations and fluctuations in tone typical of a Pindaric ode. In “Voyages VI,” a poetic speaker seeks a “fervid covenant” with “Creation's blithe and petalled word” even whilst he addresses the sea (and the reader) intimately, referring to himself, with a personable humility, as “Thy derelict and blinded guest.” “Voyages II,” with its sea personified by regal pomp, apostrophises a chorus in the exalted intensity of a lyrical ode (“O minstrel galleons of Carib fire”), where, by contrast, “Voyages V” intimately asks the lover (reader) to “Draw in your head and sleep the long way home.” The affiliation, in “Voyages,” between the grandeur of ceremonious statement and what Hanley called the poem's “subdued and pensive voice” softens the materialist core of mass-communication with a “personal” tone, as did modern advertising. Paul Giles' study of *The Bridge* and its historical contexts exposes this “double-edged quality” of Crane's writing,\(^{23}\) where secret meanings (often economic ones) are embedded in polite,


\(^{23}\) Giles, *Hart Crane*, 2
socially conventional poetry, and the same double edge cuts through the “ironic” odes of
the Fugitives and Marianne Moore's poetics of local tourism, which negotiate a tense
balance between the personal and public address, the idiomatic (regionalist) and the
idiosyncratic (modernist) word.

Tate noted this tension in Crane's style when he described it as “at once
contemporary and in the grand manner.” The contemporaneity of “Voyages” is less
obvious than that of The Bridge, which is festooned with references to industrial society.
Yet as “Voyages VI” confesses, the poem “secretes” its secret material content as “steadily
as a shell” (that portal between life and death, that technological proxy for mouth and ear),
“secretes” its “beating leagues of monotone.” The pun on “secretes,” implies that the shell
does not just emit (secrete) sound but also, as it did in “Melville's Tomb, invites the noise
of the body in, secreting it away, trapping it inside. The poetic shell is absorbent as well as
transmissive, just as poetry, so Crane argued in a letter to Waldo Frank, must “absorb the
machine” if it is to remain vital. In “Voyages,” the absorbed machine of mass geography is
all the more secret/secreted because the poem lacks literal reference to machinery, and
instead registers amid incoherent visions, lavish language on the border of pure sound, and
a free-floating sensuousness wrought of seawater flesh.

But “Voyages I” enjoys a curious status distinct from the remainder of the sequence.
Its composition began five years before “Voyages” “coalesced” as a (fragmented) whole. At
the time Crane was working as an advertiser and envisioned his single “sea poem,” as an
attempt at an “advertisement form.” “It's a kind of poster, —in fact, you might name it
'Poster,'” he suggested to Gorham Munson in 1922. Therefore, “Poster” obviously
constitutes an attempt at absorbing the technologies of the “modern advertisement,” as

24 Tate, “Introduction” to White Buildings in Hart Crane: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Alan
Trachtenberg (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1982.), 18 Originally published as Tate, “Introduction”
defined by Marchand. It the poem attempts to mask its essential economic and mass communicative nature with the “subjectivity” and personal tone of modern advertisement. It directly employs the intimate language and subjective rhetorical strategies of marketing, but reverses them in a sort of anti-advertisement, a warning to children not to fall in (to the sea of) love. As it co-opts the advertisement form and puts it to the cross-purpose of sexual advisement, Crane’s poetic language utilises an indeterminate free play indebted to Arthur Rimbaud, a freedom of signification that, with Crane, unavoidably lapses into incommunicability.

As the prosody of “Poster” is more vers libre than anything else, it makes sense to compare it to Rimbaud’s groundbreaking sea poem “Marine.” Whereas the polysemy throughout “Marine” cleverly confuses sea and land, Crane’s shoreline blends childhood play with adult sexuality. Not only does his phrase “fresh ruffles of the surf” nod to Rimbaud’s ornières immenses du reflux, but also the word “ruffles” connotes both the frumpy dress of bourgeois boyhood and the messed blankets of a lover’s bed. Rimbaud’s ronche (meaning both bramble and sea-ray) finds its answer here with “urchins,” referring, as it does, to both troublesome children and prickly sea creatures. “Poster”’s reference to the “fondling” of “sticks and shells” may lack subtlety, but there is ample nuance in the word “cordage,” as nautical rigging is displayed in neural/muscular literalness – “the cordage of your bodies.” It is tempting to read the poem this way, but “Poster” is arguably less interesting in its poetic allusions than it is commercial form, or, as Crane emphasised,
its “only value ... rests in its approach to the ‘advertisement’ form.”

As the poem absorbs the machinations of industrial print advertising, meaningful and effective communication becomes more desirable than possible: “could they hear me I would tell them,” the poem’s speaker remarks. The children’s “treble interjections” are themselves drowned out by the hieroglyphic inscription: a sun that “beats lightning on the waves” and waves “that fold thunder on the sand.” Here, the outright impossibility of address and the single coherent image of children who “have contrived a conquest” work together to imply a stasis. Nothing really moves in the poem. Even though Crane noticed the mutative qualities of his photographs when he described Alfred Steiglitz’s “stationary, yet strangely moving pictures,” his experiment with the advertisement form in poetry freezes the motion (cinema) of poetic language into a cautionary totem of death, as he put it – “a stop, look and listen sign.” The poem arrests language into a hieroglyphic tableau or frieze, which cancels the communicative gesture of the poetic subjectivity. As a purely still and soundless image, the kids are beyond the reach of the speaker’s voice and will. Meanwhile, the uncertainty over whether the poem’s children represent “real” children or children as depicted by an advertising bill marks the boundary between experience and ekphrasis.

This blurred border between descriptive and expressive communication mirrors the vexed role of communication in the modern advertisement, whose dual purpose was to advance an impersonal system of commerce while fostering an air of personality. At the dawn of the so-called “New Era” of advertising, descriptive language made way for subjective and experiential language, just as the hieroglyphic description of “Poster” (stanza one) makes way for the emotive song of experience in stanza three. By the mid-1920s, the transition from descriptive to emotive techniques of advertising was

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28 Crane, Letters, 99.
29 Ibid., 132.
30 Ibid., 99.
accompanied by other major stylistic upheavals in popular magazines. Ads were designed less to sell the product itself and more to advertise the benefits of having or the costs of not having it (the emotional security of a good motor rather than the motor itself). More ads included illustrations of people using products rather than the products by themselves. The tone of accompanying copy transformed from the conventional “reason-why” (you need this product) sales pitch (or simply, the product announcement) to an emotive and subjective mode targeted at “the hopes and anxieties of the consumer.” Advertisers appreciated the “advantage of inducing the reader empathetically ‘to have lived through an experience.’”

“Poster” utilises all these same marketing strategies but reverses them into an equivocal promotion-cum-warning, presumably because it is less concerned with an economy of pleasure and production than it is with an economy of death and seduction. Take, for example, the trend of selling the benefits of a product rather than the actual commodity. Crudely put, this is the logic of metaphor. Sex is never is explicitly mentioned but only metaphorically illustrated by the “contrived conquest” of the “brilliant kids.” At line nine, “Could they hear me I would tell them,” the poem transitions from the descriptive or illustrative intent of lines 1-8 to a more subjective mode of address: “O brilliant kids, frisk with your dog.” Line 11 plays on anxiety, “there is a line / You must not cross nor ever trust beyond it” your body to caresses. If the children are likened to targets of an advertising message, here the marketer has “lived through an experience” and would, if he could, induce the audience to empathise with him, to pity him so as to avoid his disappointment. The final disclosure that “the bottom of the sea is cruel” conveys the lessons of life experience without describing those experiences as such.

Even as one detects the outcome of experience without the experience itself, even as “Voyages” inscribes modern love while it keeps its machine-age core a secret, the sequence

31 Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, 12.
also presents perception without a perceiver. The lack of a singular coherent subjectivity to connect the perceptions of bodily love that we find in “Voyages” emerges in the tradition of what Jerome McGann describes as Algernon Charles Swinburne's radical modifications to the dramatic monologue. According to McGann, Swinburne introduced two new “salient properties” to the form: “an immersive textual environment defined as the inner standing-point of the poetic speaker” and “a nonsubjective frame of reference.” The phenomenon of the “non-subjective” inner “standing-point” of a speaker describes the speaking automatons unveiled by inventors of the mid to late nineteenth-century. “Voyages” displays the poet’s capacity to modulate immersive textual environments by condensing language into a paratactic grand manner and then relaxing it into the subdued voice of intimate address that whispers most clearly at the end of section V. Crane also updates Swinburne's “nonsubjective” frame of reference to a “transubjective” one, where the source of poetic speech fluctuates between subjective (human) and non-subjective (machine) positions.

In a 2000 issue of *Modernism/Modernity*, Brian Reed investigates Crane's relationship with popular music and his idiosyncratic use of his own Victrola. While he wrote Crane would play the same side of a record (Ravel's *Bolero*, for example) over and over again at high volume, producing an audio environment that was repetitive, fragmented and LOUD. “Voyages” recognises the phonographic method of inscription, where the sea uses a technology of sound (“diapason knells”) to imprint a surface (“scrolls of silver snowy sentences”). Using the “diapason,” which refers to an organ stop, to a swelling harmony, and to the entire scope of something, the “sceptred terror” (blood-soaked earth) of the sea completes “sessions” (recording sessions) that “rend” (meaning both to rip physically and inflict emotionally) everything but the “pieties of lovers’ hands.”

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Music is emotive, provoking warm applause (as in “give them a hand”), while it equally damages (rend) everything but the hand, which manually controls the needle and speed of the phonograph.

Distinguishing itself from phonographic writing, Crane’s poetic inscription modulates the sound of language through parataxis, such as in the sonic density of these lines:

    Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings
    Samite sheeted and processioned where
    Her undinal vast belly moonward bends,

One hears why William Carlos Williams celebrated the music of “Voyages” as carrying “all that need be said,” despite recommending nothing to the intelligence. Indeed, Crane's obsession with the musicality of language may have answered what Joseph Riddel calls Nietzsche's “prophecy that language could be purified of the world's appearance only by turning it into music.”34 Hence the deaf apparition of “Poster,” where a warning against sex could not be sounded, explodes into music of “Voyages:” its “diapason knells” and Salvadoran bells, islands in “adagio,” its “transmemberment of song,” “singing mortality” from “chancel ports,” its “clear rime” and its “beating leagues of monotone.” The transition here is from the appearance of the world, and the appearance of romantic, mystical poetry, to the materiality of sound, an immersive textuality where the reality of meaning is drowned out by language as unintelligible noise:

    All fragrance irrefragably, and claim
    Madly meeting logically in this hour
    And region that is ours to wreathe again
    Portending eyes and lips and making told

This chancel port and portion of our June—

Here “region” may refer to the Brooklyn lanes that Emil and Hart wreathed together, or the bedroom in which they writhed, but there is also the sense in which New York harbour delimits a region of American literature, where the port becomes a chancel from which other poets' voices ring. In this case, Crane is no more the romantic singer “striding there alone” than the one Stevens uncovers in Key West. On nearby Long Island, in Paumanok, Whitman strode too, seduced by migratory birds, where both he and songbird experienced a clear but confused perception of the sea: “Close on its wave soothes the wave behind,” the sound of sound “embracing and lapping” itself, as language comes “up from the waves.” So towards Whitman's “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” swim Crane's “Voyages,” as Crane drifts toward Whitman: “through wave on wave unto / Your body rocking!”

The wave is also a noisy harbinger in Swinburne's “Hymn to Prosperpine,” rolling through the world “as the noise in a dream.”35 It is ironic then that Crane should have excoriated Swinburne for subjugating sense to sound,36 in the same way Williams did him. For it is surely the influence of Swinburne's inward-turning, immersive textual environment that pushes Crane towards superseding the romantic naturalism of Whitman's ocean scenery and easily incorporating the secretions of a mass geography. By letting his hymn to oceanic love become a surrealist sound-scape, Crane's effort at mass-communication and communion with the good grey ghost of Whitman is both enhanced and interrupted by the intrusion of modernity's dream-like noise, the static's crackle from the Victrola.

35 Swinburne, “Hymn to Prosperpine” in Major Poems and Selected Prose, 102.
36 Brian Reed, Hart Crane: After His Lights (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2006), 30. Crane writes that A.C. Swinburne didn’t have much more than “art ears.”
Just as in “The Harbor Dawn,” where a “tide of voices” and “myriad snowy hands” vie for the dreamer's senses, where the Homeric and American worlds are married in the “Cyclopean towers” and whirring “sirens” of modern Manhattan, so too in “Voyages” many voices are condensed within “one” dramatic “monologue,” churning voices that shift (like hands across a breast) between subjectivities, just as the churning, mingling “ocean rivers” of “Voyages VI” shift green “borders under stranger skies.” In “Harbor Dawn” sound is confused, like “signals dispersed in veils,” so the ear of the dreamer hears “fog-insulated noises.”

So too in “Voyages” it becomes hard to attribute voices, utterances, and proclamations their sources, as if they were disembodied shouts of crewmen blinded by a storm at sea. The mingling river imagery of “Voyage's VI,” which prefigures the “tide of voices” that come through the dreamer's window in “Harbor Dawn,” precedes the poet's renunciation of a singular name:

37 Crane, Complete Poems, 68–69.
Waiting, afire, what name, unspoke,
I cannot claim: let thy waves rear
More savage than the death of kings,
Some splintered garland for the seer.

Eschewing the subjectively framing reference of a name, the poet instead defines their selves by their ability to perceive, to see and to call, not their ability to be called. As such, the mingling waters of the mingling sections of “Voyages” speak to a polyvocality, a trans-subjective frame of reference in which there may be many seeing, many speaking at once. Thus the sea is the ultimately shifting signifier, filling in for Whitman, Opffer, poetry, the poet, the grave, the ear, the mouth, the breast, the hand, the mythic object of an ode or the confiding lover in a Brooklyn bedroom.

The constantly transferring subjectivity of poetic speaker and listener is evident in the poem's frequent and idiosyncratic use of apostrophe and prosopopoeia. As “Poster” transitions from an illustrative mode of ekphrasis to one of subjective address, it transcends its status as a “stop look and listen sign” and turns into a malfunctioning dramatic monologue. Problematically, it retains the inadequate advertising form it hopes to supersede, and so “Voyages” first attempt at apostrophe, “O brilliant kids,” fails accordingly. In “Voyages II,” apostrophes invoke the sea, personified by a water nymph, whose belly laughter becomes the “inflections” of the lover's pleasure. But in the second stanza, the sea the poet addresses has transformed from gleeful accomplice to terrible punisher, whose phonographic inscription of modern noise rends the world around the lovers:

--And yet this great wink of eternity,
Of rimless floods, unfettered leewardings,
Samite sheeted and processioned where
Her urdinal vast belly moonward bends,
Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love;

Take this Sea, whose diapason knells
On scrolls of silver snowy sentences,
The sceptred terror of whose sessions rends
As her demeanors motion well or ill,
All but the pieties of lovers’ hands.

The Pindaric lability of tone is geographically circumscribed by an oceanic ebb and flow, as the first two stanzas of “Voyages” counteract each other through the dancing surf of strophe and antistrophe. First encouraging and then disparaging, the sea represents the communion of love (in the strophe of stanza one) and the ominous threat to that communion (in the antistrophe of stanza two). As the sea, subject of rhetorical apostrophe, shifts from the inducer to destroyer of love, the tropes of “Voyages” become more sophisticated than pathetic fallacies. As Giles has recognised, Crane's use of “pathetic fallacy” (for example, in “The Tunnel,” when the train platform, not the train, “hurries along to a dead stop”) hinge on syntactical inversions that reveal the relativity of objects and subjects in the world, where the nature of objects becomes “dependent” upon “the standpoint of the observer.” However, the first two stanzas of “Voyages II” stage an ecstatic encounter between a perceiver and an object of perception neither of which can maintain ontological distinction, as love is tossed around on the tumultuous surface of love itself.

As the dangerous, ecstatic object of the sea and the sensuous subject of the lover become paradoxically identical yet antagonistic, Crane enacts what Swinburne would call the union of the “perceiver and thing perceived.” But he goes further. Where Swinburne

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38 Giles, Hart Crane, 22. The example Giles provides from “The Tunnel” seems less a “pathetic fallacy” and more like a transferred epithet, a device associated with epic rather than romantic poetry.
dissolved subjectivity by merging the perceiver and the object of perception, Crane’s poems, in their elimination of fixed subject positions, present a perception without a perceiver, the autonomous space of new media where the human is removed from the act of inscription and representation. Updating Swinburne’s immersive textual effects, Crane defines poetry as “both perception and thing perceived,” so the transition from Swinburne’s wave to Crane’s is the transition between a world where one can hold “inner standing points” to one that is awash in disembodied technologies of perception. Imperfect demonstrations of relativity they may be, but Crane's poems adequately conjure up the automatised environment of America's mass geography, even when any actual references to the industrial technologies of mass society are secreted (away) by organic forms like wave and shell.

Despite these traits of “Voyages,” R.W.B. Lewis reads the sequence as an “altogether familiar and expertly conventional” love story in the “age-old tradition of romance.” Lewis takes the figurative language of “Voyages II,” for example, to be derived, generally, from Petrarch’s poems to Laura in fourteenth-century. Here he detects what Ruskin defined as the “pathetic fallacy” of the Romantic tradition, whereby, in Lewis’ words, nature “reflects or frustrates, sympathises with or opposes the movements of human emotion.” For Lewis, the first stanza of “Voyages II” confirms the “absolute nature” of the sea’s love and her “derision” for the “finite love-possibilities of man.” But Giles discovery that Crane's pathetic fallacy is a “bit of 'relativity,'” together with Crane's debt to the Pindaric fungibility of strophe and antistrophe, present a poetic force that is far more modern and contingent than romantic or absolute.

Pace Lewis, there is no distinction here between the sea being perceived and the autonomous disembodied perceptual force of the poem. His term “derision” belies the fact

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39 Crane, Letters, 237.
that Lewis interpolates an “at” into the parataxis of the stanza’s last line. “Laughing the wrapt inflections of our love,” is critically transcribed to mean: “laughing at the wrapt inflections of our love.” Read as it is written, however, the inflections of human love actually are Undine’s laughing belly.\(^{41}\) Though Lewis defines Undine as a “water-goddess,” an inaccuracy that allows him to maintain the continuity of his conventional love story, Udine was a stock character of nineteenth-century opera, a soulless water spirit who tricked men into impregnating her. In this sense, the object of pathetic fallacy (“human emotion”) is imbued with the soullessness of the nymph’s original state, vexed by her fraudulent relation to man, and troubled by the exotic tease of her inhumaness. Lewis pushes aside this motif of trickery—the “wink” of eternity, Undine’s pregnant belly, and the inflections of laughter—because it contradicts the romantic calibrations of nature and human emotion.

So the sea lacks what Lewis calls “absolute nature” and is instead contingent on perception, not a singular subjectivity that perceives, but a trans-subjective, disembodied force of perception. Even though “Voyages” is consistently “narrated” or spoken from a first person perspective, its wave of modernity moves the “I” of the poem between different times, tenses, locations, moods and identities. The speakers’ addresses emanate from states of subjectivity so vastly incongruous (hence the Pindaric flux in tone) that the poem attests to perception without a fixed perceiver. At the point of subjective-objective merger in “Voyages II,” narrative perspective becomes the most attenuated, apparent only through the possessive and objective plural pronouns, “us” and “our.”

However, who are the people or things that comprise this communal “we”? When the speaker apostrophises the “seasons” to bind “us” in time and awe, when he invokes the “minstrel galleons” (singing ships, resounding cannons) to open the “vortex of our grave”

to whom does he speak, and with whom does he descend into this watery gate? It may be that the fiery “minstrel galleons” respond, in prosopopoeia, for an absent natural world (as the clear seasons are truant). The quick mutability of the invoked image implies a bizarre prosopopoeia, where a wandering ship or singing cannon speaks in place of the natural muse, the “clear seasons.” Often the rhetorical apostrophes are made to non-human interlocutors, like seasons or the “minstrel galleons of Carib fire,” but the only interpersonal conversation, where a human voice is represented, comes in “Voyages V.”

In that section, R.W.B. Lewis finds “an unusually distinctive time and setting,” stating it is “past midnight on a moonlit evening; the lovers are gazing through an open window of their room on to the bay estuaries.” Here Lewis unites Crane, Opffer and the sea into a triadic apparatus of interpretation: “The fact of his friend’s regular and necessary voyaging, combined with the spectacular view of the harbor waters from the lovers’ apartment window, led Crane to think of the exalting human affair in terms of the sea.” Lewis speculates that the two forms together in the moonlight of “Voyages V” are Crane and Opffer, and thus explicates: “forlornly, he [Crane] begs the lover to turn back from the window and come to him one last time, that they may dream together of some far-off reunion, knowing that it is still merely a dream.”

The notion of “far-off reunion” is odd, since “Voyages V” seems the point in the sequence when the two lovers actually are together, as opposed to, for example, when “Voyages II” perceives a “tendered theme” of a person reflected in the “plains” of the sea. Though Lewis may need a stable setting to house the “clear enough and continuing action” of the poem’s “love story,” in “Voyages V,” perception is disembodied, as there is little evidence for the “distinctive setting” of a room or a window, since the reference to “the long way home” and the “slant of drifting foam” suggests a ship amid a sea-passage as much as a domicile over a bay. If the setting of the poem is confused, or undecidable, the

42 Lewis, Poetry of Hart Crane, 174.
dialogue that takes place in “Voyages V” is equally indeterminate, since the interlocutor, if not absent, can certainly not be proven present. Picking up on the muteness of “Voyages I,” where the playing children were still and incommunicative images in an advertisement (as well as the distant potential consumers of sexual experience) communication in part V is bedevilled by the “slow tyranny” (anaphoric to the diapason session in II) of “deaf moonlight:”

One frozen trackless smile ... What words
Can strangle this deaf moonlight? For we

Are overtaken. Now no cry, no sword
Can fasten or deflect this tidal wedge,
Slow tyranny of moonlight, moonlight loved
And changed . . . “There’s

Nothing like this in the world,” you say,
Knowing I cannot touch your hand and look
Too, into that godless cleft of sky
Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing.

Even in this calm, pensive, straightforward narration, coherent substance is evacuated from subjectivity as subtle modulations of time displace persons from fixed positions in space. Though it appears in these lines that two people occupy the same location, speaking together under the same “godless cleft of sky,” the second line of the first stanza refers to the scene as a “lonely” one, presided over by “remembered stars.”

Therefore, the apparent immediacy of the lover is unworked by the reference to loneliness, sleep, dreams, “changed” moonlight (signalling the passage of time), and above all the “tidal wedge” that overtakes the lovers, in the present tense, even though the “vortex
of the grave” and the “black swollen gates” were encountered “back” in parts II and III. Crane melds memory, dream and vivid presence of detail in order to complicate the coherency of the scene, and thus the continuing action of the love story is frozen (“one frozen trackless smile”) into a indeterminate temporal category, where what is past, future and present becomes increasingly indistinct, where the question of whether one is voyaging in departure or towards arrival, whether one is breaking up or getting (back) together, become increasingly undecidable determinations to make.

Although Lewis is sympathetic to Crane's wish to be “most remembered of all” in his harbour-facing Brooklyn window, he interjects that historical image into a poem that resists the desires of subjectivity and favours poetry as the pure experience of memory, pure perception that persists even in the face of an impossibly absent object or subject of memory. This perception is not an absolute experience, but the always indeterminate and incomplete attempt to connect that disembodied perception to the Real, the body, and the objects of its experience, even though the complete unity of perception and the immanent cohesion of sensuousness are always interrupted by the fragments of communal experience and the suffering it inflicts. Witness here, how senses cannot work in concert to overcome the tidal wedge that separates objects from each other, how the disabilities and gaps in the sensorium prevent the subject and object from unifying, and instead trap the object of perception within the mediating force of perception rather than the standing-point of the observer:

Knowing I cannot touch your hand and look
Too, into that godless cleft of sky
Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing.

To remember Hart Crane in his window is to remember the limits of sensuousness,
those that resist the absolute experience where subject and object become one. Yet, as Stevens recognised: “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never.”43 And so, even the limit of absolutism tempts one into thinking that the absolute can be attained. When looking out the window, gazing intently into the distance, when put in relation to the limit of vision, one feels oneself on a threshold. The limit of vision is not, paradoxically, limiting in the least, but opens a reservoir of ambition to cross the expanse that sight delimits, an urge to meet the horizon. But what of the window exactly, the pane of glass, and the frame, with its sill, which is of course another sort of threshold? In effect, the window and the horizon function identically but in separate dimensions, where the horizon marks the lateral edge of sight’s ability, and the window, which functions quite the same, limits the viewer by the expanse of surface itself. The earth’s surface finds a metonym in the surface of the glass, which can be easily navigated, unlike the land, by touch, but remains invisible to the sight that conquers the plain.

William Carlos Williams’ 1935 poem “Flowers by the Sea” also dissolves the edge separating plains, where the salt ocean “lifts its form” over a pasture’s sharp edge. The sense in which water lifts itself (in order to reveal its limit as a threshold) anticipates “The New York City Waterfalls,” a 2008 “landwork,” by Danish artist Olafur Eliasson. In a public art project ambitious even for New York, the harbour’s waters were pumped up and let cascade down in wide screens, thus displaying the dimension of depth that the water’s surface had hitherto concealed. By unfolding the sea from the sea, Eliasson’s inter-dimensional play does not just frame the city in a window of water. What had been the surface of a consolidated mass of water, a limit, becomes exposed as liminal. The “trick” of exposition can be observed in “Flowers by the Sea” where the edge of flowery meadow and placid sea is further dissolved by the lovely final couplet, which suddenly discusses the

ocean as if it were one great flower:

    the sea is circled and sways
    peacefully upon its plantlike stem

Though the sea is peaceful like a flower, it also distinguishes itself from flowers: whereas they are “shapes” of “restlessness,” it sways peacefully. The distinction between singularity and plurality is key here; where the masses of flowers are restless, the ocean, in its singularity, provides calm.

Such intricately overlapping divisions are harder to maintain in “Voyages” which uses the sea and the flower as fluctuating and interchangeable signifiers for death, loss and love. Whereas the “tied” (punning on tide) and “released” chicories and daisies of Williams’ poem are flowers that lose themselves in a field of restless colour, the “wreathed” floral strands of “Voyages” lose themselves in everything else the poem immerses in its perceptual and textual field. Notably, the perceptive organs, the “Portending eyes and lips” of the chancel choir, threaten to “stem and close in our own steps” (where “our own” could include Opffer, Whitman, or the wider plurality of the choral mass itself), and the “bright staves” of flowers (where “stave” again puns on secret storage) become likened to modern inscriptive technologies (quills of today) that mark the “fatal tides” as surfaces to be interpreted: one must be “lost in fatal tides to tell.”

It should be noted that the term “tide” has the colloquial connotation of a trend, as in a “tide sweeping the nation,” so that Crane's discussion of tides carries a secret interest in the tides of modernity, the overflow of mass geography, to which the term “tide of voices” from “The Harbor Dawn” attests. As it makes the fatal tides of mass geography interpretable, the closed inscriptive flower of “Voyages IV” (which opposes Williams’ singular picture with the polyvocality of an oceanic mass) echoes the “poinsettia meadow”
of ocean tides in part II, which close “sleep,” “death” and “desire” in “one floating flower.” If there is peacefulness here, it is the peacefulness of death, as flowers, which symbolise lovers' fertile attraction, are re-signified as the fatal attraction to life's limits, since the closing flower has an obvious homology in the calyx of death, the vortex of the grave.

The suggestion that sleep, death and desire are closed within or close to (should “close” mean “near to”) “a floating flower” is emphasised by nature's awesome act of binding one in time, winking out the sea's eternal flux in “one instant” of orgasmic perception that is unified with the Real it perceives. In this sense the poem seems far less interested in continuing a conventional love story, and far more interested in exploring the limits of perception in a media immersed geography, where subjectivity is removed from the recording of physical phenomena, where those mechanical technologies that serve as prosthetics for the human sensorium indicate the limitations of those senses. Thus “Voyages” is not a presentation of poetic subjectivity, but rather of an immersive perceptual field that acknowledges, if not its relativity, then its incompletion. If one sees because one cannot hear everything, and one hears because one cannot taste everything, “Voyages” argues that the perceptive field is never a unified one: one cannot touch and look at the same time. The senses do not present us objectivity, the Real, in its absolute entirety, but point to their own limitations, their own inabilities, so that the Real, if it is available at all, is available only through the cessation of perception, in other words – amid the immanence of death. This voids the narrative of a single subject passing through a conventional plot, as the multiple and multi-directional passages of the poem revolve around a point of communal death, the seizure of perception in the vortex of the grave.

Because the perception of love in “Voyages” is secretly ensnared by the technopolitical dominion of mass society, the option of making a suicidal escape on fatal tides stands also as a way toward the unified experience of community and the perfect communion of love that an industrial society supposedly denies. Since in “Voyages” the
calyx of death binds a plurality of perceptual forces, the poem performs something like “the joint suicide or death of lovers,” which, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, is a “mythico-literary figure” for such a “communion in immanence.” But just as he would be remembered most of all as “lost” in the view from his harbour window, Crane’s desire is not so much for the immanence of death, but for the experience of being lost at the limit/limen between death and life, in the openings (be they shells, ears, mouths, flowers, anuses, whirlpools, graves, hands or windows), which function as barriers as much as thresholds to immanence.

Since, for Nancy, community is constituted by a loss that removes one from the absolutism of whole, Crane’s commitment to the aesthetic experience of loss and suffering marks a point of resistance to his own avowed desire to merge perception with the object of perception. This final trope of loss, which makes the direction of his voyage indeterminate, resists the immanence he sought in the figure of suicide, as his arrested passage through the division between life and death resists the certainty of arriving anywhere. One does not stay dead in Crane’s poems, because the body is not aligned with its self-perception; the perceptive fields persists autonomously without a body, and as such, they pass through figurative states of life and death as if they were a personality suffering mood swings.

Roiling in the secret nacre of mass geography, Crane’s pursuit of the absolute remains a limitless yet incomplete quest for absoluteness, a frustrated voyage to and from the immanence of a final, fixed destination. As the poem posits love’s lyricism amidst a drama of modernising social relations it leaves its bid for transcendence “forever incomplete,” contradicting Lewis’s belief that a “poet-lover” finds “gratification in a vision of transcendence” and satisfies himself in the act of transposing the experience of love and loss into poetry. The indeterminacy of “Voyages” is embedded not just in the polysemy of its individual words or the reversions and illegibility of its syntax, but also in its form as a

44 Nancy, The Inoperative Community, 12.
spiralling sequence, a calyx, a watery grave for interpretation.

In his essay on “Linearity and Fragmentation,” Gabriel Josipovici argues that the “fragmented or spiralling work denies us the comfort of finding a centre, a single meaning, a speakable truth,” so the very nature of the sequential poem denies Lewis’ thesis. Because of its form and style, the poem offers no linear narrative of a person’s passage through a love affair. Instead it is an immersive textual and perceptual environment that denies chronometric precision. Like Jean-Antoine Watteau’s *morceau de reception*, which confused the French academy as to whether it depicted the voyage from or to Cythera, “Voyages” both arrives at the island of love (and death) and departs from that island simultaneously, making arrival and departure incoherent narrative topoi. In the mass geography of America, the imperative to love proves so violent a charm for language to endure that words loosen from the structures of their syntactical and temporal organisation.

*Figure 19.*

Jean-Antoine Watteau, 

The Embarkation for Cythera, 1717

Musee de Louvre, 

Paris

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46 When Antoine Watteau submitted his “morceau de reception” to the Académe in 1717 the scribe wrote down the title as it came from Watteau’s lips: "Le pelerinage a l’isle de Cithère." Soon however the painting bore the title by which it is now known: “L’Embarquement pour l’Ile de Cythère.” Generations of scholars have debated whether the painting depicts lovers leaving from Cythera or for Cythera. M. Levey, “The Real Theme of Watteau’s Embarkation for Cythera,” *Burlington Magazine* 103, no. 698 (1961): 180–185.
The indeterminacy of direction that besets “Voyages,” the geographic expression of its commitment to loss, is demonstrable in the poem’s concluding stanzas. In 1972 Evelyn Hinz set out to reconsider some of “the representative statements concerning the conclusion” of “Voyages,” seeking to challenge critics who “see the end of the poem as a ‘pure statement’ confirming the power of poetry.” Though she reads the poem as a drama on the topic of communication, she problematically contends that the subjectivity at the centre of “Voyages” is the poet in the act of making poetry, and the sort of communication at stake is the “poetic process.” Hinz’s proof against the “traditional affirmative” mode of criticism works only by comparing “Voyages VI” to an earlier draft of the poem, entitled “Belle Isle,” which has an almost identical last stanza.

Her reliance on an intertext rests on the assumption that the poem is too “alogical” and “connotative” to exclude these traditional interpretations on its own. However, the poem excludes these traditional interpretations precisely because it is “alogical” and “connotative.” In essence, “Voyages” radically reverses what Hinz calls “the donnée of poetry—that in a poem words are defined through their context,” because the novelty of Crane’s poetry is its anaphoric confusions, where its act of self-referencing (as much as its secret technopolitical references) makes the poem’s terms harder to define. Not despite but due to Crane’s carefully planned anaphoric patterns, “Voyages” effectively dissolves its own meaning, as nouns connect through convoluted syntax back to nouns that seem to lack any concrete referent at all. Due to that effect, the end of “Voyages VI” renders the traditional and affirmative readings unsupportable all on its own:

Beyond siroccos harvesting
The solstice thunders, crept away,

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48 Ibid.
Like a cliff swinging or a sail
Flung into April’s inmost day—

Creation’s blithe and petalled word
To the lounged goddess when she rose
Conceding dialogue with eyes
That smile unsearchable repose—

Still fervid covenant, Belle Isle,
—Unfolded floating dais before
Which rainbows twine continual hair—
Belle Isle, white echo of the oar!

The simple, obvious but arresting observation to be made here is that these three stanzas are all one sentence. The syntax ties with the knottiest of Milton’s. What does one do with this phrasal verb, in the perfect past tense: “crept away”? Is this the main verb of the sentence? If so where is its subject? In the case of an archaic inversion, “crept away” is the active verb of the sentence’s main clause, and the subject comes seven lines later with “still fervent covenant, Belle Isle.” As such the poem says: “Crept away behind the siroccos (did) the fervent covenant of Belle Isle.” If, in the more straightforward explanation, the thunders creep away to expose the rainbow-twined dais of the island, then why does a comma separate subject (thunders) and verb (crept)?

Crane’s syntactical inversions and flummoxing punctuation stir the same debate that surrounded Watteau's painting: is the island coming or going? Presenting a radical challenge to the affirmative interpretations of “Voyages,” the undecidablity of its syntax leaves open the disheartening possibility that, here in the final stanzas, the immanence of a covenant recedes from the seer’s perception. Adding to the indeterminate conclusion, the hyphenated clause of the middle stanza (“Creations … repose”) effectively obscures the
grammatical coherence of the entire main clause. As the need for dialogue is satisfied in the “lounged” goddess' eyes, one mode of perception interfaces another mode of perception, which differs from one person talking to another. An ineffectual communicator, subjectivity fails to bridge the divide between subject and object, so this dialogue with the divine eyes rhymes with the mute suffering felt in “Poster” and the moonlit tyranny of talking in “Voyages V.”

As a “white echo of the oar,” the Isle twined by (pubic) hair is an anaphor for the phallic, “secret oar” of “Voyages IV,” and moreover, as an echo, it carries an erotic trace, a cock tease continuing that of the nymphic Undine’s. The unreachable oar is mirrored in the “unsearchable” eyes of the goddess, since both interrupt the meeting of bodies: a hand “reaches” for an oar that is only an echo; the eyes do not completely meet. The final stanza presents the final prosopopoeia, where a word emerges as a “reply:”

The imaged Word, it is, that holds
Hushed willows anchored in its glow.
It is the unbetrayable reply
Whose accent no farewell can know.

The status of who or what makes this reply remains unclear, as does the identity of whomever or whatever receives the reply. The “word” may reply to the silence of the willows, and, since it is “unbetrayable,” it conjures “the unquestioning assent” of Crane's aesthetic “absolute.” But its origin and ontology are provisional, refracted through the immersive textual environment that surrounds it. Instead of referring to “Poetry,” the “imaged Word” that concludes “Voyages” might simply refer back to “Creation’s blithe and petalled word.” Furthermore, the phrase “imaged Word” could denote not just poetry but all print media, including both advertising copy and the poem as poster, the ekphrastic illustration of experience unveiled in “Voyages I.” The same multidirectional anaphor is
present in the earlier draft of “Voyages VI,” entitled “Belle Isle,” where the “after-word that holds hushed willows anchored in its glow” refers back to the “absolute avowal” “whispered as we passed Belle Isle.”

In both cases, there is a tension between an absolute word emerging from the waves, and the ocean as that which produces silence, speechlessness, an “absolute avowal.” Even if the interlocutor, ecstatically split between modes of speech and modes of silence, is absolutely bound by the “after-word” or “imaged Word,” there is a difficulty in deciding the tone and communicative intent of the phrase: “whose accent no farewell can know.” In what sense does an image have an “accent”? A form of synaesthesia, the image is heard as light, since it holds the hushed willows with its illumination. But what, exactly, does it mean for the accent (of an imaged and unbetrayable word) to know no farewell? Does this mean that the reply cannot, itself, be a farewell? Or is the imaged word, which glows and resounds, numb to the farewell of the seer, its deafness carrying on the poem's obsession with perceptual deficiency, like the unreachable children in beach-scene poster, or a quarrelling lover who has had enough of love's distress? As such the word may express indifference to the departing lover, ignoring the farewell, or, by contrast, it may be that lover's inescapable grasp, which never permits a goodbye. The ambiguity of the poem's final phrase suggests an undecidability between the eternal salvation (redemption) or the temporal entrapment (suffering) of love. One suffers the callousness of being with others and the indeterminacy of language as the intertwined and intractable problems of communing in ecstasy.

The poem's fickle tone and the free play of anaphoric signifiers discredit Lewis' “discovery” of a “poet-lover” celebrating the power of poetry at the end of “Voyages.” Despite Lewis' strange insistence that one should “hang on to the traditional” love story even though the poem “almost dissolves” it, Crane's work fits far better in an alternative tradition of modernism that Marjorie Perloff describes in The Poetics of Indeterminacy.
For Perloff, the “traditional modernism” (of T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and W.H Auden, for example) carries on a romantic tradition that preserves a correlation between the poet’s interiority and the object of their emotion, where symbols function as fixed containers of order and maintain recognisable relationships to each other. However, Crane really needs to be seen amid a counter-tradition comprised of Pound, Stein, and Samuel Becket that Perloff calls an “anti-Symbolist’ mode of indeterminacy or ‘undecidability,’ of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of the *Illuminations.*”

Sherman Paul provides an interesting account of the misprision that placed Crane in a romantic linage. According to Paul, Crane subscribed to the “radical American modernism associated with the ‘tradition’ of Whitman and Steiglitz,” and, even though he favoured Christian communion as a metaphor for the poetic absolute, he divorced himself from a traditional modernism which saw immanence and unity in mythic communion. Paul finds a heterosexual, ethical, and religious bias in the early negative assessments of Tate and Yvor Winters, who aligned themselves with T.S. Eliot and to some degree against Crane. Because of Crane’s disassociation from Eliot’s conservative modernist project, these influential American critics began labelling him, pejoratively, as a Romantic, a mystic. Strangely, some of Crane’s greatest proponents (Lewis and Hanley, for example) adopted the dismissive language of his conservative coevals. As such, his affirmative critics have had to suppress the indeterminate free play of his material signification, continuing a conservative political unconscious that manifest Crane’s mystic visions in criticism.

In its relation to sexuality, it could be argued that Crane’s hermetic language, obscurity, and secret meanings represent the kind of “anticommunal model of

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connectedness” that Leo Bersani finds typical of homosexual cruising spots. However, in his homoerotic devotionals, like “Voyages” and “Episode of Hands,” one finds a “model” of community in unconnectedness, as people are brought together through their falling apart, as community takes place around the factory injury (the bleeding gash in “Episode of Hands”) or the opening of the many wounds, graves, and bodily organs in “Voyages.” The ecstasy of community is felt in the very places that the body separates from itself, and the objects around it, including the bodies of others. To wit: the ringing image of “Belle Isle” (bell eye-ll) tacks an unexpected syllable on to “eye,” disrupting the ontological and phonetic integrity of the “I” and the “eye” of the seer. The ecstatic disconnections and interruptions that maintain community are internalised by the very poetic form of “Voyages” which numbers its ruptures, and presents itself, like the experiments of Toomer and Anderson, as a segmented cycle.

As the poem's inability to connect to itself mirrors the ecstatic separation of communal interaction and the body departing from itself, resisting its immanence, it reminds one of some troublesome aporias concerning perception. In his book on Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida describes the “obscure aporias” of touch identified by Aristotle, one of which concerns the integration of perceptual media into the body. Whereas the medium of hearing—sound—is a physical externality that works on perception, the medium of touch is integrated into the body as the skin itself. As such, whereas eyes are defined as things that see and the ears things that hear, no single sense organ stands for touch. Since touch happens internally and externally, the difference between the sense organs of touch is less plain, as in the case of touching with one's tongue or touching one's own tongue. Touching a part of the body (one's own or otherwise) with one's lips or with one's tongue

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blends the organs of touch together, in a way that is difficult for other organs of perception to do; for example, consider the strange idea of hearing your ear with your ear.

Prosthesis would be needed to do so, like a shell that amplifies the sound of the blood that serves the nerves of the ear. This image of immanence, where the body is reconnected to the body, where the forces of perception are unified with the material world, depends on a material apparatus, the machine absorbed in the absolute experience of self-presence, which also “incompletes” it, disrupts its immanence. The union of the body with itself, in immanence, connects aesthetically to theories of romanticism. For Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, Romanticism was nothing less than the advent of “literature” in its modern definition, where poetry requires a critical theory of itself in order to reach completion. According to their translators, “criticism, the reflective function of “critical” discourse, is determined by the romantics as a constitutive element of literature itself.”53 Here art reaches self-consciousness, aware of itself as perception.

As poetry buries its own critical theory of itself inside itself—as it hears itself hearing, sees itself seeing—it carries itself to perfection. As Simon Critchley puts it, Romanticism harbours the belief that “the problems of the modern world can be addressed and even reconciled in the production of a critically self-conscious artwork.”54 Self-conscious even about the limitations of self-consciousness, Crane’s poem dwells on the disabilities inherent in the act of self-perception and self-critique. Critchley goes on to suggest that post-romantic art has since been concerned with the impossibility of reconciling the traumas of modern life through the production of art. Crane’s aesthetic production realises the experience of trauma that cannot be reconciled, where the poem, which makes a constant attempt to reference itself through anaphor, fails to communicate

definitely with anything inside or outside of itself. Even in the act of touching itself (the ultimate fantasy of prosopopoeia, where the hands and lips of absent lovers are present in one's own) Crane's poetry is obsessed with the limits to its own act of self-completion.

Even though touch is the easiest perceptual force to confuse with its material media, “Voyages” does not adopt a uniform attitude towards touching, nor does it celebrate touch as a force for immanent communion. Throughout parts II & III, for example, the sea goes from destroying everything but the lovers’ hands, to lifting “reliquary hands,” as if the living hands of one section, after passing into the vortex of death, depend on the sea to raise them as relics in the next. Yet in the same poem the flesh of hands is transubstantiated and flesh again becomes promising: “permit me voyage, love, into your hands.” But then again touch is compromised: “The bay estuaries fleck the hard sky limits. / --As if too brittle or too clear to touch!” Finally two senses cannot coincide:

I cannot touch your hand and look

Too, into that godless cleft of sky

Where nothing turns but dead sands flashing.

The hand is an inadequate bridge between perception and thing, subject and object, and the inability of touch to perceive itself touching is the final flourish in this critique of the Romantic absolute, where the poem's self-critical theory completes the work. “Voyages” is the ultimate example of such a rupture within the critical-poetic complex of literature, and returns the literary experience of community to the experience of loss.

Crane’s own critical theory praised the “emotional dynamics” of metaphor, a mechanics that allowed him to “go through” (transcendentally to “pierce” but also simply to undergo) the (always scare-quoted) “absolute” experience of poetry. As the materials of mass geography provide the “springboard” for his motion, his venture toward the absolute
beauty of poetry equally pierces inward toward the heart of communal suffering, inscribing his locality at the limit and liminal edge of American geography. Though for him “the temporal location of an artist's creation” was of “secondary importance,” his paratactic style, as he realised, “expressed a concept of speed and space that could not be handled so well in other terms,” and he appreciated his verbal density as a mimicry of modernity’s violence: “a kind of word-grenade.” As such, the modernity of America—the explosive speed of its transit, the spatial mechanics of its media—are the engine of Crane's poetry and poetic theory, and since they absorb their machine age, since they use the prosthesis of shell and grave and self in their bid to transcend, to defy, to experience the “absolute,” they also trace the ruptures—the divisions in prosody, in perceptual force, in communal experience—that allow one to suffer and survive the ecstatic incompletion, the always undone experience of being in this world.

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